

Original Research Article

Inequality in Educational Opportunities: A cause of social reproduction in Mewat, India

Ms. Bhagya Lakshmi Balaji¹ and Dr. Dayal Pyari²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Amity Institute of Education, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

²Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Education, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India
k.bhagyalakshmi@s.amity.edu¹ and dpyari@amity.edu²

ABSTRACT

Some minority-concentrated districts in India lack basic amenities and lag behind the national average on several socio-economic indicators. Despite India having been an independent nation for the past 73 years, economic and social development in certain communities is dismal due to educational backwardness, which leads to social reproduction, whereby the economic, cultural, human, and social capital remains unchanged from generation to generation. Mewat district in Haryana is the lowest ranked district in the country in terms of many socio-economic parameters. The literacy rate in the district is 54% and the female literacy rate is only 36%, which is dismal compared to the national averages of 74% and 65%, respectively, as per data from the 2011 census. A synthesis of the published literature on educational backwardness and social reproduction in Mewat forms the theoretical framework of this study. The findings from quantitative research indicate that the district has not improved with respect to the educational and developmental status of the community. This paper makes recommendations based on the findings to address the prevalent issues.

Keywords: Inequality, Educational Opportunities, Mewat, Social Reproduction, Minority Concentrated District

1. INTRODUCTION

India is a pluralistic society comprising people of various religions, castes, ethnicities, languages, and socioeconomic status. Equity in access to services and opportunities for social and economic development should be ensured to enable citizens to contribute meaningfully to the development process and achieve prosperity [1]. However, Indian society suffers from inequalities in education, employment, and socioeconomic status based on caste and ethnicity. Sociocultural factors, traditions, and social discrimination have adversely affected the education of the SC, ST, and Muslim communities in India. The Indian government identified the 101 most underdeveloped districts out of a total of 739 districts across its 36 states and union territories. The data revealed that among the 20 most backward districts, 11 were predominantly inhabited by Muslims [2]. The Rajinder Sachar Committee report [3] highlighted that Muslim dominant areas across all Indian states lack proper civic amenities and infrastructural facilities. This coupled with educational backwardness has led to social reproduction.

Social reproduction is defined as the perpetuation of similar social structures and systems across generations. According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu [4], there are four types of capitals; financial capital (wealth and income of a person), cultural capital (outlook, values and belief system), human capital (skills, knowledge and experience), and social capital (interpersonal relationships and social networks), which are interlinked and play a vital role in social reproduction [5] as they are passed on from one generation to another.

Education plays a pivotal role in nurturing social and cultural diversity in society and supports upward social mobility while encouraging individuals to aspire for a better quality of life [6]. Additionally, education develops knowledge and skills, and helps with the holistic development of individuals. It helps in bringing social change and improves the lives of individuals, thus breaking the chain of inequalities being passed from generation to generation. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development were adopted at a historic UN Summit, in September 2015, by the world leaders. The agenda which officially came into effect on January 1, 2016, recognizes the significance of inclusion and directs countries to mobilize efforts to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities, and tackle climate change, while ensuring that no one is left behind [7].

In 2017, the Haryana government revealed a comprehensive plan of action to achieve the SDGs by 2030. Of the 22 districts, three districts (Bhiwani, Mewat, and Palwal) fared poorly across all three indicators of the human development index: health, education, and per capita income [8]. Among these, Mewat is a minority-concentrated district and has huge development gaps in living standards, education, and health. It has been ranked the most backward district in the country, with a very low literacy rate. Multi-dimensional backwardness is more prevalent among other backward communities (OBCs) Muslims, and economically poor people in Mewat. All vital parameters of development are low as people have limited access to resources and services, along with poor levels of education and awareness [2]. Therefore, the Haryana government plans to introduce new schemes and allocate sufficient funds for their implementation, in order to improve the socioeconomic indicators in the district.

1.1. An Overview of Mewat District

Mewat was carved out from Gurgaon and Faridabad as an independent district in 2005. It was renamed Nuh in 2016. It is one of the 22 districts in the Indian state of Haryana. Mewat has an area of 1,507 km², and is divided into plains and several hill ranges of the Aravalli Mountain. The Mewat district comprises five blocks: Nuh, Taoru, F.P. Jhirka, Nagina, and Punhana, as shown in Figure 1[9].

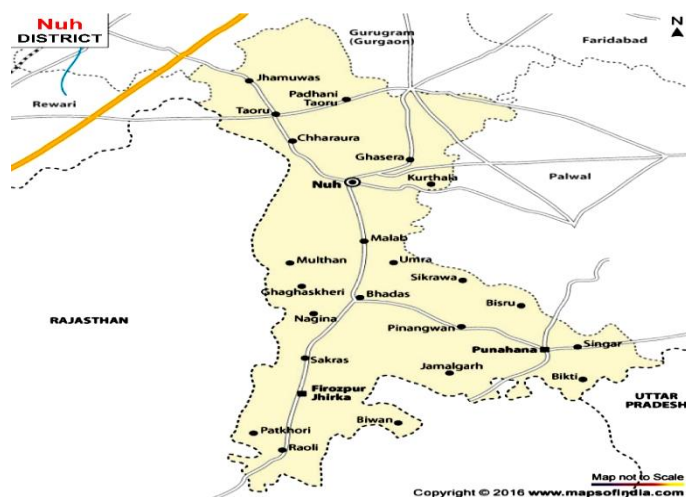


Figure 1. Location map of Mewat

Source: District Administrator, Nuh, Haryana

Mewat is a densely populated region, with 723 inhabitants/km². The population growth rate between 2001 and 2011 was quite high, at 38%, and was indicative of a higher fertility rate and larger families in Mewat. The average family size was estimated to be seven [2]. 1,2,

1.2. Socio-Cultural Diversity in Mewat

Mewat has a rich cultural and historical heritage, and the district is mostly inhabited by an ethnic group called Meo who were Hindu Kshatriyas before they embraced Islam during the reigns of the Tughlaqs and Aurangzeb in the 14th and 17th century, respectively. Islamic practices blended with their social and cultural traditions, and they continue to maintain their characteristic ethnocultural diversity [10].

1.3. Demography of Mewat

The Meos are predominantly agriculturists and Muslims. The total population of Mewat is approximately 11 lakhs [11]. The Meo community is classified as “backward class” by the Haryana Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes Department. The population statistics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Mewat population statistics in number and percentage (%)

Male	5,71,480	52.45%
Female	5,17,926	47.54%
Urban	1,24,106	11.39%
Rural	9,65,157	88.59%
Muslim	8,62,647	79%
Schedule Caste	75,251	6.9%

Source: Mewat Development Agency, District Nuh (Haryana) India

1.4. Economy of Mewat

The agriculture sector is the highest contributor to the economy of Mewat. Majority of the population is dependent on agriculture-based activities. Agriculture is mostly rain-fed, except in some areas where water canal irrigation systems are available. The gender disparity is evident in the working sector as well, with 39.3% of males being a part of the working population and having only 12.6% female participation. The participation rate in different sectors is as follows: cultivation (35.9%), agricultural laborers (19.1%), household industry workers (2.1%), and other workers (42.9%) [12].

A socio-economic field survey of 150 households was conducted in Tauru Tehsil of Mewat by selecting three panchayat villages. The employment status showed that approximately 23% of the households were employed in the formal sector while the remaining 77% in the labor force. It was observed that the process of development in Mewat is extremely complex and fractured. The economy is dependent on subsistence-based agriculture, is highly disarticulated and ad hoc in nature [13].

1.5. Development Status

A study conducted by the SM Sehgal Foundation and sponsored by the NITI Aayog Research Division in 2015 captured multi-dimensional aspects of development in Mewat. The data sources for the study were a combination of primary data from 40 villages across four blocks (10 villages each from Nuh, Firozpur, Jhirka, Punhana, and Tauru) and secondary data from the 2011 census. The key findings were [2]:

- Although Mewat had a distinct identity in 2005 as a district, performance on key development indicators (education, health, standard of living, and public infrastructure) are alarmingly low.
- Only 40% of the total population is engaged in the active workforce.
- Dependency on agriculture through traditional farming methods does not yield high returns, resulting in low incomes for families.
- There is an under-representation of women in the workforce (12.6%), which affects the overall economic development.
- Urbanization has been dismal between 2001 and 2011, with only 3% of the rural population moving to an urban locale within Mewat, as shown in Figure 2.

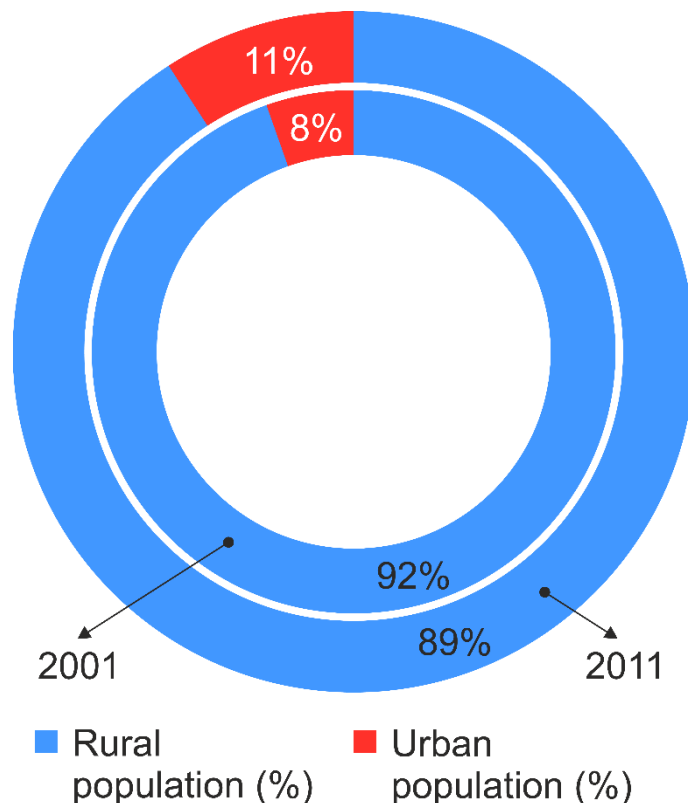


Figure 2. Rural-urban transition in Mewat
Source: A block-level analysis by SM Foundation

Additionally, the study compiled data across seven broad domains of development from the four blocks in Mewat:

- (i) Standard of living indices (SOL): the quality of life
- (ii) Education indices: the level of development in the field of education
- (iii) Health indices: health facilities and access
- (iv) Gender indices: women empowerment
- (v) Demographic indices: child sex ratio and average family size
- (vi) Agriculture and livestock indices: the status of agriculture and livestock
- (vii) Economic indices: work participation, savings, debt, and migration

Table 2. Typology of development across blocks in Mewat

Development Indices	SOL	Demographic	Education	Health	Gender	Agriculture	Economy
Average%	37%	43%	53%	66%	26%	52%	42%

Source: A block-level analysis by SM Foundation

Table 2 shows that Mewat is significantly backward in terms of gender and standard of living. The correlation matrix of the study of seven domains of development revealed the following [2]:

- Education and standard of living were positively and significantly correlated (0.62), followed by education and gender (0.48).

- Both education and standard of living were positively correlated with health (0.39 and 0.38), gender (0.48 and 0.45), and agriculture (0.31 and 0.24).

This indicates the importance of education in improving the standard of living, which in turn leads to better health, gender equality, and agricultural development. However, the level of education and education facilities in Mewat is very poor.

2. EDUCATIONAL BACKWARDNESS IN MEWAT

Mewat has a very low literacy rate and a high dropout rate. There is an alarming gap between male and female literacy rates. The literacy rates as per the District Census Handbook 2011 [12], are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Mewat literacy rate

	Overall	Male	Female	The gap between Male and Female literacy rate
India	74.04	82.14	65.46	16.68
Haryana	76.64	85.38	66.77	18.61
Mewat	54.08	69.94	36.6	33.34

Source: Census of India, 2011

2.1. Level of Education

The National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA) published an Occasional Paper on a study in Atta-Barota Mewat, Haryana, to understand the factors affecting low participation in education among scheduled caste rural girls. This study observed the following aspects [14]:

- Most of the females were illiterate, and were engaged in house work and fields.
- The girls assisted in household chores and modeled themselves on their mothers.
- Inadequate and improper maintenance of schools discouraged students from continuing their education.
- Enrollment gradually decreased in higher classes.

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A baseline survey of seven villages in Mewat reported that parents did not want to send their daughters to schools [15]. According to them, daughters are responsible for taking care of household chores, for which education is not needed. The financial constraints of the family pose a hindrance in educating children and the long distances to high schools and colleges are also a deterrent in sending girls for higher studies owing to security concerns.

Education of females positively impacts not only their own development but also that of their families and communities, leading to changes in the social, economic, and political structures in a society [16]. However, Mewat constantly recorded the lowest female literacy rate from 1991 to 2011. Statistical analysis revealed social discrimination in the education of females. It is considered a taboo to send girls for studies outside the villages, and there is also lack of educational facilities within the residential areas [17]. Cultural biases with respect to female education not only lead to social discrimination but also unequal literacy levels. The

underdevelopment and the low literacy rates in the area largely impact girls’ education in Mewat [18]. Females in Mewat are often denied the essential right to education. Young girls are sent to traditional institutions like Madrasas as parents feel that Madrasas are safer for girls due to strict gender segregation as per Islamic laws [19].

As madarsa education is very common in the Muslim community, a study was conducted on their role in promoting education and socio-economic development in Mewat [20]. The salient findings are:

- There are over 77 madarsas across the five blocks of Mewat (18 co-ed, five for girls, and 54 exclusively for boys).
- The locals are comfortable with educating their children at madarsas rather than in government schools as they feel that this can help secure employment in local mosques and Madrasas after receiving a basic education (in contrast with the 20–23 years that a child has to spend to get a regular graduation degree).
- Approximately 78% of the students who graduated from madarsas received employment in mosques, madrasas, and dargahs in Mewat, Delhi, and western Uttar Pradesh. The regular graduation degree, in contrast, does not guarantee a job.
- However, only 3% of people who received madarsa education had higher level of socio-economic status as compared to their peers who did not.

A recent study in 2015 found that in Nuh (Mewat), the female literacy rate is 50% and the male literacy rate is 83%, which is higher than that recorded in the last census in 2011. However, the number of females who never enrolled in school is still very high, as shown in Table 4 [2].

Table 4. Education development across blocks in Mewat

Educated household head	Female literacy rate	Male literacy rate	Female enrollment	Male enrollment	Female dropouts	Male dropouts	Female never enrolled	Male never enrolled
56%	50%	83%	56%	74%	24%	20%	18%	4%

Source: A block-level analysis by SM Foundation

The enrollment figures also decline as students progress to higher grades [21] as shown in Figure 3.

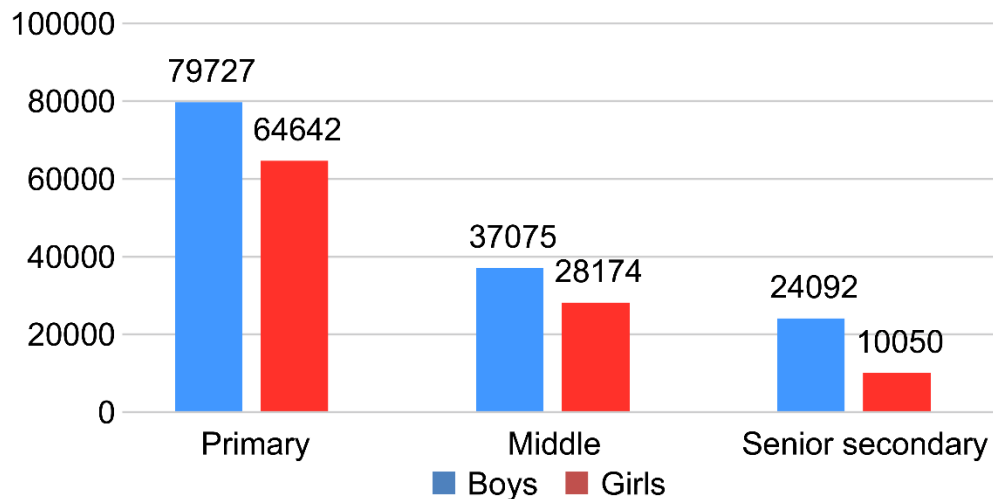


Figure 3. Total strength in primary, middle and senior secondary School
Source: Department of Economic and Statistical Analysis

The gender difference in the classroom increased from primary to high school. The percentage difference between the number of boys and girls is 10% in primary school, 14% in middle school, and 41% in high school. The dropout rates of both boys and girls are quite high as they progress from primary to high school. Approximately 70% of boys and 84% of girls drop out by the time they reach high school.

2.2. Education Facilities

Mewat has poor educational infrastructure and lacks opportunities to secure a livelihood in education related fields. The Department of Economic and Statistical Analysis, Haryana, published an annual report with recent data on educational facilities in Mewat [21]. The data below indicate the dismal educational infrastructure in the district.

- **Total Number of Schools:**

The total number of schools for the 447 villages in Mewat are listed in Table 5. There is a sharp decrease in the number of middle and senior secondary schools in comparison to primary schools which indicates that students do not have easy access to middle and senior schools after completing their primary education. There is also a significant difference in the educational opportunities available to boys and girls.

Table 5. Number of schools (primary, middle and senior secondary)

School	Total	Boys	Girls
Primary	498	467	31
Middle	385	327	58
Senior secondary	174	158	16

Source: Department of Economic and *Statistical* Analysis

- **Teacher Strength:**

The number of teachers in the schools in Nuh, in 2017, had a skewed male to female ratio of 76:24, which is also a cause for low female literacy in the area, as parents are not comfortable sending their girls to schools without female teachers. However, this ratio has improved substantially to 55:45 in the period 2018–19 [22].

- **Number of Colleges**

The region only had 12 recognized colleges for the 34,000 senior secondary students and the intake capacity of engineering colleges was just 300 [23]. The total number of students studying in colleges is 3138 which include 2042 boys and 1096 girls [24].

3. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The primary data for this study were obtained from SRF Foundation that organizes various corporate social responsibility activities in the Nuh block. The foundation collected data following the ethical guidelines of academic research by informing the participants about the data collection and seeking their consent to participate in the survey. Before initiating the survey, meetings were conducted to collaborate with community stakeholders. A detailed, door-to-door family profiling was performed for the 4869 families, and demographic details such as social background, educational status, and family details across 22 villages in Nuh block, Mewat, were procured.

4. FINDINGS

The demographic profile of the 4869 surveyed families are as follows:

4.1. Education and Occupation of Fathers

The education level of fathers and their occupation are depicted in Figure 4 and Figure 5, respectively.

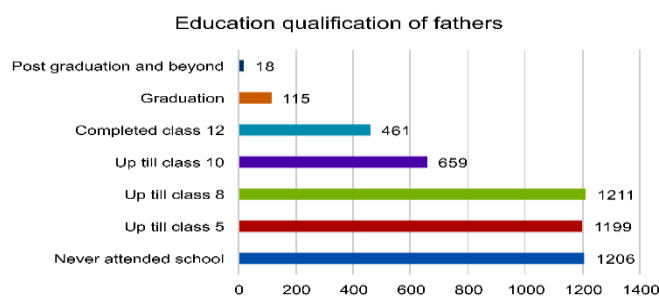


Figure 4. Education qualification of fathers

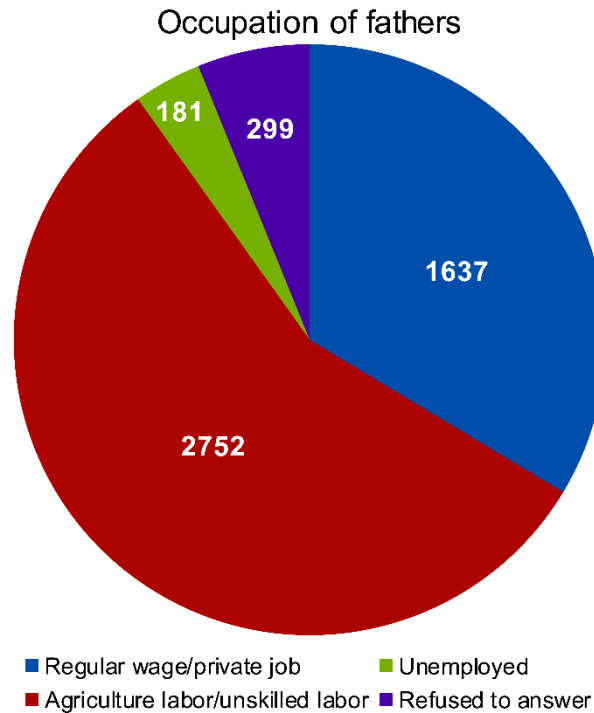


Figure 5. Occupation of fathers

The findings of the survey with regard to the education level of the fathers were as follows: those who never attended school (25%) class 5 (25%), class 8 (25%), secondary education (14%), senior secondary (9%), graduation and post-graduation (2%).

The data showed that 57% of fathers were engaged in agriculture labor/unskilled labor with an average income of Rs. 9000 (US\$ 120) per month, 34% were regular wage/private job earners with an average income of Rs. 10000 (US\$ 134) per month, 4% were unemployed and 6% refused to answer.

4.1. Education and Occupation of Mothers

The education level of mothers and their occupation are shown in Figures 6 and 7.

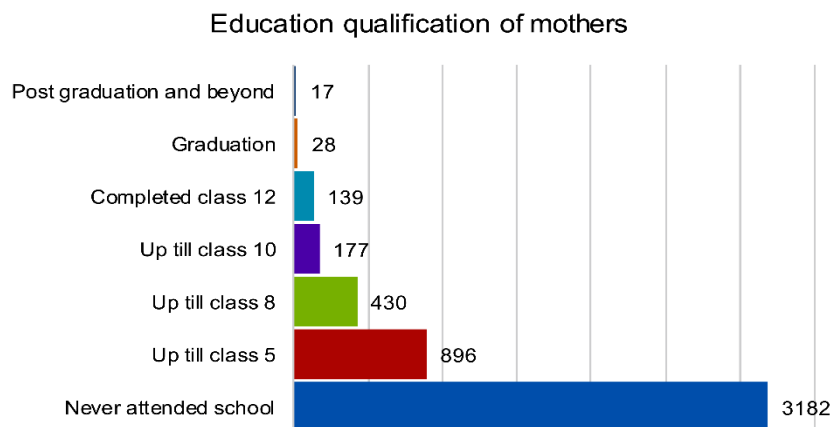


Figure 6. Education qualification of mothers

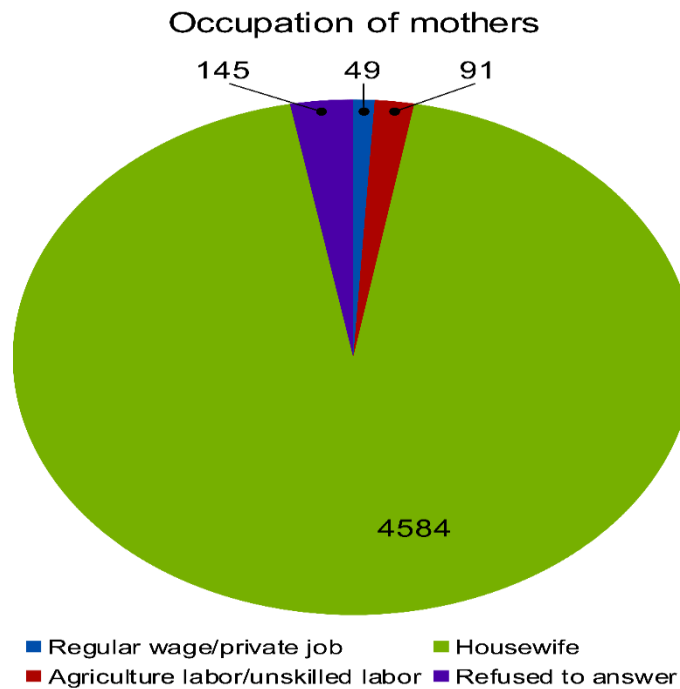


Figure 7. Occupation of mothers

The findings of the survey with regard to the education level of the mothers were as follows: those who never attended school (65%), class 5 (18%), class 8 (9%), secondary education (4%), senior secondary (3%), graduation and post-graduation (1%).

The findings of the survey with regard to the occupation of the mothers were as follows: those who were housewives (94%), agriculture labor/unskilled labor (2%), regular wage/private job (1%) and refused to answer (3%). A major proportion of the mothers were housewives with no income and only 3% who were employed had an average income of Rs 7500 (US\$ 100) per month.

6. DISCUSSION

Despite implementation of development programs at the district level for over a decade, since Mewat was selected as one of the 90 districts in 2008 under Multi-Sectoral Development Program, in 2018, it was declared as one of the most backward districts in India suffering from many social issues such as poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, increased crime rate, among others, that resulted in extreme socio-economic disparities. The vulnerability and poverty are endemic in this region as a result of a combination of interacting social, economic, and environmental factors and processes. In the absence of industries in this area, the major occupation is agriculture and hence there is a lack of focus on education. There is a major difference in the literacy rates among males and females in Mewat, as the cultural ethos restricts girls from moving out of their homesteads and adolescent girls are married early. The problem of literacy continues to thwart the development in Mewat, reproducing and perpetuating social traditions.

The educational status is dependent upon the availability of educational facilities in the nearby areas and a conducive environment that promotes education. The primary education infrastructure is adequate with at least one primary school per village; however, the middle and high school infrastructure is inadequate as only 86% of villages have middle schools and only

39% of villages have high schools. The teacher strength varies, as the primary schools have sufficient number of teachers, however it drops down tremendously for schools having higher grades. Furthermore, the proportion of female teachers in schools is very low. Parents as well as children have minimal interest and lack motivation to pursue education. Enrollment figures show a decline with increasing grades in school. At the primary level approximately the same number of boys and girls are enrolled, while in the higher grades enrollment of girls decreases to less than 50%.

The sustainable development and growth of any society is possible only with the active involvement of all key stakeholders. The focus on provision of adequate educational infrastructure along with making parents aware of the importance of education for the furtherance of their children's careers and advancements in life will help in higher school enrollment and lower dropouts. The district has a potential for development of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) with easy availability of unskilled and semiskilled manpower [25]. Setting up vocational skill centers and providing awareness regarding the benefits of the MSME schemes of central and state government will help in creating more employment opportunities for the people of Mewat.

7. CONCLUSION

The economic growth of a society goes hand-in-hand with human resource development. Although two decades of the new millennium have elapsed, districts like Mewat continue to languish in inequality and poverty. Social reproduction in Mewat can be attributed to the stark realities of the standard of living, education, and health, which are directly linked to educational backwardness.

Additionally, a review of the studies revealed that the sub-par educational infrastructure and facilities in Mewat are discouraging factors for students, especially girls, who aspire to attain higher education. Therefore, the focus should be on scaling up the number of middle and senior secondary schools, ideally, to at least one school per village. There is also a requirement for more colleges and robust infrastructure, quality teachers, and opportunities for vocational training and skill development.

The need of the hour is to create opportunities through education for people in districts like Mewat to uplift them socially, and thereby augment the growth of the country. To conclude, governments and private organizations, along with society at large, must come together to allocate the resources required to make structural changes in the access to education in places like Mewat to bring about change, and break the cycle of inequality and poverty.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Bhagya Lakshmi Balaji developed the initial concept of this study. Dayal Pyari and Bhagya Lakshmi reviewed the available information. The initial draft of the manuscript was written by Bhagya Lakshmi and was further edited by Dayal Pyari.

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