



Munich Personal RePEc Archive

# **Caste and Education: A Brief Review of Literature**

Hari, Naveen

Shiv Nadar University

December 2021

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/113775/>  
MPRA Paper No. 113775, posted 20 Jul 2022 10:03 UTC

# **Caste and Education: A Brief Review of Literature**

*Naveen Hari<sup>a</sup>*

<sup>a</sup> M.Sc. Economics, Shiv Nadar University

# 1 Introduction

*“Dalit aspirations are a breach of peace. Annihilation of Caste is a breach of peace”*

---

*Dr. B.R. Ambedkar  
Annihilation of Caste*

The interplay between caste and education has been always a topic of debate in India since a long time now. The inter-linkage is sometimes clearly visible and sometimes not due to the qualitative nature of caste. Thus, it is imperative to first understand what caste is and how caste system works, before jumping into its linkages with education. Caste is an ancient social institution that has been part of Indian history and culture for thousands of years. Caste typically symbolises the nature of social stratification that is characteristic of Indian society. Although it is an institution that is considered unique to Hinduism, its impact is felt among religious groups to which conversion from Hinduism has taken place. Dr. BR. Ambedkar, known to be the father of Indian constitution, considered the “*Origin of Caste*” to be the same as the “*Origin of the Mechanism for Endogamy*”, and he regarded class and caste as neighbours, claiming that “*a caste is an Enclosed Class*” [Ambedkar \(2004\)](#). The Indian caste system is a closed stratification system, meaning that a person’s social rank is defined by the caste into which he or she is born.

In the traditional social structure, those in the lower caste hier-

archy were denied access to education. Education has always been a privilege reserved for the upper classes. The educational backwardness of the underprivileged groups is primarily due to ideas and behaviours linked with the caste system based on social distinction, which believed access to education to be the privilege of the higher classes. The historical exclusion of dalit groups labelled as 'untouchables' from knowledge and education in traditional Hindu culture was due to their place in the caste hierarchy. Despite the fact that schools for these people were officially established in the mid-nineteenth century, attempts by dalits to obtain an education were greeted with tremendous hostility Nambissan (2013). When we link caste system with the education system, we see that the relationship is very complex and often oppressive. This has been changing over a period, but at a very slow pace.

## **2 Evidences on Inequality in Education due to Caste Discrimination**

This section captures various evidences from the literature that showcases the prevalence of inequality in education due to caste discrimination.

In India, Vidya (education), Veda (religion), and Varna (caste) are all intertwined, according to Borooah & Iyer (2005). They investigated if and to what degree community standards such as religion (Hindu or Muslim) or caste impact children's school enrollment in

India (Scheduled or non-Scheduled) Borooah and Iyer (2005). The first is that disparities in school enrolment rates between communities might be attributed to differences in the communities' endowment of 'enrolment-friendly' traits. This is known as the 'attribute effect'. Inter-community variances in enrolment rates, on the other hand, may occur even if there were no inter-community differences in attribute endowments, simply because different communities translated a given attribute endowment into different enrolment rates due to differences in their norms. This is known as the 'community effect'. They use the *Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition*<sup>1</sup> to decompose the same. They found that when both parents were illiterate, there was a significant difference in enrolment rates between Hindu and Muslim and Dalit children; however, when both parents were literate, the inter-community disparity in enrolment rates was essentially non-existent. Finally, children whose dads worked as labourers had the lowest enrolment rate, while children whose fathers worked in non-manual jobs had the greatest enrolment rate. One such reason for this inter-community disparity in enrollment rates comes from the fact that the distribution of the 'enrolment determining factors' (like region, parental occupation and literacy, availability of educational facilities) were unequally distributed between the communities. There is also a significant differences in 'attitudes' toward education amongst communities, both in terms of children as a whole and in terms of

---

<sup>1</sup>The Kitagawa-Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition is a statistical method for explaining differences in the means of a dependent variable between two groups by decomposing the gap into that part that is due to group differences in the independent variable's mean values on the one hand, and that part that is due to group differences in the independent variable's effects on the other.

males and girls separately. In addition, the physical and psychological barriers that prevent Dalit children from enrolling in school must be identified and removed. Discrimination against Dalit children in schools is a major deterrent to these children enrolling in school.

There are also studies on convergence in education, occupations, income, and access to public resources across caste groups in the decades after independence. Hnatkowska, Lahiri, and Paul (2013) utilised data from five rounds of the NSS (National Sample Survey), spanning the years 1983-2005, to examine inequalities in education, professions, incomes, and consumption between SC/ST and non-SC/ST families in the most complete analysis to date. The main result is that all of these outcomes have converged significantly throughout the time period under study, which spans far beyond the early 1990s, when the Indian economy began to liberalise. According to decomposition analysis, education convergence between SC/STs and non-SC/STs drives much of the convergence in earnings and consumption [Hnatkowska et al. \(2013\)](#).

Even with such a convergence, there are instances of discrimination as revealed by Hanna and Linden (2012). They conducted an experiment in which teachers were recruited to grade examinations. The main finding is that exams assigned to lower castes are scored lower by examiners, although the effects are extremely small in magnitude. Interestingly, this bias is accounted for entirely by low-caste graders. It appears to be generated by *statistical discrimi-*

nation<sup>2</sup> Hanna and Linden (2012). Hoff and Pandey (2006) put this theory to the test by putting low-caste and high-caste sixth and seventh graders in six-person groups to solve mazes. Low-castes and high-castes did equally well on the task when the participants' caste status was kept unknown. When caste identity was exposed in homogeneous or mixed-caste groups, however, low-caste performance dropped dramatically Hoff and Pandey (2006).

### 3 Affirmative Action and its Effectiveness

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "*Affirmative action*" is referred to the positive steps taken to increase the representation of women and minorities in areas of employment, education, and culture from which they have been historically excluded Fullinwider (2018). In India, *reservation system* is an *affirmative action programme* that ensures historically marginalised communities have representation in education, jobs, and politics. It empowers the Union Government, as well as the States and Territories of India, to designate reserved quotas or seats, which decrease the criteria required in examinations, job vacancies, and other situations for "*socially and educationally disadvantaged citizens*", based on provisions in the Indian Constitution. The problem of bridging social and economic gaps caused by caste inequities via education did not

---

<sup>2</sup>A prior belief in that group of graders that lower-caste students are worse on average (due to historic discrimination) than their higher caste counterparts, which causes discrimination

get considerable attention until the country gained independence and adopted the Constitution, which was committed to the notion and practice of social justice. The foundations of India's current affirmative action laws may be traced back to colonial-era reservation programmes for government jobs, political representation, and scholarships

There are a lot of criticisms and public debates on the effectiveness of the affirmative action policy in India due to the preferential selection of candidates on the basis of their ethnic group rather than economic condition. Bertrand et al.(2010) found that affirmative action successfully targets the financially disadvantaged. They conducted a survey on engineering college admissions to see if affirmative action had any positive or negative impact. Their study revealed that affirmative action displaced upper-caste candidates who came from a wealthier economic background than the lower-caste applicants who were displacing them, proving that the caste reservation policy does not discriminate against the economically weak, as some critics have claimed. In addition, they also found that among the applicants in the survey, upper caste group tends to be better off than lower-caste groups in terms of socioeconomic characteristics. On the other hand, their results also suggested that among the lower-caste admits, it is those from stronger socioeconomic backgrounds who benefit most from the reservation policy. This result somewhat weakens the case that the policy benefits the economically disadvantaged **Bertrand et al. (2010)**. Bagde et al. (2016) through their study proved a sim-



ilar result which indicated that affirmative action policy appears to operate effectively as intended. The approach definitely promotes attendance among targeted pupils (lower-caste), particularly among those from low-income families. Affirmative action measures, in theory, might injure intended beneficiaries by placing them in academic contexts for which they are unprepared. But there weren't any proof of this kind of mismatch [Bagde et al. \(2016\)](#).

## 4 Discussion

Evidences on caste from the literature instills many questions that are to be answered. Vast majority of the literature that talks about the inter-linkages between caste and education stresses on the inequality in educational outcomes like gross enrollment ratio, grades or scores etc. as a result of caste discrimination. While some discussed it using the drop-out rates and failure rates due to issues of mismatch<sup>3</sup>. In today's time, given all these, there are more challenges that could come across which may further aggravate or disrupt the converging trends that Hnatkovska, Lahiri, and Paul (2013) illustrated in their study [Hnatkovska et al. \(2013\)](#). One such challenge is the digital divide in this new digital age, especially post demonetization the number of digital transactions have risen 19 folds in last 7 years [Livemint \(2021\)](#) and the unprecedented Covid-19 Pandemic

---

<sup>3</sup>Mismatch occurs when a student is enrolled in a course that is harder than his/her capabilities or when the peer group are having higher knowledge of the subject

has also transformed the education sector to a whole new digital dimension. Vaidehi, Reddy and Banerjee (2020) have tried to address this issue using NSS data. They found that in India, there is a significant first-level (ownership of computer and access to the Internet) and second-level (individual's skill to use computer and the Internet) digital divide between disadvantaged caste groups and others. The findings of the *non-linear Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition* show that India's digital gap is rooted in historical socioeconomic deprivation of disadvantaged caste groups. Disparities in educational achievement and income between disadvantaged caste groups and others account for more than half of the caste-based digital divide. Vaidehi et al. (2021). However, there needs to more studies that could generate better policy recommendations. The rise of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning has been a threat to labour force. Given that vast majority of unskilled labourers belong to the marginalised backgrounds, this could further enlarge the inequality.

## 5 Conclusion

The debate on caste and its impact on education has always been in the limelight of both academia and policy. Caste is a very complicated institution that has multiple dimensions of sociology, economics, politics etc. which makes it difficult to be studied. We observe from the literature that education and caste is very much intertwined and makes it even more complex. Studies have suggested

that there has been inequality in education due to the huge disparity in other socio-economic characteristics between the advantageous (Upper-caste) and disadvantageous (Lower-caste) groups. This disparity has been developed through the practices of discrimination like untouchability and slavery. Though, there are studies that suggested a convergence in the socio-economic characteristics among the ethnic groups, there are still evidences of discrimination even today. Thus, caste as an institution is inevitable and could last for years ahead.

## References

- Ambedkar, B. R. (2004). Castes in india: Their mechanism, genesis and development. *Readings in Indian Government And Politics Class, Caste, Gender*, pages 131–53.
- Bagde, S., Epple, D., and Taylor, L. (2016). Does affirmative action work? caste, gender, college quality, and academic success in india. *American Economic Review*, 106(6):1495–1521.
- Bertrand, M., Hanna, R., and Mullainathan, S. (2010). Affirmative action in education: Evidence from engineering college admissions in india. *Journal of Public Economics*, 94(1-2):16–29.
- Borooah, V. K. and Iyer, S. (2005). Vidya, veda, and varna: The influence of religion and caste on education in rural india. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 41(8):1369–1404.

- Fullinwider, R. (2018). Affirmative action. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- Hanna, R. N. and Linden, L. L. (2012). Discrimination in grading. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 4(4):146–68.
- Hnatkovska, V., Lahiri, A., and Paul, S. B. (2013). Breaking the caste barrier intergenerational mobility in india. *Journal of Human Resources*, 48(2):435–473.
- Hoff, K. and Pandey, P. (2006). Discrimination, social identity, and durable inequalities. *American economic review*, 96(2):206–211.
- Livemint (2021). Digital transactions in india jumped 19 times in last 7 yrs: Pm modi.
- Nambissan, G. B. (2013). Opening up the black box? sociologists and the study of schooling in india. *Sociology of education in India: Changing contours and emerging concerns*, pages 83–102.
- Vaidehi, R., Reddy, A. B., and Banerjee, S. (2021). Explaining caste-based digital divide in india. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2106.15917*.