

Casteism in Education System

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Abstract

India's educational institutions are natural extensions of caste based Indian society. Casteism in educational system expressed in the form of nano-discrimination, veiled taunts and shadow lines. Some time proven academic merit cannot protect dalit student from caste bias. No doubt in this modern age, the caste bias is often sophisticated and wrapped in ornamental language. Caste based oppression is systematic and sometime knowingly or unknowingly we become a part of it. Recent suicide of Rohit Vemulla is result of this caste bias. His suicide is not an isolated incident. Nine students have taken their lives in the last seven years in the University of Hyderabad. Even in the elite educational institutions like central university and IIT, lower caste students are made aware of their caste and identities.

Keywords

Discrimination, Ornamental Caste Bias

Caste remains the parameter of social stratification in Indian Society [1]. India's educational institutions are natural extensions of its caste based culture. Time and again it has been pointed out that educational spaces in India are conceived by design as exclusively upper caste spaces characterized by an underlying hostility for the official reservation policy which biases out in the form of hatred for students from marginalized background irrespective of their academic achievements or merit. This may be the remains of education policy of ancient India where education gradually became out of reach of lower caste and women and general public. The characters of Ekalavya and Satyakama Jabali of Indian mythology are the glaring example of this stubborn casteism of ancient Indian education system [2]. In modern times, a number of movements like Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Movement castigated the caste system but the menace of casteism is still there. Untouchability might not be direct any more but still there is a large section of India where caste continues to matter a great deal indeed caste can sometimes become a matter of life and death and educational qualification do little to erase the caste biases [3]. A recent study by National Council of Applied Economics Research (NCAER) and University of Maryland US revealed that one in four Indian abroad continue to practice untouchability in some form in their homes outside India.

Caste has after all been the most significance axis of discrimination in our country. This is hard reality that the university campuses are merely subsets of large society which are organized ideologically and materially on the basis of caste, even the reputed elite institution couldn't be left untouched. Here I am focusing on higher educational institutes like IITs, AIIMS, Central Universities. Today these elite and prestigious institutions are in shadow of casteism. The problem of discrimination on the basis of caste is worse in the elite institutions. The elite education institutions which are considered very prestigious and when dalit students enter these bastions, they are considered to be the intruders who come through reservations, so the hatred and hostility against them is much more. Uneducated dalits who live on margins of society are often at the worst end of caste injustice as they have little avenues where they can speak out and even but economic stability, proven academic merit or intellectual stature cannot shield a dalit from bias. The

contours of discrimination change but the hierarchical mindset has stayed as solid as ever [4].

Students from dalits and adivasi have long spoken of the exclusion which they experience in the most elite institutions of the country. Open discrimination is not there but subtle remarks of caste and category are there at every step, many of them come to higher institutions at great personal cost to themselves and their families not in just the term of finance involved but also social opposition. Far from acknowledging their struggle and their progress, the educational institutes resist this democratization by asserting its supremacy, clout and control over them at every turn. In these institutions sometime the attitude of teachers, non teaching staff and upper caste peer towards reserved category students is influenced by caste psyche and it manifest in many ways like withholding or delaying of grants of degrees and scholarships. The instruction in these institutions is designed to cater only to English, computer literate urban students. These ordeals don't present themselves in the form of documentary evidence of caste discrimination but the large number of suicide by dalit students give a sense of how caste is present inside the educational spaces. "Insight foundation" has documented nearly 20 cases of discrimination related suicide by dalit students and posted video testimonies from their parents and relatives on you tube and various web portals under the title "Death of Merit" [5].

There is high dropout rate among dalit students, the dearth of dalit faculty and the large number of unfilled quota seats are evidence that whole education system is shot through with caste discrimination. According to documentary called "The Death of Merit" by insight foundation, 18 students committed suicide from the year 2007 to 2011 A.D. from 16 higher institutions including AIIMS, NIITs. Thus foundation has documented 20 such films which show suicide of dalit students due to unfavourable atmosphere on campuses towards SCs. Few cases of which are worth to mention, Jaspreet Singh a young talented student of Govt. Medical College Chandigarh, from caste once considered untouchable by other Hindus was stunned to find that he had failed community medicine, one of his easiest subject as his high caste professor was determined to flunk him because of his caste. He committed suicide by hanging himself, he wrote in his suicide note that he could no longer bear the insults and discrimination he had endured from two fellow students and his community, medicine professor. He died due to depression caused by his failure in community medicine exam, however he passed with flying colors when his answer sheet was checked by independent committee of experts formed by government.

Balmukund Bharti, a final year MBBS dalit student at AIIMS committed suicide on 3rd March 2010. Abused, humiliated, harassed by professors, beaten up severely by his seniors in the name of ragging, he was completely alienated from the mainstream campus life due to his belonging to dalit background.

Balmukund of AIIMS, even cleared IIT and ranked eighth in country but he wanted to be a doctor so he enrolled himself in AIIMS. His poor parents had to take loans to pay his fees at AIIMS where his professors mocked him a category and quota student and he committed suicide in 2010 out of depression created due to the unfavourable atmosphere for reserved category students. Similar is the case of Manish Kumar Guddolian, a student of computer

science from IIT Roorkee committed suicide on 6th February 2011 as he was unable to bear constant casteist remarks.

Rohit Vemmulla of Hyderabad University is of recent case of such caste discrimination. Hyderabad University a central university is alleged to be a specific brahmanic space. The university constituted a number of committees to look into spate of suicide by dalit students on its campus. Most of which have pointed out the insensitive manner in which students from marginalized communities are treated by the entire university. Suicides in higher education are quite rampant in Hyderabad. Five dalit students committed suicide between 2005 and 2015 in University of Hyderabad. Institutional bias is one of foremost cause responsible for the series of suicides, the campus has recorded in the last few years. In Hyderabad University campus discrimination on the basis of caste is very high in pure science branches, getting guide is tougher for reserved students as compared to unreserved ones.

It is not surprising that the upper caste response to Vemula's suicide has been a massive disavowal of it as a caste issue or denying Vemula his dalit identity. Responses have come from union cabinet ministers, prominent agenda setting television anchors, writers who psychologist it as clinical depression. Even progressive upper caste responses see the suicide as 'dalit problem' which needs to be solved through administrative measures undertaken at university level.

A committee chaired by sociologist Sasheej Hegde in 2014 pointed out that students from marginalized background experience a strong sense of alienation and disaffection within the university setup. In 2006, a 3 members committee under S.K. Thorat, Chairman, University Grant Commission was instituted by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Govt. of India to look into the complaints of caste based harassment against dalits and adivasi students at All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) New Delhi. The Committee brought out the horrors of caste discrimination suffered not only by the students but also by handful of SC and ST faculties in the institute that is considered to be one of the country's premier educational institutions.

Protective laws and better awareness have reduced the more blatant example of caste injustice. They now manifest themselves in other subtle and repackaged forms. In culture that place high value on education, the more attractive subjects are automatically made out of the bounds of dalits by financial barriers. They have to suffer favouritism and upper caste lobbying and the regular derision because they avail reservations. Casteism on campuses these days have taken the form of nano discrimination, there are so many challenges which low caste students have to face, like low expectations from them, language problem, phobia of high class, academic atmosphere. A dalit student is tolerated as long as he is silent but an assertion of opinion is not acceptable. The lack of representation of dalit across fields like in judiciary, power media, industry bureaucracy and the civil society clearly indicates that exclusionary system in the higher institutions is the same. As the members of teaching community, it should mean more to us where student is going to rather than where he came from.

When British introduced western education it served only the social elite as education was too academic and literary and not in keeping with the real needs of country. In order to national education was introduced in order to serve the real needs of the country e.g. to minimize the distance between different groups.[6] However today educational institutions have failed to fulfill its social objective to some extent. Awareness about classroom discrimination can help to teachers for being socially sensitive. Caste groups have become powerful political lobbies.

Caste associations attract young and educated members of the community and so casteism enters into the educational institutions. As the members of teaching community we should understand that we should motivate students from lower caste making it into elite institution through quota, have to face the challenges like transition from regional language to English, from rural to urban and it's our social responsibility to motivate such students. It's high time that the gulf between reserve and unreserved category is to be filled and this cannot be done through administration but by changing our caste oriented psyche.

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