

## **CASTE DISCRIMINATION AND ITS EFFECT ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF LOWERCASTE STUDENTS IN INDIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Caste-based discrimination and exclusion have always been highly prevalent in India due to the caste system, and the Indian higher educational institutions are no exception to this phenomenon. Through this study, we aim to identify how caste-based discrimination leads to the deteriorating mental health of lower caste students at various Indian institutions of higher education and suggest policies and reforms the government can undertake to safeguard lower caste students against caste-based discrimination better. This paper highlights the discriminatory acts practiced by upper caste students and the faculty against lower caste students in various forms like segregation, verbal abuse, belittling and humiliation. Using a thematic analysis method of close reading of papers, articles, interviews and surveys available online on the experiences of lower caste students at various universities, themes of isolation, humiliation, discrimination and deteriorating mental health emerged. Our findings confirmed the discrimination faced by lower caste students at various universities which almost always results in deteriorating mental health as the lower caste students develop self-devaluating tendencies, depression, lose self-esteem and confidence, socially withdraw and isolate themselves and in extreme cases, chose to end their life. Further, this paper suggests that various policies and reforms making mental health consultations more accessible for lower caste students should be implemented and students should be encouraged to seek help with regard to their mental well-being as the concept of therapy and mental health is still considered a taboo in India.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Due to the prevalence of the caste system and 'untouchability' in India, Indian universities are yet another arena where lower-caste students have to face caste-based discrimination and exclusion on a daily basis. There are a number of laws and policies in place to safeguard dalit

students against discrimination and provide them with better opportunities. Provisions were made for the protection of the educational and economic interests of these groups under Article 46, which states: State shall promote, with special care, the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes Article 15 of Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of caste based discrimination on grounds of religion, race, sex or place of birth and envisages equality before law (Article 14). Also equality of opportunity in public employment (Article 16) is enshrined. Anti caste discriminatory provisions are also incorporated in Article 17 by abolition of untouchability. Also right against exploitation (Article 23 and 24) is there to ensure prohibition of caste discrimination. As such the right to equality is provided under Articles 14 to 18 of the Indian Constitution. SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 prohibits atrocities and thus caste discrimination. Indian Civil Rights Act 1955 is meant to ensure equal civil rights to all the citizens of India. (Uniform Civil Code, Article 44).

Furthermore, to assure the equal representation of all communities in higher education, the government of India has provided the reservations (quota policy) for SC and OBC in admissions for inclusive development. Even after introducing all the above laws and policies the government has failed to provide substantial results. According to our research, it was found that caste-based discrimination is practiced in Indian institutions of higher education. Discrimination and exclusion is practiced in many forms- segregation, verbal abuse, ragging, humiliation and belittling. The upper-caste students harbor feelings of superiority over lower caste students and refuse to share the same room, utensils, food etc with them. (Sukumar, 2008, p.17). (Sanil Malikapurath Neelakandan) Humiliation at the hand of UC teachers is also a fairly common event in higher education. It takes place in various forms such as asking one's surname and caste affiliation publicly in the classroom, talking rudely, and passing such humiliating comments as "taking admission for collecting scholarships," or "you SCs will remain SCs." However, all the participants emphasized that such behaviors are practiced by only a few UC teachers. (R.K Maurya).

This in turn results in lower-caste students developing self-devaluating tendencies and makes them more vulnerable towards anxiety and depression. According to our research, lower-caste students reported feeling anxious, loss of self esteem and confidence and alienation. Discriminatory practices hamper their overall development as they start to withdraw themselves from social setting. As the feeling of 'belongingness' is crucial for an individual's overall psychological well being, lower-caste students feel alienated and start to view themselves as 'lesser' beings. Caste discrimination in higher education, in extreme cases, drives lower caste

students to commit suicide. It is really painful to note that a majority of the suicide cases of college-level students in recent times are proclaimed as an outcome of discrimination and social exclusion.

Further, these allegations of discrimination and exclusion are denied by the universities as they describe the individual as depressed and suffering from personal problems as the reason for dalit suicide on college grounds. Therefore, policies and reforms are needed to better safeguard lower-caste students against discrimination, and provisions to facilitate psychiatric help to these students should also be made.

## **METHODOLOGY**

- Read papers and identified an area of research
- Bounded the research question and put the research question through a system of different questions to make it stronger and reframe it
- Categorized each aspect of research question into qualitative and quantitative analysis
- Selected one method of analysis - "Thematic Analysis" for research question
- Identified the types of data and sources for secondary data collection
- Identified empirical papers and generated codes for the same.
- Wrote annotated bibliographies for each
- Wrote a literature review based on it
- Populated the data file with codes, description, examples and evidences
- Identify themes from the codes

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There have been numerous studies on caste-based violence and exclusion. There are various interviews of SC/ST students studying in different universities, surveys etc which further back up the claim that caste-based violence, discrimination and exclusion is prevalent in Indian institutions of higher education. There have been many instances where caste driven exclusion, violence and discrimination has led to many SC/ST students to drop out from their respective

universities, deteriorating their mental health and in extreme cases has driven them to commit suicide.

Discrimination has been observed in the form of segregation, like ,Dalit students are made to sit separately while writing entrance examinations for some universities. At the same time, harassment of dalit students happens in the form of calling by caste name, comments on the base of habits, colour, culture and so on. (Sanil Malikapurath Neelakandan and Smita Margeshwar Patil,2012) According to a study conducted at the university of Shah Jahan it was found that lower caste students faced discrimination even at one of the premier universities of India. Discriminatory acts at this university included the practices of not sharing a table, cups/utensils, seats, etc., with Dalits in the university canteen, or sharing rooms in university accommodation, avoiding conversing with them and acting as if they were invisible or ‘polluted’ Discriminatory acts like this results in the lower caste students feeling isolated and hampers their overall growth and personality development as they are deprived of forming proper communication skills, lower their self esteem and overall deteriorate their mental health (Ovichegan,2013). As Maurya (2018) observed, due to the constant humiliation, exclusion and belittling by upper caste students, lower caste students may even develop self devaluating tendencies as they are constantly suppressed and exploited by the upper caste students. This tendency of self-devaluation affects all aspects of their personality and group behaviors. The submissive and fearful nature of Dalit students, avoidance of classroom interaction and lack of assertiveness, and feeling of helplessness in the face of prejudiced and discriminatory behaviors of upper caste are some of the common symptoms of this tendency. Kusum Lata, a second year B.A. student, shared her experiences of Dalit students’ learned self devaluation behavior. “Dalits, I don’t know why, behave in a fearful manner. They themselves think that they are low and downtrodden people. They should not think like that; even if we have little [financial resources], we should live with dignity and pride. I think that our community has some problems of self-denigrating nature, poor self-image and low self -confidence.”(Rakesh Kumar Maurya,2018) These allegations of discrimination, humiliation and exclusion have been blatantly denied by the higher educational institutions citing the inability to adjust to the educational environment of the institution as the reason of Dalit suicides committed on campus. For example, the Rohit Vemula case, dalit PhD student at the university of Hyderabad who committed suicide as he could not cope up with the everyday discrimination faced by him on campus. He decided to end his life after constantly being taunted by faculty and fellow students as a “quota guy.” “How could Chamars become doctors? You are here only because of quota, you would not be able to go ahead from here” were the usual taunts that haunted him in classrooms, hostel, and the canteen. Chamar is one of the untouchable communities under the Indian caste system.(Maurya R., 2018) Another such example is of

Senthikumar (a dalit research scholar) at the university of Hyderabad. Senthil's body was discovered in his room at the New Research Scholars Hostel on 28th February, 2008. The university claimed that Senthil died of cardiac arrest and did not take any action/accountability and continued to feign ignorance. Later the post-mortem report asserted the cause of death as poisoning. Senthil depended on the non-NET fellowship for his survival as a student. It was also an important means of supporting his family. According to the university guidelines fellowships are not linked to performance in coursework. However, the school of Physics acted in contravention and Senthil's fellowship was revoked citing his failure in coursework as the reason. This was undoubtedly one of the reasons that drove him to commit suicide. (Senthilkumar Solidarity Committee, 2008) The universities use depression and various other mental illnesses as a safety net to escape responsibility and various legal consequences and describe the students being discriminated against as 'troubled' individuals suffering from personal problems or being unable to adjust to the rigours academic environment of the university which further leads them to commit suicide. While various government policies are in place to ensure fairness and equal opportunities to all students ( like the quota policy), they have failed to introduce any substantial reform in the education system. The quota system was devised to make education more accessible for students belonging to the lower castes but many students belonging to the creamy-layer have exploited this. The students that enter the universities through quota are often at a disadvantage compared to their higher caste counterparts due to their poor educational background and are often met with discrimination, humiliation, exclusion and hostility. Which in turn results in poor mental health of SC/ST students as they are constantly discriminated against by UC students. Through this research we aim to spread awareness about caste-based discrimination and exclusion at various indian institutions of higher education. There is a lack of knowledge about the mental health implication of caste-based discrimination, we aim to bridge this gap through exploring secondary data in the form of interviews, articles, surveys etc. Further, through our paper we want to suggest policies/reforms that can be implemented to equip the students being discriminated against with proper facilities to deal with the psychological impact of caste-based discrimination.

## **FINDINGS**

After analyzing the data we collected through a close reading of papers, articles and interviews, we divided the same in three broad themes-

- Caste-based discrimination
- Positive/negative action by universities/government

- Deteriorating Mental Health

### *Caste-based discrimination*

Lower-caste students studying at various Indian institutions of higher education reported caste-based discrimination in the form of physical segregation and exclusion, verbal abuse by both the faculty and their upper-caste counterparts and apathetic behaviour towards them by the teaching staff.

Dalit students are made to sit separately while writing entrance examinations for some universities. At the same time, harassment of Dalit students happens in the form of calling by caste name, comments on the basis of habits, colour, culture and so on. These oppressive conditions expose the caste hegemony (Sukumar, 2008, p.15).

Vijaya, a Dalit female in the Department of Psychology, described one such occurrence where she faced caste-based segregation and exclusion-"I remember one day during lunch break I went to the common room where students usually go to chat or eat their packed lunches. I went there with my friend to have lunch and noticed after a minute or two the other non-Dalit students (males and females) left the room and it was only the two of us in the room having lunch .... This attitude makes it very clear to me that caste-bias.

whether in this university or outside it's the same." (R.K Maurya), Another SC student pursuing M.Sc. observed a real incident of discrimination and its repercussion where one student from SC background dropped out because of persistent discrimination. He said:

"There was my friend during graduation time. He was SC; belonged to Chamar Caste. He had many problems in his studies and most of the students refused to share a room with him in the hostel.

Among these students, Brahmin students declared openly not to eat food with him. They also declared that they cannot take food with lower caste students. During the first year, none of the students had friendship with that guy and he remained alone. He used to live alone, isolated, depressed and lonely in a single room of the hostel. Because of this, he left the course in second year. This happened because he took these incidents very seriously. These behavioral dynamics left a painful impression in his heart. It is obvious that if one does not get proper social support and a friendly environment then one cannot concentrate on studies. He could not complete his graduation because of discrimination and its vicious impact. No doubt, he was a little poor in his studies but he would have completed his graduation if his friends and hostel inmates would have

extended a friendly social environment and proper social support. Thus I feel that discriminatory behaviours are very dangerous, induce inferior complexes and mental upheaval which hampers the creativity.” (KJ Kumar)

According to the above example, caste-based discrimination in the form of segregation and exclusion is prevalent even at various universities in India. The same makes the students being discriminated against feel alienated. This has a huge psychological impact as it hampers the overall development of the individual.

Verbal abuse is also fairly common at various universities where caste-based discrimination and exclusion is practiced. It manifests itself as name calling, using slurs to address lower-caste students, labeling/categorizing and verbal humiliation. It is surprising to note that the same is practiced by not only upper-caste students but also the faculty.

Humiliation at the hand of UC teachers is also a fairly common event in higher education. It takes place in various forms such as asking one’s surname and caste affiliation publicly in the classroom, talking in a rude manner, and passing such humiliating comments as “taking admission for collecting scholarships,” or “you SCs will remain SCs.” However, all the participants emphasized that such behaviors are practiced by only a few UC teachers. ( R.K Maurya).

This further leads the lower-caste students to devalue themselves and lose self-esteem and confidence.

Discrimination by the faculty was also reported at various universities. Which manifested itself in various forms, such as paying less or no attention to Dalit students in class, assigning lower marks/grades to Dalit students in practical examinations, and creating hurdles in PhD registration and completion. (R.K Maurya).

Another mechanism that UC teachers sometimes use to discriminate against Dalit students is encouraging UC students to make their own group and exclude Dalit students. Rajesh shared his experience during his Diploma in Mechanical Engineering.

"There was a UC boy who had a good friendship with an SC boy. A teacher pressured the UC boy to break the friendship saying, ``Why do you live with Chamars?'' (R.K Maurya)

In Deepak’s experience, the premier university he attends is yet another arena in which the practice of caste division persists. For example, “speaking of their experiences on the university campus, the Dalit students in my study report being ‘sidelined’ or neglected in classrooms by

tutors, for example, not being asked questions by the tutors even when they have put their hands up to respond to a direct question.” (Ovichegan).

It is surprising to note that caste-based discrimination is practiced by not only the students but also the faculty at these universities. This further supports systematic discrimination and gives the upper-caste students a free pass to practice the same. Further, ignoring the academic needs of dalit students during lectures by the professors results in the lower-caste students losing interest in their studies as a whole.

Due to the prevalence of the caste system and untouchability in India, the upper-caste students develop a sense of superiority over the lower-caste students as they start to view them as ‘polluted’ beings. One of the main reason for the same is that the faculty themselves do not hold the students accountable for their discriminatory acts but instead encourage such behaviour therefore, promoting structural violence.

In college campuses, there is a common tradition of showing respect towards senior students by juniors. Juniors pay respect by touching feet, using common greeting practices such as “Good Morning,” “Namaste,” or “Hello Sir.” [...] Harish, a senior research scholar, shared:

They [UC] also practice discrimination in another form. Junior students from UC category express greetings according to one’s caste. So even if you [a Dalit] are a senior research scholar, they do not say “Namaste” to you. (RK Maurya).

As upper-caste students show superiority over their lower-caste counterparts, the latter start to feel inferior to the former and start devaluing themselves as human beings. Further, this leads to them feeling like ‘outcasts’ and they start to isolate themselves. This further affects their overall development as they fail to form proper communication skills and develop tendencies of self-devaluation.

### ***Apathetic actions by universities/government***

Apathetic reaction of the universities- Allegations of discrimination, humiliation, and exclusion have been vehemently denied by the higher education institutions arguing that these suicides took place because those students were unable to adjust to the rigorous educational environment of the institution (Singh, 2013).

Dr. Balmukund Bharti in India’s premier institution of medical sciences three years after Thorat and colleagues (2007) published their report on caste discrimination on its campuses. Police and the university reported these almost identically as cases of depression in a “weak student” who



could not “cope with the rigorous academic environment”.

Just as in Vemula’s story, when the families of these students asserted that structural discrimination occurred in outwardly benign, institutionalized processes such as “ragging” (hazing), the police and university authorities cited the students’ depression as evidence against the families’ claims. Furthermore, citing the same argument of personal problems, the police refused to file the families’ complaints against the university about caste discrimination, rendering invisible the structural violence that led to the students’ psychological distress. (Vignapana Komanapalli).

The universities are not held responsible for their discriminatory acts which further supports systematic discrimination and exclusion.

It is appalling to note that these universities use the mental health of the student as a safety net to escape responsibility for their actions. As these universities are not held accountable for their actions by the authorities, it further supports systematic discrimination on college ground. Further, as these universities weaponize the mental health of the students against them hence, these students are afraid to seek help for the immense psychological distress they are under.

The quota policy was introduced to facilitate lower-caste students to complete their higher education and empower them. However, the same has not been implemented properly which has in turn given rise to a number of problems. (KJ Kumar).

One example of this ineffective implementation of the quota policy is the low representation of SC/ST and OBC teachers in higher education. Fifty-eight percent of faculty positions for SC/STs and OBCs are still vacant in central universities (Mohanty, 2016). There is no denying that representation of SC/STs has improved significantly; however, it is still significantly behind its goals. The participants shared that the obstructionist attitude of UC faculty and administration in implementing quotas in colleges and universities is one of the reasons for low representation of Dalit faculty in higher education. (Chandra Pal Singh).

Harish explained: Reservation policy has not been implemented properly yet. First, they [UC] tried to postpone it by saying “No student found,” then they started saying “No suitable candidate found.” So, they keep on obstructing implementation of reservation. There were some reports where it was found that they filled those SC/ST seats by UC candidates where SC/ST candidates were not available. (Chandra Pal Singh).

The quota policy was introduced by the government to uplift the lower-caste students and help

them to complete their higher education. However, the same has not been implemented properly.

### ***Deteriorating Mental Health***

Learned Self-Devaluation- Learned self-devaluation is a tendency among people to devalue themselves as an individual or as a group and accept imposed inequalities/injustices as legitimate, fate-based, or God-made. This tendency is commonly observed among people from Dalit communities who have been suppressed and exploited for thousands of years through the Indian caste system. This tendency is not inherent by birth, but it starts from social devaluation of a group or community by other dominant groups. Parental inculcation of such values perpetuates this behavior among Dalit students, who commonly exhibit selfdevaluation behavior in colleges and university campuses. Kusum Lata, a second year B.A. student, shared her experiences of Dalit students' learned selfdevaluation behavior.

“Dalits, I don't know why, behave in a fearful manner. They themselves think that they are low and downtrodden people. They should not think like that; even if we have little [financial resources], we should live with dignity and pride. I think that our community has some problems [of self-denigrating nature, poor self-image and low self -confidence].”

This tendency of self-devaluation affects all aspects of their personality and group behaviors. The submissive and fearful nature of Dalit students, avoidance of classroom interaction and lack of assertiveness, and feeling of helplessness in the face of prejudiced and discriminatory behaviors of UC are some of the common symptoms of this tendency. Positive changes have occurred in the last few decades, and political and educational awareness has increased significantly among Dalits; however, these developments are limited to a tiny fraction of the Dalit population (Sukumar, 2013). (R.K Maurya)

As the lower-caste students are constantly humiliated and made to feel inferior, they start to view themselves as 'lesser' beings which further lowers their self esteem and confidence. This also affects their overall development as they do not have proper communication skills and constantly feel alienated and inferior to others.

### ***Anxiety***

During our research it was found that a majority of lower caste students reported feeling anxious due to caste-based discrimination and exclusion.

Lower caste students reported that they feel bad when they are supposed to speak in front of larger gatherings and this leads them to the feelings of dizziness, palpitation, nervousness and

trembling of limbs and quivering of voices. It is also found that in the initial days during higher education, they remained less confident, hesitant, incompetent, demotivated, anxious, worried and less ambitious to achieve excellence although in due course of time they learn to overcome and adjust but not in full extent. (KJ Kumar)

An OBC student pursuing B.A. has reported his personal experiences of discrimination in the class. He said:

I feel discriminated against because whenever I ask something in the class, other students mainly from upper castes and well off families intentionally laugh at me. They think I am asking stupid questions. Most of the time, purposefully they hoot at me for asking such a trivial thing. These behaviors of other students have created a stable fear in my mind. I tried to overcome this fear but efforts were in vain. This is further increasing and putting me into high risk of breakdown. This fear is recurring frequently. Hence, these fears are haunting me a lot and prevent me from satisfying my hunches in the class. Because of these fears, now I have obsessive thoughts, several worries, anxieties and depression with dismal courage to speak in the class. (KJ Kumar)

As lower-caste students are constantly discriminated against at these universities they start fearing basic interactions with their upper-caste counterparts and faculty. This further leads them to isolate themselves and a small task like asking a question during a lecture can trigger an anxiety attack.

### ***Coping Mechanisms***

Being rooted in interpersonal relationships, the psychological impacts of caste-based discrimination are seen in two forms—aggression and withdrawal (Pal & Swain, 2009). Because of the feeling of constantly being threatened by something, the discriminated people may resort to either ‘fighting’ or ‘fleeing’ as two broad coping strategies in the presence of stressful situations. Due to the denial of opportunities and discriminatory treatment, they at times react with anger and resentment. On the other hand, discrimination manifested in terms of restrictions in interpersonal interaction and other unpleasant behaviours, bring a lot of humiliation, undermine self-esteem and violate the sense of dignity. A fear of further such negative experiences, often lead to withdrawal from social interactions. Due to the social need to ‘fit in’, many times, discriminated people are very much at risk of ‘helplessness’ and ‘alienation’ as to escape the discrimination they start isolating themselves from others. (G.C Pal).

Loss of self-esteem and confidence- The persistence of discriminatory behaviours through dishonour even leads to a feeling of ‘lesser human being’. As some victims of caste

discrimination remark: It will be difficult to change the situation of caste discrimination. "We are subjected to systemic humiliation and shaming. We feel inferior to other higher castes. We feel like an unequal human being. (Pal, 2012)" (Vignapana Komanapalli).

There are number of impacts and consequences of discrimination such as- mental block, stress and tension, frustration and behavioural problems, lower self-esteem, lower creativity, feelings of humiliation, inferiority complex, escapism, „we“ and „they“ feeling, poor performance, crisis and conflict and distortions of self perceptions (Wankhede 2003). Studies reported that discrimination of any kind can distort one's self concept, weakens the self-esteem, lowers down the self confidence, lowers down the productivity and impair the overall well being of human being in general (Berkowitz 1989; William et al. 1997; Harrell 2000; Taylor & Turner 2002; Forman T. A. 2003; Carter 2007). Further, it appears that students of lower castes and belonging to poor-socio-economic background are less confident, hesitant, not equipped with desired skills, have less motivation and have persistent lack of inspiration that is why they do not participate actively. (KJ kumar),

### ***Suicide***

Research studies underline the experiences of discrimination, exclusion and humiliation as being the predominant reasons behind committing suicides. As Sukhdeo Thorat reported (2016) that after analysing some cases of suicide, academic Anoop Singh concluded that "there seems to be more than enough evidence to believe that caste discrimination played a significant role in driving these extraordinary individuals into committing suicide", and that "elite professional institutions are the places where caste prejudice is so firmly entrenched that it has become normal".

Caste discrimination in higher education, in extreme cases, drives lower caste students committing suicide. It is really painful to note that a majority of the suicide cases of college-level students in recent times are proclaimed as an outcome of discrimination and social exclusion. Singh (2013) points that lower caste students especially to elite higher education institutions struggle against immense odds created through blatant discrimination and humiliation by both the fellow students and teachers. Although many could cope with such explicit and painful kinds of discrimination, few others because of the sustained pressure of relentless caste prejudice combined with the ill-feeling and exclusion from fellow students and institutional apathy, pushed themselves into taking their lives as the ultimate form of protest. Pal and Arjun (2013), (Komanapalli, 2020)

Over the last decade, a string of suicides has rocked the central university of Hyderabad

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highlighting the pronounced discrimination against students from the marginalized sections at the university. Members of the Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) claim that as many as 12 students belonging to scheduled castes have ended their lives since the central university came into existence in the early 1970s, largely due to caste prejudices.

Rohit vemula, a second year research scholar of science, technology and society studies Department of Central University of Hyderabad, hails from a poor family of Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh, was University Grants Commission's Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) holder. He was one of the five Dalit research scholars expelled by the university administration from the campus hostel following an intra student skirmish. He was protesting at the campus along with other students against the expulsion for nearly a fortnight. But his efforts went in vain; desperately he hung himself using the blue banner of Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) and left a five page suicide note."My birth is my fatal accident... I was always rushing. Desperate to start a life... I am not sad. I am just empty.

Unconcerned about myself. That's pathetic. And that's why I am doing this." These excerpts from his letter literally provokes our agony towards that wretched soul. A young bud wanted to blossom with full of dreams, love and longed for a happy life and aspired to become a science writer like Carl Sagan, ended up defeated and crushed by discrimination and apathy.

In 2012, on March 3, Anil Kumar Meena, an adivasi medical student at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, killed himself in his hostel room. Educated in the Hindi medium, the son of poor farmers in Baran, Rajasthan, Meena had scored 75 per cent in Higher secondary and a second rank in the AIIMS entrance test. He was following in the footsteps of BalMukund Bharti, a final year MBBS student, who exactly two years ago hung himself to death in his hostel room in AIIMS.

In 2011, Manish Kumar of Indian Institute of Technology, Roorke, committed suicide by jumping from the fifth floor of his hostel. Manish was from Muzaffar Nagar and was a bright student. Both his father and mother had found that their son was a victim of caste abuse by fellow students and complaints to the authorities went in vain. Even after he shifted out of the hostel the taunts did not stop and he went into depression leading to his death.

## **DISCUSSION**

According to our research we found that caste-based discrimination is widely practiced in various Indian institutions of higher education. As caste hierarchy is deeply embedded in our Indian culture, Indian universities are no exception to this phenomenon of one caste being superior to

the other. This feeling of superiority in turn results in the upper-caste students and faculty constantly belittling and humiliating lower-caste students. Discrimination against them generally manifests itself in various forms like physical and social exclusion, belittling, ignorance by the teaching staff during lectures and verbal abuse by both the faculty and students. It is of great concern that even that faculty at these universities not only indulges in such discriminatory behaviour but also encourages the students to follow the same giving them a free pass to blatantly humiliate and belittle their lower-caste counterparts. This in turn results in the upper caste students forming a superiority complex over the lower caste students. They start viewing the lower caste students as 'polluted' beings and constantly humiliate and belittle them.

As the lower-caste students constantly face caste-based discrimination and prejudice, they learn the tendency of self-devaluation, and accept imposed inequalities/injustices as legitimate, fate-based, or God-made. (Sukumar, 2013). (R.K Maurya) Furthermore, there is a clear correlation between deteriorating mental health and caste-based discrimination as lower-caste students report feeling anxious and depressed due to the discriminatory behaviour of their upper-caste counterparts. They also lose their self-esteem and confidence and start to view themselves as 'lesser' beings. Caste-based discrimination often left unexamined at these universities drives lower-caste students to end their lives. The apathetic reaction of universities such as in Vemula's case further promotes structural violence and discrimination.

Therefore, there is a need for certain policies and reforms in India which not only safeguard lower-caste students against caste-based discrimination but also provide support to the students who are discriminated against. Caste discrimination in any form takes a huge mental toll on the individual. Due to the same, these individuals are more vulnerable towards mental illnesses like anxiety and depression. This in extreme cases when left unexamined drives the students to commit suicide. Therefore, policies are needed to provide professional help to these students. Further, a safe space on college grounds should be created in the form of group therapy, expression of distress and recognizing the students are not alone in their experience. Students should be encouraged to seek psychiatric help and provisions should be made to make the same more accessible. During our research, we also found a new trend of universities using the mental health of the student as a safety net to escape responsibility for suicides committed on college ground as seen in Rohit Vemulas' case. Due to this, psychiatric practice and policy can be harmful for Dalit students, research is required regarding the possibility of developing confidentiality policies that allow Dalit students to receive care "off the record" and that do not require a diagnosis of depression as a prerequisite for care.

Further the government has introduced the quota policy to ensure better representation of lower-

caste students in institutes of higher education but the same has not been implemented properly. In addition, there are several scholarships, free-ships, and fellowships made available for the students of socially and economically deprived classes/communities such as Government of India Scholarship for SC and ST, Social Welfare Scholarship for OBC (non creamy-layer) and other economically poor students, free hostel facility for SC students and Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship for SC and ST students for pursuing doctoral degrees and other social welfare scholarships for minority students in order to facilitate their sustainability so that they can complete their higher education and equipped themselves to stand independently in the society. Even after the followings the government has failed to make any substantial change as there is still under-representation of lower-caste students at these universities.

## **CONCLUSION**

Even though there are laws present in our constitution which safeguard the citizens of India against discrimination in any form based on caste, creed, religion etc. The Indian institutions of higher education are yet another arena for lower-caste students to battle caste-based discrimination on a daily basis. Discrimination here is practiced by not only the students but the faculty as well. Discrimination in any form affects the mental health of these students as it adds to the immense psychological they are already under. These students develop tendencies of self-devaluation as they are constantly made to feel inferior and 'polluted' by their upper-caste counterparts. They lose their self esteem and confidence and isolate themselves from others leading them to believe they are alone in their experiences. As they start to feel like 'outcasts', they do not seek proper help for the psychological distress they are under and develop illnesses like anxiety and depression which in extreme cases lead them to end their lives.

It is appalling to note that Universities use the mental health of the students to escape accountability for suicides committed on college grounds, and describe these students as disturbed individuals suffering from personal problems. Therefore, policies are needed which help facilitate proper therapeutic and professional help to these students without it being another tool these universities can use to wash their hands of responsibility. Therapy should be encouraged and group therapy should be introduced at these universities to help make these students feel more included and recognise that they are not alone in their experiences. Further "off the record" care should be introduced that does not require a diagnosis of depression as a prerequisite for care.

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