

**The socio-political implications of government policies and legislation on the caste system's
impact on higher education in India**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this
assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

"My birth is my fatal accident... I always was rushing. Desperate to start a life... I am not sad. I am just empty. Unconcerned about myself. That's pathetic. And that's why I am doing this," wrote Rohith Vemula, minutes before he hung himself in his room. On January 17, 2016, Rohith, a 26-year-old, took his own life (Janyala, 2016). Rohith Vemula was a Dalit or an Untouchable. He was pursuing his Ph.D. in Life Sciences when he suddenly stopped receiving his monthly stipend of Rs 25,000 from the Hyderabad Central University because he had started a protest to stop discrimination against lower-caste students (Janyala, 2016).

The Indian Caste System is the oldest social hierarchy, dating back almost 3,000 years. In its prime, the Indian caste system formed the foundation of Hindu society (Thapa et al., 2021). It is considered one of the oldest systematized and institutionalized forms of oppression (Goghari and Kusi, 2023). Caste-based discrimination can be seen in various settings and fields, from education to the workplace, affecting the social dynamic, access to resources, and opportunities for those who belong to a lower caste. This systematized and institutionalized form of oppression is still faced by many low-caste members in India. In the modern era, someone's caste should not be a reason for a lack of opportunity, and more importantly, it should most definitely not be the reason why someone decides to take their own life. These events underscore the critical need to discuss higher education, a central aspect of many people's lives.

Higher education is one of the most common ways to ensure people can provide for their families and have a stable future. It offers opportunities to secure a job, which can, in turn, provide a better future. Therefore, it is only fair that every student has equal access and fair opportunity to higher education. This is not the case in India. Specifically, low-caste members such as Dalits do not have equal access and fair opportunity to higher education. Those who do

gain access face caste-based discrimination like Rohith Vemula. Even though it has been over 75 years since the government started to act against the caste system and deemed it illegal, the caste system is still a relevant issue in India. Thus, it is vital to understand how government policies and legislative measures have impacted the caste system in India. Moreover, I will look into the socio-political implications of government legislation and policies on the caste system in higher education. My research question, "How do government policies and legislation affect the caste system in India in higher education?" aims to address these topics.

Background

Initially, the Indian caste system was broken down into four main categories: Brahmins as the highest (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (farmers, merchants, and artisans), and Sudras (laborers) at the fourth position (Rao, 2010). The last category consists of Untouchables or Dalits who are the lowest in the caste system. They often do tasks considered to be physically and ritually polluting, such as working with dead bodies and animals or removing human waste (Thorat and Joshi, 2015). They do such jobs because they are perceived as water-polluting, untouchables, and impure people (Goyal et al., 2005). They were not born for these tasks; however, the caste system traps people into fixed social orders, and it's impossible to escape from the system (BBC, 2019). Thus, they are forced to undertake such tasks to make ends meet. While the Indian caste system has been deemed illegal, Dalits still face many issues in their daily lives. Government policies and legislation have attempted to tackle the issue of caste-based discrimination. They have proposed and passed various affirmative action programs aimed at leveling the playing field between the upper caste and the lower. These programs aim to ensure that low-caste students are accounted for in higher educational institutes without the influence of external factors involved such as money, caste, social status, etc.

Sociotechnical context

To understand the severity of the topic, it is vital to understand the sociotechnical aspects of the topic. Students in higher education and belonging to the lower caste are at the center of my project. For example, the Dalits or the Untouchables are the lowest in the caste system and often face the most struggles, whether that is academically, socially, or personally. Rohith Vemula and Darshan Solanki are Dalits who faced caste discrimination and inequality at the highest level of education. Darshan Solanki has a similar story to Rohith, which I will delve into later in the paper. The severity of this issue can be seen and felt through their stories. Rohith and Darshan represent and symbolize the challenges faced by lower caste students when they try to succeed and meet their goals in higher education.

The Indian caste system has been around for centuries. It is an ancient social hierarchical structure. It has developed over time to be less strict; however, problems persist. Much like racism, caste-based discrimination is illegal and has mostly dissolved in many social aspects. This has not stopped higher educational universities from using caste to discriminate against low-caste students. Low-caste students face inequalities even from the government. Thus, it is vital to understand the historical perspective of the caste system and what the Indian government has done to combat caste-based discrimination. More specifically, taking a look at how government policies and legislative measures play a dual role in combating this issue will help provide a reasonable understanding of the actions being taken against caste-based discrimination. Delving deep into the reservation system, which is much like affirmative action in the United States, is a good starting point in understanding the general role the Indian government plays.

Literature

Many articles, papers, and studies have contributed to the discussion of the Indian caste system and its effects. Caste-based discrimination is rooted in everyday interactions and institutional practices at institutions. For example, N. Sukumar's book has interviews with 600 Dalit students across India. These interviews show caste-based discrimination from the classroom to the hostel (dorms) experiences to cultural forums (Sukumar, 2022, cited in Nakeeran, 2023). These interviews show stories of alienation and oppression produced by the caste system, and the need for reformation on different levels of the educational system. These scholarly works show the various challenges faced by lower caste members and bring to light the need for a comprehensive change in the education system to address caste-based discrimination.

Additionally, Sonajharia Minz, a computer scientist and vice-chancellor of Sido Kanhu Murmu University in Dumka, talks about the necessity of support systems for the lower caste, and the lack of mentors in the science field in rural high schools attended by the lower caste (Paliwal, 2023). This carries on in higher education and leads to a lack of representation in science and technological fields (Paliwal, 2023). This disparity persists even though there are reservation policies in place. This goes to show that just having reservation policies is not enough. The lower caste needs a support system in every field to make sure they can have the support they need to pursue their dreams.

The STS social identity theory (SIT) claims that people feel a strong sense of who they are by knowing that they belong to a group (Sankaran, Sekerdej, Hecker, 2017). The social identity theory is used as a means to explain why the Indian caste system is still relevant. Higher caste members see nothing wrong with it because they do not face caste-based discrimination. Moreover, high-caste members take advantage of their caste so they can stigmatize the lower-caste members (Mahalingam, 2003). In contrast, the lower caste does not believe their caste

identity is inherited and therefore does not essentialize it. The social identity theory can be seen implicitly throughout this paper and explicitly in the findings section. I invoke SIT to understand the ongoing caste discrimination.

Additionally, my project addresses the mutual shaping of government policies/legislation, the caste system, and higher education in India. Specifically, it looks at how government policies/legislation that support affirmative action affect lower-caste students in higher education. Moreover, my project delves into caste-based discrimination within specific educational institutes such as IIT and how that is influenced by societal norms, values, and the history of the caste system. My project involved looking at social media and showing the mutual shaping of the sociotechnical system between social media and the Indian caste system. I briefly analyzed the effect social media has had on the issue of caste-based discrimination.

Methods

Caste-based discrimination in higher education is a complex issue that is affected by internal factors such as educational institutes and external factors such as the government. To address this issue, I used a multi-faceted approach to gather evidence. I conducted a thorough literature review using scholarly databases like the National Library of Medicine (NIH), Virgo, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Sage Journals, and others, along with articles from Indian news websites that reported real-life experiences of caste discrimination

The best way to get evidence would be to get information through primary sources and people who have experienced caste-based discrimination. Unable to conduct primary research in India, I utilized surveys conducted in other articles to find quantitative data to support my research topic. I did quantitative analysis and examined statistical data on academic achievement and representation of low-caste students in higher education. This allowed me to compare low-

caste students with their high-caste counterparts. I was able to use such facts to gain a better understanding of the issue. This topic can get very emotional because of the actants involved and the outcome of many scenarios; therefore, I needed to separate emotions from factual evidence to ensure I don't have any bias.

Policy and legislative analysis paired with content analysis ensured a comprehensive analysis of the issue. Looking at policies that were specifically focused on "Affirmative Action," allowed me to gain insights into the evolution of such policies over time and their impact on reducing caste-based disparities in higher education. Content analysis from scholarly articles provided a focus on themes of exclusion, discrimination, and overall view on the social dynamic within educational institutes. Lastly, I utilized a secondary article published in 2005 that focused on the history of the caste system and its impact on India. By using various sources and conducting different analyses, I was able to provide a comprehensive understanding of caste-based discrimination in higher education in India and the factors associated with it.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents my findings from analyzing policies, educational practices, and firsthand case studies of caste-based discrimination in Indian higher education. Additionally, this section highlights the continuation of systemic barriers despite powerful measures taken by the government.

My first finding revealed a significant disparity in the admissions process. These admission practices put lower-caste students at a considerable disadvantage. Anoop Saraya, a senior doctor at Delhi's prestigious All India Institute of Medical Sciences, states, "For the wealthy they can simply buy their children seats at the top colleges" (Ramesh, 2008). This is very unfair to those who cannot pay their way into getting a college education. Moreover, merit

gets thrown out the window when money comes into the equation. A lower-caste student, who is qualified or even over-qualified, may not get a seat if an upper-caste student pays a large sum for that seat. Most low-caste students end up going to a government-funded school because they have been denied admission to a prestigious school. Government institutions are not any better. These schools which are supposedly government-funded are very poorly run. For example, 71% of government schools did not have did not have chairs and desks for all their students, while 5% did not even have blackboards in their classrooms (Borooah, 2012).

Schools do not admit low-caste students making it difficult for them to get a valuable education. Not having a proper education from a well-known institution prevents lower caste students from having genuine opportunities to get a suitable job and provide for their families. The caste system is like a recycling process. It is never-ending unless you take yourself out of it. To combat this issue, government policies and legislation have been put in place.

In 2008, India's supreme court made it mandatory for publicly funded universities and colleges to reserve at least 50% of seats for lower-caste students such as Dalits and untouchables (Ramesh, 2008). This is very similar to affirmative action in the US. Focusing on one of the most prestigious institutions such as The Indian Institute of Technology(IIT), shows apparent inequality in admission, even after the affirmative policy. Scheduled Caste(SC), another name for Dalits, are admitted at an average rate of 9.07% compared to the reservation quota which is 15% (Mathew, 2021). While this doesn't fully solve the issue at hand, it is a big leap in ensuring equality.

While policies aimed at promoting equality are in place, their implementation often lacks rigor and fails to address the root causes of discrimination. For example, The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has been critiqued for not sufficiently addressing the systemic exclusion of

marginalized groups, like Dalits, from higher education. The policy is very vague and ambiguous which leads to concerns about dilution of existing affirmative action programs (Malik, 2023). Moreover, Dr Malik argues that without explicitly recognizing and having a method that targets systemic, solving this issue will remain impossible.

Another area of concern is the discriminatory environment on campus that harshly affects Dalit students' mental well-being and educational ventures. Various students have reported instances of harassment which illustrates the hostile atmosphere low-caste students have to struggle through. Students tend to face harassment on campuses from students and faculty members of the upper caste. A Ph.D. student from IIT Bombay talks about the harassment faced by the lower caste students on campus. He states, “There is deep anti-reservation thought on campus. Teachers and students label reservations as anti-merit. Such an atmosphere and mindset on campus makes life difficult for SC/ST communities” (Aswani, 2023). This student recalls an incident where an upper caste student had a Dalit roommate and the student asked his roommate to, “not touch and ‘pollute’ their belongings” (Aswani, 2023). The Dalit roommate ended up taking a semester off to deal with the hazing and bullying he had to endure.

As mentioned earlier in the paper, the social identity theory (SIT) can help explain the presence of caste-based discrimination in Indian higher education, despite the efforts made by the government to prevent it. SIT implies that people derive an important part of themselves from their social group associations and aim to protect a positive social identity by viewing other groups differently from their own. This leads to higher-caste members doing everything they can to maintain a higher status, which leads to discriminatory behaviors and actions against lower-caste members. This will cause negative psychological effects on the lower-caste students that

reduce self-confidence and self-esteem. Thus, there needs to be efforts made that focus on reducing psychological trauma.

The evidence I collected provided real-life stories of students who faced discrimination in higher education due to their caste. As mentioned in the first paragraph, the story of Rohith is one of many where caste has been a main factor in someone's death. Darshan Solanki, an 18-year-old Dalit student at IIT-Bombay studying Chemical Technology, jumped off the seventh floor of a building (Scroll Staff, 2023). Darshan's sister reported that the month before he committed suicide, he mentioned to her that caste discrimination takes place at his institution. She mentioned how after finding out that Darshan is a Dalit, "their behavior towards him changed...and stopped talking to him. They stopped hanging out with him" (Scroll Staff, 2023). Even though Darshan was able to get into one of the most prestigious universities in the world, he couldn't escape his caste and felt like he only had one option. His mom mentioned that Darshan felt tortured and seemed as if he was in distress whenever she would talk to him. An engineering student at one of the most prestigious universities in the world should not have to commit suicide to get away from discrimination.

Two Dalit students at IIT-Delhi passed away by suicide in mid-2023. Both of these students were engineering students. These incidents took the student body at IIT-Delhi by storm(Lakshman, 2023). One of them was 21-year-old Anil Kumar who died by suicide on September 1, 2023. The other student was Ayush Ashna, who passed away by suicide a few months before Anil, on July 10, 2023 (Aswani, 2023). Both students were from the same mathematics department at IIT Delhi and belonged to the Dalit caste (Aswani, 2023). Seven students died by suicide from January 2023 to September 2023 (Aswani, 2023). All seven of these students attended IITs across India, and this cannot be a coincidence. These incidents make

one wonder about belonging. Who belongs in IIT and engineering? Does caste matter? These questions stem from the continuous discrimination of lower-caste students. The correct answer to these questions is that everyone belongs in engineering, and caste does not matter. This, however, is not the case. If this was the case, then these low-caste students would not have thought that suicide in their only option.

Social media has played a crucial role in bringing light to these issues; however, the mutual shaping between technology and society has done more harm to the low caste members than good. Some lower-caste organizations and activists have experienced caste bias from various tech platforms. For example, Hansraj Meena, the founder of Tribal Army, “has raised an online petition against Twitter for providing blue tick-marks to those subscribed to Twitter Blue while withholding the same for accounts of activists from the Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), and Other Backward Castes (OBC), recognized to be marginalized due to caste by the Constitution of India” (Naik, 2023). Twitter’s biases towards the verification of accounts show caste biases because anti-caste activists either take a long time to receive Blue Ticks or don't receive them at all (Naik, 2023). Verified accounts have greater visibility and a wider reach compared to other accounts that may have a substantial following, but no official marker. This explicitly shows the bias that low-caste faces. The discrimination faced by lower caste does not stop at higher education, it continues and affects them in different ways.

Conclusion

A caste system that has been deemed illegal should not be the cause of someone’s death. The Indian caste system has done more harm to society than it has good. While the Indian government has taken many actions to improve discrimination and inequality faced by low-caste students, there are still many issues that persist. The tragic stories of Rohith Vemula, Darshan

Solanki, Anil Kumar, Ayush Ashna, and other Dalit students who faced distress at India's premier institutions highlight a systemic issue. The findings highlight the pervasive nature of caste-based discrimination in Indian higher education institutions, despite government policies and legislative policies to address this issue.

While affirmative action programs like reservation quotas aim to increase the representation of lower-caste students, they are insufficient in addressing the core issue. This paper reflects on a deeper societal bias that results in harassment, alienation, and systemic barriers that low-caste students face daily. The short stories of discrimination show an insufficient institutional support system. Additionally, the mutual shaping of technology and society provides a platform for raising awareness and gaining support; however, caste-based discrimination has made raising awareness difficult.

Lastly, this research shows the need for a multi-faceted approach to addressing this issue. Government policies need to be strengthened by a strong implementation mechanism that includes accountability. Educational institutions must foster an inclusive culture that actively combats discrimination, supports diversity, and promotes equality. This starts with a change of perspective in everyone's thinking. This may seem difficult; however, with all hands-on deck, nothing is impossible especially when lives are at stake. Beyond higher education, there is a crucial need for societal transformation, where caste biases are actively challenged and dismantled.

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