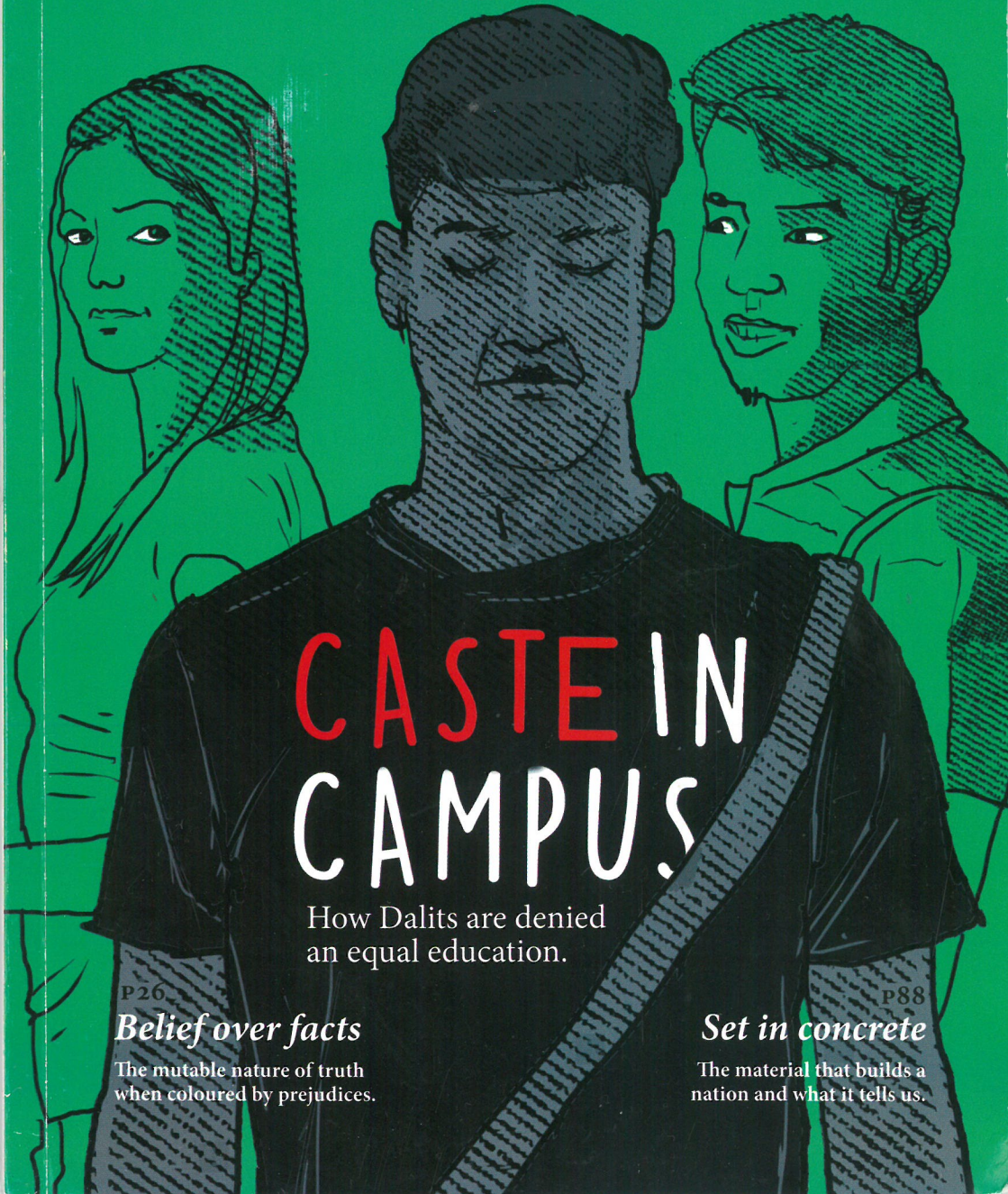


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CASTE IN CAMPUS

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nation and what it tells us.



*Does it belong to your
father then?*



An unequal education

Across colleges in India caste prevails, a social reality that overpowers rights, and redressal mechanisms continue to fail Dalit students.

By MONICA JHA

O

n September 27, 2019 Eknath Gopal was standing in the queue at the admission office. Two places ahead of him stood a girl. The staff at the counter shouted at her: *'Tumchya baapacha college nahiye. Kuthun pann yaay-ala. Fokatcha... Wait* (You come here to study for free. This college doesn't belong to your father. You have to wait!).'

Eknath immediately knew she was a reserved category student; he confirmed it later. "I had heard this language before, multiple times. As a person from a nomadic tribe, I have tolerated this multiple times. But, I stayed quiet; I did not help her."

Eknath was trying to focus on immediate problems of his own. He was looking for a transfer of college.

After the first year of MA (Journalism) at a college in Thane for the final year, he wanted an internal transfer within Mumbai University to Sathaye College in Vile Parle. Everything fell in place: The university and the old college agreed and gave him a No Objection Certificate; he had passed all his first-year papers, and the new college had only 37 students against 60 seats in his. With his papers in order, he had been making the rounds of the new college. They would ask him to get this document or that. It had been over a month.

Now in September, he was anxious about his second-

year exams approaching (in November-December). He was forced to skip lectures. He couldn't attend lectures at the old college since he had left it, and wasn't accepted at the new college. He was afraid he was going to lose a year if he didn't secure admission quickly.

When Eknath's turn came, the person behind the counter said someone else would handle the issue and that Eknath had to wait. Half an hour passed. The staff—clerk, cashier, ID card issuer, record keeper, peon—came, bowed in front of pictures of deities in the office, put *tilak* or garland, and proceeded to their businesses. The person he was waiting for finally turned up. By then, the man he had spoken to had busied himself on a phone call. He made no attempt to discuss Eknath's issue with his colleague.

Eknath questioned him. The man roared back.

"Admission havan asel tar gapp ghyayacha. Nahitar thaam tujhya HOD call karun sangto yaa mulala admission naahi dyayacha mhanoon."

"Admission ka nahi milnar? Tumcha college aahe ka?"

"Magg kaay tujhya baapacha college aahe ka?"

"Itha shikshana majha adhikaar aahe."

"Fakt 450 rupye bharun 49 hazaranchi seat pahije ka tula? Jar scholarship nahi milali tar tula poorna 49 hazar bharave lagtil. Aani bolna as jas bapacha college aahe tujhya."

("Shut up if you want admission. Or, I'll complain to the HOD and ask him not to admit you.")

"Why won't you admit me? Does this college belong to you?"

"Does it belong to your father then?"

"Sir, I have a right to study here."

"This seat costs ₹49,000 and you pay ₹450. Without a scholarship, you'll be paying ₹49,000. And look at how you talk! Like the place belongs to your father.")

Others in the office joined in, shouting. "They looked at me with contempt. Their language was unmistakably casteist," said Eknath.

He has had such experiences in school and college. He talks about the way his teachers behaved with him or rather ignored him. Some were rude and offensive and others just disinterested. "*Chhoti jaat ke ladke bolte kam hain.*

Unko chance nahi dete (Bahujan students aren't assertive so teachers don't give them opportunities," he says. "They think 'You are Dalit, you can't achieve anything.'"

He says he always scored better than most of his class and was good at elocution. "I never got a chance at public speaking. No Bahujan student did. Teachers always selected *others*. Always. So, it couldn't have been by chance. Participating in competitions—quiz, debates or even rangoli—wasn't for us.

He has had such experiences in school and college. He talks about the way his teachers ignored him. Some were rude and offensive and others just disinterested.

Forget that, just being able to speak to a professor was a big deal."

His classmates weren't any better, he says. "They judge us by our clothes and stay away. Who occupies the front benches and who sits on the last one was dictated mostly by the kind of clothes they wore or the way they spoke."

In his previous college, obtaining a library card was a struggle, for no evident reason. Problems with accessing facilities and scholarships are common, he says. "We don't get to enjoy the college fully. We don't benefit from it fully."

So, at Sathaye College, when the "casteist abuse" continued, Eknath started recording the audio on his mobile phone. One of the staff noticed. He shouted to others, "Stop! He is recording us." Eknath told them if they didn't act in a fair manner, he would complain and produce the recording and file a charge of atrocities against SC/ST. The staff continued to yell at him.

Eknath feared he was going to lose a year. How was he going to support himself for a year without a scholarship? A job would be another year away. "And what about my family's expectations? I saw my mother's face."

His mother had moved the family from Dhule district on the Maharashtra-Gujarat border to Raigad district to be closer to Mumbai for his studies. He lost her when he was in Class 6. The family disintegrated. Of his three elder siblings, one could study only till class 4 and another brother and a sister had to drop out in Class 10. Eknath and his younger sister, whose education he supports, are the only ones to study beyond class 10. He is the first in his village to reach the postgraduate level.

"Even the Brahmins and Patels in my village, who earlier derided me, ask me for information on government schemes or how to file RTIs. Now, I was going to lose all the respect I was just starting to get. And, what would happen to my sister's education? The thought of her made me very worried and helpless. And, I could not think of anybody who would support me."

He shouted at the staff: "This is how you killed Rohith Vemula. This is what you do to all of us. You don't want us to be educated."

Eknath says: "In their faces, I saw everybody who has ever discriminated against me for my caste—my classmates, my teachers, people in my village who didn't think I deserved an education, makers of the rule that my family has to live outside the main village. I saw them all."

Eknath attempted to jump off the building. His closest friend, who was witness to the entire episode, had run after him. He grabbed Eknath and pulled him back in time.

After this incident, the Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA), representing oppressed communities including the SC/ST, got involved. Eknath says the principal agreed to admit him on condition he stayed away from "union activities". Later, the principal admitted to ASA in Eknath's presence that the staff who mistreated Eknath had behaved badly with other students as well. Eknath says the principal said he'd "send him for training to an Art of Living

course”.

After 35 days of struggle, in November 2019, Eknath secured admission.

This didn't end his troubles though. “The way professors looked at me...It was very disturbing. Once I was passing by a professor of journalism who was speaking to a lady professor. Looking at me, he gave out a mocking laugh and said ‘I won't forget this boy in 10 years. He is capable of anything.’”

It made me feel like a criminal.”



Eknath is not alone. Amrapali Salve has a similar story to tell. She took a break from her BA (Sociology) at NG Acharya & DK Marathe College in Mumbai to get married. Five years later, in 2019, she joined the third year of her course to complete it. She had to write her fifth semester exams, but her hall ticket from Mumbai University did not arrive though she was registered with the college and attending classes. The college told her that her registration wasn't reflected in university records.

Another student in her course, who hadn't taken a break, did not get his hall ticket either. Both were reserved category (SC) students. “It was about our

caste. Otherwise, why would they not attempt to sort this problem? The principal didn't even make a pretence of helping me and straightaway suggested that I write all my third year papers in the sixth semester.”

For two months, Amrapali ran from this office to the other, missing many lectures. She pleaded with teachers and other staff, wrote to the principal and college trustee but no support was forthcoming. In September 2019, with exams 10 days away, she requested the Ambedkar Students' Association for help. Once they got in, the principal agreed to help.

Within eight days, she was assured of the hall ticket. An hour before the exam started, she got the hall ticket.

“They could have solved my problem but chose not to. How did things work out so quickly after I got support?”

She has cleared all her papers but is still bitter about the avoidable stress she was put through. “PM Modi says *beti bachao, beti padhao* (Save the daughters, educate them).” The story is different if you're from a lower caste.

Indian universities are a hotbed of discrimination by caste. Higher education institutions seem to be the worst perpetrators, according to a 2016 survey of 6,122 respondents in the 15-34 age group across India. Conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and Konrad Adenauer

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Dr Sushrut Jadhav, (centre), associate professor of cross-cultural psychiatry at University College London (UCL), is studying how caste identities shape the mind. Photo: Special arrangement.

Stiftung (KAS), the report said young graduates from SC, ST and Muslim communities reported discrimination more than the less educated. Graduate Dalits faced the worst of it among social groups—18 per cent reported it.

In July 2017, the University Grants Commission (UGC) issued a warning to the Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University after they made a Dalit student suffering from liver cirrhosis leave his hostel without notice. This is the university where, in 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke about Rohith Vemula's death for the first time, saying he was “pained”.

On September 20, 2018, Alok (name changed), a PhD scholar in Philosophy at Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gorakhpur University in Uttar Pradesh, shot a three-minute video on his mobile phone, accusing two professors of caste slurs and threats. He also charged the vice-chancellor with inaction over his complaint. The video was shared on social media. Then, he tried to kill himself. Seeing the video, two students rushed to his room and then took him to hospital. His life was saved but he took several days to recuperate.

In December 2018, two professors at IIT-Roorkee were booked on charges of sexually harassing a Dalit research scholar, using casteist remarks against her, and physically assaulting her. A probe is on against a Banaras Hindu University (BHU) professor accused of making an SC and an ST student clean a toilet. In July 2019, a Dalit student at BHU accused two security guards of stopping her from entering a campus toilet because she was a Dalit.



These are horrific incidents but what is far too common is discrimination that is hard to prove. It shows up in different forms—physical exclusion, academic exclusion, or often, a denial of entitlements. It also manifests in norms and practices that are blind to caste and cultural backgrounds.

“We are judged on our clothes, language, and even food. Upper caste students do not mingle. Casteist epithets are hurled at us. Even in the most neutral environment we face prejudice. In worse (situations), violence and even life threats,” says Rohit Kamble, an MPhil scholar at the department of sociology, University of Mumbai.

The forms are changing, says Matta Srinivas, a research scholar (Economics) at the University of Hyderabad. “It is not the way my grandfather recognised it in his village. A lot of times they don’t openly say ‘you are this caste or that’ but their behaviour tells you. The victim knows.”

These attitudes are not accidental, says Suraj Yengde, a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University and author of *Caste Matters*: “They are part of a plot to retain control on top. They come from a casteist mind-set that is looking for requisite grip to fight equity.”

Ramesh Kamble, who has taught sociology at the post graduate level for 35 years, says discrimination against Dalits in higher education is not an accident.

“It is part of institutional practice and structural design. It is, in fact, one of the mechanisms of the existing power to deny entitlement. Denial, which is part of the experience of being Dalit, is reiterated through institutional practices and reinforced in structures.”

Caste discrimination should be looked at not merely as a social practice but also a reaction to Dalits questioning the idea of knowledge the privileged have held and propagated. “The presence of Dalits forces the recognition of a different social experience as knowledge.

This threatens the exclusive reign of knowledge that the existing power structure has. That is why they exclude Dalits systematically,” said Kamble.



In higher education, discrimination begins at the enrolment stage itself. The chances of an SC/ST student going to college are much lower than a general category student. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education 2018-19, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for SCs is 3.3 per cent lower than the national average. For STs, the GER is a precipitous 9.3 pc lower.

Less than one per cent of candidates in IIT research programmes come from the ST and for SCs it is 7-8 per cent, *The Times of India* reported in De-

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Dalits and Adivasis are particularly disadvantaged when it comes to entrance exams, conducted typically in English, and increasingly online. The privileged class has access to good primary and secondary education, says Srinivas

cember 2019. Take IIT-Madras for instance. In the last ten years, just 47 out of 2,320 admissions to the M.S. programme came from the SCs and six from STs. Again, just 213 SC students got PhD admission out 3,846 in the 10 years. For STs the number was 21.

Dalits and Adivasis are particularly disadvantaged when it comes to entrance exams, conducted typically in English, and increasingly online. The privileged class has access to good primary and secondary education, says Srinivas. “A lot of them gain proficiency in English, technological knowledge and communication skills. Dalits don’t have that access; we’re completely different.”

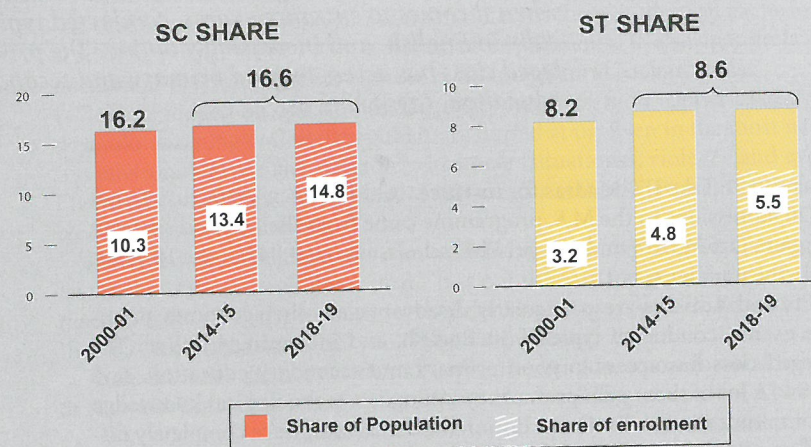
These gross inequalities are what the proponents of “merit” overlook. “The majority of Dalit students have cleared the IIT through self-study or private tuition, as they could not afford the fees in coaching centres,” writes Anoop Kumar, on *Round Table India*, a portal for writings on Dalit and Bahujan issues. Kumar dropped out of an engineering college due to caste discrimination and now runs Nalanda Academy in Wardha, Maharashtra, to train Bahujan students for entrance exams.

After they overcome these obstacles in university they are mocked as “quota students”. At college, including IITs, entrance exam ranking and caste quota are an intrinsic part of the initiation ritual. Students split along caste lines. Reserved category students are often made to feel undeserving and inadequate.

The politics of meritocracy is not about erasing caste identities, but on the contrary, a re-articulation of caste as an explicit basis for merit, argues Ajantha Subramanian, professor of anthropology and South Asian Studies at Harvard University in her paper “Making Merit: The Indian Institutes of Technology and the Social Life of Caste”.

These attitudes are evident in a survey of 121 students at the Indian Institute of Technology (Banaras Hindu University) in 2015-16. Students were surveyed to find reasons for the caste gap in GPA for students from similar socio-economic backgrounds. It found that at least 21 per cent in the SC/ST category felt fellow students were hostile. Also, 13 per cent felt teachers too were hostile. In the general category, far more candidates thought fellow students and teachers were helpful or neutral. Also, 61 per cent of general caste category students thought the academic ability of students in the reserved category was less than others. And, 55 per cent of them believed general category

REPRESENTATION OF SC/ST IN HIGHER EDUCATION



students had better academic ability.

Shaming and public humiliation over reservation might be the most common form of discrimination in colleges. "During discussions about competitive exams or jobs, even good friends say, 'you just have to appear in the exam,' or 'you don't have to worry; I do,'" says Srinivas.

Even the exams are designed to exclude, says Srinivas. "It doesn't view the skill sets of rural Bahujan students as important. The environment we come from is not taken into account at all. You get entry but the evaluation is skewed on their terms." This environment ensures that privileged students become high scoring.

Sathish Deshpande, professor of sociology at the Delhi School of Economics, calls it the conversion of caste capital into modern capital.

Quora, a question and answer website, has many discussions on caste-based reservations in India, including offensive caricatures masquerading as jokes. To one question on the existence of caste discrimination in IITs, an IITian answers it's prevalent. He is, in fact, referring to reservations. "I wish I had a caste certificate," he writes.

"What is proposed as a remedy for caste-based inequalities and discrimination, viz., affirmative action (AA), is perceived in the popular imagination to cause inequalities and injustice in a world where, presumably, none existed prior to the introduction of AA," writes Ashwini Deshpande, professor of economics at Ashoka University and author of *Affirmative Action in India*.

GROSS ENROLMENT RATIO



Source: IndiaSpend, 2016 and All India higher Education Survey 2018-19

In effect, reservations have produced a double-stigma for Dalits: First, for their caste identity and another as recipients of state provisions.



The contempt reserved for affirmative action is undeserved as it has helped push up SC/ST representation in higher education sharply. Researchers from Carnegie Mellon University did a study, published in the *American Economic Review*, on 42,914 students (from all castes) in 215 university-affiliated engineering colleges in India. It showed that 55 per cent of SC and 74 per cent of ST students wouldn't have enrolled in engineering colleges without affirmative action. Among 1,558 SC women, 1,108 would not have attended a state college in the absence of reservation. Despite these gains, their share in college enrolment is far smaller their population share warrants. Only 10.8 per cent of male matriculates are SC and only 2.5 per cent ST. Their quota shares are 15 per cent and 6 per cent respectively. The share of women is well below half for all castes, but the difference between men and women is the greatest in SC and ST categories.

SC and ST shares in enrolment in higher education are still lower than their shares in population, despite both having increased their shares.

The government also runs schemes, including scholarships, stipends and hostels, to spur enrolment and retention of SC/ST students in higher educa-

tion. But data on their impact is not available. However, there is evidence of how they have helped.

T. Deivasigamani, associate professor in the English department of Annamalai University, says, "Our university hardly had 10 SC/ST students in PhD programmes around 2010. Now, since the university has extended fee concession to PhD scholars, this number has gone up to well over 300."

There is also evidence that a lot of SC/ST students drop out when they don't get scholarships. In 2017, Bihar's scholarship scam forced hundreds of SC students to drop out of college, according to a report in *The Hindustan Times*. In January 31, 2018, pending claims with the Centre for post-matriculation scholarships for SC students amounted to over ₹6,800 crore. *Scroll.in* reported that this forced Dalit students to work in fields and skip meals in order to

continue. In 2018, when the Tamil Nadu government delayed paying scholarships, it triggered fears of large-scale dropout.

Several practices branded as student-friendly or performance-oriented can, in effect, turn out to be exclusionary. Srinivas calls the UGC's 2016 decision to give more weight to interviews over the written exam in admissions to postgraduate courses one such practice.

In 2016, a Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) committee pointed out that in JNU, SC/

ST students clear written exams but often fail interviews, "which is indicative of latent caste discrimination on the part of college authorities and teachers". It also said: (T)he education system is functioning on the archaic arithmetic of entitlement, exclusion of caste. It is this exclusionary milieu that dissuades the SC/ST from completing their studies."

Expelling students for poor performance is another exclusionary practice. In 2015, IIT-Roorkee expelled 73 first-year students, 90 per cent of whom were SC/ST/OBC. In an investigation, the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), a coalition of activists and academics, found discriminatory behaviour among teachers and a lack of institutional support. The students got a "second chance". In 2008, the Supreme Court directed IIT-Delhi to take back six SC/ST students who had been expelled. In all these cases, the institutions were found to lack facilities for remedial coaching or other support, a repeated recommendation by academics.

□ ♦ □

Dropout rates are a major problem among disadvantaged groups, especially ST, SC, and some categories in OBC, according to the Carnegie-Mellon paper. It shows that on-time graduation (OTG) rates for SC men to be

At IIMs, over 62 per cent of dropouts are from the reserved category, MHRD data in 2019 showed. IIM Indore saw the most — 17 in two years, nine from reserved category. This was followed by IIM-Kashipur, where all 13 dropouts were from the reserved category (11 OBC and two ST).

0.54 compared to 0.82 for open category men and 0.75 for all students. The rate for ST men is the lowest at 0.60.

In an analysis of dropout rates at IITs for 2017-2019, Bharath Kancharla, an HR professional, found ST students had the highest dropouts at 4.2 per cent, followed by SC students at 3.3 per cent. The corresponding numbers for OBC and general categories stood at 2.74 per cent and 2.68 per cent respectively.

Kancharla also found that the older IITs, established in the 50s and 60s, saw higher dropouts than average for SC and STs. The newer IITs, established after 2002, not only have fewer dropouts, but also a more even share between caste categories.

Among the older IITs, Delhi has the most SC and ST dropouts. One out of every 100 SC students enrolled in IIT-Delhi dropped out. The ST rate was one out of five.

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If the initial conclusion is that SC students are "less deserving" or that a lower OTG is a consequence of reservations, the Carnegie-Mellon paper has some caveats: "This fact (different on-time graduation rates) alone is not persuasive evidence of mismatch. There are many factors that affect success in college—financial duress, family obligation, or other personal issues—that might be different across caste." It links lower graduation rates among reserved category students with lower pre-college achievement as well as their "other disadvantages (e.g., poorer parents)".

The paper also notes that disadvantaged-caste men and women tend to select the most competitive disciplines (Electronics and Communication Engineering and Computer Science) at slightly higher rates than men admitted in the Open category. There is no evidence that the

Sunil Laxman Yadav, a *safai karmachari* with the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation, is a PhD scholar at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai.



beneficiaries of affirmative action choose easier majors, which might improve on-time graduation, it adds.

Prof. Sukhdeo Thorat, former chairman of UGC and professor emeritus in Centre for the Study of Regional Development, JNU, says: "Dalits have lived on the margins and therefore, a lot of students have difficulty in coping, especially in engineering education. Everyone knows this. This is why provisions were made for remedial coaching in core subjects as well as in language. The UGC has funds for this. But few institutions are making these available to students."

Also, how discrimination impacts students' performance has not been studied extensively, he adds. "We don't know how much it affects graduation and dropout rates. At the same time, there is increasing evidence that examinations and evaluation is a major area where discrimination exists." In his 2007 report on AIIMS, Thorat recognised forms of caste discriminations including discrimination in the classroom by other students, teachers and the administration, in exams and evaluation, and in their social life, including participation in social events.

People bring caste segregation from family and society, Thorat says. "It's widespread in academia and bureaucracy. A Hindu carries it wherever he

People bring caste segregation from family and society, Prof Thorat says. "It's widespread in academia and bureaucracy. A Hindu carries it wherever he goes. And it naturally impacts the policy they make and the way they implement them."

goes. And it naturally impacts the policy they make and the way they implement them." He cites Rohith Vemula's death. "The reaction was to prove he wasn't a Dalit. There was a very strong political effort to protect the VC and a minister."

Physical segregation still exists, he says. "In Patna, they have a Yadav hostel and a Kayasth hostel. In Allahabad University, they have separate hostels for Hindus, Muslims and Christians. The ministry of Social Justice builds separate hostels for SC/ST students, which is another way of segregating students. They should rather reserve seats in for

SC/ST students in common hostels."

"In case of a suicide, there is reluctance to register cases under the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. The UGC needs an act that makes caste-based discrimination in educational institutions a criminal offence. They did this for ragging and the impact has been positive and widespread."



The suffering of Bahujan students at the hands of their teachers is recorded in many newspaper reports. It is more than anecdotal, however. A pro-

It is difficult to prove a discrimination by teachers, says Deivasigamani of Annamalai University. "They rarely express their anger directly. They are aware that this would give easy evidence to complaining students."

fessor at Bangalore Central University said that, "The kind and extent of discrimination you see in higher education is not seen among illiterate people. Also, we have better tolerance for misbehaviour from uneducated people but higher expectations from the educated."

He said caste-based groups exist in all departments and that some upper caste teachers and students discriminate against Dalits. "I see several incidents every year in every department."

But he denies that it spills over into evaluation. "Only some mediocre teachers might do it. No sensible teacher would do it." He also said that at times, when students do badly, they accuse teachers of caste bias for their failure. At this point, he also withdrew permission to use his name in the story.

It is difficult to prove a discrimination by teachers, says Deivasigamani of Annamalai University. "They rarely express their anger directly. They are aware that this would give easy evidence to complaining students."

He says they find indirect ways. "They use evaluation; they don't look for a student's understanding of the subject but search for mistakes. We've an internal assessment system where teachers give lower marks to Dalit students. Every year, one or two cases come up."

Annamalai University, near the town of Chidambaram, is some 200km from Chennai. "The setting is rural and a majority of students are Dalit. The professors are mostly high caste. In my department (English), 29 out of 31 faculty members are high caste."

"They are unable to control their inflow into higher education so they try to block their progress with low marks. I'm talking about upper caste teachers."

He says most professors ignore the fact that Dalit students are first generation learners from poor families; that they work as daily wagers to support their families besides pursuing an education. "They don't give these students opportunities to clarify doubts. They have no educated people at home; the only place they can ask these questions is college. But teachers do not help."

Deivasigamani says UGC recommended remedial coaching is not being conducted for a few years now and UGC funds for economically weak students hasn't reached them.

"With scholarships withdrawn, a lot of our Dalit students are unable to complete degrees. They need support for educational survival. They need financial support for educational survival."



Part of their problem is rooted in the lack of diversity among the faculty. According to the MHRD, SCs, STs and OBCs make up only 9 per cent of the faculty in IITs and 6 per cent in IIMs. At JNU, a committee in April 2016 found that 73 posts for SC faculty and 43 posts for ST were unfilled. In 2019, the Centre passed the Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Teachers' Cadre) Act to ensure recruitment of faculty from SCs, STs, OBCs, and EWS.

But these reservations will be ineffective as long as these communities are under-represented in PG and research. As in the past, these institutes will continue to cite "lack of suitable candidates".

The case of Sunil Laxman Yadav is instructive. A PhD scholar at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, he is on a fellowship from Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Research and Training Institute (BARTI) under the Maharashtra government.

Yadav's is a story of fighting great odds for an education. He is a *safai karmachari* with the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation, with which he had to battle for unpaid leave to pursue his PhD. Despite the fellowship, Yadav is in a bind. He has not received his stipend from BARTI since September 2019. He is dependent on it to run the house, including his wife's LLM education and school fees for his two daughters. His wife has sold all her wedding jewellery and he has borrowed from friends and family. But, now next month's rent looks impossible without the stipend, he says.

His complaints to BARTI have yielded no results.

Professors at TISS, though supportive academically, have failed to intervene. "Don't they know I can't finish my PhD if I'm not paid," he says. The lack of support is part of a strategy of exclusion, according to him.

"All this is because I'm a scavenger. My family have been scavengers for three generations. They don't consider me important or even worthy. The *varna vyavastha* (caste system) wants to keep us as untouchables.

"My community looks at me as a role model," he says. "I had to fight huge disprivilege and social stigma to reach this prestigious institution; All I want is a life of dignity, away from the garbage and filth."

Yadav says he'll go on a hunger strike if he doesn't receive his stipend soon. "I want to tell the stupid Indian society that I do not want sympathy; all I need is opportunity."

Prof D.N Yadav, PhD supervisor at Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gorakhpur



A protest at IIT-Madras after the suicide of Fathima Latheef (19), a humanities student. Photo: Dinamalar

University, says "There are individuals who are caste-biased. A university is like the society outside. We still have people with that mindset." But he insisted that the university administration doesn't promote or support caste bias.



Institutions are aware of discrimination on campus. They have official evidence to show where and how it exists. The Thorat committee report in 2007 and the reports of three committees at the University of Hyderabad between 2008 and 2013 have the details. But universities on balance don't make enquiry reports public and seldom follow their recommendations. They have even failed to follow UGC directives on caste discrimination.

The UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations, 2012, provide detailed guidelines against caste discrimination. Provisions include Equal Opportunity Cells (EOC), appointing an Anti-Discrimination Officer (ADO), developing pages on websites to register complaints of caste-based discrimination, etc.

Within two weeks of Rohith Vemula's death, it sent a letter to the vice-chancellors of all universities reiterating the recommendations. In a September 2016 letter, it informed colleges that MHRD and National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) were seeking urgent action. Between 2011 and 2018,

the Commission sent seven directives to all universities to adopt measures and submit action taken reports.

The language of these letters, however, does not require strict compliance. Equity regulations lack the teeth to tackle non-adherence. The result is unsurprising—most universities do not follow them. The UGC has taken no action against non-complying universities.

A survey of 132 institutes by academics revealed that only 42 had information that could enable students or faculty to access the EOC/SC-ST Cell or lodge a complaint. Only four of 15 “institutes of excellence”, only four of 13 IITs established before 2008, and none of the six first-generation IIMs had this information.

When students at the University of Hyderabad used these institutional methods to complain, they have had to face consequences, says Iniyavan M, president of the university’s Ambedkar Students Association. “A lot of them are first-generation learners; they have a lot at stake. The university creates a fear psychosis to stop students from complaining. Also, the onus to prove discrimination falls entirely on the student.”

In April 2016, a committee under the MHRD ministry recommended a dedicated law against discrimination like the ones for gender discrimination and ragging.

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After several suicides, the University of Hyderabad has conducted some prevention programmes but the larger issue of caste-based discrimination stays, says Srinivas. “Has the university conducted a single programme to eradicate discrimination? None. Institutions still are unwilling to have conversations about caste and discrimination.”

The reaction of IIT-Madras is typical. Under heavy criticism for its response to Fathima Lateef’s suicide, it has decided to instal ceiling fans that collapse under the weight of 40 kg, rather than examine caste and religious bias or providing its students

better access to mental healthcare.



On average, 28 students died by suicide every day in 2018, according to a report on accidental deaths and suicides from the Union government. The year saw 10,159 student suicides, the highest in 10 years. Maharashtra has been the consistent leader, 14 per cent of student suicides. Caste wise data about students is unavailable.

A majority of suicides reported from premier institutions are by Dalit stu-

College administrations and police are quick to gloss over a suicide as ‘personal issues’. Sometimes, they call it a result of depression, with no attempt to probe how the college environment could have affected the student.

dents, says V. A Ramesh Nathan, member of National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, a coalition of activists and academics working to end caste discrimination.

Over 80 per cent of students who died by suicide in IITs till 2011 were Dalit students, *The Print* reported. At least 20 Dalit students committed suicide in India’s most respected institutes like IIT, IIM, AIIMS, and the University of Hyderabad between 2007 and 2017, writes Gaurav Pathania, a sociologist, whose work includes exploring caste identity issues in higher education, in a blog.

Reports on student suicides often don’t mention caste. Educational institutions ignore, or sometimes hide it. College administrations and police are quick to gloss over a suicide as ‘personal issues’. Sometimes, they call it a result of depression, with no attempt to probe how the college environment could have affected the student.

IIT-Madras alone has seen four student suicides in 2019 and 14 in the last 10 years. Swaraj Vidwaan, a member of the NCSC, said the commission has sought details of how many of these were SC/ST but the institute is yet to share it.

Kumar of Nalanda Academy writes on *Round Table India* website that IIT-Kanpur’s administration threw his team out in 2012 when they asked why eight out of 11 recent suicides were of Dalits or Adivasis. Later, Kumar and his team dug out 22 cases from central educational institutions and made three documentaries based on them, titled *The Death of Merit*. “Of these 22 students, no one was your so-called ‘weak student,’” he writes.

University of Hyderabad (UoH), a central university, went further in cover-up. When Senthil Kumar, a research scholar in physics committed suicide, the university claimed that he died of a heart attack. When a post-mortem revealed concluded it was suicide, a fact-finding committee reported SC/ST students felt discriminated against. The university tried a cover up again, in Rohith Vemula’s case when an inquiry concluded he had killed himself out of “personal frustration” despite the fact that he had written a letter to the VC about caste discrimination just days before, asking “to make preparations for the facility “EUTHANASIA” for students like me”.

The most recent suicides include Payal Tadvi of Mumbai’s TN Topiwala National Medical College in May 2019 and Fathima Lateef, a 19-year-old student

at IIT-Madras, in November 2019.

"These are not suicides, but institutional murders," says Nathan. "Multiple forms of discrimination and the failure of educational institutions to create an environment of dignity and equality have pushed them to commit suicide."



In 2016, Rohith Vemula's death had brought conversations on casteism on campus to the fore. Dr. Sushrut Jadhav, an associate professor of cross-cultural psychiatry at University College London (UCL), was searching for answers on how caste identities shape the mind, and how cultural activities shape caste identity.

Specifically, Jadhav was asking why casteism impacts the inner lives of both the perpetrators and their victims; and how their psychological wounds can be healed. And if inter-cultural therapy, as used in anti-racist interventions in the UK, can be applicable to India.

While caste discrimination in institutions had been reported previously, its impact on the mental wellbeing of students was never studied. A therapy for caste distress was never addressed.

Jadhav was in a unique position to tackle this. Born in a Dalit family, he had witnessed his parents humiliated and denied access to participation in social life. Now, as a psychiatrist at one of the premier institutions in the world, he examined caste "as an elite and yet steeped in my 'low' caste origin".

The topic of caste remains at the bottom of social concerns for Indian psychiatry, says Jadhav. "My own upper caste colleagues found my endless concerns around caste and its impact on mental health

and well-being tiresome." He was also perturbed by the absence of a genuine dialogue between health and social sciences. In his works, he has always looked to bring social science insights closer to the 'clinic'.

He adopted the same approach here. A collaboration between Jadhav, Amit Thorat, an assistant professor in economics at the Centre for the Study

of Regional Development at JNU, and, the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) was put in place. Their project, with funding from the British Academy International Partnership and Mobility Grant and UCL, studied discrimination and distress among students from marginalised communities in higher education.

Another psychologist finds caste-based stigma and discrimination unique compared to other forms of discrimination. Professor Rusi Jaspal, chair in psychology and sexual health at De Montfort University Leicester, UK says:

While caste discrimination in institutions had been reported previously, its impact on the mental wellbeing of students was never studied. A therapy for caste distress was never addressed.



Abdul Latheef, Fathima Lateef's father, told the press in Chennai that his 19-year-old daughter was harassed by professors at IIT-Madras. Fathima died by suicide on November 9, 2019. Photo: Dinamalar

"Unlike social class, caste seems to be understood by people as being more intrinsic to the individual because of his or her background. This can make it difficult to distance oneself from this stigma and discrimination."

This is why caste-based discrimination can challenge people's self-esteem leading them to internalise the stigma, Jaspal says. There is an association between discrimination and poor mental health. "A consistent finding throughout my research is that, when stigmatised groups (such as Dalits) face rejection, victimisation and discrimination because of who they are, their risk of psychological distress, depression and suicidal ideation increases."

Jadhav says Dalit students may be helped to overcome psychological distress through a political psychological therapy, designed to strengthen skills to cope with humiliating, oppressive and discriminatory experiences.

He says this with some evidence. Based on insights from his project with JNU, he piloted a follow-up—a therapeutic intervention. He conducted weekly individual therapy sessions with Dalit and Brahmin students and staff from higher education institutions over six months. He followed them up with periodic booster sessions over 18 months.

These were intensive sessions where he actively listened, reframed narratives of life experiences, and unpacked cultural dynamics of everyday oppres-

sion. Jadhav calls it “ethnographically oriented clinical therapy”.

“My subjects expressed substantial social and psychological distress,” says Jadhav. “However, no formal psychiatric disorder was diagnosed. Indeed, it is unethical and deeply stigmatising to frame social defeat among Dalits through a narrow psychiatric lens.”

The stories Dalit students shared shocked Jadhav. Despite his training as a psychiatrist, he couldn’t handle it. “The horrific demons of caste tumbling out gave me nightmares; I ran to doctors complaining about insects crawling out of my veins,” he says. He stopped midway and resumed the project only after a break.

Jadhav says people availing the therapy showed gains like improved academic confidence and performance, positive regard for personal identity, reduced suicidal ideation, better inter-personal skills and enhanced well-being. These improvements were robustly sustained over 18 months, he adds.

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Jadhav stresses that therapy would help mitigate the impact of adversity only in combination with social strategies to address casteism, and turn the gaze on the oppressor. Jadhav and his team are in the process of publishing their findings in an international peer reviewed journal. He is searching for funders to help roll out such interventions for marginalised people across other universities in India and abroad.

Mumbai-based Blue Dawn is also working on making mental health services accessible to Bahujans by pairing them with counsellors who understand the intersection of mental health and caste or minority issues.



Bahujan students are going beyond victimhood and reshaping the narrative. There is an ever-rising Ambedkarite discourse in universities. Even Pinjra Tod, a women’s progressive movement in Delhi University, saw caste fault lines drawn after women from marginalised classes quit the movement accusing it of upper caste hegemony.

“Bahujan students in central universities might form a small share of the population but they have the language to articulate. It is a very important voice,” says Iniyavan.

Their struggle and assertion started much before Rohith Vemula’s death. Yengde says: “You name any social or political movement in India— the leftist, Marxist-Leninist or JP movement— Dalit students have always been at the front. Dalit Panthers was nothing but a student movement. Historically, Dalit

Rohith Vemula in his death galvanised Dalit student politics. Today, many Dalit students are sharing their experiences of casteism on various platforms. Several survivors have come up as leaders.

students have been the most prominent response of resistance. The movement has given life to dying democratic values, always. But by being at the core of the movement they became invisible. Their contribution was never recognised.”

Rohith Vemula in his death galvanised Dalit student politics. Today, many Dalit students are sharing their experiences of casteism on various platforms. Several survivors have come up as leaders. Their resistance has found expression in a multitude of ways—alliances to win university elections, organising against fee hikes, fighting to celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti and *Mahishasur Shahadat Diwas*, and holding public discourse over caste.

Yengde says “Rohith Vemula has the credit of neo-Dalit rising. Through his activism, his writing, and, in being the son of a single mother with a meagre income, he has anchored today’s Dalit student movement.”

The chants of “Educate. Agitate. Organise.”— a slogan by Ambedkar and originally used by Dalit movements— are now being heard across Indian universities and at public protests. In September 2019, an alliance of leftist, Dalit and Adivasi student organisations including the ASA that Vemula belonged to, swept the University of Hyderabad student body elections.

Despite all this, the journey to justice does not seem smooth. “Just look at Rohith’s case; it has not moved an inch,” says Iniyavan.

“Justice Roopanwal’s report claimed Rohith wasn’t a Dalit and whitewashed his institutional murder. But the counter cases (cases of vandalism after his death) filed against Rohith’s friends are making them run around the sessions court every month and pay for expenses from their own pockets.”

Sunkanna Velpula, one of the four students suspended along with Rohith Vemula, has moved back to his village and taken up farming. This was after none of the 20 government universities he applied to for a faculty position called him for an interview.



Eknath hasn’t discussed the September 27 incident with his friends. For a while, he blamed and judged himself harshly.

“But, now, I want my story out so that when other Dalit students hear it, they should think ‘Oh this is my story,’” says Eknath. “What is personal is universal and vice versa. Our experiences are the same; we can deal with them

together.”

He still has issues to be resolved. “Entering the college still fills me with angst sometimes. When a group looks at me and whispers I know what they are talking about. The sight of *that sir* still gives me the shudders. I still use some of my scholarship money to buy good clothes. It’s about self-assertion as much as it is about fitting in and fighting visible bias.”

Eknath, now 22, is going to complete his MA in Journalism this year. He is doing an internship with a YouTube news channel in Marathi. He has made six short films and received prizes at district and state level and from independent organisations.

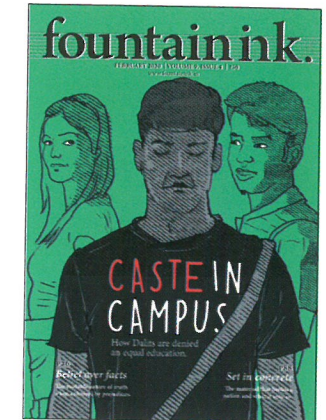
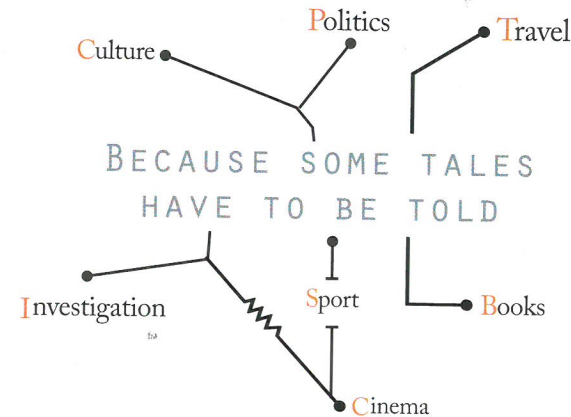
“I am working hard for a good job,” says Eknath. “And for a system that lets me build a house in the middle of the village.”

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