SUMMARY

INEQUALITY IN ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION: A STUDY OF LAKHIMPUR DISTRICT, ASSAM

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THE PROBLEM

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.

As the studies reviewed in the following chapter indicate, the facilities of higher education are availed of mainly by the urban, middle class, upper caste, sections of the society. Even among these sections there is a domination of men over women in higher education. Thus the rural, lower class, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, other backward communities and women continue to remain bereft of the facilities of higher education and the prestigious jobs available to university graduates in this country.

It is, therefore, pertinent to study as to what factors of background determine an individual’s chances of entering an institution of higher education. In other words it is highly relevant at this point of time to examine how far the constitutional provision of equality of access to higher education has been achieved after about six decades of independence and practice of socialistic principles of the Constitution. It is therefore high time to identify the groups who have benefited from the expansion of the facilities for higher education. The present study is an attempt in this direction and It is also intended to study the causes of phenomena of inequalities in access to higher education. The study is titled as, “Inequality in Access to Higher Education: A Study of Lakhimpur District, Assam.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study was intended to find out the socio-economic background characteristics of boys and girls who, after passing out from Higher secondary school (+2 stage), go to college. It was also intended to compare the socio-economic characteristics of these
persons with those who, after passing out from the Higher secondary school, do not go to college.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Since the study is a social survey, no hypotheses are proposed to be tested. Instead, the study is addressed to seek answers to the following research questions.

1. Do men and women have equal access to higher education?
2. Do rural and urban residents have equal access to higher education?
3. Do different religious communities have equal access to higher education?
4. Do members belonging to different social categories have equal access to higher education?
5. Do children of parents with different educational attainments have equal access to higher education?
6. Do children of parents in different occupations have equal access to higher education?
7. Do children of parents from different income groups have equal access to higher education?

**DELIMITATION**

Due to the paucity of time and resources at the disposal of the investigator, the study could not be made on a national or even a state scale and as such is delimited to the examination of a sample from only one district, namely Lakhimpur District of Assam.

**METHODOLOGY**

**THE SAMPLE**

The students who passed Higher Secondary (class XII) Examination in the year 2005 from the schools/colleges in district Lakhimpur form the population for this study. In district of Lakhimpur there were 39 institutions offering higher Secondary courses of which 20 were higher secondary schools one Navodaya Vidyalaya and 18 were degree colleges with higher secondary classes attached to them. Out of the 39 institutions 38 are run by the state government and one, Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya run by the central government. There were a total of 4,225 students who passed their
higher secondary examination in 2005, from Assam Higher Secondary Educational Council and 43 who passed their higher secondary stage from the only Navodaya Vidyalaya in Lakhimpur in 2005.

A sample of 20% of these students, drawn through a random procedure from each school, formed the sample for the study. In other words a stratified random sample was drawn. This sample comprised of 856 of which 485 were male and 371 were female. However only 602 – 349 male and 253 female – could be contacted from whom the information, which formed the data base for the study, was collected. Thus there was a response rate of 70% which is considered high by all standards.

TOOLS OF DATA COLLECTION

A socio-economic survey schedule with items to obtain information on the respondent’s socio-economic background such as religion and social category, rural-urban residence, education, occupation and income of parents and siblings, etc. was designed by the investigator with the help of her supervisor. The information collected through the schedule was supplemented with a personal interview with the respondents.

TECHNIQUES OF DATA ANALYSIS

The collected data was classified and tabulated according to the socio-economic variables and proportions of different categories under each variable were compared. No sophisticated statistical technique was required to be employed.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The major findings arrived at from the analysis of data are summarized as follows.

1. In the patriarchal society that we have women, in general, do not have lower access only to higher education in liberal arts but even to the higher secondary stage. However, they appear to have access equal to that of men to professional and postgraduate education. This situation is caused by the economic conditions as the poorer families which are forced to make a choice between sons and daughters give preference to sons while the well to do not mind their daughters continuing to remain in the education system longer as in this class higher educational attainments of girls brighten their marriage prospects. It must also be noted that the majority of women respondents, especially of rural origin, who have
acquired a professional graduation have actually taken a degree in teaching (B.Ed) and very few of them have studied technical courses like engineering, medicine, law, etc.

2. Rural population has considerably lower access to higher education than its urban counterpart. In this respect rural women are worst off, as they have lower access not only than only the urban women but also than the rural men. Rural residents do not have lower access only to higher education than their urban counterparts; they have a disadvantage even in access to occupationally more potent subject streams of science and commerce. Again, rural women are the worst off in this respect because they appear to have very low levels of participation in the study of science subjects. However, it is interesting to note that urban women have greater access to science stream than not only rural men and women but also somewhat greater than urban men.

3. Religion appears to be related to the extent of access to higher education. From among the Hindus, the majority community, smaller proportions pass out from the higher secondary school compared to the minority communities of Muslims and Christians, when these proportions are compared to their respective proportions in the population. But among those who pass out from the higher secondary school Hindus send the largest proportions to colleges and universities, and the Muslims send the smallest while the Christians remain in between. In other words among the higher secondary graduates who discontinue their education after this stage Hindus form the smallest proportion and Muslims the largest while Christians are in between. Again, while Hindus have the greatest access to professional education, Muslims have the lowest. In this respect Muslim women are the worst off while Christian women are only slightly better-off than them. Muslim women have lowest access not only to higher education in general but also to occupationally potential stream of science in particular.

4. When the proportions of higher secondary school graduates from different social categories are compared to their respective proportions in the population it is found the weaker sections viz. OBC/MOBC and SC’s are over represented while the ST’s and General categories are underrepresented. But the proportions of these school graduates entering colleges and universities shows that the General category predominates followed by OBC/MOBC and ST’s, while the SC
categories sends the smallest proportion of its higher secondary school graduates to colleges and universities.

In the case of professional higher education it is the OBC/MOBC’s who send the largest proportion for such education while SC’s send the lowest and other categories being in between. However most of the professional graduates among the OBC/MOBC’s, especially among women, have acquired only degree in teaching (B.Ed) and not degrees in medicine, engineering, law etc. In this regard among the men ST’s dominated while among the women it was OBC/MOBC who dominated. SC and ST women had practically no access to professional higher education. Again SC, ST and OBC/MOBC, have a great disadvantage in access to occupationally potent stream of science and this disadvantage is greater in the case of women than men and SC’ women are conspicuous by their absence in science stream and professional higher education.

5. Father’s educational attainment is a strong determinant of a persons’ access to higher education. The children of fathers with less than a high school education have very few chances of acquiring higher education and if at all they have any chances it is only to acquire a first degree in liberal arts, while the children of fathers’ with a graduation and above especially the children of professional graduates and postgraduates have the greatest access to professional graduation and post graduation. This is true in the case of both men and women. However, it is seen that father’s illiteracy is a little greater hindrance in higher education of a son than that of a daughter. This appears to be so because the illiterate fathers are in very low income occupations and therefore force their sons into work to supplement the family income while daughters somehow continue because they do not find the kind of work they are able to do or are allowed to do, and because of the special support women get from state government.

Father’s educational attainments also affect the children’s choice of streams of study. The children of fathers with less than a middle school education are very unlikely to study science, the occupationally potent stream, while the children of fathers with a professional graduation and a post graduation are very unlikely to study arts stream which has very low employment potential except in cases where the parents want their children to compete for higher administrative service like IAS or state Administrative Service.
6. Like fathers’ education mothers’ education is also a strong determinant of children’s access to higher education. Mother’s higher education especially enhances a daughter’s access to higher education more than that of a son’s. Again, illiteracy of mother is a greater hindrance in a daughter’s access to higher education than that in a son’s. Higher educational attainments of mother also brighten the children’s chances of studying science. Here again, it enhances a daughter’s chances to a greater extent than that of a son’s.

7. This study shows that it is not only the parents’ educational attainments that determine the children’s access to higher education, but the children’s chances of acquiring higher education are brightened under the influence of any other member of the family who has the highest educational attainments in the family even if the parents have low attainments. This explains why children of some illiterate parents have also acquired higher education. Such children have done so because there is some other member who has had higher educational attainments. Again the children of the families where every member, including the parents, is illiterate, children are most likely to drop out of the education system after completing higher secondary school. This is equally true for both sons as well as daughters.

8. Fathers’ occupation also is a determinant of children’s access to higher education. The higher the occupational status of father greater are the children’s chances of acquiring higher education and especially chances of studying occupationally more potent stream of science. Children of fathers in manual occupations have very limited chances of acquiring higher education while children of fathers in non-manual occupations have very few chances of dropping out of the education system after higher secondary stage. Children of fathers in manual occupation have practically no chances of acquiring professional graduation. This is true in the case of both men and women. This study also found that father’s being in manual occupation is more detrimental to a daughter’s chances of acquiring higher education than those of sons’. The children of manual fathers have very few chances of studying science stream and the children of non-manual fathers have three times greater chances of studying this stream. While the sons of manual fathers have some chances of studying science daughters of such fathers have practically no chances of studying science.
9. Like fathers’ occupational status mothers’ occupational status also affects children’s access to higher education. Mothers’ being in non-manual occupation greatly enhances the children’s chances of acquiring higher education. However, mothers’ being in manual occupation reduces a daughter’s chances of acquiring higher education, especially of the professional kind, to a greater extent than that of a son’s. However, chances of studying science are more dependent on fathers’ occupational status than that on mothers in the case of both sons and daughters.

10. As in the case of education, it is not just the occupational status of the parents on which the chances of acquiring higher education depend but even on the occupational status of any other member of the family whose occupational status in the family is the highest. Thus the children of families wherein all the members are employed only in manual occupations have very few chances of acquiring higher education, especially of the professional type and to study science stream while as children of families wherein all the members are employed in only non-manual occupations have very few chances of discontinuing education just after higher secondary stage. These children are most likely to study science and acquire professional higher education.

11. Family income, not in absolute terms but, in terms of disposable income available per capita is also a determinant of access to higher education. While higher family income greatly enhances the chances of children acquiring higher education, somewhat lower income but assured does not reduce such chances very greatly. Lower income and even somewhat higher but un-assured greatly restricts such chances. Income has the same effect even on the chances of studying science stream. Low and un-assured income is more detrimental to a daughter’s chances of acquiring higher education than that of a son’s.

12. This study found that the stream of study and chances of acquiring higher education are also related. While among those who study arts at higher secondary stage largest proportion discontinue after this stage while among those who study science at this stage the smallest proportions discontinue and those who study commerce are in between. However, among those who study science proportion of women who discontinue after higher secondary is a bit larger than the corresponding proportion of men.
13. It has been found through this study that those who aim at higher levels of education attain higher than those who aim at somewhat lower levels. Again those who aim at higher occupational status generally acquire higher levels of education than those whose occupational aspirations are low.

Thus the study leads to the conclusion that opportunities for higher education are unequally distributed among the different sections of the society in the District of Lakhimpur. These findings are consistent with the findings of most of the studies reviewed in Chapter 2 of this report. These results are consistent not only with the findings with regard to India but also to those of the other societies including the most developed ones of the USA and Western Europe. Thus a person’s access to higher education depends on the socio-economic background of the family to which the person belongs. Thus, the urban elite, upper caste Hindus in non-manual occupations and having higher incomes continue to dominate the scene of higher education in this district like other parts of this country and the weaker sections viz. the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Communities continue to lag far behind. Even the Muslims, especially those belonging to backward communities seem to suffer from the disadvantage in access to higher education. Women among these disadvantaged sections suffer the most.

Thus even after more than 60 years of independence the objective of equality, especially equality of opportunity in education and public employment, enshrined the Constitution, has not been realized and the weaker sections of the Indian society continue to remain weak despite the provision of special measures for them under the policy of protective discrimination.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Thus, while the constitutional provisions for establishment of a democratic republic with a socialistic pattern of society are lofty the Indian state has failed to implement these provisions in the right spirit and perspective. Although to a large extent democratic political system has been put in place but democratising the social system especially that of equalising opportunities for higher education and public employment remain only a cherished dream.

The situation has serious implications for educational and employment policy framework. The provisions of reservation for weaker sections of SC’s, ST’s and
OBC’ has resulted in the emergence of an elite class among them and they continue to
corner all the benefits of the special provisions made for these Communities and those
families among them who remained in their traditional caste occupations and the
landless labour continue to get exploited by the middle class from not only the upper
castes but even from their own castes. This situation cannot be corrected unless the
implementation of the reservation policy is recast. To exclude the creamy layer
among the OBC’s from the benefits of reservation the government has fixed an
income criteria of Rs 3,50,000/- per annum, which again gives opportunities to the
well to do among them to corner the benefits. In the case of SC’s and ST’s even this
creamy layer is not excluded and as a result the elite among them continue to get the
benefits to the exclusion of the poor, propertyless, landless and those employed in
their traditional occupations from the benefits of the special constitutional provisions.

This calls for a change in methodology of implementation of the policy of protective
discrimination. Thus, as recommended by Mandal Commission (Backward Classes
Commission 1980) the composite criterion of educational backwardness, social
(occupational) backwardness and economic backwardness be used to select the
individuals and groups for the benefits of reservation or the formula proposed by
Karpooiri Thakur viz. identification of weaker sections on the basis of caste and
selection for actual benefits on the basis of class could also be used. The other way to
prevent the elite among the disadvantages communities from cornering all the benefits
of reservation would be the process of descheduling meaning the removal of
castes/communities from the lists of beneficiaries if they have attained the
educational, occupational and economic status of par with the advanced sections or
General category. The third way could be to provide reservations only for a maximum
of two generations only for each family and letting them compete with nonreserved
categories thereafter. Two generation’s reservation is proposed because for those who
enter the lowest rungs of non-manual occupations are sometimes likely to skid back
into manual occupations and once the two generations are in non-manual occupations
chances of skidding are almost eliminated except in the case of some kind of a
catastrophe. Again, although education is a very important mechanism of social
engineering equal educational attainments do not lead to equal occupational
placements. Therefore, equalising educational opportunities will not necessarily lead
to elimination of employment inequalities; it may not even reduce the employment

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inequalities significantly. But, using Raymond Boudon’s model of IEO – ISO, equalizing social (Occupational) opportunities will significantly reduce the inequality of educational opportunities. This is so because once a person enters a non-manual occupation with a decent income he/she will ensure that his/her children acquire education of a certain type and level through which the children can continue retain the non-manual occupational status. In this context it would not be out of place to suggest the right to work be made a fundamental right as this would ensure a certain minimum assured income for all.

To narrow the gap between the rural and urban populations in access to higher education and to the non-manual occupations two things seem to be essential. One, to provide higher levels of education and of good quality, institutions of higher education including of professional education need to be established in rural areas. This would also helps reduce the gap between the rural men and women in participation in higher education because in the absence of institutions of higher education near home women dropout from the system after passing out of the school as their parents hesitate sending them far away from home for higher education. Two, rural industrialization that is industries for which raw material is available in the rural areas be established there the local young people be provided training to work in such industry. It is also necessary to encourage these local young people to invest in these industries. Thus Agro industries, minerals and metal extraction industries could be established in rural areas with the rural populations manning them. This would generate gainful employment for them and as a result create demand for not only higher education but for education in general and the resources to fund this education as well.

One important reason for rural poverty is the problem of marketing their products, be it agro-based products or handicrafts as the middlemen exploit the producers. To change this situation the state could help organise cooperative societies in rural areas which could undertake the marketing of their products and also make arrangements for financing the production units. This will help generate an assured income which would help families to send their children for not only school education but also to higher education. Use of better technology to increase the production of crops could help the farmers raise their income which in turn could facilitate the education of their children.
Besides, as of now higher education continues to be highly subsidized and this stage of education is accessible mainly to the elite, the benefit of the subsidy goes only to those who can afford to pay for it. A policy of differential fee structure would solve this problem. This implies that no subsidy be provided for those who can afford to pay for it and they be asked fully finance the higher education of their children while making it absolutely free for the poorest and partly free for those who can afford to bear a part of the cost. This would reduce the burden on the state who could as a result spend more and on larger member of the children whose families cannot afford to pay for their higher education.

It is also pertinent here that despite subsidizing higher education and subsidy being provided mainly in tuition fee there are a other private costs on clothing, transport, books and stationary and other personal needs of the students which the poor families cannot afford. Therefore it would be necessary to provide book banks, free transport and larger amount financial assistances to the needy to reduce the burden of private costs on their families so that they could continue to acquire higher levels of quality education.