

**AN EXPLORATION OF EXPERIENCES OF
SCHEDULED CASTE WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN
PUNYASHLOK AHILYADEVI HOLKAR SOLAPUR UNIVERSITY,
SOLAPUR OF MAHARASHTRA**

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Chapter 6

Findings and Conclusion

This study on the experiences of Scheduled Caste women in higher education emerged out of the researcher's own journey in higher education. As the researcher conceptualized the study, while developing the research design and methodology and collecting data, the process sharpened her gaze towards the Dalit feminist perspective and literature on the same. This study therefore, has enabled the researcher to recognize the specific challenges and experiences that SC women encounter in accessing higher education institutions and facilities which are quite different and diverse from women from other castes. Another interesting aspect that emerged was the historic influence of Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule and Dr. B R Ambedkar in facilitating and creating an enabling environment for accessing education as an emancipatory project among the SCs in Maharashtra specifically. This then framed the ways in which data was analysed and placed in the fourth and fifth chapters.

Literature Review:

The literature review chapter has explored studies on the experiences of Scheduled Caste students in education, including higher education, one of the earliest being by Suma (Chitnis, 1972). This study had brought out the differences in access and experiences based on rural-urban and inequalities among different Scheduled Caste groups. Further studies have highlighted the ways in which discriminatory attitudes and perceptions of faculty, staff and administration from other caste groups, often play out in everyday transactions in the lives of the Scheduled Caste students. Their experiences of these continue in different ways in the contemporary contexts as well as seen in the case of Rohith Vemula, Payal Tadvi and others. Hence several scheduled caste students shy away from discussing or accessing affirmative policies and programmes as these further stigmatise them and increase their insecurities (Rao 2002, Weisskopf 2004, Waghmare 2010 & Wankhede 2014). Similarly, with regard to employment Chalam (1990) has shown that education does not necessarily translate into jobs as there is increasing

privatization of jobs where the SC students are unable to compete adequately due to low self-confidence and lack of soft skills. Deshpande and Newman (2007) have compared the educational attainments and job outcomes between Dalit and non-Dalit students and they have found that the latter have exploited their social networks to move ahead in their careers. While the SC students have not had any such opportunity or social capital. Besides they have also not been able to utilise expensive loans due to lack of financial assets and backing unlike the non-Dalit students.

The literature review chapter also explored writings and researches on Scheduled Caste women and of special mention are those written by Chanana (2007) who highlights how due to globalisation universities are become huge hub like industries which again pose challenges for women student to survive in a market demanding higher educational courses. The domination of the upper and higher class persists as they have better financial capacity to pay the high fees demanded by private universities and colleges. The increasing cost of education serves to restrict admission to elite and upper caste students and leave out the marginalized students. This impacts the access to higher education among the SC students as a majority come from disadvantaged and low-income households. This also results in gendered discrimination where fewer Scheduled caste girls are sent for education with increasing costs.

A study by Velaskar (1995) explains that education standards have changed throughout the course of Indian history, but the subjugated SCs, and particularly female children belonging to these castes, still face the hurdles of caste discrimination in society and in the education sector in particular. She has collected data from both primary in-depth interview from secondary school and secondary from the government official records to compare the state of education among Dalit girls in Maharashtra. Moses (2004) in her study highlights the achievements of the Mahila Samkhya programme which is embedded in principles of non-formal education and empowerment of women. Moses (2004) explores the pedagogy of the programme and how it managed to transform the lives of Dalit women even though material conditions did not change but empowerment led to the emancipatory awakening of the women. In a recent study by Paik (2014) she brings out the fact that Scheduled caste women have been able to make some progress

with regard to education but there is a long way to go with regard to their presence as active citizens and also capability of taking decisions regarding their lives. What she brings out through her research is the ways in which they have negotiated their space in the political and social arena but there is still a long way to go with regard to decision making and socio-economic changes.

Lastly the researches on the current status of higher education institutions in India were explored and the impact on access to education on marginalized groups were taken up. Studies by Thorat (2010), Newman and Jodhka (2007) on employment have revealed the institutional and attitudinal discrimination that Scheduled caste employees face in access to employment. This is also a reality in educational institutions where despite affirmative actions the institutional barriers, discriminatory attitudes often covert work to the disadvantage of SC students. This becomes a double jeopardy for SC women who would have to negotiate the patriarchal norms at the family and community front and also the institutional barriers. There are very few studies on the experiences of SC women in higher education and the available literature is based only on autobiographical narratives of Dalit women. Hence this study attempts to bring to the forefront the SC women's experiences and journeys in one University of Maharashtra.

Research Methodology:

The research is descriptive in design and explains the educational journeys and lives of the Scheduled caste women in higher education Institutions affiliated to Solapur University, Maharashtra. The study follows a concurrent mixed methodology and hence data has been collected both quantitatively and qualitatively. This study is located in Solapur University (renamed as Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar Solapur University) located in Solapur city of Maharashtra. Solapur city has been recognized as one of the largest industrial cities in Asia. It is famous for its textile industry for almost a decade. The city come under categories three based at the income levels of its population. Several young people access the University from their native places both rural and urban areas. It

was started on the campus of what is formally known as Post-Graduate Centre which is located at Kegaon, 9 Km away from Solapur city. two chapters of data analysis frame some of the key findings of the study and highlight the interplay of factors related to caste and gender which, impact the access to education for SC women in higher education.

Out of 26 programs offered in the Sholapur University four MA and MSc programs were selected from the departments of the university, and four BA, BCom, BSc and B.Ed programs were selected from 10 colleges affiliated to the same university for sampling the respondents. In-depth interviews were conducted with 80 SC women students through a semi-structured interview schedule.

Findings and Analysis

The findings of the study have been organised in two chapters chapter 4: Scheduled Caste Women in Higher Education: Social and Economic Background and chapter 5: Experiences of Scheduled Caste Women in Higher Education. The major findings of these two chapters have sections and sub-sections which explain the findings in detail.

1) Details of the SC women students

The respondents who were included in the study belonged to 4 sub-castes within the Scheduled Caste community. According to the Census of India 2011, the Scheduled Caste population is about (1.8 percent) in Solapur district. 52 out of 80 from Mahar community, 12 from Chambhar community, 11 from Dhor community and 5 from Mang community. Mahar's are the numerically largest Scheduled Caste community with constituting 57.5 per cent of the SC population of the state (Census of India, 2001). 36 women are currently in graduation and in the age-group of 19-23 years, while 4 women are in the older age-group of 24-29 years. This indicates that some of the women have delayed their education and come back to it after taking a drop. 72 out of 80 participants are unmarried and 8 are married. 36 women are currently in graduation and in the age-group of 19-23 years, while 4 women are in the older age-group of 24-29 years. One third respondents

have reached graduation at an average age of 23 years but the remaining reached at a later age i.e., up to 23 years and up to 29 years.

2) Family Background

The families of the respondents mostly belong to lower socio-economic backgrounds and the struggles for them to access higher education due to financial difficulties. A number of participants narrated the influence of Dr. B R Ambedkar and how parents specifically mothers have been inspired to send their daughters for higher education. In most cases the mothers want their daughters to be independent and contribute to the family income. The parents of the participants are largely confined to daily wage labour i.e., 37 mothers and 33 fathers. These include the single parent families. The second large category to which the parents belong are construction workers or mill workers (32 mothers and 17 fathers). Only 3 fathers are working as Class I&II officers with the government. 4 parents are in Class III levels in the government and the remaining parents (19) are working as Class IV employees of the government service. This data reveals that most of the parents continue to be segregated to low level, low wage and insecure occupations. The monthly incomes are not very high and what is of significance is the fact that even though some of the family own some land, they face constant harassment from other castes over land ownership.

3) Barriers Within Family and Society in Accessing Education

Patriarchy and caste barriers create all kinds of difficulties for Scheduled Caste women. Families especially the parents fear that educated girls will marry out of caste. This is one of the important reasons to restrict women with regard to their mobility and ability to participate in college and university life holistically. There is a constant monitoring of the whereabouts of the girls and they are often subjected to admonishment and restrictions from their parents. Community policing of their activities often results in rumour mongering and parents then start imposing ground rules of behavior based on their comments. Social censuring and surveillance affects their studies and increases their struggles to achieve their goal of higher education from a reputed institute. Thus, to circumvent this they prefer to travel from their residence areas to go far away from

homes for higher study. It lends them anonymity and also allows them to do what they want with regard to their studies. This in turn affects their choice of subjects as well as increases in expense of travelling, stay in hostel etc.,

Some of the parents have the old mindset of choosing a career for girls and limit them to subjects which will direct them to vocations like teaching, banking, or public services. In case the women wish to take up any other subjects or careers they dissuade them from taking their own decision for both choices of courses and career. Majority of respondents still don't get complete and unconditional family support. 19 respondents have shared that they have faced resistance towards their higher education from family members. They are allowed to pursue higher education based on conditionalities like they must be alert always about what people talk about them, be extremely cautious about spending money, constant fear of social ostracism and living with the mental burden of costing their parents both socially and financially.

Often due to the societal pressure and financial instability of the family, fathers resist sending the girls for higher education for long periods. Their concern revolves around the dignity of the family and that the daughter should not bring shame to them. Therefore, some respondents have reported that their fathers discourage them to get into higher education and it is on intervention of their mothers that they have been able to continue their studies. None of them are freed from the burden of the household responsibility, be it in performing household work or working after college to add to the family income. This affects their academic performance.

There were several respondents who had to take a break from their education due to different factors. The narratives of the respondents show that there are several societal and economic factors that force them to take a break and then return to higher education. But the resilience of the women is apparent when they reported that they are determined to study and are willing to work to support their studies. This has significance with regard to the impact on their educational journey. 29 respondents are working either in part-time jobs or engaging in the Learn and Earn scheme of the University. Those who work in part time jobs are struggling due to family and society pressures like when returning home late and facing questions about their behaviour, character and dress.

One of the crucial aspects that facilitate young women to access educational facilities is the availability of affordable and safe transportation. Several respondents cited that transportation plays a key role in their ability to access higher education institutions. Largely the respondents used public transport to commute to university and colleges as they find it safe and secure. But most of the respondents had concerns about the low frequency of public transport that leads to them reaching late for classes.

Language hierarchy also plays a big role in limiting the opportunities a student's learning and access to future careers. The medium of higher education for the majority is Marathi medium, which is 52 out of 80, 23 are in English medium and only 5 are in semi-English medium. The students from Marathi medium expressed low self-esteem about their competencies than those students who are pursuing education in English medium. But as they move into the higher education process and make efforts to get good education, they are also becoming reflective and articulate about their rights. Several respondents have cited the unwavering support from their mothers and also their experiences which has inspired them to continue their education. For becoming independent the girls get inspiration from them in spite of the having different level of problems and they have been trying to overcome these situations.

As the data shows majority of the families are economically weak and therefore several of the SC women have to travel to colleges and University rather than stay in hostels. Most families are not able to support the respondents economically having low income in the family and lack of resources such as land, well paid job or any supplementary profession, even though they have strong a desire and willingness to send their daughters for education.

Communities play a significant role in creating obstacles for the SC girls in accessing education. Parents are under constant pressure by the community members and dominant castes comment and harass them in different ways. In the rural areas some of them still face humiliation because the daughters are allowed to go for higher education and at times they face the threatening of being boycotted by the society. Their own community

members pressurize the parents to get them married rather than send them for higher education. Some of them have the misconception that being highly educated, women invite trouble for the family and they may choose to marry out of caste. The threat perception that the women may choose their own partners and that too across different castes reflect the prevalence of casteism among the community members and the deep-seated patriarchal norms of gender.

It was perhaps for the first time that majority of them shared the stories of discrimination and struggles with someone i.e., the researcher, as they have been taught to keep silent about feeling uncomfortable about the abuse faced physically and mentally within the family. Another aspect was their fear of being withdrawn from college if they narrated their experiences of discrimination and harassment with their parents. Hence, they are not able to talk freely with them, as they found that if they do share with family they were blamed for it and advised to take preventive measures. Another major problem faced by the Scheduled caste students as compared to the upper caste woman, is a life full of the stigma of impurity, untouchability and being women who had less dignity and respect.

There is a difference regarding such perceptions among the Mahars and the other Scheduled Castes in the research. The Mahars are deeply influenced by the educational ideology of Dr. BR Ambedkar and it has created awareness among both the parents even if they are not educated. The parents have aspired to give good education to their children. But among other three caste respondents i.e., Chambhar, Mang and Dhor the same aspiration is not so strong especially for the girl's education and hence the women have struggled far more at the family and community levels to access higher education.

Since most respondents want to continue to study their ways of negotiation is of silence which in turn encourages indirect and hidden forms of humiliation and discrimination in family and society. Despite being economically constrained and socially deprived the respondents are aware about the fact that increasing the status of family is possible through a good job and financial security which they will get through higher education.

They have learnt to negotiate with difficult situation and discrimination they face within or out of the family. Indeed, the societal pressure and opposition has served to make them stronger and steadily move towards their goal for a better life free of discrimination and poverty.

One of the distinctive aspects of study finds that diversity helps them creating groups from similar background but at the same time it keeps others out. It was noticed that the SC women made friends from diverse backgrounds as it helps them to understand and learn about others culture and perspective. But it was noted that group discussion and exchange usually occur between similar socio-economic backgrounds.

4) Financial Struggles and Support for Higher Education

The key role of scholarships as an enabling factor for the respondents to go far higher education has been sharply brought out by this study. 77 out of 80 (96 Percentage) respondents are availing the post matric scholarship provided by the Government of India, and only 3 (4 percentage) failed to take advantage of it as they did not have the information or lacked knowledge about the online form submission process. Several of the respondents narrated that the scholarship helped them not only to continue their higher studies financially, but it enabled them to make informed choices and also break the gender and caste barriers which are perpetually creating obstacles for them to access higher education.

Asha (23 years old) said, *“Due to my family’s weak financial condition, both my parents go for daily wage labour and I manage all responsibility of household every day. My parents could not have agreed to continue my graduation if did not get scholarship support. Now I will get to complete my studies and they have also agreed for me to continue. I thankful to Government of India and it should continue this scholarship to encourage other girls who belong to the deprived section of the community”*.

Besides the scholarship the poorer respondents are supplementing their family incomes by taking up part time jobs. While majority of the respondents are utilising the scholarships, they have had a difficult time to actually get the grants due to a variety of reasons. This has compounded their already existing problems with regard to accessing

higher education as has been highlighted in the earlier. That discrimination on the basis of caste is still quite prevalent in society and in educational institutions and this impacts their self-esteem, performance and access to a nurturing and productive educational environment.

Despite these constraints the women are aware about the opportunity that higher education provides them to take responsibility of themselves and to some extent of their families. Through education women are getting empowered. While they are acquiring confidence and skills to be independent thinking they are struggling with family's gendered restrictions.

5) Experiences of Availing Institutional facilities in Higher Education for SCs

The study has revealed some very significant aspects of higher educational institutions and the insidious forms of discrimination and exclusion that Scheduled Caste students face in their journeys through education. 36 out of 80 respondents have been humiliated being scheduled caste while applying for and availing the scholarship. 16 have said that they have had troubles with online form submission because of lack of internet accessibility and financial limitations, 13 have complained that they have been getting their scholarship amounts late, 6 said their application has been rejected due some documentation which they were not aware and also did not get any guidance, 5 have faced issues regarding their caste certificates, 4 have said that because of lack of documentation validity of their caste certificate hence they struggled with getting the scholarship and one mentioned that she didn't get the income certificate on time so her scholarship application was rejected.

The women therefore are reminded time and again about their caste and the humiliation that they are subjected to a variety of discriminatory behaviours. Some of these are:

Need to Hide identity: Some respondents shared that they try to hide their identity as they get isolated and are insulted. They continue fighting for their self-image and self-esteem in the elite college environment and society. Though they struggle they have also learned to stand for self-dignity and right decision for the life

Feeling inferior: Many of the respondents have found it challenging to adjust to the surroundings and felt very nervous while entering the classroom the first day. It has taken some of them more than a year of feeling discouraged, lack of confidence, fear of failure and a constant impact on their academic performance to be able to move forward.

Excluded as women, as lower caste and as poor : They are neglected emotionally by being treated as inferior because of being girls. This is normative unequal attitude is replicated in the educational institutions and is complicated by the intersectional discrimination of caste and economic deprivation faced by the women. Most of the respondents have reported this triple discrimination in their lives and their educational journeys.

Verbal abuse and mental torture based on caste: They are subjected to verbal and mental torture such as blaming, insulting, treated as inferior within and out of the campus from peer group and upper caste members of the society.

Hidden and indirect discrimination: Due to the changing form of the more classist and intellectual hierarchy of work, profession and grades in the education there are indirect forms of the discrimination. Getting less grades due to language issues, not being able to speak well in class, fear of authority and hence inability to ask for clarifications, being taunted for using reservation and other affirmative action programmes all act together to exclude SC women in higher education spaces. This has led to some of the respondents to reflect the majority notion on reservations which they feel need to be given on the basis of income. The double jeopardy of identity and gender continues to percolate into the higher education system despite legal provisions within the Constitution.

6) Lack of Effective Implementation of Special Programmes by Educational institution

There are six facilities are provided which are specially for SC and ST students, which are Educational Loan, Pre-admission orientation program, Center for Competitive Exam, Book Bank Loan, Reimbursement scheme for conference travel. Amongst the students, only 34 have availed SC/ST Cell facility. Very few students have availed other facilities which are Educational Loan, Pre-admissions orientation Program, center for competitive

exam, Book Bank Loan, Reimbursement scheme for conference travel. In higher education institutions academic performance plays a vital role in succeeding and motivating students to the study and work hard. This is enabled by providing students from marginalized backgrounds added incentives. The ability to do well stems from the ready availability of these facilities. However, very few respondents have availed these. Several of them are either not aware of these or are unable to use them to strengthen their academic outcomes.

There is unweans and absence of guidance and counselling for career during admissions and after completion of course. For increasing the academic performance and confidence, the need of English language training and soft skill training is necessary. As first-generation learner they need remedial classes for better academic performance. This will also help them to get over their learning difficulties

Conclusion and Way Forward:

Even though the discrimination based on caste, class and gender are abolished in the Constitution of India the situation for Scheduled Castes has not changed much. The casteist attitudes and behaviours percolate the educational system and also amongst peers. There is considerable resentment regarding affirmative actions and there is a subtle process of ensuring that programs do not reach the SC students on time. This is apparent from the indirect forms of the discrimination reported by the respondents. While this is the overall situation the SC women are also subjected to patriarchal norms and behaviours which govern their mobility and access to higher education, from within their own communities and families. Most of them, though aware of the unequal treatment meted out to them by the social structure caste-based hierarchy and have learnt to normalise them. They are clear that they need to move on whatever ways to educate themselves and work their way through the hierarchy for bettering their lives.

For majority of the respondents economic deprivation is main reason for the inequality in education access and inability to complete their studies in time. It is a cycle of poverty and caste based exclusion that needs to be addressed by the State and the educational

institutions to facilitate the education of these students because it means getting a secure job and salary and thereby reduction of family poverty. Similarly, affirmative actions as given in the laws and policy serve to reduce the gap between rich and poor, hence privatization of higher education will only deprive such respondents from accessing quality higher education facilities.

It is quite clear that SC women students need support for improving their academic performance as it is essential for them to compete with the elite and privileged for their professional and career success. This is an important role that all educational institutions need to play and keep them inspiring for further study. Hence, they need to initiate pre-admission orientation, remedial classes and even career guidance while completing their education. It is the responsibility of the educational university to ensure adequate awareness generation of the specific programmes, reaching out to the SC students and also creating an environment where discriminatory behaviours are not tolerated. The present study has raised several questions about the internal part of the educational process which are in terms of the finding the best educational institution, empathetic professors, administrators and peer group. The study has brought out the stories of discrimination and how that impacts their self-esteem and inability to perform well in their studies.

Finally, what is extremely significant is the resilience and determination of the SC women students to continue to be part of higher education and aspire for an independent life. Despite all difficulties and adversities, they have been negotiating within their families, communities and educational institutions to get what is their due. Almost all of them are using the Government Of India scholarship to finance their education. Most of all the influence of Dr. B R Ambedkar is visible in these families where parents, especially the mothers believe that education is a pathway to liberation and empowerment for their daughters.

Recommendations and Policy Implications of the Study:

This study has highlighted the SC women's need and willingness to engage in higher education and most of all to negotiate through the adversities created by the intersections of caste, gender and class. In such a scenario it is imperative that the mandates laid down in the Constitution and flowing from the same the policies and programmes to facilitate the SC women students must be implemented with rigour. Therefore, some of the recommendations that emerge are:

- 1. Financial Issues:** Due to financial weak conditions respondents can't afford to pay hostel and food payment even though the charges are nominal. There should be a system to stagger the payments or facilitate the same through Scholarships.
- 2. Regular disbursement of GOI scholarship** which plays a vital role in supporting and encouraging the girls for participating in higher education. The regular and timely disbursement of the same should be ensured by the state and institutions of higher education and any difficulties faced by the students should be addressed timely. Prejudices about the SC students should be addressed, trouble with online submission of forms, getting a Caste certificate, lack of proper documentation of caste validity certificates all need to be facilitated to make the task of students easy.
- 3. Create awareness and do outreach with SC students with regard to specific affirmative programmes:** Awareness about the SC/ST Cell, Women Development Cell, book bank and other facilities will lead to their better participation of SC students in higher education especially of the girls. **Provision of Guidance and Soft skills training:** Guidance during admissions and after completion of course and need to increases the facilities to the woman for same issues.
- 4. As the medium of instruction** is an important factor for the SC students to lag behind. They are coming from the socially and economically vulnerable

background and have largely studied in the vernacular and regional languages. Hence institutions should provide remedial English learning classes to enable them to learn the language.

5. **Lack of convenient, affordable and safe transportation:** Most of the parent do hesitate to send their daughters at hostel due to financial and social constraints. Institutions can provide some form of transportation in addition to the public transportation.
6. **Lack of motivational support and encouragement at the educational institution:** Educational institutions especially faculty and staff need to be oriented to the requirements of such students. They need to develop empathy and recognize the needs of the students belonging to socio-economical marginalities, specially SC girls. Building their confidence and skills in reading, writing and speaking should be a major role for faculty members.
7. **Institutions Engagement with Parents:** Institutions need to ensure active engagement with parents and society through outreach and field work so that there is a continuum of support available for SC woman students.

This study has been a rich journey for the researcher and the researched. It has revealed the need for higher education institutions to work towards a gender equal and non-discriminatory environment to encourage SC women students to study further. The women have resilience, courage and determination overcome all obstacles for accessing higher education and therefore, if Constitutional guarantees are implemented properly they can change their lives for better.