

Impact of Lockdown on the Education of Dalit Community Students of West Bengal

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Abstract: *Dalit community members had been the age old prays of upper caste community members. Even after several attempts made by the Government in the recent times, Dalit community members had been suffering humiliation and injustice on a daily basis. In fact it could be said that, there had been no similarity in the existence and treatment of the Dalit community member as compared with the so called elite upper class members of the society. For this reason there had been constant struggle in the history of Dalit community members for proper right and treatment from other upper class community members of the Indian society. The struggle for equality and justice could also be seen in the educational field also. There had been cases of humiliation and injustice on Dalit students for getting admission in an educational institute or job through reservation. For several decades Dalit community students had been struggling hard to find their footing amidst the upper class students. In such circumstances, the appearance of Covid-19 and the consequent lockdown impacted heavily upon the lives, and educational upliftment of these Dalit community students. It had been a fact that majority of the Dalit families had been surviving below poverty line and to survive in such auspicious circumstances they needed help from the government. As the majority of the Dalit community members of West Bengal are daily wagers, they found it tough to survive in such a lockdown period. Being penny less they could not even afford the bare essentials and amenities, and in such a condition attending online classes or giving online exams proved very auspicious for several students belonging from Dalit communities of West Bengal. As a consequence of the inability to meet the demand of the situation, many a dalit community student suffered great amount of anxiety and helplessness. Their education hampered severely as opposed to the members of the wealthy class who had sufficient amount of resources to meet the demand of the hour. As a consequence of such peculiar circumstances, Dalit community students are struggling behind, unable to catch the forward running train of education through electronic gadgets.*

Keywords: struggle for existence, uncertainty, difficulty, auspicious circumstances, inability, degradation of educational growth, suffering

1. Introduction

Dalit community members had been living a difficult life because of the rigid caste system. From the Vedic age to the contemporary days several aspects and opportunities had been barred to the Dalit community members. In fact these lower strata of people, once considered outcaste had been bereft of normal life and activities. One of the most crucial aspects of human life, namely education, had been snatched away from them in the pre-modern days. These community members were not allowed to learn and educate themselves. Because, the upper caste considered and knew that education or in other words enlightenment would harm their position in the hierarchy of caste system. But, after the independence of India, many things started to change significantly for these community members. From the 1950's onward, the Dalit people, started to enjoy the new sun shine, as they could enjoy freedom and individual rights according to the constitution of India. Their rise in educational field started slowly and developed steadily throughout decades. But the appearance of Covid-19 and its consequent lockdown impacted their steady growth into the educational field. The introduction of lockdown resulted in a sudden country wise stoppage of all activities including education. Several educational institutions, across India and also in West Bengal were closed to combat the spread of novel Corona Virus. In this particular situation, education for the dalit community students, along with every other community member students took a pause and hampered all the educational activities. But, a closer look into the situation would prove that, the dalit community members, later came to be known as Scheduled Caste, suffered more than the upper caste and wealthy families. The have-nots of West

Bengal would not have survived the wrath and fatality of the situation if they were not helped out by government interventions and several helping hands. But it was a undeniable fact that, Scheduled Caste students and their families could barely survive on the minimal essentials. And in this particular situation affording electronic gadgets such as Smartphone, laptop, desktop seemed to be a too harsh a dream to be fulfilled. As a consequence, attending online classes and giving exams proved to be a hectic and nightmarish task for these students. They lagged behind; where as the students belonging from a well to do family was not hampered in his or her study in such a degree.

This article under discussion primarily intends to highlight the existing circumstances of education after the lockdown in India to combat the spread of the novel Corona Virus. This article would also point out key issues regarding the educational development of the dalit community students. This article would also put focus on the major issues which the Scheduled Caste students faced during the lockdown. This particular article would be also important for revealing the unintended injustice to the Scheduled Caste students in the academic field during the lockdown circumstances. This article would also reveal the existing disparity between the students from varied backgrounds. And lastly the article would also show that, how the lockdown would impact on the admission and job opportunities for the scheduled caste students. This present article also intends to deal with the unforeseen circumstances that would occur in the near about future academic progress for the scheduled caste students.

It had been a undeniable fact that the scheduled caste students always find themselves at the wrong footing in the

academic field because of their belonging from a lower strata of society. The intelligence and intellectual capabilities of the dalit students had been underrated since the foremost appearance of the dalit community members in the educational fields. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was the most notable figure and had been continuing to be an inspiration in the dalit students' academic field, because of his towering achievements even after belonging from a low caste community. It would be also worthwhile to mention that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was the prime figure behind the accession of the outcastes in the educational arena amidst the upper caste community students enjoying all sorts of possible instruments and ways for developing their intelligence and educational prowess. The dalit community students struggled in the initial stages to compete with the higher caste wealthy students. However, being deprived of the facilities and opportunities, the dalit community students showed tremendous amount of courage and intelligence in order to survive amidst the upper class bunch of students.

It needed to be mentioned that, it was perhaps the conspiracy of the Brahmins of the Vedic ages who denied, the outcastes and even the caste lower in the hierarchy of caste system, the authority to read and understand scriptures and religious texts in order to sustain their primacy and authority over the other lower caste. In **Annihilation of Caste**, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar mentioned that, nowhere in the scriptures it was written that the scriptures and religious texts was bound only to the Brahmins, who were considered heaven born and progeny of Gods, whereas the lower strata of people or the outcaste people was considered as devil born. It was primarily in the religious **Manu** text, for which there had been a misunderstanding between the castes. Ambedkar mentioned that, according to the scriptures it was stated that caste was to be decided upon the **guna** (abilities) of the peoples and nowhere it was stated that caste would be decided by birth. Rather caste was to be decided according to the virtues and abilities of a human being and not by birth. But the clever Brahmins misinterpreted the religious texts and scriptures for their own profit and authority. And this particular fact was perhaps well known to the Brahmins. For this particular reason they denied the reading of such scriptures to the lower strata of people. Thus, it was a fact that the upper caste Brahmins and later on the other upper caste in the hierarchy of caste system, had been trying to deny the dalit community members the opportunity to educate themselves. Because to educate one would mean getting enlightened about his or her surroundings and this would prove to be dangerous for the upper caste members of the society to maintain authority over these peoples.

Ambedkar's writings and thoughts proved to be too logical to avoid and since then, particularly after the independence of India, the dalit community members were intended to be given equal rights and advantages. Ambedkar broke the notion of inheritance, in simpler terms, he stated that Brahmin born child should not be considered as Brahmins if that child did not possess all the abilities, skills and virtues of a Brahmin. Likewise, a chamar's son would not and should not necessarily become a chamar because he was borne as a chamar. Thus the law of inheritance in the caste system was well debated and destroyed by Ambedkar in the early 1950's. And after the introduction of the Indian constitution each

and every people, notwithstanding their social status, would enjoy equal rights and freedom. And a couple of decades later the term **Dalit**, came to be considered as a humiliating term was altered into Schedule caste. And around the 1970's, these dalit community students or the scheduled caste students started to get equal educational rights and they found themselves in the mainstream educational atmosphere in India.

Thus, the history of the dalit existence suggested that, dalit community students or the scheduled caste students' active academic participation's history had not even been a century long. These Scheduled Caste students only started to appear in the educational foreground only after the 1960's but not without difficulty. In the initial stages, many a institution did not grant admission to these students as they belonged from a lower strata of society. And most of the students' families being associated with unsophisticated and dirty occupations, such as cleaning, sweeping, washing clothes, shoe cleaners, leather workers and every other dirty tasks, which promoted untouchability and the upper caste students maintained distance and humiliated them for their origin and family background. However, the upsurge of the dalit community students went through such a phase of turmoil and caste hatred. But even after that, many a student of dalit community could not attain a place for themselves because of the disparity in competition. And to combat such peculiar outcome, the government of India introduced reservation for such backward community students. The reservation policy helped tremendously in getting more students admitted to several streams and educational courses across India. However, the reservation policy had been continuing to be a debatable issue since its introduction in the education and job opportunities. Keeping aside the debatable aspects of reservation policies, it helped tremendously in the growth of the scheduled caste students' education. More opportunities resulted in much more participation and enrollment, which consequently resulted in the greater number of participation and competition with the upper caste well to do families students.

In the previous couple of decades the rate of dalit literacy in India soared higher and higher like a skylark in the academics and several other fields as a consequence of growing rate of literacy. In the present day there are many dalit community members working in several section of the society and in almost all the available posts, either a private post or Government post. But, it needed to be mentioned that this efficient dalit employees are few in numbers as compared with the population rate of the dalit communities across India and also in the state West Bengal. In several economical and social surveys it was found that, the state West Bengal has been lagging behind in the economical and educational upliftment of the dalit community members. If we compare the academic achievement of the dalit community students in West Bengal with the other developed and developing states of India, we will come across a unsatisfactory account of dalit communities improvement in the educational and consequently in the economical field also. States of southern India and states like Maharashtra has been witnessing a rapid increase in the academic achievement of dalit students as compared with the state West Bengal. The non-improvement of the existing

academic infrastructure and also the major economic underdevelopment may well be the primary reason behind such a condition. However, in the last decade there has been a constant effort from the government to encourage the dalit community members of West Bengal to participate in greater numbers in the academic activities. Several schemes have been introduced to encourage the active participation of Scheduled Caste students to educational field. Schemes such as providing free books, clothes, meals and even monetary fellowship and scholarships have been given to the scheduled caste students for educational purposes.

Thus, it becomes an undeniable fact that in the recent decade there has been a constant upsurge into the active academic participation of the dalit community students. There has been much improvement in the enrollment number and the number of scheduled caste students taking admission to several branches of education is only increasing day by day. But the appearance of Covid-19 and its consequent lockdown derailed the ebb of the scheduled caste students upsurge in the academic fields. The introduction of country wide lockdown meant that all the educational institution along with every other place of social activities was brought down to a sudden halt in order to combat with the novel Corona virus. The complete pause in educational activities went about for few months and in those months peoples were struggling to survive and sustain their lives. In this auspicious occasion, the education of not only the scheduled caste students but also of the upper caste students belonging from a wealthy family, hampered equally. The stoppage of classes and educational institution resulted in a slight stoppage of the dalit community students' upsurge in the educational field.

But a detailed study and survey of the existence of dalit community members at the time of lockdown and its aftermath will show that, the dalit peoples were devastated by the introduction of the Covid-19 pandemic. Suffering for food, daily necessities, jobs and difficulty in earning money brought about a pandemonium in the lives of the have-nots. And in this particular situation, the continuity of education and its expenses seemed unimaginable. It needed to be mentioned that, the upper caste wealthy families survived the wrath of Covid-19 with minimal damage to their status and other activities. But the daily wagers and the poor's suffered immensely. It would be also worthwhile to mention that, the recovery rate of the upper caste or well to do families would have no comparison with the recovery rate of the dalit community students. Being detached from the mainstream traditional education system for several months because of lockdown, the dalit community students will found it hard to get into the normalcy at a quick rate of speed and efficiency. The introduction of online classes only furthers the woes of such students who cannot even afford to buy costly electronic gadgets such as Smart phones, laptops and desktops. Inability to purchase these things and meet the need of the hour would prove very much harmful for this community's development and growth in society.

It had been also a fact that, several places in West Bengal are so remote and the distance of such remote villages with the main city make it only tougher for the government to reach them. In several places, many a dalit community

member cannot even afford the bare minimum maintenance bill for electricity. And the network coverage in those remote areas is very week in comparison to a proper main town society. In such a condition, where the bare minimum electricity bill becomes an issue, in such families purchasing an electronic gadget will seem to be a distant dream. In such a condition, where many of the dalit families are deprived of the economic resources, meeting the demand of the situation becomes nightmarish for such students. Apparently it has been also a fact that many of the dalit community students of rural areas are still unaccustomed with electronic media and gadgets. They are unable to operate such devices and in such particular circumstances online classes and online exams prove to be too ominous for such students. However, it needs to be mentioned that, life and activities cannot be paused for a very long time, it has to continue running and the social mobility is important for human survival and development of the society. For this reason, lockdown eased with time but the educational institution of West Bengal are still to be reopened. But it will reopen eventually at a point of time but by that time damage would be done to the improvement of dalit community students because of their inefficiency to accommodate themselves with the present moment.

In several districts of West Bengal, dalit community members are living in a scattered and unevenly manner. It needed to be mentioned that there are 60 different dalit communities in West Bengal. As regards the numerical strength, Dalits of West Bengal can be divided into six different classes, as presented below in the table,¹

Population Size	Communities	Number
Above 100,000	Rajbanshi, Namasudra, Bagdi Pod, Bauri, Chamar, Jalia Kaibartta, Hari, Dhoba, Sunri (Excluding Saha), Dom, Jhalo Malo, Lohar, Mal, Kaora Tiyar, Generic Castes, Paliya, Bhuiya, Khaira, Konai	21
Above 50,000 to 100,000	Rajwar, Kandra, Bhumali, Keot, Dosadh, Nuniya, Bind, Mallah	8
Above 25,000 to 50,000	Kami(Nepali), Turi, Karenga, Patni, Mahar, Pasi, Kadar, Kotal, Pan	9
Above 10,000 to 25,000	Musahar, Gonrhi, Damai (Nepali), Ghasi, Bhogta, Koch, Baiti, Kaur, Sarki (Nepali)	9
Above 1000 to 10,000	Khatik, Chaupal, Behelia, Doai, Konwar, Beldar, Nat, Halalkhor	8
Below 1000	Kurariar, Bantar, Lalbegi, Kanjar, Dabgar	5
Total		60

This community members and students are suffering tremendous amount of anxiety and suffering because of the uncertainty of their educational progress. The state government of West Bengal has been trying hard to bring solace and tranquility amidst these students by wavering the form fill up fees, examination fees and several other fees to lessen the burden of economic pressure over the poor families. It needed to be mentioned that, not only the Covid-19 pandemic but also the impact of Amphan cyclone devastated several places of West Bengal, specifically the

¹Kumar Rana, *Problems and Prospects of Dalit Emancipation in West Bengal*, Contemporary Voice of Dalit 1(2), 167-180, 2008.

coastal areas. And this double blow of natural hazard impacted severely on the lives and activities of dalit peoples along with several other castes community members also.

Thus, the educational progress struggled in the Covid-19 pandemic situation and hampered the upsurge of dalit students in the educational fields. The hard fought achievement of equal rights and consequently educational rights proved fruitful with severe struggle and hardships. Many a student of dalit community are rising in the academic fields, and giving a tough fight back and competition to the so called upper caste community students and the students of well to do families. But the introduction of Covid-19 pandemic and consequent lockdown disturbed the continuous upsurge for this sort of students belonging from poor backgrounds. The set back that the present situation brought into their lives will need a good amount of time to recover and regain the previous momentum. Because of their inability to catch up with the technologically advanced students from well to do upper caste families, the dalit students are lagging behind and performance dropped significantly as a consequence. The government and also the dalit community members are helpless in this particular situation. However, the setback of the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequent impact resulted as a backward stretch for this particular students under consideration. It can only be the unfortunate lot of this peoples that can be blamed in this particular situation for their inability to fight out of this unforeseen circumstances. However, it needed to be mentioned that, the government should come with a better plan of action to maintain equality and bring justice in the educational field, so that no disparity gets entertained. To conclude on the discussion regarding the impact of Covid-19 and its consequent lockdown to the students of dalit community of West Bengal, it may be said that, the existing conditions of online education does not seem favorable and does not do justice to equality in terms of opportunities. And for this reason it might be said that, there is a different need altogether in the current situation to combat this particular peculiar circumstances. And the government should introduce equal parameters for all the students so that not a single student remains disadvantaged. And we may encounter situations like this in the near about future and to combat such situations in a well balanced manner, the government of India and also the respective state governments should also come up with better plan of actions to minimize the damage and growth of the society.

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