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## MULTIPLE LAYERS OF INEQUALITY IN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS OF THE WORLD

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### ABSTRACT

Education has always been an important factor in assessing the overall progress of any civilized society in the history of mankind. This sounds an understatement in the modern world order where science and technology dictates everything thereby making education an absolute necessity for every individual and the most reliable indicator of prosperity for every nation. However, this promising prospect of education being used as a tool for gaining superiority comes with an essential condition which is the premise of equality. An educational system that does not grant equality of opportunities to students stands to create a society of educated youth who are not as deserving as those who could never get access to quality education. In the existing global scenario the most developed countries of the world excel in education only by minimizing all sorts of discriminations on racial and ethnic grounds. Unfortunately the problem of inequality assumes enormous proportions in our pluralistic Indian society which boasts of extreme diversity of cultures, castes, religions and languages. Ironically enough, the same constitution that grants equality of rights and opportunities to every Indian also makes certain exemptions on various grounds making the idea of equality an unrealistic and unattainable thing. The consequences of this disparity reflect in the swelling figures of educated unemployment in India. In this paper we review the various factors responsible for this educational inequality, its consequences and the possible measures to contain it.

**Keywords:** Inequality, educated unemployment, social discrimination, academic performance

### Introduction:

A work of fiction can often get so close to reality that it is able to capture the essence of some longstanding and intricate philosophical enigmas in absolutely stunning one liners. Nothing

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can beat George Orwell's wit in achieving the same in his famous novel 'Animal Farm' when the government run by pigs in the story proclaims 'all animals are equal but some are more equal than others' thereby making one of the most historic statement on the element of hypocrisy about equality that prevails in our societies. The notion of equality in society is one of the most intensely debated topics on various forums spanning the full spectrum of our social fabric. While the issues related to equality have been arousing scholarly discussions and philosophical debates since the times of Plato and Aristotle down to modern philosophers like Rousseau and Karl Marx, yet there is no consensus on various questions pertaining to the problem. Conventionally, the economic heterogeneity of a society is seen as a recipe of conflict and class struggles in communist as well as socialist schemes which therefore prescribe an equal distribution of wealth for establishing stable societies. On the contrary, it is interesting to note that a large number of thinkers have surrendered to the view that it is practically impossible to envisage a society devoid of inequality. Going a step further some regard socioeconomic inequality as not just inevitable but a desired attribute of progressive human societies (George & Wilding, 1990). This approach is in fact an attempt to legitimize social inequality and has been at the heart of liberalization drives including the famous *laissez faire* and free market rhetoric which rely on the idea that inequalities of a society can prove to be a much sought-after stimulus for the market. This view has however been questioned recently because many studies proved the otherwise and suggested that while growing inequality seems to support the market, inequality in general is often bad for the market (Ortiz et al, 2011). The phenomenon of social inequality has inspired many political and social movements yet the problem continues to manifest itself in newer forms and takes the centre stage in most of the developing countries where poverty is a norm and the distribution of wealth is extremely uneven leading to huge gap between the rich and the poor. For the social scientists it is imperative to direct their research towards finding the causes of social inequality and suggesting measures to improve the situation.

A common feature of all such societies where social inequality is an enduring reality is the existence of multiple layers of inequality in the society. This vertical social stratification is a characteristic feature leading to distinct classes formed on the basis of affluence and distribution of wealth (Norte, 2015). Although the existence of this vertical hierarchy has specifically been conceptualized with reference to industrial society of the West where

economic classes are conspicuous yet the same criteria can be extended to cover the agrarian societies from the ancient and medieval times. However, vertical stratification is not a ubiquitous feature of societies and a glaring exception to this is found in the patterns of health in a population or community. It is evident that health does not usually depend on vertical patterns in a hierarchy but is determined by many horizontal factors within a given stratum of society such as life style, ethnicity, environment, immunity and individual differences (Chauvel & Leist, 2015).

### **Types & determinants of social inequalities:**

There can be many arbitrary ways to classify social inequalities but the most widely accepted scheme recognizes three categories of social stratification viz egalitarian, ranked and stratified societies. An egalitarian society completely disregards individual differences and stresses on equal distribution of everything and equal participation by all such that it results in a class-less social structure. Ranked societies are exemplified by rural agricultural set ups where a chief or leader wields more influence on others but the elevated status of the chief is not based on his wealth and material possessions. The third type of society is stratified which consists of upper, middle and lower classes distinguishable on the basis of their affluence and power.

The major determinants of social inequalities are differences of gender, race, ethnicity, age and economic status. The accounts of discriminations that lead to social inequalities on these grounds have been profusely documented in the recorded history of various societies of the world. Thus, a prejudiced approach towards fellow human beings on the above mentioned grounds has been deeply ingrained in our psyche and the same manifests even today. Gender discrimination is the most appalling of all kinds of inequalities and assumes an ugly shape in patriarchal societies where women are persecuted and are deprived of their rights. Although biological differences of the two sexes call for a natural division of labor between males and females yet the same cannot form the basis of granting a superior status to males. Justice demands not an absolute equality but an equality based on distinct biological needs of the two sexes. It requires to develop a society where men and women get equal access to opportunities while preserving their physiological identities. An example of gender discrimination is reflected in difference of wages between males and females for the same work. Ironically, a study (Seguino, 2000) suggested that gender based wage gap may foster investment and

economic growth in general but a different study (Schober & Embet, 2011) contradicted this claim. It is thought that even when women are not being discriminated against there are some unacknowledged factors labelled 'glass ceiling' that prevent women from reaching the top in corporate sectors despite their possession of competence.

Racial and ethnic biases are another important source of social inequalities and have a great political impact. Although racism has been theoretically deplored in modern world order yet there are instances of persecution of ethnic and racial minorities. Repression of people on ethnic grounds is a burning issue even in the developed and democratic nations and is often politically motivated. In extreme cases, certain regimes have resorted to ethnic cleansing drives to change the demographics of nations and have committed heinous crimes against the humanity.

Age discrimination is also a multifaceted issue having obvious socio-economic implications. Among the various patterns of the problem there are cases where age stratification benefits certain strata and proves disadvantageous for others. Usually those at the two extremes of age ladder are the ones having to face most discrimination. Adultism, for example discriminates against young people and limits their employability. On the contrary there is less acceptability for the elderly in capitalist set ups.

### **Educational Inequality:**

The repercussions of various kinds of biases being practiced in a society reflect in almost every aspect of the life of people who bear the brunt of these discriminations. One can pick health, education, economic well being or participation in politics as an indicator of the extent and severity of discrimination being faced by a section of society. However, education takes precedence over other factors because if the status of education in the weaker sections is improved then all other factors are automatically taken care of. Educational inequality therefore requires to be addressed first and sincere efforts ought to be made to find a solution to this problem first. Educational inequality is the failure of a society to provide all individuals an equal access to educational resources and a fair, unbiased practice of admitting students to institutions of learning. This is a global phenomenon and some or other kind of discrimination is found in every nation notwithstanding the fact that the bases of discrimination may vary from place to place.

Generally speaking, the marginalized groups usually have a negative impact on economy and political stability of the nation where they exist which is the least desirable scenario for any state. The fear of civil unrest and other untoward consequences for the society has led to formulation of laws aimed at reducing educational inequality by various nation states. Despite the fact that there have been widespread efforts (Haycock, 2001) yet it is often impossible to eliminate educational inequality because the discriminatory factors are quite deep rooted in the history of a given society. Racial discrimination in the west or communal and caste-based divides in the rest of the world are the well known factors leading to educational inequality. In the following section we attempt to explore the dynamics of social inequality in Indian context.

### **Educational Inequality in India:**

India is the world's largest democracy and boasts of an amazing diversity of cultures, religions, languages and ideologies. The peaceful coexistence of people for most part of its long history presents an incredible and unique example of unity in diversity which is worth emulating for all the pluralistic societies of the world. The constitution of the nation which was adapted by the state after independence is a glue that binds people and preserves its quintessential diversity by granting equal rights to all citizen in a truly secular and democratic manner. Having said that it is sad to observe that constitutional provisions have seen frequent violations by the people and constitution alone has not been able to safeguard fundamental rights of citizen. A closer look at the causes and consequences of educational inequality illustrates this phenomenon very well.

The rural-urban divide in India is one of the most important factors contributing to educational inequality. The majority of population (68.84% as per the census of 2011) lives in villages because of agriculture-based Indian economy. However, this section of society is most deprived with respect to education (Truscott & Truscott, 2005). The reason of this trend is basically the lack of adequate educational infrastructure in rural areas which reflects the neglect of education by the farmers. The methods of farming are usually traditional that do not require a farmer to be necessarily educated. Children living in rural areas do not have good schools in their neighborhoods and are severely underprivileged when they get to compete with children raised in big cities who have access to much better equipped schools. Those living in rural areas

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who wish to provide good education to their children are usually forced to migrate towards metro cities thereby causing a rapid growth in urbanization and expansion of cities.

Family background of children forms a major factor dictating their educational success. This is validated by research on global populations (Lee and Orfield, 2005) and is possibly equally true in Indian context. A small section of population belonging to the elite class or creamy layer has much higher representation in jobs that rely on acquisition of quality education. This is obvious considering that corruption is rampant and a lot of power is vested in bureaucracy. Besides, money is no hindrance in seeking education for children from affluent families compared to those who come from poor family background.

Caste in India is a much debated and extremely controversial subject so often cited for its role in not just education but all sorts of disparities. The origin of the concept of caste-based division of society can be traced back to ancient Indian scriptures which makes it an emotionally charged issue and a persistent feature of the social fabric in India. The so called lower castes that have suffered badly at the hands of upper castes over the course of history are now staking their claim on the rights that they have been denied and an access to the resources that they have been deprived of. This is the rationale behind providing reservation to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward classes. Although reservation has positively impacted the standard of living of the weaker sections yet it comes with some undesired consequences for the society. It is argued that reservation should involve financial assistance of the poor sections in order to facilitate learning of deserving children but it should never be misused for offering jobs to undeserving candidates by compromising merit.

Gender is another important factor responsible for creating educational inequality. A global survey of the two sexes for educational performance yields varied results that depend on cultural context of a place. In a majority of nation states females seeking education have to face exploitation and discrimination. In extreme cases of a fundamentalist orthodox set up of religious states such as Afghanistan females may have to risk their lives in order to get an education (Winthrop & McGivney, 2014). Even in the advanced western societies females are often stereotyped as being fit for only few subjects. That is perhaps why they are underrepresented in the disciplines of science and mathematics Ceci et al, 2009). On the contrary there are many countries where females outcompete males in education. For instance,

the number of graduates passing out is heavily skewed in favor of females in the USA (Marcus et al, 2006). In India females seeking education have to face many hurdles in their way mainly because they are traditionally seen as financially dependent on males and are supposed to remain confined to homes so as to take care of their families. The good thing is that this stereotype of women is fast disappearing as more and more women continue to make a mark in various walks of life.

The access to education is severely restricted in case of religious minorities in India. This reflects in the high rate of illiteracy (Narula M, 2014) and extremely low representation of minorities in various administrative and other high rated jobs. The government apathy coupled with regressive and outdated format of madarsa education has only worsened the crisis.

### **Disparities in the educational system of India:**

Indian educational policy is one of the most frequently experimented-with sectors and sees very rapid changes. The primary education is highly inconsistent and heterogeneous because of a huge gap of infrastructure, facilities and educational standard between government funded and privately run schools. The latter are much better equipped and maintain higher standards than the formal. At the level of secondary education there is multiplicity of boards which vary in syllabi, pass percentage and marking criteria from one another. Coming to higher education we encounter even greater inconsistency in the standards of various universities. Students passing out from certain universities that adopt a rigorous evaluation pattern usually earn less marks compared to the pass outs of some other universities where the process of marking and assessment is relatively more lavish. It is unfair to let the students passing through different standards of examination compete on a common platform without normalizing their marks or grades.

### **Conclusion:**

It can be safely concluded from the foregoing discussion that education policies in India need a total revamp for the better. There is a dire need to ensure uniformity of practices at all levels of education. A recent impediment in doing so is the process of commercialization of education which is affecting the domain of professional education in a very severe manner. In this new pattern those who earn their degrees by working harder than others are kept at par with those

who simply buy these degrees. There is a clear trade off between merit and wealth in case of professional education which needs to change. It is common sense that a doctor selected by any criteria other than merit will be risking the lives of so many patients. We hope that the status quo ought to change in countries battling educational inequality. There is immense hope for mankind from a society where men and women join hands together and shoulder equal responsibilities or a society where artificial barriers of caste, creed, race and religion are removed and all human beings are treated as one. Thus we see that the problem of social inequality has multiple layers to it and that the act of ensuring educational equality is an important prerequisite towards the establishment of a society based on equality.

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