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Transformative Agency as Defiance – Marginalized-Caste Students' Challenges to Indian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Indian higher education, while a beacon of opportunity, often becomes a site of profound struggle for Dalit students facing entrenched caste discrimination. This paper moves beyond narratives of victimhood, instead spotlighting the powerful agency of Dalit students as they actively reshape their educational journeys. Through intimate interviews with three marginalized caste students, we uncover how their everyday actions embody transformative defiance. Their stories reveal strategic efforts: challenging pervasive myths about academic merit and reservations, illuminating the complex layers of intersectional discrimination, broadening linguistic practices within university spaces, and directly confronting systemic inequities in admissions and social life. These narratives demonstrate how Dalit students assert their dignity and drive change through both individual and collective resistance. This study ultimately champions Dalit voices and knowledge, calling for educational systems that truly affirm their experiences and foster equitable learning environments.

The grand architecture of Indian higher education, often presented as a pathway to progress, frequently conceals a different reality for students from marginalized caste communities. Within these very institutions, shaped by centuries of deeply ingrained caste hierarchies, a powerful narrative of defiance and transformation quietly unfolds. This paper aims to bring that narrative into sharp focus, portraying Dalit students not as mere recipients of discrimination, but as strategic actors engaged in a relentless struggle for dignity and systemic change. It is a story of profound agency, unwavering resilience, and the remarkable ways in which these students actively reshape their educational realities, challenging the pervasive deficit narratives that have long obscured their inherent strength.

There is a significant gap in research on the agency of marginalized-caste students in Indian higher education. Much of the existing scholarship on Dalit and other marginalized-caste students—often produced by researchers from privileged-caste backgrounds—adopts a deficit perspective, portraying these students as lacking skills or needing remediation. In contrast, our study centers the voices and experiences of marginalized-caste students themselves and adopts an asset-based lens that highlights their strengths and resourcefulness. We draw on the concept of transformative agency to illuminate how Dalit (formerly "untouchable") students disrupt deficit narratives about their communities and assert themselves as active agents of change. Our findings show that Dalit students organize for change across space and time: they consciously take action to critique everyday oppression and push against the limits imposed by their institutions. Even beyond overt political acts, the very daily survival and persistence of Dalit students on campus serve as acts of defiance in an educational system not built for their success or even survival. In this article, we foreground caste-based inequality and discrimination as fundamental to understanding the nuanced forms of agency that emerge when students confront an ancient and oppressive social order like the caste system. When students who have been marginalized by caste throughout their lives enter India's colleges and universities, they face

enormous challenges. For example, one Dalit student in a medical college in Maharashtra endured extreme ragging (hazing) in his hostel—he was forced to sleep on the floor, ordered to wash other students' utensils, and even received death threats—while hostel wardens did nothing to intervene (The Quint, 2022). In January 2022, this student finally invoked the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act to file a police complaint against his perpetrators, asserting his legal rights in the face of casteist abuse. In many other tragic instances, Dalit students have taken the extreme step of committing suicide due to sustained mistreatment by peers and faculty—citing reasons such as harassment over late payment of fees, unjust suspension of scholarships, or expulsion from hostels (The Quint, 2022; The Wire, 2017). Dalit scholars and student activists have poignantly described the taking of one's life under such circumstances as the "ultimate form of protest" (Sukumar, 2013, p. 217), underscoring the desperation and depth of injustice that these students encounter. These instances illustrate not only the institutionalized injustices meted out against marginalized-caste students, but also the students' ability to recognize discriminatory policies and practices and to stand up to oppression using their voices, bodies, and legal rights. Contemporary debates in India further highlight how contested caste equity remains: for example, calls for a comprehensive caste census and proposals to exclude the "creamy layer"—the more affluent members—of marginalized communities from reserved benefits have met with resistance from privileged-caste groups (A. Deshpande, 2013; Pai et al., 2023). Such debates underscore that even policies meant to promote inclusion face denial and pushback, reinforcing the need to center the agency of marginalized communities in challenging casteist structures. Despite facing systemic barriers in education, Dalit students and their allies have developed powerful visions and strategies to create new learning possibilities for themselves and their communities. For instance, Dalit scholars and activists have built alternative learning spaces grounded in anti-caste and feminist pedagogies (e.g., community education initiatives and publications; Rege, 2006). There is also a growing prevalence of caste-critical conversations on Indian social media, which is reshaping public understandings of caste and directly challenging dominant narratives (Kureel, 2021). These collective efforts demonstrate that Dalit students are not passive victims of the system; rather, they are knowledge producers and agents of social change in their own right (Menon, 2022). Nevertheless, dominant narratives in education and policy continue to portray marginalized-caste students as deficient or in need of assimilation, obscuring the creativity, resilience, and critical consciousness that these students bring (Chaudhuri, 2018; Sahu, 2023). To truly improve the educational and life opportunities of marginalized-caste students, it is essential to move beyond deficit framings and toward a more comprehensive understanding of their lived experiences, strengths, and aspirations. Our work takes a step in this direction by centering the perspectives of Dalit students and examining how they enact agency in oppressive educational contexts. In this article, we present findings from an interview-based study of three Dalit undergraduate and graduate students navigating higher education. We approached the study from an asset-based perspective, focusing on the cultural knowledge, skills, and community insights that marginalized learners draw upon (this notion is akin to concepts like "funds of knowledge" and "culturally relevant pedagogy" developed in other contexts; see Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll et al., 1992). By extending an asset-based approach to caste marginalization, we aim to uplift and value Dalit students' own interpretations of being in academic spaces that are dominated by privileged-caste norms. Specifically, we ask: How does Dalit students' agency manifest in their everyday actions, and toward what ends?

In pursuing this question, we seek to make marginalized-caste students' epistemologies (ways of knowing and sense-making) visible, thereby disrupting the hegemonic Brahminical perspectives in education research that traditionally position privileged caste views as the norm. Brahminical ideology—with its notions of purity vs. pollution, hierarchy, and social exclusion—has long shaped Indian education, often rendering Dalit experiences invisible or "impure." By centering Dalit students' voices and knowledge, we aim to challenge this epistemic injustice. In writing this article, then, we draw critical attention to caste-based inequality and oppression as a context for learning. Examining caste oppression is not ancillary to understanding student agency, but rather

fundamental to grasping the nuances of transformative agency that emerge when students strive for dignity and equity in a system structured against them. Our study thus recenters the gaze: rather than using Dalit students merely as examples to validate external theories, we use theory as a tool to illuminate the realities and resistance that Dalit students themselves articulate.

Persistent dominant perspectives often employed in education research, commonly grounded in privileged caste notions of purity, impurity, hierarchy, and domination, have historically dismissed or invisibilized the experiential knowledge of Dalit communities (for related analyses of brahmanical perspectives, see Najar, 2023 on brahmanical patriarchy and Ingole, 2020 on de-brahmanizing knowledge production in the disciplines; Guru & Sarukkai, 2018). This paper's unique contribution lies in making Dalit students' epistemologies visible and disrupting hegemonic Brahminical perspectives in education research. By centering the voices of marginalized caste students, we aim for a fundamental shift where they are recognized as vital sources of knowledge and agents of their own liberation (Rawat & Satyanarayana, 2016).

Caste system and higher education in India

Understanding the experiences of Dalit students in Indian higher education requires attention to the enduring and often invisible operations of caste. While we do not speak from within Dalit communities, we draw on Dalit critical theory to examine how caste operates both structurally and interpersonally. This section outlines the historical and contemporary manifestations of caste in Indian higher education, with a focus on how seemingly modern institutions often reproduce exclusionary norms under the guise of merit and neutrality.

A brief outline of caste system and caste categories

Caste is not merely a social division; it is a system of structural and hierarchical oppression, meticulously constructed over millennia to perpetuate social inequality (Dumont, 1980). As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution and a towering figure in the anti-caste movement, profoundly argued, caste is not simply a division of labor, but a division of laborers, inherently anti-meritocratic and dehumanizing. He maintained that the "real method of breaking up the Caste System was to destroy the religious notions upon which caste is founded". This clarifies that caste is not solely a social practice but also a theological and ideological construct deeply embedded in religious texts and traditions, advocating for a de-brahminization of knowledge production in education research (Ingole, 2020).

Traditionally, Indian society has been understood through the *varna* framework, categorizing society into four main groups: Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (traders and agriculturalists), and Shudras (laborers and service providers). Within these *varnas*, hundreds of *jatis* (sub-castes) exist, each with regional differences. Crucially, the system also specifies *avarṇas*, or "caste-less persons," who stand outside the *varna* order and have historically faced extreme forms of caste-based restrictions and untouchability. These are the groups often referred to as "Dalits."

In the post-colonial administrative context, caste categories have been reorganized based on the extent of social exclusion, economic deprivation, and educational "backwardness." The Scheduled Castes (SC) category largely consists of the historically marginalized *avarṇas*. The Other Backward Classes (OBC) category is composed mainly of Shudras, while the Scheduled Tribes (ST) category encompasses Adivasis, or indigenous tribes, who face similar challenges but are not traditionally part of the caste structure. Historically, privileged caste groups, by the virtue of their birth, are educationally positioned advantageously (Desai & Dubey, 2012), as evidenced by their domination in staff, faculty, and student enrollment numbers in Indian higher education (Deshpande, 2006). The affirmative action policy was mandated by the Constitution of India

when it was drafted by Dr. Ambedkar in 1950 to guarantee safeguards from social and political discrimination (Surendranath, 2013).

The terms "Dalit" and "Dalit-Bahujan" are politically charged and deliberately chosen in contemporary discourse. "Dalit," meaning "broken people" or "oppressed," refers largely to those belonging to the Scheduled Caste category. This term was repurposed in the late 1880s by social reformer Jyotirao Phule and popularized by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to reclaim identity, assert rights, and challenge social hierarchies (Rege, 2006). The term "Dalit-Bahujan" encompasses both the Scheduled Castes and the Shudras, signifying a collective identity for marginalized groups, a concept articulated by Kancha Ilaiah in his powerful critique of Hindutva, *Why I Am Not a Hindu* (Ilaiah, 1996). It is also important to note that while the structure of caste originated from Hindu practices, caste discrimination extends beyond these origins as it intersects with other sociocultural practices and identities such as religion and gender (Ahmad, 2015; Gupta, 2016; Judge, 2002; Mosse, 1996; Thomas, 2018). Furthermore, caste discrimination has extended across the globe as the South Asian diaspora and their practices expand (Gorringe et al., 2017; Srivastava & Hasnain, 2022).

A review of literature on caste and higher education in India

Casteist discrimination, social exclusion, and abuse accumulate across students' entire educational trajectories (Naraharisetty, 2021). This can have a progressive, negative impact on Dalit students' access to economic resources, professional development opportunities (e.g., Sabharwal et al., 2020) as well as their interest and engagement in educational systems (Velaskar, 1990). The multiple spaces comprising the ecology of Indian higher education are not neutral; rather, as Sukumar (2008) observed, Dalit students must learn to "occupy" hostile spaces that serve as strongholds for caste-privileged communities.

Dehumanizing practices experienced by Dalit students on campus include physical threats, harassment of Dalit women (Narwana & Gill, 2020), and ridicule for food habits (Sukumar, 2013). The issue of "food habits" is not a mere cultural difference but is deeply intertwined with caste purity and pollution norms, where certain dietary choices (e.g., meat-eating, often associated with lower castes) are deemed impure and used as markers for discrimination and exclusion (Jaswal, 2022). The institutional culture often proves unsupportive of Dalit students' educational development, well-being, and academic thriving (Neelakandan & Patil, 2012), leading to high dropout rates and, tragically, suicides (Mishra, 2019; Mittal, 2023). The high incidence of suicides among Dalit students points to continuing discrimination, exclusion, and humiliation (Qureshi, 2023). The very notion of "successful survivors" (A. K. Singh, 2013) used to describe Dalit students who manage to complete higher education, while seemingly positive, implicitly highlights the immense struggle and adversity they face. It suggests that merely *surviving* the system is an achievement, rather than thriving being the norm, pointing to a systemic failure where the educational environment itself is inherently hostile and not built for their success or survival. Studies that have examined the experiences of marginalized-caste students in Indian higher education focus on the discriminatory practices, inequality, and disadvantages faced by Dalit students in higher education (Lum, 2019; Singh, 2017; Sukumar, 2008).

The problematic nature of "Sanskritization" (Srinivas, 1956), often suggested as a coping mechanism (Pathania & Tierney, 2018), is emphasized. While Sanskritization—the adoption of uppercaste customs for perceived upward mobility—might appear as a form of agency, it is deeply problematic because it reinforces the caste hierarchy rather than challenging it (Dwivedi, 2018). This practice places the onus on the marginalized to assimilate to privileged caste norms, rather than challenging the system for their marginalization. Therefore, it does not constitute agency in the anti-caste sense, as it fails to break away from or transform the fundamental structures of oppression.

Subtle, implicit discrimination also profoundly impacts Dalit students, even if overt acts are less frequent (Qureshi, 2023). The expectation to assimilate to dominant culture is often unstated but keenly felt through interactions with instructors and peers. In classrooms, Dalit students are expected to be silent and invisible by keeping quiet about caste issues or assimilating to privileged caste norms of being on campus such as owning certain kinds of technologies, clothing, eating or not eating certain kinds of foods, or hanging out only in certain places or attending remedial class (Lum, 2019; Maurya, 2018; Narwana & Gill, 2020; Pathania & Tierney, 2018). For example, Dalit teacher trainees have reported finding instructors discouraging and intimidating (Mahapatra, 2020). This discouragement is not merely general but is caste-inflected, stemming from implicit biases, a lack of pedagogic awareness regarding Dalit students' experiences, and the perpetuation of Brahminical pedagogical norms that devalue Dalit experiential knowledge and epistemologies (Chand, 2025). The teacher trainees also said that the instructors lacked pedagogic awareness of how to educate Dalit students in what Espinoza and Vossoughi (2014) term a "dignity-affirming" way. The students, as Mahapatra (2020) writes, "were not able to assert their right to quality education and fair treatment" (p. 11). This insidious form of caste-based bias, often tied to what Pathania and Tierney (2018) refer to as "caste culture," is exacerbated by a research environment structured around upper-caste norms. Thomas (2020) describes how institutional practices—what might be called a Brahminical research environment—privilege particular forms of cultural capital (such as clothing, food habits, accents, and social networks) that align with upper-caste identity. This creates significant barriers for Dalit students even in the absence of explicit prejudice. Such dynamics necessitate a shift in focus from merely addressing explicit acts of discrimination to dismantling the underlying "caste culture" that sustains it and actively working toward a more equitable distribution of various forms of capital (Ranganathan, 2023). Studies by Madan (2020) and Tierney et al. (2019) further complicate this interplay of caste, class, and access to social capital in higher education, highlighting how structural inequalities exacerbate tensions rather than ameliorating them. There is some indication that pedagogy is improving (e.g., Singh, 2017), but the change is not yet widespread or consistent.

Dalit students' activism

Despite the systemic barriers, Dalit student movements have gained significant momentum, especially following the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990 and subsequent protests. Autonomous Dalit student organizations such as the Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students' Association (BAPSA) at Jawaharlal Nehru University, the Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA) and Democratic Students' Federation (DSF) at the University of Hyderabad, and Ambedkar–Periyar study circles across various Indian Institutes of Technology have emerged as vocal forces in higher education (Garalytė, 2019). These groups assert Ambedkarite principles, organize protests against caste discrimination, and play significant roles in shaping campus discourse and policy (Garalytė, 2019). These organizations have been instrumental in advocating for Dalit rights and challenging caste-based discrimination in academic spaces. While students in central universities in major cities might be more readily connected to established Dalit student organizations, activism also manifests powerfully in regional colleges. Even in such contexts, student initiatives draw on broader anti-caste intellectual and activist traditions, sometimes adapting them to local realities and incorporating regional icons like Periyar and Phule (Global Affairs & King's College London, 2024; Pathania, 2020). This highlights the diverse and adaptable nature of Dalit student agency across the Indian higher education landscape.

Student activism is deeply informed by the writings and speeches of Dalit-Bahujan intellectuals, including Guru (2002), Ilaiah (1996), and Thorat (2006). Gopal Guru, for instance, critiques the social sciences in India, highlighting how they are divided into "empirically inferiorized" and "critically privileged" domains (Guru, 2002). He questions why certain individuals are privileged to engage solely in theoretical work and challenges epistemological imperialism, advocating for

the exploration of new epistemological territories pertaining to the Dalit universe, thereby promoting an egalitarian principle in social sciences (Guru, 2002). Kancha Ilaiah's work offers a passionate critique of Hindutva and asserts Dalitbahujan culture and political economy, challenging the very application of "Hindu" to Dalitbahujans and focusing on their lived experiences and productive knowledge systems (Ilaiah, 1996). Sukhadeo Thorat's arguments emphasize the exclusionary and discriminatory character of Indian society and economy, the negative labeling of "reservation wale" or "quota wale," and the necessity for a thorough understanding of contemporary forms of discrimination to design appropriate remedial policies (Thorat, 2006). The critiques, offered by people who identify as marginalized caste, have challenged the so-called common sense of casteism and its hierarchical structuring of social groups (Paik, 2014; Rege, 2006). They have also interrogated the myth of meritocracy and its implications for who deserves education and toward what ends (Subramanian, 2019).

Independent Dalit media and online portals also play a critical role in this ecosystem. Platforms like "Roundtable India for an Informed Ambedkar Age" and Savari provide vital spaces for emerging Dalit writers and thinkers to share their thoughts. These platforms actively challenge dominant narratives, expose the intricate relationships between caste and violence, and foster collective sense-making and organizing, particularly for Dalit, Adivasi, and Bahujan women (Savari, 2012). They function as crucial counter-public spheres, operating outside mainstream, often caste-biased, media and academic spaces. This demonstrates that these independent media platforms are vital "cultural tools" for learning, organizing, and resisting dominant narratives, contributing significantly to the broader anti-caste movement by providing spaces for self-representation, critical dialogue, and the articulation of liberatory pedagogies.

The tragic suicides of Dalit students, such as Rohith Vemula and Payal Tadvi, have sparked nationwide protests and highlighted the extreme violence and systemic exclusion faced by Dalit students in academic spaces, leading to calls for legislation like the "Rohith Act" (Pillai, 2025; Thorat, 2006). These events underscore the urgent need for systemic change. The emergence of the interdisciplinary field of Dalit Studies (Rawat & Satyanarayana, 2016) promises to develop new concepts and methodologies that draw scholarly attention to the ongoing and historical struggles of Dalits for their human dignity. This scholarship is not merely an addition to existing knowledge but a fundamental challenge to the very frameworks and gatekeeping of knowledge production in India. It argues for a de-Brahminization of education research, emphasizing that knowledge is not neutral but deeply shaped by caste power structures, and that centering Dalit epistemologies is essential for a more just and accurate understanding of learning and social change (Ingole, 2020; Rawat & Satyanarayana, 2016). Furthermore, there is a burgeoning international movement to designate caste as a "protected category" on university campuses and workplaces (Carrasco, 2022; Soundararajan et al., 2023), reflecting a growing global recognition of caste as a pervasive form of discrimination. This movement is informed by scholarly treatments of caste, including works like Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (Wilkerson, 2020), which links caste to broader systems of oppression globally. The ongoing debate on the need for a caste census and the exclusion of the "creamy layer" from SC/ST categories further underscores the persistent resistance and denial from upper castes regarding caste-based policies on representation, exclusion, and inclusion (Chakka & Kumar, 2024). While Article 15(5) of the Indian Constitution allows for reservations in private unaided institutions, its full implementation remains a point of contention and ongoing political advocacy, upheld by Supreme Court rulings such as *Ashok Kumar Thakur vs Union of India* (2008) and *Pramati Educational and Cultural Trust vs Union of India* (Rau's IAS, 2025).

Reframing transformative agency: Dalit epistemologies and sociocultural theory

In this section, we combine an analysis of learning in scholarship on Dalit students' experiences with sociocultural theories of learning to understand the agency of Dalit students and their efforts

toward progressive social change. Dalit scholars conceptualize learning not as an individual cognitive acquisition but as a socially situated, political activity intertwined with histories of caste oppression and resistance (Rege, 2006). Learning, in line with sociocultural perspectives, is mediated by cultural tools, discourses, and power structures that shape who can participate, whose knowledge counts, and under what conditions (Jurow & Shea, 2015; Tivaringe & Kirshner, 2021; Uttamchandani, 2021). Extending Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's emancipatory vision, Dalit scholars conceptualize meaningful learning as a transformative practice that challenges structures of domination and the production of marginality (Ambedkar, 1945). This perspective directly confronts the dominant Brahmanical epistemologies that structure formal education and lead to the dismissal and invisibilization of the experiential knowledge of Dalit communities (Guru & Sarukkai, 2018).

In the anti-caste feminist scholarship of Rege (2006), for instance, the author examines how Dalit women's testimonios—narratives of their everyday survival, humiliation, and resistance—can serve as powerful pedagogical resources. As Geetha & Chakravarti (2024, p. 79) write about Rege's approach, "Dalit life narratives … forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, struggles, and resistance." Rege's analysis thus offers a feminist epistemology grounded in testimonio as a form of ethical witnessing and collective memory, urging educators to view learning as a way to reclaim voice, agency, and dignity through storytelling (see also Cruz, 2012, on using testimonio as curriculum). Teltumbde (2018) further theorizes how learning is constrained and enabled by structural conditions, such as caste stratification, institutional exclusion, and the ideology of meritocracy, which mediate learners' access to resources, recognition, and participation. To embody the view of learning as transformative, education must be reimagined as a collective, justice-oriented process rooted in community-based practices and critical dialogue (Gutiérrez, 2020; Rege, 1998).

Dalit scholars such as Guru (2002) have emphasized how these interactions are often shaped by caste-based exclusion, framing learning as an arena of struggle and resistance. It emerges through engagement and movement across spatial and temporal dimensions. For instance, it involves engagement with other people and with artifacts and tools including newspaper articles, social media, and direct actions that facilitate the sharing of stories and development of collective repertoires of practice for resistance and survival (Curnow & Jurow, 2021; Shea & Jurow, 2020). In this sense, Dalit students' learning is not purely academic because it involves asserting lived experience as a valid form of knowledge (Rege, 2006), forging solidarities, and crafting liberatory pedagogies in defiance of Brahmanical norms embedded in formal education systems.

To better understand how Dalit students navigate and resist these systems, we turn to the approach taken in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory. This theoretical orientation underscores that individual action is dynamic, relational, and cultural and is always mediated by historically developed tools and artifacts (Vygotsky, 1978). A foundational idea in this approach is that people have agency, which, as Biesta and Tedder (2007) describe it, is best understood as "a 'quality' of the engagement of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves" (p. 136). This perspective suggests that participants can achieve this quality through acting by means of their environment rather than acting in the environment. Agency is produced through action in relation to other people and the cultural and contextual factors with which the individuals interact (Edwards, 2005).

We are drawn to what CHAT scholars call "transformative" agency because Dalit students' activism targeted the transformation of oppressive systems that upheld caste-based discrimination, a fundamental contradiction within the system from their perspective. We found Haapasaari et al.'s (2016) discussion of types of transformative agency particularly valuable. Building on Engeström's (2011) framework, Haapasaari et al. identify five types of transformative agency that emerge in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory interventions, specifically the Change Laboratory

approach: (1) resisting the interventionist or management through criticism, questioning, or opposition; (2) explicating new possibilities or potentials in the activity; (3) envisioning new patterns or models of the activity; (4) committing to concrete actions, usually through speech acts, aimed at changing the activity; and (5) taking consequential actions by actually implementing changes within, between, or after intervention sessions.

While we did not create a Change Laboratory or any other formal intervention, we wondered whether this analysis of agency might help us understand how Dalit students displayed and cultivated agency through their activism. As we examined our data through this lens, we also drew on insights from Kajamaa and Kumpulainen (2019) and Vianna and Stetsenko (2011), who argue that meaningful transformations may focus primarily on immediate, targeted changes that meet personal objectives, rather than being oriented toward leading transformational systemic change.

Research design

We use a qualitative case study design to explore the nuanced experiences of marginalized caste students in Indian higher education. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena within their real-life context, particularly crucial when exploring the lived realities of marginalized communities (Yin, 2018). Our choice of a qualitative case study aligns with our anti-caste framework by prioritizing the lived realities and voices of Dalit students as central to knowledge production. We chose in-depth semi-structured interviews as the most appropriate method to understand Dalit students' interpretations of dominant narratives and how they enacted agency in daily campus life, which is often rife with power differentials. This approach was specifically chosen to emphasize an asset-based perspective, focusing on the strengths and resilience of learners from diverse and politically and socially marginalized backgrounds (for example, see discussions of "funds of knowledge" in Moll et al., 1992, and "culturally relevant pedagogy" in Ladson-Billings, 1995).

We, the authors, acknowledge our diverse intersectional positions as women and people and immigrants of color. We also recognize our privileges as Indian and Indian American individuals who have benefited from educational and professional opportunities historically denied to Dalit people. The first author is categorized as a member of the Kshatriya community, and the second author's family, as Syrian Christians, is described as a "privileged minority" (Thomas, 2018). This explicit acknowledgment of potential power imbalances and situated knowledge is a crucial methodological and ethical imperative for anti-caste research. It recognizes that our backgrounds inevitably influence the research process, and proactive measures were taken to mitigate potential biases and build trust with the marginalized caste participants. This approach demonstrates a commitment to "stronger objectivity" (Harding, 2015) by striving for accountability to the researched community, thereby strengthening the paper's anti-caste gaze. We reiterate our commitment to using our privilege to understand, document, and improve Dalit students' experiences in higher education and beyond (see also Sengupta et al., 2022), aiming to draw the attention of scholars of learning to Dalit students' experiences of educational dignity, resistance, and learning.

A description of the study

This section details the practical execution of our research, from participant recruitment to data analysis and the limitations encountered.

Sensitivities of conducting interviews with marginalized caste students during covid

The interviews were approached from a feminist perspective, a deliberate choice to counterbalance inherent hierarchical power relations (DeVault & Gross, 2012). Instead of framing

participants as mere "subjects" of study, our stance positioned them as agentic individuals, fully aware and in charge of their own voices (Trouillot, 1995) and narratives. This commitment to "co-construction" with participants meant creating a flexible space during semi-structured interviews that allowed for the sharing of stories and unexpected insights, particularly those experiences often silenced or overlooked. This entailed the first author remaining an active listener, reflecting on her own relationship to the contexts and stories shared, and asking questions designed to explore participants' meanings fully (Fine, 1994). This approach enabled participants to express their views in their own words and chosen language (English or Hindi), thereby actively shaping the narrative and ensuring their perspectives were authentically represented, rather than merely extracted. The first author made deliberate efforts to build rapport and establish a genuine partnership with participants. This included introducing herself and her work experience with teachers and caste and religiously minoritized students in India, and expressing her deep commitment to helping create equitable learning environments. She explained her intention to form partnerships with students from marginalized caste backgrounds to collectively work toward changing the learning ecologies in the Indian higher education space. The second author's role on the paper largely included supporting the design of the study, data analysis, and writing.

Interview participants

Participant recruitment involved the first author reaching out to potential interviewees through WhatsApp messaging, a process facilitated by a colleague who was part of a student political group. The inclusion criteria for participants were clear: they had to be (a) marginalized caste students in an Indian university, (b) pursuing a higher education program at any level (undergraduate, MA, MPhil, PhD), and (c) aged 18–40 years. While six students initially agreed to participate, practical limitations due to technical difficulties and internet bandwidth issues during the pandemic unfortunately impacted three interviews, resulting in a total of three interviews for analysis. This explains the small sample size, a limitation we acknowledge. This article focuses on interviews with three students: two female identifying students (Kriti and Shreya) and one male identifying student (Jai). All names are pseudonyms. Kriti was pursuing her postgraduate studies in a central university in North India. Shreya was pursuing her doctoral studies at a reputed state university. Jai was pursuing his undergraduate studies in a regional college affiliated with a state university in North India. Details on the participants' caste categorizations and disciplinary foci are presented in Table 1.

The interviews (∼80 minutes) were conducted from March-April 2021. While Kriti and Shreya, pursuing postgraduate studies in central universities in major cities, might be more readily connected to established Dalit student organizations, Jai's experiences in a regional college highlight how anti-caste struggles manifest even in less overtly politicized spaces. Even in such contexts, student initiatives draw on broader anti-caste intellectual and activist traditions, sometimes adapting them to local realities and incorporating regional icons like Periyar and Phule (Pathania, 2020). This nuance is key to understanding the diverse manifestations of agency across the Indian higher education landscape.

Table 1. Study participants.

Name	Caste	Higher education degree pursued	Region
Kriti	Scheduled Caste category (Dalit)	MA Sociology	Tamil Nadu (South India) & New Delhi (North India)
Jai	Scheduled Caste category (Dalit)	BA (Major: English, Economics, Political Science)	Uttar Pradesh (North India)
Shreya	Scheduled Caste category (Dalit)	PhD Women's Studies	New Delhi (North India)

Data analysis

To address our central research question—"How does Dalit students' agency manifest in their everyday actions and toward what ends?"—our data analysis began by transcribing the interviews and then coding the materials descriptively and inductively (Saldaña, 2021). This inductive coding involved identifying how participants articulated dominant narratives, examined their engagement with these narratives, and what practices they undertook to resolve issues. This always considered forms of power to act, including critique, resistance, and transformation, in relation to the collective activities and contexts of which they were a part. We also considered forms of potential acquiescence and withdrawal on the part of students. After identifying that the students were taking active initiative in their ecologies toward transformative ends, the interview transcripts were coded deductively. Our deductive coding was guided by the five forms of transformative agency outlined in Haapasaari et al. (2016). Specifically, we coded for instances in which participants: (1) criticized or resisted existing practices, (2) articulated new possibilities, (3) envisioned alternative models of engagement, (4) made commitments to action, and (5) took consequential steps toward change. Special attention was paid to everyday acts of subversion and reclamation, such as challenging casteist remarks, organizing events to honor Dalit heroes, and forming support groups. These micro-level actions were coded as critical steps toward building solidarity and fostering incremental but meaningful change, which could cumulatively contribute to broader systemic transformations.

The analytical process also included coding for contexts that emerged as common across the three students, irrespective of their region, gender, and socioeconomic status, in which their practices of transformative agency emerged. These codes were then used to cluster the analytical units into themes (refer Table 2), based on the meaning and critical incidents highlighted by the students (Bhattacharya, 2017). The data analysis process itself was conceived as an act of anti-caste praxis and accountability. This involved inviting the Dalit students in the study to review the analysis and share their critiques and perspectives, and putting the analysis in dialogue with Dalit experiences documented in popular media and "grey" literature (Kisana, 2023; Kumar, 2019). This deliberate methodological choice aimed to counter the "savarna gaze" and the historical "colonial and casteist gatekeeping" that has shaped academic representations of Dalit experiences. By involving the participants and drawing on activist scholarship, the analysis process ensures that interpretations resonate with and are accountable to the lived realities and epistemologies of Dalit communities.

Study limitations

As with any study, this research is subject to certain limitations. We were only able to interview a small number of students, a challenge exacerbated by the difficulties of conducting online interviews during the pandemic. The restrictions also meant we could not observe students in their everyday lives, limiting our ability to illuminate the nuanced ways in which daily forms of agency emerged in practice. Additionally, we were unable to include the perspectives of students

Table 2. Major codes and their frequency.

Codes	Number of transcript excerpts assigned
Dominant narrative	22
Engagement or withdrawal from the dominant narrative	48
Naming the issues faced by marginalized caste students	17
Action to resolve the issues faced by the students	21
Criticizing the existing activity and organization	12
Resisting the management	8
Explicating new possibilities	10
Envisioning new patterns or models of the activity	10
Committing to concrete actions aimed at changing the activity	9
Taking consequential actions to change the activity	18

pursuing science degrees, as connections with Dalit students in those universities could not be established. This is noteworthy because extreme forms of caste discrimination and violence have been directed at students in the sciences, particularly those pursuing medical and engineering degrees (Mishra, 2019). Including their perspectives would provide a broader understanding of Dalit experiences in Indian higher education, and this remains a vital area for future research.

Findings

Our analysis of three Dalit students' experiences revealed four interrelated realms of campus life in which their everyday actions exemplified transformative agency as defiance. These four themes are:

- Identifying and challenging dominant narratives
- Raising awareness about the multiplicities of discrimination
- Broadening linguistic practices at the university
- Countering intersectional inequities facing marginalized-caste students

Each theme represents a context where the participants recognized caste oppression or exclusion at play, and each illustrates strategies they employed to resist and reshape those conditions. Across all four areas, the students shared examples of pervasive casteist narratives and practices on their campuses and described how they responded in day-to-day life. Sometimes their agency took the form of direct confrontation; other times it involved strategic restraint or the creation of alternative spaces. In each case, the students were actively reorganizing their educational and social environments in pursuit of greater justice and dignity. Below, we present each theme through the students' stories and insights, then reflect on how these practices constitute transformative agency as a defiance of caste oppression.

Identifying and challenging dominant narratives

On his first day at college, Jai was taunted by privileged-caste classmates who resented that he, a Dalit student, had been admitted "just like that" through the reservation quota. They sneered at him, "You people get in with lower marks and then drop out; it's us whose lives are ruined [by reservation]." Some even boasted of their family's wealth and power—"we have so much land, we could put a gun to your head in two minutes"—creating a climate of fear. Behind these threats lay a common prejudicial narrative that all three of our participants encountered on campus: the notion that Dalit students are "undeserving" beneficiaries of affirmative action who occupy seats only because of quotas rather than merit. Faculty, peers, and even staff would imply that reserved seats were a waste, that Dalits "get in easily without hard work," positioning them as inherently less capable. This deficit narrative also carried an expectation that Dalit students should "keep their heads down"—remain silent and grateful, never protesting any discrimination they faced. Our participants became keenly aware of this narrative and the intense social pressure it created. Crucially, they exercised agency in deciding when and how to push back against such demeaning rhetoric. They treated each response as a strategic choice based on context. In some moments, openly challenging a casteist remark felt necessary to defend their rights or dignity. In other cases, responding could provoke further hostility or even danger, so they deliberately held back. For these students, choosing when to speak and when to stay quiet was itself an act of agency— an intentional tactic to navigate a hostile environment. As one participant noted, the very choice to ignore a provocation can be a form of resistance aimed at self-preservation in the face of potential violence. All three recalled instances of both engaging with derogatory remarks and not

engaging, illustrating this tactical decision-making born of lived experience. Jai's initial response to the hostile welcome at his college was to "stay quiet."

Coming from a small village and suddenly thrust into an intimidating campus atmosphere, he calculated that confronting his tormentors immediately might put him in danger. "How do I even explain to them … ?" he wondered, recognizing that wealthy upper-caste peers dominated campus politics and could retaliate. His silence in those first encounters was not acquiescence but a survival strategy—a way to avoid painting a target on his back before he understood the terrain. He keenly felt the "frightening atmosphere" surrounding Dalit students like himself. By laying low initially, Jai bought himself time to observe how power operated at the college. That very knowledge later informed him when he needed to speak up—for example, if blatant violations of policy or direct threats to his rights occurred. In other words, Jai's awareness of how violence and intimidation worked in his context guided a flexible approach: initially restraining himself, and later, when he had more footing, deciding where to draw the line and challenge the casteist narrative head-on.

Kriti, in contrast, described a situation with a former professor that she did choose to challenge—albeit carefully. The professor had casually insinuated that reservation lets unqualified students take up university spots. Kriti knew that her own exam marks exceeded the cutoff for her category, debunking the myth that she hadn't earned her place. Yet in the moment she decided not to argue her grades: "I found no point in explaining to her … I didn't say anything." Kriti's outward indifference was strategic. She sensed that trying to prove herself to someone already biased would be futile and possibly exhausting. Instead, she saved her energy for actions on her own terms. Later, in more informal settings, she sometimes addressed such attitudes by talking one-on-one with peers who made ignorant comments. "I personally [talked] to a few people who made such comments to me and corrected them," she explained. Even this quieter form of confrontation required vigilance and reflection. Kriti emphasized that she had to carefully gauge each situation—pausing to discern whether a comment was truly discriminatory or perhaps just a naive misconception—because reacting to every slight could backfire. Over time, constant exposure to casual casteism made her hyper-vigilant in social interactions on campus. She learned to protect herself psychologically: sometimes by "keeping quiet" to avoid escalation, and other times by taking on the role of educator, patiently "correcting" misconceptions in private conversations. This extra emotional labor was taxing, but Kriti felt a responsibility to push back against ignorance when it was safe to do so. In her eyes, choosing when to engage was about preserving her own well-being while also seizing whatever openings she had to dispel false stereotypes.

As Jai's and Kriti's experiences show, Dalit students often depart from the expected script of either silent submission or reflexive anger. They exercise careful judgment about how to respond in each context. Not responding to a casteist slur is not a sign of agreement or lack of agency; it can be a pragmatic choice aimed at defusing an immediate threat and preserving one's integrity. Conversely, speaking out—whether through quiet dialogue or public action—is a deliberate effort to transform the local climate by asserting one's rights or educating others. Both restraint and confrontation are part of their repertoire of transformative agency. In Jai's case, his intimate knowledge of the violent undercurrent at his college informed an astute strategy of resistance: he refused to give his harassers the reaction they sought until he could do so from a position of greater security. In Kriti's case, her cumulative experiences of bias honed her ability to judge when a conversation could make a difference. By "personally talking and correcting" peers in one-on-one settings, she broke the dominant expectation that Dalit students would just silently endure derogation. Stepping out of the imposed silence—even softly, in private—was her way of asserting dignity and demanding respect. Each of these acts required courage and shrewdness. The students constantly weighed personal safety and emotional toll against the potential impact of speaking up. In practicing this situational agency, they maintained their self-worth and continued their education in an environment rife with hostility. Transformative agency in this context

sometimes looked like restraint (silence used as a shield) and other times like open defiance; in both forms, the students consciously navigated power dynamics to carve out a livable space for themselves. Their seemingly small decisions—whether to protest an insult or let it pass—were part of a larger strategy to survive and, in subtle ways, change an oppressive campus climate. Notably, their accounts echo Dalit scholars' critiques of the so-called "meritocracy" myth that underlies such casteist narratives. By refusing to internalize the label of "undeserving" and by choosing their battles wisely, the students actively debunked the idea that they did not belong, challenging a narrative that has been used to marginalize Dalits in education (Subramanian, 2019).

Raising awareness about the multiplicities of discrimination

Another key aspect of our participants' agency was their work to broaden understanding of caste-based oppression—both within themselves and in their campus communities. All three students made efforts to shift the dominant discourse by engaging others in dialogue, sharing personal stories, and highlighting how casteism actually operates in everyday life. They recognized that one powerful way to combat caste prejudice was to produce counter-narratives, to make visible the harms and inequities that were often normalized or denied, and to represent Dalit experiences in all their complexity rather than as one-dimensional stereotypes. In practice, this meant the students took it upon themselves to initiate hard conversations, create writings and art, form peer groups, and organize events that challenged narrow or dismissive views of caste discrimination. In doing so, they were not merely reacting to negative perceptions; they were actively rewriting the narrative landscape of their universities. Their efforts show transformative agency as a discursive and cultural intervention: by changing minds and raising collective consciousness, they aimed to chip away at the hegemonic structures that marginalized them. This aligns with a rich tradition of Dalit intellectual activism that challenges the "common sense" of caste hierarchy and insists on acknowledging the lived realities of the oppressed (Paik, 2014; Rege, 2006). As we will see, each student found different outlets for this consciousness-raising work—from intersectional discussions, to creative media, to commemorative events—but all shared the goal of expanding what their peers and professors understood about caste and justice.

At her large public university, Shreya joined an existing Dalit student collective, only to realize that even her fellow activists were, as she put it, "missing the bigger picture." The group's discussions were focusing solely on caste, without accounting for the other dimensions of disadvantage that many marginalized students also navigate. Coming from a lower-middle-class family and a less privileged schooling background herself, Shreya felt strongly that they needed to consider intersectionality: the overlapping effects of class, gender, language, and more, alongside caste. She brought concrete examples into the group's conversations. Many Dalit students, she pointed out, have to work part-time jobs or tutoring gigs alongside full-time studies just to stay afloat financially. Scholarships and fee waivers might cover tuition, but hidden costs—like the "₹5,000–₹50,000" fees for special coaching or "extramural" courses—hit poorer students hard. Shreya explained to her peers, "Extramural courses have high fees, sometimes ₹5,000–₹50,000, so even if tuition is waived, students from our backgrounds struggle with these costs." She also noted that language barriers add another layer: having come from a Hindi-medium school, Shreya knew firsthand how suddenly being thrust into an English-medium university put many Dalit and rural students at an immediate disadvantage. In group discussions, she emphasized that caste discrimination never acts alone—it is compounded by economic hardship, by the urban–rural gap in prior educational opportunities, by patriarchy (for Dalit women), and even by distinctions within marginalized castes (such as differences between Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes). "We have to note there are many subdivisions within caste too, and many kinds of issues—we need to pay attention to all of that," she urged the collective. Shreya's insistence on a more

nuanced analysis pushed her activist group to expand its vision. Transforming their educational environment, she argued, required not only confronting casteism in general, but understanding how Dalit students are multiply marginalized. In practical terms, this meant identifying different patterns of exclusion on campus (from language policies to fee structures to gendered double standards) and devising responses for each. Thanks in part to Shreya's input, the collective began deliberately looking for varied forms of inequity on campus and broadening their agenda so that "all students who are at a disadvantage" could benefit, not just those who fit a single profile.

In effect, Shreya acted as a theorist on the ground, bringing an intersectional consciousness into her peers' activism. Her standpoint reflects what Dalit feminists have long argued: that we must interrogate how caste intersects with other systems of power, rather than treating it in isolation (Paik, 2014; Rege, 2006). By educating her fellow Dalit activists in this way, Shreya was expanding their understanding of oppression and, ultimately, strengthening their capacity to fight it on multiple fronts.

Kriti likewise took on an educational and consciousness-raising role, but her approach reached a broad audience through creative media. Drawing on her personal experiences, she used writing and art to communicate about caste issues in accessible, impactful ways. Kriti wrote articles in her mother tongue for regional magazines and created digital illustrations that she shared on social media, focusing on themes of caste oppression, social justice, and rights. This approach allowed her message to travel far. "By writing, I think it's … reaching many people at a time. Even if 20 people read it, that's more than enough for me," she noted, meaning that one published piece could accomplish the work of twenty individual conversations. Importantly, she chose to write in her mother tongue (the regional language) rather than in English. This decision was both strategic and symbolic. It meant she could connect directly with classmates and community members who were more comfortable in that language, including many from similar marginalized backgrounds. It was also a way of claiming space for non-English voices in an academic culture that often valorizes English as the language of intellect. Through her poems, essays, and drawings, posted on platforms like Facebook and Instagram, Kriti spotlighted issues ranging from everyday caste discrimination on campus to broader social problems that resonated with her values (for example, body shaming or the struggles of migrant laborers).

By publicly sharing her perspective as a Dalit student, she not only educated others but also reclaimed the narrative about Dalit lives. Rather than letting prejudiced views and rumors define her story, she offered authentic representations of her community's challenges, resilience, and aspirations. This public narrative work was not without risk. In openly identifying as a Dalit activist-artist online, Kriti knew she might attract trolling or stigma. But for her, the benefit of "reaching many people at once" outweighed those risks. Posting her art and articles became an exercise of agency: she wielded the tools of communication available to her as weapons against ignorance and apathy. In the process, she proudly asserted her identity and helped build a sense of community among marginalized readers who saw their own experiences reflected in her work. Kriti's media engagements exemplify how Dalit students can become knowledge producers and influencers within and beyond their campus. She was not content to correct one peer at a time in private (though she did that too); she aimed to spark wider awareness and empathy by telling her story on her own terms. In doing so, she joins a growing chorus of Dalit writers and artists who use personal narrative and cultural expression to challenge casteist ideology in the public sphere.

Jai, for his part, focused on organizing collective events that celebrated Dalit history and heroes, effectively bringing counter-narratives into the physical and symbolic space of his college. Together with other Dalit students, he organized campus commemorations on the birth anniversaries of revolutionary Dalit figures such as Savitribai Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. For instance, on Savitribai Phule's anniversary, they hosted a speech competition and marked it as a campus "Women's Empowerment Day," educating attendees about Phule's pioneering work in girls' education and anti-caste activism. They similarly celebrated Ambedkar's birthday (Bhim

Jayanti) with debates, essay contests, and gatherings where students learned about Ambedkar's legacy. "We invite students, and even faculty and administrators, to attend," Jai explained— "though our principal would always take leave on those days to avoid the events." Simply publicly celebrating these Dalit icons was itself a defiant act in a college environment where the administration was conspicuously unsupportive. Jai noted that the authorities never endorsed or helped with these events; in fact, by literally absenting themselves, college officials signaled disapproval. Yet Jai and his peers persisted every year, even if it meant organizing everything on their own time and dime. "Even in the face of no support," he said, "we did it to create a public memory of Dalit reformers."

By holding these commemorations, the Dalit students were asserting that their history matters and deserves honor on campus. This was a direct challenge to the implicit narrative that typically glorifies upper-caste figures and glosses over Dalit contributions. Especially in the current political climate—where, as Jai hinted, many institutions shy away from highlighting anti-caste leaders— remembering and venerating Dalit heroes became an act of resistance and empowerment. These events educated other students (including those from privileged castes) about the legacy of anti-caste struggles and signaled to Dalit students that their heritage is a source of pride, not shame.

In terms of transformative impact, Jai and his friends were reclaiming cultural space at the university: by inserting Dalit narratives, symbols, and celebrations into the public life of the campus, they were countering what he called the "official forgetting" of caste oppression. They offered an alternative vision of who should be recognized and revered in an educational community. In doing so, they embodied Dr. Ambedkar's exhortation to "educate, agitate, organize" as a means to uplift the oppressed. Each event both educated the attendees and agitated the administration simply by existing, while the very act of organizing these gatherings built solidarity and assertiveness among Dalit students. Through these varied strategies—Shreya's intersectional advocacy within her collective, Kriti's writing and art that touched minds and hearts, and Jai's public events celebrating Dalit icons—the students sought to expand awareness of caste-based injustices and galvanize others to support change. They understood that a critical step toward any structural transformation was getting people to see and discuss the problems that were otherwise swept under the rug. In this sense, the students' agency took on a pedagogical character: they became teachers and consciousness-raisers in their own right. By naming and questioning the deficit narratives about Dalit students, they worked to maintain and assert their own dignity in environments that often devalued them. This is courageous work, especially given the popular discourse (echoed by many officials) that claims caste discrimination is a relic of the past.

In speaking out, writing, and commemorating their history, Jai, Kriti, and Shreya illuminated how caste inequality remains structurally ingrained in Indian higher education. They showed that unless these issues are openly examined and remembered, casteist ideology will continue to dominate the collective imagination unchallenged. Their awareness-raising efforts thus represent a form of transformative agency operating at the level of ideas and community norms—it strives to change how people think and what the campus community values, thereby planting seeds for more tangible changes to come. In essence, they were enacting what Babasaheb Ambedkar envisioned: using education and collective dialogue as tools to confront caste hierarchy and build a more just society.

Broadening linguistic practices at the university

A third arena of student-initiated change was language. All our participants identified the English-dominated linguistic culture of their universities as a major barrier for many Dalit and other marginalized students. In Indian higher education—especially at elite or urban institutions—English is the de facto language of instruction and everyday interaction. Fluency in English often correlates with privileged upbringing, since many marginalized students come from

regional-language (vernacular) schools or communities without access to expensive English coaching. Language thus operates as a gatekeeper, creating an implicit hierarchy between those comfortable in English and those who struggle with it. Rather than viewing this solely as a personal deficit to remediate, the students saw it as a structural problem: a feature of the education system that systematically disadvantages certain groups (while advantaging others). Exercising transformative agency in this realm, each student took steps to change language practices on campus—not by opposing the use of English outright, but by creating spaces and support for other languages and by reframing the narrative around English proficiency. In doing so, they aimed to make the learning environment more equitable, so that students not from elite English-speaking backgrounds could participate more fully and confidently. This involved challenging deep-seated norms about what counts as "normal" or "proper" language in academia, and asserting the legitimacy of voices that are too often silenced or stigmatized.

Kriti, at her centrally-funded university in South India, noticed in her first year that a large cohort of new students had come from Tamil-medium schooling (i.e., their pre-university education was primarily in Tamil, their mother tongue). When these students arrived on campus, they suddenly had to learn and communicate in English, and many of them found this transition daunting. Kriti, who is multilingual and had herself navigated a similar change, decided to help these newcomers adapt. With a few like-minded peers, she started a peer-tutoring initiative for first-year Tamil-medium students to improve their English. Initially, the university administration gave the group minimal support in the form of some grammar workbooks—essentially treating it like a remedial English class for "weak" students. Kriti, however, imagined a much broader approach. She realized that simply drilling grammar rules would not address the deeper issues of confidence, inclusion, and identity that these students were grappling with. So she and her team transformed the study sessions into something more empowering. They set up weekly informal meetings (a kind of study circle) where students could discuss various topics in both Tamil and English. The idea was to allow students to use their mother tongue as a bridge to learning, rather than making them feel ashamed of it. In these meetings, the group talked about whatever issues were pertinent at the time—ranging from difficulties with coursework to debates on current events.

Kriti recalled one session that coincided with a national controversy: a new Goods and Services Tax (GST) had been imposed on sanitary napkins. She facilitated a discussion about that topic, which led many students (especially women) to share personal reflections on economic hardship and gender injustice. Because they were free to express themselves in Tamil, everyone could participate fully and then gradually incorporate English terms and structures as they felt comfortable. Kriti half-jokingly described these bilingual gatherings as "illegal"—since they weren't officially sanctioned by the university—but they became immensely valuable as alternative learning spaces. "It became like a sensitization program about everything," she said, highlighting that the conversations went beyond language practice to touch on social awareness and mutual support.

In essence, Kriti had transformed what could have been a stigmatizing "remedial English" drill into a collaborative, consciousness-raising forum. This was a direct act of agency: she identified a limitation in the official approach (its narrow, decontextualized focus on grammar) and, under the radar, implemented a more empowering approach based on students' actual needs. By doing so, she quietly challenged the institutional structure that demanded marginalized students assimilate to English-only norms without adequate support. Instead, she created a micro-environment where linguistic diversity was treated as a resource for learning, not a handicap. This broadened practice not only improved the first-year students' academic skills, but also built community and confidence. The Tamil-medium students no longer felt alone or "out of place"—they had a space where their first language was respected and where transitioning to English was a shared journey. In transformative terms, Kriti was critiquing and reimagining a core aspect of her university's

culture (its language practices) to better serve marginalized students. By validating the students' mother tongue and culture within the university, she helped make the campus a bit more inclusive than it had been.

Shreya, at her northern Indian university, encountered a similar language barrier for students from Hindi-medium backgrounds. Remembering her own struggles with English when she first arrived, she suspected that many peers were quietly suffering in the same way. To address this, Shreya and a few others took a systematic route: they designed a campus-wide survey to gather data on what language challenges students were facing. "We talked to many people on campus … we ended up covering around 400-450 students," she explained—roughly a quarter of the university's student body. The results confirmed what Shreya had sensed anecdotally. First, the issue was widespread: a large number of students admitted that they struggled with English, especially those who had attended government schools where instruction was in a regional language and English teaching was minimal. Second, the survey revealed that students from marginalized castes (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) were disproportionately affected by the language barrier. "We found out … 50–70% of those facing language problems were from SC categories," Shreya noted, whereas very few upper-caste students reported similar difficulties. In other words, the data showed a clear caste-class dimension to English proficiency on campus. The survey also brought to light other consequences: some students felt so overwhelmed by the language gap that it contributed to drop-outs, while others had to pay for extra tutoring or courses, adding financial strain to those who could least afford it. Armed with these findings, Shreya and her group pursued multiple strategies. They filed a formal Right to Information (RTI) request to obtain official statistics on language-related drop-out rates and on any support the university was (or wasn't) providing–a move aimed at holding the institution publicly accountable. They also compiled a small booklet for students who were struggling. This booklet served a dual purpose: it let those students know they were not alone (by sharing testimonials and facts from the survey), and it provided practical guidance and a list of resources for improving English or finding help on campus. In distributing the booklet and talking to students, Shreya and her peers essentially formed a support network—a community of practice—so that individuals would not feel isolated or ashamed about their language difficulties. Shreya's actions here exemplify systemic thinking. She went beyond her personal experience to analyze a campus-wide pattern, gathered evidence, and then tried to tackle both the structural side of the problem (through data and institutional pressure) and the personal side (through peer support and resource-sharing). What both Kriti's and Shreya's initiatives show is that transforming an inequitable system is not a straightforward path—it involves grappling with internal contradictions and potential unintended effects. Both women came to realize that, even as they helped their peers gain English skills and confidence, there were delicate dilemmas involved. For instance, organizing extra classes or sessions meant asking already overburdened students to do even more work, which could be exhausting and implicitly reinforce the idea that they needed to "catch up" to the system (rather than questioning why the system couldn't accommodate them).

Shreya also voiced a painful paradox: some Dalit students hesitated to attend special language-support meetings for fear of being "outed" as Dalit or labeled deficient in front of others. This reflects how any effort targeted at marginalized students, even when well-intentioned, can inadvertently stigmatize the very group it aims to help. Both Kriti and Shreya navigated these tensions with sensitivity. They made participation voluntary and kept many activities informal or low-key to avoid creating an official label of "remedial" on anyone. They focused on community-building and confidentiality—for example, reassuring students that seeking help was a sign of strength, not something to hide in shame. Through these efforts, they tried to ensure that their interventions uplifted students without isolating them further. The lesson they embodied is that changing higher education in a meaningful way requires balancing structural change with empathy for individual circumstances. It means acknowledging the real effects of policies (like English-only

instruction) and tending to the immediate needs of those affected, all while being careful not to reinforce stigma. In the end, both Kriti and Shreya succeeded in sparking changes in their campus's linguistic practices and attitudes. They made an invisible problem visible. They banded together those who were affected, transforming private struggles into a collective issue that could be addressed. And they took concrete steps—be it study circles, campus surveys, RTI petitions, or resource booklets—to push their universities toward recognizing and accommodating the linguistic diversity of the student body. In doing so, they broadened the definition of what "normal" educational practice looked like at their institutions. They carved out space for multilingual dialogue in learning, suggested adjustments in policy and support, and validated the experiences of students who were not fluent in English.

These efforts represent transformative agency because they did not simply help a few individuals survive; they aimed to change the underlying conditions that were causing the disadvantage in the first place (even if on a modest scale). By reframing language difference from a private embarrassment into a public concern, the students challenged a key mechanism of exclusion in Indian academia. They asserted that a truly inclusive university must value and support those who speak in other tongues, rather than forcing everyone to sink or swim in English. In essence, they were working to democratize knowledge and participation—aligning with Dalit epistemological perspectives that prize inclusivity of voices and experiential knowledge. Through their agency, they turned language from a barrier into a site of solidarity and change.

Countering intersectional inequities facing marginalized-caste students

The fourth theme encompasses actions the students took to confront structural inequities perpetuated by the entrenched privilege of dominant-caste groups on campus. Indian higher education, especially in prestigious institutions, remains overwhelmingly dominated by those from privileged castes. This dominance often manifests in everyday campus life as unfair advantages for the privileged and corresponding hurdles for marginalized-caste students (Deshpande, 2006; Teltumbde, 2018). Our participants were acutely aware of how caste privilege, intertwined with wealth and social networks, can subvert the ideal of equal opportunity. In response, they stepped into advocacy and watchdog roles to expose and challenge these inequitable structures. Two prominent issues emerged in their stories: abuses in the admission process (where reserved seats meant for Dalits were being usurped by privileged candidates through fraud or favoritism) and discriminatory campus norms linked to class status (such as stark differences in clothing that signaled socioeconomic inequality). In tackling these issues, the students demonstrated that transformative agency can also mean organizing and mobilizing for institutional accountability—effectively pushing their universities to uphold the rights of marginalized students and the rules of fairness. These are examples of individual initiative blossoming into collective action for justice, showing how personal and systemic transformations are intertwined. At Jai's college (a smaller, state-run institution), he discovered a disturbing pattern during the admissions season: some seats reserved for Scheduled Caste (SC) students had been illicitly filled by privileged caste applicants. In competitive programs, it was rumored that certain influential families managed to get their children admitted under the SC quota by using fake caste certificates or pulling strings with officials – a practice that, while illegal, is known to occur in some places. Jai became aware of this when he and friends scrutinized an admission list and noticed a candidate with a typically privileged caste surname listed in the SC category. Seeing this name, they immediately thought, how did an upper-caste student get in on an SC seat? As Jai explained, "We'd see an upper-caste surname like Sharma on the SC list… and say, how did they get in on an SC seat?" Whenever they identified a suspicious entry, Jai and his peers sprang into action. They gathered evidence (for instance, verifying the person's background or the authenticity of the certificate) and lodged complaints with the administration. "We got those admissions canceled," Jai recounted. It was not easy, it

meant directly challenging both the student who benefited and potentially powerful figures backing them, but for Jai, it was about protecting his community's rightful opportunities. "How can you give somebody admission like this? This is an SC seat," he and his peers would argue.

By bringing these cases to light and forcing the college to revoke fraudulent admissions, Dalit students like Jai effectively enforced the reservation policy from below. They made sure that measures intended to uplift marginalized groups were not quietly subverted. This kind of intervention illustrates a potent form of transformative agency: using the institution's own rules and transparency (like publicly posted merit lists) to fight caste-based injustice from within. Jai noted that many such violations would go unnoticed "unless someone vigilant" caught them; in many colleges, there is little incentive for authorities to scrutinize fake certificates unless pressure comes from students or activists. By being that vigilant force, Jai and his friends acted as guardians of fairness on campus. Their efforts had a systemic impact—each canceled fake admission not only corrected an injustice for that year but also sent a warning to those who might attempt similar fraud in the future. This example shows how even a student with no formal power can leverage information and collective voice to uphold Dalit rights. It underscores the importance of centering marginalized students' agency: those who suffer inequities are often the ones most motivated to notice and challenge them, devising solutions that outsiders might overlook.

Jai also led an initiative to counter a more everyday, but deeply felt, inequity on campus: class-based discrimination that played out through dress and appearance. He observed a "visible socio-economic divide" among students. Privileged-caste students, often from affluent families, would come to class in a wide variety of stylish or costly outfits, never repeating clothes for many days. Meanwhile, many Dalit and other low-income students, constrained by finances, owned just a few sets of basic clothes for the whole semester. This difference, though unofficial, created a social hierarchy in which poorer students felt marked and sometimes shamed. The wealthier peers could flaunt their status and even mock those who dressed modestly, reinforcing a sense of inferiority. Jai decided to tackle this issue at its symbolic root by proposing a simple but radical idea: a campus dress code (uniform) for all students. His logic was that if everyone, rich or poor, had to adhere to the same plain dress code, it would "dim the distinctions" between the haves and have-nots—at least during college hours. Marginalized students would no longer be immediately identifiable by their worn-out or repeated clothes, and they wouldn't have to feel the daily sting of that comparison. Introducing a uniform at the college level was unusual (Indian universities typically do not have uniforms, unlike many schools), and it directly challenged those students who enjoyed using fashion as an expression of their privilege.

When Jai first floated the proposal, he encountered fierce resistance and ridicule from some privileged classmates. They taunted him with casteist slurs and even threats. He remembers being called "you *Chamar*" (a derogatory slur for a Dalit community) and being warned in no uncertain terms to stop making trouble. "Who will save you? We have 100-200 bighas of land … we can get out of any case. Why are you disturbing the waters?" they jeered, asserting that their economic clout (hundreds of bighas of land) made them untouchable by law or consequences. The message was clear: in their eyes, a Dalit from a poor background like Jai had no right to dictate anything to them, and if he tried, they could crush him with impunity. Initially, Jai found himself isolated—"I had no support or unity with me," he recalls of that time. He nonetheless pressed on, writing applications and petitions to college authorities by himself to make the case for a dress code. Over time, his persistence attracted the attention and then the solidarity of other marginalized students who shared his sentiments. What began as Jai's one-man campaign grew into a small movement. Eventually, in a bold act of protest, Jai and a group of supportive students staged a half-naked demonstration on campus: they removed their shirts publicly to highlight the humiliation poorer students felt. Their statement was, in effect, "If we don't have enough clothes to wear something different every day, we might as well wear nothing. This is why we demand a dress code."

This visual protest created a stir and put the college administration on notice. The student group also didn't shy away from bureaucracy—they sent their petition up through higher channels, including to the state's Education Ministry and even the President of India, and they informed the local media. When local newspapers and TV picked up the story sympathetically, the pressure on the college mounted. After about a year of sustained campaigning, the administration finally conceded: a modest dress code policy was implemented. Notably, the State Education Ministry issued an order in support of the change, lending it official weight. Jai recounted this victory with pride, particularly because it validated the grievances that privileged students had tried to silence. Once the uniform policy took effect, it subtly but significantly altered daily life on campus. As Jai reflected, making everyone dress alike changed "how everyday life on campus was experienced." One obvious effect was that it neutralized the most visible markers of economic disparity among students—you could no longer immediately tell who was wealthy and who wasn't just by looking in a classroom. Dalit and poor students could move around campus without the "scarlet letter" of their attire betraying their background, which in turn began to shift interactions. Jai mused that this leveling of appearance might expand marginalized students' confidence in engaging with peers and even faculty, making them feel a bit more at ease and less self-conscious socially. Of course, a uniform by itself did not erase deeper caste and class inequalities, but it was an equalizer in the social space of the college, and importantly, it was achieved through student-led action.

The fact that this change came from a Dalit student's initiative, rather than being handed down by administrators, is telling. It underscores how those who bear the brunt of inequity are often the ones to devise effective remedies. By centering Jai's and his peers' agency, the college ended up adopting a policy that no one in power had considered before, yet one that addressed a genuine student need. Jai acknowledged that the dress code campaign was perhaps a more "spectacular" example of transformative agency, involving open protest, media attention, and a concrete policy outcome, compared to some of the quieter acts of resistance like choosing when to speak up. Yet he was quick to note that at its core, this campaign shared the same driving purpose as all the other acts of defiance: asserting the dignity of marginalized students. Whether it was pushing back against a classroom slur, writing an article, or changing a dress policy, each act aimed to affirm that Dalit students deserve equal respect and an equal chance to thrive. Dignity was the through-line. The uniform struggle was essentially about dignity in one's appearance and presence, just as the earlier themes were about dignity in discourse, representation, and inclusion.

By the end of our interviews, it was clear that each student's array of stories, from quietly sidestepping a provocation to leading a campus protest, illustrated a broad continuum of transformative agency. Some actions were small and personal, others collective and overt. Some addressed cultural narratives, others targeted institutional policies. But all were responses to the weight of caste history that Dalit students carry, and to the immediate challenges of an exclusionary system. Importantly, these stories show how individual change-making and broader social change can be deeply connected. Even actions aimed primarily at an individual's survival or success (like staying silent to avoid conflict, or studying extra hard to master English) carried the seeds of wider transformation when viewed cumulatively or shared in community. Through these interconnected acts, our participants were steadily reorganizing their local educational environments in meaningful ways. Their micro-level interventions, whether altering the tone of a conversation, creating a new student support group, or reforming a campus rule, added up to a more critical and inclusive atmosphere for Dalit students.

In the next section, we further examine what these findings mean for understanding student agency and resistance. We discuss how seemingly small acts of defiance contribute to collective change, and why recognizing such acts is important for both research and practice in education. By centering the voices and epistemologies of Dalit students, we gain insight into forms of agency

that might otherwise be overlooked—acts of courage and creativity that challenge oppression not in grand gestures alone, but in the fabric of everyday life.

Discussion

Caste does not merely haunt the Indian university; it continues to shape its structures, norms, and exclusions. For students from marginalized caste backgrounds, higher education is not a neutral terrain of meritocratic striving but a contested field where histories of humiliation, denial, and resilience collide daily. As our participants explained, the experience of "being" in these institutions is inseparable from the task of surviving them. Their reflections illustrate how learning is always already entangled with the structures of caste—material, discursive, and spatial—that circumscribe their presence and participation.

Our study foregrounds agency as *lived defiance*. Our participants did not merely navigate or adapt to their circumstances; they remade those circumstances through acts of refusal, resignification, and collective claiming of space. In Kriti's bilingual study group and Jai's uniform campaign, we saw epistemic labor that exceeded academic coping. It was about constructing a future where dignity is not conditional on assimilation. The "success" these students sought was not individual uplift within dominant frameworks, but the reconstitution of those frameworks from the ground up.

Our participants' narratives add nuance to discussions of transformative agency in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory. The interviewees in our study described historically sedimented inequities rooted in caste oppression, forms of contradiction that, we argue, move beyond system-level tensions because caste hierarchy is currently a constitutive feature of higher education in India. The Dalit students in our study acted as critical theorists of their conditions. Jai's identification of the "visible divide" created by clothing norms, and his organizing of a dress code campaign, for instance, was not merely a tactical adjustment to the system—a surface-level accommodation that does not change power structures. Rather, it was an epistemological challenge to caste-class privilege embedded in campus life that fundamentally questioned the knowledge systems and assumptions that legitimize such hierarchies. The dress code campaign aimed to change the foundations upon which institutional discrimination functions.

As Kancha Ilaiah (1996) and Gopal Guru (2002) have argued, Dalit epistemologies are shaped by struggle and material engagement with inequality; they are practices of theorizing from below, forged in the crucible of lived marginality. By using this perspective to ground our approach, we highlight how participants embodied their agency. As we showed, the study participants articulated complex, situated critiques of how exclusion operates and how they envisioned and enacted ways of transforming it. Kriti's refusal to use English alone in her writing and organizing was not, for example, just a linguistic preference; it was a political assertion that knowledge production in universities must accommodate the tongues and temporalities of those historically excluded. Her practice of creating "illegal" spaces for peer learning reflects a recognition that formal structures often silence, and informal collectives often liberate.

These acts—seemingly small, sometimes unnoticed—reveal a theory of agency grounded in dignity as praxis. Participants calibrated between visibility and risk, confrontation and protection. Their strategic silences, deferred confrontations, and subaltern pedagogies exemplify what Ambedkar (1936) envisioned as the "assertion of equality in the face of rejection." In resisting both the overt and covert mechanisms of caste-based exclusion, these students were not merely making space for themselves; they were expanding the moral and pedagogical horizons of their institutions.

It is important, then, for researchers in education to recognize that what may appear as micro-level interventions, such as organizing a study group, publicly commemorating Dalit leaders, or correcting a peer, carry deep systemic weight. They are not ancillary to the educational process

but central to it. These acts challenge the cultural architecture of the university, revealing that the boundaries of what counts as learning, as agency, and as change must be re-theorized through the epistemic lens of those who have long been denied the authority to define them.

By placing Dalit students' experiences and concepts at the center, this study offers an account of agencythis study offers an account of agency that emerges from the grounded wisdom of those navigating caste-oppressive educational systems. The university, as our participants make clear, is not merely a site of credentialing but of contestation. And in that contestation, new forms of learning, resistance, and futurity are constantly being invented.

Conclusion

This study foregrounds how Dalit students reconstitute what it means to learn, to act, and to belong in Indian higher education. Across diverse institutional spaces, the student participants in this study did not merely endure marginalization—they theorized it, named it, and acted upon it with purpose and imagination. Their agency was not reactive or exceptional but continuous and situated: woven into the everyday acts of organizing, speaking, withholding speech, creating alternative forums, and reclaiming cultural and linguistic space. In doing so, they asserted not only a right to education but a right to define the terms of their participation in it.

Our participants understood the university as a battleground of meaning, where caste, class, language, and merit are contested through discourse, policy, and everyday interaction. Their actions show that systemic transformation often begins with small, deliberate ruptures in dominant norms: a study circle held in a regional language, a dress code campaign launched to challenge classed visibility, or an article shared online that repositions caste not as shame but as resistance.

These findings trouble prevailing framings of equity that remain technocratic or symbolic. The participants' work was not about being included into existing educational norms but about reconfiguring what education itself should recognize, value, and protect. Their strategies emerged from deep engagement with histories of exclusion and the embodied realities of navigating caste-oppressive systems. Their insights thus demand recognition as epistemic interventions—contributions to how we understand agency, learning, and institutional change in deeply stratified contexts.

For policymakers and educators, this means listening differently. What Dalit students are already doing, crafting solidarities, building infrastructures of care and critique, and expanding pedagogical possibilities, must be seen not as compensatory work but as generative models. Institutions should not merely accommodate these efforts, but actively learn from them. As seen in the efforts of Kriti, Shreya, and Jai, the labor of transforming universities is already underway, often invisibly and without institutional support. Formal educational systems must develop the reflexivity to follow their lead.

At stake here is not only policy responsiveness but a reimagining of what justice in education can mean. The findings in this study do not offer a blueprint, but they do offer direction. By centering Dalit voices, we see that agency in education is always political, always relational, and always situated. The students in this study are not asking to be rescued or integrated. They are insisting that the university itself must be remade.

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