Un'casting' Universities: Examining the Intersections of Inclusive Curriculum and Dalit Pedagogies in a Private University in Bangalore, India

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Abstract

Despite India's constitutional dream to achieve equity and justice, caste still remains an issue of concern. Especially in the context of education, reports indicate a disparity in access and participation across gender, caste and other parameters (Hickey & Stratton, 2007). The prevalence of caste-based discrimination across universities and Dalit student suicides continue to be widely reported (Anderson, 2016; Niazi, 2022; Shantha, 2023; Nair, 2023). While the University Grants Commission, especially Mandal Commission and the Thorat Committee have placed certain recommendations, many universities fall short of implementing the same and even if they do, they don't percolate to an informed student/ faculty/ administration policy (Sitlhou, 2017). Lack of a well-defined policy, its implementation and the disconnect between curriculum and pedagogy has resulted in an erasure of the discourse on caste within higher education institutions. Furthermore, the disconnect has promoted a sense of alienation in educational institutions wherein some students graduate from school or universities without any exposure to caste as a social problem and some students face humiliation routinely. This project is an autoethnographic study of classrooms in a private university in Bangalore to understand the gaps that emerge from the disconnect between curriculum, pedagogy and comprehension of students about caste and present an alternative pedagogical paradigm that is situated, participatory, historical and critical.

Keywords

Higher education institutions, caste, Bangalore, private universities, Dalit pedagogy

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Introduction

Universities are not insulated from societal stratifications. Beteille (2007) argued that universities in the twenty-first century need to adopt policies that are compositionally diverse and socially inclusive. Albeit challenging, but attainable if universities in conformance with the constitutional ideas, engaged with academic distinction and social inclusion simultaneously. Unfortunately, the latter is compromised in most contexts. Universities have become spaces where caste stratifications between Dalit and non-Dalit students are reinforced and Dalit students routinely encounter "overt and covert discrimination based on caste" (Maurya, 2018; Ovichegan, 2013, quoted in Maurya 2018) which forces them to dropout (Anveshi Law Committee, 2002; Vasavi, 2007).

In this context, classrooms become important spaces to navigate these volatile social stratifications. Abhaya (2021) iterates that higher education classrooms "have possessed the radical potential of allowing an instructor to discuss liberatory possibilities" through "critiques of traditional societies" (Abhaya, 2021, p. 2). On the contrary, the presence of caste in classrooms and the resultant discriminations have been reported widely (Singh, 2021; Jogdand, 2017). Jogdand (2017) observes that "caste permeates the Indian classroom and obliterates creation of a space where one participates in a collaborative activity of knowledge as an equal and worthy person. The classrooms, in the experience of Dalits, instead, work as sites where one confronts the brutal reality of caste." Social stratifications mark their presence quite overtly in classrooms and "who does/does not see caste in classroom, is associated with caste privilege" (Pan, 2022; Mittal, 2020). Hence, while on one hand, upper caste students claim "caste as a practice of the past and denies witnessing it in contemporary society" (2020, p. 106) often denying its existence (Pan, 2022), on the other hand, students from the marginalised communities maintain silence (Mittal, 2020) or look for alternative articulations of their identities. Even if the curriculum shows the potential of an equitable discourse, the disconnect between curricula and pedagogy affect classroom engagements. In addition, teacher motivations affect the comprehension of students and their critical awareness significantly (Mittal, 2020). If "the ideology, curriculum, and pedagogy become tools through which power is used to secure social control" in classrooms (Jogdand, 2017; Giddens, 1984), a pedagogy that is critical, situated, historical and attempts to understand the experiences of the marginalised communities with care (Jogdand, 2017; Biko, 1971) could make classrooms more inclusive and less humiliating.

Autoethnography as Methodology

This is an autoethnographic account of my experience as a teacher in a private university in Bangalore. Autoethnography is a "first-person inquiry into the researcher's own experience of a given phenomenon" to understand and examine personal experiences to critically reflect on cultural scripts (Adams, Jones & Ellis, 2015). Autoethnographic

studies have examined narratives of teachers in educational institutions (Ernst & Vallack, 2015; Granger, 2011; Hayler, 2011; Trahar, 2013; Wilson, 2011) to reflect on issues, data and methods which have not been foregrounded in other approaches. Autoethnography considers everyday encounters, diary entries from classroom observations as important sources of data because stories emerging from them show how people "make sense of their worlds and their lives (Richardson, 2001, 2008 quoted in Ernst & Vallack, 2015) which help us understand the "unseen" and "untheorized" aspects of experiences. This article is a reflection of my experience of teaching a specific course, Additional English (between the years 2017–2023) which follows a university mandated curriculum.

Additional English is a general course on literature that is offered across departments, including Arts and Humanities, Commerce, and Sciences to undergraduate students. It includes texts or selections from larger works that aim to critically engage with the ideas of nation, culture and other social issues. It is taught for 45 hours wherein the faculty engage with the students 3 hours per week. Additional English is designed for both first and second year students (2 semesters per year). While the syllabus for the third and fourth semesters facilitate an understanding of cultural, social, religious and ethnic problems across the world, the first two semesters have writing specifically from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. The curriculum presents critical narrativisations of a nation; its location in the Indian subcontinent; familiarizes students with the literary narratives of the nation; helps in developing critical thinking skills that allow a revisiting of their ideologies, and enhances language skills across curriculum. The course aims to initiate students "into becoming more culturally, ethically, socially and politically aware" (Reading Diversity, 2022) to understand the tension that emerges from two distinct discourses: the anti-colonial and anti-caste discourses. Pan (2022) argued that "while the colonial curriculum was disjointed from the socio-religious and economic realities of India's feudal, patriarchal and casteist society, the nationalist models of education promoting 'unity' against the colonizers did not question the internal contradictions and hierarchies produced by caste (Batra, 2020; Rege, 2010)". The vision of 'unity' was challenged by the inherently stratified Indian society which justified caste differences "as rewards or retributions for one's actions in earlier lives and sanctified them through religion" (Naik, 1979, p. 42, quoted in Pan, 2022). In light of such discourses, Phule and Ambedkarite pedagogies and Dalit discourses in curriculum were seen as dissent and "antinational" (Rege, 2010). While in traditional curricula, educational privileges are justified by caste and patriarchy (Naik, 1979), the course I taught presented a critical orientation of the paradigms of nationalisms and implications of caste and colonialism in education.

Pedagogical Interventions: Amnesia to Uncasting the Curriculum

I have been teaching this course for the last 7 years (2016-2023). Teaching caste in classrooms is a difficult task, both pedagogically and ideologically and teachers need to

engage with the curriculum to present a critical perspective (George & Madan, 2009). Students often render caste as "exotic" and "distant" (Shankar, 2017; Mittal 2020). Hence, discussing caste in classrooms requires historicizing it and making students aware of their preconceptions. While some students could be aware of the four-fold classifications, they might not be aware of the inter and intra caste complexities, the labels and hierarchies and how pervasive it is in everyday experiences. On the other hand, students from diverse demographic profiles might connect with the "Dalit aspirations for freedom, dignity, self respect and equality" differently unless a context is presented (Tharu & Satyanarayana, 2013, p. 15). This is important to address for universities in Bangalore. Since Bangalore retains its status as a sought-after city for educational opportunities, students from different states and varied demographic profiles enrol for varied courses, especially undergraduate studies in Bangalore. While there is an inherent assumption that caste is "erased" in such urban spaces, I argue that caste operates in a significant manner in these spaces and is reflected in classroom interactions overtly or covertly. To reflect on caste in such classrooms, therefore, required me to engage with curricula, pedagogy and classrooms historically, critically and in a situated manner.

The Triadic Node: Curriculum, Pedagogy and Classroom Interaction

Curriculum

Mittal (2020) in her study of class comprehension among school students observed that there is a gap in comprehension about questions on caste. While select curricula show an indication of presenting, critiquing and sensitising students about caste and its atrocities, there still remains a chasm. Can student-driven interactions and their comments provide an alternative approach to address these questions? Can adding personal life narratives and experiential reflections of both Dalit and non-Dalit students (the acknowledgement of the latter's autonomy over self-categorisation should be prioritised (Jogdand, 2017), motivating them to engage in informed debates or exposing them to statistical information, policy documents and historical references provide a more inclusive classroom space? In agreement with Mittal (2020), I understand that while curricula can be designed to foster a sense of empathy and awareness, "the curriculum, however, does not produce knowledge by itself. It is imperative to understand how the text is transmitted and received" (Mittal, 2020). Pedagogy, therefore, becomes a significant aspect of the classroom experience.

Pedagogy

Reflective autoethnographic pedagogy chooses to "offer personal vulnerability for scrutiny from students" as they "create a safe space for students to share their experiences and struggles involved in making ethical and ideological choices" (Abhaya, 2021). While I presented information about caste, taking indications from the

leading questions presented in the teachers' handbook circulated by the coordinator, I was acutely aware of the pedagogy I was adopting. Hence, I presented narratives from my everyday encounters. Before engaging with a sociological, historical or textual analysis, I narrated instances of discrimination that I faced. Another important intervention in my pedagogy was informed by what Pan (2022) narrates as veering towards Dalit pedagogies informed by the pedagogy of Phule and Ambedkar (henceforth PA) which appeals teachers to situate and historicise caste. This implies that my adopted pedagogy had to be consciously dynamic and inclusive, critical and opposed to "narration sickness" (Freire, 2010) wherein the teacher remains a 'narrating subject' and her students, 'patient, listening objects' (Freire, 2000, p. 71). PA pedagogy requires me, the teacher, to be aware of their teaching methods, be conscious of whether my discussions are creating classroom spaces wherein dialogues, contestations and resistance can nurture self-dignity and inclusivity.

These underlying pedagogical motivations required me to orient the students to constitutional ideals, the historical context of Mandal Commission (1980) and Thorat Committee report (2007), the necessity of affirmative action, and finally offering statistical and documentary evidence showing the continuation of caste-based discrimination. For instance, I presented the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data which shows that "among the women in the age group 25-49 who have anaemia, 55.9 % are Dalits" whereas "the national average among Indians is 53%". Furthermore, NFHS data also shows that "the average age of death for Dalit women is 14.6 years younger than for higher caste women" (Masoodi & Sreevatsan, 2018).

I asserted that the caste system as practiced in India is a means by which individuals are socially differentiated through class, caste, gender, religion and so forth. Albeit, caste is not the only means of differentiation in societies, however, "it becomes a problem when one or more of these dimensions overlap each other and become the sole basis of systematic ranking and unequal access to valued resources like wealth, income, power and prestige" (Mittal, 2020). I informed them that the Indian Caste System is considered a closed system of stratification, which means that a person's social status is derived from and obligated to which caste they were born into. I spoke about how caste system "limits on interaction and behavior with people from another social status" (Deshpande, 2010) as it maintains an index of permissible manoeuvres that are possible, for example, limits of changing professions, limits of establishing marital connections, and a near-fixed hierarchical stratification of individual castes (Dumont, 1999; Mittal, 2020).

I had to connect caste and religion to argue that caste is often invoked, acknowledged and justified through a discourse on religion (Ambedkar, 1936; Pingle & Varshney, 2006). I clarified that we find caste-based practices in other religious communities in India (Ahmad, 1962, quoted in Mittal, 2020). The continuing classes included discussions on how unfortunately, socio-political and economic shifts have not altered their existence or perceptions completely. The idea of a nation as

an "imagined community" that overpowers, supersedes the caste-based identities and argues for a composite identity has been an issue of conflict or challenge for policymakers (Mittal, 2020). On the contrary, current socio-political situations have permitted caste to operate in different ways within the nation and beyond. Teaching them and based on my encounters with students within classrooms and outside, it did feel that my discussions had left two sets of impressions: I am pro-reservation and therefore, "those people" possibly referring to a person with radical and activist inclinations and second, I can be approached for any discussion on equity and justice. I delve now into three case studies wherein students engaged, debated and analysed what they learnt in class. Each of these classes were discussing the same curricula. However, the pedagogy adopted was changed to suit the classroom dynamics. Disciplines have significant effects on the ontological and epistemological perspectives of students in a classroom (Kumashiro, 2001).

Case Study 1: Humanities Classroom

While discussing the historical, social, economic and cultural aspects of caste, I requested the students to reflect and analyse in their own way, the issues pertaining to caste and what role, they thought, educational institutions played in such contexts. In the introductory classes, I received very few responses. The next few classes, students approached me personally and narrated incidents of discrimination. I asked for their consent to anonymize and speak about these experiences to which they readily agreed and suggested that they prefer this method instead of speaking out in class. In another incident from the same class, during the introductory lecture, an undergraduate student from my class shrugged and said, "It's too distant ma'am; this is a long time back. It's not now". A "teachable moment" (Govinda, Mackay, Menon, & Sen, 2020) indeed. To this, several others joined and argued that socio-economic class should be the primary marker and not caste. I realized at that moment that my secondary references and discussions perhaps presented a certain narrative that prioritises class and not caste. I probed further and asked about the secondary references and statistical evidence to which they responded with complete silence. It felt as if this information did not conform to their expectations and hence remained unprocessed. I feared that probing deeper would mean that I am imposing on them. I provided a range of materials to read from including advertisements, films, essays to news reports along with documentaries. As I was wrapping my class for that day after a discussion on access and participation of Dalit students in classrooms, one student said, "I am a Dalit and I will be in this classroom". Silence ensued (see Pariyar, Gupta and Fonseka, 2022 for a discussion on caste among Nepali diaspora). The student did not conceal her caste affiliation in spite of being aware of the complex dynamics of the class. Slowly, few other students started sharing experiences of caste-based discriminations and asserted that university classrooms have become clinically sanitized for holding discussions such as these. It is in these moments, students, by asserting agency over

self-categorisation, which is inherently contingent, reveal what is meaningful to them at a given moment. Belonging to a group does not automatically indicate that the person is psychologically involved with the group or the group membership is meaningful to them, especially "when one is a member of a devalued group in society autonomy over self-categorisation is often under pressure" (Jogdand, 2017). This was an important moment which revealed how students can transform classroom spaces by undoing "narration sickness" (Freire, 2007) and respond to "historical victimisation" and "psychological distancing" (Jogdand, 2017).

Case Study 2: Commerce Classroom

I had scheduled a debate session on the need for affirmative action. This was a conscious choice to make students from commerce who are generally insulated from sociological discourses on caste to unpack their own perspectives. Additionally, the demographic profile of these classes is quite distinct from Arts/Humanities classrooms—commerce classrooms are more varied in their class-caste compositions. Three students out of 97 in the class signed for the motion (affirmative action is required) and the discussion ended with a very tense moment in the class. Few students who were against the motion quickly escalated the discussion by attributing caste markers to individual students and citing concerns with meritocracy in Indian Universities. Few students, later, came and disclosed that they appreciate what I aspired to do but also disclosed that it is quite intense for many of them. These classes become overwhelming for them as other subjects, while based on economics and nation, in contrast to the ones I taught, force them to have an apolitical approach towards individuals and identities, erasing any form of discourse centring around caste. This experience will be discussed later as it made me reflect on the need to understand the volatile nature of caste-based discussions in classrooms.

Case Study 3: Science Classroom

The science class was supposed to study whether class or caste was prevalent in India. This was done primarily to counter the neoliberal tendencies to conflate caste and class and present them as different structural inequalities. The students conducted a survey; respondents were mostly in the age group of 18–26 from the same university but from different courses. While 71.1 per cent of their respondents claimed that India faces a more severe form of caste-based discrimination rather than class (28.9 per cent), 57.7 per cent of the respondents claimed that the system of reservation is unfair, 14.1 per cent considered it fair and the other 28.2 per cent were uncertain of the fairness. For most of the respondents the solution for caste eradication was education. Few respondents further argued that financial help should be given to the "needy" irrespective of the caste or financial conditions. Some of these arguments based on merit versus social justice were already challenged in my class. Hence, my interest was to understand the

students' approaches whom I had taught. I asked for their personal reflections on the data which presented a complex issue. I had shown them a documentary called, "India Untouched: Stories of a people apart" (Stalin, 2007). One student wrote,

> The notion of doing an analysis on this topic crossed my mind after watching the documentary "India Un-Touched" in the class which changed my opinion about making reservation a class-based affair. The idea was to know if people still believed in the caste system and being superior or inferior to somebody just because they belonged to a particular caste and it turns out that people still believed this. It was the smaller proportion who did believe in this orthodox ideology but for a developing nation like ours, that number is dangerous. When it comes to being discriminated or discriminating on the basis of class (financial status), the numbers were no less. If amongst a small sample of 80 we can get responses where people admit that they have been discriminated and they have discriminated people on the basis of caste or class then the bigger picture must be scary for a country of 1.31 billion population and approximately 5000 and more different castes. The caste system in India is a complicated web of several castes where each caste is discriminated from the other. When the system of reservation was taken as the complimentary question to the analysis, people believed it should either be caste-based, class-based or there should not be any reservation at all. I, personally, am of the opinion that there should not be any reservation and if it is to be there, it should be merit based. Help should be given only if there is will to work hard and earn the desired position.

This was an important narrative. The student was able to comprehend the issue, understand its complexities and situate their position within the argument. Pan (2022) mentions that "as a counter-hegemonic discipline, Dalit studies 'challenges the objectivity of knowledge and endorses the view that different belief systems and contradictory interpretations are possible' (Yesudasan, p. 621)" (Pan, 2022, p. 6). The aim of a critical pedagogy is not to convert or homogenise opinions but rather allow a space for articulating individual political choices. The student reflected on the latter and felt a sense of ease to differ from what was presented in the class. I see that as an unintended yet promising possibility: the possibility of plurality in articulations.

On the contrary, another student from the same class, echoing quite a few others, wrote that,

> I feel that the problem is still existing in the country only because of the mentality of some people, this kind of discrimination should be removed from the society and all people should be treated equally without any priorities. It can only be achieved by providing good quality education to the coming generations and creating awareness among people. [*sic*.]

Education can be transformative. The student articulated the need for a sense of criticality to achieve the same. What was important is their perspective wherein they

asserted the need for achieving equity together, in solidarity with the marginalised; the latter considered significant for transformative abilities of education (Rege, 1998).

Case studies 1, 2 and 3 are from the introductory lectures from diverse classes. The next excerpt is from Case study 4 wherein in conformance with Dalit pedagogy (Pan, 2022), I attempted to historicise caste using a literary text. I was teaching Meena Kandaswamy's "Becoming a Brahmin" which presents a sharp critique of India's continuing legacy of casteism and especially focusses on Gandhi's approach to eradicating casteism. The poem is performative, and iterates the impossibility of that vision. I spoke about how the "algorithm" presented like a code reminds one of "Mendelian eugenics which was practiced by the Nazis to produce a purely Aryan population" (Venkateswaran, 2021). The trajectory of a Shudra woman becoming a Brahmin by marriage and becoming a mother to his children presents a chilling critique of bio-racist ascriptions of caste prejudices and narrativises recurrent incidents of caste-based violence and killings. The automated and technical tonality of the text adds to the indifference that has been meted out to the discourses centring caste. Continuing with Venkateswaran (2021), the poem is a reminder of Dr Ambedkar's response to Gandhi's "toleration and catholicity" of Hinduism. Dr Ambedkar had called such approaches "indifference or flaccid latitudinarianism" (Ambedkar, 2020, p. 345). I reminded the students that many scholars opine that Gandhi's approach towards caste system, his naming of people as "Harijan" who were problematically referred to as "untouchables" continued the colonial legacy and made healing unredeemable, justice unattainable and an aspiration of socially and culturally sanctioned dignity unfeasible. A discussion on Brahminical patriarchy that controlled women and caste had to be brought forth for a nuanced understanding. However, I didn't present one narrative. I carefully placed the ideas of Gandhi, B R Ambedkar and Meena Kandaswamy as an author and presented the interpretation of the two thinkers and activists so that the students can form their own ideas regarding the same while being informed about certain factual details, such as the document pertaining to the discussion held in Tirupur between Gandhi and B R Ambedkar.

A student from the class narrated their understanding of the class discussion. They presented a sense of nuanced criticality in their analysis of Meena Kandaswamy's poem as a satire. They said,

> It is considered as a satire, mainly because of the fact that the highest relationship that could exist between a Dalit and a Brahmin, is that of a servant master relationship. Even though it is a rare occurrence that a caste as low as a Dalit could work in the accommodation of a Brahmin. Now while talking about social stigma, it isn't considered "Brahminish" to marry a Shudra, as it downcasts the Brahmin and his social status would be so downtrodden as compared to what an elevated status he had, the Brahmin wouldn't generally do it. Considering these points and the usage of the word "beautiful", while

mentioning the type of Shudra girl in the first step of the algorithm itself is a way of how Meena Kandaswamy tries to present a satire on the basis of the caste system.

The student was able to understand the perspective that is underlying the poem: the perspective of challenging Brahminical hegemony in the knowledge traditions and social structures. The interpretation presents the critical interpretation of the circularity and thereby, absurdity in expecting Dalit perspectives to be objective and impartial. The student was able to understand the categories and uncover the idea of history and violence intimately linked to the people. This was perhaps the closest that I could reach to implementing a Dalit pedagogical approach (Pan, 2022) which argues for a historical and situated sharing of knowledge.

Transitioning from "Narration Sickness" towards Dalit Pedagogies: Identities and Vulnerabilities

These experiences made me reflect on my position as a teacher. The comprehension emerging from the classrooms were not identical. Most students felt that they were exposed to uncomfortable yet factual details. While few students could demarcate the concerns and identify few important issues that distinguish class and caste-based discriminations, others continued with the class-caste overlap. Did I fail to convince everyone in the class? The experience in the commerce classrooms did leave an impact on me. How do I ensure the safety of the voices who choose to speak out? The students who voiced their opinion were not from marginalised communities and were allies. However, given that the debate happened in a classroom which had students from marginalised communities, the incident exposed the discriminatory attitudes of many of their own friends. How should I have unpacked the varied semiotics of silences in class? The exposure of caste affiliations of individual students and explicit opinions could have led to unintended consequences of identification. While many individuals disapprove of identity concealment (others may continue to adhere to for safety) (Pariyar, Gupta & Fonsenka, 2022), the classroom spaces can be volatile and the ensuing implications could be difficult to negotiate for the marginalised students and teacher. How must teachers, who do not come from a homogenous group in terms of social locations, identities and intent, take these issues to class, especially since each of these have an influence on students and their learning (Thapan, 2009)?

Afterthoughts

Through this study, I wanted to understand the interactions between curriculum, pedagogy and students' comprehension of caste. Specifically, I wanted to examine how pedagogy and curricula are designed to address caste in university classrooms which have people from diverse demographic profiles. In line with Dalit pedagogy,

I believe that the discourse on caste can be participatory, inclusive and reflective if individual subjective experiences from diverse social (caste) and cultural backgrounds are brought forth and acknowledged. This would contribute to the work done by Tharu and Satyanarayana (2013) in bringing forth inclusive textbooks. I hoped that the adopted pedagogy could demonstrate the possibilities of challenging "narration sickness" and present an enabling educational environment that does not erase caste but rather presents it within a framework of pedagogy that acknowledges the personal, historical and social (Pan, 2022). I did see a significant difference in how classroom dynamics evolved and transformed—students from Dalit and non Dalit communities responded, articulated and narrated their understanding, privileged students who were initially complacent or uninformed about caste atrocities were able to understand continuing systemic discrimination and students from marginalised communities exercised autonomy over their self construal and responded in diverse ways. These interactions created a non-hegemonic discursive space. For discussing caste, individual classrooms should be contextualised and navigated differently to develop dynamic pedagogical choices, prioritising discussion and challenging "narration sickness", albeit with the anchoring of the course in a conscious ideological context. This is in line with the recommendations of the National Curriculum Framework (2005) which requires educational spaces to discuss and resolve issues pertaining to social justice and discrimination, including caste. This approach will provide a platform to discuss caste within the university so that the erasures of caste discourses are unpacked, encountered and understood using curricula and autoethnographic narrations of both students and teachers.

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