

Equal Access and Opportunity in Education for the Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups: The Indian Scenario

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Introduction:

To begin with, disadvantaged groups are composed of those who, because of their economic situation, gender, ethnic or linguistic origin, religion or political statuses (refugees) have less chance of being integrated socially and economically. They invariably do not have access to land, or other forms of income generating activities, and are generally deprived of basic social services like health, proper housing and education. In education, disadvantaged are those who either have no access to education or those who after few years of schooling, drop out without having acquired the minimum levels of skills required to manage further life in specific local and national contexts (Caillods, 1998). Most of them are likely to be disadvantaged in several arenas of social life, i.e. they are often disadvantaged in multiple levels. However, disadvantaged people are never a homogeneous category. For instance, children belonging to remote rural areas, from ethnic and cultural minorities, living in urban slums etc. are more likely to be among the mostly disadvantaged categories, whereas children belonging to socio-economically affluent backgrounds are generally among the privileged few. The concept of disadvantaged is actually a relative concept, which varies from one society, context and time to others. So, the underlying cause, which is perhaps the major cause or facilitator to make people disadvantaged, is the existence of 'inequality' in almost all sectors of social life. The unequal socio-economic status of individuals all over the world and in India (for our concern) limit them from leading a so-called healthy and desired life and they are jeopardized in several sectors simultaneously. Thus, education plays a very important role in maintaining the stratification system and justifying the unequal distribution of wealth. Like other social systems, schools also reflect stratification and sometimes can be a cause of it (Rawat, 2013:259). Given this backdrop this paper aims to focus on how education sustains and reinforces social inequality, what initiatives can promote equal access and opportunity in education system and especially how special educational policies and measures can enlighten the socially and economically disadvantaged groups in India.

Education and Inequality:

Social inequality is often reflected through the education system of a society. Despite the ideal concept of 'all human beings are equal' or equal opportunities (social, economic, cultural, educational etc.) for all, various layers of inequality are evident in almost all societies of present day. Education is also no exception here. The schools that children attend can have an enormous influence on their life-chances. Those who attend first-rate elementary (nursery or primary) and secondary schools usually are selected for professional courses (engineering, medical etc.) and get high-paying jobs. Some scholars contend that schools are often biased in favour of high-middle and upper class students. It is seen quite often that these schools are segregated by socio-economic class (Rawat, 2013:259)

If we speak theoretically, while functionalists believe that education bestows status upon the recipients, conflict (Marxist) theorists argue that this bestowal of status causes differences in society. They stress that schools admit pupils according to social background, thus preserving class-related inequalities. According to this perspective, society is based on an unequal distribution of advantage and is characterized by a conflict of interests between the advantaged and the disadvantaged children from lower class and in India castes also (SCs, STs, OBCs). Though the educational system helps certain poor children to move into

middle class professional positions, it denies the most disadvantaged children the same educational opportunities afforded to children of the affluent class. Thus, schools or educational institutions tend to preserve social class inequalities in each new generation. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990) termed this process as 'cultural reproduction'. Through this concept of cultural reproduction he established that schools reinforce variations in cultural values and outlooks picked up early in life, when children leave school, these have the effect of limiting the opportunities of some, while facilitating those of others. Paul Willis (1977) carried out a study in a school in Birmingham, which reinforced the long-established notion that working class kids get only working-class jobs. Moreover, educational opportunities open to working-class students are limited than to the wards of service class (managerial and professional). Education creates the conditions for the reproduction of inequality, i.e. education helps to justify in people's minds a system of inequality and to reconcile them to their own position within it. Sociologists Glenna Colclough and E.M. Beck (1986) pointed three factors that contribute to the role of education in maintaining social class differences:

1. Public versus private schooling;
2. Economic disparities between school and communities and
3. Tracking of students into curriculum groups (Rawat, 2013:260-261)

Role of Education in promoting Equal Access and Opportunity

Education has also consistently been seen as a means of equalization. It is argued that universal education helps reduce disparities of wealth and power by providing able young people with skills to enable them to find a valued place in society. Ideally speaking a society always wishes to provide equal opportunities to all its members for achieving goals and aspirations of their life, and this undoubtedly recognizes the importance of education. Though education does not guarantee high status and positions to all people, yet it plays an important role in equalizing opportunities in basically three ways (Gore, 1982):

1. By making it possible for all those who have the desire to be educated and the ability to benefit by that facility.
2. By developing a content of education which will promote the development of a scientific and objective outlook, and
3. By creating a social environment of mutual tolerance based on religion, language, caste, class etc., for providing equal opportunities of social mobility to all individuals in society, and for securing good education.

Various programmes have been developed so far to cater to the learning needs of the people belonging to different disadvantaged groups. On the basis of the variations due to objectives, size and teaching-learning strategy, these programmes have been organized both by government and non-governmental organizations at central and local level. These programmes differ in terms of their cost and effectiveness also. However, the typology of these programmes emphasize various aspects e.g. school-based compensatory programmes, programmes aiming at developing basic competency like literacy and eventually bringing back children into mainstream educational system, programmes fostering at rural development or citizenship etc. (Caillods, 1998).

Programmes developed in India

Since the inception of our republic the role of Universal Elementary Education (UEE) for strengthening the social fabric of democracy through provision of equal opportunities to all, has been accepted. With the

formulation of NPE (National Policy on Education), India initiated a wide range of programmes for achieving the goal of UEE through several schematic and programme interventions.

The **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan** (SSA) is being implemented as India's main programme for universalizing elementary education. Its overall goals include universal access and retention, bridging of gender and social category gaps in education and enhancement of learning levels of children. SSA provides for a variety of interventions, including inter alia, opening and construction of new schools, additional teachers, regular teacher in-service training, academic support to ensure free textbooks, uniforms and free support for improving learning outcomes. The Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 provides a justiciable legal framework that entitles all children between the ages of 6-14 years free and compulsory admission, attendance and completion of elementary education. It provides for children's right to an education of equitable quality, based on principles of equity and non-discrimination. Most importantly, it provides for children's right to an education that is free from fear, stress and anxiety. (<http://mhrd.gov.in/overview-ee>)

Other constitutional provisions regarding education for disadvantaged groups in India:

1. **Article 30:** provides certain cultural and educational rights to establish and administer educational institutions. It lays down that a) all minorities whether based on religion or language shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice; b) the state shall not, in granting aid to educational institutions, discriminate against any educational institution on the ground that it is under the management of a minority, whether based on religion or language.
2. **Article 29(1):** it states "Any section of the citizen, residing in the territory of India or any part there of having a distinct language, script or culture of its own, shall have the right to conserve the same." It also states that no citizen shall be denied admission into any educational institution maintained by the state or receiving aid out of state funds, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, language or any of them.
3. **Article 350B:** provides for the appointment of special officer for linguistic minorities to investigate into all matters relating to safeguards provided for linguistic minorities under the constitution.
4. **Article 15, 17, 46:** safeguard the educational interests of the weaker sections of the Indian community, i.e. socially and educationally backward classes of citizens and scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Article 15 states that nothing in this article or in clause (2) of article 29 shall prevent the state from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the SCs and the STs. Article 46 states that the federal government is responsible for the economic and educational development of the SCs and STs.
5. **Article 25(1)** guarantees all the citizens the right to have freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practice and propagate religion.
6. **Article 28(1):** no religious instruction shall be provided in any educational institution if wholly maintained out of state fund.
7. **Article 28(2):** nothing in clause (1) shall apply to an educational institution which is administered by the state but has been established under any endowment or Trust which requires that religious instruction shall be imparted to such institution.
8. **Article 30:** the state shall not in granting aid to educational institution maintained by the state or receiving aid out of state funds, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, language or any of them, will make any discrimination.

The well-known Kothari Commission 1964-66 recommended that central government should undertake the responsibility in education for the equalization of educational opportunities with special reference to the reduction of inter-state differences and the advancement of the weaker sections of the community.

Constitutional provisions for Women's education: one of the unique features of modern Indian education is the tremendous advancement of women's education, which is considered to be more important than that of the boys.

1. Article 15(1): provides that the state shall not discriminate any citizen on grounds only of sex.
2. Article 15(3): nothing in this article shall prevent the state from making any special provision for women and children.

The NPE was always concerned about the status and education of women in the country. It envisages that education would be used as a strategy for achieving a basic change in the status of women. It opined that the national system of education must play a positive role in this education. The policy states, "Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. In order to neutralize the accumulated distortions of the past, there will be a well-conceived edge in favour of women."

Distance Education as a Facilitator of Women's Educational Development

Distance education as non-formal method of education should be fully utilized. Distance learners have many advantages over the conventional learners. The advantages as outlined by Dr. P. Satyanarayana and Dr. Emmanuel Dk Meduri are:

- Distance education materials are written by good teachers.
- Distance education materials are self-teaching in form and hence there is no need to go to colleges regularly.
- Distance education uses technologies like radio, television, computers for providing education.
- Distance education enables people to study while working.
- Distance education students who join from rural and remote areas need not stay in hostels and spend money.
- Distance education system given books for study while conventional education does not provide any books to students.
- Conventional education does not allow aged people whereas distance education does not impose any restrictions.
- Even without having any educational qualifications one can study degree courses and PG courses.
- Distance education system is offering many new and useful courses which are not offered by conventional system.
- Distance education is egalitarian while conventional education is elitist.

Conclusion:

It is an accepted working policy of all the democratic nations to make provision for equal opportunities. As Dr. Radhakrishnan had pointed out long back "Democracy only provides that all men should have equal

opportunities for the development of their unequal talents”. It is in tune with this spirit of the constitution the Education Commission has observed thus: “One of the important social objectives of education is to equalise opportunity, enabling the backward or underprivileged classes and individuals to use education as a lever for the improvement of their condition.

1. Equality of educational opportunities is needed for the establishment of egalitarian society based on social equality and justice;
2. It contributes to the search for talents among all the people of a nation;
3. It is essential to ensure rapid advancement of a nation;
4. It is needed for the successful functioning of a democracy. Educated and enlightened people alone can ensure a meaningful democracy, and
5. It helps to develop a closer link between manpower needs of a society and the availability of the skilled personnel. (<http://www.shareyouressays.com/essays/essay-on-equality-of-educational-opportunities/87638>).

Education thus is an institution, the fruits and effects of which shall be distributed equally among all people in the society. But social inequality and discrimination does not cater to the needs of all people equally and thus we find people, who are denied and deprived of basic rights and opportunities of social life. Thus they (e.g. in India women, SCs, STs, minorities, OBCs etc.) become disadvantaged and face discrimination and oppression from very sources. It is for this reason that all countries attempt to take as well as have taken several initiatives to provide the disadvantaged with basic amenities, of which education is of pivotal importance. So equal opportunity and access has paved the way for socio-cultural as well as educational development of these sections to a large extent, however, much more is yet to achieve to form a better integrated egalitarian society.

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