Caste in Indian Higher Education: The Missing Organisational Studies

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Abstract

Literature engaging with the issue of caste in Indian higher education can broadly be classified into three streams. While all streams ascribe caste as a systemic issue, the third and most recent stream lays much emphasis on an individuals' experience of caste discrimination. This has problematised the deep-rooted casteism within everyday functioning of Indian Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs). However, it implicitly assumes that caste as a systemic issue, translates directly into an individual's experience of caste, thereby overlooking the crucial mediating role of higher educational institutions at the meso-level. The scholarship on caste in Indian higher education cannot afford such omissions provided that caste affiliations lie at the very core of establishment and the functioning of HEIs. Drawing on the engagement of organisational studies with race, we contend that there exists a necessity for examining the caste affiliations of HEIs. Such studies would enable the disaggregation of the all-encompassing category of 'private' institutions by providing for an examination of the abilities of each caste to administer their own HEIs thereby adding yet another layer for the study of inequalities in Indian higher education with profound policy implications.

Keywords: *Higher education, Caste, Organisational studies, Race, India*

Introduction

In late August 2023, the Government of Tamil Nadu constituted a one man committee headed by Retired Justice K Chandru to recommend measures to **"**create an atmosphere free of differences based on caste/creed in schools and colleges**"**(Chandru 2024). This action followed the public uproar against the brutal attacks on two Dalit students – Chinnadurai, who was studying 12th standard and his sister Chandra Selvi by Chinnadurai**'**s classmates belonging to a different caste hailing from the same village (Chandru 2024).

The committee submitted its report in May 2024 and recommended a series of measures including a set of recommendations pertains to the dropping of caste appellations. The recommendations read as under:

> **"**b. The government must mandate the removal of any caste prefix or suffix associated with government schools that indicate either the donor or their family.
> c. If any educational agency seeks to establish a new school, the conditions for permission to start a school must include a stipulation that the school**'**s name shall not bear any caste appellation.
> d. In case of existing private schools that have caste appellations, the department should request these schools to give up. If they fail to comply, appropriate legal steps should be considered, including legislative changes to serve the larger public interest.**"** (Chandru 2024, p.8)

Infact, it is not the first time that a recommendation has been made to drop the caste appeallations of educational institutions. The High-Level Committee for Prevention of Caste Clashes in Southern Districts of Tamil Nadu in 1998 also had suggested similar measures.

While dropping caste appellations in names of schools and colleges could serve the purpose of upholding **'**public**'** character of educational institutions, mere implementation of such recommendations cannot undo the workings of caste that constitutes the underbelly of educational institutions. This is more so in the

case of private educational institutions as the root of their very establishment, more often than not, is tied to interests of particular castes. In India, examination of caste affiliations has, unfortunately been limited to questions of representations within student and employee segments of a higher educational institution. However, this paper argues that an examination of caste affiliations of higher educational institution must engage with questions of whose culture, history, and socio-economic needs the institution was built to protect and promote and the varied ways in which it is achieved.

Such readings of the caste affiliations of educational institutions shall allow us to move further than mere questions of representation and enables us examine the ways in which educational institutions are serving the interests of particular castes. While one might argue that public educational institutions are, atleast normatively devoid of such caste affiliations, deeper engagements could enable us to unpack the caste affiliations of public institutions too. For instance, in her anthrophological work on the IITs, Ajanta Subramaniam (2019) traces how the upper-caste communities came to claim technical education during the colonial period and handiwork of caste in the establishment of IITs. However, such caste affiliations cannot be attributed to public institutions at all occassions. The IIMs for instance, function as elite islands for management education by consistently flouting reservation policies and has been the bastions of upper castes (Joshi & Malghan 2017) that practice Brahminical pedagogies (Kisana 2025). Historical studies on the establishment of IIMs have highlighted the elitist tendencies in the nationalist movement, the corridors of state and the national and international market forces that were at work during the establishment of these institutions and its subsequent professionalisation (Patel 2024). However, the aspects of caste and its influences on the establishment of IIMs have received scant attention thus far. Yet, Tumbe (2020) argues,

> the IIT system appeared to create an aura of merit, especially in its early days when affirmative action programmes were not in place, because of the relatively easy access of upper-caste Indians to enter the institution using social and caste capital. Evidence on such a caste-based meritocratic view at IIMA is limited for the 1960s, perhaps attributable to the religious diversity among key institutional builders. By the late 1960s, meritocratic norms at IIMA were closely aligned with the ability to pass the admissions test, which had by then started to favor engineers (Tumbe, 2020, p. 194).

Hence, while public universities might share caste affiliations, it has to be unearthed while placing the educational institution at the centre. In the case of public universities there seems to exist a possibility for contesting caste affiliations, unlike in case of private higher educational institutions. Therefore, examination of caste affiliations of higher educational institutions in private sector is of utmost importance. It is especially so, when, unlike most developed economies "where public institutions facilitated universalization of higher education, massification of higher education in India is a market mediated process facilitated mostly through private institutions and financed by the households" (Varghese 2015 , p.1). This expansion of higher education in the country was accompanied by expansion of disparities (Varghese 2015). Even while the higher education sector in the country was undergoing massification and private higher educational institutions gaining prominence, the character of public universities was under-going a massive change.

The extension of reservations to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) as recommended by the Mandal Commission[1] in 1980 and its implementation in higher education during the mid-2000s challenged the notion that public higher educational institutions were a preserve of the upper castes by altering the then existing demographics of these spaces. The Brahminical forces that resisted such a demographic change increasingly resorted to discriminatory acts, including name-calling and shaming students entering higher education through 'quotas', alongside widespread violence and lynchings (Balagopal 1990).

However, aided by the entry of students hailing from OBC communities, students from Dalit and other marginalised communities were able to forge stronger alliances against such discriminatory practices (Pathania 2020). In other words, the counter-revolutionary forces in order to thwart the revolutionary ideal of de-elitising higher educational spaces resorted to discriminate against students hailing from oppressed castes. This called to question the experiences of students in higher educational spaces, leading to a surge in studies that placed the experiences of students from marginalized communities at its centre.

The timely assertions from women from within these communities ensured that such studies also acknowledge multiple axes of discrimination. This led to the emergence of studies that attempted to understand experiences of women from marginalized communities from intersectional lenses (Paik 2009; Renukuntla and Gundemeda 2023). These studies have documented discrimination faced by students on higher educational spaces, the limitations of affirmative action and also pushed for democratisation of the public university spaces by enabling advocacy and on-ground resistances. This paper traces the engagements of organisational studies with race to argue that there is a necessity to shift the focus of studies engaging with caste in higher education to engage with 'organisational' ways in which caste functions. In other words, in-line with the recent shifts in the domain of sociology to engage with structures and institutions at the meso-level (Gumport 2017, p.35), critical caste studies must engage with the issue of caste affiliations of higher educational institutions. While historical studies on various caste groups in India offer critical insights into how specific caste groups navigate educational landscapes (refer for instance, Leonard 2020; Upadhya 2016), their analytical lens remains centered on the continuities and/or changes in the trajectory of the community. Therefore, the functioning of educational institutions receed to the backdrop

serving only as a ‘site’ for community progress or otherwise, rather than as ‘object of organizational inquiry’. On the other hand, most biographies of higher educational institutions fail to go beyond hagiographical sketches, thereby disallowing us to link it with the histories and needs of the communities that promote them. Therefore, the paper argues that studies examining the genesis, social-growth and changes in the social functions of higher educational institutions owned by particular castes would enrich our scholarship by enabling us to foray into an area of scholarship which has, till date, received scant attention: the caste of a higher educational institution. Further, such studies would also allow us to disaggregate the loosely held notion of ‘private’ institutions, allowing us to unpack how educational institutions administered by certain castes have played a central role in the history of their own castes by mediating the binary spheres of ‘systemic’ and ‘individual’; alongside, ‘public’ and ‘private’. Then, studies on inequalities in education will also have to account for the abilities of each caste to administer their own educational institutions thereby adding another aspect for the study of inequality in Indian education. This would also provide for informed debates on state-market relations in education with profound implications for the domain of education policies.

In pursuance of these arguments, the paper in its first section traces the history of engagement of organisational studies with race. This section emphasises the scholarly consensus that underlies the necessity of moving beyond the realm of the ‘individual’ (micro-level) to the ‘organisational’ (meso-level) in order to unpack structural stratifications. The second part of the paper engages with critical caste studies in Indian higher education to highlight that the manifestation of caste has not been subjected to extensive examinations at the organisational levels. The third section engages with the realm of ‘private’ from the standpoint of caste to argue that study of caste-affiliations of higher

education institutions could enable the disaggregation of 'private' and thereby have profound policy implications.

'Holisticity' of organisational studies

Inspired by the advances in sociology of formal organisations and comparative sociology, organisations of higher education as the units of study has historically developed as an important area of enquiry within the discipline of sociology of higher education. In one of the earliest reviews of works on the sociology of higher education, Clark (1973) acknowledges it as a path, though subsidiary, to the then existing dominant streams comprising educational inequalities and the effects of colleges on students. Further, he notes that such studies are built mostly on the conceptual leads provided by organisation theory alongside contributions from social sciences, thereby acknowledging the contributions of organisation studies in higher education (p.8). Since then, organisational studies in higher education, as an area of enquiry, has witnessed considerable attention, with the introduction of several newer models and approaches enriching the domain.

Peterson (2007) outlines a contingency perspective to trace the primary industry and environmental conditions that influenced the emergence of various organisational models. While early models of organisation considered higher educational institutions as closed systems that enjoyed much autonomy, the subsequent models were all open-system models clearly focused on the interaction of higher educational organisations with both, the industry and the larger environments that shaped the industry. Additionally, Peterson also notes that these models had moved away from their earlier focus on specific aspects or dynamics of an organisation to encompass a much broader and holistic perspective of the organisation itself (p.178).

Despite the evolution of the discipline over the decades, it is important to note that the phase between the years 1965-1972 is the only time-period in the history of the discipline wherein, overtly "political" issues like higher educational access to minority and other disadvantaged communities had a considerable influence on the emergence of organisational models including the conceptions of *organisational saga* as proposed by Burton Clark (1973) and the *political model* of organisation of higher education.

With the diversification of American higher education over the next few decades, one would have expected that such models would dominate the domain of organisational studies on higher education. However, with the neo-liberal restructuring of the American higher education system commencing in the 1970s (Giroux, 2005) and as market-principles infiltrated the very environment within which higher educational organisations were expected to function, open-models of organisations also started to manifest these market-driven values. In fact, the very names of organisational models (Market model, Resource Dependence Theory, Techno-managerial, strategic, Matrix and Cybernetic) indicated the dominance of market-driven principles on the then emergent models of organisations thereby marginalising the engagement of organisational studies with issues pertaining to social-economic and cultural justice agendas. Hence, studies on higher education had turned to be 'holistic' models without even engaging with issues pertaining to race, ethnicity and gender.

Such views have also been generally shared by scholars working on organisation theory. For instance, Charles Perrow (1979) notes "Organizational theory could benefit from a hostile perspective; it has been altogether too accommodating to organizations and their power" (Perrow, 1979, cited in Ray, 2019, p. 26). In a paper, Wooten (2006) argued that,

> While paying respect to such racially focused research in the past, I use these works to form the basis of a general critique of our field: we conceptualize race far too

> narrowly. To our field's detriment, we continue to think of race as though it represents a system that has meaning and consequences only for the individual situated in an organization. We have yet to conduct research that seeks to understand race as a complete social structural system that leaves its mark on various levels of analyses." (Wooten, 2006 p.191)

In what can be considered a response to such calls, one witnesses a steady growth in the set of studies that consider race as a central concern of organisational theory, and also particularly within the stream of organisation studies of higher education. For instance, in *A Theory of Racialized Organizations* (2019), building on Sewell's argument that social structures are representative of both – cultural schemas and the mobilisation of resources, Victor Ray proposes a theory of racialised organisations. Nguemeni Tiako, Ray, and South (2022) use this framework to demonstrate how the race-neutral medical schools were racialised organisations which uphold status-quo grounded in racism. In other words, the theory proposed by Ray was utilised to study medical schools, proving its relevance to the study of educational institutions.

In their study on the community colleges, Heather McCambly et.al, (2023) used of Ray's conceptualisation to uncover the racialised processes that are embedded in organisations by examining how efforts to advance equity, justice and inclusion in community colleges are diluted, derailed or delayed. Similarly, the edited volume *Race, Organisations and the Organizing Process* (2019) engages with (dis)embeddedness of race in organisation theory across fields including higher education. Here, Christi Smith develops the theory of racial activation in an attempt to integrate the conceptualisations of Race and Organisation theory in the realm of higher education. In yet another attempt in this line of enquiry, Dian Squire (2016) forwards a framework, bringing together organisational level and actor level analysis which the author termed as Critical Race Institutional Logics Perspective (CRILP).

While the above-mentioned studies provide varying frameworks to engage with race and organisational theories, the emergence of such studies are inherently demonstrative of the scholarly consensus to move beyond the existing understandings of race as operating at the level of the individual to encompass the functioning of organisations on the whole.

In the following section, we engage with three major streams of literature within critical caste studies in higher education to examine the ways in which Caste has been conceptualised so far to argue that, studies that examine the functioning of caste at the meso-level, particularly in 'private' institutions can provide newer insights into the issue.

Studies on Caste in Higher Education

Studies have examined the varied connections of caste with the realm of education, particularly higher education. One of the oldest streams in critical caste studies in education has also proved to be the most poignant of critiques of the manifestation of caste in education. These foundational critiques of caste laid out by anti-caste leaders and intellectuals have emerged at times from their engagement with the realm of education (Phule, 1884; Ambedkar, 1928) and at other times through their broader anti-caste works whose implications for education have been detailed by other scholars and activists. (Velaskar 2012; Rege 2010; Mokashi-Punekar 2023; Tschurenev and Mhasker 2021; Darokar and Bodhi 2022). Building on such foundational texts, a stream of critical caste studies in education, particularly higher education has mostly highlighted caste as a systemic issue. More often than not, such studies have recorded and used the differences in achievements of students hailing from Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Other Backward Class communities vis-à-vis the upper castes to highlight the issue. Such studies conducted from time to time have attributed the differences in achievements between communities on widely

accepted quantitative indicators like Gross Enrolment Rate (GER), Net Enrolment Rate (NER), Drop-Out Rates, share of various communities amongst teaching and non-teaching staff amongst others, to caste, thereby treating caste as a systemic issue with implications for education and thereby advancement of lowly placed castes (Varghese, Sabharwal, and Malish 2019; Goswami 2022).

The second set of critical caste studies in higher education can be traced to the period post the 1990s wherein the Mandal commission recommendations to extend reservations to Other Backward Classes was sought to be implemented. Hence emerged a set of debates on affirmative actions and reservations, including: the basis for reservations (Ghosh 2006);its limitations (Mehta 2009); alongside critiques of 'Merit' and 'efficiency' (Ilaiah 1990; Chalam 1990) and the ways in which Dalit students to resist, cope and navigate their ways through environments that devalue their identities (Lum, 2019).

The changes in the demography of Indian university spaces sparked by the implementation of the recommendations put-forth by the Mandal commission and the ensuing backlash from upper-caste communities to the growing assertion of Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi and Minority students raised fundamental questions pertaining to inclusion and equity in higher educational spaces, over and beyond the then existing debates surrounding reservations. These assertions from Dalit-Bahujan students community to claim their rightful place in academia was met with violence and hostility as India witnessed 23 Dalit students commiting suicide between the years 2008 and 2016 owing to caste discrimination (Sukumar 2023). Protests and resistances ensued in university spaces across India (Pathania 2020; Chnige 2021). These contestations in higher educational spaces led to the emergence of a set of studies that documented and examined the hostile, discriminatory and exclusionary everyday experiences of students in higher educational spaces: ranging from classrooms (Kumar, 2023; Ovichegan, 2015 and Chalam, 2007); hostel experiences (Suresh Babu 2020);

to anti-reservation discourses and hostile peer interactions labelling students entering higher education through ‘quota’ as non-meritorious (Pathania et al. 2023); to the discriminatory attitudes of teachers’ and administrators (Chalam 2007; Kumar 2023).

Bagesh (2021) notes how scholars have used different theoretical frameworks to study the prevalence of caste in higher educational spaces. While ‘Discrimination’ and ‘Disadvantage’ framework upacks the patterns of exclusion through the experiences of Dalit students after they enter higher educational spaces (Deshpande and Zacharias 2013), Ovichegan (2015) builds on the everyday experiences of discrimination faced not just by Dalit male and female students, but also by faculty members in an elite university to argue that though the reservation policies proves to be a vital step, their impact is severly constrained in the higher educational eco-system that is disabling Dalits at every instance, thereby necessitating improvement in the legislations and its implementation for furtherance of social justice ideals (Ovichegan 2015). In her seminal work, Subramanian (2015), critiques the ideas of ‘merit’ by building on Bourdieu’s social and cultural capital framework to argue that contemporary ‘merit’ flows from the historical privileges usurped by the upper-castes and through her study undertaken at an Indian Institute of Technology, the premier-tier of Engineering instituions in the country (Subramanian 2015).

In addition to such studies, several reports too have documented the prevalence of ‘institutionalised casteism’ across universities and colleges in India (Kumar 2006; Thorat, Shyamaprasad, and Srivastava 2007; Raju, Shastri, and Banyal 2017; Report of the Committee Appointed to Inquire into the Circumstances Leading to the Demise of Mr. M Venkatesh, Ph.D. Scholar, ACRHEM” 2013; Sukumar, 2023).

These studies critically examine how traditional power structures and exclusionary norms—often rooted in caste-based hierarchies —persist within academic institutions. By identifying these biases, such research empowers marginalized groups to challenge elitism and advocate for more inclusive policies. Ultimately, this shift transforms the university from a space of inherited privilege into a more equitable environment where diverse voices and knowledge systems can thrive. In other words, such studies problematise the deep-rooted Brahminical practices and enable resistances, and hence, have played an important role in the democratisation of the university spaces. Some such studies also have problematised the very roots of certain higher educational spaces (Shobhana 2016; Bhattacharya 2019). However, it must be noted that such studies that highlight the prevalence of caste in higher educational spaces by documenting 'institutionalised casteism', fail to shed light on how the caste identity of the institution impacts the way the institution functions. Hence, they fall short of spilling light on how the caste identity of the institution itself can impact the various manifestations of institutionalised casteism. Therefore, caste as experienced by an individual is often understood to have been handed to them straight-down, from being a systemic issue.

In other words, while studies thus far have framed higher educational institutions as a 'space of caste contestations', they inadvertently downplay the active ways in which higher educational institutions also work as 'active agents' in shaping the dynamic process of caste contestations influenced by the very specific characters of an institution. This disallows us from examining how a wide-range of higher educational organisations with caste-affiliations mediates, exacerbates, curtails or (de)legitimises caste and casteist discourses. The importance of attempts to unpack these processes cannot be emphasised enough in the Indian context whose higher education system, far from being homogenous, is an outcome of multiple actors and their interests over centuries,

thereby warranting an examination of the role of caste and its linkages with the 'private' educational institutions.

Caste and the 'Private' Institutions in India

In India, higher educational institutions, or even more broadly, educational institutions are for the purposes of administrative convenience grouped under three main categories: government; government – aided; and private institutions. Amongst scholars of education and the general public, such categorisations have enabled public discussions on the nature of engagement of both – the state and the market in the education sector. Despite being a tall claim at the outset, it needs to be stated that these categories conceal much more than they can ever reveal. Today, the Indian higher education system, arguably the world's largest highest education system, encompasses 1168 universities and over 42825 colleges ("All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-22" 2023). In addition to this horizontal diversity, recent studies also point to the acceleration of vertical stratification within the system adding to the complexities (Singh 2007). However, the categorisation of higher educational institutions on lines of 'public' and 'private' have long-dominated the debates on education in India, as is the case elsewhere (Agarwal 2006; Tilak 2008; Marginson 2007; Kumar 2015).

In an important work that illuminates the limitations of such categorisations in the Indian context, Manish Jain (2018) demonstrates that such a categorisation "assumes that these categories have a singular and unchanging meaning, are mutually exclusive binaries with strong boundaries and have no internal plurality" (p. 31). Therefore, moving beyond these categorisations of 'private' educational institutions, he identified five major trends which have led to the establishment of private educational institutions by Indians. Further, he undertakes a politico-historical interrogation of the categories 'public' and

'private' to challenge the narrow 'economistic' framework with a near-exclusive focus on funding, ownership and management. He notes,

> contradictory[ly], usage of the 'public' in the private school context and inter-mixing of the languages of public good and community interest in the discourse of/on private schools underlines that the motives of profitability and market logics of efficiency in monetary terms are insufficient to capture and explain the variety of reasons that guide the emergence and operation of the private. This historical examination of the private stresses the need to disaggregate the private and to recognise that the private exhibits a range of characteristics. It serves different aims of education and the logic of profit and community boundedness may both inform and obfuscate these aims (Manish Jain, 2018, p.60)

Further, he calls for examining the objectives behind establishment of different private institutions and developing thick descriptions, to be able to "develop a disaggregated and complex picture of the ways in which the private schools continue to operate within or shed the bounded communities from which they originate" (p.61). Therefore, it is clear that there exists a necessity to disaggregate the 'private'. Jain has also indicated that 'thick descriptions' of the everyday functioning, school processes and its connections with the 'local' can be one of the methods that can be utilised to accomplish such a task. Implicit in this call for providing 'thick descriptions' is the focus on organisations as a unit of study. Hence, there lies an underlying need to undertake studies focussing on organisations providing educational services and its relation to caste to conceptualise private institutions over and beyond the binaries of 'public' and 'private'. While some might argue against such studies for they view markets as open and democratic spaces where people from any caste background can succeed in establishing their own educational institutions, thereby being a level playing field. However, Madan and Halbarg (1972) point to the problems in such understandings when they argue,

> The argument that equality of opportunity is guaranteed by the freedom which all communities enjoy to run their own educational institutions is fallacious. First, only the economically powerful or culturally advanced communities seem to be able to operate effectively as managers of educational institutions. Second, the activity of many communities in fostering particularistic values and communal attitudes, and in practicing discrimination within their institutions, does not improve the situation but actually worsens it. Third, the fact that government foots most of the bill for both public and private institutions makes this a problem of public policy as well as of private initiative. (Madan and Halbarg, 1972, p.137)

In other words, the multiplicity of meanings attached to the categories of 'public' and 'private' and the growth of private educational institutions needs to be understood in relation to caste hierarchies and its contestations. In fact, caste and its contestation is one of the axes that not just illuminates the public and private debate but also has important implications for public policy.

Considering the state of Karnataka as a case in point, it can be noted that leaders, politicians and various caste associations and mathas have all established their own educational institutions. Each caste has its own share of educational institutions. It is important here to note that such a phenomenon is in no means limited to the state of Karnataka but extends to almost all other states. While the exact number of caste-affiliated higher educational instituions isn't available as the state does not enumerate them, the pattern of a large set of higher eduational institutions sharing affiliations to particular communities extends across the state. Writing about the phenomenon as early as 1970s, Rudolph and Rudolph noted that,

> "Of 139 colleges in Punjab University, 43 were identifiable as being associated with organised caste or sectarian communities. Of these, 10 were associated with castes, notably peasant communities such as the Jats and Ahirs... Of the 127 colleges in Agra University, 36 could be associated with a caste or sect.Thirteen were founded by caste communities...In Kerala the pattern shifts, reflecting the characteristic of social segmentation of that state, in which Christians, mobile lower caste Ezhavas, dominant

> caste Nairs and Muslims almost exhaust the social sprecturm. In the University of Kerala, 42 of 89 colleges can be associated with one or another of those communities: 28 Christian colleges, 5 Ezhava colleges; and 4 Muslim colleges" (Rudolph and Rudolph 1972, p.22).

In the case of Kerala for instance, Professor M Kunhaman, a professor who rose from the shackles of untouchability and extreme poverty to serve as a member of the University Grants Commission (higher education regulatory authority in India), in his autobiography notes more than once how caste-affiliated institutions control the entire functioning of the sector in his home-state. He noted,

> In Kerala, Higher Education Institutions are under N.S.S [Nair Service Society], S.N.D.P[Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam], Muslim organisations and Christian Sabhas. Vice-Chancellors come from these four social categories. It is these forces which control the academic field and not educational experts or political leaders." (Kunhaman, 2023, p.55-56)

Similar to names being markers of an individual's caste identity, more often than not, the names of colleges and universities also reveal their caste affiliations. In fact, the decisions to change the names of colleges and universities are more often than not based on caste considerations (Assadi 2018; Nandakumar 2017).

It must, however be noted that the discourses on community-affiliations of organisations of higher education have mostly been dominated by the discussions on the rights of religious and linguistic minority communities to administer educational institutions that have been guaranteed under Article 30 of the Indian Constitution (for instance, Ranu Jain 2005; Kothari and Ravi 2016; Saeed 2016; Rao 2008). Since the rights of the religious and linguistic minority communities is protected under the Indian Constitution, institutions with religious and linguistic affiliations they have been identified and enumerated by

the state and has also received considerable scholarly attention (Mahmood 2007; Reddy 2017; "Committee on the Establishment of Educational Institutions for Educationally Backward Minorities" 2017). However, despite many higher educational institutions sharing caste affiliations, they have remained rather 'invisible' in scholarly discourses despite a few studies bringing to light the various ways in which they have garnered a larger public influence, including its influence on politics (Kaul 1993; Narain 1972; Gould 1972). Hence, an important question that scholars must engage with is: Why aren't educational institutions enumerated on the basis of their caste-affiliations by the state? What effects would such enumerations have on the domain of public policy, especially, with regard to regulation of the educational markets by the state? These questions compel us to engage with at least three sets of questions.

The first set of questions pertain to the identification of colleges with caste-affiliations. This set of questions warrant a discussion about the parameters that must be used to identify a caste-affiliated higher educational institution. In their work, Rudolph and Rudolph (1972) determine the sectarian or caste community affiliation of colleges by inspecting the names of colleges. While they note that this might be a ready method that highlights a rough pattern of ownership of colleges by certain castes or sects, they note that such a method "undoubtedly understates the number of institutions that have such affiliations" (Rudolph and Rudolph 1972, p. 383). While higher educational institutions maybe enumerated on the caste-affiliation of the sponsoring bodies, it remains contested as to how an educational institution sponsored by societies or trusts regisedtered under the laws be enumerated. Such questions shall haunt more so, in case of takeover of educational institutions or when such societies or trusts lays claim for 'secularity'.

While a mechanism could be worked out for self-identification by institutions, Ramakrishna Mission's claim to be a minority community and hence, its

institutions be provided with special rights accorded to minority institutions demostrates the complexities involved with 'self-identification' (Mukherjee 2012).

Secondly, we shall have to engage with the ways in which the identities of caste-affiliated colleges are enmeshed with continiuties and/or changes in the identity of the sponsoring caste. As stated earlier, while there exist studies that trace the nature of investments made by various caste groups in education (for instance, Chitra 1972; Fuller 2011; Kumar 2019; Tschurenev and Mhaskar 2023), scholarship that examine how the operational realities of caste-affiliated colleges influence the persistence or evolution of the sponsoring community's identity remains scant. In other words, we must move beyond looking at these institutions as mere assets and instead examine how they serve as sites where the sponsoring caste's identity is continually renegotiated.

Finally, we shall also have to engage with questions pertaining to the ways in which caste-identity of a college shall affect its day-to-day administration and functioning. This is of importance if one were to articulate how sectarian and caste interests is intervowen with the domain of higher education deemed to be 'secular', thereby allowing for unpack the various ways in which it affects the performance of colleges – including its ability to raise resources and garner good-will enabling us to explore if colleges affiliated to higher castes tend to perform better. Alongside, it would also enable us to understand the differential impact of caste-affiliations of colleges on various stakeholders hailing from the community sponsoring the college and otherwise thereby enabling us to unpack pertinent questions that lie at the intersections of an identity of the institution and that of the experience of an individual including students' choices of college, courses, experiences of discrimination amongst others.

Dalit initiatives in education

Tracing the historiography of education in India, Bagchi (2014) argues that with the rise of alternative histories of education in India focused on the educational issues of Dalits and other lower castes (see for instance, Bhattacharya 2002; Kumar 2019; Tschurenev and Mhaskar 2023; Velaskar 2012 and Zelliot 2014), Indian histories of education moved away from both – its tendencies to examine the unequal and hierarchised growth of education of western education and also Gandhi's patronising views of uplifting lower castes by articulating the experiences and struggles of Dalit leaders, thereby construing them as agentic actors. While a detailed discussion on the Dalit initiatives in education embedded in varied historical, linguistic and regional contexts is beyond the scope of this article two specific studies are of particular significance to our current analysis as they highlight and inform the nature of Dalit initiatives in education.

Laura Dudley Jenkins (2016) draws on the insights from mergers of Historically Black Colleges and University (HBCUs) with White Institutions to engage with the question of whether Dalit colleges must be merged with other institutions. The author notes,

> A final important lesson from India's historically Dalit colleges is that these were not conceived to be separate institutions (implying exclusion), but rather, distinct institutions, which any student is welcome to attend. Today, these colleges educate students from a variety of social backgrounds, while continuing to promote their original goal of educating those with little access to higher education. (Jenkins, 2016, p. 89)

In an illuminating essay, Zelliot (2014) arrives at a few characteristics that could be dubbed as benchmarks of such Dalit initiatives in education including: that such efforts were, in most cases, born out of an individual's initiative with some aid from support from other castes, mostly non-Brahmins. The Dalit leaders

who strove for providing education enjoyed a minimal level of economic freedom from traditional occupations enabled these initiatives. However, most important was that such initiatives emphasised self-respect and instilled a sense of pride. Further, she notes that such initiatives were catering to a need which was not met by reform efforts led by the Christian missionaries (Zelliot 2014).

In other words, both Zelliot and Jenkins argue that Dalit educational initiatives were catering to a distinctive need which raises a very fundamental question. What was the 'distinctive' need that colleges other than 'historically Dalit colleges' did not cater to, leading to the establishment of Dalit colleges? What is it that incapacitates non-Dalit colleges from catering to this distinctive need? Or simply put, what is it that makes a historically Dalit College distinct from a Brahmin college or a Lingayat Or Vokkaliga or Kuruba college or colleges with any other caste-affiliations?

While one could attribute this distinctiveness to the composition of people in the college, such answers fail to answer the question: Do colleges with similar compositions function similarly? Since we know that it is not the case, we could attribute it to how the genesis, structures, mediations and processes of the organisation itself is embedded in caste and the differences therein. Such an empirically rooted understanding urges us to undertake caste studies not only at the micro-level focused on its potential to impact individual outcomes, but also at the meso-levels where organisations and its interactions with both macro-level systemic issues and micro-level experiences of individuals are considered as a unit of study. This would allow us to deconstruct whether higher educational institutions have instilled dignity and self-respect.

Conclusion

While literature has for long identified caste as a systemic issue within Indian higher education, in more recent times individual experiences of caste has also

been acknowledged. However, a critical gap remains in that a direct and top-down transmission of macro-level systemic casteism to the micro-level is assumed, thereby overlooking the critical mediating role played by higher educational institutions at the meso-level. Such an omission fails to capture the many ways in which caste identity and affiliations of higher educational institutions have a bearing on the very foundation and functioning of these institutions.

Drawing parallels with the engagement of organisational studies with race, the paper argues for the adoption of organisational perspectives to enrich future scholarship on caste in Indian higher education. Such an approach can offer a robust framework to unpack the caste affiliations of higher educational institutions. An examination of the caste affiliation of higher educational institutions would enable us to disaggregate the all-encompassing catchword 'private' which could have profound policy implications. In otherwords, future scholarship must engage more rigorously with how the operational realities of caste-affiliated colleges influence the persistence or evolution of the sponsoring community's identity. Such an approach could add yet another dimension for the study of caste inequalities in higher education.

Endnote

In India, reservations was originally provided for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The Mandal Commission or the Second Backward Classes Commission (1979), was established by the Government of India to identify "socially and educationally backward classes" and recommend measures for their advancement. Its landmark report of 1980 identified 3,743 castes comprising roughly 52% of the population and recommended the extension of reservations for the communities who came to be known as Other Backward Classes. Pertaining to higher education, the Commission's primary recommendation was the implementation of a 27% quota (reservation) for OBC candidates in all state-run and state-aided universities and professional institutions. While reservations in jobs were implemented in 1990, the extension of these quotas to central higher education institutions was codified

later via the **Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Admission) Act, 2006**, significantly altering the demographic composition of Indian academia. Pages of *Economic and Political Weekly*'s special issue dated 17 June 2006, Issue No.24, Vol. 41 more details on the same.

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