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## Caste-Based Exclusion In Indian Higher Educational Institutions: A Case Study Of Hyderabad Universities

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### Abstract:

Affirmative action policies in higher educational institutions in India, while intended to promote equity, often inadvertently perpetuate social hierarchies. This paper explores the role of caste categories in reinforcing discrimination and stigma within academic spaces. Drawing on data from Hyderabad Central University, NALSAR University of Law, and the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), this study highlights how institutional practices, combined with entrenched social biases, maintain and even deepen caste-based divisions. Using interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, and case studies, the research identifies key themes related to the marginalization and exclusion of students from reserved categories.

**Key Words:** Affirmative Action, Discrimination, Caste, Equity, Marginalization, Higher Education

### Introduction:

In Indian higher education, affirmative action policies aimed at ensuring representation for marginalized communities are deeply embedded in institutional frameworks<sup>1</sup>. However, these well-intentioned measures can also result in unintended consequences, particularly in how caste categories are constantly invoked in official documentation and interactions<sup>2</sup>. Instead of fostering inclusivity, these practices often reinforce pre-existing social hierarchies, leading to an environment where students from marginalized communities are stigmatized or viewed primarily through their caste identity<sup>3</sup>. This paper examines the complex interplay between caste-based affirmative policies and social realities within higher educational institutions, specifically focusing on three major universities in Hyderabad: Hyderabad Central University, NALSAR, and EFLU. Through fieldwork that included interviews, focus group discussions, and case studies, the study sheds light on how institutional frameworks, societal biases, and individual interactions contribute to maintaining social divisions.

<sup>1</sup> Weisskopf, T. E. (2004). Impact of reservation on admissions to higher education in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4339-4349.

<sup>2</sup> Haq, R., & Ojha, A. K. (2010). Affirmative action in India: caste-based reservations. In *International Handbook on Diversity Management at Work*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

<sup>3</sup> Desai, M. (2008). Reservations; compulsions & contradictions. *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, 44(2), 149-153.

## Caste Categories and Social Divisions

The constant reference to caste in academic institutions, although meant to ensure equitable representation, paradoxically amplifies social divisions.<sup>4</sup> This is evident in the way students from marginalized communities, particularly those benefiting from reserved seats, are often singled out<sup>5</sup>. These students are frequently perceived through the lens of their caste identity, which not only isolates them socially but also reinforces the stigma attached to their background<sup>6</sup>. Faculty, administrators, and students from dominant communities often carry subconscious biases that affect their interactions with reserved category students<sup>7</sup>. The presence of caste markers in admission forms, rosters, and other institutional documents further entrenches these biases, making it difficult for students from marginalized communities to be seen beyond their caste identity<sup>8</sup>. As a result, rather than fostering an environment of equality and opportunity, these institutions inadvertently maintain and reinforce caste-based hierarchies<sup>9</sup>.

## Discrimination, Exclusion, and Stigma in Hyderabad Universities

Data from Hyderabad Central University, NALSAR, and EFLU reveal how caste-based exclusion manifests in different forms across institutions. Through interviews and focus group discussions, students from marginalized communities expressed experiences of subtle and overt discrimination. In many cases, these students face social isolation, and their academic potential is undermined due to the preconceived notions held by peers and faculty. The prevalence of caste-based prejudice is not limited to interactions between students but is also reflected in institutional processes. Faculty members often fail to address the specific needs of students from marginalized backgrounds, while administrative policies, though outwardly neutral, perpetuate exclusion by failing to provide adequate support systems. These dynamics contribute to a hostile academic environment where students from marginalized communities are frequently marginalized or overlooked.

## Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research design, with a focus on in-depth interviews<sup>10</sup> to explore the experiences of caste-based discrimination among Scheduled Caste (SC) students in higher educational institutions. The goal was to capture detailed narratives that illustrate how institutional practices and social dynamics contribute to the exclusion and marginalization of SC students. The study was carried out across three universities in Hyderabad: Hyderabad Central University (HCU), NALSAR University of Law, and the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU). The methodology is detailed in the following sections.

## Sample

A purposive sampling<sup>11</sup> method was employed to identify participants for this study. The sample comprised Scheduled Caste (SC) students from different academic disciplines and years of study within the three selected institutions. Only SC students were interviewed, as they are the primary focus of this investigation into caste-based discrimination. The participants were selected based on their willingness to share their experiences and their availability for in-depth interviews. This method allowed the research to target those with direct and relevant experiences<sup>12</sup> of caste-related discrimination within higher educational spaces.

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<sup>4</sup> Nayak, S. (2024). CASTE DISCRIMINATION IN EDUCATION. *The Routledge International Handbook of Equity and Inclusion in Education*, 291.

<sup>5</sup> Nayak, S. Caste discrimination in education: A study of the Dalit minority in Odisha, India. In *The Routledge International Handbook of Equity and Inclusion in Education* (pp. 291-307). Routledge.

<sup>6</sup> Chauhan, C. P. S. (2008). Education and caste in India. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 28(3), 217-234.

<sup>7</sup> Sukumar, N. (2013). Quota's children: The perils of getting educated. In *Beyond inclusion* (pp. 205-221). Routledge India.

<sup>8</sup> Sukumar, N. (2013). Quota's children: The perils of getting educated. In *Beyond inclusion* (pp. 205-221). Routledge India.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Roller, M. R. (2020). The In-depth Interview Method. *Journal of Language Relationship*, 10(1).

<sup>11</sup> Rai, N., & Thapa, B. (2015). A study on purposive sampling method in research. *Kathmandu: Kathmandu School of Law*, 5(1), 8-15.

<sup>12</sup> Mears, C. L. (2012). In-depth interviews. *Research methods and methodologies in education*, 19, 170-176.

## Field Site Selection

The study was conducted across three prominent universities in Hyderabad: Hyderabad Central University, NALSAR University of Law, and the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU). These institutions were chosen because they represent a diverse range of academic disciplines and are known for their varied student demographics. Additionally, these universities have been the site of multiple reported incidents of caste-based discrimination, making them relevant locations for the study. The fieldwork covered different institutional settings, including classrooms, hostels, administrative offices, mess halls, and recreational spaces, to capture a holistic picture of caste-based dynamics.

## Data Collection

The primary method of data collection was in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' personal experiences with caste-based prejudice, discrimination, exclusion, and stigma in their day-to-day interactions with peers, faculty members, and administrative staff. The interview questions were designed to elicit detailed responses about both overt and subtle forms of discrimination that SC students face in academic and non-academic settings. Each interview was conducted one-on-one to ensure confidentiality and to allow participants the freedom to speak candidly about their experiences.

The data collection was conducted over several months, and interviews were carried out either in person or through virtual platforms, depending on participants' preferences and availability. The interviews were recorded (with participants' consent) and later transcribed for analysis. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process to protect participants from potential retaliation or social repercussions within their academic institutions.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data, following the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach<sup>13</sup>. IPA is a qualitative method that focuses on how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds<sup>14</sup>. This method was chosen to capture the deep, subjective experiences of SC students regarding caste-based discrimination. The data was examined in a multi-step process:

- 1. Familiarization with the data:** All interviews were transcribed, and the researcher repeatedly read through the transcripts to become thoroughly familiar with the data.
- 2. Initial coding:** Transcripts were coded for recurring themes and patterns. This involved identifying specific instances where participants described their experiences of discrimination, marginalization, or resistance.
- 3. Thematic development:** Once the data was coded, the next step was to group these codes into broader themes. These themes reflected key issues such as social isolation, exclusion, prejudice from dominant caste students, faculty biases, and institutional failures.
- 4. Interpretation:** The final step involved interpreting these themes in the context of the research questions and theoretical framework. The analysis aimed to understand both the individual and collective experiences of SC students in relation to caste-based discrimination.

The use of IPA allowed for a nuanced understanding of how SC students interpret and respond to their marginalization in higher education institutions, emphasizing the importance of personal narratives in revealing the complexities of caste-based exclusion.

## Findings and Discussion

The study identified several key themes related to caste-based exclusion in higher education. First, the frequent reference to caste in official documentation leads to social labeling, which reinforces divisions between students. Second, ingrained social biases among faculty and students from dominant groups exacerbate prejudice against students from reserved categories, leading to an environment of exclusion rather than inclusion. Finally, the lack of institutional mechanisms to support marginalized students, both academically and socially, deepens their sense of isolation.

<sup>13</sup> Eatough, V., & Smith, J. A. (2017). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. *The Sage handbook of qualitative research in psychology*, 193-209.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

One of the more concerning findings was the role of institutional practices in maintaining these social hierarchies. The emphasis on caste categories during admission processes, grading, and other official functions continually reinforces caste as a primary identity marker, making it difficult for students to transcend these social boundaries<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, faculty members often fail to engage with the unique challenges faced by marginalized students, perpetuating a cycle of academic and social exclusion.

### **The initial experience itself reflects discrimination based on caste**

Most of the respondents said since the very first entry into the institution they made to face some sort of marginalization in all the spheres of their academic life. Respondents explained through the list of selection to the admission the administration provide the dominant caste students and faculty with the information of students coming from Lower caste particularly SC and ST by adding the caste identity in the selection list.

### **There used to be a cold war**

One respondent held the idea that 'then onwards, the cold war starts between Dominant and Lower caste students'. She said the fight does not take much time to be ripen and immediately it transforms into direct fight, finally victory rests with dominant caste students only.

### **Systematic discrimination**

Testimonies from students indicate that NALSAR University remains largely indifferent to numerous issues related to caste discrimination. One third-year LLB student openly acknowledged the pervasive nature of caste-related problems on campus, stating that students from marginalized backgrounds encounter systematic discrimination in their daily lives. He recounted a troubling incident that highlights the discriminatory attitudes faced by lower-caste students, particularly from those belonging to dominant castes and certain administrative staff. During a celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti, a Dalit LLM student shared sweets with his classmates and hostel mates to commemorate the occasion. However, just two days later, a party hosted by the outgoing LLB batch took a disturbing turn. On the night of this gathering, a dominant caste LLM student, after consuming excessive alcohol, approached the Dalit student in his hostel room. In a fit of aggression, he not only forcibly shut down the Dalit student's laptop but also unleashed a torrent of casteist slurs, threatening physical violence. Fortunately, the situation was defused when other students present in the room intervened, preventing any harm from coming to the Dalit student.

### **Faculty dare to make derogatory statements**

A respondent recounted that prior to the aforementioned incident, a faculty member responsible for teaching LLB courses made a blatantly casteist remark during a lecture on reservation policy. The professor stated, "Some students are not suited for this university; they are here solely because of reservations." In response to this statement, students lodged a formal complaint with the Vice-Chancellor, who assured them that any incidents of physical or verbal violence against members of the SC/ST community would not be tolerated. He promised that any perpetrator would not only be removed from their position but also expelled from the university. Another respondent, an alumnus of NALSAR who is now a human rights lawyer in Delhi, reflected on his experiences during his LLM studies at the institution. He recalled facing derogatory remarks from dominant caste students who asserted that "some lower-caste individuals do not deserve to be here." This respondent emphasized that such discriminatory attitudes extend beyond NALSAR, affecting lower-caste individuals in every higher education institution across India. He vividly remembered sitting in the classroom and enduring these hurtful comments. These incidents were not isolated; they occurred frequently on campus, yet very few students dared to file complaints. This reluctance persisted despite the presence of strong forums designed to combat casteist behavior from dominant caste students and faculty. It seems that, in many instances, the administration leaned towards supporting the dominant caste students rather than standing up for the victims of discrimination.

<sup>15</sup> Sukumar, N. (2022). *Caste discrimination and exclusion in Indian universities: A critical reflection*. Routledge India.

## Exhibition of Caste Bias

In EFLU the case is little different. Here students directly face caste discrimination by the faculty members. One respondent, who is a Doctoral Fellow in English, hails from Mahabub Nagar district of Telangana from Scheduled Tribe community, says, 'I am in my 6th year of Ph.D. But my supervisor is not allowing me to submit my thesis while the same supervisor allowed two of his students to submit who are juniors to me'. The reason the supervisor is highlighting is that quality of my thesis is not well'. He said there are several students in the same situation. There are so many BA and MA students from the SC and ST communities who did not get permission to write semester exams just because of less than 3% of attendance, required to write exams. He narrated a story of a student, who due to his severe ill health condition, fail to get permission to write exam. Even the same student clears all the subjects in supplementary exams with a 68%, the university did not give his original certificates and closed his room without informing him. Even did not give permission him to take his other documents from his room.

## Insensitiveness

In both the above mentioned incidents inquiry committee formed but it remains inaction. Hence the SC/ST student representative to the Inquiry Committee had resigned from the committee. She said, (Researcher met her), 'I have resigned from the inquiry committee since I could see no culture of "sensitivity and sensibility" towards the question of "caste" and "Casteism. Hence I felt sitting in the inquiry committee would only validate such insensitive forum. Therefore, I withdrew'. She further said 'thus there was 'strict' punishment to victim who complaint'.

## Conclusion

Affirmative action policies in India's higher education system are vital for ensuring representation and providing opportunities for historically marginalized groups<sup>16</sup>. However, these policies often inadvertently perpetuate existing social hierarchies, highlighting the complex interplay between institutional practices and societal biases<sup>17</sup>. This paper has examined how these factors contribute to caste-based discrimination and exclusion within three prominent universities in Hyderabad. The findings reveal that while affirmative action aims to create a more equitable educational landscape, the persistence of deep-rooted caste dynamics can undermine its effectiveness. Institutional practices such as biased admissions processes, inadequate support systems, and a lack of awareness about the unique challenges faced by marginalized students exacerbate these issues. Furthermore, societal attitudes towards caste continue to influence the experiences of students, often resulting in stigmatization and isolation within academic environments<sup>18</sup>.

For higher education to evolve into a genuine space of learning and growth for all students, it is essential to confront and dismantle these entrenched hierarchies<sup>19</sup>. This necessitates not only a critical reassessment of current affirmative action policies but also the implementation of more inclusive practices that address the specific needs of marginalized communities<sup>20</sup>. Universities must actively engage in fostering a culture of inclusivity, ensuring that support mechanisms are in place to empower students from diverse backgrounds. Moreover, there should be a commitment to ongoing dialogue about caste discrimination, encouraging all stakeholders—students, faculty, and administrators—to participate in creating a more equitable academic environment. By prioritizing equity and inclusion, institutions can cultivate a richer educational experience that not only enhances academic performance but also promotes social cohesion and understanding. Ultimately, the goal should be to transform higher education into a realm where every student can thrive, free from the constraints of caste-based discrimination.

**Keywords:** Affirmative action, caste, higher education, discrimination, exclusion, marginalized communities, Hyderabad universities.

<sup>16</sup> Sabharwal, N. S. (2024). Understanding students' attitudes towards affirmative action policy in higher education in India. *Social Inclusion*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Desai, S., & Kulkarni, V. (2008). Changing educational inequalities in India in the context of affirmative action. *Demography*, 45, 245-270.

<sup>18</sup> Haq, R., & Ojha, A. K. (2010). Affirmative action in India: caste-based reservations. In *International Handbook on Diversity Management at Work*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

<sup>19</sup> Bull, A., & Dey, A. (2022). Power, Hierarchies, and Higher Education: Rape on Campus in India and the UK. In *Rape* (pp. 78-92). Routledge.

<sup>20</sup> Herring, C., & Henderson, L. (2012). From affirmative action to diversity: Toward a critical diversity perspective. *Critical Sociology*, 38(5), 629-643.