



## CASTE IN THE CLASSROOM: SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION, ACADEMIC CHALLENGES, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG DALIT AND ADIVASI STUDENTS AT ANDHRA UNIVERSITY, VISAKHAPATNAM

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### ABSTRACT

Higher education is commonly viewed as an important pathway for equality and social mobility in India. However, students from Dalit and Adivasi communities continue to experience several forms of social, academic, and psychological challenges within universities. This study examines caste-related experiences among Dalit and Adivasi students at Andhra University, Visakhapatnam. The research focuses on social interaction, academic performance, classroom participation, emotional well-being, and institutional support. The study adopted a descriptive sociological approach using questionnaires and interviews among 120 students from different academic departments. The findings show that indirect discrimination, social isolation, financial insecurity, language barriers, and emotional stress continue to affect students from marginalised communities. Many students reported hesitation in classroom participation due to fear of judgement and feelings of inferiority. The study also found that institutional support systems such as scholarships and hostel facilities play an important role in educational continuity, but counselling and mentorship services remain limited. The article argues that educational equality requires both policy support and inclusive social environments. The study concludes that universities should strengthen counselling services, awareness programmes, and inclusive teaching practices to ensure dignity, confidence, and equal participation for all students.

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## Introduction

Education occupies an important position in Indian society because it is considered a tool for social mobility, economic progress, and personal empowerment. Universities are expected to create equal opportunities for students irrespective of caste, class, religion, or region. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and reservation policies, caste continues to influence educational experiences in visible and invisible ways. Students from Dalit and Adivasi communities often face challenges that go beyond academics. Their experiences are shaped by social background, economic conditions, peer relationships, institutional culture, and psychological pressures.

The relationship between caste and education has deep historical roots in India. For centuries, access to knowledge and educational institutions was restricted by caste hierarchy. Although independent India has introduced several welfare measures and affirmative action policies, inequalities continue to exist within higher education institutions. Modern universities may appear socially inclusive at the policy level, yet many students from marginalised communities continue to experience exclusion in subtle forms.

Andhra University, located in Visakhapatnam, attracts students from urban, rural, and tribal regions of Andhra Pradesh and neighbouring states. Many Dalit and Adivasi students enter the university with hopes for social mobility and stable employment. At the same time, they encounter challenges linked to language, financial insecurity, urban adjustment, social interaction, and academic competition. Experiences of indirect discrimination, stereotypes, and low self-confidence often influence their educational journey.

This study examines the social and psychological experiences of Dalit and Adivasi students at Andhra University. The article focuses on how caste-related experiences influence classroom participation, academic performance, emotional well-being, and social identity. The study also explores the role of institutional support systems in addressing inequality and promoting inclusion within higher education.

## Review of Literature

Several sociological studies have highlighted the continuing influence of caste in Indian education. B.R. Ambedkar argued that education is an important tool for liberation and social transformation among oppressed communities. Scholars such as Andre Beteille and Satish Deshpande have explained how caste inequalities continue to exist within modern institutions despite formal equality.

Research on higher education indicates that discrimination is not always direct or openly visible. Students from marginalised communities often experience subtle forms of exclusion through peer behaviour, social distance, stereotypes, and institutional neglect. Such experiences affect not only academic performance but also self-confidence and mental well-being.

Studies conducted in Indian universities reveal that students from Dalit and Adivasi backgrounds frequently experience language barriers, financial stress, and difficulties in adjusting to urban educational culture. Some researchers have also pointed out that students from reserved categories are often subjected to negative assumptions about merit and capability. These experiences can create feelings of inferiority and social isolation.

Psychological stress among university students has become an important area of sociological and educational research. Anxiety related to examinations, employment, family expectations, and financial conditions affects many students. However, students from marginalised communities often face additional stress arising from social discrimination and exclusion.

Previous research mainly focused on national-level educational inequality or elite institutions. Limited studies have specifically examined the experiences of Dalit and Adivasi students within Andhra University and the social context of Visakhapatnam. Therefore, this study attempts to contribute to sociological understanding by providing a local and grounded analysis of caste, education, and student experiences.

## Theoretical Perspective

This study is broadly guided by sociological perspectives on social inequality, stigma, and social exclusion. The ideas of B.R. Ambedkar remain important in understanding caste-based inequality in education.

Ambedkar

viewed education as a means of social liberation and argued that equal access to education is essential for social justice.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is also useful for understanding educational inequality. Students from privileged social backgrounds often possess advantages such as language skills, confidence, and social networks that help them adjust easily to academic environments. Students from rural or marginalised communities may lack these forms of cultural capital, which can affect classroom participation and academic performance.

Erving Goffman's concept of stigma helps explain how individuals experience feelings of shame or social inferiority when they perceive negative social judgement. In university settings, students may internalise social stereotypes related to caste and develop feelings of hesitation or self-doubt.

The study also draws from the sociological understanding of social exclusion. Exclusion is not limited to economic disadvantage but includes restricted participation, lack of representation, emotional isolation, and unequal treatment within social institutions. These theoretical perspectives help in analysing the educational and emotional experiences of Dalit and Adivasi students at Andhra University.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To study the educational experiences of Dalit and Adivasi students at Andhra University.
2. To examine the relationship between caste-related experiences and academic performance.
3. To understand psychological stress and emotional challenges among students.
4. To analyse classroom participation and social interaction within the university environment.
5. To evaluate the role of institutional support systems in promoting inclusion and equality.

### **Research Methodology**

The study adopted a descriptive research design with a sociological orientation. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to understand the experiences of students. Primary data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

The study included 120 respondents from different departments of Andhra University. The respondents consisted of undergraduate students, postgraduate students, and research scholars belonging to Dalit and Adivasi communities. Purposive sampling was used because the study specifically focused on students from marginalised social groups.

Data collection was conducted during 2025 in university departments, hostels, libraries, canteens, and student common areas. The questionnaire contained questions related to classroom participation, academic performance, social interaction, discrimination, emotional stress, financial difficulties, and institutional support.

Simple percentage analysis and thematic interpretation were used for analysing the data. Confidentiality and informed consent were maintained throughout the research process.

### **Study Area**

Andhra University is one of the oldest universities in South India and is located in Visakhapatnam city of Andhra Pradesh. The university attracts students from different districts, including tribal and rural regions. The campus represents social diversity in terms of caste, language, region, and economic background.

Visakhapatnam itself is an important educational and industrial city. Students entering Andhra University often come from different educational backgrounds and levels of social exposure. Students from urban and economically privileged families usually adapt more easily to university culture, while students from rural and tribal backgrounds may experience adjustment difficulties.

The university environment includes classrooms, hostels, libraries, student organisations, and social groups where interaction takes place daily. These spaces become important in shaping students' educational and social experiences.

**Findings and Analysis**

The findings of the study reveal that caste-related experiences continue to influence educational life in subtle ways. Many respondents stated that they experienced hesitation during classroom discussions due to lack of confidence and fear of judgement. Students from rural Telugu-medium backgrounds often found it difficult to communicate confidently in English-medium classrooms.

Around 61 percent of respondents stated that they had experienced some form of indirect social exclusion within the university environment. This exclusion was often expressed through peer group separation, stereotyping, or avoidance in social interaction. Some students mentioned that they avoided discussing their caste identity openly due to fear of negative reactions.

Financial insecurity emerged as another major challenge. Many students from economically weaker backgrounds struggled with hostel expenses, food costs, study materials, internet access, and preparation for competitive examinations. Several respondents explained that scholarships helped them continue their education, but delays in scholarship payments created emotional and academic pressure.

Psychological stress was found to be a common experience among respondents. Students frequently reported anxiety related to academic competition, employment uncertainty, family expectations, and social comparison. Some respondents expressed feelings of loneliness and low self-esteem, especially during the initial stages of university life.

Classroom participation was also influenced by social background. Students from privileged educational backgrounds were generally more confident in interacting with teachers and participating in seminars or presentations. In contrast, several Dalit and Adivasi students reported fear of making mistakes or being judged negatively.

The study also identified positive aspects within the university environment. Many students appreciated the support provided by reservation policies, scholarships, hostel facilities, and certain faculty members who encouraged inclusive learning. Some respondents stated that participation in student groups and friendships helped them gain confidence and social support over time.

However, counselling and mentorship services were found to be limited. Several students felt that emotional support systems within the university were insufficient. Respondents suggested that universities should organise mental health awareness programmes, mentorship initiatives, and anti-discrimination workshops to promote inclusion and confidence among students.

**Discussion**

The findings indicate that caste-related inequality in higher education extends beyond economic conditions. Educational experiences are influenced by social interaction, cultural background, emotional well-being, and institutional environment. Although access to higher education has improved due to reservation policies and government welfare measures, equal participation and social acceptance remain incomplete.

The experiences described by students reflect the continuing relevance of sociological theories of exclusion and inequality. Students from privileged backgrounds often possess greater confidence, communication skills, and familiarity with academic culture. These advantages function as forms of cultural capital that support educational success.

The study also highlights the relationship between social discrimination and psychological well-being. Experiences of exclusion, hesitation, and negative assumptions can reduce confidence and increase stress. Therefore, educational inequality should not be understood only in terms of examination performance or economic status. Emotional and psychological dimensions are equally important.

At the same time, the study demonstrates the positive role of institutional support systems such as scholarships, reservations, and supportive faculty members. Such measures create opportunities for social mobility and educational continuity. However, universities need stronger counselling systems, mentorship programmes, and awareness initiatives to ensure that students feel socially accepted and emotionally secure.

**Conclusion**

The study concludes that Dalit and Adivasi students at Andhra University continue to experience social, academic, and psychological challenges despite improvements in educational access. Indirect discrimination, social isolation, financial stress, and emotional pressure continue to influence student experiences within higher education.

At the same time, educational opportunities, scholarships, and reservation policies remain important sources of hope and mobility for students from marginalised communities. The findings suggest that universities should focus not only on academic support but also on emotional well-being, inclusion, and equal participation.

Educational institutions should strengthen counselling centres, mentorship programmes, anti-discrimination awareness activities, and student support systems. Teachers should encourage inclusive classroom participation and create environments where students from all social backgrounds feel respected and confident.

Higher education can become a meaningful instrument of social justice only when institutional culture supports dignity, equality, and belonging for every student.

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