

The Unmaking of Caste

By Tabea Schroer

Meritocracy claims that educational titles are vested on the basis of achievement and not inherited ascription. Examining an Indian elite education institution, Ajantha Subramanian shows how upper castes use this discourse to make their caste privilege invisible. The processes of the social (un-) making of caste then serve the reproduction of inequality

About: Ajantha Subramanian, *The Caste of Merit. Engineering Education in India*, Harvard University Press, 2019

On July 30th, 2020, California regulators accused the tech multinational Cisco of discrimination against an Indian-American employee. Just like other tech companies in Silicon Valley, Cisco has employed thousands of Indian immigrants. According to the lawsuit, the employee was outed by his Indian supervisor as Dalit in front of two other colleagues. The term *Dalit* refers to people belonging to castes that were imagined to be outside the four castes of the Hindu caste system and therefore considered *untouchable*. His outing did not only reveal his social status within the Hindu caste system, but also disclosed that he had been admitted via affirmative action to one of the so-called Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian elite

universities in engineering. After having reported to Cisco's HR over the matter, the engineer in question was reassigned and denied promotions.¹

This episode points to the ambiguity of IITs: Questions of caste seem to become especially relevant, when dealing with questions of social disadvantage and empowerment, e.g. in discussions about the so-called reservations (quotas) for students from disadvantaged groups.² However, the obvious and maybe self-evident opposite of caste disadvantage is less often dealt with: Caste privilege. In *The Caste of Merit*, the anthropologist Ajantha Subramanian picks out caste privilege as a central theme. Her institutional ethnography of one of the so-called Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian elite universities in engineering, illustrates how the imagination of a person as casteless is connected to modernity and how it is especially upper-caste IITians, who profit from this ascription as 'casteless' and 'meritocratic'.

For her study, Subramanian draws on a variety of data: Besides a vast body of academic literature, she collected historical material such as newspaper articles or documents by the Supreme Court of India, e.g. when reconstructing the discourses on reservation (p. 204ff.). Furthermore, she conducted interviews with students, faculty and alumni both from upper and lower castes. Inspired by Bourdieu's forms of capital and US-American studies of Whiteness, she looks at caste from a sociohistorical and relational perspective, i.e. that she investigates the social (un-) making of caste and understands it as a process rather than a fix status. IIT Madras serves as an example when tracing the process of how caste and engineering education came to be deeply intertwined.

Engineering Education in India

Her historical anthropology traces the evolution of engineering education in India from the colonial period up to the present. Historically, there were two tracks in the field of technical education that were connected to imaginaries of caste: The first track was based on a formation in classroom-based theoretical knowledge and, therefore, addressed and attracted candidates from upper castes. This created a

1 For further information on the Cisco case, see <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cisco-lawsuit-idUSKBN2423YE> or <https://thewire.in/caste/cisco-caste-discrimination-silicon-valley-dalit-prejudice>

2 Quotas usually aim at including people from so-called Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) und Other Backward Classes (OBC).

distinction to the second track of industrial schooling that was linked to hands-on training. Interestingly, the British and the colonial administration had an understanding of technical knowledge as a hands-on, practical knowledge. In colonized India, it was especially lower castes who held this kind of practical, technical knowledge. However, they had a worse social standing and including them into higher ranks of engineering would have meant a conflict with upper castes, which the colonial administration surely wanted to avoid. Consequently, in the colonial era, engineering students mainly came from upper-caste, “well-connected families with a history of education and government employment” (Subramanian 2019, p. 89f.). Scholarships were granted to applicants with the desired social capital and not the technical qualifications (p. 91f.).

This distinction was somehow echoed in the context of the foundation of IIT Madras.³ It was founded in 1959 in a particular context of tensions: In Madras, the division between Brahmin and non-Brahmin populations became associated to the division of “sinews and brains” (p. 107). In other words, the Brahmin was imagined to be ideally suited for the mental, for leadership positions, while the non-Brahmin was imagined to be designed for rather manual labor. As the founding of the IITs strengthened the institutional stratification of higher education, its students were even more likely to be upper-caste, and Brahmin in particular.

From the establishment of the first IITs in the 1950s and onwards, they had strong ties to the Soviet Union, West Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom that provided the needed equipment, visiting staff and consultancy. In case of IIT Madras, West Germany overtook the tutelage. Until 1973, West Germany sent German professors and technical experts to India in order to practically orient the institute and gave 14% of its development aid to India between 1956 and 1961 (p. 110f.). West Germany’s influence resulted in a curriculum focused on practical training in manual skills that stood in conflict with the Brahmin self-understanding as working rather mentally than manually. On the German side, this led to a stereotype of *the Indian* as unwilling to take over manual work and work hard – this perception echoed British colonial rhetoric on Indian capacities and did not distinguish between different castes. Although the German tutelage “emphasized the modern individual as the site of embodied technical knowledge” (p. 114), posing challenges to existing caste hierarchies, it did not change the social basis of recruitment.

³ In order to become “a modern industrial society based on applied science” (Subramanian 2019, p. 64), the foundation of elite institutions for technical education was decided in postindependence India.

The Making of Merit

The patronage of foreign partners along with the IITs' foundation as institutions that were explicitly distinct from the already existing educational institutions, assured a certain IITian exceptionalism, that was additionally stressed through "routine rituals of recognition" (p. 75) by the Indian state, such as the presence of important statesmen at IIT convocation ceremonies. This created a feeling among IITians of being the "chosen ones" (p. 76). The exceptional status was mainly nurtured by the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE), the mass examination for admission to the IITs. Initially, the shift to the JEE meant democratizing the admission process in shifting from ascriptive criteria to individual achievement. However, building on Bourdieu and Passeron, Subramanian points to the social effects of such exams, i.e. "their role in gatekeeping, cultural certification, and ranking" (p. 202). Poor and lower-caste students were eliminated, even before applying.

Subramanian's data collection allows for the reader to explore the institutional procedures and discourses at IIT Madras through the lens of the individuals' experiences, which becomes especially clear in chapter four, when she showcases the life histories of twenty first-generation alumni of IIT Madras who attended the institute during the 1960s.⁴ These 20 life histories reveal three main narratives: First, the time spent at the IIT Madras is described as one of nationalization for the alumni, i.e. that they "came to understand themselves as exceptional because of their link to state and nation" (p. 117). Secondly, the 1960s are narrated as a time of castelessness, for which forms of a post-caste subjectivity are claimed. However, Tamil Brahmins do not share this narration of castelessness, but explicitly distinguish themselves in terms of caste from former non-Brahmin classmates. Some of the accounts collected reveal that due to the regional political milieu, where quotas for lower castes had been introduced at regional engineering colleges, the interviewees had taken the IIT exam "to bypass" (p. 129) the regional reservation system that they considered an unfair barrier for themselves. Going to the IIT was a way of seeking "national refuge in a context of regional caste hostilities" (p. 118). Thirdly, Subramanian reveals that masculinity plays a strong role in the sense that campuses were mainly male ("the percentage of women has never exceeded ten on any IIT campus", p. 7) and that male

⁴ Here, she does not only draw on her own material, but also makes use of life histories compiled by Ram Krishnaswamy (2008), an IIT Madras 1970 alumnus.

family relations motivated the interviewees to follow an engineering career at IIT Madras. By choosing that track, they hoped to fulfill their fathers' aspirations.

Challenging the Meritocratic Illusion

The upper-caste meritocracy was challenged by two developments, that, paradoxically, led to its stabilization at the same time: First, from the 2000s and on, "the coaching industry challenged the relationship of ascription and achievement through the market" (p. 203) by offering special coaching for applicants. However, new mechanisms of distinction between "the gifted", understood as "urban, mobile, English educated, upper caste" (p. 202), and "the coached" (ibid.) restabilized caste and class boundaries. "In these ways, the examination produces merit not as the index of individual ability but as a modern expression of caste and class difference." (p. 202) Secondly, in 1973 and 2006,⁵ reservations consisting in quotas for lower castes challenged the meritocratic illusion:

"It acknowledged caste discrimination as the basis of nonachievement. At the same time, it left unnamed caste inheritances as the basis of achievement. This imbalance between naming caste as a factor on one side and not naming it on the other has reinforced the representative status of upper castes as subjects whose merit is purely the result of talent, not history. In this sense, reservation policy, too, was only a partial critique of meritocracy." (p. 204)

Subramanian reveals the strategies through which IITians tried to find out who the quota students were, e.g. by asking for the rank in the JEE or assuming the status from a student's academic performance or English language proficiency. The marked students were "treated as intellectually inferior" (p. 248), as one of her interviewees accounts. On the other side of the boundary, Dalit students were very aware of such practices of distinction and they rather tried to hide their Dalit status and their paths into the IIT. As the Cisco case illustrates, such practices do not only happen among Indians in India, but rather travel with the subjects transnationally.

⁵ In 1973, a 22,5% reservation was introduced for scheduled castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). In 2006, a quota of 27% was introduced for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) at the IITs (Subramanian 2019, p. 226).

The Transnationalization of Caste

Due to different factors such as an Indian labor market in the 1960s that was not prepared for the kind of highly skilled graduates the IITs produced and the reservations for disadvantaged groups, some IITians left India and migrated to the United States. Contrary to the common scholarly literature on the Indian diaspora to the US that assumes that caste largely vanishes as a category of stratification outside the boundaries of the Indian nation-state, Subramanian argues for a transnationalization of caste. She points to the fact that Indian migrants in the US are a highly skilled and educated group and that mobility, in turn, became another source of capital accumulation for them. Through factors such as “the rise of information technology, the shift of many IITians to this sector, and the Silicon Valley boom” (p. 314) they helped producing “the image of the entrepreneurial Indian” (ibid.) and made the IIT a well-known brand. This branding of the IIT “also transformed the meaning of meritocracy by shifting the emphasis from intellectualism to entrepreneurialism.” (p. 262)

Silicon Valley IITians have regarded the legal recognition of subaltern rights as “bad for business” (p. 320) and therefore welcomed Narendra Modi’s election as prime minister in May 2014. Modi’s politics turned away “from a rights-based approach toward the leveraging of moral panics [that, T.S.] undercut lower-caste claims” (p. 320) His election complicated the situation between upper- and lower-caste interest groups and made central government campuses (like IIT Madras) “more open battlegrounds of caste conflict” (p. 316): OBC and Dalit groups in form of student associations confront an upper-caste status quo, e.g. through the organization of lectures on the politics of language (esp. Sanskrit) or the history of bans of cow-slaughter (p. 317). Furthermore, his politics led to an increase of social inequality, while securing “the position of upper castes in the most lucrative private sectors of the Indian economy.” (p. 320)

The upper-caste fight against any measure of distributive justice thus obscures, Subramanian argues, “how favorable the conditions actually are for the upper-caste accumulation of wealth” (ibid.). She traces this behavior back to “a remarkably powerful and resilient sense of entitlement” (p. 321) among upper-castes and concludes: “Caste is still very much the basis for the reproduction of inherited privileges and disadvantages.” (p. 322) Reservations only offer opportunities to a

small fraction of the population, so that the “notion of meritocracy [...] has come to service the reproduction of inequality.” (p. 323)

Thinking About Caste Differently

Overall, Subramanian’s ethnography offers a rich account of how merit services social inequality. Her approach to caste as a form of capital from a relational and processual perspective, serves as an important counterbalance to public discourse on the matter. Additionally, it offers a fruitful ground for future constructivist research on caste. Furthermore, her study points to the importance of moving beyond methodological nationalism (Wimmer/Glick Schiller 2003). Only through her historical ethnography was she able to reveal how caste transnationalized, i.e. how accumulated caste capital allowed for diasporic mobility and, in turn, became “a source of upper-caste social and economic capital” (Subramanian 2019, p. 259). Finally, it was diasporic IITians, who made the label of IIT “a globally recognized brand” (p. 260).

What some might call a minor drawback of this book, might actually be its strength: Those interested in intersecting categories of social inequality might be underwhelmed by *The Caste of Merit*. However, the intense historicization of caste privilege constitutes a much-needed addition to the study of social inequality, which is why the focus on caste is convincing. The book is evidence of how valuable it can be to look at both sides of a boundary, e.g. when looking at the privileged *and* the underprivileged in a reservations system. Much qualitative research on social inequality still focusses on the underprivileged only, which is why her work offers a valuable example for how to approach inequality differently. Therefore, the book is not only a must for scholars interested in India, but also warmly recommended to those interested in the reproduction of social inequality in general. With an excellent foundation laid, future research could focus on other regional constellations of caste privilege and opt for intersectional analyses of the very topic.

Further reading

- Ajantha Subramanian, *The Caste of Merit. Engineering Education in India*, Cambridge/London, Harvard University Press, 2019.

- Andreas Wimmer, Nina Glick-Schiller, “Methodological Nationalism, the Social Sciences, and the Study of Migration: An Essay in Historical Epistemology”, *International Migration Review*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2003, pp. 576-610.
- Ram Krishnaswamy, *Reflections by IITians: Alumni Share Their Journeys*, Chennai, Sterling Prints and Conversions, 2008.

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