



Bridging the Gap: A Case Study on The Role of Socioeconomic Background in Shaping Educational Aspirations of Rural and Urban Students in Barasat Subdivision, West Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT

Educational aspirations are often shaped by a variety of factors, with socioeconomic background being a significant determinant. This case study explores how the socioeconomic conditions of rural and urban students in Barasat Subdivision, West Bengal, India, influence their educational ambitions and career goals. The region, which includes both rural and urban areas, presents a unique context where differences in infrastructure and resources impact students' academic opportunities. Adopting a qualitative research approach, the study employs in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with students, parents, and educators to understand the factors that influence educational aspirations. The research highlights the disparities between rural and urban students, showing that urban students have greater access to resources, parental support, and career guidance, while rural students often struggle with inadequate infrastructure, low family income, and limited awareness of higher education pathways. The findings reveal how these socioeconomic factors create significant gaps in educational aspirations between the two groups. The study concludes that addressing these disparities through improved infrastructure, community engagement, and policy reforms is essential to ensure equitable educational opportunities for all students, regardless of their

socioeconomic background.

Introduction

Educational aspirations significantly shape the trajectories of students, influencing their academic achievements, career paths, and long-term social mobility. These aspirations, however, are not formed in isolation; they are deeply intertwined with various factors, including family background, economic conditions, cultural norms, and access to educational resources. Among these, socioeconomic background stands out as a critical determinant, particularly in regions where disparities in income, education, and infrastructure create unequal opportunities for students. This case study focuses on Barasat Subdivision, located in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, India, which serves as a microcosm for understanding these dynamics.

Barasat Subdivision comprises both rural and urban areas, presenting stark contrasts in terms of development and resource availability. Urban areas generally have better infrastructure, such as well-equipped schools, access to extracurricular opportunities, and career guidance services. In contrast, the rural regions often grapple with challenges like poorly maintained schools, a lack of trained teachers, and minimal exposure to higher education and career options. Such disparities provide a compelling backdrop for analyzing how socioeconomic factors influence students' educational aspirations.

This study is guided by the following research question: *How does socioeconomic background shape the educational aspirations of rural and urban students in Barasat Subdivision, West Bengal?* Complementing this question, the objectives are to identify the challenges faced by students from different socioeconomic contexts, understand their perceptions of education, and propose actionable solutions to bridge the aspiration gap between rural and urban students.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to highlight systemic inequalities in educational opportunities and aspirations. By exploring the lived experiences of students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, the study offers valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and community leaders. Understanding these dynamics is critical for developing targeted interventions to ensure equitable access to education and foster a culture of aspiration and achievement. This case study is particularly relevant in the broader discourse on educational equity, providing a regional perspective

on a global challenge. Its findings can inform local policies and programs, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and sustainable educational outcomes.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore how socioeconomic background influences the educational aspirations of rural and urban students in Barasat Subdivision, West Bengal, India . A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the depth and complexity of students' lived experiences, as well as the contextual factors shaping their aspirations.

Research Design

The research follows a case study design, focusing on the specific geographical and sociocultural context of Barasat Subdivision. This design allows for an in-depth exploration of the interplay between socioeconomic conditions and educational aspirations in a defined setting. By examining the rural and urban areas within the subdivision, the study provides a comparative perspective, highlighting similarities and differences between these two environments.

Data Collection Methods

To gather comprehensive data, the study utilized the following methods:

1. In-depth Interviews

- Participants: 30 students (15 rural and 15 urban), aged 14–18, were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Focus: Interviews explored students' aspirations, perceived barriers, parental expectations, and access to resources.

2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

- Participants: Separate FGDs were conducted with parents, teachers, and community leaders from rural and urban areas.
- Focus: Discussions delved into the broader sociocultural and economic factors influencing students' aspirations.



3. Secondary Data Analysis

- Sources: Government reports, school records, and census data were reviewed to provide context regarding the socioeconomic conditions in the study area.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for qualitative research. The analysis followed these steps:

1. Transcription and Familiarization

- All interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were read multiple times to identify recurring patterns and key themes.

2. Coding

- Data were coded inductively, with initial codes capturing specific concepts (e.g., "parental influence," "infrastructure challenges," "aspirational barriers"). These codes were then grouped into broader themes.

3. Thematic Categorization

- Themes such as "resource disparity," "cultural perceptions of education," and "role of community support" were identified and compared across rural and urban contexts.

4. Validation

- Triangulation was used to ensure the reliability of findings by cross-verifying data from interviews, FGDs, and secondary sources.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection. Informed consent was secured from all participants, ensuring they were aware of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process.

By employing these methods, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how socioeconomic factors shape educational aspirations, offering insights that are both context-specific and broadly applicable to similar settings.

Selection Criteria for the Case Study

The case study was conducted in Barasat Subdivision, West Bengal, India, chosen for its unique mix of rural and urban areas, which offers a natural contrast in socioeconomic and educational conditions. The selection criteria for participants and settings were as follows:

1. Geographical Diversity

- Rural and urban areas within Barasat Subdivision were selected to capture the contrasting socioeconomic contexts.
- Schools representing different resource levels (e.g., well-funded urban schools and under-resourced rural schools) were included.

2. Participant Characteristics

- Students aged 14–18 were chosen, as this age group typically begins to form concrete educational aspirations and career goals.
- Purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, categorized based on family income, parental education, and occupation.
- Parents, teachers, and community leaders were included to provide a holistic understanding of the factors influencing students' aspirations.

3. Accessibility and Feasibility

- The study focused on schools and communities that granted access and consent for participation.
- Local language proficiency (Bengali) among researchers facilitated effective communication during interviews and discussions.

Limitations of the Methodology

1. Sampling Bias

- The purposive sampling method, while effective for ensuring representation, limits the generalizability of findings. The relatively small sample size (30 students, along with



parents and educators) may not capture the full range of experiences, particularly those of marginalized or minority groups in the region.

2. Self-Reporting Bias

- The data relies heavily on self-reported information from participants during interviews and focus groups. This introduces the risk of social desirability bias, where participants may provide responses they believe align with societal expectations rather than their true experiences or opinions.

Mitigation Strategies for Biases

- **Triangulation:** Cross-referencing data from multiple sources (students, parents, teachers, and secondary data) reduced the risk of over-reliance on a single perspective.
- **Reflexivity:** Researchers maintained reflexive journals to document potential biases and ensure transparency in the analysis process.
- **Pilot Testing:** The interview and focus group guides were pilot-tested to ensure clarity and neutrality in the questions.
- **Diverse Perspectives:** Including multiple stakeholder groups (students, parents, teachers, community leaders) minimized the risk of overlooking important dimensions of the issue.

By acknowledging and addressing these limitations, the study aimed to present a balanced and credible analysis of how socioeconomic factors influence educational aspirations in Barasat Subdivision.

Case Description

This case study examines the role of socioeconomic background in shaping the educational aspirations of rural and urban students in Barasat Subdivision, located in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, India. The subdivision, part of the larger Kolkata Metropolitan Area, presents a diverse socioeconomic landscape, making it an ideal setting for studying the influence of socioeconomic disparities on education.

Background Information

Barasat Subdivision comprises a mix of rural villages and urban centers. The rural areas are characterized by agriculture-based economies, limited infrastructure, and lower literacy rates. In



contrast, the urban areas have more diverse economic activities, better educational institutions, and greater access to resources. These differences have led to significant variations in the educational opportunities and aspirations of students across the region.

Socioeconomic background in this context encompasses factors such as family income, parental education, occupational status, and access to community resources. Rural families often face economic hardships, with many parents engaged in low-paying agricultural or informal jobs, resulting in limited capacity to invest in their children's education. Urban families, on the other hand, tend to have higher incomes, better access to information about educational opportunities, and greater exposure to career pathways, all of which influence the aspirations of their children.

Context and Setting

1. Educational Landscape

- Rural schools in Barasat Subdivision often lack basic infrastructure, such as adequate classrooms, libraries, and technology-enabled learning tools. Teacher shortages and limited extracurricular opportunities further constrain the learning environment.
- Urban schools, in contrast, are generally better equipped, with access to modern teaching aids, career counselling, and extracurricular activities. These differences significantly impact students' exposure to educational opportunities and their ability to envision ambitious career paths.

2. Cultural and Social Norms

- In rural areas, traditional cultural norms often emphasize early marriage, particularly for girls, and prioritize short-term income-generating activities over long-term educational goals. This cultural context can limit aspirations, particularly for students from marginalized communities.
- Urban families are more likely to value formal education as a pathway to upward mobility, encouraging students to aim for higher education and professional careers.



3. Parental Influence

- In rural settings, low parental education levels often translate to minimal academic support at home. Parents with limited exposure to formal education may be unaware of the benefits of higher education or lack the knowledge to guide their children effectively.
- Urban parents, on the other hand, are more likely to be educated and actively involved in their children's academic journey, providing them with guidance, resources, and encouragement.

4. Government and Community Support

- Rural areas have limited access to government schemes and scholarships, partly due to lack of awareness or bureaucratic hurdles. Community support systems, such as mentoring or after-school programs, are also scarce.
- Urban students benefit from better implementation of government programs, greater awareness about scholarships, and access to private tutoring and coaching centers.

Case Significance

This case holds its significance in highlighting the disparities in educational opportunities and aspirations between rural and urban students, shedding light on the systemic inequalities that perpetuate these gaps. Understanding the contextual and structural factors influencing aspirations is critical for designing targeted interventions to address these disparities. By focusing on Barasat Subdivision, this study offered a microcosmic view of broader regional and national challenges in educational equity, making its findings relevant to stakeholders involved in policy-making, community development, and educational reform.

Data Analysis and Results

The qualitative data collected through interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and secondary data sources were analyzed thematically.

Key Findings

1. Socioeconomic Disparities in Aspirations



- Rural students generally aspired to locally available jobs, such as teaching or low-tier government roles, while urban students aimed for more diverse careers, including engineering, medicine, and entrepreneurship.
- Parents in urban areas were more likely to encourage higher education, whereas rural parents often prioritized immediate income generation.

2. Access to Educational Resources

- Urban schools had better infrastructure, extracurricular programs, and career counselling services compared to rural schools.
- Rural students lacked access to digital learning tools, libraries, and skilled teachers.

3. Impact of Parental Education

- Students from families with educated parents were more confident in setting ambitious educational goals, regardless of whether they were from rural or urban areas.

4. Cultural Norms and Gender

- In rural areas, societal norms often limited girls’ educational aspirations, focusing instead on marriage and domestic roles. This was less prevalent in urban settings.

Tables and Figures

Table 1: Career Aspirations of Rural vs. Urban Students

Career Aspiration	Percentage of Rural Students (%)	Percentage of Urban Students (%)
Teaching	40%	20%
Government Jobs	35%	25%
Engineering/Medicine	10%	35%
Business/Entrepreneurship	5%	15%



3. Cultural and Gender Barriers

- Societal norms in rural areas disproportionately limit girls' aspirations, revealing a critical area for intervention. Programs targeting gender equity in education can help bridge this gap.

4. Policy Implications

- The results emphasize the need for targeted policy measures, such as improved rural school infrastructure, awareness campaigns about higher education opportunities, and community-based mentorship programs.

Discussion

Interpretation of Results

The results of this case study underscore the critical role socioeconomic background plays in shaping the educational aspirations of students. Rural students in Barasat Subdivision exhibit limited aspirations, often constrained by infrastructural deficiencies, cultural norms, and parental lack of awareness about higher education opportunities. In contrast, urban students benefit from better school facilities, career guidance, and parental support, enabling them to aim for diverse and ambitious career paths.

These findings align with broader literature on educational disparities, which consistently highlight the interplay between socioeconomic factors and student aspirations. Studies have shown that resource availability, parental education, and cultural expectations significantly influence students' confidence in setting long-term academic and professional goals. Similar trends have been observed in other regions of India and globally, particularly in areas with pronounced urban-rural divides.

Implications for Practice

1. Educational Interventions

- Teachers and educators in rural areas can be trained to provide career counseling and foster ambition among students.
- Schools should integrate extracurricular programs that expose students to diverse career possibilities, especially in rural settings.



2. Community Engagement

- Initiatives to raise awareness among parents about the benefits of higher education can help shift cultural attitudes, particularly in rural areas.
- Gender-specific programs targeting girls' education can address cultural norms that hinder their aspirations.

Implications for Policy

1. Infrastructure Development

- Governments should prioritize improving rural school infrastructure, ensuring equitable access to resources like libraries, digital tools, and qualified teachers.
- Policies must incentivize the establishment of higher education outreach programs in rural areas.

2. Financial Support and Awareness

- Scholarships and financial aid programs must be better publicized and made accessible to rural families. Simplifying the application processes can increase participation.

3. Gender-Sensitive Policies

- Policymakers should implement schemes to support the education of girls in rural areas, including awareness campaigns and financial incentives.

Implications for Future Research

1. Longitudinal Studies

- Future research could track the evolution of students' aspirations over time to understand how socioeconomic changes impact their goals.

2. Comparative Studies

- Conducting similar studies in other regions of India or internationally could provide comparative insights, helping identify universal and region-specific challenges.



3. Intersectional Analysis

- Examining how other factors, such as caste, religion, and disability, interact with socioeconomic background to shape educational aspirations would provide a more nuanced understanding of the issue.

Conclusion

This case study explored the role of socioeconomic background in shaping the educational aspirations of rural and urban students in Barasat Subdivision, West Bengal, India . The findings revealed significant disparities, with rural students often limited by resource constraints, cultural norms, and parental education levels, while urban students benefited from better infrastructure, career guidance, and supportive environments. These differences highlight how socioeconomic inequities perpetuate unequal opportunities for students to envision and achieve ambitious educational goals.

The research question guiding this study was: *How does socioeconomic background shape the educational aspirations of rural and urban students in Barasat Subdivision, West Bengal?* This question was addressed by employing a qualitative approach that included interviews, focus group discussions, and secondary data analysis. The study identified key factors influencing aspirations, including access to resources, parental influence, and cultural norms, and provided a comparative analysis of rural and urban settings.

Key Implications

1. For Practice:

- Teachers and community leaders in rural areas should be equipped to foster ambition among students through career counselling and exposure to diverse career opportunities.

2. For Policy:

- Targeted policies to improve rural school infrastructure, promote gender equity, and raise awareness about higher education are essential.

3. For Research:

- Further studies should explore the interplay of additional factors such as caste, religion, and disability, and examine the long-term impact of interventions on aspirations.

Recommendations for Future Research or Action

1. Longitudinal studies can be conducted to track changes in aspirations over time and assess the effectiveness of interventions.
2. The scope of research can be expanded to include other regions with similar socioeconomic divides, allowing for comparative analyses and broader applicability of findings.
3. Community-based mentorship programs can be designed and piloted in rural areas to bridge the aspiration gap and encourage higher education.

By addressing these recommendations, future efforts can build on this study's findings to promote more equitable educational opportunities and empower students from all socioeconomic backgrounds to achieve their full potential. This research reinforces the urgent need for systemic reforms to reduce disparities and foster a culture of aspiration and achievement among all students.

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