
UNIT 25 EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

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Suggested Readings

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Learning Objectives

After going through this unit the learner will be able to:

- Define the role of education in social mobility;
- Describe how education bridges the gap between social classes;
- Identify different dimensions and causes of social mobility linked with education; and
- Examine the limitations of educational mobility.

25.1 INTRODUCTION

Education has been the harbinger of social change and social mobility in any society. It is of value in many ways in all societies. The role of education as a catalyst of mobility varies between rural and urban arenas. In the context of urban-industrial society, education functions as a promoter of upward social mobility. In such societies, occupation is the principal channel of social mobility. Occupations that help social mobility require certain educational qualifications. It is in this context education acquires significance as a promoter of upward social mobility. Famous Sociologists Reid writes: “The functions of the educational system are to provide people with the qualifications and aspirations to meet society’s occupational needs. Built into the system is that assumptions that people will or should want to be upwardly mobile. Underlying such reasoning is, then, the belief that social mobility is a desirable characteristic of that society and that the education system exists to promote and facilitate it” (Ivan Reid, 1997, pp14).

Modern education endeavours to remove social rigidity and discrimination. Through education, a person may gain recognition and a good position or standing in society, rising above discrimination based on birth, race, religion or nationality. Beyond just improving the situation of individuals, education encourages people to strive for higher

ideals, create good habits and serves towards the instilling of permanent values in a society. At its core, education promotes both social mobility and the development of morals and values in a population.

In his study on 'Social Mobility in Bangalore City' Siva Prasad (1987) observed that in order to understand social mobility of various groups of people, whether in rural or urban contexts, one need to study the role of education in the process of social mobility. Peter Blau and Otis Duncan (1967), in their study of social mobility in USA, found that the important factor affecting whether a son moved to a higher social status than his father was the amount of education the son received. A higher level of education is a scarce and valued resource, and one for which people compete vigorously.

It is rightly observed by Miller and Roby that, '... school-related factors are less important than family-related factors in educational outcomes' (1978: 18). In this context, as Goode points out 'The family is the keystone of the stratification system... How rigidly the family system enforces its rules determines how rigidly people are kept in the positions ascribed to them at birth... Stratification system places families rather than individuals in various social positions high and low, ... yielding some sort of social pyramid... In most modern societies, most people are at the bottom of the pyramid, and few at the top. In a society with rigidly defined castes, the barriers between the layers of the pyramid will be rigid and supposedly impenetrable' (1967: 582). This clearly points out to the implications of family and social group in social mobility and social stratification of individuals. In case of India, as Bernard Barber (1968: 29) noted that most social mobility is group mobility and it ensures that the social mobility that occurs is largely gradual.

This leads to the question whether education leads to a social mobility among lower caste classes. It is widely acknowledged that education is mostly confined to upper castes or economically advanced groups that are reaffirming the ascriptive social stratification (Siva Prasad 1987). As Jayaram (1977) observed higher education has been a status stabiliser. In this regard, the role of protective discrimination extended to the SCs, STs and OBCs is expected to break this jinx. Though to some extent, coupled with other factors, it has achieved to weaken the stranglehold of upper caste-classes and paved the way for social mobility of some of the groups from these sections. Though education is one of the elements of social mobility along with economic, social and other aspects of human society, it is one of the major players in heralding social mobility among the lower caste-classes. In a way, as observed by Siva Prasad, 'education mobility is the resultant of various processes and, in turn, it influences the mobility chances of people... There are many factors that influence a group's educational mobility. Some of the influencing factors are: one's family, caste and class and rural-urban backgrounds, place of residence, social networks, etc. The various caste associations, social movements, governmental measures, etc., also influence the chances of a group acquiring higher education. Access to higher education, in turn, enhances the chances of mobility of an individual or group' (1987: 100-101).

This desire for both social mobility and the potential benefits it confers has resulted in large numbers of students perusing higher education. However this does not result in good, high-paying jobs for all higher education graduates. "In fact, it has been calculated that only 15% of the increase in educational requirements for jobs during the course of this century can be attributed to the replace of low-skill jobs by new jobs requiring greater expertise" [Collins – 1971, 1004]. There are not enough college-level jobs available for the many new college graduates. This has also resulted in a rising

“educational threshold”; people need more advanced qualifications to get jobs they once could have secured with less education.

As noted by Emran and Shilpi (2012), in the context of economic liberalisation and growth, ‘The rise in cross-sectional inequality becomes a serious concern when it is primarily a result of inequality of opportunity, i.e., the inability of children born in poorer families and disadvantaged social groups to move beyond their parents’ position in economic ladder by their own effort and choices’ (p. 3). They further argue that, ‘An immobile society may require policies, public investments and reforms to ensure both efficiency and equality of opportunity’ (ibid.).

In developed countries, researchers have noted that people aspire to attain more years of education, even when it is not necessary for the jobs they want. Although some research suggests that there is no correlation between educational achievement and strong job performance, people cite a desire to obtain more prestigious jobs as one of the main reasons to pursue a higher level of education. On the other hand, people unable to get higher educational credentials can struggle to obtain higher-paying or more prestigious jobs thus potentially inhibiting their social mobility.

25.2 EDUCATION AND RESOLUTION OF INEQUALITIES

Education can have a part in reducing societal inequalities, particularly when it is introduced into societies where rigid stratification discouraged social mobility. One such example is the introduction of formal, modern education by the British into India. For the first time, people who were from low castes had widespread opportunities to obtain higher status in society through higher education and the opportunities it made available. People belonging to what is now called SC/ST and OBC communities could attempt to improve their social position through pursuing higher education. Although education is often cited as one of the main factors in removing inequalities from society, it must be remembered that it is simply one of many factors. Strongly ingrained society hierarchies cannot be so easily dismantled, and there is to dismantle these factors preventing social mobility in addition to providing education.

25.3 POLICY, SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

Claire Crawford et.al. (2011) while reviewing the literature on social mobility, observed that the cognitive and non-cognitive skills are important to promote social mobility among the lower classes. Similarly, policy interventions and providing credit can help in promoting social mobility among the lower and middle classes. The Government of India’s initiatives in regard to starting residential schools for the children from the deprived classes, mid-day meal in the schools, supplying free books, providing post-matric scholarships, bank credit for higher education, scholarships for pursuing higher education, positive discrimination by way of reserving seats in higher education institutions, offering coaching to the weaker sections for the competitive exams – including all-India services, scholarships for studying abroad, etc., have certainly played an important role for promoting social mobility aspirations among the lower caste classes. This also has played an important role in challenging the traditional inequality structures. Another important initiative of the Government of India is ‘Skill India’ Programme to promote

skills among the youth, especially from the lower caste classes, in order to promote innovation and entrepreneurial activities among the youth. In this regard, 'startup India' programme, Incubator Programme, etc., are regarded as an important step to promote entrepreneurship and to create new jobs through such initiatives. Besides, training for skill development is an important programme initiated through number of government programmes. This is in a way to develop non-cognitive as well as cognitive skills to reduce inequalities and increase social mobility among the lower caste classes.

As Crawford et.al., while commenting on inter as well as intra-generational mobility, noted that, 'Policies to improve intra-generational inequality, such as interventions to boost individuals' skills, are also likely to impact on inter-generational inequality (unless the entire distribution shifts upwards as a result), but the extent to which intra- and inter-generational mobility are affected may vary. . . For instance, efforts to improve parenting skills might not necessarily have an immediate effect on the parents' economic situation but may impact on their children's education and income in future' (ibid.: 7). They have clearly demonstrated as to how investments at different ages and across different skills pave the way for narrowing the gap between social classes and promotes social mobility among the lower class groups.

25.4 DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

In their 1959 work *Social Mobility in Industrial Society*, Lipset and Zitterberg¹ listed four dimensions of social mobility tied to education:

- (1) **Occupational Ranking:** Occupations with a related social and economic base may be grouped into distinct occupational classes, each class with its own level of social standing. Generalisations can be made about the values, beliefs and habits of people of one occupational class and then tend to differ between different classes. Some common themes are noted, such as the desire of people from skilled or blue-collar jobs to move into seemingly more prestigious white-collar occupations. Such mobility often requires increasing ones educational credentials.
- (2) **Social Class:** It is comparatively easier for a person to move from a lower-prestige job into a higher-prestige one than it is for a person to move from a lower to a higher social class. A person's social class is not merely based on their salary or their distinguished career, but on a number of factors including friends, associates, family-relations, etc. Generally, people of high society will prefer not to interact with people of lower social status. This has a number of effects in social mobility, including preventing opportunities for attaining higher education for people of lower social classes.
- (3) **Consumption Ranking:** Lipset and Zitterberg distinguish between occupational and economic status. Occupational or business status is tied directly to income while on the other hand economic status is determined by expenditure, how much people spend to support their lifestyle and habits. People who have similar lifestyles and spending habits belong to the same consumer group, regardless of their occupation. This is because people in the same occupation may have very different goals, values and educational credentials which will be reflected in their diverse lifestyles and spending habits. For example, a person from a lower social class who obtains a good education and

subsequently acquires a good profession will see a change in their occupational status as their income rises. If their expenditure and lifestyles also change to reflect middle-class or high-class aspirations, they likely will see a rise in their economic status, and increase in their standing in society.

- (4) **Power Ranking:** The relationship of the individual to the larger society determines their power ranking. People with similar power impacts will form a power group that may or may not be affected by related occupational groups. Even people with low occupational or economic status may use their power and influence to improve the social status of themselves and their families. For example, the child of a union leader may obtain an occupation and social status equal to the child of a middle-class professional. Obtaining political power can provide opportunities of the education advancement of one's children and the social mobility of one's family or larger community. This can be seen in India today, as members of SC, ST and OBC communities obtain higher education and then challenge the upper-caste classes that have traditionally held power. Codified policies such as reservations have advanced the challenging traditional hierarchies and inequalities. Such challenges are often led by the educated from among these classes.

25.5 INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CONSTRAINTS

Constraints on mobility prevent individuals from moving up socially or economically in a particular society or structure. Constraints may be internal, such as goals, beliefs and one's own personality, or they may be external, such as discrimination or lack of opportunity within a specific social framework.

- i. **System of Beliefs and Values:** In his work 'On Class Differences in Educational Values, Motivations for Economic Advancement and Perceptions Of the Opportunity Structure' (1953), H.H. Hyman discovered that parents in lower socio-economic groups are less likely to want their children to attend college and place less emphasis on college as a necessity for social progress. Therefore some of the largest constraints in the upward social mobility are the beliefs and values of the individual within the existing social dynamic. This has proved true in the Indian context as well, particularly in rural areas.
- ii. **Family Influence:** Social mobility may also be hindered by the individual's family. Research done by Richard M. Stephenson (1974) uncovered a positive association between the prestige of a father's job and the occupational aspirations of the child. Similarly, a child may not show much interest in education if their parents do not encourage it. A child maybe simply takes up the sort of job that the parent does or a similar one within the social hierarchy.
- iii. **Individual personality:** An individual's personality may also play a role in one's social mobility or lack thereof. Many studies support the notion that while an individual's intelligence quotient (IQ) is an important indicator of school performance during one's early years, as that person gets older their performance is increasingly shaped by their socialisation and values. For example, a child's inclination towards higher studies may be praised by parents as an opportunity for social mobility or it may be discouraged by family or friends who view it as either not desired or not attainable.

Stephen Aldridge (2001) study found that upper-status boys learn that good performance in school is necessary, and that they are expected to do well enough in secondary school to get admitted to college. On the other hand, a boy/girl from a lower status home is taught that college is either not meant for him/her or at best a matter of indifference to his/her parents. The boy's/girl's friends are not interested in college or in high school. Consequently, even a bright boy among them gets discouraged. This study further revealed that the strength of the achievement motive is clearly related to upward mobility. It seems that youth from upper strata of society may not need strong personal motivation for mobility. Such youth get good advice; they live in such environment where higher education is encouraged and where they are provided with wise decisions for setting up their careers. This is not the case of lower-class youth. They have to learn a great deal to make decisions.

It is widely acknowledged that education has been a key factor in bringing change in the society and in weakening the social mobility barriers like class, caste, ethnicity, etc. As Aldridge observed, 'Educational attainment appears to be especially important for long range upward social mobility, for example from a manual working class background to the professional classes. Lack of educational attainment correlates less well with mobility in the other direction, however, perhaps because children from professional backgrounds have access to other opportunities or support from their families to enable them to maintain their social position. There is further evidence that formal education has played a (modestly) diminishing role in determining class destinations in recent decades, perhaps because softer skills such as personal style and team working ability have become more important to employers' (2003: 190). In a way, what has been established is that the parental status has a bearing on the educational and occupational achievements of their offspring. Intergenerational mobility is usually impacted by the educational achievements of individuals and its impact is usually not uniform across caste classes because of different factors.

It is observed that childhood poverty impacts one's social mobility, as it hinders access to higher education and necessary skills for the jobs of higher prestige. It is also associated with worklessness. As Aldridge observed, 'childhood poverty and early year's development appear to be strongly associated with both educational outcomes and labour market outcomes... Furthermore, analysis of young adults in the 1970 British Cohort Study found that young adults (aged 26) earn nine per cent less than young adults at the same educational level if they were brought up in a household with an income below half the average' (ibid.: 192).

In one sense childhood poverty is also linked to the family background and, thus, family background also affects social mobility. As noted by Aldridge 'Families are also a source of various types of 'capital' that may affect the opportunities open to children. How a child is brought up may affect a child's 'psychological capital' – including feelings of self-esteem and self-confidence – which may influence their success in the labour market in later life. If a child is brought up knowing nothing about particular types of music, cuisine, sport or art this will restrict their 'cultural capital' and may serve as a barrier to social mobility. Lack of 'social capital', including access to social networks as well as norms and values (which shape attitudes and aspirations), may be another barrier that it is down to families in the first instance to remove. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, a family that can offer access to even a modest amount of financial capital may be making a significant contribution to a child's outcomes in later life' (ibid.). Besides these, discrimination of groups, for example, in the Indian context, as

elsewhere too, social and cultural discrimination of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minority groups, and other lower caste classes, affect negatively the social mobility opportunities of the members of these communities. Even if they possess similar educational qualifications, they have lesser chances than members from the socially advanced groups.

25.6 EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

Education is a means to achieve higher social status and position in society. Achievement of higher status or social mobility is not possible without education. The following elements play an important part in the social mobility.

- (i) Educational curriculum influences social mobility. Different subjects have different importance and value. In comparison with humanities, science subjects like engineering, medicine and technology are rated higher. Therefore, persons having knowledge of science get higher social status and social prestige. Therefore, there is intimate relationship between type of curriculum and social mobility.
- (ii) Some are able to achieve higher social status by their academic and research work in various fields of study. Thus, the higher the academic achievements, the greater are the chances for social mobility.
- (iii) Students of colleges and universities having a higher recognition and greater academic rating among institutions of higher education get better jobs in comparison of students receiving education in other institutions.

John Goldthorpe, commenting on the linkage between education and social mobility, rightly pointed out that, ‘As regards research into the role of education in social mobility more generally, two points of importance emerge. First, in mediating the mobility chances of individuals, education should not be seen as operating in some single mode. Rather, it has to be recognised that it may operate in several, quite different modes: as a source of human capital and thus of actual productive capacity; as a basis – along with other individual attributes – for the screening and signalling of productive potential; as a positional good determining individuals’ chances in processes of job competition; and as an agency of socialisation endowing individuals with values, norms and preferences more or less appropriate, from an employer’s point of view, for different levels of work. Second, it seems likely that these different modes will be of differing relative importance – as also may be the role of education itself, however viewed – according to economic sector and to type and level of employment’ (2013: 28). This really sums up the role of education in social mobility.

25.7 SUMMARY

Education and social mobility are closely related. Education promotes the growth and removes the backwardness of a country. In modern times, no further development is possible in some developed countries whose advanced technology has achieved a saturation point. The process of social mobility operates very little in such countries. But social mobility has unlimited possibilities in underdeveloped and developing countries like India. The more useful and productive is the education in such countries the more is the social mobility. In developing or under-developed countries, only capable children

will go up whereas the incapable and socially challenged will go down. By achieving both, these processes will attain a balance between the education and the upward and the downward social mobility. The policies and programmes of the governments help in promoting social mobility among the lower class groups and help in the reduction of inequalities. It is also important to understand the barriers to social mobility among the lower class groups.

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Sample Questions

1. How is education linked to reduction of inequalities?
2. What are the different barriers to educational mobility?
3. How policies and government programme interventions enhance the chances of intergenerational mobility among the lower caste classes?

