

Dalit Education: A Psycho-Social Perspective

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How to cite this article: Raphael Vellankanni, M.C. Raja (2024) Dalit Education: A Psycho-Social Perspective. *Library Progress International*, 44(2), 1252-1259

Abstract

Education means different things to different people. Education is normally understood and defined as a process in which the educand undergoes a formal training in an institutional setting with a prescribed curriculum and well-formulated texts, under the guidance of subject experts. As far as its characteristics are concerned, it is a process as well as a product. It plays a vital role in the holistic formation of human persons. Specifically, it contributes to and is concerned with constructive changes in their intellects, characters and behaviors with the fellow members in their community and society at large. Dalit education, while following the normal norms and undergoing the usual procedure, can be viewed as a mental process through which a non-human person tries to get rid of all the clutches of socio-cultural oppressions and establish its own identity and resume its lost human dignity. This article approaches 'education' from a psycho-social perspective of Dalits in India and Tamil Nadu in particular and surpasses its formal meaning into a deeper meaning and underpins its pivotal and dynamic role in human formation and flourishing of Dalits in the social sphere. In the course of empowering the weaker sections of the society, education is not merely a means of economic and materialistic development but occupies an irreplaceable position and becomes *the* liberating tool in terms of freeing their caged *psyche*, frozen thoughts and fixed thought-patterns and leading them into a fresh *mental framework*, with vibrant *thought-patterns* and *creative thinking* which would certainly make them biologically strong, psychologically healthy and socially effective. This paper, while hinting upon the trio-interwoven-nature of education, theoretically and psychologically expounds on the *psycho-social* perspective of Dalit-education.

Keywords: *Dalit-Education, Dyche, Emancipation Human flourishing, Social-Transformation*

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a result of my sincere and modest attempt, of course impelled by a great desire; to psychologically contribute something towards the cause of the emancipation of the Dalits, whose only liberating weapon is education to which they had been denied access for around three millennia and the situation has not changed much even after the Indian independence.

In the Indian caste context, the condition and the identity of Dalits is perplexing. They are not non-persons without names. Ironically, they do have names and that is precisely the problem. In fact, most of the Dalits think their emancipation lies in their effort to get rid of their names – mostly by hiding them. S/he lives all along in an unconscious fear of her/his ‘caste’ name being exposed to the neighbourhood, especially in the city context. For their very name is a symbol of despise, denigration, humiliation and aversion in the Indian socio-cultural and religious milieu. It is a question of one’s identity both of the Dalits as well as the caste people. So, we need to ask how deeply has the caste culture affected one’s *psyche* and, from where does the caste system draw strengths to sustain itself during all these centuries despite many political and socio-cultural upheavals to this day.

Though initially I titled my paper as “Education and Social Upliftment: A Bio-Psycho-Social Perspective”. Having felt it is vast, I narrowed it down by modifying it as “Dalit Education – A Psycho-Social Perspective”. Thus, this paper will be predominantly focusing on *psychological* and *social* dimensions of Dalit Education.

BURNING ISSUE AS SPRING BOARD

First of all, let us try to pin down what is meant by ‘Dalit education’ which is a pivotal concept of this paper. Just before doing that, let me give a precautionary note on the very context in which this international psychological conference is arranged amongst academicians around the central theme, “The Urgency of Sustainable Development: A Bio-Psycho-Social Perspective”.

What if the country is sustainably developed in all the fields while the vulnerable and weaker communities of the country like Scheduled Castes are forced to drink water in which human excreta is mixed with¹? Or is it just and appropriate to remain quiet brooding over NEP 2020 – a marvelous attempt to place India in comparison with the developed / Western countries while completely neglecting through its historic silence to the three-millennia-old-subjugation of Dalits? Is it permissible to mortgage the long-earned-national properties and amenities to a few corporate firms in order that India could reach its goal of 5-trillion-economy? As academicians or psychologists can we turn a deaf ear to the whole issue yet be satisfied of having attended an international conference held on the central theme, “The Urgency of Sustainable Development: A Bio-Psycho-Social Perspective”? What is going to be our response to this issue?

The central theme of the conference can be summed up with three key words/concepts namely – **life, psyche and socialization**. I attempt to enquire in this paper whether or not the education that has been imparted to the citizens at various levels under various titles like ‘elementary education’, ‘adult education’, ‘higher education’ is really preparing or shaping the young minds to live an exemplary human living and let the least brethren live a dignified life. In this situation, what is the connection between Education and Psychology in relation to Dalit ordeals and following emancipation? What is the relevance of this connectivity between both in view of ‘Dalit Education’ or *Dyche*?

DALIT EDUCATION

Before making a psycho-social enquiry into the process of education from Dalit *psyche* (*Dyche*), one needs to know what ‘Dalit education’ means. It is not merely imparting education to the Dalits. Nor does it mean educating the Dalits. It may begin with that but goes deeper than and beyond that start. To have a better understanding of it, first let us try to know *who Dalits are* and *what education means to them*.

a) Dalits in Indian Caste-society

The word ‘dalit’ is an inclusive term. It means the “oppressed, broken and torn asunder”ⁱⁱ which can be applied to any oppressive situation. However, within the caste framework, it refers to a group of people who are considered the untouchables and tribalsⁱⁱⁱ of Indian society, and who are excluded from the mainstream. They are addressed by numerous names; each name designates either their place in the social hierarchy or their qualities or occupation. While some names are coined in the effort of reconstruct their history and identity, unfortunately most of the (given) names are derogatory and despising.^{iv}

Among myriad forms of oppression that the Dalits suffer in the caste-ridden society, segregation or exclusion is the most inhuman. It is meted out against Dalits in the form of untouchability. This form of exclusion is characterized by despise and aversion. It ranges from physical, geographical, social, intellectual and religious to psychological (most of the time reflexive and unconscious). A Dalit is forced to live an unequal and perpetually “stigmatized existence.”^v

b) What is ‘Dalit Education’?

Education “is concerned with certain changes in the intellects, characters and behaviour of men”.^{vi} The Dalit population has been forbidden from gaining access to education more than three millennia. After the independence, in spite of the Constitutional guarantees, education to Dalits still remains unreachable and a question mark. Education is more than a mere scholastic learning/achievement; it conscientizes them. It makes them conscious of their powers and weakness. It empowers them by weaken their weaknesses and strengthening their strengths. It opens up their eyes to the reality of suppression and discrimination and thus the educated Dalits cannot but begin to raise their voice for their dignity and equality. Pandit Iyothi Thass, Rao Bahadur Rettamalai Srinivasan and M.C. Rajah are archetypes to this.

Thus, Dalit education is the only liberating weapon that would free them psychologically, intellectually and physically from all the sorts of clutches. Once they are educated, they try to assert their rights and fight for their emancipation from all sorts of discriminations. This act of their would automatically question the age-old-hegemony exercised and privileges enjoyed by the casteists. In a nut shell, Dalit education means *holistic empowerment* – bio-psycho-socio-economic-politico-religious-cultural perspective. But often times, access to education for Dalits is either overlooked or one-sidedly emphasized. Hence, it has impacts on real life-worlds of Dalits.

c) Critical Dalit Pedagogy

Dalit education requires a unique pedagogy as Dalits have a differing socio-cultural history from the others. I would go along with Shailaja Paik who proposes pedagogy called **Critical Dalit Pedagogy** (CDP) which takes into account of their three-millennia-old ordeals; which emerges from their ideas, actions and life-experiences; which is at the same time anti-caste, anti-hegemonic, anti-patriarchal in nature.^{vii} In short, it has to be a humanizing pedagogy not only for the victims, that is Dalits, but also for the victimisers, the so-called upper castes.

DALIT EDUCATION AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESS

From psychological perspective, education “is the means to a complete development of man. To achieve a complete development, it is essential that the various capacities of the individual be given adequate opportunity of manifesting and developing themselves.”^{viii}

a) Dalit Psychology – Dyche

Before we discuss the psychological aspect of Dalit education, let us first try to analyze the psychology of Dalits in general. Dalits’ *psyche* that is broken and shattered by the social segregation and suppression, religious discrimination, economic exploitation, and political

oppression by the so-called upper castes becomes completely bruised and disfigured. This suppressed and humiliated condition of Dalits' collective *psyche* is referred to as *Dyche*^{ix} by Kalyani Hazri. This *dyche* is looking for its liberation in totality.

b) *Dyche* and Dalit Education

As Psychology is defined as “the science of the intellects, characters and behaviour of animals including man”^x *dyche* can be viewed as a scientific study of the intellects, character and behaviour of Dalit as collective subjects. “Psychology contributes to a better understanding of the aims of education by defining them, making them clearer”.^{xi}

c) *Intrinsic Relationship between Education and Psychology*

There is an intrinsic bond between Education and Psychology. Ram Nath and Rajendra Kumar acknowledge this fact that “a causal glance at the various aspects of the contemporary process of education will convince anyone about the intimate relationship of Education and Psychology.”^{xii} Parameswaran too affirms this by saying that “psychology is closely associated with fields of knowledge like Philosophy and Education since a long time.”^{xiii}

Dalit education as a psychological as well as process which aims at producing a renewed *dyche* (Dalit-psycho-self) which is cleansed of all wounds of *dyche*.

DALIT EDUCATION BREEDS A FREED SOCIAL-SELF

Many studies have been made and many concrete action-plans have been proposed and some have been actualized. Yet the psyche of the so-called upper caste remains the same taking different modern forms in spite of rationalistic and scientific and technological developments. On the side of the Dalits, their *dyche*, having been treated positively, yet they cannot fully come out of post-traumatic experiences of caste discriminations. All cannot come to clinics or labs. In this way, ‘how to reach out to them as it claims to be a “human” science’ is the focus of this section.

a) Dalit Education as Humanisation

I would like to begin this section with two inhuman and horrible incidents. Going by chronological order, the *first one* happened in the year 2002 at Thinniyam, a village in Tiruchi district, Tamil Nadu. There are about 200 upper-caste families and 100 dalit families. An upper-caste woman is a president of the village and her husband, a teacher, only runs the town's administration in her place. Seven years ago, Karuppiyah (38), a dalit, reportedly paid Rs.2000 to the president to allocate a government house for his sister. With no house having been allotted and the president's term drawing to a close, Karuppiyah demanded that the money be returned. The president's husband first asked for time; later he denied that he had taken any money. A frustrated Karuppiyah made a public announcement about this problem using the traditional drum that dalits play. Enraged, the president's husband, along with his son, abused and assaulted him with footwear, Karuppiyah later said in a complaint to the police. The next morning the president's husband and his relatives allegedly also assaulted Karuppiyah's relatives Murugesan and Ramasami with footwear and hot iron rods, and reportedly forced them to feed each other human excreta for helping Karuppiyah bring his grievance to public notice. They also made Murugesan and Ramasami beat the drum again to announce that what Karuppiyah claimed was false.^{xiv}

The *second incident* has taken place 20 years after ‘Thinniyam massacre’ in 2022 at Vengaivayal village in the Annavasal block of Pudukkottai district, Tamil Nadu. Initially a few children in the village fell sick having diarrhea and vomiting. The doctors who treated those children guessed from the common symptoms found among the sick that possible contamination of the source of drinking water. Soon some of the villagers having sensed foul smell in the water checked the overhead tank located in the area where the Scheduled Caste

community resides and found that human excreta was dumped inside to the extent the water turned into yellow. The miscreants who had mixed excreta in the drinking water were caste Hindus. And this has been done because of caste discrimination and vengeance towards the Adi-Dravidar families at Vengaivayal.^{xv}

b) Society an Authentic Space for Self-actualization

For any country or society to progress there is a need to emerge as a healthy nation. Prerequisite or prior step to this is 'healthy people', both mentally and physically. "Mental Health is described as an appropriate balance between the individuals and their social groups in the larger societal environment."^{xvi} These three components – individuals, society and environment – constitute and are essential to promote psychological well-being, self-actualization of the individuals in the society and finally leading to social harmony. In other words, harmony should be found within oneself and in one's social relationships (inter-personal, between groups). "It is the sharing of a common life, which constitutes the individual personality. We become persons in community, in virtue of our relations to others."^{xvii}

Unless individuals and their social groups interact comfortably, psychological and social harmony cannot be achieved. The absence of such interaction is bound to cause tension and anxiety in their minds and ultimately this leads to mental illness and physical ailments.

c) Caste-ridden Indian Society and Mental health of *Dalits*

Indian society is basically a **caste-ridden** society. Besides her multi-cultural, pluri-religious and linguistic dimensions, it is the caste system that binds every individual in India from birth to death. The law given by Manu seems to prevail in the *minds* and the hearts of the people till date. Manu, the law giver prescribes 'permanent exclusion'^{xviii} of *Dalits* from the *chaturvarna*, comprising primarily of the *Brahmins* created out of the mouth, the *Kshatriyas*, of arms, the *Vaishyas*, from the thighs and the *Sudras* from the feet. He codified the then prevailing **social norms** consigning *Shudras*, *Adi-Shudras (Dalits)* and women thoroughly unequal and miserable existence. Hence, the so-called members of the upper castes, for instance a Brahmin, **behave** with the so-called members of the lower castes, for instance a *Dalit*, **indifferently** and in **inhuman way**. This reveals the fact that they (both the castes) suffer from a kind of mental illness, which may be called "caste-delusion."

d) Caste Delusion

In the field of Psychiatry, *delusion* is understood to be a false opinion or belief a person has developed over a thing or a phenomenon which cannot be shaken by reason. In this way, **caste-delusion**, which is indeed the consequence of the caste system, has seriously impaired the mind-set of both the upper castes and the lower castes. As a result, both have lost their capacity to look at each other as normal human beings; to recognize and respect each other on the basis of their merit i.e., what they have achieved with whatever they had. The different symptoms or behavioural problems are manifesting the presence of the mental illness i.e., the caste-delusion among the upper castes and the lower castes.^{xix}

However, its impact on the psyche of the *Dalits* is more miserable - than the other – that they are forced to unbearable indignity and wretched treatment in the society and it becomes very hard and impossible for them to deal with their emotions. And thus, *Dalits* invent a *psychological mechanism of stealing* away from their emotions which Raj names as stonewall or steeling.

"Steeling refers to a particular psychological state of being and action wherein a person either consciously or subconsciously decides to close the shutters to respond emotionally to situations that are beyond his

control. Generally steeling is marked by a high level of rationalization even in situations that may require a high level of emotional response.”^{xx}

Hence, **Dalits** are very much prone to anxiety disorders, mood disorders (major depressive disorders), psychotic disorders (shared *psychosis*, bipolar disorders and schizophrenia). The degree and ratio vary from person to person depending on the ambience and social relationship established now and family-set up. In general, thus Dalits suffers from long standing and **multifarious delusions**. The observable behaviours/habits of Dalits are open rebellion, over achievement, faking illness, being verbose, being too reticent, being always berated, or being always moralizing.

This depressed and humiliated psyche of Dalits finds various ways/forms of reactions and responses. They are broadly categorized into two: **submissive** and **aggressive**. Under each category we can find various psychological responses. Some Dalits acquire stress and undergo depression and anxiety. This is how their psychological coping *mechanism drives their force to prevent from facing the reality of inequality and injustice*.

e) The task of Psychology

It is said that God for the hungry is ‘the food’. Likewise, the humiliated Dyché is looking for liberation in totality. As for as the field of psychology in general and clinical psychology in particular is concerned, it should very **seriously** take into **consideration** this dehumanized suppression and oppression of Dalits, while treating the mental disorders and psychic diseases Dalits suffer. They are not one among the many but they are very unique and drawing your special attention.

Another challenge from *dyché* reality to psychology is that the discipline is to incorporate the liberation elements outside the clinics and labs. In short, what they are in need of now is a **Liberation Psychology** or **Liberative Clinical Psychology** of religion that could, healing them from the past wounds, psychologically strengthen them, widen their future - beyond all these discriminative and divisive factors - towards a **cosmic-psyche**, which sees every good in others and which could mutually and friendly correct, if need be.

Psychology, as a strict science in relation to the reality of Dalits, studies their situations or the individual cases, analyses them and finds the causes of problems. Going with a set of pre-conceived theories, tools and techniques and observing the phenomena surely will help human persons to come out of their psychological issues. But it should go beyond the framed or structured ways of enquiry, collection and analysis of data with an open-mind searching and re-searching the unknown and unraveled psyche of Dalits. In short, the psychologists who deal with Dalits’ individual psychological issues should go beyond the frontiers of the ordinary ways of dealing with the oppressed *dyché*. Only then it will give a societal dimension of their psychological issues. It is the need of the hour. By this suggestion I don’t neglect the contribution rendered by psychology in general, clinical psychology in particular. But I envisage a foresighted, optimistic and futuristic agenda to the discipline at least as far as India is concerned, where they form 40% of its total population.^{xxi}

‘Social-self’ of Dalits is the product of Dalit education. The hallmark of it is that it is a fully **freed social self**; at the same time, it is not completely independent or isolated but interdependent on other social selves of Dalits and non-Dalits.

CONCLUSION

As a way of conclusion, the author arrives at the following propositions. **Firstly**, Dalit education has got a close affinity with Psychology and Sociology. **Secondly** Dalit education will bring psychological and social emancipations. This necessarily means that their three-millennia old discriminations and mistreatments has got a social foundation and has impacted psychologically to the extent their (Dalits’) psyche has collectively attained certain distinct

characteristics incorporating all their sufferings, agonies and traumas. Dalit education, looking through the lens of Dalit pathos with a longing for emancipation, has to forcefully follow a process of socialization in which the wounded *dyche* finds it valid and socio-environmental ways and means to get freed from all the clutches that are socio-political-cultural in characteristics.

Thirdly, Dalits are still carrying the cross of humiliation, exploitation, oppression and subjugation. Such a perennially devastating and inhuman treatment has inflicted on **Dyche** deep emotional wounds and an irremovable trauma of low self-esteem or worthlessness or 'no-people-status'. Dalit education has to precisely address it and help their wounded psyche to get freed and healed through the process of national reconciliation like that which was advocated by Nelson Mandela in the context of African anti-apartheid revolution. **Fourthly**, the pedagogy of imparting Dalit education has to be in line with Paulo Freire's The pedagogy of the Oppressed following the "Critical Dalit Pedagogy" proposed by Shailaja Paik.

One can realize that Psychology is not merely concerned to study mind and its impacts on one's behaviours or children's physical or physiological development alone rather it has to focus on the holistic personality development of all humans in special way of Dalits and socialization process by organically connecting and dynamically organizing all the essential elements and processes of human and natural environments because *dyche* cries in loud voice as follows:

I am a Man/Woman & I Have a Name...

*What else I want
Treat me as a Man/Woman
With dignity and love
Just call me by my name*

ⁱ See "Human excreta found in water tank for SC village in Tamil Nadu, case filed," <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chennai/human-excreta-water-tank-sc-village-tamil-nadu-8347377/> [accessed 28, September 2024].

ⁱⁱ See L. Stanislaus, *The Liberative Mission of the Church among Dalit Christians* (Delhi: ISPCCK, 1999), 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ There are differences between the untouchables and the tribals. Not all the tribals suffer untouchability. They still preserve their own identity and resist being assimilated into the national mainstream. They are economically poor. Their rich eco-friendly culture is looked down upon by the mainstream as backward. On the contrary the untouchables are a more general category which includes different linguistic and cultural groups. Each group in their own linguist community suffers exclusion and oppression.

^{iv} 'Dalit' is a name coined by the untouchables themselves in order to construct their identity as other names of the untouchables given by the oppressors are derogatory in nature. For instance, in Vedic literature they are called *Dasu*, *Raksasa* and *Avarna* (the no-caste), and *Chandalas* and *Panchamas* (the fifth caste). In the government registers they are termed as Scheduled castes, Out-castes, Depressed classes, Exterior castes, Untouchables; Gandhi called them Harijans meaning 'children of God'. The dalits do not accept this name since it denotes a kind of condescension on the part of the high caste people. Instead, they prefer to call themselves 'Dalits', since it describes the real situation of oppression and as Clarke observes it also "forces caste people to reckon with the reality of a surviving human community that has been wronged by them for centuries." See Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 18. However, one should note that these names and labels refer to untouchables in general at the sub-continental level. Each region/locality has specific names for the untouchables, which indeed are despising and denigrating. For instance, the name *Pariah* is used in Tamil Nadu which is one of the most despising names. This word is used in English to denote an outcast who is excluded and disliked. Words such as 'political pariah,' 'literary pariah' are commonly heard in the country's English news channels.

^v Saral K. Chatterji, "Some Aspects of Dalit Ideology," in *Towards a Common Dalit Ideology*, ed. Arvind P. Nirmal (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute, 1989), 1.

^{vi} Edward L. Thorndike, "The Contribution of Psychology to Education", *The Journal of Educational Psychology*, 1, 5-12.

- vii See “What Dalit people Taught Us About Education and Why We Must Commit to It,” <https://thewire.in/caste/what-dalit-people-taught-us-about-education-and-why-we-must-commit-to-it> [accessed September 30, 2024].
- viii Ram Nath Sharma and Rajendra Kumar Sharma, *Advanced Educational Psychology*, (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2022), 1.
- ix See M C Raj and Jyothi, *Dyche: The Dalit Psyche – The Science of Dalit Psychology – Reconstructing Indian Nationalism*, (Tumkur: Ambedkar Resource Centre, 2008), 19. See also Kalyani Hazri, “Exploring Dyche: A Reading of Yoikana,” <http://ijellh.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/4-47-58.pdf> [accessed October 15, 2024].
- x Edward L. Thorndike, “The Contribution of Psychology to Education”, *The Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 1, 5-12; 1
- xi Edward L. Thorndike, “The Contribution of Psychology to Education”, *The Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 1, 5-12; 1
- xii Ram Nath Sharma and Rajendra Kumar Sharma, *Advanced Educational Psychology*, (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2022), 1.
- xiii E.G. Parameswaran, *Psychology at School*, (Hyderabad: Neelkamal Publications, 2004), 1.
- xiv See “Preying on Dalits,” <https://frontline.thehindu.com/other/article30246394.ece> [accessed September 13, 2024].
- xv See “Human excreta found in water tank for SC village in Tamil Nadu, case filed,” <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chennai/human-excreta-water-tank-sc-village-tamil-nadu-8347377/> [accessed 29, September 2024]. Also see “Those who mixed human waste in water tank will be identified,” <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Madurai/those-who-mixed-human-waste-in-water-tank-will-be-identified/article66347221.ece> [accessed October 12, 2024].
- xvi M.A. Khan, *Scheduled Castes and Their Status in India*. (New Delhi: Uppal 1980), 2.
- xvii Ryan LaMothe, “Pastoral Counseling in the 21st Century: The Centrality of Community,” *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Vol. 68:2, (2014), 4.
- xviii Here permanent exclusion means exclusion from social, economic, political and religious spheres. It has caused an irreparable damage to **Dalits** so much so that Government Reservation Policies could not make them up as par lance with the rest of the citizens.
- xix See Shura Darapuri. “Caste Delusion, Buddhism and the **Dalit** Psyche,” *Voice of Dalit*, Vol. 3 (2), (2010), 118.
- xx Kalyani Hazri, “Exploring Dyche: A Reading of Yoikana,” 52.
- xxi In the global family, of those 260 million people are affected by caste-based discrimination worldwide, an estimated 200 million live in India, where they have been treated as "untouchable" due to Brahminic ritual traditions that considered them "polluted" or "polluting". *Dalit* people have been victims of current history still. See also Raj, M.C. & Jyothi Raj, *Dyche, the Dalit Psyche: A Science of Dalit Psychology*, (Ambedkar Resource Centre: Tumkur, 2008), 51.