



American Journal of Interdisciplinary Research and Innovation (AJIRI)

ISSN: 2833-2237 (ONLINE)

VOLUME 5 ISSUE 4 (2026)

PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

Caste, Rights, and Dalit Shakthi: Exploring Vulnerability, Social Exclusion, and Affirmative Action in Telangana

Medi Karthik^{1*}

Article Information

Received: February 02, 2026

Accepted: April 14, 2026

Published: October 26, 2026

Keywords

*Affirmative Action, Dalits,
Grassroots Mobilization, Rights
Awareness, Social Exclusion*

ABSTRACT

Caste continues to be a defining axis of inequality in India, shaping access to resources, opportunities, and dignity. Dalits, historically subjected to systemic exclusion and discrimination, remain among the most vulnerable groups despite constitutional safeguards and affirmative action. This study focuses on Dalit communities in Telangana, with particular reference to the role of Dalit Shakthi as a mobilizing and empowering force. The objective of the research is to examine the socio demographic profile of Dalits, assess their experiences of discrimination, evaluate their awareness of rights, and analyse the impact of Dalit Shakthi's interventions in fostering empowerment, cultural identity, and political consciousness. The importance of the study lies in its contribution to understanding the paradox of Dalit progress: while education and occupational diversification are evident, discrimination persists as a structural reality. By documenting the role of grassroots mobilization, the research highlights the necessity of complementing state affirmative action with community based initiatives. Methodologically, the study adopted a descriptive design, employing simple random sampling to select 328 respondents across Telangana. Data were collected through a structured interview schedule and analysed using SPSS software, with frequencies, cross tabulations, and chi square tests applied to interpret patterns. The results reveal high educational attainment among Dalits, with nearly three fourths completing graduation or post graduation, alongside significant occupational diversification. Yet, 69.5% reported facing discrimination, underscoring persistent vulnerability. Dalit Shakthi emerged as a pivotal actor, with 84.1% respondents affirming its support during discrimination and 86.6% recognizing its literacy initiatives. The study's significance lies in its demonstration that grassroots mobilization, coupled with affirmative action, can foster multidimensional empowerment, cultural pride, and political consciousness, offering a model for inclusive development in India.

INTRODUCTION

Caste remains one of the most enduring and complex social institutions in India, shaping identities, opportunities, and exclusions across centuries. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and decades of affirmative action, caste continues to be a powerful determinant of social status, access to resources, and participation in public life. Among the most marginalized groups within this system are the Dalits, historically referred to as "untouchables," who have faced systemic discrimination, violence, and exclusion from mainstream society (Jena & Acharya, 2025). The struggle of Dalits for dignity, rights, and recognition has been a defining feature of modern India's social and political landscape (Hans, 2013). This study, situated in Telangana, seeks to explore the perceptions, challenges, and rights awareness of Dalit communities, with particular emphasis on the role of Dalit Shakthi as a mobilizing and empowering force.

The significance of this inquiry lies in its attempt to bridge empirical realities with broader national debates on caste and social justice. While India has witnessed remarkable progress in education, employment, and political representation among Dalits, the persistence of

discrimination and exclusion underscores the paradox of empowerment (Miglan, 2025). Dalits today occupy positions in universities, government services, and civil society, yet they continue to encounter barriers in housing, workplaces, and cultural spaces (Garalyte, 2020). This paradox demands careful examination, not only to document progress but also to highlight the structural inequities that remain.

Historical Context of Dalit Marginalization

The roots of Dalit exclusion lie in the hierarchical caste system, which divided society into rigid categories based on notions of purity and pollution (Svensson, 2018). Dalits were relegated to the lowest rung, denied access to temples, schools, and public spaces, and forced into degrading occupations such as manual scavenging. This systemic exclusion was not merely social but also economic, as Dalits were denied land ownership and relegated to exploitative labour (Agarwal & Levien, 2020). The stigma of untouchability created a cycle of poverty and marginalization that persisted across generations. The colonial period witnessed both reinforcement and challenge to caste hierarchies. While colonial policies

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Osmania University, Hyderabad, Telangana, India

* Corresponding author's e-mail: karthikmedi88@gmail.com

often codified caste distinctions, reform movements and Dalit leaders such as Jyoti Rao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar articulated powerful critiques of caste oppression (Bag, 2025). Ambedkar's role in drafting the Indian Constitution ensured the abolition of untouchability and the introduction of affirmative action policies, including reservations in education, employment, and politics. Yet, despite these constitutional safeguards, caste discrimination has persisted in subtle and overt forms, shaping the everyday lives of Dalits.

Dalits in Contemporary India: Progress and Paradox

Post independence India has witnessed significant progress among Dalits, particularly through affirmative action. Reservations have enabled Dalits to access higher education, government employment, and political representation (Mandal, 2009). Dalit leaders have emerged in national and regional politics, and Dalit literature and art have gained visibility in mainstream culture. These developments reflect the transformative potential of constitutional safeguards and social movements.

However, progress has been uneven. National surveys reveal that Dalits continue to face disproportionate poverty, limited land ownership, and high exposure to caste based violence. Reports of atrocities, including physical assaults, social boycotts, and denial of access to public resources, remain widespread. Even educated Dalits in urban areas often encounter workplace discrimination and social exclusion (Arora & Navjot, 2025). The paradox of Dalit empowerment—progress amidst persistent vulnerability—defines the contemporary scenario.

Telangana as a Study Context

Telangana provides a particularly relevant context for examining Dalit realities. The state has a significant population of Scheduled Castes, with communities such as the Madigas and Malas forming the backbone of Dalit mobilization. Telangana's history of social movements, including struggles against feudal landlords and caste oppression, has created a fertile ground for Dalit activism. Organizations like Dalit Shakthi have emerged as critical actors, mobilizing communities, raising awareness, and providing support against discrimination.

The state also reflects the paradox of Dalit empowerment. On one hand, Dalits in Telangana have achieved remarkable progress in education, with increasing representation in universities and professional courses. On the other hand, caste based discrimination remains pervasive, manifesting in housing, employment, and cultural spaces. The role of grassroots organizations in addressing these contradictions becomes crucial, making Telangana an ideal site for this study.

Dalit Shakthi: A Grassroots Force

Dalit Shakthi represents a grassroots initiative aimed at empowering Dalit communities through literacy programs, anti discrimination campaigns, and support mechanisms (Prasant & Kapoor, 2010). Its interventions

are multidimensional, encompassing education, rights awareness, cultural pride, and political consciousness. By providing immediate support to victims of discrimination, initiating literacy programs in communities, and fostering collective identity, Dalit Shakthi complements state policies and addresses gaps in implementation.

The organization's emphasis on cultural identity, such as recognition of Jambavanthudu and Maharaj's, reflects the importance of reclaiming heritage as a form of empowerment. Its political initiatives, including fostering awareness of autonomous platforms like the Dharma Samaj Party, highlight the growing aspirations of Dalits for independent political representation (Bandlamudi & Ramakrishnan, 2018). Thus, Dalit Shakthi exemplifies the transformative potential of grassroots mobilization in challenging caste hierarchies and fostering empowerment.

Theoretical Framework: Social Exclusion and Affirmative Action

The study is situated within the theoretical framework of social exclusion and affirmative action. Social exclusion refers to the systematic denial of participation in social, economic, and political life, often based on identity markers such as caste. Dalits, historically excluded from mainstream society, exemplify this phenomenon. Affirmative action, in contrast, seeks to redress exclusion by providing targeted opportunities and safeguards (Gururaj et al., 2021). In India, reservations in education, employment, and politics constitute the primary form of affirmative action.

However, affirmative action alone cannot dismantle caste hierarchies. Structural reforms, cultural recognition, and grassroots mobilization are equally necessary (Singh, 2024). The role of organizations like Dalit Shakthi becomes critical in this context, as they address the everyday realities of discrimination and foster multidimensional empowerment. By situating the study within this framework, the research seeks to highlight both the persistence of exclusion and the potential of affirmative action and grassroots initiatives to foster change.

Objectives of the Study

The central objective of this study is to examine the perceptions, challenges, and rights awareness of Dalit communities in Telangana, with a particular focus on the role of Dalit Shakthi as a mobilizing and empowering force. By analysing the socio demographic profile of respondents in terms of gender, caste, occupation, and educational attainment, the study seeks to understand the structural realities of marginalization that continue to shape Dalit lives. It further aims to investigate the extent and nature of caste based discrimination experienced by these communities and to assess their level of awareness regarding constitutional and legal rights designed to protect them. A key dimension of the study is to evaluate the interventions of Dalit Shakthi—such as literacy programs, anti discrimination campaigns, and support

mechanisms—in fostering empowerment, resilience, and collective confidence among Dalits. In addition, the study explores the assertion of cultural identity and the emergence of political consciousness, particularly the recognition of heritage and the aspiration for autonomous political platforms, as integral aspects of empowerment. Ultimately, the objective is to generate a nuanced understanding of Dalit vulnerability and empowerment in contemporary Telangana, while situating these findings within the broader national discourse on caste, rights, and affirmative action in India.

Importance of the Study

This study holds significant importance in both academic and social contexts. At the national level, Dalits continue to face entrenched exclusion despite constitutional safeguards and affirmative action policies. By situating the findings within Telangana, the research contributes to the broader discourse on caste, rights, and social justice in India. The importance of the study lies in its ability to highlight the paradox of Dalit progress: while education and occupational diversification are evident, discrimination persists as a structural reality (Raj Silwal, 2024). By documenting the role of Dalit Shakthi, the study underscores the transformative potential of grassroots mobilization in complementing state policies. Furthermore, the study provides empirical evidence that can inform policymakers, activists, and scholars about the need to strengthen affirmative action beyond reservations, encompassing cultural recognition, social services, and private sector inclusion (Singh, 2024). It also emphasizes the importance of fostering political consciousness and cultural pride as integral dimensions of empowerment. Ultimately, the study contributes to the ongoing struggle for equality and dignity, offering insights that can guide both academic inquiry and practical interventions aimed at building a more inclusive and just society.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study adopted a descriptive research design to systematically examine the perceptions, challenges, and rights awareness of Dalit communities in Telangana, with particular reference to the role of Dalit Shakthi. A descriptive method was chosen as it allows for the careful documentation of social realities and the interpretation of patterns within the data without imposing experimental controls (Bijou et al., 1968). The analysis relied on frequencies, cross-tabulations, and chi-square tests to identify relationships between variables and highlight the structural dimensions of caste, occupation, education, and experiences of discrimination. This methodological approach was particularly suited to the study's objectives, as it enabled both quantitative clarity and sociological insight into the lived experiences of Dalits.

The study area was Telangana State, which has a significant population of Scheduled Castes and other marginalized groups. Telangana provides a relevant context because of its historical struggles against caste oppression and its

contemporary mobilizations through organizations such as Dalit Shakthi. Within this setting, the research sought to capture the voices of Dalit communities across diverse occupations, educational backgrounds, and socio cultural contexts. The sample size consisted of 328 respondents, which was considered adequate to provide both representativeness and analytical depth. Respondents were selected using simple random sampling, ensuring that each individual had an equal chance of being included in the study. This sampling technique minimized bias and enhanced the reliability of the findings, while also reflecting the heterogeneity of Dalit experiences in the region.

Data collection was carried out using a structured interview schedule, which served as the primary tool. The interview schedule was carefully designed to elicit information on demographic characteristics, occupational distribution, educational attainment, experiences of discrimination, awareness of rights, and perceptions of Dalit Shakthi's interventions. The use of interviews allowed for direct engagement with respondents, enabling the collection of both factual data and nuanced perspectives (Husband, 2020). This method was particularly effective in capturing sensitive issues such as discrimination and cultural identity, which may not be adequately reflected through purely quantitative instruments.

For data analysis, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was employed. SPSS facilitated the computation of frequencies and percentages, the construction of cross tabulations, and the application of chi square tests to examine associations between variables. The use of SPSS ensured accuracy, consistency, and efficiency in handling the dataset, while also enabling the presentation of results in a clear and systematic manner. The combination of descriptive statistics and inferential tests provided a robust framework for interpreting the data, allowing the study to move beyond surface observations to uncover deeper patterns of exclusion, awareness, and empowerment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study sought to explore the perceptions, challenges, and rights awareness of Dalit communities in Telangana, with particular reference to the role of Dalit Shakthi as a mobilizing and empowering force. The findings, derived from a sample of 328 respondents, reveal a complex interplay of caste identity, occupational distribution, educational attainment, experiences of discrimination, and the socio-political interventions of Dalit Shakthi. The results are presented thematically, with attention to both descriptive frequencies and cross-tabulations that highlight the structural realities of caste and rights in the region.

Demographic Profile: Gender and Caste Composition

The sample was overwhelmingly male, with 290 respondents (88.4%) compared to 38 females (11.6%). This skewed gender representation reflects broader

patterns of male dominance in public participation and mobilization within marginalized communities. While women's voices remain underrepresented, their presence, though limited, signals an emerging participation in collective struggles. Caste distribution underscores the centrality of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in the study. Out of 328 respondents, 276 (84.1%) identified as SC, while Scheduled Tribes (STs) accounted for 12 (3.7%) and Backward Classes (BCs) for 40 (12.2%). This composition highlights the study's focus on Dalit realities, with SCs forming the backbone of the sample, thereby ensuring that the findings are deeply anchored in Dalit experiences.

Occupational Structure and Caste Linkages

Occupational data reveals a diverse spread, though heavily concentrated in student and private employment categories. Nearly half of the respondents (47.6%) were students, reflecting both the aspirations of younger generations and the emphasis on education as a pathway to empowerment. Private employees constituted 26.8%, while business activities accounted for 10.4%. Traditional occupations such as labour (4.9%), agricultural labour (5.5%), and artisanship (0.6%) were relatively marginal, suggesting a gradual shift away from caste-bound manual labour toward modern employment avenues. Government employees formed a small but significant 4.3%, indicating limited but notable access to state employment opportunities. Cross-tabulation of occupation and caste reveals important nuances. Among SCs, students (130) and private employees (74) dominate, while business activities (32) also show a strong presence. STs, though few in number, are represented across student (4), private employee (4), and government employee (2) categories. BCs show a more diversified profile, with 22 students, 10 private employees, and 4 government employees. These patterns suggest that while SCs remain concentrated in education and emerging employment, BCs demonstrate relatively broader occupational spread, albeit within smaller numbers.

Educational Attainment and Qualifications

Education emerges as a critical dimension of empowerment (Dziemianowicz-Bak, 2017). A striking 90.2% of respondents reported having access to education, while only 9.8% lacked it. This high literacy rate reflects the impact of sustained community initiatives and the prioritization of education among Dalit households. Qualification levels further illustrate this trajectory. Graduation (39.6%) and post-graduation (32.9%) together account for nearly three-fourths of the sample, underscoring the remarkable educational advancement among Dalits in Telangana. Intermediate education was reported by 12.8%, while primary and secondary education each accounted for 2.4%. Notably, 9.8% respondents were categorized as "not applicable," corresponding to those without formal education. The predominance of higher education qualifications signals a generational shift, where Dalit youth increasingly access universities and professional courses, thereby challenging traditional caste hierarchies.

Experiences of Discrimination

Despite educational and occupational progress, discrimination remains pervasive. Out of 328 respondents, 228 (69.5%) reported facing discrimination, while 100 (30.5%) did not. Disaggregated by caste, 198 SCs (71.7%) acknowledged discrimination, compared to 6 STs (50%) and 24 BCs (60%). These figures reveal that caste-based exclusion continues to shape everyday realities, with SCs bearing the brunt of systemic prejudice.

Awareness of Rights and Role of Dalit Shakthi

Encouragingly, 79.9% of respondents reported awareness of their rights against discrimination, while 20.1% remained unaware. This high level of rights consciousness reflects the impact of grassroots mobilization and awareness campaigns. Dalit Shakthi's role is particularly significant here: 84.1% of respondents affirmed receiving support from the organization when discriminated against, while 15.9% did not. This demonstrates the organization's centrality in providing solidarity and redressal mechanisms. Dalit Shakthi's literacy initiatives were widely acknowledged, with 86.6% respondents reporting such programs in their communities. Similarly, anti-discrimination campaigns were recognized by 76.2% of respondents. These interventions have evidently contributed to the high levels of rights awareness and collective confidence among Dalits.

Community Engagement and Motivations

Respondents were asked about their motivations for engaging with Dalit Shakthi. A majority (66.5%) cited "all of them"—cultural, political, social, and personal—as motivating factors, indicating the holistic appeal of the organization. Smaller proportions identified cultural (8.5%), political (10.4%), social (11.6%), and personal (3%) motivations individually. Cross-tabulation with caste reveals that SCs overwhelmingly engaged for multiple reasons (180), while STs (8) and BCs (30) also reported comprehensive motivations. The chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 12.205$, $df = 8$, $p = 0.142$) suggests no statistically significant difference across caste groups, implying that motivations for engagement are broadly shared across communities.

Observed Changes Due to Dalit Shakthi Programs

Respondents reported significant changes attributable to Dalit Shakthi's interventions. A majority (70.1%) observed "all of them"—personal, social, cultural, and political awareness—as outcomes. Political awareness was specifically noted by 42 respondents, social awareness by 30, cultural awareness by 16, and personal awareness by 10. These findings underscore the transformative impact of Dalit Shakthi, which not only addresses discrimination but also fosters multidimensional empowerment.

Cultural Identity and Recognition

Cultural identity emerged as a strong theme. An overwhelming 95.1% of respondents affirmed that

the Madiga community considers Jambavanthudu as its cultural identity, while 89% recognized Madigas as Maharaj's. These responses highlight the assertion of cultural pride and identity among Dalits, challenging stigmatization and reclaiming heritage. Finally, political aspirations were evident in responses regarding the Dharma Samaj Party. A substantial 78.7% believed such a party could exist, while 21.3% did not. This reflects the growing political consciousness among Dalits, who increasingly envision autonomous platforms to articulate their rights and demands.

The results collectively reveal a paradoxical reality: while Dalits in Telangana demonstrate remarkable progress in education, occupational diversification, and rights awareness, they continue to face entrenched discrimination. Dalit Shakthi emerges as a pivotal actor, providing support, literacy initiatives, and anti-discrimination campaigns that have significantly enhanced awareness and confidence. Cultural identity and political aspirations further underscore the community's resilience and determination to assert itself in the socio-political landscape. The findings thus paint a picture of a community in transition—anchored in historical struggles yet propelled by education, collective mobilization, and cultural pride toward a more empowered future.

Discussion

The findings of this study, situated in Telangana and focused on the role of Dalit Shakthi, illuminate both the progress and persistent challenges faced by Dalit communities in contemporary India. While the results reveal significant strides in education, occupational diversification, and rights awareness, they simultaneously underscore the enduring reality of caste based discrimination and exclusion. This paradox—advancement amidst vulnerability—frames the broader discussion of Dalit empowerment in India, where affirmative action and grassroots mobilization remain central to social transformation.

Dalits in the National Context: Historical Vulnerability and Contemporary Exclusion

Dalits, historically referred to as “untouchables,” have endured centuries of systemic exclusion rooted in the caste system (Sikka, 2012). Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and the abolition of untouchability under Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, caste continues to shape social hierarchies and access to resources. National surveys and reports consistently highlight Dalits' disproportionate vulnerability in areas such as land ownership, education, health, and political representation. The persistence of manual scavenging, caste based violence, and discrimination in housing and employment illustrates that exclusion is not merely historical but remains embedded in everyday structures (Shahid, 2015).

The Telangana results mirror this national reality. Nearly 70% of respondents reported facing discrimination,

despite high levels of education and occupational mobility. This finding resonates with broader studies across India, which show that Dalits, even when educated and employed in modern sectors, encounter subtle and overt forms of exclusion—from workplace bias to social ostracism. Thus, vulnerability is not erased by progress; rather, it coexists with it, demanding sustained interventions.

Education as Empowerment: A National Shift with Local Resonance

One of the most striking findings of this study is the high level of educational attainment among Dalit respondents: nearly three fourths had completed graduation or post graduation. This reflects a generational shift, where Dalit youth increasingly access higher education, often through affirmative action policies such as reservations in universities and scholarships. Nationally, the expansion of educational opportunities has been a cornerstone of Dalit empowerment, enabling entry into professions, civil services, and academia.

Yet, education alone does not dismantle caste hierarchies. The persistence of discrimination among educated Dalits in Telangana underscores the limitations of education as a solitary tool. While literacy and qualifications provide mobility, they do not guarantee social acceptance (Fowles-Sweet & Barker, 2018). This paradox is evident across India, where Dalit students in elite institutions often report experiences of isolation, bias, and even suicide due to systemic pressures. Thus, education must be coupled with broader social reforms and affirmative action to translate into genuine empowerment.

Occupational Diversification: Breaking Traditional Boundaries

The occupational profile of respondents reveals a gradual shift away from caste bound labour toward modern employment. Students and private employees dominate, while traditional roles such as agricultural labour and artisanship are marginal. This diversification reflects national trends, where Dalits increasingly enter urban labour markets, business ventures, and professional sectors (Lakra, 2025). Affirmative action in government employment has also created pathways for Dalits to access secure jobs, though representation remains limited.

However, occupational diversification does not eliminate vulnerability. Dalits in modern sectors often face “glass ceilings,” where promotions and leadership positions remain elusive. In Telangana, only 4.3% of respondents were government employees, highlighting the limited penetration into state structures. Nationally, Dalits continue to be underrepresented in higher bureaucratic and corporate positions, reflecting structural barriers that persist despite diversification (Network, 2025). Thus, while occupational shifts signify progress, they also reveal the need for deeper affirmative action to ensure equitable representation across all levels.

Discrimination and Rights Awareness: The Role of Grassroots Mobilization

The persistence of discrimination, reported by nearly 70% of respondents, underscores the entrenched nature of caste prejudice. Yet, the high level of rights awareness (79.9%) and the widespread recognition of Dalit Shakthi's support highlight the transformative role of grassroots organizations. Dalit Shakthi's literacy programs, anti discrimination campaigns, and solidarity mechanisms have evidently enhanced confidence and consciousness among Dalits in Telangana.

This finding resonates with the national scenario, where grassroots movements—from the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra to contemporary NGOs—have played pivotal roles in mobilizing communities, challenging caste violence, and advocating for rights. Such organizations complement state affirmative action by addressing gaps in implementation and providing immediate support in cases of discrimination (Alemu et al., 2022). They also foster collective identity and pride, as seen in the respondents' recognition of cultural symbols like Jambavanthudu and Maharaj's. Thus, grassroots mobilization emerges as a critical pillar of Dalit empowerment, bridging the gap between policy and lived reality.

Cultural Identity and Political Consciousness: Reclaiming Space in the National Imagination

The assertion of cultural identity among respondents—95.1% affirming Jambavanthudu as a symbol and 89% recognizing Madigas as Maharaj's—reflects a broader national trend of Dalits reclaiming heritage and challenging stigmatization. Cultural pride serves as a counter narrative to centuries of dehumanization, enabling communities to redefine themselves on their own terms (Tilleg, 2007). This reclamation is evident in literature, art, and festivals across India, where Dalit voices increasingly assert visibility.

Political consciousness, too, is on the rise. The belief among 78.7% respondents that a Dharma Samaj Party could exist reflects aspirations for autonomous political platforms. Nationally, Dalit political mobilization has been significant, from the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh to regional movements in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. While electoral success varies, the very articulation of Dalit political identity challenges mainstream parties to address caste inequities (Verma, 2019). In Telangana, Dalit Shakthi's role in fostering political awareness aligns with this national trajectory, where grassroots organizations nurture political consciousness as a form of empowerment.

Affirmative Action: Necessity and Limitations

Affirmative action, primarily through reservations in education, employment, and politics, has been the cornerstone of Dalit empowerment in India (Bhojani et al., 2019). The Telangana findings—high education levels, occupational diversification, and rights awareness—are in part outcomes of such policies. Yet, the persistence of

discrimination and limited representation in government employment highlight the limitations of affirmative action. Structural barriers, bureaucratic resistance, and societal prejudice often dilute the impact of reservations. Moreover, affirmative action has uneven reach. While urban, educated Dalits benefit significantly, rural and marginalized sub castes often remain excluded (Nikolopoulou et al., 2010). The Telangana data, with its overwhelming SC representation, underscores this imbalance, as STs and BCs are relatively underrepresented. Nationally, debates continue over the need to expand affirmative action to cover private sector employment, land redistribution, and social services. Thus, while affirmative action remains indispensable, it must be complemented by broader reforms addressing structural inequities.

Dalit Vulnerability in Contemporary India: A Persistent Reality

Despite progress, Dalits remain among the most vulnerable groups in India. National data reveals disproportionate poverty rates, limited land ownership, and high exposure to caste based violence. The Telangana findings—high discrimination rates despite education and employment—mirror this vulnerability. Social exclusion manifests not only in overt violence but also in subtle forms, such as exclusion from housing, denial of temple entry, and workplace bias. These realities underscore that vulnerability is structural, not merely individual, requiring systemic interventions.

Toward Affirmative Action Beyond Reservations

The findings of this study suggest that affirmative action must move beyond reservations to encompass holistic measures. Key areas include:

- Education: Expanding scholarships, mentoring, and support systems to ensure Dalit students not only access but thrive in higher education.
- Employment: Extending affirmative action to the private sector, where Dalits increasingly seek opportunities, and ensuring representation in leadership positions.
- Social Services: Targeted interventions in health, housing, and sanitation to address structural inequities.
- Cultural Recognition: Promoting Dalit heritage and identity in national narratives to challenge stigmatization.
- Grassroots Mobilization: Supporting organizations like Dalit Shakthi that provide immediate support, foster awareness, and nurture political consciousness.

Such measures would complement existing reservations, addressing gaps and ensuring that progress translates into genuine empowerment.

Dalit Shakthi as a Model for National Replication

The role of Dalit Shakthi in Telangana—providing support during discrimination, initiating literacy programs, and fostering political awareness—offers a model for replication across India. Grassroots organizations, rooted

in local realities, can effectively address discrimination, mobilize communities, and complement state policies (Mosse & Nagappan, 2021). Nationally, supporting such organizations through funding, recognition, and collaboration could enhance the reach of affirmative action. Dalit Shakthi's holistic approach—combining education, rights awareness, cultural pride, and political consciousness—illustrates the multidimensional nature of empowerment, which must be replicated to address the complex realities of Dalit vulnerability (Ganguly, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The discussion of Telangana's findings within the national context reveals a community in transition—anchored in historical struggles yet propelled by education, mobilization, and cultural pride toward empowerment. Yet, vulnerability and exclusion persist, demanding sustained affirmative action and grassroots interventions. Dalit Shakthi exemplifies the potential of community based organizations to complement state policies, fostering multidimensional empowerment. Nationally, the challenge remains to translate constitutional guarantees into lived realities, ensuring that Dalits not only access education and employment but also experience dignity, equality, politically, and inclusion. Affirmative action, therefore, must be reimagined—not as a static policy of reservations but as a dynamic, holistic framework encompassing education, employment, social services, cultural recognition, and grassroots.

REFERENCES

- Agarwal, S., & Levien, M. (2020). Dalits and Dispossession: A Comparison. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 50(5), 696–722. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2019.1597145>
- Alemu, N. E., Adeagbo, M. J., Muchie, A., & Tigabu, Y. (2022). Affirmative Action Policy in Bridging the Gender Gaps in Governmental Institutions of Ethiopia: Implementation, Successes and Challenges. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 8(1).
- Arora, A., & Navjot. (2025). Caste, Gender and Labour: Narratives of Exclusion and Discrimination of Dalit Women in the Education Sector of Chandigarh Region. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23944811251372781>
- Bag, L. (2025). From the Phule to the Present: Historicizing Caste Oppression across Economic, Social, and Political Realms. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/SSRN.5143414>
- Bandlamudi, L., & Ramakrishnan, E. V. (2018). Bakhtinian explorations of Indian culture: Pluralism, dogma and dialogue through history. *Bakhtinian Explorations of Indian Culture: Pluralism, Dogma and Dialogue Through History*, 1–212. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-6313-8>
- Bhojani, U., Madegowda, C., Prashanth, N., Hebbar, P., Mirzoev, T., Karlsen, S., & Mir, G. (2019). Affirmative action, minorities, and public services in India: Charting a future research and practice agenda. *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics*, 4(4), 265. <https://doi.org/10.20529/IJME.2019.062>
- Bijou, S. W., Peterson, R. F., & Ault, M. H. (1968). A Method to Integrate Descriptive and Experimental Field Studies at the Level of Data and Empirical Concepts 1. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 1(2), 175–191. <https://doi.org/10.1901/JABA.1968.1-175;Requestedjournal:Journal:19383703;Wgroup:Stri ng:Publication>
- Dziemianowicz-Bąk, A. (2017). Empowerment in Education—A New Logic of Emancipation or a New Logic of Power? *Marxism and Education*, 144–159. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351253321-12>
- Fowles-Sweet, W., & Barker, J. (2018). Widening Participation and Social Mobility: Encompassing and Integrating Learning Opportunities. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 20(2), 69–95. <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.20.2.69>
- Ganguly, S. (2025). So long as equality is elusive: Lessons for education of Dalits from Ambedkar's life and work. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*.
- Garalyte, K. (2020). Dalit Counterpublic and Social Space on Indian Campuses. *CASTE / A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, 1(2), 135–156. <https://doi.org/10.26812/CASTE.V1I2.198>
- Gururaj, S., Somers, P., Fry, J., Watson, D., Cicero, F., Morosini, M., & Zamora, J. (2021). Affirmative action policy: Inclusion, exclusion, and the global public good. *Policy Futures in Education*, 19(1), 63–83.
- Hans, V. B. (2013). Dalits in India: From Marginalisation to Inclusion. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/SSRN.2323268>
- Husband, G. (2020). Ethical Data Collection and Recognizing the Impact of Semi-Structured Interviews on Research Respondents. *Education Sciences 2020, Vol. 10, Page 206*, 10(8), 206. <https://doi.org/10.3390/EDUCSCI10080206>
- Jena, B. K., & Acharya, A. K. (2025). Dalit, Structural Violence, and Stigma in India: An Approach to Study the Untouchability. *Sociological Research Online*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13607804241282944>
- Lakra, N. R. (2025). Transitioning from Caste-bound Village Occupations to Peri-urban Jobs: Experiences of Dalit Migrant Labourer. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X251314225>
- Mandal, B. C. (2009). Dalits and Reservations in the Private Sector. *Voice of Dalit*, 2(1), 45–58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974354520090105>
- Miglani, P. (2025). Invisible Chains: Caste, Religious, Nationalism, and the Struggle for Freedom to Innovate in India. *OCAD University Open Research Repository*.
- Mosse, D., & Nagappan, S. B. (2021). NGOs as Social Movements: Policy Narratives, Networks and the Performance of Dalit Rights in South India. *Development and Change*, 52(1), 134–167.

- Network, B. L. (2025). The Challenges Of Dalit And Minority Advocates in the Justice System. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/SSRN.5236723>
- Nikolopoulou, A., Abraham, T., & Mirbagheri, F. (2010). Caste, Exclusion, and Marginalized Groups in India: Dalit Deprivation in India. *Education for Sustainable Development: Challenges, Strategies, and Practices in a Globalizing World*, 3–27. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9788132108023>
- Prasant, K., & Kapoor, D. (2010). Learning and Knowledge Production in Dalit Social Movements in Rural India. *Learning from the Ground Up*, 193–210. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230112650_12
- Raj Silwal, K. (2024). Shifting Dynamics: Modernization and Its Impact on Dalit Occupations. *DMC Journal*, 9(8), 123–134. <https://doi.org/10.3126/DMCJ.V9I8.74891>
- Shahid, M. (2015). Manual Scavenging: Issues of Caste, Culture and Violence. *Social Change*, 45(2), 242–255.
- Sikka, S. (2012). Untouchable cultures: Memory, power and the construction of Dalit selfhood. *Identities*, 19(1), 43–60.
- Singh, H. (2024). Affirmative Action and Its Limits: Reassessing Dalit Rights in Contemporary India. *International Journal of Advanced Research and Multidisciplinary Trends (IJARMT)*, 1(2), 463–477. <https://www.ijarmt.com/index.php/j/article/view/501>
- Svensson, T. (2018). Pollution and purity: Caste-based discrimination and the mobilisation of Dalit sameness. *The Politics of Identity*, 180–198. <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526110268.00020>
- Tileagă, C. (2007). Ideologies of moral exclusion: A critical discursive reframing of depersonalization, delegitimization and dehumanization. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 46(4), 717–737.
- Verma, V. (2019). A Crisis of Representation: Interests, Identities and Politics. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies*, 5(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2394481119849289>