



## The GAPS Think Piece - Issue 18

# Oppression and access to postsecondary education: Caste-based exclusion in India

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Globally, access to postsecondary education is constrained in several ways. Here I focus on a context where despite policies that actively allow access to postsecondary education to those from oppressed backgrounds, experiences in postsecondary education act as mechanisms of exclusion. I focus on access to postsecondary education in India, where members of various caste groups are provided social protection in the form of affirmative action. Despite this social protection, access to and success at postsecondary education is imbued with problems for those from oppressed castes: In January 2016 a Dalit Ph.D. scholar Rohit Chakravarty Vemula committed suicide arguably due to caste-based discrimination at a central public university. It is then worth thinking about why this may be.

### Oppressive Caste System in India

Indian's affirmative action policies are considered among the more successful inclusion-policies of their kind (Deshpande S. & Yadav, 2006). In a country with extreme wealth disparities and where poverty intersects with one's social group, state funded higher education offers viable opportunities for accumulating social capital (Deshpande S, 2006). These policies were drafted to mitigate some of the problems of a system of social oppression, namely the caste<sup>1</sup> system in Hinduism (Srinivas, 1957). The system broadly classifies Hindus into four occupational castes or *varnas* – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras – with varying levels of access to resources and opportunities. These varnas are treated as hierarchical with Brahmins at the 'top' and Shudras at the 'bottom'. However, the system also classes others as those who do not have a caste, widely referred to as 'Dalits<sup>2</sup>', which means broken or oppressed. Dalits continue to face a range of interpersonal and systematic injustices, inclusive of micro-aggressions, extreme violence and systematic exclusion (Chakma, 2015).

Dalits have continuously been treated as 'untouchables' for a horrendously long period in India and other South Asian countries.

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<sup>1</sup> Caste is understood as an endogenous group with hereditary membership (Ovichegan, 2014)

<sup>2</sup> Those identified as Scheduled Castes [SC] are routinely referred to as Dalits. In this piece 'Dalit' is interchangeably used with SC.



The 'untouchability' around these peoples involves two aspects (Dushkin, 1967). First, Dalit peoples are treated as unclean and polluted by virtue of their birth outside of the caste system. Second, caste Hindus treat contact with Dalit peoples as polluting and sully them and therefore engage in practices that avoid or rectify this pollution. These notions of purity and impurity are directly bound-up with practices in education. Brahmins, considered as being at the top of the caste hierarchy, are associated with knowledge and education – those who are from this caste can readily make claims to education, erudition, and purity. Together with the arrangement that only those from this caste can act as priests (in the majority of cases, at least), being born into this caste affords opportunities for practices that can regulate access to education and do so with legitimacy (Srinivas, 1957). Gough (1981) observes how there were no records of Dalit students attending indigenous schools in 19<sup>th</sup> century India. Nambissan (1996) argues that outside of the economic and structural reasons for this exclusion, the inherent nature of prevailing practices that maintain and propagate caste hierarchies and stratification is central to an examination of the exclusion of Dalits from education. A similar critique of access to education was made in 1882 by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule. Phule noted that caste had consequences for access to education and knowledge (Venkatesh, 2016) and demanded prioritising education, a 'Western' education, for oppressed peoples. These demands for reservations or some form of affirmative action were made in 1882 to the Indian Education Commission under the British Raj.

Access to education became a central issue for activists working to end the oppression of Dalits and 'backward castes'. Ambedkar, the Chair of the Drafting Committee for the Constitution of India and a prominent Dalit activist, treated education as essential for the empowerment of Dalit peoples. Nambissan notes that Ambedkar's call to Dalit peoples and those in the 'backward' castes was to 'Educate, Agitate and Organise' (Nambissan, 1996).

### **India's Affirmative Action Policies or Reservations**

Articles 15, 29, 30, 45 and 46 of The Indian Constitution include policies that reserve places for oppressed castes in education, employment and legislature (Ovichegan, 2015). Several castes and tribes were identified as those in need of restorative justice and named Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Nambissan, 1996). Many amendments have been made to the Constitution to widen the scope of these reservations, as they are commonly known in India. In 1991, reservations were extended to those from 'Other Backward Castes' (Weisskopf, 2004) based on the findings of the Mandal Commission (Mandal, 1980).



Currently, the Supreme Court of India recommends that people who are classed as belonging to Scheduled Tribes (ST) get 7.5%, Scheduled Castes (SC) get 15% and those in Other Backward Castes (OBC) obtain 27% reservations in public educational institutes (Malish & Ilavarasan, 2016).

Let's get a sense of what this means. The 2011 National Census reports that the population of STs is 8.6% and that of the SCs is 17.7%. While nationwide literacy stands at 73%, literacy rates for those from ST and SC communities are 59% and 66.1% respectively (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2011). Deshpande and Yadav (2006) show that graduates from unoppressed castes represented more than 'one and a half times' their population share, whereas SC graduates only represent 30% of their population share. Deshpande and Ramachandran (2014) show that among various indicators, such as years of education, those in the SC and ST communities fall behind those in OBC and both are behind, what the authors call, 'Others'<sup>3</sup>. Desai and Kukarni (2008), show that implementation of reservations has led to little improvement in disparities at the higher education level.

What of the consequences of having availed these affirmative action policies? Findings again show that whatever impact in terms of employment or wages there has been, it leaves people from SC, ST and OBC communities behind those who are from unoppressed castes. Vaid and Heath (2010) argue that there has been 'little to no improvement' in access to professional occupations for those from these communities. Vaid (2012) shows that people from unoppressed castes dominate white-collar work and manage to avoid manual work, whereas those from oppressed castes are disproportionately overrepresented in manual work, inclusive of lower paid 'agricultural labour'. Deshpande and Ramachandran (2014) show that wage differences between SC-ST peoples and Others are noticeably large (in the favour of Others).

A rather noteworthy objection to reservations is that several members of the SC, ST and OBC communities are now on the same footing as those from unoppressed castes and, therefore, are disproportionately advantaged. This set of members is referred to as forming a 'creamy-layer' (Jenkins, 2003). However, findings show that upward mobility for those from SC, ST and OBC communities is extremely hard. Deshpande and Newman (2007) show that unoppressed caste members can retain social and economic capital, which is beyond the reach of others. Vaid (2014; 2016) shows that the effects of family background on employment are mediated through education attainment, which itself is bound-up with caste.

Alternatively, several studies point to the benefits of reservations. For instance, Chauhan (2008) shows that over a period of 50 years in the implementation of reservations in education from 1951 to 2001, the overall literacy rate grew from 16.67% to 64.38%.

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<sup>3</sup> The authors include those who are from unoppressed castes as 'Others'.



The increase for people in SC was 8% to 54.34% and for those in ST was 5% to 46.34%. More recent studies show that reservations increased student enrolment in prestigious institutions of higher learning: 26% male and 35% female students from SC and ST communities are now able to access higher education in engineering because of reservations (Bagde, Epple, & Taylor, 2016). The Ministry of Human Resources Development<sup>4</sup> data show that while the overall Estimated Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India is 24.3% (for those in the 18-23 years age group), for those from SC and ST communities it is 19.1% and 13.7% respectively (MHRD, 2015). But looked at another way, of all the students enrolled, 13.5% are from SC communities and only 4.8% from ST communities (MHRD, 2015). Given their share in the population, this isn't exactly a 'rosy picture'.

### **The Higher Education Experience**

In primary and secondary schooling environments, these students face daily discrimination in the form of restricted access to food distribution programmes (Thorat & Lee, 2005), school facilities such as toilets and water, derogatory treatment, declarations that these students are unsuited for education, and, forcible manual scavenging (Chakma, 2015).

In institutes of higher education, the problem is of an altogether different nature: suicides. Between 2008 and 2011, official figures show 18 Dalit students committed suicides in India's prestigious Indian Institute of Technology<sup>5</sup> (IIT) (Chakma, 2015). In an exemplary study on caste-based discrimination in one elite university in India, Ovichegan (2014) shows that all Dalit participants claimed to have faced discrimination, irrespective of whether they used reservations or not. Malish and Ilavarasan (2016) offer an ethnographic account of goings-on in engineering higher education institutes in the state of Kerala. Their examination shows that 'institutional habitus'<sup>6</sup> as perceived by SC students and other students was substantially different. Importantly, the authors show that along with issues of discrimination between fellow students, teachers' perceptions of SC students as essentially 'unteachable', played a significant role in students' experiences.

In 2008, the Ministry of Human Resources Development ordered the IITs to implement quotas for prospective faculty from SC, ST and OBC communities (Chhaipal, 2008). However, reports suggest a severe shortage of faculty from these communities.

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<sup>4</sup> This Ministry under the Government of India is in-charge of education in the Indian Republic.

<sup>5</sup> IITs are centrally run public institutes that primarily specialize in engineering and technical instruction.

<sup>6</sup> This can be understood as how the institution brings together the social or cultural effects for an individual.



The All India Survey on Higher Education for the years 2014-15 shows that across higher education institutes in India, teachers from the 'General category'<sup>7</sup> form 67%, those from OBC constitute 23.8%, and those from SC and ST communities form 7.1% and 2.1% respectively (MHRD, 2015). In these institutes, non-teaching staff reflect a similar distribution. Nambissan (2010) argues that since the majority of faculty are likely to be *non-SC*, ST or OBC and non-Muslims<sup>8</sup>, they are less likely to be understanding or sympathetic to issues faced by these students. She argues that perhaps, in addition to hiring faculty from these communities, transforming schools into welcoming places might help.

While reservation policies guarantee access to postsecondary education, these obviously do not control or attend to issues that happen in these institutes.

### **Social Practices of Exclusion**

As mentioned, Dalits, more so than those from ST or OBC communities, were historically treated as those for whom education has no relevance. Several studies and reports show similar claims being made about these students in institutes of higher learning. For Dalit students themselves, issues of their own identity and who they are, are central to negotiating experiences of education particularly in postsecondary education settings. Ovichegan (2014) argues that while institutional practices may treat Dalits as a homogenous group, there exist roughly 900 sub-castes (D'Souza, 2009). Dalit peoples themselves may offer various versions of who they are. Jeffery, Jeffrey & Jeffrey (2004) show that for members of the Chamar community in one north-eastern Indian state, being literate and educated were very important. However, the authors caution that the dearth of regular wage 'white-collar' jobs means that investment in formal schooling may become unattractive.

Ganguly (2000) draws attention to the performative aspects that produce, enact and maintain caste as relevant. This is particularly so because it shifts the focus from individual prejudices to everyday practices that are involved in caste oppression. Sikka (2012) argues that, for Dalits, their identity construction, and by extension performance is constrained not only by the horrendous historical injustices but also by ongoing discrimination and violence. Similar to African Americans, Dalit identities have to take into account their oppression. The consequences for this in postsecondary education then need to be examined and considered for the ongoing problems that Dalit, ST and OBC students face.

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<sup>7</sup> Those without any reservations

<sup>8</sup> The conditions for Muslims in India are similar to if not worse than OBC and SC community members. However, this issue needs separate examination as the factors involved are different.



Social scientists examining social exclusion direct attention to practices that mask, promote and maintain exclusion. Findings here show that these practices involve avowals of inclusion while engaging in exclusion (Gill, 1993; McVittie, McKinlay, & Widdicombe, 2003). Alternatively, findings also point to how talk of meritocracy and adherence to egalitarianism can derail efforts at inclusion (Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Every, 2005). Exclusion of students from SC, ST and OBC communities can then be similarly examined. Here, however, a particular attention is to be given to the contexts. Findings from 'liberal democracies' where egalitarianism is taken-for-granted (Billig et al., 1988) cannot be treated as ready frames of reference. Rather, inclusion in the Indian or South Asian setting needs to seriously attend to local concerns of social justice (Deshpande S, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

As I write this there are reports of another student suicide at one of India's most premier higher education institutes: Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur (Express News Service, 2017). The student belonged to an ST community. Access to postsecondary education for the most oppressed peoples of India works as a *failing dream*: they can dream and perhaps even achieve it, but once in, attainment and completion of education come at a cost. The achievements of reservation policies in institutes of higher learning are irreplaceable. However, these need to be supplanted with other measures. These involve attending to entrenched practices of discrimination and prejudice against those from SC, ST and OBC communities. The practices in question are two-fold: practices that treat students from these communities as inherently 'unteachable' or unsuited for learning and the other is the lack of faculty from these communities who can act as role-models or be able to accommodate and nurture students. Social scientists who are primarily concerned with examination of how practices of exclusion take place, and how practices maintain and promote exclusion, can usefully offer relevant insights into these processes. A change in how institutions are run and enact policies can go a long way to addressing inequalities in access to postsecondary education. Enrolment in an institute of higher learning is just the first step, while a more important outcome is completion of education.

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