



CASTE IN THE NAME OF MERIT: REPRODUCING SOCIAL HEIRARCHIES IN CORPORATE ORGANISATION IN DELHI- NCR

Sumayya Khan,

Research Scholar,

Department of Sociology,

Jamia Millia Islamia,

New Delhi, India

Abstract: The study uses Yogendra Singh's view of caste as a lasting system of hierarchy. The study looks at how caste creates differences in organisations in the Delhi NCR region. The research questions the idea that corporate environments, in areas where work outside of caste, rely on merit-based norms. The research examines caste diversity, job mobility and daily workplace practices. I used a numbers-based design to collect data from 25 employees, with caste backgrounds in two corporate places—a tech firm in Noida and an advertising agency in Gurugram—through a structured questionnaire. The study takes a perspective that focuses on groups that have been left out before. The study finds both open caste-based practices. The study checks how job mobility is for groups that have been left out before. The study also asks employees what they think about action in the sector. The study links these views to talks about merit and fairness. Using Pierre Bourdieu's idea about how society repeats itself, I see that the study shows how structural inequalities and unequal access to resources still shape hierarchies. The study is small. The study offers insights into how caste resurfaces in seemingly neutral corporate settings. The study also joins the talk about making sure inclusion and fairness happen in the sector.

Index Terms- Caste and Corporate Sector, Meritocracy and Inequality, Occupational Mobility, Affirmative Action, Social Reproduction of Inequality.

I. Introduction

The caste system has lived in society for centuries. The caste system has changed over the years. Social mobility has blurred some lines. This is especially true in areas where people from castes move away from traditional jobs. Caste still shows up in ways. Also, in obvious ways. I have seen this in my life. Some people think that caste discrimination happens in certain areas. That idea is wrong. Caste discrimination also appears in environments. Caste discrimination even appears in institutions that claim to be progressive.

For example, in September 2022, the Mess Council at IIT Bombay sent an email that labelled tables in the hostel mess as "vegetarian-only." The Mess Council presented the segregation of tables as a promotion of "vegetarianism." The segregation of tables reminds me of the practice of untouchability in settings. Another example is the suicide of Rohith Vemula. Rohith Vemula, a university student, described his birth as an "accident" in a note. Rohith Vemula referred to the caste discrimination he faced. Discrimination also hurts housing markets. I read the article "Good People Please" by Vithayathil, Singh and Pradhan. The article tells a story about a landlord who refused to rent to a Dalit couple. The landlord said the landlord wanted "people" for the property. When the landlord learned the couple's caste, the landlord humiliated the couple. Evicted the couple. The caste bias is not a problem. The caste bias also spreads into the economy. The job market still offers openings to lower-caste people. The lower-caste people have the skills, like the upper-caste applicants. The lower-caste people still face job openings. Thorat and Attewell's study, "The Legacy of Social Exclusion: A Correspondence Study of Job Discrimination in India", found that lower-caste and Muslim applicants with the qualifications got job offers more often than upper-caste Hindus when lower-caste and Muslim applicants applied for jobs in the modern private sector. The discrimination came from the names that showed the caste and the Muslim applicants' caste or religion. Even lower-caste and Muslim applicants who manage to get jobs in firms still face attitudes. On April 22 2024, HRWorld reported in the Economic Times about a case. The Mumbai Police filed a complaint against the owner of an event management company. The complaint followed a message that the owner sent to an employee. The message said, "main Jai Bhim wale ko job pe nahi rakhti" (I do not employ Dalits). The owner sent the message after learning the employee belonged to a Scheduled Caste. I read this. It reminded me that discrimination still happens. These examples show that even if the caste system looks weaker, it still exists. Caste discrimination still lives in the economic and cultural life of India

II. Objectives

- Examine caste diversity in organisations in the Delhi NCR region and assess any job mobility that has happened.
- Investigate the presence of caste-based practices in these organisations.
- Explore employee views on action policies in the sector.

III. Research Methodology

This research used a framework. The researcher collected data from 25 employees across different caste groups within the private sector using a questionnaire to evaluate their experiences with caste discrimination in the workplace. This initial investigation was small-scale, with the possibility of expanding further through qualitative insights and narratives from the employees. Data was collected from two office locations in Noida (IT Tech Firm) and Gurugram (Advertising Agency), focusing specifically on the Delhi NCR region. The study used a subaltern perspective as its methodological approach.

IV. Analysis

Demographic Context and Structural Location

Consistent with Yogendra Singh's view of caste as a lasting and adaptable system of division, the demographic makeup of the sample reflects inequality in corporate environments. Of the 25 respondents, 17 identified as General caste, while only 2 were from the Scheduled Castes, 1 from the OBC, and 2 identified as Muslim; 3 chose not to disclose their caste. This uneven representation indicates that caste hierarchies are not absent but are instead maintained through unequal access to corporate jobs. From a Bourdieusian viewpoint, this shows different access to cultural and educational resources, especially considering the prevalence of engineering backgrounds and undergraduate degrees among the respondents.

Recruitment Process and the Illusion of Meritocracy

Most respondents denied facing caste-related challenges during recruitment; however, the only two respondents who reported such issues were from the SC category. This highlights that caste disadvantage is selectively experienced yet statistically minimised. This supports Singh's argument that caste persists not through direct exclusion but through structural reinforcement.

Additionally, 32% of respondents mentioned being asked to provide their surname during recruitment. As Jodhka and Newman (2010) noted, these inquiries serve as indirect indicators of caste and social background. Within Bourdieu's framework, these practices allow employers to evaluate cultural capital and social background disguised as neutrality, thereby reinforcing what seems to be a fair process while upholding existing hierarchies.

Workplace Practices and Everyday Reproduction of Caste

In the workplace, 6 respondents indicated they received different treatment from managers based on caste or class, showing signs of symbolic and relational forms of domination. Although most denied having such experiences, this denial aligns with critiques by subaltern theorists who argue that dominant groups often normalise inequality and overlook structures of privilege.

Peer interactions also show the hidden presence of caste. Forty per cent of respondents reported colleagues asking about their caste identity, and some observed the separation of vegetarian and non-vegetarian employees during lunch. These behaviours reflect historically caste-associated ideas of purity and pollution, demonstrating how caste is reinforced through daily social interactions rather than formal company policies. Such findings support Bourdieu's idea of habitus, where deeply ingrained attitudes sustain social hierarchies even in modern institutions.

Caste Identity and Symbolic Power

Responses about pride in caste identity reveal a significant contradiction. While many respondents claimed caste discrimination was not relevant, a notable number expressed pride in their caste identity—something more commonly linked to dominant caste positions. This illustrates symbolic power, where upper-caste identities are normalised and valued, while lower-caste identities are often stigmatised or silenced, reinforcing Singh's perception of caste as a strong social structure.

Affirmative Action and Competing Discourses

Views on affirmative action in the private sector were sharply divided. Many opponents framed their arguments around the idea of meritocracy, which Bourdieu criticises as failing to recognise privilege where inherited advantages are viewed as personal merit. Supporters of affirmative action highlighted historical exclusion and systemic inequality, aligning with perspectives that emphasise real experiences of marginalisation. Thorat, Madheswaran, and Vani (2023) argue that the lack of reservations in the private sector keeps caste-based inequalities in employment outcomes alive.

Caste Blindness as Structural Silence

Suggestions for inclusivity ranged from diversity training to completely removing caste from workplace discussions. This push for caste blindness, although presented as forward-thinking, effectively disregards historical and structural disadvantages. From a subaltern perspective, such silence acts as a form of power that sustains current hierarchies by denying the validity of caste-based claims.

Overall, the findings show that while visible caste practices may have decreased, caste still functions through subtle, normalised, and symbolic means in corporate organisations. Consistent with Singh and Bourdieu, the study indicates that caste adapts to modern institutional contexts while experiences of marginalised groups remain sidelined in broader narratives of merit and fairness.

V. Conclusion

In summary, the data reveal a troubling lack of caste diversity in private organisations, reinforced by the majority of upper-caste respondents who may not fully understand the nuances of caste discrimination. The results also underline the need for critical discussions about affirmative action in the private sector, stressing that a merit-based approach without context risks perpetuating existing inequalities. For meaningful change, it is crucial to foster a deeper understanding of caste issues within corporate environments and push for policies that genuinely promote inclusivity and equity.

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