The Nooks And Crannies Of Education: The Process Of Alienation And Subjugation

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Abstract

The Rig Vedic era caste system of India had been based on occupational hierarchy, but it soon lost its purpose and became rigid and orthodox. With the Later Vedic period of India began the curse of untouchability that gave rights to the upper castes to percolate mistreatment through the layers of the caste system. The society at large always subjects the socially backward to exploitation and in this case also has not been any different. The ugliest form of discrimination is when it finds ground within the boundaries of an educational institution. It is also of importance here to understand that decolonizing is not as easy as it might sound. What colonisation can do is proof of me writing this paper in a language that is not my own but still more acceptable and universal in any field of academia. An effort to decolonize the nation from its caste hegemonies was taken up right after India's independence when a person of the Dalit community (untouchables in India) took upon the responsibility of drafting the Constitution of India. The ripple effects of this were widely recognized but however were not successful in providing social equality to Dalits. This brings to light the importance of being at the helm of affairs for voicing genuine concerns that are relatable to the ones for whom the provisions are being made available. Various policies of the government have had far-reaching impact but have not been able to solve the problems of caste discrimination within the frame of education. The Mid-day Meal Scheme has seen mass enrolments and retention of students but in some instances has also widened the caste differences in schools as the teachers and peers are often responsible for alienating the students of socially backward sections of society. This buds the forms of discrimination even in the young, growing minds of India. Social representation in higher education and participation of stakeholders from the Dalit community thus becomes pivotal in realising the dreams of a marginalised section.

Keywords: Dalit, alienation, subjugation, education, decolonize

More than 75 years of an independent India has failed to bring equality and equity among its citizens. The concept of subjugation was however not synonymous with the British rule in India. The rigid caste system in India had divided the education systems based on their occupation initially and it soon became hereditary and was passed on by birth. There was no flexibility in the choice of opting for a particular line of study or profession. Caste hegemonies then started strengthening its roots in the Indian society. The arrival of the British in India diluted some caste and class discrimination as they had found a common enemy that was acting as an overlord for the entire Indian subcontinent. The cemented and deep-rooted biases among the citizens could never erode completely but it still brought together the Indian brothers and sisters fighting for their own survival and existence. It was also upon the British who realized and exploited the caste and class differences among the Indians. They tried to convert the affluent and the educated Indians into allies, who would help them rule over the general masses effectively. As it progressed, the educational setup underwent massive changes. Indian education, even before the British, had been subjected to influx and influence of other religions and culture that had ruled over the subcontinent. Under the British, the most popular debate was between the Anglicists and the Orientalists. They were diametrically opposite ideas and schools of thought where the Orientalists preferred the traditional and ancient way of teaching and the Anglicists followed the modern concepts of learning. The Partition further created a religious divide that was difficult to navigate through. Various policies and commissions have been addressed to solve the recurring problems of education but it has been taken with a grain of salt, as none of the implementations have shown ground-breaking results on the ground.

Education in today's age is not only divided on the lines of religion, and caste, but also on the gender and class (income level) of an individual. For schemes being introduced by the government to increase retention of students in schools, schemes like the 'Mid-day Meal' have had far-reaching impact and have also been successful in their endeavor. The Mid-day Meal aims to provide a nutritious, and balanced meal to students of the primary and the upper-primary section to improve their nutritional food intake, and act as a reinforcer for parents and students to enroll in schools and participate in the learning process. The vision and aim of the programme is exemplary but also faces backlash when the orthodox and narrow-mindedness of individuals lead to discrimination. Several incidents of discrimination have been reported in relation to the scheme, where the students of different castes are made to sit separately. Other shameful incidents include the educator or the teacher themselves creating a distinction among students coming from different economic and social backgrounds. A noble cause of providing students with a nutritious and healthy incentive to stay in schools has also been polluted by the rudimentary thought of discriminative caste behavior. An empirical study conducted at the Indian Institute of Technology, Roorke, has said that caste prejudice against Dalits poses a significant barrier to the effective implementation of the mid-day meal scheme, with implicit biases and intra-community discrimination within the Scheduled Caste group affecting its success. Research in Moradabad schools revealed that identity-based discrimination persists in social structures, calling for continued discourse to eliminate caste-related stigma.(Bhandari & Mishra, 2023) Other schemes that have been conceptualised to help the disadvantaged groups have also been sometimes overshadowed by different forms of discrimination. This gives us a backdrop to how diluted the scene of higher education would look like when the discrimination

is carried out even in the earliest stages of education. The alienated students at the elementary and secondary levels of education would by choice or circumstances in general not enrol in higher education. According to a study by Khanal, Pokhrel, & Dewey (2023), Dalits in India and Nepal encounter persistent barriers in higher education. A review of 18 studies, guided by Amartya Sen's capability approach, reveals that despite government initiatives, caste biases among non-Dalit faculty and peers hinder Dalits' access to equitable and inclusive education. To advance social justice, higher education must actively challenge discriminatory values and practices.

Gender and income based discrimination are also easily spotted in different aspects of our lives. Making education available to a particular gender with continuous advertising efforts has made some difference wherein we now see that the gap between the two genders have reduced even at the higher education level. In the Indian context, women from marginalized castes face compounded challenges. They not only experience discrimination based on caste but also encounter exclusion based on gender, leading to underrepresentation in higher education institutions. (Khanna & Mukherjee, 2024)

In my study, where the doctoral theses of scholars have been studied from three universities, Ravenshaw University, University of Calcutta, and Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda from the year 2011 to 2021 for the Department of Education. It shows that the numbers of male and female candidates have been very close while a difference has been noted in Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda where the male scholars outnumber the female scholars by approximately 22%. There are 14 male and 16 female scholars at Ravenshaw University, 57 male scholars and 58 female scholars in University of Calcutta, making it an almost equal distribution of genders. At the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, the number of male scholars is 35 and female is only 22. The data highlights that the gaps have now started closing in on the disparities of gender based enrollment in higher education. This however, may or may not reflect the bigger picture of status of women enrolling and completing PhD Programmes in other Educational departments and states of India. A paper on 'Gender Inequality and Higher Education', reviews literature on gender and higher education, highlighting uneven gender inequalities. Women perform relatively well in access, face challenges during college, and are particularly disadvantaged in post-college outcomes. Addressing gender inequality requires analyzing these distinct stages and understanding both areas of parity and persistent disparities. (Jacobs, 1996)

India's higher education is already not accessible to everyone due to the high percentage of dropouts seen during high school and graduation. The data for caste and category based discrimination is more daunting for higher education. The reserved seats in government universities are not met with the right candidates for top-level specialization courses. For my research, I gathered data from three government-run universities in India, where the data from 2011- 2021 for the Department of Education shows that there were no candidates from the Scheduled Tribes. Across the three universities, less than 10% seats were taken by Scheduled Castes' candidates, less than 15% from Other Backward Classes out of the total percentage of seats reserved for PhD scholars for their doctoral degree. The data highlights the non-enrollment and representation of backward classes into higher education. This also leads to the fact that the research for the disadvantaged communities

will not be catered to, or will not be voiced in an appropriate manner. Actual representation goes a long way in redefining the objectives, purposes, and implementations of solutions of research.

Several newspapers and research have shown the meagre participation of the backward sections in roles of decision making and implementation. The other 50% of the Indian population which comprises women also fall into a similar category when facing the issue of non-representation. With reserved seats making up for more than 50 percent of the total available seats, representation from the reserved communities have not seen a similar growth. Prestigious institutions of the country including IITs, IIMs, AIIMs, and NITs have also not been able to garner students from all the marginalised sections of society. The Indian Government also made provisions for allocating 33% of seats in the assemblies and the Lok Sabha for female members but only close to 10% seats are secured by female candidates. The identification of low representation among women and the backward classes is not enough but understanding the problems that concern the non-availability of candidates for these seats is worth addressing. Non-representation across castes, class, and gender negatively impacts the growth of the country as resources are either channelized in directions which do not benefit the masses at large or focus on solving problems without taking into consideration the local viewpoints or the beneficiaries directly.   The reflection of vacant seats at the higher education level correlates with the vacant seats of reserved category at prestigious institutes across India. The article in Hindustan Times recently voiced the concerns that the Right to Information (RTI) has revealed. It highlights that there are no faculty members across eight departments for the mandated SC, ST and OBC seats at IIT Bombay. (Pandit, 2024) Similar cases have also been reported for the IIMs, where IIM Indore was under fire for not being able to fill its reserved category faculty positions. (TOI, 2024)

When the seeds of a plant are sown into the soil, it needs sunlight, water, minerals to grow and blossom into a tree. The case of representation is also such. The seed-like seats have been made available but no full-proof means have been identified to achieve them. The system allocates free, compulsory, and universal education available to all between the age of 6 to 14 years through the Right to Education Act (2009), but it fails to measure the qualitative output of the process. Sarva Siksha Abhiyan, Operation Blackboard, Mid-day Meals have contributed heavily to the increasing number of enrollments in schools. The system however focuses on enrollment and retention (up to a certain extent) of children in school but fails to correlate the growing numbers with qualitative growth and improvement of such students. A number of research has been conducted to deduce the qualitative impact of these government initiatives, but their sample size is not large enough to paint a picture for the entire nation. The world of education has always been associated with champions where only the bright and successful students seem to be leading respectable lives. However, the definition of 'success' has also been different in academia and the real-world. You would often read PhDs or other highly educated individuals opting for occupations that are no match for their eligibility. The question that also lingers in the minds of the parents is related to my previous statement where parents would pose questions as, 'What would he/she do after studying so much? What are the benefits of studying so much?' They believe that instead of studying, they could gather work experience that would help in their future. The 'work experience' mentioned here, is also different for both the genders. Boys and sometimes girls are expected to

work as a daily wage earner who could learn a skill and support the family while more often the girls are expected to help with household chores that would form the basis for their future married life. Even in privileged households, you see girls or women meeting the same fate of a compromised dream ambition.

Even at a nascent stage, a feeling of inferiority is instilled through biases and various social constructs that favour the upper classes and men. Caste and class differences will widen the gap between the common folk. Age-old traditions and superstitions also lead the general population into a falsified stratum of segregation. The differences and divisions of our social order have infiltrated the deep roots of our existence. Social evils like female infanticide are proof of the bias that alienates a particular gender even before its birth. Also, the constant debate between the merit and reservation of individuals will take center stage when we talk about the non-representation of disadvantaged communities. We would also have to understand that we cannot expect everyone to compete at the same level when they have been provided with the same benefits or provisions required to compete.

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