

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Hidden Social Exclusion in Indian Academia: Gender, Caste and Conference Participation

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Research Domain: International Perspectives and context (IPC)

Abstract:

Conferences are key sites for the development of academic careers; however multiple studies show that conferences are exclusionary on the basis of gender and other axes of social disadvantage. Most conferences research has focused on Global North contexts; this study focuses on India and as such also incorporates caste as an axis of privilege and disadvantage in relation to access to conferences. A social exclusion perspective is taken as the analytical lens. The paper is based on data from a large-scale national study of social inequalities in higher education, which included quantitative analysis of administrative records and qualitative analysis of interviews with academics. Key findings include that participation in conferences is proportionally lower for women and scheduled caste academics than for men and upper caste academics, and that access to conferences is embroiled in relational processes of social exclusion which operate in the academy, despite formal policies being in place.

Paper: Introduction

Conferences are key sites for the development of academic careers. They lead to the formation of national and international networks and the development of publications and collaborative research projects (Wang et al, 2017). Research on conferences tends to focus on global North contexts (Mair, 2014); this study focuses on India. This paper focuses on the ways in which social exclusion which is already evident in academia (Hyers et al, 2012; Stockfelt, 2018) is manifested in relation to conference participation. The paper asks, is social exclusion in academia manifested in conference participation; if so, to what extent; how does social exclusion operate in practice? The key argument of this paper is that hierarchies that are evident in the academic profession as a whole are reflected in conference participation, and that these inequalities are currently operating as a hidden facet of social exclusion in the academic profession.

Academia and access to conferences – a social exclusion perspective

In India, as in other nations, the share of women faculty members is lower as compared to men. Of the c.1.2 million faculty members in India in 2018, 42% were women (MHRD, 2018). Caste differences are also clearly manifested; the share of faculty members falls short of the stipulated reservations. By delving into the issue of conference participation, we can explore some of the hidden practices of academia which contribute to these disparities. An important policy is the API (Academic Performance Index), which is included in the appointments/promotions process (UGC, 2018), and which includes conference participation. API means that access to conferences (and lack thereof) is clearly linked with career progression. The reproduction of inequalities in Indian academia can be usefully explored from a social exclusion perspective (Sabharwal and Malish, 2016). Social exclusion is defined as a process that involves denial of fair and equal opportunities to certain social groups on the basis of their group identity, resulting in the inability of individuals from excluded groups to 'fully participate in the life of their communities' (Borooah et al, 2015:9; cf. Sen 2000). Within academia, social exclusion is embedded in the channels of social inter-relations, wherein faculty members from disadvantaged groups are excluded from academic communities.

Methodology

The empirical evidence presented in this paper is from a large-scale, mixed-method study which worked with 12 institutions in six states in India. This study included research on diversity and discrimination in academia, which produced data on conference participation. Quantitative data was extracted from administrative records to examine conference participation. We explored this data in relation to one institution as a specific case to understand faculty conference participation, asking if social exclusion in academia manifested in conference participation; if so, to what extent? Interviews were conducted with c.200 faculty members across the selected institutions. The interview guide included a question on academics' experiences of accessing conferences and professional development opportunities. These data are used to answer the question: how does social exclusion operate in practice (with regards to conference participation)? We analysed the interview data using an iterative thematic analysis process. The social exclusion perspective was used to discern group-specific challenges.

Findings: gender, caste and conference participation

The first analysis explores the quantitative data. The case institution was a selective public institution specializing in STEM education. The analysis is based on the 229 permanent faculty; participation in conferences was calculated based on total number of conferences attended (7382) during the four-year period. 86.5% of permanent faculty members were men, and 13.5% women (0% other genders). If conference participation were distributed equitably in this institution, we would expect to see that the proportion of women academics would match the proportion of conferences attended. However while 13.5% of faculty are women, only 7.1% conferences were attended by women. Men academics gained an extra 473 conferences over women over the period. Despite the reservation of 15% posts for SC (Scheduled Caste – former 'untouchable') groups, only 7.4% of faculty were from SC group. 80.8% of the faculty were from the dominant caste group. 9.6% were OBC (Other Backward Classes – disadvantaged groups) and 2% ST (Scheduled Tribes – indigenous peoples). The caste conference participation data also shows a gendered disparity. The proportion of conferences attended by ST, SC and OBC academics is slightly lower than the proportion of faculty in those groups (by 0.1% for ST, 0.2% for SC, 2.1% for OBC), with the opposite being true for dominant caste groups (by 2.6%). This

still amounts to 192 more conferences being attended by dominant caste academics. More than mirroring the faculty representation data, the conference participation data reveal that participation in conferences is even more unequal than faculty representation.

The second analysis explores the processes by which social exclusion produces the inequalities shown in the first analysis. A major issue regarding conference access in India concerns permission for academic leave to attend conferences. Women and faculty members from marginalised groups suspected that they were susceptible to institutional issues regarding leave: 'lots of problems are created by administration, such as unwillingness to give leave' (Man assistant professor, OBC). Women academics and academics from marginalised groups also noted that there was 'unavailability of financial support' for professional development programmes which were 'deemed compulsory' for promotion (woman assistant professor, non-SC/ST/OBC). A second issue was the perceived absence of official guidance on conference participation; here informal networks (jaan-pehchaan in Hindi) and social interactions over a 'cup of tea' with senior academics featured. Women participants felt that such informal social interactions would be frowned upon and their reputation would be at stake and SC faculty members reflected on 'caste-based biases of their upper-caste Head of Departments' (man assistant professor, SC).

Conclusion

Analysis of administrative records found that access to conferences was proportionally lower for women and marginalised caste groups than their representation at faculty level. Analysis of interview data showed that, while policies are in place which appear to guarantee fairness and representation, these processes are themselves open to relational exclusion where the policies are implemented differently for different social groups. This paper sets an agenda for further research into this area, both within India and across other country contexts.

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