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Understanding Discrimination in Higher Education

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Abstract

The incidence of discrimination in education, especially higher education is reported almost every day in covert or overt form all round India. Discrimination follows a particular pattern i.e it is by and large aimed against dalits and linguistic minorities. The resultant of discrimination is suicides, drop-outs, low enrollment ratio of some particular groups of society and, preventing dalit children from full participation in their classrooms, thereby barring them from accessing the most important tool for social mobility. The percentage of atrocities against dalits in campus is rising every year. According to NCRB data the atrocities have been rising from 17.1% in 2013 to 19.4% in 2014. The government tries to address the issue through commission and omission but it always fails to develop any faith among dalit student and their organizations. The atrocities are such that like suicide is termed as institutional murder which ultimately results in waste of talent. Only benefit out of the whole mess is that dalits are united and through various forums they are coming up with some serious questions and attacking the basic foundations which have made one caste dominant over other. In Indian scenario discrimination has a long history of almost 3000 years which make the fight against discrimination long and persistent as it is still carried out explicitly and implicitly. In this paper I have tried to address the sociological reason behind discrimination followed by some empirical evidences and commentary by dalit scholar.

Keywords: dalit and linguistic minorities, NCRB, discrimination

Introduction

The word "Discrimination" connotes very negative meaning. It is always read in relativity with some entity, but in this paper I will be focusing on the discrimination in education along caste and gender line. Discrimination in literal sense means unfair treatment among individuals of the same society, separating, creating differences etc. When we analyze discrimination, we find that it is deep rooted in the social organization as a result some groups are continuously made victim of such practices. In Indian society, since ancient times, caste based discrimination is prevalent in the occupational practices. It was and is (because of their over representation in education) Brahmins (along with savarnars) ascribed with the monopoly in education. Who then compose the underprivileged/discriminated categories? The answer is obvious in Indian scenario the same hitherto dalit and women especially dalit women.

Discrimination is supposed to have two effects, firstly, the the long term effect.

The short term discrimination effect can be seen in the affirmative action, aimed at providing special benefits to the underprivileged, positively discriminating the general category. The short term effect is compensatory in nature. The long term effects do not operate in isolation but in consonance with the forces of economic growth and political development. This very well explains the condition of dalits and women for their deprived condition.

Discrimination in education includes instances of deliberate ragging of dalits(despite ban on ragging) by upper caste, comments based on caste, color, cultural background, language, attire, dressing sense, prejudices of faculty members regarding reserved category students, under representation of faculty members belonging from deprived section etc.

According to Amartya sen, discrimination is an acute case of exclusion. He talks about two kinds of exclusion, firstly, active exclusion and secondly, passive exclusion. Active exclusion includes denying some group their rights to participate through policy formulation or may be through favoritism by the dominant groups. Passive exclusion is not like active exclusion but the result is same as it also discriminate the same group but through discouraging and lower self-confidence which hinder them from education and access to income. The following section will explain how discrimination itself is installed in the nationalist discourse, how upper caste through their power and knowledge dominates the institutional set up, and the neoliberal framework and its asymmetric developments. Discrimination is also carried out at inter-personal level which is discussed in part 2 of the paper. current or shot term effect, and, secondly,

Debates in Indian nationalist discourse

In order to understand discrimination, we need to focus on the popular nationalist discourse and the way it unfolded itself in the debates of Gandhi and Ambedkar. In 1921 Gandhi made a statement saying that "the caste system is the natural order of the society and I am opposed to all those who are out to destroy the caste system". Gandhi was staunch supporter of caste system and believed in chaturvarna system. But after getting fierce challenge by Ambedkar his views were gradually changed. In 1932 after 'Poona Pact' his views were "caste must go". Gradually Gandhi started talking about the evils of caste system and attempted to purify the system. He

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stated that our fore fathers have done great sin to the dalits and it's our duty to purify theirs did to bring them into mainstream.

Ambedkar in his various works like *"what congress and Gandhi have done to the untouchables"* and "*Mr. Gandhi and the emancipation of the untouchables"* talks about how

'abolition' became the common talk but in reality no contribution was given to understand caste and its abolition. Ambedkar was apprehensive of the approach by the Gandhi and INC. Gandhi was of the view that reform should come from the upper caste as they are the sinner and the Satyashodak Samaj constituted mostly of upper caste and no member from the lower caste. Even in bringing reforms, the participation of lower caste was not sought and it was made belief to them that a readymade discrimination free society would be provided to them. So it was left to upper caste that how much space they are willing to provide to the depressed and in which field. Ones Ambedkar was asked whether he believed in Mahatma Gandhi or not, then he replied "there have been many mahatma as in India whose sole object was to remove untouchability and to elevate and absorb the depressed classes, but everyone has failed in his mission. Mahatmas have come and Mahatma has gone, but the untouchables have remained a untouchables".

In independent India, Ambedkar was appointed as chairman of drafting committee on the recommendations of Gandhi. Our constitution provides special protection to the depressed caste and measure to be taken by state machineries for their empowerment through various fundamental rights like equality of opportunities which bring the long depressed caste at par with the other dominant caste.

In independent India education was made sure for every one irrespective of caste but in reality it did not reflected the way it was meant for. Soon after independence, many universities were opened and both central and state government funded in education. Satish Deshpande talks about the 1960s era where attention was paid to education system because of global talk of "knowledge- based economy and society". This is very interesting phase in Indian society as because two major structures of society is going to confront itself as in upper caste and depressed caste in the same field. Here the philosophy of Gandhi was going to be tested. According to Satish Despande there is contestation between groups already entrenched in higher education and the hitherto excluded classes and castes that are now forcing their way into it. This was profoundly new social revolution that is introducing a new heterogeneity in the homogenous space of university and college. The new composition is going to be women and first generation learners from different castes and classes. This new composition is going to bring social changes which will not go without creating friction and tension among new learners and old hegemonic castes.

Institutional Approach

Here I will talk about how upper caste institutionalized them into various institutions and their culture dominated the entire arena. 1960s saw massive expansion in number of universities under the state funding. The moment was captured by the upper caste by converting their landed capital into credential capital. During Nehruvian era, state government invested a lot in education (as educated human capital was needed to run the state machinery), also provided educational opportunities and training as well as employment. Satish Despande talks about 'historical luck' where demand was more than supply, all elite posts were captured by the upper caste or dominant class which ultimately filled the whole space with one particular group. Upper caste created their hegemony despite constitutional safeguards in the field of education. Even in the independent India knowledge became sanctity of upper caste only. As Foucault argues modern forms of power and knowledge creates new forms of domination. For Foucault knowledge is power. This ruling class or upper caste creates a discourse which gets institutionalized. Upper caste use institutions to serves for their legitimacy. For example in ancient times religion was made sanctity of Brahmins only and any interpretation will come from their sides. Even the Nationalist discourse was rotated around upper caste manufacturing. During independence movement, dalits and women fully participated in the movement but historians were upper caste so the tilt of the writing was mostly to the prominent upper caste discourse. Subaltern study provides us another angle to look into the history. Knowledge is associated with particular group, Dalit discourse is treated in the same manner as West treats the Orients.

Here now, I will discuss how upper castes with their hold of institutional space tend to perpetrate discrimination with legitimacy. In independent India, special provisions were provided to depressed class in the field of education. Each state was asked to make necessary changes to accommodate this new group in the educational arena. Reservations were provided to OBCs, SCs and STs. But this was not welcomed by upper caste/general categories student as there were certain reserved seat for backward castes. Education became widespread arena and it was the demand to funnel out over arching representation. Examination served as a tool to funnel out students based on merit. Now the whole regulation revolved around merit argument that if you lack certain number you are not fit for education. The whole upper milieu of society with their over representation in education brought the debate of reservation between meritocracy and social justice. Merit argument is itself flawed concept because nobody knows beforehand that he/she will serve the right purpose after selection. Merit definitely is the reflection of good educational atmosphere but higher rating in an examination does not mean higher intrinsic worth. Dalits throughout their life lives in a resource crunch situation. Where are we going to draw line for dalits who first face resource discrimination and then merit discrimination? Merit definitely shows the potential but how much actualization of

that potential happen will be known only afterwards. The upper castes wanted a durable and self-reproducing mechanism through which their hegemony is maintained was rightly served by merit debate. This has so much deep rooted into the conscience of people that they hardly question why he/she is selected and what should be the argument of conducting body not to select over the marks difference of one or two.

It is very important to discuss how reservation is used as double sword by upper class intelligentsia. On the one hand they convey message to society that education is no more the hegemony of upper caste, we have incorporated depressed class into this field through reservation. Hence, equality for all, to become doctors, engineers, academician etc which earlier were the profession of upper castes only. Secondly, this reservation also serves as a tool for discrimination by upper castes. Upper caste made themselves as general category i.e a casteless group whereas under reservation every other student is asked to provide caste certificate hence making them caste ridden. Nobody knows the caste of general category but caste became the identity for reserved category students. After 93rd amendment act the popular joke was: India decided to send a space exploration team to the moon. How then the composition of team is to be decided? After much discussion and negotiation, it was decided that the team would constitute nine OBCs, six members of schedule castes, three from the schedule tribes and if there is any place left, two astronauts. The insight of the joke is very well explained by Satish

Deshpande; "astronauts" are not identified by their caste but only their qualifications as astronauts. The quota-walas are identified through their caste and not qualifications. In short, the intention of the joke was, we will know the caste of astronauts without being told but even if the quota-wala after qualifying reached there would not be known for his word work (qualification) but be known by castes. In other words our imagination can capture upper castes in all modern professions but this is not true for the depressed castes.

In neo-liberal framework

In 1992 India opened up its economy and embraced itself with the globalised world. Nehru long back dreamed of uplifting its education system and embrace in the global market. But the nature of state changed from welfare state to empowering state. In the wake of globalization and neo-liberal state, funding to the higher education has significantly reduced. Punnaiya committee recommended twenty five percentage of expenditure to be collected from students and renting school resources for paying staffs. In 1997 finance committee's one report considered education including secondary education as 'non-merit goods' and in 2004 it was further considered in

Merit 2 goods, hence huge cut in subsidy. Technical and professional courses are on demand with fluent English and good attire. Basically education is marketised and government sees student as human capital which is capable of returning the amount which state has invested in them. In this empowering society, only student with the good background is going to excel. This very whole setup is discriminatory for the student from backward castes. This doesn't mean that the whole investment in creating level playing field is of no value.

But at the same we can't ignore the fact that dalits lack the opportunity of education in their childhood and adolescence will be disadvantageous with them who have them like upper caste.

Ivan Illich talks about '*deschooling society'* where he says, in this new society student learn more in the society than in school. The ambiance teaches them a lot along with the gossip in the family, social gathering and various other institutions. This is something which dalits lack completely as their circle or social gathering compose of same depressed section. In new empowering society, education is actually disempowering because whole syllabus is decided by technocrat and student is seen as consumer. I would further expand this point of Illich that dalits are more disempowered as education in this framework is to produce labor and not educated individual. Dalits are not groomed by any during the course of education. Hence dalits are at total disadvantageous position. Poor sees education as a mode of emancipation, education captures their dream which Illich has rightly put as "futile promises of salvation to the poor of the technological age".

When Indian modernity came we see asymmetric developments, during independence movement; borrowing inner and outer domain concept of Partha Chatterjee, it was mainly upper caste which allowed modernity in outer domain such as socio economic activity, but do not allowed in inner domain like caste system, culture, marriage etc. Its effect is such that upper castes are in a position to transform itself with the modern world and globalization whereas depressed castes faces tremendous problem in the globalized world. Education in privatized world is very costly. To accommodate huge student population many new schools, colleges and universities were opened. Some institutions are private but partly funded by government and others are fully private. We see enrollment of SCs in private colleges as very low. Dalit students who reach the best of universities often found money crunch situation, financial disadvantage results in drop out or shift their focus from education to earnings, ending up paying less attention to education.

The student population on campuses of higher education has become increasingly diverse: according to 2008 data, of the total number of students in higher education in the country, 4 per cent were Scheduled Tribes, 13.5 per cent Scheduled Castes (SC), and 35 per cent Other Backward Classes (OBC). Hindus accounted for about 85 per cent of students, followed by Muslims (8 per cent) and Christians (3 per cent). And yet, suicide of 23 out of 25 were of Dalits. The expansion in higher education has brought extreme diversity on the campus. Students come from different social, ethnic, racial, religious, and regional backgrounds. This diversity reflects two dimensions; first the nature of interaction among students on

the campuses varies by differing ideologies and values that they learn from their native places, from their family, village and society. Second dimension includes the behavior of teachers and administrators, which is the reflection of their prejudices based on class, caste, ethnicity, region and religion. The number of students from various diverse backgrounds is increasing whereas the understanding of cultural background of students is sometimes made fun by the faculty member because of their limited knowledge about different cultural background. One such incident happened on the JNU campus in Mahi hostel, where few students pitched tent on the roof (new admission, waiting for the hostel and were living in temporary settlement); in lieu of this the senior warden came and said the whole set up is illegal and asked for immediate dismantle of the tent. Senior Warden then asked one student from south India that this is how u stay back home in tents? This very remark explains many things and prejudices of faculty on the campus.

Research indicates that experiences of discrimination, exclusion and humiliation are the predominant reasons for high incidence of suicide among dalits. After analyzing some cases of suicide, academic Anoop Singh concluded that "there seems to be more than enough evidence to believe that caste discrimination played a significant role in driving these extraordinary individuals into committing suicide", and that "elite professional institutions are the places where caste prejudice is so firmly entrenched that it has become normal".

A study in 2010 by Professor Mary Thornton and others of five higher educational institutions in India and the United

Kingdom observed that "separation of groups on the higher education campus is pervasive and ubiquitous. While some such separation may be for supportive reasons, at other times it is due to overt discrimination on the grounds of race, region, nationality, caste, class, religion, or gender". In 2013, Samson

Ovichegan, in a study on the experience of Dalits in an elite university in India, observed that "this university is yet another arena in which the practice of caste division continues to exist. The university environment reinforces and maintains a divide between Dalit and non-Dalit. Dalit students do, indeed, experience overt and covert discrimination based on caste at this premier university".

Sukumar (dalit professor in DU) says, "Social interaction with the non-dalit student is limited and issue of poverty, attire, English language, make dalit life difficult. Attire, language skills, and general 'etiquette' influence the relationship between genders. Dalit students are at a disadvantage with respect to such markers of social status, and find it difficult to interact with opposite sex. The attitude of the upper caste boys and girls towards the dalit students is non-supportive, with there being very little sharing of study materials. Apart from routine interactions, all social and academic gatherings are very exclusive (sukumar,2008). In one The Telegraph report of 2007 talks of ragging to the dalit students despite ban on ragging. Twenty five students were interviewed during preparation of the Thorat committee report conform that dalits were humiliated by the seniors when they had taken admission. "They would call us to their rooms, will order us to do things…tell us ten different reasons why you should get reservation otherwise I will beat u", one of them said.

Places of discrimination includes both inside and outside classroom, on the campus, in the hostels, mess, exclusionary behaviours is show by the students of dominant castes and classes which result into psychological and physical violence against women and students from depressed castes like SCs and STs. The incidence of discrimination also includes the refusal of room sharing by upper caste with the dalits or sitting on the same dining table with them or using the same tap. This whole incidence indicates the deep rooting of understanding of caste system and feeling of pure and superior by the dominant caste. Caste based discrimination is also seen in the form that upper caste student do not allow dalit student to put dalit icons posters in the hostel rooms. One incident was reported from one of IITs that dalit students are afraid of being politically active/consciousness. Rohit Vemula's initial study of case also reflects this situation where inquiry is set up the administration whenever student from depressed class organize any programs on E V Ramasamy Naicker or any such programs. This has nothing to do with the institutional design. These kinds of discrimination can be best explained by looking into the interaction at interpersonal level. Earlier in this paper I have talked about the institutional aspect but one more aspect of discrimination at inter-personal level shows how exactly discrimination is purported in the reality. Most of the time discrimination carried out is very sophisticated and subtle which comes in the form of metaphorical languages, body gestures and in implementing institutional rules. Every individual experience discrimination in one or other form but we can develop a typology of it on the basic of similarities and perpetual experiences by dalits. Taking the institutional aspect a bit forward, we see that students coming into this space, because of the sanctity of institution, show themselves as enlightened as well as educated(in reality pseudo- intellectual) and hinder oneself from carrying out discrimination in public but back deep down heart they support the discriminatory behavior and subordination of depressed castes. This fact can be examined by looking into the personal conversations among upper/dominant castes and classes. For instance, various students enrolling through reservation says that they are called as *sarkaridamads or sarkari Brahmins* by upper caste students in various universities. It is also reported that on IIT campuses, Dalits are named as *saddus(*derived from the term Schedule castes and Tribes*)*. Sometimes the comment made along gender lines, along with reservation outrage the modesty and dignity of dalit girls on the campus. They are frequently asked *"quote se aye hoy yakothe se"(*have u come via reservation quota or brothel?*)*. So in institutional set up students from various communities bring their understanding to the educational space which forms the basis of discrimination. For example, taking the case of 'North East students', students from that part of the region object against their common leveling as North-East students. They argue that the North-East region is not one cultural homogeneous place and they should be recognized by the names of their state. They call this

behavior as dehumanizing and humiliating. As one respondent stated, "we don't like somebody call us North-east people, we also want to be known by our names". But I think this issue of North-east student needs little critical looking as I find them living into their own groups and not many are open to assimilate and accommodate with other students from various regions of the country. Even they create an invisible wall limiting intermingle among different regional background students. This wall is the outcome of discriminatory behavior or they themselves mock others among their grouping may be the possible reasons.

It will be very helpful to understand the atmosphere on campus by looking into friendship pattern. The basic underlining for friendship depends on caste, ethnicity and regional background. Students befriend mostly from the other student from their same caste and ethnicity. For example, OBC students befriend mostly from the same group or students from higher caste. Similarly, the student from higher caste befriend student from same group or from the OBCs. It cannot be completely nullified that upper caste people do not mingle or befriend SCs and STs. But the percentage is very low which automatically narrates the true scene. Point here is, why it is so necessary to befriend from general category? The answer is SC student benefits from their friendship, like language skills, reading notes, entry into other popular circles etc. Upper caste people do carry privileges, this attract students from marginalized section and want to be in such 'privilege-popular circles'. On the other hand, upper caste student do not find it difficult to enter into the existing 'privilege-popular circle', hence it is regardless for them to forge friendship with students from marginalized community. Now I will discuss in details about the faculty and student (dalit) interaction in the university. One of the continued allegations put by dalit students is that they are denied guide for MPhil and PhD for months. Incidences of discrimination like upper caste supervisor do not allow dalit students to work on particular themes for PhD, they are more harassed than other students is also reported. Sometimes supervisor force them to change their PhD thesis after they had worked on them for two or three years. Or that their thesis is not returned on time after evaluation or their thesis is not at all evaluated and sent for further evaluation. English has become cornerstone of higher education. Student from Hindi backgrounds are forced to listen or pursue thesis on which supervisor thinks he will be able to do no matter what effort student is ready to put for his/her thesis. Student activists even demand for reduction of viva marks during MPhil admission because dalit student find it discriminatory against them. In a closed panel marks are allotted to the dalit students or even other minorities according to the whims and fancies of professors. To a great extent selection and rejection depends upon the faculty sitting in the viva room, upper caste students have an edge over other students because of their cultural capital. We even see differences of behavior for dalit students among faculty members. The dominant class is treated nicely and little loud in the voice or different body gestures are taken as offence by some upper caste teacher. Faculty fails to understand the social background (etiquettes are not taught to lower caste more often because of their illiterate parents) of these students and held them indiscipline and arrogant. It is true that dalit students in general have read fewer books or in general they have less bookish knowledge but they have experimental knowledge. When student tries to explain with broken English or incorrect grammar they are less entertained and their experimental knowledge is refuted then and there. Injustice based on caste and class divide is much understands by lower caste students than upper caste writing for them because they (lower caste) are the one to face injustice every day. It is true that upper caste would narrate or analyze it well and can write with decorated language. This discriminatory nature is explained by some professors like this "that the common understanding among SC-ST student is that they will be passed with less hard work", even parents teach them the same. Some students also think that by scoring 50% marks they will get the job. The above statement reflects the biases and insensitivity towards the idea of social justice. However there is some element of truth in this but every law is used and misused. But having such views reflects the negativity of faculty towards these students. Rohit Vemula's case is not an isolated incident; in Hyderabad University nine students have ended their lives in past seven years. All of them belonged to backward castes or dalits. The suicide as well as drop out ratio due to discrimination is also higher among dalit boys and girls. The prime reason for these incidences is the inability of institutions to accommodate socially and backward students in the university space.

Concluding Remarks

As long as education will be equated with economic and social prestige, higher aspirations will be among hitherto backward castes students. The sociological approach shows the discriminatory nature of society but empirical evidences shows that much is need to be done along with existing laws and regulations to address the discrimination problem in education. The need of the hour is to create much secular and democratic space in university arena. Mere giving accessibility will not improve the condition of education system in India rather providing 'acceptability' will definitely create a democratic space, then only education will be open to all otherwise looking at the discriminatory sphere education 'then' (ancient times) and even 'now' will remain upper caste business. Privatization has affected dalits adversely both in education and employment, need of the hour is to provide financial help to these strata so that their full concentration is on study and not on looking after family affairs. This will significantly reduce the drop out ratio among Dalits. The debate between 'quantity' and 'quality' has to see under the rubrics of social justice.

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