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**To cite this article:** Rahul Sambaraju & Arti Singh (20 Nov 2024): 'Lol even poor Brahmin discriminates poor Dalit': intersections of class mobility and caste immobility in negotiating support for caste-based reservations in India, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2024.2424496

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2024.2424496>



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Published online: 20 Nov 2024.



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# 'Lol even poor Brahmin discriminates poor Dalit': intersections of class mobility and caste immobility in negotiating support for caste-based reservations in India

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## ABSTRACT

We examine how economic inequality is considered at the intersection of one form of structural inequity: caste in India. While caste and class intersections are topics of extensive study in social sciences, we focus on how people make sense of these intersections in rejecting or defending reservation policies. We undertake a discursive analysis of discussions on the social media platform Quora, with a particular focus on how class-predicates are ascribed to caste groups in downgrading or upgrading privilege normatively associated with caste groups. Posters ascribed features suggestive of class to caste groups to indicate relative economic privilege in questioning the use of reservations. Constructions of economic progress for oppressed caste groups meant that principles of meritocracy and egalitarianism could be used to treat caste-based reservations as unfair. These findings are discussed in relation to current qualitative psychological research on economic inequality and the cultural salience of intersecting inequities.

## KEYWORDS

Caste; class; discursive psychology; economic inequality; India; intersectionality; membership categorization analysis; reservations

This paper engages with critiques of how psychological theories and knowledge have contributed to maintaining and justifying wealth and caste inequities through edifying 'merit'. We employ discursive approaches that examine practices by which such inequalities are maintained and justified. Our focus is on how negotiating the nature of inequ(al)ities in contemporary Indian society, at the intersections of caste and class or not, is used to criticize or defend policies that aim to redress inequities. We offer novel insights into how merit is understood not only in terms of abilities to achieve economic gains but also to reject policies that might address wealth inequality.

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## Caste and wealth in India

The rising wealth inequality in India clearly shows a division along caste lines: those in ‘forward’ caste groups are becoming richer while those in oppressed caste groups are becoming poorer (Banerjee, Gethin, and Piketty 2019). It has been a subject of much debate whether, how, and in what ways caste and class intertwine in the Indian context (Kosambi 1944; Munshi 2019; Sharma 1984).

### *Caste as a system of structural and hierarchical oppression*

In the Indian context, the term ‘caste’ has a Portuguese origin (Devy 2023). The relatively indigenous term is *jāti*, which refers to, largely, endogamous groups bound by occupation but loosely mapped to a more hierarchically structured social stratification of four *varṇas*. The *varṇas* in Hinduism refer to four sets of caste groups delineated by their abilities, psychological dispositions, and fate in life: Brahmin (priestly and knowledgeable), Kshatriya (warrior), Vaishya (commoner and traders) and Shudra (servants) (Ambedkar 1936, 2002 [1917]). The system also specifies *avarnas*, or caste-less persons, who are outside of the *varṇa* system are treated as sub-human and meant only to serve those within the caste system. In various times and contexts, members in these latter groups have been called ‘untouchables’, ‘Harijans’, and ‘Adi Hindus’. Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian constitution, used the term ‘Dalits’ to refer to these groups (Ambedkar 1936). Dalit, meaning ‘broken’ or ‘oppressed’, is used to signify a socio-political identity, indicating that these groups are targets of oppression.

Membership in caste groups is strictly monitored to maintain boundaries and limit mobility – inter-caste marriages are targets of severe forms of punishment (Pandian 2023; Sathi 2023). Practiced over centuries, this has meant consolidation of land, wealth, knowledge, access to education, occupations, culture, culinary practices, and fashion along caste lines (Yengde 2019). In other words, certain types of activities and ‘being’ are reserved for members of specific caste groups (Guru and Sarukkai 2019).

An institutional means of addressing caste inequities has been to provide reservations, a form of affirmative action that offers quotas, to those from oppressed caste groups in education and employment, since before the formation of the Indian nation-state (Das 2000). Caste group labels used by the British Indian Government continue to date: the depressed classes included Scheduled Castes (SCs), those who were classed as being outside the *varṇa* system and called ‘untouchables’, Scheduled Tribes (STs) were those who were considered indigenous to the Indian territory, and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) which are other oppressed caste groups within the *varṇa* system. These reservation categories have continued not only in legal discourse but

in everyday parlance as proxies for caste groupings.

Several reports and studies point to the continued marginalization and exclusion of Dalits (IndianExpress 2019; Shroff 2022; Tiwari et al. 2022; Zacharias and Vakulabharanam 2011). Bharti (2019) shows that the oppressed caste groups not only have lower overall wealth and per capita income than those in 'forward' caste groups, but the share of the former in higher wealth deciles is significantly lower than in lower wealth deciles. Bhatnagar (2023) offers a longitudinal analysis of income mobility across caste groups using data from 1993 to 2012, showing that 'forward' caste households show higher income growth than oppressed caste groups. Intersectional analyses show that Dalit women do poorly across human development indicators (Deshpande 2019; Sabharwal and Sonalkar 2015). Members of oppressed caste groups are not only underrepresented in education, public sector jobs, academic posts, and politics but face various forms of violence (Hafeez 2023; Khan 2022; OHCHR 2021; Raveendran 2024). These disparities suggest that reservations, although have been in play for some time, have not materialized into real benefits for oppressed caste groups.

In November 2022, the Indian Supreme Court upheld as constitutional the 103rd Amendment Act, 2019, introduced by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party government. The amendment was challenged for introducing an alternative and parallel form of reservation to that based on casteist discrimination. This Amendment based on Articles 15(6) and 16(6) of the Indian constitution allows for a 10% quota in higher education and public appointments, respectively, based on economic criteria alone. The Economically Weaker Section (EWS) reservation is meant for those who are not eligible for reservations based on their membership in otherwise oppressed caste groups like SC, ST, and OBCs (Scobserver n.d.). For activists and scholars, because of EWS a novel class category is constituted as oppressed in distinction to the prevalent oppressed caste groups (Choudhary and Sodhi 2020; Khan 2022; Wankhede 2023). The separation of oppressed caste groups from those who are 'poor' or financially weak is widely seen as offering reservations to the latter based on their membership in the so-called 'upper castes'.

Caste-based reservations are subject to much criticism and debate on grounds of violating broadly egalitarian principles, being unfair to those without reservations, and encouraging unmeritorious ways of being (Thorat 2005; Thorat, Tagade, and Naik 2016; Waghmore 2013). Waghmore (2019) has argued that cross-caste interactions are underpinned by civility and politeness, which mask disgust directed toward Dalits. These raise issues for justifying EWS while managing opposition to caste-based reservations, in contexts of continued caste-based inequities are explained (cf. Waghmore 2019). While there are several sociological, anthropological, and political science explanations (Ambedkar 2002 [1917]; Jodhka 2017; Yengde 2019), here we are more concerned with

socio-psychological practices of explaining and justifying wealth inequalities across caste lines in India.

### **Psychology of caste and casteism**

Psychological studies that examine caste and casteism have rarely employed qualitative methods (see Mukherjee et al. (2024) and Nair and Vollhardt (2020) for exceptions). Instead, studies of explaining and justifying casteism have employed constructs from quantitative social psychology, such as those of stereotype threat (Hoff and Pandey 2006), identity processes (Jaspal 2011), and, identifying caste consciousness and essentialist beliefs among 'forward' caste groups (Mahalingam 2003) to the role of social dominance orientation (Jogdand, Khan, and Mishra 2016). Thorat, Tagade, and Naik (2016) show the role of prejudice in denying reservations to Dalits. Sharma and Jogdand (2024) point to the importance of the glorification of caste identity in casteism in contrast to the salience of caste-based discrimination like humiliation (Jogdand, 2015; Sharma and Jogdand 2024).

Problematically, however, much research, perhaps owing to a Brahmanical research environment (Paliwal 2023), has proceeded along a deficiency-based approach: the focus has been to examine how Dalits experience, manage, and respond to oppression and stigma, instead of identifying other aspects of Dalit life (see Kamble (2008) and Thorat (1979) for exceptions).

Recently Jogdand (2024) has argued for the development of critical psychology of caste, raising the issue that much contemporary psychological research on caste is disparate and piecemeal with little effort at developing a coherent program of research. Toward this, approaches that abandon Euro-centric and variable-based psychological approaches are ideally suited, given the uniqueness of caste to South Asia and its diaspora (Bhatia 2007, 2018). This study, in using discursive psychology, aims to contribute to such a body of research by focusing on peoples' mundane practices by which casteism is undermined or managed in relation to wealth inequality in contemporary Indian society (cf. Waghmore 2019). Instead of either understanding continued wealth inequities as merely structural or outcomes of inner psychological attributes, the present study will examine discursive practices by which such inequities are explained (away) and justified.

### **Discursive approaches to examining wealth inequ(al)ities**

Recent scholarship in psychology, using discursive approaches, has questioned psychological explanations for wealth inequality (Carr 2020, 2023; Carr,

Goodman, and Jowett 2019; Goodman and Carr 2017; Goodman, Carr, and Abell 2022). Carr (2023) has argued that much of psychology's edifice contributes to normalizing wealth inequality. Alternatively, approaches arising from social constructionism (Burr 2015; Potter and Hepburn 2008) argue for considering psychological variables, like 'traits', as constructions that are developed in specific contexts. Discursive psychologists examine practices by which wealth inequality is attributed to individual traits, broader contextual factors, or other elements.

Discursive researchers, using rhetorical psychology, also engage with the role of ideology in how wealth (and other) inequalities are explained (Billig 1996; Carr 2023). Gibson (2009) has shown that claiming welfare in the United Kingdom is problematized by attributing a lack of effort to those who do so. Gibson (2009) argues that effortfulness was oriented to as a common-sense means of making one's way in the world. Carr, Goodman, and Jowett (2019) show that those who are super-rich in Euro-American contexts justify their wealth and oppose taxation by attributing their wealth to hard work. Goodman and Carr (2017) demonstrate that arguments like the above work off of taken-for-granted ideologies of a 'just world' where hard work pays off in desired ways. These arguments could be mobilized to justify or excuse specific forms of wealth distribution. Taxation is seen not merely as a means of wealth distribution to achieve equity but also as a means of indicating bona fide citizenship. Research has shown that references to being taxpayers allow individuals to be seen as legitimate citizens either to affirm their belonging (Goodman and Rowe 2014) or to complain about other groups' citizenship (Barnes, Auburn, and Lea 2004).

In other work, Carr (2023) show that those who are super-rich, from various parts of the world, face the dilemma that their wealth is inherited and so perhaps is not 'deserved': how come they were so wealthy when they had not worked hard for it? The analysis shows that speakers could account for their inherited wealth in a supposedly meritocratic society by redefining ownership and presenting themselves as unintentionally privileged. Billig et al. (1988) argues that ideological positions are rarely unidimensional. Instead, these take a dilemmatic form, where individuals manage their position along two or more implications of an ideological position. An instance is a position on state welfare: while individuals might support the provision of a 'safety net' for those who have fallen on hard times, they might still attribute the hardship to the actions of those individuals. Research using these approaches has then argued for examining discursive practices by which wealth inequality is justified and maintained (Carr 2023).

These arguments for meritocracy and egalitarianism are also used to justify the exclusion of minoritized and racialized others (Augoustinos, Tuffin, and Every 2005). Augoustinos, Tuffin, and Every (2005) show that affirmative action toward Aboriginal groups in Australia is rejected through references

to meritocracy and egalitarianism. This allowed speakers to manage being seen as racist for rejecting redressal policies. Again, references to merit and hard work make salient that those in marginalized groups – minoritized and racialized others – deserve their current status (Goodman and Rowe 2014). More broadly Billig (1988) has argued that a veneer of being rational and liberal is routinely used to manage being seen as prejudiced. The management of these concerns saves ‘face’ and softens critique or justification, akin to what Waghmore (2019) has identified as Hindu or caste politeness.

Scholarly work in other social sciences demonstrates that wealth inequality is routinely compounded by marginalization along dimensions like race/ethnicity, sex/gender, coloniality, or migrant status (Brown 2001; Crenshaw 2017; Ghavami and Mistry 2019; Mukhopadhyay 2015). It is then important to identify practices by which inequalities are considered purely along economic or other intersecting aspects. Some recent work within discursive psychology has examined how intersectional concerns are treated as salient in explaining problematic outcomes for individuals in specific groups. Figgou, Bozatzis, and Kadianaki (2023) examine how the killing of an LGBTQI+ activist in Greece was explained through references to their sexuality and class. Whitehead (2013) has shown how in South Africa, social class can be interchangeably used with race to, for instance, indicate that Black persons are ‘poor’ and that White persons are ‘wealthy’ in accounting changes in expenditure or having to face problems with resources. The argument here is that these common-sense associations reflect the severe legacies of Apartheid and continue to inform how people make sense of race and class. In other work, Figgou (2023) argues that intersecting identities are not only a resource for participants that orient to concerns of accounting for actions and events, and their positionality, but also are a researchers’ concern. The point here is, first, to propel discursive and critical researchers to undertake intersectional research practices either in their framework or analytic approaches (Phoenix 2022). We aim to make progress in this direction. Second, little work in this area has examined how provisions for addressing income inequality are criticized and defended. Carr, Goodman, and Jowett (2019) work on how the super-rich reject taxation, is an exception. Instead, research has examined other instances where group membership is implicated in negotiating positions on progressive policies (Author 2024). In these ways, the present study contributes to a qualitative examination of wealth inequality in its intersections with one of the most pernicious forms of oppression: caste.

## The present study

Given the above arguments, opposition to caste-based reservations would involve arguments about egalitarianism, merit, and hard work (Thomas 2020) as these have a notable rhetorical force as these mobilize common-sense understandings of how the world operates (Augoustinos, Tuffin, and Every 2005; Carr, Goodman, and Jowett 2019). At the same time, rising wealth inequality means that social class can be seen as a force of oppression in its own right and work as a justification for EWS. We then examine how claims of economic mobility are used to undermine caste-based reservations in contexts marked by politeness about caste (Waghmore 2019).

We examine these aspects in online interactions on the platform Quora about caste-based and EWS reservations in India. Quora is a question-and-answer digital platform that has over 400 million users. It has wide use among Indian communities and is frequented by those with access to education and digital media indicating use by those in 'forward' castes – online interactions then afford possibilities for taking issue with caste-based reservation, perhaps, in favor of EWS. Owing to these possibilities, interactions on Quora are likely to involve practices of questioning, justifying, and negotiating caste-based or the EWS reservations.

## Position statements

I, Dr Rahul Sambaraju, am a Brahmin male who grew up in India with caste privilege. I have not availed of EWS reservation, and come from a relatively financially secure family background. My time in Europe and the UK has however subjected me to racism and marginalization both within and outside academia. My aim in researching casteism arises from both my witnessing and participating in casteism in India and my own experiences of racism elsewhere. Further, my research has focused on racism and migration, where I am a potential target. In studying casteism, however, I am a potential perpetrator. The selection of the research topic, method, and analytical focus has been informed by this sensibility.

I, Arti Singh, belong to one of the poorest states of India, Bihar, which is infamous for caste-based atrocities, violence, and politics. Since childhood, my parents never discussed our caste identity with us. However, I often heard them talk about caste-based atrocities committed by the upper castes in India, particularly in Bihar. I remember my father's colleagues calling him 'Singh Sahab' or 'Thakur Sahab,' which are titles associated with a high caste in North India. Over time, I learned that my family belongs to the Kushwaha caste, which is categorized as OBC (Other Backward Classes). My father, a retired army personnel, never explained why he concealed his true caste identity, but I often wondered about it. As someone from an OBC background with the surname 'Singh,' which



typically represents a higher caste, I have experienced both the social privileges of being part of a dominant caste and the social disadvantages of belonging to a backward one.

## **Method**

### ***Data and participants***

The data examined here are from a broader project that aims to examine support and criticism of caste-based reservations in the aftermath of the EWS reservations introduced in 2019. We chose to collect and examine interactions among the comments to answers given to questions since our focus is on actions of challenging and defending caste-based reservations. To collect relevant interactions, we searched using the terms ‘caste’, ‘reservations’, and ‘India’, in early 2024, for those questions posed since 2019. We employed several criteria to collect manageable data: we chose only those question-answers which had at least 5 comments as opening posts to a maximum of 20 opening posts per answer, interactions where at least one of the posters re-entered the interaction, and avoided explicitly political questions. This last was done so that the interactions do not turn into partisan discussions. We restricted ourselves to data that were in English or Hindi since these are the languages that we both are familiar with. The two co-authors each separately undertook this process and limited ourselves to 50 interactions (at least 3 turns) each, resulting in an overall 100 interactions on caste-based reservations in India since 2019. Given that these are online data, we followed the ethical principles laid out by the British Psychological Society and inline with those have anonymized the participant names.

The majority of the questions were critical of caste-based reservations and set up responses regarding how and when caste-based reservations should be removed. The interactions covered various aspects, like the history and religious bases of caste, the continued impact of casteism, casteist incidents, caste-based violence, the impact of reservation on education and commerce, the legitimacy of reservations, the rationale for EWS reservations, and so on. From these, for the present study, we coded our own and each other’s data set for those instances where issues of wealth inequality were salient: wealth-related features were brought up to criticize, justify, and defend caste-based reservations.

### ***Data presentation***

The collation and presentation of data to enable a close analysis involved copy-pasting the interactions from Quora to MS Word in the format presented in the extracts below. We treated a direct first comment to an answer (to a question) as the opening post (OP) and subsequent comments

as replies to this OP or other replies. These are marked as such in the extracts below. As the data are interactions on an online digital platform, there is routine use of various linguistic and symbolic features like emojis, links to other online sources, profanity, and notable deviation from any form of standard English or Hindi.

### ***Analytic procedure***

The data were analyzed using procedures of discursive psychology as relevant to online interactions (McKinlay and McVittie 2008; McVittie, Sambaraju, and Bain 2021; Potter 1996, 2021). The analysis then examined constructions of caste, casteism, discrimination, and access to wealth. These constructions were examined for how these were used to treat caste-based reservations as justified or not. The analysis also attended to how posters treated their and others' actions as implying casteism or not and managed these.

We were specifically concerned with practices where differing financial status was ascribed to members of various caste groups to accomplish specific forms of social action. To this end, we employed certain techniques of Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) (Housley and Fitzgerald 2009; Sacks 1995; Stokoe 2012). We examined practices by which members were not only categorized into specific caste categories but also the various ways that economic status in terms of 'class' was made salient. We then focused on how predicates indicative of 'class' – wealthy, rich, poor, and others – were ascribed to various caste groups to complicate their deservingness of caste-based reservations and to criticize or defend reservations as a policy (Housley and Fitzgerald 2009). MCA scholars argue that categories in their use mobilize culturally salient inferences that are bound to these categories (Hester and Eglin 1997). Category use also mobilizes inferences about rights and entitlements, and relations with respect to other categories. Category use is given by the membership categorization device which informs the specific inferences that are made salient, among several possible inferences (Sacks 1995). Through ascribing specific predicates individuals can make salient alternative inferences than what are normatively associated with specific categories. For the present study, this means that through ascribing predicates about economic status to caste categories inferences about relative privilege or its absence can be mobilized. As these are interactional concerns where posters orient to each other's comments in particular ways we employ techniques of discursive psychology to examine the social actions that are accomplished sequentially, while attending to stake and interest, through using specific forms of categorizations.

## Analysis

The analysis shows that posters treated being targets of discrimination, financial and social position, and abilities to achieve these positions as relevant for criticizing or defending caste-based reservations. Posters made salient relative economic and educational advantages as informing the deservingness of availing caste-based reservations, through ascribing class-based predicates to caste categories. Posters were negotiating the salience of merit and a ‘just world’ in ways that had implications for the legitimacy of caste-based reservations (Augoustinos, Tuffin, and Every 2005; Goodman and Carr 2017). We show the relevance of these issues across three sections: social and economic reasons for reservations, casteism as a reason for reservation, and ‘economic privilege’ as undermining reservations.

### *Social and economic reasons for reservations*

In Extracts 1 and 2 below, posters are concerned with reasons for reservations in ways to treat these as valid or not.

#### *Extract 1: reservation and forms of inequality*

Extract 1 shows interaction in the comments section to an answer to the question: ‘Will the caste-based reservation system come to an end in India?’.

1	OP (PJ)	There should be No RESERVATION for anyone
2	Reply1 (SL)	Yes there should be no reservation. And it is about time that people stop looking down on
3	@OP	us ST. It just boils my head
4	Reply2 (RS) @	No reservation is not equal to looking down on ST. Reservation is given to promote
5	Reply1	economic well being of SC ST community. 78% reservation for 30% of population is too
6		much.w
7	Reply3 (AK) @	Caste-based Reservation is to Bring social equality not economical equality.
8	Reply4	Who told you that. Reservation is for giving jobs and hence money. It can bring money to
9	(RS) @ Reply3	people and financial equality. Which can be a part of social equality. It cannot alone bring
10		social equality.
11	Reply5 (AK) @	I am talking about caste based reservation dude, it's sole purpose is to bring social
12	Reply4	equality.

Above, posters are engaged in negotiating the salience of reservation as a response to the opening post (line 1) which rejects reservations across groups and contexts. The first response makes salient the poster’s social background – ‘ST’ – in offering an agreement while pointing to ongoing casteism: ‘stop looking down’. This then makes it salient that reservations are in some ways related to casteism. This is addressed by RS in the second response at lines 4–6.

RS rejects possible understandings that reservation is a form of casteism and offers an alternative: ‘promote economic well-being of SC ST community’ (line 5). The subsequent use of percentages allows for inferring that

a minority of the population ('30%') can access a majority share ('78%') of resources and is evaluated as problematic: 'too much'. In doing so, RS indicates that reservations address access and distribution of resources. It is this that AK addresses in its response to RS. AK offers an alternative aspect of reservations, which is to address 'social equality' in distinction to 'economic equality'.

RS, however, offers reasons why reservations are a form of redressal directed as economic inequalities: 'giving jobs and hence money' (line 8) and 'bring money to people and financial equality' (line 9). Instead of rejecting the claim that reservations can address social equality, RS treats these as directed primarily at economic equality and then social equality. It is here that AK makes salient the caste-based reason for the implementation of reservations: 'sole purpose is to bring social equality' (lines 11–12). Extract 1 then points to the intersection of economic and social inequalities in making sense of reservations for the posters here.

***Extract 2: attaining ability as reasons for rejecting reservations***

Extract 2 shows interaction in the comments section to an answer to the question: 'Do we really need reservations in India based on casts rather than merit? If yes, why?'. Here, posters are concerned with the social and alternatively economic reasons for caste-based reservations.

1	Reply1	So why they need reservations in jobs after getting opportunities in education and equals them in terms of education with general category.
2	(BC) @ OP	
3	Reply2	To ensure a safe work environment where they are not bullied and given equal platforms to perform and provide atleast hand to mouth security of themselves and their family.
4	(A) @	
5	Reply1	Give hand to mouth security on the basis of financial soundness regardless of caste. I have seen many sc/sts who have luxurious cars but still got a scholarship from the government.i am not against reservation but I am against caste based reservation.they have got reservation in education government strengths them by providing good education and give equal opportunities to them to strengthen them by getting education same as general get. Then why they need reservation in jobs. Is it not a unfair with other students because they study with them but at the time of jobs they are ahead of them because of reservation.
6	Reply3	
7	(BC) @	
8	Reply2	
9		
10		
11		
12		
13		
14		

Although BC in the opening post at lines 1–2, does not specify the target of their complaint, it is hearable as those availing reservations through the contrast with the 'general category' (cf. McVittie and McKinlay 2019). The complaint is about the necessity of reservations for oppressed caste groups in employment despite achieving some form of equality with others through 'education'.

To this, at lines 3–5, A offers an explanation treating BC's question as inquiring for a reason. Here A gives as reasons security against bullying, possibilities for achievement, and consistent livelihood, in a three-part listing (Jefferson 1990) suggesting a commonality of decent work conditions.

Notably, these include social and economic aspects indicating that reservations are a means of addressing these.

BC addresses the salience of economic hardships for claiming reservations in their response, across lines 6–14. At lines 6–7, BC treats economic matters as the sole reason for reservation and not caste. This is explained through witnessed (Sambaraju and Minescu 2019) claims of financially well-off and wealthy persons from ‘sc/st’ groups who continue to avail of reservations. Of note is ascribing wealth through features like ‘luxurious cars’, which indicates not only financial stability but extreme wealth, to oppressed caste groups. BC treats this as a contrast, which has implications for legitimacy in claiming reservations. It is this that allows BC to make claims against caste-based reservations. BC, however, offers a disclaimer (Hewitt and Stokes 1975) – ‘I’m not against reservation but I’m against caste-based reservations’ – to manage the implications of minimizing the relevance of inequities while rejecting caste alone as the reason for inequities.

BC then offers an explanation for this rejection, which is that those from oppressed castes are well supported by the ‘government’ in ‘education’. Of note is that BC treats ‘general’ category members as the standard to which the education of oppressed caste must be raised: ‘same as general get’ (lines 11–12). This manages possible implications that BC might harbor ill feelings against oppressed caste groups while treating the limits of achievement and quality as that which general category members might have access to. BC makes salient that the issue is with unfairness in giving privileged treatment to those from oppressed caste groups (Augoustinos, Tuffin, and Every 2005).

BC’s question at line 12 addresses one aspect of this unfairness in undermining reservations in employment when oppressed caste groups have access to education on par with general category members. That this might be unfair is explicitly spelled out at lines 12–14, where the latter is presented as being at a relative disadvantage in comparison with the former. Here then posters were engaged in the rightfulness of measures that aim to redress historic injustice. The negotiation of whether such measures are appropriate or sufficient involves making salient economic conditions in ways that undermine the legitimacy of reservations to oppressed caste groups.

### ***Economic privilege as undermining casteism***

In this section, posters treat caste-based reservations as tied to casteism. Notable casteism is not directly rejected (Augoustinos and Every 2007; Goodman 2014). Instead, it is downgraded through ascriptions of relative economic privilege.

**Extract 3: caste-class gradient**

In Extract 3 posters directly address the nature of discrimination that legitimizes caste-based reservations. Extract 3 comes from interactions in response to an answer to the question: ‘Is reservation hurting the upper castes?’

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1	OP	If discrimination isn't economic, how can reservation be?
2	(MB)	Reservation isn't given because of economic status, rather for economic upliftment of the
3		society. There are many instances, even in the present times where people were denied their
4		rights/facilities, even the basic ones, that they could afford just because they belonged to
5		a lower caste.
6		If economics could solve caste discrimination, then Dr. B.R. Ambedkar himself wouldn't be
7		treated as untouchable as he was working in high position under the king. Even Blacks in the
8		USA get benefits under affirmative action, despite only 400 years of history. Because
9		discrimination of a group doesn't end with finances, demolition of birth clubs is what's needed.
10		
11		
12		
13	Reply1	Reservation should be given in villages then since most discrimination against backward
14	(VD)	communities happens there.
	@ OP	
15	Reply2	Erm. Discrimination <i>is</i> economic.
16	(AVK)	Ever seen a poor brahmin oppress or discriminate against a rich gounder or mudhaliyar? You
17	@ Reply1	wont because he cant.
18	Reply3	Lol even poor bhramin discriminates poor dalit. Economic basis has nothing to do with
19	(AK)	casteismreservation exists because of Casteism and not the other way around
20	@ Reply2	
21	Reply4	Lol. And how exactly can a poor brahmin discriminate against a poor dalit? He himself doesnt
22	(AVK)	have any power to make anything happen.
	@ Reply3	

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Above, posters are engaged in negotiating the relations between the forms of discrimination and the need for relevant reservation. MB in the OP rejects claims about discrimination based on economic status, while constructing reservations as contributing to economic upliftment. In doing so, MB treats caste and economic matters as going together and so must be addressed in this way. To this end, MB first offers generic claims – ‘many instances’ – about discrimination that those in ‘lower caste’ groups face (Potter 1996). Second, MB offers the example of Dr B.R. Ambedkar who despite economic security had faced discrimination. Third, MB draws an analogy with racial oppression in ‘the USA’ to suggest that Black people avail benefits. These examples are used to claim that financial betterment alone does not address discrimination based on group membership decided by ‘birth’.

VD in response aligns with MB's arguments and offers one means of their application: ‘villages’. This is supported by claims that villages are sites of routine discrimination (Patel 2021; Wallwork and Dixon 2004). AVK, however, does not readily align with VD and rejects claims that caste alone is the reason for discrimination: ‘Discrimination *is* economic’. Of interest is AVK's means of supporting this claim. This is done through ascribing class-based predicates to caste groups: ‘poor brahmin’ and ‘rich gounder or mudhaliyar’ (Fitzgerald and Housley 2002). This ascription is made to develop examples of

instances where possible superiority of certain caste groups, like Brahmins, is relatively downgraded with respect to other caste groups, like Gounder or Mudhaliyar.<sup>1</sup> While the normative assumption is that those in the former groups would discriminate against those in the latter, a downgrading of this possibility is achieved through moderating economic status. In offering class as a means of diminishing possibilities for access to power, AVK offers the inference that class is a more salient aspect of discrimination than caste. This allows for minimizing caste-based discrimination in favor of class-based discrimination (cf. Waghmore 2019).

At lines 18–20, AK initially rejects these possibilities by characterizing AVK’s construction of class-informed inter-caste relations as ludicrous (cf. Antaki, 2003): ‘Lol’. Further, AK offers an explicit rejection of relations between economic status and casteism using the extreme case formulation – ‘nothing’ – indicating that the rejection is readily available as common knowledge (Billig 1996). Of note is how AK undermines the relevance of economic status. This is done through ascribing similar economic status – ‘poor’ – to members across caste groups: Brahmins and Dalits. While being poor might be normatively expected of Dalits, it is not category-bound to Brahmins. In ascribing this feature to Brahmins, AK sets up the possibility that such a change in economic status might mitigate caste-based discrimination. It is this possibility that is rejected: ‘even poor Brahmin [sic] discriminates poor Dalit [sic]’. AK then rejects claims that downgrading the economic privilege of Brahmins might mean that they are in a position of being targets of discrimination.

AVK mirrors AK’s formulation – ‘Lol’ (line 21) (cf. McVittie, Sambaraju, and Bain 2021) – in treating AK’s claims as unrealistic. This is done through rejecting the category-bound feature of Brahmins when treated as perpetrators, which is to have ‘power’. The rejection itself arises from ascribing the predicate ‘poor’ to downgrade their economic status. AVK then treats economic status as the sole arbiter of power and consequently the potential for discriminating against others. In Extract 4 below, posters are concerned with the legitimacy of availing reservations for those who might have economically prospered despite being from oppressed caste groups.

#### ***Extract 4: class mobility and persisting casteism***

Extract 4 shows interaction in comments to an answer to the question: ‘Isn’t India shamed that it never cleared the caste problems and rather raising it again by reservation system in jobs?’. Posters in this extract are engaging with the opening post ‘I know lot of Brahmins who are sanitation workers’. The post includes ascribes an occupation to the caste group ‘Brahmins’ which is

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<sup>1</sup>Gounder is a title used to denote caste groups in Southern India, who while traditionally land holding, are classed as Backward Caste. Mudhaliyar is also a set of caste groups in Southern India, who occupy Forward and Other Backward Classes reservation categories.

not category-bound and undermines any caste privilege. The posters below take up similar concerns where ascribing alternative class-based features to caste groups is used to criticize and defend caste-based reservations.

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1	SOTC	So should the Dalits who own BMW car need to use their reservation anymore for their children as
2	@VVV	they are settled now? ...
3	VVV	Yes there would be some Dalit who would own BMW however this has happened due to
4	@SOTC	reservation, my friend there was a time when dalit were not allowed to ride horses or palanquin that
5		would mean death by upper caste men or keeping moustache
6		However compared to this BMW guy, over a significant amount of Dalits still face Discrimination and
7		are poor.
8		Btw a counter question even if a Dalit is made a president there is no guarantee that people will see
9		him with respect for them he remain a POLLUTED person
10		
11		
12	SOTC	Yes bhaiya I understand that ... I agree that they face discrimination ... The poor Dalits getting
13	@VVV	reservation is completely fine by me ... I was asking if the reserved categories who have finally
14		taken the benefits of the reservation system and are now rich and we'll settled be rational enough
15		to enroll their children in general categories in the educational institutions with any caste
16		certificates?
17		Should they do that or use their caste identification for their children too?
18		

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SOTC's response to VVV is part of a longer interaction where the OP attempts to downgrade privilege experienced by Brahmins in instances where they are in daily-wage and less respected occupations, like being 'sanitation workers'. Subsequent to examples and counter examples, SOTC uses one example of mismatched caste and class positions to criticize availing reservations, at lines 1–2. Framed as a question about appropriateness – 'should' – SOTC ascribes features that are treated as altering the routine expectations of being a member of the category Dalit: owning a 'BMW car'. Two features are of note here. One is that access to wealth is treated as going against features associated with being Dalit, and two, is that such access to wealth is treated as transferring to others in the family, especially the next generation – 'children'. The latter is delivered using an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986) – 'anymore' – indicating that once wealth is achieved it removes the need for further support in the form of reservation. SOTC then treats an initial access to wealth as altering the social class, in this case of Dalits, in questioning the appropriateness of availing reservations. It is this disjunction between normative expectations and the current ascribed feature that are treated as making salient whether such Dalits should avail reservation.

VVV responds with undermining the salience of acquired social class of a Dalit person. First, VVV treats this as a particular case (Billig 1985) of change in class status: 'Yes, there would be some Dalit who would own BMW' (lines 3–4). This class mobility is attributed to 'reservation' and works to reject SOTC's use of this type of example in rejecting caste-based reservations. Second, VVV offers examples of severe discrimination and oppression that Dalits faced in an unspecified time in the past – 'there was a time' (line 4). The inclusion of 'death' for trivial



reasons like ‘keeping moustache’ suggests the severity of caste-based discrimination (OHCHR 2021; Tileaga 2005). VVV treats Dalits as continuing to face discrimination and economic marginalization (‘poor’ (line 8)), despite the relative privilege of a Dalit person who might own an expensive car. This adds to treating the case of a wealthy Dalit person as an exception and perhaps less as an exemplar based on which caste-based reservations can be questioned.

In further support of this, VVV offers alternative instances, presented as a ‘counter question’. Here, VVV uses a similar format to that of SOTC where Dalits are ascribed privileged positions – ‘made a president’ (line 9) – while offering contrasting outcomes in terms of not being given ‘respect’ and being seen as ‘a POLLUTED person’ (line 11). In giving this example, VVV makes salient that the normative expectations around how Dalits are seen do not change despite a change in their privilege. For readers familiar with contemporary India, this example can be read as a reference to India’s former President Ramnath Kovind, who comes from a Dalit background but was widely seen as not respected by the Government in power and denied entry into a temple in 2018 (Mohapatra 2018).

SOTC’s response acknowledges caste-based discrimination in ways to mitigate implications that they are suppressing casteism: ‘I agree that they face discrimination’ (line 12) (Antaki and Wetherell 1999). This is expanded to supporting reservations, however qualified to those who are ‘poor Dalits’ (line 13). The qualified support sets up an explication, which is given at lines 13–17. Here, SOTC makes salient that certain ways of using reservation are problematic, where those availing have achieved social mobility: ‘finally taken the benefits’ (line 14) and ‘are now rich and well [SIC] settled’ (line 15). This allows for inferring that SOTC is not prejudiced against reservations or that certain persons might access them. Instead, their concern is with a specific type of Dalits – those who have availed reservations and because of which moved across social class. SOTC undermines the use of reservation by the ‘children’ of those who have made economic progress. This is done through offering the alternative of enrolling ‘their children’ in non-reserved or ‘general categories’. SOTC then makes salient that the issue is about whether changes to economic status do not translate into mitigating the problematic effects of caste. This allows SOTC to side-step issues around the prevalence of casteism as made salient by VVV or that their criticism itself is casteist.

Further framed as a question addressing the appropriateness of this, SOTC treats the continued use of caste-based reservations by the children of those who are economically well-off as inappropriate. In doing so, SOTC treats class

mobility as addressing and mitigating caste inequities and so limiting the use of reservations.

### ***Economic privilege as undermining reservations***

In the two extracts in this section, posters are concerned with how relative economic privilege means that caste-based reservations are not required. This, however, involved acknowledging the limitations of economic progress.

#### ***Extract 5: caste immobility and possible class mobility***

Extract 5 is an interaction in comments to an answer to the question: ‘What are your views on the Supreme Court’s observations that we need to revisit the reservation system in the larger interest of society?’. SV in their opening post develops a criticism of caste-based reservation based on claims about upward class mobility of caste groups that are accorded reservations. SAM in their response rejects this criticism by undermining the relevance of class mobility for changes in caste positions.

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1	OP	As long as the sons, grandsons and their grandsons from middle and upper middle class families
2	(SV)	keep snatching the reservation seats meant for actual poor marginalized communities,the
3		disparity will continue to remain for the next 2000 years.
4		But will you marry your sister to a lower caste man? If not,then don't talk and keep the creamy
5		layer away from the reservation so that they can continue to live on government patronage.
6		It's only a matter of time they start asking in H1B visa as they are already pushing in private sector
7		too.
8		
9		
10	Reply 1	That's because you seem to be confusing the reason for the reservation system. Reservation was
11	(SAM)	originally done to alleviate the discrimination on the basis of caste. If Dalits can become Brahmins
12	@ OP	(or any other upper caste) as soon as they become rich, then we can materially phase out
13		reservation. But we almost never see this happen. Nor do we see the reverse - poor Brahmins
14		becoming poor Dalits.
15		It's almost as if, even by being poor, a poor Brahmin would get a far better treatment than a poor
16		Dalit.
17		
18	Reply	Yes,i agree. 70 years ago, the social and economic conditions of backward castes were very low
19	(SV)	and they need some government help to come up.
20	@	But currently the ones who are backwards still remain so because the seats and scholarship are
21	Reply1	bagged by the sons and grandsons of those who already availed and moved to middle or upper
22		middle class
23		Unfortunately no politician is ready to touch as they can easily spin it as an casteist move.
24		
25		

---

At lines 1–3, SV criticizes an answer, presented at lines 4–6 in italics, about the relevance of ‘creamy layer’. This is a controversial term that refers to those from oppressed castes who are ostensibly wealthy or financially well-off and continue to avail reservations (Kapoor 2022; Sarma and Toor 2020). SV treats as the problem that reservations meant for ‘actual poor marginalized communities’ (lines 2–3) are being availed by others: ‘sons, grandsons and their grandsons from middle and upper middle-class families’. The use of reservations by the latter group is treated as

problematic in two ways: first by the descriptor ‘snatching’ and second by the contrast developed between these groups, which makes salient financial capacities (Hepburn and Wiggins 2005). Both groups are constructed through descriptors of wealth and access to wealth: ‘poor’ and ‘middle and upper middle class’. Of note is that SV’s complaint is not just about those who are financially well off, but to those whose financial well-being is derived from their ancestors or is familial wealth: ‘sons, grandsons and their grandsons’ (Author 2024; Carr 2020; Carr et al. 2021). This points to the lack of hardships for those who would grow up in these families and consequently that these people do not require support or welfare from the State. SV ascribes to the continued use of reservations by this set of persons further inequities: ‘for the next 2000 years’ (line 3).

This criticism comes in response to the answer (lines 4–6) by another poster which makes salient that caste-based reservations are meant to address casteism. The answer quoted here brings up casteism through a challenge about caste preferences in making marriage alliances: ‘will you marry your sister to a lower caste man?’ (line 4). SV, however, furthers this criticism by ascribing to unspecified ‘they’ demands that reservations be applied in non-public sectors and evidenced through a hyperbole: ‘asking in H1B visa’.

SAM in response takes as issue that SV treats caste-based reservation will address financial disparities in contrast to casteism: ‘you seem to be confusing’ (line 9). In support, SAM offers a hypothetical instance designed to show that economic mobility would not alter caste group membership, at lines 11–13. This involves ascribing a change in economic status to ‘Dalits’, becoming ‘rich’, which implies a betterment in their financial position. While ‘Dalit’ categorically rules out membership in another category – ‘Brahmin’ – as this category is not informed by financial status (like ‘upper class’ or ‘wealthy’ might imply) (Stokoe 2012). However, in including this category as a possible change in status, SAM indicates that change in financial status might suggest proximity to other caste groups. In so doing, SAM treats Brahmins and ‘other upper caste’ groups as being associated with wealth, but not that wealth alone alters caste group membership.

SAM, however, denies this through references to common knowledge about social structures and mobility that change in financial status does not result in a change in caste groups: ‘we almost never see this happen’ (lines 12–13). Here, the use of the extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986) ‘never’ suggests that it is expected that a change in financial status does not change caste group membership. SAM extends this claim about the immutability of changes in caste groups because of economic changes by offering another instance: ‘poor Brahmins becoming poor Dalits’. In this case, SAM again treats Dalits as routinely associated with poorer economic conditions by suggesting that even though Brahmins might lose wealth, they do not change their caste status. Instead, SAM

indicates that Brahmins retain their caste privilege and might receive ‘better treatment’ if they lose wealth – ‘being poor’ (line 14). Overall, then, SAM rejects changes in economic status as implicating changes in caste status while orienting to an economic gradient across caste groups.

To this, SV offers an agreement token – ‘yes, I agree’ (line 16) – and proceeds to acknowledge that those from specific caste groups – ‘backward castes’ – suffered from marginalization that was both social and economic, suggesting civility in discussing matters of caste (Waghmore 2019). This is used to justify efforts from the ‘government’, such as that of reservations. However, SV does not explicitly attribute these to casteism and, instead, locates these conditions in the past – ‘70 years ago’, indicating that conditions now might be different.

SV attributes contemporary exclusion to problematic practices as indicated in their earlier post. Again, SV attributes to others from protected caste groups who are in an economically stronger position practices – ‘bagged’ (line 19) – of availing reservations when they perhaps do not need to as their families have moved onto ‘middle or upper middle class’ (line 20). Notably, SV attributes these actions to ‘sons and grandsons’ (line 19) of those who have made class mobility – ‘moved to’. In doing so, SV indicates that mobility across economic classes should mitigate availing reservations. SV then develops an equivalence between economic status and caste status in ways to criticize caste-based reservation policies. SV orients to the possibility that this criticism can be seen as ‘casteist’ in attributing to ‘politician[s]’ reluctance to address these issues (Augoustinos and Every 2007). The posters above offered different explanations for the continued marginalization of caste groups in ways to criticize or defend caste-based reservations.

***Extract 6: contrasting social and economic status of caste groups***

In Extract 6 below, posters treat progress in financial status as salient for legitimately claiming caste-based reservations. Extract 6 shows an interaction in comments in response to the answer to the question “Will the caste-based reservation system come to an end in India?”

Here, a similar effort is made to equate changes in economic situation with caste mobility by AP at lines 7–14. This comes at the back of complaints by KCC about a news media article that criticizes caste-based reservations. The complaint suggests possible bias and indicates a preference for EWS: ‘they get benefits through EWS, so they don’t oppose EWS’. This is used to explain their negative evaluation of caste-based reservation: ‘oppose only SC ST and OBC’ (line 5).

In response, AP offers an alternative form of hypocrisy that undermines KCC’s claims and rejects the opposition to EWS. This alternative hypocrisy is when those from oppressed caste groups – ‘sc and st candidates’ (line 7) – are

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1	OP	How did the Newspaper and writer cleverly don't mention EWS reservation.
2	(KCC)	Hypocrisy.
3		They get benefits through EWS so they don't oppose EWS but slectevely oppose only SC
4		ST and OBC.
5		<a href="https://www.thequint.com/amp/story/news/india/neet-pg-counselling-verdict-explained-sc-upholds-obc-ews-quota-for-2021-22">https://www.thequint.com/amp/story/news/india/neet-pg-counselling-verdict-explained-</a>
6		<a href="https://www.thequint.com/amp/story/news/india/neet-pg-counselling-verdict-explained-sc-upholds-obc-ews-quota-for-2021-22">sc-upholds-obc-ews-quota-for-2021-22.</a>
7	Reply1 (AP)	Because sc and st candidates even after earings lakhs and crore claiming the benefits of
8	@ OP	quota. An St person living is whole life in metropolitan city claiming that he is from
9		schedule tribe that is hypocrisy my friend.
10		Even in my opinion quota is restricted to some generation.A person having good job
11		whats the need for quota for their children.
12		There is lot of fragmetion in Indian society but everyone is happy in their circles but now
13		their is no discrimination in education and health barring a few exceptions
14		
15	Reply2 (KCC)	Oh my friend even you don't say nothing about EWS.
16	@Reply1	Ews people who are governments servant and taking 6 month unpaid leave just to ensure
17		that their ward will get EWS reservation. and some getting tranfered their properties in
18		the name of married daughters and other relatives just to get EWS reservation.
19		This is clear hypocrisy.
20		
21	Reply1 (AP) @	There are always people who Bends the rule but for you isn't the hypocrisy when rich
22	Reply2	people claims quota by stating that they are from lower caste

---

now in financially better positions – ‘earning lakhs and crore’ (line 7) – but might still avail reservations. AP then suggests that financial status must interrupt caste-based inequities.

AP offers another instance where someone from the Scheduled Tribe group might make claims to being from that group despite living in urban areas: ‘whole life in metropolitan city’ (line 8). AP then makes salient that as those who identify as tribal communities, their living in urban spaces goes against their normative place identity and belonging. This in itself is problematic for implying that those who were traditionally proscribed to engage in caste-linked actions or states of being should continue with those (Ambedkar 2002 [1917]; Jogdand 2024).

These above claims are likely to indicate that AP is perhaps against reservations, which is then denied subsequently (Goodman 2014; Waghmore 2019): ‘Even in my opinion quota is restricted to some generation’. This claim is presented as arising from their view and in agreement with another view about the extent of ‘quotas’. AP explains why this must be the case again making salient economic prospects: ‘having good job what’s the need for quota for their children’. Here, the reference to cross-generational effects of economic status suggests that children of those who are financially stable would not need other forms of support. It is noteworthy that cross-generational aspects of wealth transfer are noted as mitigating other possible forms of oppression that a person might have faced.

Finally, AP diminishes the salience of discrimination, while not specifying casteism (Goodman and Rowe 2014; Thorat, Tagade, and Naik 2016). Instead, AP offers generic references to divisions in the ‘Indian society’ and a generic lessening of discrimination across the board. This addresses

possible claims that caste-based reservations are needed because of ongoing casteism.

To this, at lines 15–16, KCC responds by ascribing a similar position to AP as to those who were criticized earlier for not criticizing EWS: which is that AP is not from caste groups that might have access to caste-based reservations. KCC then offers vague instances of problematic practices by those who avail EWS reservations at lines 16–19 (Potter 1996). These involve ascribing practices that only make an appearance of a weaker financial situation so that they may avail themselves of EWS reservations. The practices are those of ‘taking 6 month unpaid leave’ and ‘transferred their properties’ to those outside their family. The mention of ‘married daughters’ along with ‘other relatives’ is used to suggest that those receiving properties would not bear their family or surname and so conceal their wealth.

AP in response treats cheating to avail reservations as a routine aspect of people’s behavior: ‘always people who Bend the rule’ (line 21). However, AP takes issue with KCC’s claims that this is limited to those who might avail of EWS reservation by offering an alternative where those from ‘lower caste’ might engage in similar acts. AP develops a contrast between ‘rich people’ and ‘lower caste’ in ways to suggest that those in the former when identify as the latter are being disingenuous. AP again makes salient that access to wealth interrupts claims of caste-based oppression to undermine the legitimacy of caste-based reservation. AP then orients to the distinction in category incumbency between those who are ‘Dalit’ and ‘rich/wealthy’, in justifying ongoing caste-based reservation.

## Discussion

The analysis here has examined how individuals make sense of wealth inequality in its intersections with caste. This centered around the reservation policies – based on caste or economic backwardness – in ways to criticize or defend these on the online platform Quora. The analysis shows that posters could treat changes in wealth status as informing changes in relative privilege. This change in the status of being oppressed allowed for making claims to criticize the use of reservations, without overtly demeaning caste groups thus aligning with notions of Hindu civility and caste politeness (Waghmore 2019). Posters made salient that achieving some form of economic progress or access to wealth meant that those in oppressed caste groups were in a similar position as others to compete. Posters then mobilized understandings of the social context as meritocratic and egalitarian once some form of economic progress or reduction of disparity had been achieved (cf. Augoustinos, Tuffin, and Every 2005). It is this that gives significance to the present findings: meritocracy was oriented to as relevant once some form of social equality was achieved.

In Extract 1, OP's rejection of any form of reservation is not taken up. Similarly, across the interactions presented above posters do not directly question reservations or their utility (Waghmore 2019). Instead, they negotiated the extent of economic progress for oppressed caste groups and what this means for using reservations. Across the extracts here posters made salient casteism in various forms as reasons for reservations. Instead of direct criticisms or rejections of reservations (Thorat, Tagade, and Naik 2016), posters mobilized complex claims about relative economic progress and the privilege of oppressed caste groups (cf. Augoustinos, Tuffin, and Every 2005). These claims about graded privilege allowed for mobilizing ideas about egalitarianism and equality of opportunity to criticize the continued use of caste-based reservations.

Negotiations of reasons for and addressing wealth inequalities have a distinctive cultural flavor: individuals oriented to the cultural salience of various forms of group memberships, identity, and relations between these. Given the unmissable salience of caste, meritocratic ideas came to be salient only after assertions of some form of economic progress. In Extracts 1 and 2, posters treated social and economic equality as intertwined in negotiating the salience of caste-based reservations. In Extracts 3 and 4, posters engaged with the relations between class privilege and casteist discrimination in negotiating the salience of reservations. In Extracts 5 and 6, posters made salient that the economic privilege of oppressed caste groups means that caste-based reservations are suspect. Across these instances then casteism and the relevance of caste was understood through relative economic privilege.

What is then of note is precisely the use of economic status markers to challenge and undermine prevalent caste-based oppression and reservations. In the present instance, posters orient to the broad salience of economic inequities, specifically for future outcomes. However, various positions along an economic gradient, from being poor to super-rich, were treated as intersecting with positions on the caste gradient, from oppressed castes to 'forward' castes. Posters treated positions of caste groups on the economic gradient as possibly altering their caste status. Posters then mobilized a 'caste common sense' that among other features, included the understanding that different caste groups have differing access to wealth, as incidentally, several reports show (Shroff 2022; Tiwari et al. 2022; Zacharias and Vakulabharanam 2011). This, however, was not merely used to produce and reproduce caste inequities but also notably to challenge and downgrade the continued relevance of casteism and caste-based reservations (cf. Whitehead, 2013).

References to economic progress if only for a subset of oppressed caste group members were used to make salient that reservations are perhaps not needed anymore (Extracts 3, 4, 5, & 6). The possibility of having achieved equality was used to indicate that continued availing of reservation was unfair. Posters then mobilized meritocratic views about the world to indicate that

reservations were deserved only when caste groups were unequivocally oppressed. Hypothetical or other claims about having achieved economic progress and/or access to wealth through education and employment allowed posters to question the continued salience of caste-based reservations.

It is here that acknowledgment of continued casteism and oppression in tokenistic ways as disclaimers is noteworthy (Augoustinos and Every 2007; Goodman 2014; Thorat, Tagade, and Naik 2016). Posters' concessions about casteism mitigated possible implications that they were unaware or dismissive of these concerns. Posters treated financial progress and stability to imply that ongoing redressals and support from the State need not continue (cf. Carr, Goodman, and Jowett 2019). Posters were careful not to come across as rejecting any form of redressal or State support (cf. Augoustinos, Tuffin, and Every 2005). In these ways, posters attempted to manage intersectional identification based on economic and caste status, to challenge, undermine, support and re-instate redressal policies aimed at the upliftment of oppressed caste groups (cf. Figgou et al., 2023).

These findings are notable for developing an analysis of inequality that is intersectional (Figgou 2023; Phoenix 2022). Casteism is an oppressive system that has marginalized individuals and groups from full participation in society resulting in social and economic marginalization, among several others (Ambedkar 1936, 2002 [1917]). The analysis here shows how ascribing specific features of economic status as predicates to caste categories allows for downgrading (or at least altering) the relative privilege of certain caste groups vis-à-vis others. In doing so, posters brought about an intersectional bearing on matters of caste-based oppression and its continued relevance to achieve specific outcomes. Posters attempted to suppress the relevance of caste-based oppression and the continued relevance of caste-based reservations.

While much research in discursive psychology and related approaches has examined various forms of inequities, like xenophobia (Goodman and Rowe 2014), racism (Sambaraju and Minescu 2019), sexism (Stokoe 2003), and income inequities (Carr, Goodman, and Jowett 2019), little research has examined how inequities experienced by individuals routinely are at the intersection of various axes of categorization and exclusion, as critical scholars would say (Crenshaw, 1991; Figgou, 2023; Phoenix 2022). What the present findings show is how the potential intersection of identities – class and caste – are variously constructed and negotiated by individuals in ways that address specific concerns. Despite the prevalence and salience of caste and casteism, meritocratic and egalitarian claims about equality of opportunity were used to reject reservations. Further, this rejection was made on the back of claims to some form of relative economic privilege, indicating that perhaps in the Indian context, the world is not so 'just' (Goodman and Carr 2017). Even though caste-based reservations maybe rejected the power of caste in shaping social affairs could not be neglected (cf. Waghmore 2019).



## Conclusions and limitations

The analysis here took an explicitly intersectional focus, perhaps at the expense of other forms of analytic thrusts. A through-and-through MCA would have perhaps offered notably different knowledge. Further, the data come from Quora, which is more frequented by middle and upper-class Indian men (Mangurkar, forthcoming) reflecting the pervasive questioning and criticism of reservation policies. This latter is what makes these findings interesting: despite the questioning and criticism, these posters treated caste as shaping opportunities and access to wealth. Examination of economic inequality then would immensely benefit from considering intersections with other aspects of oppression from the perspective of those involved.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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