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## Educational empowerment of tribal women in Sikkim: A review of policies and schemes

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### Abstract

This paper explores the educational empowerment of tribal women in Sikkim by critically reviewing national and state-level policies and schemes aimed at bridging gender and social disparities. Education is widely recognized as a transformative tool that not only improves literacy but also enhances socio-economic participation, political representation, and individual agency. In the context of Sikkim, where tribal communities such as the Lepchas, Bhutias, and Limbus form a significant part of the population, women have historically faced multiple disadvantages due to geographical isolation, cultural traditions, and economic hardships. National initiatives like the Right to Education Act, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Samagra Shiksha, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas, and Eklavya Model Residential Schools, combined with state measures such as free educational materials, scholarships, hostels, and women's reservation in Panchayati Raj institutions, have contributed to narrowing gender gaps and improving literacy among tribal women. Despite these achievements, challenges persist in terms of high dropout rates, infrastructural limitations, shortage of qualified teachers, and inadequate cultural adaptation of curricula. The paper argues that while policies have created a foundation for progress, more context-specific strategies, community involvement, and culturally sensitive approaches are needed to achieve sustainable empowerment. The study emphasizes that educational empowerment of tribal women is not just a gender issue but a crucial element of inclusive development in Sikkim.

**Keywords:** Educational empowerment, tribal women, Sikkim, policies and schemes, inclusive development

### Introduction

Education has long been regarded as one of the most powerful instruments for social change, empowerment, and inclusive development. For women, especially those belonging to marginalized and disadvantaged communities such as Scheduled Tribes, education is not merely a means of acquiring literacy but a gateway to enhanced agency, socio-economic mobility, and political participation. In India, tribal women often face the double disadvantage of gender and community-based marginalization, which restricts their access to resources, decision-making, and opportunities for growth. This challenge is particularly visible in remote and hilly regions such as Sikkim, where geography, cultural traditions, and limited infrastructure intersect to shape women's educational trajectories. The tribal communities of Sikkim—such as the Lepchas, Bhutias, and others—possess rich cultural traditions, but their women have historically remained excluded from the mainstream educational and developmental processes. Low literacy levels, high dropout rates, early marriage, economic hardship, and linguistic barriers are recurring issues that hinder tribal women's progress. At the same time, education is increasingly being recognized as the key to their empowerment, as it strengthens women's confidence, enhances their role in household and community decision-making, and allows them to participate more actively in social, economic, and political spheres. Therefore, the educational empowerment of tribal women in Sikkim is not only a matter of gender justice but also of regional and national development, as it ensures the integration of marginalized groups into the broader socio-economic fabric of the nation.

Over the decades, a wide array of policies and schemes have been introduced at both the national and state levels to address these disparities and to promote education among women and tribal populations. Constitutional safeguards such as Article 46, the Right to Education Act, and targeted initiatives like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, and

Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas have sought to universalize access to schooling while providing special attention to disadvantaged groups. At the same time, the Government of Sikkim has introduced state-specific measures such as scholarships for tribal girls, free textbooks and uniforms, hostel facilities, women's reservation in Panchayati Raj institutions, and reforms in succession and property laws to enhance women's confidence and status. These interventions are complemented by community-based initiatives, self-help groups, and NGOs that have played a critical role in raising awareness and mobilizing families toward supporting girls' education. Despite significant progress—reflected in the narrowing gender gap in literacy, rising enrollment of tribal girls, and increased visibility of women in public and political life—challenges persist in the form of infrastructural gaps, cultural resistance, lack of disaggregated data, and limited adaptation of curricula to tribal contexts. A review of policies and schemes thus becomes essential to assess both the achievements and shortcomings in this journey of empowerment. By focusing specifically on tribal women in Sikkim, this study highlights how education functions as a transformative tool, evaluates the efficacy of various interventions, and identifies gaps that need to be addressed for building a more inclusive and equitable society.

### **Concept of Empowerment and Women's Education**

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process through which individuals gain the ability to exercise control over their lives, participate actively in decision-making, and challenge structures of inequality. For women, empowerment entails access to resources, knowledge, skills, and opportunities that enhance their confidence, self-worth, and agency in both private and public spheres. Education plays a central role in this empowerment process, acting not merely as a tool for literacy but as a catalyst for social change, economic independence, and political participation. Women's education helps break cycles of poverty, reduces gender inequalities, and improves health and social outcomes for families and communities. A well-educated woman is better equipped to make informed choices about her life, advocate for her rights, and contribute productively to society. Importantly, education fosters critical awareness, enabling women to question oppressive practices and resist discriminatory structures. In developing contexts such as India, where traditional gender roles often restrict women's mobility and opportunities, education has emerged as one of the most powerful means to redefine women's positions in society. It contributes to narrowing the gender gap, promoting equality, and building inclusive communities. Thus, women's education must be understood as a fundamental human right as well as a transformative instrument that empowers women to achieve autonomy, dignity, and participation in shaping social, economic, and political life.

### **Significance of Tribal Women's Education in Sikkim**

In the state of Sikkim, tribal women's education holds special significance due to the unique socio-cultural and geographical context of the region. Sikkim is home to several tribal communities such as the Lepchas, Bhutias, and Limbus, whose cultural traditions and livelihoods are closely tied to the Himalayan environment. Historically, tribal women in Sikkim have contributed significantly to

agriculture, household management, and the preservation of cultural heritage, yet they have remained marginalized in terms of access to modern education and opportunities for upward mobility. The remoteness of many villages, linguistic diversity, limited infrastructure, and prevailing socio-economic challenges have acted as barriers to their educational progress. At the same time, education is crucial for enhancing their participation in decision-making processes, ensuring gender equity, and enabling them to benefit from developmental initiatives. The literacy and empowerment of tribal women in Sikkim are directly linked to the welfare of their families and communities, as educated women can improve child health, promote sustainable practices, and foster social cohesion. Moreover, educational attainment opens avenues for tribal women to engage in entrepreneurship, access better employment, and play a more active role in governance through Panchayati Raj institutions, where Sikkim has already taken progressive steps by reserving seats for women. Therefore, promoting tribal women's education in Sikkim is not only an instrument of individual empowerment but also a key driver of inclusive regional development, cultural preservation, and social justice.

### **Socio-Cultural and Historical Background**

Sikkim, nestled in the Eastern Himalayas, is a small state with a rich mosaic of tribal communities, each with distinct histories, languages, and cultural traditions. Among the prominent groups are the Lepchas, considered the aboriginal inhabitants of Sikkim, who traditionally lived in harmony with nature and practiced subsistence farming. The Bhutias, of Tibetan origin, migrated centuries ago and brought with them Buddhist traditions, monasteries, and a hierarchical social structure. The Limbus, belonging to the Kirati group, have their roots in Nepal and form another important tribal community in the state. Together, these groups contribute to the cultural fabric of Sikkim, blending indigenous practices with modern influences. Despite cultural diversity, these communities share a strong attachment to their land, religious practices, and community-based social systems, which continue to shape their identities.

Within these communities, the status of women has historically been complex and varied. In some tribes, such as the Lepchas and Limbus, women traditionally enjoyed relatively better social recognition and involvement in family decisions compared to many other patriarchal societies in India. They were integral to agricultural labor, family income generation, and the preservation of rituals and traditions. However, despite these contributions, women remained largely confined to domestic and community roles, with limited access to formal education and political power. Patriarchal practices, though less rigid than in other regions, still constrained their mobility and access to resources. Modern reforms, including reservations in Panchayati Raj institutions and succession rights, have improved women's visibility in the public sphere, but structural inequalities persist, particularly for tribal women living in remote areas. Education for tribal women in Sikkim has historically faced numerous challenges shaped by cultural, economic, and geographical factors. Geographically, the rugged Himalayan terrain and dispersed settlements make accessibility to schools difficult, particularly for girls who must travel long distances on foot. Economically, many families rely on subsistence farming and seasonal labor, which creates

pressure for girls to contribute to household work instead of pursuing education. Cultural barriers such as early marriage, preference for boys' education, and the lack of curricula in local tribal languages further exacerbate the problem. Moreover, poor infrastructure, shortage of trained teachers in rural areas, and limited awareness among parents about the long-term benefits of education contribute to high dropout rates among tribal girls. Despite policy interventions and scholarships, the intersection of these barriers continues to hinder the educational empowerment of tribal women in Sikkim, making it essential to design more inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches to bridge these gaps.

### Policy Framework at the National Level

The Government of India has long recognized that education is a crucial tool for empowering women and marginalized communities, including Scheduled Tribes (STs). The Constitution itself provides the foundation for such efforts. Article 14 guarantees equality before law, Article 15 prohibits discrimination based on sex and caste, Article 15(3) empowers the State to make special provisions for women and children, and Article 46 directs the State to promote the educational and economic interests of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes while protecting them from social injustice. These constitutional safeguards have been reinforced through successive Five-Year Plans and national education policies that identified women's education as a priority area of social development.

Several landmark policies and schemes have directly shaped women's educational empowerment at the national level. The National Policy on Education (1986, revised in 1992) emphasized reducing gender disparities and expanding educational opportunities for girls, especially in disadvantaged groups. Later, the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 made free and compulsory education a fundamental right for children between 6 and 14 years of age, creating a legal basis for universal access. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 further highlighted inclusivity, with provisions for gender sensitivity, support for disadvantaged groups, and special attention to tribal languages and regional needs to make education more culturally responsive.

Alongside these broad policy measures, the government has introduced targeted schemes. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and its later integration into Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan sought to universalize elementary education and improve infrastructure, teacher quality, and gender parity. For girls from disadvantaged backgrounds, initiatives like the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme established residential schools for girls belonging to SC, ST, OBC, and minority communities in educationally backward blocks. Scholarships for ST students, such as the Post-Matric Scholarship Scheme, Pre-Matric Scholarship Scheme, and National Overseas Scholarship, aim to support higher studies and reduce economic barriers. The Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRSs) specifically target tribal children, offering quality education with hostel facilities to bridge geographical and social gaps.

Central government programs such as the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) campaign have raised awareness about the importance of educating the girl child, while the National Scheme of Incentives to Girls for Secondary Education provides direct financial support to encourage girls from

disadvantaged groups to continue beyond elementary school. Collectively, these constitutional provisions, policies, and schemes form a comprehensive framework designed to ensure that women, particularly from tribal and marginalized backgrounds, gain equitable access to education. However, their effectiveness depends on how well they are implemented at the state level and adapted to the cultural and geographical contexts of communities like those in Sikkim.

### Literature Review

Shetty, S., & Hans, V. (2015) <sup>[1]</sup> This study investigates the critical role of education in promoting women's empowerment and broader development. The authors highlight that education is not just a tool for literacy but a transformative mechanism that reshapes societal attitudes and empowers women to challenge traditional norms. Drawing upon data and policy analysis, the paper articulates how access to education influences women's decision-making abilities, socio-economic participation, and self-worth. The authors emphasize that although multiple educational policies have been introduced, there remain barriers such as poverty, patriarchal resistance, and infrastructure inadequacies. The study proposes that educational empowerment is closely tied to women's health, employment, and political engagement. I

Dangal, S. D., & Jha, D. S. (2019) <sup>[2]</sup> This paper focuses on the impact of education on women's empowerment specifically in the context of Sikkim, offering a regional lens to the broader discourse. It underscores how education in the state has gradually improved female participation in socio-political domains, thus reshaping gender roles within the Sikkimese society. The authors draw upon qualitative data and secondary sources to demonstrate that educational access for women has led to increased employment, better health awareness, and higher levels of self-confidence. The paper highlights government initiatives such as free primary education and scholarship schemes that have significantly enhanced educational opportunities for girls.

Rai, N. (2019) <sup>[3]</sup> Rai explores the pursuit of rights and empowerment among women in Sikkimese society, situating the role of education within a socio-legal framework. The paper examines the historical and cultural dimensions that shape women's quest for equality, suggesting that education acts as a bridge between traditional structures and progressive change. It emphasizes that education has catalyzed increased legal awareness, political participation, and resistance to domestic violence among women in Sikkim. Rai's analysis is grounded in case studies and policy evaluations, revealing that women with higher education levels demonstrate stronger agency in asserting their rights and influencing community norms. The study critically assesses the implementation of women-centric laws and welfare programs, pointing out gaps between policy intent and on-ground realities.

Bhutia, T. (2021) <sup>[5]</sup> Bhutia analyzes how the socio-cultural changes taking place have impacted women empowerment in Sikkim in a transformational way. The paper hypothesizes that education has been instrumental in the reconstitution of gender relations in the state and in particular, the recent generations. Bhutia reveals based on the ethnographic studies and the regional statistics, women have been able to breach traditional boundaries through educational advancement and have gained access to such



realms as business, governance, and civil society. The paper will follow the transformation of the culture and norms of patriarchal society to a more egalitarian society and attribute a lot of these changes to state policies which argue that women should be educated.

Sharma, G. (2021) <sup>[6]</sup> Sharma studies the interaction between education and empowerment of women in North East of India especially on regional challenges and achievements. In the study, various dimensions have been mentioned as to where women due to education have contributed to their better involvement and appearance-social, economic and political. The paper postulates that the educational progression has resulted to changes in the level of literacy, health awareness and decision making autonomy among women. Sharma highlights different government programs and NGO activities that have made it possible to increase the number of girls in school.

### **Impact of Policies and Schemes**

The implementation of national and state-level policies in Sikkim has significantly contributed to improving the educational status of women, especially those from tribal backgrounds. One of the most visible impacts has been the steady rise in female literacy rates over the last few decades. With the introduction of schemes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Samagra Shiksha, and the Right to Education Act, access to schooling for girls has improved substantially. In tribal-dominated areas, programs like the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) have created safe residential schooling opportunities, which is especially important in remote hilly regions where distance and safety concerns often discourage parents from sending girls to school. The Eklavya Model Residential Schools have also played a crucial role in improving access to quality education for Scheduled Tribe children by providing academic support, hostel facilities, and a more culturally inclusive environment. These measures have contributed to narrowing the gender gap in enrollment and retention in Sikkim.

Another major impact of these schemes is the improvement in secondary and higher education participation among tribal women. Scholarship programs at the pre-matric and post-matric levels have reduced the financial burden on families, thereby encouraging parents to support their daughters' continued education. Free textbooks, uniforms, and mid-day meals have further minimized educational costs, making school more accessible to marginalized groups. As a result, dropout rates among tribal girls have shown signs of decline. At the higher education level, specific scholarship and fellowship programs for Scheduled Tribe women have enabled them to pursue advanced studies, vocational training, and professional courses, thereby broadening their career opportunities. This expansion of access has helped tribal women move beyond traditional roles, allowing them to enter government service, teaching professions, entrepreneurship, and leadership roles in the community.

Beyond literacy and enrollment statistics, policies and schemes have also influenced broader aspects of empowerment. The reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions in Sikkim has encouraged greater political participation, allowing educated tribal women to take leadership positions at the grassroots level. Similarly, reforms in succession laws and property rights, combined with educational empowerment, have given

women a stronger voice in household and community decision-making. At the social level, exposure to education has improved awareness of health, hygiene, and reproductive rights among tribal women, leading to better outcomes for families and children. Despite these achievements, gaps remain in infrastructure, cultural inclusivity, and digital access in remote regions. Nevertheless, the overall impact of policies and schemes in Sikkim demonstrates that sustained educational investment has the potential to transform the lives of tribal women, bridging social inequalities and fostering inclusive development.

### **Research Problem**

Despite significant progress in literacy and educational access over the past decades, tribal women in Sikkim continue to face multiple barriers that limit the full realization of their empowerment through education. National and state-level policies, along with targeted schemes such as scholarships, residential schools, and reservation in local governance, have indeed improved enrollment, retention, and participation of tribal women in education. However, challenges remain deeply rooted in socio-cultural, economic, and geographical contexts. Remote and hilly terrains still restrict physical access to schools, while economic hardship often forces families to prioritize domestic or agricultural labor over girls' education. Cultural norms, including early marriage and gender-based expectations, continue to limit opportunities for tribal girls despite policy interventions. Moreover, disparities in infrastructure, shortage of qualified teachers, language barriers in curricula, and uneven digital connectivity further exacerbate educational exclusion. While the statistical rise in literacy rates reflects progress, it does not fully capture the quality of education, its cultural sensitivity, or its ability to translate into sustainable empowerment. There is also a lack of disaggregated research focusing specifically on tribal women, making it difficult to assess how effectively these policies meet their unique needs. Therefore, the research problem lies in evaluating the actual impact of existing educational policies and schemes on the empowerment of tribal women in Sikkim and identifying the gaps that continue to hinder inclusive development.

### **Conclusion**

The review of policies and schemes for women's educational empowerment in Sikkim, with special reference to tribal women, highlights both significant progress and persistent challenges. Education has undoubtedly emerged as a powerful tool for transforming the lives of tribal women, enabling them to participate more actively in social, economic, and political spheres. National initiatives such as the Right to Education Act, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas, along with state-level interventions including scholarships, free learning materials, and reservations in Panchayati Raj institutions, have collectively contributed to narrowing the gender gap and increasing literacy and enrollment among tribal women in Sikkim. These measures have also encouraged greater participation of women in community decision-making, improved health awareness, and opened pathways for employment and leadership.

However, despite these achievements, structural and contextual barriers remain. Geographical remoteness, cultural norms, financial constraints, and lack of culturally sensitive curricula continue to restrict the full impact of these policies. The uneven reach of digital infrastructure and shortage of qualified teachers in rural areas further limit opportunities for tribal women to access quality education. Therefore, while existing policies have laid a strong foundation, there is a need for more inclusive, context-specific, and participatory approaches. Strengthening infrastructure, promoting cultural sensitivity, and engaging local communities will be critical in ensuring that education becomes a sustained and transformative force for the empowerment of tribal women in Sikkim.

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