

DISCRIMINATION IN THE IITS IS SOMETHING TO WRITE ABOUT

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'What merit completely fails to account for are the starting points, the trajectories, the social networks, the affluence, the prejudices, hardships and innumerable other factors that shape us' | Photo Credit: EMMANUAL YOGINI

[Darshan Solanki, an undergraduate student](#) of chemical engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay, ended his life on February 12, 2023. He was a Dalit. The institute formed a 12-member committee to conduct [an investigation](#), which submitted its report on March 2. The report said, "It appears from the marks obtained in various courses that the performance of Darshan Solanki deteriorated specifically in the second half of the autumn semester. His deteriorating academic performance could have affected him seriously." The report further said: "Other than the statement of Darshan's sister, there is no specific evidence of direct caste-based discrimination faced by him during his stay at IIT Bombay."

Unlike the hard sciences, establishing causal links of discrimination is challenging. However, the lack of tools to establish causality does not negate the presence of discrimination. In thinking about marginalisation, the tendency is to sympathise with the most victimised. While that is understandable, it should not dilute the many forms of discrimination. What is needed is not sympathy or band-aid empathy for the most victimised but a constant engagement with the politics of assertion because discrimination is not necessarily a one-off, high-pitched melodramatic event of hurling abuses at somebody. It is a layered and continuous process that happens through everyday doses, steadily creating an atmosphere of "us" and "them". It takes subtle, seemingly innocuous forms such as a smile combined with a frown, a wince, a hand gesture, or just silence. And, a discussion on discrimination at the IITs needs to be predicated on a discussion on merit as it is the embedded idea of merit that gives licence to discriminate.

The political philosopher, Michael Sandel, in the book, *The Tyranny of Merit*, presents a scathing critique of meritocracy as a societal ideal and argues how hubris among the elites and a politics of humiliation are natural outcomes of meritocracy. This is not to suggest that every upper-caste student at the IITs discriminates or that every lower-caste student feels victimised. However, some upper-caste students at the IITs, knowingly or unknowingly, embody what Sandel calls "credentialist prejudice" as symptomatic of meritocratic arrogance. This happens, when elites tend to "look down on those who do not rise". Such an approach "undermines social recognition and esteem for those who lack the credentials the system rewards".

Variations of graded inequality and, consequently, discriminatory judgements about one's so-called abilities are deeply entrenched within the veneer of merit at the IITs.

Soon after one enters IIT campuses, one steps into well-demarcated zones of hierarchy. The first level of hierarchy is whether you are an undergraduate or a postgraduate student. Intermingling of these two cohorts was an exception than the norm as undergraduates tended to feel superior to postgraduates. For undergraduates, one's abilities are immediately tattooed in the minds of everyone based on one's rank in the entrance exams. Much like the accident of birth, one's branch of studies is an accident of one's rank. This then becomes the unique identifier of this phantom called merit; then, slowly, the lines between being objective and objectifying get blurred.

The accident of the branch of studies results in disinterest and disillusionment among some students. But it plays out differently among students across caste. On average, for some upper-caste disinterested students, it becomes an opportunity to explore other facets, which then acts as a justification for bad academic performance in college. There is usually an implicit confidence among such students that they could be bailed out when needed, owing to their family connections, affluence, cultural capital or social networks with 'successful' people. These act as cushions for them to take risks in college. Think of how and whom you would refer for a job in your company where you get a referral bonus.

However, on average, even when some students on 'reservation' feel trapped in a branch not of their choice, they do not have the luxury to explore or take the same kind of risks as their upper-caste counterparts. More often, they lack similar connections, affluence or cultural capital as their upper-caste friends. An apprehension of being stigmatised for bad academic performance tends to amplify their anxiety and pressure. What these imply is that even the freedom to take chances is implicitly conditioned on one's rank and caste location. The buoyancy of youth is not equal for everyone. What merit completely fails to account for are the starting points, the trajectories, the social networks, the affluence, the prejudices, hardships and innumerable other factors that shape us. Contrary to what we were told, we realised that it was never a level-playing field. Metaphorically speaking, in a 100 metre race, people like us were running downhill, and many others from historically marginalised backgrounds were doing so uphill. In most cases, not only did our slopes differ but also that some of us were just running 50 m downhill while many others had to run 500 m uphill and the only metric to compare our abilities was the time taken to complete our races. This is what ranks or grades do. The argument of using rank or grades as a proxy for merit is like using a person's body temperature as a sole metric to assess health, ignoring one's age, gender or other pre-existing health conditions.

The principle of equal opportunity is only a corrective measure of historical injustice. It is not a sufficient principle to foster an equitable society devoid of discrimination. Sandel quoting British economic historian, R.H. Tawney, writes: 'social well-being depends upon cohesion and solidarity. Individual happiness does not only require that men should be free to rise to new positions of comfort and distinction; it also requires that they should be able to lead a life of dignity and culture, whether they rise or not.'

We write this from the perspective of being alumni of two different branches from two IITs and societally identified with the privileged upper castes. This is neither a sentimental confession nor is this any grand theory of caste discrimination at the IITs. This is merely a reflection on what we saw and how we were occupants of the upper echelons by default and, on occasions, were either silent or ignorant about how discrimination operated on the pretext of merit. There is no denying that every student at the IITs has put in immense effort to get in but it has taken us a while to realise that calling it merit was erroneous. The tragic case of Darshan Solanki should serve as a reminder to lakhs of elite alumni from the IITs to pause and reflect on the blind spots

of biases they may have had during their student days. Being key institutional collaborators, it is equally important for the faculty at the IITs to re-imagine classrooms as spaces free of meritocratic or discriminatory judgements. Building empathy and fostering a culture of equality, dignity, and fraternity cannot happen through short orientation programmes. These should be built-into the curriculum at the IITs and should become the DNA of campus life for learning spaces to be sanctuaries. These are not just moral imperatives but can play a huge role for a healthier and prosperous India.

Those in distress or having suicidal tendencies could seek help and counselling by calling helplines

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