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Review Article



DALIT STUDENTS SUICIDE IN INDIA: DISCRIMINATION, EXCLUSION AND DENIAL OF EQUALITY IN ACCESS TO EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

There is a need to address the problems that Dalit students face in institutions of higher education and find a more durable solution. It can be firmly said that experiences of discrimination, exclusion and humiliation are the predominant reasons for dalit committing suicide while pursuing their course. The incidence of dalit students committing suicide in India is becoming frequent these days as they undergo traumatic experiences of being victims of caste-based discrimination. This paper attempts to study the forms of discrimination that dalit students undergo in the campus documented with case studies.

Introduction

Harijans in India, individuals who are at the bottom of or outside the Hindu caste they were traditionally sweepers, washers of clothes, leatherworkers, and those whose occupation it was to kill animals. The term is also sometimes applied to the hill tribes of India, who are considered unclean by some because they eat beef. Originally called untouchables or pariahs, they were given the name Harijans by the Indian political and religious leader Mahatma Gandhi, who worked for many years to improve their lives. Many now refer to themselves as Dalits to indicate their oppressed position outside Hindu society; legally the Indian government groups them as "scheduled castes." Although many Dalits live in the city, they hardly belong to it; they are always-already on the margins, socially, spatially, educationally and culturally. They are 'equal' but 'different'; hence they are continuously coerced to accept living on the periphery.

"The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker section of the people, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation."

-Article 46 of the Indian Constitution¹.

We may be a democratic republic, but justice, equality, liberty and fraternity-the four basic tenets promised in the Preamble of our Constitution-are clearly not available to all. Dalits continue to be oppressed and discriminated against in villages, in educational institutions, in the job market, and on the political battlefield, leaving them with little respite in any sphere or at any juncture of their lives.

DISCUSSION

Dalit Students: A life of exclusion

Dalits form a quarter of India's population, belonging to various religious communities and sub caste groups. They occupy the lowest social status in Indian society due to their birth as

“untouchables” and are considered to be socially and religiously polluting. They are outside the rigid caste system that strictly orders and governs Indian society. Higher education and successful employment among Dalit populations remain a distant dream in India. High levels of school dropout, compounded by a lack of accessibility and the denial of opportunities, means that students from Dalit backgrounds have to depend on the benefits offered by the state, such as the reservation policy, which provides ring-fenced opportunities to individuals

The Caste system is designed in a way that no one can escape it. Mentioned below are some of the widely spread forms of discrimination and humiliation that the dalit students face in the name of caste discrimination in their day to day life and at school, college or universities.

- Dalit students in schools are purified by sprinkling cow urine on them.
- There are separate pre-nursery schools (anganwadis) for the Dalits and non-Dalit students.
- Many Dalit students are forced to commit suicide because of caste discrimination at schools.
- Scholarships for Dalits students aren't issued on time or many times diverted.
- Dalits students are forced to clean school toilets
- Dalits students are forced to sit at the back benches of the classroom or sometimes even out of the classroom.
- Some schools have separate attendance registers for Dalits.
- In many schools, Dalit students are not allowed to drink water from the tap.
- So-called upper caste students don't eat food cooked by the Dalit cook.
- In many schools, Dalit Students are made to sit separately for lunch.
- Because of caste discrimination, many schools forbid Dalit students from participating in school events.
- Dalit students are raped and murdered in schools by teachers.
- Schoolchildren in India 'made to wear colour-coded wristbands to show caste' and are given bags marked with their caste.
- Dalit kids are forced to play in separate playgrounds.
- Even though Dalit students pass the examinations, they are failed by upper caste teachers purposely and are awarded lesser marks in the interviews².

Ironically, upper castes who hate lower castes FAKE caste certificates to take benefits.

Dalit Student Suicides in India

In Hindu religion, Dalits have some of the highest suicide rates among caste groups. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) in the year 2014 recorded for the first time data on suicides based on religion and caste groups. However this data remained unpublished and was never released by the Home Ministry.

Caste	Rate Of Suicides*	% Share In Suicides	% Share Of Population	Number Of Suicides
SC	10.4	8.2	8.6	10,850
ST	9.4	14.4	16.6	19,019
OBC**	9.2	34	40.2	44,827
General	13.6	43.3	34.6	56,970
All India	10.6	---	---	1,31,666

*Suicides per one lakh population

Source : NCRB

Among caste groups, Scheduled Tribes have the highest suicide rate at 10.4 followed by Dalits at 9.4, according to the data. Although the “general” category has a higher rate (13.6), it includes suicides by those from of all other religions as well.

In India it was noted that the suicide rate among Dalits in Gujarat and Tripura is nearly 1½ times the overall suicide rate in each state. This was inferred by the government data collected on suicides based on caste and religion. The data collected by NCRB also showed that the average

suicide rate in Gujarat is 11.7 per lakh population, and that for Dalits in the state is 18.7. In Tripura, against the state average of 20.3, Dalits had a rate of 31.8. In Punjab, which has a dense Dalit population, the suicide rate among SCs (3.4) is close to the state average (3.3). But Chandigarh has a huge gap with an SC rate of 23.6 against the UT's average of 6.3. Kerala, which has a state average suicide rate of 23.9, has a suicide rate of 47.6 among tribals. Sikkim, which has a very high population of tribals (33.8%), also has a high suicide rate among SCs at 35.9 but it is still lower than the state average of 38.4³.

In India in some of the premier educational institutions there seems to be a high rate of suicides being committed by dalit students. This would include institutions providing technical, science and professional education. This indicates that there is a widespread prevalence of various forms of discrimination and humiliation with respect to caste and students are prone to undergo such humiliation on a regular basis while pursuing their education.

The prevalence of Dalit committing suicide in India has been increasing and has become more frequent these days beyond imagination. Amidst allegations of injustice from universities and administrative staff, there are many who have ended their lives leaving questions behind. Perhaps there is no record of data available in government with respect to the number of suicides by dalit students in India. The only source of information available in this context are the first hand media reports and journalistic investigations. In light of this, a group of dalits activists under Insight Foundation documented cases and came out with a list of suicides by dalit students in the year 2011. This article highlighted that within a short span of 2007 to 2011 more than 18 dalit students committed suicide. Though many cases were registered after that it did not get documented. However the list included only those that was made as news and that which witnessed the follow up by parents and activists. Hitherto none could make headlines. A spectre of suicide deaths by several Dalit students is haunting India. Out of 25 students who committed suicide only in north India and Hyderabad since 2007, 23 were Dalits. This included two in the prestigious All-India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi, and 11 in Hyderabad city alone⁴.

Case Studies

One of the primary forms by which Dalit students are discriminated against is their lack of fluency in English,

- *Muthukrishnan of dalit community* hailed from a poor family from the city of Salem in TamilNadu. Muthukrishnan completed his Bachelors and Masters in History from the Government Arts College in the city and later did his B.Ed at a private college in Coimbatore. He earned an M. Phil from the University of Hyderabad in 2015 before joining JNU for a Ph.D in Modern History. While pursuing his Ph.D in Jawaharlal Nehru Institution in New Delhi which is one of the premier institutions in India catering research education to students across India he committed suicide on 13th March 2017. His last post on Facebook two days before his death spoke about his struggle to be treated fairly, and the shrinking space that Dalit students have to navigate in institutions of higher education.

He wrote in facebook that

*"When equality is denied everything is denied. There is no Equality in M.phil/phd Admission, there is no equality in Viva - voce, there is only denial of equality, denying prof. Sukhadeo Thorat recommendation, denying Students protest places in Ad - block, denying the education of the Marginals."*⁵

In his note in Facebook Muthukrishnan referred to recommendations tabled by a committee led by Professor Sukhadeo Thorat in 2011⁶ which determined to ensure non-discriminatory treatment of dalit students on campuses. The recommendations included, the need for provisions for developing the English language and communication skills of dalit students and also provide for the establishment of equal opportunity cell and NET coaching classes to ensure not to be at disadvantage. Further the committee also recommended a

personalized approach to dalit students whereby they can develop the fluency in English and enable them to acquire social skills. It had also suggested an equal-opportunity cell in institutions that could facilitate special coaching for students from marginalised communities as well as affordable hostels, free tuition, research grants and additional capacity development for SC scholars. However these recommendations remain unimplemented by the government.

In connection with the suicide the police did not find a suicide note, while reports suggest that he had committed suicide, Muthukrishnan's parents dismissed claims about their son committed suicide and has pleaded for a CBI enquiry to investigate his death. Due a suspicion that there is a mystery in the death of Muthukrishnan, his parents and sisters wanted to probe for CBI investigation. Since it is a difficult to get admitted in JNU to pursue Doctoral degree Muthukrishnan was so determined to complete the degree, which was actually communicated by the candidate himself to his family members. Hence their family wanted to know the actual mystery behind his death. The police claims that the suicide was due to personal reasons which the friends and family of Muthukrishnan deny. The death has brought into focus questions of social exclusion and institutional discrimination suffered by Dalit students in universities across India.

Opposition members in Rajya Sabha demanded a through probe into the alleged suicide of J. Muthukrishnan. The voices of CPI MP D.Raja and several others to his support who questioned the economic deprivation and social discrimination of Dalits made the Commerce Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to respond to opposition questions who said the government is committed to make universities better places for students. She stressed on the filing of FIR by police invoking sections related to SC/ST and abetment to suicide and to consider Prof. Thorat committee's recommendations on improving conditions for marginalised students⁷.

- **Rohith Chakravarti Vemula** was an Indian PhD student at the University of Hyderabad was a student activist of the Ambedkar Student Organization who committed suicide on 17 January 2016. His death occurred after a controversy which extended over several months starting in July 2015. In July 2015, the University reportedly stopped paying him a fellowship of 25,000 per month after he was found "raising issues under the banner of Ambedkar Students Association (ASA)" as part of institute's disciplinary inquiry.

Mr Vemula was a member of the Ambedkar Students' Association, which fights for the rights of Dalit students on the campus. He was one of five Dalit students who were protesting against their expulsion from the university's housing facility. The five faced allegations that they attacked a member of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) - the student wing of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. They all denied the charge and the university cleared them in an initial inquiry, but reversed its decision.

The suicide note left behind was an outburst of a thinking mind. Though he did not blame anyone for his death, the contents of the letter show that he was upset over the discrimination shown to Dalits like him.

In an earlier letter to the vice-chancellor of the University, he had requested that a "nice rope" should be supplied to rooms of all Dalit students.

"Please give us poison at the time of admission itself instead of humiliating us like this,⁸" which has been mentioned in his five page suicide note reveals the pain and frustration that he underwent in the campus during the course of his study

In his suicide note, he expresses similar pain.

"For some people life itself is a curse. My birth is my fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. I am not hurt at this moment. Not sad, just empty. That is pathetic. That is why I am doing this. The unappreciated child from my past."⁹ His mother's adoption into an upper caste

family which treated her as a servant contributed to what Rohith called "the fatal accident" of his birth. He has mentioned in his suicide note that he was denied scholarship for 7 months that amounts to one lakh and seventy thousand. Rohith's suicide had sparked nationwide outrage over caste discrimination in university campuses.

JNU research scholar Muthukrishnan who allegedly committed suicide, discussed in the previous case study was as a close friend of Rohith Vemula.

Conclusion

The number of students committing suicides in Indian campuses is in itself a big cause of worry for our society and points towards lacunae in our higher education system, proving it to be completely feudal and insensitive towards the students to say the least. However, the disproportionate numbers of Dalit and Adivasi students committing suicides, especially, in premier institutions also points towards the kind of caste discrimination prevalent in these campuses where the students have to face harassment due to their caste background on a regular basis from not only their colleagues but more from the faculties and even from the administration.

Therefore, it is necessary for the government of India to take appropriate measures to redress the issue of caste discrimination met by Dalits in educational institutions across India. Investigations should be conducted by appointing an enquiry committee to probe into students suicides in Indian campuses and appointing a judicial commission to enquire the prevalence of various forms of caste discrimination in higher education which should come out with stringent measures to prevent such happenings. Such incidence can be reduced by punishing guilty faculty members and the administration. Further effective implementation of recommendations made by Prof Thorat Committee report must be ensured.

ENDNOTES

- [1]. J.N.Panday, Constitutional Law of India, Central Law Agency, 2014, p 17.
 - [2]. <https://velivada.com/2017/03/24/15-ways-caste-discrimination-affects-dalit-students/>
 - [3]. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/suicide-scheduled-castes-gujarat-tripura-ncrb-data>
 - [4]. <https://thedeathofmeritinindia.wordpress.com/2011/04/25/>
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 - [6]. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/dalit-teachers-activists-call-for-political-struggle>
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 - [8]. <http://gulfnews.com/news/asia/india/>
 - [9]. www.hindustantimes.com/static/rohith-vemula-an-unfinished-portrait/
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