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Research Article

Impact of Socio-Economic Factors on Educational Attainment in India: A Review of Secondary Data

Kanchan Saha

Assistant Teacher, Bairati 5th Plan Primary School (MSD)

Abstract

Educational attainment is a key determinant of human capital formation and socio-economic development. Despite significant progress in expanding access to education, India continues to experience substantial disparities in educational outcomes across socio-economic groups. This paper examines the impact of selected socio-economic factors on educational attainment in India using secondary data from national-level sources such as the Census of India, National Family Health Survey (NFHS), National Sample Survey (NSS), and UDISE. The study adopts a descriptive and comparative review approach to analyse variations in literacy levels, school completion, and years of schooling across income groups, gender, caste, and rural-urban residence. The findings reveal that household economic status, parental education, social group affiliation, and place of residence play a crucial role in shaping educational outcomes. Although gender gaps have narrowed in recent decades, disparities persist among disadvantaged social groups and poorer households. The paper highlights the continuing relevance of targeted policy interventions and inclusive educational planning to reduce socio-economic inequalities in educational attainment. The study contributes to existing literature by synthesizing evidence from multiple secondary sources and offering policy-relevant insights for strengthening educational equity in India.

Keywords: Educational attainment, Socio-economic factors, NFHS, NSS, India, Inequality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognised as a fundamental driver of economic growth, social mobility, and human development. In India, the expansion of the education system since independence has led to considerable improvements in literacy and enrolment rates. However, educational attainment remains uneven across socio-economic groups, reflecting deep-rooted structural inequalities. Factors such as poverty, caste, gender, parental education, and rural-urban disparities continue to influence access to education and learning outcomes. Understanding the relationship between socio-economic factors and educational attainment is therefore essential for achieving inclusive development and the goals of the National Education Policy (2020). This paper aims to review and synthesise evidence from secondary data to assess how socio-economic factors shape educational attainment in India.

2. Conceptual Framework

Educational attainment refers to the highest level of education completed by an individual, commonly measured through literacy status, years of schooling, or completion of primary,

secondary, and higher education. Socio-economic factors influence educational attainment both directly and indirectly by shaping household resources, aspirations, and access to educational facilities. In this study, socio-economic factors

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Authors Details

Kanchan Saha

Assistant Teacher, Bairati 5th Plan
Primary School (MSD)

include household wealth, parental education, caste/social group, gender, and place of residence. These factors interact to produce cumulative advantages or disadvantages in educational outcomes.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A large body of literature has examined educational inequality in India. Studies based on NSS and NFHS data consistently show strong associations between household wealth and schooling outcomes. Parental education, particularly that of mothers, has been found to significantly influence children's educational attainment. Caste-based disparities persist, with Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) exhibiting lower levels of educational attainment compared to other social groups. Gender gaps have narrowed at the primary level but remain evident at higher levels of education, especially in rural areas. Existing studies highlight the need for a comprehensive review that integrates findings from multiple secondary sources, which this paper seeks to address.

4. Data Sources and Methodology

4.1 Nature of the Study

The study is based on a descriptive and analytical review of secondary data.

4.2 Data Sources

- Census of India (2001, 2011)
- National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4 and NFHS-5)
- National Sample Survey (NSS) education rounds
- UDISE reports
- Government and international agency reports

4.3 Method of Analysis

The study employs descriptive statistics, trend analysis, and comparative analysis across socio-economic categories. Data are presented through tables and interpreted in light of existing literature.

5. Socio-Economic Factors and Educational Attainment

5.1 Household Economic Status

Secondary data indicate a strong positive relationship between household wealth and educational attainment. Children from richer households are more likely to complete secondary and higher education compared to those from poorer households.

5.2 Gender

While gender disparities in literacy have declined over time, females from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds continue to face barriers to educational attainment.

5.3 Caste and Social Group

SC and ST populations exhibit lower literacy rates and school completion levels, reflecting historical disadvantages and limited access to quality education.

5.4 Rural–Urban Differences

Urban residents consistently demonstrate higher educational attainment compared to their rural counterparts, owing to better infrastructure and educational facilities.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of secondary data from multiple national sources reveals persistent and systematic inequalities in educational attainment across socio-economic groups in India. The findings highlight the strong influence of household wealth, gender, caste, and place of residence in shaping educational outcomes. Despite significant progress in expanding access to education, disparities remain deeply entrenched.

Influence of Household Economic Status

Table 1 clearly demonstrates a strong positive association between household wealth and literacy levels. Literacy rates increase steadily from the poorest to the richest wealth quintile. Among males, literacy rises from 65.2% in the poorest group to 95.1% in the richest group. A similar trend is observed among females, where literacy improves from 49.8% to 90.4% across the same categories.

Table 1: Literacy Rate (%) by Wealth Quintile, India (NFHS-5)

Wealth Quintile	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
Poorest	65.2	49.8	57.3
Poorer	72.4	58.6	65.3
Middle	80.1	68.9	74.5
Richer	88.6	80.2	84.4
Richest	95.1	90.4	92.8

Source: Compiled from NFHS-5 (2019–21), Government of India.

This gradient indicates that economic capacity plays a crucial role in educational attainment. Households with higher income levels are better able to invest in education through private schooling, supplementary coaching, digital resources, and a supportive learning environment. In contrast, children from poorer households often face constraints such as financial hardship, early entry into the workforce, and limited access to quality schooling. The relatively lower female literacy rates within poorer quintiles further suggest that economic deprivation disproportionately affects girls' education.

Gender Disparities in Educational Attainment

Although gender gaps in literacy have narrowed over time, the data indicate that disparities persist, particularly among disadvantaged groups. Across all wealth quintiles, female literacy rates remain consistently lower than those of males. The

gap is especially pronounced in the poorest categories, reflecting the combined effect of economic and socio-cultural barriers.

Table 2 further reinforces this pattern, showing that the proportion of females attaining secondary education and above is significantly lower than males across all social groups. For instance, among Scheduled Tribes, only 21.8% of females achieve secondary or higher education compared to 32.5% of males. This disparity highlights the continuing challenges faced by girls, including early marriage, household responsibilities, and limited access to educational resources.

However, the data also suggest gradual improvement, as gender gaps are relatively narrower in higher socio-economic categories. This indicates that improvements in economic conditions and targeted policy interventions can contribute to reducing gender-based inequalities in education.

Caste-Based Inequalities

Caste remains a significant determinant of educational attainment in India. Table 2 shows clear disparities among different social groups. Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs) have considerably lower levels of educational attainment compared to Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and the 'Others' category.

Table 2: Educational Attainment (%) by Caste and Gender, India (NSS)

Social Group	Male (Secondary & Above)	Female (Secondary & Above)
Scheduled Tribe (ST)	32.5	21.8
Scheduled Caste (SC)	38.7	28.4
OBC	49.6	38.9
Others	67.8	59.3

Source: NSS 75th Round, Education in India.

For example, only 32.5% of ST males and 21.8% of ST females attain secondary education or above, whereas the corresponding figures for the 'Others' category are 67.8% and 59.3%, respectively. These differences reflect the historical marginalization, socio-economic disadvantages, and limited access to quality education experienced by these communities. The persistence of such disparities indicates that while affirmative action policies and welfare schemes have improved access, they have not fully addressed issues related to quality, retention, and completion of education among disadvantaged groups.

Rural–Urban Disparities

Table 3 highlights significant differences in educational attainment between rural and urban areas. The literacy rate in urban areas (85.7%) is substantially higher than in rural areas (68.9%). Similarly, secondary school completion rates show a wide gap, with 63.8% in urban areas compared to 41.2% in rural areas.

Table 3: Rural–Urban Differences in Educational Attainment (%), India

Residence	Literacy Rate (%)	Secondary Completion (%)
Rural	68.9	41.2
Urban	85.7	63.8

Source: Census of India 2011; NSS Education Round.

These disparities can be attributed to differences in infrastructure, availability of schools, quality of teaching, and access to educational facilities. Urban areas benefit from better educational institutions, improved connectivity, and greater exposure to educational opportunities. In contrast, rural areas often face challenges such as inadequate school infrastructure, teacher shortages, and socio-economic constraints that hinder continued education.

The rural–urban divide also interacts with other socio-economic factors such as poverty and caste, further intensifying inequalities in educational attainment.

The combined analysis of the tables reveals that educational attainment in India is shaped by multiple, overlapping socio-economic factors. Economic status, gender, caste, and location do not operate independently; rather, they intersect to produce compounded disadvantages. For instance, a girl belonging to a Scheduled Tribe in a rural and economically poor household is likely to face multiple barriers, resulting in significantly lower educational attainment.

The consistent upward trend in educational attainment with improvements in socio-economic conditions indicates that inequalities are not merely incidental but structurally embedded. While policy interventions such as scholarships, mid-day meals, reservation policies, and expansion of schooling infrastructure have contributed to improvements, they have not been sufficient to eliminate disparities.

DISCUSSION IN THE CONTEXT OF POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT

The findings align with broader national and international research that identifies socio-economic inequality as a major barrier to inclusive education. They underscore the need for targeted and context-specific interventions, particularly for marginalized groups. Improving access alone is not enough; attention must also be given to quality of education, retention, and transition to higher levels of schooling.

Efforts under recent policy frameworks, including the National Education Policy (2020), emphasize equity and inclusion. However, effective implementation requires addressing structural issues such as poverty, social discrimination, and regional imbalances.

Overall, the results confirm that socio-economic factors continue to exert a strong influence on educational attainment in India. Despite notable progress in expanding educational access, inequalities based on wealth, gender, caste, and location remain significant. Bridging these gaps is essential for achieving

equitable human development and ensuring that education serves as a true instrument of social mobility.

7. Policy Implications

The findings of the study clearly indicate that socio-economic inequalities continue to shape educational attainment in India. Addressing these disparities requires multi-dimensional and targeted policy interventions that go beyond mere expansion of educational infrastructure.

First, there is a need to strengthen equity-oriented financing in education. Since household economic status strongly influences educational attainment, policies should prioritize financial support for students from poorer households. Expansion of scholarships, conditional cash transfers, free textbooks, digital access, and residential schooling facilities can reduce the economic burden on disadvantaged families and improve retention, particularly at secondary and higher levels.

Second, gender-sensitive interventions must be reinforced. Although gender gaps have narrowed, they persist among socio-economically weaker sections. Policies should focus on preventing early school dropout among girls by addressing issues such as child marriage, safety concerns, and household responsibilities. Provision of separate sanitation facilities, transport support, and awareness programs promoting girls' education can significantly improve female educational attainment.

Third, targeted support for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) is essential. The persistent gap in educational attainment among these groups suggests that existing measures need to be strengthened. Policies should emphasize not only access but also quality of education through improved school infrastructure in tribal and marginalized areas, recruitment of trained teachers, and culturally relevant curricula. Bridge courses and mentoring programs can help first-generation learners cope with academic challenges.

Fourth, reducing rural-urban disparities should be a key policy priority. Investment in rural educational infrastructure, including digital learning facilities, libraries, and teacher training, is crucial. Strengthening secondary and higher secondary schools in rural areas will help reduce dropout rates and improve transition to higher education. Additionally, improving connectivity and transportation can enhance access to educational institutions.

Fifth, there is a need to focus on quality of education and learning outcomes. Increasing enrolment alone is insufficient if it does not translate into meaningful learning. Policies should emphasize teacher accountability, continuous assessment, and skill-based education to ensure that students not only attend school but also acquire relevant competencies.

Finally, an integrated and intersectional policy approach is necessary. Since socio-economic factors interact with each other, interventions must address multiple disadvantages

simultaneously. For example, special programs targeting rural girls from SC/ST communities can be more effective than isolated measures. Strengthening data systems and monitoring mechanisms will also help in identifying vulnerable groups and designing evidence-based policies.

8. Limitations of the Study

The study relies exclusively on secondary data, which limits causal inference. Differences in data definitions and time periods across sources may affect comparability.

9. CONCLUSION

The present study, based on a review of secondary data, highlights the persistent influence of socio-economic factors on educational attainment in India. Despite considerable progress in literacy and enrolment over the past decades, inequalities based on household wealth, gender, caste, and place of residence continue to shape educational outcomes.

The analysis reveals a clear socio-economic gradient, where educational attainment improves with better economic status, while disadvantaged groups particularly the poor, females, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and rural populations remain at a relative disadvantage. These disparities are not isolated but interconnected, reflecting deeper structural inequalities within society.

The findings underscore that access to education alone is not sufficient to ensure equity. Issues related to affordability, quality, social norms, and regional imbalances must be addressed simultaneously. While government initiatives and policy frameworks have made important contributions, greater emphasis on targeted, inclusive, and context-specific interventions is required.

In conclusion, achieving equitable educational attainment in India requires a holistic approach that integrates economic support, social inclusion, and quality enhancement. Education must be viewed not only as a means of individual advancement but also as a critical instrument for reducing inequality and promoting inclusive and sustainable development. Bridging socio-economic gaps in education is therefore essential for realizing the broader goals of social justice and national development.

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