

Constraints of Higher Education in Darjeeling Hills: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Constraints of higher education, particularly in the Darjeeling hills, include infrastructure deficits, teacher shortages, high dropout rates, a curriculum focused on rote learning, and disparities in quality and access. Higher education in the Darjeeling Hills faces several constraints that impede its development and effectiveness. The key challenges encountered in the region's higher education landscape, including infrastructural limitations, faculty shortages, financial constraints, access issues, and curriculum relevance. Addressing these constraints is crucial for enhancing the quality and accessibility of higher education in the Darjeeling Hills and fostering regional socio-economic development. The constraints in higher education are not as simple as in the plain areas of the district and other districts of West Bengal. Here in the Darjeeling hills, right from the geographical factor to the ultimate channel, i.e. political factors, is also responsible, the constraints in the Hills of Darjeeling have been divided into the following heads. Infrastructural problems, limited numbers of seats, language problems, geographical factors, social factors, political factors, financial constraints and psychological factors.

Key Words : Higher education, Faculty shortages, Infrastructural limitations, Financial constraints, Psychological factors

INTRODUCTION

India's higher education system has its roots in the colonial era, heavily influenced by the British model. The establishment of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras universities in 1857 signified the formal institutionalization of Western higher education in India (Basel Mission Archive, 2004). Education is the key to all success; without it, there would be no distinction between man and animals. The new 21st century is a time of computers, Information, and technology, so without them, life is incomplete. Modern advancements in information technology have revolutionized every aspect of human life. These transformations are largely attributed to the global development of educational systems. Key to these changes is the advancement of higher education. However, significant challenges persist, leaving thousands deprived of access to quality education. To accommodate the people according to the changing times and conditions, the people must adapt

to the new conditions, but if the people are not highly educated and conscious, the time will not wait for them, to bridge the gap between the populace and the evolving demands of the era, the establishment of new vocational colleges becomes imperative. . The modern facilities and research opportunities, particularly in Western education, attract thousands of students worldwide. India, in this regard, is no exception. Since gaining independence, India has endeavored to provide quality education by establishing universities, colleges, and research institutions. While some successes have been achieved, India still grapples with widespread educational disparities. The state of West Bengal, within India, similarly strives to excel in the field of education by establishing numerous educational institutions annually. Unfortunately, the people of Darjeeling Hills find themselves distanced from these opportunities, unable to reach them. Fields such as Medicine, Engineering, Law, Information Technology, and Management beckon, yet remain elusive dreams akin to stars in the night sky. Consequently, there arises a pressing need for the government to proactively establish accessible colleges catering to these disciplines. However, governmental efforts in this direction have been lacking in sincerity. However, higher education emerges as the paramount stage of learning. Despite its significance, the Darjeeling Hills grapples with numerous constraints in this regard.

However, significant challenges remain, depriving thousands of people of access to quality education. As society evolves, people must adapt to new conditions. Yet, without proper education and awareness, they risk being left behind. The establishment of vocational colleges is essential to bridge the gap between the population and the growing demands of the modern world.

Advanced educational facilities and research opportunities, particularly in Western institutions, attract thousands of students worldwide, and India is no exception. Since gaining independence, India has made considerable efforts to provide quality education through universities, colleges, and research institutions. While progress has been made, disparities in education persist.

West Bengal has also strived to improve its education system by establishing new institutions each year. However, the people of Darjeeling Hills remain largely excluded from these opportunities, unable to access higher education. Fields such as Medicine, Engineering, Law, Information Technology, and Management continue to be out of reach, distant aspirations akin to stars in the night sky. This highlights the urgent need for the government to take proactive measures in establishing accessible colleges in these disciplines.

Despite the critical role of higher education, the Darjeeling Hills continue to face numerous challenges in this domain. Unfortunately, governmental efforts in this regard have lacked sincerity, further widening the educational gap in the region.

Objectives:

The objective of the study is:

- To determine the status of higher education in Darjeeling.
- To find out the facilities provided for better higher education in the Darjeeling hills
- To find out the role of the Government in promoting higher education.
- To assess the problems faced by the people of the Darjeeling hills
- To find out the best possible remedies to cope with those problems

METHODOLOGY

The research paper is based on secondary sources of information. Different books and journals have been consulted for information, more emphasis has been placed on the qualitative aspects rather than the quantitative. The observation method is also used to discuss the ground realities of Darjeeling.

Brief History of Higher Education in Darjeeling Hills:

The Christian missionaries were instrumental in introducing Western education to the Darjeeling Hills. Their primary motives included religious conversion and clerical training, yet they inadvertently laid the foundation for formal education in the region (O'Malley, 1907).

Higher education in India was modelled after the British education system. During British rule, universities and colleges were established because, at that time, higher education was largely unplanned. Wealthy Indians pursued higher studies abroad, while the poorer sections had little to no access to higher education. In 1857, the British established three major universities—Calcutta University, Bombay University, and Madras University—following the London University model. By the time India gained independence in 1947, only 19 universities existed in the country.

The first higher education institution in the Darjeeling Hills, St. Joseph's College, was founded in 1927 in Darjeeling. Initially located at the present Park Hotel site, it was later relocated to its current campus. Salesian College was established in 1933 at Sonada, Gorabari, originally catering only to outsiders but now open to locals as well. Local aspirations for higher education led to the establishment of Scottish Universities Mission Institution (SUMI) College in Kalimpong in 1933, offering Intermediate Arts courses for both men and women. Despite its early promise, SUMI was shut down in 1959, even though the Darjeeling Enquiry Committee (1955–57) had recommended its expansion (Sen, 2010).

Despite a well-functioning school system, there was no structured higher education system in the Darjeeling Hills. However, local residents were keen on establishing a college. Their efforts led to the founding of S.U.M.I. College in Kalimpong in 1933, offering intermediate arts courses. It was the first institution in the hills to provide higher education for both male and female students and was affiliated with the University of Calcutta. Unfortunately, the college was shut down in 1959, despite recommendations from the Darjeeling Enquiry Committee (1955–1957) to upgrade the institution and provide financial aid.

During British rule, India's education system followed a structured path where students completed matriculation, then two years of intermediate courses, followed by an undergraduate program leading to a degree. Universities conducted all examinations, and in West Bengal, Calcutta University was the only institution overseeing higher education. After independence, Post-independence, higher education became a joint responsibility of central and state governments under the Concurrent List of the Constitution (MHRD, 2016). In West Bengal, the government passed several bills to establish new universities, including Jadavpur University, Burdwan University, Kalyani University, North Bengal University (1962), Vidyasagar University, Gour Banga University, and West Bengal University of Technology.

Although North Bengal University (NBU) was established in 1962 in the Darjeeling district, it was located in the plains, limiting accessibility for people from the hills. Despite 18 colleges being present in the Darjeeling district, only 11 are situated in the hilly areas, highlighting the need for a

university within the Darjeeling Hills.

In 1948, Darjeeling Government College was founded and initially affiliated with Calcutta University. After the establishment of NBU, it was re-affiliated. The college initially offered intermediate courses in science and arts, and from 1950, it introduced Honours courses in both streams. Today, it provides postgraduate (PG) programs in Botany, Zoology, Nepali, and English. To train teachers, Shree Ram Krishna B.T. College was established in 1957, primarily to prepare educators for schools and higher secondary institutions. However, teacher training has become increasingly expensive, making it difficult for fresh graduates to enroll. The institution reserves a certain number of seats for deputed schoolteachers. Loreto College, now Southfield College, was founded in 1961 exclusively for women and offers undergraduate degrees in the arts. Kalimpong College was established in 1962, followed by Kurseong College in 1967. Despite recommendations from the Darjeeling Enquiry Committee (1955–1957) to establish a degree college in Kurseong, the West Bengal government did not act on it. Finally, local citizens took the initiative, and after a decade of efforts, the college was established at Kanika House, later moving to its present campus. The science stream was introduced in the 1980s.

Other notable institutions in the Darjeeling Hills include:

- **Sonada College (1985)** – Located in the lower Sonada Gram Panchayat area at Ramitey, offering only arts courses with Honours programs in various subjects.
- **Bijanbari College (1995)**
- **Cluny College for Women (1995)**
- **Mirik College (2000)**
- **Ghoom–Jorebunglow Degree College (2004)**

All colleges in the Darjeeling Hills are affiliated with North Bengal University, which was established in 1962, approximately 15 km from Siliguri town in the plains of the Darjeeling district. Higher education in the Darjeeling Hills has evolved from missionary-led initiatives to government-supported institutions. However, despite the growth in the number of colleges, the absence of a university in the hills remains a major challenge. Expanding educational infrastructure in the region is crucial for improving accessibility and fostering academic development.

Constraints of Higher Education in the Darjeeling Hills:

Identifying the constraints of higher education in the Darjeeling Hills is no easy task. Based on my observations over the years of teaching and data gathered from secondary sources, including library books, local magazines, journals, and unpublished articles, I have compiled the key challenges faced by students and institutions in the region. These constraints are not as straightforward as those found in the district's plains or other West Bengal districts. In the Darjeeling Hills, factors ranging from geographical challenges to political influences play a significant role in shaping the higher education landscape. The constraints, as I have observed, can be categorized into the following areas:

1. Political Instability and Its Impact:

The Darjeeling hills have experienced significant and frequent political turmoil from 1986 to 2017, notably the ethnic movement, which has adversely affected educational institutions from the Primary level to higher education. Frequent strikes and shutdowns disrupted

academic calendars and leading to uncertainty and a decline in student enrolment. Once upon a time Darjeeling hills was an educational hub for foreign students but due to movement, the students' numbers decreased drastically. T.B Subba discusses the ethnic and political movements in Darjeeling, including how identity and education are interconnected (Subba T.B. 1992) The Economic Times reported that political movements have led to substantial student withdrawals and a decrease in new admissions, affecting the local economy and the sustainability of educational institutions.

2. **Infrastructural Problems:** Colleges in the Darjeeling Hills are overwhelmed with students, as thousands from various parts of Darjeeling and other districts of West Bengal seek higher education in the region. However, due to insufficient infrastructure, they face significant challenges, particularly when it comes to classroom space. Many colleges lack adequately sized classrooms to accommodate all students, making it difficult for everyone to sit comfortably during lectures. Although several colleges offer different Honours and general subjects, the lack of proper classrooms means that classes are often either not conducted or, if they are, not all students can be accommodated. For instance, Darjeeling Government College urgently requires an additional building to accommodate students in the arts stream. This shortage of infrastructure is a major constraint facing higher education in the Darjeeling Hills.
3. **Limited Number of Seats:** The colleges in the Darjeeling Hills are allocated a very limited number of seats by the University of North Bengal, particularly for Honours subjects. Despite receiving hundreds of applications, only a small fraction of students can be admitted to these courses, creating significant difficulty in securing a spot. The university must increase the number of seats for Honours programs to ensure that more students can pursue their preferred courses. Currently, the seat allocation in the hill colleges is much lower compared to colleges in the plains areas and South Bengal, leaving many students deprived of higher education opportunities. Increasing the number of seats would allow more students to pursue Honours and even Postgraduate courses.
4. **Language Barriers:** Many students from Nepali-medium schools face challenges with English-medium instruction in colleges. Most colleges have faculty appointed by the College Service Commission, except for Darjeeling Government College, where teachers are appointed by the Public Service Commission. The majority of teachers in these colleges are non-Nepali speakers, making it difficult to cater to the linguistic needs of the students. On the other hand, students from English-medium schools also face challenges because teachers from other parts of Bengal and beyond are often not proficient in English. This language barrier complicates learning.
5. **Lack of Hostel Facilities:** Colleges in the Darjeeling Hills lack hostel facilities, which creates significant challenges for students who travel from remote areas. Many students, especially those from distant parts of Darjeeling, are unable to secure accommodation in hostels, which forces them to reconsider their pursuit of higher education. Providing hostel facilities for both boys and girls should be a priority for colleges, but this basic need

remains unmet in many institutions in the region. Sonada Degree College, Mirik College, Govt. General Degree College at Pedong and Gorubathanetc don't have their hostel facilities.

6. **Geographical Factors:** The Darjeeling Hills are home to several colleges across three subdivisions: Darjeeling, Kurseong, and Kalimpong. However, many students have to travel over 50 km to reach these colleges. For example, areas like Rimbick and Mangpu lack colleges, forcing students to travel to distant locations like Bijanbari or Darjeeling town. Similarly, areas such as Sitong, Latpancher, and other remote villages are far from any college, presenting significant challenges for students to access higher education.
7. **Social Constraints:**
 - i) **Lack of Awareness:** Many parents in the Darjeeling Hills are not fully aware of the importance of higher education. Due to their daily struggles to earn a living, they often fail to provide adequate guidance to their children. As a result, many students lack the support and encouragement necessary to pursue higher education, which hinders their academic and prospects.
 - ii) **Lack of Counselling:** Higher education options are often unclear to students in the hills. After completing their higher secondary, most students opt for general degree programs like B.A., B.Sc., or B.Com, without exploring alternative career paths like MBBS, LLB, or engineering. Vocational courses, management, IIT, etc, this lack of proper counselling leads to confusion, leaving students without clear career goals or future planning.
 - iii) **Influence of Peer Pressure:** Students in the hills are often influenced by their friends' choices when selecting their subjects or streams, rather than pursuing what truly interests them. This peer pressure leads to dissatisfaction and poor academic performance when students are not studying subjects they are passionate about.
8. **Economic Constraints:** Many families in the Darjeeling Hills, particularly those working in tea estates, have limited financial resources. This makes it difficult for them to afford higher education for their children. The region's agriculture is not economically viable due to traditional farming methods and low productivity. Only wealthier families can afford to send their children to cities like Kolkata, Bangalore, Delhi, for higher education, while the majority of students from low-income backgrounds face significant barriers even to send them to the nearest locations
9. **Lack of Employment Opportunities:** There is a severe lack of employment opportunities for students in the Darjeeling Hills. Despite passing the necessary exams, many candidates face delays in getting appointed to teaching positions due to ongoing political issues. The limited job market for subjects like Nepali also means that even students with postgraduate degrees struggle to find work, leading to frustration and a sense of deprivation among students.

10. **Lack of Competitive Environment:** The Darjeeling Hills lack a competitive academic environment compared to urban areas like Kolkata. Many students, especially those from rural areas, lack the drive and competitive spirit seen in students from more urbanized regions. This lack of competitiveness affects their academic performance and future prospects.
11. **Psychological Factors:** The sense of deprivation and discrimination felt by the people of the Darjeeling Hills, fueled by political narratives, and has deeply affected many individuals. There is a prevailing belief that non-Gorkha individuals are given preferential treatment in terms of employment opportunities. As a minority group in West Bengal, the Gorkha people of Darjeeling feel marginalized and often find themselves at a disadvantage, especially when competing for top jobs against well-educated candidates from urban centers like Kolkata, who are often better qualified. This disparity, particularly when candidates from affluent families with foreign qualifications are involved, makes it difficult for Gorkha people from the hills to compete. As a result, the psychological burden of this perceived inequality makes many individuals disillusioned with higher education. Instead of pursuing further studies, many young people opt to join the military or other armed forces, seeing it as a more attainable path to employment.
12. **Role of the State Government:** The Darjeeling Hills, once renowned for their school and college education up until the 1960s, have lost their former academic excellence due to the apathy of the state government also. There has been no significant effort to establish institutions for Engineering, Technical, Medical, Management, IT, or vocational education in the region. Government colleges and high schools in the Hills have remained without regular Principals and Headmasters for over a decade, leading to a sharp decline in educational standards and institutional management.

Many secondary schools in the Darjeeling Hills have been awaiting recognition and upgradation for the past 20 years due to bureaucratic negligence from the state education department. The urgent need for additional colleges to meet the growing demand for graduate and postgraduate education has largely been ignored. The state government's neglect of education and cultural development in the Hills is evident in numerous instances.

Amar Singh Rai, a retired professor, highlights this issue in the web journal *State of Higher Education in the Hills*, where he asserts that the West Bengal government has consistently treated the Hills unfairly in terms of higher education. Despite repeated requests, no initiatives have been taken to establish technical or vocational institutions that would allow students to pursue career-oriented education. Proposals for Medical and Engineering Colleges in the Hills have been consistently ignored, whereas numerous such institutions have been set up in other parts of Bengal.

Conclusion:

The Darjeeling Hills are known for their tea, timber, tourism, and as a region rich in tribal cultures, surrounded by international borders and the strategic gateway to India's North-Eastern states. The national security of India would be greatly enhanced if the people of this region were

better educated and more aware of their importance. However, being a peripheral minority in the larger context of mainland India, the people of Darjeeling Hills have often been overlooked by both the government and national political parties. As a democratic nation, India must recognize the significance of every region, ensuring the well-being of all its citizens, regardless of their colour, place, or background. A nation is truly developed when there is comprehensive progress for all its people and regions. Ignoring the needs of the Darjeeling Hills will not lead to peace, security, or development for the country. Therefore, the government must prioritize education as the key to the region's advancement.

The Darjeeling Hills remain significantly underdeveloped in many areas, especially in higher education. The current educational infrastructure is outdated, and the region lacks essential institutions like medical colleges, engineering colleges, law schools, IT institutes, and management colleges. To meet the growing educational needs, the government must establish such institutions to provide better opportunities for the people of the hills. Additionally, the population's basic needs—such as roads, clean water, and sanitation—must also be addressed to foster holistic development.

Higher education in the Darjeeling Hills is full of constraints, which are not only barriers to education but also to the overall progress of the region. Until these issues are properly addressed, there will likely be continued agitation and unrest, not just in Darjeeling but also in North Bengal. Therefore, solving the educational constraints is key to resolving many of the region's broader challenges. The West Bengal government must approach the issues of the Darjeeling Hills from a perspective of humanitarianism and fairness, rather than from a political lens, in order to effectively solve these problems and promote lasting peace and development.

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