BOOK REVIEW

Ajantha Subramanian. *The Caste of Merit: Engineering Education in India*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2019. 374 pp.

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*Papa kehte hain bada naam karega.
Beta hamara aisa kaam karega . . . Koyi
engineer ka kaam karega* (My dad says
that I'll make him proud. He says,
'My son will do such good work'. . .
Some of them will be engineers)

This song from the 1988 Bollywood classic, *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak*, resonates with many Indian parents even today who place high expectations on children. Engineering is one of the preferred destinations of the postsecondary Indian students. The best of the lot aim to enter the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), while the majority look for the engineering colleges managed by the state governments or private players. IITs (especially the older ones) are considered gate passes for a stunning life in the United States of America, if not in Europe. Naturally, competition is very high and the gate-keepers are merit and pocket. Recently another dimension was added by Ajantha Subramanian: family lineage—and the complex relationship

between caste and merit. Through a historical anthropology of techno-scientific education and IIT Madras, she emphasizes the relationship between the development of engineering education and caste formation—how the upper-caste graduates (IITians) came to be seen as “global poster children” of Indian education.

In several non-Western societies science traditionally enjoyed a higher status than most forms of technology. The intellectual creams in these societies often looked down upon technology as an inferior form of activity. Traditional Indian society was no exception—science as a part of philosophy resembled more with the erudite, the Brahmins. Technology, in spite of its place in cosmology, was confined among the manipulators of things, the artisans. Theologically also, even today, the Hindu goddess of learning, *Saraswati*, enjoys a higher status than the god of technology, *Viswakarma*. Did colonial intervention merely mark the earlier fault-line between hand and mind?

Subramanian’s story revolves round the impact of engineering education on the scale of caste belonging and affiliation *inter alia* the role of IIT Madras in transforming caste privilege into merit. Initially, the graduates were part of the development discourse of the newly independent India. The majority of engineers were from upper-caste backgrounds during the time of the Raj. The founding of the IITs reinforced the trend. Germany was instrumental in establishing the institute and exposure to a culture of hands-on engineering, which, according to the author, defied caste sensibilities of privileging mental over manual (pp. 107-114). But the commitment to state-centric development was short-lived. The period between 1970s and 1990s was very significant—the incorporation of IIT graduates into American academia and industry, and their lately acquired belief in “free market,” set the stage for the emergence of a new ethnic commodity “Brand IIT” (Silicon Valley boom). The ultimate destination of these new *Brahmins* (fortified with knowledge of technology and managerial skills) was the Global North. Significantly, Subramanian identifies, these IITians started to manipulate certain things in the name of meritocracy to secure their own market value abroad. The naturalization of upper-caste merit since then has been a contested terrain of Indian academia and politics (politics of academics?).

Reservation (reserved quotas for student admission) is a fundamental challenge to meritocracy. In this context, Subramanian asks a pertinent question, “How did the shifting terrain of reservation policy shape the contours of Tamil Brahmin and upper-caste affiliation at IIT Madras?” (p. 205) The caste-based reservation, regional political transformation and expression of merit as a consolidated form of upper-caste affiliation in Tamilnadu are well-documented by the author. The judicial position on the questions of merit and reservation was not always static, the popular politics and lower-caste movements played a significant role. IIT Madras was a key site for strengthening Tamil Brahmin and upper-caste affiliation in the context of an expanding reservation system. A presumed intellectual difference between the general

and reserved categories became legitimate; anything that disturbed it caused significant uneasiness. The students and alumni of IIT Madras were not well represented initially in the anti-reservation movements (anti-Mandal agitations of 1970s). Being the early migrants to the United States (US) and to the private sector, they did not experience the impacts of reservation of Indian public sector jobs to a significant extent. However, the 2006 reservation policy entirely changed the scenario—"it brought the reserved category up to almost half of the total student population of IIT Madras." The contention was crystal clear by then.

Indians, precisely the US-based IITians, are at present one of the most affluent and educated residents in America. In the last chapter, *Brand IIT*, Subramanian identifies "several push-pull factors" that augmented the process—development driven agenda of post-independence India, the rise of lower-caste politics (Non-Brahmin and Dravidian movements in the context of Tamilnadu), and the Silicon Valley boom along with a friendly US immigration policy. The newly emerged upper-caste middle class, unlike their predecessors—landed aristocracy and commercial elites—depended on education and white-collar jobs (their caste capital), both of which were highly mobile. Subramanian claims that the diasporic mobility is a key mechanism of caste consolidation and capital accumulation. The Tamil Brahmins, the alumni of IIT Madras, who migrated to the United States, were the vocal advocates of meritocracy (including market deregulation and privatization). Now, the debate over lower-caste claims to rights and upper-caste claims to merit is not restricted to India only, it has expanded to a transnational level. The OBC (category of underprivileged students) and Dalit students together formed the Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle (APSC) at IIT Madras in 2014. However, the current Indian regime, as mentioned by our author, is vindictive towards institutional autonomy and any form of criticism. Thus, the institution banned APSC the very next year. The Indian professional class including IITians (and US diaspora) is the follower of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Subramanian concludes, "Once again, the linchpin has been merit." (p. 321)

Caste and Indian techno-scientific culture is not an altogether new theme in STS. However, anthropologists and sociologists have now started looking at these issues from fresh perspectives. Ajantha Subramanian's book which questions IIT's claim to excellence by focusing on the caste contours of meritocracy is a welcome addition to the literature. She conducted several interviews and consulted primary documents like annual reports of the IIT Madras. As a student of history, what I missed is a comprehensive bibliography. The production quality is superb as expected from Harvard University Press. Permit me to conclude with another Bollywood classic—*3 Idiots* (2009). It points out to the viewers that our young engineers turn up as executives in multinational companies, even banks! After receiving 'world-class' education from elite engineering colleges, they prefer to move away from their disciplines. This is one of the contradictions of our time.