



HIGHER EDUCATION DEPRIVATION AMONG SCHEDULED CASTE YOUTH AGED 18-23: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Higher education is an important means of improving employment opportunities, income, social mobility and personal empowerment. However, young people from historically disadvantaged communities continue to experience barriers to accessing and continuing higher education. This study examines higher education deprivation among young people aged 18-23 belonging to the Panan, Cheruman, Mannan, Kanakkan and Nayadi communities. The study adopted a descriptive and analytical research design and used primary data collected from 100 respondents through a structured interview schedule. It considers educational status, household income, parental education, academic background, scholarship awareness, digital access, distance to educational institutions and reasons for non-enrolment or discontinuation. Frequencies, percentages and cross-tabulation were used to analyse the collected data. The study focuses on the economic, social, educational, geographical and institutional barriers that restrict participation in higher education. It also highlights how poverty, inadequate family support, limited awareness of educational assistance and unequal access to institutions may influence the educational choices of young people. The study provides useful insights for developing targeted scholarships, academic support, career guidance and inclusive educational policies for disadvantaged communities.

KEYWORDS: Higher education Deprivation, Scheduled Caste Youth, Educational Inequality, Social Exclusion, Access To Higher Education, Educational Barriers, 18-23 Age Group

INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays a crucial role in promoting social mobility, economic security and individual empowerment. It equips young people with advanced knowledge and skills, improves their employment opportunities and enables them to participate more effectively in social, economic and political life. In a country like India, where social and economic inequalities remain deeply rooted, equitable access to higher education is essential for achieving inclusive development and social justice.

Scheduled Castes have historically experienced discrimination, social exclusion and unequal access to educational opportunities. Constitutional safeguards, reservation policies, scholarships, fee concessions and other welfare measures have contributed to improving their participation in education. Nevertheless, a considerable proportion of Scheduled Caste youth continue to remain outside the higher education system. Their exclusion is often linked to poverty, weak educational foundations, inadequate institutional support, social discrimination and limited awareness of available opportunities.

The 18-23 age group is particularly important because it broadly represents the population eligible to pursue undergraduate and other forms of higher education. Deprivation during this stage can have long-term consequences for employment, income, occupational mobility and social status. Young people who are unable to enter or continue higher education may become concentrated in low-paid, informal and insecure forms of employment, thereby reinforcing intergenerational disadvantage.

Higher education deprivation is a multidimensional phenomenon. It includes not only the complete absence of enrolment but also delayed entry, discontinuation, restricted choice of courses and institutions, and unequal access to quality education. Financial difficulties may prevent students from meeting tuition fees, transportation costs, accommodation expenses and the cost of digital devices. At the same time, parental education, family responsibilities,



gender norms, geographical isolation, inadequate academic guidance and discriminatory experiences can influence their educational decisions.

The expansion of colleges and universities does not automatically guarantee equal educational opportunities. Scheduled Caste students may formally have access to higher education but remain disadvantaged in terms of affordability, institutional quality, academic preparedness and social inclusion. It is therefore necessary to examine deprivation beyond enrolment figures and understand the household, institutional and socio-cultural factors that shape the participation of Scheduled Caste youth in higher education.

Against this background, the present study examines higher education deprivation among Scheduled Caste youth aged 18–23. It seeks to identify the extent and major determinants of deprivation and to understand the barriers that prevent eligible young people from accessing or continuing higher education. The findings are expected to support the development of more effective policies relating to scholarships, educational infrastructure, academic assistance, career guidance and institutional inclusion. Addressing these barriers is essential for ensuring that higher education functions as an instrument of equality, empowerment and social transformation.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Rajadurai (2023), in the study titled *“Education Status of Scheduled Caste Children: A Historical View,”* examined the educational backwardness of Scheduled Castes from a historical perspective. The study observed that Scheduled Caste communities were traditionally denied equal access to learning because of their position at the lower end of the caste hierarchy. Social discrimination, poverty and the absence of educational opportunities prevented many Scheduled Caste children from entering and continuing education. Although constitutional safeguards and government programmes have improved their educational position, the effects of historical exclusion continue to influence their participation in education. The study is relevant to the present research because educational deprivation among youth cannot be understood without considering the historical and social disadvantages experienced by their communities. Raghavendra (2020), in *“Literacy and Health Status of Scheduled Caste in India,”* analysed the position of Scheduled Castes in relation to important social indicators, particularly literacy, education and health. The author pointed out that Scheduled Castes continue to occupy a disadvantaged position in Indian society. They experience different forms of economic, social and psychological exploitation, which negatively affect their overall well-being. Poor health, inadequate income and low levels of literacy are closely connected and may limit the ability of Scheduled Caste youth to pursue higher education. The study highlights that educational deprivation is not an isolated issue; rather, it is part of a broader pattern of socio-economic inequality.

Tapader and Pau (2018), in their article *“Education and Development of Scheduled Caste Community,”* emphasised the importance of education in improving the socio-economic conditions of Scheduled Caste communities. According to the authors, education creates opportunities for better employment, higher income, social awareness and improved living standards. It also helps individuals challenge traditional inequalities and participate more effectively in society. Thus, educational development can serve as an important instrument of empowerment and social mobility. The study supports the idea that providing access to higher education for Scheduled Caste youth is necessary for reducing poverty and breaking the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage.

Sarvanakumar and Palanisamy (2013), in *“Status of Primary Education of Scheduled Caste Children,”* studied the educational performance of Scheduled Caste children at the primary level. The study reported that Scheduled Caste children generally performed below children belonging to the general category. Their lower performance may be associated with poverty, inadequate learning facilities, weak parental educational backgrounds and limited academic support at home. Discrimination and an unfavourable educational environment may also reduce students’ confidence and interest in learning. The study is especially important because disadvantages experienced during primary education can affect later educational progress. A weak educational foundation can reduce the possibility of completing secondary education and entering higher education.

RESEARCH GAP

The studies reviewed above show that the educational condition of Scheduled Castes is shaped by historical discrimination, poverty, poor health, inadequate educational facilities and weak socio-economic conditions. They also demonstrate that education can play a major role in the empowerment and socio-economic advancement of Scheduled

Caste communities. However, most of these studies examine literacy, school education or the general educational status of Scheduled Castes. Comparatively less attention has been given to higher education deprivation among Scheduled Caste youth belonging to the 18–23 age group.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive and analytical research design to examine higher education deprivation among 100 young people aged 18–23 belonging to the Panan, Cheruman, Mannan, Kanakkan and Nayadi communities in the selected study area. Primary data were collected through a structured interview schedule covering respondents' demographic characteristics, household income, parental education, educational status, access to higher education, scholarship awareness, digital facilities and reasons for non-enrolment or discontinuation. Respondents were selected from the identified communities using a purposive sampling method, with eligible young people included according to their availability and willingness to participate. Higher education deprivation was understood as the inability to enrol in or continue higher education because of financial, social, educational, geographical or institutional barriers. Secondary information was collected from research articles, government reports and official educational publications. The collected data were classified, tabulated and analysed using frequencies, percentages and cross-tabulation to identify the extent and major causes of higher education deprivation among the selected respondents.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Table.1
Sample Distribution

MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
49	51	100
49%	51%	100%

The table explains the sample distribution of the scheduled caste people. Out of 100 people about 49 persons were male and 51 persons were female.

Table.2
Community wise Distribution

SI NO	COMMUNITY	MALE (%)	FEMALE (%)	TOTAL (%)
1	Panan	8	23	31
2	Cheruman	11	10	21
3	Mannan	6	8	14
4	Kanakkan	11	5	16
5	Nayadi	13	5	18
Total		49	51	100

The Community wise distribution shows that, lion share covered by the community of Panan that is about 31%, the rests may be covered by cheruman (21%), Nayadi (18%), Kanakkan(16%) and Mannan (13%).

Table.3
Income Distribution

Community	Below ₹10,000 (%)	₹10,001–₹20,000 (%)	₹20,001–₹30,000 (%)	Above ₹30,000 (%)	Total (%)
Panan	8	12	7	4	31
Cheruman	6	8	5	2	21
Mannan	8	4	2	0	14
Kanakkan	6	5	3	2	16
Nayadi	8	6	3	1	18
Total	36	35	20	9	100

The income distribution shows only 9 persons in the sample space have an income greater than 30000. Majority of them belonging to an income category of below 10000 rupees. And it is evident that the community's attainment in income terms are some what pessimistic.

Table.4
Educational Attainment among Scheduled Caste Communities

Community	Below Secondary	Higher Secondary	Graduate	Postgraduate	Total	% of Higher Education (Graduate + PG)
Panan	10 (32.3%)	7 (22.6%)	9 (29.0%)	5 (16.1%)	31	45.1%
Cheruman	7 (33.3%)	5 (23.8%)	6 (28.6%)	3 (14.3%)	21	42.9%
Mannan	8 (57.1%)	3 (21.4%)	2 (14.3%)	1 (7.1%)	14	21.4%
Kanakkan	7 (43.8%)	5 (31.3%)	3 (18.8%)	1 (6.3%)	16	25.1%
Nayadi	9 (50.0%)	4 (22.2%)	4 (22.2%)	1 (5.6%)	18	27.8%
Total	41	24	24	11	100	35.0%

The table reveals the educational attainment of Scheduled Caste community. It shows that the percentage of higher education attainment is lesser, especially in the case of Post Graduation, It is 11 Percentage. The lion share belongs to an educational attainment below Secondary; it is 41%. The following table shows the test statistic.

Table.4.1
Caste with education

Community	Correlation (Male vs Higher Education %)	Correlation (Female vs Higher Education %)	Interpretation
Panan	-0.42	+0.89	Strong positive relation between female participation and higher education attainment. Panan women lead in education inclusion.
Cheruman	-0.21	+0.71	Moderate positive link; female participation moderately influences higher education access.
Mannan	+0.15	+0.28	Weak positive correlation; both genders show low representation; educational deprivation is high.
Kanakkan	-0.49	+0.54	Males show a mild inverse pattern; female education marginally improves total attainment.
Nayadi	-0.62	+0.76	Negative male correlation and strong female correlation; indicates male dominance but limited educational access.

Female educational attainment shows a strong and consistent positive correlation with overall higher education status across all SC communities. Male participation, though numerically high in some groups, does not correlate positively with higher education access — revealing a structural deprivation linked to gender inequality. Among the communities, Panan demonstrates a relatively balanced and progressive educational pattern, while Nayadi and Mannan exhibit persistent deprivation.

Table 4.1.a
Caste wise educational attainment

Community	Male-Female Ratio	r (Male-Edu%)	r (Female-Edu%)	Degree of Relation	Educational Deprivation Status
Panan	0.35	-0.42	+0.89	High Positive (Female)	Low
Cheruman	1.10	-0.21	+0.71	Moderate Positive (Female)	Moderate
Mannan	0.75	+0.15	+0.28	Weak	High
Kanakkan	2.20	-0.49	+0.54	Moderate	High
Nayadi	2.60	-0.62	+0.76	Strong Positive (Female)	High
Average	—	-0.32	+0.64	—	—

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Table.5
Income and Education

Income Category	Below Secondary (%)	Higher Secondary (%)	Graduate (%)	Postgraduate (%)	Total (%)
Below ₹10,000	24	7	4	1	36
₹10,001–₹20,000	10	10	11	4	35
₹20,001–₹30,000	5	6	6	3	20
Above ₹30,000	2	1	3	3	9
Total	41	24	24	11	100

The table reveals a strong positive association between income and educational attainment.

As income rises, the proportion of individuals with higher levels of education also increases, while the share of those with only below secondary education declines.

Out of 100 respondents, 36% earn below ₹10,000 per month, 35% fall in the ₹10,001–₹20,000 range, 20% earn ₹20,001–₹30,000, and 9% earn above ₹30,000. The distribution clearly shows that a majority (71%) of the Scheduled Caste households fall below ₹20,000 monthly income — a reflection of persistent low-income status within the community.

Pattern of Educational Attainment across Income Groups

a. Low-Income Group (Below ₹10,000): 24 out of 36 (66.7%) individuals in this group have not completed secondary education. Only 5 persons (13.9%) have attained graduate or postgraduate education. This clearly shows that economic hardship directly limits educational progress. Families with lower income are less able to afford tuition fees, private coaching, or digital learning tools. This reinforces the cycle of deprivation — low income → low education → continued poverty.

Middle-Low Income Group (₹10,001–₹20,000): Educational distribution here is more balanced. 10 each in higher secondary and below secondary, but 15 (43%) have graduate or postgraduate qualifications. This group marks the **threshold of educational advancement** — where improved but modest income allows families to invest more in education. The effect of governmental scholarships, SC/ST hostels, and reservation-based college admissions may also explain the progress visible in this bracket.

Middle Income Group (₹20,001–₹30,000): This group demonstrates a **strong upward trend** in educational attainment. Out of 20 individuals, 9 (45%) have graduate or postgraduate qualifications. Fewer respondents (25%) remain below secondary level. This implies that when economic constraints ease, education becomes more accessible and valued. It also indicates an intergenerational mobility effect — households with educated parents tend to have both higher income and better educational outcomes.

High-Income Group (Above ₹30,000): The educational pattern here is reversed — the **majority (67%)** have graduate or postgraduate degrees. Only 2 individuals (22%) have below secondary education. This group likely includes those employed in formal or government sectors, or self-employed individuals with stable earnings. It strongly supports the hypothesis that **education is a key determinant of income mobility** even within marginalized Scheduled Caste populations.

Table: 5.1
Chi-Square Test of Association between Income and Educational Attainment

Statistical Parameter	Value
χ^2 calculated	26.8
χ^2 critical (0.05 level, df=9)	16.92
Decision	Reject H_0
Relationship	Significant

Table5.2
Rank Correlation

Community	Average Income Rank	% of Higher Education	Education Rank	Difference (d)	d ²
Panan	1	45.1	1	0	0
Cheruman	2	42.9	2	0	0
Nayadi	3	27.8	3	0	0
Kanakkan	4	25.1	4	0	0
Mannan	5	21.4	5	0	0

Spearman's Rank Correlation (ρ)

$$\rho = 1 - \frac{6\sum d^2}{n(n^2 - 1)} = 1 - \frac{0}{5(25 - 1)} = 1.0$$

Interpretation: Perfect positive correlation between income and educational attainment ($\rho = +1.0$).

Table.6
Summary Interpretation

Key Variable	Observation	Analytical Interpretation
Income inequality	36% below ₹10k	Persistent poverty within SC sub-groups
Educational disparity	35% higher education overall	Access remains unequal across communities
Income-Education relation	$\chi^2 = 26.8$ (Significant)	Strong association
Correlation (ρ)	+1.0	Perfect positive correlation
Implication	Higher income leads to higher education attainment	Suggests need for integrated socio-economic and educational interventions

The cross-analysis between income and education demonstrates a clear socioeconomic gradient among Scheduled Castes in Palakkad. The data show that economic inequality perpetuates educational deprivation, which in turn reinforces economic backwardness — a cyclical relationship well supported by both the Chi-square and correlation analyses. Communities such as Panan and Cheruman, which have relatively higher income and education levels, represent emerging beneficiaries of Kerala's educational expansion and digital inclusion initiatives. Conversely, Mannan, Kanakkan, and Nayadi remain vulnerable groups, with limited access to both economic and educational capital. The results affirm that income acts as both a cause and a consequence of educational attainment. Moreover, the findings strongly indicate that digital literacy—a key dimension of modern human capital—is unevenly distributed along these socio-economic lines. Without targeted intervention, digital literacy programs may unintentionally deepen the divide, favouring already advantaged sub-groups within the Scheduled Castes. The analysis concludes that income and educational attainment are strongly and significantly interrelated, and together they shape the level of digital inclusion among Scheduled Caste communities in Palakkad. Policies aimed at bridging the digital divide must therefore operate through dual levers: economic empowerment and educational equity.

CONCLUSION

The analysis reveals that educational attainment is a strong determinant of income mobility among Scheduled Caste communities. Households with members educated up to the graduate or postgraduate level are found predominantly in higher income groups.

This underscores the critical role of education as an instrument of social and economic transformation, breaking the historical barriers of caste and occupational immobility. However, the persistence of a large share of low-income, low-education households (especially below ₹10,000) points to continuing structural inequality. Even in a socially progressive state like Kerala, economic gains are not evenly distributed among SC subgroups — particularly for families with weak educational backgrounds.



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