Understanding the factors of inequality in access to Higher Education:
In the context of Scheduled Castes in India

Abstract

In spite of educational expansion, significant social differences in higher education have remained persistent. Social origin has continued to be an important determinant for reaching towards higher education. In the process of development, though the social transformation is on increase, yet the general correlation between caste and education level continues to exist in the sense that the upper castes are moving into higher level education, while the lower castes are remaining into lower level education. So, it is important to look into the factors of inequality in access to higher education of Scheduled Castes. In my paper, I am discussing some prominent factors to explain the notion of social inequality in higher education. The basic factors under focus are Historical factors, Socio-economic factors, Institutional factors and legislative factors.

Introduction

"A social system consists of a set of groups whose members together perform certain functions that they do not accomplish as separate groups. The groups thus interdependent and they are interdependent in a particular arrangement"[1]. Social organisation of primitive tribes was based on equality principle though with a simple stratification. The natural potential differences become inequality only with the application of scales and scales with which we are concerned in talking about inequalities in a social context are not given to us by nature, but culturally by particular human beings under particular historical condition.[2]

Historical Factors

Several historical factors have affected the levels of inequality in educational attainment opportunity over a period. Subbarao conceptualization of Indian diversity is important to understand the foundation of regional differences in social phenomena. He said that in a country of the size and environment diversity of India, it is impossible to postulate a uniform development of culture in time and space. The recognition of this fundamental principle- the geographical and ecological bash of Indian history and culture diversity of the country- will help us to understand the true significance of the physical and cultural diversity of the country based on the deeper social, economic and technological difference, which are the result of a slow penetration of higher cultures in different parts and at different periods.[3]

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[1]David G. Mandelbaum, (1970), *Society in India*, Vol.1, Continuity and Change, London: University of California Press

[2] Andre Beteille (2003), *The Idea of Natural Inequality and Other Essays*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp-8.

[3] B. Subbarao (1956), *The Personality of India*, Baroda: MSU of Baroda Press, pp. 4.

Indian society is characterized by the division and hierarchy[4]. Social inequality is a keynote of the caste system; it is the theme of the social etiquette of the Hindus[5]. Attitudes of social inequality are not only strongly impressed upon the culture, but they are also binding upon the least privileged Hindus[6].

The word caste is derived from the Latin 'castus' and implies purity of bread and essential principle is mainly concerned with eating and drinking[7]. Caste is known as jati in common parlance. The word jati is being derived from Sanskrit root meaning 'to be born' and carry connotation of one's social birth right as well as one's inherited group[8].

A jati is an endogamous, hereditary social group that has a name and a combination of attributes and all members of a jati are expected to act according to their jati attributes and each member shares his jati's status in the social hierarchy of a village locality in India. The ranking criterion is with the ritual pollution and purity that are inherent in the group's practices[9].

One caste cannot exist in an otherwise casteless society, for castes are interdependent social phenomena. Repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialization: caste includes three elements which divided Hindu society into a considerable number of diminutive societies in opposition[10].

Caste, as a system, is an all- India phenomenon which became more inflexible when birth became the basis of caste rank. Caste as system has become an overarching ideology which pervades all aspects of Hindu life in particular. All social relations emanate from the ideology of caste, that is, from the notions of hierarchy, pollution-purity and inclusion-exclusion. Caste is both a normative system and a system of actual relations.

1.3.2. Socio-Economic Factors

Social differentiation is most important. Differentiation has been discussed in social, economic, occupational, religious, territorial and education contexts. Social divisions indicate descent in the caste society and also indicate status, and are connected with social control and control over resources[11].

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[4] K.S Singh, (1992), People of India- An Introduction, Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, p.73

[5] Oliver Cromwell Cox (1948), *Caste, Class and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics*, New York and London: Modern Reader Paperbacks, pp.14.

[6] ibid. pp. 17

[7] Herbert Risley (1915), *The People of India*, Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, K.C.I.E, C.S.I, pp.67-68.

[8] David G. Mandelbaum (1970), *Society in India*, Vol. 1, Continuity and Change, London: University of California press, pp.14.

[9] ibid. pp. 14-15.

[10] Oliver Cromwell Cox (1948), *Caste, Class and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics*, New York and London: Modern Reader Paperbacks, pp.3-4.

[11] ibid., pp. 73.

Inferiority is inherent and accepted with equanimity. Low caste people are not seeking liberators; they are almost always able to find a group lower than themselves, and their preoccupation becomes that of making the latter feel its position of even greater inferiority[12].

Desai and Dubey in their article, examine the relationship between social background and different dimensions of well being and the result showed the continued persistence of caste disparities in education, income and social networks[13].

A positive change on various socio-economic parameters has been recorded but that change has touched merely less than half of their population. In fact, the gap between the mainstream and scheduled caste population still persists. The basic reasons behind their low socio- economic conditions are illiteracy, lack of required skills, inequalities in agrarian structure due to failure of land reforms, lack of income generating assets and ineffective implementations of the welfare schemes[14]. Saraswati Raju mentioned that there is circular relation between low literacy among scheduled castes and their occupational avenues which require low literacy and hence has low occupational status which further reinforced the low literacy among Scheduled Castes[15].

1.3.3. Institutional Factors

The problem of illiteracy, rural background, non-ownership of productive assets, insecurity of employment, untouchability and their exploitation by the non-Scheduled Caste people, etc are some of the factors which are mainly responsible for their abject poverty and have been hampering the process of governmental development programmes to bring them in the mainstream of national life.

Education is considered as an instrument to serve the social object of equalizing the under – privileged in the matters of opportunities for advancement and enabling them to use their education as a lever for improvement of their condition. Education has been viewed -as the mechanism through which members of the Scheduled Castes are to be equipped to obtain occupational and economic mobility in order to establish their equal status. More specifically, it has been viewed as the instrument through which members of the Scheduled Castes can be equipped for a social structure in which status is determined, not by ascription but by individual achievement and worth[16].

It is important to know how educated Dalit young men perceive education, how they seek to use educational credentials to obtain 'respectable' jobs, and how they react when this strategy fails.

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[12]Oliver Cromwell Cox (1948), *Caste, Class and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics*, New York and London: Modern Reader Paperbacks, pp. 16.

[13] Sonalde Desai and Amaresh Dubey (2011), "Caste in 21st Century India: Competing Narratives", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVI, No. 11, pp. 40.

[14]Darshan Singh (2009), "Development of Scheduled Castes in India- A Review", *Journal of Rural Development*, Vol. 28, No. 4, pp. 530.

[15]Saraswati Raju "Female Literacy in India: The Urban Dimensions" ,

[16] Suma Chitnis, (1972), "Education for Equality: Case of Scheduled Castes in Higher Education", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 7, No. 31/33.

Increased formal education has given Dalit young men a sense of dignity and confidence at the village level. However, these men are increasingly unable to convert this 'cultural capital' into secure employment. This has created a reproductive crisis which is manifest in an emerging culture of masculine Dalit resentment. In response to this culture, Dalit parents are beginning to withdraw from investing money in young men higher secondary and tertiary-level education. Without a substantial redistribution in material assets within society, development initiatives focused on formal education are likely to be only partially successful in raising the social standing and economic position of subordinate groups.

But K.S. Singh shows in his study that there is gender bias in education and picture is much poorer for the SC. The dropouts among SC's are still higher than national average. The reasons are a mixture of factors, like social, logistics- there being no school nearby- and the need to earn from an early age to support the family[17].

1.4. Conclusion

Higher education is the threshold where future decisions – makers & policy makers generally receive training and are exposed to principles. It is thus critical to focus attention on mainstreaming social equality issues to allow for equal representation of all sections of society.

Equality of educational opportunity, as has been pointed out already, does not consist in a mere provision of opportunities. Rather it implies that such provisions be actually utilized by all particularly by those who have been denied such privileges before. If expansion of opportunities for secondary and higher education has not really enabled the underprivileged to use them either because of social or economic reasons and has only helped the dominant classes in the society to strengthen their position, no true egalitarian would plead for a further expansion of them.

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