

Dominant Bodies and Their Ethical Performances

Violence of Caste Embodiment in Higher Educational Institutions

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The everyday normalised brutality that dominant upper-caste bodies seem to inflict on Dalit Bahujans in elite higher educational institutions is addressed in this article. The reproduction of everyday institutional embodiment displays a direction and an intensity that allow dominant bodies to realise their undiminished being. This direction and intensity are supposedly expressed through the arts of living of the upper castes, namely the domains of cellular, intellectual, and social reproduction.

The case of Payal Tadvi,¹ a Muslim tribal postgraduate medical student, who committed suicide in May 2019 allegedly due to caste harassment by upper-caste colleagues, joins the long series of complaints against institutional indifference of elite higher educational institutions (HEIs). The conscious hatred of the upper castes and their resentment towards affirmative policies that allowed marginalised students to access the sacred portal of HEIs cannot adequately explain their normalised brutality towards Dalit Bahujans.

The normal escapes attention and the lack of institutional care remains unaddressed. Paradoxically, this lack of institutional care towards Dalit Bahujans means that institutions are fine-tuned to the hegemonic needs of the cultural elite and do not act neutrally towards its various constituents. This purportedly appears to be the hostile structure of HEIs and this structure has to be reproduced on a day-to-day basis. From being slighted for their awkwardness of being and sloppiness of thinking, to being constantly reminded that they lack proficiency in the imperial cultural possession—the (English) language of propriety and legitimate material acquisition—the structure of HEIs is exclusionary to the core. The testimonies of fellow Dalit Bahujans in other professional fields, which followed Payal Tadvi's incident in the popular media, express the internalisation of this corrosive structure—an internalisation that eats into the vitals of a decent and dignified existence.

One's allegiance towards one's caste means that it is more intimate than loyalties towards one's professions,

friendships, or even conjugal relations. It is about one's body as being more intimate than one's cerebral apparatus. How does one study the carnal nature of intimate relations founded on one's caste identity, especially among upper-castes working in elite HEIs? Intimacies, warmth and intensities that are needed to bond these upper-caste allegiances form the flesh and blood of elite HEIs. They come before individual making and institutional re-embodiment.

It is not the merely identity-less individual who embodies HEIs, but caste-embodied individuals who provide the skin for these institutions. It is through the pores of this skin that they can sniff and snuff out the perceived odour of the Dalit Bahujans and not necessarily through rational procedures and processes of estrangement of the marginalised. More importantly, how this intimacy is expressed through the arts of living of the upper-caste community—that is, cellular (choice of food intake), intellectual (styles of thinking) and social reproduction (courtships, festivals and choices of colleagues who are invited home)—need to be paid attention to. These techniques of living provide the intensity of affinity towards the upper-caste identity and community, and this identity appears to undergird the institutional care, ethos and telos of HEIs.

It is in this sense that the caste virus that afflicts educational institutions seems to be grounded in material caste practices that go beyond calculable intentions of elites to hurt, insult or humiliate Dalit Bahujans. Material practices refer to techniques that are inclusive of styles of thinking as well as doing and making of upper-caste normalised brutality on an everyday basis. I would like to surmise that caste is produced through specific techniques that are related to "Brahminic sense" making process within HEIs. The suffix "sense" does not point solely to sensory faculty that registers information, but it refers to sensing or making sense of the world. It is laden with energy and direction.

The term Brahminic sense registers thought and practice in a manner that

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refuses to see them separately and instead views them only in relation to each other. What menu is served in the canteen should have a necessary, if not sufficient, relation to what is read and taught in the classroom. Eating habits are suggestive of pre-reflective experiences of the body, whereas the classroom denotes a space of reflective mood that has already established the distinction between subject and object. Caste is a kind of social that we carry with us prior to any objectification of ourselves as individual entities/beings.

The habitus of elite HEIs encompasses an orientation towards both “perception” and “practice”—an orientation that is suggestive of caste supremacy. When we say that, “this is a Brahmin institution,” what we mean is that it is not merely an object of thought, but of (imperceptible) practices too whose effects on the Dalit Bahujan’s moral, psychic, social and spiritual health can be devastating. In such a cultural imagination, Dalit Bahujans are things that lack the capacity to shine and they are constitutive of matter that is devoid of immanent power and vitality. At their best, they may form the vestigial organs of HEIs, a distasteful and (un)avoidable historical and cultural baggage.

Dominant Narrative

Elite HEIs are modern castles designed and built by upper castes for upper castes to do, to be, and to expand their being. For them, it is not merely the space of the actual to merely exist, but the space of the possible and realisable. The cultural elites have rarely been constrained by the role that is legislatively or bureaucratically assigned. For decades, elite central universities, Indian Institutes of Technology and sought-after scientific establishments like the Indian Institute of Science and Tata Institute of Fundamental Research have rarely responded positively to questions of plurality or diversity. An emphasis on “reservation” has been treated as lesser peoples’ moral agenda. On the other hand, the transgression of these spaces by the marginal presence of Dalit Bahujans is considered as a violation of their cultural space.

According to elite folklore, Dalit Bahujans do not have a clue on how to inhabit,

cultivate and socialise their mind, self and community gracefully in these spaces. Affirmative policies only allow Dalit Bahujans to inhabit the formally assigned space, but not the culturally cultivated space which is supposedly soil-rich. Their representational claim is mocked at because elites assume that they are yet to make a substantial claim over these spaces because of the lack of cultural embeddedness. Ironically, this formally assigned space is never easily made available for Dalit Bahujans to intensely inhabit. The gatekeeping of these castles is too subtle and nuanced for Dalit Bahujans to easily gatecrash into the inner recess of these aesthetically-driven architectural spaces.

Right now, the issue has more to do with Dalit Bahujans becoming gradually visible in the corridors of these castles. In other words, the representational inclusion of Dalit Bahujans in itself poses a problem. The word “corridor” is used to signify the lesser people who are seen walking through these passages that lead to private rooms where the cultural aristocracy sits and cogitates. What kind of grooming is necessary to aesthetically inhabit these private spaces vis-à-vis the corridors of these institutions? There are too many mirrors in the corridor, and the Dalit Bahujans get hassled over the different resolutions, corruptions and distortions that these mirrors produce of themselves.

In my reckoning, Dalit Bahujans walking in the corridor of these castles have caused serious discomfort for the upper castes and have led to a backlash, resulting in the tragic loss of the Rohith Vemulas, Anithas, Payal Tadvis, Muthukrishnans² and others. While all the current action is on restricting the appearance of the Dalit Bahujans ambulating in the corridors without appropriate cultural equipment, the desire of the upper castes is to curb the imagination of Dalit Bahujans to experience themselves as rightful inhabitants of these castles, namely the entitlement to cultural wealth and a potential corruption of the caste order. The logical revolt that ought to inform modern HEIs cannot take place in these structures, as there is a deep antagonism between the architecture of castles

(places where caste thrives) and democratic forms of living.

In the neo-liberal era, there is a withering of inclusionary policies, and public educational institutions are becoming less sensitive to questions of diversity in recruiting students or faculty from disadvantaged backgrounds. In other words, HEIs are being allowed to become more exclusionary through public policies, whereas during the Mandal³ period, HEIs were forcibly opened to a larger swathe of the population. But, the external force exercised through the Mandal Commission did not have internal compliance, and the exclusionary character of institutions was only cosmetically tweaked to acquire resources rather than radically change the social composition of HEIs. In other words, the castles are ever more exquisitely designed for the vaporisation of the marginal representation of Dalit Bahujans in the corridors of these newly constructed plush and affluent habitations. Private universities will preserve and defend the caste order in all its distinguished eloquence and exuberant opacity and promote it as a place for the pursuit of excellence and undiminished being.

Discrimination and Elite HEIs

This intervention takes the view that contemporary institutions in post-independence India do practise caste, and practising caste is tantamount to practising discrimination. But, these institutions are not completely closed and they do allow moments of self-scrutiny and legislative or coercive accommodation. The latter has received some scholarly attention, but the focus is on the possible open-endedness of HEIs to engage with the question of iterability of caste in the different historical and political settings in the last 70 years.

Modern schools and universities were introduced during the colonial rule. Historically, the colonial establishment did not disturb the entry of upper castes (its other name is nationalism) and the caste order into the nascent institutions they brought to the Indian subcontinent. Paradoxically, colonial rule (also) seemed to have inspired struggles from the lower castes for constituting an open society

through the establishment of these modern cultural institutions. However, differences were reined in, and unity was forged across the graded hierarchy from the late 19th century onwards.

Discrimination in the HEIs refers to students or faculty or support staff being unfairly treated on the grounds of class, caste, gender, sexual orientation, religion, region or other forms of identities. This work attempts to focus on how HEIs have the disposition to discriminate based on caste-based identities, especially students belonging to Dalit and other lower caste communities loosely known as Dalit Bahujans. Further, it situates this institutional disposition within a kind of Brahminic sense-making, where the act of thinking is devoid of care, concern or love for the other, “the other” to be read as Dalit Bahujans or even a sensuous desire for knowledge in itself.

According to A K Ramanujan (1989), modern thinking is supposedly context-free and is not mediated by tradition. Perhaps, it may be appropriate to say that modern knowledge has to be treated as the other of tradition as the Brahmin body refuses to be cut open to establishing a desecralised connection between finite body and finite thinking. The Brahmin body exists in multiple temporalities (from the mundane, austere and spiritual states), whereas the space of the classroom (of reflective mood) exists in a homogeneous and empty time. This is reflective of a larger process, of the co-appearance of capitalism and Brahminic supremacy, of multiple temporalities and homogeneous empty time. Scholars have to look at the close nexus between the shared haptic practices (working of the Brahmin sensorium) and multiple temporalities. This nexus points at cultural meanings and social constraints that accompany “perception” via practices. Are these practices to be considered as constraints on instituting modern thinking and learning environments? In turn, how does this absence of free learning environments debilitate access to these institutions for Dalit Bahujans?

HEIs are places of inhabitation (places where haptic knowledge is disguised and caste practices are restored creatively) as much as places of learning (cognition

and reflection). In other words, HEIs display a tension between tacit knowledge that is associated with (caste) bodies premised on differences and modern knowledge that is governed by conscious rules grounded in equality. Intriguingly, the Brahminic sense ensures that its (caste) body acts in ways where differences are played out (hierarchically), and its mind engages in a monistic creation where differences are compossible in a historically contingent manner. This creation of unity, which is expressive of cultural violence, retains the irreducible singularity and inassimilable particularity of Dalit Bahujans. Further, the process of cultural coding and overcoding makes HEIs at once modern and casteist, because it dilates the egalitarian postulates inscribed overtly into these institutional structures.

Among the Indian literati, there is a common saying—“it is only on paper”—whether it relates to education, legality or justice. Dalit Bahujans exists on paper as numbers in these HEIs, and their concrete existence through their arts of living are rarely encouraged, acknowledged or nourished. Strangely, policies of inclusivity have allowed only for spatial and formal inclusion rather than substantial inclusion in a limited number of elite HEIs.

The general non-correspondence between thinking and disinclination towards the other may be thought of as primary to the working of modern HEIs. This lack of entwinement between thinking and disinclination towards the other is what may be called the Brahminic form of embodiment that underlies the everyday experience of perceptible and imperceptible discomfort or unease for Dalit Bahujans in HEIs. Tautologically, modern Brahminic sense deals with a kind of thinking that displays a disposition to address the other in a less respectful and dignified manner, be it Dalit Bahujans or modern knowledge in itself.

It may be argued that modern institutions per se may not possess an interiority, and the life and career of these institutions are based on external compliance rather than a voluntary form of compliance. But, the Brahminic sense appears to invoke a particular kind of allegiance for upper castes and

disallows inclusion of Dalit Bahujans voluntarily. This cultural translation and overcoding of HEIs require elaboration. This creative overcoding seeks to underplay HEIs as open and premised on contractual relations.

There are three interrelated areas that the author seeks to understand to situate the normalised brutality of upper castes towards Dalit Bahujans in HEIs and other professional institutions. The three interrelated domains that produce caste discrimination on an everyday basis in HEIs are bodies, styles of thinking and arts of living.

Bodies

How does the sheer physical presence of upper castes affect the Dalit Bahujans? It is important to examine what kind of force upper-caste bodies exert on Dalit Bahujans without the elites being conscious of it. The HEIs, as modelled on *agraharas*,⁴ disallow the heresy of opening the Brahmin body and positing the flesh as the substance of Brahminic thought. HEIs are supposedly modelled on historically deflating the mythical incarnation of the Brahmin. But, in practice, the Brahmin body is irreducible to modern biology, physics, chemistry or sociology. The normal functioning of HEIs provides a surplus of meaning and substance to upper-caste existence and thought, while it depletes the meaning and substance of Dalit Bahujans.

The supposed belief that the Brahmin comes from the head of the Brahman has to be qualified with an acephalic nature of the Brahminic thought. The cephalic organisation of the Hindu community underplays the cultural significance of the Brahmin body in the desire to acquire and express power in this world. An event like Payal Tadvī's suicide shakes up upper-caste forms of embodiment and makes transparent the structures of discrimination.

The Brahmin body's sense affects recomposition, and this recomposition is the ground for the creation of thought. This recomposition may be treated as the birth to presence of the caste elite on such historically ineffable moments. But, the emphasis of this article is about looking at the recomposition of Brahminic

bodies on an everyday basis, where the thresholds of discrimination are minutely dispersed, diffused and diffracted. What makes HEIs dynamic and palpable is partly the dispersed, diffused and diffracted caste-related practices of discrimination.

The sensuous Brahmin makes sense of his body only through his encounter with others. For instance, the eyes, hands, liver, skin, ears and other vital organs seem to be in conversation with one another when they encounter other bodies (Dalit Bahujans). Suppose the movement of the organs were to be recorded in the classrooms, hostels, canteens, seminar halls, administrative offices and so on, we would get an idea of the Brahmin body and the socialisation of its involuntary senses. If the sense of the Brahmin body is primarily to effect distance, then how does this sense affect its encounter with others?

The corpuscular Brahmin has the potential to perform unmediated action. The corpuscular invites the body without a centre (cephalic); it lays emphasis on a principle of organism rather than organisation, which is hierarchically arranged. The action is unmediated because the eyes per se are not talking about how they look, or the ears are not telling about what is the Brahminic form of attunement that is needed for religious, aesthetic and sensuous listening, and similarly, how touch enlarges or shrinks the Brahmins' generosity of the soul that lies behind the corporeal self. The non-sharing of the Brahmin corporeal from the words, facts and voices results in lifeless words and empty voices—an uncaring, distant, and sometimes letting die atmosphere for the Brahminic other, namely Dalit Bahujans.

The stuttering of Dalit Bahujans interrupts and sullies the embodied Brahmin geo-body of the HEIs, agrahara to be precise. The stuttering decentres the Brahmin (thought) and anticipates the decomposition of the Brahmin (body). During the Mandal agitation, in the name of merit (Brahmin thought), caste elites were waging wars to protect the singularity of the Brahmin body. The self-immolation of upper-caste youths during the Mandal struggle symbolised their anxiety about

the potential displacement of Brahminic bodies in HEIs.

A central character of HEIs is that there is scope for a mingling of bodies and, therefore, for allowing bodies to encounter each other in a field of power relations. This securing of the Brahmin "being" happens through the deployment of modern techniques, apparatus and discourses and the sites of these denials of being for Dalit Bahujans happen in classrooms, laboratories, professional associations, hostels and affirmative policies regarding recruitment of teachers and students. A particular form of Brahmin sanitising of these institutions on a policy level and maintaining the denial of "being" for Dalit Bahujans on a day-to-day basis has been the life and career of HEIs in India. Therefore, violence happens at a conceptual or categorical level and also at a far deeper level of non-recognition of Dalit Bahujans' being.

More specifically, Dalit Bahujan bodies get marked through these caste practices of the elites, and the abilities of these Dalit Bahujans' bodies to make sense of these institutional spaces recede and disintegrate. Hence, it is important to examine the nature of the unconscious deliberation of the elites in particular and, by extension, the pre-reflective capacities and dispositions of HEIs, that is, we need to examine how dominant caste bodies exclude marginalised Dalit Bahujans bodies without speaking, nudging, sniggering, or what may be broadly called as caste-plaining. This caste-plaining forms the parallel coding or overcoding of HEIs, which otherwise ought to run on bureaucratic premises.

Styles of Thinking

Are there thinking styles that characterise the mood of pedagogy, research and intellectual presence of upper castes, vis-à-vis the Dalit Bahujans? How do we revisit the debate on the theoretical Brahmin and empirical Shudra, especially in the liberal arts and social science disciplines in HEIs (Guru and Sarukkai 2012)? This is a useful heuristic to work with, and it somewhat corresponds to an altogether different set of concepts (and contexts) that Deleuze posits, namely the fluid distinction between the virtual (reflective) and the actual (concrete existence).

While Dalit Bahujans are acknowledged to occupy the actual dimension, the upper-castes occupy both the actual and the virtual dimension of their being. Simply put, the virtual dimension allows one to notice the process through which a person gets transformed from the actual to the realisable. There is a pervasive belief that the upper castes have potentials that seek expression and realisation. Modern institutions should cater to the ever rejuvenating philosophical character, as formulated by Gopal Guru in Guru and Sarukkai (2012), known as the "theoretical Brahmin." It is in order to say that there is a reification of the virtual by the modern Brahminic sense, despite the fact that the actual is what is exquisitely crafted on a day-to-day basis in the food that is served, texts that are privileged, partnership preferences, choices of festivals that are celebrated within these campuses, and preferring interviews for students and faculty rather than written examinations. To live is to live (caste) intensely, to think is to negate equality as a maxim. Also, it refuses to confer equality as an assumption that the Constitution affirms and validates. Intelligence and equality appear to have no bearing on each other; the "theoretical Brahmin" is rarely possessed with that (equality) truth.

The inseparability of the actual from the virtual for the upper castes does not mean that the upper castes refuse to consciously acknowledge that these domains form distinct dimensions of their existence, but such a distinction is rarely attributed to the Dalit Bahujans. Very often, Dalit Bahujan students are told that they avail scholarships to eat and sleep in hostels, and it is hostels instead of classrooms or libraries that apparently become the fulcrum of their existence. Inhabiting the hostels do not need the virtue of arts of living for the Dalit

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Bahujans. In other words, upper-caste faculty and students tend to assume that the actual or the concrete existence needs to be reified in the case of Dalit Bahujans.

Arts of Living

It appears that the capacity to act in diverse circumstances that form the habitus of HEIs is augmented in the case of upper-caste students, and it leads to the diminution of the capacity to act on the part of the Dalit Bahujan students. The circumstances may be that of performing as a diligent student, rebel, lover, sportsperson and bibliophile. The emphasis of this intervention is to understand how modern institutions practise their everyday reproduction of the institution through the performance of what seems to be an endless series of disparate activities (that occur in spaces of classroom, laboratory, hostel, canteen, library, playground, administrative and office premises, washrooms and so on).

The elite institutions are often touted as a bubble that students pass through while completing their various academic programmes. The term bubble is used to

refer to a supposedly free and encouraging environment with a tremendous capacity to transform students' lives and realise their potentials. The question is—for whom are these elite institutions a bubble? An ethnography of elite campuses will reveal how this unrestrained mingling is mediated by dominant social structures. By bubble, one means that students can experiment with their bodies and minds without the mediation of caste and other identities. This plural habitus is mired in a dominant social structure, and it is from such a premise that it affirms the (unregulated) mingling of bodies and minds.

NOTES

- 1 Payal Tadvi was a postgraduate medical student at Mumbai's T N Topiwala National Medical College (TNMC). She committed suicide on 22 May 2019 in the hostel of the B Y L Nair Hospital, Mumbai. She hailed from the Muslim Tadvi Bhil community, a community listed under the Scheduled Tribes in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Her suicide caused a wave of protests across the nation. For more, see TNM Staff (2019).
- 2 Rohith Vemula was a Dalit PhD scholar at the University of Hyderabad who committed suicide on 17 January 2016, after being banned from entering the public spaces of the university by the varsity administration. Anitha was a Dalit higher secondary student from Tamil

Nadu who committed suicide on 1 September 2017 as she failed to secure the minimum edibility marks in National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET), which is the basis for admission into medical courses. If state board marks were considered, she would have secured a medical seat in one of the top government medical colleges of Tamil Nadu. Muthukrishnan was a Dalit PhD scholar at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, who committed suicide on 13 March 2017.

- 3 The Mandal Commission was set up in India on 1 January 1979 with a mandate to identify the socially or educationally backward classes of India. The commission's report, completed in 1980, recommended that members of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), recognised on the basis of caste, economic and social indicators who constituted 52% of India's population, be granted reservations to 27% of jobs under the central government and public sector undertakings. This brought the total proportion of reservations for SCs, STs and OBCs to 49%.
- 4 Agraharas are lands where Brahmins lived and more importantly, were places of religious learning.

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