

Globalization: Theoretical Perspective
Professor R Santosh
Department of Humanities and Social Science
Indian Institute of Technology Madras
Lecture 54
Employment, Exclusion and Merit in the Indian IT Industry

Welcome back to the class, and we are in the 11th week. One more week to go, and for the past couple of sessions, we have been discussing particular themes related to globalization and the Indian context. And in the previous classes, we had a session on the cast and economic situation in the late globalised contemporary India, and we continued a similar kind of discussion. And in today's class, we will discuss an essay written by an Anthropologist named Carol Upadhyaya. She is a professor at the national institute of advanced studies NIAS in Bangalore.

And this essay appeared in economic and political weekly in 2010, and it is titled employment exclusion and merit in the Indian IT industry. So, I hope you understood why I decided to take up this particular small essay. It is a short essay that appeared in EPW economic and political weekly.

Because IT industry, as you know, really represents the globalised face of Indian society. It was an industry that became popular, became extremely popular and became one of the most important sources of foreign revenue for India after India became liberalised. And we have a Bangalore considered to be India's Silicon Valley or our answer to the west, and millions of people have found their employment in India, IT industry, whether it is this proper software development or in BPO's or KPO's or various other initiatives.

And the reason why Carol and her team researched the question of exclusion and question of merit is also to look at how such a newly developing field of employment now because it is an entirely non-traditional field of work. Is IT industry does not come under any of the traditional forms of employment. It is completely private, public institutional, or the state has hardly any role.

So, this is an employment field that represents new possibilities. The global considerations are the kind of situation that is considered truly modern in that sense. And she begins this essay with

the kind of a reflection or the kind of claims made by many important people of the IT industry. The CEOs and top industry people claim that they are least bothered about caste. They are least bothered about individuals' social background, and the only thing that matters is the merit of the candidates' ability or quality.

So, that has been the claim. Because that as we know that, they would want to talk in the language of meritocracy as if this industry is undoubtedly based on the innate abilities of the individuals and they are least bothered about the so-called traditional kind of features or markers, like, caste, region, gender, ethnicity, nation other things which are considered to be unmodern or of more conventional or do not have any space in that.

Now, given that is the kind of claim, this claim also gets reflected in many discussions and debates about government policies on reservation whether the reservation is required. Quite a lot of the people who speak the language of meritocracy are against the continuation of reservation in higher education institutions, especially in premier institutions like IIT's and IIMs, because they think that the continuation of reservation perpetuates.

So, it will pull down the quality of the institution, and it dilutes the quality of these centres of exclusion; there is an enormous amount of sociological literature very very interesting literature analysis and data, which talked about the situation, the scenario of reservation in the Indian institution of or institutions of higher education. I am not going into the details, but please take up some time take some time to read up on that material because it is fascinating.

(Refer Slide Time: 04:48)



- common narrative holds that employment in the software industries does not depend on social connections (influence) or "ascriptive" status (reservations) - unlike in the public sector and "old economy" companies - but is based entirely on "merit".
- data from a study of the IT workforce in Bangalore and draw on other sources to show that the social profile of IT workers is largely urban, middle class, and high or middle caste.
- discuss the ideology of merit that dominates the industry in the context of the recent debate on reservations



So, let us see what Carol has to say about this, and it is based on an ethnographic study. She collected the data from software professionals in Bangalore conducted interviews. It is a small study, and again, it appeared almost ten years back. Still, I believe that the study has a lot of insights even to talk about, even about contemporary times. It reminds you about the continuing relevance of these social markers your identities, your background, the kind of cultural capital you have and the kind of inequality that exists among sections of the population, categories of people, not merely intra differences.

So, it is something significant. So, the standard narrative holds that employment in software industries does not depend on social connections influence or ascriptive status reservations like the public sector and old economy companies. But it is based entirely on merit, the same point that we discussed so far. So, this whole term is called an ascriptive status. Whether what is given to you, you are cast at the time of your birth, your religion, gender, or ethnicity. These are the things that are considered to be an ascriptive identity.

And in contrast to these ascriptive identities, you also have achieved identities, and performed identities are those the individual achieves through their effort. So, we the kind of a modern framework are used, you must be able to move out of your achieved sorry ascribed, identities, transcend, another word transcend your ascribed identities. Then, you will be evaluated purely based on your performed identities.

The kind of education you have, the kind of wealth you made, and the kind of position you have created. So, this is a kind of interesting discussion in the contemporary in the conventional sociological circles. So, Carol argues or points out quite a lot of the standard narrative in the IT circle. So, the software circles do not depend on social connections or influence, unlike the old economy companies private sector companies where reservation is essential.

People are appointed based on their caste. So, that is considered an old economy. In contrast, software industries or a host of new things are considered the product of a new globalised modern era, which is least sensitive to or which is, which least is kind of cares about this kind of issues. Now, she draws data from a study of the IT forces workforce in Bangalore and draws on other sources to show that the social profile of IT workers is mainly urban middle class and high or middle cast.

Now, when the spokespersons of the IT industry say that we do not care about cast. We only look at the merit of the individual, of course; they could be true what they are saying that they do not they are least bothered about the cast of the individual. But when you look at it from a sociological perspective, when you look at it from an anthropological perspective, their unwillingness to look at the caste or their reluctance to look at the form results in a highly skewed kind of workforce which are predominantly from the urban middle class and the high or middle states.

So, their reluctance to look into the cast background does not result in creating an equal representative workforce, that is a whole irony, or that is about the tragedy if you want to use that word because they are reluctant or they are unwilling to look at it on the hope that would provide certain kind of equality for everybody.

But simply that has does not happen, and every empirical study tells you that IT workforce of even today. I do not think that situation has changed drastically even today IT industry is predominantly from the urban centres. People from the middle class constitute it, and the definitional middle class is more or less high or medium caste.

So, in that sense, the IT workforce has a considerable over-representation of people from this higher caste and class. Now, she also discusses the ideology of merit that dominates the industry

in the recent debates on the reservation. So, you can always look up this particular essay for those debates. We may not go deeper into that.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:35)

- survey of software professionals in Bangalore found that 80 per cent of their fathers had graduate degrees or above, while only three respondents (out of 132) had fathers with less than SSLC level education. In addition, 56 per cent of respondents' mothers were graduates or above.



- With regard to occupation, 84 per cent of the fathers in the sample were engaged in occupations that are usually identified as "middle class": they were managers or executives in public and private sector companies (21 and 10 per cent, respectively), government officers (21 per cent), professionals such as doctors and university professors (18 per cent), and businessmen (13 per cent). Only 9 per cent had fathers in lower level clerical (white-collar) or blue-collar jobs, and 3 per cent were from agri-cultural families.



The survey of software professionals in Bangalore found that 80 per cent of the fathers had graduate degrees or above, while only three out of 132 had fathers with less than SSLC level education. In addition, 56 per cent of the respondent's mothers were graduates or above. This is interesting because this question about the parents' education tells you about their social, economic and educational background. It gives you an obvious idea about the candidates' overall social, cultural, and educational experience.

So, this study shows that over 80 per cent of the IT employees whom Carol and her team interviewed had their parents as graduates, and more interestingly, 56 of them were of the mothers were graduates. And they were only four people out of 134 whose parents had education, which was less than SSLC level. So, it tells you that these IT professionals are predominantly coming from well-educated families whose parents are already graduates and must be employed; about occupation 84 per cent of the father's in the sample were engaged in fields that are usually identified as middle class.

They were managers or executives in public and private sector companies of 21 and 10 per cent respectively, government officials, professionals such as doctors, university professors, and business people. Only 9 per cent had fathers in lower-level clerical, white-collar, blue-collar

jobs, and 3 per cent were from agricultural families. This is, again, a very striking distribution. Among these 134 people, Carol interviewed only three people whose parents were from agriculture.

And a staggering amount of 84 per cent of people had their parents educated in jobs that can be described as middle-class jobs, including all these things, private sector, public sector doctors, professors, business people, and 9 per cent had lower-level clerical as well blue-collar jobs.

So, this tells you that the students, the generations of the people who were able to make use of the possibility of the IT industry, the IT boom and the resultant economic prosperity were predominantly from the already privileged background, and this is a vital lesson. Sociologists keep on writing about this particular ability of the already affluent class to make use of the new possibilities because they are all prepared. They have all the economic, cultural, and social resources to use the latest opportunities completely. Whereas for the lower-class people from the lower background, it is challenging to develop that. And that is a critical point.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:35)

- 36 per cent of the sample were born in one of the five metros (including Bangalore), 29 per cent were from tier two towns and cities such as Mysore and Pune, and only 5 per cent came from rural areas. However, an interesting finding is that a substantial proportion - 31 per cent - came from tier three towns, including district and taluk headquarters such as Tumkur, Guntur, or Madurai, and smaller, semi-urban towns.

- Even among those software engineers who come from rural and semi-urban areas, closer investigation of their background usually reveals that most are from relatively well-off agricultural families and have entered the profession after being educated in one of the many private engineering colleges located especially in the smaller towns of the southern states.



So, 36 per cent of the sample were born in one of the five metros, including Bangalore, 29 per cent were from tier two towns and cities such as Mysore and Pune, and only 5 per cent came from rural areas. However, an interesting finding is that a substantial proportion of 31 per cent came from tier three towns, including district and taluk headquarters such as Tumkur, Guntur or Madurai and smaller semi-urban towns.

Again, it is found expected lines, most of them almost 36 of them come from five metropolitan cities, then 29 come for smaller towns and another 31 come from smaller towns district and taluk headquarters and they were only 5 per cent who come from the typical rural areas.

So, this also we know how this distribution is skewed even among those software engineers who come from rural and semi-urban areas closer investigation of the background usually reveals that most of them were relatively well, of agriculture families can have entered the profession after being educated in one of the many private engineering colleges located, especially in the smaller towns of the southern states.

So, even among those who come from small towns and villages. If you probe a bit deeper, you know that these people are coming from the well of agricultural families with the economic and cultural resources to send these children. These boys and girls a to nearby private engineering colleges pay substantially high amount of you to know fees and then make them employed to make them employable and which is not available for quite a load of people or parents from the lower castes and lower class.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:24)

- 88 per cent of respondents in the survey were found to be Hindus while only 5 per cent were Christians and 2 per cent Muslims. Brahmins constituted 48 per cent of our sample. The predominance of brahmins is not surprising, given their historical monopoly over higher education and formal sector employment, especially in south India.
- If we include others belonging to "twice-born" castes, the figure for all upper castes comes to 71 per cent. Employees from dominant agricultural castes [including some which are classified as other backward classes (OBCs)] constituted 15 per cent, bringing the proportion of respondents who come from upper or dominant caste groups to 86 per cent.
- Only one identified himself as from Scheduled Caste



So, 88 per cent of the survey respondents were found to be Hindus, while only 5 per cent were Christians at 2 per cent Muslims; Brahmins constituted 48 per cent of our sample. The predominance of Brahmins is not surprising given the historical monopoly over higher education and formal sector employment, especially in south India.

Again, another very well known the fact that you know that in out of 138 people, 48 people were from Brahmins and we know that the population of the proportion of Brahmins in population is around roughly around five per cent, but we have seen that over a percentage for Brahmins in almost all the higher positions of both private as well as public enterprises or job opportunities.

Whether it is in bureaucracy or medicine, that is a fascinating history. There is an intriguing history that predates that of colonialism. And there are fascinating accounts about how Brahmins as a community were able to stay on the top of a caste hierarchy. They were the first to use all new opportunities, whether during the pre-colonial period or the colonial period or even the post-colonial period.

They had the cultural capital to use the new opportunities compared to other castes. Because Brahmins are a community that has invested heavily in education and have very robust cultural capital systems of cultural capital that value education so much and relative economic prosperity.

So, in comparison with say, middle cast or a lower caste Brahmins, as a cast group or a group of form are always do have a kind of higher advantage, and that is very evident in this sample as well, because almost half of them are come from this background and especially given the fact that they are roughly five per cent of the total population.

And Muslims constitute 2 per cent, Christians 5 per cent again very telling examples if we include others belonging to the twice-born caste. I hope you know that it refers to the varnas system twice-born caste. The first three varnas, the Brahmins Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, are considered the twice-born cast or the cast belongs to twice-born varnas because they undergo this sacred thread ceremony, which is deemed to be the holy thread ceremony to be their second birth.

Employees from a dominant agricultural cast, including some classified as other backward OBC, constituted 15 per cent, bringing the proportion of respondents from upper or dominant caste groups to 86 per cent. So, 86 per cent of the IT professionals Carol studied in 2010 belong to the upper caste, which is quite striking. Only one identified himself as from schedule caste, and we know that the researchers would not have examined their certificates, but it is all based on self-disclosure. So, only one identified himself as belonging to the scheduled caste.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:44)



- Examination of the recruitment practices of IT companies reveals that there are several mechanisms that have the effect of privileging candidates with a certain social background.
- The first important factor is that software companies recruit primarily engineering graduates. Studies show that the percentage of students from OBC, SC and ST categories graduating from engineering colleges (and from other professional and graduate courses) continues to be much lower than their percentage in the population, and that of higher castes correspondingly much higher.
- The advantageous position of the upper castes in education largely flows from historical factors and their class status. — Private engineering colleges with high fees, coaching industry etc



Now, the next part of the remaining part of the essay, Carol examines the kinds of processes that lead to such kind leads to the kind of formation such kind of a workforce among IT's, what among the IT sector? What are the reasons? What are the recruitment processes? What are the direct and indirect methods of this kind of filtering?

That an IT workforce ends up having a say 86 per cent coming from India's topmost caste and class. So, she says that examination of the recruitment practices of IT companies revealed that several mechanisms have the effect of privileging candidates with a specific social background.

And this is again a fascinating field of study. Quite a lot of recent literature is available connecting the social position of different communities with higher education, which established the very robust connections between your class position cast position and that of your educational attainment.

Now, they can show a definite correlation between them. The first important fact is that software companies recruit primarily engineering graduates studies show that the percentage of students from OBC, SC and ST categories graduating from engineering colleges and other professional and graduate courses continue to be much lower than the percentage in the population and that of higher caste correspondingly much higher.

So, again statistically evident, the upper castes and upper class predominantly look forward to these professional courses, including medicine and engineering. In contrast, students from the lower caste and grace even if they aim for higher education, often these very competitive

professional courses could be much beyond their ability. They take other streams that are not demanding or not in so much demand and other stuff.

So, the advantageous position of the upper caste in education essentially flows from the historical factors, and their class states private engineering colleges with high fees coaching industry, etcetera. Again, we are all familiar with striking features and facts about the connection between educational quality education and economic position. Why do the upper-class people not want to send our children to government schools?

We are always ready to pay massive amounts of money as capitation and vast quantities of cash as annual tuition fees and then send our children to some of the very famous private schools. But at the same time, when it comes to engineering, IIT's becomes the most crucial attraction for everybody.

And there is a massive rush for getting a seat in the IIT systems. So, we know that the kind of a connection if not IIT or other significant, prestigious engineering colleges are costly to get a seat as capitation fees and as also as annual tuition fees and again there is a vast economy revolving around the coaching industry with the again cost you lakhs of rupees which is not affordable for people from the disadvantaged communities.

So, there is an obvious connection I am not. I do not have the time, or we are not discussing that. Still, there is fascinating work done by scholars like Satish Deshpande Sukhadeo Thorat and a host of others who have looked at this connection between engineering education and merit. There is a professor by the name of Ajantha Subramanian. So, her book on IT systems and caste is essential. She has done terrific work. She has looked at the evolution of engineering education in India and then analyses the inherent biases in these systems.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:09)



- For the major companies (which are the largest employers), the pool of candidates is limited at the outset to students of the best engineering colleges in India as most of them depend on campus placement for recruitments.

- High cut-off marks and consistently high marks

- Interviews- technical and HR-

- The assessment of the candidate's general appearance, demeanour, and "ability to mingle" during the HR interview acts effectively as an exclusionary mechanism, in that it is weighted against those who are not from middle class, cosmopolitan and English-speaking backgrounds.

- Good communication and social skills, confidence, and the right kind of personality are elements of cultural capital that students from urban middle class (and usually high caste) families are most likely to possess.



So, for the major companies, which are the most prominent employees, the pool of candidates is limited to the outset to the students of the best engineering colleges in India. Most of them depend on on-campus placement for recruitment. We know how the largest big company's function. They go for campus placements or only to the metro cities where this very prestigious engineering education is located, like IIT's or nits or some private institutions.

So, with that very approach itself, the mere fact that they go for campus placement there, the selection criteria gets skew gets kind of it becomes highly skewed at the beginning itself and then very high cut off marks and consistently high marks for the performers. And again, there are studies about how this background help you in getting consistently high CGPA or consistently high marks.

And there is a lot of fascinating work on the politics of examination, how examination favours certain particular kinds of learning and many exciting things. Then they have interviews, both technical and HR interviews. Another fascinating area is how Carol explains what happens during this HR interview because the HR interview is supposed to be an interview where your personality is evaluated. Your attitude is evaluated, your communication skill is considered, and she argues or has been argued by many other scholars. The so-called character is your communication skill. These things are not taught in the regular colour regular classes in colleges.

Instead, they are heavily dependent upon your family background, your cultural background and the kind of social background that you come from. So, the assessment of the candidate's general

appearance, demeanour and ability to mingle during the HR interview act effectively as an exclusionary mechanism in that it is weighted against those, not from middle class cosmopolitan and English speaking backgrounds.

If you take a moment to reflect on and think how many of us are speaking English at your home or how many of us are pretty comfortable conversing in English in our day-to-day life. And that percentage is minute. It is a highly insignificant number. It is minuscule of the Indian population who speak English at home and is quite confident about speaking English.

And invariably those people who do speak English at home. Those who speak English in a public forum always come from the upper sections or privileged areas. So, your command with the language, how you conduct yourself, even your appearance, colour, and complexion. All these things do play a part in this whole story, called his personality assessment or your communication skills and other things.

So good, social communication skills, confidence and the right kind of personality are elements of cultural capital that students from the urban middle class and usually high caste families are most likely to possess the same thing the type of your confidence, your social skills your right kind of personality elements of the cultural capital, we made a mention about this particular term. A term made very popular by Pierre Bourdieu as a critical French sociologist, argues that the host of things that we consider a part of culture is effectively valuable in certain things. They act as capital compared to others who do not possess that.

So, this capital is not in the form of money or resources other the thing, but certain kind of traits certain kind of say, for example, your ability to sing Carnatic music, your ability to enjoy Carnatic music with it all complexity, your ability to make sense of that or your ability to make sense of say western music of particular kinds or your ability to listen to some Hebrew cultural programs, certain TV shows.

So, these are all kinds of cultivated habits. These cultivated habits are precious in specific contexts. These interviews are certain areas in which your cultural capital is something essential. And one of the previous classes, I also mentioned how being fair, looking beautiful, looking with a certain kind of body structure. These are actual trades in specific industries, and the people who do not adhere to the standards get eliminated very ruthlessly.

(Refer Slide Time: 27:25)



- The merit argument ignores the social and economic factors that produce "meritorious" candidates in the first place, especially the continuing monopoly over a certain kind of cultural capital that is enjoyed by the middle class - which is composed mainly of upper castes - due to their greater access to the best educational institutions and other processes of social closure.
- The criticism against reservations as the 'murder of merit' and the call for less state intervention and liberalization of educational scenario.



In the last section, she brings our attention to the whole question of merit argument. The merit argument ignores the social and economic factors that produce deserving candidates in the first place, especially in the continuing monopoly over a certain kind of cultural capital enjoyed by the middle class, which is composed mainly of the upper caste due to their greater access to the best, education institutions and other processes of social closure.

So, how and why that high education continued to be a stronghold of upper caste and the upper class is fascinating and why the lower caste finds it challenging to get adequate representation. Why is primarily the most sought after fields like medicine and engineering still over representational students from upper castes?

Irrespective of these reservation policies is a very contentious issue. It is a very debatable issue. In the background of the debate about the Mandal commission, recommendations, and latest advancements, it is a fascinating area, and there are quite a lot of interesting sociological works on that.

And the criticism against the reservation as the murder of Merit and call for less state intervention and liberalisation of education scenario. So, as she says that many of these IT leaders in the IT field are against any such kind of extension of reservation or they take part in the criticism of a reservation or calling it as a murder of merit and this term 'murder of merit' was very very popular during the anti-Mandal commission agitation.

Because many people criticised the Mandal commission recommendation, they believed that the relationship was an onslaught or meritocracy. Still, they hardly ask the question of how is merit constituted, how his distinction is constructed and why that despite reservation, why that there is a vast over-representation of upper castes in the fields of higher education.

(Refer Slide Time: 29:31)



- For instance, the industry's emphasis on the need to improve primary education, while laudable, also has the effect of deflecting attention away from the question of exclusionary processes in employment. It is also based on the individualist liberal assumption that all that is required is to provide every child with an education that will enable him or her to "compete" on an equal footing. This notion, like the ideological opposition to positive discrimination of any kind, reflects a complete denial of the unequal distribution, by class and caste (and other divisions such as gender and religious community), of the cultural, social, and economic capital required to become an IT professional.



So, for instance, the industry's emphasise the need to improve primary education. While laudable also has the effect of deflecting attention away from exclusionary processes in employment. It is also based on the individualist liberal assumption that all that is required is to provide every child with an education that will enable them to compete on an equal footing.

This notion, like the ideological opposition to positive discrimination of any kind, reflects a complete denial of the unequal distribution by class and caste and other divisions, such as gender and religious community of the cultural, social and economic capital required to become an IT professional in India, critical point because, in the latter part of the essay, she discusses some of the IT industries who have invested heavily in improving primary education as a part of their corporate social responsibility.

But it all comes from every liberal individualistic understanding that if you teach a child, well, then they will be able to look at to compete with others, and such a view is highly problematic because it is incapable of looking at the structural barriers in terms of you having adequate

access to everybody lack of resources to different sections of the population, how caste and classwork in society and other things,

So, it is a concise essay, Carol essay but a simple essay, so please read it up. I decided to include that because it tries to bring in two dimensions. One is about a discussion on caste, which is supposed to be a topic that represents traditional India. Another one is the IT workforce, which is supposed to represent the face of a new India, and when you put it together, you see that continuing influence of caste on in this new era of global say IT workforce and other stuff. So, let us stop here and come back for the next class. Thank you.