

Merit and caste as cultural capital: Justifying affirmative action for the underprivileged in Kerala, India

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Abstract

This article aims to offer a theoretical critique of the propaganda against the affirmative action programmes, as well as to unpack the veil of merit and provide justifications for affirmative action for the underprivileged in Kerala. For this purpose, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and its origin would be introduced as the central focus of analysis. Next, hate campaigns through social media against affirmative action and misconceptions about merit will be introduced briefly. Second, this article will present the implications of Bourdieu's concepts for affirmative action in India. Third, it will critically explore how caste system creates different fields for the reproduction of cultural capital with family habitus and the circulation of capital in different forms on behalf of the dominant communities. Fourth, the relative aspect of merit regarding the caste bound traditional occupational culture will be discussed. Fifth, this article will critically analyse the extent to which dominant communities reproduce embodied cultural capital historically and claim privileges in political engagements. To conclude, some recommendations to deal with anti-affirmative action mind-sets in relation to merit will be presented.

Keywords: *merit, caste, cultural capital, habitus, reproduction, reservation, privilege*

Introduction

Bourdieu developed the concept of cultural capital within the specific context of the French educational system in order to explore the nature of culture, its reproduction and circulation from one form of capital into another: economic capital (money, asset, property rights), social capital (network of people), symbolic capital (prestige, celebrity, consecration, honour, or privilege) and cultural capital (communication skills, accent, books, academic achievements). He coined these concepts in different phases while revisiting the classical Marxist ideas of economic capital. Unlike traditional Marxists, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 118–9) argue that the dominant classes cannot maintain social power only bounded to economic capital: ‘A general science of the economy of practices that does not artificially limit itself to those practices that are socially recognised as economic must endeavour to grasp capital, that ‘energy of social physics’ in all of its different forms’. The dominant classes also hold capital in non-economic forms and circulate them from one to another.

Robbins (2005) outlines that Bourdieu introduced the concept of cultural capital in the early 60s in collaboration with Passeron in ‘Les étudiants et leurs études’ (1964a) and *Les Héritiers* (1964b). He further explored the concept of cultural capital in his paper *cultural reproduction and social reproduction* in 1973, and later formed a theoretical tool in 1979 in his popular book- *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. In 1986, he classified cultural capital into three states in a chapter -The forms of capital-in *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (Bourdieu, 1986): embodied, objectified and institutionalised, and explained how they can be inherited or reproduced by different communities at varying levels. Bourdieu later named his another concept habitus as embodied cultural capital, in order to explore how people reproduce certain mindsets to maintain historical privileges. In general, Bourdieu’s works can be divided into two phases: before and after the 90s. This

article is predominantly focused on the reproduction of cultural capital, and its circulation (see figure two) into other forms that Bourdieu developed before the 90s. Moreover, this article focuses on the critical application of these concepts into the specific context of affirmative action policies, merit and caste bound privileges in Kerala.

Caste is a system of hierarchy formed of four major communities including Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras (Ambedkar, 1987). It justifies inequality with the myth of Chaturvarna; Brahmins are priests since they were born from the head of the Lord Brahma, Kshatriyas are warriors because they were born from the arms of the lord, Vaishyas are merchants as they were born from the thighs, Sudras were supposed to serve all these superior castes, because they were born from the feet, and the untouchables are outside of caste system and they are mostly scavengers, cleaners, or manual labourers. This article explores how this system of inequality reproduces different forms of capital that support the privileged communities; and simultaneously limit the oppressed to have the benefit of historical privileges. Furthermore, it discusses why certain occupations restrict people from gaining any form of capital or convert it into other forms of capital. Also, this article explores the relative character of merit in the traditional occupations in Kerala.

Kerala is a state in the south-west region of the republic of India with a population of over 35 million. Modern Kerala state was formed after the reorganisation of three princely states of British India namely Travancore, Cochin and Malabar in 1956. Kerala ranks first in the country for its performance over social development and health care having high literacy rate (over 90 percentage) high life expectancy (over 70 percentage for male and 75 percentage for female), and low infant mortality (14 per thousand) despite facing criticisms over the exclusion of the oppressed from this developmental

model (Harilal and Joseph, 2003). In addition to this, Kerala is also well known for the implementation of affirmative action in the form of reservation or quota system for the underprivileged communities including Dalits (Scheduled Castes), Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). As part of India's reservation policy, specific quotas are allocated for students seeking admission to higher education courses, for job seekers in the public sector; and for candidates in the local, state assembly and central parliament elections. This quota or reservation also includes women candidates in the local governing bodies due to 73rd and 74th amendments in the Indian constitution. Since affirmative action in India is known as reservation policies this article makes use of both terms interchangeably.

Propaganda against affirmative action over merit is not a new phenomenon in Kerala' history. The demand for effective affirmative action and the hate campaign against it went side by side even before the formation of Kerala state in 1956 (Sudesh, 2017). In 1891, the native elite communities in Kerala, particularly the Nairs, protested the appointment of non-native Brahmins in public sector jobs: a memorandum called 'Malayali Memorial' (or Travancore Memorial), drafted by G.P Pillai, was presented to the princely states of Travancore, demanding representation in legislature and public sector jobs in proportion to their numerical strength (Nair, 1982; Nair, 2014). In 1896, the Ezhava community came up with a counter movement called Ezhava Memorial to demand for representation as they were excluded from the Malayali Memorial (Koshy, 1972). In response to these movements, in 1936, Travancore government introduced the quota system in the public sector for each community in proportion to their numerical strength. Since then, issues of merit, efficiency, and quality have existed in different forms of propaganda.

Anti-reservation propaganda has been increasingly powerful since the early 90s, when affirmative action was extended to include the OBCs as per the recommendations of the Mandal Commission (Deshpande, 2013; Nigam, 2000). Deshpande (2012:16) writes of how the representation of beneficiaries increased during the post-Mandal period although not sufficiently:

The educational inequalities between SC-STs on the one hand, and upper caste Hindus on the other hand, have declined significantly at the primary education stage. For the middle and high school levels, there is a decline too, but not significant. At the college levels, the inequalities between ST men and upper caste Hindus have declined, but for ST women, SC men and SC women, the inequalities have increased.

Deshpande (2012) demonstrated that, affirmative action enabled the excluded and the untouchable communities to become more visible to the mainstream society. This revolution might have been the cause of discomfort in the dominant elites, as their concerns over merit continued to appear in both public and private discussions, even in the form of racist jokes on social media,

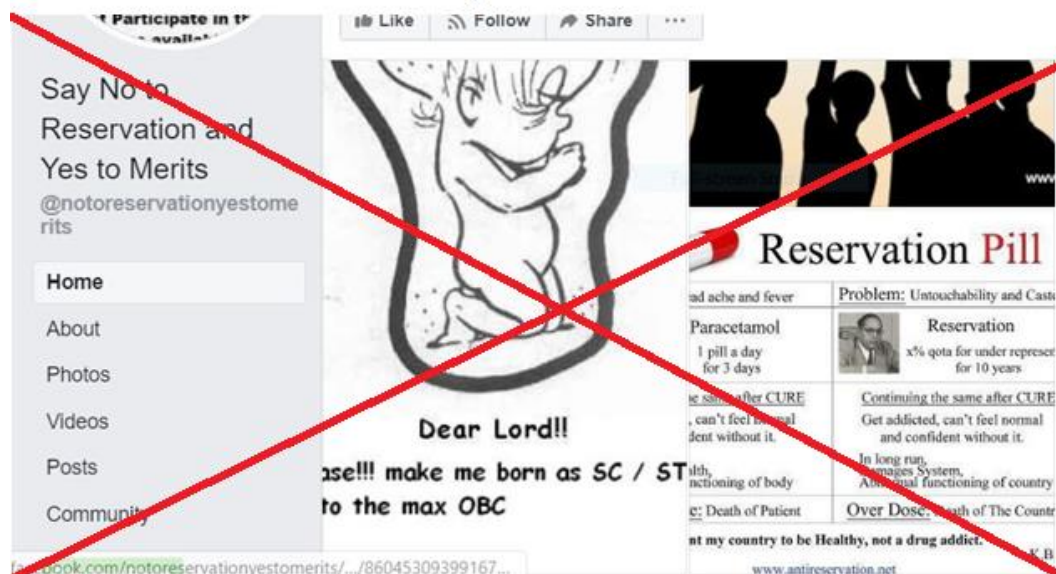
Here are some relaxations for the SC/ST candidates for the aircraft pilot recruitment: Dalit candidates are simply requested to turn the aircraft engines on and then attempt to move the aircraft back and forth on the runway. However, the upper caste candidates are expected to show their expertise to take off and land the aircraft on designated areas of the runway.

This joke presented portrays the idea that ‘Those who enjoy reservation benefits don’t hold merit, they may even seek jobs that need extensive training; and reservation compromises quality’. However, the hidden fact is that no one can be employed without holding mandatory qualifications or training. According to Vishwanathan (2018), reservation policies

ensure representation of the historically excluded upholding the principle of distributive justice. He further argues that caste reservation is the right of an individual in a caste-society, to which s/he could have naturally been given access in a casteless society, and therefore caste reservation should continue as long as caste continues to trigger injustice and discrimination.

Affirmative action in India allows 22.5 percent quotas in governmental educational institutions, governmental jobs and elected bodies for SCs and STs, which are proportional to their share of population. As per the recommendations of the Mandal Commission Report (1990), 27 percent quotas are given to OBCs in jobs; and such provisions have been extended to educational institutions since 2006, under the 93rd constitutional amendment. However, there are no quotas for OBCs in the electoral sphere. Furthermore, 33 percent seats have been reserved for women in local self-government elections (Human Rights Watch, 1999). However, Weisskopf (2004) claims that at least half the seats reserved for SCs and at least two-thirds of the seats reserved for STs remain unfilled, if all institutions of higher education are considered together. Similarly, the representation of the underprivileged in Kerala's public sector still lay behind expectations despite the existence of reservation policies for the last 70 years (Sudesh, 2017). Besides, since 2006, there is no statistics available for the representation of each community in each sector despite demands being made by organisations like Sri Narayana Darma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP). Indeed, the details of community wise representation in the governmental jobs are currently unavailable. Therefore, it would be problematic to address the gap between reservation policies and practices in the real sense. Recently, hate campaign against the reservation system in India became stronger through social media:

Figure one



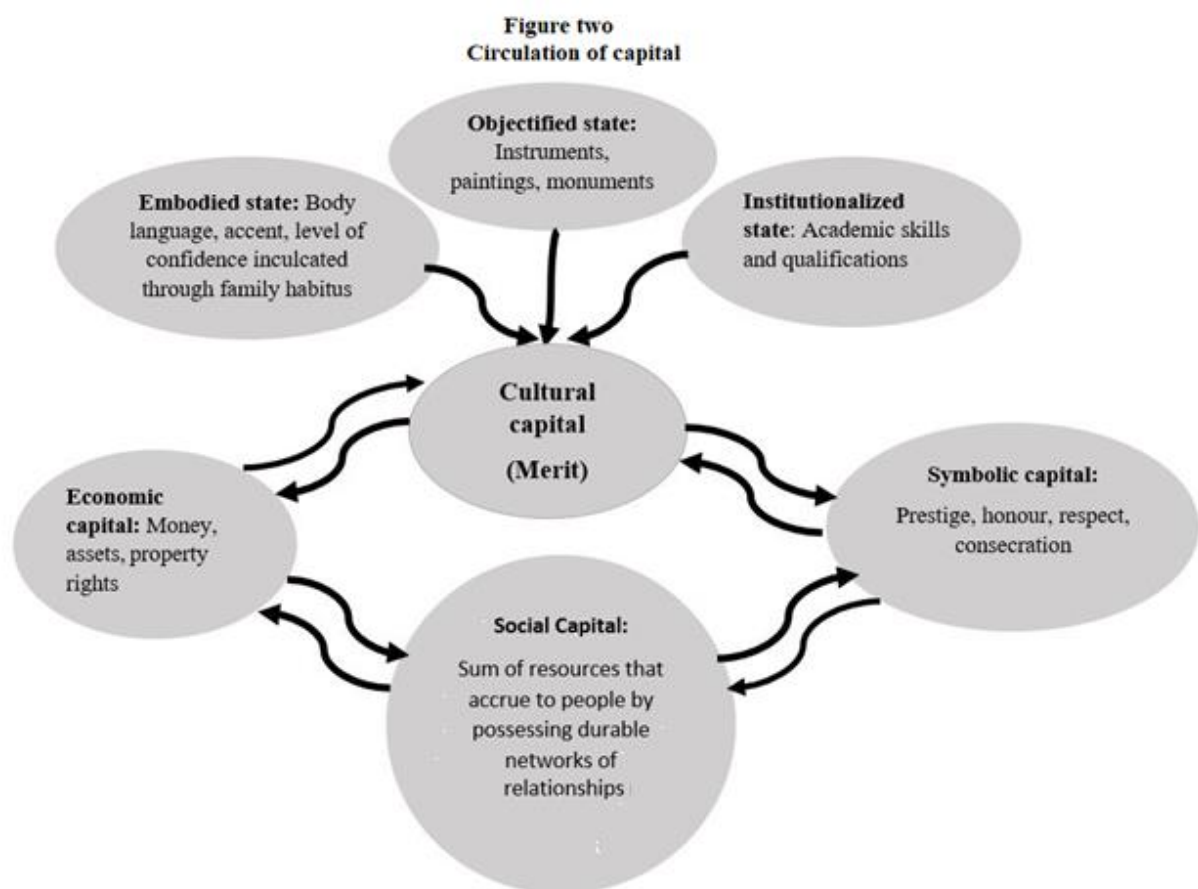
There are several Facebook pages including the message *Say No to Reservation System in India, Say No to Reservation and Yes to Merits* that spread hate campaign against the rights of the underprivileged. Most of these posts and comments predominantly attack reservation system with unfair comparison. As stated in the above figure, reservation is given to people to resolve their problem of caste in a similar way paracetamol pills are given to patients to treat body ache or fever. It also implies that consumption of pills after cure would make a patient addict, consequently reservation should be stopped in a similar fashion because problems of caste no longer exists. Such propaganda rarely follows empirical evidences to prove that caste discrimination no longer exists in India. However, some of the posts contain academic success stories of lower caste students that appear in newspapers to claim that exclusion of the lower caste in the field of education no longer exist. Most of them reduce reservation to a solution of the problems of caste rather than re-distribution of its power relations and inclusion of the under privileged in education, employment or electoral politics.

Moreover, they position the general community including the forward castes as meritorious and the underprivileged communities as its opposite without addressing merit as historical privileges. In addition, they argue that reservation policies overlook merit and hard work of the upper castes without considering the historically and culturally contingent factors that determine merit. Furthermore, they also argue that reservation is a system for recruiting inefficient candidates from the lower castes; it reproduces caste inequality in new forms rather than considering equality as ‘treating people fairly’ instead of ‘treating people equally’ (Equality Act, 2010). These forms of propaganda continue to get strong hold with the advent of social media. It is high time to unpack them, disseminate awareness about positive discrimination, re-define ‘equality’ and continue to uphold effective affirmative action for the historically underprivileged communities in Kerala. Deshpande (2012) emphasizes that all such debates generally consider merit a neutral, objective feature which is independent from the tool that is used to measure merit in a similar way we measure height or weight. This article intends to address complex questions to resist the hate campaign against affirmative action in India, such as; how merit can be defined, who defines this word, and how capability or merit can be achieved

Implications of Bourdieu’s concept of capital for affirmative action in India

Bourdieu (1986) discusses capital in both economic and non-economic forms: that include economic capital (money, asset, property rights), social capital, symbolic and cultural capital; Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:119). Social capital is more about inequality among them in social engagements than mere network. Symbolic capital refers to degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity,

consecration, or honour and it is found on a dialectic of knowledge and recognition. Drawing on Bourdieu, Edgerton and Roberts (2014) argue that the dominant elites convert their economic capital for the purpose of ensuring resources and investing cultural capital for their children, which triggers their educational and professional success and accumulates economic capital in return. The following figure depicts the circulation of capital and how they are mutually inseparable.



This image represents a combination of themes derived from Bourdieu’s four major works: *Les Héritiers: Les étudiants et culture* (1964) Eng. The inheritors: French students and their relations to culture (1979); *cultural reproduction and social reproduction* (1973); *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (1984); and *The forms of capital* (1986).

Cultural, symbolic and economic capital together enable people to gain social capital and vice-versa. Simultaneously, each capital by itself can generate one or the other form of capital and therefore its circulation is not unidirectional but mutually constitutive. As marked by Bourdieu (1986:47), the field legitimates cultural capital as positive qualities rather than reproductive forms of inequality:

Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the *embodied* state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the *objectified* state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc; and in the *institutionalized* state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee.

Each state of cultural capital needs to be understood in relation to other forms: objectified states of cultural capital like writings, paintings, and monuments can be converted into economic capital. Moreover, the potential of conversion of objectified cultural capital is based on the embodied cultural capital (or habitus) that unconsciously determines the nature of conversion which is socially significant. The circulation among these forms of capital enables the dominant class to achieve capabilities and legitimate them as inborn privileges (Bourdieu, 1973, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). For example, the volume of social capital is determined by the size of the network of connections an individual can mobilise and on the volume of economic, cultural and symbolic capital held in his own right (Bourdieu, 1986, Edgerton and Roberts, 2014). Furthermore, dominant communities mostly inherit cultural capital in the form of symbolic capital or they may be honoured regardless of the possession of their cultural capital unlike the backward communities.

Bourdieu further demonstrates that differences of academic credentials between social classes indeed come to reflect unequal distribution of cultural capital. Those who hold cultural capital can generate a natural impression that they are brilliant or meritorious. Mostly, such brilliance is rewarded by teachers considering merit as ascribed quality. Furthermore, those who score higher grades hold a prestigious track which means that their cultural capital is circulated into symbolic capital which can be circulated back to cultural capital over time, so as social capital. In other words, symbolic and social capitals are sources of cultural capital and vice-versa.

Bourdieu (1986) argues that merit is the outcome of the investment of time and cultural capital provided to students by their family habitus not a natural ability. He further states that lower-class students eventually lack all forms of capital unlike the upper class. He predominantly focuses on the class identity of students, although he rarely discusses cultural capital in relation to caste, ethnic or racial identities. Besides, Bourdieu's (1986) concept of habitus is vague in its relationship with embodied cultural capital. On the one hand, both concepts seem to be similar to one another as he presents them as 'long lasting dispositions of the mind and body' (17). For example, people's body language, accent or the way they speak are examples of embodied cultural capital in relation to specific fields they represent. On the other hand, he tries to separate both concepts while considering them mutually constitutive: embodied cultural capital is a form of knowledge that resides within people; but, habitus is a taste or mind-set which is unconsciously formed through the collected experience of people in different fields having its own set of practices, and that habitus itself reproduces the field and new forms of practices in return. For instance, having internalised the 'habitus' of a social structure, people are inclined to certain cultural practices such as food habits, clothing, forms of knowledge; and once they have adopted such practices they tend to reproduce them historically with a

potential to transmit a new form of 'habitus' to the next generation. This is why Bourdieu (1990) called habitus a structuring structure and a structured structure. Moving beyond the binaries, these concepts are useful to critically analyse the unequal social structure of caste and the way in which anti-affirmative action campaigns make people develop certain mind-sets or 'habitus' in relation to merit, and the way in which that habitus further reproduces anti-affirmative action campaigns through social media (see figure one, page7). Additionally, habitus could influence the dominant communities to acquire or reproduce certain roles which are socially and symbolically significant to maintain their status quo. On the other hand, habitus of the underprivileged could only prepare them to seek traditional occupations that are imposed by caste norms (see figure four and five p26).

Many scholars (Kisida *et al*, 2014; Keskiner, 2015; Jæger and Breen, 2016) discuss the role of cultural capital and family habitus in differential talents of students belonging to different social class, underprivileged communities or immigrants drawing on Bourdieu. These findings are significant in regard to the upward mobility of migrant families across the world (Louie, 2012; Zhou *et al*, 2008). Children may also acquire cultural capital outside the family context, for example via peers or schools (Bisin and Verdier, 2011; Kisida *et al*, 2014). Bourdieu raises many critical questions in relation to students' confidence levels regarding their potential to inherit cultural capital along with symbolic and social capital. He mainly argues that lower class students lack all forms of capital unlike the upper class. Bourdieu (1999:424) addresses the relation between students' performance and structurally contingent factors:

The elite students who have received a well-defined sense of place, good role models and encouragement from their families are in a position to apply themselves, at the right moment in the right place in the good tracks, in the good schools, in the good sections etc. On the contrary, students who come from the most disadvantaged families, especially children of immigrants, often left to fend for themselves from primary school on, are obliged to rely either on the dictates of school or on chance to find their way in an increasing complex universe.

Although Bourdieu explores education as a system of oppression, inequality and exclusion, he rarely suggests any political action to minimise exclusion or inequality like Ambedkar (1987) or other scholars. Medeiros *et al* (2017) investigates if affirmative action in place as a revolutionary step to reduce inequality, ensures inclusion and creates opportunities for the excluded groups in the higher educational institutions in Brazil:

The federal government defined the target group of its higher education affirmative action as the low-income students from secondary public schools, also with stratification concerning racial and ethnic aspects. Then, differently from fundamental education, which the government acts in order to expand, universalize and massify, in higher education, the government congregates expansion actions with affirmative action.

Affirmative action in Brazil aims to break the vicious cycle of horizontal and vertical inequalities, which are naturalised or inevitable under the mask of merit (Brown, Langer and Stewart 2012). Marrara and Gasiola (2011) and Gomes and Moraes (2012) emphasize that, affirmative action policies in graduate education are related to diversification of the student body, citizenship and leadership, institutional change responsive research, and fostering of individual talents. In doing so, graduate education creates an affirmative action policy not only to promote democratic access, but also to benefit from the capital of the excluded groups. Through affirmative action both people and state benefit from each

other, which is yet to be realized by the opponents of affirmative action and the policy makers in India. Bourdieu predominantly focuses on the achieved identity of students but he overlooks cultural capital in relation to the ascribed identities like caste, race or ethnicity. Accordingly, this article extends Bourdieu to analyse how caste generates and mobilizes different forms of capital while offering a comparison between dominant and underprivileged communities, particularly cultural capital at the institutionalized, embodied, and objectified states.

Unequal possessions of capital and merit in the caste system

For Ambedkar (1987), the Indian caste system was historically a system of graded inequality. Graded inequality refers to unequal assignment of civic rights, education, and privileges for different castes. In other words, these rights are increased or reduced based on the grade each caste holds. The rights will increase if someone is moved from the lower caste untouchables, Sudras, to middle caste Vaishyas, Kshatriyas and then to the upper caste Brahmins. However, caste system has made such movement impossible because someone's position in the pyramid is rather fixed based on their birth.



Worldatlas (2019) What is the caste system in India. Available from:

<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-caste-system-of-india.html>[Accessed on 27.10.19]

Ambedkar (1987:18) elaborates on what makes ‘graded inequality’ different from the general conceptualization of inequality: The system of graded inequality prevents the rise of general discontent against inequality. It cannot therefore become the storm centre of revolution. Secondly, the sufferers under inequality being unequal both in terms of the benefit and the burden does not offer a possibility for forming a unity among different castes to overthrow inequality. Graded inequality should be differentiated from its general connotation as it divides the oppressed castes themselves with unequal benefits and disadvantages. For instance, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras are the victims of caste system; on the other hand, they are the beneficiaries of caste simultaneously. Under graded inequality only the Brahmins hold absolute power and untouchable castes are the absolute victims. The more you move up to the pyramid the more respected you are. Similarly, the more you move down to the pyramid the more contemptuous you are. Although the caste system does not seem to be rigid as it used to be since its inception, it still continues to oppress and marginalise people.

Unlike Bourdieu, Ambedkar discusses how graded inequality itself stops people from fighting caste and inequality. On the other hand, Bourdieu discusses the ways in which the students’ performance, talents or merits are structurally reproduced by the French educational system. These conditions have many things in common with the educational system in India, despite having significant differences between the types of social structure in both countries. Indian caste system undeniably has allowed the elite Brahmins to have all sorts of access to both formal and informal methods of education. Historically, education was a privilege for the Brahmins, while it was a taboo for the Dalit communities due to the practice of caste. As Deshpande (2013) pointed out, caste should only be considered as a means of disadvantage or vulnerability but not a means of privilege or advantage. Furthermore, caste oppression indeed has

created a field for the elite castes to historically gain and transform all forms of capital.

Bourdieu's concept of reproduction is useful to explore the extent to which different forms of capital are unequally distributed among different castes in India. Historically, caste system has formed people with unequal capabilities because they have had unequal access to cultural capital in the form of formal education. Education has been a privilege for the Brahmins especially learning Sanskrit, which was the medium of instruction in the ancient system of Education. Similarly, other privileged castes were used to work in the Royal palaces as secretaries or accountants. Moreover, they are historically well-trained while reproducing cultural capital through family habitus.

Several scholars (Kaufman and Gabler, 2004; Kisida *et al*, 2014) explore that extracurricular activities might strengthen the creativity of students and such cultural participation triggers a genuine increase in their analytical and academic competence. For example, the upper caste students in India are also able to develop more cognitive skills through extra-curricular activities because they have spare time to practice poetry, music or similar sorts of artistic or cultural activities and they have the privilege of family habitus to reproduce that skills. This would lead them to gain or supplement cultural capital which can be converted into symbolic or social capital and vice-versa. On the other hand, students belonging to excluded communities rarely inherit enough cultural capital through parental habitus in the form of symbolic capital; learning therefore will be a daunting task for them unlike their upper-caste peers. But these students may be confident to talk about their lived realities of their traditional occupations.

Absence of educated personnel puts pressure on such families as they have had very limited opportunities to adequately train their children or influence them consciously or unconsciously with habitus. Additionally, their ancestors were excluded from the formal educational system and professional jobs. They were instead forced to work as slaves, tenants or manual labourers. Majority of them might internalise a habitus that persuades them to reproduce their skills in traditional occupations only. However, those who wish to break down their habitus have had to work part-time with their parents. In other words, they must put surplus effort to compete with their upper caste peers. Thus, thanks to compelling financial situations they rarely enjoy their times off after school as breadwinners of their household. These conditions continue to have a strong impact over their classroom performance. Therefore, learning becomes monotonous or a mechanical exercise for them and they are more likely to be dropped off and in this way be under-represented in education and employment. However, the opponents of affirmative action increasingly mythicize that lower-caste students holding reservation benefits are inefficient or non-meritorious. In fact, efficiency of upper caste students are their historical privileges, but they are legitimized as normal or considered to be extraordinary.

Dalit and Adivasi community possess abundant sources of cultural capital at the objectified state, including unique musical or art forms, but which are excluded from mainstream. Again, affirmative policies are not supposed to address individual merit because merit is relative and historically inherited as Bourdieu explored. Moreover, merit is abstract or intangible, so it is rather difficult to define precisely. Merit also needs to be understood in the context of reproduction of cultural capital through family habitus. Opponents of affirmative action consider merit as biological mainly due to the myth of Chaturvarna. As per the four-fold caste system, Brahmins originated from the mouth of Lord Brahma, so, they are given the duty of priesthood. Brahmins are

considered intellectuals because learning vedas or Sanskrit has historically been their sole privileges. On the other hand, lower castes were prohibited from learning Vedas or Sanskrit and they were supposed to perform manual jobs (Ambedkar, 1987). Although, manual jobs also require engineering skills, they are not considered meritorious by caste. Furthermore, those who are born as such are considered to be serving sentence for their sins committed in previous lives according to the principle of Karma.

The Indian caste system set up many taboos for education that prevented the Dalit community from gaining such skills. Many reformations occurred during the colonial period, especially when modern education system replaced the traditional Gurukula system in India. Nonetheless, the underprivileged students had been unable to cope with the new system despite the removal of all taboos because everything had remained unknown to them, so they had to learn everything from the beginning due to lack of access in India's ancient education. As Jæger and Breen (2016) explore, the potential to exchange cultural capital into educational success varies from one student to another; students who belong to families having lower social and economic status (SES) benefits less from the cultural capital that are transmitted by their parents than children belonging to families having higher socio-economic status. This is because they are less subjected to identify and valorise cultural capital in school. On the other hand, higher SES students might be enrolled in schools where the pedagogy, teaching style and school organisation are well suited for these students to convert cultural capital into academic success.

Supporters of affirmative action in Kerala or India rarely extend Bourdieu to expose that myth revolving around merit. However, in the global context they argue that both merit and affirmative action are compatible. For example, Livingston (1979:167) points out that 'affirmative action is necessary because it

is the closest approximation to justice that meritocracy permits. A society based on the pure application of the merit principle would be an unliveable society, without any vestige of loyalty or community'. Van de Werfhorst (2010) criticises Bourdieu for being very deterministic to explain the low performance of students from disadvantaged groups, since, according to him, other factors also play a significant role that negatively affect their performances. An increase in tuition fees might also trigger lower rate of enrolment of students regardless of their economic or immigration status. Moreover, the educational system has been changed rapidly and representation of middle-class students has increased substantially in higher education.

Educational mobility of the lower caste or OBC students in Kerala also shows a similar trend to a greater extent. Certainly, these changes in educational disparities need to be acknowledged. Nevertheless, the process of changing is rather complex, although it may not necessarily indicate absence of inequality. In Kerala, many students from lower caste families prefer higher education because traditional occupations have no longer become a means of substance for them; nor have they provided them with any symbolic or social capital. So, they have quitted their traditional occupations in order to become software engineers, teachers, nurses and so on. Nevertheless, they have had to put surplus effort to pass competitive examinations unlike their upper caste peers. Occasionally, lower students may sometimes equal results with upper caste students despite having insufficient cultural capital. Nonetheless, there will still be significant differences between both students regarding their capacity to inherit cultural capital. Upper caste students might still need less effort, and less time that can be supplemented with their inherited cultural capital to achieve their desired outcome. Lower caste students on the other hand, would have to spend more time and more effort to fill the gaps of their inherited cultural capital to be in par with or surpass upper caste students.

Let us consider two students namely Kiran Nair (an upper caste) and Arun Kumar (a Dalit). Imagine both secure 60 marks for their science examination. Although both students seem to be equally *brilliant or meritorious*, the total time they spend on their studies and leisure may not be the same. Suppose Kiran Nair has had to study for an average of 3 hours per day to secure his 60 marks. On the other hand, Arun Kumar may have had to study for 5 hours per day to get an equal score of 60. This shows that Kiran Nair who has had the benefit of parental habitus enabling him to reproduce cultural capital saves two hours of hard work. Whereas Arun Kumar who has had no benefit of parental habitus that does not reproduce the required cultural capital for him had to put surplus effort to compete with Kiran, which Arun Kumar could have saved for other activities like music, sports, or poetry. If Arun Kumar had spent a few more hours per day, his performance would have been better than Kiran Nair. Thus, it is unfair to say that Arun does not face exclusion or systemic inequality when he scores better than Kiran just because of his surplus hard work. These facts are not shown in the campaign against affirmative action in relation to the stories of lower caste students' academic success (see figure one, page 7).

Let us move on to another imaginary situation: 'Kiran Nair goes abroad for higher studies with his parents migrating to the United Kingdom'. As an immigrant student, will Kiran's merit or talent be the same as British home students that might inherit embodied cultural capital with a different family habitus or are taught differently? Kiran cannot be considered brilliant or meritorious unless he works very hard and seeks external support to improve his performance. Subsequently, merit is relative to students who have inherited embodied cultural capital and family habitus (Bourdieu, 1986) and its criteria varies contextually.

Therefore, the relative educational mobility of lower caste students does not diminish the importance of Bourdieu for understanding merit and hidden forms of exclusion and inequality in education. However, such students are treated as inefficient or unskilled by the mainstream society. Furthermore, in most situations, candidates achieve relevant skills from experience or working with their senior colleagues. They must prove efficiency on completion of their probation period. Consequently, the argument related to merit and quality does not seem to be valid. In addition to reservation policies, the government of India initiated many programs to defray the cost of education for such students: that includes scholarships and fellowships, midday meals, uniforms, stationery, and books; with special schools and tutorials where the government also encourages parents to educate their children and to reduce dropout rates (Desai and Kulkarni, 2008). These measures are important because affirmative action should not be limited to increase the representation of the excluded communities by filling the gaps in education, employment or politics. Deshpande (2006:19) writes of the shortcomings of the affirmative action over its implementation:

Most institutions get away by simply stipulating the mandatory quota; given the lack of a monitoring agency, there is neither the accountability to fill the quota nor penalties for loopholes used to circumvent quota restrictions. Follow-up support programs to enhance the performance of quota entrants are non-existent.

So, the government should constantly monitor such system and in addition it should strengthen the community education support system for building embodied cultural capital that could have been naturally inherited in a caste-free society. As some scholars (Minimol and Makesh, 2012) explored, women neighbourhood groups like Kudumbashree are proved to be successful in bringing increased self-esteem, self- confidence and communication skills for

the historically silenced women in Kerala. As I wrote earlier last year (Syamprasad, 2018), self-help group and community work meetings are educational both for the leaders and members to speak for themselves and their future endeavours.

Merit is relative in traditional occupational culture

According to Bourdieu (1973; 1984; 1986), the lower class students lack all forms of capital which affect their performance. Similarly, Panda (2017) argues that the Indian social structure is made of the complex interplay between caste and class. For him, Dalit and downtrodden communities in India lack all forms of cultural capital restricting their upward mobility. Nevertheless, these arguments would be too reductionist as they rarely address the complexity of skills or talents that traditional occupations require and its limited exchange value. Therefore, the task of extending Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital into caste based occupational interactions could be problematic.

Differently from Bourdieu and Panda, it should be argued that Dalit communities also possess cultural capital at the objectified state, but, they miss their exchange value as such occupations are degraded by caste. Unlike the upper caste Hindus, Dalit community rarely receive any acknowledgement despite holding merit or wealth because their ancestors may have been slaves, tenants or may have been engaged in traditional occupations. Since these jobs have been historically degraded and imposed on to them by caste, the symbols of such occupations rarely hold any significance in their social lives. Their merit is relative to the traditional jobs they perform, which, of course, is meant to be a source of cultural capital. However, such cultural capital becomes immobile and loses its exchange value socially, and therefore it cannot be transformed into social capital due to insufficient symbolic capital. To substantiate more, let us read a traditional coconut tree climber in a village in Kerala,

One day I was climbing on the top of a coconut tree as part of my work. Suddenly, I realized that the tree was going to collapse. I suddenly threw my axe, (which I inserted into my waist through my underwear) away, I then hugged the tree strongly. When the tree was about to land I jumped into the ground opposite to where the tree was located. I did this because unlike jackfruit or mango trees coconut trees do not have many branches allowing them to have a spring action upwards, as elephants do with their trunks on their backsides, that could have killed myself. Similarly, falling down with axe inside my waist would have left me with serious injuries.

Krishnan developed such skills from his occupational culture and related family habitus, which of course is an indicator of merit. However, that indicator of merit is naturally excluded from the so-called socially constructed criteria for merit. Additionally, since coconut tree climbing belong to the PARAVA caste in Kerala and therefore that job is degraded by caste Krishnan's skills, it can rarely achieve any sort of symbols (unlike like a Brahman priest', Kshatriya warrior' or a Vaishya Merchant) that could be exchanged into social and cultural capital. In history, there is evidence that shows that the indigenous Adivasi community's local knowledge and experiences were useful for the modern British engineers to construct road through dense forests. The Adivasi community found that chasing the footprints of wild animals is one of the best ways that could help the engineers to build roads across dense forests. Similarly, great temple skyscrapers, monuments, statues, artefacts made of gold, bronze, or iron, built by the traditional artisan community in India prior to the development of modern engineering, are clear indicators of their immense knowledge or engineering skills which are indicators of their objectified cultural capital.

Furthermore, such skills are limited to remain as 'local' knowledge. The term local is again degraded or inferior when compared to formal 'classroom' knowledge. Once more, these indicators of merit rarely become a symbolic

capital for the lower caste labourers to achieve social capital unlike the upper castes. Since such indicators of merit are excluded from the mainstream merit criteria, people are more likely to internalise a habitus forming prejudiced mind-sets against the Dalit, OBC or the Adivasi community supporting the idea that they are inefficient or no-meritorious and therefore, that they get professional jobs simply due to reservation policies. Certainly, these community members could score better marks with hard work and constant training to achieve cultural capital in the form of academic qualification. However, they still lack the other forms of cultural capital including self-confidence or communication skills (the embodied state) which are normally achieved outside formal education platforms and the cultural artefacts or products they make (the objectified state). This is because they share a culture or ways of being in the world, that rarely becomes an exchangeable form of capital. Hence, the concerns revolving around merit have no justification when considering the network of caste that continues to exclude and marginalize people in Kerala or India.

Merit as embodied cultural capital in politics

This section discusses people's different abilities to achieve and convert embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977a; 1977b; 1986) including personality traits, attitudes, confidence, and communication skills. Let us make a comparison between the potential of upper and lower castes to inherit and circulate embodied capital in political and public interactions.

Figure four



Figure five



Figure four is a poster being circulated on the social media by the Indian National Congress Party across Kerala during the recent parliament election campaign in 2018-2019. This campaign is a typical example of how caste or political privileges together form a symbolic capital for the reproduction of cultural capital through family habitus: Rahul Gandhi is the leader of the Indian National Congress Party in India and he is the son of late Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi. At the same time, Rajiv Gandhi is the son of the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi: and Indira Gandhi is the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India. They all share a common family name with Mahatma Gandhi, the father of independent India. Rahul Gandhi's preferences to become a politician, prime-minister or leader of the Congress party is mainly associated with the fact that he has been benefited by the cultural capital of his family members who have held similar offices; and in addition, he might have been influenced to become a politician due to his historically inherited 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1990).

The Congress party chose Rahul Gandhi as the leader merely because of his ancestral privileges. Therefore, they use the mask of merit in relation to his

ancestral contributions, which creates a natural impression that Rahul Gandhi is meritorious because his ancestors were meritorious. In other words, his caste and political privileges allow him to transmit his symbolic capital to reproduce cultural capital. The symbol of Gandhi is an influential mark for Rahul Gandhi to achieve and reproduce social capital too, regardless of his individual talents. In other words, Rahul Gandhi's individual merit becomes insignificant in its reproductive context. In other words, such misleading statements do not simply intend to help Rahul Gandhi to re-gain political power or save India but also to reproduce the heritage of Gandhi or relations of caste. Such propaganda only legitimises the institution of royalty although such propaganda may be empirically true. Therefore, merit is a simple reflection of his/her historical privileges beyond individual talents which are well illustrated by Bourdieu (1986). On the other hand, people belonging to the Dalit community may not have such choice as their ancestors may have been servants, tenants or slaves, as presented the figure five. As previously discussed, backward communities were forced to follow traditional occupations from time to time. Consequently, their children' embodied cultural capital in the form of taste, artistic skills or knowledge that are inculcated through habitus could only make them become successful farmers, barbourers or carpenters, but it could rarely make them successful politicians, musicians, or doctors. This is because their chances to inherit and reproduce related embodied cultural through parental habitus are restricted by caste. In other words, traditional labourers are not able to reproduce the dominant embodied cultural capital through family habitus.

To substantiate the aforementioned more, a member of an Ezhava caste was selected as the President in a panchayat in Kerala's Kottayam district for the first time in history (Syamprasad, 2016). President's merit became a concern for the members of the public because he did not complete his schooling, although formal qualification is not a constitutional mandate. Additionally, he was

criticized for being humble and not showing enough enthusiasm and dominant gestures to resemble an *ideal* president (Syamprasad, 2007). Eventually, this president had to resign without completing his tenure. Insufficient symbolic and social capital limited his bargaining power to keep his position. As a farmer, the president's merit needs to be discussed in relation to his lived realities and his potential to reproduce embodied cultural capital through parental habitus, which is different from the natural expectations of his colleagues' understanding of merit for becoming a president. Again, misconceptions of merit played a significant role in terminating the presidency although he was elected constitutionally and had met all the criteria. The outcome would have been different if that seat had been allocated to him under the quota system. This indeed contributes to natural exclusion of the oppressed candidates.

On the other hand, members of the upper caste are not restricted from accessing, reproducing or exchanging cultural capital in any forms. When they perform their roles as civil servants, officers, collectors or ministers, their lack of experience or seniority will not be an issue for them unlike backward castes. This is due to since childhood they might have been well trained unconsciously by family habitus. They are more likely to be familiar with their father, mother or uncle holding higher salaries or political positions. For instance, delivering a speech, conducting a meeting, social engagement with people having similar social or economic backgrounds. Hence, lack of seniority or experience would not relatively affect their level of confidence or performance in school or their public engagements as they achieve embodied cultural capital while observing or listening to their conversations or typical meetings in their family events enabling them to be confident enough to deal with similar circumstances in future endeavours. On the other hand, the unselected are the underprivileged facing implicit exclusion without having embodied cultural capital. Moreover, their official or political engagements would be easier because they might be

interacting with a network of obligatory relationships including family, friends, community members who benefit from one another. As Bourdieu (1986) illustrates, such network of relationships is product of their investment strategies and consciously or unconsciously seeks to maintain or reproduce social relationships that can be useful in the short or long run. Contrastingly, when a Dalit and OBC individual come to contact with such network, they might find it difficult to comply with achievement duties rapidly because they rarely form relationship with their upper caste colleagues. Consequently, they would be treated as inefficient or incomplete to become a politician or government servant by the opponents of reservation without knowing the fact their talent or efficiency are embodied cultural capital which are the outcomes of their historical privileges and durable network of relationships.

Conclusion

Advocates of meritocracy and anti-affirmative action campaign on the one hand avoid considering the structural conditions enabling the upper caste students when reproducing cultural capital, disguising it as “merit”. On the other hand, they avoid paying attention to the compelling conditions that forces the lower caste students invest extra time and surplus effort in their learning journey. Historically, caste reproduces derogatory symbols of occupations for the underprivileged. Such symbols rarely build up any form of capital by themselves and loose its exchange value in contemporary social interactions of the underprivileged. Therefore, the merit that the underprivileged utilises in traditional occupations in the form of embodied cultural capital, or the products they make in the form of objectified cultural capital, are far outside the so-called measures of merit.

In other words, differently from Bourdieu (1974;1984;1986;1990), Dalit and backward castes do certainly possess cultural capital, however it is limited to

perform only their traditional occupations. They also have differential exchange or reproductive values due to its symbolic attributes of caste. Consequently, unlike the upper caste, members of the underprivileged still need to get involved in various charity activities as to gain symbolic capital sources that can be used by their future generations to reproduce social and cultural capital for future social and political engagements. These differences lead to the hegemony of one group over the other causing the underprivileged exclusion.

Therefore, the state must continue to follow deliberate measures to ensure the underprivileged communities' representation and participation in politics, education, or employment. In addition, the state should go beyond this to work in partnership with out-of-school education platforms (Syamprasad, 2018), including self-help groups, community-based organisations aiming to building cultural capital for the underprivileged communities in Kerala, India. Simultaneously, these community educational platforms should be transformed as to breakdown the family habitus that works by being reproduced and by reproducing the veil of merit as well as anti-affirmative action campaigns ; and thus to disseminate critical knowledge about affirmative action for the underprivileged in Kerala or elsewhere in India.

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