

Making Merit: The Indian Institutes of Technology and the Social Life of Caste

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The social world is accumulated history, and if it is not to be reduced to a discontinuous series of instantaneous mechanical equilibria between agents who are treated as interchangeable particles, one must reintroduce into it the notion of capital and with it, accumulation and all its effects.

———Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital”

INTRODUCTION

In India today, the technical sciences are prized as the true measure of intellectual worth and a proven means of professional advancement. The technical graduate has become India’s greatest export, widely understood to exemplify the country’s comparative advantage in the global marketplace. The value and mobility of Indian technical knowledge are most graphically represented by the success story of the Indian Institutes of Technology, or IITs, a set of engineering colleges founded through bilateral cooperation with West Germany, the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union.

Deemed “institutions of national importance” by the IIT Act of 1961, the IITs are directly administered and financed by the Indian central government and fall outside the structure of affiliation to universities, giving them far greater autonomy in institutional functioning, faculty hiring, and curricular development. Their autonomy was guaranteed in other ways as well. In the name of ensuring “merit” as the only basis for admission, they were originally exempted from policies of compensatory discrimination, or reservations as they are called in India. (This changed with the reservation of 22.5 percent of seats

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for Scheduled Castes [SCs] and Scheduled Tribes [STs] in 1973, and 27 percent for Other Backward Classes [OBCs] in 2006).¹ Over the past forty years, the IITs have become steppingstones to transnational mobility, at their peak sending approximately two-thirds of every graduating class to the United States. IIT graduates have become the poster children of Indian education, with many joining the upper echelons of Indian and American industry and academia.

The IIT aura has come to pervade U.S. society. In 2005, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill honoring the contribution of IIT graduates to American society.² A 2003 *60 Minutes* special on the IITs underscored the mystique surrounding the institutions. As her opening to the piece, correspondent Leslie Stahl asked, “What is America’s most valuable import from India? It may very well be brainpower. Hundreds of thousands of well-educated Indians have come to the United States in recent decades—many to work in the computer and software industries. The best and brainiest among them seem to share a common credential: they’re graduates of the Indian Institutes of Technology, better known as the IITs.” She ends by saying, “Imagine a kid from India using an Ivy League university as a safety school. That’s how smart these guys are.”³

But nowhere is the IIT more representative of excellence than within India itself.⁴ The Joint Entrance Exam (JEE) to gain admission to the IITs is held every year in April and is a hotly anticipated event. Since the exam was first held in 1960, the number of candidates has grown steadily with close to five hundred thousand students taking the exam in 2010 and under 3 percent getting admission to the now fifteen IITs. Every year, the JEE’s “toppers” become instant celebrities, their faces and “All India Ranks” splashed over newspapers and billboards. The success of the IITs has also spawned a massive coaching industry to train students for the JEE. With key outposts in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan, coaching centers now admit students from as early as the seventh grade, who spend up to five years mastering a single exam.

¹ These are the constitutional terms for different social groups that fall within the reservations system. “Scheduled Castes” refers to castes on the lowest rung of the Hindu ritual order who have historically faced severe social disabilities such as untouchability. “Scheduled Tribes” refers to groups defined as the aboriginals of India. “Other Backward Classes” refers to castes deemed educationally and socially disadvantaged. Under Article 15(4), the Constitution qualifies the ban against discrimination by allowing the State to make “special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.”

² House Resolution 227, “Recognizing and Honoring the Contributions of Indian Americans to Economic Innovation and Society Generally,” 109th U.S. Congress (2005–2006).

³ “Imported From India.” 2003. *60 Minutes*, 19 June.

⁴ There is a growing hagiographic literature on the IITs (e.g., Deb 2004), as well as a huge amount of journalistic work.

Within Indian and, to a lesser degree, American public discourse the IITian has become an exemplar of intellectual merit, someone seen as naturally gifted in the technical sciences. What such assessments occlude are the forms of accumulated social and cultural capital that have enabled admission to the IITs. The majority of IITians come from upper-caste families of bureaucrats, school-teachers, and academics where capital has long been held in education. While most were already children of the professional class, the value of their accumulated capital has suddenly spiked due to the reorganization of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century capitalism around the “knowledge economy.” At the same time, the role of caste and state in producing the IITian has been obscured in favor of his or her⁵ portrayal as a socially disembedded individual with an innate capacity for technical knowledge.

What do the naturalization of the IITian’s merit and the elevation of the IITs to emblems of meritocracy mean for the possibilities and limits of democratic transformation in India? More broadly, what are the structures, discourses, and forms of affiliation that shape the contours of democratic social stratification? To address these questions, the meaning of merit and its relationship to social identity and economic opportunity, have to be situated within histories of state, caste, and capital. Only by illuminating the historical production of caste, and the way it has intersected with colonial and postcolonial political economies of education and employment, can we understand the making of the IITian as an exceptional intellect.

The politics of merit at the IITs illuminates the social life of caste in contemporary India. For reasons I detail below, my analysis moves outward from the southeastern state of Tamilnadu, and IIT Madras located in its capital city of Chennai, to encompass national and transnational dynamics. Building on Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the forms of capital and Satish Deshpande’s on the social life of caste, I argue that the IITian’s status depends on the transformation of privilege into merit, or to use Deshpande’s terms, on the conversion of caste capital into modern capital. However, I call for a more relational approach to merit than offered by these two authors. Claims to merit must be understood, not simply in terms of the transformation of capital, but as responses to subaltern assertion. Analyzing meritocracy in relation to subaltern politics allows us to see the contextual specificity of claims to merit: at one moment they may be articulated through the disavowal of caste, at another through caste affiliation. This back and forth movement between the marking and unmarking of caste suggests the need for greater nuance in approaching the concept of meritocracy. Even in the critical literature that illuminates the social bases of merit, meritocracy is still assumed to be a modernist ideal that disdains the particularisms of caste and race. The claim to merit is presumed to be a disclaimer of social

⁵ The proportion of women at the IITs has hovered at 10–12 percent, and is among the lowest of any co-ed Indian educational institution.

embeddedness. The politics of meritocracy at the IITs suggests instead that claims to caste belonging and to merit are eminently commensurable, and become more so when subaltern assertion forces caste privilege into the foreground. Far from the progressive erasure of ascribed identities in favor of putatively universal ones, what we are witnessing today is the re-articulation of caste as an explicit basis for merit. Moreover, this re-articulation is not simply the assertion of an already constituted caste identity. Rather, claims to merit generate newly consolidated forms of upper-casteness.

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF CASTE

Caste Capital and Modern Capital

In his essay “The Forms of Capital,” Pierre Bourdieu calls for more attention to the different forms of capital—economic (money), cultural (cultivation and credentials), and social (connections)—and the mechanisms through which one is converted to the other. Without such an analysis, he argues, the social world of “accumulated history” would “be reduced to a discontinuous series of instantaneous mechanical equilibria between agents who are treated as interchangeable particles.” Bourdieu offers a particularly insightful analysis of embodied cultural capital, those accumulated effects of family and class history that become an integral part of the person: “Because the social conditions of its transmission and acquisition are more disguised than those of economic capital, it is predisposed to function as symbolic capital, i.e. to be unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence.” In this way, symbolic, or embodied cultural capital “manages to combine the prestige of innate property with the merits of acquisition.” However, Bourdieu points out that there is an inherent instability to embodied capital that is stabilized through the alchemy of institutional recognition in the form, for instance, of academic qualifications. Such institutional mediation not only stabilizes cultural capital, it also endows it with greater legitimacy by appearing to be autonomous of accumulated history and social relationality. Finally, it makes cultural capital into a currency more easily traded in the marketplace.

Bourdieu’s analysis dovetails nicely with the recent work of sociologist Satish Deshpande, who calls for more analysis of how upper castes are rendered casteless in India. He points out that the story of how upper castes transform “their caste capital into modern capital” is not well known because “it runs with the grain of the dominant common sense.” When it is seen and heard, it is in other guises: “It appears to be a story about something *other than caste*, like the story of nation-building for example, or the story of a great and ancient tradition modernizing itself” (2013: 33, his italics). By contrast, the political encashment of caste by low castes is a recurrent, publicly debated theme. The result of this asymmetry, Deshpande maintains, is that upper castes are

naturalized as the “legitimate inheritors of modernity” while lower castes are hyper-visible as the illegitimate purveyors of caste.⁶

In a striking vindication of Deshpande’s argument, eminent sociologist André Béteille has put forward the argument that caste is now irrelevant as a framework of social classification and evaluation among urban professionals. He states:

The compulsions of occupation operate rather differently in the different sectors of the Indian economy. Among engineers, doctors, scientists, civil servants and managers, the obligations to one’s occupation exists independently of the obligation to one’s caste and to some extent displaces it.... Until the nineteenth century, Hindu intellectuals could argue with force and conviction about the significance and value of caste. Their counterparts of today, who are still mainly of upper caste, have lost the capacity not only to explain and justify caste, but even to describe it coherently (1996: 162).

Béteille’s conclusion about the irrelevance of caste for urban professionals has led him to argue that it is India’s reservations system and low-caste political mobilization that perpetuate caste today. It is worth quoting him again at length:

Caste has ceased to play an active role in the reproduction of inequality, at least at the upper levels of social hierarchy where it is no longer an important agent of either social placement or social control.... The recent attack on caste by egalitarians of both radical and liberal persuasions is misdirected even where it appears well-meaning. Caste should be attacked for its divisive role in electoral politics rather than its active role in the reproduction of inequality which is relatively small and clearly declining. The role of caste in politics is neither small nor declining. Caste is no longer an institution of any great strength among the influential urban intelligentsia; but it is an instrument of great force in mobilizing political support in the country as a whole.... Equality, at least at the higher levels of society, can no longer be significantly advanced by attacking caste (1991: 25).

Unlike Deshpande, who is concerned with the persistence of caste privilege in the form of castelessness, Béteille actually takes the elite disavowal of caste as an indication of its decreasing power as a structure of opportunity and sociality. Instead, Béteille’s approach to elite social reproduction primarily as a class phenomenon disregards the intersections of class and caste and places the onus for the persistence of caste on quotas and electoral politics. Most striking is his own unwillingness to think of the two relationally and ask why caste appears to have declined in social meaning for elites at the same time that it has assumed a political charge for non-elites. Finally, his assumption that elites are post-caste moderns assumes the stability of castelessness as a form of upper-caste subjectivity.

To be fair, Béteille’s assessment of the social life of caste only reflects the overriding focus of public and scholarly discourse today. Beginning in the

⁶ There is very little work on contemporary upper-caste consolidation as a process or a politics. One exception is work on Hindu nationalism, although even here it figures more as the instrumental politics of a fully realized collective than as a process of subject formation.

mid-1970s, scholarly attention shifted from the modernist treatment of caste as an outmoded form of social organization and affiliation rooted in Hindu text and ritual, to its treatment as a localized formation that is inherently political, and even intrinsic to the democratic process. Since then, scholarship on contemporary caste dynamics has highlighted the transformative effect of low-caste political mobilization on parliamentary democracy, the public sphere, social movements, civil society, status, violence, and embodiment.⁷ The news media, too, now focus on low-caste challenges to the existing social and political status quo far more than on caste as a sphere of elite privilege.⁸ While many are more celebratory, or at least sympathetic, to the spread of low-caste rights politics as a counter-hegemonic force, they increasingly share Bêteille's perspective on caste as a subaltern formation. The postcolonial present thus appears to be one in which non-elites have caste while elites have class and other more "cosmopolitan" affiliations.

It is undoubtedly true that non-elites have embraced caste as a vehicle of empowerment, and that collective mobilization for low-caste rights in both formal and informal political arenas has changed the contours of Indian society and politics. However, I would argue with Deshpande that this only underscores the need for work on how caste operates at the other end of the spectrum. Significantly, the proliferation of work on lower castes that shows the increasing significance of caste, not simply as a discrete unit based on birth but as a consolidated sociopolitical category, has not led to parallel work on how upper castes are similarly consolidating in multiple arenas and through a variety of discursive registers.

There is no question that many upper castes think of themselves as modern subjects, or at least as subjects with sincere commitments to universalistic ideals of equality, democracy, and rationality. At the same time, they are able to inhabit a universal worldview precisely because of a history of accumulated privilege, a history that allows them a unique claim to certain forms of self-fashioning. Whereas at an earlier moment, status might have been more explicitly tied to caste, the social bases of merit continue to be constituted in ways that allow the same social groups to inhabit merit as an embodied ideal. This begs the question of how castelessness as a subjectivity is produced, and what the interplay is between castelessness and caste belonging in the postcolonial, democratic present.

⁷ See Bayly 1999; Dirks 2001; Gilmartin 2010; Gupta 2000; Jaffrelot 2003; Kothari 1970; and Rao 2009.

⁸ Similarly, the popular understanding of race as a political force in the United States is now typically understood through racial minority politics rather than through the reproduction of white privilege.

Privilege and Merit

How does historical privilege become modern merit? Merit is a loaded term, one that does similar political work as an earlier discourse of republican “virtues and talents.” In this sense, Indian meritocracy is part of a much longer history of modern political thought and its reconciliation of universal equality and naturalized social hierarchy. As historians of the Enlightenment have shown, virtues and talents became the focus of philosophers and political writers concerned with engendering a new society based on principles of nature and reason (Kloppenber [1987](#); Carson [2002](#); [2006](#)). They argued that a socio-political order founded on these principles would best ground the emergent notions of the republican citizen and the enlightened society. While most like Jefferson, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Diderot presumed that hierarchies would necessarily remain within a democracy, they would now be rooted in legitimate differences and not the legacy of family or rank. Despite the widely circulating language of equality and universal rights, they argued that the “natural superiority” of some over others—men over women, adults over children, or Europeans over other people—made them best suited to govern. Even for those, like John Adams, who fretted about the substitution of an aristocracy of birth with an “aristocracy of talent,” there was little question that stratification would persist as an integral part of the social order, in large part because of differences in peoples’ “natural” endowments (Carson [2002](#)). For eighteenth-century ideologues, naturalized difference became a key alibi for the perpetuation of social hierarchy after the advent of republican democracy.

As with eighteenth-century republicanism, post-independence India witnessed heated debates over how to reconcile the formal ideal of equal citizenship in the new republic with persistent social hierarchies. Of course, Indian republicanism was far more radical than its eighteenth-century predecessor. Universal adult franchise symbolized a radical break with colonial subjecthood. Moreover, departing from the explicit colonial invocation of caste as the organizational basis of society and economy, postcolonial statesmen and planners consciously sought to overcome, not just colonial “underdevelopment,” but also the purported social barriers to Indian modernity.

Within Indian modernization theory, caste was a part of social organization that would be abolished with state-led social progress. At the same time, Indian statesmen were committed to redress for those historically disadvantaged by the institution of caste. As Deshpande points out, these dual imperatives of abolition and redress found place within the Constitution but were weighted unequally; while the right to equality and non-discrimination are Fundamental Rights, redress for caste disabilities is a Directive Principle. Plus, ironically, part of what allowed for the translation of caste capital into modern capital was the constitutional mechanisms providing redress for historical discrimination. In the very effort to account for historical injustice through the reservation of

seats for low castes in education and employment, those who fell under the non-reserved, or “general category,” were by extension deemed casteless. Moreover, every court case challenging reservations, whether in victory or defeat, further reinforced the idea of the “general category” as embodying the constitutional ideal of castelessness and the “reserved category” as a negative departure from it. Deshpande puts it starkly: “Although the commitment to redress caste injustice was integral to the social contract upon which the nation was founded, the new Constitution constrained the victims of caste to demand justice as a caste-marked exception, while its beneficiaries were empowered to demand the perpetuation of their advantages as a casteless norm” (2013: 36).

Within the educational domain, the correlation between the “general category” and castelessness assumes an additional charge when you consider the alternate term for “the general category”: “merit-based” admissions. The semantic equivalence between the general, the casteless, and the meritorious reinforces the idea that those who fall within the general category do so, not on the basis of accumulated caste privilege, but by dint of their own merit. By definition, then, those who fall within the “reserved category” do so by virtue of their caste. This categorical distinction between the meritorious/casteless and the reserved/caste-based has profoundly shaped the debate around educational equality in India. It has allowed those who fall within the general category to invoke what Bourdieu calls an “imaginary universe of perfect competition or perfect equality of opportunity, a world without inertia, without accumulation, without heredity or acquired properties” (1986: 46) to argue that it is the system of reservations, and not historical caste privilege that produces inequality and undermines the modern republican ideal of equal citizenship. In the process, upper castes evacuate caste markers and inhabit the “meritocratic norm” while lower castes become “hyper-visible” (Deshpande 2013) as castes whose very presence and relationship to the state are signs of India’s incomplete democracy.

THE IITS AND THE FORMS OF CAPITAL

To what extent do the IITs underwrite the cultural, social, and economic capital of upper castes while avoiding the “taint” of caste?

In the larger debate over “competing equalities” (Galanter 1984), the IITs have played a significant role in translating caste capital into modern capital. By the end of the colonial period, engineering had come to be regarded as a modern field of expertise that would propel India into its developmental future. Nationalist critics of colonial technical education typically focused on the perpetuation of a racial glass ceiling. They connected the underdevelopment of India under colonialism to the under-education of Indians by a state primarily invested in perpetuating its own sovereignty and the racial hierarchies that underpinned it. Indian modernizers called instead for a radical new approach to

technical education as a force that would transform both the society and infrastructure of India. Despite arguments by colonial officials and Indians alike for a gradualist model of development that hewed more closely to the social contours of native society, large-scale technological change guided by a professionally trained elite emerged as the dominant developmental model. Under the postcolonial developmentalist state, engineering was to achieve its true potential.⁹

Within the universe of post-independence engineering education, the IITs were always intended to stand apart and represent modern India at its best. On the eve of independence in 1945, the Government of India appointed the Sarkar Committee to review the state of technical education in India in anticipation of the need for post-independence industrial development. In its interim report the committee recommended the establishment of one centrally administered engineering college in each of the four regions of the country. The IITs were to be founded through the active support of foreign industrial powers that would provide know-how and infrastructure to make these fledgling outfits into “world-class” engineering colleges. They were thus set apart, not only from technical schools for artisans and industrial workers, but also from the older, regional engineering colleges established in the colonial period to train an emerging professional class. In defining the ambitions of the IITs, the Sarkar committee identified the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as the most desirable model with its mix of practical and theoretical sciences, mathematics, and the humanities (Leslie and Kargon 2006).

As mentioned above, the exceptional status of the IITs was also secured through the guarantee of “autonomy,” both in terms of institutional functioning and their initial exemption from caste-based reservations. Although the central government reservation of 22.5 percent for Scheduled Castes and Tribes was implemented after 1973, this relatively small quota reinforced the representative status of the “general category” at the IITs, with the result that they came to be widely perceived as casteless meritocracies. And indeed, entering the IITs feels like one is entering a world apart from the vicissitudes of Indian social and political life. They are typically set on large, pristine campuses and funded by the central government at levels far above their competitors.

While the founding, structure, and resources of the IIT system all contribute to their exceptional status, the single most important emblem of the IITs’ meritocracy is the JEE entrance exam. In a country whose educational system is thought to be corrupted by nepotism and money power, the JEE has become a shining example of the incorruptibility of the IITs (e.g., Joseph 2012). Indeed, the notion of autonomy is routinely extended by IITians to distinguish their admissions process from those of other institutions that they

⁹ On British Indian engineering and technical education, see Ambirajan 1995; Basu 1991; Gil-martin 1994; Kumar 1995; Kumar 1982; and Swaminathan 1992.

consider less impervious to political influence. As I heard repeatedly across interviews, “Here, not even a powerful politician can use his influence to get his child admitted.” The inordinate amount of labor that goes into developing the examination papers each year, and guarding against leaks that might compromise the outcome of the JEE, speaks to the faith IIT faculty and administrators have in its role as a near-perfect arbiter of intellectual worth.¹⁰ That applicants are admitted solely on the basis of their performance in the exam is taken as proof of the system’s integrity. Finally, and despite the fact that most students attend JEE coaching classes, the exam’s sharply individuated and ranked outcome further reinforces the notion that the IITian’s merit is an innate characteristic divorced from other social and political influences.

Since the 1980s, the spectacular success of IITians in the global marketplace has secured their image as self-made men whose accomplishments speak to the anomalous and exceptional character of their alma maters. Structural changes after economic liberalization, along with discourses of entrepreneurship and managerialism, have allowed for rapid economic advancement within a single generation and the portrayal of these successes as the accomplishments of talented, socially disembedded individuals. In the first decades of their functioning, one sees more scrutiny of the IITs as engines of elite social reproduction within a young democracy (Rajagopalan and Singh 1968; King 1970a; 1970b). By the 1990s, the focus had decisively shifted toward a celebration of the IITs as proof of India’s global competitiveness and of IITians as national ambassadors.

There has also been a perceptible shift for IITians themselves in how they understand the relationship between the IITs and the wider society. For earlier generations, merit involved transcending politics more generally to become men of science who derived their status from their profession and from their association with the state. Now, however, merit has acquired a new valence as the transcendence, not just of politics, but also of the state and the public sector. Although IITians from as far back as the mid-1960s migrated out of India for education and employment, the antipathy towards the public sector is a more recent phenomenon. Several alumni from the past ten years drew a clear distinction between the public sector as it *was* when their parents were employed in the state administrative services and the public sector as it *is*. One 2004 graduate put it to me succinctly in terms that resonate with Béteille’s criticism of the “divisive role” of caste in electoral politics: “Employment became based on interest group politics, on politicians making appointments to build vote banks, and not on individual merit.” This idea of the public sector as having become an extension of “vote bank politics” where your group identity matters more than your merit must be placed in the context of

¹⁰ I thank Shreeharsh Kelkar for his work on the history, structure, and ambitions of the IIT-JEE.

the increasing influx of low castes into the bureaucracy and other public sector enterprises. As a result, the public sector now appears to be suffused with caste while the private sector is caste-free.

This more recent sense of the IITs as a circumscribed sphere of merit unconnected to the state and its associated publics is underwritten by a dramatic shift in the career trajectories of recent graduates. Most now would find it laughable to even consider public sector employment, a trend that has escalated since the Silicon Valley boom of the 1980s when several IIT alumni made it big. Their stories have circulated in both the United States and India, solidifying the equation between an IIT education and private financial success. Now, however, even the 1970s and 1980s model of going to the United States for an advanced degree and then branching out into either academia or industry is no longer the prevalent one. More and more, IIT graduates are finding lucrative jobs in transnational companies based in India and elsewhere and foregoing the option of a higher degree in engineering altogether. While many go on to get degrees in management to enhance their industry status, fewer and fewer are even interested in keeping the door open to research and education.¹¹

The annual event of the institutes' job recruiting drive makes big news in India. In the last fifteen years, the number of private corporations that recruit on IIT campuses has increased exponentially. Now, IIT graduates join companies like Schlumberger, Shell Oil, Microsoft, McKinsey, Tata Consultancy Services, or Infosys for starting salaries that are considerably higher than what their parents earned at the end of a lifetime of work. This is intergenerational economic mobility at its most dramatic. Although most IITians are the children of professionals, within a single generation they have leapfrogged over their parents' modest incomes to earn hundred thousand dollar corporate salaries.

The impressive salaries garnered by newly minted IIT graduates have been characterized in the Indian media as the realization of "Brand IIT." This term has spread like wildfire. In a 2006 article, Shashi Tharoor, former United Nations Under-Secretary General for Communications and Public Information, commented, "'Brand IIT' has shown the way. In 2007, we must start to scale this up to the point where one day 'Brand India' becomes synonymous not with cheap products or services but with the highest standards of scientific and technological excellence" (2006). This reference to an IIT education as a brand that has shored up India's comparative advantage in the global marketplace situates the IITs and IITians as the forerunners of a future Indian modernity free of the social and political encumbrances of the past.

Despite the munificence of their patron-state, IITians have been at the forefront of challenges to state developmentalism. A 2000 quote in the

¹¹ Many IIT faculty complain that, as a result, students are now less interested in their subjects of study and see an IIT education purely as a marketable pedigree.

New York Times by Kanwal Rekhi, an IIT Bombay alumnus and one of Silicon Valley's most successful entrepreneurs, is emblematic of this disavowal of the developmental state. In the article, Rekhi says that he left for the United States after getting his IIT degree so that his "brain wouldn't go down the drain in socialist India" (Dugger 2000). Significantly, the liberalizing Indian state also actively fosters its relationship with the IITs as a way of trumpeting its own disjuncture with a past of state-centered development. At the 2008 Pan-IIT alumni conference held at IIT Madras, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh gave an inaugural speech and launched a study on the societal impact of the IITs. "I believe it is India's destiny to become a knowledge power," he said, "and the IITs have contributed handsomely in the country's efforts to realize this destiny." Once again, we see here the unique role accorded to the IITian as an engine of Indian development through whom the country is to achieve its true potential. Even as Singh is quick to claim the IITian's success as the nation's own, he and other statesmen are typically careful to downplay the debt to the state owed by these "institutions of national importance." Rather, the IITian, a key beneficiary of the developmental state, is lauded for transcending Indian conditions to attain his accomplishments.

These structural factors—constitutionalism, engineering education, and global market success—have helped to mediate the conversion of caste capital into modern capital for IITians. At the same time, other trends in and beyond India have complicated the transformation of capital and the production of upper castes as casteless moderns. After all, the naturalization of upper-caste merit has not gone unchallenged. Through the twentieth century, constitutional amendments, policy initiatives, and regional politics have variously illuminated the persistence of upper-caste privilege as a structural determinant of opportunity and success. These interventions have advanced competing notions of equality that presume, not the level playing field of formal democracy, but the historical accumulation of advantages and disabilities. Attention to histories of accumulation has been particularly pointed in regions where a politics of low-caste assertion has interrupted the transformation of caste capital into modern capital by re-marking upper castes *as castes*. In this sense, Deshpande's account of castelessness seems too neat when he argues that, for upper castes, "caste-qua-caste has already yielded all that it can and represents a ladder that can now be safely kicked away. Having encashed its traditional caste-capital and converted it into modern forms of capital like property, higher educational credentials and strongholds in lucrative professions, this section believes itself to be 'casteless' today" (2013: 32). Significantly, the one part of his analysis where Deshpande delves more into the instability of castelessness is where he considers the impact of the 1990 Mandal Commission report recommending the addition of OBCs to the reserved category. He argues that the report sent shock waves through the system because Mandal undercut the universalism of the general category by re-marking it as upper caste.

But what of those regions, like Tamilnadu, where the reserved category had become the norm long before? Did castelessness ever acquire a stability there? As I argue below, the case of Tamilnadu suggests that castelessness might be less a *fait accompli* suddenly destabilized by interventions such as Mandal and more an aspect of upper-caste self-definition that has always shifted according to circumstances. Moreover, the re-marking of caste is not necessarily done at the expense of claims to merit. Rather, the commensurability of caste and merit within these claims shows that meritocracy is not always a universalistic politics. While Deshpande's essay is helpful in thinking through the structural factors that convert inherited "illegitimate" capital into "legitimate" currency, he does not sufficiently illuminate the relationality of merit and the instability of castelessness.¹²

The relationality of claims to merit can be seen clearly in Tamilnadu and at IIT Madras. While Tamilnadu's history of caste politics arguably makes this a somewhat unique case, the IIT Madras story highlights a relational dynamic that anticipated broader trends unleashed by Mandal and the political rise of backward castes nationally. In this sense, my focus on Tamilnadu and IIT Madras serves as an analytical provocation to situate the meanings of merit in other regions within their own changing configurations of caste and class. Moreover, in linking Tamilnadu to national and transnational processes, it argues for treating regions as interconnected spaces.

TECHNICAL EDUCATION IN THE SOUTHEAST

Understanding the regionally specific contours of meritocracy and its relationship to caste is an urgent need across India. While upper-caste claims to merit are now prevalent nationally, Tamilnadu represents a much earlier suturing of caste and merit against low-caste assertion. Here, it has been expressed primarily through Tamil Brahmin exceptionalism.

The understanding of Tamil Brahmins as bearers of higher knowledge harkens back to a regional history of caste formation. During the colonial period, Brahmins emerged as key intermediaries who were inducted into the bureaucracy in greater numbers than their non-Brahmin counterparts. From their literacy as a priestly caste, to their dominance within the fields of law, science, and mathematics, and their more recent ascendancy within the technical and management sciences, Tamil Brahmins have consistently been associated with the most coveted forms of knowledge. The cumulative effect of this history has been their production as a highly educated, urbanized, and mobile caste (Fuller 1999; Fuller and Narasimhan 2006; 2007; 2008; Geetha and Rajadurai 1991).

¹² Granted, Deshpande's essay is a very short introduction to his larger work on "the general category," where I suspect this relational dynamic will be elaborated more fully.

Colonial technical education played its part in the Tamil Brahmin dominance of the modern professions. Through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, racial barriers to technical education were expressed through a preference for recruiting engineers from England. This was the case despite Britain's late turn, well behind France and Germany, toward the professionalization of engineering and away from a long-standing model of apprenticeship. The founding in 1871 by the Government of India of a new engineering college in Cooper's Hill, England was an indication that British Indian public works were to be serviced by the graduates of metropolitan, not colonial, institutions. However, this was a short-lived and fiercely contested experiment, and with the closing of Cooper's Hill in 1906 the colonial government turned in earnest to formal technical education and employment for Indians.

Even at the outset, the question of what kind of training this would be and what kind of man was suited for it was hotly debated. From the early debates around formal technical training in the 1850s, we see colonial efforts to track Indians into different tiers of technical training—craft enhancement for artisans, industrial training for mechanics and other workmen, and professional education for engineers—and the role of a sociology of caste in distinguishing between the trades, industrial labor, and the professions. This quote from the Madras Presidency's Military Board is just one example of how colonial administrators differentiated among the kinds of technical training for different categories of Indians: "A master-workman must know his trade and know it well but a Civil Engineer has a craft of his own; his skill is in his science; his tools are his formulae and his surveying and mathematical instruments; his labors are for the most part those of the mind; his studies those of projecting and controlling; and he must therefore be one of a very different class and status in society as well as of totally different attainments from those of the mechanic whose labors he has to direct" (quoted in Ambirajan 1995: 120).

While "status" was typically interpreted according to regionally specific histories, the question of caste was always at the heart of such evaluations. In Madras Presidency, caste was a central index of social belonging and administrative sociology, as is evident in this quote from the Director of Public Instruction's Report for 1906–07: "Out of the large population of this Presidency, less than three thousand children were receiving technical instruction in the various handicrafts and of these less than nine hundred were *non-Brahmin Hindus*, the class of the community to which the bulk of hereditary workers in wood and metal and textile fabrics belong. There is as yet little demand for technical education, and the little advance that has been made has practically left unaffected the great mass of the industrial population (in Swaminathan 1992: 1617, my italics).

Here, we see not only the emphasis on enhancing "hereditary occupations," a code for caste labor, but also how the elaboration of technical education increasingly hinged on the distinction between Brahmin and non-Brahmin

populations, itself a discursive product of the Non-Brahmin Movement that was picking up pace in the region. Through the 1910s, the enhancement of hereditary occupations, and concern over what a more laissez faire approach to technological development would do to indigenous industry, remained a centerpiece of technical education policy in the Presidency.

This was due in large part to the efforts of Alfred Chatterton, professor in the Madras Civil Engineering College who later became a member of the Indian Industrial Commission. Chatterton's concerns were routed through an understanding of caste as the foundational category of Tamil society and economy:

For the indigenous industries [therefore] it seems inevitable that we must have recourse to industrial schools, but I would suggest that instruction in each industry should be confined to the sons and relatives of those actually engaged in the industry at the present time: that is to say, *we should carry on the industrial schools on a caste basis*. The indigenous industries have suffered very severely from foreign competition and it will not help the people still dependent on these industries for a livelihood to have added to their difficulties the competition of locally trained people belonging to the non-artisan castes (in Swaminathan 1992: 1619, my italics).

While Chatterton's primary concern was to build up indigenous industry, and to do so without displacing an existing artisanal population, his proposals only strengthened and naturalized the link between caste and technical skill. That caste was key to the tracking of groups into technical education is evident in who *did* benefit from professional training. As the numbers of Europeans in Madras Presidency's engineering profession fell over the early twentieth century, Brahmins were the single largest group of Indians who filled the vacuum, this despite being barely 3 percent of the total regional population (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008). Not all Tamil Brahmins were inducted into engineering, and Vellalas and other upper castes were also key beneficiaries. Nevertheless, as a caste, they became disproportionately well represented across the modern professions.

Anthropologists Fuller and Narasimhan (2010) have looked at why Tamil Brahmins, who historically disdained practical knowledge because of its association with low-caste manual labor, flooded the ranks of colonial engineering despite its "hands-on" character. They argue that it was the distinction between industrial labor and artisanship on the one hand, and the engineering *profession* on the other, that ultimately convinced Brahmins that they could enter this new occupation without the loss of status. As did the Public Works Department, Brahmins foregrounded the centrality to the engineering profession of science, and more importantly mathematics, long perceived as the preeminent intellectual discipline and one for which Brahmins were thought to have a natural propensity. Just as in earlier moments of political economic transformation when the relationship between caste, occupation, ritual practice, and status was in flux (Barnett 1976; Price 1989; O'Hanlon and Minkowski 2008;

Washbrook 2010), the late colonial period, too, witnessed negotiations around the re-signification of caste. Even as Brahmins and other upper castes were inducted into new occupations and lifestyles that involved a reworking of caste definitions, the preoccupation with caste status and distinction persisted. Rather than a shift from caste to modern forms of subjectivity, then, the modern professional was always also a caste self.

From the 1920s, non-Brahminism drew attention to Brahmin overrepresentation in the colonial bureaucracy and modern professions by calling for “non-Brahmin” self-respect and regional sovereignty.¹³ In its later guise as Dravidian cultural nationalism, the movement built on colonial ethnologies of race and caste to argue for the cultural alienness and illegitimate authority of the Brahmin within the heartland of the “Dravidian race.” Dravidianism profoundly reshaped the Tamil political and social milieu. A century later, Tamilnadu is now known for its highly politicized low-caste majority, the predominance of regional parties emerging out of Dravidianism, and far-reaching institutional reform through the implementation of caste quotas in education and employment.¹⁴ One of the effects of Dravidianism has been a lasting cleavage between Tamilnadu’s other castes and Tamil Brahmins, with caste privilege more closely tied to Brahminness than in most other parts of India.

Within the technical sciences too, the impact of Dravidianism was far reaching. The southeast was one of the first regions where caste quotas in education and employment were implemented in 1921. The reservations system has expanded steadily to the point where, today, most regional engineering colleges in Tamilnadu reserve up to 69 percent of their seats for those designated as Backward Castes. These measures have had considerable success at changing the caste composition of these colleges from the days when Tamil Brahmins filled over 70 percent of seats. The proliferation of private engineering colleges from the 1980s with increasing numbers of students from across the social spectrum acquiring degrees, and employment opportunities opened up by an Information Technology sector able to absorb huge amounts of technical labor, have also significantly democratized access to educational and occupational niches once monopolized by upper castes.¹⁵ There is a certain dissonance, then, between the claim to merit by upper castes and the very real dispersal of social capital among other castes in the region. How, then, do IITians in Tamilnadu navigate this sociopolitical terrain? When do they claim merit on the basis of castelessness and when on the basis of caste?

¹³ While scholars have variously explained non-Brahminism as the politics of non-Brahmin high castes (Washbrook 1989; Price 1989) or of low-caste self-respect (Geetha and Rajadurai 1991; Pandian 2007), they agree that the Brahmin emerged as its discursive target.

¹⁴ On the Dravidian Movement see, for example, Barnett 1976; and Subramanian 1999.

¹⁵ But see Upadhyaya 2007 for an analysis of the exclusionary politics of merit in the Indian IT industry.

CASTE AND MERIT AT IIT MADRAS

IIT Madras was founded in 1959 through bilateral cooperation between the Indian and West German governments, and was the third IIT established after the institutes in Kharagpur (1951) and Bombay (1958). IIT Madras's student body is drawn from across India although a greater percentage is from the southern states, with students from Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh now comprising the two largest groups. Its location in Tamilnadu has made IIT Madras a lightning rod for debates over educational equality. As a central government institution long exempt from quotas, IIT Madras is seen by its detractors as a Brahminical stronghold where claims to intellectual superiority have strong caste overtones. The institute is even sardonically referred to by some in the vernacular press as "Iyer Iyengar Technology," referencing the two Tamil Brahmin subcastes (Azhagi 2012).

What is less considered in this marking of IIT Madras as Brahminical is how the institution operates as a critical site, not for the expression of an already consolidated group identity but for the very constitution of both Brahminness and upper-casteness. In the remainder of this essay, I first consider Madras IITian claims to merit in light of the regional political rise of Backward Castes, and then turn to the extension of this relational dynamic nationally across the various IITs. Alongside the role of subaltern assertion in constituting such claims, I also consider the impact of a global politics of ascription in IITians' leveraging of caste capital.

As an early example of caste rights politics, Dravidianism precluded the "encashing" (Deshpande 2013) of caste capital by upper castes refashioning themselves as modern meritocratic subjects. As the discursive target of regional politics, Tamil Brahmins in particular came to be hyper-visible and their claims to knowledge inextricably linked to caste privilege. Their explicit marking as caste subjects has in turn produced a heightened consciousness among Tamil Brahmins of their own caste belonging. For them, however, being Brahmin is an expression of both modernity and merit.¹⁶

We see this in their relationship to IIT Madras. For many Tamil Brahmins, the founding of IIT Madras was uniquely propitious. Affiliation to an "institution of national importance" promised some measure of redress for what they perceived as their cultural victimization within the region. Moreover, the initial absence of quotas at the IITs guaranteed a much better chance of admission than in regional colleges with their ever-expanding quotas. At the same time, the caste marking of IIT Madras did not preclude claims to merit. On the contrary, Tamil Brahmins understood the institution as meritocratic *because* of its association with them and its insulation from the pressures of regional low-caste

¹⁶ See Bairy 2010 for a similar suturing of Brahminness and modernity in Karnataka.

demands. Unlike in other regions where merit was universalized, in Tamilnadu, it came to be framed more explicitly as a form of caste property.¹⁷

While Tamil Brahmin affinity with IIT Madras is in part a response to Tamilnadu's reservations system, it also comes out of a longer history of pan-Indian mobility and national education. Since the nineteenth century, Tamil Brahmins leveraged their cultural capital as knowledge bearers to move from the countryside to the city and outside the region for employment. Particularly as a result of their conscription into the state bureaucracy, they are over-represented in schools that follow the curriculum set by the Central Board of examiners, and not state or regional boards. Many attend government-run Central Board schools that cater to children of the national civil services, guaranteeing them a seat regardless of frequent interregional transfers.¹⁸ Others send their children to private schools that also offer the Central Board exam. These Central Board schools state as one of their key missions, "to develop the spirit of national integration and create a sense of 'Indianness' among children."¹⁹ The notion of "Indianness" gestures to a cosmopolitan subjectivity that is supra-regional and supra-caste. At the same time, in the Tamil context, the distinction between the regional/State Board and the national/Central Board is not simply that between caste and castelessness. It maps quite explicitly onto lower and upper caste and has become the basis for claims to intellectual merit.

The assumption that the Central Board curriculum produces "thinking students" who are better suited to intellectual life in general and the IITs in particular was conveyed to me across a wide swathe of interviews with Central Board teachers, administrators, and students. Person after person distinguished the Central Board's "conceptual training" from the "rote learning" in the State Boards. It was this training, they argued, that made their students a natural fit for the IITs. One principal told me that his school sends an average of fifteen to eighteen students each year to IIT Madras. It was not merely the affinity between the Central Board and JEE entrance exam that made these feeder schools for the IITs; the schools specifically tailor their Central Board exam preparation in such a way that it dovetails with the JEE curriculum. I conducted group interviews and surveys with students in several JEE coaching classes in Chennai and found that the overwhelming majority went to Central Board schools where there was a commonsense assumption that they would take the exam, gain admission to the IIT, and further enhance their own geographical

¹⁷ While the material benefits of the symbolic association between Brahminness and merit have accrued primarily to the middle class, it has underwritten the caste formation of Tamil Brahmins more generally, both in terms of cross-class identification and of dis-identification with non-Brahmin Tamils.

¹⁸ In fact, the school on the IIT Madras campus is a Kendriya Vidyalaya school.

¹⁹ From the Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan website:<http://kvsangathan.nic.in/Mission.aspx> (accessed 8 Dec. 2014).

and economic mobility. IIT Madras alumni who conduct coaching classes in Chennai also confirmed that the vast majority of their students were Tamil Brahmins from Central Board schools.

Kartik, a Tamil Brahmin alumnus who graduated in 1995 from IIT Madras, talked to me about his educational trajectory. He was the son of engineers employed in the central administrative services. He had attended Kendriya Vidyalaya schools until his family settled in Chennai where he switched to the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic Boys' School, a national private school that also offers the Central Boards. Kartik described the school as a bubble within the city where the vast majority of his classmates were Brahmins, and where getting into IIT Madras was the singular goal of his peers. Once he got there, Kartik told me, he felt truly at home. He talked about the comforting sense of homecoming he felt upon entering the campus gates where he could stop de-Brahminizing his Tamil and slip back into the Brahmin vernacular spoken by his family. He spoke of an intimacy between Tamil Brahmin students and their professors through the cultivation, not just of shared intellectual projects, but also of a form of extended caste kinship expressed, for instance, in invitations to family functions.²⁰

IIT Madras has not simply been a site for Brahmin caste kinship within a "non-Brahmin" region. On campus, other Tamilians who gained admission through the "general category" were assumed to be Brahmin simply by virtue of being at IIT. The conscription into Brahminness of Tamil IITians was strikingly conveyed to me by Nagaraj, another alumnus from the 1990s. He was changing his clothes when his Tamil Brahmin roommate inquired into the whereabouts of his *poonal*, the sacred thread worn by male Brahmins. "When I told him that I don't wear one, he paused and then asked, 'Doesn't your mother get upset?'" It never struck him that I was Backward Caste. In fact, I think he still assumes that I'm from a particularly liberal Brahmin family."

Nagaraj's experience of his own illegibility speaks, not so much to the castelessness of the "general category," but to its explicit marking when it comes to Tamils, as Brahmin. We might think of these instances of caste misrecognition as "passing" in reverse: unlike the stories of passing in the United States in which blacks attempted to "pass" as white in order to avail of the benefits of whiteness,²¹ here it is the high-caste student who needs to assimilate his lower-caste peer. This desire to erase difference is particularly telling in the context of Tamilnadu, where a long history of reservations has meant that increasing numbers of low castes do in fact inhabit the same social spaces as

²⁰ I was unable to get caste statistics from IIT Madras. However, anecdotal evidence and the names of IIT Madras faculty point to the preponderance of Tamil Brahmins.

²¹ The whiteness literature I build on includes Piper 1992; Harris 1993; Jacobson 1999; 2005; and Lipsitz 1998.

high castes. The blurring of boundaries through the dispersal of social capital has produced acute status anxiety among regional upper castes and the need to create new distinctions that once again differentiate high from low. IIT Madras has uniquely serviced this need: just when caste-status boundaries are blurring in the wider region, within the walls of the institution, it has become imperative to mark the Tamil IITian as Brahmin and make merit into a form of caste property.

Over the past decade, the success of the IITs has also produced a second set of anxieties around class. While the majority of Tamilians at IIT Madras are still drawn from professional, middle-class Brahmin families, the institution's most rapidly expanding group of students is from the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh. Andhra Pradesh has the highest concentration of JEE coaching centers in India that attract a much wider spectrum of students than in Tamilnadu. As a consequence, the class profile of students at IIT Madras has slowly shifted over the past decade to include some from poorer small town and rural families without as much social or cultural capital. Their arrival, however, has not been met with equanimity.

In a newspaper interview about the proliferation of coaching classes, IIT Madras's former director, M. S. Ananth, clarified that he was "looking for students with raw intelligence and not those with a mind prepared by coaching class tutors. The coaching classes only help students in mastering pattern recognition skills. With this, you cannot get students with raw intelligence" (Suresh Kumar 2008). This notion of "raw intelligence" places the ideal IITian outside institutional or even social formation as a naturally gifted individual with a native capacity for technical knowledge. In conversations with Ananth and other IIT administrators, I heard their concerns that the coaching industry undermined the ability of the exam to test for those who were truly worthy, in the process admitting students who would eventually dilute the institutional brand. It is clear that this divide between "the gifted" and "the coached" is not actually about who attends coaching classes since virtually all IITians do. When I probed further about "the coached," I heard that they were from less urban, professional, and English speaking backgrounds. These were students who came from schools where, as one administrator said ruefully, "rote learning was the norm and the IIT merely represents a paycheck and a local job for life."

It is indeed strange to hear IIT administrators bemoaning the economic instrumentality of "the coached" when one of the hallmark features of the IIT pedigree is its market value. After all, this is what is encapsulated in the term "Brand IIT." For them, as for students, the contrast between "the gifted" and "the coached" seems to hinge on a perceived relationship between non-market and market value, or inalienable and alienable, forms of knowledge. "The coached" are deemed illegitimate because they are seen as gaining admission to the IIT, not through their inalienable knowledge, but

because they paid money for coaching classes. While they are pure creatures of the market, “the gifted” have “raw intelligence” that is recognized, but not produced by, the market. Through this shadow play between market and non-market value, the class distinction between “the gifted” and “the coached” is glossed as regional difference, and “true” merit denied to students from Andhra Pradesh.

FROM BRAHMINNESS TO UPPER-CASTENESS

Such instances of caste misrecognition and class anxiety might suggest that the claim to merit at IIT Madras is only about the institutional reproduction of middle-class Brahminness. It is certainly the case that a regional history of caste formation has given merit a uniquely Brahminical inflection. But other examples reveal a structure of feeling through which merit is increasingly mapped, not simply onto Brahminness, but onto an emergent form of upper-casteness. Here too, merit as caste capital has been articulated in relation to Backward Caste assertion, although now this dialectic has been rescaled nationally and is evident across the IITs.

We see the articulation of merit as upper caste, and not simply Brahmin, virtue in IITians’ responses to OBC reservations in 2006. When the Supreme Court issued its 2006 ruling requiring the reservation of 27 percent of seats for OBCs in all central educational institutions, the IITs lost one aspect of their “autonomy.” However, the government of India sought to preclude opposition by creating eight new IITs and doubling the total number of seats. Nevertheless, the verdict sparked mass protests within the IITs and other affected institutions where students and faculty decried “the end of meritocracy” driven by “vote-bank politics.”

These protests were reminiscent of an earlier, more strident set of protests in 1990 sparked by the Mandal Commission’s recommendations of 27 percent reservation of public sector jobs for OBCs.²² At that time, upper-caste college students in the north took to the streets, masquerading as vendors, sweepers, and shoe shiners in a graphic depiction of their future reduction to low-caste labor. The starkest expression of opposition was self-immolation with a number of students adopting this tactic to oppose “the end of merit.” That the spectacular courting of death was a real political choice speaks volumes about the settled expectations of privilege. The investment in public sector employment in the early 1990s also speaks to the far-reaching changes wrought since by economic liberalization.

While IITians were not as well represented in the 1990s anti-Mandal agitations, there were earlier moments when they protested what they perceived as political interference in their meritocratic functioning. In 1973, when the

²² In fact, the 2006 reservations are also referred to as Mandal II.

22.5 percent quota for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes was extended to the IITs, one of the most vocal opponents was P. V. Indiresan, director of IIT Madras from 1979 to 1984. In the Director's Report of 1983, he stated:

Some members of the [Parliamentary Committee on Scheduled Castes] have gone so far as to say that what we need is *an Indian standard and not an international standard of instruction*. Whether we need or need not be aware of the latest developments in technology, it is necessary to debate the fundamental question whether, just because a group of people cannot cope with a certain level of education, they should have the veto power to deny such an education to the rest; whether social justice should imply that there shall be no institution at all in the country where merit shall be the criterion and also while *the socially-deprived* should have *special privileges*, *the talented* need have no *rights* of their own (in Indiresan and Nigam 1993, my italics).

The distinction drawn by Indiresan between “the socially-deprived” and “the talented” illustrates the ability of upper castes to inhabit a casteless norm. After all, he refers to upper castes, not as “the socially-advantaged” but simply as “the talented.” Furthermore, the distinction between “special privileges” and “rights” speaks to the recurrent theme of reservations as antithetical to democratic equality and meritocracy as consistent with it.²³ Finally, by pointedly contrasting an “Indian” with an “international” standard, he assimilates the IITs into a global meritocratic norm that is inherently superior to the mediocrity of a nation willing to sacrifice excellence to social justice. In 2011, it was Indiresan who took the Indian government to court challenging the constitutional validity of the 2006 reservations. His pivotal role in the legal battle further underscores the significance of Tamilnadu as a precedent in a nationally proliferating politics of meritocracy.

Dynamics internal to the IITs make clear that Indiresan's view of “the talented” and “the socially-deprived” had wider resonance. SC and ST students started attending the IITs from the early 1980s and, from all accounts, their integration into the campuses was far from smooth (Kirpal et al. 1985; Nair 1997). Students who graduated in the 1980s and 1990s from IIT Madras and the other IITs admitted that, although outside social divisions ceased to matter on campus—“Here, you're just an IITian”—the one set of students that did stand out were “the SC/STs.” When I probed further, I heard a number of explanations from their poor academic performance to their provincial dress style and poor command of English. In sum, they did not have the forms of social and cultural capital required to be true IITians. Indeed, the same “C” was interpreted entirely differently depending on who earned it: “general category” students got poor grades because they were too busy having fun while “SC/STs” did because they were not intellectually capable of performing up to standard. That those who gained admission to the IITs

²³ This way of framing the relationship between democracy and meritocracy has clear echoes in other social contexts, most obviously in the United States, where opponents of affirmative action redefine it as antidemocratic “reverse racism.”

through the 1973 quota suffer routine slights and indignities, and have been thoroughly alienated within their institutional settings, has been graphically revealed by a spate of suicides and attempted suicides by SC and ST students across the various campuses (Kumar 2007; Mukherji 2014).

It was the OBC reservations of 2006, however, that precipitated more explicit claims to merit across the IITs on the basis of upper-casteness. The reservations were part of a sea change in politics in the northern Hindi-speaking belt sparked by the political mobilization and consolidation of low castes under the “OBC” banner from the early 1990s (Jaffreot 2003). As with the southern mobilization around the category of the “Dravidian” decades earlier, the transformation of a constitutional label into a political community presented the first serious challenge to upper-caste dominance in the north (Yadav 1996).

Within the IITs, the expansion of quotas to include 27 percent for OBCs has brought the reserved category up to almost half of the total student population. This increase has transformed the “general category” from an unmarked norm into an explicitly upper-caste collective.

This came through in a conversation with a faculty member who oversees counseling services at IIT Madras. He spoke to me about the different kinds of problems students face through their college years and was particularly vocal about the difficulties faced by Backward Caste students whose numbers have increased sharply since 2010. “It haunts them that they have gotten admission through the quota,” he told me, “and this sense of intellectual inferiority has a paralyzing effect.” Although he admitted to “general category” students also having problems, he insisted that this was because they were used to effortlessly excelling and were unsettled by the presence of so many peers “like themselves.” When I asked him whether the SC/ST and OBC students who come in through the “general category” have their own issues, he paused and said, “Well, no, they’re just general category students.” As with Nagaraj’s assimilation into Brahminness in the 1990s despite the absence of a *poonal*, here again one sees a kind of categorical dissonance at work. Anyone who does not come in through the quota is seamlessly integrated into the general category. Now, however, it has become more imperative to mark the “general category” as upper caste so it is not devalued by association with the expanding reserved category. This is no longer a universalistic politics of merit; it is an explicitly caste-based one. Furthermore, the association of merit with Brahminness has given way to its equation with a more consolidated form of upper-casteness.²⁴

²⁴ The impact of the 2006 reservations on post-graduate trajectories remains to be seen. My prediction is that IITian networks of institutional kinship will increasingly fracture and begin to be tracked along “general category” and “reserved” lines.

Articulating Caste and Race

Defense of upper-caste meritocracy against low-caste quotas has been widespread, not just in India but also in the diaspora. In the United States, the IITian's merit is rarely if ever expressed in terms of caste. It surfaces, however, in the face of perceived threats to their institutional brand posed by the entry of low castes. As the extension of OBC quotas to the IITs was being debated in the Indian Parliament, alumni in Silicon Valley organized under the banner of "Indians for Equality" started online petitions, staged public protests and solidarity campaigns, and wrote letters to the Indian President against reservations. At one such public protest held in Sunnyvale, California, a stone's throw from the head offices of Google, Yahoo, Cisco, and Intel, an IIT alumnus working as a Silicon Valley engineer commented to an Indian reporter: "Let Arjun Singh²⁵ do whatever he wants to any educational institute in India. But tell him to leave the IITs alone.... It is because of us that the West has recognized the worth of India.... Remember, Brand India is Brand IIT" (Chadha 2006).

This idea that the entry of low castes threatens the institutional brand is a striking instance, not of the transformation of cultural into economic capital but the inverse: the market value of Brand IIT depends on its continued association with upper castes. Moreover, with the invocation of the West as audience, upper-caste IITians claim to be shoring up the value of "Brand India" itself.

The notion of "Brand India" has to be situated in the context of a late twentieth-century politics of ascription. Whereas the explicit invocation of particularistic genealogies as a basis for social worth or market value was once discredited, we are witnessing the resurgence of claims on these grounds. The return to genealogy has been accorded new legitimacy by the neoliberal marketplace for identities, a trend that anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff have glossed as "Ethnicity Inc" (2009). Identitarian claims are no longer just the resort of the powerless; in the face of subaltern assertion, the powerful are similarly inclined. However, elite mimesis of subaltern identity politics transforms identity from a form of rights into a form of capital. This is the case with the self-marking of upper castes as a response to the rise of low-caste rights politics. It is equally so in the United States where, in response to African American racial assertion, we have witnessed a "white ethnic revival" (Jacobson 2005). For their part, affluent diasporic South Asians engage in a complex negotiation of race, culture, and capital to enhance the economic and cultural value of homeland connections (Subramanian 2000).

²⁵ Arjun Singh was a Congress Party member and former "Union Minister for Human Resource Development" who spearheaded the 27 percent reservation for OBCs in central educational institutions.

Such patterns of racialization for the market are strikingly evident within the global “knowledge economy.” The 2003 episode of *60 Minutes* is just one example of the current fetishizing of the IITian as today’s “global Indian.” IITians themselves have been particularly adept at forging diasporic networks that shore up the value of Brand IIT. In the United States, older alumni are hugely influential in facilitating the induction of newer ones into university campuses (Kripalani, Engardio, and Spiro 1998; Salkever 1999; Warner 2000). To offer just one example, an IITian teaching at Duke University has started a summer internship program exclusively targeting IIT undergraduates in hopes of luring some away from higher ranked engineering and computer science Ph.D. programs. When I asked whether other faculty in Duke’s engineering school objected to the exclusivity of the program, I heard, “Why would they? They know that the IITs produce the best students and that all the engineering schools in the United States are competing for them.” And indeed, this pattern is not limited to Duke; IITians that I have interviewed at Harvard, MIT, and Stanford are equally explicit about their goal of admitting and hiring their own. Characteristically, such practices of institutional nepotism are glossed as the elevation of merit over all other standards of measure.

The leveraging of cultural and social capital is perhaps most evident in the role of U.S.-based alumni in facilitating entrepreneurship (Saxenian 1999). The Indus Entrepreneurs, a network started by IIT alumni in Silicon Valley in 1992, has on its list of mentors the most well-recognized Indian names in the Indian and American corporate sectors.²⁶ In conversations with both senior mentors and junior members of the organization, it became obvious that the entrepreneurial ambitions of IIT graduates are the most actively cultivated. When a group of IITians brings forward a proposal, they are almost guaranteed seed funding. This is transnational kinship at its best, an affective, institutionally generated bond that underwrites the commodity value of an IIT pedigree and enhances the racial mystique around the IITian’s intellect.

When American understandings of the IITian’s racial talent travel back to India, they reinforce claims to caste exceptionalism, making it possible for IITians to claim representative authority for “Brand India” as upper-caste global moderns. Of course, the IITs are not the only Indian engineering colleges that send students abroad. Increasingly, other institutions, particularly in the south, have been successful at exporting their student talent. IITians have responded to the competition by distinguishing their training from that received at other engineering colleges in terms that recuperate a caste logic.

Much of this hinges on the claim to merit as the mastery of immaterial knowledge. The association of immaterial knowledge with engineering perhaps sounds paradoxical. Unlike the “pure sciences,” engineering is

²⁶ At: www.tie.org (accessed 8 Dec. 2014).

typically thought to involve practical work with one's hands and with material objects. However, even within engineering, the difference between conceptual and practical training has become a crucial part of institutional stratification, with the IITs seen as the most conceptual of engineering colleges.

The colonial legacy of mapping technical training onto existing social hierarchies certainly contributes to this postcolonial stratification of engineering colleges. However, in my interviews with earlier and later cohorts of Madras IITians, I noticed a clear difference in how they spoke about their training. Early alumni studied under German and Indian professors and followed the colonial pattern of entering public sector enterprises after a period of practical training either in Indian or West German factories. Several who graduated in the 1960s told me that it was exposure to the factory that enhanced their love of engineering. One who graduated in 1962 narrated a fairly common career trajectory:

I did my internship at one of the biggest mechanical engineering concerns in Germany, at their head office.... When I came back, I worked in a company—Utkal Machineries—which had three German collaborations and was in the state of Orissa, near the Rourkela Steel Plant. A lot of our products were for steel plants, for mining, and for paper industries ... this kind of heavy engineering was really my cup of tea.... Most of my IIT classmates were doing similar things.... We thought of ourselves as literally building the country but with German standards.... That was my first job where I worked for ten years.

By contrast, most IITians who graduated after the 1980s disdain the practical dimensions of engineering. Alumni recounted the trials of practical training and how they would do anything to avoid doing time in the labs. "We thought it was beneath us to do something as dull as put together a piece of machinery," one told me, "That was for people in other engineering colleges." Another described the attitude of IITians in terms that echo both the colonial state's caste sociology and the Hindu textual correlation between caste duties and parts of the body:

We had a greater emphasis on math and physics, a lot of problem solving on paper ... you do modeling, you think about writing formulas, equations, and less about doing something with your hands. Because we always thought that we should use our brains, not our hands. That was the mindset we had ... it wasn't explicit, but it was understood. No one was going to say that but it was understood if you came through the system, took the exam.... God gave you your brains so you should use them. Hands are for other people who don't have brains.

The disassociation of IITians from the state industrial sector and association with post-industrial economies in India and the United States has only reinforced their status as an intellectual elite. Most IIT graduates today have shifted from the industrial to the information sector. The pecking order of departments within the IITs has shifted correspondingly from the heyday of civil and mechanical engineering in the 1960s to the dominance of computer science today.

The IITian's perceived capacity for abstract thought that makes him least suited for the shop floor, and perhaps even for the engineering profession more generally, is what corporate recruiters I interviewed identified most readily as his unique virtue and what makes him best suited for the knowledge industry. Recruiters and the news media in the United States resort to broad brush racial typologies in characterizing IITians' intellectual capacity with reference to India's "long tradition of conceptual mathematics" or Indians' "knack for numbers" (Kripalani, Engardio, and Spiro 1998). Within India, however, the distinctions are finer. Private sector employers trade quite blatantly in assumptions about relative skill and knowledge when distinguishing graduates of different institutions. When I interviewed corporate recruiters from the software industry in Chennai, they typically distinguished the Madras IITian from other regional engineering graduates by his unsuitability for the industrial workplace. A few even pointedly opined that "Tam Brahms" were especially well suited for the upper echelons of IT work.

CONCLUSION

In post-independence India, new patterns of caste stratification and consolidation have emerged through the very process of democratic transformation. Significantly, these consolidated groupings of high and low castes forward their claims in the languages of democracy, whether through the invocation of "merit" or "equality" as democratic virtues. Rather than the gradual erosion of caste, what we see in regions like Tamilnadu is the claim to merit as an upper-caste virtue. This caste claim to merit has been strengthened by the resurgence within the late twentieth-century "knowledge economy" of ascriptive understandings of skill that bind caste and race more tightly to intelligence so that it is now legitimate to claim merit on the basis of particularistic genealogies. Rather than just subaltern identitarianism, then, the leveraging of caste must be seen as an upper-caste politics that is arrayed against low-caste assertion and derives its legitimacy from a larger global politics of ascription.

What are the implications of these processes for the relationship between democracy and meritocracy? The current standoff in India and elsewhere is between two competing visions of democratic equality: the first rests on a formal definition of equality that attributes social hierarchies to the natural aptitudes of individuals and groups; the second presupposes the existence of historically accumulated privileges and disadvantages and the need for compensatory measures to level opportunity.

In India, education has been widely regarded as a prime instrument for improving the condition of the historically disadvantaged, and their elevation as one of the most important social outcomes of education. As stated by the Ministry of Education in 1966, "One of the most important social objects of education is to equalize opportunity, enabling the backward or underprivileged classes and individuals to use their education as a lever for the improvement

of their condition” (Ministry of Education 1966). Toward this end, it was thought necessary to apply redistributive mechanisms to level the playing field. Marc Galanter argues for defining India’s approach to redistributive justice as one of “compensatory discrimination” because this term “does not blink at the fact that some are left out, that we are dealing with something more than a benign process of inclusion. At least where scarce resources are distributed, it employs a principle of selection that is akin to the old discrimination. But the purpose is different: it is not exclusion and relegation but inclusion and recompense both for historic deprivations and to offset present handicaps” (1984: 3).

Those who most vocally oppose compensatory discrimination argue that it undercuts the principle of equality and is antithetical to merit. As noted above, however, there are different understandings of equality at stake here, and they have steadily diverged over the course of India’s post-independence history. The strident claim to merit as an upper-caste virtue and discrediting of redress as “vote bank politics” is evidence of increasingly incommensurate visions of the Indian future.

So is merit really incommensurable with redress? Meritocracy has been upheld as a republican ideal that is a necessary corrective to older hierarchies of status. However, in bracketing out the social and the historical, it has serviced the reproduction of privilege. Is there a way of recuperating the notion of merit to make it consistent with substantive equality? If the definition of merit could be pluralized enough to accommodate the diversity of historical experiences, it is perhaps redeemable. If, however, it continues to underpin a more standardized measure of value that necessarily favors those with accumulated cultural and social capital, it is difficult to see how meritocracy could be made commensurate with the ideals of republican democracy.

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Abstract: The politics of meritocracy at the Indian Institutes of Technology illuminates the social life of caste in contemporary India. I argue that the IIT graduate's status depends on the transformation of privilege into merit, or the conversion of caste capital into modern capital. Analysis of this process calls for a relational approach to merit. My ethnographic research on the southeastern state of Tamilnadu, and on IIT Madras located in the state capital of Chennai, illuminates claims to merit, not simply as the transformation of capital but also as responses to subaltern assertion. Analyzing meritocracy in relation to subaltern politics allows us to see the contextual specificity of such claims: at one moment, they are articulated through the disavowal of caste, at another, through caste affiliation. This marking and unmarking of caste suggests a rethinking of meritocracy, typically assumed to be a modernist ideal that disclaims social embeddedness and disdains the particularisms of caste and race. I show instead that claims to collective belonging and to merit are eminently commensurable, and become more so when subaltern assertion forces privilege into the foreground. Rather than the progressive erasure of ascribed identities in favor of putatively universal ones, we are witnessing the re-articulation of caste as an explicit basis for merit and the generation of newly consolidated forms of upper-casteness.