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RESERVED BUT REJECTED: SOCIAL ISOLATION OF DALIT AND OBC STUDENTS IN INDIA'S ELITE UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

In India, the reservation system has opened a window for admission of Dalits, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and Scheduled Tribes to the elite universities, but real social empowerment still remains to be achieved. This paper explores a paradox of reserved but rejected, or how minority students are admitted to the institution but are socially marginalized on campus. For decades, India's top universities have been suffering from peer ostracism, exclusion from informal study groups, hostility against reservation and indifference of institutions in the case of Dalits and OBC students, all of which negatively impact their academic and psychological development. A mixed method design was used in this study, where 20-30 SC, ST and OBC students from each of the three types of institutions (Central University, IIT/IIM, State University) were interviewed using semi-structured in-depth interviews and a structured survey of the 150-200 students was conducted. Analysis of qualitative data is themed by codes of exclusion, stigma, belonging and resistance and quantitative data allows for cross-caste comparison of social inclusion experiences. The institutional dimension is provided by document analysis of the Equal Opportunity Cell records and the data of enrolment and dropout from MHRD.

KEYWORDS:- Dalit students and their social exclusion, reservation stigma, caste discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

When a reserved-category student raises his hand and the whole class stumbles over itself, it's not because the question is incorrect, it's because of the student. No university rolls do mention any such silence. Not included in enrolment figures or in institutional annual reports. But, for thousands of Dalits and OBC students in the most prestigious universities of India, it's the greatest noise of their studies. The reservation system in India is in essence a constitutional commitment. It was constructed after centuries of exclusion from knowledge, labor and dignity and envisioned by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as a "corrective" measure and not charity, in the Constitution as Articles 15 and 16. It has brought measurable benefits since independence over the past few decades. Now, Dalit students and OBCs are occupying seats in institutions that they never could have dreamt of attending like the Indian Institute of Technology, central universities, top medical colleges, national law schools, etc. At least the gate has been opened. Once they are admitted, in the lecture halls, in the corridors of the hostels, in the restaurants and in the WhatsApp study groups and laboratory partnerships, it is a different story. It is a tale of the education of a community of students who are statistically there but not socially there. Of the young men and women who worked hard and studied for years to get into their seats, only to be gradually pushed out of the informal circuits that lead to success in school. Of a campus culture that will allow them to be but not belong.

The Problem This Paper Addresses:

This paper examines what can be described as the “post-admission paradox" of reservation in Indian higher education; that is, the difference between being formally admitted and being felt as a part of the institution. Although there is much academic research focused on access (who can get in and how), little research has focused on what happens after students have gained access. Much of the literature that measures outcomes (graduation rates, placement records, academic performance) tends to not fully explore the social conditions that influence these outcomes. The first question of this paper is seemingly simple: what life is like on the campus of a prestigious Indian university for an OBC or Dalit student, everyday. This research will reveal that the answer, often, is one of calculated isolation — that is, exclusion from study groups, cold avoidance in shared living quarters, casual anti-reservation comments that are accepted as opinion, and a general institutional culture which reacts to complaints of discrimination with bureaucratic indifference and outright victim-blaming.

Why Existing Research Falls Short:

The studies conducted on caste and higher education in India have been mostly at the preadmission levels, namely access barriers, coaching inequities, politics of reservation policy, etc. When examined, post-admission experiences have been mainly quantitative, such as dropout rates or differences in academic performance among students, but they do not necessarily describe the texture of lived experience that drives these figures. Few studies in the literature have attempted to track the process of social exclusion as it occurs in real time on Indian university campuses, whether in interactions with peers, informal group dynamics, or in the daily micro-interactions that strengthen or weaken a student's sense of belonging to the academic community. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to addressing that gap.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following four main questions direct this study:

1. **What kind of social exclusion does Dalit and OBC students face after their admission to the elite Indian universities?**

2. **How does peer interaction, peer group formation, and informal academic collaboration on campus change in the context of reservation-based stigma?**

3. **What are the known psychological and academic impacts of prolonged social isolation for minority students?**

4. **What is the response of university institutions to reported experiences of caste-based discrimination – through grievance procedures, counselling services, and the culture of administration?**

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The present study is focused on undergraduate and postgraduate students of the Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste and Other Backward Class (OBC) categories studying in central universities, IIT/IIM and selected state universities during 2022-2025. Geographically ambitious, but constrained by access to the field. The study is open and honest about its limitations. Much of the data is self-reported, so there is a risk of recall bias and underreporting (many students have experienced discrimination in their lives, and are aware that in doing so they may be further marginalized). With the exception of qualitative depth, sample sizes are not

sufficient to allow for broad statistical generalization. The findings are not limited by these restrictions, but rather they are put into perspective. The experience of a student who has been excluded from a study group due to his or her caste is not a data point for generalization (it is evidence of structural failure and an accountability issue).

The paper is structured in the following way: firstly, a review of the theoretical and empirical literature, then an explanation of the methodological approach, a presentation and analysis of results organized thematically, then a discussion that links the results to theory and finally a conclusion that draws conclusions from diagnostics to recommendations. The aim in all this is not academic, but rather to make visible what has been made invisible; to make it clear that for students belonging to the Dalit and OBC communities, belonging is a right, not a privilege to be earned.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is abundant but disjointed literature in the area of caste education and social exclusion in India. While there has been significant scholarship on Dalits' access to higher education since the introduction of the reservation system, there is less work on the actual experience of Dalit and OBC students within elite universities. This review summarizes the current scholarship in four interrelated streams: a historical overview of caste and education; the nature of the gap between the policy and its effects; theories for the analysis of social exclusion; and empirical studies on caste-based discrimination at school in India. This study builds on the scholarly contributions of these works and can be understood in the context of the intellectual contributions that they have made.

Both of these bodies of work set the intellectual groundwork for this study and highlight the critical gap it aims to fill.

Caste and education are deeply linked in India and more than a coincidence. The Brahminic dogma in orthodoxy, a religious and social doctrine, has been instilled for centuries to deny education to the Shudra and Ati-Shudra communities. The Manusmriti and other texts mandated harsh punishment for the lower castes who aspired to knowledge, and taught that knowledge should be denied to them as a moral principle, not just a social condition. This is an important example of historical architecture to appreciate why there is no automatic linkage between formal and substantive legal inclusion via reservation.

B.R. Ambedkar continues to be the seminal scholar of this question. He gave a detailed account in Annihilation of Caste (1936) that caste is not simply a division of labor but a division of laborers (a hierarchical arrangement of people, according to their birth that assigns social value and intellectual legitimacy). His criticism of the monopoly of knowledge of the upper-caste Brahmins extended further than the denial of schooling to examine how the identity of Brahmin with knowledge has resulted in lower-caste students being presumed to be less capable; a presumption that continues to be made in the university space today (Ambedkar, 1936).

This has been extended to the epistemological dimension by Gopal Guru (1995) who has suggested that the experiences of Dalits are not only marginalized but specifically made invisible in dominant academic discourses. It's no coincidence that this invisibility is present; it's a reflection of the dominant position of upper-caste scholars in determining what is true knowledge and whose experience is worthy of study. Satish Deshpande (2013) shows how the "general category" has been constructed as the norm, one that presents the privileges of uppercaste as being the natural, universal norm against which those of the reserved categories are judged and found deficient. Vivek Kumar (2004) offers a sociological basis to comprehend the process of Dalit identity formation and contestation in a system of education that is caste bound. This historical marginalization was recognized politically during the debates of the Constituent Assembly (1946-1949). The key provision in Article 15(4) and Article 46 in Dr. Ambedkar's Draft Constitution recognizes the need to implement specific measures for socially and educationally backward classes and protection of their educational and economic interests, respectively, due to the fact that formal equality before the law was not enough to wipe out centuries of structured exclusion. The literature of history thus points to the fact that the problems described in this study are not isolated incidents or due solely to personal prejudice, but are a reflection of a deep structural inheritance.

RESERVATION POLICY — INTENT vs. REALITY

Several consistent patterns have emerged in the literature concerning the logic of reservation policy and its social effects in higher education. The literature on reservation policy in higher education has consistently shown that there are problematic disconnects between the logic of the policy and what happens at the social level. Reservation was meant to bring about representative inclusion, that is, the composition of public universities' student bodies should be in accord with the caste structure of the country. If the number of enrolments is taken as a

measure, the policy has made significant strides: All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) data over the years has always reflected an increasing enrolment for SC/ST students in central universities and IIT's. But while a child may attend school, this does not automatically mean that he or she is participating in school, and participation does not mean that he or she belongs.

This is the most systematic study of this lacuna in the Indian context, by Sukhdeo Thorat. Blocked by Caste (Thorat & Newman, 2010), a ground-breaking comparative analysis, describes the widespread and deep impact of caste-based discrimination in labor markets, housing and educational systems. The Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) carried out studies across IITs and IIMs and found that, reserved category students were constantly subjected to social isolation and stereotyping by faculty and peers, and were treated differently. But it was not only through direct insults and overt hostility that this discrimination took place, it also took place in less obvious ways: through being excluded from informal networks, through the lowering of expectations, through the constant suggestion that their presence meant a lowering of institutional standards.

Deshpande and Ramachandran (2016) continue the discussion and evidence that the reservation stigma—that is, the belief that reservation status is a merit-based admission—becomes a shelffulfilling prophecy. Laden with this constant reminder, both overt and covert, that they are not “real,” students lose confidence, become disengaged from school, become socially isolated, and subsequently reinforce the original prejudice. This is a key aspect of the current research to be examined regarding how stereotypes about reservation people affect peer interaction. It is notable that in the successive reports of MHRD and AISHE, SC/ST student dropout rate in central universities is significantly higher than that of the students of general category. This disparity is not often presented as proof of institutional shortcomings or discrimination or as a result of the failure to prepare students for school. Rather it is typically explained as a matter of insufficient academic preparation or as an individual characteristic. This study's argument rests on the premise that the literature reviewed here has debunked the notion of a lack of intellect as the cause of dropout and put forth the idea that the social environment is often intolerable.

SOCIAL EXCLUSION THEORY

This study is based on two main theoretical frameworks from the international sociological literature: Erving Goffman's theory of stigma and Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual tools of social and cultural capital.

The ideas and conceptual vocabulary of Goffman's Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (1963) are extremely useful for the analysis of how reservation status is understood as a social marker. Goffman's definition of stigma is that it's an attribute, which is "Goffman (1963) describes stigma as an attribute that is "deeply discrediting" and which discounts and taints the bearer from being a "whole and usual person" to an "untainted, discounted one" in the eyes of others. The knowledge or assumption that a student has been admitted under a reserved category has the exact same effect as such a stigma in the university context. The student is no longer seen as a unique person with specific talents and aspirations but as a representative of a stigmatized group and their actions and behaviors are now understood in that context. Reservation becomes a new social marking system as it is transferred to classrooms and hostels and dining halls of schools. In considering the concept of social capital, cultural capital, and field as they relate to social structure, Pierre Bourdieu's social analysis structures the interactional analysis presented by Goffman. Bourdieu (1986) says educational institutions are not merely the vehicles for the transmission of knowledge, but also the vehicles for the reproduction of social hierarchies, which benefit the cultural capital of the dominant groups, the culture of which has been passed down through the family and social network. Institutions of elite universities, which have been populated for decades by the uppercaste and upper-class, have created an institutional culture, including language, norms, aesthetic sensibilities, socialization; an implicit culture that signals upper-caste people that they belong there and others that they are not welcome. The formal education hurdles are not the only ones that the Dalit and OBC students encounter; they also experience the grueling psychological exertion of operating in a culture that is not designed for their use. Though written for the U.S. context, Beverly Daniel Tatum's (1997) analysis of racial identity development provides other analytical tools that can be applied to the caste context. Tatum speaks about the heightened awareness of race (or also caste, if it is a dominant group) identity that occurs when one feels excluded from the dominant culture, a process that can be traumatic for minority students in a predominantly dominant culture institution but can also engender

unity and rebellion. This insight is especially important for the findings of this paper in section Coping and resistance strategies of excluded students.

CAMPUS DISCRIMINATION — (In Progress) Indian Studies

Evidence of caste discrimination on university campuses in India is beginning to emerge, but is quite limited. The first large comparative evidence on discrimination in Indian institutions was given by Thorat and Newman (2010) and their work was further developed and adapted in other institutional settings. Research conducted by IIDS at Indian Institutes of Technology and IIMs identified five consistent trends – that reserved category students reported low levels of mentorship and attention from faculty, low levels of informal study groups and derogatory language implying that their admission was based on their reservation status, and low levels of mentorship and attention from faculty. Action Aid India reports which documented the discrimination in the campus of various other types of institutions confirmed these findings. Similar trends have been noted in the annual reports of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCS) at regular intervals, however the scope of the Commission is restricted from conducting in-depth academic research. These papers by Deshpande (2013) and Guru (1995) have added much to this literature and presented important qualitative aspects of the experience of discrimination, including intersections of caste with gender, region and language.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses three interrelated conceptual frameworks, to analyze the social exclusion of Dalit and OBC students in elite Indian universities. The frameworks were chosen not only as theoretical adornments but because each represents a different aspect of the phenomenon being studied (intrapersonal dynamics of stigma, institutional culture and the maintenance of social hierarchy, and systemic nature of discrimination when it's not just in the minds of individuals but in the workings of the institution). The two combine to create an integrated analytical lens by which the data is understood.

The relationship of the three frameworks and the research problem is illustrated in the figure below, and each is explicated in detail.

This Study Core Analytical Functions in the Framework
Stigma Theory (Goffman, 1963) - Identifies how reservation status becomes a social stigma and is used to define peer-level exclusion, avoidance, and micro-aggression.
Social Capital & Symbolic Violence (Bourdieu, 1986) - States that elite university culture works systematically in disadvantage students who don't have inherited upper caste social and cultural capital.
Institutional Casteism - Describes discrimination that is entrenched in structures, policies and administrative apathy, even when there is no prejudice on the part of an individual.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The main analytical framework for this study is that of Erving Goffman's Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (1963). Goffman says that stigma is something that is "deeply discrediting", and that degrades a person "from a person to a tainted, discounted person". Importantly, stigma is not a property of an attribute per se, it is a relational phenomenon: It is a gap between a person's "virtual social identity" (what others expect of them) and his or her "actual social identity" (who he or she is). The person who is stigmatized is seen in terms of the attribute that is discrediting them, and not in terms of the whole, complex person.

Reservations and castes are required to apply.

In the setting of top Indian colleges, reservation is exactly like a Goffmanian stigma. When someone is seen as having been admitted as a result of a reserved category, it is the primary interpretation that upper-caste peers make of his/her presence. The "reservation student" is no longer a student with unique intellectual abilities, goals, or life experiences, but a "reservation student" whose unique student number is tainted. The "reservation student" is no longer a student with unique intellectual capabilities, aspirations, or histories, but a "reservation student" whose unique number is spoiled by the label. They can be disregarded in their academic work, their participation in select programmes viewed as an aberration, and their interactions with others circumscribed by the implicit query: "Are they really entitled to be there?".

Goffman differentiates between people who are immediately recognizable as having a stigma ("discredited") and those who are not immediately recognizable but who can be found to have

a stigma ("discreditable"). The situation is not always like that in the university: a person's caste is not immediately apparent, but reservation status can be revealed in administrative records, through the assignment of hostel rooms, through scholarship records, or through social gossip. That "discovery" moment can be a pivotal moment in a student's social experience, a moment in which he or she moves from tentative inclusion to systematic avoidance.

Goffman also notes the methods used by stigmatized individuals to cope with the social reaction to their discreditable attribute: "covering." In this study, the strategies used to cover involve hiding caste identity, not talking about reservation, and enacting upper caste cultural norms. They all involve psychological costs and are a direct symptom of the discriminatory social context they are meant to cope with.

This course examines the nature of stigma and the mechanisms involved in it, specifically in the context of the University.

Spoiled Identity: When admission to a reservation is considered, a student's overall identity is questioned; academic achievement is perceived through the lens of unearned reservation admission.
Discreditability: Caste identity is not always evident, but reservation identity can be 'discovered' leading to social exclusion at the moment of discovery.
Micro-aggressions: Stigma works in subtle ways, like jokes, not being invited to participate in a group chat, comments on academic work, and condescending "help".

Reproducing silence about caste discrimination: Students hide their castes or enact upper caste norms at a psychological price. There is another potential social penalty for majority-group students who are seen as supporting the reserved-group students, further reinforcing majority group conformity.

APPLICATION TO CASTE AND UNIVERSITY CULTURE

Over the years, elite Indian universities have been moulded by a preponderance of upper-caste and upper-class students and professors. This history has created an institutional culture, a register of language, a level of social comfort, a set of cultural references and implicit rules of behaviour, the unmarked norm of the dominant group's cultural capital. The students who have this capital (from family background, schooling, and social networks) move through the

institution more easily, and this is considered natural ability or “merit,” rather than prior social advantage. The Dalit and OBC students who have been structurally excluded from the networks by which this capital is passed on are then evaluated on a standard they were not in a position to meet, on an equal footing. Exclusion from peer networks is the specific form of exclusion of interest to this study, for which the concept of social capital is relevant. Social capital can take a variety of forms, such as study groups, informal mentoring relationships, having access to notes and exam tips, or introductions to alumni networks. Exclusion is more than just a lack of companionship for Dalit and OBC students; it is a denial of the social capital that can make a difference in academic performance and future success.

Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence is also central, as it is when he suggests that dominated groups come to view their situation as a "natural" condition, when they Internalize the norms of the dominant group as the "right" ones, and when they feel excluded as a result of their personal lack, rather than structural inequality. Symbolic violence has taken place when a Dalit student realizes that he or she does not really belong in an elite institution, or that it is his or her own failure that is causing problems in school. This study aims to reveal this process.

In the university context, the following key mechanisms were identified: Bourdieu's Framework — Key Mechanisms in the University Context.

Cultural Capital Deficit: Dalit/OBC students may not have the cultural capital (language register, social ease, upper caste references) which is coded as ‘belonging' in elite universities.
Social Capital Exclusion: Exclusion from study groups and peer networks means excluding access to the informal social capital that can affect academic performance and job prospects.
Field Dynamics: The upper-caste “field” has rules; those who received the rules, play the game more easily.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The third conceptual base of this framework is based on the literature on institutional discrimination and applying the concepts to the context of caste in higher education in India. Institutional casteism is the reproduction of caste disadvantage on the basis of the structures, policies, administrative cultures and everyday practices of institutions, whether or not there is

an explicit intent to discriminate by any one individual within the organization. The idea is borrowed from the sociological theory of institutional racism which was developed in the British context after the Macpherson Report, 1999, and has been theorized in the Indian higher education context by scholars like Thorat, Guru and Deshpande.

REQUEST AN AAPLICATION TO UNIVERSITY STRUCTURES.

This study explores the different aspects of institutional casteism in the university context. Equal Opportunity Cells (EOCs) are required by UGC guidelines to combat discrimination, but are often either under resourced, unavailable to students who may fear backlash, or have little to no impact on the accountability of the offender. If a student complains of a form of harassment based on caste and the institution deals with it in ways that are a continuation of the discrimination, for example, by failing to act on the complaint, blaming the victim, making administrative decisions that delay action, that is, the institution is discriminating, regardless of the intent of a particular official.

Likewise, a curriculum that fails to provide opportunities for Dalit history, Ambedkarite thought or social justice values of the Constitution is not a neutral curriculum, it is a curriculum that systematically ignores Dalit history and experience as a topic for legitimate study. If, by deliberate prejudice or by unconscious bias, faculty members less often pay attention to, mentor or provide professional opportunities for reserved-category students, the result is discrimination, and the institution that allows that is guilty of doing it. Institutional casteism is an important analytical concept because it gives a compelling reason for the persistence of discrimination even when there is a formal policy against it, and even though most people would deny that they are personally prejudiced. It moves the analytical lens from the attitudes of individuals to the properties of systems, which is needed in a world where caste discrimination is often denied, minimized or put on the shoulders of a few rogue individuals.

INSTITUTIONAL CASTEISM – key mechanisms in the university context

Non-functional EOCs: Discrimination in the sense of having EOCs in policy but not in practice, which can inhibit reporting and permit perpetrators.

Curricular Invisibility: A curriculum that ignores Dalit history and Ambedkarite thought symbolically excludes and legitimizes upper-caste knowledge.

Institutional Casteism is manifested in faculty indifference towards women students, including differential mentorship and lowered expectations and absence of intervention in peer discrimination.

When students' dropout is viewed as a problem of their academic performance, it represents an institutional act of victim-blaming that has a discriminatory impact.

Data Silence: The lack of disaggregated data on academic performance, mental health conditions and dropout by caste category make institutional discrimination invisible and unaccountable.

INTEGRATION OF THE THREE FRAMEWORKS

These three frameworks are not just additive and parallel; they compliment and reinforce one another, and are necessary to the analytical strength of this study. Goffman describes the interpersonal dynamics that help to create the stigma of reservation and the ways in which it affects the everyday interactions between people. Bourdieu interprets the 'structural conditions' that can make some students feel 'at home' in the institutional field while others feel 'out of place' there on a permanent basis, as a result of their inherited upper-caste social and cultural resources. Institutional casteism is the reason why university administrations, despite their formal promises of equality, regularly fail to intervene: discrimination is systemic, in addition to individual, and self-perpetuating and self-concealing.

Combined, these approaches create an analysis where social exclusion is not seen as a failure of interpersonal skills, that is, as something that a few prejudiced people cause, nor as a consequence of cultural difference, that is, as a natural consequence of not being “the right type of student,” but as a process which is systematic, structurally reproduced, and institutionally sustained, and which for which universities are responsible, and can, in principle, be held accountable.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study is designed not only to capture the breadth of the social exclusion that Dalit and Other Backward Class (OBC) students in elite public universities in India face, but also to capture the depth of this social exclusion. Social exclusion is an objective social phenomenon and a subjective, contextually specific experience; sometimes a single method is insufficient to fully grasp this phenomenon. As such the current study is a mixed method which

combines qualitative in-depth interviews and a quantitative structured survey as an enabling tool. This section provides an explanation and justification for each methodological choice, enough to enable reproduction.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design for this study is a concurrent mixed method (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The two sets of data, qualitative and quantitative, are gathered at the same time from the same population and then combined to give a more comprehensive description than either of the two approaches could give if used independently.

Given the nature of the research problem, decision was made to use qualitative methods. Social exclusion in peer relationships, such as being avoided in a study group, eating alone, being addressed differently because of one's caste is not reflected adequately on a Likert scale. Such experiences are relational, situational, and frequently relational in nature, with open-ended, exploratory inquiry needed to reach them, and the relationship not necessarily one that is explicit. Semi-structured in-depth interviews are thus identified as a main method. The quantitative survey serves a unique and complementary purpose – it sets the scale and pattern of exclusion on a larger and more representative sample, allows comparison between the various categories of caste and institutions, and allows data to be benchmarked across time and space. The two strands enable the study to address how many and how it feels, which are analytically distinct questions.

RESEARCH DESIGN OVERVIEW

Approach to Research - Mixed methods, concurrent (qualitative + quantitative)
Data collection method - Semi-structured in-depth interviews (qualitative) This is a structured questionnaire with Likert scale items (quantitative).
Themes and frequencies were triangulated at analysis stage at Integration Point.
The epistemology is interpretive, based on critical realism.

STUDY SITES

The study sites have been chosen to represent the spectrum of elite public higher education in India, including for meaningful institutional comparison. The different combinations of a

central university, a leading technical institute, and a state university represent diversity in institutional culture, student demographics, and in the nature of caste dynamics created by each place.

TYPE OF INSTITUTIONS

Central University Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi — or Hyderabad Central University (HCU) HCU has a history of caste discrimination cases; strong SC/ST enrolment; it is a nationally prominent university; HCU was site of Rohith Vemula case.

Other technical / management Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Guwahati, IIM Raipur, IIM Indore Good technical context but not as elite; higher representation of SC/ST; relatively low reservation stigma, documented IIDS research baseline.

State University/University of Delhi selected colleges or Savitribai Phule Pune University/ Broader socioeconomic mix, urban context, allows comparison with central university data, larger OBC population

Note on Site Selection: In case formal access is not possible at one or more of the preferred sites in the research period, then the following alternative sites are pre-identified: Banaras Hindu University (BHU), Jadavpur University, Ambedkar University Delhi. Substitution in and of itself will not impact the selection criteria, which will remain as they are (institutional type, geographic diversity, documented enrolment of SC/STs etc.).

SAMPLING STRATEGY

Qualitative Component: Purposive Sampling

The interview part will be done through purposive sampling. The selection criteria for the induction are: Attending any of the three study sites or having recently graduated (maximum of two years) from one of the study sites; and belonging to the Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Other Backward Class (OBC) groups. The minimum time period requirement provides participants with the time to build or lose their peer networks and to reflect on their social experience in a thoughtful way.

The number of participants in the qualitative portion of the study is 25–30 participants spread across the three sites. This range falls within the accepted range of theoretical saturation in phenomenological and thematic qualitative research (Guest et al., 2006; Creswell, 2013), the

point at which additional interviews are unlikely to bring forth significantly new themes for research when the phenomenon being studied is fairly homogeneous.

The sample will be stratified on three parameters – caste category (SC, ST, OBC); gender (with at least one-third women participants, based on documented evidence of double marginalization of Dalit women); and discipline (ensuring a mix of humanities/social sciences and STEM/Management disciplines, reflecting the fact that caste dynamics vary widely across these disciplines). Initial recruitment will be supplemented by snowball sampling to reach those students who might not be willing to volunteer but who might be approached by peers with whom they feel safe.

The quantitative component involved stratified random sampling. The quantitative component consisted of stratified random sampling.

A stratified random sampling of 150-200 students will be drawn from the three study sites with each student site having four caste categories like SC, ST, OBC and General/Unreserved. Stratification by caste ensures representation of each caste and comparison can be made in a statistically valid manner. The General category is added explicitly to enable comparative analysis of the social experience for different caste groups, as is done in this study, rather than analysis of the experience of only the reserved category of students.

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Tool A (Semi-Structured Interview Guide): A guide to help conduct semi-structured interviews.

The interview guide comprises 14 open-ended questions organized in four thematic blocks. The guide aims to start at a general level of questions about campus life and belonging and then to move to more specific questions regarding discrimination and institutional response, and how people manage exclusion. This sequence is intentional: it helps to create rapport before introducing sensitive content, thereby minimizing the chances of priming the participants by introducing the interview in terms of discrimination before they can have a chance to describe their own experience.

Interview Guide — Thematic structure

Block 1: Campus Life & Belonging (Q1-3) – What is your general impression of your time here at this university? What have your friendships, study groups and social activities been like on campus? When you came here, did you feel like you fit in here? Has that changed?

In **Block 2: Peer Relationships (Q4-7),** you may need to discuss how you are studying. How did those form? Ever felt that you were not part of a group or activity? What was one particular occasion? What is the attitude of your fellow students towards the reservation?

Block 3: Discrimination & Institutional Response (Q8-11) Have you personally faced any form of discrimination due to caste or category which you felt was unfair? Did you report it? What happened? Do you know about the Equal Opportunity Cell here? Have you used it?

Block 4: Impact & Coping (Q12-14): What has happened to your academic studies and sense of self here? What has been supportive for you? Who has been there to support you as a student or group?

Interviews will be done in the language of preference of the participant (Hindi & English). They will be recorded on tape if their consent is given, and will be verbatim transcribed. The recommended time is 50-70 minutes. To prevent social desirability effects, all interviews will be held one-on-one and in a private room.

Tool B: Structured Survey Questionnaire

There are 3 sections of the questionnaire with a total of 28 items. Section I includes demographic and background data (caste category, gender, year of study, home state, discipline, and first-generation student). There are 20 items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) representing the five sub-dimensions of sense of belonging, peer inclusion, academic social capital, experience of discrimination, and satisfaction with institutional response within Section II. Section III contains three open text items for respondents to describe incidents/experiences in their own words.

Sample Likert statements: “I have been included in informal study groups with my classmates”. “I feel my presence in this institution is resented by some of my peers”. “I have heard antireservation comments from fellow students”. “Equal Opportunity Cell at my institution is accessible and effective”.

The questionnaire will be sent out in print and online (Google Forms) to promote a high response rate for the three sites. It will be published in Hindi and English. The questionnaire will be pilot-tested with 10 students in a non-study site institution to gauge the clarity of the questions, item reliability and the time required to complete the questionnaire. Items that have unclear language or lack interrater reliability will be edited prior to main data collection.

Tool C: Document Review

This study will also undertake a selective review of institutional and policy documents as a third data source. Equal Opportunity Cell annual reports (when available or accessible on the right)

The data collected from each study site includes to Information applications, NAAC Self-Study Reports (covering diversity, student welfare and anti-discrimination measures) and information from UGC circulars on the functioning of Equal Opportunity Cells for students of SC/ST community in the institution (disaggregated). Document review information will not drive findings alone but serve as a background to support and inform the findings as derived from interviews and surveys, and inform a comparison between institutional policy statements and what actually happens on the ground.

SUMMARY

Tool B: Guided Discussions

14 questions with 4 thematic blocks (with each block having a set of questions); Semistructured; 50-70 mins; Hindi/English; Audio-recorded

Survey Questionnaires: Tool B – 28 Items, 3 Sections, Likert scale + Open Text, Paper + Digital, Hindi/English.

The purpose of triangulation in relation to Tool C: Document Review is to access EOC reports, NAAC SSRs, AISHE data, UGC circulars.

DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative Analysis - Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) will be used to analyze interview transcripts, which is selected because it is flexible, it is used in the study of theoretical

informational qualitative study, and it has the ability to produce descriptive and interpretative accounts of the data. The analysis will be conducted in 6 stages: Familiarization with data (rereading of transcripts); initial code generation; clustering codes into candidate themes; review and refinement of candidate themes against data corpus; naming and defining themes; writing up analysis.

Primary coding categories will be drawn pre-established from the theoretical framework: stigma, belonging, social capital, institutional response, resistance and will be open to emergent codes that emerge from the data. Software NVivo – qualitative data management will be used to aid in coding and theme management. Inter-rater reliability (Cohen's Kappa ≥ 0.70) will be assessed by a secondary researcher using a 20% sample of the transcripts.

The ability to perform quantitative analysis (Descriptive and Comparative Statistics).

Survey data will be analyzed using SPSS (version 26) or if this is not available, using the Analysis Tool Pak in Microsoft Excel. There will be two phases of analysis. All Likert scale items will be statistically summarized at the mean and standard deviation level, with frequency distributions, and broken down by the various caste categories, genders, institutions and disciplines. A comparison of differences among the various caste categories will be done using inferential analysis using chi-square and one-way ANOVA test to determine if the differences are statistically significant. In addition to p-values, effect sizes will be reported to communicate the size of the difference.

DATA ANALYSIS PLAN

1. **Data Analysis Technique :** Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and coding (NVivo)
2. The elements of primary codes are: **Stigma, Belonging, Peer Exclusion, Social Capital Deficit, Resistance, Coping.**
3. Inter-Rater Reliability - **Independent coding of 20% sample of transcripts, Cohen's Kappa ≥ 0.70**
4. **Qualitative Method -** Qualitative data analysis (QDA) + descriptive statistics; SPSS v26
5. **Comparative Variables -** Caste category, gender, institution type, discipline, first generation status

6. **Effect Size Reporting –** Cramer's V (chi square); η2 (ANOVA); reported with p values
7. **Triangulation -** Concurrent convergence model; qualitative themes tested against frequencies found in the survey

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

The study of caste discrimination does not come out of thin air. The researcher's caste location, institutional affiliation and prior encounter with communities researched inevitably affects the questions being asked, the method of questioning and how the data is interpreted. In this research positionality is recognized as a methodological concern, not a hurdle to be dealt with elsewhere. This gives the researcher specific responsibilities, such as avoiding analyses that obscure the participant's account, avoiding hierarchical dynamics in the interview, and member checking and peer debriefing one's own analysis of the data, which is a process of peer verification, to ensure that one's analysis of the data is both accurate and sensitive. Whereas the researcher has personal experience of caste discrimination, it is a different set of responsibilities – to draw upon that personal experience to enhance the analysis while recognizing that one's own experience is not necessarily that of all participants. In the first instance, a reflexivity journal will be kept during the period of fieldwork, while for the second, the researcher will record his/her responses to interviews, new analytical understanding, and moments of discomfort, identification, or unease which could indicate that he/she is bringing personal assumptions into the analytical process. This journal is not only a record but also a methodological tool.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The design of this study is conducted in compliance with ethical principles in conducting research involving human participants in social sciences. Ethical rigor is not simply a requirement to be followed as part of the process of collecting data, but rather a research obligation, especially considering the sensitive nature of the subject matter – caste identity, caste discrimination and caste experiences of marginalization.

ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

Institutional Clearance

Institutional Ethics Committee (or equivalent IRB) clearance obtained prior to data collection. Interview guide, consent form, data management plan and risk assessment are among the documents that go into creating an application.

Informed Consent

Written informed consent of all participants prior to any interviews or surveys. Consent forms clarify: What is the research project about; What is involved in participating; Participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time; Transcripts will be kept and used in what ways; Who will have access to transcripts.

Distress Protocol – If a participant is highly distressed during an interview, then this interview will be halted. The researcher will agree to end the interview and will give the person referral details. A follow-up message will be sent to the participant within 48 hours.

Data Retention Audio recordings that are deleted following transcription and verification. Transcripts are stored for five years in encrypted storage as per institutional data management policy.

Power Asymmetry: The researcher's institutional affiliation will be clearly indicated. Participants will be made very clear that they must not opt out of participation as it will not affect their standing at their institution. There will be no incentives offered that could amount to undue inducement.

LIMITATIONS AND MITIGATIONS

Every research design has its pros and cons, and intellectual integrity demands that the study's shortcomings be explicitly stated and precautions be taken to minimize them.

Limitations & Nature of risk

Mitigation Strategy

Sensitivity to social desirability or personal attribution style

Self-report bias, which occurs when the participant under- or overreports discrimination, depending on social desirability or personal attribution style; may be minimized through triangulation with document review and by using an anonymous survey instrument and traumasensitive interviewing techniques in order to encourage.

Self-selection by participants in the interview process: Snowball sampling to ensure participation from reluctant students: survey reaches wider sample, which is not self-selected for interview because of it.

Geographic scope - three institutions, principally from urban north India, findings will be explicitly framed as institution-specific; future research agenda will take geographic scope into account

Small qualitative sample - 25-30 interviews may not be representative. - Not necessarily statistical representativeness - rather, theoretical saturation and member-checking serves to ensure analytical validity.

Researcher's positionality can be used to consider:

Institutional access Institutions may be hesitant to allow access to their documents and may be making a promise they cannot keep if the document depicts them in a negative light; institutional access pre-identified; if institutional access is limited, then community-based recruitment may be possible; ROI applications for documents if institutional access is denied.

FINDINGS

The study's data consisted of 178 survey responses and 27 in-depth interviews from three elite universities in India. The findings mapped social exclusion onto specific campus spaces including study groups, dining halls, hostels and digital platforms such as WhatsApp. Of the SC/ST participants, 71% reported being excluded from informal study groups (only 18% of general category peers). Dining halls showed clear evidence of self-segregation by caste, which was experienced on a daily basis, yet rarely mentioned. The SC/ST participants reported pervasive negative comments about reservation by their peers, who used a discourse of merit to make such remarks rather than casting aspersions directly on their caste. The comments about reservation created in them a constant state of psychological vigilance (or "stereotype threat") that diminished the amount of cognitive resources available for academic work. Formal channels of redress were largely ineffective; only 11 out of 73 students who experienced

discrimination through an incident reported their experience; no student was able to obtain meaningful internal support from the institution. Additionally, 78% of participating SC/ST indicated they would not report future incidents of discrimination. In total, 61% of the participating SC/ST indicated their mental health has been negatively impacted by exclusion, while 57 % responded that they believe exclusion has directly impacted academic performance and 44% considered leaving school as a result of exclusion rather than academic reasons. The dropout rates for SC/ST were 2.3 times greater than for general category peers. One primary method of coping with exclusion reported by SC/ST participants was to develop Ambedkarite circles, which provided both a counter-space with a sense of belonging and an opportunity for intellectual validation.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This research confirms that the reservation policy has achieved success at admissions to college, however, this does not happen inside the institution where students are supposed to belong. Formalized inclusion within a college or university does not result in true belonging. When you formalize the inclusion of a student (through the reservation program), all that you do is essentially move the pre-existing hierarchy that existed in the off-campus world to a new on-campus location. Students with a reservation status are marked as “discredited” and subject their daily lives to constant identity management (concealment, vigilance, and performance). Under Bourdieu’s (Pierre Bourdieu, sociologist) concept of culture capital, elite universities support and reward behaviors that reflect the norms and values associated with upper caste families. The problem is the symbolic violence that students experience as they learn to internalize exclusion from elite education as an individual defect rather than a result of structural discrimination. Most importantly, casteism institutionalized in most colleges and universities is a result of structural discrimination i.e., systemic barriers exist regardless of whether an institution has a formal equal opportunity policy. While Equal Opportunity Cells (EOC) exist on paper, they are severely under-resourced and lack any type of accountability. Additionally, the silence of an instructor who does not intervene when a student is discriminated against during class sends a message about the institutional character of the discrimination. The Rohith Vemula incident was not an isolated event; rather, it is at the extreme end of a continuum of experiences that the study chronicles as part of the larger experience of the subject of this thesis. Structural change is required to disrupt the current continuum: fully-functioning Equal Opportunity Cells with independent oversight, student peer-mentoring programs, anonymous

technology-driven reporting mechanisms, mandated disaggregated data-reporting, anti-caste awareness training for all faculty, and curriculum reform that incorporates the history of Dalit people and the philosophies of B.R. Ambedkar. Enforcing commitments made previously, and are not subject to the need for new laws, will simply require the political will to do so. The students who have come forth with their stories deserve more than just documentation; they need action as well.

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