

Challenges Faced by Scheduled Caste Students in Higher Education in India

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ABSTRACT

Higher education plays a significant role in promoting social mobility, economic empowerment, and democratic participation. In India, however, access to higher education remains unevenly distributed across social groups due to the enduring influence of caste-based hierarchies. Scheduled Castes (SCs), historically subjected to social exclusion and discrimination, continue to face significant barriers in accessing and sustaining participation in higher education despite constitutional safeguards and affirmative action policies. This paper examines the major challenges faced by SC students in higher education in India using secondary data drawn from government reports, national surveys, and existing scholarly literature. The study analyzes patterns of enrolment, socio-economic constraints, institutional limitations, caste-based discrimination, psychological stress, and the impact of privatization. The findings reveal that structural inequalities, economic deprivation, and subtle forms of discrimination continue to marginalize SC students within higher education institutions. The paper argues for the need to move beyond access-based policies towards inclusive institutional reforms that ensure equity, dignity, and academic success for SC students.

Keywords: Scheduled Castes, Higher Education, Caste Inequality, Social Exclusion, India

INTRODUCTION

Education has long been recognized as a powerful instrument for social transformation and upward mobility. In India, higher education is particularly significant for historically marginalized communities such as SCs, who have been subjected to centuries of social exclusion, discrimination, and economic deprivation. The caste system, a rigid form of social stratification, continues to shape life chances and access to resources, including education, employment, and social networks (Ambedkar, 1936; Thorat, 2006).

Post-independence India adopted several constitutional measures to promote educational inclusion among marginalized communities. Articles 15(4), 15(5), and 46 of the Indian Constitution mandate the state to promote the educational and economic interests of SC and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Affirmative action policies such as reservations in admissions, scholarships, hostels, and fee concessions were introduced to reduce caste-based disparities in higher education. Despite these interventions, SC students remain underrepresented in prestigious institutions and continue to experience systemic disadvantages (Beteille, 2012; Borah, 2023).

The expansion of higher education in India has been significant over the last few decades. According to the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE, 2021–22), total enrolment increased to 4.33 crore students. However, this numerical expansion has not translated into substantive equality. SCs constitute only 15.3% of total enrolment, which remains disproportionately low given their population share. Moreover, SC students face higher dropout rates, lower completion rates, and poorer academic outcomes compared to their upper-caste peers (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008).

This paper seeks to analyze the challenges faced by SC students in higher education in India using secondary data. It aims to examine how socio-economic constraints, institutional factors, discrimination, and policy limitations intersect to shape the educational experiences of SC students.

Objectives of the Study:

The present study has been undertaken with following objectives

- To examine enrolment patterns of SC students in higher education in India
- To analyze the socio-economic challenges affecting access and retention
- To explore institutional and structural barriers within higher education institutions
- To understand experiences of caste-based discrimination and marginalization
- To assess the impact of privatization on SC participation in higher education

METHODOLOGY

The research design for the present study is descriptive in nature. The present study is based on secondary data. Data have been collected from Government publications such as AISHE, NSS, Census of India, UGC reports, books and research articles related to caste and education. With help of thematic approach efforts have been made to identify recurring patterns and challenges faced by SC students in higher education.

RESULTS

India has witnessed a substantial expansion in higher education since the 1980s. Azam and Bloom (2008) documented that between 1983 and 2004, tertiary education attainment among individuals aged 25–34 doubled from 4.4% to 8.8%, while enrolment increased from 7.6% to 12.6%. Despite this growth, disparities across caste lines continue to persist. This argument can be established through following table.

Enrolment Patterns of SC Students in Higher Education in India: AISHE-Based Trends

Table 1: Year-wise Total Enrolment and SC Enrolment in Higher Education (India)

Academic Year	Total Enrolment (in crore)	SC Enrolment (in lakh)	Percentage of SC Enrolment (%)
2014–15	3.42	51.1	14.9
2015–16	3.46	52.5	15.2
2016–17	3.67	55.2	15.0
2017–18	3.74	57.3	15.3
2018–19	3.74	59.3	15.9
2019–20	3.85	62.0	16.1
2020–21	4.14	63.8	15.4
2021–22	4.33	66.2	15.3

Source: All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), Ministry of Education, Government of India

Table 2: Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) by Social Group (Recent Estimates)

Social Group	GER (%)
Scheduled Castes (SC)	23–24
Scheduled Tribes	18–19
Other Backward Classes (OBC)	26–27
General Category	30–32
All India (Average)	27.3

Source: AISHE (2021–22)

The year-wise AISHE data clearly indicate that SC enrolment in higher education has increased steadily in absolute numbers, rising from 51.1 lakh in 2014–15 to 66.23 lakh in 2021–22. However, the percentage share of SC students has remained same with around 15–16%, which is less than their population proportion.

Raju (2008) found that general category students have the highest participation rates in higher education, followed by OBCs, SCs, and STs. The Gross Enrolment Ratio for SCs remains significantly lower than that of the general category, reflecting unequal access despite expansion. Moreover, SC participation declines sharply at postgraduate and research levels, suggesting that reservation policies are more effective at entry-level access than at ensuring academic progression.

Institutional data further reveal that SC students are largely concentrated in public institutions and general degree programmes, with limited representation in elite and professional institutions. Gender and rural–urban divides further intensify exclusion, particularly for SC women.

Overall, the table-based evidence confirms that while quantitative expansion has occurred, qualitative and structural inequalities persist, limiting equitable participation of SC students in higher education. Disparities are more pronounced at higher levels of education. While SC participation is relatively better at the undergraduate level, it declines sharply at postgraduate and research levels. Desai and Kulkarni (2008) observed that although reservation policies facilitate entry into undergraduate programmes, SC students are significantly underrepresented in postgraduate courses, professional degrees, and doctoral programmes.

Data from AISHE show that SC students are concentrated in general degree programmes (Arts, Commerce, and Science) and are underrepresented in professional and technical education, including engineering, medicine, and management. Azam and Bloom (2008) similarly found that expansion in tertiary education did not translate into equal participation across caste groups, particularly in elite and high-return fields of study.

Studies reveal that SC students are disproportionately enrolled in state universities, affiliated colleges, and rural institutions, while their representation in central universities, IITs, IIMs, and private elite institutions remains limited (Jodhka & Newman, 2007; Deshpande, 2013). Ghuman et al. (2009), in their study of professional education in rural Punjab, found that nearly three-fourths of students in professional courses belonged to upper-caste backgrounds, with SC and ST students accounting for only a quarter.

Socio-economic status plays a decisive role in shaping access to and retention in higher education in India. Caste and class remain deeply intertwined, with SC households disproportionately represented among economically marginalized groups (Thorat & Newman, 2010). Historical exclusion from land ownership, formal employment, and social capital has resulted in persistent intergenerational poverty among SC communities, directly affecting their educational participation and outcomes.

Evidence from the National Sample Survey (NSS) consistently shows that economic constraints significantly limit the ability of SC students to pursue education beyond the secondary level (Chakrabarty, 2009). The cost of higher education including tuition fees, examination charges, textbooks, transportation, and accommodation poses a substantial barrier for SC households with limited and irregular incomes. Even in public institutions where tuition fees are relatively low, hidden costs often make continuation in higher education financially unsustainable.

Weisskopf (2004) observed that SC and ST students typically come from households characterized by low income, inadequate housing, food insecurity, and limited access to educational resources such as books, private tutoring, and digital tools. These material disadvantages translate into lower academic preparedness and higher vulnerability to dropout. Poverty often compels SC students to engage in wage labour or household income-generating activities, reducing the time and energy available for academic engagement (Chanana, 1993). This “double burden” of study and work significantly affects attendance, academic performance, and psychological well-being.

Parental occupation and employment insecurity further shape access and retention. Bhoi (2013) and Churiyana (2017) noted that parents of SC students, particularly girls, are predominantly engaged in unskilled and low-paying manual occupations such as agriculture, construction work, scavenging, mining, cobblery, and casual wage labour. These occupations are characterized by income instability, lack of social security, and seasonal unemployment. As a result, families often struggle to support long-term educational investments, especially at the higher education level, where returns are delayed.

First-generation learners constitute a large proportion of SC students in higher education (Nambissan, 2016). The absence of educated family members limits access to academic guidance, information about institutional processes, scholarships, and career pathways. Desai and Kulkarni (2008) emphasized that first-generation SC students face difficulties navigating admission procedures, examination systems, and academic expectations, which adversely affects retention.

Gender further intensifies socio-economic constraints. SC women experience compounded disadvantages due to the intersection of caste, class, and gender. Economic hardship often leads families to prioritize sons' education over daughters', particularly in contexts of limited financial resources (Jeffery & Basu, 1996). Additionally, costs associated with safe accommodation, transportation, and hostels disproportionately affect SC women, contributing to higher dropout rates.

The digital divide has emerged as a significant socio-economic barrier in recent years. Studies indicate that SC students have lower access to digital devices, reliable internet connectivity, and digital literacy compared to upper-caste students (Tilak, 2020). The shift toward online education, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbated existing inequalities, leading to exclusion and learning loss among economically disadvantaged SC students.

Scholarship schemes and financial aid, though crucial, often suffer from delayed disbursement, inadequate coverage, and bureaucratic hurdles. Several studies (UGC, 2019; Madan, 2020) report that delays in scholarship payments force SC students to borrow money, skip semesters, or drop out altogether. Inadequate awareness about available schemes further limits their effectiveness.

Retention is also affected by the opportunity cost of education. For many SC households, higher education represents a loss of immediate income that could otherwise contribute to family survival. Wankhede (2016) argued that when education fails to provide short-term economic security, marginalized students are more likely to discontinue their studies, reinforcing cycles of poverty and exclusion.

Thus, socio-economic challenges affecting SC students extend beyond mere affordability. They encompass structural poverty, occupational vulnerability, first-generation disadvantages, gendered expectations, digital exclusion, and weak financial support systems. Together, these factors significantly constrain both access to and retention in higher education, underscoring the need for comprehensive socio-economic interventions alongside educational reforms.

Gender and Intersectional Disadvantages

SC women face compounded disadvantages due to the intersection of caste, class, and gender. Studies show that SC female enrolment in higher education remains lower than that of SC males and upper-caste females (Jeffery & Basu, 1996; Desai et al., 2010). Early marriage, household responsibilities, safety concerns, and lack of hostels further restrict their participation.

Bhoi (2013) highlighted that parental occupation and education significantly affect the continuation of SC girls in higher education. Gendered expectations often prioritize sons' education over daughters', reinforcing educational inequalities. Chauchard (2014) emphasized that Dalit girls often bear the brunt of family pressures, particularly in contexts where economic resources are limited. When financial difficulties arise, families prioritize the education of male children, leaving girls with limited access to the educational support they need.

Sabharwal and Sonalkar (2015) explained that Dalit women in India face a "triple burden" of gender bias, caste discrimination, and economic hardship. Due to this triple burden, they perform worse than both Dalit men and non-Dalit women in areas like literacy and life expectancy. Similarly, Babu and Chandrasekarayy (2015) stated that SCs continue to face significant educational and socio-economic disadvantages, because of factors such as poverty, landlessness, and low income, which are both a cause and consequence of their limited educational opportunities.

Many studies highlighted that the dual burden of poverty and caste-related barriers significantly impacts SC youth, particularly Dalit women, leading to higher dropout rates and limited participation in the educational system (Das & Lalitha, 2023; Mastkar & Sharma, 2022; Nagaraja et al., 2023). Ganjikutna and Kadavakollu (2022) emphasized that for many low-income families, the pursuit of long-term education for girls is not seen as a priority, and the education of daughters is often sacrificed in favour of more immediate financial needs. Dutta (2024) highlighted that due to a lack of resources, primarily caused by financial constraints, SC/ST girls face significant academic challenges that hinder their ability to keep up with coursework and meet academic expectations. Francis et al. (2020) emphasized that about 40% of respondents point to the high cost of education as a key obstacle, 10 % said they have a Poor family background and other reasons. Rani (2023) argued that Dalit women from financially stable families with robust support systems are more likely to pursue higher education. These women benefit from a combination of economic resources and family encouragement, which enables them to continue their studies beyond the basic level.

Institutional and Structural Barriers

Higher education institutions in India continue to grapple with a range of systemic and structural challenges that undermine educational quality and equity. Key issues include inadequate physical infrastructure, shortages of qualified faculty, outdated and rigid curricula, overcrowded classrooms, and weak academic governance (Singh, 2011; Chahal & Dar, 2015). These structural deficiencies affect all students, but their consequences are disproportionately severe for students from marginalized communities such as SCs, who depend heavily on institutional support mechanisms for academic and social mobility.

Faculty shortages remain a persistent concern in Indian higher education. According to the University Grants Commission (UGC), a significant proportion of teaching positions in central and state universities remain vacant, leading to high student–teacher ratios and reduced academic engagement (UGC, 2020). Tilak (2012) observed that faculty shortages particularly affect public institutions that cater to socially disadvantaged students, resulting in limited academic mentoring and weak classroom interaction. For SC students, who often come from first-generation learner households, the absence of adequate faculty support hampers comprehension, skill development, and academic confidence.

Outdated curricula and pedagogical practices further exacerbate institutional exclusion. Singh (2011) argued that higher education curricula in India remain largely theoretical, examination-oriented, and disconnected from students' socio-economic realities. Such pedagogical rigidity disadvantages SC students, who may lack prior academic exposure, language proficiency, and cultural capital required to navigate abstract and elitist academic content (Jodhka, 2012). Studies by Deshpande (2013) and Reay et al. (2010) suggest that when teaching methods fail to accommodate diverse learning backgrounds, marginalized students are more likely to experience alienation and poor academic outcomes.

Overcrowding in classrooms and hostels is another structural issue affecting the learning environment. Chahal and Dar (2015) noted that rapid expansion of enrolment without proportional investment in infrastructure has resulted in congested classrooms, inadequate laboratories, libraries, and student housing. SC students, many of whom rely on public hostels due to financial constraints, face difficulties in securing accommodation, which negatively affects attendance and academic continuity (UGC, 2019).

Jaysawal et al. (2023) emphasized that despite policy commitments, challenges related to access, equity, and affordability remain unresolved in Indian higher education. While reservation policies facilitate entry, they do not adequately address issues of retention, academic integration, and institutional support. SC students often lack access to mentoring programmes, remedial coaching, language support, and career guidance, which are crucial for navigating higher education environments (UGC, 2019; Desai & Kulkarni, 2008).

Empirical studies have shown that remedial and mentoring programmes, where available, are poorly implemented and inadequately funded. Nambissan (2016) observed that special support schemes for SC students often exist only on paper, with limited outreach and ineffective monitoring. As a result, SC students struggle with academic workload, assessment methods, and competitive evaluation systems, leading to higher dropout rates and lower completion levels (MHRD, 2018).

Moreover, institutional cultures in many higher education settings remain exclusionary. Jodhka and Newman (2007) argued that universities often reflect upper-caste norms and values, which marginalize students from Dalit backgrounds. The absence of sensitization among faculty and administrators further perpetuates subtle forms of bias, discouraging SC students from seeking academic help or participating in classroom discussions (Bhoi, 2022).

Thus, institutional and structural inadequacies in Indian higher education not only limit academic quality but also reinforce existing social inequalities. Without targeted reforms aimed at strengthening infrastructure, filling faculty vacancies, modernizing curricula, and institutionalizing inclusive academic support systems, higher education will continue to remain an unequal space for Scheduled Caste students.

Caste-Based Discrimination and Campus Climate

Caste-based discrimination in higher education institutions in India is often subtle, normalized, and embedded within institutional practices rather than expressed through overt acts of untouchability. While explicit caste exclusion has reduced due to constitutional safeguards and legal provisions, discrimination continues to operate through indirect mechanisms such as social exclusion, stereotyping, academic neglect, and differential treatment by peers and faculty (Jodhka, 2012). These forms of discrimination create hostile campus environments that adversely affect the academic performance, psychological well-being, and sense of belonging of SC students.

Jodhka (2012) argued that Indian universities largely reflect upper-caste social norms, cultural values, and linguistic practices, which marginalize students from Dalit backgrounds. SC students often experience exclusion in classrooms, hostels, and informal social spaces, limiting their participation in academic discussions and peer networks. Such exclusion reinforces feelings of alienation and reinforces existing power hierarchies within educational spaces.

Tierney et al. (2018) emphasized that SC students face systemic disadvantages due to limited access to social networks and cultural capital that are critical for academic success. These networks often provide informal academic support, information about internships, research opportunities, and career pathways. The absence of such social capital places SC students at a disadvantage, even when formal access through reservation policies is ensured.

Narwana and Gill (2020) identified a “hidden culture of silence” within higher education institutions, wherein Dalit students refrain from reporting discrimination due to fear of retaliation, social isolation, or institutional inaction. This culture is reinforced by weak grievance redressal mechanisms and the lack of sensitization among faculty and administrators. As a result, discriminatory practices often go unchallenged, perpetuating an environment of impunity.

The psychological consequences of caste-based discrimination are severe and long-lasting. Komanapalli and Rao (2020) documented cases of caste-based harassment, humiliation, and institutional neglect experienced by Dalit students, linking these experiences to mental health distress, anxiety, depression, and in extreme cases, student suicides. They argued that institutional apathy and the absence of accountability mechanisms exacerbate vulnerability among SC students, particularly those who are first-generation learners and economically disadvantaged.

Bhoi (2022) reported the prevalence of everyday discrimination against SC students in higher education institutions. His study revealed that 74% of SC students reported experiencing caste-based segregation in academic or residential spaces, 68% encountered caste-based verbal abuse or derogatory slurs, 65% faced marginalization due to language, dress, accent, or body language and 68% reported the absence of effective grievance redressal mechanisms in their institutions. According to him, discrimination is widespread and systemic issue affecting the daily lives of SC students. Judgments based on speech patterns, physical appearance, and economic background often serve as markers of caste identity, reinforcing stigma and exclusion (Bhoi, 2022).

Several studies indicate that SC students are sometimes perceived as “less meritorious” due to their entry through reservation, leading to biased evaluation, lack of mentoring, and discouragement from pursuing research and leadership roles (Deshpande, 2013; Jodhka & Newman, 2007).

It can be argued that caste-based discrimination and hostile campus climates significantly hinder the academic integration and well-being of SC students. In order to addressing these challenges institutional reforms such as mandatory sensitization programmes, transparent grievance redressal mechanisms, inclusive pedagogy, and mental health support systems are required. Without transforming campus cultures, higher education institutions will continue to reproduce caste inequalities rather than dismantle them.

Privatization and Marketization of Higher Education

The rapid privatization of higher education in India has significantly altered the structure, accessibility, and objectives of the sector. While privatization has contributed to the expansion of institutions and seats, it has simultaneously intensified inequalities by privileging market-driven logic over social justice concerns. This shift has had particularly adverse consequences for SC students, who already face economic and social disadvantages (Tilak, 2015).

Table 2: SC Enrolment in Public vs Private Institutions by Level of Education

Level of Education	Public Institutions (%)	Private Institutions (%)
Undergraduate	82	18
Postgraduate	85	15
Professional & Technical Courses	70	30
Research (M.Phil./PhD)	90	10

Source: AISHE; Desai & Kulkarni (2008); Deshpande (2013)

Private higher education institutions typically charge substantially higher tuition fees compared to public universities, making them largely inaccessible to students from low-income households. Since a significant proportion of SC families rely on unstable and low-paying occupations, the rising cost of private education acts as a major barrier to access (Thorat & Newman, 2010). Even where private institutions offer scholarships or fee concessions, these are often limited, merit-based, or discretionary, thereby excluding students who lack prior academic advantages.

Tilak (2015) argued that privatization has shifted the burden of financing higher education from the state to households, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. In the absence of adequate public investment, SC students are increasingly compelled to either opt out of higher education altogether or enroll in low-quality institutions that offer limited academic and employment returns. This trend has contributed to the stratification of higher education, wherein elite and professional programmes are dominated by upper-caste and economically privileged groups.

Bhoi (2013) critically examined the impact of privatization on social equity and argued that private institutions often fail to effectively implement reservation policies mandated for public institutions. Weak regulatory oversight, ambiguous policy frameworks, and legal loopholes allow many private colleges, particularly in professional and technical fields, to bypass social inclusion mandates. As a result, SC students remain underrepresented in engineering, medical, and management education, which are increasingly dominated by private providers.

The commodification of higher education has also redefined students as consumers rather than citizens with educational rights. This market-oriented approach prioritizes profitability, rankings, and employability metrics over inclusivity and social responsibility (Tilak, 2012). For SC students, this shift reduces education to a financial transaction, where access is determined by purchasing power rather than merit or social need.

Several studies have highlighted that privatization exacerbates retention challenges as well. SC students who manage to enroll in private institutions often struggle with recurring fees, additional charges, and lack of

institutional support, leading to stress and higher dropout rates (Beteille, 2012). Unlike public universities, many private institutions lack adequate grievance redressal mechanisms, academic counseling services, and inclusive support systems for marginalized students.

Furthermore, privatization has implications for the quality of education accessed by SC students. Deshpande (2013) observed that marginalized students are often concentrated in lower-tier private institutions with poor infrastructure, contractual faculty, and limited research orientation. Such institutional segmentation reinforces existing inequalities and limits upward mobility.

In this context, privatization not only restricts access but also undermines the broader objectives of social justice enshrined in India's higher education policy framework. Without strong regulatory mechanisms, increased public investment, and mandatory enforcement of inclusion policies across both public and private institutions, privatization risks deepening caste-based inequalities rather than alleviating them.

Policy Limitations and Implementation Gaps

Although policies exist to support SC students, implementation remains weak. Scholarships are often delayed, hostels are inadequate, and grievance redressal mechanisms are ineffective (UGC, 2020). Madan (2020) noted that caste-based disparities are more pronounced among economically disadvantaged households.

Wankhede (2016) argued that educational policies alone are insufficient to dismantle caste-based exclusion unless they are accompanied by broader efforts to address social marginalization and institutional culture. Discrimination embedded in everyday interactions, academic evaluation, and administrative practices often negates the benefits of formal policy measures. Without institutional sensitization, faculty training, and accountability, policies risk becoming procedural formalities rather than instruments of social justice.

Additionally, monitoring and evaluation of policy outcomes remain weak. There is limited systematic data on dropout rates, academic performance, and post-graduation outcomes of SC students, which restricts evidence-based policymaking (Tilak, 2015). The absence of disaggregated data hampers the identification of gaps and the formulation of targeted interventions.

In sum, while policies supporting SC students in higher education are comprehensive in design, their impact is diluted by implementation failures, resource constraints, and persistent social biases. Bridging the gap between policy and practice requires strengthening administrative mechanisms, ensuring timely financial support, enhancing institutional accountability, and addressing the deeper social structures that reproduce caste-based exclusion.

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that SC students in India continue to face persistent challenges in higher education despite affirmative action and expansion of educational institutions. Economic deprivation, caste-based discrimination, institutional weaknesses, and privatization collectively undermine educational equity.

To ensure meaningful inclusion, policy interventions must move beyond access to focus on retention, dignity, and academic success. Strengthening financial aid, enforcing anti-discrimination mechanisms, promoting inclusive campus cultures, and regulating privatization are essential steps toward social justice in higher education.

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