

Identities, Mobility and Well-Being
National Workshop-cum-Orientation Programme for
Researchers/Faculty Members from Scheduled
Caste/Schedule Tribes and other Marginalized Groups

A joint initiative of ICSSR-ERC and Dept. of Sociology, St. Xavier's College, Kolkata)

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CONCEPT NOTE

We are, here, focusing mainly on the categories of caste and tribe and attempting to see social mobility primarily through access to education and a shift away from 'traditional' occupations; however, we are open to papers/ideas that look at the Workshop theme through other lenses and categories as well. The practice of reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, a colonial legacy, has been officially incorporated as part of our national agenda after independence. This has been the predominant way in which the State has tried to address the question of welfare of these socially and economically marginalised groups. Over the years, the legitimacy of this policy has increasingly been called into question, by the upper castes. The middle classes, where upper castes overwhelmingly predominate, have most prominently adopted this anti-reservation position on the grounds that the policy is inegalitarian and anti-meritorious and therefore unfair; often it is condemned as being a divisive policy and a colonial inheritance. This policy has not only been considered retrograde, the utility of these measures in the long run have also been questioned.

On the other hand, reservations in education and subsequently in jobs have played an important role in giving these marginalised groups some access to scarce resources which have for long been cornered by the upper castes. This has also led other ethnic groups and communities now to look upon reservations as the only channel of social mobility.

But though reservations exist, the presence of Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribe and other marginalized people in higher education and in the coveted professions has never been

proportionate to their population. In many cases the quality of those involved in higher education has been questioned in terms of the desirable standards in the field. While the aim is not to discount this sceptical view about some reserved category candidates in higher education certain things need to be borne in mind before we accept such scepticism. Let us understand that social and cultural capital is vastly disproportionately accumulated with the privileged upper castes. This accumulation is crucially a function of caste among other factors. Tied with this is the idea of 'merit' which again seems to somehow 'inhere' in upper castes. Hence, not only are reserved category candidates seen as 'inherently lacking in merit' but those who do not fall within this understanding are treated as 'exceptions' which in turn reinforces the caste/dominant common sense we just referred to. Further, hierarchies of caste and its practices are major obstacles to social mobility for these groups, even for 'meritorious' candidates from such categories which in turn have affected the wellbeing of such individuals and groups. Institutional support to such candidates and professionals has been rare as reports would indicate. Perhaps there is a need to take a fresh look at what constitutes for instance, 'merit', 'equality of opportunity', 'social justice' as well as 'access' to resources. Understanding of 'access', its nature, its problems, its possibilities may become a productive concept or way through which to approach these contested notions of merit, justice, equality of opportunity.

In this context the Workshop would like to foreground the issues that confront the contemporary higher educational aspirations and the consequent well-being of Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe and other marginalized people; it would attempt to focus on West Bengal too, for this is a state where caste is alleged to have been weak and almost inconsequential in determining the life chances of the people. Besides developing critical approaches to questions of merit etc. that have been mentioned in the foregoing paragraph in this Workshop we would also like to discuss for instance what has been the role of institutions including the State in delivering to these groups of people meaningful access to higher education; what has been their role in ensuring the well-being of these groups? What has been the role of the Dalit/Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribes organisations in helping foster such access and also in initiating dialogues with the wider society on these issues? How have the roles and activities of such organisations been perceived by members of these communities? What alternatives to reservations or dependence upon the State have been envisaged by Dalit organisations and individuals?

Along with these, this Workshop has another central aspect: resource persons would be invited to review and comment upon research proposals/papers that would be presented here by researchers/faculty members belonging to Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe and other marginalized categories. The theme of this Workshop is broad enough to accommodate presentations on a variety of concerns like stratification, identities, practices and contestations of hierarchies, understandings of mobility and wellbeing. Such deliberations are aimed at enhancing the quality of research and are therefore highly likely to be of benefit to these scholars; these presentations would also help bring to light the various kinds of research work that are being undertaken by researchers from these categories.

The Workshop would be conducted over two days. The first session on the first day would have paper presentations by resource persons addressing the themes and issues of the Workshop. Four sessions over two days would be devoted to paper presentations by researchers followed by discussions. The first session on second day would consist of a panel discussion on the Workshop theme. The final session would bring together in a concise way the discussions that have taken place over these two days.

In the long run this Workshop also intends to bring out a volume of the proceedings and think out ways of possible collaborations with institutions and organisations for the long term benefit of those aspiring for higher education from these disadvantaged categories.

SOME POSSIBLE SUB THEMES:

Constructions of Identities

Identity Politics

Caste and wellbeing

Experiments in inclusive education

Discrimination in higher education

Role of the state in inclusive education

Scheduled castes/tribes and educational standards

Role of SC/ST organisations in higher education

Political parties and inclusive agendas in higher education

Alternatives to state sponsored affirmative action

Affirmative action

Differentiation and questions of solidarity among disadvantaged groups

Caste and/in higher education

Mobility, Workplace experience and Well being

Higher education and empowerment of marginalised groups

The above sub themes do not exhaust the scope of the topic. Papers could address these themes or others that fall within the rubric of the larger theme given for the Workshop.

The scheduled date for the Workshop cum Orientation is 26th-27th September, 2015.

The abstracts should be sent to the email address given below. The last date for receiving the abstracts is 15th July, 2015. The selection of the abstracts will be communicated by 21st July, 2015. Paper presenters will get two months to write the paper.

Email to: icssrsxc2015@gmail.com

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