

# Experiences and Perceptions of Affirmative Action in Higher Education: A Critical Analysis of Dalit and Non-Dalit Women in a Central University

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## Abstract

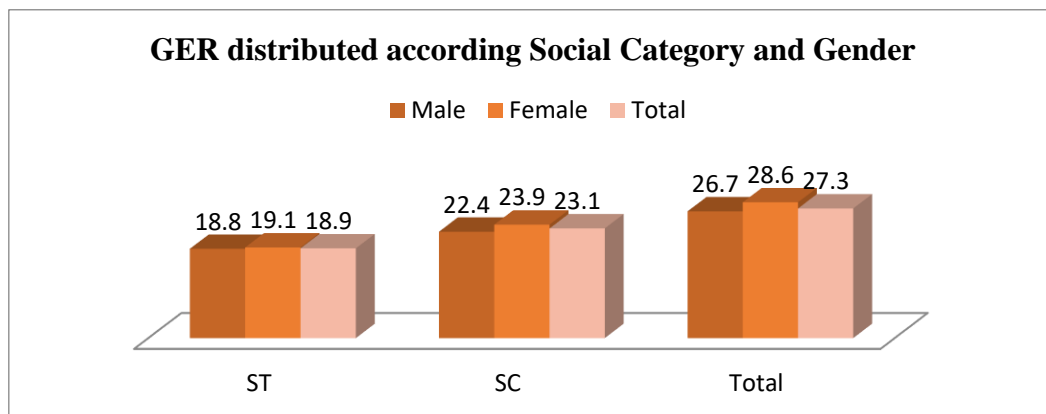
Education helps to groom and enhance people's personalities by inculcating in them a desirable set of knowledge, values, and skills. Higher education makes people specialise in a particular set of knowledge, fields and skills. One of the vital functions of higher education in a society is that it serves the demands of the labour market as it leverages individuals with skills and acts as a ladder to achieve upward social mobility, which enhances one's status in society, especially for the marginalised sections of the population. Because of its significance in establishing equality among all sections of society, the Indian government implemented an affirmative policy, primarily a reservation for disadvantaged castes. The present research paper aims to understand the experiences and perceptions of Dalit women and non-Dalit women studying in higher education toward affirmative policy. It is an endeavour to analyse the government's efforts to provide social equality through the means of distributive justice by introducing the policy of protective discrimination. Primary data was collected through qualitative means for which the case study method is used. Twenty-four respondents, twelve Dalit women, and twelve non-Dalit women were selected by a purposive sampling method and analysis was done by coding their responses and applying a narrative analysis technique. Secondary data has been collected and analysed from government reports, newspapers, magazines, articles, etc. to substantiate the data.

**Keywords:** Affirmative policy, Reservation, Dalit women, non-Dalit women, Higher education

## Introduction

The British colonial government introduced the Western university system during the mid-19th century in Mumbai, Kolkata, and Madras to meet their various interests such as political, economic, and administrative ones (Bhoite, 2009; Agrawal, 2007). Colonial rulers to achieve their ulterior motive of ruling over Indian citizens for whom higher education was used as a tool established it. Higher education institutions are meant to inculcate and leverage individuals with the skills that will benefit in enhancing their personalities and earning a livelihood.

In India, a study that an individual pursues after completing 12 years of schooling is termed as higher education and it is considered as a tertiary level education. The Indian higher education system is the third largest in the world with 1113 Universities, 43796 Colleges, and 11296 Stand Alone Institutions (AISHE, 2020-21). One of the functions of higher education institutions is to make an individual skilled in a particular discipline so that he or she can make a living, enhance his or her status and contribute to the development of the nation. In the present time, higher education is considered an important means which helps improve the social status of those who come from marginalised sections of society by enabling them to have some level of social mobility in society (Warikoo & Allen, 2020). Due to the various initiatives of the government, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of women across all social groups has increased and even surpasses their male counterparts in terms of ratio. As per the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), 2020 report, the Gross Enrolment Ratio of general women is 28.6% whereas women of the SC community have a GER of 23.9% and it is interesting to notice that both Dalits i.e., constitutionally termed as Scheduled Caste (SCs) (Vij, 2018) and non-Dalit women surpass their male counterparts in terms of GER.



**Source:** All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), 2020-21

Considering higher education institutions as an important area where the representation of the SC community is necessary, the Indian government has introduced an affirmative action policy in the form of reservation for the inclusion of this excluded group and others such as Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and recently for Economically Weaker Sections (EWSs). The university which has been selected for collecting data has a provision of reserving 50% of seats for SC/ST as per academic ordinance Chapter- VII (clause 9) and 10% for Economically Weaker Sections (EWSs) in admission (BBAU, 2021). This study focuses on knowing the experiences and perceptions of the affirmative policy of women from different social category groups i.e., Dalit and non-Dalit women to analyse the similarities and differences in their views on the notion of affirmative policy as they both share one aspect of the identity of being women. Hence, it analyses how their perception and experiences differ by coming from different social caste groups.

### Affirmative Action: A Historical View

Affirmative action is also known as positive discrimination (Sowell, 1989). It was introduced by the Indian government in the 1950s under the constitutional provision that deals with making special laws, policies, and plans for the disadvantaged section of society. In India, affirmative action has been introduced in the form of a reservation or quota policy that reserves a certain amount of seats in public institutions based on caste that was historically, socially, and educationally backward (Maheshwari, 1997; Maurya, 2018;

Warikoo & Allen, 2020; Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015; Rawat & Satyanarayana, 2016). Recently, the government of India has also introduced a 10% reservation in public institutions in jobs and education for those who are economically weaker among the upper caste group (Sharma & Garg, 2020). In higher education institutions, reservation is implemented as an act of reserving a fixed amount of seats in admission and appointments for the disadvantaged section of society. This initiative of the government has always been an act of contention between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of reservation policy as it reserves some percentage of scarce resources for a particular section of people (Bagde et al., 2019). Dalits are considered a historically marginalised section of society who are accustomed to systemic oppression and discrimination in society by the upper caste individuals and the women who belong to this group are the victim of a double burden as they also belong to the gender “women” who are treated as the subordinate in comparison to “men”. Hence, this study will assess the experience and perception towards affirmative policies from women's perspective - the women who were beneficiaries of the reservation system i.e., Dalit and the women who are not, i.e., women from the non-reserved category in terms of gender but not having such affirmative policies for them i.e., women from non-reserved social category.

### **Objective**

The present research paper broadly deals with two main objectives, first, understanding the experiences and perceptions of Dalit women and non-Dalit women studying in higher education institutions toward affirmative policy, and second, analysing the government’s efforts to provide social equality through the means of distributive justice by introducing the affirmative policy. This will help in examining the effectiveness of affirmative policy through the experiences and perceptions Dalit and non-Dalit women have of affirmative action.

### **Methodology**

The present research was carried out at “Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University (A Central University), Lucknow Uttar Pradesh. This research is exploratory and consists of both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through a case study method for which an interview is used as a technique of data collection and an open-ended questionnaire has been formed. There was a total number of 24 respondents (12 Dalit women and 12 non-Dalit women) who were selected through the purposive sampling method. The responses of the respondents were codified and their analysis was done by narrative analysis technique. A total of four case studies have been considered. Secondary data was collected from government reports, newspapers, magazines, articles, etc. to substantiate the data. To protect the identity of the respondents pseudonyms are used.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The intersectional theory was introduced by a British lawyer, Crenshaw who while talking about black women’s experiences criticised the scholars that viewed existing systemic oppression of a group of people from a single frame that is gender and argued that the multiple social identities of an individual intersect with each other and generates a complex relation of power and (dis)advantage (Dillon, 2010). Crenshaw argued that there are multiple statuses (gender, class, race, and so on) attached to an individual that intersect with each other and generate different life experiences than those who have different sets of identities. Likewise in India, various scholars have argued that an individual’s life experiences are the result of the multiple identities he or she carries out with them and it is quite difficult to address the

problem of people with multiple identities through common legal safeguards as it does not consider multiple aspects of identity such as caste, class, and gender while its framing (Sabharwal, N. S., & Sonalkar, W., 2015). Policymakers in India have introduced affirmative action policy but they failed to notice that an individual carries multiple social identities with them that become a reason either for being privileged, oppressed, or oppressed among oppressed. These multiple identities that women carry with them make them marginalised in multiple ways such as based on caste, class, and gender. Dalit women face a triple burden of caste, class, and gender that worsen their situation (Sabharwal, N. S., & Sonalkar, W., 2015) and hinder their growth and access to various resources such as higher education institutions that impede their social mobility in society (Warikoo & Allen, 2020).

### Literature Review

The article “Double Jeopardy? Stigma of Identity and Affirmative Action” by (Deshpande, 2019) aimed to analyse the effect of affirmative policy on the disadvantaged section of society, as there is a certain stigma that associates these students as incompetent. Externalisation refers to the stigma generated through negative evaluation of disadvantaged sections of people by their fellows rather than their actual low performance or zeal. Internalisation refers to the process in which a disadvantaged section of people internalises the stigma of having low worth as compared to the advantaged section that used to be instilled by their fellow mates. The findings of the study show that there is no difference in the attitude and motivation of the students belonging to those having benefits of affirmative action than those who have not benefited from it. It shows that there is a prevalence of externalisation i.e., stigma generated through negative evaluation by the external force on the disadvantaged section of the people rather than that of internalisation which explains the internalisation of a stigma having low worth imposed by the upper caste among the disadvantaged section.

In an article titled “Discrimination in Indian Higher Education: Everyday Exclusion of the Dalit–Adivasi Student” (Kumar, 2021) case studied 20 students by using a snowball sampling method in which he argued that affirmative action enables students to access entry to higher education institutions but it is unable to tackle the structural impairments that constraint them in continuing higher education which resulted in a dropout. He concluded that Dalits were humiliated and discriminated against by all (peer groups, teachers, or administration) in an institutional setting despite doing well in academics. They all are trapped under the prejudice of being incompetent by society due to their identity that they cannot escape even if they want to.

The article titled “Higher Education, reservation, and scheduled castes: Exploring Institutional Habitus of Professional Engineering Colleges in Kerala” (Malish & Ilavarasan, 2016) attempted to understand equity in terms of the process and outcomes of SC students in an institutional setting by comparing Kerala’s two engineering college with the help of ethnographic accounts. They found that the institutional culture plays an intrinsic role in the educational mobility of SC students which comprises the factors such as socio-political location, socio-cultural components of the students, institutional mission, academic and management structures, institutional receptivity means to support and responsiveness of the institution towards any discrimination. It shows that institutional setting alone can have a positive or negative effect on the experiences of Dalit students.

A study “Does Affirmative Action Work? Caste, Gender, College Quality, and Academic Success in India” was conducted to assess whether the affirmative policies regarding admission are beneficial for the beneficiaries i.e., disadvantaged sections and women or not. The result shows that these policies have a positive impact on their inclusion in higher education institutions but in terms of pre-college preparation, college participation, and college academic performance, the disadvantaged section especially women of this section stand far behind the upper caste individuals (Bagde et al., 2019).

A chapter named “Critical Exploration of the Quota System Policy and related social justice issues” in the book titled “Faces of Discrimination in Higher Education in India: Quota Policy, Social Justice, and the Dalits” (Ovichegan, 2015) argued that the existing quota-based reservation policies, an affirmative action taken by the government for uplifting the marginalised section of the society is not as effective as it should be because it does not incorporate the cultural context of the Indian society that resulted into the injustice; and its implementation process remain un-scrutinized due to which there is an existence of malpractices regarding filling of Dalit seats.

In an article named “Cracking the Egg: Which Came First- Stigma or Affirmative Action?”, (Onwuachi-Willig et al., 2008) attempted to comparatively analyse the internal and external stigma students face in different race-based affirmative and non-affirmative action public law institutions. The result shows that there is no variation in the level of internal stigma and the effect of external stigma students face in both types of institutions as well as internal stigma does not induce much harm in these students. They concluded the study by saying that affirmative action is not a threat to their growth and inclusion rather it acts as a booster of their inclusion.

### **Narratives of Respondents**

This research has collected the narrative of a few Dalit and non-Dalit women on their experiences and perceptions of an affirmative action policy through an interview from a central university named the Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University of Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. Based on questions interviewed by respondents, the data can be categorised into five different themes.

The first question which was asked to the respondents was to know their views on the reservation system. It focuses on analysing whether their opinion varies or not on how they perceive the reservation system based on their caste identity. Three out of four women agreed irrespective of their caste association that the reservation system is meant for the inclusion, better representation, and upliftment of the marginalised section. They all have the same view that the status of the disadvantaged section of society gets enhanced by positive discrimination as it helps them access the basic resources that were inevitable for their existence and to get desirable jobs. There was one non-reserved student who showed her discontentment towards the basis of the reservation system i.e., caste and argues that it should be on an economic basis.

Then, we proceed to ask a question on their experiences related to the reservation system in higher education institutions in which there seem to be discrepancies in the way both Dalit and non-Dalit women experience reservation in a higher education institution. A respondent named AK shared that, “there is some sort of prejudice that non-reserved category students carry with themselves towards reserved one of having less capability than them. She also claimed that the university administration has a pattern of

limiting the reserved category students to their category only in admission or in any competitive function.” Another Dalit student AD argued that she experienced hostility from the non-beneficiaries of the reservation system because unreserved category students perceived them as they were snatching their seats. On the other hand, an unreserved category woman named SM said that she doesn’t have any experience related to reservation and prefers not to speak on it while another woman from the same group RS argued that the reservation system tends to stop students from exploring their full potential by killing their motivation to excel in a field as they can get desirable result at a lower merit. She concluded her answer by saying, “I feel discriminated against when an individual of the same economic background gets admission to an institution because of their caste but the other individual cannot because he or she belongs to the general category. Hence, it should be based on economic background.”

The third issue is to know the perception of women from two different caste category groups towards those who avail reservation. It is noted that there is uniformity among the respondents irrespective of their caste about the problem of creamy layer in a reservation. They all argued that there are specific caste groups whose representation is more within the social category as they are much aware and privileged enough to benefit from the reservation policy of the Indian government. However, a general respondent RS was completely against caste-based reservation while favouring economic-based reservation.

The next question which was asked by the respondents was whether they see affirmative action as a means to uplift the status of the disadvantaged social groups to whom the government granted it. It can be seen that there is uniformity in the perception of the respondents irrespective of their social groups that it is helpful in the upliftment of the disadvantaged sections but the problem of the creamy layer within these groups should be tackled by the government to ensure equality and provide social justice to those who were historically marginalised.

The last question which was asked by these respondents was their views on the reservation for women. All the women irrespective of their caste were in favour of reservation for women. Dalit women who were already getting a benefit of reservation policy based on caste favour reservation for women with the argument that women were the most marginalised of all as they were oppressed and dominated irrespective of their caste group by the opposite gender which devoid them of many opportunities. They continued by saying that Dalit women are mostly doubly-triply burdened by the structure of the society which makes them among the most vulnerable of all sections of women and withered their chances of enhancing their social status. General women SM also favour reservation for women by arguing that they were completely neglected by the government despite always being at a loss in comparison to men but the other respondent from the same group RS was against women’s reservation and favours economic-based reservation.

### **Analysis of Dalit and Non-Dalit Women**

Reservation has always been a bone of contention between those who avail of it and those who do not as well as among those who avail it on the problem of creamy layer. It is an initiative of a government to redress the issue of discrimination and exclusion of historically marginalised sections by reserving a fixed percentage of seats in public education and jobs for meeting the needs of equity to ensure social justice. This reservation system carried with itself a certain level of stigma for the students who avail it of being incompetent and less meritorious than those who were not entitled to avail of it. While analysing the

narratives of respondents we came to know that the initiative of the government of India to ensure equality of opportunity in higher education by introducing affirmative action policy which is a reservation system to attain equity and ensure social justice is partially successful as the narratives of the respondents reflected the same.

The present study is conducted on a university campus that supports and promotes the upliftment of the population who hails from the SC-ST social category by reserving 50% of seats in admission for them (BBAU, 2021) which signifies its pro-inclusive approach but it seems that their special efforts made for the inclusion of these sections went in vain. The experiences of Dalit women in this university setting are not that much creditable rather it is just reaffirming the results of several studies published on this issue despite the institution having progressive provisions towards handling the deeply entrenched caste inequality. Hence, there is no significant difference in the way Dalit women experience and perceive affirmative action policy in this higher education institution that caters to their needs and ideology in comparison to other higher education institutions. It is visible that Dalit women's experiences in higher education institutions are continuously affected by their caste identity. They often experience caste-based discrimination and prejudices associated with availing reservation policy of being incompetent.

The experiences of Dalit and non-Dalit women vary as they both experience a reservation policy from their respective caste identities. Dalit women often experience prejudice of being less capable and hostility from non-reserved category students whereas women of unreserved category either are unaware of any such experience related to reservation policy or show their disapproval for the caste-based reservation while voicing their support for economic-based reservation. Both Dalit and unreserved category women mention the problem of the creamy layer and also of women being the most vulnerable of all which signifies an urgent need to implement a quota within quota in the reservation system and resolve the issue of the creamy layer which will make the reservation system more effective. Policymakers should consider several factors such as caste, class, gender, etc. that devoid the marginalised social group from accessing basic resources in society as well as other factors.

Narratives of Dalit women show that they used to face the animosity of their unreserved category peer group for coming from a particular section of society and availing reservation in a university setting. This signifies that an institution is not free of society despite being structured upon modern values like rationality, unbiasedness, equality, etc., rather its functionality is purely dependent upon the dominant values that exist in a given society. Hence, the administration should be secretive about disclosing the caste identity of a candidate which to an extent will become successful in minimising the discrimination, humiliation, and exclusion they face in a university setting from their teachers, peer groups, or administration.

## Conclusion

It is visible from the data that women of both groups agreed on the view that it helps in the inclusion and upliftment of the historically marginalised groups but the women having Dalit identity share the stigma and hostility it carries off with being a beneficiary of the reservation system from their peers who belong to upper caste category and this get reflected in the answer of a general woman who ardently rejected the reservation based on caste and supported it on an economic basis. This hostility becomes a reason for

caste-based grouping in a classroom which acts as a barrier to their inclusion in a university setting (Kumar, 2021) and also hampers their growth as it hampers the confidence of the beneficiaries of reservation policy leading to the having low self-worth (Deshpande, 2019).

There are students from both categories who raise the issue of the creamy layer with the argument that the benefit of reservation policy often reaches the upper-class individuals of the marginalised section only, generating inequality within and across social caste groups (Weisskopf, 2004). The government should modify the reservation policy to ensure equal representation of all classes of disadvantaged social groups to increase its effectiveness in the inclusion of the excluded.

The implementation of the reservation system in higher education institutions is not being properly executed as a respondent shows her discontent towards the culture of limiting the category students to their category only by cutting off her marks in the interview despite being qualified in written exams among the toppers in the mentioned institution. The problem of lack of vigilance in assessing the proper implementation of reservation while doing admission is rampant in the institution which can act as one of the biggest hurdles in giving social justice to the disadvantaged section of the group (Ovichegan, 2015). Hence, the initiative of the government is partially successful in giving social justice to disadvantaged sections with affirmative action because it does not incorporate the deep-rooted structural factor that becomes a major factor in experiencing discrimination within a university campus.

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