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Economic Growth, Development and Education of Scheduled Castes: Line Drawn from Neoliberal Era

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Abstract

The economy of India was reasonably well during the world economic crisis and is performing well in the economic growth of the nation. However, relatively high aggregate economic growth also co-exists with the persistence of less *social development* for more than a decade. The exclusiveness of this growth rate is associated with region, locality, education, employment, living standard and social position. In this situation, this study poses questions: what are the changing impacts of neoliberalism in India and does economic growth co-exist with social development? What are the neoliberal experiences of marginal sections connected to economic growth? How are the educational attainments, retention and achievements of Scheduled Caste students connected to the structural changes in higher education?

Keywords

Neo-liberalization, economic growth, social development, Scheduled Castes, higher education

Introduction

The economic growth of a country depends upon its knowledge economy and skilled manpower. In every economy, skilled manpower helps to strengthen economic growth by extending knowledge to the productive process. The manpower of a country is known as ‘social capital’ or ‘human resource’. In addition to this, social capital is usually empowered by education and innovative ideas. Thus, to make a society productive and effective, education has become an important aspect in fostering growth and development for the nation. In this present context, the knowledge economy depends upon the development of science and technology with grasping the capacity of human resources. The economy of a country requires skilled human resources as a factor of production in the process of economic development, where the knowledge economy plays an important role in empowering the human resources in the growth process. Also, technological development is an indicator of the knowledge economy that

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originates from skilled human resources. India's long-term economic growth has accelerated since the 1990s and 2000s with an average rate of 7.1% and even stabilized during the 2010s and 2020s. The acceleration of growth is evident not just for aggregate gross domestic product (GDP), but even more strongly for per capita GDP (Economic Survey, 2021). The average pace of per capita growth was over 6% in the last decade. Interestingly, when compared with some of the world's largest emerging economies, this rate of acceleration of growth stands out as being unique to India compared to the world's other economies (Gupta, 2018).

Economic Growth and Sectoral Allocation in India

During the world economic crisis of 2008, the economic growth of India was declared substantially high (7.75%). That remained high (7.86%) in 2009, continuing to 8.50% in 2010, 7.41% in 2014, 8.00% in 2015, 8.26% in 2016, 6.80% in 2017 and 6.53% in 2018. India's advancing growth can also be seen when, in the last two and a half decades (between 1990 and 2018), the average GDP growth rates (6.5%) have been greater than interest rates (2.6%). However, coming to the expenditure in the social sector, it was seen that the same year in 2008, the social sector expenditure on health was very low (1.41%) in 2008, and remained low (1.30%) in 2009, 1.40% in 2010, 1.30% in 2014, 1.2% in 2015 and 1.3% in 2016 of the GDP in the respective years (Economic Survey, 2016, 2021).

In the social sector expenditure, 'education', which fuels the economic growth both directly and indirectly, is seen as a neglected area compared to the percentage of GDP. In the year 2014–2015, for education, only 2.8% was expended of the total GDP. This grew by 0.7% only in the year 2020–2021 (Economic Survey, 2021). The Economic Survey, 2020–2021 also shows that economic growth does not co-exist with inclusive growth. And the economic growth shows higher inequality, which leads to adverse socio-economic outcomes in social sectors like education, health and life expectancy of the people of India. It also explains that both economic growth and inequality have similar relationships with socio-economic indicators.

Studies have been questioning how India can be expected to maintain its social development with extreme levels of disparities within the social system and inclusiveness in the economy. Neglecting inclusive growth engenders disparities of caste, class and gender within society and has been challenging the nation's economic growth. This reinforces the need to recognize the extreme nature of social inequalities. In addition to that, India also has a very low rank in the Human Development Index (HDI), which shows the replica of the exclusive and less social development index among the emerging economies. On contrary to the economic growth of India, its HDI recorded 131 out of 189 countries in the list of the HDI, 2019 (Dreze & Sen, 2020; Human Development Report, 2019).

For economic growth which was seen as non-inclusive for the last few years, Bhoi (2013) stressed on the need for inclusive development as an essentiality in every sector and, especially in the education sector, to maintain the stability in economic growth and to strengthen the human capital in our country. Though we achieved a high growth rate in our economy, still, we are unable to provide basic education to the marginalized, deprived and depressed categories in terms of accessibility and retention. As per All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE, 2019), large portions of the population are deprived of getting quality education at different levels of education. They are also excluded from higher education, both in general and professional courses. The participation of marginal communities in technical education and information technology education is also under-represented. Moreover, they are excluded from mainstream development as they are debarred from employability and economic development (Bhoi, 2016).

This study continues with the idea of the human capital theory of Schultz (1972), where it engages in exploring the experiences of SC students in India, both from private and public managed higher educational institutions in the era of neo-liberalism. The theoretical framework for this article borrowed ideas from the theory of the *possession of wealth to market* managed economy and engaged in the experiences of SC students in educational attainment, retention and achievement at their higher educational premises.

Based on these inferences, this article engages with the discourse of economic growth and sectoral development with emphasis on social sector development. Today, when the world is in the neo-liberal era, it is important to see that, among the social sectors, is education a primary target of the forces of neoliberalism? Likewise, it also tries to discuss the position of different social groups in the economy's growth and the Scheduled Castes (SCs) who have a very low literacy rate (Census, 2011). Also, the study will follow SCs' human development, human poverty and social justice index (SJI) to determine their stake in accessing education at a national level and how the structural changes of neo-liberalization and its emerging issues determine access to education and their social and economic inclusion.

Research Questions and Objectives

As advancing economy for the nation, which is not substantiated with the equitable economic growth of the nation this study is engaged with the discourse of neoliberalism on economic growth, development, social development and more particularly, SCs development India. Mainly, it enquires about the structural changes in education and the link between the World Trade Organization (WTO) and its follow-up process. It also investigates how it is marching towards a private form of education on par with the expectations of the WTO through neo-liberal policy. The education policy has also been made on par with international frameworks which are completely captured under neoliberal rules and regulations. It engaged in exploring Indian experiences in connection to neoliberal discourse. Through this study, we are trying to locate whether neo-liberalization can co-exist with economic growth and development? Does economic growth and development have any connection with the SCs' progress in India? How do structural changes in higher education affect SC students in their educational attainment, retention and achievement? Following these questions, the specific objectives are to try to bring the neoliberal experiences of SC students to a higher educational setting. The specific objectives of the study are given below.

1. To study the relationship between economic growth, development and SCs' development in the presence of a neoliberal platform.
2. To find out the structural changes and space for SCs students at higher education levels in the era of neoliberalism.
3. To explore the educational attainment, retention and achievement of SC students in the neo-liberal era.

Methodology of the Study

This is an exploratory study on SC students in higher education in the times of neoliberal discourse. The study followed mixed method approaches. A purposive sampling method was used to reach the SC students at the higher education level. The unit of the study was based on the SC students of Odisha studying in higher education across the discipline. For good representation of students, five major public and private

educational institutions were included for this study. The sample size for the study was 50 ($n = 50$) students, of which 25 ($n = 25$) were male and 25 ($n = 25$) were female. It has also collected five ($n = 5$) in-depth interviews of male and female SC students who are pursuing their graduation/post graduation courses. Five ($n = 5$) focus group discussions (FGDs) were also made to have multiple perspectives on the neo-liberalization of SCs' higher education. *Pseudonyms are used for defining the identities of cases and the educational institutions.* The primary data were collected through semi-structured interview schedules, in-depth interview (case study) guides, observation techniques and FGDs approaches. The secondary data were collected from the Ministry of Education Reports of India, Economic Survey of India, documents of WTO, UNESCO and Census of India, research articles, newspaper articles, books and journals. The data analysis procedure is based on the descriptive statistics, thematic analysis and FGDs points methods for data tabulation, computation, analysis and interpretation processes.

Development of Marginal Communities

The development of marginal communities depends on inclusive policies to meet the upward mobility that is accountable for the inclusion of vulnerable and marginalized groups in a society. There are different obstacles in the way of educational inclusion at different levels of education. The school repetition rate is a major obstacle in the way of educational retention, which is increased by the low-grade rate in different classes of education. The educational expenditure increases, when the students repeat a class many times, which would be provided for additional support to those who encounter difficulties getting an education at different levels. Different countries have initiated several cost-benefit measures with the scarce resources to promote educational inclusion (Bhoi & Lakra, 2020; UNESCO, 2005).

Development of marginal communities can be possible through education which is the only gateway for their (SCs) economic and social upliftment. Elucidating this, Ambedkar argued, 'I regard education to be a very necessary qualification for possessing that degree of competence which is very necessary for the performance of one's duty', he also said, 'It requires education and therefore education even from the standpoint of the backward classes, scheduled classes or tribal areas is a very necessary ingredient' (Ambedkar, 1956 [1979], p. 160). He also organized the marginal section, especially for the depressed class, with the institution called *Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha* for the grievances of untouchability, where the motto or slogan framed as 'Educate, Agitate and Organize' (Ambedkar, 1924 [1979], p. 396) to empower the socially and educationally excluded people.

Scheduled Castes' Human Development, Multidimensional Poverty Index and Social Justice Index

As per Census 2011, the number of SCs in India is 201.4 million, which is 16.6% of the total population of India. Among them, 103.5 million (51.39%) are male and 97.9 million (48.61%) are female. The rate of literacy in India is 74%, whereas for the SCs it is 66.1%. The literacy rate for SC males is 75.2% compared to 82.1 % of total male literacy and SC females' literacy is 56.5% compared to 65.4% of total female literacy (Census, 2011).

Indian social structure is based on a hierarchical structure, that has given the SCs the lower strata in the society. This social stratum has been a challenge for the SCs because it does not allow them to come out of their poor living standards into a better and decent life. Their socio-economic condition has been

terrible due to injustice and inequality that continues to keep them in deprivation and prevent them from gaining further development. They are victims of the oppression of the caste system and its practices in society. In many indicators, the conditions of SCs are worse and tormenting compared to the general castes. About 34% of SCs still remain below the poverty line (BPL) compared to general castes (9%) people. Similarly, the total SC population of India possess a very small share of the national wealth (7%), which is 2.5 times less than their total population. Whereas for the general castes national wealth share is very high (45%); it is almost double of their population. Likewise, SC land possession is also very less (7.3%) compared to 42.2% of general category people. And very high portion of the people from the SCs are landless compared to 11% of the general caste (Thorat & Madheswaran, 2018).

In the developmental index, the SCs have been at a low level of HDI,¹ in which the HDI value of SCs was 0.30 point compared to the general castes (0.39 point). This shows the SCs' HDI rank is lower than general castes. The SJI² keeps a record of crimes against SCs, where 33,501 crimes have been reported against them every year (Thorat et al., 2007). While the Multiple Multidimensional Poverty in India (MPI)³ of SCs was 33.3% compared to the general castes at 22%, comparatively more SCs are poorer than general castes. Overall, *five out of every six persons* are poor among SCs in India (Multidimensional Poverty Index, 2021).

Despite many efforts by the Government of India, the condition of SCs has not improved much. This social group continues to be among the poorest, most deprived (health, education) and most subordinated groups in human development, human poverty and social justice indices. For a very long time, this social group was deprived of access to many things in society. Their deprivation is historically associated with social, economic and educational exclusion and caste-based discrimination. The SCs are also denied property rights where the caste hierarchy plays a role in assigning degraded and stigmatized occupations to living in society.

Scheduled Castes and Higher Education

Bhoi (2013) argues that the social and academic non-acknowledgment and financial burden force SCs to discontinue their education at higher education levels. Also, the emergence of private universities affects the affirmative benefit at the higher education level in India.

Educational accessibility begins in each activity when a student enters the institute premises, engaging them in the process of curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. In addition to that, each of them should have equal space and opportunity to participate, perform and achieve (Bhoi, 2016). Educational accessibility is difficult for the marginal groups where UNESCO estimates 'the most vulnerable and marginalized the hardest ... widened inequalities and could erode decades of hard-won progress. About 24 million children and youth—from pre-primary to tertiary education—are at risk of dropping out' (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021, p. 1).

Internationally, access to education is a challenging task for children of people of diverse backgrounds across the world. The United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which announced that the 'right of education should be provided to every child'. However, many young people are unable to attend school due to their poor socio-economic backgrounds and the absence of enough ascribed support for them (UNDHRE, 1994). In the European context, the legislation on the *Right to Education* has been introduced since 1952, in its *Article 2* of the first Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights obliges all signatory parties to guarantee the right to education. Globally, the United Nations' International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966 guarantees *Right to Education* under *Article 13* (United Nations Human Rights, 1976).

India is a vast and diverse country with various inequalities relating to caste, class, gender and religion. The *Right to Education* was brought in 2010. It aimed to achieve social inclusion, but failed to reflect on the education of all students equally. Apart from the inequality in education, today's deprivation has also ruined Indian society, where the SCs are getting ruined by caste confrontations. Deprivation is more dangerous than inequality in a society like India, where some groups of people have been denied access to many things since the *Vedic* age. Now, the communities are called SCs, officially or constitutionally. Besides the denial of accessing socio-economic resources, they are also victims of educational inaccessibility. Since they are deprived of proper education in many parts of the country, students from these communities continue to lag in terms of socio-economic and educational development (Chatterjee, 2000). The situation of the SCs is appalling regarding income, employment and educational attainment. Furthermore, they are facing ill-treatment in society and educational institutions. Mainly, they are dominated by upper caste people in society.

... education system does a lot of violence to the culture of the Dalits. Who determines the culture of the universities? The caste culture that is prevalent in higher education is the creation of the caste people who teach and administer at these centres of learning. ...Consciously or unconsciously, teachers and administrators perpetuate through their interactions with Dalit students ...(Pinto, 2002, pp. 183–184).

Despite several provisions and constitutional remedies for the upliftment of SCs in India, the SCs are continuously behind in accessing education in comparison to other caste students. Moreover, the issues of access to higher education and equity for SC communities face different problems that require divergent policy responses for their development. In terms of the higher education of SCs, the data reveals that the enrolment of SC students is very negligible compared to that of non-SC students in higher education. This can be seen as the gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education in India is 26.3% and 26.9% for the male and 27.3% for the female in general, which is calculated between the age group of 18–23 years. However, when it comes to the GER for SCs, it is just 23.4% of which 22.8% are male and 24.1 are female (AISHE, 2019).

Education and Liberalization

The education system in India has been found non-inclusive with the introduction of liberalization, privatization and globalization (LPG). It is observed that privatization segregates students from having equal access to higher education. This can be seen as holding different admission procedures exclude students from entering higher education when there is no uniformity of admitting students from different socio-economic backgrounds or gender parity. The fee structure also systematically fails to admit students from low economic backgrounds. Different teaching pedagogies give less space for retention in higher education in private institutions. Bhoi (2013) argued that privatization excludes students based on class, caste, gender and locality in the educational setup, where pupils from marginal communities are deprived of getting educational accessibility and participating in educational activities. Rather, LPG has added to disparities in access to higher education in India. Privatization gives chances to private entrepreneurs to make a profit rather than offer an equitable education to all citizens (Deshpande, 2005).

Theoretical Discourse of Neoliberalism and Privatization

The theoretical debate of neoliberalism comes through the pathways of a small firm to a larger organization (Coase, 1937). The theory of firm stands on the pillar of wealth of the nation proposed by

Smith (1776) and grew up with the argument that a *free market is a lack of belief in freedom itself* (Friedman, 1962). Later, the process of liberalization reached the theory of *property rights*, where the state withdrew to regulate (Alchian & Demsetz, 1973; Pejovich, 1990). After that, the *pluralist theory* of privatization became a political phenomenon rather than an economic activity (Henig et al., 1998; Samson, 1994). In times like these, the journey of privatization has reached to *functional transaction theory*, where the power of the state does not work to tackle the economic crisis and fails to continue welfare activities. Failure to manage an oil crisis in a large public sector company in 1970 is an example of this functional theory that gave birth to widespread privatization in the world. This *functional theory* was considered the gateway to the *laissez-faire* (market-driven) economy. The energy crisis appeared in countries like the USA, Canada, Western Europe, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, which made them adapt 'privatization' in their country as a part of functional requirement. Subsequently, from the oil crisis, the UK began to expedite the privatization process, and at the same time, Australia endorsed privatization as it was offered funds from the international body (Franzway et al., 1989; Steel & Heald, 1982). Theorising, how privatization was encouraged in the firms for their sustenance, with time had become a new trend of adoption across economies in the world. Likewise, India too adopted neo-liberalization through the New Economic Policy in 1991, which encourages services to be run by private management and not by the government. It promises profit incentives, cost cuts and more efficient organizations. Also, with less political interference, faster visible results, and no space for less performing organizations. As a result, like other sectors, education too saw the massive emergence of private higher education institutions (Bhoi, 2013; Reed & Mukherjee, 2004).

Privatization, Neoliberal Policy and Indian Higher Education

India adopted neoliberalism with a policy regime where the WTO and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) trapped India in signing the agreement on LPG. India adopted the neoliberal agreement by introducing the New Economic Policy of India, 1991 (Reed & Mukherjee, 2004). Since then, privatization is rampant in every corner of India; it has also spread over almost all sectors of the Indian economy. After two decade and a half when the follow-up of neoliberal policy started, the government also channelized their funds through private bodies by reducing the fund of the University Grant Commission (UGC), where the university is supposed to return the fund, the universities and educational institutions will receive the fund as a loan, not a grant. In this process, the Govt. of India introduced the Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA) in 2017, which is a joint venture of the Ministry of Education, Government of India and Canara Bank for financing school education, higher education educational institutes under the Ministry of health (institutes of medical education), etc. (HEFA, 2017). The government is looking to stop recruiting the faculty on a permanent basis. *Like the universities of USA and UK, Indian government has plans to introduce track tenure faculty appointments in higher education* (meeting with MHRD Officials, 2018). The market liberalization mainly targets the secondary sector, where both health and education are being targeted. Here, the discourse is based on the education sector, particularly, the private form of education in India. Taking the inferences, this article engages in exploring the SCs' educational attainment, retention and achievements in the neoliberal higher education system.

Structural Changes and Higher Education in Neo-liberalization

Structural changes are the important changes that appear as the giant devil who is always ready to devour the *have-nots*, especially the marginal sections. Among them, SCs are the most vulnerable groups who are struggling to access basic needs as well as access to education and basic education. The hike in

course fees at different educational institutions with a neoliberal imposition happened not because the state is proactive in inviting private players into higher education but because of the compulsion in the WTO's loan follow up process. Uttam Das (aged 58), professor of economics discusses:

...rapid privatisation is happening because the Government of India had borrowed money from WTO as loan to develop the nation. The beneficiaries of this loan failed to repay it, as a result government was compelled to re-pay the loan amount in the form of gold deposit and seven ships loaded with gold were sent to WTO which was also failed to completely repay the taken amount. This forced India to sign the treaty of GATT introducing LPG in 1991. Its interrogation of following the rules of LPG enforces India to be a complete privatised economy since 2015.

This shows how faulty economic policy and financial management have invited huge structural changes in the Indian economy, which have also been promoting structural change in higher education to have more private educational institutions.

Transit in Higher Education of India

Under these conditions, out of 1,043 Indian universities, 40% ($n = 408$) of them are private universities. With the guidelines of the *New Education Policy*, the remaining of them would be slowly and completely privatized. Similarly, about 80% ($n = 31,390$) colleges in India are managed by private bodies compared to 20% ($n = 8,565$) public managed colleges (AISHE, 2020). This reveals that the huge transition from public to private forms of higher education can create more a larger number of exclusions of people from higher education.

Affordability of Scheduled Castes to Higher education

Looking at two public funded institutions, it is found that ₹1,500 per annum is charged for degree level general-courses and ₹84,000 per annum is charged for professional courses. Whereas, in a private institutions like *Infinite* [pseudonym], a professional degree can costs as skyrocketing high to ₹350,000 per annum. Similarly, at *Altech* and *Netversal* [pseudonym], a professional course can cost to ₹250,000 per annum. In this context, Kishore (aged 21) narrated:

local *Sahookar*, the village merchant lend money to my parents mortgaging land and livestock for my admission to bachelor degree in engineering. Today, the loan amount has compounded to huge interest. As the amount was arranged taking heavy loan that had multiplied over the time, my family is undergoing creates a difficult mental traumatic condition that I may be able to explain. Looking at this, I get suicidal tendencies, due to this burden. For my parents, this is a highly insecure days too, because, if by the end of my graduation I cannot find a decent job then it would be impossible to bring out my parents from this life-threatening situation. During my last visit to home in holidays, I saw, my family has reduced their intake of food amount, and have been working day and night to meet the family requirements. They are in complete stressful and anxious conditions. My mother has lost a lot of weight since my previous visit to home.

This shows how difficult it is for an SC family to manage to get admission to a private institution. Not only that, s/he also needs to retain it and to successfully achieve the goal of a decent job, or else a minor gap can keep on escalating their loans that can hardly be repaid to come out of it. This means education in private institutions is highly unaffordable for SC students. The high, skyrocketing fee has been a major

hurdle for the SCs to enter and continue their education at a higher education level. Here, the inaccessibility of higher education is driven by the economic capabilities which mostly the SCs have been facing due to communal resource denial to them in the society (Bhoi, 2013; Dreze & Sen, 2020).

Parental Occupation of Scheduled Caste Students and Neoliberalism

The life struggle of SCs is always a reality in Indian society, where economic prosperity has been hoarded by the dominant caste groups for more than 3,000 years. The economic transaction has also been transferred through generational transformation by birth. Education was the only gateway to break the inequality of Indian society. However, education has not been shared with them systematically and structurally till date. Along with caste oppression, the neo-liberal economic structure comes as a huge hurdle in the way of SCs' education and higher education. This study finds SC students' parental occupation brings them harsh realities about the affordability of education at a higher education level in private institutions. Ullash (aged 23) says, 'capability of SC families has been murdered with the neo-liberal forces'. It was seen, SC students who were in private institutions, 71.6% of them stated their parents were engaged in business and service sector and on contrary only 28.4% confirmed their parents have been in agriculture, household, or other traditional occupation. Comparatively, in public institutions, 17.5% of SC students stated their parents were engaged in business and services; and, on average 82.5% of SC students' parents were in agriculture, household, or other traditional occupation.

This reveals that SC parents who are engaged in services in the secondary or tertiary sector can have mainly managed to enrol their children in private colleges or universities and could take the risk of not being able to pay the high fee of the private institution for higher education. Further data also revealed that these parents were mostly at no higher ranks in their service (jobs) but were mostly in the lower grades of the service sector.

Looking further, it was seen that due to the practice of caste-purity in the society, SC students' parents refrained from having businesses related to cooked food or other food (like groceries) shops. In this discourse, Savita (aged 20) says:

My father had started a food stall near my village. Though it became popular but never a profitable or say a sustainable one even. Popular because, it was highly gossiped far and wide that a *Pana* has given a *jalakhiadokaan* (food stall). But, within sometime, the village dominant caste who never used to come for having food, one day simply destroyed our food stall. Moving away from food related business my father managed to open a small sized cabin for general stationery items. This was set-up away from our village, in a semi urban locality, where our caste was not revealed. Fortunately, this worked out and today my education is supported by shop, but it is not adequate, so I give evening tuitions to the local children for adding to my expenses at this private college. This shift to a semi-urban place was a difficult decision for my parents, but they were left with not much occupational option in our village. In neoliberal format, my college's high course fee became a problem in our family. This cost never allowed my siblings for better education and kept them deprived of it. Today both my brother and sister are doing their general degree from the nearby public education institution. This is now there has been dominance and control of caste and people on our living sources.

Second, we find how the lives of the SCs were very difficult to arrange money for educating their children. A student whose parents were not in any occupation that can allow them to afford costly private education but their dream of educating their son who was enrolled in an engineering institution and to fulfil their dream they had to sell their jewellery yet failed to succeed in getting the degree. This struggle was narrated by a student, Kishore (aged 21), who said:

It was a long struggle when I enrolled in a private educational institution. I paid a substantial amount of course fee with many difficulties. My parents arranged that money by selling our land and minimum ornaments. But after the first semester, I was unable to pay the fees of the second semester and was deprived of the benefit of affirmative action...my parents were devastated with the huge loss and the course fee pattern. I realise privatisation is a curse for families like me who are economically not affluent and come from socially dis-privileged background.

These life struggles in a SC students' life, for getting educated from a privatized institution at a higher education level, in the neoliberal economy, can lead to a huge dis-balance in attainment of higher education across all communities. There can be so many fluctuating education ratios that it might strike hard on the Indian economy and have a direct impact on the GDP of India. Moreover, a large section of society may remain un-educated systematically for generations, and might never be able to attain a balanced average income per family per se. Therefore, enrolment to higher education, retention and attainment of an employment can be highly crucial in neoliberal education system for the SCs. At one end, the caste autocracy that holds in the education of SCs shows sign to get worsened on with privatization; and, on the other hand, shift from traditional occupation is another nightmare for SCs to get hold of a good job, if they do not have basic educational degrees to apply for jobs. This also raises the question: can an SC ever get rid of its caste boundaries by climbing the ladder of 'education' and can it ever choose an independent occupation in this neoliberal education system?

Space for Scheduled Castes in Attaining Higher Education

Educational attainment of the SCs was challenged by the neoliberal force where including initial course fee, re-admission fee, co-curricular and extra-curricular fee, entrance examination system, application form fee and its admission/filling procedures are the hindrances. The SC students are usually faced with these hindrances starting from their application to appearing at the entrance which define their entry level struggle later they are also struggling with the hindrances which distract them in continuation of their study are discussed in the *retention section* of this article. They were also grappling with the reservation facilities, scholarship and curriculum structure, which are also discussed in the next section. Course fees are the major neoliberal challenges which affect the educational attainment of SC students at the higher education level. Apart from these, the exclusionary and unfavourable entrance system, taking away of reservation facilities, non-availability of institutional scholarship/student fund and autonomy in the curriculum system restrain the educational attainment of SC students at private institutions. Results show, predominantly that 84% of students opined that course fees are not affordable for them, 66% SC students experienced that the entrance system was not supportive to them because of its tricky and difficult procedures, which required coaching to qualify for entrance in comparison to the public mode of education. The above evidence shows that privatization makes these obstacles more intricate to exclude the SC students from the attainment point of view. In this linkage of unreachable course fees at a private institution, Ullash (aged 23) said:

I am in a public professional institution. Prior to this, I tried to get enrolled in a reputed private higher educational institution, but I failed to enter in that institution due to the non-reservation and politicised entrance system. I missed that opportunity because of non-reserve seat and a different format of selection-admission in privatised higher education system.

Later, the entrance examination and question sets' patterns were prepared by the private coaching centres (the neoliberal forces) and sold to the private colleges or universities. Therefore, the coaching centres have an idea of the entrance question paper, which they circulate among the students coming to their respective coaching centres. This is how coaching centres (private bodies) sell the exam framework. Badal (aged 23) narrates:

Private coaching centres frame the questions, and they sell it to the private institution for conducting entrance examinations. So, for only those who took the private coaching, it is easy for them to click the entrance examination and me and my fellow mates who have not attended these centres due to their high charges, fail to score well in the entrance examination which overall puts us in lower ranks in the admission list. List that has no recognition to affirmative action.

However, Kishore (aged 21) has different experiences connected to educational attainment. He is studying at a government educational institution after dropping out of his course at a private higher educational institution. He said:

I was feeling relaxed when I again got a chance to pursue my higher education though, at government higher educational institution. Where, the course fee is comparatively low. Earlier, I was aspiring to study engineering, I had scored good marks in the JEE exam also. But my family's finances would have never been possible to attain engineering course. I never spoke about it at home, they have already been doing a lot for me, I don't want to put them into more financial burden or into any loan from the *Sahookar*. I realize due to high fees in the private institute, I could have never been able to complete engineering if I had entered it. I have many aspirations to fulfil for my family. Because I studied in this public institution, my parents/family were able to bear my education expenses which was not possible in my earlier private institute, and I am pursuing my bachelor's degree here. Next year on completion of my graduation, I will sit for a competitive exam and give my best to get a job first. My parent sharing their money for both of my brother and sister's education because we all are studying at public higher education institution. It would have not possible to choose private education for three children by my parents.

These experiences of SCs show that higher education in a neoliberal structure excludes SCs from attaining higher education silently due to their family economic structure. As the entry level process seems to have been hijacked by socio-economically privileged groups (dominant social groups), where SCs have limited existence and the private players in the form of private coaching centres have control over the entrance system of education at private educational institutions.

Both non-reservation and fixing with a coaching centre limit the space of SC students in private higher education; and the neoliberal structures chaotically obstruct the desires and aspirations of SC students in higher education.

Retention of Scheduled Castes in Higher Education

SC students in higher education have been denied participation in curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Bhoi (2016) saw that SCs have been restricted in participating and performing in academic, cultural and leadership activities. This study also found that SCs have been affected by the privatization of various platforms. Figures show around 60–80% SC students complained they faced restrictions and non-inclusion for academic (78%), cultural (74%) and political (60%) participation at private higher education institutions. Ullash (aged 23) gives evidence of how he faced negligence, non-acknowledgment, discouragement and hatred-ness based on his skin colour, looks and his non-branded outfits. He explains:

My educational institution's structure and the attitude of my teachers and peers and non-academic staff towards me has always been very woeful throughout. At school I was not recognised due to my social structure, at university I continue to lack recognition due to my appearance, shy nature and non-confident body language. I have been suffering dominion and deprivation for resources all throughout my life. It is not possible for me to overcome presentation skills or leadership skills all at once. In my university (private) I was never given chance to participate, or to lead any student activities. Here, I face challenges that reduced my level of participation more in comparison to my previous government college. Negligence of teachers and batchmates' discouragement

has also become hurdle in the way of my participation in debate, seminar, symposium, picnic, song, and dance events. My peer groups and authority rarely bother to include me in our annual meet and in other events. My classmates wear uniform that is comparatively of better and expensive quality fabric of that of mine. They are much shinier, wrinkle free and ironed. Comparatively, my uniform looks dingy and run down from several regular hand wash and wear day after day.

In total, 36% of SC students opined that their name being excluded from the selection list of sports events at their educational institution was infuriating. This name exclusion affects their continuation of education at private educational premises. Ullash (aged 23) continues,

sports area sponsored event at my institution by leading business companies. But we have been discouraged from participating in sports day, reason being, it is where if selected, the business firms sponsor us to participate at inter-college national and other forums. For this, parents of the shortlisted students' give donations to our institute management for their children's' exposure. Because once selected in the institutions' sports list, the business firms will sponsor heavily for their children's regional, state, zonal, national level participation. Therefore, we have never given a chance to perform though my capabilities can bring medals and prizes for the institution.

Here, it is seen that neoliberal forces promote non-inclusion of SCs on various platforms and allow them to lose their confidence for socialization. This makes SCs hesitant and reluctant to participate both in classroom and outside class activities at higher education. SCs have been facing non-cooperation and negligence from their teacher, peers and administrator. About 80% of students opined that due to different structure at higher education level and less supportive environment at private higher educational institutions, their continuation of the study is a threat which they have been living with day since they took admission in this non-cooperative scenario. Also, about 75% of students opined that continuation of their studies was obstructed by the financial framework of the institution where they were not given preference in extra-curricular activities.

Adding to this, Badal (aged 23) said:

I was playing well, and in preliminary list my name was there to represent my institution at the zonal-level basketball game. Later, a private sponsor group approached my institute. As this team arrived that was sponsoring this event, the institute gave them the list of students who can participate in that event (those who had already made donations). In this process, my name was cancelled from the zonal level game and replaced with those who had made donations to institute management. This was a very sad day for me as my name was never stroked-off once it was declared in the main list like this, at my previous public educational institutions.

Likewise, space for SCs in attaining (entry) and retention (successful completion) of higher education was really limited and challenging in the existence of neo-liberal policies. The withdrawal of the reservation system, the discriminatory pattern of the entrance examination system and the exclusionary retention system have been challenges faced by SC students in higher education.

Neoliberalism and Achievements of Scheduled Castes in Higher Education

The SC students are hesitant, fearful, suppressive, discouraged and lack focus in academic activities. This was observed as they struggled to cope with others (dominant castes) in connecting to their social and cultural capital. In the privatized education system, SC students' achievements were devalued. They were not recognized, awarded or declared winners, and they were not even praised for doing

comprehensively well in comparison to their counterparts. Around 55% SC students confirmed they were given only average and below average score for all activities across, the curricular, co-curricular and extracurricular activities. Also, there were cases where their teachers failed them intentionally. Looking into the scores of SC students, it was seen that more than 60% of SC students scored average or below average for curricular and co-curricular activities. Wherein, for extra-curricular activities, around 40% scored average or below. However, there is evidence that SC students have been mis-managed in sports while intentionally being downgraded and not awarded with positive management decisions (mentioned above).

The lower achievements of SC students in academic activities discourages future aspiring students from getting into higher education and leads to the gaps in educational achievements between the SCs and upper castes at the private platform of education. The educational achievements of SC students at higher education levels reveal a discriminatory pattern in the evaluation system that exists in the neoliberalist system. Badal (aged 23) explains that:

In my educational institution, I realise the distinct curriculum pattern, unfavourable and exclusionary atmosphere and non-democratic structure affects my understanding in the teaching-learning process. In the private educational premises, I felt isolated, humiliated, and ignored in my classroom and outside classroom. My teachers intentionally failed me and they used to neglect and not acknowledge my classroom interaction. Despite doing well and performing better, my result (achievement) was completely the reverse in last semester's curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.

The SC students are more confident and enthusiastic than their opponents in events like sports which 64% of students opined in favour of the statement, despite this, they suffer from negligence and discouragement due to their low socio-economic profile and neoliberal management system that adopted the sponsorship system in sports events. One of the students described how his achievements were pushed down by the private force of management.

Relating to 'retention' of SCs at higher education, there were similar observation for the 'achievements' of SC too. They were hardly allowed to perform at cultural evenings, debate competitions or quiz competitions (60%). And those who were even allowed, of them 30% SC students complained they were never given ranks or declared winners in these events. Privatization appears to have disregard for SC students' calibre in the form of denying them good scores, not making them rank holders, or even promoting them for any activities. This lowers the 'achievements' of SC students in private practice at higher education. They face negligence and non-recognition attitudes of teachers and friends that lead to academic failure among SC students in private educational institutions. Sometimes the fellow students make them humiliated and isolated, taking advantage of their caste, shyness and submissiveness, which also affects their academic performances, as has been discussed.

Discrimination Faced by Scheduled Caste Students at Higher Education

In the neoliberal frame of higher education, the age-old caste-based discrimination comes in a modified edition. SC students were segregated, isolated, humiliated, ill-treated, excluded and deprived of opportunities by their peers, teachers and administrative staff in educational premises. SC students opined that they were segregated based on their caste (74%); dress, accent and body language (65%); caste and economic background (64%); intention (68%); ill-treatment by teacher and fellow students with derogatory caste slurs about their caste and occupation when they made any mistake in and outside the class (56%); losing their rights with non-existence of *social justice cell* in the campus that checks the

discrimination and any other injustice happening in the institutional premises (68%). Discrimination prevails in different forms where, other than caste-based discrimination, the dressing pattern and body language and accent are used as markers in caste deprivilege that is analysed as the outcome of neoliberal politics. Adding to this, Pratima (aged 22) says:

In comparison to my graduation career at public institution, I am facing more discrimination here during my MCA course; other students used to make caste-slur comments as I belong to SC community of Pana *Caste*. The same was also reflected in the cultural programmes and celebrations they used to avoid by making me feel alone. Many times, teachers also do not acknowledge and pressurise me in academic activities. In my last examination my teacher intentionally failed the internal examination, giving me less marks in my practical examinations. Academic pressure and the bitter experiences have made me upset and de-concentrate (wander) from my academic activities. When I felt completely hopeless and trapped both the caste discrimination, in my educational institution, I have not found any social justice cell or equal opportunity cell of counselling centre to make consult.

These reveal that discriminatory practices do persist in private higher educational institutions in a more devilish form. As it is getting space among even the highly educated masses in the society, it can be a major challenge to curb for any society. In result to all this, SCs have a devastated educational life that restricts their general development. Practice of untouchability, ill-treatment, avoidance, loneliness are age-old caste issues, but its presence in the form of non-acknowledgement, living in frustration with suicidal tendency and academic non-scoring of SC students, problematic situations in terms of wearing dress, accent and body language, show discrimination have not left educational institutions though in privatized educational sectors, which aims high to give the most efficient service institutions.

Conclusion

For more than a decade now, the country has done reasonably well in achieving economic growth. On contrary the economic growth does not co-exist with equivalent social development and marginals continue confronting with challenges of existence. Socio-economic condition of the SC transacts with many obstructions. A large portion of their population is still illiterate, deprived and vulnerable in terms of socio-economic indicators. In the *human development* and *social justice index*, SCs are positioned at the bottom; and, have remained at the top of the *poverty development index*. Their economic instability persists as their livelihoods scuffle with non-access to communal resources till date. Of those, many are still engaged in low paid, inhuman traditional occupations that never allow them to have a decent living. Caste oppression still determines their access to education, which never allows them to come out of their traditional occupation. The shift from their traditional occupation to a choice of occupation is always evidenced of social sanction. Ambedkar (1956) consistently stressed 'education' is the only way that gives SCs a better job, social mobility and helps them to move away from all the curses that a SC goes through in his life in the caste.

With the introduction of neoliberalism, nation fails to provide inclusive education for the SCs' development. Empirical evidence shows that 'education' has de-escalated in effects on the neoliberal forces. In neoliberal structural changes, there have been limitations on the educational affordability of SCs. SC students' low parental income challenges them to afford education from private institutions at higher education levels. Among those SC families who could manage to enter in higher education, in private institutions, these students' parents were into services in low-grade jobs mostly. Parental occupation in

sharing cultivation and traditional occupations showed minimum entry to these institutions. Next to access, SC students faced the challenge in continuation of their higher education at these neoliberal institutes. Course fees and *on course*⁴ fees have been the major structural changes where education has emerged as a market. The neoliberal policy directly invites the private players who stopped the entry level of SC students in higher education, either by withdrawing the reservation system or affirmative action, or by creating an exclusionary pattern of entrance application, questions and evaluation system. The neoliberal policy also created problems for the SCs in retaining higher education where their participation and performance in academic, cultural, leadership and political activities were restricted. Likewise, their achievement was also affected when they were intentionally not given good marks/grades and points in curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Sometimes, they were intentionally failed in practical and internal examinations. Importantly, this study also gathered some unique experiences of SCs, which expose that neoliberal higher education differentiates SC students based on their dress, accent and body language due to which most of the SC students undergo several mental traumatic situations like, dejection, loneliness and isolation and hopeless in the higher education premises.

Suggesting to neoliberal challenges, this study argues to affirm the democratic, welfare and social justice principles in the neoliberal model of higher education where the reservation policy can be enshrined in. Further, the parliamentary bill could be passed to implement an affirmative action system in private higher education to safeguard the interests of SCs. Fees wave, common pattern of pattern of examination system, stopping outsourcing of questing bank, delinking coaching systems from the entrance system, favourable curricular, remedial courses, bridge-up courses can be made for the SCs. Anti-discrimination laws, anti-caste tribunals and anti-caste cells can be introduced at private higher educational institutions. In the end, to have an inclusive human capital-based economy, the nation should re-think about the interests of SCs for some financial support, not only for the students but also to support the parents and an inclusive educational platform which can enable the SC to attain, retain and achieve their educational, economic, occupational, social and political mobility.

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Notes

1. HDI, values lower than 1 will show lower achievement for group A and vice versa. But in the case of HPI, values lower than 1 indicate less deprivation of group A and vice versa. This is because the indicators of HDI are the inverse of HPI indicators (see Thorat et al., 2007, p. 7).
2. SJI; it is the incidence of total crime (ITC) which includes murder, rape, kidnap and abuse, dacoity, arson, hurt, Prevention of Civil Rights (PCR) Act, 1976, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes' Prevention of Atrocity (PoA) Act, 1989, and other offences (see Thorat et al., 2007, p. 90).
3. MPI measures acute multidimensional poverty across more than 100 developing countries. It does so by measuring each person's deprivations across 10 indicators in three equally weighted dimensions: health, education and standard of living (see figure). By identifying both who is poor and how they are poor, the global MPI complements the international \$1.90 per day poverty rate (see Multidimensional Poverty Index, 2021, p. 2).
4. 'On course' the fees like semester fees, library fees, hostel fees, picnic fees, puja fees, etc.

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