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THE IMPACT OF POVERTY ON EDUCATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This research critically examines the profound and multifaceted relationship between poverty and education in India. Despite constitutional guarantees such as the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, and a plethora of welfare schemes aimed at improving educational access, a large segment of the population—particularly children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds—continues to struggle with limited access to quality education. The paper investigates how poverty negatively impacts school enrollment, attendance, retention, and learning outcomes. It highlights how associated factors such as child labour, gender inequality, infrastructural deficiencies, and digital divides exacerbate the educational challenges faced by the poor. The study also analyses government policies, schemes, and non-governmental initiatives intended to mitigate these effects. Drawing from primary data, recent surveys, and case studies, the research identifies systemic gaps and proposes targeted policy recommendations, including increased budgetary allocations, conditional cash transfers, and improved accountability mechanisms, to create a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape in India.

Keywords:

Poverty, Education, India, Right to Education (RTE) Act, Child Labour, Educational Inequality, Gender Disparity, School Dropout, Learning Outcomes, Digital Divide, Government Schemes, Public Policy, Inclusive Education, Social Justice, Educational Access.

1. Introduction

Education is universally recognized as both a **fundamental human right** and a **cornerstone of sustainable development**. It plays a transformative role in empowering individuals, improving socio-economic conditions, and strengthening democratic institutions. The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)** and the **Sustainable Development Goal 4** of the United Nations explicitly emphasize the right to inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

In India, this vision was constitutionally embedded through **Article 21A**, introduced by the **86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002**, which guarantees the right to free and compulsory education to all children aged 6 to 14 years. This commitment was operationalized through the **Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE), 2009**, which mandates minimum norms for schools and prohibits the denial of admission or expulsion of students during elementary education[1282].

Despite these legal safeguards and substantial public spending on education, the practical reality diverges sharply for children from low-income households. According to the **Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2023**, while enrollment rates are relatively high, learning outcomes remain alarmingly low among

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[1282] Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India

children in rural and impoverished settings. Factors such as **household poverty**, **child labour**, **gender discrimination**, and **inadequate infrastructure** systematically hinder educational attainment and reinforce **intergenerational cycles of poverty and exclusion**.

Poverty does not only affect **access to education** but also its **quality, continuity, and outcomes**. Children in poor families often face malnutrition, lack of learning resources, and pressure to contribute to household income. Moreover, schools in impoverished regions typically lack trained teachers, digital access, and basic facilities, contributing to high **dropout rates** and poor **learning levels[1283]**. These issues create a **vicious cycle**: poverty limits access to quality education, and inadequate education further entrenches poverty.

2. Understanding Poverty in the Indian Context

Poverty in India is a **deep-rooted and complex socio-economic issue**, shaped by historical inequities, rapid population growth, urban-rural disparities, and systemic exclusion. It goes beyond mere lack of income and encompasses a range of **deprivations in health, education, living standards, and access to basic services**. This broader conceptualization of poverty is captured in what is known as **multidimensional poverty**.

The **NITI Aayog's National Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Baseline Report 2021** reveals that approximately **25% of India's population** suffers from multidimensional poverty, with particularly high concentrations in states like Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh[1284]. The MPI considers deprivations across three equally weighted dimensions: **health (nutrition, child & adolescent mortality), education (years of schooling, school attendance), and standard of living (electricity, sanitation, drinking water, housing, etc.)[1285]**.

For children growing up in such environments, **education often takes a backseat to survival**. They are more likely to face **malnutrition, chronic illness, and lack of learning resources**, which adversely affect school attendance and academic performance. Many poor families, especially in rural India, view child labour as a necessary economic contribution to the household, which directly impacts the child's right to education.

Moreover, poverty intersects with **caste, gender, disability, and regional inequalities**, exacerbating educational deprivation. For example, **Scheduled Caste (SC)** and **Scheduled Tribe (ST)** children from poor households are more likely to be first-generation learners, and often lack the support systems to navigate formal education.

Poverty also forces families to make trade-offs between **short-term economic needs and long-term educational gains**. In many cases, children—particularly girls—are withdrawn from school to help with household chores, care for siblings, or participate in income-generating activities. This creates a **self-perpetuating cycle**, where the lack of education keeps individuals education

3. Effects of Poverty on Educational Access and Retention

3.1 Enrollment and Dropout Rates

One of the most direct consequences of poverty is its negative impact on school enrollment and retention. Although India has made commendable progress in **gross enrollment ratios (GER)** at the elementary level, **disparities persist** when disaggregated by income, gender, and region. Children from poor households often either do not enroll or drop out early due to financial constraints, household responsibilities, or migration.

[1283] Dreze, Jean and Sen, Amartya. *An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions*, Penguin Books, 2013.

[1284] NITI Aayog, *National Multidimensional Poverty Index: Baseline Report Based on NFHS-4 (2015–16)*, Government of India, 2021.

[1285] Alkire, S., & Foster, J. (2011). *Counting and Multidimensional Poverty Measurement*. Journal of Public Economics.

According to the **Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2023**, dropout rates are significantly higher among children from economically weaker sections, particularly in rural areas[2]. Girls are especially vulnerable, as families facing financial stress are more likely to invest in the education of male children, considering them future earners. Studies indicate that **female dropout rates spike after Grade 5**, largely due to gendered roles and safety concerns.

3.2 Child Labour and Early Marriages

Poverty often necessitates that children **supplement household income**, leading to increased incidences of **child labour**. According to the **ILO**, over **10 million children** in India are engaged in labour, and most belong to economically deprived backgrounds. These children are forced to sacrifice schooling for income-generating activities, both within and outside the home.

Additionally, **early marriages**, particularly of girls in impoverished regions, are driven by financial pressures and social customs. A **UNICEF report (2021)** revealed that nearly **23% of girls in India are married before the age of 18**, and a significant number of these marriages occur in low-income households[1286]. These practices abruptly terminate formal education, making re-entry into the system difficult.

3.3 Lack of Educational Resources

Access to basic educational resources remains a major hurdle for children in poverty. Many poor students lack essentials such as **textbooks, notebooks, digital learning devices, uniforms, and transportation**, which not only hampers attendance but also negatively affects academic performance[7]. During the **COVID-19 pandemic**, the **digital divide** was particularly stark: only **27% of Indian households** had internet access, and the figure was even lower in rural areas, depriving millions of children of online education[1287].

4. Quality of Education in Poor Communities

The quality of education available to children from economically disadvantaged communities is **often substandard** due to infrastructural and administrative inadequacies in government schools. Poorly funded schools tend to have **dilapidated classrooms, lack of electricity, inadequate toilets**, and **unsafe drinking water**, all of which directly impact a child's ability to learn and thrive.

4.1 Infrastructural Deficits and Teacher Shortages

Government schools in impoverished areas frequently suffer from **shortages of trained teachers**, **multi-grade classrooms**, and **high student-teacher ratios**, which dilute the learning experience. A **UNESCO report (2022)** highlighted that over **one-third of elementary schools in India operate with fewer than three teachers**, compromising instructional quality.

4.2 Absenteeism and Accountability

Teacher absenteeism is another chronic problem in schools located in poor regions. A study by the **World Bank** found that teacher absence rates in rural public schools ranged from **20% to 25%**, often due to poor monitoring mechanisms[1288]. This not only affects learning outcomes but also erodes trust in the public education system.

4.3 Language and First-Generation Learners

Children from marginalized and poor families are often **first-generation learners**, unfamiliar with the dominant language of instruction (usually Hindi or English), which creates significant learning barriers. Without adequate support, these students struggle to keep pace with curriculum requirements, leading to low retention and poor performance.

Understanding this dynamic is essential for crafting educational policies that do more than increase enrollment—they must **address structural barriers**, ensure **inclusive learning**

[1286] UNICEF India, *Child Marriage and Early Union in India: 2021 Report*.
[1287] Pew Research Center, *Internet Use in Emerging Economies*, 2021.

[1288] World Bank, *Service Delivery Indicators in Education: India Country Report*, 2019.

environments, and provide **targeted support** for children from poor households.

5. Government Schemes and Their Effectiveness

In recognition of the barriers posed by poverty to educational access and retention, the Government of India has launched several schemes aimed at improving enrollment, reducing dropout rates, and enhancing learning outcomes. While these initiatives have made measurable contributions, they face persistent challenges related to implementation, infrastructure, and monitoring.

5.1 Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS)

Launched in 1995 and expanded under the **National Programme of Mid-Day Meal in Schools**, this scheme aims to **improve nutritional levels of school-going children and incentivize school attendance**[1289]. The scheme covers children from Classes I to VIII in government and government-aided schools. It has had a significant impact on **reducing short-term hunger**, **improving enrollment**, and **enhancing attendance rates**, especially among economically weaker students[1290]. However, the program has been **criticized for poor hygiene**, **irregular food supply**, and **cases of corruption and food poisoning incidents**, especially in rural and semi-urban areas.

5.2 Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)

Launched in 2001, the **SSA** was a flagship program to **achieve universal elementary education** through community ownership of school systems. It focused on **school infrastructure, teacher training, and inclusive education**. SSA has significantly improved **access to schools**, especially in rural India, but **learning outcomes remain stagnant**. The **lack of trained teachers**, **overburdened classrooms**, and **low community engagement** hinder its long-term effectiveness.

5.3 Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP)

Introduced in 2015, **BBBP** is a multi-sectoral scheme focusing on the **survival, protection, and education of the girl child**, especially in districts with low **child sex ratios**. While awareness around **girls' education** has increased, implementation has been weak, with a **CAG report (2021)** noting that **78% of the funds** were spent on **publicity**, rather than actual educational outcomes.

5.4 Digital India and PM eVIDYA

In the wake of the **COVID-19 pandemic**, the government accelerated digital initiatives like **PM eVIDYA**, which aims to provide **multimodal access to online education** via TV, radio, and digital platforms[1291]. However, due to **digital illiteracy**, **lack of internet access**, and **insufficient devices**, these initiatives have **further marginalized** students from poor and rural households.

Challenges Across Schemes

Most schemes suffer from **a lack of accountability, regional disparities**, and **insufficient ground-level monitoring**. Moreover, **state-specific political will**, **bureaucratic delays**, and **misallocation of resources** often dilute their intended benefits.

6. Case Studies

The following case studies highlight successful interventions that have attempted to mitigate the effects of poverty on educational access and outcomes in India. These examples demonstrate the importance of targeted, context-sensitive approaches in improving educational equity.

Case Study 1: Bihar's Cycle Yojana

Launched in 2006, the **Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana (Chief Minister's Bicycle Scheme)** aimed to address one of the primary barriers to girls' education in rural Bihar: **lack of transportation**. Before the scheme's inception, many girls were unable to attend school,

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[1289] Ministry of Education, *Mid-Day Meal Scheme Guidelines*, Government of India, 2022.

[1290] Dreze, Jean & Goyal, A. (2003). *The Impact of Mid-Day Meals on School Participation in Rural India*. Economic and Political Weekly.

[1291] Pew Research Center, *Internet Use in India: A Digital Divide*, 2021.

particularly in the **secondary school phase**, due to the distance between their homes and schools. Often, families preferred keeping girls at home for domestic chores rather than sending them to school, especially when the journey was long and difficult.

The scheme provided **free bicycles** to school-going girls, significantly enhancing their mobility and enabling them to attend school regularly. The initiative had a remarkable impact on **girls' education** in the state. A **study conducted by the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)** found that the program led to a **30% increase** in female enrollment in **secondary education**. Additionally, the program reduced **dropout rates**, particularly in the later grades, where retention had been historically low.

This intervention serves as a **model of material support**, where provision of a simple but impactful resource—like a bicycle—can remove significant barriers to education. By offering physical mobility, the scheme not only improved access but also contributed to **empowering young girls** and **promoting gender equality** in the educational sphere. The success of this program has led to its adoption and replication in other states, emphasizing its importance in removing structural barriers to education.

Case Study 2: NGO Pratham's Remedial Education

In the context of India's **low-income communities**, children from disadvantaged backgrounds often face enormous educational gaps, particularly when they enter school with limited prior exposure to formal education. **Pratham**, one of the leading non-governmental organizations in the field of education, has been at the forefront of efforts to bridge these gaps. One of their most successful initiatives has been the **Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)** program, which focuses on **remedial education** for children who are behind in reading, writing, or arithmetic skills.

The core philosophy of TaRL is to assess each child's learning level—rather than simply their age or grade—and tailor instruction accordingly. This **individualized approach** allows teachers to address **learning gaps** directly, offering a more personalized and effective method of teaching. The program has been **implemented across various states** in India, especially in **underdeveloped and rural areas**, where children from low-income families are often left behind in formal school systems that prioritize age-based grade progression over actual learning achievements.

The **impact** of Pratham's TaRL initiative has been significant. A **large-scale evaluation** of Pratham's remedial programs showed that children participating in these sessions had **substantially better** outcomes in **reading and arithmetic skills** compared to their peers in traditional classrooms. For instance, children in the TaRL program exhibited a **20–25% improvement** in reading fluency and basic arithmetic. This success highlights the importance of **community-driven, low-cost, scalable interventions** as a supplement to traditional education. Pratham's model demonstrates that **grassroots, context-sensitive interventions**, which work with local teachers and communities, can often produce better results than top-down educational reforms that fail to address local needs effectively.

These two case studies underscore the importance of **localized solutions** and **community participation** in addressing the barriers posed by poverty to education. While the **Cycle Yojana** addresses infrastructural challenges, **Pratham's TaRL** focuses on **personalized learning**, both demonstrating that innovative, adaptable, and **context-specific interventions** can yield tangible improvements in educational access and quality, especially for marginalized groups.

In addition to these, several other NGOs and state-led programs are working to remove barriers to education, showing that while

challenges are immense, **solutions tailored to local needs** can be highly effective in improving educational outcomes for children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

7. Recommendations

Addressing the deep-rooted relationship between poverty and education in India demands a strategic, inclusive, and well-coordinated policy response. The following recommendations aim to tackle the systemic issues that hinder educational equity and quality for children from impoverished backgrounds:

7.1 Increase Investment in Public Education

A significant increase in government expenditure on education is imperative, particularly in underserved rural, tribal, and marginalized urban areas. Investment should prioritize the development of adequate school infrastructure, such as safe buildings, clean drinking water, sanitation (especially for girls), and electricity. Equally important is the provision of well-stocked libraries, science laboratories, and digital learning tools. Enhanced funding should also support recruitment of qualified teachers and ensure the regular maintenance of school facilities. Focused investments must be directed toward states and districts with the poorest educational indicators to close the access and quality gap.

7.2 Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs)

Conditional cash transfer programs can act as a powerful incentive for poor families to keep their children in school. By offering regular financial support contingent on children's school attendance, academic performance, and timely progression, such schemes can significantly reduce dropout rates and child labour. Special emphasis should be placed on targeting vulnerable groups such as girls, children with disabilities, and those from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and minority communities. Implementation must be streamlined with efficient delivery mechanisms

and real-time monitoring to avoid leakages and delays.

7.3 Community Engagement

Strengthening the role of the community in school governance can foster accountability, improve enrollment, and reduce absenteeism. Empowering School Management Committees (SMCs), involving local panchayats, and collaborating with NGOs and civil society organizations can lead to better monitoring of school functioning and ensure the inclusion of marginalized voices. Regular parent-teacher meetings, community-led enrolment drives, and awareness campaigns on the importance of education—especially for girls—can create a conducive environment for educational participation.

7.4 Integrated Policy Approach

Given the multifactorial nature of poverty, educational policies should be integrated with broader social protection and poverty alleviation programs. This requires effective coordination among various ministries such as Education, Women and Child Development, Rural Development, and Health. For example, linking nutrition schemes like the Mid-Day Meal Program with health initiatives and child protection services can improve both educational attendance and learning conditions. A comprehensive approach would address interconnected challenges such as malnutrition, child labour, lack of transportation, and early marriage.

7.5 Teacher Training and Accountability

Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping student learning outcomes, particularly for first-generation learners in economically backward areas. Therefore, there is a critical need for sustained and practice-oriented teacher training programs. These programs should focus on inclusive pedagogy, multi-grade teaching techniques, use of local languages, and remedial education strategies. Alongside, robust mechanisms for performance appraisal, incentives for teachers working in difficult

terrains, and transparent transfer policies should be established. A culture of accountability and mentorship must replace the current system that often tolerates absenteeism and inadequate performance.

8. Conclusion

The relationship between poverty and education in India is both **complex and profound**, with poverty emerging as one of the most **significant obstacles** to educational access and quality. Despite considerable efforts by the government and various NGOs, the persistence of socio-economic inequality continues to limit opportunities for many children, especially those from marginalized communities.

Poverty creates a **vicious cycle**, where children from poor families face multiple barriers to education, including **lack of resources**, **poor infrastructure**, **limited mobility**, and **early economic responsibilities**. This results in **low enrollment rates**, high **dropout rates**, and **subpar learning outcomes**, particularly in rural areas and underprivileged communities. The lack of **basic educational materials**, **qualified teachers**, and **adequate infrastructure** further exacerbates the situation.

For India to move toward achieving **universal education**, it is essential that a **holistic and integrated approach** be implemented. The government must prioritize increased **investment in education**, ensuring that funds are directed to rural and underdeveloped regions where the need is greatest. Furthermore, targeted programs such as **Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs)**, **community-led initiatives**, and **remedial education** can help mitigate the socio-economic barriers that many children face. Collaboration across government agencies, **NGOs**, and **local communities** is crucial to ensure **accountability** and to achieve **sustainable educational outcomes**.

It is only through a sustained focus on **poverty alleviation**, alongside targeted educational reforms, that India can hope to break the cycle

of disadvantage and offer all children, regardless of their economic background, the opportunity to **learn, grow, and contribute** to society. The ultimate goal should be to create an **inclusive educational system** that not only provides access but also ensures quality education, thereby empowering future generations to contribute to the socio-economic development of the nation.

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4. **Right to Education Act, 2009**
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