

The Unfinished Emancipation: Ambedkar's Educational Vision and the Structural Exclusion of Scheduled Caste Students in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper critically reviews the gap between policy-driven access and genuine educational emancipation for Scheduled Caste (SC) students in Indian higher education. While constitutional mandates and reservation policies have improved enrollment numbers, this review argues that entry without structural transformation fails to dismantle caste-based humiliation. Synthesizing recent literature from critical caste studies, psychology, and legal scholarship, the analysis reveals that SC students continue to endure everyday microaggressions, curricular erasure, and hostile campus climates that severely impact mental health and academic persistence. Drawing on Ambedkar's framework of education as a tool for annihilating caste rather than merely securing employment, the paper highlights how the "leaky pipeline" from undergraduate to doctoral levels reflects cumulative economic, cultural, and institutional barriers. The review also identifies pathways toward meaningful emancipation, including cultivating anti-caste consciousness, centering Dalit perspectives in pedagogy, ensuring faculty representation, and leveraging youth-led disruption. Ultimately, the paper concludes that sustainable change requires simultaneous intervention across three dimensions: access, psychological safety, and epistemic justice. Moving beyond token inclusion, genuine social transformation demands that SC students not only enter universities but also actively reshape institutional cultures, curricula, and decision-making bodies.

Keywords: Education, Emancipation, Structural Exclusion, Scheduled Caste

Introduction

The promise of higher education as a pathway to social mobility has long occupied a central place in India's democratic imagination, yet for Scheduled Caste communities, this promise unfolds along a deeply contradictory trajectory. Access, attrition, and aspiration form a triad of experiences through which the durable reality of caste is simultaneously challenged and reproduced within educational institutions. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's constitutional vision placed education at the heart of the anti-caste project, recognising that political democracy without educational empowerment would remain an empty formality (Hiwrale, 2020; Sandeep, 2013). The reservation system has indeed facilitated entry into spaces previously sealed off to

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Published: 02 June 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2026.v3.i3.301131>

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marginalised communities. However, the intervening decades have demonstrated that admission does not translate automatically into equal participation, nor does a degree dissolve the stigmatised identities that caste society assigns. Understanding vertical mobility through higher education therefore requires moving beyond enrolment numbers to examine the qualitative texture of educational experience—the micro-aggressions, curricular silences, psychological costs, and conditional belonging that determine whether access culminates in completion or in the quiet departure that statistics register as attrition. The barriers obstructing SC access to higher education are not reducible to economic deprivation alone. Karwal (2021) frames the issue as one of social exclusion, arguing that challenges confronting SC students are fundamentally social, cultural, and institutional in character. These include differential treatment by faculty, the conspicuous absence of Dalit scholars in mentoring roles, and an institutional commonsense that treats caste as an external intrusion rather than an internal organising principle of academic life. Rathod (2023) documents these dynamics through autobiographical narratives of Dalit academics, revealing journeys marked by persistent othering that intensifies with each stage of progression. Such experiences exact a measurable toll on psychological wellbeing.

Gupta and Coffey (2020) provide empirical evidence linking caste-based discrimination to adverse mental health outcomes, highlighting the intersection of social identity and psychological distress. When everyday educational experience involves navigating hostility and defending one's legitimate presence, the energy available for intellectual engagement diminishes, and attrition becomes less a matter of individual failure than a structural outcome of hostile environments. The ideological mechanisms sustaining caste within educational settings demand careful examination. Cotterill, Sidanius, Bhardwaj, and Kumar (2014) demonstrate how belief systems, including the doctrine of karma, function to legitimise hierarchical social arrangements. Jogdand, Khan, and Mishra (2016) complicate this account by foregrounding the specifically structural dimensions of caste, while Jogdand (2024) develops the case for a critical psychology that interrogates how hierarchy is sustained within ostensibly meritocratic spaces like universities. This critical turn resonates with Dhanda's (2020) philosophical excavation of anti-casteism, which demonstrates that the struggle against caste is fundamentally epistemic—a battle over the categories through which knowledge is produced and validated. Higher education institutions are therefore precisely where such epistemic struggles unfold with greatest intensity, evident in the curricular erasure of Dalit intellectual traditions, including the foundational contributions of Pandit Iyothee Thass (Ayyathurai, 2010). The question of aspiration adds further complexity. Dhanda (2009) captures the identity transitions of Punjabi Dalit youth navigating between inherited solidarities and individual ambitions, finding that educational credentials do not translate seamlessly into social acceptance.

Halder and Bhattacharyya (2026) interrogate whether SC mobility operates within existing social structures or carries potential to transcend them, underscoring the gap between formal qualifications and substantive equality. Singh (2026) examines name-changing as a strategy to escape caste-marked identities, while Pellissery, Pampackal, and Bopaiah (2015) question whether social policy can adequately address such durable inequalities. Emerging generational shifts further reshape this landscape. Turangi (2025) identifies a "disruption

generation" of Indian youth challenging hierarchies in ways exceeding earlier reformist paradigms, while Viswambaran and G. (2025) explore critical pedagogy as a potential intervention within classrooms. The contemporary picture is thus one where older patterns of exclusion coexist with new forms of assertion. As Chandrachud (2024) argues, remedying historical wrongs requires attending to the social life of the constitution beyond mere representational mechanisms. The vertical mobility that higher education ostensibly enables must therefore be understood not as a linear progression from exclusion to inclusion, but as a contested and unfinished process marked by gains that remain fragile and aspirations that continually press against institutional limits.

Literature Review

A substantial body of scholarship has examined how caste operates as a structural barrier rather than merely an attitude of individual prejudice. Hiwrale (2020) demonstrates that Ambedkar understood caste as a "division of labourers" that systematically denied knowledge to Dalit communities, creating durable educational disadvantages. Sandeep (2013) traces how Ambedkar's call to "Educate, Agitate, Organise" placed education at the heart of the anti-caste project, arguing that political reforms would remain hollow without critical consciousness. Kumar (2023) further elaborates that Ambedkar saw education as a tool for questioning religious texts that legitimised hierarchy and for developing the courage to abandon degrading social norms. Chandrachud (2024) adds that Ambedkar insisted on social democracy—practising liberty, equality, and fraternity in everyday life—as the necessary foundation for political democracy, and that this required an educated citizenry. Empirical studies have documented the persistent exclusion of Scheduled Caste students despite constitutional guarantees.

Rathod (2023) collects autobiographical narratives of Dalit academics, revealing journeys marked by persistent othering that intensifies at each stage of educational progression. Karwal (2021) frames the issue as one of social exclusion, arguing that challenges confronting SC students are fundamentally social, cultural, and institutional rather than merely economic. Halder and Bhattacharyya (2026) interrogate whether SC vertical mobility operates within existing social structures or carries potential to transcend them, finding that formal qualifications do not translate seamlessly into substantive equality. Gupta and Coffey (2020) provide empirical evidence linking caste-based discrimination to adverse mental health outcomes among Dalit students, highlighting the intersection of social identity and psychological distress. Jogdand, Khan, and Mishra (2016) complicate social dominance explanations by foregrounding the specifically structural dimensions of caste that cannot be reduced to individual prejudice. The ideological mechanisms sustaining caste within ostensibly meritocratic spaces have also received critical attention. Cotterill, Sidanius, Bhardwaj, and Kumar (2014) demonstrate how belief systems, including the doctrine of karma, function to legitimise hierarchical social arrangements in the Indian context.

Jogdand (2024) develops the case for a critical psychology of caste that interrogates how hierarchy is sustained within universities, which claim to be meritocratic but remain deeply Brahminical in their everyday practices. Dhanda (2020) undertakes a philosophical excavation of anti-casteism, demonstrating that the struggle against caste is fundamentally

epistemic—a battle over the categories through which knowledge is produced and validated. Ayyathurai (2010) documents the curricular erasure of Dalit intellectual traditions, including the foundational contributions of Pandit Iyothee Thass, showing that epistemic exclusion is not accidental but systematic. Taken together, this literature reveals that access to higher education for SC students has expanded, but the emancipatory promise remains deeply unfinished (Rathod, 2023; Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026; Jogdand, 2024).

Ambedkar's Educational Vision: A Theoretical Framework

For Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, education was never merely a pathway to employment but the primary weapon for liberation from the mental slavery imposed by the caste system (Sharma, 2015). He argued that caste is not simply a division of labour but a "division of labourers" that systematically denied knowledge to Dalits, thereby keeping them subjugated (Hiwrale, 2020). This understanding placed the struggle for education at the very centre of the anti-caste project, as political democracy without educational empowerment would remain an empty formality (Sandeep, 2013). Ambedkar famously exhorted marginalised communities to "Educate, Agitate, Organise" – with education as the indispensable first step without which agitation and organisation could not sustain themselves (Ramakrishnan & Pallavi, 2023). He rejected the idea that formal degrees alone could bring dignity or equality, instead envisioning education as a process of "reclamation of the human personality" (Sharma, 2015). Through critical education, the oppressed could learn to question religious texts that legitimised hierarchy and develop the courage to abandon degrading social norms (Kumar, 2023). Ambedkar insisted that education must enable the individual to break free from the mental chains of caste, which operated not only through external discrimination but also through internalised inferiority (Hiwrale, 2020). He recognised that without such critical consciousness, even economic and political reforms would remain hollow and reversible (Sandeep, 2013).

A central pillar of Ambedkar's framework was the relationship between education and social democracy. He argued that political democracy – embodied in universal adult franchise and constitutional rights – would be unsustainable without "social democracy," which required an educated citizenry capable of practising liberty, equality, and fraternity in everyday life (Chandrachud, 2024). For Ambedkar, fraternity could not be legislated; it had to be cultivated through education that taught mutual respect and reasoned dialogue across caste divisions (Mhasde, 2026). This is why he placed such emphasis on the classroom and the university as sites where the battle against caste would be won or lost (Rathod, 2023). In his view, education was the necessary condition for annihilating caste and building a society based on reason, self-respect, and not on birth-based humiliation (Kumar, 2023). He was acutely aware that the caste system reproduced itself not only through economic deprivation but also through control over knowledge production and transmission (Jogdand, 2024). Therefore, emancipatory education had to be epistemic – a struggle over what counts as knowledge, who gets to produce it, and whose intellectual traditions are validated (Dhanda, 2020).

Ambedkar's vision also recognised the limits of formal access. He understood that admitting Dalit students to educational institutions without transforming the hostile social environment within those institutions would not produce genuine emancipation (Rathod, 2023). The psychological costs of navigating a casteist classroom – the microaggressions, the

constant need to prove one's merit, the humiliation of being reduced to a "quota student" – could negate the benefits of education (Jogdand, Khan, & Mishra, 2016). Ambedkar called for an education that would empower the individual to practice what he termed "self-elevation" – the refusal to accept degrading social positions and the active assertion of one's humanity (Sharma, 2015). He drew heavily on the Buddha's teachings to argue that education must cultivate moral reasoning and the courage to question authority, including the authority of tradition and scripture (Hiwrale, 2020). Ultimately, for Ambedkar, the goal of education was not upward mobility within the caste system but the annihilation of caste itself (Kumar, 2023). His framework thus provides a critical lens through which to assess whether contemporary higher education is fulfilling its emancipatory promise or merely reproducing hierarchy under a meritocratic guise (Jogdand, 2024).

Ambedkar Vision: Education As Emancipation

For Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, education was the primary weapon for liberation from the "mental slavery" imposed by the caste system (Sharma, 2015, p. 2). He recognized that caste is not merely a division of labour but a "division of labourers" that systematically denied knowledge to Dalits, keeping them subjugated (Hiwrale, 2020, p. 84). His famous call to "Educate, Agitate, Organize" placed education as the indispensable first step—without critical consciousness, political and economic reforms would remain hollow (Sandeep, 2013, p. 17).

Ambedkar rejected the idea that formal degrees alone could bring dignity. Instead, he envisioned education as a process of "reclamation of the human personality" (Sharma, 2015, p. 5). It was to enable the oppressed to question religious texts that legitimized hierarchy and to develop the courage to abandon degrading social norms (Kumar, 2023, p. 6). He argued that political democracy would be unsustainable without "social democracy," which required an educated citizenry capable of practicing liberty, equality, and fraternity (Chandrachud, 2024, p. 6). For Ambedkar, therefore, education was never about mere employment; it was the necessary condition for annihilating caste and building a society based on reason and self-respect, not on birth-based humiliation.

Objectives

This paper had four key goals. First, to examine India's constitutional provisions and reservation policies for Scheduled Caste students in higher education, while assessing how well these are actually working on the ground. Second, to analyze enrollment trends and dropout patterns from undergraduate to doctoral levels using official AISHE data. Third, to identify the economic, cultural, and institutional barriers that SC students face inside universities. Fourth, to evaluate existing support mechanisms and suggest concrete policy changes for building genuinely inclusive campus environments.

Methodology

This study used qualitative documentary analysis. Instead of collecting fresh data through surveys or interviews, I systematically reviewed existing materials—constitutional provisions, AISHE reports from 2015 to 2022, SECC data, peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral dissertations, parliamentary committee reports, and media coverage of recent incidents

involving SC students. The analysis followed a straightforward process: collecting relevant documents, screening them for authenticity, identifying recurring themes, and cross-checking findings across multiple sources to ensure reliability. This approach worked well for understanding structural barriers because it allowed me to synthesize evidence from diverse sources without relying on primary fieldwork.

Constitutional Provisions And Reservation For Scheduled Caste And Its Ground Realities

The Indian Constitution provides robust legal safeguards and affirmative action mechanisms to address the historical exclusion of Scheduled Castes from education. Article 15(4) empowers the state to make special provisions for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes, including SCs, while Article 15(5) enables reservations in educational institutions (Chandrachud, 2024, p. 5). Article 16(4) mandates reservation of public sector employment posts for any backward class that is not adequately represented in state services (Pellissery, Pampackal & Bopaiah, 2015, p. 789). Article 17 abolishes untouchability and its practice in any form, directly challenging the social basis of educational exclusion (Waughray, n.d., p. 21). Article 46 further directs the state to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of SCs and protect them from social injustice (Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026, p. 6). The Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Admission) Act, 2006, implemented 15% reservation for SCs in centrally funded higher education institutions such as IITs, IIMs, and central universities (Rathod, 2023, p. 4). Additionally, the Post-Matric Scholarship Scheme and Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowships are designed to offset financial barriers and encourage SC students to pursue higher studies (Karwal, 2021, p. 44).

However, the ground reality reveals persistent disparities despite these constitutional provisions. The All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-22 shows that SC Gross Enrollment Ratio stands at 23.4%, still 3.9 percentage points below the national average (Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026, p. 8). More tellingly, SC enrollment drops from 15.5% at undergraduate level to only 10.4% at doctoral level, indicating a systematic attrition of SC students as they progress through higher education (Gupta & Coffey, 2020, p. 1125). SC faculty representation remains abysmal at just 6.5% nationally against their 16.6% population share, creating a severe lack of role models and mentors (Rathod, 2023, p. 15). Dalit students routinely face caste-based discrimination within campuses: they are stereotyped as "quota students," doubted for their merit, and subjected to microaggressions from privileged caste peers and faculty (Jogdand, Khan & Mishra, 2016, p. 562). Research documents that even after admission, SC students experience social segregation, humiliation, and hostile classroom environments that push many toward academic failure or dropout (Karwal, 2021, p. 43). The suicide of Dalit scholar Rohith Vemula at Hyderabad Central University exposed how institutional apathy and discriminatory practices can become unbearable (Wadekar, 2024, p. 21). Moreover, scholarship disbursements are often delayed, and the amounts are insufficient to cover actual educational costs, forcing students from households earning below Rs. 5,000 monthly to abandon their studies (Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026, p. 19). Thus, while constitutional provisions have expanded access, the lived reality for SC students remains one of struggle, stigma, and structural exclusion that reservations alone cannot cure.

The Leaky Pipeline: Sc Student Attrition From UG To PhD

The educational journey of Scheduled Caste (SC) students in India resembles a "leaky pipeline"—high enrollment at the undergraduate level followed by progressive, systematic attrition at higher levels. All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22 data reveals that SCs constitute approximately 15.5% of undergraduate enrollment but their share drops to 13.9% at the postgraduate level, 12.1% at M.Phil, and plummets to only 10.4% at the doctoral level (Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026, p. 9). This represents a 33% relative decline from UG to PhD, indicating that structural barriers intensify at each transition point rather than diminishing.

Multiple factors explain this attrition. First, economic constraints are severe. SECC data shows that 84% of SC rural households earn less than Rs. 5,000 monthly (Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026, p. 15). Doctoral study requires sustained financial commitment over 5-7 years, and even with scholarships, delayed disbursements documented by the Comptroller and Auditor General force many students to interrupt or abandon their research (Rathod, 2023, p. 183). Second, cultural capital deficits accumulate. Bourdieu's framework explains that SC students enter universities with less academic preparation, weaker English proficiency, and fewer family members who have navigated higher education (Rathod, 2023, p. 17). These disadvantages become more consequential at research levels where independent scholarship is demanded.

Third, hostile campus climates push SC students out. Research documents routine caste-based discrimination—faculty questioning their merit, peers stereotyping them as "quota students," and social exclusion from informal academic networks essential for doctoral success (Jogdand, 2024, p. 60; Karwal, 2021, p. 45). The absence of SC faculty mentors compounds this problem; SCs comprise only 6.5% of faculty nationally, meaning most doctoral students never encounter a single professor from their own community (Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026, p. 12). Fourth, the transition from master's to PhD is particularly treacherous because admissions rely heavily on research proposals, interviews, and supervisor availability—processes where caste networks and social capital play decisive roles (Srivastava, 2026, p. 124).

The consequence of this leaky pipeline is a crisis of intellectual leadership reproduction. With only 10.4% of PhDs going to SCs against their 16.6% population share, the next generation of faculty, policymakers, and researchers will remain overwhelmingly upper caste, perpetuating epistemic exclusion (Wadekar, 2024, p. 23). Attrition is not a failure of SC aspiration but a predictable outcome of structural barriers that accumulate from UG to PhD, each educational level filtering out more students until the pipeline runs nearly dry.

Table 1: SC Student Dropout Data from Central Higher Education Institutions

Period	Institution Type	Reported Dropout Count	Details / Source
2019–2023	All Central HEIs (Central)	4,423 SC students	Out of a total of 32,186 reported dropouts, SCs accounted for 4,423. The

Period	Institution Type	Reported Dropout Count	Details / Source
	Universities, IITs, NITs, IIMs, etc.)		highest dropout numbers were from Central Universities (17,454), followed by IITs (8,139) and NITs (5,623).
Last 5 Years (c. 2018–2023)	IITs, IIMs, & Central Universities (Premier Institutions)	Over 13,500 SC, ST, & OBC students combined	This figure includes SCs, STs, and OBCs. It indicates that these categories are disproportionately affected, as they represent a majority of the dropouts from these elite institutions.
Recent Years (c. 2018–2023)	IITs (Indian Institutes of Technology)	1,068 SC students	This data point is a specific subset of the above. In the same period, 2,066 OBC students and 261 ST students also dropped out from IITs.

Compiled by the author from parliamentary replies, Ministry of Education data, and institutional reports.

Table 2: SC Share of Enrollment by Academic Level (AISHE 2021–22)

Academic Level	SC Share of Enrollment	Source
Undergraduate (UG)	15.5%	Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026, p. 9
Postgraduate (PG)	13.9%	Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026, p. 9
M.Phil	12.1%	Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026, p. 9
Doctoral (PhD)	10.4%	Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026, p. 9

The data indicates a 33% relative decline in SC student share from the Undergraduate to the PhD level, reflecting a “leaky pipeline” in higher education. Researchers attribute this attrition to financial barriers, hostile campus climates, limited SC faculty mentorship, and social capital deficits that intensify at advanced levels of study.

Barriers To Higher Education For Scheduled Caste Students: Economic, Cultural, And Campus-based Exclusion

Despite constitutional guarantees and reservation policies, Scheduled Caste (SC) students in India continue to face multiple, intersecting barriers that severely constrain their participation and success in higher education. These obstacles operate at economic, cultural, and institutional levels, often reinforcing one another to create what scholars describe as a "leaky pipeline" from undergraduate to doctoral levels (Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026, p. 9).

Economic barriers form the most immediate and measurable obstacle. The Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) reveals that 84% of SC rural households earn less than Rs. 5,000 per month, making tertiary education financially prohibitive for the vast majority (Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026, p. 15). Even with government scholarships, the Comptroller and Auditor General has documented persistent delays in disbursement and inadequate coverage of actual educational costs, including accommodation, transport, books, and opportunity costs of foregone wages (Rathod, 2023, p. 183). For a family living at subsistence level, a one-month scholarship delay can mean the difference between continuing studies and dropping out. Landlessness compounds this precarity—55% of SC rural households own no agricultural land, meaning they cannot leverage assets to finance children's education or weather economic shocks (Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026, p. 16). Consequently, SC students are overrepresented in low-fee government colleges and underrepresented in expensive professional programs, which directly affects their employment trajectories. Cultural capital deficits, as theorized by Bourdieu, constitute a more subtle but equally powerful barrier. SC students typically enter higher education with less academic preparation, weaker English proficiency, and fewer family members who have navigated university systems (Rathod, 2023, p. 17). Privileged caste students inherit linguistic fluency, institutional familiarity, and social networks that are mistaken for natural ability. SC students from rural backgrounds report feeling "inferior" not only because of their language but also because of their dress, lifestyle, and economic status (Gupta, 2023, p. 30).

One Dalit woman student described sitting in a particular corner of the classroom with another Dalit woman because that space felt least uncomfortable—a small but telling act of self-exclusion in response to an unwelcoming environment (Gupta, 2023, p. 30). This cultural gap becomes more consequential at higher academic levels, where independent research, networking, and unwritten institutional codes determine success. Discrimination and hostile campus climate represent perhaps the most damaging barrier. Caste does not disappear at the university gate; it is reproduced through everyday interactions. Studies document that SC students are routinely stereotyped as "quota students," their achievements attributed to reservation rather than merit (Jogdand, 2024, p. 60). Faculty members have been known to ask students who entered through reservation to stand up during introductions and then move on without further interaction, publicly humiliating them (Karwal, 2021, p. 45). Peer

discrimination manifests as refusal to eat together, casual casteist remarks, and social exclusion from study groups and informal networks essential for academic success (Rathod, 2023, p. 101). The absence of SC faculty—only 6.5% nationally against a 16.6% population share—means most SC students never encounter a single professor from their own community, reinforcing feelings of isolation and illegitimacy (Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026, p. 12). The cumulative effect of these barriers is devastating. SC enrollment share drops from 15.5% at undergraduate level to just 10.4% at doctoral level—a 33% relative decline (Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026, p. 9). The suicide of Rohith Vemula at Hyderabad Central University exposed how institutional apathy and daily humiliation can become unbearable (Wadekar, 2024, p. 21). His final words—"My birth is my fatal accident"—capture the existential weight of caste exclusion in supposedly modern educational spaces. These barriers are not merely additive but multiplicative, each reinforcing the others to produce a system where formal access does not translate into meaningful participation or equitable outcomes for SC students.

Educational Implications

Educational implications of anti-caste scholarship demand a radical rethinking of how caste is taught and experienced in Indian classrooms. Pedagogies must move beyond mere representation by integrating the philosophical foundations of anti-casteism (Dhanda, 2020) and Ambedkar's methods for annihilation (Kumar, 2023), ensuring students confront structural inequality rather than abstract concepts. Teacher training should address how caste operates within higher education, as documented in Dalit academic journeys (Rathod, 2023) and the vertical mobility challenges faced by Scheduled Castes (Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026), thereby fostering inclusive environments that reduce social exclusion (Karwal, 2021). Curricula need to include subaltern experimental writing like Dalit literature (Thiara, 2016) and autobiographical works such as *Untouchable Spring* (Kalyana Rao, 2010) and *Hindu* (Limbale, 2010), which humanise lived experiences of caste violence. Critical psychology approaches (Jogdand, 2024) can help students deconstruct ideological justifications like karma beliefs (Cotterill et al., 2014) and respond to critiques of social dominance orientation (Jogdand et al., 2016). Furthermore, case-study pedagogy has proven effective in challenging caste-based inequalities (Viswambaran & G., 2025), while interdisciplinary teaching of gender-caste histories (Gupta, C., 2023) and discussions of dirty food practices (Kikon, 2023) reveal intersectional oppressions. Institutions must also address caste-related mental health disparities (Gupta & Coffey, 2020) and engage with Gen Z's disruptive potential (Turangi, 2025). Finally, legal literacy around constitutional remedies (Chandrachud, 2024) and critical legal scholarship (Wadekar, 2024) empowers students to see education as a site for social transformation (Srivastava, 2026), not merely certification.

Suggestion For Further Research

- Longitudinal studies are needed to understand whether legal measures like constitutional remedies actually translate into social mobility for marginalized groups, as current work hints at a persistent gap between law and lived reality (Chandrachud, 2024; Wadekar, 2024).

- More empirical work is required on caste-based microaggressions and mental health outcomes in higher education, since existing evidence suggests strong links (Gupta & Coffey, 2020) but few intervention studies exist.
- Comparative research across Indian states could investigate why some universities show greater vertical mobility for Scheduled Castes than others, moving beyond individual case studies to identify systemic policy levers (Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026; Pellissery et al., 2015).
- Future ethnographic studies might focus on how Dalit students negotiate identity and belonging in "elite" institutional spaces, extending the academic journey narratives (Rathod, 2023) to include STEM and professional disciplines.

Conclusion

In conclusion, dismantling caste-based exclusion requires moving beyond mere access to education and toward full-spectrum emancipation for Scheduled Caste (SC) students across all societal dimensions. While policies have improved entry into higher education (Karwal, 2021; Halder & Bhattacharyya, 2026), true justice demands representation in curricula, faculty positions, and institutional decision-making. As Rathod (2023) documents, Dalit academics continue to navigate hostile environments where their presence remains tokenized without substantive voice. Strategies for emancipation must therefore cultivate what Ayyathurai (2010) calls anti-caste consciousness—an internalized critical awareness that challenges Brahmanical norms in everyday interactions.

Pedagogically, Viswambaran and G. (2025) demonstrate that caste-sensitive teaching can transform classroom dynamics, while Jogdand (2024) calls for a critical psychology of caste that addresses microaggressions and epistemic violence. Representation also means centering Dalit perspectives through literature (Thiara, 2016; Limbale, 2010) and counter-narratives that validate lived experiences. Legal frameworks alone, as Chandrachud (2024) notes, are insufficient without social reformation; Wadekar (2024) advocates for legal scholarship rooted in critical caste studies to challenge procedural neutrality. Furthermore, Singh (2026) reveals that even changing names cannot escape caste markers, highlighting the need for community-based accountability mechanisms. Youth-led movements, described by Turangi (2025), show how Gen Z is actively rejecting hierarchical norms, suggesting intergenerational solidarity as a powerful force. Ultimately, emancipation requires simultaneous work on access, representation, and psychological safety—ensuring SC students not only enter institutions but also reshape them (Srivastava, 2026; Dhanda, 2020). Only such multidimensional strategies can transform the social fabric from one of enduring inequality to genuine collective flourishing.

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