Caste Identities and Structures of Threats: Stigma, Prejudice, and Social Representation in Indian Universities

Gaurav J. Pathania[1], Sushrut Jadhav[2], Amit Thorat[3],
David Mosse[4], Sumeet Jain[5]

Abstract

Caste is a complex ontological construction. Despite several anti-caste movements and constitutional provisions, caste exists in the Indian psyche as part of everyday life. Even in the advent of globalization, caste continues to foster social and economic inequalities and exclusion in newer forms and perpetuates violence. The available research on caste-based stigma and humiliation provides a limited understanding as it deals with Dalits only; and ignores caste-Hindus (upper-caste) agency. Based largely on qualitative data collected at an intense three-day workshop, including two Focus Group Discussions and a year-long ethnography, this article illustrates the micro processes of everyday life experiences of caste-based stigma and humiliation among university students, academic staff and administrative staff. It explores subtle and overt caste discrimination, prejudices and stereotypes existing in the spatial morphologies of Indian higher education, its perpetuation on campuses and its impact on students' psyche. It highlights the dearth of scholarship in this area of caste identity and stigma; and proposes nuanced questions for future research to understand why universities in India are turning into places of social defeat for Dalit and OBC students. The article argues the basis of caste discrimination and humiliation in universities is not the same as it exists in other social institutions. Instead of asserting conclusions on this matter we set out justifiable lines of inquiry. There are two issues that this

[1]Assistant Professor of Sociology and Peacebuilding, Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA
[2]Professor of Cross-Cultural Psychiatry, University College London, UK
[3]Assistant Professor, Center for the Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India
[4]Professor, Social Anthropology, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, UK
[5]Senior Lecturer in Social Work, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, UK

Corresponding author
Gaurav J. Pathania
E-mail: gaurav.pathania@emu.edu

article examines: first, how students in Indian higher education evolve strategies for coping with threatened identities. Second, what structural repair in higher education is required to heal the wounded (caste) psyche?

Keywords

Dalit, caste, stigma, mental health, wellbeing, passing, higher education

Understanding Changing Higher Education Landscape

> *Between January 1, 1995 and December 31, 2019, India lost more than 1,70,000 students to suicide, according to the National Crime Record Bureau.*[1]

Higher education in India is known as a key driver of economic growth as well as a pathway for achieving social equality. Scholars believe these existing inequalities in education not only emanate from social and economic, but also, they are further accentuated by the higher education system itself. Universities claim to be spaces of 'casteless modernity', but recent studies argued that this space of 'casteless modernity' is implicitly upper-caste (Deshpande, 2013; Pathania & Tierney 2018; Singh, 2013; Subramanian, 2015, 2019; Vithayathil; Thomas 2020). There are two observations this article discusses and conceptualizes: (a) higher education (despite its expansion and diversification) is dominated by upper-castes, (b) for privileged groups (students and staff) 'caste-less merit' has become an (implicit) idiom of caste privilege, based on their special capacity to deny/invisiblize caste as a source of advantage.

Despite the least implementation of reservation policy in education,[2] one cannot ignore the complexities among non-Dalit (unreserved) castes. Due to reservation, Dalits suffer double discrimination, or as Deshpande (2015) calls it, face a "double-stigma"[3] effect. The non-Dalit caste becomes culturally, socially, and politically dominant in order to maintain their upward social and cultural mobility in Indian society (Paul, 2007). In admissions into courses such as engineering or medicine in view of the reservation scheme, a Dalit applicant's grade is viewed as a mediocre entry grade, and considered not acceptable, as it could undermine the aspirations of high-achieving non-Dalit students, and lower the standards of the profession (Panini, 1996; Naito, 1997).

Understanding Caste in the Indian higher education landscape

The traditional landscape of higher education in India has changed significantly at the start of the twenty-first century, due to the rampant growth of private institutions.

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[1] One Every Hour: 10,335, last year saw most student suicides in 25 years, *Times of India,* September 7, 2020

[2] Not even 3 per cent of IIT faculty are Dalits, Tribals, *Justice News,* January 1, 2019. https://www.justicenews.co.in/not-even-3-per-cent-of-iit-faculty-are-dalits-tribals/

[3] Dalits are stigmatized both for their caste identity and as recipients of the state provision in the form of quota/ reservation policy.

Despite expansion, it has not changed the fact that the spaces of higher education are dominated by upper-castes and "lacks diversity" (Kumar, 2016; Rathod, 2023; Sabharwal & Malish, 2017). However, the most recent study of an elite campus by Pathania & Tierney (2018, p. 10) observes that the 'hallways of elite institutions do not transcend existing prejudices and stereotypes.' Despite all the development, such issues remained unresolved. Studies also highlight discrimination and everyday 'problems' of academic and non-academic life of Dalit students (Malish & Ilavarasan, 2016; Narwana & Gill, 2020; Ovichegan, 2013; Pathania & Tierney, 2018; Sukumar, 2022; Verma & Kapur, 2010). For such privileged groups (students and staff) 'caste-less merit' has become an (implicit) idiom of caste privilege, based on their special capacity to deny/invisibilize caste as a source of advantage. The issue of drop-outs in higher education needs to be addressed. Between 2016 and 2019, around 2,400 students have dropped out of IITs, half of which are SCs and STs. On these issues, the New Education Policy 2020 is completely silent (Pathania, 2020).

Identity Threats in Higher Education

Caste is a unique form of discrimination because of its concealable nature. The look or appearance are illusory in the case of caste. In everyday interaction, there is a presence of "intrusive archeology of caste" (Jogdand, 2013). A lower-caste individual constantly faces the threat to his identity. For example being asked about a surname to find out about one's caste. This often occurs in the case of lower castes as their surnames reveal or hide their caste. Bayetti et al. (2017, p. 35) in their studies on the construction of professional identities of psychiatrists, highlights that there are the "other" identities operationalized during the professional training, and what may be the "emotional cost of doing so"? The authors suggest further qualitative ethnographic research to unpack these challenging and vital questions. A threat to identity occurs when the processes of identity, assimilation-accommodation and evaluation are, for some reason, unable to comply with the principles of continuity, distinctiveness and self-esteem, which habitually guide their operation (Breakwell, 1986, p. 47). The discussion on caste identities in higher education is centered on "quota" versus "non-quota" Or "reserved" versus "general".

(a) Language as "Structure of Threat"
(b) Classroom as a "Structure of Threat"
(c) (sur)Naming as "Structure of Threat" in casteist societies

The existing dominant social representation poses a threat by stigmatizing the 'reserved' category. It dos this on a number of fronts: historical roots (Kelvin, 1984), economic and social. But more importantly it is the grip of social representation upon the minds of the lower caste students who face continuing negative stereotypes. The social representation which slowly but surely erodes self-esteem, and threatens identity, could account for much of the depression, insecurity and anxiety among quota students (Sukumar, 2013).

The evolution of identity entails continual and a dialectical relationship between personal and social identity (Breakwell, 1983, p. 12). The structure of identity should not be confused with its content (Breakwell, 1986, p. 18). According to Breakwell, the actual contents of an identity are not static and it shifts according to the social context within which the identity is situated. As Tajfel (1981) pointed out, individual values cannot be independent of social stereotypes. This is partially how threat arises, when the individual learns that a new social position carries a negative social value. The distinctive contribution of this article is to look at the context of universities, and to make the point that discrimination in universities is not the same as it exists in other social institutions. This becomes important, as universities are seen by the marginalized as spaces and means of escaping their lived places and contexts. It argues for the distinctive conditions on campuses and the implication of discrimination here. How do Dalit and OBC students face the obstruction and discrimination in their pathways to higher education and what strategy do they opt to cope up? Discrimination is considered as one of the most damaging factors when it comes to stress or distress that leads to social isolation and social exclusion.

Theoretically speaking, social representation is essentially a construction of reality. It reflects dominant systems of belief and values in presenting and accepting interpretation of objects, persons or events (Breakwell, 1986, p. 55). Identity process theory suggests that if the identity principles are obstructed, the process will be unable to function satisfactorily, which will result in threats to identity (also see Jaspal, 2011, p. 33). This article elaborates Breakwell's idea of social representation and tries to understand the caste-based discrimination by understanding the impact of stigma attached with caste-based reservations as well as caste-based stigma and how it leads to an emotional rupture.

The social representation has two roles: when it comes to reservation: First, to attach a definite form to reserved /category students by locating within a social category with distinctive characteristics; second, it acts as a template prescribing how reserved/Dalit student actions should be explained and interpreted. The social representation of the reserved therefore, effectively erect a stereotype of them which depicts their psychological and social qualities. It also explains how quota people should be evaluated.

The way the reservations system works, and is perceived, assigns SC/STs (i.e. all Dalits/Tribal regardless of ability) to the category of the 'non-meritorious', those who are 'the caste-infected'; the implicit assumption being that 'merit' is an upper-caste characteristic,[4] or merit belongs to the upper-castes (purveyed in a claim that merit is casteless, which of course it is not)—perhaps is found more in science than arts/humanities disciplines? This means (in this view) either that Dalits do not belong in the university (as a category they are ascribed the status of a subordinate laboring class); or if they do reach the university, they should occupy the non-meritorious 'reserved'

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[4]Caste-lessness has come to mean "merit" and "anti-reservation", largely by a section of dominant castes and elites in contemporary India who specifically call for caste-blind enumerations (Deshpande, 2013, p. 38).

category. SC/STs who enter the university under the open or non-reserved categories or sets are doubly 'out of place' and singled for sanction. Moreover, there are issues and challenges of being 'first generation learners' and hailing from rural households, receiving their school education in their regional language (Kamat et. al., 2018, p. 15) while having to interact with city-based English-medium educated students in higher education. Thus, student interactions and relations across identity groups of caste, rural-urban, nationality, religion, language, and gender are an important metric of campus climate (ibid).

Social policy on caste focuses on the disadvantages of particular groups, treating caste as a static or residual problem addressed through remedial provisions, safeguards and complaint-handling, rather as a dynamic relational problem that might be subject to the state's general duty to address inequality and discrimination in economy and society (Thorat & Attewell, 2007; Thorat & Newman, 2010). In her report on campus climate in India, Kamat et. al. (2018, p. 13) highlighted three major categories: 1) first generation, 2) rural and 3) language. First generation learners are relatively poorer than the second generation learners and generally they are below or near the poverty line. The process of navigating through spaces of higher education generates various struggles and strategies to deal with existing caste stigma, stereotypes and distress. Stigma promotes and reinforces social isolation (Farina et al., 1992; Link et al., 1997; Mehta et. al., 2015), and universities have become the sites of embodiment and reification of stigma (especially caste-related).

Constitutionally, SC, ST and OBC students have seats reserved (15 per cent, 7.5 per cent and 27 per cent, respectively) both in institutions of higher education as well as in public sector employment. Colloquially they are called (reserved) category students or quota students. 'Category Students', recount their experiences of prejudice from other students, teachers as well as administrative staff. Kumar (2016) highlights how, at the prestigious Delhi University, Dalit girls are humiliated by the question, "*Quote se aayi ho ya kothe se aayi ho*" (Have you come through reservation or have you come from a brothel? Here the word quota rhymes with the Hindi word for brothel *'Kotha'*). Similarly, Guru points out how words such as *sarkari damad* (son-in-law of the government) and other phrases are used to humiliate reserved category people. Just as the group is stigmatized as a permanent carrier of dirt, waste and disease, the whole segregated space they inhabit or are relegated to sometimes symbolizes the same and becomes a threat to the "clean" and "normals" (as Goffman refers to the non-stigmatised). Therefore, even spaces can evoke a sense of nausea or anxiety (Sibley, 1995). Such spaces, therefore, can become "stigma symbols" in a Goffmanian sense that is a sign which is "effective in drawing attention to a debasing identity discrepancy" (Goffman, 1986, p. 45).

An anti-caste scholar N. Sukumar (2008, p. 17) writes about his students' experience of hostel life at Hyderabad Central University: 'Comments like Bakasura and Kumbhakarna (negative characters from Hindu mythology) are commonly made by the non-Dalit students and mess workers. Abusive comments like "pigs",

"government's sons-in-law", "bastards", "beggars"', etc., and comments which question paternity are quite common…'. Similarly, humiliation is faced by reserved category teachers who report experiences in classrooms, staff rooms, in dealing with staff in residential quarters and hostel canteen halls. They expressed that they experienced many forms of subtle and overt behaviors, remarks, etc., from non-category students, faculty and administrative staff. N. Sukumar (2008) states: "Every Dalit or reserved category student in a 'meritorious' higher educational institution dies a little every day". Although other students from poor or rural families also face problems, the daily experience of social exclusion adds a huge and uniquely negative dimension to the lives of quota students.

The fact that a large number of Dalit and Adivasi students have committed suicide[5] (Karthikeyan, 2011; Patel et al., 2012) clearly indicates the widespread prevalence of caste discrimination in the Indian education system, which perceives them as 'non-meritorious' and not fit to belong there. In 2008, Senthil Kumar, a Dalit student at the University of Hyderabad, committed suicide. Professor N. Sukumar who prepared a report on this suicide highlighted 'murky realities of caste discrimination in our universities' (Senthil kumar Solidarity Committee 2008, p. 10). The National Commission for for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) in their draft prepared to contribute to the Rohit Act recommends the government 'to provide arrangements for appropriate psychological, emotional and physical support in the form of counseling, security and other assistance to the victim if s/he so desires or needs' (NCDHR draft 2016, p. 17). In 2006, a Dalit student committed suicide due to caste humiliation by hostel-mates in India's top medical school. In response, the government of India formed the Professor Thorat Committee to investigate the matter.[6] The humiliation of reserved category students continues even in the coaching industry for higher education (Henry & Ferry, 2017, p. 3; Subramanian, 2015)—as revealed by the multiple mechanisms the institution employs to eliminate and sanction students from the marginalized groups, particularly SC and ST students, thus contributing to the differential value of the academic titles it delivers.

Non-Dalit individuals, privileged in their caste identity, are likely to remain disinterested towards the Dalit community (Ovichegan, 2014, p. 375). Along with highly visible caste and associated symbolic violence against SC students, teachers' perception that SC and ST students are 'unteachable' (Anveshi Report 2002) had a negative impact on their educational experience (Malish & Ilavarasan, 2016). Thus, from policy to institutional landscape, the university serves as a crucial site of display of public perceptions, stigma, stereotypes and prejudices.

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[5]https://www.thelancet.com/action/showFullTextImages?pii=S0140-6736%2812%2960606-0
[6]"Committee to Inquire into the Matter of Allegation of Differential Treatments of SC/ST Students in All India Institute of Medical Sciences", New Delhi. One of the striking findings of the committee was that about 76 per cent of the respondents reported that the examiner during the viva had asked the caste background; about 84 per cent mentioned that their grades were affected because of their caste background.

Method

The study was funded through an international partnership and network mobility grant from the British Academy to bring together scholars from the UK and India working in the area of caste. This research is based on qualitative ethnographic research methods that included field observations, focused group discussions, and field logs. The study was carried out between September 2016 and August 2017. Two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were organized in Delhi at a university among students and teachers from four major universities in Delhi in September 2016. The respondents were selected using a purposive sampling method to include representation across gender, age groups and social categories. A mixed sample in terms of seniority, age and gender was chosen to maintain heterogeneity and to avoid power differences. An attempt was made to select students and faculty members from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. The aim of the FGDs was to understand the lived experiences of students and teachers who experienced caste-related distress. FGDs were audio recorded and then transcribed. A thematic analysis was conducted by authors, grounded in different disciplines including psychiatry, medical anthropology, social work, sociology and economics. An email list and a website were created to maintain the network among scholars. The material shared through these networks is also used in the article. Pseudonyms are used in this article to ensure the confidentiality of respondents.

Table 1.1: Representation of social categories

Faculty FGD (19)						Student FGD (18)					
M	**F**	**SC**	**ST**	**OBC**	**Gen.**	**M**	**F**	**SC**	**ST**	**OBC**	**Gen.**
14	5`	6	4	2	7	10	8	8	3	1	6

Focus group interviews were conducted from a phenomenological approach to understand students and teachers' personal and educational experiences and processes, in order to understand caste-based stigma and prejudice. Phenomenology is grounded in the focus of the participants' experiential world, that is, how they view and make meaning of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2003; Sokolowski, 2000; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). It relies on lived experiences to understand how meaning is created through perception and contributes to a deeper understanding of these lived experiences by exposing traditional assumptions (Sokolowski, 2000). This approach served as a valuable tool to elicit student perceptions of school power and influence in their lives.

Findings and analysis

Names, Categorization and Pre-higher Education Experiences of Discrimination and Distress

School is a crucial site where childhood takes shape. Many popular Dalit autobiographies such as Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2008) and Sheoraj Singh Bechain's *My Childhood on my Shoulders* (2018) present the lived experience of humiliation

and discrimination faced by Dalit children in the schools. In our FGDs, while sharing about their caste-related humiliation, every respondent started with their childhood experiences of discrimination. Their narratives reveal a world in which Dalit life remains an endless struggle. Even after achieving academic credentials, Dalits feel compelled to keep proving to themselves and to the upper castes that they are indeed capable and talented.

In a rigid and strict structure of Indian society, there are various mechanisms of identification. In Indian society, its identification is generally through surnames as it denotes one's caste. A participant (A) who was named after Dalit icon Dr. B.R. Ambedkar discusses the stigma associated with his name. He went to pre-school in a city, and his family changed his name just to avoid any trouble with the name Ambedkar. He shares his story:

> My name was Alok for two years when I was in kindergarten, but when I had to write an entrance examination, my official name "Ambedkar" had to be brought back on a certificate. This was an embarrassment for my uncle with whom I was staying in the city. But in the village you are made aware of your identity very soon because your locality is different from others[7] but when you are moved to a different location, you are called by your caste name or whatever. My introduction to caste or being from a lower caste was from my childhood itself.[8]

Another participant, Gautam, whose primary schooling was in a village, shares a contrasting experience:

> I think in villages an individual does not feel discriminated against because since childhood he lives in his area/mohalla,[9] which is separated from others. Everyone knows each other, and every caste resides differently in their specific location. Everything is segregated, and you grow up with this and therefore you don't feel it. But in cities, everyone mixes with others and there is a curiosity to know about others.

Gautam mentions that caste-related distress does not emerge in a day or two, or in a year but it takes its shape through various incidents in childhood. As our surname roughly indicates our caste, it has a deep impact on a student's psyche. Gautam shares his schooling experience:

> Any new teacher coming to class was more interested in wanting to know who [caste-wise] this person was and what his caste was. I tell my name to them and they would say, "*Aage kya*?" (What comes after your first name?). Over

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[7]Dalits or the ex-untouchables have always lived in segregated hamlets, little away from the main village area.

[8]From a Focus Group Discussion with university students on September 15, 2016 at JNU, New Delhi.

[9]Hamlet.

> a period of time, I developed this habit of staying silent. Somehow from 6th to 10th [grade], I did not speak anything in class. I did not make any friends. I was alien to my own class. They [teachers] slapped my face but I promised myself that I wouldn't say anything. Whenever new teachers came, my heart started beating so fast, thinking that he would ask me about my name. And when they did, they would ask in a very derogatory manner: *Aaage peeche kuch hai ki nahi?* (Is there anything after your first name?). To know my caste, they will always be starting from the top [of the varna system]: *Brahim ho? Rajput ho?.. Arre, kaun ho bhai? [Are you Brahmin, Rajput? … Who the hell are you?].* I never answered this question. In those six years I remained silent.[10]

> There are official mechanisms which re-establish these themes as social stereotypes that are reproduced in the education system. A university professor who himself faced discrimination since his childhood as a child laborer, studied through distance education and managed to become a schoolteacher and later a college teacher. He is also a theater artist and managed to 'act out of his caste[11] due to his personality and indistinct surname which is used by both upper and lower castes. With a smile on his face, he explains with lots of conjectures, guesses and all that (stammers) ultimately, society wants to understand you under the category of caste. It might take years. For example, in my case it took them 20-30 years, and they have not been able to figure it out (the entire group burst with laughter). It is very enigmatic.[12]

The participant whose teachers harassed him over his name continues his story and the impact on his behavior:

> During my school days, for five years, I could not speak (due to fear) and starter stammering. My father was taking me to different places and it was not going away. But when I left the school, I was the only one from my batch who opted for government school because there I felt safe and developed leadership qualities. When I went to college, can you believe that I became the best speaker from college to state level declamation contests?[13]

The vignettes above illuminate how 'silence' is a coping mechanism along with hiding one's stigmatized identity but it is also the manifestation of subtle forms of discrimination existing in our education system. This silence represents those who are and/or feel 'unwelcome' and 'unwanted' in school or university (also see Nambissan, 2009). Toni Morrison (1995), in her essay, *Site of Memory* describes a character: "The language of her grief is silence. She has learned it well, its idioms, its nuances. Over the years, silence within her small body has grown large and powerful". According to

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[10]from FGD with college and University teachers on September 14, 2016 at JNU, New Delhi.
[11]Comments by moderator of the FGD.
[12]From FGD with college and University teachers on September 14, 2016 at JNU, New Delhi.
[13]Ibid.

Verma (2016), silence is a behavior that is "preceded by several stages of language, cognition, and emotional states involving underlying belief systems hidden to the speaker of silence" (106). He further states that 'pedagogy is often reduced to a method to manage hierarchies' (108). In short, silence is the reflection of existing social hierarchies.

During fieldwork, it was found that a large number of Dalit and OBC students could not complete their studies and de-registered from the university as they were not helped by their supervisors. Such departures from a reputed institution occur with an element of shame. This shame leads to the situation of alienation. In general, teachers' reactions to such situations are: 'I don't understand why they (Dalit students) do not speak up. Even when they come to my office to discuss, they generally remain silent. There might be several reasons behind this, but I don't ask about their personal life'.

This is an issue of 'stereotype threat' as Dalit students are constantly worried about how they are judged—that their achievements are perceived as lesser—which impacts self-confidence and then performance by comparison to those not living under the negative stereotype. Thus, it is important to recognize the emotional aspect of silence (Sue, 2015, p. 126). Therefore, disclosure of their caste identities makes them even more vulnerable to various kinds of prejudice and discrimination. Such behavior, according to Maurya (2018, p. 24) "attributing Dalit students' academic achievements to quota, and using implicit humiliating comments [by the upper castes] based on negative caste stereotypes."[14]

Language, Etiquette, and Silence

Language is an important medium of social interaction. Bernard Cohn's (1985) famous phrase "command of language and the language of command" reveals an important component of cultural capital, namely, the ease and familiarity with the dominant language, both in a narrowly linguistic sense. A large section of students, especially lower caste students who come from rural backgrounds find it difficult to adjust to a comparatively cosmopolitan campus environment as language becomes a basic hindrance to their social interactions. Though some campuses have formed 'Linguistic Empowerment Cells' to provide basic training in English grammar they have not yielded any significant results. FGD data shows that language is used as a negative stereotype associated with lower castes. A professor, belonging to the Scheduled Tribe at India's top university shares her experience when she was teaching at a college in Tamil Nadu:

> "…one very senior professor said to me in Hindi, "Jab tum muh kholti ho to pata nahi chalta ki tum aise background se ho"- [when you open your mouth, I can't make out that you come from such a background]. I asked what do you mean by that, Sir? He said, "Because you speak such good English".

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[14]21 year-old Student Kills Self at Osmania University, Protest Erupts, *The Times of India,* December 3, 2017.

Similarly another respondent, a Dalit scholar who is also an activist shares his experience with his upper caste friends after revealing to them his 'chamar' caste identity:

> "I used to get a reply like, "Why are you kidding? You don't look like them." That's when I understood that these [upper caste] people judge us on the basis of our dress, our physique, our way of talking and our education, and so on.[15]

Commenting on the attitude of upper caste classmates, Dev, a Dalit student from the department of Journalism at Jamia Milia Islamia University states that, "It is very common for them to comment on their appearance and clothes: "Yaar bhangi ban ke aa gaya/chamaar ban ke aa gaya?" (Your dress makes you look like chamar or bhangi? referring to the lower castes of cobblers or street sweepers). Professor Sukumar (2008, p. 15) explains how 'dress codes, language skills and general "étiquette" influence the relationship between different groups. Gestures, body language…more than anything it's body language (to exclude)'. Further, an upper caste teacher at a college highlights his interaction with his students:

> I observed it is only the upper caste students who speak and ask questions, (pause) because lower caste people are made voiceless in classrooms. I feel the distress of Dalit and tribal students in my class, which disturbs me. Therefore, by initiating a positive debate on affirmative action, I try to settle down my distress.[16]

choose 'silence' and 'submissiveness', or 'hiding' as options. This is another form of stigma management. "Stigma management is an offshoot of something basic in society, the stereotyping or "profiling" of our normative expectations regarding conduct and character; stereotyping is classically reserved for customers, orientals, and motorist, that is, persons who fall into very broad categories and who may be passing strangers to us" (Goffman, 1986, p. 51). Stigma is imbued with certain notions of power. Goffman conceptualizes the spoiled identity by claiming that stigma reflects societal norms and expectations.

Institutional Mechanisms

The classroom is an important space where students experience a teacher's authority as a knowledge giver. Shifrer (2013, p. 476) in his study on high school students suggests that teachers may have more power than parents to use stigmatized labels on students. In India, due to the age-old caste hierarchy, the classroom serves as a hierarchical space of discrimination, as a majority of the teachers in the education system are upper caste. Our FGDs with teachers highlighted a trend in undergraduate colleges (of Delhi University) regarding the appointment of teachers and allotment of classes to teachers

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[15]From a Focus Group Discussion with college and University teachers on September 14, 2016 at JNU, New Delhi.

[16]Ibid.

and students. In every college, students in a particular field, say sociology, are divided into various sections of classes and these sections are formed on the basis of a merit list. This does not make for a socially integrated classroom. A senior faculty highlights the general process: "In the first list of merit you don't find SC/ST/OBCs students. In A section we will find the upper caste [students], B section we will find more of the OBC students and in section C, you can find more SC/ST [students]."[17]

In the past few years at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), OBC and SC students performed very well in the written portion of the MPhil admissions exam but did not eventually gain admission. Through a Right to Information Act file, it was learned that in the viva-voce portion of the exam, lower caste students were given 1 or 2 and sometimes 0 points. This reveals institutional biases in the selection process. Instead of making socially inclusive rooms, institutional 'entrapment' forces them to remain in their 'section' and their 'quota'. Moreover the purpose of conducting interviews is also suspect. While all those who clear the entrance examination are at par with each other and have adequately displayed their subject knowledge, the question then arises, what is the purpose of or objective of conducting a viva? Is it then some kind of identification process? Students from marginalized groups are usually first or second-generation learners. Many of them are facing senior faculty members in universities for the first time. An interview setting can be extremely intimidating. The interviewee is sitting alone on one side facing at times 7 to 10 faculty members. In such situations more than memory, subject knowledge, future research plans, etc., a candidate's cultural capital, confidence, language skills get tested. While students from economically and socially well-to-do backgrounds would understandably be expected to do much better than the first or second-generation learners from poor and socially backward groups. They are inexperienced, under greater stress to perform as a lot rides on such interviews for them and they have fewer options as opposed to the well-off students, who have many more opportunities to study and/or work, relying on their social-network to cash on (Deshpande & Newman, 2007). At the same time, the interviewers are able to discern the regional origins, class, social background (broadly) and are free to make judgments based on their own personal stereotypes or even biases or prejudices. The 'subjective' evaluation is indeed, subject to all the above-mentioned qualifications of both aspiring students and the interviewing faculty members.

Conversation about Caste, Untouchability Stigma

A recent telephonic survey called the Social Attitudes Research for India (SARI)[18] conducted by researchers at r.i.c.e[19] and J.N.U, asked respondents about their beliefs

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[17]From a Focus Group Discussion with college and university teachers on September 14, 2016 at JNU, New Delhi.

[18]SARI (Social Attitudes Research for India) uses a sampling frame based on mobile phone subscriptions, random digit dialing, within household sample selection, and statistical weights to build representative samples of adults between 18-65 years old. A small research team carries out the interviews.

[19]Research Institute for Compassionate Economics (https://riceinstitute.org)

on untouchability, reservations and inter group marriage amongst others. The first round of the survey, asked male and female respondents, *"Kya aapke parivar me kuch sadasya chuachhoot ko mante hain?* (Do some members of your family practice untouchability?") in Delhi and rural and urban Uttar Pradesh. In rural U.P around 62 per cent and in urban U.P 52 per cent of the women reported that at least one person in their family practiced untouchability (from Coffey et al., 2018). This percentage was around 40 per cent for women and 28 per cent for male respondents in Delhi. Similarly, another study found that across India in 2011, among 30 per cent of households, at least one member practices untouchability (Thorat & Joshi, 2015). What this shows is that ideas of and practices around caste, untouchability, purity and pollution are still pervasive. It's part of childhood socialization, leaving lasting influences on young children, which even the schooling system fails to address and finally are carried onto the higher education level, where these issues and ideas are not addressed in any institutional manner.

Besides the classroom, the science lab is another crucial site of discrimination and hierarchy. Neha shares her conversation with a hostel mate who is doing research in natural sciences at one of India's top universities. She says that by the third year of her Doctorate degree, only two or three Dalit scholars continued their studies. She states, "In the laboratory, during lab work, many upper caste scholars dilute the chemicals of Dalit students and spoil their results often."[20] Such a caste-based evaluation of one's scientific experiments begins from the first day of their academic careers, when their guide asks about their caste. There are several cases where due to such bullying, lower caste scholars often leave the elite institutions and move to lesser-known institutes where they can concentrate on their results.

Lack of institutional mechanisms of the notion of privacy in India gives authority to academic staff/faculty to publicly shame students by identifying them by their caste. For example, the list of names of admitted students and obtained marks is generally on public display. Similarly, in most of the universities during registration of new students, separate counters are set up for SC/ST/OBC and unreserved 'general' category students. This is a classic example of institutional caste-based discrimination that blatantly violates SC/ST student's basic dignity and right to privacy. An anti-caste author, Yashica Dutt writes: "All these universities seem to be following the same playbook on how to exclude Dalits" (Dutt, 2019, p. 76).

Individual Agency and Suicide

During the fieldwork of this study, a research scholar and an activist, Muthukrishnan Rajini Krish of JNU[21] ended his life by hanging himself. His suicide led to debates across campuses. Student bodies blamed the university for his death calling it

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[20]Shared by a FGD participant on an online network on May 17, 2016 at 12:17 pm.
[21]On April 13, 2017, a Dalit M.Phil student of India's most politically vibrant campus Jawaharlal Nehru University hanged himself

an 'institutional murder'.[22] Amidst such arguments, missing was the debate on his complex struggle, of how Krish dealt with his Dalit identity. His Facebook posts reveal that it was his dream to study in JNU and he appeared four times for the entrance and in these four years he revised his research proposal 25 times. His profile picture was one of him standing next to the statue of Nehru[23] on campus. His name was Muthukrishna but he was known as 'Rajini' Krish because he was a big fan of Rajini Kant, a popular film star from Tamil Nadu. Many of his Facebook posts reveal him mimicking Rajini Kant's dialogue and style. He was popular among friends for cracking jokes and always smiling. 'It is hard to believe that the most lively and jolly person amongst us committed suicide' his friend exclaimed.[24] His Facebook posts also reveal a kind of isolation that despite having lots of friends, he chose Facebook to express himself, and he lived in complete isolation. In 2016, University of Hyderabad student, Rohith Vemula (whose suicide led to nation-wide protests), wrote in a letter[25] to the university administration that university authorities should "make preparations for the facility of euthanasia for students like me" (Dhillon, 2017).

Suicide is the consequence of multiple factors such as psychiatric disorders and interpersonal distress (Boahen-Boaten et. al., 2017, p. 376; Mythri & Abenezer, 2016; WHO 2016). Durkheim (1951) argues that suicide is not simply a personal choice an individual makes in response to stress but also a phenomenon which reflects social constraints or turbulences in institutions or structures (e.g. employing organizations, educational institutions, and social providers) meant to buffer the individual against stress. On the contrary, our ethnographic observations reveal that many student-activists including Dalit activists as well as teacher-activists find suicide to be a cowardly act. They proudly refer to Dr. Ambedkar, Birsa, Phule, Periyar and Marx who 'fought the fight' for the downtrodden. A Dalit professor angrily comments:

I don't even want to talk about suicide. Such [people who commit suicide] are very selfish individuals. Their crisis or problems or discrimination are not anywhere close to what Ambedkar faced. Yet Ambedkar never gave up. He fought and struggled for the entire society.

Most activists across parties perceive life in binaries: cowardly and brave; bourgeois and proletariat; exploiter and exploited; upper and lower caste. In these binaries, from the socio-cultural to the ideological level, there is little or no importance given to individual agency. University campuses and student activism is the reflection of these ideological binaries (Pathania, 2018). Existing ideologies also represent similar tendencies. In his social integration theory, Durkheim (1951) suggests that suicide risk is heightened when there is a breakdown of social ties between the individual and the

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[22]BAPSA (Birsa Ambedkar Phule Student Association) poster: "Against Institutional Murder of Muthukrishnan" March 15, 2017.

[23]Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of Independent India.

[24]From an interview of his friend Satish on May 1, 2017.

[25]Letter dated December 18, 2015 that was made public. [accessed on March 8, 2016. https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/give-euthanasia-facilities-rohith-wrote-to-v-c/]

social group. In this context, universities, in terms of their education and activism, fail to integrate those who struggle with their stigmatized caste identity.

Mosse (2018, p. 433) calls the idea of caste "as an imprisonment of the mind", which is experienced by Dalits as devastating, hurtful, even traumatic humiliation. Such "dignity humiliation"—the rejected claim to equality (Lindner, 2010), is a source of distress, turning the universities to which they gain access, into places of defeat for ambitious Dalit students or faculty (Deshpande & Zacharias, 2013; Guru, 2009; Jadhav et al., 2016). The bearing that this has on the tragic deaths by suicide of talented students in elite institutions needs careful inquiry, but it has without question disrupted the public narrative of casteless modernity. SC/ST students and faculty enter a system that, in this way, overtly offers the promise of equality and recognition, while at the same time covertly removing that possibility through structurally-driven practices of discrimination and exclusion. To be humiliated in a dignified space (of higher education) means to "suffer an actual threat to or fall in one's self respect" (Statman, 2010). Gopal Guru says that '[i]t could be argued that humiliation is a modern phenomenon which occurs within the conditions that make it possible for the servile to acquire both assertion and autonomy so necessary for self-respect." (Guru, 2009, p. 10). The expectation of equal treatment in universities creates particular conditions for a form of humiliation that is psychologically dangerous in a certain way that leads to alienation, exclusion and distress among students. More exclusion causes more negative emotions. When the salience of self is high and the network of others, within a network that is extensive, emotional reactions will be strong. Verification of identity will thus generate more intense positive emotions, where failure to have an identity will produce strong negative identity. Negative emotions in self, such as embarrassment, shame, and guilt, lower self-esteem (Turner & Stets, 2005, p. 119) and "labeling the other impure and subhuman is psychological ethnocide".[26] In other words, universities are becoming "socially toxic" spaces for lower caste students.

The reports of WHO have highlighted that India has one of the highest suicide rates in the world ranking, "particularly the developed and more educated South India. They have also pointed out that age specific suicide rates is from 15–24 years. Mosse (2012) in his studies on South Indian society concludes that caste has turned inward and now resides as a feeling inside the mind and heart. It functions in both the minds of the victim and of the tormentor, the lower and the upper caste. It takes the form of horrific violence such as rape, lynching, murder or arson perpetrated by the more powerful against the powerless, especially Dalits (Jadhav et al., 2016). It also serves as a mediator between poverty, caste and social suffering (Mosse & Jadhav, 2014). All of this has a deeper impact on the human mind. In brief, 'heart-mind' is about matters of worry, concern and suffering which are common and socially acceptable, but 'to discuss "brain-mind" problems invokes heavy social stigma' (Kleinman, 2012, p. 94).

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[26]https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/india-news-calling-the-other-impure-subhuman-is-psychological-ethnocide/304575 (accessed: April 2, 2022)

When a mental health condition is seen as a matter of the loss of control of the heart-mind by the 'brain-mind', this means loss of status and respect (*izzat*) which are part of an individual's cultural identity'. As a matter of fact, psychological research on caste has not paid enough attention to the fact that disadvantaged groups like Dalits might not internalize their devaluation willingly but develop strategies to overcome negative evaluation and protect their esteem (Branscombe, Schmitt & Harvey, 1999). This is a systemic oppression that keeps Dalits away from intellectual resources.

Conclusion and Future Research Questions

The article attempts to highlight that humiliation (and fear of humiliation) is an emotional engine that intensifies along with expanding aspirations, assertions of autonomy (social or economic) and has serious mental health effects. Discriminating on the basis of caste amidst the expectation of equal treatment "can be experienced by Dalits as devastating, hurtful, even traumatic; and it is this kind of distress that our data points to, including the part it might play in the tragic deaths by suicide of talented students in elite institutions.

As much as we admit to the persistence of caste discrimination and stigmatization as a problem plaguing higher education campuses, there is also a constant denial or attributing of depression, distress and suicides to incident-specific situations with total disregard for links with the larger social milieu of exclusion. Undoubtedly, there are incident-specific reasons, but it cannot be a coincidence that for every 25 cases of suicide, 23 are Dalits (Nayar, 2017). The trend suggests a structural relationship between caste identity and suicide. It requires an examination of the different forms and experiences of discrimination to understand what triggers suicide. It needs to be emphasized that for policy makers, caste-based discrimination and depression has been unchartered territory of higher education. Also, in the Indian higher education system, "a genuine dialogue between health and social science is still missing" (Jadhav, 2012). Intergroup contact can reduce intergroup bias by fostering more fluid, continuous, and inclusive social identities, but higher education in India does not show positive signs of bridging this gap The way in which the South Asian social system of caste produces social suffering, the consequences of which include poor psychological well-being. The neglect of caste in public health research in general and mental health in particular, strongly impacts wellbeing. There is lack of data on subjective wellbeing (Fontaine & Yamada, 2014, p. 407); the available research centers on caste and the humiliation are more centered on the "plights of Dalits" (Jadhav, 2012).

The above-mentioned data underscores how the overall higher education landscape and environment is severely affected with caste prejudice. It highlights how upper caste agency is also affected by caste stigma. With changing times and social mobility, the binaries of upper and lower castes are not as obvious as they may appear. Especially with the changes brought about by policies of affirmative action, there is dilution in the traditional caste structure. Satish Deshpande observes that '[u]pper caste

identity is such that it can be completely overwritten by modern professional identities of choice, whereas lower caste identity is so indelibly engraved that it overwrites all other identities' (Deshpande, 2013, p. 32). Therefore, future research needs to be looked at in this light: a) How are universities becoming places of social defeat? b) Are our educational institutions able to transform Dalits into academic resources? c) Do Indian universities have any mechanisms to deal with caste-related distress that leads to suicide? d) How different institutional habitus produce different impacts on Dalit students?[27] Therefore, we suggest that more studies should be conducted in state-run institutions to understand students' distress.

These are the special conditions that give rise to discriminatory practice against Dalits (SC/ST) staff and students which will be illustrated by our data. As in Tilly's (1998) theory of "durable inequality", caste involves processes of both "categorical exclusion" and "opportunity hoarding". Moreover, the effects of caste are such as to operate quite differently (sometimes inversely) on upper and lower castes (Mosse, 2018, p. 430). The nature of the experience of this discrimination, humiliation and their psychological or mental health effects requires another specific theoretical framing: Jadhav, Mosse & Dostaler (2016) draw distinction on Evelin Lindner's (2010) distinction between 'honor humiliation' and 'dignity humiliation' arguing that universities illustrate a shift from the 'honor-humiliation' associated with the subjugation of Dalits within caste orders of graded status and entitlements and which involves ritual humbling and 'knowing your place in a social order'; to 'dignity humiliation' which involves violation of claims to acknowledged rights to equal treatment, membership, opportunity, recognition etc. In a similar vein, Dalits involve "the making salient of caste and all its social judgments" in places where caste is not meant to be salient (Mosse, 2018, p. 433); this is a modern form of power over Dalits.

There is an urgent need to "reinvent" mental theory and it should be informed by local suffering, caste included (Jadhav, 2012). It is a matter of dialogue with one's own personal and collective memory (ibid.). It is also a matter of dialogue between disciplines. Social sciences is considered a very complex image of being very abstract and sacrosanct, needs to be revised and social sciences insights needs to be incorporated in the 'clinic'.[28] Although clinicians have devised "effective methods for healing traumatized people, they have done little to expand our understanding of how individual (caste-based) traumas[29] are socially constructed and also afflict collectives and influence ongoing and protracted conflict dynamics" (Rinker & Lawler, 2018, p. 151). When we think of linking social science with "clinic"; we are thinking of linking social suffering with the collective historical trauma of caste. In this regard, universities can serve as healing sites for both upper and lower castes.

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[27]The Proposal for India's First University Only for Dalit Students to Come up in Hyderabad by 2018. [*Hindustan Times,* Hyderabad. July 6, 2017.]

[28]in an interview (see Jha 2020).

[29]Although trauma is primarily understood as an individual human experience, it often generalizes to symptoms in collective social settings (Rinker & Lawler, 2018, p. 151).

Acknowledgement

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