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Girls' Enrolment Statistics at Secondary Level in Punjab: How Do Inequalities Widen Across the Grades?

Dr. Mandeep Kaur
Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Punjabi University Regional Centre, Bathinda, Punjab
Email: kaur.mandeep920@gmail.com

Abstract

The role of education must largely be to maintain a society of equals, which gives access, fairness and opportunities for all. However, despite the various measures undertaken by the Indian government and local bodies to reduce the inequality in education between genders, castes, classes and religions, this inequality persists (Vaid, 2019). Unfortunately, there are glaring regional, caste and gender inequalities in literacy status and access to education at all levels. The current paper tries to examine the girls' enrolment statistics in Punjab at secondary schools in terms of social category, especially Dalit girls who are living in rural areas. This paper analyses the enrolment trends of girls by using data from secondary sources, namely, census reports, statistical abstracts, economic surveys, district diaries, reports of MHRD, Planning Commission, etc. Intersectional analyses highlight that girls from lower castes face triple disadvantages: locale, gendered norms and caste-based marginalization. Thus, the analysis of all these education growth parameters demands far more serious policy attention to improve the status of rural girls and Punjab has to travel a long journey to bridge caste and gender barriers in literacy and school enrolment gaps.

Keywords: Girls' education, dalit girls, literacy, enrolment, dropout

Introduction

Education is a powerful vector for social mobility, particularly for historically disadvantaged groups. In Punjab, India, secondary education (Classes 9–10) is a critical juncture: students transition into adolescence, and decisions at this stage heavily influence future opportunities. While there has been progress in overall enrolment, inequalities based on gender and caste persists, and may even widen as students advance through grades. Girls' education received much-needed comprehensive attention in the past few decades. The persistent unequal participation of girls in schools, the pressure of rising women's awareness and movements in India and international compulsions and commitments compelled national and state governments to formulate compensatory schemes for enhancing girls' participation in education. Some of these schemes cover all girls, while others target girls from disadvantaged communities only. Such schemes may seem in contradiction to the equal educational opportunity and the meritocracy principle or doctrine that the Kothari Commission (1966) and NPE (1986) had affirmed. However, as 'social classes do not come to the market as equal' (Halsey et.al. 1997), mere equal educational opportunities do not ensure a level playing field. Compensatory policy decisions seem necessary for the pursuit of equality and justice. Such decisions are 'grounded in an awareness of deep-rooted inequalities and injustices stemming from a history of oppression' (Velaskar 2010). Overcoming segregation and exclusion has

been a part of much of education planning and the interventions of both government and non-government players. Contextually, the relative inequalities of the marginalised sections, particularly girls, in terms of education, may be an articulation of the overall, lower educational milieu, the nexus of social-economic and cultural settings, political conditions and general neglect operating over the decades. Overcoming these constraints is a challenging task. It can be said that marginalised and Dalit girls have a long way to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of achieving universal equity in education. This paper explores how girls' enrolment at the secondary level in Punjab diverges by caste (especially Scheduled Castes) and how these inequalities evolve across different grades. The central research questions are:

1. What are the trends in girls' enrolment in secondary and higher secondary levels in Punjab?
2. How does caste composition (SC and General) among these girls change across grades?
3. What mechanisms (dropout and access issues) drive widening inequalities?
4. What policy interventions have been used, and how effective are they in addressing these disparities?

The significance of this study lies in its intersectional approach — by jointly analyzing gender and caste, we can unpack more nuanced inequalities and suggest targeted policy reforms.

Literature Review

Jodhka (2002) explored that despite having the largest proportion of SC population in India, Punjab has rarely been seen as a relevant case for the conceptualization of the caste system and the changes taking place therein. Though some aspects of caste in Punjab have been studied, there has virtually been no detailed empirical documentation of the practice of untouchability in rural Punjab. The educational status is closely associated with the caste dynamics in Punjab. Ramachandran (2018) argued in her book entitled 'Inside Indian school' that even after 70 years of independence, the tragic reality of Indian schools strictly depends upon who are the students, where they live, how much their family earns and they are of which gender. As a whole caste, class and gender trajectories, which influence the kind of education, they will get. Similarly, Satvinderpal (2018) stated that in Punjab there has been a huge surge in the number of institutions, enrolment figures and literacy rates in the last few decades. However, the education sector continues to remain in a state of disarray. Almost 66 percent of the state population lives in rural areas; 75 percent of the Dalit population resides in villages. More than 80 percent of the children in rural government schools are from Dalit families and the non-Dalit are from economically weaker sections. Further, the study revealed that the Malwa region private schools in the rural areas are no better than government schools. Schools in the rural sector are facing sheer neglect in budgetary provisions, shortage of teachers, poor infrastructure and a non-conducive learning environment. Ramachandran and Saihjee (2019) argued that girl's enrolment has considerable progress and as revealed in the census 2001, in the more backward regions like Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, more girls are in the school than ever before. However,

the situations of girls in poor households, among disadvantaged groups remain a cause of concern. Further, Khanna (2020) examined 927 Dalit women labor households across four districts (Amritsar, Jalandhar, Amritsar, Fatehgarh and Mansa) representing Majha, Doaba and Malwa regions of Punjab. The study revealed that more than two-thirds (72.82 percent) of Dalit women were illiterate. Among the literate, majority of Dalit women were studied up to the primary level only. Bhaskar (2021) reported that the accounts of Dalits and Adivasi students across the country present a picture of discrimination within educational institutions by their fellows, non-Dalit staff members and authorities. These lived experiences continue to suffocate their education, dignity and self-respect. Pal (2021) argues that the term 'merit' is just a form of discrimination and exclusion since the performance of the students in any examination depends largely on their access to various resources that are largely shaped by their caste, class, socio-economic background, upbringing and schooling. Since students from higher castes had better access to resources, hence, they were able to transform their inherited capital into a claim to 'merit'.

Data & Methodology

This paper analyses the enrolment trends of girls by using data from secondary sources, namely, census reports, statistical abstracts, economic surveys, district diaries, reports of MHRD, Planning Commission, etc. Further, data sources like UDISE+: The Unified District Information System for Education Plus provides school-level enrolment data by gender, caste, grade and other characteristics. Descriptive analysis: of enrolment by grade, caste and gender were used. Apart from this, qualitative and contextual analysis was used to interpret quantitative findings.

Locale variations in Literacy Rates in India and Punjab

As far as Punjab, a state of 'bread butter' is concerned, the dropout rate among Dalit girls is very high, 30.13 per cent at the primary level, 46.96 per cent at the middle level and 63.62 per cent at the secondary level (Sharma, 2018). Thus, Punjab, besides the prosperity, has shown some serious concerns related to school enrolment and the literacy rate among the females and urban urban-rural sections of the society.

Table 1

Urban-Rural Differentials in Literacy Rates in India and Punjab

	Literacy Rate	Literacy Rate	Literacy Rate	Urban Literacy	Urban Literacy	Urban Literacy	Rural Literacy	Rural Literacy	Rural Literacy
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
India	74.04	80.09	64.63	84.98	89.06	79.92	68.09	78.57	58.75
Punjab	75.84	80.44	70.73	81.05	86.06	68.29	72.05	76.62	58.09

Source: Census (2011)

Table 1 presents the region-wise literacy rate of India and Punjab. Figures indicate that on overall literacy statistics, Punjab's literacy rate is 75. 84 is slightly better than the national literacy rate, which is 74.04, but the urban male literacy rate of 86.06 per cent and a female literacy rate of 68.29 per cent are lower than the national average. The rural male and female literacy rate of Punjab is much lower than the national figures. There is a large urban-rural differential in literacy rates in Punjab. The per capita income of the state continues to be quite high, but the state's performance on social indicators, particularly in the rural areas, is quite poor in terms of literacy rates, school enrolment, sex ratio and health indicators (Gill, 2011). Unfortunately, they are always subject to neglect and this unequal treatment still persists, but with varying amounts in many of the areas of the Punjab region. Illiteracy, low school enrolment and dropout rates among girls are high due to a number of social and physical factors.

Table 2

Position of Punjab in Girls' Enrolment by Social Group

Enrolment by Social Group (2015-16) (in percentage)

Secondary School Level		
States/UT	General	Scheduled Caste
	2015-16	2015-16
A & N Islands	69.69	0.05
Andhra Pradesh	25.35	19.48
Arunachal Pradesh	23.14	0.29
Assam	43.21	9.63
Bihar	19.17	14.99
Chandigarh	83.89	13.45
Chhattisgarh	9.10	14.70
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	31.46	3.59
Daman &Diu	36.78	5.21
Delhi	81.08	12.84
Goa	72.43	1.70
Gujarat	33.55	7.93
Haryana	49.38	21.28
Himachal Pradesh	52.22	26.05
Jammu &Kashmir	74.69	8.34

Jharkhand	19.31	11.52
Karnataka	13.78	17.49
Kerala	26.49	9.77
Lakshadweep	0.18	0.00
Madhya Pradesh	20.84	16.60
Maharashtra	41.95	13.87
Manipur	37.31	4.48
Meghalaya	8.72	1.54
Mizoram	1.03	1.20
Nagaland	6.85	1.99
Odisha	23.59	18.04
Puducherry	8.39	19.02
Punjab	50.37	33.98
Rajasthan	19.72	17.66
Sikkim	12.59	6.52
Tamil Nadu	4.01	23.04
Telangana	25.39	17.20
Tripura	24.68	20.39
Uttar Pradesh	26.20	22.47
Uttarakhand	54.69	22.51
West Bengal	51.07	26.78
All India	29.49	18.16

Source: SecondaryEducationFlashStatistics:2015-16 NIEPA

Table 2 presents the Gross Enrolment Ratio of various states in India in terms of social categories, e.g. general and scheduled caste categories, at the secondary school level. The data shows that for scheduled castes, GER in Punjab is higher than that of the national GER figures and other states, maybe because of the highest population of the SC community in Punjab. However, the gap between the GER of SC students and General category students is wider in and school dropout rates at this level are much higher in scheduled caste children as compared to upper castes. Satvinderpal (2013) in her study of Punjab, reported that the perceived reasons for school dropouts yielded nearly twenty-four causes. Poverty in the family, illiteracy of the parents and school-related factors, etc., emerged as crucial factors behind out-of-school children. Other factors, including poor infrastructure in the schools, difficulty in learning, lack of motivation, child labour, low socioeconomic status, socio-

cultural barriers, lack of employment opportunities, etc., are found as determining factors behind the incidence of dropping out and exclusion.

Participation of Dalit girls in Punjab: Nation-wise Rank

Table 3

Indian states ranked by SC girls' participation at the secondary level (2015-16) (in percentage)

States/UT	Participation of SC girls	Rank
A & N Islands	90.91	1
Meghalaya	54.02	2
Sikkim	52.77	3
West Bengal	51.84	4
Assam	51.59	5
Chhattisgarh	50.63	6
Delhi	50.26	7
Telangana	50.24	8
Odisha	50.17	9
Tripura	49.67	10
Andhra Pradesh	49.58	11
Tamil Nadu	49.37	12
Puducherry	49.14	13
Manipur	49.12	14
Goa	48.79	15
Uttarakhand	48.74	16
Jharkhand	48.47	17
Nagaland	48.38	18
Kerala	48.13	19
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	48.11	20
Bihar	47.8	21
Himachal Pradesh	47.77	22

Haryana	47.6	23
Mizoram	47.37	24
Karnataka	47.16	25
Uttar Pradesh	47.02	26
Jammu &Kashmir	45.98	27
Maharashtra	45.81	28
Punjab	45.66	29
Madhya Pradesh	45.04	30
Daman &Diu	44.87	31
Chandigarh	44.7	32
Arunachal Pradesh	44.03	33
Gujarat	42.72	34
Rajasthan	42.68	35
All India	47.69	

Source: SecondaryEducationFlashStatistics:2015-16 NIEPA

Table 3 depicts the disparities in SC girls' participation at the secondary school level across all Indian states. The presented figures provide testimonial proof of emerging ground realities in the Punjab state regarding the education of Dalit girls. The position of Punjab is much below the other states in terms of SC girls' educational participation at the secondary level. The figures reveal that Punjab has the lowest rank, 29 out of 35, among all the states and UTs. Punjab is far below the many states and UTs like A & N Islands, Meghalaya, Sikkim, West Bengal, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Telangana, Odisha, Tripura, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Manipur, Goa, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Nagaland, Kerala, Dadra & Nagar Haveli, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Mizoram, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Maharashtra in terms of SC girls' participation at secondary school level. Only a few states like Madhya Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan are behind Punjab. It is generally believed that a greater degree of urbanisation would make the area more conducive to attaining good literacy and school enrolment. This holds only to a very limited extent in Punjab.

How do Inequalities widen across the grades?

There are huge educational disparities based on caste, region and class, which are layered along with feudal patriarchal rudiments. The gender bias and suppression experienced by Punjabi girls are deeply ingrained in the social and cultural setup of the state, which has acutely influenced the SC girls' school participation at the secondary school level. Thus, Punjab's relatively higher per capita income is not commensurate with its moderate level of

education and health standards (Brar, 2002). The lopsided policies of the state ushered in by the neo-liberal agenda of development have done little to bring all the marginal girls into the school system. However, in this atmosphere of educational lethargy towards poor Dalit girls, especially, the school practices along with pedagogical issues need to be examined at the ground level. In this context, Bourdieu and Pierre (1977) rightly argued that the educational system serves merely to reproduce the distribution of cultural capital. How caste interlocks with class, the significant question is whether the caste-class educational attainment nexus can be broken to bring about equality in education. Therefore, there have always been debates that the process of education is more important than the educational inputs. The real problem rests with the social context in which schools operate; namely, the family, neighborhood and peer environments that make it difficult for children to take advantage of educational opportunities. Poverty and inequality negatively affect children's prospects in education, which act as push factors for them.

Table 4

Average Annual Dropout rate in school education (2014-2015)

Level	All	All	All	SC	SC	SC
Level	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Primary	4.36	3.88	4.13	4.71	4.20	4.46
Upper Primary	3.49	4.60	4.03	5.00	6.03	5.51
Secondary	17.21	16.88	17.06	19.64	19.05	19.36
Senior Secondary	0.25	NA	NA	3.34	3.09	3.22

Source: Educational Statistics at a Glance, 2018

Table 4 compares the dropout rate of all category children with SC children in India in terms of different school levels. Figures in the table clearly mention that the dropout rate is considerably high at secondary school levels for all category children (17.06) and SC children (19.36). Further, the dropout rate of boys of all categories (17.21) and boys of the SC category (19.64) is slightly higher than girls of both categories at the secondary school level. As Chattopadhyay (2015) describes in her study that the secondary average annual dropout rate in Karnataka is 40 per cent, the highest in the country and the transition rate from elementary to secondary school level is a very serious issue for girls. Hence, it can be said that the dropout rate of boys and girls varies from state to state and community to community. There is a dire need to check and differentiate the dropout rates across India for micro-level analysis.

Gender wise Annual Dropout Rate by Social Group

National annual average dropout rate of scheduled caste students at the secondary school level in Punjab is 12.88, which is higher than compared of other states or UTs like Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Manipur, Mizoram, Sikkim and Tamil Nadu in the country. In Punjab, the dropout rate of SC girls at the secondary school level is 12.63, which is slightly lower than the SC boys' dropout rate of 13.11 in the state. Girls in India tend to have higher dropout rates than boys, which remain usually unreported. Girls belonging to socially disadvantaged groups like SC and ST have higher dropout rates in comparison to the general population. There are also regional and location-wise differences and the children living in remote areas/urban slums are more likely to drop out of school (Chugh, 2011). It is clearly visible from the above figures that the dropout rate of SC girls at the secondary school level in Punjab needs attention. But at the same time, these figures do not go beyond presenting quantitative information and status. What actually happens behind their dropout from the school system has not remained on the agenda of statistical organizations. Even the policy ventures have never gone beyond the statistics.

Policy Analysis

Although, numerous national and state level policies have been framed to improve secondary school enrolment and reduce dropout rates in India—such as the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, pre-matric and post-matric scholarships for SC/OBC students, free textbooks and uniforms, girls' hostel schemes, bicycle distribution programmes, and conditional cash transfers—their overall impact remains uneven. These initiatives have undoubtedly helped expand access and reduce some of the structural barriers that prevent adolescents from continuing their education. However, for marginalised groups, particularly girls from Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes, and rural poor households, the journey toward equitable secondary education is still long and challenging.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis suggests that while enrolment at secondary level in Punjab has improved, inequalities widen significantly along intersecting lines of gender and caste. Girls from SC and OBC backgrounds face compounding disadvantages: economic hardship, gendered social norms, and caste-based segregation. These forces lead to higher dropout, lower transition, and decreased retention across secondary grades. Importantly, caste segregation in schools doesn't just reflect social stratification — it potentially entrenches educational inequality, by limiting exposure, reducing school quality, and reinforcing social divides. Multiple, overlapping disadvantages—economic hardship, gendered expectations, caste discrimination, safety concerns, distance to secondary schools, and inadequate rural infrastructure—continue to limit the effectiveness of these policies. As a result, despite improvements in aggregate enrolment indicators, marginalised girls remain at a disproportionately high risk of dropping out or failing to transition from upper primary to secondary and from secondary to higher secondary levels. This persistent gap highlights the need for more targeted, intersectional policy interventions that directly address the specific vulnerabilities faced by rural, caste-marginalised adolescent girls. Addressing gender-caste disparities thus requires intersectional policy approaches rather than soloed 'gender-only' or 'caste-only' interventions. The story in Punjab also reflects broader patterns in India: marginalized castes often inhabit under-

resourced schools, and within these, girls may be the first to drop out. Without focused interventions, these inequalities can translate into limited upward mobility, reinforcing socio-economic stratification. In a nutshell, the degree of inequality within a society has a clear impact on what type of education children can receive. When regional educational disparities become wider, this simply reflects the varying importance placed by local populations on educational investments. Further, regions with wide gaps between social groups may find that the interests of the weaker section are increasingly marginalised in the policy-making process. Therefore, it is necessary to make marginalised groups employable by making education up to the secondary level universal, so that they can acquire higher education and skills for their future needs.

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