

Caste Dynamics and Educational Mobility among Marginalised Communities in Northern India

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Abstract

This study aims to look into the caste structure and educational mobility of the marginalised groups in northern India. Examines the impact of caste, gender, family background, rural–urban setting, economic status and institutional access on educational opportunities and social mobility. While there has been an increase in enrollments of the socially disadvantaged groups in general schools, their retention, quality of education received, stream in which they are being educated, access to higher education and employment opportunities remain negatively affected by caste based inequalities as a result of constitutional safeguards, reservation policies and scholarships and expansion of education. Educational mobility is not only about school or college involvement but also about dignity, equality and changing education into social and economic movement. It asserts that first generation learners, rural students and marginalised girls are exposed to various challenges including poverty, social discrimination, lack of academic support, digital disparity and lack of social capital. It highlights the importance of inclusive policies that go beyond enrolment to learning outcomes, institutional support and equitable mobility.

Keywords: caste dynamics, educational mobility, the marginalised communities of the Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, Northern region of India, social inequality, inclusive education, first-generation learners, and social mobility.

Introduction

Education is well known as one of the most powerful means for challenging social exclusion, economic vulnerability and intergenerational inequality for historically disadvantaged groups. However, in stratified societies, the impacts of education are not simply linear; they are shaped by the social position handed down from generation to generation, household resources, cultural capital, spatial location, gender, access to institutions, and the organization of the labour market. Globally, marginalised populations are still facing unequal access to school, limited transitions to higher education, and access to low quality digital learning, as well as unequal opportunities for translating their learning into occupational opportunities. The global working on

Sustainable Development Goal 4, as such, has moved the policy discussion from just increased enrolment to inclusive, equitable and quality education. UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report 2020 highlights that exclusion in school is a consequence of multiple disadvantages, including gender, location, disability, ethnicity and poverty, and that formal access to education is not enough if the system maintains and sustains social inequalities (UNESCO, 2020). This is an international issue, which can give a broader context to the analysis of caste-based educational inequality in India in which constitutional provisions and affirmative action policies play a role against the backdrop of social stratification.

Caste in India continues to be one of the most persistent forms of structuring access to education, aspirations, institutional life and social mobility. Despite the Indian Constitution banning caste discrimination and offering protection to Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes, as well as to other socially disadvantaged groups, caste remains an important factor in the distribution of land, income, occupation, social networks, and symbolic status. Education has been a key factor in empowering a large number of marginalised families to transcend their traditional occupations and social dependence in the limited locality, but this empowerment is unequal and precariously weak. While the National Education Policy 2020 acknowledges the necessity to provide special interventions for the socio-economically disadvantaged, integrate these groups into the curriculum, offer scholarships, provide residential facilities, implement gender-sensitive schooling and enhance access to higher education, it does not give any specific definition of these groups (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, caste-based inequality is still prevalent indicating that policy inclusion needs to be understood in conjunction with social processes and practices, institutional cultures, and regional variations.

Northern India is a particularly significant region for the analysis of caste dynamics and educational mobility given its deep agrarian hierarchies, high population density, rural–urban contrasts, entrenched patriarchal norms and uneven public educational infrastructure. While there are varying degrees of educational development across states, caste relations impact schooling experiences through segregated neighbourhoods, village power dynamics, access to coaching, language capital, parental education and exposure to discrimination. Caste location in some parts of rural North India can influence access to good schools in the neighbourhood, the distance to secondary education, parental ability to assist with learning and the social acceptability surrounding higher education for girls and those from the first generation. Research on rural India reveals that the social structure of villages and traditional structures can impact educational and occupational transitions from one generation to the next (Iversen et al., 2023). In a similar fashion, within rural Bihar, the differences among the various Scheduled Castes, local opportunity

structures and household resources have been shown to impact educational and occupational mobility (Mahapatro & Choudhary, 2022).

This study emphasises the following key concepts: caste dynamics, marginalised communities and educational mobility. Caste dynamics not just the presence of caste categories but shifts in the power dynamics, exclusion, negotiations, aspirations and competitions between caste groups in social and institutional arenas. Marginalised communities are the ones that are socially excluded and have been denied education, property, and access to decent work and institutional representation historically. These communities include the Scheduled Tribes (STs), Scheduled Castes (SCs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and other socially disadvantaged groups. Educational mobility is upward intergenerational change in education, progression from primary to secondary/tertiary education, access to 'highly sought after' education streams, institutions and attainment, and the transformation of education into social recognition and occupational opportunities. In this way, educational mobility has a quantitative dimension – in terms of having been able to gain a certain number of years of schooling and earn a degree – but also a subjective dimension – in terms of dignity, belonging, aspiration and agency. Through the study of high-achieving Dalit women, Nivedita shows that education-based mobility can come with family support, affirmative action, and individual agency, and has “hidden costs” associated with caste, gender and class intersectionality (Nivedita, 2023).

Indian education has expanded and at the same time has been contradictory in recent times. The All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-22 has revealed that students from the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities are enrolled in higher education institutions, with gross enrolment ratio (GER) reaching 27.2% and 25.8% respectively in 2021-22 (Ministry of Education, 2024). These statistics show that historically disadvantaged groups are more represented in higher education. But greater enrolment growth does not necessarily mean reduced institutional quality, field of study, language levels, access to digital resources, or employment outcomes. While the UDISE+ data continues to be a key tool to monitor enrolment and infrastructure at school level, recent data also suggest issues with overall decline in enrolment and inequitable educational participation across states and social groups. A focus on caste/region/count class/gender in the understanding of the actual experience of educational mobility is required in light of these trends.

The main aims of the study are to explore the connection between caste structures and educational transitions of the marginalised communities in Northern India; to examine the role of family background, school quality, gender and rural and urban location in educational trajectories; to identify barriers to secondary and higher education education

faced by first-generation learners; and to evaluate the impact of affirmative action, scholarships and institutional support on educational aspirations and experiences. The novelty of the study is that it is based on a combination of regional and intersectional approaches. The study does not consider caste as an explanatory category alone but also within class, gender, locality, and institutional culture and digital inequality. The importance is that it helps to contribute to debate on inclusive education, social justice, intergenerational mobility and regional development. The study can contribute to more contextually relevant policy-making to decrease exclusion rates, improve public education, and allow for the possibility of allowing marginalised learners to participate, succeed, and use education to achieve a dignified social mobility that is linked to their lived experiences of caste.

Literature Review

The literature on caste dynamics and educational mobility of marginalised groups is situated at the crossroads of social stratification, sociological literature on education, development studies, political economy and social justice. Educational mobility has been theorised as a measure of equality of opportunity, but cross-country studies demonstrate that the schooling system creates regressive inequalities and inequalities in mobility as well. Classical theories of social reproduction have been based on the idea that education promotes social inequalities and class and status privilege by reproducing the cultural capital, language skills and familiarity with institutional norms of dominant groups (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). By contrast, according to human capital theory educational investments boost productivity, income and upward mobility (Becker, 1993). These viewpoints provide different analytical foundations; human capital theory emphasizes the economic benefits of education, reproduction theory emphasizes the disparities in starting positions, covered and hidden curricula, and institutional bias. Neither of the two frameworks is adequate for a caste-based society like India. Caste influences household income, social access to school, dignity, peers, teacher expectations, space segregation, marriage networks, labour-market conversion and much more. So educational mobility of the marginalised groups needs to be analysed in terms of both economic as well as socio-cultural processes.

There is an increasing body of international research focused on studying educational inequality in a multidimensional and intersectional way. UNESCO (2020) states that inclusive education needs to tackle disadvantages associated with social identity, poverty, gender, disability, location and language; and that simply getting children into school does not necessarily guarantee justice. A global perspective is valuable for India because caste exclusion is not a standalone issue, but one that is linked to class, gender, rurality, and regional backwardness. But, the literature from around the world on race and

ethnicity does not translate to caste. The features of race and caste are similar in many ways: it is an inherited status and a stigma and a group-based exclusion, but there are also distinctive features of caste and graded hierarchy, ritual status, endogamy, occupation and localised power relations. Comparative frameworks like critical race theory, intersectionality and social reproduction are useful as they reveal the mechanisms through which formal equality can coexist with institutional inequality, but the study of caste also needs to be more attuned to the historical specificity, sub-caste differentiation and local power structure. The concept of intersectionality is especially pertinent in the context of this research as it highlights the distinct barriers faced by marginalised caste women, rural Dalit girls, tribal learners and first-generation learners differently to men or relatively privileged women of the same general class. This concept of intersectionality is important in the context of this research, because it emphasises the different barriers that marginalised caste women, rural Dalit girls, tribal learners and first generation learners face when it comes to education.

The National Education Policy 2020 identifies the socio-economically disadvantaged groups in general and includes the categories of SCs, STs, OBCs, minorities, girls, rural learners and others under it, and proposes measures to ensure equity in education including gender inclusion, special education zones and targeted support (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, recognition of policy does not lead to equitable outcomes. The central issue in the literature is then, whether educational expansion has significantly undermined the caste hierarchy or whether caste has been able to adapt to new forms of competition in the modern education system.

The debate has the strongest empirical evidence to back it up in the studies of intergenerational mobility. Hnatkovska et al. (2013) has suggested that convergence of the education, occupation and wages of the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes with non-SC/ST groups has occurred in India after liberalisation. This is significant as it puts a halt to the largely static view of caste and demonstrates the possibility of new opportunities arising out of educational expansion, urbanisation and changes in the labour market. However, later studies have provided a more conservative view. While disadvantaged students' educational mobility is improving, Sinha (2018) observed that the mobility rate was lower in the labour-market sphere for disadvantaged individuals. The upward educational mobility of SCs and STs has improved, and the occupational mobility is worrying, reports Venumuddala (2020).

This is an even more compelling claim based on recent evidence. In a multi-generational rural India perspective, Iversen et al. (2026) demonstrate that the educational and occupational mobility of social groups depends on the nature of the village-level dominance regime.

Studies elsewhere in North India, including Bihar, also show that there are significant differences within broad caste groupings. The study of the SCs by Mahapatro and Choudhary in rural Bihar debunks the notion of treating the SCs as a uniform social group. They find that intra-caste disparities, family resources and community development factors influence intergenerational educational and occupational mobility. This is particularly true for Northern India, where caste groups vary in terms of land ownership, political representation, migration patterns, access to state welfare, and educational aspirations.

as reported by Bailwal and Paul (2021) with rural villages with a larger proportion of marginalised castes being at a disadvantage in school access and educational outcomes. This study is important as it addresses a change in focus from demand for the household to supply of the state and local public goods.

Kumar and Sahoo (2023) show that at the higher secondary stage of education, caste and gender differences impact the choice of stream, particularly science, which has a significant impact on STEM education and high-return streams of employment. Formal participation could coexist with stratified opportunity if SC, ST, OBC and minority students are overrepresented in lower return streams or institutions. The strength of the study is the link between caste, gender, and subject choice; however, more research needs to be conducted on the impact of parental education, availability of coaching, English-medium education, and teacher counselling on the decisions made regarding the streams in Northern India.

Nivedita (2023) studied high-achieving middle-class Dalit women and found that education has the potential to provide upward mobility and access to the government sector and symbolic transformation, while also having hidden costs related to caste, gender and class. The qualitative nature of the study provides rich insights into aspects of life that are not included in large surveys, such as aspiration, dignity, family support and emotional labour. However, the results of this study are not necessarily translatable to the situation of high achieving Dalit women in rural and semi-urban Northern India, where the situation of the women may be influenced differently by the patriarchal restrictions, early marriage, safety concerns and the presence of the dominant caste. (Taylor & Francis Online)

The debate is enriched by studies on subjective expectations and returns to education. This study by Balasubramanian (2020) does not confirm that there was a significant difference in students' expectations of returns to education from OBC, SC and ST groups in Mumbai, even when they faced discrimination in the labour market. This is a challenge to the notion that marginalised students are not aspirational.

Digital inequality is a prominent theme of recent educational mobility studies, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Caste-based digital divides in India are related to unequal access to devices, internet access and digital skills, according to Vaidehi et al. (2021).

Another body of literature looks at the link between education and labour-market transitions. Bhatnagar (2023) has found that there is still an inequality in income mobility across caste groups, as upper caste groups in some cases benefit from more income mobility even after taking education into account. This is in line with broader studies showing that educational mobility does not necessarily translate into economic mobility.

Gupta and Kothe (2021) also conclude that the caste based earnings gap is indicative of pre-market human capital investments, such as education. Such research is significant in that it makes it difficult to interpret the expansion of education in an overly positive manner.

Research Methodology:

The study employs Mixed Methodology technique of Primary and secondary data. It dissects caste, gender and their intersection with family background, location (rural–urban) and institutional access at the level of educational mobility. The data will be gathered using questionnaires, interviews, case studies and official reports and analysed through statistical comparison and thematic interpretation.

Analysis and Discussion

It suggests that the numerically increased mobility of education for the marginalised communities in northern India is also structurally limited, socially unequal and less transformative in its nature. Official figures released recently reveal that the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes now form a significant proportion of the school-going population in India. As per UDISE+ 2023-24, the percentage of enrolled school students who belong to OBC communities is 45.2%, SC 18%, ST 9.9% and General category 26.9% of enrolment. The proportion of females to males (Gender Parity Index) to school enrolment was greater than one indicating proportional female participation in school enrolment at all school levels while girls made up 48.1% of the total enrolment. The same data, however, also indicate that total enrolments in school amounted to 24.8 crore in 2023–24 (although there were some reported decreases in individual states, largely due to better data collection at the individual student level and the elimination of duplicate or “ghost” records). From an analytical point of view, this is not only a regression in the education field, but also a change in the way that school enrollments are reported. However, the downward trend in population-heavy northern

states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh is worrisome as these states have significant marginalised populations, and are important in caste, schooling and mobility discussions.

Table 1: Educational participation and mobility indicators relevant to caste dynamics in India

Indicator	Recent data	Analytical implication
Total school enrolment, India	24.8 crore students in 2023–24	Indicates mass educational participation, but not necessarily equal learning or mobility.
Social composition of school enrolment	General: 26.9%; SC: 18%; ST: 9.9%; OBC: 45.2%	Marginalised groups form the majority of school enrolment, making equity in schooling central to national development.
Female share in school enrolment	48.1% in 2023–24	Gender parity has improved, but caste-gender constraints remain in retention, stream choice and higher education transition.
SC school enrolment	4.83 crore in 2021–22	Shows expansion of access, but quality, retention and progression remain critical issues.
ST school enrolment	2.51 crore in 2021–22	Indicates inclusion in schooling, but ST learners often face spatial, linguistic and infrastructural disadvantages.
OBC school enrolment	11.49 crore in 2021–22	OBCs are numerically dominant in schooling, but intra-OBC inequalities require deeper analysis.
Higher secondary GER	Improved to 57.6% in 2021–22	Transition beyond elementary schooling remains a key mobility bottleneck.

Total higher education enrolment	4.33 crore in 2021–22	Higher education is expanding, but institutional quality and field of study remain stratified.
SC higher education enrolment	66.23 lakh in 2021–22; 44% rise since 2014–15	Suggests upward educational mobility, though not automatic occupational mobility.
ST higher education enrolment	27.1 lakh in 2021–22; 65.2% rise since 2014–15	Shows rapid growth from a low base; access to elite institutions remains limited.
OBC higher education enrolment	1.63 crore in 2021–22; 45% rise since 2014–15	Reflects broadening access, but OBCs are internally differentiated by caste, class and region.
Rural youth enrolment, age 14–18	86.8% in ASER 2023	Adolescents remain connected to education, but learning deficits persist.
Foundational learning among rural youth	About one-fourth of 14–18-year-olds could not fluently read a Class II-level text; only 43.3% could solve division problems	Mobility is weakened when formal enrolment does not produce functional learning.
Digital access among rural youth	Close to 90% had household smartphone access and knew how to use it	Digital access is improving, but gendered and caste-class control over devices may limit educational use.

Sources: Ministry of Education/UDISE+ 2021–22 and 2023–24; AISHE 2021–22; ASER 2023.

The data show a huge paradox in the field of education mobility: increasing access for students has outpaced increasing equality of educational outcomes. The rising enrolment of SC, ST and OBC students at the school level reflects a decrease in the exclusion of these children from basic education. However, mere enrolment is not a good measure of meaningful mobility. The critical question is whether students of marginalised groups can access secondary school, and then higher education and better work. While there is improvement in higher secondary GER for 2021-22, it also shows that a huge proportion of the age group is at risk of being out of higher secondary schools. The dropout rate,

early marriage, wage labour, household poverty, poor school quality and absence of transport are important factors that disrupt the learning curve of marginalised girls and boys in this stage, particularly in Northern India.

There is more evidence of upward educational participation in higher education data. According to AISHE 2021-22, the total enrolment in the higher education institutions is 4.33 crore, of which 66.23 lakh students are SC, 27.1 lakh are ST and 1.63 crore are OBC. The enrolment of SC students has gone up by 44%, of ST students by 65.2% and of OBC students by 45% compared to 2014-15. There was significant improvement in female enrolments as well with female SC enrolments increasing by 51%, female ST enrolments by 80% and female OBC enrolments by 49.3% during the same period. These indicate an increase of aspirations for education among the marginalised communities and that affirmative action, scholarships, public universities and social awareness have helped to broaden access to higher education.

The concern is further reinforced by the surprising results of ASER 2023 which reveal that school enrolment is not necessarily correlated with learning capability. Eighty-six percent of rural youth aged 14 to 18 were in school, but about 25 percent were unable to read a fluently a text at the level of a Class II student, and 43.3 percent could not solve a simple division problem correctly. The importance of this is great for marginalised communities as their learning gaps that they create during their primary and middle school education affect their competitiveness when it comes to the written board exams, entrance exams, scholarships, technical education and government jobs. Weak foundational learning is a structural barrier to mobility in Northern India, where weak learning is embedded in aspirations for secure public employment.

The other conflicting trend is digital access. Nearly 90% of young people in rural areas had access to a mobile telephone in the home and they could use them. This indicates that the penetration of digital has increased markedly. However, having access to a household mobile phone does not equate with control of a technology in the school context. Boys might have greater individual access to devices than girls, in caste/household stratified families, and in better-off families, students might use their mobile phones for coaching purposes, applications and learning platforms, whereas in poorer households, students might be using shared devices for communication or entertainment purposes.

The statistics have to be understood in the context of the caste situation in Northern India. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are states with a large number of SCs and OBCs and have a high reliance on public education institutions, with a clear hierarchical rural order. Labor mobility is frequently linked to the desire to leave the hereditary labour market, join

government employment, gain social recognition and family prestige in these states. Local caste dominance can influence school choice, teachers' behaviour, the relationships between peers, access to tuition, girls' mobility and parental confidence in education, however. Thus, caste functions in ways other than in terms of measurable indicators like enrolment, in the regular institutional practices and social relations.

The key finding from the analysis is that educational mobility exists for the marginalised communities but is not uniform. The participation of SC, ST and OBC students is increasing in school and higher education and there was improvement in female participation. However, the mobility pathway is still weak as transition is still unequal, quality of learning is still not high enough, the variety of streams is still not sufficiently broad and digital access is still not wide enough, and institutional prestige and conversion to employment are still not achieved equally. The evidence suggests that caste is no longer just a mechanism for excluding marginalised groups from education, but is also a mechanism that affects the quality, direction and returns of the education that these groups receive.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that the educational mobility of the marginalised communities in the Northern part of India has improved because of the increased school enrolment, reservation policy, scholarships and rising awareness among the masses. But, caste still matters in terms of access, retention, quality of learning, stream selection, higher education and employment opportunities. Poverty, low school facilities, discrimination, lack of access to digital devices, low academic support and social capital are factors that affect marginalised students, particularly the first generation learners and girls from rural areas. Thus, education has opened new avenues for social mobility but caste inequality has constrained the potential for educational attainment to become a tool for social and economic mobility.

Suggestions

The study recommends better provision of public schools in marginalised communities; better provision of scholarships and frequent checking of caste based discrimination in schools. Pupils who are first-generation learners should be given special academic support including mentoring, counselling, remedial classes and career guidance. The use of digital access will be increased by the provision of affordable devices, internet facilities and community learning centres. Girls from the marginalised communities require safe transport, hostel facilities and family level awareness programmes. Higher education institutions should encourage inclusive admission, anti-discrimination cells, equitable access to competitive coaching, skill development and employment support.

Policy should aim not just at enrolment, but on learning outcomes, retention and on the access to education in a dignified manner.

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