

Caste Prejudices in Denial: Analysing Student Perceptions in an Indian University

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Abstract

How do caste prejudices vary across students from different socio-economic communities? Do perceptions on caste (e.g., inter-caste marriage, existence of caste in modern times, reservation policy, etc.) correlate with caste prejudice levels? What are the factors that impact 'Caste Prejudice Levels' among students? In answering these questions, we measure the Caste Prejudice Levels among students of varying socio-economic backgrounds in a Central University in India. Statistical methods like two independent samples t-test, ANOVA, Chi-square test, Effect Sizes, etc., have been performed for analysing data. Overall, the results reveal that the people who are more likely to deny or are not aware of the relevance of caste today in terms of its impact on people's lives are more likely to have higher caste prejudices. The findings provide empirical insights into the literature around caste prejudice and inform policies to eradicate caste-based discrimination, especially in higher education.

Keywords

Caste Prejudice, Discrimination, Reservation, Higher Education, Policy

Introduction

Understanding prejudice is crucial as it underpins the behaviours that lead to discrimination (Allport et al., 1954). While prejudicial attitudes are learned through socialization processes, it is when these attitudes are enacted in behaviour that results

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in discrimination (Pettigrew, 1998) and when discrimination receives state backing, such as when individuals with prejudiced orientations become embedded in formal institutions, that it becomes systemic and leads to structured oppression (Oommen, 1990). Therefore, any intervention aimed at equity, diversity, and inclusion must address not only the process and outcomes of discrimination but also the underlying prejudices that shape such processes and outcomes (Chakravarti, 2018).

Caste-based discrimination has persisted for centuries in the Indian subcontinent, rooted in deeply entrenched systems of social hierarchy, power asymmetry, and cultural practices (Ambedkar, 2022). Despite the legal abolition of untouchability and the implementation of affirmative action policies such as reservations, caste prejudice remains a pervasive and enduring reality. Particularly within Indian higher education, the persistence of subtle and explicit caste bias continues to undermine the constitutional ideals of equality and social justice. Recent reports and testimonies from Dalit and other marginalized students indicate that campuses remain contested spaces, marked by social exclusion, intellectual devaluation, and stereotype-based marginalization (Ramvilas, 2022).

Even elite, meritocratic institutions that pride themselves on inclusivity remain fertile grounds for caste-based prejudice. Scholars have argued, entering multicultural or heterogeneous environments alone does not dissolve deep-seated biases—unless consciously and structurally addressed, such biases persist and adapt (Jodhka, 2016). This underscores the need to examine caste prejudice not merely as a personal belief but as an outcome of collective socialization, identity processes, and cultural narratives. The endurance of caste prejudice among educated youth points to the limitations of formal inclusion and necessitates deeper engagement with the psychological and relational underpinnings of bias.

While there exists an extensive body of literature on caste discrimination—highlighting manifestations such as untouchability, underrepresentation in institutions, and socio-economic deprivation (Jodhka, 2002; Jeffery et al., 2007)—there is inadequate empirical discussion on the variation in caste prejudice across different socio-economic communities, particularly within educational contexts (Thorat et al., 2016). This gap in research is critical, given that caste-based attitudes are often shaped by intersecting factors such as identity, status, exposure, and institutional culture.

In this regard, the present study contributes to a growing call for empirical and conceptual investigations into caste prejudice among students from different caste and class backgrounds (Deshpande, 2004; Thorat & Newman, 2007; Sharma & Jogdand, 2024). Specifically, we examine how caste-based prejudice varies among students in a Central Indian university, how it relates to students' perceptions on caste-related issues (such as reservation and inter-caste marriage), and how socio-demographic and educational factors influence prejudice levels. In doing so, we respond to the need for a deeper understanding of caste prejudice as a social-psychological phenomenon, rooted in individual cognition but shaped by group dynamics and structural ideologies.

Given the growing heterogeneity of university campuses—facilitated by affirmative action policies and demographic shifts—these spaces present an important

arena for examining social interaction, attitude formation, and identity negotiation (Relph, 1997; Shaban, 2017). As higher education institutions are sites of both social reproduction and transformation (Merret, 2004), they are uniquely positioned to explicate the mechanisms through which caste-based biases are either challenged or reinforced.

By empirically analysing caste-based prejudice and its correlates among students, this study aims to shed light on how caste continues to structure perceptions and interactions in contemporary academic spaces. Further, we seek to inform policies and pedagogical interventions that might help promote equity and inclusivity in higher education, and to contribute to the theoretical discourse on caste, prejudice, and social identity.

Theoretical Foundation

This study is built upon a comprehensive theoretical framework to understand the persistence of caste prejudice in Indian higher education, described below:

Caste as a Social-Psychological Construct

The caste system in India is one of the oldest surviving social systems in the world, predating many of the largest religions. Despite its antiquity, a universally accepted definition, origin, or understanding of the caste system remains elusive due to its immense diversity across the country. In a generic sense, caste system is a highly elaborate and nuanced social institution, maintained by endogamous marriages, and characterized by an unequal socio-religious and economic relationship between people who are hierarchically arranged by the principle of purity and pollution.

More than 6,000 castes exist across India, each with their own sub-castes and localized social structures. However, popular categorizations tend to cluster castes within the Varna system: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, while the “Untouchables,” now referred to as Dalits, fall outside this classificatory order. These hierarchies are further reinforced through distinctions such as Savarna/Avarna (touchable vs. untouchable) and Dwija/Non-Dwija (twice-born vs. non twice-born). The Brahmins, situated at the apex of this structure, historically exercised the ideological power to define caste positioning (Ambedkar, 2022). For lower castes, this system is one of deprivation and systemic exclusion; for upper castes, it operates as a system of entrenched privilege (Phule, 1983).

A growing discourse, particularly by Ilaiah (2009, 2012, 2019), challenges these dominant narratives by classifying castes into ‘productive’ and ‘non-productive’—assigning economic and cultural value to castes traditionally engaged in physical labour while problematizing the roles ascribed to privileged caste groups. This framework reasserts caste as a lived, material condition, rather than merely a symbolic or religious identity.

Importantly, caste is not confined to Hinduism but cuts across religious groups, manifesting in social exclusions, spatial segregation, and unequal material outcomes

among Muslims, Christians, and others (Ambedkar, 2022; Trivedi, Goli, & Kumar, 2016). Inequities in land ownership, access to education, and wealth distribution highlight the ongoing material implications of caste stratification (Marar, 2019). Attempts to resist these structures are frequently met with coercion and violence—honour killings, caste atrocities, and everyday harassment serve as mechanisms to preserve caste hierarchies (Ambedkar, 2020).

In recent years, scholars have urged a theoretical shift towards understanding caste not only as a sociological but also as a psychological construct. They argue for theorising the cognitive and affective mechanisms through which casteist beliefs are maintained and expressed (Jogdand, 2024). Contributions in this field include the psychological conceptualisation of caste prejudice at the group level (Sharma & Jogdand, 2024), as well as explorations of how people internalize narratives related to reservation, suffering, victimhood, collective memory, and even everyday practices such as food taboos and colorism (Choudhary, 2024; Harshitha, 2024; Mukherjee et al., 2024; Chereches, 2024).

From a social-psychological perspective, caste can be understood as a salient social identity that organizes people into in-groups and out-groups, much like ethnicity or race. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that individuals derive a sense of self from their group memberships and seek a positive social identity by favourably comparing their own group to others. In the context of caste, this implies that belonging to a higher-status caste group may become a source of pride and positive self-esteem, whereas lower-caste identity may be socially devalued. This theory helps explain why caste divisions can powerfully evoke in-group and out-group biases and prejudices. Even in modern educational spaces, students who strongly identify with their caste group might display favouritism toward peers of their own caste and harbour distrust or derogatory views of those from castes traditionally deemed “lower”. Such group-based biases reinforce the existing hierarchy by valorising high-status castes and marginalizing lower-status ones.

Notably, caste is an ascribed identity, one is born into, with a historically entrenched hierarchy that carries centuries of social significance. Social identity processes intersect with this stratification; members of dominant castes may develop a psychological investment in preserving their group’s elevated status, resisting equality with lower castes and rationalizing prejudice as a means of protecting group prestige. Beyond Social Identity Theory, Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 2012) suggests that individuals ascribed with higher position group inequality and are more likely to endorse casteist beliefs, oppose affirmative action, and view the caste hierarchy as legitimate.

Caste Prejudice

Prejudice is a foundational concept to explain social-psychological phenomena such as exclusion, discrimination, and oppression. While stereotypes refer to oversimplified and generalized beliefs about particular groups, prejudice involves evaluative attitudes,

typically negative, held against group members based on these assumptions (Allport et al., 1954). Discrimination, in turn, is the behavioural expression of such prejudices, and oppression refers to systemic and institutionalized injustices sustained by such attitudes (DiAngelo, 2022).

These processes are deeply interlinked. Prejudices are often rooted in early socialization, wherein individuals internalize group distinctions, values, and stereotypes from family, school, media, and community (Bandura & Walters, 1977). In the Indian context, this is shaped heavily by the caste system's compartmentalization. The early life social interactions being not caste-neutral, aided by casteised socialisation contributes to group-based attitudinal formation. Caste-based prejudices become naturalized through these interactions, embedding themselves in one's psychological schema.

Although extensive literature documents the structural and institutional aspects of caste discrimination, relatively few studies focus on measuring caste prejudice and examining its variation across caste and class groups. Understanding caste prejudice allows scholars and policymakers to trace the attitudinal roots of discrimination and to design targeted interventions (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). It also helps identify which groups are more susceptible to holding or reproducing prejudiced attitudes, and which are most affected by them (Desai, Dubey, & Joshi, 2011; Sharma & Jogdand, 2024). Thus, we ask:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): *How does the 'Caste Prejudice Level' vary across students from different socio-economic communities?*

In contemporary academia, caste prejudice often intersects with debates over meritocracy and affirmative action. Upper-caste prejudice may be cloaked in rhetoric about "academic standards" or "misuse of reservations," reflecting modern prejudice—biases expressed in ostensibly non-prejudiced terms (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). For instance, an upper-caste student might harbour resentment that reserved category students "take away" opportunities, or suggest lower-caste students need to "prove" themselves more due to presumed deficits. As Ambedkar (2022) argued, caste bias is rooted in cultural notions of purity and pollution, creating a sense of social disgust toward castes that are low in hierarchy that lingers in subtle and explicit forms, such as reluctance to share meals or living spaces with Dalit classmates.

Prejudice and Perceptions for/against Caste

Socialization also reproduces broader cultural capital and distinctions that inform individuals' perspectives on caste (Bourdieu, 1977). In India, caste informs not only social interaction but also moral and political perception. People from different socio-economic backgrounds often develop distinct understandings of caste injustice and the policies meant to address it.

One key site of divergence is in perceptions of affirmative action, particularly the reservation policy outlined in Articles 15, 16, and 46 of the Indian Constitution (1949). One of the key objectives of the reservation policy is to ensure equitable representation of disadvantaged groups in various spheres of life. By providing quotas

in educational institutions, government jobs, and legislative bodies, the reservation policy has facilitated access to opportunities and resources for these groups, reducing caste-based disparities and empowering historically marginalized communities. Designed to correct historical injustices, these policies have enabled increased participation of marginalized communities in education and employment (Thorat & Newman, 2007; Desai & Kulkarni, 2008). By facilitating access to resources, and allowing individuals from underprivileged castes to succeed in diverse areas such as education, employment, or politics, these policies challenge caste-based prejudices and stereotypes, especially when beneficiaries succeed in competitive environments (Woodard & Saini, 2006; Ghosh, 2018).

However, these policies are often met with skepticism or opposition from upper-caste individuals who lack exposure to the lived experiences of caste marginalization (Thorat & Newman, 2012). Conversely, individuals from disadvantaged communities tend to view these policies as essential for equality and empowerment (Jodhka & Shah, 2010).

Similar divides emerge around inter-caste marriage. Despite its potential to disrupt caste boundaries and promote social integration, same-caste marriage remains overwhelmingly dominant (i.e., more than 90% of marriages) (Mondal, 2021). These perceptions—of who deserves support, of what constitutes fairness, or of how marriage should be arranged—are shaped by underlying caste attitudes and socialization. As perceptions affect one's socialization practices, a caste-prejudiced mind is likely to prefer same caste marriage even though inter-caste marriages are considered a potent means of weakening the caste system as they challenge the boundaries between castes and promote social integration (Thorat & Neuman, 2012).

Thus, the association between one's perceptions for/against reservation policy or inter-caste marriage and their caste prejudice levels can be explained by the varying experiences and socialization processes that shape one's habitus. The exposure of individuals to different aspects of the caste system plays a critical role in shaping their understanding of the problem of caste. Greater exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences of caste can foster empathy and support for anti-caste efforts (Miles & Brown, 2003). In contrast, limited exposure to the realities of caste-based discrimination and inequality may lead to a lack of awareness or denial of the problem, resulting in hostile attitudes towards reservation policies (Deshpande, 2005).

As a result, one's stance on caste-related policies and practices often correlates with their level of caste prejudice. Individuals with low caste prejudice levels may be more inclined to support reservation policies, recognizing the need for such measures to address historical and ongoing caste-based inequalities (Jodhka & Shah, 2010). Considering the fact that there is lack of theoretical as well as empirical exploration of the underlying basis of various popular perceptions against caste-related statements (Thorat et al., 2016), we therefore ask:

Research Question 2 (RQ2): *Does one's perception on caste-related matters (e.g., reservation policy & inter-caste marriage) correlate with one's Caste Prejudice Levels?*

Factors Influencing Caste Prejudices in Higher Educational Institutes

Higher education plays a critical role in secondary socialization. University spaces can challenge or reinforce caste-based attitudes, depending on the nature of peer interactions, faculty engagement, curriculum content, and institutional ethos (Tinto, 1997). Students at different stages of their academic journey may have varying degrees of exposure to critical thought, diversity, and intergroup contact. Students pursuing advanced degrees may have more opportunities to interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds, influencing greater understanding and empathy towards different social groups (Gurin et al., 2002). Additionally, higher levels of education often correlate with increased critical thinking skills, which can help students question and challenge existing social hierarchies and prejudices (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Disciplinary orientation also matters. As fields of social science foreground aspects related justice, inequality, and inclusion, students are most likely to be encouraged with progressive attitudes towards caste. In contrast, disciplines that remain detached from these concerns may do little to provoke critical introspection (Milem, 2003).

The composition and inclusiveness of the university environment also significantly affect student attitudes. Diverse campuses that promote inter-caste dialogue and explicitly engage with equity issues tend to foster lower levels of prejudice (Hurtado et al., 1999). In contrast, homogenous or hostile environments risk perpetuating or intensifying biases (Smith et al., 2004).

Thus, the educational, disciplinary, and institutional contexts within which students are embedded shape how caste prejudice is formed and sustained. Considering these factors are important for discussions, as policymakers can design educational initiatives that promote critical thinking and empathy among students, encouraging them to question social hierarchies and work towards a more inclusive society (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Accordingly, we ask:

Research Question 3 (RQ1): *What are the factors that impact 'Caste Prejudice Levels' among students?*

Methods

Sample and Data Collection

A Central University from north India has been chosen for the case study. The university has the reputation of being one of the oldest and premier higher education institutions in the country, attracting students across India, making it a suitable site for investigating socio-psychological phenomena such as caste prejudice in a heterogeneous academic environment. The fieldwork for data collection was conducted between January 31, 2020, and February 13, 2020.

For a reasonably large population, a sample size of approximately 400 is considered appropriate for a $\pm 5\%$ precision level, 95% confidence interval, and a degree of variability of 0.5 (Israel, 1992). A total of 506 valid responses were collected, exceeding the minimum threshold and thereby increasing the statistical robustness of

the analysis. Although a *non-probability* sampling method was used, the final sample closely mirrors the social category composition of the university's enrolled student population for the academic session 2019–2020.

Out of the total 506 samples, 250 respondents (49.41%) belong to the General category, 166 (32.81%) to the OBC category, 63 (12.45%) to the SC category, and 27 (5.34%) to the ST category. These proportions closely correspond with the university's reported student enrolment for the same period: General (49.41%), OBC (32.81%), SC (12.36%), and ST (5.08%).

For the purpose of data collection, a structured questionnaire was developed by the researcher and administered through Google Forms. The questionnaire was presented before the Doctoral Research Committee (DRC) for review and approval on October 1, 2019.

Methodological Procedure

The analysis proceeded in three broad steps corresponding to the three research questions and associated theoretical constructs. To address the RQ1—*How does caste prejudice vary across students from different socio-economic communities?*—a Caste Prejudice Index (CPI) was developed to quantify individual levels of caste-based prejudice. The CPI reflects attitudes internalized through primary and secondary socialization and aligns with the broader theoretical framework that views caste prejudice as a learned psychological orientation.

The index is based on student responses to four carefully framed statements, designed to elicit biases regarding caste. Each statement was assessed using a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree):

- General category students are more hardworking than reserved category students.
- Do you think upper-caste students are more intelligent than reserved category students?
- Reserved category people have got more benefits due to reservation than they deserve.
- Reserved category students do not need to study hard to progress in life.

Each response was scored as follows: +2 (Strongly Disagree), +1 (Disagree), 0 (Neutral), -1 (Agree), and -2 (Strongly Agree). These were summed to create a Caste Prejudice Score (CPS) for each respondent. The CPI was calculated using the formula:

$$\text{Index Value} = \frac{\text{Actual Value} - \text{Maximum Value}}{\text{Minimum Value} - \text{Maximum Value}}$$

Where,

Actual Value = CPS of each respondent.

Maximum Value = Maximum possible value of CPS, i.e., (+8)¹.

¹Maximum score for one question is (+2), there are a total of four question. Thus, maximum possible score = (2) + (2) + (2) + (2) = (8).

Minimum Value = Minimum possible value of CPS, i.e., $(-8)^2$.

The resulting CPI values range from 0 (no caste prejudice) to 1 (maximum caste prejudice), allowing comparisons of Caste Prejudice Levels across respondents. To ensure the reliability of the CPI, Cronbach's Alpha (α) was computed and found to be 0.8013, which exceeds the recommended threshold of 0.80 for widely used indices (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). This indicates high internal consistency and confirms the robustness of the index as a psychometric measure of caste prejudice.

The second stage of analysis addresses the RQ2. For this purpose, CPI values were categorized into three levels:

- Low Prejudice: CPI < 0.3
- Medium Prejudice: CPI between 0.3 and 0.6
- High Prejudice: CPI > 0.6

These three levels of prejudice were cross-tabulated with student responses to the following five statements:

- Is reservation policy in higher education justified?
- Reservations should solely be based on economic criteria.
- I would like to go for inter-caste marriage in the future.
- Caste is the thing of the past; it is alive due to the reservations.
- Discrimination in India today is about class (rich and poor), not about caste.

Statements 1, 2, 4, and 5 were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, while Statement 3 was recorded as "Yes," "No," or "Can't Say." These perceptions serve as proxies for the respondent's attitudinal orientation toward caste-related issues. Pearson's chi-square tests were performed to assess the statistical significance of differences in perception across prejudice levels, thus operationalizing key social-psychological assumptions regarding social cognition and stereotype maintenance.

The third step explored RQ3—*what factors impact caste prejudice levels among students*—focusing on broader cultural and structural variables such as education level, disciplinary training, and family income. These are conceptualised as domains of secondary socialization that may either reinforce or reduce caste-based attitudes. To assess these influences, various statistical methods were applied depending on data type and distribution, e.g., two-sample t-tests to compare mean CPI scores between two groups (e.g., undergraduate vs. postgraduate students), one-way ANOVA for multiple group comparisons (e.g., across academic disciplines), Chi-square tests to examine categorical associations, and Effect size calculations to assess the magnitude of observed differences.

These analyses illuminate how academic and economic contexts intersect with attitudinal dispositions, supporting the theoretical position that caste prejudice is not fixed but shaped through ongoing social experiences. This step, therefore, allows for a nuanced understanding of the role that educational institutions play in either reproducing or challenging casteist attitudes in Indian higher education.

²Minimum score for one question is (-2), there are a total of four question. Thus, minimum possible score = $(-2) + (-2) + (-2) + (-2) = (-8)$.

Findings

Caste Prejudice Index among Different Social Groups

Table 1 presents the average Caste Prejudice Index (CPI) values across different social categories. The General category exhibits the highest mean CPI value of 0.5845, followed by OBCs at 0.3414. In contrast, the SC and ST categories register substantially lower mean CPI values of 0.1706 and 0.2268, respectively, indicating lower levels of caste prejudice among historically marginalized groups.

These findings suggest that caste prejudice is most prevalent among students from socially dominant groups (General and OBC), with significant differences between them and SC/ST respondents. This confirms the view that caste-based prejudice is more pronounced among dominant caste groups, while those from historically disadvantaged communities exhibit greater awareness of structural inequalities.

Table 1: Category Wise Caste Prejudice Index (CPI)

Social Groups	Freq.	CPI	Std. Dev.
General	250	.5845	.2192
OBC	166	.3414	.2076
SC	63	.1706	.1560
ST	27	.2268	.1451
Total	506	0.4341	.2585

Source: Estimated by authors using fieldwork data

Caste Prejudice Levels and their Perceptions

To address RQ2, respondents were asked about their views on caste-related statements. These responses were cross-tabulated with their CPI categories (Low, Medium, and High Prejudice Levels) to explore the correlation between prejudice and perception.

It reveals that among individuals with Low Prejudice Levels, the majority (49.38 per cent) *strongly agree* that reservation in higher education is justified, with another 30.25 per cent agreeing. Conversely, among those with High Prejudice Levels, 53.47 per cent *strongly disagree* and 29.17 per cent *disagree* with the policy. The chi-square test statistic of 242.45 ($p < 0.001$) indicates a significant association between caste prejudice and support for reservation.

In the Low Prejudice group, 34.57 per cent *strongly disagree* with the idea of reservation based solely on economic criteria, compared to 70.83 per cent *strongly agreeing* among the High Prejudice group. The association is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 176.85$, $p < 0.001$), reinforcing that opposition to caste-based reservations is positively correlated with higher caste prejudice.

Willingness to consider inter-caste marriage declines as CPI increases. In the Low Prejudice group, 60.49 per cent expressed willingness, compared to only 41.67 per cent among those with High Prejudice, where uncertainty (36.81 per cent) and outright rejection (21.53 per cent) were more common. The chi-square value of 25.92 ($p < 0.001$) confirms a significant association.

Furthermore, a majority (52.47 per cent) of Low Prejudice respondents *strongly disagree* with the claim that caste exists only due to reservations, while those with High Prejudice predominantly *agree* (32.64 per cent) or *strongly agree* (41.67 per cent). This suggests that higher caste prejudice is aligned with narratives that deny structural caste inequality. The association is again significant ($\chi^2 = 186.51$, $p < 0.001$).

Among Low Prejudice respondents, 35.19 per cent *strongly disagree* and 31.48 per cent *disagree* with this statement. In contrast, 31.94 per cent of High Prejudice respondents *strongly agree*. The chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 88.81$, $p < 0.001$) confirms a significant relationship.

Table 2: Caste prejudice levels and perceptions on caste-related statements and questions

Caste Prejudice Levels		Low Prejudice Level	Medium Prejudice Level	High Prejudice Level	Total	Pearson Chi2 (P-Value)
Statements/Questions						
Is reservation policy in Higher Education Justified?	Strongly Disagree	3.7	20	53.47	24.31	242.45 (0.0000)
	Disagree	8.64	29	29.17	22.53	
	Neutral	8.02	19	9.03	12.65	
	Agree	30.25	23.5	6.94	20.95	
	Strongly Agree	49.38	8.5	1.39	19.57	
	Total	100	100	100	100	
Reservations should solely be based on economic criteria.	Strongly Disagree	34.57	5	0.69	13.24	176.85 (0.0000)
	Disagree	22.84	10.5	2.78	12.25	
	Neutral	10.49	12.5	6.94	10.28	
	Agree	17.28	30	18.75	22.73	
	Strongly Agree	14.81	42	70.83	41.5	
	Total	100	100	100	100	
I would like to go for inter caste marriage in future.	Can't Say	32.1	46	36.81	38.93	25.92 (0.0000)
	No	7.41	9.5	21.53	12.25	
	Yes	60.49	44.5	41.67	48.81	
	Total	100	100	100	100	
Caste is the thing of Past. It is alive due to the Reservations.	Strongly Agree	8.02	19	41.67	21.94	186.51 (0.0000)
	Agree	9.26	26	32.64	22.53	
	Neutral	11.73	20.5	13.19	15.61	
	Disagree	18.52	25	9.72	18.58	
	Strongly disagree	52.47	9.5	2.78	21.34	
	Total	100	100	100	100	

Discrimination in India today is about Class (Rich and Poor) and not about Caste.	Strongly Agree	9.88	17.5	31.94	19.17	88.81 (0.0000)
	Agree	14.81	29	29.86	24.7	
	Neutral	8.64	17.5	15.28	14.03	
	Disagree	31.48	26.5	15.97	25.1	
	Strongly disagree	35.19	9.5	6.94	17	
	Total	100	100	100	100	

Source: Estimated by authors using fieldwork data

These findings reveal that respondents with higher prejudice levels are more likely to resist caste-based reforms (e.g., reservations, inter-caste marriage) and adopt views that delegitimize caste as a category of contemporary discrimination. This pattern mirrors broader societal trends in India, where dominant caste groups often endorse economic or meritocratic framings to avoid acknowledging caste inequalities.

Factors Affecting the Caste Prejudice Index

To gain insights around why CPI values vary, we examined how educational, disciplinary, and economic backgrounds influence the CPI scores using multiple analytic techniques. For example, an ANOVA test ($F = 6.01, p = 0.0026$) revealed a significant difference in caste prejudice across educational levels. Mean CPI for Bachelor’s and Master’s students is similar (0.4496 and 0.4504), but significantly lower for PhD students (0.3357). This suggests that advanced academic exposure may contribute to a reduction in caste bias.

An independent samples t-test indicates that Humanities students have a lower mean CPI (0.3922) than Science students (0.4809). The difference of -0.0887 is statistically significant ($t = -3.4918, p = 0.0005$). The effect size (Cohen’s $d = -0.3494$) suggests a small to medium effect. This aligns with prior research indicating that disciplines engaging with social justice themes may facilitate more critical reflection on caste.

Additionally, a Pearson’s chi-square test examining CPI distribution across income groups yielded a p-value of 0.1578, indicating no significant association. This suggests that within a largely middle-class, university-educated sample, income levels do not significantly shape caste prejudice.

Table 3: Variation in CPI across different socio-cultural groups

Tests Performed	Levels of Study		Mean CPI	Std. Dev.	Frequency
Results of ANOVA	Bachelors		0.4496	0.2615	232
	Masters		0.4504	0.2524	204
	PhD		0.3357	0.2478	70
	Between Groups	SS=0.7875	df=2, MS=0.3937	F-value=6.01 P=0.0026	
	Within Groups	SS=32.9608	df=503, MS=0.0655		
	Bartlett's equal-variances test: $\chi^2(2) = 0.4385$ Prob> $\chi^2 = 0.803$				

Results of Two Independent Sample T-Test	Streams of Study	Obs.	Mean CPI	SE	Std. Dev.
	Humanities	222	0.392	0.017	0.265
	Science	173	0.48	0.018	0.238
	Combined	395	0.431	0.012	0.257
t value= -3.491, df = 385.217, p-value=0.0003 Effect Size: Cohen's d= -0.349					
Results of Chi-Square Test	Monthly Income Groups	Low Prejudice Level	Medium Prejudice Level	High Prejudice Level	Total
	< 20k	36.6	39.15	24.26	100
	20k - 40k	28.69	42.62	28.69	100
	40k - 80k	26.37	39.56	34.07	100
	> 80k	25	34.62	40.38	100
	Chi2= 9.29, p-value=0.1578				

Source: Estimated by authors using fieldwork data

Our findings reveal that caste prejudice is influenced by educational trajectory and disciplinary context more than by economic standing within the student population. While PhD training and Humanities education are associated with lower prejudice, the level of household income is not a differentiating factor. These results reinforce the idea that academic socialization, especially in critical disciplines, can serve as a key factor in reducing caste-based biases.

Discussion & Conclusions

Overall, this study offers empirical insights into how caste prejudice manifests among university students, particularly across different social categories, and how it relates to broader policy attitudes and identity-based affiliations.

Variation in Prejudices Across Social Groups

Our findings confirm that privileged social groups, by virtue of their social standing, are more likely to exhibit higher prejudices compared to disadvantaged social groups (Reicher & Haslam, 2017). Students from historically privileged caste communities displayed significantly higher levels of caste prejudice compared to those from SC/ST communities. This supports the premise of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which suggests that individuals derive self-worth from group affiliations and often elevate their in-group while denigrating out-groups. In this context, high-status caste identities serve as sources of pride and entitlement, reinforcing hierarchical social schemas.

The privileged groups tend to maintain their social status by adhering to the norms and practices of the caste system, such as endogamy or marrying within their own caste (Ghurye, 1969). This pattern is further reinforced by individuals, especially those from dominant groups, who are motivated to defend the existing social order, even when it perpetuates inequality. By rationalising caste hierarchies as natural, deserved, or merit-based, prejudiced individuals uphold structural inequality while maintaining a positive self-concept. This dynamic was visible in the data: those most invested in the caste status quo also scored highest on caste prejudice.

Students from marginalized communities, on the other hand, reported lower prejudice levels, reflecting their critical awareness and personal experience of caste-based disadvantage. However, prior research suggests that even members of oppressed groups can internalise casteist ideologies, sometimes shaping the perceptions around discrimination they face (Pew Research Centre, 2021). Nonetheless, in our study, SC/ST students largely rejected casteist statements, highlighting the salience of lived experience in shaping counter-hegemonic attitudes.

Prejudice and Caste-Related Attitudes

The study also reveals a strong association between caste prejudice levels and respondents' views on caste-related policies and practices. Students with high prejudice levels were significantly more likely to oppose caste-based affirmative action and social integration measures, such as inter-caste marriage.

This correlation reflects patterns where discriminatory attitudes are expressed indirectly through seemingly neutral language, such as advocating for meritocracy or economic-based reservations. These “coded” expressions allow individuals to resist equity policies without appearing overtly biased, functioning as what scholars term “legitimising myths”—rationalisations that preserve privilege while deflecting accusations of prejudice.

Such patterns echo what is found in other contexts of symbolic racism, where opposition to policies benefiting the disadvantaged is couched in the rhetoric of fairness or cultural difference (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). In the Indian case, students opposed to caste-based reservations often invoked meritocratic ideals, denying the structural barriers that necessitate affirmative action in the first place. Individuals with high caste prejudice may also believe that caste is no longer relevant in contemporary society. However, this reflects both cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957)—where individuals reconcile the contradiction between prejudice and self-image—and system-justifying ideology and cognitive support for the existing social order (Jost et al., 2003). By asserting that caste is not relevant today, such individuals can distance themselves from the discriminatory practices associated with the caste system while still adhering to its norms and practices in their personal lives.

Thus, findings of RQ2 illustrate how caste prejudice is not just an abstract bias; it translates into tangible social and policy positions that resist caste integration and equity. This underscores the importance of addressing both the attitudinal aspect and the ideological narratives that render casteism socially acceptable under the guise of neutrality.

Factors Shaping Caste Prejudice

Our findings further reveal the underlying factors that influence caste prejudice, offering a nuanced perspective grounded in social identity theories and ideological orientation. Group Identification emerged as a key predictor in shaping the views on reservation policies. Individuals belonging to the General category may perceive

the policy as unfair and discriminatory, as it often results in a reduced number of opportunities for them (Sahoo, 2009). Conversely, those from SC, ST, and OBC categories are more likely to support reservation policies, as they directly benefit from these affirmative action measures (Jodhka, 2017). Views towards reservation policy are also shaped by whether they are beneficiary of reservation policy or not. Members of reserved groups may be more supportive of the policy, while unreserved individuals may see it as unjust (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008).

As a consequence, students who identified with their privileged caste background, viewing their caste as superior or central to their identity, tend to report higher prejudice levels. This reminds one of the work by Roccas et al. (2006), who distinguish between “attachment” (a benign form of group loyalty) and “glorification” (a superiority-driven form), the latter being more likely to generate out-group hostility. In our analysis, students with strong glorified caste identities consistently scored higher on the Caste Prejudice Index.

Demographic factors also play a critical role. People’s views on reservation policies can also differ based on their place of permanent residence. Rural and semi-urban residents may be more inclined to support reservation policies, as they may face more socio-economic challenges compared to urban dwellers (Gupta, 2005). A higher education level among parents may lead to more critical views of reservation policies, as they may believe that merit should be the primary determinant of opportunities. Conversely, parents with lower education levels may be more supportive of the policy, as they may consider it an opportunity for their children to overcome socio-economic barriers.

Individuals with high caste prejudice tend to favour economic-based reservations, suggesting that their objection is not against the concept of reservations per se but against who benefits from them. This stance indirectly perpetuates caste prejudice by denying the continued relevance of caste in determining social opportunities and access to resources. However, contrary to popular expectations, the findings indicated that family income did not significantly correlate with caste prejudice. This finding challenges the common assumption that economic advancement fosters egalitarian attitudes. Instead, it affirms that prejudice reduction depends more on exposure, empathy, and education than on class status alone (Pager & Shepherd, 2008).

Similarly, the relationship between education and caste prejudice reveals interesting patterns. As students advance in higher education, their caste prejudice tends to decrease. This could be attributed to increased exposure to diverse perspectives and critical thinking skills acquired during higher education (Brint & Cantwell, 2010). Humanities students typically exhibit lower levels of caste prejudice than science students, possibly because the former are more likely to engage with issues of social justice, human rights, and inequality (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that caste prejudice among students is sustained through an interplay of group identity, ideological frameworks, and socio-cultural context. Students from dominant castes who strongly identify with their group and endorse hierarchy-justifying ideologies are more likely to exhibit casteist attitudes.

By contrast, students who belong to marginalized groups or embrace egalitarian principles are more likely to reject caste prejudice.

These insights have important implications for educational and policy interventions. Reducing caste prejudice requires more than individual attitude change; it calls for dismantling the ideological structures that legitimise group identities and inequality. Interventions should therefore aim to challenge myths of meritocracy that mask privilege; develop space for critical dialogue around caste and structural inequality; promote meaningful intergroup contact in university settings, as suggested by Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954); and cultivate curricula and campus cultures that actively disrupt caste normalisation.

This study also reaffirms the importance of higher education as a potential site of transformation, provided it engages students in meaningful reflection and cross-group interaction. Combating caste prejudice on campuses is not merely a cultural or moral imperative but a political and psychological challenge. It requires sustained efforts to interrupt the reproduction of caste hierarchies, not just in institutional practices, but also in how individuals understand themselves and others.

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