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Dalit Empowerment Through Education: Challenges, Opportunities and Government Policies

Avneet Kaur
(Research Scholar)
Department of English,
SKD University, Hanumangarh.
Rajasthan
Dr. Ram kumar
(Research Supervisior)
Assistant Profressor,
Department of English, SKD University, Hanumangarh,
Rajasthan

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Abstract

Education serves a crucial function in empowering Dalit societies, facilitating social conversion, and battling against systemic differentiation. Traditionally disregarded, Dalits have struggled against hindrances to acquire education due to caste-based injustice. However, education works as influential tool to shatter these cycles of oppression and authorize upward mobility. Dalits experienced obstacles in attaining education, many of which originate from systemic prejudice and socio-economic barriers. The challenges like caste-based discrimination, finding difficult to afford school fees, uniform and books, cultural standard and societal attitude which demoralize Dalit students and also lack of representation in educational institution both as student and faculty faced by the Dalits. Steps to deal with these obstacles include the government policies, fellowships, and awareness campaigns, but prominent work persist to secure equitable access to education for Dalits.

Keywords: Dalit, discrimination, Education, Government Polices, Campaigns, Socio-economic barriers.

Introduction:

Education works as a determining role in transfiguring the societies and shattering the long-standing structured barriers. The challenges confronted with Dalits in India regarding literacy and recruitment are profoundly founded in historical disparateness and distinctive practices. Despite efforts by the Indian government to construct opportunities and encourage associability—namely

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recruitment policies, fellowships, and special educational schemes—the improvement delays because of extremely entrenched biases, shortage of proper infrastructure in rural areas, and socio-economic obstacles.

Initiatives like midday meal programmes and awareness expeditions are some measures in the right direction, but there's still plenty of work to be fulfilled to certify that education becomes actuality for all, regardless of caste.

Significance of Education in Dalit Life:

Before exploring ways to improve primary school enrollment and literacy, it's essential to understand why education holds such a central place in development studies. Over the past hundred years, access to education has expanded significantly worldwide. Yet, at the same time, the divide between different social and economic groups has also widened (Desai and Kulkarni). For people living in poverty, education can be a powerful means to increase their earning potential and improve their overall quality of life.

Many development experts see education as a practical route to improving social well-being through economic progress. Among all education levels, primary schooling delivers the most significant returns. This means that teaching basic literacy skills brings benefits that far surpass the costs of offering such education. Historical data shows that during the 1950s and 1960s, expanding education contributed roughly 17.2% of economic growth in Africa and around 11.1% in Asia (Psacharopoulos 102). The connection between primary education and greater income equality is indeed a compelling case for expanding educational access, particularly for marginalized communities such as the Dalits in India. Your mention of a 10% increase in primary education enrolment leading to a 5% decrease in the inequality index underscores how critical education is as a tool for social transformation.

For the Dalits, who have historically faced systemic discrimination, ensuring access to primary education could open doors to better economic opportunities and social mobility. Alongside enrolment, it might be equally important to focus on improving the quality of education, providing inclusive learning environments, and addressing broader societal barriers to participation.

Education isn't just about acquiring knowledge; it's a transformative force that reshapes how people perceive their potential and possibilities. The insight that individuals base their goals and actions on what they believe to be achievable is profound. Education broadens horizons, making people aware of opportunities they may not have realized existed.

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For individuals facing poverty or social oppression, education can ignite hope and foster the ambition to seek better lives. It equips them with the tools needed to break free from limiting circumstances and opens pathways to upward mobility. This empowerment often extends beyond the individual, as educated people can inspire and uplift their communities.

Primary education is the foundation for enabling human capabilities and fostering societal benefits. By focusing on a human capabilities approach, governments can empower individuals with fundamental skills like literacy and numeracy, which transcend academic achievements and directly enhance daily living. These skills contribute to better decision-making, greater economic participation, and improved resilience against social challenges.

The real-world impact of these capabilities, —such as taking loans, navigating legal systems, and improving working conditions—is a compelling reminder of how education shapes lives in deeply practical ways. Moreover, the independent effect of education on life expectancy further underscores its significance, not just economically, but in overall well-being.

History of Education:

The 1991 Census of India indeed highlighted the challenges faced by Dalit communities in accessing education. The literacy rate among Dalit children was alarmingly low, with only about 30% having basic reading and writing skills. This disparity was largely attributed to systemic barriers, including historical oppression, lack of incentives, and insufficient access to primary education. While some narratives have pointed to family values or societal behaviours, the root causes lie in entrenched social inequalities and the absence of effective public education programs.

Historically, Dalits in India faced severe restrictions on education due to the rigid caste system. Education was largely reserved for upper castes, reinforcing social divisions and limiting opportunities for Dalits to improve their quality of life.

During British rule, particularly in the 1850s, efforts were made to expand educational access, though progress was slow and met with resistance. Even after India's independence in 1947, Dalits continued to struggle for equal educational opportunities. Government policies and affirmative action programs have since worked to improve literacy rates and access to education, but disparities still exist.

Education is often seen as a key to breaking cycles of poverty and discrimination, yet systemic barriers make it difficult for Dalit communities to fully access and benefit from it.

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Rather than framing it as apathy, many scholars argue that structural inequalities—including entrenched caste discrimination, economic hardships, and underfunded educational institutions—make it disproportionately difficult for Dalit children to attend and excel in school. Families facing daily economic survival might prioritize immediate income over long-term educational investment, not out of indifference, but necessity.

Government initiatives, reservation policies, and activist movements have sought to bridge these gaps, but there are still significant obstacles in terms of affordability, accessibility, and quality of education. The history of oppression has left lasting effects, such as discrimination within classrooms and societal prejudices that discourage Dalit students from continuing their education. It's not just about access—it's about ensuring education is truly inclusive, supportive, and empowering. If institutions are not welcoming or actively discriminatory, the promise of education remains hollow.

The historical oppression of Dalits in India, especially in education, is deeply troubling. Throughout the 1800s and the mid 1940s, All over the 1800s and mid-1940s, situations for the Dalit children throughout the Indian education system were too indigent. The rigid caste system created immense barriers that discouraged Dalit children from attending school, and those who did often faced humiliating treatment. Forced to sit outside classrooms, denied physical interaction with teachers, and subjected to abuse, their educational experiences were filled with discrimination and fear while the higher-class students were used to sit inside. Teachers were not allowed to physically touch Dalit children, so they would instead use bamboo sticks to punish them harshly, while students from higher castes faced no such treatment and could even throw mud without consequence. This atmosphere of fear and humiliation often discouraged Dalit children from attending school at all (Freeman 67). Among the small number of Dalit students who did enroll, most were boys—a pattern that, unfortunately, still persists (Nambissan 1012). After India gained independence in 1948, the government became more willing to support Dalits financially and academically in an effort to reduce the social discrimination and exploitation they faced. In the next few years, the Dalits would perceive barely measures to assist the affirmation and development made during the fifties to facilitate their entrance to primary education. The 1950s saw precise progress in the number of schools under construction in India, along with the amount of money being distributed towards primary education programs. The endeavour being place further by the government declining in the coming decades. However, the pace of building new primary schools fell sharply—from 58% during the 1960s to just 2.1% in the 1970s, and further down to only 1.3% by the 1980s (Nambissan 1015). At the same time, government spending gradually shifted away from primary education toward improving middle schools. This change

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showed a clear policy shift: rather than expanding access to primary schooling, the focus turned to enhancing the quality of education for students who were already enrolled. Between 1983 and 2000, there was progress in overall access to education across India. Yet, the gap between Dalit students—especially girls—and those from higher castes remained largely unchanged. Over this 17-year period, the enrollment of Dalit boys rose modestly from 47.7% to 63.25%. In contrast, enrollment among boys from dominant castes climbed from 73.22% to 82.92%.

The results were even less encouraging for Dalit girls. Their enrollment increased from just 15.72% to 32.61%, while their higher-caste peers went from 43.56% to 59.15% (Desai and Kulkarni). This persistent disparity was visible across all levels of education, from primary through secondary and beyond. Despite various initiatives aimed at boosting enrollment rates, the data makes it clear that closing the educational divide between castes has proven extremely difficult. Over the past century and a half, very few efforts have meaningfully improved social equality within India's caste-based educational system. Even today, while progress has been made, disparities persist, particularly in gender representation within education. Efforts to improve accessibility and equity continue, but the legacy of systemic exclusion remains a challenge.

Education based Development programs: Can they work?

It's important to look closely at the factors that keep Dalit children out of school when discussing how to improve enrollment rates. One of the biggest challenges is the family's financial situation. Since many Dalit families have very limited incomes compared to those from higher castes, affording school fees, uniforms, and other costs can be nearly impossible. Distance also plays a major role. Because Dalit households are often located on the outskirts of villages, children must travel long, sometimes unsafe routes to reach school. Along the way, they risk harassment, violence, or even abduction (Desai and Kulkarni). Another issue is the attitude of teachers, who frequently belong to dominant castes. These teachers often have low expectations of Dalit students and rarely create a welcoming or supportive classroom environment.

Over time, many barriers have stood in the way of Dalit children receiving even a basic education, and numerous programs have tried to overcome these challenges. Early efforts mainly focused on educating Dalit children separately so they wouldn't have to face the rigid caste hierarchies and discrimination present in mixed classrooms. As the caste system gradually began to weaken in India, there was a growing focus on building a more equal society that could offer safer, more inclusive learning environments. After India gained independence, the government continued working to improve the living conditions and educational opportunities of marginalized communities. Exposure to global ideas and practices also helped India adopt new approaches

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aimed at increasing Dalit enrollment, with some encouraging results in recent years (Nambissan 1011).

This section reviews some of the strategies implemented over the past 150 years to assess how effective they have been. For instance, during British rule, the Caste Disabilities Removal Act was passed as part of efforts to improve access to schooling. However, rather than directly challenging caste prejudice, British authorities often tried to sidestep it by introducing alternative education formats.One such approach was to establish night schools for Dalit children. This allowed them to avoid daytime interactions with upper-caste students but forced them to travel in the dark, which brought safety risks. Another solution was to create separate schools exclusively for Dalit students. While this removed the dangers associated with night schooling, it did nothing to ease resentment and division between communities.

By 1931—more than 80 years after education was officially opened to all—only about 4% of Dalit children were enrolled in primary school, and most of them (93%) attended segregated schools. A further challenge was that very few of these schools offered secondary education, which meant only about 1% of Dalit students continued beyond the primary level (Nambissan 1012). When British rule ended in 1948, the newly independent Indian government began exploring fresh ways to expand educational access. To address persistently low enrollment rates, India sought advice and financial support from international partners. One notable example was the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), recommended by the World Bank. The DPEP aimed to reduce disparities in enrollment across gender and caste lines to within 5% and to bring dropout rates down to 10%. Most of its funding came from the World Bank, and the initiative emphasized recruiting and training para-teachers. These contract-based instructors were brought in to fill vacancies at primary schools and were offered better pay and incentives to maintain motivation and performance (Kumar, Priyam, and Saxena 565).

While para-teachers were more affordable than permanent staff and often delivered strong results, the broader impact of the DPEP was mixed. Though India did see some improvements in enrollment rates, the program's highly structured approach sometimes failed to address the specific, localized challenges that kept Dalit children out of school (Kumar, Priyam, and Saxena 567).

A low cost and increased investment-based outlook to evaluation, growth and raising elementary recruitment rates is the division of surplus enchiridion summation. In developing countries, handbooks are frequently the just basis for a course in a subject. If a school is not suitable to procure its individual handbooks, then comprehension assets will be finite. By raising the quantity

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of handbooks, progression plans are offering to raising the capability of schools to accept in more students and they expect that moreover assets so that presentation in school will raise (Crossley and Murley 111). The largest consideration which originates out of affording handbooks is that it will not raise recruitment rates.

New handbooks endow some encouragement for Dalit children to be present in classes as they don't detract any of the hurdles presently choking or obstructing then from retrieve education. Expanding ingress to handbooks has encouraged in rising the standard of education in spite of having compact or no influence on recruitment rates. Finally, this paper highlights an important approach that goes beyond traditional education policies: using school-based health treatments as a way to boost enrollment and regular attendance. Many common parasitic infections, such as hookworm, roundworm, and whipworm, affect millions of children worldwide every year. These illnesses not only make kids sick but also prevent them from attending school or doing physical activities (Miguel and Kremer 159). Providing free medication to treat these infections has proven to be an effective incentive. Not only does it motivate families to send their children to school, but it also ensures that students stay healthy enough to keep coming back. Research shows that children in schools offering this treatment are healthier and more comfortable attending class regularly.

Programs offering deworming medicine have been shown to reduce absenteeism by about 25%. They also help increase enrollment among both girls and boys (Miguel and Kremer 190–191). For example, in one study analyzed by Miguel and Kremer, attendance among girls improved by 10%—nearly double the improvement seen among boys (Desai and Kulkarni). Besides being effective, this approach is also cost-efficient. Compared to food-based incentives, deworming is much cheaper. Providing regular deworming treatments costs around $5 per child each year, making it about six times less expensive than offering meals as an incentive. While supplying school uniforms can also help increase enrollment, deworming treatments remain the more economical option—costing about twenty times less than providing uniforms (Bossuroy and Delavallade). Through these initiatives, organizations such as the World Health Organization and campaigns like Deworm the World have introduced an innovative and successful strategy for improving school participation and learning outcomes.

Conclusion:

Over the past 150 years, there have been many efforts to improve the lives of Dalits in India, especially by promoting primary education. Education has the power to help individuals increase their earnings and find better work opportunities. It also gives people the tools to organize and advocate for social change.

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However, the lack of motivation to pursue schooling among Dalit communities is rooted in a long history of oppression and violence. Even today, caste discrimination continues to create unstable and unwelcoming environments for Dalit children. Many Dalit families live on the outskirts of villages, which means their children often have to walk long distances to school—a factor that discourages attendance and adds safety risks. Financial hardship further prevents parents from affording education-related expenses.

Over time, a variety of approaches—both traditional and modern—have been proposed to tackle these challenges. Evening classes and separate Dalit schools were created to offer safer spaces, but they did not address the deeper problem of caste-based prejudice. During the twentieth century, some policies helped reduce tensions and create conditions where the government could concentrate more effectively on improving primary enrollment. One of the largest initiatives, the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), was launched with support from the World Bank. However, even this extensive effort fell short of resolving the main issues that kept Dalit children out of school. Similarly, providing more textbooks improved learning outcomes but did not address why many Dalit students never enrolled in the first place. In contrast, offering free deworming treatments at schools has proven to be one of the more successful strategies. Not only did it improve children's health, reducing dropouts caused by illness, but it also increased attendance and participation rates.

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