



## EDUCATION, LAW AND EMPOWERMENT: INTER-LINKAGES FOR INCLUSIVE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

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### **Abstract**

*Education, law, and empowerment constitute the core pillars of social justice and sustainable human development. Their interconnection defines the scope of democratic participation, equality, and inclusive growth in India. This paper critically examines how education acts as a transformative force, law serves as an enabling framework, and empowerment emerges as a dynamic process leading to social change. Drawing on constitutional mandates, landmark legislations, and key policy initiatives—such as the Right to Education Act (2009) and the National Education Policy (2020)—the study highlights the ways in which education and law intersect to advance gender equality and human rights. It argues that empowerment cannot be achieved merely through access to education or legal provisions alone but requires an integrated strategy encompassing legal literacy, institutional accountability, and gender-responsive governance. The paper also identifies persisting challenges including gender bias, caste-based inequities, and digital exclusion that limit the realization of empowerment for marginalized communities. Through a multidisciplinary approach grounded in the Human Rights-Based and Capability frameworks (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000), the study proposes a model that links education, law, and empowerment with India's broader developmental agenda. Aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals—particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions)—the paper emphasizes the need for integrated reforms to ensure equity, justice, and participatory empowerment for all citizens.*

**Keywords:** Education, Law, Empowerment, Gender Equality, Social Justice, India, SDGs.

### **1. Introduction**

Education and law, though distinct in their functions, share a symbiotic relationship in promoting empowerment and inclusive social development. They operate as the twin pillars upon which democratic societies are built—education fostering enlightenment

and participation, and law ensuring justice, equality, and protection of rights. Together, they not only shape individuals' consciousness but also transform the collective social order. In the Indian context, both education and law are deeply embedded in the constitutional framework and developmental discourse, making them central to the nation's pursuit of equality and justice.

The Indian Constitution reflects this interdependence through its emphasis on equality (Articles 14–18), liberty (Articles 19–22), and justice (Preamble and Directive Principles of State Policy). Education is seen as a means of realizing these values, while law serves as a mechanism to enforce them. The inclusion of Article 21-A, which guarantees the Right to Education (RTE) as a fundamental right, marked a transformative moment in Indian legal and educational history. This legal mandate recognized education not merely as a privilege but as an inalienable right crucial for the realization of human potential and social justice.

Education is more than literacy—it is an emancipatory process that equips individuals with cognitive, moral, and social tools to question hierarchies and challenge injustice. As Amartya Sen (1999) argues in his *Capability Approach*, education expands human capabilities and freedoms, allowing individuals to make meaningful choices and lead lives they value. Similarly, Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* conceptualizes education as a political act—an instrument for liberation from oppression rather than mere transmission of knowledge. In India, where historical injustices based on caste, gender, and class persist, the transformative potential of education becomes even more critical.

However, education without legal empowerment risks remaining symbolic rather than substantive. Legal frameworks provide the structure through which education translates into empowerment. Laws such as the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) operationalize the constitutional promise of universal education. Similarly, anti-discrimination provisions (Articles 15 and 17) protect marginalized groups from exclusion in educational spaces, while Article 46 directs the State to promote the educational and economic interests of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other weaker sections. These constitutional and legal instruments serve as both enablers and protectors of empowerment.

Empowerment, in this context, refers to the process of enhancing individuals' capacity to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them (Kabeer, 1999). It encompasses access to resources, participation in decision-making, and control over one's life circumstances. Education and law together make this empowerment possible. Education nurtures awareness and confidence, while law institutionalizes rights and provides avenues for redressal against injustices. For instance, awareness of legal rights through education enables women to resist gender-based violence and assert their entitlements in the family, workplace, and community.

Yet, the relationship between education, law, and empowerment in India is not free from challenges. Despite progressive legal frameworks, structural inequalities—such as caste-based discrimination, gender disparities, and regional imbalances—continue to limit access to quality education and justice. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2023) reveals that while enrollment rates have improved, learning outcomes remain alarmingly low, especially among rural and marginalized groups. Similarly, the Global Gender Gap Report (2024) notes that India's gender gap in literacy and labor force participation persists despite policy interventions. These gaps underline the need for integrating education and legal awareness to achieve genuine empowerment.

The gender dimension of empowerment further underscores the importance of this interlinkage. Historically, women in India have faced systemic barriers to education due to patriarchal norms and socio-economic dependence. Legal reforms such as the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act (2005), Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), and Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (2013) have sought to address gender inequities. However, these laws become effective only when women possess the educational awareness and agency to utilize them. Empirical studies by Kumar (2021, 2023) show that states with higher female literacy rates also demonstrate stronger gender empowerment indices, validating the mutually reinforcing nature of education and legal literacy.

At the same time, the judiciary has played a proactive role in interpreting the interdependence between education and empowerment. In *Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka* (1992) and *Unni Krishnan v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (1993), the Supreme Court of India established that education

is intrinsic to the right to life and dignity under Article 21. These judgments emphasized that without education, the constitutional promise of equality and liberty remains hollow. Later, the Supreme Court's emphasis on gender justice in cases like *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan* (1997) and *Joseph Shine v. Union of India* (2018) further underscored how legal interpretation and social awareness must converge for empowerment to materialize.

The intersection of education, law, and empowerment also resonates within India's global development commitments, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) are deeply interconnected and serve as enablers for other goals such as poverty reduction, health, and sustainable growth. India's National Education Policy (NEP 2020) also aligns with this global vision by emphasizing equitable access, critical thinking, and inclusion of marginalized communities. Yet, realizing these aspirations demands more than policy articulation—it requires the democratization of education and law at the grassroots level.

Empowerment through education and law also extends to marginalized groups beyond gender, including Dalits, Adivasis, persons with disabilities, and minorities. Legal provisions such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989), and educational schemes like *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan*, aim to create inclusive environments for learning and participation. However, implementation gaps often undermine these initiatives. Social empowerment cannot be achieved merely through formal laws; it requires an active, informed citizenry capable of demanding accountability—something only education can ensure.

Moreover, digital education and access to legal information have become new frontiers in empowerment. As India embraces digitalization, ensuring equal access to online education and e-governance platforms is critical. Legal literacy campaigns must adapt to digital modes, using social media, mobile applications, and community-based digital education to reach rural and underprivileged populations. Bridging this digital divide is now essential for realizing both educational and legal empowerment in the 21st century.

In conclusion, education and law together form the bedrock of empowerment in democratic societies like India. Their synergy fosters not only individual development but also collective transformation toward justice and equality. However, empowerment cannot be

achieved in isolation; it requires dismantling structural barriers, fostering inclusive pedagogy, and ensuring access to justice. As Mahatma Gandhi rightly asserted, “True education must correspond to the surrounding circumstances or it is not a healthy growth.” Education provides the moral and intellectual grounding, while law ensures that this growth is protected and directed toward the common good.

This paper, therefore, examines how education and law intersect to produce empowerment and inclusive social development in India. It seeks to explore how constitutional mandates, judicial interpretations, and policy frameworks have evolved to strengthen this relationship, while also identifying the challenges that persist. The discussion aims to demonstrate that genuine empowerment—particularly for marginalized groups—can be realized only when education and law operate in tandem as transformative instruments of social justice.

## ***2. Theoretical Framework: Human Rights and Empowerment***

The theoretical foundation of this study rests upon the Human Rights-Based Approach to Development (HRBAD), which conceptualizes education and law not as state-given privileges but as fundamental human entitlements intrinsic to dignity and freedom. This approach emphasizes the indivisibility, universality, and interdependence of human rights, asserting that access to education and justice are not optional social goods but essential prerequisites for empowerment and inclusion. HRBAD views development as a rights-claiming process, wherein individuals—especially those marginalized by gender, caste, or class—are active agents rather than passive recipients of welfare. Within this paradigm, empowerment becomes both an end and a means: it is the goal of enabling individuals to live with dignity and autonomy, and the process of equipping them with the knowledge, legal tools, and institutional support to claim and exercise their rights.

This framework is further strengthened by Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach (1999), which redefines development as the expansion of human freedoms and capabilities rather than mere economic growth. Sen argues that empowerment involves enhancing individuals’ real opportunities—their ability to make choices and act upon them. Education and legal literacy are central to this process because they expand human agency, enabling people to participate in democratic life and access justice. In India, this perspective is particularly

relevant given the entrenched inequalities that limit the capabilities of marginalized groups such as women, Dalits, Adivasis, and persons with disabilities. Ensuring equitable access to quality education and legal remedies thus becomes a moral and constitutional imperative for realizing substantive empowerment.

Building upon Sen's work, Martha Nussbaum (2000) elaborates the *Capabilities Approach* by identifying key human functions necessary for a life of dignity—among them education, bodily integrity, and political participation. Nussbaum contends that societies have a moral obligation to guarantee these capabilities for all citizens, especially those systematically excluded from development processes. Her framework bridges the gap between abstract rights and practical entitlements, illustrating how education and law must work in tandem to create conditions for human flourishing.

In contrast, Catherine MacKinnon's (1989) feminist legal theory\*\* critiques the assumption that formal equality—treating everyone the same under law—inevitably leads to justice. She argues for substantive equality, which recognizes that structural hierarchies rooted in patriarchy, caste, and class prevent marginalized individuals from benefiting equally from legal and educational opportunities. According to MacKinnon, true empowerment requires transforming the very institutions that perpetuate inequality. This insight is vital in the Indian context, where access to education or legal remedies does not automatically translate into empowerment unless accompanied by institutional reform and gender-sensitive implementation.

Together, HRBAD, Sen's and Nussbaum's capability approaches, and feminist legal theory converge to form a comprehensive framework for analyzing the nexus of education, law, and empowerment. They collectively highlight that empowerment is not achieved merely through access but through agency, awareness, and transformation. When human rights principles, expanded capabilities, and equitable institutions intersect, they create the foundation for inclusive and participatory social development—one where education and law serve as instruments of justice rather than mechanisms of exclusion.

### ***3. Education as a Tool of Empowerment***

Education serves as the cornerstone of empowerment, functioning not merely as a means of acquiring knowledge but as a transformative process that cultivates agency, self-reliance, and social consciousness. It

enables individuals to question inherited hierarchies, challenge socio-economic inequalities, and participate meaningfully in democratic life. As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emphasized, “Education is the milk of a tigress; whoever drinks it will roar.” This assertion encapsulates the emancipatory potential of education in dismantling structural oppression and advancing social justice in India.

The Indian Constitution reflects this commitment through its recognition of education as a fundamental right, establishing a direct link between education, empowerment, and democracy. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009)—enacted under Article 21-A—marked a watershed in the nation’s educational history by converting the state’s moral obligation into a legally enforceable right. This legislation ensured that every child between the ages of 6 and 14 has access to free and compulsory schooling, thereby institutionalizing education as a tool for social transformation. It reinforced the idea that empowerment is not merely a developmental goal but a constitutional mandate.

Building upon this legal foundation, the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) envisions education as an instrument of holistic human development. The policy emphasizes critical thinking, experiential learning, and inclusivity while promoting gender equity, multilingualism, digital literacy, and vocational education. It positions education as a bridge between individual aspirations and collective well-being, encouraging students to become responsible global citizens. However, translating this ambitious vision into reality remains a formidable challenge due to persistent socio-economic disparities.

Empirical evidence indicates that inequalities in educational access and quality remain pervasive. The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO, 2022) reported disproportionately high dropout rates among marginalized groups, particularly girls from Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and rural areas. Factors such as early marriage, domestic responsibilities, lack of safe infrastructure, and inadequate sanitation facilities hinder female education. Moreover, gendered stereotypes embedded in textbooks and classroom practices often reinforce patriarchal norms rather than dismantling them.

The COVID-19 pandemic further deepened these divides by exposing the fragility of India’s educational ecosystem. The sudden shift to digital learning highlighted vast inequalities in access to technology and the internet, particularly for students from low-income and

rural households. The digital divide has not only disrupted learning continuity but also widened gender and caste-based educational disparities, undermining the inclusive ethos envisioned by NEP 2020.

To harness education's full potential as a tool of empowerment, systemic reforms must extend beyond enrollment statistics to address quality, inclusivity, and relevance. As Kumar (2022) emphasizes, empowerment-oriented education must incorporate gender-sensitive pedagogy, critical legal literacy, and digital equity. Integrating discussions on constitutional rights, gender justice, and environmental sustainability into the curriculum can foster a generation of socially responsible citizens. Teacher training programs, too, must be redesigned to sensitize educators to issues of equity, intersectionality, and inclusiveness.

Furthermore, community participation and decentralized governance play an indispensable role in ensuring educational accountability and contextual relevance. Empowering School Management Committees (SMCs) and local governance bodies can make education more responsive to local needs, ensuring that marginalized voices are heard in policy implementation. When communities actively participate in school management and curriculum development, education becomes not only a public service but a collective empowerment process.

Ultimately, education must transcend its instrumental role as a ladder for economic mobility to become a vehicle of human freedom and dignity. It should aim not only to produce employable individuals but enlightened citizens who understand their rights, responsibilities, and capacity for social change. When aligned with constitutional safeguards and empowerment frameworks, education can function as the foundation for inclusive, participatory, and sustainable development—a true realization of India's vision of equality, liberty, and justice for all.

#### ***4. Law as a Framework for Social Justice***

The Indian legal framework provides a comprehensive foundation for realizing social justice through the integration of education, equality, and empowerment. Rooted in the principles of the Constitution of India, the legal system ensures that rights are not merely aspirational ideals but enforceable entitlements accessible to all citizens. Law in this context operates as both a *protective mechanism*—safeguarding

individuals from discrimination—and a *transformative instrument*—facilitating structural change and inclusive development.

At the heart of this framework lies the Constitutional commitment to equality and justice, articulated through key provisions such as Article 14 (equality before the law), Article 15 (prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth), and Article 21-A (right to education). Together, these articles establish a legal foundation that guarantees equal access to education and opportunities irrespective of identity or background. Furthermore, the Directive Principles of State Policy (Articles 39, 45, and 46) urge the state to promote the educational and economic interests of weaker sections, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other marginalized groups. These constitutional provisions underscore the intrinsic link between education, equality, and empowerment, envisioning a society in which rights are both universal and substantive.

In practice, the state has enacted several progressive laws that operationalize these constitutional guarantees. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) provides legal recourse against domestic abuse, while the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006) aims to safeguard the educational and health rights of young girls by preventing early marriage. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act (2013) institutionalizes gender justice in professional spaces, ensuring safety and dignity for women in both formal and informal sectors. These legal frameworks extend beyond punitive measures; they foster an enabling environment in which women can access education and employment free from coercion and violence.

The judiciary has played a pivotal role in strengthening this nexus between law, education, and empowerment. Landmark judgments such as *Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka* (1992) and *Unni Krishnan v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (1993) redefined the meaning of the “right to life” under Article 21, interpreting it to include the right to education as an essential element of human dignity. These decisions laid the groundwork for the subsequent constitutional amendment introducing Article 21-A and the enactment of the Right to Education Act (2009). Through judicial interpretation, the courts have transformed education from a developmental aspiration into a legally enforceable right, reinforcing its centrality to social justice.

However, the transformative potential of law depends on how it is interpreted, implemented, and experienced in society. As Kumar (2021, 2023, 2025a, 2025b) emphasizes, the empowerment of marginalized communities, particularly women, requires a gender-just interpretation of laws and institutional accountability to bridge the gap between legal provisions and lived realities. Legal empowerment must therefore go beyond statutory recognition to include access to justice, legal literacy, and effective enforcement.

In essence, law serves not only as a system of regulation but as a framework for social transformation—one that protects rights, promotes equality, and enables empowerment. When aligned with education and human development, the legal system becomes a catalyst for achieving substantive equality and inclusive growth, fulfilling the constitutional vision of justice—social, economic, and political—for every citizen.

### ***5. Education, Legal Literacy, and Women’s Empowerment***

Education and legal awareness together form the backbone of women’s empowerment, reinforcing each other in advancing gender justice. Education provides women with the intellectual tools to question patriarchal norms, while legal literacy equips them with the knowledge to claim their rights and demand accountability. The synergy between these two domains transforms empowerment from an abstract ideal into a practical and lived reality.

In India, numerous initiatives have sought to combine education and legal literacy to strengthen women’s agency. Programs conducted by the National Commission for Women (NCW) and civil society organizations such as SEWA (Self-Employed Women’s Association) and Pratham have demonstrated that integrating literacy with awareness of legal and constitutional rights significantly enhances women’s participation in social and political life. Women who are both educated and legally aware are more likely to resist gender-based violence, seek redressal through institutional mechanisms, and engage actively in local governance and community development.

Empirical evidence underscores the transformative potential of this interconnection. States such as Kerala and Himachal Pradesh, with higher female literacy rates, consistently demonstrate stronger gender equality indicators, lower incidences of child marriage, and improved maternal health outcomes (NITI Aayog, 2023). Conversely, regions

with low literacy levels often experience entrenched gender disparities and limited female participation in decision-making processes. These patterns affirm that education and legal literacy are mutually reinforcing components of empowerment—each amplifying the impact of the other.

Moreover, the inclusion of legal education within school curricula, particularly in secondary and higher education, can play a transformative role in shaping a generation that is both informed and rights-conscious. Legal literacy camps, gender-sensitization workshops, and awareness drives at the grassroots level can help dismantle the ignorance and social stigma that perpetuate inequality.

For empowerment to be sustainable, however, education and legal literacy must be institutionally integrated into broader development policies. This includes strengthening community-based legal aid services, ensuring gender-responsive budgeting, and promoting representation of women in law enforcement and judiciary. As Kumar (2021, 2023, 2025a, 2025b) notes, empowerment requires not just legal protection but the democratization of legal knowledge and access.

Ultimately, when education and law converge, they create the conditions for women to exercise agency, demand justice, and shape policy. This convergence is central to realizing gender justice, not as a distant ideal but as a concrete social reality. Empowered through knowledge and legal awareness, women can redefine social norms, influence governance, and contribute to a more equitable and inclusive India.

## ***6. Challenges and Policy Gaps***

Despite progressive constitutional mandates and a comprehensive set of legal and educational reforms, India continues to face deep-rooted structural and institutional barriers to inclusive empowerment. Gender and caste disparities persist as major impediments, disproportionately marginalizing women, Dalits, Adivasis, and persons with disabilities in access to education and justice. The digital divide, widened during the COVID-19 pandemic, has further deepened inequities in learning outcomes, particularly among rural and low-income communities (UNESCO, 2022).

In addition, weak law enforcement mechanisms and limited legal awareness among rural and semi-literate populations dilute the impact of empowerment initiatives. Many citizens remain unaware

of their rights under key legislations, resulting in underreporting of violations and continued vulnerability. Furthermore, curricular and pedagogical frameworks in schools and teacher education institutions often fail to integrate critical perspectives on gender, equality, and citizenship, inadvertently reproducing patriarchal and exclusionary norms (Kumar, 2024).

Bridging these systemic gaps necessitates a multi-dimensional policy response—including stronger institutional accountability, gender-responsive budgeting, participatory monitoring mechanisms, and the integration of human rights education at all levels of schooling. Empowerment cannot be legislated solely through law; it must be cultivated through awareness, participation, and equitable access to educational opportunities.

### *7. Towards an Integrated Model of Empowerment*

To move from fragmented initiatives to transformative change, education and law must operate in synergy as complementary instruments of empowerment. A holistic framework can be envisioned through the following three pillars:

1. Education for Rights Awareness – Embedding legal literacy, gender equality, and constitutional values into school and higher education curricula to cultivate active, informed citizenship.
2. Law as an Enabler of Access – Strengthening and effectively implementing legal frameworks that guarantee inclusive, quality education and protect against discrimination across gender, caste, and class lines.
3. Empowerment through Participation – Promoting community-based and participatory governance models that enable women, youth, and marginalized communities to influence policy decisions and hold institutions accountable.

This integrated model echoes the global development vision articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Together, these goals highlight that true empowerment is not merely about access to education or legal protection, but about transforming power structures to ensure justice, equality, and inclusive social development.

## 8. Conclusion

Education, law, and empowerment represent the three foundational pillars of inclusive and sustainable social development. Each reinforces the other—education cultivates critical awareness, the law institutionalizes equality and justice, and empowerment transforms individuals into active agents of change. In the Indian context, where social hierarchies based on gender, caste, and class continue to shape access to opportunities, the convergence of these domains holds transformative potential. Education, when combined with legal literacy and social justice values, not only enhances employability but also nurtures civic consciousness and gender sensitivity.

The legal framework, through constitutional provisions and progressive legislations, provides the structural guarantee for equality and protection against discrimination. Yet, empowerment cannot be achieved merely through legislation—it demands continuous engagement, awareness, and the democratization of institutions. Empowered citizens must be both *educated in rights* and *enabled by law* to exercise them meaningfully. This synergy is crucial to dismantling systemic barriers that inhibit participation, particularly among women and marginalized groups.

India's developmental agenda, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), must therefore prioritize gender-responsive education, inclusive governance, and accessible justice systems. Policy interventions should focus on strengthening grassroots legal awareness, integrating gender equality in curricula, and ensuring equitable access to digital and educational infrastructure.

Ultimately, empowerment is not a static outcome but an evolving process of transforming power relations. When education fosters critical thinking, and law safeguards equality and justice, individuals gain the agency to shape their own futures. A truly empowered society is one where every citizen—regardless of gender, caste, or class—can claim their rights, voice their concerns, and contribute to a more humane and equitable India. Thus, education and law must continue to function as dynamic instruments of empowerment, advancing the nation's collective pursuit of dignity, justice, and equality for all.

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