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Surge in Dropouts Among Dalit Students in Higher Educational Institutions | Karamala Areesh Kumar, Aaron Nair, Paul Newman

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#socialtags

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The Indian social system has been largely influenced by thoughts and perceptions of the Varna or caste system. Higher education provides a window of opportunity to Dalits who for thousands of years have lived in a culture of oppressive silence. Generally, Dalits lack the resources to enter the portals of good higher educational institutions, their problems are compounded as most of them are first-generation learners coming from socially, economically and politically oppressed backgrounds. Most of them opt to study in government-run institutions due to affordability factors as well as the ease of access. The education of Dalits was the utmost priority of the architect of India's constitution Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. He believed the oppressed classes needed to educate themselves to enable their capability to take on roles for social upliftment in the political arena. However, even after 75 years of independence, Dalit students were denied opportunities and access to education despite several constitutional measures.

Recently there has been a surge in the dropouts of Dalit students from higher educational institutions, indicating the biases and prejudices that are still very prevalent. The resulting reduction is also indicative of how Dalits still face systemic oppression, with even the Government-run institutions seeing a rise in student numbers dropping out every year. According to the Government of India statistics provided by the former Minister of Higher Education in 2019 at the Indian Parliament, 48% of dropouts from IITs and 62.6% of dropouts from the IIMs were from SC, ST and OBC Categories, this is alarming as these elite institutions have forced out and denied meaningful education to the most deserving categories of our society. Similarly, according to the statistics released by the All India Survey on Higher Education in 2022, India had over 725 higher educational institutions at the time of independence which has increased to over 56,000 in 2022, yet the rate of Dalit literacy remains at 66.1 per cent, way below the national average of 73 per cent.

The suicide cases of Dalit students in IITs have been a prolonged issue without a proper solution or consensus being arrived at. A 2022 survey conducted by the SC/ST Cell of IIT Bombay revealed that one out of every three students are asked about their caste and over 15.5 per cent of students faced mental pressure due to caste-based discrimination. In 2022 Kirit Prembhai Solanki led a Parliamentary Panel Report whose findings stated that SC/ST students were being repeatedly failed due to their caste in institutions such as the AIIMS. While there has been large-scale agitation and mass reporting by news agencies, the rise in death tallies is indicative of how deep-rooted discrimination is still prevalent and is instrumental in making educational institutions places of inequality.

The Minister of State for Education, Subash Sarkar 2023 said over 13,000 SC, ST, and OBC students dropped out of Central Universities like IIMs, IITs and NITs since 2018. Furthermore, trends in higher education link students coming from marginalized or oppressed castes to only specific alma matters. For example, Dalit students are concentrated in the fields of social sciences and social service, while they are least represented in the hospitality and medicine sectors. This results in limiting job prospects and thus ensuring that they do not climb the socio-economic ladder.

Among the most discriminated against are the Dalit women, who are treated far below their oppressed male counterparts. Dalit women continue to face social stigma and educational apartheid especially at the level of higher education as it is still seen as an exclusive bastion of the upper castes. The dropout rate of Dalit girls is higher than their

men folk as the cost of higher education is expensive, social stigma attached to the girls' entering colleges, early marriages, seeking employment to support the family, insults and feeling out of place in colleges are some of the common reasons for this high rate of dropouts.

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The solutions for the underrepresentation of students from oppressed or marginalized communities have always surrounded reservations. Highly misinterpreted, reservations are still a necessity in this age and time. The recent surge in dropout cases and suicides of Dalit students make reservations a prerogative delegated to the backward communities. Yet, what remains unclear is how the Government looks to tackle the situation. While in place are amendments and laws protecting the backward classes, there is an urgent need to solve the situation from the roots itself. Education is the best way to uplift and inform people from marginalized communities about their rights, but most of the discrimination that they face stems from these very campuses.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar valued education and its power to solve oppression and injustice faced by the backward classes. He intended that each underrepresented community be able to voice their opinions freely without the fear of bias or prejudice, thus they must be able to usher in a new era for their voiceless communities. The failure of representation in educational institutions must be considered the biggest derailment in progress as it also highlights the failure of democracy.

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