Intersectionality in Education: How Caste, Class, and Gender Shape Educational Outcomes in India under the SDGs

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Abstract

This paper examines how caste, class, and gender intersect to shape educational experiences and outcomes in India, with specific reference to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality). While policy advancements have improved enrollment rates, critical disparities remain due to entrenched social hierarchies. The study adopts an intersectional framework, originally conceptualized by Crenshaw (1989), to analyze how these identities interact and compound disadvantages, particularly for Dalit, Adivasi, and economically marginalized girls. Drawing on case studies from rural and urban India, the paper highlights real-world curriculum bias, and systemic neglect. It also incorporates critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) experiences of discrimination, and feminist educational theory (hooks, 1994) to suggest how education can be Reimagined as a transformative social force rather than merely a site of knowledge transfer. The findings underscore that access to education alone is insufficient to meet the goals of equity and

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empowerment. True progress requires structural reforms that challenge traditional hierarchies and promote inclusive, critical, and transformative pedagogy. Recommendations include curriculum reform, inclusive teacher training, community participation, and disaggregated data collection to inform policy. By addressing the intersectionality of oppression, the education system in India can move toward fulfilling the promise of the SDGs and creating an equitable society where learning is a liberating force for all.

1. Introduction

The global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), set forth by the United Nations in 2015, articulate an ambitious global vision for inclusive, sustainable, and equitable development by 2030. Central to this framework is SDG 4, which commits to "emphasizes equitable and inclusive quality education and promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all," and SDG 5, which focuses to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (United Nations, 2015). Education is rightly positioned as a foundational pillar in the SDG agenda—not only as a goal in itself but also as a means of achieving other objectives such as poverty alleviation, health, and gender justice. However, while several countries, India among them, have made strides in improving educational access, significant challenges remain in ensuring that education is inclusive, equitable, and empowering for all.

India has achieved substantial gains in expanding access to education over the past two decades. Programs such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the Right to Education (RTE) Act have increased enrollment rates, particularly at the primary level. According to government data, net enrollment in primary education is near universal (Ministry of Education, 2021). However, these aggregate statistics often obscure the realities of children who fall through the cracks, particularly those marginalized by caste, gender, and class. Girls from Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and low-income backgrounds often face a multitude of overlapping challenges, ranging from household poverty

and domestic responsibilities to school-based discrimination and lack of adequate infrastructure (Nambissan, 2010; Rege, 2003).

The persistent educational disadvantage experienced by these groups cannot be fully understood or addressed through a single-axis lens. This paper employs an intersectional framework, first developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), which emphasizes that systems of oppression—such as casteism, patriarchy, and economic inequality—do not operate separately but are interlinked and mutually reinforcing. Intersectionality helps illuminate how the experiences of a Dalit girl in rural Bihar, for example, cannot be adequately captured by examining her identity solely as a girl or solely as a Dalit; rather, it is the intersection of these identities that shapes her opportunities, exclusions, and agency.

This analytical approach is particularly relevant for a country like India, where the caste system, although constitutionally outlawed, continues to shape access to resources, opportunities, and social mobility. In educational institutions, this manifests in several ways: differential treatment by teachers, curriculum content that privileges upper-caste histories, lack of representation in school governance, and inadequate implementation of reservation policies (Deshpande, 2011). At the same time, gender norms and economic constraints often limit the ability of girls to attend school regularly or complete their education. The compounded effects of these structural barriers often lead to lower persistence rates, deprived learning outcomes, and diminished aspirations among girls from marginalized communities.

Furthermore, even when these students manage to stay in school, they often experience alienation and exclusion within the classroom. Pedagogical practices and curricular content rarely reflect their realities, and educators are often not trained to deal with diversity sensitively or inclusively. The "hidden curriculum" of school culture reinforces dominant norms and values, often silencing dissenting or marginalized voices (Kumar, 2009). In this perspective, academic institutions can become spaces of both symbolic and structural violence rather than sites of empowerment.

The limitations of the current education system pose significant challenges to the realization of the SDGs. SDG 4 and SDG 5, while noble in their aspirations, cannot be achieved without addressing the systemic inequalities that hinder educational participation and learning. Equity in education requires more than access—it demands the transformation of the structures, processes, and

ideologies that perpetuate discrimination and exclusion. This includes reimagining curricula, pedagogy, teacher training, and assessment mechanisms through an intersectional lens.

This paper seeks to explore how caste, class, and gender intersect to shape educational experiences and outcomes in India, with a specific focus on the SDG agenda. It argues that intersectionality is not merely a theoretical tool, but a necessary analytical framework for identifying structural inequities and informing effective educational policy and practice. Drawing on feminist pedagogical theory (hooks, 1994), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), and empirical case studies from India, the paper highlights both the challenges and the transformative potential of an education system grounded in social justice.

In doing so, the paper intends to support the broader discourse on inclusive education within the SDG framework and underscore the importance of moving beyond technocratic solutions toward structural and epistemic change. If the global promise to "leave no one behind" is to be fulfilled, education systems must confront and dismantle the entrenched inequalities that hinder the full participation of marginalized learners. This requires an educational vision that not only acknowledges diversity but also values it, enabling all students to thrive—not despite their identities, but through them.

2. Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality and Critical Pedagogy

This study draws on two interrelated theoretical frameworks—intersectionality and critical pedagogy—to examine how caste, class, and gender shape educational outcomes in India. Taken together, these frameworks provide deeper insights into the structural and institutional forces that produce and perpetuate inequality within educational settings.

Intersectionality, a term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), emphasizes that systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, and classism are interconnected and cannot be examined in isolation. Drawing on Black feminist thought, Crenshaw's work which critiqued mainstream feminism and anti-racism for ignoring the compounded experiences of Black women. In the Indian context, caste functions similarly to race in other societies, shaping access to resources, dignity, and representation (Guru, 2009). For example, a Dalit girl from a low-income rural household may encounter discrimination for reasons beyond she is a girl or because she is

poor, but because these identities interact in complex and specific ways. Thus, intersectionality gives a theoretical lens for understanding how multiple identities intersect to create layered and cumulative disadvantages in educational institutions.

Critical pedagogy, as developed by Paulo Freire (1970), complements this framework by conceptualizing education as a space for societal change relatively than merely knowledge transmission. Freire criticized the "banking model" of education, wherein students receive knowledge passively and instead advocated for a dialogical model rooted in consciousness-raising and mutual learning. His idea of education as the "practice of freedom" resonates with efforts to dismantle systemic inequalities in the classroom and society.

Building on Freire, feminist intellectuals such as bell hooks (1994) emphasized the significance of education in challenging structures of domination, including patriarchy, racism, and colonialism. Hooks called for classrooms that are inclusive, democratic, and rooted in the lived experiences of marginalized students. This perspective is especially relevant to the Indian context, where dominant pedagogical practices often reproduce upper-caste, male-centric norms that alienate marginalized learners.

Together, intersectionality and critical pedagogy provide a comprehensive framework for examining how education both reflects and reproduces societal hierarchies. They also point toward the possibility of transformative pedagogy—one that not only includes marginalized voices but actively challenges the structural inequalities embedded in curricula, school culture, and policy. This theoretical foundation is essential for realizing the inclusive and equitable education envisioned in SDG 4 and the gender empowerment goals of SDG 5.

3. Intersectionality and Educational Outcomes in India

Educational outcomes in India are deeply shaped by intersecting social hierarchies, notably caste, class, and gender. Although India has achieved significant gains in expanding educational opportunities for all, these gains remain uneven and exclusionary. An intersectional analysis reveals how structural inequalities function in tandem, creating compounded barriers to meaningful educational participation and achievement.

3.1 Caste-Based Disparities

Caste remains a significant determinant of educational opportunities. Dalit and Adivasi students frequently experience systemic discrimination within schools, including segregated seating arrangements, teacher bias, and verbal abuse (Nambissan, 2010). Even with constitutional protections and affirmative action policies, educational institutions often mirror the casteist prejudices of broader society. Deshpande (2011) notes that caste-based exclusion results in lower academic performance, high dropout rates, and minimal representation in higher education for these communities. Many students internalize this marginalization, which affects their self-esteem and learning motivation. Structural issues such as the underrepresentation of Dalit teachers and the lack of culturally relevant curricula further entrench exclusion (Kumar, 2025).

3.2 Class and Economic Marginalization

Socioeconomic class also plays a significant role in shaping educational outcomes. Children from low-income households face barriers including lack of access to quality schooling, poor nutrition, and pressure to contribute economically to their families (Jha & Parvati, 2010). With the increasing privatization of education in India, a dual system has emerged: elite private schools serve the affluent, while underfunded government schools are attended predominantly by children from marginalized communities. This has reinforced educational inequality, as the standard of education remains closely linked to economic capital. Learners from marginalized economic backgrounds are often first-generation learners with limited academic support at home, compounding their vulnerability.

3.3 Gender Inequality in Education

Although primary-level gender parity has improved, disparities persist at the high-secondary and tertiary levels, particularly among girls from marginalized caste and class backgrounds. Kabeer (2016) highlights how social norms, such as early marriage and the burden of unpaid care work, drive adolescent girls out of school. Additional barriers include inadequate sanitation facilities, lack of safe transportation, and gender-insensitive curricula, all of which

discourage female participation. The difficulties are intensified for girls from Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim communities, where intersecting identities create unique forms of vulnerability.

Queer and gender non-conforming students also face systemic exclusion. Schools largely operate within a heteronormative framework, offering little to no support for diverse gender identities. These students often encounter bullying, misgendering, and erasure within the curriculum and school culture, leading to higher dropout rates and emotional distress.

The intersection of caste, class, and gender creates a layered architecture of disadvantage that obstructs the goals of SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 5 (gender equality). Addressing these inequalities requires a shift from siloed policy approaches to holistic frameworks that acknowledge and dismantle structural oppressions within the education system.

4. Case Studies: Intersectional Exclusion in Practice

Intersectionality in education is not merely a theoretical construct—it manifests concretely in the lived experiences of students who occupy marginalized identities. The subsequent case studies from varied Indian contexts illustrate how caste, class, and gender intersect to shape limited access to and experiences within education systems, thereby undermining the promise of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 and SDG 5.

4.1 Case 1: Dalit Girls in Rural Uttar Pradesh

Dalit girls in rural Uttar Pradesh face a triple burden of exclusion based on caste, class, and gender. Kumar and Das (2019) study revealed that Dalit girls are often subjected to overt caste-based discrimination, including being made to sit separately in classrooms and being denied leadership roles in school activities. Their economic status restricts access to private or well-funded public schools, further limiting educational quality and opportunities. Moreover, prevailing patriarchal norms impose mobility restrictions, leading to poor attendance or early dropout due to domestic responsibilities or early marriage. Girls who do attend school are often discouraged from pursuing education beyond the primary level, a reflection of persistent familial-societal gender biases. This case highlights the compounded disadvantage experienced by Dalit girls and underscores the need for intersectional approaches to educational inclusion.

4.2 Case 2: Urban Slums and School Access

In urban informal settlements such as those in Delhi, lower-caste and migrant children, particularly girls, face unique educational barriers shaped by urban poverty and social marginalization. Singh and Bangay (2014) document that domestic chores, lack of safe transport, and exposure to sexual harassment in public spaces often restrict girls' regular attendance at school. Caste identity further complicates this exclusion, as many urban slum residents are Dalits or belong to backward castes who migrated due to rural displacement or poverty. These families often reside in precarious housing with inadequate access to nearby schools, sanitation facilities, or legal identity documents needed for enrollment. The intersecting nature of caste, class, gender, and migration status results in a multilayered educational disadvantage that policies focused solely on income or gender fail to address.

4.3 Case 3: Gender and Curriculum Bias

Another form of intersectional exclusion operates through the content and design of school curricula. Sundaram (2021) emphasizes that Indian school textbooks often reflect dominant caste and gender ideologies, reproducing narrow and stereotypical narratives. As an illustration, women are commonly portrayed in domestic roles, while histories of Dalits, Adivasis, and queer communities are either omitted or misrepresented. This absence denies students from marginalized backgrounds the opportunity to see themselves reflected in educational materials, contributing to alienation and disconnection from formal schooling. Furthermore, the failure to integrate critical perspectives on caste, class, and gender into pedagogy limits the ability of all students to engage with structural inequalities, thus undermining the transformative potential of education.

Findings from these case studies show that exclusion in education is not the result of isolated disadvantages but rather the cumulative effect of multiple, overlapping systems of oppression. Addressing educational inequality in India thus requires an intersectional approach that recognizes the interplay of caste, class, gender, and spatial marginalization. Only then can the vision of inclusive and equitable education, as envisioned by the SDGs, be meaningfully realized.

5. Policy Gaps and Challenges

Despite the existence of progressive legislative frameworks such as the Right to Education Act (2009) and various gender-sensitive educational policies, the gap between policy and practice remains significant in India. Implementation is uneven across regions and institutions, often hindered by deeply entrenched teacher biases, inadequate training in inclusive and intersectional pedagogy, and a lack of institutional accountability (UNESCO, 2020). Teachers frequently bring their own caste, class, and gender prejudices into the classroom, which go unaddressed due to the absence of monitoring or corrective mechanisms. Furthermore, curriculum reforms aimed at inclusion are often superficial and fail to challenge dominant social narratives.

Compounding these challenges is the narrow focus of SDG 4 indicators, which emphasize access, enrollment, and infrastructure, while neglecting qualitative aspects such as learning outcomes, emotional well-being, and social inclusion. This results in a limited understanding of what constitutes educational equity and success, particularly for marginalized students whose challenges go beyond mere attendance. Additionally, budgetary constraints, bureaucratic inertia, and political reluctance to confront structural inequalities further limit the transformative potential of current education policies. Without a stronger emphasis on implementation, critical pedagogy, and intersectional accountability, the SDG vision of inclusive and equitable education will remain largely aspirational.

6. Recommendations

To advance the goals of SDG 4 and SDG 5 through an intersectional approach, targeted and systemic reforms are essential.

6.1 Curriculum Reform

Educational content must be restructured to incorporate caste, gender, and class perspectives, enabling students to critically engage with social hierarchies. Textbooks and classroom discussions should reflect the lived experiences of marginalized communities to foster empathy and awareness.

6.2 Teacher Training

Teachers must be equipped with intersectional and inclusive pedagogical strategies. Regular workshops and sensitization programs should be institutionalized to challenge unconscious biases and promote equitable classroom practices.

6.3 Data Disaggregation

Educational data must be collected and analyzed along lines of caste, gender, and socio-economic status. This can assist in identifying particular learning gaps and inform targeted interventions that address structural disparities (UNESCO, 2020).

6.4 Safe Learning Environments

Policies must ensure both physical and emotional safety in schools, particularly for Dalit, Adivasi, and gender non-conforming students. Anti-discrimination protocols and inclusive facilities are significant to retention and success.

6.5 Community Engagement

Promoting active involvement of local communities in school governance enhances accountability. Community-based monitoring, especially involving marginalized groups, can support inclusive education reform and empower stakeholders from the ground up.

7. Conclusion

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on quality education and inclusive learning and SDG 5 on gender equality, necessitates a fundamental rethinking of educational systems. Access alone is insufficient if educational environments continue to replicate entrenched hierarchies of caste, class, and gender. Intersectionality provides a powerful framework to expose how these structures intersect, shaping differential outcomes for marginalized learners, especially in countries like India, where historical social stratification persists.

This paper has shown that intersectional inequalities manifest in curriculum design, pedagogical practices, and institutional cultures, undermining the very goals of equity and empowerment. Without addressing these embedded forms of exclusion, the SDG promise of "leaving no one behind" will remain rhetorical. To realize education as a space of transformation rather than reproduction, structural reform must be both holistic and participatory.

Transforming pedagogy, investing in inclusive teacher education, reforming curriculum, and empowering communities are not peripheral options but central to meaningful educational change. An intersectional approach not only enhances educational equity but also aligns with broader development goals such as reducing inequalities (SDG 10) and fostering inclusive institutions (SDG 16). Only then can education truly serve as a vehicle for justice, dignity, and sustainable development.

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