



Caste and the Right to Learn: Policy, Practice, and Persistent Inequalities

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Abstract

This paper looks at the long-standing relationship between caste and the right to education in India, the paradox of progressive policies existing alongside deeply rooted inequalities. Though constitutional protections exist, affirmative action by reservation of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and the groundbreaking Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, the article is a historical analysis of how ever-present disparities based on caste still influence educational experiences. The study is a critical analysis of on-the-ground realities, such as rural-urban disparities, gender-caste relationships, and structural determinants such as economic precarity, lack of social capital (Bourdieu), and neoliberal privatization based on empirical evidence in the form of sources such as ASER reports, AISHE data, and fieldwork studies. It ends with practical suggestions obtaining a better implementation of RTE, more reservations, caste-sensitivity training, Dalit-led movements and more action on the part of multiple stakeholders to bring education to its emancipatory potential, repeating the mantra of Ambedkar: Educate, Agitate, Organize.

Keywords: Caste inequalities, Right to Education, Affirmative action, Reservations policy, RTE Act, Education disparities, Classroom discrimination, Social justice.

Introduction

As a well-developed historical and social structure based on the hierarchy of varnas, the caste system in India has remained one of the primary causes of deep inequalities on different stages of

life, including education. Caste, which started with the ancient Vedic texts, subdivided the society into four varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, and those who did not fit into this system were called Untouchables or Avarnas, has evolved to become an intricate system of jatis (sub-castes), enforced by endogamy, professional segregation, and standards of ritual purity and ritual pollution (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). B.R. Ambedkar, who orchestrated the Indian Constitution and had a passionate aversion to caste, considered it a basic obstacle to social movement and believed that it segregated the community into graded disparities and did not allow a harmonious nation to emerge. Under the title of his best-known work, *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar (1936/2014) wrote that caste kills public spirit, morality, and unity: Caste has killed public spirit. The idea of charity in society has been killed by the concept of caste. Caste has rendered popular opinion impossible. This system has traditionally denied the lower castes, especially Scheduled Castes (SCs, formerly: untouchables or Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) access to education, considering knowledge as the preserve of higher castes.

The right to learn is the response to this kind of exclusion making education one of the key human rights and sources of empowerment, equality, and social justice. In the international sphere, the right is enshrined in documents such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) that requires free and compulsory primary schooling and fair access to secondary and higher education. In India, it is constitutionally supported in Article 21A, added to the constitution by the 86th Amendment in 2002 that makes free and compulsory education of children between the age of 6-14 a fundamental right. It was operationalized by the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 where non-discrimination is emphasized, neighbourhood schools and quality have been stressed. Education is viewed as an emancipatory impetus, whereby society has marginalized it as a way of opposing oppression and gaining dignity, which coincides with the vision of Ambedkar, regarding education as a means of annihilating caste.

Still, there exists a vehement contradiction: even after such progressive policies as caste-based reservations in education (which started its way with the Articles 15, 16, and 46 of the Constitution) and the 25% quota of disadvantaged groups (SCs/STs and economically weaker ones) in education establishments in the RTE Act, the caste-based inequalities in education are not going to pass. These gaps are outlined in recent data. Higher education has an overall Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of about 28.4% (Ministry of Education, 2024), whereas the SCs have a GER of about 23.1% and the STs have a GER of about 18.9% (All India Survey on Higher

Education [AISHE], 2021-22). Although the literacy rates are on the rise, there are disparities; the national literacy rate of persons of those aged 7 and above stands at approximately 80.9% (Periodic Labour Force Survey [PLFS], 2023-24) though the marginalized population has lower levels of literacy with the highest level of illiteracy among SCs and STs. The average secondary level dropout rates stand at 12.6% and are higher in such states as Bihar or Uttar Pradesh, with the disadvantaged castes being an overrepresented group because of socio-economic and discriminatory factors and inadequate schooling (UDISE+, 2021-22). Learning outcomes also unveil disparities; reports such as Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2023) show that the basic skills in reading and arithmetic are lower among rural and disadvantaged children.

This chapter insists that although policies such as reservations and the RTE Act have the intentions of removing caste barriers by encouraging access and inclusion, gaps in their application (such as lack of enforcement of the 25% quota in the private school system, underfunding, and bureaucratic obstacles) and the prevalence of socio-cultural structures such as the classroom discrimination and teacher prejudices promote inequalities. These aspects require more systemic changes than enacting policies, such as reinforced monitoring, caste-sensitive pedagogy, and wider de-casting of the society.

Historical Context of Caste and Education in India

The interaction between caste and education in India is highly historical and the current inequalities are the result of centuries of marginalization and reformation. Vedic education was limited to the upper varnas between 1500 and 500 BCE; Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishyas were not excluded and even women were not allowed to access Vedic knowledge. This exclusion was codified in works such as the Manusmriti where lower castes were subjected to harsh penalties in case they tried to learn the Vedas, thereby affirming caste as an inherent obstacle to education (Doniger and Smith, 1991). This system continued to perpetuate illiteracy in the marginalized populations and therefore considered education as a tool of perpetuating ritual and social stratification. Caste-based restrictions existed in medieval India under the rule of Islamic and regional masters, although there were certain differences. Gurukuls, madrasas were dominated by the elites.

The colonial period also enforced these divisions by bringing the modern education systems that increased inequalities. The British policies of teaching English as their language, as in the case of the Minute on Education (1835) by British historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, were used to produce a category of Indians, called by him Indian in blood and colour, but English in

taste, in opinions, in morals, in intellect (Macaulay, 1835/2003). This theory of downward filtration sought to train a limited elite of people mostly of high castes to act as service providers in the colonial government, excluding the vernacular and mass education. Education Despatch of 1854 by Wood increased schools, but solidified the caste hierarchy with Brahmin and other upper caste schools receiving a greater share of funds, resulting in unequal access (Nurullah and Naik, 1943). Towards the end of the 19th century, the census data showed dramatic differences: in 1881, the literacy rate was approximately 3.2 percent on the whole, and lower castes and tribes were practically illiterate (Government of India, 1883). Colonial reforms, which were shaped by missionaries and social reformers, started to interfere with this, yet education was still a force of social control instead of social equality.

After gaining its independence, India has tried to resolve these legacies in terms of constitutional and policy choices. The equality and social justice founded in the Indian Constitution, which was adopted in 1950, were aimed at combating caste discrimination. Article 15, which forbids discrimination based on caste in access to education institutions, Article 16, which guarantees equality in government employment (subject to reservations), and Article 46, which instructs the state to further educational and economic interests of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) (Government of India, 1950). This formed the basis of affirmative action, such as quotas in schools and colleges, 15 per cent. of the SCs and 7.5 per cent. of the STs, as a result of the Poona Pact of 1932 between Ambedkar and Gandhi. This structure was further developed by the first Backward Classes Commission (Kaka Kalelkar, 1955) and then the Mandal Commission (1980) which identified Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

The most significant characters and movements played a significant role in promoting the idea of educational reform as a way to break the caste. B.R. Ambedkar, a Dalit scholar himself, believed in education as a key to annihilating caste and created organizations such as the People Education Society in 1945 to educate the disadvantaged groups (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). He considered education as giving strength to the oppressed to defy the rule of Brahman. In 1873, Jyotirao Phule an educational reformist, established the Satyashodhak Samaj and in 1840s-1850s opened schools of girls and lower caste based on the idea that education would emancipate Shudras and Atishudras, because they were exploited by the upper caste (O'Hanlon, 1985). In 1937, Gandhi in his Nai Talim model of basic education (referred to as Nai Talim) proposed vocational and inclusive education to develop self-reliance, but it was seen as inadequately radical by opponents such as Ambedkar to eliminate caste (Gandhi, 1937/1962).

There are historical remnants like Sanskritization, which is the imitation of upper-caste ways by lower castes in order to become treated as such (Srinivas, 1952) and untouchability, which still affect the educational access of the modern world. Sanskritization is usually focused on cultural assimilation rather than structural change whereas untouchability is expressed in the form of social ostracism that restricts school enrolment. These are some of the causes of unequal gaps. The 2011 Census has reported that SC literacy was 66.1% and ST literacy was 59 taken against the national average literacy rates of 73 (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, 2011). Recent data, as indicated by Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023-24 still indicates improvement, but with gaps: SC literacy is 75.2, ST 71.3 per cent, when compared with the overall rate of 80.9 per cent (YourStory Media, 2025). Such inequalities are extreme in rural settings and in females, which are intergenerational outcomes of historical exclusion.

This chronological course highlights the manner in which caste has been restrictive of lower groups in the provision of education, leaving systematic inequalities that can hardly be overcome by policies. These efforts have given way to modern structures, e.g. the reservations and the RTE Act, which are impeded by the burden of the old practices as discussed in the following sections.

Policy Framework: Affirmative Action and the Right to education

The Indian policy of addressing caste-based differentiation in education is founded on the affirmative action and legal provisions, which strive to generate accessibility and inclusiveness within the marginalized communities. The most significant of them is the reservation within the education, which is 15 per cent reservation to Scheduled Castes (SCs), 7.5 per cent reservation to Scheduled Tribes (STs) and 27 per cent reservation to Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and which was furthered by the Mandal Commission Report of 1980 (Backward Classes Commission, 1980). The Mandal Commission or the Second Backward Classes Commission was suggested as a solution to the past disadvantages of the OBCs and was implemented in 1990 following the ruling of the Supreme Court in the case of Indira Sawhney v. Union of India (1992). These quotas apply to the government institutions and this was changed by the Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Admission) Act, 2006 to the central education institutions.

RTE Act, 2009, entitled to Free and Compulsory Education of Children is amongst those milestones in the history of elementary education which mandates free and compulsory

schooling to children between 6-14 years of age (Government of India, 2009). The principal ones are: 25 per cent quota in independent schools not assisted by the government of children who belong to the disadvantaged groups such as SCs, STs, and economically weaker sections; no detention up to the Class 8, and the infrastructure, teaching and learning standards, and ratio of pupils to teachers. This scheme is also complemented with other initiatives: The Mid-Day Meal Scheme, implemented in 1995 and expanded as per the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education, provides free school lunches to enhance enrolment and nutrition, particularly in rural areas with children of lower castes (Ministry of Education, 2023a). In 2001, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) was an initiative aiming at the realization of universal education at the elementary school level through infrastructure development and special provision to the SC/ST populations. National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which concerns inclusive education where Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education is 50 percent by 2035 and social-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) are taken into account (e.g., caste-based scholarships, digital inclusion, and multilingual education) are more recently published (Ministry of Education, 2020).

These policies collaborate with the social justice theories, such as the veil of ignorance, where social policies are drafted without having an idea where one will be in the society, to have the least fortunate in the society have the opportunity to be just to everyone. This can be symbolized by implementing the reservations in order to offer a form of compensation to the deprivation that caste causes in an effort to support equity rather than extreme meritocracy. The major controversy is the merit vs. equity, critics argue that reservations hurt merit (i.e. in that they lower the barriers to entry), and that merit is, the proponents say, a social construct, having been created to favour upper castes, those equipped with resources (Deshpande, 2013). Affirmative action is thus a redefining of equity to balance structural prejudices and this argument is proven by the idea of the reservations as temporary means of attaining equality as propounded by Ambedkar.

Some of the strengths of these policies are sufficient gains in enrolments and legal protection. As a case in point in higher education, SC GER has risen to 25.9 percent as of 2021-22, relative to 17.1 percent in 2013-14, and ST GER up to 21.2 percent in the same years, respectively (Ministry of Education, 2024; Varghese and Malik, 2015). Overall, the SC/ST/OBC enrolment ratio rose by 17.7 points (43.1 in 2010-11 and 60.8 in 2022-23) as one of the indicators of the policy impact (Indian Institute of Management Udaipur, 2025). RTE Act gave an upturn to the

enrolment in the elementary education, and GER has gone beyond 100 percent in most of the states and legal protection, like provisions against discrimination checks open discrimination.

Nevertheless, restrictions still exist. There are silo operation of policies and an example of this is RTE because it does not clearly deal with caste violence whereas Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, specifically deals with discrimination based on education (Government of India, 1989). The emphasis on the student population at the cost of their learning: The enrolment numbers grow, but the learning outcomes are not so high, and 40 percent of children in the Class 5 can reach the basic level of skills proficiency, and the number is even smaller when it comes to SC/ST children (Pratham Foundation, 2023). Underfunding (RTE is implemented by 60-70 percent of the required budgets) and unequal implementation of quota in private schools exacerbates the gaps (Accountability Initiative, 2022).

Table 1 compares key policies:

Policy/Initiative	Year	Key Objectives	Target Groups
Constitutional Reservations (Articles 15, 16, 46)	1950	Prohibit discrimination; promote educational advancement for weaker sections.	SCs, STs, socially/educationally backward classes
Mandal Commission	1980 (implemented 1990)	Recommend 27% quota in education/employment for OBCs.	OBCs
Mid-Day Meal Scheme	1995	Provide nutritional support to improve attendance and health.	School children, esp. SC/ST/rural
Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)	2001	Achieve universal elementary education through infrastructure and equity.	Children aged 6-14, focus on SC/ST/girls
RTE Act	2009	Ensure free/compulsory quality education; 25% private quota.	Children 6-14, disadvantaged groups incl. SC/ST/EWS
NEP 2020	2020	Holistic, inclusive education; aim 50% GER by 2035.	All, with focus on SEDGs incl. castes

This framework, while progressive, reveals implementation challenges that sustain inequalities, as discussed next.

Practices on the Ground: Implementation Challenges and Everyday Realities

Since policy framework of caste inclusive education in India on paper might be good, the implementation part of the same reveals that there are numerous gaps in policies which merely serves to confirm the fact that there exists no connection between the intent and the implementation. Systemic inefficiencies, socio-cultural resistances, and overlapping inequalities are the problems of implementation that keep imposing educational disadvantages to the lower castes. This section will be a review of these realities based on empirical evidence to highlight how some of these policies like the reservations and the RTE Act do not work in day to day lives, in many aspects, reinforce caste hierarchy rather than undermine it.

The significant issues of implementation are bureaucracy, under-finance, and corruption as far as quota allocations are concerned. One such instance is that of the RTE act that has defined infrastructure standards and the number of teacher and pupil on ratio but this has not been implemented because of administrative bottlenecks. The 25% quota amount is also not paid by the states to the private schools and thus, are hesitant to admit disadvantaged students (Accountability Initiative, 2022). This is aggravated by funding deficits: The Union Budget of 2024-25 allocated on the implementation of RTE 37,500 crore which is insufficient to cover the entire nation (Deccan Herald, 2025). The spending of 2023-24 was equivalent to 70 percent of the budget, which is a sign of endemic underinvestment, which affects school infrastructure and teacher wages (PRS Legislative Research, 2025). Quotas are also undermined by corruption; in the example of reservation seats, the upper castes students are reported to commit fraud on certificates, hence weakening the benefits of the SCs and STs (IT for Change, 2024). Such issues cause unequal enforcement of policies, and the poorer groups must bear.

The impact of the socio-cultural hurdles is highly pronounced in the classrooms whereby the Dalit students are always discriminated against despite the fact that this is an illegal act. Segregated seats, verbal abuse, and caste prejudiced biases of teachers are some of the causes of hostile environments. Human Rights Watch (2014) reported cases when Dalit children were forced to clean toilets or sit in a separate place and it confirms the concepts of becoming a polluter. According to the latest reports, still there is systemic violence; the world report 2025 said that the Dalits are subjected to rampant caste-based discrimination, and include discrimination in education (Human Rights Watch, 2025). The statistics of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) confirm this: It was found that in 2023 over 67,000 cases of atrocities

against SCs and STs took place, and educational institutions were a new weapon (The Hindu, 2024). As a case in point, the instances of bodily assaults and harassment in schools indicate towards the success of cultural requirement in the face of the policy security.

These are compounded by the rural-urban irregularity, in which the inferior ranks of the rural populace are undergoing intense infrastructural scarcities. Poor facilities like toilets and access to drinking water are also present in the rural schools that are more affected by SC and ST populations. Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE+) 2023-24 states that 15 percent of the rural schools do not comply with the RTE infrastructure norms and 5 percent of urban schools do not (Ministry of Education, 2024a). It also results in growing dropout rates: In the secondary level, SC dropout stands 10.9% in ST and 11.2% in general category (Ministry of Education, 2024b). In Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the rates are over 15-20% of the SCs, which is justified by poverty, migration, and poor sanitation which makes attendance deteriorating, especially post-COVID (Education in India Education for All, 2025).

The gender intersectionality adds to the caste-based exclusion particularly in Dalit girls. The caste and gender are made to interlock to augment vulnerabilities and Dalit girls were badly discriminated against twice. The National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) shows that child marriage rates amongst 20-24-year-old women married before 18 years of age are 27.8 percent of the SCs and 28.1 percent of the STs, as opposed to 23.3 percent on the whole (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2021). This is restrictive habit because early marriage normally becomes a challenge to dropout; girls among the Dalit societies in the rural areas are forcefully taken to do the chores at home or due to the perceived insecurity in the hands of caste violence. The studies have shown that boys receive more education than girls because, according to the policies like SSA, female children are not sufficiently served by the system including caste systems that are patriarchal (UNICEF, 2023).

Case studies describe these dynamics. The issue of high caste violence in schools is not dead and not yet exhausted in Uttar Pradesh; the recent 2025 reports talk about the recent outbreak of anti-Dalit crimes, among which are assaults on SC students who cross their caste boundaries, like sharing water or seating (Citizens for Justice and Peace, 2025). An example of one of the instances was where a Dalit minor girl was harassed and the institutional complication was apparent. Tamil Nadu on the contrary has a success story of reforms led by Periyar. The Dravidian educational policies that encouraged egalitarian education were adopted in the state because of the impact of the Self-Respect Movement spearheaded by E. V. Ramasamy Periyar,

who stood against the dominance of the Brahmans. Free education and anti-caste programs have led to more SC attendance and reduced disparities in literacy levels of SC in this region of above 80 (compared to national average) due to political promises and mobilizations (Dravida Pozhil, n.d.; Forward Press, 2015).

Table 2 enumerates common implementation barriers:

Barrier Type	Examples	Impacts on Marginalized Groups
Bureaucratic Hurdles	Delayed quota admissions, paperwork overload	Reduced access; enrolment denials for SC/STs
Underfunding	RTE budget cuts (e.g., 70% shortfall in 2023-24)	Poor infrastructure; higher dropouts (10-20% for SCs)
Corruption	Fake certificates in reservations	Diluted benefits; perpetuation of upper-caste dominance
Socio-Cultural Discrimination	Segregated seating, teacher biases	Psychological trauma; lower learning outcomes (e.g., 35% reading proficiency for SCs)
Infrastructure Deficits	Lack of toilets in rural schools	Gendered dropouts; health issues for Dalit girls
Policy Silos	Weak linkage with anti-atrocity laws	Unaddressed violence; over 67,000 NCRB cases

Learning outcome gaps are highlighted by quantitative analysis. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2023, there are very sharp inequalities: 40.2 percent of all rural children in Class 5 can read Class 2-level text in general, but with SC children, the percentage of this ability is approximately 35 percent, which is a result of worse background knowledge because of discrimination and a lack of resources (Pratham Foundation, 2023). The same can be said in arithmetic, as SC/ST students are 10-15 percentage points behind, which continues the vicious cycles of inequality.

These on-the-ground realities demonstrate that without addressing implementation gaps, policies remain symbolic. The following section delves into structural factors sustaining these inequalities.

Persistent Inequalities: Structural and Systemic Factors

Caste-based educational inadequacies in India live long despite progressive policies because of the profound structural and systemic influences discussed here in critical perspectives like the theory of social reproduction of Pierre Bourdieu and the Ambedkarite theories of caste. These are parts of perpetuating marginalization which cross over other axes of inequality and

cannot be easily changed by surface-level reforms. Based on new evidence, this section claims that the incompleteness of de-casteing of society (where caste is still embedded in the economic, social, and institutional fabric) requires more than policy adjustments. These dynamics can be related to global experiences such as racial inequalities in the education system of the U.S. which sheds light on how past injustices find their reflection in various countries.

These inequalities are supported by structural factors that start with economic disparities which make educational opportunities unattainable to lower castes. As historically landless and asset-poverished, Scheduled Castes (SCs) are disadvantaged by lack of access to additional resources such as private tuition, which they use to gain benefits in competition with upper castes. According to the data of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), more than three-quarters of SC households are landless or have minimum land, which limits investment in education (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2024). Such economic precarity can be imagined to fit the Bourdieu (1986) scheme of deficit of social capital, whereby the under-castes do not have networks and cultural capital, including knowledge of schooling norms of elite educational systems, to succeed at school. Cultural capital is passed down to upper castes, which take control of the educational systems and recreates disparities. This has been exacerbated by neoliberal changes that have occurred since the 1990s, whereby the focus on privatisation now rests at the expense of equity; the growth of private schools in has favoured fee-driven models, marginalising state institutions in which SC/ST students are predominated (Jha & Parvati, 2023). Oxfam reports have highlighted this: In India, the top 10 per cent of the population control 77 per cent of the national wealth, and wealth concentration has been increasing since liberalization, as marginalized groups now cannot afford access to quality education. An Oxfam analysis published in 2025 points to the intersection of the economic inequalities such as gender pay gap where men earn 82 percent of the labour income and caste to further increase educational exclusion.

Isolated problems also institutionalize inequalities by elite capture and weaknesses of the system. This is highlighted by the case of the so-called creamy layer: Although reservations are meant to be uplifting, the wealthy members of SC/ST communities, who are referred to as the creamy layer, are the ones to take advantage of them, as has been discussed in recent case law in the Supreme Court. In 2025, the Court sent notices to consider pleas that creamy layer to SC/ST reservations, following the position of Chief Justice B.R. Gavai that only benefits of the deserving should be filtered out. Such elite capture erodes policy intent, which enables

intra-caste hierarchy to continue. Another structural defect, exacerbated by the COVID is the digital divide; distance learning revealed the access disparities, with country SC/ST students having no devices and access to the internet. A 2025 story about digital inequalities in higher education observes that the situation with the pandemic deteriorated the results of low-income castes in terms of home study conditions, and 24% of rural households had an opportunity to access the internet (NFHS-5 data). This is worsened by weak monitoring mechanisms: Although RTE is stipulated, the controlling bodies such as National Commission of Protection of Child Rights are not enforced, which means that violations are unaddressed (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Marginalization is enhanced in interactions with inequalities. Caste mixes up with class because poor Dalits are deprived twice; in the region, those in the north such as Bihar are more illiterate than the SCs because they have not developed in the same way the south has developed. The same is the case with disability, where disabled SC children are triply excluded by the impact of stigma, poverty, and inaccessible infrastructure (World Bank, 2023). The SDG 4 Scorecard 2025 provided by UNESCO indicates that India is 11 percentage points out of track on primary reading proficiency and the caste-disaggregated information indicates that SC/ST falls behind the equitable quality education (Goal 4). The 2025 State of the Education Report on India highlights the need to have multilingual education as a means of equity but mentions that there have been consistent obstacles to the marginalized groups.

These are issues that are contextualized by global comparisons. Racial disparities in the U.S. reflect those of the caste system: Black and Latino students are less enrolled in higher-level STEM programs, and proficiency in reading/math (e.g., only 17% of Black fourth-graders reading on par with 45% whites, 2022 NAEP data) has a disparity in proficiency. Similar to the case of the creamy layer in India, the politics of affirmative action in the United States (e.g., post-2023 Supreme Court decisions) throws light on the issue of elite capture in race quota. These similarities highlight structural racism/casteism as an international issue with neoliberal policies focused more on markets than inclusion is reflected in the post-pandemic digital divides of both countries.

After all, such inequalities exist due to the lack of total de-casteing: Caste infuses institutions, and destroying it is difficult as envisioned by Ambedkar. Community mobilization, economic redistribution and cultural changes beyond-policy interventions are also necessary to promote the genuine equity as discussed in the further recommendations.

Towards Equity: Recommendations and Future Directions

The caste-based disparities in education in India need practical solutions to fill the policy gaps, enlist power, and to create systemic changes. Though the situation in India is distinctive, the trends are similar in Asia, as in Madhesi communities of Nepal or marginalized groups of Pakistan, where caste-like hierarchies need to be tackled with local reforms (Paik, 2014). The section gives policy, community, research, and societal recommendations based on evidence in India and the Asian experience on equity as a whole in the form of the right to learn. These measures are supposed to finalize the de-casteing process in order to make sure that education destroys and not reinforces hierarchies.

- **Strengthen RTE Enforcement:** Improve the implementation and financing of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, by auditing and allocating budget to at least 6 percent of GDP, as suggested by historical commissions. Rationale: Lack of compliance due to chronic underfunding and low oversight, especially in rural settings; high levels of compliance would help decrease dropout rates among SC/ST children, as infrastructure and teacher responsibility, are highly effective, monitored in inclusive education systems in Sri Lanka (UNESCO, 2020).
- **Expand Reservations to Private Sectors:** Requirement of more quotas than the 25% RTE requirement, even in elite private institutions and higher education, and fines on failure to meet this requirement. Reason: Privatization will alienate lower caste since it is expensive, and increasing would enhance GER of SCs/STs, which would help mitigate elite capture and attract Nepal with affirmative policy towards Dalits, which facilitated greater access albeit with implementation problems (Paik, 2014).
- **Integrate Caste-Sensitivity Training for Teachers:** Make compulsory, continuing education programs on anti-caste pedagogy, included in the teacher education plan as a part of NEP 2020. Arguments: Discrimination in the classroom is sustained by teacher biases; training decreases epistemic violence and leads to better results among marginalized students, just like the anti-discrimination courses of the Bangladesh education system that aim at ethnic disparities (Human Rights Watch, 2014).
- **Promote Dalit-Led Education Initiatives:** Grant and collaborate with community-based schools and coaching schools, such as those founded by Bhim Army. Reason: Grassroots campaigns empower the Dalits by giving culturally-relevant education, countering exclusion; 350 such schools in Uttar Pradesh have boosted enrolment and self-esteem, and

this model can be applicable to Asian diasporas confronted by casteism (Children on the Edge, n.d.).

- **Implement Digital Literacy Programs:** Introduce SC/ST-focused programs, such as provision of devices and online anti-bias education. Reason: Digital divide has increased after COVID; programs close access lines, create economic mobility skills, similar to rural digital equity initiatives of ethnic minorities in Vietnam (UNESCO, 2020).
- **Launch Anti-Discrimination Campaigns:** Finance national awareness campaigns at schools, through media and community forums to oppose caste system. Rationale: Stigma and violence are minimized through campaigns; the South Asian reports indicate that campaigns enhance retention, as observed in initiatives to prevent education based on sectarianism in Pakistan (IDN, 2017).
- **Advocate for Better Data Disaggregation by Caste:** Require national surveys such as ASER and NSSO to include caste-specific measures to track them in disaggregation. Rationale: Existing statistics hides intra-group differences; disaggregation makes it possible to intervene specifically, helping to achieve SDG 4, and similar results in caste-involving censuses in Nepal (Paik, 2014).
- **Conduct Longitudinal Studies:** Invest in 5 years caste studies in education, interdisciplinary teams. Reasoning: These studies show such tendencies as the persistence of segregation, which guide policy, and the examples of Asian countries, such as those of Japan, show how long-term tracking contributes to equity (UNESCO, 2020).
- **Link to Anti-Caste Movements and Economic Empowerment:** Connect education to movements such as Bhim Army and land reform and vocational education programs. Reason: Movements build solidarity against atrocities; economic connections break the barriers of poverty, which increases the emancipatory power of education as seen in the case of the post-conflict reconciliation process in Sri Lanka (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Future trends include multi-stakeholder involvements such as international affiliations in Asia to expand these reforms and keep track over coming years to test the inclusive education.

Conclusion

This chapter has clarified the long-standing paradox of caste and education in India: Progressive policies (constitutional reservations and the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009) have increased the access and enrolment of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). However, there are gaps in implementation,

characterized by bureaucratic inefficiency, under-investment and corruption, and the daily occurrence of socio-cultural discrimination and structural constraints such as economic differences and lack of social capital perpetuates deep disparities in quality, performance, and experiences. The past histories of exclusion, including Vedic taboos and colonial support have persisted into the present where classroom prejudices, inadequate rural infrastructure, and overlapping marginalization of genders have played a role in inhibiting the true achievement of education as emancipatory tool.

At the most basic level, education has been the key tool of breaking caste as envisaged by B.R. Ambedkar who said in his speech to the All India Depressed Classes Conference in 1942: Educate, Agitate, Organise (as cited in Keer, 1954). These threefold highlights the importance of education as not only in personal progress but in social agitations against oppression and systematic struggle against equality. As much as the policy has made strides; gaps in the learning outcomes and access continue to persist indicating that caste inequalities persist and require interventions that can address both direct discrimination and indirect structural reproductions.

The understanding that everyone should have the right to learning requires a multi-stakeholder urgent intervention. Governments need to focus on strong enforcement, inclusion funding and incorporation of anti-caste policy, educators and institutions need caste-sensitivity training, communities, even Dalit-led, need to become mobilized at the grassroots and civil society needs to promote accountability. India can only overcome the symbolism of reforms to equity substantive through collective action, and this includes policymakers, teachers, activists, and technologists. In the future, areas of research are promising to provide more. Of particular interest is the study of how artificial intelligence (AI) affects fair education through caste differences. Although AI can provide customized learning and multilingual tools to narrow down disparities among marginalized communities (UNESCO, 2022), there are emerging troubles that are threatening: biased algorithms might perpetuate stereotypes, and the digital divide can become an intelligence divide, only generating exclusion in rural and lower-caste students (Das, 2025). To make sure that technology is an equalizer to inequality and not a magnifier, longitudinal research on the application of AI in various situations, such as caste-disaggregated analyses of such tools as adaptive platforms, are needed.

India is on the brink in taking up the challenge of Ambedkar: Education can destroy caste, it can create a society of dignity and justice, in case it is used in a conscious and careful way.



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