Abstract
In the context of modern global changes, the issue of social justice, social welfare and thereby the assurance of well-being of humans are the primary concerns of the world in general; and in Indian society in particular. These issues demand for review of principles of social justice, human rights, and strategies for social change and equality for social welfare. Endeavours to achieve justice and equality in the society are the prime focuses and education plays crucial role to achieve them. Therefore, education is the essential element for the assurance of development socially and economically. It is the instrument for achieving equality and social justice in the social, political, economic and cultural spheres. Indian society is known for diversity and complexity based on social inequality and hierarchy drawing from religion and caste system. Majority of the Indian sections of communities have been traditionally, historically deprived of socio-economic opportunities and educational rights. Prominent among these sections of the society are the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). However; reaching up to the higher pedestal of education is full of social, cultural and personal difficulties for the students of SCs, STs and OBCs particularly coming from rural and poor socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore it is pertinent to analyse the perceived and experienced discrimination because of differential caste and socio-economic backgrounds among the students of higher education and its consequential effects on mental health and well being of students. Hence; in the contemporary Indian scenario, the issue of caste based discrimination and its affinity with mental health problems is significant to analyse to capture the dynamics and functioning of social structures fabricated with the psychological feelings and well being of person.

Rationale:
Globally; discrimination based on race, gender and ethnicity is well studied phenomena with its implications on human development and well being. However, caste based discrimination is a phenomenon of the Indian society because of its socially hierarchical structure. Unequal distributions of social, economic, educational and political status are determined by castes hierarchies. Although; national level literature based on social issues implicitly deals with the issue of caste based discrimination and its impact on
societal developments; yet gaps exist in the literature relating to caste based discrimination in higher education and its impact on educational attainments and mental health. Considering our society with majority of youth population; and a chunk of that are pursuing higher education. Higher education system is part and parcel of larger society and presumed to be discrimination free which is prevalent at large in the society but in the higher educational institutions, there are strong probabilities to be discriminated on the basis of caste and to have its consequences on health and mental health. Therefore, it was proposed to select purposely the students pursuing higher education for this study and to explore their overall stress and mental health related problems caused due to discrimination.

The students pursuing higher education were proposed to be covered in the present study from the universities in the northern state of India- Uttar Pradesh (U.P.), which is highly prone to caste identity and orthodoxy with socio-economic backwardness. Also, the state of U.P. is selected because of its low (0.490) Human Development Index (HDI) in comparison to several other states of this country (Meghalaya report on HDI 2008) and of its high population with strong practice of discrimination based on caste and community. Therefore the attempt is made to conceptualize discrimination and mental health in Indian context among student population with more emphasis on the research questions that are- what are the demographic and socio-economic background factors along with one’s caste which determine the appraisal of discrimination in educational settings with its consequences on mental health? What are the common appraisal of psychological, physical and health behavioural problems of students in higher education induced by various stressors? Are there any underlying factors / patterns which determine the appraisal of such problems? What are the patterns of reported health problems of students belonging to different communities, different universities and different courses? Therefore, attempt has been made to answer these questions through this empirical exploration.
Objectives:

The broad objective of the study is to explore and analyse the issue of discrimination based on caste during higher education along with its consequential impact on the mental health of students. The specific objectives of study are given below-

1. To prepare the socio-demographic profile of students
2. To explore and analyze the experiences and perceptions of discrimination among students along with its consequences on mental health.
3. To assess the stress, depression and anxiety level among students due to discrimination in higher education and examine co-relation with their socio-demographic background.
4. To reveal the degree of differential effects based on educational institutions, courses of study and social discrimination, on their stress and mental health related problems.

Variables:

Independent Variables- Social Discrimination, Socio-Demographic profile

Dependent Variables- Stress and Mental Health

Methodology:

Here the attempt is made to understand the nature of caste based discrimination in educational institutions among students pursuing higher education and its implications on the mental health and well-being. Therefore, the study is based on the ‘Cross-Sectional-Correlation’ design. In addition, the qualitative approach is also adopted to explore thematic association of discrimination with mental health consequences.

For the research purpose, region specific four universities of U.P. are selected. These four universities have been covered to get appropriate representative sample where discrimination issues and students number is relatively high. Method for selection of sample is Multi-stage Stratified-Systematic sampling because regional specific four universities are selected, then within each university Undergraduate (U.G.) and Post-graduate (P.G.) students from final year of study are selected. Again course-wise
undergraduate category are stratified into three groups that are B.A., B.Sc. and B.Com, similarly post-graduate category stratified into M.A., M.Sc. and M.Com. Within each course to get statistical representative number, 30 students (without any biasness towards their health) are selected systematically. Thus the proposed total sample was- $4 \times 6 \times 30$ students = 720 students. Hence from each university systematically 180 students have been surveyed and studied about their stress and related mental health problems. Therefore the sample size is n=720. Due care was taken so that the students from each community that is – SC, OBC and General have been included in the sample. Thus again the total number of students from each course have been sub-divided into 10 from SC, 10 from OBC and 10 from General category. In addition, 35 students have been interviewed in-depth and of them; 80 percent (28) are male and 20 percent (7) are female.

The questionnaire contains the tools of data collection which are standardised scales and inventories. For the assessment of stress level, the ‘stress checklist’ is used and for discrimination, the ‘perceived discrimination scale for student’ is used. Similarly to assess anxiety and depression level the ‘Beck anxiety inventory’ and ‘Beck depression inventory’ are used. These scales and inventories are validated in Indian context for the students’ population. These are highly reliable and valid tools for the assessment of attribute which they are intended to measure. Interview guide is the tool for qualitative data which is designed carefully and pretested.

Quantitative data analysis is done with the help of SPSS and advanced statistical analysis (regression analysis) is computed to capture the trends and patterns of discrimination and mental health consequences affected by several social and economic factors. The thematic analysis is done for qualitative data which is yielded insightful association between discrimination and mental health of students pursuing higher education.
Findings:
In the process of attainment of high school and intermediate education, certain insightful patterns have emerged that majority of SC and OBC students pursued their education from rural based schools, primarily managed by government and in Hindi medium whereas from the beginning the majority of general category students completed their education from urban based schools managed by private entrepreneurs and through English medium. This is a clear disparity of caste and accessibility to the quality education.

There is a specific pattern between academic performance and caste. It is found that in the academic performance from primary to graduation level, the students of SC and OBC community scored lower percentage of marks at every examination whereas general category students scored good and higher marks. Average academic performance is associated with majority of SC and OBC students while high and good performance is associated with general category students. Therefore this pattern suggests that in general, at every level, the poor performance in academic is associated with the lower caste students whereas higher performance is associated with the upper caste students.

The monthly income of the family is significantly negatively correlated with the perception of discrimination which suggests that lower the income of the family, the higher the perception of discrimination during higher education and vice-versa. However a greater amount of variance in the discrimination perception is explained by the monthly income of the family, caste, affiliation to rural background and specific occupation of father. In other words these factors are more responsible for the discrimination perception among the students while pursuing higher education. In addition it has been found that it is the discrimination perception which is significantly responsible for the appraisal of anxiety, stress and depression because explained variance of discrimination perception is always true and significant for predicting these mental health related problems. Hence it is proved that there are mental health related problems among the students due to discrimination during higher education.
It is found that based on caste, the practice of untouchability to some extent is revealed, and segregation and isolation at special occasions are found prevalent till today in the educational settings but more in subtle forms, which are equally debilitating and distraction for category students.

Because lower caste status, students usually belong to poor socio-economic backgrounds and therefore most of them very often, experienced financial problems to afford basic necessities of academics and lost several opportunities for future prospects during their studies. Most of them experienced English language and communication problems due to which they found themselves lagging behind other students and felt discriminated.

It is also revealed that English language problems have emerged as the key factor in the perception of discrimination as well as experiences of discrimination. It has a dual role to play in the discrimination- first the individual does not know it properly and therefore feel inferior to others, and secondly, individual believes that because of English language one is performing poorly in education. It also appears from the analysis that coming from the rural and the Hindi medium background, majority of the students have some personality drawback. These drawbacks are seen in terms of poor English language, poor communication skills, low level of confidence, low level of awareness and rustic mannerism which make them feel discriminated in the educational settings and prevent them from taking part in academic and extra-curricular activities and force them to be isolated.

Reservation and other welfare schemes are found as the source of discrimination among the beneficiaries and also among the non-beneficiaries. Beneficiaries are intentionally targeted and are being victimized by passing sarcastic caste laden comments because of availing these benefits. Non-beneficiaries feel discriminated because of deprived feelings of non-availability and jealousy from intentional support of government targeted to educationally and socially backward students.

In educational situations, the interactions between students and teachers are very relevant. It is the teacher’s behaviour which can facilitate or inhibit the learning process of students. In this study majority of respondents experienced both subtle and open
discrimination by teachers especially by upper caste teachers. Majority of lower caste students have experienced discrimination by teachers in the forms of biased grading, sarcastic caste based comments, partiality in good opportunities and biased behaviour towards them. It is true that the trivial to intentional discrimination by teachers pushed students to realize the caste based stigma attached to them along with mental pressure, apprehensions, anxiety and distrust towards the teachers, which in turn lowered down the educational performance and achievements.

It appears that in the educational settings, the behaviour of fellow students and peers give the strength and social support. However, most of the times discriminatory attitude or behaviour shown towards the category students, in the form of sarcastic comments, living style and domination in class and hostels are the most frequent incidences, which make lower caste students feel discriminated. Further, those who have experienced discrimination have also experienced tension, frustration, depression, nostalgic feelings, obsessive recurring thoughts, anxiety, distortion of self-esteem and self-identity with a higher threat to mental health.

The impact of caste based discrimination is seen in poor academic achievements and performances along with psychological upheavals. Majority of lower caste students scored poor marks and most of them have emotional problems such as tension, frustration, isolation, depression, mental block, humiliation, inferiority feelings and distortion of self-identity and self-esteem which poses threat to their mental health.

Thus, subtle forms of caste based discrimination hampering the educational performance of lower caste students especially those coming from rural, vernacular and poor socio-economic backgrounds. Although, Indian constitution has several provisions to protect all kinds of discrimination but caste based subtle forms of discrimination is prevalent today and endangering the principles of social justice and equality in the democratic society.