

The Dalit Closet: Managing Dalit Identity at an Elite University in India

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Abstract

This article discusses from a critical education perspective what it is like to be a Dalit (former untouchable) student studying at an elite university in India. Much writing on exclusion and discrimination in higher education is focused on power relations such as gender, race, ethnicity and religion. This article broadens this focus to consider how caste shapes the experiences of those positioned at the very bottom of the caste hierarchy in higher education, and offers an innovative perspective on how caste in contemporary India, and particularly in elite contexts, has parallels with the stigma and prejudice that LGBT students suffer. This article departs from mainstream scholarship on Dalits in higher education by focusing not on numbers or reservations policy, but on the inner lives and struggles of Dalit students and how they cope with both institutional and social environments that devalue their identities. 'The Dalit Closet' reveals the immense pressure to hide one's identity and pass at an elite institution, while at the same time prove oneself academically in the face of pervasive anti-Dalit stereotypes of intellectual weakness. In this study, Dalit students, whether open or not about their identity, are sharply critical of the dominant ideology of merit that surrounds the policy of 'reservations' in India, and are well-aware of the structural and cultural disadvantages of their caste identities, in comparison to the life-long caste privilege of their upper-caste peers. The 'Dalit Closet' reveals the limitations of the

current reservations policy from the perspective of Dalit students, and discusses measures that can be taken to promote a genuine culture of inclusion at Indian universities.

Keywords: *Critical education; India; affirmative action/reservations; Dalit activism; stigma*

Introduction

The campus is immaculate, its bushes and lawns maintained to perfection. Silent workers spend hours in the sun weeding the grass, sweeping the walkways, and performing other routine maintenance work. During ‘rush hour’, the campus swarms with students walking purposefully to class. To the casual observer, the campus environment appears to buzz with studious, productive and competitive students who are preparing for high powered careers in the corporate world. However, for Dalit (untouchable or scheduled caste) students, the pristine and orderly campus masks a silent culture of caste privilege and an official policy of ‘no politics on campus’ that is in fact deeply political. A silent culture that renders invisibility an option, but also a prison.

Each year, this elite university is meant to recruit a government mandated percentage of 15% Scheduled Caste (SC) students, who live within the shadow of an ideology of merit that deems them incompetent and undeserving of their university place, as in the popular imagination, Dalits are ‘naturally’ unintelligent. The Indian government’s policy of reservations or affirmative action in higher education for the Scheduled Castes, as Dalits are commonly called in India, is legally enshrined in India’s 1950 constitution and was designed to remedy centuries of discrimination and exclusion in all areas of life, from enforced residential segregation to banned temple entry. Several studies, such as those edited by Rao (2009), have discussed the politics of reservations

in promoting access for the Scheduled Castes to government jobs and higher education, such as which sub-groups within Dalit communities are most likely to benefit from the policy of reservations.¹ However, while it is clear that the poorest of the poor among Dalits are still so structurally disadvantaged that aspiring to university is not even an option, the reservations policy has enabled growing numbers of middle class and lower middle class Dalit students to enter not only local institutions, but also highly selective universities whose entry is determined by extremely competitive national entrance exams.

Much of the current discourse in higher education policy circles focuses on expanding access for disadvantaged groups, without addressing the learning and social environments that such students find on campus once they secure their coveted ‘seat’. It is as if governments, by simply broadening access for groups that have historically been excluded from higher education, believe that their job is done, and no further transformative action is needed. However, what happens to these students *after* they get in, is equally as important in achieving long-term equality as ensuring access. Not only because evidence suggests that SC students have a higher likelihood of dropping out or being “rusticated” or expelled², but also because the quality of life, both social and academic, of socially marginalised students matters in a more holistic definition of ‘broadening access’.

This paper will discuss the social and academic environment of an elite university campus from the perspective of Dalit students, and their strategies for managing their Dalit identities. While my interviews revealed that each student has a unique stigma learning trajectory and childhood stigma experiences, by the time they have reached university, they will have all internalised society’s negative view of Dalits, and in particular, the widespread view that Dalit students are academically weak. Gaining access to elite institutions is a huge

achievement, but for Dalit students it also means swimming in a sea of caste privilege and having to manage their identities in an often hostile environment. This paper will highlight how broadening access must be accompanied by a series of complementary measures that work to facilitate genuine inclusion on campus.

The History of Reservations in India

Although caste-based reservations in India are commonly associated with independent India's first constitution in 1950, they originated in colonial India in the princely states. The first reservations were passed in 1902 by the Maharaja (prince) of Kolhapur State (current Maharashtra), for the depressed classes, as the Scheduled Castes were called during the British colonial occupation of India (Laskar 2010: 29).

However, the Indian political leader and social revolutionary that had the greatest impact on shaping the modern policy of reservations in India was B. R. Ambedkar. Born in 1891 into the untouchable Mahar caste, Ambedkar became a national leader for Dalit rights and fought tirelessly to convince his fellow citizens as well as untouchables themselves that Dalits were full human beings deserving of respect and dignity. Education was central to his message. Indeed, one of his most famous words of advice was "educate, agitate, organise; have faith in yourselves". Ambedkar was the first untouchable to earn a PhD and study abroad, thanks to a scholarship from the Maharaja of Baroda state, which enabled him to complete a PhD at both Columbia University and LSE, in addition to a law degree.

When India achieved independence in 1947, he was made the Chairman of the drafting committee of India's constitution. The final product reflects Ambedkar's vision for an inclusive society in which untouchables would be

able to claim full citizenship rights. In particular, the articles that pertain to reservation reflect Ambedkar's philosophy that in order to achieve equality, "favoured treatment" must be given to those groups who have been disadvantaged and excluded: "for I honestly believe that equality of treatment to people who are unequal is simply another name for indifferentism and neglect" (Ambedkar 1982: 42).

India's policy of reservations in higher education mandates that all centrally funded universities must reserve 15% of their seats for the Scheduled Castes and 7.5% for the Scheduled Tribes. Indian states are able to determine their own levels of reservation in state funded universities according to the proportion of Scheduled Castes, Tribes and backward castes in the local population. However, the total level of reservation is subject to limits; in 1963, the Supreme Court of India ruled that reservations could not exceed 50% of the student intake. Some states, such as Tamil Nadu, have long exceeded this limit. After years of legal challenges to their 69% level of reservation, the Tamil Nadu government succeeded in having their state system of reservation added to the ninth schedule of the Indian constitution in 1994. Today, the number of states that exceed the constitutionally mandated limit of 50% continues to expand, although their reservation percentage is subject to legal review.

Over time, reservations have expanded in India, at both the federal and state levels. In 1980, the government appointed 'Mandal Commission' issued recommendations that reservation be expanded to include the Other Backward Caste (OBC) communities who were "educationally and socially backward". These recommendations were implemented in 2007 in central universities when the government implemented a 27% OBC quota despite intense upper-caste protests, particularly in North India. The Supreme Court unanimously upheld the OBC quota in 2008, with the added provision that the "creamy layer" or

well-off sections of OBC communities be excluded. Although the government accompanied the expansion of reservation with a corresponding increase in the number of places, OBC reservation further politicised affirmative action and deepened cleavages between competing caste groups, heightening the fault lines between the privileged castes, known as “general category” students, and those eligible for reservations.

It was during this time that a popular and media-based discourse around merit emerged, in which reservations were seen to be allowing weak, poorly qualified students into universities at the expense of truly meritorious students. Many commentators described the expansion of reservation as the “death of merit”. This ideology of merit ignores the cumulative advantage and superior economic, social, cultural and linguistic capital that upper caste and usually middle-class students gain from their families from birth onwards. Upper caste students are more likely to attend private, English-medium schools, and have the money for extra tutoring to prepare for highly competitive entrance exams to the most elite institutions. However, the ideology of merit continues to be a powerful tool for discrediting the “category” or “quota” students who make it to university as not properly belonging, and ultimately, as undeserving of their seats. Quite apart from the gap between official policy and reality, which sees SC and OBC seats/jobs unfilled at universities across India, the pervasive ideology of merit is what Dalit students encounter when they enter university, and this ideology is particularly strong at elite institutions, among students, faculty and administrators alike.³

The personal account of N Sukumar, currently a University of Delhi professor, of his experiences as an SC, postgraduate student at Hyderabad Central University, shows in powerful detail the multiple abuses and discrimination to which SC students are subject by a casteist administration, faculty and student

body (Sukumar 2013: 205-222). Reservation has generated deep resentment among the privileged castes, who often feel that their seats have been stolen by undeserving low performers in order to appease low caste vote banks. This backlash against reservation affects the entire higher education sector in India, and collectively makes all Dalit students suspect and out of place.

Going into the Field

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out during the summer of 2015 on an elite university campus in Western India, with visits to three other state-level universities for further interviews. A total of 37 interviews were carried out with both male and female Scheduled Caste (SC) postgraduate students representing a variety of *jatis* (castes) and regions, including North and South India. I choose to focus specifically on SC students, as interviews revealed that they face more intense social stigma and prejudice than Other Backward Caste (OBC) or ST students, and indeed, several SC interviewees indicated that they had been discriminated against or not supported by OBC students.⁴ In other countries with large affirmative action programs, such as the US, studies have found similar differences in the stigmatisation of different ethnic minority groups, with African American students reporting the highest levels of discrimination and stress (Cokley et al.: 2013: 84).

Postgraduate students were selected in order to explore whether Dalit students face more resistance and resentment as they climb the academic hierarchy, and enter into spaces previously dominated by the upper castes. Interviews were also carried out with students studying at three nearby state universities, in order to compare the degree of stigma and discrimination experienced by SC students at less prestigious universities. Individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were held on a variety of locations on campus, and complemented by daily participant observation of campus life. Interviews were conducted in English,

mixed with some Hindi. At the elite university, access to SC students was obtained through a mixture of a list of SC students provided by a contact in the administration, and the snowball method.

In India, from grade school onwards, all students must indicate their caste category when enrolling at school, and in many schools/universities, the caste category of students is provided to teachers and is not considered confidential information. At the four non-elite universities, the snowball method was used. Several follow-up interviews took place with those who wished to speak at greater length about their experiences with casteism and this paper draws particularly from these interviewees, as they articulated themes and issues common to all SC students. Casteism is akin to racism, sexism and homophobia in that it is a system of beliefs and practices that disadvantages Dalits in myriad ways, at macro, meso and micro levels, while simultaneously privileging the upper castes. Confidentiality was ensured by meeting with students individually on campus locations that the students themselves chose and by my own low profile- the topic of my research was not known on campus except to my interviewees and one faculty member. Although the focus was on SC students, informal conversations took place with privileged caste students and professors, along with a female SC professor working at a non-elite university, in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of the politics of reservations in Indian higher education.

Social Stigma

My focus on social stigma is guided by the pioneering work on stigma by the sociologist Erving Goffman, as well as more recent work on stigma by social psychologists such as Crocker, Major and Steel. Goffman defined stigma as an attribute that deeply discredits an individual, reducing her or him “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman 1963: 12). Goffman

emphasised that stigma is always situational and relational, and identified two main types of stigmatised individuals: the discredited, whose stigma is immediately visible, such as a black person living in a white-majority society, and the discreditable, whose stigma can potentially discredit them and reveal the discrepancy between what Goffman calls their virtual and actual (devalued) social identity, such as someone who is gay. He further classified stigma into three broad categories: stigma based on physical deformities; character blemishes, such as alcoholism, and finally “tribal stigmas” based on group identities that are transmitted via lineage such as race and religion (Goffman 1963: 14).

The Scheduled Castes fall into the latter category, although it is interesting to note that deviant character traits are frequently attributed to Dalits, such as addiction and unrestrained sexuality, and that physically, Dalits are perceived to be dark-skinned, which in the Indian context is a sign of low social status. Goffman states that stigmatised individuals are likely to have experience of both discredited and discreditable forms of stigma, and this is true for SC’s in India. Rural SC’s are discredited as they are easily identifiable and live apart from the other castes; urban, middle-class SC’s are for the most part discreditable, although there are times when urban SC’s can also be automatically discredited, due to housing discrimination that sees even SC’s with money unable to buy in upper caste building societies and hence forced to live in lower caste-specific neighbourhoods.

In an elite university context, SC students are discreditable, which opens up the possibility of passing and hence of escaping automatic stigma, but also brings with it the need to manage one’s stigmatised identity. Crocker et al. define stigma as a social identity that is devalued in a particular context (Crocker et al.: 1998). Both definitions provide a useful analytical framework for SC students

studying at elite institutions, for they highlight the contextual nature of stigma: Dalit students must battle both the broader cultural stigma that devalues their identities, as well as the context-specific stigma against reservations that is particularly intense at prestigious universities. SC students do not have the luxury of taking their identities for granted: as Dalits they are well aware that they are not socially accepted, and in many cases, actively resented, due to historic prejudice as well as opposition to SC reservations. Stigma shapes the university experiences of all SC students, forcing them to make difficult choices about the management of their identities, and to devise strategies for avoiding prejudice. Those who choose to pass must live with the daily stress of concealing their identities. Those who choose to be open risk higher levels of prejudice, rejection and ostracisation. Such identity management strategies are energy draining and can be anxiety provoking, meaning that Dalits, like minorities elsewhere, experience high levels of minority stress, defined as chronically high levels of stress due to prejudice and discrimination, which over time impacts negatively upon both mental and physical health (Meyer: 2003). In addition, Dalit students face stereotype threat, whereby heightened awareness about negative stereotypes regarding one's social group can hinder performance (Steele: 1995)⁵, making their university years ones in which achieving academically is only one of many challenges that they face.

Despite the insistence on the part of opponents of reservation, that class, as opposed to caste, should be the basis of reservation⁶, my research reveals that caste stigma does not end when Dalits achieve middle-class status. On the contrary, stigma intensifies as middle-class Dalits enter elite spaces that were previously the exclusive domain of the upper castes. My interviewees came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, both working and middle-class, but all experienced caste prejudice. Regardless of class, stigma marks the daily lives of Dalits in ways that would be unimaginable for the upper castes.

Dalit Invisibility: “A Good Dalit is a Quiet Dalit”

On paper, government statistics show that the national policy of reservations has broadly been successful in ensuring access to higher education for SC students. According to the 2013-14 All-India Survey on Higher Education, SC students constitute 13.1% of total enrolment in higher education institutions (both public and private), which is close to their proportion of India’s population of 16%. Furthermore, if we compare communities, SC students have done far better than either ST or Muslim students in entering higher education. However, these statistics do not tell the whole story, for democratisation in access does not mean democratisation of university cultures, curriculums, and values. Dalit students repeatedly spoke of pressure to not bring up caste and to minimise, if not completely erase, their identities as Dalits at their institutions. It is almost as if there exists an unspoken rule at many Indian universities: we will admit you, but leave your Dalit identity and experiences behind. As one female Dalit student put it: “I felt caste every day in my Masters. In higher spaces, they don’t talk about it. If you talk about it (caste), they label you as casteist- that you are the one discriminating” (Nandini). This sentiment was echoed by a male Dalit student who said “The isolation is worse at X university. There the upper caste professors tell you to keep quiet. One even told me that Gandhi is the best person to speak about caste. When I told him, no Ambedkar is the best person to speak about caste, he told me to shut up” (Bhagat). Speaking out on caste, especially at elite institutions, is therefore a risky venture that ruptures the upper-caste assumption that most students are non-Dalit, and disrupts the invisible normalisation of public space as upper caste space. It marks you, and sets you apart. For this reason, the more elite the institution, the more Dalit students attempt to pass by not revealing their Dalit backgrounds. One male Dalit student, who was passing on campus, including to all his friends, made it clear that speaking out on caste was not an option for him: “If you speak out on caste, you will automatically be labelled as SC - the risk is high” (Kumar).

Indeed, during our interview, at one point three boys came towards us. Kumar told me that “they cannot hear us discussing about caste”, and we promptly moved to another location on campus to continue our conversation.

The taboo on discussing caste, particularly in the classroom, means that those few students who are open and assertive about their Dalit identity, pay a heavy social price, and are often ostracised. At the elite university where I was based, only two SC students, both male, were publicly Dalit. Similar to how homosexuality was long, and is still treated in the West, with society quietly tolerating gays as long as they are closeted and never actually speak about homosexuality or discrimination, Dalit students who are visible appear to bring what is seen as a ‘private matter’ into the public domain. There are parallels here with the global feminist movement, whose various theorists, such as bell hooks, have argued that the distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ is false, for women’s everyday reality is “informed and shaped by politics and is necessarily political” (hooks 1984: 24).

The personal is political also for Dalits. Bhagat’s experience at university changed irrevocably when he spoke out about caste and defended reservations in the classroom:

Just as a good black is a dead black in the US, a good Dalit is a quiet Dalit. As long as you are not open about your identity, you can get by. I was okay at X University until one day in class we were discussing class issues and other social issues.... I was the only student who spoke up and defended reservations. This is how the other students came to know that I am Dalit. There was a huge backlash afterwards.

After this incident, Bhagat stated that a lot of students stopped talking to him, including the few students he either knew or suspected of being SC, because “they are afraid to be seen talking to me”. This is a clear example of what

Goffman terms courtesy stigma, whereby individuals who associate with a stigmatised individual come to be tainted with the same stigma and can explain the lack of socialising between open and closeted SC students at the elite institution at which I was based (Goffman 1963: 30). One of Bhagat's most painful experiences at university occurred shortly after taking a stand on reservations in his Public Policy course. During small group work in class, the professor called over a female Brahmin student to sit next to him, who refused to work with him, provoking laughter from the other students. This is a profoundly humiliating memory for Bhagat, which reinforced his feelings of isolation and alienation on campus.

While raising the issue of caste can provoke a backlash, one of my interviewees studying at a non-elite university did manage to secure an important victory by speaking up about caste, despite feeling intensely uncomfortable, scared and isolated in doing so. In a class discussion about making a film about waste management, Nandini suggested linking the issue of waste management to caste. While she said that “the whole class fought back, saying why are you enforcing caste on us”, and resistance to the issue remained, she won in the end, and each group was required to make a film addressing the issue from the perspective of caste experience and privilege.

The pressure to be invisible, or at the very least discreet, means that efforts to organise and build internal SC solidarity are impeded, compounding the social isolation Dalit students feel on campus and beyond. At this elite university, unlike at other leading public universities in India, there is no SC or Ambedkarite association. When I asked SC students if they identified this as a problem, or felt that such an association was lacking, not one student felt that such a group would be viable at their university. Time and again, students said that belonging to a Dalit association would label them, and “everybody would

know” that they were Dalit, breaking their anonymity. The fear of being exposed extended to other aspects of university life. Some students spoke of being hesitant of applying for scholarships for SC students, until they had ascertained that the list of recipients would not be made public. However, the area where students felt the most pressure to hide or minimise their caste origins was during their entry interviews for university, as well as for job placements. For upper caste students, questions about their family background are innocuous, and often a source of pride, enabling them to boast about their families’ occupational and educational status. For many SC students, in contrast, such questions can provoke anxiety and discomfort, as they try to project a public image of upper caste normalcy that they don’t feel they measure up to. Kumar stated that these personal questions are anxiety-inducing and affect his performance during interviews, saying “it would be great to just be able to be yourself”. Bhagat had a similar experience, when he had what he described as a “stress interview”:

They asked me what does your father do? I said government service, and they asked clerk? I said no, peon. Then they attacked me, why are you here, why are you not working, supporting your family if your father is a peon? To see how I would react. They also asked specifically to which caste do you belong to? Because it only says Buddhist on your caste certificate. I said I am Mahar.

While most students were not so explicitly asked about their caste background during interviews, fear and apprehension that they might be asked, usually indirectly via questions about family background, mean that interviews are often extremely stressful experiences for SC students. There are several, underhanded ways that an interviewer can indirectly ask about caste. In many cases specific religions, such as Buddhism, and in certain regions, Christianity, equals an SC identity, as large numbers of SC communities have converted to Buddhism and Christianity respectively in a vain attempt to escape the

religiously legitimated casteism of Hinduism. Asking about religion can therefore reveal caste. Indeed, in the above example, the interviewers already knew that Bhagat was SC due to his Buddhist caste certificate- what they really wanted to do was force him to publicly identify his specific *jati* (sub-caste) and thereby induce a feeling of shame. In a study of the job interview experiences of both Dalit and GC graduates of three elite universities in Delhi, Deshpande found that family background questions were very common, which Dalit students interpreted as discrediting, and that furthermore Dalit candidates were often made to justify the policy of reservations, putting them on the defensive. In contrast, GC students did not experience discomfort or feel singled out by such questions, but rather saw such questions as neutral and normal (Deshpande 2011: 200-210). These findings have been echoed in other studies of the private sector job market which have found that Indian employers see no contradiction whatsoever between subscribing to an ideology of meritocracy, and affirming the importance of family background, valuing such factors as “educated parents”, which clearly puts Dalit candidates at a disadvantage (Jodkha & Newman 2007: 4127).

Ultimately, as Dalit students enter higher education, and then the workforce, they encounter deeply entrenched upper caste norms and a pervasive assumption of upper-casteness that continually reminds them that they are Other, different, and part of a stigmatised minority. However, for those who have been bullied at school or during undergraduate study, many welcome the anonymity that Dalit invisibility affords. Passing can provide a degree of social acceptability and normalcy that would be impossible otherwise. It means that rather than being Nandini the “SC girl”, one is simply Nandini. It also means not being branded as non-meritorious, which is a recurring theme in the controversy surrounding reservations in India.

Debunking the Ideology of Merit: Rendering Visible the Invisibility of Caste Privilege

For many General Caste (GC) students and their parents, reservations are a travesty of justice that deprive hard-working, meritorious students of their rightful place at university. SC candidates are assumed to be less competent. Vote bank politics is blamed, and there is deep resentment at what is perceived to be an unfair advantage given to the SC in the form of what is known in India as grade relaxation (typically SC students receive a grade relaxation of 5%). These views must be situated in context. Gaining entry into the most prestigious institutions, such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT), is extremely difficult. The IIT's average acceptance rate of just 2%, which is below Harvard's 2017 acceptance rate of 5.2% (Glatter: 2018). It is not uncommon for the most sought-out colleges of the University of Delhi, one of India's leading universities, to have minimum cut-off percentages of over 98%. Given that competition for elite university places is fierce, and that competition only continues to increase, many GC's feel left out and discriminated against. The following words from a GC professor who is also a parent aptly sums up how many GC parents feel:

It's becoming reverse discrimination. Good meritorious kids have to leave the country. 50% of the seats are gone, plus state quota. The higher education system is actually being ruined.... Keep appeasing people, keep appeasing more groups politically, rather than tackling the real problems of education. It's so tough, my son is in 11th standard. I'm facing this, as a faculty member and as a parent. So what's left for the general after the 50% quota? Just look at the numbers (Vijayshree)

For GC parents such as Vijayshree, who see their children work hard, study relentlessly and attend after-school tuition, reservations leave a bitter taste. Some, like Vijayshree, are considering sending their children abroad for study if they do not get into the university of their choice.

On the other side of the caste divide however, a very different set of opinions emerges. SC students spoke of how they struggled to get to university and must continually prove their worth wherever they go. SC students consistently criticised the pervasive ideology of merit that surrounds them, and that judges them incompetent. Simultaneously, they lamented the fact that upper caste students were blind to multiple forms of caste privilege, ranging from having a supportive family environment, possessing social capital and a better command of English, to having the money to attend expensive tuition classes that prepare one for the most competitive entrance exams. On the outside looking in, Dalit students are acutely aware that although they have not had it easy, this is often the perception of the upper castes. As with male privilege and white privilege, caste privilege, although omnipresent, is often invisible. Male and white norms that are assumed to be “universal” and “neutral” are replicated in the case of caste. Indeed, as Deshpande has argued, in India the irony is that affirmative action has forced a hypervisibility upon India’s Dalits, while simultaneously enabling India’s privileged castes to lay claim to casteless citizenship and seek refuge in the purportedly caste-neutral “general category” (Deshpande2013: 32).

Yet, Dalit students highlight examples that show that there is no such thing as castelessness: some castes are born with surnames that grant them automatic social respect; Dalits are born with surnames that many either try and hide or change in order to escape automatic discrediting. The upper castes have the privilege of not having to think much about the implications of their caste identity until marriage; for Dalits, their caste identity is inescapable and accompanies them everywhere, and is especially present at an elite university that resents their presence. The invisibility of caste privilege makes the university environment particularly treacherous to negotiate for Dalit students,

for any form of Dalit visibility is interpreted as an unwelcome intrusion in a presumed space of caste neutrality.

While a growing percentage of SC students are second-generation reservation beneficiaries, following in the footsteps of their parents, the majority of my interviewees were first generation university students. As such, several came from home environments in which the expectation that they would excel academically and aim high was not there. A number of students mentioned that they had no one in their family to guide them. This was the case of female Dalit student Kiran, who spoke of how she independently had to drive herself to achieve:

The upper castes do not recognise their inbuilt advantage because of their family. All throughout, I have pushed myself on my own. I did not have my parents or anyone else to guide me. My parents do not know about NIT (National Institute of Technology) or IIM (Indian Institute of Management). My father said study, do well, but for him it would have been okay if I went to some engineering college in MP (Kiran).

The connection between caste and class is complex in India. Most of my interviewees stressed not financial hardship growing up (even though this was present for some), but, as in the example above, their parents' lack of social and cultural capital. Some Dalit students from middle-class families also struggled with this, showing that money alone is not enough to compensate for the lack of an upper-caste cultural 'habitus'.

Although the ideology of merit negatively affects Dalits, leading them to be on the defensive and in some cases inducing guilt and a lack of self-confidence, at the same time SC students sought to validate themselves and their efforts to achieve in a hostile world. Bhagat, who endured horrendous bullying

throughout his school years, as well as a harsh home environment in which he was regularly beaten, nonetheless managed to achieve entry into elite institutions at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level, all without extra tuition. The tuition industry in India is a sector worth an estimated 6.5 billion dollars, but not all can afford it. Many well-off students spend an entire year in cities such as Kota in Rajasthan, preparing for entrance exams. Being the son of a peon, Bhagat prepared on his own:

I managed to get 82% in my 12th board and cracked IIT JEE screening.... both without any coaching.... I am sure I would have got better ranks had I got coaching. JEE coaching in X city used to be very expensive and all my classmates enrolled for it. Some had enrolled at two coaching centres to get the best of both and each used to cost 50, 000Rs. None of them could crack the screening- all upper castes Brahmins professors' children even with expensive coaching and they blamed reservations for their incompetence.

For many Dalit students, the ideology of merit is a sham that continues to legitimise upper caste dominance, and is used as a tool to keep Dalits 'in their place'.⁷ Dalit students are angry that no matter how much they achieve, they are presumed to be incompetent. Dalit student Gaurav asserted that he experienced this disdain even as a general category student:

For postgraduation, I qualified in a general seat.... but despite this qualification, the upper castes always claim you are not merit. The merit is the monopoly of the upper castes...Over there (i.e. in the West) there is no reservation. They (Dalits) are getting good jobs. How is it possible if they are not intelligent?

Like Bhagat above, Nandini believes that reservations have been made into a scapegoat for structural problems in Indian higher education. With the expansion of the Indian middle class, there has been a surge in demand for

university places that existing institutions have not been able to keep pace with, particularly at the elite level. Although the government has been steadily expanding the number of IIT and IIM institutes throughout the country, these new institutes lack academic staff. Reservations act as a powerful lightning rod for upper caste discontent:

The upper castes make reservations the scapegoat for all of their woes. The reality is that even if that 15% quota was removed, still they would not get in, because the competition is so intense. Another General Category student would get in. They are obsessed with- 'you took my seat'. But they are born privileged. This privilege accumulates with time and then is multiplied. (Nandini)

These vigorous critiques of the ideology of merit show that Dalit students, including those who are not politicised, actively resist anti-Dalit stereotypes and feel that, although they are made to feel out of place, they have every right to study in the most prestigious institutions of the land. While upper caste students resent reservations and feel that Dalits exist on government handouts alone, Dalit students resent pervasive caste privilege that goes unchallenged and unnoticed.

In effect, although upper caste students study side by side with Dalit students (whether open or not), they know very little about the hurdles Dalits must overcome to enter university, and then once there, to maintain self-confidence and respect in the face of social stigma and a wall of opposition to reservations. One male Dalit student from Tamil Nadu argued that all students should be required to learn about why reservations exist, and the problems faced by Dalits, so that "they feel that they are not losing opportunities because of Dalits" (Anaan). For Anaan, the government "cannot just give reservations and do nothing else", it must be proactive in ensuring that the entire nation is educated

about Dalits and about Ambedkar. Anaan further added that although an SC student may have entered through reservations, this should not erase her or his hard work in getting there, and then, once in, “having to perform like everyone else”. Indeed, speaking with upper caste students, it soon became clear that in their minds, Dalit students are privileged and cosseted by the government, as reflected in the use of stigmatising terms such as *sarkarkedamad* or sons-in-law of the government⁸ (Gudavarthy 2012: 55). This finding is echoed by research on caste discrimination in the private sector job market in Delhi, which has found that non-Dalit students do not see themselves as privileged despite acknowledging their superior cultural and linguistic capital (Despande 2011: 205). A Dalit-inclusive curriculum at all levels, forms and linguistic mediums of schooling needs to be implemented, so that Dalits start to be perceived as fellow citizens, as opposed to a ‘special interest group’ that is a parasite on state resources. The Indian government has adopted reservation, but it has done very little to challenge caste stigma, leaving individual Dalit students to cope as best they can with a national problem of social discrimination that requires collective solutions beyond reservations.

Navigating Casteist Institutions: Institutional and Interpersonal Discrimination

Grade Discrimination

Regardless of how they have gained entry into university, SC students universally complained about systematic bias and discrimination against them - both overt and covert, institutionalised and social. In other words, it is not the status of being a “category” or reservation student alone that is the source of discrimination, but belonging to, in the words of one interviewee, a “hated” caste category. The experiences of Dalit students show that Indian universities remain very much dominated by the upper castes, and that low caste identity

can be a liability both academically and socially. Several interviewees asserted that being Dalit had negatively impacted upon their grades. Students explained that teachers had access to their caste category via admission forms, and that, depending on the institution, attendance sheets also contained their caste category, which left them vulnerable to negative stereotyping. The common assumption that Dalit students are weak academically and won't be able to cope with university can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as Dalit students don't conform to the image of a 'good student'. Gaurav argued that being Dalit means being subject to a harsher grading regime than GC (General Category) students, as there is mental resistance to accepting SC students as high achievers:

I have been at four universities. Casteism is everywhere, at every step....

Psychologically, the untouchability is changing. I will take dinner with you, touch you, touch your mobile. But in terms of grades, I cannot touch the highest grades, A plus. You can become a professor, but not a VC. Of the 43 central universities, just 2 or 3 VC are SC or ST... In my previous university in X, also my friends get low grades by upper caste professors. Upper caste students have shameless writing and they get A, A minus. (Gaurav)

When Gaurav was failed in a subject at his current university, he approached his MP in his home state, who lobbied to have the exam reset, which he promptly passed. Although Gaurav was the only student who mentioned being unjustly failed, several others maintained that Dalit students are sometimes purposely failed, and that SC students are more likely to be punished for copying. The problem of grade discrimination is widespread in India. The Thorat committee report into caste discrimination at India's premier medical school AIMS (All India Institute of Medical Sciences), revealed that 84% of SC students felt that their grades were negatively affected by their caste background, while UC students benefited from more lenient marking regimes. It also found that SC students were systematically failed at the institution, despite having performed

well previously (Thorat 2007: 25-26). Whether consciously or unconsciously, the presumption of Dalit incompetence has led to a casted glass ceiling in Indian universities. This assumption of lower intelligence has deep historical roots: in the past, students were literally seated in different rows in Maharashtra, with Brahmins at the front, followed by Marathas and finally the different untouchable castes at the back or outside (Paik 2009: 185).

The politics of grades extends to fellow students. Bhagat was terribly bullied throughout his school days as one of the few SC students at an elite, English-medium primary and secondary school, being called “Bhangi” (a derogatory term for a sweeper), and excluded socially. His good grades, he said, further provoked his bullies, who would taunt him by saying “why do you need to study? You will get grace marks in your exams, just attach your caste certificate to your answer sheet”. Yogi recalled how during his BTech, two upper caste boys came near his room, commenting loudly how SC students only got into IIT with low marks and don’t deserve to be there. This incident motivated Yogi to study even harder: “because of this I became a topper, to prove to them”. Just as SC students assert that the upper castes have monopolised merit, so too it appears that high grades are meant to be their exclusive territory. When SC students excel academically, they challenge the common belief that SC individuals are not as capable as the upper castes. Indeed, when Bhagat became a “topper” (highest grade in his class), he was invited to a local coaching school to serve as a role model for aspiring IIT candidates. However, this came with a caveat: he was explicitly told not to reveal his caste identity, as having an SC topper could potentially damage the reputation of the school and cause it to lose clients.

Johnson et al. have shown that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds studying at an elite university in the US demonstrated greater concerns about

their academic competency, and as a result experienced “self-regulatory depletion” from managing these concerns (Johnson et al.: 2011: 838). Similarly, SC students revealed that they were anxious about their academic fit, and keen to disprove the negative stereotypes about their academic abilities. This led to high levels of psychological pressure to achieve, and a strong psychological dependence on securing high grades to prove one’s self-worth. While all students are under pressure to get good grades, when you grow up surrounded by the message that you are not meritorious, this pressure gets amplified at an elite university.

Neglect on the part of supervisors

In contrast to discriminatory grading, all students reported experiencing more subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination from both professors and fellow students. At the postgraduate level especially, students complained about neglect from their upper caste guides (supervisors), which impacted negatively upon their thesis writing and research. The experience of Maru is just one of many examples I heard of poor supervision. Maru realised that he had not been guided properly during his MPhil thesis, and sought out an unofficial Dalit guide for his PhD. Yogi said that while he had never been discriminated against grade-wise, he felt that the teachers paid more attention to upper caste students. Nandini had difficulty securing recommendation letters from some faculty members, whilst other students got letters easily. While most teachers would not make openly casteist comments, there were many reports of more subtle attempts to stigmatise SC students. For example, Ravi related how one of his lecturers, a Brahmin, asked the class, who is non-vegetarian? Who eats egg? (In India, egg is considered a form of meat). Ravi was the only person who raised his hand. As Gujarat is one of India’s most vegetarian states, where the dominant castes and the vast majority of Hindus are vegetarian, such a question can be used to determine both caste and religion. These findings are paralleled

in the Thorat committee report, where SC students reported receiving less support than other students from their professors. Relations with teachers at AIIMS were described as one of “avoidance, contempt, non-cooperation, and discouragement....” (Thorat 2007: 28).

Belittling by professors

Dalit students are particularly vulnerable, and are likely to face a hostile classroom environment, when they raise the issue of caste. Not only does one mark oneself publicly as SC, but as mentioned in the section on invisibility above, one risks public ridicule for “complaining” and “seeing caste everywhere” (as Dalit students stand accused). It takes great courage, therefore, to speak about one’s own life experiences, and to bring caste into purportedly caste-neutral debates in the classroom. Bhagat remembers a very painful experience of being mocked by one of his lecturers when he argued that Ambedkar would not have resigned and would have been able to pass the Women’s Rights Bill had Parliament not been dominated by Brahmins at the time. His lecturer responded sarcastically, asking Bhagat if he believed that the lecturers at their university should all resign if most of them belonged to the same community. Bhagat’s great inner strength and self-belief, derived in large part from his identification as an Ambekdarite, enabled him to overcome such humiliating experiences, but many other SC students shut down and learn that it is safer to just keep quiet and to self-censor. Indeed, the ‘out’ Dalit students reported the most negative experiences in the classroom, as they were the only ones to risk raising the subject of caste.

English: Social discrimination by proxy

Dalit students also struggle with the high level of English demanded in Indian higher education. Even those students who had attended private English-medium schools reported struggling, at least initially, particularly with writing

in English. Although Indian universities are meant to provide remedial classes in English for those who need it, such provision varies widely and is often stigmatised on campus. At the elite university, only two weeks of remedial English and Maths are provided before terms starts. Another university had cancelled its English orientation session for SC/ST students to help them pass the entrance exam. Nandini, who attended an English-medium primary and secondary school in South India, spoke about how critical comments about her written English knocked her confidence. All my Gujarati interviewees had attended Gujarati-medium schools, and shared that they struggled with both written and spoken English, referring several times to their “language problem”. SC students generally arrive at university with far lower levels of English than their upper caste counterparts, which further sets them apart and can compound feelings of low self-confidence. This language gap varies according to state origin (South Indians generally have stronger levels of English than North Indians), type of school (not all English-medium schools are of equal quality), and class background. Nandini expressed this linguistic hierarchy aptly when she stated:

Here it breaks your courage. Some come from Hindi backgrounds- they struggle to survive. Stressing more on English they make them feel inferior. They should be allowed to write in Hindi.... I did not worry about fitting in. I was enthusiastic from BA to MA. But the very first day, I was scared. Majority are upper caste and class. Difficult to fit in, with the language. I cried for a week because I could not understand anything. Academic English in the classroom is difficult to understand.

Social Exclusion

In addition to an uphill battle with English, SC students face higher levels of social exclusion based on a combination of class and caste. Several of my interviewees spoke about being regularly socially excluded from upper caste socialising due to both caste and their lower socioeconomic position. Nandini

described how UC students would frequent expensive eating places that SC students can't afford: "It's very obvious who hangs out where and who eats what. When they hang out, they band together. We are excluded from those spaces... Here they judge everything, gadgets, clothes, food". While many students reported having mixed caste friendships, there is a clear social division between SC and non-SC students when it comes to socialising, both on and outside of the campus.

SC students also find it more difficult to integrate into study groups. At the elite university, the two open SC students described difficulties in finding a welcoming study group, with some study groups alleging that they didn't have vacancies when approached. At elite institutions in India, senior students and one's peer group play key roles in mentoring and studying, and students look more to their seniors/peers for study help than to professors (Henry & Ferry 2017:12). SC students therefore enter into university environments in which both academically and socially, they are made to feel apart and inferior. Their cultural, social and linguistic capital lags behind that of their upper caste peers, but official narratives of merit continually send out a message of individualised trajectories of success that ignores the multiple layers of structural disadvantage that SC students face both before and during their university studies. University campuses are often, as one of my interviewees aptly put it, a "small ecosystem", and being able to fit in socially and find one's niche is important. Too often, SC students told me how isolated they were - a problem that is more acute in elite universities, where more SC students are hidden and hence there is a lack of social and emotional support from fellow SC peers. This means that after overhearing or witnessing a casteist remark, there is often no one to turn to. Bhagat, for example, would turn to social media to vent his anger, hurt and frustration, but he does not have one SC friend on campus to provide vital emotional first aid after a casteist incident. His parents, he said, are not

understanding, telling him to just ignore such prejudice and dedicate himself to his studies. Similarly, Jyoti, who is passing, minimises the fact that one of her friends uses the term “Chamar” (colloquial and derogatory term for the Dalit leather working caste), to insult other girls, arguing that they are just “small comments”, when it is clear that this casteist language hurts her. Although Indian universities are meant to have SC/ST “cells” to provide support for SC/ST students and act as a channel with the administration for their grievances, not one of my interviewees stated that they had personally been helped by their university’s cell, or felt that it was effective in representing them. Just as there is economic precarity, so too there is social precarity, and SC students, especially those who are hidden, often carry a heavy psychological burden that they are not able to share with others. Every day, Dalit students face myriad microaggressions (daily insults/indignities/demeaning messages), from peers and lecturers, that, collectively, and continually hammer home the same, dispiriting message: you are Other, different, less than, and implicitly unworthy (Sue: 2010).⁹ In such a hostile environment, where the quiet violence of daily caste stigma is not recognised, not having a strong, supportive social network can further widen the ‘confidence gap’ between SC and UC students.

Where are the SC professors? Where are Dalits in the curriculum?

Just as caste privilege goes unacknowledged by the majority of UC students, institutionalised forms of discrimination against Dalits are often invisible and normalised. The curriculum at both the elite institution where I was based, and the other universities that I visited, for the most part rendered the life experiences of Dalits invisible. When Dalit issues are raised, it is done so in an ad-hoc fashion and not integrated throughout the curriculum. The purportedly caste-neutral curriculum in these institutions in fact reflects the needs and values of upper caste students, while rendering invisible the needs of Dalit students. The lack of a Dalit-inclusive curriculum is linked to another key

problem for Dalit students: the severe lack of faculty role models. When I asked SC students how many Dalit professors they had, at the elite university, students could not identify one SC professor, despite the fact that reservations in public employment, in theory, exist for academic staff (in practice, many vacancies are not filled). At non-elite universities, one or two, invariably male SC professors were identified, but female Dalit students said that such male Dalit professors were not always supportive, and in fact at one institution, the lone male SC professor was known to sexually harass female Dalit students with impunity. Nandini, who studies at a social sciences university, did have the benefit of a Dalit Issues course being offered, but her institution appeared to have assumed that all 'Dalit issues' could be segregated and confined to this course only, resulting in silence in other courses. This results ironically in the hypervisibility of the *marked* identity of Dalits, and the invisibility of the *unmarked* upper-caste curriculum. When speaking with some students, so accustomed had they become to an upper caste curriculum and upper caste professors, that they have never paused to question their lack of representation in the curriculum or the faculty. They had come to accept what Friere terms a 'culture of silence' to refer to Brazilian and Latin American peasants in general who are deprived of a voice and critical awareness of their own oppression and dependence upon the dominant classes (Friere: 1981). Ambedkarite students however were more critical and aware of their institutionalised invisibilisation. Bhagat criticised how textbooks in the Indian educational system "are busy glorifying a few men beyond measure and running a propaganda that India has the most inclusive culture when in fact it has the most exclusivist kind of culture". Nandini argued passionately that the "whole structure of the course should be changed. Content on marginalised sections should be highly present. The content we had was manufactured politics, manufacturing consent". However, without more Dalit professors, especially female Dalit professors, such mainstreaming of caste will be difficult to achieve, as many upper caste professors deny the existence of

caste bias at their institutions, and do not see the need to discuss caste in the classroom or as part of the curriculum. Having professors that look like you is of more than just symbolic value: a quantitative study of the impact of social distance between teachers and pupils at Indian primary schools found that having a teacher of the same caste, gender and religion significantly improved academic performance (Rawal & Kingdon 2010: 18). Anaan, from Tamil Nadu, maintained that while the public debate focused on reservations, the true problem, he felt, was overrepresentation of the upper castes in Indian universities. He gave the example of IIT Madras, in Chennai, where “out of 427 professors, 400 are Brahmin...”. While India’s reservations policy appears strong on paper, the practice, particularly with regards to faculty, is leaving generations of SC students without positive role models and a curriculum in which they find themselves reflected. Gloria Steinem, in her book “The Revolution Within”, argued that in her generation, women who attended university excelled academically even as the male-centric curriculum undermined their self-esteem. A similar process is occurring in India, whereby Dalit students are accessing university, but on very unequal terms, graduating with degrees for which the price they often pay is invisibility, discrimination and social marginalisation.

Making it to the Top: How Ambedkarite assertiveness co-exists with widespread passing

Elitism and Stigma

What united all of my interviewees was a sense of struggle, of having to affirm and manage their identities in a culture and in institutions hostile to any assertion of Dalitness. While caste stigma is always present, the degree and intensity of casteism is felt differently as Dalits climb the academic hierarchy- and crucially, enter into elite spaces. Most students affirmed that they felt more

casteism during their postgraduate degrees. Their comments reveal that the more Dalit students enter into the higher echelons of higher education, the more resistance they face, particularly if the institution they are attending is prestigious:

The worse bias is in post-graduation. It is a prestigious college. Might also be there at high school and graduation (BA), but I might not have been aware. Here, I can really interpret it through caste. It is very much evident. It is not direct. It is very indirect... You can feel it, you cannot see it. For example, in cultural studies we never discussed caste at all (Nandini)

In college, I used to talk openly. But here we can't talk about our background. In that way I feel isolated here... I didn't anticipate having problems. Initially, I was natural and vocal about my caste. Then after some bad experiences, I stopped (Anaan)

The experience of Nandini suggests that some SC students experience an increase in stigma consciousness upon entering postgraduate study. Previous research based on academically stigmatised minority students in the US (blacks and Latinos), has shown that an increase in stigma consciousness at a predominantly white university can lead to lower academic performance and greater psychological disengagement for men, and lower self-esteem in women (Pinel et al. 2005: 481). However, these results have not been replicated in my case study. On the contrary, as shall be seen below, the students with the highest levels of stigma consciousness (both male and female), also possessed strong self-confidence and engagement with their studies due to their Ambedkarite ideology. While Pinel et al. recommend reducing the likelihood that stigmatised ethnic minorities will develop high awareness of stigma at university, I contend that high stigma consciousness can also be a resource for building positive identities and combating that stigma in society.

Students who had graduated from IIT's, the most prestigious engineering-focused universities in India, felt that casteism was worse there, regardless of level (under/postgraduate), lending credence to the argument that the more elite the institution, the more intense the caste stigma:

The isolation is worse at IIT. There were three other SC's in my batch- not open. I got to know. One person dropped out. One person told me, he said, why do you speak out? This will only lead to more discrimination... My classmates said Dalits should try to work hard and contribute to the community and not ask for reservations...no supportive professors at all. (Bhagat)

At IIT the casteism was intense- open. Roll call was according to rank. The upper caste guys hated us, because of reservations. They think they have worked hard and we get in with lower grades (Yogi)

Every interviewee who was an IIT graduate had had a traumatic experience during their time there- one even received online abuse threatening to sexually assault his sister. IIT's were established to produce a professional elite and indeed the 'IIT brand' has been one of India's most successful, both nationally and internationally, as many IIT graduates have been successful abroad. IIT's market themselves as 'factories of merit', and pride themselves on their fiercely competitive and corruption-free entrance exams. However, both men and the upper castes are disproportionately overrepresented at IIT's across the country. The more elite the institution, the more Dalits are marked as out of place, undeserving, usurping, and a problematic presence. They have left their 'naturally ordained' spaces and occupations, and as a result, they are frequently seen as encroaching upon spaces where they don't belong. Contrast, for example, the feeling of homecoming that Subramanian reported a Tamil Brahmin student experienced when arriving on the campus of IIT Madras, where he could slip into Brahmin vernacular and feel a sense of intimacy and

kinship with his Tamil Brahmin professors, with the acute discomfort and self-consciousness that my interviewees related (Subramanian 2015: 309). It appears that a Dalit who accepts her or his station in life will be accepted, but one who steps outside her culturally mandated domain will have more obstacles to overcome in order to belong and achieve. This has been borne out by studies of economic discrimination in the urban labour market that show that employers have no aversion to hiring Dalits in traditional Dalit occupations, but would be far more resistant to hiring SC's in prized formal sector jobs (Banjeree & Knight 1985: 301). Despite over 60 years of reservation for Dalits in state jobs, the caste mentality has proved remarkably resistant to change- Dalits are still perceived as most suited for unskilled, menial employment.

Passing

Caste stigma and the backlash against reservations means that various degrees of passing becomes an essential survival strategy for many Dalits, and one's identity, rather than expressed normally, becomes something to manage, regulate, and veil. Passing is a common response to stigma the world over. Lamont et al., in their study of how black Brazilians cope with racial exclusion, identified three main strategies: confronting, management of the self, and not responding (Lamont et al.: 2016). They found that although confronting racism was seen as the ideal, many in practice responded by either signalling their class status to deflect prejudice, or by not responding at all (Lamont et al 2016: 170-178). In my sample, the most common stigma management strategy was to pass as upper caste, which ranged from keeping one's caste identity secret (at least on campus), to actively assuming an upper-caste identity. The 'Dalit closet' is variable in its intensity, but the common thread was keeping one's head low and mouth shut- responding not being a viable option when one is closeted. Using class signals to pass as upper caste was not emphasised. A few interviewees mentioned joining Hindu religious groups that are associated with the upper

castes, gaining greater social 'cover' and respectability in this way. The most common passing strategy however was to carefully manage one's public identity, including one's online identity, in such a way as to not reveal any hint of Dalitness.

Although rarely discussed openly, passing over time takes a heavy psychological toll. Only one of my interviewees, who started singing during college, and since graduating has become a classical Indian music singer, spoke at length about the psychological price he paid for changing his Dalit surname to a Brahmin surname. Narinder explained that after changing his surname, his career took off, he got more respect, and earned more for his performances. He also gained more professional recognition in the form of music awards. However, inside he was dying:

This is a business strategy, but inside I am not feeling good... Spiritually, I felt I am philosophically cheating. Why I say I am Brahmin? Inner side cheating. Guilty feeling.

After years passing as Brahmin, Narinder decided to embrace the path advocated by Dr. Ambedkar and converted to Buddhism. Although he predicts his career will suffer, he feels stronger, takes genuine pride in his identity, and contributes to social change when he publicly announces before each performance that he is Buddhist. While Buddhism has not been demonised by the Hindutva (Hindu right-wing nationalist) forces as Islam has, its association with Dalit assertion means that to publicly claim a Buddhist identity is to ideologically reject all that Hindutva stands for.

Although they may not have changed their surnames, many SC university students who pass may excel academically, but inside feel like frauds, which

once again widens the confidence gap with UC students, whom they witness spontaneously and nonchalantly speaking about their caste identities without fear, without thinking in the back of their minds- “what if they knew?” The pressure to be closeted, moreover, does not begin or end with graduation: I spoke with the mother of an undergraduate student who was considering a “family strategy” to change their surname in order to improve her son’s prospects on the job market. Similarly, some interviewees spoke about how they had already spent their primary and secondary school years passing as upper caste, or another caste positioned higher in the social hierarchy.

Dalit Pride

Given that subtle casteism is widespread in Indian universities, which stigma management strategies have worked best for navigating such hostile environments in the absence of institutional and broader social support? Those students (a distinct minority), who identified as Ambedkarite, that is as followers of the principles of Dr. Ambedkar, demonstrated greater self-awareness and resilience in the face of both institutional and interpersonal forms of casteism. Also, those who were active in Ambedkarite student associations on campus were more vocal and assertive about their civil rights. These associations can provide emotional and social support, friendship and understanding, as well as opportunities for leadership, confidence building and activism. The philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar, whose core tenets promote self-respect and dignity for Dalits, with a strong emphasis on education, provides vital intellectual and moral fuel for Dalit students. Not all Ambedkarite students had embraced Buddhism like Narinder above, particularly if not from Maharashtra (Dr. Ambedkar’s home state), but those who identified with him and his movement were keener to assert their ‘Dalitness’. The experience of Nandini is instructive. When she arrived on campus, she lacked confidence due

to a combination of caste, class and language, but becoming involved in Dalit student politics emboldened her:

In the beginning, I lacked confidence. Then it became easier when I met other Dalit students, people on the same wavelength. I contested the Dalit group election and that boosted my confidence. I ran in the very first semester. I lost but I still felt good...I became very confident. People started to speak to me in the classroom. At the beginning, they did not speak to me.

At the elite institution however, a very different story was unfolding. There, in contrast to both other elite universities and to less prestigious state universities, there was no Ambedkarite student association, no celebration of his anniversary, and in the words of one of my interviewees, “Ambedkar is like a swearword here”. The lack of any public Dalit presence whatsoever has made it difficult for Ambedkarite students to connect with each other, network, and provide mutual support, let alone pressure the administration for change. The only two Ambedkarite students were also the only open students on campus, but they were surrounded by an institutional culture that promotes a ‘caste does not exist here’ ethos, which ends up silencing and marginalising Dalit students, as well as reinforcing the caste status quo. One of my last interviews on the elite university campus had a profound impact on me. I was chatting with a male Dalit student in his dorm room. When the topic turned to caste, he abruptly proceeded to close his door and then turned on his AC. He whispered: “no one else here knows I am SC”. In effect, the extreme social apartheid of rural India has transformed itself into a far more subtle, yet insidious social divide in urban areas, in which the upper castes are able to speak openly about their caste background, while many SC have entered, in varying degrees, into the Dalit closet.

Conclusion

At first glance, the notion of a 'Dalit closet' may seem out of place in contemporary India. Until recently, Mawayati, a Dalit woman, governed India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), while throughout India Dalits enjoy a significant political presence, both through reserved seats in state legislatures, as well as political parties, such as the BSP in UP, that were founded with a Dalit vote base. In 2017, both the ruling and opposition coalitions have nominated Dalit candidates to be President of India. However, this growing political assertiveness and social activism co-exists with a very quiet and invisible form of violence on especially elite university campuses, in which discussing caste is taboo, and being publicly SC exposes one to even higher levels of stigma, prejudice and discrimination. Political visibility coincides with widespread stigma in everyday life, and myriad social situations where relations of power are weighted against Dalits. Reservations have produced a growing Dalit middle class with rising aspirations, but also pressure to erase caste, and an ideology of merit discourse that delegitimises the hard work and achievements of all Dalits. Most Dalit students studying at the elite university were 'content' to pass, focus on their studies and placements, and not mention caste or reservations. The Dalit closet thus enables Dalits to enter elite spaces and graduate with prestigious degrees, even as it handicaps them socially, harms their self-esteem, and consigns them to invisibility on campus- and beyond. Reservation has provided the first step- access. But unless accompanied by both institutional and broader cultural transformation, the ultimate goal of reservation- a truly inclusive society, will not be fulfilled. Dalit and non-Dalit students arrive at university with very different starting points, not just socioeconomically and linguistically, but also psychologically, whereby the former often struggle to affirm and accept themselves, leading to a social confidence gap between Dalits and non-Dalits. The Dalit closet is not limited to elite university campuses. Dalit students spoke about hiding their identities

during placements (internships), when searching for accommodation (where discrimination based on caste and religion is rampant), and in job interviews. They could all cite examples of Dalit families they know who had changed their surnames. The price for upward mobility should not be silence and passing. In his last speech to India's constituent assembly, Ambedkar spoke about the importance of not just political democracy, but critically social democracy, in order to achieve equality and Dalit emancipation, arguing that "political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy... What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognises liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life" (Ambedkar: 1949). It is a lack of social democracy which makes elite university environments so stressful for SC students to negotiate, demands draining identity management strategies, and allows social stigma and negative stereotypes to flourish. For reservations to be qualitatively successful, Indian universities need to move beyond a focus on access alone, to recognising the caste nature of their institutions, and be provided with financial/cultural incentives, as well as sanctions for non-compliance, to make them genuinely inclusive and welcoming spaces for the most marginalised.

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Notes

¹ Across India, SC communities have their own internal caste hierarchies. When reservations were first introduced, more socioeconomically advanced SC castes were better placed to take advantage of them, in both education and in government jobs, leading to increasing demands for the sub-categorisation of the SC quota for more disadvantaged SC groups. The first Indian state to introduce such 'reservation within reservation' was the state of Punjab in 1975. For a detailed discussion of the Punjab case, as well as the politics of SC reservation in other Indian states, see *Dividing Dalits: Writings on Sub-Categorisation of Scheduled Castes* (2009).

² Although the Indian government does not collect statistics on drop-out rates in higher education disaggregated by caste category (nor do Indian universities make public their drop-out rates as a general rule), IndiaStat does publish general figures on the drop-out rates at the top-rated government-funded IIT's. These figures show that the older, more prestigious IIT's have the highest drop-out rates, and media reports have revealed that at IIT Roorkee, for example, 90% of the students expelled for poor academic performance after being given a second chance were SC, ST or OBC. See for example: <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/90-of-students-expelled-from-iit-roorkee-belong-to-reserved-categories/articleshow/48059941.cms>.

Henry & Ferry report that for the BTech degree in IIT's, both the drop-out and the repeat rate are significantly higher for SC students- 9.9% versus 2% for the General Category and 1.3% for OBC's (2017: 10).

³The following article written by an IIT faculty member opposed to both SC and OBC reservations for diluting the quality and 'merit' of elite institutions in India is a good example: "OBC Reservations: an IIT Faculty Member's View". Available at: https://www.ee.iitb.ac.in/~hpc/old_studs/hrishi_page/random/reservation.pdf

⁴ The OBC category for the purposes of reservation in education and employment is very broad. In many states, it includes caste groups who are powerful politically, economically or both regionally. Many political parties (the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh or the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar for example), have been founded by and are supported by specific OBC groups. In some states, such as Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, the cleavages between OBC and SC communities can be stronger than that between the SC and the upper castes. As a result, there is no automatic solidarity between OBC and SC students. Many of my SC interviewees alleged that the OBC identified with the upper castes and were not necessarily allies of the SC. However, in some universities, OBC individuals are active in Ambedkarite associations.

⁵ The first study on stereotype threat was carried out by the social psychologists Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson in 1995, when they showed that African American college students performed worse on the verbal portion of the GRE Graduate School entry exam than white Americans when they were given instructions that indicated that performance would be indicative of intellectual ability. African American students in the two control groups, where reference to negative stereotypes were not made in the instructions, performed better. Since this study, numerous empirical studies on stereotype threat have followed among women and racial minorities, which have both confirmed and called into the question the impact of stereotype threat.

⁶ For a detailed discussion of the main arguments advanced against reservations in India, and, in particular, the economic arguments against reservations, see Thorat et al. *Prejudice against Reservation Policies: How and Why?* *Economic and Political Weekly*. Feb 20, 2016.

⁷ Here it is important to note that the ideology of merit has also been used as a weapon *within* the SC category. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, when the more socioeconomically backward Mandigas launched a movement to ask for sub-categorisation of SC reservations, the Malas (more dominant Dalit caste) responded by arguing that the Mandigas did not possess merit, and that is why they were underrepresented. See Sambaiah and Balagopal in *Dividing Dalits: Writings on Sub-Categorisation of Scheduled Castes* (2009).

⁸ This term is used as traditionally, sons-in-law receive doting treatment from their wives' families.

⁹ The concept of microaggressions was first coined by the psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce in 1970, to refer to racial microaggressions experienced by African Americans. The concept has since been developed further and extended to all marginalised social groups. The perpetrators of microaggressions are frequently not even aware that they have insulted, denigrated or offended someone. The diffuse and casual nature of microaggressions means that they are difficult to challenge in daily life.