

Prestigious Inferiority: The Silent Crisis of Stream Selection and Career Discrimination in Indian Society

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Abstract - In modern Indian society, the issue of stream selection and career discrimination has become a major socio-educational challenge. Academic streams such as Science, Commerce, and Humanities are often linked with social prestige, intelligence, and financial success, creating a hierarchical mindset among parents, students, and educational institutions. Science is generally regarded as the most prestigious stream, whereas Commerce and Humanities are frequently undervalued despite their important role in national development. These bias influences students' career decisions and often compels them to choose socially accepted professions instead of careers based on their interests and abilities.

This paper examines the sociological, psychological, and developmental aspects of stream-based discrimination in India. It explores how parental pressure, societal expectations, and comparison culture contribute to stress, anxiety, low confidence, and career dissatisfaction among students. The study highlights the equal importance of all streams in ensuring balanced national growth and emphasizes the need for educational reforms, career counselling, mental health awareness, and respect for every profession.

Keywords: Stream Selection, Career Discrimination, Indian Education System, Student Mental Health, Educational Inequality, Social Stratification.

1. Introduction

Stream selection represents a significant educational decision within the Indian education system, where students choose among the three primary academic streams: Science, Commerce, and Humanities. Science is generally associated with careers in engineering, medicine, and technology; Commerce focuses on business, finance, economics, and accountancy; while Humanities encompasses disciplines such as History, Political Science,

Sociology, Psychology, and Geography, leading to careers in administration, law, journalism, education, and social sciences. Although all three streams contribute substantially to national development, societal perceptions often assign unequal status to them. However, societal perceptions often create a prestige hierarchy where Science receives greater recognition, while Commerce and Humanities face stereotypes. This stream-based bias can influence career decisions, generate psychological pressure, reduce confidence, and lead many students to pursue academic pathways shaped by social expectations. Despite the seriousness of this issue, limited research has focused on grassroots-level career discrimination and its interdisciplinary impact on mental health, educational equality, and national development. Therefore, this study aims to analyze stream-based discrimination in Indian society, examine its psychological effects on students, highlight the equal importance of all streams for national development, and suggest educational and policy reforms for balanced national growth.

2. Literature Review

Educational stratification in India has historically been influenced by social values, cultural norms, and economic aspirations. Among the available streams, Science is widely perceived as the most prestigious due to its association with higher income, professional status, and intellectual capability. This perception has created an academic hierarchy in which Science students receive greater social recognition, while Commerce and Humanities students are often undervalued (Singh, 2021). Consequently, students are frequently encouraged to pursue Science regardless of their aptitude, interests, or career preferences.

Research suggests that stream selection in India is strongly shaped by parental expectations and societal pressure. Kumar (2024) observed that the collectivist nature of Indian society often links educational and career choices with family reputation and social status rather than individual aspirations. Sharma and Gupta (2022) reported that adolescents frequently experience pressure to

conform to socially accepted career pathways, which can lead to stress, dissatisfaction, and reduced autonomy in decision-making. Educational success is therefore often measured through prestigious occupational outcomes rather than personal fulfilment.

The literature also highlights the psychological consequences of educational pressure and stream-based discrimination. Students compelled to pursue unsuitable academic pathways may experience anxiety, emotional exhaustion, burnout, and diminished self-confidence. Excessive competition and unrealistic parental expectations further intensify these challenges. Yadav and Mishra (2023) identified academic stress and social comparison as significant contributors to mental health concerns among Indian youth. Additionally, social stigma surrounding mental health often discourages students from discussing emotional difficulties or seeking professional support.

Despite their significant contributions to society, Commerce and Humanities continue to face social prejudice. Humanities is frequently viewed as a stream for academically weaker students, while Commerce is often considered less prestigious than Science. Such stereotypes overlook the important role these disciplines play in governance, economic development, policymaking, law, journalism, education, and social transformation. Patel and Desai (2021) argued that Humanities education is essential for promoting democratic values, ethical leadership, and social understanding. However, limited awareness regarding career opportunities in these fields continues to reinforce traditional biases.

Recent developments in education and industry increasingly demonstrate the importance of interdisciplinary knowledge. Emerging fields such as Data Science, Business Analytics, Biotechnology, Public Policy, and Cognitive Science integrate concepts from Science, Commerce, and Humanities. These developments highlight that innovation and sustainable development depend on intellectual diversity rather than the dominance of a single stream.

Although previous studies have examined educational stress, career aspirations, and student well-being, limited research has specifically addressed stream-based discrimination and its broader implications. Existing literature lacks a comprehensive analysis connecting stream hierarchy with mental health, educational equality, and national development. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by critically examining the sociological, psychological, and developmental

dimensions of stream selection and career discrimination in Indian society.

3. Theoretical Framework: Stream Selection, Social Prestige, and Career Satisfaction

The present study is grounded in sociological and psychological perspectives that explain how educational choices are influenced by social structures, cultural expectations, and individual motivations.

A. **Functionalism Theory:** Functionalist Theory views education as a mechanism for allocating individuals to appropriate social and occupational roles based on their abilities (Haralambos & Holborn, 2019). However, within the Indian context, stream selection is often shaped by perceived social prestige rather than aptitude, resulting in unequal valuation of academic disciplines.

B. **Bourdieu's Concept of Symbolic Capital:** Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital further explains how educational streams acquire differential social status. According to Bourdieu (2020), symbolic capital refers to the recognition and legitimacy associated with particular social positions. In India, the Science stream is frequently regarded as a symbol of intelligence, social honour, and upward mobility, whereas Commerce and Humanities often receive comparatively less recognition.

C. **Psychological Perspective (Self-Determination Theory):** From a psychological perspective, Self-Determination Theory emphasizes that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential for motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When students are compelled to pursue socially preferred careers, they may experience stress, reduced motivation, and lower career satisfaction.

D. **Ikigai Philosophy:** The Ikigai philosophy highlights the importance of aligning personal interests, abilities, societal contribution, and economic sustainability in career decisions (Garcia & Miralles, 2020). Collectively, these perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding stream selection, educational inequality, psychological well-being, and career fulfilment.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives provide a multidimensional understanding of stream selection and career discrimination by linking educational

hierarchy, social prestige, motivation, and life satisfaction.

4. Social perception Regarding Academic Streams

Academic stream selection in India is often influenced by social perceptions rather than students' aptitude and interests. However, research suggests that achievement and satisfaction are influenced by aptitude, motivation, and personal interest (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Table below shows the social perception and evidence-based observations.

The study concludes that the perceived superiority of Science over Commerce and Humanities is largely a social construct rather than an evidence-based reality. Career success depends on aptitude, skills, interests, and opportunities rather than academic stream alone. While Science drives technological advancement, Commerce supports economic growth and Humanities strengthens governance, education, and social development. Persistent stereotypes regarding stream selection often lead to educational inequality and inappropriate career choices. Therefore, promoting aptitude-based career guidance and recognizing the equal value of all academic streams are essential for ensuring student well-being, workforce diversity, and sustainable national development.

Table 1: Social Perception versus Educational Reality

Common Social Belief	Evidence-Based Observation
Science ensures success	Career success depends upon aptitude, opportunity, and skills
Humanities lacks scope	Civil services, education, law, psychology, policy sectors depend on Humanities
Commerce has limited contribution	Finance, trade, business, economics drive national growth
High salary depends only on Science	Satisfaction, competence, and professional alignment influence long-term success

5. Educational Stream Diversity and Balanced National Growth

Career discrimination based on academic stream selection has emerged as a significant educational and societal challenge in India.

Table 2: Societal and Developmental Implications of Stream-Based Career Discrimination

Dimension	Key Observation
Educational Imbalance	Preference for a limited number of academic streams, particularly Science, may create an imbalance in the educational ecosystem and reduce occupational diversity (OECD, 2023).
Loss of Human Potential	Career choices driven by social prestige rather than aptitude and interest can hinder individual growth and lead to underutilization of talent.
Impact on Innovation	Innovation increasingly depends on interdisciplinary knowledge and collaboration across Science, Commerce, and Humanities. Overemphasis on one stream may limit creativity and problem-solving capacity.
Workforce Diversity	Nations require professionals from diverse fields, including economics, law, education, governance, psychology, business, and technology. Balanced participation strengthens workforce resilience.
Professional Interdependence	Modern professions function through collaboration. Scientific advancement, economic development, and public administration depend upon coordinated contributions from multiple disciplines.
National Development	Sustainable development requires balanced representation across academic streams to support technological progress, economic growth, governance, and social well-being.
Constitutional Analogy	Just as the Legislature, Executive, and Judiciary function through interdependence, national progress depends on the complementary roles of Science, Commerce, and Humanities.
Social Cohesion	Recognizing the equal value of all academic streams can reduce discrimination, strengthen social harmony, and promote educational equity.

The unequal social valuation of Science, Commerce, and Humanities influences students' educational choices and contributes to structural imbalances that may affect long-term national development. When career decisions are driven by social prestige rather than aptitude and interest, both individuals and society experience losses in innovation potential, workforce diversity, and institutional effectiveness.

Educational systems that recognize professional interconnectedness strengthen social cohesion and reduce stream-based discrimination.

Table 3: Major Contributions of Academic Streams to National Development

Academic Stream	Major Areas of Contribution	Emerging Career Opportunities (2020–2026)
Science	Healthcare, Engineering, Technology, Research, Infrastructure	Artificial Intelligence, Biotechnology, Renewable Energy, Data Science

Commerce	Finance, Business Management, Entrepreneurship, Economic Planning	FinTech, Business Analytics, Digital Marketing, Investment Management
Humanities	Governance, Public Policy, Education, Law, Social Development	Public Policy Analysis, Behavioural Science, Psychology, Social Research

National development depends upon the interdependence of professions rather than the dominance of a single discipline. Several developed nations demonstrate the value of balanced educational participation. Countries such as Germany, Japan, Canada, Sweden, Norway, and South Korea maintain diversified educational systems that encourage participation across scientific, technical, managerial, social science, and humanities disciplines (UNESCO, 2024). Their workforce structures emphasize complementary expertise rather than rigid educational hierarchy

Comparative evidence from developed nations indicates that sustainable development is best achieved through balanced participation across diverse academic disciplines. While STEM fields drive scientific and technological progress, Commerce, Humanities, health sciences, and public administration are equally important for economic growth and social development. Research suggests that interdisciplinary educational systems foster innovation, adaptability, and problem-solving. India has witnessed gradual educational diversification despite the continuing societal preference for Science-related streams. Countries with stronger developmental outcomes generally maintain a balanced distribution of graduates across multiple fields, enabling effective utilization of human capital and meeting the evolving demands of modern economies.

Table 4: Comparative Educational Ecosystem and National Development

Country	Educational Characteristic	Development Strength
Germany	Strong vocational + technical balance	Industrial innovation
Japan	Technology + management integration	Manufacturing leadership
Canada	Interdisciplinary higher education	Knowledge economy
Sweden	Balanced social sciences + STEM	Social development
South Korea	Technology + educational diversification	Innovation ecosystem

India	Growing STEM emphasis with educational diversification opportunity	Emerging economy
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Sources: OECD (2023, 2025); UNESCO (2024)

6. A Comparative Study of Academic Stream Distribution in India and Developed Nations

Comparing academic stream participation in India and developed countries helps understand how sociological, psychological, and economic factors shape educational choices. While India exhibits a strong preference for Science-related disciplines, many developed nations promote balanced participation across diverse academic fields. Such comparisons provide valuable insights into educational equity, workforce development, and innovation.

The analysis indicates that developed countries generally encourage greater educational diversity, career autonomy, and interdisciplinary learning. In contrast, India continues to experience strong parental influence, high STEM prestige, and significant academic pressure.

Table 5: Comparative Stream Analysis: India and Developed Countries (Sociological, Psychological, and Economic Dimensions)

Dimension	India	Germany	Japan	Canada	Sweden	South Korea
Sociological Perspective	Strong social hierarchy among streams; Science perceived as prestigious; family influence dominates career choices	Greater emphasis on vocational and technical diversity	Balanced respect for academic disciplines; strong educational culture	Flexible educational pathways; interdisciplinary acceptance	Equality-oriented educational philosophy	High academic competition but diversified tertiary participation
Parental Influence on Career Choice	Very high	Moderate	Moderate-High	Moderate	Low-Moderate	High

Interdisciplinary Career Promotion	Economic Contribution Model	Educational Diversity	Career Autonomy	Psychological Pressure Among Students	Social Prestige Associated with STEM
Emerging but limited awareness	Growing service economy with STEM concentration	STEM preference socially dominant	Limited in many households due to collective decision-making	High academic stress and societal comparison	Extremely high
Strong	Manufacturing + vocational innovation economy	Strong technical + vocational integration	Higher student autonomy	Moderate	High but balanced with vocational sectors
Strong	Technology + business integration	Balanced graduate distribution	Moderate autonomy	High examination pressure	High but balanced by humanities and management sectors
Very strong	Knowledge economy + innovation sectors	Interdisciplinary emphasis	Strong student autonomy	Moderate	Balanced recognition across disciplines
Strong	Welfare economy + social innovation	High educational flexibility	Strong autonomy-based educational culture	Lower psychological pressure due to supportive systems	Relatively balanced
Strong	Technology-intensive economy	Balanced graduate participation despite STEM strength	Improving autonomy but competitive structure remains	Highly competitive educational environment	High STEM preference with educational diversification

Innovation Ecosystem Support
Growing innovation ecosystem
High industrial innovation
Advanced technology ecosystem
High research and knowledge economy orientation
Social and technological innovation balance
Technology-driven innovation leadership

The findings suggest that balanced participation across Science, Commerce, and Humanities supports innovation, workforce adaptability, and sustainable national development.

7. Consequences of Stream Selection and Career Discrimination

Academic stream selection has significant implications for students' mental health, identity, and career satisfaction. In India, stream choices are often influenced by social prestige and parental expectations rather than individual aptitude and interests.

Stream-based social pressure can adversely affect students' psychological well-being, career satisfaction, and personal development. Promoting aptitude-based educational choices and supportive learning environments is therefore essential.

Table 6: Social and Psychological Consequences of Stream Selection and Career Discrimination

Dimension	Impact on Students
Stress and Anxiety	Academic competition, fear of failure, and pressure to pursue prestigious streams contribute to stress, anxiety, and reduced self-confidence.
Identity Crisis	Stream choices driven by external expectations rather than personal interests may create confusion regarding career goals and self-identity.
Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)	Social comparison and stereotypes encourage students to select streams based on status and social approval rather than aptitude.
Mental Health Challenges	Prolonged educational pressure can lead to burnout, emotional exhaustion, depression, and reduced psychological well-being.
Student Suicides and Emotional Vulnerability	Excessive academic expectations and career-related stress increase emotional vulnerability and mental health risks among adolescents.

Decline in Creativity and Innovation

Restricting students' freedom to pursue their interests may suppress creativity, innovation, and intellectual exploration.

8. Societal and Policy Interventions for Equitable Stream Selection and Educational Equity

Addressing stream-based discrimination and career hierarchy in India requires coordinated efforts from educational institutions, policymakers, families, and society. Educational choices influenced by stereotypes rather than aptitude can reduce workforce diversity, affect psychological well-being, and limit national development potential. Therefore, comprehensive policy interventions are necessary to promote educational equality, career autonomy, and balanced participation across Science, Commerce, and Humanities.

A. Constitutional and Ethical Perspective selection of stream

- **Constitutional Freedom:** Article 19(1)(g) of the Constitution of India guarantees individuals the freedom to choose their profession, emphasizing autonomy in educational and career decisions (Government of India, 2023).
- **Educational Freedom:** Educational choice is linked to human dignity and self-development. Students should have the opportunity to pursue streams aligned with their abilities and aspirations (UNESCO, 2021).
- **Ethical Considerations:** Imposing career choices based on social prestige rather than aptitude may lead to stress, dissatisfaction, and reduced personal growth. Ethical educational practices require respect for individual interests and informed career choices.

Aptitude-based stream selection promotes individual well-being, educational equality, strengthens workforce diversity, and contributes to inclusive national development.

B. Government Initiatives

The persistence of stream-based discrimination in India reflects deep-rooted social perceptions that often associate academic worth and career success with particular disciplines, especially Science. Such perceptions can influence students' educational choices, psychological well-being, and career satisfaction. To promote educational equity and ensure optimal utilization of human potential, schools, families, policymakers, and educational institutions must create an environment that supports

aptitude-based and interest-oriented career decisions. The following recommendations aim to reduce stream-related bias and foster a more inclusive educational ecosystem.

Reducing stream-based discrimination requires a collaborative approach involving educational institutions, families, policymakers, and society. Strengthening career guidance, promoting awareness, supporting student mental health, and ensuring equal recognition of all academic streams can foster informed educational choices and enhance student well-being. Recognizing the complementary contributions of Science, Commerce, and Humanities is essential for building a diverse workforce, encouraging innovation, and supporting inclusive and sustainable national development.

Table 7: Key Recommendations for Reducing Stream-Based Discrimination

Recommendation	Purpose and Expected Outcomes
Career Counselling in Schools	Provide aptitude-based guidance, career awareness, and informed decision-making support to help students select streams aligned with their abilities and interests (OECD, 2021).
Parental Awareness Programmes	Reduce stereotypes regarding Science, Commerce, and Humanities through workshops and outreach activities that encourage informed parental support.
Equal Promotion of All Streams	Highlight the contributions of all academic disciplines and promote diverse career opportunities in alignment with multidisciplinary educational goals (Government of India, 2020).
Mental Health Support Systems	Establish counselling centres and well-being programmes to address academic stress, anxiety, and career-related pressures among students (UNICEF, 2021).
Research and Innovation in Diverse Careers	Encourage interdisciplinary learning and investment in emerging fields such as behavioural sciences, public policy, sustainability studies, and AI ethics (World Economic Forum, 2023).
Institutional Anti-Discrimination Policies	Implement policies that discourage stream-based labelling, stereotypes, and discriminatory practices, thereby promoting educational equality and inclusion.

C. *Societal Responsibility in Promoting Equitable Stream Selection*

Societal attitudes play a critical role in shaping educational perceptions. Stream hierarchy often develops through social narratives transmitted across families, communities, and peer networks. Therefore, addressing career discrimination requires broader social participation.

- **Respect for All Professions:** Sustainable national development requires equal recognition of all professions. Contributions from educators, engineers, doctors, economists, administrators, lawyers, psychologists, and entrepreneurs are equally important for societal progress.
- **Supporting Students' Interests:** Families and educators should encourage students to pursue academic pathways aligned with their aptitude, interests, and career aspirations. Interest-based educational choices enhance motivation, creativity, and long-term career satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2020).
- **Responsible Social Communication:** Society should discourage stereotypes that portray certain academic streams as superior or inferior. Positive and informed communication can promote educational equality and reduce stream-based discrimination.

An inclusive educational culture that respects diverse talents and career pathways can strengthen student well-being, innovation, social harmony, and national development.

9. Discussion

This study examines the sociological, psychological, and developmental implications of stream-based discrimination and its impact on educational choices. The previous research papers indicate the hierarchy of stream selection influences educational decisions and may encourage students to prioritize social approval over personal aptitude and interests and also career decisions in many Indian households are strongly influenced by parental expectations and collective social norms.

Despite prevailing social perceptions, after societal and policy interventions of Govt of India for equitable stream selection and educational equity, Humanities accounts for a substantial share of undergraduate enrollment in India. The ministry of Education, Govt of India, release the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) Final Report 2021–22, which challenge the common misconception that Science dominates the higher education in India by publishing the data that, Arts

(Humanities) accounts for the largest share of undergraduate enrolment (34.2%). While, Science (14.8%), Engineering & Technology (11.8%), Medical Science (5.1%), Computer & IT (2 to 3%) and commerce (13.3%), demonstrating a high degree of academic diversity. These Result demonstrate that no particular stream dominates higher education in India.

The study suggests that modern economies increasingly depend on interdisciplinary collaboration involving science, business, governance, social sciences, and technology. comparative evidence from developed countries demonstrates that educational diversification contributes significantly to sustainable economic and social development. Therefore, equal recognition of all academic streams is essential for promoting educational equity, student well-being, workforce diversity, innovation, and sustainable national development. Educational choices should therefore be guided by aptitude, interests, and aspirations rather than social prestige.

10. Conclusion

The present study concludes that stream selection in India is influenced not only by educational considerations but also by social prestige, parental expectations, and economic aspirations. The findings demonstrate that Science, Commerce, and Humanities are equally important for national development, contributing respectively to technological advancement, economic growth, governance, education, and social progress. However, persistent stream-based stereotypes often shape career choices, leading to educational inequality and psychological challenges among students.

The study further highlights that career satisfaction and professional success are more closely associated with aptitude, interests, and motivation than with the perceived status of a particular stream. Excessive preference for one academic pathway may restrict educational diversity, reduce workforce adaptability, and hinder interdisciplinary innovation. Comparative evidence from developed countries indicates that balanced participation across academic disciplines strengthens human capital and sustainable development. Therefore, promoting aptitude-based career guidance, educational equity, and equal recognition of all academic streams is essential for enhancing student well-being, fostering innovation, and supporting long-term national progress.

The central message emerging from this study remains clear: “A perfect stream for that individual can accelerate the growth of the country.”

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