

## Discussion

# From Textbooks to Campuses: How Caste Continues to Undermine Dalit Representation and Social Justice in Indian Education

*Locating Ambedkar in the Curriculum*



The National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), a body responsible for publishing textbooks and other educational resources in the country, has long evaded Dr. Ambedkar's contribution to social reforms and the uplifting of weaker sections of society. AI generated symbolic image

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—   **Fr. Don Prem Lobo & Aaron Nair**

Caste and its various parallels have become the reality of modern India, refusing to part ways with the social construct deeply ingrained in the culture of the people. While Dr. Ambedkar, in his analysis, called caste a state of mind, he predicted that the discriminatory practices associated with hierarchical standings among human beings would persist despite progress and forward thinking. In a way, while we have overcome complete exclusion and forceful entry into undignified occupations, caste still holds onto its status quo as the dictating factor for the Dalit community in India. Clear examples of this are seen in the educational sphere, where the community is often ignored, leading to high dropout rates of 44.27% at the primary level and just 14.9% enrollment at the higher education level, according to the national census.

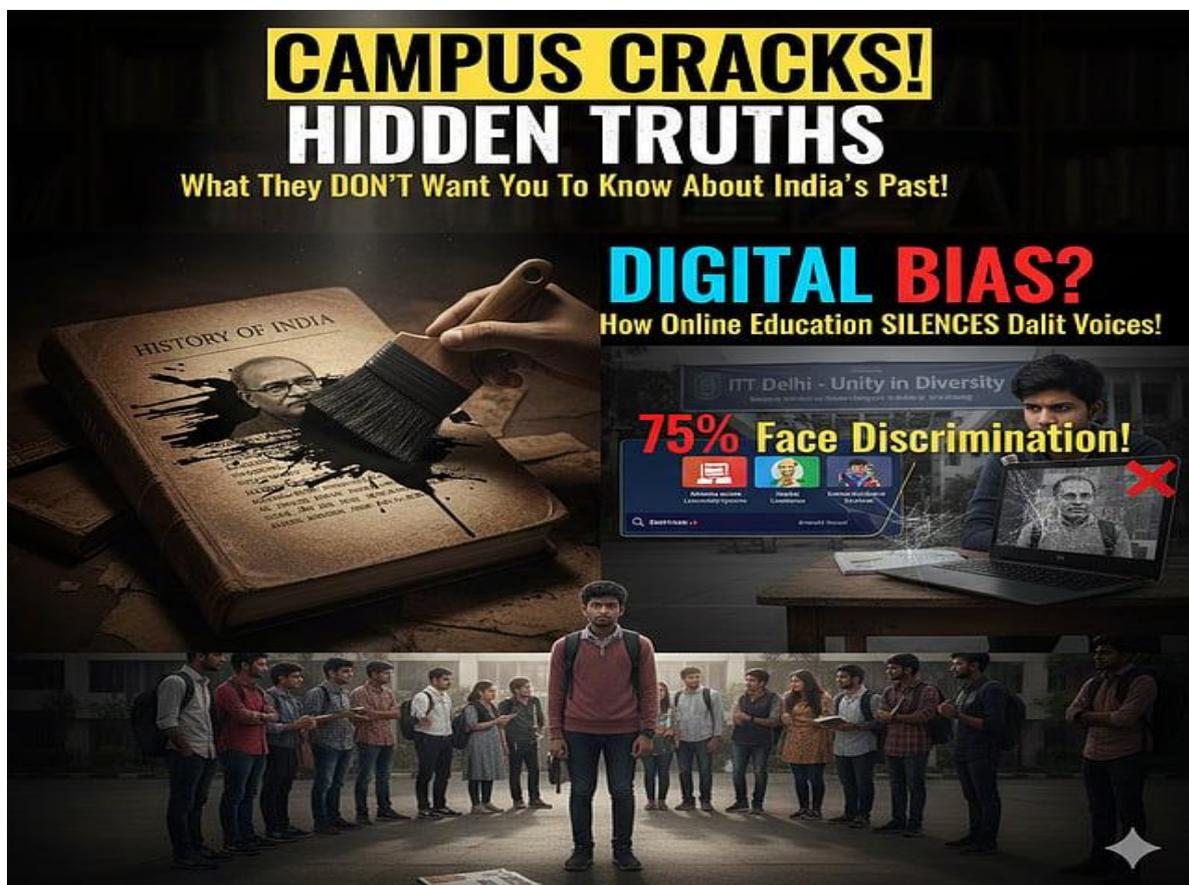
Another interesting perspective on the Dalit issue is the purposeful ignorance or exclusion of historical suffering and wrongdoing. The first step to achieve complete oblivion is to deny rightful space in textbooks and other popular discourse, thus shunning any discussion on marginalised groups. The National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), a body responsible for publishing textbooks and other educational resources in the country, has long evaded Dr. Ambedkar's contribution to social reforms and the uplifting of weaker sections of society.

*In 2012, they went so far as to publish a textbook with a derogatory cartoon featuring Ambedkar as a snail, titled 'The Constitution,' and to haul a chariot with Jawaharlal Nehru holding a whip. While the cartoon was later brought down and the then Congress minister Kapil Sibal made an official apology, the incident reflects how Bahujan, Dalit, and marginalised communities have their leaders insulted or defamed from time to time.*

Apart from exclusion or defamation, the plight of the Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe groups is not given a platform in

educational parleys. With the recent surges in the field of education that involve online mediums and other convenient modes of qualifications like remote learning, the continued ostracism is a culmination of a purposeful agenda and the downplaying of Dalit icons and leaders. This can be vividly seen in government-run online portals like Swayam and NPTEL, wherein Dalit representation is cornered into literature and culture, safely avoiding radical opinions and thoughts that may find a mainstream audience.

These platforms host certificate courses on leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and even offer classes on religion and faith, elevating Indian Knowledge Systems to the highest level. However, the ignorance of caste-based issues, which are a by-product of faith, is a hypocritical understanding of Indian society. The marginalised sections of society have long gone through undeniable struggles and injustice based on irrational ideals, and such a downgrade in terms of content in education can be seen as a revamp of the same ideals that were promised to be eradicated.



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The result of such exclusion is not only historical differences in how events are remembered but also a misinformed view of an entire generation regarding caste-based issues. In the latest report from IIT Delhi, over 75% of students from disadvantaged groups face racial discrimination and separation on campus. In comparison, 58% of students coming from general or upper-caste backgrounds are either indifferent to their struggles or agree with the remarks and actions against the community. Lack of education and discourse on Dalit icons also enables misuse by certain political parties to target minorities or the marginalised.

The need for more dialogue in areas concerning Dalits and the icons who represented them, like Dr. Ambedkar, rises even more in the present environment, which seems hostile to unbiased education. The State Education Department of Maharashtra's decision in 2018 to procure more books on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, way ahead of Ambedkar, Gandhi, and Phule, substantiates the concern. Similarly, conversation on Ambedkar is contained only within the purview of being the Father of India's Constitution, unfairly misrepresenting a leader who has fought for women's rights, social justice, education of the marginalised, labour reforms, rational thinking, and so many more.

Given that Ambedkar's writings are under the Government's complete control, their suppression proves that the authorities in power pay mere lip service to the ideals and thoughts of India's most popular leader. In times when indoctrination in education is at an all-time high, critical analysis of the writings of Indian leaders is a necessity, and the reading of Ambedkar must be at the forefront of such a revolution. The likelihood of social upheaval by the downtrodden can only be guaranteed if the most decorated leader of the marginalised is given a rightful place on our bookshelves and textbooks.

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