**Exploring the opportunity gaps regarding education among the rural and urban youth of Mandla**

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**Abstract**

**This study explores the difference in educational attainment and the gaps in educational opportunities as experienced by youth in rural areas of Mandla district and proximate urban areas. Mandla is a dominantly tribal district in Eastern Madhya Pradesh. Urbanization is low at 13%. The study was done using a sample survey method. 36 youth in rural areas and 21 in urban areas were interviewed using a structured questionnaire. It was found that the proportion of youth who had studied up to matriculation or beyond was significantly higher in urban areas than in villages. Rural youth had to travel much greater distances to reach their secondary school and had to come to the nearby Bichiya town for higher level education. Urban youth did not have to travel as much. A larger proportion of rural youth had to engage in work to help their parents. There was no significant difference in other aspects of opportunities such as libraries, facilities for sports or other extra-curricular activities, guidance for career, access to coaching classes or tuition classes etc. The educational attainment among rural youth did not seem to be caused by paucity of opportunities but due to other factors: casual attitude to education, having to engage in work etc. Thus on the whole, while villages had somewhat poorer opportunities compared to proximate urban locations, the difference was not the primary reason for lower attainment.**

**Introduction**

Post liberalisation, during the economic growth period, India witnessed an increase in both inter-state and within-state inequality. This seems to have slowed down the rate of poverty reduction in India. According to the Poverty Profile of the World Bank released in May 2016, one in every five Indian individuals is poor. Naturally, income and other kinds of inequalities have been a significant concern of the policy-makers.

Measuring inequality has always been a debatable topic. Inequality has been traditionally measured by outcomes such as income, consumption, educational achievement, health status and overall development of an individual but recently paramount of scientific literature has highlighted the role of opportunity. Inequality thus, is a result of heterogeneous components, mostly which are fundamentally unfair such as caste, gender, and place of origin, family background, so on and so forth which are beyond the control of the individual. John E. Roemer has conceptualised ‘equality of opportunity’ and its importance to ‘level the playing field’. (Roemer, 1998; Roemer, 2002; Roemer & Alain, 2013) His approach can be narrowed down to two terms, circumstances and efforts where circumstances are the environmental influences that are beyond the control of the individual and effort comprise of all the actions of the individual that affect his or her achievements in general.

A scheduled caste rural girl of Bihar does not have access to the same opportunities as a Delhi boy belonging to the upper castes. Equality of opportunity in a given society is usually tested by investigating whether the outcome distributions conditional on circumstances are different. It is generally termed as unfair when the potential of achieving these outcomes is determined merely by the lottery of birth. In an ideal world, inequality in outcomes should reflect only differences in effort and choices that individuals make along with luck and talent. (Barros, Ferreira, Vega, & Chanduvi, 2009)

In this study, we have tried to attempt to capture the inequality of opportunity in education for a rural child vis-à-vis an urban child. By opportunity we mean, existence and access to a particular service despite the socio-economic conditions of a child. In India, the enrolment rates have increased, but the attendance and quality of education have not shown any improvements. (ASER Centre, 2017) Children’s access to essential services is critical for their full development, and they cannot be held responsible for their family circumstances which are why we will not be looking into efforts undertaken by them. (Singh, 2011) Thus, we identified a set of circumstances which are exogenous to a child but affect his/her overall development such as caste, gender, geographic location of birth (rural-urban residence), no. of siblings, parent’s education and wealth status of the household.

**Materials and methods**

This is an exploratory study based on a micro-unit recorded household survey of young people aged 18-25 years. The fieldwork was conducted in the villages and semi-urban areas of Bicchiya block of Mandla, a tribal district of Madhya Pradesh. Mandla is the eastern part of the Satpura hills, and its total population is 1,054,905 out of which 57.9% are Scheduled Tribes. (Census of India, 2011)

A total no. of 8 villages with no. of households ranging from 45 to 275 were covered from Bicchiya block. For comparison, individuals from some urban parts of Bicchiya as well as Mandla tehsil were also interviewed. The principal purpose of the study was explanatory rather than descriptive, so the snowball sampling method was used, based on logical considerations. Efforts were made to include participants from all parts of the village and similar socio-economic backgrounds to avoid the apparent bias due to a wealthy family background. Proper consent was taken before interviewing the participants, and they had the right to deny answering any question according to their will. The in-depth interviews were conducted on the basis of a semi-structured questionnaire.

The primary objective was to capture the differences in opportunities in access to education among rural and urban children. Thus the research tool included questions related to their childhood (including details of education) based on independent variables such as caste, gender, geographic location of residence and parent’s education and the dependent variables like the access to school and or presence of teachers. These parameters were selected due to some logical assumptions and past literature. For example, the closer a village to an urban city, the greater exposed it will be to better opportunity conditions and vice versa. Similarly, having an understanding of the household conditions will enable us to have a better knowledge about their present living conditions. Their present living conditions would affect their future endeavours. The details of the parental background were captured as parents’ education level, the source and level of income reflect their initial social status. Finally, their status of education and various conditions during their childhood, having the chance to participate in extracurricular activities, so on and so forth brings out the gap prevalent concerning opportunity available.

**Results**

Out of the 57 respondents, 36 belonged to the rural parts, and 21 belonged to the urban regions of Mandla. The majority of the sample population belonged to the scheduled tribe (ST) or other backward classes (OBC). The gender ratio in the rural areas is almost 1:1 but relatively fewer men could be interviewed in the urban areas since most of them were away for work. The current occupations of rural participants who were not studying full- time included agricultural activities, construction work, manual labour and other odd jobs with irregular wages. Many urban respondents were found managing small businesses or local shops apart from casual labour at medium level enterprises.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Distance of the village from nearest Urban area (in kms)** | | | | |
| **EDUCATION LEVELS** | **>20** | **15-20** | **5-10** | **Within 5** | **Total** |
| 1. **Illiterate** |  |  | 1 |  | 1 |
| 1. **Primary** |  | 5 | 1 | 1 | 7 |
| 1. **Below Matriculate** | 3 | 6 | 5 |  | 14 |
| 1. **Matriculate** | 1 |  | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| 1. **Intermediate** | 1 | 1 |  | 2 | 4 |
| 1. **Graduate and above** | 3 | 2 | 1 |  | 6 |
| **Total no. of rural individuals** | 8 | 14 | 10 | 4 | 36 |

Table 1 presents cross-tabulation of education levels of individuals and the distance of their villages from the nearest urban areas.

The above table depicts the education level of all the rural participants and on the same hand, gives us the data of the distances of their nearest urban areas. It seems nothing substantial can be said as to whether the distance from an urban area plays a role in one’s education. However, it was seen that the no. of urban individuals who pursued beyond secondary education was way higher than their rural counterparts.

Past literature might suggest otherwise, but no association was found between the no. of siblings and the level of education among the individuals neither in rural nor urban areas. This can perhaps be attributed to the sample size, which is relatively low.

When asked whether they helped their parents in work (other than household chores), 88% of the rural respondents and only 30% of the urban respondents agreed to help their parents during their childhood. Out of these individuals who helped with the work, a majority expressed that it severely affected their studies, but some outliers were smart enough to manage both.

While trying to explore whether there is an association between a parent’s literacy and the individual’s education level, we found some interesting results. It can be seen in the following tables that majority of the individuals who have completed their graduation have parents who have at least some education level.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **URBAN** | **Individual's education level** | | | | |
| **Parent's literacy** | Intermediate | Matriculation | Below Matriculation | Graduation | Total |
| Illiterate | 2 |  | 3 | 1 | 6 |
| Literate | 3 | 3 | 3 | **6** | 15 |
| Total | 5 | 3 | 6 | 7 | **21** |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **RURAL** | **Individual's education level** | | | | | | |
| **Parent's literacy** | Nil | Graduation | Intermediate | Primary | Below Matriculation | Matriculation | Grand Total |
| Illiterate | 1 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 10 | 2 | 22 |
| Literate |  | **5** | 3 |  | 4 | 2 | 14 |
| Grand Total | 1 | 6 | 4 | 7 | 14 | 4 | **36** |

It was quite surprising to find that all the participants (both rural and urban) were enrolled in a school, most of them in Government schools. They also agreed that there were no absentees and teachers were present throughout the academic year. When asked about the most crucial question of the study, “Why did you not pursue higher education?” variety of responses were received. Many of the rural participants blamed availability and access to education institutes as the primary reason for dropping out of school. Apart from this, they blamed other reasons as well. Out of those who said they could not pass Class 10th matriculation, 46 per cent blamed their family’s problems like financial constraints or absence of parents to provide for the household. It was interesting to note that around 44 per cent of the participants who did not pursue education beyond Class 7th did so due to lack of awareness. The reasons were ranging from, ‘forgot the examination date’, ‘ failed and lost interest to apply again’, ‘mother asked me to help in household chores’ and even responses like, ‘sister’s marriage was on the date of exam’, so on and so forth. On an attempt to judge how motivated an individual was to study further, it was found that more than half of the participants (58.3% rural, 57.1% urban) had a strongly positive attitude towards education, in general.

**Discussion**

The past two decades have been dominated by discussions ( Roemer, 1998; Roemer, 2001; Peragine, Palmisano, & Brunori, 2013) related to the equality of opportunity in education, health, livelihood, etc. It is seen as unfair when the potential of achieving outcomes is determined merely by the lottery of birth. The World Bank even came up with a Human Opportunity Index (HOI) in 2008 to measure inequality of opportunity among children.

We are so used to the rural-urban divide in India that by default, we expect economic and social differences among the residents. There have been gaps regarding the educational attainment, occupation choices, consumption and wages. The government has devised various policy interventions favouring rural areas which aim at converging these gaps with time. Some say that urbanisation is the fundamental solution to all the problems of rural regions. However, what about the fact that higher levels of urban poverty than rural poverty have been reported for a no. of years in many developed as well as less developed states on the nation. The level of urbanisation correlates positively with economic development at all the time-points under consideration. One would, therefore, expect a negative correlation between urbanisation and rural poverty. Indeed the case. (Sivaramakrishnan, Kundu, & Singh, 2005)

As one would expect, in the rural parts of Mandla, infrastructure for education after the secondary level was not feasible either due to the absence of colleges or inadequate modes of transportation to the nearby colleges. The urban region of Bichhiya block is just 5.5 km2, and thus it was found that the immediate urban areas like Anjaneya did not have the appropriate facilities for education. However, unavailability of infrastructure was not a significant reason for many to not pursue higher education. Many blamed their family’s problems like financial constraints or absence of parents to provide for the household or the responsibility of taking care of siblings. For instance, being the eldest child, Kuvriya from Manikpur village had to quit school so that she could take care of her siblings and help out her mother with household chores. Similarly, another young gentleman said, “I had to leave school because my father died and there was no one to provide for the family…Now that I have been left behind, I feel its importance.”

Parents’ presence and their background profoundly influenced whether the child wanted to continue studying. It was not surprising that the majority of them who were graduates had literate parents while the others had parents who albeit being illiterate still encouraged their children to study and prosper. It was interesting to note that several of them who did not pursue beyond Class 7th or 8th did so due to their shortage of exposure. Once they failed or missed an examination, they had no motivation to re-apply. Shubhlal Markam from Umarvada said, “I was eleven when I migrated and started working. My friends who passed 10th are still at home without jobs… I think I am doing fine.” This highlights the importance of the environment in which they are raised.

As expected, a higher number of the urban participants had pursued education after secondary in the urban areas of Mandla which indicates that geographic location (rural or urban) does play a role in access to opportunities. For those who did not pursue higher education, most of them mentioned the same reasons that were stated by their rural counterparts. Even though they had access to infrastructure, their social and economic background held them back. For instance, Pappu Chowdhary from Bicchiya town had to leave school to do odd jobs to sustain his family, and Anju Yadav had to quit after 7th because she had to take care of four siblings at home and her mother could not manage alone. There were a few exceptions who were motivated, but that could be attributed to their parents who were exposed to the happenings in and around the world. Thus, it is not incorrect to believe that all the motivation and exposure boils down to the circumstances which are beyond a child’s control.

The Preamble to the Constitution of India assures equality of status and opportunity. If the opportunities available to everyone are equal and all have the same platform, then the circumstances such as gender, caste, geographic location, the parental background should not affect their future. We need to level the playing field so that unequal outcomes cannot be attributed to the circumstances in which the child is brought up.

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