Aspirations for Higher Education among Mahadalit Students and Strategies for Overcoming Urban Marginalities in India

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Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to understand the aspirations of first-generation learners for higher education and overcoming urban marginalisation in Indian higher education. It also aims to understand how students from the most disadvantaged social group, mahadalit, overcome their marginalities in accessing and obtaining higher education. Access and equity in higher education have been important goals for Indian policymakers and planners. The study, which is qualitative in nature and uses the ethnography method, provides a deep and nuanced understanding of the aspirations for higher education and Strategies for Overcoming Urban Marginalities among the mahadalit students in Bihar, India. Various educational and equalising programs focusing on disadvantaged groups have created aspirations among first-generation and marginalised learners like Mahadalit students. These mahadalit students are also from non-urban backgrounds and come to cities for higher education. In pursuing higher education, these students face social and economic marginality in

their villages, schooling, and urban marginality. They use their social networks to find space at the transformative Dr B. R. Ambedkar hostel, which helps them sustain their higher education in the city. The Dr B. R. Ambedkar hostel becomes the site of educational and career aspirations for the mahadalit students in Bihar, India.

Keywords: Aspiration; marginalities; higher education; first generation learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Entangling Aspirations and Higher Education

A variety of studies have explored opportunities for mobility through higher education. This section deals with aspiration in general and for higher education in particular. Aspiration, in simplistic terms, has been defined as a (strong) desire to achieve something high or great in future concerning employment, higher(education), recognition, wealth, dignity and power in terms of their relative positions depending upon one's or groups' place in their socio-economic hierarchies in the system. It has been highlighted that Aspirations are future-oriented goals where individuals, families and group members invest time and money with their own social and cultural capital. For Sherowood Jr. [1] aspirations have two distinctive aspects. These two aspects are as follows: first, aspirations are future-oriented, which may be satisfied in the future, and second, aspirations are motivators under which individuals are willing to invest time, effort, and money to attain them.[1]

Appadurai [2] recognises aspirations from the domain of culture. For him, aspirations form parts of broader ethical and metaphysical ideas derived from more significant cultural norms. He provides the cultural dimension of aspiration. Aspirations are never simply individual. They are always formed in interaction and the thick of social life.[2] For Appadurai, the capacity to aspire is navigational. Further, Appadurai emphasises that the capacity to aspire conceived as a navigational capacity nurtured by the possibility of real-world conjectures and refutations compounds the ambivalent compliance of many subaltern populations with the cultural regimes surrounding them. According to Appadurai, aspirations are relatively evenly held, and having

particular desires for the future is not exclusive to more affluent and influential groups [2]. For Appadurai, the problem is not aspiration but people's navigational capacity.

Exploring the notion of aspiration as a cultural capacity rather than an individual motivational trait enables the effects of the unequal distribution of social, cultural and economic capital on the capacity to aspire to be considered[3]. Writing on 'The capacity to aspire to higher education', Bok, J. [3] has drawn Appadurai's notion of the 'capacity to aspire', where the author has reframed aspiration as a cultural category rather than an individual motivational trait. Bok, J. [3] further uses Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, which provides a means for thinking about the relationship between economic and cultural spheres. Bourdieu describes how economic capital enables certain practices and experiences and is translated into embodied dispositions and capacities, i.e. cultural forms of capital over time. This process can affect how people can negotiate particular social spaces, such as the field of education, in different ways [4][4] in general and higher education in particular—combining more significant cultural and economic capital makes the field of study of aspirations much broader concerning higher education.

Sellar and Gale [5] define aspiration in a broader sense in Australian contexts. They define aspiration as "the capacity to imagine futures".[5] The authors conceived aspiration as comprised of six interrelated concepts: social imagination, taste, status, desire, possibility, sociocultural navigation, and resources[6]. In their study, the

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[1] *Sherwood Jr, R. A. (1989). A Conceptual Framework for the Study of Aspirations. Research in Rural Education, 6(2), 61-66.*
[2] *Appadurai, A. (2004). The capacity to aspire. Culture and public action, 59-84.*

[3] *Bok, J. (2010). The capacity to aspire to higher education: 'It's like making them do a play without a script'. Critical studies in education, 51(2), 163-178.*
[4] *Sweeney, C. (2002). The case for developing social capital in schools. Critical Pedagogy Networker, 15(2), 1–11.*
[5] *Sellar, S., Gale, T., & Parker, S. (2011). Appreciating aspirations in Australian higher education. Cambridge journal of education, 41(1), 37-52.*
[6] *Gale, T., Parker, S., Rodd, P., Stratton, G., & Sealey, T. (2013). Student aspirations for higher education in Central Queensland: A survey of school students' navigational capacities.*

authors viewed these six concepts concerning the understanding of aspirations in general and how they contribute to a sense of students' aspirations for higher education in particular. Taylor defines Social Imaginary as how people imagine their social existence (p.23, 2004). [7] Social imaginary refers to how "people imagine their collective social life" (Gaonkar 2002, p. 10 as cited in Gale et al., [6]. According to Gale et al. [6] students' aspirations for higher education are influenced by their perception of their social status and how they think they fit in with others. In his theory of taste and status, Bourdieu defined them in three ways, i.e., a person's preference for one thing over another is never simply an expression of individual whim, and they are always informed by the cultural norms associated with particular social classes. The second taste is a claim to status among all possible preferences. Third, goods and practices are considered tasteful when they contribute to attaining or maintaining dominant social positions (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 466, as cited in Gale et al., [6]. Similarly, students' aspirations reveal their future preferences, like higher education, a job or life itself. Aspirations of the students for higher education or employment reflect their whole socio-cultural about the imagined future good, practices and social positions [6]. Historically, the Indian government's effort to increase enrolment in higher education with equitable access to its disadvantaged group through positive discrimination is a well-established fact. India adopted the world's most extensive favourable discrimination policy. Under the Indian policy of positive discrimination, the underrepresented group was given representation according to the proportion of the population. The policy of positive discrimination has immensely helped the underrepresented groups fulfil their aspirations for higher education and jobs. However, the aspirations for higher education amongst the most disadvantaged groups still need much wider attention regarding access and participation in higher education in the context of urban marginalities.

1.2 Higher Education Aspirations and Marginalities: Indian Context

People from disadvantaged backgrounds cannot successfully navigate from where they are to where they want to be if they are attempting to navigate pathways outside their experience or the experience of their sociocultural group [6]. However, in Indian contexts, most Dalits and Mahadalit students are first-generation higher-education learners. Navigational capacity to have a smooth transition from schooling to higher education becomes difficult due to structural constraints. Their material conditions constrain the navigational capacity of Dalit and Mahadalit students, such as access to land and proper quality schooling, lack of confidence in the English language, having family members in higher education and socio-cultural and economic capital. The presence of someone in the family or relatives who have previously attended the college and university helps these students immensely in access to higher education as they provide proper information and advice about the college, institutions or university, and of subjects which broadens the horizon of a student's capacity to navigate from schooling to a particular higher education institution, college or university courses. The policy of positive discrimination has enabled the underrepresented groups to make a presence in higher education and make their voice heard; however, the policy of positive discrimination has its limitations. It pays little attention to the changing aspirations of groups like Mahadalits, who have been entirely out of higher education. In his Idea of Justice, Sen [7] provides examples from Sanskrit script on ethics and jurisprudence, i.e., nit and 'Nyaya'. These words denote justice in Sanskrit, though both differ as 'the term 'niti' is organisational propriety and behavioural correctness, and in contrast, the term '*nyaya'* stands for a comprehensive concept of realised justice. The roles of institutions, rules and organisations must be assessed from the broader and more inclusive perspective of '*nyaya*' [7][8] It becomes essential to understand the aspirations in the realised sense of how the students from most disadvantaged groups can aspire for higher education and how those aspirations are realised in higher education in the actual sense in terms of freedom to choose which these students value. Massification in Indian higher education [8] has created new aspirations and possibilities for students from non-traditional classes, castes and genders who have traditionally been unable to access higher education. The following section deals mainly with Marginalities, aspirations and higher education.

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[7] Taylor, C. (2004). *Modern social imaginaries. Duke University Press.*

[8] Sen, A. K. (2009). *The idea of justice. Harvard University Press.*

1.3 Marginalisation in Indian Higher Education

Marginalisation is a process that denies the opportunities to individuals and social groups to effectively participate in social, economic, and political life in general and higher education in particular. Scholars believe that marginalisation in Indian society is built into its social structure, and higher education institutions only perpetuate it further. In the Indian context, marginality and marginalisation take place or revolve around institutions that subordinate, discriminate, deprive, and exploit certain groups based on their identities like caste, class, religion, gender, tribe, ethnicity and disability. The caste system as an institution has been explored in several studies; however, caste as a marginalised category in urban spheres in higher education has been unexplored in Indian contexts. Higher education has a multifaceted role. It is widely accepted that higher education has the potential to bring social transformation in society; hence, it has a transformative character for the individual, society and nation. The current section deals with the process of marginalisation that takes place in the Indian higher education system through discrimination, social exclusion and, hence, social injustice. According to Kumar [9] discrimination, exclusion, and humiliation are built into the structure of curriculum and pedagogy, that is, the way the curriculum is framed and the way it is taught.[9] It is believed that Indian Upper caste urban males dominate higher education in India, and the marginalisation of underrepresented groups like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and Women are inherent in its character. Marginalisation with these groups occurs in every sphere of life, and higher education also carries it forward. In his study, Singh [10] has categorised four primary areas of discrimination faced by students from Dalit and Adivasi backgrounds in higher education. These four areas are the social and economic environment before entering higher education, teachers' attitudes and actions, and the exclusion from peers and administrative staff. He has found that students from Dalit and Adivasi social backgrounds face rampant discrimination by almost all the stakeholders in the higher education institutions[10] in each sphere of higher education, either in covert or overt ways. Similarly, in the study, Sukumar finds that Dalit students experience marginalisation and humiliation in higher education from the admission process to its completion in every sphere of higher education, including in hostels[11]. A Study conducted by Sabharwal and Malish [11] based on a large-scale survey of 3,200 students, interviews with 200 faculty members, and 70 focus group discussions with students in higher education institutions across provinces of India reveals that students from disadvantaged socially excluded groups (SCs, STs, and OBCs) are still facing discrimination and prejudice in higher education due to their social identity.[12] It has been found that student composition in higher education institutions has wholly changed; however, the composition of teachers in higher education institutions has not changed as per the changes in the composition of students. It is essential to find that discrimination continues in post-university experiences with students from Scheduled castes and minorities. Tilak, in his study, finds that among inequalities between different groups of the population, inequalities by economic levels of households are higher than inequalities by other characteristics of population gender, caste, religion and region. He further shows that disparities by gender, caste/religion, and between rural and urban areas are decreasing, and inequalities by economic levels do not show such a decreasing trend. They are widening over several points of time [12][13] The Study conducted by Thorat and Attwell [13] reveals that marginalisation and exclusion of Scheduled Castes and Minorities are widely rampant in even so-called modern private enterprises in the Indian Economy.[14]

2. Method and the Research Setting

This study mainly uses qualitative data collected in the Gaya Districts of Bihar. Gaya District in

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[9] Kumar, V. (2016). Discrimination on campuses of higher learning: A perspective from below. *Economic and Political Weekly, 51(6), 12-15.*

[10] *Singh, A. K. (2013). Defying the odds: The triumphs and tragedies of Dalit and Adivasi students in higher education. In Beyond Inclusion (pp. 186-216). Routledge India.*
[11] *Sukumar, N. (2013). Quota's children: The perils of getting educated. In Beyond Inclusion (pp. 217-233). Routledge India.*
[12] *Sabharwal, N. S., & Malish, C. M. (2017). Student Diversity and Challenges of Inclusion in Higher Education in India. International Higher Education, (91), 25-27.*
[13] *Tilak, J. B. (2015). How inclusive is higher education in India?. Social Change, 45(2), 185-223.*
[14] *Thorat, S., & Attewell, P. (2007). The legacy of social exclusion: A correspondence study of job discrimination in India. Economic and Political Weekly, 4141-4145.*

Bihar has been selected for the current study. The Gaya district has two essential characteristics. The district has more than 30% of the Scheduled Castes population, and secondly, the district has been selected as an aspirational district by the government of India. Qualitative information was collected from a Scheduled Caste student in general and sub-group students within the SCs called 'Mahadalits' who are in higher education using Ethnographic methods, including in-depth individual interviews and observations for a year with regular intervals. The current paper discusses the trajectories of Mahadalit students' aspirations for higher education and their marginalisation in urban space in accessing higher education. Ethnographic methods help understand the phenomenon in natural settings as they have foundations in empiricism and naturalism [14][15].

Higher education institutions are concentrated in urban and suburban spaces; however, most Mahadalit students come from different sub-urban locations and are predominantly from rural backgrounds. This paper revolves around students' experiences in negotiation with their aspirations, urban marginalisation and access to higher education, the role of Dr B. R. Ambedkar Hostel in fulfilling their aspirations and how these students from Mahadalit groups form their aspirations for higher education and the future. The study covers multiple sites of higher education. Due to the small sample size, the study's findings cannot be generalised in larger contexts; however, it shows much more profound insights and everyday life experiences of marginalities and aspirations of the students from the Mahadalit community in Bihar and their navigation into higher education [15,16].

2.1 Findings

2.1.1 Aspirations for higher education and marginalities in the city

The emergence of sub-urban Aspirations leads to massification in Indian higher education. It is also important to note that these new sub-urban aspirations are formed among India's relatively disadvantaged social groups who have been traditionally not able to access education in general and higher education in particular. These students have been trapped in the vicious circle of marginalisation and exclusion due to their actual social and economic positions. Research shows that the navigation capacity to enter higher education depends upon their immediate linkage with economic, social, gender and cultural resources. The Navigational capacity is thus different for different social groups with varied access to these resources. Aspiration for higher education meets hurdles for individuals and families, such as their ability to attain qualifying marks for admission into higher education and their ability to migrate to the city and spend. Resilience to sustain in the city is also an essential navigational capacity for higher education. An individual's ability to find the rooms and pay for them in the town is not decided by the individual alone, as the present study finds. It goes beyond their ability to determine how the landlords perceive their identity in giving them room on rent or not. Individuals' caste identity might compromise their ability to decide what things they have reason to value. Hence, identity becomes one of the essential navigational capacities for individuals and groups in caste-ridden societies, apart from other reasons. Most students from rural areas of higher education face challenges finding room/space in the city, as shared by most students. Most of these students are from landless families, as shared by most of the students. The lack of social and cultural capital, as well as space itself, makes these students' lives challenging in the city. Higher education institutions have limited hostel spaces and are allotted based on merits. Those with better rank or marks in the board examination get the hostel. However, meritocratic principles are limited for students from the most disadvantaged social categories like Mahadalits. Reservation policy does have provisions to differentiate between the rural and urban students, and hence, rural students from the Mahadalit community face doubly disadvantages. One is the lack of recognition of a relatively disadvantageous position under the favourable discrimination policy, and the other is not getting the different advantages in terms of colleges and university hostels. In such a condition, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's hostel becomes a hope for the students from Mahadalit students. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Hostel is located on the outskirts of the city [17].

The hostel provides space for more than 800 students in different buildings on the same campus. It combines old and new buildings. The new building is named after former Deputy Commissioner Mr. K. P. Ramaiyah, who was influential in constructing it. One section of an old building is abandoned; however, students

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[15] *Hammersley M, Atkinson P. 2007. Ethnography: Principles in practice. 3rd ed. London: Taylor & Francis.*

still live in it despite the danger of collapsing [18].

Dr B. R. Ambedkar Hostel is a place of formation and reformation of aspirations of students from the Dalit category in general and Mahadalit in particular. Due to this hostel, thousands of students have completed their higher education and fulfilled their schooling aspirations. It is the only public space where students live with dignity and security. They feel bad when people call it Harijan Hostel now; however, earlier, it was not the case, as shared by the students. This is because of the politicisation of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's thoughts and ideas among the students at the hostel. Students like this hostel to be called Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Hostel, not Harijan Hostel. The students run several study groups in the hostel for the various competitive examinations. Sometimes, these groups are caste specific and occasionally mixed. The success of one student motivates others [19,20].

2.1.2 The genesis of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar hostel

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Hostel is the oldest Hostel in Bihar, and it was established in 1952, immediately after the adoption of the Indian Constitution. It is the oldest building in the area. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar hostel was built for the Scheduled caste and Tribes students. It has a long legacy of having great alumni networks in different social and political domains who regularly visit the hostel. Foremost among the student alums is the former Bihar Chief Minister (CM), Mr Jitan Ram Manjhi. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar hostel is a place of formation and reformation of aspirations of students from Scheduled Caste (SC) in general and Mahadalit in particular. Thousands of students have completed their higher education and fulfilled their schooling aspirations due to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar hostel. It is the only public space where students live with dignity and security. Students feel better at a hostel than at home. Students feel bad when people call it Harijan hostel; however, earlier, it was not the case, as shared by the students. This is because of the politicisation of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's thoughts and the clarity of his ideas among the students at the hostel. Students like this hostel to be called Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Hostel, not the Harijan Hostel. Ambedkar Hostel is where students from rural and sub-urban settlements come for their social mobility through higher education. The students run several study groups in the hostel for the various competitive

examinations. Sometimes, these groups are caste specific and occasionally mixed. These study groups are the backbone for the intellectual development of the students [21].

2.1.3 Hostel Infrastructure of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar hostel

Hostel infrastructure is the first entry point from where we can see the creation of an inferior and even sub-human space for children of the lowest social castes. It is observed that the hostel is one of the oldest buildings in the area, adjacent to Gaya Jail. It is interesting to note how these two constructions were done at their earlier stage. The hostel combines old and new buildings. The old building has three buildings. One building was built for the girls, and the other two buildings were made for the boys. The girls' section of the old building is abandoned; however, male students still live there despite the danger of collapsing. However, girls have never lived in a hostel. It has become a highly masculine-gendered space. The new building is under former Deputy Commissioner Mr. K. P. Ramaiyah, who was essential in constructing it. Mr Ramaiyah played an instrumental role in removing the stigma of the hostel through regular visits and interventions due to his deep interest in the upliftment of Scheduled Castes. Broken boundaries, hanging electric wires, dirty toilets, open bathrooms and dilapidated buildings do not present the first impression of the space where the world's most disadvantaged students are living. Approximately 8-10 students live in sub-human conditions in every room [22].

2.1.4 Ownership of Dr B. R. Ambedkar hostel

The district welfare officer has been formally in charge of the Dr B R Hostel. The welfare department of the state and district welfare department decides the rules and regulations of the hostel. To live in the city for higher education, the only Ambedkar hostel is a place for the Mahadalit students. It is interesting to observe that the District welfare officer is incharge of the hostel; however, he is not an educational authority. The district welfare officer runs the hostel with the co-ordination of 'Chhatra Nayak,' an elected hostel head among the students. 'Chhatra Nayak' is the intermediary between the students and the district welfare department. The district welfare officer rarely visits the hostel, as shared by the students. 'Chhatra Nayak' has become an important person on the hostel premises. He handles most of the internal issues [23].

2.1.5 Dr B. R. Ambedkar Hostel as aspirational space

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar hostel is the oldest place in the city for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes students. It has a long legacy of having great alumni networks in different social and political domains. These alumni regularly visit the hostel. Foremost among the student alums is former Bihar Chief Minister (CM) Mr Jitan Ram Manjhi. He periodically visits the hostel. According to Students,

> *Whenever Manjhi Ji visits the hostel, he sits with us, eats with us, and shares his experiences from the hostel days. We had many expectations from him, and they are due to him. We hoped he would do something good for the hostel and us.*

One of the alums shared that this hostel has produced several bank officers, police sub-inspectors, bank clerks, railway employees, army men, paramilitary forces, and other government departments. This is the most sought-after place among the scheduled castes students and their parents. It is also a safe place to live. Students get one bed and a chair from the welfare department. It is also free. Students have nothing to pay for the room. Students are not charged for the hostel, and it gives immense relief to the rural students who cannot find and afford accommodation in the city, as shared by many students. Various study circles run in hostel rooms to prepare for general competitive examinations. Most of the students are involved in it. Students focus more on the competitive class than their graduation or post-graduation subject. The lack of teaching and learning processes in colleges and universities has also played a role. It also perpetuates inequality and injustices as students are not able to realise their careers in higher education. Pursuing higher education also requires time and opportunity costs. Getting entry into railway groups -D exam becomes the most obvious choice for most students. In recent years, the aspirations of the students have gone beyond railways to other examinations.

3. Access to Ambedkar Hostel and Social Networks

Living in the city for education is costly, and students have to live there due to their daily coaching classes and other educational activities. It requires their/parental ability to pay for the rent and other costs in the city. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Hostel provides space to those students who are enrolled in any institution and are pursuing their education from 11th standard onwards to all the levels of higher education based on the availability of seats. Getting a room at Ambedkar Hostel is very difficult as it is in high demand. Access to a hostel also depends upon the individuals of the social network in their caste or within the scheduled castes. The caste network plays a vital role in access to the hostel. Social networking means having relations with students or former students living in hostels and higher education institutions. It is observed that relations with Chhatra Nayak are vital as he manages the hostel's internal affairs. Students from the same caste of Chhatra Nayak have a great chance of getting a room at the hostel. Chhatra Nayak generally belongs to the caste with the most students in the hostel. It perpetuates the inequality in access to Ambedkar Hostel and maintains dominance of one or two caste students in the hostel. Here, several matters regarding having their own caste students' networks or sometimes being outside of the caste networks. Students' experiences show the navigation into the city and higher education concerning Dr. B. R. Ambedkar hostel and how it worked as a navigational site and habitus for the students from Mahadalit social group into higher education. Student A is a first-year PG Student from the Ravidas community. He is pursuing his post-graduation in History and wants to become a professor in the college/university. He came to the city for his intermediate after completing 10th. Due to the second division, he could not get admission to Gaya College and took admission to A M College under the reserved category student. There was no hostel in his college, and it was difficult for him to stay in the city, so he returned to his home after admission. Student A shared that:

> *I could not sustain my studies, and there were living costs in the city. Later, I met one of the students who was living at the Dr. B. R. Ambedkar hostel. He helped me find space in the Dr. B. R. Ambedkar hostel, and I immediately shifted to the hostel. I discovered that the Hostel was very crowded. Sometimes, more than ten students were living in one room. It was always a disturbing environment for me and my education, and it took time for me to adjust to the hostel. Later, I joined a study group, which hostel students ran for competitive examinations. I completed my*

Intermediate and graduation simultaneously from the Dr. B. R. Ambedkar hostel. It was only possible for me to pursue my education with Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's hostel.

Student B is a final-year graduate student in the science department and wants to become a teacher in a government school. He belongs to one of Bihar's most deprived social groups, Mushahar. It is said that Mushahars are traditionally rat eaters due to acute poverty among them, and they are still usually trapped in agriculture as labourers. His parents are an agricultural labourer in the village. After his 10th result, he could not move to the city due to financial constraints. According to Student B:

I am the son of an agricultural labourer, and my parents have no regular income. However, they work on other farms to sustain the family. It took much work for them to spend money on my education, although they wanted to teach me. Their inability to pay for my education was due to their landlessness, poverty and regular employment. As in agriculture, they do not get to work every day. I was regularly exploring the ways through which I could continue my education. I came in contact with relative in my village, who was doing his graduation. He is not from my community, but he is known to me. I came to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's hostel with his help only. Now, I am in the final year of my graduation, and after that, I plan to do a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) to become a teacher in a government school. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Hostel has played a vital role in continuing my higher education.

3.1 Division Within and Outsiders' Perspectives

Caste works as a real identity rather than a group identity in every sphere of everyday life. Scheduled Castes have been accepted as a homogenous category within the policy framework and at institutional levels in implementing the policy of positive discrimination. Each caste student uses their caste network access to information about the colleges and courses to access the hostel. Paswan students, including leadership within the hostel, dominate the hostel. Due to the large number of students from the Paswan community in a hostel, there are fewer spaces for students from other castes to lead the activity. However,

the dominance of Paswan students is not unchallenged. Ravidas students constitute the second majority caste after the Paswan. Students from the Ravidas community have established networks with local leaders to balance the power with Paswan students. As discussed earlier, the number matters not only in terms of the caste population but also in terms of the number of higher education institutions. It was observed that many students had issues in their everyday life at the hostel. Number matters in the internal process of election of the hostel 'Chhatra Nayak', the everyday decision-making process at the hostel related to the welfare of the hostel, having a dialogue with other different stakeholders like district welfare officers, administrative officers in colleges and universities, local political leaders. The number is also essential in understanding who convenes the meeting at the hostel, who participates in decision making, who makes the decision, who sets the agenda at the hostel, whose voices are included and heard, whose leaders are celebrated and whose not.

Despite having the largest population of Mushahars in the district, students from this community are the most marginalised. Even the former chief minister and alums of the hostel are not role models for other dominant caste group students within scheduled castes. Due to the low numbers of students from the Mushshar caste, these students are voiceless and leaderless. Several studies find the internal differences in Scheduled Caste across the vertical and horizontal hierarchies. Mahadalit students are trapped in layers of hierarchies and simultaneously marginalised and excluded.

The outside world believes the Ambedkar hostel is a contested place. According to a faculty member of a prominent college in the district, this hostel nurtures criminals. Police raids are a regular phenomenon. Broader society sees the Ambedkar Hostel as the Harijan Hostel. However, teachers from disadvantaged groups avoid visiting this place. Even the information related to scholarships or admission in UGC-sponsored classes needs to be communicated to Ambedkar Hostel, which accommodates more than 800 students.

3.2 Emerging Collective Consciousness

In recent years, the collective identity of Dalits among students has emerged. As mentioned earlier, it is a caste of the individual which is the

primary identity in everyday practices. Recent changes in the government's policy, like the closure of post-matric scholarship, have united these students to fight for it as a common interest of all the students. The matric scholarship issue has united students across the Ambedkar hostel in Bihar. Students from Ambedkar Hostel have protested several times in the state capital for their scholarship; however, they have gone unheard. The state government has implemented the Student Credit Card Schemes for all the students. Other incidents which have also played an essential role in uniting these students are the attacks on Ambedkar hostels in several districts by the upper castes as well as by the Yadav. Dr B R Ambedkar is god for most students from different castes within the Scheduled Caste, bringing collective consciousness among the students.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Enrolment expansion in the Indian Higher Education sector has created new challenges for higher education institutions, students, teachers and other stakeholders. Most students from underrepresented groups like Mahadalit are entering higher education, and these students are generally first-generation learners. Favourable discrimination policies have helped the under-represented groups fulfil their aspirations of access to higher education in a limited way. Policies have helped few only in terms of access to higher education; however, policies had larger aims in terms of recognising the role of education in general and higher education in particular as the great instrument of social emancipation by which a democracy establishes, maintains and protects the spirit of equality among its members. The Indian state has strengthened the capacity of its under-represented group to exercise their voices in social, economic, political and educational spaces in general and higher education spaces in particular, and students have also succeeded in fulfilling their aspirations through their collective social life, however, in limited ways. Simultaneously, there has been continuous apprehension about whether the policy is benefiting the few and hence reproducing existing social inequality and injustice in general and within SC in particular because it has been found that those who have higher levels of social capital, economic capital and cultural capital required for higher education are more inclined to maintain it and continue to expand their social, economic, cultural and political capital over time.

Dalit students in general and Mahadalit students in particular experience multi-layered marginalities and exclusion in higher education in Bihar, India. Socio-economic marginality and its impact on access to higher education have been researched extensively. New rising suburban aspirations are encountered with constraints in migrating to the cities for higher education. Migration for higher education to the cities requires substantive preparation. Sub-urban aspirations of Mahadalit students and urban marginality interplay in many ways. Their identity influences individuals' ability to find a room to rent in the first stage and secondly in their ability to pay the rent on time. Dr B. R. Ambedkar's Hostel has been such a place in Bihar that it is fluffing the dreams and aspirations of the students from these marginalised communities. Urban marginalities have been contested and negotiated by creating various social, cultural and political networks at the Dr. B. R. Ambedkar hostel in Bihar. It has proved to be a space where students from under-representation groups form and reform their aspirations through participation in higher education and the larger political, social and cultural milieu. "There are conflict and hierarchy within the Dalits, and it is an alternative to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's idea of the associated mode of living.

The present study can explain that despite having the limited socioeconomic means required for higher education, these Mahadalit students have been able to access higher education. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Hostel is a habitus and navigational space for these students. Most of these higher-education students had an individual who shaped them and acted as a mentor or role model in accessing higher education. It was the brothers and not their parents in most cases who were able to act as a change agent in accessing higher education and participation, and they were able to break the cycle of social reproduction that has persisted among Mahadalit students. The current study can explore how social capital and social networks play a significant role in accessing Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's hostel and navigating through higher education for the Mahadalits students.

Urban marginalities in higher education have been less explored in Indian higher education research. Apart from socio-economic, political, and cultural marginality, the current study looked at the issue of sub-urban aspirations and urban marginality and how individuals from marginalised communities overcome their

marginalities and access, participate in, and sustain higher education. In conclusion, the state needs to strengthen the capacity of people with low incomes to exercise "voice," to debate, contest, and for collective social life as they wish, and it must engage social, political, and economic issues. However, Sen goes further in saying that the **S**tate has to strengthen the capabilities of people to realise what they value. This becomes more important for deprived communities in the Indian context. The student's abilities can be enhanced by public policy, which can fulfil the aspirations of marginal groups. More hostel infrastructure can be built in higher education, in particular, to overcome the urban marginalities of these students. Public policies need to expand the freedom and opportunities of the students from Mahadalit communities so that they can aspire and realise their aspirations in ways they want. The denial of access to housing in the city is often the deprivation from which many students from Dalit and mahadalit social backgrounds suffer in the urban spaces and restricts their freedom to pursue their higher education.

CONSENT

The participants' consent was considered after a detailed discussion with participants for ethical reasons for participating in the research.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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