CONFRONTING THE PANDEMIC

RESPONSE AND RECOVERY FOR DALIT AND ADIVASI STUDENTS

NCDHR
DALIT ARTHIK
ADHIKAR ANDOLAN

Dalit Rights are Human Rights - Cast out Caste

Description of cover page: Dalit Youth from Rajamala Village, Idukki District of Kerala walk 6KM through forests to reach this spot at Eravikulam National Park to access Online Classes.

Contents

List Of Abbreviations

AISHE	All India Survey on Higher Education
ASHA	Accredited Social Health Activist
AWST	Allocation for Welfare of Scheduled Tribes
BE	Budget Estimates
CAG	Comptroller and Auditor General
CLO	Civil Liberty Organization
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DAAA	Dalit Arthik Adhikar Andolan
DHE	Department of Higher Education
FCRA	Foreign Contributions Regulation Act
FY	Financial Year
GoI	Government of India
HE	Higher Education
IBP	International Budget Partnership
IIT	Indian Institute of Technology
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex
MBC	Most Backward Classes
MSJE	Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment
NCDHR	National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSSO	National Sample Survey Office
OBC	Other Backward Classes
PMO	Prime Minister's Office
PMS	Post Matric Scholarship
PVTG	Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group

PwD	Persons with Disabilities
RE	Revised Estimate
RPwD	Rights of Persons with Disabilities
SASY	Social Awareness Society for Youths
SC	Scheduled Castes
SCP	Special Component Plan
ST	Scheduled Tribes
Trans	Transgender
TSP	Tribal Sub-Plan
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UT	Union Territory

Foreword

The continuing denial of higher education for the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe students in India epitomizes the caste-based mindset and biases prevalent among all the sections in our society and demands a multi-pronged action plan as a nation. I am greatly encouraged by **NCDHR-Dalit Arthik Adhikar Andolan** for bringing this piece of work highlighting the gaps and challenges faced by the students during the Covid crisis towards strengthening access to government scholarship by SC and ST students.

Promotion of higher education is a necessary stepping stone for expanding the opportunities and avenues for social mobility for the Scheduled Caste (SCs) and Scheduled Tribe (STs) students. Access to scholarships has played a critical role when it comes to representation of Dalit and Adivasi students in higher education. Various studies and government data clearly indicate that lack of financial resources is one of the main reasons why Dalit and Adivasi girls and boys are either not able to enter into the institutions of higher education or they have to drop out in the middle of their studies because they are unable to pay the prescribed fees and educational expenses. In order to address this serious issue of Dalit Adivasi exclusion from higher education institutions, over the years, the government had initiated scholarships programmes for Dalit Adivasi students from economically weaker background at various levels. These scholarships paly a very critical role in terms of facilitating the access to higher education for SC and ST students.

The Post Matric Scholarship (PMS) Scheme for Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe students is one the oldest schemes since 1944 and was a dream scheme of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar to ensure education justice to the communities through financial support. This scheme covers more than 60 lakh students belonging to the poorest of the poor students across country, whose annual income falls below Rs 2.50 lakhs. However even after so many years of its implementation SC/ST students are not able to fully gain the benefits from this scholarship programme. The scheme is under-resourced and is fraught with systemic and fiscal challenges.

In order for SC/ST students to fully realize the potential and the transformational impacts of the PMS, not only are there greater investments in the scheme needed, the design of and systems for how the PMS scholarships are delivered must be reviewed and overhauled. Additionally, the pandemic and lockdown has exposed these students to massive challenge of accessing online classes and learning modules. It has deepened the already existing inequalities for those with already poor access to capital, resources and skill. The Covid19 situation and the lockdown has disproportionately impacted the vulnerable communities

who are migrant and daily wage workers. They have lost their daily employment and income. Many of the families are already exhibiting increased poverty, increased hunger and stress, including violence in the families. There is great possibility of students dropping out, or getting engaged into some manual labor especially for the ones availing higher education. There is a great danger of increased education inequality in this context.

This report brings to fore the implementation of the Post Matric Scholarship scheme across the states and understand the barriers faced by the students in accessing the scheme. This study provides the ground realities faced by SC and ST students in accessing higher education especially during COVID-19. The work is also appreciated for building a platform in engaging with the government authorities and agencies, giving a status of implementation of the PMS on the ground and gives a valuable set of recommendations to move forward.

I am greatly encouraged by the work put together by **NCDHR- Dalit Arthik Adhikar** Andolan for empowering SC/ST students and facilitating the need of the students to drive the processes for ensuring that the PMS deliver the promise of transforming their lives. I sincerely hope that this impetus will lead to changes for the community on the ground, predominantly for the SC/ST students accessing higher education.

Prof Sukhdev Thorat
Former Chairperson UGC
ICCSR Chair

Preface

India has a history of oppression against the marginalized sections particularly Dalits and Adivasis and within these the people with disabilities and transgender people. Caste can be seen as the institution that has been structured and maintained for centuries the relation of power among different communities and seeks to legitimize these power relations through systematically dispensing mixes of economic and cultural assets/opportunities and deprivations to different communities. Historically, there have been numerous struggles and steps taken towards assuring to end the deprivation and systemic discrimination however, even during this present day, the situation remains intact and unchanged and the further marginalisation of these sections continue.

The Government of India's approach to historically marginalized groups draws on provisions made in the Indian Constitution, which contains explicit state obligation towards protecting and promoting social, economic, political, and cultural rights of the marginalised sections of society. Dr.Ambedkar emphasized on Dalit-Adivasi rights with particular emphasis on educational rights. Substantial reduction in the education budget over the past five years has reduced allocations for scholarships given to students from marginalised communities, affecting their ability to stay in the education system. The Post Matric Scholarship, started in 1944 by Dr. Ambedkar, is one of the oldest academic upliftment schemes for Dalit students post-class 10th. The post-Matric scholarship scheme was nearly shut down as the central government has been providing only 11% of funding since 2017, prompting many states to discontinue it. Due to this scheme, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (higher education) among the SCs has increased from six per cent in 2002-03 23.4 percent in 2019. The schemes provided to SCs and STs face a major challenge in their implementation. When the country is already going through its tough days during the pandemic, access to online education is a privilege that poor Dalit Adivasi students cannot afford. According to Standing Committee On Social Justice And Empowerment (2019-20), the post-matric scholarship scheme for SC students saw a decrease in the number of beneficiaries from 5.8 million in 2016-'17 to 3.3 million in 2018-'19, a 43% reduction.

The dropout rate of SC ST students has been rapidly increasing so there is an absolute dire need for the government to make efforts in mapping out the difficulties that students face in their academics. Despite relaxations and reservations, the rate of SC/STs constantly declining in a worrisome manner. One of the major reasons behind this decline is the societal norms and discrimination that revolves around caste. Most of the parents of the students belonging to poor Dalit households are involved in menial tasks which are considered unclean. So the only

way forward for them is to get an education and this can only be achieved by receiving a scholarship.

This being the situation during normal times is not different during the pandemic, caste based discrimination continued unabated and minimum attention was given to the difficulties faced by SC-ST students. With colleges having to shut down and classes moving to the online mode of education was the major barrier. Unavailability of devices, be it smart phones or computers or poor to no network connections, the struggles seemed to be endless. They dealt with enormous physical and mental health crises as their families lost jobs and stayed at home during the lockdown. But the government also decided to stop transferring funds to the students accounts thereby paralysing the student community from all the sides. The students were left surprised and unable to cope with this situation. Stories of distress labour, students finding alternative ways to earn a livelihood to make ends meet and trying to cope with the situation became the order of the day.

The **Dalit Arthik Adhikar Andolan (DAAA)**,

NCDHR has been working on the ground to enable students to access higher education but also on the policy level to bridge the gaps that exist in the implementation of one of the most critical and largest development scheme the Post Matric Scholarship (PMS). Through their efforts over the last 5 years they have been able to ensure atleast one lakh students direct access to PMS. Once again seeing the plight of many students hanging in the air, DAAA-NCDHR has conducted the study of the situation of Dalit and Adivasi students during the pandemic. Their constant efforts make me hopeful of the future for the marginalised section. The fight for social justice and a discrimination-free society is tough but not impossible. The team working at NCDHR-DAAA encourages so many of us to hope for a society that Babasaheb envisioned.

Jai Bhim and Johar,

Mr N Paul Divakar
Chairperson, Asia Dalit Rights Forum
Chair, Global Forum of Communities
Discriminated on Work and Descent

Message From Dalit Arthik Adhikar Andolan (DAAA)

Dalit and Adivasi community constitutes 25% of the population according to 2011 census. However, it continues to be a community that faces social inequality and often finds itself deprived even in the area of economic development. 36.8% of Dalits and 47.3% Adivasis are living below the poverty line. On the one hand, it is perhaps the only society that relegates a certain section of the society to inequality and margins, devoid of human rights, dignity of labour and social equality. On the contrary, it takes pride in being the largest democracy in the world and guaranteeing to its people equality. India is a hierarchical society and the socio-economic inequality is only widening. During the pandemic, the worst affected sections were Dalits and Adivasis who lost jobs, houses, migrated back to native places, walked thousands of miles without food and water, and in fact died on the roads too. This condition of SC ST citizens is not new but centuries old. The students especially, face enormous difficulties in continuing their education, if only they are able to enrol with the least privileges they have. Alienation, social exclusion, and physical abuse transcend all levels of education, from primary education to university. Illiteracy and drop-out rates among Dalits are very high due to a number of social and non-social factors. Structural discrimination and abuse are something that Dalit-Adivasi extremely normalized to the point that stigmatised students end up dropping out.

In our research over the years, we found out that it is not only the fellow students but the faculty as well who endorse such behaviour by participating in caste practices. Discrimination is often used as a weapon by the dominant castes against Dalits to keep them away from education and maintain the hierarchy and power relations. There is a clear lack of assistance from the school and university administration also and the classroom is segregated on the basis of caste. Dalit students are forced to sit in the corners of the class room or in the back rows. Moreover, the knowledge provided within the curriculum is also dominant caste-driven. The Dalit history is totally erased out of mainstream syllabus. Dalit students thus face tangible and intangible ways of social exclusions during their school days to that of higher education. The social and economic upliftment schemes run by the government have failed miserably at the grass-root level.

The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown have reproduced the same exclusion and discrimination faced by the Dalit and Adivasi communities for centuries. In such a backdrop, **NCDHR-DAAA** is bringing out this study focusing on the impact of covid on Dalit and Adivasi students in accessing higher education across the 6 states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Orissa & UP! The study attempts to give an account of the challenges faced by the Dalit and Adivasi students during the pandemic in terms of availing online classes, accessing the government scholarships and most importantly the livelihood challenges faced

by the students during this critical time.

The study findings point out the significant gaps that persist in our education system for addressing the existing inequalities during this pandemic and making it more inclusive. It underscores the situation prevailing for the students from the marginalised communities while also addressing the questions of digital divide faced by these students and lack of resources widening the existing gaps between the dominant caste and the marginalised communities. The present study looks closely at the issues and service delivery gaps faced by the Dalit and Adivasi students in accessing government scholarships particularly Post Matric Scholarship. The study also puts forward strong recommendations that the government should adopt to ensure that the future and aspirations of the Dalit and Adivasi youth are not compromised as the result of the pandemic and the lockdown.

I would like to acknowledge and thank Juno Varghese for anchoring this study, Catherine Rhea for shaping the narrative, Adikanda Singh, Dnyaneshwar Shejwal, Rashmi Beck, Manish Kumar, & Dolly Paswan for the excellent data analysis and giving life to the numbers, Bhanu Priya and Anjali Rai for their contribution in writing this report and Dr Ramesh Nathan, Kuldeep Baudh, Rihana Mansuri, Chittibabu Penki, Mithilesh Kumar, Tapan Nayak, Dharamdev Paswan, Nandini Nayak & Durai Pandi for their ever so ready spirit and resilience for leading us and building a strong movement on the ground, I am ever indebted to this team and their efforts without whom this report would not have been possible. A big shout out to the 240 volunteers who themselves are students and were going through these tough times while doing this survey, gratitude to you and may each of you fly high to achieve your dreams. Special thanks to Aroh Akunth, Ekta and Riri for your inputs to the study. I would like to thank **Mr. N Paul Divakar, (Chairperson, Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent)** for his support and constant inspiration to drive us to think outside the box, his role in shaping and building this was critical to the study. Finally, the study is only a tiny piece of our contribution to the real heroes, the Dalit and Adivasi students who challenge and fight every day to ensure that they access higher education following the principles laid down by Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar to Educate Organise Agitate! Accessing Higher Education will be one step towards ensuring Social Justice!

We at **NCDHR-DAAA** really hope that this report will facilitate deeper engagement with the multi stakeholders, state and non-state actors working in this sphere in the coming days. We would be grateful for your feedback on this report as well as suggestions on how together we can make the education system inclusive for the students from the marginalised communities.

Jai Bhim & Johar!

Beena J Pallical
General Secretary
National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights
(NCDHR)
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Executive Summary

"Education is something which ought to be brought within the reach of everyone… the policy therefore ought to be to make higher education as cheap to the lower classes as it can possibly be made. If all these communities are to be brought to the level of equality, then the only remedy is to adopt the principle of equality and to give favoured treatment to those who are below level."

- Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

The promotion of higher education is a necessary stepping stone to expand the opportunities and avenues for social mobility for Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) students. With better educational opportunities, SC/ST students are more likely, and able, to reduce the gap between themselves and other socially-advanced groups. AISHE[1] data clearly indicates that lack of financial resources is one of the main reasons why Dalit and Adivasi girls and boys are either unable to enter institutions of higher education or are forced to drop out in the middle of their studies. Besides their own limited ability to pay fees and meet educational expenses, they struggle to access available scholarships.

The Government of India has instituted several schemes and programmes to promote higher education among SC/ST students. The Post Matric Scholarship (PMS) scheme is the largest available scholarship. PMS provides financial assistance at the post-matriculation or post-secondary stage to enable students to complete their education. In addition to covering basic tuition, PMS offers a maintenance allowance, reimbursements for non-refundable compulsory fees charged by institutions, book-bank facility and other charges.

However, the PMS is fraught with systemic and fiscal challenges. The scheme is poorly designed, opaque in its operations, unaccountable, and suffers from a shortage of funds. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the higher education sector, which is one of the critical pathways to reduce the economic gap between marginalised communities and dominant groups. Government entitlements become even more important for students from marginalised communities to realise their right to education. COVID-19 has increased the existing disparity in access to education, and will do so further. It has exposed students from these communities to many more challenges like poor access to digital infrastructure, lack of financial resources and space, lack of livelihood opportunities and social protection. The pandemic has pushed many students towards informal employment, increasing their vulnerability.

The National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR)-Dalit Adhikar Andolan (DAAA) initiated a survey-based study to identify the challenges faced by Dalit and Adivasi students in accessing higher education during the COVID crisis and subsequent lockdown. The study covered 10,190 students from marginalised communities across six states. Findings from the study indicate that COVID-19 forced students to prioritise survival over studies.

22% of all Scheduled Caste respondents and 29% of all Scheduled Tribe students were forced to take up employment during the COVID pandemic. Women constituted 21% of them.

1   All India Statistics on Higher Education, 2018-19, MHRD

> **During the lockdown, students were unable to access hostel facilities, further putting them at risk. Of the total SC/ST hostellers surveyed, 61% of SC students and 68% of ST students didn't receive any relaxation in paying their hostel fees during the pandemic.**

1. Even before the pandemic, about 15% of students surveyed (1,551 in absolute terms) were doing part-time work to either pay for their education or to contribute to household earnings.

2. Understandably, most respondents who said they were working part-time along with their studies were from lower-income households. About 17% reported the annual income of their household was between Rs 0 and 20,000, and 16% said it was between Rs 20,000 and 40,000.

3. 22% of all SC respondents and 29% of all ST students were forced to take up employment during COVID. Women constituted 21% of them. Here, 48%[2] of them have taken up manual labour in the COVID period.

4. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a large proportion of SC/ST students who applied for PMS are first-generation entrants into academia, with limited access to information about the scheme and accessing its entitlements. About 32% of students[3] were not availing any scholarship due to a lack of awareness about the scholarship and the process of availing it.

5. About 31% of the total surveyed students didn't receive scholarship in the past 1 year, with women constituting 47% of them.

6. Online education has been a big challenge for students from marginalised communities. Given the huge digital divide, 51% of surveyed students[4] couldn't access online classes due to unavailability of smartphone/laptop and 22% students didn't have access to an internet facility in villages.

7. During the lockdown, students were unable to access hostel facilities, further putting them at risk. They were not even allowed any relaxation in paying their hostel fees. Of the total SC/ST hostellers surveyed, 61% of SC students and 68% of ST students didn't receive any relaxation in paying their hostel fees during the pandemic.

Using the results of the study as a foundation for advocacy, NCDHR hopes to improve awareness about the PMS scheme and access to it; enhance the effectiveness and accountability of the systems through which it is distributed; and advocate for an increase in resources and their accountability. Through the study, NCDHR aims to advocate proper and timely implementation of the PMS scheme, especially during the COVID-19 crisis, increase accessibility of online classes, and meet the immediate need to ensure financial and livelihood support for SC/ST students.

An important lever to increase access to government entitlements is the budgetary allocation to higher education schemes, particularly PMS. In spite of growing demand from SC/ST beneficiaries across the country, the PMS has faced continuous budgetary cuts. Demand for Central Assistance (CA) under the scheme, made by states and Union Territories (UTs) to the Union Government, has not been met, year after year since 2012-13. This mismatch has resulted in accumulation of arrears. The government has failed

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2   Not based on total respondents – 395 respondents explained the nature of work that they took up due to pandemic.
3   The percentage is calculated out of the 1720 students who responded to the question
4   The percentage is calculated out of the 594 students who responded to the question

In 1944-45, there were 114 scholarships for SC students. As of 2019, more than 3 million students avail of financial aid under the scheme.

to address the issue to adequately allocate for the scheme and work towards its better implementation.

Over the last six decades, the reservation policy for SC/ST students has given rise to serious backlash, open animosity, and even further oppression by dominant castes. For SC/ST students to fully realise the potential transformational impacts of the PMS, greater investments in the scheme are needed. Further, the design and systems used for delivery of PMS require a serious overhaul and must be reviewed. The PMS is a programme that aims to empower SC/ST students. These students need to be trained and motivated to drive the processes that will ensure the PMS delivers on the promise of transforming their lives.

The study also points to the caste hegemony and patriarchal structures that continually stoke the embers of inter-generational poverty and systemic deprivation of the Dalit and Adivasi communities, especially in India. These establishments not only control social institutions, but also exert their influence over the political-economy that inform government policies and programmes. Decades after the abolition of untouchability, a majority of Dalits are still marginalised, denied opportunities, and forced into dehumanising jobs. A large section of the 'broken people', as Bhimrao Ambedkar called them, continue to be left behind due to serious gaps in the implementation of policies and programmes.

ⓘ Introduction

The arrival of the complex and virulent COVID-19 virus in March 2020 led to chaos and confusion on a global scale. It has decidedly altered the way we live and engage with society and our surroundings. In India, the outcomes were deeply varied and starkly unequal, as one might expect. While most people were held hostage in their homes, adapting to new technology tools, work from home, and digital learning, millions were without a job, food, shelter, healthcare, or money, and forced into a long walk home. The crisis has also given way to mental anguish, including stress, anxiety, fear, anger, depression, and in many cases, suicidal thoughts, especially among students.

The education sector has faced enormous challenges since the lockdown. In response, institutions have introduced remote learning and the use of online learning modules and television. For several students from underprivileged backgrounds, this was a new barrier in a system that was already fraught with discrepancies and discrimination, especially for those from poorer families.

The mental health of students without access to these facilities is of great concern. In what is possibly the first case of COVID-19-related student suicide, a bright and gifted 15-year-old girl without access to a smartphone or television died by suicide as she was unable to attend online classes[5]. According to media reports, the student committed suicide as she was afraid that her academic performance would be affected, she became depressed and took her own life. The girl belonged to the Scheduled Caste (SC) community, highlighting the fault lines in our education system, the wide angle of caste, and the discrimination and disparity that can neither be ignored nor isolated.

This case also highlights the digital divide that exists in India, where access to technology seems like a far-off reality for many from oppressed communities. This comes as no surprise, but when the lockdown was announced and online classes became the norm, the government did not seem to factor the issue of access. Many students from the Dalit, Adivasi, PVTG and trans communities were left looking for ways to cope with the situation, sometimes failing to find solutions.

Since its inception, the PMS scheme has been a ticket out of deprivation for marginalised sections. The scheme is a flagship programme of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, and was initiated even before independence, in 1944. The scheme was administered by the central government directly till 1958-59. In 1959-60, as the demand and applications for scholarships saw a steep rise, it was transferred to states and union territories.

According to the Evaluation and Impact Assessment of Post Matric Scholarship Scheme, 2013, in 1944-45, there were 114 scholarships for SC students. As of 2019, more than 3 million students avail of financial aid under the scheme. The beneficiaries of the scheme are mostly students and parents from minority communities. Around 52% of eligible students are from rural areas and 53% are females. An analysis

> The study also points to the caste hegemony and patriarchal structures that continually stoke the embers of inter-generational poverty and systemic deprivation of the Dalit and Adivasi communities, especially in India.

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5   https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/pune/satara-no-smartphone-to-attend-online-classes-15-year-old-girl-commits-suicide-6653432/

of the socio-economic background of beneficiaries reveals that most of them come from educationally- and economically-disadvantaged families. Parents of more than 85% of students earn less than Rs 85,000 per annum. For 63% beneficiaries, household income does not exceed Rs 60,000 per annum.

Mere awareness of the PMS scheme has had a significant influence on the decision of beneficiaries to pursue higher education. Drawing from all income groups, more than 90% of beneficiaries from all minority communities decided to pursue post-matric level of education because of the information they had about the possibility of availing the PMS scheme. Similarly, 89% of parents reported that the decision to support their children pursuing higher education is also influenced by knowledge of the PMS scheme. If not for the scheme, many students from these communities would not be able to access higher education and dream of a better future. This scheme gave them wings to fly from poverty and reach heights they wanted to achieve.

According to 2011 Census, SCs and Scheduled Tribes (STs) make up 25% of the country's population. But they constitute only 20% of those who are educated. In spite of increased demand, for SCs, the PMS scheme saw a reduction in beneficiaries from 5.8 million in 2016-17 to 3.3 million in 2018-19, a fall of 43%. Budget allocation for the PMS scheme for the ST category has stayed stagnant year after year. Between 2015-16 and 2017-18, the number of post-matric beneficiaries fell from 2.03 million to 1.86 million, an 8% fall.

For academic year 2018-19, 7.3 million new PMS applications and 3.5 million applications for renewal of existing scholarships were received from students belonging to minority communities. Scholarships were disbursed to 2.9 million (40%) of fresh applicants and 2.7 million (77%) of renewal applications. The PMS scheme has suffered in the recent past, caught in a centre-state logjam, and leaving its beneficiaries in a state of limbo. There have been reports of massive irregularities and delays in disbursement. The centre and states are at loggerheads over who should be funding the scholarships according to the new policy.

Besides abysmally low allocations, the scheme is further impaired by delays and backlog of payments.

Data from Census 2011 broadly shows that members of SC/ST communities are moving towards cities to access better education. For them, higher education is necessary to demolish the structural inequalities and discrimination based on work and descent. In the recent past, we have also seen a rise in Dalit assertiveness, like in the aftermath of the tragic suicide of Dalit student Rohit Vemula in January 2016. This case also highlighted the issue of scholarship, where he demand the amount be released to his family. This also brought to the fore challenges in accessing the scheme, be it at the level of college authorities or at the level of policy.

Census 2011 reported an overall increase of 51% in the number of literate persons among SCs between 2001 and 2011, and 59% among STs. In urban areas, during the same period, literacy increased 62% among SCs and 71% among STs. The effective literacy rate is 66% for SCs and 59% for STs, against the national average of 73%. According to the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) Report of the Ministry of Human Resource Development for 2017-18, the total enrolment of students in higher education was 36.6 million. Of this, 14.4% were SC students and 5.2% were ST students.

This report explores the ramifications of COVID-19 not only as a public health crisis but also as a crisis of deep, endemic inequality. It has deepened disparities between the privileged and the underprivileged, and multiplied the barriers that marginalised communities have to navigate to attain equal footing in a society that caters to dominant castes. Discrimination and oppression of minority community students who venture into academia or professional courses is not a new phenomenon. However, preparing an environment that supports them, gives them the confidence to hold their own and take pride in their community, and gives them the necessary tools to change the status quo is of utmost importance in this current phase.

ii Research Questions, Objective, Methodology & Limitations

NCDHR proposes to support the SC/ST student's access to scholarships to complete higher education. It is driven by the firm belief that access to higher education lies at the centre of empowering disenfranchised communities, achieve equality and make transformational shifts. Through the survey, the team sought to understand the means to protect the PMS scheme and monitor specific entitlements to Dalit and Adivasi students through evidence-based advocacy by student leaders. The analysis of the financial package and its implications in the medium- to long-term was also another key area of interest under this study. The study focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on students and the barriers that they are facing in the current scenario.

SC/ST students are encumbered by the effects of caste-based discrimination. Power structures are constantly intersecting in visible and invisible ways at every stage of the delivery chain of the scheme, restricting the individual and collective agency, and social mobility, of students from these communities. The internalised casteism in some cases, even overt prejudice in several cases, of the authorities responsible for the implementation of the PMS scheme have made accessing the scholarship difficult and burdensome. Through this study, NCDHR will support the purpose to understand the ground realities faced by SC and ST students in accessing higher education, especially during COVID-19. This study has been carried out in 6 states: in alphabetical order, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh.

The purpose of this study is to answer four main questions.

- What are the specific challenges faced by SC/ST students in accessing scholarships, particularly PMS, and other facilities like hostel, mess during COVID-19 crisis?

- What are the definite challenges faced by SC/ST students in accessing online classes during the pandemic?

- What are the explicit impacts of COVID-19 on SC/ST students in terms of access to livelihoods and continuation of their education?

- How differently has this pandemic affected the most marginalized groups, namely women, transgenders and persons with disability (PwDs)?

The analyses of these aspects will help draw up a situational analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on SC/ST students from the perspective of education. It would generate the insights needed to suggest corrective policy measures at different levels to reduce the burden of the crisis on students from marginalised communities.

> **According to the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) Report of the Ministry of Human Resource Development for 2017-18, the total enrolment of students in higher education was 36.6 million. Of this, 14.4% were SC students and 5.2% were ST students.**

Structure of the Report

The report is presented in 11 sections. After the introduction, as a context setting, Section II outlines the research questions and objectives, methodology and limitations of the study. Section III puts forward the caste discrimination faced by SC/ST students in educational institutions. COVID-19 and its impact in accessing higher education has been discussed in Section IV. Section V deliberates the status and trends in higher education for SC/ST students. Section VI looks at the pattern of fund allocation and utilisation of PMS, and also reflects on the challenges in its proper implementation. Section VII highlights the study findings and analysis with special reference to the case studies. Section VIII sheds light on the intersectional narratives on access to higher education for SC/ST students. This is followed by recommendations and conclusion.

Methodology

The study design and methodology included an online rapid assessment survey of the sample population (10,190) across the 6 survey states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh. There was also an effort to raise awareness about the same via visual and print media in the form of case stories, blogs and videos.

The rapid assessment survey covered 10,190 respondents across 6 states. For conducting the study, 240 student SC/ST volunteers were identified (40 SC/ST students from each designated state). These student volunteers have been associated with NCDHR state teams for over a year, continuously engaging on issues pertaining to improper implementation of PMS in their respective states. Additionally, many of these volunteers had also been engaged in several rounds of discussions with nodal departments responsible for implementing PMS at the state level, as well as with officials concerned at the district level.

Inclusiveness and diversity were embedded in the selection of the 40 student volunteers. The mix comprised at least 50% girls, 10% individuals with disabilities, and 15% represented students from the transgender community. These volunteers conducted surveys for almost a month. They were trained to conduct the surveys. They were also made aware of how the PMS scheme works, how approvals were made, how funds were authorised and released, and whom to approach for delays in receipt of entitlements.

In order to have an intersectional perspective, interviews and discussions were also conducted with students from the transgender and PwD community to understand the specific challenges faced by these groups during the COVID-19 crisis. Further, to capture the budgetary allocation, spending and utilisation of PMS, union budget numbers have been analysed at the most disaggregated level for the last four years. The survey findings will also serve as evidence to engage with local media and carry out advocacy at the local level, particularly with the district administration and colleges.

Limitations Of The Study

Given the current political environment, the study is ambitious in its move to advocate for a change in policies and higher allocations for the educational development of SC/ST students. This may be challenging. At present, the government is further reducing the already-inadequate funding for larger social welfare schemes. If the PMS is not

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given priority, it will affect the degree to which the scheme contributes to the ability of SC/ST students to complete their higher education. To address this risk, NCDHR will make efforts to engage and systematically advocate with champions within the system who are willing to engage with relevant government institutions on these issues.

There are also challenges in effectively organising and supporting how SC/ST students exercise their collective agency. Their time beyond coursework is limited. Without scholarships, in the current scenario, they are likely to be working as much as they can to meet their living and other expenses. They will be residents at colleges/universities for a limited number of years, depending on their course.

Designating students as volunteers for this study was a deliberate move to support them via a stipend to continue their studies. The COVID-19 crisis has put many students in a dilemma to continue their education, given the loss of livelihoods and food insecurity induced by the lockdown for thousands of students from marginalised communities. It has been extremely challenging to mobilise resources to support students in need.

Most importantly, by working collectively and receiving training, the agency of SC/ST students would be strengthened, and they would make a concerted attempt to influence access to their PMS entitlements. Additionally, the entire process of the study helped them engage with the other CSOs, CLOs, media and other stakeholders for the rapid assessment survey. One of the biggest challenges throughout the study has been difficulty in accessing student participants from PwD and transgender community. Lack of internet facility at the village level has also been very challenging for collecting data through online platforms.

iii Caste Discrimination In Educational Institutions

Education is one of the cardinal principals of emancipation for Dalit and Adivasi communities. However, there is resistance from dominant forces, as it can be considered a threat to existing power structures. Thus, in their pursuit of higher education, children from Dalit and other minority communities face unspeakable hardships and challenges. Low literacy rates among minority communities reflect the ways in which the school system fails these communities and their children, reorienting one's understanding of caste-based discrimination beyond physical violence and atrocities.

The four main areas of prejudice and discrimination in higher education has been identified in a study titled Defying the Odds: The Triumphs and Tragedies of Dalit and Adivasi students in Higher Education, Singh A.K. in 2013[i] . First, the experiences of prejudice and discrimination before entering higher education. Second, the teachers' actions and attitude. Third, animosity and exclusion from fellow students. Fourth, the apathy and opposition from administrative officials.

It is telling that 99% of Dalit students are enrolled in government schools that lack basic infrastructure, classrooms, teachers and teaching aids[ii]. There is also a notion among teachers, as reported in the 67th session of the Commission on Human Rights, that Dalits are incapable of basic comprehension sans corporal punishment. This leaves them at the receiving end of caning and other demeaning forms of punishment.

Between 1983 and 2000, enrolment rates for Dalit boys increased from 48% to 63%, and that for Dalit girls from an abysmal 16% to 33%[iii]. Lack of financial resources is a significant barrier. Dalit families have a harder time paying for fee-based education than their dominant caste counterparts, who have a relatively higher income. Accessibility is another issue as Dalit homes are situated on the fringes of a village. There are also obvious indicators of discrimination like segregation in the classroom and the provision of midday meals. Dalit students are made to sit on the floor or the last benches, and are fed after dominant caste students have had food. They are also forced to use separate utensils.

All these factors have a bearing on how Dalit students, especially girls, attend school. According to the 2002 India Education Report, school attendance in rural areas between 1993 and 1994 was 64% and 46% for Dalit boys and girls, respectively. By comparison, the attendance figures for boys and girls from dominant castes was 75% and 61%, respectively.

> **Between 1983 and 2000, enrolment rates for Dalit boys increased from 48% to 63%, and that for Dalit girls from an abysmal 16% to 33%iii. Lack of financial resources is a significant barrier.**

i   Singh, A. K. (2013). Defying the odds: The triumphs and tragedies of Dalit and Adivasi students in higher education. In S. Deshpande & U. Zach-arias, Beyond inclusion: The practice of equal access in Indian higher education (pp. 205-221). New Delhi, India: Routledge.

ii   Dynadev Sabale (2017).Issues of Inclusive Education for the Underprivileged Students in India. Educational Quest: An Int. J. of Education and Applied Social Science: Vol. 8, Special Issue, pp. 355-361, June 2017 DOI: 10.5958/2230-7311.2017.00076.9

iii   Fraser, Eric (2010). The Dalits of India: Education and Development

Further, caste bias erodes the confidence of Dalit students and robs them of dignity in schools and institutes of higher education. 'Hidden Apartheid: Caste Discrimination Against India's Untouchables' reports that Dalit enrolment at the graduate, post-graduate and research/professional/PhD levels is abysmally low at 9%, 8% and 3%, respectively.

In 2006, in the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), India's premier medical institute, two first-year Dalit students submitted written complaints to the director. They were facing caste discrimination, and various forms of harassment and intimidation from senior dominant-caste students. The complaints were accompanied by a memorandum signed by 40 students recounting similar incidents.

More recently, in April 2021, a video of a professor at an Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), India's premier engineering institute, abusing Dalit students in her class went viral, to much outrage and little shock[6]. The body of the Dalit student carries the scars of thousands of aggressions and micro-aggressions that occur every day, parables of prejudice against oppressed communities, entrenched and playing out in insidious, sometimes invisible, ways.

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6   The Free Press Journal https://www.freepressjournal.in/viral/bloody-bds-iit-kharagpur-professor-hurls-abuses-at-scst-and-physically-chal-lenged-students-video-goes-viral

iv Covid-19 And Its Impact On Accessing Higher Education

Ensuring access to education for Dalits has been the greatest challenge in diminishing the effects of the caste system. As the world transitions into a knowledge-based economy, this thought holds greater relevance today. Estimates suggest a 10% marginal increase in primary education can reduce income inequality by 5%.

As the COVID-19 health crisis unfolded, and socio-economic systems collapsed around the world, education systems were swift to react and adapt. In order to protect learners and educators, governments shut down schools and other physical learning spaces. According to a UNESCO report, over 320 million students in Indian schools and colleges are adversely affected. The pandemic pushed the world to reinvent to cope with the 'new normal'. It precipitated a tectonic shift in education: from the confines of classrooms to online platforms that enable remote learning.

However, the unequal provision of learning modalities during the lockdown would add to existing inequities in the longer term. A majority of Dalits reside in villages with little or no digital access. According to the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) of 2011, 74% of India's Dalit population resides in rural areas. The pandemic would aggravate the consequences of the prevailing digital divide.

According to 2017 National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) data, only 24% of Indian households have internet access. While this figure is 42% in urban India, it is just 15% in rural India, becoming a deterrent for Dalit students to access digital education. Expectedly, student attendance suffered during the crisis, especially among the economically-weaker sections. Families with low incomes, and who lost their means of livelihood, discontinued their education as economic hardships took their toll. Additionally, issues like student debt, and the looming unemployment crisis, also affected several households. This is especially true among Dalit students who self-finance their education through part-time jobs.

In a country with stark social divides, the pandemic has visibilised and reinforced centuries of discrimination and exclusion faced by marginalised communities. This study affirms that. Online education has exposed students from marginalised communities to another layer of exclusion. Students have no access to books, internet connections or smartphones. Moreover, there has been a multi-layered poverty in SC/ST families, forcing students to join daily-wage work in the fields in rural areas and in the construction sector in urban areas. Many of them were unable to access government scholarships, as admissions for the new academic year was challenging throughout the pandemic. Exclusion from education may take them back to their malicious past, grounded in caste dogma and practices.

v Dalit Students, Status And Trends In Higher Education

A Dalit student faces numerous challenges and barriers in institutes of higher education. Researchers have observed that a separation of groups based on caste was pervasive and ubiquitous. Sukumar, a Dalit scholar in his autoethnography has recorded that[1] first-generation entrants of Dalits into academia have to come to terms with an alien curriculum with entrenched pedagogical prejudices and a lackadaisical administration. Further, their unfamiliarity with English puts them at the receiving end of social ostracization.

Additionally, the epoch of neo-liberalisation in 1991 ushered in an age of privatisation of education. It has unleashed market forces, resulting in education being priced based on the market, adding to the woes of Dalits in higher education[2]. This pattern has further relegated Dalits to the bottom of the barrel, resulting in a vicious cycle of under-education. In reality, the ruling class has adapted modern values to an old social order having paradoxical hypocrisies[3].

According to 2007-08 NSSO data, the gross enrolment ratio, an indicator of educational attainment, was 8% for STs and 12% for SCs, against 27% for dominant castes[4]. Brahmanical hegemony is an aspect that is overlooked in institutes of higher education. The blindness of caste exists not only among students and faculty, but it has also percolated into academic curriculum and university administration. The illusion of encroachment of opportunities by minority communities is also created in higher education. Dominant-caste communities believe meritocracy is being compromised to admit Dalit students into institutes of higher education via quotas. This, in turn, creates a parallel discourse of majority victimisation, a deeply fallacious notion.

In an essay, On Backwardness and Fair Access to Higher Education: Results from NSS 55th Round Surveys 1999-2000, scholar Krishnamurthy Sundaram writes that once SC/ST/OBC groups cross the secondary education level, their decision to go for higher education is not significantly affected by their economic conditions anymore. But poverty does make a significant difference for eligible students in the general category. This implies that reservation positively impacts the level of enrolment once the threshold level of school education is crossed. Data also suggests that the inability of some marginalised groups to reach higher levels of education may be due to unequal access to school education.

In a 2007 study by Abhijit Banerjee and Rohini

> **74% of India's Dalit population resides in rural areas. As per NSSO data only 24% of Indian households have internet access. While this is 42% in urban India, it is just 15% in rural India, becoming a deterrent for Dalit students to access digital education.**

1   Sukumar, N. (2013). Quota's children: The perils of getting educated. In S. Deshpande & U. Zacharias, Beyond inclusion: The practice of equal access in Indian higher education (pp. 205-221). New Delhi, India: Routledge.
2   https://idsn.org/fileadmin/user_folder/pdf/New_files/India/The_status_of_reservation_in_education.pdf
3   B.B. Malik (2010) BARRIERS TO LEARNING: DALITS IN POST-INDEPENDENT INDIA, ICERI2010 Proceedings, pp. 409-416.
4   Sawaiker, Vasudha (2019). Protected Engaging with Caste in Higher Education: Reflections In Critical Pedagogy In India. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342230282_First_case_of_student_suicide_in_India_due_to_the_COVID-19_education_crisis_A_brief_report_and_preventive_measures

Somanathan titled The Political Economy of Public Goods: Some Evidence from India, Census data between 1971 and 1991 was analysed to find that unequal access to primary schools plays a key role in fuelling disparities among various caste groups. The duo mapped the availability of public goods against the parliamentary constituency areas, and found that areas of SC/ST concentration had much less access to primary or secondary schools in 1971 as compared to other areas.

Furthermore, as far as linkages of the combined impact of affirmative action in education and employment is concerned, Virginius Xaxa, in his essay on the Ethnography of Reservation in Delhi University, examined the quota system in admission to the University of Delhi. He found that even after implementation of this system in higher education, and in government and semi-government jobs, SC/ST/OBC quotas remain largely unfulfilled in several places. An older study from 1999 by Kirpal and Gupta on reserved seat students entering the BTech programme in five of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) between 1981 and 1992 found that the average graduation rates of SC/ST students was lower than that of their peers in the general category.

Both demand- and supply-side factors influence Indian higher education. The demand for professional and technical courses has been rising rapidly. However, a corresponding increase in investments required to meet the quantitative expansion and improve quality is missing. Government support has also been dwindling, for multiple reasons. Firstly, the central government has reduced allocation of resources for higher education. Secondly, the share of education in total state expenditure has reduced. Lastly, there is greater cost recovery in education in the form of fee hikes.

vi Post Matric Scholarship – Context And Issues

Education, an agent of upward social mobility, has been systemically denied to the Dalit and Adivasi communities for generations. Many of those from oppressed communities who are currently enrolled in schools and colleges are first-generation students from their families. To enable and empower these marginalised communities, the Indian government, through its various ministries, has instituted schemes and programmes to promote access to higher education among youth belonging to marginalised communities.

In this regard, interventions by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE) and the Department of Higher Education (DHE) are noteworthy. The University Grants Commission (UGC), under the DHE, is the nodal body for the implementation of a number of scholarship schemes for higher education among SC youth, including the Junior Research Fellowship, and the Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship for SC candidates. Then, under the aegis of the MSJE, the Department of Social Justice and Empowerment (DSJE) also implements a number of schemes aimed at promoting higher education among SC youth such as scholarship schemes, coaching schemes and residential schools. While these schemes are important to increase opportunities related to higher education of marginalised students, the PMS scheme implemented by the MSJE is the largest scholarship scheme that supports higher education for SC and ST students.

Improving access to PMS scholarship entitlements can ensure students from poor families do not drop out and complete their course. However, the scheme is beset by financial and systemic challenges. There is an inherent, immediate need to enhance the efficacy and accountability of the system through which scholarships are delivered. This makes reformulation of the scheme, transparency in its operation and accountability the need of the hour.

The scheme is inadequately funded, and even the allocated amount is not disbursed on time. Timely access to the scholarship amount is critical—for most SC youth, these funds help sustain their lives. The implementation and fiscal bottlenecks that plague this scholarship also include outstanding arrears, which further constrain the scheme. Thus, advocacy for an increase in resources under the PMS scheme, combined with accountability of resources, is essential.

In the current scenario, institutions are faced with the added burden of reinventing and redefining themselves to overcome barriers posed by the current pandemic. Higher education institutions have transitioned to e-classrooms. Yet, they are witnessing several other challenges relating to accessibility of education and availability of resources, besides issues pertaining to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

> **Post Matric Scholarship is a massive scheme, covering about 62 lakh students across the country. In 2014-15, students belonging to SC had a share of 13.5% and STs 4.8%. By 2018-19, this had increased to 15% for SCs and 6% for STs.**

Lastly, it is proposed that SC and ST students complete their higher-education programmes through the exercise of collective agency to gain greater access to, and benefits from, the PMS. Students from the respective communities have been denied education for generations, and lack the social capital and agency. They have limited access to information about the PMS and how to access entitlements they are eligible for. The above necessitates the need for collective agency to increase information and reduce the asymmetry of information held.

PMs Fund Allocation And Utilisation For Sc & St Students

The PMS scheme, launched in 1944, is one of the best centrally-sponsored schemes under the Scheduled Caste Sub Plan (SCP) and Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) fund. By enabling access to higher education, it has the potential to bridge socio-economic gaps faced by the communities it is aimed at. This was the dream of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, to ensure education

justice to the communities through financial support.

PMS is a massive scheme, covering about 62 lakh students across the country. They come from the poorest of poor households, with an annual income below Rs 2.50 lakhs. Data from the All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) shows the increase in number of enrolled students in the last five years. In 2014-15, students belonging to SC had a share of 13.5% and STs 4.8%. By 2018-19, this had increased to 15% for SCs and 6% for STs. In absolute terms, their numbers amounted to 55.67 lakh SCs and 20.67 lakh STs. However, there is no disaggregated data on PVTG and trans communities in AISHE data for 2018-19.

In all years except 2018-19, utilization under PMS scheme has exceeded allocation, implying that allocation falls short of demand. For instance, in 2017-18, utilization exceeded allocation by Rs. 66 crore (Rs. 3,414 crore versus Rs 3,348 crore). Similarly, in 2019-20, utilization exceeded allocation by Rs. 21 crore. A utilization rate above 100% implies inadequate funding in meeting the growing needs of eligible students across the country.

Figure 1: 5-year trend on fund allocation versus utilization under PMS in Union government for SC and ST Students

Amount (Rs. crore)   ■ BE/RE   ■ AE/Released

SC students

Year	BE/RE	AE/Released
2017-18	3348	3414
2018-19	6000	5928
2019-20	2690	2711
2020-21	3815	3877
2021-22	3416	0

ST students

Year	BE/RE	AE/Released
2017-18	1436	1464
2018-19	1643	1648
2019-20	1826	1863
2020-21	1900	1889
2021-22	1993	1116
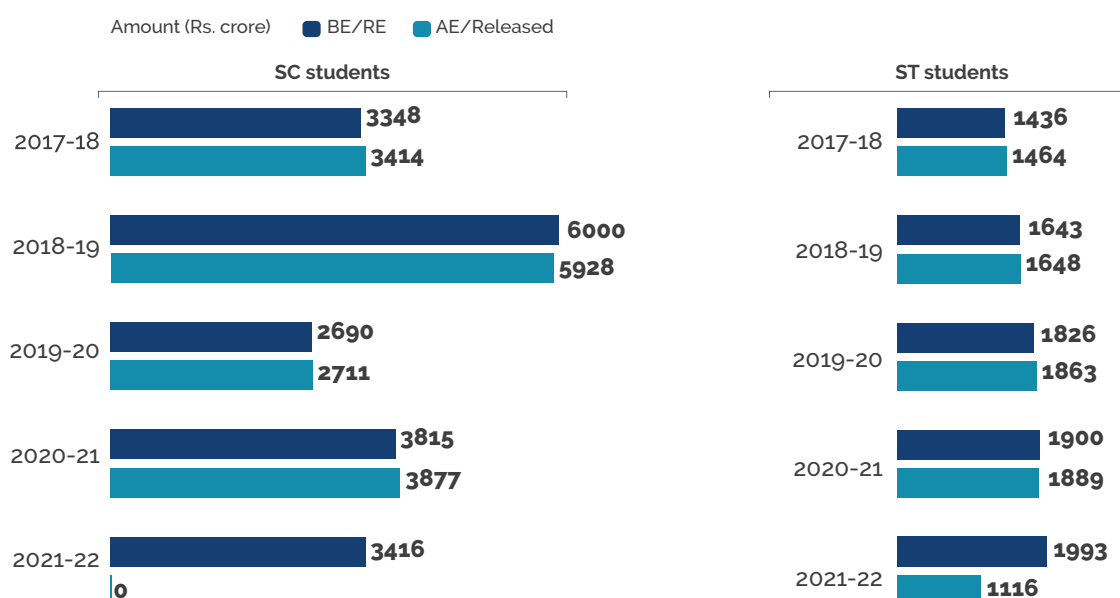
BE/RE: BE for 2017-18 and 2021-22; RE for 2018-19, 2019-20 and 2020-21.
AE/Released: AE for 2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20; Released for 2020-21 and 2021-22.
Source: Statement 10A & Statement 10B & EUTHAN, as on 29-06-2021 06:43.

Figure 2: Funds demanded by MSJE, GoI. vs Approved by Ministry of Finance vs Central Assistance (CA) released by MSJE towards PMS-SC vs total beneficiaries covered

Financial year	Funds demanded by Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment	Funds approved by Ministry of Finance	Total CA released in 5 years	Shortfall	Total Beneficiaries covered (lakh)	Fund allocation as against demand	% of CA released by MSJE
1	2	3	4	(2 -3)	5	6 (% between 4 and 2)	(% between 4 and 3)
2019-20	14,871	8,885	2,711	5,986	52.80	18.2	39.3
2018-19	11,028	7,750	5,928	3,278	60.30	53.8	76.5
2017-18	10,356	6,908	3,414	3,448	59.25	33.0	38.4

Source: Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment (2019-20), 17th Lok Sabha and other Lok Sabha & Unstarred Q No. 3811 for answer on 17.03 & unstarred question no- 2315, dated 02.01.2018, ANNUAL_REPORT_2021_MSJE_GOI.pdf

Yet, it is a major concern that utilization rate in PMS has fallen in 2020-21, the pandemic year. Under PMS-SC, as on 21st February 2021, only Rs. 1,185 crore was utilized[5] against the revised estimate for allocation of Rs. 3,815 crore—a utilization rate of just 31%. As much as Rs. 2,630 crore has been found unutilized. Similarly, under PMS-ST, in 2020-21, the total utilisation is Rs. 1,655 crore, against the revised estimate for allocation of Rs. 1,833 crore—a utilization rate of 90%. Similarly, in 2021-22, fund allocation towards PMS-SC is Rs. 3,416 crore and no CA has been released to states as of 29th June 2021. Under PMS-ST, the fund allocation is Rs. 1,993 crore and funds released is Rs. 1,116 crore.

Discrimination in allocating funds under PMS for SC and ST students across India

A performance audit report by CAG (2018)[6] states that only 70% (Rs. 10,350 crore) was approved by the Ministry of Finance against the demand of Rs. 14,775 crore proposed by the MSJE during the period of 2012-17. For 2018-19, the MSJE received only Rs. 7,750 crore against the demand of Rs. 11,027 crore to the Ministry of Finance.

The Department has informed this has led to a squeeze in the proposed outlay of some schemes and adversely affected the PMS scheme for SCs. The continuous shortfall and accumulated outstanding arrears under PMS-SC was brought to the notice of the Union Government by several Parliamentarians and members of Standing Committee reportedly. The unstarred question 2315, dated 2nd January 2018 reveals that more than Rs. 8,000 crore is outstanding. Starred question 216 dated 2nd January 2018 also reveals the same, which is quite unsatisfactory.

The above table shows there has been a continuous cut in funding towards PMS-SC, in spite of the growing demand from SC student-beneficiaries across the country. In 2017-18, the Ministry of Finance approved only Rs. 6,908 crore against the demand of Rs. 10,356 crore submitted by MSJE—a shortfall of Rs. 3,448 crore, or 33%. Similarly, in 2019-20, the fund approval was Rs. 8,885 crore, against the demand of Rs. 14,871 crore—a shortfall of Rs. 5,986 crore, or 40%.

There have been constant fund cuts towards PMS-SC: 33% in 2017-18, 30% in 2018-19 and 40% in 2019-20. As a result, there were pending arrears of PMS-SC fund with the Ministry of Finance over the years. Various Parliament debates affirm this. For instance, the unstarred question number 2,315 dated January 2nd 2018 reveals[7] that despite the demand of Rs. 11,407 crore in 2016-17, there was an allocation of Rs. 2,732 crore, resulted in a backlog of Rs. 8,000 crore. Minister of State under MSJE, Shri Vijay Sampla, also

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5   e-UTTHAAN: Scheme & State wise Financial Summary (e-utthaan.gov.in)
6   https://cag.gov.in/en/audit-report?gt=50&page=5
7   unstarred question no- 2315, dated 02.01.2018, starred question no-216 dated 02.01.2018

revealed the same and replied that there was an outstanding of more than Rs. 8,000 crore towards PMS-SC at the end of 2016-17. Another starred question number 216 dated 2nd January 2018 also revealed a total outstanding amount of Rs. 7,031 crore as on December 28th 2017.

The above table shows that only Rs. 2,711 crore (18.2%) has been released to 52.8 lakh student beneficiaries in 2019-20. This is quite negligible. Similarly, Rs. 5,928 crore (54%) has been released to 60.29 lakh students beneficiaries in 2018-19, despite arrears from the previous year. Further, Rs 3,414 crore (33%) has been released for 59.25 lakh student beneficiaries in 2017-18, which seems to be meagre.

It is a major concern that the percentage of funds released has drastically reduced over the years. For instance, between 2018-19 and 2019-20, the CA release has drastically reduced from 54% for 52.80 lakh students to 18% in 2019-20. This has resulted in many students not receiving their scholarship or receiving it rather late.

MSJE, the nodal ministry, has drawn the attention of the Union Finance Ministry several times to release the arrears. As per News 18, the Cabinet had to take the decision to release the funds in February 2018. Subsequently, the then-Finance Minister Arun Jaitley announced that ahead of 2019, the government may clear PMS arrears of over Rs. 6,000 crore in One Go[8]. This clearly shows the discriminatory practice towards allocating and releasing funds towards SC and ST students.

Due to mounting arrears, the MSJE has also expressed its inability to release funds to states, despite multiple requests. Many states could not reimburse the PMS scholarship to students in a timely and effective manner. As a result, many students faced severe challenges in continuing their studies. Many were asked to vacate their hostels in engineering colleges and many dropped out.

Changes in PMS guidelines (2021-22)

Challenges

Earlier, the PMS scheme was 100% centrally-sponsored. But later, committed liabilities of 60:40 came into the picture, where the central government contributed 60% of the total required amount and the rest 40% was to be taken up by the state government. This model continued until the end of the 12th Finance Commission. However, in the recent past, the PMS scheme was facing huge challenges of timely disbursement of scholarship to lakhs of students across the country.

Media reports said the scheme was on the verge of being scrapped in 14 states, including Bihar, Punjab and Maharashtra, as the central government was not releasing funds to states under the 2017 formula. The report added the central government had formulated a proposal to revise the funding pattern under the PMS scheme for SC students from the concept of "committed liability" to a "fixed sharing ratio" between the centre and the states/UTs. Ratan Lal Kataria, honourable union minister of state for MSJE, also revealed the same in his response to a unstarred Parliament question number 3,862 on 16th July 2019.

The fixed sharing ratio would place the burden on states to implement the scheme with their own resources. According to a media report, a recent PMO

> There have been constant fund cuts towards Post Matric Scholarship for SCs: 33% in 2017-18, 30% in 2018-19 and 40% in 2019-20. As a result, there were pending arrears of PMSSC fund with the Ministry of Finance over the years.

8   Ahead of 2019, FM Arun Jaitley May Clear Post-Matric Scholarship Arrears of Over Rs 6,000 Crore in One Go - News18.pdf

meeting appraised the 2017-18 era of "committed liability" at just 10% central share in 2018 (against the 60% previously), with 90% being the share of states. A 90% funding burden would be difficult for states to reimburse the scholarship to students, and they have expressed their inability to implement the schemes. Many state governments, including Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra and Bihar, have repeatedly raised this issue with the MSJE.

Several social activists, intellectuals, concerned individuals and academics started appealing through social media and held a series of state-level press conferences anchored by NCDHR. A memorandum was also submitted to the honourable Prime Minister seeking urgent steps through the PMO website. As an immediate outcome of all these campaigns (SavePMS) and series of appeals, finally, the Narendra Modi government has approved significant changes to the centrally-sponsored scholarship scheme. The

Cabinet has also now approved[9] a total investment of Rs. 59,048 crore for the scheme, of which, the central government will spend Rs. 35,534 crore—around 60% of the total. State governments will have to cover the remaining amount.

Later, during the Budget session of Parliament, Finance Minister Mrs. Nirmala Sitharaman also announced a significant fund increase towards PMS for SC students; the total central share is Rs. 35,219 Cr for the next six years, and almost 4 crore students stand to benefit. Still, it is a major concern that in the current financial year (2021-22), the budget allocation for PMS-SC has been reduced from Rs. 3,815 crore in 2020-21 (RE) to Rs. 3,415 crore in 2021-22 (BE)—a drip of about 10%. In PMS-ST, there is a minor increase of 5%, to Rs 1,993 crore. Therefore, though the centre will continue to support PMS, it will not make good on its promise to allocate Rs. 7,000 crore every year for SCs.

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9   https://theprint.in/india/education/modi-govt-to-now-fund-60-of-post-matric-scholarship-scheme-for-scheduled-caste-stu-dents/572328/N.B_ LINK OF THE CAG Report
     Parliament question link

vii Study Findings and Analysis

Survey Coverage

Total respondents: **10,190**

65% of respondents were from SC community and

28% from ST community

26% of respondents have income between Rs. 20,001 - Rs. 40,000

31% of respondents have annual household income between Rs. 40,001 - Rs. 60,000 and

45% of respondents were males and

55% were females
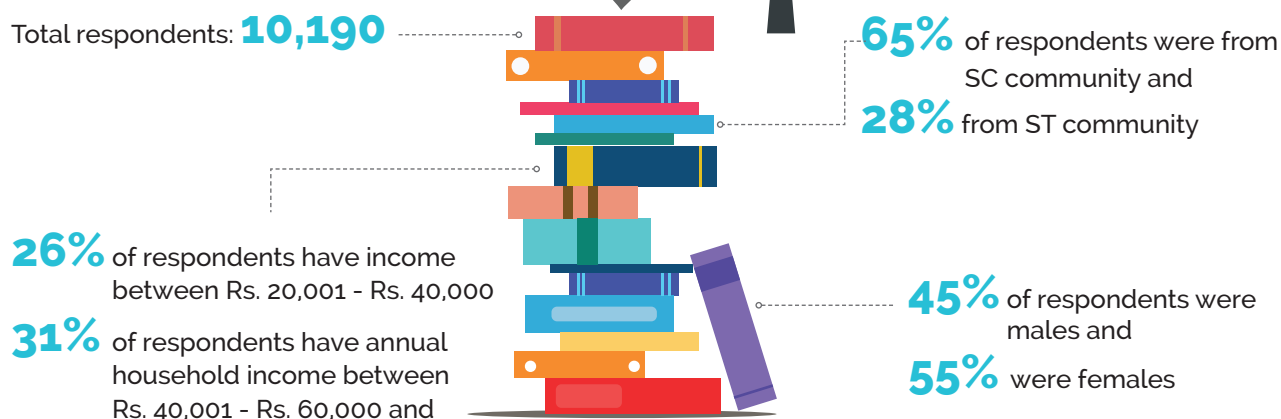
SURVEY FINDINGS

Education

Around 50 percent of students in the income group of Rs 20,000-40000 per year were unable to access online classes.

51% of the surveyed students couldn't avail the online classes due to unavailability of android phone/laptop and 22% students didn't had access to internet facility in village.

Accommodation

- **More than 56% of the students** pay upto Rs 3000 as their accommodation (hostel, PG or rented place) and around 51% students pay their monthly mess charges upto Rs 3000., therefore the non-payment of PMS would risk them to vacate their premise or run into financial debt.

- **Out of the total students** surveyed who live away from their families; 45% students are facing difficulty in paying rent and other bills. Of this 45% students, 42% were women.

- **Out of the total SC/ST hostellers** surveyed 61% of the SC students and 68% of the ST students didn't receive any relaxation in paying the hostel fees during the pandemic.

College fees

48% of the total surveyed students informed that they are unable to pay the college fees during the pandemic and 69% of them are not getting any relaxation in paying the college fees (women constituting 70% of them).

68% of the surveyed students will not be able to continue their study because of lack of income and food insecurity as a upshot of Covid 19 outbreak.

Scholarship

Out of the 68% (56% in the income group of Rs20,000 annually) students who are entitled to government scholarship pertaining to higher education, 51% are accessing Post Matric Scholarship.

32% of the students are not availing any scholarship because of lack of awareness regarding the scholarship and the process of availing them.

Out of the total surveyed students 54% of them do not know whom to reach out in the government for information regarding Post Matric Scholarship and other government entitlements.

93% of the students didn't receive any information/updates about the entitlements/Post Matric Scholarship from the media especially during the Covid period.

Employment

22% of the SC and 29% of the ST students of the total respondents were forced to take up employment during Covid, women constituting 21% of them. Here 48% of them have taken up manual labour in the Covid period.

Disability

26% of the total PWD students were forced to take up employment during COVID

33% of the PWD students are facing difficulty in paying the rent and other bills during the pandemic

41% of the total PWD students are not aware of the public entitlements available for them

20% of the PWD students are planning to discontinue their study post Covid.

Education

During the pandemic, regular classes were first suspended. Then, they moved online, via digital platforms and video calls. In India, the digital divide is huge, adding another barrier for the marginalised and putting right to education further out of reach of the underprivileged. Given the poor access to internet and electricity, especially in rural areas, online classes appear to be an option only for students from select privileged groups.

Online education conveniently ignores existing inequalities and discrimination that exist beyond this online mode, especially among girls, who are at greater risk of missing out on education. It will reinforce the prevailing social exclusion that Dalit and Adivasi students face. Inequitable access to online classes is a dangerous trend, given that education is one of the tools for Dalit-Adivasi students to escape the burdens that carry due to their socio-economic status.

Has your college started online classes?

Two in five respondents said their college had not started online classes and another 17 per cent did not know.

Share of respondents (%)

43%
Yes

40%
No

17%
Don't Know
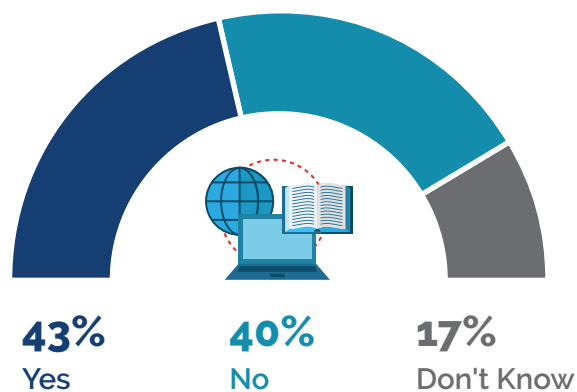
(n = 10,190)

If your college has started online classes, are you able to access them?

Of the 43 per cent whose college had started online classes, almost 39 per cent (75 per cent of all respondents) were unable to access these classes online.

Share of respondents (%)

58%
Yes

39%
No

3%
Don't Know
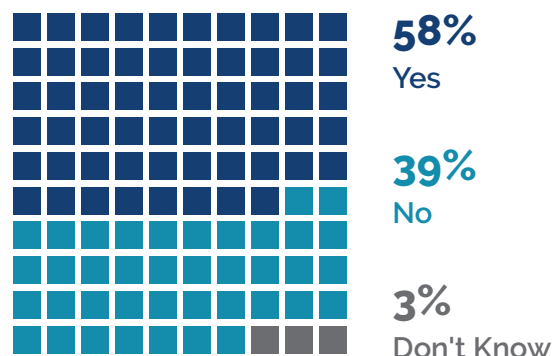
(n = 4,340)

Why are you not availing online classes?

The main reasons to not access online classes were unavailability of Android phone/laptop, internet and space at home, or engagement in a job to meet expenses.

(n = 594). Other 9,597 students didn't respond to this question.

Share of respondents (%)

Value	Reason
51.0	Do not have Android phone/laptop
21.9	Do not have internet facility in village
8.a6	Others
8.1	Do not have proper space at home to attend classes
7.2	Engaged in full time/part time job to meet expenses
2.5	Have to help parent in field/own business
0.7	This arrangement is not available in the college
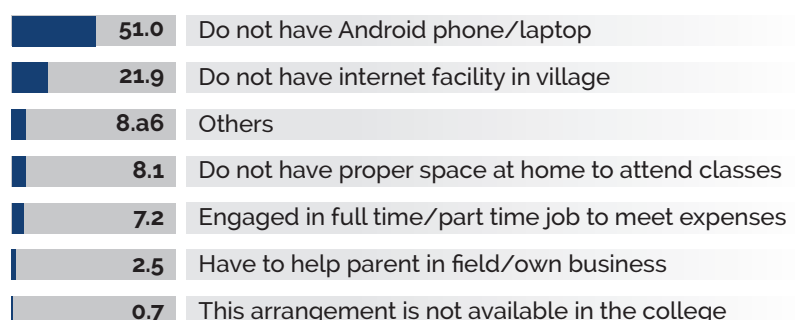
Student unable to attend online classes

Ramesh (name changed), 20, hails from a village in Jharkhand where basic necessities like water and electricity are unavailable. He works part-time along with his studies, and used his savings to buy a smartphone. However, he now struggles to find a good network connection that will let him attend online classes. Ramesh has not received any scholarship to continue his studies, and the pandemic has increased his troubles. He has had to take up multiple jobs to make ends meet, leaving him with no time for studies. Ramesh is hopeful the government will come to his aid. If it doesn't, he will have to abandon his dreams of an education.

How did access to online classes vary by household income?

Access to online classes improved with financial status of household. Among the poorest, with an annual income of up to Rs 60,000, a mere one in four students had access to online classes. In the income band above Rs 2.5 lakh, this improved to nearly one in two.

Access to online classes (%)

Annual income of household (Rs)	Yes	No	NA	Total respondents
Up to 20,000	19			(n = 1,938)
20,001 to 40,000	24			(n = 2,676)
40,001 to 60,000	24			(n = 3,205)
60,000 to 1.2 lakh	35			(n = 1,727)
1.2 lakh to 1.8 lakh	37			(n = 306)
1.8 lakh to 2.5 lakh	42			(n = 156)
Above 2.5 lakh	45			(n = 182)
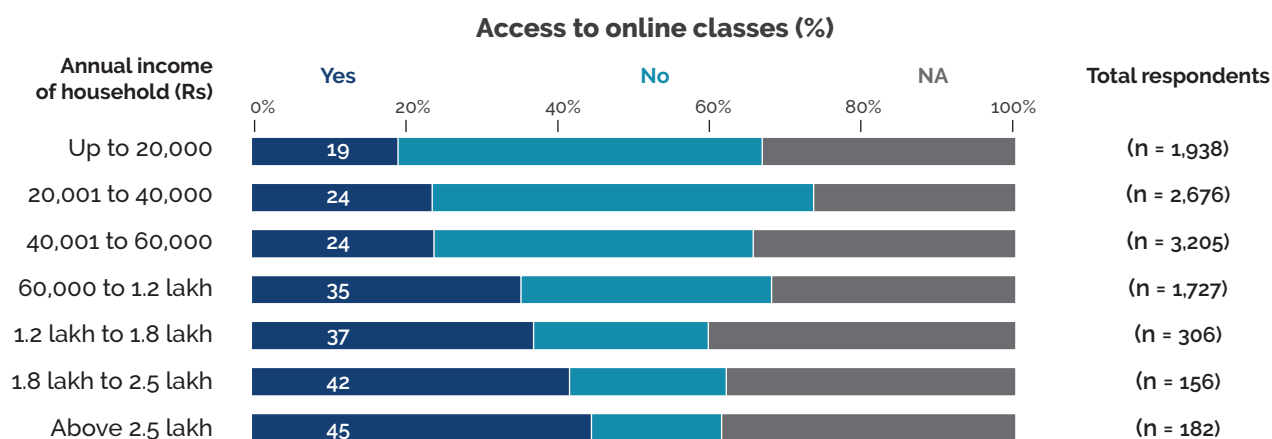
Note: Income bands arranged in ascending order   (n = 10,190)

How did access to online classes vary by social status?

Access to online classes was acute among all particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs). Among respondents who were unable to access these classes online, 73 per cent were from PVTGs. Among the ST community, this was 43 per cent. Among the SC community, 41 per cent.

Share of respondents (%)

	Yes	No	NA	Total respondents
Scheduled Caste	29			(n = 6,600)
Scheduled Tribe	22			(n = 2,874)
Minority	18			(n = 305)
OBC	14			(n = 193)
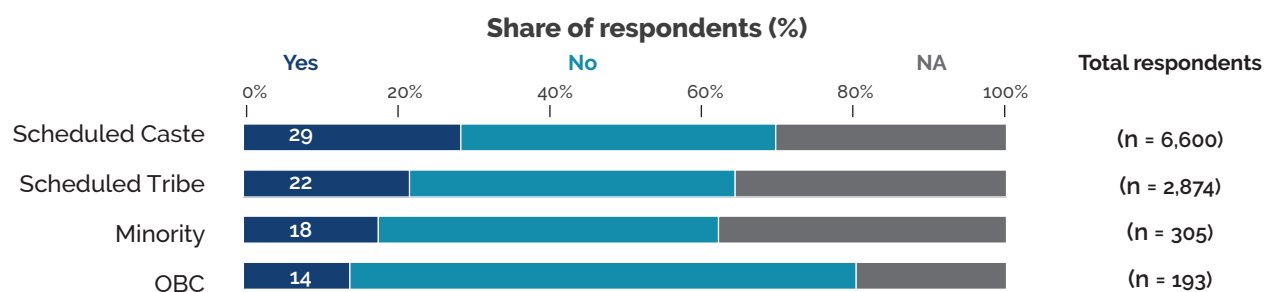
Note: Income bands arranged in ascending order   (n = 10,190)

Employment

For many Dalit and Adivasi students, attaining the dream of higher education often comes with the condition of earning their own livelihood. COVID-19 and the related lockdown has unleashed a vicious livelihood crisis for these students. Our study shows that for many students who continued with their employment during the pandemic saw their wages fall and work hours increase, making them even more vulnerable to adverse labour market conditions.

The pandemic has also forced many students into financial debt or entering the workforce as manual or casual labourers. Without adequate savings or government provisions, these students will be left with no option than getting into the workforce.

Have you been involved in any form of part-time employment along with studies?

About 15% of students surveyed were involved in part-time work even before the pandemic. Working while studying was seen more among males, among STs and PVTGs, and students from poorer households.

Share of respondents (%)

15%
Yes

85%
No

(n = 10,190)

Breakup by gender, social status and income

Share of respondents (%)   **Total respondents**

	Yes	No	
By gender			
Male	19		(n = 5,639)
Female	11		(n = 4,541)
By social status			
Scheduled Caste	13		(n = 6,600)
Scheduled Tribe	19		(n = 2,874)
Minority	13		305
OBC	19		193
PVTG	41		83
By income			
0 - Rs. 20,000	17		(n = 1,938)
Rs. 20,001 - Rs. 40,000	16		(n = 2,676)
Rs. 40,001 - Rs. 60,000	15		(n = 3,205)
Rs. 60,001 - Rs. 1,20,000	14		(n = 1,727)
Rs. 1,20,001 - Rs. 1,80,000	16		306
Rs. 1,80,001 - Rs. 2,50,000	12		156
More than Rs. 2,50,000	9		182
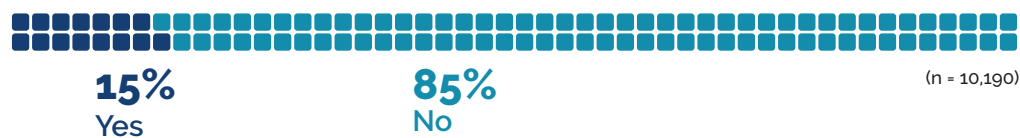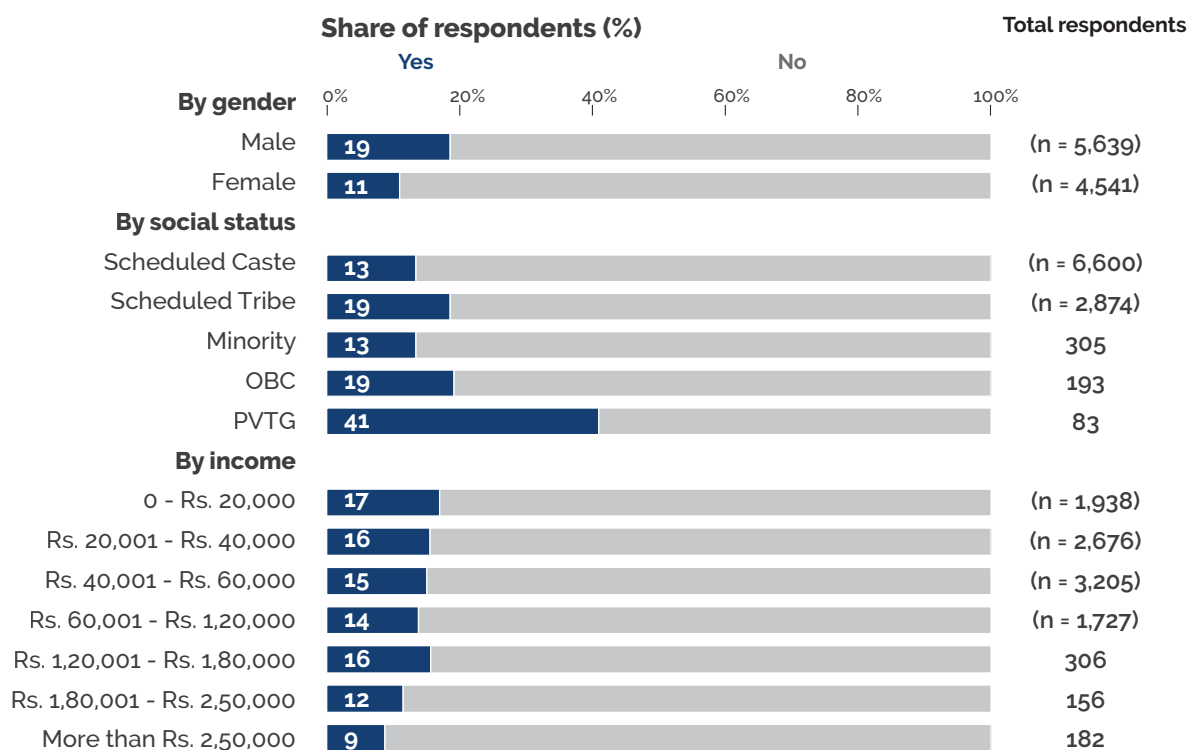
Student forced to do odd job to support family

Akash (name changed), a 29-year-old student from Jharkhand, was pursuing a BA programme. During the pandemic, his father lost his job at a factory, and Akash was forced to take up work as a daily wage labourer on a farm. With the help of civil society organisations and government entitlements, Akash arranged ration for his family. However, his studies took a backseat. Classes were conducted online, and this was a significant obstacle for students like Akash, who were on the wrong side of the digital divide. As the sole breadwinner in his family, the situation soon left Akash mentally, physically and financially exhausted.

Did you manage to continue with that part-time job during the COVID pandemic?

Of the 1,551 students who had part-time employment, about 60% could not continue with their job during the pandemic. The job loss was seen across income groups.

Share of respondents (%)

59%
Yes

36%
Yes

5%
NA

(n = 10,190)

Breakup by income

	Yes	No	NA	Total respondents
0 - Rs. 20,000	55			(n = 330)
Rs. 20,001 - Rs. 40,000	55			(n = 416)
Rs. 40,001 - Rs. 60,000	63			(n = 484)
Rs. 60,001 - Rs. 1,20,000	67			(n = 239)
Rs. 1,20,001 - Rs. 1,80,000	54			(n = 48)
Rs. 1,80,001 - Rs. 2,50,000	56			(n = 18)
More than Rs. 2,50,000	50			(n = 16)
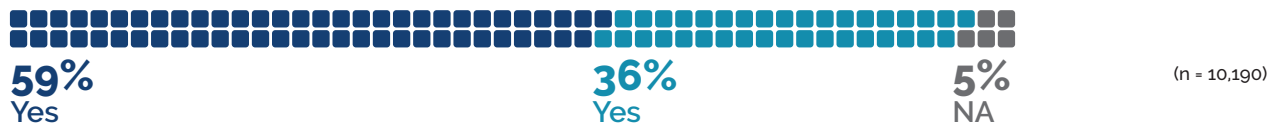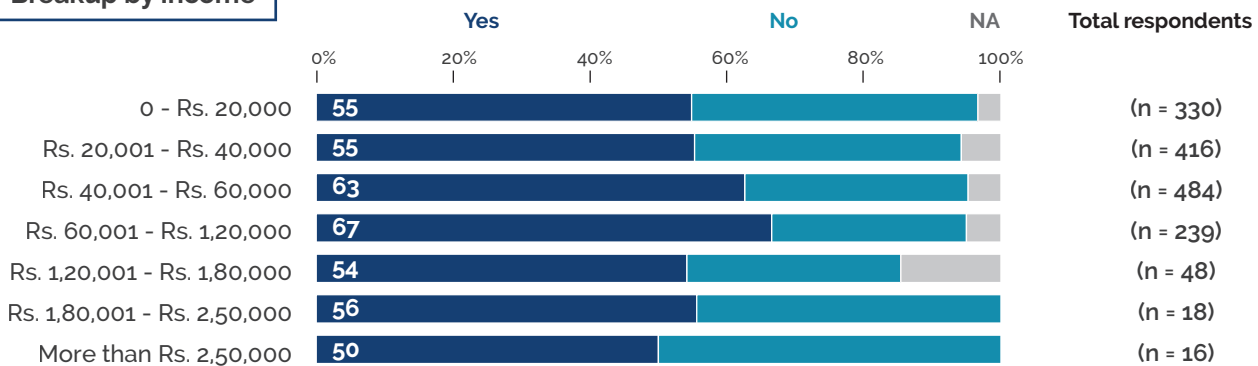
Note: Income bands arranged in ascending order

If you continued with your job, has there been any change in pay scale and/or working hours?

Even among students who continued working, about 44% saw a pay cut or longer hours, or both. In this survey, respondents came from households where their primary source of income was from daily wage labour, marginal farming, migrant labour, self-employment, small farming, and in some cases, government and private jobs. For some profiles, working conditions worsened to a greater degree. For example, 56% of respondents who relied on migrant farming reported a drop in income and spike in working hours, against 28% among the self-employed.

Share of respondents (%)

No change
44

Both
17

Decrease in pay scale
20

NA
10

(n = 674)

Increase in working hours

9
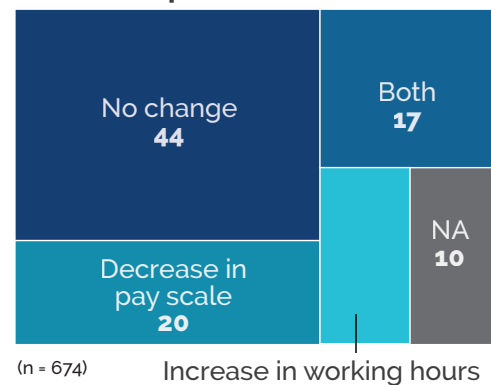
Has the pandemic forced you to take up an employment?

Of the 10,190 students surveyed, about 25% said they had been forced to take up employment during the pandemic. Higher levels of forced employment were seen among males, in lower income households, and among OBC, PVTG and ST.

Share of respondents (%)

25%
Yes

75%
No

(n = 10,190)

Breakup by gender, social status and income

Share of respondents (%)

	Yes	No	Total respondents
By gender			
Male	29		(n = 5,639)
Female	21		(n = 4,541)
By income			
0 - Rs. 20,000	30		(n = 1,938)
Rs. 20,001 - Rs. 40,000	26		(n = 2,676)
Rs. 40,001 - Rs. 60,000	27		(n = 3,205)
Rs. 60,001 - Rs. 1,20,000	22		(n = 1,727)
Rs. 1,20,001 - Rs. 1,80,000	19		(n = 306)
Rs. 1,80,001 - Rs. 2,50,000	13		(n = 156)
More than Rs. 2,50,000	9		(n = 182)
By social status			
Scheduled Caste	22		(n = 6,600)
Scheduled Tribe	29		(n = 2,874)
Minority	35		(n = 305)
OBC	73		(n = 193)
PVTG	43		(n = 83)
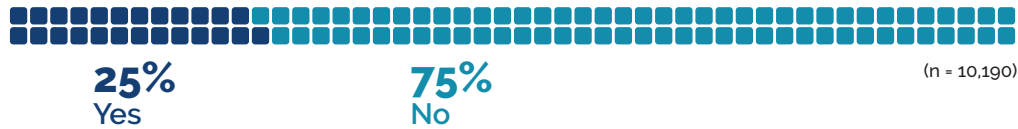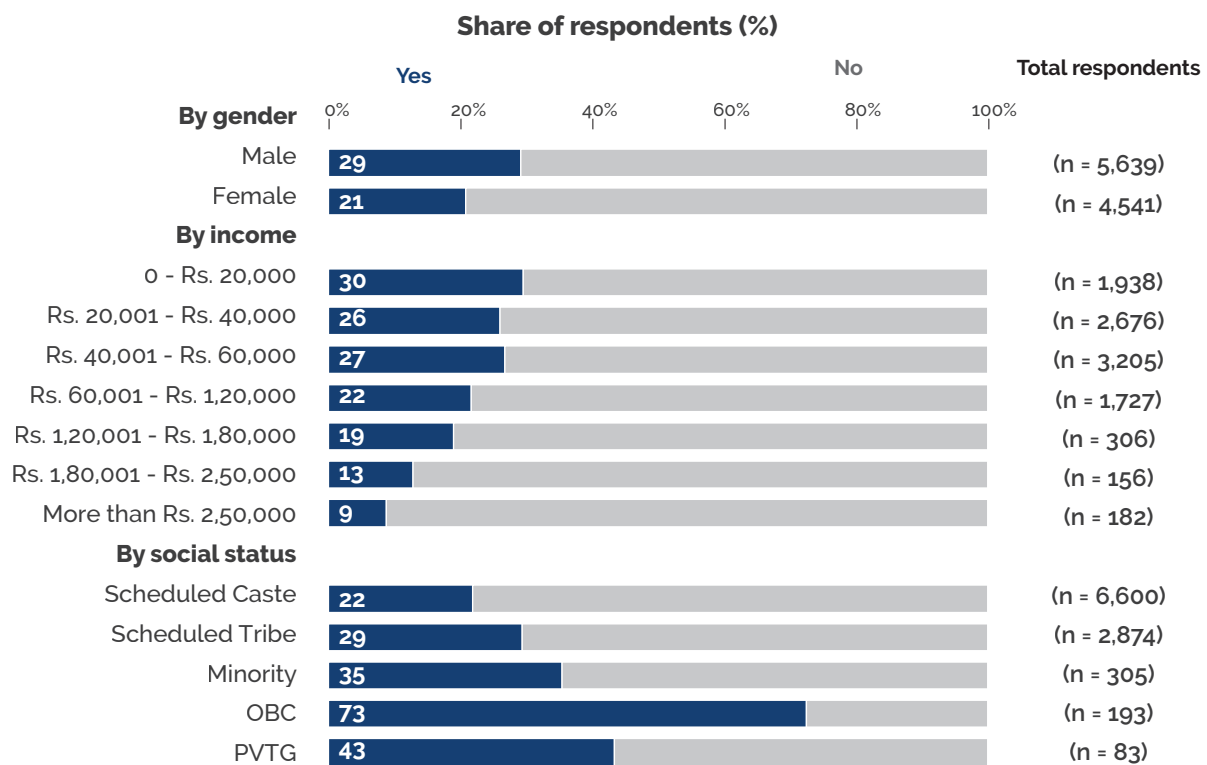
What job were you forced to take up due to the pandemic?

Of the 2,596 respondents who said they were forced to take up a job during the pandemic, nearly 85% did not specify the nature of that job. Among those who responded (395), nearly half were forced to take up manual labour.

Manual labour **48.6**

Private home tuition **11.9**

Courier delivery **2.5**

NGO **0.5**

Courier delivery service, tailor **0.3**

Others **23.5**

Sales person **5.8**

Hotel/ restaurant **3.5**

Earn and learn program in institution **2.5**

Private company **0.5**

Daily wage labourer **0.3**
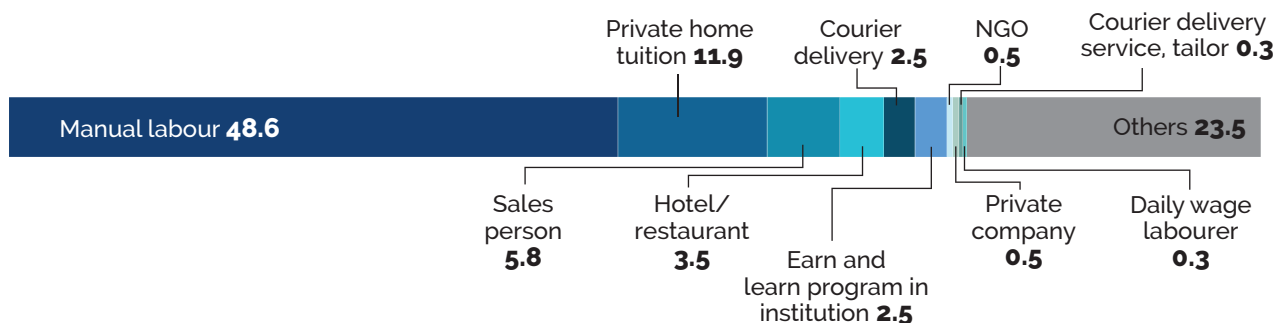
COVID lockdown pushed student to work as casual labour

Karuna (name changed), a young research scholar from Telangana, started working part-time along with her studies in 1999 to ease her family's financial situation. She was in class VI then. Her father was handicapped and her mother was the principal earner. Despite her onerous responsibilities, Karuna not only completed her matriculation, but followed it up with a bachelor's degree and a master's degree via correspondence.

Karuna's thirst for learning seemed unquenchable. She enrolled in an M.Phil programme. Here, she was subject to horrendous forms of discrimination based on her caste and ethnicity. Due to her participation in anti-caste movements, the administration placed various hurdles to prevent her from completing her course. But Karuna was not deterred and topped the university.

Fuelling her ambition further, Karuna began working on her Ph.D at Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi. However, without a fellowship, Jamia became unaffordable, and she was unable to meet her hostel and mess expenses. When Karuna's mother became paralysed, her dreams came to a staggering halt, as the burden of managing household expenses fell on her. In June 2019, Karuna returned to her village to take care of her bedridden parents and younger siblings. During the pandemic, in spite of her top academic qualifications, Karuna could only find work as a casual labour, picking cotton for daily wages of Rs 200-300.

Are you planning to continue your studies?

About 75% of respondents said that intend to continue with their studies. Similar or higher rates were seen across communities and income groups, barring OBCs and those whose annual income was below Rs 20,000.

Share of respondents (%)

(n = 10,190)

75% Yes   **17%** No   **8%** Don't know

Breakup by social status and income

	Yes	No	NA	Total respondents
By social status				
Scheduled Caste	76			(n = 6,600)
Scheduled Tribe	72			(n = 2,874)
Minority	72			(n = 305)
OBC	65			(n = 193)
PVTG	76			(n = 83)
By income				
0 - Rs. 20,000	64			(n = 1,938)
Rs. 20,001 - Rs. 40,000	77			(n = 2,676)
Rs. 40,001 - Rs. 60,000	77			(n = 3,205)
Rs. 60,001 - Rs. 1,20,000	78			(n = 1,727)
Rs. 1,20,001 - Rs. 1,80,000	81			(n = 306)
Rs. 1,80,001 - Rs. 2,50,000	79			(n = 156)
More than Rs. 2,50,000	88			(n = 182)
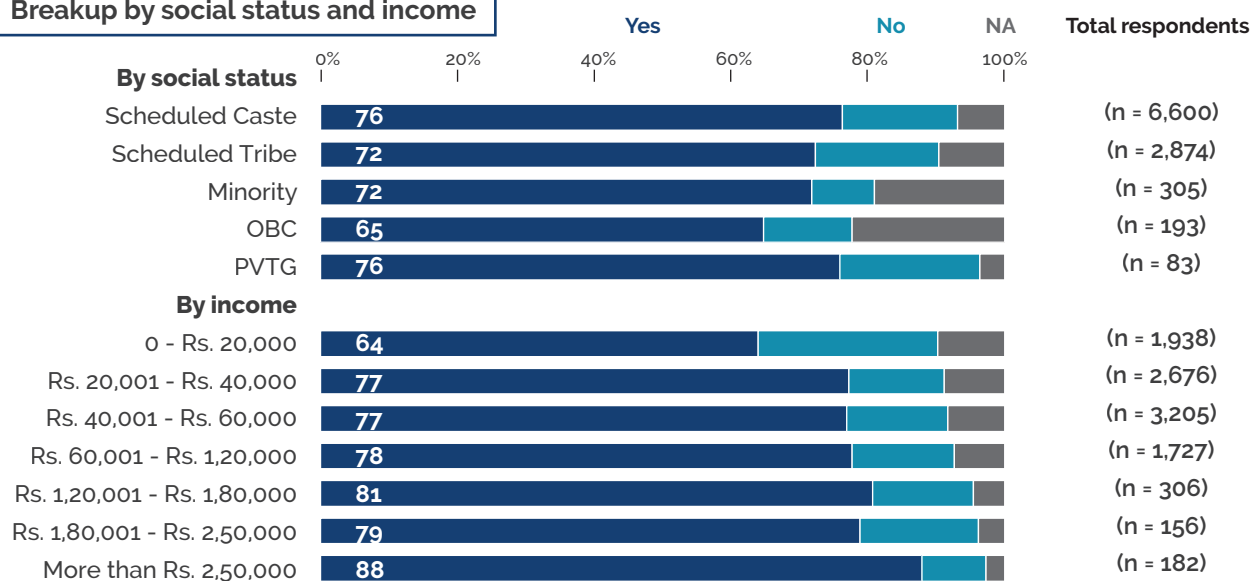
Note: Income bands arranged in ascending order

Scholarship

Dalit and Adivasi students largely depend on scholarships for their higher education. A series of newspaper reports during the COVID-19 period have captured the additional financial burden and distress students are facing due to scholarship delays. Not receiving the scholarship, or not receiving it on a timely basis, makes them even more vulnerable, given the severe financial crisis amid the COVID-19 pandemic. For those without any financial backup, it has meant taking loans and small-time jobs, even dropping out.

Whichever the step, it impacts their future greatly. This is especially true for girls, for whom higher education often comes with many restrictions as a fallout of patriarchy. Without scholarship support, girls are more likely to lose out on their education, exacerbating existing gender gaps in education. For many students, especially from marginalised communities, scholarships are the minimum source of their survival and also a medium to support their families. Many students have lost their family income during this lockdown, making them even more vulnerable.

Our survey shows that 71% of PVTG, 49% of SC and 42% of ST students have not received their scholarship during the pandemic. Many are not even aware of their application status due to closure of colleges and universities during the pandemic. They are at acute risk of being forced to discontinue their education, if they haven't already.

Are you entitled to government scholarships pertaining to higher education?

68% of respondents said they were entitled to government scholarships. Broken by income groups, those in the lowest income band expressed the smallest right to government scholarships. Among persons with disabilities, 71% said they were eligible.

Share of respondents (%)

(n = 10,190)

68% Yes   **23%** No   **9%** Don't know

Breakup by income

By income	Yes	No	Don't Know	Total respondents
0 - Rs. 20,000	56			(n = xxx)
Rs. 20,001 - Rs. 40,000	70			(n = xxx)
Rs. 40,001 - Rs. 60,000	72			(n = xxx)
Rs. 60,001 - Rs. 1,20,000	75			(n = xxx)
Rs. 1,20,001 - Rs. 1,80,000	72			(n = xxx)
Rs. 1,80,001 - Rs. 2,50,000	63			(n = xxx)
More than Rs. 2,50,000	42			(n = xxx)
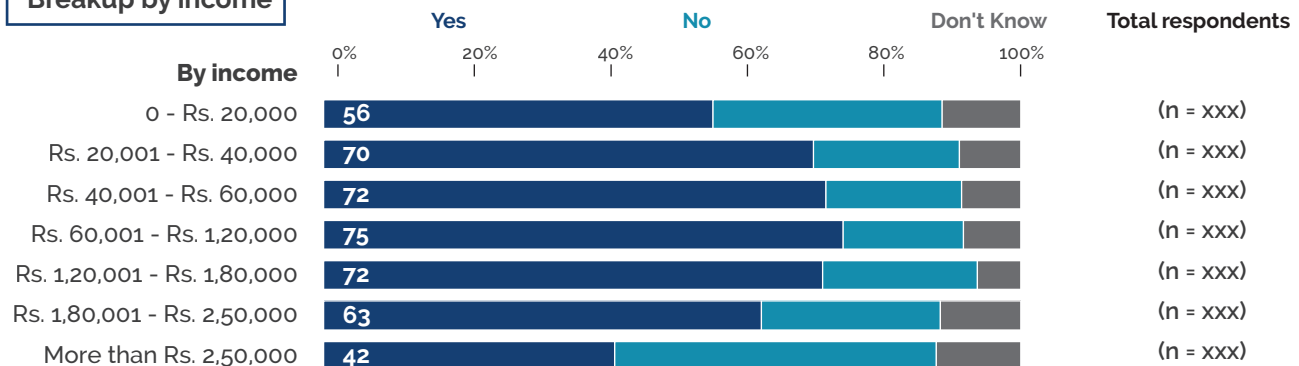
Note: Income bands arranged in ascending order

Lack of access to scholarship forces student to drop out of graduate programme

Scholarships are crucial for students from marginalised communities to pursue or even dream of higher education. Lakshmi (name changed) is a young woman from Andhra Pradesh currently in her second year of college. She lives in the social welfare girls' hostel. Due to the lockdown, hostels were shut, and Lakshmi was forced to return home to her parents. Her father works as a watchman and her mother as a domestic help.

While Lakshmi applied for a scholarship during her first year, she is yet to receive any funds. There has been no response from the college administration or faculty. Previously, Lakshmi r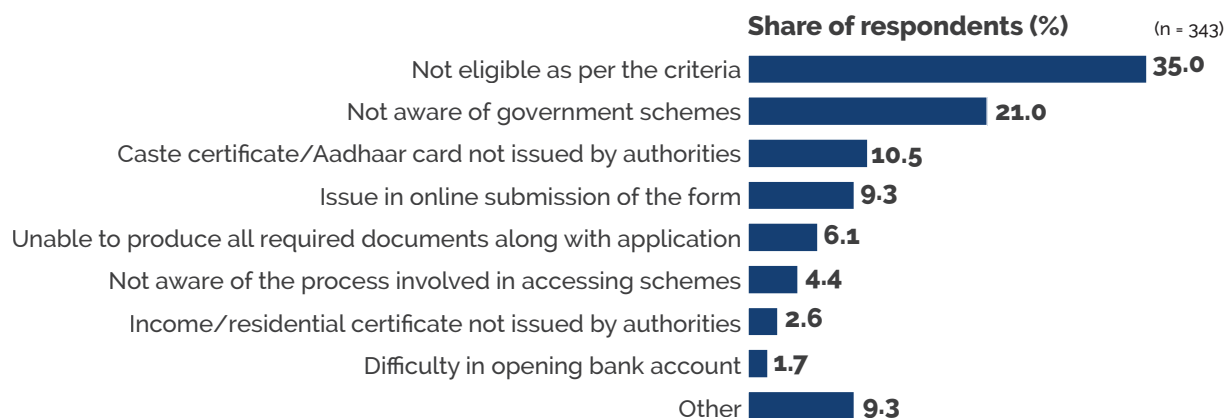eceived a scholarship under the PMS scheme, which benefited all SC/ST students. However, when the government in the state changed, the PMS scheme was withdrawn, and only select candidates were entitled to benefits of the scholarship. Unable to pay the fees, Lakshmi has since dropped out of her graduate programme.

If no, what is the reason for not availing any scholarship?

Of the 3,239 respondents who said they were not entitled to a scholarship or they didn't know, 2,897 did not respond to this question. Among those who did respond, 35% said they were not eligible as per the criteria and 21% were unaware of such government schemes. The remaining reported issues with access, paperwork and process.

Share of respondents (%) (n = 343)

Reason	%
Not eligible as per the criteria	35.0
Not aware of government schemes	21.0
Caste certificate/Aadhaar card not issued by authorities	10.5
Issue in online submission of the form	9.3
Unable to produce all required documents along with application	6.1
Not aware of the process involved in accessing schemes	4.4
Income/residential certificate not issued by authorities	2.6
Difficulty in opening bank account	1.7
Other	9.3

Do you know whom to reach out in the government for information around Post-Matric Scholarship and other entitlements?

While the PMS was the most popular option, with about 51% students availing the scheme, there was very little information available about it. Nearly 54% of all respondents said they did not know whom to reach out to in the government regarding information on the scholarship.

Share of respondents (%)

20% Yes

54% No

26% Don't Know

(n = 4,340)
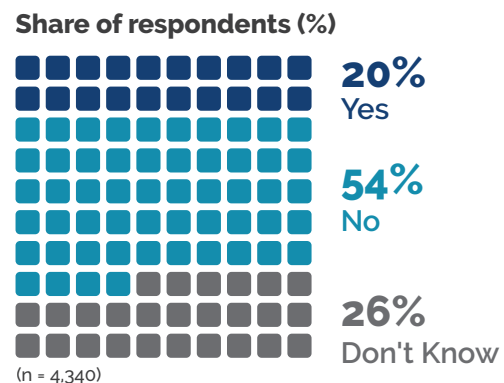
Have you been receiving the scholarship amount in the past one year?

Further, as many as 48% said they had not received the scholarship amount in the past year. Respondents of all profiles are equally affected by this non-receipt. Among communities, the worst-affected were PVTGs (71%), followed by SC (49%) and ST (42%). Further, nearly 54% of those whose annual household income was below Rs 20,000 had not received the scholarship. In the Rs 60,000 to Rs 1.8 lakh annual income bracket, about one-third were affected.

Share of respondents (%)

|	Yes	No	NA
All	48		
Female	47		
Male	48		
Scheduled Caste	49		
Scheduled Tribe	42		
Minority	40		
Person with disability	48		
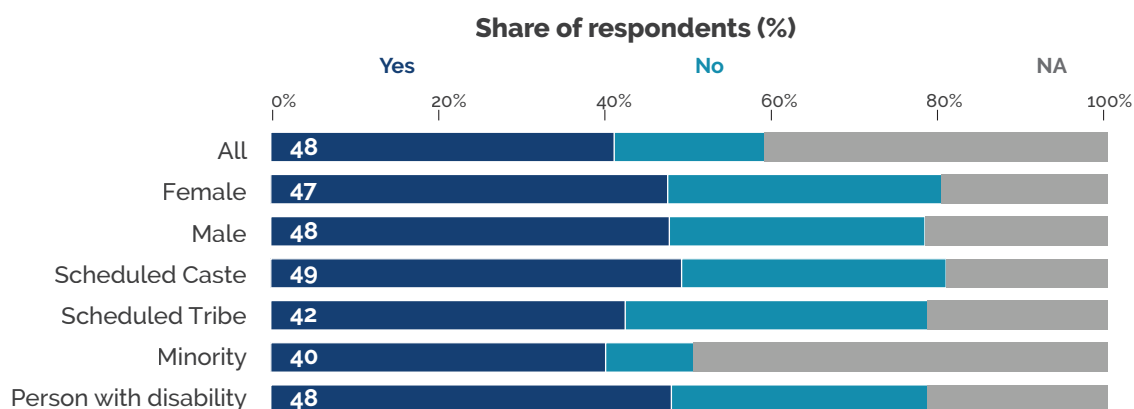
Has you faced a delay in disbursal of scholarships since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Among those who have received the scholarship amount since COVID-19 began, only 31% said they had received it on a timely basis. Similar numbers were seen for both male and female genders. Among communities, 67% of PVTG respondents experienced a delay, 50% among the most backward class (MBC), 48% among OBCs, 35% among SCs and 25% among STs.

Share of respondents (%)

31% Yes

46% No

23% Don't Know

(n = 2,932)
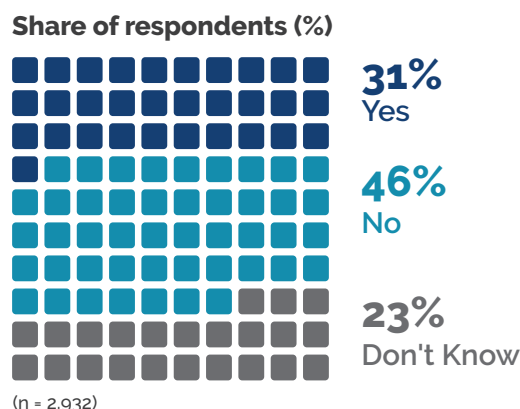
If you have not received your scholarship, have you received any intimation regarding it? If so, how?

Among those who did not receive the scholarship, three-fourths did not receive any intimation regarding the scholarship. Most of the remaining were contacted via SMS, call or email.

Share of respondents (%)

No intimation received **75.6**	SMS **16.4**		

Phone call **6.0**

College noticeboard **0.1**

WhatsApp message **0.1**

E-mail **1.3**

Post **0.5**

(n = 3,306)

Have you filed a complaint regarding delayed disbursal?

Only 27% have filed a complaint regarding the delay in disbursement of their scholarship. Most of these complaints (89%) were registered with the college authorities. About 8% complained to the district social welfare officer, 2% to civil society networks, and less than 1% took it to the district magistrate; 10 % did not answer the question.

Share of respondents (%)

64%
No

27%
Yes

9%
NA
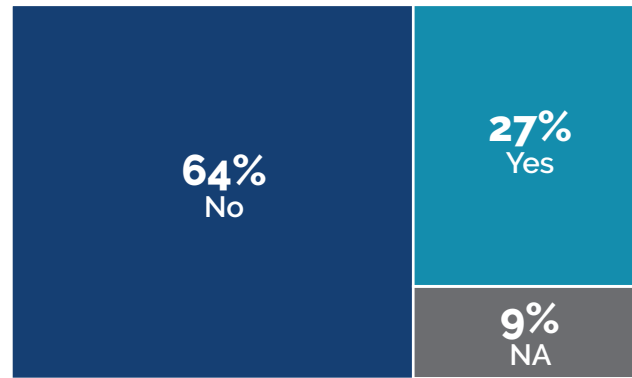
(n = 921)

Disability

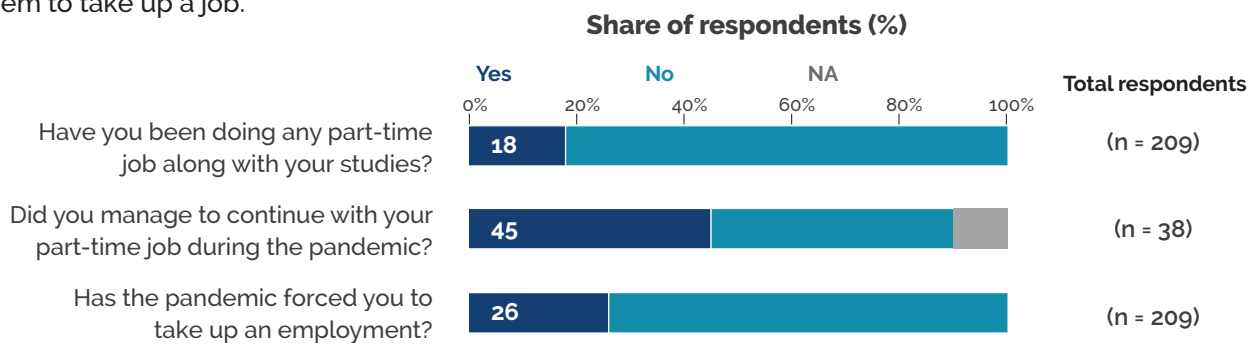Among the surveyed groups, respondents who were also persons with disabilities (PWDs) were significantly lesser in number (209). This, in itself, is an indicator of the marginalisation of this group. Our survey shows that students with disability were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 due to lack of information, unavailability of resources and inadequate social protection measures, severely affecting their access to education.

Many students are dependent on government support schemes to access basic services. However, a lack of information on such schemes, or other reasons leading to a disruption in delivery of these government entitlements, made them even more vulnerable. The data also shows that such students have been forced to take up employment to meet their expenses during the pandemic, putting them at greater risk. Through our in-depth discussions with students with disabilities, we learnt that access to online education was a challenge for several reasons, including lack of a sub-structure, unavailability of teaching and learning methods, and inaccessibility or unaffordability of internet services.

Studies and employment

About 18% of respondents were doing part-time jobs alongside their higher studies, and the pandemic forced nearly half of them to leave it. Further, 26% said the pandemic had forced them to take up a job.

Share of respondents (%)

	Yes	No	NA	Total respondents
Have you been doing any part-time job along with your studies?	18			(n = 209)
Did you manage to continue with your part-time job during the pandemic?	45			(n = 38)
Has the pandemic forced you to take up an employment?	26			(n = 209)

If at home, are you planning to continue your study further?

Among the PWD group, 71% were keen on continuing their studies while staying at home.

Share of respondents (%)

71% Yes

20% No

9% Don't Know

(n = 85)
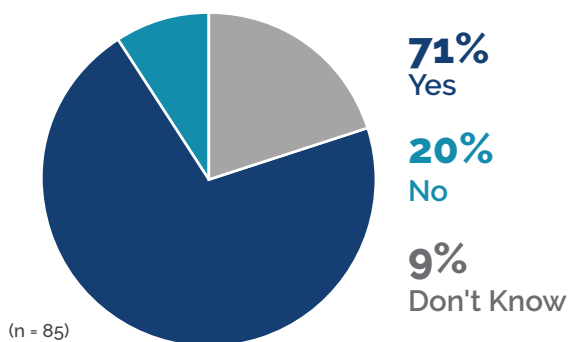
Are you facing any difficulty in paying the rent and other bills during the pandemic?

About one-third respondents said had to consider other challenges like paying rent and bills during the pandemic.

Share of respondents (%)   (n = 209)

43% NA

24% No

33% Yes

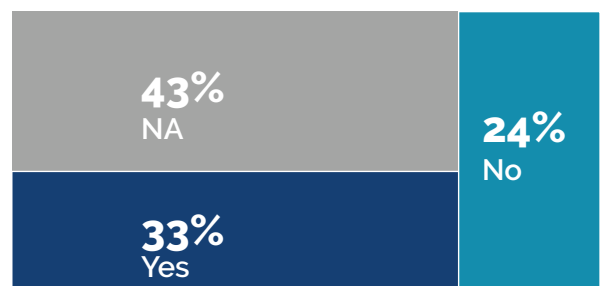## Are you aware of public entitlements for SC/ST students with disabilities?

About 41% respondents said they were unaware of public entitlements for SC/ST students with disabilities.

Share of respondents (%)

34%
Yes

41%
No

25%
NA
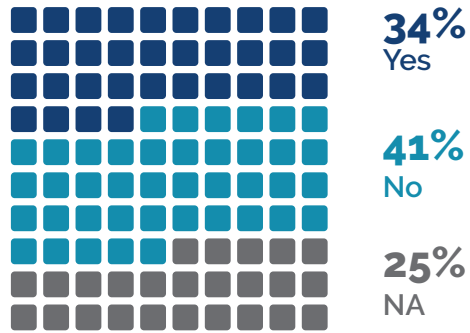
(n = 185)

If yes, did you avail them?

Among those who were aware of these benefits, 48% reportedly did not avail them because of several reasons like unawareness of the scholarship process, lack of facilities for physical access, and cumbersome application process.

Share of respondents (%)

42%
Yes

48%
No

10%
NA

(n = 62)

College Fees and Other Expenses

The survey also focused on the various expenses incurred by students other than college fees. Accommodation and mess charges are essential and recurring spends. They are also large spends, especially for SC/ST students. The survey shows the delay in disbursal of the Post Matric Scholarship and oth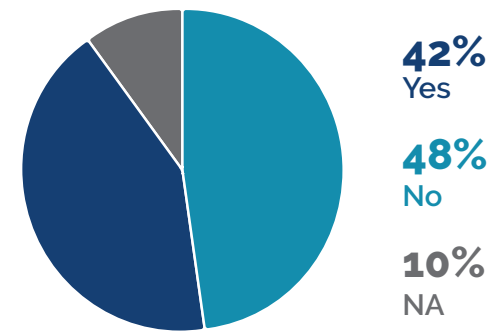er scholarship schemes have impacted the ability of SC/ST students to pay rent and continue with their education. In many private institutions, students are forced to pay hostel and mess charges despite not availing these facilities since the lockdown. This is an added burden on students, who are already struggling to make ends meet during this pandemic.

In normal times, students from marginalised communities find it difficult to pay college fees. During the pandemic, with disrupted and delayed access to scholarships, it became a greater burden. Some students were hopeful about continuing their education after the COVID-19 crisis had passed, but were unsure how they would bear college expenses.

Do you live with your family?

About 78% respondents said they were currently living with their family. The figure was similar was both male and female respondents. However, a slightly smaller percentage was seen among the ST community.

Share of respondents (%)

78%
Yes

22%
No

(n = 10,190)

Breakup by social status and gender

Share of respondents (%)

Total respondents

Social status	Yes	No	
Scheduled Caste	83		(n = 6,600)
Scheduled Tribe	68		(n = 2,874)
Minority	81		(n = 305)
OBC	93		(n = 193)
Gender			
Female	78		(n = 4,541)
Male	78		(n = 5,639)
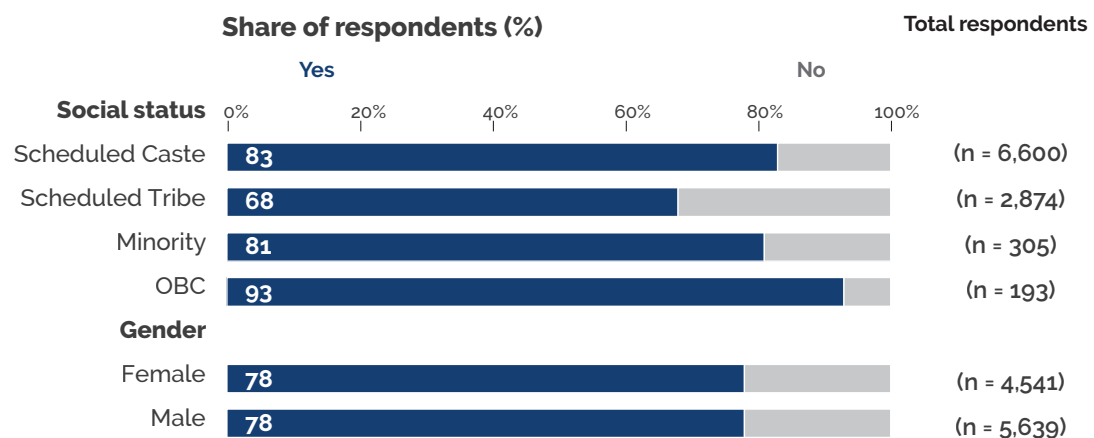
If no, where do you live?

Among those who did not live at home, 50% said they lived in a hostel and 35% in a rented accommodation. A greater percentage of SC respondents lived in a hostel than other communities. A greater percentage of females lived in a hostel than males.

(n = 2,224)

Hostel accommodation **49.8**

Rented accommodation **35.3**

NA **12.9**

PG accommodation **1.8**

At relative's place **0.1**

Breakup by social status and gender

Share of respondents (%)

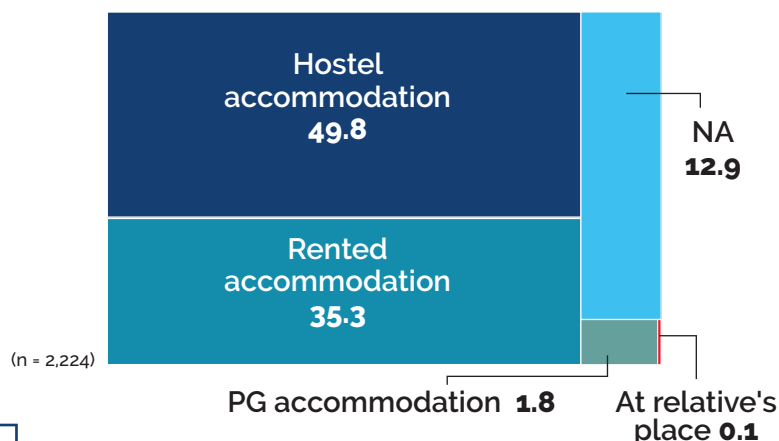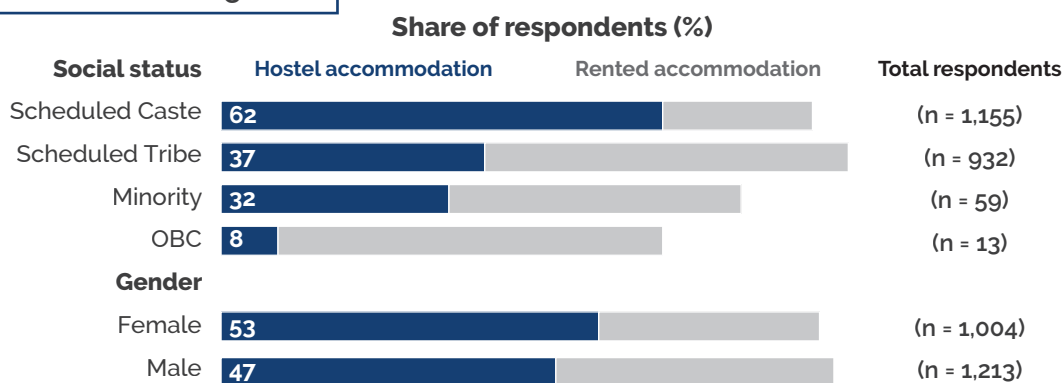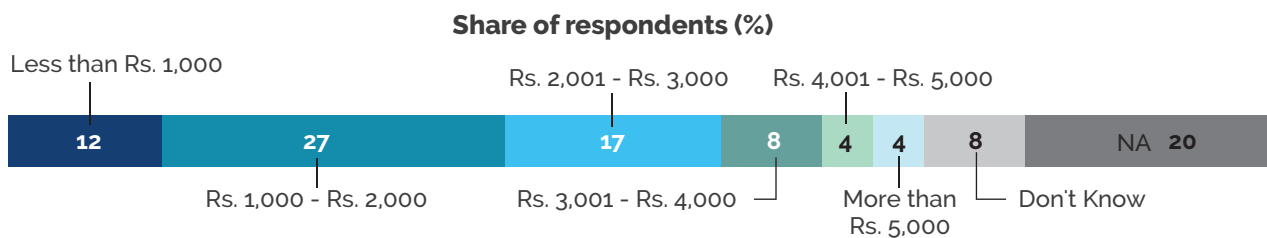| Social status	Hostel accommodation	Rented accommodation	Total respondents
Scheduled Caste	62		(n = 1,155)
Scheduled Tribe	37		(n = 932)
Minority	32		(n = 59)
OBC	8		(n = 13)

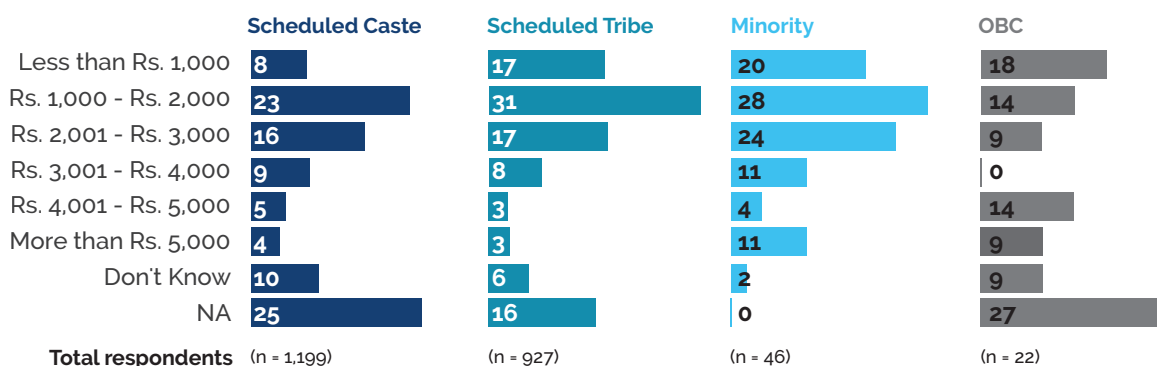| Gender			
Female	53		(n = 1,004)
Male	47		(n = 1,213)

Do you share the accomodation?

Maximum respondents (27%) lived in accommodation that cost them Rs. 1,000-2,000 a month. The next cost bracket with the most respondents was the Rs. 2,001-3,000 one. The bottom two cost brackets (less than Rs. 1,000 and Rs. 1,000-2,000) and saw a greater percentage of ST and minority respondents than SC ones.

Share of respondents (%)

Less than Rs. 1,000

Rs. 2,001 - Rs. 3,000

Rs. 4,001 - Rs. 5,000

12	27	17	8	4	4	8	NA 20

Rs. 1,000 - Rs. 2,000

Rs. 3,001 - Rs. 4,000

More than Rs. 5,000

Don't Know

(n = 2,257) Note: Arranged in ascending order of cost.

Breakup by social status

	Scheduled Caste	Scheduled Tribe	Minority	OBC
Less than Rs. 1,000	8	17	20	18
Rs. 1,000 - Rs. 2,000	23	31	28	14
Rs. 2,001 - Rs. 3,000	16	17	24	9
Rs. 3,001 - Rs. 4,000	9	8	11	0
Rs. 4,001 - Rs. 5,000	5	3	4	14
More than Rs. 5,000	4	3	11	9
Don't Know	10	6	2	9
NA	25	16	0	27
Total respondents	(n = 1,199)	(n = 927)	(n = 46)	(n = 22)

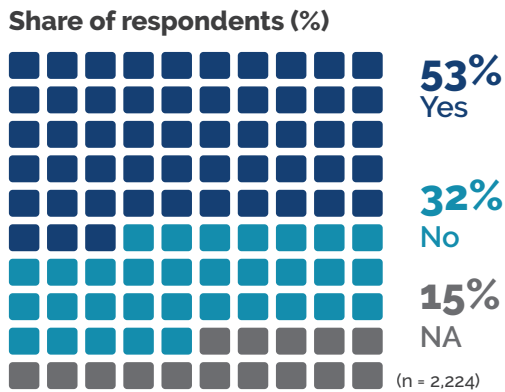## Do you share the accomodation?

About 53% of respondents shared their accommodation with other occupants. This figure was similar across communities and genders.

Share of respondents (%)

53%
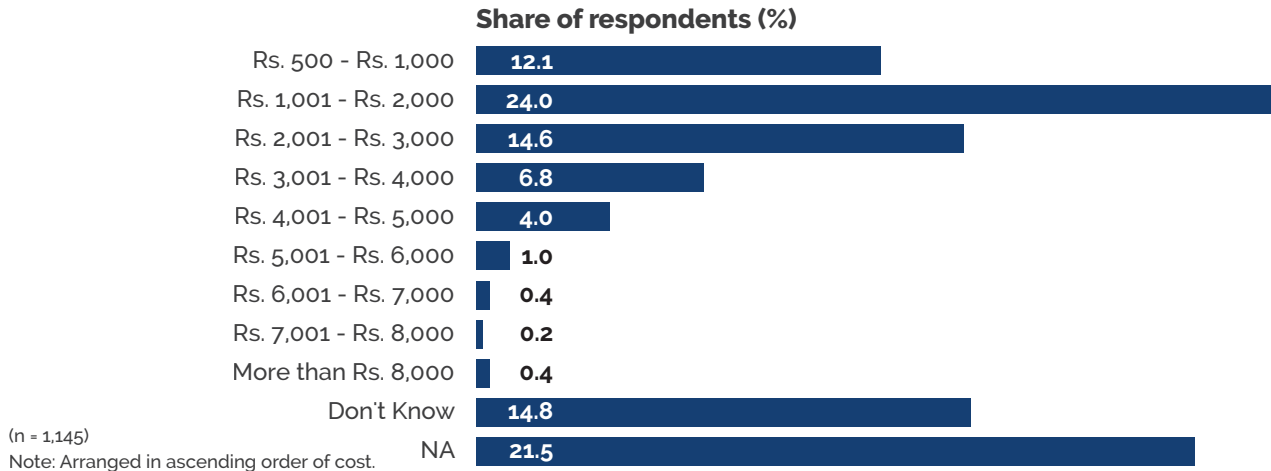Yes

32%
No

15%
NA

(n = 2,224)

How do you pay your hostel and mess charges?

Most respondents (65%) paid the hostel and mess charges in cash, while 7% paid in both cash and food grains. Similar numbers were seen across genders and communities.

Share of respondents (%)

65%
Cash

25%
NA

7%
Both

2%
Food grains

(n = 1,145)
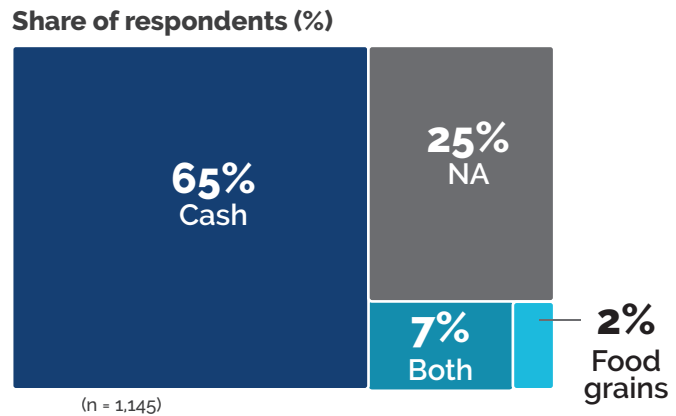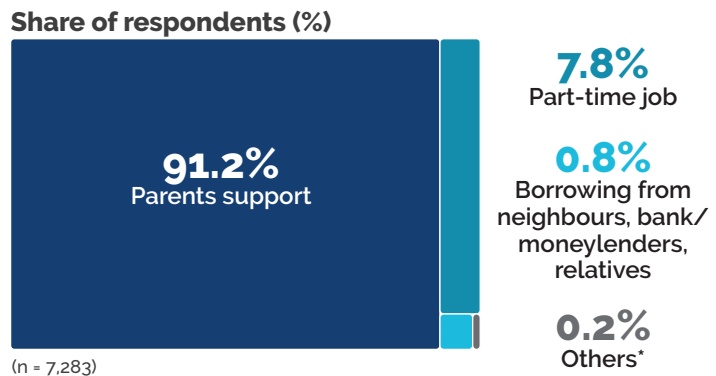
What is the monthly mess charge?

The monthly mess charge incurred by the survey respondents ranges from Rs. 500 to Rs 8,000. About 24% fell in the Rs. 1,001-2,000 bracket, followed by 15% in the Rs. 2,001-3,000 bracket. In the lowest bracket (Rs. 500-1,000), the share of ST respondents exceed SC respondents (21% versus 8%).

Share of respondents (%)

Rs. 500 - Rs. 1,000	12.1
Rs. 1,001 - Rs. 2,000	24.0
Rs. 2,001 - Rs. 3,000	14.6
Rs. 3,001 - Rs. 4,000	6.8
Rs. 4,001 - Rs. 5,000	4.0
Rs. 5,001 - Rs. 6,000	1.0
Rs. 6,001 - Rs. 7,000	0.4
Rs. 7,001 - Rs. 8,000	0.2
More than Rs. 8,000	0.4
Don't Know	14.8
NA	21.5

(n = 1,145)
Note: Arranged in ascending order of cost.

How are you planning to bear college expenses?

Of the students who said they plan to study further, nearly 91% were relying on their parents to pay their college fees. Another 8% were depending on a part-time job. The findings were similar across caste communities and genders.

*Mortgaging household assets, scholarship/fellowship and home tuition

Share of respondents (%)

91.2%
Parents support

7.8%
Part-time job

0.8%
Borrowing from neighbours, bank/ moneylenders, relatives

0.2%
Others*

(n = 7,283)

What is the reason for discontinuing studies?

Among those who chose to discontinue their studies, 47% did not answer this question. Among those who did, about one-third said they were struggling to meet daily rations and another one-third said the job losses caused by the pandemic had left no earning member in the family. Meeting running expenses was a greater challenge from ST respondents than SC respondents (48% versus 27%).

Share of respondents (%)

|	
Struggling to meet daily rations	34.2
No source of income in family due to unemployment	33.6
Taking care of younger siblings due to parents being ill	13.4
Earning members affected by Coronavirus	5.0
Struggling to repay loans from moneylenders/bank	4.9
Struggling to repay loans from neighbours/friends	3.6
Taking care of parents ailing due to Coronavirus or other critical diseases	2.3
Affected by migration	2.2
Others	0.8

Payment of rent and other bills

About half the respondents living away from home said they faced difficulties in paying rent and other bills during the pandemic. To compound matters, an overwhelming two-thirds of them said that rent had not been relaxed during the pandemic. Reponses were similar across communities and genders.

> **Are you facing any difficulty in paying rent and other bills during the pandemic?**

> **Have you received any relaxation in paying the rent during the pandemic?**

Share of respondents (%)

Yes
No
NA

(n = 2,224)

23%
45%
31%

7%
64%
29%
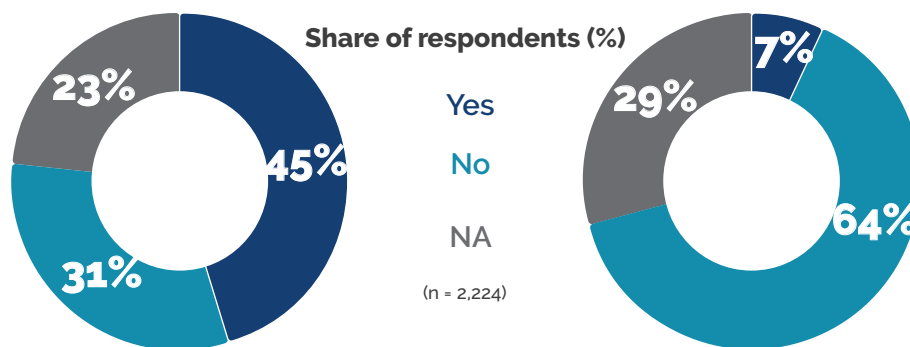
Accessing hostel facilities

Only 12% of respondents staying in a college hostel were able to access hostel facilities like the mess and the library during the pandemic. Despite not using these facilities, nearly 63% of respondents said they received no relaxation in paying hostel fees. Reponses were similar across communities and genders.

| If staying in college hostel, are you able to access hostel facilities such as mess, library etc during the pandemic? | Have you received any relaxation in paying the hostel fees during the pandemic? |

Share of respondents (%)

34% 12%
54%

Yes
No
NA

(n = 1,145)

28% 9%
63%
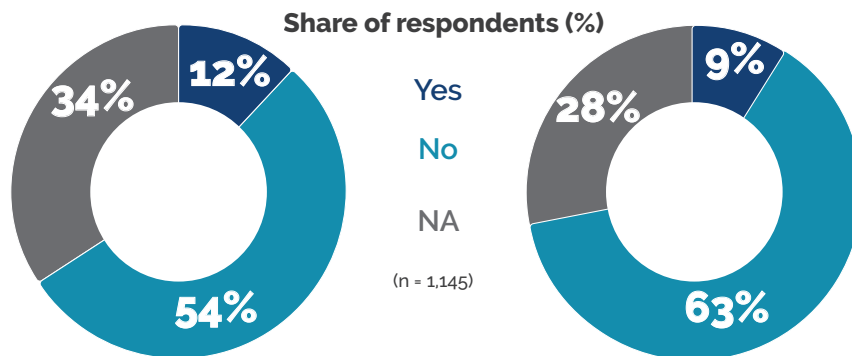
Paying college fees

Only a quarter of respondents were able to pay college fees during the pandemic. Even among those who were able to, more than two-thirds said they had got no relaxation in paying college fees. Reponses were similar across communities and genders.

| Are you able to pay the college fees during the pandemic? | If yes, are you getting any relaxation in paying the college fees? |

Share of respondents (%)

28% 24%
48%

Yes
No
NA

(n = 10,191)

4%
27%
69%

(n = 2,481)
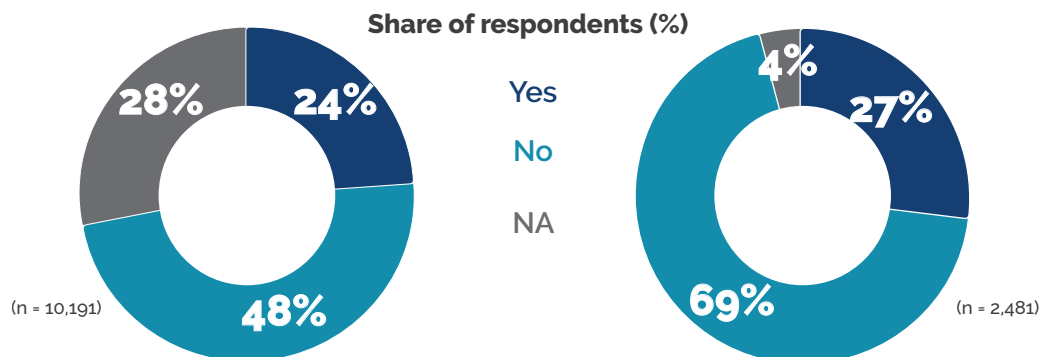
Viii Intersectional Narratives On Access To Higher Education For Dalits And Adivasis

Dalit And Adivasi Women's Access To Higher Education

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the entire communities of Dalits and Adivasis in terms of access to education, particularly given the rigid attitude of school and college administrations. Despite schools and colleges being closed, the private ones have not relaxed student fees, they have not extended financial support to access online education, or relaxed examinations.

While this has been the general situation across states, it is important to understand how gender shapes the experiences of Dalit and Adivasi students differently. This chapter focuses on how the social location of being a woman impacted Dalit and Adivasi women's access to higher education. While our case stories illustrate some of the experiences in this context, this section will provide a larger outline around this issue.

Restricted to the domestic space; earning for the family

The struggles with which Dalit and Adivasi women reach higher education are not unknown to us. In rural contexts, young girls and women travelled long distances to reach their educational institutions and attend classes. College and university spaces give them some social mobility and resources when they are not under pressure to fulfil household responsibilities. It provides them with much-needed exposure and thinking space to be able to prioritize their own lives in some ways, something that usually gets sidelined amidst familial responsibilities.

Closing down of university spaces has literally blocked these possibilities for Dalit and Adivasi women. It has restricted many of them to domestic spaces, while many others have taken up paid work as domestic workers, agricultural labourers, daily wage workers, etc., to meet the financial needs of their families. Women's education automatically becomes a non-priority amidst survival struggles and lack of social security.

> **Closing down of university spaces has literally blocked social mobility and resources for Dalit and Adivasi Women. Women's education automatically becomes a non-priority amidst survival struggles and lack of social security.**

The study revealed that 21% of women respondents were forced to take up employment during COVID-19. This led many women students to drop out of education. Some have also been forced into early marriage. Further, being restricted to domestic spaces, especially during such a stressful time with a nearly chaotic law and order situation, has made young girls and women more vulnerable to domestic violence than before.[1]

Barriers to accessing online education

Relatively difficult access to smartphones, computers and other such devices means Dalit and Adivasi women have a lesser chance to access online education. When a household has one smartphone or laptop/computer, it is likely that a male student will receive priority over a female student in education. Moreover, while digital literacy is lesser among women and girls[2], they are also more vulnerable to online abuse than men, due to which the online mode is more distrusted by families in the case of women students.

Another reason behind families discouraging online education for women students is exercising strong control over women's sexuality. Access to the digital space also opens up avenues for one to explore their sexuality in various ways. In a tightly monitored Brahminical culture of regulating women's sexuality, women's social mobility, be it in the physical space or digital, is bound to be put to scrutiny.

Smartphones and online classes are inaccessible to

Savita, a 17-year-old ST student from Jharkhand. Her parents are no more and she works as a domestic help to pay for her degree course in Surat Pandey Degree College, Garhwa. Moreover, there's hardly any network connectivity in her village. Without any money or books, Savita is being deprived of her right to education. Despite reaching out to the authorities for financial assistance, Savita has not received any aid from the government, leaving her with no choice but to drop out of her course.

Rising mental health concerns

The tendency is to see marginalized communities only within the development economy framework. This frame tends to ignore mental health as a concern with respect to Dalits and Adivasis. While the pandemic has generated a collective feeling of distress and hopelessness among historically marginalized communities, the situation has been particularly hard for women from these communities for various reasons like doing double labour—domestic and paid.

In this health emergency, the work of frontline workers and caregivers (paid and unpaid), who are usually women from marginalized communities, has increased greatly. Young girls and women are not only quitting their education, but the hopelessness caused because of these factors is leading to some even quitting their own lives.[3] Furthermore, rising cases of atrocities on Dalits during the pandemic have worse consequences on Dalit and Adivasi women, as they are more vulnerable to these

> **The study revealed that 21% of women respondents were forced to take up employment during COVID-19. This led many women students to drop out of education. Some have also been forced into early marriage.**

1   Scroll Staff. 2020, April 17. "Covid-19 lockdown: Domestic violence cases reported to NCW nearly double in last 25 days". Retrieved from https://scroll.in/latest/959515/covid-19-lockdown-domestic-violence-cases-reported-to-ncw-nearly-double-in-last-25-days
    Vignesh Radhakrishnan, et al. 2020, June 22. "Domestic violence complaints at a 10-year high during COVID-19 lockdown". Retrieved from https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-domestic-violence-complaints-at-a-10-year-high-during-covid-19-lockdown/article31885001.ece
2   Infographic: How does access to Technology Lead to Gender Equality? | Gallery (globalfundforwomen.org)
3   Unable to attend online classes, 14-year-old student in Kerala's Malappuram district ends life - India News , Firstpost

> **People with disabilities continue to be seen as unproductive members of society and the economy. Hence, the burden on the disabled to prove their 'utility' is immensely high.**

atrocities when the legal authorities concerned have conveniently excused itself from acting promptly against perpetrators.[4] It gives more power to people from dominant castes, especially men, to practice their hooliganism against Dalit and Adivasi women. The question of gender is often overlooked when we broaden our focus on community oppression.

People With Disabilities

Disability is a non-issue not only for policymakers, but also for groups representing social movements, perhaps because of the low percentage of disabled population on record. People with disabilities continue to be seen as unproductive members of society and the economy. Hence, the burden on the disabled to prove their 'utility' is immensely high. To even demand basic human rights to function, sustain oneself and ensure social security, people with disabilities, particularly those from marginalized communities, need to prove they are deserving of these basic entitlements. Given this context, we interviewed Dalit and marginalized Muslim students with disabilities on the question of access to higher education and how it has been affected during the pandemic.

Invisibility of Dalit and Adivasi students with disabilities

There is a near absence of Dalit and Adivasi students with disabilities, particularly in higher education. This invisibility needs to be understood within two contexts: firstly, people from marginalized communities already struggle to attain formal education, particularly higher education; and secondly, the burden of access to education is imposed on the person with disability and their family amidst absolute inaccessibility. Disability isolates the individual not only in their community but also further in the family, thereby pushing the historically marginalized disabled to extreme margins.

Farheen Anwar[5] speaks from her experience that the disabled has lowest value in the family. There is an additional pressure of marriage on girls and women with disabilities, so parents discourage their education. This is reiterated by Mayank Dohare[6] who exclaims, "It's difficult for disabled students to reach higher education because their families have less expectation from them as compared to their non-disabled siblings."

Mayank's experience of data collection as a volunteer for the study made him realize that there is a caste gap in students enrolled under the PwD category. In spite of being a part of support groups for students with disabilities in Delhi, he couldn't find Dalit and Adivasi students with disabilities. He adds, "The general assumption, however, is why would caste matter for a person with disability."

This gap is also determined on the basis of gender identity, geographical location and religious identity of the student. Some common reasons behind this caste gap are: generational economic depravity; marginalized families not being educated enough to realize the importance of higher education and/or be able to facilitate education of children

4   Surge in atrocities against Dalits and Adivasis under COVID-19 lockdown in India reported - International Dalit Solidarity Network (idsn.org)
5   Farheen Anwar was an interviewee for the study. She is a Delhi-based gender rights activist and a woman with locomotor disability. She has a Masters degree in Education from Azim Premji Unversity, Bangalore, and works on Muslim girls' and women's education.
6   Mayank Dohare was an interviewee for the study. Based in Noida, he is a Dalit student with visual impairment. Mayank is presently pursuing his undergraduate studies from Delhi

with disabilities; lack of timely awareness about public entitlements for people with disabilities in marginalized communities; admissions to higher education institutions happening on the basis of social capital, i.e., good connections and acquaintance with university administration, particularly in rural and semi-urban regions; and dominant caste students taking up most of the benefits of affirmative action.

Kurukshetra Dip[7] adds that the nature and degree of impairment are crucial to the question of access to education. An example of this would be that there are special schools in Odisha for students with visual impairment, so parents send their children there. But special schools offer only primary education, after which many children from Dalit and Adivasi communities are forced to discontinue their education. In another instance, he shares that people with speech and hearing impairments are not as obviously recognized as disabled as a person with visual or orthopaedic impairments would be, which in turn reflects in accessing public entitlements.

Reflecting on the role of social movements in initializing caste location in the experience of disability, Kurukshetra shares, "The disability movement is afraid to address the question of caste. Despite the movement being active in Odisha, I haven't come across any discussion on caste—how Dalit students struggle to even get their disability certificates." To cite another example, he shares that the responsibility of providing information about public entitlements for PwDs is on ASHA workers, who already discriminate among children on the basis of caste. Farheen reiterates the problem of identity certificate by sharing that Bahujans usually

don't have necessary documents required to avail government benefits.

Impact of COVID-19 on Persons with Disabilities from SC/ST community

The government's response to the pandemic has portrayed the question of access to higher education as a non-issue, especially for people with disabilities. A reflection of this can be seen in the Union Budget 2021-22. Not only was there no mention of people with disabilities in the budget speech presented by the Finance Minister, especially as part of COVID-19 relief packages, the larger allocation towards the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD) has also been reduced.[8]

Our study paints a more helpless picture of the impact of the pandemic on SC and ST students with disabilities. Mayank Dohare shares that access to university spaces provided peer support to students with disabilities in accessing reading material etc., which is now completely absent because of restrictions in physical interactions. While there are no guidelines in place for digital platforms to ensure accessibility of visually heavy content, online education becoming the only medium for imparting education makes it inaccessible not only for Dalit and Adivasis communities in general, but also for people with disabilities. Many disabled students do not own personal computers, laptops and mobile phones.

Equal Opportunity Cell and other support groups for students with disabilities running in the universities, if any, haven't been operational since the lockdown,

> **In the Union Budget 2021-22 speech, not only was there no mention of people with disabilities, especially as part of COVID-19 relief packages, the allocation to the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD) has also been reduced.**

7   Kurukshetra Dip was an interview for the study. He is a disability rights activist and scholar based in Odisha. He is presently in the final year of PhD in Sociology at Jawaharlal Nehru University.
8   A detailed analysis of the budget in terms of its impact on SCs and STs with disabilities, please refer to Dalit Adivasi Budget Analysis 2021-22. National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights. Retrieved from http://www.ncdhr.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/NCDHR-Budget-2021.pdf

thereby individualizing the disability question yet again. Farheen adds that the university space allowed some escape, especially to marginalized women with disabilities, for whom family is the immediate source of violence and exploitation. With the increased rate of unemployment, people with disabilities are the first to lose their job, while the possibility of getting one is already less. With such high levels of job insecurity, students pursuing higher education with the hope of entering the job market have rather been pushed to drop out. Being pushed back inside the home negates the efforts of the disabled towards social participation and inclusion.

Some of the common demands that have been raised are: accessible public infrastructure; sensitization of teaching and non-teaching staff in higher education institutions; separate and accessible hostels for students with disabilities, with reservation for SC, ST and OBC students; financial assistance for students with disabilities; formation of support groups for students with disabilities from the school level itself; Tehsil and block awareness about disability-related schemes; ongoing schemes must be operational with adequate implementation; simpler application process to avail scholarships and other schemes; sensitization of government officials from district level onwards; and, implementation of reasonable accommodation policy as mandated in RPwD Act 2016.

Adding to these, Javed Mansoori[9] shares the case of UP, where the disability pension scheme can be availed only by people whose annual income falls below the poverty line, i.e., Rs. 46,080 for rural areas and Rs. 56,460 for urban areas. The income cap should therefore be increased to Rs. 3,00,000 per annum.

There is also a general consensus on the need for sub-categorisation within the existing reservation policy to ensure that we have proportionate representation of Dalit, Adivasi and Bahujan students with disabilities. In terms of formal and informal support systems, Equal Opportunity Cells should be mandatorily set up in all educational institutions with elected representatives, particularly women and students from marginalized castes, in the decision-making body. Policy measures should be taken to protect the rights, prevent harassment, and ensure active participation of students with disabilities in higher education institutions. Regular reading groups and study circles should be started for students with disabilities to encourage and facilitate organized, collective learning.

Transgender[10] Persons

The question of trans rights in the context of access to higher education is directly linked to the legal status of trans persons.[11] The rushed enactment of the infamous Transgender Persons' (Protection of Rights) Bill in 2019 has been heavily criticized by trans activists for various reasons . Among these, the issue that one has to go through a screening process by a district screening committee in order to get a transgender identity certificate is foundational to the

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9   Javed Mansoori is a Pasmanda youth leader with locomotor disability based in Jalaun district, Bundelkhand, Uttar Pradesh. He has a graduate degree in Political Science from Bundelkhand University, and presently works with Yuva Shakti as a Block Coordinator.
10   The term transgender is used here as an umbrella category including transmasculine, transfeminine, gender non-binary, gender queer and gender non-conforming persons.
11   Lalwani, Vijayta. 2019. "Explainer: Despite criticism, the Transgender Persons Bill was just passed. What's next?". Scroll, Nov 27. Retrieved from https://scroll.in/article/944943/explainer-despite-criticism-the-transgender-persons-bill-was-just-passed-whats-next

question of access to higher education and other public entitlements, particularly for Dalits, Adivasis and other oppressed communities.

Dalit trans rights activist Grace Banu shares the case of Tamil Nadu in this context, "When I want to get an identity card, we have to stand naked in front of a team of doctors, officials and community members."[12] The Act revolves around certification process but not what must follow, i.e., welfare schemes, social security benefits and reservation policy.[13] Dalit trans students and activists interviewed for the study share their perspectives on this and other issues that contribute to access to higher education.

Invisibility and legal identity of Dalit trans persons

Reflecting on the factors leading to invisibility of trans students in higher education, Ekta Sonawane[14] shares that trans students live on their parents' money even when living away from home, while Dalit students don't have this access. They have to choose sex work, and other risky and low paying jobs, as they are excluded even from formal employment. Thus, education becomes a second priority amidst survival struggles, including saving money to have the desired body.

They share from their own experience that when they came to Delhi to appear for university entrance examinations, they faced difficulty in finding a temporary accommodation, as Dalit students usually do not have the finances to afford these expenses. Along similar lines, Riri[15] shares from their experience that since living alone on rent is even more unsafe and expensive, they had to opt for accommodation in a men's hostel because it's at least inside the campus. Using the men's washroom is an everyday discomfort and risk they have to bear as there are no gender-neutral washrooms in universities. They add that forced marriage of trans persons becomes another reason for this invisibility.

Given that access to higher education is already a struggle for Dalit communities, Aakash Sinha[16] finds it difficult to even think about Dalit trans identity. Similarly, she reiterates the issue of washrooms by sharing that she herself was initially nervous about using women's washrooms. However, Aroh Akunth[17] rather insists that it is not invisibility but erasure of Dalit trans persons from higher education where caste itself is access. They argue that the comparison between dominant caste and Dalit trans is a farce because higher education institutions are built on caste lines.

Stressing on the visibility aspect of gender identity, Aakash exclaims, "People are not ready to accept you if you are visibly trans." Along similar lines, Riri notes that, on the one hand, being closeted comes with shame, which makes you rather more vulnerable to

> Using the men's washroom is an everyday discomfort and risk trans people have to bear as there are no gender-neutral washrooms in universities. Forced marriage of trans persons becomes another reason for this invisibility.

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12   Shali, Pooja. 2019. "Stop transgender bill: Community activists say it violates their rights". India Today, Nov 27. Retrieved from https://www.indi-atoday.in/india/story/stop-transgender-bill-community-activists-say-it-violates-their-rights-1623035-2019-11-27
13   Mohan, Ram G. 2019. "Halt Implementation of Trans Act 2019: Activists". The Wire, June 5. Retrieved from https://thewire.in/lgbtqia/trans-act-2019-rules-feedback-activists
14   Ekta Sonawane is a non-binary gender queer Dalit activist based in Maharashtra and is pursuing Masters in Gender Studies from Ambedkar University, Delhi.
15   Riri (chosen name) is a Dalit trans rights activist based in Odisha and is currently pursuing their PhD from Pondicherry University.
16   Aakash Sinha is a Dalit transfeminine person from Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, She is currently pursuing M.Phil. in Comparative Literature from University of Delhi.
17   Aroh Akunth is a non-binary Dalit queer activist currently pursuing their Masters in Modern Indian Studies from the University of Gottingen, Germany.

> **Putting transgenders under an oppressed caste category erases the caste privileges that savarna transgenders have. It is better for us to have caste- and gender-based reservation so that Dalit women and Dalit transgenders get representation.**

violence and sexual abuse; on the other hand, the visibility of gender performance also makes you vulnerable to bullying and harassment in schools and universities.

Aroh explains that legal identification boxes Indian citizens into biologically assigned identities, and the same problem extends to trans laws. "How will you trace transness when it's a process to be trans?" They further add that most Dalit trans students are enrolled in universities under SC reservation. So, the question of Dalit trans reservation needs to be addressed differently as there are already laws in place for Dalits. This is reiterated by Ekta when they explain that Dalit trans people prioritize their gender identity as they are not accepted within their own communities. What is needed instead is that they realize the value of caste-based reservation and use it to access public entitlements meant for SCs. Along these lines, Aakash adds that meritocracy and competition in higher education becomes a bigger hurdle when one lives with emotional and psychological distress.

The recent proposition of trans persons being included in the OBC category complicates the question of trans reservation even further. Living Smile Vidya argues in an interview, "We need reservation on the basis of gender, not caste. But it has to be more complex. But I definitely do not want to be OBC. And you will understand why as a Dalit, I do not want to come under the OBC category of all things! Putting transgenders under an oppressed caste category erases the caste privileges that savarna transgenders have. It is better for us to have caste- and gender-based reservation so that Dalit women and Dalit transgenders get representation. Otherwise, reservation will only benefit savarna

transgenders and Dalit men." [18]

Reflecting on the role of social movements in addressing the issues of Dalit trans identity, Riri shares, "Trans community portrays itself as casteless, but the Guru Maa is always upper caste, NGO funding on trans issues go to organizations run by upper castes, while the menial jobs are given to Dalits." Aakash shares her experience of attending a queer pride parade where bringing up the issues of caste and Kashmir has often been discouraged. Access to higher education has Brahminical roots, and a Dalit trans student is more affected by it than a dominant caste person.

Dalit queer and trans persons, on the other hand, do not come from safe private spaces. Since there is lack of education among our communities, there is also lack of acceptance. They explain that even though socialization is a safety issue deeply influenced by caste location, social transition is still easier for marginalized trans persons. It's the medical transition that is more difficult and riskier. Within higher education institutions, meritorious students are also discriminated against and abused if they are Dalit, almost as if they are supposed to remain non-meritorious.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Transgender Community

As an immediate fallout of the pandemic, even unsafe work like begging and sex work has stopped, which was the main source of livelihood for trans persons. For students, exams were conducted despite the pandemic, leading to increased rates of suicide

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18   2013. "(Trans)gender and caste lived experience – Transphobia as a form of Brahminism: An interview of Living Smile Vidya. Sanhati, Jan 26. Retrieved from http://sanhati.com/excerpted/6051/

among marginalized students, particularly as they lack access to education. Online education has been mostly inaccessible, yet it has continued. It's almost as if the state does not recognize everyone's right to attain education.

Riri reiterates this by adding that SC students' scholarships have been stopped for months during the pandemic. Aakash, on the other hand, notes that the experience has also been subjective as for some people who can access online education, online classes have proved to be rather helpful in helping them avoid social interaction. But for trans persons living with abusive families, online classes have rather pushed them back to homes, while they only had university spaces as a temporary escape.

Some immediate concerns that needs to be addressed are: legal recognition of caste identity within trans reservation; inclusion of Bahujan history in mainstream education; reservation in government hostels and accommodation for outstation candidates applying for admissions to universities; gender-neutral washrooms in campuses and hostels; common restrooms for trans persons, like girls common rooms, with basic care services, which they can use especially during medical transitioning as the process requires constant care; build mechanisms for self-identification of trans identity; abolition of dress code and uniforms in schools and colleges as they force students into assigned gender binaries; sensitization programmes for trans and queer issues as present for women's issues; addition of transgender as an option for gender identity category in application forms etc.; anti-sexual harassment laws in higher education institutions to protect the rights of trans students, with decision-making positions for trans and Dalit trans students; safe commuting/travel options for trans and queer persons; and student support groups – Ambedkarite collectives and organisations like Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA) and Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students' Association (BAPSA) must take up feminist and queer issues.

But for trans persons living with abusive families, online classes have rather pushed them back to homes, while they only had university spaces as a temporary escape.

ix Conclusion & Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has made visible the longstanding prejudice against students from marginalized communities. The study has outlined various impacts of the pandemic on access to higher education for students from marginalized groups, namely Dalits and Adivasis. The pandemic has put students in a dilemma on whether to continue their education for several reasons. This included livelihood crisis, inaccessibility of online mode of education, delay in disbursal of government entitlements, especially for girls since their need to access education is often overlooked.

During such a critical period, state negligence and apathy towards Dalit and Adivasi students is clearly evident, highlighting the exclusionary tendencies in our education system. There is a strong need to re-evaluate our education system to address the existing inequalities and make it more inclusive. One should not forget that for thousands of Dalit and Adivasi students, education is the only means to break the vicious circle of economic deprivation and oppression. This section presents recommendations emerging from the study. It highlights the recommendations for strengthening access to higher education to students from marginalised communities during the critical situation of COVID-19.

Recommendations

I. Increase access to government entitlements, particularly Post Matric Scholarships (PMS)

- Release pending PMS amounts to SC/ST students who have dropped out, and give them the option to re-enrol with full fee waiver.

- Immediate release of pending PMS funds to all students who haven't received the amount during the pandemic.

- An awareness campaign to highlight and publish information about PMS and other entitlements, along with associated timelines and enrolment process. This involves placing kiosks and posters in universities and villages.

- Every college should have a help desk to support students facing challenges to file scholarship applications and to ensure that all students receive scholarship on time.

- 50% reservation for SC/ST women in all scholarship schemes offered by state and union governments, along with 50% reservation of seats for SC/ST women in women's hostels to ensure that girls are able to continue their education without many hindrances.

- Full scholarship should be awarded at the beginning of the year and deposited in the student's account at the beginning of the course. It should be drawable year after year if conditions are met. This will ensure students are able to complete their course without any administrative blocks.

- A guarantee of continuation of scholarship amount once all requirements are fulfilled for the entire course of study.

- A dashboard to monitor disbursement of scholarship to all student beneficiaries that is updated real-time. Plus, a monitoring cell to be established within nodal ministries.

- Government helpline to ensure that students can get all the information they need regarding scholarships.

- Nodal ministries should institute an active complaint mechanism to address complaints and grievances of students, along with clear guidelines regarding scholarships and other

government entitlements.

- Penalty should be imposed for deliberate negligence on the official responsible for releasing funds in nodal ministries.

- MSJE and MOTA should give course-wise disaggregated data of students for a clear assessment while preparing due estimates of the PMS program in every financial year.

II. Increasing access to online education

- State governments should provide special emergency allowance to enable access to technology (internet), laptop and online library. It should also make classes accessible through different mediums like YouTube and Doordarshan, among others.

- In areas without electricity and internet, especially in tribal areas, the government should take measures at the local level to start centres where students can access online classes with facilitators and counsellors.

- The government should provide technological training to SC/ST students, especially women students, to access online education during the pandemic.

- Students to be given digital-learning kits for easy access to classes. Universities/colleges should ensure easy availability of study material in both printed and recorded forms.

- The government should provide SC/ST girls with smartphones and internet plans to access online classes. That's because during the pandemic,

education of the girls is compromised and less prioritised.

- Scholarships, particularly PMS, should be calculated for the full year. Even during the pandemic, it must be released to the students to address the issue of livelihood and online access.

III. Financial assistance and social security

- Students who have lost their families/parents during disasters should be given special long-term financial assistance to complete their higher education.

- A minimum social protection plan that guarantees access to universal basic healthcare and basic income security to all Dalit and Adivasi students during the pandemic. This to ensure that students are not forced into taking up employment for survival needs.

- PMS should take into account accommodation costs. Its guidelines need to be revised to include the accommodation cost, as well as basic livelihood allowance as per the tier of city/town a college/university is based.

- Contingency budget should be introduced to meet emergency needs of SC/ST students during emergency situations like COVID-19.

IV. Focus on students with disability and transgender students

- Scholarships with effective implementation for SC/ST students with disabilities and transgender students.

MSJE and MOTA should give course-wise disaggregated data of students for a clear assessment while preparing due estimates of the PMS program in every financial year.

Ensure accessibility of online classes along with provisions for accessible study material for students with disabilities.

- COVID-19 relief packages for students with disabilities, including financial assistance, insurance policies and access to medical facilities.

- Ensure accessibility of online classes along with provisions for accessible study material for students with disabilities.

- Make SC/ST hostels accessible for students with disabilities, with mandatory PwD reservation.

- COVID-19 relief packages for transgender students, including financial assistance, insurance cover and free access to education.

- Support with documentation for transgender students to access government entitlements.

- Set up an Equal Opportunity Cell with proportionate representation from Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi students with disabilities in all colleges to address student grievances.

- Provide disaggregated data specifically on people with disabilities and trans students, with a special drive to ensure their enrolment numbers in higher education increase.

Conclusion

As the report on 'Confronting the Pandemic: Impact on Dalit and Adivasi Students in Accessing Higher Education' reaches its conclusion, it is essential to note that India is still in the throes of COVID-19. The virus has swept across urban and rural communities, multiplying the suffering of a population already on the edge. In many states, a second lockdown was announced, once again disrupting an economy and a society that was limping back towards capacity.

Mirroring how crises play out in an unequal society, yet again, Dalit/SC/ST groups endured the worst of it. Students from these communities are robbed twice, once of social security, and then their aspirations and dreams to secure their future.

The study was carried out under unprecedented circumstances, and the sample, therefore, was limited. However, it would be fair to say that the representation provides us with an accurate understanding of the larger issues at hand. Education of students from disadvantaged communities has become a casualty of the pandemic, especially those pursuing higher education. Many have been forced to support their families by taking up part-time or full-time employment to supplement household income.

Other barriers like poor technology, limited or no access to digital devices, and environments ill-suited to learning are issues that will continue to grow as schools and colleges normalize the practice of online classes. It is also necessary to recognize that for the marginalised student, the loss of two years is critical. In some cases, it not only ends the pursuit of higher education, but also erases the glimmer of hope that education brings. If nearly 51% are unlikely to be able to continue their education due to non-disbursal of funds, it will be a real travesty of justice for students from marginalized communities.

In this new scenario, students depend on learning opportunities, resources, activities and interactions that can bridge the gaps towards achieving equal learning outcomes. Besides addressing caste discrimination among administration staff and faculty, it is imperative to learn the needs of students during this time—if they require financial support to pay fees, or need digital equipment like mobile phones, laptops and high-speed internet. Furthermore,

surveys are an effective, necessary tool to help gather data, understand the plight of students, continually monitor the situation and enable collective decision-making.

In India, it is well-known that students from vulnerable communities rarely receive support from faculty or even institutions. Therefore, any financial, social or academic support and guidance that might benefit these students are also stalled during a crisis. In this context, financial aid and schemes like the PMS are imperative to prevent the loss of a generation of Dalit, SC and ST graduates. In 2021, many states opened PMS portals; however, this went unnoticed in the shadow of the bigger crisis. Several students were unable to apply due to the short window in which applications had to be submitted. Students were unaware when the portal was opened, and many missed higher-education opportunities due to the information gap.

Before we conclude, we must also recognize that these students face overwhelming odds and overcome significant challenges in the hope of a better career and prospects for themselves and their families. In the recent past, social media has been leveraged to draw attention to the challenge of caste discrimination in higher education. In a horrifying video that went viral, an Associate Professor at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kharagpur, abused students and their parents . The professor used profanities and threatened to fail students, challenging them to complain to the Ministry of Women and Child Development and Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. The professor followed up with cruel disregard for lives lost to COVID-19 when she dismissed a request from a student who lost their grandfather to be excused from class for a few days. This incident is just one example of a whole system of discrimination.

Besides physical and verbal abuse, students from SC/ST/Dalit communities also suffer a financial handicap. Coverage of PMS is at an 11-year low. In 2010-2011, there were 4.32 lakh beneficiaries. In 2020-21, there are only 15,629 beneficiaries. There is sufficient evidence to suggest the number of applications is in decline because of technical issues with the portal, inadequacies in the application process, lack of cooperation by universities, and disinterest in ensuring that the disadvantaged receive their right to education.

This report attempts to quantify the aspirations of Dalit youth and the price they have paid through the lockdowns and the pandemic. But what has also been highlighted is that about 75% of students would like to continue their education despite all odds. They see PMS as a vehicle for upliftment and empowerment, and the hope is the government listens to their woes and ensures smooth functioning of the PMS and other scholarships.

Marginalised students are excluded from mainstream access to better education and employment opportunities. Worse, they are subject to caste humiliation, and many are pushed to end their lives. In the face of such despair, it is pertinent to recall the advice of Dr Ambedkar to "educate, agitate and organize". Education is the key to breaking the yoke of oppression. Dalit, SC, ST, and other minority students need to be heard, their concerns recognized and validated. The students need to be welcomed into a system that protects them, wants them to succeed and preserves their right even during a crisis.

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CONFRONTING THE PANDEMIC

RESPONSE AND RECOVERY FOR DALIT AND ADIVASI STUDENTS

About Dalit Arthik Adhikar Andolan (DAAA)-NCDHR

Dalit Arthik Adhikar Andolan (DAAA) is a Unit of the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights and is working towards securing and strengthening the economic rights of the Dalit and Adivasis Community and believes strongly in bolstering the agency of the community. The main vehicle is through access to public entitlements like Livelihood schemes, education, entrepreneurship and asset building through the constitutional provisions of budgetary allocations. DAAA believes strongly in the inclusion and promotion of marginalised communities in the economy of the country. DAAA makes strategic interventions in public policy, planning, budgeting, advocacy and research and implementation and monitoring of the SCP TSP sub plans. DAAA has worked extensively in the last 7 years to make scholarships a reality for students from the rural and semi urban areas and has managed to ensure scholarships reach atleast one lac students. DAAA encourages, supports and enables students to access the post matric scholarships and works on ensuring the effective implementation of this scheme.

Description of cover page: Dalit Youth from Rajamala Village, Idukki District of Kerala walk 6 KM through the forests to reach this spot at Eravikulam National Park to access Online Classes.

...age,
...to
...s online

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Dalit Rights are Human Rights - Cast out Caste

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DALIT ARTHIK ADHIKAR ANDOLAN