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Lived Experiences of the Indian Stigmatized Group in Reference to Socio-Political Empowerment: A Phenomenological Approach

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Abstract

The authors present the lived experiences of the stigmatized castes in the context of the opportunities made available by the government of India for their Socio-Political Empowerment. The study aimed to gain an understanding about the respondents' unique experiences of caste-based stigmatization at their workplace, their overall experience of empowerment at work and the other spheres of their lives, and to capture their perceived importance of, and the success of reservation policy as well as several other initiatives taken by the Government of India for empowering the marginalized castes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 male Schedule Caste/Schedule Tribe respondents working at respectable positions in the government organizations situated in the National Capital Region of Delhi. The phenomenological approach (Langdrige, 2007) was used to unearth the essence of the participant's experiences of stigma driven treatments. The overall perceptions and experiences of the respondents included experiencing direct and indirect forms of caste-related discrimination at workplace; experiencing economic, social and psychological empowerment but not at the workplace; favouring the policy of reservation for Schedule Caste/Schedule Tribe in government jobs; and believing in the improper implementation of policies in India. The research findings indicate the incomplete success of the governmental policies for the holistic empowerment of the Indian marginalized castes.

Keywords

Stigma, Empowerment, Marginalised Caste, Stereotypes, Discrimination, Phenomenology

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The authors present the lived experiences of the stigmatized castes in the context of the opportunities made available by the government of India for their Socio-Political Empowerment. The study aimed to gain an understanding about the respondents' unique experiences of caste-based stigmatization at their workplace, their overall experience of empowerment at work and the other spheres of their lives, and to capture their perceived importance of, and the success of reservation policy as well as several other initiatives taken by the Government of India for empowering the marginalized castes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 male Schedule Caste/Schedule Tribe respondents working at respectable positions in the government organizations situated in the National Capital Region of Delhi. The phenomenological approach (Langdrige, 2007) was used to unearth the essence of the participant's experiences of stigma driven treatments. The overall perceptions and experiences of the respondents included experiencing direct and indirect forms of caste-related discrimination at workplace; experiencing economic, social and psychological empowerment but not at the workplace; favouring the policy of reservation for Schedule Caste/Schedule Tribe in government jobs; and believing in the improper implementation of policies in India. The research findings indicate the incomplete success of the governmental policies for the holistic empowerment of the Indian marginalized castes. Keywords: Stigma, Empowerment, Marginalised Caste, Stereotypes, Discrimination, Phenomenology

Introduction

The social world, at the global as well as at the specific contextual level is stratified and organized on the basis of various attributes/characteristics of people and their belongingness for example, to particular religions, beliefs, customs, races, and genders. The ubiquitous presence of diversity across the globe has become the seed for a number of ill practices happening against those who fail to acquire dominant positions in the society. One such practice is stigmatization which triggers demeaning behavioural repertoire constituting of discrimination, atrocities, exploitation, and exclusion against the stigmatized. It has been like an epidemic across the world. However, the grounds of such treatments may vary. Generally speaking, race, religion, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, and language have been potential indicators on the basis of which people, all across the globe, segregate the ones who are considered non-potential or non-benefiting interaction partners.

The phenomenon has been evident in various forms. There are research evidences of ill discriminatory practices happening against racial minorities, including African Americans, Blacks, and Hispanics, in their daily lives (Schuman et al., 2001), at their workplaces (Schiller,

2004), in the form of harassment, exclusion, and other subtle forms of biases (Rosignio, 2007). An equitably parallel understanding could be drawn about the lives of the people in India.

Caste finds a central place in the lives of the people in India (Jaspal, 2011; Kumar, 2017; Vaid, 2014) similar to what race signifies in the Western world. Indian society has always been oriented in terms of hierarchical relationships among the various castes embedded in it. Caste is understood as a socio-psychological phenomenon having great influences on many spheres of human social living particularly within villages (Jaspal, 2011). The social identity that a person carries determines whether he/she would be looked at with grace or be disgraced and devalued in the eyes of others. The social identity of people in India draws heavily from the mutually exclusive, relatively permanent social castes, each having a set of rigid or unchangeable customs, norms, and laws of its own (Kroeber, 1950). In accordance with the concept of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), this has created fertile grounds for inequality and injustice to prosper, leading to the stigmatization of specific castes in the society (e.g., Schedule Castes, Schedule Tribes, and Other Backward Castes). The present study is an attempt to venture into the lived experiences of stigmatization and/or empowerment of Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribes employees at their respective workplaces and society and also to understand their perspective on the importance and success of reservation (affirmative actions taken by the Government of India to uplift the lives of the economically, socially, and politically weaker and the underrepresented section of the Indian society) as a step towards achieving socio-political empowerment.

Caste Stigmatization in India: Review of Literature

Stigmatization can be understood as the devaluation of people based on the characteristic features associated with them. These characteristics might be overtly visible, for example leprosy, overweight, physical disability, facial disfigurement, or on the other hand, might be related to the position of an individual in the hierarchical structure of the society, for example, individuals belonging to particular castes (scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other backward classes), socio economic class (economically weak or poor), religion, and sexual orientation (sexual minorities). Caste stigma is strongly represented in power dynamics, as something brought into deliberate actions by those in power against the relatively powerless group of people (Parker & Aggleton, 2003). The lower castes are treated as ineffective interacting partners in the interpersonal relationships and are devoid of any kind of any positive regard from the rest of the society (Herek, 2009). On the contrary, they are devalued, considered as immoral, flawed, impure, and tainted in the eyes of others (Goffman, 1963).

Stigmatization of particular castes in the Indian society has its roots and origins from the ancient mythological and religious texts; for example, *Manusmriti* wherein the people in the society were hierarchically segregated on the basis of *Karma* (occupation) or the kinds of the duties they were expected to perform in the social realm of their living (Hutton, 1946; Nesfield, 1885), and then on the basis of birth in particular kind of family. Brahmins were considered to be more closely related to education. They were the priests and they assumed the highest status and power in the society. The *kshatriyas* were the warriors meant to protect the civilization during the times of wars. *Vaishyas* were the business class given the duty of being traders. The lowermost division were called *Shudras*. Considered to be impure and dirty, their main role comprised of being manual scavengers, rag pickers, and the other workers concerned with cleaning. These distinctions also led to the centralization of power in the hands of those that were higher up in the social ladder of the caste system.

This led to the creation of lot of social inequality (Ambedkar, 1987) in the Indian society wherein those higher up in the social ladder were enjoying most of the power and privileges than those who were at the lower strata. This ascription of belonging to a lower caste

made the society stigmatise them as an impure, dirty, devalued, unfit interacting member and hence restrained them from accessing the mainstream socio-economic rights, facilities, powers, and privileges otherwise enjoyed by the rest of the society.

Because of the centralisation of the power in the hands of the upper castes, the lower caste individuals, known as Untouchables/Dalits (now nomenclated as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) were not even able to uplift themselves socially, economically, and politically as they were devoid of the right of education, non-traditional roles, social interactions outside their caste, and any kind of say in the decision making about the issues prevalent in the society. "Dalit" is the term used to represent the ambiguous position of certain groups or communities in the Indian civilization (Rajkumar, 2010), someone who is crushed, destroyed, scattered, torn, or broken (Chatterjee, 2009). The untouchables are understood as those who have been subjected to intense exploitation and ill-treatment by the upper castes (Devi, 2003; Singh et al., 2009). According to Tripathy et al. (2016), Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are officially classified as the underprivileged social groups in India.

Being a socially constructed phenomenon (Dovidio et al., 2003; Kurzban & Leary, 2001), the effects of stigmatization are highly mediated by the particular social contexts in which it manifests itself (Crocker et al., 1998). In Indian society, the stigmatized castes are subjected to certain types of stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination (Channa, 2005; Ram, 2013; Sinha, 2020). The discrimination could take many forms like exclusion, marginalisation, atrocities, abuse, and inaccessibility to certain rights otherwise enjoyed by the rest of the society including lack of education, political power, housing facilities, and health services (Devi, 2003; Shah et al., 2006; Singh, Rai, & Yadav, 2009). The presence of these practices only during the older times is a myth. Researchers have identified the still prevalent caste-related ill practices in overt and subtle forms in the various spheres and dimensions of social relations and interactions (Sooryamoorthy, 2006).

There have been unbiased evidences that this segment of the society still lacks the lived experiences of social inclusion, dignity in the society (Festino, 2015; Ghose, 2003; Gorringer, 2005; Parekh, 2005). Thus, the attempts for their empowerment appear successful only in theory and not in practise (Sharma, 1985). There have been extensive studies to show the demarcation of physical spaces along with ecological segregation (Judge & Bal, 2009; Vithayathil & Singh, 2012) between Dalit localities and the higher castes in rural as well as urban areas. The discrimination is also deeply acknowledged to exist in organisations in addition to public and private spheres of life (Ram, 2008). They have been incorporated in the teaching institutions, or government organisations by using the legislative policies of reservation but that is actually incorporation in unfavourable conditions (du Toit & Hickey, 2007) where they have entered these institutions but could not become the part of it.

There are also seen variations in the projection of discriminatory treatments towards the stigmatized. These come from more overtly expressed and rude kinds of practices for the lower castes who are poor or reside in the villages (Ambedkar, 1989; Shah et al., 2006) against subtler expressions of exclusion and discrimination for the rich or urban habitants (Sooryamoorthy, 2006). Beating of Dalits for keeping a moustache, for watching *garba* during the *navaratri* festival in Ahmedabad, lashing them for going through certain streets in the village otherwise reserved for the higher castes, are a few evidences of the same (Dhar, 2017). As a measure for protection of lower castes, the Indian central government implemented The Scheduled Castes and The Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Amendment Act 2018 (The Gazette of India, Ministry of Law, Legislative Department, 2018). The central government has re-amended the Act which was diluted in 2016 to be implemented in its original form in 1989, wherein provisions are made for the immediate arrest of the accused without investigation even on the verdict of the single complainant with no provision for applying for anticipatory bail, for example.

Upward mobility to better occupations has been very minimal with a large section of Dalits still working at lower ranked jobs and only a minimal number amongst them have been able to climb the ladder up-to upper occupations (Deshpande & Palshikar, 2008). Dalits' exclusion from the private sector jobs was investigated by Jodhka and Newman (2007). It was found that this is due to the ingrained assumptions and preconceived notions among the private sector organisations about their historical past and background.

There have been Right To Information reports that indicate that the private sectors in India are not willing to recruit lower caste candidates for work, however they are willing to pay for their education and scholarships (Khan, 2019). In the government sectors the central government has given 15% reservation to Scheduled Caste (SC) and 7.5% to Scheduled Tribe (ST) community in promotions in government jobs (Sarda, 2018).

A number of studies mentioned in the text bring forth the existence of prejudicial, and discriminatory practices against the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in some or the other forms at various facets of their lives. These include news articles (Khan, 2019; Sarda, 2018), studies conducted using the techniques of meta-analysis (Leslie et al., 2014; Thorat et al., 2016), narrative analysis (Festino, 2015), analysing the secondary data available officially (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015), and survey (Jodhka, 2010), to mention a few. The present study seeks to gain the primary data in the form of the participants themselves (in person) sharing their experiences related to the domain of investigation by employing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). It was assumed to yield the most proximate picture of the participants' unique experiences embedded in their respective individual and collective worlds (Larkin et al., 2006; Tomkins, 2017) and the meanings they assign to such experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Rationale for the Study

Societies across the globe have witnessed a number of rigorous attempts, in the changing time and space, to bring notable upliftment in the lives of those who have been living in the dearth of equitable conditions. With the incorporation of certain laws and regulations, for example, civil rights law enforced during the 1960s, attempts have been made in uplifting the lives and status of Blacks in the Western world and providing to them adequate representation in the socio-political domain of their living. With the coming of the so-called backward people to the socio-political upfront like Barrack Obama and Nelson Mandela, people sharing the same social identity witnessed an increased social representation in the society.

Similarly, innumerable attempts have been made for the upliftment of the stigmatized castes in India who, since time immemorial have been living in extremely debilitating conditions in the society. During colonial rule too, Britishers', even if to suit their own benefits, enactment of Indian Council Act of 1909, Government of India Act of 1919, and the Government of India Act of 1935 (Jain, 2006), paved the way for recruitment of Indians in the British governance, education, and upliftment of the untouchables and their children. However, these attempts were not free from ambiguities about intentions to bring upliftment (Ghurye, 1970). Dr. B. R. Ambedkar has been a key figure to address the issues related to caste untouchability and discrimination (Raghavendra, 2016). He stressed upon the right of the untouchables to use the resources otherwise available to the rest of the society, decentralisation of power in the hands of the devalued castes and asked for a separate electorate for them as he believed that their upliftment could only have been possible if they were given certain powers in the society.

Post-independence, the laying down of the preamble of Constitution of India (Pal & Pal, 2010), tabled in 1950, was a strong step to bridge the gap existent among castes in the

society which stressed giving fundamental rights and political powers to all the citizens of India irrespective of their caste, class, race, or gender. Reservations were also introduced for the upliftment of the socio-economic and political status of the devalued castes of Dalits with the effort of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (Raghavendra, 2016). Reservations are the affirmative actions that were taken by the Government of India in order to uplift the lives of the economically, socially, and politically weaker and the underrepresented section of the Indian society in order to bring their social position at-par with the already dominant sections of the society. Reservations for the backward castes like Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes constituted, among others, provision of reserving a particular percentage of seats in the public sectors jobs, all government and non-government educational institutions, civil services, and the governmental departments of union and state. Special provisions for the same were laid Under Articles 15, 16 (4), 17, 46, 243 (D), 330, 332, 334, 335, 341 and 342 thereby also providing to them special representation in the lower (Lok Sabha) and upper house (Rajya Sabha) of the Parliament of India. With the establishment of the Mandal Commission in 1978, recommendations of reservation for Other Backward Classes were introduced. Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989, implemented on 30th January, 1990, declared the practise of untouchability as an intentional crime under the Indian Penal Code (Pal & Pal, 2010).

With affirmative actions like these, numerous people belonging to the backward castes (Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes) like Babu Jagjeevan Ram, Mulayam Singh, Mayawati, Lalu Prasad Yadav, Krishna Teerath, and Udit Raj could make their mark to the political upfront. This paved the way for the possible opportunities of getting adequate social representation by the people belonging to the lower castes in the society. But have these measures of providing representation to the marginalized caste groups on paper been successful in providing the actualized experiences of empowerment to them? This is what is needed to be explored. The impetus to conduct the present study came from the deep-seated quest to understand the experiential correlate of those who have been explicitly accorded with the benefits of affirmative actions taken by the Government of India to uplift their lives.

There is no denying over the fact that ever since the nation got independence, the Government of India has been taking painstaking efforts, since the incorporation of constitution of India under article 341 (The Constitution (Ninety-eighth Amendment) Act, 2014, p. 153) and from time to time, for the integration of stigmatized segments in the mainstream social, economic, and political community of India. The idea behind all these efforts is to bring drastic social change and provide economic, social, and political empowerment to the stigmatized groups.

However, it is also true that even after more than 6 decades of providing constitutional reservation (the opportunities of positive discrimination), the country has not been able to achieve what it aspired to achieve within the initial 10 years since the constitution of India was tabled in 1950. Leslie et al. (2014) suggest that the stigmatization is an unforeseen consequence of the affirmative actions taken by the Government of India meant for the empowerment of the backward and downtrodden castes of the Indian society. There has been a clear rise in the discriminatory and dehumanising practices against the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes by those who do not fall under the constitutional provision of reservation.

Hence, it is extremely important to explore whether the policy makers have done enough towards the empowerment of stigmatized groups in the society, or whether there is a need to make certain revisions in the reservation policy so as to be able to bring equality to the actualized experience of those who have been living in dearth of it despite the constitutional provisions available for the same. The above assertion is supported by the research findings on Caste based discrimination in educational institutions (Thorat et al., 2016), in urban and rural sectors of India (Ambedkar, 1989; Shah et al., 2006; Sooryamoorthy, 2006), against Dalit women (Festino, 2015; Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015), Dalit children (Nambissan, 1996), and

Dalit in employment (Jodhka, 2010) in addition to evidences provided in the literature review section.

The present study aspires to understand the caste-based experiences of Dalits employed in government jobs. It wishes to unravel the ground level experiential reality of those who have had utilized the reservation policy in getting into the government jobs. An understanding of these is expected to supplement the policy makers, and social workers with an additional insight of how could things be worked out to head towards achieving a state of equality (in all facets) which is not only penned down on paper but also finds its existence in the experience of all. At this backdrop, the present study attempts to explore and uncover the perceptions and experiences of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe employees working in the government organizations in reference to the opportunities provided to them for their socio-political empowerment. The study sets to provide answers for the following laid down question of inquiry

Research Questions

1. What are the participants' personal experiences of casteism at their workplace?
2. Do they feel empowered in any way?
3. What is stand of the participants on the concept of reservation and the attempts made by the Government of India for providing them with the opportunities of socio-political empowerment?

Researchers' Positions

The present study is conducted with a research position that draws from the constructionism approach. Social constructionism emphasizes the relational nature of human beings (Gergen, 2009). According to this approach, there is no single, hegemonic, or objective truth or reality, nor it is a tangible existence (Gergen, 1994). Rather, there are numerous realities that are subjective in nature and constructed in the minds of those who experience it during the dynamic interaction with the social world they are situated in (Burr, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and the way it is understood at particular times (Blaxter et al., 2006). That means that the realities are embedded in the particular social context as (Crotty, 2010). The present position in the research also draws from social identity theory that belongingness to a particular social group has certain implications onto the behavior of individuals in response to the differences they share with others with respect to their social status (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

We hold a core interest in the field of social psychology and an inclination to understand more about the experiences of those who are generally left out or feel dejection from the society who may or may not be known to the target but the target is bound to bear the consequences in some form or the other just because of their belongingness to a group that the society in general does not consider worthwhile to include in the mainstream (e.g., caste). As the first author, I have often come across the reserved caste individuals sharing their experiences of subtle and direct cues of rejection, non-inclusion, and non-acceptance by the non-reserved caste individuals. This initiated a quest to understand their in-depth experiences at their workplace and general sphere of life.

The second author of the study belongs to the Other Backward Class Category, one of the beneficiary caste groups that has been granted the opportunities for reservation according to the policies of the Government of India. In general, people who do not belong to any of the reserved categories, believe that the reserved caste individuals who have been provided reservation have been able to empower themselves economically, and therefore, there is no need to provide reservation opportunities to their children. Being from a marginalized section of the society, the second author has observed that there is a general dearth of acceptance by

the social world that has also gone to the extent of people saying that the reserved caste need not to be worried for working hard because they would anyways get success due to their caste status and not the capabilities. The instances like these have intrigued the authors to explore that are these experiences of being “not-required” common to several those who have attempted to empower themselves through the reservation policies or are these the individually driven experiences. This quest provided a major initiation to understand their experiences and perspectives as per the objectives of the study.

Method

The present study adopted a qualitative approach as it intended to encapsulate the participants' experiences in their natural social environment to yield rich and substantial elucidation of phenomenon pertaining to the present study (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The process of studying and explaining the meaning of the perception and experiences about a particular phenomenon as they get registered in the conscious awareness of the experiencing beings is called phenomenology (Langdrige, 2007; Moran & Mooney, 2002). Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used in the study to systematically explore and get the most proximate picture of the participants' unique experiences embedded in their respective individual and collective worlds (Larkin et al., 2006; Tomkins, 2017) and the meanings they assign to such experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA acknowledges an important aspect of symbolic interactionism, according to which the meanings that individuals assign to their encounters in their personal and social world are the subjective constructions emerging out of their interactions with others. That means that individuals derive meanings of their experiences while communicating these experiences to others during social interactions. The study was taken up as a pilot research work of the broader Ph.D. research study that has been approved by the Delhi University research committee (DRC, Department of Psychology).

Participants

In-line with the objectives, an equitably homogeneous sample was selected for whom the purpose of the present study carried personal relatedness (Noon, 2018). The technique of criterion-based purposive sampling (Patton, 1990) was used to identify and select the participants who are presently working in a government organization for the past 10 years at least and who have been the targets of casteism and were eloquent about the same (Creswell, 2007). It was done to make sure that the participants for the study had relatively adequate familiarity with dynamics of the organizational functioning so as to be able to produce abundant and detailed account of experiences for analysis (Noon, 2018).

The appropriate size of the sample for conducting a qualitative study at the doctorate level is 4 to 10 (Clarke, 2010). According to Coyle (2014), the average size of the sample for conducting IPA is between 1 and 12. For the present study, participants were 10 Schedule Caste/Schedule Tribe male employees having placed at nearly similarly high organizational positions in the government organizations, situated in the National Capital Region of Delhi, including Assistant law officer, Chief Superintendent, Commercial Railway Inspector, Assistant Accounts Officer, and Assistant Executive Engineer. There has been research evidence indicating the stigmatization of people on the basis of gender resulting in women falling prey to heightened practices of discrimination and stereotyping at their workplace (Cihangir et al., 2013) as well as in the other spheres of their lives (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001; Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). Therefore, the present study purposefully recruited male employees so as to nullify the probability of the role of gender as contributing to the

experiences of stigmatization at the workplace. The criteria for including participants for the present study were (a) the participants had at least 10 years of experience working in their respective organizations, (b) the participants identified themselves with their castes as Schedule Caste/Schedule Tribe, and (c) the participants were eloquent about their experiences pertaining to casteism or caste related exclusion or discrimination at their workplace. The participants' ages ranged from 40-60 years with the average age of 40.8 years. The identification of the participants with their castes as Schedule Caste/Schedule Tribe was evident when the participants reported applying for their present job through the particular SC/ST caste category to which they belong. The participants also consented to discuss their personal experiences of the caste-based treatments in the society and their respective workplace.

Data Collection

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis orients to elicit the depth and texture of the personal subjective meanings that individuals assign to their experiences in the various facets of their lives (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Wedlock, 2016). For this purpose, we conducted semi-structured interviews to elicit the interpreted world views of the participants by engaging in detailed conversation with them (Smith & Osborn, 2008). A semi-structured interview schedule constitutes the non-directive, open ended questions that are prepared beforehand based on what the researchers expect/hope to understand from the participants in terms of the specific experiences related to the research objectives specified for the study (Smith & Osborn, 2008). For the present study, we prepared a semi-structured interview schedule on the basis of the three research objectives specified for the present study to gain in-depth understanding of the participant's perception and experiences related to their personal experiences of casteism at their workplace, their overall experiences of empowerment, and their personal stand on the success of reservation and other policies meant for their socio-political empowerment. The questions were amended and re-amended as per how the conversation unfolded with the individual participants. However, overall the questions formed were inclusive of, but not limited to, "Tell me something about yourself, your journey until now. How have your experiences been at your workplace? How have your relations been with the fellow colleagues? What kind of changes have you experienced in your life after joining this job/coming to the workforce? What is your general stand on the concept of reservation? To what extent do you feel reservation is important in the contemporary world?"

Identifying and getting the approval of SC/ST participants was not an easy affair as caste-based experiences is something that does not constitute the day-to-day discussions of the lower caste individuals openly. A prior appointment was taken from the participants who were approached and/or introduced-to through the known relatives. After the participants had the purpose of the study explained, and after convincing them about the importance and relevance of this study for their own benefit, an informed written consent was taken from the participants who were willing to participate without any remuneration. They were assured about the confidentiality of their responses and identity.

We prepared a flexible framework of a few questions, beforehand which was followed loosely and was re-amended based on the answers provided by the participants. The flexibility in following the interview schedule has been evident to have an advantage in providing unexpected directions that the researcher might not have thought to venture into but it later proves to be beneficial in providing details on the issue considered relevant from the vantage point of the participants (Noon, 2018). Similar insights were also drawn in the present study as it was observed that the participants sailed through the interview interacting about the issue and concerns that matter to them the most pertaining to the present study. Prompts are often considered to be an important component of the semi-structured interviews which can be used

in case the participants are not able to comprehend the questions or try hard to extensively verbalize their experiences or opinions (Noon, 2018). However, in the present study prompts were used barely as the participants were able to talk at length about their concerns. On the participant's permission, the interviews were audio recorded to avoid missing any important information while analyzing the content. The interviews were conducted at the participant's natural work settings but having an undisturbed and peaceful atmosphere so as to avoid the responses of the participants to get adulterated because of unintended factors. The interview took place in a face-to-face one-to-one setting and each interview lasted for about 50-60 minutes. The interviews were later transcribed and any information revealing participants' identities was deleted to maintain their anonymity.

Analysis

We adopted interpretive phenomenological analysis for the present study. It followed a methodical investigation of the personal experiences shared by 10 Schedule Caste/Schedule Tribe male employees working at respectable positions in the government organizations of Delhi NCR (Tomkins, 2017). The analysis was meant to gain a deeper understanding about how the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994) of stigmatization is perceived and experienced by the participants at their workplaces. For this purpose, we analyzed the transcripts to identify all the apropos, non- iterative, and non-overlapping disclosures about how the participants have experienced the phenomenon of stigmatization at their workplaces. We then congregated the assertions into different themes reflecting the essence or textures of their experiences.

For analyzing the transcripts, we followed the steps delineated in Noon's (2018) paper *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: An Appropriate Methodology for Educational Research?* as a guide. We traversed through the process of analysis following an idiographic approach in a sense that it was aimed to understand in-depth the unique experiences of each participant, their thoughts, perspectives, and beliefs with respect to the phenomenon under study (Cassidy et al., 2011). After that, we finally arranged the individually extracted themes in the form of broad themes (Smith & Eatough, 2006).

The step-wise progression in the process of analyzing the data is described as follows. At first, to ingress deeply in the experiential domain of the participants, we read and re-read the transcripts a number of times. The reading of the transcripts was also complemented by listening to the audio recordings of the participants in order to gain as proximate an understanding of the data as possible. While reading and re-reading the transcripts, we added notes alongside the texts. Since, what should constitute the note making is not restricted (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), in the present study notes were made regarding the particular observations or comments that best reflected the text in the transcripts. For the convenience of understanding and maintaining uniformity in stating the verbatim of the participants, we translated the Hindi verbatim to English in this paper. An illustration of note-making is presented in Table 1:

Table 1.

Text from the Transcript	Notes
<p>Interviewer: What is your stand on the reservation policy in India? What do you think and feel about it?</p> <p>Respondent: I feel that the reservation is very important for the lower caste individuals. However, the purpose for which the Government of India gave reservation, that purpose has still not got fulfilled. At the time when the constitution of India was getting framed, Dr. BR Ambedkar had put the provision of reservation so that representation can be provided to those who were devoid of their political rights, who were the target of atrocities. But, if we see, the seats reserved for SC/ST are still not fully filled half in Government posts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has Positive or favourable attitude towards reservation • Feels that the purpose of reservations remains unsuccessful. • Considers Dr. BR Ambedkar as the key figure to bring reservation in India. • Argues that seats reserved for the SC/ST's are still not even half filled and are vacant.

In the subsequent step, we attempted to transform the notes which were made from the original transcripts, into a relatively succinct locution. It was done with an intention for the locutions to unravel the quintessence of the verbatim from the transcripts. In this way, the phrases moved distant from the initial verbal expressions and headed closer to the conceptual framework while still being deeply connected to the participant's original verbatim. For the convenience of understanding and maintaining uniformity in stating the verbatim of the participants, we translated the Hindi verbatim to English in this paper. An illustration of the same is provided in Table 2.

Table 2.

Notes	Emergent Themes
Has Positive or favourable attitude towards reservation	Favours reservation.
Feels that the purpose of reservations remains unsuccessful.	The purpose of Reservation remains unfulfilled.
Considers Dr. BR Ambedkar as the key figure to bring reservation in India.	Gratitude for Dr. BR Ambedkar for introducing reservations.
Argues that seats reserved for the SC/ST's are still not filled fully and are vacant.	The Seats reserved for lower castes are not even half filled.

We then congregated the emergent themes together according to their homogeneity at the conceptual level (Smith & Osborn, 2008). While clustering them, there were certain themes that emerged as the supreme themes under which the sub-themes could be subsumed. There were certain other themes that did not relate to or synchronize well with the phenomenon under study. Those themes were abandoned. At this stage, we once again visited the transcripts and made certain that the emergent themes had meaningful connections with the raw verbatim of the transcripts and made sure that that the themes reflected the essence of the raw data. However, at this stage the themes were worded in a way that was different from the actual verbatim of the participants but still remained intact with quintessence of the original response.

Subsequently, we organized the themes and the superordinate themes in the form of a table thus creating a rich reflection of the voice of the participant (Denovan & Macaskill, 2012). This procedure is followed with the verbatim account of each of the 10 participants. In moving from one transcript to the another, we ascertained that the findings of the previous transcription interfere the least in extracting the themes in the subsequent transcription. Thus, each transcription was considered in its own unique terms (Smith et al., 2009).

The final step in the process consisted of making of the final table of the main themes under which several sub-themes were placed based on Smith and Osborn (2008) guidelines. This was a process in which the selection of the themes was done on the basis of how elaboratively it was discussed in the transcription and they have been repeated in at least half of the transcripts (i.e., five). Thus, the textural and structural descriptions were combined in the final table to create a rich reflection of the voice of the participants.

Table 3.

Themes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Experiencing Direct and Subtle Expressions of Discrimination. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The core reality is different than the apparent. • Knowledge of one's caste determines the attitude of others towards them. • Caste favouritism among the upper caste officers. • Feeling of disgust held for them. • Subtle expressions of casteism personally experienced by them. • Biases or stereotypes about the potentials of the lower caste held by higher caste employees. • Explicit and direct form of discrimination experienced at the workplace. • Fear of decentralization of power among the higher caste employees. 2. Experiencing Economic, Social, and Psychological Empowerment but not at the workplace. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of economic empowerment. • Rise in the living standard. • Can pay for children's education. • Clear indication of discrimination at the workplace. • Difficulty in implementing decisions at the workplace. 3. Favourable Attitude towards Reservation. 4. Improper Implementation of Policies in India.

Qualitative enquiry rests on the premise of trustworthiness (Hoyt & Bhati, 2007; Morrow, 2005). We do acknowledge that the same could be ensured by taking into account various methods or steps. We followed here, Williams and Morrow (2009) according to whom trustworthiness could be ensured by following the following three criteria: integrity, equilibrium between subjectivity and reflexivity, and clear reporting of the unearthed findings. The integrity (or the adequacy) of the data (Morrow, 2005) was decided based on the variability of the participants in terms of their belongingness to different government organizations so that diversity of viewpoints and experiences could be captured. Also, saturation of the responses was another means to decide upon the adequacy of the responses to the interview.

It is important that the rigorous efforts that researcher(s) put in an investigation yield the results that encapsulate the findings which reflect the most unbiased, realistic picture of the phenomenon under investigation. In order to account for subjectivity-reflexivity equilibrium,

we followed the method of seeking feedback from the participants at relevant phases of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was done to crosscheck that whether the reality as discussed by the participants (subjectivity) coincided with how we have understood that (reflexivity). In order to provide a clear reporting of the findings, we attempted to provide thick descriptions of the answers to the research questions specified in the beginning and supplemented the findings by the verbatim account of the participants.

Results

The approach of hermeneutics was followed in order to interpret the findings that have been articulated by the respondents while discussing their experiences and perspectives in accordance with the research objectives of the present study (Dallmayr, 2009). At first, an attempt is made to put, in clear terms, what has been expressed by the participants regarding the understanding that they have derived out of their social experiences. The emergent thematic analysis delineates a set of four broad themes presented under the Results section. This is followed by a discussion section constituting the way these experiences have been made sense of, in the light of the available research, thereby going by the process of double-hermeneutics (Smith, 2004).

The final organization of the articulated sense of the participants resulted in four major themes pertaining to the essence of the varied kinds of experiences that the participants had at their workplaces pertaining to the phenomenon of stigmatization, their experiences of empowerment, and their perceptions and or their stand on the concept of reservation and several other attempts made by the Government of India for the socio-political and economic development of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes- experiencing direct and subtle expressions of caste-related discrimination, experiencing economic but not social and psychological empowerment, favourable attitude towards reservation, improper implementation of policies in India (Table 3).

Experiencing Direct and Indirect Forms of Caste-Related Discrimination at the Workplace

The present theme attempts to highlight the distinct ways in which the participants have come forth with their experiential understanding of having fallen prey to caste-based discriminatory practices at the overt as well as at the covert levels at their respective workplaces and also what according to them make them experience that. The true reality is almost always apparent to others in its disguised form. This assertion was one of the significant components in the experiential pool of the respondents. Commenting on the overall condition of the workplace a 40-year-old Commercial Railways Inspector gently smiled and said,

Madam the true reality of people like us at the workplace is completely different from what may be visible to the people outside. Everyone outside might feel that we have achieved a lot, we are working in government organizations. But only we know what we are going through.

Experience of caste-based discriminatory treatment saddens Mr. A (A is used as a pseudo-name), a 44-year-old Assistant Law officer when he shares his experience that the caste of the other person is an important indicator of how that person has to be behaved with or treated in general.

Till the time people don't know that a particular person belongs to SC or ST category, everything is normal and fine. But, as soon as they are aware about the caste membership of the other person their mentality changes. Even though it doesn't get reflected in their overt behaviour so explicitly, their opinions change which tends to manifest in their backbiting behaviours.

Caste-based favouritism was one of the significant findings found as a concern amongst the respondents. It was felt by the respondents that the upper caste employees are biased towards the employees of their own caste which according to them was a seed cause of a rise in the prejudiced and discriminatory treatments towards the marginalized caste employees which they reported to have experienced at their workplace. Mr. B, an employee, working as a Chief Superintendent argues:

If the boss belongs to an upper caste, he/she supports the employees belonging to their own caste. Being an employee I have personally undergone through this experience. The employees at the workplace keep feelings of disgust for people like us. They might not always say things overtly on face, but they do talk about us at our back, criticize us, they mostly ignore us.

Apart from the caste-based favouritism, the other root concern that disturbs the respondents was the presence of biases or stereotypes among the higher caste employees in the organization related to their potentials and capabilities to deserve their present position in the organization. The respondents were increasingly disappointed to share that the upper caste employees and officers in their department or their workplace hold onto the stereotypes that they are not capable for what they are positioned at. According to them these biases played an important role in the way they are looked upon and treated by the rest of others. This instils the feeling of being humiliated in the eyes of others among them. An Assistant Executive Engineer working for more than 15 years shared,

If it becomes known to others already that a person is a Shudra or belongs to SC or ST caste, a presumption gets formed that he/she is not capable. People think that the only reason we have been able to make it to our present job is through reaping the benefits provided by the reservation policy in the Indian constitution, otherwise we do not possess the requisite capabilities and potentials to be in this job.

Not only the indirect discrimination constituted the respondent's personal experiences but the blatant or what we call the direct discriminatory treatments at their workplace were also part of their experiential discourses. An Assistant Accounts Officer was angry when he shared that the concerned department in the organization held his promotion and promoted the general category candidate.

When exams happened for promotion, the people whom I had taught and gave training to were passed and I was failed intentionally because I belong to quota unlike them who all belonged to the general caste. So, somewhere or the other I am the sufferer.

Another respondent, a Chief Railway Inspector having a work experience of 20+ years shared the kind of inhumane treatment he had to go through and overcome the strong resistance from the rest of the department to let him enter his workplace for a month.

My entry in the job was most challenging. I was not allowed to enter in the office for a month because I am a SC person. I opposed that and had to take the required help to be able to enter the organization.

The respondents also attributed their experiences to the strong inability of the upper caste employees to see them progress in their work. According to the respondents their success would instill strong fear among the higher caste employees of losing their long-held power and supremacy over the lower caste employees. One Senior Electrical Engineer working at the electricity unit for the past 14 +years stated,

The actual situation is not the way we see it. In today's date if the lower caste people are moving forward and progressing in their lives, then the anti-reservation voices are becoming strong. Actually, they don't have a problem with the existence of reservation but they fear that they will lose their domination by allowing us to progress. Sometimes this resistance is direct and many-a-times it is more at the level of subtle expressions.

Experiencing Economic, Social and Psychological Empowerment Not at the Workplace

The present theme discusses the findings pertaining to the respondents' experiences of empowerment in the various domains of their lives. The respondents were asked about anything good that has happened after their coming into their present employment. Without a doubt empowerment at the economic level constituted majorly all the experiential discourses of the respondents. The 44-year-old Assistant Law Officer shared that,

Reservation policies have helped us to become economically empowered. We are also now able to get job opportunities in the government sector. This has helped us to raise the bar of our living standards, we have been able to build our own house, can now fulfil our needs and desires more easily. Our children can go to good schools now, and we can bear the expenses of their education and can provide them the opportunities where they can learn and grow.

Divergence was seen as the experiential content pertaining to social and psychological empowerment began to surface. Increased economic condition as a result of joining the governmental workforce was operant in reaping respect and better relations with their family members and people in their locality. It also nurtured a sense of worth amongst the respondents of being capable enough to help someone in need. The Assistant Executive Engineer shared: "People in the society now give respect to us. We also feel increased status in the society where we live. The family members also respect us who used to consider us incapable and unworthy." While discussing one of the instances, the Commercial Railways Inspector discussed how he has been now contributing to the study of a poor child.

We can also help someone now. There is this one child of my maid who does not have enough money to pay the school fee. I have taken that responsibility. It feels good from inside when we are able to be a positive change in someone's life. We feel as if we are worthy now.

However, there was an evident dearth of social and psychological empowerment at the respondent's respective workplaces. The experiences of discrimination at the overt and the subtle levels clearly indicate social disempowerment. And regarding the psychological

disempowerment, experiencing difficulties in taking and implementing work related decisions in their respective department was reported by all 10 respondents. For example, the Chief Superintendent asserted: “At work people don’t give heed to our opinions and our decisions are not valued so we find it difficult to implement them.”

Favourable Attitude Towards Reservation

The present theme discusses the respondent’s general stand or perception about the reservation policy in India. All of them favoured the existence of the reservation policies introduced by the government for the betterment of the lives of the people who have been living as marginalized sections of society for so long. One of the respondents working as Assistant Executive Engineer shared:

Reservation is very important. It has given the opportunities to people like us for social empowerment in the form of providing opportunities for education in schools and colleges that has helped them to increase their social status in the society. I am working because of this policy. This has been a major catalyst in increasing the self-confidence of the individuals to stand with others in the society. India is not in the position to remove it.

The respondents had a lot of gratitude towards Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who proved to be an influential figure for the upliftment of the backward classes. They emphasized that due to the upliftment that has taken place in the lives of the people, they owe a great deal to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar whose rigorous efforts became successful in providing reservations to the backward sections of the society. The respondent continues to share that

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar is our hero. He has done a lot for the upliftment of Dalits. If he had not been there, probably I would have been where I am. He initiated conversion of religion of people from Hinduism to others so that he could prevent any harm caused by the discriminatory practices prevailing against them.

Improper Implementation of Policies in India

The present theme highlights the respondents’ concerns regarding the unsuccessful and improper implementation of the various policies in bringing upliftment of the lives of the marginalized caste. The respondents see the purpose of the reservation policies becoming futile through its improper implementation. The respondents were highly sensitized about the fact that the sole purpose of reservation to provide representation to those who remained unrepresented and underprivileged for years has remained unfulfilled until now. One of the respondents, a Section Accounts Officer notes,

See, policies are made but are not implemented properly. If our constitution of India is implemented properly into action, then these policies are not even required. Our constitution gives equal rights to all. Now, even if the policies of reservation are there, not even half of seats have been filled. Ma’am, we are given 15% reservation in recruitment to organizations. But, due to anarchy those seats are pushed towards others, who may be of general caste or can be an Other Backward Caste.

Lack of awareness amongst the people about the existence of such policies was another reason according to the respondents, contributing to the inability of the people to take the benefit of them. And education was emphasized to be a tool of gaining awareness. The Chief Railway Inspector says, “Ma’am law is there, all the policies are also present but how will the reform come? Who can make use of the formulated policies? The educated. The uneducated won’t even know about law and policies.” Whereas, the Assistant Executive Engineer blames poverty for all the failure. “A poor fellow who is busy in arranging for two meals in a day won’t even know and bother about the policies and laws.”

A Composite Discussion

Caste-based discrimination has been a common practice in India since the very beginning getting evidenced in varied kinds of behaviours. However, the way it is expressed has changed over the years by becoming subtle in its expression in contrast to the more blatant expressions in the past. This is probably because the laws enforced in India do not give the authorization to practice the blatant expressions. This explanation seems plausible on the level of objective discussions of having no understanding of the actual experiences. What is understood from the interaction with the respondents is that the truth lies deeply seated in the interaction dynamics of the lower caste with the upper caste but never surfaces. And what is evident to the world is considered the truth. In a country like India, which claims to be at the travel road of achieving progress, equality, justice, and matching to the advancements of the globalized world, caste still remains a significant teaser in the minds of the people when it comes to forming impressions or developing attitudes towards others in the society.

Social identity theory aptly justifies the experiences of discrimination by the respondents which they support with the evidence of caste-based favoritism by the upper caste employees. Since everyone wants to maintain a higher status of the group to which one belongs (in this caste caste-group), the phenomenon of ethnocentrism can explain the experiential findings of the respondents where they have reported experiencing direct as well as indirect forms of demeaning and discriminatory treatments from the rest of the upper caste staff, whether it be colleagues or their bosses. In this way employees are made to feel as if they don’t belong to the “whole,” as if they are different in negative ways.

“It is not the individual who is considered capable or incapable, but it is the caste of that individuals which signifies or validates the potentiality or capability of that individual” is what the several experiences of the respondents of being treated by others revolve around. They are just not considered capable enough and it makes them suffer at the emotional level. The upper caste people are not happy to see the lower caste progress; this was a deep concern that came forward as considered-to-be one of the root cause of the respondents’ negative experiences at their workplace. The fear of decentralization of power by the upper castes was strongly reflected in the verbatim of the respondents. The psychological non-acceptance of seeing the lower caste at par with them, standing on the same pedestal can be related to the way they deal with the lower caste employees. Whether this state of non-acceptance is conscious or the upper caste employees unknowingly do that is a matter that demands further exploration.

It is not only that the marginalized caste groups have had only been subjected to discrimination or stigmatization in its various forms. From literature available it should also be acknowledged that the condition is not always unfavourable for them (Verma et al., 2018). The same can be understood from the respondents’ shared experiences in the present study, but in a different form. The participants were considerate about experiencing empowerment in various domains of their lives. The economic empowerment was associated with an enhanced social and psychological empowerment in their familial and social life, but not at their work settings. The findings presented in the results section point towards an understanding that non-

marginalized caste individuals at large are positive about seeing the marginalized caste prosper, but at the same time become reluctant towards them when they are sharing the same social platform (in this case the platform is their work settings) where they are not socially and psychologically empowered. Probably, fear of dominance amongst the dominant caste individuals prevails here.

Highly favourable attitudes could be found towards reservation amongst the respondents as it was the only tool perceived by them that has brought changes that they are experiencing today. But, improper filling-up of the specified percentage of seats reserved, lack of awareness, lower levels of education and poverty were important elements, according to the respondents of the present study, creating hurdles in actualizing the socio-economic, psychological, and political empowerment in various domains of their lives. Education makes an individual informed about what is going on around. And when we do not know if something is going wrong, it cannot be corrected. Above all, poverty hinders the path of achieving education which can make an individual aware. Thus, the loopholes are at the side of the system of not doing justice to what has been specified (Rajivlochan, 2019). Also there are certain loopholes at the side of the people at large who are not able to identify the loopholes of the system to correct it.

Limitation and Future Implications

We do acknowledge that the study was endowed with certain limitations. The present study focused upon the experiences of the participants working in the government sector only. The researchers could also be benefitted by expanding their understanding of the experiences at the private sectors as well. The sample size for the present study was only restricted to 10. Triangulation methods could also be used to ensure the reliability of the findings from various other sources. Further research can be directed to understand the coping techniques employed by the people for dealing with the various kinds of ill experiences related to their caste. Also, women and men's experiences could be studied separately so as to find if their experiences vary or come similar in the similar contexts. However, the results of the study have important implications in terms of providing a reality check of the extent to which the policies formulated by the government for uplifting the social status of the marginalized or disempowered have been successful or unsuccessful.

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