



Navigating Challenges: A Sociological Study Of Dalit Women's Experiences In Higher Education In Odisha

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Abstract: This study provides an in-depth analysis of Dalit women's experiences in higher educational institution in Odisha. It investigates Dalit women's challenges within educational institutions, focusing on access to education and opportunities. The study specifically addresses the dual impact of caste and gender-based inequality, highlighting how these forms of inequality intersect to create unique obstacles for Dalit women in their pursuit of education. By examining these complexities, the research seeks to shed light on the broader societal implications and inform strategies to improve educational outcomes for this marginalized group. This qualitative and descriptive research study focuses on 11 Dalit women from a regional university in Odisha. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling for diverse representation. Data was gathered via in-depth interviews, which were analyzed and analyzed thematically to identify key themes and patterns. This method offered insights into the socio-cultural context and nuances of the women's lived experiences. The study found that they face major challenges related to caste biases. The finding shows the reservation system support girls' education encourages them to pursue higher education; however, at the same time, it has used a weapon against these Dalit students.

Keyword - Dalit Women, Higher Education, Gender, Caste

1.INTRODUCTION

Education is vital to achieving equal opportunity, as it fosters individual growth, enhances social mobility (Soni, 2023), and promotes economic empowerment for oppressed, Dalit, and marginalised communities (Sharma et al., 2023). Despite its potential, the Indian education system has historically fallen short of fully realising these aspirations. This paper examines Dalit women's unique challenges as they seek to carve out their own democratic space and establish their identities within higher education institutions. It delves into their experiences, motivations, and the barriers they confront in academia, highlighting their aspirations and the contributions they wish to make in the academic world. The study also aims to investigate why Dalit women continue to represent only a small fraction of the student population in higher education after more than seventy years of independence. By analysing these issues, the research seeks to offer insights into the systemic barriers and societal attitudes that inhibit the full participation of Dalit women in educational settings, ultimately advocating for greater inclusivity and representation.

The pervasive influence of Brahmanical hegemony has led to the marginalization of Dalit women, significantly limiting their access to education, particularly at higher levels. Dalit women of India have been the greatest challenge in ensuring access to education for the for the Indian government to reduce the social effects of the caste system, which remains rooted in Indian society (Kumar, 2015, p.826). In addition to facing oppression from Brahmanical structures, these women also encounter challenges within their communities (Paik, 2014). Consequently, Dalit women remain profoundly underrepresented in higher education and various areas of society. Despite their strong aspirations to pursue educational opportunities, they frequently find themselves compelled to abandon them.

The low participation and enrolment rates among Dalit women do not reflect a lack of interest; rather, they highlight the numerous obstacles that impede their access to higher education. Dalit women navigate a complex landscape filled with structural barriers related to class, caste, gender, and patriarchy, all of which obstruct their paths to achieving their educational goals.

2.DALIT WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Kar and Kar (1999) examined dropout rates among low-income families in rural Odisha, focusing on the impact of specific socio-economic factors on female education. Their study sampled participants from the 13 undivided districts of the state, categorizing them according to the educational attainment of females. One significant finding was that greater distances to workplaces hindered women's educational opportunities. Additionally, the research indicated that families with more members often required women to spend more time on household responsibilities. In contrast, families with more female members supported educational attainment better. The study also revealed that upper-caste women were generally more educated than those from Scheduled Castes (S.C.) and Scheduled Tribes (S.T.), a disparity rooted in the caste or tribe into which individuals were born. John (2012) further noted that factors such as caste, gender, and religion contribute to these disadvantages, highlighting the complex and often elusive nature of gender discrimination faced by women from various groups. Moreover, Bhoi (2011) pointed out that privatization has exacerbated socio-educational inequalities by diminishing the effectiveness of the state's affirmative action and reservation policies, thereby limiting opportunities for the socio-educational advancement of marginalised communities.

Paltasingh (2004) argues that the empirical study has mainly analysed the role of gender socialisation in shaping the career and educational orientation of the young students of Odisha. Further, she argues that the existing system of education not only reduces the social class and power structure and prevailing gender disparities. The achievement of an educational system can only be noticed if it does not artificially limit thoughts and abilities based on gender, class and caste. Of course, it is a difficult task, but attempting to bridge the gap is crucial. An educational system that is free from sexism, casteism, classism, and racism is crucial in the broader struggle for the liberation of Dalit women, and it should be given priority. Research in Odisha highlights that girls face significant disadvantages in their educational participation at all levels (Paltasingh, 2004).

Concerning the variable factors affecting the pursuit of higher education, a high degree of variation exists among women and men across gender, caste, class and family backgrounds. According to Mishra (2011), she found that the performance of Dalit girls is lower than that of upper-caste girls. She has also argued

that Dalit students are hurt and humiliated by the apathetic attitude of Savarna students (2011). There are significant and pronounced regional disparities in Odisha, particularly affecting marginalized communities such as Dalit and Adivasis, who face some of the highest levels of discrimination in the country. Several factors contribute to these disparities, including educational backwardness, which is prevalent across nearly all districts in Odisha. This lack of access to quality education exacerbates the issues of inequality, making it a pressing concern for both rural and urban populations.

In rural areas, implementing educational programs and policies often needs more active participation from local communities, which diminishes their effectiveness. Similar issues can arise in urban settings, as educational initiatives may not adequately address the specific needs of disadvantaged groups (Sailaba, 2004).

To understand educational inequality comprehensively, it is important to assess enrolment rates by calculating the percentage of individuals from different population groups who are enrolled in various educational levels, such as primary, secondary, and tertiary education. This approach examines socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and geographic location, which can significantly influence enrolment patterns. By analyzing these rates, researchers and policymakers can identify disparities in educational access and achievement among diverse demographics. Such insights are crucial for developing targeted strategies aimed at promoting equity in education and ensuring that all individuals have the opportunity to succeed academically, regardless of their background.

This analysis focuses on higher education enrolment trends among individuals aged 18 to 23, specifically within the context of the general population. It will emphasize the participation rates of men and women from Scheduled Castes (S.C.s) and Scheduled Tribes (S.T.s). By examining this data, I aim to highlight the educational disparities experienced by these communities, ultimately fostering a deeper understanding of the challenges they face and promoting the pursuit of more equitable educational solutions.

Table Gross Enrolment Ratio in Higher Education in Odisha (18-23 Years) from 2011 to 2014

S.I. No.	All Category			SC			ST		
	Male	Female	total	Male	female	Total	Male	female	total
2011-2012	18.3	15.0	16.6	10.0	8.4	9.2	7.2	6.0	6.6
India	22.1	19.4	20.8	15.8	13.9	14.9	12.4	9.7	11.0
2012-2013	16.7	14.1	15.4	9.2	7.9	8.5	6.6	5.6	6.1
India	22.3	19.8	21.1	16.0	14.2	15.1	12.4	9.7	11.0
2013-2014	18.0	14.8	16.4	11.4	9.6	10.5	7.4	6.0	6.7
India	23.9	22.0	23.0	17.7	16.4	17.1	12.5	10.2	11.3

(All India Survey on Higher Education 2011-14)

The table above illustrates that gross enrolment in higher education for the 18-23 age group in Odisha rose marginally from 16.3 to 16.4 during the 2013-14 academic year. This increase came despite a decline in male enrolment from 18.6 to 18.0, while the female enrolment ratio improved from 14.1 to 14.8. On a national scale, gross enrolment increased from 21.1 to 23.0, with male enrolment rising from 22.3 to 23.9 and female enrolment from 20.1 to 22.0. At the national level, enrolment among Scheduled Castes (S.C.) also saw a rise from 16.1 to 17.1, with male numbers increasing from 16.9 to 17.7 and female numbers rising from 15.2 to 16.4. In contrast, the enrolment of S.C. students in higher education within Odisha increased from 8.5 to 9.6, with male enrolment rising from 11.1 to 11.4 and female enrolment from 9.7 to 10.2 (AISHE 2013-14). Notably, the gap in enrolment for Dalit women in Odisha widened from 7.9 to 9.6 during the same period, reflecting a concerning trend compared to other communities and states and indicative of higher dropout rates. Additionally, enrolment among Scheduled Tribes (S.T.) remains significantly lower, increasing from 6.1 to 6.7, with male enrolment rising from 7.1 to 7.4 and female enrolment from 5.5 to 6.0. A contributing factor to the state's low enrolment rates is the prevalence of poverty in Odisha.

3. LITERACY RATE AND DALIT WOMEN

The literacy rate in Odisha has increased by 9.8 percent since 2001, with an attendance rate of 72.87 percent in 2011, nearly on par with the national average of 73 percent. The male literacy rate is 81.59 percent, slightly above the national figure. In contrast, the female literacy rate reached 64 percent by 2011, closely aligning with the national average.

A significant factor in the overall rise in literacy rates in the state has been the growth in female literacy among Scheduled Castes (S.C.s) and Scheduled Tribes (S.T.s). Women's literacy increased by 13.5 percent, compared to a 6.2 percent rise among males, resulting in a notable reduction of the gender gap from 24.84 percent in 2001 to 17.58 percent in 2011.

However, disparities in literacy rates among S.C. and S.T. communities remain a concern, with their literacy rates at 69.02 percent and 52.24 percent, respectively, significantly lower than the general population. In Odisha, the gender gap persists among S.C. and S.T. populations, measuring 20.45 percent for S.C.s and 22.5 percent for S.T.s. The male literacy rates for these groups are 72.60 percent, while the female literacy rates are 52.60 percent. The evident disparity in literacy rates emphasizes deep-seated gender inequalities that persist in higher education enrollment in Odisha. This gap stresses the challenges these marginalized women face in accessing educational opportunities and reflects broader societal issues that hinder equitable participation in academia.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the experiences of Dalit women in higher education in Odisha context. Eleven Dalit women were chosen from an Odisha higher education institution using stratified random sampling to guarantee a representative sample. In-depth interviews enabled a thorough examination of each participant's viewpoints and experiences. Participants' experiences (interviews) were analyzed through thematic analysis, which involved identifying and interpreting patterns and themes that emerged from the participants. Interviews were designed based on their experiences and understanding of the systemic issues and challenges that Dalit women commonly face. Participants' experiences were enriched by

valuable insights, ensuring that the inquiry was grounded in established scholarship while simultaneously highlighting the unique narratives of the individuals involved. This approach sought to foster a more nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics influencing Dalit women in higher education.

5. Data Analysis & Discussion

The data analysis highlights classroom participation, highlighting students' diverse backgrounds and experiences. In addition to identifying problematic aspects of the higher education system that affect certain student groups, respondents pointed out several key characteristics that contribute to an unhealthy learning atmosphere. Many students reported feeling anxious when raising their hands or asking questions during class discussions. This reluctance to engage fully in the learning process stemmed largely from their perceptions of teachers' and peers' need for more support and encouragement.

Riya shares her class environment in her own words as follows,

I feel awful and try to study when I don't comprehend. Yes, I occasionally take part in class activities like dancing and singing. Speaking in front of the class is something I'm afraid to do. I don't get questions from teachers. They don't give us any attention.

Jali has a similar complaint as Riya,

The beautiful girl (the favourite of the teachers) sits in the front. The teacher tells her to sit on the front bench. We sit at the back. I am a second-class student. I wrote well in the exams but did not get sufficient marks on the results. I lose my confidence. From that day onward, I do not want to participate in class.

Sikha has a different experience; she explains in her own words,

I chose not to participate in class discussions because there were many students from XX University, and it often feels like they dominate the conversation. Their confidence can be intimidating, which leaves me feeling a lack of self-assurance in the classroom. Because of my background, including factors like caste and language, I often feel isolated in class. This combination of elements makes it difficult for me to engage fully and share my thoughts.

Sunita has a classroom experience like Sikha's, marked by shared challenges, learning moments, and personal growth.

Many students enjoy teasing me and criticising comments about my English. They often resort to hurtful remarks, trying to undermine my confidence by telling me I am not good at English. It is disheartening to see that the students who take pleasure in disparaging me frequently go out of their way to be unkind and make me feel inferior. Their mean-spiritedness adds an extra layer of difficulty to a positive learning and sharing experience.

Arpita shared her insights regarding the challenges she faced during her educational journey. She detailed her feelings, thought processes, and the lessons learned along the way, highlighting specific events that shaped her perspectives. Arpita's reflections provided a comprehensive overview of how these experiences impacted her growth and development.

I find school is challenging, but I am not sure why. Sometimes, I stay quiet because I feel nervous and doubt my ability to keep up. My classmates are tough on me; they often put me down and call me a "quota student. (Arpita)

Deepa delved into the intriguing world of classroom dynamics, exploring the subtle yet impactful ways discrimination can influence the educational experience.

They do not practice open discrimination based on caste in the classroom in a visible way, but it is in their mind. I am in my MPhil, and this one-year course is two semesters long. I have no guide until now. Nobody wants to be my supervisor. I am not getting my fellowship. If I get a guide, I will get my fellowship.

I have always refrained from discussing my caste background because I fear that people might change the way they treat me if they were to find out. My friendships are incredibly important to me, and I invest a lot of care and concern into those relationships. It is about the bond and support we give each other rather than any social categories that might divide us. (Rekha)

The quotes highlighted above reveal a strong, shared sentiment among Dalit women students about their experiences in the educational system. These reflections shed light on their unique challenges, emphasizing their struggles, aspirations, and the impact of societal caste attitudes on their academic journeys. Many students strongly desire increased support and personalized attention from their teachers, believing that such guidance is crucial for their academic success and unlocking their full potential. However, there is a significant concern regarding the experiences of Dalit women students. These students often feel marginalized in the classroom, sensing that their presence and contributions are frequently overlooked or disregarded. This feeling of invisibility can impede their educational engagement, participation, and overall academic achievements, highlighting the urgent need for greater recognition and support within the educational environment.

Interestingly, the observations indicate that some girls who are perceived as especially attractive frequently choose to sit at the front of the classroom. This behaviour may suggest an unspoken preference or bias from teachers, who often tend to engage more with students they find appealing or noteworthy based on physical appearance. In addition to their academic pursuits, students were keenly aware of the dynamics shaping their experiences within educational institutions. They distinguished between two significant forms of bias in their learning environments. The first type is discrimination, which arises from a student's socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and cultural heritage. This bias resulted in unequal treatment and opportunities, creating complex inequities students often recognise and navigate. The second type of bias relates to favouritism, where some teachers treat certain students differently based on personal biases or preferences. This practice can cultivate

an atmosphere of inequity, wherein not all students receive equitable support or encouragement, further complicating the educational landscape.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study strongly point out that the experiences of Dalit women students are shaped by Brahminical patriarchy in classrooms. Dalit women feel invisible, unheard, marginalized, and disregarded. Thus, this finding outlines that Dalit women's invisibility reveals how Brahminical patriarchy functions in academic spaces and how Dalit women experience it. Dalit women's experiences identified and highlighted how the behavior of upper caste faculties within academics' manifests in these Dalit women's everyday experiences of hindrance and harm due to their intersectional identity (caste, gender, class, and colour) of being Dalit women.

The prevalence of Brahminical patriarchy in higher education in Odisha has had a detrimental effect on the academic performance of Dalit women students, as well as their social and academic relationships and self-esteem. Findings revealed that Dalit women experienced discomfort and difficulty associating and interacting with upper-caste students and faculties due to their lack of friendliness, hostility nature and unwelcoming attitude.

Dalit women students expressed deep-seated feelings of fear and hesitation regarding their experiences and identities. This anxiety stems largely from the caste conservatism prevalent across the broader campus. The findings highlight a profound and troubling divide between non-Dalit and Dalit students at the university, illustrating various social and emotional barriers that hinder meaningful interactions. The fear of discrimination and stigma contributes to an atmosphere where many feel compelled to remain silent about their struggles, further entrenching the existing social divides. This atmosphere of caution underscores the urgent need for more inclusive dialogues and supportive measures to foster a sense of security for all students, irrespective of their caste backgrounds.

The findings heightened awareness among students indicates they were observant of the challenges and disparities they faced while critically engaging with the educational system's injustices. Their insights underscore the urgent need for a commitment to fairness and the provision of equal opportunities for all learners, advocating for a more inclusive and equitable approach to education that respects and values each student's diverse backgrounds and needs.

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