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School of Development Studies
Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi



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Know Thy Neighbour:

The Anti-discrimination Potential of Intergroup Contact in Indian University Spaces

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The Anti-discrimination Potential of Intergroup Contact in Indian University Spaces¹

Abstract

This paper explores the anti-discrimination potential of intergroup contact between social groups, facilitated by affirmative action. Gordon Allport's 'Contact theory' postulates intergroup contact as a solution to reducing prejudice and discrimination. The context of the research was the problem of social discrimination in Indian higher education spaces. There is a correlation between prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory actions. This paper studied the relationship between intergroup contact and prejudiced attitudes by looking at student attitudes on gender, caste, class, and religion, in an Indian public university. It measured attitudes using a Likert survey questionnaire and performed descriptive statistical analysis. The findings were interpreted in the context of 'Contact theory' and the positionality of the respondents. The study found that students who are privileged had relatively progressive attitudes while marginalised students displayed more regressive attitudes. We observe that intergroup contact likely benefited privileged students. At the same time, there was a lack of solidarity between different marginalised sections of society. Consequently, the research paper makes an important case for ensuring inter-group contact through affirmative action and constructively engaging with the attitudes of marginalised students through further research. This research highlights the need for more progressive attitudes in general and across different verticals of prejudice, to achieve intersectional solidarity and drive progressive politics.

1. Introduction

The context of this paper is the problem of social discrimination, where individuals are treated differently based on their ascriptive identities, such as their gender, religion, caste, race, and class, among others. In a country like India, a vast majority of the population suffers from the negative effects of such identity-based discrimination, affecting their quality of life and dignity. Higher education sites are one of the key spaces where such discrimination occurs. These

¹ This working paper is based on my MA in Development Studies dissertation titled "A study on student attitudes on gender, caste, class and religion in a public university" and the Development Dialogues seminar presentation on the same.

spaces are the central research site of this paper.

The social life of discrimination is closely linked to forms of prejudice. For Allport, discrimination is one of the negative actions that can flow from prejudiced attitudes (Allport, 1954). Schutz and Six's empirical meta-analysis identifies a positive correlation between prejudice and discrimination (Schutz & Six, 1996). The connection between prejudice and discrimination makes it imperative to study prejudiced attitudes in society. A key feature of discrimination is its intersectional nature, in which individuals can experience multiple forms of discrimination simultaneously. Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term 'Intersectionality' in 1989 to describe the overlapping of multiple forms of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). She looked at the example of Black women in the US suffering on account of both their gender and race. In the Indian context, scholars like Sharmila Rege and Uma Chakravarty show the intersectional relationship between gender and caste and how gender and caste discrimination reinforce each other. Understanding the nature of discrimination helps us study it in different walks of life.

One such specific site to study discrimination is higher education in India. There still exists significant prejudice, discrimination and harassment in higher education spaces because of gender, caste, and religion. The spectrum of discrimination includes actions that range from the less heinous to the more heinous, and effects that range from the humiliating to the tragic. Humiliating forms of discrimination observed in Indian campuses include segregation of dining spaces and harassment and intimidation at the hands of fellow students and the institution. The tragic forms include student suicides due to discrimination, showcasing institutional apathy. University spaces are sites of intersectional discrimination in which some individuals are subject to multiple layers of overlapping discrimination. Such examples include female Muslim and female Dalit students being harassed based on their intersecting gender, caste and religious identities (Kumar, 2016). Over the years, state authorities have formed several committees and regulations to study and counter discrimination. The Thorat committee examined caste discrimination at a premier medical institution in the country, and documented significant caste injustice (Satendra, 2019). Similarly, the Mungekar committee focused on caste-based complaints in another government medical college in Delhi, and recommended action against the administration and faculty (Gatade, 2012). The University Grants Commission (UGC) has played its part by introducing the UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations in 2012. It mandated the creation of Equal Opportunity

Cells and the position of Anti-discrimination officers to tackle discrimination. However, the 2012 UGC regulations have been criticised as largely ineffective (Dhumal, 2018). A Public Interest Litigation filed, by the mothers of marginalised students who committed suicide, in 2019 led to the 2026 UGC Equity regulations (Anand & Kumar, 2026). However, the 2026 regulations have faced severe pushback from dominant caste groups, highlighting the severely contested nature of anti-discrimination action and the rights of marginalised communities in higher education institutions. Thus, discrimination in the Indian higher education system is linked to issues of community access and representation, or the lack thereof. Representation in higher education is a key issue given the importance of education for social mobility. There is a predominance of the private sector in the Indian higher education sector. The private sector manages the majority of higher education institutions and accounts for two-thirds of total enrolment in the country (MHRD, 2019). As a result of this ownership pattern, there is a public-private split in the representation of marginalised communities within the student body. Looking at figures from the 2019 All India Survey on Higher Education, we observe lower representation of marginalised communities in the private sector compared to the public sector. In the public sector, affirmative action such as India's reservation policy in education for marginalised groups like the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and the Economically Weaker Sections exists. These policies have led to marginalised communities having a higher share in public universities than in private universities, providing empowerment and representation. Apart from empowerment and representation, India's reservation policies also lay the ground for inter-group contact between different communities. Such intergroup contact has the potential to reduce prejudice and discrimination and to encourage harmony between social groups.

2. Contact Theory as the Solution

This section introduces Gordon Allport's 'Contact Theory' as a theoretical solution for reducing intergroup prejudice and discrimination. Allport presented his theory in his book "The Nature of Prejudice" in 1954. He states:

"Prejudice (unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual) may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports (i.e., by law, custom, or local atmosphere), and provided it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups" (Allport, 1954, p. 281)

The terms ‘equal status contact’, ‘common goals’, and ‘institutional support’ for inter-group contact emerge as key conditions for the benefits of inter-group contact. Equal status contact points to the necessity of members of different social groups interacting with each other at an equal status, for example, like a student-to-student relationship, to ensure the positive effects of contact. The presence of ‘common goals’ for all members to work towards and institutional support that encourages contact, through specific policies like affirmative action and desegregation, magnifies the positive effects of intergroup contact. An example of how this process takes place can be observed in the movie “Remember the Titans”, set in the context of desegregation politics in the US. The story traces the journey of a high school football team with significant racial divisions between white and black players. The differences and prejudices between white and black players are resolved over the course of the movie through intergroup contact as they pursue the common goal of winning team honours. Although the story is a mix of fact and fiction, it acts as a theoretical example of contact theory. Empirical assessments of the theory provide strong support for the role of intergroup contact in reducing prejudice levels as observed in Pettigrew and Tropp’s 2006 meta-analysis of contact studies (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). We see similar positive results in studies set in the Indian context, supporting the applicability of contact theory in India (Barnhardt, 2009; Beaman et al., 2008). Pertinently, the strongest contact effects were observed on children and college students (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

The Indian state provides ‘institutional support’ for inter-group contact in higher education spaces through policies like affirmative action, public funding for education coupled with low fees, and special schemes supporting the education of marginalised communities. However, there is inadequate institutional support beyond affirmative action policies, as evidenced by discriminatory policies in institutions. In public universities, affirmative action should increase intergroup contact, reducing discrimination and prejudice. On the other hand, intergroup contact due to reservation can have negative effects on prejudice as it takes place in a zero-sum context of competition between different communities. It goes against the core tenets of contact theory, such as cooperation and common goals. This could lead to negative effects arising from intergroup contact. As a result, it is possible for intergroup contact in institutions to have conflicting effects. Reservation policies are a source of conflict in Indian campuses with arguments based on individual merit justifying the status quo. Ajantha Subramanian’s work on premier Indian technical institutes, such as the IITs, shows how the life of caste is deeply intertwined with the ideology of merit (Subramanian, 2019). The implementation of affirmative

action policies in Indian higher education provides us with an opportunity to assess the potential of Allport's contact theory. This study explores the relationship between intergroup contact and attitudes facilitated by affirmative action in an Indian public university. It assumes that affirmative action leads to intergroup contact, thereby positively affecting students' attitudes. Observing the theory, both the privileged and the marginalised students can benefit from intergroup contact. In the context of this study, I consider intergroup contact to be contact between any two groups that differ in terms of gender, caste, class, or religion. This is in contrast to studies that focus solely on two groups, traditionally referred to as the majority and minority groups, based on a single identity.

3. Methodology

The study collected data from an online survey sent on the AUD university email group. It elicited twenty-nine responses from the students based on voluntary response sampling. The survey questionnaire was split into two sections. The first section measured the respondent's social positionality, and the second focused on their attitudes. The first section included nine questions that collected data on the respondent's characteristics, such as age, religion, gender, income, reservation category (as a proxy for caste), and other personal data. Such data on the respondent's social position helps us analyse their attitudes with respect to their position. The second section of the questionnaire had a total of sixteen questions, four subsets of four questions each on gender, caste, class, and religion, asked in a random order. The respondent had to respond to a statement that shared a belief or opinion by choosing from five options in the form of a Likert scale, including 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neutral', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree', in that order. The use of a Likert scale helps us convert qualitative data to quantitative data and use descriptive statistics to analyse it. Some sample questions in this part include "Dowry and Domestic Violence cases are frequently misused", which seeks to measure gender attitudes, while the question "Public money should not be spent on building religious statues and places of worship" looks at the respondent's religious attitudes. The building block of the descriptive analysis used in this study is the concept of 'desirability values'. It helps us understand and compare individual scores and aggregate patterns at the university level. These values were assigned for an individual's response to questions in the second section of the questionnaire. The values can range from 0 to 4, with a value close to 4 being highly desirable. A value of 3 is considered the minimum from a politically progressive standpoint on issues of caste, gender, religion and class and differs from a value of 4 due to a difference in emphasis.

Broadly, the analysis strategy is two-pronged, focusing on responses by individuals and by specific questions. For studying responses according to the individual, a desirability index is formulated by taking the average of the desirability value of each response for the entire questionnaire. In addition to the entire questionnaire, the study examines an individual's responses to subsets of questions on gender, caste, class, and religion. Individuals' responses to the second section are cross-analysed with the positionality data gathered in the first section. Further, individuals are grouped by age, education level, gender, caste, class, and religion, and the responses of these groups to the subsets of questions are studied. In the question-wise analysis, all responses to individual questions and to subsets of questions on gender, caste, religion, and class are calculated. The study will examine the meta-average of these question subsets as an aggregate metric. The meta-average is the average of the averages of all responses to each identity-based subset of questions. This analysis strategy allows us to discern patterns in an aggregated and disaggregated manner based on the data.

4. Results

For individual questions, the desirability value ranged from 2.66 to 3.90. The average across all responses to all questions was 3.37. The highest desirability index value for an individual respondent was 4, with the median value at 3.43. The negative skew indicates that a few individuals pulled the dataset's average down. Five of twenty-nine respondents had an individual desirability index below 3, with the worst at 2.43. The bottom five respondents identified as Hindu, were all female, were below 25 years, and displayed disproportionately high representation from the reserved categories.

Analysing the identity subsets of questions, the meta-average for the religion subset was the highest, followed by gender, caste, and class, respectively. This shows that respondents generally do not have uniformly progressive attitudes across different axes of discrimination, with religion showing the greatest progressiveness and class the greatest regressiveness. A significant reason for the respondents' poor performance in class is the number of neutral responses to class questions. Neutrality when it comes to supporting progressive ideals and condoning regressive attitudes is morally questionable and socially undesirable. Further, the level of contestation can serve as a framework for assessing the results. The variance in the desirability values is the highest for the caste subset and lowest for the religion subset. This shows the difference in opinion or contestation amongst the respondents regarding caste. Another way of looking at contestation is to link it to the extent of prejudice in the question,

identified by its level of overt/covert prejudice. We observe higher levels of prejudice and contestation when the question concerns covert prejudice, making it tougher for the respondent to choose the desirable answer. For example, the question on Brahmanical patriarchy was not straightforward and was heavily contested, with all options being exercised. The question “The Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 is not discriminatory” on religion was much less contested, with only two options being chosen and dealt with more overt prejudice.

5. Discussion

We interpret these results in the context of affirmative action and contact theory. Firstly, the findings have caveats, and we need to be measured when it comes to our conclusions. The study is based on assumptions of inter-group contact taking place, and assumes causality of reduction in prejudice due to contact, in the specific case of students in AUD. These assumptions are fair in the light of significant evidence proving the existence and positive effects of inter-group contact in the general literature once the specific conditions in the theory are met.

Due to the lack of baseline data on prejudiced attitudes, we cannot identify if any specific group has preexisting prejudice. We have two operating assumptions on existing prejudice levels. The first is that privileged students are more likely to show prejudices according to their social position in comparison to the general population. The second assumes that marginalised students would show relatively more progressive attitudes than the general population due to their experience of being discriminated against and display solidarity with other marginalised groups. On the question of the efficacy of intergroup contact, the overall average across all questions was 3.37, above the minimum desirable value of 3, indicating that the students collectively have socially desirable attitudes. We find that students who are privileged in at least one identity out of class, caste, and gender, have higher averages than the total study average, which supports the possibility of positive effects of inter-group contact. The only exception is that of students from the majority religion, who are privileged on account of their religion, exhibiting a lower group average compared to all other religious identities. Respondents who are marginalised based on at least one of their identities, such as gender, caste, and class, had below average values, especially on issues of caste and class. The puzzle of regressive attitudes shown by marginalised groups deserves deeper attention regarding the lack of positive effects of inter-group contact. Possible explanations include the existence of a Marxian ‘false consciousness’ where the respondents subscribe to the dominant ideology and

engage in self-victimisation. The findings of the study contradict the working assumptions on levels of prejudice, namely that the privileged would show regressive attitudes and that the marginalised would show progressive ones.

Prejudiced attitudes amongst marginalised communities have negative implications for progressive politics as they prevent intersectional solidarity. Intersectional solidarity is a strategy for progressive politics, and the lack of it is one of the defining features of this study. The lack of intersectional solidarity hampers cooperation between different social movements like the feminist, anti-caste, and workers' movements in India. We observed this lack of solidarity in a clash between Prof. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a female upper-caste professor, and Anshul Kumar, a male Dalit student at JNU, centred on the pronunciation of W.E.B. Du Bois' name. Instead of a respectful and meaningful dialogue, the interaction descended into a problematic confrontation from the perspective of gender and caste (Gudavarthy, 2024). A constructive interaction based on understanding and solidarity between the two individuals who have each suffered because of their identities would have been an opportunity for advancing progressive politics.

6. Conclusion

This paper examines the role of intergroup contact, facilitated by affirmative action in nurturing progressive attitudes. The study makes an important case for affirmative action based on its anti-discrimination benefits, given its role in facilitating inter-group contact, and extending it to address other forms of discrimination. However, as this study has shown, there is much work to be done. We need more progressive attitudes in general and across different verticals of prejudice. The end goal is intersectional solidarity and progressive politics to correct social discrimination. Affirmative action coupled with other anti-discrimination policies, can potentially lead to intersectional solidarity.

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