

Class Inequality and Educational Policies in India: A Sociological Study of Historical and Contemporary Disparities in Education

YASH SINGH SISODIYA¹

¹PhD Scholar, School of Social Sciences, Devi Ahilya University

Abstract

Educational inequality in India is a persistent issue deeply embedded in the country's historical, social, and economic contexts. This paper conducts a sociological analysis of educational policies from the pre-industrial era to the present, highlighting how these policies have both reflected and shaped class disparities. During the pre-industrial period, informal and community-based education primarily served upper castes, leaving lower castes marginalized. The introduction of Western-style education during colonial rule helped entrench existing inequalities with a new educated elite.

Post-independence, policies such as the Kothari Commission Report (1964-66) and the National Policy on Education (1986) have been aimed at equity in education, but the results have been mixed. The Right to Education Act (2009) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan have focused more on access, but there have been problems with implementation and quality, especially for disadvantaged groups. Despite the higher enrollment rates, huge disparities in educational quality remain, especially between upper and lower castes. This paper argues that the eradication of these inequalities requires a holistic approach, considering socio-cultural contexts and addressing both access and quality. The recent National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduces reforms that are aimed at inclusivity and quality improvement but must be critically evaluated for effectiveness. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the need for sustained initiatives to foster an equitable educational system that genuinely serves all segments of society.

Keywords : Educational Inequality, Class Structure, Sociological Analysis, Policy Impact, India

1. Introduction

Educational inequality is one of the most significant challenges to India, deeply rooted in the country's historical, social, and economic contexts. In this paper, the researcher tries to answer the following research question: How do educational policies in India promote class inequalities, especially when the new National Education Policy 2020 has been introduced recently? The NEP 2020 aims to create an inclusive and equitable educational structure; hence, it requires critical examination of its potential impact on current disparities.

Historically, the caste, class, gender, and geographical location have had their influence on access to education (White&Ruther, 2015). In the pre-industrial period, education was mostly informal and community-based, which involved significant inequalities favoring the upper castes while relegating the lower castes. The colonial period reinforced such disparities through the introduction of Western-style education, creating a new elite that was educated.

Post-independence initiatives include the Kothari Commission and the National Policy on Education, which focused on promoting equity. But their implementations have been inconsistent over time. Although policies such as the Right to Education Act and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan have contributed to increased enrollment rates, they have not addressed educational quality or the structural problems that marginalized groups face in society. Children from the poorer classes experience higher dropout rates and poor academic performances due to fewer resources available to them.

This paper will trace the evolution of educational policies across various historical periods and how they have reflected and contributed to class inequalities over time. By referring to sociological studies, historical documents, and contemporary research, it attempts to critically outline the interplay between educational policy and class structure in India. It underlines, therefore, the need for targeted interventions that consider socio-economic factors and power dynamics to bring about an equitable educational system for all.

2. Overview of Educational Inequality and Class Structure in India

Education in India accurately reflects the class structure. Access to education throughout Indian history has been majorly determined by caste and economic status—heralding the creation of gross inequalities in education across classes (GS, 2024). Perpetuation of these inequalities in present-day India demands a rigorous sociological probing of educational policies.

3. Pre-Industrial Education Systems and Class Dynamics

The system of education in pre-industrial India was all but informal and community-based, with glaring inequalities based on castes and classes. Traditional systems of education, such as the gurukul, pathshala, and madrassa systems, mainly catered to upper-caste people; in fact, lower castes have remained considerably outside the pale of formal education (Sankhdher, 1999). The Varna system further exacerbates the inequality by creating obstacles for the marginalized. With the great access provided to upper castes, especially the Brahmins, there was an actual denial of admission to the lower castes and other groups who were considered relatively low.

3.1 Traditional Education Systems in Pre-Industrial India

Before the advent of Western-style education under colonial rule, India had well-established systems of traditional learning. The gurukul system prevailed in Hindu society and consisted of a residential school with students living with their teacher (guru) for education in such diverse subjects as the Vedas, philosophy, and the arts. On the other hand, the pathshala represented a somewhat informal system of elementary education normally attached to temples or mosques, by which students learned reading, writing, and elementary arithmetic (Azad, 2024).

3.2 Access to Education Based on Caste and Class Status

Access to the traditional education systems was governed more or less by caste and class status (Kumar, 2021). With the greatest access to formal education allowed to the upper castes, especially the Brahmins, there was an actual denial of admission to the lower castes and other groups who were considered relatively low. This essentially meant that a system of education-based and caste-based hierarchy created very little mobility for those not born into the upper echelons of society (Deshpande, 2012).

3.3 Role of Religion and Social Status in Determining Educational Opportunities

Educational opportunities during the period of pre-industrial India were mostly caught up in a myriad of factors combining the effect of religion and social status. The Varna system divided this society into four main Groups- Brahmins, the priests and scholars; Kshatriyas, the rulers and warriors; Vaishyas, the merchants and farmers; and Shudras, laborers and servants. Such a hierarchical structure predetermined one's occupation and thus one's access to education, along with all ensuing social privileges. Access to formal education was the highest among Brahmins and Kshatriyas, although for Shudras and those 'outside the Varna', like Dalits, these opportunities were very few. Opportunities for education in the case of the Islamic madrasas were mainly confined to elites among Muslims. These factors institutionalized class and caste-based educational inequalities prevailing well into the colonial period (SETHI, 2015).

4. Impact of Industrialization on Educational Access and Class Structure

The advent of industrialization in the 19th century set a trend in terms of changing India's educational scene and its effect on the Indian education system. It introduced policies typical of colonial rule, ushering in Western education to Asia and creating a new class of educated elites with access to modern education and consequently better employment opportunities, thereby exacerbating existing inequalities. Industrialization created economic opportunities that favored those with access to education, further entrenching class divisions.

4.1 Expansion of Western-Style Education Under Colonial Rule

The British colonial regime initiated western-style education into India mainly to suit their administrative and economic interests. Institutions like the Fort William College in Calcutta, established in 1800, and the Calcutta Madrasa, established in 1781, marked the formal beginning of Western education in India. Funds for the "revival and promotion of literature" and the "encouragement of the learned natives of India" were provided by the Charter Act of 1813, expanding Western education (iZGi, 2014).

4.2 Emergence of an English-Educated Elite Class

Western education gave birth to a new class of English-educated Indians, mostly from the upper castes and classes. This educated elite class acted as an interface between the colonial masters and the masses in the task of administering British Empire (Whitehead, 2005). The English language thus became a symbol of power, social status, and prestige opposite to the mass population not able to access that education (Torri, 2017).

4.3 Widening Gap Between Upper and Lower Classes in Educational Attainment

The expansion of education in the Western style during the colonial period accentuated pre-existing inequalities in educational attainment. The upper castes and classes now had the resources and social capital to access this new form of education and so could entrench themselves further. In contrast, the bulk of lower castes and classes, much more so those from rural areas, continued to suffer a lot of barriers in accessing Western education, thus a continued chasm between these two strata of society (Chauhan, 2008).

5. Post-Independence Policy Shifts and Class Inequalities

The realization by the government, soon after the country's independence in 1947, that education had a key role in ensuring social justice and equality, was incorporated into the Directive Principles of State Policy. These principles were envisioned to provide the framework necessary for the universalization of education and mitigating class inequalities. The Kothari Commission, 1964-66, and the National Policy on Education, 1986, became prominent in bringing about educational reforms with a view to removing these disparities.

5.1 Directive Principles of State Policy and the Goal of Universal Education

The Directive Principles of State Policy, spelt out in Article 45 of the Indian Constitution, laid down an obligation upon the State to provide free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14 (Rao, 2008). It brought into clear relief the constitutional commitment to education as a basic right and an instrument of social equality. However, the translation of this universal education into practice has been slow due to unsupportive infrastructure in the form of inadequate teaching resources and strong socio-economic barriers for citizens who are already marginalized. Although evidence might point toward the fact that enrollment rates have considerably risen, disparities in educational attainment and quality still subsist among the lower castes and rural areas.

5.2 Kothari Commission (1964-66) and Its Recommendations for Equitable Education

The Kothari Commission, appointed by the Government of India, carried out a comprehensive review of the educational system and made many basic recommendations for the promotion of equality. It called for a national system of education that puts emphasis on access, quality, and relevance. It suggested that a 10+2+3 educational structure be adopted so as to ensure that education is not only accessible but also relevant to the needs of the economy (Development, 2020). The policy put the emphasis on vocational education and the need to reflect, in curriculum formulation, the diverse cultural and social realities of India (Mishra, 2019). Notwithstanding these recommendations, its implementation has been very inconsistent.

5.3 National Policy on Education (1986) and Its Focus on Access and Quality

The National Policy on Education (1986) also built up on the recommendations of the Kothari Commission, aiming at providing an integrated approach to education that took into concern the questions of access and quality. It specifically focussed on the fact that there was a dire need for inclusive education, particularly for disadvantaged groups. This policy also aimed at increasing the participation of women and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in educational opportunities (Bhola, 1988); (Kalyanpur, 2008). The policy laid the ground

for big-ticket reforms; however, very disproportionate progress across geographies and among various social groups has been made. It is supported by research that despite increased enrollment, quality of education still remains a huge concern, wherein disparities in learning outcomes between urban and rural students, as well as among different caste groups, exist (Jain&Prasad, 2018); (Bandyopadhyay et al ., 2021).

5.4 Recent Policies and Measures to Reduce Educational Disparities

The Government of India has, in the past couple of years, been framing policies aimed at reducing educational inequities and promoting education for all. Most important among these are the Right to Education Act of 2009 and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, both aimed at enhanced access to education among children, especially from the marginalized sections of society.

5.5 Right to Education Act (2009) and Its Impact on Enrollment and Retention

The Right to Education Act was a pathbreaking legislation that made education a fundamental right for all children in the age group of 6 to 14 years. The Act provided for free and compulsory education and laid down that private schools should reserve a certain percentage of seats for economically disadvantaged students (Sinha&Verma, 2014). Preliminary reports have suggested that there is a considerable rise in enrollment rates since the enactment of the RTE Act, especially in the case of deprived sections of society. There are still some problems regarding retention and quality of education. Reports are coming in that though enrollments have increased, dropout rates for students from Scheduled Castes and those from rural areas continue to be high due to socio-economic pressures, infrastructural problems, and lack of support systems (Shah&Steinberg, 2019).

5.6 Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Other Initiatives for Universalization of Education

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, launched in 2001, had the objective of universalization of elementary education through a community-driven approach. The program focuses on infrastructural development of schools, pre- and in-service teacher education, and improvement in children's learning achievements (Srivastava et al ., 2019). Though it succeeded in achieving enrollment targets, it has been criticized for not being able to effectively address quality differentials (Yadav et al ., 2018). On the other hand, research shows that though there has been increased access to education, the quality of education, especially in rural areas and amongst disadvantaged groups, has remained a far cry. Many schools do not have basic facilities and properly trained teachers, which adversely affects their functioning (Pahwa&Indira, 2021); (Parbin, 2022).

5.7 Challenges in Implementation and Persistent Disparities Along Class Lines

Despite all the ambitious objectives of recent educational policies, there are still serious problems relating to their operational aspects. The problems of inadequate funding, bureaucratic inefficiencies and socio-cultural barriers persist (Chaudhary, 2023). Moreover, it is at the intersection of caste, class and gender that educational inequalities have multiplier effects for groups at a disadvantage. Available research substantiates the fact that though policies have been enrichment-oriented, the deep-seated structural barriers within the socio-economic fabric of India have continued unabated to perpetuate inequalities in access and outcomes in education (Nawani&Jain, 2010); (Velaskar, 2010). While post-independence policies forms the base for policies aimed at promoting equity in education, the persistence of these challenges calls for a more holistic approach to address questions of access and quality, creating opportunities for every child to succeed in school regardless of background.

6. Evaluation of Policy Effectiveness in Reducing Class-Based Inequalities

The effectiveness of Indian educational policies towards reducing class-based inequalities has been highly debated and researched. Progress has been made on access and enrollment, but the disparity in quality education between various social classes is still pretty significant. This analysis takes Pierre Bourdieu's Capital Theory as a consistent framework to explore how educational policies could perpetuate class inequalities while identifying the structural barriers which prevent equitable educational outcomes.

6.1 Progress Made in Improving Access and Enrollment

Since the introduction of key education policies, notably the Right to Education Act in 2009 and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the rate of enrollment in the most diverse categories has improved spectacularly, with children belonging to Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) at its forefront. According to the figures, enrollment of SC and ST children increased from roughly 70% at the beginning of the 2000s to more than 90% over the last few years (Deka, 2015); (Gupta, 2024); (Garg, 2024). However, in terms of retention rates, these lower castes have still lags behind the upper castes (Assari&Zare, 2024). It means that a policy should be enacted not only for enrollment but also to sustain students till the completion of their qualification.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is crucial here; children from lower socio-economic backgrounds often lack the cultural resources—such as familiarity with academic norms and language—that facilitate success in educational settings. This lack of cultural capital can lead to lower retention rates, as students may feel alienated or unsupported within the educational system.

6.2 Continuing Gaps in Quality of Education Between Classes

Despite the increase in enrolment, there is much inequality in the quality of learning experienced by students from the various social classes. Evidence suggests that students from more marginalized socio-economic backgrounds are more often taught in under-resourced schools with poor infrastructure and with poorly trained teachers (Martins&Wangenheim, 2024). A study further found that even though enrolments of SC and ST have increased, their performance in standardized tests remains significantly lower than that of upper-caste students (Dalwai&Singh, 2024). Moreover, Bourdieu's theory illuminates the way in which schools become sites of social reproduction, whereby dominant cultural values are emphasized over the more marginalized cultures. This, in addition to inequalities based on educational quality between cities and rural areas, makes matters even worse. NAS results repeatedly prove that the students coming from rural areas have a relatively lower grade than those students who hail from urban cities in subjects like mathematics and reading. This indicates that simply increasing access does not guarantee equitable educational outcomes (Iftikhar, 2022).

6.3 Limitations of Policies in Addressing Structural Barriers

It is apparent that educational policies cannot really tackle structural barriers in class-based inequalities. While affirmative action policies, such as reservations in higher education, are instituted to make the playing field more level, they hardly take into account socio-economic deterrents to educational attainment. Studies reveal that the persistent problems of poverty, lack of education of parents, and social stigmatization continue to prevent the educational development of the marginalized.

Furthermore, bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption often impede the proper operation of educational schemes at both central and state levels. School infrastructure and teacher training improvement funds often do not arrive at their destinations, hence the policy rhetoric and the actual practice. Bourdieu's model explains how this systemic factor perpetuates class inequality by keeping the status quo that works to the advantage of those who already have cultural capital. (Smith, 2010); (Walters, 2019).

Although significant developments have been made regarding educational access and enrollment among marginalized groups in India, substantial quality gaps and fixed structural barriers continue to undermine the effectiveness of educational policies aimed at reducing class-based inequalities. Employing Bourdieu's Capital Theory throughout this analysis highlights the critical role that cultural capital plays in shaping educational experiences and outcomes. To foster a more equitable educational system, it is essential for policymakers to address both access and quality while recognizing the diverse forms of capital that influence student success.

7. Conclusion

This paper focused on the intricate relationship between education policy and class inequality in India, examining how historical and contemporary policies have shaped educational disparities.

While India has made considerable strides in terms of access and enrollment of marginalized groups, there still remain substantial quality gaps and entrenched structural barriers that compromise the effectiveness of educational policies for reducing class-based inequalities. This analysis, using Bourdieu's Capital Theory, illustrates the role that cultural capital plays in shaping educational experiences and outcomes.

While reviewing different education policies, such as the Right to Education Act, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and affirmative action measures, it is important to understand that these policies should not only be considered in isolation but also in relation to each other. Understanding how these policies interact within the broader, evolving political and economic landscape is crucial for a comprehensive analysis. Hence, for example, the overall implications of NEP 2020 might be better understood when the document is read in a historical context with previous measures and current socio-economic realities.

This will call for a more balanced access and quality approach in education, which recognizes that various forms of capital are crucial in shaping the prospects of students. Targeted interventions, focusing on socio-economic factors and taking into account the interconnectedness of educational policies, would be needed to break these barriers perpetuating inequality within India's educational landscape. Only then can we genuinely hope for equity in education for all.

References

1. Assari&Zare. (2024). *Caste-based Diminished Returns of Educational Attainment on Wealth Accumulation in India*. Open Journal of Educational Research, 2-3.
2. Azad, Y. (2024). *The 21st Century Education System in India: Barriers to Overcome in Learning. Transforming Indian education in the 21st century: challenges, innovation, and solutions* | 1, 1-2.
3. Bandyopadhyay et al . (2021). *Exploring Rural–Urban Education Divide in India*. Bridging the Education Divide Using Social Technologies, 165-166.
4. Bhola, H. S. (1988). *A Policy Analysis of Adult Literacy Education in India: Across the Two National Policy Reviews of 1968 and 1986*. Retrieved from Annual Conference of the Comparative and International Education Society (32nd, Atlanta, GA, March 17-20, 1988).: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED290909.pdf>

5. Chaudhary, H. C. (2023). *MAJOR CHALLENGES OF EDUCATION SYSTEM IN INDIA AND EFFORTS FOR SOLUTIONS*. International Journal of Emerging Knowledge Studies, 268-269
6. Chauhan, C. P. (2008). *Education and caste in India*. Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 217-218
7. Dalwai&Singh. (2024). *Caste in education: promises and reality*. Political Science and Public Policy 2024, 298-299
8. Deka, B. (2015). *RIGHT TO EDUCATION AND THE GIRL CHILD: A STUDY OF THE ROLE OF THE SARVA SIKSHA ABHIYAN IN DARRANG DISTRICT OF ASSAM*. Gauhati.
9. Deshpande, S. (2012). *Inclusion versus excellence: Caste and the framing of fair access in Indian higher education*. South African Review of Sociology , 127-129.
10. Development, C. f. (2020). *Kothari Commission Report (1964–66)*. Quarterly Newsletter of Council for Social Development , 2-3.
11. Garg, M. (2024). *Learning Crisis at Elementary School Level in India: Need for Systemic Interventions*. Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies, 85-86.
12. GS, S. B. (2024). *Unequal Educational Opportunities and Challenges in Online Learning during the Pandemic in India*. Review of Development and Change, 1-2.
13. Gupta, R. (2024). *AN ANALYSIS OF CHANGING TRENDS IN GROSS ENROLLMENT RATIO AT PRIMARY & UPPER PRIMARY LEVELS IN JHARKHAND*. International Journal Of Creative Research Thoughts, 334-335.
14. Iftikhar, F. (2022, May 26). *NAS 2021 highlights progressive decline in learning levels of school students*. Retrieved from [www.hindustantimes.com: https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/nas-2021-highlights-progressive-decline-in-learning-levels-of-school-students-101653504148459.html](https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/nas-2021-highlights-progressive-decline-in-learning-levels-of-school-students-101653504148459.html)
15. iZGi, M. C. (2014). *British Colonial Education Policy: The Orientalist- Evangelist Controversy in India (1780-1835)*. Turkey, Turkey.
16. Jain&Prasad. (2018). *Quality of Secondary Education in India Concepts, Indicators, and Measurement*. Singapore: Springer.
17. Kalyanpur, M. (2008). *Equality, quality and quantity: challenges in inclusive education policy and service provision in India*. International Journal of Inclusive Education , 243-244.

18. Kumar, N. (2021). *The History of Education in South Asia*. Handbook of Education Systems in South Asia, 259-260.
19. Martins&Wangenheim. (2024). Martins, R. M., & Gresse von Wangenheim, C. (2024). *Teaching Computing to Middle and High School Students from a Low Socio-Economic Status Background: A Systematic Literature Review*. Informatics in Education, 23(1), 179-222. . INFORMATICS IN EDUCATION, 179.
20. Mishra, A. (2019). *Vocationalisation of education: Improving productivity and employability through skills development*. International Journal for Environmental Rehabilitation and Conservation , 44-45.
21. Nawani&Jain. (2010). Nawani, D., & Jain, M. (2010). *Learners and learning in India: History, perspectives, and contexts*. In Handbook of Asian education (pp. 503-528). Routledge. Routledge.
22. Pahwa&Indira. (2021). *Performance evaluation of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA): A comparative study of two states in India*. International Journal of Research in Social Sciences, 86-87.
23. Parbin, R. (2022). *Role of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan in Inclusive Education of Assam*. Journal of Positive School Psychology.
24. Rao, P. (2008). *FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT TO EDUCATION*. Journal of the Indian Law Institute, 585-586.
25. Sankhdher, B. (1999). *Education System on the Eve of World War I, 1914*. New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publication.
26. SETHI, C. (2015). *Indian education system in ancient India*. International Research journal of Management Sociology & Humanities, 350.
27. Shah&Steinberg. (2019). *The right to education act: Trends in enrollment, test scores, and school quality*. AEA Papers and Proceedings, 232-233.
28. Sinha&Verma. (2014). *An exploratory study on the feasibility and challenges of implementation of Right to Education Act (RTE)*. The International Journal of Indian Psychology , 162-163.
29. Smith, L. (2010). *Psychology, poverty, and the end of social exclusion*. Miami: Teachers College Press.
30. Srivastava et al . (2019). *Private Sector Research Study: Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*. London: The Department for International Development (DFID) UK-India.

31. Torri, M. (2017). *Westernized Middle Class': Intellectuals and Society in Late Colonial India*. The Congress and Indian Nationalism, 300.
32. Velaskar, P. (2010). *Quality and inequality in Indian education: Some critical policy concerns*. Sage.
33. Walters, V. (2019). *Parenting from the 'Polluted' Margins: Stigma, Education and Social (Im)Mobility for the Children of India's Out-Casted Sanitation Workers*. Journal of South Asian Studies, 52-53.
34. White&Ruther. (2015). *Educational Inequality in India: An Analysis of Gender Differences in Reading and Mathematics*. Indian Human Development Survey, 2-3.
35. Whitehead, C. (2005). *The historiography of British imperial education policy, Part I: India*. Journal of the History of Education Society, 315-316.
36. Yadav et al . (2018). *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan: Achievements, Problems and Future Prospects: A Comparative Analysis of Some Indian States*. Reflecting on India's Development, 175-176.