

A Decomposition of Educational Gaps Between Religion And Caste Groups In India

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This paper analyses differences in primary education across the three main social groups in India, namely upper caste Hindus, low caste Hindus and Muslims. We decompose these into differences associated with characteristics and residual differences that may reflect either tastes for education or disadvantaged access to educational facilities. This exercise is conducted using repeated cross-sectional data from the 1990s. The 1990s was a decade of unprecedented economic growth in India and overall enrolment increased considerably. This paper shows how social inequality in education evolved over this period. The analysis is conducted separately for boys and girls to allow for the fact that gender differentials vary across the social groups.

Upper caste Hindus have an advantage of about 10 percentage points over the other two groups. Within each social group, boys' enrolment rates exceed those of girls by between 12 and 17 percentage points. Between the start and the end of the decade of the 1990s, social inequalities have narrowed but only a little. In contrast, gender inequality within each group has narrowed a lot.

Differences in characteristics can explain only about a third of the difference in primary school enrolment rates between Muslims and upper caste Hindus. It is striking that the explanatory power of characteristics has decreased over time so that, in 1998/9, it was only 26% for boys and 12% for girls. In contrast, differences in characteristics explain more than two-thirds of the difference between lower and upper caste Hindus. In 1998/9, this was 70% for boys and 77% for girls.

These results suggest that ready policy instruments that might, in a short term, close the Hindu-Muslim education gap are elusive, but that endowing low caste families with the characteristics of high caste families will result in substantial catch-up. This said, it is not evident that the usual thought experiment whereby policy bestows endowments/characteristics on a disadvantaged group is as straightforward in practice as it may seem. It works when the characteristic is wealth, since poverty-alleviating policies can be targeted at low caste households. However, it will take a generational length of time and the cooperation of households to alter levels of parental education and fertility. State fixed effects in the model are the other large part of the characteristics effect. While it is not easy to pick up a person in one state and put them down in another, the results point to differences in state education policies and, possibly, differences in historical attitudes that determine social differences.