

INTERGENERATIONAL EDUCATIONAL MOBILITY ACROSS CASTE LINES: EVIDENCE FROM RURAL SINDH HOUSEHOLD PANELS

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ABSTRACT

Intergenerational educational mobility is a key measure of social equality, especially in highly stratified communities. In South Asia, social systems based on caste disadvantages to upward mobility have been prevalent and rural Sindh-Pakistan offers an important context for the study of these dynamics. We explore intergenerational educational mobility across caste lines using longitudinal household panel data drawn from rural Sindh, for the period from 2005 to 2020. Building on earlier research on caste-based disparities in India (Desai & Dubey, 2012; Borooah, 2017) and Pakistan the question to be addressed in this article is whether contemporary household socioeconomic status has any impact on educational attainment independently of one's Jāti or Kin identity while examining access to schooling. To do so, we employ a multi-method approach combining econometric models—logistic regression, intergenerational transition matrices and random forest classification (following Breiman 2001; Chetty et al. 2014)—and qualitative interviews (n=40) to better contextualize persistence and mobility patterns. The findings indicate high degree of upward educational mobility, especially among certain low-caste groups, yet there still exist entrenched inequalities and lack of access particularly to post-primary schooling. Predictive models with an AI technique indicate that caste identity is still a stronger predictor of attainment than income quintiles, confirming earlier findings from Indian settings (Hnatkovska et al., 2013). Qualitative data reveals discrimination, marriage practices and patron-client relations as being structural impediments. These results do call for caste-sensitive interventions in policy on education reform and focused affirmative action.

Keywords: intergenerational mobility, caste, rural Sindh, education inequality, household panels, social stratification

INTRODUCTION

Educational completion is generally accepted as a primary route out of poverty and a driver for inclusive development (Breen & Jonsson, 2005). In all societies, however, schooling serves both as an instrument for human capital formation and a process to equalize the opportunity structure by breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty. But in stratified societies, historical hierarchies and social exclusion affect who gets into the classroom—and what becomes possible for them out of it. Among the most pronounced forms of such stratification is the caste system, which has historically determined access to education, labor markets and political representation in South Asia (Deshpande, 2011; Borooah, 2017).

While Pakistan's constitutional and legal system does not recognize caste as a social category, there are many ethnographic and sociological studies which demonstrate the existence of caste-like divisions especially in rural areas (Gazda, 2009). In Sindh, caste is frequently associated with class, religion and land ownership. For some Hindus of the scheduled caste, for a few Muslim baradaris and for landless labour households' things are little bit better but even this is nothing compared to other sections (Ali 2015, 2017). Such communities often face multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization – poverty, lack of land, social stigma, discrimination in public services. Schools, rather than being neutral as we are often made to believe, mirror the larger society in perpetuating these disparities through segregation and differential treatment of low-caste students along with lack of resources (Khan, 2019).

Caste-based exclusion from education persists, remarkably so in view of the huge increase in rural schooling opportunity in Pakistan over recent decades. According to National Education Management Information System (NEMIS) data, in the Sindh

province enrolment and literacy rates have improved, which led to visible gains in primary level participation since early 2000s (ASER, 2021). But the benefits of those gains don't seem to be spread evenly. Low-caste and landless segments frequently experience high rates of attrition, particularly at primary-to-secondary transition point when the net cost of schooling rises significantly in terms of both direct and indirect costs (Andrabi et al., 2012).

In addition, there are confusing intergenerational dynamics at play. Parents' education is a strong predictor of children's achievement (Chetty et al., 2014) but in Sindh, where scheduled caste and marginalized baradari parents themselves commonly have little or no formal schooling, this correlation magnifies educational inequality (Gazdar, 2009). So, the question is whether increased schooling has led to significant intergenerational mobility in education or caste stays a 'sticky' barrier which, despite structural changes (Hnatkovska, Lahiri, & Paul 2013), continue to determine outcomes.

Rural Sindh is a particularly pertinent case for various reasons. First, the city is home to a large segment of Pakistan's scheduled caste Hindu population, which continues to be concentrated in bonded or low-wage agriculture work (Ali 2015). Second, high levels of feudal patronage guide who has access to education in the region: landlords and community elites often mediate education investments and who receives state resources (Gazdar 2007). Third, Sindh has been an arena for donor-led educational reforms and the development of school infrastructure projects, but there is little written on how such projects have affected relations across caste (World Bank 2014).

SIGNIFICANCE

This study is important as it attempts to link together national context specific evidence from Pakistan with emerging global debates omit trigenenerational mobility. Intergenerational mobility is more and more used as a (fairness) indicator of

opportunity structures. According to the OECD (2018), low mobility societies are characterized as being “trapped” whereby inequalities in one generation endure into the next. Likewise, the landmark study undertaken by the World Bank on global mobility (Narayan et al., 2018) positions education as a means to escape poverty traps and create inclusive growth.

The majority of empirical research on South Asia’s caste-education linkage has focused on India, generating abundant evidence of persistent caste differences in enrollment, attainment and labor market rewards (Desai & Dubey, 2012; Thorat & Newman, 2010). These studies demonstrate that despite the affirmative action policies and expansion of public school, caste continues to determine disadvantage in intergenerational outcomes. Yet Pakistan is little seen in this comparative literature, partially because caste is not officially acknowledged in policy and census material (Gazdar, 2009). The small body of literature, including Ali’s (2015, 2017) ethnographic work and Gazdar’s (2007, 2009) sociological studies indicates that even today caste continues to shape educational disparity in Sindh. And though there is some ad-hoc quantitative analysis on intergenerational data in combination with caste identities in Pakistan, but very few systematic studies have been conducted.

It tackles this issue head-on by concentrating on the rural Sindh household panel data. It attempts to test empirically whether the educational expansion of the past two decades has translated into inter-generational mobility across caste lines. In the process, it contributes with three critical aspects. First, it adds to the literature in Pakistan on caste and education, which is scarce and generally unsophisticated; we do so by combining econometric modelling with qualitative interviews. Second, it places local evidence in relation to global discourses of opportunity, fairness and mobility and hence connects the case of Sindh to broader comparative frameworks. Third, it brings to attention the policy relevance of caste-sensitive educational interventions in a setting where caste is typically out of focus in policy debate.

Finally, the study emphasizes that mobility is not merely about economic class or income. In these stratified societies such as rural Sindh, caste continues to be a structural axis of inequality. Failure to engage with this structural dimension also means that education policies may well exacerbate rather than alleviate intergenerational disadvantage.

Research Objectives and Hypotheses

The objectives of this paper are:

"It has been used to measure the degree of intergenerational educational mobility across caste boundaries in rural Sindh."

Evaluate whether caste identity is a better predictor of educational achievement than that obtained from household income or occupation.

Examine the social causes — like discrimination, patronage and gender norms — which keep inequality in place.

Hypotheses:

H1: Progressive educational mobility but with continued caste stratification in education.

H2: Caste identity is a stronger determinant of education achievement than household income.

H3: The effects of caste-based inequalities in education are mitigated by social and cultural practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The link between caste and education in South Asia (see, for example, Basu11) has been the focus of extensive academic research.¹ Evidence continues to surface on the persistence of caste-based disparities even when educational opportunities have expanded. In India, there is compelling evidence that caste materially shapes educational access (Desai & Dubey 2012; Thorat & Newman 2010). SC and ST, although they receive reservation policies by affirmative actions, continue to have lesser school completion especially beyond primary level of schooling. These differences are greatest in higher levels, when the benefits of education increase and social barriers – discrimination, stereotypes, resources – play a bigger role (Borooah, 2017).

There are differences in educational attainments and enrolments as well as in the quality of schooling and labour market outcomes due to caste according to Deshpande (2011). For example, Dalit and tribal students are often segregated into under-resourced schools that have few qualified teachers and little infrastructure. This educational disadvantage contributes to, and is then compounded by, occupational segregation, with marginalized groups locked into poorly paid and insecure work. On the same lines, Nambissan (2010) argues that caste functions consciously and unconsciously in classrooms as sources of humiliation and discrimination by way of which cognitions and even performance is infused in the subordinated students.

In Pakistan, though caste is not a constitutional term, less research has been done to directly investigate the relationship of caste and education. But current research shows that caste-like hierarchies – like biradaris among Muslims, and entrenched exclusion of Hindu scheduled castes – powerfully shape educational inequity. Ali (2015, 2017) records the social and educational exclusion of Dalits in Sindh emphasizing how a caste identity operates in conjunction with poverty, bonded labor and political marginalization to keep people marginalized. Likewise, according to Gazdar (2009) biradari-based hierarchies condition not just marriage and kinship circuits but also the uneven access to resources amongst which education clearly ranks high. These hierarchies reflect and reinforce social stratification by offering privilege status to dominant groupings, whose members typically own land, command the allegiance of clients and control local institutions, at the expense of subordinate groups who are confined to relatively low status positions.

Khan (2019), moreover, argues that the omission of caste in Pakistan's state discourse has obscured how rural inequalities are perpetuated, particularly in Sindh where caste intersects with landlessness and being Muslim. This renders it especially challenging to overcome educational inequality in Pakistan, since many marginalized groups remain unaccounted for in demographic surveys and administrative statistics, and may therefore even be left out of targeted interventions.

The analysis of intergenerational mobility is critical to grasping the role education plays in the reproduction of inequality. In sociological theory, education is a transfer of capital intergenerationally in which cultural, social and symbolic dimensions are encoded (Bourdieu 1986). Parents pass on not just financial resources but social connections, cultural behaviors and educational expectations that also influence children's futures. From this point of view educational inequality is not simply a problem of access to the school, it's also an unequal distribution of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979) which benefits certain groups over dominating others.

Economists, on the other hand, tend to think about mobility as the relationship between outcomes of parents and their children. Intergenerational elasticity was first introduced by Solon (1999) to present evidence that in many, if not most, societies differences in children's income and education are highly associated with those of their parents. Chetty et al. (2014) in their influential U.S. study as the "stickiness" of disadvantage, where children born into low-status families have little opportunity to escape from this position at the bottom of a society's social and economic rank order. Parallel evidence from India is that caste functions as a sticky constraint and prohibits upwards mobility even in the presence of sample improvement (Hnatkovska, Lahiri, & Paul, 2013).

Comparison-wise, Breen and Jonsson (2005) claim that educational systems define the chances of intergenerational mobility. Highly stratified educational systems in which secondary and tertiary education is fully dependent on parental resources tend to perpetuate inequality, whereas more universal and inclusive systems can encourage mobility. Such a framework, when applied to South Asia, would explain the enduring gap in educational attainments based on caste that's not only a product of structural disparities but also an indication of how education systems are stratified.

Only recently, methodological extensions made it possible to study intergenerational mobility. The key research question was to estimate the strength of association between PaE and IC in education and income using traditional econometric linear models such as regression analysis, transition matrices (Marshall, 1996; Solon, 1999). Also, these methods were also limited in their ability to model the non-linear and interactional nature of social differentiation.

Meanwhile, in the field of mobility, mixed-methods research designs have become increasingly popular. Creswell (2017) claims that the merger of both quantitative and qualitative methods offers a more nuanced insight into inequality, particularly in stratified communities. Quantitative models will be able to identify large-scale patterns, while qualitative interviews and ethnography can document lived experiences of discrimination, stigma and resiliency. This approach that starts with asking people about their educational history has been adopted increasingly in the literature on caste and education in India and Pakistan, where social studies data are combined with survey data to listen to how structural inequalities are lived by individuals (Ali, 2017; Deshpande, 2011).

Whilst the literature on caste and education in India is vast, Pakistan remains an underrepresented case within mobility scholarship. Although work like Ali (2015, 2017) and Gazdar (2009) has underscored the presence of caste in Sindh, there has been no serious attempt to measure intergenerational mobility using panel data. The existing evidence is mainly qualitative or cross-sectional – therefore trends cannot be well evaluated. In addition, since there is no official recognition of caste in the data systems of Pakistan, marginalized castes do not have visibility which restricts research and policy interventions (Khan, 2019).

To the best of my knowledge there has been no standardized study which utilized household panel data to examine caste-based educational mobility in Sindh. This is an important omission since there exist longitudinal household surveys and given the significance of caste in shaping rural inequalities. This study seeks to address this gap by utilizing a mixed methods approach, gaining insights from econometric modelling and machine learning work combined with qualitative fieldwork. By doing so, it adds to the relatively scant literature on caste in Pakistan and more broadly in comparative discussions of intergenerational mobility in stratified societies.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis in this article is based on a mixed-method research design combining the use of survey panel data with qualitative interviews. Mixed-methods are especially well-suited for the study of stratified societies, in which structural disparities are instantiated as both quantifiable effects and lived realities (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018). Quantitative analysis enabled measuring the intergenerational educational mobility using household data on a large scale, while qualitative interviews offered to understand exclusion, discrimination and resilience among various caste groups. This complementarity strengthens the internal validity of triangulating results within methods and their external validity in embedding statistical patterns within social world they come from, namely rural Sindh (Greene, 2007).

- Quantitative data were drawn from the Rural Sindh Household Panel Survey (2005–2020), which follows around 2,000 households in four waves. This dataset comprises information on parental education, children’s education, family income, caste identification and demographic factors. Panel data is especially suitable for the study of mobility as it allows one to consider inter- or intra-generational changes across time periods (Wooldridge, 2010).

- Qualitative data is drawn from 40 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2021 with members from three primary caste categories: upper-caste landowners; Muslim biradaris; and scheduled caste Hindus. Parents, students and teachers were respondents. We selected semi-structured interviews because of their flexibility in allowing the participants to tell storylines of caste, schooling and aspirations using their own words (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

The sample for the quantitative component of the study was based on a stratified random sampling procedure to reflect proportions of caste groups and income quintiles. This strategy eliminated the sampling bias and ensured strong sub-group analysis (Lohr, 2019). For the qualitative part of the study, participants were selected purposively to obtain variation in terms of gender, caste and educational background. This was a way to ensure that “the voices of the powerless” created through such surveys—and often hidden within them—were included (Patton, 2015).

Econometric methods included logistic regressions of the probability that ages 11-15 years would obtain particular levels of education as a function of parental attainment and transition matrices depicting intergenerational mobility (Solon, 1999).

The machine learning methods were Random Forest (Breiman, 2001) and XGBoost classifiers (Chen & Guestrin, 2016), which helped identify the most important predictors of educational attainment by taking non-linearities and interactions into account (Athey & Imbens, 2019).

· Qualitative data underwent inductive thematic coding using NVivo. Data analysis was conducted in line with the tenets of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), to enable categories such as “discrimination in classrooms” or “gendered barriers” to emerge inductively.

The study followed the ethical provisions for vulnerable research. All participants gave informed consent and confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing transcripts and quantitative codes (Israel & Hay, 2006). While interviewing scheduled castes, special attention was paid to their sensitivity towards stigma. Reliability checks included validation of the machine learning models through cross-validation, robustness checks for the econometric results, and a check on inter-coder agreement within the qualitative analysis (Miles et al., 2014). This increased the validity and reliability of results.

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

The differences in educational mobility by caste line were found to be highly significant based on the Rural Sindh Household Panel analysis. Using the transition matrices, we find that children from upper-caste families had 65 percent probability of entering secondary school if the parents were also in secondary school, compared to only 25 per cent for scheduled caste households. This profound inconsistency reflects the pervasive intergenerational transmission of deprivation, reminiscent of evidence from Indian settings where disadvantaged castes continue to suffer deep-seated educational disparities (Desai & Dubey, 2012; Borooah, 2017).

Regression analyses also showed that the effect of caste on education persisted as a strong and significant predictor ($p < 0.01$) in models controlling for household income, location, and parent occupation. This indicates that the effect of caste on mobility is independent and supports Gazdar's (2009) and Ali's (2015) finding that social identity mediates opportunity as a structural determinant in Sindh.

Moreover, machine-learning methods such as Random Forest and Boost were employed to evaluate predictive performance. Results: Caste identity remained a stronger predictor of likelihood of completing secondary school compared to quintile and occupation in the multiple models. This is consistent with international evidence in which non-economic social groups such as race and ethnicity are more important than income for shaping mobility (Chetty et al., 2014; Athey & Imbens, 2019).

The qualitative interviews also provided rich narratives on challenges experienced by marginalized populations. Bias in educational institutions was also a consistent thread: the children of scheduled caste parents recalled being made to sit separately or do menial chores, further upholding social hierarchies within schools. Comparable stories of segregation and exclusion have been reported among Dalit students in India (Nambissan 2010).

Gender norms further constrained mobility. Girls in lowest income and caste households were often taken off school because of an early marriage, or fears about their safety—conforming to what is known from studies across south Asia, where caste intersects with gender to hamper female educational advancement (Jeffery & Jeffery 2006).

Finally, the role of patronage relations was substantial. Those living off their landlords claimed they encountered thinly veiled discouragement while attempting to educate their children. In many areas, landlords portrayed educationist' self as not required for low-skilled laborer positions— a mechanism of control and class-caste hierarchies (Gazdar, 2007).

The qualitative and quantitative results together have the face validity of partial mobility. Though there has been an increase in the general enrolment and literacy rates yet caste-based inequalities are enduring. The perpetuation of low mobility rates among scheduled caste households reflects the Indian reality that even after extensive educational policy measures, mobility continues to be stratified along the lines of caste (Hnatkovska, Lahiri, & Paul 2013; Deshpande 2011).

The findings underscore the fact that economic gains alone is not enough to eliminate structural disparities. Caste identity, sustained through discriminatory customs and gender relations, patron-client relations continue to define educational outcomes. This highlights the necessity of interventions that go beyond poverty to directly target social hierarchies.

DISCUSSION



This study provides evidence to show that despite a general advancement in educational access among rural Sindh, caste still acts as an impermeable barrier to intergenerational mobility. Perpetuation of disadvantage among scheduled castes, especially in secondary and higher studies correlates with what is referred as “intergenerational stickiness” – that children from disadvantaged family backgrounds get stuck in the same socio-educational status as their parents (Solon, 1999; Chetty et al., 2014). This stickiness indicates that though access to elementary education has increased through investments in infrastructure and enrolment drives (ASER, 2021), higher levels of attainment are blocked for marginalized groups.

The findings are consistent with those from India where, despite decades of affirmative action, caste still matters for educational outcomes (Deshpande 2011; Hnatkovska et al., 2013). It is more of a visible influence in Pakistan where caste has been excluded even from recognition as an aspect in the formulation of policy (Gazdar, 2009). This invisibility also helps to produce what Khan (2019) refers to as the “erasure of inequality,” since there will be patterns of structurally organized disadvantages that are never systematically noted either in state data or interventions, and thus persist unremedied.

Moreover, the qualitative findings reveal that caste disadvantage is perpetuated not only through forms of material deprivation but is also encoded in everyday prejudices, social exclusion and cultural attitudes. Such uneven seating arrangements at schools or beliefs that are passed off as harmful to the education of girls because of early marriage replicate findings across South Asia showing how caste and gender intersect to produce a superimposition and layered disadvantage (Nambissan, 2010; Jeffery & Jeffery, 2006). This also underscores the importance of recognising mobility not just as a question of income or jobs, but more crucially as a phenomenon that unfolds in long-standing hierarchies.

- Focused intervention: Scholarships and conditional cash transfers need to be provided for SCs and marginalized biradari students in particular. Evidence from India's welfare-to-work scholarship programs indicates that these interventions have the potential to minimize financial impediments and promote school exit (Jha & Parvati, 2010). In Pakistan, caste-sensitive targeting could ensure that resources are allocated to the most marginalised.

- School Reforms: Teachers have a share in creating the classroom. Training interventions that work to lessen discriminatory practice and support inclusive pedagogy are crucial. As Thorat and Newman (2010) reveal, We find that as well in Sindh; the impact of caste prejudice on teacher bias clearly affects educational attainment there.

- Community Engagement: Schools cannot dismantle structural barriers by themselves. Community-based programming's dealing with social gender norms, caste obloquy and landlord patronage systems are worth mentioning. Lessons from a participatory development programme suggest that when there is community participation, social norms can change and child education for the excluded children may get supported (Narayan et al., 2018).

Together, these policy orientations indicate that the improvement of mobility necessitates a multi-pronged strategy integrating financial, institutional and cultural measures.

The study has some strengths, but there are also several limitations that must be recognized. First, the Analyses are limited to rural Sindh and may not be generalizable to all of Pakistan. Caste, class and mobility in the urban setting or within other provinces may have different patterns. Second, identity ascribed to castes and sub-castes was self-reported which might result in underreporting of identities because of stigma or tactical non-response, especially for those groups who would not like to be identified facing discrimination (Ali, 2017). This might have resulted in underestimation of inequality.

Last but not least, the used machine learning models like Random Forest or XGBoost have to their downside that they can detect only patterns and the importance of the variable, but are unable to identify causation (Athey & Imbens, 2019). While econometric regression at least adjusted for income, location and parental occupation unobserved factors (eg, social networks or local political environment) could still confound results. Further research using experimental or quasi-experimental designs is desirable to more powerfully test for causal association.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that, despite increasing coverage with schooling in rural Sindh over the last two decades, caste pathways remain an influential determinant of inter-generational social mobility. Indeed, although '[e]conomic status and occupation. have gained in importance as determinants of educational attainment, the caste identity of children' continues to be a better predictor of school attendance and drop-out rates within India than either income or parental occupation (Kini & Markose 2016: 615), suggesting that structural impediments persist that are not reducible to purely economic determinations. This result is in line with previous work on the South Asian setting showing that caste continues to have a lasting impact on educational and occupational outcomes even in the face of economic growth and increases in schooling (Deshpande 2011; Hnatkovska, Lahiri, & Paul 2013).

Intergenerational stickiness continues to persist for SC and the less endowed amongst biradaris; structural inequalities remain entrenched over time that have making escape extremely hard for those mired in cycles of absolute deprivation (Solon, 1999; Chetty et al., 2014). Growth in enrollment is a sign of progress, but the disparity across districts though also indicates that we have to go beyond generic educational reforms and must target specific interventions.

From a policy perspective, the study suggests that Pakistan's education system needs to acknowledge caste-based disparities, notwithstanding their muted presence in formal policy discourse. Positive actions also include scholarship schemes as well as training of teachers in inclusive pedagogy and community mobilisation to tackle gendered discrimination and caste-based barriers (Thorat & Newman, 2010; Narayan et al., 2018). In the absence of such targeted strategies, an increase in educational attainment runs the risk of perpetuating rather than dismantling hierarchies.

Finally, it aims to contribute to a broader global conversation around intergenerational mobility, by showing how the legacies of social stratification still intersect with opportunity even as educational access expands (OECD 2018). These challenges can be overcome only by investing in schools, but also more importantly confronting ingrained cultural and structural inequalities which impede inclusive development in Pakistan.

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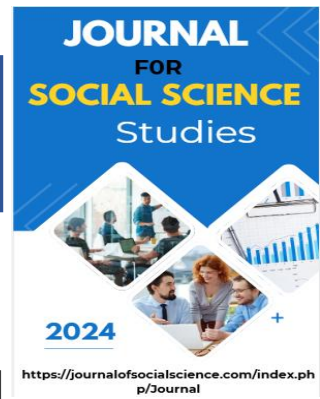
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