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COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SUBJECT CHOICE AMONG RURAL YOUTH BY GENDER AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLASS

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Abstract

Education is a vital instrument of social mobility and subject choice reflects both personal aspirations and societal influences. This study explores how gender and socio-economic background shape subject preferences among rural youth of higher secondary schools in district Pauri Garwal of Uttarakhand. The sample consisted of 300 students (150 male and 150 female) from selected GICs in rural areas from Pauri district. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and analyzed using percentage analysis and chi-square tests. Findings revealed that male students predominantly opted for science and technical streams, while female students preferred arts and education. Socio-economic background significantly influenced subject choices. Students from upper and middle classes leaned toward commerce and science, whereas those from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more concentrated in arts. The combined effect showed that higher secondary school students belong to upper-class males were highly represented in science, whereas lower-class females were concentrated in arts. The study concludes that educational aspiration of students at higher secondary school level is still mediated by gender norms and socio-economic class-based opportunities, calling for career guidance and equitable educational planning in rural areas for the youth of higher secondary school.

Keywords : Higher Secondary, Subject Choice, Rural Youth, Gender, Social Class, Education Equity.

Introduction

Higher Secondary education is base of higher education which plays a vital role in determining individual identity, social mobility and occupational outcomes. Student makes mind set to select their study subjects and discipline for higher education level. Students have two ways to opt this as regular education through colleges and another one is distance education mode. Mostly in rural area either most of the students are pursuing their college education besides part time jobs or they have responsibility towards their families. In this case the pattern is subjects chosen by the students depend upon their previous study streams. In rural India, the process of subject choice at the higher education level often reflects a combination of personal interests, gender expectations, family aspirations and socio-economic limitations. Subject choice is not merely an academic decision—it is a social statement that mirrors how opportunities and expectations differ for boys and girls and for students of various economic classes. Research across rural regions of India (e.g., Tilak, 2018; NCERT, 2020) shows that subject choice remains highly stratified. While boys are encouraged toward science, agriculture and technology-related fields, girls are often steered toward arts, humanities and teacher training. Similarly, class differences define access—students from upper social strata have greater exposure and resources to pursue science and commerce, while those from lower strata often choose arts due to affordability and accessibility. This study attempts to make a comparative analysis of subject choice among rural youth by gender and social economic class, highlighting the structural inequalities that persist despite universal education policies at higher secondary school level.

Review of Literature

Previous studies have consistently highlighted that subject preference among students is largely shaped by gendered socialization and economic capital. **Giddens (2015)** observed that in traditional societies, educational choices are influenced more by cultural expectations than by individual interest. Similarly, **Agarwal (2017)** found that rural Indian girls receive limited encouragement to pursue science and technical subjects due to prevailing gender norms and societal perceptions. Supporting this, **NCERT (2019)** reported that socio-economic background significantly determines subject stream selection



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at the secondary level, as students from wealthier families tend to have broader academic exposure and resources. **Bourdieu's (1986)** concept of *cultural capital* further explains how class-based differences in values, attitudes, and experiences shape educational trajectories and aspirations.

In a related study, **Desai and Kulkarni (2018)** revealed that family background and parental education strongly affect students' confidence in selecting non-traditional subjects, particularly among rural girls. **Sharma (2020)** found that lack of counseling services and career guidance in rural schools restricts students from exploring diverse subject options, leading to stereotyped academic patterns. **Rao and Thomas (2022)** noted that peer influence and community expectations play a crucial role in shaping subject preferences, especially in small rural communities where conformity is valued. **Mehta (2023)** further argued that digital exposure and media awareness are beginning to change these patterns, as rural students increasingly aspire toward commerce and information technology-related fields. Moreover, **Kumar and Singh (2021)** emphasized that rural students' aspirations are often constrained by local employment opportunities and family income, leading them to choose subjects perceived as more practical or accessible. Collectively, these studies indicate that both gender and social class function as powerful determinants influencing the educational choices and aspirations of rural youth, while recent developments in technology and awareness are gradually reshaping traditional subject preference patterns.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the patterns of subject choice among rural youth of higher secondary school.
2. To compare subject choice patterns between male and female students of higher secondary school.
3. To examine the influence of social class on subject choice among rural youth.
4. To suggest educational interventions that promotes equitable opportunities in subject selection.

Hypotheses

1. There is a significant difference in subject choice between male and female rural youth of higher secondary school.
2. There is a significant association between social class and subject choice among rural youth of higher secondary school.

Research Methodology

The present study followed a descriptive and comparative survey design to analyze differences in subject choices across gender and social class categories. The population comprised students of rural higher secondary schools in Pauri Garhwal of Uttarakhand. Using stratified random sampling and lottery method, 300 students (150 male and 150 female) were selected from Government Inter Colleges situated in rural area of Pokhra block, Pauri Garhwal. A structured questionnaire on subject choice and influencing factors was developed by the researcher, including items on personal background, preferred subject stream (Science, Commerce, Arts) and reasons for choice (interest, parental advice, social prestige, economic constraints, etc.). Data were analyzed using percentage distribution, cross-tabulation and chi-square tests to determine the significance of differences by gender and social class. The sample was further categorized into three social classes:

Classification Details		Gender			Separate Total
		Male	Female	Total	
Class	Upper Class	40	40	80	300
	Middle Class	60	60	120	
	Lower Class	50	50	100	
Subject preference	Science	44	32	76	300
	Commerce	38	42	80	
	Arts/Humanities	68	76	144	

Data analysis and interpretation

Data were analyzed using percentage distribution, cross-tabulation and chi-square tests to determine the significance of differences by gender and social class. The collected data were analyzed using simple statistical methods such as percentage distribution, cross-tabulation and the chi-square test. These tools helped to compare how male and female students, as well as students from different social classes, chose their subjects. Percentage distribution showed overall trends,



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while cross-tabulation helped in comparing different groups. The chi-square test was used to check whether the differences found were statistically significant. Through this analysis, it became clear that both gender and social class play an important role in shaping students' academic preferences and choices, especially among rural higher secondary school students.

Subject Choice by Gender

The study aimed to evaluate compare subject choice patterns between male and female students or rural youth at higher secondary education level. Hypothesis-1, "There is a significant difference in subject choice between male and female rural youth of higher secondary school."

Table-1

Subject Choice by Gender and Chi-Square Test of Association between Gender and Subject Stream Choice

S.No.	Subject Stream	Male (Observed) (%)	Female (Observed) (%)	Total (Observed) (%)	Male (Expected)	Female (Expected)	(O-E) ² / E (Male)	(O-E) ² / E (Female)
1.	Science	68	32	100	50	50	6.48	6.48
2.	Commerce	38	42	80	40	40	0.10	0.10
3.	Arts/ Humanities	44	76	120	60	60	4.27	4.27
Total		150	150	300	—	—	—	—

$$\chi^2 = \sum (O-E)^2 / E$$

$$\chi^2 = 6.48 + 6.48 + 0.10 + 0.10 + 4.27 + 4.27 = 21.70,$$

$$df = (r-1)(c-1) = (3-1)(2-1) = 2$$

Since calculated $\chi^2 = 21.70 > 5.99$

At df = 2, the critical value at $p < 0.05 = 5.99$,

The table indicates clear gender differences in subject preference. Male students largely favored science (68%) and commerce (44%), influenced by employment expectations and societal prestige. Female students predominantly chose arts (76%), citing interest and family encouragement for teaching professions. Since the calculated chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 21.70$) is greater than the critical value (5.99) at 2 df. The result is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Hence, there is a significant association between gender and subject choice. Male students of rural areas tend to prefer Science and Commerce, while female students predominantly choose Arts/Humanities, indicating that gender continues to influence subject preferences through social and cultural expectations. So that the hypothesis-1, there is a significant difference in subject choice between male and female rural youth of higher secondary school is accepted.

Subject Choice by Social Class

The study aimed to examine the influence of social class on subject choice among rural youth at higher education level. Hypothesis-2, "There is a significant association between social class and subject choice among rural youth of higher secondary school."

Table-2

Subject Choice by Social Class and Chi-Square Test of Association between Social Class and Subject Stream Choice

S. No.	Subject Stream	Upper Class (Observed) (%)	Middle Class (Observed) (%)	Lower Class (Observed) (%)	Total (Observed) (%)	Upper (Expected)	Middle (Expected)	Lower (Expected)	(O-E) ² / E (Upper)	(O-E) ² / E (Middle)	(O-E) ² / E (Lower)
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1.	Science	50	32	18	100	33.3 3	32.6 7	34.0 0	8.33	0.01	7.53
2.	Commerce	36	28	16	80	26.6 7	26.1 3	27.2 0	3.26	0.13	4.61
3.	Arts/ Humanities	14	38	68	120	40.0 0	39.2 0	40.8 0	16.90	0.04	18.69
Total		100	98	102	300	—	—	—	—	—	—

$$\chi^2 = \sum (O-E)^2 / E$$

$$\chi^2 = 8.33 + 0.01 + 7.53 + 3.26 + 0.13 + 4.61 + 16.90 + 0.04 + 18.69 = 59.50,$$

df =

$$(r-1)(c-1) = (3-1)(3-1) = 4$$

At df = 4, the critical value at $p < 0.05 = 9.49$ Since calculated $\chi^2 = 59.50 > 9.49$

The table indicates clear class differences in subject preference. Upper class students largely favored Science (50%) and Commerce (36%), influenced by employment expectations and societal prestige. Middle class and lower class students predominantly chose Arts (38% and 68% respectively), citing interest and family encouragement for teaching professions. Since the calculated chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 59.50$) is greater than the critical value (9.49) at 4df. The result is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Hence, Upper-class students are highly represented in Science and Commerce, while lower-class students are concentrated in Arts, reflecting how socio-economic background influences subject preference. So that the hypothesis-1, there is a significant association between social class and subject choice among rural youth of higher secondary school is accepted. Simply, we can say that High class students tend to prefer Science and Commerce, while middle class and lower class students predominantly choose Arts/Humanities, indicating that class continues to influence subject preferences through social and cultural expectations.

The combined effect revealed that upper-class male students were predominantly represented in the Science stream, reflecting the advantage of economic status and gender-based encouragement toward professional fields. In contrast, lower-class female students were largely concentrated in the Arts stream, indicating limited economic means and traditional expectations influencing their educational paths. This pattern highlights the dual influence of gender and social class hierarchy in determining the academic choices of rural students of higher secondary school, where both economic capital and cultural norms jointly shape subject selection.

Major Findings

1. The trend shows that subject choice was found to be strongly influenced by gender. Male students from rural areas preferred Science and Commerce streams, which are socially linked with higher status and better employment opportunities. Female students from rural areas showed a higher preference for Arts/Humanities, reflecting cultural expectations and family encouragement toward teaching and care giving professions.
2. Socio-economic class from rural areas had a significant impact on stream selection in this study. Students from upper and middle social classes were more likely to choose Science and Commerce due to greater access to financial resources, awareness, and academic support. Students from lower social classes of rural areas were more concentrated in arts/humanities, where the cost of education and entry barriers are comparatively lower.
3. Gender and class together created layered inequalities as per interpretation. Upper-class male students from rural areas were most represented in the science stream, benefiting from both economic advantage and cultural support. In contrast, lower-class female students from rural areas were concentrated in the arts stream, reflecting economic constraints combined with traditional gender norms that limit their academic choices.

Conclusion

The findings clearly indicate that subject choice among rural students of higher secondary schools situated in Pokhra block of district Pauri Garhwal Uttarakhand is influenced by both gender and social class, reflecting deep-rooted socio-cultural expectations and economic limitations. To address these disparities, schools of Pauri district as well as all rural hilly districts must introduce effective **Career Guidance Programs** so that students can make informed and interest-based academic decisions. Further, **financial and scholarship support** needs to be expanded particularly for lower-class students and girls who aspire to pursue science and commerce. **Community awareness initiatives** are also essential to promote



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more progressive attitudes and reduce gender stereotyping in subject and career choices. In line with the **NEP 2020**, ensuring greater **curriculum flexibility** will encourage multidisciplinary learning suited to diverse student aspirations. Additionally, establishing **teacher mentoring and counseling units** in rural schools will support first-generation learners who require additional academic and emotional guidance. Overall, the study concludes that while access to education has increased, true freedom of academic choice remains limited by cultural beliefs, economic constraints, and unequal opportunities. Addressing these issues will help rural youth of all hilly districts align their educational pathways with personal aptitude and future aspirations, ultimately contributing to more equitable human capital development in society.

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