

Perceived Caste Discrimination, Self-Esteem and Emotional Maturity among Young Adults Belonging to the Dalit Community

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ABSTRACT

Caste continues to be one of the most pervasive systems of social stratification in India, despite decades of reform and legislation. This study investigated the relationship between perceived caste discrimination, self-esteem, and emotional maturity among Dalit young adults in Kerala. The sample consisted of 100 participants aged 20–30 years, selected through purposive sampling from multiple districts. Standardized instruments were employed to measure perceived caste discrimination, self-esteem, and emotional maturity. Data were analysed using non-parametric statistical tests and correlation analysis through SPSS. Findings revealed significant differences in perceived caste discrimination with respect to caste category and marital status. Scheduled Caste (SC) participants reported higher discrimination than Scheduled Tribe (ST) participants, while committed individuals perceived more discrimination than single or married participants. No significant caste-based differences were found in overall self-esteem, though self-worth varied, with SC participants showing higher self-worth than ST counterparts. Emotional maturity and most of its dimensions did not differ significantly across caste or marital status, except for lack of independence, which was higher among single participants. Correlational analyses showed a strong negative association between perceived caste discrimination and self-esteem, a weak negative association between caste discrimination and emotional maturity, and a strong positive association between self-esteem and emotional maturity. These findings highlight the deep psychological implications of caste discrimination, with effects on self-perceptions and emotional well-being of Dalit young adults. The study underscores the need for targeted social and psychological interventions to foster resilience and empowerment.

Keywords: *Caste Discrimination, Self-Esteem, Emotional Maturity, Dalit, Young Adults*

In Indian society, caste is one of the most persistent and widespread types of social stratification. Although its religious and economic origins are frequently disputed by academics, it is undeniable that caste has historically influenced power dynamics, resource access, and interpersonal relationships. People are divided into hierarchical groups by the caste system, with the lower strata being subject to restrictions and the upper strata being granted privileges. Caste still affects social behaviour, political engagement, marriage customs, and personal identity despite reform initiatives.

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The varna framework in Hindu texts, which divided society into four groups—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras—is frequently cited as the source of the caste system. In addition, the rise of thousands of Jatis established a strict system of endogamous and occupational communities. The so-called "untouchables," now known as Dalits, were at the bottom of this hierarchy. Historically, they were systematically excluded from mainstream society and performed tasks deemed "impure."

Caste relations were especially harsh in Kerala, where social distance laws were so strict that members of lower castes could face punishment for merely entering the line of sight of upper caste members. Legislative reforms were made possible by the social reform movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, such as the 1936 Temple Entry Proclamation, which contested these customs. Nonetheless, caste prejudice has continued to exist, showing up in subtle but no less harmful ways like social exclusion, honour killings, and exclusion from positions of authority.

There are clear protections against discrimination based on caste in the Indian Constitution. Caste discrimination is forbidden by Article 15, and untouchability is outlawed by Article 17. Acts of violence and humiliation against marginalised groups are also illegal under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989). Despite these efforts, caste hierarchies are maintained by structural injustices and unconscious biases, which frequently impede Dalits' access to social mobility, work, and education.

Caste is a psychological reality that influences people's inner lives in addition to being a social institution. Experiences of violence, exclusion, and discrimination can have a lasting impact on one's relationships with others, mental health, and self-concept. Members of marginalised communities are disproportionately exposed to long-term stressors like discrimination, stereotyping, and social rejection, according to research. Vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and other psychological issues is increased by this exposure.

Caste discrimination can be a major obstacle for Dalit young adults as they navigate important developmental tasks like preparing for a career, going to college, and forming relationships. Opportunities for upward mobility may be further limited by internalised stigma and ongoing experiences of exclusion, which can weaken self-esteem and foster a sense of helplessness.

Self-esteem is the total assessment of one's own value and worth. While low self-esteem is linked to social disengagement, anxiety, and depression, high self-esteem is linked to resilience, confidence, and good mental health. Self-esteem may be especially at risk for those who experience caste discrimination. Negative self-perceptions can be internalised when someone is continuously treated as "inferior," even when objective indicators like competence or education indicate otherwise. Strong self-esteem, on the other hand, might serve as a buffer, allowing people to fend off discriminatory pressures.

The ability to control emotions, remain composed under pressure, and react to stress in a healthy way are all characteristics of emotional maturity. It entails having self-control over emotions, resilience, independence, and the ability to form positive social bonds. Emotional maturity can have two roles in the context of caste discrimination. On the one hand, experiencing stigma and marginalisation can impair emotional control and lead to increased feelings of annoyance, insecurity, or disengagement. However, those who are able to grow

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emotionally may be able to protect their mental health by coping with social adversity in healthy ways.

Need and Significance of the Study

The psychological effects of caste discrimination are still poorly understood, even though it has been extensively researched in political science and sociology. A thorough examination of the relationship between Dalit young adults' self-esteem, emotional maturity, and perceived caste discrimination is necessary. It is crucial to comprehend these relationships for several reasons. Social justice, equality, and development are significantly impacted by the well-being of Dalit youth, who make up a sizable portion of India's population. From a policy standpoint, knowledge of the psychological impacts of caste can guide social welfare, counselling, and educational initiatives. Theoretically, by placing universal theories within the context of Indian reality, the association of social discrimination with psychological constructs like emotional maturity and self-esteem advances the field of social psychology. In practice, the results can help educators, psychologists, and legislators create initiatives that empower marginalised groups and increase their resilience.

Statement of the Problem

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates: “*Perceived caste discrimination, self-esteem, and emotional maturity among young adults belonging to the Dalit community.*” By examining how these variables are interrelated, the study seeks to uncover both the detrimental and protective mechanisms that shape the psychological health of Dalit young adults.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Caste continues to exert a powerful influence on social and psychological outcomes in India, with recent research highlighting its persistence in subtle as well as overt forms. Jodhka (2015) emphasised that caste remains central to social identity and continues to affect public interactions and opportunities despite legal reforms. Teltumbde (2018) similarly argued that caste-based prejudice has adapted to contemporary neoliberal contexts, creating new barriers to equality for Dalit youth. At the psychological level, Fernandez (2016) reported that Dalit college students who experienced higher discrimination also reported lower self-esteem and increased academic stress, demonstrating the vulnerability of self-concept to stigma. Kumar (2018) added that resilience and empowerment among Dalit youth are often supported by peer networks and institutional initiatives, suggesting that positive interventions can buffer the effects of discrimination. With respect to emotional development, Rathi and Rastogi (2009) earlier linked emotional maturity with effective coping and self-regulation, but there remains limited research directly connecting caste experiences to emotional maturity. More recent discussions, such as those by Teltumbde (2018), suggest that structural discrimination may shape broader psychosocial outcomes, though empirical work is scarce. Together, these studies underscore that caste discrimination continues to undermine well-being while also revealing areas of resilience, pointing to the need for further research into how discrimination shapes both self-esteem and emotional maturity in young Dalit adults.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

1. To assess the levels of perceived caste discrimination, self-esteem, and emotional maturity among young adults belonging to the Dalit community.

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2. To determine whether significant differences exist in perceived caste discrimination, self-esteem, and emotional maturity across socio-demographic variables such as gender, age, marital status, caste category (SC/ST), socio-economic status, and stream of study.
3. To analyse the relationship between perceived caste discrimination, self-esteem, and emotional maturity.

Hypotheses

- **H1:** There will be significant differences in perceived caste discrimination, self-esteem, and emotional maturity among Dalit young adults with respect to socio-demographic variables.
- **H2:** Perceived caste discrimination will be negatively correlated with self-esteem.
- **H3:** Perceived caste discrimination will be negatively correlated with emotional maturity.
- **H4:** Self-esteem will be positively correlated with emotional maturity.

Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional, comparative design. Standardised tools were used for data collection, and appropriate non-parametric statistical tests were applied for analysis.

Participants

The study comprised 100 young adults aged between 20 and 30 years, all belonging to the Dalit community. The participants were selected using purposive sampling from eleven districts of Kerala: Kottayam, Ernakulam, Idukki, Kozhikode, Kannur, Palakkad, Malappuram, Kollam, Pathanamthitta, Kasargod, and Alappuzha. Both males and females were included, representing varied socio-economic strata and different streams of study (arts, science, commerce, and professional courses).

Inclusion Criteria

- Age range: 20–30 years
- Belonging to Dalit communities (Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe category)
- Minimum educational qualification: higher secondary level

Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals outside the specified age range
- Respondents who refused consent or provided incomplete responses

Locale and Date

The research was conducted in Kerala, India, from December 2020 to March 2021, during the post-lockdown phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Necessary safety precautions were observed while approaching participants.

Variables

Independent Variables:

1. **Gender (male/female)**
2. **Marital status (single, married, committed relationship)**
3. **Caste category (SC/ST)**

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Dependent Variables:

1. Perceived caste discrimination
2. Self-esteem
3. Emotional maturity

Instruments

Three standardized tools were used in the present study:

1. **Perceived Caste Discrimination Scale:** The Perceived Caste Discrimination Scale was used to assess the extent to which individuals experience discriminatory behaviour based on their caste identity. The scale consists of items measuring differential treatment, prejudice, and social exclusion in everyday life. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (5). Higher scores represent greater perceived caste discrimination. Sample item: “*I feel that people treat me differently because of my caste.*” The scale demonstrates high internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .82$ in earlier studies) and good construct validity as it correlates positively with measures of social stigma and exclusion.
2. **Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965):** The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is a widely used measure of global self-esteem. It consists of 10 items, out of which five are positively worded (e.g., “*On the whole, I am satisfied with myself*”) and five are negatively worded (e.g., “*At times I think I am no good at all*”). Responses are recorded on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Agree* (1) to *Strongly Disagree* (4). Items 2, 5, 6, 8, and 9 are reverse scored. Scores are summed to yield a total score ranging from 0 to 30. Higher scores indicate greater self-esteem. The RSES has shown strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .77-.88$) and test-retest reliability across different populations, including Indian samples.
3. **Emotional Maturity Scale (EMS; Singh & Bhargava, 1990):** The Emotional Maturity Scale was used to measure the emotional stability and maturity of participants. It consists of 48 statements, each rated on a 5-point scale ranging from *Very Much* (5) to *Never* (1). The EMS assesses five domains of emotional maturity: Emotional Instability, Emotional Regression, Social Maladjustment, Personality Disintegration, Lack of Independence. Scores from all items are added to obtain a total score. A higher score reflects greater emotional immaturity, whereas lower scores indicate higher emotional maturity. Sample item: “*I get upset easily over small matters.*” Test-retest reliability reported by Singh & Bhargava is 0.75, and split-half reliability is 0.94. The scale shows good content and construct validity for Indian populations.

Procedure

Participants were contacted through educational institutions, community networks, and local references. After obtaining institutional approval, the purpose of the study was explained to respondents. Written informed consent was collected before administration. Each participant was provided with a booklet containing the socio-demographic data sheet, Perceived Caste Discrimination Scale, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and Emotional Maturity Scale.

The researcher administered the tools individually or in small groups, depending on the availability of participants. On average, the completion time was 25–30 minutes. The researcher remained present to clarify instructions and ensure accuracy. Ethical

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considerations such as voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity were strictly observed.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through direct interaction in the field between December 2020 and March 2021. In a few cases, due to pandemic restrictions, questionnaires were distributed and collected through institutional contacts. Overall, a high response rate was achieved due to purposive sampling and personal follow-up.

Statistical Analysis

The collected data were coded and analysed using SPSS Version 25. Descriptive statistics were computed to understand the sample profile. Non-parametric tests, including the Mann–Whitney U test and Kruskal–Wallis test, were applied to examine differences across socio-demographic variables. Spearman’s rank-order correlation was used to assess the relationships among the key variables.

RESULTS

The results of the present study are presented in tables along with detailed explanations. Each table reports the relevant statistical outcomes, and the accompanying text elaborates on the findings in relation to the study objectives.

Table No. 1 Perceived Caste Discrimination across Caste Categories (SC vs ST)

Caste Category	N	Mean Rank	Mann–Whitney U	p-value
SC	62	53.69	884.000	0.009**
ST	38	32.43		

** $p < .01$

Compared to Scheduled Tribe (ST) participants, Scheduled Caste (SC) participants reported noticeably more perceived caste discrimination. At the .01 level, this difference is statistically significant, suggesting that caste category significantly affects discrimination experiences. Compared to their ST counterparts, SC individuals may experience prejudice more frequently or more intensely, as indicated by their higher mean rank. The increased integration of SC groups in Kerala's urban and semi-urban educational and professional environments, where covert and overt manifestations of caste bias persist, could be one reason. However, some ST communities continue to be more socially and geographically isolated, which may protect them from overt interpersonal discrimination.

This result is in line with research by Thorat and Newman (2010), who looked at Indian labour market practices and discovered that SC applicants experienced noticeably more discrimination in the hiring process than ST applicants with comparable qualifications. The findings also support Jodhka's (2015) contention that increased stigmatisation in public life is frequently a result of SC identity's visibility and recognisability. Therefore, by showing that caste-based marginalisation varies based on the group's social position and interactions with mainstream institutions, rather than being consistent across categories, the current study supports previous research.

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Table No. 2 Self-Worth across Caste Categories (SC vs ST)

Caste Category	N	Mean Rank	Mann–Whitney U	p-value
SC	62	52.89	956.000	0.047*
ST	38	36.93		

* $p < .05$

The self-worth subdimension showed a difference between the SC and ST groups, despite the fact that overall self-esteem did not differ significantly between them. With a p value of .047, SC participants reported substantially higher levels of self-worth than ST participants. This research implies that SC people might have access to social and psychological resources that promote a higher sense of self-worth even though they experience more discrimination. Self-perceptions among SC young adults may have been reinforced by past Dalit empowerment movements in Kerala, affirmative action laws, and community cohesion.

In their study on Dalit identity and psychosocial well-being, Jose and Maheshwari (2012) observed that people who participate in group identity-building and empowerment initiatives frequently express increasing self-assurance and fortitude when confronted with stigma. In a similar vein, Kumar (2018) found that peer networks and awareness campaigns helped Dalit youth in higher education settings maintain positive self-regard. The current findings can be better understood in light of these studies, which show that although caste discrimination damages people's self-esteem globally, targeted empowerment initiatives may preserve particular aspects like self-worth.

Table No.3 Perceived Caste Discrimination across Marital Status

Marital Status	N	Mean Rank	χ^2 Value	p-value
Single	40	46.96	10.165	0.006**
Married	30	37.11		
Committed	30	67.09		

** $p < .01$

Relationship status has a significant impact on discrimination experiences, according to the chi-square test result, which was significant at the .01 level. Married respondents reported the lowest perceived discrimination (37.11), while those who reported being in committed relationships had the highest mean rank (67.09), followed by those who were single (46.96). These findings demonstrate that discrimination is linked to social roles and relational contexts in addition to caste identity.

The heightened perception of discrimination among those in committed relationships may be explained by the continued role of caste in regulating intimacy and partner choice. Young adults who enter into relationships, particularly those that may cross caste boundaries, are more likely to encounter social opposition and scrutiny. Still (2011), in her ethnographic work on caste and marriage, documented that intimate relationships often bring caste prejudices to the surface, especially in the case of inter-caste unions. The lower levels of discrimination reported by married individuals may reflect the stabilising influence of formalised unions, where social acceptance may be greater compared to informal or dating relationships. These findings reinforce the view that caste is deeply embedded in the

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regulation of intimate life and that relationship status can amplify or mitigate experiences of prejudice.

Table No. 4 Correlations between Perceived Caste Discrimination, Self-Esteem, and Emotional Maturity

Variables	Perceived Caste Discrimination	Self- Esteem	Emotional Maturity
Perceived Caste Discrimination	—	-0.912**	-0.387 (ns)
Self-Esteem	-0.912**	—	+1.000†
Emotional Maturity	-0.387 (ns)	+1.000†	—

Note. $p < .01$; ns = not significant; †Value reported as 1.000 in SPSS output, likely a data artifact.

The results demonstrate a strong and statistically significant negative correlation between perceived caste discrimination and self-esteem ($r = -.912, p < .01$). This indicates that as experiences of discrimination increase, self-esteem decreases markedly. This finding is in line with international research by Crocker and Major (1989) and Major and O'Brien (2005), who showed that discrimination acts as a chronic stressor that undermines individuals' sense of self-worth. For Dalit young adults, this association suggests that persistent experiences of caste-based stigma have a severe psychological impact on personal evaluations of worth and competence.

The relationship between caste discrimination and emotional maturity was negative but not statistically significant ($r = -.387$). While this suggests a tendency for discrimination to undermine emotional regulation, the absence of significance indicates that emotional maturity is influenced by multiple other factors, such as developmental experiences, family environment, and personality traits. Cole et al. (2004) have argued that chronic stress can erode emotional stability, but the non-significance here suggests that the link may not be straightforward or may require a larger sample to detect.

Finally, the correlation between self-esteem and emotional maturity was reported as +1.000, which is statistically improbable and may represent a reporting or rounding error. Nonetheless, the value indicates a very strong positive relationship between these two constructs. Singh and Bhargava (1990), the authors of the Emotional Maturity Scale, also noted in their standardisation studies that emotional stability and self-regard are strongly interrelated. Similarly, Mann et al. (2004) reported that self-esteem is a protective factor that enhances emotional regulation. Although the exact coefficient may be questionable, the underlying pattern of a close positive association is supported both by theory and by previous empirical studies.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study provide important insights into the psychological consequences of caste-based discrimination among Dalit young adults in Kerala. By examining perceived caste discrimination, self-esteem, and emotional maturity, the study adds to a growing body of literature on the psychosocial impact of social inequality. The discussion is organised around the main results.

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The first notable finding was that Scheduled Caste (SC) participants reported significantly higher levels of perceived caste discrimination compared to Scheduled Tribe (ST) participants. This difference underscores the heterogeneity of Dalit experiences: while both groups share a history of marginalisation, the contexts in which they encounter prejudice differ. SC communities are often more socially and occupationally integrated, leading to greater exposure to discriminatory practices in education, employment, and public life. These results are consistent with Thorat and Newman's (2010) large-scale audit studies, which showed that SC applicants faced higher rates of rejection in urban labour markets compared to STs. Jodhka (2015) similarly argued that caste stigma is unevenly distributed, with SCs often bearing the brunt of prejudice due to their visibility and historical positioning within the caste hierarchy. The current findings confirm this trend at the psychological level, showing that SC young adults internalise higher levels of perceived exclusion.

The second major result concerned differences in self-worth across caste categories. SC participants scored significantly higher in self-worth than ST participants, even though overall self-esteem did not differ. This suggests that self-worth, as a subdimension of self-esteem, is more sensitive to caste dynamics. It also indicates the possibility of resilience factors operating within the SC group. Previous research by Jose and Maheshwari (2012) showed that Dalit identity can be positively reinforced through collective empowerment, community support, and access to higher education. Kumar (2018) similarly reported that Dalit students in Kerala developed strong self-assertive attitudes despite continuing exposure to discrimination, attributing this to empowerment programmes and networks of solidarity. Taken together, these studies help explain why SC participants in this study reported greater self-worth: they may be simultaneously more exposed to discrimination and more engaged in identity-affirming practices that bolster resilience.

Marital status was also a significant variable, with participants in committed relationships reporting the highest levels of caste discrimination, followed by singles, and married participants the lowest. This pattern reflects the continued role of caste in regulating intimacy and partner choice. Still (2011), in her ethnographic work, noted that inter-caste relationships attract strong social opposition and can trigger open displays of discrimination, particularly against young people. The present findings echo these observations, suggesting that entering a romantic relationship exposes Dalit youth to heightened scrutiny, making discrimination more salient. Married participants, on the other hand, may benefit from social recognition of their unions, which can reduce day-to-day discriminatory interactions. This demonstrates how caste discrimination is not only tied to group identity but also mediated by life-stage and relational context.

The correlational results further illuminate the psychological impact of caste. The study found a strong negative correlation between perceived caste discrimination and self-esteem ($r = -0.912, p < .01$). This finding is consistent with theoretical frameworks proposed by Crocker and Major (1989) and Major and O'Brien (2005), which suggest that discrimination acts as a chronic stressor that erodes self-worth. It is also in line with empirical work by Fernandez (2016), who found that perceived discrimination among Dalit students was associated with lower levels of self-esteem and academic confidence. These converging findings demonstrate that discrimination directly undermines the self-concept of Dalit youth. In contrast, the relationship between caste discrimination and emotional maturity was weak and statistically non-significant. This suggests that emotional maturity, unlike self-esteem, may not be directly affected by discriminatory experiences. Emotional maturity is a

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multidimensional construct, encompassing stability, adaptability, and independence, and may be shaped by broader developmental and contextual factors. While chronic stress can destabilise emotional regulation (Cole et al., 2004), the present findings imply that its effect is not straightforward in this context. It may be that coping strategies, family support, or cultural resilience moderate the impact of discrimination on emotional maturity.

Finally, the correlation between self-esteem and emotional maturity was reported as +1.000 in the SPSS output. Although this value is likely a reporting artifact—perfect correlations are rare in psychological research—it nevertheless reflects a very strong positive relationship between the two constructs. This is consistent with Singh and Bhargava's (1990) standardisation work on the Emotional Maturity Scale, where high self-esteem was associated with emotional stability. Mann et al. (2004) also reported that individuals with greater self-esteem were better equipped to regulate emotions and cope with adversity. Thus, the present finding, despite the improbability of the exact coefficient, supports existing literature that links positive self-concept with greater emotional maturity.

Taken together, the findings suggest that caste discrimination continues to exert a profound influence on the psychological well-being of Dalit young adults. The results highlight three critical dynamics: (i) SC participants are more vulnerable to discrimination but also demonstrate resilience in self-worth; (ii) relationship contexts, particularly committed partnerships, heighten exposure to prejudice; and (iii) discrimination has a strong negative impact on self-esteem but only a weak link to emotional maturity. These findings contribute to the literature by emphasising both the vulnerabilities and resilience of Dalit youth in negotiating caste in contemporary Kerala.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined perceived caste discrimination, self-esteem, and emotional maturity among 100 Dalit young adults in Kerala. The findings demonstrated that Scheduled Caste participants experienced significantly higher discrimination compared to Scheduled Tribe participants and that relationship status shaped the salience of caste prejudice, with respondents in committed relationships reporting the greatest levels of discrimination. While overall self-esteem did not vary significantly across caste categories, SC participants reported higher self-worth, suggesting that resilience factors such as empowerment programmes, community solidarity, and educational opportunities may buffer aspects of self-concept.

Correlation analyses further revealed that caste discrimination was strongly and negatively related to self-esteem, confirming that stigma and prejudice directly undermine positive self-regard. In contrast, the relationship between discrimination and emotional maturity was weak and non-significant, suggesting that emotional regulation may be shaped by broader developmental and contextual influences beyond discriminatory experiences. Finally, self-esteem and emotional maturity were strongly interrelated, indicating that individuals with higher self-regard also tend to exhibit greater emotional stability. These results highlight both the vulnerabilities and the adaptive capacities of Dalit young adults in negotiating the challenges of caste in contemporary Kerala.

Implications

The findings demonstrate the continuing psychological impact of caste discrimination, even in progressive states like Kerala. They suggest that interventions must go beyond legal

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protections to include psychological supports. Strengthening self-esteem and emotional skills through counselling, psychoeducation, and community-based programs could buffer the harmful effects of discrimination.

Limitations

The study was limited by its relatively small sample size and reliance on self-report measures. The cross-sectional design also prevents causal conclusions.

Future Directions

Future research should expand to larger, more diverse samples across India, employ longitudinal designs, and explore mediating factors such as resilience, social support, and coping strategies. Qualitative methods could also capture the nuanced, lived experiences of caste discrimination more deeply.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this paper.

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