Intersecting Identities: The Influence of Gender and Caste on Educational Outcomes in India

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ABSTRACT

Since 1947, India has strived to expand access to education. Yet deep-rooted inequalities tied to gender, caste, and social identity persist. This paper explores these inequalities and the ways in which they shape educational outcomes. Despite policy interventions aimed at inclusion, disparities in access, quality, and performance continue to plague the system. The privatization of education and the shift to digital learning, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, have further widened this gap, leaving vulnerable populations with limited opportunities for advancement. The paper demonstrates the need to adopt an intersectional framework in educational policy, addressing not only access but also the achievement and outcomes of marginalized students. By highlighting the structural inequalities that persist in India's education system, this research underscores the urgency of rethinking policy interventions to create equitable educational opportunities, particularly for those at the intersection of caste and gender. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions, through which, India can move closer to achieving its universal education goals while ensuring that its most vulnerable populations are not left behind.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Indian Education System, Gender, Caste, Social Identity.

Introduction

Since gaining independence, India has made significant efforts to promote equal access to education. At the time of the first Indian census in 1951, literacy rates were alarmingly low, with just around 9% of women and 27% of men recorded as literate—consequences tied to centuries of British rule. In decades that followed, policy interventions such as the landmark National Policy on Education (NPE) asserted the importance of providing equal education to all sections of the society. It included provisions for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and other marginalized groups, and to bridge the gender gap (Ministry of Education, 1968, p.40). The

NPE, and even earlier recommendations from the Kothari Commission, acknowledged the importance of addressing these disparities in educational opportunities. Despite this, the results since then have been mixed (Varughese and Bairagya, 2020).

Currently, India's literacy rate exceeds 77%, yet its educational system is fraught with deep-seated inequalities. Researchers, such as Asadullah and Yalonetzky (2012), have long pointed to the stratification of Indian society itself, divided along the lines of gender, caste, religion, as well as its rural-urban disparities, as contributors of such outcomes. Given that education is closely linked to positive externalities, such as improved health outcomes, enhanced quality of life, civic participation, and socio-economic development, this has been an enduring challenge for policymakers (EENEE, 2018, p.9).

At the same time, the persistence of unequal educational outcomes, particularly among vulnerable populations, often has a multidimensional, generational component that spans various social and economic spheres. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the dropout rates in schools tripled, an alarming number of children who were impacted came from marginalized communities (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Limited access, however, is just one dimension to the problem. Performance disparities are also rampant in the Indian educational system, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds often performing poorly compared to their peers. In fact, Sinha (2023) points to a survey conducted in low-income areas across 16 states and union territories, which reveals that while all students should have been able to read their mother tongue fluently at grade 3, only 25% of students could actually read beyond a few words. More alarmingly, this percentage was even lower among Dalit and Adivasi children.

Returns on education, after having received it, are not uniform across social groups either, with ST and SC communities often experiencing the lowest benefits. Moreover, the highest returns are often tied to private sector education, which has historically been inaccessible to many marginalized groups. All these factors point to the problematic nexus between social identities, caste, gender, and educational access, outcomes, and achievement in India. By analyzing studies, data, and literature, this research is aimed at broadening the understanding of how the axis of identity shapes the educational landscape in India.

Background

Caste-based inequalities, which predate even the British colonial era, are among the most deeply embedded challenges India faces today (Jha, 2018). While some lackluster attempts were made during the colonial period, particularly in the early 20th century, to integrate marginalized

classes into the education system, enrolment rates for these communities still remained negligible during this time.

Following the Indian independence, several policy measures were introduced to remedy this divide. Universal education programs were launched, and reservation policies were implemented to promote inclusivity. Successive higher education policies, Thorat and Khan (2023) note, such as those formulated in 1952, 1968, 1986, and the Programme of Action in 1992, explicitly called for the need to bring Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and other minority groups into the fold of formal education.

Despite these efforts, the outcomes have been fairly inconsistent. In India's most socio-economically vulnerable regions, for instance, the likelihood of a girl receiving primary education was 42% lower than her male counterparts, even after controlling for variables like religion and caste (Desai). Among girls from SC and ST communities, the educational gender gap remained stark too, with disparities of nearly 30% at the primary level and 26% at the upper primary stage. The quality of education is a critical issue as well. While enrollment rates have increased in the country, learning outcomes and the overall quality of education, particularly within public institutions, reveal a different story.

India's increasing trend towards the privatization of education has further exacerbated these challenges, especially at the higher and tertiary education levels. In the 1950s, most higher education institutions were either state-run or privately funded but supported by the state. But after the late 1980s, following the economic crisis, Thorat and Khan (2018) note that Indian policies, stances, preferences, and trends increasingly turned to the private sector. Evidence from statistics supports this, wherein the proportion of private universities, which already stood at around 28% in 2011, surged to 40% for the 2018-2019. The share of standalone institutions also grew from 14% to a staggering 66% during the same period (Thorat and Khan, 2023).

Parallel to this privatization trend, the share of students enrolled in government institutions has also declined by 21 lakh between 2009-10 and 2010-11 alone, while private school enrollment rose by 11 lakh (The Economic Times, 2012). Over 50% of students in India are recorded as being enrolled in private schools this decade, making it one of the largest education systems in the world (Gohain, 2022). These shifts no doubt raise concerns, as caste and religion remain significant determinants of private school enrollment, with Dalits, Adivasis, and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) being less likely to access private education. Hence, while enrollment rates for marginalized groups have improved, the longstanding inequalities, especially in light of the projected changes within the educational landscape, are a pressing concern that needs to be addressed.

Discussion

The National Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 2020) has set an ambitious goal—achieving universal adult literacy by 2035. As a signatory of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), India has also committed to providing inclusive and quality education by the end of the decade. However, to realize this, the country must first address the marginalization and exclusion of different social groups within its educational landscape.

On one hand, student enrollment rates reveal crucial insights on which groups need to be brought into formal education. However, they do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the nuances or the intersectionalities that lie within. For instance, female students, Kumar and Soham (2023) find, are nearly 10% less likely than their male counterparts to pursue science streams, despite performing at the same level. This implies that there are socio-cultural factors at play that enrollment figures alone do not reveal.

Alongside gender, caste-based inequalities have long been analyzed to have a crucial role in shaping educational access, experiences, achievement, and outcomes. Although the quality of public and private institutions cannot be generalized, there is strong evidence suggesting that attending private schools produces an economic "premium" in India (Singhal and Das, 2019). In the context of the proliferation of private schools in India, this premium means that existing disparities can potentially widen even further. This is because marginalized groups are significantly underrepresented in private schools. According to a study by Oxfam India (2022), just 12.7% of Scheduled Tribe (ST) children attend private schools, with similarly low rates for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

However, regardless of the setting, caste and social hierarchies have long been found to affect educational performance. Research even indicates that social status often outweighs economic factors and psychological variables in determining student outcomes (John et al., 2020). This is particularly evident when examining the lived experiences of marginalized communities in the classroom. This second vantage point, or what happens inside the school, Ramachandran and Naorem (2013) suggest, is equally crucial in understanding educational exclusion. Dalit students frequently report experiencing discrimination from peers, teachers, and school administrators. This leads to absenteeism, disengagement during lessons, and low self-confidence—all of which are factors that contribute to poor academic performance (John et al., 2020).

Gender-based disparities further complicate this landscape. Girls in general also attend private schools at lower rates than boys. But the intersection of gender and caste exacerbates the challenges they face. This is the case especially for SC and ST girls, where multiple forms of discrimination intersect—that is both caste-based discrimination as well as gender-based

discrimination, which compounds her disadvantage, making it more challenging to access and succeed in education. Findings of Javalkar and Brooke (2014) confirm this too, where SC and ST girls in two districts of Karnataka were found to exhibit the highest dropout rates—17% and 12%—compared to the overall dropout rate for girls in the entire state, which was just 5%.

Due to this, while reservation policies have led to modest improvements in educational outcomes for boys from marginalized groups, an intersectional framework reveals that the same might not be true for girls. Secondly, it means that future policy interventions need to recognise and prioritize these overlaps to ensure an equitable educational landscape. More importantly, these challenges need to be contextualized within India's changing educational contexts.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift toward digital education in the country, a development that was also highlighted in the NEP 2020. However, there appears to be no official roadmap on how to bridge the digital divide and ensure equitable access to technology-driven education. This means the expansion of digital education, much like the privatization of schooling, risks deepening the structural inequalities that already plague India's education system.

Lastly, there is substantial evidence to suggest that the digital divide is particularly pronounced among marginalized communities (Rajam et al., 2021). With online education becoming more prevalent, students without access to digital tools and resources are at an even greater disadvantage. Girls are also more likely to lack the necessary digital infrastructure further entrenching the barriers they face in the education system (CBGA, 2020).

The need of the hour, therefore, is a more comprehensive policy approach—one that not only focuses on enrollment rates, but also on metrics like achievement, outcomes, and the intersectionalities of social identities. Through targeted interventions, policies can focus on improving outcomes for girls within marginalized groups, especially in higher and tertiary levels of education, where dropout rates sharply increase. These insights and measures, while not exhaustive, are still imperative for India to meet its universal education targets and ensure that the educational needs of its most marginalized populations are met.

Conclusion

India's educational system, despite decades of reform and progress, continues to be shaped by deep-rooted social inequalities tied to caste, gender, and social identities. Historical policies have aimed to address these disparities. Yet marginalized communities, particularly SCs, STs, and women from these communities, continue to face barriers in accessing quality education, which not only limits their immediate academic success but also hinders their long-term socio-economic mobility. Two major shifts–the growing privatization of education and the shift to

digital learning, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic–have further complicated this landscape, creating additional hurdles for already underrepresented groups.

To address these intersectional inequalities, India must adopt a multifaceted approach. While the importance of having an effective and equitable public sector education cannot be overstated, others suggest a more pragmatic policy that aims towards public-private synergy. Regulation of fees, subsidies on loans and accommodation facilities for students, and financial support, are all avenues that need to be effectively expanded.

Creating a conducive school environment is also essential for fostering equitable opportunities. Hence, efforts must focus on eliminating all forms of discrimination while creating safe, supportive, and inclusive spaces for students, particularly for those from marginalized backgrounds. Teacher training programs should prioritize sensitization to caste, gender, and socio-economic biases, equipping educators to recognize and address these issues in the classroom.

Bridging the digital divide is equally critical. This means not only investing in digital infrastructure and providing devices but also through comprehensive digital literacy programs aimed at marginalized students that ensure technological advancements do not exacerbate existing inequalities. Ultimately, India's universal education goals can only be achieved through a deep, sustained commitment to uplifting vulnerable groups and integrating an intersectional understanding into every level of policy and practice.

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