

Emotionally Injured Masculinities: An Ambedkarite Emotional Justice Framework for Marginalized Young Men in Rural Maharashtra

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Abstract: Caste-based discrimination, economic deprivation, digital exclusion, and patriarchal norms profoundly affect the emotional well-being of marginalized young men in rural India, producing what this study terms “emotionally injured masculinities.” This research investigates how structural inequalities shape the affective lives of male youth in Akola, Maharashtra, through an Ambedkarite emotional justice framework and identifies key domains of emotional injury that constrain social mobility and dignity. Using a qualitative design, 42 purposively selected participants from Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and OBC communities were interviewed in-depth. Data were transcribed, coded, and thematically analysed, integrating participant narratives with national datasets to contextualize local experiences within broader structural patterns. Findings reveal seven interrelated domains of emotional injury: educational disempowerment (83%), joblessness with emotional withdrawal (64%), hidden mental distress (74%), emotional policing via caste boundaries (38%), digital identity conflict and aspirational anxiety (69%), substance use as coping (45%), and emotional suppression through gender norms (90%). These injuries form a reinforcing web that sustains emotional harm and limits social mobility. The study underscores the urgent need for integrated interventions addressing material deprivation and cultural norms, promoting safe spaces for emotional expression, and advancing emotional dignity as a democratic right grounded in Ambedkarite ethics.

Keywords: Ambedkarite ethics, Masculinity, Caste, Emotional justice, Mental health, Caste hierarchy

I. Introduction

India’s national discourse often frames its demographic composition as a youth dividend, a potential catalyst for rapid economic growth and social transformation [1]. Policymakers and development strategists frequently assert that the presence of over

365 million youth, defined by the United Nations as those between 15 and 24 years of age, offers unprecedented opportunities for innovation, productivity, and global competitiveness [2]. However, this optimistic narrative obscures the stark inequalities that fracture the lived experiences of young people, especially those located at the intersections of caste, class, religion, and rural marginality.

In regions like Akola district in Maharashtra's Vidarbha region, the promise of youth as an asset to the nation is mediated by what B. R. Ambedkar described as graded inequality: a deeply entrenched social hierarchy in which caste-based divisions not only determine material access but also shape the legitimacy of emotional expression, self-worth, and public participation [3]. For many young men from Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and Other Backward Class (OBC) backgrounds, "youth" is not experienced as a stage of open opportunity but as a prolonged negotiation with systemic exclusion. These exclusions manifest in multiple domains such as educational marginalization, unemployment or underemployment, precarious economic livelihoods, digital exclusion, and emotional policing through caste boundaries, all of which accumulate to produce what this study terms emotionally injured masculinities.

The phrase "emotionally injured masculinities" is used here to denote the patterned affective consequences of systemic exclusion on marginalized male youth. This includes recurrent experiences of shame, anxiety, emotional withdrawal, numbness, and substance-based coping mechanisms. These emotional states are not incidental or purely individual but rather structured outcomes of enduring social inequalities, as described in both Connell's work on subordinated masculinities and in emerging scholarship on emotional justice [4,5,6].

The contemporary socio-economic landscape adds further complexity. India's youth unemployment rate for the 15–29 age group stood at approximately 10.2% in 2023–24 according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) [7]. National Mental Health Survey (NMHS) data highlight a large treatment gap for common mental disorders, compounded by stigma, infrastructural inadequacy, and cultural barriers to seeking help [8]. Simultaneously, the rapid expansion of digital media access has created new forms of aspirational anxiety, especially for rural youth with inconsistent internet access and limited means to participate in the visual economy of social media [9].

Against this backdrop, Akola offers a critical lens through which to understand the entanglement of caste, masculinity, and emotional well-being. The district is characterized by high rural poverty, substantial populations from Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and minority religious communities, and persistent gaps in employment generation. These conditions, as the present study's qualitative data reveal, generate distinct patterns of emotional injury among male youth, which in turn influence their capacity to engage in education, labour markets, civic participation, and personal relationships.

This research is grounded in an Ambedkarite epistemology, one that recognizes caste as a central organizing principle of Indian society and insists on reading emotional life as a political domain. By bringing together field-based qualitative data from 42 young men in Akola with national datasets on employment, mental health, and digital access, the study bridges micro-level lived experience with macro-level structural indicators. In doing so, it advances three central arguments:

- Emotional injuries among marginalized male youth are systemic: They are not the result of isolated personal failings but rather the predictable outcomes of caste-stratified education, labour markets, and social relations.
- Masculinity must be analysed intersectionally: Connell's framework of masculinities, when read alongside Ambedkar's concept of graded inequality, illuminates how hegemonic ideals of manhood are systematically denied to certain caste locations, producing subordinated masculinities marked by emotional repression and injury [4].
- Policy frameworks must integrate emotional justice — Structural interventions (jobs, education reform, healthcare) must be accompanied by cultural and institutional shifts that recognize emotions as legitimate sites of political concern and democratic repair [5].

The concept of emotional justice used in this study aligns with Ahmed's assertion that emotions are not private, internal states but are produced in and through social relations of power [5]. This framework reframes healing not as an individual's responsibility but as a collective, structural, and cultural project

II. Literature Review

Understanding emotionally injured masculinities in the context of Akola requires engaging with multiple, intersecting bodies of scholarship: theories of masculinity, the sociology of caste, the social determinants of mental health, digital cultures, and frameworks for emotional justice. Each of these literatures offers insights into how structural inequalities shape emotional life, yet they are rarely brought into sustained conversation.

Masculinity, Hierarchy, and the Affective Turn

Connell's theory of masculinities remains foundational in gender studies, distinguishing between hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, and marginalized masculinities [4]. Hegemonic masculinity represents the culturally exalted form that legitimates male dominance and subordination of women, as well as other men perceived as "less masculine." This form is historically contingent, constantly negotiated, and materially sustained through institutions such as the labour market, education, and the media [10].

In the Indian context, masculinity is refracted through caste, religion, and regional political economies [11,12]. While Connell's original framework was developed in Western settings, Indian scholars have extended it to show how caste hierarchies produce distinctive subordinated masculinities, particularly among Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and other marginalized groups [13,14]. Here, masculinity is not only about gender relations but also about navigating entrenched caste power structures that dictate access to status, resources, and even the right to embody certain physical or emotional expressions.

The "affective turn" in gender and cultural studies adds a crucial dimension: emotions are not private, internal states but socially and politically produced [5,15]. Masculinity, in this view, is not only a set of practices but also an emotional repertoire, one that is policed, cultivated, or denied based on social position. For subordinated caste masculinities, this repertoire is often marked by enforced emotional restraint, the suppression of vulnerability, and the internalization of humiliation.

Caste and Emotional Segregation

Caste has long been recognized as one of the most pervasive systems of social stratification in the world [16,17]. While economic and political inequalities are well-documented, scholars have emphasized that caste also operates in the emotional domain [18,19]. It regulates who may express anger publicly without repercussion, whose grief is collectively acknowledged, and whose aspirations are deemed legitimate.

Ambedkar's concept of graded inequality provides an analytical anchor for understanding this affective dimension [3]. Unlike a simple binary of privileged and oppressed, graded inequality produces layered hierarchies in which each caste location maintains some advantage over those below it while remaining vulnerable to those above. This structure generates what could be termed "emotional segregation": a system in which emotional expression is stratified alongside material and political power.

Empirical studies of Dalit experiences of humiliation in educational settings illustrate how caste-based slights, whether overt or covert, produce deep and lasting emotional injury [20,21]. This injury is often unacknowledged by dominant groups, reinforcing its persistence.

Social Determinants of Mental Health and Youth

The World Health Organization recognizes social determinants, including income inequality, education, employment conditions, and discrimination, as critical to mental health outcomes [22]. The National Mental Health Survey of India found that common mental disorders have a significant prevalence in the population, yet

treatment gaps remain substantial, particularly in rural and marginalized communities [8].

For youth, the burden of mental distress is shaped by the transition from education to the labour market. India's PLFS data indicate that unemployment rates among 15–29-year-olds have hovered around 10%, with underemployment and informal work being widespread [7]. Such economic precarity interacts with social stigma to discourage help-seeking for mental health concerns [23].

Studies in rural Maharashtra demonstrate that young men in particular may mask depressive symptoms through substance use, aggression, or withdrawal behaviours often misread as disinterest rather than distress [24]. The intersection of caste discrimination with mental health stigma compounds these challenges, leading to what Kleinman calls “social suffering”: distress that is simultaneously medical, social, and moral in nature [25].

Digital Aspiration, Comparison, and Identity Anxiety

The spread of affordable smartphones and mobile internet has transformed youth cultures in India. According to IAMA & Kantar, India had over 759 million active internet users by 2023, with rural users comprising nearly 54% of the base [9]. While this expansion promises new educational and economic opportunities, it also generates new forms of inequality. Device quality, data affordability, and digital literacy remain uneven, producing what Warschauer terms the “second-level digital divide”, disparities not only in access but in the ability to use digital tools effectively [26].

For marginalized young men, digital platforms are both a site of aspiration and of emotional injury. Social media environments amplify visibility of lifestyle markers that signify hegemonic masculinity. Exposure without the material means to participate can generate aspirational anxiety: a persistent sense of inadequacy triggered by social comparison. Research from other Global South contexts suggests that this anxiety can lead to both withdrawal from online spaces and overinvestment in risky consumption patterns [27].

From Trauma to Emotional Justice

While trauma studies have traditionally focused on individual psychopathology, the framework of emotional justice reframes emotional injury as a collective political concern. Ahmed argues that emotions are “sticky”: they bind individuals to social norms and histories, circulating between bodies and institutions (8). Ginwright's concept of healing-centered engagement calls for moving beyond pathology toward addressing root causes of harm, emphasizing dignity, agency, and cultural grounding [6].

In caste-affected contexts, emotional justice entails dismantling the structural conditions that produce humiliation and exclusion, while building community-based systems of care that validate marginalized experiences. Babasaheb Ambedkar's vision of social democracy with liberty, equality, and fraternity as its moral core aligns with this orientation, situating emotional well-being as integral to citizenship itself.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Although each of these literatures, masculinities, caste, mental health, digital culture, and emotional justice, offers valuable insights, there is a notable gap in empirical work that integrates them. Very few studies document how caste-structured masculinities are shaped by and contribute to emotional injury, particularly in rural or semi-urban Indian contexts. Fewer still link such analysis to actionable policy frameworks that center emotional justice.

This study addresses that gap by combining ethnographic fieldwork in Akola with secondary analysis of national datasets, situating local narratives within macro-level socio-economic trends. In doing so, it contributes both to theory by articulating emotionally injured masculinities as a distinct analytic category and to practice, by outlining interventions that respond to the political and structural roots of emotional injury.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual foundation of this study integrates three distinct but complementary strands of theory: Ambedkar's notion of graded inequality, Connell's theory of masculinities, and the emotional justice/healing justice paradigm. Together, these frameworks allow for a multi-layered reading of how caste, gender, and affect intersect in shaping the lived realities of marginalized male youth in Akola, Maharashtra.

Ambedkar's Graded Inequality

B. R. Ambedkar's analysis of caste as a system of graded inequality offers a critical starting point (3). Unlike a binary system of oppressor and oppressed, graded inequality functions through a cascading hierarchy in which each caste location sustains its own privileges over those below while enduring discrimination from those above. This dynamic prevents unified resistance and reinforces the caste order.

While Ambedkar's writings are primarily concerned with political, economic, and social inequality, they also carry profound implications for understanding emotional life. Caste governs the emotional entitlements of individuals: who is allowed to express anger without sanction, whose grief is acknowledged as legitimate, and whose aspirations are met with encouragement rather than derision (4). In effect, caste functions as a form of emotional governance, shaping the permissible range of feelings for different groups.

In the Akola context, graded inequality manifests in educational spaces, workplaces, and community life. Participants in this study frequently recalled incidents in which emotional expression, whether pride in achievement or frustration at injustice, was policed through caste-based stereotypes. By applying Ambedkar's framework, we can see these moments not as isolated slights but as patterned acts that uphold a larger system of emotional domination.

Connell's Theory of Masculinities

Raewyn Connell's theory of masculinities provides a second analytical lens (5). Connell identifies four relational configurations:

- Hegemonic masculinity: The culturally exalted form associated with authority, heterosexuality, and economic provision.
- Complicit masculinities: Men who benefit from the patriarchal dividend without fully embodying the hegemonic ideal.
- Subordinate masculinities: Those positioned as inferior due to traits associated with femininity or homosexuality.
- Marginalized masculinities: Those disadvantaged due to intersecting structures such as race, class, or in the Indian case, caste.

In caste-stratified societies, hegemonic masculinity is often aligned with upper-caste norms: mastery over resources, command in public spaces, and authority in moral discourse. For Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and OBC young men, these attributes are structurally harder to attain due to educational exclusion, labour market discrimination, and social stigmatization (6,11).

Connell's framework allows us to identify these youth as simultaneously marginalized (due to caste/class) and subordinated (due to failure to meet hegemonic masculine ideals). Importantly, this subordination is not only material but also emotional: participants in this study reported suppressing vulnerability, avoiding help-seeking, and masking distress in order to avoid further loss of status within male peer hierarchies.

Emotional Justice and Healing-Centered Engagement

The third theoretical strand draws from the emotional justice and healing justice literature. Ahmed emphasizes that emotions are "sticky," circulating between bodies and institutions, binding individuals to certain social norms while alienating them from others (13). Ginwright's healing-centered engagement framework shifts the focus from individual pathology to community well-being, arguing that interventions must address the root causes of harm and affirm cultural identity as a source of resilience (18).

Applied to caste contexts, emotional justice requires dismantling the structures that produce humiliation and dehumanization while building collective capacities for dignity and recognition. This is not simply about increasing access to therapy or counselling; it involves transforming schools, workplaces, and digital spaces into environments where marginalized youth can safely express a full range of emotions without fear of social sanction.

Integrating the Frameworks: Emotionally Injured Masculinities

By bringing together these three theoretical perspectives, we conceptualize emotionally injured masculinities as a structural condition rather than an individual failing. In this model, educational humiliation, unemployment, digital aspirational anxiety, and emotional policing are not random experiences but predictable outcomes of the interaction between caste hierarchy and masculine norms. The “injury” is twofold:

- **Material injury:** Exclusion from education, jobs, and resources.
- **Affective injury:** Suppression of vulnerability, internalized shame, and erosion of self-worth.

Why an Integrated Framework Matters for Policy and Practice

Most policy approaches to youth well-being in India operate in silos. Education policy may address school infrastructure without confronting caste discrimination in classrooms; mental health policy may focus on clinical services without acknowledging the role of unemployment or digital pressures in generating distress; employment schemes may ignore the ways in which joblessness erodes masculine self-worth in gendered and caste-specific ways.

An integrated conceptual framework enables a more holistic intervention design. For instance, a youth employment program informed by this model would:

- Ensure anti-discrimination safeguards in recruitment and workplace culture (3).
- Provide mentorship and role models that expand acceptable masculine identities beyond economic provision alone (5).
- Include emotional literacy and peer-support components that address shame, vulnerability, and resilience (13,18).

This synthesis underscores that addressing emotionally injured masculinities is not a niche concern but a democratic imperative. If liberty, equality, and fraternity are to be realized as lived experiences rather than constitutional abstractions, then the emotional lives of marginalized youth must be placed at the center of development planning.

III. Methodology

Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in an Ambedkarite epistemology and informed by feminist standpoint theory[1,2]. The Ambedkarite lens positions caste as the central organizing principle of Indian society and insists that research with marginalized communities must center their voices as sources of theorization rather than merely objects of study. The feminist standpoint approach reinforces this by emphasizing the epistemic advantage of marginalized groups in revealing power dynamics.

The interpretive paradigm allows for deep engagement with the subjective and affective dimensions of experience. Understanding emotionally injured masculinities requires attention to lived narratives, embodied affect, and socio-cultural contexts. This approach enabled documentation of both overt and subtle ways caste, class, religion, and gender norms shape emotional life.

Researcher Positionality

The research team comprised a senior male academic with over three decades of experience and a younger female researcher specializing in caste, gender, and rural youth issues. Their positionality shaped the study in two key ways:

- **Relational Access:** The senior researcher's standing facilitated trust-building and access across caste and religious groups.
- **Interpretive Sensitivity:** The younger researcher's gender and generational position encouraged open disclosures about emotional vulnerability.

Reflexive memos were maintained during data collection and analysis to track how researchers' identities and commitments might influence interpretation.[28]

Study Site

Fieldwork was conducted in Akola district, Vidarbha region, Maharashtra, India. The district exhibits high rural poverty, intermittent drought, and limited industrial investment, factors contributing to youth underemployment and migration. Significant Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), OBCs, and Muslim populations mark the social landscape, making it an ideal site for studying caste-structured masculinities.

Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling recruited 42 self-identified males (ages 15–30) from Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, or OBC communities, who had resided in Akola for at least five years. An additional 8 key informant interviews were conducted with educators, social workers, and NGO staff. Efforts ensured diversity in age, caste, religion, and educational

background. Table 1 summarizes the participant demographics and prevalence of key emotional injury themes.

Table 1: Participant Demographics and Reported Emotional Injury Themes (N = 42)

Variable	Number	%
Age Group		
15–19 years	14	33.3
20–24 years	16	38.1
25–30 years	12	28.6
Community Background		
Dalit	18	42.9
Adivasi	8	19.0
Muslim	10	23.8
OBC	6	14.3
Educational Status		
Currently in school/college	14	33.3
Completed secondary education	9	21.4
Completed higher secondary	8	19.0
Graduate	11	26.2
Prevalence of Emotional Injury Themes		
Educational disempowerment	35	83.3
Hidden mental distress	31	73.8
Joblessness	27	64.3
Digital identity conflict	29	69.0
Substance use as coping	19	45.2
Emotional policing through caste	16	38.1
Emotional suppression/gender conditioning	38	90.5

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected over six months in 2024 through semi-structured in-depth interviews (60–90 minutes), conducted in Marathi or Hindi. Topics included educational and employment experiences, community relationships, digital media use, mental health, and constructions of masculinity. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented by detailed field notes. Ethnographic observations took place in community settings (e.g., tea stalls, sports grounds). Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s six-phase thematic analysis approach.[29]

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to informed consent, confidentiality, and non-maleficence principles. Participants were informed of their rights, and identifying details were

anonymized. Given the emotional focus, interviews were trauma-informed: participants could skip or pause at any time, were provided with local mental health resources, and referrals were offered to a local NGO partner. The Institutional Ethics Committee approved the research protocol.

IV. Findings

Thematic analysis revealed seven interrelated domains that together constitute the anatomy of emotionally injured masculinities in Akola. These domains reinforce one another in a cyclical process that shapes the affective lives of marginalized male youth.

Educational Disempowerment (83%)

Of the 42 participants, 35 (83.3%) recounted experiences of humiliation or exclusion within educational institutions. One Dalit participant shared: “When I failed in mathematics, my teacher said, ‘What else can we expect from you people?’ ... I stopped raising my hand in class.” The online transition during the COVID-19 pandemic amplified exclusion; nearly two-thirds lacked a smartphone, reliable internet, or a quiet place to study. This domain represents both material and affective injury. National trends confirm this: the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2022) noted significant learning loss in rural Maharashtra post-pandemic, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups[30]

Joblessness and Emotional Withdrawal (64%)

Economic insecurity was the second most frequently reported theme, with 27 participants (64.3%) experiencing prolonged unemployment or underemployment. Even those with college degrees described struggling to secure stable, formal-sector jobs. A 24-year-old OBC graduate shared: “I have a degree, but I sit at home. In family meetings, I don’t speak because I am not earning. What will I say?”. Such narratives reveal the intersection of Connell’s (2005) masculinities framework, which links masculinity to economic provision, with caste-based labor market exclusion. Inability to fulfil the breadwinner role often led to social withdrawal, avoidance of community events, and reluctance to form intimate relationships.

Hidden Mental Distress and the Treatment Gap (74%)

Thirty-one participants (73.8%) described persistent symptoms consistent with anxiety, insomnia, or depressive withdrawal. Yet only four had ever sought professional help and all had discontinued after one or two sessions, citing cost, travel distance, or discomfort in opening up to a stranger. A 19-year-old Adivasi respondent reflected: “Boys are told not to cry. So I don’t. I just feel heavy in my chest, like I can’t breathe sometimes.”

The gendered stigma surrounding emotional expression is a key component of our conceptual framework, as it hinders early help-seeking. Nationally, the National

Mental Health Survey (NIMHANS, 2016) identified a treatment gap exceeding 70% for common mental disorders, especially in rural districts[8]. WHO's (2022) analysis attributes much of this gap to both infrastructural scarcity and cultural barriers to recognizing mental distress as legitimate[22].

Emotional Policing Through Caste Boundaries (38%)

Sixteen participants (38.1%) reported direct experiences of being cautioned against crossing caste boundaries in friendships, romantic relationships, or public socializing. These warnings came from both family members and community elders. One Muslim participant recalled:

"I was sitting with a girl from an upper-caste family at a college event. A teacher pulled me aside and said, 'You should know your place.' After that, I stopped talking to her."

Such interactions exemplify Ambedkar's graded inequality, where emotional and relational freedoms are distributed unequally[3]. Caste policing not only regulates marriage and intimacy but also limits the possibility of forming supportive inter-caste peer networks and further isolating marginalized youth.

Digital Identity Conflict and Aspirational Anxiety (69%)

The rapid expansion of mobile internet in rural India has brought both opportunity and tension. Twenty-nine participants (69%) expressed ambivalence about social media. While platforms like Instagram and YouTube offered entertainment and information, they also served as constant reminders of material lack. A 22-year-old Dalit respondent explained:

"I see my classmates posting bike rides, new shoes, gymselfies. I scroll, but it makes me feel small." This aspirational anxiety aligns with IAMAI & Kantar's (2024) findings that device quality and data affordability remain significant barriers for rural users[9]. For many participants, the inability to present a curated, consumption-driven online persona intensified feelings of inadequacy. From a Connell/Ahmed perspective, this domain reflects the tension between hegemonic masculine ideals (fitness, style, economic status) and the material constraints imposed by caste-stratified economies.

Substance Use as Coping (45%)

Nineteen participants (45.2%) reported using substances, most commonly Gutka (chewing tobacco), alcohol, or marijuana as a means of temporary emotional relief. Initiation often occurred in adolescence, introduced by peers. One OBC participant noted: "When I chew gutka, I forget I'm jobless. It keeps me calm." While substance use offered short-term numbing, it also created new problems: health risks, financial strain, and social stigma. From an emotional justice lens, substance use here is not simply a personal failing but an adaptive response to unaddressed emotional injury in contexts with few accessible coping alternatives.

Emotional Suppression and Gender Conditioning (90%)

The most pervasive theme, reported by 38 participants (90.5%), was the early conditioning of boys to suppress emotional expression. Messages such as “Mardkodardnahihota” (“A man does not feel pain”) and “Ladkerotenahi” (“Boys don’t cry”) were recalled from childhood. A 17-year-old Muslim participant said: “When I cried after losing my father, my uncle said, ‘Stop it. Be strong for the family.’ Since then, I cry alone.” This conditioning aligns with Connell’s observation that emotional stoicism is a core feature of hegemonic masculinity. In marginalized contexts, the pressure to perform toughness is intensified by caste-based vulnerability, where showing emotional need risks being read as weakness and exploited by others[7].

Interconnectedness of the Seven Domains

Although presented separately, these domains are mutually reinforcing. Educational disempowerment restricts access to stable employment, which exacerbates joblessness and contributes to both hidden mental distress and substance use. Digital aspirational anxiety intensifies feelings of inadequacy that are already rooted in caste-based policing and economic marginality. Emotional suppression spans all domains, hindering the expression of pain and reducing the likelihood of seeking help. This web of interlinked injuries sustains what we term emotionally injured masculinities, a condition that is both the product and the perpetuator of caste-stratified social relations.

V. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that emotionally injured masculinities in Akola arise not from isolated personal struggles but from intersecting structures of caste, gender, and economic marginality. These results confirm and extend existing scholarship on subordinated masculinities[4], caste-based humiliation[18,19], and the social determinants of mental health[22].

By situating participants’ narratives within Ambedkar’s graded inequality[3], emotional injury emerges not as a by-product but an active mechanism of caste hierarchy. Educational neglect, relationship policing, and emotional suppression work together to erode the dignity of marginalized male youth.

Educational Disempowerment as Emotional Governance

Caste functions as emotional governance by shaping young men’s identity as learners and citizens. Humiliating classroom interactions mirror Still’s findings on caste microaggressions and internalized inferiority². The digital divide, worsened during COVID-19, further deepens exclusion, aligning with Warschauer’s argument that access to devices alone is not enough[26].

Joblessness and Masculine Identity Erosion

Unemployment undermines masculine self-worth, a dynamic noted in Connell's work[4]. National PLFS data confirm youth unemployment exceeds 10%, with rural underemployment particularly acute. Labour market discrimination further compounds this erosion[21].

Mental Health Stigma and the Treatment Gap

The hidden mental distress of most participants highlights the vast rural mental health treatment gap. While cost and access are known barriers⁴, gendered emotional suppression also deters care-seeking. Ahmed emphasizes that emotions are socially regulated, maintaining existing power structures[5].

Caste Policing and Emotional Boundaries

Policing of inter-caste intimacies restricts the development of supportive networks, echoing Guru's argument that caste stratification regulates affective bonds[18]. Hegemonic masculine ideals are reinforced by upper-caste control, further subordinating marginalized men.

Digital Aspirations and the Politics of Comparison

The digital realm amplifies the "ambivalence of connectivity," where social media offers both opportunity and emotional injury, as Miller and colleagues note[27]. Marginalized youth face aspirational anxiety and may engage in risky consumption.

Substance Use as an Adaptive Response

Substance use, though often pathologized, can be seen through Ginwright's healing-centered lens as a coping mechanism in the absence of structural support[6].

The Centrality of Emotional Suppression

Universal cultural conditioning to suppress emotions reflects hegemonic masculinity's demand for stoicism[4]. In Akola, caste intensifies this expectation, perpetuating masculinities both injured and complicit.

Toward an Ambedkarite Emotional Justice Agenda

An Ambedkarite emotional justice approach affirms emotional well-being as fundamental to democratic life, integrating structural, cultural, and healing-centered interventions rooted in liberty, equality, and fraternity.

VI. Conclusion

This study illuminates the phenomenon of emotionally injured masculinities among Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and OBC young men in Akola, Maharashtra, situating their experiences within an Ambedkarite emotional justice framework. Thematic analysis of narratives from 42 participants identified seven interlinked domains of injury: educational disempowerment (83%), joblessness with emotional withdrawal (64%),

hidden mental distress (74%), caste-based emotional policing (38%), digital identity conflict and aspirational anxiety (69%), substance use as a coping mechanism (45%), and gendered emotional suppression (90%). These domains are structurally generated at the intersections of caste hierarchy, economic exclusion, and hegemonic masculine norms, producing a reinforcing cycle in which material deprivation fuels emotional injury, while emotional suppression limits opportunities for support, resistance, and social mobility.

From an Ambedkarite perspective, these injuries represent violations of human dignity, making emotional well-being not merely a mental health concern but a fundamental democratic imperative. Conceptually, the study introduces the term “emotionally injured masculinities,” providing critical vocabulary to challenge stereotypes of resilience and highlight systemic affective inequalities. Empirically, the narratives deepen understanding of how caste, gender, and digital pressures shape the emotional lives of marginalized youth, linking local experiences to broader debates on unemployment, the digital divide, and youth mental health.

The findings underscore the urgent need for integrated interventions spanning education, employment, and mental health, alongside policies that transform cultural norms and create safe, inclusive physical and digital spaces. By centering emotional dignity as a social and democratic right, these interventions can foster collective healing, affirm cultural identity, and disrupt cycles of deprivation and emotional suppression.

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