

CHANGING DYNAMICS OF EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY IN INDIA SINCE THE INCEPTION OF THE PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

There are different forms of inequalities prevailing in society, especially in a country like India where large diversity prevails in the human population. Education inequality can have long-term effects on society. This paper studies the effect of COVID- 19 on the educational sector and how it changed the inequality among children in educational attainment. Educational inequality is the uneven distribution of resources among students. Educational inequality leads to major differences among individuals and it may result in social and economic distress. This study uses various sources of data from government agencies, international organizations, various reports, and analyses. As the Pandemic struck the world India was not an exception. Just like other sectors experienced drastic changes in their way of functioning, the educational sector faced changes from its roots. The entire structure of the school was compressed into a small screen, even though the structure is small, it is accessible to a small number of people. The basic axiom behind education is the upliftment of socially deprived societies, the transition of educational systems prevents the children who came from socially deprived societies who lack basic amenities. The efficiency of quality teachers in online mode education is also a problem that can increase the difference in educational attainment levels. The present government policies to attract students to schools are incapable of attracting students to the online mode of education. The exodus of labour with families from cities, children forced to support families in distress times, etc. also lead to educational inequality. Gender inequality in attaining education also increased in society. The

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difference in the amount of educational inequality in rural and urban areas needs to be addressed. These differences in various spectrums of education will significantly worsen the country socially and economically. It will affect the educational attainment index of the country. It will affect the Human Development Index which considers education as a parameter. These changes may slow down the successful attainment of The Global Agenda of 2030. India as an economy mainly concentrated on human resources the lack of educational attainment disturbs its leadership in human resource development and manpower exporting. It may cause other developing nations to out pass India in its development goals. In order to bring in a strong nation, its roots must be strong enough to hold the entire tree. Education is the root upon which the entire country builds its development, so equal, efficient, and productive education is a must factor in a country under any circumstances.

Keywords: Education Inequality, Digital Divide, Education since the pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

The earth can be regarded as a union of people from different parts who share different cultures, languages, ethnicity, etc. Thus, Earth forms a home for different types of differences among people which creates various forms of inequality. Inequality in a country can be attributed to factors of history, political structure, geography, etc. In the case of the majority of Asian, African, and South American countries persisting in a stage of underdeveloped or developing due to European and American invasions of the people, resources, and territories. As time flies, inequality is present in different parts of the world which were triggered or introduced as a consequence of various issues like war, pandemics, etc. COVID-19, a disease that made the world in a stationary state is the latest trigger of inequality in the world. When the world and nations are trying to

balance the gap between the inequality in different strata to make decorum, the pandemic interfered and caused severe havoc in the lives, income, and social structure of the people. COVID-19 has increased the inequalities in most sectors of the economy. It affected the educational sector that it transformed the fundamental structure of education in the world.

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), inequality can be viewed from different perspectives, all of which are related. The most common metric is income inequality, which refers to the extent to which income is evenly distributed within a population. Related concepts are lifetime inequality, Inequality of wealth, and Inequality of Opportunity. Inequality can be considered as a cycle that can interfere with and initiate other forms of inequality. Another form of inequality, Educational Inequality can be regarded as the unequal distribution of educational opportunity, financial and educational resources, qualified teachers, or digital assets that results in lessening of a student or population's educational, academic success, or performance.

India's educational landscape is extremely unequal. These inequalities are in the form of differences based on caste, class, gender, etc. This gap is increased with the advent of COVID-19 in the country which leads to the closure of schools and transformation into the online mode of education.

This paper tries to explain how educational inequality is increased in India since the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it will affect the educational agenda of the country.

Literature Review

The concept of educational inequality largely prevailed in India due to its structure and differences based on caste, class, and gender. Therefore, the subject got much attention from academics, government bodies, and social organizations. As the COVID-19 transformed the educational sector into another

mode, it increased educational inequality and which eventually attracts interest from various bodies. "COVID-19 and its effects: On the risk of social inequality through digitization and the loss of trust in three education systems" (Bormann et al) discusses the educational system differences in three European countries Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany during the pandemic period. "Student's perception and preference for online education in India during COVID-19 pandemic" (Muthuprasad et al,2020) deal with how the educational institutions changed to online mode and the difficulties and gains in this mode of education. "Pandemic school closures may increase inequality in test scores" (Catherine Haeck and Pierre Lefebvre) finds out how the school closures can induce socioeconomic skill gaps among the students and assess the impact of the pandemic on inequalities in education. Education through the spillover effect creates new assets and improves social welfare without making anyone worse off (Thomas et al.,2001). Educational inequality leads to a loss in a large amount of social welfare and the underutilization of potential human capital. Household economic factors, school environment including quality of physical and human infrastructure and quality of instruction, and social-cultural factors are three important factors that influence participation in schooling (Tilak,2009).

The studies done by international organizations like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, UNICEF, and UNDP analyzed data on educational inequality and how digital forms of education impact children.

METHODOLOGY

The Gini coefficient measures the degree of inequality in the distribution of income/wealth. With these, the inequality in education is also measured which demonstrates the extent of educational inequality. There are different causes of the educational inequality comprise including rural and urban variations, educational inequality with gender, and inequality in response to caste and social groups. Due to the COVID-19, the digital divide, which is the gap in access to

modern information and communication technology, further escalated the educational inequality.

The data on causes of educational inequality is collected from various secondary sources like reports of government organizations, international organizations, and surveys conducted by different agencies. Thus, the extent of educational inequality has been analyzed some solutions to the problem be formulated.

Education System in India

The education system in India is designed to uphold its culture, history, values, and customs. Under India's Right to Education act 2020, free and compulsory education is ensured for every child between the ages of three and eighteen.

As of 2020, Education in India statistics shows that about 26 percent of the Indian population falls under the age category of 0-14 years, which contains approximately 1.39 billion people who fall into the segment of the primary education sector. About 18 percent of people fall under the 15-24 age category, which contains approximately 500 million who fall into the segment of secondary and higher education sector. According to Indian Education statistics, the literacy rate for adults is 69.3 percent, which includes male literacy and female literacy at 78.8 percent and 59.3 percent respectively. The state of Kerala has got highest literacy rate at 96.2 percent.

Educational Inequality

The inequality index Gini is to measure the inequality in education too. The decrease in the educational inequality index is less in comparison to other developing countries, especially before globalization. The Gini declined slowly from 0.76 in 1970 to 0.69 in 1990. Then the educational inequality further declined slowly to 0.69 in 1993, 0.61 in 1999, 0.57 in 2004, and 0.51 in 2009. India is having a reduction in the inequality index. But COVID-19 transformed the

education system further increased inequality and it leads to an increase in the inequality index.

When we travel towards the history of education in India, the earliest form is the Gurukul who are shishya (student) and Guru(teacher) reside in the teacher's residence and acquire the knowledge on different subjects. In this form, this kind of education can be attainable for only the people from higher castes. Thus, inequality in education is also sprouted along with the education system in India. From these, the Indian education system is also transformed into different forms. Along with education improvement, educational inequality is also spread among different forms in the Indian education sector.

At present India has one of the world's largest education and a school system that contains 250 million students admitted to government schools and privately managed schools. Even though India has a large number of students, there is a large amount of educational inequality in India. Education inequality contains different factors that restrict the motto of education for all including regional inequality, gender inequality in education, inequality based on caste and social groups, and inequality based on parental income and profession. Even after so many years of independence, India is struggling with its aim to provide education for all.

Educational Inequality before COVID-19

India faces regional inequality as in the difference between the development in urban and rural areas. In India, better infrastructure facilities like schools with furniture, smart rooms, clean water, medical facilities, and qualified teachers are mostly available in the urban areas. Many government schools in India do not even have proper classrooms, lighting, and clean water. Students in rural areas are not capable to move toward urban areas in search of quality education. Thus, students in urban areas have more affinity for greater educational opportunities.

It is increased to a further extent by the opening of branded educational institutions in urban areas targeting the rich people. These things point toward the relationship between education towards geographical factors.

The stereotyped Indian society considers education for women not as important as for men because women are considered to focus on household chores rather than education. Parents are not willing to invest in their daughter's education in comparison to sons. With the change in the time gender gap in India is also diminishing in many ways.

The complex form of the Indian caste system is a problem for the Indian Education sector since the learning process developed in the country. The social background of students matters a lot in terms of the level of learning they are going to approach. The students from disadvantaged social backgrounds suffer from unequal educational participation. Some social norms of different groups are also preventing students from attaining knowledge. The caste system divides people into the Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), Other backward Class (OBC), and general category. Students who belong to disadvantaged groups do not have a fair chance or an equal number of opportunities in the field of education to perform their highest capability.

In India, parental income is an important component that determines the educational attainment of a student. In India majority of the population falls under the lower-income groups who were mostly not at all able to afford the amenities like clothing, books, stationaries, and food. Here the level of education a student attains is proportional to the level of income. Students from higher-income families can afford a high quality of education while students from lower-income groups can only afford a low-quality education.

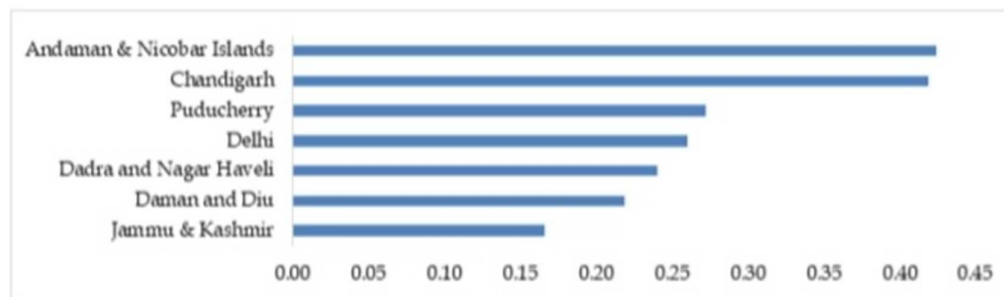
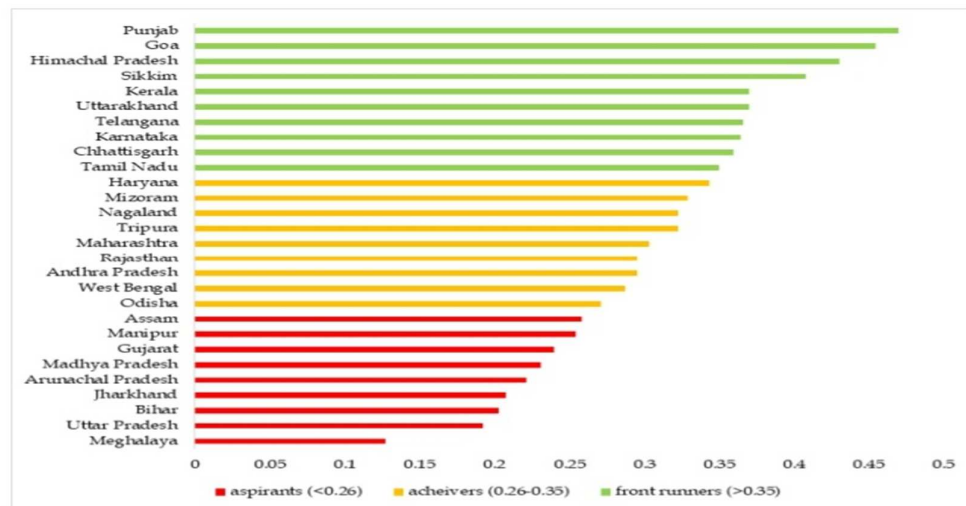


Figure: Access to education; Ranking of states

In a recent study undertaken by the Centre for New Economics Studies, OP Jindal Global university studied the inequality index in different states and union territories in India, concerning five attributes, one among them is Access to education. As per their study analysis, they divided the states into three groups aspirants, achievers, and front runners. This is developed concerning the attributes Net Enrolment Ratio, Net Attendance Ratio in secondary level, Average Annual Dropout Rate, Pupil-Teacher Ratio. According to this, the top five front-runner states based on their overall performance are Punjab, Goa, Himachal

Pradesh, Sikkim, and Kerala. Meanwhile, the aspirant states are Arunachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Meghalaya.

COVID-19 and Educational Inequality in India

India is the second most impacted country in the world with more than ten million cases. India went into full lockdown on 24 March with little warning to the public. The national lockdown continued till June and was slowly lifted in a phased manner. All educational institutions in India were temporarily closed in March 2020 as most schools were wrapping up the 2019-20 educational academic year. Due to the upsurge in COVID-19 cases, schools were not opened, and the Ministry of Education presented the Alternative Academic Calendar (AAC), guidelines on continuing formal education online in the 2020-21 academic year. Closures have affected millions of learners from pre-primary to secondary levels of schooling. The transition from face-to-face to distance learning has shone a spotlight on vast inequalities within the education system between and within states. It faces various inequalities like capacity of teachers, learning outcomes, the digital infrastructure provided by the government, and access to technology. A report found that only 32 percent of the rural population of 12+ years and 54 percent of the urban population had internet access and that only eleven percent of Indian households have computers such as Desktops, Laptops, and tablets. This symbolizes another form of inequality in the Indian Education sector due to Digital Divide. Apart from a new form of inequality, in a time of online mode of education, it increased the extent of inequality in every form of gender, caste and social group, geographical and parent's income, and profession.

State (percent)	Ability to operate computer (Rural)	Able to use internet (Rural)	Ability to operate computer (Urban)	Able to use internet (Urban)
Andhra Pradesh	1.5	10.4	11.6	29.5
Assam	3.7	12.1	30.8	46.9
Bihar	2.7	12.5	20	38.6
Chhattisgarh	3.2	10.6	22	34.6
Gujarat	4.4	21.1	20.1	49.1
Haryana	5.9	37.1	29.5	55.4
Himachal Pradesh	10.5	48.6	28.3	70.6
Jammu and Kashmir	3.5	28.7	16	57.7
Jharkhand	1.3	11.9	15.6	40.2
Karnataka	2	8.3	22.9	33.5
Kerala	20.1	46.9	27.5	56.4
Madhya Pradesh	2.3	9.7	17.2	35.4
Maharashtra	3.3	18.5	27.4	52
Odisha	1.8	5.8	17.2	31.2
Punjab	9.4	39.4	26.7	57.1
Rajasthan	6.4	18.5	26.6	49.9
Tamil Nadu	11.6	14.4	24.7	24.8
Telangana	1.6	9.9	17.6	41.9
Uttarakhand	7	35.2	32.5	64.3
Uttar Pradesh	4	11.6	22.3	41
West Bengal	3.3	7.9	23	36

Source: National Sample Survey

With the closure of schools due to the COVID-19 crisis, the methods of teaching had been changed to digital platforms like online platforms, television, etc. Even though it is helpful for students in a crisis time, there is a vast difference in access to digital infrastructures, like smartphones, computers, and electricity and internet connectivity. The quality of electricity provided in the country is low. While 24 percent of Indians own a smartphone, only 11 percent possess a computer. Only 8 percent of households with children age group 5-24 years possess both computer and internet connection. Moreover, as per the IMRB report, there is a rise in the proportion of data expenditure in comparison to voice expenditure for most users in the last four years. Between 2013 and 2017, the ratio of Data: Voice Expenditure went from 45:55 to 84:16. Online classes regularly have a cost implication as students have to bear the cost of internet services. Some of the other problems associated with the digital mode of education are poor network connectivity, electricity, digital distraction, and language barriers.

	Households that own computer	Households with Internet facility
Rural	4.4	14.9
Urban	23.4	42
India	10.7	23.8

Source: National Sample Survey

According to a survey conducted by School Children's Online and Offline Learning (SCHOOL) titled, "Locked out: Emergency report on School Students" states that only 28 percent of children study regularly and 37 percent do not at all studying in rural areas. Whereas 47 percent study regularly and 19 percent do not at all studying in urban areas which drastic difference in the educational attainment in both areas. In rural areas, only 4.4 percent of households have a computer and only 15 percent have internet facilities. In contrast to this, 23.4 percent have a computer and 42 percent have internet connectivity in urban

areas respectively (MOSPI, 2019). According to ASER 2020 survey highlights that most of the students in rural areas do not have textbooks and educational assistance from their families. Only 11 percent have attended live online classes and 32 percent of children with smartphone access had not received any materials.

	Can operate computer(R)	Can Use the Internet(R)	Internet Use in the last 30 days(R)	Can operate Computer(U)	Can Use the internet(U)	Internet use in the last 30 days (U)
Male	12.6	17.1	14.6	37.5	43.5	40.4
Female	7	8.5	6.6	26.9	30.1	26.6
Total	9.9	13	10.8	32.4	37.1	33.8

Source; National Sample Survey

According to a policy brief issued by the Right to Education Forum, in January 2021, 10 million girls in India could drop out of secondary school due to COVID-19. A report released by UNICEF usage of digital platforms for education among girls was 8 percent lower than boys. As per the survey findings of a Delhi-based NGO, 33.6 percent of girls don't have access to digital devices. They also have limited access to devices owned by families as well. The survey also points out that 56.1 percent of girls got increased responsibility for doing domestic chores during the pandemic leaving less time to focus on education. In June 2020, UNESCO raised concern over increased domestic violence and sexual abuse during the lockdown. A report by Child Fund India, a non-profit organization, mentions that a delay in opening schools will increase by 47 percent in girl student dropout rates which would lead to an increase in child marriages, early pregnancy, gender-based violence, and trafficking. According to the States data, the Maharashtra government revealed that 790 child marriages were prevented during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In India, 84 percent of households suffered a loss in income during the pandemic period. The loss in income forced the parents to default on the fees and thus leads to the discontinuation of education. The children of migrant laborers left their schools near their workplace during the pandemic for different work to support their families. In a report by Aide at Action, during the first wave of the pandemic, approximately 18 percent of the migrant children accompanied their parents to the worksite, which rose closer to 100 percent during the second wave.

The number of children in will double in dropout rates from 32.2 million in the aftermath of the pandemic, with children from marginalized communities disproportionately affected. The shift from classroom education to online education was like a lock for the marginalized communities. With the closure of ashram schools which are residential schools for tribal students, they were completely left off education. Only 4 percent of SC/ST children in rural areas study regularly.

The Government of India organized schemes to increase the educational attainment levels among people to achieve the target of education for all. It includes the Mid-Day Meals Scheme, Samagra Shiksha, Scheme for Infrastructure Development of Private and Minority industries, and Scheme to Provide Quality Education in Madrasas. Most of the schemes are offline. There was a lack of effective online schemes for educational attainment in the initial period of the pandemic situation was extended the effect of the pandemic on the educational sector. For example, the Mid-Day meal scheme is a significant part of the diet of Indian children. It is one of the most important interventions of the Government of India with multiple benefits such as classroom hunger, increasing school attendance, and addressing malnutrition. As the schools closed, the school feeding program failed to provide free lunch for the 115.5 million people

enrolled under this scheme. A study by IFPRI shows that as of May 2020 only 15 of 36 states/UTs had taken steps to adapt to the scheme.

Sustainable Development Goal four is to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". India targets to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and Goal 4 effective learning outcomes. The closure of schools and educational inequality in the Indian educational sector may adversely affect the target which unexpectedly arises in the world. Development measuring indexes like Human Development Index (HDI), Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI), Multidimensional Poverty Index, etc. use different aspects of education as a measure for life quality measurement. The presence of educational inequality and the closure of schools will decrease the rates of this index.

RESULTS

Educational inequalities in the country are generally due to rural-urban regional differences, gender inequality in education, norms of caste and social groups, and parental income and profession. In this, the COVID-19 caused school closures which led to a digital divide too.

During the pandemic period, the access to education is very low in comparison to urban areas both in the case of material, financial and physical support.

The gender inequality has widened as a result of about 10 million girls dropping out of school due to less access to digital devices in comparison to boys. The marginal sections (SC, ST) of the society also suffered in the crisis due to a lack of infrastructure, income, and support. The government schemes like the Mid-Day Meal scheme did not function well which increased the suffering of these people.

A decrease in parental income mutually increased the dropout rates in schools. Especially in the case of children of migrant laborers who left their places for their native land.

The increased educational inequality will affect the sustainable development goals and development indexes.

CONCLUSION

Order to curtail the increased educational inequality induced by COVID-19 can be decreased by various measures and policies. The government should ensure that no children are left behind in education. The digital divide can be balanced by providing scholarships in the form of scholarships, devices for education, free data package, or reimbursement of the amount. Government should strengthen its facilities in rural areas like continuous electricity and internet connectivity. Government should prioritize the distribution of learning and support materials accessible and inclusive for all children, particularly girls and children from marginalized sections.

India, a large nation that comprises a huge population that includes poor and rich, rural and urban, marginalise and elevated groups in the different spectrums. In a country where social inequality prevails and educational inequality does not form an exception. Even though the digital mode of education is an answer to the crisis times, it escalated the educational inequality too. The adequate steps for online mode of education to be implemented by the government with concerns of the future and as well as achieve the objective of education for all.

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