Education and Social Mobility: A Textual Analysis in Indian Perspective

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Abstract

Societies differ considerably in the depth, span, and shape of their systems of stratification. The study of social mobility is an indispensable part of the study of social stratification. Down the years, the study of social stratification and social mobility within various strata has been a subject matter of great interest and concern to sociologists. Sociologists are also concerned with exploring origin, forms, and consequences of such stratification and mobility systems. People who are unequal in property, power and prestige always differ in their life chances, their institutional pattern of conduct, their life styles or cultural patterns and their attitudes, ideologies and beliefs. Although education seems to promise a bright future, widen horizons and ensure social mobility the role of education too under scanner today. This article, therefore, will try to provide an insight in understanding the education system and its relation with social mobility process with special reference to Indian Education system.

Key words: Social Mobility, Social Inequality, Cultural Capital, Inequality of Educational Opportunity

Introduction

Social inequality is a universal phenomenon found in all societies from the simplest to the most complex, although the inequalities vary considerably in form, nature and extent and function from one society to another. Social inequality refers to the unequal pattern of distribution of something such as wealth, income, occupation and education. It is an objective, descriptive and measurable concept. Inequalities when ranked lead to formation of social strata arranged hierarchically. The phenomenon is called ‘social stratification’. Human societies vary in the extent to which social groups as well as individuals have unequal access to advantages. Rousseau had made a distinction between natural and social inequality. The former emerge from the unequal division of physical and mental abilities among the members of a society. The latter arise from the social entitlement of people to wealth or economic resources, political power and status regardless of potential abilities possessed by individuals. Anthropologists generally distinguish three types of societies in terms of social-inequality. These are classified as egalitarian, rank and class societies.
Egalitarian societies contain fair amount of equality and no social group enjoys greater access to economic resources, power or prestige. Rank societies do not have unequal access to wealth or power, but they do contain social groups that enjoy greater honor and status. A pre-literate tribal society in which social ranking is based on rules of descent and alliances belong to this category. The complex class societies have unequal access and entitlement to economic resources, power and status.

The data about inequalities in income, occupation and education can definitely ascertain how equal or unequal are the positions of the individuals in a social hierarchy in a given society, irrespective of its degree of openness and closeness. In an open society, the movement up and down goes on over generations and is characterized by the acquisition of statuses by achievement. By contrast in a closed society which is featured as rigid, inflexible and static, statuses are essentially ascribed.

EDUCATION, INEQUALITY AND POWER

The relationship between education and social mobility is complex and dynamic. While there is no doubt about the fact that education makes an important contribution towards social mobility of individuals and groups, there are several factors that sometimes significantly alter the direction and fate of such a relationship. In a society which is rigidly stratified, it becomes very difficult for the formal institution of education to remain unaffected or unbiased. Under those circumstances, it ends up maintaining the status quo and reinforcing the socio-economic or cultural divide between people. In many cases, the stigma of belonging to lower castes, for example *dalits*, may remain in the lower status even after attaining the highest educational status. At the same time, however, there have been occasions, when schools have been able to rise above those prejudices and give a fair chance to people, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, to overcome their handicaps and move up the social ladder.

Educational inequality is the disparity that certain students experience in their education as compared to other students. The measures of educational success focus on examination marks, drop-out rates, attainment of cut-off marks in the admission of professional educational institutions, and successful completion of courses etc. The common sense understanding of schools perceives them as democratic, liberal institutions, committed to make social progress. It would be fallacious to assume that the school curriculum imparts neutral knowledge. Education enhances the inequalities existing in an already unequal and stratified society. Education is entrenched in the wider web of social and political relations that guide it. Apple (2004) argues that close relationship exists among those who have economic, political and cultural power in the society and the ways and means in which education are thought about, organized and evaluated.

Education is used as a means through which power is exercised. Dominant groups of society use education to exercise their control. The biased selection of knowledge followed by the deliberate representation favors the powerful sections of society which ensure the subtle control of masses through the educational curriculum. Such control
happens in the area of education that makes the power of the dominant groups legitimate and extremely difficult to challenge. Kumar (1992:2) refers this as ‘quiet, civilized dynamic dominance.’ Education becomes the agency for maintaining social hierarchies in society. The dominant social groups of society sustain and further perpetuate their power by making their knowledge and skills highly exclusive. It becomes the prerogative of only a few elite people to possess such highly privileged knowledge. This becomes the major means for dominant groups of society to maintain their power. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), the education systems of industrialized societies function in such a way as to legitimate class inequalities. Success in the education system is facilitated by the possession of cultural capital and of higher class habitus. Lower-class pupils do not in general possess these traits, so the failure of the majority of these pupils is inevitable. This explains class inequalities in educational attainment. Therefore, for Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), educational credentials help to reproduce and legitimate social inequalities, as higher-class individuals are seen to deserve their place in the social structure. In sum, Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1990) view is that cultural capital is inculcated in the higher-class home, and enables higher-class students to gain higher educational credentials than lower-class students. This enables higher-class individuals to maintain their class position, and legitimates the dominant position which higher-class individuals typically go on to hold. Of course, some lower-class individuals will succeed in the education system, but, rather than challenging the system, this will strengthen it by contributing to the appearance of meritocracy.

Based on a study of the schooling in American society, Bowles and Gintis (2002) stressed the economic role of educational institutions. They mentioned that educational institutions play a paramount role in reproducing the division of labor in society, sustaining class division. For this Apple (2004) explores the relationship between economic and cultural domination because of which inequality in society is reproduced. He stated that one of the important ways through which dominant groups are able to exert their power is through the control of the governmental mechanisms that grant official legitimacy to particular groups’ knowledge. One such way is through the process of state textbook adoption. Textbooks are an important medium for exercising control as they embody dominant ideologies. In textbooks knowledge continues to be inherently ideological as it reproduces the culture of dominant class and perpetuates the established patterns of social order and social inequality.

Foucault (1969) provided an analysis of knowledge and finds the complex relationship existing between forms of knowledge and relations of power. He finds a circular relationship between the systems of power and regimes of knowledge. Through knowledge, control is exercised and order is imposed. This is the dialectic of knowledge and control. Fiske (1993) also shared the same critical Foucaultian thought. For him, “knowledge is never neutral; it never exists in an empiricist, objective relationship to the real. Knowledge is power, and the circulation of knowledge is part of the social distribution of power”.

The education and power linkage becomes vivid when the deliberate selection and organization of knowledge is studied critically. Selective tradition, ideology and hegemony
are three critical terms used by Apple (2004) for his analysis. The deliberate selection of knowledge in any text allows social control and social inequality to continue. Williams (1983) calls this selection as ‘selective tradition’, and defines it as, ‘someone’s selection, someone’s vision of legitimate knowledge and culture, one that in the process of enfranchising one group’s cultural capital disenfranchises another’s. Through the process of ‘selective tradition’, educational curriculum acts as agents of both culture and knowledge of the dominant groups.

Educational institutions play an important role in cultural and economic reproduction. So, despite the egalitarian ideal of post-colonial Indian state, there are still disproportionate access to resources, power and entitlements between different social classes and castes. The relationships between the upper and lower castes in the rural areas are still governed by the ideology of caste. According to Beteille (1972), professionalization and specialization of modern service sector in the post-colonial Indian society has increased the role of formal education, technical skills and training; ‘family’ and not caste plays critical role in the social reproduction of inequality, especially in urban areas. Heath in his ‘social mobility’ (1981) correctly points out that even if equality of opportunity be assumed to exist, it is wrong to think that it would necessarily be lead to equality as an end state. Class and gender all influence the outcome of education as far as the individual child is concerned and their effects are cumulative. Educational institutions play a pertinent role as they have a major role in legitimizing and accepting inequalities, and in maintaining hegemony.

INDIAN SCENARIO

Complex identities of race, culture, language, religion, caste and tribes comprise the Indian subcontinent. This multiplicity and multi-ethnicity lends the subcontinent its heterogeneous or pluralistic character. Pluralism in a society is the presence of more than one identity among its population. It can be multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual and other multi-cultural categories. India is the world’s most complex and comprehensive pluralistic society, harboring a vast variety of races, tribes, castes, communities, religions, languages, customs and living styles. All these complex identities have created a sense of identity crisis and all-pervading mistrust and isolation in the mindset of the people. As a consequence, social inequalities got firmly implanted in the soil of India. In this context it can be mentioned that India has the second largest tribal population in the world. Tribals have traditionally been distinct cultural groups that have evolved in isolation from the mainstream cultures. With heterogeneous, social, economic, linguistic and religious patterns, these tribes survived in isolation for centuries until the Constitution of India provided them the opportunity for entering the mainstream by upholding the dignities of their respective cultural patterns.

Our country today has been facing many problems such as –

a) Regional imbalances owing to uneven expansion and growth of educational institutions.
b) Mismatch between educational attainments and employment opportunities.

c) Sharp division in the educational attainments between elite class and the poor masses.

d) Sorrowful plight of rural population and their migration to urban areas in search of better standard of living.

e) Deprivation of the marginalized and the oppressed such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Dalits, Minorities and Women, etc. in matters of education and non-manual occupations.

f) Impact of economic globalisation upon the poor and weak hindering their socio-economic developments.

These all-pervading and deep-rooted social inequalities in Indian society led the founding fathers of Indian Constitution to take solemn pledge with a view to transforming the society into an egalitarian society.

The adoption of the four-fold ideal of Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity in our Constitution has really been incorporated for the elimination of social inequalities, economic disparities and political disadvantages. These ideals were needed to purge us of various disparities and a division on the basis of some artificially created social hierarchy. These are also intended to strengthen unity in diversity that distinguishes Indian social system.

The constitution has made provisions to safeguard the right of religious and linguistic minorities. The constitution of India, under Article 29, states that the ‘minorities with a distinct language, script or culture have the right to conserve the same’ and that they ‘shall not 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’. Article 30 states that all minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. 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.

The Constitution of India provides for special provisions for the advancement of Schedule Castes and Tribes. Article 46 of the Directive Principles of State Policy is a comprehensive article comprising both the development and regulatory aspects. It reads as follows:

“The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all form of exploitation.”

Educational and cultural safeguards are provided to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes under Article 15(4) which empowers the state to make any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This provision has enabled the state
to reserve seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in educational institutions including Technical, Engineering and Medical colleges and in Scientific and specialized courses.

Through the Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy, the Constitution of India guarantees certain rights and privileges to women. Article 14 confers on men and women equal rights and opportunities in the political, economic and social spheres. Article 15 prohibits discrimination against women; 15(3) contain an enabling provision for the State to make affirmative discrimination in favor of women. Similarly, Article 16 provides for equality of opportunity in matters of public appointment for all citizens. Article 39(a) further mentions that the State shall direct its policy towards securing to all citizens’ men and women, equally, the right to a means of livelihood, while Article 39(e) ensures equal pay for equal work. Finally, renunciation of practices derogatory to the dignity of women is imposed by the Constitution as a fundamental duty of every citizen through Article 51(A) (e).

The founding fathers of the Constitution conceived education as a mechanism of social engineering for the following reasons:

Skills and values acquired through Education are supposedly related to the way in which the economy and the occupational structure operate. Education trains the individual in skills that are required by the economy. Literacy, for example, stimulates socio-economic development and that is why all developing countries have undertaken large scale literacy programmes. In India as well as other developing countries there exists a great demand for education which is considered the gateway to an improved social position.

Amount of education is a good indicator of socio-economic status from lower working class up through middle class, for education leads to economic opportunity. It is through education that young people secure higher status jobs than their parents. With higher income they come to be associated with persons of higher status and adopt their ways. Thus education provides the channel not only to better socio-economic status, but also to social mobility in the broader sense.

Education in a broad sense tends to generate vertical social mobility by assisting young people to move up the social scale, by preparing them for a higher status occupation than that of their parents, by increasing their earning power and by giving them more of the general knowledge of the past and present which characterizes middle class people. In India, education is believed to be an important avenue for bringing about social change and gaining entrance into prestigious occupations. Educational inequality in India involves more than social class and gender. Backward caste groups such as the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and the Other Backward Classes (groups that are constitutionally recognized for certain preferential policies) lag behind the higher castes with respect to both enrolment and completion at each educational transition stage. The Indian government has over the past six decades implemented a wide array of educational policies to alleviate inequalities in educational attainment. As Aggarwal (2001) points out that the original National Policy on Education (NPE 1968) was unable to meet its target of universalizing education for all and the NPE 1986 was implemented to increase the scope
of the previous programme and to emphasize in particular the education of the girl child and of the backward castes and communities. In addition to these policies, the government has also implemented various affirmative action or reservation policies for certain backward communities under which among other things places have been reserved for them in certain educational institutions.

Therefore after attaining Independence, the Government of India started constituting the various commissions and committees with a view to overhauling the entire education system in India. Some of the primary government initiatives regarding education are the 1986 National Policy on Education (NPE) which had the aim of providing more comprehensive educational access to all children up to the age of 14 years irrespective of their social origins and gender, and the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) launched in 1993 which through district level programmes and interventions aims to achieve the government’s goal of Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE). The government’s goal of providing free and compulsory education at the elementary level (up to 14 years of age) was included as the 86th Constitutional Amendment in 2002. In addition to these policies, the government provides preferential treatment to members of certain backward groups in terms of places in educational institutions and in the relaxation of criteria for entrance into these institutions.

The policy of reservation is another step taken by the Government of India to provide safeguards to the weaker sections. Of late the Supreme Court of India (April 10, 2008) upheld the legislation providing 27 per cent reservation for OBCs in government funded central elite institutions like IITs and IIMs etc., although the policy of reservation has become a much debated issue over the years.

Conclusion

Education reflects the structural inequalities in the social system. Schools are not accessible to everyone and the education system brings about a division between elite and the masses and it serves to perpetuate the existing inequalities.

Therefore despite all these achievements in India, the dream of an egalitarian society continues to be far from realization. We have still to go a long way to realize the path of equalization of educational opportunity, the universalisation of primary education, women empowerment through education, improvement of cultural environments of the marginalized and oppressed population, solution of unemployment problem, etc.

Wide spread inequality of educational opportunity remains despite the introduction of free and compulsory state education in many countries including India. Many children coming from working class and poor families face a number of obstacles and disadvantages to success on education, this means that they do not do as well as their ability should allow them to. The chances of upward mobility are thus restricted. Those who hold positions of wealth and power can make sure their children have the best available education, and this often leads them to prestigious and lucrative jobs. In the light of what has been said above it is pertinent to examine how far the constitutional provisions have succeeded in equalizing educational and occupational opportunities and
how far the promise of a better standard of life for the oppressed sections has been fulfilled. Therefore the politicians, the academicians, the executives and the other stakeholders of the society should come forward and prepare a common agenda to deal with those afore-mentioned unresolved issues today.

References