



Rawlsian Justice, Social Inequality and Educational Equity in Contemporary India: A Critical Evaluation

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Abstract:

This article critically evaluates the relevance of John Rawls's theory of justice in addressing social inequality and educational inequity in contemporary India. Drawing upon Rawls's principles of equal basic liberties and the difference principle, the study explores how justice as fairness can inform debates on distributive justice within educational institutions. India's deeply stratified social structure—marked by caste, class, gender, and regional disparities—continues to shape unequal access to quality education and life opportunities. By juxtaposing Rawlsian normative ideals with empirical realities in Indian educational policy, including affirmative action and public welfare initiatives, the article identifies both the strengths and limitations of applying Rawls's framework in a complex, plural society. While Rawlsian justice provides a strong ethical justification for redistributive reforms and prioritizing the least advantaged, it requires contextual adaptation to address historically entrenched structural inequalities. The article concludes by suggesting integrative policy and theoretical approaches to advance substantive educational equity in India.

Keywords: *Rawlsian Justice, Educational Equity, Social Inequality in India, Difference Principle, Affirmative Action and Distributive Justice.*

Introduction:

Social inequality remains a defining challenge in contemporary India. Despite economic growth and democratic governance, disparities based on caste, class, gender, religion, and region persistently shape life chances and access to opportunities. Among such disparities, educational inequality stands as one of the most consequential forms of socio-economic exclusion. Education is both an instrument and a right: it enables individual capability, citizenship, and collective development. However, differential access to quality education deepens existing social hierarchies and reproduces disadvantage.

Philosophical theories of justice provide frameworks to evaluate the ethical legitimacy of institutional arrangements that shape equality and inequality. Among modern theories, John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) stands as a dominant normative framework. Rawls proposes that justice should be understood as fairness, emphasizing equal liberties and social arrangements that benefit the least advantaged. His principles have been widely discussed, critiqued, and applied to social policy debates.

Objectives: This article critically evaluates the relevance of Rawlsian justice in understanding and addressing educational inequity in contemporary India. Specifically, it examines how Rawls's principles

align with or depart from the Indian socio-political context and what insights they offer for policy and practice.

Theoretical Framework: Rawlsian Justice and Its Core Principles

Rawls's Conception of Justice: John Rawls conceptualizes justice as “justice as fairness,” a normative framework designed to regulate the basic structure of society (Rawls, 1971). His theory is anchored in two fundamental principles. The first is the Principle of Equal Basic Liberties, which guarantees each individual an equal claim to fundamental freedoms—such as liberty of conscience, freedom of expression, and political participation—compatible with similar liberties for all (Rawls, 1971). This principle holds lexical priority, meaning that basic rights cannot be sacrificed for economic or social gains.

The second is the **Difference Principle**, which permits social and economic inequalities only if they are arranged to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society and attached to positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity (Rawls, 1971). Together, these principles aim to reconcile liberty with distributive fairness.

Methodologically, Rawls introduces the **Original Position** and the **Veil of Ignorance**, hypothetical devices through which rational individuals select principles of justice without knowledge of their own social status, talents, or background. This abstraction ensures impartiality and fairness in institutional design (Rawls, 1971). The framework thus prioritizes rights and equitable distribution while recognizing that limited inequalities may be justified if they uplift the most disadvantaged.

Justice and Educational Opportunity: Within a Rawlsian framework, education occupies a central position as both a basic liberty-supporting institution and a social primary good essential for life prospects (Rawls, 1971). Education enables the exercise of autonomy, political participation, and informed citizenship, making it integral to equal liberty. Simultaneously, access to quality education determines individuals' future opportunities, income potential, and social mobility.

Under the difference principle, educational inequalities—such as differential allocation of resources or targeted interventions—are justified only if they demonstrably improve the situation of the least advantaged. This provides normative support for redistributive measures, including affirmative action, public funding for disadvantaged schools, and compensatory educational programs.

In an ideal Rawlsian society, educational institutions would ensure universal and equitable access to quality schooling, uphold fair equality of opportunity, and allocate resources preferentially to historically marginalized groups. Educational reform would thus be treated not merely as administrative improvement but as a moral imperative grounded in distributive justice (Rawls, 1971; Freeman, 2007).

Social Inequality in Contemporary India:

Caste and Class Structures: India's social structure continues to be deeply influenced by caste-based stratification, notwithstanding constitutional safeguards such as Article 15 of the Constitution of India, which prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. While affirmative action policies (reservations) in education and public employment have improved representation for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), caste remains a powerful determinant of life chances (Thorat & Newman, 2007). Empirical studies demonstrate that caste and class increasingly intersect, producing layered forms of disadvantage in access to land, credit, employment, and education (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008).

Marginalized caste groups are disproportionately represented in low-paying and informal occupations, which restricts their capacity to invest in quality schooling and higher education. Even where legal equality exists,

social discrimination and inherited economic deprivation constrain mobility. Thus, caste-based hierarchy continues to shape structural inequalities, often operating in conjunction with economic class to perpetuate unequal access to opportunity (Jodhka, 2012).

Gender and Regional Disparities: Gender inequality remains a significant dimension of social stratification in India. Although female literacy rates have improved over recent decades, gaps persist in secondary and higher education, particularly among rural populations and disadvantaged caste groups (Government of India, 2022). Early marriage, domestic labor burdens, and socio-cultural norms limiting girls' mobility contribute to higher dropout rates among adolescent girls. These constraints are more acute in economically weaker households, reflecting the intersection of gender and poverty.

Regional disparities further compound inequality. Urban centers generally offer better educational infrastructure, higher-quality schools, and greater access to private institutions, whereas rural and remote areas often face shortages of teachers, inadequate facilities, and limited higher education options (Drèze & Sen, 2013). Differences between states—particularly between southern and northern regions—also reflect historical variations in social reform, public investment, and governance capacity. Such regional unevenness produces markedly different educational trajectories across India.

Economic Inequality: Despite sustained economic growth, India has experienced widening income and wealth disparities in recent decades (Piketty & Chancel, 2019). Economic inequality significantly shapes educational opportunity. Access to private schooling, coaching centers, digital resources, and professional higher education is strongly correlated with household income. Middle- and upper-class families are better positioned to leverage economic capital into educational advantage, thereby reinforcing intergenerational mobility within privileged groups.

Conversely, economically disadvantaged households often depend on under-resourced public schools and may prioritize immediate income generation over long-term educational investment. Financial constraints also limit access to competitive examinations, higher education admissions, and urban employment networks. As a result, economic inequality translates directly into educational stratification, creating divergent pathways of opportunity and social mobility (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008).

Collectively, these intersecting cleavages of caste, gender, region, and class generate differentiated educational experiences and outcomes. For Rawls's framework of justice to be meaningfully applied in the Indian context, it must address not only formal equality of opportunity but also these deeply embedded structural inequalities that shape access to education and life prospects.

Rawlsian Justice and Educational Equity:

Alignment with Rawlsian Principles: Rawls's theory of justice provides a compelling normative foundation for evaluating educational equity in India. The principle of equal basic liberties affirms that every individual is entitled to fundamental freedoms necessary for autonomy and democratic participation (Rawls, 1971). Education, though not explicitly listed as a basic liberty, is indispensable for the meaningful exercise of such liberties. Without literacy, critical reasoning, and civic knowledge, formal rights remain hollow. In this sense, universal access to quality education may be interpreted as an institutional precondition for securing Rawlsian liberty (Freeman, 2007).

The **difference principle** further strengthens the case for redistributive educational policies. According to Rawls, inequalities are permissible only if they work to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society (Rawls, 1971). In the Indian context, affirmative action policies—such as reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in educational institutions—can be understood as practical embodiments of this principle. These measures aim to correct historically entrenched disadvantages and expand opportunities for marginalized communities.

Public investment in government schools, scholarships for disadvantaged students, mid-day meal schemes, and targeted funding for backward regions may likewise be viewed through a Rawlsian lens as redistributive mechanisms intended to equalize life prospects. By directing greater resources toward those structurally disadvantaged, such policies align with the moral requirement that social institutions mitigate rather than perpetuate inequality.

Limits of the Rawlsian Framework in the Indian Context: Despite its normative appeal, Rawls's framework encounters significant conceptual and contextual challenges when applied to India. The idea of the Original Position and Veil of Ignorance presupposes that decision-makers can abstract themselves from their social identities and design fair principles impartially (Rawls, 1971). However, in a society where caste, religion, language, and community identities deeply shape social relations, it is difficult to bracket these embedded structures in practical policymaking. Historical injustices tied to caste hierarchies complicate the assumption of neutral starting points.

Moreover, Rawls's theory primarily emphasizes individuals as the unit of justice. While this focus protects personal liberties, it may insufficiently address structural, group-based inequalities that are historically institutionalized. In India, discrimination often operates collectively against caste groups rather than merely against isolated individuals (Thorat & Newman, 2007). Thus, policies must sometimes target communities rather than individuals, raising questions about how far Rawls's individual-centered framework can accommodate group-differentiated rights.

A further limitation concerns the Rawlsian notion of **fair equality of opportunity**, which assumes that social institutions can create relatively level starting conditions (Rawls, 1971). In reality, deep structural inequalities—manifested in unequal access to early childhood care, nutrition, schooling quality, and social capital—distort opportunities from the outset. Children from economically and socially marginalized backgrounds often enter the educational system at a severe disadvantage, undermining the premise of meritocratic competition (Drèze & Sen, 2013).

Therefore, while Rawlsian justice offers a powerful ethical justification for redistributive educational reforms, its abstraction and individualistic orientation may require supplementation by context-sensitive frameworks—such as the capability approach and intersectional analysis—to fully capture the complexity of inequality in contemporary India.

Policy Implications and Reform Proposals:

Applying Rawlsian justice to the Indian educational landscape requires translating normative principles into concrete institutional reforms. If justice as fairness demands both equal basic liberties and distributive arrangements benefiting the least advantaged (Rawls, 1971), then educational policy must be structured to reduce structural barriers and enhance substantive equality of opportunity. The following proposals outline practical pathways consistent with this framework.

Strengthening Public Educational Infrastructure: In Rawlsian terms, education functions as a foundational condition for exercising basic liberties—political participation, freedom of thought, and personal autonomy (Rawls, 1971; Freeman, 2007). Therefore, the state bears primary responsibility for ensuring universal access to quality public education. Strengthening public infrastructure involves expanding school facilities in rural and marginalized areas, improving teacher recruitment and training, ensuring digital access, and maintaining accountability standards.

Public schools must not become residual institutions serving only the poor, while private institutions cater to privileged groups. Instead, a robust public education system can mitigate stratification and prevent the reproduction of inequality. Investments in early childhood education, nutrition programs, and foundational

literacy are particularly critical, as early disadvantage undermines fair equality of opportunity (Drèze & Sen, 2013).

Revising Affirmative Action: Affirmative action policies, including reservations in educational institutions, align with the Rawlsian difference principle insofar as they aim to uplift historically marginalized communities (Rawls, 1971). However, reforms must acknowledge intersectional inequalities within beneficiary categories. For instance, women within Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes may face compounded disadvantages due to both caste and gender.

Refinement of affirmative action could include sub-quotas for the most disadvantaged groups, expanded scholarships, mentorship programs, and monitoring mechanisms to prevent elite capture within reserved categories. A more nuanced design would ensure that redistributive benefits reach those most in need, thereby better satisfying the moral demand to prioritize the least advantaged (Thorat & Newman, 2007).

Resource Redistribution Mechanisms: To operationalize the difference principle, resource allocation must be sensitive to regional and socio-economic disparities. Targeted funding for underdeveloped districts, tribal areas, and minority-concentrated regions can address structural imbalances in infrastructure and teacher availability. Incentive structures to attract qualified teachers to rural schools, alongside continuous professional development programs, would enhance instructional quality.

Additionally, learner support mechanisms—such as remedial education, transportation subsidies, digital inclusion initiatives, and hostels for students from remote areas—can mitigate non-academic barriers to educational attainment. Such redistributive strategies reflect Rawls’s insistence that inequalities are justifiable only when they demonstrably improve the position of the disadvantaged (Rawls, 1971).

Inclusive Curriculum and Pedagogy: Educational equity is not solely about access and funding; it also concerns recognition and representation. Curriculum and pedagogy should reflect cultural diversity, linguistic plurality, and the historical experiences of marginalized communities. Inclusive curricular reforms that incorporate Dalit, Adivasi, minority, and women’s perspectives foster dignity and belonging, strengthening democratic citizenship (Sen, 1999).

Pedagogical practices must also be sensitive to varied socio-cultural backgrounds. Multilingual education, community engagement, and participatory teaching methods can bridge gaps between formal schooling and lived realities. Such reforms resonate with Rawls’s broader commitment to ensuring that social institutions respect persons as free and equal moral agents (Rawls, 1971).

Conclusion:

Rawls’s theory of justice offers valuable moral imperatives for addressing educational inequality, especially in emphasizing equal access and uplifting the disadvantaged. Yet, applying Rawlsian justice in India requires adaptation—accounting for entrenched caste hierarchies, gendered exclusion, and multidimensional deprivation. Combining Rawlsian insights with capability-based, intersectional, and culturally grounded approaches can more effectively inform equitable educational policies in India.

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