

Three Responses to Discrimination in Higher Educational Institutions in *I Have Become the Tide*

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ABSTRACT

Githa Hariharan's novel *I Have Become the Tide* is one of the rare novels in Indian English writing that, besides other things, deals with the discrimination faced by Dalit students in institutions of higher learning. Dalit students are often stigmatized in such institutions which are dominated by students, teachers and administrators from higher castes. This paper explores the challenges and harassment faced by the three Dalit youngsters, namely, Satya, Asha and Ravi in their respective institutions. It also attempts to highlight their respective responses.

Keywords: Educational-discrimination, Dalit, Caste, Reformed

INTRODUCTION

In Indian English writing, we observe that very few Indian writers portray the struggles of Dalit students in the educational field.

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) was the first Indian English novel that highlighted the Dalit experience of social discrimination. However, the author did not focus on the struggles of Dalits in accessing higher education.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) presents a rebellion against the deeply rooted caste system, and how it affects personal and social relationships. However, it only indirectly addresses the theme and does not focus specifically on the educational struggles of Dalits.

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) also discusses caste and poverty and how these factors shape the lives and destinies of his characters. But again, it does not center on the experiences of Dalit students in educational institutions. Overall, most Indian English writers have not explored the specific challenges faced by Dalit students in the education system. Among contemporary writers, Githa Hariharan is one of the rare ones who address this issue. She portrays the multifarious struggles of Dalit students across different educational institutions.

The novel *I Have Become the Tide* (2019) emphasizes the urgency of voicing opposition to the atrocities of the caste system and the destructive forces that are crushing the idea of social equality. It presents a compelling portrayal of the lives of three Dalit students, shedding light on their struggles and offering a relatable narrative for anyone who has endured caste-based discrimination.

EDUCATION AND DISCRIMINATION

Asha, Ravi and Satya are friends who belong to a Scheduled Caste. Asha's mother is a tailor, and Ravi's parents are daily-wage labourers, while Satya's mother works as an agricultural labourer. All three come from marginalised backgrounds and aspire to receive a good education and build successful careers.

The three students put their all at stake and prepare for the medical entrance exam. Satya is the only one among the three who qualifies for the medical entrance exam and gains admission to a medical college. Asha begins her journey to become a nurse, while Ravi enrolled in a B.Sc course.

Satya: A Silent Victim

Satya faces severe humiliation from both classmates and teachers due to his caste. He is allotted a hostel room next to the toilet, and on the first day of college, no one sits beside him in the orientation hall. His classmates taunt him with cruel remarks such as:

“Lazy people living off quotas. It’s in their genes. No merit. Taking seats away from merit students. This is a good institution. We are about who are with.” (94)

This remark grows out of the prejudice that is passed from one generation of India’s upper castes, also known as the General Category, to the next, and has now attained the status of a general truth. This comment fails to recognize the living conditions and the larger social and historical situation within which India’s Dalits live. Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd states:

“Dalit-Bahujan Children are not born with a different brain, but they are forced to live in a different world of discrimination and denial.” (85)

This above statement is a direct refutation of the assumption that Dalits are intellectually inferior.

Satya’s professor ignored his responses in the class because he is from reserved category. Satya sat alone, wrote in his diary, ate alone in the dining hall and remained isolated in his room. Hariharan stated:

“The only dreams to keep in view current in the immediate goal-surviving, anyhow, all the four and a half in college and then one year of internship, so that they can get the degree. In the meantime, all he has to do is a hard-work, work to survive the loneliness, and the hundreds of pinpricks a day.” (91)

Dr. Sharma, one of his professors, disliked Satya and never addressed him by name. He only referred to him as “you” or “boy”, avoiding Satya’s name completely. This highlights the prejudice of even educated people. Though the educated class claims to be modern in their thoughts and values, their actions often reveal deep-rooted caste biases that go beyond our understanding.

His professor forces Satya to sit at the back both during lectures and examinations. Despite working hard, Satya’s efforts go in vain, as he barely manages to pass the exam.

Dr. Sharma, the anatomy professor, frequently undermines Satya and tries to convince him that he won’t succeed. He said to Satya:

“Suppose you get your MBBS—just in case you do manage to get your degree from here,—he emphasizes the *here*— ‘how many people would agree to be treated by you? His face hardens; his eyes bore holes in Satya’s face. Sharma has stopped playing. He holds up his right hand, makes a fist of it. It’s such a tight fist that whatever empty space remains inside must be airless. ‘See this fist? Take a good look at it because that’s where your future is.’” (185)

Satya’s professor told him that due to his caste no one will come for treatment and therefore his future is in dark.

Dalit students are not only harassed socially but they are also mentally harassed by the educational institutions, as we see in Satya’s case. Like Satya, many Dalit students lose their self-confidence, become emotionally depressed, face academic decline-not because they are not good at studies, but because they are mentally disturbed due to the hostile harassment and torture they face every day.

Satya was very upset after listening these words from his professor he thought why only lower caste people dreams were not accomplished. Why they were not allowed to fulfill his/her dreams? He realized that it is not necessary that dreams of lower caste must be fulfilled. He picks up the blue notebook, opens it to a new page, and writes:

“This is a cobbler’s child. Don’t sit next to him.
This is a washerman’s child. Don’t speak to him.
This child’s mother lifts buckets of shit. Run away from him.
My tears for these children have dried up. Must my voice too grow silent?

There are several pages in the notebook still, inviting him to fill them up. But they too will have to learn that not all dreams are allowed to live.” (257)

Mr. Murthy, an office staff member at Satya’s college, humiliates him when Satya says that he “earned the scholarship”. Criticizing Satya’s use of the word “earn”, Murthy mockingly asks what work people like him have done to use such a word. He then pulls out Satya’s attendance sheet where he was falsely marked absent for at least two classes in a week in Dr. Sharma’s anatomy class.

Satya was shocked, disturbed and devastated by this deliberate act of discrimination. Despite giving correct answers in

the exam, Dr. Sharma awarded him less marks. When Satya visits his chamber to explain that his answers are accurate, Dr. Sharma ignores him and questions how he managed to score well in other subjects without being accused of cheating. Dr. Sharma's bias against Satya, a student from the reserved quota, becomes evident. Satya, distressed, writes in his diary about the struggles he faced at college because of his caste. Hariharan later reflects on Satya's pain:

"We have gone beyond caste, says one. Another says: we have to stop looking backward, caste is history. The good man among them says: Yes, I agree all people are the same and we must not say these are high those are low. But caste has been there for so many years. It can't change overnight, can it?" (190)

Eventually, Satya takes his own life, unable to bear the humiliation any longer.

Such humiliation faced by Dalit students in colleges and universities affects them emotionally and mentally. They are often labeled as a "weaker section" due to their social and economic background. Despite these challenges, they continue to fight for dignity and equality. Students enter college with hope, longing for a better life. But once they are emotionally shattered, not all of them can endure the pain. As a result, many lose all hope, feel empty, and some even take their own lives.

The cause of Satya's death was stated to be his inability to handle the academic pressure. However, this explanation was shaped by college administration and was far from the actual truth.

Our society tends to forget such incidents all too quickly. Information shared by those in power is often accepted blindly, without question. This reflects a troubling power-knowledge dynamic that obscures the truth.

"As always, the story hides behind the old smokescreen. A Dalit Student's Suicide: It's a case of academic weakness. Inadequate merit. In Satya's too, the College and the police have agreed on that. The College Principal has issued a statement: 'The unfortunate suicide of first year MBBS student Satya was because of his inability to cope with academic pressure. We try to help all our students, especially those from a weak or humble background, but some students give up because they can't keep up with academics or because of personal reasons.'" (267)

Anand Teltumbde states:

"Dalit students do not lack merit. What they lack is a level playing field."

He highlights that it's not the students who are deficient, but the system that is unequal.

Many Dalit students, like Satya, endure humiliation and mistreatment in educational institutions daily. Investigations have revealed that most Dalit and tribal students felt unsupported by their teachers. Some even claimed that teachers asked about their caste during evaluations and did not award them the marks they deserved. In many cases, their exam papers were not assessed properly. Over 90% of students reported being regularly humiliated during practical and oral examinations.

Dalit students in Indian universities are subjected to systemic discrimination. Often, they are deliberately failed by their teachers.

We claim to live in the twenty-first century and consider ourselves modern, yet our thinking remains narrow and caste-based prejudice continues to thrive. Individuals like Dr. Sharma- representing the outdated and rigid mindset still present in society -are partly responsible for the suffering and death of students like Satya. Unfortunately, many people remain silent observers, detached from these tragedies, as if they don't concern us.

Teachers hold immense power in shaping a student's future. They are meant to guide, support, and uplift. It is disheartening that some educators, like Dr. Sharma, misuse their position, allowing personal ego and orthodox beliefs to ruin student's lives and careers.

Education serves as a vital tool for the progress of human society. It not only fosters individual growth but also contributes to social, psychological, emotional and economic development. Rohith Vemula, or Satya, is not the only one who committed suicide. There are many more Dalit students who have taken their lives. The Union Education Minister told Lok Sabha members that from 2014-2021, 122 students died by suicide at IIT, IIM, NIIT and other central universities. Out of these 122, 68 students were from reserved categories.

No suicides can perhaps be seen only as a result to personal frustrations especially not- Dalit student suicides. Dalits often do not get justice in many cases. They continued to be suppressed because of caste.

Our Constitution says, "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them", and nothing shall prevent the state from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the

Scheduled Tribes. It is shameful that even after everything is clearly stated this caste-discrimination still prevails in every sphere of the society.

The widespread discrimination against Dalit throughout the entire educational system indicates that more needs to be done to ensure the effective implementation of laws and quotas.

In India, educational backwardness is often associated with specific marginalized groups, including Dalits and other backward classes. These communities frequently face caste-based discrimination, both in society and within educational institutions. Many do not receive adequate academic support from their families or communities, which increases their susceptibility to both social and educational exclusion. For many such Dalit students who face incessant harassment and discrimination in the educational institutions, ending their own lives seems like the only escape. That's what happens to many bright but highly sensitive young people like Satya.

ASHA: A DETERMINED SEEKER

Asha was admitted to a nursing college, the institution conducted interviews to familiarize themselves with each scholarship student from the “weaker sections”, as well as to introduce them to the college and its courses. During the session, one teacher gave a lecture on how noble the nursing profession is. Meanwhile, another teacher looked at Asha with a sarcastic smile, aware that she was a quota student.

When Asha was asked, “Why do you think you would make a good nurse?”, she hesitated to respond. At that moment, the smiling teacher interrupted and, in an attempt to remind Asha of her Dalit background, remarked, “But you people are used to serving other aren't you? Nursing will come naturally to you.” (39)

Another incident involves Mrs. Kumari, Asha's professor, who assigned kitchen and cleaning duties in the ward to six students. Asha was the only one asked to clean urinals, bedpans and the walls and floors of the bathroom. It was evident that Mrs. Kumari deliberately gave Asha this task because she belonged to a Dalit community. Many people in society still believe that such unhygienic tasks are meant to be done by Dalits.

Despite the discrimination, Asha faced the situation with courage. She remained optimistic even in the face of hardship. She recognizes that caste-based prejudices continue to manifest in various forms.

Asha experienced similar embarrassment when she visited her friend's aunt's house. An elderly man, noticing her dark complexion, asked Priya about Asha's caste. As mentioned in the novel, he said:

‘Your friend, this black girl. What caste?’ His voice sounded especially loud in the silence.’ (41)

Later, when Asha followed Priya into the kitchen to help carry plates, Priya's aunt stopped her and said:

‘When Asha accompanied Priya to the kitchen with the plates from the table, Priya's auntie stopped her. No, no, don't come into the kitchen’. Her smile wavered. ‘You're a guest, after all.’ (41)

This incident highlights a significant issue: people often judge caste based on physical appearance, name. In Asha's case, her complexion alone was enough for others to assume her caste.

“Colour prejudice is an offset of the bigger evil of casteism in India”, says Udit Raj, leader of the Indian Justice Party, which represents Dalits or the oppressed tribes and caste in the traditional political system.

Asha was deeply upset after experiencing such humiliation. She came to the realization that caste still exists in modern society—it has merely changed its form. Even today, it continues to follow people from lower castes wherever they go. Our society is not yet completely free from the caste system.

As stated in the novel:

“Caste is officially gone. She can see him act it out, looking for it everywhere—under the table, inside a backpack, in the congealed drain by the roadside. She can hear him playing the fool, calling in a plaintive voice, ‘Where are you, where are you? Show us your face, Mr. Caste, I know you like to follow us wherever we go...’” (42)

Women students and individuals from marginalized communities in India have gained access to education but continue to face institutional discrimination. Dalit women students, in particular, often deal with challenging family circumstances and unpleasant experiences shaped by their caste, gender, and identity. They frequently endure humiliation and encounter discriminatory attitudes and exclusionary practices throughout their education.

Dalit women students are especially burdened by stereotypes and hostile academic environments from an early age. These adverse experiences take a toll on their psychological well-being and become major barriers to get advantage of academic opportunities and achieve upward educational mobility.

Asha begins her book by highlighting the illusion of caste-free institutions. On the very first page, she writes: “Untouchability is a sin. Untouchability is a crime. Untouchability is inhuman. It’s a sin for those who believe in such ideas, for those who follow such beliefs in the name of religion. It’s a crime for those who want to keep on the right side of the law. And, inhuman-whose heart does that appeal to?” (42)

The above lines are only written in the books but no one follows. The reality is something different. Our educated society still practicing untouchability, casteism.

When Asha came to know about the death of her friend Satya, she and her friend Ravi raised their voices against the injustice done to him. This incident gave Asha a purpose in life. She decided to become a voice for the Dalits. Like a rising tide, she stood up fearlessly. Just as the tide roars in the sea, she began speaking out for the rights and freedom of Dalits. She is determined and will not stop until she achieves her goal.

As the author stated:

‘The river rises; it fills Asha with anger and grief, but also a strange joy. She can hear Satya tell her, or maybe it’s she who’s telling Satya and Ravi, even Professor Krishna and Chikkiah: I have become the tide.’ (320)

Asha and Satya’s story presents a true picture of the educational system. When educational institutions and the education system themselves become the root causes of humiliation and discrimination against Dalits, what hope can these students have for the future?

In the article "Education, Nation and Dr. Ambedkar: A Philosophic Reflection," Dr. Santosh states:

“Dr. Ambedkar firmly believed that equality must be the guiding principle in every sphere, including religion. The Indian caste system denied proper education to individuals from lower castes due to systemic inequality, pushing even the most talented individuals into unjust situations. The caste system’s influence on education stifles intelligence and jeopardizes the nation’s future. More than 40% of India’s intellectual potential comes from marginalized communities. Yet, we continue to build a nation that excludes them. How can a nation’s history, sociology, economy, politics, culture, and religion be complete while ignoring more than half of its population? Without the inclusion of all sections of Indian society, the narrative of our country’s past and future will continue to be one of privilege.”

Asha represents resilience under pressure-she balances survival, friendship and dignity, even where societal structures seem to conspire against her. Her journey underscores both hope and weariness: hope through camaraderie and weariness from constant, silent struggle.

Her portrayal is quiet yet powerful-a modern echo of the novel’s broader call for collective resistance and recognition, not just of history but of present-day courage.

Some students, like Asha, did not end their despite facing harassment. Instead, they faced it boldly, working hard to overcome the situation and striving to build a bright future. Like Asha, many students have raised their voices for their rights and justice-regardless of the outcome, they tried.

RAVI: AWAKENED INTELLECTUAL

Ravi was a student at a government science college. He was discussing with Ramesha (his roommate) how Simpson classified animals according to their domain, kingdom, phylum, class from top to bottom. So, we human beings are also classified according to Manu taxonomy but where our caste fit in that? The tragedy is that these Dalits are not there in the caste hierarchy they are out of the category. That is why they are called outcaste community. That is what Ravi asked here.

One day, Ravi and his friends were discussing how Dalits are often identified through their names.

“Antyaja, Chandala, Panchama, Asprushya—what else, Ravi? Let’s see—there’s Madiga, Mala, Relli, Chindu, Mashita, Pariah, Parayan... Gaudala, Hakkipikki, Irula, Jenu Kuruba, Malaikud, Malikudi, Bhil, Gond Chenchu, Koya, Yerava, Haleya, Korama, etc.” (103)

There are many such names, and through them, Dalits are often labelled as SC or ST. They are humiliated using these names—names created to mark them as different, impure, or less than human. These names are often associated with those who are forced to do demeaning jobs, those who are considered polluting through touch or presence, and those whose humanity is denied.

Ravi said:

“We are like protozoa—the only identity we have is caste or tribe, official labels like SC or ST.” (103)

He expressed that Dalits are treated like protozoa—basic life forms—recognized only by their caste and names.

Ravi also remarked:

“So, I can grow a new head or leg when one is cut off?” (103)

The real tragedy is that the upper castes have consistently resisted the progress of Dalits. They do not want Dalits to improve their condition or gain a better life. The upper caste continues to push Dalits back, forcing them to remain backward. Their goal is to keep Dalits under control— under a system where dominance is displayed and power is exercised by the upper caste over the marginalized.

Later on, under the leadership of his professor, Senthil, Ravi embarks on a journey to bring change to the prevailing conditions of society. He joins the 'Bhim Shakti Group'. This group, which Ravi becomes a part of, invokes Ambedkar's call to "educate, agitate, organize" through Senthil, a Dalit professor. Ravi also plays an active role on social media by highlighting the injustices faced by Dalits in different parts of the country (India). He reads books and seeks to learn more about the history of the oppressed classes and their ongoing struggles.

When Ravi's friend Satya dies, he leads a procession and protests against the injustice done to his friend. Ravi responds to Satya's suicide by saying:

"We are neither weak nor humble. Why don't they name us, why do they hide behind these lies? and merits. Satya not have merit? What merit does his college have if it drove him to death?" (267).

The article in *The Wire* heading "India's Universities Are Falling Terribly Short on Addressing Caste Discrimination" by Makepeace Sitlhou reveals that:

"The prevalence of caste-based discrimination in Indian universities has been an open secret for decades. While some Dalits student's suicides have been more widely reported in recent years, away from the headlines, direct and indirect systemic discrimination continues to suffocate the lives and thwart the education of Dalits students across the country. Information obtained through Right to Information applications reveals that many universities are yet to implement recommendations made by the University Grants Commission (UGC) to address caste -based discrimination.

Discrimination on campuses varies from physical exclusion to a more subtle denial of entitlements, and to seemingly neutral practices which disproportionately affect Dalit students. Several official bodies set up to investigate allegations of discrimination have found evidence of caste -based discrimination."

However, instead of giving in to despair, Ravi begins to channel his frustration into questioning the system and connecting with others who share similar experiences. His journey shows how silent endurance can shift into a search for collective strength, awareness of social injustice, and the courage to speak out -even if cautiously. Many Dalit students like Payal Tadv, a young doctor who spoke out discrimination during her medical residency. Like Ravi, they represent the struggle of many marginalized students who, despite hostility, strive to claim their rightful place in education and society.

CONCLUSION

The novel presents a mirror of the prevailing society through the lives of the characters. Even the affirmative actions and protections provided by law exist, they have not been fully effective. The students Asha, Satya, and Ravi got admission through the quota, yet they are treated as estranged. They are not integrated. Their quality and efficiency are always put into question. The attitude and mindset of the people who are still bound by the chains of prejudice have not changed. Though they have been educated, they are still wrapped in the chains of prejudice and humiliation.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar said, "The purpose of education is to moralise and socialise the people."

Freedom and equality have been provided to us by the law of the land, but we are far from achieving freedom of mind and equality in the true sense. It is we who can establish or dismantle a system. This novel brings forth the lacunae of society and what we could do as responsible citizens to bring about positive change. These positive actions must come from within society. Mere policies can never be effective without social sensitization and active participation.

The Indian Express review about the novel:

"This novel conveys the same message, but with a burning rage. While Hariharan's book is a call to action at a certain level, it is also encouraging. By moving beyond the constraints of a headline, she shows that these stories do not fizzle out when they drop out of the short attention span of the ever-churning news machine. While seemingly fragile, the voices of defiance and anger do not exist in isolation — they become a part of a rising tide."

The novel unveils the social reality that, although situations have changed, humanity is still continuously involved in an endless fight with the caste system prevailing in society. Githa Hariharan created this story and highlighted the image that exposes the hostility prevailing in contemporary India and the world as a whole. Githa Hariharan, with her powerful writing and storytelling skills, has very efficiently managed to uncover the dark, open secrets that require immediate attention.

Our Indian authors are writing great books on various serious issues, but they are ignoring the major issue of our

society, i.e., casteism and the struggles of Dalits. Everyday, there is a news headline about a Dalit student's suicide or the problems they face. This is alarming, but the writers and critics remain silent. They try to hide the true reality and highlight only great lives. Very few writers, like Githa Hariharan, come up with these types of issues and unveils the true reality of society.

The three stories underline that Dalit struggle in education is not only about personal strength but also about confronting a deeply entrenched social structure that demands both courage and collective change.

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