

Caste, Gender, and English Language: Opportunities and Challenges in English Language Education for Women in Vidarbha Region, India

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Abstract

This paper draws inspiration from the teachings of social reformers Savitribai Phule, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, exploring the complex relationship between women's educational achievements and the broader implications for community progress in India. It critically examines the enduring practice of socio-economic and political elites seeking to maintain their privileges through their English-speaking abilities. Instances include here families with sufficient means to enroll sons in English-language schools, relegating daughters to less privileged vernacular educational settings. This phenomenon reflects deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, perpetuating gender-based discrimination in educational opportunities. English, aside from its linguistic significance, assumes a crucial role in building confidence and dismantling ingrained inferiority complexes, further underscoring the urgency of equitable access to English-language education for women in Vidarbha. Since independence, access to the English language has proved particularly useful for marginalised sections of Indian society to empower themselves. Advocating for equitable English-language education aligns with Ambedkar's belief in its power to combat injustice and enable social mobility for marginalised groups. This paper's focus is to highlight socio-economic, gender, and regional disparities within an economically developed state in India, using the spread of English language education as a parameter to present the analysis.

Keyword: Vidarbha, Education, Gender, English language, First generation students

Introduction

"I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved," said Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a pioneering anti-caste and feminist leader from India in the mid-twentieth century, who envisioned a future where societal advancement was deeply intertwined with the advancement of women. Education was an integral aspect of his vision for the progress of women and lower castes. This research paper draws inspiration from Ambedkar's public engagement and scholarship to explore the complex relationship between women's educational achievements and the broader implications for community progress in India decades after his death in 1956, after which many aspects of socioeconomic and political life have changed.

When we look into this complicated relationship, we argue that educating women goes beyond just providing individuals agency; it also has the potential to change society as a whole. However, it is confronted with multiple challenges, starting from the smallest unit which is the family, to the history of uneven development by state institutions in different regions of India. The distribution of most

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premier colleges and universities in India is uneven across certain metropolitan cities and districts, with a vast number of districts lacking quality higher education and infrastructure (Shobhana, 2018). Women in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra experience considerable socio-economic, cultural, and systemic obstacles to obtaining English language education, despite its capacity to empower and facilitate socio-economic advancement. Enduring caste and gender prejudices, disparities between rural and urban areas, and patriarchal conventions persistently restrict women's access to education, especially in English fluency, which is essential for modern employment and changing societies.

The Vidarbha region of Maharashtra starkly exemplifies the phenomenon of educational and industrial disparity when compared to other regions such as the Mumbai-Thane-Pune belt (Amrutkar 2009). Vidarbha's story is one of underdevelopment and disparity, where economic growth has not kept pace with other parts of the state and educational opportunities, particularly for women, remain limited. This economic and educational asymmetry has created a noticeable disparity, further fuelled by discontent resulting from the mismatch between the spread of higher education and the generation of employment opportunities. Education, as argued by many contemporary scholars, particularly for women, embodies a transformative power that is crucial for the advancement of society and the empowerment of women (Nag 2018; Banerjee 2018; Deshpande 2006; Akram 2018). However, as we argued in the introductory paragraph, families often decide the life trajectories of women, including their education. In India's complex caste system, it is important to know about the traditional rules and laws that govern women's bodies and movements when it comes to maintaining endogamy and especially hypergamy (Chakravarti 2002). Endogamy, which necessitates marriage within one's caste, acts as a cornerstone for the preservation of the caste system. The Hindu newspaper's 2014 survey highlights the rigidity of this system, revealing that only 5% of Indian marriages are inter-caste, underscoring the strict adherence to caste boundaries (R. 2014).

This study aims to investigate the socio-economic, gender-based, and cultural factors that influence women's access to English language education in the Vidarbha region. The research seeks to explore the challenges women face, the transformative potential of English proficiency for empowerment, and the implications for socio-economic mobility and gender equity in the region. In caste-based patriarchal societies like Vidarbha, women have historically been assigned the roles of homemakers and caretakers, with decisions about their lives and mobility often made by the male heads of the families, including their access to education. The rural-urban divide exacerbates this situation for women. While in cities like Pune, Mumbai, and Thane, women from middle and upper-middle classes have relatively better access to education, including English language education, most women from rural areas and backward regions like Vidarbha are deprived of these opportunities. Such disparities not only highlight the need for targeted educational policies in different regions but also underscore the imperative to avoid analysing women as a homogenous group in their access to education, specifically English education. In Vidarbha, within families where educational resources are scarce, the focus often gravitates towards educating male members at the expense of female members of the family. This dynamic is emblematic of a broader societal issue in South Asia, where sons are expected to look after their families later while daughters are sent off after marriage to a different family. Hence, English-medium convent schools prioritise access to education for males over females. This relegates daughters to less privileged vernacular educational settings, allowing them to study only up to a certain grade. Even when they are allowed to study, it is rooted in the notion that their educational qualifications would eventually help in finding them a suitable groom. This phenomenon of preventing women from continuing education after a certain grade stems from the fear that they might make decisions contrary

to the family's wishes. This can be attributed to the idea of the 'Sanskari Bahu' or 'Sharif ghar ki Ladki,' which reflects the imagery of a servile, submissive, and obedient woman (Khurshid 2017; Mujahid et al. 2015).

However, we cannot underestimate the crucial role of educational opportunities in providing women with a degree of mobility. Such opportunities, particularly in the form of English language education, offer a gateway for women, especially those from smaller towns and rural areas, to access new and diversified job markets in nearby cities. These markets not only demand specific language proficiencies but also promise a departure from traditional home-based gender roles. Nonetheless, many in small towns view the acquisition of education, particularly English language proficiency for women and the ensuing mobility, with trepidation, fearing the potential of cross-caste interactions. At the same time, proficiency in English equips women with the necessary skills for enhanced communication and access to a plethora of opportunities that were previously unattainable with vernacular medium education, which offers limited prospects.

Within this broader context of underdevelopment, rural-urban divide, patriarchal caste norms, and class divide, our research explores women and their access to English education in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra state in India.

Literature Review

This section examines the complexities surrounding English language education for the lower castes, specifically Dalit and Adivasi women. The intersection of caste, gender, and power dynamics has a dramatic impact on access to and experiences within India's higher education system. Deshpande (2006) explains how the historical dominance of upper castes in higher education has been legitimised under the pretext of merit, which frequently disguises the systemic exclusion of lower castes such as Dalits and Adivasis. Such unequal access to quality higher education must be examined within historical processes that favour certain groups over others (Deshpande 2006). Central to this review is the influence of patriarchy, as elucidated by Chakravarti (1993), who provides a critical analysis of how patriarchal structures in South Asian societies, including India, curtail women's movements and freedoms. Chakravarti's insights into the relegation of women to nurturing roles within the household highlight the broader societal constraints that limit women's educational and economic opportunities, particularly in regions like Vidarbha. Moreover, Gurjar and Srishti (2022) scrutinise the manifestation of caste and its consequences on Dalit identities in urban environments, contending that the stigmatisation of caste and broader societal perceptions inextricably link Dalits' obstacles to higher education and social mobility. They indicate that the urban aesthetics of caste complicate socioeconomic advancement narratives and highlight the necessity for policies that address the interconnectedness of caste, gender, and urban poverty (Gurjar & Srishti 2022). Additionally, the intersection of caste and education, particularly for Dalit women, adds another layer of complexity to the educational landscape. Still (2008) offers an in-depth exploration of class dynamics among Dalit women in Andhra Pradesh, highlighting the nuanced relationship between educational attainment and societal expectations. Still points to the persistent challenges faced by women, even after accessing education and advancing their economic class, suggesting that the mobility of middle-class Dalit women is curtailed by their families striving to emulate values of respectability tied to caste and class status. On the other hand, upper-caste women, despite receiving education, often find their empowerment limited in terms of job prospects and societal roles. Akram (2018) and Mujahid et al. (2015) have explored this pattern of limited empowerment, reflecting broader societal norms.

The post-colonial linguistic landscape of India, as discussed by Liddicoat and Kirkpatrick (2020), further complicates the context within which English language education operates. Their analysis of the marginalisation of indigenous languages in favour of English demonstrates the socio-economic disparities perpetuated by linguistic preferences in education. This trend is particularly evident in the uneven access to English-language education between urban and rural areas and is acutely relevant in a region like Vidarbha, where the local Marathi language is a prevalent form of communication in everyday life.

Ramanathan's review highlights the challenges in English language teaching, including the need for improved teacher training and localised educational research, underscoring the urgent need for reforms to enhance educational access and quality. This discussion is critical for understanding the broader implications of English language education for social mobility and economic opportunities in the region (Ramanathan 2006).

While existing research offers insights at national or state levels, it often overlooks the unique challenges faced by different regions with their unique socio-economic structures, development histories, and cultural values. In summary, the challenges encountered in accessing English education are particularly pronounced in rural settings, where economic constraints and societal inequalities limit educational opportunities, especially in English-medium schools. The privatisation of English education in India reinforces its association with privilege, further exacerbating gender-based disparities in educational access and outcomes.

This literature review, therefore, underscores the critical need for further research to bridge the knowledge gap and address the multifaceted challenges faced by marginalised communities, particularly women. By fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape, there lies potential to transform English language education into a potent tool for empowerment and social change, contributing to the socio-economic development and cultural transformation of the region. However, a recent report by the ILO suggests that Indian youth constitute 82.9% of the unemployed population in India. Even those who have acquired secondary and higher education continue to be in this demographic, which increased by 11.5%, from 54.2% in 2000 to 65.7% in 2022 (Naseer, 2024). Economists and public policy scholars have argued that India has been witnessing jobless economic growth, with more youth moving back to agriculture-related jobs, which is disguised unemployment (Nilakantan, 2024). This phase requires us to critically examine the relationship between higher education, the English language, and job opportunities, which serve as indicators of socioeconomic mobility for women.

A broad historical overview of access to higher education, caste inequalities, prestige associated with English education in post-colonial India, gender norms, changing economies, and region-specific studies would help us to better understand the link between women and English education.

Methodology

This research utilised a quantitative, non-experimental methodology to investigate the challenges and opportunities related to English-language education for women in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, India. The study focused on understanding the socio-economic and cultural factors influencing educational access, ensuring both objectivity and depth without manipulating variables. We selected a purposive sample of 197 participants, aged 18 and older, from 11 districts in Vidarbha to ensure representation across various caste and socio-economic groups, including Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and Nomadic Tribes/Denotified Tribes (NT/DNT). Data collection primarily relied on a structured questionnaire designed to explore multiple aspects of women's educational experiences, such as socio-economic barriers, cultural influences, and aspirations regarding English education. Google Forms facilitated the efficient collection of quantitative data from geographically dispersed participants. We employed additional methods such as focus group discussions, unstructured interviews, and both participant and non-participant observations to enhance the qualitative depth of the study. These methods provided insights into participants' experiences and challenges. Specific objectives guided the study, which included identifying socio-economic and cultural barriers to English education and exploring women's aspirations related to it. We framed hypotheses to investigate whether marginalised women faced greater challenges and whether cultural barriers significantly impacted educational access. The selection process was very detailed. We found participants through local groups and colleges, and included them based on their socioeconomic status. The criteria for inclusion were women aged 18 and up who lived in Vidarbha. We conducted quantitative data analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), enabling the identification of patterns, relationships, and trends in the responses. Along with the quantitative results, thematic analysis of qualitative data gave a more complete and nuanced picture of the education system in Vidarbha. We rigorously followed ethical guidelines throughout the research process, including obtaining informed consent and ensuring participant confidentiality. By integrating statistical analysis with qualitative insights, this study provides practical recommendations for addressing institutional and cultural barriers and promoting equitable access to English education for women in Vidarbha.

Regional Context and Socio-Economic Overview of Vidarbha

The Vidarbha region, encompassing two administrative divisions, Amaravati and Nagpur, with 11 districts and 120 sub-blocks, is quite different from other regions of Maharashtra in many ways. Despite occupying 31.6% of Maharashtra's total area and accounting for 21.3% of its population, Vidarbha contributes only about 10% to the state's GDP, according to the Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Maharashtra Government. Historically, the region has faced agricultural distress and high farmer suicide rates. According to the National Census 2011, approximately 30% of its population comprises SC and ST communities, with notable representation from NT-DNT communities such as Banjara, Dhangar, Vadar, and Bhill. The OBC castes, such as Kunbi, Teli, and Mali, have maintained a hold over land ownership in the region. The Scheduled Tribes percentage, higher than the state and national average, includes primitive tribal groups (PVTG) communities Kolam, Madiya Gond, and other tribal groups like Pardhan, Mana, and Korku. Seasonal migration among landless labourers, including Dalit groups like Mahar, Matang, and NT-DNT communities, is quite prevalent. Since 2014, the BJP, the right-wing Hindu nationalist party, has been holding sway over electoral politics in the region. In recent years, there has been an increasing privatisation in education, particularly in higher education and private schools. Establishing these private institutions has become a business for

traditional merchant caste groups such as the Marwaris and a few wealthy Kunbi political leaders who utilise their agrarian surplus in this domain. The languages spoken in the region are Marathi and its dialects such as Varhadi and Zadiboli, along with Hindi, Gondi, Korku, Kolami, Telugu, and Lambadi. Seasonal migration to big cities such as Pune, Mumbai, Nashik, Nagpur, and Aurangabad has been a phenomenon among landless labourers, mostly Dalit groups like Mahar, Matang, and NT-DNT communities. Major reasons for this migration can be attributed to the dry climate in the region with inadequate rainfall for agriculture, lack of industries, and poor infrastructure for education and health. According to government data, Maharashtra's per capita income in the fiscal year 2011-12 was INR 127,606, while Vidarbha's was significantly lower at INR 65,368. This stark contrast highlights the economic disparities between Vidarbha and the rest of Maharashtra.

Caste-Based Insights:

In our research survey, a majority of the study participants are first-generation college students and come from OBC, Adivasi, and Dalit backgrounds, with significant numbers from Kunbi, Banjara, Kolam, and Korku communities. The Kunbi caste, most of whom have landholdings ranging from small and marginal to large, often allows higher education for women, viewing it as a means to secure a prosperous marriage by matching with well-off grooms. Simultaneously, a significant number of female participants from agricultural families across various caste groups encountered financial difficulties as a result of agricultural distress. Furthermore, the absence of transportation facilities to nearby colleges significantly hinders their ability to pursue higher education. Only a small section among them could secure accommodation in college hostels, thereby restricting their ability to travel far for education. Those from Korku Adivasi backgrounds could access government-funded hostels, but since most had difficulty speaking the predominant Marathi language, navigating the academic space was challenging for them.

Seasonal migration, especially among Dalits and NT/DNT communities who have historically worked as landless labourers, affected the education of women, as some had to travel with their parents. Given the caste-enshrouded class socio-economic trajectories, most participants across caste groups among OBCs and Dalits hailed from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and could not afford to study in expensive English-medium schools. However, focus group discussions revealed that while parents are willing to invest in English-medium education for their sons despite economic hardships, they often do not do the same for their daughters. Given that caste status in the Vidarbha region influences community access to land ownership, many female participants from Dalit and NT/DNT backgrounds reported working as farm labourers to fund their higher education.

Data Collection

It is within this broad context that we intend to explore the educational journeys and outcomes of young girls and women from Vidarbha. This research adopts a quantitative, non-experimental design, incorporating survey methods, focus group discussions, and participant observation. Aligned with the principles of non-experimental research outlined by Antwi and Hamza (2015), this approach avoids manipulating independent variables and focuses on observing the natural unfolding of variables. Leveraging survey research, a widely accepted quantitative technique in the social sciences (Bethlehem, 2009), the study systematically collects information to understand and predict various aspects of the behaviour of the target population. This design, guided by literature principles, allows for the exploration of trends, variations, and correlations relevant to English language education for women in

Vidarbha (Ary et al., 2010). The strengths of this approach are situated in its capacity to generate generalisable results, ease of analysis, and comparability across diverse groups. The reliability and replicability of quantitative data can provide robust indicators for policy guidance, supported by existing professional standards ensuring consistency in survey work (Walker, 2005; Atieno, 2009).

Demographic representation is a crucial aspect of the research design, with a primary focus on women aged 18 and above. We believe that it is a reflective stage in life where educational choices and experiences become particularly relevant. The inclusion of women actively pursuing education in colleges within the Vidarbha region ensures a comprehensive exploration of their encounters with English language education. This demographic specificity adds depth and relevance to the study, as it hones in on the segment of the population most directly engaged with formal education.

English language education for women in Vidarbha (Data Analysis)

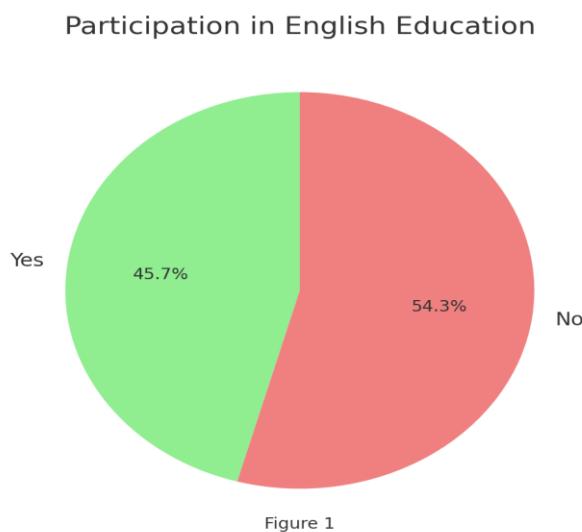
We use a thorough data analysis approach to demonstrate the complex circumstances of women's access to English language education in Vidarbha. Our findings illustrate the enormous challenges these women confront in obtaining an English education, as well as the transformative implications for those who succeed. We examine this phenomenon systematically through three major topics: access to English language education, cultural tensions in English language learning, confidence, and English language education. Each section delves deeply into the multifaceted difficulties and opportunities, providing an in-depth overview of the socio-cultural and economic factors at play.

1. Access to English Language Education

• Educational Background

An analysis of young women's educational backgrounds indicates a remarkable concentration of higher education attainment, with 75.12% (148 out of 197) of them possessing a bachelor's degree or pursuing higher education. The data, primarily collected from colleges, underscores the academic aspirations and achievements of young women in Vidarbha, initially casting a favourable light on gender and education in the region. However, further investigation of the socioeconomic backgrounds that influence these educational choices reveal complex interconnectedness between caste, gender norms, development, ecology, agriculture, and land. The high percentage of participants with higher education degrees reflects the importance of formal education among Indians, which is consistent with findings by Jeffery et al. (2005) that education is a means of socio-political empowerment in low-caste communities. Jeffery's study in rural North India finds similar resonance here in Vidarbha when it comes to the motivation behind acquiring higher education among women.

• English Education Participation



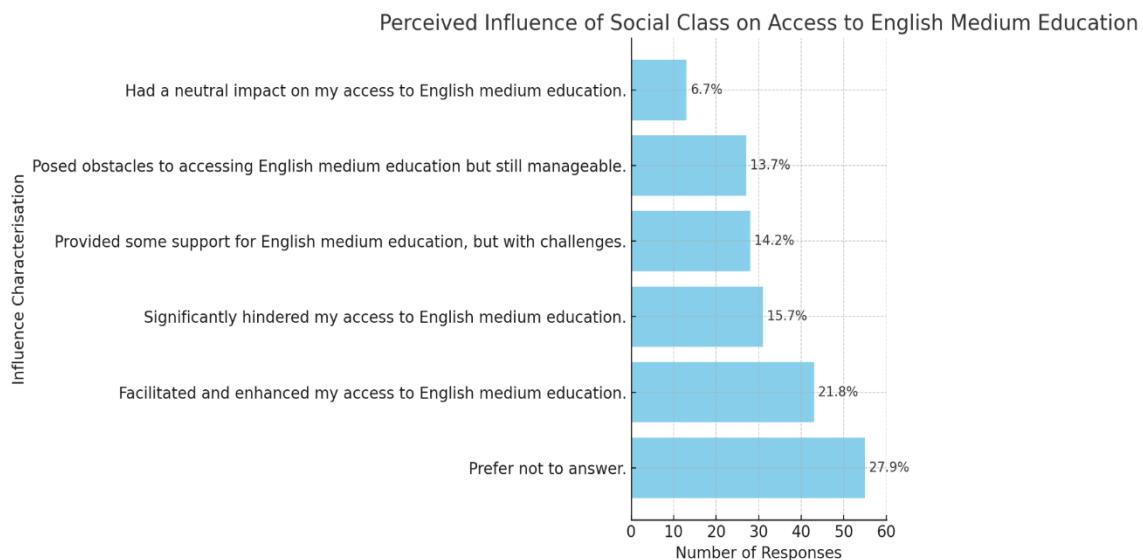
The survey's findings about English education participation showed that while 45.7% (90) of the participants had received instruction in English, 54.3% (107) had not, pointing to uneven access in women's language learning. Although English is certainly a compulsory third language at school and college, it is often treated merely as a subject rather than as a medium of communication or a practical communication skill. This difference became more marked during the study that was conducted in two institutions working with different instructional mediums. In the diploma engineering college, for instance, where English is the medium of instruction, the

students receive constant exposure to English through various subjects. The social work college, on the other hand, functions mainly in Marathi, which means that the students engage with English only as an independent subject. This is a contextual difference that underscores varied experiences and exposure to English education among participants, even within similar academic settings. When compared to the participants' educational attainment, this gap in English education enrolment is quite illuminating. This survey shows that English education increased progressively with educational attainment: only 7.10% of the respondents with primary education, 25% with secondary education, and as many as 67.90% with a bachelor's degree or higher reported that they received education in English. However, this data highlights the tendency to treat English as a subject rather than as a useful communication skill. During discussions with participants, it was found that some had studied in semi-English secondary schools where some subjects, such as science and mathematics, were taught in English while the other subjects were taught in their regional language. Thus, partial exposure restricted their holistic engagement with English, reinforcing its role as a compartmentalised academic subject rather than a comprehensive medium of learning. On the other hand, the majority of participants had bachelor degrees with a medium of instruction in English, such as a Bachelor in Science or Engineering. This also raised a question about whether a sudden shift from regional language to English might be difficult for participants.

The gradient of rising involvement in English education with increasing educational attainment suggests that curriculum and textbooks in higher education are primarily in English, unlike the vernacular language textbooks that students would have used in their primary and secondary learning. Although the quantitative analysis of the survey data primarily highlights this link, it also indirectly addresses the structural barriers and inequities that Sukumar (2023) and Deshpande (2006) have pointed out. The gap in English education participation, particularly among those with lower educational levels, reflects larger socio-economic and caste-based disparities that characterise the Indian educational system. Those lower in the caste ladder are more prone to dropping out of colleges due to a lack of financial capital and entrenched gender norms about women's higher education, which ring true for the colleges that we visited in Vidarbha.

- **Social Class Influence**

Figure 2 Assessment of the Perceived Influence of Social Class on Access to English Medium Education



Based on Figure 2 above, a notable portion of respondents (21.8%) believed that their social class facilitated and enhanced their access to English medium education. A smaller percentage (6.7%) perceived a neutral impact of social class on their access to English education. 13.7% of respondents felt that their social class posed obstacles to accessing English-medium education, but these obstacles were manageable. Further, a substantial portion (27.9%) of respondents chose not to disclose their perception of the influence of social class on their access to English education. Another 14.2% of respondents believed that their social class provided some support for English medium education, even though it had challenges. 15.7% perceived that their social class significantly hindered their access to English-medium education. Therefore, the perceptions are diverse, with some individuals feeling positive about the influence of their social class, while others perceive challenges or obstacles. The substantial percentage of respondents choosing not to answer may also reflect the sensitivity or complexity associated with the relationship between social class and access to English-medium education.

Table 1

	Facilitated and enhanced my access to English-medium education	Had a neutral impact on my access to English-medium education.	Posed obstacles to accessing English-medium education but still manageable	Prefer not to answer	Provided some support for English education, but with challenges	Significantly hindered my access to English-medium education
Agriculture	19.3%	9.6%	17.5%	25.4%	11.4%	16.7%
Business/Entrepreneurship	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%	25.0%	12.5%	29.2%
Employment/Salary	19.0%	0.0%	19.0%	19.0%	28.6%	14.3%
Government assistance/Welfare	25.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	25.0%
Investments/Financial assets	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Other	20.0%	10.0%	25.0%	30.0%	10.0%	5.0%
Prefer not to answer	30.8%	0.0%	0.0%	53.8%	15.4%	0.0%

Table 1 illustrates that access to English-medium education is significantly affected by money sources and social standing, revealing clear discrepancies that underscore the impact of socio-economic privilege. Individuals from business or entrepreneurial backgrounds reported facilitated access more often, highlighting the socio-economic advantages and accumulated cultural capital present in these groups. In contrast, participants whose main income derived from agriculture or government aid reported greater difficulties in obtaining English-medium schooling, highlighting the systemic obstacles encountered by underprivileged communities. A significant observation is that a considerable percentage of participants chose not to respond to enquiries about the impact of social class, indicating two possible explanations: either they perceived the question as sensitive and felt uneasy discussing it, or they may not have comprehended the question entirely. Based on the overall answer patterns found in the study, the likelihood of feeling uncomfortable seemed high, since participants consistently avoided questions about sensitive social dynamics. This hesitation illustrates the complex socio-cultural dynamics involved, where conversations about privilege or socio-economic status may be viewed as controversial or stigmatising.

Barriers to English Education: Affordability and Availability

While patriarchy remains a significant barrier to women's education, our findings reveal that issues of affordability and availability of educational resources are equally critical. Financial constraints and a lack of accessible educational opportunities emerge as substantial hurdles in Vidarbha. This highlights the necessity for targeted policy interventions aimed at enhancing the affordability and accessibility of English language learning opportunities, thereby ensuring that women across different socio-economic backgrounds can access education, moving beyond the barriers imposed by patriarchy alone.

Table 2 Primary Barriers Reported by Participants

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Socio-Cultural factors	10	5.1
Affordability	48	24.4
Availability	38	19.3
No response	101	51.3

The table explores the significant obstacles to obtaining English-language education, as revealed by an open-ended inquiry. A majority of participants (51.3%) abstained from responding, perhaps indicating difficulties in expressing their obstacles or unease in confronting the inquiry. 5.1% of respondents cited cultural issues, emphasising socio-cultural obstacles that hinder access. Affordability constituted a major obstacle, reported by 24.4% of participants, signifying that financial limitations had a substantial influence. Availability, noted by 19.3%, highlights the restricted access to English-language resources or opportunities. The large number of non-responses suggests that many barriers may not be clearly stated or are less concrete, even though financial and availability issues are important.

2. The Cultural Tensions within English Language Learning

• English Education as a Challenge to Cultural Norms

In this context, cultural norms are deeply rooted beliefs, attitudes, and practices shared by a community that shape people's perceptions and behaviors. These norms encompass attitudes towards gender roles, language, and education, all of which shape the perception and value of women's educational opportunities in society. For instance, the region's deeply ingrained linguistic pride upholds the Marathi language as a fundamental symbol of cultural identity and values, often leading to scepticism or outright rejection of foreign languages like English, perceived as a symbol of western influence and moral decay. Such norms often prevent families from sending their daughters to English-medium schools, perpetuating stereotypes about English's association with western moral values. There is an underlying notion that equates Marathi with cultural purity and English with cultural degradation.

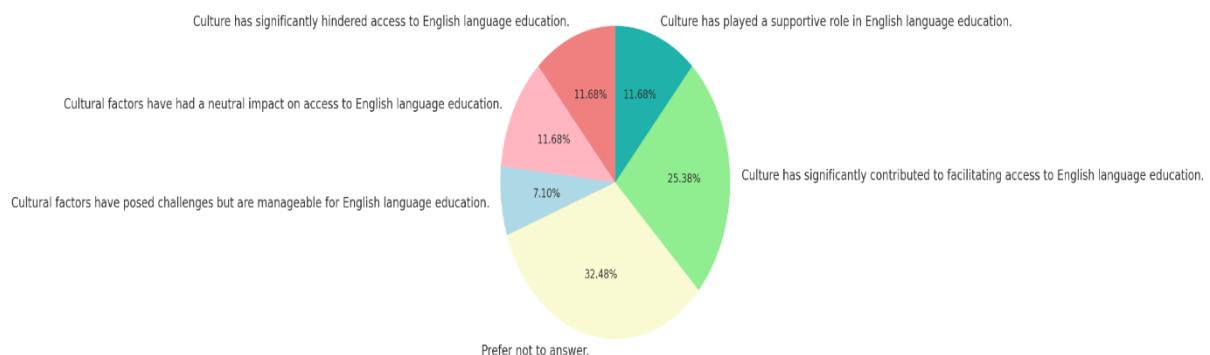
Furthermore, there are restrictions that demand college-going women adhere to specific dress codes, dietary restrictions, and submission in front of male family members. This also includes

prohibitions against sitting with male family members when they discuss events and issues. These culturally conservative norms influence the broader participation of women in social and public life and hinder their aspirations to be mobile. Despite this broad cultural pattern, a positive shift is also occurring within many families who are increasingly supporting female education, moving beyond rigid restrictions. This change, however gradual, suggests that cultural norms, both visible and invisible, affect the way women access life opportunities. d Access to higher education is one such important opportunity.

• Cultural Influence

Figure 3

Cultural Influence on Access to English Education (Exact Percentages)



A substantial percentage of respondents (25.38%) reported that culture played a crucial role in enhancing access to English language education. Additionally, 11.68% indicated that culture contributed to the support of English language education. Likewise, 11.68% of participants indicated that culture exerted a neutral influence on access to English language education. Additionally, 11.68% of respondents indicated that cultural issues substantially obstructed access to English language education. Approximately 7.10% of respondents recognised that cultural issues provide obstacles; however, these are controllable within English language instruction. A significant percentage of respondents (32.48%) choose not to respond to the question.

Therefore, the findings reflect a wide range of perspectives on the role of cultural influence in improving access to English language education. The high percentage of respondents who chose not to respond may point to a complex interaction between culture and English education access. Discussions with participants showed that 'cultural variables' substantially affect access to English-language education, especially concerning gender. Many families were hesitant to enroll their girls in English-medium schools due to concerns about the values these institutions would instill. This reluctance seems to arise from a conviction that exposure to English education may jeopardise traditional cultural values and encourage cultural assimilation. These observations underscore the intricate relationship between educational ambitions and the maintenance of socio-cultural norms, elucidating how cultural concerns influence decisions regarding English-language education for girls.

Further findings indicate that participants perceive English-language education as fostering behaviours that are viewed as unsuitable in their cultural setting, such as increased independence or questioning established gender roles. Many participants highlighted the perceived threat of 'modern' or

'degrading' values often associated with English-medium schools, which contributes to families' reluctance to support their daughters' education in English.

Concerns surrounding marriage also emerged as a significant barrier. Participants discussed how families fear that higher education, especially in English, could empower girls to express their preferences about the timing and choice of marriage, potentially challenging traditional norms related to age and community expectations. Safety concerns were another prominent theme, particularly in rural areas where quality English-language education is often locally unavailable. In such cases, participants noted that girls may need to travel or migrate to urban centres for education, which parents discourage due to fears of harassment or violence. Daughters are often considered symbols of family honour, and any incidents—such as eve-teasing or harassment—are seen as bringing shame and indignity upon the family. These tendencies reflect a victim-blaming culture and illustrate how deeply entrenched patriarchal norms continue to influence perceptions and decisions regarding girls' education.

- **Autonomy and Empowerment in Education**

The analysis highlights the importance of autonomy in decision-making as a critical factor in women's engagement with English language education. This paper examines autonomy and decision-making within the socio-cultural and familial contexts that shape women's educational pursuits. These contexts often determine the extent to which women can make independent choices about their education. Women with greater autonomy are more likely to participate in and benefit from English language education. The findings emphasise the need to support women in making informed choices about their education, particularly in settings where such autonomy is limited.

- **Autonomy in Decision-making:**

Table 3 Participants' Perception of Autonomy in Decision-making and its Association with English Language Education

Chi-Square Tests	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	16.095	8	0.041
Likelihood Ratio	15.576	8	0.048
N of Valid Cases	197		

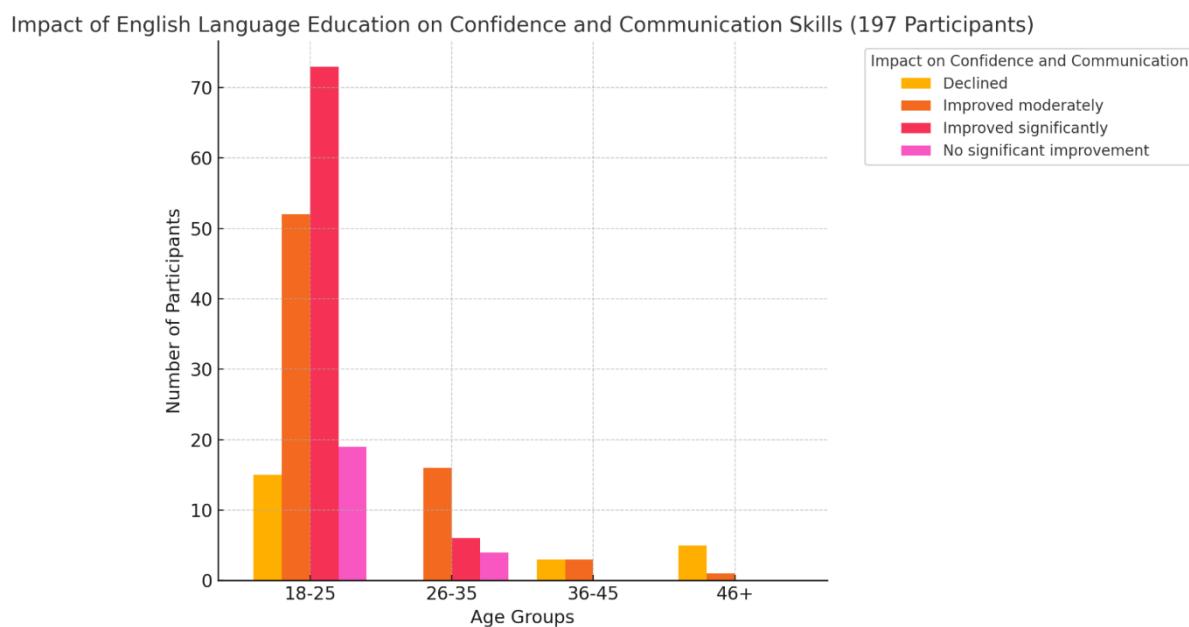
In Table 3, 46.7% of the 197 participants felt completely empowered to make their own decisions, whereas 30.0% experienced a degree of autonomy but sought advice from others. 23.3% either regarded decision-making as a collaborative endeavour or depended on the counsel of others. The revised analysis demonstrates a notable correlation between the degree of autonomy and perceptions of the influence of English education, as evidenced by the Chi-Square test ($\chi^2 (8) = 16.095$, $p = .041$). This suggests a correlation between autonomy in decision-making and the perception of English language instruction as a transformative element.

3. Confidence, Employment and English Language Education

English proficiency is essential for education and empowerment in India since it provides avenues for social mobility, international interaction, and self-assurance. Proficiency in English correlates with increased salaries, as proficient speakers earn 34% more than individuals with weak skills (Azam et al., 2010). English proficiency is a crucial determinant of employability, with more than 50% of companies in India evaluating English skills during recruitment and frequently providing higher compensation to adept candidates (Das 2019).

In addition to economic advantages, proficiency in English enhances self-assurance, as it is linked to status and competence. It empowers individuals, especially women and rural communities, by improving their capacity to navigate competitive landscapes and access global opportunities. Nonetheless, access inequities endure, with urban groups and males exhibiting superior proficiency rates. English fluency is an essential asset for education, self-assurance, and socioeconomic progress in India. The clustered column chart depicts the effect of English language instruction on participants' confidence and communication abilities, visually demonstrating how competency in English affects these essential personal and professional traits.

Figure 4 Clustered Column Chart Examining the Impact of English language Education on Participants' Confidence and Communication skills



The above graph illustrates the impact of English language education on confidence and communication skills among participants, categorized by age. Most participants were aged 18–25 (159 participants), with 73 reporting significant improvement and 52 reporting moderate improvement. In the 26–35 group (26 participants), 16 noted moderate improvement, and 6 reported significant improvement. Participants aged 36–45 (6 participants), and 46+ (6 participants) showed minimal or no significant improvement, with some reporting a decline. The data highlights that English education is most beneficial for younger participants (18–35), with its advantages diminishing for older groups.

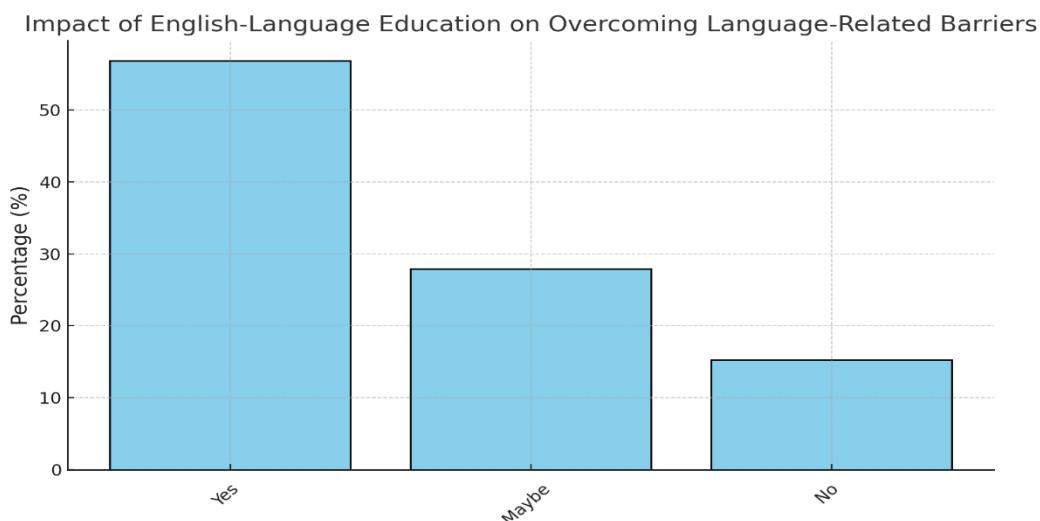
Furthermore, data shows that English language education considerably boosts confidence and communication skills, especially among young women. According to the research, English proficiency

is more than a skill; it is a type of cultural and social capital that can have a significant impact on people's social identities and mobility. Many women find that knowing English significantly enhances their job prospects, provides access to a wealth of information, and enables them to participate in urban networks. They feel English language proficiency builds confidence and is crucial for personal and professional development.

During discussions, many participants shared that learning English has helped them assert their rights more effectively, enabling them to challenge traditional norms and advocate for gender equality. Women emphasised that English proficiency empowers them to communicate confidently, actively participate in discussions, and make decisions that affect their lives. Based on qualitative feedback, respondents expressed a recurring theme about the transformative role of English in enhancing their agency and self-expression.

- **Impact on Language-related Barriers**

Figure 5 Bar graph showing how English-language education helped overcome any language-related barriers



More than half of the respondents (56.9%) reported that English language education has helped them overcome language-related barriers or discrimination. About 27.9% were uncertain about its impact, while 15.2% stated that it did not help. These findings suggest that the majority of respondents view English language education as beneficial in overcoming such barriers. However, the uncertainty among some respondents and a minority reporting no impact highlights the need for further exploration to understand individual experiences and challenges more deeply.

- **The Transformative Potential of English Education**

Participants reported significant improvements in confidence and communication skills as a result of their English language education, as indicated by both quantitative data and participant discussions. This transformation indicates the empowering potential of language proficiency, which not only enhances personal and professional communication but also boosts overall self-confidence. Additionally, both quantitative and qualitative research show that learning English is an important way to prepare for working in the global economy and a powerful way to challenge gender and caste conventions. Participants indicated that English proficiency allowed them to challenge societal

expectations, thereby facilitating a reconfiguration of values and norms. However, we did not examine enquiries about marriage and inter-caste relationships because they were beyond the scope of this research. Although such an investigation might have yielded significant insights into the radical potential of English language instruction, the present findings support important claims regarding its transformational function, as evidenced by the participant narratives and the numerical data.

Access to English education among women has shown to significantly impact their learning, speaking, and writing in the English language. Women who studied in colleges and universities are more likely to enhance their fluency in English. Additionally, their employment opportunities are also diversified beyond manual labour and nurturing roles in the house. Despite initial apprehensions and challenges, this process has led to significant progress in moving away from traditional values that restrict women's increased mobility. This trend not only highlights the importance of educational attainment for individual women but also suggests a ripple effect on the community, as educated women are better positioned to contribute to financial wellbeing as well as community progress in terms of cultural values.

Discussion

The relationship between English proficiency and occupational opportunities underscores the growing importance of language skills in the contemporary job market. Since the liberalisation and privatisation policies of 1991, the job market has experienced significant diversification. Urbanisation and migration from smaller towns to metropolitan areas, especially among women, have heightened the demand for English proficiency as a critical skill for accessing better job opportunities (Graddol, 2010).

However, while this study highlights the positive impact of English education on confidence, employment, and mobility among women in Vidarbha, it is crucial to acknowledge that the results align partially with previous studies yet also reveal significant contrasts. For instance, Azam et al. (2010) reported that proficiency in English led to a 34% increase in salaries, a finding consistent with this study, which showed enhanced career opportunities for women with English proficiency. However, despite Azam et al.'s broader optimism regarding the benefits of English skills, this study also reveals substantial barriers faced by women in accessing English education, particularly related to cultural norms and gender restrictions.

Drawing on Sen's (1999) concept of 'Development as Freedom,' this study underscores the understanding that access to education, including English proficiency, is fundamental for expanding individual capabilities and enhancing social freedoms, thereby fostering empowerment and broader societal development. However, this study adds nuance by highlighting the uneven distribution of these capabilities, especially in the rural areas of Vidarbha, where cultural resistance persists in impeding equitable access. Unlike Sen's more generalized view of empowerment through education, the present study indicates that empowerment is contingent on overcoming socio-cultural and economic barriers, which are often intensified by caste dynamics. Proficiency in English is often crucial for transitioning from informal to formal employment sectors, as it opens up opportunities for higher-paying and more secure jobs. However, the current findings demonstrate that without addressing foundational issues like affordability and accessibility, these opportunities remain out of reach for a large segment of women in Vidarbha. This discrepancy suggests that while English education can indeed be transformative, its benefits are not equally attainable for all women, largely due to entrenched structural inequalities.

Furthermore, the findings of the present study partially align with (Qamariah 2024), who argued that English proficiency is a tool for empowerment, enabling women to challenge gender norms and participate in global conversations. While the current research supports this view, it also contradicts the implied universality of empowerment through English language acquisition. This study emphasises that, for many women in Vidarbha, English proficiency remains a distant goal due to patriarchal resistance, which prevents them from fully benefiting from this form of linguistic empowerment. Consequently, multiple intersecting barriers such as socio-economic class, caste, and family attitudes constrain the transformative power of English.

Another significant difference emerges when comparing this research to Still (2008), who focused on Dalit women's educational experiences, arguing that even when Dalit women gain access to education, their socio-economic mobility is often constrained by caste-based stigma. The present study extends this argument by highlighting how English education, specifically, can become a factor for both empowerment and exclusion, particularly for women from lower castes. Many participants shared that despite their educational achievements, caste-based discrimination limited their opportunities, indicating that English proficiency alone cannot overcome the deeply ingrained caste hierarchies that continue to affect educational outcomes and employability.

The present study shows that English instruction plays a big part in building confidence. However, it also shows that confidence and autonomy are very situational. For instance, women from higher caste or more financially stable families were more likely to gain support for their education and to translate their proficiency into meaningful employment, as opposed to women from marginalised castes who still faced constraints despite similar qualifications. This finding differs from Graddol's (2010) general argument about urbanisation and migration creating a uniform demand for English skills, demonstrating instead that such opportunities are differentially available based on caste, region, and economic status.

Thus, the discussion underscores the need to address the broader socio-cultural and economic factors that shape women's lives in order to fully realise the potential benefits of English language education. Unlike earlier studies that focused primarily on the advantages of English proficiency, this research provides a more grounded understanding that acknowledges both the opportunities and the barriers present in the specific socio-economic context of Vidarbha. These findings, when compared with existing literature, show that English proficiency can serve as a tool for empowerment. However, the transformative potential is heavily mediated by structural conditions that require targeted policy interventions to promote equitable access.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper brings together the different issues we have looked at regarding English language learning for women in Vidarbha. It reflects on historical inequalities in access to quality education, intensified by caste and gender biases, and highlights the potential of English language proficiency in challenging these entrenched social norms. The findings underscore the understanding that while English education has significant transformative potential, the benefits are not equally accessible to all women due to persistent structural inequalities and cultural norms. It demonstrates a complex picture of their challenges, involving issues like traditional gender roles, uneven development histories, cultural and regional values, affordability, and availability. Although learning English can open new opportunities, the above factors can influence the trajectories of

women's access to English education and their mobility. The intersectionality of caste, gender, class, and regional disparity further complicates access, necessitating a more inclusive approach to language education policy. This paper suggests we should explore the multidimensional effects of various factors to understand and formulate pathways and policies to improve women's access to English education.

Women in Vidarbha try to learn English because they believe it could help them find employment, improve their communication skills, and build confidence. However, the various factors, along with cultural restrictions, make it difficult for them. Those who continue learning English throughout their university and college education are more likely to enter the job market and demonstrate autonomy in their decision-making. The research highlights that autonomy in decision-making is significantly correlated with educational attainment, thereby emphasising the role of family support and socio-economic background in women's success. This indicates that longevity in learning English has better outcomes for women in their life opportunities. However, it also reveals the importance of cultural shifts within family structures to facilitate educational longevity. Another crucial factor is the occupational background of the family and their attitude towards women's education.

This research highlights the significance of taking caste and gender into account while conducting language education research. The interplay of caste and gender has a profound impact on women's access to English education. Women from marginalised caste backgrounds face compounded challenges, making targeted interventions for these groups essential. They endure additional obstacles due to caste and gender biases, which limit their educational opportunities. This paper used data to highlight the complicated relationship between caste, gender, and English language learning, revealing how these dynamics influence educational attainment. Caste and gender should be considered as important elements in language education research. Policies aimed at increasing women's access to English education must address these intersecting inequities in order to be effective. Furthermore, regional disparities, such as those observed in Vidarbha, emphasise the need for a differentiated educational policy that is sensitive to the socio-economic and cultural context of each region. We may design more nuanced and effective solutions to enhance women's access to English education by examining the specificities of a particular region within South Asia rather than using generic and unidimensional approaches.

As a result, this paper describes the numerous obstacles and opportunities for women in Vidarbha in terms of English language education. It advocates for a better understanding of the relationship between caste, gender, and language acquisition in order to provide inclusive and equitable educational pathways that empower women and encourage social mobility.

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