

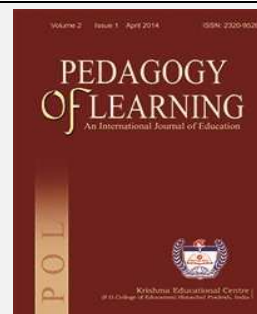
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Role of Socio-Economic Background in Higher Education Participation in India

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Abstract

Socio-economic background of the students plays a decisive role in their higher education participation. In the context of Indian society, the factors like gender, caste, locale, religion etc. along with the economic and occupational status of the family are the significant socio-economic factors which reflect individually or collectively in the student's access to higher education, his/her choice of higher education institution, choice of professional or general course of study etc. As a result of interplay of these factors, there has been inequitable participation in Indian higher education. The retreat of the government from its responsibility to fund higher education, the predominance of private sector in higher education, introduction of cost recovery mechanism in the public institutions, commercialization of higher education etc. have further increased the influence of socio-economic background in availing higher educational opportunities. Although the Government of India has time to time made concerted efforts to address the structural inequalities between different socio-economic groups and to widen higher education participation, but in the face of the above situation, there is a need to appropriately reorienting governmental efforts for ensuring more equitable higher education participation.

Keywords: Higher Education, Inequitable Higher Education Participation, Socio-Economic Background

Introduction

Socio-economic background may be referred to as ‘home background’, ‘family background’, ‘social class background’ etc. It is related to a number of social and economic variables. For analytical purposes there is no single, agreed measure of individual or family socio-economic status (Singh, 2007:112). But, the most common measures of classifying socio-economic status includes social category of the students, gender, religion, parental education, parental occupation, family income and other materialistic assets owned by the family.

Socio-economic background of the students is regarded as a major determinant in their participation in higher education especially in professional higher education. Students from a well-educated and reasonably well-off family gain much cultural capital from his/her immediate family, tend to have access to good primary and secondary schools, and are also likely to have access to tutoring and test coaching that can significantly raise standardized test scores. Conversely, students from a poorly educated and poorly off family will suffer in all these respects from situational disadvantage. The degree of one’s situational disadvantage is largely a function of one’s family’s socio-economic status. The fact that measures of academic achievement are almost everywhere highly correlated with SES indicators suggests that situational circumstances are indeed an important determinant of academic achievement (Weiskoff, 2012).

The influence of certain variables such as social background, family earnings and scholastic ability on the probability of choosing a university degree was analysed and it was found that the students from high socio-economic status as well as those with best high school curricula are more likely to follow a university degree of greater duration as they could easily bear the higher cost of studies (Jimenez and Velasco, 2000). Further, when attitudes of senior secondary students towards higher education were investigated it was observed that opinion of students about attainability of university education was strongly influenced by socio-economic background, gender and geographic isolation (James, 2002). Salim (2004) in his study outlines how residential location of the students, poverty, low caste status, lack of higher education/high level occupation of the parents and recourse to poor coaching for entrance tests has contributed substantially to the widespread failure of most rural students in securing admission to bachelor of technology courses. Undoubtedly, financial condition of the family is imperative to attain entry into higher education especially professional education but it is not the only barrier to entry in the professional education. There are many non-financial barriers such as schooling background of the students, medium of instruction of the students, first generation learners, agriculturist and self-employed parents, gender bias etc. and all these huge disparities in the educational standards at the school level are attributed as a major factor contributing to the strengthening of the entry barrier (CSES, 1997, Kumar and George 2009).

Socio-Economic Determinants of Higher Education Participation

The various socio-economic factors which influence the higher education participation of the students include gender, locale, social category of the student, educational background of the parents, occupational background of the parents, ownership of agricultural land, income level of

the family etc. These factors have been discussed vis-à-vis higher education participation as under:

Gender

Gender is a social construct which is seen as a full range of personality traits, attitudes, feelings, value, behaviour that society ascribes to males and females on differential basis. Indian society being a patriarchal society, inequality prevails in all spheres on the basis of gender. These inequalities stem from relations of power and authority, class and caste hierarchies and socio-cultural traditions, customs and norms. These inequalities points towards status of women or the gender bias. Gender bias starts from within the families itself. This discrimination against female is visible not only at prenatal but also during postnatal period in the form of access to education, medical services, nutrition, clothing etc. These gender-related prejudices have put the females in a disadvantaged position in every sphere (Gill, 2011:7).

In spite of the fact that constitution has given equal rights of liberty, fraternity, equality and justice, to all its citizens, the women do not enjoy these fundamental rights like men. Patriarchal mind sets, gender based conflicts in society, existing phenomenon of declining sex ratio, gender disparities in education, participation of girls of marginalised sections of society in education are the common issues that continue to be the area of concern in gender discourses (Srivastava, 2015:4).

One significant way available to end the gender bias and to empower the women is education. All the education commissions and committees appointed in independent India envisaged the role of women in the development of nation and stressed on education of girls on grounds of social justice and also because it accelerates social transformation. The 1968 policy highlighted the gender disparities in education and on the basis of it for the first time a separate chapter was included in the Sixth Five-Year Plan(1980-85) on Women and Development. The POA (1992) also outlined various roadmaps for women empowerment.

Participation of females in education in India particularly higher education cannot be simply read as female participation or women participation because Indian women as a category are very heterogeneous and they are divided by caste, tribe, class, region and religion. In their case, the dimensions of caste, class, tribe, region and religion provide cumulative disadvantages and they bear a multiple burden of inequality. Thus, picture of educational reality of women has to be seen at aggregate and disaggregate level. At aggregate level there are vast disparities in enrolment of female across faculties or subjects; across levels such as undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral or research level and across professional and general courses. Females are more clustered in general courses than professional ones and their enrolment in masculine courses such as engineering and technology is very less (Chanana, 2007: 592) At disaggregated level, rural ST, SC and OBC female is experiencing grave exclusion in higher education participation in not only professional courses but also in general courses whereas urban Hindu upper caste women are rapidly closing the gender gap and furthermore, gender differentials are starkest among rural Muslims, where men already have very low levels of access (John, 2012:211).

Rural/Urban Location

India is a rural economy where most of the population resides in the villages with agriculture as their main occupation. According to Census 2011, at present out of the total population of India the size of the rural population is 68.84 percent while size of urban population is 31.16 percent. There is a great divide between rural and urban India. Villages are virtually getting starved and most of the growth and investment is urban bound. Merely, locating institutions of higher education in rural areas does not ensure the participation and inclusion of local population in these institutions. The Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) data for rural India also belies the claims of India's high growth and its underlying philosophy that the benefits of high growth automatically percolate down. The data also casts aspersions on claims that rural poverty has declined over time. The knowledge base of the rural society is abysmally low. Only 3.45 percent rural households have graduate degree holder. The gulf between rural and urban India widened during the post-economic liberalisation period. (Ghuman, 2015).

The proportion of rural students in higher education of Punjab also presents a dismal picture. According to a study conducted by Ghuman et al. in 2006, the share of rural students in the four conventional universities of Punjab was only 4.07 percent during the academic session 2005-2006. In Punjab Agricultural University, very few students from rural areas get admission. More than 96 percent of the students were from urban areas and non-farming families (Johl, 2008:327). Further, the proportion of rural students in the professional courses in the Punjab is only 3.7 percent from the total enrolled students and majority of them are from relatively better off sections of the rural society, while only a meagre proportion is from marginalised sections of rural society (Ghuman et al., 2009). Educational exclusion of rural population leads to lopsided development of the society and also leads to the social exclusion of majority of the population as they are shut out of global market place and limited to the local market opportunities at a time when these are becoming precarious and insecure (Alston and Kent, 2003) resulting in the society suffering from acute skewedness in income distribution and knowledge deprivation.

Thus, when competitive advantage of nations/states depends exclusively upon the knowledge intensity of a society, the education sector of rural India needs to be strengthened, good quality school education in the government schools should be the prerogative of each and every rural household as children from nearly 65 percent of the rural population in India depend mainly on government schools, which impart an indifferent quality of education that does not enable the students either to compete for admission to higher education or equip them for any sort of gainful employment (Johl, 2008:306).

Social Category

India is undeniably one of the world's most unequal societies. Caste is the most pervasive dimension of social stratification in India. In the caste-based social hierarchy those at the top of the hierarchy are regarded as privileged while those at the bottom are underprivileged and are forced them to live a life of social exclusion and isolation (Rao, 2010:288). This social exclusion also deprived lower castes (disadvantaged sections of the society) from access to knowledge, thereby safeguarding the privileges of certain castes. As this social exclusion was

reinforced through custom and religious law and the dismantling of such an edifice of social apartheid was not an easy task (Sukumar, 2013:206).

These oppressed people, in the official parlance are called the Scheduled Castes (SCs), the most deprived and vulnerable sections of Indian population. The Scheduled Tribes (STs) form yet another segment that has remained dispossessed and marginalised for centuries, which together with SCs constitute nearly a quarter of Indian population. Acknowledging their centuries old and accumulated social, economic, political and educational deprivations, the Constitution of India made special provisions to protect SCs, STs and other weaker sections from any form of discrimination. Due to the policy of positive and protective discrimination and reservation in educational institutions for the socially and marginalised sections their enrolments in various stages of school education and higher education has increased to an extent but the consequences of the historical denial of rights to the lower castes still remain as residual and are visible in the poor representation of the lower castes with regard to ownership of land, business and in education (Thorat, 2010: 30). It was observed that general category have highest GER in higher education both in rural and urban areas, while the scheduled tribes and scheduled castes have the least. SCs among the Sikhs were the most deprived lots with just miniscule enrolment in higher education. OBCs fared comparatively well as far as higher education participation was concerned (Sinha and Srivastava, 2008: 121).

Thus, it can be articulated that institutions of higher education in India are highly selective as far as socio-economic background of the student is concerned and this selectiveness has got more substance with the privatisation of higher education. Students in such institutions are predominantly drawn from the families belonging to higher strata characterized by high educational, occupational and income backgrounds. Further, as majority of SCs live in rural areas, thus, they are deprived of 'better' education; the lack of urban exposure makes them unaware of many basic things which are important for their motivation and aspirations. So, it is not education as such which determines one's position, rather it is the social existence of the people which determine accessibility to education (Choudhry, 2007).

Schooling Background of the Students

Equal access to school education is the birth right of every child born in a democratic country, irrespective of caste, creed, place of birth and economic status of the parents. Seeing the inequality perpetuating in the society on the basis of education, Education Commission (1964-66) highlighted the need of common school system of public education. According to commission this system will be open to all the children irrespective of caste, creed, community, religion, economic conditions or social status; where access to good education will depend not on wealth or class but on talent.

But in a highly stratified society of India due to the lack of the commitment of political leaders and pressure from civil society this common school system which was visualised by Education Commission could not be realised. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 totally disregarded the framework of common school system as it itself legitimized the different types of schools having varied infrastructural and academic facilities

and imparting education of varied quality. In this process of multilayered schooling, quality education at school level became the exclusive preserve of a limited number of privately funded and managed schools located in the urban areas, which catered to the educational needs of economically sound, educated and articulate sections of the society. The government funded and operated schools, gradually but ultimately, became the preserve of the lower strata of the society. The cumulative impact of many factors, particularly resource crunch, loss of interest by vocal sections and utter neglect by the state authorities made government operated schools completely dysfunctional. In between the quality private schools and sick government schools, a third layer made up of large number of substandard private schools strengthened its foothold (Brar, 2008:336). In the process, the poor and disadvantaged sections of the society, particularly in rural areas, suffer cumulatively through generations and the better-off sections move on higher and higher up the growth path of prosperity (Johl, 2008: 326).

Thus, patterns of inequality in higher education are the results of longer term cumulative processes of disadvantage rooted in the differential economic, social and cultural capital of the families. Such inequalities are reflected throughout the education system and also in the selection of school and are the proximate determinants of access, retention and performance in higher education (Connell, 2006:330). Basant and Sen (2013) also strongly linked the participation in higher education to the completion of elementary, secondary and post-secondary education and the educational gap at different levels to the primary reasons behind educational deficits among socially disadvantaged groups at the college level.

Further, India is a multi-linguistic country, where there is a peculiar kind of competition between regional languages and English as the medium of instruction in the educational system especially at the stage of higher education. At the ideological level, there is a kind of glorification of regional languages. At the same time, from the practical point of view, English education is perceived as more useful especially in the context of competitive examinations and employment. Private educational institutions which respond to the increasing demand for English language are not within the reach of the lower sections of the society. Naturally, upper sections of society continue to be at advantage with regard to education through English as medium of instruction. Thus, language has been a contributing factor through which the social differentiation existing in the larger social system is brought into the educational system. To that extent language has also become part of the cultural capital that contributes to the inequality in educational achievement in India (Aikara, 2004: 44). In context of language, Kanchallaiah also put forward an argument that English is the first and foremost stepping stone into the merit house of success and power and that is denied to vast SC, ST and OBC students who can study only in the state government schools in regional languages. While most public schools run by upper caste Hindus and Upper caste Christians are based on money power and childhood training in Western culture and languages leading to structural differences (Ilaiyah, 340:2010).

The exclusion of rural students in higher professional education in Punjab reported Ghuman et al. (2008) happened because the entrance tests based on physical and biological science subjects for admission to higher technical education courses are held in English. There are not many higher secondary schools in villages that teach the sciences, further, science and

mathematics subjects are taught in these schools in local language. These students are, therefore handicapped in competing for seats in institutions of higher professional education (Johl,2008: 327).

Educational Background of the Parents

Educational background of the parents is considered as one of the factors influencing the educational attainment of children. Parental education plays a very important role in deciding the future aspirations of the child. Those students who come from highly educated families have an edge over those who come from illiterate or less educated families. The level of education of a person also decides his/her social status. Similarly, parents with good educational background will have high status in the society and this affects the future achievements of child in one way or the other. Further, upbringing of the child, the knowledge he achieved from the home, the picture of the world which is constructed by the parents is also a determinant in the future achievement of the child. In fact, degree of achievement of children depends largely upon the degree of education of the parents (Desai, 1991, cited in Singh, 2007: 113). The continuous support and back up of the parents helps the children to perform well in their school and college.

Singh (2007) also established a positive link between educational background of the parents and higher education participation of their wards and also articulated that majority of female students in higher education were from the families where their fathers were graduates and postgraduates. Further, in context of Punjab also it was observed that there is high positive correlation between the entry of rural students in higher education and the educational level of their parents. Besides, the parents with higher education are sending their children for professional and technical education (Ghuman and Madaan, 2013:157).

Pierre Bourdieu viewed this factor as ‘cultural capital’ and articulated that reproduction or transmission of cultural capital is the main function of educational system. In this process, children of the families from the class of dominant culture have a clear advantage over others in educational achievement, “in that culture which it transmits is closer to dominant culture and that the mode of inculcation to which it has recourse is less removed from the mode of inculcation practiced by the family”(Bourdieu,1977:493). In contrast, children from lower classes are handicapped in their educational achievement because the educational system expects them to possess what it does not give, that is, “linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be reproduced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture” (ibid.: 494).

Thus, we cannot negate the role of cultural capital while viewing the barriers of higher education participation. But any society which plans to increase social mobility through education must make it increasingly accessible to ‘first generation’ students. It must see that the handicaps faced by the students with less parental education are removed (CSES, 1997:13).

Occupational Background of the Parents

It is generally accepted that the education and occupation of parents and homeethos are crucial in determining academic performanceof the children. Occupational background of the

parents is one of the most significant factors associated with the higher education participation of their wards. Occupation represents both the social as well as economic position of a person. It is also an index of person's class position. Students whose parents are engaged in white collar occupations had better chances of receiving higher education than those coming from other occupational background (Singh, 2007:120). Wards of poor, less educated and lower-occupation parents are only marginally represented in professional education (Salim, 2004). Parents with professional category of occupation better guide their children in career planning also. Highest entry rates in university education are among those students whose parents belong to higher professional group and lowest among those students who come from semi/unskilled manual backgrounds (McCoy and Smith, 2011). Further, students from working class families are underrepresented at traditional universities but overrepresented in all other institutions, especially in those which are outside the realm of tertiary education (Schindler and Reimer, 2010:269).

Dandekar (2013) in his study found that most of the students entering into the medical colleges in Maharashtra were from service class parents receiving secured incomes while very small number of them were from agriculturist families and there were only stray instances of children of daily wage earning parents in the open category while wards of wage earner parents belong mainly to the reservation group at large, and to the scheduled caste in particular.

Economic Background of the Students

The level of income of parents has a positive relation with the students' access to high cost education. No doubt the ability of students matters but nowadays when professional education has become so costly, the paying capacity of parents is a major determinant of whether the student will enter into a costly professional course or will opt for some low-cost courses. Philip Brown named this phenomenon as educational parentocracy, where a child's education is increasingly dependent on the wealth and wishes of parents, rather than the ability and efforts of pupils (as cited in Aikara, 2004: 50). The increased fee structure under the higher education reforms acts as a deterrent on the participation of the students from the lower socio-economic backgrounds in higher education as the financial issues constrained on the choice of the institution, place of study for the lower income students and also lead to their dropping out of higher education (Pennel and West, 2005: 136).

Sky rocketing tuition fee of the universities have lowered down the chances of children of low-income, marginalized families from acquiring higher education (Yulin and Baojun, 2005:89) while the students from high income group had disproportionably benefited from expansion in elite universities (Ding, 2006:151). Access to education particularly of professional education depends upon the students' ability to pay the fee and thus, meritorious students from poor families are excluded from the professional education and access of education is limited to the middle income group living in the metropolitan cities belonging to general category (Banwari, 2014). The family income and participation in higher education are thus closely linked and ability to pay for higher education is a positive factor in the decision to participate in higher education in India which is middle class oriented (Singh, 2007:120).

Thus, economic status of the family, will largely determine the participation of the student in the higher education. Even where tuition fee is free, students have to bear indirect costs such as living expenses and cost of books and stationery. Scholarships, grants and loan programmes are demonstrating some degree of success but cannot by themselves remove economic barriers. Fear of debt tends to be a greater deterrent for students from poorer backgrounds (Altbach, 2011:306).

Conclusion

Thus, from the above discussion it can be inferred that the various factors constituting the socio-economic background of the students play a decisive role in their higher education participation. In the context of Indian society, the factors like gender, caste, locale, religion etc. along with the economic and occupational status of the family are the significant socio-economic factors which reflect individually or collectively in the student's access to higher education, his/her choice of higher education institution, choice of professional or general course of study etc.

In the view of such situation, although the Government of India has time to time made lot of efforts to address the structural inequalities between different socio-economic groups and to widen higher education participation. But in the present scenario, the retreat of the government from its responsibility to fund higher education, the predominance of private sector in higher education, introduction of cost recovery mechanism in the public institutions etc. have posed new challenges for ensuring equitable higher education. Now when it has been realized that higher education can play an important role in social mobility of the individual as well as in the overall development of the society, there is a need to take appropriate steps to control the influence of socio-economic background on higher education participation.

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