

# Empowering Bhotia Girls: Education and Inclusion in Uttarakhand

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## ARTICLE INFO    ABSTRACT

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The present research was conducted among the Bhotia tribe, located in the remote Himalayan regions of Uttarakhand, to understand the intricate dynamics of their education system, including the inclusion of girls' education and participation. Through a qualitative analysis of responses from a total of 36 participants, comprising various stakeholders including elders, women, and girls themselves, the study examines the perceptions, traditional norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes that shape girl-child education within the community. Findings reveal a coaction between cultural traditions and modern aspirations, emphasising girls' empowerment through education. Bhotia community girls often face significant barriers, including societal expectations to prioritise domestic duties and support family livelihoods through activities such as animal husbandry and boutique work. The study identifies key strategies and interventions to promote equity, equality, and inclusion in girl-child education within the Bhotia community. Through collective action and shared commitment, the study envisions a future where education mobilises social change and inclusive development within the Bhotia community.

**Keywords:** Bhotia, tribe, inclusion, education, equity

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## Introduction

In India, girls have always been the victims of the oppression of their human rights. One of the very essential rights is the right to education, which has certainly been a topic of continuous research. According to Article 21A of the Constitution, every individual, irrespective of caste, gender, creed, and religion is entitled to a fundamental right to education. The percentage has gained its volume in recent years yet girls in the remote rural regions of India face difficulties in participation in mainstream education. "Bhotia" is a word derived from the term "Bhot" which means "people from the north" (Kumar & Sati, 2021). The Bhotia or Rung tribe has been traditionally involved in their age-old practice of "Transhumance Pastoralism" (Kumar & Sati, 2021) due to which their lives and way of living have been quite different from the rest of India and people living in the other parts of Kumaoun and Garhwal Himalayas. At present the traditional practice of seasonal migration has been declining for many years due to community mobilization and the shift from traditional agricultural occupation to service sectors in "Bhabhar" regions, yet education of girls and women empowerment seems an unsolved story among the tribe. Originally, Bhotias were found in the Greater Himalayan ranges above 3,000 m and had to survive in extreme conditions with the least facilities. However, these regions are indeed quite difficult to reach due to the absence of connections to other regions through roads, and these regions lie in the dangerous and alert zones for natural calamities; thus, they are left uncovered and unreachable. The Bhotia tribe has been facing a lot of challenges, one of them being the acceptance of discrimination and inequality from the non-tribal regions of Kumaoun and Garhwal.

## Gender Roles

Traditionally, men were engaged in trading, whereas women and children had a role in agriculture and household chores. Rural women are responsible for 60-80% of crop production in the country (Singh & Saryam, 2019). Women have been engaged in wine-making, knitting warmers, and weaving their traditional dress as contemporary sources of earning. Girls in the families are engaged in siblings' care as their mothers do not find much time to take care of their children because of household chores and caring for their livestock. Girls and boys also feel responsible for milking their goats and cows in the peak hours when the women of the

families are out or engaged in some other work. Usually, girls experience the least interaction with their fathers and other male members.

### Family Dynamics & Education

“Education is a powerful instrument for preparing our citizens in a knowledge society. It will mix globalisation with localisation, making the children and young ones become world citizens while their roots are deeply embedded in Indian culture and tradition” (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2016). Families in the Bhotia tribe are traditionally joint, with the eldest male being the head of the family. They live in their traditional houses, in the Kumaon region, these houses are known as ‘Baakhli’ or ‘Kudi’ because they are built in length for the purpose that each brother’s family has a separate space for sleeping, and keeping their stuff despite cohabitation. These houses are built up of the wood of Deodar trees, Himalayan mud, cow dung, and Himalayan stones locally called ‘paathar’. People build their own houses; they are the smartest engineers because these houses stand against all natural calamities. Hence, the study was conducted with the following objectives,

- To understand the perceptions and the role of traditional norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes of the Bhotia community towards girl-child education.
- To explore the factors influencing the educational opportunities for the Bhotia girls.
- To identify strategies and interventions that promote equity, equality, and inclusion in girl-child education within the Bhotia community.

### Methodology

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the viewpoints of adult members belonging to the Bhotia/Rung community regarding the education of girls within their tribe. Additionally, it seeks to examine the importance of tribal education, comprehend gender inequalities prevalent within the community, identify obstacles encountered by women in accessing education, gauge the perspectives of girls concerning their education, and analyse the impact of intervention programs on the overall community structure.

### Participants of the study

The study includes 36 participants, including the Government School staff, school-going girls, and residents and natives of the Garbyang village.

### Selection of respondents

Purposive and snowball sampling was used for sample selection. The village administration in the community outreach was approached to conduct pilot study. Engagement with the village administration was initiated through the "Kaaryaalaya Pramukh Kshetra Panchayat". Before participation, individuals were provided with a comprehensive briefing on the study's objectives. Consent for involvement was obtained after elucidating the study's scope, accompanied by an assurance of confidentiality regarding any shared information, with a commitment to employ it solely for academic and research pursuits.

### Tools used for data collection

**In-depth interviews:** Two interview guides were devised, tailored specifically for girls and community members, respectively. These guides were structured around thematic areas designed to elicit comprehensive insights pertinent to the research focus, while also ensuring alignment with the study's objectives and minimising potential digression. The organization and selection of themes were meticulously crafted to foster a deeper understanding of the subject matter and maintain fidelity to the research aims.

**Focused Group Discussions (FGDs):** Group discussions were conducted with 3-5 participants per group, categorised into four distinct demographics: girls aged 10-17, 18-22, women aged 35-45, and men aged 60 and above. These discussions were centred around the predefined themes outlined in the interview guide, aimed at eliciting insights relevant to the research objectives. By engaging participants within these age brackets, the discussions sought to garner nuanced perspectives and fulfil the overarching aims of the study effectively.

### Participatory Learning & Action (PLA) Techniques:

**Mapping:** A transit survey was conducted with the assistance of a facilitator, a female member of the community, who aided in identifying the various resources accessible within the community, such as schools, Anganwadi centers, community museums, and road networks. The mapping process involved collaboration with the women's group, Village Development Officer (VDO), and Gram Pradhan, ensuring comprehensive coverage and accuracy in delineating the community infrastructure and amenities.

**Trend Analysis:** Elderly community members, the Village Development Officer (VDO), Gram Pradhan, and some school staff, collaborated to create a timeline. Together, they discussed key historical periods such as trade relations with Tibet, the progression of rights for Scheduled Tribes (STs), and various developmental initiatives. Of notable focus was the advancement of girls' education within these broader historical and societal contexts.

### Procedure for data collection

The data collection process for this study on the Rung Community involved several key steps to ensure accuracy, cultural sensitivity, and ethical standards. Firstly, participants were selected through a face-to-face interview approach, accommodating their availability while obtaining permission from the school authority to engage with school girls and staff. These interviews were conducted in Hindi, the local language, to facilitate communication. However, recognizing potential discomfort or language barriers, a local individual was appointed as a convenor and moderator. Also, the consent was taken from each participant for recording the responses so that it becomes easy to transcribe. This not only helped in ensuring comprehension but also fostered rapport between the interviewer and the participants, vital for eliciting candid responses. Moreover, the moderator played a pivotal role beyond language mediation. They facilitated rapport-building by creating a comfortable environment, encouraging open dialogue, and establishing trust. Additionally, the moderator assisted in mapping the community, providing invaluable insights into its dynamics, social structures, and cultural nuances. Collaboratively, with the Village Development Officer (VDO), Gram Pradhan, and members of both genders, a timeline was formulated to analyze developmental trends. This inclusive approach not only enhanced data accuracy but also empowered the community by involving them in the research process, fostering ownership and sustainability.

### Ethical Recommendations

Before commencing data collection, all ethical protocols were diligently adhered to. The initial review of the proposal was undertaken by the supervisor, who provided insightful recommendations about the research instruments. Subsequently, the proposal underwent scrutiny by the technical review board, comprising faculty members from the department along with internal and external experts. The board issued several recommendations, namely: reframing the title to solely encompass the term "inclusion", elucidating the existing community infrastructure constraints hindering participation, articulating the primary causes of disparity, particularly in male and female child education, and consolidating the objectives to a concise 2 to 3 points. In response to the expert feedback, appropriate adjustments were made to the proposal.

### Results

The data was collected using the interview guide, mapping, and trend analysis, and qualitatively analyzed. The method of analysis followed a deductive approach. The pre-defined themes were collated with the responses found and findings were generated through locating the recurring themes from the responses.

### Familial Support

Support from one's family is needed to achieve one's goals as it acts as a pillar to build self-confidence and determination. The responses illustrate the strong familial backing for girls' education within the Rung community. Over time, women have witnessed significant advancements in educational facilities within the community. Obtaining an education was once a formidable challenge, hindered by factors like inadequate transportation, poor road connectivity, and financial constraints. Similarly, the men recount the difficulties of accessing education earlier when walking to school was the norm. With the nearest school located approximately 200 kilometres away in Tanakpur, they often traversed through dense jungles to shorten the journey. A few women also expressed a sense of guilt by saying, "Our parents were always in support of educating us and never forced us into marriage; it was our mistake that we chose to marry and quit our studies, we were not mature enough to see the consequences". This statement depicts that girls in the Rung community receive liberty to choose the way they want to live their lives. Elders stated, "In earlier times, our tribe was economically deprived such that we did not have money to satisfy our essential needs like hunger, clothing. Trading with Tibet was our only source of earnings. Gradually, we adopted agriculture after we suffered scarcity due to the Indo-China war; however, our community had never discriminated between girls and boys. Girls are worshipped as goddesses in our community, and on every auspicious occasion, girls are the first ones to be called and offered food. Nowadays, boys have lost their interest in studying, and they have always wanted to earn for the family, so we focus more on girls' education than boys, as boys are the ones who are engaged in agriculture and other traditional occupations, such as wool-making, where they engage many women to support their earnings". Through these statements, it can be drawn that no traces of gender discrimination can be found within the tribe, and the Rung people are a source of motivation for others.

### Educational Infrastructure

Respondents unanimously voiced the arduous journey required to access education, with only one school serving several villages. Even children from areas like Askot and Jauljibi must travel significant distances, ranging from 20 to 30 kilometres daily, to attend school. The condition of the national highway connecting Pithoragarh city to remote Himalayan regions exacerbates this challenge. Moreover, the shortage of teachers, particularly in subjects like science and math, compels students to seek education in urban centres like Haldwani, Pithoragarh, and Champawat. This migration highlights the educational disparities between rural and urban areas, leaving hinterland schools struggling to provide comprehensive learning experiences.

In addition to transportation and staffing issues, students lament the lack of adequate play areas and deteriorating furniture within schools. Parents and elders express concerns about the insufficient and dilapidated furniture, emphasising the need for improved infrastructure. However, there are glimpses of progress, as former female students note advancements in school infrastructure since their time. They recall sitting on mats due to the absence of desks, whereas now each classroom boasts four to five desks. Despite these improvements, there remains a pressing need for more spacious classrooms to accommodate the dwindling enrollment rates. As families increasingly migrate to urban centres, schools in rural areas face the grim reality of declining admissions, underscoring the urgency for comprehensive educational reform in remote regions.

Apart from all this, the ratio of girls studying in school to boys has seen a major transformation. Mr. Tasleem, Assistant Teacher-In-Charge, highlights, "In my work, I have observed major changes in the number of admissions. It is very shocking to see that more girls are getting enrolled rather than boys". Upon asking the reason for more admissions of girls to elders, they stated, "Girls show a determination to study, they are more focused."

### **Transhumance, Pastoralism and Education**

In the Bhotia community, education is prioritised as the Rung people stated, "We want our children to study and move out to cities for greater opportunities". Therefore, every Bhotia community in Uttarakhand during winters migrates with the school staff so that the education of their children does not get impacted. Respondents reflected on the historical practice of seasonal migration from the upper Himalayan regions to the lower valleys during winters, a tradition born out of necessity for survival. This migratory pattern saw families purchasing land along the banks of the Ganga River for permanent settlement in these lower regions. During these migrations, the entire community, including the school staff, would relocate to ensure that children's education remained uninterrupted, often bringing their animals along. However, over time, this tradition waned for various reasons. With the attainment of Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, families found more stability and opportunity in urban centres like Haldwani, Tanakpur, Pithoragarh, and Delhi, where government employment was available.

### **Role of Schools in Promoting Equity, Equality, and Inclusion**

Respondents highlighted the evolving dynamics between schools, NGOs, and local government bodies, emphasising collaborative efforts aimed at enriching the educational experience and empowering the Rung community. School initiatives include cultural celebrations and programs held in the Rung Museum, fostering a sense of pride and participation among children. NGOs extend support by distributing essential items like sanitary pads and stationery, addressing critical needs, and promoting hygiene and education. A few parents expressed, "We do not get to know anything beneficial for our children through the school authorities; rather, we get all the updates from our community people". Some parents also highlighted that there are no such awareness campaigns organised for us about policies and schemes for girls. Teachers who also belong to the Rung tribe play a pivotal role in engaging families through regular meetings, forging personal connections, and sensitising them to the importance of girls' education.

### **Women Empowerment**

Elders and women within the community underscore the emphasis placed on fostering women's independence and economic empowerment. Throughout the day, women are actively involved in various income-generating activities, exemplifying their multifaceted roles and contributions to household livelihoods. From engaging in animal husbandry and selling livestock products to pursuing entrepreneurial ventures such as boutique work, tailoring, and mid-day meal preparation, women play a pivotal role in sustaining their families' economic well-being. Many Rung women have established their enterprises in organic farming, promoting sustainable agricultural practices and marketing organic products. Women from the Mahila Mangal Dal highlight, "We connect with each Rung woman and their family, and their families support them to start their venture". These women have formed social groups aimed at empowering others within the community, with certain groups even receiving recognition from the State Government for their impactful initiatives.

### **Government Interventions**

Participants in the study voiced their concerns about the mismanagement of funds allocated for the development of critical infrastructure such as roads, schools, colleges, and hospitals within their community. Despite the availability of funds, corruption by middlemen often hampers the progress of development initiatives, resulting in stagnation and exacerbating the existing challenges faced by the community. They emphasise the need for greater government intervention and oversight, urging authorities to organise camps and conduct regular visits to their community to gain a firsthand understanding of the ground realities. A key priority highlighted by participants is the urgent need for the improvement of road infrastructure, particularly the route to their hometown, Chota Kailash, which is severely damaged and poses significant safety risks to travellers.



## Conclusion

In this study, the researcher tried to understand and throw light on important findings regarding the perceptions, traditional norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes of the Bhotia community towards girl-child education, aiming to explore factors influencing educational opportunities and identify strategies for promoting equity, equality, and inclusion. Through an analysis of the responses from various stakeholders, within the community, including elders, women, and girls themselves, PLA products, and pictures of the community, valuable insights have been gleaned regarding the current landscape of girl-child education within the Bhotia community.

The findings stress the complex interplay between the cultural traditions, socio-economic factors, and systemic challenges shaping the educational experiences of Bhotia girls. Traditional norms and values, while deeply ingrained in the fabric of the community, often intersect with modern aspirations for education and empowerment. Elders and women within the community highlight the evolving role of women, advocating for independence and economic empowerment through various income-generating activities such as animal husbandry, boutique work, and organic farming. This dual commitment to preserve cultural heritage while embracing educational opportunities reflects a nuanced approach to navigating socio-cultural dynamics.

The Bhotia community does not adhere to patriarchal norms; rather, the Rung people are quite broad-minded in letting the women choose their paths. Despite the aspirations for education, Bhotia girls encounter numerous obstacles in accessing quality education. Geographic remoteness, inadequate infrastructure, and limited resources pose significant challenges, particularly in rural Himalayan regions. The arduous journey to school, coupled with the scarcity of teachers and educational facilities, underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to improve educational outcomes for Bhotia girls. Additionally, socio-economic factors, including poverty and migration trends, further compound these challenges, necessitating holistic approaches that address systemic barriers to education.

In response to these challenges, various stakeholders within the community have initiated efforts to promote equity, equality, and inclusion in girl-child education. Schools collaborate with NGOs and local government bodies to organise cultural programs, distribute essential items, and raise awareness about educational opportunities. Teachers play a pivotal role in engaging families and sensitising them to the importance of girls' education, while community initiatives, such as social groups, empower women and foster collective action toward educational advancement.

However, gaps persist in the dissemination of information about government policies and resources, highlighting the need for improved communication channels and community outreach strategies. Additionally, while progress has been made in certain areas, such as infrastructure development and access to basic amenities like textbooks and mid-day meals, persistent disparities in educational outcomes underscore the imperative for sustained efforts toward systemic reform.

In conclusion, promoting equity, equality, and inclusion in girl-child education within the Bhotia community requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the intersecting challenges of socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, and systemic barriers. By fostering partnerships, leveraging community resources, and empowering stakeholders at all levels, sustainable solutions can be implemented to ensure that every Bhotia girl has the opportunity to fulfil her educational potential and contribute to the holistic development of her community. Through collective action and shared commitment, we can pave the way toward a more inclusive and equitable future for Bhotia girls, grounded in the principles of dignity, justice, and empowerment.

## Implications

- The study emphasised the significance of community-based intervention towards girl-child education, aiming to explore factors influencing educational opportunities and identify strategies for promoting equity, equality, and inclusion.
- The state government must provide financial support to the families, organise awareness campaigns, and link itself with the people serving the community.
- The Indian Education system is generally not specific, which means that it does not cater for the special educational needs based on the culture, i.e., language and mode of delivery.
- The content is excerpted from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) countries to which a child from an Indian tribal community could not relate.

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