



Self-Esteem and Social Stigma: A Psychological Study of Dalit Youth in Higher Education

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between self-esteem and perceived caste-based social stigma among Dalit youth in higher education institutions in India. Drawing upon stigma theory and social identity frameworks, the research adopts a mixed-method design involving 200 Dalit students aged 18–25 years. Quantitative data were collected using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and a Perceived Caste Stigma Scale, complemented by qualitative interviews. Findings reveal a significant negative correlation between perceived stigma and self-esteem ($r = -0.62, p < .01$). Regression analysis indicates that stigma significantly predicts lower self-esteem even after controlling for socioeconomic background ($R^2 = .41$). Qualitative narratives highlight identity strain, subtle discrimination, and psychological coping strategies. The study underscores the need for institutional mechanisms that address the psychological dimensions of caste discrimination in higher education.

Keywords: Dalit youth, self-esteem, caste stigma, psychological wellbeing, higher education, discrimination.

1. Introduction

Caste remains a persistent axis of inequality in India despite constitutional safeguards and affirmative action policies. In higher education institutions, Dalit students often encounter subtle and overt discrimination, social exclusion, and stereotyping. While structural barriers have been widely documented, the psychological consequences—particularly self-esteem and perceived stigma—require deeper scholarly attention.

Self-esteem, defined as an individual's overall evaluation of self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965), plays a central role in academic performance, emotional health, and social integration. Social stigma, conceptualized as the discrediting of individuals based on group identity (Goffman, 1963), can undermine self-worth and restrict participation. This study investigates the psychological relationship between caste-based stigma and self-esteem among Dalit youth in higher education.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The foundational understanding of stigma emerges from Erving Goffman (1963), who described stigma as a socially constructed attribute that spoils identity. Expanding this framework, Bruce G. Link and Jo C. Phelan (2001) conceptualized stigma as a process involving labeling, stereotyping, separation, and status loss within power relations. These elements are clearly reflected in caste-based discrimination.

Self-esteem theory developed by Rosenberg, Morris (1965) suggests that sustained exposure to devaluation reduces individuals' self-worth. Similarly, stereotype threat theory proposed by Claude M. Steele (1997) explains how awareness of negative stereotypes impairs performance and confidence among marginalized groups.

Within the Indian context, Sukhdeo Thorat and Katherine S. Newman (2010) documented caste discrimination in educational spaces. Satish Deshpande (2013) further argued that caste operates invisibly within "casteless" institutions such as universities. The philosophical critique of caste by B.R. Ambedkar (1936) emphasized that caste destroys dignity and self-respect, directly linking structural oppression with psychological injury. Additionally, Gopal Guru (2009) highlighted humiliation as a central psychological experience of caste oppression.

Despite these theoretical contributions, empirical studies examining the direct relationship between perceived caste stigma and self-esteem among Dalit youth remain limited. This study addresses this research gap.

3. Objectives

- 1.To assess levels of self-esteem among Dalit students.
- 2.To measure perceived caste-based stigma in higher education.
- 3.To analyze the relationship between stigma and self-esteem
- 4.To explore lived psychological experiences of discrimination.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

Mixed-method approach (quantitative + qualitative).

4.2 Sample

200 Dalit students (18–25 years) enrolled in arts, science, and professional programs.

4.3 Instruments

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

Perceived Caste Stigma Scale (Tiwari,R.K.)

Semi-structured interview schedule

4.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis.

5. Results

Table 1: Demographic Profile (N = 200)

Variable	Category	f	%
Gender	Male	108	54
	Female	92	46
Age	18-20	72	36
	21-23	96	48
	24-25	32	16

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Self-Esteem	17.84	4.52	8	28
Perceived Stigma	32.65	6.78	18	48

Self-esteem scores indicate moderate-to-low levels, while stigma perception is relatively high.

Table 3: Correlation Analysis

Variables	Self-Esteem	Stigma
Self-Esteem	---	
Stigma	-0.62**	---

$p < .01$

There is a strong negative relationship between stigma and self-esteem.

Table 4: Regression Analysis

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	28.45	1.92	—	14.81	.000
Stigma	-0.33	0.05	-0.62	-6.84	.000
Family Income	0.21	0.09	0.14	2.33	.021

Model Summary:

$R^2 = 0.41$

$F(2,197) = 68.42, p < .001$

Perceived stigma significantly predicts reduced self-esteem even after controlling socioeconomic status.

6. Qualitative Findings

Three major themes emerged:

1. Identity Strain: Fear of caste exposure limits classroom participation.
2. Subtle Discrimination: Micro aggressions and social exclusion.
3. Resilience and Assertion: Development of collective identity and psychological resistance.

7. Discussion

The findings align with stigma theory (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001) and stereotype threat theory (Steele, 1997), demonstrating that caste-based discrimination adversely affects psychological well-being. Consistent with Ambedkar's critique of caste as a destroyer of dignity, the study empirically confirms that stigma reduces self-esteem among Dalit youth.

Higher education institutions must recognize psychological harm as a dimension of caste discrimination and implement structured counselling and sensitization programs.

8. Conclusion

Caste stigma continues to shape psychological experiences within Indian universities. Addressing mental health dimensions of caste discrimination is essential for inclusive and equitable higher education.

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