Social Discrimination: Are Schools Narrowing the Gaps?

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Abstract

'School is a miniature society.' When schools continue to practice exclusion, how can the society be without discriminations? Schools are assumed to be the temple of learning but when the temples continue to discriminate its learner on several grounds, how does a just society prevail? The paper presents an insight into the practices of education system based on the data, facts and statistics by Indian Human Development Survey of 2011-12, Indian Exclusion Report (2014), National Sample Survey Organization data, RTE Forum Survey, and District Information System for Education (DISE, 2013-14). Reports released by the Indian government and human rights organisations in recent years highlight the problem of children from socially excluded and economically marginalised communities being discriminated in schools. The children differently abled and marginalised, who face subtle or glaring discrimination, feel outcaste, humiliated and hurt, and eventually they no longer want to attend. Dropping out from school makes them vulnerable to child labour and early marriages. The article presents a discussion based on observations, several readings and the data sited from different sources.

KEYWORDS: school education, social discrimination, widening inequality, educational schemes and programmes

INTRODUCTION

'Paradoxically, the belief that universal schooling is absolutely necessary is most firmly held in those countries where the fewest people have been and will be served by schools', says Ivan Illich in his famous book 'Deschooling Society'. Education has been one of the biggest watersheds in India's landscape of discrimination and inequalities. As it stands, it presents a fledgling ground for more equity, amidst a scenario that is one of the most unequal worldwide. Post-independence there have been numerous efforts for universalisation of education with several policies, schemes and laws. Efforts towards universal education were channelled through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (the education for all movement) and more recently through the Right to Compulsory and Free Education Act in 2010. Children enrol the school system from heterogeneous backgrounds, have different and variety of experiences of education, and leave with entirely different results. In India there may be a government, aided, semi-aided and unaided or private school. The facilities and input provided by these schools have their own outcomes and products that diverge entirely. Children from the poorest and most disadvantaged homes are most likely to attend the lowest performing schools and to achieve the poorest academic outcomes. Regardless of other factors, children and young people from the most disadvantaged homes consistently make the least progress at school. Many researches and reports have acknowledged this problem. Finding ways of breaking this chain of disadvantage, educational failure and restricted life chances remains a fundamental challenge.

SCHOOLING AND WIDENING SOCIAL INEQUALITY

In education, the relationship between schools and social inequality is often explored by looking at the test and examination scores achieved by different groups of children and young people, and other monitoring data. This can reveal long-standing patterns of unequal outcomes. For example, as a group, children from poorer backgrounds are less successful than their more advantaged peers in tests across a range of subjects. This is a widespread phenomenon accepted in the context of environment, with social disadvantage having a negative impact on attainment. Learning outcomes reflect the challenges posed and faced by the disadvantaged groups in the school. Without a strong public education system, the risk exists that timid progress towards greater equity of opportunities will be undermined, as richer and more educated parents afford quality schools for their children, the relatively less fortunate have to make do with mediocre private schools, and the poorest are left to bear with a fledgling government system.

While 80% schools in India are government run, private schools form a fairly significant number in real terms. Furthermore, historically, processes of regulation of private schools have often remained weak and the new legislation was heralded as being critical in terms of mandating a system of regulation of private schools in all states. Progresses are worth stressing: the near universal enrolment of children contrasts sharply with the 30 per cent of men and 60 per cent of women aged 40-59 who never enrolled. The number of schools with two rooms nearly doubled between 1996 and 2006, and drinking water facilities or toilets increased significantly in recent times. There are signs that certain groups are starting to overcome their historic disadvantage: Dalit boys in particular are studying more but providing another gap of gender-discrimination. However, deep inequalities in children's access to quality education persist. Girls across all groups appear to be left behind in secondary school attendance. In rural areas, the number of girls who never attended schools was a high 35.8 per cent among Muslims falling in the other backward class category in 2007-8; it was 29.3 among Adivasis and 24.7 among Dalits against 8 per cent for girls and 4 per cent for boys in other groups. Boys and to a lesser extent girls in urban areas fare better but disparities between groups also affect them. The actual time spent learning is much lower. Various surveys across the country suggest that teaching activities are less than half of what they would be if all teachers in all schools were present and actively teaching. It brings out the scenarios practised at the school.

Social discrimination was accepted as a fact in the scheme of constitutional development and has been reflected in the positive discrimination policies of independent India. These policies of positive discrimination were initially limited to education and the provision of public sector jobs to Dalits and Adivasis (Reservations). Certain proportions of seats were also reserved for Dalits and Adivasis in India's national parliament and state legislative assemblies. Later, reservations in jobs and educational institutions were extended to Other Backward Classes. How has the Indian State fared in addressing the socio-economic concerns of the social groups constituting marginalised? Has it managed to mitigate longstanding and sometimes religiously sanctioned discriminatory actions against them?

SOME ISSUES AND CONCERNS

The RTE Act was envisaged as facilitating the social inclusion of marginalized communities. However, several state rules have removed some of the provisions for non-discrimination in classrooms. Others make special mention of provision for child labour, migrant and conflict affected areas.

According to the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009, every child in a primary school should receive textbooks on time i.e. at the beginning of the academic year. But the reality is far from what the Act stipulates. In fact, most children do not receive school books at all. The ones who do, do not necessarily get all the books and rarely do they get these at the beginning of the academic year. The annual RTE Forum survey for 2014-15 in 457 schools across 10 states showed that textbooks were not available in 50% of the surveyed schools. The numbers are dismal. A 2013-14 District Information System for Education (DISE) data showed that around 27% of government primary schools did not receive books at all in the academic year. The worst performers in textbook distribution are Kerala (70.72%), Delhi (49.33%) and Chandigarh (43.76%).

Looking at the learning assessment survey through the lens of these numbers, sheds some light on why children in government schools lag behind their grade-appropriate learning. It is hard to imagine that a child without text books would be able to achieve any level of learning. There are also other factors at play, but the non-availability of text books is most critical and hinders quality. There are many systemic issues that affect distribution of textbooks on time. A 2014 NCERT report cites late issuance and inadequate supply of textbooks, delayed admission of students and lack of transport facilities as some reasons for the delay. The RTE Forum's national stocktaking draft report, 2015, suggests the need for a coordinated effort to improve the distribution of textbooks in all schools. The states of Delhi, Arunachal Pradesh, Haryana and West Bengal reported the most delays in distribution of books. The report noted that, 'textbooks are the basic tool for learning for students, without which no quality education can be provided'.

The worst impact of the lack of availability of books is on poor children and first generation learners who are mostly not aware of this entitlement or lack the confidence to demand it. Children belonging to poor families do not have access to books at home and hence are at a disadvantage when compared to a child accessing books as part of their social environment. For first generation learners, the school is where they see books for the first time. In this scenario, receiving textbooks late, puts them at a disadvantage and impacts their learning capability.
The RTE Act is a beacon of hope for nearly 20 crore (200 million) children enrolled in primary schools, but if textbooks do not reach them on time, it will impact the quality of education and would result in large scale drop out of children from schools.

RTE has also provided a provision of 25% of reservation for disadvantaged group in the private schools. Usually these seats are filled up by the management committee with the children of the employee of the schools like drivers and ayahs. Even if some schools provide the admission, a sense of inferiority develops

among the children due to the biased behaviour in the school. Prejudices have been observed to such an extent where the provisionally admitted children are asked to put on some sort of symbol to identify them from other children. Thus, role of schools remains under scanner and interrogation for the equality of opportunity for disadvantaged group.

CASTE DISCRIMINATION INVADING EDUCATION

India Exclusion Report (2014) by Centre for Equity Studies observes how exclusionary and discriminatory practices prevail in Indian schools. Education is indeed a tool of social transformation. However, the stranglehold of caste-discrimination makes this process a slow and difficult one. Official data indicate that across India, four out of five female teachers and three out of four male teachers belong to the three caste groups where practice of untouchability is the highest – Brahmin, forward castes and other backward classes. Understandably, Indian schools are often sites of extreme forms of discrimination. There are instances where teachers discourage hard work among Dalit and Adivasi (Tribal) students, either unfairly stereotyping them as beneficiaries of reservations or questioning the value of education for such children who they presume will only undertake menial, traditional, caste-based occupations later in life. The social transformation agenda of Indian education system has scope for radical improvement. Discrimination within educational institutions keeps many students out of it, or affects their performance within. Poorer children are shown to have lower educational participation indicators, and it follows that a higher proportion is out of school. Marginalised households including Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim and female-headed households, and households with persons with disabilities are vulnerable to educational exclusion due to impacts of poverty. As a result of many of these factors, 75% of the more than six million children currently out of school in India are either Dalits (32.4%), Muslims (25.7%) or Adivasis (16.6%).

National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) data on education covering a sample of almost half a million people across the country shows that in the richest expenditure class, for every person who could not read, there were two who were graduates or above. At the same time, for the poorest class, for every person who was a graduate or above, there were 127 who could not read. NSSO also found that the proportion of educated persons (those with secondary level education and above), increases eight times between the lowest and the highest expenditure class for India as shown in Figure 1.
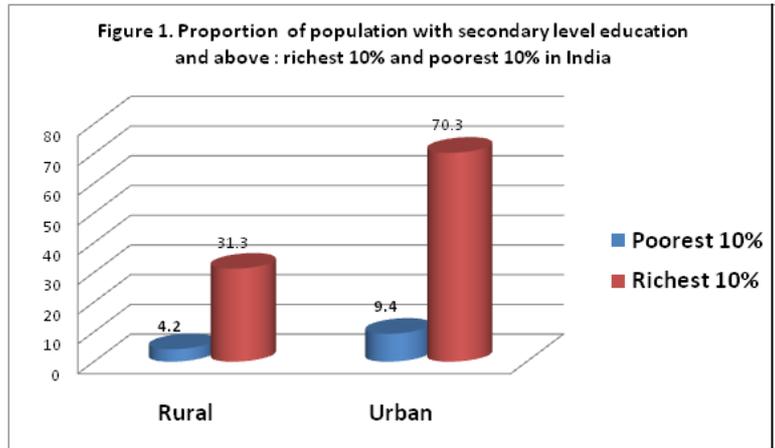
Figure1. Proportion of Population with Secondary Level Education and Above:
Richest10% and Poorest 10% in India

Another disappointing fact is that untouchability is not a thing of the past. Poverty in India is intertwined with caste-based exclusion. It is pointed out that many from the upper strata of India's caste ladder practice untouchability which can be regarded as casteism's most obnoxious aspect that regards "lower" castes as too "polluted" to be allowed even into one's house. Much of India's poverty is concentrated among social groups which are excluded from the mainstream through systematic discrimination.

India Human Development Survey (IHDS) of 2011-12 covering 42,152 households across the country had shown that 27% of the Indian population claims openly to practice untouchability (30% of rural and 20% of urban households). Caste-wise disaggregation of these households reveals an interesting picture. While the spread is across the whole social spectrum, the "higher" castes comprise the majority of households who practice it as shown in Figure 2.
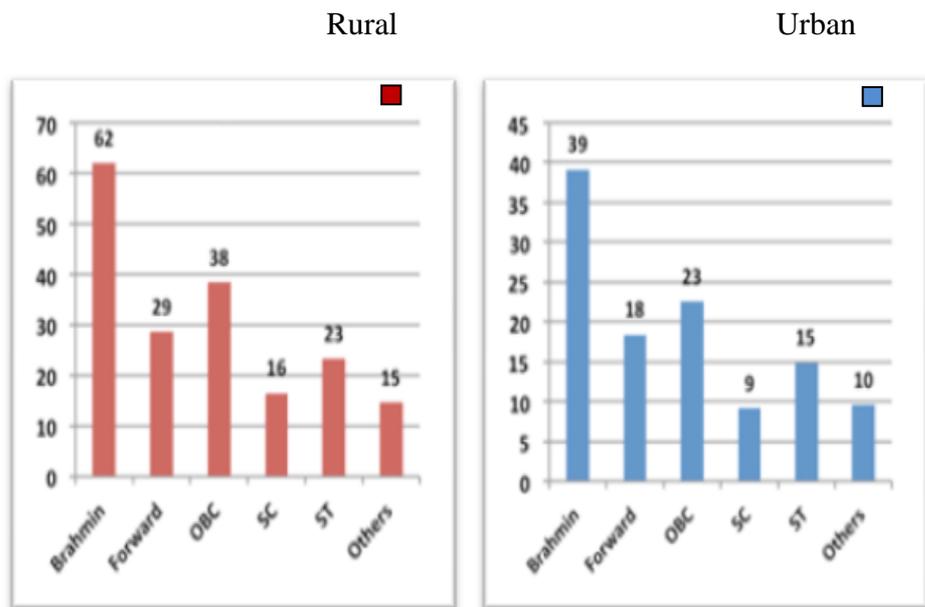
Rural   Urban

Figure 2. Families Practicing Untouchability across Castes: Rural and Urban India

India Human Development Survey data showed that caste discrimination remained neutral to the economic standing of people. The difference between the poorest and the richest households practicing untouchability was a mere 2 % in rural and 1 % in urban areas. The 'benign neglect' of school education post-independence has adversely impacted the well-being of generations of Indians.

CONCLUSION

School education in India is a major site of class and caste struggle – where the poor from marginalised social categories inch towards a future of justice, prosperity and equity, with great difficulty. How we shape our educational system is the key to how fast we can emerge as a modern, developed nation. Government data shows that more than 42 percent of students drop out before completing the eighth grade, and more than 49 percent drop out before the tenth grade. Here the question is raised on the role of the school. Is it narrowing the gap of discrimination or widening it?

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