SUMMARY
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INEQUALITY IN ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION: A STUDY OF BARAK VALLEY IN SOUTH ASSAM

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INTRODUCTION:

Indian society has traditionally been stratified on the basis of spiritual purity-pollution dimension and as such the traditional Hindu society is divided into four major divisions or varnas of Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras with the extent of prestige and social status ranking in that order. Each varna is composed of a large number of Jatis, or Caste groups based on the traditional occupations. The castes within each varna are also arranged hierarchically. As said earlier, that, a person’s or group’s position in the hierarchy of the strata determines his/her life chances including access to education, a certain type of occupation, and a certain income has been a function of caste in the traditional Indian social structure.
During the medieval times Muslims brought with them the concept of an egalitarian society, as they believe all human beings are children of God and as such equal. Although the two communities, Hindus and Muslims have been living together for several centuries and exchanging culture and traditions and also adding through this to the already rich cultural heritage of the Nation, there has been no significant dent in the system of caste stratification.

Similarly, the European settlers specially the British, who ruled India for over two hundred years, brought with them so-called modern science, philosophy of humanism, concept of a secular state and that of an egalitarian society based on the cardinal slogans of the French Revolution, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

With this background in mind Indian people constituted themselves into a democratic secular society with a socialistic pattern of society, after obtaining freedom from British rule. The founding fathers of the Constitution of independent India specified the goals of modern Indian society in the Preamble to the Constitution. The Constitution makes provisions with a view to fulfilling the envisaged goals in the form of Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles of State Policy. An important administrative issue dealt within the Constitution refers to the
division of educational responsibility between the Government of India and the Government of States.

The various committees and commissions have made recommendations to make education in India relevant to her social, cultural, economic, political and spiritual needs. They also made recommendations as to how equality of opportunity in education can be ensured. During the last six decades of independence a lot of positive change towards implementation of the principles of equality of opportunity in education and employment has taken place through the operation of the constitutional provisions and the implementation of the recommendations of the committees and commissions on Education referred to above. Through the implementation of the recommendations of the committees and commissions vigorous developments have taken place since independence.

As far as the provision of schooling facilities are concerned the same have been provided within a walking distance of all children up to the standard V and for 60% of the children upto standard VIII. But even then the children in the eligible age groups do not attend them. The number of secondary and higher secondary schools and colleges has multiplied.

The literacy rates have gone up considerably from 18.33% in 1951 to 65.38% in 2001. For men it has increased from 27.16%
to 75.85%. Literacy among women has increased proportionately with men. However, though the progress has been phenomenal, increasing from 18.33% in 1951 to 65.38% in 2001, the light of education has not touched the people of all regions, communities, castes, social classes etc., equally. Proportion of population (of relevant age group) participating in higher education has also been increasing at a very fast pace.

At present there are 306 University-level institutions in India including 18 Central Universities, 186 State Universities, five Institutions established under States Legislature Act, 84 Deemed Universities and 13 Institutes of national importance. Of them, 38 Institutions provide education in agriculture (including forestry, dairy, fisheries and veterinary Science) 21 in Medicine (including Ayurveda), 44 in Engineering and Technology, and four in Information Technology, four in Legal Studies. The number of Open Universities is nine and that of Women Universities is five. The total enrolment of students in Universities and Colleges is 88 lakhs while the number of teachers is more than four lakhs. Participation of girls at all levels of education improved considerably over the years. At present the proportion of women students to men students in higher education is 1:4. The enrollments have also increased manifolds.
Research literature on the subject points to the facts that the facilities of higher education are availed of 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.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The major objective of the study is to examine the nature and extent of inequality in access to higher education. The study is intended to find out as to who goes to college and to draw a socio-economic profile of the students on the rolls of the institutions of higher education.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Since the study is made through a sample survey, no hypotheses are proposed to be tested. However, it is addressed to seeking answers to the following questions:

1. Do males and females have equal access to higher education?

2. Do rural and urban residents have equal access to higher education?

3. Do children of parents of different religious communities have equal access to higher education?

4. Do children of parents of different 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 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 was limited to a sample of undergraduate students on the rolls of colleges and University departments in Barak Valley and is titled, ‘Inequality in Access to Higher Education: A Study of Barak Valley in South Assam’.

**METHODS AND PROCEDURES:**

The data was collected through socio-economic survey of the students on the rolls of the second year / third semester integrated in Barak Valley. A census of these students was taken.

A socio-economic survey schedule, with items to obtain information on the respondent’s socio-economic background such as Religion and Category/Tribe; rural - urban residence, Education, Occupation and Income was used to collect the requisite data. The collected data was analysed by comparing the proportions of different categories under the various determining factors.

**3.1 POPULATION AND SAMPLE:**

For this study students on the rolls of first degree courses (in both liberal arts and professional) in the districts of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj in Barak Valley area form the universe. This includes those on the rolls of the under graduate sections of the integrated courses offered by the University departments. But due to the limitations of time and resources
only the students in second year / third semester courses were considered for data collection and a census of these students was taken. All the under graduate colleges in the three districts of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj, and the undergraduate classes of the integrated courses offered by Assam University were included in the survey. Medical College, Silchar and NIT, Silchar were also included in the survey. B.Ed and Law colleges were excluded as they offered courses for which the entry qualification is first degree (B.A./B.Com/B.Sc.etc.).

**MAJOR FINDINGS:**

The analysis of data and its interpretation made in chapter 4, lead to the following major findings with regard to the participation in higher education by different sections of the population living in the three districts of Barak Valley:

1. Higher education, in Barak Valley, is predominantly accessible to urban residents and the rural residents continue to suffer from disadvantage in this respect.

2. There is a predominance of males over females in college attendance in general. However while in the urban areas there seems to be almost equal access to both the sexes, in the rural areas the females are grossly under represented.

3. The courses such as Engineering and Technology, Computer Science, Medicine, BCA, Law, Social Work etc. with greater
potential for employment in key sectors of modern Indian industry, are dominated by urban males and the rural males and females both have very limited access to such courses.

1. Hindus have several times greater access to higher education as compared to the Muslims despite the fact that the latter constitute about 46% of the population of this region. However, other religious communities especially the Christians seem to be represented in the same proportion to in which they exist in the society. Not only do the Hindus have disproportionately greater access to higher education in general, but they also dominate the courses with greater employment potential. Among the Muslims only the elite sections seem to have access to higher education but even they have restricted access to courses with greater employment potential.

2. Among the various categories of General, OBC, SC and ST, General category families have greater access to higher education especially to the courses with greater employment potential while the other categories especially the SC’s and ST’s have, whatever little access, to the liberal arts courses only.

3. The scene of higher education is dominated by the persons whose fathers are highly educated. In this regard it may be mentioned that the children of fathers with less than a high school education have very few chances of getting higher education. Even the mothers of the college going students are also highly educated. Education of parents brightens the
of daughters’ higher education even more than those of
the sons. Again, the higher the educational attainments of
greater are the chances of children joining the courses
with greater employment potential like professional courses of
Engineering and Technology, Medicine, BCA, Computer Science,
Laws, Social Work etc. Though there are few students on the
rolls of colleges whose parents may not be highly educated, but
there is at least one member each in their families who has at
least a high school education and the chances of attending a
college are brightened especially of attending professional
courses, if some member in the family is a graduate, not
necessarily one of the parents.

4. Facilities of higher education are almost completely
accessible to the children of fathers in non-manual occupations.
Even mothers of participants, if employed outside home, are
employed in only non-manual occupations or otherwise mothers
are busy only in looking after their homes. In case, mother or
father is not employed in non-manual occupation, at least one
member of the family of each college going student is employed
in a non-manual occupation. The children of families with no
member employed in non-manual occupations have very few
chance of going to college and still fewer chances of going in for
courses with greater employment potential.

5. Higher education is found be accessible to the children of
families with high per capita income and despite the provision of

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highly subsidized higher education system and the provision of freeships, financial assistances, etc children from the poor families are not able to avail the opportunities especially those from the weaker sections of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes etc. Again, whatever small fraction of students that come from poor sections of the society they are not enrolled in the courses that have high employment potential and have to be content with liberal arts courses.

6. A vast majority of the college going students have had their secondary schooling in private schools and very few of them came from the poorly managed government run schools. Again, howsoever small number of students from government run schools are in colleges are mainly in liberal arts streams leaving the courses with employment potential for graduates of private secondary schools, who essentially come from the highly educated non-manual workers’ families.

7. The presumption that higher education is accessible only to the meritorious secondary school graduates is also belied by the fact that the majority of the students in the colleges in Barak Valley had obtained lower than 60% marks in the higher secondary school examination, although on an average students in professional courses like Engineering and Medicine had higher percentage of marks than others. Again the male college goers had a better score in the Higher secondary school examination than their female counterparts.
8. Majority of the college students aspired to obtain postgraduate degrees in their subjects of study, some did not want to continue beyond the first degree while a very small proportion aspired to continue till a research qualification.

9. Occupational aspiration of the college students indicate that business, employed professional work, school teaching and clerical work are the most preferred occupations among the young people and very few of them seem to be inclined to take up responsibilities of superior administration and independent professional work.

Summing up, these findings show that the higher education in Barak Valley is accessible to the children of families of general category urban families employed in non-manual occupation. Hindus among these groups have greater access than Muslims and males have greater access than females especially in rural areas. Besides, the families of the college students have a tradition of obtaining comparatively higher levels of education and have, on an average, higher incomes that enables them to bear the cost of higher education of their children. Moreover, such families being the urban or urbanized middle class families place a high premium on higher education of their children which in turn helps them to ensure the middle class occupational status for the former, as it gives them an edge in the employment market against those whose parents cannot
afford to keep their children in the school system longer. This ultimately also leads to the phenomenon called inflation of education which results in the lowering of the standards of education, especially the so called higher education.

From the above findings one can safely conclude that the scene of higher education in the Valley does not indicate any movement towards realizing the goal of equality of opportunity in higher education. Even the policy of protective discrimination in favour of the weaker sections of the society has not proved to be of much use. Glaring inequalities in access to higher education continue to exist among the various sections of the society. The facilities of tuition free higher education continues to be availed of by the urban Hindu, upper caste, men from economically, socially and educationally advanced sections of the society. The rural population, Scheduled Castes, Social Castes, other Back Communities the educationally and economically backward sections of the population have hardly any access to it.

Again, higher education being itself, elitist in nature fosters elitism among those who receive it. Although it inculcates not much of academic interests it indoctrinates its recipients to shun manual work.
5.2 **IMPLICATIONS:**

The major implication of the findings reported above is that the access to higher education continues to be inequitable. This situation results in serious consequences for both the individuals and the nation as a whole. The young people from the weaker sections without higher education have no chance of entering remunerative jobs and as such no chance of getting integrated into what is called knowledge society into which India aims of developing. Similarly, the pool of talent that these young people in the weaker sections may have, remains untapped to the detriment of the process of National Development. A society where such a large population does not have access to higher education cannot expect to transform itself into modern, democratic, republic with the socialistic pattern of society, the goal of Indian society envisaged in the Preamble to the Constitution of India.

Therefore, it is imperative that the access to higher education, especially to the courses with greater employment potential and important for the strategic development of the nation as a whole, be widened to include the hitherto excluded sections of the society viz. Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBC’s women and the rural and urban poor. This requires establishment for quality colleges, especially for the professional and technical and the ones with greater potential for
employment, in the backward region which are generally inhabited by these weaker sections. Again, enrolment in the elite institution be increased to accommodate larger numbers of young men and women from these sections. Besides, it is necessary to provide more hostel rooms, book grants, scholarships, freeships, travel grants and even pocket money in increasingly larger amounts to increasingly larger numbers from the weaker sections.

To make such an equitious system of higher education economically viable, besides government funding of the institutions of higher education self financing differential fee structure may also be introduced, so that the well off sections of the society pay for their children’s education as they can afford to pay. This will help provide better facilities for the weaker sections at the state expenses. Even private institutions are asked to accommodate a certain proportion of students from weaker sections without charging them fees and to provide other facilities. Even the state could bear the expenses of meritorious students from weaker sections taking admission in private colleges of good quality.

Lastly, it must be remembered that success in college depends on the quality of secondary school education also. It is therefore essential to improve the quality of schools in which children from weaker sections study and also support students from
these sections in the private schools of good quality. Then, again to make the outcome of higher education equitous, it is important to increase employment opportunities for young people from weaker sections in key sectors of Industry.

However, it must be remembered that if education, especially higher education has to be used as a mechanism of social engineering, only widening the access even to good quality higher education is not going to help. As Boudon has proposed elimination of economic inequality through ensuring the placement in appropriate occupations is necessary. This can be done as suggested by Jencks only through the establishment of political control (state control) over economic institutions that shape our society or in other words through socialistic political-economy. Without such a control higher education may only serve a dysfunction of strengthening inegalitarian tendencies in the society.