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Discussion Paper 67

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October 2021

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Viewing Caste Inequality Upside Down

The Perversity of Special Schemes for Brahmins in South India*

Ashwini Deshpande[†] Rajesh Ramachandran[‡]

October 2021

This paper empirically examines the justification for a slew of preferential policies aimed at Brahmins, the group unambiguously regarded at the top of the caste hierarchy, in three southern states of India. Using data from India Human Development Survey, 2011-12, for united Andhra Pradesh at the time of survey (which later split into Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) and Karnataka, we compare Brahmins with non-Brahmin upper caste Hindus, OBCs, SC-STs and upper caste Muslims in their respective states. Our results reveal that Brahmins in these three states are at the top of (a) various human capital measures; (b) various standard of living indicators; and (c) have better political and social networks, compared to all other social groups. Since these schemes focus on economically weaker sections within the Brahmin communities, we also compare the poor within each of these communities. Even within the poor, the caste hierarchy is clear and present, with the human capital and material outcomes of poor Brahmins being substantially better than those of poor from other social groups. Finally, we show that this pattern, where Brahmins are at the top of virtually every indicator, is not confined to these specific states, but is a pan-Indian phenomenon. Thus, we argue that these preferential policies are perverse and retrench existing caste inequalities instead of eliminating them, and are in violation of the spirit of the Indian Constitution.

Keywords: Caste inequality, Brahmins, Preferential Policies, Affirmative Action, India

JEL Codes: I240; O15; J71

*We are grateful to Pratap Bhanu Mehta for a phone discussion on the nuances of the Indian Constitution's approach to caste inequality; and to Vivaan Gupta for compiling background material on the special schemes examined in this paper. We are responsible for all remaining errors.

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1 Introduction

The preamble of the Constitution of India promises to secure for all citizens “Justice, social, economic and political; [and] ... Equality of status and opportunity...”, among other goals.¹ Ensuring genuine justice, liberty, equality and fraternity is immensely challenging for any society; this was especially the case for newly independent India. As the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar famously emphasised, by adopting these core constitutional values in 1950, India entered “into a life of contradictions”, in that political equality (the principle of “one man, one vote”) was superimposed on a foundation of social inequality embodied by caste hierarchy that permeated all parts of the country, albeit with regional variation. Weakening the stranglehold of deep-rooted and multi-dimensional caste inequality was essential to the realisation of the goals of justice and equality. The Indian policy of affirmative action, the reservation system, was one step in that direction, designed as a scheme of compensatory discrimination via quotas. The affirmative action measures were complemented by several preferential policies targeted towards groups that were at the receiving end of the worst expression of caste inequality, viz., untouchability and the deep stigmatisation associated with it.

The administrative categories of Scheduled Castes or SC (a list of jatis, i.e. castes, that were considered ritually impure and therefore untouchable) and Scheduled Tribes, or ST (tribes that were highly marginalised) came into being as groups towards whom compensatory discrimination would be targeted. This policy was constitutionally sanctioned via Articles 15 (4) and 16 (4).² Untouchability was abolished via Article 17, deemed illegal and punishable by law through the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955. This was followed by the Prevention of Atrocities against SC-ST Act in 1989.³ The aim of these policies was to move towards substantive equality, which would make the formal guarantee of equality by the Constitution a lived reality. As a result, all states of India have special schemes targeted towards SC-STs. Over time, other groups such as Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) got added to the list of beneficiaries of affirmative action and preferential schemes.

Contemporary India has simultaneously witnessed vicious opposition to caste-based reservation alongside vociferous demands by groups for inclusion as beneficiaries. While the dominant discourse around reservation policies is opposed to caste-based preferences on grounds of these being antithetical to “merit”, and/or being populist vote-garnering ploys, the demand for being included in the reserved list continues to be raised by multiple caste groups, such as dominant castes in specific states (Jats in Haryana, Marathas in Maharashtra, Patels or Patidars in Gujarat, Kapus in Andhra Pradesh). We have provided empirical evidence to show why extension of reservations to these dominant

¹https://www.constitutionofindia.net/constitution_of_india/preamble

²https://www.constitutionofindia.net/constitution_of_india/fundamental_rights/articles/Article%2015

³<https://tribal.nic.in/actRules/preventionofAtricities.pdf>

castes would be misplaced (Deshpande and Ramachandran, 2017). We have also analysed the extension of reservations to the EWS category (the definition of which makes it a highly inaccurate way to count the poor, i.e. those below poverty line), which effectively creates a quota for upper castes and dilutes the purpose for which reservations were created in the first place, which was to provide representation to stigmatised and marginalised social groups in elite positions (Deshpande and Ramachandran, 2019a).

In this paper, we focus on an extraordinary set of measures adopted by three south Indian states, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, which provide preferential schemes for Brahmins, the jati (caste) unambiguously at the top of the caste hierarchy. These measures are extraordinary and perverse for four reasons. One, they invert the logic and purpose of preferential policies by suggesting that the most revered and socially dominant group needs protection, instead of the most vulnerable, as has hitherto been the case in independent India. Second, by conferring extra advantages to a group already at the top of an entrenched social hierarchy, these measures violate the constitutional vision that sought to create a society in which caste-based disadvantages would be minimised, to be eventually eliminated. Third, by earmarking certain types of training exclusively for Brahmins (e.g. Vedic education, without going into the merit of this training), it reinforces the injustice of the caste system due to which the accident of birth becomes the arbiter of future life chances. Fourth, the three state governments have been issuing caste certificates to individual Brahmins who wish to avail of these policies. Thus, these measures paradoxically count (i.e. identify) a non-SC-ST caste group, at a time when there is a fierce opposition to counting caste through a national census. Such a census would throw light on the actual material status of individual castes, but it is vociferously opposed because of the belief that it would harden caste distinctions instead of obliterating them. Identifying Brahmins violates the status quo just as much as a caste census would, since currently the only context under which caste appears in the official or public domain is that of reservation or preferential policies, i.e. groups such as SCs are identified as beneficiaries of schemes. For all other purposes, individual caste affiliation is not officially or legally recognised or counted, notwithstanding the ubiquitous presence of caste in the public sphere, via the marriage market or in electoral strategies and outcomes.

Using data from India Human Development Survey 2011-12 for united Andhra Pradesh at the time of survey (which later split into Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) and Karnataka, we compare Brahmins with non-Brahmin upper caste Hindus, OBCs, SC-STs and upper caste Muslims in their respective states. Our results reveal that Brahmins in these three states are the top of a) various human capital measures; b) various standard of living indicators; and c) have better political and social networks, compared to all other social groups. Since these schemes focus on the EWS within the Brahmin communities, we also compare the poor within each of these communities (by using the more sensible official poverty line cut-off, which identifies the poor more accurately).⁴ Even

⁴We use the official poverty line based on the Tendulkar methodology (Tendulkar, 2013).

within the poor, the caste hierarchy is clear and present, with the human capital and material outcomes of poor Brahmins being substantially better than those of poor from other social groups. Lest it be argued that these states are exceptional, we also show that the pattern of Brahmin outcomes exceeding those of other social groups by a large margin is not unique to these states. Our results show that this is a pan-Indian reality.

The rest of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 briefly outlines details of the preferential schemes. Section 3 shows the empirical results of comparing Brahmins to other social groups in the respective states. Section 4 focuses only on the poor and compares group differences between the states. Section 5 presents a discussion of the results and offers concluding comments. The online appendix presents the analysis of Section 3 for the entire country.

2 Details of Preferential Schemes for Brahmins

All three states have very similar schemes targeted at Brahmins, briefly enumerated below. It is noteworthy that the schemes have been named after iconic Brahmin figures such as Chanakya (Vishnugupt), the highly revered Brahmin philosopher, jurist and economist, the author of the first treatise on economics, “Arthashastra”, dated between 3rd and 4th century BC. Schemes are also named after other historical and mythological figures that are an integral part of the mainstream Hindu cultural ethos that the majority community subscribes to. Just this fact is sufficient to indicate that the schemes are not targeting a disadvantaged or marginal community, but one whose icons predominate the mainstream psyche and cultural values, despite the community being a tiny minority.

It is noteworthy that the set of policies promote or support Brahmins in their traditional caste roles (priesthood or pursuing Vedic knowledge), but also pushes for diversification of livelihood opportunities outside traditional roles e.g. entrepreneurship, in recognition of modern realities. This makes the policies all the more bizarre, as one can, for arguments’ sake, justify a special policy to preserve a vanishing or a possibly non-remunerative occupation. The question that arises is what considerations compel these state governments to reserve diversification of livelihoods only to Brahmins and not open up these opportunities to everyone. Caste-based occupational or educational division is not meant to be promoted; it is a scourge that prevents equality of opportunity. Whatever the merit of Vedic education might be, reserving any kind of training or education for one section is anathema to the idea of equality.

We can see in the descriptions of the schemes below that many of consist of support to the poor, which is a laudable goal for public policy, had it not been exclusively reserved for the poor among the socially privileged and revered group.

The pioneer in developing preferential policies for Brahmins was the state of Andhra

Pradesh. In December 2014, N. Chandrababu Naidu, the Chief Minister heading the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) government, set up the Andhra Pradesh Brahmin Welfare Corporation for Brahmins in the state, a group with a 5 percent population share⁵. While the initial amount of funding is not mentioned on the website, the state government’s CM Office Real-time Executive dashboard (CORE portal) provides a fair amount of detail on the “Brahmin Welfare Corp” until the year 2018-19⁶.

It ran schemes such as Vedavyasa, a financial assistance for Brahmin students pursuing Vedic Education; Gayathri, “recognizing of “topper students”, belonging to the Brahmin community, of a recognized and reputed” college at any education level; Bharti, “financial assistance to Brahmin students to continue their academic education”; Vasishta, “Coaching and guidance to Brahmin students for competitive examinations”; Dronacharya, “Skill development among unemployed Brahmin youth”; Chanakya, “encourage economically weak Brahmin entrepreneurs to set up enterprises”; Kalyanamastu Pathakam “Encouraging Vedic culture for the Bride who is marrying to a Brahmin Boy who is in the profession of Purohityam or Veda-Parayanam or Archakatham”; Kashyapa “Monthly pensions to poor orphaned or destitute women or differently abled, senior citizens, widows with food and shelter expenses”; Garuda, “financial assistance for funeral expenses of deceased Brahmins where the family has no other means to meet the said expenses”; and Bhargava, “matching grants “to catalyse, energize and strengthen the efforts of individuals or an association or organisation representing Brahmin Community”.

In January 2017, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) government led by K. Chandrashekhara Rao followed suit and established the Telangana Brahmin Samkshema Parishad (TBSP) with an initial funding of INR 1 billion (100 crores) targeted at the 3 percent Brahmin population in the state.⁷

It runs schemes such as Vedahita (“encouraging and providing financial assistance to Veda classes, Vedic studies and students across the state”), and to provide “honorarium for Veda Shastra Pandits (expert scholars of the Vedas)” in the state; Vivekananda Overseas Education, which provides financial support to Brahmin students for higher educational courses abroad; Sri Ramanuja, which offers fee reimbursement to Brahmin students belonging to the below poverty line (BPL) category; Brahmin Entrepreneurship Scheme of Telangana (BEST) providing financial assistance to Brahmin entrepreneurs; and Brahmin Sadan, which establishes centres of cultural, religious, spiritual and communal activities to benefit Brahmins from the state.

⁵<https://theprint.in/politics/now-ap-karnataka-telangana-usher-in-world-of-upper-caste-politics-privilege-the-brahmins/731030/>

⁶<https://core.ap.gov.in/CMDashBoard/UserInterface/School/BrahminWelfareCorpReport.aspx>

⁷<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/upper-caste-quota-telangana-and-andhra-already-running-brahmin-corporations/articleshow/67465534.cms>. To put this number in perspective it is interesting to note that for instance the entire state budget for mid-day meals for the year 2019-20 was INR 318 crores; see http://mdm.nic.in/mdm_website/Files/PAB/PAB-2019-20/PAB_2019-20_minutes/Telangana.pdf

There is very little information available on the detailed functions of the TBSP, with the occasional mentions of “applications open for TBSP schemes” in some regional newspapers. An internet search revealed that the TBSP also runs a marriage scheme similar to that in Karnataka, which guarantees a joint fixed deposit of INR 300,000 and an additional INR 100,000 for wedding expenses to brides who would marry a Brahmin priest, with no upper limit for the number of couples who would get this assistance.

In July 2020, the Chief Minister of Karnataka, B. S. Yediyurappa of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the national ruling party, set up the Karnataka State Brahmin Development Board (KSBDB) at a cost of INR 250 million (25 crores)⁸. The share of Brahmins in the state population is roughly 4 percent. These schemes include financial assistance to “needy” Brahmin students, training and skill development programmes to help students compete in national level entrance examinations as well as for entrepreneurial activities, old age support via pensions and old age homes and organising youth festivals for “younger generation in the development of [the] Brahmin community and society as a whole”. Significantly, the KSBDB also conducts a survey of Brahmins in the state.

Although the KSBDB website does not provide any details, the Karnataka government announced two schemes which were launched by the board, *viz.*, Arundhati (550 Brahmin women from poor backgrounds to be given INR 25,000 each for their marriage), and Maitreyi (offering a financial bond of INR 300,000 lakh for 25 women who marry Brahmin priests from poor backgrounds, to be used over three years.⁹)

3 How do the Brahmins fare in comparison to the other social groups?

3.1 Data and Methodology

We use data from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) of 2011–12, which classifies individuals as Brahmins, Forward/General (except Brahmin), Other Backward Castes (OBC), Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Others, as well as by religious categories - Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Tribal and Others - giving us a sample of 40,588 households and 197,377 individuals.

We construct five social groups using data on caste category and religion that account for the two of the key cleavages in society: Brahmin Hindus comprising 5 percent of the sample¹⁰; the upper caste Hindus (UC-Hindus), the non-SC-ST-OBC Hindus comprising

⁸<https://ksbdb.karnataka.gov.in/english>

⁹<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/karnataka-brahmin-development-board-schemes-explained-7191607/>

¹⁰The Brahmins are the individuals involved traditionally in the occupation of priests, scholars and

15 percent of the sample¹¹; Other Backward Classes (OBCs) comprising 43 percent of the sample¹²; Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SC-ST) comprising 31 percent of the sample;¹³ and the upper caste Muslims (UC-Muslims) comprising 5.80 percent of the sample (Sachar Committee, 2007)¹⁴

We compare the five groups on indicators of human capital, material standards of living and social prestige and networks. We present group level means and the 95 percent confidence intervals for each of the indicators. For the indicators measured at the individual level, when calculating the group means and the confidence intervals, we account for age, gender and state of residence of the individual, and also allow for the standard errors to be correlated for individuals living within the same sampling cluster. For the indicators measured at the household level, we account for the age, gender and state of residence of the household head, and also allow for the standard errors to be correlated for individuals living within the same sampling cluster.

3.2 Human capital differences across groups

The first five indicators are: (i) years of schooling; (ii) a dummy for an individual with 12 or more years of schooling; (iii) dummy for being literate; (iv) dummy for being fluent in English; (v) dummy for having some English ability. We consider the sample of individuals aged 18 years or more in 2011-12 resulting a total of 18,383 respondents, and the results are shown in Figure 1. We can see a clear ordering with Brahmins having the best human capital outcomes on all seven indicators, followed by the non-Brahmin UC-Hindus, OBCs, SC-ST and UC-Muslims. For instance, they have on an average 9.5 years of schooling, 41 percent have finished 12 or more years of schooling and 87 percent are literate. The commensurate figures for SC-ST are 4.70, 0.13 and 0.53, respectively. Thus, compared to the SC-ST they have more than double the years of schooling, are three times more likely to have finished 12 years or more of schooling, and are 64 percent more likely to be literate. Even when comparing with the non-Brahmin

teachers and at the top of the caste hierarchy.

¹¹The UC-Hindus are the group consisting of the Kshatriyas (traditional occupation consisting of rulers, warriors and administrators) and Vaishyas (traditional occupation consists of agriculturalists and merchants), i.e. high-ranking castes.

¹²They are a group of intermediate to low-ranked castes and communities traditionally identified as Shudras (traditional occupation of laborers and service providers). The OBCs receive affirmative action since 1992 in central government services, and since 2006 in central and private institutes of higher education (Deshpande, 2013)

¹³The SC-ST are among the most socioeconomically disadvantaged groups and receive preferential affirmative action, for which purpose they are listed in a government schedule (hence called the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes). While the nomenclature of SC and ST are the official administrative categories, *Dalit* meaning “oppressed” and *Adivasi*, meaning “indigenous people,” is often used to describe SC and ST communities.

¹⁴The Muslims they have been recognized as a group facing multiple forms of disadvantage in the country since the publication of the Sachar Committee report on the social, economic and educational status of Muslims.

UC Hindus, Brahmins have two more years of schooling, are 1.78 times more likely to have finished 12 years or more of schooling, and are 18 percent more likely to be literate.

The human capital indicators show that Brahmins also report superior English abilities, a skill rewarded highly on the labor market (Azam et al., 2013); 22 and 63 percent report being fluent or having some English ability, the corresponding figures for non-Brahmin UC-Hindus, and SC-ST are 9 and 33 and 4 and 21 percent, respectively.

These differences in human capital are already visible among children aged 8-11 years old whose ability to read, as well as numerical skills were tested. The last two bars of Figure 1 consider the following two indicators for the children aged 8-11: (vi) dummy for a child that can read a paragraph or sentence; and (vii) dummy for a child that can divide or subtract. It shows that 64 percent of Brahmin kids aged 8-11 can read a paragraph or story and divide and subtract, respectively. On the other hand, the figures for non-Brahmin UC-Hindus is 53 and 64 percent, respectively, and for the SC-ST, 40 and 44 percent, respectively.

Figure A1 in the Appendix shows that the documented differences in human capital, with the Brahmins on top followed by the non-Brahmin UC Hindus, OBCs and SC-ST is true not just for these states, but at an all India-level.¹⁵

3.3 Differences in material standards of living

Figure 2 compares the same five social groups in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka on six indicators of living standards. Five indicators, namely: (i) per capita household income measured in 10,000s of Rs. (in 2011-12 prices); (ii) per capita household consumption expenditure measured in 10,000s of Rs. (in 2011-12 prices); (iii) dummy for household classified as non-poor; (iv) dummy for households with access to some toilet facility; (v) dummy for households who own or cultivate land - are calculated at the household level accounting for age, gender and state of residence of the household head and results in a sample of 5664 households. The last indicator (vi) dummy for holding a professional job considers the entire sample of individuals aged 18 or more and who report having an occupation (a sample of 8836 individuals).

We again observe that Brahmins have the best outcomes followed by the non-Brahmin Hindu UCs and the OBCs. The SC-ST and UC-Muslims are largely indistinguishable though the UC-Muslim households do better in terms of access to toilets and owning or cultivating land. In terms of income per capita, the figures are Rs. 58200, 24700, 22600, 19400 and 21200 for the Brahmins, non-Brahmin UC Hindus, OBCs, SC-ST and Upper Caste Muslims, respectively. In other words, the per capita income of Brahmins

¹⁵The ordering between SC-ST and UC-Muslims switches around, that is, the SC-ST perform better than the UC-Muslims in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, whereas the UC-Muslims perform better when the country is considered as a whole.

is 2.35 to 3 times greater than the non-Brahmin UC Hindus and SC-ST, respectively. 30 percent of Brahmins hold a professional job, whereas the corresponding figures are 12, 8, 6 and 3 for non-Brahmin UC Hindus, OBCs, SC-ST and Upper Caste Muslims, respectively. Only 4 percent of Brahmin households are classified as poor, whereas the corresponding proportions are 8 and 10 percent for non-Brahmin UC Hindus and the OBCs, respectively, and 16 and 19 percent for the SC-ST and UC Muslims, respectively. In other words, the rate of poverty is 4 to 5 times higher among the SC-ST and UC Muslims compared to the Brahmins. Finally, there are large differences in access to basic infrastructure; whereas 85 percent of Brahmin households have access to some form of toilet, the commensurate figures are 63, 58, 39 and 57 for non-Brahmin UC Hindus, OBCs, SC-ST and Upper Caste Muslims, respectively.

Figure A2 in the Appendix shows that the differences on the same six material standards living indicators but now for all of India. We see that the ordering is maintained though the UC Muslims perform better than the SC-STs when the country is considered as a whole.

Summary The evidence presented in Section 3 shows that the Brahmins do significantly better than the four other social groups in terms of both the human capital they possess, as well as the material outcomes in terms of income, consumption, occupation, poverty, access to sanitation and land. Moreover, this is true not only for the states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka but for the country as whole. Thus, the Brahmins can not be considered a disadvantaged group in terms of any capabilities or on the material basis of life.

The reservation policy was designed to account for social disadvantages faced by groups and to counter discrimination stemming from the caste system and the associated rituals of untouchability. Table 1 shows that 55 percent of Brahmins self-report that they adhere to the practice of some form of untouchability. Moreover, 22 percent of SC-ST households respond that some household members experienced untouchability in the last five years. Table 1 also shows that Brahmin households are also likely to possess superior political and social networks both within and outside their caste/community. For instance, they are more likely to have acquaintance with doctors, teachers, elected politicians, officers, inspectors, other government employees and health workers both within and outside their community/caste. Thus, Brahmins not only self-profess following practices that discriminate against individuals from other social groups but are also seen to be better connected both socially and politically. In sum, the evidence suggests that there are neither social nor economic criteria that justify targeting benefits to Brahmins based on their group identity.

4 Are poor Brahmins worse off than the poor from other groups?

The eligibility criteria of the schemes is often only the requirement of belonging to the Brahmin community though certain income thresholds have been fixed depending on the scheme. One might thus wonder that though the share of poor among the Brahmins is 4 to 5 times lower than the SC-ST and the UC-Muslims is it the case that the poor among the Brahmins are especially disadvantaged?

To explore this we restrict the sample to households classified as poor and resident in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka and regress the 13 outcomes from Figures 1 and 2 on a set of group dummies, as well as dummies for age, sex and state of residence and cluster the standard errors at the level of the primary sampling unit. The coefficients on the group dummies are shown in Table 2. We see that the picture emerging from the comparison of the poor from the five social groups is similar to the picture from the comparison of the entire population; poor Brahmins are again at the top followed by the non-Brahmin UC Hindus, OBCs, SC-ST and Upper Caste Muslims. For instance, Brahmins are 10, 14 and 21 percentage points more likely than non-Brahmin UC Hindus, SC-ST and UC Muslims to finish 12 or more years of schooling or have household per capita income that is greater by Rs. 8200 and Rs 5400 as compared to the non-Brahmin UC Hindus and the SC-ST, respectively.

Our estimates on the poor in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka reduces the sample to between 300 and 600 households. Therefore, we also explore the differences among the individuals classified as poor across the five social groups, but at the all-India level. Here the larger sample allows for greater precision in the estimates. The results are shown in Figures A3 and A4. The patterns are very stark and again in favor of the Brahmins followed by the non-Brahmin UC Hindus and the OBCs, whereas the SC-ST and Muslims are largely indistinguishable at the bottom of the pyramid. For instance, poor Brahmins have on an average 6.83 years of schooling, 17 percent have completed 12 or more years of schooling and 77 percent are literate. Comparing these to Figure A1 shows that the educational attainment of poor Brahmins is greater than the attainment of all OBCs, SC-ST and UC-Muslims (poor and non-poor combined). Similarly, poor Brahmins are more likely to have access to a household toilet or hold a professional job as compared to the sample of both poor and non poor SC-ST and UC-Muslims.

5 Discussion and Concluding Comments

Our analysis provides empirical demonstration of the reality that marks contemporary India, *viz.*, that Brahmins continue to be at the top across a range of socio-economic indicators. Whatever the churning in the caste system has been due to affirmative action

and the “Mandalisation” of politics that saw a sharp rise in political representation from hitherto stigmatised caste groups, it has not upset the traditional position of Brahmins at the top of the caste hierarchy.

The thrust of all the Brahmin-specific welfare support schemes is financial assistance in a variety of ways to sections within the Brahmin community. Most schemes are laudable in their objective, but there is absolutely no justification to excluding non-Brahmins from their purview. Making special and exclusive schemes for Brahmins goes against the promise of equality in the constitution, which aims to create a society where the accident of birth would not determine future life chances of any individual. We have noted that affirmative action and preferential policies targeted towards SC-STs are subject to vicious opposition for many reasons, including the belief that these entrench caste consciousness, rather than weaken it. It is remarkable that none of the usual anti-reservation hysteria, decrying the death of merit or pandering to vote-banks or the politics of appeasement, has accompanied the announcement of these schemes. Even the mainstream media is strangely silent; there have been only 2-3 articles on these highly significant policy measures that have been around for at least five years.

These measures should make us reflect on why group-based preferential schemes are needed in the first place. Public policies should target groups *qua* groups when their socio-economic outcomes are adverse because of systemic or structural causes. In the US, analysis points towards systemic racism preventing equalisation of Black-White outcomes.¹⁶ In India, the analogous institution that keeps caste hierarchy intact is Brahmanical Hinduism, which is the dominant version of Hinduism. Thus, not only are Brahmins not systematically persecuted or suppressed, but on the contrary, the version of Hinduism that maintains their place at the top is the version that rules.

Groups at the bottom of the hierarchy are typically negatively stereotyped everywhere in the world. Debates on Black-White disparities in the US hinge on whether the disparities are caused by structural or systemic racism or by cultural or even genetic deficiencies within Black communities (see the discussion in Small et al. 2010, as well as other commentaries¹⁷). India has witnessed similar debates, where SCs (Dalits) are mocked as undue beneficiaries of reservations, ridiculed as “*sarkari damaad*” (sons-in-law of the state, i.e. living off largesses without doing any work), and suffer the stigma of incompetence in addition to the ignominy of their “untouchable” status.

However, the stereotypes for Brahmins are the exact opposite, i.e. are extremely positive. Indeed, the Telangana Brahmin Samkshema Parishad’s description of Brahmins makes no bones about their belief and explicitly states that the community is superior, a description that can be read as a belief in innate or genetic superiority. Their home page states “BRAHMIN stands for Broad and Brilliant in Thinking, Righteous and

¹⁶<https://www.vox.com/2020/6/17/21284527/systemic-racism-black-americans-9-charts-explained>

¹⁷<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/04/the-source-of-black-poverty-isnt-black-culture-its-american-culture/359937/>

Religious in Livelihood, Adroit and Adventurous in Personality, Honesty and Humanity in Quality, Modesty and Morality in Character, Innovation and Industry in Performance and Nobility and Novelty in Approach (*sic*)¹⁸. This description is dangerously close to the White Supremacy argument, which consists of “beliefs and ideas purporting natural superiority of the lighter-skinned, or “white,” human races over other racial groups”¹⁹.

Is poverty a problem among Brahmins? Indeed it is, but poverty does not afflict Brahmins exclusively. There are poor Brahmins, just as there are poor within every community. Our argument is that all poor individuals should be able to avail of universal programmes that India has plenty of, such as rural employment guarantee or the public distribution system providing subsidised foodgrains. Are these universal programmes sufficient in their reach and depth? The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the serious shortcomings of these programmes and proved that these are woefully inadequate. Therefore, it is clear that India needs to strengthen its welfare support system, which will benefit the poor among all communities, including Brahmins. There is absolutely no justification for schemes exclusively targeted towards the Brahmins. As political scientist Pratap Bhanu Mehta argues, these schemes are a “grotesque perversion of constitutional values”²⁰.

The original contradiction, highlighted by Ambedkar, of the form of formal equality being superimposed on a structure of substantive inequality remains persistent and serious (Mosse, 2018; Deshpande and Ramachandran, 2019b), especially since the state has made no effort to sensitise society to caste-based discrimination by, for instance, inclusion of caste sensitivity training for bureaucrats or politicians or curriculum addressing caste disparities and its origins at any level of education. The measures implemented by the three states are the exact opposite of what needs to be done to weaken the stranglehold of caste. These are possibly motivated by political, electoral or ideological considerations and unlike preferential schemes for SC-STs that provide a modicum of social justice (albeit nowhere sufficient enough), these are quintessential appeasement policies that have no place in a modernising India that aspires to be a global superpower or a “Vishwaguru” (teacher to the world).

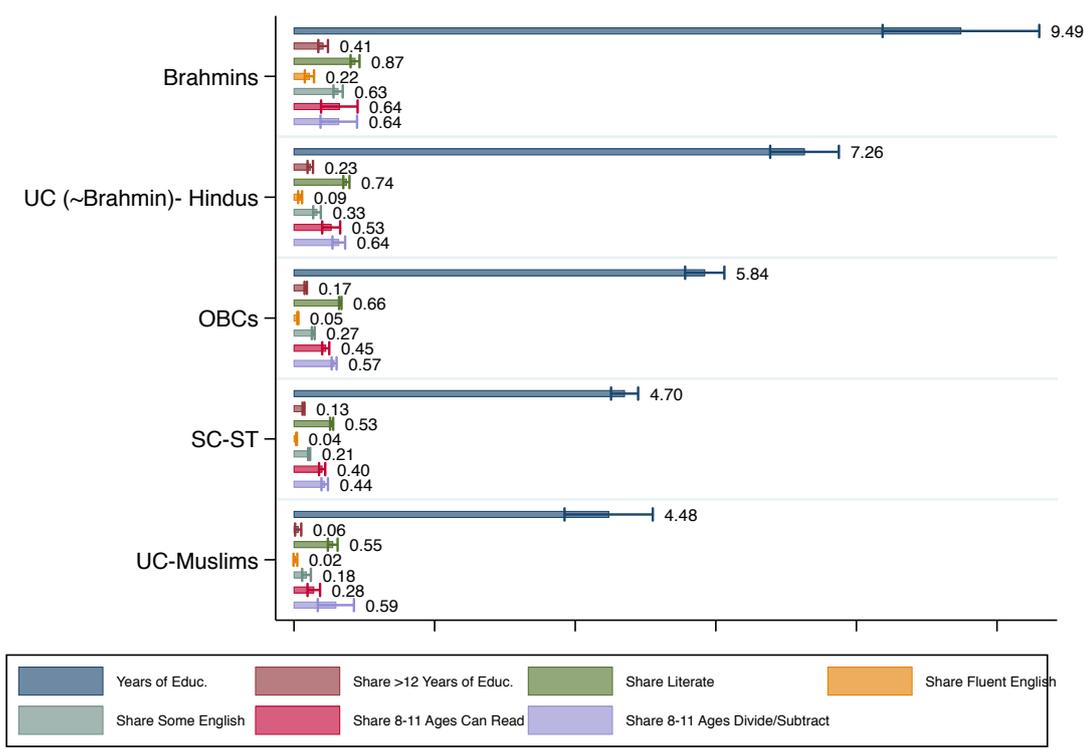
¹⁸<https://brahminparishad.telangana.gov.in/FirstPage.do>

¹⁹<https://www.britannica.com/topic/white-supremacy>

²⁰<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/brahmin-welfare-schemes-social-justice-7495186/>

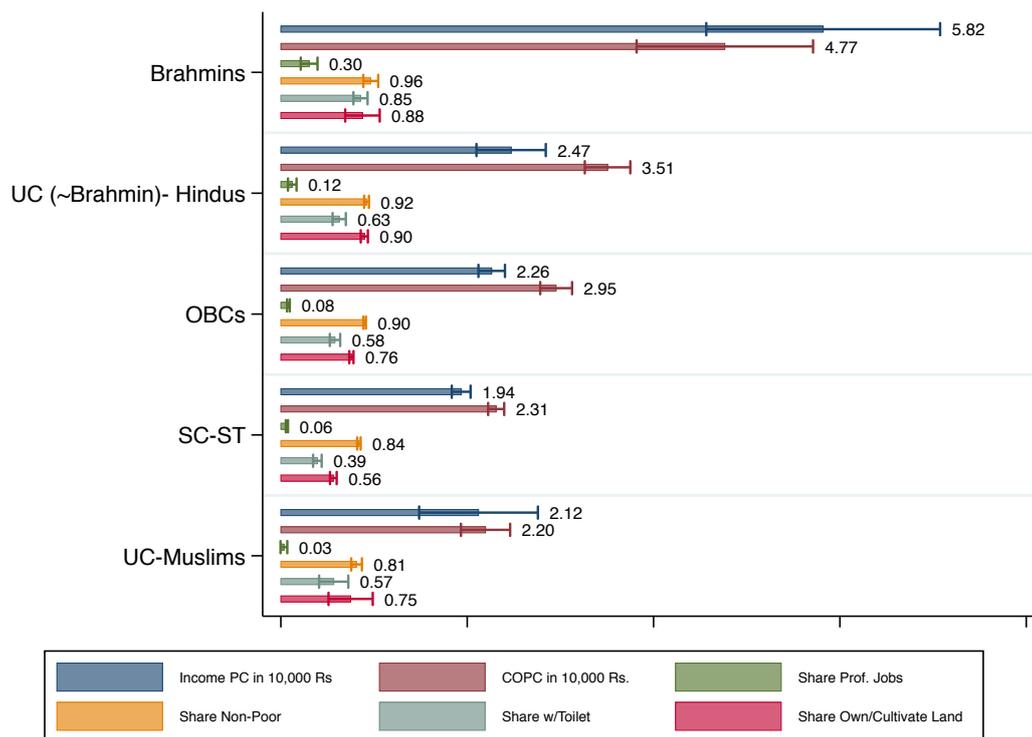
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Notes: The graph presents the average and the 95 percent confidence interval accounting for the age, gender and state of residence of the respondent for the indicators of (i) years of schooling; (ii) share greater than 12 years of schooling; (iii) share literate; (iv) share fluent in English; (v) share with some English ability; (vi) share of 8-11 year old's that can read a paragraph or sentence; and (vii) share of 8-11 year old's than can divide or subtract. The data is from the IHDS-2011-12.

Figure 1: Differences in Human Capital Across Groups - Andhra Pradesh and Karnatka



Notes: The graph presents the average and the 95 percent confidence interval accounting for the age, gender and state of residence of the respondent for the indicators of (i) per-capita household income measured in 10,000 of Rs.; (ii) per-capita consumption expenditure measured in 10,000 of Rs.; (iii) share holding professional jobs; (iv) share classified as non-poor; (v) share of households with access to some toilet facility; (vi) share of households who own or cultivate land. The data is from the IHDS-2011-12.

Figure 2: Differences in Material Standards of Living Across Groups - Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	UC-Hindus				
	Brahmins	not Brahmins	OBCs	SC-ST	UC-Muslims
Practice untouchability	0.55 (0.50)	0.32 (0.47)	0.35 (0.48)	0.19 (0.39)	0.14 (0.34)
HH members experienced untouchability	.	.	.	0.22	.
Member Political Party	(.) 0.06 (0.23)	(.) 0.07 (0.25)	(.) 0.04 (0.19)	(.42) 0.04 (0.19)	(.) 0.07 (0.25)
Panchayat member/official in HH	0.06 (0.23)	0.06 (0.23)	0.04 (0.20)	0.05 (0.22)	0.03 (0.18)
Panchayat member/official close to HH	0.25 (0.44)	0.22 (0.41)	0.28 (0.45)	0.26 (0.44)	0.13 (0.34)
Acquaintance among relatives/caste/community with					
Doctors	0.34 (0.47)	0.34 (0.47)	0.21 (0.40)	0.15 (0.36)	0.29 (0.45)
other health workers	0.25 (0.43)	0.26 (0.44)	0.16 (0.36)	0.14 (0.35)	0.23 (0.42)
Teachers/Principal	0.50 (0.50)	0.46 (0.50)	0.31 (0.46)	0.27 (0.44)	0.39 (0.49)
Officer	0.16 (0.37)	0.16 (0.37)	0.07 (0.26)	0.06 (0.24)	0.09 (0.28)
other govt. employees	0.17 (0.38)	0.21 (0.41)	0.11 (0.32)	0.13 (0.33)	0.18 (0.38)
Elected Politician	0.09 (0.29)	0.12 (0.32)	0.05 (0.23)	0.05 (0.23)	0.08 (0.28)
Acquaintance outside community/caste with					
Doctors	0.48 (0.50)	0.49 (0.50)	0.43 (0.49)	0.36 (0.48)	0.40 (0.49)
Inspector	0.11 (0.31)	0.11 (0.32)	0.06 (0.23)	0.05 (0.22)	0.06 (0.24)
Health workers	0.40 (0.49)	0.36 (0.48)	0.33 (0.47)	0.29 (0.46)	0.33 (0.47)
Teachers	0.58 (0.49)	0.54 (0.50)	0.46 (0.50)	0.40 (0.49)	0.43 (0.49)
Officer	0.20 (0.40)	0.23 (0.42)	0.13 (0.33)	0.11 (0.32)	0.13 (0.34)
other govt. employees	0.23 (0.42)	0.28 (0.45)	0.18 (0.39)	0.17 (0.38)	0.21 (0.41)
Elected Politician	0.19 (0.39)	0.23 (0.42)	0.13 (0.33)	0.11 (0.31)	0.14 (0.35)
Inspector	0.12 (0.33)	0.17 (0.37)	0.09 (0.28)	0.07 (0.26)	0.10 (0.30)
Observations	10179	31264	83853	60478	11488

Notes: The table presents the mean and standard deviation from the IHDS-II on a range of proxies measuring social and political connectedness of groups.

16
Table 1: Differences in political and social networks across groups - All India

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Panel A - Human Capital Outcomes							
	Yrs. of educ.	Dummy ≥ 12 years of educ.	Literate Literate	English Fluent	Dummy for Some English	Can Read	Can Divide and Subt.
UC Hindus (not Brahmins)	0.50 (1.49)	-0.098* (0.052)	0.035 (0.20)	-0.016 (0.019)	-0.24*** (0.083)	-0.58*** (0.17)	-0.24 (0.17)
OBCs	-0.66 (0.91)	-0.13*** (0.043)	-0.014 (0.10)	-0.015 (0.016)	-0.27*** (0.072)	-0.82*** (0.11)	-0.76*** (0.11)
SC-ST	-1.53 (0.93)	-0.14*** (0.039)	-0.13 (0.11)	-0.015 (0.019)	-0.26*** (0.061)	-0.88*** (0.10)	-0.92*** (0.093)
UC-Muslims	-1.87* (0.99)	-0.21*** (0.039)	-0.100 (0.11)	-0.030 (0.019)	-0.38*** (0.059)	-1.21*** (0.16)	-0.67 (0.46)
Constant	5.16*** (0.94)	0.20*** (0.041)	0.60*** (0.11)	0.028 (0.017)	0.39*** (0.066)	1.20*** (0.095)	1.11*** (0.083)
Observations	2,349	2,353	2,348	2,349	2,349	168	167
R-squared	0.306	0.079	0.276	0.069	0.153	0.188	0.250
Panel B - Material Outcomes							
	Household Income Per Capita	Household Consum.	Prof. Job	Dummy for HH Toilet	Own/Cult. Land		
UC Hindus (not Brahmins)	-0.82*** (0.29)	0.37** (0.14)	-0.054 (0.054)	-0.64*** (0.20)	1.04*** (0.15)		
OBCs	-0.56 (0.40)	0.33** (0.14)	-0.053 (0.054)	-0.65*** (0.21)	0.97*** (0.14)		
SC-ST	-0.54 (0.34)	0.23* (0.13)	-0.039 (0.062)	-0.78*** (0.20)	0.63*** (0.16)		
UC-Muslims	-0.43 (0.38)	0.37** (0.15)	-0.074 (0.056)	-0.57** (0.25)	0.73** (0.26)		
Constant	1.72*** (0.34)	0.65*** (0.13)	0.079 (0.054)	0.98*** (0.19)	-0.15 (0.15)		
Observations	595	595	1,261	587	313		
R-squared	0.138	0.220	0.070	0.174	0.497		
Age Dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State Dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gender Dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

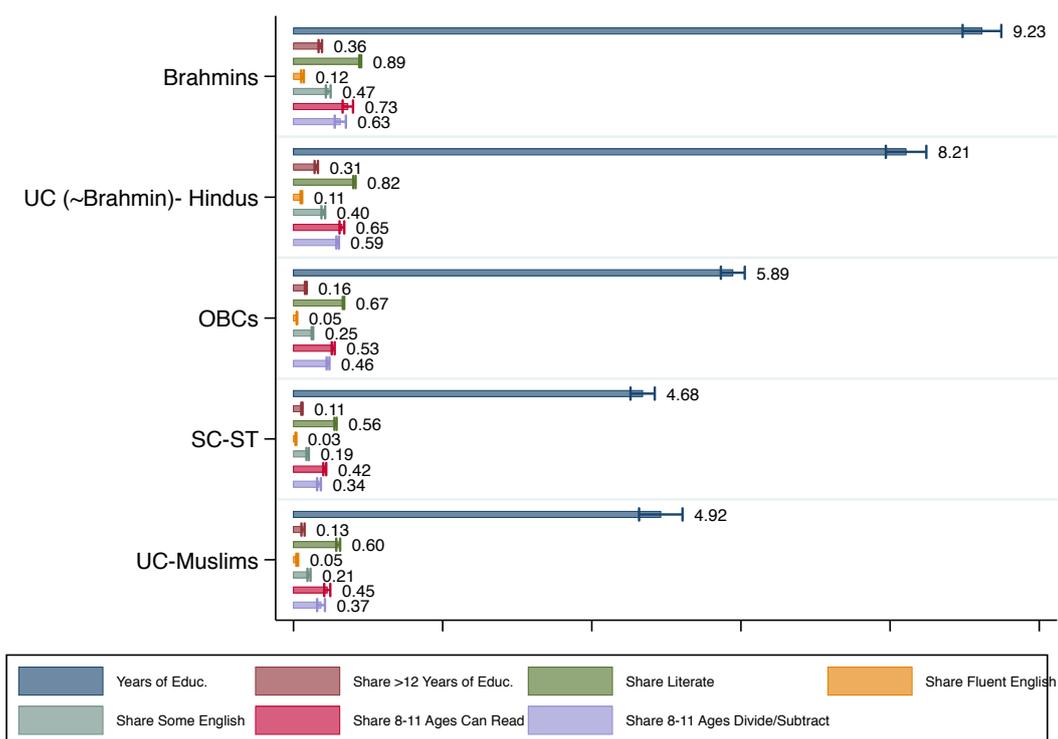
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Notes: The table presents the results of regressing the seven proxies for human capital - (i) years of schooling; (ii) dummy for greater than 12 years of schooling; (iii) dummy for literate; (iv) dummy for fluent in English; (v) dummy for some English ability; (vi) dummy for 8-11 year old can read a paragraph or sentence; and (vii) dummy for 8-11 year old can divide or subtract - on a set of group dummies and dummies for age, gender and state of residence. The standard errors are clustered at the primary sampling unit level.

Table 2: Differences in Human capital across 17 groups - Sample of individuals classified as poor in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka

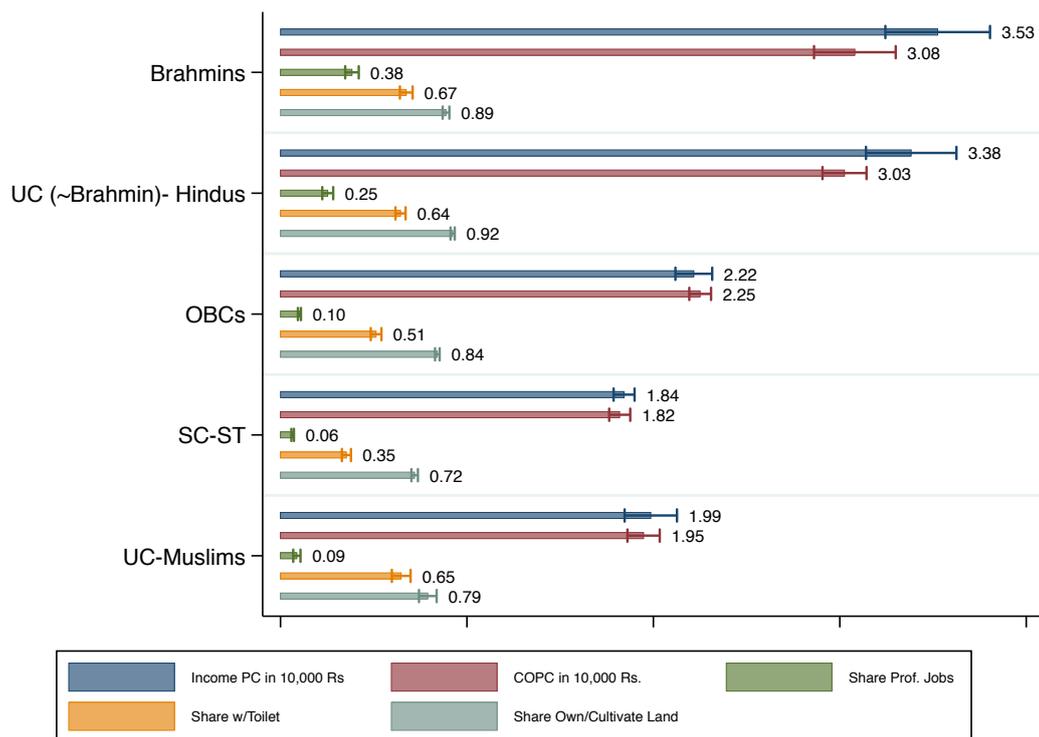
Online Appendix

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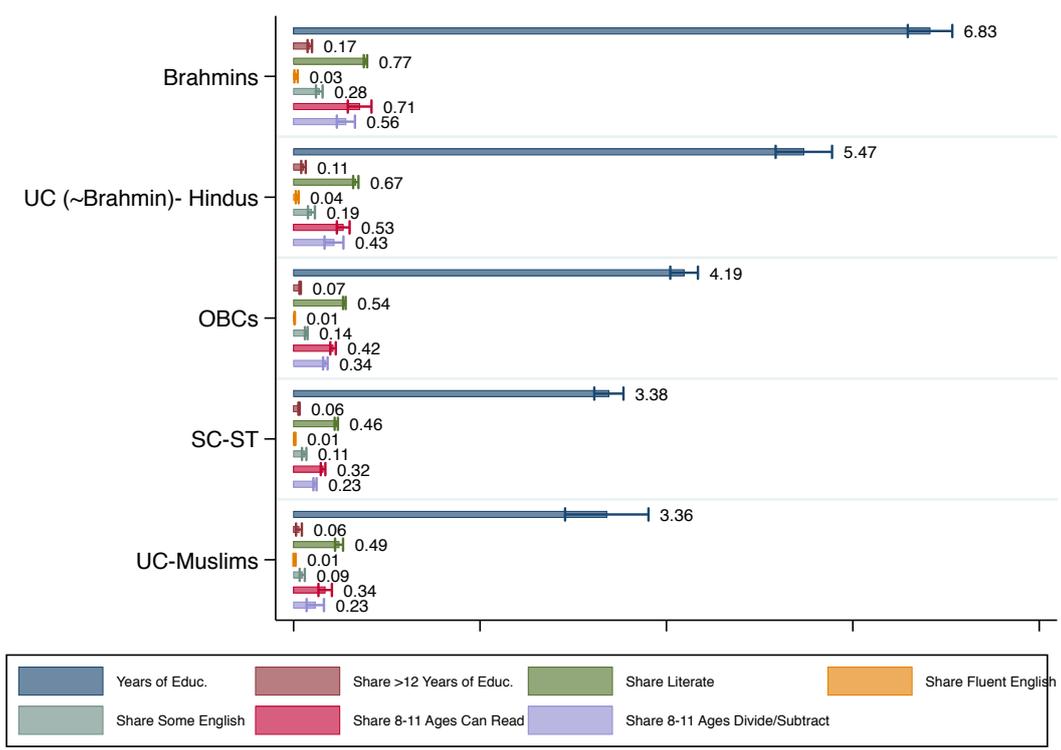
Notes: The graph presents the average and the 95 percent confidence interval accounting for the age, gender and state of residence of the respondent for the indicators of (i) years of schooling; (ii) share greater than 12 years of schooling; (iii) share literate; (iv) share fluent in English; (v) share with some English ability; (vi) share of 8-11 year old's that can read a paragraph or sentence; and (vii) share of 8-11 year old's than can divide or subtract. The data is from the IHDS-2011-12.

Figure A1: Differences in Human Capital Across Groups - All India



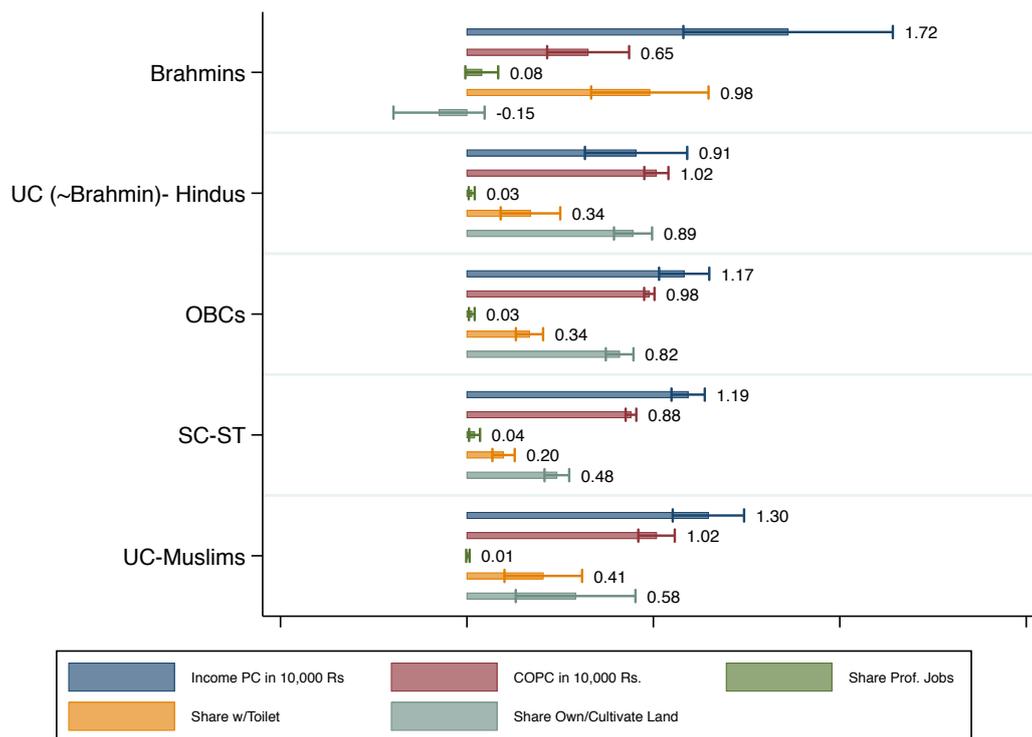
Notes: The graph presents the average and the 95 percent confidence interval accounting for the age, gender and state of residence of the respondent for the indicators of (i) per-capita household income measured in 10,000 of Rs.; (ii) per-capita consumption expenditure measured in 10,000 of Rs.; (iii) share holding professional jobs; (iv) share classified as non-poor; (v) share of households with access to some toilet facility; (vi) share of households who own or cultivate land. The data is from the IHDS-2011-12.

Figure A2: Differences in Material Standards of Living Across Groups - All India



Notes: The table presents the results of regressing the seven proxies for human capital - (i) years of schooling; (ii) dummy for greater than 12 years of schooling; (iii) dummy for literate; (iv) dummy for fluent in English; (v) dummy for some English ability; (vi) dummy for 8-11 year old can read a paragraph or sentence; and (vii) dummy for 8-11 year old can divide or subtract - on a set of group dummies and dummies for age, gender and state of residence. The standard errors are clustered at the primary sampling unit level.

Figure A3: Differences in Human Capital Across Groups - Individuals Classified as Poor - All India



Notes: The graph presents the average and the 95 percent confidence interval accounting for the age, gender and state of residence of the respondent for the indicators of (i) per-capita household income measured in 10,000 of Rs.; (ii) per-capita consumption expenditure measured in 10,000 of Rs.; (iii) share holding professional jobs; (iv) share of households with access to some toilet facility; (v) share of households who own or cultivate land. The data is from the IHDS-2011-12.

Figure A4: Differences in Material Standards of Living Across Groups - Individuals Classified as Poor - All India