



# The intersection of caste, social exclusion and educational opportunity in rural Punjab



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## ABSTRACT

The policies directed towards increasing access to education, often ignore how the political economy of local social structures can configure educational opportunity for the marginalized. This paper reports key findings of a qualitative, multiple-case study that explored caste-based social exclusion and educational opportunity in rural Punjab, Pakistan. Social exclusion was conceptualized within Sen's capability approach and analysed under multiple dimensions of social exclusion suggested by Whitley (2005), and Bourdieu's social critical theory. The data from seventy-two low and high caste parents, school heads and focus group interviews, reveal evidence of caste based social exclusion. This refracted into 'active' and 'passive' forms of institutional exclusion (Sen, 2000), across temporal and spatial planes. It also resulted in micro-level exclusionary processes within schools and the self deselection of the most stigmatized from education.

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## 1. Introduction

The challenge of persistent inequalities in educational access, despite enhanced provision of schools continues to confound the policy makers and donors alike as the millennium goals draw to a close in 2015. The problem is particularly severe in some South Asian countries, like Pakistan, where incidence of social inequality is high along 'horizontal' lines (Stewart, 2002) leading to social exclusion of certain groups (Kabeer, 2006).

One such powerful stratifying dimension is caste that may intertwine with class, culture, ethnicity, religion and language in multifaceted ways, ensuring the persistence of social exclusion of stigmatized groups across generations, arresting their social mobility and access to education (Kabeer, 2006; Drèze and Kingdon, 2001; Kingdon, 2009). In India and Nepal, *Dalit* groups have been excluded from land-ownership and are concentrated in low-status occupations, for example, sweeping and collecting garbage (Kabeer, 2011). In Nepal, the high caste groups, for example, *Brahmins* and *Chetris* have enjoyed many state privileges because of their connections to royalty, while *Dalit* and other low-caste groups have experienced lack of opportunity in different sectors, arresting their social mobility (Pherali and Garratt, 2014).

Despite the significant improvements in access to education, researchers studying South Asia, particularly India, find evidence that caste identity continues to play a powerful role both in access to education and school performance (Rawal and Kingdon, 2010; Tsujita, 2013). In Nepal, also, the 'New Education System Plan 1971,' continues to benefit the high-castes, while keeping the lower castes at a disadvantage (Mooij, 2008). Borooah and Iyer (2005) examined Hindu, Muslim and *Dalit* group identity from a survey of 33,000 rural households, in 1765 villages, from 16 states of India. The authors found that the extent of the religion or caste effect diminished in the case of both parents being literate, but in its absence, the group-based disadvantage was considerable for children.

While in India, caste has merited much attention both in research and public policy debates (Rawal and Kingdon, 2010), in Pakistan, its presence is often denied on the assumption of a prevailing Islamic 'egalitarian' ideology (Gazdar, 2007). However, limited, but in-depth ethnographic research has shown that although caste-system in Pakistan is different from that in India, it persists in large regions of rural Punjab setting off processes of social marginalization and social exclusion for low-caste groups (Mohmand and Gazdar, 2007; Gazdar and Mallah, 2012; Alavi, 1971; CSR, 2004; Kabeer, 2006). Nevertheless, with the exception of two macro-level quantitative studies (Jacoby and Mansuri, 2011; Karachiwala, 2014), with somewhat conflicting results, the relationship of caste with educational opportunity remains largely unexplored in Pakistani context.

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This paper contributes to the current literature by exploring the caste-based political economy of the social structures three villages, lying in the south, north and centre of Punjab to address the question: how does caste-based stratification and social exclusion shape the educational opportunity for the marginalized? The paper interprets social exclusion in relation to the capability approach to human development, as suggested by Sen (2000), and evaluates educational equality in the space of capabilities i.e. the range of effective educational opportunities and choices available to the marginalized in relation to high-caste groups in the given context. The paper uses Sen's (2000) typology of: 'active,' 'passive' and 'unfavourable inclusion[ary],' processes, along with Whitley's (2005) dimensions of social exclusion, to discuss the findings, while it situates the concept of caste within Pierre Bourdieu's social critical theory. The findings in the paper are focused only on the exclusionary processes faced by the low-castes in two villages, with some passing references to the third, because of the homogeneity of contexts between the former.

The paper proceeds by presenting an overview of the context of Pakistan and the salience of caste. It then moves on to provide the conceptual framework of the study. This is followed by the description of cases and then discussion of findings. The argument is discussed in the concluding section.

## 2. The context of Pakistan and the salience of caste

Pakistan is a multicultural and multilingual country, facing issues of wide spread poverty and inequality. Currently, Pakistan stands at 146th position as per the Human Development Report (2013), with an estimated 46% of its population living below poverty line (ibid.). The literacy rate of Pakistan is 58% (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2013), which despite the efforts of government seems to have made little progress over the last two years (ibid.). According to EFA report, out of 775 million illiterate adults in the world, 50 million are from Pakistan, which makes it the third highest illiteracy in the world (Saleem, 2013). Pakistan is also ridden by high social inequality, along 'horizontal' (Stewart, 2002) lines, that involves marginalization of certain groups. Naveed and Islam (2010) using a Multi-dimensional Poverty Index (MPI), found the spread of poverty across ethno-linguistic lines. In other studies, an important dimension of such 'horizontal inequalities' (Stewart, 2002), has been found to be caste-based, especially in rural contexts (Alavi, 1971; Wakil, 1972; Mohmand and Gazdar, 2007).

Caste refers to a system of social organization that is closed and highly stratified, intersecting with class boundaries (Leach, 1960). Caste titles linked with inter-generational occupational division of labour, define the differential status of caste groups in the given social structure (Ghurye, 2008; Chokshi, 2014; Gazdar, 2007). Such mutually recognized, and accepted, social positioning ascribed to different group affects the life chances of the individuals who comprise it (ibid.). Caste boundaries are carefully guarded through certain social practices, for example, endogamy, and/or sale of land (Mohmand and Gazdar, 2007) to maintain the distinction of the group (Bhowmik, 2013). Hence, it is through micro-level interactions that macro-level social structures are constructed. These discriminate and exclude individuals on the basis of 'who they are perceived to be,' in terms of their group membership, or their 'social identity' (Kabeer, 2006; Ghurye, 2008).

In Pakistan, caste is translated as '*zaat, biraderi* or *quom*' [Itl. Org.], 'kinship' groups related to endogamy and 'patrilineal lineage' (Mohmand and Gazdar, 2007, p. 3; Qadeer, 2012). In such kinship groups, it is the group that bears 'rights to the direct sources of livelihood,' to which individuals comprising the group, are expected to 'conform' (Nazir, 1993, p. 2899). In lieu of adherence to the group's traditional authority, the kinship groups act as a support (Wakil, 1972), while non-conformity is threatened with 'ostracism' (ibid.).

Caste-system in Pakistan, though devoid of the religious overtones and clear hierarchy across Hindu castes, is nevertheless pervasive in large regions of Pakistan (Alavi, 2001; Gazdar, 2007; Nazir, 1993; Gazdar and Mallah 2012), and at times the exclusion of low-castes borders on untouchability. Gazdar (2007) lists several '*kammi*' and '*menial labour castes*' for example '*muslim sheikhs*,' '*choras*,' '*masih*,' '*bheels*,' '*laches*,' and '*kolhis*' [Itl. Org.] in Punjab, Sindh and Baluchistan, who remain stranded in poorly paid work, marginalized because of their ascribed caste and traditional occupation (ibid.). In certain cases, the social exclusion they face is 'reminiscent of severe caste-based stratification by Brahmins in India,' comprising daily exclusionary practices of refraining from sharing of food or utensils, though such discrimination may not be extended to high-class Hindus or Christians (ibid.).

Gazdar (2007) highlights the conflict in the phenomenon of 'public silence verses salience of caste [in Pakistan] in the working of labour markets and private dealings' (p.87). He argues:

Zaat quam and caste remains a-perhaps the key-dimension of economic, social and political interaction [ . . . ] the inequality is so severe and so deeply embedded in parts of the country that it hardly even noticed (ibid., p. 87).

Punjab is the largest province of the country and home to 55% of Pakistan's population (Punjab Millennium Development Goals Report, 2011). The province, with a substantial industrial and agrarian base contributes about 58% to Pakistan's GDP. Hence, a change in development indicators in Punjab has a significant effect on weighted national indicators (ibid.). Although Punjab has the highest literacy rate of 60% (male 70%, females 51%) among the provinces, the disparities between its urban 76% vs. rural 53% literacy rate has actually widened, on the basis of PSLM 2010/11 data (cited in Economic Survey Report, 2013, p. 28). This is despite the fact, that in rural areas, 70% of the government and 35% of the private schools are situated within a radius of 2 km of villages (MICS Report 2007–2008). Hence, gender, regional, and rural/urban disparities and high inequalities in learning outcomes continue to plague its educational landscape (Punjab Millennium Development Goals Report, 2011; ASER, 2012; Andrabi et al., 2007).

Literature divides castes in Punjab into three categories: (a) landowning cultivator castes; (b) service castes; and (c) landless agricultural labourers or menial labour castes, with the latter two often referred to as '*Kammis*,' [Itl. org.] (Mohmand and Gazdar, 2007, p. 3; Qadeer, 2012). We however, keep the distinction between the menial labour and service castes. Traditionally, landownership is a key distinguishing feature of high-castes, though acquiring land, itself, does not automatically ensure rank (Nazir, 1993, p. 2900). In rural Punjab, landholdings, to a large extent, remain caste-based. This has stemmed from the Punjab Land Alienation Act, 1900 and Punjab Pre-Emption Act, 1913 (cited in Cassan, 2011) that restricted the transfer of land from the agricultural to non-agricultural castes. The '*Zamindari* system' introduced by the British in 1793 as '*Permanent Settlement of Land*,' not only eroded the prevalent community system and collective ownership of land in the villages, but also 'funnelled' caste into class dimensions (Mukherjee, 1999, p. 1759). The resulting 'class-caste nexus' (Mohmand and Gazdar, 2007; Thorat and Newman, 2007; Mukherjee, 1999) has led to multidimensional social exclusionary processes that have been embedded and 'naturalized' in the form of tradition and culture (Das, 2006). Studies exploring the social structures in rural Punjab highlight the salience of caste in social relationships.

Alavi's (2001) work on patron-client relationships revealed that local politics in rural areas were organized along caste rather than class or ideology – and resulted in differential access to public goods. Qadeer's (2012) study revealed that caste correlated with ownership of land and occupational specialization leading to

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