Social Capital and Social Inclusion in Higher Education

Case Study Narratives on the Lived Experiences of Scheduled Caste Youth in Tamil Nadu, India

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Contents

Abstract

Scheduled Castes are considered oppressed and exploited social groups in India. The social functioning of members of the Scheduled Caste is impacted by systemic oppression. According to studies, parents of Scheduled Caste youth see education as a means of achieving liberation. Youth is a period of transition and identity development. Social capital, which includes manifestations of agency, is a crucial element of identity. In addition to emotional support, social capital gives people chances and power. Young people use their social networks and relationships to advance their education and job mobility. According to the theory of social capital, social connections serve as valuable assets that contribute to the advancement and progress of human capital. Consequently, the cultivation of social capital holds the potential to empower the youth belonging to the Scheduled Caste (SC) community, enabling them to achieve academic success,

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improve their overall well-being, and actively engage in both formal and informal social circles. Moreover, the enhancement of social capital among Scheduled Caste youth is an essential prerequisite, as it fosters social integration and aids in overcoming the systemic obstacles imposed upon them due to their historical marginalization. This chapter presents the narratives of young people from Scheduled Castes who are enrolled in government colleges in Tamil Nadu to pursue undergraduate degrees using a purposive sample technique. The chapter finds that new relationships and the educational setting had a major impact on the social inclusion of Scheduled Caste youth in higher education in Tamil Nadu.

Introduction

Social relationships and social networks are considered resources to human beings to create human capital in the next generation. Unlike physical and human capital, social capital is found in interpersonal relationships. These social relationships are frequently employed by the younger generation to advance professional mobility and career choices. The creation of human capital in the younger generation is significantly influenced by social capital in the family and community (Coleman, 1988). Youth benefit from social capital in education and transition to employment mostly through the social capital of their parents. Youth transmit their allegiance to their peer group, albeit as a phase of transition from dependence to adult independence. On the path to adulthood, this aids in resolving identity conflicts and dealing with uncertainties. Youth are influenced to experiment with new forms of relationships and identities by their peers' social capital as well as social capital from media outlets and information and communication technology advancements (Helve & Bynner, 2007). Positive results for young people in terms of well-being, education, and employment are directly related to social capital. It is essential to improving the well-being of youth from marginalized communities and is linked to beneficial outcomes like higher educational achievement, full-time employment, and promotional chances (Scales et al., 2020).

Social capital within the family and community has an impact on young people's aspirations in education. Youth who have positive relationships with their parents and teachers help reduce social inequality. Youth who have close relationships with their college professors, staff, or counselors as mentors, either formally or informally, have a stronger sense of purpose in their lives (Lund et al., 2019). This implies the significance of supportive relationships in higher education institutions for young people from Scheduled Caste (SC) communities who were historically marginalized (Ambedkar, 2014) in Indian society (For a detailed understanding, refer to Dr. B.-R. Ambedkar's works on the same, such as Annihilation of Caste (1936) and Who

Were the Untouchables? (1948) where he provides a detailed historical narrative of how the Scheduled Caste community, also identifying politically as Dalits, were historically marginalized within the social fabric of the Indian subcontinent (Ambedkar, 2014)). Higher education gives young people the chance to build new relationships with professors and students from varied social and economic backgrounds. This has an impact on both the experiences they are having now and those they will have in the future. Higher education can help Scheduled Caste youth overcome structural impediments to their growth imposed by the caste system. Higher education experiences are crucial for identifying and comprehending the systemic reasons that impede development and for giving young people from Scheduled Castes a sense of agency. Agency is the capacity of a person to make decisions and do actions independently of social structures as explained by Giddens (1984), and Kipo (2013). Developmental relationships are crucial in establishing this sense of agency. According to Scales et al. (2020), these relationships help young people discover who they are (identity), cultivate the skills to shape their own lives (agency), and engage with and contribute to the world around them (contributions and connections to the community) through close connections. These relationships comprise five relational strategies such as express care, challenge growth, provide support, share power, and expand possibilities. Pekel et al. (2018) made an important observation in this area, noting that the extent to which developmental relationships are promoted in these interventions is a key factor in determining whether they are successful or unsuccessful in working with young people who live in poverty and come from marginalized communities.

Background of the Study

Affirmative action procedures are being used by the Indian government to enable marginalized communities with access to higher education institutions. The experiences of SC youth in higher education institutions, however, are influenced by echoes of social hierarchy in higher educational institutions. Various researchers have studied the living experiences of SC youth in higher education. In his study, Singh (2013) lists 11 case studies with successful survivors of hardship who have completed the higher education system and are now working in their field of interest. Especially family members, such as parents and grandparents, are a source of inspiration for them. Another research study conducted by Sonavane (2019) among SC women at the University in Solapur, Maharashtra, reveals that the majority of SC women in the university were supported by their mothers. SC women students were motivated and empowered to complete their education and overcome difficult circumstances after witnessing their mothers struggle with poverty and discrimination. In terms of significant people who influenced their decision to pursue higher education, the majority were family members, followed by self-recommendations and suggestions from friends. Maurya (2018) discussed SC students' interaction with faculty at college. All the participants in his research study experienced some kind of caste prejudice and discrimination from a few faculty

members. Likewise, in approaching administrators for any relevant work, the experience is the same. Technical higher education is a rapidly expanding field of study, and SC students in engineering education have fewer than average interactions with faculty members, according to a study conducted by Gautam (2015). Peer group relationships beyond caste groups have been developed, which has aided SC students in strengthening their academic performance. Unreserved category students' "unfriendly" and "indifferent" gestures, however, hinder the usefulness of social capital built on campus. Students from Scheduled Castes frequently encounter prejudice, discrimination, and discriminatory treatment from peers, teachers, administrators, and other staff members (Rathod, 2021).

Understanding the social capital of youth from marginalized communities and its influence on shaping identity and sense of agency is crucial in the process of social inclusion. In this light, the current chapter attempts to analyze the narratives of SC youth who pursue higher education in Tamil Nadu to understand the overall social capital of SC youth and how it influences social inclusion, in higher education. The following research questions are addressed in this chapter:

1. What are the relationships that motivated SC youth to pursue higher education?
2. What are the new relationships gained by SC youth from the college?
3. How do these relationships influence SC youth for social inclusion in higher education?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

Concepts of social capital and social inclusion are used as theoretical frameworks for this chapter. The concept of social capital, which is used extensively by many researchers and policymakers, was initially developed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and later by James Coleman (1988), Putnam (1993), etc. According to Bourdieu, "Social Capital is the aggregate of actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). He explained two dimensions of social capital, which are (a) social networks and connections or relationships and (b) sociability. He emphasized that social networks must be constructed and then skillfully maintained to utilize their resources (Schaefer-Mcdaniel, 2004).

For this chapter, Bourdieu's (2018) social capital is more applicable as the study population is completely constituted of SC youth. For Bourdieu, social capital is the relationships that can refer to or provide access to resources that are economic and cultural. In other words, social capital is the capital of "belonging recognition authentication received from the members of the group to which we belong or usurp membership in it" (Mickiewicz, 2021, p. 6).

Silver (2015) defines "social inclusion as a multidimensional, relational process of increasing opportunities for social participation, enhancing capabilities to fulfill normatively prescribed social roles, broadening social ties of respect and

recognition, and at the collective level enhancing social bonds, cohesion, integration, or solidarity" (pp. 2–3). According to Silver, social inclusion comprises three characteristics: First, social inclusion is multidimensional in nature, in which participation takes place in the realm of the economic, political, cultural, and social; second, social inclusion has a processual, dynamic nature, in which "the vicious circles" of exclusion are replaced, or even actively broken and substituted by "virtuous circles" of inclusion (2012, p. 7); and likewise, the third characteristic of social inclusion is that it "ensures" the existence of an active participation of both the ostracized and the ostracized, within an exclusionary setup. This simultaneous engagement of both the oppressed and the oppressor to create a more balanced, equal, and just society is a significant aspect of social inclusion. For Sen (2000), one of the prime features of social exclusion is the deprivation of one's capabilities to fully grow, develop, or even be executed in its fullest potential taking a cue from Sen's understanding, Silver states that the "participation" of the excluded to realize their fullest potential is one of the defining characteristics of social exclusion (Sen, 2000; Silver, 2012). In other words, enhancing the conditions under which individuals and groups participate in society – improving the capacity, opportunity, and dignity of those who are disadvantaged because of their identity – is the process of social inclusion (World Bank, 2013).

Methodology and Universe of the Case Studies

The proposed study is qualitative in nature and takes on the research design of a *multiple-embedded case study* (Berg, 2001; Yin, 2003) to describe the lived experiences of Scheduled Caste youth in the context of their social capital. The rationale to have a *multiple-embedded case-study* design is based on the multiplicity of the "units" of analysis which were formed while framing the research questions: "Social Capital" and "Social Inclusion," for the unit(s) of analysis forms one of the key components in which the structure of the case study rests on (Yin, 2003). This "descriptive" case-explorative study (Berg, 2001) uses in-depth interviews as the tool of data collection (Berg, 2001; Seidman, 2006), with five SC youth pursuing graduation in three Government Arts and Science Colleges across three districts in Tamil Nadu: Cuddalore, Kanchipuram, and Vellore via a sampling method which is purposive and convenient (Berg, 2001) (Fig. 1).

The college in Kanchipuram district, which started in 2013, offers bachelor's programs in eight departments and is not well developed in terms of infrastructure: Apart from having only two three-storied buildings, it also lacks a playground and the necessary transportation facilities. The college in Cuddalore, located in a small coastal village, was founded in 1964 and has 20 departments, offering Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral programs. Having been reaccredited with a B grade by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in 2015, it has a range of organizations functioning, such as the National Cadet Corps (NCC), National Service Schemes (NSS), Red Ribbon Club, Citizen Consumer Club, Fine Arts Club, etc. and has a functioning playground. Likewise, the college in Vellore,

Fig. 1 Methodo-conceptual map of the proposed study using a *multiple-embedded case-study design*. (Derived from the conceptual map "Basic types of Designs for Case Studies" (Yin, 2003, p. 40)
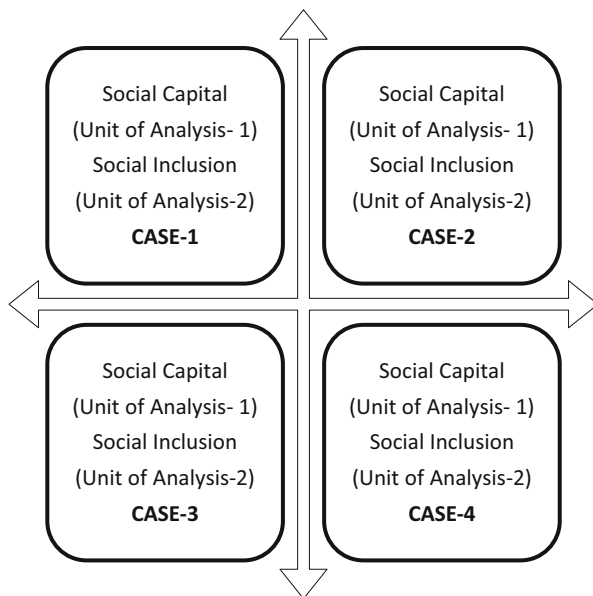
Social Capital (Unit of Analysis- 1) Social Inclusion (Unit of Analysis-2) **CASE-1**	Social Capital (Unit of Analysis- 1) Social Inclusion (Unit of Analysis-2) **CASE-2**
Social Capital (Unit of Analysis- 1) Social Inclusion (Unit of Analysis-2) **CASE-3**	Social Capital (Unit of Analysis- 1) Social Inclusion (Unit of Analysis-2) **CASE-4**

Table 1 Summary of background of respondents

No.	Initials	Districts	Gender	Parents' education	Fathers' occupation	Course studying
1	PP	Cuddalore	Male	Illiterate	Daily wage	BSc Statistics
2	KS	Cuddalore	Female	Illiterate	Farmer	BA English
3	GP	Kanchipuram	Female	Illiterate	Daily wage	BA English
4	MV	Cuddalore	Male	Illiterate	Carpenter	BA Tamil
5	GS	Vellore	Male	12th (father)	Daily wage	BSc Botany

[*]Derived from interviews with respondents

which was also founded in 1964, has a B+ NAAC Accreditation and offers Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral programs across 15 departments and does possess good infrastructure facilities.

Analysis of the Data Collected

As this study was a qualitative cum descriptive study using narratives of SC youth in higher education from three districts of Tamil Nadu, the themes derived from the narrative analysis are discussed below (Table 1).

Relationship Motivation for Joining College

All the respondents have a specific person who motivated them to join college. Most of these persons are educated from 10th to graduation. Three respondents mentioned relationships are from outside the family and two are their father. For instance, Mr. PP, who comes from a very low socioeconomic background and has illiterate parents, was encouraged to enroll in an undergraduate program by an advocate who lives across the street from his home and goes by the name *Chithappa* (Father's younger brother).

> He stated *"My uncle questioned me about my plans one day when we were riding along on his bike. I retorted that I intended to major in computer science when I entered engineering. Then he discussed the difficulties finding employment for engineering graduates as well as the financial security offered by government employment. He advised them to complete their degrees and concentrate on competitive tests for government jobs. So I decided to enroll in BSc Statistics. This Chithapa is an inspiration to PP since he always performs good deeds for the villages and is a supporter of Dr. B R Ambedkar's philosophy."*

Mr. MV, also from Cuddalore, describes how he sought assistance from his *Chithappa* when he was in trouble after choosing to major in engineering and finding it difficult to adjust to the collegiate environment.

> "I wasn't feeling good with the engineering college, so I decided to drop the course," he said when describing his experience. So desperate that I turned to my Chittappa for guidance. My parents are illiterate and ignorant of the educational system, whereas he is a schoolteacher. He gave me some advice for my plans, particularly for picking a UG programme with lots of potential for government employment.

Ms. KS named Mama (her maternal uncle) as a source of funding for her higher studies. The final-year BA English student Ms. KS claims,

> "My mama is my continual support for my studies. He is the only member of my family's previous generation who is literate.

Unsurprisingly, the following two respondents mentioned that their fathers are a source of inspiration. In Ms. GP's comments,

> "There was no one in the family who went to college so my father determined that I must join college," the determination of the parents is clear. He wants me to work as an advocate. He always tells me to do well in school and find a job in the white-collar sector. He constantly wishes that his children wouldn't go through the same things in life. He always wishes that his children should not have the same life experiences."

The father of Mr. GS is educated up to 12th standard. Mr. GS is studying BSc Botany at Government Arts and Science College in Vellore. He stated that

> MyAppa(Father) motivates me to gain education and for bodybuilding.

Relationships with Faculties in College

Two of the respondents say they feel like they belong at the college. These young people at least have a college-established supportive bond. Mr. PP, the head of the department, serves as his college mentor. He clarified that the teacher's statements inspired him to enroll in this specific course at this college. Mr. PP said that

> "I applied for this course in other colleges as well, but this HoD called me first. He was kind to me and chatted to me on the phone like a familiar person. I replied that I would join the following day because I liked his approach. I went for admission by myself and was anxious, but he talked to me and helped me feel at ease. I have so far been completely at ease talking to him about any topic, whether it be personal or academic. He always reassures us that he will be there to listen to us, as well as to offer assistance and support. He offers solid advice and offers free TNPSC exam preparation.

According to this narrative, professors' social acceptance has a good impact on college students' ability to form relationships and, as a result, makes them feel like they belong (DeWall & Bushman, 2011). Ms. KS, another respondent, likes her class tutor (the person in charge of the class) the most among faculties. She stated,

> I like the way she takes classes and she always tells us to join additional skill acquisition programs like computer courses.

The other three youths, meanwhile, stated that their professors in college are unfriendly to SC youths. Ms. GP, the Kanchipuram respondent, began by saying,

> "In this college, teachers are prejudiced against SC students. Teachers think we are less worthy than other pupils from the upper castes. In this college, I haven't encountered a teacher who is comparable to my 10th-grade English teacher (who encouraged her to enjoy the English subject).

These remarks reveal that, in comparison to teachers at schools, college teachers are less interested in helping students understand their family backgrounds, and that certain teachers' caste discrimination causes students to experience social rejection and decreased self-esteem.

SC Youth Participation in Extracurricular Activities in College

Youth who have positive relationships with faculty members experience a greater sense of inclusion than other youth. According to Mr. PP,

> "Externals may think that this college is not very nice, but when I enrolled here, I realized that there are numerous possibilities and facilities that can be used for our development, such as NCC, NSS, etc. Being an NCC Cadet, I spend more time in college hanging out with other NCC Cadets than my peers. I don't have many friends in college, Ms. GP confesses, making

the other students seem distant. Since my house is only two kilometers from the college and other students travel there by bus, I walk there by myself. College is currently only open for three hours due to the COVID-19 scenario, thus there is no chance for students to communicate with one another.

Another youth, Mr. GS, stated that

"I'm going to college only to finish the course. After earning my degree, my cousin's brother promised to assist me in finding employment as a medical representative. I had no idea what college life was like because of the Covid-19 problem. Although I don't know much about it, I've heard that the college has amenities like NSS and YRC.

Since MV could not establish a helpful relationship with professors, he has no one to turn to for support while he is in college. So he said that

"*I could not find any supportive teachers in this college. I need a degree so I am coming to college. I can't say that I built a good relationship with any person at this college.*" says MR. MV

The abovementioned case study narratives reveal that Scheduled Caste students from economically and educationally disadvantaged households rely heavily on the college's faculty for assistance and direction in their higher studies (Maurya, 2018). The youth who perceived supportive relationships with faculty are provided with emotional support (empathetic connection with faculty and SC youth), instrumental support (providing resources), informational support (sharing knowledge), and appraisal support (encouraging). These students actively participate in cocurricular activities in the college while the other three explicitly claim they did not do so while attending college. Except for one, whose parents are educated above high school, all others were first-generation learners whose parents are daily wage laborers. Since their families are unable to provide them with the required advice, their nonparental family members serve as their natural mentors before enrolling in college. Even when they fail to develop a very supportive relationship with their peers, in contrast to the supportive relationships they have developed with their professors, they still harbor good career aspirations. Out of the five cases, four of them had very clear and definitive goals for their futuristic careers. According to Lund et al. (2019), youth who have close relationships with their college professors, staff, or counselors as mentors informally or formally have stronger senses of purpose in their lives. They have a greater motivation to improve the current social and economic conditions of their family because they are extremely aware of the job security in the public sector.

Another significant finding from the stories is that the young people who interact with professors feel a sense of loyalty to their college. The experience in developing relationships gives them a sense of competence, belonging, and autonomy. It is these relationally based outcomes, which in turn facilitate the achievement of significant educational and occupational outcomes later, that Scales et al. (2020) refer to as

catalytic outcomes. These results are closer to the final results than developmental relationships and resources are. A young person's chances of attaining their goals are increased and sped up when they experience these results. Since SC youth lack the necessary material, financial, and social networks to identify and take advantage of opportunities in the current, rapidly expanding world, these improved chances are essential to helping them achieve their educational goals.

Implications of the Study

One important aspect that the current study attempts to imply is that the increase in social capital will be a definitive support in the development of Scheduled caste youth. Efforts should be made from an institutional perspective, to implement an effective and efficient teaching mechanism. The possible provision of having a student counselor for assistance is crucial for psychological support. Likewise, having a well-functioning SC/ST grievance cell to investigate any kind of discriminatory incidents on campus is a necessity. Such basic amenities can play a significant role in the solidifying social capital of SC youth in campus spaces. It may be possible to do a more thorough qualitative study including a larger number of students to better comprehend the challenges SC youths face while trying to build social capital in higher education institutions.

Conclusion

Scheduled Caste youth, one of the categories of marginalized youth, deal with a variety of developmental concerns, such as financial hardship and social isolation, in addition to the typical problems that young people in the current pandemic environment experience. The youth and the numerous resources for youth are always connected by social capital. An additional strategy to improve SC youth social capital in educational institutions is to increase the likelihood that they will succeed academically and professionally. The results of this study may not necessarily be generalized to other areas of the state's educational institutions. To better understand the dynamics of SC youth's social networks, more research in a wide range of educational sectors is required. However, this study has implications for organizations and youth workers that work with SC youths to comprehend the value of social capital developed via developing connections in SC youth's social inclusion. Higher education institutions are where students' knowledge is transformed, their skills are developed, and their personalities are shaped. These organizations play a bigger part in providing the students with a nurturing environment. Such a support structure or social capital is necessary for students from marginalized groups, such as Scheduled Castes, to improve their capacities for self-development and societal contribution.

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