CAN EDUCATIONAL POLICY REDRESS HISTORICAL DISCRIMINATION?
EXPLORING A UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY'S EXPERIENCES WITH INDIA'S CASTE-BASED AFFIRMATIVE ACTION POLICY

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This research engaged a grounded theory process to explore whether or not and, if so, in what ways, an affirmative action quota policy disrupted historical power structures towards generating change in one university community in rural India. This rural university community has implemented an affirmative action quota system for three decades. Participants' embrace of and resistance to diversity and caste-based social transformations were identified through an analysis of in-depth interviews with 6 upper caste faculty and staff, 3 Dalit students, and 7 upper caste students. Strategies of embracing and resisting diversity and broader pushes for social transformation to create a more inclusive community included participants positioning themselves in favor of or opposed to the affirmative action quota policy. Implications for change at individual, community, institutional, and national levels are discussed.

Keywords: *educational policy, caste inequality, university community*

1.   Introduction

The caste system in India has persisted for centuries. As one response to this longstanding system of discrimination and its ongoing effects, the Indian government instituted reservation policies or quotas to redress injustices and create systems that foster equal opportunity in Indian education in 1982 (Jangir, 2013). This is one among many strategies designed to redress overall inequality and foster an inclusive community.

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Within India public universities are required to reserve nearly 50% of all student places for individuals of the lower castes. While these quotas are in place and contemporary university communities are more diverse in their caste make up, less is known about whether or not, and if so, how, university students and professors embrace this new multi-caste community. To our knowledge, no systematic research has examined student and faculty perceptions of these policies or other local university strategies that support integration and acceptance of lower caste students into the university community. This exploratory study aimed to address this knowledge gap through a grounded theory based on university student and staff perceptions and experiences vis-à-vis India's caste-based affirmative action system. The paper begins with a brief historical overview of the caste system within India and its implications for resource distribution, educational access, and a multi-caste, inclusive community. It then presents the current study's methods and findings and concludes with a discussion of limitations and implications for future research and policy development.

2. Background

The Indian caste system has historically determined the profession and access to material resources for all Hindus. Upper castes have historically owned land and held positions of power in their communities, with lower castes serving the dominant castes (Banerjee & Knight, 1985). "The castes and tribes that were economically weakest and historically subjected to discrimination and deprivation were identified in a government schedule as a target group for reservation policies," (Kijima, 2006, p. 369), including "scheduled castes" (SCs) otherwise known as Dalits, scheduled tribes (STs), also known as *adivasis,* and "other backward[1] classes" (OBCs). The terms "Dalit" and "SCs" will be used interchangeably throughout this paper. Upper castes, which the government terms "general castes," have had historic access to resources which Dalits have not. In this paper, those who the government refers to as "general castes" will be referred to as upper castes, to subvert further the disempowerment strategies that state-sponsored identity categories perpetuate by failing to accurately name existing power relations (Soundararajan & Varatharajah, 2015).

2.1 Historic Discrimination Against Dalits

India's Dalits make up around 167 million people, or one-sixth of India's population (Waughray, 2010). Dalit, meaning "crushed underfoot" or "broken into pieces," is a modern term for those historically considered "untouchable" (Ovichegan, 2014). Waughray (2010) explains untouchability as a positioning, "… whereby members of certain groups are considered permanently and irredeemably ritually polluted, polluting such that all physical and social contact with them must be avoided, [a system that] serves both as a cause of and a mechanism for social exclusion and material exploitation" (p. 328).

Dalits have had to battle institutionalized forms of casteism for centuries (Dalit History Month, 2015). This includes what Dalit activists have called "caste apartheid" involving caste

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[1] "Backward classes" is a constitutional term often used to denote the SCs, STs, and OBCs combined (Waughray, 2010).

lynchings, massacres, and public rapes and beatings (Tsundur Massacre, Dalit History Month, 2015). Caste apartheid operates in subtle, systemic forms as well. Dalits claim that the Indian government has failed to protect their families, particularly in cases of rape, gender violence, and caste-based hate crimes in schools (Dalit Women Fight, 2015). Dalits face a significant uphill battle of caste-based stratification and the violence that stems from it.

The Constitution of India distinguishes between the SCs, STs, and OBCs and religious, linguistic, and cultural minorities, with quotas applying to the former cluster and not to the latter. India's distinction is in line with the general international consensus on the definition of "minority" which is, "non-dominant groups possessing stable ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics that differ sharply from those of the rest of the population, which have been retained over time and which members of the group wish to preserve" (Capotorti, 1981; Pentassuglia, 2002; found in Waughray, 2010, p. 332). Thus, victims of caste discrimination such as Dalits do not easily fit into the universal definition of minority, nor that of indigenous people (Castellino & Dominguez-Redondo, 2006), as they are sub-divided according to religious, linguistic, and ethnic characteristics. Because of this, Dalits have constitutional protections distinct from these other groups (Waughray, 2010), including protections against caste discrimination and a banning of the practice of untouchability. In 1996, the United Nations declared caste discrimination a form of racial discrimination. Caste discrimination has also been prohibited by international human rights law since 2000 (Waughray, 2010).

Despite local, national, and international laws and conventions prohibiting caste discrimination, Dalits in India continue to suffer caste-based discrimination and violence (Waughray, 2010). Given their lack of power and their vulnerability, very few acts of physical violence are actually registered under the Protection of Civil Rights Act of 1955 (Nambissan, 1996), and few perpetrators are convicted even if the violent situations are reported (Radhakrishnan, 1991). Further, the Human Rights Watch World Report of 2008 stated that laws prohibiting violence and discrimination provide a strong basis for protection, "but are not being faithfully implemented by local authorities" (p. 276).

Caste discrimination and inter-caste conflict are also related to poor mental health outcomes for Dalits (Nath, Paris, Thombs, & Kirmayer, 2012). Further, caste-based discrimination in education, as well as economic factors, are related to poor mental health outcomes (Nath et al., 2012). In the West, suicidality has been found to be associated with childhood adversity (Beautrais, 2003), and in India, Nath et al. (2012) also found cultural factors such as caste discrimination and economic difficulties are related to youth suicide. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (2008), suicide statistics in India for 2008 showed that 35.7% of all suicides that year were by young adults aged 15-29. However, the numbers are likely higher than this. Suicide is a punishable offense in India and to avoid legal consequences, many suicides or attempts are not reported (Nath et al., 2012). Families also conceal suicides to avoid facing stigma and shame[2] (Vijayakumar, 2007). These results suggest that stress due to caste discrimination and economic difficulties make youth more vulnerable to suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Nath et al., 2012).

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[2] Intellectuals, protestors, and artists in India have critiqued the discourse of suicide and family shame revolving around the recent death of, for example, Rohit Velmula (discussed later in the paper), drawing attention to the patterns of institutional oppression resulting in death by suicide. Instead of suicide, the radically different discourse of "institutional murder" is being utilized to explain the perpetrators of violence responsible for Dalit deaths (The Hindu, 2016; Zargar, 2017).

2.2   Historic Intersections of Education, Religion, Class, and Caste

Vidya (education), Veda (religion), and Varna (caste) are interlinked in India (Borooah & Iyer, 2005), connections which give form to Dalits' historical lack of access to resources. As such, low caste status and low socioeconomic status are structurally linked, often leading to the equivocation of class and caste. This intersection is necessary to note, as focusing only on issues of class contributes to the erasure of caste-based stratification. According to Nambissan (1996), the Dalit "backwardness" in education is attributed to poverty and homes that are illiterate.

Dalit children who live in villages where upper caste Hindus also live may develop a psychological barrier against attending school (Borooah & Iyer, 2005). "Even though a vast majority of Dalit children may have easy access to school, in terms of physical distance, the psychological distance between the school and Dalit children may be considerable" (Borooah & Iyer, 2005). Moreover, there is evidence suggesting that 90% of Dalit-majority schools experience dropouts of Dalit girls (Sainath, 1996). Regarding location, the village primary school is frequently in a part of the village where upper caste Hindus live, which also creates more barriers. In a study of South India, Caldwell, Reddy, & Caldwell (1985) argued that where a school was located depended on "the activity of local politicians and leading citizens, and on pressures exerted upon them by *panchayat* councils, caste organizations (which, at the state level, are very concerned with the increased access to education of their own caste members), and other groups" (p. 33).

The discrimination that students face from other students and teachers may also discourage Dalit children from seeking education. Upper caste students may physically separate themselves from lower castes in the classroom. Many Dalit students also find their teachers to be unhelpful, and feel as if teachers perceive them as inferior and unintelligent (Nambissan, 1996). Nambissan (1996) reports instances in Dalit schooling where teachers physically separated themselves from Dalit children, teaching them from a distance. The schooling offered to Dalit children has been historically poorer than that of other castes (Nambissan, 1996). Based on these findings it is unlikely that a large percentage of Dalits reach higher education. Thus state intervention is important as one resource for reducing educational inequity.

2.3   Quota & Reservation Policy: Strategies to Redress Inequalities

In 1982, the Indian Constitution specified 15% and 7.5% of vacancies in public sector and government-aided educational institutes as a quota reserved for SC and ST individuals respectively for a period of five years, after which the quota system would be reviewed (Jangir, 2013). This period was routinely extended by succeeding governments. In 2006, this quota was extended to include an additional 27% of seats reserved for OBCs. This was followed by a constitutional amendment extending reservations to private schools, colleges, and training institutions (Ovichegan, 2015). The Supreme Court of India ruled that reservations cannot exceed 50% as to not violate equal access for all, but some state laws exceed this 50% and are under litigation in the Supreme Court (Jangir, 2013).

India's Parliament had voted to add many articles to the Constitution since the mid-1900s which have paved the way for equality and the development and implementation of the quota

reservations. Article 15 prohibits discrimination based on one's caste, race, religion, place of birth, or sex, as well as no restriction on:

> access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment; or the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public (Government of India: Ministry of Law & Justice, 2007).

This article will not prevent the State from making advancements for social and education needs of "backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes (SC) and the Scheduled Tribes (ST)" (Government of India: Ministry of Law & Justice, 2007). In addition, Article 46 focuses on SCs and STs specifically, stating that:

> the State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation (Government of India: Ministry of Law & Justice, 2007).

Weisskopf (2003) identified Article 46 as "paving the way" for the adoption of reservations in the central government and individual states. Based on the quota and reservation affirmative action policies implemented in 2006, 49.5% of university seats are now reserved for Dalits (Bertrand, Hanna, & Mullainathan, 2010).

2.4   Discrimination within Higher Education in India

Despite the above-discussed legal strategies, lower castes continue to be underrepresented in higher education in India while upper caste individuals predominate (Deshpande, 2006). In addition to the above-mentioned limitations in Dalit educational equity, Deshpande argues that this phenomenon is the product of self-reproducing systemic mechanisms that regulate entry into higher education specifically, with the latter considered to be an exclusive field; he calls this a gatekeeping process that discriminates in favor of the upper castes and against the lower castes.

Although those in the lower castes are benefitting due to the affirmative action policy, broader societal discrimination against them persists, preventing their success in higher education (Nath et al., 2012). Additionally, the current education system may actually be reinforcing class inequalities, since private education is more expensive than public, and lower castes have reserved seats in the public sector, which has lower pay than the private sector (Nath et al., 2012). Hindu upper castes are a little more than one-third of the total urban population but around two-thirds of professional and higher education degree holders, confirming ongoing discrimination. In other words, "their share in the highly educated is about twice their share in the general population" (Deshpande, 2006, p. 2441). Thus, despite the reservation system, discrimination and access to education for Dalits and historically excluded castes remains problematic.

Deshpande (2006) goes on to state that "by its very nature, higher education presupposes access to a minimum level of economic, cultural, and political resources" (p. 2441). He notes that higher education in poor, populous countries like India usually involves different forms of

de facto discrimination, summarized as resource discrimination since many low income individuals lack adequate resources required to access and succeed in higher education. Resource discrimination is sometimes linked with merit discrimination. Academic success and merit is seen by many in India as a form of entitlement, therefore members of upper castes may not want people in the lower castes to receive this entitlement. Deshpande argues that it is not merit and ability alone that explains the difference in castes and the dominance of the upper castes, but inequalities in other factors such as economic and cultural resources. He said that these other factors help to explain the difference in dominance and place in society, "for it cannot be argued today that large groups numbering in the millions are more or less intrinsically able than other such groups" (Deshpande, 2006, p. 2443).

2.5   *Tensions about Reservation Quota Policies*

Globally, education has been found to reinforce class inequalities, as private education is highly competitive and expensive (Béteille, 1993; Jeffrey, Jeffery, & Jeffery, 2005). In India, there are explicit reservations in the public sector, but not in the private sector where higher-paying jobs are now to be found (Nath et al., 2012). Thus, "while higher-caste groups can improve their social standing through better educational credentials and consequently better social connections and greater wealth, lower castes struggle to improve their overall living standards" (Jeffrey et al., 2005; Kijima, 2006; *Found in Nath,* 2012, p. 398). This disparity has also led to conflict between castes as they compete for the same types of employment opportunities (Martyn, 2008). As Deshpande (2006) detailed, public education also reinforces inequalities with a power differential and dominance among students within the system. Despite the quota system in public universities, "the dominance of the Hindu upper castes in Indian higher education is still substantial, while the lower castes and Muslims are significantly under-represented" (p. 2439).

The quota system was intended to break down caste barriers and offer education and jobs to those who were disadvantaged, but some argue that it has reinforced the caste system (De Zwart, 2000). Yet it is complex to seek redress for societal wide inequalities through higher education alone. Reactions to the quota system suggest some of the reasons why.

Those in the upper castes may not like the idea of affirmative action/reservation policy. According to a study by Crosby, Iyer, & Sincharoen (2006), the dominant, majority group likes to think that of itself as having achieved positive outcomes due to hard work, otherwise known as the myth of meritocracy (McNamee & Miller, 2009). Upper castes can thus feel insecure in relation to the more successful Dalits due to postcolonial shifts in material and legal rights (Chowdhry, 2009). For example, a group representing upper caste students, Youth for Equality, has expressed negative opinions about the quota system in universities. In April 2006, when the Indian government announced that the reservation system would be expanded by 27%, to 49.5% total, in universities, the group protested. Sporadic events that they organized demanded education for all, more transparency in government, and a casteless society (Capron, 2012). Some of the protests to date include a hunger strike by engineers, candlelit marches and hunger strikes by medical college and university students, as well as a large protest at Connaught Place, one of the largest financial, commercial, and business centers in New Delhi.

Many who oppose the quotas argue that it is allowing "academically weaker" students to be admitted to higher education, thus reducing its quality (Neelakantan, 2011). Lynch (1992) has

argued that one unintended consequence of affirmative action is that it functions as a type of reverse discrimination, increasing tensions among groups. Some believe that affirmative action promotes the stereotype that those who benefit from the policy could not succeed on their own (Sowell, 2004; Zelnick, 1996). Kaushal Kant Mishra, a founding member of Youth for Equality, suggests that Dalits "are weak [academically]. That's why they are taking the benefit of reservations" (Neelakantan, 2011). Despite this he does not think the admissions standards should be lowered to redress historical and structural injustices to Dalits. The language of the dominant group, that is, the upper caste —such as "academically weak" and "lowering of standards"– discursively constructs an image of the Dalit while ignoring the broader socio-political and economic context in which large sectors of the Indian population have minimal or no access to social, cultural, or material resources. This discourse invalidates the reservation policy and practices while failing to engage the historical reasons for and purpose of affirmative action policy

Dalit students and activists have held protests to have their voices heard in support of quotas and the role of affirmative action in dismantling caste-based discrimination. The National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) is committed to the elimination of discrimination based on caste. In March 2015, 30 Dalit and lower caste individuals, including Paul Diwakar, a well-known Dalit activist and general secretary of National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), were arrested in New Delhi after they demanded to meet the Union Minister of Human Resource Development, Smriti Irani, over unfair budgetary allocations in the education of Dalit and lower caste students (TCN News, 2015).

Neelakantan reported that Dalit students and their supporters have seen and experienced discrimination in a number of ways, including professors ignoring questions from Dalit students, physical abuse by upper caste students, and professors who have all students reveal their caste in class and then give Dalits lower grades (Neelakantan, 2011). She reported that many institutions also publicly post lists of new students that include their entrance exam scores and whether they were admitted under upper castes or SCs. In 2016, Rohith Vemula, a Dalit student activist who organized demonstrations with the Ambedkhar Students Association, killed himself after experiencing repercussions from his university.

Figure 1. *Images characterize two main perspectives nationally– the upper caste students (left) criticize reservations, while Dalit students (right) view them as their "right to grow".*

His death sparked international outrage in the Dalit activist community, inciting world-wide protests and a demand for justice involving his death was raised at the United Nations 31st Human Rights Council (India Resists, 2016; Ramanathan, 2016). Figure 1 illustrates the ongoing controversies between upper castes and Dalit students.

2.6   Educational Communities as a Site for Integration

The caste system in India is a system of exclusion that places upper castes at the top of society and Dalits at the bottom (Sharma, 2002). In the attempt to reduce exclusion, "education has frequently been seen as a key arena through which it is possible to make provision for a variety of strategies for inclusion" (Ovichegan, 2014, p. 2). India's government adopted the quota system as one strategy for reducing social exclusion. Yet, it has not been fully applied within all public universities and remains a highly contested policy (Chalam, 2007; Michael, 2007), with its primary opposition being from upper castes.

A diverse student body has many education benefits, but by itself diversity "does not guarantee the socially legitimate goal of integration" (Lehman, 2004, found in Ovichegan, 2014). Engberg and Hurtado (2011) found that participation in courses, activities, and readings about diversity as well as activities with cross-group interactions showed improvements in students' interaction skills defined as pluralistic orientations. To foster inclusion and raise tolerance, it is necessary to interact in ways that challenge stereotypes about other groups (Crisp & Turner, 2011; Haring-Smith, 2012; Noden, 2007). As for the role of higher education, Tienda (2013) argued that, "universities are uniquely positioned to foster integration through curricular and co-curricular practices that purposefully activate the coalition-building system through experiences that leverage diversity" (p. 472).

As described above, there are mixed opinions on the value of reservations. Ovichegan's (2014) study outlined above is the only study to date that examined experiences of Dalit students within a university environment. Our study explores the ways in which the quota system has been embraced or resisted by a small number of students and staff within a single university that has sought to redress inequity and foster inclusion or community. It analyzes the experiences of a small group of Dalit and non-Dalit students and of upper caste faculty members towards better understanding how a small group within one private university is responding to the complex and dynamic set of issues within higher education in India today.

3.   Method

3.1   Sample & Procedures

Data was collected at a private university in rural India. The university has two feeder institutions, one of which educates an elite population and the other, a Dalit population, in a community with few higher education options. Moreover, it has a specific mission to prepare students from tribal backgrounds for educational success. The first author had an existing partnership with the institution through a previous research and teaching fellowship. She recruited a convenience sample of sixteen (*N*=16) participants through snowball solicitation.

Thirty-eight percent (6) of participants were university teachers and administrators while 62% (10) were university students. The self-reported caste composition of the sample was 19% (3) Dalit and 81% (13) upper caste. The 3 Dalit participants were students. Thirty-eight percent of the sample (6) identified as female and 62% (10) identified as male. Participants' university disciplines included electrical engineering, law, social science, national defense, biotechnology, computer science, nursing, dental, agriculture, and environmental responsibility. Ages ranged from 19 to 62 with a mean of 32.

This exploratory study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Boston College and was funded through a summer research grant from the Center for Human Rights and International Justice at Boston College. Participants were recruited during a two-week visit by the first author. No compensation was given to participants.

Interviews were arranged in an office in the student affairs building where privacy could be guaranteed. Semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. Interview questions were designed to elicit participants' stories about their experiences and their feelings about the affirmative action quota system ("how do you feel about the reservation/quota system?"), personal and university experiences with reservations and discrimination ("have you witnessed any violence or ragging in response to reservations and quotas?"), and ideas about integration across castes and/or change ("do you think there is an understanding between different caste students? If not, do you think there could be?"). A newspaper vignette about a Dalit student who had committed suicide because of discrimination at a university was shared with each participant to elicit their responses to one of the widely known multiple effects of the controversial quota system on Dalits in higher education. After the interviews were completed, demographic information was recorded.

3.2   *Researcher Reflexivity*

The first author identifies as an upper caste, Brahmin, U.S. Citizen, Person of Indian Origin, cis-gendered woman who speaks fluent English and occupies multiple intersecting privileges in the context in which the study took place. This author taught a course at the school for tribal students years prior to conducting this study which enabled her to build rapport with the Dalit student community at the university. To build further rapport and trust with the participants in this study, she shared with participants that her parents had an inter-caste marriage which propelled her interest in these issues. She also told participants about debates about the affirmative action system in the United States that were similar to some in India. At the end of each interview, the researcher shared with participants her perspective on the importance of those with social privilege investing that privilege to support the liberation of the marginalized in society. Neither of the other two authors share heritage with or had contact with the participants. Both collaborated in the project vis-à-vis the literature review and data analysis and interpretation. All three of the authors share a commitment to social justice and equity in higher education and beyond and thus collaborated in this study to explore local understandings of each vis-à-vis a particularly repressive system of marginalizing some within India while privileging others.

3.3   Data Analysis

Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006) was used to analyze the data. Grounded theory is rooted in the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) and follows an interpretive philosophical paradigm (Hughes, 1990). A key premise in grounded theory is that individual actors (in this case, university students, professors, and administrators) derive their reality from their social interactions (their experiences with and perceptions of quotas), in the context in which they occur. Although grounded theory uses a constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006), where theoretical sampling, data collection, and analysis occur concurrently to develop and confirm patterns in emerging data, an iterative process was not feasible during this research. Despite that, participants representing diverse viewpoints were selected to achieve theoretical sampling. Due to time constraints related to the university schedule, iterative in-depth analyses were not conducted until after all data had been collected.

Coding included three phases: initial, focused, and theoretical (Charmaz, 2006). During initial coding, one transcript was selected and fragments of data were studied – words, lines, incidents – for their analytic value. Participants' own words were identified as *in vivo* codes. This coding strategy sought to generate knowledge that reflects participants' perceptions and experiences. During focused coding, initial codes were selected to test them against the overall data set. This process advanced with each subsequent transcript. Data was compared against other data and the previously developed codes. New codes were generated if they did not appear in previous transcripts. The codes generated reflected Glaser's (1978) "strategy family" in which codes capture strategies, tactics, mechanisms, maneuvers, manipulation, techniques, positioning, and dominating. They also reflected the "cultural family" in which codes capture social norms, beliefs, and sentiments. During theoretical coding, relationships were specified among categories of codes to help tell a coherent analytic story, for example codes such as *quota has utility for social development* and *quota protects rights of all to education* were seen as related to a higher level code of *embracing diversity and social transformation*. Categories, their relationships, and supporting text were recorded in detailed memos. This process developed iteratively in consultation between the first and third authors. Given the small sample and the diversities of responses we analyzed data across all participants and found the most meaningful theory through that strategy. An overarching basic social psychological process of *strategies of embracing and resisting diversity and social transformation* was identified and mapped as is reflected in Figure 2.

4.   Psychosocial Processes of Affirming and Resisting Diversity and Social Transformation

Participants' strategies of embracing diversity and social transformation were characterized by perceptions that affirmative action has utility for social development, protects the rights of all to education, and that the policy can be paired with effective university integration strategies. Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between these processes graphically and summarizes the findings. The process depicts two dominant perspectives: embracing affirmative action and resisting affirmative action. These perspectives are theorized by the authors to be mitigated by

positive intergroup perceptions and negative intergroup perceptions, respectively. Strategies of resisting diversity and social transformation were reflected in perceptions that affirmative action perpetuates competition for limited resources for upper castes, negatively impacts and/or frames Dalits as undeserving, and that policies should focus on class or gender preference in lieu of caste. The authors theorize that these perceptions are moderated by negative intergroup perceptions towards members of divergent castes from the participants. Strategies of embracing diversity and social transformation were reflected in perceptions that affirmative action has utility for social development, protects the rights of all to education, and can be paired with effective university integration strategies. The authors theorize that these perceptions are moderated by positive intergroup perceptions towards members of divergent castes from the participants. Specifically, seven participants openly supported affirmative action while nine opposed affirmative action or reported historic support but believe it to be outdated.

Details reflecting these varying positions are described briefly below in the words of participants.
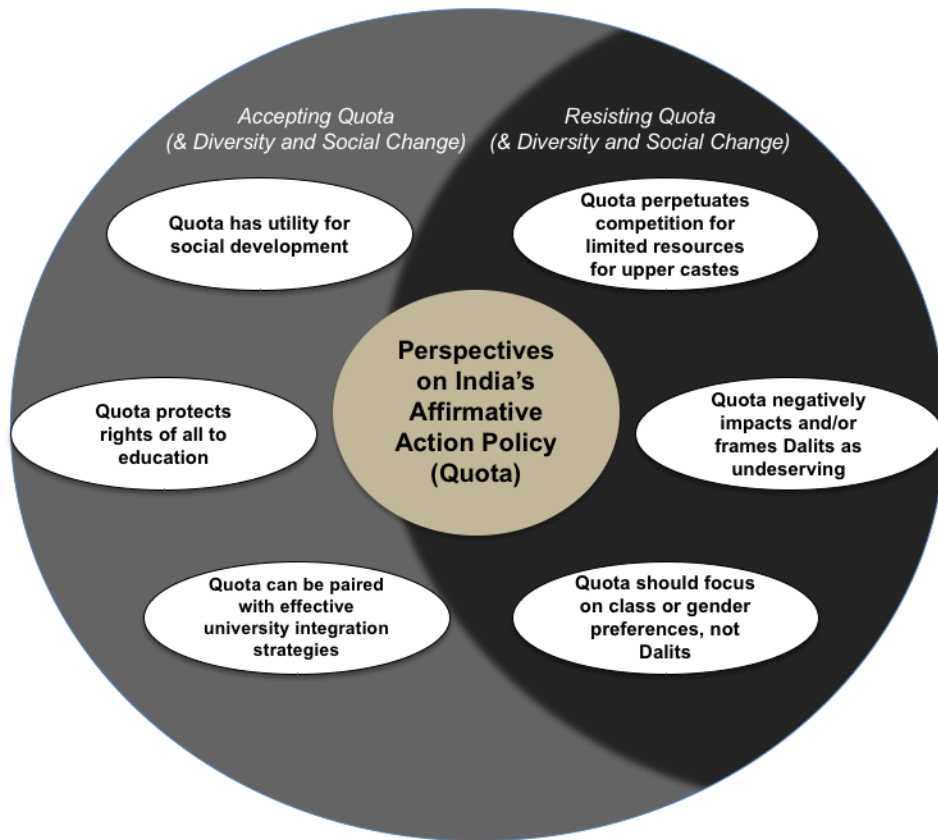

Figure 2. Graphical representation of grounded theory findings illustrating social psychological processes.

4.1   Quota has Utility for Social Development

"[Quotas] are quite effective. Most of the students who are coming from an SC/ST category are coming from a hard life, a hard category. But now they are also having the foundation". – *Dalit student*

"It is useful for the socially backwards part of our society. It is useful for them to come up to our level and to compete with others. … if you see from the SC and ST, they get a chance to go to and compete with the rest of society who might have some better facilities of education and upbringing than those people". – *Upper caste student*

Seven participants discussed how quotas can facilitate social development for those who have been historically disadvantaged. Participants referenced stories about people they knew who came to university because of quotas and are now in engineering and government jobs. As described in other studies, quotas have been known to produce positive outcomes for individual Dalits in accessing higher education (Bob, 2009), and are considered to be successful state programs (Guru & Chakravarty, 2005). Both Dalit and upper caste participants discussed the necessity of reservations in creating opportunities for Dalit students because of their historical disadvantages. Beyond university-level reservations, participants discussed that quotas ensuring basic, primary school level education for Dalits are essential for social development. They reported how Dalits are not given opportunities, do not have the same rights, and do not benefit from a weak system of class stratification. One Dalit student noted, "To improve someone's life and health government support is necessary. Education is the most important thing to go through mainstream society. Most students are staying in the village if they are not getting education".

4.2   Quota Protects Rights of All to Education

"I think that it should be a human right. If you do not give education to the people you are violating a human right. I strongly believe that everybody has a right to education. And denying education is like committing a crime, not against a person but against society". – *Upper caste administrator*

"Education is the most important thing through which we can go through the mainstream the society. Education is the most important thing. What my father say. If you want to grow, in the main the society. Then you can grow through the education only, not through anything else". – *Dalit student*

Five participants discussed affirmative action as a mechanism which protects the right of all to education. They discussed how everyone has the right to attend school, and that denying that right would be committing a crime. One participant reported that it is a policy which symbolizes the Indian government's belief in the right to education for all. Three additional participants discussed how university education is a human right but believed that the quota actually worked to prohibit some people from receiving an education. These participants spoke about the quota disadvantaging upper caste students in their right to education and "handicapping" Dalits in their pursuit of mainstream education (detailed below).

Those who saw affirmative action's role in protecting education all referenced the historical deprivation of education Dalits have experienced and some discussed how this policy holds the government accountable to admit Dalit students to higher education. Bob (2009) argues that quota programs have encouraged Dalits to be more aware of their legal rights and have contributed to raising their self-esteem.

4.3   *Quota Can be Paired with Effective University Integration Strategies*

"Mixing through group discussion; studying, asking questions…Good discussion makes me feel more comfortable". – *Dalit student*

"Especially when they are put together for a project, there is a lot of camaraderie and they feel good to be working with each other, so the possibility of understanding each other is always there. …Projects, sports, when they play together, and when they go on any kind of celebrations together…Children can mix very quickly, students can mix very quickly, provided they are both in the same kind of environment". – *Upper caste administrator*

Ten participants were able to identify effective university integration strategies, which they noted had helped or could help facilitate integration for Dalits in higher education, generating a more inclusive community. One participant discussed how one of his professors on his first day of school reminded students of the "no ragging [teasing] policy". He stated that discrimination could be addressed with punishments for bullies and positive interventions with Dalit students, if there was effective communication among university staff. A few other participants discussed the value of doing group projects, volunteering, playing sports, having inter-caste marriages, having common worship spaces, and attending workshops and conferences with students from different backgrounds as a way to bridge barriers and move towards inclusivity. One participant discussed the role that drama and theatre programs could have in bringing diverse groups of students together. Another discussed integrating students through debate teams. Some participants discussed the necessity of all students understanding the history of Dalits from the perspectives of anthropologists so that Dalits would be represented in classroom discussions. A faculty member discussed the importance of bringing up integration issues in faculty meetings to draw attention to the topic and to problem solve among peers.

Dalit students discussed the role of mentors in increasing their confidence and security in higher education. Participants also discussed the barriers to effective university integration strategies. Some participants stated that only those who are interested would come to programming aimed at bridging historical caste gaps and that it would be hard to incentivize additional programming. Others discussed that inter-caste communication can be uncomfortable for both castes and that students and faculty may avoid this discomfort. One participant discussed the added cost for schools to include programming as a barrier. Many participants discussed programs within their colleges dedicated to "volunteering for" rural Dalit communities, but made no mention of how these initiatives helped Dalits integrate into universities or to generate a more inclusive university.

4.4   Quota Perpetuates Competition for Limited Resources for Upper Castes

"There are many people from the general [upper] category also who are not able to get a meal per day, and there are many SC ST people who are having a better life, so why should we give reservation only to the SC ST people? We should also give to the general [upper] category". – *Upper caste student*

"Person going in by quota always looked down upon by classmates; Discrimination bound to be there…In streets fighting with each other for place in university and job". – *Upper caste administrator*

Those participants who listed a variety of reasons the quota negatively affects upper caste students seemed to be resisting a possible social change process towards an inclusive community. Five upper caste students and faculty discussed the negative psychological effects that quotas have had on upper caste students, and mentioned that the latter "could be the ones to commit suicide for not getting into university". Eleven participants discussed how the quota deprives and/or takes jobs away from upper caste students, and in some cases, "gives jobs to people who are not qualified or deserving". Upper caste individuals have historically opposed the quota policy, arguing that the policy works to exclude high-caste students (Chalam, 2007) and displaces meritorious non-Dalit applicants (Amman, 2008). Participants discussed how affirmative action reduces merit as the criteria for access as well as the quality of education. This is in line with arguments which suggest the policy favors less meritorious Dalit students (Hooda, 2001; Jogdand, 2007; Thorat, 2009). Also, they discussed how Dalits are already in positions of power in parts of the government and argued that giving them a quota gives them a double-advantage that upper castes do not have. Five participants stated that the quota was only in place so that politicians could gain votes from the Dalit community. Two Dalit students stated that they feel upper caste students are angry at them because the latter have to pay tuition, whereas Dalit students often go to university for free. One participant stated that upper caste students even make fake certificates to obtain the quotas given to Dalits. The concerns of upper caste people are regularly circulated in the Indian mass media (Ovichegan, 2014).

4.5   Quota Negatively Impacts and/or Frames Dalits as Undeserving

"If you give them the reservations for a seat in the college, again give reservations to get a job, again give reservation for getting a promotion, you are doing harm to them. It is like if someone is a beggar, instead of giving them some employment you just donate some money to them. So that encourages not working". – *Upper caste administrator*

"Reservations harming SC/ST people…There is this mindset that okay that they have come from these reservation quotas, you never know if they are good enough to do certain jobs". – *Upper caste student*

Eight participants reported that receiving a quota is tied to a negative connotation for Dalits. These participants mentioned that the quota carries a stigma, suggesting a Dalit student is not worthy, is not trained, and does not have to work to earn their university education.

Four participants also suggested that the quota puts a barrier between students from different caste backgrounds and/or generates tension or conflict among people from different castes. According to Sadangi (2008), Dalits can be stigmatized and excluded from the very outset of the process of application, while non-Dalit students can receive advantages and preferential treatment at the admissions stage. D'Souza (2009) claims students of the dominant castes frequently exhibit caste bias towards their Dalit peers and treat them differently as such. A few participants stated that the quota diminishes the successes Dalits have had in the past 60 years since independence and continuing the quota disrespects their ability to overcome adversity.

The long-standing perception of inferiority of Dalits is said to contribute to low self-esteem (Reddy, Narayan, & Rao, 2004) and may act as an obstacle to Dalit success and achievement (Rajawat, 2004). However, it is noteworthy that Dalit students in this study did not express any negative effects of being the beneficiaries of quotas.

4.6   Quota Should Focus on Class or Gender, not Caste

"Again in the quota, if you ask me, there is reservation, and if there isn't, there should be, for women. I think more than the lower class, the women in our country, India, have been very, very underprivileged". – *Upper caste administrator*

"And just because he is a Brahmin, he isn't entitled to the same privileges, that maybe a SC/ST who is earning maybe more than him, getting more access than him to education is getting. So what I am trying to say is that I am not against the concept of affirmative action. What I am trying to say is that caste is a wrong determinant. What it should be is economics". – *Upper caste student*

Some participants opposed a quota for caste, but expressed limited support for an alternate system of quotas. Five participants stated that a quota should exist based on gender and five believed a quota should exist on the basis of economics or social class status (SES). Three participants expressed that a time-limited quota for caste should exist but that it should not be indefinite. Three participants stated a belief that Dalits should get quotas for either jobs or education, but not both. And finally, three participants suggested that a reduced quota percentage for Dalit students would be preferred, opposed to the existing 50% quota percentage.

5.   Discussion

Dalits, commonly known as "untouchables" for their low caste status, systematically endure discrimination despite sometimes gaining access to the Indian university system through the system of reservation quotas. The purpose of this exploratory study was to engage a small sample of students, staff, and faculty in one private university in India in what are difficult conversations in India today. The research sought to generate participants' reflections about their

university's affirmative action policy, towards developing a grounded theory to better understand the diverse meanings associated with India's quota policy by those directly affected by it or expected to implement it through higher education.

Participants varied in their stances on the affirmative action quota system. Responses either embodied a resistance to or an embrace of a more inclusive university community than is currently experienced in India. Authors theorized that these responses were being moderated by negative and positive intergroup perceptions, respectively. Participants who resisted change shared their defenses against the quota that included: adverse effects of quotas on upper caste students, negative effects for Dalits, and alternative identities for which quotas could be assigned. Participants embracing change discussed the quota's impact on overcoming historical divisions, its utility for social development, education as a human right, and the quota as an effective way through which institutions can break historic barriers between students of different castes. All Dalit participants embraced the quota and four upper caste participants embraced the quota or expressed mixed feelings about it. Those who resisted the quota were all from upper castes.

All participants in the study discussed prejudice and discrimination as occurring between students of different castes. As Dhawan (2005) and Ovichegan (2014) found, the data from this study confirm that the university environment maintains a divide between upper caste and Dalit students, including Dalit students being neglected and overlooked by people with institutional power and upper caste students engaging historic exclusionary behaviors towards Dalit students. Many in this study offered suggestions as to how to better support effective integration of Dalits into higher education and the majority of participants said there was a need to do more programming beyond affirmative action to help Dalit students integrate and upper caste students to expand their comfort zones in interacting with each other, regardless of their positions on affirmative action policy.

University community members who did not perceive themselves as personally benefitting from the quota system expressed a bias against it. The findings suggest a need for active engagement with university personnel and students regarding the development of the quota systems and its aims for supporting Dalits' opportunities to gain power in a system designed for and by upper castes. It is also important to note that affirmative action is only one step towards dismantling historic marginalization of Dalits. Further, inclusion not only needs to provide opportunities and access to Dalits, but needs also to structurally affirm the development of already existent power and engage those who hold it in dialogic processes through which they can facilitate caste-privilege-consciousness for upper caste people and build upon historical legacies towards caste liberation.

Educational policy researcher Ovichegan states:

> Therefore, the administration of the Quota policy, for instance, confirms that although the policies may be empowering in theory, the process of carrying them out is certainly not. Although Quota reservations offer opportunities to Dalit (both male and female) individuals, the procedures associated with the scheme are notably insecure, often perpetuating the exclusion of Dalit applicants rather than facilitating their access to higher education (Ovichegan, 2014, p. 375).

The findings of this study are consistent with the assertion that policy alone does not change historic discrimination; institutional procedures actualizing inclusion of Dalits taking into consideration historic psychosocial dynamics is necessary to facilitate Dalit empowerment and liberation.

6.   Limitations & Implications

The small number of students from Dalit backgrounds who participated in this study limited the robustness of the findings. Additionally, the study took place in a context where people "save face" and attempt to please people by exhibiting what they imagine may be socially desirable behavior, which may have influenced their responses in the interviews. Participants' perception of the researcher's caste may have contributed to this. Another complexity to consider is raised by Ovichegan (2014), who discusses how affirmative action policy has benefitted "creamy layer" economically privileged Dalits, and how economically disadvantaged Dalits have been left behind in accessing higher education through the quota policy. This distinction did not emerge in this study and should be examined in further research. Additionally, the snowball sampling method may not have yielded the most diverse participant pool, as people may have referred others to the study who had perspectives more similar to their own. Finally, given the modest and non-representative sample these findings are not generalizable either to that educational context or beyond it.

Despite these limitations this exploratory study has multi-tiered implications. On an individual level, students from upper caste and Dalit backgrounds expressed a misunderstanding of and hesitation to engage with those they perceive to be "the other". Some students did not seem to fully appreciate the possibilities of breaking down barriers by interacting with and taking opportunities to learn from one another. On a local community level, student and faculty organizations can develop groups or courses dedicated to furthering genuine Dalit-upper caste engagement and/or integration. Social psychological research within the U.S. context suggests that contact alone is insufficient to generate positive relationships across racial groups whereas genuine interactions and/or engagement in shared activities reversed those trends (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). However, one of the implicit conditions in intergroup contact is equal status of participants. In order for intergroup contact to yield any transformative results that do not simply reproduce the status quo these opportunities must be predicated on and nurture conditions of equal status – which is challenging given the ubiquity of the caste system. Being explicitly cognizant of social and historical power differentials contingent on caste is critical to any such intervention. Universities should consider engaging anti-caste dialogue, which considers not simply altering perspectives about caste but about the caste system as a whole, which is predicated on dehumanization. Anti-caste, Dalit scholars, starting from Ambedkar discuss the need to demolish the caste system in its entirety, not merely create positive representations and relations (Omvedt, 2006). Student groups from different backgrounds can collaborate to determine projects and programming that aim toward liberation from and abolishment of caste. An initial step could involve information dissemination to raise consciousness about the utility of reservations to overcoming historical dynamics. This study documented the ways in which upper caste students and faculty resist structural policies aimed to redress historic discrimination. It also documented positive embrace of the quota by Dalits as furthering their development and

right to education. Understanding these strategies of resistance and embrace provides a basis for intervention.

At an institutional level, faculty can encourage group projects and match upper caste students with Dalit students. Educators can educate upper caste students about historic caste privilege and the reason caste based reservations exists in contrast to the absence of economic reservations in India today despite gross economic inequalities. At a national policy level, affirmative action alone is not enough to change historic discrimination, but the policy could be more effective in contributing to social change if coupled with programs within universities to engage students in inter-caste and anti-caste dialogue. Policies can facilitate peacemaking processes in contexts with historic conflict. Discrimination against out-group members in India (including poor, lower-caste, "untouchable" communities) has been entrenched in the Indian social system for centuries. The caste system in India has caused massive discrimination; the caste into which one is born strongly influences one's future and access to resources (Sooryamoorthy, 2006). Students, administrators, and faculty can contribute more effectively to creating a more just environment for Dalit inclusion in higher education when individual change (mindsets, perceptions, practices) intersects with systemic change (institutional and government policies).

Acknowledgements

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