

Healing The Psyche from Caste Violence: Addressing the Cumulative Psychological Trauma of Generations of Oppression and Deprivation Among the SC/ST Community in India

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ABSTRACT

The intergenerational hypothesis in psychology explores how behaviours, traits, and even trauma can be passed down through families, potentially influencing the mental health and well-being of future generations through various genetic, environmental, and psychological mechanisms. The psychology of intergenerational trauma shows how historical oppression continues to shape the thoughts, behaviours, and emotional well-being of SC/ST communities. The Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) communities in India have historically faced systemic oppression, social exclusion, and economic deprivation. For centuries, SC/ST communities of India were subjected to *caste-based discrimination, untouchability, and social ostracism*. Researchers are exploring the mechanisms by which intergenerational transmission occurs, including genetic, environmental, and psychological factors. Addressing these deeply embedded psychological wounds requires mental health support, economic upliftment, cultural reclamation, and systemic reform. By acknowledging and actively working to heal this trauma, India can move toward a more just, equal, and psychologically healthy society. This article explores the deep psychological impact of generational oppression on SC/ST communities and suggests ways to address these challenges.

Keywords: *Healing, Psyche, Caste Violence, Cumulative Psychological Trauma, Generations of Oppression, Deprivation, SC/ST Community*

The Varna System, the basis of the caste system in India belongs to the Vedic Period (1500–500 BCE). The earliest mention of social classification appears in the Rigveda, where society was divided into four Varna's (classes) based on occupation. Brahmins – Priests and scholars, Kshatriyas – Warriors and rulers, Vaishyas – Merchants and traders, Shudras – Laborers and service providers. This system may have originally been flexible and based on function rather than birth. Anyhow over time during the Later Vedic Period & Manusmriti (500 BCE–200 CE) the Varna System became rigid, with people being born into their Varna rather than choosing their profession. The Manusmriti, a Hindu legal text, codified caste rules, reinforcing birth-based hierarchy and social restrictions. The

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concept of "purity and pollution" emerged, leading to the exclusion of certain groups (Dalits) entirely from the caste hierarchy and were labelled as "untouchables."

During the Medieval Period (500–1700 CE), new castes (or jatis) emerged within each Varna, creating a complex sub-caste system based on occupation, trade, and regional influences. Islamic rulers (Delhi Sultanate, Mughal Empire) did not abolish caste but created new social divisions, such as Ashraf and Ajlaf among Muslims. The British Colonial Rule (1757–1947) reinforced the caste divisions through censuses and administrative policies. They categorized people strictly by caste in land records, employment, and governance, making the system more rigid. The Indian Constitution (1950) outlawed caste-based discrimination through Article 17 by Abolition of Untouchability. Affirmative action, such as reservations in education and government jobs, was introduced to uplift Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC). Anyhow despite legal all reforms, caste identity still influences social and political life in India today.

The intergenerational hypothesis in psychology explores how behaviours, traits, and even trauma can be passed down through families, potentially influencing the mental health and well-being of future generations through various genetic, environmental, and psychological mechanisms. The psychology of intergenerational trauma shows how historical oppression continues to shape the thoughts, behaviours, and emotional well-being of SC/ST communities. Repeated social conditioning and caste-based discrimination have led many individuals from SC/ST backgrounds to internalize negative stereotypes. This psycho-social scenario creates chronic stress and anxiety among SC/ST individuals and significantly increases the risk of depression, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Due to generational poverty and systemic discrimination, many SC/ST individuals experience lower academic self-confidence, social withdrawal, lack of participation in public life, and reluctance to pursue opportunities. The importance of psychological rehabilitation of the vulnerable among the SC/ST population in India needs to be an essential and integral part of any policy making aimed at instituting a comprehensive affirmative action for upliftment and empowerment.

Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma

Intergenerational trauma is the psychological and physiological effects that the trauma experienced by people has on subsequent generations in that group. The primary mode of transmission is the shared family environment of the infant causing psychological, behavioural and social changes in the individual. Collective trauma is when psychological trauma experienced by communities and identity groups is carried on as part of the group's collective memory and shared sense of identity.

The psychological wounds of caste-based oppression are not limited to one generation but are passed down across generations. Children raised in environments marked by poverty, exclusion, and caste discrimination often develop low self-expectations and limited ambition. The trauma experienced by parents affects their ability to provide emotionally stable and encouraging environments for their children, continuing the cycle of mental distress and economic struggle.

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Intergenerational trauma is primarily transmitted through psychological, social, and biological mechanisms:

A. Psychological Transmission

- **Internalized Oppression:** Children raised in environments where caste-based inferiority is reinforced develop low self-worth.
- **Learned Helplessness:** When generations experience systemic barriers and discrimination, individuals stop believing they can improve their circumstances.
- **Fear-Based Conditioning:** Families that have faced violence and exclusion teach their children to avoid conflict and suppress their identity.

B. Social and Environmental Factors

- **Parenting Styles:** Parents who have experienced oppression may unknowingly pass on fear, anxiety, and distrust to their children.
- **Educational Barriers:** Schools that perpetuate **caste biases** reinforce trauma, discouraging SC/ST students from achieving their full potential.
- **Community Reinforcement:** SC/ST individuals may feel social alienation and exclusion, which strengthens the cycle of psychological distress.

C. Biological and Epigenetic Effects

- Studies in epigenetics suggest that severe stress and trauma can alter gene expression, making future generations more vulnerable to anxiety and depression.
- Generations of malnutrition, economic hardship, and discrimination can impact brain development and stress responses.

Psychological Effects of Oppression and Deprivation

1. Internalized Inferiority, Low Self-Esteem & Self doubt

- Repeated social conditioning and caste-based discrimination have led many individuals from SC/ST backgrounds to internalize negative stereotypes. This results in lower self-esteem, self-doubt, and reduced aspirations. Studies indicate that individuals facing caste-based prejudice often develop a sense of helplessness and resignation to their social status.
- Generations of exclusion result in deep-seated insecurities and a lack of confidence in one's abilities.
- Imposter syndrome is common among SC/ST individuals who achieve success but feel they don't belong.

2. Fear, Anxiety, Social Withdrawal & Hypervigilance

- Persistent experiences of discrimination and violence create chronic stress and anxiety among SC/ST individuals. Many fear humiliation, exclusion, or even physical violence in social and professional spaces. This fear leads to social withdrawal, lack of participation in public life, and reluctance to pursue opportunities.
- Fear of caste-based discrimination, violence, or humiliation leads to heightened stress responses.
- Many individuals from oppressed backgrounds develop defensive behaviours or avoid interactions with dominant groups.

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3. Educational and Career Aspirations

- Due to generational poverty and systemic discrimination, many SC/ST individuals experience lower academic self-confidence. The lack of role models, discrimination in educational institutions, and bullying contribute to higher dropout rates and lower career aspirations. Even those who succeed often face the "imposter syndrome," doubting their achievements despite hard work.
- Lack of role models within the family and many a times in the immediate community itself that inhibits the possibility for adaptive observational learning.
- Such low self-esteem stemming from insecure community identity leading to lack of projected self-efficacy to meet educational and career goals.

4. Mental Health Challenges

- Long-term exposure to discrimination and exclusion significantly increases the risk of depression, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Unfortunately, due to financial constraints and stigma, many SC/ST individuals lack access to mental health support, further deepening their struggles.
- Feelings of hopelessness and despair are prevalent due to economic struggles and social rejection.
- SC/ST individuals often do not have access to mental health care due to stigma and financial constraints.

5. Loss of Cultural Identity, Cultural Displacement & Alienation

- Many tribal communities have suffered forced displacement and assimilation, leading to a loss of cultural heritage. This cultural alienation causes psychological distress, identity confusion, and a sense of rootlessness among younger generations. The struggle to balance traditional identities with modern aspirations creates psychological conflict.
- Many individuals struggle to balance their traditional heritage with modern aspirations.
- Loss of tribal culture and forced assimilation leads to psychological distress and rootlessness.

6. Repetitive Patterns of Poverty and Marginalization

- Economic hardship and limited opportunities reinforce a cycle where families remain in lower socio-economic conditions. Generations of SC/ST youth may feel trapped in systemic barriers, reducing their motivation to strive for higher goals.
- A downward spiralling cycle of poverty having an intergenerational characteristic.
- A progressive lack of motivation, self-efficacy and aspiration stemming from learned helplessness that becomes a familial learning and is prone to inter-generational transmission.

Breaking The Cycle of Trauma: Psychological Healing and Empowerment Mental Health Awareness and Access

- Providing caste-sensitive counselling and therapy can help individuals process historical trauma.
- Community-led support groups and safe spaces can empower individuals to discuss their experiences.

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- Community-based mental health programs should be established to address caste-based trauma and provide psychotherapy or psychological counselling.

Building Self-Esteem and Confidence

- Representation of successful SC/ST role models in leadership, media, and education can inspire future generations.
- Affirmative action and mentorship programs can help boost confidence among SC/ST youth.
- Personality development and coaching initiatives.

Educational and Economic Empowerment

- Scholarships, skill development, and leadership training can break the cycle of low aspirations.
- Economic initiatives that support entrepreneurship and job security can provide financial independence.
- Posting caste sensitive institutional psychological counsellors.
- Envisioning inclusive and bias free education system and institutional environment as a policy matter to help rebuild the educational aspirations of the marginalized.

Reclaiming Cultural Identity and Heritage

- Strengthening tribal and Dalit cultural heritage can create a sense of pride and belonging.
- Documenting and teaching historical struggles and victories can empower younger generations.

Social and Legal Protections

- Strong enforcement of anti-discrimination laws can prevent caste-based trauma from continuing.
- Creating inclusive social spaces and narratives can promote psychological healing and collective empowerment.

Promoting Positive Role Models

- Showcasing successful SC/ST individuals in various fields can inspire confidence and ambition among younger generations.

Affirmative Action

- Policies such as reservations in education and employment must continue to provide opportunities for socio-economic upliftment.

CONCLUSION

The caste system in India is a paradigmatic ethnographic instance of social classification based on castes. The psychological scars of centuries of caste-based oppression and deprivation continue to shape the lives of SC/ST individuals. The Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) communities in India have historically faced systemic oppression, social exclusion, and economic deprivation. The consequences of this long-standing discrimination are not just material but also deeply psychological. The intergenerational trauma resulting from centuries of marginalization has led to a profound impact on identity, self-worth, aspirations, and overall mental health of the SC/ST population. Repeated social

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conditioning and caste-based discrimination have led many individuals from SC/ST backgrounds to internalize negative stereotypes. This psycho-social scenario creates chronic stress and anxiety among SC/ST individuals and significantly increases the risk of depression, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Special safeguards for SC/ST communities are not about favouritism but about ensuring deserving rehabilitative justice and equal opportunities. By fostering an inclusive society that acknowledges past injustices, providing for relevant constitutional safeguards and equal opportunities, India can help SC/ST communities overcome historical trauma and achieve true empowerment and dignity. Anyhow, Studies show that marginalised castes remain far more susceptible to chronic illnesses, specifically mental health issues. Hence addressing the issue of rehabilitation of SC/ST population in India requires not only legal safeguards, economic reforms and social transformation, but also psychological healing on the lines as discussed in this article.

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Conflict of Interest

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