

The Illusion of Inclusion: The Increasing Marginalization of Disadvantaged Students in Elite Educational Institutions in India

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In a country with a deep-rooted hierarchy that is founded on ascribed identities, education has been seen as one of the few means of acquiring social mobility by marginalized groups. However, there is a flip side to this story where in the changing socio-economic and political terrain of post-colonial India, the dominant groups have constantly tried to establish and reproduce their ascendancy by primarily controlling the gates of the educational institutions of excellence.



The illusion of inclusion. (Representative image)

An 18-year-old Dalit boy, Darshan Solanki, who was a first-year student of the Department of Chemical Engineering at IIT Bombay killed himself on February 12, 2023. Another death of a Dalit student was added to the long list of suicides in one of the most sought-after educational institutions in India. This pitiful list is fraught with the names of students belonging to the marginalized communities of the country. Pointing at the systemic and structural discrimination faced by students from underprivileged backgrounds in elite educational spaces, these suicides have been termed as 'institutional murders' by progressive groups and individual activists. In a report published by The Wire, the Ministry of Education on March 15, 2023, presented data in the Rajya Sabha concerning student suicides. The report unveiled that across the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), National Institutes of Technology (NITs) and the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), there were a total of

61 suicides between 2018-2023. However, such data conceals more than it reveals about the pathological underbelly of the leading academic institutions of the country. The deeply hierarchical and stratified Indian society brings about a plurality of student experiences coming from diverse backgrounds into places of higher learning. A homogenous category of 'students' hides the everyday struggles of scholars belonging to Dalit, Adivasi, and other minority backgrounds who face constant alienation, discrimination and humiliation that come as part of their admission in the higher arenas of learning.

In a country with a deep-rooted hierarchy that is founded on ascribed identities, education has been seen as one of the few means of acquiring social mobility by marginalized groups. However, there is a flip side to this story where in the changing socio-economic and political terrain of post-colonial India, the dominant groups have constantly tried to establish and reproduce their ascendancy by primarily controlling the gates of the educational institutions of excellence. Therefore, the story of higher education in India is one that depicts a constant tussle between the demands for increased access and inclusion of the underprivileged on one hand, and resistance by powerful groups against the greater incorporation of backward communities on the other. The argument put forward against the increasing representation of historically marginalized groups in top-tier higher education institutions is that their presence would compromise the quality of the education imparted and dilute the overall 'merit' of the institution. The outcry against the implementation of Other Backward Classes (OBC) reservations in elite educational institutions in 2006 revealed the anxiety amongst the upper caste groups towards increasing the democratization of higher education in India. In fact, a group of students from IIT, Delhi submitted a rather preposterous memorandum to the President seeking permission to commit suicide if the reservations of OBCs in elite educational institutions were implemented.

A careful glance at the conceptualization and the functioning of premier educational institutions like the IITs, especially before the implementation of the reservation norms, would reveal the nature of pathology ailing these specialized places of learning. The IITs were created to be crucial institutions for India's development after independence and they occupied the foremost echelons in the country's higher education system. According to Ajantha Subramanian's book titled *The Caste of Merit*, the IITs were allocated significant funds and other resources to produce a select group of top-tier engineers. She highlights that the government omitted the implementation of reservations and that the rationale behind such a sacrifice was to help preserve the 'meritocracy' of the IITs. Hence, the principles of equity and social justice were sacrificed at the altar of meritocracy thereby limiting the diversity of institutions like the IITs that were tasked with the role of producing specialized personnel to accelerate the process of nation-building.

The exalted value of these institutes allowed the privileged groups to capture these educational spaces mostly on account of their existing caste privileges that directly reinforced their meritocracy. Therefore caste privilege masqueraded as meritocracy and became a filter for the dominant groups to restrict the entry of marginalized groups to top-tier educational institutions. The implementation of the reservation policy, particularly the OBC reservation, has opened the doors of elite institutions to historically marginalized groups. Their entry into institutions such as IITs, IIMs, and AIIMS greatly

increased the socio-cultural diversity of these institutions. The reservation policy aided the entry of marginalized groups but did not ensure their substantive inclusion by failing to address their historically accumulated disadvantages and their effects in these newfound spaces. The decades of domination of these spaces by privileged groups had entrenched the upper caste sensibilities in all aspects of life inside the campus. They were determined to not concede space to the newcomers easily. Despite the legal safeguards, provisions for an institutional support system and public discourse against caste discrimination, systemic and structural casteism operated in multifarious ways where the experience of students from marginalized sections was stained with discrimination and humiliation inside these so-called institutes of eminence.

A familiar story of an aspirational Dalit boy, despite the avalanche of economic and social difficulties, managed to enter the hallowed gates of IIT. He was a source of hope for his family, neighbourhood and students belonging to marginalized groups. His presence on campus was inspirational for many IIT aspirants from disadvantaged groups. Nonetheless, his presence was also a challenge to a system which hides casteism in the garb of meritocracy, rankings and marks. His enrollment brought him to a campus devoid of empathy, sensitivity and fraternity. His alienation and academic pressure combined with the lack of institutional and peer support compelled him to arrive at a moment of ultimate despair. The accounts of suicides in IITs were brought to the foreground again when Darshan Solanki took his life. In a well-rehearsed manner, the 12-member committee constituted by IIT Bombay probed the case of Darshan's suicide and submitted an interim report implying that 'poor academic performance' and 'aloofness' may be the cause of his taking his life. The report clearly stated that there was no caste discrimination in this case.

The portrait becomes even more ghastly when one pays heed to the frightening incompetence of the IITs in fulfilling the reservation quotas even for the teaching faculty. Given that a major fraction of the faculty positions has been occupied by professors of privileged castes since the inception of these premier institutions, it is not difficult to acknowledge the crystallization of socio-cultural and caste hierarchies. These stratifications constantly emerge across the academic curricula inside the high-tech smart lecture theatres of the IITs. The July of 2019 saw the then education minister Ramesh Pokhriyal reveal in the Lok Sabha that out of the 8,856 sanctioned vacancies in 23 IITs, only 6,043 seats had been filled. Out of these, a mere 149 (2.5%) and 21 (0.34%) candidates belonged to the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe categories respectively. There was also no mention of recruitment under the OBC category during the then-education minister's address. In 2021, the Ministry of Education recommended the enactment of the 'Mission Mode Recruitment' (MMR) across all centrally funded institutes of higher education to primarily fulfil the vacancy positions in accordance with the central reservation norms. Unfortunately, even after the vacancy advertisements by various IITs under the MMR, there has not been a substantial fulfilment of the available seats as per the reservation norms in several IITs in spite of receiving overwhelming applications for the advertised faculty posts ([RTI filed on May 20, 2022](#)). The lack of diversity and inclusiveness within the walls of the IITs are, therefore, not only confined to the student populations but also stands true for the teaching staff rendering the lack of social diversity in the faculty bodies. The professors that occupy

the spaces of knowledge and power, therefore, may not necessarily be welcoming and empathetic to the various issues of socio-cultural discrimination among the marginalized students hailing from various disadvantaged backgrounds.

The institutes of national importance are known to have boastful infrastructural amenities that add to their physical grandeur. These are built to facilitate a multitude of extracurricular activities to supplement the overall development and well-being of its pupils in their scholarly endeavours. Among these are hospitals, wellness centres and mental health clinics that are exclusively catered to address the psychological distress among students. However, it is important to understand that these resources that are rational initiatives to attend to the mental anguish of the students are also a part of the larger functioning hierarchical system and may not necessarily provide a safe space for the address of the grievances of the students from the deprived sections. Furthermore, there is always a strong possibility of the stigmatization of the pupils if they take recourse from these facilities, further adding to their existing trauma and humiliation that emanate from the narratives of their inability to cope with the academic curriculum on account of their alleged mediocrity and undeservingness.

These suicides, after being promptly investigated, are most often unapologetically acknowledged by the IITs as accidents that are outcomes of a student's personal troubles and not as outcomes of systemic discrimination. The possibility of rationally identifying a single causal explanation regarding a student's unnatural death on account of institutional prejudice is completely absolved by the enquiry committees constituted by the IITs.

The concurrence of student suicides in these spaces invariably leads one to introspect the obsession with the grand rhetoric of IITs as glorious spaces of triumph; guarantors of high-salaried job placements that reassure all of its students 'good' and 'successful' lives. The highly adorned bubble of prestigious IITs is frequently burst by the extremely unfortunate cases of suicides that, many a time, are the result of the systemic inequalities that these eminent institutions harbinger.

N. Sukumar points towards the experience of students from marginalised backgrounds once they enter Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in his article 'Quota's Children: The Perils of Getting Educated'. He argues that the prevalence of suffocating experiences for Dalit students is so alarming that suicides have become a common occurrence rather than cases of exception. These typical incidents illustrate the everyday difficulties of students from marginalized groups in prestigious educational institutions.

Due to national policies and affirmative actions, more students who come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are able to enter HEIs in India. However, many of these HEIs, especially the elite institutions like IITs are not prepared to deal with this diversity and do not provide them with adequate support after their admission. This inadvertently leads to the alienation of these students leading them to perform poorly in their academics or drop out of the institutions and in extreme cases commit suicide due to their stress and despair. The structural and systemic inequalities that hinder the paths of students from marginalized backgrounds after they enter elite spaces like the IITs, reflect

a certain upper-caste anxiety. These discomforts arise from the paranoia of the formerly excluded groups striving to enter higher educational arenas and that they may achieve substantive inclusion instead of mere symbolic inclusion.

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