

## **STRATIFICATION OF EDUCATION**

The development of education has always been closely linked to ideals of mass democracy. Reformers value education, of course, for its own sake for the opportunity it provides for individuals to develop their abilities and aptitudes. Yet, education has also consistently been seen as a means of equalization. Universal education, it has been

argued, will help reduce disparities of wealth and power by providing able young people with skills to enable them to find a valued place in society. Sociological studies conducted in many countries show that education tends to express and reaffirm existing inequalities far more than it acts to change them. The term 'inequality' here simply refers to the existence of socially created inequalities which is known as 'social inequality'. It is not biologically based. Though it is a bare fact that all human beings are not born with equal physical and mental ability and proficiency, yet, a society, if so wishes, can provide equal opportunities to all its members for achieving goals and aspirations of their life. Sociologists are not much concerned with inborn inequalities based on sex, age, bodily strength or quality of mind, but are concerned with inequalities in conditions of existence. This inequality can be filled in to some extent through the efforts of a society by providing equality of opportunity to all.

Equality of opportunity for achieving one's social standing is a recent idea, recognizing the importance of education in it. Achieving merit and ability is possible through education. Though education does not guarantee high status and positions to all people, it plays important role in equalizing opportunities in three ways:

1. By making it possible for all those who have the desire to be educated and the ability to benefit by that facility;

2. By developing a content of education which will promote the development of a scientific and objective outlook; and

3. By creating a social environment of mutual tolerance based on religion, language, caste, class, etc., for providing equal opportunities of social mobility to all individuals in society, and for securing good education.

Post-independence expansion of education has to some extent benefited the depressed classes (SCs, STs and OBCs). There is a pattern of unequal access to the more prestigious schools. But class inequality grew more severe as pupils moved up the educational ladder. A boy or girl from upper class or higher middle class, compared with a working class (SC, ST), has more chance of entering school and university. Thus, the educational system helps perpetuate social and economic inequalities across generations. These class differentials can be reinforced by privatization of education, where money has a great role to play in perpetuating this disparity. Of course, education is not the only channel to social mobility. Class, cultural and family background, and parental and other support, etc., are also important variants but lack of education is bound to prove a great handicap in mobility. Many studies conducted in this field reiterate the idea that education works as a powerful instrument of equality and mobility and illiteracy increases inequality and prevents occupational, as well as social mobility.

Though, education is an important means to upward mobility, it is not always open to all. In most countries, including India, students must pass qualifying examination to gain admission in various courses, such as engineering, medical, architecture, MBA, etc. This system is known as sponsored mobility and only those students can get as much education as they are willing and able to pay. The costs of remaining in school are enormous because students are dependent on their families longer and they lose additional years of income.

Education plays a very important role in maintaining the stratification system and justifying the unequal distribution of wealth. Like other social systems, schools reflect stratification and sometimes can be a cause of it. The schools that children attend can have an enormous influence on their life chances. Those who attend first-rate elementary and secondary schools usually are selected for professional courses and get high-paying jobs.

Some scholars contend that schools are biased in favour of high-middle and upper class students. It is seen that these schools are segregated by socio-economic class. Upper class children join the best private schools, while in government schools mostly pupils from lower status background are admitted. While functionalists believe that education bestows status upon the recipients, Marxist theorists argue that this bestowal of status causes differences in society. They stress that schools admit pupils according to social background, thus preserving class-related inequalities. According to this perspective, society is based on an unequal distribution of advantage and is characterized by a conflict of interests between the advantaged and the disadvantaged children from lower class and castes (SCs, STs and OBCs) who are much less likely to attend the private schools that give better chances for a good career.

Although, the educational system helps certain poor children (for example, children of SCs, STs and OBCs) to move into middle class professional positions, it denies the most disadvantaged children the same educational opportunities afforded to children of the affluent class. Thus, schools tend to preserve social class inequalities in each new generation. French sociologist *Pierre Bourdieu* (1993) named this process as 'cultural reproduction'. Through this concept of cultural reproduction, he established that schools reinforce variations in cultural values and outlooks picked up early in life; when children leave school, these have the effect of limiting the opportunities of some, while facilitating those of others. Education creates the conditions for the reproduction of inequality, that is, education helps to justify in people's minds a system of inequality and to reconcile them to their own position within it. As long as most people believe that education gives everyone a fair chance to prove their worth and as long as privilege and disadvantage are widely believed to stem from fair competition in the educational arena, then inequality may appear to be justified by different levels of educational attainment.