

The Caste of Campus Habitus: Caste and Gender Encounters of the First-generation Dalit Women Students in Indian Universities

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Abstract

This article critically examines the university academic spaces and the campus culture determined by a particular form of the dominant habitus which is, in effect, actively excluding the first-generation women students belonging to the marginalized sections of Indian society. As this dominant habitus is constantly reproduced on university campuses, with or without contentions, entering the academic spaces of Indian universities for first-generation Dalit women—who are deprived of both cultural and social capital—is invariably becoming a herculean task. Therefore, this article analyses the concealed forms of dominant campus habitus that structurally create a conducive environment for privileged students and a rigid glass ceiling for first-generation Dalit women students in their journey toward higher education. Notwithstanding the limitations associated with their social status of being first-generation learners, the formations of alternative cultural capital and resilience of the Dalit women students have been analysed from a feminist perspective, proving that one could overcome these social challenges through the acquired cultural capital. The analytical concepts and theoretical frameworks of this article have been developed based on empirical/ethnographic data collected from women research scholars at a prominent university in South India. The narratives were collected in the academic year 2020–2021 through in-depth interviews and focused group discussions.

Keywords

First-generation learners, university education, dominant habitus, intersectionality, acquired cultural capital, gender, and caste

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Introduction

The concept of habitus and forms of capital proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977) rightly enables us to understand the educational challenges and negotiations the first-generation students confront in their journey toward higher education. Bourdieu (1977) observes that the concept of cultural capital refers to the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, material belongings, credentials, and so forth that one acquires through being part of a particular social class. The habitus is the physical embodiment of cultural capital that refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that we possess due to our life experiences. For Bourdieu, habitus denotes the “internalized structures” and “schemes of perception” in which the dominant social and cultural conditions are established and reproduced (Bourdieu 1977: 86). Hence, the habitus produces relationships of domination through its institutions, and one such social institution is a university campus in which the structural inequalities are recreated and normalized.

Across the globe, university education is seen as a social space that has the theoretical potential to transform the lives of individuals and eventually society towards the egalitarian paradigm by precluding the consequences of categorical inequalities such as gender, race, class, and ethnicity. The purpose of university education is the achievement of a particular expansion of outlook, turn of mind, habit of thought, and capacity for social and civic interaction (Newman 1996: 15). But, dominated by the hegemonic intelligentsia that promotes the praxis of the dominant habitus, certain sections of students are privileged over their counterparts in the universities that are spaces mandated with the responsibility of countering unjust structural practices. Therefore, every social space is characterized by its own expressive culture, and the university as a social institution has its normative ways of being (Puwar 2004: 116). The codes of conduct on university campuses such as curriculum and pedagogy, evaluation of academic performance based on skills and knowledge, academic activities, the symbolic language used, mannerisms, dressing patterns, non-academic amenities, interactions, and so forth are produced/generated on lines of dominant culture, which effectively benefits students from affluent socio-economic backgrounds who merely need to re-conform to those established patterns. Interestingly enough, these social privileges are taken for granted, by those students who are in an advantageous position, as certain sets of social practices are normalized and considered objective in the context of universities. On the other hand, students who do not share similarities with the dominant habitus suffer from limited economic, social, and cultural capital and are perceived as the ‘cultural other’ in the academic spaces, and are in constant conflict with the dominant habitus on campus. Thus, educational institutions reflect and reproduce wider social patterns of power and sometimes become sites of policing, and regulation of wider social meanings associated with multiple cultural habitus that students bring along with them (Sanjakdar 2011: 10).

In the context of India, as Beteille argues, universities opened new horizons both intellectually and institutionally in a society that had stood still in a conservative

and hierarchical mold for centuries. The universities were among the first open and secular institutions in a society that was governed largely by rules of kinship, caste, and religion (cited by Guha 2007: 564). Though the contribution of universities in promoting the nation towards progress is significant, its exclusionary practices against marginalized students such as allotment of a few admissions into academic programmes, judging their skills based on identity, not recognising their academic performance, negative slurs, smear campaigning, name calling and so forth cannot be ignored. With the established conventional glass-ceilings, the nature of universities in embracing diversity and inclusivity comes under contestation. For Deshpande, the centres of excellence have not opened up their doors to the non-elite until recently and they have been dominated by the monopoly of the minority privileged sections (Deshpande 2006: 140). Owing to the dichotomous nature of both exclusion and inclusion, male students from upper caste social backgrounds are privileged and women, Dalits, and tribes are excluded and systematically marginalized in institutions of higher education. Indian universities, therefore, operate as the 'gatekeepers to the upper caste kingdom in India' as pointed out by Tharu et al. (1998: 2702). Deshpande (2006) observes, that elite higher educational institutions are hampered by caste apartheid, and students from lower caste backgrounds are denoted as deficient with preconceived assumptions, ignoring their inadequate educational training and lack of social and cultural capital. With these exclusionary practices in place, students from historically marginalized sections are systematically barred from attaining a university education. On the other hand, women students carry with them an intense burden of discrimination and exclusion on university spaces as gender relations are intricately woven into a system of hierarchical social relations and prescriptive codes of conduct determined by gender stereotypes.

Despite the deep-rooted, and patriarchal stereotypes and other social challenges, Indian women have succeeded in entering universities in pursuit of higher education in the past six decades or so. Though participation of women in higher education increased numerically compared to previous decades, even today the sex ratio of students on Indian campuses is still unhealthy and lopsided in favour of men. Feminist scholarship in sociology such as Beauvoir (1949), Harding (1986), & Collins (1990) contest the establishment of dominant habitus, the nature of women's subordination to men on the one hand and portray family and educational institutions as an important site of social reproduction which communicates the binary opposition of femininity and masculinity through socialization and gender stereotypes on the other. Spivak's (1988: 28) observation of female as subaltern seems to be still in the shadows in the Indian context as university spaces continue to produce, and reproduce, both conventional and new categories of inequalities. Often, women experience undesirable social encounters in university social spaces that are patriarchally-driven and deepens when their identity intersects with their social status of being first-generation learners. First-generation learners are those in their immediate families to attend college education. The condition of first-generation Dalit women students is even worse, as they lack what Pierre Bourdieu (1986) terms, the three forms of capital, namely, economic, social,

and cultural capital which are necessary for any individual to make a decent living. Dalit women undergo multi-faceted oppression pertaining to their first-generation status as the dominant habitus is not devoid of gender and caste. Sukumar (2022: 12) observed that in the Indian context, caste or other social identities, vernacular medium of education, and rural/urban are determinants of social reproduction in university spaces. When it comes to the context of first-generation Dalit women students, on one side they are subjected to gender oppression from all men in general and men of their caste in particular. Additionally, they undergo indifferent treatment from upper castes, as well as second-generation Dalit women students. As rightly pointed out by B.R. Ambedkar, “Dalit woman is a most Dalit among Dalits.” (cited by Swaroopa 1998). Experiences of Dalit women in higher educational institutions can be understood by the lived experiences of Dalit women in Rege’s (2006) writing caste/writing gender, reading Dalit women’s testimonies. Shantabai Dhanaji Dani who is a known woman leader of the Ambedkarite movement in ‘Ratrandin Amcha...’ (For Us- These Nights and Days (1990) explains her experiences in higher education coming from a rural background, bearing a village stamp on her appearance, eventually leading to humiliations on campus (Rege 2006). Kumud Pawade, a Dalit woman professor in Sanskrit explains the lived experiences of Dalit women in Brahmanical academic spaces and disciplines through her book *Antasphot (Thoughtful Outburst 1981)*, ‘where women and Dalits have been denied the right to study Sanskrit, the fact that a Shudra woman learning *Sanskrit* challenged the Brahmanical caste ideology on campuses. This resulted in humiliation from her own faculty colleagues taunting and branding her as ‘government-sponsored Brahman.’ Correspondingly, first-generation Dalit women students experience unwelcoming attitudes and are subjected to humiliation and discrimination in Indian higher educational institutions. The self-worth of students from underprivileged backgrounds gets negatively affected due to their caste status (Chadha 1997: 791–792).

Hence, this article is an attempt to unravel the lived experiences of contestations and negotiations of first-generation Dalit women students while navigating the university campus spaces, determined by the dominant habitus where caste acts as the strong cultural capital to certain individuals and marginalizes the other. The educational trajectory of first-generation Dalit women students, the unique challenges they confront in the process of learning, the significant role of non-academic spaces in reinforcing inclusion and exclusion, survival strategies of negotiations, and social agencies in contesting the conventional glass ceilings through the acquired cultural capital are significant lines of inquiries which this article aims to cover in the following sections.

Encounters in Mounting the Educational Ladder

The unique challenges experienced by first-generation students are not only influenced by their social status as first-generation learners, but also by other social factors such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, and region (Arch & Gilman 2019: 997).

First-generation Dalit learners face structural challenges as caste identity influences their representation in schools (Nambissan 2006: 259). Therefore, it is imperative to understand the social dimensions of their school education. In our present context, the educational journey of the first-generation Dalit women students has been explored which has a greater impact on their academic opportunities and psychological well-being as they advance on the educational ladder. As a respondent from the field says:

There was a primary school, meant for 1-5 grades, near the Dalit hamlet. There is no school for secondary education in our locality, so I went to the upper primary high school (UPHS) located in the colonies of upper castes. Going to school every day was the biggest hurdle, as the distance was almost one kilometer and we had to go by walk. As the washrooms were not available nearby open fields were used for nature calls which I feel embarrassed about. There is no availability of teachers for science subjects hence clearing board exams was a tough job. Due to the mid-day meals scheme attending classes in the afternoon was possible. After returning from school in the evening, being a girlchild I was obliged to do the household chores and often help my parents with the agriculture work. I hated Sundays in my childhood as we were taken to the agricultural fields and made to work the whole day with no time to study at home. Hence, until the time of intermediate (10+2), merely clearing the examinations was a major objective in my mind instead of focusing on scoring high.

It is evident that the families of the poor status group are not able to provide improved home conditions and atmosphere for their children for better education, in comparison to others. The discriminatory practices and humiliation based on their social status in the educational spaces and among their peer group are part of the Dalit women students' everyday life from childhood, which has a major toll on their self-confidence and mental health. As one of the respondents says:

Our school is towards the upper castes' households. As we pass by each lane drastic differences between our houses which are made of mud and their big houses with modern infrastructure can be noticed. My friends used to pass comments saying, 'These people are low in status as they consume beef in their houses. I used to feel embarrassed and almost left eating beef. When I visited their homes occasionally, their parents asked me to stand outside. These things got imprinted on my mind from childhood and [I] used to consider myself and my community inferior to others. I became quite cautious from then to stop being friends with people belonging to upper castes let alone visiting their houses.

Hostile experiences and humiliation based on their caste status as 'Dalits' are exhibited which eventually haunts the Dalit students right from an early age where they do not even know what caste is. Hence, first-generation status accompanied by

the intersection of gender and caste stands out as a double-layered barricade for first-generation Dalit women students aspiring to pursue higher education. Despite lacking parental guidance, and low economic and cultural capital, they manage to navigate their way into university spaces. But, being the minority among the majority-driven mainstream students hailing from affluent families, they come across undesirable experiences in higher educational institutions which need to be scrutinized & analyzed. The following section describes the phenomena.

Institutional Inequalities and Lived Realities

The manner in which first-generation women learners position themselves as women and Dalit women in particular, along with analyzing how the intersection of class, caste, and space determine their access to educational opportunities and adaptation to the university campus are issues of grave concern. This unravels the layered forms of discrimination encountered by first-generation students when converged with the social identity of gender and caste in university settings, where a particular form of caste habitus is institutionalized and broadly viewed as normal.

The ingrained exclusionary practices of universities hinder the emancipation and social agility of first-generation Dalit women students at every level of the university hierarchy. The proportion of first-generation women research scholars at this university to the general population on campus is 42.86 per cent and the first-generation Dalit women research scholars is merely at 3.57 per cent. The ratio of second-generation women research scholars in the general population is 57.14 per cent, and 25 per cent is the proportion of second-generation Dalit women research scholars. Hence, it is evident that the presence of women research scholars from privileged caste backgrounds is almost equal in both first and second generations. However, a very small proportion of Dalit women research scholars are first-generation learners, which display their absence in urban-centric educational institutions with minimal representation. The chronicles of the first-generation Dalit women learners who stand out as marginalised groups in university academic spaces with no cultural and social capital are explained further which visualizes their impediments in the process of registering a certain degree of creating achieved status.

Denied Cultural and Social Capital

For the first-generation Dalit women students, availability of institutional assistance from the administration and faculty members is the major source of dependence. With no cultural capital, inadequate communication skills, and an English language barrier they tend to have less social capital, specifically, engagement and social connections with administrative staff, faculty, seniors, and fellow students. Additionally, non-institutional support such as recognizing their constraints and assisting them to overcome them by motivating faculty members, seniors, and colleagues, seems to be very minimal and almost absent. Therefore, their attempt towards 'fitting in' into

higher educational institutions like universities is nothing short of a miracle. One of the field respondents highlights the same point:

My parents know nothing about universities and higher education degrees like Ph.D. I must take the whole responsibility for my studies and explore the available opportunities. Doing a Ph.D. in Chemistry from a university is not a small thing and I have no idea about the admission process, selecting semester courses. The sight of a well-speaking administrative staff, faculty, and seniors was very intimidating for me to ask questions in English as I lacked proficiency. Also, they were not ready to talk to me which was quite evident in their hostile gazes. Due to a lack of awareness regarding financial fellowships availability on campus, I missed a one-semester fellowship too. So, in the initial days of my stay at the university, I struggled a lot to adjust and get my things done as I felt uncomfortable with my language skills and seeking help from strangers.

Academic Space and Double Burden of Identity

Indian universities are dominated by upper castes who act as gatekeepers for academic spaces through their exclusionary practices and discrimination. Caste identity often becomes a source of rebuke and insult. Such caste-based insults and rebukes combined with poor economic and social capital, tend to push the first-generation Dalit women scholars beyond the boundaries of their tolerance. This is explicated by one of the respondents from the field:

Most of my fellow researchers refer to Dalit scholars like me as '*reservation batch*'. I feel ignored by both my supervisor and seniors. My thesis supervisor once stated, 'I committed some sin earlier may be due to which am teaching Dalit students, who are equal to beggars'. He never spoke except to comment on the doctoral committee report. My seniors also consider me incapable and judge my subject knowledge irrespective of my academic excellence. I feel irritated when the male scholars from the Dalit community also try to dominate and pass orders taking the advantage of same caste identity. Women scholars from the upper castes and those who are financially better off tend to form their own groups and do not interact with people like me.

The preconceived assumptions of faculty members and seniors that first-generation Dalit women scholars are deficient because of their caste identity persist in Indian universities. Dalit women scholars endure oppression not only from men of other castes but also from their own castes. Accordingly, women scholars from a privileged backdrop exclude Dalit women scholars based on their poor socio-economic background. This scenario contests the patriarchal practices of men in general and Dalit men in particular. First-generation Dalit women scholars, therefore, undergo a double burden due to the non-egalitarian practices of the university system.

Campus Culture and Retrieving Non-academic Spaces

The unexplored accounts of first-generation students from marginalized communities provide us insights into the structural inequalities of Indian universities. Coming from a minority background and unequipped with sufficient knowledge and skills of the dominant habitus, the first-generation Dalit women students converse with unfamiliar and impertinent environments upon their arrival at universities. This is because the dominant group can exercise their dominance merely by conforming to the status quo, while the marginalised must engage in rupture with their own habitus itself. The first-generation Dalit women students undergo a transition in their social environment, which is to deal with stereotypes and stigmatizations accompanied by pressures of family expectations which together negatively impact their academic potential.

Cultural Conflict

Upon entering the universities, first-generation Dalit women scholars encounter a cultural shock, which is an experience a person may have when one moves to a new cultural environment that is different from one's own (Jhon et al., 2010: 54). With the transition in their life from traditional educational institutions to that of new university environments, the first-generation Dalit women learners experience isolation and 'feel out of place.' This phase of adaptation to the new social environments of the university campus has the potential to bring out new social agencies of first-generation learners, which in turn paves the means for an inclusive environment on campus. One of the respondents of the study from the field stated as below:

Getting admission into a prominent university in Hyderabad was the first independent decision in my life. I came to Hyderabad alone for the first time without even knowing the public bus numbers in the city. I kept staring at the tall and concrete buildings and the crowded busy bus stops. With the help of my relative in the city, I reached the university. The first sight of the university campus made me feel, 'Am I going to study on such a big campus with a wide area, all greenery around, and well-built departments and hostel.' I clearly remember my first day in our department which made my enthusiasm disappear in no time. I had the appearance of a village girl and everybody in the laboratory were well dressed and speaking in good English. The hostile gazes of people around me made me feel inferior and that made me isolate myself. Though I liked the campus, the unwelcoming attitudes of people around me made me feel displaced. In hostels too I was shocked to hear about girls drinking alcohol, as I never encountered such things before back in my village.

The habitus of first-generation learners is mismatched with the socio-cultural life at university, as they belong to "the social strata that are far away from academic culture and who are condemned to experience that culture as unreal" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: 922). Therefore, first-generation Dalit women are at risk for limited educational

attainment with less social engagement in the campus culture and delayed adaptation. Non-academic spaces like hostels, shopping complexes, cafeterias, annual university fests, and so forth are vital in opening possibilities for the socialization of the campus culture. One of the respondents narrates her experience, as below:

Since the hostel rooms accommodated one person it was comfortable and [I] could stay as I wished. In the initial days, going to canteens and shopping complexes in the university was utterly uncomfortable. Fellow students used to sit there for hours and be involved in discussions, on the contrary, walking on campus roads also was scary for me. Therefore, accessing the facilities such as the gym and sports complex was far beyond my thoughts. For the first annual university festival, my sister paid a visit to the campus. On the third day, which will be the last, we both went to the open ground where students were dancing. We were shocked to see girls wearing short dresses and all boys and girls dancing together freely. After that, I never went to the fest again.

These experiences display the concealed forms of how the dominant habitus operates on the university campus. With the deepening cultural mismatch, assimilating into the campus ambience is challenging for first-generation Dalit women scholars, as it demands delinking oneself from pre-existing habitus and obliging the new lifestyle. Along with these confrontations of first-generation status, insolences based on their intersectional identity, such as stereotypes based on appearance, dressing patterns, skin complexion, food habits, give an insight into the Dalit women scholars' minority-ness in university settings.

Nexus of Physical Attributes & Cultural Stereotypes on University Campus

The antagonistic aesthetic notions of dominant culture tend to marginalize Dalit women based on the intersectional identity of women first, and Dalit women additionally. Judith Butler (1990, 1993, 2004) argued the performativity of gender, which is a stylized repetition of acts as an imitation or miming of the dominant conventions of gender. The intersectional theorists have argued that they also are co-constituted with class, race, and ethnicity. Accordingly, Dalit women students are stigmatized based on their appearance, skin color, and dietary practices such as the consumption of beef on the hostel premises. One of the respondents from the field says:

Beauty plays a vital role in the way people treat us in academic spaces too. Based on my appearance and less sophisticated dressing style I was always considered an average student and disrespected by people who have no idea about my academic performance. There is a common understanding in society that if a person is dark in color, she/he belongs to the Dalit community, often seen in surprise if they are fair in their skin color, which is always linked to Dalit identity. Additionally, I was looked down upon by my colleagues for eating beef and following other cultural practices of Dalits.

Thus, in academic environments, young Dalit women struggle with an inferiority complex due to the narrow definitions of beauty. There is a preconceived assumption in society that Dalits are dark in color and people will be surprised to see a Dalit with fair skin. These conditions throw light on the relation attached to caste and skin complexion, where it is assumed that all Dalits are racially black, and if any Dalit individual is of light skin tone, they are detached from their Dalit identity and are seen as the mismatch of their caste. Hence, the first-generation students are negatively stereotyped resulting in unfavorable university experiences that obstruct their academic performance. Additionally, the pressure of family expectations places a double burden on first-generation Dalit women scholars.

Dalit Women as 'Most Dalits': Daughters as Passing Birds

With the existing patterns of academic stress and hostile workplace environments, first-generation Dalit women scholars also endure marriage pressure differently. Traditionally, getting married is considered a higher ideal for a woman than attaining a higher education and getting employment, due to the existing patrilineal practices. For Dalit women, the pressure of marriage is increased due to their poor economic backgrounds. Marriage proposals begin at the early age of 14 years, and Dalit women learners are obliged to negotiate with families in every phase of their journey in higher education. This shows how the authoritarian and patriarchal social structures do not allow any free space for adolescent girls, particularly in certain sections that assign different reasons for the continuation of the practice of early marriages (Ghosh 2011: 307–326). In terms of the pressure of marriage experienced by Dalit women scholars, one of the respondents states:

In the case of male children, parents beg them to study well, and, in our case, we must beg our parents to let us study. I felt my educational achievements were not valued when my parents were not happy regarding my Ph.D. studies and kept worrying about the delay of marriage. Their concern remains that, I was the only girl in our locality to attain higher education and remained unmarried until the age of 25 years. Also, if I have higher educational qualifications, they must search for a groom more than my qualification which in turn may cost them more dowry.

Hence, the first-generation Dalit women research scholars are the most Dalits among Dalits as stated by Dr. Ambedkar compared to their Dalit male counterparts who are considered as the breadwinners of the family, contrarily female as 'passing birds.' They do not often enjoy readily available parental consent to the continuation of higher education and are considered deviant from family expectations. Dalit women students always have to put in extra effort to convince parents before pursuing their higher education. Withstanding the systemic oppression based on their interactional identity of gender, caste, and family pressure, how they adapt and negotiate with university spaces will be discussed further in the following section.

From Excluded to Exceptional: Acquired Cultural Capital

Though the navigation of the first-generation Dalit women learners into hierarchical university academic spaces is extremely tough, it is their agency in adapting to those settings through the possible contestation and negotiations that makes their untold stories exceptional. First-generation Dalit women learners have developed their survival strategies to cope with the patriarchal and casteist exclusionary practices experienced in the university. The responses are non-homogenous with both confrontational and strategies of ignorance. How they adapt themselves to the university and the students who partake in caste politics is noteworthy. As stated by one of the respondents:

It was hard for me in the initial days to be on campus without anyone to guide and support me. I ended up isolating myself for months. By the end of the first semester, I got habituated to the surroundings and academic culture. Though I was discouraged and looked down upon by my supervisor and seniors, our poor family conditions were the major pushing factor to be strong. Financial support in the form of university fellowship gave me some hope and I had some friends from the social sciences who used to discuss the issues of gender and caste discrimination in the university. This gave me awareness and exposure to the ideas regarding the marginalization of the oppressed and the anti-caste movements led by leaders like Dr. Ambedkar and Periyar. So, I started accepting the fact that I was capable enough and that the narrow-minded attitudes of other students should be ignored. Though there are students' unions organized on lines of political ideologies, due to less availability of time and work pressure I was not an active participant.

Though the social environments of the first-generation Dalit women scholars are different from the university, they constantly contested the conventional regressive notions and adopted acquired cultural capital in the university settings. In university social spaces the first-generation learners are exposed to new social assets such as education, intellect, style of speech, style of dress, and so forth, which also enhance social interactions that eventually lead to acquiring cultural capital. This process depicts the potential of universities as an efficient social institution of reform in transforming the lives of individuals and society eventually towards the framework of sustainable equality. The transitional phase of the first-generation Dalit women scholars from the excluded to the exceptions involves certain negotiations and contestation. The resilient covert forms of questioning the casteist slurs undertake certain costs that are striking and must be analyzed. One of the respondents says:

I was advised to hide my caste identity to be free from ill-treatment and discrimination in the department. When my colleague asked about the certificates that needed to be submitted for fellowship, I sent my certificates through the mail, which included my caste certificate. Another colleague of mine stopped me and told me, 'Do not send your caste certificate, they will get

to know your caste and you will be looked down upon. In my lab other girls who belong to the Brahman community used to discuss among themselves, 'Why reservation is there, people must be given opportunities based on 'merit'?' When I argued with them, they stopped talking to me. So, to avoid such instances, I used to keep earphones and ignore such comments.

The negotiations of the first-generation Dalit women learners can be tacit, whereas, for the privileged sections of students, their caste is a strong cultural capital and shields them from the vulnerabilities of the first-generation status. On the contrary, first-generation Dalit women students are advised to conceal their identity as Dalits to escape from the exclusionary practices and discrimination based on their social identity being a 'Dalit woman.' Therefore, the habitus of caste in university is quite evident and it makes the lower caste women experience the university spaces as hostile ones. These hostile spaces needed to be contested and those modes of contestation acquired cultural capital to survive on campus.

The multiplicity of voices of first-generation Dalit women scholars in the process of challenging the institutional discernments and countering their structural inequalities are insightful terrains to examine. In a confrontational manner one of the respondents from the field says, I quote:

The first thing Dalit students need to learn is, 'they are not inferior to anybody' if the other caste people talk to us, then we must talk otherwise avoid them, if we are respected, then we should respect, if not, we should repeat the same. First thing, I will not feel inferior based on my caste identity and if someone tries to discriminate against me through words or actions, I will respond to them with a counterargument, 'why should Dalits be scared always?'

These instances arguably have their roots in the self-respect movement (1952) led by Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy to allow people to live a life of freedom from slavery. The perception that first-generation learners are not merely passive recipients of institutional inequalities but are also active agents in challenging them and carving out channels of social mobility. Therefore, as stated by Phule and Ambedkar, education has been the major social agency in bringing change and giving a sense of self-respect in the lives of these first-generation Dalit women research scholars in the hegemonic structures of educational institutions such as universities. Education is considered the only hope for the Dalit community to redeem themselves from the clutches of caste-based discrimination and exclusionary practices. Therefore, as stated by Deshpande & Zacharias (2013: 16), higher education is the most legitimate means for sustaining or justifying the existing social order, as well as changing or overthrowing it. With the lived experiences of the first-generation Dalit women scholars in Indian university spaces, it is observed that gender is a significant aspect in countering the mainstream casteist paradigms in contemporary times.

Conclusion

First-generation learners can accomplish a positive and intergenerational change by overcoming educational deprivation in the academic space. The journey of first-generation students highlights a unique trajectory of contestations and struggle from elementary education to the university level with poor economic and socio-cultural capital. Breaking the glass ceiling by way of reaching universities, Dalit women scholars of the first generation are subjected to institutional inequalities leading to undesirable university experiences of systematic exclusion. Being a minority among the university, the dominant campus habitus which is a new phenomenon to the first-generation Dalit women learners, poses an additional burden on their coping methods and capabilities. This vividly depicted the social phenomenon of the 'invisibilisation' of the privilege to the students belonging to the upper castes and the marginalization of the students from Dalit and other marginalized communities deepens with their intersectional identity of gender and caste. Besides, the first-generation Dalit women students undergo a transition in their social environment which is substantially radical to make themselves fit into university spaces. This process of coping and adjusting to the campus dominant habitus negatively impacts their academic performance, as the process takes time and a toll on them. On the other hand, irrespective of all the barriers, first-generation learners are exposed to new social assets such as education, intellect, style of speech, style of dress, and so forth, and also enhanced social interactions that eventually lead to acquired cultural capital, which sometimes helps them succeed in their academic endeavors. It is to be noted that campus habitus is not devoid of caste and gender structures and the formations of alternative cultural capital that facilitates inclusive university campus experiences and just social relations for first-generation learners.

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Notes

- i Being a first-generation Dalit scholar from a rural area, Renuka who is 25-years-old from the Mahbubnagar region of Telangana state narrates her experiences of schooling. The unavailability of schools in and around her neighbourhood, poor quality of teaching, lack of basic facilities, and caste-based discrimination which is an everyday reality in rural India have been a part and parcel of her childhood. The cultural shocks experienced and the constant efforts to adapt herself to the new social environments of higher educational institutions are the central focus of her narrations. An in-depth interview was conducted from 7.00 p.m. to 9.00 p.m. on February 17, 2022. (ii, vi, vii, xi, *ibid.*)
- iii The respondents of the study include female research scholars from the 2nd year of their PhD to 5th year scholars in basic sciences from a central university in south India. The quantitative data was collected through questionnaires in February 2020. The names and characters of these narrations have been anonymised to protect the privacy of respondents and to maintain professional ethics.
- iv Treating the Dalit women scholars as people of less worth in the academic field and the intensification of their victimization is vividly explained by Ramya, a 27-year-old Dalit women scholar from a university at Hyderabad, while conducting her interview on January 20, 2022, from 10.00 am to 11.30 am. This shows the double oppression of Dalit women students in universities. (viii, xi, *ibid.*)
- v Vani who is 28-years-old, explained diverse forms of stigmatizations based on the intersectional identity of gender and caste. The differential treatment received by them from faculty members, seniors, and classmates based on their gender and caste identities is highlighted by Vani. This interview was held on January 04, 2022, from 4.00 p.m. to 5.35 pm in Hyderabad. (x, xii, *ibid.*)