

The Nature of Caste Prejudice: A New Look at Prejudice, Social Identity, and Casteism in India

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Abstract

Most research on caste prejudice is rooted in personality and individual difference approaches. As a result, there has been limited understanding of caste prejudice as an aspect of group psychology shaped by peoples' sense of group positions. Drawing on the social identity approach in social psychology (Reicher et al. 2010), this article proposes a group-level psychological conceptualisation of caste prejudice and examines its relevance for understanding contemporary expressions of casteism. Using a cross-sectional correlational survey design and a purposive sample comprising different caste categories ($N=278$), we examined associations between socio-demographic factors, personality and individual difference factors, caste prejudice, subjective identification with caste, opposition to reservations, and endorsement of discriminatory practices. The data was analysed using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation, ANOVA, and Multiple Linear Regression. We found that members of historically advantaged caste groups are more likely to endorse caste prejudice. Caste prejudice, in turn, significantly predicted opposition to reservations and endorsement of discriminatory practices. Importantly, those seeking to glorify their caste identity were found to be more likely to endorse caste prejudice. The psychological attachment to caste identity was not found to be associated with caste prejudice. All results were found to be significant even after statistically controlling for socio-demographic and personality-individual difference factors, suggesting the unique contribution of social identity-based analysis. We discuss the implications of our findings for theory, research, and efforts for social change.

Keywords

caste prejudice, social identity approach, casteism, affirmative action in India, intergroup relations in India

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Introduction

Many discussions on the persisting social exclusion and discrimination in society inevitably turn to prejudice in the minds of the majority groups. Prejudice is generally understood as a *negative evaluation* of others based on their membership in social groups. Prejudice, as a scientific concept, gained prominence in the aftermath of World War II, reflecting a profound shift in political and moral positions (for a historical overview, see Duckitt 1992). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, many scholars thought of prejudice as an aspect of the “deficiencies” of the minority group members. The post-war understanding of prejudice shifted attention towards the “faulty” ways that majority groups perceive minority groups. Another important conceptual shift occurred in this period. Prejudice was viewed as a personality-based phenomenon rooted in the individual differences in ethnocentric intergroup attitudes among people (e.g., Adorno et al. 1950). Criticising this personality and individual-difference approach for its psychological reductionism, some scholars argued for understanding prejudice as a group phenomenon to be considered as an aspect of prevalent group dynamic, intergroup conflict, and social system (e.g., Muzafer 1967; Pettigrew 1958; Tajfel & Turner 1979).

In this transition, the publication of Gordon Allport’s (1954) seminal compendious book *The Nature of Prejudice* occupies a special place. Allport defined prejudice as “an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalisation” (Allport 1954: 10), highlighting the cognitive, motivational, and affective components of the concept. Allport’s approach was unapologetically value-oriented and sought to challenge social injustice. He examined the White prejudice towards African Americans and ethnic hatred, particularly anti-Semitism, and briefly discussed the prejudice in the Indian caste system (Allport 1954: 10, 320). Allport’s key achievement in this work, as Reicher (2007) has pointed out, was to “refocus ...from studying the attributes of the oppressed to studying the perceptions of the oppressor” (p. 832). Allport’s book reframed the way prejudice and discrimination are understood and set up an agenda for future research.

In the early 1950s, India, as a young nation, was recovering from the large-scale violence witnessed in the partition. A useful foundation was laid in this period by Gardner Murphy’s (1953) book, *In the Minds of Men: The Study of Human Behaviour and Social Tensions in India*. The book reported findings of a large-scale ‘tensions project,’ led by American Psychologist Gardner Murphy with teams of Indian academics, commissioned by the Indian Government to UNESCO in 1949 to study the nature of communal tensions and paths to social harmony. Psychologists in India took to research on prejudice to understand intergroup conflict in Indian society, reflecting their concern for nation-building. While the main focus of Indian psychologists in this period remained on Hindu-Muslim conflicts, caste conflict also received some attention. Indian psychologists started studying the implications of caste prejudice as early as the 1960s.

Notably, Paranjpe's (1970) book - *Caste, Prejudice and the Individual* - investigated intercaste differences in belief, opinions, and attitudes relating to the caste system. The book reported findings from a survey study conducted among college students ($N=503$) from Brahmin, Maratha, and Dalit communities in Poona, India. Paranjpe was motivated by reading Allport's work and adopted some of the advanced theoretical and methodological tools to study caste prejudice. The analysis in the book emphasised how caste prejudice and discrimination are deeply rooted in social inequality. However, while the book discussed the prevalent sociological and anthropological literature on caste at length, it fell short of adopting a group-level psychological approach and treated prejudice as a matter of individual psychological processes. Importantly, Paranjpe did not take a value-oriented position towards exploitation and injustice in the caste system but maintained that social scientific study must be 'objective' (cf. Allport 1954). Therefore, caste prejudice was approached in this research as an aspect of Hindu social order rather than a pervasive social problem needing intervention. Despite raising the critical issue of caste prejudice, the focus of the analysis remained on how Dalits are different and cause prejudice rather than how the oppressor caste groups create, maintain, and perceive these differences.

Other Indian psychologists in this era also approached prejudice in a similarly individualistic manner and distanced themselves from studying the oppressive and exploitative nature of caste hierarchy (Anant 1970; Pandey & Singh 2005). Consider, for example, the way Rath and Sircar (1960: 16) explain the prejudice of upper castes towards the Untouchables:

The upper caste people do not mind the students of the Harijan groups to live with them in the same hostels, but they do not like all kinds of Harijans to enter into the temples and hotels. This prejudice of the upper castes may be more due to uncleanly habits of the Harijans, but as the dirty habits gradually disappear when they are educated in schools and colleges the upper caste people do not mind their children living with them in the hostels.

Rath and Sircar explain the prejudice of upper castes as a consequence of the "uncleanly habits" among "Harijans" rather than due to the way upper castes come to perceive "Harijans" as unclean and dirty. They naively assume that the prejudice will disappear once the "Harijans" forsake their "dirty habits." Here, these researchers overlooked the fact that caste prejudice is deeply rooted in social disgust arising from the beliefs and practices of untouchability (Ambedkar 1989). The exclusion and control of Dalits, i.e., erstwhile untouchables, lower castes, and women, has been instrumental in materialising systemic inequalities and legitimating a status quo in Indian society (see Omvedt 2011; Thorat & Joshi 2020).

The key question that needs to be asked from an Allportian perspective is why some people in the Hindu social order are perceived as dirty and how such perception

is problematic. The Allportian perspective would have motivated these researchers to challenge the perpetrator and not blame the dehumanised and discriminated victims. Consequently, the Allportian perspective would have suggested exploring “contact” (Pettigrew & Tropp 2006) as a means of reducing prejudice in the minds of upper castes. However, such an engagement with prejudice research was lacking. Psychologists in India seem to have distanced themselves from the issues of caste prejudice after the mid-1970s. To our knowledge, there has been little systematic psychological research addressing the problem of caste prejudice in Indian society after the early decades of Indian independence. As a result, the social psychological examination of caste prejudice has not kept up with the progress in social psychology internationally.

There is limited scope here to discuss the major developments in prejudice research in social psychology. Despite critical debates over the problems and potential of prejudice as a scientific concept, the political and action-oriented nature of prejudice is well recognised (see Reicher 2007). The earlier conceptual emphasis on ‘prejudice-as-antipathy’ is replaced with more nuanced consideration of ideologies, attitudes and beliefs that sustain group-based inequality and oppression (Barlow & Sibley 2018). An influential body of research indicates that prejudice needs to be understood as a political rather than narrowly psychological category; prejudice mobilises individuals into social action that may reproduce social inequalities through discriminatory behaviour or may build norms that legitimise the inequalities between groups, thus explaining the reproduction of the social hierarchy and asymmetries (see, Dixon et al. 2012). Social identity theory in social psychology (Reicher et al. 2010) has provided a non-reductionist and politically relevant approach to studying the group process and intergroup conflict. In sum, there is a good basis available to theorise and study patterns of caste prejudice in India and elsewhere.

This article is an attempt to reinvigorate the study of caste prejudice. Our main aim here is to go beyond the individualist and apolitical stance and develop a group-level psychological conceptualisation of caste prejudice that is sensitive to the ideological as well as political nature of caste. We test our approach using a quantitative study and examine associations of prejudice with caste identity and contemporary expressions of casteism.

Conceptualising Caste Prejudice as a Group Process

As discussed earlier, much of the prejudice literature has focused on individual-level factors such as early socialisation, personality trait, or their interaction with socio-political context that may consequently shape prejudice against outgroups (Altemeyer 1998; Duckitt 2001; Duckitt & Sibley 2017; Pratto et al. 1994). For instance, two individual-level differences in psychological motivations are widely used as underlying and near-universal explanations for prejudice (Ho et al. 2015; Osborne et al. 2017; Reynolds et al. 2001; Sibley et al. 2006). First, the need to build a hierarchical society (Social Dominance Orientation-SDO), and second, the need to maintain social stability and cohesion (Right Wing Authoritarianism-RWA). However, even

these personality-level individual differences are aligned to and triggered by broader intergroup processes rather than just individual worldviews (Dru 2007). For example, Jogdand, Khan, and Mishra (2016) have highlighted the limitations of SDO and RWA in explaining the full spectrum of group processes in the caste context. Another major issue with this research is that it does not fully acknowledge how prejudice makes a member of a group a social actor on behalf of the group. We, therefore, need to turn towards approaches that provide insights into group-level psychological processes.

An insightful piece of research by Thorat and colleagues (2016) contributed to the conceptualisation of caste prejudice. Building on insights from Blumer (1958) and Ambedkar (1989), Thorat and colleagues made a distinction between individual and group-level conceptualisation of caste prejudice. They highlighted the limitations of individualistic conceptualisation to explain the material and status-seeking behaviour among the upper castes, especially through opposition to caste-based reservations provided to scheduled castes and tribes. They proposed that caste prejudice is best understood as a “group feeling” embedded in the present-day social asymmetries and future aspirations associated with the ingroup. Their examination of the opposition to reservation highlights the instrumental functions of such opposition for the advantaged upper castes. We take this line of conceptualisation forward by incorporating the cognitive-motivational processes rooted in social identities and self-categorisations in the caste context.

A Social Identity Approach to Caste Prejudice

Social Identity Approach (SIA; Reicher et al. 2010) comprises two sister theories: social identity theory and self-categorisation theory. SIA emerged in the 1970s from the attempts to explain the findings of minimal group studies. Originally set out to examine the effect of arbitrary and novel social categorization on intergroup behaviour, the minimal group studies led to surprising and provoking findings (Spears & Otten 2017). While it was assumed that the realistic competition for limited resources among groups lead people to favour their ingroup and discriminate against an outgroup, these studies showed that categorizing people into groups is enough to alter their behaviour, influencing them to favour their ingroup over the comparative outgroup. Henri Tajfel, one of the most influential social psychologists and author of social identity theory, argued that if we want to understand human behaviour in the minimal group studies, we must take into account the role of group membership in providing meaning, value and purpose to individuals. He proposed the concept of social identity to explain the psychological importance of group membership to individual’s self-concept. Tajfel defined social identity as the “knowledge that [we] belong to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to [us] of this group membership” (Tajfel 1981: 251). The concept of social identity encapsulated the interactions between society and the individual mind, mediated by a set of cognitive-affective-motivational processes.

SIA provided an alternative to individual or personality-level factors to explain complex social dynamics. SIA considers the issues of social structure more important in shaping intergroup relations than personality and interpersonal factors (Tajfel & Turner 1979; Reicher et al. 2010). SIA makes a distinction between personal and social identity. It is proposed that we define ourselves not only through our individual and idiosyncratic sense of self but also through the groups that we are members of. The groups we belong to matter to us as they are the sources of meaning, esteem, purpose and support. We are, therefore, psychologically motivated to maintain and enhance a positive and distinctive sense of social identity. At the same time, the meaning of being a group member is not solely based on a sociological or external classification; instead, it needs to have some psychological meaning for the individual. People's social status, sense of security and certainty, and self-esteem remain contingent on the group's fate (Tajfel & Turner 1979; Reicher et al. 2010).

The dynamic conceptualisation of self in SIA helps us understand many important group-level phenomena without succumbing to reductionism (see Khan et al. 2017; Reicher & Jogdand 2016). SIA research succinctly shows that ethnocentrism, violence, oppression, and discrimination against other groups are not a given. They are rooted in the psychological relationship one has with the ingroup and the perceived position of the ingroup vis-à-vis relevant outgroups (Dixon et al. 2012; Reynolds et al. 2016; Turner et al. 1987). Thus, prejudice is not considered a reified and pathological characteristic of an individual or a group but a dynamic and psychologically meaningful process shaped by the social context. A critical move of SIA on prejudice is that it treats prejudice not as the internalisation of external ideology but as a function of the interaction of people's psychological relationship with their ingroup's position and treatment in a perceived social system. Prejudice, therefore, does not remain a matter of measuring the accuracy of perception against a perceived reality but a matter of politics and mobilisation rooted in group identities (Reicher 2007; Drury 2012).

Dimensions of Subjective Identification with Caste: Attachment and Glorification

In a society, an individual belongs to multiple social groups, but not all groups are psychologically meaningful to the individual. Social identity research has emphasised the importance of subjective identification with valued social groups to an individual's cognition, emotion and behaviour. Social groups are important in addressing basic psychological needs (Greenaway et al. 2016). A strong psychological relationship with an ingroup may not necessarily lead to blind conformity or breed prejudice against an outgroup. A strong psychological identification with ingroup may in fact be critical in nature and can foster dissent (Penic et al. 2016). For example, movements like #HeforShe or whites allying with BlackLivesMatter show pro-social and progressive potential of identification among historically privileged groups (see Highfield & Miltner 2023).

Notwithstanding these positive aspects of group identification, several studies have also found that those who identify strongly with their ingroup may endorse more

prejudice and ignore moral transgressions by ingroup members (Doosje et al. 1998; Doosje et al. 2006; Roccas et al. 2008; Sahdra & Ross 2007). Furthermore, when confronted with information that reflects negatively on the ingroup, those identifying highly with the group are also more likely to be motivated to defend the ingroup (Leidner et al. 2010; Penic et al. 2016).

This apparent contradiction is resolved by considering the multiple ways people identify with their ingroup. Roccas and colleagues (Roccas et al. 2006 2008) proposed a bi-dimensional model of subjective identification with ingroup: glorification and attachment. The glorification component captures the belief that the ingroup is superior to other groups on a variety of dimensions, as well as a tendency of absolute loyalty and obedience to the ingroup. The attachment component, on the other hand, captures emotional attachment to the ingroup and the importance of the ingroup to an individual's self-concept. Across multiple contexts, researchers have noted that ingroup glorification rather than ingroup attachment makes a strong predictor of aggression and hostility towards outgroups. It was noted that individuals who seek to derive a sense of superiority from their group membership may legitimise violence towards an outgroup (Bilali & Vollhardt 2019; Leidner et al. 2010). It is, therefore, plausible to expect that those seeking to glorify their group may be more likely to practice or endorse prejudice against the outgroups. Following this reasoning, we can expect that glorification of one's caste rather than mere attachment to it should be a strong predictor of caste prejudice.

To summarise, we propose a deeper focus on the psychology of caste identity and caste power. We contend that the psychological relationship with caste identity may be critical in shaping the individual, interpersonal or societal manifestations of caste prejudice over the personality and individual difference factors (see Osborne et al. 2017; Roccas et al. 2006). The psychological need to glorify ingroup caste identity may be a source of prejudice rather than a mere psychological connection to caste ingroup. For people whose caste group constitutes an important part of their self-perception, an aggrandisement of the caste identity may lead to a more positive sense of self. Thus, the strength of subjective glorification of one's caste group may shape the target of the prejudice and that determines members of which groups would be more likely to inhabit prejudice (Bonnot et al. 2016; Dixon et al. 2012; Roccas et al. 2006). Thus, this study seeks to underline that the psychology of caste prejudice is not just located at the level of personality and individual differences but also at the level of caste identities and the social system. In the following sections, we highlight the role of prejudice in sustaining social hierarchy and shaping casteist attitudes.

Whose Interest Does Caste Prejudice Serve?

Plethora of sociological, historical, and anthropological literature indicates that it is the dominant caste groups whose relative privilege, resources and power are maintained and legitimated by their position within the caste hierarchy (Subramanian 2019; Teltumbde 2010; Thorat et al. 2020; Thorat et al. 2016). The caste system functions

as a graded hierarchy that assigns value to people depending on their birth in caste groups. As an exploitative and consensual system of status and power relations, the caste system evolved to protect the interests of the upper castes, mainly Brahmins (see Ambedkar 1989; Teltumbde 2010). The sacred literature of Hindus elevated Brahmins to godly status and legitimated the subjugation, segregation, and humiliation of the 'Untouchables' (Ambedkar 1989). Despite the substantive changes in the political-economic relations in the last two centuries, caste remained resilient and reproduced the inequalities and patterns of social dominance (see Gupta 2005; Jogdand et al. 2016). The sacred literature shaped (and arguably still shapes) the hierarchical beliefs, attitudes, and subjectivities in Indian society. Notably, Cotterill et al. (2014) identified the role of the Hindu theory of Karma as a 'legitimising myth' that drives attitudes of social dominance and prejudice in Indian society; they found generalised prejudice associated with tendencies to support hierarchical social arrangement and opposition to egalitarian policies and practices (also see, Jogdand et al. 2016). Therefore, it is plausible to expect upper castes to be more likely to hold and express a higher degree of prejudice.

Contemporary Expressions of Casteism

Caste relations have not remained frozen in time. Along with notable stability of status and power relations (Dumont 1980; Moffatt 2015), caste relations also involved protest and social change (Gupta 2005; Hardtmann 2009). The socio-political changes in society and, consequently, the caste system, specifically those accompanying colonial rule, destabilised the traditional prejudicial underpinnings of violence and discrimination. With the weakening of religious order (Gupta 2000), capitalistic market relations supplanting the self-replicating caste system in rural society, and increased opportunities for competition among Dalits and non-Dalits (Jodhka 2015), the old notions of mythological or essential superiority cannot fully explain how caste inequality has continued in modern Indian society. Notwithstanding the politicisation of caste identities and the rising agency of oppressed caste groups, caste violence is a persistent social reality (Teltumbde 2010). The cases of caste atrocities have increased in recent years (Sadanandan 2018). The continuity of caste in a changing society requires that we consider both subtle and blatant expressions of caste prejudice:

Discriminatory practices. Multiple studies have mapped the continuing caste discrimination in employment opportunities (Mosse 2018; Siddique 2011; Thorat & Joshi 2020), access to education (Bailwal & Paul 2021; Subramanian 2015), marriages (Ahuja & Ostermann 2016), etc. However, overt casteist and discriminatory practices are not the only way that injustice and inequality in caste context are maintained and reproduced. A growing interest in understanding the changes in caste relations offers new modes of prejudice legitimising caste discrimination and inequality. For instance, Natrajan (2012) argues that caste groups have claimed the language of 'culture', allowing casteism to continue as a preference. In other words, prejudice is increasingly directed not at the 'other by blood' but 'other by culture'. Caste prejudice has taken

increasingly nuanced forms to build contestation to social justice measures such as caste-based reservations (e.g., see Katju 2020).

Opposition to Reservations. A notable feature of the attempts to maintain a status quo is the vehement opposition to institutional policies aimed at social justice, such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 (SC/ST (PoA) Act) and reservation policies for Scheduled Castes and Tribes (see Thorat et al. 2016). Subramanian (2015) offers a powerful case study of caste-based discrimination in the premier educational campuses of the Indian Institute of Technology (IITs) in India. This research highlights how discourses of caste and merit have interacted to produce new and more ‘acceptable’ forms of caste subjectivities in premier engineering colleges (cf. Deshpande 2013). Reservations are vehemently opposed in the IIT campuses on account of threats to “merit”. The notion of “merit”, a symbolic capital in the urban labour market, becomes associated with being an upper caste from a general category, whereas Dalits and lower castes as beneficiaries of caste-based reservations are sneered at and considered meritless. Thorat, Tagade and Naik (2016) have highlighted the instrumental value of opposition to caste-based reservations for the historically advantaged caste groups. They examined the role of prejudice in the opposition to caste-based reservations and found that the opposition to caste reservations, notwithstanding the variety and pervasiveness of arguments, is, in fact, driven by the fear of losing privileges among dominant castes.

Hypotheses

Based on the above discussion, we shall now formally summarise the hypotheses of the study. We expect more endorsement of caste prejudice among the historically advantaged castes (General, OBC) compared to historically disadvantaged social groups (SC, ST) (Hypothesis 1). We expect the glorification of one’s caste identity to predict caste prejudice, compared to the attachment to caste identity (Hypothesis 2). Caste prejudice, in turn, should be positively associated with the endorsement of discriminatory practices and opposition to caste-based reservations (Hypothesis 3). It is proposed that these relationships will be significant even after accounting for socio-demographic factors and personality and individual difference-level predictors of prejudice (J. Duckitt 2001; J. Duckitt & Sibley 2017).

Method

Sample: We recruited adult participants through convenience sampling across universities and institutions of higher education. Data was collected from 287 participants through an online survey (90 General, 103 OBC, 94 SC/ST; 180 Male and 98 Female; Mean age=21.83, SD=3.6). The data from 9 participants were removed due to issues (repeated entries, age below 18 years, etc). Thus, the analysis was based on the data from 278 participants in total. The majority of the participants identified themselves as Hindus and were comfortable in English ($N=226$).

Procedure: The survey was in English language and set up online using Google Forms. Participants were approached through course instructors and personal contacts. Participants received the link for the survey through emails. The survey began with an information sheet containing necessary information about the study and the signing of the consent form. After completion of the survey, the participants were presented with a debriefing sheet that clarified the nature of the study and contact information of researchers and help services.

Ethical Approval and Data Availability: The Institute Ethics Committee (IEC) of the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, approved the study protocol (Ref. No. P-075/2020). The dataset and analysis syntax will be shared upon a reasonable request.

Measures:¹

- 1. Subjective identification with caste:** This scale was adapted to the caste context from the bi-dimensional identification scale devised by Roccas and others (Roccas et al. 2006, 2008). The 16-item scale seeks to measure the nature and extent to which the participant identifies with their caste group. The scale had two major components, as discussed earlier, with 8-items each: Glorification and Attachment. The glorification component measures the extent to which self is derived from the purported superiority of the caste ingroup. The attachment component measures the extent to which the self is committed to the caste ingroup and the members of the ingroup. Items were rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Some of the sample items for glorification of caste identity are: “Other caste groups can learn a lot from us.”, “My caste is better than other caste groups in all respects.”. Some of the sample items for attachment with caste identity are: “When I talk about the group members, I usually say “we” rather than “they.” “Being a member of my caste is an important part of my identity.” The scale reflected a satisfactory degree of internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha =.95).
- 2. The subtle and blatant Prejudice:** We used the 9-item ‘Blatant and Subtle Prejudice’ scale by Pettigrew and Meertens (1995). The blatant prejudice subscale measures more traditional forms of negative attitudes against low castes, and the subtle prejudice subscale constitutes a need for ‘hard work’ emotional ambivalence and highlighting cultural differences between ‘high and low castes’. These components, as discussed above, are relevant in the caste context. The participants responded to items on a 6-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Sample items from the scale are: “The high castes and low castes can never be really comfortable with each other, even if they are close friends” (Blatant), “ It is just a matter of some people not trying hard enough. If low castes would only try harder, they could be as well off as high castes.” (Subtle). The internal consistency of the measure was acceptable (Cronbach’s alpha=.67)

¹We also measured some other variables which are not part of the present analysis and may be reported in another publication.

3. **Endorsement of discriminatory practices:** This scale was constructed *de novo* by the authors. The participants expressed their perceived endorsement of six different caste-related practices on a 4-point Likert scale between “Completely unacceptable” and “Completely acceptable”. The questions sought to measure the degree to which the participant may perceive a discriminatory act as reasonable or legitimate. Here are few sample items. To what extent do you think it is acceptable to: “Not allow people from other castes to enter the kitchen” or “Refuse to hire someone based on his/her caste”? The internal consistency of the measure was satisfactory (Cronbach’s alpha=.89).
4. **Opposition to reservations:** The scale was adapted from the 3-item opposition to reservations scale by Cotterill and colleagues (2014). However, the reliability of the scale was very poor (Cronbach’s alpha=.29) hence, we used a single-item scale. Participants indicated their responses using a 7-point Likert scale with the following item: “Reservations are bad for the overall progress of our society, and they have created a vested interest in backwardness among caste groups.”
5. **Social Dominance Orientation:** Social Dominance Orientation (Cronbach’s alpha=.76) was measured with the 8-item Scale (Ho et al. 2015; Pratto et al. 1994). Some of the sample items are: “Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups” and “It is unjust to try to make groups equal”.
6. **Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA):** This was measured with a 9-item version (Cronbach’s alpha=.73) of Duckitt et al. (2010) 18-item RWA scale. Some of the sample items are: “What our country needs most is discipline, with everyone following our leaders in unity”, and “Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn”.
7. **Socio-demographic variables:** We also collected the demographic details of the participants in terms of age, sex, region, education, socio-economic status (SES) and caste category.²

Analytic Strategy: Data were analysed using JASP version 0.16.4 (Love et al. 2019). All measures were first computed for their internal consistency, mean, standard deviation, normality of distribution, etc. Statistical analysis required a single figure for a measure; hence, the average of all items in a scale was taken as the score for a participant. We conducted the bivariate correlational analysis to explore associations among all the measured variables using Pearson Product-Moment correlation. For hypothesis 1, we conducted an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to examine the mean differences in endorsement of caste prejudice among different caste categories. To assess the predictive validity of our hypothesised relationships in hypotheses 2 and 3, we conducted linear regression analyses. To test hypothesis 2, we ran a multiple regression analysis to examine whether and to what extent two different forms of

²We refer to General category to indicate the historically advantaged caste groups (see Deshpande 2013).

subjective identification with caste groups may predict caste prejudice. For hypothesis 3, we put caste prejudice as the predictor variable and sought to examine its predictive influence on the endorsement of discriminatory practices and opposition to caste-based reservations.

Results

Data Preparation and Screening

The missing values in the dataset were found to be random and at desirable levels of 5 per cent (Tabachnick et al. 2013). We used pairwise deletion of the missing data to utilise the data fully. Our variables had a reasonable kurtosis and skewness between +1 and -1 (Tabachnick et al. 2013). Some variables had a statistically significant Shapiro-Wilkes score, suggesting that the distribution may not form a normal curve. However, with our sample size, the graphical distribution (Q-Q plot and histograms) and skewness and kurtosis, the threat to normality may be minimal (Field 2013; Tabachnick et al. 2013). We followed bootstrapping with 5000 resamples for all regression analyses to ensure the validity of analyses irrespective of any assumption about the normality of distribution (Kline 1998; Tabachnick et al. 2013). Visual inspection of histograms, scatterplots, and P-P plots revealed no violations of linearity, normality, or homoscedasticity. There were no variables with an extremely high degree of correlation (<0.90), suggesting minimal threat of multicollinearity. Furthermore, the possibility of multicollinearity was discarded with VIF and tolerance within thresholds (Field 2013).

Descriptive Findings and Univariate Analysis

The descriptive findings and univariate analysis are stated in Table 1. We find that caste prejudice has a moderate and positive association with both components of subjective identification but more strongly with the glorification of caste identity. On the other hand, caste prejudice is positively associated with endorsement of discriminatory practices and opposition to reservations. We also find that there is a substantial positive correlation between glorification of and attachment to caste identity, yet they differ in their bivariate correlations with prejudice, endorsement of discriminatory practices and opposition to reservations.

We explored the statistical relationships between the demographic variables and other variables. There may be an argument that as we grow older and invested in caste identities, caste prejudice may also increase. A linear regression analysis found that age has a statistically insignificant relationship with caste prejudice ($p=.66$). Similarly, the residents of small towns were more likely to endorse caste prejudice in an ANOVA analysis ($F(2, 270)=3.53, p=0.03$), than those residing in rural or metropolitan areas ($t=-0.44, SE=0.11, p=0.04$). We also found gender differences in an ANOVA analysis ($F(3, 269)=4.85, p=0.008$), with men reporting higher levels of caste prejudice ($t=-0.2.89, SE=0.09, p=0.08$). Differences in education ($p<.05$) and SES ($p<.05$) were found to be statistically insignificantly associated with caste prejudice.

Regarding the forms of subjective identification, an ANOVA analysis indicated that those from rural areas are more inclined to identify with their caste identity ($F(2, 269) = 4.29, p = 0.01$) than metropolitan cities ($t = -2.91, SE = 0.28, p = 0.01$). Similarly, only those with postgraduate degrees and above are significantly less likely to have identified with their caste identity ($F(4, 265) = 3.92, p = 0.01$). Subjective identification with caste identity showed a meaningful and positive association with lower SES ($p > 0.05$), men ($p > 0.05$) or greater age ($p > 0.05$).

An ANOVA showed that there is a statistically significant difference in opposition to reservation ($F(3, 274) = 11.21, p < .001$). A post-hoc comparison with Bonferroni correction showed that participants from General castes opposed reservation significantly more than those from Dalit groups ($p < .001$) and ST groups ($p < .05$), and OBC participants opposed reservations more than Dalit participants ($p < .001$).

Table 1: Mean, SD and Correlations for all variables in the study

Variables (Measures)	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Caste Prejudice	2.65	0.73	-						
2. Glorification of Caste Identity	3.09	1.43	0.41***	-					
3. Attachment with Caste Identity	3.33	1.62	0.31***	0.85***	-				
4. Endorsement of Discriminatory Practices	2.05	1.26	0.44***	0.49**	0.43***	-			
5. Opposition to Reservations	4.28	1.93	0.41***	0.11*	0.02	0.19**	-		
6. SDO	2.42	1.07	0.44***	0.48***	0.43***	0.52***	0.14**	-	
7. RWA	4.11	1.01	0.43***	0.46***	0.40***	0.23***	0.23***	0.23***	-

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < 0.10$

Testing Hypothesis I

We predicted that the caste groups occupying higher positions in the social hierarchy would endorse a higher degree of caste prejudice compared to caste groups occupying lower positions. Thus, the General category and OBCs would express a higher degree of caste prejudice compared to SC and STs.

Our data shows (see Table 2 and Figure 1) that OBC participants endorsed higher amounts of caste prejudice ($M = 2.78, SD = 0.62$), closely followed by General category participants ($M = 2.67, SD = 0.85$). We conducted an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to compare the effects of caste category or position on caste prejudice. The findings showed that there was a statistically significant difference in caste prejudice among the three groups ($F(2, 270) = 4.111, p = 0.017$). We also ran a post-hoc analysis with Bonferroni correction, comparing the differences between the groups. We found that there is a statistically significant difference between ST/SC on the one hand and OBC on the other hand ($t = -2.847, p = 0.014, 95\% CI = -0.557, 0.052$). There was no significant

difference between OBC and General category participants ($t=1.83, p=0.20$). This supports our hypothesis that the high-status and advantaged caste groups are more likely to endorse prejudicial attitudes. The hypothesised relations remained significant ($p>0.05$) even after controlling for age, education, gender and socio-economic status.

Table 2: Mean differences and standard deviations among different categories in caste prejudice.

Category	N	Mean	SD
General	90	2.67	0.85
ST/SC	81	2.47	0.65
OBC	102	2.78	0.62

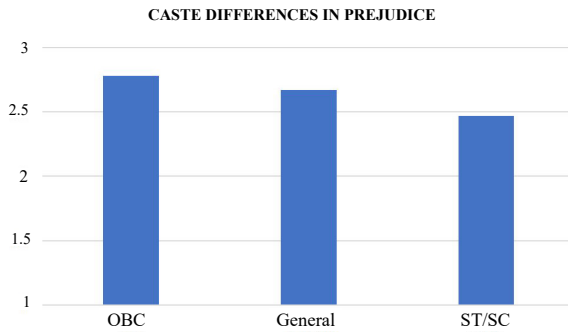


Figure 1: Graphical representations of mean differences in prejudice among caste groups. The vertical axis refers to the reported caste prejudice, and the horizontal axis refers to the caste categories.

Testing Hypothesis 2

We conducted a multiple regression analysis to test our hypotheses 2. We hypothesised that subjective identification with one’s caste ingroup would be positively associated with caste-based prejudice. We ran an OLS regression analysis that tested if subjective identification would predict caste prejudice (also see scatterplot in Figure 2a). We found that identification with caste ingroup is positively and significantly associated with caste prejudice ($\beta=0.378$, adjusted $R^2=0.14$, $t=6.617$, $p<.001$, CI 95%=0.132, 0.244).

We also predicted that the glorification of caste identity but not attachment to caste identity would be positively associated with caste prejudice. We conducted a multiple regression analysis in which glorification and attachment components of identification were our covariates, and we entered caste-based prejudice as the outcome variable. We found that the glorification component of identification predicted an increase in caste-based prejudice (see scatterplot in figure 2c) ($\beta=0.577$, $sr^2= 0.30$, $t=5.374$, $p<.001$, CI 95%=0.185, 0.400). However, the attachment component was a weak and negative predictor of caste prejudice (see scatterplot in Figure 2b) ($\beta=-0.082$, $sr^2= -0.094$, $t=-1.885$, $p=0.09$). Thus, the explanatory effect of identification on caste prejudice

can be singularly attributed to the glorification component of the identification. We found that the hypothesised relations remained significant ($p > 0.001$) even after adding age, education, gender and socio-economic status as covariates. We also found the effects of glorification on prejudice to be significant ($p > 0.001$) while controlling for personality-level variables, i.e. SDO and RWA.

Table 3: Standardised Regression Coefficients and Semi Partial Correlation in Multiple Regressions with Caste Prejudice as Outcome and Components of Identification as Predictors.

	Caste Prejudice	
	β	sr^2
Glorification of Caste Identity	0.57***	0.30
Attachment with Caste Identity	-0.08 ^a	-0.09
Adjusted R^2	0.188	

*** $p < .001$, ^a $p < .10$

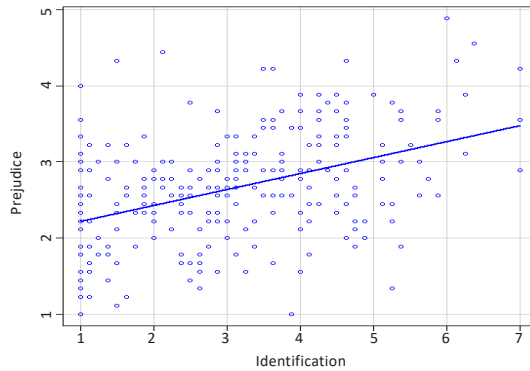


Figure 2a: Scatterplot depicting the distribution of responses along the regression line. The vertical axis represents the caste prejudice, whereas the horizontal axis represents the subjective identification with the caste identity.

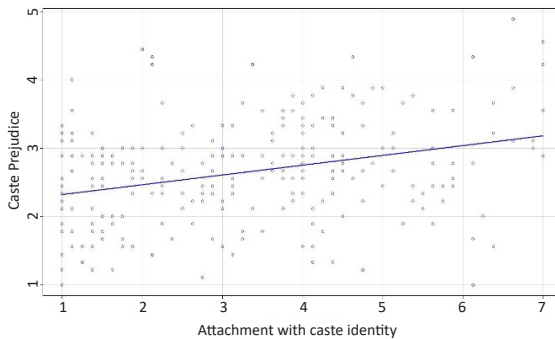


Figure 2b: Scatterplot depicting the distribution of responses along the regression line. The vertical axis represents the caste prejudice, whereas the horizontal axis represents the attachment with caste identity.

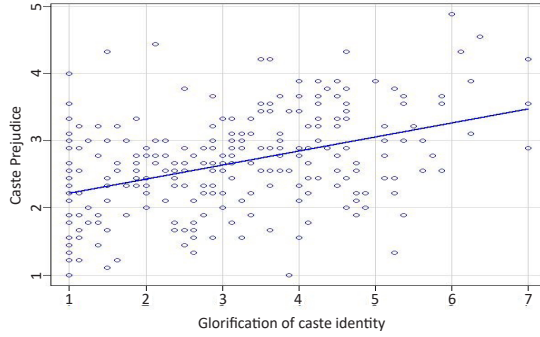


Figure 2c: Scatterplot depicting the distribution of responses along the regression line. The vertical axis represents the caste prejudice, whereas the horizontal axis represents the glorification of caste identity.

Testing Hypothesis 3

H3 stated that caste prejudice would be positively associated with the endorsement of discriminatory practices and opposition to reservations. Table 2 shows the statistical indicators of the multiple linear regression analyses conducted to test the hypothesis.

Table 4: Effect of Caste Prejudice on endorsement of discriminatory practices and opposition to reservations.

	Endorsement of Discriminatory Practices	Opposition to Reservations
Caste-based Prejudice	0.44***	0.41***
Adjusted R ²	0.19	0.17

***p<.001

We found that caste prejudice significantly predicted endorsement of discriminatory practices ($\beta=0.44, t=7.97, p<.001, \text{Adjusted } R^2= 0.19, \text{CI } 95\%= 0.584, 0.967$) as well as opposition to caste-based reservations ($\beta=0.42, t=7.16, p<.001, \text{Adjusted } R^2= 0.17, \text{CI } 95\%= 0.832, 1.413$). Here, too, we found that the hypothesised relations remained significant ($p>0.001$) after controlling for age, education, gender, socio-economic status, SDO, and RWA.

Discussion

Caste-based discrimination and inequality continue in various forms. Even as there is a growing recognition of caste prejudice contributing to this continuity (Ahuja & Ostermann 2016; Bailwal & Paul 2021; Coffey et al. 2018; Cotterill et al. 2014; Mosse 2018; Thorat et al. 2020), it has not received a systematic and consistent attention among researchers. Most research on caste prejudice was conducted in the 1960s-1970s

and, therefore, remains limited by outdated reductionist theoretical paradigms. Drawing upon the social identity approach in social psychology, we developed a group level psychological conceptualisation of caste prejudice and used it to understand the contemporary expressions of casteism using a cross-sectional correlational survey design. We found that members of historically advantaged caste groups are more likely to hold and endorse caste prejudice. Caste prejudice, in turn, significantly predicted opposition to reservations and endorsement of discriminatory practices. Importantly, those seeking to glorify their caste identity were found to be more likely to endorse caste prejudice. The psychological attachment to caste identity was not found to be associated with caste prejudice. These results were found to be significant even after statistically controlling for socio-demographic and personality-individual difference factors, suggesting unique contributions of social identity-based analysis. A non-representative sample in our study precludes any generalisation. However, we believe that our theoretical work and findings contribute to the understanding of caste prejudice.

For a reader familiar with social scientific research on caste inequities, some of our findings may seem tautological. We hardly claim any novelty in findings confirming a relatively high degree of prejudice among historically advantaged caste groups and caste prejudice relating to opposition to reservations and endorsement of discrimination. Yet, these findings shed light on the psychological underpinnings of these patterns and provide a piece of converging evidence confirming them. In addition, considering the fact that most research on caste prejudice was focused on the oppressed rather than the oppressors, our findings help shift the analytic gaze towards the ‘psychology of the oppressors’ following the Allportian perspective. Hence, we would reject any charge of tautology and emphasise the importance of our findings in the context of how caste prejudice and its consequences have been conceptualised and operationalised in the existing literature.

We found that the participants from OBC category endorsed the highest levels of prejudice. This finding is novel and counter-intuitive. However, when the amorphous nature of the OBC category and internal stratification and/or competition is considered, this finding makes sense. It is likely that the prejudiced attitudes are rooted in the motivation to establish social relations of hierarchy within OBC category and between other caste categories (see Palshikar 2006). The emergent agrarian distress and serious stagnation in the rural economy, limiting growth opportunities among OBC castes, may have further added to intensified competition for social mobility and antipathy towards competitive outgroups (Jaffrelet 2019).

This finding is likely to be misinterpreted and hence requires further explanation. We would discourage any essentialist reading that renders the OBC category inherently “prejudiced”. Rather, the finding must be interpreted in the context of intergroup dynamics that may shape the conditions under which groups are likely to hold and

express prejudice against outgroups. Therefore, a high degree of prejudice among the participants from the OBC caste groups should not be seen as reflecting any “essence”. We would like to reiterate that it is the intergroup relations that cause prejudice in the minds of individuals rather than the other way around.

A novel contribution of our study is the conceptualisation of caste prejudice using a social identity approach. We argued that the personality and individual difference approaches (Duckitt & Sibley 2017; Pratto et al. 2006; Sibley et al. 2006) do not sufficiently explain the psychological processes underlying caste prejudice. We proposed that caste prejudice should be understood as a matter of how ingroup identity and ingroup power are defined and identified. The glorification of caste identity emerged as the stronger predictor of caste prejudice. This fits with the extant social psychological research on the glorification of identity that shows its relevance for many negative intergroup behaviours, such as support for violence towards an outgroup and exoneration of an ingroup from historical transgressions (Bonnot et al. 2016; Leidner et al. 2010; Penic et al. 2016; Roccas et al. 2006, 2008). Our approach extended Thorat and colleague’s (2016) conceptualisation of caste prejudice in terms of a “group feeling” that serves a function for the caste groups that benefit from inequality in society. In a sense, our approach also complements the socio-structural explanations (Blumer 1958; Bonilla-Silva 2003) by integrating psychologically meaningful predictors (see McGarty et al. 2009) and accounting for psychological processes within historically advantaged caste groups.

Limitations and Future Directions

A major limitation of our study is its correlational design and reliance on a convenience sample. The correlational nature of the study precludes any claims of causality of hypothesised relationships. Future research should examine these relationships employing experimental and/or longitudinal designs with representative samples. Another major limitation relates to the measurement of caste prejudice and other constructs. Although we adapted a very influential and well-validated measure of prejudice, it cannot be claimed to have captured critical dimensions of caste prejudice. The blatant subscale performed poorly (Cronbach’s Alpha=0.28). We relied on a single-item scale to measure opposition to reservations. The subtle subscale (Cronbach’s Alpha=0.63) and the full scale (Cronbach’s Alpha=0.68) were found to be adequately consistent, and single-item measures are equally reliable and valid (Allen et al. 2022). Yet, there are problems in conceptualising and measuring what exactly are ‘blatant’ and ‘subtle’ aspects of caste prejudice in contemporary India. We cannot emphasise enough the need for a better measure of caste prejudice. One of the main agendas for future research on caste prejudice should be developing a conceptually and empirically efficient measure of caste prejudice. The measurement of negative intergroup attitudes, such as opposition to reservations, also needs to be refined.

Our findings align with the assertion that outside developed and post-industrial countries, the traditional and blatant forms of prejudice may very well survive and co-exist along with the new and subtle form of prejudice without the former replacing the latter (Bilewicz 2012; cf. Dixon et al. 2012). Caste prejudice may not always reflect in blatant negative behaviours or feelings of antipathy towards Dalits and lower castes; it may very well be an aspect of positive but paternalistic intergroup attitudes that position Dalits and lower castes as “weaker” and in need of saving. Future research should examine ambivalent forms of caste prejudice and underlying value and attitude structures.

Concluding Thoughts

Prejudice is one of the most important psychological concepts in understanding social exclusion and discrimination in society. Despite a useful foundation in the early decades of Indian independence, there has been limited theoretical and empirical interest in the study of caste prejudice. This article sought to reinvigorate scientific attention to caste prejudice by shifting the analytic focus from the oppressed to the oppressors. Our research highlighted the importance of ingroup identity and ingroup power in shaping the nature of caste prejudice. However, a systematic programme of study is needed to elucidate the causes, correlates and consequences of caste prejudice. Yet, understanding the psychology of caste prejudice is only part of the task. The main priority is finding ways to eliminate caste prejudice.

In social psychology, prejudice is often sought to be resolved by altering the views of dominant group members. An influential body of research suggests the critical role of intergroup “contact” as an effective prejudice reduction mechanism (Van Assche et al. 2023). The problem of caste prejudice, however, cannot be simply reduced to the perceptual distortion or biases among the upper castes that will be changed with more contact with Dalits. Arguably, as the upper caste mobilisations against the SC/ST (Preventions of Atrocities) Act, 1989 and caste-based reservations suggest, being tolerant or sympathetic to Dalits does not hinder the social action that fosters opposition to social justice and support for social dominance. In fact, there is evidence that prejudice reduction strategies dampen the motivation of oppressed groups to challenge inequality (Dixon et al. 2010).

The roots of caste prejudice go deep into the Hindu sacred literature that underpins the logic of untouchability sustaining the caste system. Without the radical systemic changes envisioned by revolutionary anti-caste thinker and leader Dr Ambedkar (2014), caste prejudice is likely to continue in various blatant/subtle forms. While there is some utility in reducing caste prejudice through civic engagement and democratic learning among the upper castes, it should be complemented with the self-mobilisations and leadership among Dalits and other oppressed communities. The reduction of caste prejudice is therefore not simply a matter of psychological change;

it is also a matter of social change. Studying and eliminating caste prejudice should be a priority for intellectuals, activists, and organisations concerned with social justice. We conclude with Allport's (1954) reminder of the weight of this onerous task on future generations:

“It required years of labour and billions of dollars to gain the secret of the atom. It will take a still greater investment to gain the secrets of man's (sic) irrational nature. It is easier...to smash an atom than a prejudice” (p. xvii).

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