

CONFLUX

JOURNAL OF EDUCATION

ISSN 2320-9305 (PRINT) ISSN 2347-5706 (ONLINE)

A PEER REVIEWED JOURNAL PUBLISHED SINCE 2013

VOLUME 14

ISSUE 1

DECEMBER 2025

cjoe.naspublishers.com

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Patterns of Equity and Access in Education in Today's World with Special Reference to Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

The concept of equity and access in education goes beyond simply providing the same resources. It emphasizes on offering the specific support each student needs to achieve their full academic potential. Studies on educational equity reveal patterns of disparity based on various student characteristics. This paper highlights some of the most prominent patterns of equity, access, and inequity, along with the barriers associated with them. It aims to create an awareness by examining these patterns in today's digital era and exploring the role of government and NGOs in promoting quality and equity in education in India, with special reference to Tamil Nadu. The discussion is supported by case studies and examples, that illustrate the challenges, successes, and failures encountered. The study employs a qualitative analysis of policy documents, and previously published journals, articles, and case studies to address inequities and promote inclusive education.

Keywords: education, equity, access, equality, awareness, digital era, inclusive education

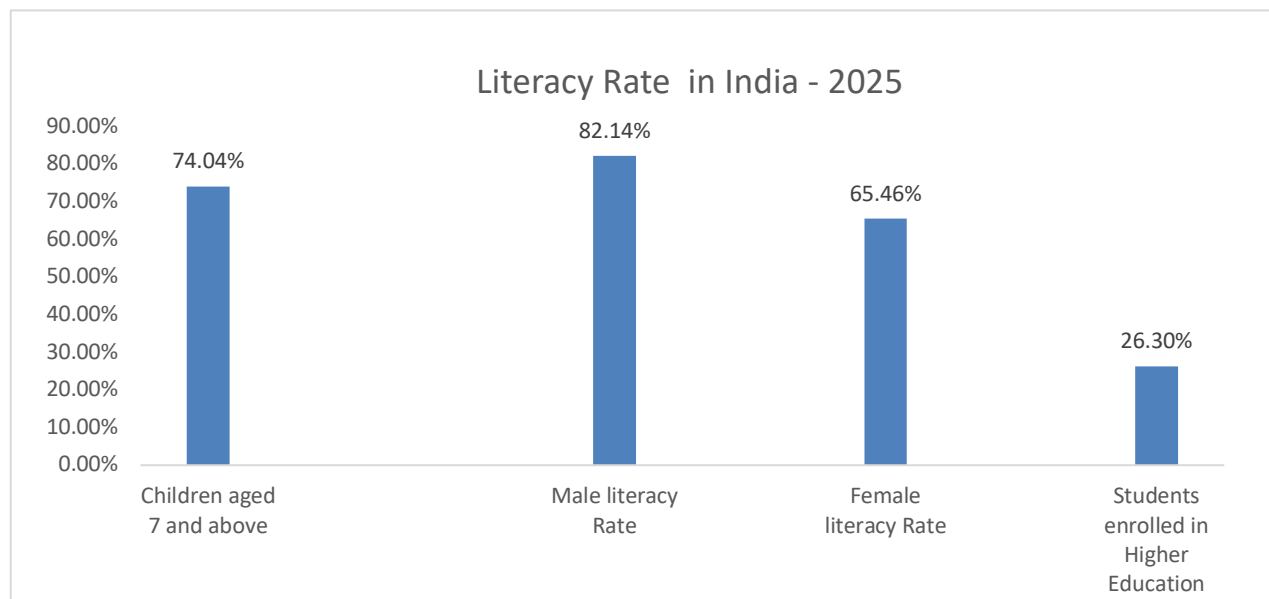
Introduction

Education in India is a vast and a multifaceted system supervised by three primary national bodies: the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), the University Grants Commission (UGC), and the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT).

Each state also operates its own Department or Ministry of Education, which governs school – level education within its jurisdiction.

As per recent data, the literacy rate for individuals aged seven years and above in India stands at 74.04%, with male literacy at 82.14%, and female literacy at 65.46%. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education is 26.30%, representing the proportion of young adults aged 18 to 23 enrolled in higher education is 26.30%, representing the proportion of young adults aged 18 to 23 enrolled in higher education institutions. By 2025, the overall literacy rate is projected to reach approximately 80.9%, within urban literacy at around 88.9% and rural literacy at about 77.5%

Children aged 7 and above	Male literacy Rate	Female literacy Rate	Students enrolled in Higher Education aged 18-23
74.04%	82.14%	65.46%	32.5%



Education contributes significantly to individual and social growth – personally,

professionally, and socially. It drives intellectual, cultural, and economic development and is one of the most vital tools for human progress. In today's technology-driven world, education prepares individuals to lead effective, meaningful lives while fostering their social, emotional, physical, aesthetic, and spiritual development.

These observations raise important questions:

- Does today's education system meet the needs of all students equitably, without discrimination or bias?
- Are all learners – irrespective of caste, creed, gender, social status, culture, or economic background – treated fairly within educational institutions?
- What measures can be implemented to ensure equitable and easily accessible education to improve literacy rates in the present context?
- Role of government and NGOs in creating an equitable atmosphere?

Literature Review

Equity in Education? Schooling of Dalit Children in India

The effect of learning environment within the formal educational system has been having on the dalit pupils, besides poor infrastructural facilities, lack of effective pedagogic supports to acquire linguistic, numerical and cognitive competencies adversely affect the schooling of dalit children. More importantly, despite active encouragement from impoverished family members, the apathetic treatment by teachers and school administrators largely shape the learning experiences of these socially disadvantaged groups. By creating a separate sphere of non – formal education for each groups, the government of India has abdicated the responsibility to

generate equity within the formal school system. (Namibissan, 1996)

Educational Policies and Their Impact on Equity and Access

The evolution and impact of educational policies in India, focusing on their role in promoting equity and access across the countries diverse socio-economic landscape these policies have addressed disparities related to gender, socioeconomic status, and disability, and their efforts to overcome geographic and economic barriers to education. While significant progress has been made, on the ongoing challenges in policy implementation, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. However, the need for continuous monitoring, adaptable strategies, and community involvement to ensure that the goals of equity and access are fully achieved. (Dr.Chawla, 2024)

Equity in Education: Understanding Equity in Classroom

The goal of education is to prepare students with the skills and knowledge they need to become successful, productive members of society. However, the path to reaching their objectives may present more substantial obstacles for some students compared to others. For example, some students might face socioeconomic barriers or have learning disabilities that make it more challenging to complete assignments in a classroom setting. By promoting equity in education, teachers can help reduce these barriers and promote an environment where everyone can achieve their best. (National University, Editorial Contributors, 2023).

A review of the existing literature reveals that although numerous scholarly works discuss equity in education, very few focus on the patterns of equity and access, particularly within the context of Tamil Nadu. The current study seeks to fill this notable gap by employing a conceptual framework designed to analyze the trends and dimensions of equity and access in

education in the contemporary context, with specific reference to Tamil Nadu.

Methodology

The present study has employed a qualitative research methodology to offer comprehensive insights into the issue under investigation. Utilizing the qualitative strategy facilitates the implementation of a methodical approach for research, whereby current sources are methodically analyzed (Kingdon, 2020). This paper has followed secondary research for data collecting, allowing this attempt to gather information from previously published journals, articles, and case studies in a short period of time. (Dr.Singh, et.al, 172)

Before exploring educational policies, it is essential to clarify the concepts of equity, access, and equality in education.

Equity in Education refers to fairness in providing learning opportunities. According to Gabriella Montell, every student – regardless of race, ethnicity, or family income – is entitled to quality education, as well as the resources and support required to succeed. Equity addresses students' diverse social, emotional, and academic needs, fostering an inclusive and positive learning environment.

Access in education implies that all learners have the opportunity to participate in educational experiences, regardless of their circumstances. It involves removing barriers such as financial constraints, geographical distance, or discriminatory practices. Essentially, access ensures that every learner has the right and opportunity to enter and benefit from educational systems.

Equality in education, on the other hand, ensures that all individuals receive the same

resources or opportunities. In contrast, equity recognizes that learners' circumstances differ and therefore allocates specific resources and opportunities to achieve fair and comparable outcomes.

Policies And Frameworks for Sustainable Educational Development

Several policies and frameworks have been developed to promote the sustainable growth of education at the regional, national, and international levels.

- **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020:** Approved by the Union Cabinet of India on July 29, 2020, the NEP 2020 represents a landmark in India's educational reforms. It seeks to make the education system more holistic, flexible, and responsive to the needs of the 21st century. Built upon the pillars of access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability, the policy envisions transforming India into an inclusive and knowledge driven society (Source: ICT Education Policy)
- **Incheon Declaration (2015):** Adopted at the World Education Forum in Incheon, South Korea, on May 15, 2025, this declaration extends the legacy of the Education for All (EFA) movement and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on education. It underscores the importance of equality, emphasizing that financial and social barriers should not hinder access to quality education. The declaration also promotes gender equality and recognizes diversity as a valuable resource rather than an obstacle.
- **International Frameworks – UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and UNESCO Conventions:** These frameworks provide global direction for achieving inclusive and equitable quality education for all individuals.

In India, educational reforms have been implemented through initiatives such as the

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the Right to Education (RTE) Act (2009), which established education as a fundamental right. Together, these measures reflect India's commitment to universal access to quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities.

Tamil Nadu's Commitment to Inclusive Education

In Tamil Nadu, the idea of inclusive education has long been defining principle of the state's educational philosophy, founded on the belief that education serves as a vehicle for social justice and empowerment. The Mid Day Meals Scheme (1920) laid the foundation for a welfare oriented education system by linking schooling with nutrition and social support. Likewise, the Communal Government Order (1921) broadened educational access for marginalizes and backward communities, establishing a strong precedent for equity in education.

Over the years, successive Dravidian governments have expanded this welfare approach by providing free uniforms, textbooks, and bicycles. These initiatives have significantly improved school enrollment and retention, particularly among girls and economically disadvantaged groups.

The State Education Policy (SEP) 2025 reaffirms Tamil Nadu's commitment to addressing emerging challenges while adhering to its principles of equity, inclusion, and social justice. The policy seeks to reduce disparities affecting Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), minorities, and children with special needs (CwSN) through measures such as scholarships, hostels, barrier – free infrastructure, and inclusive curricula.

The Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme (2022) extends the legacy of Mid-Day Meal Scheme by improving nutrition, attendance, reducing dropout rates and learning outcomes

among primary school children.

Through these sustained efforts, Tamil Nadu has transformed education from an elite privilege into a powerful means of social empowerment. The state's continuous emphasis on inclusion and welfare has not only improved enrollment rates but has also contributed to building a more equitable and economically progressive society.

As these policies and frameworks illustrate, numerous initiatives have been implemented to make public education the “great equalizer” of opportunities and conditions (Mann, 1957).

Nevertheless, global evidence suggests that no nation has yet succeeded in completely eradicating socio economic disparities in education.

- (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, [OECD], 2018).

State education policy (SEP) bats for inclusivity and equality in Education

Times of India recently awarded 82 students who were the wards of newspaper vendors and had excelled in their 10th and 12th board exams. School education minister Anbil Mahesh Poyyamozi, while distributing scholarships to these award winners said, “There are many leaders who worked as newspaper vendors and milk vendors in their early careers. However, not all of them came up in life. So it's good to see that vendors are educating their children to provide them better opportunities. This is the difference between Tamil Nadu and other states. It's also the difference between national education policy (NEP) and (SEP)”. State government wanted to provide education for all through SEP, The Times of India also joined in the efforts of state government”. He added, “Education and power are not exclusive to any caste or religion. If you work hard, you will get a better education”. – Times of India, dated, 26th October, 2025.

Kalviyil Sirantha Tamil Nadu (Tamil Nadu that Excels in Education)

A government event held on 25th September, 2025, in Chennai to celebrate educational achievements and launch new schemes like Pudhumai Penn, Tamil Pudhalvan and Naan Mudhalvan (Educational schemes to promote government and aided school boys and girls). The event highlighted how these programs have helped underprivileged students succeed, showcasing the success of R. Prema, of Tenkasi district, a student of the Government College of Engineering in Tirunelveli, and daughter of a mason, acquired skills in the semiconductor industry with the help of Naan Mudhalvan Scheme. – The Hindu, dated, 25th September 2025.

Case Study: Urban Slums in Chennai

Context

A field survey conducted by the Sethu Foundation among 500 households from the slum areas of Teynampet, T. Nagar, and Nandanam highlights the persistent challenges of educational equity in Chennai. Although the government offers free schooling, many parents – most of whom are daily wage earners – report spending between Rs.1000 and Rs. 1,500 each month on private tuition. They view this expense as essential because their children's academic progress in school remains limited.

As explained by the foundation's Managing Director, Ms. Sethulakshmi, schools often assign homework and provide digital resources such as QR codes and online links to support classroom learning. However, these tools remain underutilized, as most parents lack the digital literacy required to assist their children. Consequently, private tuition centers have proliferated across these localities, providing guidance to students who struggle to keep pace with

schoolwork. The survey also revealed that children need continuous support for homework completion, conceptual understanding, and exam preparation. – Times of India, dated 24th January, 2023.

Equity and Access Challenges

Technology collectively hinders consistent learning among slum dwelling children. The digital gap between students and their parents further restricts family involvement in education, widening existing inequalities between different socio – economic groups.

Resolutions and Key Lessons:

Community- driven learning initiatives, including small tuition hubs and notable classrooms, have proved effective in improving students’ academic engagement. During the pandemic, digital learning solutions and flexible instructional methods helped sustain learning continuity.

Organizations such as Bhumi in Chennai have experimented with creative play based approaches that make education more engaging for children who might otherwise disengage from formal schooling. Similarly, Sethu Foundation’s interventions illustrate the value of consistent mentorship and localized support networks in strengthening student learning outcomes.

Preventing Recurrences of Inequity

Reducing educational disparity in Chennai’s urban slums requires a multi-pronged strategy:

- **Strengthening foundational learning:** Targeted remedial programs focusing on literacy and numeracy can bridge learning gaps resulting from irregular school attendance and limited classroom resources.
- **Building digital literacy:** As society becomes increasingly technology – driven, competency has become essential. NGOs like NalandaWay Foundation and AID India provide underprivileged children with interactive learning platforms, tablets, and other digital tools that promote both technological proficiency and responsible online.
- **Encouraging collaborative frameworks:** While the Tamil Nadu state government has made notable progress on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) concerning education and poverty reduction, collaboration with NGOs can enhance the reach and impact of these initiative. By leveraging the data and field experience of local organizations, the government can refine existing policies and expand successful NGO – led programs to ensure inclusive, equitable education for all urban learners.

Conclusion

Empirical studies indicate that although states such as Tamil Nadu have achieved significant progress in expanding educational access, disparities linked to gender, caste, geography, and socio – economic background continue to influence learning outcomes. The adoption of flexible learning approaches offers the potential to enhance educational quality, particularly in the digital era where e-learning can bridge existing educational divides across India. By enabling personalized and adaptable modes of instruction, e-learning can support marginalized and disadvantaged groups in accessing meaningful education. Nevertheless,

realizing the full potential of e-learning requires addressing several challenges, including limited access to digital devices and the internet, the need for localized and inclusive learning materials, ensuring fairness in evaluation, and providing adequate learner support systems. A comprehensive strategy that integrates policy reforms, community engagement and targeted welfare initiatives is essential to translate the vision of equitable and inclusive education into practical reality.

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