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Caste and Education in India: Linkages, Promises, and Obstacles

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Backward castes face many challenges in accessing educational institutes owing to many reasons such as low accessibility to institutions, discrimination in the admission process, unfair treatment in classes, undue peer pressure based on caste identities, societal pressures and so on.

ABSTRACT

The status of education among backward castes in contemporary India reveals deep-rooted inequalities which manifest themselves in various ways. Backward castes face many challenges in accessing educational institutes owing to many reasons such as low accessibility to institutions, discrimination in the admission process, unfair treatment in classes, undue peer pressure based on caste identities, societal pressures and so on. This mistreatment of marginalised individuals translates into the slow social progress of the community over the years. Government policies that aim to reduce inequality often do not reach intended beneficiaries due to ineffective implementation, complicated procedures, and lack of awareness, among other reasons. As highlighted in a study by the World Bank, a new approach to policymaking could be explored as a way forward to make policies more comprehensive, targeted, and sustainable (World Bank 2017).

INTRODUCTION

Caste plays an essential role in everyday life of many individuals in India. Given the lucid framework and its interpretation in different forms across states and regions, evaluating caste identities combined with gender, sub-castes, and economic backgrounds reveal a new lens to policymaking. The World Bank (2017) analysed the everyday impact of caste (Varna) and sub-castes (Jatis), finding that although welfare policies are made at a macro level, local dynamics and on-ground realities such as caste, gender, and geography considerably impact an individual's accessibility to resources. The Hindu society's odious caste structure is aptly captured by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's metaphor of caste being "a multi-layered tower with no staircase and no entrance. Everybody had to die in the storey they were born in" (Ambedkar and Roy 2014).

With caste superstructures in place, education becomes the only 'ladder' that can help break this rigid social order and allow movement across 'levels.' Therefore, access to education is one of the most powerful ways to combat caste stratification. This paper assesses the current status of education in scheduled castes and marginalised classes on different parameters such as enrolment ratio, dropout ratio, and education at different stages. It evaluates the underlying reasons for these disparities, examines the impact of select government policies and advocates for a new approach to policymaking and implementation that may be more impactful.

CURRENT STATUS OF EDUCATION IN MARGINALISED GROUPS

Through the latest National Policy on Education [NEP], India launched a series of government schemes across elementary, secondary, and higher education to increase access to education within all demographic groups. NEP schemes promise a special focus on students from disadvantaged backgrounds by offering scholarships or ensuring infrastructural support. However, the current enrolment ratio captures a different reality (Table 1 below).

Table 1: GER [Gross Enrolment Ratio] in school education for different gender and social groups (2015-16)¹

Level	Male	Female	SC	ST	All
Primary (I-V)	97.9%	100.7%	110.9%	106.7%	99.2%
Upper Primary (VI-VIII)	88.7%	97.6%	102.4%	96.7%	92.8%
Secondary (IX-X)	79.2%	81%	85.3%	74.5%	80%
Senior Secondary (XI-XII)	56%	56.4%	56.8%	43.1%	56.2%

Source: Educational Statistics at Glance 2018, Ministry of Human Resource Development; PRS Legislative Research.

¹ GER greater than 100% means children outside the class' target age group also enrolled, thereby studying in a lower class than what is appropriate for their age.

A move from primary to higher education charts a decline in the GER for all groups. However, the drop is particularly stark for Scheduled Castes [SC] and Scheduled Tribes [ST] communities. The annual average dropout rate of SCs escalated from 4.9% at the primary level to 6.6% at the upper primary level to 21.8% at the secondary level during 2017-18. The annual average dropout of ST went from 3.7% at the primary level to 6.1% at the upper primary level to 22.3% at the secondary level (Rajya Sabha 2020). PRS Legislative Research (2020) finds that the reason for dropping out from school was primarily engagement in domestic activities for girls and engagement in economic activities for boys.

These differences become even more evident in state-level data, especially for states such as Bihar and Jharkhand, which are among the worst-performing states (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment 2018).

REASONS BEHIND THE DISMAL STATUS OF EDUCATION

Several factors such as a family's income level, proximity to educational institutes, perceived importance of education, cultural norms, discrimination within institutes are some of the reasons that affect education enrolment in marginalised groups. Even those who break systemic confines and access the labour market with educational qualifications have lower chances of getting selected for jobs than individuals from dominant castes. This is evidenced in Kishore's (2016) study that applied for jobs under different names, thereby revealing caste identities. The research discovered that chances for Dalits or Muslims being called for an interview were lower than for upper-caste Hindus. The rejections mentioned above arrived despite availing complete education; however, as discussed above, many reasons hinder SC/ST access to education.

The following section offers a deeper look into some of the factors influencing the accessibility to education for marginalised communities.

1. Income Inequality

Income levels and access to resources go hand in hand. Families with higher income levels often secure a better education. The Hindu Dominant Castes [HDCs] boast four times more wealth than Scheduled Castes. HDCs hold approximately 41% of the total wealth in the country, almost twice their population size of 22.28%. Whereas SCs and STs own a mere 11.3% combined compared to their population, which is over 27% (Agarwal 2019).

A steep disparity in the economic status of marginalised groups dictates that their household's expenditure tilts towards more immediate needs and returns rather than long-term investments such as education. This vicious cycle results in a large number of poorly educated individuals from marginalised communities.

2. Stereotyping

Karla Hoff and Priyanka Pandey from the World Bank (2016) conducted an experiment to assess the effect of making caste identity salient on the intellectual

performance of boys. In the experiment, students in a six-person session generally unknown to each other were taught how to solve mazes and were rewarded financially (in private) for the number of mazes that solved (which was never publicly revealed). The control condition of the experiment, in which each student's caste was not revealed, demonstrated that boys from backward castes solve mazes just as well as high-caste boys. However, publicly revealing the boys' caste identities reduced the performance of the backward caste boys. Everything else equal, low-caste boys solved 23% fewer mazes than high-caste boys if they were in a mixed-caste setting where caste identities were revealed. This is an example of stereotype threat, suggesting that stereotyping a social identity as mentally deficient influences their performances and self-image. Often teachers and their peers imply that children from SC/ST communities are inferior, thereby adversely impacting their academic performance (ibid).

3. Physical Abuse

Attacks against SC/STs rose from 44,000 in 2018 to 49,000 in 2019 (National Crime Records Bureau 2021). According to a 2017 report by the International Dalit Solidarity Network [IDSN], cases of violence in schools disproportionately report sexual abuse of children belonging to marginalised communities. In a case in Rajasthan, a principal beat 11 Dalit children for drinking water from the common water pot, which, according to the principal, polluted the water for everyone. Such instances discourage parents from marginalised communities from sending their children to schools, which results in high dropout rates (Mruthunjaya 2019).

4. Discrimination during Admissions

Discrimination during admissions to educational institutes further pushes marginalised castes to the fringes. The National Commission for Backward Classes' [NCBC] look into grievances of Other Backward Classes [OBC] revealed that they had received 15 complaints regarding discrimination in OBC admissions to Central Universities and NEET admissions (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment 2021). For all the uproar about reservations, many educational institutions don't even endeavour fully filling reserved seats. The enrollment rate for SC and ST students between 2011 and 2018 was 13.45% and 4.8%, even though the constitution mandates at least 15% and 7.5% (Sharma, Rampal 2019).

IMPACT OF CURRENT GOVERNMENT SCHEMES: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

To alleviate the barriers mentioned above, aside from affirmative action for adequate representation of the marginalised classes, the Indian government launched numerous schemes over time to improve the caste-rooted economic, social, and education plight.

The government has put in place several welfare schemes to help SC, ST, and OBC students get access to better education. Some such measures include providing financial support, constructing special hostels, financial assistance

based on caste and livelihood for higher education, and offering financial aid for pursuing higher education abroad².

The number of beneficiaries against different schemes has indeed improved since the implementation of the programs. But unfortunately, the impact has been sparsely distributed and does not always impact the most oppressed, the ones who need it the most.

Firstly, beneficiaries often lack awareness about application procedures of different schemes intended to help them, making it difficult for the policies to reach the target group. For example, the Gujarat government launched Mukhyamantri Yuva Swavlamban Yojana to help 10th pass students with monetary assistance for enrolment in higher studies. However, both students and parents found it challenging to apply for the scheme on the government website and mistakenly sent the necessary documents on The Indian Iris portal³. This created confusion and left many targeted beneficiaries out of the process who could not understand the entire process. The above example shows that complex processes make it difficult for beneficiaries to understand and avail scheme benefits (Nishant 2016) fully.

A second issue with policymaking is the lack of detailed information and elaborate data on economic indicators and social status. For example, The National Family Health Survey, the District Level Household Survey, and the Annual Health Surveys collect information on the socio-economic status of women. However, the list of economic indicators is limited to a checklist that includes only household assets and the occupational status of household members (World Bank 2017). Given that local data management systems are virtually non-existent, it is difficult for policymakers to have the necessary information about relevant indicators on the status and economic ability of households at a local level (Bhatty 2019). Thus, policies made never fully consider the complexity faced by the target group.

In addition to ensuring the right target audience and simple processes, experts suggest that there is significant scope in rationalising social schemes. A.K. Shiva Kumar, a Development Economist at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, said that the early childhood education scheme should not be managed by the Women and Child Development Ministry but by the School Education Department of the Human Resource Development Ministry (Nanda 2014). It is crucial to ensure that social schemes do not run into overlapping objectives with different ministries tangled in the monitoring and evaluation processes. Streamlining ministries to lay clear frameworks and accountability will help to revamp and reorganise social schemes.

These are only some prominent gaps that need to be worked on while designing and implementing policies. Many aspects need to be factored in while creating policy frameworks. The following section offers an insightful approach for making policies targeted at improving access to opportunities and resources to

² A detailed list of such prominent schemes with objectives for SC and OBCs can be found in the Annexure.

³ A dedicated website for all government policies and schemes.

marginalised castes.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The previously discussed World Bank (World Bank 2017) study conducted in Tamil Nadu, Odisha, and Bihar offers a new lens aimed at policymaking for eradicating caste and its debilitating impacts. It suggests that taking a closer look at the caste by combining the caste/sub-castes influences with local dynamics like geography, economic status, income level, gender differences, among others, could reveal valuable policy insights. It indicates that policies closer to the ground, such as those at Panchayat or block levels and within the beneficiaries' reach, have a higher impact.

There are hundreds of sub-castes in each region of India, and there is no uniform system of classifying them based on the amount of institutional assistance they need. Members within a sub-caste have strong social ties across villages, complicating matters for policymakers as it becomes difficult to fully comprehend the range of factors to be considered in policymaking. Even the Indian census continues to understand and use caste in only broad terms as it does not have the identifiers for sub-castes. Over the years, the inclusion of different sub-castes within eligible SC/ST categories has only swelled. For example, in 1935, the colonial government typified 429 castes as SC. In the most recent census of 2011, 1241 castes made the cut, along with 705 STs and additional inclusion lists at the state level, thereby adding to overall evaluation problems (World Bank 2017).

The 2017 World Bank study suggests that there is high disparity even within the castes. For example, in Bihar, Musahars have a significantly higher female employment rate than any other SC sub-caste. They are 17% more likely to work than the OBCs, Dominant Castes, and Muslims and are at least twice as likely to work as the Dhobis (laundrer) and 'Other' SC sub-castes. Anthropological studies also note that Musahars, geographically concentrated in Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, have a unique history and are one of the most politically, economically, and socially marginalised groups in India (World Bank 2017).

In light of the complexity of castes and sub-castes divisions in India, working with schemes and policies at only the caste level may be misleading. A more targeted and grassroots approach is requisite as the first step to ensure the policy benefits reach the target groups and create opportunities equitably. In addition, creating awareness about the existing policies will ensure it reaches the target beneficiaries. The government must ensure that the schemes have clear instructions and do not create ambiguous clashes or overlaps with other policies. This can create confusion for beneficiaries and the possibility of passing the blame among government departments when results are not achieved.

Finally, a robust, transparent, and inclusive monitoring mechanism should be set up to follow through with the beneficiaries and measure the intended impact. Government organisations should also make an active grievance cell within reach of beneficiaries to resolve any queries. This will actively involve the beneficiaries in the process and also build their trust in the system. Over and above the mentioned administrative reforms by the government, public action and

engagement like building social awareness about the need to eradicate caste in everyday life should be propagated via social events, projects, and community-building programs.

It is only through sustained efforts on various integrated fronts by different governments, communities, and institutions that we can make sure education is no longer determined by caste.

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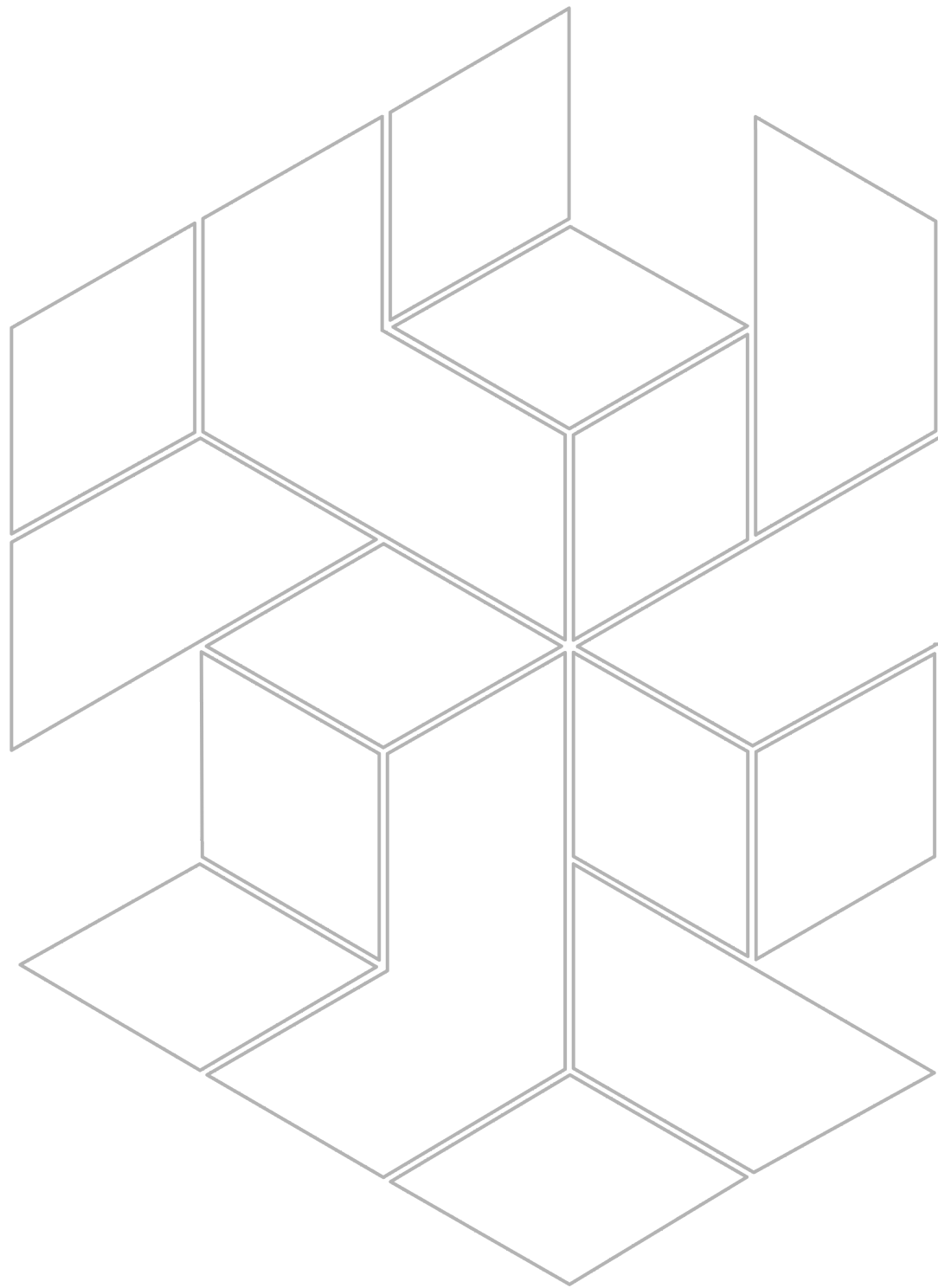
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ANNEXURE:

Scheme for OBCs	Objective
Pre-Matric Scholarship to the OBCs	To motivate children of OBCs studying at Pre-Matric stage. Scholarships are awarded to students belonging to OBCs whose parents'/ guardian's income from all sources does not exceed INR 2,50,000 per annum.
Post-Matric Scholarship for the OBC students	Promote higher education by providing financial support to OBC students studying at post-Matric/post-secondary levels leading to their earning PhD degrees.
Construction of Hostels for OBC Boys and Girls	Providing hostel facilities to students belonging to socially and educationally backward classes, especially from rural areas, enables them to pursue secondary and higher education.
Assistance for Skill Development of OBCs/DNTs/EBCs (NGO Scheme)	Involve the voluntary and skilling sector, through National 107 BACKWARD CLASSES DEVELOPMENT Backward Classes Finance and Development Corporation (NBCFDC), to improve educational and socio-economic conditions of the target group, i.e., OBCs/DNTs/EBCs etc. by way of upgrading their skill to enable them to start income-generating activities on their own or get gainfully employed in some sector or the other.
National Fellowship (NF) for OBC Students	Providing financial assistance to the OBC students in obtaining quality higher education leading to degrees such as M. Phil and Ph. D in universities, research institutions and scientific institutions.
“Dr. Ambedkar Scheme of Interest Subsidy on Educational Loans for Overseas Studies for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Economically Backward Classes (EBCs)”	Award interest subsidy to meritorious OBC and EBC students so as to provide them better opportunities for higher education abroad and enhance their employability.
Dr. Ambedkar Scheme of Post Matric Scholarship for Economically Backward Classes (EBCs)	To provide financial assistance to the EBC students studying at post-matriculation or post-secondary stage. The income ceiling of parents/guardians for eligibility is INR 2.50 lakh per annum.
Venture Capital Fund for OBCs	Support those entrepreneurs from Backward Classes who will create wealth and value for society while also promoting profitable business.
Post Matric Scholarship for Scheduled Caste Students (PMS-SC)	Provide financial assistance to scheduled caste students studying at post matriculation or post-secondary stage to enable them to complete their education.
Pre-Matric Scholarship for SC students studying IX and X	Support parents of SC children for education of their wards studying in classes IX and X so that the incidence of dropout, especially in the transition from the elementary to the secondary stage, is minimised, and to improve participation of SC children in classes IX and X of the pre-matric stage so that they perform better and have a better chance of progressing to the post-matric stage of education.

<p>Pre-Matric Scholarship to the Children of those engaged in occupations involving cleaning and prone to health hazards</p>	<p>Under the scheme, financial assistance is provided for pre-matric education (Classes I to X) to children of the following target groups, irrespective of their caste or family income:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Persons who are Manual Scavengers as defined under Section 2(l) (9) of the Manual Scavengers Act 2013 2. Tanner and Flayers 3. Waste pickers 4. Persons engaged in hazardous cleaning as defined in Section (2)(l)(d) of the Manual Scavengers Act 2013
<p>National Overseas Scholarship for Scheduled Caste Students etc.</p>	<p>Facilitate the low-income students belonging to the Scheduled Castes, Denotified Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes, Landless Agricultural Labourers and Traditional Artisans category to obtain higher education viz., Masters.</p>
<p>National Fellowships for SC Students</p>	<p>Provide fellowships in the form of financial assistance to students belonging to Scheduled Caste category to pursue higher studies leading to M. Phil., PhD in Science, Humanities, Social Science and Engineering and Technology, in Indian Universities/ Institutions/Colleges recognised by UGC.</p>
<p>Pradhan Mantri Adarsh Gram Yojana (PMAGY)</p>	<p>The scheme aims at integrated development of villages where the population of Scheduled Castes is above 50%.</p>



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