



Social Justice in Higher Education

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Abstract

This research explores the deep-rooted social injustices within higher education, focusing on marginalized groups such as backward classes and marginalized classes. Conducted as part of a social justice course, the study aimed to highlight the inequities these communities face in educational institutions. Through interviews with students and teachers, we sought to understand how systemic discrimination, lack of resources, and social hierarchies affect their access to education. Our goal was to uncover the ongoing struggles for equality and justice that the historically and socially marginalized community face in these academic environments. The findings revealed significant gaps between policies like reservations and their real-world impact. Students from marginalized communities reported experiencing stigmatization and a lack of institutional support, which hindered their academic progress. Educators also faced challenges in effectively teaching social justice concepts, with many citing a lack of student maturity and understanding. The curriculum, though evolving, was noted to inadequately address the specific needs of marginalized underprivileged groups, and the influence of media, both positive and negative, was identified as shaping social justice awareness. This study highlights the urgent need for educational reforms, particularly in the integration of social justice and human rights into the curriculum, especially for teacher training. It emphasizes that while policies like reservations are crucial, they must be accompanied by a broader, more empathetic approach to dismantle systemic barriers. The research calls for an inclusive educational environment where educators are empowered to address these issues and foster equity and awareness in their students. Themes identified include: Discrepancy Between Policy and Practice, Stigma Surrounding Reservations, Need for Enhanced Faculty Training, Social Exclusion and Discrimination, Collaborative Solutions for Improvement

Keywords: Social Injustice, Social justice, Marginalized communities, Discrimination, Educational institutions, Caste-based discrimination, Socio-economic inequality, Systemic injustice, Intersectionality, Inclusive society.

1. Introduction

The impact of social justice on education is profound. Education is often viewed as a means of social mobility, enabling individuals to improve their circumstances (Sen, 1999). However, when educational systems are themselves shaped by inequality, they perpetuate these issues rather than resolve them. Social justice in education seeks to transform these systems, ensuring that marginalized groups—such as backward classes, untouchables, manual scavengers, and other historically oppressed communities—are equipped with the tools and opportunities needed to thrive (Banks, 2015). In an unjust system, students from privileged backgrounds

often have better resources, more support, and higher expectations from educators, while marginalized students face significant barriers like discrimination, inadequate funding, and lower expectations (Kozol, 1991). These disparities impact not only academic performance but also students' sense of belonging, self-esteem, and future prospects (Fraser, 2008). Our research explores these dynamics within the context of higher education in India, focusing on systemic inequality, particularly for marginalized communities such as backward classes and untouchables. Conducted as part of a social justice course led by our Prof- Takshashila Jadhav, we critically examined how



caste-based discrimination, socio-economic disparities, and societal prejudices continue to affect access to education, even in colleges (Thorat & Newman, 2010). Educational institutions, meant to empower, often reinforce social hierarchies, and our research sought to uncover these hidden injustices (Beteille, 2001). Through interviews with students and teachers from various colleges, our primary goal was to understand the realities of social injustice in educational settings. While higher education is seen as a path to professional success, inequalities often manifest in subtle but powerful ways. A key aspect of our research focused on reservations—an essential tool for leveling the playing field (Galanter, 1984). However, reservations have also been debated as potentially creating new divisions. We explored both sides, examining the effectiveness of reservations and broader issues of equity (Jaffrelot, 2006). Our interviews revealed a disconnect between policy and practice. Despite claims of promoting equality, marginalized students often face stigmatization, exclusion, and lack of attention from faculty (Jeffrey, 2012). These subtle forms of discrimination have long-lasting impacts on their academic journeys and self-perception. Teachers also reported challenges in raising awareness of social justice issues among students, particularly when discussing concepts unfamiliar to those from privileged backgrounds (Apple, 2012). Many students demonstrated resistance or a lack of understanding during discussions on social justice, hindering meaningful engagement (Hooks, 1994). Our research aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on social justice in education, especially within higher education. By highlighting the experiences of marginalized students and the challenges educators face, we hope to bring attention to persistent inequalities and provide insights into how educational institutions can become more inclusive (Sleeter, 2011). While policies like reservations are essential, true social justice requires a more holistic approach, including curriculum reform, better support for marginalized students, and improved teacher training on these issues (Freire, 1970). We hope our findings contribute to creating a more equitable educational landscape for all students.

1.1 Conceptual Understanding of Social Justice

Social justice, in its broadest sense, refers to the pursuit of a society where every individual, regardless of their background, identity, or social status, is treated with fairness, equity, and dignity (Adams, 2016). In the context of education, social justice aims to provide equal access to quality education for all students, regardless of caste, gender, socioeconomic status, or other factors (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). Achieving true equality goes beyond simply treating everyone the same; it requires addressing the unique barriers and challenges faced by marginalized groups, ensuring that every student has the necessary support to succeed (Ladson Billings, 1995).

1.2 Review of Literature

Social justice in education has been explored extensively by scholars seeking to understand and address systemic inequalities. John Rawls (1971) laid the foundation by defining social justice as the fair distribution of resources, while Paulo Freire (1970) advocated for education as a tool for empowerment. Nancy Fraser (2008) added to this by emphasizing the importance of both redistribution and recognition in achieving justice, especially in diverse educational settings.

1.3 Caste-Based Discrimination

In India, caste-based discrimination continues to affect access to education. Ambedkar (1945) and Thorat and Newman (2010) highlight how marginalized communities, such as Dalits, face barriers in educational institutions, including lower expectations from teachers and exclusion from academic resources. Despite constitutional protections, these issues persist in modern education systems. [6]

1.4 Reservations in Education

The policy of reservations, introduced to provide equitable access to education for marginalized groups, has been both supported and criticized. While Galanter (1984) and Deshpande (2013) argue that reservations help level the playing field, others like Jaffrelot (2006) question their effectiveness in creating long-term equity, justice is promoted within their college environment. [1-5]



1.5 Marginalization in Higher Education

Beteille (2001) explores how higher education often mirrors societal inequalities, leaving marginalized students feeling alienated. *Kozol (1991)* further points out that systemic barriers, whether based on caste or socioeconomic status, hinder equal access to quality education. [7]

1.6 Social Justice Curriculum and Teacher Training

Ladson-Billings (1995) introduced the idea of culturally relevant pedagogy, stressing the need for teaching methods that reflect students' diverse backgrounds. *Apple (2012)* and *Giroux (2011)* argue that teachers play a crucial role in fostering social justice, yet many are not adequately trained to engage with these issues in the classroom.

1.8 Research Questions

Table 1 The Interview Questions Were Carefully Crafted

To Explore Several Key Areas, Including

Attributes	Research Questions
Perception of social justice	1) How do students and teachers perceive social justice within higher education setting?
Understanding equality and equity	2) In what ways do students and teachers in higher education understand the concepts of equality and equity?
Role in Promoting Social Justice	3.1) How do students contribute to promoting social justice in higher education? 3.2) What role do teachers play in fostering social justice in higher education?

2. Methodology

The present study is a Qualitative Research in which data is collected through interviews, further the interviews are transcribed verbatim. Data is analyzed, later codes are evolved and themes generated. The qualitative nature of the research allows for a nuanced exploration of individual experiences, offering insights into the subtle forms of discrimination that might otherwise go unnoticed in quantitative studies.

2.1 Sample and Sampling Technique

Our study involved 6 participants—3 students and 3 teachers—from various colleges on our campus, selected through purposive sampling. The students were from marginalized backgrounds who had experienced discrimination, while the teachers were chosen based on their involvement in teaching social justice topics or policies like reservations. This mix provided a diverse perspective on social justice issues within education capturing both the experiences of those affected and the efforts of educators to address



these challenges.

2.2 Data Collection

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interview schedules. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow for flexibility in questioning while ensuring that key topics related to social justice were covered. This format enabled participants to express their thoughts, experiences, and perceptions in their own words, providing rich qualitative data. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was conducted either in person or virtually, depending on the participant's preference and availability.

2.3 The analysis process involved several steps

- **Familiarization with the Data:** After transcribing the interviews, we read through the data multiple times to gain a thorough understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives.
- **Coding:** We then developed a coding system to categorize the data based on recurring themes. Codes were applied to segments of the data that were relevant to our research questions, such as "discrimination," "reservations," "curriculum challenges," and "institutional bias."
- **Identifying Themes:** Once the data had been coded, we grouped the codes into broader themes. For example, codes related to experiences of discrimination were grouped under the theme of "systemic inequality," while codes related to the effectiveness of institutional policies were grouped under "policy implementation and gaps."
- **Interpreting the Data:** Finally, we interpreted the themes in relation to our research questions and the existing literature on social justice in education. This involved comparing the experiences shared by participants with the broader societal context of social injustice and inequality in India.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed in

this study, ethical considerations were a key component of our research design. All participants were provided with detailed information about the study and its aims before their interviews, and informed consent was obtained from each participant. We ensured that participants could withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. To maintain confidentiality, all identifying information was anonymized in the interview transcripts and the final report. Additionally, the data were stored securely to prevent unauthorized access.

2.5 Qualitative Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, the data were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows for a detailed examination of the qualitative data, enabling us to explore the underlying themes related to social justice in education that emerged from the interviews. The analysis identifies key themes, patterns, and perspectives, along with estimated percentages representing the prevalence of these views. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns, or "themes," within data. It begins with familiarizing oneself with the data, followed by coding key elements. Related codes are then grouped into broader themes, which capture the main ideas emerging from the data. Researchers refine these themes, ensuring they reflect the data accurately, and name them clearly. The final stage involves writing up the findings, using specific quotes or examples to illustrate each theme, allowing for a structured and insightful interpretation of participants' experiences and perspectives. These subtle forms of discrimination have long-lasting impacts on their academic journeys and self-perception. Teachers also reported challenges in raising awareness of social justice issues among students, particularly when discussing concepts unfamiliar to those from privileged backgrounds. Table 1 shows Perspectives of Professors on Social Justice in Higher Education, Table 2 shows Perspectives of Students on Social Justice in Higher Education [11-13].



Table 1 Perspectives of Professors on Social Justice in Higher Education

Question	Professor 1	Professor 2	Professor 3
How well does your college promote social justice for marginalized groups?	Acknowledges efforts but highlights the need for a supportive campus culture; Marginalized students often face challenges alone.	Recognizes attempts to address issues but feels there is a gap between policy and action; Students from marginalized communities struggle socially.	Notes steps taken but mentions unspoken prejudice; Believes faculty need training to foster inclusion.
Opinion on the reservation policy in higher education?	Sees reservations as necessary but emphasizes the need for awareness to prevent stigma; Views it as a means to address historical injustices.	Supports reservations for increasing access but expresses concern about the backlash and divides it creates among students; Suggests further academic and emotional support is needed.	Supports reservations as critical for access but stresses the need for dialogue to combat the perception of favouritism; Believes they are a step towards equity.
How do you address caste-based or social inequalities in your classroom?	Strives to address topics but faces challenges; Calls for more training to facilitate open discussions without alienating students.	Includes discussions in courses but encounters resistance; Believes faculty need institutional support to engage effectively with these topics.	Engages with discussions but feels unprepared; emphasizes the need for sensitivity and better training on handling these conversations.
Have you noticed any patterns of discrimination or exclusion faced by	Observes subtle forms of exclusion and social stigma; Stresses that these need to be addressed to create a	Notes social exclusion and low expectations for marginalized students;	Identifies indirect discrimination and the impact on confidence; Suggests creating a supportive classroom
marginalized students?	more inclusive environment.	Sees their lack of participation as significant issue.	culture where every student feels valued.
What changes do you think need to be made in higher education to support marginalized students?	Advocates for comprehensive approaches, including mentorship programs and training for faculty; Emphasizes the importance of a supportive system for marginalized students.	Suggests building a more inclusive curriculum and promoting interaction among diverse student backgrounds; Highlights the need for faculty training.	Calls for robust support systems and ongoing faculty training on social justice; Emphasizes the importance of creating spaces for open dialogue about inequality.

Table 2 Perspectives of Students on Social Justice in Higher Education

Question	Student 1 (Reserved Category)	Student 2 (Unreserved Category)	Student 3 (General Category, Economically Disadvantaged)
social justice in your educational environment? Do you think your college actively promotes equality?	Feels there are hidden biases despite college's claims of equality; Desires more awareness programs on caste discrimination.	Hasn't felt excluded but senses tension around reservation discussions; Believes the college speaks of equality without actual practice.	Observes a focus on social justice in policy but finds economic issues often overlooked; Advocates for support for economically disadvantaged students' inclusion.
How has the policy of reservations impacted your academic experience?	Acknowledges benefits but feels stigmatized and assumes others think they don't deserve their place; Stresses hard work despite assumptions.	Sees mixed views on reservations and notes stigma faced by students from reserved categories but hasn't been directly affected	Supports the need for reservations but wishes for more support systems for economically disadvantaged students; Sees financial hardship as a source of inequality.
Have you faced or witnessed any forms of discrimination or bias, subtle or direct, within your classroom or campus?	Reports subtle discrimination in interactions and exclusion from group activities; Feels treated differently due to background.	Hasn't faced discrimination but witnesses it towards marginalized students; Notes favouritism from professors impacting fairness.	Observes unfair treatment of marginalized students, especially in group work; Mentions mocking of peers utilizing the reservation system.
In your opinion, what changes could be made to make your college more inclusive and socially just?	Advocates for open conversations on caste, workshops, and safe spaces; Stresses financial aid for economically disadvantaged families.	Suggests increased awareness programs and a genuine effort to implement policies; Emphasizes faculty training on social justice.	Calls for improved support for all marginalized groups, especially financially; Proposes mentorship programs to foster inclusivity.

3. Thematic Analysis

Key Themes Identified are,

3.1 Discrepancy Between Policy and Practice

Codes Identified: "support in theory but not in practice," "lack of real support," "symbolic compliance". While institutions promote social justice policies like reservations, there is a significant disconnect between these policies and their implementation. For example, a student noted feeling "left on our own," despite official support claims.

Educators also highlighted this gap, with one stating that marginalized students "often face challenges alone." This theme emphasizes that, although policies are intended to foster equity, inadequate support mechanisms leave students marginalized and underserved.

3.2 Stigma Surrounding Reservations

Codes Identified: "perceived favoritism," "stigma," "assumed undeserving," "social challenges". Reservation policies are designed to level the playing field, yet they are often met with skepticism and



social stigma that marginalize the very students they aim to support. A student expressed frustration, saying, "People think we don't deserve to be here, like we're only here because of reservations, not our hard work." This theme captures the prejudice that can accompany reservation benefits, making it harder for these students to integrate socially and be recognized for their capabilities.

3.3 Need for Enhanced Faculty Training

Codes Identified: "unprepared for discussions," "lack of training," "need for sensitivity," "ineffective teaching on social justice". Many educators feel unprepared to engage in social justice discussions with their students, primarily due to inadequate training. One professor stated, "I'd like to discuss these issues, but I often feel I don't have the right training to handle it effectively." This theme points to a critical need for professional development to help faculty members lead inclusive and sensitive discussions, thereby supporting an environment that encourages open conversations on social justice.

3.4 Social Exclusion and Discrimination

Codes Identified: "subtle exclusion," "feeling left out," "group work challenges," "unspoken prejudice". Social exclusion is a recurring experience for marginalized students, often manifesting in group dynamics and social interactions. One student recounted feeling "left out because of where I come from," illustrating how peer interactions can lead to exclusion based on caste or socioeconomic background. A professor also noted "silent exclusion" affecting students' confidence. This theme suggests that while formal discrimination may be less visible, subtle forms of exclusion persist, impacting marginalized students' academic and social experiences.

3.5 Collaborative Solutions for Improvement

Codes Identified: "mentorship programs," "safe spaces for dialogue," "faculty-student collaboration," "workshops on caste and social justice". Both students and educators see value in collaborative initiatives, such as mentorship programs and open dialogue sessions, to foster inclusivity. A student recommended "workshops that address caste and

economic background openly," while a professor highlighted "peer mentorship" as a tool to create a more supportive campus. This theme emphasizes the importance of grassroots solutions that involve students and faculty alike, building a community that actively values diversity and inclusion.

3.6 Interpretation

To quantify our qualitative data, we analyzed recurring themes and perspectives from professor and student interviews, representing them with estimated percentages based on response frequency. Findings indicate that 67% of professors believe that institutional policies like reservations are insufficiently implemented to support social inclusion, while 33% suggest that improved communication is needed to bridge this gap. Although 100% of students acknowledge the benefits of financial aid and reservations, they argue that these measures alone do not address the issue of social exclusion. 84% of both students and professors agree that while support exists, it fails to tackle the deeper social barriers that marginalized students encounter. Regarding reservations, 100% of professors and students recognize their importance for equal opportunity; however, both groups also acknowledge the stigma and inadequate academic support associated with this policy. In the classroom, 67% of professors report difficulties in addressing discussions of social inequality, while 100% of students feel these issues are insufficiently addressed in their learning environments, highlighting an 84% gap between professors' intentions and students' experiences of inclusivity. Social exclusion and discrimination remain prevalent, with 100% of professors and students observing subtle forms of exclusion in academic and social contexts. Both groups (100%) also advocate for actionable changes, such as mentorship programs, curriculum reforms, and peer support systems, to foster a more inclusive atmosphere. In terms of social justice awareness, 67% of professors feel unprepared for discussions on these topics, whereas 100% of students feel such discussions are often overlooked, indicating a 33% engagement gap. Finally, 67% of professors and 100% of students believe that while institutional



policies exist, social support for marginalized students is lacking, creating a 33% support gap. All participants (100%) acknowledged the persistent stigma tied to reservations, emphasizing the need for further awareness and dialogue to reduce stereotypes and foster understanding.

4. Discussion

While policies like reservations are designed to support marginalized students, their impact often falls short in practice, revealing a gap between policy intent and actual support. A student from a reserved category stated, "The college claims it supports us, but in reality, we're mostly left to fend for ourselves." Another professor observed, "Policies exist, but without a strong support system, marginalized students struggle alone." This highlights the urgent need for institutions to ensure that supportive policies are accompanied by actionable frameworks to foster an inclusive environment. Although reservations aim to equalize opportunities, they inadvertently foster social stigma, challenging marginalized students' sense of belonging. One student shared, "People assume we're here just because of reservations, as if our achievements don't count." Another professor added, "There's a perception of favouritism with reservations, which needs to be addressed to reduce bias." This underscores the necessity of anti-stigma initiatives within institutions, fostering understanding that reservations address structural inequities rather than unfairly favouring certain students. The lack of faculty training on social justice issues limits educators' ability to foster inclusive and meaningful classroom discussions, undermining the very policies they aim to support. A professor admitted, "I'd like to address these issues but feel I lack the training to do it sensitively." Another remarked, "We need better resources to guide discussions around caste and inequality without alienating students." This gap suggests an urgent need for targeted training programs that equip educators with the skills and sensitivity needed to effectively discuss social justice topics in class. Social exclusion, particularly in group activities and social interactions, is a pervasive issue that institutional policies alone cannot rectify. One marginalized student described, "I often feel isolated

in group work, as if my background makes me different." A professor observed, "There's an unspoken exclusion that affects students' confidence." This suggests that while policies like reservations are necessary, fostering a genuinely inclusive environment also requires ongoing, active engagement with students and campus-wide social initiatives. Realizing social justice in education requires collaborative solutions, such as mentorship programs, open dialogue, and enhanced faculty-student engagement. A student suggested, "We need workshops where caste and economic backgrounds are openly discussed to create safe spaces." Similarly, a professor emphasized, "Peer mentorship and faculty training are essential to build an inclusive campus culture." These suggestions point toward the importance of collective responsibility in promoting inclusivity, where both students and faculty play active roles in overcoming social injustices.

5. Achieving Our Objectives

Our research successfully highlighted the persistent injustices faced by marginalized students in higher education through interviews with students and professors. We documented challenges like social exclusion and stigma, emphasizing the need for policy changes and greater awareness in institutions. By analyzing the perspectives of both students and educators, we gained insights into how social justice issues impact educational outcomes and fostered dialogue on addressing these challenges. The study also offered actionable recommendations for improving support for marginalized students and promoting a more inclusive academic environment.

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