**The Production of Castelessness in Postcolonial India**

**The Invisibility-hypervisibility Conundrum**

Background discussions:

1. Talking about masculinity to understand the production of women’s subjection to patriarchal norms (topic 1)
2. The Nationalist resolutions of the caste question: social reforms and the slow but steady growth of the sentiment that ‘caste should go’ (see Deshpande 2013 for a discussion on Gandhi and Ambedkar. We have already encountered Tagore’s views on this in ‘Nationalism in India’)

Deshpande’s argument:

The Constitution of the new Republic embodies a tension: ‘The central tension is between, on the one hand, the need to “abolish” – or at least to delegitimise – caste as an institution that affects all citizens; and, on the other, the commitment to redress the disabilities of caste imposed on one section of citizens, namely the lower castes. These conflicting demands – requiring in the first case that caste be derecognised, and in the second case that it be recognised’ (2013:36).

The Constitution makes it illegal to talk about caste as a source of privilege or an advantage for a certain group of people. Rather, it creates rooms for the assertion of caste identity as only a means to address disadvantage or dis-privilege, to those who wish to claim justice for the wrongs that historically caste has done to them. In other words, the Constitution forces them to wear their caste on their sleeves. What then does the Constitution allow the upper castes? Deshpande argues that the Constitution allows them the gift of anonymity—they are the only ones who can claim that the evil of caste system has been or is soon to be abolished with the course of development, urbanization, modernization and the expansion of capitalist market: ‘This effectively means that regardless of the extent of their past or present privileges, their caste identity can never be used directly to prohibit or limit access to any public resource. In other words, the upper castes cannot be prevented from cornering a disproportionate share – or even all – of a public resource because they belong to caste A or B; their share can be limited only by setting aside portions exclusively marked for castes X and Y’ (2013: 36).

Thus, the Constitution allows them to thrive on an infrastructure of intergenerationally accumulated privilege, standing on which, I can say ‘I am where I am because of my merit. I am not demanding any handouts of welfare and hence I don’t want reservation’. What I don’t wish to say or even think is the fact that my reservation has already worked to convert my caste capital into modern capital of merit, property and an edge in the competitive market. Therefore, imposing a system of formal equality on a reality which is deeply unequal is one of the most unjust things one can do, for, it perpetuates and furthers the gap between the privileged and the underprivileged. [here, the norm is castelessness and the exception is quota/reservation]. Standing on this ground, the upper caste folks may say, ‘let’s have free competition of merit’. The other side which is so acutely aware of their accumulated disadvantages that they have no other option but to shout out their caste to try and get some government benefits. Thus, the politics of caste after Independence thrives on two interconnected registers: invisibility of ascriptive privilege and hyper-visibility of quota. Merit plays a central role in conceptualizing this scheme. Now, [following a lecture of Deshpande at National Law School at Bangalore in 2014] I will show how merit is constructed and propagated in Higher Education Institutions.

The Production of Merit

Higher education is the best and the most legitimate means and also the bloodless means of equalizing. On the other hand, [and that’s where the paradox lies] higher education is the best means to maintain the status quo of the existing ascriptive/inherited hierarchies. It happens in ways familiar to all of us though we do not often speak them up in public. It happens if you open the access to higher education to all in theory, and restrict it to the old elite/historically privileged social groups in practice. If you work this out in such a way, you can ensure a peaceful conversion of your inherited privilege to the merit-based privilege. Having gone through this process, one can say, now I’m there where I’m [not because of my caste, but because of my sheer merit], and you are there where your merit permits you to be. And then, it is not just a matter of pure coincidence that the largest pool of meritorious students comes from a certain social group with very distinct caste privileges. So, this is a modernization, and hence a rather strengthening of caste privilege, because, you have successfully converted caste privilege into merit privilege by ensuring that in theory there is equality of opportunity in the educational system. When you convert caste privilege into merit privilege, you conform to the dominant ideology of our time that thrives around meritocracy. Given that higher education occupies this critical space, and that therefore we really need to be sensitive to the forms of discrimination in this sector, we come to the final leg of our journey and that is to ask how does discrimination work and affect ourselves in higher education institutions? In India, we do this in a variety of ways, and please remember that the Indian scenario presents a number of peculiarities. We can call this higher education sector a distorted credential market [Deshpande mentioned this in his lecture]. Normal markets are supposed to drive out substandard producers. In higher education, we have a rather peculiar situation in which institutions known to be producing substandard services, i.e., higher education institutions offering little or no training, nevertheless flourish. How does that happen? They flourish because the real requirements from such institutions is a legal credential and not competence. The former is required for the transmission of privilege, prosperity from across generations. Suppose, I’m a doctor with a very well-established practice and I wish to pass this onto my son or daughter. My child needs a legal document to practice that profession, and I am confident that I will be able to teach her/him the real craft of my profession. So, here, I am willing to partner with a poor service provider in order that my specific requirements are catered to. This is what we mean by a distorted credential market, for the need is really for a credential and not for the competence. I am confident that I will be able to protect the next generation from the evils arising out of a broken institutional structure. Therefore, even though we have a tremendous expansion of higher education institutions, the evil continues. A few recent figures will illustrate our next point. You may note, the expansion of higher education is mind boggling in our country between 1991 and 2014-15. The enrolment increased by 6.5 times, the number of institutions increased by 4 times, the gross enrolment ratio has gone up 3 times from 8 percent to 24 percent during these years and now, the number students in higher education exceeded 3.23 crore, which is the size of the population of Australia.

It should be good news. Without reservation and the Mandal, I don’t think this was at all possible. However, there are some aspects of great concern in this spectacular growth. This expansion is also accompanied by privatization of education and by a distortion of a distribution of disciplines and subjects for some obvious reasons. Easily encashable disciplines and subjects and professional colleges have expanded the most and privatization has led to high costs of education. In short then, despite a welcome and necessary expansion of higher education, it does not follow that equality of opportunity has been achieved. Today, 65 percent of all enrolment happens in private institutions where reservation of any sort is a very distant dream. Therefore, we come back to the question of discrimination. So, how does discrimination work in higher education institutions? To answer this question, we need to track the worldview in which ideas of discrimination are fitted. In a meritocratic society, we think of discrimination as an exception. We assume, the default setting of society is meritocratic and we think of discrimination as an aberration, as an exceptional behaviour. However, in actual fact in societies around the world it is the opposite, for privilege begets privilege and gets asymmetrically distributed along the pre-existing social hierarchies. There are eminent reasons why privilege is very hard to prevent. We now consider the real assumption, i.e. the default setting of society is that it is not in favour of equality of opportunity and that therefore the institutions such as ours is to get a sense of being active rather than passive. Why? Because, if you adopt the other view, the dominant view that thinks of discrimination as the exception, then it becomes possible for an institution to reproduce inequality at an expanded scale. But, if we are alert about the fact that discrimination is a rule then we have the reason to do something. Now, how do we measure merit? We are certainly confused about the measurement of merit. We typically try to measure merit in terms of the rank in an exam. When it is an entrance test, we inevitably trap ourselves in a confusion/slippage as to whether we measure eligibility (the minimum required level of competence) or excellence. The rank on the other hand is destined to produce a graded hierarchy. Arguably, that hierarchy is about to selecting the best for admission. But, why do we need only the best and not the eligible at the entry level? Here again, we tend to confuse between a rationing logic and an excellence logic. What is an educational institution for? An educational institution is to train you, is to make you perfect for survival. If so, what hinders a competent fellow to get into a centre for excellence? This becomes stressful if we have just a handful of good institutions with limited intake capacity. You then need a socially legitimate ground to shut your gate beyond a threshold. The elimination test helps us accomplish this particular task. Thus, the so-called excellent institutes are surrounded by ill-equipped colleges to cater to the eligible ones who missed an entry in special educational institutions. The gap expands and reproduces hierarchy. In my view, selection criteria for institutes of much scholarly credentials should be much more eclectic, involving the issues of historic deprivation along with merit. Remember, [if you are called meritorious], only a fraction of it comes from your genetic inheritance. The idea of merit is influenced by your social location and of course to the mentality and expectations of those who after all find you meritorious and pat on your back. Once you find out people who recognize you as someone possessing merit, you tend to stick to that group forever. You develop an inertia to go out and seek recognition elsewhere, in another field. This is how, academics like me create clubs around ourselves—a club of people who represent similar social experience of privilege. Also remember, discrimination does not require bad people. Often, the most well-intentioned people contribute to discrimination and the merit of discrimination is that it is often not seen as discrimination. Much of the times discrimination works because it is not seen as discrimination. The most durable forms of discrimination are in fact practiced by the most well-intentioned people, because they are not aware of the fact that this is discrimination. True education makers you aware of your inheritance and asks you to live with a difference.

**Some IISER Mohali Data in Tabular Form:**

Table 1: Caste-wise break-up of IISER Mohali students (2007-17):



Table 2: Caste and admission channel wise break-up (why scrapping SEB channel might reduce diversity)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **2010** | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** |
| **General** | **SCB** | 66.66 | 65.11 | 62.71 | 77.58 | 61.72 | 71.42 |
|  | **IIT-JEE** | 25 | 23.25 | 13.55 | 15.51 | 25.92 | 13.98 |
|  | **KVPY** | 8.33 | 9.3 | 5.08 | 6.89 | 12.34 | 14.28 |
| **OBC** | **SCB** | 97.77 | 100 | 74.19 | 90 | 72.91 | 100 |
|  | **IIT-JEE** | 2.19 | 0 | 16.12 | 10 | 29.16 | 0 |
|  | **KVPY** | 0 | 0 | 6.45 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **SC** | **SCB** | 85.71 | 100 | 87.5 | 60 | 75.86 | 79.16 |
|  | **IIT-JEE** | 14.29 | 0 | 12.5 | 35 | 24.13 | 16.66 |
|  | **KVPY** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 4.16 |
| **ST** | **SCB** | 100 | 100 | 66.66 | 100 | 83.33 | 90 |
|  | **IIT-JEE** | 0 | 0 | 33.33 | 0 | 16.66 | 0 |
|  | **KVPY** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 10 |

A request: Please treat this lecture-note as an invitation to you to share your anecdotes/feeling and reflections about caste in higher education. Please send letters to the community. If you want to be anonymous, please write only to me and I will anonymise your identity and share the same with the 2018 community.