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Economic Inequality and Higher Education in Jammu District of Jammu and Kashmir, India: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract: Economic inequality profoundly impacts educational outcomes, perpetuating cycles of poverty and limited economic mobility. This paper investigates how disparities in income shape access to quality education, influence academic achievement and hinder equitable opportunities for economic advancement.This research explores the complex interplay betweensocioeconomic disparities and education, with a focus on higher education in the Jammu district of Jammu & Kashmir Union Territories. Using a stratified random sampling method, a sample of 395 students across various educational streams—arts, science, commerce & management, medical & engineering—were selected to represent the statistical population of higher education enrollees. The methodology includes a questionnaire-based survey, descriptive and inferential statistical analyses, and a comparative evaluation of educational streams.The study findings aim to shed light on the role educational institutions play, whether perpetuating inequality through systemic disparities in funding and resources or mitigating it through equity-focused interventions and inclusive practices. By examining the interplay of institutional factors and socioeconomic conditions, this research contributes valuable insights toward addressing educational inequities and fostering inclusive growth.

Keywords: economic inequality, education, socioeconomic disparities, educational inequities

I. Introduction

Economic inequality presents a significant barrier to achieving educational equity. The economic disparities directly affect access to education and outcomes, perpetuating cycles of inequality. The introduction contextualises the topic by referencing global trends, highlighting how unequal access to education is both a symptom and driver of wider economic inequities. Education has long been recognised as a powerful engine for economic mobility and economic development. However, economic inequality poses significant barriers to educational equity, creating disparities in access, quality, and outcomes across diverse socioeconomic groups. These disparities are not only a reflection of

existing economic inequalities but also contribute to the perpetuation of such inequalities across generations (Reardon, 2011).

Economic inequality manifests in various ways within educational systems. Affluent families frequently benefit from well-resourced educational institutions, personalised tutoring, diverse extracurricular opportunities, and cutting-edge technology, all of which contribute to stronger academic outcomes. Conversely, children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often face limited access to these enriching resources, which can impact their educational growth and lead to systemic challenges, including underfunded schools, overcrowded classrooms, and limited access to higher education opportunities (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Such disparities widen achievement gaps and undermine the potential of education to serve as a pathway out of poverty. Globally, the relationship between economic inequality and educational outcomes remains a critical area of concern.

The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) highlights how income disparities directly affect access to quality education, particularly in developing countries where marginalised communities often lack basic educational infrastructure. Even in developed nations, persistent funding inequities between affluent and low-income school districts exacerbate educational disparities (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2021). Education is a factor for economic prosperity and economic development in modern society. Higher education is often linked to improved career prospects and increased earning potential, though income levels among tertiary-educated individuals can differ depending on their chosen field of study. The inequities in higher education access, particularly influenced by socioeconomic factors, have drawn the attention of global organisations and policymakers across numerous nations (Mccowan, 2007; UNESCO, 2015; Reed et al., 2015).

The unequal access to higher education remains a significant challenge in Indian society, despite its strong influence on individual economic advancement. Several factors shape college admissions and enrollment, including family income, parental education, and access to accurate information about tertiary education. Financially stressed parents often prioritise immediate needs over education, contributing to disparities in higher education accessibility across socioeconomic backgrounds. Those from lower-income families frequently struggle to invest time, resources, and energy in fostering their children's academic and career prospects (Corak, 2013).Economic constraints not only limit a family's ability to afford tertiary education but also influence students' decisions when applying to college, with financial considerations often outweighing academic aspirations

(Hoxby, 2013). Many students perceive their socioeconomic status as a barrier to pursuing selective courses or prestigious institutions.

Conversely, parents with higher educational backgrounds encourage their children to set ambitious goals, including aiming for elite institutions and choosing selective courses that align with their interests. These individuals are more likely to graduate and secure well-paying jobs in the future (Dubow, 2019). Additionally, high-achieving students from low-income families encounter further challenges due to insufficient access to crucial information, which can hinder their ability to make informed decisions and affect their long-term prospects (Terenzini et al., 2001).This paper explores the multifaceted relationship between economic inequality and educational outcomes, focusing on how disparities in income and wealth shape access to resources, academic achievement, and opportunities for long-term economic mobility. This study seeks to offer practical insights into addressing these inequalities and fostering a more inclusive education system.

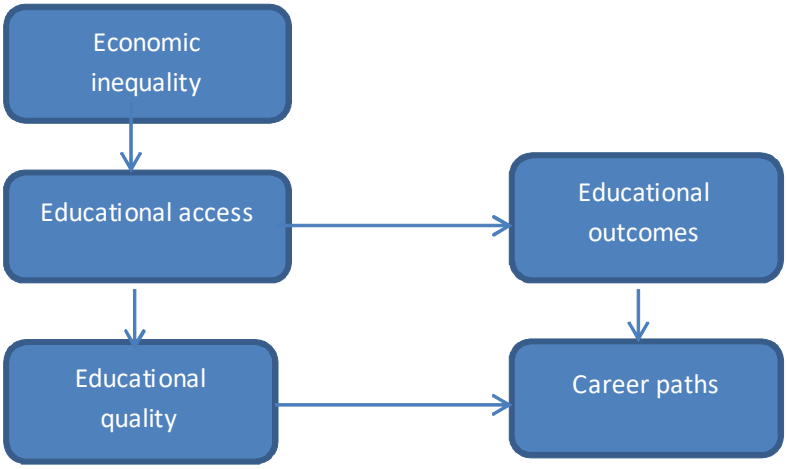
I.1. Conceptual Framework

Economic inequality (household income, wealth distribution, community affluence)

Educational access (type of school, type of higher educational courses, type of higher educational institutions)

Family support systems (parental education levels, ability to afford tutoring)

Educational outcomes (e.g. academic achievement, occupation level, income level)



"*Source:* created by the author

II. Review of literature

Economic inequality creates stark disparities in access to educational opportunities. Reardon (2011) highlights the growing academic achievement gap between students from high-income and low-income families, arguing that economic inequality limits access to well-funded schools, extracurricular activities, and other academic resources. Families with higher incomes are more likely to afford private schooling, tutoring, and advanced educational tools, further widening the gap (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Research from UNESCO (2020) indicates that in low-income countries, Children belonging to the lowest 20% of income groups are significantly disadvantaged in accessing secondary education, with their likelihood of attending school being four times lower compared to those from the highest 20% of wealthiest households.

The quality of education available to students often correlates with their socioeconomic background. Schools in affluent neighbourhoods typically benefit from higher property taxes, resulting in superior facilities, experienced teachers, and advanced curricula (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Conversely, schools in low-income areas often face overcrowded classrooms, outdated learning materials, and underqualified educators. For instance, Baker and Corcoran (2012) find a consistent link between increased school funding and improved student outcomes, emphasising that resource allocation plays a crucial role in mitigating educational disparities. Numerous studies document performance gaps arising from economic inequalities. For example, standardised test scores often reflect disparities in access to quality education. Sirin (2005) conducted a meta-analysis and found a strong correlation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement, with socioeconomic status accounting for up to 25% of the variance in test scores. Furthermore, the gap in college enrollment rates between low-incomeand high-income students is stark; students from wealthier families are significantly more likely to pursue and complete higher education (Bailey &Dynarski, 2011).

Economic inequality in education perpetuates cycles of poverty and limits economic mobility. Chetty et al. (2014) illustrated how disparities in early educational opportunities significantly influence long-term income levels and career trajectories. Children from low-income families who attend underfunded schools are less likely to achieve the same economic success as their peers from more affluent backgrounds. The World Bank (2018) further underscores the importance of equitable education systems in fostering economic growth and reducing intergenerational poverty.

Research on policy interventions highlights the importance of addressing educational inequalities through systemic reforms. Countries like Finland and

South Korea have successfully minimised educational disparities by implementing equitable funding models, universal preschool programs, and rigorous teacher training initiatives (OECD, 2018). In the United States, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) aims to address disparities by increasing accountability for educational outcomes in underserved communities, although its implementation has faced challenges (Hess, 2017).Research gaps in the study of economic inequality and educational outcomes reveal significant opportunities for deeper exploration. One pressing gap is the need for localised studies that focus on specific regions, such as Jammu & Kashmir, to understand how unique socioeconomic and institutional factors shape disparities. Comparative analyses across higher education streams—arts, science, commerce, medical, and engineering—remain underexplored, particularly in how economic inequality influences enrollment and academic success. Furthermore, the effectiveness of equity-focused interventions and inclusive practices by educational institutions lacks sufficient evaluation. Addressing these gaps can provide critical insights into fostering more equitable educational systems and opportunities.

III. Objectives and Methodology

Keeping the above background and theoretical and empirical review of literature in view, the study will be an attempt to analyse the following objectives:

- To analyse the impact of economic inequality on access to educational opportunities
- To evaluate the relationship between economic inequality and tertiary education
- To explore the role of educational institutions in perpetuating or mitigating inequality

III.1 Hypothesis

Higher education has no significant impact on increasing economic inequality within society.

III.2. Sampling Design

This study was conducted in the Jammu district of Jammu & Kashmir Union Territories, selected as a case study due to its relevance to the research objectives and distinctive characteristics. The research aligns with the identified problem, offering unique features of interest and practical accessibility for fieldwork. The study population comprises the total enrollment in higher education within the district.To ensure reliable sampling and accurately represent the statistical

population, a stratified random sampling technique was employed, selecting participants from various streams of higher education. Data collection was carried out through a questionnaire-based survey distributed among the sample population. The sample size for each stream was determined using the Slovin formula, ensuring adequate representation. The formula used for sample size calculation was ($n = N/1+Ne^2$)with detailed sampling information provided below.

Table 1: Distribution by the respondent by educational stream

Education stream	*Statistical population*	*Sample size*
Arts	28833	202
Science	14003	99
Commerce &Management	7480	51
Medical & Engineering	6305	43
Total	56621	395

Source: Government of Jammu & Kashmir. Calculated: using Slovin's formula

IV. Findings and Discussion

Table 2: Type of school studied up to high school

Educational stream	*Govt.*	*Private aided*	*Private unaided*	*Total*
Arts	106(26.83)	30(7.59)	66(16.70)	202(51.13)
Science	49(11.39)	13(3.29)	37(9.36)	99(25.06)
Commerce/Management	5(1.26)	19(4.81)	27(6.83)	51(12.91)
Medical/Engineering	2(0.50)	13(3.29)	28(7.08)	43(10.9)
Total	162(41.01)	75(18.98)	158(40)	395(100.00)

Source: Field survey

The type of school that children attend has a very significant influence on their learning behaviours and academic achievement. This table shows the distribution of respondents based on the type of school they attend. In the arts and science stream, the majority of the respondents completed their schooling in government schools, followed by private aided and private unaided schools. In the commerce stream, the major proportion of the respondent completed their schooling in private unaided schools, followed by private aided schools. Lastly, in medical and engineering, only 2 (0.50%) respondents completed their schooling in government schools, and the rest of the respondents completed their education in private, unaided schools. The findings of the study by Blau and Duncan (2007) have pointed out that schooling is the key factor affecting differential education and occupational attainment and mobility.

Table 3: University or Higher Education Institution Attended

Education stream	*Govt.*	*Private aided*	*Private unaided*	*Total*
Arts	182(46.07)	15(3.79)	5(1.27)	202(51.13)
Science	83(21.01)	15(3.79)	1(0.26)	99(25.06)
Commerce/Management	43(10.88)	5(1.26)	3(0.76)	51(12.91)
Medical/Engineering	28(7.08)	11(2.79)	4(1.03)	43(10.9)
Total	336(85.05)	46(11.63)	13(3.32)	395(100.00)

Source: Field survey

This table presents the distribution of respondents according to the type of institution they attended for higher education. Within the study area, most participants were enrolled in government institutions. A very small proportion of the respondent completed their higher education in private institutions.

Table 5: Chi-square analysis: Career Guidance Attendance and Course Selection among Students

	Value	*Df*	*Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)*
Pearson Chi-Square	38.313*	3	.000
Likelihood Ratio	39.808	3	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	38.146	1	.000
No Valid Cases	395		

The chi-square analysis indicates a strong correlation between participation in career guidance programs and students' access to various higher education courses.

Table 6: Factors Influencing Stream Selection

Course opt	*Limited choice*	*Access education according to their choice*	*Total*
Arts	129(32.65)	73(18.48)	202 (51.13)
Science	34(8.61)	65(16.45)	99 (25.06)
Commerce/Management	14(3.54)	37(9.37)	51(12.91)
Medical/Engineering	3(0.77)	40(10.13)	43 (10.9)
Total	180(45.57)	215(54.43)	395(100.00)

Source: Field survey

The table indicates that the majority of the respondents had made a choice they want to pursue in higher education. Out of the total respondents, 54.43% maintained that they had access to education according to their choice, only 45.57% of the respondents had limited choices they did not access education for what they wanted to pursue in higher education. In the medical/engineering stream, the majority of the respondent stated that they have access to education

according to their choice. On the contrary, in arts and sciences majority of the respondent highlighted that they have limited choice and do not access education according to their choice.

Table 7: Reasons for limited choice

Reasons for limited choice	*Frequency*	*Per cent*
Too expensive	61	34.7
Family responsibility	42	20.34
Lack of information	34	19.29
Limited seats available	23	13.98
Wanted to work	20	11.69
Total	180	38.2

Source: Field survey

The table provides the reasons behind limited choices faced by individuals, along with their frequency and percentage of the total responses. The most common reason for limited choice is that the options are "Too expensive," affecting 61 respondents, which accounts for 34.7% of the total. The second most common reason is "Family responsibility," cited by 42 respondents (20.34%). This indicates a significant portion of individuals are constrained by their familial obligations. Lack of information is a reason for limited choices for 34 respondents (19.29%). This highlights the importance of providing better guidance and information to individuals. Limited seats available affect 23 respondents (13.98%), suggesting that the scarcity of available positions is a notable barrier. Lastly, 20 respondents (11.69%) cited "Wanted to work" as the reason for their limited choices, indicating some individuals prefer entering the workforce over other options. The primary factors limiting choices seem to be economic constraints and family responsibilities. Lack of information and limited seat availability are also significant barriers. There's a noteworthy portion of individuals who choose to work instead of pursuing other options, which could reflect on their immediate economic needs or personal preferences.

A family's financial situation significantly influences their children's educational opportunities, shaping decisions regarding school selection and academic courses based on income levels.Parents' financial conditions additionally have an impact in their immediate or indirect impact on their children's education. The coefficient is significant with a p-value of 0.001, which is less than 0.05. This signifies that there is a positive relationship between the income level of parents and the education level. The study showed that respondents from high-income families are increasingly roused and have high career goals; they have an occupational decision that is confined to an official

Table 8: Educational stream and parent total income level

Education stream	*Parents'monthly income level*						
	>25,000	*25,000-50,000*	*50,000-75000*	*75000-1,25000*	*1,25000-1,50,000*	*More than 1,50,000*	*Total*
	Frequency	*Frequency*	*Frequency*	*Frequency*	*Frequency*	*Frequency*	*Frequency*
Arts	74(18.73)	63(15.94)	32(8.10)	24(6.07)	9(2.27)	_	202(51.13)
Science	35(8.86)	40(10.12)	12(3.03)	7(1.77)	4(1.01)	1(0.25)	99(25.06)
Commerce &Management	7(1.77)	21(5.31)	17(4.30)	4(1.01)	2(0.50)	_	51(12.91)
Medical & Engineering	_	_	8(2.02)	12(3.03)	14(3.54)	9(2.27)	43(10.88)
Total	116(29.36)	124(31.39)	69(17.46)	47(11.89)	29(7.34)	10(2.53)	395(100.00)

Source: Field survey

	Chi-Square Tests		
	Value	*Df*	*Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)*
Pearson Chi-Square	48.801[a]	15	.0001
Likelihood Ratio	44.545	15	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	13.111	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	395		

kind of profession. Then again, students from low-income families generally lean towards general and less skilled courses that offer quick financial returns. What's more, students from higher-income backgrounds additionally profited by proceeding with exposure to social associations, which will improve their career decision-making. Sun et al. (2009) also found a significant positive impact of the parents' income level on the child's education.

Table 10: Monthly income of respondents (in Rs.)

Educational stream	*Monthly income (in Rs.)*					
	Less than 15,000 *Frequency*	*15,000-30,000* *Frequency*	*30,000-45,000* *Frequency*	*45,000-60,000* *Frequency*	*Above 60,000* *Frequency*	*Total* *Frequency*
Arts	44(11.13)	76(19.24)	39(9.87)	16(4.05)	27(6.84)	202(51.13)
Science	12(3.03)	38(9.65)	15(3.79)	12(3.03)	22(5.56)	99(25.06)
Commerce/ Management	4(1.01)	22(5.56)	13(3.31)	7(1.77)	5(1.26)	51(12.91)
Medical/Engineering	-	-	6(1.51)	11(2.78)	26(6.61)	43(10.9)
Total	60(15.17)	136(34.45)	71(18.48)	46(11.63)	82(20.27)	395(100.00)

Source: Field survey

The upcoming section of this research will examine the characteristics of income levels. A descriptive analysis detailing the distribution and frequency of respondents based on their earnings is presented in the table. Additionally, the financial benefits of higher education differ depending on one's field of study.

Generally, disciplines such as medicine, engineering, commerce, and management are linked to higher earnings.This table shows the monthly income of the respondents. Where in the arts stream out of 202, 51.1% of respondents fall in the income category of 15,000-30,000, 11.13% of respondents fall in the income category of less than 15,000, 9.87% of respondents fall under the category of 30,000-45,000, 4.05% of respondent fall under the income category of 45,000-60,000 and remaining 6.84% fall under the category of 60,000 and above.

In the science stream, the majority of the respondents i.e. 9.65% fall in the income category of 15,000 - 30,000, a significant percentage of respondents i.e. 5.56% fall under the category of 60,000 and above, 3.79% of the respondents fall under the income group of 30,000-45,000, the 3.03% of respondent come under the income group of 45,000-60,000 and remaining fall under the income group of less than 15,000. The arts stream is the largest group in terms of total number of respondents (202 or 51.13% of total respondents), but it is also concentrated in the lower income ranges. The medical/engineering stream stands out for having a large proportion of respondents in the higher income brackets, indicating that these fields tend to have higher monthly incomes. The science stream shows a more even spread, with respondents in all income brackets, though fewer in the higher-income categories compared to Medical/Engineering. Commerce/ management is somewhat concentrated in the middle-income ranges and has fewer respondents in the higher-income ranges. This table suggests that the arts tend to have a higher representation in lower income ranges, while medical/ engineering has a higher representation in the higher income brackets, which aligns with the expectations of income distribution in various educational fields.

Measuring Economic Inequality using the Gini Coefficient

1st generation	2nd generation	
The area under the Lorenz curve is	20.32783	23.07863
Gini index	0.406557	0.461573

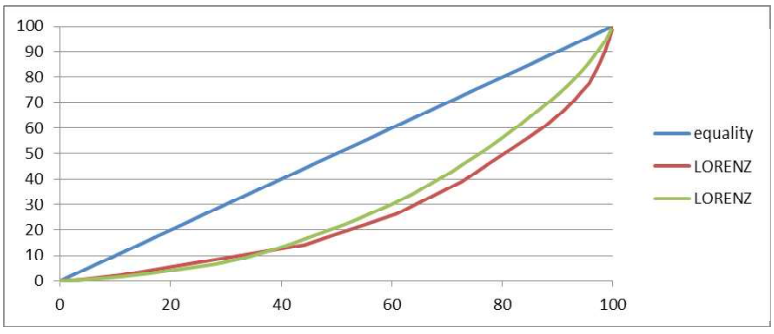


Figure 1: Lorenz curve and Gini coefficient analysis

This table presents the **Gini index** and the **area under the Lorenz curve** for two generations: the **1st generation** and **2nd generation**. These are common methods used to measure economic inequality. Area under the Lorenz curve: This represents the cumulative distribution of income or wealth against the population. The area under the Lorenz curve reflects the degree of inequality — the smaller the area under the curve, the greater the inequality.Gini index: The Gini coefficient is a measure of income or wealth inequality within a society. It ranges from 0 to 1. The 2nd generation has both a larger area under the Lorenz curve and a higher Gini index, indicating that economic inequality has increased from the 1st generation to the 2nd generation.The Gini index has risen from 0.406557 in the 1st generation to 0.461573 in the 2nd generation, pointing to a trend where economic inequality has become more pronounced.This analysis suggests that while both generations exhibit moderate inequality, the 2nd generation is experiencing more economic inequality compared to the 1st generation.

V. Conclusion

The survey findings provide a nuanced understanding of the educational and occupational trajectories of students from backwards classes, highlighting how socio-economic factors, institutional access, and guidance interventions shape their outcomes.This study reveals that while access to education among backwards-class students has improved, deep-rooted inequalities continue to shape their educational and occupational outcomes. Government institutions remain the primary providers of education for these students, yet limited financial resources, lack of career guidance, and structural barriers constrain their choices. Higher-income families are more likely to access professional and commerce education, leading to better employment prospects and higher incomes, while students from poorer backgrounds remain concentrated in the arts stream with limited mobility.

The influence of parental income, access to guidance, and type of schooling significantly affects career paths. Although education is increasingly seen as a pathway to advancement, the rising income inequality between generations highlights the need for stronger support systems and targeted interventions to ensure that education truly becomes a tool for empowerment and inclusion.

VI. Policy Implications

Invest in quality improvements in government schools, especially in professional education, to enhance competitiveness and reduce dependence on private schools for professional training.

Institutionalise career counselling at the school level, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas. Tailored guidance programs can empower students to make informed educational choices.

Develop targeted financial support schemes to reduce the economic burden on students opting for higher-cost resources (like engineering and medicine), ensuring affordability doesn't limit educational aspiration.

Introduce skill development and entrepreneurship modules for students in the arts and general streams to improve employability and income potential.

Re-evaluate reservation policies to ensure they are effectively reaching those in greatest need, particularly within the backwards class community, in both education and employment sectors.

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