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'Dreams' and 'Struggles' of Female Dalit Students in Indian Public Universities

Madhuparna Karmakar¹

¹*Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India*

Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: "Dreams" and "struggles" of female dalit students in Indian public universities

The visibility of *dalit* female students in Indian public universities has increased considerably due to implementation of affirmative action policies in higher education. I present findings from my PhD research on students from socio-economically marginalized *dalit* communities in two public universities in West Bengal, India. The paper will focus on *narratives of oppression* of these young women to show how their "dreams" and "struggles" shape their intersectional gender and caste experiences in universities. While access to HE provides them freedom against patriarchal norms and overt caste oppression, they find themselves as 'misfit' in the elite environment of university. Though they have access to academic resources, autonomy, and increased mobility, these neither lead to democratized academic citizenry nor to social mobility thereby reinforcing knowledge formation and social formation as two distinct categories.

Keywords – higher education, gender inequality, narratives, caste oppression.

Paper:

'Dreams' and 'Struggles' of Female *Dalit* Students in Indian Public Universities.

'It was my dream that one day I will study at this university. Now I am here. But to be honest I never felt comfortable with this elite environment. I am still struggling to fit in.'

Research Participant[\[1\]](#)

Context

The visibility of *dalit* female students in Indian public universities has increased considerably due to implementation of affirmative action policies in higher education (HE). The Gross Enrolment Ratio for young women from *dalit* communities in higher education has increased from 12.3% in 2010 (AISHE

2010) to 23.3% in 2018 (AISHE 2018). There is scholarship on how public universities in India are spaces for increasing equality while simultaneously reaffirming hierarchies (Deshpande 2016; Nair 2017; Arunima 2017). While access to HE for *dalit* students provides them freedom and hope against patriarchal norms and caste oppression, it remains important to assess whether access to higher education leads to social mobility. They move to a new city/place from home and accommodate in university hostels to continue their study. I will focus on their journey - from patriarchal families to democratic (?) space of public universities, and how they experience freedom and difficulties at the same period of time.

Research Focus

The paper will focus on narratives of young *dalit* women in higher education who invariably use the terms “dreams” and “struggles” to describe their experience and how dreams, struggles and ‘glorification’ of struggle’ become relevant to construct their narrative of ‘experience’. I attempt to understand the complexities and nuances of gender and caste differentials in university spaces to locate exclusionary experiences faced by these women.

Research Methods

I use findings from my PhD research where I have conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with 12 female students of *dalit* communities studying in two public universities in West Bengal, India.

Research Findings

Beginning from their journey of fighting poverty and migrating from rural areas to study in HEIs, *dalit* women speak of *different* narratives of the oppressed. Though each research participant has a unique journey into higher education I have noticed two patterns in the interviews formulated below.

Narrative 1 – “I never thought that I will pursue master’s degree in this university. I never imagined that I could come this much way. It is like a dream to me”.^[2]

Narrative 2 – “I have spent many years in this university but I never belonged here, continuous struggle to fit in is painful. Later I stopped”.^[3]

Thus stories of dreams and struggles are coming up again and again.

The environment of the university is starkly different from the everyday realities of these women. A ‘look down’ gaze from the ‘privileged’ students and teachers in the university chases them as they find themselves as ‘misfit’ in the academic space having endless conceptual deficiencies and lack of cultural capital. They struggle to overcome language and accent limitations while they push themselves to put up a ‘good’ appearance and ‘comfortable’ body language to ‘fit’ in the elite university campus. They struggle to understand how to respond correctly and suffer from identity crisis regarding who they actually are in academia. They make intense efforts to fit into the ‘standard’ parameters and continuously question themselves and suffer from anxieties because of how ‘backward’ they are.

The university hostel accommodations provide young girls with opportunities to move away from their homes to these hitherto unknown 'alternative' spaces for living. I refer to 'alternate' space to signify their shift or escape from the simultaneously protected, secured as well as intimidating gendered experience at their homes to the new space of the hostels where they get personal space and acquire the courage to rediscover their wishes and fulfill their dreams. After having to fight with patriarchal rules and invisible barriers imposed by their family and community to move out for higher education, they feel overwhelmed knowing that a bigger world full of possibilities away from home is awaiting them. Through out their higher educational journey they face obstacles and meet possibilities, they simultaneously dream and struggle to achieve their wishes.

While access to higher education opens avenues for improving the access of *dalit* female students to academic resources, autonomy, increased mobility and different kinds of exposure, it neither necessarily leads to democratized academic citizenry nor to social mobility.

[1] Interview conducted by author, 12 February 2020, Kolkata.

[2] Interview conducted by author, 15 March 2020, Santiniketan.

[3] Interview conducted by author, 3 January 2021, online.

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