

‘I’m an Upper Caste Myself’: Caste Identities in Negotiating Casteism

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Abstract

Caste is the single most important determinant of life outcomes in India (Pathania et al., 2023; Teltumbde, 2022; Yengde, 2019). Caste is pervasive—in our homes, friendships, places of worship, love and marriage, clothing, language, food, and more. Caste as a ‘system’ of oppression is, at its core, a means of organizing social groups and memberships. Social psychologists have examined inter-caste attitudes and possible reasons for discrimination (Jogdand et al., 2016; Prasad et al., 2020; Sharma & Jogdand, 2024) Sidanius, Bhardwaj, and Kumar’s (2014). What has been less examined is what it means for persons to engage with caste and casteism. In this article, I examine how individuals construct specific caste identities for themselves in addressing casteism. Using discursive psychology, I examined interviews with 20 students who were protesting the death of Rohit Vemula. Findings show that interviewees negotiated their positions on casteism through softening their attachment to caste identities. Interviewee accounts developed their own and others’ caste identities in ways that grounded these in contexts of higher education to downgrade or upgrade claims about prevalent casteism.

Keywords

Caste, Casteism, Social Comparison, Caste Identity, Discursive Psychology, India, Higher Education.

Introduction

It is wholly unsurprising that education is a core site for the production and enactment of oppressive caste practices. The historical ideas of the caste system treat Brahmins as tied to learning and knowledge, ‘lower’ caste groups as tied to labor, and those outside the caste system (Dalits) as tied to menial labor. For the latter sets of groups, education and learning are considered unbefitting (Pathania & Tierney, 2018; Sabharwal & Malish, 2017). This, of course, manifests in the composition of the

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university population: At higher-tier IITs and the IISc, 98 per cent of professors and more than 90 per cent of assistant or associate professors are from privileged/'upper' castes (Paliwal, 2023). This contrasts with many Indians who identify themselves as 'lower' castes (Center, 2021).

Historically, anti-caste activists and leaders had championed education—Savitribai Phule, for instance, was one of the first persons to start schools for Dalits and oppressed caste group members. Dr. Ambedkar similarly emphasized the role of education in enabling Dalits to achieve what they wish for. For researchers, such consequences of caste (Bros, 2014; Chauhan, 2008; Pal, 2015, 2020) mean that reservation in education and employment is necessary. The aim here is to provide quotas for various caste, religious, and tribal groups that were socially marginalized for centuries. As a program of social justice, reservations have largely been successful (Basu, 2021; Borooah et al., 2007; Weisskopf, 2004).

Despite this, several studies point to pervasive discrimination in educational settings. Various studies, including those by Patwardhan and Palshikar (1992), Neelakandan and Patil (2012), Rao (2013), Singh (2013), Ovicegan (2015), and official committee reports, shed light on the experiences of Dalit students in Indian higher education. Reports such as the Anveshi Law Committee report (2002) at the Hyderabad Central University, the Thorat Committee Report (2016), and the Mungekar Committee report (Gatade, 2012) at Vardhman Mahavir Medical College (VMMC) have concluded that caste-based discrimination is institutionalized. Subramanian (2015) highlights how discourses of caste and merit have interacted to produce new and more 'acceptable' forms of caste subjectivities in premier engineering colleges (cf. Deshpande 2013). In an ethnographic study on inter-caste relations in an elite university in Delhi, Pathania and Tierney (2018) examine interview accounts of students from upper and lower-caste groups. Their findings show that upper caste students avowed favorable positions towards Dalits and other caste members while shirking away from endorsing reservation (cf. Anant, 1978). For instance, Natrajan (2012) argues that caste groups have claimed the language of 'culture', allowing casteism to continue as a preference. In other words, prejudice is increasingly directed not at the 'other by blood' but 'other by culture'.

Researchers have pointed out how the fact of making use of reservations is routinely the reason for targeting Dalits and other lower caste group members. Individuals who benefit from reservations or quotas are often negatively labelled as 'reservation wale' or 'quota wale' (Thorat, 2006). Reservation beneficiaries may also be referred to as 'schaddu' or 'sarkar ke damad' (sons-in-law of the government) in a derogatory manner to diminish their achievements and emphasize that what they receive is viewed as 'charity and not parity' (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019). Kumar (2016) highlights instances at Delhi University where Dalit girls are subjected to humiliation with questions like, 'Have you come through the reservation, or have you come from the brothel?' The term 'reserved category' is used to denigrate, while those in the 'general category' are widely accepted and often perceive themselves as superior. Essentially, Dalits endure

a dual stigma—both for their caste identity and as beneficiaries of state provisions through affirmative action (Sukumar, 2023).

For most Dalit students, the classroom is a problematic space. Thorat (2006) argues that treating Dalits as deficient and undeserving of education results in feelings of insecurity and develops an inferiority complex. Sharma and Subramanyam (2020) argue that caste minority students facing discrimination often deal with emotional stress, fear of failure, academic disinterest, and low self-esteem. This discrimination distracts them from their studies, resulting in poor academic performance. Jogdand (2017, 2024) argues that the Indian classroom is often a site of humiliation for Dalit students. Jogdand identifies ‘caste blindness’ as a set of strategies that seek to isolate and marginalize Dalit students in the class. Dalit identity is marked by oppression and stigma, constantly brought up in classrooms to cause further humiliation. As Komanapalli and Rao (2020) argue, such experiences contribute to further stress and problematic mental health outcomes. Across these studies and findings, a common concern is about caste identities and their consequences for attitudes and perspectives on members in other caste groups, a focus that is central to social psychology.

Background: The Social Psychology of Caste

Recent social psychological studies on caste have highlighted two interrelated concerns: first, the vast neglect of caste as a topic of study in social psychology, and second, that this has resulted in neglect of an extremely interesting means of conceptualizing intergroup relations and prejudice. However, what is missing is examining the uniqueness of caste as a means of identification. In that, scholars have largely treated caste as similar to race, gender, or other ways in which identification might be done. Jogdand (2024) has argued that the social psychology of caste is missing an integrated focus and is plagued by Euro-American understandings. Some of the earlier work reflects this focus.

Early work on casteism and attitudes across caste groups used survey methods. Rath and Sircar’s (1960) work argued that ‘upper’ caste persons were more progressive and wanted change than those categorized as ‘lower caste.’ Other work of this time, however, was different. Sinha and Sinha (1967) showed that attitudes towards caste groups were shaped by broader stereotypes of caste. Anant (1970) shows that reported attitudes by ‘Caste Hindus’ towards Dalits and ‘Harijans’ followed legal guidelines on disallowing untouchability or restriction to temples and so on. However, reported attitudes were far more conservative when it came to more private aspects of life, such as friendship and marriage.

More contemporary work on caste and casteism has similarly employed techniques of social surveys and experiments. Sahgal et al (2021), for instance, find that while individuals identify with caste groups, they do not report witnessing much discrimination, although offering a preference for same-caste marriages. Sharma and Jogdand (2024), for instance, have shown that those who might glorify their caste identities will endorse caste prejudice. In other work, Jogdand has shown the limitations

of using constructs from Euro-American contexts to examine casteism without close attention to how caste is embedded in specific contexts (also see Hoff & Pandey, 2006). For instance, Khan et al (2016) have argued that the foundational variables used to explain racial and gender prejudice by the Social Dominance Orientation model are insufficient to examine casteism.

Social psychologists have examined the role of the oppressor caste groups and members in the prevalence of casteism (Pal, 2023; Pathania et al, 2023; Sophan & Nair, 2023). Scholars, however, have pointed to the absence of social psychological research that examines caste in terms of people's understandings and identifications (Fatima et al., 2024). Pal (2015) similarly argues that researchers should focus on the 'everydayness of caste'. Fatima et al critique extant research on caste given their distance from real-life contexts. A notable concern voiced by Fatima et al is the adoption of the four varna system by researchers instead of attending to the fluid ways in which caste identification is accomplished and negotiated.

To an extent, qualitative examination of caste and casteism has addressed this concern. Mukherjee et al (2023), for instance, document the various accounts of experiencing casteism and resistance. Pathania et al (2023) similarly offer a qualitative examination of university students and faculty from diverse caste groups in India with an explicit focus on experiences of stigma, discrimination, and opportunities for resistance. Their findings show that experiences of discrimination and humiliation in contexts, like higher education, where the expectation is that of fair and equal treatment, deepen the humiliation. For the authors, this aspect of casteism in higher education can lead to severe mental health issues, at times resulting in self-harm.

Research has also shown the internalization of caste discrimination and problematic 'lower status' (Bros, 2014). For researchers, this speaks to the 'power' and influence of the caste system that allocates and imposes oppressor and oppressed caste identities onto individuals, leading to problematic outcomes for those who see themselves as 'oppressed' (Thapa et al., 2021). In some social contexts, 'lower' caste members come to accept and reproduce social representations of their caste (Jodhka, 2004; also see Jogdand, 2024). For instance, acts of subordination, such as maintaining social distance and appearing passive, are noted for members of the oppressed caste groups (Judge & Ball, 2008). These findings raise interesting questions about the possible distinctions between 'caste' as a system of societal organization and oppression and caste as a source of identity.

Kumar (2022) argues that caste identities are fluid, especially in response to government policies, such as those on reservations, which classifications have continued since the British colonial rule over South Asia. The construction and negotiation of caste identities take place in relation to caste hierarchies imposed by the government. While this reconfiguration is easier for caste groups that are toward the top of caste hierarchies, it is hard for those who are towards the bottom (cf. Sambaraju & Sinha, 2024). Vaid (2014) similarly argues that considering caste identities as fluid is crucial in getting a grip on contemporary manifestations of caste. It is this aspect

of identities and consequent relations with and between groups that is the focus of discursive psychologists.

Identity and Exclusion: A Discursive Perspective

Discursive psychologists exclusively focus on discourse to examine discourse for how persons construct various versions of agents, groups, actions, and entities and their use in situated interactions to accomplish social action (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008; Potter, 1996, 2021). The primary focus is then to examine what it is that persons are doing in and with talk (or text). Such a focus on identities and exclusion has meant that discursive psychologists study how persons might construct their own or others' identities in asserting, minimizing, justifying, and/or challenging exclusion. Much work in this fashion has explored identities and exclusion in areas of gender (Stokoe, 2010) and uses conversation analysis to shed light on the location and design of, and responses to, suspects' category-based denials? that they are not 'the kind of men who hit women'. Two sections of analysis identify how, first, such denials routinely follow police officers' direct questions about violent behaviour, and, second, how they become embedded in extended narratives that are not directly describing violence. In contrast to other discourse-analytic studies of men's accounts of violence towards women, the article unpacks the component features that comprise what others might label grossly as the 'discourse of gendered violence'. Rather than see how such 'discourses' operate in interview contexts, it shows how suspects construct, in a high-stakes setting for a particular purpose, different categories of men, claiming membership in one (who do not hit women, race (Sambaraju, 2022), migration (Gibson & Hamilton, 2011), and refuge-seeking (Goodman & Burke, 2011)). However, barely any work has taken up a discursive focus to examine the construction of caste identities, caste group memberships, and their relevance for casteism (Sambaraju & Singh, 2024). Below, I offer a brief outline of what this form of scholarship can offer to an understanding of identities and exclusion.

Discursive research has shown that while identities are central to much of our social life, these are hardly straightforward matters (McKinlay & McVittie, 2011). In an early work on sub-culture groups, Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) show that interviewees were reluctant to readily claim identities of being 'punk' or members of a 'sub-culture'. Instead, they sought to present themselves as regular persons. Merino and Tileagă (2011) show that Mapuche ethnic group members in Chile might resist a ready ascription of Mapuche identities to manage the moral implications of belonging to a marginalized ethnic minority position. In other contexts, ethnic identities are shown to be constructed in contrast to the majority identities to seek a sense of distinctiveness (Sala et al., 2010). Constructions of 'who we are' are then bound to broader social projects but are variously constructed in ways that are salient to ongoing interactional concerns. For instance, Sambaraju (2020) shows how women who were disclosing traumatic experiences of sexual harassment during the #MeToo movement in India were made to account for their reports in the context of the movement. Women could

then flexibly draw upon their gendered identity in negotiating the genuineness of their experiences and reports.

Constructions of identities are used to affect and negotiate social exclusion. Stokoe (2010) shows how constructions of gendered identities were used to counter the implications of misogyny. Figgou and Condor (2007) show how constructions of Greeks as distinct from Muslims allowed for legitimating the exclusion of Turkish migrants. These and other findings show that in accomplishing and justifying exclusion, 'prejudiced identities' become salient and are negotiated (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) and looks at the ways in which some recent developments in literary theory, post-structuralism, semiotics and cultural studies might be applied to the social psychological study of racist practices; while Part II tries to exemplify our conclusions through our case-study of racist discourse in New Zealand. In focusing in this book primarily on discourse—on meanings, conversations, narratives, explanations, accounts and anecdotes—we do not want to suggest that the study of racism should be equated with the study of certain streams of talk and writing. . . . Our emphasis will be on the ways in which a society gives voice to racism and how forms of discourse institute, solidify, change, create and reproduce social formations. (PsycINFO Database Record (c. Billig (1988) has shown that a routine feature of prejudiced talk is the management of irrationality through denials of being prejudiced. Augoustinos and Every (2007) and Goodman (2014) have documented the various ways that the discourse of prejudice and exclusion, while seeming to be rational and liberal. Other work has shown that social identities are constructed and used in ways to perform anti-racism. Sambaraju (2022) shows that constructions of national identification as Irish persons are used in responses to migrant-others' complaints about exclusion, to effect inclusion and anti-racism. In these ways, discursive psychologists point to the centrality of identities for our social lives across various aspects. It is this that gives the focus for the present study, where the aim is to examine how caste-related identities are constructed and treated as salient for negotiating caste-based exclusion. I do so in the context of a protest in opposition to casteist practices in higher education in India, galvanized by the murder-suicide of a doctoral student, Rohith Vemula.

Present Study

Rohith Vemula, a Dalit research scholar at the University of Hyderabad in India, died by suicide on January 17, 2016. His death triggered widespread protests and discussions about caste-based discrimination in educational institutions. Rohith was identified as a Dalit, and his suicide note and subsequent statements from his family and friends suggested that he faced discrimination based on his caste. He wrote about feeling socially ostracized and spoke about the societal inequalities that Dalits face. Rohith Vemula's death had a lasting impact on discussions about caste discrimination in educational institutions. It became a symbol of the larger issues of caste discrimination and social inequality in India, leading to increased awareness and activism surrounding these issues within academic and societal contexts. In this context, the present study

aimed to examine how individual caste identities were salient and used to make sense of wider societal issues of caste-based oppression and discrimination, particularly in higher education contexts in India. The study then wanted to know how caste-based identities become salient in negotiating casteism.

Method

I conducted an interview study with members who were part of the protest in the aftermath of the death of Rohit Vemula on a South India Central University campus.

Data and Participants

The data for this study are from an interview study about student protests against caste-based discrimination in a South Indian university in January 2016. The interviews were conducted at the site of the protest with student-protestors in a context where caste was an expected topic of various interactions. I conducted 12 research interviews with student protestors ($f=8$; $m=12$). 15 of these were with a single interviewee, and 5 of these had more than one interviewee present at the time of the interview. In these latter, the interviews resembled a focus group insofar as interviewees were discussing points of interest guided by me as the interviewer.

I approached the interviewees as co-members in the protests. A combination of snowball and convenience sampling approaches was taken: interviewees were asked if their friends and acquaintances would participate in the interview. At times, co-present persons became interested in the interviews and approached me directly.

The interviewees were students, student activists, and 1 faculty member. They were diverse in their regional origin and apparent socio-economic backgrounds. The interviews ranged from 15 minutes to just over an hour in length and were captured on a recording device. They were conducted in English, Telugu, and Hindi-Urdu, and often, flexibly traversing these languages. Topics ranged from their views about the contemporary prevalence of caste, its various manifestations, and possible means of addressing the caste system.

Reflexivity

I am a Brahmin by birth. Although I'm not a practicing Hindu, my social situation as that of a Brahmin is salient, given my family's position and wider social organization in India and beyond. My caste privilege has allowed me immense socio-cultural and economic capital. I have had a longstanding interest in understanding and attempting to eradicate caste-based social order in India and its diaspora. The death of Rohit Vemula was a significant moment as it brought to light the prevalence of caste in an elite educational institution. I wanted to understand how it is that those in the university, in the first instance, make sense of caste and casteism. In conducting the interviews, I was conscious not to seek out and make connections between one's caste identity and their responses. None of the researchers were asked about their caste identities

or affiliations; these were made relevant in 15 of these interviews. At the same time, my identity as a Brahmin male was never explicitly stated. However, my position as a possible 'upper' caste member is extremely likely to be relevant in these interactions and conversations about caste will proceed along this identity gradient.

Coding

The interviews covered a range of topics related to caste, casteism, and protests. Interviews resembled discussions that were guided by the interview schedule (see Appendix I). For this study, I focused on those instances where interview identities were salient in articulating their positions on caste and casteism. Interviews were coded for specific practices such as identity construction and negotiation, descriptions and accounts of discrimination, and denials of casteism. These were guided by the specific interview questions. These instances were transcribed in line with the Jeffersonian transcription system (see Appendix II) (Jefferson, 1991; Poland, 2020) to enable a fine-grained discursive analysis. The study received Ethical Approval from the relevant university body's research ethics committee.

Analytical Procedure

The data were analyzed using discursive psychology (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008; Potter & Edwards, 2001), which focused on analyzing interview interactions as constructing specific versions of the caste system and speaker identities in ways that accomplished specific social actions in the context of these interviews (McKinlay & McVittie, 2011). Potter and Hepburn (2005) argue that interview data are saturated by social science categories and understandings. This, however, can be used to examine how some of these categories are understood by participants themselves (Sacks, 1995). In the present case, then, interview data were examined for how caste was oriented to as implicating interview identities. The analysis focused on the construction, ascription, and negotiation of specific caste identities for the interviewer and interviewees, and the social actions accomplished in the context of these interviews (McKinlay & McVittie, 2011). Alongside this, the analysis considered the potential concerns interviewees might have in talking about casteism as a form of prejudice (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Goodman, 2014). The analysis then closely attended to issues of managing possibly prejudiced talk (Sambaraju & McVittie, 2021). In so doing, the analysis examines discursive practices by which identities are implicated and subsequently negotiated in talk about caste and casteism.

Analysis

The findings are organized into three sections: outside of 'caste', explaining casteism, and comparing outcomes to indicate casteism. Across these three sections, a central concern is with how caste-related identities are treated as salient for negotiating

positions on caste, articulating casteism in education, and, interestingly, ostensible challenges to caste and casteism.

Outside of 'Caste'

In the extracts below, the interviewees treat the awareness of caste as a matter of concern. Initially, in Extracts 1 and 2, interviewees present themselves as having realized about casteism only recently. In both cases, the interviewees offer some information about themselves in ways to indicate the out-of-the-ordinary nature of Rohit Vemula's death and related casteism. Interviewees make their upbringings and social backgrounds salient to indicate that their lives are outside the caste system. Instead, interviewees develop accounts of their identities that moderate their relationship to their claims about caste and its persistence.

Extract 1 comes from an interview with a female student, and Extract 2 is from an interview with another female student. The two extracts are presented together to highlight how interviewees treat their identities as relevant in articulating their positions on caste. Both extracts are at the beginning of the interview recording.

1 – Realizing Casteism

- 1 IR So:: what are your eh thoughts on caste
1.0
- 2 IE uh eeh till I came to this university I never really believe that caste is an issue in
3 this country
- 4 IR yea
- 5 IE in my place people don't differentiate on the basis of caste (())
- 6 IR wh- which er which is s your place
- 7 IE Kerala

2–'Not' Having to Think about Caste

- 1 IR so:: eh what are your thoughts on caste
(.8)
- 2 IE Honestly up until now I hadn't had much thought about it because I'm a I'm an
3 upper middle class girl (()) never had to think about it and I'm a Christian so::
- 4 IR Hmm
- 5 IE for me: it was something that I always read in my textbook I NEver had to think
6 about (.) caste up until now
- 7 IR hmmh

In both extracts, the interviewer starts with a similar question, although it varies in its delivery. The question is noteworthy since, in attempting to initiate a discussion on 'caste', it carries implications for the interviewee (Potter & Hepburn, 2013; Sambaraju & Minescu, 2019). These could be around potentially having some form of opinion or view about castes, the caste system, and casteism, especially given that these are pervasive concerns in the Indian context. The responses are similar in both cases insofar as the interviewees offer something about themselves as implicating their relatively limited awareness of caste and casteism. Further, these are similar in treating ongoing issues of casteism on the campus and the protest as salient in their becoming aware of casteism.

In Extract 1, the interviewee directly associates their presence in the university with their awareness of the scale of the caste problem in India. This is supported by differentiating her presence in the university from another place that she had been before: 'in my place' (line 5). This latter place is described in relatively favorable terms, suggesting the absence of casteism: 'people don't differentiate on the basis of caste'. Her belonging to this place—place identity (Dixon & Durrheim, 2004)—is treated as a reason for her novelty in encountering caste and its problematic manifestations. This, of course, is notable and, in many ways, contrasts with the proximal events in the university and widespread casteism across much of India. It is this that the interviewer takes up at line 6: 'which is your place'. The response – 'Kerala' – is treated as sufficient, and the interview proceeds further.

In Extract 2, the interviewee starts with an 'honesty-phrase' (Edwards & Fasulo, 2006) we examine parenthetical uses of honesty phrases (HPs, which mitigates possible undermining of her position. The position she takes is noteworthy for indicating an absence of engagement with caste, which might indicate a range of possible inferences about her, such as that she is immune to problematic outcomes of caste or is perhaps unaware of matters about Indian society. Her subsequent account then mitigates such inferences through claims about herself. First, she claims for herself a class-based identity: 'I'm an upper middle class girl' (lines 2-3). This identity is treated as implicating a distance from caste-consciousness or awareness: 'never had to think about' caste (Sambaraju & Singh, 2024). The use of the extreme case formulation¹ (Pomerantz, 1986) ('never') indicates that immunity from caste concerns is related to her class identity. Second, she claims for herself a religious identity—'I'm a Christian'—which again is treated as distancing herself from considering caste. This latter connection is given at line 5, where caste concerns are constructed as esoteric matters that were only distantly relevant. All this, however, is contrasted with current goings-on where concerns of caste are primary: 'up until now'. In doing so, the interviewee treats concerns over caste as not so distant as they were earlier and presents herself

¹Extreme case formulations are discursive devices that formulate the extreme-ness of an event, action, or entity to address issues of accountability. The emphasis on the scale of what is being described treat it as routine and normal in ways that removes the need for an explanation (Pomerantz, 1986).

as engaging with caste and casteism. In response, the interviewer allows for the production of the subsequent account without explicitly asking for further information.

Two points are noteworthy: first, interviewees' avowals of caste-awareness are about the problematic aspects of caste and caste identities, instead of caste pride or glory. Second, interviewees' accounts indicate a distance from such problematic aspects of caste: they do not present themselves as in any way the perpetrators or targets of casteism. Together, their claims served as implicit reasons why their lives were removed from the atrocities of caste.

In both cases, the interviewees treat 'caste' and caste group membership as something that is external and is only received as information at some point in their lives, in that it is not immediately, readily, or naturally an aspect of one's life. Specifically, caste and related casteism are offered as problematic features that have only now become apparent. This relates to what Jogdand (2017) has identified as 'caste-blindness'. In doing so, interviewees treated themselves as possibly accountable for casteism.

Explaining Casteism

In the two extracts in this section, interviewees offer explanations of casteism. In Extract 3, the interviewee treats the state or a broader society as a source of 'caste labels' and identities, which then result in continued oppression. In contrast, the interviewee in Extract 4 nominates the use of reservations as the reason offered for discrimination, while treating this as inexplicable. In both cases, the interviewees are concerned with treating social status as derived from caste as bound to casteism. Extract 3 below comes from an interview with a male student.

3— 'Caste' Identity as the Problem

- 1 IR caste meedha mee abhiprayam enti
- 2 *what are your views on caste*
- 3 IE caste ante:: na tenth class varaku teelidu saar naaku caste ane
- 4 *caste means for me until tenth standard I did not know caste only*
- 5 *daani indians ki mostly k-valaa caste entanedi teliidu*
- 6 *to Indians mostly their caste they don't know*
- 7 IR hmm
- 8 IE kevalam governmentuu unna paristhi thulu maatrame phalana vyakthini
- 9 *only government and surrounding circumstances that this particular person*
- 10 *phalana caste ani cheppi*
- 11 *is of this particular caste they say*
- 12 IR R: hmmm
- 13 IE antanni anaga tokkuthunnai

- 14 *and oppressing them*
- 15 IR hmm
- 16 IE kevalam dannu valla maatrame ee voo ee caste naada anduvalla nenu:: ila
- 17 *only for this reasons this is my caste so I have to be*
- 18 undala ila undaala ani cheppi vallaku vallu classifications icheesukuntunarru
- 19 *like this like that they themselves give classifications to themselves*
- 20 IR hm
- 21 IE ade caste ana padam vaadiki teliyaka pote
- 22 *but then the term caste if he (diminutive) didn't know*
- 23 IR hmm-mm
- 24 IE ataniki teliyaka pote
- 25 *he did not know*
- 26 IR hmm
- 27 IE antanu free ga andharilo samanatva svechayanadige aavanni
- 28 *he will freely be others on equal terms with freedom and all that*
- 29 fulfill avuthaai kada
- 30 *will be fulfilled right*

The generic opening question at line 1 is being asked in the context of a protest against casteism. It is then unlikely that the response is going to wholly endorse caste, caste hierarchies, or casteist practices. Above, however, the interviewee constructs the concept of 'caste' in ways to treat it as accountable for further oppression. As such, it is a hard account to deliver (Potter, 1996).

The interviewee, at lines 2-3, constructs caste identities as not naturally familiar. This is done in two ways: one is to claim their awareness of caste as arriving much later in life—'10th standard'—by which time individuals are routinely 15-16 years of age. This late awareness of caste is not treated as unusual or in need of further account by the interviewer, indicating a known-in-common aspect of caste identification for the present interaction. This much is similar to accounts given in Extracts 1 and 2, where interviewees similarly indicated an unawareness of caste. Here, however, this is used to call for the removal of caste names and identities from public awareness. The second is to make a generalized claim about 'most Indians,' asserting that they are unaware of their caste, developing consensus (Potter, 1996). Together, these points suggest a possible imposition of caste and caste identities in the Indian context. At line 5, the 'government' and unspecified 'surrounding circumstances' are nominated as those that impose caste identities on individuals. In doing so, the interviewee is developing an account that treats caste identification as external to the individual instead of an identity that is willingly chosen or is 'natural' to the individual (Pal, 2023).

More specifically, the interviewee constructs the interrelations between caste identity and casteism as arising from the actions of external sources like the Government.

This much is in common with research that treats oppressed caste identities and casteism as being internalized by those in ‘lower’ caste groups (Bros, 2014; Jodhka, 2004; Jogdand, 2024). These outcomes are broadly treated as ‘oppression’ (line 8), which comprises constraints on how to behave (lines 10-11). The interviewee treats the imposition of caste identities as meaning that individuals now act in line with the expected norms of caste groups. A possible inference here is that protests such as the one that was going on in the background can be seen as merely arising from one’s caste identity instead of legitimate actions for justice. However, this is not explicitly spelled out by the interviewee.

The interviewee’s quasi-anthropological account treats the prevalence of caste names and classifications as reasons for distinct forms of actions and oppression. It is in this frame that the interviewee suggests the removal of the term/concept of ‘caste’ as a means of addressing oppression and exclusion. At lines 15-18, they offer outcomes of the absence of caste names in highly favorable terms: ‘freely be with others on equal terms,’ ‘with freedom,’ and ‘all that.’ This three-part listing (Jefferson, 1990) of ostensibly highly favorable outcomes is notable for collectively giving inferences about the absence of oppression and exclusion. The interviewee then treats identification with caste groups as implicating specific actions, behaviors, and expectations, which can lead to problems, instead of what is widely acknowledged as the reason, namely, societal oppression based on caste. Instead, these were constructed as ways of identification that are achieved, which could be used to call for abandoning caste labels.

In Extract 4, the interviewee’s description of casteism in education brings up the salience of the possibility for members in specific caste groups to make use of reservations provided by the state. Extract 4 comes from an interview with a male student interviewee. The discussion below comes after a discussion on the role of caste in daily life.

4—Reservations as Reasons for Hate

- 1

IR

education lo ee prakaram etlanti:: role play chestadi caste
in education what type of role does caste play
- 2

IE

oka chaduvllonnalla kante education system lo chaala
those without education it is within education system that there is an extreme
- 3

ghoram aina paristhiti undi ippudu present (.) adi:: explain kuda cheyalemu
horrible situation at present (.) this cannot even be explained
- 4

IR

right
- 5

IE

prati vishayam lo
in every facet
- 6

IR

ah

- 7 IE reservation osthundani prati reservation osthundi ani chepi prathi okkariki
that we have reservation every that we have reservation everyone
- 8 kullu professorslaki students ki prathi varganiki :: adi kullo kopamo
has envy professors students every section either its envy or hate
- 9 dveshamo maakaithe telvadu gaani (.) nenu neenaithe bear cheyyaleka
or disgust we don't know but (.) I I cannot bear it anymore
- 10 pothunna ikkada situation ()) ga bear cheyyaleka pothunna
situation here ((unclear)) cannot bear it anymore
- 11 IR right

The interviewer's question is on the relevance of caste in 'education,' given that protests are taking place at a university regarding caste-based discrimination in higher education. The response setup is an account of such matters. In response, the interviewee frames the goings-on 'within the education system' as much worse than outside the education system. This is developed through describing casteism in higher education as 'extreme' and 'horrible,' alongside avowing an inability to fully articulate the horribleness of casteism in education (cf. Jogdand, 2017; Mukherjee et al., 2024). The extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986)—'every facet'—treats it as routine and evident that caste pervades the education system. Researchers have argued that the expectation that education settings are expected to be 'fair' and 'equitable' compounds experiences of casteism (Pathania et al., 2024).

The reason for this is given in terms of who the targets of discrimination are: 'those who have reservation.' For the interactants and more widely, it is available that reservations are for those who identify as backward or other forms of marginalized caste groups (Bros, 2014; Chauhan, 2008; Pal, 2015, 2020). The availing of reservations is then a means to address some of the structural and historical injustices (Basu, 2021; Borooah et al., 2007; Weisskopf, 2004).

At lines 7-9, the interviewee constructs availing reservation as the reason for a range of university-relevant actors to engage in problematic actions and views towards those who make use of reservations. These actors are described in a three-part list format (Jefferson, 1990): 'professors,' 'students,' and 'every section.' The last item in the list works as a list completer, which here works to treat it as routine that those who make use of reservations are targeted. The role of these actors is relevant as it connects casteism in education settings with the specific form of identity being offered, namely that of those who can access reservations. This description makes it salient that the issue is that of merit.

Similarly, the form of targeting is given in the form of a three-part list: 'envy,' 'hate,' or 'disgust.' These together indicate an extremely problematic disposition towards those who make use of reservations. Juxtaposed to this is the avowal that the reasons for this are not known. In doing so, the interviewee constructs making use of reservations as inexplicably the target of discrimination (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019;

Mukherjee et al., 2024; Thorat, 2006). What is conveyed, however, is the extremeness of casteism that the interviewee personally experiences as given by a shift from a broader 'we' to a more personal 'I'. Possible reasons that might involve the actions, behaviors, or features related to biological aspects are avoided in place of the more societal organization of caste in Indian society (Kumar, 2016; Pathania & Tierney, 2018). In that, the interviewee treats these other possible reasons as unrelated to casteism in higher education settings over that of reservations.

Comparison of Caste Groups to Indicate Casteism

In the two extracts below, interviewees are concerned with articulating how casteism manifests in education settings. These were selected for analysis because here the interviewees make salient their own caste identities and caste group membership as central to describing casteism in higher education. In other interviews, interviewees similarly highlighted the role of preferential treatment to non-Dalits.

In the extract below, an explication of casteism is given in terms of contrasting issues for those who are Dalit and those who are not. The extract below comes from an interview with a female student interviewee. The interaction comes after discussions on the role of caste in daily life.

5–Casteism as Access

- 1 IR what what do you think of how caste is involved in higher education
- 2 IE caste is involved in many levels like
- 3 IR right
- 4 IE one example which I can give is like uhh when I uh I studi I studied my MA and
- 5 MPhil here in this university and now I do my PhD in IIT Bombay so::
- 6 IR hmmh
- 7 IE uh one thing I have always observed in both these departments is that uh when
- 8 when lower caste students joined when Dalit students join here
- 9 IR hmmh
- 10 IE th uh they take it takes time for them to get a supervisor find a supervisor
- 11 IR right right
- 12 IE so:: the system here is like you have to go to go and talk to the supervisor and if
- 13 the supervisor is interested in your topic then they will give the consent that
- 14 IR hm
- 15 IE to supervise you but sometimes what happens is like upper caste people I'm an upper
- 16 caste myself >i have to say that< so: um we get uh supervisors easily hmm

In response to the question, the interviewee gives an example of how caste is involved in education settings. Noteworthy here is that this account is given as a first-person account arising from the interviewees' access to information either from

experience or otherwise (cf. Sambaraju, 2025). This is offered after the assertion that 'caste is involved in many levels' (line 2), and so the example is designed to support this assertion. The example starts with a description of their proximity and access to information about the university where the instance of casteism is situated: 'When I uh I studi I studied my MA and MPhil here in this university' (lines 3-4). These descriptions involve claims that indicate proximity to goings-on at the university (Sambaraju & Minescu, 2019). However, it is not merely their educational status or experience that is implicated in their oncoming description of casteism (cf. Sambaraju, 2025). Instead, the interviewee develops the salience of caste group membership in describing casteism.

Based on such entitlement to access relevant happenings, the interviewee describes issues for 'Dalit' and 'lower caste' students in finding a supervisor for their academic work: 'when Dalit students join here'. While this in and of itself might not be problematic, it is the comparison with another category of students—'upper caste'—that the interviewee treats as a problem (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1999). The descriptions of the problem involve other categories like 'supervisor' and the implicated 'student' in the context of higher education. Such use makes salient normative expectations of rights and entitlements that operate across members in these categories, such as giving supervision so long as the topic of study is of interest (Sacks, 1992; Jayyusi, 1984). Specifically, at lines 12-15, the interviewee describes routine ways of accessing a supervisor. Ascribed to these categories are expected activities, such as when 'students' approach a supervisor and 'if the supervisor is interested' they accept the student. Potential difficulties in finding a supervisor can then be ascribed to a lack of fit between the proposed project and the supervisor's interests or some issues with the student, such as their calibre, or so on.

It is here that the interviewee's avowals of being an 'upper caste' person and assertions about the relative ease with which other students from similar caste groups gain access to supervisors is given. Moreover, the interviewee is careful to locate these instances in the present university: 'when Dalit students join here' (line 8). This aligns with their claims about closeness to this institution, across courses and departments, and so is sufficient in describing casteism. Despite this, the interviewee expressly categorizes herself as an 'upper caste' person in a notable manner: 'I have to say that' (line 14). This identity avowal is noteworthy because it comes in a position where she is describing the relative ease of accessing supervisors. In doing so, the interviewee introduces the alternative categorization of caste as a means of making clear that the reason for the relative ease of access is because of caste group membership and not other possibilities. The interviewee's avowal of their identity indicates casteism.

Pal (2023) has argued that a focus on social comparisons, such as 'downward comparisons' made by 'upper' caste members, might be of benefit in examining caste and casteism. Above, we see that such comparisons are made to demonstrate the forms of discrimination in higher education.

In Extract 6, two sets of comparisons are made to point to casteism and then to indicate possibilities for challenge. Extract 6 comes from an interview with a male

student interviewee. The discussion below comes after a discussion on the role of caste in daily life. This interview involved 3 male students as interviewees. The focus here is again on reservations, and caste-based reservations are uniquely targeted for discrimination.

6–Casteism and Merit

- 1 IR yes yes (.) what do you think about uh the role of caste in higher education
 2 IE as he said uh broadly I would agree with that point uh
 3 IR okay
 4 IE the moment if I I perform badly in the exam they'll say teekh hai aapne teekh se
 5 padhai nai kiya padhai karlo
okay you maybe did not study well enough
 6 IR right
 7 IE try your level best
 8 IR ya
 9 IE but suppose they know that I am from the backward caste or Dalit group or ST
 10 who has somehow got reservation
 11 IR ah
 12 IE they immediately attach me with that uh idea oh ye tho reservation se aaye hai
he is here because of reservations
 13 IR right right
 14 IE I mean I also want to ask them do you do that when you army reservation candidate
 15

In response to the interviewer's question about caste in higher education, the interviewee treats their response as broadly in agreement with an earlier response from another interviewee. This, however, is expanded at lines 4-10 through a description of a hypothetical but routine instance of casteist discrimination in education. This involves drawing a comparison between how the interviewee, as not a 'lower' caste person, is treated with how a 'Dalit' person might be treated in case of a bad performance on an 'exam'. In his case, the interviewee ascribes a position to teachers regarding a bad performance, which position exculpates the interviewee: 'maybe you did not study well enough' (lines 4-5). This position does not treat it as a dispositional feature of the interviewee that their exam performance was not up to the mark. In that, their non-Dalit status is treated as a reason for attributing to them generic abilities in achievement.

This is contrasted with a response given to a student from 'backward caste or Dalit group or ST' background, all of which are considered as 'lower' castes or groups and are accorded reservations. The use of these three caste groups is bound with the feature of having access to reservations. In this situation, the response given is that the teacher attributes their bad performance to their availing reservation, inferring that the student is perhaps not meritorious enough (Tierney & Pathania, 2018). These descriptions are

given to infer that the treatment is different based on whether the student is someone who has availed reservations and is perhaps not meritorious, and those who are (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019).

The interviewee, however, offers another instance of reservations, given for those whose parents had served in the Indian armed forces, as possibly involving similar forms of adjustments for 'merit'. This is done in ways to indicate that those who avail this type of reservation are perhaps not treated as less meritorious in contrast to those who come from caste groups. In doing so, the interviewee indicates that caste groups who avail of reservations are unique targets for discrimination in distinction to other groups that are also given reservations. This allows for inferring that discrimination based on reservation is more about caste status than merely availing reservations or supposed 'merit'. This is accomplished through bringing up their own caste identity as relative to those who are discriminated against.

In the extracts above, then, casteism is constructed as that which is structural or happening through relative dis-preference for those who are Dalits, instead of instances where Dalit and other oppressed caste group students are direct targets of casteism. In these ways, interviewees treated caste, caste group membership, and casteism as forms of societal organization in the context of higher education.

Discussion

Social psychological examination of caste identities and casteism, as Jogdand (2024) has argued, is growing but perhaps with less of a consistent trajectory. This article has taken a discursive psychological approach to examine caste identities and casteism in a specific context: interviews at a site of protest about the death of Rohit Vemula due to casteist harassment. In this context, then the issue of casteism is highly salient and interviewees' talk is likely to take place in this regard (Waghmore, 2017). The above analysis shows that for the interviewees and interviewers alike, caste as a source of identification with a caste group along a societal hierarchy is a resource in negotiating caste identification and casteism.

The findings speak to the social psychological literature on caste and broader connections between identity, group membership, and prejudice (Sharma & Jogdand, 2024; Mukherjee et al., 2024; Pathania et al., 2023). The findings show that there are unique benefits to examining talk about caste or 'caste-talk'. In distinction to research inspired by traditional social psychological theories like that done by Sharma and Jogdand (2024) or proposed by Pal (2024), the effort here has been to examine caste and caste identities in terms of individuals' descriptions and experiences (Fatima et al., 2024).

In line with the core tenets of discursive psychology (Potter, 2021), constructions of caste identities and the negotiation of membership in caste groups were examined for how these were developed and used. Caste identities were occasioned: these were constructed, claimed, softened, and negotiated in specific instances in the service of specific actions. Of specific interest here is the salience of caste identities in ways to

negotiate interviewees' positions vis-à-vis casteism. Interviewees constructed caste as a means of deriving their and others' identities while managing their relation to casteism. The first two extracts are instances where the interviewees offered accounts that treated themselves as distant from casteism and identification based on caste. This managed their accountability for casteism on their campus—they were not aware of caste hierarchies and so could not notice casteism. In Extracts 3 and 4, interviewees attributed casteism to an acceptance of caste labels (cf. Jodhka, 2004; Thapa et al., 2021) or making use of state-accorded reservations (Sukumar, 2023; Thorat, 2006). In both cases, caste identities were derived from aspects external to the individual. Notably, however, the acceptance of caste labels was identified as a problem in arguing for the eradication of caste labels and not caste hierarchies.

In Extracts 5 and 6, casteism was an explicit topic. In both cases, interviewees presented themselves as 'upper' caste persons who are not direct targets of casteism. However, their identities were again constructed and offered in ways to describe how casteism unfolds in higher education, even though they were not direct targets of casteism. Notably, these did not involve ascribing attitudes or problematic dispositions to those perpetrating casteism. Much research in social psychology on racial and anti-migrant prejudice has shown the pervasive denials of prejudice and discrimination (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Goodman, 2014; Sambaraju & McVittie, 2021). Relatedly, there are difficulties targets face in reporting prejudice (Essed, 1991; Sambaraju, 2022, 2025). Present findings then relate to these insofar as the articulation of casteism involved constructing specific forms of caste identities, which related to inferences about merit. Previous research has shown how affirmative actions for Aboriginal peoples of Australia were rejected for disturbing meritocracy (Augoustinos et al., 2005). Across these accounts of casteism (Extracts 4-6), it is reservations that are used as a means of categorizing caste groups, as meritorious or not. This last set of findings resonates with much research that identifies how reservations are routinely offered as reasons for casteism (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019; Thorat, 2006; Sukumar, 2023).

Overall, a notable aspect of the construction of caste identities is their societal valence. For interviewees, caste identities are external, unfamiliar, imposed, or bound to state policies of reservation. These versions, of course, are neither completely accurate nor fully inaccurate. Instead, these are constructed in the context of these interviews to accomplish specific interactional tasks, such as managing accountability for casteism, explaining casteism so that the fault is with making salient caste identities, or demonstrating that casteism in higher education is bound to unique aspects of education, like finding a supervisor and assessment outcomes. Caste groups and their membership are treated not merely as inner psychological constructs or feelings of belonging, but as a means to make salient and negotiate one's social relations with institutions, social structures, and other social groups (Jogdand, 2024). It is through these relations that privilege for those in the 'upper' caste and discrimination against those in the 'lower' caste groups or Dalits is affirmed, negotiated, and possibilities for challenge articulated (cf. Pal, 2024; Pathania et al., 2023).

The very social nature of caste hierarchies was then treated as a resource and constraint in locating oneself vis-à-vis caste. All of this suggests that for the interlocutors here, accounting for casteism meant addressing and making explicit that caste identities and group membership are socially accomplished outcomes. In line with the arguments of Pathania et al (2023), I have demonstrated that caste identities, especially for Dalits, are constructed along soci(et)al dimensions, such as one's class, religious, and geographical position, or state-related policies, in ways that inform their negotiations about their positions on casteism.

In the context of a protest against the caste-related death of Rohit Vemula, likely, responses and those who were willing to participate in the interview will give accounts that do not perhaps privilege their 'upper' caste identities. This carries two implications: first, despite the possible constraint of the protest and a research interview, interviewees could and did oppose reservations and rejected caste consciousness as the problem instead of casteism. Second, is that articulations of caste group membership, caste identities, and casteism are necessarily always context-bound. This again will take place in respect of the more immediate context of the research interview and the proximal context of the protest. Of course, this does not mean that caste or casteism is limited to specific settings or interactions. In contrast, specific manifestations of caste and casteism are salient for specific contexts.

These findings raise interesting implications for studying caste identities. First, this aligns with the more recent calls to examine the 'everydayness' of caste and caste identities, which might reveal the fluidity of caste identification and possibilities for anti-caste activism (Fatima et al., 2024). What it perhaps surprisingly shows is that caste identities are relational, generated in relation to other identities and the focus of interaction. Second, the findings show that caste identities can be a resource to demonstrate and explicate casteism. Third, in distinction to work on casteism in higher education (Pathania, 2016; Sukumar, 2023), the findings here show that the recognizability of casteism is informed by caste identities that individuals can claim and negotiate. Future work can further this engagement with understanding caste in its varied manifestations.

Limitations and Conclusions

The study was an interview study grounded in a specific context, namely, protests in the aftermath of the death of Rohith Vemula. As such, it focused more on broader topics around caste and not particularly on how individuals might perceive caste-based violence (Pal, 2016), experiences of caste-based discrimination (Jogdand, 2017; Sharma and Subramanyam, 2020), or opposition to reservation policies (Thorat, 2006). Further, as interviews conducted by an upper-middle-class Brahmin interviewer, these are bound to be specific to those constraints. Nevertheless, the emic focus of the analysis means that the findings are limited to the orientations of participants in the situated setting in which they find themselves. It is from within this context that the present findings are to be considered.

To conclude, the article examines how individuals themselves claim, ascribe, or negotiate caste identities. The examination shows that caste identities are claimed in ways to proffer, describe, and negotiate how caste is pervasive in our lives and the possibilities for challenging it. Instead of promoting or suppressing caste identities, the research here shows how the pervasiveness of caste is bound to its capacities to allow us to derive a sense of who we and others are.

Appendix I – Interview schedule

- 1) What are your thoughts on caste in India?
(caste meedha mee abhiprayam enti?)
- 2) What do you think of caste in everyday life?
(rooju jeevithamlo caste meedha mee abhipraayam enti?)
- 3) And, in higher education?
(mari education leka campuses lo?)
- 4) What are your thoughts on protests?
(protests meedha mee abhiprayam enti?)
- 5) Do you think protests might address these issues?
(mee prakaram protests valla ee vishayalu emaina marocha?)
- 6) What are your thoughts on political agents and their actions to address this?
(politicians inka valla panula paina mee abhiprayam enti?)
- 7) In your opinion, what is the role of the Government in addressing caste issues?
(mee prakaram, prabhutvam emi cheyochu ee vishayam lo?)
- 8) Would you say this is irrespective of any political party in power?
(mee prakaram, prabhutvam lo ee party unna vishayalu elane untaya?)
- 9) What are your thoughts on student actions and activities on caste-related issues?
(caste vishayala meeda vidyarthulu cheese panula meeda mee abhiprayam enti?)
- 10) Do you think student-led actions are useful?
(mee prakaram vidyarthulu cheese panula valla emanna avoccha?)
- 11) In your opinion, what other actors and their actions would be relevant?
(mee prakaram, vidyarthulu kaakunda inkee veere vaari actions kuuda ikkada varthisthaayi?)
- 12) Is there anything else you would like to add?
(meeru inkemaana cheppa dalchukunnara?)

Appendix II - Jeffersonian Notation

Symbol	Name	Use
[text]	Brackets	Indicates the start and end points of overlapping speech.
=	Equal Sign	Indicates the break and subsequent continuation of a single interrupted utterance.
(# of seconds)	Timed Pause	A number in parentheses indicates the time, in seconds, of a pause in speech.
(.)	Micropause	A brief pause, usually less than 0.2 seconds.
. or ↓	Period or Down Arrow	Indicates falling pitch.
? or ↑	Question Mark or Up Arrow	Indicates rising pitch.
,	Comma	Indicates a temporary rise or fall in intonation.
-	Hyphen	Indicates an abrupt halt or interruption in utterance.
>text<	Greater than / Less than symbols	Indicates that the enclosed speech was delivered more rapidly than usual for the speaker.
<text>	Less than / Greater than symbols	Indicates that the enclosed speech was delivered more slowly than usual for the speaker.
°	Degree symbol	Indicates whisper or reduced volume speech.
ALL CAPS	Capitalized text	Indicates shouted or increased volume speech.
underline	Underlined text	Indicates the speaker is emphasizing or stressing the speech.
:::	Colon(s)	Indicates prolongation of an utterance.
(hhh)		Audible exhalation
? or (.hhh)	High Dot	Audible inhalation
(text)	Parentheses	Speech which is unclear or in doubt in the transcript.
((italic text))	Double Parentheses	Annotation of non-verbal activity.

Jeffersonian Transcription Notation is described in Jefferson, G. (2004). Glossary of transcript symbols with an introduction. In G.H. Lerner (Ed.). *Conversation analysis: Studies from the first generation* (pp. 13-31). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

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