

# The Dalits of India: education and development

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Ensuring access to education for the Dalits of India has been the greatest challenge for the Indian government in diminishing the social effects of the caste system, which still remain entrenched in Indian society. There have been many different reasons proposed as to why the Dalits suffer from low rates of literacy and primary education enrolment, but the most realistic one describes history and unequal access as the causes. The ancient caste system of India, which has resulted in the social and economic oppression of the Dalits, continues to play a dominant role in India. The Dalits, also known as the scheduled caste or untouchables, have experienced consistent denial to access to education since the 1850s. This decade coincided with Britain's established control over India, which meant many of the improvements to Dalit education were coming from outside influences, rather than from the national government. Because of unchanging social norms and behaviour, incentives to pursue education were minimal for the Dalits who were still physically and emotionally harassed. Increasing efforts to eliminate caste discrimination combined with additional attempts to increase the accessibility and appeal for education have contributed to the slow progression of Dalit education. The responsibility for social equalization fell fully upon the Indian government when it gained its independence from Britain in 1948. While some benefits of social programs and government policies designed to increase primary education rates can be noticed, the Dalit literate population still remains much lower than that of the rest of India. There remains still, hostility, oppression and flaws in social programs in Indian society that prevent an increase in education growth. Despite efforts to decrease caste discrimination and increase national social programs, the Dalits of India continue to experience low enrolment rates and a lack of access to primary education in comparison to the rest of India.

### Historical Context

Deeply entrenched in Indian society is the complex social stratification of individuals known as the caste system. It is a division of society traditionally based on occupation and family lineage. In India, the caste system is divided into five separate classes. The highest class in Indian society is that of the priests and teachers, or Brahmins, followed by the warrior class, the Kshatriyas. Third ranked are those who fall in the farmer and merchant class, the Vaishyas, followed by the fourth ranked labourer class, the Shudras ("The Caste System in Hinduism"). The fifth group, which was seen as being so low as to not deserve being placed in a caste, were the Dalits. Often referred to in Indian culture as the untouchables, these were the people who have the harshest and most unjust restrictions imposed upon them (Desai & Kulkarni).

The organization of the caste system and its entrenchment within Indian history has resulted in centuries of hostile interaction between classes. In rural areas, Dalits were excluded from temples, village wells and tea shops. In some areas of the country, the Dalits were not permitted to walk in daylight for their shadows were considered pollution (Nambissan 1011). In addition to the cruel and humiliating circumstances the Dalits have been put in, their efforts to improve their situation have often been squashed by assault, rape and murder by upper castes threatened by the Dalits' search for equality (Bob 173). The cruel and unjust treatment imposed upon the Dalits has decreased in frequency as history has progressed, although it still continues in today's society.

After the introduction of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled tribe Prevention of Atrocities Act of 1989, the practice

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of the caste system became illegal in India. Despite increased government intervention, the discrimination and mistreatments of individuals of lower castes still occur. Today, the Dalit population represents 16% of the country's population and still struggles to achieve social equality. There remains geographic division within Indian cities and villages which exemplify the role that the caste system plays in today's society (Desai et al). Many Dalits have attempted to avoid the caste system by converting from Hinduism to other religions, although this rarely allows these individuals to escape their social and economic hardships.

The Dalits have experienced a bit of progress in establishing an equal position in Indian society. Under the Poona Pact, a reserved number of seats in the national legislature were reserved for Dalit candidates only who would be elected based solely on the votes of their Dalit constituents (Bob). Their movement has also been encouraged by slow societal shifts towards a greater acceptance of Dalit equality and a greater role played by local and international nongovernmental organizations (Bob 173). The Dalit population continues to struggle for equality, though the progress of the past few decades shows hope for an improved level of equality within Indian society.

## The Importance of Education

Before beginning to examine methods of improving enrolment in primary education and literacy rates, it is important to know why education is such an important topic in development studies. The past century has been characterized by a global expansion of education. Alongside this growth in education has also been an increase in the gap between different social strata (Desai & Kulkarni). Education can be a way to increase the incomes of impoverished people. Education helps to ensure that benefits of growth are experienced by all. Economic perspectives see education as a means to make individuals more productive in the workplace and at home. It can also be seen as a means of empowering socially and economically deprived groups into seeking political reform. By using any of these reasons as motivation to pursue educational development, governments are attempting to generate some form of social or economic equality for the population.

Some of those who study development see education as a means of improving social welfare through economic means. When compared to secondary and university level education, rates of return are highest for primary education, which means that the costs associated with providing basic education are much lower than the benefits received from learning to read and write. About 17.2% of economic growth in Africa and 11.1% in Asia between the 1950s & 1960s have been credited to increases in education (Psacharopoulos 102). In addition to an increase in economic growth, primary education is also said to lead to greater income distribution. Providing primary education to 10% more people would equate to a decrease in the inequality index of 5% (Psacharopoulos 103). The economic advantages of increasing enrolment rates for primary education emphasize the importance of increasing education accessibility for the dalits of India.

An alternative reason to study education is for its ability to empower the individual to strive for an improved quality of life. A big factor impacted by education is that human beings often base their life goals and everyday actions on what they perceive to be feasible (Simon Wigley & Akkoyunlu-Wigley 290). Education expands the knowledge of possibility to poor individuals, and is often a necessary factor in providing incentive to escape poverty and social oppression.

Development projects focused on increasing access to basic education, rather than ones that increase capital to improve current levels of education, ensure governments are able to know that the benefits of these programs are experienced by all, rather than a select few. As mentioned previously, the rates of return for primary education exceed those of secondary and university levelled education. It is therefore of greater value for governments to focus first on increasing access to primary education before moving onto to increase levels of education. By focusing development on a human-capabilities approach, governments and aid organizations are able to increase the number of people with the fundamental skills of reading writing and arithmetic (Simon Wigley & Akkoyunlu-Wigley 288). These skills allow individuals to communicate, argue, count, and problem solve so that they are able to become more aware and in control of their own lives. This allows them to better deal with problems in their everyday lives including taking a loan out from the bank, defending them in a court of law, escaping unhealthy personal relationships or avoiding jobs which would expose them to unsafe working conditions (Simon Wigley & Akkoyunlu-Wigley 293). Even

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the value of holding a basic education is in itself a frequently overlooked asset. Education has had an independent effect on life expectancy, increasing the age for educated individuals (Simon Wigley & Akkoyunlu-Wigley 290).

One of the most important Dalit political activists who saw the value of social equity within India was Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, who became the chief architect of India's constitution after years of social activism. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Ambedkar dedicated a significant portion of his life to improving the quality of life and social status of Dalit Indians. He established the People's Education Society in 1945 which believed that increasing access to education to the Dalits would increase their empowerment. He thought that a higher level of education would cause the Dalits to realize their position so that they would aspire to the highest of Hindu positions, and that they would consequently use political power and influence as the means to an end to their oppression (Nambissan 1014). Ambedkar believed that the value of education was in the empowerment of Dalits to pursue political action for social reform through informed lobbying.

## A History of Education

The 1991 census of India reported that Dalit communities were one of the least literate social groups in the country, with only 30% of Dalit children recognized to have basic reading and writing skills (Nambissan 1011). These high levels of illiteracy are a result of insufficient access to primary education. Reasons proposed for this low primary education rate amongst the Dalits have ranged from blaming family values to universal acceptance of social behaviour. In reality, it is a history of constant oppression and missing incentives that have been the reason why India's lowest caste has struggled to take advantage of public education programs.

For centuries, the Dalit population of India were forbidden from gaining access to education. Originally reserved for upper castes only, the denial of conventional education to Dalits was designed to prevent them from increasing their quality of life and to highlight caste divisions. Caught in a colonial struggle between European nations, Indian society had no motivation to determine who should manage social programs until the British established control over India. Then, during the 1850s, the British began the long process of increasing the accessibility of education to all citizens on India.

Signed in April of 1850, the Caste Disabilities Removal Act theoretically abolished all Indian laws which challenge the rights of those who are members of any caste or religion. To most, this was the first step towards social equalization within India. It was also the beginning of a series of attempts to increase accessibility to education for members of the dalit caste. To coincide with the signing of the act, the Indian education system became accessible to every member of society. However, one hundred and sixty years after the Dalits were granted permission to attend schools, the primary education rates of the Dalit population compared to those of upper castes remain as low ever.

There have been a number of suggestions proposed as to why the Dalits have yet to take advantage of open access to education. Some have suggested that Dalits possess an apathetic attitude towards education, and so the thought of attending school seems unappealing and inefficient compared to entering the workforce or doing nothing at all. Another suggestion of the cause for lower access to education to Dalits is that most families are caught in a vicious cycle of illiteracy and poverty. Therefore, not only do parents have no incentive to have their children attend school, but they also frequently lack the financial means to send them to the fee-based schooling system of India (Nambissan 1011). The final and often most realistic reasons for why the Dalits have failed to take advantage of their access to education is a combination of a history of oppression and a lack of access to local, quality education systems.

A historical back-drop of mistreatment and class hierarchies has provided little incentive for the Dalits to pursue education. Throughout the 1800s and into the mid 1940s, conditions for Dalit children within the Indian education system were very poor. Due to discrimination from higher castes, the Dalits did not feel comfortable attending schools. Dalit children were required to sit outside the school, listening on the veranda while those in higher castes would be taught inside. Teachers, who refused to touch the Dalit children even with sticks, would throw bamboo canes as undeserved punishment while children of other castes were permitted to throw mud. The Dalit children, who knew retaliation would result only in increased abuse, would be essentially scared into not attending school (Freeman

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67). Of the limited number of Dalit children who were attending school, the majority were male; a trait which continues even today (Nambissan 1012).

The 1948 independence of India prompted an increase in responsibility for the government to promote the economic and educational interests of the lower castes and to protect the Dalits from social injustices and exploitations. Over the next few decades, the Dalits would see very little action to support the claims and progress made during the fifties to help improve their access to primary education. The 1950s saw subtle improvements in the number of schools being built in India, as well as the amount of money being allocated towards primary education programs. The efforts being put forward by the government lost momentum over the next few decades however, as the rate of primary schools being constructed slipped from 5.8% in the 1960s, to 2.1% during the 1970s, and eventually down to only 1.3% through the 1980s (Nambissan 1015). This was complemented by a shift in funding from primary school education to middle school education. This transition exemplified the government's shifted focus from increasing primary enrolment rates to increasing the quality of the education provided to those already provided with sufficient access to education.

Between 1983 and 2000, improvements in access to education for all of India have been made, although the difference between education rates for Dalits, especially females, and those in higher castes remained constant. In the seventeen year period, enrolment rates for Dalit boys grew from only 47.7% to a meagre 63.25%. When compared to those males in upper castes, enrolments jumped from an already relatively impressive 73.22% to 82.92%. Even poorer results were observed when looking at the female Dalit enrolment rate, which inched from 15.72% to 32.61%, when compared to their upper-caste counterparts whose enrolment climbed from 43.56% to 59.15% (Desai & Kulkarni). The education gap can also be understood to translate through the entire schooling system, with the proportion of Dalit to non-Dalit success remaining at a constant low rate through primary, secondary, and post-secondary schooling. Although large improvements have been made to increase enrolment rates in India, statistics show that there has been little progress in decreasing the education gap between castes.

The lack of success in increasing primary enrolment rates for Dalits over the past one hundred and fifty years is evidence that very few projects have had any success in increasing social equality within the Indian Caste system. In the next section, the paper will look at some of the programs which have attempted to provide incentive for India's poorest to seek primary education.

## Education-Based Development Programs: Can they Work?

When discussing methods which seek to improve enrolment rates, it is important to analyze which circumstances prevent Dalit children from attending school. A family's financial situation plays a role in whether or not they are able to afford to send a child to school. This is a major contributor to low Dalit enrolment rates since Dalits have considerably lower incomes than those in upper castes, and therefore have a hard time paying for education. Distance also plays a key role in determining a child's ability to attend school. Because Dalit homes are often located outside of a village, it is more dangerous for Dalit children to travel to and from school by themselves without risking assault, sexual abuse or abduction (Desai & Kulkarni). In addition, teachers at the schools are often members of upper castes who set low expectations for the Dalit children and rarely seek to provide them with a positive learning environment. There are many factors that act as obstacles for Dalits attempting to gain a primary education, and which many development methods have attempted to overcome.

India has attempted many different strategies to help increase the incentive to receive education for Dalit children. Earlier strategies focused on finding ways to give Dalit children an education without exposing them to the harshness of upper castes. As time progressed and the caste system began to weaken in India, there was a greater shift towards equalizing society so as to provide safer and more positive learning environments. Since gaining its independence, the Indian government has continued to make progress on improving the quality of life for India's lowest caste. Modern exposure to international thought has increased access to ideas and methods on how to increase education rates for the Dalits, providing for some of the best results in recent years (Nambissan 1011). The remainder of this section will examine some of the strategies used over the past one hundred and fifty years, attempting to look at how effective they really were.

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Following the creation of the Caste Disabilities Removal Act, the British government attempted to increase Dalit school attendance through methods which took into consideration the sensitivity of the caste society. Because the Dalit children were often harassed when they attended schools, the British chose to propose alternative teaching methods, rather than directly addressing the caste issue. One proposed alternative was the use of night schooling for Dalit children. In this manner, children would not need to worry about attending school with members of upper castes, but would still face dangers of travelling without daylight to and from school. Another proposed solution was the use of all-Dalit schools. This solution eliminated the dangers associated with night-time schooling, but also did not help to decrease hostility between the classes. These two methods combined resulted in a 4% primary enrolment rate for Dalit children by 1931, 81 years after education was first opened to all citizens on India. Of these Dalit children, 93% were attending all-Dalit schools. A problem occurred when there were insufficient all-Dalit schools at which children could pursue secondary education. Only 1% of all students at the time ever made it past primary education (Nambissan 1012). It was because of this, that when the British handed over control of the country to India in 1948, the Indian government began thinking of new ways to increase access to education.

Often, governments try to bring in international assistance in dealing with a national crisis like severely low primary enrolment rates. Prescribed to the Indian government by the World Bank, the District Primary Education Program was designed to increase primary enrolment rates within India. The goal of the program is to reduce differences in enrolment between gender and social standing to 5%, and to decrease the dropout rate to 10%. The DPEP receives the majority of its funding from the World Bank. It calls for the formation of local committees that oversee the hiring and management of Para-teachers. These Para-teachers are trained teachers hired by the DPEP program to fill growing vacancies in primary schools. They are hired on a short term basis but are offered extended terms as an incentive to perform well (Kumar, Priyam, & Saxena 565). They are a low-cost alternative to permanent teaching staff and their performance is often higher due to increased incentives. Since the introduction of the DPEP, India has actually managed to see decreasing primary enrolment rates (Kumar, Priyam, & Saxena 567). It is possible that national campaigns to increase enrolment in primary education fail to have a direct intended impact. Instead, the management of such programs are so focused on a top down approach to education development that they are not able to discover and acknowledge specific issues.

A smaller scale, and more capital based approach to development and increasing primary enrolment rates is the allocation of additional textbooks to a community. In developing countries, textbooks are often the only basis for a curriculum in a subject. If a school is not able to purchase its own textbooks, then knowledge resources will be limited. By increasing the amount of textbooks, development projects are attempting to increase the ability of schools to take in more students and they hope that additional resources so that performance in school will increase (Crossley & Murby 111). The biggest concern which arises out of providing textbooks is that it will not increase enrolment rates. New textbooks provide little incentive for Dalit children to attend classes as they do not alleviate any of the barriers currently blocking them from access education. Increasing access to text books has assisted in increasing the quality of education despite having little or no impact on enrolment rates.

Lastly, this paper will look to an outside approach to increasing school enrolment and attendance by observing how school-based drug treatments to common diseases attempt to provide incentive for enrolment. Many preventable diseases, including hookworm, roundworm and whipworm affect millions of children worldwide every year, preventing them from attending any sort of school or doing any physical labour (Miguel & Kremer 159). In this sense, the free drugs associated with this program not only provide incentive for children to come to school and learn, but they also serve a second purpose in that they keep students healthy, ensuring they are physically capable of returning to school. Children who attended schools which offered this program not only remained healthy, but felt more comfortable attending school on a regular basis. It has been proven that programs which offer medical incentives decreases absence rates by 25%. This method has also proven to equally increase the amount of girls and boys who are being enticed to attend regular primary schooling (Miguel & Kremer 190-191). In a case examined by Miguel and Kremer, female attendance increased by 10% in subject areas, nearly two times that of males (Desai & Kulkarni). The medication has also proved more cost effective for the organizations administering the medication. This method has been proven as a more effective way of increasing education levels compared to food incentives. On average the annual \$5 cost of administering deworming medication to a child is six times cheaper than providing the same child with food incentives. School uniforms, which are often so expensive as to prevent young girls from

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attending school, have had relatively equivalent success in increasing enrolments rates in young females. Deworming, however, remains more effective because costs associated with deworming medication are twenty times less expensive than providing school uniforms (Bossuroy & Delavallade). Using medication and deworming medicines as incentives, international organizations including the World Health Organization and The Forum of Young Leaders' campaign, Deworm the World, have developed a successful outside-the-box approach to increasing enrolment and attendance rates.

## Conclusion

There have been many attempts over the past one hundred and fifty years to help increase the quality of life for the Dalits of India through development focused on enrolment in primary education. Education provides individuals with the means to increase their income and to engage in economic activities. In addition, it can help empower individuals to lobby for social change through political activism. The lack of incentives to pursue education for the Dalits of India can be traced back to a long history of mistreatment and oppression. Still occurring today, caste harassment makes teaching environments unstable for caste children, it places caste homes on the outskirts of towns so that children have greater distances to walk to school, and it economically suppresses the Dalits so that they are unable to pay for their children's education. Many suggestions, both traditional and modern, have arisen on how to go about resolving issues surrounding Dalit primary enrolment. Night classes and all-Dalit schools provided a safer learning environment for the Dalits, but did not address any issues of caste conflict. Twentieth century policies helped officially decrease some of the animosity and inequality between groups so that the Indian government could have a greater focus on national primary enrolment rates. Larger operations, including the DPEP cooperative project with The World Bank failed to resolve some of the grass-root issues which deterred Dalits from attending school. Funding increasing supplies of textbooks to Indian schools do not address any of the core reasons as to why dalits are not attending school. Instead of increasing enrolment, additional textbooks only had an effect on increased performance levels. Providing free deworming medication at school has proven successful both in increasing the health of children which prevents absenteeism, and in increasing enrolment levels. Minor increases in incentives for Dalits to pursue primary education have been beneficial, but not sufficient in equalizing the enrolment gap between the Dalits and members of upper castes. In order for significant progress to be made in increasing the primary enrolment rates of Dalit children, development organizations must continue to explore varying levels of incentives and pursue national social equality in India.

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