



Fostering Inclusive Education in Ladakh: NGO Contributions and Policy Imperatives

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Background

The high-altitude region of Ladakh in India presents a uniquely challenging educational landscape, shaped by its extreme climate, geographical isolation, sparse population, and inadequate infrastructure. Although multiple government initiatives have been introduced to address these challenges, access to quality education, particularly in remote and rural areas, remains inconsistent and limited. This persistent disparity highlights the pressing need for complementary and context-sensitive support systems. In this regard, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have emerged as pivotal contributors to the region's educational development, often stepping in where formal mechanisms fall short. By leveraging their deep understanding of the local socio-cultural and economic environment, NGOs can tailor their interventions to the specific needs of the communities they serve (Muga et al., 2013).

Building on this localised approach, NGOs and grassroots organisations have actively worked to bridge critical gaps in education by enhancing access, equity, quality, and contextual relevance (Bhadoria, 2024). Their multifaceted involvement includes initiatives such as teacher training, provision of infrastructure and learning materials, and fostering community participation. These efforts not only supplement state-led educational programmes but also contribute significantly to the promotion of inclusive and

sustainable educational outcomes (Dey, 2025; Senemi Foundation, 2025).

In underserved settings such as tribal regions, slums, and isolated villages, NGOs reach populations that public systems often miss, thereby promoting equity in learning opportunities. This complementary function has led to measurable impacts in student enrolment, academic performance, and educator development (Olwan, 2025). In addition to their direct educational interventions, NGOs frequently engage in partnerships with government agencies, private organisations, and local educational authorities. These collaborations foster synergies that enhance the overall impact of their initiatives by enabling resource sharing, knowledge exchange, and coordinated efforts. NGOs play a crucial role in expanding educational access, especially for marginalised and underserved communities (World Education Forum, 2000). Their involvement goes beyond classroom teaching, encompassing areas such as community mobilisation, policy advocacy, and capacity building (Abiddin et al., 2022; Yasmin, 2022). However, despite their active presence and demonstrated success in addressing educational challenges, the full potential of NGOs remains largely untapped. Structural constraints, fragmented coordination, and the absence of a cohesive policy framework continue to limit their reach and effectiveness.

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Methodology

This study examines the role of NGOs in promoting education in Ladakh. The study reviewed key interventions by NGOs in the education sector, focusing on infrastructure development, the provision of learning materials, and teacher training. It examined student-focused initiatives such as seasonal camps, awareness programmes, and other enrichment activities. The study also identified gaps in service delivery and proposed strategies to strengthen collaboration between NGOs, government agencies, and community stakeholders. Additionally, it evaluated the effectiveness of direct support measures for students such as scholarships, uniforms, and digital resources and assessed the inclusivity and accessibility of these interventions, particularly for marginalised and underserved communities.

The purposive sampling method was used in this study to select ten NGOs actively involved in the education sector across Leh and Kargil, based on their recognised contributions and wide outreach. This method ensured the inclusion of organisations most relevant to the study's objectives, enabling the collection of rich, context-specific data by selecting NGOs with proven impact and experience within these distinct geographic and socio-cultural contexts, the study was able to obtain meaningful and in-depth qualitative insights. Data collection involved structured interviews with NGO leaders and project coordinators, providing rich qualitative insights into their operations, challenges faced, and future aspirations.

Key Findings

The study revealed that NGOs play a multifaceted and critical role in advancing school education in Ladakh, with the majority operating at the national level and primarily serving rural communities. NGOs were found to have significantly contributed to the improvement of educational infrastructure, the introduction of digital learning tools such as Digi Labs, the establishment of libraries, and the promotion of child rights. Their interventions extended beyond academics to include support for Village Education Committees, life skills education, road safety training, and awareness on food security—indicating a strong commitment to both educational and broader community development. Furthermore, many NGOs initiated community empowerment efforts through self-

help promotion, awareness campaigns, and skill-based training. However, student enrichment activities such as competitions, career counselling, and seminars crucial for holistic development were found to be limited and insufficiently integrated into NGO programmes.

In addition to their wide-ranging activities, the study found that although NGOs generally experienced cooperative relationships with government authorities, only a few received direct financial support. This lack of consistent funding restricted their capacity to implement long-term and large-scale programmes. While infrastructure enhancement and the provision of learning materials remained strong areas of focus, gaps in service delivery were evident. For example, seasonal educational camps essential in Ladakh's harsh climatic context were infrequent, and student-centred initiatives like scholarships, uniform distribution, and textbook provision were largely missing. Gender-responsive interventions were also scarce, with few NGOs adopting schools or implementing targeted programmes for girls. Teacher training efforts were found to be minimal, pointing to a significant gap in professional development support. Importantly, the study noted that all NGO interventions were confined to the school level, with no participation in higher education initiatives.

Further findings revealed several systemic challenges that hindered the effectiveness of NGO interventions. NGOs reported persistent issues such as inadequate school infrastructure, the lack of a clear and locally relevant education policy, a shortage of qualified teachers, and insufficient academic resources. These were compounded by weak parental engagement and the absence of strong community accountability frameworks. Additional barriers included poor transportation facilities, the lack of hostels for students from remote areas, low digital connectivity, and the prohibitive cost of accessing quality education.

In response to these challenges, NGOs recommended a range of strategies to enhance educational outcomes. These included upgrading rural schools, implementing transparent teacher transfer policies, providing hostel accommodations, and organising regular parent-teacher meetings to build trust and involvement. Overall, the findings of the study highlighted the dual reality of NGO participation: while their contributions have been instrumental in improving access and infrastructure,

their impact remains limited by systemic, financial, and structural constraints. Strengthening institutional support and fostering more integrated collaboration between NGOs, government bodies, and local communities emerged as essential for ensuring sustainable and inclusive educational development in Ladakh.

Policy Suggestions

To address the complex educational challenges in Ladakh's geographically remote and socio-culturally distinct setting, NGOs must adopt context-sensitive and sustainable strategies. The following policy suggestions aim to enhance the effectiveness of NGO-led educational initiatives:

- Expand outreach to underserved urban and semi-urban populations while continuing to serve remote areas, ensuring inclusive educational access.
- Seek increased and sustainable financial support, including pursuing direct funding partnerships with government agencies, to maintain long-term programme viability.
- Develop and implement student-centred initiatives such as awareness campaigns, scholarships, and distribution of uniforms and textbooks to improve enrolment and retention.
- Introduce enrichment activities like competitions, career counselling, and seminars to support the overall development of learners.
- Address gender disparities by catering to the specific needs of girls through the provision of safe sanitation

facilities, menstrual hygiene awareness, flexible schooling hours, and prevention of early marriage.

- Invest in regular teacher training, capacity-building workshops, and peer mentoring to enhance pedagogical effectiveness and learning outcomes.
- Extend programmatic efforts into higher education to create a continuous learning pathway for students.
- Upgrade school infrastructure by integrating digital learning tools, establishing libraries, and promoting child rights education within schools.
- Expand awareness programmes focused on life skills, road safety, and food security to foster holistic development of students and communities.
- Promote community empowerment through self-help groups, skill development initiatives, and ongoing awareness campaigns.
- The government should actively recognize and support NGOs as critical partners in educational development by offering consistent funding opportunities, simplifying bureaucratic processes, and providing platforms for policy dialogue and collaboration.

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