

Regurgitative Violence

The Sacred and the Profane in Higher Education Institutions in India

P THIRUMAL

The violence against marginalised students by a teacher at the Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur is intrinsically related to the Brahminic cultural psyche of elite higher education institutions in India. It stands as testimony that post-independence India's modern secular education has failed to replace caste as an institution to build "character" in terms of the capacity for living with others. The vitality rather than the ideology of caste is the subject of this analysis, tracing the historical and social formation of these elite institutions and caste in them.

P Thirumal (pthirumal6@gmail.com) teaches at the Department of Communication, University of Hyderabad.

It is a widely recognised fact that elite higher education institutions (HEIs) practise caste. Caste is practised within or outside the classroom or in the virtual space of the Google classroom or Zoom. The practice is not merely limited to the ideational content and institutional structure of HEIs. If one understands practising caste as a form of sociability, then modern secular education fails to build the character of citizens who need training to live in a community of others. This is an internal form of damage corroborated by the external damage that the current regime is wreaking on HEIs.

Pedagogy, in a multicultural and historical society like ours, ought to be less constrained by a philosophy of self-consciousness and the creation of a self-positing subject. The latter objective is generally given as the excuse for practising caste and the grounds for the denial of the very being of Dalit and Bahujan students. In other words, modern secular education in post-independence India has displayed its inability to replace caste as an institution for building "character" in terms of the capacity of living with others.

In an analysis and description of the much-circulated story of a teacher in the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kharagpur verbally abusing marginalised

students in an online remedial English class, I want to suggest that such acts of discrimination and hostility are widespread and they need to be located in the cultural psyche of these elite institutions. Further, this intervention proposes a Brahminic telos which guides the casteist nature of these institutions and I attempt to excavate a particular genealogy of these HEIs. The vitality rather than the ideology of caste constitutes the subject of analysis.

Vitality of Caste

The country has been witnessing an unimaginable sorrow caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media uninterruptedly displays visuals of horror-stricken citizens unable to grasp the virulent nature of the virus and the glaring indifference of the state in providing minimal facilities for coping with the infection. Many middle-class families have witnessed casualties and many have not escaped from the jaws of death. Amidst these heart-wrenching scenes of ordinary citizens trying to battle with COVID-19, a video was widely circulated among liberal, progressive and Dalit-Bahujan activists.

The video showed a teacher at IIT Kharagpur screaming at the students who had assembled for her online remedial class on English. Several Dalit-Bahujan students have committed suicide and others have complained of a lack of access due to several reasons, including bandwidth, devices and allied technological tools. The video was put together by anti-caste Ambedkarite student body from IIT Bombay. The students were being given special coaching to prepare for the IIT entrance exams. Such are the compulsions

and compunctions of these students that they refused to formally lodge a complaint against the unwarranted violence meted out to them by the erring teacher.

Without going into the utterly unacceptable utterances of the teacher, let me draw your attention to the mode of her expression. A clinical description would run as follows. The screaming, yelling, verbal abuse and hostility against the marginalised students suggest an intensity of anger that refuses to be contained. Is this anger more than an individual expression? Is she regurgitating the anger of an entire community of upper-caste cultural elites who find the aspirations of the Dalit–Bahujans incommensurable with the ethos of elite HEIs? Swallowing the bile may be a more appropriate response among the politically correct fraternity, but someone like this teacher has to eject it.

Here, we see the teacher throwing up on the faces of the students. Anger and disgust are related emotions. It is difficult to know when anger turns to disgust or disgust into anger, or it is possible in some extreme cases like this one, that they come together. I want to locate her anger in the overproduction of bile and, more importantly, in the collective bile. Our cherished HEIs are repositories of this collective bile.

Caste is more in the bile rather than in the calculable head. Otherwise, how can anyone under such conditions of human hopelessness and unthinkable suffering wrought by the pandemic have the heart to perform a mythical dance of death extolling her powers to destroy lives? This is not surprising. Even during natural disasters like the tsunami, caste boundaries failed to loosen.

The yelling seems to signify the crushing of bodies from the inside and numbing the power of the senses of these students. Intellect does not figure as a site for destruction because in the imagination of the aggressor, it does not exist. This gesture of war against unarmed students is one of the theatrical modes in which caste presents itself. What is gouged out and blighted is not merely the power to see and minimally exist. The ambition of the aggressor seems to be the ability to cut off the psychic power

lines that supply energy to gather one's senses, thought, and cultural equipment that allows for the experience of personhood. To break the sense of a person is to break a person within.

The teacher repeatedly demands that the students keep the camera on and make their faces available for her to see. Her hyper-vigilance is yet another excuse to practise caste in the most audacious visible sense. For those of us who have now become familiarised with online teaching due to the lockdown, we know that students may login without keeping the camera on while attending the virtual classroom. Therefore, it is difficult to monitor whether students are paying attention to what the teacher is saying. But what is more interesting is a different question. How does caste recognise faces? Why are some people allowed to enter the house through the back door rather than the front? Is there an inventory of those who have traditionally sat in the front benches and those who have sat behind in the IITs and other elite HEIs? What has face got to do with caste, not in the historical or anthropological sense but the act of encountering the “face,” as being fundamental to human consciousness? It is possible to construe the face as coeval with the mind. Both are in different ways related to meaning-making. If face is taken as a bearer of presence, then what the teacher seems to be demanding is to defile and shatter the defenceless, vulnerable faces of these marginalised students. Caste renders the face of others as faceless and the act of the teacher is suggestive of denying the ethical recognition warranted in encountering other faces. To be faceless is to lack signification.

Generally, caste discrimination in elite HEIs takes on a more prosaic mode. Upper-caste teachers feel sad that they have to teach Dalit and Bahujan students. There is an active withdrawal from interacting with marginalised students. Sometimes, the distant and indifferent approach by *savarna* teachers may be even more unwelcome than the frontal attack in Kharagpur. Indifference and politeness of a condescending sort are perhaps more lethal. They can demoralise and make students lose confidence.

Caste has many hues and moods. Mood facilitates an ability to orient oneself towards something. Mood is a precondition for learning. Discrimination is suggestive of a disruptive and alienating mood. Dalit–Bahujan students find it difficult to orient themselves in the most desirable way to learn in these elite HEIs. This unfriendly or casteist mood is not always consciously engineered but it is the invisible intentionality of caste that is at work. If the overall pedagogy in HEIs refuses to accept these students as having a capacity for being involved, interested and engaged in learning, it is because of a particular genealogy of the life of caste in elite HEIs.

‘Modern Temples of India’

In the received narrative, there is an effort to identify the establishment of elite HEIs, including the various IITs, as “the modern temples of India.” The modern temples of India are directly involved in material production. Among other things, the HEIs were supposed to create a workforce for running public sector units. However, the elite HEIs were allowed to remain a bubble without getting roughed up and tossed by the unmanageable swamps created by electoral and democratic participatory processes.

While things were falling apart on the streets and other unwieldy public spaces for the cultural elite, these cloistered spaces provided much-needed distance from the unbearable cacophony of political society. Whether agriculture-related scientific laboratories and institutions or in the broader areas of natural and applied sciences, including the establishment of IITs, or exclusive liberal arts and social science institutions, the distance from the *socius* was clear. The *élites* who manned these institutions were offered anonymity and protection from a pure means-end, rationale-seeking calculus.

Political society, consisting of disgruntled classes and castes, had no material and cultural equipment to belong to civil society. More interestingly, they were not aware that these spaces existed within India. For instance, a famous Dalit leader, the late Bojja Tharakam, who studied law at Osmania University in the 1970s, recalled that he was simply

clueless about the nature of activities that an institution called the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (CIEFL) performed. This elite institute was located within the Osmania University campus, but Tharakam strangely felt intimidated by its presence as he went past the formidable gates of CIEFL every day, to his college. The experience of this mystery has since faded with the conversion of this institute to a central university currently renamed as the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU).

English was exported by the cultural elite several decades prior to the advent of the digital economy but redistributing this cultural wealth remains extraordinarily contentious to this day. The unfortunate incident at IIT Kharagpur attests to this fact. English is at the heart of this violence. The University Grants Commission (UGC) mandates remedial classes for socially disadvantaged students in its institutions, including quasi-private ones like the IITs.

'Brahmin Being'

To continue the story of the spell cast by the cultural elite in creating these institutions of perceived excellence, we have to admit that the Brahmin was the forerunner and other savarna elites followed. More importantly, the Brahmin had to practise caste and in the same breath claim to be modern. Thus, caste had to exist in a palpable sense, and it had to ensure and affirm "Brahmin being" on a daily basis in these elite HEIS. In a way, these exclusive places of teaching, learning and research facilitated the Brahmin to gather his sacral, material and cultural possessions, including his sensorial and aesthetic dispositions, and hold them in the most appropriate way possible. This gathering one may call "Brahmin being."

The dwelling for this Brahmin being had to be crafted outside and inside of the sovereign nation. This called for the conversion of the physical space of these newly established institutions into Brahminically inhabitable places where the senses are delighted rather than corrupted, ignited rather than doused, instinctual life is mediated through a Brahminic sense and aesthetic. A sense of mastery seems to accompany the

Brahmin being. Mastery refers to acknowledging that there are wider non-discursive contexts to understanding knowledge and is not restricted to individual self-mastery. The question that informs how one becomes a better scientist, philosopher or historian is, how does one become a better Brahmin? How to be committed and responsible for various projects? It is in that sense that these institutional places are to be perceived as more than source of employments. The grooming of the senses becomes as important as the cultivation of the intellect to experience "being" in its fullest sense. Hence, the gatekeeping.

In my understanding, the cultural practices of the Brahmin rather than any philosophical mooring undergird the logic of these elite institutions. Let us call this community rule-making mechanism. This rule-making is never fixed and rigid but is inscribed within the folds of the skin of these institutions. It is about a Brahminic disposition and less about transparent rules or principles. This is also related to what I have articulated in an earlier article as a force associated with dominant bodies that govern elite HEIS (Thirumal 2020). The article alluded to a non-discursive context for the practice of caste and consequently of discrimination too. The creativity of the Brahminic disposition has enabled even student bodies in one of the IITs to found the institution of "the Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music and Culture amongst Youth (SPICMACAY)" known for promotion and preservation of Indian classical music (read Brahminical music). Its fundamental orientation is to put off any logical revolt against caste.

This feeling of the Brahminic history of HEIS is passed on to generations of savarna middle-class homes. In the mid-1980s, the itinerary of post-independent India's Brahmin middle-class family pilgrimages to South India would include not only the temples of Kancheepuram and elsewhere but also a visit to IIT Chennai. In a way, these pilgrimages were primarily subsidised through the Government of India's policy known as Leave Travel Concession. It is important to note that the secular institution becomes part of a pilgrimage and granted the similar auratic

power of the sacred. It is possible that one of the kith and kin studied in that institution and therefore the nostalgia.

But what is at stake here is in building a blood relationship or a primary relationship with the institution. The refusal to see it as a public institution but to identify themselves in a more originary sense of the public. Better still, it may be grasped as their attempt to invoke a divinity among the divinities, which is even more indestructible than blood relations. One might label this constant concealment and (that is, post-independence) revelation of the Brahmin being as a way of positing a metaphysical setting to the workings of elite HEIS.

In a manner of speaking, it seeks to destroy the causal relation between creators and creations. Gods cannot be created. They can only be creators. This is the everyday unconscious that informs the pores of the skin of these institutions. In that sense, Brahminical embodiment is not merely ephemeral and, therefore, sociologically reducible. One can imagine the fear and disgust that will be associated with the entry of uncouth political society into the astral portals of these institutions. One of my senior colleagues surmised thus, "Even the grass which grows in our University is divine." The spell is cast on both astral and terrestrial. The earth opens itself and the sky descends in obeisance to the Brahminic spell. The elite HEIS are composed of such elemental and cosmic substances. The story does not end here. What constitutes the Brahminic telos is actually a productive ambiguity between the Brahmin as the creator and the Brahmin as the historical subject.

I remember a friend of mine telling me that as children, they were asked to touch the soil of one of the IITs, while on a pilgrimage. Soil in most cultures symbolises fecundity, HEIS are little, self-enclosed paradises where the Brahmin being is affirmed and allowed to aesthetically reproduce its aura with a notional interruption from the state. The extremely successful upper-caste engineering graduates found swanky jobs overseas were seen as manifestations of this aura by the Indian middle class. The likes of Sundar Pichais are products of such a seamless fusion of horizons.

In a different but related context, Rukmini Devi Arundale's establishment of the Kalakshetra might be seen as affirming and securing a Brahmin being that is beyond the dictates of bureaucratic logic and is subject to its own reign only and nothing else. Scholars have failed to count these institutional structures as belonging to the Nehruvian secular project. It is possible to conjecture the architectural ethos of Kalakshetra as resembling an ideal Brahmin home and not just any middle-class home.

Notwithstanding the controversy surrounding the problematising of the Brahmin in the Tamil film *Anniyan*, the film's song *Iyengaru Veetu Azhage* musically espouses the irrepressible beauty that exudes from a modestly successful middle-class home. The lyrics allude to the rich sensorial infrastructure that makes possible such aesthetic-sensuous excesses. One will find in this home an uncanny fusion of the time of capital

with the temporality of the Brahmin (the inventiveness of the Brahmin time may be a subject for another essay). Elite educational institutions are ontotheological extensions of such domestic spaces, which breathe unsurpassable beauty and moral edification of the secular Brahmin and the savarna elite.

So far, I have tried to establish the porous boundaries between the Brahminic domestic, sacral (Kancheepuram) and secular elite HEIs (IIT Chennai). The point is that HEIs are losing their auratic power and their sensorial and aesthetic comportment required for affirming the cultural authority of these institutions. They are also being increasingly substituted by bureaucratic logic, market forces and electoral democracy. These places of enchantment are becoming institutions where questions of means and ends that attend to existents rather than existence are increasingly demanded, leading to a perceived insecurity of reducing the

irreducible Brahmin being to content and essence.

Of course, the Brahmins and the savarna elite are reinventing themselves in the sanitised spaces of plush private universities where they can maintain a remarkable indifference to public accountability and the background noise created by electoral democracy. The inventiveness of the temporality instituted by the structures of existence of the Brahmin, its many shapes and textures are something that should attract the attention of post-human studies scholars and philosophers of technology. In the meanwhile, the Dalit-Bahujan student must learn to not to save face but show her face in the face of the regurgitation of Brahminical violence.

REFERENCE

Thirumal, P (2020): "Dominant Bodies and Their Ethical Performances: Violence of Caste Embodiment in Higher Educational Institutions," *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol 55, No 3, pp 36-40.