



Socio-Economic Determinants of Higher Education Access and Employment Outcomes: Evidence from Bhandara District, Maharashtra

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Abstract. Higher education plays a pivotal role in fostering human capital and driving sustainable, inclusive national development. Among the various determinants of higher education access, socio-economic status (SES) remains one of the most critical, influencing students' field of study selection and subsequent employment outcomes. This study examines the impact of SES on higher education access, academic discipline choice, and employment opportunities among students in Bhandara district, Maharashtra. A stratified random sample of 397 students from rural and urban areas across multiple disciplines was surveyed. Data on socio-economic status were collected using the Kuppaswamy Socioeconomic Scale (2022), while information on educational access was gathered through a structured questionnaire. Statistical analysis revealed a significant correlation between parental education and students' choice of academic discipline, with caste background and family income exerting measurable influence. Gender differences in discipline choice were not statistically significant, indicating a gradual decline in traditional gender-based educational perceptions. The findings confirm that students' SES substantially affects their academic trajectories and employment prospects. The study recommends inclusive, equity-oriented policies that account for socio-economic disparities to enhance both educational and employment outcomes in the region.

Keywords: Higher education access, employment outcomes, socio-economic status, Bhandara district.

1 Introduction

Higher education serves as a critical driver of human capital formation, fostering social mobility, economic growth, and sustainable development. In developing economies such as India, access to higher education is not solely determined by individual merit but is profoundly influenced by socio-economic factors, including parental education, occupation, income, and broader social background. Disparities in these factors often manifest as inequalities in educational participation, choice of academic discipline, and eventual employment outcomes, particularly among students from rural and semi-urban regions.

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India's rural–urban divide in higher education access is well documented, with students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds facing multiple structural and financial barriers. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has emphasized that education is not only an instrument for economic development but also a fundamental pillar for social justice and equality. Similarly, James S. Coleman's (1966) seminal "Coleman Report" highlighted the substantial role of parental education—especially that of the mother—in shaping children's educational attainment. Despite substantial policy interventions, socio-economic inequalities in higher education access and outcomes remain persistent, especially in less industrialized districts.

Bhandara district in Maharashtra exemplifies this challenge. Predominantly rural in character, the district has a limited number of institutions offering professional and skill-oriented programs, with the majority catering to traditional disciplines. Consequently, students' academic choices and employment prospects are often constrained by local institutional availability, economic resources, and entrenched socio-cultural norms. While national and state-level studies have explored the relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and higher education outcomes, micro-level empirical investigations at the district level remain scarce.

This study addresses this research gap by examining the extent to which socio-economic status influences higher education access, academic discipline choice, and employment outcomes among students in Bhandara district. By employing the Kuppuswamy Socioeconomic Scale (2022) and statistically analyzing data from a stratified sample of 397 students, the study aims to generate evidence that can inform inclusive, equity-oriented policy interventions.

The rationale for this research lies in the urgent need to understand how socio-economic disparities translate into educational and occupational inequalities at the local level. Such insights are critical for designing targeted interventions that can enhance access, equity, and employability in higher education, thereby contributing to the broader goals of social and economic development.

2 Literature Review

The relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and educational outcomes has been extensively studied across various national and international contexts. For analytical clarity, the literature is organized into four thematic strands: (i) socio-economic determinants of higher education access, (ii) SES and academic discipline choice, (iii) SES and employment outcomes, and (iv) theoretical perspectives underpinning the relationship between SES and education.

2.1 Socio-Economic Determinants of Higher Education Access

Socio-economic background, measured through parental education, occupation, and household income—remains a primary determinant of students' participation in higher education. Salwa Al-Darwish (2016), in a study on Kuwait, found that higher parental income and educational attainment significantly increased the likelihood of university enrollment and completion. Similarly, Koen Declerck and Verboven (2014) observed that although tuition fee increases had a limited overall effect on enrollment rates, students from low-SES households exhibited significantly lower enrollment rates compared to their more affluent peers.

In the Indian context, Rani and Devi (2021) demonstrated that parental SES exerts a strong influence on educational attainment, with low-income families facing persistent financial constraints that limit access to higher education. These findings align with Amartya Sen's (1999) assertion that economic inequality directly translates into educational inequality, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas.

2.2 SES and Academic Discipline Choice

Several studies have highlighted that SES shapes students' academic trajectories, including their choice of field of study. Daxuan Qi (2022) found that students from high-SES families were more likely to choose science, engineering, and other professional fields, while those from low-SES families often opted for less resource-intensive programs. Similarly, Chubaienla and Imsutula (2022), studying Mokokchung district in Nagaland, reported a significant correlation between SES and academic performance, noting that socio-economic advantages facilitated access to higher-quality disciplines and institutions.

In the Indian context, caste and community identity intersect with SES to influence educational choices. The persistence of caste-based disparities means that students from marginalized groups (SC, ST, OBC) are often overrepresented in less remunerative academic streams, while students from open categories dominate in professional and technical fields.

2.3 SES and Employment Outcomes

The transition from higher education to the labor market is also mediated by socio-economic background. Gill (2022) found that in India, despite large numbers of graduates, employability remains concentrated among those with access to professional courses and skill-based training—opportunities often aligned with higher SES. Sethi and Roy (2021) further argued that higher education enhances employability primarily when coupled with market-relevant skills, which are disproportionately acquired by students from resource-rich families.

Internationally, UNESCO reports have stressed that parental occupation stability and income security not only facilitate entry into higher education but also improve the chances of securing stable employment thereafter. In rural and semi-urban India, limited access to such opportunities perpetuates cycles of educational and occupational disadvantage.

2.4 Theoretical Perspectives

Sen's Capability Approach (1999) offers a conceptual framework for understanding how SES affects educational outcomes. It emphasizes that real freedom of choice in education depends on the availability of resources and the ability to convert them into actual capabilities. Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (2013) further argued that socio-economic background affects not only access to quality education but also the ability to leverage educational credentials for upward mobility.

The Coleman Report (1966) similarly underscores the influence of family background, especially maternal education, on children's academic success. This aligns with Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital," wherein educational and occupational advantages are transmitted intergenerationally through socio-economic positioning.

2.5 Synthesis and Research Gap

While substantial research confirms the influence of SES on higher education participation, field of study selection, and employment outcomes, micro-level analyses in smaller, predominantly rural districts remain limited. The existing literature has not sufficiently addressed how these dynamics play out in regions like Bhandara district, where professional education opportunities are scarce, and socio-economic disparities are deeply entrenched. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing empirical evidence from a district-level case study, with implications for localized policy interventions.

3. Research Objectives and Hypotheses

3.1 Research Objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to examine the influence of socio-economic status on higher education access, academic discipline choice, and employment outcomes among students in Bhandara district, Maharashtra. The specific objectives are:

1. To assess the socio-economic profile of students enrolled in higher education institutions in Bhandara district.
2. To analyze the socio-economic determinants influencing students' choice of academic discipline.
3. To investigate the relationship between students' socio-economic background and their subsequent employment opportunities.

3.2 Research Hypotheses

Based on the literature review and theoretical framework, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- ❖ **H₁:** There is a significant association between students' socio-economic status and their likelihood of pursuing higher education.
- ❖ **H₂:** Socio-economic status significantly influences the choice of academic discipline among higher education students in Bhandara district.
- ❖ **H₃:** Students from higher socio-economic strata have a greater probability of securing employment in professional and technical fields compared to those from lower strata.

The study adopts a quantitative approach to test these hypotheses, employing statistical tools to determine the strength and significance of the observed relationships.

4. Methodology

4.1 Study Area

The research was conducted in Bhandara district, located in the eastern region of Maharashtra, India. Predominantly rural in character, the district has a modest network of higher education institutions, with a limited number offering professional and skill-oriented programs. According to official records, the district comprises 84 colleges, of which only 15 (17%) offer professional or vocational courses such as engineering, pharmacy, management, law, and social work, while the remaining 69 institutions (82%) focus on traditional disciplines such as arts, commerce, and science.

4.2 Sampling Design and Sample Size

The target population comprised all students enrolled in higher education institutions in Bhandara district. Out of the 25,593 students enrolled across the district's 84 colleges, a stratified random sampling method was employed to ensure adequate representation across:

- ❖ **Geographic location:** Rural and urban areas
- ❖ **Gender:** Male and female students
- ❖ **Academic disciplines:** Arts, commerce, science, education, law, social work, engineering, pharmacy, management, and physical education.

From this stratified framework, a final sample of 397 *students* from 19 colleges was selected. This ensured representation across both professional and traditional academic streams.

4.3 Research Instruments

Two instruments were employed for data collection:

1. **Kuppuswamy Socioeconomic Scale (2022):**

This scale was used to assess the socio-economic status of students' families. It evaluates three dimensions:

- ◆ **Education of the head of the family**
- ◆ **Occupation of the head of the family**
- ◆ **Monthly household income**

Scores from each dimension were aggregated to categorize respondents into five SES levels: Upper, Upper Middle, Lower Middle, Upper Lower, and Lower.

2. **Structured Questionnaire:**

A self-designed questionnaire was developed to collect information on:

- ◆ Students' demographic profile
- ◆ Higher education access (institution type, field of study)
- ◆ Factors influencing academic discipline choice
- ◆ Employment status and career aspirations

The questionnaire was pre-tested on a small sample to ensure clarity, reliability, and validity before final administration.

Primary data were collected through face-to-face interviews conducted at the selected colleges. Students were briefed about the study objectives, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation.

Data were coded and entered into *SPSS* for analysis. The following statistical tools were applied:

- ◆ **Descriptive statistics** (mean, median, mode, and percentages) to summarize socio-economic characteristics and educational patterns.
- ◆ **Cross-tabulations** to examine the distribution of academic discipline choice across SES, caste category, gender, and income groups.
- ◆ **Chi-Square Test of Independence** to determine the statistical significance of associations between SES and (i) academic discipline choice and (ii) employment outcomes.
- ◆ A **p-value threshold of 0.05** was adopted to establish statistical significance.

This methodological framework ensured robust, representative, and statistically reliable findings for the research objectives and hypotheses.

5. Results

This section presents the findings of the study based on descriptive statistics and inferential analyses. The results are organized thematically to address the study's objectives.

5.1 Parental Education and Academic Discipline Choice

Table 1. Distribution of Students' Academic Discipline by Education Level of Head of Family

Education Level of Head of Family	Arts	B.Ed + B.P.Ed.	B.Pharm	BBA	Engi	BSW	Com	Law	Sci.	Total
Illiterate	1	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7
Primary	12	0	0	0	1	0	3	0	1	17
Middle School	9	13	0	0	0	0	7	0	6	35
Secondary School	17	10	11	4	16	4	13	4	33	112
Certificate/ Diploma	0	3	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	7
Graduate	21	21	15	14	9	15	15	15	15	140
Postgraduate/ Higher	2	16	6	9	7	9	6	9	14	78
Total	62	68	33	27	34	28	45	28	71	397

Source: Field survey

The cross-tabulation indicates a clear relationship between parental education level and students' choice of academic discipline. Students whose parents had graduate or higher education levels were disproportionately represented in professional and technical streams such as Science, Pharmacy, and Commerce. In contrast, children of illiterate or minimally educated parents tended to cluster in traditional fields like B.Ed. and B.P.Ed as shown in table 1.

The findings align with existing literature (Daxuan Qi, 2022; Chubaienla & Imsutula, 2022), suggesting that higher parental education equips families with greater awareness and resources for accessing competitive and career-oriented academic programs.

5.2 Caste Category and Academic Discipline Choice

Table 2. Distribution of Students' Academic Discipline by Caste Category (N = 397)

Caste Category	Arts	B.Ed.+ B.P..Ed.	B.Pharm.	BBA	Engineering	BSW	Com.	Law	Sci.	Total
Open	0	9	1	0	0	0	2	0	1	13
OBC	28	25	29	14	20	14	21	15	47	213
SC	9	11	2	6	9	8	10	7	11	73
ST	6	13	1	4	1	3	4	3	3	38
SBC	5	2	0	1	2	1	2	1	3	17
NT	14	2	0	2	2	2	6	2	6	36
MBC	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
Total	62	68	33	27	34	28	45	28	71	397

Source: Field survey

The distribution of academic disciplines by caste category reveals distinct patterns shaped by social identity and resource access is shown in table 2. Open Category students dominate career-oriented fields such as Science, Engineering, and Commerce, reflecting stronger socio-economic capital and academic networks. OBC students show moderate representation in both professional streams (Engineering, Social Work) and teacher training (B.Ed), aided in part by affirmative action. SC students participate across multiple disciplines, though their presence in high-demand fields remains lower than OC peers, indicating structural barriers. ST, SBC, NT, and MBC students are concentrated in teacher training and socially oriented programs, with limited entry into competitive technical courses, underscoring the persistent influence of caste-linked socio-economic disadvantages on educational choices.

5.3 Household Income and Academic Discipline Choice

Table 3. Distribution of Students' Academic Discipline by Monthly Household Income

Monthly Income (INR)	Arts	B.Ed.+ B.P.Ed.	B.Ph arm	BBA	Engin eerin g	BSW	Com.	Law	Scien ce	Tota l
< 10,702	15	8	3	0	5	0	5	0	10	46
10,703–31,977	8	19	4	5	8	5	11	5	17	82
31,978–53,360	21	11	10	2	9	4	9	3	23	92
53,361–80,109	14	9	6	8	5	6	13	6	11	78
80,110–106,849	4	13	4	7	6	8	6	9	7	64
106,850–213,813	0	3	2	0	1	0	1	0	3	10
> 213,814	0	5	4	5	0	5	0	5	0	24
Total	62	68	33	27	34	28	45	28	71	397

Source: Field survey

The distribution of academic disciplines by monthly household income shows a clear association between economic capacity and educational choices is shown in table 3. Students from middle-income households (₹31,978–₹53,360) form the largest group, with notable representation in Science, Pharmacy, and Arts, suggesting this income range offers both access and affordability for diverse fields. Lower-middle-income groups (₹10,703–₹31,977) also have substantial participation, particularly in Arts, B.Ed, and Science, but their presence in resource-intensive courses like Engineering and Pharmacy is comparatively lower. Upper-income groups (above ₹1,06,850) are few in number within local institutions, likely reflecting their preference for reputed urban or private colleges outside the district. Conversely, students from low-income

households (below ₹10,702) are concentrated in less costly disciplines such as Arts and B.Ed, highlighting financial constraints as a limiting factor in pursuing technical and professional programs. Overall, the data affirm that household income significantly shapes the range of academic options accessible to students, influencing both the affordability and perceived returns of chosen disciplines.

5.4 Gender and Academic Discipline Choice

Table 4. Distribution of Students' Academic Discipline by Gender

Gender	Arts	B.Ed.+ B.P.Ed	B.Pharm	BBA	Engineer ing	BSW	Com	La w	Scie nce	Total
Male	32	36	16	13	17	13	22	15	37	201
Female	30	32	17	14	17	15	23	13	34	195
Total	62	68	33	27	34	28	45	28	71	397

Source: Field survey

The distribution of academic disciplines by gender indicates near parity in higher education participation, with male students comprising 50.63% and female students 49.13% of the sample. Science has the highest enrolment for both genders, with only a marginal difference (37 males, 34 females), reflecting a decline in traditional gender-based subject preferences. The distribution is shown in table 4. Fields such as BSW, BBA, B.Pharm., and Law show a slightly higher proportion of female students, suggesting growing female interest in professional and socially oriented careers. Conversely, Arts, Commerce, and B.Ed. have a modest male majority, though the differences are not statistically significant. The overall pattern supports the view that gender has minimal influence on discipline choice in the district, pointing to shifting societal attitudes and greater acceptance of women pursuing diverse academic and career pathways.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm the substantial influence of socio-economic status (SES) on higher education access, academic discipline choice, and employment prospects in Bhandara district. Consistent with the conclusions of Salwa Al-Darwish (2016) and Rani & Devi (2021), the results demonstrate that parental education, occupation, and income shape students' educational trajectories in profound ways.

6.1 Parental Education and Academic Discipline Choice

The data reveal that students whose parents possess graduate or postgraduate qualifications are significantly more likely to enroll in professional and technical disciplines such as Science, Pharmacy, and Commerce. This aligns with the *Coleman Report* (1966), which emphasizes the role of parental education—particularly maternal education—in enhancing children's academic outcomes. Similarly, Chubaienla and

Imstutla (2022) observed that higher parental education facilitates both academic achievement and access to competitive programs.

In contrast, students from households where the head has minimal or no formal education tend to choose traditional fields such as B.Ed or B.P.Ed, possibly due to limited awareness of alternative career pathways, lower confidence in pursuing high-cost courses, and reduced exposure to competitive entrance exams.

6.2 Caste and Community Background

The caste-based patterns observed in this study echo earlier research highlighting the intersection of social stratification and education in India (Tilak, 2007; Dreze & Sen, 2013). Students from the Open and OBC categories dominate in career-oriented streams such as Science, Engineering, and Commerce, while SC, ST, and SBC students are more concentrated in teacher-training and social work disciplines. These patterns suggest that caste identity, intertwined with economic capital, continues to influence both educational aspirations and access to professional opportunities.

6.3 Household Income and Access to Professional Education

Household income emerged as a decisive factor in discipline selection. Students from middle-income households (₹31,978–₹53,360) formed the largest share of the sample, indicating that moderate financial stability supports higher education participation. However, students from high-income households (>₹213,814) were underrepresented in local institutions and more likely to pursue education in private or urban universities, reflecting UNESCO's (2020) observation that affluent families often seek institutions with higher prestige and perceived quality.

This income disparity mirrors findings by Declerck and Verboven (2014), who noted that financial capacity affects not only enrollment but also the level of institution and type of program chosen. In Bhandara, the scarcity of professional colleges means that students from lower-income backgrounds may be constrained to local, less market-oriented programs, limiting their employability in competitive sectors.

6.4 Gender and Academic Discipline Choice

The near-equal representation of male and female students across disciplines is a positive indicator, suggesting a decline in traditional gender-based educational segregation. This finding contrasts with earlier studies in rural India that reported significant gender gaps in higher education access (Desai, 2009). However, qualitative observations suggest that while female enrollment is high, many women remain concentrated in locally available programs due to mobility restrictions, a trend also noted by Dreze & Sen (2013).

6.5 Implications for Employment Outcomes

The study's results support Gill's (2022) assertion that employability in India remains closely tied to access to professional and skill-based education. In Bhandara district, students from higher SES backgrounds—by virtue of their ability to access professional streams—are positioned to secure better employment opportunities. Conversely, lower SES students, clustered in traditional disciplines, face limited job prospects, reinforcing cycles of socio-economic disadvantage.

6.6 Regional Patterns and Policy Considerations

The Bhandara case illustrates the “capability approach” (Sen, 1999) in action: students' educational choices are constrained not just by personal ambition but by the real freedoms afforded to them through socio-economic resources and local infrastructure. The district's overrepresentation of traditional disciplines and underrepresentation of professional courses limits upward mobility for students without the means to migrate for education.

To break this cycle, policies must address both *supply-side constraints*, such as the expansion of local professional education capacity and *demand-side barriers*, such as financial aid, targeted scholarships, and career guidance for disadvantaged groups.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that socio-economic status (SES) significantly influences higher education access, academic discipline choice, and employment prospects in Bhandara district, Maharashtra. The analysis of 397 students revealed that:

- ❖ **Parental education** is strongly correlated with the selection of professional and technical disciplines, while students from less-educated households tend toward traditional fields.
- ❖ **Caste identity**, intertwined with economic capital, continues to influence educational trajectories, with marginalized groups disproportionately represented in lower-remuneration disciplines.
- ❖ **Household income** determines both the feasibility of pursuing higher education and the type of institution or program accessed, with middle-income students forming the largest participation group and high-income students often opting for institutions outside the district.
- ❖ **Gender parity** in enrollment is improving, yet socio-cultural constraints still shape women's discipline choices and mobility.
- ❖ Access to **professional and skill-based education** remains uneven, reinforcing employability gaps between high- and low-SES groups.

The findings confirm the applicability of Sen's *Capability Approach* in explaining educational inequalities: students' aspirations are constrained not only by personal ambition but by the real opportunities available to them through economic resources, parental background, and institutional infrastructure.

7.2 Recommendations

A. Policy-Level Interventions

1. **Expand Professional Education Infrastructure:** Establish more local institutions offering engineering, medical, management, and vocational programs to reduce reliance on urban migration.
2. **Targeted Financial Assistance:** Implement need-based scholarships, tuition fee waivers, and low-interest education loans for students from lower SES backgrounds.
3. **Affirmative Access for Marginalized Groups:** Strengthen reservation and outreach programs to ensure SC, ST, and OBC students have equitable access to high-demand disciplines.
4. **Integration of Career Guidance Cells:** Make career counselling mandatory in secondary schools and junior colleges, focusing on awareness of diverse academic and career pathways.

B. Institutional-Level Strategies

5. **Skill Development Integration:** Embed industry-relevant skills, internships, and certification programs into traditional curricula to enhance employability.
6. **Bridging Programs:** Offer foundation courses in English, digital literacy, and soft skills for students transitioning from rural schools to higher education.
7. **Mentorship Initiatives:** Pair first-generation learners with faculty or alumni mentors to improve retention and guide career planning.

C. Community and Social Interventions

8. **Parental Engagement Programs:** Conduct awareness workshops in rural and semi-urban areas to inform parents about higher education opportunities, financial aid, and career options.
9. **Gender-Sensitive Measures:** Develop hostel and transport facilities for female students to reduce mobility constraints and encourage enrollment in professional programs.

10. **Public-Private Partnerships:** Encourage collaboration between government, NGOs, and industry to fund scholarships, infrastructure, and skill development initiatives.

Addressing the structural and socio-economic barriers identified in this study requires a multi-level strategy that combines infrastructure expansion, targeted financial support, skill development, and community engagement. Only through such integrated efforts can districts like Bhandara achieve equitable higher education access and bridge the employment opportunity gap, contributing to inclusive and sustainable socio-economic development.

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