

Research Article

Caste-Based Discrimination in Higher Education: An Application of Microaggression Theory in Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

The quota policy of the constitution has been an effective instrument for the lower caste students to access higher education in India. The presence of a significant and growing population of marginalised student groups on college campuses have been perceived as a challenge to the historical hegemony of the higher castes. Few studies have reported that caste-based discrimination in higher education is evident across the institutions, specifically in elite institutions. However, it is an under-researched topic and this offers a unique opportunity to explore a new theoretical framework to study caste-based discrimination in the context of higher education. The racial microaggressions model offer a new definition, terminology and analytical tool to understand caste discrimination and how such discrimination results in low academic outcomes of lower caste students and also explains the tragedy of the student suicide that has received widespread media attention in recent times. The paper explores a microaggressions theory to illustrate implicit, subtle and complex forms of caste-based microaggressions that appear prevalent in university campuses in India. A taxonomic classification of caste-based discrimination indicates four types of microaggressions conveyed to lower caste students by the higher caste groups. The microaggressions framework facilitates new theoretical ground to comprehend caste-based invisible forms of discrimination. Further, it raises critical awareness of how discrimination operates in everyday institutional life, as well as the need for institutional interventions to stop caste-based microaggressions.

Keywords: Caste-based discrimination, Higher education, Microaggressions, Higher castes

Abbreviations

ABVP	:	Akhil Bharatiya <i>Vidyarthi</i> Parishad (All India Student Federation)
AIIMS	:	All India Institute of Medical Sciences
ASA	:	Ambedkar Students' Association
CAT	:	Common Admission Test
HCU	:	Hyderabad Central University
IIT	:	Indian Institute of Technology
IRB	:	Institutional Review Board
JEE	:	Joint Entrance Exam
LGBTQ	:	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer
MHRD	:	Ministry of Human Resource Development
NGO	:	Non-Governmental Organization
OBC	:	Other Backward Caste
PC	:	Preparatory Course
SC	:	Scheduled Caste
ST	:	Scheduled Tribe
US	:	United States

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, higher education in India has been witnessing an increase in enrolment across social groups such as first generation, female, rural and the Lower caste students. This has changed student demographics in academic disciplines. Due to the great diversity of the college-student population, higher education institutions are facing diversity, social justice and discrimination issues. Caste-based discrimination is one of the issues which is pervasive across the institutions in India (Neelakandan and Patil, 2012; Patwardhan and Palshikar, 1992). The lower caste students have been experiencing discrimination in higher education institutions since primary stage (Nambissan, 2006, 2009; Sedwal and Kamat, 2008). Caste-based discrimination is an under-researched topic (Thorat and Kumar, 2008) and deserves wider study. Moreover, in this paper, I argue that the forms of discrimination are also fairly complex and require new theoretical perspectives to enable one to grasp the subtle and soft forms of discrimination, which are communicated in routine interactions that nevertheless exert a detrimental impact on the self-esteem and academic performance of lower caste students. I have borrowed from research on race-based discrimination in the United States to better understand caste-based discrimination on Indian university campuses and to specifically develop an analysis of Microaggression theory (Sue *et al.*, 2007a) as relevant to the study of discrimination experienced by the lower caste students.

Caste is an identity status and a caste identity is one of the most grounded and pervasive social identities in Indian society, often overriding class identity (Jodhka, 2012). Despite constitutional guarantees¹ to eradicate caste discrimination, after more than 60 years of independence, caste remains a fundamental identification of an individual, and caste discrimination remains a pervasive phenomenon in rural and urban India. This is made evident by the fact that untouchability is still widely practised by the upper castes. Studies on untouchability claim that it has greatly declined and is virtually non-existent (Jodhka, 2012). However, incidents of untouchability frequently surface in the media. Such reports have included the Dalits² being denied entry into temples and limits imposed on their ability to fetch well water. Further, instances of inter-caste marriage have resulted in the murder of the groom, bride and family members, with very few perpetrators being prosecuted. Even untouchability is still accepted as an egregious form of caste discrimination, albeit it manifests in subtle ways in urban India. A majority of the nation is still rural, where untouchability is routinely practised (Shah, 2006). Reports show that this is also still widespread in schools – clearly evident in the implementation of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MMS³) in public schools (Thorat and Lee, 2005), without discounting the persistence of untouchability to the absolute neglect of other subtle but nevertheless harmful ways that stigma, bias and prejudice are communicated.

In the twenty-first century, Hindu orthodoxy still defends the caste system⁴ as a ‘division of labour’. However, Ambedkar (1944) presented a scholarly critique of caste system and argued that it is also a ‘division of labourers’, which imposes social divisions on labourers – it is a hierarchical separation of labourers where one group of labourers graded above the others. He brilliantly articulated – ‘the effect of caste on the ethics of the Hindus is simply deplorable. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu’s public is his caste. His responsibility is to his

¹The legal provisions such as Anti-Untouchability Act (1955), Protection of Civil Rights Act (1975) and Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989). These acts are facilitated by the Article 17 of the Constitution that considers the practice of untouchability in any form as an offense.

²Dalit means the oppressed and it is a commonly accepted term by former untouchables of India. Dalit is also a popular term in Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

³In 2003, a detailed survey was conducted by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) in 531 villages across five states of India. The study found that various kinds of exclusion and caste discrimination have been experienced by the Dalit students and people associated with meal preparation in MMS.

⁴The Indian caste system is a social hierarchical structure that perpetuates discrimination and stigmatisation based on a caste status. A caste identity is hereditary and a permanent social identity of a person. There is no scope for upward mobility in the caste hierarchy and a caste identity is entirely different than a class identity (Jodhka, 2012). The caste system is an integral part of Hindu religion and justified by religious text such as the *Rig-Veda* and *Manusmriti*, which are ancient Hindu scriptures (Haslam, 1999).

caste. His loyalty is restricted only to his caste' (Ambedkar, 1944, p.24). The dominant narrative justifies caste identities as 'cultural differences' in the society. In reality, caste represents graded inequalities of the society; further, caste identities itself signifies hierarchy and exclusion. Caste system has existed more than 2000 years, therefore, it has great influence on culture and social psyche of the society. Despite modern and secular outlook of Indian culture, feudal caste system and caste identities dominate consciousness of the society; hence, caste is seamlessly merged within the institutions of the country. The higher education institutions are part of the larger society and it is apparent that caste identities manifest in the institutional culture and social relations (Teltumbde, 2001).

Caste-based discrimination in higher education and particularly in elite institutions has been recorded in several studies. A few empirical research studies have been conducted to study caste-based discrimination in higher education (Subramanian, 2015; Thorat and Kumar, 2008). To study causes of discrimination at IIT (Indian Institute of Technology), Nambissan and Rao (2013) noted that the lower caste students and particularly Dalit students face various subtle and explicit forms of discrimination in the institution. The authors explored the concept of stigma⁵ (Goffman, 2009) in a context of polluted caste identities and its impact on social relations in the institution. Deshpande and Zacharias (2013) recorded seventeen suicide cases of Dalit students in various elite institution across India. The article is based on interviews and a compilation of testimonies of families, peers and friends of the deceased students. A detailed qualitative research study was conducted in the elite University of Shah Jahan (north India); in the study, Ovicegan (2015) reported several experiences of caste-based discrimination of the Dalit students and concluded that the caste divide is evidently pervasive across the University.

However, none of these studies provide a framework to understand the systematic nature of the various types of discrimination; it mainly focuses on evident forms of discrimination and not on microaggressions, which are unnoticed and subtle in nature. Research on the topic shows that very little systematic empirical research has been explored to examine a theoretical framework, the underlying context and the concept of microaggression. Though, taxonomic analysis of discriminatory experiences of lower caste students demands empirical study to classify the nature and types of biases, prejudices and exclusionary practices. Research on race and gender microaggressions in the United States and other Western contexts offers a

⁵The concept of stigma (Goffman, 2009) is associated with an identity of a person, group, ethnicity, caste, religion, nation, race, gender and physical and mental condition. A stigmatised person is an undesirable character in public spaces as well as in social relationships. A person with a stigmatised identity is considered not quite human disqualified from full social acceptance and prone to discrimination and physical assault.

unique opportunity to explore a theoretical framework to analyse caste-based discrimination.

I borrow from research on racial microaggression in the United States to develop a language of caste-based discrimination as a way to track acts of bias, prejudice and exclusion which are subtle, complex, mostly invisible, yet that are not recognised as acts of discrimination. Lacking an accepted framework and language to name ‘microaggressions’ (disrespectful or violent messages or communication) as discrimination, often those at the receiving end of such discrimination also do not recognise it as such. On the other end of the spectrum, explicit, visible and recognisable discrimination can be called ‘macroaggressions’. According to laws, macroaggressions (explicit discrimination) are offensive acts and punishable by laws; however, microaggressions are largely outside the purview of existing legal framework; therefore, difficult to prove as caste-based discrimination or as an offense. It shows that caste-based microaggressions are ignored when designing a scholarly study to illustrate various aspects of microaggressions in different contexts.

The first part of the paper explores the ‘Racial Microaggression’ model to classify and develop nomenclature and language that identifies different implicit and explicit forms of bias and negative interactions experienced by the lower caste students that have a detrimental impact on their academic performance, success and self-esteem. The remainder of the paper is organised into three main sections. In the first section, I discuss available research on caste discrimination in higher education in India highlighting both its contributions and limitations. In this section, we will discuss the paucity of research in this area and the fact that scholarly research on the topic is of recent vintage. Most of it is in the form of reports and investigations that have not been made public, which I was fortunate to access and cite in the paper. The second section introduces microaggression theory as developed by US scholars to discuss racial discrimination that can be applied in real and practical ways to explain everyday forms of caste-based discrimination in Indian higher education. I describe the framework developed by Sue *et al.* (2007a), which I have found to be the most comprehensive framework and very relevant to the Indian context. In the final section, I present the taxonomy developed to identify racial discrimination as directly applicable to caste-based discrimination. Here, I draw from secondary research data where students narrate their experiences and specific incidences of bias to show how each of these can be classified within the taxonomy of microaggressions. There is need for in-depth research that can substantiate and validate this theory. In my conclusion, I argue that acknowledging microaggressions is an essential first step to improve campus climate and inculcate self-awareness among all students and ensuring higher academic performance and success of the lower caste students.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Brief Conceptual and Historical Note on caste in India:

The caste system is a feudal institution and it has changed its form through different epochs in history. The system is a hierarchical social structure located in the Indian subcontinent. In the system, each individual has a fixed position by birth (hereditary) and caste hierarchies are broadly classified into four categories. In other words, the system has four prominent caste identities/categories in this order: (1) *Brahmin* (priest or teacher) at the top, (2) *Kshatriya* (king or warrior), (3) *Vaishya* (trader or businessman) and (4) *Shudra* (labourer) at the bottom. Haslam (1999) stated that an explanation of caste system is grounded in ancient Hindu scripture the *Rig-Veda*, the God created the castes to maintain a social order. Other social groups outside the system are known as untouchables (they are also known as outcaste groups or the fifth caste⁶). For more than two millennia, the Dalit have been experiencing a range of exclusion and oppression. The caste system has evolved throughout this long period of time, therefore, it is extremely complex and dynamic in terms of social relationships between castes, regions, religions and contexts.

In this paper, the lower caste refers to the bottom castes – *Shudra*, Dalits and Tribals grouped together. In the Constitution of India, *Shudras* are listed as Other Backward Caste (OBC), Dalits are listed as Scheduled Caste (SC) and Tribals are listed as Scheduled Tribe (ST) in the Constitution. Two years after gaining independence in 1947, the government of India outlawed caste-based discrimination and practices, subsequently forming stringent laws to stop discrimination against the Dalits. The Constitution of India incorporated a compensatory mechanism as laws for the development of the oppressed caste and originated the quota policy⁷ (popularly known as reservation policy). Among the lower castes, Dalits and Tribals have historically experienced socioeconomic, cultural and economic marginalisation. Discrimination and exclusion faced by Dalits and Tribals is profoundly different than that faced by the OBC. Caste-based discrimination in

⁶The fifth caste is groups of communities which are not part of four caste categories, therefore, they are called 'out caste'. Along with the Dalits, Tribals (also known as *Adivasi*) are also recognised as out caste.

⁷The quota policy is a legal mandate (Article 15(4) and Article 16 (4)) to reserve seats in education, employment and political representation at various levels. Both the Articles enable the state and central governments to reserve seats for SC, ST and OBC groups. The number of reserved seats varies in both the central and State government-run public institutions. In central government run institutions, 7.5 percent for ST, 27 percent for SC and 27 percent for OBC seats are reserved. However, each state has slightly different quota policy as per population of the lower caste and other marginalised social groups in the State.

higher education is attributed to two main causes: subordinate⁸ caste identity and the quota policy (Thorat and Kumar, 2008). The paper identifies the OBC in the lower caste groups because they access the quota policy, thus they also confront caste-based discrimination from the higher caste groups.

The caste system is deeply imbedded in Indian society because it is more than two thousand years old. Current Indian society has many relics of ancient history and feudal culture, which are still evident in the society. A caste is a decisive identity in social relationships; however, most higher caste people do not accept its existence (caste blindness), but they practise it consciously and subconsciously. Caste is one of the most significant identities of all social groups across the country, irrespective of religion and class. Ashforth and Mael (1989) noted that in social identity theory, an individual classifies self and others in different social identities such as caste, gender, religion, language, ethnicity, skin colour, class, physical status and others. These identities can be defined by salient characteristics of the members. Social identities facilitate two main purposes; forming cognitive perceptions about self and others and social classification in the context of identity to locate self and others in a larger social environment. Castes have become prominent social identities over a long period of history and gradually they superseded all other identities of the lower caste social groups. The lower caste identity has been the single most critical identity that determines human dignity, social status, economic opportunities and educational outcomes.

The caste system has been justified by the Hindu religious doctrine and strict social customs, rituals and traditions. A lower caste identity is a sign of the polluted (stigmatised) status of a person, which validates all kinds of exploitation and oppression by the higher caste groups. In other words, stigma is a differentiator and an integral part of a Dalit identity. Harro (2013) pointed out that a social identity or identities collectively inculcate people to play roles in the system of oppression and often people are socialised by hegemonic forces around them. This socialisation process facilitates unequal social relationship between various social identities and social groups. Similarly, Smith (2005) stated that a person's subordinate social identity had powerful consequences on that person's survival, social relationships in society and confidence to compete with others, specifically with the dominant identities. It is evident in the literatures⁹ that experiences of

⁸The quota policy builds a solidarity among Dalits, Tribals and OBC groups, which poses a challenge to the caste superiority and cultural hegemony of the higher caste. This creates a rejuvenated animosity among the privileged castes; therefore, their social cognition persuades them to justify that the lower caste groups are submissive to them and they rationalise the caste-based discrimination (Pal, 2015).

⁹Ogbu (1978) studied the 'caste' (caste term is used in North American context that is quite different than caste as an identity in Indian society) status of African Americans and stated that inferior status (subordinate identity) of black students couples with economic marginalisation and social discrimination leads to academic failure. Ogbu's caste theory is still relevant because the inferior status attributed by the dominant group is evident in contemporary society.

stigma create a condition of marginalisation in which a person is excluded, oppressed and refused access to resources.

On one side, caste identities facilitate power and privileges to the higher castes and on the other side is the cause of exploitation and discrimination for the lower castes. The higher castes believe that it is their divine right to dominate society. Further, they are ignorant about their compounded historical advantages as well as an existing social system that offers the unprecedented edge over the lower caste groups. Hoff and Pandey (2006) conducted a research regarding a perceived inferior social identity (the lower caste) of a social group and their interaction with higher social identity (the higher caste) groups in rural India. The authors found that when the lower (subordinate) social identity of a group is publicly revealed, their self-esteem goes down, they have increasing negative thoughts about themselves, their self-confidence drops, and they feel a lower desire to succeed and compete against a dominant identity. The unequal power relation causes enormous psychological harm to the lower caste groups. Contrarily, higher caste groups highlight their dominant identity and reinforce¹⁰ the historical supremacy through the discriminatory regime and exploitative social relationships.

The existence of these caste identities gives a significant advantage to the higher castes in their endeavour to maintain their historical advantages and contemporary hegemony. Education is a 'cultural capital'¹¹ in which the higher castes have been dominating for centuries and are still benefiting from that historical legacy. It is a well known fact that education is a modern capital and the privileged castes have employed their cultural capital and accumulated capital to strengthen their supremacy over the society (Subramanian, 2015). In developing countries such as India, higher education is an important factor for promoting technical advancement and institutional modifications, as well as boosting economic and social development by developing human capital in the society (Ahir and Joshi, 2013). Higher education has been a most potential tool of the higher caste to reinvent their caste power in contemporary India. In the context of caste-based society, the function of higher education is 'cultural reproduction' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990); it reproduces the dominant caste culture in higher education. Therefore, caste hierarchies and caste-based discrimination are institutionalised in higher education institutions.

¹⁰The higher caste groups often use strategies such as confrontations, aggressive attitude and violence to strengthen their historical caste superiority and privileged position in the social order (Pal, 2015).

¹¹The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu offers a concept of cultural capital. He argues that how cultural resources such as formal education can be exploited by the dominant groups (e.g. the privileged castes) to perpetuate their historical position of privilege and power. He noted the social hierarchies (caste system) being reinforced through formal schooling which tend to reproduce the culture of the privileged groups.

Systemic Exclusion in Indian Higher Education

Indian higher education is third largest system in the world, after the United States and China. Higher education system encompasses over 42 central universities, 275 state universities, 130 deemed universities, 90 private universities, 33 institutes of national importance and 33,000 institutions operate as government and private colleges. Since the 1990s, the government of India has been promoting privatisation of higher education. Kamat (2011) pointed out that the privatisation of higher education has reduced the pressure from the public sector and encouraged well off students to access private education, which enhanced access to higher education among all the sections of the society. Though, private sector primarily focusing on sciences, engineering, medical, technology, management and professional courses. From 2001 to 2010, numbers of higher education institutions have doubled (254 to 544) and enrolment has increased by 62 percent. Therefore, access to higher education by the lower caste students has enhanced, but accessibility has been limited to public institutions. The private institutions are not required to implement the quota policy, which diminishes the chance of Dalits to access private education.

Higher education has been elitist because disadvantaged social groups have been systematically filtered out before they reach its doorstep. One of the leading arguments of the privileged caste is 'merit' to pursue higher education. I argue that meritocratic criteria in higher education have been used as an instrument to discriminate against lower caste students. Deshpande and Zacharias (2013) stated that demand for higher education in India far outstrips supply, which encourages various forms of discrimination and meritocratic criteria for rationing. Meritocratic values have taken a dominant position in higher education. In the current meritocratic society, meritocracy has become a major political ideology¹², which derives its strength from higher education. Thus, the argument of merit has been strongly supported by the higher castes against the quota policy, to justify and maintain their control over cultural capital. Subramanian (2015) discussed merit and caste relationship through Bourdieu's 'the forms of capital' and Satish Deshpande's 'social life of caste' framework. Subramanian argues that a large number of IIT students belong to the higher caste background who are enabled to transform¹³ their caste privileges into merit or in Deshpande's words, it is an exchange of caste capital into modern capital (merit).

¹²In context of neoliberal ideology, meritocratic values have taken a dominant position in higher education. Since the 1990s, the meritocratic argument consistently challenged the quota policy and disregarded the social justice spirit of the constitution.

¹³An empirical study conducted by Upadhya (2007) noted that in Indian Information Technology industry, employees mainly belong to the higher castes. In regard to a caste identity, she found only 1 respondent from SC-ST groups; however, 48 percent respondents identified themselves as 'Brahmin' (constitutes around 5 percent of the population) out of 132 respondents of the study.

It is a well known fact that higher education has been one of the leading instruments to promote and prevent social mobility. Neelakandan and Patil (2012) argue that people of the higher caste disregard the role of caste in access to and achievement of education. Caste-based discrimination in education starts at the primary level, which fosters higher dropout ratios among the lower caste groups and is particularly egregious in the Dalit and Tribal groups (Nambissan, 2006, 2009). Caste-based discrimination in higher education institutions has been intentionally neglected by policymakers and political class. Instead of recognising it as an institutional problem, they have treated it as isolated incidents and further denigrated the lower caste students as 'uneducable' or non-meritocratic. Among the lower caste groups, Dalit and Tribal students have experienced intensified humiliation, segregation, derogatory comments and academic harassment (Sukumar, 2008).

Despite the constitutional safeguards, the lower caste students have been facing discrimination (Patwardhan and Palshikar, 1992; Desai and Kulkarni, 2008) and harassment, even in the most prestigious educational institutions. With regard to high dropout, stagnation and suicide cases in elite institutions, IIT campuses are notorious for discriminatory practices, behaviour and attitude towards the lower caste students and particularly against Dalit and Tribal students. To highlight systemic exclusion, (Nambissan and Rao, 2013, pp. 199–223) emphasised that due to lack of institutional social justice awareness in IIT, the lower caste students experience covert and overt discrimination in academic and social relationships. He further added that caste-based discrimination is institutionalised¹⁴ in these institutions and further, the institutions consistently denied such discrimination.

In the last decade, a number of Dalit students have committed suicide (Deshpande and Zacharias, 2013; Girija, 2011; Janyala, 2016; Karthikeyan, 2011) due to systemic discrimination and institutional failure to comprehend caste-based discrimination in higher education. Pal and Arjun (2013) studied suicide cases of the lower caste students in higher education through psychoanalytical and sociological lenses. They argued that life experiences of exclusionary treatment, discrimination by teachers and peers during schooling and past struggles exaggerate social and psychological pressure on them. The consequences of the situation manifest in their academic ability and mental health, which gradually damages their human dignity and future aspirations. Altogether it makes difficult to survive in an institution where the lower caste students do not find adequate institutional supports and social spaces that leads to a tragic outcome.

¹⁴In context of subordinate student identity, Jim Cummins studied a 'framework of intervention' to empower minority students in schools. Cummins (1986) pointed out that minority students are disempowered by schools (structural aspects in the organisation of schooling), which is similar to their communities are marginalised in the society. The *dominant* group controls societal institutions and denied the *dominated* groups' access to high-status positions in the institution.

A detailed investigation of suicide cases was reported by Insight Foundation, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). The foundation investigated seventeen cases (in between 2005 to 2012) of suicides and presents that in all the cases the Dalit students were harassed, discriminated against and intimidated by their higher caste peers, faculty and the administration. The NGO pointed out that only in one case a suicide note was found, not in any other cases. Further, was in the jacket of the deceased student (Singh¹⁵) which he left in the library just before the suicide. The foundation claims indicate systemic apathy of law enforcement agencies and of institutional administrators, which eliminated vital evidences in most of the cases. To make matters worse, these authorities frequently shifted blame to the deceased students and reported the issues as a mental health problem or inability to handle rigorous academic work and completely rejected any type of caste-based institutional discrimination as a cause for suicide.

One of the most appalling official reports regarding institutional discrimination was reported by the Thorat Committee (2007), which is available on Medico Friend Circle website (www.mfcindia.org). The committee was appointed by the Union Health and Family Welfare Ministry of India to investigate allegations of differential treatment of the lower caste students at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS). The committee clearly concluded that caste-based discrimination was prevalent in the institution; however, AIIMS rejected the report and denied any caste-based discrimination (Dhar, 2007). The report categorically states that the AIIMS did not follow the quota policy as directed in the constitution and effectively denied a considerable number of opportunities to student of the SC & ST groups. The report clearly noted that discrimination against the lower caste students is evident in both subtle and direct manners. The administration harassed students who did not want to participate in anti-quota¹⁶ agitation. The committee further reported, that around 72 percent of SC and ST students mentioned some forms of discrimination were experienced in classroom. Similarly, approximately 76 percent of the respondents reported that the examiner asked them their caste background and about 88 percent students reported experiences of social isolation in various ways by higher caste peers (pp. 63–70). These staggeringly higher numbers in one of the elitist institutions indicate the pervasiveness of caste-based

¹⁵He was a fifth year student of Government Medical College, Chandigarh. He was intentionally failed by the higher faculty and before that he never failed in four academic years. The faculty threatened him to fail again and again which Jaspreet mentioned in his suicide note. In the inquiry process, Jaspreet's answer sheets were sent to a team of external evaluators who declared him passed in the same subject in which he was failed. Jaspreet was awarded a medical degree after death.

¹⁶Protests against the quota policy have been led by higher caste groups to eliminate all forms of the quota policy. Over the past decade, various groups and organisations such as 'Youth for Equality', 'All Indian Anti-Reservation Front' and recently in 2016, *Patidar* community, have been protesting against the quota policy in Gujarat.

discrimination and the very high frequency of microaggressions against lower caste students in the institution. It is an appalling reality that casteism has been exported outside of India (Ghuman, 2015). A final year Dalit student of AIIMS has shared shocking facts. He said, *I had an opportunity recently for an internship at the University of Pennsylvania. AIIMS couldn't do anything about it, so they got in touch with their seniors there, who, as I have heard, assured them they would set me right* (Donthi, 2007).

Caste-based discrimination has been investigated by various committees in different institutions. Hyderabad Central University (HCU) is one such premier institution; however, it is infamous for harassing its students from the disadvantaged castes. In 2002, Anveshi Law Committee investigated a rustication of 10 Dalit students who were office bearers of the Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA¹⁷) and reported that the Dalit students at HCU campus face alienation, segregation, harassment and exclusion by the higher caste students, faculty and administration. The committee also reported that the Dalit students experience microaggressions in classrooms, hostels and in social relations on the campus. Similarly, Girija (2011) noted that in 2008, a Dalit doctoral student, Senthil Kumar committed suicide because he was not assigned an academic advisor for a long time and he was subject to caste-based harassment. A committee was appointed to investigate Senthil's suicide. The committee mentions in the report that the School of Physics was clearly acting against the interest of Dalit and Tribal students. These reports identified institutionalised casteism where caste hierarchies are part of the institution and stated that the institution has been practising casteism covertly and overtly in the institutional life. I argue further that casteism is rampant where the lower caste students are vocal about their rights and protesting against discrimination. As an example, ASA has been agitating regarding caste-based discrimination and social justice issues on the HCU campus. Therefore, the lower caste students are confronting strong institutional retributions from the higher castes.

In January 2016, another Dalit scholar at HCU – Rohith Vemula was driven to suicide. He was a doctoral student at HCU and a student leader who was raising socio political and caste issues on the campus. Rohith was a member of the ASA and engaged in social justice issues of the lower caste and other marginalised students on the campus. Therefore, the authority (the higher caste) was hostile to him and ASA members in every possible way; on the ground of disciplinary actions he was stripped off his fellowship, expelled from the hostel, suspended for a

¹⁷ASA is a group of the lower caste students at higher education institutions across the country. The group endorses the ideology of the Dalit emancipator Dr. B R Ambedkar, it organises intellectual events, raise issues pertaining to social justice, anti-brahminical (against caste hegemonic ideology) discourse and Dalit rights. Therefore, they are treated as anti-social and problematic students by the casteist administration.

semester and harassed through multiple investigations (Henry, 2016). After a great struggle against the authority and the higher caste propaganda, Rohith took an extreme step to demonstrate his final protest by ending his life. He clearly mentioned discrimination against Dalit students in the university, which he stated in his letter to Vice Chancellor of the university. Rohith writes, *First, let me praise your dedicated take on the self-respecting movement of Dalits in Campus. When an ABVP¹⁸ president got questioned about his derogatory remarks on Dalits, your kind personal interference into the issue is historic and exemplary*, (Janyala, 2016).

Rohith's death was widely reported in different media and reports of previous cases of atrocities and suicides on the campus inspired a robust protest at the HCU campus. The protest rapidly expanded into a massive nationwide outcry against caste-based discrimination across higher education institutions. Similarly, the political classes from lower caste groups as well as academicians, public intellectuals and Dalit activists joined the protest, which created popular pressure on the government of India. In response, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has announced that a new policy will be prepared to tackle issues of discrimination against students from disadvantaged sections of society. This announcement is applauded; however, the MHRD does not name or recognised it as 'caste-based discrimination' and still avoids acknowledging that lower caste students are being discriminated. The MHRD has taken exactly the same stand which was taken by IITs, AIIMS, HCU and other institutions— denial of caste-based discrimination. Here, the point whether the MHRD seriously wants to deal with the caste issues in higher education or has merely prepared an impotent reactionary policy response that will maintain the status quo.

The status quo raises a critical question – what types of implicit and explicit caste-based discrimination push lower caste students toward suicide and academic failure? Research into this question demands a scholarly study of caste-based discrimination in higher education through different theoretical lenses such as classification of various types of discrimination through 'Microaggressions' theory (Sue *et al.*, 2007a).

Application of Microaggressions Theory to Studies of Caste-Based Discrimination

'Every black child will recognise and defend promptly and adequately against every offensive microaggressions. In this way, the toll that is registered after accumulation of such insults should be markedly reduced' (Pierce, 1970, p. 280).

¹⁸ABVP is a dominant student organisation on college campuses across India. It is affiliated with RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or National Volunteer Organization), a Hindu nationalist organisation that is also a parent organisation of a current ruling party of India.

For more than two decades, higher education institutions in the United States have recognised issues of diversity and discrimination. Studies on diversity and discrimination are mainly grounded in race and identity issues. Discrimination of students of colour or racism in higher education in the United States is parallel to caste-based discrimination in Indian context. Gupta (2006) states that discrimination based on caste in India and race in the United States are similar at a fundamental level and both groups have been facing a range of exclusions from the dominant groups in their respective countries. In both the groups, students of colour and the lower caste students are perceived and treated as stigmatised. Further, historical oppression of both the groups are evident in contemporary socioeconomic and educational deprivation. In North America and Western countries, microaggressions theory has been explored to study racial and gender discrimination, interpersonal behaviours and biased attitudes in higher education settings.

The term 'microaggressions' is derived from 'racial microaggressions' which was coined by Chester Pierce in 1969, a professor of psychiatry and education at Harvard. Pierce defined racial microaggressions as an 'offensive mechanism' (Pierce, 1970) in everyday life to communicate a range of covert and overt racial insults aimed at African American groups. The concept of microaggressions was further developed by Derald Sue *et al.* in 2007: 'Microaggressions are the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation and religious slights and insults to the target person or group' (Sue, 2010, p.5).

Dr. Sue developed a robust theoretical framework and research tools (e.g. discourse analysis), which facilitate an opportunity to apply the racial microaggressions model in terms of gender, sexual orientation and stigmatised identities such as caste. In the theory of microaggressions, Sue *et al.* (2007a) explains taxonomic classification of microaggressions messages in everyday life. Through the lens of clinical psychology, Sue and his colleagues have identified three broad categories: (1) microassaults, (2) microinsults and (3) microinvalidations. They also discuss various physical, mental and academic consequences suffered by the recipients. One should note that microaggressions theory has been for over-emphasising the harmful effects suffered by recipients (Schacht, 2008).

The theory of microaggressions offers a deeper understanding of verbal and non-verbal exchanges between subordinate and dominant groups. The theory is widely explored to investigate implicit and explicit communication/messages between various groups on college campuses. Yosso *et al.* (2009) stated that students of

colour and white students perceive campus climate¹⁹ differently because both the groups are socialised in a dominant white culture. At many campuses, racial climate (Hurtado, 1992) conveys both subtle and overt messages that students of colour are unqualified and unwanted, whereas white students feel they are an integral part of the predominantly white institution. In this scenario, students of colour (particularly Black, Hispanic and Native American) everyday receive racial microaggressions in a college environment (Sue, 2010. p. 25–57).

Similarly, exploration of microaggressions theory when studying caste-based discrimination provides a theoretical framework to investigate bias, prejudice and discrimination in Indian higher education. A few empirical research projects have been conducted to study caste-based discrimination in higher education. The studies conducted in elite higher education institutions have reported discriminatory experiences of lower caste students (Nambissan and Rao, 2013; Deshpande and Zacharias, 2013; Ovichegan, 2015). It reiterates the pervasiveness of caste-based discrimination; although they do not specifically discuss the nature of discrimination, types of hostility and consequences on the lower caste students. In this regard, the theory of microaggressions helps to identify and name these experiences as messages of microaggressions. Discrimination faced by lower caste students consists largely of microaggressions (not easily visible and lack of language to define), which are insidious and complex, as well as physically and physiologically draining.

According to the racial microaggressions model (Sue *et al.*, 2007a), caste-based discrimination occurs at three levels: individual, institutional and cultural. Individual casteism refers to any conscious, explicit and purposeful act directed by an individual against the lower caste groups such as blocking lower caste people from live in higher caste neighbourhoods, preventing a higher caste person from marrying or dating a lower caste person, stopping a lower caste person from fetching water from the higher caste controlled water source and maintaining a distance from any kind of physical contact (e.g. untouchability). On the other end of the spectrum, macroaggressions can include violent reactions for breaking social norms such as not showing respect to a higher caste person or neighbourhood (e.g. celebrating a festival and achievement and marriage procession) and hate crimes (e.g. rape, naked parade, violent assault and burning of houses) which are committed specifically against the Dalits to maintain caste superiority.

¹⁹Susan Rankin, a leading scholar on campus climate research defines campus climate as ‘the current attitudes, behaviours and standards of faculty, staff, administrators and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities and potential’ (Berkeley, 2016, para.1). Campus climate encompasses various issues such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, religion and religion. Campus climate is a significant aspect of the academic experience of students because the environment both within and outside of the classroom affect students’ thinking and academic performance.

Institutional casteism (institutional microaggressions)²⁰ refers to any practice, procedure, policy or structure in an institution such as government, business, judiciary, religious, education and others, by which actions and decisions are made that unethically discriminate against the lower caste groups, bringing profit or favour to higher cast groups. Casteism is institutionalised in caste profiling (e.g. non-meritocratic), housing segregation (strict in rural areas and evident in urban spaces), segregation of religious worship, distortion of Dalit history and discriminatory hiring and promotion practices (Thorat and Newman, 2007), subversion of the quota policy (Thorat Committee report on AIIMS, 2007) and implementation of official policy in a way that harms lower caste groups and facilitate benefits to others.

Cultural casteism²¹ is a code of social hierarchy in which exploitation and discrimination are part of various cultural representations (Hall, 1997) that people internalise in the socialisation process. In other words, caste hierarchy is a part of everyday life (Seigworth and Gardiner, 2004) and explicitly and subtly seeps into languages, traditions, religious practices, commerce and social consciousness. Caste is profoundly merged into Indian culture that reinforces higher caste values, beliefs, traditions and social norms over lower caste groups. Further, higher castes legitimate their culture by scriptures and religious reasoning, thus, culture of lower caste has been considered as uncivilised and abnormal. Several examples are evident such as the beef-based diet of Dalits and Tribals being considered blasphemous²². In general, a person's last name represents a caste identity, strictly vegetarian food habits and particular dress code of the higher caste, and negligible and distorted representation of lower caste in textbooks and history.

One might argue that overt forms of caste-based discrimination have declined; however, expressions of bias, prejudice and discrimination have morphed into subtle and implicit forms, which are invisible and hidden in the modern outlook. Most higher caste individuals believe that they are moral, decent human beings who do not intentionally discriminate on the basis of caste identity. However,

²⁰Institutional structures, practices and culture create a campus racial climate which conveys aggressive messages to people of colour. These kinds of hostility are collectively permitted and encouraged by the university administration (Yosso *et al.*, 2009).

²¹According to Marxist analytic frameworks, caste-based discrimination is a repressive cultural code, which is justified by the ideologies and coercive power of the higher caste. Further, culture is orchestrated by the 'Ideological State Apparatus'; it constructs the dominant narratives of everyday life and a system of representations to reproduce capitalistic (casteist) modes of production.

²²In July 2016, a cow vigilante group publically flogged four Dalit men in Gujarat. The four Dalit men were transporting dead cows to remove their skin. The vigilante groups inspired by Hindu nationalism and they believe cow is a holy animal (mentioned in religious scriptures) and their spiritual mother (*gau mata*). Therefore, beef eating or cow slaughtering is blasphemous act; moreover, most of Indian states have legally banned cow slaughter and beef-based food.

caste identities and caste-specific behaviours are profoundly merged into Indian culture and the psyche of society, and it is difficult for an individual to be immune from inherited caste biases (derived from *aversive racism*, Dovidio and Gaertner, 1996). Further, I argue that it is possible that one can claim that he/she/they do not know about caste identity. It can be interpreted that such an individual is ignorant about caste privileges and most likely is from the higher castes. Otherwise, it is impossible that one could belong to a stigmatised/polluted caste without being aware of his/her/their caste identity because society (the higher caste groups and socialisation process) would constantly reinforce a stigmatised identity upon his/her/their identity as part of a social norm.

Racial microaggressions are similar to aversive racism and are manifested unconsciously by well-intentioned people. Research on microaggressions focuses on explaining the dynamic relations between recipient and perpetrator, interpretation of messages, classification of various manifestations, studying internal (psychological) and external realities (e.g. education, employment and socioeconomic status) (Sue *et al.*, 2007b; Sue and Capodilupo, 2008). Diverse literature on racial microaggressions inspires how to study caste-based discrimination in higher education. For instance, racial microaggressions studies in higher education settings offer a critical explanation regarding relations between white faculties and students of colour, unintentional and hidden message from faculty/peers, pedagogical sensitivity towards students of colour, syllabus content and race issues, and pathologising black students' communication and learning styles (Sue, 2010. p. 25–57).

In modern India, caste specific bias, prejudice and discrimination have transform edits manifestation, now perpetuates in more implicit, subtle and complex forms. The Constitution of India is explicit about the human rights of the lower caste groups. Despite the stringent laws to stop caste discrimination and atrocities, the lower caste groups are still experiencing a range of atrocities and discrimination. Jain (2015) stated that official (according to the National Crime Record Bureau) statistics of crimes committed against the Dalit showed increased from 39,408 in 2013 to 47,064 in 2014. This is just reported crimes and unreported crimes are probably many times higher. Further, these crimes are explicit (macroaggressions) acts of caste-based atrocities, as opposed to microaggressions on caste lines, which causes gradual psychological harm to the recipients. It is ironic that with rapid modernisation and urbanisation processes, caste-based atrocities have to be declined; however, the statistics reveal escalating violence against the Dalits. In this scenario, the most significant question is why crimes against the Dalits have increased by more than twenty percent in a single year (2013–2014). More ominously, this also indicates that commitment of caste atrocities could be a tool to suppress Dalit empowerment (National Human Rights Commission, 2004) and reinvent caste hierarchies for the twenty-first century.

In context to microaggressions, a conscious perpetrator (microaggressor) might cause less harm compared with an unconscious perpetrator because the greatest harm to the lower caste person (specifically the Dalits & Tribals) is delivered by well-intentioned individuals who believe in democratic values, fairness and non-discriminatory policies. In general, well-educated and modern-thinking higher caste individuals frequently practise unconscious caste-based microaggressions. On a conscious level, they appear egalitarian, but at an unconscious level they harbour anti-lower caste feelings and caste superiority perspectives.

Taxonomy of Caste-Based Microaggressions

A taxonomy of the racial microaggressions model (Sue, *et al.*, 2007b; Sue and Capodilupo, 2008) has been adapted to classify caste-based discrimination in higher education. Microaggressions are identified into three categories: microassault, microinsult and micro invalidation. These three categories represent different forms of overt and covert forms of invasive messages inflicted upon recipients. The model shows the relationship between the three categories and lists a few examples of each category, of everyday concealed/humiliating messages which are communicated to people of colour. This model explores racial microaggressions to explain various forms in which racism is the central cause. In Figure 1, the racial microaggressions model (race as an example) is adapted to illustrate caste-based discrimination.

Examples for the taxonomic classification are mainly cited from three secondary sources. First, the book *Face of Discrimination in Higher Education in India: Quota Policy, Social Justice and the Dalits* (Ovichagan, 2015) relates several incidents of microaggressions which were quoted by Dalit students in elite University of Shah Jahan. This is one of the few detailed empirical studies focusing on discriminatory experiences suffered by Dalit students in higher education. Second, an article [*Structural Exclusion in Everyday Institutional Life: Labelling of Stigmatized Groups in an IIT* (Nambissan and Rao, 2013)] cited from the book *Sociology of education in India: Changing contours and emerging concerns* to discuss some direct quotes of the Dalit and Tribal students in IIT. Third, an article (*Defying the Odds: The Triumphs and Tragedies of Dalit and Adivasi Students in Higher Education* (Deshpande and Zacharias, 2013) quoted from the book *Beyond inclusion: the practise of equal access in Indian higher education* to elucidate discriminatory experiences of the Dalit and Tribal students in various premier institutions of the country.

Microassaults

Microassaults are conscious, deliberate and either subtle or explicit racial (casteist), gender or sexual-orientation biased attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours that are communicated to marginalised groups through environmental cues, verbalisations

or behaviours (Sue, 2010, p. 28). They are conscious attempts to harm an individual or group from a stigmatised/subordinate identity and where the perpetrator is aware that the type of action, behaviour or symbol being imparted will cause harm to the intended victim. In the case of casteist microassaults, it is a clear message to the lower caste groups to threaten them and make them feel that they are unwanted and polluted because of their stigmatised identities and subhuman status in society.

Verbal microassaults include disrespectful casteist epithets; in general, ‘achhut’, ‘bhangi’, ‘chamar’, ‘chuhri’ and many other slurs in different languages and contexts across the country. In the same language, there might be other epithets/slurs directed at an individual which s/he/they is not familiar with and may not even be aware that a slur was intended. Casteist verbal microassaults are mostly possible in a limited geographical space where caste identities are known to each other or easily identifiable through accent, attire, and cultural cues (e.g. common in rural areas). In other words, a verbal microassault occurs when stigmatised caste identity is publicly revealed (people known to each other) to the higher castes. Sue (2010) stated that verbal microassaults are directed at various subordinate groups across the United States because of visible identification marks of a stigmatised identity such as skin colour (e.g. blacks), external look (e.g. Asians/Hispanic), gender (e.g. female) or sexual orientation (e.g. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer).

A stigmatised caste identity indicates cultural oppression perpetuated by the dominant castes and reinforces stratification between the Dalits (polluted) and the higher caste (pure). In 2015, a disturbing news account was published and aired in Indian mainstream media that Dalit brothers faced stone-pelting in their village because they achieved a milestone by clearing the prestigious Joint Entrance Exam (JEE) to enter into IIT (Basu, 2015). This is a classic example that the higher caste mindset cannot tolerate the fact that the Dalits can attain an incredible success and join elite IIT. Further, it indicates that the privileged castes want to maintain their hegemony over the cultural capital. It is evident that higher education and elite institutions are bastions of the higher caste; therefore, the stigmatised caste students experience challenges and discrimination (Sukumar, 2008) to first gain access to and then achieve a degree if they survive in higher education institutions.

When a teacher²³ harbours casteist mindset and discriminatory attitude against the lower caste students then it is difficult to survive and attain a degree in such circumstances.

²³The Indian Exclusion Report (2014) stated that biased attitude of a teacher often inspires discriminatory behaviour by the higher caste peers. The impact of negative experiences of the lower caste students are seen in psychological hurt that reflects in frequent absenteeism, school dropout, lower participation in learning processes, limited intergroup relations among peers and lower educational attainment.

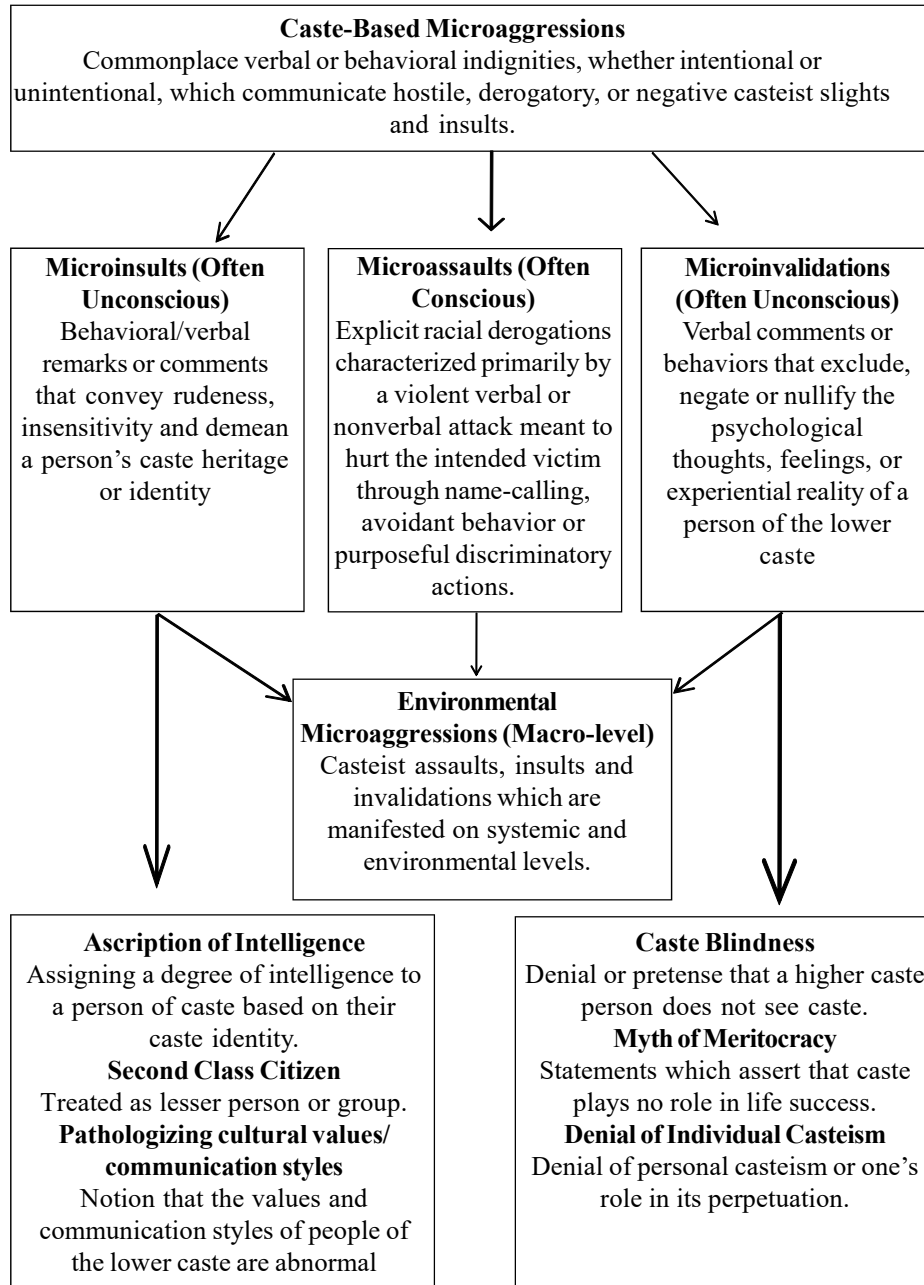


Figure 1: The Racial Microaggressions Model; *Source:* Adapted from Sue *et al.* (2007a), Categories of and Relationships Among Caste-Based Microaggressions

Source: Adapted from Sue *et al.* (2007a), Categories of and relationships among caste-based Microaggressions Deshpande and Zacharias (2013) couple of examples based on investigation regarding the suicide of Dalit and Tribal students in elite institutions across India. A Dalit student in Madurai college shared a microassault communicated by the higher caste teacher in response to the future plans of the students. The teacher said, *you are not able to afford your BA in Madurai and [you are thinking to go in JNU? You can't even think of going there* (Deshpande and Zacharias, 2013, p.186). Similarly, one of the most egregious cases of caste-based discrimination reported in VMMC (Vardhman Mahavir College), New Delhi. Chandra (2012) noted that a faculty of physiology in the college repeatedly failed 25 Dalit students in physiology exam. After an intervention of the Delhi High Court, re-exam was conducted at a neutral place and 24 cleared the exam out of 25 students

A Tribal woman from Jharkhand State shared a personal experience at a professional college in Ranchi. *While we were sitting together on the second row in the class, an 'upper' caste classmate, who came late in the class, made this statement, 'coming from reservation quota, you do not deserve to be in this course and sit in the second row, go and sit last'* (Deshpande and Zacharias 2013, p.190). The casteist mindset reinvented caste in different forms. For an example, the quota policy has been a great support for the lower caste students; however, the same policy perceived as a stigma and imposed upon lower caste students by the higher castes. It also reinforces feudal caste etiquettes in institutional settings to convey a message that who has the control over higher education.

I earlier mentioned that IIT is one of the most notorious institutions pertaining to caste-based discrimination. A study was conducted to investigate the systemic exclusion of lower caste students at IIT (Nambissan and Rao, 2013). In the article, authors quoted several statements of Dalit and Tribal students who experienced microaggressions at the institution. In IIT, Dalit and Tribal students are known as 'PC' (Preparatory Course, it is another stigmatised identity in IIT that labels them as weak students). Students are also referred to as Common Admission Test), indicating students who enrolled in IIT directly through JEE. A Dalit student shared his first physics class experience, *I asked a question. Then the teacher instead of answering it straight, he asked me another question in return, you don't know even this? Are you a PC student?* (Nambissan and Rao, 2013, p.210). Everyday exclusion and humiliation are not limited to faculty and peers; even technical staff engaged in microassaults. A Dalit student in the fourth year of engineering shared his experience, *we have a workshop demonstrator [...] who used to keep uttering all the bad things about the SC students. He keeps creating nuisance every now and then* (Nambissan and Rao, 2013, p.210).

Microinsults

Microinsults are often unconscious forms of microaggressions which are communicated through interpersonal or environmental messages such as stereotypes, insensitivity and rudeness. These messages are humiliating to the race, caste, gender, sexual orientation, culture or identity of an individual (Sue, 2010). Microinsults are different than microassaults because the perpetrator is unconsciously practising microaggressions towards the recipient. Microinsults are delivered outside of conscious awareness either through interpersonal communication or environmental hints which might be intended to communicate a positive statement or a compliment but actually conveys an adverse or insulting message to the recipient. In the paper, I have overlooked 'assumption of criminal status' theme of microinsults (Figure 1) category, in Western world the people of colour and specifically blacks are perceived as 'criminal' or 'aggressive'; however, the lower caste groups are not stigmatised as criminal or dangerous.

Themes of microinsults (Sue and Capodilupo, 2008) adapted in caste context:

a) Ascription of Intelligence: The microinsults refer to subordinate groups' intellect, competencies and abilities. For an example, the higher caste peers, faculty, and administration believe that lower caste students and specifically Dalits and Tribals are intellectually inferior to the higher caste students, a common casteist microaggression that persists in elite higher education institutions. In the IIT, the common perception about the quota students is *they are weak students*. In other words, the institution treats them as less intelligent.

b) Second-Class citizen: This microinsult conveys that people of certain groups (mostly subordinate identities) are inferior human beings compared with the dominant groups. They are treated as less important and non-worthy; this microinsult is frequently delivered by well-intentioned higher caste people who unconsciously engage in discriminatory behaviour against the stigmatised students. In the context of premium institutions, the lower caste students are treated as substandard through comments like, *they do not belong in this institution*.

c) Pathologising Cultural Values/Communication Style: This microinsult suggests that the dominant norms of cultural values and communication style represent the higher castes, and that other cultural values and styles are uncivilized. As an example – a non-vegetarian diet is common among Dalit and Tribal students but is considered to be outrageous in the elite education institutions. Most of the higher caste students' communication style considered to be sophisticated because of their English medium schooling. On the contrary, large number of Dalit and Tribal students educated in regional languages; therefore, their communication style perceived as less competent. Even in regional languages, accent and word

differences are significant marker of caste identities. Thus, whatever language the lower caste students speak their caste identity can be recognised.

Microinsults against the lower caste students are more common in higher education institutions because caste-based discrimination is illegal and people pretend to be decent. Examples of microinsults show subtleness and implicit caste presence in the centre of learning. A Dalit man in the University of Shah Jahan quoted, *I was asked personal questions about my family members [...] where they are from [...] family income [...] what kind of area I live in, etc. And the worst part is that the faculty members asking these questions were high-caste non-Dalit.*

(Ovichegan, 2015, p.100). This quote shows that directly asking about caste is an offensive act, a person might inquire about it through indirect methods. These indirect methods are common in educated individuals than undereducated or illiterate people. It is possible that someone merely wants to know a person's personal background, nonetheless these loaded questions are messages of microaggressions for the lower caste students which they feel instantly.

A Dalit student in a veterinary science college in Madhya Pradesh shared his experience about institutional discrimination experienced by Dalit and Tribal students in the college. *During my entire graduation period I never scored more than average marks in my practical despite always being the first or the second topper in theory papers* (Deshpande and Zacharias, 2013, p.186). An institution adapts culture of the dominant group/identity which gradually blend into the institutional life. In IIT, the reception class offers an opportunity for students to get to know each other; students and teachers share their personal information such as first name, last name (generally signifying a caste identity), region and JEE rank. The introduction process reveals two important identities of lower caste students such as caste identity and JEE rank, which confirm their caste identity. From the first class on, teachers and students identify the lower caste students and caste hierarchy enters into social relationships in the institution. The higher caste students feel proud of their caste superiority and high JEE rank, thus they reinforce it through various ways. A Dalit student in IIT shared an example of this type of behaviour from the higher caste peers. *We were three in our room in the hostel of the first year. Both the other guys are from the general category[...]the other fellow would say that he belongs to the same caste as so and so movie actor and their family is like this and that. I never told them about myself and my family* (Nambissan and Rao, 2013, p.217).

Microinvalidations

Another form of microaggressions, microinvalidations is messages and environmental hints which convey disrespect for or contradict recipients' personal views, feelings (psychological perspectives) and experiential reality (Sue, 2010).

Microinvalidations are indirect and hidden, therefore, it may cause great harm to the recipient and further, it denies a subjective reality such as the race, caste, gender or sexual orientation of subordinate groups. In context of caste identities, the dominant narrative invalidates socioeconomic realities of the Dalits and Tribals. An overwhelming number of the privileged caste believes that caste is insignificant in modern India. In the paper, I have overlooked 'Alien in Own Land' theme of microinvalidations (Figure 1) category because it does not apply in the context of caste.

Themes of microinvalidation (Sue, 2010) adapted in caste context:

a) Caste Blindness: This microinvalidation communicates that the higher caste groups do not see caste, in other words, denial or reluctance to admit caste as a prominent identity in Indian society. Caste blindness is a common expressed notion, *I do not see or believe in caste*. This message conveys that one should not bring up caste issues in conversation and also taking the defensive stance, *I am not casteist, though I belong to the higher caste*. It shows that the higher caste people consciously and unconsciously receiving the privileges of their caste identity but pretends to be a blind toward the disadvantages of the lower caste students.

b) Denial of Individual Casteism: It refers to an individual denial of personal experiences of casteism. Example of such denial is, *I have friends from the lower caste*. If the lower caste students complain about caste discrimination and then blame upper-caste individuals, *you are using the caste card to defame me/us*.

c) Myth of Meritocracy: It is a dominant narrative that all social groups in India have an equal opportunity to attain success in any field. According to the meritocratic values of higher education in India, merit becomes a standard argument used by the privileged caste to deny access and further discriminate against the lower caste students in the institutions (Deshpande and Zacharias, 2013). *The lower caste students are not meritocratic, therefore, they are quota students*.

At elite campuses, Dalit students are mostly invisible or their existence is largely invalidated. A Dalit female student from the University of Shah Jahan revealed, *I'm not implying that non-Dalits blatantly discriminate against us[...] however, I would add that [...] here there is a clear invisible line of caste separation. As a Dalit [...] this line is very visible, as I am accustomed to being sidelined* (Ovichegan, 2015, p.134). If Dalit and Tribal students express their opinion about caste discrimination and exclusion in the Institution, they will be blamed for exploiting their caste identity. In some cases, the higher caste people conspire to invalidate their intellect and scholarship. A Dalit student from professional college in Madhya Pradesh said, *if they (the higher caste) find some Dalit student performing much better than them, instead of changing their impressions, they*

make plans to obstruct his/her studies by every means possible (Deshpande and Zacharias, 2013, p.190).

A stigmatised caste identity might change the objective reality of a person or invalidate personal admirable characteristics. A similar experience shared by a Dalit student in IIT; Nambissan and Rao (2013) stated that a handsome Dalit student was praised and he was called *Maddy* (looked like a movie star *Madhavan*). When his caste was known, he became a Dalit and therefore, his attractive features abruptly vanished. Microinvalidation also occurs at an institutional level, as earlier mentioned in the Thorat committee (2007) report. However, the report was completely rejected by the eight member AIIMS committee. They claimed, *the Thorat Committee acted with a clear prejudice to deliver a misleading report that relies on imaginary facts, flawed methodology and baseless conclusions apparently with the sole purpose to discrediting the AIIMS* (The Hindu, 2007). The official stand of AIIMS is quite shocking because it is an invalidation of caste-based discrimination of Dalit and Tribal students in the institute. Even worse, with the committee report invalidated, how does an aggrieved person pursue an individual grievance?

Environmental Microaggressions

The word environment itself suggests that it is pervasive and one can feel and experience all the time. In other words, it is like a weather that one can instinctively feel and sense, without having any kind of negative experience. Environmental microaggressions are delivered through various aggressive signals that affect the social, economic, political and educational domains and can be communicated at individual, institutional or cultural levels against subordinate groups (Pierce, 1970; Sue, 2010). Verbal and non-verbal forms of microaggressions can be easily recognised, but environmental microaggressions are difficult to recognise and pinpoint. Moreover, environmental microaggressions may be more damaging when they intentionally or unintentionally appear in an environment (the climate of a place). Yosso *et al.* (2009) noted that in the context of the higher education institution, campus climate refers to environmental messages conveyed to students and staff members. A racist campus climate conveys environmental microaggressions (without any kind of interpersonal relations) against students of colour (Sue, 2010b, p. 25–57).

In many cases, environmental microaggressions are direct and clear messages to subordinate student groups that this campus is not inclusive. Sue *et al.* (2007b) state that environmental microaggressions communicate different messages for different groups. Students of colour may experience a campus climate that is hostile and exclusionary; whereas white students experience a campus climate that is welcoming and accommodating. However, campus climate is more than

the perceptions of the underrepresented students; there are multidimensional environmental aspects that impact academic outcomes (Hurtado *et al.*, 2008). Environmental microaggressions occur at both macro and systemic levels. This could be the most effective way to deliver microaggressions because it is prevalent everywhere in a specific context. Environmental microaggressions can be communicated through symbols, images and mass media presentations of subordinate groups (Sue, 2010).

Environmental microaggressions in the context of caste-based discrimination refer to the dominance of the higher castes in higher education and specifically that it is prominent in elite institutions across India. Some examples such as last name of faculties (e.g. a name plate outside an office); the last name mostly signifies caste identity and the higher caste faculties dominate the elite institutions. In the case of IIT, faculty statistics show that the proportion of higher caste faculty is disproportionately high (Nambissan and Rao, 2013). A high number of the dominant caste faculties consciously and subconsciously build solidarity around a caste identity, which further strengthens their caste culture in the institution. Therefore, in Tamil Nadu, some vernacular press sarcastically referred IIT as *Iyer Iyengar Technology* (IIT), referring the two *Brahmin* sub-castes in the state (Mulai, 2012). On the other side, the stigmatised students experience an environmental aggressions and they do not feel part of the institution. Several incidents of caste-based discrimination in IITs have been recorded; therefore, lower caste students may perceive these institutions are threatening and not welcoming (Deshpande and Zacharias, 2013).

In the elite institutions, the lower caste students are treated as low status because of their poor material condition (Weisskopf, 2004) compared with the higher caste peers and faculties. All the elite institutions emphasise meritocracy, which indirectly communicates a subtle message to the beneficiaries of the quota policy that *you are not meritocratic*. Some of the elite institutions do not legitimately practise the quota policy and in some cases subvert the policy to benefit the higher caste groups. These types of practises create a fear of environmental microaggressions for lower caste students. Other examples of environmental microaggressions such as non-vegetarian food – beef is a common food among the Dalits and Tribals, but non-vegetarian food and specifically beef is a forbidden among the higher caste groups (Jodhka, 2012). Thus, Dalits and Tribal students are aware that talking about beef is a taboo in the institution and it might disclose their caste identity or affiliation with lower caste groups.

Research on campus climate has demonstrated that students of colour and white students experience campus climate differently (Yosso et al., 2009). Similarly, the lower caste students and the higher caste students also perceive campus climate differently. A Dalit student from the University of Shah Jahan said, *I can tell from*

the non-Dalits' body language that I am not welcome (Ovichegan, 2015, p. 96). The body language of non-Dalits might not be a conscious behaviour to convey a message; however, micro expressions emerge from deeply rooted biases and prejudices that collectively communicate environmental microaggressions against lower caste students. It is very difficult for an individual or group belonging to the subordinate identity to confront environmental hostility on a place such as a college campus. In other words, environmental microaggressions are coercive and continuously communicating vibrations of exclusion. The environmental aggressions reinforce life experiences of discrimination and exclusion that alienate the lower caste students from an institutional life. A Dalit student from an agriculture college of Rajasthan says, *the campus atmosphere was so hostile that most of our students were conditioned to accept their 'lower' positions* (Deshpande and Zacharias, 2013, p.195).

I reiterate that when caste identities and caste-based culture/habits²⁴ are profoundly entrenched in the social psyche, then higher education institutions reproduce a casteist climate on campus. (Nambissan and Rao, 2013) noted that caste is evident on IIT campuses; caste-based relations are part of the institutional life, which continuously manifests in formal and informal settings. I argue that the environment is exclusionary; thus the lower caste students do not file a complaint regarding caste-based discrimination against any individual or the administration and moreover, they are afraid of serious retaliation. One such personal experience shared by a Dalit student from the University of Shah Jahan illustrates, *my family reminds me not to complain about my issues to the university authorities[...] as it will only rebound and make things worse for me [...] because my family would certainly not be able to cope with the setback of their son's being expelled from university* (Ovichegan, 2015, p. 106).

CONCLUSION

Caste system is prevalent in modern India and still the notion of pollution and purity is a cultural demarcation line between the higher castes and lower castes. Caste-based hierarchies and exploitative social relations are part of the socialization process; therefore, many higher caste people consciously and unconsciously perpetuate discrimination against the lower caste groups. The privileged castes reinvented graded inequalities in different forms; education is one of the most potent domains where discrimination is recorded in numerous studies. Historically, higher education has been dominated by the higher castes; as a result, caste-based

²⁴Swartz (2002) theorised Bourdieu's concept of 'Habitus' (habits) and stated that habitus are predominantly unconscious cultural process. It starts during early childhood and gradually people internalise their group specific habits/behaviours. The caste specific habits are naturally a part of higher education institutions, therefore, microaggressions are part of an environment.

discrimination has become institutionalised. Both the covert and overt forms of discrimination are detrimental to the lower caste students' academic performance, social relationships and self-confidence in their ability to compete with other students. Moreover, in many cases, a hostile academic and social environment drives them to commit suicide, which shifts the blame on victim as 'incompetent'. In Indian higher education, caste-based discrimination is an overlooked topic, therefore, the role of caste in academic settings has not been explored through different perspectives.

The paper discussed microaggressions theory to understand the nature and types of caste-based discrimination in Indian higher education institutions. The theory of microaggressions (Sue *et al.*, 2007a) was developed to study racial and gender microaggressions in the United States contexts but is also applicable to Indian contexts due to the similarities between caste and race issues, specifically regarding stigmatisation and exclusion. The racial microaggressions model explains how everyday hostile, derogatory and disgraceful messages are delivered to subordinate identities by the dominant identities. The model has adapted to classify conscious, unconscious and explicit forms of caste-based microaggressions conveyed to the lower caste students by their higher caste peers, as well as by faculty and staff members. The theory of microaggressions facilitates taxonomic categories to identify caste-based discrimination or bias as microinsults, microassaults, microinvalidations and environment microaggressions. The paper widens the understanding pertaining to caste-based discrimination as well as facilitates a new language to define it. Further, it explores a theoretical perspective and critical lens to comprehend concealed aggressive messages or communication, which are complex in nature to recognise and name it. In Pierce's (1970) words, the lower caste students and scholars must understand caste-based microaggressions to empower themselves and educate others against a pervasive 'offensive mechanism'.

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