

## Nature and Dynamics of Caste Discrimination on Higher Education Campuses: A Perspective from Below

Dr. Vivek Kumar\*

Professor of Sociology, Center for the Study Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi - 110 067, India

\*Corresponding author: Dr. Vivek Kumar

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**Abstract:** This article tries to understand the nature of discrimination, humiliation and social exclusion, against Dalit students and teachers, prevailing on the campuses of higher education in India. In the light of Article 46 of the Indian Constitution. It records the sources and foundation of the aforesaid phenomena at different levels of the campuses. At the level of appointments of the heads of some 472 institutions; second, appointments of Professors, Associate Professors, Assistant Professors and officers; third at the level of admission of students; forth at the level of curricula and pedagogy of social sciences and humanities; fifth, is the way in which general caste teachers interact with Dalit students in the arena of teaching and research, in science streams; sixth, the way general category students interact with Dalit students. Last but not the least the Dalit students and Dalit teachers suffer discrimination and exclusion when they assert to celebrate their own Icons on the campuses. The data is collected through narratives of Dalit students and teachers belonging to various universities and colleges across the country, using purposive sampling. We have also used few government reports and Court judgements, in the article, to substantiate our arguments.

**Keywords:** humiliation, Caste Discrimination, Article 46, Nature.

### INTRODUCTION

There are two important reasons to write this paper, one historical another immediate. Historical reason being, some 70 years back when we gave ourselves a democratic constitution under Article-46 we had argued that

The state shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation [1].

In the same vein Article 51-A (h) on Fundamental duties argues that it will be the fundamental duty of every citizen of India to develop the scientific temper, humanism and spirit of inquiry and reform (Ibid: 30).

Immediate reason was prompted, some four years back, by the suicide of a Ph. D. Scholar from Hyderabad Central University, Rohit Vemula on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Though it is fact that before his suicide there have been at least eight suicides, as told to the author of this paper by the students of the

Hyderabad University, but Rohit Vemula's suicide was marked with political debate and protest in the society at large and on the university campuses across the country. A few social scientists and intellectuals turned this case of sad suicide into secular Vs communal and democracy vs fascism debate relating to government of the day. Some others declared that those fighting on side of Dalit students are not there true well-wishers. Still others have associated it psychological disorder 'depression' of students.

In the light of these two facts this paper tries to analyse whether State and citizens have done enough to promote higher educational interests of Scheduled Castes better known as Dalits.

### Discrimination Prevailing on Campuses lacking Diversity

However, in this debate a few very important and significant issues regarding the environment prevailing on the campuses of higher education got ignored. First and foremost we need to probe whether they have become democratic and inclusive in their ethos? Are they representative in their composition? Is there diversity in the appointment of the heads of the institutions –Vice Chancellors and Directors? Is there diversity in appointing teachers - Professors, Associate Professors, Assistant Professors and university

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employees - Officers and Clerks? Whether the admissions of students represent diversity? It is important to analyze this because if all of them-heads of institutions, teachers and students come from the same social background with their own cultural baggage then there will be no caste based discrimination and exclusion on the campuses of higher learning? However, if the composition comprises a minority of such actors with stigmatized natural identity then discrimination and exclusion is bound to occur.

In this context, by mere observation we can argue that these institutions are yet not inclusive, representatives and hence democratic. For instance, out of 46 Central universities and one Open Central university only one Vice Chancellor belongs to Scheduled Tribe. In Madhya Pradesh out of 19 universities there is one Scheduled Caste and in Uttar Pradesh in 25 State Universities there is no one from the category. These examples are sufficient to bring the point home that these universities are not inclusive. In the same vein, according to information obtained through RTI UGC revealed that till 2009-2010 out of 1688 sanctioned Professor's and 3298 Associate Professor's post there were 24 Professors and 90 Associate Professors in 24 Central Universities. In percentage it comes out to be 2.73% and 4.4% respectively vis-à-vis constitutionally mandated 15% of reservation for Scheduled Castes.

Still more the exclusive character of higher education comes to fore when we discern that out of total number of students in higher education only 13.5% and 4% belong to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes respectively. That proves the point that our higher education lacks diversity. Don't we need a social audit and roster for the appointment of heads of such Institutions, Professors, and officers and of admissions of students?

### **Nature of Discrimination and Humiliation**

A number of Social Scientists, Humanities teachers and students cutting across disciplines, belonging to Dalit community, teaching and studying in different universities and colleges, reveal that the nature of social exclusion, discrimination and humiliation on the campuses of higher education in India is very different and sophisticated and that is why difficult to capture (Kumar 16 (a)). They revealed that discrimination crops up many a times in its ancient and crude form of caste discrimination like practice of untouchability. For instance the so-called upper castes refuse sharing the room with Dalits (hostel rooms with Dalits students and Staff rooms with Dalit teachers), sharing dining table or drinking water from the same pot or tap used by Dalits. To substantiate this point let me give a concrete example of a very progressive university,

In 2016 a Dalit student perusing her M. Phil told that her upper-caste room-mate asked her to clean the hostel room with broom. When the Dalit girl asked why she should do that she said that because she is scheduled caste and it is job of Scheduled Castes. The worst was yet to come. When the Dalit girl complained to Warden of the hostel she sided with the upper-caste student. The girl could be saved from this torture only when she changed the room.

Many students revealed few new ways in which discrimination takes place with Dalit students by their peer group. For example one Dalit student revealed that the so-called upper-caste hostel room-mates do not allow Dalit students to put posters of their icons in the hostel rooms. They form a ghetto of their own upper caste students and do not share any information about competitive exams or conferences. In the same vein few students argue that the classmates ridicule us on our rustic behaviour and pronunciation.

Discrepancies in grades of Dalit students when graded by so-called upper caste teachers are another general complaint of scheduled caste students. Dalit students apprehended that they may get low grades because they have quoted -Ambedkar, or Phuley. Moreover, the Dalit students also revealed that Professors harass us by not signing the scholarship forms at one pretext or the other. The University employees never welcome us with our scholarship forms. Rajiv Gandhi Scholarships meant for Scheduled Castes and Tribes always comes late which creates lots of uncertainty for Dalit students. Dalit students' names get displayed with their categories on the notice boards making them uncomfortable. However, for so-called upper-caste dominated university administration this act is normal.

Apart from Dalit students, Dalit Teachers have complained that they also face discrimination at the hands of university authorities, their colleagues and students. Some social science teachers complained that they are/were not allowed teaching theory courses. Some have complained that courses are imposed on them and changed on the whim and fancies of the Chairpersons of the department. In the same vein science teachers complained that they are not given space for long to set their own Laboratories while some of the teachers argued that even separate office space is denied to them. Discrimination also comes to fore in the allotment of students for research under a teacher. Usually Dalit teacher is the last choice under whom so-called upper-caste students want to pursue research. One can argue that Dalit teachers have usually have

specialization on caste and Dalit movement. Even if we grant that, though it is not a fact, even then it has been observed that the so-called upper caste students pursuing research on Dalits prefer a so-called upper caste teacher for his/her research. In this context it would be interesting to give an example of a Dalit teacher, who taught at a very progressive university for more than three decades but when he retired he told that

I have taught for thirty two years. I have taught courses on research method. My specialization is also in Urban Sociology. However, not even on upper-caste student chose me as his/her Ph. D. Supervisor. Hence I ended up supervising Dalit, Tribals, Minorities and oBCs scholars from different parts of south Asia. Moreover, my colleagues always asked to contribute a paper in seminars and for their publications on Dalits.

The teachers have also revealed that they are also discriminated against in the appointment on different committees or the post of functionaries-like Deans, pro-vice chancellors or rectors etc. They face exclusion when their colleagues do not call them to participate in various seminars and conferences organized by them. House allotment is another area where they face discrimination in spite of the fact that these houses have been year marked for them.

### **Analysing the Nature and Pattern of Discrimination and Humiliation**

Yet, most of the time discrimination and humiliation is very subtle, sophisticated and refined. It is disguised in the ornamental and metaphorical language, body gestures, and in the garb of objective Institutional rules (which can be bent or flouted any time in favour of the so-called upper caste students, teachers and officers in the university; on the contrary constitutional mandates in favour of Dalits (Scheduled Caste) may not be fulfilled at all). It is individual experience-each being so different and unique that it is difficult to develop a typology. However, we can still evolve a typology on the basis of similarities and repetitive experiences of Dalits on the campuses in question [5].

### **Patterns of Epithets for Dalit Students**

For instance, a number of students, different universities and colleges, have revealed with pain and anguish that they are referred as '*Sarkar Damads*' (Government's Son in Law) or '*Sarkari Brahmins*' (Government Brahmins) by so-called upper caste students in. On IIT campuses Dalit students are named as *Saddus* (an epithet derived after the term Scheduled Castes and Tribes) or *Cata* students (derived from SC

and ST as a separate category). In Delhi Colleges Dalit girls with deep anxiety told that they are ridiculed by a question '*quote se aye hoy a kothe se*' (Have you come via reservation quota or brothel)? In this regard students and teachers have revealed that in every Indian language such type of address to ridicule Dalits in general and Dalit Students in particular exist.

### **Patterns of Discrimination of Dalit Research Scholars**

In the same vein few other Dalit students, from different universities across the nation, have complained that they have been denied a Ph.D. or M. Phil Supervisor for months together although their so-called upper caste classmates were allotted Supervisors as soon as they were admitted in the course. Further, the Dalit students also revealed that their so-called upper Caste Supervisors did not allow them to peruse a research on a particular theme or their Supervisor have forced them to change his/her Ph.D. research topic after they had worked two or three years. Students also complained that their Supervisors did not help them, at all, in writing a Ph.D. synopsis or thesis. The supervisor did not help them in formulating research objectives, Chapter-ization, finding relevant material for research, editing etc. There was a general complain that, in the event when the students gave their Chapters of correction to their supervisors they used to return their chapters very late, often without any input or some minor spelling corrections. In the same vein, the Dalits also complained that their supervisors did not send their thesis for evaluation to external examiners for years after its submission. Another most common complain which students made was that they were awarded their Ph.D. degree three or four years after its final submission Ph.D. thesis although their counterparts were awarded Ph. D degree within one year after it was submitted.

A student from IIT Delhi revealed that he was awarded his Ph. D degree in Mechanical Engineering after five years of his final submission of his thesis although he could complete his Ph. D. in 12 years after he was admitted in the programme. During this period his topic was changed thrice. Once, topic was changed after he had worked for two years on the topic and his research paper, related to the topic, was accepted for publication in US journal. Another student from Centre for Biotechnology, JNU, New Delhi was awarded his Ph.D. after 8 years of final submission. However, he was creative and applied for Postdoctoral research in American universities and got through there.

### ***Pattern of Discrimination Specific to Science Stream***

Along with the aforesaid series of discrimination against Dalit students in general a specific type of discrimination can be observed in the discipline of Science, where laboratory experiments are part and parcel of curriculum. Here, students have complained delay in the allotment of supervisors and hence labs. In some cases lab was allotted only during the office hours (i.e. during 10 am- 5pm) and progress report was asked on daily basis. Though, usually progress report is asked at the end of semester. If they get lab, they were denied teacher's help in the supply of relevant reagents and compounds to perform experiments, even if they get all this they may not get attention or help of the Professors (in lab they are working) who can instil in them the confidence that their experiment is in the right direction. Some students told that there is no input from the Supervisor when we are not getting our readings in an experiment. Many so-called upper caste Supervisors do not allow their names to be used in the research paper- to be presented in seminar or to be published in the Journal by a Dalit student (A standard practice in Science disciplines is that student researchers use the name of supervisors in their papers as they are working under him/her and in his/her lab). Further, Dalit students have complained that their so-called upper caste supervisors or teachers decline in giving them recommendations when they apply for a scholarship or a job. At least a dozen of Dalit Post-Doctoral, Fellows (PDF) working in different Universities and research Institutes in US from Yale to MIT, shared with me how badly they were treated in India as Post Doctoral Fellows which forced them to leave India.

### ***Discrimination in a Medical Institute***

In this context it would not be out of place to record the nature of caste discrimination suffered by Dalit students and teachers in All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) which is located in New Delhi. The level of discrimination reached to such a level that the government had to constitute a three member committee under the Chairmanship of University Grant Commission's Chairman to, "... enquire into allegations of differential treatment of SC/ST students in the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. This was in the wake of media reports and complaints to the Government about the said harassment and abuse. The committee was given the mandate to look into all matters connected with the said harassment". And committee found that,

"Discrimination of residents of the SC/ST category is evident in a subtle and direct manner" ... "AIIMS has not taken any initiative to arrange remedial coaching in English language, basic courses or any other spheres for SC/ST students as is

required by the educational institutions. About 84 per cent of SC/ST students mentioned the need for remedial coaching in English language and basic courses ... Post based Roster system of selection and appointment was never followed by the AIIMS for the faculty even though it is a requirement under Central Government rules and directives. This has been to the disadvantage of the SC/ST category of faculty". (Report)

### ***Students' Mannerisms the Cause of Discrimination***

Sometimes, loud voice or aggressive body gesture of a Dalit student may also be considered as disrespect and indiscipline by the so-called upper-caste teachers. Teachers are not patient enough to locate these gestures within the contextual social background of the students. Instead, they hold the students as indiscipline, discourteous, and arrogant towards themselves. Further, good English is equated with disciplinary knowledge, which is a questionable preposition. How can only English and bookish knowledge be the real judge of 'What is accepted as knowledge'? There is no room for less bookish knowledge mixed with experiential knowledge, articulated in broken and grammatically incorrect English to be also termed as knowledge. Whether teachers, in general, are sensitive enough to evaluate a loud and aggressive Dalit student with his experiential knowledge with broken English and treat him/her at par with average general caste student? I know most of the teachers will reject this idea at the pretext of objectivity, though I do not rule out a few sympathetic teachers, who may do so but that amounts to be patronage, and not a systemic act or decision. That is only by default and not by design.

### ***Dispute and Discrimination by Teachers and Officers***

In a dispute between a Dalit and so-called upper-caste students The Honourable Delhi High Court has highlighted the deep entrenched caste prejudice among another Central University authorities including Vice Chancellor of the University against the Dalit student in no uncertain terms. Honourable Judge observed,

...it is clear that the impugned order is unsupportable in law; it is arbitrary ...I cannot help in commenting the utterly indefensible conduct of the University which shows it in poor light...the defences put forth, by it, of an enquiry against someone likely to be irreversible prejudiced by its action ...is disquieting at this point. Such a stand perhaps would have been considered proper in medieval times where the writ of a monarch could run

unquestioned and his authority, accountable to none. That Vice-Chancellor of the University has chosen to support such a stand and apparently “applied his mind” is alarming to say the least...Almost Half a century ago, in another context, the Supreme Court articulated the goal of the Constitution of social equity and caste less society ... Sadly, the stark reality of caste prejudice has been highlighted in this case. The (University)\*, consistent with its mandate of promoting modern education and secular values, unfortunately displayed rank insensitivity. There no more justice where the victim and the oppressor are treated alike, as were the lion and the lamb are afforded the same treatment. That (University)\* has done so, betrays its callousness, to say the least. (In The High Court of Delhi at New Delhi; W.P. (C) 4980/2007, Pronounced on November 28, 2007) (\* the term University is mine).

Now, many of these experiences are so personal, unique and told from one side that we cannot substantiate their authenticity as fact. However, the repetitiveness of the events gives us a trend and a pattern. Therefore one is forced to ask, why is it happening with only Dalit students only?

### **Discrimination and Curriculum**

Besides, discrimination, exclusion and humiliation are inbuilt in the structure of curriculum and pedagogy i.e. the way the content of curriculum is framed and the way it is taught in the class rooms. This is more applicable to Social Sciences and Humanities. Kumar [2-4] has highlighted this type of exclusion in discipline of Sociology. There are enough evidences to further prove the point that such disciplines suffer from almost total domination of so-called upper-caste values, norms, institutions, icons (social, political, Bhakti), movements, political parties, etc. In turn Dalits, *Adivasis*, Minorities and women are totally excluded from discussion. Virtually there is cognitive blackout of Dalit icons, their social movements, and contributions through labour, norms and values, Political Parties etc. Even if a few of them have found the space they suffered stigmatization, reductionism and never get discussed in the classrooms independently on their own. Dalit students have revealed that Ambedkar is never taught independently. Either he is taught with reference to Gandhi or reduced only to a Dalit Messiah. They ask, “Why can’t we teach him as an independent social thinker who contributed in diverse spheres of life -

nation building, constitution builder, educationist, economist, protector of women’s rights etc.? Even if few topics around these themes have been included they are seldom asked in exams and if asked they are done as optional questions. Hence, it is only pseudo inclusivity without any reflexivity.” Further, they also added that very few non-Dalit students will take such topic for their presentation and higher research. Dalit students who do their research on such topics are looked down upon by class-mates. Along with this, few students argued that icons like Ravidas, Jotiba Phuley & Savitiribai Phuley, Naryana Guru, E. V. Pamasamy Nicker (Periyar), Chatrapati Sahu, Birsa Munda etc. do not find any mention in the University curriculums of various disciplines. They further argue that, we should deconstruct the way the Dalits have been only understood through a reductionist perspective of – atrocity, poverty, literacy, and reservation as if they do not have any other aspirations.

### **Dalit Assertion and Discrimination on Campuses**

Activist and assertive Dalit students revealed that university authorities, Professors, and students belonging to so-called general categories and various students’ political organizations do not appreciate independent assertion and demands of self-representation of Dalits on the campus. They argued that though, it is true, that the Dalit youth assertion, in post independent Indian in general, can directly be traced back to 1970s when Dalit Panther movement came into existence in Maharashtra. The Dalit youths launched *Naamantar* (movement for changing the name of Marathwada University, Aurangabad after Ambedkar) movement in Maharashtra. Many of them were put behind the bars and few of them lost their lives also. However, during this period Dalit youths on the campuses of higher education, to a large extent, were lured by number of youth wings of National Political parties. They joined these organizations and gave their selfless services as foot-soldiers, told a number of passionate Dalit student activists in various universities. In many universities they joined National Students’ Union of India (NSUI related to Indian National Congress). Students Federation of India (SFI is associated with Communist Party of India (Marxist)), and AISF (All India Students Federation associated with Communist Party of India)- the Left and Progressive students associations.

However, number of teachers on the JNU campus who were themselves student activists told that after the emergence of Bahujan Movement with BAMCEF, DS4 and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) led by Kanshi Ram, Dalit in 1980s, there developed a renewed sense of assertion, among Dalit youths at pan India level. Kanshi Ram extended the legacy of Babasaheb Ambedkar’s, independent Dalit political movement, of course with a new narrative. In fact, he gave more teeth

and sharpness to the Dalit assertion by establishing new Iconography and Narrative. According to one teacher,

this narrative included the struggles and teachings of –Buddha, Sant Raidas, Sant Kabir, Daadu, Jotiba Phule, Narayna Guru, Chatrapati Sahuji –Maharaj of Kolahpur, E.V.Ramasamy Nicker (Periyar), Babasaheb Ambedkar, Savitribai Phule, Uda Devi Pasi, Maharaja Bijli Pasi, Jhalkari Bai Kori... to name just a few. During 1990s -2010 BSP had come to power a number of times, though for small periods, and had become a national political party. The whole process instilled among Bahujan youth a high level of confidence. However, when these youth entered in the universities they did not find their icons in their social science or humanities curricula. But the consciousness of their own icons did not fade away. Hence on the one hand they started questioning the contents of the social science curriculum and on the other hand started celebrating and commemorating, on the campuses, birth and death anniversaries respectively, of these Bahujan icons. So, till other day we could see posters only of Gandhi, Nehru, Tagore, Vivekanand, Marx, Lenin, Bhagat Singh and *Bharat Mata* etc. on the walls of various universities in the name of national icons. Now Buddha, Ravidas, Jotiba and Savitribai Phule, Periyar, Birsa Munda, Babasaheb Ambedkar etc. also started appearing on university walls. This has not been appreciated by the members of general castes in the universities and various political organizations on the campus. But they cannot stop them directly. So many students have told that, “their repulsion comes to fore in denial of permission to Dalit students to hold public meetings on the death and birth anniversaries of their icons”.

In one of the IITs students told me that Dalit students are so afraid to be identified as politically conscious Dalit that they do not participate in the Babasaheb Ambedkar’s birth anniversary, April 14th, programme organized by the authorities. In one of the Central University teachers told me that when they participated in a programme on ‘E.V. Ramasamy Nicker (Periyar)’ organized by Dalits students of the

campus the Vice Chancellor of the university instituted an inquiry against them.

### ***Disdain for Dalit Student’s Politics***

The worst suffers in this case are assertive Dalit students who want to lead an ideological path and pursue independent politics on the campuses of higher education, specifically on the Universities. The real problem is that they have to do so without any political patronage, institutional and financial support from outside contrary to their so-called upper castes counterparts who are usually associated with students’ wings of National and State political parties led and dominated by so-called upper castes. NSUI, ABVP, SFI, AISF, AISA to name just a few are student organizations which have substantial presence in various university campuses. These student organizations get patronage, ideological and institutional support from their parent organizations. Dalit Student activists argued that, “Their party functionaries are either in government or in parliament who provide full protection to the student members on their organization. They provide ideological and many a times financial support to the student organization to run their affairs both at national and state level. In terms of legal issue they also provide them legal support. The parent organizations organize training and cadre camps for their students’ organization. They in many ways set political agenda for students and their organizations”. Contrary to this independent Dalit students’ organizations have to do everything on their own. From framing their ideology and programme they have to fight for the cases of injustices on the campus on their own. It is they who are at the forefront in doing all the celebrations and deliberations on behalf of Dalit students. And hence they become an easy targets of discrimination.

### **A white Paper on the Universities**

Under these circumstances, we can conclude that many students and teachers wanted that Government of the day should bring out a ‘White Paper’ on some 472 institutions of higher education -47 central Universities (including one Open University), 13 State Open Universities, 290 State Universities, 38 Deemed universities and 73 Institutes of National Importance. This ‘White Paper’ should highlight the social composition of the aforesaid institutions in terms of their heads of the institution, representation of teachers, officers, and students belonging to different caste and communities. Above all the paper should highlight content of different social sciences and humanities curricula. The paper should analyse whether our universities have become representative or not? Have they become inclusive of caste, communities and gender or they have been monopolized by one religion or castes? If they have not then we can evolve certain mechanism to make them more representative otherwise it would be difficult to dispense social justice to socially

excluded communities. This will lead more confrontation and conflict of the campuses of higher learnings in India.

The second issue that should be highlighted in the white paper is whether Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes Commissions and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 (amended in 2015), Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955, and University Grants Commission regulations are effective enough to deal with discrimination of Dalits on the campuses of higher education. Do they really have requisite expertise to capture the exclusion and discrimination prevailing on these campuses given their sophisticated and subtle nature? Hence, in the light of above, do we need new method, scale, index or mechanism to capture or measure and analyse the intensity and enormity of social exclusion, discrimination and humiliation prevailing on the campuses of higher and professional educational learnings- Universities, Indian Institute of

Technologies, Indian Institute Management, All India Institute of Medial Sciences etc.

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### Note:

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