

# The Story of Caste and Indian Campuses - II

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Now I would like to take you back to my engineering college days. I did my 10+2 in 1994 and got selected into this engineering college that was supposedly one of the best colleges in North India and one of the oldest, established by British in Kanpur. And I went into this college. On the very first day you have to show all your certificates. So the moment they come to know you are a scheduled caste, the clerk, you have to see his eyes, the moment you show your caste certificate, his behaviour changes. You will find nothing but hate in his eyes. Most of the Dalit and Adivasi students will vouch for this. This becomes our first experience in campus. So what happened was that on the first day itself, in engineering college, we had to select our hostel. The category list is put up along with the hostel names but we have to choose our hostel mates. Here was this guy who was very friendly to me during admission, so I wanted to be his roommate. He was from Lucknow, I was from nearby Lakimpur. We became very good friends before the orientation program. There we were filling up all forms. All the students and their guardians sat around with couple of professors who were guiding about all the procedures etc. So we became friends and we said we will share our room. We were from the same department also. The moment the hostel list came out, he said that I would not stay with you. I was like why, what is the problem? My elder brother, he was doing his law then, who was there as my guardian, he understood immediately. He took me away. I was just 16 or 17 years old. At that moment I didn't understand. I thought that ok, maybe he doesn't want and maybe he got another friend. It never occurred to me that it has something to do with that hostel list that came out and had my caste category included.

Then in our first lecture which was an introduction class another incident happened. For that class, a professor came, a very aged professor. It was a class like this one, some 80-85 students, 10-12 scheduled caste and scheduled tribe students sitting in between somewhere. He took introduction, and in the introduction what you have to tell is, your name, your father's name, your entrance test rank according to your category and then your background, where you have come from, your district etc. I don't know why he wanted to know about our caste categories. Suppose you are scheduled caste like me, from UP and your rank is 21 in the category list, so you have to tell that your rank was UP-SC-21. If you are from General category, you would say UP-GE-31. So if I say UP-SC, everybody knows that I am a scheduled caste from UP. If I am from other state, we would say we are OS-SC or OS-GE and so on. OS-SC meant that you are not from UP. You are from other state but you are still an SC. I felt very awkward telling this thing. But everyone was telling so I also did.

Once the introduction got over, the professor stood up and said, 'those who are SC, ST students, they should study hard, Mayawati will not give you number, I will give'. This was the time in 1995, Mayawati had become, for the first time, the Chief Minister of UP. I joined the college in July 1995; she had become Chief Minister in May or something. So it was for the first time. It was a big issue, a chamar woman becoming a CM. Lots of bad comments were passed on her, on buses, on trains. They used to abuse Mayawati like anything because they could not digest her becoming a chief minister. I had myself witnessed this growing up in UP during that period, but for us it was ok you know. They are abusing her, it's ok. We just used to listen. This was the first incident where a professor is marking me without even knowing me, and he has linked me to one politician, whom he clearly hates and I have nothing to do with. I had nothing to do with Mayawati. I was just a student. I was not even 18, I didn't even vote till then. And here I was being linked with one politician, whom he clearly hates. It's clearly visible. And he has marked me forever and in front of my own classmates with whom I was going to spend rest of the 4 years of my life. And everybody laughed when he said that. The worst part was, everybody laughed. They thought that it was all a joke, that it was a brilliant joke. I don't know whether the rest of the 8-9 Dalit students laughed or not because I didn't laugh. I was like shell-shocked. How can he mark me like this? I didn't know what to do. I felt like why he is saying like this, I am a good student. Why is he saying Mayawati will not give number and I should work hard? I have already worked hard. I have come here. I am an 80 percenter. And this was the first day! This statement was not made, after you know a test or something, where you know my merit and you can say "you better work hard". You have not even taken a single class! And you already believe that none of us are meritorious. This is how my caste education began in campus.

Then there was this whole ragging. And the ragging was completely caste-based. Open caste-based ragging. I am talking about 1995, before Supreme Court thing came and ragging is now banned. It is now not that serious of an issue but this is prior to that Supreme Court ruling. Here teachers used to encourage ragging openly. Teachers used to come into the class and ask whether you were ragged yesterday or not. If you say that you were not, they will say that you will be and then only you will learn about

discipline. So it was kind of like the army training, where you have to teach them discipline! It was told to us that unless and until you were not ragged properly, you would not respect your seniors. The justification was, you need ragging to respect your seniors. You need ragging to respect your teachers. And ragging used to happen with everyone irrespective of their caste background but if an upper caste student used to get 2 slaps, we used to get 10 slaps - that was the degree of difference.

Then there were open casteist questions that were asked like why you are here etc. And the worst part was they made some of us to abuse Dr. Ambedkar. In the ragging you have to do whatever they say. They will make you dance, they will make you go naked, they will ask you about your favorite heroine, and describe her body parts. All these things happened in the ragging. What happened with some of us was they asked us about our caste. They of course knew what caste we were because that is how we were supposed to give the introductions. There was this whole process where you were to first tell your name, your father's name, your rank etc. So every time, a senior student or a teacher asked you for an introduction, you have to repeat those things again and again. So during the ragging, the senior students already knew that some of us were Dalits so they took us aside and said, "Abuse Ambedkar". I said why I should abuse Ambedkar? Actually at that time, I had nothing to do with Dr. Ambedkar also. I came from an environment which was not very political in a way. Yes my father voted for BSP, but we knew nothing about Dr. Ambedkar and all. We just heard about him. We knew that somebody called Dr. Ambedkar is there who gave us reservation and all. But we were not that politically conscious, at least I was not then. But this question came in my head, why are they not asking me to abuse Gandhi? Why they are not saying me to abuse Nehru? Why only Ambedkar? So some of us gave, some of us did not, we got beaten up. So this is how I learned about caste in campuses and then there were series of incidents because I was the one who was not able to take this up. Rest of the Dalit students were from very humble backgrounds. I started resisting. Then we also became aware that we were marked by red pens by the teachers in the attendance list. Our categories were written in the attendance register itself. So "Anoop Kumar, Scheduled Caste" - red pen. The list was according to alphabetical order so after Anoop Kumar (SC), some general name, no category mentioned, then again some Adivasi student name comes, ST was written before it. So we were marked - we were literally marked by red pen. So during the Vivas and in the lab, if I am not able to answer, immediately they will look at the list "Oh! Quota wale ho? You have come through quota? That is why - you don't know anything. Get out". So these were the kinds of interactions that used to happen between me and my professors.

The moment it became clear to me as a caste issue, I started looking out for a Dalit faculty. I wanted to talk about it. I didn't know what else to do. I had no clue. I couldn't even tell my parents about this. Because we are taught to believe that teacher is God. And here is this teacher, with white hair and some fancy foreign degrees, abusing you. Literally he abused my mother, in the viva, and on caste line. And he was supposed to be PhD from some foreign university. So I didn't know how to tackle. I started looking for a Dalit faculty and believe me - this institution was some 75-80 yrs old - not even a single SC, ST or OBC faculty was there. Not even a Single. Some of our Dalit seniors

were there, they were also going through the same process as us. But what they were doing was that they used to organize informal meetings. They used to call us. Then we used to sit together and they used to tell us which professor is more casteist. They will say - "Don't take his paper, he will fail you. Take this Professor, he is good". So this was our defense mechanism, this is how we were coping. The only thing to do in coping was to know which of the Professor was less casteist!

I was one of the first ones to begin thinking about it, now when I look back maybe because of Mayawati and BSP I got the strength. Some of our students were also there who were a little bit BSP-minded, they had an inclination. Some of us started to organize our students. We started meeting. We had our SC and ST freshers' welcome. Officially we had our fresher welcome but it was completely upper caste thing. Their own cultural activities they used to do. We had nothing to do, we used to just go there and sit and eat and come back. Then we thought that lets have our own fresher welcome. So that we could directly interact with each other. This was you know one year later, when I was in my second year. We thought that lets have our own fresher welcome. We thought that the problems that we faced at least we will able to tell our own new students directly, so they can also get prepared. Because we also got some support from our Dalit seniors. So we wanted to institutionalize this, so that every year there has to be some kind of function, some kind of meeting, so that the new students become aware about their seniors and we know our juniors and we are able to reach out to them because there was no other mechanism available. So we tried to hold our first fresher welcome. We were refused the space. The administration said that "You cannot do this, this is a casteist thing! You guys are introducing caste in this engineering college". This was because we wanted to hold our own fresher welcome!

The teachers abusing us along caste lines was not caste, students abusing us on caste lines was not casteism but when we said that, and very officially, we were not doing some kind of illegal activity, some bomb-making or something, we just wanted to have one hall booked, they denied us saying they will not allow caste to enter into this campus. This was the statement they were making. So what we did was we booked a hall at a guesthouse. We took a guesthouse outside and we did our function, some 4km-5km away. So this was my first experience of organizing. But the moment, the teachers came to know that we were organizing, the real harassment started. There were already physical fights between our group and non-Dalit students. A lot of things happened. It is a long story and I want to cut it short here. Ultimately they targeted me because they thought that this is the man who is doing things. So they threw me out of the hostel. I was not doing anything. I was a normal student. I used to pass. I used to do my work. I could not focus as much I wanted but I could do my work. So they barely passed me. Then there used to be raid in my room. Every few days they will come - some 4-5 professors and they would raid my room. They will say that you bring liquor and you drink and used to bring all sorts of allegations against me and then i was thrown out of the hostel. I had to take a room outside. And this was a very difficult time for me because I was in my second year last or maybe third year I don't remember now. In 1997, there was this one issue where some MCA students wanted to hold a strike. So the real culprits, those students who did something, they got scot free and the Dean

took hold of one Dalit MCA student and started abusing him in front of everyone. I was also standing there. I had already been in the campus for 2-3 years, by that time it had become very tough for me and I was already on my breaking point. So I could not handle it and I just went and started beating the Dean then and there only, in front of hundreds of students. After some time I could realize what I had done. I ran away from there. For two days I was in hiding. I thought they would send police and beat me up. I was very scared. So this is how my engineering college period ended. After that, I could not complete my course. They didn't allow me to come back. And I also did not want to go back because I knew that I would not be able to do it now. It was almost impossible for me to go back and again become a student there at campus where I had done something of this nature. So I left engineering. But at that moment I decided that I am going to work on this issue my entire life. I still could not understand why these professors hated us so much. And this question used to bother me a lot. What we have done? We have done nothing. We just entered and from the first day they hated us. They gave us less mark. They are openly abusing us in the labs and Vivas and everybody treated this as a normal thing! As you know if a Dalit student is being abused on caste lines, no upper caste student ever raises heckle. They think that ok fine, he is a reserved category student, he is scoring low and he needs to be scolded.

Few days later my father was called at the campus. They sent some three telegrams one after the other that your son has done this and that. So my father came and he took me to the professors and they said we did all this (harassment) actually to make him work hard. They said if we didn't scold him, he would not work hard. So in front of my father and my elder brother, one professor said when we scold Dalit students, call them out in front of others - actually we are helping them to study more. I could not understand all this. My father was there, nodding in agreement with the professor. He thought probably the professor was right. And again, I was not able to say anything. This was the same professor who used to abuse my mother and sister openly. This is the same professor who called me jungle, said that you won't be able to take a degree from here and now he was telling to my father that I was like his son, that he treated me always like a son, that he wanted me to study hard, but I got into this politics and ruined myself. I was very surprised that how easy it was for him to say all these things and how difficult it was for me to even convince my own father that the professor was lying, I was not. As I mentioned earlier my father also believed that with education, caste vanishes. This is the narrative which he also grew in.

So I had to go back to my home town and I did my graduation there. I started reading Dr. Ambedkar, Phule and then little bit I could understand that this was not the problem of one college, this was not the problem of one university, this is a structure which I am fighting against. I also got this answer why they hated us so much. Then in 2001, I went to JNU, New Delhi for my Post-Graduation. But this whole experience was with me always, that of my engineering college. In JNU already there was a strong Dalit student movement. A lot of my friends and seniors were very active. It was a very good training ground. After some time in JNU, we started our magazine. We thought that we should have some sort of magazine. So in 2004, we started our own magazine INSIGHT and

that was probably one of the first Dalit students' magazines at the national level. It ran for almost 2-3 years. After coming out of JNU, I have been in this student thing.

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Apart from narrating my experiences today what I want you to know, and I am going back to where I started from, that I am still searching for answers. I don't know whether sending my students, those I have been teaching, to TISS and JNU is a good thing or bad thing. I don't know. I don't know how they are going to cope up with all this. I don't know whether these spaces are meritorious enough to deal with such diversity of students, because the whole system, the whole academic system is made to cater only to students from elite backgrounds. You take your syllabus, from the first day itself, assignments, this and that and for our students it takes 6 months to understand what the semester pattern is. And there is no help at all - if I am wrong - please tell me I am wrong! There is absolutely no help to our students, there is no proper orientation program, nothing. And whatever orientation programs they organize, I know what happens there. I have seen orientation programs of TISS and JNU and IITs. So I am not talking out of thin air. And there is this entrenched belief that our students lack something. So a good hearted upper caste teacher, what he does is to try to 'help' the student. I am not saying that his thing is wrong. But his whole thing is to try to help the students but never a word for changing this structure.

If in this country, more than 85% of the students are from non-English background, from various regional languages what is your mechanism to deal with such diversity? Tell me what is there in JNU, in IITs? Can you even imagine a classroom in premier educational institutions where only 10% of the students are from English medium background? No you can't. You can't imagine such a class in these institutions, even when about 80-85% of the total students of this country are from regional languages backgrounds. But your class rooms are full of only elite English speaking students; only exceptions are students who came through reservations. Your own classroom is not a democratic space! And then they want to make a social worker out of such elite students. I am not against them. Please don't think that I am taking away your right to be a social worker or a professor or whatever you want to. But I am saying that these institutions are specifically designed in a way that only you can study and a person like me who is one or two percent, who can speak English, can cope. Rest of the students who come from regional background, please ask them, how they cope up with TISS? And TISS is one of the best institutions. I am not criticizing TISS. I have seen worse! In this space, just imagine your own classmates sitting together with you, coming from Wardha and around. What happens to them with this whole notion that you don't know English, you are not meritorious and have come through reservation, how it plays into their minds. And if an institution is new I can understand, but this is a 70 year old institution, IITs are 50 year old, you don't have a mechanism where you can deal with the sheer diversity of this country and you call yourself a national institution!

OK fine, you tell it openly - see this is not a national institution, it is only for the upper caste/upper class and for some upwardly mobile Dalits who have English education, who have English knowledge, rest need not apply. I have absolutely no problem. Please don't pretend. We will start a movement to have our own share of the budget and we will start

our own institutions. We will fight for that. But this whole notion that this is a liberal space is completely bogus. Forget about class, you just look at the entrance exams - the way it has been designed. Please look at your own TISS entrance exam, which is in English medium and again it has 30% questions to check your English comprehension. You know, even if you are good in Maths and from a Marathi background - you will not be able to solve that Maths problem! So are those students less meritorious than you? And then if these students enter through reservation, obviously they will have less mark than you. So for two years or three years that becomes their identity. Nobody questions that. Nobody questions why there is so much merit among English speaking crowd in this country. Why all your national institutions are filled with only English medium students? And why your own professors, only want to teach you in English? India might be a peculiar country because most of the other nation states are one language states. I understand that. I understand that this is a tricky situation. I understand that this is a problem. I am not saying that this is a very simple thing and they should teach you in Marathi and these are national institutions so students come from different language backgrounds. I understand all this. But have you designed your curriculum in a way that every student feels that after 6 months she can be equal to others? Have you developed any mechanism where these students do not suffer just because they are non-English medium?

From the first day itself the whole thing is in English and the assignments, paper presentations. And you think this is not all deliberate? You know I am in touch with my students here. I don't know what to do when they say that they are not able to cope up. I feel guilty that I have sent them and just keep hoping that they are able to cope up with this. I have nothing to tell them. I just keep saying that TISS is very good, most of the professors are very helpful, so if you have any difficulties please go to the professors directly. This is the only thing I could tell them. Has this institution been able to do anything on it except for the benevolence of few good-hearted professors? Honestly look at it. Please do not think that I am blaming or accusing. Please look at it. Has this institution developed a mechanism which can actually address the diversity of backgrounds the students come through? If TISS has not been able to do it, then just imagine about IITs, just imagine about AIIMS.

Just imagine all your so called 'institutions of national importance'. They have given this offensive name to many educational institutions - Institute of National Importance - by making a parliamentary law and why they gave it, they gave it because they do not want to implement reservation there. So Institutes of National Importance - it is a huge list - all these mostly are scientific institutions, are exempt from reservation. Because these are institutes of national importance! So it means that what you're trying to say is that with reservations, they will not remain institutions of national importance and because these institutions are so important, we need 'merit' and not reservations. So you have to look at how this whole environment has been created and why it is so difficult for me. So you know the moment I talk about all these there is lot of hostility. I am not here to blame individuals. You are casteist, no you are casteist. But what I am saying is that we have to look beyond this now. We have to look at structures now. We have to look at whether these spaces truly belong to us. I feel unwanted here. These places are not

designed for me. These places were specifically designed to teach upper caste/upper class kids. So if TISS or JNU teaches in English and has no mechanism for others, it is on purpose. It is designed that way. So if they are treating me as unwanted it is not wrong that way because I am an unwanted person here. It is my own problem that I think these are liberal institutions, that these are my own institutions. That is what I want for us to look at.

There are many other issues that I want to talk about but let me stop here. I did not know that this much crowd will turn up. I thought it would be a small informal gathering, I should have prepared much better. Thank you so much for patiently listening to me.

*Jaibhim!*

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