

Social-Justice Character among College Students in the context of their Socio-Cultural Background (Religious, Educational, Caste, Socio-Economic, Residential and Gender Background)

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Abstract: The concept of social justice is intrinsic to the Indian Constitution and aims at providing equality, dignity, and equal opportunities to all citizens irrespective of their caste, religion, gender, socio-economic background or the objects of their choice of residence. Although there are constitutional protections, institutionalized social injustices keep affecting the lives and attitudes of students in their course of education. The paper will discuss social justice and how social-cultural elements such as religious, educational, caste, socio-economic, residential and gender backgrounds influence the social-justice nature of Indian college students. It also looks into the concerned literature, provides national statistics on any kind of social inequalities, barriers against Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and even women and also analyses the provisions brought forward in the constitution aimed at ensuring equality and inclusiveness. The conclusion of the paper is that higher education institutions and government policies are critical in promoting the value of social-justice, minimizing discrimination, and creating socially responsible citizens who will become part of a full, inclusive, democratic, and just society.

Keywords: Social Justice; College Students; Socio-Cultural Background; Gender Equality; Caste; Religious Diversity; Constitutional Rights; Educational Equity.

How to cite this article: Verma AK, Upadhyay SK. Social-Justice Character among College Students in the context of their Socio-Cultural Background (Religious, Educational, Caste, Socio-Economic, Residential and Gender Background). Int J Drug Deliv Technol. 2026;16(70s): 1106-1114. DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.70s.117

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Social justice is the cornerstone concept that aims at creating a community where all people have equal rights, opportunities, dignity and fair access to resources irrespective of caste, religion, gender, socio-economic status, level of education or residence among others. It seeks to eliminate inequality in the distribution of social, economic and political opportunities as well as historical inequality and institutional discrimination [1]. The issue of social justice in the Indian context is especially important due to such a high level of cultural, religious, linguistic, and social diversity of the country. In spite of the constitutional provisions regarding the equality, caste, gender, religious, and economic based disparities still affect access to education, employment, healthcare, and social participation. Colleges and universities in promoting democratic concepts, critical thinking, tolerance, and civic responsibility among the youth are very important. Colleges and universities are the places where students with different socio-cultural backgrounds can meet, exchange their ideas and attain attitudes about equality and inclusion [2]. These experiences play an important role in developing social-justice character in a student, which includes values recognition of diversity, empathy, fairness, devotion to human rights.

The socio-cultural background of students greatly influences their perceptions and attitudes towards social justice. Religious principles might influence ethical norms and interconfessional knowledge, with the caste and socio-economic status factors potentially influencing privilege or discrimination [3]. Awareness of constitutional rights and democratic principles is dependent on educational background (in contrast to rural or urban), access to educational resources and exposure to multiple views. Equally, gender is significant in determining equality, discrimination, and involvement in the society. It is imperative to understand the effects of such socio-cultural variables on the social-justice nature of college students to enhance inclusive education and a socially responsible generation.

1.2 Objectives

The aims of this paper are:

- To explain the concept and meaning of social justice.
- To get an insight into the meaning of having social-justice character among college students.
- To investigate socio-cultural variables, such as religion, caste, gender, educational, residential, and socio-economic backgrounds on student attitudes towards social justice.

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- To examine prevalence and form of discrimination of disadvantaged groups in India.
- To speak about the constitutional provisions and legal protections that already encourage social justice and equality.

II. MEANING AND CONCEPT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

2.1 Definition of Social Justice

Social justice is the establishment of a fair and equitable society in which everybody has equal rights, opportunities and access to the resources irrespective of caste, religion, gender and socio-economic status. It is more than the equality created by the law but seeks to rectify structural inequalities and inclusion.

Social justice as fairness was an identity proposed by John Rawls (1971), who formulated that inequalities can only be justified when they enhance the status of the least privileged. In the Capability Approach, Amartya Sen (2009) focused on increasing the capabilities of people to attain education, health, dignity, and meaningful involvement in the society [4]. Social justice to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was the removal of caste discrimination and social oppression by removing inequality, liberty, fraternity and constitutional protection. On the same note, the United Nations considers social justice to be the provision of equal opportunities, human rights, inclusion, and sustainable development to everyone [5].

2.2 Principles of Social Justice

To build social justice, there are a number of principles on which it is based. Equality provides equal opportunity before the court of law and equity acknowledges that certain deprived groups might need extra effort to acquire equitable results. It also fosters human dignity, involvement in social and political life, non-discrimination, equality in accessing education and social inclusion [6]. Combined, the principles form a society with diversity held in high regard, and all people given a chance to thrive.

2.3 Importance of Social Justice

Sustainable development, democracy and national development require that social justice be established. It assists in decreasing poverty, inequality, and social exclusion as well as enhancing equal access to education, healthcare, and jobs. With less discrimination and more respect, a just society is socially strong because it enhances peace, social harmony and trust of the people [7]. It also helps in economic growth whereby all citizens have an opportunity to explore their talents and lead constructive lives in the society. Finally, social justice enhances human development through safeguarding of dignity, increased opportunities, and inclusive and responsible citizenship.

III. MEANING OF SOCIAL-JUSTICE CHARACTER

Social-justice character The term social-justice character defines a set of values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours that encourage people to enhance equity, equality, respect and inclusion in the society. It depicts the reservation of an individual to embrace human dignity, to resist discrimination and protect equal opportunity to every individual irrespective of their caste, religion, gender, socio-economic status, disability, or cultural background [8]. Social-justice character among those in college is expressed in the form of respectful relationships, responsible citizenship, making ethical decisions, and also in participating directly in establishing inclusive educational spaces. The social-justice character has strong attributes that are composed of a few features. Diversity respect will help students learn to value differences in culture, language, religion, and identity and abandon prejudice and stereotypes. Empathy enables them to be able to empathize and act in a way that is compassionate to the plights and problems of the disadvantaged group. Inclusiveness promotes acceptance and participation of diverse individuals in educational and other social contexts equally [9]. Gender sensitivity fosters equality, defies gender stereotypes, and empowers women. Due respect to constitutional principles, such as equality, liberty, fraternity, secularism and justice reinforce democratic citizenship. Civic responsibility encourages students to make a difference in the society through community work and social service. Ethical behaviour enhances honesty, integrity, fairness and accountability in personal and professional relationships [10]. Lastly, human rights awareness will promote students to respect and advocate the rights and dignity of every person.

Social institutions have a significant impact on the formation of social-justice character. The initial place where fairness, cooperation, and respect values are taught to the children is within the family. The school is a source of formal learning about citizenship, equality, and democracy and promotes the learning of diverse students in a collaborative manner [11]. Colleges and universities further reinforce these values through encouragement of critical thinking, intercultural dialogue, involvement, and consciousness of constitutional rights. Students can be influenced by the local cultural norms and traditions, social interactions within the community that shapes the attitude towards diversity and inclusion. Media, both digital and social, have an important impact on the masses opinion when it creates awareness of social inequalities, discrimination, or human rights, but can be misused as well, thus promoting stereotypes. Religion circumscribes the moral values in the form of

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compassion, service, justice, and respect to the human beings but may be interpreted differently by different communities [12]. All these institutions together form a part of what students believe and their attitudes and behaviours, whether they grow to be an inclusive and socially responsible person with a character to add to building a more equitable and democratic society.

IV. SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF INDIAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

India is a culturally diverse nation where religion, caste, gender, socio-economic status, educational background and place of residence influence the values of students, their attitudes and opportunities. These socio-cultural indicators affect the ways college students understand equality, diversity, inclusion, and social justice. Higher education offers chances of intermingling among students with diverse backgrounds that enable them to attain democratic values and social-justice character [13].

4.1 Religious Background

Several religions exist in India which are- Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism. This is diversity that promotes cross culture and cross understanding between the students. Many times, religious values instill feelings of compassion, tolerance, honesty, and respect toward others. Nevertheless, prejudice and stereotypes might be the results of communal strains or lack of exposure to other religions [14]. Colleges do a great thing by advancing the ideologies of secularism, interdensity, and cultural diversity in a respectful way.

4.2 Educational Background

College students belong to both government and non-government schools, rural and urban education systems. Such differences influence academic readiness, spoken communication and confidence and social concern awareness. Government schools usually have students whose economic background is weak whereas the infrastructure and digital facilities are better in the private schools [15]. Experiences in education that foster critical thinking, civic dedication and constitutional ethics assist students to grow in understanding of equality and social justice.

4.3 Caste Background

Even with the constitutional protection, the historical caste system is still involved in educational opportunities and social interactions. Students fall under the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC) and the General category. Reservation policies, scholarships and financial aid have enhanced access to education by the underprivileged groups. However, social stigmas and caste discrimination continue to impact the lives of certain students in terms of academic experiences and identities. Inclusive educational set ups aid to lessen bias and enhance societal assimilation [16].

4.4 Socio-Economic Background

There is a lot of impact on the education opportunities of students based on the family income, education of parents, and occupation. Those with high-income families tend to enjoy high-quality schools, electronic technology, counseling, and educational materials. Conversely, students with low economic status do not have access to material needs and academic resources [17]. The digital divide is also a result of socio-economic inequality with limited access to online education and, consequently, academic achievement and social mobility.

4.5 Residential Background

Living areas affect the educational life of students. Students located in urban areas tend to enjoy more infrastructure, the internet, libraries and educational facilities. Rural education may be characterized by a lack of access to good schools, technology, transportation, and learning opportunities. Such inequalities impact on academic achievement and access to higher education [18]. Increasing digital infrastructure and educational services can decrease rural-urban disparities and lead to equal access to education.

4.6 Gender Background

Gender plays an important role in influencing the educational experiences and involvement of students. Despite the growth in the number of females in higher education, there are still obstacles to female enrolment in learning institutions due to gender stereotypes, security concerns, leadership roles, and advancement in career. Educational and occupational decisions are still affected by patriarchal attitudes within certain communities [19]. Colleges enhance gender equality by organizing awareness campaigns, anti-discrimination laws and empowering women. Promoting equal engagement and gender stereotypes that challenge are ways of raising socially responsible students who appreciate inclusion, equality and human rights considerations.

V. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

5.1 Studies on Social Justice

Social justice is a concept that has received a lot of research in order to foster equality, inclusion and democratic participation in education. According to Rawls (1971), the theory of justice is founded on fairness in which the social and economic inequalities must be justified in cases where they favor the least privileged members of the society. His theory has had a profound impact on educational policies to provide equal opportunities to all students. Freire (1970) pointed out that learners should be educated to be able to critically analyze the social inequalities in the society besides being the ones who contribute to change in the society [20]. Freire defines social justice education as one that promotes critical consciousness,

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dialogue and collective responsibility. On the same note, Bell (2016) proposed that social justice education establishes awareness among students on privilege, discrimination, and systemic inequalities and ensures inclusive learning opportunities. Similar remarks were made by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2021) which emphasizes that equitable and inclusive quality education is what sustainable development and minimization of social inequalities are [21].

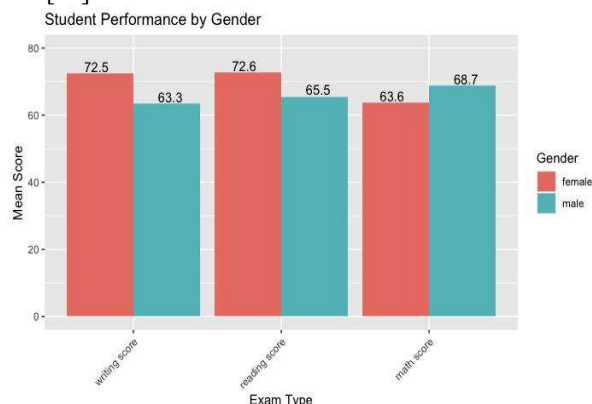


Figure 1: “Comparison of Mean Justice Character Scores by Gender”

5.2 Studies on College Students

The impact of higher education on the attitude and value of students towards social justice has been explored by a number of researchers. Astin (1993) discovered that higher education experience can give students a better sense of civic responsibility, ethical decision-making as well as appreciation of diversity by exposing them to students of diverse cultural backgrounds. According to Gurin et al. (2002), engaging students in diverse educational settings enhances critical thinking, democracy, and understanding across groups in universities. A study carried out on higher educational institutions in India has also revealed the same, i.e. students who are subjected to multicultural classrooms show increased acceptance of diversity and empathy as well as respect of constitutional values [22]. But research also shows that the attitude of students towards equality is still affected by the background of their families, culture and any experience in their early education.

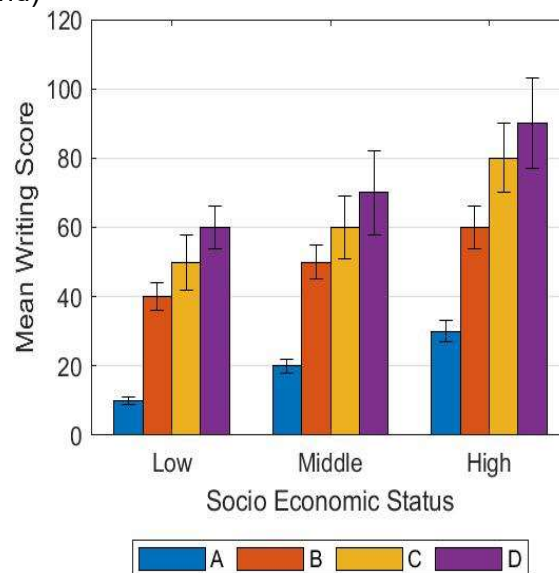


Figure 2: “Justice Character Scores Across Different Socio-Economic Backgrounds”

5.3 Studies on Caste and Gender

Studies always show that caste and gender play a significant role in determining the educational experiences in India. Ambedkar (1936) had claimed that the caste system institutionalised inequality by limiting educational and social mobility amongst the marginalised communities. Through more recent research by Thorat and Newman (2010), there was observed evidence of caste based discrimination in higher education and employment although it had constitutional protection as well as reservation policies [23]. Scholars have also noted that reservation has greatly enhanced educational opportunities to the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) even as the realities of social stigma and prejudice against students still prevail.

Similar studies conducted under gender have also indicated that there are ongoing disparities in educational involvement, leadership, job opportunities, and security of the individual. Research has shown that gender stereotypes as well as patriarchal values and unequal household roles still affect aspiration to study and advance careers of the female students even as enrolment levels rise.

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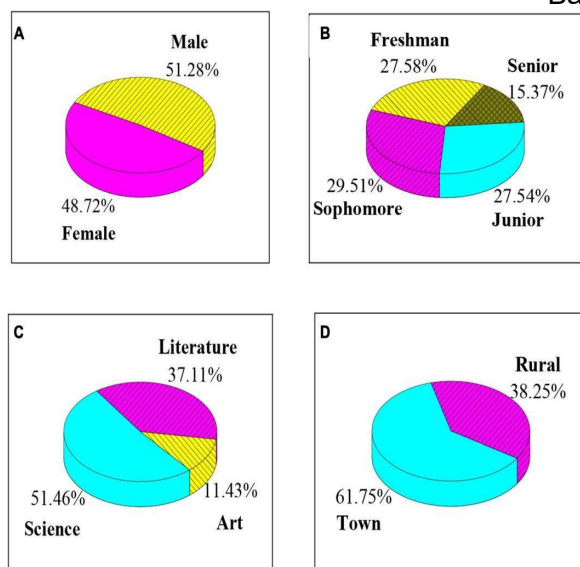


Figure 3: “Distribution of Participants According to Socio-Cultural Background”

5.4 Studies on Socio-Economic Background

One of the most powerful predictors of educational attainment and social orientations has been discovered to be the socio-economic background. A study conducted by Bourdieu (1986) showed that families with more economic and cultural-social capital accord their children greater educational advantages that lead to educational success [24]. The Indian studies also indicated that parental education, family income, and occupation are important factors that impact the access to high-quality education, digital technologies, coaching facilities, and career opportunities of students. Economically disadvantaged students usually have barriers to access, digital inequality and lower access to education and this may impact their social justice and civic engagement awareness [25].

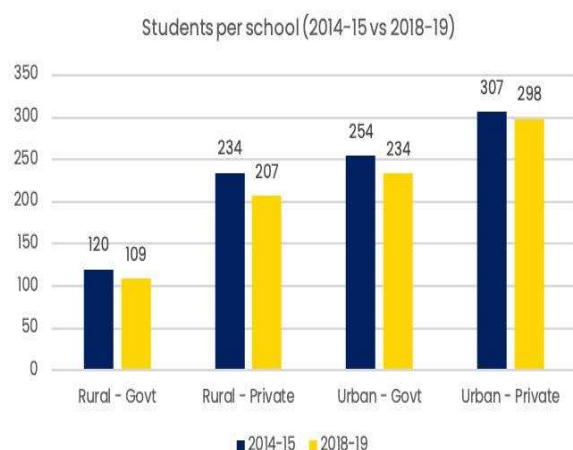


Figure 4: “Comparison of Justice Character by Educational and Residential Background”

Research Gap

There is a lot of literature on individual aspects of social justice, such as caste discrimination, gender inequality, socio-economic disparities, inclusive education, and gender inequality. Nevertheless, limited studies have been done to examine the effectiveness of several socio-cultural variables, such as religion, caste, gender, educational status, residential address as well as socio-economic status, in knowledge jointly leading to the emergence of social-justice character in Indian college students [26]. The majority of the past studies have concentrated on education access or discrimination alone instead of looking at how these different socio-cultural factors relate to each other and determine the values, attitudes, empathy and commitment with respect to equality among students. Thus, more studies are needed to create a generalized view of the effects of socio-cultural diversity on the social-justice nature of college students in modern India.

VI. DATA RELATED TO SOCIAL INJUSTICE IN INDIA

As seen in the recent national statistics, despite a huge progress in education and social development, the inequalities that occur within the country in terms of caste, gender, and socio-economic status persist.

Table 1. Literacy Rate by Social Group (Approximate National Estimates)

Social Group	Literacy Rate (%)
General	80.9
OBC	73.5
SC	71.2
ST	59.0

The table demonstrates that the levels of literacy amongst Scheduled Castes (SCs) and especially Scheduled Tribes (STs) is lower than the General category, which reflects the existing educational inequalities.

Table 2. Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education

Category	GER (%)
Overall	28.4

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Male	28.3
Female	28.5

The statistics show that women have begun to enter higher education institutions in equal or even higher numbers. But regional and socio-economic differences still exist in enrollment.

Table 3. Female Gross Enrolment Ratio in Higher Education

Year	Female GER (%)
2017–18	25.4
2019–20	27.3
2021–22	28.5

The percentage of female enrolment has been on the rise and is a good showing of the effects of government efforts of encouraging girls to attend school and empower women.

Table 4. Registered Crimes Against SCs and STs

Category	Reported Cases (2022)
Crimes against SCs	57,582
Crimes against STs	10,064

Nevertheless, even with legal protection, a significant portion of crimes is still reported against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and serves as evidence of the ongoing social discrimination and violence.

Table 5. Average Monthly Earnings (Illustrating Gender Wage Gap)

Gender	Average Monthly Earnings (₹)
Male	Higher
Female	Lower

Regular findings of PLFS have revealed that women are generally paid less than men in most industries and this depicts that gender inequality is still an issue in the labour market in spite of the rising education levels.

On the whole, these indicators provide evidence that the educational participation in India has increased significantly, especially among women. However, there are still great inequalities in literacy, educational achievement, employment rates and anti-discrimination coverage which underscores the importance of pursuing policy measures that could facilitate social justice and equal opportunities.

VII. DISCRIMINATION AGAINST SC/STs AND WOMEN IN INDIA

7.1 Discrimination Against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes

In spite of the constitutional provisions, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are still socially marginalized and found to be the victims of discrimination in India. Traditionally, cases like untouchability limited access to education, employment and state facilities. The social implications of untouchability have been experienced in most societies despite the abolishment of Article 17. Students of SC, ST backgrounds tend to encounter unequal opportunities in the field of education, financial resources, and discrimination due to caste [27]. Policies of reservations, scholarships applied to education have facilitated access to education, and employment in the population but social stigma and inequitable treatment have become a problem. Though illegal, manual scavenging continues to have a disproportionately negative impact on historically marginalised groups. In line with National Crime Records Bureau (2022), it is noted that above 57000 crimes were committed against SCs, and 10000 crimes were addressed against STs, showing the persistence of the need to have law enforcement, awareness programmes, and inclusive educational practices [28].

7.2 Gender Discrimination

Although there have been great improvements over the past several decades, gender discrimination has remained a challenge to the social, educational and economic opportunity of women. Women tend to face wage disparity, discrimination at the workplace, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and reduced number in leadership roles [29]. The POSH Act, 2013 is a protective act towards sexual harassment at the workplace and the Protection of Women against Domestic Violence Act, 2005 deals with domestic abuse. Education of girls has been promoted by government programs like Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, which have questioned gender discrimination. There is also the Women Reservation bill, 2023 (Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam) to boost the political representation of women. These legal and policy

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actions have empowered gender equality, but still there is need to control, implement, create awareness and social change to help eradicate the discrimination against women and provide women with equal opportunities.

VIII. CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

The Constitution of India addresses the issue of social justice in a holistic manner as it covers the promotion of equality, protection of vulnerable groups, and the reduction of social and economic disparities. The Preamble asserts India to be a sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic republic and gives a pledge of Justice-social, economic as well as political- to all citizens. It also ensures liberty, equality and fraternity, which are the pillars of an inclusive society. Social justice constitutes the Fundamental Rights of the Constitution which reinforces it in a number of provisions. Article 14 secures that there must be equality before the law and the laws must be equally safeguarded. Article 15 does not permit discrimination based on religion, place of birth, race, caste, sex, though it does permit special treatment of disadvantaged individuals. Article 16 ensures equality of opportunity in public employment. Article 17 does away with untouchability and outlaws all forms of untouchability. Article 21A provides free and compulsory schooling to children aged between 6-14 years. Article 23 is against human trafficking and forced labour, whereas Article 24 is against use of children that are under 14 years old in dangerous occupations [30].

Directive Principles of State Policy are what the government uses to further welfare and minimise inequalities. Article 38 guides the State to develop a social order that is founded on justice. Article 39 enhances equal livelihood and fair allocation of resources. Article 41 advocates the delivery of education and public support where there is the capacity in the State. Article 45 addresses the early childhood care and education whereas Article 46 encourages the State to seek the interests of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), as well as the rest, economically and education-wise. These aims are supplemented by several constitutional institutions such as the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC), National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST), National Commission for Women (NCW) and National Commission for Minorities (NCM). These institutions follow up on protections, research grievances as well as suggestions to improve the policy. The reservation policy also promotes social justice in India with SCs, STs, and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) being reserved in the education sector, employment within the state as well as in political representation. Although reservation has enhanced

access to education and representation of disadvantaged communities, its issues like gaps in implementation, social stigmatization, and inclusion controversies need close attention to policy.

IX. CONCLUSION

Social justice will form the core of developing a democratic, inclusive, and equitable society where all people have equal rights, dignity, and opportunities. This paper has demonstrated that socio-cultural variables including religion, caste, gender, educational background, socio-economic status and residence significantly determine the social-justice character of college students. These are what affect the attitude of students towards equality, diversity and civic responsibility. Colleges and universities have a significant role to develop respect towards diversity, critical thinking, empathy, and constitutional values by teaching and practicing inclusivity in campuses. At the same time, government policies and constitutional protections should still aim to mitigate discrimination and educational inequalities as well as socio-economic inequalities experienced by marginalized populations. The enhancement of social-justice character amongst the college students is the key towards developing responsible citizens who are sensitive to the value of equality, human rights and the existence of harmony in the society. With suitable encouragement of inclusive education and proper implementation of provisions in the constitution, India can have a generation that can help in sustainable national development and a more just and united society.

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