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Inequity in Education: Structural Dimensions of the Problem

Padmini Swaminathan



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Literacy and formal levels of education

Levels of formal education as against levels of mere literacy are significant markers in any society; more so in one that is organised so strongly on caste, class and religious lines and where social and economic exclusions were the norm for some sections of the population for a long period in history. Post-independent efforts to universalise education as well as compensate for past discriminations have gone some way in providing a measure of justice. However, the persistence of structural constraints as well as the logged-jam effect of poverty not only militate against the accessing of existing educational facilities but also make it difficult for these sections of the population to break free of the many inter-linked shackles binding them.

At the outset, the adverse implication of conflating literacy with education, as is often done by policy makers, needs to be highlighted. For example, while the literacy base of Kerala and Tamil Nadu may be relatively high, this need not translate in to high formal levels of education. In fact available data from Census as well as from the National Sample Survey reveal that, while the literacy base of Kerala and Tamil Nadu are way



above Bihar and Rajasthan [in terms of the percentage of population that is literate], Kerala and Tamil Nadu are only marginally better than

Bihar and Rajasthan with respect to the category 'matriculation but below graduate'. In the category, 'graduate and above' Rajasthan and Bihar are almost equal to Kerala and Tamil Nadu, particularly in the urban areas. This holds even when we deduct the scheduled caste (SC) population from the general population and concentrate on the educational achievement of the non-SC population.

The above findings suggest that Kerala and Tamil Nadu have, through conscious state intervention, widened their literacy base to cover many segments of the population, including girls

and socially deprived sections of society. Hence inequality in access to education at lower levels has, to a significant extent, been addressed in these two states. What has however become contentious in these states is the iniquitous access to higher education and to acquisition of professional skills, leading consequently to disproportionately higher levels of unemployment among an otherwise 'literate' population. In Bihar and Rajasthan, on the other hand, the persistence of stark inequality in access to even primary education between rural and urban areas and between males and females has resulted in a thin stream of the urban elite reaching higher levels of education leaving a vast majority behind.

Therefore, we need to talk of state-specific policies; we also need to get out of the spurious debate that sees investment in basic and/or higher education as competing fields.

Levels of literacy and education among social groups

An analysis of literacy data, age-wise, no doubt gives an impressive picture of the educational achievement of the younger population even for socially deprived groups, when compared to their respective adult population. However the gaps between SC/ST and Non-SC/ST are still wide within regions as well as between regions. National Sample Survey data for 1999-2000 reveal that, in the rural parts of our country, in 5 out of every 10 households among the SCs and STs, there were no literate *adult* members. The corresponding proportions for 'other' castes were 2 out of every 10 households and for Other Backward Castes (OBCs) it was 3 out of every 10 households.

Among all social groups, the proportion of families with no literate *female adult* member is far greater than families with no literate adult member. This suggests the high levels of gender differentials among all social groups.

The level of deprivation of families across all social groups is much lower in the urban areas.

Analysing Census data relating to the 'school attendance status of children and adolescents' from a caste-gender-spatial perspective, we get the following picture:

- ◆ There is a significant *caste-gap* in school attendance; a far larger proportion of children and adolescents, both males and females, among the SCs do not attend school when compared to non-SCs
- ◆ There is a large *gender-gap* in education, which is particularly stark when we compare the school attendance status of female and male adolescents; larger numbers of female adolescents [both SCs and non-SCs] are out of the school system than male adolescents

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- ◆ There is a *rural/urban* divide in school attendance, particularly for female children and adolescents. What is also interesting in the rural/urban divide is that while a larger proportion among both SC and non-SC female adolescents in rural areas do not attend school, the proportion of SC and non-SC female adolescents '*not working and not attending school*' is greater in the urban areas, signifying in our opinion, fewer work opportunities in urban areas for formally illiterate persons

The negative impact of the caste and gender gap in school attendance can be gauged to some extent from the data on *levels of education of the worker population*. In a nutshell these data reveal the considerably higher levels of formal illiteracy among female workers when compared to male workers; among female workers the levels of formal illiteracy is higher for SC women workers than for non-SC women workers. This phenomenon seen in conjunction with the fact of significant gender gaps in higher and technical education, has important implications for [a] the kind of jobs that women can access; [b] women workers' prospects for upward mobility; and, [c] women workers' bargaining capacity in the labour market due to their very limited educational attainment.

The 'quantity-quality' debate in education

The nature, type and location of educational institutions have contributed in no small measure to the polarisation that one observes today among segments of the population across space and caste. To state the problem in a nutshell, government/corporation schools have come to be identified with the poor, and among the poor, the identification of government schools is with Dalits. Increasingly, these schools have also come to be associated with inadequate number of teachers, poor quality teaching, higher percentage of teacher absenteeism - a combination of factors making it extremely difficult for children of already deprived households to transit to institutions of higher learning, entering which requires achievements of a particular order.

The theme of quality of education is as central as the issue of quantity and both have a crucial bearing on the magnitude and nature of differentiation and inequality characterising our society.



Thus for example, good quality primary education depends on good quality tertiary education, and

the problem is hardly solved by shifting the emphasis from tertiary to primary. The problem needs to be viewed as a whole, with the entire education sector being given prime emphasis in terms of finance and planning. Privatisation is hardly a solution; if anything, all other things remaining same, privatisation exacerbates differentiation.

Information deficit in an era of IT revolution

There is an appalling dearth of first-hand information on several issues relating to education. Just to conclude with a few examples of the nature of information deficit that has crucial policy implications as well:



- [a] Hardly any systematic data exist to conclude whether children are out of school and working *because* schools are dysfunctional. The presumption generally is that child labour is related to poverty of households. The phenomenon of 'out of school' children needs careful documentation and disaggregated analysis so that policies to address this phenomenon are based on facts and not presumptions
- [b] The administrative set-up of the departments comprising the 'Education' sector either at the state or central level, have not received the scholarly attention that they should have. The pleas for increasing financial allocations to the 'education' sector are generally based more on comparative allocations made by other countries rather than on any convincing study of why or how existing allocations have hampered delivery of quality services
- [c] While much noise is made of the need to vocationalise higher education and/or impart professional education to enhance employability of the working population, there is no engagement with the issue of what constitutes 'vocational' education, who is to impart this education and towards what end. In a hierarchically constituted society, the location of, and access to existing 'professional' institutions of higher learning contribute to development and digital divides rather than narrowing and/or closing these divides

Professor Padmini Swaminathan is Director, Madras Institute of Development Studies