

# Understanding Social Exclusion: Scheduled Castes In Higher Education In India

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## ABSTRACT

Social exclusion is usually defined as a dynamic process of progressive, multidimensional rupturing of the 'social bond' at the individual and collective levels. Social exclusion precludes full participation in the normatively prescribed activities of a given society and denies access to information, resources, sociability, and recognition, eroding self-respect and reducing capabilities to achieve personal goals. Social exclusion is a form of discrimination which is a threat to any society. Social exclusion is a process as well as a result. With reference to India, concept of exclusion can be understood best from the perspective of caste, because caste is the most prominent feature of Indian society. In country like India, where the society is highly stratified and hierarchical, it is very important to understand the discrimination faced by scheduled caste people who have been excluded in all the aspects of life historically due to their caste identity. Even after 70 years of independence, we have not been able to achieve Ambedkar's dream of fair India. Schedule castes have always denied full rights and one of them is right to knowledge. The tragic suicide of Rohith Vemula, a (dalit) PhD student in Hyderabad Central University who hanged himself after being defeated by discriminatory behavior of the authorities of the institution depicts the role of caste identity in higher educational institutes. Through this paper the author will make an attempt to understand the concept of social exclusion from the perspective of caste in India and how students in higher education faces discrimination in higher educational institutes due to their caste identity and 'stigma'. The author will also try to understand the concept of stigma from Erving Goffman's perspective and how stigma is operationalised in daily life.

**Keywords:** Social Exclusion, Caste, Discrimination, Higher Education, Stigma

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Social exclusion is defined as social process which involves denial of fair and equal opportunities to certain social groups in multiple spheres in society, resulting in the inability of individuals from excluded groups to participate in the basic political, economic and social functioning of the society (S.Thorat, et. al 2014). The term 'exclusion' emerges from the English word 'exclude' which means to refuse to admit or consider (*Webster's New World Dictionary*). The term 'social' is pre-fixed to 'exclusion' gives birth to the term 'social exclusion'. The term 'social exclusion' is of relatively recent origin which was first used by **Rene Lenoir**, who called mentally and physically handicapped, suicidal people, abused children, delinquents, asocial persons and other social 'misfits' as "excluded" (Amartya, S. 2000). The term 'social exclusion' can be defined as a process by which certain collectivity or group or individuals are denied access to social, economic and political rights by a dominant group or groups. There are no thresholds exist for exclusion like poverty. Social exclusion is dynamic and multidimensional. Social exclusion is a structural process of social isolation, of stripping away multiple dimensions of social involvement. Social exclusion is a form of discrimination which is a threat for any society.

With particular reference to India, the concept of **Social Exclusion** can be best understood from the perspective of caste, because caste is the most prominent feature of Indian society. Indian society is highly stratified and hierarchical, especially in terms of its caste structure which has historical roots. Hindu society was divided into four Varna's- *Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra* according to Hindu social order (Kumar, V. 2014). There was fifth category that was called *untouchables*. It is very important to understand and look at social exclusion from caste perspective because a certain group has always faced discrimination because of their caste identity and denied equal rights in society (Kumar, R. 2013). The position of Dalits as 'untouchables' in the caste system has been a major factor which not only led to their historical exclusion from knowledge and education but the stigma of being an 'untouchable' continues to impact their educational access and experience

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(Rao, S. 2012). According to **Dr. B.R Ambedkar**, education is an instrument to liberate Dalits from illiteracy, injustice and exclusion. However over the years in India, large number of Dalit children remains highly vulnerable to exclusion from schools due to various factors like poor socio-economic background and discriminatory practices.

### **Constitutional Definition**

The term “Scheduled Castes” is defined in Article 366 (24) of the Constitution of India, as under: *“Scheduled Castes means such castes, races or tribes or parts of or groups within such castes, races or tribes as are deemed under Article 341 to be Scheduled Castes for the purposes of this Constitution”*

### **SCHEDULED CASTES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Education is conceived as a process for upliftment of people who are excluded from various rights and opportunities. It is argued that higher education has become accessible to all irrespective of any discrimination on gender, caste, religion or any other consideration, which is an illusion. The Scheduled Caste population represents one of the marginalized and impoverished groups in India, because factors such as caste and religion play an important role in socio-economic, religious, and educational aspects. Looking into history of India, Scheduled Castes have been living on the fingers of society and were deprived of opportunities and other good things in life due to their lowest position in the hierarchy of *Hindu Social Order*. One of the major opportunities is education. Literacy and educational attainment are significant indicators of socio-economic development among marginalized groups in India and Scheduled Castes lag behind in literacy and educational attainment. The representation of SC (Scheduled Caste) in higher educational institutes is 12%, while the earmarked value in reservation of admissions and 15% (Central Education Institution (Retention in Admission) Act, 2006) which indicates that there is need to increase their representation in higher educational institutions (All India Surveys on Higher Education, MHRD, 2014-15).

Understanding education from structural functionalist approach, the main function of education is to enable the child to move from particularistic values to universalistic values of modern society. Achievement of children should be acknowledged irrespective of the sex, race, caste or class (Parsons and Bales 1956)<sup>2</sup>. But in contemporary India, caste factor still plays an important role in functioning of educational institutions. The literacy rate in India is 74.04% and literacy rate among Scheduled Caste population in India is 66.1% (Census of India, 2011)<sup>3</sup>, which is quite low in comparison to the average literacy rate of India. Scheduled Caste children face various forms of discrimination right from schools, which makes education a painful process for them and, in turn, discouraging them from continuing their education (Nambissan, 2010; Ramachandran, 2004). There have been evidences of discrimination in schools which affects their confidence and dignity which later becomes reason for drop out. There are only 3.2% Scheduled Caste population who are Graduate or above (Computed from data files of the Census of India 1991-2011), which is quite low. Gross Enrolment Ratio of SCs (7.3%) is very low than the state Gross Enrolment Ratio (19.4%) of Punjab (ASHE 2013, Deloitte)<sup>4</sup>.

Talking about higher education, Scheduled Caste children face various hurdles in reaching higher education level due to the factors like poor socio-economic conditions, poor cultural capital and historical deprivation (Aikara, 1980). Even if they reach to higher education level, they are constantly reminded of their caste identity. They are often stereotyped as non-assertive and non-capable. Dalit students generally belong to families with poor socio-economic conditions that negatively influence their academic achievements. Scheduled Caste students have limited access to the networks that create social capital (Tierney et. al, 2018). Instead of high status disciplines like engineering and medicine and other professional education, SCs and STs are largely concentrated in “traditional disciplines” of arts and humanities (Deshpande 2006; Rao 2006). Their journey to reach higher education becomes challenging due to the obstacles they face due to their caste identity and socio-economic factors.

### **UNDERSTANDING ‘CASTE’ AS THE BASIS OF ‘EXCLUSION’ IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

It is very important to know the epistemology of ‘Social Exclusion’ which means to know the nature and scope of human knowledge about social exclusion. The nature of social exclusion is dynamic which takes shape in time and context and it is to be located in proper socio-political context. Epistemology of exclusion helps to identify the sources and agency of exclusion (Kumar, R. 2013). Social exclusion is not a natural process which occurs on its own rather it occurs because of systems and structures. For instance, when we observe the social exclusion of Dalits and tribals in Indian society, we find that the paradigm of exclusion is social and

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9781315824307/family-socialization-interaction-process-robert-bales-talcot-parsons>

<sup>3</sup> <https://censusindia.gov.in/2011-common/censusdata2011.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/in/Documents/public-sector/in-ps-ashe-2017-noexp.pdf>

informal. That is based on ascriptive and religious principles which are particularistic in nature. These ascribed features are justified on religious grounds through sacred texts and religious philosophy. Scheduled caste people were known as untouchables who were looked down upon and were forced to do menial jobs. They were excluded from different spheres of life and were denied their basic human rights to lead a dignified life. One of the rights is right to knowledge which has also been denied to them. The tragic suicide of Rohith Vemula, a (dalit) PhD student in Hyderabad Central University who hanged himself after being defeated by the discriminatory behavior of the authorities of the institution depicts the role of caste in educational institutional settings (The Economic Times, 2016). India, an independent and democratic nation has written Constitution, in which the practice of social exclusion in the form of untouchability is a punishable offence under article 17 and 18 (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2019). Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 was enacted to prevent discrimination, prevent atrocities, hate crimes against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes<sup>5</sup>. Even after 70 years of independence, we have not been able to achieve the Ambedkar's dream of fair India. In spite of the constitutional protection and legal safeguards, incidents of discrimination against Dalits have not decreased which depicts that caste is not simply a law and order problem but a social problem. So, it is very important to see how and in what ways exclusion and discrimination stemming from stigma attached to these groups operate in everyday context of educational institutes.

Education is considered as the most powerful instrument of social change and development in any society. Education is the most crucial tool to uplift the social and economic conditions of the marginalized people but educational institutes themselves become the centers of exclusion and discrimination when students from particular caste have to struggle because of their caste identity. It seems that in spite of having constitutional provisions and rights, scheduled caste are still facing several problems in the society. Hence, we can say that paradigm of social exclusion of Dalit emanates from social structure justified by religion and caste structures in which historicity plays a dominant role.

#### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

**Henry Tajfel and John Turner (1970):-** They formulated *Social Identity Theory* which describes the conditions under which social identity becomes more important than one's identity as an individual and how social identity impacts intergroup behaviour. According to this theory, three psychological processes are involved in how individuals create and define their place in society: social categorisation, social identification and social comparison. *Social categorisation* is a natural cognitive process through which humans categorise people in various social groups to reduce the complexity of navigation through the social world. *Social identification* explains how individuals adopt the identity of the group they think they belong to and act in ways they think their group acts. *Social comparison* refers to the tendency of groups to distinguish themselves from other groups in an effort to make their in-group look better. SIT offers a psychological explanation of intergroup discrimination, exclusion, prejudice and conflicts. We become prejudiced towards out-groups and favour in-group which leads to discrimination. This theory helps to understand the social discrimination on the basis of caste in Indian society as upper caste people distinguish themselves as superior to Scheduled Caste people. They become prejudiced towards them which lead to discrimination and exclusion.

**Erving Goffman:** - Goffman was one of the most prominent sociologists of the twentieth century gave the interaction approach. His writings suggest the social origin of the self. *Stigma (1963)* is one of the notable works of Goffman in which he defines stigma as 'undesired differentness'. Self is defined by the traits or attributes valued by the dominant culture and individuals who do not possess these traits or possess those that are seen as undesirable, come to be devalued in society. It is this 'undesired differentness' that characterizes the individual as stigmatized. In his work, he mentioned three types of stigma. First is the physical deformity. Next there are blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, dishonesty, rigid beliefs, unnatural passions, these being inferred from a known record of, for example, mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, unemployment, suicidal attempts, and alcoholism. Finally there are tribal stigmas of race, nation, these being stigma can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family. In his work *Interaction Ritual (1967)* he explains when stigmatized and non-stigmatized confront each other in an interaction situation, stigmatized individual may not be sure of how the 'normals' will receive and respond to him. One of the significant ways to deal with the situation is that of self-exclusion. Goffman suggests how this self-exclusion is an outcome of exclusionary social situation and the structure of the social life the individual encounters. Thus, stigma is a form of social control and stigmatized are 'disqualified from full social acceptance. The concept of stigma helps to understand that Scheduled Caste people tend to exclude themselves because their identity is stigmatised in Indian society due to their belonging to lowest strata in Hindu Social Order. Second and third type of stigma, explained by Goffman, is attached to Scheduled Castes which transmits through lineages and put them to face challenges in living with dignity in society.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scheduled\\_Caste\\_and\\_Scheduled\\_Tribe\\_\(Prevention\\_of\\_Atrocities\)\\_Act,\\_1989](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scheduled_Caste_and_Scheduled_Tribe_(Prevention_of_Atrocities)_Act,_1989)

**C.H Cooley (1902):** - Charles Horton Cooley, an American sociologist, gave the idea of the looking glass-self in his book *Human Nature and the Social Order (1902)*. The concept of looking glass self demonstrates that self-relation, or how one views oneself is not a solitary phenomenon, but rather includes others. Cooley believed that self-feeling and social feelings are the two sides of the same phenomenon and it is through these interactions that one begins to develop an idea of who they are; therefore the self is a product of our social interactions. Cooley explained the three principle elements of this theory-

1. The imagination of our appearance to the other person
2. The imagination of his judgement of that appearance
3. Some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification (1902, pg. 152)

The thing that moves an individual to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of oneself, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind. For example, an individual could be ashamed to seem evasive in the presence of a straightforward man, cowardly in the presence of a brave one, gross in the eyes of a refined one, and so on. Therefore, Cooley's concept of looking glass self helps to understand that development of self among Scheduled Caste students.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

**Nambissan, G. (2009)** made some observations through her exploratory study of the experience of the Dalit children in schools. Her study covered 64 children from different Dalit sub castes, at different stages of schooling- both government and private at two sites-in a village of the Phagi tehsil of Jaipur district as well as in a poor settlement in the Jaipur city. The study revealed a number of exclusionary practices followed in the schools. As she observed, the Dalit children were not allowed to procure water from the earthen pots that was otherwise a common source of water for all children. They faced discrimination when food was served at the mid-day meal, at programmes and functions at school. School routine was marked by 'process of naming the students by caste (Nambissan, 2010). She notes that such a naming process brought their stigmatised identity into 'public gaze', which becomes a source of distress for the Dalit children and lowers their self esteem.

**Jha & Jhingran (2001)**, conducted a detailed fieldwork in 37 villages and 15 slums in India wherein among other things, they explored the schooling decisions and experiences of children from different socio-economic groups, of which the Dalit children were also focused upon separately. As revealed through their fieldwork specifically in the villages, teachers who belonged to the Caste Hindu groups had an indifferent as well as negative attitude towards Dalit children in the class. Dalit children, as they reveal, were unnecessarily beaten, abused and harassed by upper caste teachers.

**Mickelson, R.A. (2002)**, suggested that there was association between family monetary wealth and the health, nutrition and potential for student academic success. She mentioned that wealthy persons can afford to purchase textbooks, tutors, good living environments, access to computers, better trained teachers that leads to high achievement.

**Wankhede, G.G (2008)** has examined the educational inequalities of Scheduled Caste groups in Maharashtra. He found that Schedule Caste people along with their sub-castes in Maharashtra across primary, secondary and higher education show poor response in education.

**Thorat S.K (2005)<sup>6</sup>** in his article "Why Reservation in private Sector is Necessary" provides arguments for a reservation policy in private sector as a remedy against discrimination of the weaker sections they have been experiencing over centuries. He points out that discrimination has been taking place in social, economic and political environment and affirmative action's should be taken to correct the system.

**Malish, C.M & Ilavarasan, P.V. (2016)**, explored the ethnographic accounts of the educational experience of 14 Scheduled Castes (SC) engineering students. This analysis suggested that the notion of institutional habitus better captures the impact of institutions on marginalised students and play a decisive role in shaping the educational experiences of SC students. It was found that discriminatory culture and practices and oppressive culture not only impact academic life but also the non-academic life of students even after many years of their college life. They are reminded that they got admission only because of reservation time and again. Instead of high status disciplines like engineering and medicine and other professional education, SCs and STs are largely concentrated in "traditional disciplines" of arts and humanities (Deshpande 2006; Rao 2006).

**Loo, C.M. & Rolison, G. (1986)** found that minority students attending predominantly white institutions were significantly more likely than their non-minority peers to report feelings of isolation or not belonging to the campus. Moreover, minority students who reported feeling isolated were more likely to withdraw from college.

**Steele & Aronson (1995)** conducted a test on undergraduate students to test *stereotype test theory*. When students were informed that the test was diagnostic of their academic ability, black students scored lower than did white students which was a controlled condition. When they were not told that the test is going to

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.india-seminar.com/2005/549/549%20sukhadeo%20thorat.htm>

assess their academic ability, reducing stereotype threat, black students' performance did not differ significantly from that of white students. Stereotype threat is thought to impair test performance by creating anxiety, intensifying frustration with difficult test problems and distract students from concentrating on the test.

**Pierre Bourdieu (1977)** in his *theory of cultural reproduction* propounded that social and cultural inequalities being transmitted from generation to generation which is highly relevant to Indian society. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, 1979) provided a theoretical explanation for the relationship between socio-economic status of children and their achievement in education. Bourdieu argued that students from privileged families and elite class were advantaged by the cultural capital in the form of verbal facility, good cultural awareness and competence in a society's high status culture which enables them academic mastery. High class people were highly benefitted by their cultural capital in terms of accessing higher educational opportunities.

**Halsey, Heath & Ridge (1980)** accessed a large sample of 8000 men, to look at the extent to which social class had impacted their experience of education. They divided people up into three social classes of the service class, the intermediate class and the working class. They found that the children born into the service class did much better at school than those from the intermediate class, and both did better than the working class. It depicts that a student from privileged social background has a much higher chance of doing better in education than his or her unprivileged contemporary.

**Kirpal et al. (1985)**, addressed the academic and social adjustment of SC/ST students in IIT (Indian Institute of Technology). It was found that the percentage of SC/ST students with low socio-economic status admitted to IIT was higher than the general category students. The study revealed that urban background affects the academic performance to some extent. The number of those who had bad performance (in SC/ST group) was highest in the poor income category. Income forms one of the determinants of academic performance. It was found that it is not necessary that a low level of educational background or no educational background of parents automatically leads to the ward's poor performance. The data suggested that a good number of SC/ST students feel that the conditions in their home/hometown were not up to the mark. Problems arising in the lives of SC/ST students were surely in part contributed by their inability to visit parents at short, regular intervals. It was found that SC/ST students get labelled, that others resent their easy admission to IIT due to special provisions. It was found that SC/ST students face problems caused by inferiority complex, problems with English, their introverted nature, ragging rooted in the fear of 'reverse discrimination'. The study suggested that bright SC/ST students should be made to train for competitive set up.

**Castro, D., Gomez D.R., & Joaquin Gairin (2016)** studied exclusion factors in American Higher Education because inequalities in access to and completion of higher education still remain in American university system. They found five key factors that help to understand the exclusion from higher education in Latin America which are personal characteristics (low self-esteem or low self control), family situations (low educational attainment of parents or siblings and families living in remote areas are badly connected with university centres), institutional features (teachers sensitivity towards minority groups), public policies (to what extent implementation of policies contribute to provide real opportunities for these groups to succeed in higher education institutes) and phases of university students' development (academic development of student).

**Khushwaha, J.K. (2013)**, in his doctoral research study "**Stress and Mental Health related Problems among Students due to Discrimination during Higher Education in Uttar Pradesh**", revealed that there were several factors and situations which paved the way for discrimination amongst students belonging to particular caste or community which were poor socio economic conditions, personality factors, rustic mannerism, cultural audacity, caste identity and previous educational attainments with poor English language, domination of peers, lack of awareness about facilities provided by government and experiences of untouchability etc. These factors lead to mental stress and poor performance in academics.

## **INFERENCES FROM REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The literature reviewed above reveals that Scheduled Caste people have been lacking behind in comparison to the higher castes in terms of access to various resources and opportunities. Though the government tries hard to achieve equality in educational opportunities for all sections of Indian society, but still it is lacking in one way or the other. Very less number of Scheduled Caste students reaches higher education due to poor social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977). Even if they reach, they are reminded of their caste identity time and again and denied opportunities to come forward. Indian constitution disregards caste discrimination and untouchability, but socially it is still there and practiced in educational institutes in many ways.

## **B.R AMBEDKAR'S VIEWS**

In the modern times, according to historical sources, a number of social reformers and leaders belonging to *Shudra* and ex-untouchable castes raised the issue of exclusion of *Shudras* and ex-untouchables. Jyotiba Phule, Narayan Guru, B.R Ambedkar, Gopal Baba Walankar, E.V Ramaswamy Naicker, to name just a few, highlighted the issue of social exclusion of Dalit. It is a fact that Ambedkar was possibly the first person to

use the term 'exclusion' in India while defining the oppression and exploitation of Dalit in Indian society. Ambedkar raised the issue of exclusion of Dalits using modern weapons such as educational, political and constitutional means along with different types of movements. According to Ambedkar's view, the real basis of process of exclusion of scheduled castes is the philosophy of Hinduism. Philosophy of Hinduism has given birth to caste system which further leads to discrimination on the basis of that particular caste identity and become 'Institution of exclusion'. According to Ambedkar, since Hindu social order is based on 'rank and gradation', it does not recognize equality. Manu has also introduced and made inequality the vital force of life which always perturbed Ambedkar. According to him, caste consciousness has promoted anti-social spirit, created segregation, and exclusiveness and common consciousness. He examined that in *Chaturvarnya* system, there is no hope for emancipation of *Shudras*.

### CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS AND LAWS

The Indian Constitution provides special provisions and rights to Scheduled Castes to maintain social justice and equality and for their development in all aspects.

- **Article 15:** Prohibition of Discrimination on Grounds of Religion, Race, Caste, Sex or Place of Birth
- **Article 16:** Equality of Opportunity in Matters of Public Employment
- **Article 17:** Abolition of Untouchability
- **Article 46:** Promotion of Educational and Economic interests of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other weaker sections

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