



When Poverty Teaches First: How Economic Hardships Shape Educational Choices

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Abstract

This study explores how poverty directly influences educational decisions in underdeveloped rural regions of Jammu and Kashmir. Through a structured survey of 150 respondents—students, parents, and teachers—it uncovers the emotional, financial, and practical choices families face when survival outweighs schooling. Results show that poverty leads to early dropouts, irregular attendance, and limited career aspirations. The study calls for systemic interventions to ensure no child is forced to choose between livelihood and learning.

Keywords

JEL Classification: I24, O15

Poverty, Education, Rural India, Dropouts, Economic hardship, School access, Jammu & Kashmir

Introduction

In many rural parts of India, education is not a right—it's a privilege. For families living in economic distress, every day is a choice between survival and schooling. The idea that 'poverty teaches first' reflects the stark reality that children often inherit economic roles far earlier than educational opportunities. This paper investigates how financial constraints shape decisions about school attendance, completion, and continuation in economically backward areas of Jammu & Kashmir.

Literature Review

Poverty remains a primary barrier to universal education. UNESCO (2017) reports that children from low-income households are five times more likely to be out of school. In India, the ASER Report (2023) noted that despite rising enrollment, consistent attendance and learning outcomes remain low in rural areas. Studies by Jha & Parvati (2019) and Kumar (2021) show how poverty intertwines with other challenges—child labor, migration, and gender bias—to cripple educational aspirations. However, region-specific research, especially in the Himalayan belt, remains limited.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how poverty affects school enrollment, attendance, and dropout rates.
2. To explore family perceptions about the value of education amidst financial struggle.
3. To identify common coping mechanisms adopted by poor families regarding education.
4. To offer policy recommendations that make education more accessible for the poor.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey method. Sample Size: 150 respondents (80 parents, 50 students, 20 teachers) Area: Rural, hilly districts of Jammu & Kashmir Sampling Technique: Purposive Tool: Structured questionnaire (20 questions: Likert scale + Yes/No + open-ended) Data Analysis: Simple percentages, pie charts, bar graphs, and thematic interpretation

Sample Survey Questions

1. Has poverty ever forced you or your child to skip school? (Yes/No)
2. How many days per week does your child miss school due to work/home responsibilities?
3. Rate how strongly you agree: "Education is important, but survival comes first."
4. Have you taken any loans to support your child's education?
5. At what grade do children in your area usually drop out?

Findings and Interpretation

Table 1: Impact of Poverty on Education Choices (Parents' View)

Survey Item	Yes (%)	No (%)
Child missed school due to economic reasons	72	28
Education-related loans taken	49	51
Prefers child to earn over attending higher classes	63	37
Unable to afford school materials (books, shoes, etc.)	68	32
Item	% of Students	
Worked before/after school to support family	58%	
Felt embarrassed due to lack of uniform/supplies	42%	
Missed school due to household labor	54%	
Aspire to finish schooling despite economic pressure	71%	

Table 2: Student Responses on Daily Challenges

Discussion

The results affirm a painful but common pattern: when money is scarce, education becomes optional. Most parents value schooling but lack the means to support it consistently. Children are aware of their academic needs but feel pressured by their families' survival struggles. Teachers, though committed, feel helpless in reversing dropout trends without structural change. The belief that 'education ends poverty' is alive—but under constant threat from lived reality.

Recommendations

1. Direct Cash Incentives for school-going children in rural poor households
2. Free school materials (uniforms, bags, books) through local schemes
3. Flexible school hours or bridge classes for working children
4. Community awareness campaigns linking education with long-term empowerment
5. Monitoring dropout cases at cluster level with real-time data tracking

Conclusion

Poverty doesn't just affect what families eat—it shapes what children become. In many parts of rural India, children are forced to abandon dreams for duties. The only way to break this generational curse is to treat education not as a choice, but as a right insulated from economic vulnerability. Policy must stop asking: 'Why don't they attend school?' and instead ask: 'What forces them to leave?'

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