

# Understanding the Factors of Dalit Girls' Exclusion in Education

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## Abstract

The relationship of Dalits with exclusion is a common scenario in India over several periods of time. Since ancient times, Dalits have faced different social, political, and cultural exclusion in the Indian society. When it comes to education, the exclusion is still prevalent in various part of modern India. Especially in the low-access, caste dominant areas, the situation is worse for the higher education of Dalits. For girls, it becomes more complicated to access the general resources to continue education without hassles. Therefore, the literacy rate (56.6% from census 2011) of Dalit women is still very low in India compared to the general population of this country, which creates a gap in their social, political, and economic engagements in the country. Irrespective of constant governmental efforts, the complexities of the Dalit women's education are still very much persistent in India, after over 74 years of independence. Thus, this paper mainly focuses on factors such as gender- and caste-based discrimination, low enrolment in schools, scholarship issues, violence against them, and so on, based on secondary data, which create exclusion in Dalit girls' education. This paper also tries to highlight the constitutional provisions. It further highlights the history of Dalit girls' exclusion and their struggle for education in India. The ultimate goal of the paper is to underline the current situation of Dalit girls' education and the root cause of the problem, to ensure closing of the gap between governmental efforts and Dalit girls' education in India.

**Keywords:** Exclusion, Dalit, Girls, Education

## INTRODUCTION

Education is the key factor for the development of any country in every sphere. Development can only be possible when every community and people have the equal resources, rights, and achievements throughout the country. Besides, education also determines the literacy, and progress, and also opens new doors for experiments in every part of life. Primary education is important not only for the country's development but also for self-development, achievements, and to exercise equal rights in the society. However, unfortunately, in the case of Dalits, the scenario has been quite different in India for a long period of time. The rate of Dalit education is constantly poor in the country. The government, with several laws and amendments, though tries to ensure equal education for them, the rates are visibly low, especially in higher education. The presence of exclusion in academic and non-academic areas is quite prominent in their lives till now. Though, irrespective of having so much socio-economic disparities and isolations, the literacy rate of Dalits has improved gradually (66%, 2011 census). Similarly, when around 16.6% of the total Indian population are Dalits, the enrolment in higher education is still very low, especially for women. In 2018-2019, only 11% of the Dalits enrolled in graduation courses all over India (The Mint, 2019). Thus, irrespective of having the reservations by the Government of India in education, the rate of enrolment in education by Dalits is remarkably poor. Even after so many years of independence, the cases of exclusion by untouchability, the distance from the school mainly in rural areas, and financial imbalance further creates much more difficulties for them in education. In addition, for

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Dalit girls it becomes more difficult to live a standard life with very low access to resources and continue their education thoroughly. Hence, the rate of drop-out is high, and social exclusion, harassments, and bullying create a prominent difference, both in schools and the community, which further make it difficult for them to continue their education.

## Who are Dalits in India?

The concept of Dalits emerged from the ancient Hindu culture of India, when society was divided on basis of class and strata. The lowest strata of society were considered as the Dalits back then. Over a period of time, the concept of Dalits has changed. During the medieval and Mughal era, the Dalits were oppressed and more isolated. Before independence, Mahatma Gandhi called them Harijans and worked for their equal rights in the everlasting caste system. During that time, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar understood the need for legal rights to ensure the accessibility of Dalits to resources, which could only be possible through education and engagement of them in the workforce equally with the general caste. This was followed by the constitutional amendments for Dalits, by removing the concept of untouchability in the society. This further generated the concept of scheduled tribes and scheduled castes in the society, followed by the SC/ST Atrocities Act in 1989 and other different governing bodies, to ensure the rights of Dalits in society by stopping exclusion and disparity by the upper class people.

## History of Dalit Women's Struggle in Education

The oppression and struggle of Dalit women in India has been going on for decades. Not only Dalits, but women in general faced a lot of subjugation and restrictions in different eras. During the ancient era, women were considered as equal participators in education like men, irrespective of their classes. The examples of Apala, Lopamudra, Ghosha, and Visvabara are significant evidences in this case. They had equal rights to participate in the ved gyan, horse riding, and war with men. However, in the medieval period, the scenario changed drastically, where women became so much restricted to their houses as secondary participators in society, and their right to education became a matter of high-class opportunity.

During that time, with the emergence of class division in Hindu society, it created a prominent gap between upper-class and lower-class women. Not only did it restrict the lower-class women from getting education, it gradually snatched their basic rights to general resources, which were only available to the upper-class women. They became the working and slavery class of people, who had to honour the decisions of the upper-class people in society. Though during the pre-independence era, Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar raised their voice against the years-old oppression based on caste, the struggle of Dalits, especially women, remains constant. Moreover, during 1800s to 1940s, Dalits had to face extreme harassment in schools, like untouchability issues, with no right to sit beside an upper-class student, bullying, and corporal punishments with cane, stick, and negligence, which are very much present even now in different parts of the country. Hence, the constant rates of illiteracy among the Dalits are stagnant. Although during 1850s, the Caste Disability Removal Act theoretically removed the caste-based discrimination, majorly, in 1948, with the hand of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the legal process of applying this act started. During 1991, Dalits were the least literate population in India, after so many years of independence. The rate of retention in higher education also was too low. Even among the few Dalit students, women were considerably fewer in number than men. Thus, a large number of Dalit women population remains far behind in their education. Over a period of time, with constant governmental monitoring and policies, the literacy rate of Dalit girls has increased from 15.72% to 32.61% during 1986 to 2000; however, that was still low compared to the general average women and literacy rate of Dalit boys during that time. Less access to schooling and less exposure to the primary, secondary, and higher level of education majorly confined them by limiting their development compared to the general population. Hence, the subjugation and exclusion of Dalit women in education and other sectors of life remain persistent.

## Policies and Schemes for Dalit Education in India

The struggle of Dalits for their rights is everlasting in society since a long time. Though over a period of time, the issues are going down in number, it is still present in different corners of India, both in urban and rural areas.

The exclusion and constant suppression by upper-class people is still present in society. This not only restricted the growth of the Dalits in different sectors of their lives, but also caused a deep-rooted acceptance in their minds that they are the submissive and lower part of society, and they are born to be excluded. As a result, like other factors, education became difficult to access compared to the general population. Thus, the Government of India has implemented several policies and laws for the Dalits in India, to develop their educational status by ensuring their equal access to education.

- Article 14: Equal protection by government irrespective of any caste, religion, race, and sex.
- Article 15: Prohibition of discrimination irrespective of any caste, religion, race, and sex. That means irrespective of any caste, religion, and sex, everyone has the equal access to the resources.
- Article 16: Equal rights in the employment. Relaxation for SC/ST in the government jobs.
- Article 17: Abolition of untouchability and included it as a punishable offence.
- Article 29 (2): No students can be prevented to get admission in any government educational institutions due to religion, caste, and sex.
- Article 45: Free and compulsory education by government to all till the age of 14 years.
- Article 46: Special educational care for SC and ST students and protection from any social injustice and social exploitations.
- Article 331 to 335: Reservation for scheduled caste and scheduled tribe for posts, services in different states.
- Article 338: Commission for scheduled tribe and scheduled caste to ensure their rights, needs, and prevent them from any kind of exploitations.

Along with these constitutional provisions, the Government of India has implemented several policies to ensure equal education for the Dalits, such as the Kothari Commission (1964-66) to establish equal education for all; National Policy for Education (1986) to eradicate the disparity from education; Policy Formulation and Programme of Action (POA, 1992) to improve the enrolments and retention of SCs in education; and a five-year plan where equal education, women engagement, and prevention of exclusion were very important areas. Even

over a period of time, the Government of India has identified the needs of Dalits and implemented programmes and scholarships to eradicate their exclusion and uplift their educational status, such as ashram schools, upgradation of SC merit, free books, hostels, remedial coaching, pre- and post-metric scholarships, books banks, mid-day meal, anganwadi and balwadi, teacher training and special services, community-related monitoring, orientation programmes, National Fellowship for Scheduled Caste (NFSC) and National Fellowship for Scheduled Tribe (NFST) for Ph.D., and other alternative government, state, and private scholarships. Even the implementation of Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Rashtriya Madhyamik Siksha Abhiyan (RMSA) were two major programmes to ensure equal education for all, irrespective of any class, caste, religion, and race, to ensure the overall growth of every child of the country through education.

### Exclusion of Dalit Girls in the World

Like India, the presence of Dalits and their exclusion is present all over the world. The mere difference in the name is the main dissimilarity in this case. However, the oppression, violence, and exclusion on the basis of their class, caste, religion, or race are still the same for them.

In the case of Bangladesh, the scenario is quite similar to India, as it was an extended part of India before the British Raj. Hence, the oppression and violence against Dalit women are also visibly the same for these two countries. As the major population of Bangladesh is Islamic, the oppression is mainly based on religion and habitation by the upper-class population of the country. In addition, Dalit women have to face extreme restrictions and oppression to practice their equal rights. The scenario is quite similar for the black women in America, where their constant struggle and exclusion is still a matter of concern. The exclusion on the basis of race not only restricts them to participate equally with the white women in education, politics, and labour force, it also becomes one of the major reasons for violence and harassment in the society. The recent case of a Dalit girl (Neha Singh) from India who faced extreme oppression, bullying, and harassment by the upper-class Indians in California State University inevitably shows the deep-rooted casteism and hierarchical difference in society even across the border. The restrictions, constant bullying, and harassments in education and the high-ranking job sectors still continue

for the Dalit women all over the world. Similarly, the powerlessness, unequal labour division, violence, and sexual harassment in the work place by the white people in Australia shows the exclusion and oppression of black women. Besides extreme poverty, less access to the resources and increasing number of rapes, murders, and sexual harassments in the workplace in the name of caste and lower status of society are causing more difficulties for the Dalit women to exercise their rights equally like the general population all over the world.

## Factors of Exclusion of Dalit Girls in Education: The Indian Scenario

The exclusion and stagnation of Dalit girls' education, both in the primary and secondary level of education, are subjected to various challenging factors that are creating a prominent restriction for the girls to leave home and participate in proper academic institutions. Hence, the development and empowerment of Dalit girls are restricted in several areas, such as education, health, politics, and economy. UNESCO, in their 2006 report, once mentioned the high dropout rate of Indian Dalits (44.67%), which is far behind the general population of India (Kumar, 2017). The major challenging factors are poverty, caste discrimination, cultural exclusion, violence against Dalit women, child labour, and their lack of access to the resources.

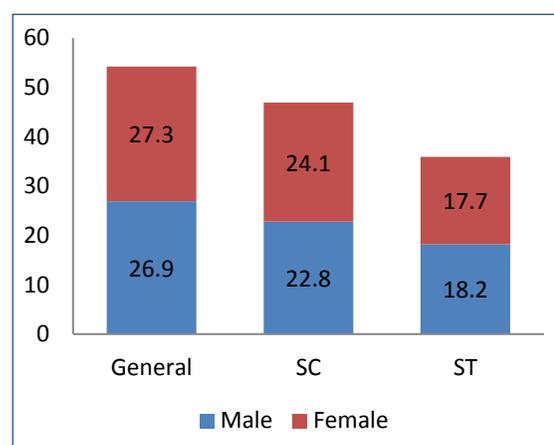
### • Gender and Caste-Based Discrimination

The caste-based discrimination and segregation in habitation caused a major separation between Dalit women and non-Dalits. Both in society and schools, there are ample cases of caste-based discriminations in the name of untouchable, impure, and polluted caste, which generally makes it difficult for the Dalit girls to participate in school events, as well as continue their education. Not only is it by the upper class students, it is very much visible in the school among the teaching and non-teaching staff, who create discrimination between the two classes. The perceptions of Dalit parents and students also have a great impact on such caste based differences in school, as they have to face daily struggles in school and constant exclusion of their caste. Their constant struggle as they face separation in seating arrangements from the non-Dalit population, both in classroom and during midday meals, less care, extreme corporal punishments, and extra work assignments by the teachers further causes

more physical, as well as mental harassments for the Dalit girls in schools (Sabarwal & Sonalkar, 2015). Along with this, in the case of higher education, they often had to face sexual and mental harassment as they hold reservations in education. This further creates bullying by the upper class, as they consider Dalits have no right to study and their presence decreases the number of seats available for others because of reservations (Singh, 2017). Hence, the struggle of Dalits are prevalent in every part of their education, and for girls, in particular, it becomes more complicated to participate and continue their education with such gender- and caste-based discriminations in institutions.

### • Less Enrolment in Higher Education

One of the key reasons for Dalit oppression is their extreme poverty and economic instability in life. When it comes to education, it becomes a matter of struggle and a thing of luxury given their poverty. Due to the unstable income source, the issue of their landlessness and property makes it difficult for the Dalit parents to meet the needs of their children in education, in terms of educational materials such as books, copies, and tuition fees, to continue their education in the long run. Apart from this, the illiteracy of Dalit parents, fear, and gender bias, along with social restrictions further caused Dalit girls to discontinue their education after the primary level (Subhramaniyam, 2016). Moreover, enrolment in colleges is extremely low by the Dalit, which shows the prominent difference with the general population of India. Thus, their development in education is still considerably low in India.

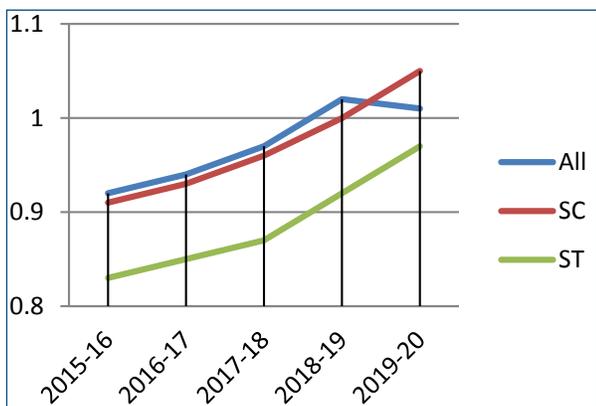


Source: All India Survey on Higher Education Report (2019-20).

**Fig. 1: Gross Enrolment Ratio in Higher Education 2019-20**

● *Illiteracy and Distance from School*

The difference between Dalit and non-Dalit female literacy rate shows the clear difference between the educational statuses of these two classes. According to the 2011 census, the literacy rate of SC female is 56.05%, whereas the male literacy rate is 75.02%, and overall female literacy rate is 65.46% and total literacy rate of ST population is 59%. Hence, the gap between general population and gender-wise educational disparity is still very much present among the Dalit and non-Dalit population. The major reason for the discontinuation and poor educational status is lack of access to the schools and higher institutions. Due to extreme poverty and caste issues, the major population of Dalit girls rely on the government schools which are present in their community. However, the lack of school facilities in extreme rural areas and slums further make it difficult to enrol themselves in schools. Along with this, the domestic work pressure, excessive work load, and restrictions from the society further create more difficulties for the Dalit girls to continue their education far from their habitation. Hence, the constant differences in various levels of school enrolment are very much visible for both Dalit girls and boys till now.



Source: AISHE 2016-17, 2017-18, and 2019-20.

**Fig. 2: Trend in Gender Parity Index of Dalit Students**

**Table 1: Group and Gender-Wise Student Enrolment 2019-20**

Groups	Gender	
	Girls	Boys
General	18892612	19643747
Scheduled Caste	2803359	2854313
Scheduled Tribe	1083463	1072646

Source: All India Survey on Higher Education Report 2019-20.

● *Exclusion from School Events and Cultural Programmes*

The issue of exclusion is very much present in school events, such as sports and cultural programmes. UNICEF (2006), in their study, showed that the upper class non-Dalits consider that Dalit girls have no right to participate with them in the same events in the schools in Bihar. In addition to this, the teachers and staff also discriminate in the role given to Dalit and non-Dalit girls in school events. Hence, majorly, Dalit girls either prefer to compete with only Dalits or they remain uninterested in participating in any school events. They have to face extreme humiliation due to their social status if they defeat non-Dalit students. As a result, the interest and motivation of Dalit girls in school programmes remain very limited.

● *Frequent Dropouts*

Due to the ever-lasting issues attached to Dalit girls, education remains a difficult part of their lives. Besides the extreme poverty, harassment and struggle in their daily lives make it a huge problem for the girls to continue their education.

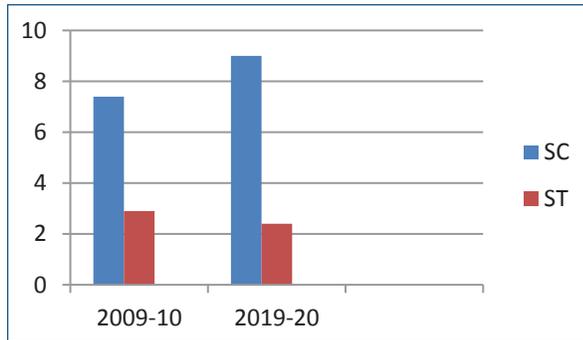
**Table 2: Rate of Girls' Dropout in Different Classes of School in Five Years**

Level	General		Scheduled Caste (SC)		Scheduled Tribe (ST)	
	2014-15	2019-20	2014-15	2019-20	2014-15	2019-20
I-V	3.88	0.3	4.20	1.62	6.84	3.45
I-VIII	4.60	0.07	6.03	3.39	8.71	5.65
I-X	16.88	10.25	19.05	17.39	24.40	25.51

Source: Educational Statistics at a glance 2018, Unified District Information System for Education Plus report (UDISE+ 2019-20).

Though educational status in India has changed a lot in these five years, there is still a high rate of dropouts, mainly in higher education, among the Dalit girls; this clearly shows a difference between them and the general population. Along with this, their parents are illiterate and unable to provide equal resources for their education. Thus, the lack of guidance, poor understanding of subjects, the biased attitudes of the teachers in the school, and the dropout culture in the community creates a negative perception of schools and education among the Dalit girls. In addition, the absenteeism rate due to outside

work and unemployment make them consider education as a waste of time and resources. Moreover, the distance from their house for higher education, lack of traditional educational patterns, low interest, child marriage, and fear of harassment and exploitation causes the increased rate of dropouts, majorly in higher education, among the Dalit girls.



Source: AISHE Report 2010-11 and 2019-20.

**Fig. 3: Rate of Dalit Teaching Staff Enrolment in Ten Years**

● *Lack of Dalit Teachers in Institutions*

Along with the students, the number of Dalit teachers, both in schools and colleges, are also limited. It is clear that teachers from the same community bring a certain level of confidence and interest among the students, to discuss and learn things properly in the institutions. In this regard, a study on Uttar Pradesh further highlighted that though the number of Dalit teachers in the higher educational institutions is limited in that state, the presence of Dalit teachers mostly in rural areas provides a certain amount of safety, courage, and relief among the students, to continue their education. The case studies further showed that Dalit women preferred to continue their MPhil. and Ph.D. works under the Dalit teachers, as the upper caste teachers mostly prefer to guide the upper caste students (Vandana, 2020). Thus, the continuation and quality of education are highly interlinked with the presence of Dalit teachers in the education of Dalits.

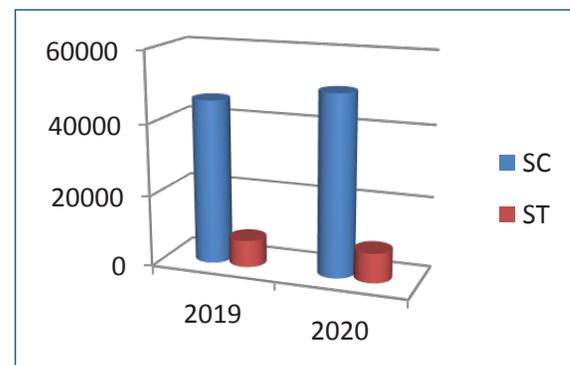
● *Lack of Access to Resources and Social Rights*

The social exclusion in the name of untouchability is an ever-existing issue for the Dalits. In addition, their lack of access to social resources and unequal rights, further make their life miserable. The issue of less access to tube wells and water tanks, poor adolescence and reproductive health, maternal health facilities, antenatal care, and

less access to employment make the situation more problematic for the Dalit girls in rural Rajasthan. Even the pre- and post-natal pregnancy health and nutrition are highly ignored for the Dalit girls. In the case of education and employment, the non-Dalit upper class people consider that Dalits have no right to education and to work along with them (Kalaiselvan & Maheswari, 2014). Therefore, due to this exclusion and subjugation, the scope of equal rights of the Dalits in societal resources remains limited.

● *Issues of Scholarships*

Though the Government of India, as well as different state governments, have implemented a number of scholarship programmes for the Dalits, awareness regarding these is very poor among the Dalit students as well as their parents. Further, the delays in scholarships increases the problem for the poor Dalit families in continuing the education of their children. A study in Coimbatore district verified the above situation, as only 7.5% of the students are availing themselves of the free hostel facilities and 67.5% of the parents have concerns, as in spite of having the scholarships, the scholarships hardly cover the financial needs of the students. Though the government is providing uniforms and books for the Dalit students, the scholarships hardly cover the daily needs, such as transportation and tuition costs, especially in secondary and higher secondary level of education (Radhakrishnan, 2018). Delays in scholarships further complicate the situation for the parents in taking care of the education expenses. Besides, the schools inform them about the scholarships, but due to frequent absenteeism, most of the students remain unaware of the educational programmes and scholarships. Thus, in spite of having a lot of governmental facilities, Dalit girls are still a long way from using them, in various parts of India.



Source: National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) 2019 and 2020.

**Fig. 4: Increased Rates of Crimes against SC and STs in India**

### • Physical and Social Violence and Child Labour

Dalit girls are subjected to extreme harassment, along with violence and exploitation both in schools and working sectors. The current cases of Hathras, Kathua, R. Chitra (six-year-old girl from Tamil Nadu, 1996), Bhanwadi Devi from Rajasthan (1997), Suman Rani from Haryana (1998), and many more unknown cases of rape and sexual assault of Dalit women by the upper class are still showing the ugly truth of society. The emerging cases of eve teasing, trafficking, rapes, and harassments are a clear picture of their struggles. In addition, due to extreme casteism, they often have to face physical and sexual violence by the upper class people in public, for exercising equal rights or rising against their oppression. Besides, for using social resources or sitting with the upper class girls in schools, they often face bullying and mental torture by the students. Due to extreme poverty, Dalit girls often work as child labour in different sectors or houses of the upper class. Even in those areas, they frequently face bullying, punishments, and sexual exploitations. Around 1,137 crimes have been reported against Dalit women in 2020 (NCRB, 2020) and the increased rate of cases against Dalits shows a concerning picture. Even caste-based crimes are very common for the Dalit girls, majorly in rural areas; unfortunately, justice and punishments are very rare. As a result, due to the constant fear, anxiety, and extreme struggles in daily life, education in general comes low on their priority list. Hence, the rate of Dalit girls' participation and their status in higher education remains remarkably poor in this country.

**Table 3: Crime Cases across the Country against Dalits**

State	2020	
	SC	ST
Uttar Pradesh	12714	-
Bihar	7368	-
Rajasthan	7017	1878
Madhya Pradesh	6899	2401
Maharashtra	2569	668
Delhi	69	-
Odisha	-	624
Telangana	-	573
Chhattisgarh	-	502

Source: National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2020.

### • Psychological Issues

The constant fear of judgement, injustice, and exclusion in society has a significant impact on the psychology of the Dalit students, specifically the women. Thus, the extreme self-devaluation is increasing the cases of Dalit students' struggle in the educational sector in several parts of the country. Due to the years of suppression, injustice, class differences, and social inequalities, the behaviour of the Dalits is impacted severely (Maurya, 2018). Most of the students often consider the situation their fate and remain silent; they do not speak up against the odds, engage in any classroom discussion or group activities in the educational institutions, which eventually affects their educational growth. Moreover, Dalit students with decent financial conditions prefer to live a respectful life, rather than fighting against the society and completing their higher education. Though the scenario is changing very slowly with the financial assistance and support of the government in their educational growth, the interpersonal skills of the Dalit students are still significantly low in various parts of the country.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

There is major need to uplift the status of Dalit girls, for their ultimate development. For this, education and unbiased treatment should be given utmost priority. The government and NGOs should reach out to the Dalits in every corner of the country, so that they can have knowledge of their rights and policies regarding that, and exercise them freely for their development. The gap between the policies and beneficiaries should be highlighted with time-to-time assessments. Along with this, the government, with the help of voluntary organisations, should arrange for separate community-based tuition facilities and teacher trainings. The presence of Dalit teachers in Dalit-dominant areas is required to make them feel comfortable in the school. In Gujarat and Tamilnadu, organisations like WESWA and Navsarjan are already working for the residential schooling and education of the Dalits. This approach can be adopted by the government for the better and immediate outcome of Dalit education, in both rural and urban Dalit-based communities.

Due to extreme poverty and livelihood issues, Dalits often consider education a waste of time. Thus, it is important to make them aware of the importance of education and generate economical and livelihood opportunities for them to develop income stability. Therefore, the economic stability and empowerment of Dalit girls will automatically increase their interest in education, and will make an ideal image for the other Dalit girls to pursue their higher education. Apart from this, constant monitoring of the schools by the educational officers from the government should be mandatory, to provide equal, unbiased, and casteless education in schools. Not only that, crimes against Dalits should be given immediate attention, and punishments should be doled out by the local police and courts as well, to safeguard the rights of the Dalits in every sphere of life.

Finally, education is the ultimate medium to spread equality among all people in a country. Unfortunately, after so many years of independence, it is important to spread awareness and knowledge to the people about the baseless casteism culture and constant oppression in society. Hence, India still needs time-to-time community-based monitoring and assessments to identify the needs of the Dalit girls, to spread a hassle-free unbiased atmosphere and to provide a better educational environment like the mainstream population.

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