

# **Castes in the Indian Education System**

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## **Abstract**

**In today's world, education goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge—it serves as a crucial instrument for building a fairer and more inclusive society. A fundamental aspect of this is recognizing and valuing diversity, which encompasses differences in race, gender, religion, language, and, particularly relevant to India, caste. According to UNESCO, inclusive education ensures that "every learner matters equally," highlighting the importance of making education systems accessible and supportive for all students, regardless of their background. In practical terms, this means creating learning environments where students from diverse backgrounds learn together, benefit from shared experiences, and develop both academically and personally. Studies consistently show that exposure to diverse perspectives significantly enhances students' critical thinking abilities, creativity, and collaboration skills. When educational environments embrace diversity, they help reduce prejudice and foster mutual respect among students. Thus, promoting diversity strengthens education for everyone—not just for marginalized groups. In India, caste remains one of the oldest and most persistent social divisions. Despite the Indian Constitution outlawing caste discrimination and introducing affirmative action policies for historically marginalized communities, educational inequalities continue to be widespread. This essay explores the critical importance of caste diversity in Indian higher education, examines key policies designed to promote it, and analyses the tensions and challenges that persist in implementation. I argue that despite significant barriers, advancing caste diversity remains essential not only for creating more equitable universities but also for building a more just society. This essay looks at how caste has shaped access to higher education in India, from its historical roots to the policies meant to fix it, and the real-life struggles students still face today. It argues that true inclusion isn't just about getting in the door, it's about feeling like you belong, being treated fairly, and changing institutions so everyone has a real chance to succeed.**

## **Keywords**

**Caste; Indian Higher Education; Inclusive Education; Affirmative Action; Social Justice; Institutional Discrimination; Student Activism.**

## **1. Introduction**

In today's world, education goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge—it serves as a crucial instrument for building a fairer and more inclusive society. A fundamental aspect of this is recognizing and valuing diversity, which encompasses differences in race, gender, religion, language, and, particularly relevant to India, caste (UNESCO, 2017; OECD, 2018). According to UNESCO (2017), inclusive education ensures that "every learner matters equally," highlighting the importance of making education systems accessible and supportive for all students, regardless of their background. In practical terms, this means creating learning environments where students from diverse backgrounds learn together, benefit from shared experiences, and develop both academically and personally.

Studies consistently show that exposure to diverse perspectives significantly enhances students' critical thinking abilities, creativity, and collaboration skills (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). When educational environments embrace diversity, they help reduce prejudice and foster mutual respect among students (OECD, 2018). Thus, promoting diversity strengthens education for everyone—not just for marginalized groups.

In India, caste remains one of the oldest and most persistent social divisions. Despite the Indian Constitution outlawing caste discrimination and introducing affirmative action policies for historically marginalized communities (Government of India, 1950), educational inequalities continue to be widespread (Thorat & Newman, 2009). This essay explores the critical importance of caste diversity in Indian higher education, examines key policies designed to promote it, and analyses the tensions and challenges that persist in implementation. I argue that despite significant barriers, advancing caste diversity remains essential not only for creating more equitable universities but also for building a more just society.

This essay looks at how caste has shaped access to higher education in India, from its historical roots to the policies meant to fix it, and the real-life struggles students still face today. It argues that true inclusion isn't just about getting in the door, it's about feeling like you belong, being treated fairly, and changing institutions so everyone has a real chance to succeed.

## **2. Understanding Diversity in Education: A Conceptual Framework**

Diversity in education encompasses the wide range of differences among students—including race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, language, nationality, disability, and religion. It acknowledges that each learner brings unique experiences, perspectives, and abilities to the classroom. As UNESCO (2020) aptly notes, diversity is inherent in all educational settings because "all classrooms are diverse as all children are unique" (p. 10). Rather than viewing these differences as obstacles, educational theorists encourage institutions to treat diversity as a valuable resource for enriching the learning experience.

Students who encounter different cultures, languages, and viewpoints develop broader knowledge and greater empathy. Research demonstrates that diverse learning environments enhance critical thinking and problem-solving abilities because students are exposed to varied ideas and perspectives (Phillips, 2014). Therefore, diversity supports not only social values but also strengthens academic outcomes—making it a win-win proposition for educational institutions.

### **2.1. Cognitive Benefits: Thinking Beyond Boundaries**

One of the primary advantages of diversity in education is its positive impact on cognitive development. When students engage with peers who have different life experiences and worldviews, they naturally question their assumptions and develop more nuanced thinking. Phillips (2014) observes that diverse groups excel at problem-solving precisely because members contribute different information, perspectives, and approaches to solutions. This process challenges students to think more deeply and creatively about complex issues.

Antonio and colleagues (2004) discovered that exposure to diverse opinions in classroom settings significantly enhances students' intellectual engagement and critical thinking abilities. When learners work in mixed groups with varied backgrounds and perspectives, they consistently produce more innovative solutions and demonstrate greater cognitive flexibility. Particularly in STEM fields, research has shown that diverse teams outperform homogeneous groups on complex tasks because they draw from a wider range of knowledge and

experiences (Page, 2007). In this way, diversity serves as a catalyst for deeper, more meaningful learning.

## **2.2. Social Learning: Building Bridges Across Difference**

Beyond cognitive development, diversity plays a crucial role in social learning. Students in diverse classrooms develop stronger communication skills, greater empathy, and increased tolerance for difference. UNESCO (1995) emphasizes that education must foster "respect, understanding, and appreciation of diversity" to prepare students for life in pluralistic societies (p. 22). Regular interaction with peers from different backgrounds helps students move beyond stereotypes and form meaningful relationships based on mutual understanding. These experiences teach valuable lessons in cross-cultural collaboration—an essential skill in both professional and personal contexts. Northeastern University (2021) highlights that students need opportunities to "understand and appreciate different perspectives and worldviews" to succeed in our increasingly globalized world. When collaborative learning projects bring together students of different abilities, languages, and cultural backgrounds, they create environments where respect and teamwork become central to the educational experience. As students collaborate, they learn to negotiate differences, listen actively, find compromises, and value alternative viewpoints—developing social competencies that will serve them throughout their lives.

## **2.3. Emotional Well-being: Creating Belonging Through Recognition**

In addition to academic and social benefits, recognizing diversity in education positively affects students' emotional well-being and self-esteem. When children see their cultural backgrounds and personal identities respected within educational settings, they develop a stronger sense of belonging. The Open Society Foundations (2019) emphasizes that inclusive classrooms should ensure "every child feels safe and has a sense of belonging." This feeling of inclusion correlates with higher levels of motivation, participation, and resilience among students.

Educational environments that value diversity can significantly reduce feelings of marginalization and isolation, promoting healthier emotional development. When schools incorporate students' home languages, cultural practices, and histories into the curriculum, they validate those identities, instilling pride in students' backgrounds. UNESCO (2020) describes a project where teaching in students' native languages improved their self-confidence and engagement, demonstrating the importance of cultural recognition in education. When learners know their unique contributions are valued, they become more willing to take academic risks, ask questions, and participate fully in the learning community.

## **2.4. Equity and Justice: Transforming Systems**

Recognizing and fostering diversity is also essential for building more just and equitable education systems. Historically, many groups have been marginalized or excluded from full participation in education due to factors such as race, disability, language, caste, or economic status. The Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2020) reminds us that "inclusive and equitable quality education for all" represents not merely an aspirational goal but a fundamental human right (p. 6).

When educational institutions ignore diversity, they risk reinforcing existing inequalities and discrimination. Conversely, embracing diversity helps dismantle systemic barriers to education. Inclusive education operates on the principle that schools must adapt to meet the needs of all students, rather than expecting students to conform to a single standard. Research consistently shows that children with disabilities achieve better outcomes when educated alongside their non-disabled peers in inclusive settings, rather than being segregated into special schools (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Similarly, policies promoting racial

integration in schools have been found to reduce achievement gaps and improve social cohesion (The Century Foundation, 2019). Therefore, valuing diversity benefits not only individual students but also contributes to creating a fairer and more cohesive society.

## **2.5. Preparation for Life Beyond the Classroom**

Importantly, diversity prepares students for life beyond academic settings. In today's interconnected world, employers increasingly value the ability to work effectively in diverse teams. Organizations actively seek employees who demonstrate adaptability, cultural competence, and strong communication skills across differences. Schools that prioritize diversity are therefore preparing their students for real-world success in diverse workplaces. As Phillips (2014) argues, diverse environments equip individuals to think innovatively and collaborate effectively across cultural boundaries.

Beyond employment considerations, engaging with diversity fosters global citizenship. Students learn that their experiences form part of a larger human tapestry and that cooperation and understanding are vital for addressing pressing global challenges such as climate change, migration, and inequality. This broader perspective helps students see themselves as members of a global community with shared responsibilities.

In summary, diversity in education offers profound academic, social, emotional, and societal benefits. By creating environments where differences are celebrated rather than merely tolerated, education can unlock each learner's potential and contribute to building a more compassionate society. As UNESCO (2020) affirms, inclusive education is fundamental for achieving social justice and fostering peaceful, cohesive communities. With this understanding of diversity's value established, we can now examine how these principles apply to the specific context of caste in Indian higher education.

## **3. Caste in the Indian Education System: Historical Context and Policy Responses**

### **3.1. Historical Foundations and Exclusion**

Caste represents one of the defining dimensions of diversity in India's society and education system. Deeply rooted in India's historical, religious, and social structures, caste hierarchies have fundamentally shaped access to education and opportunity for centuries. Traditionally, the Brahminical order restricted formal learning and teaching to upper-caste Hindus, systematically excluding Dalits (formerly referred to as "untouchables") and Adivasis (indigenous peoples) from educational opportunities (Deshpande, 2009). This historical exclusion has had profound intergenerational effects, contributing to persistent illiteracy, poverty, and social marginalization among these communities.

### **3.2. Constitutional Guarantees and Affirmative Action**

The Indian Constitution (1950) attempted to address these historical injustices by explicitly abolishing untouchability under Article 17 and guaranteeing equality of opportunity through Articles 15 and 16. Affirmative action policies—most significantly, reservations in education and public employment—were designed to empower Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and later, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), by ensuring their access to institutions of higher learning. These measures represent one of the most ambitious social justice initiatives in the world.

The implementation of reservation policies has evolved significantly over decades. Initially, 15% of seats in public higher education were reserved for SCs and 7.5% for STs. Following the recommendations of the Mandal Commission (1980), an additional 27% of seats were allocated to OBCs beginning in the 1990s—a policy change that sparked significant social

upheaval and debate. More recently, in 2019, a 10% reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) among non-reserved categories was introduced through the 103rd Constitutional Amendment, further expanding the scope of affirmative action.

### **3.3. Progress and Persistent Challenges**

While these policies have undeniably improved access to higher education, the caste-based inequities they were designed to address remain deeply entrenched in educational institutions. Dalit and Adivasi students continue to face widespread discrimination ranging from institutional indifference to active exclusion. According to Kumar and Mocherla (2021), many students from marginalized communities report feelings of social isolation, stereotyping, and alienation on university campuses. These experiences have contributed to elevated dropout rates, particularly among first-generation learners from rural or economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Nevertheless, significant progress has occurred in terms of representation. According to All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) data (Thapan, 2023), SC student enrolment in higher education increased from 3.84 million in 2012–13 to 6.6 million in 2021–22. ST enrolment more than doubled during the same period, growing from 1.32 million to 2.71 million. OBC students now constitute approximately 38% of total enrolment in higher education. These figures suggest that, at least in terms of formal access, higher education has become considerably more inclusive over the past decade.

Yet true inclusion extends beyond mere enrolment numbers. As emphasized in the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2020), equity in education must ensure that "every learner matters and matters equally." This means inclusion must address deep-rooted hierarchies within academic institutions. When Dalit and Adivasi students are represented as peers, mentors, and scholars in their own right, they not only benefit personally from educational opportunities but also contribute to democratizing and decolonizing knowledge production itself.

The gap between policy intentions and lived realities reveals the complex terrain that marginalized students must navigate in pursuing higher education. While reservations have opened doors previously closed to them, the journey toward genuine inclusion remains fraught with challenges—from subtle microaggressions to institutional apathy. The next section will explore these tensions and challenges in greater depth, examining how caste continues to shape educational experiences despite formal policies promoting diversity and inclusion.

### **3.4. Tensions and Challenges in Practice: The Lived Experience of Caste in Higher Education**

Despite constitutional guarantees and policy frameworks, caste-based discrimination persists in educational spaces—often manifesting in subtle yet deeply impactful ways. While universities appear nominally inclusive on paper, they frequently reproduce the social hierarchies present in broader society. Students from marginalized communities regularly encounter microaggressions from both faculty and peers: assumptions about their intellectual capabilities, condescending tones in interactions, and exclusion from study groups or extracurricular activities (Bagesh, 2023).

These lived experiences often remain invisible to those in power. I was particularly struck by a case involving a Dalit PhD scholar at a prestigious university who resorted to a hunger strike to protest casteist harassment and exclusion from lab work. Though the incident sparked national outrage, it led to minimal institutional change—highlighting the gap between public outcry and meaningful action (Bagesh, 2023).

Faculty members from marginalized backgrounds face similar patterns of discrimination. Many report being assigned administrative rather than research responsibilities or being overlooked for leadership positions. Kumar and Mocherla (2021) document the persistent underrepresentation of Dalit and Adivasi faculty across universities, especially in sciences and elite institutions. Those who secure positions often find themselves isolated, with limited peer support or mentorship.

The exclusion extends beyond formal structures into institutional cultures that privilege upper-caste norms—including particular language usage, social behaviours, and communication styles—creating a "hidden curriculum" that disadvantages first-generation learners from rural, non-English speaking backgrounds. Even high-performing Dalit students report being viewed primarily as "quota admissions" rather than individuals with unique abilities—their identity reduced to a policy benefit.

In 2024, students from marginalized communities at IIMs and IITs organized protests demanding enforcement of faculty reservations, mental health support, and functioning anti-discrimination cells. These protests highlight the disconnect between progressive policies and everyday experiences of exclusion (Thapan, 2023).

As Bhoi and Lakra (2022) persuasively argue, despite formal entry into higher education, Dalit and Adivasi students continue to navigate a "complex terrain of marginality," where social belonging, intellectual recognition, and emotional wellbeing remain elusive. This terrain is characterized not by overt rejection but by subtle forms of invalidation and othering that accumulate over time, creating significant barriers to genuine inclusion.

### **3.5. The Meritocracy Debate: Unpacking Privilege and Potential**

The most pervasive criticism of caste-based reservation policies centers on the contested concept of merit. Critics contend that reservations compromise academic standards by admitting students with lower entrance exam scores. This argument has gained particular traction among urban upper-caste students competing for limited seats in prestigious fields like medicine, engineering, and management. However, this critique fundamentally misunderstands how privilege shapes educational outcomes. Deshpande (2009) and Velaskar (2012) demonstrate that merit is not a neutral measure but reflects accumulated advantages—quality schools, coaching centres, parental guidance, and cultural capital—disproportionately concentrated among upper-caste communities.

When I examine standardized exams like NEET and JEE, I see how they fail to account for disparities in schooling quality, language barriers, and regional inequities. A Dalit student from a government school in rural Bihar faces structural disadvantages compared to peers from elite urban schools, regardless of their intelligence or potential.

The narrative of "merit" often masks caste privilege. As Neelakandan and Patil (2012) remind us, Indian universities were originally established for upper-caste elites. In this historical context, affirmative action doesn't dilute merit but expands its definition—recognizing that potential exists across social strata if given proper support.

Evidence contradicts the notion that reserved category students underperform. Many succeed in their fields, becoming role models and contributing to research, policy, and public service. They achieve this despite systemic skepticism, not because of special treatment. The debate around merit versus reservation reflects deeper questions about who defines excellence, who participates in nation-building, and whose knowledge is legitimized. At its heart, this is about power, not performance.

### **3.6. The "Creamy Layer" Issue: Navigating Intra-Group Tensions**

The "creamy layer" concept adds another layer of complexity. Originally applied to OBCs, it aims to exclude the most privileged individuals within backward classes from reservation

benefits, ensuring affirmative action reaches those most disadvantaged. Though well-intentioned, this approach has limitations. Criteria like parental income or education level often fail to account for social exclusion and caste stigma. A Dalit student with government-employed parents may still face caste abuse in classrooms, showing that economic status doesn't guarantee social acceptance (Rao, 2019).

Thapan (2023) argues that while intra-group inequality deserves attention, the creamy layer framework requires careful application. For SCs and STs, the Supreme Court has repeatedly stated that economic advancement doesn't erase caste discrimination. Therefore, exclusion based solely on income could undermine these policies' fundamental purpose.

The debate has created tensions within marginalized communities. Poorer subgroups within the OBC category sometimes resent the perceived dominance of better-off groups like Yadavs or Kurmis. These dynamics suggest the value of sub-categorization within reservation frameworks—an idea gaining traction in policy discussions. This highlights the importance of intersectionality in policy design. Effective affirmative action must consider the interplay of caste, class, geography, and gender in shaping opportunity. A one-dimensional approach risks creating new forms of exclusion while addressing others.

### **3.7. Institutional Resistance: Barriers Beyond Policy**

Implementation of caste inclusion faces persistent obstacles at the institutional level. While reservation policies have created entry pathways, many universities continue to reflect caste biases in everyday functioning (Bagesh, 2023). Numerous institutions lack functioning Equal Opportunity Cells, anti-discrimination mechanisms, or support systems for Dalit, Adivasi, and OBC students (Kumar & Mocherla, 2021). Without these structures, campuses remain exclusionary despite appearing inclusive on paper.

Faculty diversity is particularly inadequate. UGC data shows that reserved category faculty constitute less than 10% of professors in many elite institutions (UGC, 2022). This creates a representational vacuum, leaving students without mentors who share their experiences and reinforcing the perception that marginalized communities don't belong in academic leadership (Thapan, 2023).

In my fieldwork, I've observed how implicit biases among faculty entrench these inequalities. Studies show that Dalit and Adivasi students are often presumed academically weak, overlooked for research opportunities, and subjected to condescending treatment. These microaggressions, though difficult to document formally, have significant psychological and academic impacts. Administrative systems often fail to consider caste-related barriers. Complex procedures for verifying caste certificates, delays in fellowship disbursements, and poorly trained staff disproportionately affect marginalized students (Deshpande, 2009). Elite institutions continue privileging upper-caste cultural norms—including particular forms of English, social behaviours, and erasure of caste identities—creating alienating environments for students from different backgrounds.

Without active institutional commitment to equity—including faculty sensitization, curriculum reform, improved representation, and peer mentoring—reservations alone cannot ensure genuine inclusion. Policy without implementation remains merely symbolic.

### **3.8. Student Activism and Demands for Change: Resistance as Transformation**

Despite these persistent structural barriers, student activism has emerged as a powerful force for transformation within Indian higher education. Across university campuses nationwide, Dalit, Adivasi, and OBC students have consistently mobilized around issues of caste-based discrimination, institutional neglect, inadequate faculty representation, and the absence of culturally sensitive mental health support (Bagesh, 2023; Neelakandan & Patil, 2012). These movements should not be viewed as isolated protests but rather as part of a longstanding

tradition of resistance aimed at democratizing education and challenging entrenched caste hierarchies (Velaskar, 2012).

The tragic suicide of Rohith Vemula in 2016 at the University of Hyderabad marked a watershed moment in this struggle. His death—attributed to systemic caste discrimination, academic exclusion, and administrative indifference—ignited an unprecedented national wave of protest and solidarity (Deshpande, 2009; Kumar & Mocherla, 2021). Students across institutions and identity groups united in holding candlelight vigils, organizing marches, and staging sit-ins, compelling universities and the broader public to confront the everyday violence experienced by Dalit students within elite academic spaces.

Subsequent mobilizations have occurred at institutions including IIT Bombay, JNU, and multiple IIMs. These protests have articulated clear demands: the establishment and proper functioning of Equal Opportunity Cells (as mandated by the UGC), implementation of reservation in faculty recruitment, timely disbursement of scholarships, effective grievance redressal mechanisms for caste-based harassment, and culturally competent mental health services (Thapan, 2023; UGC, 2022). Student activists have also advocated for decolonizing curricula and incorporating Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi intellectual traditions into mainstream syllabi (Neelakandan & Patil, 2012).

While some universities have responded by establishing inquiry committees or updating anti-discrimination protocols, many actions remain largely symbolic—limited to token gestures such as commemorating Dalit History Month or issuing diversity statements without substantive change (Bagesh, 2023). These gestures, while not without value, fall significantly short of the systemic transformation that is needed.

As UNESCO (2020) emphasizes, genuine inclusion must be structural rather than merely symbolic. Meaningful transformation requires fundamental redistribution of institutional power, recognition of caste-based knowledge systems, and proactive measures to create spaces where marginalized students feel seen, heard, and valued as full members of the academic community. These student movements represent more than acts of protest—they embody expressions of dignity, democratic participation, and a radical reimagining of what Indian higher education can and should become.

#### **4. Conclusion: Beyond Access to Belonging**

Fostering caste diversity in Indian higher education is both a policy objective and a moral imperative. Reservation systems have created pathways for historically excluded groups, but the journey toward meaningful inclusion continues. While access has improved, structural barriers—implicit bias, campus alienation, and resource inequality—hinder true equity (Bhoi & Lakra, 2024).

Affirmative action has reshaped access patterns and sparked crucial debates around merit and justice. Kumar (2023) argues these policies challenge the myth of caste-neutral merit and expose how privilege disguises itself as ability. Critics highlight issues like the "creamy layer" problem, calling for more precise targeting (Sivanandan & Shivnekar, 2023).

Despite challenges, abandoning caste-based inclusion would reinforce historical injustices. Genuine diversity requires institutional reform, culturally responsive teaching, and dismantling exclusionary practices. As UNESCO (2020) emphasizes, inclusion addresses both access and belonging.

Several approaches show promise for deepening inclusion. First, institutions must move beyond numerical representation to create environments where diverse identities are valued—incorporating marginalized perspectives into curricula and building faculty diversity. Second, support systems must be strengthened through mentorship, culturally sensitive

counselling, and robust grievance mechanisms. Third, the conversation around merit must be reframed to acknowledge structural advantages and disadvantages.

While progress has been uneven, the push for equity remains vital for educational excellence and social justice. The growing activism of marginalized students represents a promising sign of transformation. With sustained commitment, Indian higher education can evolve into a system where diversity becomes a celebrated strength rather than a contested obligation.

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