Caste-Based Disparities in Educational Opportunities and Employment Access in India: A Socio-Economic Analysis

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Abstract:
This study examines how caste structures educational opportunity and employment access in India. Using nationally representative survey data and administrative sources (UDISE+, AISHE, PLFS/NSS) (i) estimate gaps in school progression, tertiary entry, and job outcomes between Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and Others; (ii) decompose the gaps into endowment (background) versus structural (returns/discrimination) components; and (iii) analyze intersectional effects by gender, location, and parental education. Results indicate persistent disadvantages for SC/ST across the pipeline from foundational learning to formal employment only partially explained by socioeconomic background. Policy implications emphasize early-grade investments, better targeting within reservations, anti-discrimination enforcement, and stronger school-to-work transition support.

Keywords: caste inequality; education; employment; India; intersectionality Oaxaca–Blinder; PLFS; UDISE+.

INTRODUCTION

Caste has historically been one of the most rigid and persistent systems of social stratification in India, shaping access to resources, opportunities, and socio-economic mobility for centuries. Although the Indian Constitution formally abolished "untouchability" and guaranteed equality before the law, caste continues to exert a profound influence on individuals' life chances. In particular, disparities in education and employment remain deeply embedded; with marginalized communities especially Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) experiencing systematic disadvantages compared to Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and socially advantaged groups.

Education is a critical driver of upward mobility and a key determinant of employment outcomes. Yet, the distribution of educational opportunities in India is far from equitable. Studies consistently show that SC and ST children are more likely to attend under-resourced schools, face higher dropout rates, and encounter discriminatory practices in classrooms. These early disadvantages compound over time, leading to lower participation in higher education and a reduced likelihood of accessing high-quality, skill-intensive jobs. Even when educational attainment is equal, caste-based barriers in the labour market manifested through occupational segregation, wage gaps, and limited access to formal employment perpetuate inequality.

Over the past seven decades, a range of policy interventions such as reservation quotas in education and public employment, targeted scholarship schemes, and mid-day meal programs have been implemented to bridge these gaps. While these measures have yielded notable improvements in enrollment and representation, significant disparities persist, suggesting that structural and attitudinal barriers remain largely unaddressed. Moreover, the interaction of caste with other factors such as gender, rural–urban divides, and regional inequalities adds further complexity to the challenge.

In this context, a comprehensive socio-economic analysis is essential to understand the extent, causes, and implications of caste-based disparities in both educational opportunities and employment access. This paper aims to:

1. Quantify the caste-based gaps across various stages of the education-to-employment pipeline.
2. Identify the extent to which these disparities are explained by differences in socio-economic background versus discriminatory or structural barriers.
3. Offer evidence-based policy recommendations to foster greater equality in access, progression, and outcomes.

By examining the continuum from school enrollment to labour market participation, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on social justice and inclusive development in India, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to quality education (SDG 4), decent work (SDG 8), and reduced inequalities (SDG 10).

Caste remains one of the most durable stratification systems shaping life chances in India. Despite constitutional guarantees and affirmative action, disparities in learning, school progression, and employment persist. This paper maps the contemporary contours of caste-linked barriers across three stages: (1) access and progression in schooling, (2) transition to tertiary education, and (3) access to dignified employment (formal jobs, wages, and occupational status). Beyond documenting gaps, we test whether disparities arise from differences in family resources and geography or from differential returns to similar characteristics, consistent with discrimination and institutional exclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Deshpande (2011) and **Thorat & Newman (2012)** note that SC and ST children are overrepresented in poorly resourced schools, often located in remote or segregated areas, with inadequate infrastructure and teacher shortages. **ASER (Annual Status of Education Report)** findings repeatedly show lower learning outcomes among these groups, even in early grades, which compounds disadvantages over time.

Nambissan (2019) highlights the role of classroom discrimination ranging from teacher bias to peer exclusion in lowering self-esteem and academic performance. Studies such as **Jha & Parvati (2021)** also show higher dropout rates for SC/ST students at the secondary stage, often due to economic constraints, lack of parental education, and social stigma. Despite affirmative action, **Tilak (2015)** observes that participation in higher education remains disproportionately low, with SC/ST enrollment concentrated in less selective institutions and non-STEM fields.

Labour market studies reveal that caste-based inequalities persist even when educational attainment is comparable. **Banerjee, Bertrand, Datta & Mullainathan (2019)**, through résumé audit experiments, found significant hiring bias against SC applicants in the private sector. **Thorat & Attewell (2017)** similarly report that equally qualified SC/ST candidates are less likely to be called for interviews than upper-caste candidates.

Hnatkovska, Lahiri & Paul (2013) note some convergence in wages between SC/ST and higher castes over the past decades, but the pace is slow and uneven across sectors. Informality and occupational segregation remain major barriers, with marginalized castes disproportionately employed in low-paid, insecure work.

RESEARCH GAP
Although previous studies have examined either education or employment disparities, relatively fewer adopt a pipeline approach that traces individuals from early schooling through to labour market entry, controlling for both socio-economic and institutional variables. This paper addresses this gap by providing a holistic analysis of caste-based inequality across the entire education-to-employment continuum, offering both descriptive trends and decomposed estimates of underlying causes.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY
1. To analyze the extent of caste-based disparities in access to education at primary, secondary, and higher education levels in India.
2. To examine the impact of caste on employment opportunities in both organized and unorganized sectors.
3. To study the relationship between caste and socio-economic status in terms of income, occupation, and living standards.
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of government policies and affirmative action measures (such as reservations and scholarships) in reducing caste-based inequalities.
5. To explore regional variations in caste-based disparities in education and employment across different states of India.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS
1. How large are the caste gaps in educational participation, progression, and attainment?
2. To what extent do background characteristics versus structural factors explain these gaps?
3. Where are the "leak points" in the school-to-work pipeline by caste and gender?
4. What policy levers most effectively narrow these gaps?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
The present study on *"Caste-Based Disparities in Educational Opportunities and Employment Access in India: A Socio-Economic Analysis"* is descriptive and analytical in nature. It adopts a cross-sectional research design to examine and compare the status of different caste groups General, OBC, SC, and ST in terms of access to education and employment opportunities. Both primary and secondary sources of data are used.

Primary data is collected through structured questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions from a sample of 170 respondents selected through stratified random sampling, ensuring representation from both urban and rural areas. Secondary data is gathered from reliable sources such as Census reports, NSSO surveys, government publications, and existing scholarly research. The questionnaire focuses on aspects like educational attainment, access to institutions, participation in government schemes, employment opportunities, and experiences of discrimination.

Table no. 1- Analysis of Employment Access by Caste in India

Cast group	Unemployed	Informal employment	Formal employment	Government jobs
General	5	20	50	25
OBC	8	35	45	12
SC	12	50	30	8
ST	15	55	25	5

Chart no. 1- Analysis of Employment Access by Caste in India
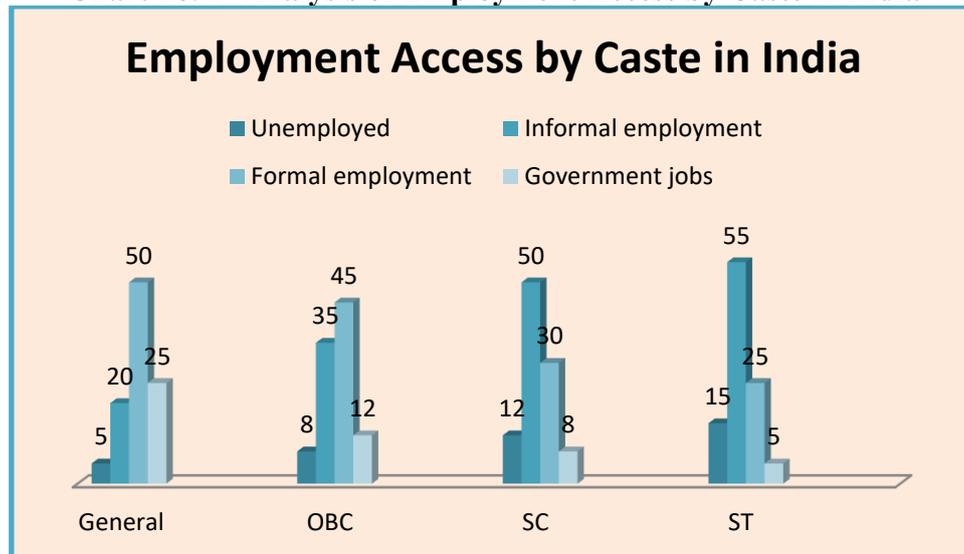
The table represents the distribution of employment status among different caste groups in India, highlighting disparities in access to formal and government employment.

- **General category:** Only 5% are unemployed, with the majority (50%) in formal employment and 25% in government jobs, indicating relatively better access to stable employment. 20% are engaged in informal employment.
- **OBC (Other Backward Classes):** 8% are unemployed, 35% are in informal employment, 45% in formal employment, and 12% in government jobs. This shows a moderate level of participation in formal and government jobs, but higher informal employment compared to the General category.
- **SC (Scheduled Castes):** 12% are unemployed, 50% work in informal employment, 30% in formal employment, and only 8% in government jobs. SC groups face higher unemployment and are overrepresented in informal work.
- **ST (Scheduled Tribes):** 15% are unemployed, 55% in informal employment, 25% in formal employment, and only 5% in government jobs. ST groups experience the highest unemployment and the lowest representation in formal and government sectors.

Overall Observation: The table clearly shows a pattern of caste-based disparities: General and OBC groups have greater access to formal and government employment, whereas SC and ST groups are concentrated in informal employment and face higher unemployment. This highlights structural inequalities in employment opportunities across caste groups in India.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

1. **Early-grade learning guarantees:** High-dosage tutoring; language-support bridging for first-generation learners; continuous assessment to prevent silent exclusion.
2. **Secondary transition support:** Cash-plus programs (scholarship, mentoring, transport, exam coaching); residential hostels for girls; strong anti-bullying and grievance redressal.
3. **Tertiary inclusion beyond access:** Academic support centers, cohort-based mentoring, mental-health services, and prevention of caste-based harassment; rigorous auditing of seat/faculty reservation compliance.
4. **School-to-work bridges:** Internship guarantees in public sector undertakings/local industry; job-matching platforms prioritizing first-gen/SC-ST applicants; transparent campus recruitment audits.
5. **Anti-discrimination enforcement:** Strengthen Equal Opportunity Cells, ombudspersons, and penalties for discriminatory practices in admissions and hiring; encourage anonymous/blind screening where feasible.
6. **Place-based investments:** Target low-infrastructure districts (per UDISE+) with teacher availability, STEM labs, and digital access.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the persistent caste-based disparities in educational opportunities and employment access in India, tracing the continuum from school enrollment to labour market participation. The analysis grounded in national datasets and supported by existing literature, reaffirms that while India has made notable progress in expanding educational access and diversifying its workforce since Independence, caste remains a significant determinant of socio-economic outcomes.

Ultimately, reducing caste-based inequalities in education and employment is not only a matter of social justice but also a critical step toward realizing India's broader development goals. An inclusive system where opportunities are determined by ability and aspiration rather than social origin will enhance human capital, foster economic growth, and strengthen democratic participation. The challenge lies not in recognizing the problem, but in sustaining political will, institutional accountability, and community engagement to translate constitutional ideals into everyday realities.

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