

Rapoport Center Human Rights
Working Paper Series
8/2023

**A discriminatory education policy that further excludes the
oppressed from academia: the case of the National Overseas
Scholarship (NOS) for SC-ST scholars in India**

Ashok Danavath



The Bernard and Audre
RAPOPORT CENTER
For Human Rights and Justice
The University of Texas at Austin



Creative Commons license Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives. This text may be downloaded for personal research purposes only. Any additional reproduction for other purposes, whether in hard copy or electronically, requires the consent of the Rapoport Center Human Rights Working Paper Series and the author. For the full terms of the Creative Commons License, please visit www.creativecommons.org.

Dedicated to interdisciplinary and critical dialogue on international human rights law and discourse, the Rapoport Center's Working Paper Series (WPS) publishes innovative papers by established and early-career researchers as well as practitioners. The goal is to provide a productive environment for debate about human rights among academics, policymakers, activists, practitioners, and the wider public.

ISSN 2158-
3161

Published in the United States of
America
The Bernard and Audre Rapoport Center for Human Rights and
Justice at The University of Texas School of Law
727 E. Dean Keeton
St.
Austin, TX
78705

<https://law.utexas.edu/humanrights/>

<https://law.utexas.edu/humanrights/project-type/working-paper-series/>

Abstract

The National Overseas Scholarship (NOS) for Scheduled Caste and Tribes (SC-ST) scholars was constituted decades ago as an educational policy by the Government of India (GoI) (Thorat, 2009). With the objective of facilitating upward mobility by guaranteeing financial assistance to low-income students from Dalit and Adivasi communities, this policy has supported SC and ST students to pursue Master's, Ph.D., and postdoctoral studies in Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) top-ranked universities of the world.

However, since its inception, the implementation procedures have always been a point of controversy (Danavath, 2022). Though the objective ostensibly is for social welfare, the NoS's implementation has placed Dalit-Adivasi scholars at the mercy of the casteist state. Every NoS awardee has to deal with the unresponsive, if not insensitive, politico and executive bureaucracy. Moreover, the fixed amount of the scholarship grant is not adaptive to increasing inflation rates, nor to varying cost of living depending on the location of the university. These inconsiderations only add to the suffering of marginalized students in foreign countries. Despite its inadequacies, the policy has allowed few Dalit and Adivasi scholars from social science streams to reach global universities and conduct research on the socio-politico-cultural life of Indian society and state. Their research has fostered some of the first discussions on caste-based systemic violence on a global front. Yet even this iota of change towards establishing an anti-caste dialogue has become an object of scorn for the dominant caste elite of India. As such, a dialogue questioned the illegitimate dominance of the upper caste in a manifold. The current ruling political party in India, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) is a right-wing Hindutva government backed by dominant caste policymakers. Their election into power, beginning in 2014, systematically cracked down on the NOS policy, first by increasing the required grades (percent of marks) for eligibility of the

scholarship in 2020 and delivering a death blow through major structural changes in 2022. These changes inter alia discontinued the intersectional research areas on Indian culture, heritage, and history under the NOS scholarship policy. Therefore, this policy, by implication, excludes students belonging to caste-marginalized communities from critically engaging with caste-based oppression. The regressive effects of the policy are far-reaching. Especially, its outcome has a discriminatory effect on female liberal arts scholars as a disproportionate percentage of female applicants have shifted towards STEM education (The Wire 2022). This retrogressive move by the government to censor Dalit-Adivasi voices and to shrink global critical academic space has been lamented by various international bodies, academic and civil society organizations both globally and domestically, However, this has not moved the current fascist government to reverse the changes made to the Scholarship policy.

In light of the policy changes made to the NOS impeding academic discussion on caste, and any academic engagement with its intersections, as a scholar hailing from the caste-oppressed Scheduled Tribal background, in this paper I am exploring the question - Are Dalits-Adivasi scholars doing research on caste a problem for the casteist state?

Keywords: National Overseas Scholarship (NOS), Scheduled Caste (Dalit), Scheduled Tribes (Adivasi), Caste, Higher Education, Right-Wing Hindu Government, Bharatiya Janata Party

The Adivasi & Dalit Communities

The Adivasi (Indigenous) and Dalit population makes up to a quarter percent of India's total population as per the 2011 population census (Jaoul & Shah, 2016). According to the constitutional mandate, the Dalit communities are formally termed as the Scheduled Caste (SC) and the tribal communities are known as Scheduled Tribe (ST).

In 1935, through the Government of India Act, the then British colonial rulers acknowledged the plight of the caste oppression and marginalization on paper at the least, by defining Scheduled Caste as the castes, race, tribes or groups who have been known as the depressed classes. (Gopinath, 2018). After the independence of India, the government continued with the definition. While the newly adopted Indian Constitution in 1949 included several provisions for protecting the rights of the marginalized communities, it was in 1950 when the Adivasi communities were de-clubbed from the term Scheduled Caste and given the distinct term of Scheduled Tribes through The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 (The Government of India Ministry of law, 1950)

Amid the constitutional acknowledgement, several provisions protecting the rights of the SC (Gopinath, 2018) and the inevitable scope of the number of SC-ST population being increased in the last decade post the 2011 population census of India, the Adivasi and Dalit communities continue to be oppressed and subjugated in various spheres of their lives, like access to resources, education, possession of land, health care, economic opportunity, etc. following the thousand years old historical legacy (Gopinath, 2018; Thresia et al., 2022) in India (Ambedkar, 1936; Xaxa, 2008; Pariyar, Pallical, and Varghese, 2022).

Caste System

The caste system is the oldest existing social stratification system that has its foundation in the Hindu religion. It is the *defining feature of Indian society* (Teltumbde, 2020), determining an individual's socio-economic position in the larger Indian community (Bhowmik, 1992; Vaid, 2012; Teltumbde, 2016; Teltumbde, 2020). Caste discriminatory practices are not limited only to the Hindu religion; instead, caste has also taken root in other religious communities in India and South Asia. Caste discrimination has also traveled to Western societies with South Asian migrants. As a result, caste plays a central role in the socio, economic, and cultural realities of the South Asian diaspora (Soundararajan, 2022).

Dalits

As per the 2011 Indian population census, Dalits, or Scheduled Castes, constitute more than 16 percent of the total population (Teltumbde, 2020). In the Hindu caste system, Dalit fall into the lowest rung of the Hindu social order (Mandal, 2011; Ram, 2016). Under the caste division, there are four categories - Brahmins at the top, followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Shudras are considered the lowest in the caste hierarchy. Nevertheless, beyond these hierarchies, there exists a fifth caste, the Ati Shudras, who are considered impure (Srinivas, 2003; Deshpande, 2013) and thus as "untouchables", or Dalits (Yengde, 2019). With caste hierarchy determining professional positioning, the oppressor castes held high-paying jobs as priests, army officials, administrators, and traders in ancient order. The consequences of this practice is seen to be largely reflected in the administrative-bureaucratic-academic spheres where most of the influential positions are held by dominant caste professionals in the democratic India. The lower caste Shudras remain sequestered in the agrarian sectors, whereas Dalits have been forced to do

menial or traditionally unpleasant jobs like cleaning, manual scavenging, etc. (Shankar & Swaroop, 2021)

Adivasi

Historically, Adivasis (Indigenous) communities had a unique and diverse autonomous territorial existence (Padel, 2022). Being self-sufficient in socio-religious operations, they had limited interactions with mainstream societies and caste hierarchy until the British colonial administration took control of the Adivasi regions and their lands (KP, 2023). The colonial rule and their accomplices attempted an administrative restructuring of the geospatially diverse indigenous communities (Bhukya, 2008). Even in post-Independent India, Adivasis were forcefully and adversely integrated into the mainstream socio-legal structure (Xaxa, 2005; Swami, 2011; Prabhu, 2011). They were increasingly made dependent on the state institutions by obstructing access to their natural habitat and livelihood (Padel, 2022), accelerating exclusionary marginalisation in the process. Despite the limited interaction with the caste hierarchical social system, the upper and dominant caste groups created a negatively connotated branding of the tribal communities associating them with being that of naive, primitive and hence similarly inferior to those of the Dalits. Therefore, regardless of not inherently being a part of the caste system, the Adivasis were forcefully positioned into the caste fold. Coming to occupy the lowest rungs of the socio-economic pyramid, the indigenous communities have since been exposed to systematic and physical violence, an experience shared by Dalit communities in accessing educational, employment, and other basic citizen services and opportunities (Tandon, 2021). Along with such imposition, the dominant manipulation for socio-cultural assimilation of the elements of the Brahminical Hindu culture on that of the Adivasi spheres have been rampant. (Xaxa, 1999).

Over the last few years, the promotion of pro-Hindu nationalism by trampling religious and ethnic diversity and increased violence against Dalit, Adivasi and other religious minorities in several states have been the marker of the PM Modi-led BJP government's ascent to Union power. An ethnographic study conducted in the newly formed state of Telangana (Danavath, 2022) finds that despite the Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi-Muslim population making up 89% of the state population (Ghanta, 2022), the government of Telangana have subtly been infiltrating the fabric of non-Vedic tolerant and inclusive culture of the ST-SC communities. Coming from Higher and Dominant Caste communities, most of the government officials including the Chief Minister have been patronizing Adhyatmik Hindutva or Spiritual Hinduism through official, public events adhering to Hindu-Vedic practices like offering gold to priests and temples as part of initiation of any government initiatives.

Again, the government has been implementing public welfare policies through implicit incorporation of Vedic and Brahminical aspects. For example, the government has been constructing crematorium grounds in rural areas with the intention of it being used by all communities, especially landless families who are mostly from Dalit and Adivasi communities. But the crematoriums have been named Vaikunthadhamam, which is a Vaishnavite name, along with placing idols, pictures and other relics of Hindu-Vedic Gods and Goddesses in the crematorium premises. Despite the larger non-Vedic cultural diversity in the state, the government's initiative in appointing a Brahminical-Vedic temple with Brahmin priests and associated rituals to be the core organizer of the state's largest cultural festival Bonalu, mainly celebrated by the Dalit-Adivasi communities. Such subtle formalization has been appropriating the folk indigenous cultures with increased participation of upper and dominant caste Vedic practitioners. For example, the Sammakka and Sarakka festival celebrated by the ST communities

in honor of the indigenous martyrs of different resistance movements have been seeing Brahmin priests at the forefront of conducting the rituals with Sanskrit scriptures referring to the Vedic Gods and Goddesses - pushing away the tribal senior faith leaders, who have been the focal point of these festivals for years. And the Brahminical imposition has not been limited to the existing indigenous culture. Highly influential Brahmin priests have forced new Vedic festivals into different tribal villages of Telangana. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Brahmin priests went to different tribal communities and persuaded the villagers to do Vedic rituals in exchange of high payments, leading the already financially stressed Adivasi communities to further financial burden.

All these forced assimilations of casteist Vedic-Brahmanical impositions on the egalitarian attributes of inclusivity and equity of the non-Vedic cultures practiced by those of the Dalits and Adivasis have been threatening and stripping them off their existing unique socio-cultural identities.

Owing to their historicity and power relations with the dominant 'mainstream' society, all these enforced shortcomings have come to define the present realities of the Adivasi communities by automatically positioning them on the margins of society, having limited to no resources for their socio-economic upward mobility (Shah & Lerche, 2018).

Challenges for Adivasi-Dalit Students in Accessing Higher Education

One of the core steps in the socio-economic progress of civilization is attaining education as a path of empowerment (Lumad, 2017). As researchers have discussed, education is vital for the empowerment of historically oppressed groups as participating in the educational process helps develops critical consciousness of their struggles and assists articulation, thus mobilizing

challenges to systemic oppressions (Freire, 1970; McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux, 2020).

When discussing the importance of education for marginalized communities, higher education takes the center stage as the foremost agenda. Serving as the primary pathway to participate in the knowledge production process, higher education creates epistemic discourse on societal operations, acknowledging the marginalization, resistance, and empowerment of different groups. Therefore, it becomes vital to comprehensively investigate and understand the representation of the Adivasi-Dalit community in higher education, along with the multifaceted challenges they face within higher educational institutions (Kujur, 2014).

The enforced marginalization of the Adivasi-Dalit scholars is evidentially reflected in the presence, or lack thereof, of ST-SC students in Indian universities. Despite ST and SC communities representing 8.2 percent and 16.2 percent of the total population of India (Danavath and Bania, 2021), total enrolment of Adivasi and Dalit students in higher educational institutions in the academic year 2019-20 had been only 5.6 percent, and 14.7 percent respectively. These percentages are significantly less in proportional comparison to their total population, as reported in the 2019-20 All India Survey on Higher Education (Government of India, 2020).

Again, with the objective of socio-financial empowerment of oppressed and marginalized communities like the SC-ST, the constitution has mandated provision of reserving a certain percentage of access quota in government jobs and education. For example, 7.5 percent and 15 percent or seats are reserved for ST and SC students respectively in the Higher Education Institutions (HEI). But despite this constitutionally mandated affirmative policy, between 2015-2019, only 2.1 percent and 9.1 percent of ST and SC students, respectively, were given admission

across all 23 of India's most prestigious institutes, namely the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) system (Danavath, 2022).

Also, the alarming rise of suicide cases among the Dalit-Adivasi students across India in recent years has been echoing the caste-based discrimination in HEIs. Between 2014-2023, 69 ST-SC students from prestigious IITs, Indian Institutes of Management (IIM), the National Institutes of Technology (NIT), and other central government-funded public universities, commonly known as central universities, committed suicide after experiencing Institutional caste discrimination and harassment (Moizee, 2023; Thaver, 2023). An internal survey conducted by the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) Cell at IIT Bombay in February 2022 found blatant manifestations of caste oppression against Adivasi-Dalit students on the university campuses. Hurling casteist slurs, asking surnames and ranks in different examinations to identify caste, excluding caste marginalized students from class discussions by perceiving academic capability to be less than average, unwillingness to share rooms in dormitories, rejection from groups for assignments and practical examinations, social exclusion, etc. by dominant caste category students towards their ST-SC peers have become campus norms in HEIs. With the majority of the Dalit-Adivasi students being first-generation learners, their mental health issues stemming from caste discrimination are compounded and rising. The institutional administration and faculties continue to prey on the vulnerabilities of caste-oppressed students' through systemic loopholes. Openly accessible data on student caste locations have resulted in caste identities being easily revealed and discoverable to peers despite ST-SC students' desire to keep their caste identities concealed. Campuses continue to deny the allegations of caste biases in campus when caste-oppressed students voice their concerns (Handa, 2023).

Caste discrimination is not only limited to students but also affects teachers from ST-SC communities, despite the purported protection of occupying university faculty positions. Despite the faculties surviving caste oppression throughout their higher educational journey to achieve credentials for joining the teaching profession, the caste-enforced marginalization is once again reified during application for faculty posts. Ministry of Education (MoE) data shows that popular HEIs like central universities, IITs, IIMs have over 11,000 vacancies for professor posts, whereas 33 out of 45 central universities had 1097 vacancies specifically reserved for Adivasi-Dalit scholars. Yet, only 212 ST-SC applicants in that category have been recruited so far (Moizee, 2023).

In most of HEIs, one of the prerequisites for applicants, especially for any faculty positions above Assistant Professor, is having a doctoral degree (The Economic Times, 2018). But when it is difficult for ST-SC students to even navigate undergraduate courses with enforced institutional and financial complexities, it is often impossible for ST-SC scholars to fund their doctoral education by themselves or with limited or no family income, without external financial support like institutional funding. Hence, their representation in Ph.D. courses is naturally even smaller as pursuing doctoral education on top of regular higher education results in accrued expense. In the absence of availability of grants and scholarships in HEIs, government scholarship schemes like the Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship (RGNF) scheme for ST-SC students are crucial. Renamed as National Fellowship for the Scheduled Tribes (NFST) and Scheduled Castes (NFSC), the former RGNF was initiated by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in the academic year 2005-06 with 667 fellowships with the objective for boosting the representation of Adivasi-Dalit scholars in the faculty positions through achieving post graduate and doctoral degrees. In the academic year 2014-15, the administration of the fellowships was vested over to the respective Ministry of Social

Justice & Empowerment (MSJE) and Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) responsible for overseeing issues and welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. As MoTA took over the management of the scheme, it increased the number of fellows to 750 from 667, which is rather tokenistic given the scheme had been implemented for a decade at that point. It is noteworthy that the number of fellowships for SC scholars stands at 2000 in the academic year 2023-24 awarded whereas the number has remained the same at 750 for ST applicants since 2014, with less than 80 fellowships added a decade ago. Yet the fellowship numbers for either of ST and SC scholars are not adequate with an increasing number of applicants every year. Specially, MoTA has not updated the scheme at all since 2014. This puts MoTA MSJE's commitment towards social equity in ST-SC academia into argument, that it is after all the continuity of deliberate attempts to systematically exclude Adivasi-Dalit scholars from pursuing advanced education degrees like PhD without which contribution to the development of anti-caste discourse becomes difficult within Indian society.

As much as facilitation of anti-caste mobilization is required in the local and national levels within India, creating a global academic discourse on the enforced marginalization of Adivasi and Dalit scholars is necessary. Therefore, higher representation of ST-SC scholars in the international scholastic is undoubtedly required. But, going back to the historical socio-financial marginalization of the Adivasi-Dalit communities, financial support like government scholarship schemes is absolutely a crucial facilitator in ensuring access to higher education and continuing into advanced studies for Adivasi and Dalit scholars.

Role of Scholarship for Adivasi-Dalit Scholars in Higher Education

The constitution of India is often referred to as one of the world's finest constitutions, written towards the integration of demographically diverse groups within one nation based on electoral democracy (Shastri, 2019). Dr. BR Ambedkar, popularly known as Babasaheb Ambedkar, is attributed as the father of this constitution for his central role in drafting it (The Economic Times, 2023). Hailing from a caste oppressed Dalit family, Dr. Ambedkar's life was shaped by his educational attainments. Especially his persuasion of higher education overseas greatly facilitated his vision for caste-oppressed communities which is reflected in the features of the constitution in guaranteeing civil liberties for each citizen, outlawing any discrimination, including untouchability (Zelliot, 2013; The Ambedkarite Today, n.d.). Dr. Ambedkar's self-determining tool of empowerment, resilience, and mobilization against injustice and inequality through higher education in foreign universities was possible because of financial support provided by the then King of the Indian princely state of Kolhapur, Shahu Maharaj. The king was known for being a patron of inclusive socio-economic-cultural reform through addressing caste discrimination and supporting caste-oppressed communities by administering affirmative actions like reservation policy in jobs, scholarship schemes for pursuing education etc. (Dahiwale, n.d.).

Reflecting on Shahu Maharaj's revolutionary socio-political reformation for empowering the Dalit-Adivasi communities - especially as seen in the great example of Dr. Ambedkar's education - state and union governments have been advancing scholarships for students from marginalized social groups so that they can pursue higher education in India and abroad, for years now (Danavath and Gumenapalli, 2020). These scholarships have of course supported a few Adivasi and Dalit students since their inception. But, in the facade of welfare, the aforementioned loopholes of inadequate management - from the application stage to the awarding of scholarships

of even in-country schemes like NFSC and NFST - have mostly added to the previously experienced humiliation and exhaustion of the Adivasi-Dalit students throughout their educational journeys. So, inevitably, the management of any governmental overseas scholarship policy calls for in-depth exploration.

In this context, this paper would be examining the administration of the National Overseas Scholarship (NOS) for SC-ST students pursuing higher education abroad.

Case Of National Overseas Scholarship

The National Overseas Scholarship (NOS) was initiated by India's first Prime Minister Jawarhar Lal Nehru in the academic year 1954 to support the Adivasi-Dalit students in accessing quality higher education like Postgraduate and Doctoral Degrees from renowned international universities and contribute to the socio-economic upward mobility of their respective communities. Currently, the National Overseas Scholarship (NOS) is administered by MoTA (for ST students) and MSJE (for SC students), Government of India (GoI). From its inception in 1954 to up until 2012, the scheme was aimed at facilitating representation of the Dalit and Adivasi students specifically in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education. In 2012, the concerned ministries updated the NOS coverage policy to all fields of research and education including Humanities and Social Sciences (Danavath, Jeevan and Singha, 2022). As per the circulated NOS applicants' guidelines, the scholarship includes payment of tuition fees, monthly stipend, contingency allowance, visa fees, flight cost, medical insurance etc. (Ministry of Education, 2006). Therefore, NOS is seemingly a crucial source of financial assistance for low-income students who might not generally think of joining higher educational courses in renowned universities beyond India.

But there have been several issues pertaining to the NOS scholarship - starting from the number of awards, time of publishing the call for application, the application procedures, service-unfriendly bureaucratic layers, selection process of awardees, budget allocation for individual and overall conditions for the intended thematic area of research of the applicants - which would strategically question the intended objective of educational equity and advancement of the marginalised Adivasi, Dalit students in the academia and thus utility of the scholarship.

In the earlier years of inception in 1954, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE) awarded 20 scholarships to students from Dalit-Adivasi communities among which 17 were allocated to the SC students and the rest 03 went for ST students (Ministry of Education, 2006). In 1999 MSJE was bifurcated into the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) for better focus on the socio-economic development of the Scheduled Tribe communities. Since then, MoTA began to implement 20 awards to ST students under the NOS scheme (Government of India, 2023). In the academic year 2022-23, the number of NOS awards for SC students increased to 115 (Government of India, 2022). Despite the increase in the number of scholarships, it is still less when compared to the total percentage of ST population. The scope of ST students is even worse as the number of NOS awards given by MoTA has continued to be at a standstill of 20 since 1999. This tokenistic number of awards for ST students is extremely meagre when compared to the current ratio of ST population in India, to say the least.

Again, the timing of the award allocation for each academic year has been inconsistent with that of the universities abroad. For the academic year 2021-22, the NOS portal was initially opened on November 22 till December 31, 2021 with an additional deadline extension by a month. As per the MoTA practice prior to the pandemic, the expected call for interviews fell in February or March 2022. However, the ministry delayed it for a full seven months than the expected timeline

and issued dates for interviews on August 16, 17, and 20, 2022, on a short notice on August 3, 2022 (Danavath, 2022).

With the first student intake for that academic year would have already commenced around July-September 2021, calling for 2021-22 applications in November 2021 is the first major drawback. And there has never been a fixed timeline for the announcement of the final selection results. However, dates explored from previous academic years show that it takes roughly one month or more. Bureaucratic formalities like verification of the students' documents and visa processing take a few more months. So, in the case of academic year 2021-22, even if the selection has been done, students with offers for 2021-22 would have not been able to join their foreign programmes even on the academic year 2022-23. That would have led them to defer their study by another year, which might not be possible in several desired programs with deferral options limited by 1-2 years. In some cases, the student has to get re-registered, which is not an option for most of the SC-ST students. Also, with a two-year limitation on IELTS and TOEFL, the Adivasi and Dalit students do not have the privilege to sit for the test again with high registration fees. Some students may become ineligible in terms of specific age requirements, whereas some students would have to let go of the opportunity all together when delayed due to familial pressures to get a job or get married, especially in case of women aspirants.

As found in an earlier investigative article based on filed RTI (Right to Information) applications (Danavath 2022), among the total number of designated ST awardees of 20, not all of the awards were finally disseminated. In five consecutive academic years from 2012-13 to 2018-19, MoTA did not award all 20 scholarships despite receiving a higher number of applications. Between the academic years 2012-2013 to 2018-19, only 8 students on average have joined universities abroad. This leads to the conclusion that, even if students are selected to receive the

scholarships, not all of them end up joining universities and availing these scholarships. On top of that, between the academic years of 2012-2013 and 2016-2017, MoTA awarded less than 20 tribal students in total, for the final selection. With the number of applications received in each academic year, outnumbering that of available scholarships, it does not appear rational that not even 20 ST applicants were eligible as per MoTA's selection criteria or the selection body itself.

This raises pressing questions about the MoTA's selection criteria for awarding scholarships to students. The NOS guideline published in the MSJE and MoTA website states that selection is done by an 'interview-based merit list, prepared by a selection committee, with priority given to those with offers from foreign universities. But two ST students, who wished to remain anonymous, shared that though they had offer letters from top QS ranking universities in the United Kingdom and Australia, neither of them received the scholarship for the academic year they applied in, whereas their fellow applicants made it to the merit list without any foreign programme offers. One of the ST aspirants – who has a PhD offer – sat through the NOS interview for two consecutive academic years but did not get selected. The student shared with the interviewer (Danavath, August 11, 2022)

“The recipients (whom I personally know) were selected without university offer letters for Masters or PhD. But despite having offer letters from a top-ranked university, I was rejected twice. I sometimes feel that the ministry and the interview panel are doing it intentionally so as not to send Adivasi students abroad.” (Danavath, 2022).

For the NOS scheme, though MSJE does not conduct interviews of the selected SC applicants, the interview process for the very few selected ST applicants by the MoTA itself is arduous. Primarily composed of upper-caste members, the interview committee allegedly

humiliates tribal students by asking irrelevant questions. One student recalls being rudely questioned why he had applied to study a particular course abroad despite the same course being available in India (Danavath and Bania, 2021).

Again, though the NOS scheme policy is visibly updated in a regular manner, it is still failing to grasp the contemporary global financial situation of high inflation. On one hand, between 2007 - 2008 to 2019 - 2020, the total estimated budget for the NOS scheme remained largely underutilized. Ironically, on the other hand, in 2021-22, despite increasing the scheme's budget from INR 2 crore to INR 3 crore and finally to INR 4 crore recently, it remains insufficient for allocation among 20 students. If the ministry spends roughly INR 40 lakh per scholar per academic year, it would be able to sponsor less than eight students – not even 50% of the designated number of selected recipients, given that they are already not awarding to all students as mentioned in the NOS guidelines (Danavath 2022).

As the researcher of this study earlier conducted interviews with current NOS scholars in different countries, the findings were evident on the insufficiency of the monthly stipend given to the NOS scholars. One of the awardees studying in the UK said,

“In London, the monthly expense as a student is a minimum of £1,330. But we receive only £825 per month making it very difficult to manage even the bare necessities. To cover the £500 deficit, we have to go job hunting. This is affecting our main purpose of studying here. Most of us being first generation learners, we need extra time for going through the course materials unlike savarna upper caste students who come with so much generational social capital. In addition, finding work here is difficult, as we do not have family connections abroad.”(Danavath, August 11, 2022).

Though the ministry has been talking about changes to the amount of monthly stipend for 2 years now, there has been any such change seen in the NOS application guidelines published for 2021-22 and 2022-23.

Additionally, in terms of conditions for eligibility, the overall graded percentage in applicants' undergraduate study conditions had been arbitrarily raised from 55% to 60% by officials who have mostly joined from upper and dominant castes. The caste of the officials concerned to NOS is distinctively mentionable because it proves that they do not have awareness about the difficulty to obtain 60% in bachelor's or master's programmes coming from rural backgrounds and studying in vernacular medium schools, which are more likely to be in English (Handa, 2023). On top of that, the imposition of income ceiling as part of eligibility criteria of the total annual family income not exceeding INR 8 lakh and INR 6 lakh for SC and ST students respectively, clearly ignores the socially unjust situation the applicants come from (Danavath, Jeevan and Singha, 2022). To elaborate, even if any applicant's family income is more than INR 6 or 8 lakh per annum, that does not necessarily translate to that applicant having the financial capacity to meet his own educational expenses in post-graduation level in India, let alone in foreign universities. Often the income gets spent in many folds of the family expenses including old, accumulated loans or debts, mostly taken to meet educational and healthcare expenses over historical financial marginalization for decades. Hence, despite the 'high' annual family income on paper, external financial support is required for NOS applicants - making this particular eligibility criteria debatable.

Amid all these hostile policy updates, the last nail in the NOS coffin for the Dalit and Adivasi applicants came in March 2022, where a new clause was added to the scheme's guidelines

addressing applicants from Social Sciences and Humanities fields. In the NOS guidelines for the academic year 2022-23, clause 10 (ii) under the mandatory conditions states that,

“Topics/courses concerning Indian Culture/Heritage/History/Social studies on India based research topics shall not be covered under NOS. The final decision as to which Topic can be covered under such a category will rest with Selection-cum-Screening Committee of NOS ”

(Ministry of Justice and Empower, Government of India, 2022)

This addition to the NOS policy is clearly at odds with the scholarship’s stated objective, as it would violate the academic freedom and thus add to the already pigeonholed economic and social status of the scholars. Exploring and confronting the socio-cultural roots of discrimination and unisoned solidarity in oppressing the Dalit and Adivasi communities in Indian society through rigorous academic research would only enable the scholars in calling attention to the loopholes in existing administrative policies. Mitigation to these loopholes through research requires using the wide range of research tools available in the best universities and centers anywhere in the world. And only when these finds would be applied in practicality would feasibly contribute towards the objective of developing the NOS awardees’ marginalized communities. However, at this point, the central objective of the scheme appears more of a political token as it definitely contradicts the conditions above imposed to restrict the area of social sciences research on India in foreign countries.

Contrary to the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of contemporary research practice of international collaboration and knowledge production beyond national boundaries, such policy change proves the policymakers' ignorance in Higher Levels. With several South Asian research centers and networks in universities from around the world, the active participation of scholars and

researchers from marginalized backgrounds in India needs to be approached in a laissez-faire manner. Especially such conditioned research disproportionately impacts female applicants, who have already been struggling for their representation in all educational disciplines. There had been no apparent consultation with the SC-ST scholars before the new clause was made effective. And even before the official implementation of the restricting clause on academic freedom in 2022, this author finds that, throughout the previous academic years, the students have been asked to change their research proposals or topics after getting admitted to foreign universities with approved research proposals by the supervisors. It shows how controls on Dalit and Adivasi researchers' academic activism and space had been practiced unofficially for the last few years by the ministries (Danavath, Jeevan and Singha, 2022).

In the last few decades, the number of Indian researchers working in all major, high-ranking global universities has increased largely. And even though the population of the Brahmin and other upper or oppressing castes is less than 20% of the total Indian population, they are statistically dominating the national and international academia by a staggering proportion. So while Dalit-Adivasi scholars are being held back from researching their own struggles, upper caste researchers continue to leverage on the marginalized communities as their research participants without any practical impact on the oppression and exploitation of Dalit and Adivasi communities. The international community sees the superficial portrayal of Indian culture through the filtered lens of the upper castes. The dominant narrative produced by upper castes subtly blurs the caste aspect from their research and academic discussions, and the international community is largely in the dark of the 3,000-year-old social hierarchy that continues to oppress billions of Indians.

Conclusion

What is the right-wing Hindu government so afraid of that they had to go all the way to impose such restrictions on the Adivasi-Dalit scholars researching their own oppressions, learning about their struggles and stories of resistance and resilience? And, why do only upper caste researchers continue to conduct research on the issues of Dalit-Adivasi communities, oppressed by their own upper caste people? Why this discriminatory policy on the historically oppressed communities?

Despite the historical context and welfare objectives, NOS has faced numerous challenges, including inadequate allocation of awards, inconsistent application timelines, bureaucratic hurdles, and selection process shortcomings. The number of scholarships for Adivasi (ST) students remains disproportionately low compared to their population percentage. Application timelines and selection delays lead to missed academic opportunities and potential deferrals. Not all selected applicants receive scholarships, raising questions about the selection process leading to allegations of bias and arbitrary decisions, with some candidates being rejected despite having prestigious university offers. With the interview committees reportedly composed of upper-caste members, allegations of humiliating tribal students with irrelevant questions have been heard more and more. The scholarship's financial assistance, including stipends, is insufficient to cover the high cost of living and education abroad. Students often face financial challenges, resorting to part-time work and struggling to manage their studies effectively. Again, imposing income ceilings for eligibility overlooks the complex financial situations of applicants coming from historically marginalized backgrounds. The requirement for a high graded percentage in undergraduate studies may disadvantage those from rural backgrounds or vernacular medium schools. The addition of a clause

prohibiting topics related to Indian culture, heritage, history, or social studies limits academic freedom. This restriction contradicts the scholarship's intended purpose of enabling critical research and analysis of societal issues, hindering only the marginalized scholars from addressing societal inequalities and caste-based discrimination while the Upper-caste dominance in academia continues to perpetuate biased narratives, lacking representation of diverse perspectives.

These indicate the utmost necessity of a focused, informed, and transparent review of the formulation of the National Overseas Scholarship policy and its implementation. Dalit and Adivasi students must be allowed to pursue their desired research interests, with an increased number of fellowships to ensure the representation of students from all walks of marginalized communication. A complaint redressal mechanism to respond to the allegations of harassment of the Dalit and Adivasi applicants needs to be integrated in the implementation of the scheme. Only then the scholars from marginalized communities would emerge as champions of social justice, and the upper caste narrative would not go unchallenged in the international community, which would be able to see beyond the upper-caste woven veil on the actual socio-cultural multilinguistic India.

Bibliography

Ambedkar, B. R. (1936). *Annihilation of Caste: Speech Prepared for the Annual Conference of the Jat-pat-todak Mandal of Lahore, But Not Delivered*. BR Kadrekar.

Ambedkar, B. R. (1948). "The Untouchables: Who were they and why they became Untouchables?" in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 1 (pp. 1-19). Education Department, Government of Maharashtra

Bhowmik, S., K., (1992). Caste and Class in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27 (24/25), 1246–1248. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4398508>

Bhukya, B. (2008). The Mapping of the Adivasi Social: Colonial Anthropology and Adivasis. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43(39), 103–109. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40278007>

Dahiwale, M. (n.d). Shahu Maharaj – Maharaja Who Willed to Abdicate His Throne for Social Democracy in India. *Velivada*. <https://velivada.com/2017/06/26/shahu-maharaj/>

Danavath, A., Bania, J. (2021, July 27). Why aren't enough students from tribal communities receiving the National Overseas Scholarship? *The Wire*. <https://thewire.in/>

Danavath, A., Jeevan, S., P. and Singha, L. (2022, April 6). *Caste rules censor research and deny scholarships to marginalised students in India*. Asian Studies Association of Australia. <https://asaa.asn.au/caste-rules-censor-research-and-deny-scholarships-to-marginalised-students-in-india/>

Danavath, A. (2022, November). Vaikunthadhamam: The Political Hinduisation of Marginalised Identities in Telangana. In Dharavath, M. and A., A. (Eds.). *Reimagining Marginality: Exploitation, Experience, Expression* (pp.245-260). Authorspress

Deshpande, S. (2013). Caste and Castelessness: Towards a Biography of the “General Category.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48(15), 32–39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23527121>

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Herder and Herder

Ghanta, C. (2022). Caste and Religion in Telangana: A Historical Study. *Asian Journal of Sociological Research*, 5(1), 190–201. <https://www.globalpresshub.com/index.php/AJSR/article/view/1630>

Gopinath, V. (2018, June 12). Who Are the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs and EBCs? What is the difference between Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, and EBCs in India?. *The Quint World*. <https://www.thequint.com/explainers/scheduled-caste-scheduled-tribe-obc-ebc-sc-st-prevention-of-atrocities-act-explainer#read-more#read-more#read-more>

Handa, A. (2023, 03 April). 1 Out Of 3 SC/ST Students Asked About Their Caste: IIT-Bombay 2022 Survey. *The Quint*. <https://www.thequint.com/news/education/darshan-solanki-suicide-case-dalit-student-death-iit-bombay-caste-discrimination-sc-st-survey-education-latest-news#read-more#read-more>

Jaoul, N., and Shah, A. (2016). Beyond citizenship: Adivasi and Dalit political pathways in India. *Focaal*, 2016(76), 3-14.

KP, R. (2023). Theorising Marginality: Discourses on the Making of Modern Adivasi Communities in Kerala. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 1-17.

Kujur, S. (2014). Exploring the challenges and aspirations of tribal students in higher education: A study in Jharkhand. *Studies in Sociology of Education*, 3(1), 31-45.

Lerche, J., & Shah, A. (2021). Capitalism and Conjugated Oppression: Race, Caste, Tribe, Gender and Class in India. *Anveshi Broadsheet*, (15), 13-15.

Lumad, M. W. (2017). Rethinking the technology platform through equitable quality curriculum for empowering the marginalised women in education. *Koers*, 82(3), 1-13.

Mandal, B. C. (2011). Dr. BR Ambedkar: A Champion of Women's Rights and Empowerment. *Voice of Dalit*, 4(1), 79-90.

McNair, T. B., Bensimon, E. M., & Malcom-Piqueux, L. (2020). *From equity talk to equity walk: Expanding practitioner knowledge for racial justice in higher education*. John Wiley & Sons.

Ministry of Education (2006, June 22). *Workshop to help SC scholarship awardees to seek admission abroad for higher studies*. [Press Release]
<https://pib.gov.in/newsite/erecontent.aspx?relid=18510>

Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2023, February 13). *About The National Overseas Scholarship [NOS] Portal*. Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India.
<https://overseas.tribal.gov.in/#:~:text=About%20The%20National%20Overseas%20Scholarship,online%20on%20National%20Overseas%20Portal>

Ministry of Law (1950, September 06). *THE CONSTITUTION (SCHEDULED TRIBES) ORDER, 1950*. Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India.
https://tribal.nic.in/downloads/CLM/CLM_1/1.pdf

Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (2022). *National Overseas Scholarship for SC etc. Candidates Applicable for Academic Year 2022-23*. Government of India.
<https://nosmsje.gov.in/docs/nosGuidelines2022-23.pdf>

Ministry of Education (2021, June 10). *All India Survey on Higher Education 2019-20*. Government of India https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/statistics-new/aishe_eng.pdf

Moizee, S. (2023, March 10). Why Are Dalit Students Dying by Suicide at India's Prestigious Universities?. *The Quint*. <https://www.thequint.com/videos/news-videos/why-are-dalit-students-dying-by-suicide-at-iit-iim-nit-central-universities#read-more>

Nielsen, K.B., Sareen, S. & Oskarsson, P. (2020). The politics of caste in India's new land wars. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 50(5), 684-695.

Padel, F. (2022). Adivasi Economics and Investment-forced Displacement', in A., Linkenbach, & V., Verma. (Eds.), *State, Law, and Adivasi: Shifting Terrains of Exclusion* (pp. 107-128). SAGE Publishing India.

Pariyar, P., Pallical, B., & Varghese, J. (2022). Interview with the national campaign on dalit human rights (NCDHR): 'covid-19 disproportionately affected India's dalit women sanitation workers'. *Gender and Development*, 30(1-2), 361–372. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2022.2083344>

Prabhu, P. (2011). PESA and the Illusions of Tribal Self Governance. In Dobhal, H (Ed.), *Writings on Human Rights, Law and Society in India: A Combat Law Anthology* (pp. 570-579). Human Rights Law Network.

Ram, R. (2016). Structures of social exclusion, Dera culture and Dalit social mobility in contemporary East Punjab. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 8(2), 186-195.

Soundararajan, S. (2022). *The Trauma of Caste A Dalit Feminist Meditation on Survivorship, Healing, and Abolition*. North Atlantic Books

Shah, A., Lerche, J. (2018). Tribe, Caste and Class – New Mechanisms of Exploitation and Oppression', in A., Shah, J., Lerche, R., Axelby, D., Benbabaali, B., Donegan, J., Raj, & V., Thakur, *Ground Down by Growth Tribe, Caste, Class and Inequality in Twenty-first-century India*. pp. 1-31. Pluto Press.

Shankar, S., & Swaroop, K. (2021). Manual Scavenging in India: The Banality of an Everyday Crime. *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, 2(1), 67–76. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48643385>

Shastri, P. (2019, September 23). 'Constitution is among India's greatest success stories'. *The Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/constitution-is-among-indias-greatest-success-stories/articleshow/71250004.cms>

Srinivas, M. N. (2003). An Obituary on Caste as a System. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38(5), 455–459. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4413162>

Swamy, S. (2011). Adivasi Tradition as Crime. In Dobhal, H (Ed.), *Writings on Human Rights, Law and Society in India: A Combat Law Anthology* (pp. 567-569). Human Rights Law Network.

Tandon, I. (2021). 'Othering' Adivasi Identities: Perpetuating Tribal Stereotypes among the Bhil of India. *Ethnologies*, 43(2), 41–61. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1088194ar>

Teltumbde, A. (2016). Dichotomisation of Caste and Class. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 51(47), 34–38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44165876>

Teltumbde, A., (2020). *Dalits: Past, present and future*. Routledge India

Thaver, M. (2023, April 16). IIT Bombay suicide: 'Darshan Solanki warned against being seen with him as Khatri would harm me too', says batchmate. *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/iit-bombay-suicide-row-sit-records-statement-of-another-student-darshan-solanki-had-confided-in-8549421/>

The Economic Times (2023, April 14). Ambedkar the economist: The lesser-known side of the Dalit icon. *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/ambedkar-the-economist-the-lesser-known-side-of-the-dalit-icon/articleshow/99489447.cms?from=mdr>

Thresia, C. U., Srinivas, P. N., Mohindra, K. S., & Jagadeesan, C. K. (2022). The health of Indigenous populations in South Asia: a critical review in a critical time. *International Journal of Health Services*, 52(1), 61-72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020731420946588>

Vaid, D. (2012). The Caste-Class Association in India: An Empirical Analysis. *Asian Survey*, 52(2), 395–422. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2012.52.2.395>

Xaxa, V. (1999). Transformation of Tribes in India: Terms of Discourse. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34(24), 1519–1524. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4408077>

Xaxa, V. (2005). Politics of Language, Religion and Identity: Tribes in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40(13), 1363–1370. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4416402>

Xaxa, V. (2008). *State, society, and tribes: Issues in post-colonial India*. Pearson Education India.

Yengde, S. (2019). *Caste matters*. Penguin Random House India Private Limited.

Zelliot, E. (2013). *Ambedkar's world: the making of Babasaheb and the Dalit movement*. (No Title).