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'Quotas for education helped SCs, but boys alone reaped the benefit'

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Empirical impact of reservations is yet an un-studied phenomenon

The first evaluation of the impact of reservations on educational attainment has shown that quotas in educational institutions did indeed improve the education indicators of the Scheduled Castes (SCs), but nearly all of the improvement was among boys only. The SC girls experienced next to no improvement in their education levels as a result of reservations.

While there is broad political consensus on the value of affirmative action in educational institutions for children from scheduled castes, the empirical impact of reservations is yet an un-studied phenomenon. What makes it particularly difficult is that no data is available on the educational levels of people before and after reservations came into effect.

Guilhem Cassan, an economist and assistant professor at the University of Namur in Belgium, took advantage of a natural experiment which occurred in 1976, when the lists of SCs were harmonised across States for the first time since Independence, giving fresh SC status to 25 lakh more people. Mr. Cassan was thus able to compare the educational levels of those people who had had the SC status since Independence, and those who were of school-going age when they got the SC status in 1976.

For educational levels, Mr. Cassan turned to the 1998-99 National Family Health Survey-2, the only large-scale official Indian survey that includes both precise caste group names and data on educational outcomes.

Mr. Cassan found that access to the SC status led to an increase of 0.3 years of schooling which may sound small, but is large in statistical terms. "It has to be put in perspective with the average level of education in this population, which is of 4.2 years (for individuals born between 1950 and 1979). Hence, 0.3 years of education is a 7% increase in the number of years of education of this population," Mr. Cassan told *The Hindu*.

To broaden the understanding of educational attainment from years of schooling alone to measures of skills, Mr. Cassan also looked at literacy levels and numeracy levels. While literacy is measured in a straightforward way, Mr. Cassan constructed an unusual measure of numeracy, by looking at a respondent's tendency to round off his or her reported age, something that is associated with a discomfort with numbers.

Access to the SC status led to an improvement in both literacy and numeracy levels, Mr. Cassan found. However, the findings were extremely uneven across gender, to the extent that most of the improvements in SC educational attainment was among boys alone; reservations had next to no impact on educational outcomes for girls, Mr. Cassan found. For males alone, access to the SC status meant an increase of 0.7 years of schooling on average; a 12% increase for boys, and 0% for girls.

"Gender is clearly a dimension that is too often neglected in the reservation debate," Mr. Cassan said. "However, this issue goes beyond the caste question, as girls in general are discriminated against," he added.

The Scheduled Caste girls face the combined effect of patriarchy and poverty, Sukhdeo Thorat, chairman of the Indian Council for Social Science Research and an economist who has widely published on the impact of caste, told *The Hindu*. However the newer generation of scheduled castes have begun to increasingly send girls to school and even on to higher education, Dr. Thorat said. A sharp rural-urban gap in female enrolment in higher education remains, he added.

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Quotas had next to no impact on educational outcomes for girls

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