

**PERCEPTIONS OF LIFE EXPERIENCES AMONG
WOMEN COLLEGE TEACHERS WHO AVAILED
SCHEDULED CASTE BASED RESERVATION**

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CONCLUSION

The present study ‘Perceptions of Life Experiences among Women College Teachers Who Availed Scheduled Caste Based Reservation’ was designed to explore the understanding of women from Scheduled Caste, about their community, along with societal influences affecting their own lives. The present work has significance for understanding of how the reservation policy has impacted their lives and how positive discrimination has facilitated the lives of individuals and of the communities who have faced societal oppression for a long period of time. The research also attempted to discover familiarity that the sample of women had regarding the reservation policy, and its role in their lives.

The sample comprised of 60 Dalit women in the age group 30-45 years working for more than 10 years on permanent jobs in government educational institutions of Delhi. The women had got their employment through availing of Scheduled Caste reservation. Purposive sampling technique and snowball method were used for recruiting the sample of 60 teachers. College teachers were contacted through common friends and through the Delhi University Scheduled Caste Association. The study used a mixed method approach applying both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analyses.

Thus, I divided the study into two phases:

- First phase involved contacting all 60 participants individually and getting their demographic profile. The Flourishing Scale and the Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving were also completed by each participant.
- In the second phase 30 participants were interviewed and the Diagrammatic Representation of Life Course tool was administered for a deepening understanding of their life experiences.

The tools used for data collection were: An interview guide designed to obtain insights on the reservation policy. The Diagrammatic Representation of the Life Course (Bhargava, 2005) was used to elicit narratives of the life experiences, including important episodes. The tool has a participatory and descriptive method for collecting information about participant's life journey. The Flourishing Scale (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2009) is a seven-point scale was used for evaluating the participant's self-orientation towards life. The use of wellbeing paradigm was obtained on both positive and the negative aspects from their perspectives. The Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (CIT) (Diener, Su, & Tay, 2014) is a five-point scale that explores the relationship of participants with the community, their engagement, mastery of skills, autonomy, meaning of life, optimism and subjective wellbeing. This tool was used to analyse the wellbeing of participants in the context to their psychological resources and strengths.

Each participant was contacted telephonically, and individual appointments were fixed. Most teachers met with me in their respective college rooms or college staffroom. The interviews with the participants were recorded and transcribed.

The findings have been presented and discussed under the following headings: The demographic profile of the participants, the reservation policy and its implications, Dalit/Scheduled Caste women, and motivation and wellbeing of the participants.

Bronfenbrenner's systems theory (1976/1979) was helpful not only in the arrangement and documentation of participants' environments, but also in enlightening the dialogue and exploration of the significance of academic and social support in the participants' lives. This theory is directly involved in the relationship of individuals with the systems surrounding them. Therefore, analysis is centred on multiple levels. The study invoked the ecological model to explore how academic and social support obtained from proximal processes has had an effect on the academic

performance, employment opportunities and well-being of participants. Renn & Reason (2013) and Evans et al., (2009) found that grounded on Bronfenbrenner's nested systems theory and other widespread development theories, it was anticipated that first generation college students who experience higher levels of academic and social support to act as buffers possibly will have higher levels of academic performance. Interaction between participant and the micro-system, has mutual effects. The micro system here contained the parent, grandparents and siblings, who in this case were supportive and therefore positive relationships developed. Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) explain the mesosystem as a system where in the individual and the multiple Microsystems interrelate to generate a network of developmental possibilities. In an analysis of the mesosystem, an individual is influenced by the relationships at work, in the family, and in educational institutions. The teachers, peers and extended family take on a significant role in fostering development in the individual, in this case the Dalit women. The components of exosystems contain contexts that do not consist of the individual directly but have an effect on the systems in which individual operates, and thus forms a part of their development. In this study the community, religion, the State and its policies become the exosystem. The Microsystems, and the union amongst mesosystems, are ingrained within the exosystems. Exosystems may include the relation of individual with national level institutes. Macrosystems consists and influence the micro, meso and exosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Macrosystems in this study encompass some of the historical, cultural, and social components that during the course of time have a collective effect on the more proximal schemes which influence, and are influenced by individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Macrosystem influences could comprise of access of higher education through reservation for minorities and women, the Dalit movements and activism for positive affirmation action were important. Evans et. al (2010) describes that macrosystem includes the sociocultural building blocks that turn out to be visible in the proximal processes of the individual. The role of Ambedkar in

procuring for the Dalits the Constitutional provisions of Scheduled Caste reservation have paved the way for Dalits to enter educational portals. However, had the Poona Pact not been implemented and Gandhi's ideological frame not prevailed, the macrosystem may have been different. However, history being what it was reservation was what the Dalits got. Many have been able to complete school education, and education including graduation, post-graduation and armed with education, these candidates have been able to avail the reserved seats for Scheduled Castes in Government jobs. This journey has not been an easy one as the society that comprises the administrators, teachers, peers and community at large carry deep rooted prejudices against the lower caste communities. This oppression and exploitation especially in the rural communities has been a major hindrance in accessing provisions for growth and development of children. The anonymity of urban communities has mitigated some of the discriminatory contexts for the Dalits. However, when dimensions of lower caste and class come together, the force of exploitation and oppression is amplified. The findings of the study placed in the theoretical paradigm of Bronfenbrenner's systems theory or the ecological model enable a systematic categorizing of factors into five levels of influence: (1) the individual level, including beliefs, values, education level, skills and other individual factors; (2) the relationship level, including interpersonal relationships between individuals at home, in school, college and work spaces (3) the organizational level, which covers the way relevant institutions are sensitive to the policy provisions of reservation and implement them in spirit and not just letter (4) at the community level i.e. in professional spaces, educational spaces, neighbourhoods and religious spaces through the attitudes and the relationship among different institutions within communities; and (5) the policy level, which refers to policies and their implementation that affects participants e.g. Scheduled Caste reservation within the institutions in which they avail them. In the following section are the finding placed in the context of this theoretical frame.

The demographic profile of the participants: Most of the women were from families who had migrated to Delhi from predominantly States of Northern India and Delhi NCR. These women were supported by their parents, extended family members, peers, teachers (school and college), neighbourhood, extended family and distant relatives. Most of the women were first in their generation in the family and who were working outside the home, and had the highest level of education in their families. A few mothers were working in schools, but not working in jobs that were considered high profile. It was unclear from the findings what proportion were the first generation of families to avail reservation; although the fathers of a significant number (66.6%) of participants were in government jobs. Some participants had revealed this information but others were not sure if they had got their job through reservation. The fathers of six participants were Class I officers in the Government. What is evident is that education of fathers and a high percent being in government would have created greater awareness related to reservation in academic institutions and employment for their daughters. However, a high percentage gave credit to their mothers in the role they played in encouraging their daughters in both education and employment. The support often came at a time when the other family members or fathers had objections.

Findings also revealed that reservation played a very significant role in building their self-esteem and autonomy. Reservation provided an opportunity for lower caste people to become educated, gain paid employment and enhance their status in life. According to the findings, without reservation, they would not have been able to avail their basic rights in Indian society. However, several women felt that reviewing of reservation policy is necessary but removal of it altogether should not be done as inequalities are still highly evident. Findings revealed that only a first generation of women has received education, and availed employment, hence, it is necessary that it should continue for several more years. A demand urged and articulated by these women consisted of doing more than only providing reservation.

The government should focus on its implementation in society. Participants revealed that government and political parties should not use caste as a criterion for ‘vote bank’ (Srinivas, 1966; Rudolph and Rudolph, 1960; Jafferelot, 2003; Mitra, 1994; Kothari; 1970; Panini, 1996; Stephen, 2006). They should work for the true welfare of society instead of using it as tool for political gains.

Further government should use other means for providing opportunity for lower caste people so that it can reach each member of the lower castes. Reservation should be based on both caste and economic grounds, so that upliftment of members of lower castes and lower class, can take place by providing equal opportunities. Ambedkar understood that the only way people could get out of caste discrimination and poverty was through economic development and industrialisation. He had always insisted that socio-economic policies must be worker friendly, not capitalistic, and argued for ‘state socialism’.(Omvedt, 2012).

Results unveiled that there are benefits and drawbacks of having reservation in society. On the one hand opportunities and basic rights are enabled; on the other hand, reservation result in segregating them in the society, giving them a label. The abilities of deserving candidates of reserved category get questioned. Often persons who do want to apply for unreserved posts are advised to use the category post so that a ‘general’ position is not ‘taken away’. This therefore would allow a creamy layer to exit through a natural process, and not through enforcement. It was stated by participants that often children of lower castes do not put their best efforts to reach their goals, since they believed that they would get admission and employment via the caste reservation.

This research study was not just a task of academic upgradation but it was actually a learning process. During the course of the study, I developed in-depth understanding of the context I was working on and uncovered numerous new concepts. The journey from secondary data to primary data helped me to assemble the

structure of my study. Caste as a term is not a hidden construct in Indian society. It is a very significant part of Indian societal structure. Despite this the researcher was unable to disentangle many strands of thought evident in literature. The results of the study however seemed to highlight the oppression and backwardness of caste that still exists and thus the fact that reservation must continue. The political use of caste in keeping it in focus was also evident from participants' discourse.

Participants shared that their understanding of the Dalit community was not much, given that they grew up in privileged environments. In Dalit society there are two factions: One faction consisted of those who are motivated, liberal and modern in approach. Individuals were willing to intermingle with others due to that confidence. They are willing to share their inhibitions and perhaps leave aside these caste considerations and move ahead. There is another faction that is still carrying on the orthodoxy and, do not want to leave their own so-called roots and are in a miserable condition. Sometimes the privileged also need to confront the reality of their identities. "*What It Means to be an 'Elite Dalit Woman,'*" by Priyanka Singh is an autobiographical account of how people viewed her privileges as a Dalit woman. She writes,

Just the thought of trying to de-construct "Elite Dalit woman" seems daunting, it is indeed a profound almost soul searching task,Yes, for a Dalit woman, I live a very privileged life, but what does my privilege exactly include? As far as I know, I am just a regular working class educated woman living an independent life. Apparently meeting the basic requirements of life makes me elite and in my case an elite Dalit woman, however, when the same applied to a 'Savarna' (upper caste) woman, it qualifies her as a 'normal' girl.....I am also miserably judged for coming from a very cool hip family as my parents had lived abroad and till the age of 18, I had mostly lived in and out of the country since my father was in the foreign services. Imagine a Dalit man's experience as a diplomat. As part of the diplomatic culture, there are a lot of parties that happen. Imagine that Dalit man's

experience who never feasted on the other side of the table, but always at the receiving end of one. Imagine a Dalit woman's experience, a woman, who doesn't know how to read, write, or speak English. She had to host parties where one had to engage with the educated, the elite, the rich and she had no idea what it meant to be either one of them. As a child, I would always wonder how my parents never had any friends or social life. As I have grown older, I have understood that it is very difficult to engage with the world from that space of mind. Ever wondered, why Dalits, Muslims or people from other marginalised communities live in ghettos, that's exactly why. It feels good, it feels comfortable. My parents have seen the world, but they chose to go back to their community because as a Dalit person, the world outside can be lonely and very alienating. Rarely does it happen that anyone understands or empathizes with your experiences. On the other hand, what happens is me too, how Brahmanical patriarchy has also ostracized Brahmin women! (<https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2019/06/what-it-means-to-be-an-elite-Dalit-woman/>retrieved on 14-11-2019).

The present study concludes that the women of Scheduled Caste, working in permanent jobs in colleges of Delhi are very satisfied with their achievements. Through this exercise it was evident that all participants had secure government jobs, were independent, had acquired a positive identity in their community, and had a proactive attitude towards life. This positive side of their self-showed that they were confident about sharing their life journey and confronting of obstacles in their life (family, school, college and work place) and ultimately conquering them was actually their triumph.

Findings revealed that there may be little difference in the condition of any woman in society in comparison to a Dalit woman but a few women responded that Dalit women are discriminated against by non- Dalit men and women, as well as by

Dalit men too. In every society, women are burdened with household chores, children and profession. She needs to create a sense of balance between both the places by her own endeavour. Where the Women spoke about feeling fortunate in receiving support of their in-laws, a few were ‘managing everything’ on their own. Dalit women’s condition has improved in Indian society. They get more freedom than other caste women are the positive aspects yet on the other hand, they are targets of sexual harassment by men of other castes male. All participants shared that they were considered to be “a remarkable example in their community.”

The life journey of these women was not easy. Findings revealed that all of them went through caste discrimination and prejudices during the course of their life span. Through the help of Diagrammatic Representation tool, I have delved deeper into understanding of these women. Participants revealed that different forms of discrimination had occurred in school, at neighbour’s homes, even in a friend’s home, the college and even in their jobs. According to participants, these experiences were very impactful on their psyche. Further, they disclosed that it drove them to conceal their caste identity on many occasions. During childhood they often did not comprehend the reasons for others’ conduct towards them.

Participants who faced discrimination at their workplace revealed that it is actually a fight for them to maintain their dignity in the system. People comment on them by using derogatory statements like, ‘*Chure-chamar ab padayege*’, ‘*tum toh hamri jute ki nok ke barabar ho*’, ‘*tum bahar nalke se paani le lo*’, ‘*Tum shakal se SC nahi lagte*’, ‘*tum padha nahi sakti so we need to share subject*’, ‘*reservation mil raha hai khaa rahe hai*’ and many more such.

Family played a very significant role in both promoting and downgrading the participants. Often in situations where one member of the family was not supportive towards progress of the individual another stood up to encouraged and supported the individual.

Being humiliated at a young age and carrying the burden of this, affected their psychological and emotional wellbeing. This could be a reason that many children/adults from lower caste perform poorly. With lower self-esteem they are unable to realise their competence and capabilities. Nambisan (2009) states, that one of the most significant areas within the school where prejudiced practices continue are those that are related with water and food, these have been traditionally strong sites of caste based exclusion. Where taps (and hand pumps) are not available and drinking water is ‘stored’ in pots, Dalit children continue to face caste prejudice such as not being allowed to take water themselves.

The Dalit communities’ demands for education as aspirations for social mobility are going up. Policy shifts, political pressures and monetary interests are leading to the disintegration of the public system of education. This will impact the marginal groups most due to their greater vulnerability. A growing number of private schools and colleges are mushrooming with claims of ‘better quality education’ and the assurance of occupational opportunities which all marginal groups increasingly aspire towards. How will these changes impact the education and employment opportunities for Dalit groups particularly women in the future life chances in a globalizing world requires serious research and policy attention. (<http://Dalitstudies.org.in/wp/wps0101.pdf> retrieved on 14-11-2019)

Competence and wellbeing have an effect on each other was evident from the Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (CIT) tool. Mastery has a positive relationship with optimism, meaning and purpose and subjective wellbeing. Independence and autonomy also correlate well with wellbeing. So, it is important to acknowledge the connection between both components, both qualitative and quantitative data validated this connection. Outcome of research revealed that motivation is a powerful process, it actually gives a vision towards goal achievement. Reservation identified as a significant motivation factor, provided support financially, opportunities to break the caste barriers, increasing their living standards and being an independent woman in

society. Other than reservation, mother, father, friends, sibling, cousins, husband, in-laws, teachers, and working colleagues were identified as motivational factors and support. Through these findings, without their support, these women would not have been able to achieve their current status and not be able to ‘shine’ in their community. Finding showed that these supports were substantial throughout the life span of the participants. There was sustainability in the performance of participants maintained by and only because of motivational supports.

Wellbeing is a happy state of mind, this term is associated with money, happiness, financial status, having good physical and mental health. It can be concluded that wellbeing of participants was good due to the fact that they had secure jobs, good financial status, living in high quality houses, they can even afford to live in higher status localities, and children were going to good schools and colleges. Flourishing Scale revealed that these women are leading purposeful lives and their social relationships are supportive and rewarding. Women participants were occupied and engaged in doing daily chores. They felt that their work contributed to the happiness and wellbeing of others. Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (CIT) revealed finding that participants were having sense of belongingness and involvement with the community, state and country. They were fully engrossed with their work and energetically engagement in, mastery of skills, autonomy, meaning of life, optimism and subjective wellbeing were measured in context to their life satisfaction, positive and negative feeling in daily life. Mostly participants are satisfied with their life, positive and negative feeling varied with the surroundings they were confronting in their everyday life.

Participants have left a message for upcoming generations: that they should educate themselves to grow in their community and society in general. They should study hard and strive to reach a position where they can affect future of others not so fortunate. They should make themselves financially stable as money is very important factor of life. Participants showcased high success rate in their life achievements.

Women responded that they are very content and satisfied with their achievements. It came through that they all are remarkable examples of success in their community, as women who have achieved so much in their life. They believed that women should start their own entrepreneurial efforts so that they can be pillars of support to their community. Availing the reservation and getting jobs in prestigious colleges was a boost for all participants as this job gave them higher status in professional as well as in personal life. People of their community and others are now seeing them as respected individuals who contribute to the society.

Omvedt's (2012) article on 'A part that parted' revealed that Ambedkar stood for the eradication of caste. He saw untouchability as a basic result of it, and believed there could be no mitigation without the abolition of caste. Referring to the current findings women were trying hard to break the caste label, they assured that they would not use reservation for their next generations. Reservation as an opportunity should reach the target population so that people of lower castes get their basics and educate themselves. They perceived themselves as trend setters in their community, a symbol of pride, and a remarkable example for their upcoming generation. Participants showed higher level of self-esteem, very efficient, confident, better decision makers and proficient in every aspect.

The narrow perception of reservation as an electoral tactic and as a single policy decision of caste inequity and poverty is flawed on two grounds. Reservation in independent India was based on a political contract between Gandhi and B R Ambedkar. It was not merely a policy instrument by a concerned government to lift a section of its population out of poverty. Rather, it was a commitment made by the 'father of the nation' to the 'leader of a people without a nation'. Reservation was only one of the policy instruments with which to provide equality. Debates about whether reservation is sufficient and has fulfilled its role will continue to take place. However, in history there was a promise that was made and must be upheld

(//economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/67444143.cms?from=mdr&utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst).

There is perception that reservation is a discretionary policy instrument, with which the State can freely distribute reservation to any politically powerful constituency, is partly an outcome of the recent movements by the Marathas, Patidars and Gujjars. These were all politically and socially dominant landed castes. But a combination of market forces and a structural crisis in the agrarian economy struck a majority of them, leading to their economic downfall.

The Government of India in 2019 has done away with the Supreme Court mandated cap of 50% on reservation with the new 10% reservation for the economically weaker, the total share of reservations stands up to 60%. The proposition by the government to provide reservation to economically weaker upper castes in jobs and education violates the Constitution. The Constitution did not envisage reservation provided to SC and ST communities as a poverty alleviation programme. The economically backward upper castes do not need reservation they need scholarships, education loans, skill development and other welfare schemes. Our Constitution introduced reservation and other social justice measures for those who were excluded collectively from education and entry into services of the State.

Caste-based reservations cannot remove poverty and cannot end economic exploitation However, as can be seen in this study, it can motivate, it can enhance self-esteem and effect change in women to succeed. Thus, I conclude that the Government must promote an inclusive approach. Reservation is not only a means to uplift lower caste people, Singh (2010), noted in his chapter on reservation as a measure of welfare, that Reservation did not provide equal access within each group/ community to all beneficiaries. Consequently, there is no homogeneity in different castes and tribes within a group/ community having benefitted from reservation equally (Cited in Omvedt, 2012, p.20)." I would conclude that increasing reservation

or adding more castes do not solve the problem of lower caste people instead the government needs to look at this issue from a different perspective, and should work with a holistic approach for their wellbeing.

4.1 Limitations of the Study and Areas for Further Research

This research study explores the lives of a privileged section of Dalit society thus offering a very limited vision of the concerns of Dalit women at large. Most people would have advised me to take women in rural areas where the challenges are stark and sure to hit you in the face. However, from the very beginning my orientation was whether availing all reservation opportunities would make matters more positive for Dalit women in society.

Field research has its own limitations and one of my biggest problems was to find women who would be able to spare time to answer my myriad questions. This led to sample attrition. After the first meeting with the participants almost 50% did not get back to me with a time slot for a second session. Therefore, the tool “Diagrammatic Representation of the Life Course” could only be used with a smaller sample of women.

My attempt to get permission through the government education department to access school teachers was also thwarted. Several letters to the relevant departments and multiple visits totally demoralised me and finally I gave up on selecting a sample of school teachers as well. It did not make a difference to the objectives of the study so reluctantly I abandoned the chase of officers in the Department of Education.

The research on Dalit studies is limited to socio-political dimensions: I feel that more studies on psycho-social dimensions should be done. Studying different occupational groups and regional groups could be another area that can be selected.

Child care practices among Dalit communities are another area that needs attention. Children are the most vulnerable category and understanding the principles of parenting that operate to reproduce feelings of degradation from generation to generation need to be looked at, and reflected upon and rectified.

Due to time constraints, I was unable to gather the understanding of male members of Scheduled Caste community. Being a significant part of the world's population, a study on male's perspective on reservation could be a substantial piece of future work. This study can contribute to holistic understanding caste and reservation in society. I think a study with adolescents can be recommended, as youth of any community are the representation of its present, past and future.

In the end I would like to say that more studies by Dalit scholars outside the disciplines of History, Political Science and Literature are required to be done to understand socio-psychological processes of behaviour.