METHODOLOGY

Statement of the Problem

Education is considered as an instrument of social change, individual mobility and social equality. It is a basic human right, embedded with a liberating potential and is chosen tool for contesting structures of inequality rooted in caste, class and gender. Indian society is characterized by division of caste, class, religion, region and gender while caste is a pervasive parameter and gives a hierarchical structure to the society. A section of the society continuously lacks opportunity to participate and benefit fully from society reflecting multiple overlapping natures of disadvantages experienced by certain groups, where social identity is the axis of exclusion (Kabeer, 2006)

Dalits are the most deprived sections of Indian society and have been the victims of untouchability, segregation and denial of access to multiple resources. The constitutional provisions recognize the caste inequalities and provide ameliorative measures and opportunities towards inclusiveness. Education represents one way to break out of cycles of poverty and distress. Since independence, the statistics show a steady growth in the enrolment of Dalits at all levels of education but reveal unequal educational achievements. They also experience alienation, disempowerment, drop early, fail or leave with a lower degree qualification in the process of educational attainment. Hence not just enrolment but sustenance in the program and deriving meaningful benefits through education deserves to be the targeted goal.

Gender plays a crucial role in determining the chances of acquiring literacy and attaining higher educational qualification. Dalit women are the most marginalized among marginalized groups and face multiple forms of discrimination as members of impoverished class and as women. Their educational levels are considerably low in comparison to Dalits in general and non-Dalits in particular (Harinath, 2011) and especially in relation to Dalits (Chanana,2012). Dalit women face the triple jeopardy of oppression by caste, class and gender dominated by ‘discrete’ and ‘overlapping’ patriarchy. As a result of the systematic, entrenched and significant gender discrimination, Dalit women remain highly disadvantaged largely outside the reach of government policies. Hardly any research exists on SC women attaining higher education (velaskar, 2010; Paik, 2014). To understand what operates in their access to higher education, reviews document individual histories, ‘family habitus’ (Coleman, 1990), access to
'cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1977) and ‘institutional habitus’ (Reay et al., 2005) as important factors. Since such attempts are few in Indian context and in the academic field, the present study finds it as a necessary and researchable topic to be explored and explained.

Background characteristics such as socioeconomic status (Alexander, 2003), race/ethnicity, gender, family income (Jefferey, 2002) tuition, and financial aid, human capital (Becker, 1964) academic preparation and achievement, social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), parental involvement in education, cultural capital (Sullivan, 2001), parental educational attainment are identified to be important in education but research specific to Indian context focusing on Dalit girls remains to be explored. The family determines the socioeconomic position of children and has a key influence on educational chances and outcomes (Croll, 2004). Among parental characteristics that differentiate between families, parental education, income, and wealth (Conley, 2001) are associated with a higher probability of children attending college, and parental income is associated with greater parental willingness to pay for college (Steelman and Powell, 1991). Researchers found that parental involvement promotes the college enrolment of underrepresented groups of students and states that parental involvement is associated with a greater likelihood of specific aspirations to attend college and actual enrolment (Carbera and La Nasa, 2000; Horn, 1998; Perna, 2000). Studies have also suggested that low retention rates in secondary school and an associated low participation rate in higher education in lower socioeconomic groups are largely attributed to lower aspirations, and less encouragement and the value placed on higher education (Williams et al., 1993). Coleman (1990) also suggested that the set of resources that inhere in family relations and in community social organization are useful towards educational progress of children. How and what issues dominate at micro level will be explained through the study.

In spite of state initiated programs, access to higher education remains a core issue for the Dalit community, especially girls. A range of socio-political, cultural, religious and economic factors are closely linked to low literacy levels and enrolment in higher education. A considerable progress is evident at all levels of education but the required momentum to gain from the affirmative action and prominent gender differences prompt to understand the complexities beneath. Several research studies exist on gender and education (Duraisamy, 2002 and Dutta, 2006) but fewer studies focus on issues related to access to higher education by caste
and gender at a national level and at other cultural settings. An attempt is made in this study to trace the factors associated with access to higher education for Dalit women with focus on Parental Involvement, affordability, awareness of government schemes and support network. Studies at micro level can provide deeper insights for further research and address issues at a policy level. The study is descriptive in nature and includes both qualitative and quantitative approach.

**Significance of the Study**

Educational institutions are places of knowledge transformation and equality. With liberalization, the country has moved to a development phase along with measures to address traditional inequality. However little is known regarding what happened subsequent on policies and social change? The major indicator such as GER indicates wide gap between Dalits and non Dalits and between men and women showing Dalit women in the last rung. Such gaps inform that the utilization of opportunities is not adequate and mere legal measures do not bring in the desired change. Are these causes attributed to the socio-economic conditions, preparatory capacities or failure in realizing the advantages of education or difficulty in connecting, education with real life difficulty? Much remains to be explored before definite conclusions and hence systematic and scientific studies are required to understand the situation. Based on these the researcher believes that a micro level study can reveal what happens at grass root level taking into considerations the factors that are identified to be important. This research is timely to understand the relationship between institutionalized social stratification and educational inequalities which will promote a significant contribution in framing on effective educational policy at higher education level. With increasing number of children attending and completing school, what deters their passage into higher education? Why is it that they congregate in less privileged course? How would we deal with it? Hence it is with strong need to understand the reality, the study proceeds forward. The sub groups in education and success is important as they do not have an enabling social environment at various levels and it is the social responsibility of stake holders concerned to address the issue for better outcomes.
Conceptual framework

Based on reviews and research objectives a conceptual framework is designed to understand access to higher education for Dalit women. The concepts and variables are derived from the literature and personal factors (age, birth order, sub caste etc.), household particulars (family type, family size, income of the family etc.), schooling history (type of school, location of school, subject chosen etc.), parental involvement, family affordability, awareness of government educational programs and support network of the respondents are identified to be important and are included in the framework to understand its relationship with access to higher education.

Fig 1. Conceptual Framework
Operational Definitions

**Higher Education:** Higher education is defined as the education obtained after completing 12 years of schooling or after completing 10 years of schooling and is of the duration of at least 3 years. The education may be of the nature of General, Vocational, Professional/Technical education (MHRD, Report, 2010). The present study includes respondents who have enrolled for under graduation or above and are considered to have accessed higher education.

**Dalit:** The term Dalit means ‘the broken and oppressed’. The term is political and is often used as a politically correct term to refer to all formerly untouchable groups.

**Access:** The term access refers to enrolment in higher education. Respondents who have enrolled in any course of higher education are considered to have accessed Higher education while those who have not enrolled in any course of Higher education after schooling are considered to have not accessed higher education (dropouts).

**Parental Involvement:** Parental involvement is the degree to which parents engage in fostering their children for better academic achievements. It relates to significant indicators of participation in children’s academic activities at home as well as at school. It involves in the qualitative aspect of involvement in children’s academic progress and providing a motivating environment and resource building process. For the present study an index for parental involvement is created through a set of indicators and level of parental involvement is ascertained.

**Aspiration:** The concept of aspiration relates to informed thinking about entry into higher education to attain their career interests which may be general or specific.

**Awareness:** Awareness is essential for utilization, and utilization, in turn, helps to know what is obtained in actual practice. Knowledge of the concessions enable us understand the group’s attribution of importance and the utilization of the facilities in their educational career (Miller, 1984).

**Social support:** Social support is based on the idea that people must rely on each other to meet certain interpersonal needs. Social support network is the structure through which social support is given and received which may have a direct or indirect support on enrolment in
higher education. This network may consist of friends, family, significant others, faculty, peers, co-workers and others (Pettis, 1995).

**Objectives of the Study**

The broad objective of the study is to understand the factors associated with access to higher education among Dalit women. The specific objectives are to:

- understand the personal, familial and schooling factors and its relationship with access to higher education.
- know the family affordability towards access to higher education and awareness regarding government schemes facilitating higher education.
- identify the parental involvement and support networks and its relationship with access to higher education.

**Research Design**

As the purpose of investigation is to describe the factors associated with access to higher education and to understand in detail, several conceptual variables in higher education the study is broadly descriptive in nature while quantification and explanation are attempted in certain issues. As the research topic is less focused in Indian context with the social backdrop of caste and gender dynamics, it demands a qualitative approach in aspects of explaining the process and mechanism. Hence the study is a combination of both qualitative and quantitative approach.

**Tool for Data Collection**

Based on the research objectives a comprehensive interview schedule was formulated to collect the primary data. It contained questions related to the personal information, household particulars, educational history, parental involvement, respondent’s aspiration, familial affordability, awareness and the social network involved in support for accessing higher education. The variables were identified through the literature review and were consolidated as questions. Respondents were clearly explained about the research objective and the need for inclusion of certain questions. Further information related to the factors that affect the educational choices was collected.
Secondary data on enrolment in higher education is also used extensively to describe the trends among the Scheduled castes in India as well as Tamil Nadu. The Gross enrolment ratio is a frequently and widely used indicator of educational advancement of a country/region and hence used as a focus variable. The three main sources of enrolment statistics on higher education in India are Selected Educational Statistics, National Sample Survey Organization, Social & Cultural Tables, C-Series, Registrar General of India or the Population Census, MHRD, GOI. For the present study, Selected Educational Statistics (SES) forms the core data while other sources provide supplementary information to describe the trends of enrolment in higher education.

**Pre-Test**

On compiling various factors linked to women’s enrolment in higher education in the interview schedule, a pre-test was conducted during September 2014. Ten women accessing higher education and ten women who have dropped out after schooling were included in the pre-test. A few questions were incorporated in the parental involvement and support network and a few questions were dropped as it was irrelevant. Where ever there was scope, qualitative information were recorded, which helped in defining the social situations and in finalizing the technique to be adopted in eliciting information. A diary was maintained to record the personal observations and other qualitative information.

**Study population and Sampling**

Both primary and secondary data are used for the study. The primary data for the study is collected from rural and urban regions of Thanjavur district which is geographically situated in the western part of Tamil Nadu, South India. The urban regions of Thanjavur district is emerging as a higher education centre with colleges of arts and science, several professional colleges and deemed universities. Both government and private institutes contribute towards promoting higher education. With the growing availability of educational institutes it becomes important to know how the available opportunities are used by the target population (Dalit women) in the district and as well the researcher is familiar with the social setting and hence indentified Thanjavur district as the research setting. All Dalit women pursuing higher education and women dropped out after school in the age group of 18 to 25 years were the
universe of the study and are considered as the target population. Non probability sampling is
adopted and the respondents were drawn through purposive sampling technique. Dalit women
pursuing any degree after completion of schooling are considered as those accessing higher
education while those who have dropped out after school are considered as those who have not
accessed higher education for the present study. Snow ball technique was used to identify
respondents from different colleges in Thanjavur district as well as drop outs. Interviews were
conducted at the college premises for those who were enrolled in higher education and
interviews were held at homes for drop outs. It was relatively difficult to identify drop outs as
many had been married or engaged in work and similarly respondents pursuing professional
education were also difficult as the numbers are very few. In total, 160 respondents, 108
accessing higher education and 52 respondents who had dropped out after school are the
sample.

**Research Setting**

Thanjavur District was once the cultural capital of Tamil Nadu, South India. The District
is situated on the East Coast of Tamil Nadu. The district is divided into two distinct divisions,
viz., the deltaic region and the upland area or non-deltaic region. The deltaic region covers the
whole northern and eastern portions of the district where the Cauvery with its wide network of
branches irrigate more than half of the district. It comprises the whole of Kumbakonam taluk
and parts of Thanjavur, Papanasam taluks. A good portion of upland regions which was dry has
now been brought under irrigation with the help of Grand Anicut canal, fed by the Cauvery-
The district represents 10 Assembly constituencies of which one are reserved for Scheduled
Caste. Thanjavur is a Parliamentary Constituency consisting of 6 Assembly segments.
Thanjavur district has 8 taluks, 14 blocks, 22 town panchayats and 3 municipalities.

Thanjavur district is the core region of Tamil culture and knowledge. It has legacy of
traditional state capital and centre of power during medieval period with a strong base for art,
literature and science in the region. The place is also known as the ‘cultural hub’ of Tamil
Nadu. The knowledge and literacy gained momentum during Chola period and continues to be
region dominated by educational institutes and yet the difference between castes in terms of
literacy exists. Apart from arts and science colleges, several professional colleges and deemed
universities.
Fig 2. Map of the Study Area

Tamil Nadu

Thanjavur (District)
Have also been established in the area and both government and private players are competing with one another to promote higher education.

As pointed out by key educationalists, the setting up of information technology companies and the presence of Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) and thousands of engineering units along the Trichy -Thanjavur highway have spurred the growth of institutions of higher education in the area. Scant rainfall and non-profitability of agriculture have driven the farming community to sell its land to educational institutions and hence the scheduled caste dependent on agricultural labor are forced to search other jobs which is an added problem to the continuing economic backwardness. As farming is not as profitable, rural youth are turning to technical education. With the transformations occurring at the individual community and societal level, it is worth understanding the transitions that occur in the educational field, especially with regard to higher education.

**Statistical Technique**

The data collected were edited, coded and analyzed through SPSS package. Simple descriptive techniques like percentages and means are used to describe the basic information. A set of descriptive statistics are used to explain the association between variables and correlation and regression techniques are used to establish the relationships and strength of factors associated with access to higher education.

**Field Encounters**

Dalit women accessing higher education were clearly explained about the research objective and provided the scope for further clarification in the process of interviewing. Time constraint was a major issue throughout the study as it was time consuming to identify Dalit women students, convince them and explain to them the various questions related to the study. In addition, the Dalit women were busy during their college hours and the only time available to meet them was during their free time at lunch break. To identify the drop outs the researcher had to seek help of those who were enrolled in higher education but who know their former classmates who had dropped out after school. It was difficult to identify them, build rapport and convince them and also took a longer time. Despite these, the respondents cooperated once rapport was established and understood the merit of the study.
Chapterization

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