Research Articles

Expression of Social Inclusion and Exclusion in Adolescent Friendships

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ABSTRACT *Though most of the schools are directed to follow an inclusive policy, but interactions with adolescents reflect the social inequalities prevalent in our society. Contrary to popular understanding, social exclusion begins during formative years. While one may think that studying social exclusion is more illuminating and promises a better understanding of disadvantaged groups and the basis of their exclusion, it is also essential to understand that this concept is so evocative, multifaceted and ambiguous that it can be defined in various ways and may hold different interpretations for different people. In our study, we developed a questionnaire using proxemics to understand the levels of friendship one shares with peers of different social class and caste. The sample consists of 60 female students of Grade 8th to 12th from Dhanbad Public School in the state of Jharkhand. The analysis showed that adolescents with similar socio-economic status and caste preferred each other over peers from different socio-economic status and caste. The exclusion mainly accounted for differences in socio-economic status and caste hierarchies. Participants belonging to upper caste groups were more likely to exclude peers from backward classes from their private and personal domains. Interestingly, inclusion of peers from lower caste groups in social and public spaces have been observed irrespective of social caste or class. A thematic analysis of their responses was also done to corroborate the results and account for any confounding variables. The results have been further discussed in the light of current theorization in the given area.*

Keywords: Inclusion, exclusion, inequalities, friendship, adolescence

1. INTRODUCTION

Social categorization is a perceptive phenomenon to instinctively and supposedly classify people belonging to various groups with a similar set of characteristics, both personal and social. Caste, socio-economic status, religion, geographical location, language, etc. have all been a handy tool in the multifaceted enactment of this process. As much as the human societies have been reliant upon social categorization, it has also been an effective medium to channelize social inequality. Humans have a propensity to include or get included with people or groups which are similar to our socio-cultural standing in the society. People or groups that we perceive as "unequal" or "different" are generally excluded. Awareness about "my" group commences at a young age and all those who do not fit in the criteria of 'in-group' are categorized as 'out-group'. Our focus is to determine the role played by caste and social class in the paradigmatic formation of in-groups and out-groups of the adolescents.

Social inclusion and exclusion are conceptually interdependent terms which are fastidiously making their way in the policy discourse of lower-middle-income economies like India. Since both the terms are synergetic, it is essential to understand social inclusion in the framework of exclusion. Thorat and Newman (2012) conceives exclusion as revolving around societal institutions that exclude on the basis of group identities such as caste, ethnicity, religion and gender.

The discourse of social inclusion and exclusion in the educational context have been connoted differently by different scholars. Some of them have restricted the conceptual boundaries to disability whereas others have recognized social inclusion of marginalized children who are at a disadvantage due to structures of caste, patriarchy, ethnic hierarchy, and class hierarchies as well (Singh, 2014).

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, upholds compulsory and free education in mainstream schools for all children irrespective of their disability or marginalized status in society. Apart from children with special needs, educationally deprived groups such as Dalits (scheduled castes), Adivasis (scheduled tribes), religious minorities and girls are given special emphasis under the policy making and implementation (Singh, 2014). According to Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2008), most of the schools in the country have approximated universal enrolment. While the enrolment statistics seem to be highly encouraging, a major challenge is to retain the enrolled students in the schools. Nambissan (2006) points out that even though the entry point at schools are inclusive, the institutional processes and ethos are in stark conflict with the discourse of inclusion. Lack of affordability, flexibility in curriculum, toilet facilities, being bullied in classroom, and not getting adequate attention from the teachers further aggravate the situation. According to Mascarenhas (2014), inclusive education is bound to fail if teachers or principals are not qualified and if children with disabilities or children belonging to marginalized sections of society are treated as a burden and passive participants in classroom.

Nambissan (2006) stresses that the quantification of inclusion should not be dependent upon indices like enrolment, attendance and completion rates as being understood in current policy documents. Inclusive education should be regarded as a far more complex process that places social groups differently in relation to valued resources like knowledge, skills, cultural attributes, future opportunities and life chances, sense of dignity and self-worth (Kabeer, 2000).

Acknowledging the imperativeness to embolden the agenda of social inclusion in schools, our paper focus on the dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion among peer groups. For our study, we conceptualized social exclusion as a way of relational aggression in which a child is exposed to physical, social or psychological harm due to their economic or social status. It entails a fundamental disconnection and lack of participation with peer groups. While belonging and connectedness are essential at any age, research suggests that adolescents are extremely sensitive to peer rejection thus indicating a significant threat to their mental health. Adolescence marks increased independence from parents and increased dependence on peers. Since identity development is highly reliant on peer groups, adolescent friendships become very salient. Maintaining peer relations can be fraught with complication due to the fluidity of in-group and out-group rules (Leets & Wolf, 2005).

Neurological profile for adolescents suggest that their brain areas for emotions such as Anterior Cingulate Cortex become highly activated in response to peer rejection whereas they show significantly less activation in the brain regions which govern emotional regulation such as Ventrolateral Prefrontal Cortex in response to peer rejection in comparison with younger children (Bolling, et al., 2011). DeWall, Deckman, Pond & Bonser (2011) observed lower immune function, reduced sleep quality, reduced ability to calm oneself in times of distress, reduced self esteem, feelings of anxiety, depression and aggression in children who have faced social exclusion from a peer group. This suggests that social exclusion during adolescence may be particularly distressing and that they may have significant difficulty in managing their distress.

Against this backdrop, we have attempted to study the underlying dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion by bringing to light the peer preferences during adolescence. We wanted to study whether the adolescents prefer their friends for various day to day activities on the basis of their social status in the society. Considering this to be a finding, we also

wanted to look profoundly into the patterns of peer interactions in various spaces and spheres of life, thus indicating inclusion and exclusion through the choices made.

2. METHOD

2.1. CONTEXTUALIZING THE STUDY

As per the 2011 census, Dhanbad ranks second in terms of population and 20th in terms of area in the state of Jharkhand. In terms of population per sq.km. Dhanbad is the most densely populated district in the state with 1,316 persons per sq. as against the state's 414. The economy of the district mainly depends on cultivation or related work. More than 23% of the total workers are engaged in Primary sector. In 2006, Indian government categorized Dhanbad as one of the 250 most backward districts of India. Dhanbad receives funds from the Backward Regions Fund Programme (BRGF). However, there is a marked trend towards growth and urbanization due to increased non-agricultural openings and immigration of rural people to urban centers (Gazetteer of India : Bihar, Chapter VIII Economic Trends, 1964).

Besides being known as the 'Coal capital of India', Dhanbad is a perfect blend of various cultures as it is a melting point for people with varying economic and social backgrounds, different religions and socio-cultural values. Since a long time, Dhanbad has been home to lot of Marwari, Rajasthani, Gujarati, Punjabi, Tamil, Malayali, Telugu, Bengali, Bihari communities. Rapid development and urbanization will subsequently lead the city to be reckoned as one of the efficacious cities of India.

2.2 Sample

The upper caste (Forward class) students were identified as the 'General' category (GC) and the lower caste (backward class) students were identified as 'Reserved Category' (RC). These two terms are provided by the state. The latter term 'RC' includes Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC). However, the terms 'Forward class' and 'Backward class' are commonly spoken by the locals. We have used both the set of terms interchangeably in our paper.

For the current paper, we have taken data from 60 female students residing in the hostel of Dhanbad Public School, Dhanbad. All students were from grade VIII-XII. 26 students belonged to 'Forward Class' whereas 34 belonged to 'Backward class'. It was a geographically diverse group as the students belonged to West Bengal, Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. Most of the participants were upper or lower caste Hindus.

2.3 PROCEDURE

For this paper, we developed a questionnaire using proxemics to identify the patterns of interpersonal peer relationships. E.T. Hall(1966) coined the term Proxemics in 1963 which denotes "The study of how human beings communicate through their use of space". Though Proxemics study inter-spatial behaviour which is often concerned with territoriality, we used this concept to study social distance among the participants. The questionnaire consisted of 27 questions pertaining to the participants' various facets of life: Private domain (4), Personal domain (10), Social domain (7), Public domain (1), No contact domain (2), and Hostile domain (3).

The items looked like "I will share my transport to school with_____", "I can trust _____ with all my secrets", "I can share my tiffin with _____." Some items were reverse in nature – "I will not go for swimming with_____".

Participants were asked to nominate one of their class mates/friends for every item which pertained to their daily life activities. Since this paper focuses on understanding the dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion based on the preferences and choices pertaining to the socio-economic status of the nominees, it wasn't mandatory for the participants to select someone from their class. They were allowed to nominate their friends from the same school irrespective of their grade, section and gender. They were requested to state the reason for choosing the particular peer. After the questionnaire was administered, the data was subject to quantitative and thematic analysis.

1. RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the number of nominations by Participants belonging to Upper and Lower Caste Groups in favour of peers from Upper and Lower Caste Groups
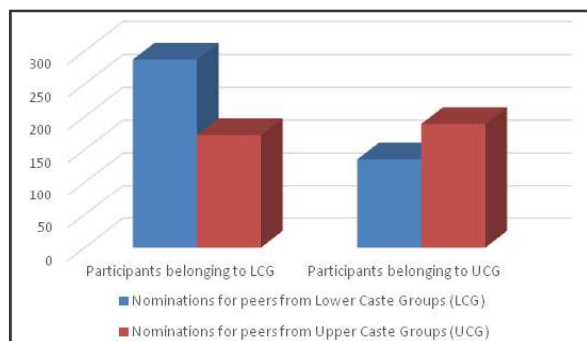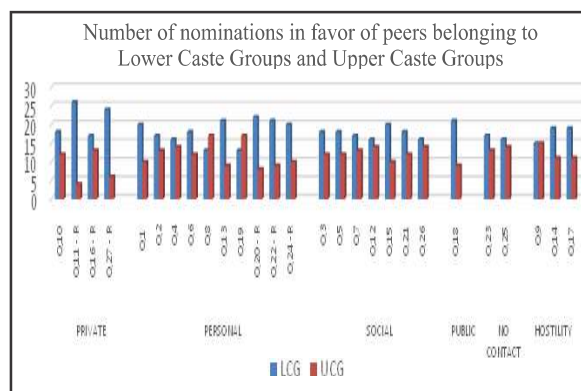

Figure 2 shows the number of nominations in favour of Upper and Lower Caste Groups

(*) DENOTES REVERSE ITEMS

Table 1 shows the Thematic Analysis of the responses of the participants from Upper and Lower Caste Groups

THEMES	Participants belonging to Lower Caste Groups (LCG)	Participants belonging to Upper Caste Groups (UCG)
Outlook on Academic Advantage	While a few LCG participants felt that UCG friends can offer an intellectually stimulating company, most of them believed in doing academic/sports related activities with friends belonging to backward class. They felt that backward class friends are at the same level of competition and they enjoyed their work with same class friends only.	UCG participants believed that backward class friends have an advantage over academics in terms of the relaxation in percentages, reservations and opportunities. They felt that doing activities related to academia or sports with friends from backward classes will also put them at an advantageous position.
Concerns related with hygiene	Apart from LCG participants preferring UCG friends over LCG friends for activities like swimming, drinking water from their bottle or sharing their clothes, about half of them also stated that they feel that their friends belonging to backward class do not maintain hygiene.	Most of the UCG participants out rightly expressed their concerns over sharing water, swimming pool, and clothes with the LCG. They believed that LCG friends do not maintain proper hygiene. It was interesting to note that they did not express any issue in sharing their food with their backward class friends in school. They were also willing to go to their homes for a meal with their family.

Expression of Relational Aggression	It was interesting to note that backward class participants also conveyed repressed aggression for their fellow backward class peers. More than forward class, they considered backward class as their competition.	On one hand, participants belonging to UCG nominated their backward class friends for sharing their prizes and on the other hand, most of them were also willing to display their aggression on backward class peers and would feel happy if the teacher reprimands them.
Dependency for Trust and Support	Majority of the LCG participants reported that they rely on their friends from forward class with their secrets and during emergency situations. Some of them considered them to be more responsible whereas others felt that the power of their 'forward class' status will prevent them from landing into any trouble.	Participants from UCG did not express much of a variation in preferring peers from forward or backward classes. They believed in helping everyone and when required receiving the same help in return. However, more than half of the UCG have still preferred peers from forward classes.
Compensatory Mechanism	Most of the LCG participants expressed solidarity with the peers belonging to backward classes for general activities relating to their personal, social and public domains. Their preference was skewed towards peers from backward classes.	Majority of the participants from UCG excluded peers from backward classes from their private and personal domains. However, they chose backward classes more in their Social and Public domains to compensate for the exclusion that they did.

4. DISCUSSION

The focus of the current paper was to understand the dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion in adolescent friendships. While our country continues to struggle with discrimination, marginalization, and deprivation on account of one's position in the social hierarchy; inculcating the values of inclusiveness has become the need of the hour. We wanted to study peer preferences and patterns of interpersonal relationships emerging against a backdrop of one's social class and caste. The findings reiterate the fact that schools are a microcosm of society where we can effectively study the social phenomena taking place in the society. It also points out to the fact that social relationships among peers are driven by the subtleties of social inclusion and exclusion.

Figure 1 indicates overall preference of peers by participants belonging to lower and upper castes. After taking into account the reverse items, it was found that participants belonging to upper castes preferred peers from upper castes whereas lower caste participants preferred peers from lower castes.

However, Figure 2 deeply explores the complexities of social inclusion and exclusion. It showed that the participants exhibited higher preference to include peers from forward classes in their private and personal domains whereas the pattern reversed when it came to social and public domains. Peers from backward classes were preferred more in social and public domains. The data also highlights the hostile and bigoted attitudes towards peers belonging to backward classes. However, the domain 'no contact' emitted neutral responses.

Thematic analysis of the reasons given by the participants for their peer preferences indicate predisposed and dogmatic attitudes towards backward classes. Participants, irrespective of their own class and caste, preferred to include peers belonging to forward classes in their private and personal domains. This can be attributed to the unsubstantiated association of upper caste groups

with positive characteristics like maintaining good hygiene, trustworthiness, dependability and support. This is clearly reflective of the imbibed attitudes and thinking which is discriminatory in nature. Forward classes are still considered 'pure' and 'dependable'. The power that their caste status, irrespective of their financial status, exerts is overarching. A participant stated that "*I will call Saurav Prasad in case of emergency because his family has a good name and contact in society and he should be able to help me out.*" Even though lot of people from backward classes are socially successful, the general notion of lower castes being "weak" persists.

Peers from backward classes are considered 'unhygienic' (or 'impure') and they were not given preference when it came to sharing secrets, sharing clothes, swimming together in the same pool, drinking water from the same bottle, or approaching in an emergency situation. A participant wrote that "*I will not drink water from the bottle of Tanya Murmu as I find her way of drinking very unhygienic.*" We received similar kind of responses for most of the peers belonging to backward classes. Though not in its literal sense of being as extreme as untouchability, one can still prominently observe the perpetuation of 'purity and pollution' as described by Dumont (1959). Thorat (2002) pointed out that while the practice of untouchability and socially excluding the Scheduled Caste children by making them sit separately from other students was disappearing, the prejudiced demeanor against them persisted in the form of lack of friendships between Scheduled Castes and non-Scheduled Castes. Disappointedly, even our results showed that such behavior is still disseminated in adolescent interactions which subsequently lead them to maintain caste distance, thus excluding the peers belonging to lower caste groups in their private and personal domains.

Kaul (2001) found that while discrimination was not expressed openly in classroom, the friendly attitudes changed to hostile outside the school. Contrary to our findings, she found no signs of social inter-mingling outside the school. Interestingly, our data indicated that participants from both upper and lower groups preferred peers from lower caste groups more than upper caste

groups in their social and public domains. A participant stated, "*I will go for a movie* with Rani Kumari (name changed) because I can't share my food and water with her and she will feel left out." Such responses showed that adolescents are aware that they are marginalizing and socially excluding their fellow peers, thus making them want to compensate for the exclusion. There is also a willingness to accept and include peers from lower castes in their life, but due to their unprimed attitude towards backward classes they confine the inclusion of peers from backward classes to their social and public spheres.

Our results also suggests that the boundaries of social exclusion are malleable. When it comes to one's academia and extra-curricular activities, peers from backward classes were preferred. As per the qualitative responses, most of the participants felt that peers from backward classes have an added advantage in terms of relaxation in percentages and other opportunities. Instead of evaluating their peers on an intellectual criteria, some participants have even misconceived everyone from the lower caste groups to be "intelligent" and "winner" just on the basis of their 'reserved category'. This led them to perceive peers from backward classes as their toughest competition as well as the ones with whom they would like to do their academic and extra-curricular activities.

However, this acceptance and inclusion of peers from lower caste groups bring along underlying relational aggression against them. Their fellow peers from lower caste groups reap negativity for those who excel in academics and have a better social standing. Some participants from upper caste groups have also expressed anger towards the peers of lower castes on account of "unfair competition" and "skewed distribution of opportunities." A XIIth grade participant from upper class stated "*I will hit Anuja Banka as I don't like her attitude. She doesn't study but will still get a good college.*" It, thus, becomes imperative to not only implement policies related to reservation but also counsel the children regarding the need for such policies. We strongly recommend intervention in terms of creating awareness and inculcating positive attitudes towards inclusive-

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ness in classroom setting. The opinionated and inequitable attitude and practices have been internalized by the adolescents towards the lower caste peer groups, thus affecting the school ethos and classroom social networking on everyday basis. Killen (2007) suggests that children from a preadolescent age are aware that social exclusion is wrong, thus talking to them about including everyone, feelings when social exclusion is encountered and strategies to manage social exclusion could be really beneficial.

5. CONCLUSION

Through this study, we conclude that though there is social inclusion of children from lower caste groups, it is only restricted to the social and public domains. The boundaries of inclusion grow rigid as we approach the domains of one's private and personal lives. Education has not been able to perpetuate awareness against or built a value system that can combat prevalent social exclusion and discrimination at grass roots level. The situation can only be challenged and transformed by bringing in intervention which disseminate inclusiveness and new set of values.

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