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Educational and Economic Status Quo of Scheduled Castes

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Out of roughly 3000 Castes estimated to exist in India, as many as 779 have been designated, as 'scheduled castes' (SCs) accounting for 16.3 per cent of the total population. For hundreds of years this entire section of the Indian population was discriminated against on the basis of their social status. However, since Independence the Government of India has been following positive discrimination policies in various spheres, especially in the education sector, towards the upliftment of the SCs. This article places available facts in the education sector to understand where the nation stands vis-à-vis the development and the empowerment of the SCs after more than 50 years of concerted efforts in this regard.

Any data on enrollment and literacy figures shows that there has been a 'significant increase in overall literacy rates and 'school participation rates' across the country since the early 1990s'. Various data sources including the National Family Health Survey-II (1998/99), Reproductive and Child Health Survey 2002-2004, the 2001 Census, routine monitoring information from the Department of Education and papers based on these data show that 'gender and social disparities have also declined to an extent with an overall increase in school attendance'. (Jenkins & Barr) There has also been a considerable decrease in the drop-out rates. It is important to compare the figures for SCs to the national average on the same aspect and to the figures of 'others' (high caste groups) to get a perspective on the status of SC population.

Enrollment

The country is said to be approaching 'near universalisation of enrollment at the primary stage with the Gross Enrollment Rate for classes I to V having increased from 90 per cent in 2003-2004 to 98 per cent in 2004-2005 and the net enrollment rate having risen from 72 per cent to 82 per cent'. (Jenkins and Barr)

Table 1 : Gross Enrollment Ratio (6-11 years)

Age Group	Gross Enrollment Ratio (% age)	
	Total (All)	SC
6-11 years (classes I-V)	98.2	88.3

Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) is the total enrollment of pupil in grade or cycle or level of education, regardless of age, expressed as percentage of the corresponding eligible official age-group population in a given school year.

However, during the same period when the total GER (for all categories) is compared to the SC GER the disparity is significant at the primary level enrollment itself as seen in table 1 above which shows SC GER to be only 88.3 per cent compared to the national average of 98.2 per cent.

Never attended school

Similar to the enrollment aspect, when the percentage of children of ages 7-17 attending school is taken into account, huge disparity can be seen on two aspects - 'currently attending

school' (Net Enrollment Rate) and having 'never attended school' as shown in the table below:

Table 2 : Percentage of children age 7 - 17 years by schooling outcomes

Social group	Never attended	Ever attended	
		Dropped out	Currently attending
Hindu Other	7.8	10.7	81.1
Hindu SC	20.8	13.0	65.7

Source: National Family Health Survey, 1998/99 (In Jenkins and Barr)

Data indicates 20.8 per cent of SC children age 7-17 never attended school compared to 7.6 per cent of children from high caste and only 65.7 per cent of SC children age 7-17 are currently attending school compared to 81.3 per cent of higher caste groups. (Jenkins and Barr)

Drop-out

The table below shows that the drop-out rate for the SC children has decreased only by 1.27 per cent - once again showcasing the existing disparity.

Table 3 : Drop-out rate

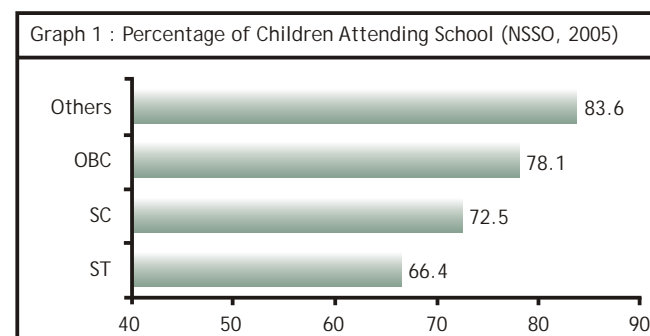
	1996-97	2002-03	Decrease in percentage points
All categories	40.20	34.89	5.31
SC	42.74	41.47	1.27

Source: Selected educational statistics - 2002, Education in India - 1996-97 (school education)

Attendance

In 2005, the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) Baseline Survey, supported by UNICEF, was undertaken in 43 districts in the country. The survey shows disparities in 'attendance rates' and 'learning achievements' between children from scheduled caste and others.

In the age-group of 6-14 years, 72.5 per cent of SC children are found to be attending school compared to 83.6 per cent of children from 'others', indicating that the disparity between the

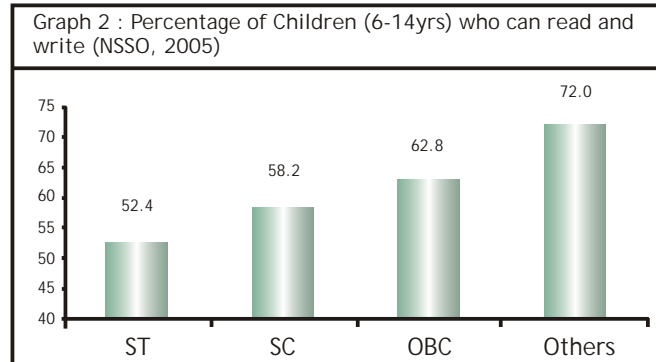


Source : Jenkins and Barr

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SCs and 'others' not only exists in enrollment and completion levels, but also in attendance levels.

Achievement



Source : Jenkins and Barr

There is a glaring disparity even among the achievement levels of SC students when compared to others with the percentage of children who can read and write among 'others' being 72 per cent, while only 58.2 per cent of the SC children are able to do so.

If the achievement of SCs from only rural areas is looked at, the story is grimmer. Eric Calpas in his study *'Social Hierarchy and Human Resource Development: Education of Scheduled Castes in India'*, says that 'scheduled castes in the rural context show a 70 per cent failure rate before the completion of primary education'.

Poverty

Strong linkages have been seen between education levels and poverty. Therefore, as expected, disparities continue when we compare the poverty levels for SCs with others.

Table 4 : Population below poverty line (NSSO, 1999/2000)

Population below poverty line (per cent)	India	SC
Rural areas	27.09	36.25
Urban areas	23.62	38.47

Source: National Sample Survey Organisation (In Jenkins and Barr)

The table above shows that 27.09 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line in rural areas, and among the SCs it is 36.25 per cent and so is the case in urban areas. Quoting Kabeer. N 'the SCs were 19 per cent more likely to be poor than the rest of the population'.

Education and poverty are closely interlinked. 'Poverty of education is a principal factor responsible for income poverty; and income poverty does not allow people to overcome poverty of education.' (J.B. Tilak)

Further, there are differences among scheduled castes themselves. The causes are 'generally economic, but even with economic equality, scheduled castes remain at a disadvantage compared with non-scheduled castes'. There is thus a 'triple disparity', (Calpas) which puts SCs at disadvantage. This includes regional, social and gender differences. Political factors also contribute significantly to unequal education opportunities. (Calpas)

Way forward

A few ideas to bridge this disparity:

1. By using the recently available statistics and simple regression coefficients Jandhyala B G Tilak has found that 'secondary and higher education makes a significant contribution to reduction in absolute as well as relative poverty'. He categorically states that 'literacy and primary education do not matter for poverty reduction as the threshold level seems to be upper primary education'. Though we are approaching near universalisation of enrollment at the primary stage with the GER reaching 98 per cent in 2004-2005, at secondary and higher education it is below 50 per cent and 10 per cent respectively.

He puts across 3 main arguments for the country to focus on secondary and higher education. He argues that 'primary education rarely provides skills necessary for employment and children relapse into illiteracy as soon as they drop-out. Secondly, it serves only as a terminal level of education and thirdly, even if it is able to economically uplift the people it is only marginal. From say below the poverty line to just above the poverty line, with the imminent danger of falling back below the poverty line. More focus is required in the area of secondary and higher education, when planning for special provisions for SC students so that the positive impact of the provisions are truly felt.

2. The National Policy on Education (NPE) says "The central focus in the SC's educational development is their equalisation with the non-SC population in all stages and levels of education. The policy focused on incentives, scholarships, reservations, recruitment of teachers, location of school buildings and 'constant micro-planning and verification to ensure enrolment, retention and successful completion of SC students (GOI, 1986)'. However, many of these have a diffused effect due to what Eric Calpas calls the 'political factor'. There is a case for a 'quasi-independent body' like the Election Commission to be constituted, to run our Education system, which will be based on the principles of our constitution, not compromising on critical issues related to secularism and equity.

3. There has been a substantial increase in the enrolments figures of the private schools with 6 per cent of rural children and 19 per cent of urban children studying in private unaided schools. The figure is said to further increase to 31 per cent when children studying in private aided schools are also included (World Bank, 2001). Decline in the quality of the Government schools is said to be the prime reason for this. Therefore it is of primary importance to do all that is required to strengthen the Government schools so that SC children (and the other disadvantaged sections) studying in the government schools get better educational facilities compared to the private schools thereby aiding the critical 'uplift'.

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