

Addressing Inequality in Education: Examining Caste, Class and Gender Dynamics

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Abstract: Education is often celebrated as a liberating force, yet classrooms across the globe continue to reflect and reproduce entrenched social hierarchies. In India, the interplay of caste, class, and gender structures not only shapes access to education but also determines the quality of educational experiences. This paper, "*Addressing Inequality in Education: Examining Caste, Class and Gender Dynamics*" explores the classroom as a critical site where oppression can either be perpetuated or challenged. It argues that education for social transformation must actively dismantle hegemonic practices embedded in curricula, pedagogy, language, and teacher-student relations. Drawing from Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, B.R. Ambedkar's vision of education as emancipation, and contemporary feminist and subaltern scholarship, this study examines how teaching practices can confront and resist systemic inequalities.

The paper identifies three interlinked domains of classroom transformation: representation, ensuring marginalized voices and histories are included in curricula; participation, creating equitable spaces where all students can contribute meaningfully; and reflection, enabling both teachers and students to critically interrogate their own positions within structures of privilege and oppression. Through an analysis of existing literature, case studies from Indian schools and higher education institutions, and comparative insights from global contexts, the paper highlights pedagogical strategies that can reorient the classroom towards inclusivity and justice.

Ultimately, the study emphasizes that teaching against inequality is not an ancillary responsibility but central to the democratic promise of education. Classrooms that challenge caste, class, and gender hegemonies do more than impart knowledge—they nurture critical citizenship, cultivate empathy, and foster the social transformation necessary for an egalitarian future.

Keywords: Education, Social Transformation, Caste, Class, Gender, Critical Pedagogy, Equality

Introduction:

Education is widely hailed as the great equalizer, capable of transforming societies and bridging social divides. Yet, in reality, classrooms often mirror and reinforce the very inequalities they are supposed to dismantle. In India, the social hierarchies of caste, class, and gender continue to shape not only who has access to education but also how students experience learning within educational spaces. These hierarchies manifest in subtle and overt ways—through curricula that privilege dominant voices, pedagogical practices that silence marginalized perspectives, and institutional cultures that normalize exclusion.

This paper, "*Addressing Inequality in Education: Examining Caste, Class and*

Gender Dynamics " explores how classrooms can serve as sites of both oppression and transformation. It argues that the task of teaching against inequality requires conscious and deliberate pedagogical choices aimed at disrupting hegemonic practices. Drawing on critical pedagogy, Ambedkarite visions of education, and feminist scholarship, this study examines strategies that can enable classrooms to become spaces of resistance, empowerment, and social change.

Theoretical Framework:

The conceptual foundations of this study rest on four interlinked intellectual traditions—

Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy:

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and philosopher, developed the influential framework of critical pedagogy, most famously articulated in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). His central critique was of the "banking model of education" where teachers deposit knowledge into passive students. Freire argued that this method reinforces social hierarchies by denying students the ability to think critically or challenge oppression.

In contrast, he proposed the problem-posing model of education, in which teachers and students engage in dialogue as co-learners. Knowledge is not transmitted from above but co-created through critical reflection on lived experiences. This process fosters the awareness of social, political, and economic contradictions, coupled with the capacity to act against injustice.

For Freire, education is never neutral: it either domesticates learners into accepting the status quo or empowers them to transform it. He viewed the classroom as inherently political, where teachers have the ethical responsibility to align with the oppressed and nurture spaces of liberation. His emphasis on dialogue challenges authoritarian teaching and validates the voices of marginalized students, whose perspectives are often silenced in traditional classrooms.

Another cornerstone of Freire's philosophy is praxis the unity of reflection and action. Reflection without action becomes empty intellectualism, while action without reflection risks becoming directionless. True education cultivates praxis, enabling learners to link analysis with transformative social engagement.

Freire's ideas remain profoundly relevant in contexts marked by inequality, such as India, where caste, class, and gender hierarchies persist. His pedagogy offers a framework for reimagining classrooms as sites of empowerment, where marginalized voices are heard, curricula reflect diverse realities, and education serves as a practice of freedom rather than control.

B.R. Ambedkar's Vision of Education as Emancipation:

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), the principal architect of the Indian Constitution and one of the foremost social reformers of modern India, consistently emphasized education as the most powerful weapon against caste oppression and social inequality. For Ambedkar, education was not merely a means of acquiring literacy or professional skills; it was a radical tool for liberation, dignity, and empowerment of the marginalized. His philosophy of education must be understood against the backdrop of the systemic exclusion of Dalits and other oppressed groups from knowledge systems under the rigid structures of caste.

Ambedkar's own life was a testament to the emancipatory power of education. Born into a Dalit family subjected to humiliation and exclusion, he struggled against immense social and economic barriers to pursue his studies. His academic journey from Columbia University to the London School of Economics exempli-

fied his conviction that education could challenge deeply entrenched hierarchies. Yet Ambedkar did not see education as an individual escape route. He envisioned it as a collective instrument for the social and political awakening of oppressed communities.

Central to Ambedkar's vision was the idea that education is a precondition for equality and citizenship. Without access to knowledge, marginalized communities would remain trapped in ignorance and servitude, unable to claim their rightful place in democratic society. He often declared that "cultivation of mind should be the ultimate aim of human existence." In his view, education should not be restricted to vocational training or religious instruction, as was historically imposed on Dalits, but should encompass rational inquiry, scientific temper, and critical thinking.

Ambedkar also challenged the Brahmanical monopoly over knowledge. He argued that traditional systems of learning, particularly Sanskritic education, were designed to preserve caste hierarchies by excluding Shudras and Dalits. To counter this, he called for universal, secular, and state-supported education that would democratize access to knowledge. His insistence on free and compulsory primary education was revolutionary in early 20th-century India, where large sections of society remained illiterate.

Equally important in Ambedkar's philosophy was the idea of education as a vehicle of social mobility. He urged Dalit and oppressed communities to prioritize education as a collective strategy for self-respect and empowerment. His famous call to his followers "Educate, Agitate, Organize" placed education at the forefront of social struggle. Education, for Ambedkar, was not an end in itself but part of a broader political project to annihilate caste and establish a just society.

Ambedkar also recognized the role of education in shaping gender equality. He supported women's education as essential to dismantling patriarchal structures within both caste and family systems. In his legislative and constitutional work, he advocated for women's rights to property, education, and political participation, demonstrating his belief that the liberation of women was inseparable from the liberation of Dalits.

In the classroom context, an Ambedkarite pedagogy would emphasize inclusivity, dignity, and critical engagement with structures of oppression. It calls upon educators to highlight marginalized voices in curricula, encourage critical reflection on caste and social inequality, and create safe spaces for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In sum, Ambedkar's vision of education as emancipation transcends the idea of learning as a private good. It is fundamentally a collective and political act rooted in the pursuit of justice, equality, and human dignity. For Ambedkar, education was both the means and the end of social transformation: a pathway to freedom for the oppressed and the cornerstone of a truly democratic society.

Feminist Pedagogy:

Feminist pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that challenges traditional, hierarchical models of education and seeks to create classrooms grounded in equality, participation, and critical reflection. Emerging from feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s, it emphasizes the inseparability of knowledge and power, insisting that education cannot be divorced from the social structures of gender, patriarchy, and inequality.

At its core, feminist pedagogy critiques the authoritarian role of the teacher as

the sole producer of knowledge. Instead, it promotes collaborative learning in which teachers and students co-create knowledge through dialogue and shared experiences. This challenges the silencing of marginalized voices particularly women and other gender minorities- whose perspectives have historically been excluded from curricula. By valuing lived experience alongside academic theory, feminist pedagogy democratizes the classroom space.

Another central principle is consciousness-raising. Just as feminist movements emphasized the political nature of personal experience, feminist pedagogy encourages students to analyze how gender, class, caste, and sexuality shape their everyday lives. Through reflection and discussion, students develop critical awareness of systemic inequalities and their intersections.

Importantly, feminist pedagogy seeks to create classrooms as safe and inclusive spaces. It resists competitive and patriarchal models of learning by emphasizing cooperation, empathy, and respect for diversity. This often involves using participatory methods such as group projects, storytelling, peer feedback, and open discussions.

Finally, feminist pedagogy views education as a transformative practice. It aims not only to impart knowledge but also to inspire social change by nurturing critical citizenship and activism. In contexts such as India, where gender intersects with caste and class oppression, feminist pedagogy provides a vital framework for building inclusive and equitable classrooms.

Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Pedagogy:

The Subaltern Studies collective, emerging in the 1980s with scholars such as Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty and Partha Chatterjee, sought to recover the voices of marginalized groups peasants, workers, women, and Dalits- who were excluded from dominant historical narratives. By critiquing colonial and elite-centric histories, subaltern studies highlighted how knowledge production itself is shaped by power and silences. This perspective profoundly influenced approaches to pedagogy in postcolonial societies.

Postcolonial pedagogy, drawing from these insights, critiques education systems that reproduce colonial hierarchies by privileging Western epistemologies, languages, and cultural norms while devaluing indigenous knowledge systems. In many contexts, including India, colonial legacies still dominate curricula, with English-medium instruction, Eurocentric histories, and elite perspectives marginalizing subaltern experiences. Such patterns reinforce inequalities of caste, class, and gender.

A subaltern and postcolonial pedagogy calls for decolonizing the classroom. This involves recognizing marginalized histories, languages, and cultural practices as legitimate sources of knowledge. It also requires questioning who speaks, who is represented, and who remains invisible in teaching and learning. For instance, integrating Dalit literature, Adivasi oral traditions, or regional histories challenges the dominance of Brahmanical and colonial narratives.

Furthermore, this pedagogy emphasizes critical reflexivity. Teachers and students must reflect on their own positionalities within systems of privilege and marginalization. Classrooms become spaces of negotiation, where multiple epistemologies coexist and are critically examined. Like Freirean pedagogy, postcolonial approaches emphasize dialogue, but with special attention to historical and cultural contexts of domination.

In essence, subaltern and postcolonial pedagogy aims to make education an

act of recovery and resistance. It seeks not only to critique dominant knowledge systems but also to empower marginalized voices, enabling students to reimagine education as a tool for dignity, justice, and cultural affirmation.

Historical Background: Education and Social Hierarchies in India:

Education in India has historically been mediated by systems of privilege and exclusion. In ancient times, access to learning was largely restricted to upper-caste men, with Shudras, Dalits, and women systematically excluded from scriptural knowledge. Colonial education introduced new hierarchies by privileging English and Western epistemologies while undermining indigenous systems of knowledge.

Post-independence India adopted constitutional safeguards and affirmative action policies, yet the structural inequalities of caste, class, and gender persisted. For example:

Caste: Dalits and Adivasis remain underrepresented in higher education, often facing discrimination and alienation in elite institutions.

Class: The privatization of education has widened the gap between the rich and poor, making quality education inaccessible to marginalized communities.

Gender: Despite progress in female literacy, classrooms often reflect gendered biases, with women underrepresented in STEM fields and leadership positions.

This historical trajectory underscores the need to situate contemporary classroom practices within broader social structures.

Classroom as a Site of Inequality:

Caste-based Exclusions:

Caste discrimination in classrooms can be explicit (segregated seating, derogatory language, bullying of Dalit students) or implicit (erasure of Dalit histories, privileging Sanskritic traditions over folk cultures). Research has documented how Dalit students face social isolation, dropout pressures, and psychological stress in both rural schools and elite universities.

Class Privilege and Economic Barriers:

Economic inequality shapes access to quality education through the digital divide, unequal resources, and disparities in school infrastructure. Middle and upper-class students often benefit from private coaching, English-medium schooling, and extracurricular exposure, which widen achievement gaps.

Gendered Dynamics in Teaching and Learning:

Gender biases manifest in subtle ways teachers calling on boys more often in math and science classes, discouraging girls from leadership roles, or reinforcing gender stereotypes through textbooks. LGBTQ+ students often face invisibility or hostility in classroom discussions.

Pedagogical Interventions for Addressing Inequality:

Representation in Curriculum:

Curricula must include diverse voices, histories, and epistemologies. This involves integrating Dalit literature, women's writings, Adivasi folklore, and working-class narratives into mainstream syllabi. Representation counters the symbolic violence of exclusion and affirms marginalized identities.

Participatory Pedagogy:

Teaching must move away from top-down instruction towards collaborative learning. Group discussions, peer teaching, and project-based approaches encourage students to engage critically with knowledge and challenge hierarchies within the classroom.

Reflective Teaching Practices:

Teachers must engage in self-reflection to examine their own biases and privileges. Reflexivity allows educators to create safe spaces where students can express their identities without fear of discrimination.

Case Studies and Examples:

Indian Context—

Eklavya Model Residential Schools have experimented with culturally relevant pedagogy for Adivasi students.

Ambedkarite student movements in universities like JNU and HCU have pushed for inclusive syllabi and anti-discrimination policies.

NGOs like **Pratham** and **Teach for India** have worked towards bridging class gaps, though not without critiques of reproducing elite perspectives.

Global Insights—

Critical Race Pedagogy in the US parallels caste critique in India, emphasizing the role of race and systemic inequality in shaping education.

Feminist classrooms in Europe and Latin America highlight collaborative and experiential learning, challenging gendered hierarchies.

These comparative insights reveal the universality of inequality in education while emphasizing the need for context-specific interventions.

Challenges and Critiques:

Despite progressive pedagogical interventions, challenges remain—

Institutional Resistance: Schools and universities often resist curricular changes that threaten dominant narratives.

Teacher Training: Many teachers are not equipped to handle discussions on caste, class, and gender, fearing backlash or controversy.

Intersectionality: Addressing one axis of inequality (e.g., gender) without considering others (e.g., caste, class) risks reproducing exclusions.

Tokenism: Representation can become symbolic if not coupled with structural change.

Towards a Transformative Pedagogy:

A transformative pedagogy seeks to reimagine education not as the reproduction of existing hierarchies but as a collective practice of liberation, equality, and justice. It builds upon insights from critical pedagogy, Ambedkarite thought, feminist teaching, and postcolonial approaches to create classrooms that are inclusive, participatory, and socially engaged. Unlike traditional methods that prioritize rote learning and authority, transformative pedagogy foregrounds dialogue, critical inquiry, and action.

At its heart, transformative pedagogy rests on the belief that education is never neutral. Every act of teaching either reinforces or challenges structures of caste, class, gender, and power. A transformative approach deliberately challenges these structures by integrating marginalized voices into curricula, validating lived experiences as knowledge, and encouraging students to interrogate systems of domination. For example, including Dalit and Adivasi literatures, women's histories, and working-class perspectives ensures that curricula reflect diverse realities rather than privileging elite narratives.

Equally important is the role of participation and collaboration. Transformative pedagogy rejects the hierarchical teacher-student divide and instead creates dialogical learning spaces. Group projects, storytelling, debates, and experiential activities encourage learners to co-create knowledge while developing empathy

and collective responsibility.

Another key dimension is reflection and praxis. Students and teachers are encouraged to reflect critically on their own social positions and privileges, linking this awareness to concrete actions that address inequality both inside and outside the classroom. This alignment of reflection and action ensures that learning translates into social change.

Ultimately, a transformative pedagogy envisions classrooms as microcosms of democracy-spaces where equality, dignity, and justice are practiced daily. By cultivating critical consciousness, nurturing inclusive participation, and inspiring social engagement, it prepares learners not only to succeed academically but also to become active agents of social transformation.

Conclusion:

Addressing inequality in education necessitates a multifaceted understanding of how caste, class, and gender intersect to shape access, opportunities, and outcomes for learners. These social hierarchies do not function in isolation; rather, they interlock to create persistent barriers that marginalize vast sections of the population, especially in countries like India where historical and systemic discrimination has long impacted educational equity.

Caste-based disparities continue to deny children from Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) equal footing in accessing quality education. Despite affirmative action policies such as reservations and scholarships, these communities often face discrimination within classrooms, suffer from poor infrastructure in government schools, and are overrepresented in low-performing institutions. Similarly, economic class shapes the quality of education a child receives, wealthier families can afford private schooling, tutoring, and extracurricular enrichment, while poorer children may drop out early due to financial pressure or lack of resources.

Gender further complicates this picture. Girls, particularly from marginalized caste and low-income backgrounds, are disproportionately affected. Patriarchal norms, early marriage, safety concerns, and lack of sanitation facilities in schools all contribute to lower enrollment and higher dropout rates among girls. Transgender and non-binary students face additional stigmatization and exclusion, often without formal recognition or support systems in place.

To truly address these inequalities, policy measures must move beyond token reforms and actively work to dismantle the structural roots of exclusion. This includes investing in public education, training teachers on inclusive pedagogies, enforcing anti-discrimination laws within educational institutions, and fostering community engagement. Curricula must also reflect diverse histories and voices, promoting respect for all identities.

Equity in education is not only a matter of justice but also a prerequisite for a more inclusive, democratic, and prosperous society. Only by addressing the deep-seated inequalities of caste, class, and gender can we hope to create an educational system where every child, regardless of background, has the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive.

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