



Barriers to Education among Urban Slum Students: An Analytical Study

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ABSTRACT:

Education is the key indicators to economic upliftment, social mobility and empowerment. It increases the possibilities to remove from economic stigmas, not only this it plays an important role to creating a skilled workforce and better citizen. But different marginalized groups are deprived from its productive results and people living in slums are one of them. People residing in slums often found themselves in a financial instability, poor housing tenure, unhealthy living conditions, job insecurity, unhygienic practices lead to live an improvised living standard. However, various national and international efforts have been made to promote universalization of education such as Right to Education Act (2009), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), National Literacy Mission (NLM) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and so on. Despite this, slum children in India facing multiple barriers to participate and continue their education. This paper is primarily focused to identify the major barriers faced by slum students to access education. This study adopts a review-based analytical method aims to synthesize existing knowledge regarding barriers faced by urban slum students in their educational practices and the required data were collected from secondary data sources include journal articles, news articles census data, reports of the different agencies and organization. A thematic content analysis method was used by the researchers to identify the common barriers that usually faced by slum students. Here, barriers to education were grouped into themes. Poverty and financial constraints, engagement in income-generating activities, lack of positive parental attitude toward education, excessive family responsibilities, inferiority complex and low self-confidence, lack of motivation and academic encouragement, gender-based inequality in educational opportunities, limited opportunity for regular and consistent study, unfavorable surrounding and learning environment are identified as common barriers that urban slum students frequently face.

Key Words: Education, Urban Slums, Educational Barriers, Educational inequality, Socio-economic Factors. Economic Condition.

1. Introduction:

Education is widely recognized as one of the important key indicators to human development. It plays an important role in shaping sound human body and mind. Education also capable to develop individual's intellectual, social, emotional, and moral growth. The relationship between poverty and education is deeply interlinked. Educated individuals are better equipped with skills and knowledge that improve their employability and earning potential, which in turn enhances their standard of living and social status. So, a society's economic progress and social mobility enhanced through education (Sumangala, 2022) and helps to create a humanize better informed, socially responsible citizen's society. Moreover, it can be said that education has the ability to human's socio-economic development. Therefore, education serves as a means of freeing generations from poverty trap cycle, but in such case a generation, or group, or community deprived to access the sweet fruits of education or if they do not get chance to educational participation led them to economic and social deprivation. So, keeping this in mind different national and international organization strongly recommended to ensure quality education for each and every individual. In Indian context, from constitution of India to different committees and commissions and even national policies on education recommended education for all. Central and State government takes different policies and practices to ensure that each and every individual gets an equal chance receive education. Additionally, different Non-governmental agencies also take initiatives to promote quality education among underprivilege section. But after taking different government and non-government initiatives to promote education, a significant portion of the Indian population are deprived from receiving education, even though a huge population is deprived from basic education. A large section of educationally deprived persons reported in urban slum areas, according to the census 2011 India's 17.4% population is living a substandard lifestyle in slums (Das 2025), whereas the literacy rates was found very low in slums. Slums basically are the areas where people are living improvised lifestyle with limited resources. These areas usually marked by overcrowded population in an unhealthy environment, lack of fresh and clean water facilities, substandard housing tenure, lack of sanitation facilities, improper drainage system, improper health facilities and so on (Sumangala, 2022; Devi, 2023). They are forced to live in improvised living conditions and their subsequent generations also found themselves in this poverty trap. Only education has the ability to rescue the people living in slums from such improvised conditions. Studies showed that access of education is not universally seen among slum residents, there is many reasons exists that restricts them to pursue education. Several governments and non-governments initiatives takes to accelerate education among urban slum students but there is some fundamental barrier exists that hinders their chances of receiving education. This paper mainly focuses to identify the barriers that hinders urban slum students from accessing education.

2. Methodology:

This study adopts a review-based method aims to synthesize existing knowledge regarding barriers faced by urban slum students in their educational practices. This study completely based on secondary data sources including journal articles, news articles census data, reports of the different agencies and organization. A thematic content analysis method was used by the researchers to identify the common barriers that usually faced by slum students. Here, barriers to education were grouped into themes, and key findings from reviewed studies were outlined and interpreted.

3. Review based Discussion:

3.1 Poverty and Financial Constraints:

Many studies recognized poverty as one of the common barriers to education, especially for different marginalized groups including urban slum. For instance, McKinney (2014) highlights that students living in poverty usually face barriers to accessing school education and cause of illiteracy (Ahmed, 2024). A significant portion of slum families are fall under below poverty line and struggle to meet their basic needs. Due to this, they failed to afford to purchase important educational equipment for their children (Chowdary & Khan, 2025). Azad (2024) found an association between ability to access educational equipment with dropout among slum students and even non-enrolment. Despite this some slum parents are not financially able to pay for private tuition or coaching fees (Devi, 2023), and they also mostly failed to acquire modern technological tools like Smartphones, Laptop or PC desktops, internet facilities which are often needed for studies today (Saxena & Yadav2025). Even though essential items like textbooks for the academic year, notebooks, pen-pencils, geometry box, dictionaries are sometimes difficult to purchase by these families. When students failed to access these essential materials, they face some constraints in studying and engaging academic activities. As a result, their academic performance becomes poor, and in many cases, they struggle to score the minimum marks required to pass the examinations (Harms & Garrett-Ruffin, 2023). Shah & Mushtaq (2024) showed that poverty led families to prioritize present economic survival over investment in education for future perspective. Therefore, poverty directly affects student's education and becomes one of the strongest reasons for their educational discontinue and less academic success.

3.2 Engagement in Income-Generating Activities / Child Labour:

People living in slums mostly performing daily earning jobs led them living a substandard lifestyle. Income of these families is very low, and many of them even struggle to ensure three meals a day for their children. Students and their parents of this marginalised section often struggle to choose one between schooling and work, economic condition is the reason for this (Quattria and Watkins, 2019; Devi, 2023). Because of financial conditions, all family members try to earn money, and their children are also forced to work to support the family (Evans, 2002). Non-availability of school in slum areas resulted in helping at home or end up working by default (Hussain, 2005). Student's own needs include school uniforms, pens, exercise books, school fees, and even food and clothing sometimes not be fulfilled (Quattria and Watkins, 2019), consequently increases high chances to involve in money earning activities. Many slum students drop out of school or college so they can earn money by performing small jobs such as working in shops, hotels, garages, or doing household work. A study was conducted by Dey (2005) exhibits that slum students were engaged in earning activities includes garage (42.3%), rag pickers (35.5%), worked in hotels and food stalls (13.3%), and shop helpers (8.9%). Patil *et. al.*, (2013) demonstrated that 36.30% of children living in slums went to work. When students start working at a young age, they miss school regularly and slowly lose interest in studies. This results in high dropout rates and low literacy levels among slum children. Thus, the need to earn money becomes a major barrier to education for students living in urban slums.

3.3 Lack of Positive Parental Attitude Toward Education:

It is commonly found that slum residents have low level of education and many of them were illiterate (Sumangala, 2022; Ghosh & Maity, 2025). For instance, Singh (2023) observed illiteracy among majority slum parents, due to being illiterate, parents could not able help their children in studies (Devi, 2023). Azad (2024) highlights that illiteracy of slum parents is interlinked with students dropout of school compared to educated parents. Consequently, the parents of students living in slums are unable to understand clearly the sweet fruit of education, especially for their children (Bhatrai, 2024). They often think that going to school and college will not secure a good job for their children in the future. They strongly believe that spending time and money on education is not very useful because they did not experience any good results of being educated yet. However, these parents are always worried about earning money for daily needs, this led their children to work, help in household chores instead of going to school or college. A significant portion of slum parents are not aware about different government schemes available to help their children's education like free education, scholarships or other support. Study conducted by Devi, 2023 showed that majority of the parents were not aware about important government programmes such as; free and compulsory primary education (64.1% not aware), Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 (80.1% not aware) and even 34.5% parents were not aware about any scholarship schemes. These reasons direct them to form careless and sometime negative attitude towards education. Due to parental lack of positive attitude or lack encouragement or support at home affects student's attendance in school and college, interests in learning, and even they also formed negative attitudes toward learning.

3.4 Excessive Family Responsibilities:

A salient feature observed in living standard of slum dwellers is that all family members, irrespective of age and gender, all are engaged in earning money for day to day survival. Consequence of this, burden of household responsibilities often shifts onto the shoulder of slum children (Garg, 2017). Many students living in slums are required to perform different household tasks including looking after younger siblings (Devi, 2023), cooking food, fetch water, house clean and even purchase food or other items from market (Sumangala, 2022; Azad, 2024). Besides these duties, some students are also involved to help their parents in some informal jobs, selling goods, assisting in household-based work, or running errands to support the family's income (Garg, 2017). Somewhat these responsibilities limit their study times and energy too. As a result, their attendance in educational institution becomes irregular and learning gets interrupted. Instead of focusing on books and classrooms, they grow up too fast, carrying responsibilities far beyond their age a reality that keeps them trapped in the cycle of poverty and limited educational opportunities.

3.5 Inferiority Complex and Low Self-Confidence:

Inferiority complex and lack of self-confidence observed as key barriers to education among slum students, they often failed to develop strong self-concepts, while suffer from a deep sense of inferiority regarding education. The sense of achieve anything through education is lacking among them indicates their doubts about their own ability. Even though children living in slum often found themselves in an uncertainty whether they can able to achieve well in studies and sometimes also in a doubt that they can pass the examination. There are many reasons to for this inferiority and low self-confidence including limited educational resources, lack of additional privation tuition or coaching, parental less encouragement in education and so on. Consequently, this inferiority and low self-confidence led them distracts from education and increases chances to academic withdrawal.

3.6 Lack of Motivation and Academic Encouragement:

Motivation is commonly identified as one of the important factors for achieving educational excellence. It plays a pivotal role in stimulating students to attain meaningful academic achievement and to stay consistent and focused on their educational goals. Whereas lack of motivation marked by low interest in learning, struggle to maintain consistency in academic performances, which later resulted in poor performance or sometimes leads academic failure. Lack of motivation toward learning frequently observed among students living in slum areas. Herrera et al., (2020) showed that economically poor or less earning parents not really encouraging their children to go to school, particularly girl young children. Hardship in lifestyle, limited educational support, lack of continuous encouragements and even absence of adequate role model are the reasons for motivational lacks and low interest to achieve academic excellence. So, lack of motivation among slum students in education can be said as major barrier to achieve academic excellence and schooling.

3.7 Gender-Based Inequality in Educational Opportunities:

Gender inequality identified as a major constraint to educational participation, especially for girls (Shah & Mushtaq, 2024). Lack of awareness and lower educational attainments among slum parents leads to form this bias in slum communities. Many children parents are prioritizing the education of their sons over girls. They are more interested to invest financial resources and time for education of their sons' compare to daughters', indicates a negligible willingness for girls' education (Saxena & Yadav2025). In addition, early marriage among slum girls is still frequently seen in such slum areas (Sumangala, 2022), marked by traditional prejudice mindset of these parents. Due to this reason girls are somehow deprived of equal educational opportunities and led them to drop-outs or discontinue their education earlier than boys (Saxena & Yadav2025).

3.8 Limited Opportunity for Regular and Consistent Study:

Excellence in education and positive attitude toward learning deeply interlinked with study habits. Consistency in academic practices leads to student's subsequent progress in their educational journey, whereas irregular study resulted in poor academic performance. In many cases, this ultimately becomes a major reason behind school dropout. Slum areas are marked by improvised living conditions include overcrowded houses (Azad, 2024), congested of one or two rooms (Aggarwal & Chugh, 2003). Limited spaces are used for multi-purpose like cooking and eating food, resting, sleeping and for other day-to-day activities. Therefore, students living in such slum areas hardly get a chance to study in a quiet and peaceful place. The absence of adequate learning environment restricts them from enhancing regular study habits which are linked with academic performance (Kapur, 2016). As a result, these students face difficulty to sustained educational lessons, experience academic set backs and even pushed them out of the institutional education system.

3.9 Unfavourable Surrounding and Learning Environment:

Urban slum areas are usually overcrowded and improper sanitation, drainage system and improper use of dustbin creating an unhealthy and chaotic living environment (Aggarwal & Chugh, 2003). Daily life in these surroundings often marked by unnecessary noise (Bhattra, 2024), quarrels among slum residents, loud shouting, frequent arguments, abusive language, and continuous disturbances such as loud music and street commotion. This kind of atmosphere somehow affects mentally and emotionally the children growing up there, as the unrest and constant noise make it highly challenging for students living in urban slum areas to concentrate on their studies (Ernst, Phillips, & Duncan 2013). Consequently, students ability to practice studies peacefully and regularly in a healthy suitable learning environment becomes severely limited, restricting their academic growth and overall development.

4. Conclusion:

This study found educational exclusion among urban slum students is a complex barrier caused by poverty, lack of adequate educational support, limited educational resources. Challenges like economic constraints resulted in child labour, substandard living condition and even disrupt in schooling. Lack of parental positive attitude toward education, gender inequalities further strengthen these barriers. Although different government schemes exist to increase educational participation include mid-day meals, RTE Act, and special schooling schemes exist, their implementation remains inconsistent in slum areas. To break the cycle of poverty and ensure educational equalities, coordinated action is required combining government support, community awareness, NGO involvement, and school-based interventions. The review suggests strengthening scholarship programmes, improving slum school infrastructure, establishing remedial and community learning centres, and designing flexible educational models for migrant children. Ensuring equitable and inclusive education for slum students is essential not only for fulfilling constitutional and global educational commitments but also for fostering a more just and socially progressive society.

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