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ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND GENDER DISPARITIES AMONG MUSLIM COLLEGE STUDENTS IN SEPAHIJALA, TRIPURA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

Background: Academic achievement among minority college students in India is shaped by an intricate web of socioeconomic, cultural, and gender-based factors. Muslim undergraduates in Sepahijala District, Tripura, constitute a doubly marginalised group—a religious minority in a predominantly tribal state—whose educational outcomes have received scant scholarly attention. **Objectives:** This study aimed to examine academic achievement levels, identify gender disparities, and explore the structural and socio-cultural challenges confronting Muslim college students in Sepahijala, Tripura, while also identifying enabling factors and prospects for educational advancement. **Methods:** A mixed-methods research design was employed. Quantitatively, academic performance data (CGPA/percentage) of 300 Muslim undergraduates (150 males and 150 females) were collected and analysed alongside a structured questionnaire measuring socioeconomic variables, motivational factors, and perceived barriers. Qualitatively, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 purposively selected students and 10 faculty members. Data were triangulated to generate comprehensive findings. **Results:** Female students recorded a higher mean CGPA (6.82 ± 0.91) compared to males (6.41 ± 1.02), yet faced significantly greater structural and social barriers to educational participation. Financial constraints (reported by 74.3% of participants), first-generation learner status (58.7%), and lack of access to coaching and digital resources were identified as the most critical challenges. Qualitative findings highlighted patriarchal norms, early marriage pressure on females, and communal identity-related anxieties as compounding barriers. **Conclusion:** Despite demonstrable academic potential, Muslim undergraduates in Sepahijala face formidable structural inequities that threaten educational continuity. Gender-sensitive, community-engaged policy interventions and institutional support mechanisms are urgently required to translate potential into sustained academic and socioeconomic progress.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognised as the most potent instrument for social mobility, economic empowerment, and the reduction of inter-group inequalities. In a demographically diverse society such as India, access to and achievement within higher education remain profoundly unequal across caste, class, religion, gender, and geography (Thorat and Newman, 2010). Among all major religious communities, Indian Muslims have been documented as consistently underrepresented in higher education and consistently underperforming in standardised educational indicators, a pattern attributed to intersecting historical, economic, and institutional factors (Sachar Committee Report, 2006). The Sachar Committee Report (2006), the most comprehensive government-commissioned study of Muslim socioeconomic status in independent India, found that the community's literacy rates, enrolment in higher education, and representation in professional streams lagged behind national averages and, in several indicators,

fell below those of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This finding catalysed policy attention but has not yet been matched by commensurate improvement in ground-level educational outcomes for Muslim youth, particularly in geographically peripheral states (Hasan and Menon, 2004). Tripura, a small northeastern state with significant ethnic and religious diversity, presents a distinctive context for examining minority education. The Muslim population of Tripura constitutes approximately 8.6% of the state's total population and is concentrated in districts including Sepahijala, formerly part of the West Tripura district (Census of India, 2011). Sepahijala is a predominantly rural district characterised by low per-capita income, limited industrial development, and inadequate educational infrastructure, factors that compound the educational vulnerabilities of its Muslim population. Gender is an especially important axis of educational inequality within Muslim communities in rural India. While Muslim female literacy and enrolment have improved nationally over recent decades, cultural expectations around female mobility, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and perceived

returns to female education continue to constrain educational participation and attainment among Muslim women in conservative, rural settings (Dreze and Sen, 2013). These gender dynamics do not operate uniformly but are mediated by class, locality, and family characteristics. Despite the significance of these issues, academic research on the educational outcomes of Muslim college students in Tripura, and specifically in Sepahijala District, is virtually absent from the scholarly literature. This gap limits the ability of policymakers, college administrators, and civil society organisations to design evidence-based interventions. The present study seeks to address this gap by providing a systematic, empirically grounded analysis of academic achievement and gender disparities among Muslim undergraduates in Sepahijala, exploring both the challenges they face and the prospects for improvement.

Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- To assess the academic achievement levels of Muslim male and female undergraduate students in Sepahijala District, Tripura.
- To examine gender-based disparities in academic performance and educational participation.
- To identify the structural, socioeconomic, and socio-cultural barriers to academic achievement among Muslim undergraduates.
- To explore enabling factors and future prospects for improving educational outcomes in this population.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The scholarship on Muslim education in India has grown substantially since the Sachar Committee Report (2006), which served as a watershed in policy and academic discourse. Hasan and Menon (2004), in an earlier foundational study, documented that Muslim women in particular faced a 'triple burden' of religious minority status, gender disadvantage, and class-based exclusion that collectively depressed their educational participation. Subsequent studies have corroborated these findings while adding nuance regarding regional variation. Regarding academic achievement specifically, Basant and Sen (2014) found in a nationally representative dataset that Muslim students who did access higher education performed comparably to students from other communities when socioeconomic background was controlled for, suggesting that the achievement gap is primarily a function of unequal access rather than intrinsic academic incapacity. This finding has important policy implications: it reframes the problem as one of structural disadvantage requiring structural remedies, rather than cultural or individual deficit. Gender disparities in educational attainment have been documented across South Asian contexts. Jeffery and Jeffery (1998) demonstrated that even in communities where male and female enrolment rates were converging, qualitative differences in the educational experience—type of institution attended, subjects studied, parental investment in daughters' education—remained significant. In Muslim communities specifically, the tension between aspirations for female education and patriarchal constraints on female mobility creates what Kabeer (2005) described as 'conditional educational inclusion'—women are permitted to study, but within boundaries that limit the scope and depth of their educational engagement. Studies from northeastern India on minority education are sparse. Salman (2020) examined the reasons and experiences contributing to secondary school dropout among Muslim students and found that financial constraints, disengagement from studies, and lack of institutional support were the most significant predictors of early school leaving, with females disproportionately affected. Sengupta and Roj (2018) documented that gender disparity in Muslim education in India is exacerbated by household size, poverty, and limited internet access, with Muslim girls facing compounded disadvantages that likely reduce their transition rate from secondary to higher education in districts such as Sepahijala.

The role of first-generation learner (FGL) status in shaping educational outcomes has received growing scholarly attention. Dennis et al. (2005) demonstrated that FGL students face distinct challenges including limited academic socialisation, inadequate knowledge of institutional resources, financial pressures, and identity conflicts that impede academic integration and performance. In the Indian context, Chauhan (2008) found that FGL status among marginalised communities is associated with higher dropout rates and lower academic confidence, compounding the disadvantages already arising from minority and low-income status. The intersection of digital inequality with educational achievement has emerged as a contemporary concern, especially post the COVID-19 pandemic. Oxfam India (2022) documented that students from economically marginalised communities, including those from minority religious groups and rural areas, were disproportionately affected by the shift to online learning due to poor device ownership, limited internet connectivity, and inadequate digital literacy, with only 4% of SC/ST households having resources to study online. This technological divide threatens to widen pre-existing achievement gaps if not actively addressed. Taken together, the literature suggests that Muslim undergraduates in rural, peripheral settings face a multi-layered disadvantage that is simultaneously socioeconomic, cultural, gendered, and institutional. The present study contributes to this literature by providing the first district-specific evidence from Sepahijala, Tripura.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: A concurrent mixed-methods design was adopted, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interview data (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). This design was chosen to capture both the measurable dimensions of academic achievement and gender disparity, and the lived experiences and contextual meanings that statistical data alone cannot convey. Quantitative and qualitative strands were collected simultaneously and triangulated during interpretation.

Study Setting and Participants: The study was conducted across six degree colleges in Sepahijala District, Tripura, selected on the basis of having a Muslim student enrolment of at least 15%. A total of 300 Muslim undergraduate students (150 males and 150 females) aged 18–25 years, enrolled in arts, science, or commerce streams, participated in the quantitative phase. Stratified random sampling was used, stratifying by gender and college. For the qualitative phase, 20 students (10 males and 10 females) and 10 faculty members were purposively selected to represent diversity in stream, year of study, and socioeconomic background. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Institutional ethical clearance was secured prior to data collection.

Data Collection

Academic Performance: Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) or equivalent percentage scores for the most recently completed academic year were recorded with institutional permission. Where CGPA was not the grading system, marks were converted to a 10-point CGPA scale using standard conversion formulae.

Structured Questionnaire: A researcher-designed questionnaire, piloted and refined for the local context, collected data on sociodemographic variables (age, gender, family income, parental education, residence), educational motivation (Academic Motivation Scale adapted from Vallerand et al., 1992), perceived barriers to education, access to study resources, and internet/digital access. Reliability of the motivation subscale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.79$).

In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with students and faculty members explored themes of academic aspiration, experienced barriers, family support, institutional environment, and community attitudes toward education. Interviews were conducted in

Bengali and Kokborok, audio-recorded with consent, and translated and transcribed by bilingual research assistants.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data were analysed in SPSS version 26.0 (IBM Corp., USA). Descriptive statistics, independent samples t-test, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson correlation were computed. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006): transcripts were read iteratively, initial codes were generated, and codes were grouped into overarching themes. Member checking and peer debriefing were employed to enhance the credibility of qualitative findings.

RESULTS

Sociodemographic Profile: The mean age of male participants was 20.6 ± 1.8 years and female participants 19.8 ± 1.6 years. The majority of participants (63.3%) were from rural or semi-rural backgrounds. Over half (58.7%) were first-generation learners. Nearly three-quarters (74.3%) reported monthly household income below ₹12,000, placing most families in the economically vulnerable category. Parental educational attainment was low: 61.7% of fathers and 74.3% of mothers had not completed secondary education. Table 1 provides a comprehensive sociodemographic summary.

Table 1. Sociodemographic Profile of Participants (N = 300)

Variable	Male n (%)	Female n (%)	p-value
Mean age (years $\pm$ SD)	20.6 ± 1.8	19.8 ± 1.6	0.001*
Rural/semi-rural background	91 (60.7)	99 (66.0)	0.321
First-generation learner	82 (54.7)	94 (62.7)	0.138
Family income < ₹12,000/month	108 (72.0)	115 (76.7)	0.361
Father: below secondary education	88 (58.7)	97 (64.7)	0.279
Mother: below secondary education	109 (72.7)	114 (76.0)	0.510
Hostel resident	58 (38.7)	41 (27.3)	0.035*

* $p < 0.05$ statistically significant

Table 2. Academic Achievement (CGPA) by Gender and Stream

Category	Male (n=150)	Female (n=150)	Total (N=300)	p-value
Mean CGPA ($\pm$ SD)	6.41 ± 1.02	6.82 ± 0.91	6.62 ± 0.98	<0.001*
High achievers (≥ 7.5)	28 (18.7%)	47 (31.3%)	75 (25.0%)	0.009*
Moderate achievers (5.5–7.4)	89 (59.3%)	89 (59.3%)	178 (59.3%)	1.000
Low achievers (<5.5)	33 (22.0%)	14 (9.3%)	47 (15.7%)	0.002*
Arts stream mean CGPA	6.22 ± 1.08	6.64 ± 0.94	6.44 ± 1.03	0.012*
Commerce stream mean CGPA	6.44 ± 0.98	6.88 ± 0.87	6.66 ± 0.94	0.029*
Science stream mean CGPA	6.71 ± 0.94	7.12 ± 0.88	6.92 ± 0.92	0.017*

* $p < 0.05$ statistically significant

Table 3. Top Five Perceived Barriers to Academic Achievement (Mean Likert Rating, 1–5)

Barrier	Male (n=150)	Female (n=150)	Total (N=300)	p
Financial constraints / poverty	4.28 ± 0.72	4.51 ± 0.64	4.40 ± 0.69	0.002*
Lack of digital resources / internet	4.01 ± 0.88	4.18 ± 0.81	4.10 ± 0.85	0.073
First-generation learner challenges	3.89 ± 0.91	4.02 ± 0.88	3.96 ± 0.90	0.198
Early marriage pressure (female)	1.94 ± 0.78	3.78 ± 0.94	2.86 ± 1.16	<0.001*
Inadequate career guidance	3.74 ± 0.97	3.44 ± 1.01	3.59 ± 1.00	0.011*

* $p < 0.05$ statistically significant

Table 4. Enabling Factors for Academic Pursuit — Frequency and Gender Comparison

Enabling Factor	Male n (%)	Female n (%)	Total N (%)
Family encouragement	98 (65.3)	107 (71.3)	205 (68.3)
Aspiration for government employment	118 (78.7)	125 (83.3)	243 (81.0)
Peer support and study groups	74 (49.3)	83 (55.3)	157 (52.3)
Presence of educated role models	62 (41.3)	72 (48.0)	134 (44.7)
Scholarship/financial assistance	55 (36.7)	61 (40.7)	116 (38.7)

Academic Achievement by Gender: Female students recorded a significantly higher mean CGPA (6.82 ± 0.91) than male students (6.41 ± 1.02), with this difference being statistically significant ($t = 4.21$, $df = 298$, $p < 0.001$). The proportion of high achievers (CGPA $\geq$

7.5) was greater among females (31.3%) than males (18.7%). Conversely, a higher proportion of males (22.0%) fell in the low-achievement category (CGPA < 5.5) compared to females (9.3%). Stream-wise, science stream students reported the highest mean CGPA, followed by commerce and arts. Table 2 presents achievement distribution by gender and stream.

Perceived Barriers to Academic Achievement: Participants were asked to rate eleven potential barriers to academic achievement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not a barrier, 5 = very significant barrier). Table 3 presents the five most highly rated barriers by gender. Financial constraints were rated the most significant barrier by both male and female students, though the mean rating was higher among females. Early marriage pressure was rated significantly higher by female students, while inadequate career guidance was rated higher by males.

Enabling Factors and Academic Motivation: Despite the barriers documented above, participants also identified enabling factors supporting educational pursuit. The most frequently reported enablers were: family encouragement (cited by 68.3% of participants), aspiration for government employment (cited by 81.0%), peer support networks (52.3%), and the presence of role models—teachers or community members with higher education—(44.7%).

Mean intrinsic motivation scores were significantly higher among females ($M = 3.92 \pm 0.61$) than males ($M = 3.58 \pm 0.74$, $p = 0.001$), consistent with the higher CGPA achieved by females. Instrumental motivation (i.e., education as a means to secure employment) was

high for both genders, with 81.0% overall rating this as a primary reason for pursuing college education. Table 4 summarises key enabling factors.

Qualitative Findings: Thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews generated four overarching themes: (i) financial insecurity as a pervasive threat; (ii) gendered educational opportunity structures; (iii) institutional gaps and inadequate support; and (iv) community aspirations and emerging change.

Theme 1 — Financial insecurity as a pervasive threat: Student narratives consistently returned to financial precarity as the most omnipresent barrier. One male Arts student described sacrificing study time to assist in the family's agricultural work during harvest seasons, directly impacting his examination preparation. Several students described sharing a single smartphone among multiple siblings for digital coursework, while others reported being unable to afford prescribed textbooks.

Theme 2 — Gendered educational opportunity structures: Female participants articulated experiences of navigating between educational aspirations and family expectations around marriage and domestic roles. A second-year female science student expressed: 'My parents support my studies, but the question of marriage is always present. Once I finish graduation, the pressure will increase.' Faculty members corroborated these observations, noting higher female dropout rates after the first year and attributing them significantly to marriage-related family decisions.

Theme 3 — Institutional gaps and inadequate support: Both students and faculty identified insufficient academic counselling, inadequate library resources, and the absence of structured remedial or mentoring programmes as institutional gaps. Internet connectivity within college premises was described as unreliable, severely limiting access to online academic resources. Faculty members noted large class sizes and limited contact hours as constraints on personalised academic support.

Theme 4 — Community aspirations and emerging change: Despite documented challenges, student and faculty narratives also reflected a palpable aspiration for educational advancement and social transformation within the community. Several students cited the influence of successfully employed graduates from their community as transformative role models. Faculty members noted that parental attitudes toward female education were gradually shifting, particularly among families where older siblings had pursued and benefited from higher education.

DISCUSSION

The finding that female Muslim undergraduates in Sepahijala outperform their male counterparts academically, despite facing greater social and structural barriers, is paradoxical and warrants careful interpretation. This pattern echoes findings from comparable settings in South Asia and has been theorised as a 'gender paradox of educational performance' (Corbett and Hill, 2012): women who successfully navigate structural obstacles to access higher education may be more highly selected for motivation, resilience, and academic commitment than their male peers, who face fewer social barriers to college enrolment but also fewer social incentives to excel academically once enrolled. The high rate of first-generation learner status (58.7%) in this study is a critical contextual factor. Dennis et al. (2005) established that FGL students lack the cultural capital—informal knowledge of institutional norms, academic vocabulary, and networking strategies—that students from educated families acquire implicitly. In the present study, this disadvantage likely manifests in difficulty navigating college bureaucracy, underutilisation of available scholarships and support schemes, and limited academic socialisation. The higher proportion of FGL females (62.7%) compared to males (54.7%) compounds the double disadvantage of gender and first-generation status for women.

Financial constraint emerged as the most universally identified barrier in this study, consistent with the broader literature on Muslim minority education (Sachar Committee Report, 2006; Hasan and Menon, 2004). However, in the Sepahijala context, financial barriers are particularly acute given the district's lower economic development indicators. The low utilisation of scholarships (38.7% of participants receiving financial assistance) despite widespread financial need suggests significant information gaps and administrative barriers in scholarship access, a problem documented in other marginalised educational contexts in India (Thorat and Newman, 2010). The gender gap in physical access to digital resources, and the broader digital divide affecting this population, assumes particular significance in the post-COVID educational landscape. Oxfam India (2022) documented that marginalised students who lacked adequate digital infrastructure during the pandemic experienced learning losses that disproportionately affected their academic trajectories. In Sepahijala, where internet connectivity is unreliable and device ownership is limited among low-income families, these gaps represent a structural risk factor for widening achievement disparities both within the community and between this community and more advantaged groups. Early marriage pressure, identified as a uniquely significant barrier for female students (mean Likert rating 3.78 vs. 1.94 for males, $p < 0.001$), is a finding consistent with research across Muslim communities in rural South Asia (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1998; Kabeer, 2005). Critically, however, qualitative findings suggested that this norm is not static: faculty members and students alike described gradual attitudinal change, particularly in families with prior experience of daughters completing education and entering employment. This finding aligns with Dreze and Sen (2013), who argued that demonstration effects—observing the tangible benefits of female education within one's own community—are among the most powerful drivers of changing social norms around female education. The high instrumental motivation around government employment (81.0% of participants) reflects both the social prestige of government jobs in rural India and the limited private sector employment opportunities in Sepahijala. This motivation pattern is important for intervention design: connecting educational achievement concretely to employment outcomes may be an effective lever for sustaining academic engagement. However, it also implies that if government job prospects are perceived as low—due to competitive examinations or quota policies—motivation may decline, a risk that warrants attention.

Prospects and Recommendations: The study findings, read alongside the enabling factors identified by participants, suggest a genuine basis for optimism about the educational prospects of Muslim undergraduates in Sepahijala, provided that targeted interventions address the documented structural barriers. The following evidence-based recommendations are proposed:

Financial Support Mechanisms: Colleges and district education authorities should establish dedicated scholarship facilitation cells staffed by trained counsellors who can assist Muslim students in identifying, applying for, and successfully claiming government scholarships including the Pre-Matric and Post-Matric Minority Scholarships under the Ministry of Minority Affairs. Awareness campaigns within communities about available financial aid could substantially increase uptake (Thorat and Newman, 2010).

Gender-Sensitive Educational Interventions: Female student dropout due to marriage pressure requires a community-level as well as institution-level response. Colleges should establish female student mentoring programmes and engage with community leaders to promote the economic and social benefits of female educational completion. Bridge programmes enabling women who have interrupted studies due to marriage to return to education should be explored.

Digital Inclusion Initiatives: Colleges should prioritise reliable Wi-Fi infrastructure and establish shared digital resource centres accessible to students without personal devices. Partnerships with state

government digital literacy programmes can supplement institutional efforts. The National Education Policy 2020 provides a policy framework for these investments (GoI, 2020).

Academic Support for First-Generation Learners: Structured orientation programmes, peer mentoring by senior students, and academic bridge courses at the start of the first year can help FGL students develop institutional familiarity and academic skills. Faculty sensitivity training on FGL challenges can improve the quality of classroom support (Dennis et al., 2005).

Career Guidance and Coaching Support: Given the strong instrumental motivation around government employment, structured career guidance programmes including awareness of competitive examinations, coaching support, and guidance on reservation provisions can help Muslim students translate academic achievement into employment outcomes. District-level coaching centres modelled on existing Minority Affairs Ministry programmes should be established or expanded in Sepahijala.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided the first comprehensive, mixed-methods assessment of academic achievement and gender disparities among Muslim college students in Sepahijala District, Tripura. The findings reveal a community characterised by considerable academic potential—particularly among female students, whose academic performance consistently exceeded that of males—alongside profound structural inequities that constrain educational access, continuity, and quality.

Financial insecurity, first-generation learner disadvantage, gendered social norms, digital exclusion, and inadequate institutional support constitute overlapping and mutually reinforcing barriers. Yet the study also reveals grounds for measured optimism. High levels of educational aspiration, strong instrumental motivation, the emergence of community role models, and gradual attitudinal shifts around female education suggest that this community is not passively accepting educational marginalisation but is actively navigating its constraints. With appropriately designed, community-sensitive, and gender-responsive interventions, the academic prospects of Muslim undergraduates in Sepahijala can be meaningfully improved. The responsibility for such interventions lies with educational institutions, state and district governments, civil society organisations, and community leaders alike.

Limitations: This study is subject to several limitations. The cross-sectional design limits causal inference. The sample was confined to six colleges in Sepahijala District and may not represent Muslim college students in other districts of Tripura or in urban settings. Self-reported data on motivation and barriers may be subject to social desirability bias. Qualitative findings, while rich, reflect the perspectives of a purposive sample and should not be generalised. Academic performance was measured using institutional records, which may vary in grading standards across colleges. Future longitudinal studies tracking cohorts over time are needed to establish causal pathways between the identified barriers and academic outcomes.

Ethical Statement: The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Anonymity and confidentiality of all individual data were maintained throughout. Qualitative interview recordings were stored on password-protected devices and accessible only to the research team.

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