

Understanding Educational Mobility: An In-depth Analysis of Higher Education Migration Among Tribal Students in Ladakh

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Abstract

Migration and its processes are not new phenomena. It is a product of both nature and human activities. Recently, student migration has been a topic of discussion among educationists and social scientists, impacting the region from which students migrate, either temporarily or permanently. The present study attempts to understand why students migrate from Ladakh and what causes such movements. For this purpose, a descriptive study was conducted on 240 college-going students who were seeking admission to other cities to pursue advanced higher education degrees. The 'Lee Theory of Migration' was used as a theoretical framework, and the findings suggest that issues such as the unavailability of higher education institutions within students' vicinity, along with harsh terrain and inadequate human and material resources, such as no heating facilities in college during extreme temperatures, are contributing factors leading to migration.

Keywords: *higher education, student migration, regional disparity, Ladakh.*

Introduction and Rationale

Migration has been a subject of study for social scientists (Cwerner, 2001), traditionally understood as human movement driven by natural factors such as famine, plagues, and other catastrophes (Thomson, 1999; King, 2012). Over the years, non-natural factors have increasingly influenced migration, with people relocating for better opportunities and an improved lifestyle. Among these man-made reasons, access to education (Dustmann & Glitz, 2011; Smith et al., 2014) has emerged as a significant driver, prompting individuals to move from their hometowns to areas with quality educational facilities. This trend has risen sharply (Brezis & Soueri, 2011), with growth rates doubling in certain regions. In India, large disparities in the

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distribution of higher education institutions are one of the main causes of student migration (Varghese & Panigrahi, 2019). Certain states and union territories also face multi-layered marginalisation in accessing higher education, furthering this disparity.

This study focuses on Ladakh, a relatively newly formed Union Territory that has long struggled with disconnected curricula and the quality of education (Suri, 2016; Goswami, 1999; Norberg, 1991). The formal education system in Ladakh began expanding only in the 1990s, following government initiatives to establish primary schools in remote villages. However, Norberg (1991) and Rizvi (1999) highlight that language barriers and unsuitable curricula designed by outsiders posed significant challenges. English and Urdu, being foreign languages for Ladakhi children, made it difficult for them to grasp the content. Consequently, 95 per cent of students failed the Class X board examinations (Rehman, 2013). Through community initiatives like *Operation New Hope* (Dawa, 2007) and the efforts of the *Mutahhary Educational Society* (Gupta, 2023), along with policy interventions in both Leh and Kargil districts, significant improvements were observed in board examination results. This led to the pass percentage increasing from 5 per cent in 1998 to 50 per cent in 2005 (Ranganathan et al., 2017). As the number of secondary students grew, the demand for higher education in Ladakh surged abruptly. This resulted in a 90 per cent increase in migration patterns among students seeking quality higher education (Wangchuk, 2019; Ahmad, 2018).

The objective of this study is to highlight to policymakers and stakeholders in Ladakh the importance of reforming the current higher education system to tackle the issue of student migration, retain talent and combat the ageing population.

Theoretical Framework

The literature synthesis suggests that migration is not a modern phenomenon but has existed since time immemorial. However, the nature and intensity of migration have changed across different periods. This is the reason that, at the end of the 19th century, Ravenstein (1885) identified eight laws of migration that later became a framework and foundation for scholars who explored and studied migration behaviours. Educational migration then became a subject of study among social scientists as it emerged as a new form of migration that intensified largely in the 20th century and is now observed across the globe.

Ever since globalisation and the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) came into force, flexible and favourable policies have further increased the number

of student migrants across continents (Arar, 2021). However, there is a significant gap between international and intra-national migration patterns in theoretical understanding. For example, Riaño and Piguet (2016) suggest that the theories of migration pertaining to students in the international context have been primarily formulated by British scholars who focused on the context of the United Kingdom (UK). This raises questions about the empirical validity of these theories outside the UK, increasing the complexity of understanding student mobility in the international context.

Meanwhile, the theorisation of interstate migration further becomes complex due to its multidimensional methodology. For instance, Prafula and Jadhav (2016) state that students migrate to upgrade their skills in advanced cities. Similarly, the rise of middle-income families and the availability of education loans are identified as factors by Pande & Yan (2016). Mistri and Sardar (2022) inform that the number of internal student migrants is 5.5 million in India. However, the nature of these migrations differs significantly. Chandrasekhar and Sharma (2014) report that some students migrate within districts, some within states, and others across states. Such diversity in student mobility makes it difficult for the state to maintain empirical data on all these migrating students, further intensifying the challenges for social scientists in framing a concrete framework or theory to understand the migratory phenomenon. Based on this understanding among the various frameworks and theories proposed by scholars to understand migration, the present study adopts Lee's (1966) 'push-pull theory'. This theory provides a structural framework for examining the economic, social, and natural factors that motivate individuals to migrate from or return to urban areas. It is comprehensive, offering multiple dimensions for analysing migration and its underlying factors. For example, the theory identifies key parameters such as factors associated with the place of origin and destination, intervening obstacles, and personal factors. These serve as potential variables for understanding the complexities of migration.

The present study aims to explore the motivations behind the migration of students by analysing the relationship between the place of origin and destination. It will specifically highlight factors that push students to migrate to other cities. These include deficiencies in infrastructure, inadequate human resources in the colleges in which they are enrolled, physiographical impacts, and other challenges at the point of origin that act as triggers for migration. Thus, the study utilises Lee's (1966) theoretical framework to investigate the dynamics of student migration. The rationale and concepts outlined in the push-pull theory have been applied to trace and construct the factors influencing student migration in the present research context.

Research Methodology

To conduct the study, the researchers adopted a descriptive research design. As the primary focus was on individuals intending to migrate outside Ladakh for higher studies, observing and interacting with them in their natural setting was essential. This approach aligns with the theoretical understanding of tracing populations within their natural environments to obtain first-hand information from respondents.

Additionally, a mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2005; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) was employed to collect and analyse data, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The total sample size was 262, comprising 240 students, 8 parents, 10 teachers, and 4 college principals. The samples were selected using the 'convenience sampling' technique to address the research questions effectively. The sampling technique 'convenience' was employed due to the high absence of students in the colleges as a result of harsh weather conditions during data collection.

To gather data, the researchers administered a questionnaire that included both open-ended and closed-ended questions for students, an interview schedule for administrators and parents, and an information schedule to collect the human and material status of the colleges. These tools ensured the collection of diverse and relevant data, allowing the study to capture a holistic view of the participants' perspectives and experiences.

Results and Discussions

The data highlights that Ladakh currently has six undergraduate colleges, of which four are operational, while two remain non-functional despite being announced in 2018. The colleges located in urban areas, specifically in Leh and Kargil districts, were established in 1994 and 1995, respectively. The rural colleges, situated in Zaskar and Nubra, were established later, in 2011.

The colleges located in urban areas offer a range of undergraduate courses, including Bachelor of Arts (BA), Bachelor of Science (BSc), and Bachelor of Commerce (BCom). In contrast, those in rural areas offer only a Bachelor of Arts (BA) programme, indicating a disparity in academic opportunities between urban and rural areas.

During field visits, students expressed frustration over the lack of a dedicated university in the region. In 2018, the state government announced the establishment

of a cluster university for Ladakh. However, the existing colleges fail to meet several basic eligibility criteria required to form a cluster university, particularly under Component 2 and Sub-criterion 2.0 of the Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA).

At present, all colleges in Ladakh are affiliated with the University of Kashmir, which has introduced additional challenges. Frequent civil unrest in the Kashmir Valley often disrupts academic schedules, delaying the timely completion of courses. This was mentioned by one of the college principals, who shared his concerns about the impact of such disruptions on students' academic progress and overall morale.

“The affiliation with the University of Kashmir and their insensitivity towards far-flung colleges of Ladakh kills the motivation of students.”

-Personal interaction

The statement reflects the fragile ecosystem of higher education in Ladakh. It highlights the numerous challenges faced by higher education in the region, particularly the administrative disconnect. Being geographically distant from Kashmir, Ladakh experiences delays in resolving disputes or addressing challenges in higher education due to the absence of university officials in the area. These logistical challenges disrupt the smooth functioning of colleges in Ladakh. Additionally, the statement underscores the failure of the University of Kashmir to develop an academic framework that meets the specific needs of colleges situated in far-flung and inaccessible areas.

The statement also points to the insensitivity of the host university, which has not provided adequate services or taken proactive measures to address the pressing issues faced by students and teachers. This neglect fosters feelings of marginalisation and disengagement among the students.

The systemic failure of higher education explains the strong demand for a dedicated university in Ladakh. Studies further reveal that the absence of local higher education institutions often forces students out of the system (Rai, 2022). In areas heavily dependent on government institutions, this results in lower gross enrolment rates and reduced participation in higher education (Varghese & Panigrahi, 2019). Despite these administrative failures, the aspiration for further studies is high among the students, as depicted in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1. Percentage of Students who would like to seek further education.

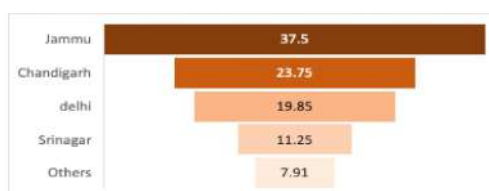


Source: Field Visit in Ladakh

The data reveal that, despite challenges, a significant majority (79.50 per cent) of students across all colleges in Ladakh expressed a willingness to continue their education. Notably, in the Kargil district, the highest percentage of students (86.50 per cent) indicated their intention to pursue further studies, compared to 72.50 per cent in the Leh district. However, a significant shift is observed in Degree College Nubra, where only 60 per cent of students expressed interest in further education, while 40 per cent showed disinterest. It is interesting to note that these students have no option to continue their higher education within Ladakh. This compels them to migrate to other cities in India or abroad, as the region lacks institutions offering educational opportunities beyond graduation. According to Lee's theory, every location is characterised by a combination of positive and negative factors that influence migration decisions. In this context, the lack of advanced educational institutions in Ladakh acts as a significant negative factor, driving students to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Additionally, the researchers investigated the destination preferences of migrating students. The findings underline how the absence of local higher education infrastructure not only limits educational aspirations but also perpetuates a cycle of migration for academic and professional advancement. The following figure (Fig. 2) depicts the trends and preferences of students who intend to migrate and the cities they prefer as migration destinations.

Fig. 2. Preference given for migration.



Source: Field Visit in Ladakh

The selection of migration locations aligns with the challenges highlighted in the previous analysis. Among the cities, the sister region of Ladakh, Jammu, is chosen by the majority of students (37.50 per cent). The choice of city is not random; rather, it is influenced by the students' prior experiences and available information about the location. In this context, Smith & Gergan (2015) suggest that many Ladakhi students prefer Jammu due to its proximity to Ladakh. Moreover, given Ladakh's harsh winters, several families migrate temporarily to Jammu during the cold season, making the city a familiar and accessible destination for students.

Prior knowledge and connections significantly influence the selection process, as illustrated by a student's narration during a personal interaction:

"Most of my friends are in Jammu. They are studying in different universities, and I have visited Jammu twice. I found it safer, and the locals maintain good relationships with Ladakhis."

Personal interaction

This analysis indicates that peer networks and earlier exposure to potential destinations influence migration decisions. Following Jammu, the other preferred cities are Chandigarh (23.75 per cent), Delhi (19.85 per cent), Srinagar (11.25 per cent), and other states and Union Territories (7.91 per cent). It is noteworthy that despite being geographically closest to Ladakh, Srinagar ranks fourth among the preferred migration destinations. This is linked to the civil unrest, academic disruptions, and disturbances in the valley, which demotivate students from seeking admission to universities affiliated with the University of Kashmir. Additionally, students' dissatisfaction with the University of Kashmir further deters them from choosing Srinagar.

The analysis reveals that factors such as accessibility, quality of education, socio-economic conditions, and past experiences heavily influence migration choices. These findings align with Lee's migration theory, which emphasises the role of "push factors", such as the lack of local opportunities, in driving migration. The absence of higher educational institutions in Ladakh serves as a critical push factor, compelling students to seek education in other regions.

Limited Courses to Study

Both colleges situated in urban areas offer three undergraduate courses, whereas only one undergraduate course is offered in the colleges located in rural areas. This further intensifies the absence of professional and technical courses within Ladakh.

All these factors are major reasons for pushing students outside Ladakh for better course opportunities. The following figure indicates the percentage of students who are satisfied and dissatisfied with the courses offered in their respective colleges.

Fig. 3. Percentage of Students showing satisfaction/dissatisfaction with courses.



Source: Field Visit in Ladakh

The figure reveals that students in GDC Kargil were highly satisfied, with 70 per cent expressing satisfaction, while the least satisfied respondents were respondents from GDC Nubra. It further indicates that satisfaction decreases progressively from GDC Kargil to GDC Nubra, while dissatisfaction shows the opposite trend. The data suggests that GDC Zaskar and GDC Nubra need to evaluate their courses or other contributing factors to address the high levels of dissatisfaction.

In addition to limited course options, the distance of colleges from far-flung areas has been identified as another major factor driving migration. Students from Drass and Suru Valley have to cover 100-120 kilometres (to and fro) daily to reach the nearest college. Moreover, the hefty transportation fares and the absence of a subsidised transport system further discourage students and parents from choosing colleges within Ladakh.

Mismanagement of the affiliated University

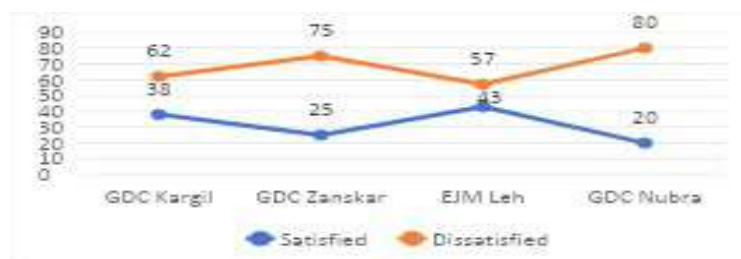
The colleges in Ladakh are affiliated with the University of Kashmir, which is located 225 km from Kargil, 423 km from Leh, 448 km from Zaskar, and 582 km from Nubra. The university remains inaccessible to the colleges in Ladakh during the entire winter. Moreover, due to negligence, students face several serious issues related to their academic degrees and examinations. Moreover, the absence of proper management and autonomy in the colleges further complicates the process, as every single dispute arising in the colleges needs to be resolved in Kashmir. This mismanagement and casual attitude of the university are summarised by a student in these words

“We raised our concerns genuinely many times regarding delays in the exam and result process with the college authority, but they were unable to solve our problems... I want to suggest to all my friends not to be admitted to the colleges of Ladakh; it spoils both time and energy.”

Personal Interaction

This statement reflects a student’s deep frustration and dissatisfaction with the academic and administrative inefficiencies in Ladakh’s colleges. The narration is further supported by empirical evidence, as the following figure shows the attitude of students regarding the functioning and management.

Fig. 4: Attitude towards the affiliated University.



Source: Field Visit in Ladakh

The above figure details students’ satisfaction levels versus dissatisfaction regarding the affiliated university’s functioning. Figure 4 highlights that dissatisfaction rates are alarmingly high across all colleges, with Nubra (80 per cent) and Zaskar (75 per cent) being the most affected. The reasons for dissatisfaction vary, including feelings of resentment and exhaustion with the university’s management system, as reflected in the narration given above.

The data reveals systemic issues in the university’s functioning, leaving students disillusioned. Addressing management inefficiencies and student grievances is critical to restoring trust and ensuring better academic and professional outcomes for Ladakh’s students.

Topographical features of the region

Ladakh is an arid and harsh region, landlocked with the highest and mightiest mountains of the Himalayan and Zaskar ranges. This creates a hurdle in making

Ladakh accessible to all year-round by road. This is the reason why Ladakh remains cut off from the rest of the world for more than 3 to 4 months in winter. Heavy snow causes the motorable roads to be closed at Zojila, and all road communications are severed.

Although the enrolment of students at Degree College, Kargil, showed 2,337 students across different courses, during the field visit, less than 50 per cent of students were present in their classes. Technically, the colleges in Ladakh remain closed for only two months in winter (January and February), but after September, most students prefer to attend coaching in other parts of the country instead of attending college due to the harsh winter and unbearable cold. They prefer to return only after winter, as the winter season is the most challenging period for both students and teachers. Commenting on the difficulties posed by the weather, a college teacher remarked:

“The cold weather and the unavailability of any heating arrangement in winter are the biggest challenges I have faced to date.”

Personal Interaction

During the data collection process, it was observed that villages in distant valleys and barren mountains remain cut off from the district headquarters. Only villages within a 40-kilometre radius remain connected to the district headquarters. The temperature drops to below -35°C to -40°C . Ladakh is also known as the home of the world's second coldest inhabited place (Ahmad, 2018). A parent recorded his response as follows:

“Winter is the most challenging period for Ladakhis as most of the livelihood stocks stored during summer finish during the winter season...” Further adding to his conversation, he lamented the tyranny of the harsh season... “Since winter lasts from October to March, half of the year in Ladakh is experienced as winter.”

Personal Interaction

The majority of students reported that the harsh cold weather severely affects their studies. Those who can afford the expenses of coaching send their children outside the region for winter coaching classes, while the financially weaker sections suffer.

A similar statement was given by the college Principal:

“The months from December to the end of February are too cold for the study environment. Many times, we cancelled summer vacations to compensate for the

lost time. We are considering increasing the working hours from 6 hours daily to 7 hours and 30 minutes. To boost enrolment, hostel facilities for both boys and girls with maximum amenities could help.”

Personal Interaction

Based on the interviews, it can be stated that the harsh cold weather during winter and the problems faced by the people of Ladakh are unimaginable. Such extreme weather, with temperatures as low as -30°C, makes it difficult for students to attend classes, especially when there is no heating arrangement. These factors are a strong reason for student migration from Ladakh to other parts of India.

Conclusion

Students in Ladakh face several challenges, primarily due to the region's geographical, academic, administrative, and climatic factors. The absence of a local university, along with difficulties arising from affiliation with the University of Kashmir, has caused significant dissatisfaction among students. Harsh winters, coupled with a lack of heating facilities in the classrooms, make studying during the colder months extremely difficult, prompting many students to seek education elsewhere. Additionally, rural colleges offer limited course options, and the disparity between urban and rural areas in terms of educational infrastructure further pushes students out of Ladakh. The inefficient management of colleges only adds to this frustration. As a result, many students migrate to cities like Jammu, Chandigarh, and Delhi for better educational opportunities. These ongoing issues make it clear that policymakers and stakeholders need to reform Ladakh's higher education system to support its students effectively, to retain talent and prevent students from migrating out of Ladakh to tackle the ageing population.

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