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## An ethnography of caste and class at an Indian university: creating capital

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### ABSTRACT

Despite having outlawed the caste system and the concept of untouchability in 1947, caste identity remains a cornerstone of social, political and economic life in India. Like other social institutions, educational institutions are the reflection of caste prejudices and discrimination. The recent inclusion of lower castes through the reservation system (affirmative action) has changed the nature of higher education. Based on an ethnographic account of a university campus and students' perceptions about caste issues, the authors suggest that the structure of higher education in India is designed in a manner that exacerbates, instead of ameliorates, tensions of class and caste. Using Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, the paper defines the existing campus culture as a 'caste culture'. The text concludes that elite institutions do not yet guarantee the capability to overcome existing caste prejudices and stereotypes, regardless of structural attempts at reform.

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## Introduction

Pawan, an upper caste student, a Brahmin, nods his head vigorously and motions with his right hand as he explains his attitude toward Dalits (the term Dalit is used for former 'Untouchables': the Indian Constitution defines them as 'Scheduled Castes'):

I know a lot of my friends make fun of them or are repulsed, but not me. I don't really understand it. It's something genetic in them; I think for this country to move forward we have to help them improve.

He pauses and looks out the window. He turns back and hesitates before he says,

The only thing that is difficult is eating with them, their food [and] hygiene, or playing cricket. I just don't want to get their sweat on me. But I'm totally fine with studying with them or having a roommate in the hostel (dorm).

Pawan's observations are in part borne out by Mayank, a Dalit on the same campus, but he describes his isolation and his struggles more in terms of class than caste: 'I spend time with rich classmates and I learn how to sit, eat and behave in that class and how to speak English in their style'. He has grown frustrated that he does not have a girlfriend, even though he helps girls with assignments.

They are very rich girls. They are good in English but don't know what to write in their assignments. They all are dependent on me for this. But they cannot accept me as their boyfriend because I don't belong to their caste.

This ethnographic research tries to understand the sociology of caste and class at an Indian university. Our interviews and observations offer a portrait of a range of students from different castes and class backgrounds, as well as varying degrees of social and cultural capital. Our point surely is not to suggest that these students are in some way inadequate, or 'genetically inferior', as Pawan remarks. Rather, our purpose here shall be to argue that the structure of higher education in India is designed in a manner that exacerbates, instead of ameliorates, tensions of class and caste. But rather than empowering students with the skills, knowledge and values to function in a complex globalised world, teaching and learning in India is more technocratic than democratic, more focused on skill enhancement than capital development.

The idea of capital, in its many formulations, informs our analysis of caste in India. To advance our argument we shall first delineate our theoretical notions about capital and then turn to a discussion of methodology. We, of course, are not seeking to generalise about the ethnography we have conducted as if one university at one point in time is illustrative of the Indian post-secondary world. The degree of time spent on campus and the ability to develop a thick description afforded us the opportunity to put forward propositions pertaining to capital. Our subject positions invariably framed the data and analysis, and the differences in our standpoints aided our subsequent analysis. We present the data framed in two manners: (a) caste as an ascribed status; and (b) the interrelationship of caste and class.

## Understanding capital

India's focus on education in general, and higher education in particular, mirror the priorities of other developing countries in the twenty-first century. Frequent reports in the press (<http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/phd-holders-among-23-lakh-applicants-for-peon-jobs-in-up/story-OqHzHbv016gUN2DfTkfYII.html>) prove that the higher the level of education, the higher the unemployment. This notion goes against existing human capital theories suggesting that education plays a central role in how much an individual earns (Spring, 2015). Schools, colleges and universities equip individuals with the skills necessary to acquire human capital, which in turn increases their economic capital.

Social capital pertains to social obligations or contacts that have the ability to form important networks. Bourdieu (1986) offers his definition of social capital as the following:

The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to a possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (p. 249)

To explain social capital, Bourdieu utilised the idea of 'cultural capital'. Cultural capital refers to cultural resources that have an obscured exchange value and enable advancement from a social and educational perspective. It also involves assets that are not available in social interactions and networks. Cultural capital is therefore valued and transmittable, but often undervalued. The process of transmitting cultural capital does not simply occur when a

single individual gives capital to another. Instead, one of the idea's most significant contributions comes from the notion that cultural capital, similar to economic capital, can be exchanged for other advantages or beneficial resources – such as advanced schooling. Hence, cultural capital is more indirect than economic capital. Since social reproduction is frequently taken for granted, it institutionalises rewards for the actions and characteristics of the upper class and creates a framework for the attitude that such exchanges are natural.

Educational researchers use Bourdieu's concept of habitus to explain issues of accommodation, integration and assimilation among children and young adults. As stated by Bourdieu (1979), 'the sharing of time, space, and activities [cultivates] a shared habitus and the feeling of friendship' (p. 82). Schooling plays a key role in this assimilation through 'shared habitus'. As with social capital, schools and universities can reinforce notions of inadequacy among the poor.

Hence, we incorporate narratives from both cultural capitals to get a clear picture of how caste as a status quo is negotiated in the everyday life of a campus. Our work is attuned to the structural constraints largely overlooked by human capital theory. However, while we are in agreement that educational organisations play a critical role in shaping individual success, we are less deterministic than Bourdieu. Through the theoretical prism of social capital, we endeavour to achieve two goals: (1) understand how capital is generated and distributed within social structures, and (2) consider how to cultivate the conditions through which individuals can acquire necessary capital that enables human agency.

## Understanding caste and class

Caste is perhaps the most complex phenomena in Indian society to understand. As defined by Blunt (1946), it is a collection of endogamous groups whose membership is hereditary and who bear a common name, follow a common occupation and claim a common origin. The basic structure of the Indian caste system has remained largely intact since its inception approximately 3000 years ago. Hindu society has been traditionally divided into four major caste groups (known as *Varna*). At the top are the *Brahmins* (priests and teachers), followed by the *Kshatriyas* (warriors and royalty), then the *Vaisyas* (traders, merchants, moneylenders) and lastly the *Shudras* (those engaged in lowly jobs that primarily serve the top three). Outside of this fold are the *Ati Shudras*, also known as 'Untouchables', who are forced to perform the most 'polluted' and menial work (Ambedkar, 1989). Thus, an essential demarcation between upper and lower castes is the dichotomy of purity and pollution in occupation.

Higher education in India has expanded rapidly in the past thirty years, and yet it remains far behind in addressing issues of caste and equity (Tilak, 2013). Although Dalit literacy rates and education levels have improved greatly over the last half century, they still fall short of the national average. Kumar (2016) highlights that only 13.5 and 4% of the total students in higher education belong to Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) categories, respectively (Scheduled Tribes were not allowed to be part of mainstream society and had to survive only in the forests: currently, they constitute 7.5% of the Indian population and their presence and social hierarchy varies by region). The caste profile of faculty at public higher education institutions reflects similar asymmetries, despite the mechanism of reservation. According to 2011 statistics from India's University Grants Commission (UGC), only 4.9% of the faculty positions reserved for SCs, STs and Other Backward Classes (OBCs: formerly

*Shudras*; OBCs constitute around 50% of the population) were filled in central and state universities (Source: RTI 6-4/2009 Central Universities, UGC. January 7, 2011). Moreover, North-East Indian states, which have a largely tribal population, do not have a single vice-chancellor from the ST category in their universities (<http://ifp.co.in/page/items/32408/higher-education-is-on-the-deathbed-mockery-of-higher-education-in-manipur>). Thus, Indian higher education lacks diversity in its representation and is inherently an elitist and exclusive field.

## Research design and methodology

Ethnography traditionally has pertained to the collection of socio-cultural data from a particular social group or groups through long-term observations and interviews that occur over time (Agar, 1980). Perhaps the most traditional work pertaining to collegiate culture involves understanding social institutions or subcultures, such as that of the faculty (e.g. Bergquist, 1992). Nevertheless, a variety of investigations have honed in on student life on college campuses in Western universities (e.g. Nathan, 2005).

### *Standpoints: situated observers*

The biases and interpretations of the ethnographer have haunted academic work since the time of Malinowski (Behar, 1996). The assumption, of course, that one can divorce one's self from a particular point of view has been shown to be false. Instead, the situatedness of the ethnographer has come to the forefront. While we entirely agree that one's standpoint influences how one sees and interprets that data, we also have called upon a slightly different strategy for this study pertaining to co-authorship. Both of us are university educated, but our age significantly varies – as do our life experiences. The point is that through our co-authored work, we have not attempted to form a particular viewpoint to find the 'truth'. Instead, our differences enabled us to see things differently and we came to terms with the data in an innovative manner. Thus, the text does not reflect a singular 'standpoint', as if there is one with one point of view. Instead, it is a co-created undertaking by two researchers who are quite dissimilar from one another and the students with whom we interacted.

### *Interviews*

In-depth, open-ended recorded interviews ( $n = 50$ ) were conducted three times a week between the period of December 2015–May 2016. Participants were chosen through the snowball method. To meet students, we first approached the hostel wardens who introduced us to students and who had given us official access to the hostel. By spending approximately 20 h a week on campus, in dorm rooms, in the cafeteria, watching television in the common room, and participating in annual celebrations, the researchers gradually gained trust among students. The purpose of the interviews was to understand how students' ideas about caste and reservation are constructed. To understand this, students' socio-economic and educational background was explored. They were interviewed separately and in focus groups. Interviews were conducted both in English and Hindi. Apart from 50 students, 3 hostel wardens, 2 resident tutors and 5 professors were also interviewed to understand the campus culture. Male researchers in India have a difficult, if not impossible, time interviewing young

women in their dorm rooms or even on campus. The result is that this is an all-male sample.

### **Observations**

Ethnographic observations included students' daily activities in their dorm rooms on campus. We met students in cafeterias, hostels, the sports-complex, departments, libraries and over meals. On some occasions, such as hostel nights and festivals such as 'Holi', we spent time with students to understand their behaviour among their peer groups and amongst friends.

### **Background of the site**

We chose an Indian university which enjoys a high placement in academic rankings. Spread across 69 acres, the campus is full of greenery and magnificent boulders, surrounded by other colleges, and located near an upscale shopping area. The university provides dormitories for 300 of the 500 students, as well as residential quarters for faculty members and non-teaching staff. The campus consists of a range of faculties from the social sciences to natural sciences, and also offers masters and doctoral programmes. Students have shown very little interest in political and/or union elections, and the institution, as a whole, is politically inactive.

### **Data presentation**

#### ***Caste as ascribed status***

As I knock on Akhil's door, I find him studying at his desk. He turns his head and mutters, 'Yes, please, come in'. Confidently, he introduces himself as 'Akhil Bhargwa' (all names are pseudonyms), emphasising his surname which denotes a Brahmin caste. A writing board hanging on the wall has his schedule written on it, as well as a quote stating that 'Target is just 180 days away from you', referring to the time left for a competitive examination. Akhil is surrounded by books and keeps rearranging his notes while he talks. While talking about his hometown and his family, he recalls with pride his grandfather who served as a post-master. His father has a Master's degree in Law (LLM), and his mother has an MA. Akhil is tall and thin with a deep voice and animated facial expressions. He explains, 'Some of my friends don't want to be friends with lower castes as they don't trust these people'.

Akhil's closest friend is Rocky, an OBC student completing an MA in History. As I approach Rocky's door that morning, I find it ajar. I peep inside and find him praying. Like him, many students have a small temple in their rooms. Rocky worships twice a day and goes to temple every Tuesday. He chants the word 'Om' while he does Yoga every morning for two hours. His friends jokingly call him *Yoga Sultan* (King of Yoga).

Rocky is popular. One of his friends, Atul, comments, 'Rocky is a good guy, though he is OBC. But still we love him, and we made him our hostel representative'. During a later meeting with Rocky's next door neighbour, Vijay, who is upper caste, we slowly come to discuss how lower castes perform in class. He says, 'In my class, none of the SC and ST guys completed their degree without failing once or twice, but none of the upper caste students failed in any exam'. We ask, 'Why do SC/STs fail even after getting the same education with you?' He confidently replies, 'They don't know how to struggle for their career'.

The majority of upper caste respondents find performance linked to one's caste, which in turn is 'genetic' and can be 'traced through DNA' as offered in the opening example. Accordingly, traits such as 'smartness', 'brilliance' and 'humbleness' all are particular caste traits. The notion of the purity and impurity of blood is a strong one, as Akhil claims: 'Like values and culture, genes are transferred through family. SC/ST and even OBC people don't have those values in their family because their hormones are different'.

Such is the belief that 'hormones' and 'genes' reproduce characteristics of a particular caste, and that one's skin colour is also linked to one's caste status. Ronny, a short, chubby upper caste student proudly introduces himself as Kshatriya (a warrior caste) in a very convincing way, points to himself, and explains the performance of lower castes:

See, my colour is a little dark. If I marry a white [fair skinned] lady, there is no guarantee that my offspring will be white, but yes, they will be fairer than me. Then the next generation will be fairer than the previous one. In the same way, we cannot expect Dalit students to think like us. It will take many generations for them to reach to our level.

We also find that virtually every upper caste student shows a sympathetic attitude towards Dalits, but they are against the reservation system. Vijay, an upper caste Rajput student who studies electronics and recently got a job offer from a multi-national company, shows affection for the lower castes. 'I like my electronics teacher, though he is Dalit, but he knows his subject'. He further reveals:

I am from an upper caste, but we are not very well off. I remember in my childhood I have seen my grandparents were not allowing lower castes to enter the house. They used to give them drinking water from a distance. But my parents got an education, and now they let them sit next to them. When it will be my time, I will be teaching my kids to marry inter-caste.

Vijay sounds progressive, but he never did anything against his family's will and followed his family's values of twice-born (upper) castes. He believes that a good student should follow a pure and restrained life.

Higher education is a sophisticated arena where caste and other forms of discrimination are often hidden. A Dalit student, Raghu, finds it more of a systemic problem:

When I go to pay my fee and I run into my friends, I purposely try to avoid that place. If they see me paying half of what they pay, it makes them angry, and sometimes out of frustration, they make some funny comments.

As a lower caste, Raghu qualifies for a discount in university fees due to the reservation policy, which has become a bone of contention for those who feel students from reserved categories do not deserve a place in the university.

Rajesh, another Dalit student, shares a similar experience: 'Even after being so long at this campus, I am a little scared to go to receive my scholarship or filling out any form with my friends. I don't want any person to know about my caste'. He complains how office staff sometimes show little sensitivity about a student's privacy concerning caste identity: 'They will shout loudly in front of everyone, asking "Where is your caste certificate?"'

Prem, a Dalit student who is always seen wearing a cap, happily shares that he has '1000 friends on Facebook'. He is very active on social media sites and uploads pictures daily:

I used to have a girlfriend, but once she got to know about my caste, her relationship status on Facebook changed to 'single'. She was hanging out with me but never revealed to her friends that she is hanging out with a Dalit. Later, she found a guy of her own caste and broke up with me immediately.

Prem laughs, 'I have around 200 upper caste girls in my friend list, but I am still single. But at least through Facebook I have hopes to get hooked up'. Yet, his Whatsapp status reveals feelings of being an outsider, 'an alien in the human crowd'.

Coming from a casteless, tribal society in Northeast India, Sibó – a short, athletic student – tried to understand 'mainland' India's caste system when he came to Delhi. 'Actually, I have no idea about how to explain caste! He compares it with slavery, 'which was traditionally practiced in their tribe in earlier times that created a hierarchy among tribal societies'. Sibó shares his encounter with caste in the hostel:

Once I asked one of my hostel mates who is a Brahmin and wears a 'sacred' thread around his body. I asked, 'What is sacred about it?' And he gave me a whole lecture on Hinduism, but I could not understand how human beings in Hindu society are treated as Untouchables and polluted, but a thread and animals are pure and sacred.

Sibó thinks that 'mainland India is still stuck in the past' and is 'shocked to hear sometimes that draconian practices such as honour killings and caste atrocities are still rampant in Indian society'.

### ***The interrelationship of caste and class***

Caste and class become complex categories when they intersect. How do we understand these as cultural capital generating categories in our everyday life? On campus, everyday life is all about spending time with friends. Class is generally analysed in terms of material things.

The very first impression about someone's class is informed by his or her clothing, and the way he speaks English or Hindi. Niraj, a Dalit, believes that 'class is more important than caste, because if you have money, then you can do anything'. However, Niraj's experience indicates that there is an intangible element of class which acts as a glass boundary or ceiling. He explains further:

To have a girlfriend, one has to have a [motor] bike, phone, laptop. After having these three things, my life has changed drastically. Girls started coming to me, and I got a chance to talk to them. I used to drive them on my bike. But they maintained a distance from me because I am not from their class.

Niraj's father was a peon (a low-ranking worker) in a government school and passed away when Niraj was in college. The family suffered economically after his father's death. Out of fifteen Dalit students we interviewed, three have economically-weak backgrounds whose father had 'fourth class' jobs, such as peon, guard and attendant. The other 12 appear to have equal economic status as their upper caste peers. Out of 10 ST students, nine belong to the middle class, while the other student is from a wealthy family, as his father was a senior bureaucrat.

The policy of reservation has created a 'class' within castes. All student respondents (100%), whether they were from upper castes or SC/ST/OBC, expressed the opinion that the reservation system should be based on an economic basis. Raj, an upper caste student, articulates the following:

It makes me angry to see rich SC/ST people getting the benefit of reservation. Tell me if they were capable of being meritorious, then in the past 69 years, did they top any exam? Show me any SC/ST who could become CEO or any company or scientist in any government organisation. It is the reservation system which is pushing our country backward.



Raj believes that the 'reservation is a mentality that limits your ability and struggle just to get the minimum, not the maximum'. Deepak, a Rajput (Kshatriya) student from Bihar who was recently offered a job in a large company, believes that the 'reservation is producing corrupt and incapable people in our society. I have created a Facebook page for an anti-reservation group. My future plan is to fight against reservation and make people aware about this disease'.

Like Raj, all upper caste respondents feel that the reservation should be on an economic basis and should not be given to wealthy lower castes. Abhishek, a tall, thin student from a Brahmin middle class family, expresses his opinion on SC/ST reservation, stating,

My mother used to tell us that this is a wheel-of-time. We had ruled and discriminated lower castes for a very long time; now it is their turn and we have to suffer. But the wheel-of-time shall move in our favour soon.

Abhishek, like others, also shows a sympathetic attitude towards lower caste students. He thinks that only 'well-off and greedy' lower castes are benefitting from reservation. Shiva, a mathematics student, makes the point that 'rural India and urban India are two different worlds. When we talk about caste, we generally come and take a particular stand but we ignore rural India in this process. Our perspective is built on urban based realities'. Shiva's observation is based on his diverse rural experience. He comments that 'the situation of my village's Dalits will never change as the benefits of reservation will never reach them'. According to him, the reservation system is strengthening an already-established class.

## Analysis

We have presented two themes derived from the ethnographic data presented. First, we pointed out how caste is an ascribed status; second, we outlined the inextricable interrelationship between caste and class.

During our field work, we encountered two points of view: one view derived from the administrators of the dorm, and the other was from the students. On the issue of discrimination, a dormitory Warden stated, 'This is an elite campus of Delhi – you will see only rich students. Some of them come in Mercedes and BMWs and they have addresses in [exclusive neighbourhoods]'. Obviously, we encountered students who did not meet this description. Recall the case of Niraj and Prem, how their economic background and caste background overlapped, and how it reduced their self-esteem. As other studies (Baviskar & Ray, 2011; Fernandes, 2006) have pointed out, religion, gender and region of origin remain important in class formation, along with income and occupation.

Upper caste students evoke caste in two different ways: (1) through criticising the reservation system, and (2) through discussing the 'hereditary traits' and 'behaviour' of lower caste students. Recall how Abhishek and Raj related the nation's backwardness to the reservation system, insofar as they believe that 'reservation is a mindset'. Their argument favours the notion of capability and efficiency, which is generally used to counter reservations for lower castes. Students develop pro or anti-reservation sentiments through their experiences with their friends and peer groups. For those who are anti-reservation, everyday language is part of a broader outlook which opposes the reservation system but not the caste system.

Friendship on campus occurs within the structure of caste. The following quotes made by upper caste respondents explain their friendship with lower castes: 'it is OK to have friendship with them'; 'although he is OBC, we made him our representative'; and 'they show their

true colours in the end'. *Habitus* in the form of campus life has the possibility to transform thinking, yet the data suggests that any act of friendship by an upper caste student to a lower caste student is seen as an 'act of charity' or 'sympathy', rather than pure friendship. Therefore, changes in mindsets may be interpreted as social change, yet bringing about 'structural change' is far more elusive.

Within the educational field, Bourdieu (1973) reminds us that cultural capital is particularly important: 'Academic success is directly dependent upon cultural capital and on the inclination to invest in the academic market' (p. 96). It offers the opportunity for personal achievement and to leave ascribed social status behind. Those who are first generation learners have very low cultural capital. Recall Niraj, whose father was a peon in the education department. He did not receive guidance in pursuing an education, and had to rely on others for advice and direction. Consider Pawan, who is a Brahmin and third generation learner, and who boldly justifies the caste system. Pawan has caste capital, accumulated through three generations, whereas first generation learners struggle to accumulate cultural capital through education. What is special about this capital accumulation is that it varies according to caste. When upper caste students join such elite institutions of higher education, they find it easy to assimilate because they have the cultural capital that the institution seeks and rewards; in effect, they are in symmetry with one another. The cultural capital from lower castes, however, does not offer enough tools for individuals to understand or navigate the culture of an elite institution. This issue lengthens their assimilation period and negatively impacts their chances at personal and academic success.

Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction and cultural capital posits that the culture of the dominant class (for this example, those who are vegetarian) is transmitted and rewarded by the educational system. The dominant class culture works in both 'visible' and 'invisible' ways. Bourdieu (1984) suggests that a legitimate and a dominant culture exists because the value of cultural preferences and behaviours are defined relationally around structuring binary oppositions such as 'distinguish/vulgar, aesthetic/practical, pure/impure' (p. 245). For example, food serves as a metaphor for cultural imagination, as well as friendship and harmony in any institution. The hostel, therefore, serves as a site for the putative national culture and unrepresented food cultures.

The idea of 'purity' as the cornerstone of the caste system is expressed in terms of genetics and the consumption of particular foods. North-East Indian students (with the exception of the state of Assam) are culturally non-vegetarian. It is not easy for students from this region to adapt to a North Indian vegetarian diet. On campus, the majority of the upper caste students have never tried non-vegetarian food in their lives, due to their strict vegetarian family culture. These students also do not smoke or drink alcohol. The resulting assumption is that culture inhibits, rather than promotes, change. However, this is less an account of social change than of the continuity of historical hegemonic and traditional privileges which is part of caste (not class) culture.

During our campus observations, we found that, whenever respondents talked about reserved categories, the argument was generally centred on the idea of merit. Thorat (2006) states that, since Dalit students have come to the university through reservation, they are looked down upon by classmates, faculty and even the administration. As a result, the Dalit student often develops an inferiority complex and becomes an introvert. Thus, in the arena of higher education, reservation and caste are so entangled that it is not easy to see them as separate entities. Most of the respondents think only about reservation and its

consequences and tend to ignore caste realities. In conversation, they often did not mention caste categories by name. Instead of saying 'SC', 'ST' or 'OBC' they would refer to them 'reservation wale' or 'quota wale' (those who benefit from reservations or quotas).

Guru (2009) explains that reservation beneficiaries are often referred to as *schaddu* or as *sarkar ke damad* (sons-in-law of the government) to both demean them and to remind them that what they are getting is a form of 'charity and not parity' (p.18). Kumar (2016) highlights how, in the prestigious Delhi University, Dalit girls are humiliated by asking: 'Have you come through reservation or have you come from the brothel?' The 'reserved category' becomes a stigma, whereas those from the 'general category' are accepted widely and usually consider themselves superior. In other words, Dalits are doubly stigmatised for their caste identity and as a recipient of state provision in the form of affirmative action.

As observed by Niraj, 'Financial status is more important than caste'. Thus, class is viewed in financial terms and reproduced through various settings. However, students are not 'agents struggling within cultures', but are instead conceptualised as 'actors trapped in modern-day cages' that lead 'to the reproduction of their social and economic conditions' (Tierney, 1999, p. 84). One cannot ignore the role of affirmative action in bringing a large marginalised section into mainstream institutions. Yet, the core question remains that the educational, economic and cultural mobility among Dalits does not necessarily bring change in their caste hierarchy, discrimination and social identity.

By way of focus groups and interviews, we made an effort to understand the complexities of upper caste students' negative attitudes towards lower castes. We found that their everyday lives are highly competitive; their views are shaped by their *habitus*. From the walls of their rooms, to their Facebook pages and Whatsapp statuses, upper-caste, middle-class students share their dreams and goals by posting famous quotes about 'success', the importance of 'time' and/or the inescapability of 'life and struggle'.

## Conclusion

The hallways of elite institutions do not transcend existing prejudices and stereotypes. Without frank discussion about structural barriers (in this case, caste as a structure), the relationship between *habitus* and individual choice also does not change. We have not suggested that the relationship between caste and class has become less relevant. Rather, an awareness of caste takes centre stage when one becomes part of a class embraced by educational institutions. What is missing in educational institutions is the training inside and outside the classroom to address structural barriers that facilitates a sense of community. As noted in the data presented, caste issues are talked about derogatorily and not critically interrogated. Through the prism of caste, students make important decisions about their friendships, their careers and even their love life. Reservation plays an important role in forming such consciousness, as upper caste students think that it is due to the reservation policy that 'inefficient' people are gaining social mobility. The educational institution plays a role in highlighting caste identity. There is no mechanism to cope with such humiliation and prejudice, in general, and in postsecondary education in particular.

Caste is seen as a part of culture and not a structural shortcoming. None of the upper caste respondents said that the caste system is wrong, per se. Instead, the notion of reservation was, for them, problematic. Their discussions were limited to the reservation system and its side effects, yet they remained disengaged from the complexities of existing caste

discrimination, untouchability and social inequalities. What makes it interesting as well as complex is that upper-caste students reveal their agency as sympathisers to lower castes or their anti-reservation stand, or both. In contrast, lower caste students try to engage with the campus community and succeed, but they are constantly made conscious of their ascribed identities. Even as higher education becomes more accessible, equity and equality remains elusive.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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