

Reproduction of Caste Privilege in Elite Educational Institutions

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Abstract

This article, embedded in empirical work in two colleges of a central university in Delhi, focuses on how caste privilege is legitimized and reproduced within elite higher educational institutions. Unlike non-elite educational institutions, these spaces claim to anchor themselves in notions of social justice and equity. These institutions claim progressive pedagogical processes, meanwhile obscuring upper caste dominance in college as well as in the curriculum. Scholarly insistence on looking at caste only as a form of marginality within the discourse of education also conceals the way in which *caste privilege* is reproduced through curriculum as well as college culture. The paper also centres absence of caste in curricula and how dominant epistemology sidelines caste-critical knowledge. Taking critical caste theory as a theoretical framework, the study aims to look at caste relationally to explain how students navigate these institutions.

Keywords

Caste, Privilege, Higher Education, Critical Caste Theory, Curriculum, Capital

Introduction

Shagun,² 18 years old, is a Dalit³ student in a college at a central university in Delhi. I interviewed him in February 2024 on his college campus. He wears big spectacles, is fashionable and speaks fluent English. He is part of a queer collective in college and is assertive of his Dalit identity. When asked about his experience in college, he painfully describes how his hope from college died the very first day. He reminisces the day of the

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³The term Dalit refers to a community of people in India who have been historically marginalized and were considered outside the fourfold caste hierarchy. Etymologically, the term translates to oppressed. However, Ambedkarite groups have reclaimed the term to assert their identity.

orientation when some of the students called him *Chakka* (a derogatory term used for transgender persons or non-heteronormative men) only because he sported long hair. He shared another incident in which a student sneeringly asked him, '*tum jaise kitne mein bikte hai.*' [how much do you charge for your sexual services]. When I queried the caste of those students and whether they were aware of his caste identity, Shagun confirmed them as mostly upper castes and OBCs and the person who made the latter remark was aware of his identity. Derogatory utterances hurled towards a Dalit person are also a way of asserting one's masculinity rooted in caste superiority. This is one of several other instances of experiences of Dalit, tribal and minority students across spaces of higher education. As crude a form of humiliation as the vignette above might not be a common occurrence in elite educational institutions, however, subtle forms of discrimination and humiliation continue to persist. (Kumar, 2016).

This is where my research question also emerged from. There is vast scholarly work delineating marginalized students' experience in elite educational institutions and subsequent humiliation and exclusion (Sukumar, 2023; Sharma, 2019; Kumar, 2021; Donald, 2019; Kumar, 2016; Deshpande, 2006). Academic work on privileged students, in terms of caste, has been sparse in the Indian context (Pathania and Tierney, 2018). However, there is an increased interest in understanding privileged students' *habitus* and the way it helps them stride through college. Western scholarship has dealt with reproduction of elite lives and elite institutions as engines of inequality (Khan, 2012). In her recent work, Subramanian (2019) traces the trajectory of engineering students and how their proclaimed merit is, in fact, rooted in caste privilege. She situates her work in an engineering college in South India which is popularly called 'Iyer-Iyengar¹ Technology' because of the predominance of a brahmin student body. Subramanian argues that the institution known for its academic excellence does not however make any claims regarding its inclusive nature. Affirmative policies within the institution are seen as regressive, something which hampers national growth. She looks at merit, traces its genealogy and how it has been situated in the Indian context, especially when it comes to affirmative policies, and explores how upper caste students' *habitus* reproduces their lives as modern casteless beings who reach premier institutions and consider it a result of their merit. Nonetheless, scholarly work on caste privilege in the context of institutions which are known primarily for their social science courses becomes difficult, as well as interesting because of the values such institutions claim to uphold. Students are trained in ideas of social justice and are aware of politically correct vocabulary. What needs to be seen is whether those ideas translate into academic and cultural praxis. Privilege has been understudied in the Indian context, caste privilege more so. Thus, this is a probable opening which, I argue, needs to be engaged with.

This article, a descriptive narrative, is based on empirical work which considers the social, educational and economic background of students of elite educational institutions to see if it helps them navigate college. Taking inspiration from Critical

¹Two brahmin communities living predominantly in Tamil Nadu, India

Caste Studies,² I aim to look at caste relationally. In my work, I intend to reverse the epistemic gaze to understand reproduction of privilege in spaces of higher education. Critical Caste Studies and Bourdieu's trifecta of *capital*, *habitus* and *field* inform my understanding of how power is played out in the context of higher education in general and elite educational institutions in particular.

There is a myriad of literature cataloguing the paradoxical character of higher education. Even though it promises mobility especially to hitherto oppressed groups, it continues to disguise ways in which it leads to structural inequalities. Higher education in general and elite educational institutions in particular have been spaces which reproduce privilege (Khan, 2011; Howard and Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2010; Maxwell, 2015; Van Zanten, 2015) while simultaneously claiming to favour excellence and merit. Merit as a category has been unpacked and dismantled to unveil a synthesis of social, cultural and economic capital (Khan and Jerolmack, 2012) which supposedly produces a meritorious student. However, the term still hasn't lost its constituency and continues to surface during debates around the efficacy of policies regarding affirmative actions (Deshpande, 2006; Iliaah, 2006; Subramanian, 2019). The importance of looking at elite educational institutions as exclusionary spaces or as spaces which reproduce caste privilege lies in the fact that these institutions symbolize (or higher education in general) as gateways of aspirations, mobility and success. Narratives of progress, equality (especially after implementation of affirmative actions in admission/ recruitments and seemingly increased visibility of students coming from historically oppressed backgrounds), open dialogue, social justice, etc., continue to revolve around such institutions even after a sustained critique, both academic and political, overturning the same (Guru, 2002; Kumar, 2016; Mahanad, 2016; Madhukar, 2016).

Method

I use the term elite for the institutions I traversed not only because of their high National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) ranking but also because of their respective institutional histories. I chose a central university's two colleges which I would refer to as college A and college B. As part of a qualitative research framework with an ethnographic sensibility, I spoke to students who largely came from affluent, upper caste backgrounds with necessary cultural capital to not only know how to gain admission in elite colleges but also how to traverse the terrain comfortably. Exclusive practices during school, as Bhopal and Myers (2023) note, guaranteed their progression into elite universities. They further note how socialization during school years plays a significant role in preparing students for college. Using Bourdieu's framework of field

²Critical Caste Studies (CCS henceforth) is an emerging framework which aims to expand how caste is viewed and conceptualized. Gajendran Ayyathurai (2021) underlines the importance of looking at caste relationally; firstly, as a form of domination, secondly, unpacking counter-caste practices of women, children, men and movements of subjugated Indians. The need to form a new subfield, as he claims, is because of the failure of South Asian academia to pin down caste as the "the self-privileging groups' invention and imposition of social supremacy." The field's aim is to centre caste power as well as see anti-caste, casteless praxis.

they discuss, ‘how the field of elite schools intersects with those of elite universities and by doing so maintains the status and dominance of some groups within ‘a state of power relations’ in which individuals and institutions engage in a struggle to redistribute and accumulate capitals’ (Bhopal and Myers, 2023, p. 32). Ambivalence of experience, if at all, eventually turned into a sense of belonging in college. Progression from the school to college almost seems like a natural continuation as students are prepared not only academically but in terms of extracurricular activities as well. This sense of belonging, however, did not happen for students coming from oppressed backgrounds.

Access to the field was easier as I had prior acquaintances in both the colleges. I took necessary permissions before starting the field work which started in January 2024 until March 2025. 35 interviews were in person at college campuses while the balance 10 were conducted through video conference. I spent extended periods of time in both the colleges to understand the experiential geography. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Languages used were Hindi and English. All respondents were asked beforehand if they were comfortable with their interviews being recorded. In college A, I used the snowball method to identify participants. There is, however, a limitation to this method as one may not find participants outside the circle of the current respondents. To avoid this, in college B with the help of a colleague who teaches at the same college I shared a google form with the students; asking for their caste background, their parents’ annual income and their course of study. I kept the column of caste background optional; however, all students filled it out. I also approached students in canteens, foyers and during the cultural events which helped in keeping the sample heterogenous. Since in college A, I had not shared any google form, I did not directly ask participants’ caste background during the interviews. Nonetheless, during the interview, all shared the caste background they come from, barring one participant. I primarily wanted to speak to upper caste students to understand their journeys from their respective schools to college, their experience in college and how they navigate different counters of a college life. So, I made sure that my sample size remains dense with such participants. Yet having a diverse set of samples in terms of caste helped me enrichen my analysis. The interviews were semi-structured with a set of 20 questions which ranged from asking their family background, their schooling, college experience, participation in cultural societies and their expectations from the college. Taking a cue from ethnographic methods, I wanted to situate myself within the everydayness of the college. I could inhabit the space without any constraints as I could pass off as a student. By the 40th interview, no new themes were emerging, but I did five more just to make sure data reaches saturation. The analysis was done simultaneously so that themes could be cross-checked across interviews rather than towards the end. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes. In the table below, I have mentioned the gender and caste demography of the respondents.

Total No. of Respondents	Men	Women	SC	ST	OBC	Upper Caste
45	19	25	8	5	7	22

Insider or Outsider?

I entered the field with two questions in mind as to how does one understand reproduction of caste privilege in higher education and who has access to the opportunities which the college claims to provide equally? Initially, there was a reluctance/confusion to situate myself; was I an insider any longer? Or perhaps since I left college a long time ago, am I now an outsider? Would my past experiences be still considered valid enough to understand how privilege and discrimination work relationally? This disjunction of positionality, nonetheless, helped me be cautious of how I approached the field. This liminal space, I argue, helped me to be reflexive of my potential biases, the impact that my ideological positions may have on the way I inhabit the field as well the influence my own privileged position (not only in terms of caste and class but also seniority with respect to students) may have on my work (Hamdan, 2009; Hertz, 1996; Dodgson, 2019; Pillow, 2010; Finlay, 2002).

There is always a dilemma as a researcher that knowledge which might be evident to an outsider seems mundane to me if I am part of the group I am studying. However, being an insider also opens the possibility of recognising cultural practices, gestures and lifestyles. This rhythmic trajectory between an insider and outsider (since I am no longer an undergraduate student) influences the way I situate myself as a researcher. I also try not to create a dichotomy between these two statuses as the movement between these two is almost fluid. Dwyer et al. (2009) discuss the *in-betweenness* of the position of a researcher. They urge to move beyond the dichotomy between insider-outsider to state that the duality is not simplistic. A dialectical relationship between outsider and insider status preserves the complexities of similarity and difference. The fluidity of a researcher's position as in-between outsider and insider can help comprehend the complexities of human experience. However, Asselin (2003) articulates the need of the researcher to work with their eyes open and assume that they don't know anything about the phenomena being observed. For example, during the field work I ended up taking certain comments for granted. It was later while listening to the interviews again I comprehended the intensity of seemingly banal comments. This process of continuous self-awareness, strict vigilance is what forms the foundation of a reflexive praxis in research in general and knowledge production in particular. However, I was an outsider when it came to students who came from marginalised locations. I could not say that I understood their struggles in terms of identity. Even though I could relate to their sense of alienation as I felt while I was in college. Nonetheless, my goal was to centre their voices first, by listening to them intently and second, writing their stories how they expected me to. Interpreting data did not only mean writing down their experiences in a vacuum, but to situate them in the larger anti-caste critique of institutions of higher education and gain insight into their experiences as students at elite colleges.

Researcher Positionality

All students agreed on how social and economic background affects one's access to college as well as how one navigates it. One of the things I wanted to look at was their

respective *journeys* into elite universities. I have also been trying to figure out how to place my upper caste identity within the work on caste. I also thought it to be my responsibility as an anti-caste activist to look at caste not from the lens of discrimination but from the lens of privilege. My own privileged location opens the possibility of unpacking how privilege manifests itself through institutions. My own experience in one such elite college influences the way I pose questions. My experience, both as a student with privilege in terms of caste and class, and disprivilege in terms of past lack of cultural capital, dictates the kind of questions I ask. When I say disprivilege, I mean to underscore my journey from a small town in Haryana to a premier college in Delhi. There is a duality in my experience as a person who had economic and social capital to reach Delhi from a small town, though subsequent alienation because of the absence of requisite cultural capital to navigate an elite space. Inability to speak English became a major impediment. I remember one experience where a teacher, in front of an entire class chided me for not being able to write well. What such instances do is that they mark off a student as lacking the necessary skills to be considered a good student. It did not matter if I read Anna Karenina in Punjabi, what mattered was that I did not read it in English. This duality, as I argue, of despite knowing the importance of knowing a famous book did not put me in an advantageous position as it did not follow the *rules of the game*. Such experiences, nonetheless, became the starting point of how I entered the field.

Theoretical Framework

Privilege

Privilege is often associated with something positive, something one has but is also legitimate. For instance, the privilege to attend a university of one's liking, or the privilege of getting a dream job. Privilege seems legitimate, harmless even. It is also easy to weave privilege with merit. One's 'privilege' of attending a university is then anchored in their respective merit. It is merit which helps a student accrue privileges. In a neo-liberal economy, 'individual' success becomes the benchmark against which everyone, as if a homogenous mass, is graded. Success then becomes individual. Thus, privilege is individuated. The notion that one's privileges are contingent on how much effort one puts into their work is detached from the fact that one's social position decides who has access to resources and who does not. Caste, or gender, or religion become a sieve through which those at the margins are 'filtered' out. Anti-caste, anti-race and feminist interventions have helped carve out a space where conversations around social positions' role in access to resources (or lack thereof) have been held. It is an accepted norm within identity-based movements to acknowledge one's privileges (by those who are at power positions because of their identity) to be considered an ally. It is an important exercise, one which forces an *ally* to introspect themselves and the way their privileges remain unseen.

Peggy McIntosh's (1989) work on privilege became a popular entry point to explore privilege as a conceptual category. She started with understanding unacknowledged

male privilege and the way it stays naturalized as well as invisible. She notes how her white skin earned her privileges which remain oblivious to her. Her work became an entry point into anti-racist work and the way in which oppression is hyper-visible, but privilege (gender or race-based) remains invisible. She further notes that invisibility of privilege is structurally enshrined. Privilege, in a stratified society, is—more often than not—based on ascriptive categories. Race or caste becomes the ground on which privilege as well as oppression traverse. McManimon (2021), however, argues that white privilege is not a *cause* of racial oppression but an *effect* of white supremacy, ‘a social, economic political, legal, cultural and historical construction of domination on the basis of what we now call race, enacted over hundreds of years of laws, regulations, policies, practices, and beliefs’ (p. 499). The *cause* and *effect* of white supremacy, she notes, are collapsed. She argues that the *why* of white privileges need to be kept in mind while acknowledging one’s privileges. She further posits that continuum between white supremacy and white privileges needs to be maintained. Otherwise making a check list of white privileges would be a futile exercise. It might work as a cathartic endeavour but does not do anything to end racial oppression as it reduces privileges to the individual. It is, thus, consequential to understand how privilege maintains systems of domination.

Critical Caste Studies

In the context of Indian higher education, Critical Caste Studies plays a significant role as it does not only conceptualise caste in terms of discrimination and exclusion but also privilege so as to build a continuum between caste-based privileges and caste supremacy. Caste privileges, accrued over generations, eventually not only help students with knowledge of the *rules of the game* (Bhopal and Myers, 2023) to move ahead but also tightly secure their dominant positions within the *field* (Bhopal and Myers, 2023, p. 65) of a college. Unpacking the trajectory of privilege, as McManimon (2021) notes, will help unravel systems of continued domination and power. Thus, laying bare the trajectory of caste privileges becomes a crucial exercise to how caste supremacy is consolidated.

Capital, Field and Habitus

Higher education is an important site to understand reproduction of caste privilege while also to see how elite institutions privilege the already privileged. The inequity in achievement in terms of caste can be explained with Bourdieusian trifecta of capital, field and habitus. Bourdieu describes field as a relational structure which binds agents, or people with institutions to struggle/compete to acquire resources or what he calls capitals. (Bhopal and Myers, 2023, p. 46). For instance, a playground can be understood as a field. The players compete, keeping in mind the rules of the game, to win the game (Calhoun, 2003). Education, for example, became a field, much like culture, or the housing market, etc. (Bourdieu, 1988; 1996; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Thompson, (2008, p. 69) explains field as formal or informal norms governing a sphere of activity. The individual’s habitus, and its relational dynamic

with capitals decides their position in the field. Capitals, according to Bourdieu, can be fundamentally divided into three parts—economic, social and cultural. Economic capital is convertible, social capital refers to social connections and cultural capital is embodied, objectified and institutionalized (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014). Habitus, Bourdieu explains, are dispositions of individuals with which they inhabit the world. Habitus and capitals are interrelated as a secure position within the matrix of capitals moulds one's habitus. Bourdieu's framework helps understand how privilege fundamentally relies not only on ascribed identity but also the position one inhabits in a field and vice versa. For instance, caste privilege, or lack thereof, will decide the position one inhabits in the field of education which further moulds one's dispositions. The importance lies in not to look at these concepts as separate but as interrelated.

Contextualizing the Field

When I decided my field location, I was sure of what I would do. I thought I knew the kind of students there would be, I was expecting upper caste, visibly rich, English-speaking students strutting with confidence. However, the college as an institution had changed. The 'arrogance of entitlement', as Khan (2010) puts it, was replaced with an 'ease of privilege' (p. 10). This was an indication to reflexively unpack one's biases, to step out, even for just a moment, from the location of a former student to a researcher who would not see things within binaries. To create a sense of familiarity, I remember being chirpier and using slangs to develop a rapport with the students as the kind of questions and the way one poses questions can influence the outcomes (Hamdan 2009). There is a way affluent students speak, which I have learnt over the years being in elite institutions of Delhi. I knew which students to speak to with a certain accent as language plays a significant role in boundary making (Drewski, 2023). I made sure that I dressed well because it warrants not only attention but respect. There was a discernible difference in the way students spoke, dressed and went about their lives. Even those privileged students who were critical of their own privileged subjectivities carried an air around them which was indicative of their cultural capital, if not economic. Being an insider helped me understand certain gestures which are specific to privileged upper caste culture (Hardman, 2009). I knew how language becomes refined; however, the underlying meaning remains problematic. Hefty vocabulary can barely mask everyday casteist remarks.

Narratives from the Field

Frustration in the Field as a Methodological Space

Not restricting one's field analysis just to audible spoken data opens the possibility of incorporating details which do not necessarily come within the rigid conventional process of data gathering. However, making meaning from such instances remains slippery and requires a continuous observation of events in the field. Nairn et al. (2005) note that "attention to other forms of data regarding embodiment, laughter and silence may provide a richer set of data" (Nairn, et al., p. 236). I want to look

at *frustration*³ in the field as a methodological space to locate students' responses as emerging from their caste entitlement. Even though initiation into the field was easy, however trying to get ahold of students proved challenging. Students, especially from privileged locations, would not respond. Or, if they did respond, they would take days to finalize a date to meet. These instances can be ignored as contentions from the field, however what I noticed throughout the course of my field work was that those students who were indecorous and who took time to respond overwhelmingly came from upper caste locations. I want to place my own experience here, not only as a student at such colleges, but also having been around students (primarily upper caste since my own friend group constituted only upper castes) who felt superior and entitled to be critical of not only students but of teachers. However, this sense of superiority stemmed from the forms of capital they held; their speech and language, their clothing, the music they listened to came from not only generational wealth but also histories of education. I do not want to dismiss, if not assert vigorously, the possibility of upper caste students' behaviour as caste entitlement.

Trajectory From School to College

The chasm between differential trajectories which students take to reach elite institutions is glaring. The annual school fee of a respondent whom I spoke to was 18 lakh rupees. This was one extreme end but even other students who may not have attended fancy international schools received support from schools as well as parents. One respondent, Aparna (Political science Honours, 1st year, college A), who mentioned that she went to a convent school described at length the opportunities the school provided. The school, an Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE) board (which is popularly considered to be posher, elite and remains mostly restricted to schools in metropolitan cities), encouraged extra-curricular activities along with academic rigour, which entailed participating in state as well national level sports, debate competitions and theatre amongst other opportunities. She positioned herself as a casteless middle-class student and situated herself in Kerala's progressive politics which has done away with caste-based hierarchies. The fact that they did not use their caste names meant she also did not associate with her caste. On the other hand, however, were students who were made to sit at the back of the class in school because of their identity. Riya, a 'first-generation female Dalit' (History Honours, 1st year, College B) narrated her experience in a private ICSE board school, as to how she always sat in the back of the class even though she performed well. "I had a back-bencher topper-image." Initially, it struck me as a choice (which was indicative of my inability to see caste dynamic at play), but I was soon corrected that all SC (Scheduled Caste) students in her class in school sat (or were made to sit) in the back. She notes something similar but more subtle in college. She said the moment people get to know about your caste, they start behaving differently, their behaviour gets 'weird.'

Ambedkar (2013) describes caste-based division as graded inequality where the four classes (he translates Varnas to class) are on "the vertical plane. Not only different but unequal in status, one standing above the other" (p. 107). The gradation

of students within the classroom gets replicated in college as well. Native-speakers, Dalit or Adivasi students, students from the north-east are reduced to small clusters within the space of a classroom (Goswami, 2021; Sharma, 2018). Another example was of a Dalit student, Sapna (Physics Honours, 2nd year, College B) who mentioned that she wasn't even aware that College B was a women's college. Whereas, not even most, all upper caste students I interviewed not only knew which college they wanted to attend, but which subject would be good for their career. Besides families, they had access to remarkable school infrastructure as well as teachers who were aware of which subject would align with the student's interests. This is also an indication that elite educational institutions, despite having affirmative policies, constitute primarily of students who come from, if not economic, substantial cultural and social capital. It is also indicative of the fact that not only they came from histories of educational wealth but also *dispositions* which will eventually help them fare well in college as well as the job market (Deshpande and Newman, 2009). This helps in further securing one's dominance in a college space, of which a strong representation in student bodies is a result. The idea of looking at the trajectory from school to college is to study the continuation of privilege, a smooth transition to see how students from upper caste backgrounds settle in college and later in the labour market with ease.

Everyday Casteist Practices

The demography of colleges has changed drastically over the years. There is an increased admittance of native speakers from rural backgrounds. Even during the field work, respondents frequently remarked on the increase in the number of students from the north Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Such arguments, though, weren't backed by any statistical data. However, this acknowledgment was followed by a tinge of bitterness as according to my respondents, these students affected the *vibe* of the college. What was surprising was that *vibe*, considered to be a personality trait, came up a lot during the interviews. President of the debating society at college B, Aanchal (English Honours, 3rd year), mentioned they also match *vibe* while selecting a candidate. When asked as to what she meant by it, she did not have a concrete answer. But after several interviews it became clear that *vibe* was almost exclusively meant, what Bourdieu (1972) calls, *dispositions* which were in fact markers of caste and class privilege. For instance, a shared interest in mystery novels of Agatha Christy marked boundaries of who can be let in a cultural society or a group of friends. *Vibe* can also be understood through the concept of *cultural matching* (Rivera, 2012). In the context of hiring at elite professional service firms, Rivera shadowed the hiring managers to understand the basis on which new recruits are hired. She argues that apart from good colleges and grades, cultural fit played a significant role in the hiring process, at times more than the grades and institutional affiliation. The idea of merit, then, can also be problematized with this. Merit as *passion* and *hard work*, as described by my respondents becomes contested when overridden by the cultural insinuation of *vibe*. Another example of cultural matching was seen in other cultural societies as well. For instance, English or Hindi dramatics society at college B are the most rigorous and difficult to

get in. Whereas at college A, photography society and the women's development cell are the most sought after. The heads of the photography society did not agree to speak to me. So, the one student who agreed to talk, Abhimanyu (B.A. programme, 2nd year, college A), I did an exercise with him to know the caste background of the position holders of the society. The core membership was constitutive of ten students, the rest were non-core members, and the decision-making power lay with the core, as is the case with all societies. I asked him to list out last names of all the core members. Out of ten students, seven students were from upper caste backgrounds (which he claimed to be a diverse pool of students as they came from different regions of north India). I could not place the caste background of the rest of the three students as they were not from north India. He further recalled how the hiring members of the photography society asked students whether the applicants are comfortable with doing drugs or if they can bring in sponsorships for society events? Upper caste students did not only fill up most of the seats, but they also devised ways to keep the society an exclusive club through marking boundaries in the name of selecting those with resources. Getting sponsors, for instance, would mean having personal connections who can donate money or put one in touch with someone who can. Caste dominance, in terms of access to resources such as education and financial stability, has historically put upper castes in a favourable position. Their upper caste dominance is, thus, reconstituted through cultural matching.

Caste in the Classroom

A Dalit student, Priya (Sociology Honours, 3rd year, College B), mentions how there is no caste-based discrimination in her department. It doesn't mean, however, that there is none in others. Nonetheless, she narrates a story of how a professor once asked her, "You must be a brahmin, no?" since she excels in academics. This idea that only a brahmin can be intelligent or do well academically is hinged on a relational idea that a Dalit cannot perform well. It is this everydayness of casteist practices which go unnoticed, hence also exceedingly difficult to delineate. She also takes a jibe at upper caste students' casteist projection of Dalit students, she says, 'Ye log abhi bhi sochte hai ki hum ghade se paani peete hai,' (these people think that we still drink from earthen pot) and laughs.

These two institutions which claim to have progressive legacies proved to be what Sukumar (2016) calls 'modern agraharas.' Chand, an Ambedkarite second year undergraduate student from the sociology department at college B narrates an anecdote of a classroom discussion. The conversation during a class on social justice turned towards whether affirmative policies are socially just. A debate arose between Ambedkarite (which constituted only students from marginalized background) and upper caste students and rather than letting the conversation to reach its conclusion, the teacher, who also belonged to an upper caste location, ended the discussion abruptly without critically engaging with the issues raised. Chand narrates that even though Ambedkar's writings are taught, there may be classes on social stratification, but the pedagogical process does not critically engage with caste and rather obfuscates casteist praxis.

Kain (2022) argues that absence of caste in curriculum furthers caste in pedagogy. She analyses Delhi University's undergraduate syllabus of women's/gender studies and feminist writings of the department of sociology, political science, etc. She posits that caste remains invisibilized in academic curricula, however it manifests itself through teacher-student relationship, classroom dynamics, etc. She underlines that even if anti-caste, Dalit writings are included, let's say in English or sociology department, the engagement remains tokenistic. In my own empirical work, I discovered through interviews with Dalit students, that teachers tend to dissipate conversations on caste or affirmative policies. The sociology department at Delhi University has Ambedkar's writings in its syllabus, however students pointed out that engagement with Ambedkar remains cursory and its always taught towards the end of the semester when there is barely any time left for critical engagement. Mittal (2020) argues, in the context of implementation of National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005 and the way it is perceived and taught in classrooms. In her empirical work in a government school in Delhi, she posits that students' and teachers' caste identities dictate the way conversations on caste through curriculum takes place. Even though NCF tried to address entrenched caste hierarchies in the curriculum and foster critical thinking, however it did not translate into pedagogical processes. Structural changes, she underlines, are required for a change in curriculum to be successful. Thus, who does or does not see caste depends on which caste location one inhabits.

Upper Caste Students' Claim to Marginality

There is also a tendency, I saw, to claim some form of marginality amongst upper caste students. When they situate themselves as middle class, they eventually go on to underline how their success is a result of their merit. Subramanian's (2019) work underlines how upper caste students continue to invoke merit as an empty category. Their claim to marginality, I argue, is a way to assert their superiority over their 'reserved category' peers. The popular perception of EWS, however, stays elusive to such a branding. It is only after prodding do they come to think of students from the EWS category as reserved category students. One respondent shared an interesting anecdote while talking about admission in college A, the role of affirmative policies and upper caste students' behaviour towards her availing reservations. She chuckles and says, "I understand if those who aren't availing any reservations judging us or feeling hurt. You won't believe students who avail EWS quota, who have scored even less than us, also judge us." She goes on to recount another instance where her classmates complained that they are considering studying abroad because undeserving candidates have hogged all the seats. Upper caste resentment, as well as hurt against affirmative policies, is made palpable through numerous ways. For example, having no contention with EWS as an affirmative policy and a call for castelessness is an indication of two things, amongst others a) Collapsing EWS with upper caste, hence deserving students; b) upper caste insistence on maintaining caste hierarchy. Caste privilege as a way of life has been naturalised, is all pervasive and invisible. Caste capital has been converted to economic and social capital, hence the call for castelessness (Deshpande,

2014), or a call to discontinue reservations. Claiming castelessness or saying 'I don't believe in caste' is in fact a reiteration of caste privilege.

Caste Beyond Classroom

College space is like a microcosm where students from various religions, castes, class and ethnicity are supposed to form a community. College does not happen only in classrooms, but also in the field, in canteens, in the foyer, in cultural societies, etc. Cultural societies play a significant role in any college culture. This central university is known for, apart from academic rigour, its seemingly vibrant cultural societies. Everyone 'seems' to stand a chance to participate, grow and 'make connections.' However, the process of entrance which is projected as transparent is an insidious way of gatekeeping and maintaining upper caste dominance. The process of induction heavily relies on accrued forms of cultural capital. For example, women's development cell (WDC) needs to be mandatorily present in all colleges. It doesn't have an active presence in all colleges; however, it is quite active at college A. I spoke to then president of the cell, Niharika (Political Science Honours, 3rd year, college A), and asked her about the induction process. It entailed a written exam as well as an interview—all conducted in English. I asked her if English can be an obstacle to which she replied vaguely, 'Oh but it is difficult to manage in any other language because there are students who speak other languages also.' The questions in the written exam are complex and required special training. It was tantamount to what privileged students received at their schools, which they eventually replicated in college. Niharika, for instance, went to an international school. She came from a wealthy family. However, she called herself middle class even though she came from an upscale residential area in Delhi where the cost of a house is usually in millions of rupees. Her father worked at a prominent position in a national bank of India. She came from a family which constantly reminded her to 'padhai theek se karo' (study well). She mentioned how her entire family is academically oriented. "Do it well" is a constant reiteration in her interview. The school she went to has all sorts of extra-curricular activities. She was part of a team which created a gender cell, she attended meetings of Model United Nations which she continued while in college. What we see here is a smooth linear trajectory of a student who was prepped in school to succeed in college and eventually in the labour market. When I asked her that why is there a need for an entry process in the first place? She replied that the right wing needs to be kept at bay is the reason why written exam is a prerequisite. I asked her opinion on the reason of dismal number of Dalit, Adivasi, OBC and minority students in cultural societies. She replies that maybe they do not have enough exposure to sit for the interview. So, shouldn't the process be more democratic, I asked? We cannot do their work for them, she responded hesitantly. There is an ambivalence in Niharika's responses. Even though there is recognition of her own caste and class privilege which afforded her access to elite schools, however, there is a reluctance to accommodate students within the ambit of WDC who do not carry the same cultural capital as she does. Niharika comes from a 'progressive' left-wing politics. WDC, during her tenure, claims to be constituted

primarily by women/queers/non-binaries from oppressed locations. However, the leadership was constitutive of upper caste heterosexual women/non-binary persons. There was gendered diversity in terms of sexuality but not in terms of caste. Linguistic capital became a boundary marker to create an exclusive club. It is, however, not to say that students from marginalised backgrounds did not become members but they did not climb up to the leadership position as easily as their upper caste peers did.

Dalit, tribal and minority students haven't had any stakes in the power in Indian higher education. Most Ambedkarite student groups across various institutions have been critical of not only the right but also liberal/radical left of not giving students at the margin the opportunity to come forward. First, the selection process works as 'filters' so that students with pre-approved cultural capital can be chosen. Second, they require students to have had the training to be considered for membership. Training, again, requires not only money but an awareness as to what is more fashionable. For example, playing a violin would garner more attention and an increased possibility of getting into the music society than let's say dholak (a folk percussion instrument). The current president decides who the next president would be (which is mostly their own friends or cousins) and that decision remains final.

Membership in cultural societies puts one in proximity of the seniors which can help navigate college, exams and other opportunities. It also gives exposure to other students across the university which extends the web of connection. Since the same process of selection is replicated in all societies across the university, they become dens of upper caste privileged students. It's almost like small clusters of cultural societies constitutive of upper caste students which later amalgamates into a larger web of connection. Habitus can be used a framework to understand characteristics and dispositions of students which they claim helped them be successful in college. These predispositions are shaped by past experiences which influence their current social world (Bhopal and Myers, p. 38).

Conclusion

One thing was clear during the field work that according to upper caste students, the 'meritorious' is always an upper caste even though caste is claimed to be anti-thetical to modernity as well as merit (Subramanian, 2019). Higher educational institutions by reinforcing the idea of merit imbue upper caste students with a sense of worthiness which is supplemented by the popular narrative on merit. Everydayness of caste is often overlooked and collapsed with class. It is not caste discrimination as long there is no violence, or no overt mention/invocation of one's caste. Caste is marked on a body only when it is violated or if it avails affirmative policies. Affirmative policy might serve as inclusionary measures; however, it does not necessarily translate to representation in informal settings such as cultural societies. There are Ambedkarite study groups in university colleges, but their place remains marginal. Groups formed for SC/ST/OBC students, like Equal Opportunity Cell, remain defunct in both the colleges; their work is merely perfunctory. The universities need to rigorously work

towards making such groups active, make it necessary for colleges to robustly build redressal cells. Those spaces which remain outside the purview of affirmative policies need to be vigilantly audited to assess diversity across caste, ethnicity and gender.

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