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TITLE PAGE

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

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

Abstract

Conferences are key sites for the development of academic careers; however multiple studies have shown that conferences are exclusionary on the basis of gender and other axes of social disadvantage. This study focuses on India and as such also incorporates caste as an axis of privilege and disadvantage in relation to access to conferences. Conferences in this paper are framed within a broader professional development agenda, which is the way in which conferences are located in Indian higher education policy discourses, and 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 on their participation in conferences and professional development activities. 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. The article recommends further scrutiny of policy implementation and replication of this analysis across different country contexts.

Keywords

Professional Development; Higher Education; Conferences; India; Caste; Gender; Social Exclusion

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 (Kyvik and Larsen, 1994; Wang *et al*, 2017). They contribute to building esteem and

reputation, and they can also act as direct factors influencing recruitment and promotion. Multiple studies have shown that conferences are exclusionary on the basis of gender (Eden, 2016; Jones *et al*, 2014; Walters, 2018), and exclusions based on class (Stanley, 1995), dis/ability (Hodge, 2014; Rodríguez-Zulaica and Ara, 2019), race (King *et al*, 2018) and caring responsibilities (Henderson, 2019; Henderson, Cao and Mansuy, 2018) have also been studied. However research on conferences has tended to focus on global North contexts (Mair, 2014); this study focuses on India and as such also incorporates caste as an axis of privilege and disadvantage in relation to access to conferences. This paper focuses on the ways in which social exclusion which is already evident in overarching analyses of academia (Hyers *et al*, 2012; Pifer, 2018; Stockfelt, 2018) is specifically manifested in relation to access to conferences. 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 paper explores commonalities and differing experiences of social exclusion by different groups (women and marginalised caste groups) and also by multiply disadvantaged groupsⁱ.

This paper adopts a social exclusion lens to analyse conference participation in Indian academia. 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 (Sen 2000; Buvinic 2005; Borooah 2010). The paper is based on data from a large-scale national study of social inequalities in higher education which also used a social exclusion lens (Sabharwal & Malish, 2016), and which included quantitative and qualitative data collection on academics' conference participation.

The key argument of this article is that hierarchies that are evident in the academic profession as a whole (and indeed in society) are reflected in conference participation, and that these inequalities are currently operating as a hidden facet of social exclusion in the academic profession. This article therefore makes an original contribution to the international higher education research field by

exploring the contextual specificities of social exclusion in the Indian context, but also contributes to wider debates on inequalities in the academic profession by highlighting the role of unequal access to professional development opportunities in perpetuating hierarchies in academia (see also Hyers *et al*, 2012).

Academia and access to conferences and professional development opportunities – a social exclusion perspective

Academia is known to reproduce the social inequalities of the societies in which higher education institutions are situated (Ahmed, 2012; Morley, 1999). Academia is also known to further perpetuate social inequalities, and to be slow to change (David, 2014), and India is no exception in this regard. Indian society is characterized by social diversity in its population groups in terms of social, ethnic and religious belongings. Diversity, however, is uniquely combined with inter-social group disparities associated with gender, caste, ethnicity, and religion. This article particularly focuses on the axes of gender and caste, as two prevalent axes of inequality, and also explores where these axes intersect.

Social exclusion in Indian academia

In India, as in other nations, the share of women faculty members is lower as compared to men faculty members. Of the c. 1.2 million HEI (higher education institutions) faculty members in India in 2018, 42% were women, with their presence at higher levels of academic hierarchy (e.g. professors) being lower as compared to men (MHRD, 2018). Caste differences are also clearly manifested at a national level (*ibid.*). Data on the academic profession in India show that, even with affirmative action stating that reservations should be in place for disadvantaged groups, the share of faculty members in HEIs from these groups falls short of the reservations. While these statistics give us a general idea of inequalities in the academic profession, they do not explore how inequalities are

created. By delving into the issue of conference participation, we can explore some of the hidden practices of academia which contribute to and indeed perpetuate the reproduction of inequalities.

The reproduction of inequalities in Indian academia can be usefully explored from a social exclusion perspective. This is because economic exclusion alone cannot fully explain the ways in which marginalised groups are disadvantaged in society; Borooah et al. (2015) explain that, even if a member of a marginalised group possesses the same means or goods as a member of a privileged group, they tend to obtain less value from these means or goods. This requires a further conceptualisation of exclusion, which brings in the *social* aspect. 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’ (*ibid.*, 2015, p.9; see also Sen 2000; Buvinic 2005; Borooah 2010). It is beyond the scope of this article to give a full account of the history and nature of the caste systemⁱⁱ, but it is necessary to provide some salient details here to frame the context of this article. The caste system operates along hereditary lines and divides the population according to different levels of civil, cultural and economic rights; traditionally the ‘untouchables’, now known as Dalits (Anandi Collective, 2009) or SCs, who were placed at the bottom of the system, were considered to be impure and polluting, and this stigma and social ostracism persists today. Social norms and the code of conduct laid down in the Hindu philosophical-cultural texts also governed the social status of women (Ambedkar, 1950; Olivelle and Olivelle, 2004; Sabharwal, 2010). The code of conduct for women had a profound negative impact on their access to rights, control over resources, social position in the family and society, and decision-making power in social, economic and political institutions (Ambedkar, 1950). Women from the SC groups suffer not only from exclusion based on their gender but also from caste identity and its consequent deprivation. In indicators of human development, SC women score lower than both SC men and higher-caste women (Sabharwal, 2015).

The Indian constitutional provisions, developed during the era of independence from British colonial rule, overturned the customary rules of the caste system and guaranteed ‘equality before law’ (Article 14, GOI, 1950). On the basis of these constitutional provisions, the government of India employs legal safeguards against untouchability-based discrimination in public spaces, violence, and atrocities (GOI, 1955; GOI, 1989). Furthermore, to improve the economic and educational status of the scheduled castes, affirmative action in the form of reservation policy in public employment, higher education, and legislature and also other government spheres such as public housing have been initiated. For women, the government has used mostly informal affirmative action policies for their economic and social empowerment, as well as enacted various laws that aim to protect women against violence and sexual harassment at the workplace (GOI, 2013). To improve the representation of academics from socially excluded groups, such as the SCs, affirmative action in staff recruitment in higher education has been in place in India for over seven decades (GOI, 1950).

At the level of recruitment for academic positions, affirmative action takes the form of a relaxation of 5% marks both at the Bachelor’s and at the Master’s levels for candidates from SC groups as well as from indigenous tribal groups (scheduled tribes or STs), and from other marginalised caste groups (other backward classes or OBCs). In addition, there must be a senior academic belonging to the SC, ST, OBC groups and women in the Selection Committee formed for direct recruitment of academic staff in universities and colleges (UGC, 2018). Moreover, for SC groups for example, a 15% reservation is in place for academic positions. However, as noted above, affirmative action regarding the academic profession has not succeeded in rectifying imbalances in representation across marginalised groups; despite the reservation, in 2018 only 8.6% positions were held by SC academics (MHRD, 2018). Within academia, social exclusion is embedded in the channels of social inter-relations, wherein faculty members from the disadvantaged social groups are excluded from

being a part of social connections, resulting in their separation, isolation and deprivation.

Conferences in the Indian context: the professional development agenda

In the Indian context, access to conferences is framed within a wider professional development agenda. The policy for the professional development of academics has evolved to respond to the changing context of higher education development (Varghese, Malik and Gautam, 2017). An important policy to note is the API (Academic Performance Index), which also brings conferences into the professional development agenda. In addition to stipulated minimum qualifications, the process for appointments and promotions includes an assessment by a selection committee and is based on an Academic Performance Index (API) score (UGC, 2018). The API considers activities not only related to teaching and research, but also assigns scores to professional development activities, including paper presentation at conferences. As such, access to conference opportunities can be clearly linked with career progression in the Indian policy context. Of course these quantified metrics cannot necessarily be aligned with career *development*, as the metrics do not capture these nuances, but rather the focus on the quantification of the CV can be aligned in a more technical sense with career advancement. We do not wish to suggest that API is necessarily a positive policy shift, but rather that the inclusion of conferences in API introduces leverage to argue for greater equality in access to conferences from an institutional perspective.

Access to conferences – a social exclusion issue

Contrary to the official connection between conferences and professional development in the Indian context, across the international literature on conferences this formal connection is less evident. More common are studies of academic conferences which focus on the conferences as sites in their own right, rather than the higher education institutions which employ the delegates who attend. In this sense, conferences are explored as ‘temporary institutions’ (Lewis, 2013, p. 881), but as such the

institution as gatekeeper of conference attendance is eclipsed. There is a growing literature on conferences as sites which are inaccessible and/or exclusionary for marginalised and minority identities. Racial and ethnicity-based othering at conferences has been explored by a number of authors (Bilge, 2013; Lewis, 2013; Petzen, 2012); social class has also been explored (Hughes, 2004; Kastberg, 2014; Stanley, 1995), as has dis/ability (Hodge, 2014; O'Brien, 2018; Rodríguez-Zulaica and Ara, 2019) and care (Henderson, 2019; Henderson, Cao & Mansuy, 2018; Lipton, 2019). Several authors have explored conferences from a gender perspective, showing them to be exclusionary spaces for women (Eden, 2016; Jones *et al.*, 2014; Walters, 2018). King *et al.* (2018) explored inequalities at a conference from an intersectional perspective. While this literature provides a sound evidence base to demonstrate the exclusionary nature of academic conferences, there is less evidence which connects academics' institutional conditions with access to conferences. Contrary to the conference-based perspective, an institutional perspective examines for example who within an academic department attends national and international conferences, how often, how funding is applied for and distributed, how information is shared about conference attendance policy. This information provides valuable evidence not just on who attends conferences, but also who does not.

Access to conferences – institutional evidence from a national study

The empirical evidence presented in this article is drawn from a large-scale, mixed-method study, 'Diversity and Discrimination in Higher Education: A Study of Institutions in Selected States of India' (Sabharwal & Malish, 2016), co-led by the first author with the participation at regional level of the third author. The project worked with 12 institutions located across six states in India (Bihar, Delhi, Maharashtra, Kerala, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh). More information on the study as a whole can be obtained from the report cited above, but specifically this study included a section on diversity and discrimination in the academic profession, which produced data on professional development and conferences. The academic profession component included the analysis of

institutional administrative data and documents and interviews, both of which included relevant data for the present article.

Quantitative data was extracted from administrative records in the selected institutions to examine representation of academic staff across caste, gender, religion, place of residence and state. The sources of administrative data included academic leave records, annual reports and intranet web. The time period for this analysis was 5 years preceding the implementation of the research study (i.e. from 2010-2014). It should be noted that collecting institutional data on conference participation is challenging, particularly when monitoring participation is not an organisational policy; the data does not for example capture a conference attended in the academic's own time. As such we can only work with the data within these limitations. We explored this data in relation to one of the selected institutions as a specific case (due to data access constraints following the official completion of the study) to understand faculty representation and conference participation. The institution was a specialist STEM institution, which has a bearing on the nature of the data explored here. This was the institution for which we were able to access the most complete data for this article, but explorations of less complete data for another institution with a broader disciplinary remit revealed the same patterns – indeed in that institution, there were more women faculty members than men, but men attended the majority of conferences. We are not seeking to generalise from this case institution but rather to show an example of conference participation inequalities which are then further explored in the qualitative data analysis. An initial version of the descriptive analysis was presented in Sabharwal (2018) and this is extended further in the following section to answer the first parts of the research question for this article: *is social exclusion in academia manifested in conference participation; if so, to what extent?*

Interviews were conducted with close to 200 faculty members across the selected institutions, using

purposive sampling to ensure inclusion of different positions in academic hierarchy, with specific attention given to including participants belonging to the marginalized social groups. Close to 40% of the interviewees belonged to the marginalised social groups such as the scheduled castes and the other backward castes and 37% were women faculty members. Faculty members engaged in sixty-minute semi-structured interviews, where participants were asked to share the nature of interaction with their colleagues, and with the administration. The interview guide included a question which all participants were asked, which led the authors to revisit the data for this article: what was the nature of participants' experiences at the institution in accessing professional development opportunities? Data from the interviews is used to answer the final part of the research question for this article: *how does social exclusion operate in practice (with regards to conference participation)?* For this article, we analysed the interview data using an iterative process. Firstly we engaged in thematic analysis to explore where conferences appeared in the reports, and examined these instances in relation to the specific issues mentioned, in addition to the identity of the speaker and specific identity-related comments made by the participant. The social exclusion perspective, where exclusion is understood as both instrumental and relational (Borooah et al., 2015), helped in discerning group-specific challenges.

Hidden social exclusion in Indian academia: gender, caste and conference participation

Does social exclusion exist in access to conferences? To what extent?

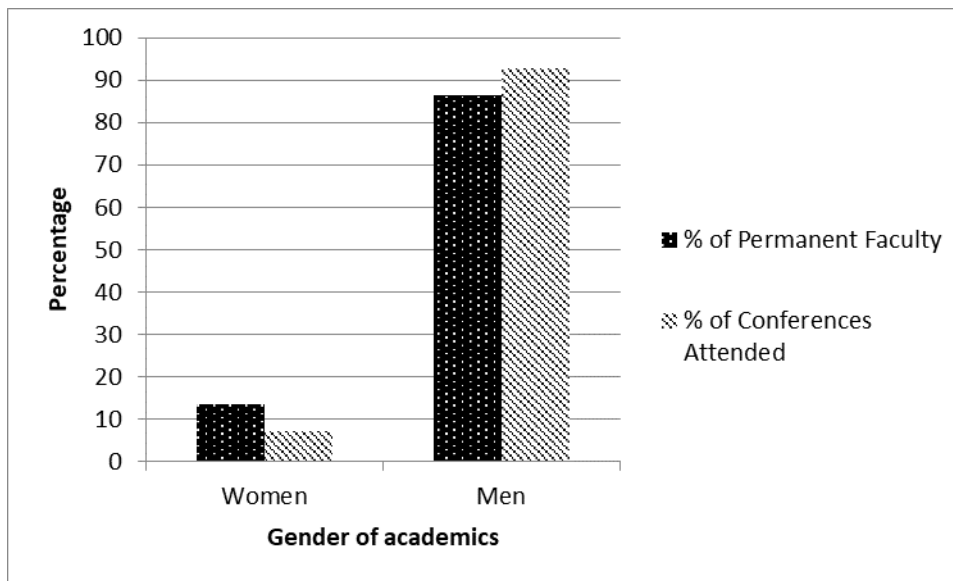
This first analysis section explores quantitative data collected from administrative records regarding gender and caste in the make-up of the faculty and participation in conferences. As noted in the methodology section, this section focuses on a single case institution, due to availability of data. However we can infer further applicability for these findings from the qualitative data analysis section, where data from across the study are analysed. The case institution specialized in STEM

education and was a selective public institution founded in the 1960s and located in the south of India. The analysis is based on the permanent faculty, of which there were 229; participation in conferences was calculated based on the total number of conferences attended (7,382) by all faculty members (229) during the specified period (2010-2014), then broken down by gender and then by caste.

Gender

Patterns of gendered inequality in higher education were clearly evident from this institution. Within the institution, 86.5% of permanent faculty members were men, and 13.5% women.ⁱⁱⁱ This imbalance is further reflected when gender is broken down according to seniority, as only 2.9% of the 69 full professors were women. If conference participation were distributed equitably across men and women in this institution, we would expect to see that the proportion of women academics would match the proportion of conferences attended. However, as Figure 1 shows, there is a discrepancy where men academics attend proportionally more conferences than women academics. 13.5% of faculty are women, but 7.1% conferences are attended by women. Male academics gained an extra 473 conferences over women over the four year period, approximately an extra two conferences per man academic during that period.

Figure 1: Comparison between proportion of faculty by gender and proportion of conferences attended by gender in a case institution

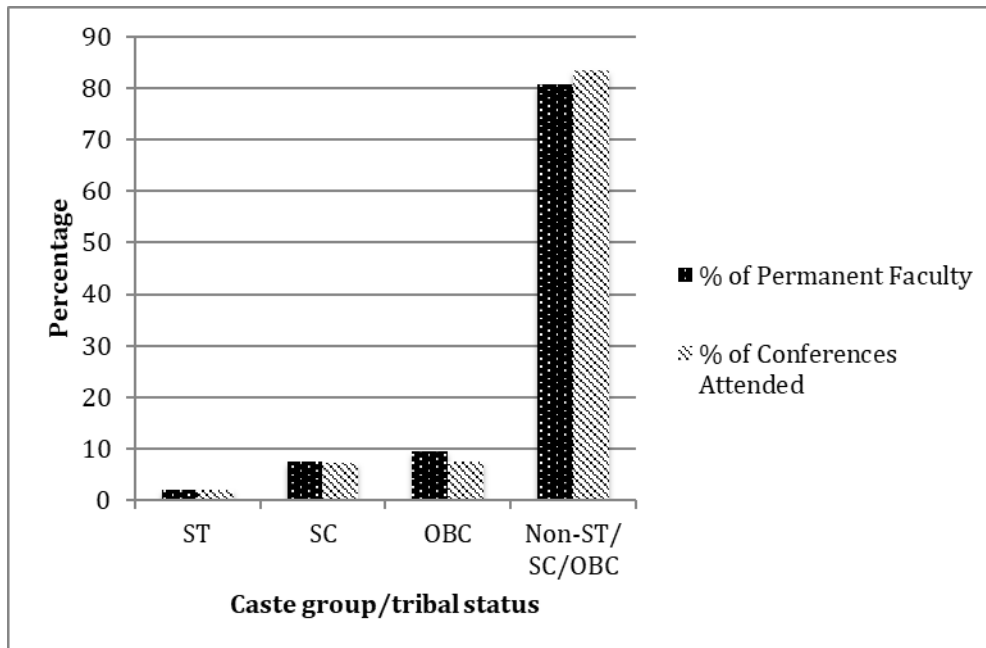


Source: authors

Caste

Patterns of caste-based inequality were also evident at this institution. Despite the reservation of 15% for SC groups, only 7.4% of faculty were from SC groups. 80.8% of the faculty were from the dominant caste group. The remaining figures were 9.6% OBC and 2% ST. Caste differences are also visible across the seniority data. 2.9% of the 69 full professors were from SC groups, compared with 91.4% from the dominant caste group. The caste conference participation data shows a less marked disparity than the gender data (see Figure 2). We see a slight discrepancy where the proportion of conferences attended by ST, SC and OBC academics is marginally 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%). In real terms this still amounts to 192 more conferences being attended by dominant caste academics, and for SC academics for example it still amounts to almost one fewer conference being attended per academic during the period (14 fewer conferences attended by 17 academics).

Figure 2: Comparison between proportion of faculty by gender and proportion of conferences attended by caste group in a case institution



Source: authors

Discussion

From this case institution, we can see firstly that patterns of inequality in the representation of women and marginalised social groups are reflected in the conference participation of academics from these groups. The imbalance is particularly striking for women, who are not a minority group in terms of the share of the general population, but who appear as a minority group in academia. As we discuss later, a complex interplay of various factors influences women's access to conferences. These are related to institutional factors such as women being placed lower in academic hierarchy, lack of access to channels of information, uncongenial social atmosphere, but are also in part attributable to wider societal issues such as care, household responsibilities and restrictions from families to travel long distances; as discussed in the literature section deeply ingrained gendered social norms apply in

Indian society from which academics are not exempt. We also see a shortfall in the reservation requirements for e.g. SC groups, where the 15% reservation target is not met. More than mirroring the faculty representation data, the conference participation data reveal that participation in conferences is *even more unequal* than faculty representation.

There are several questions which remain from this analysis which stem from limitations in the data – this is an issue which emerges when engaging in opportunistic data analysis from a study which was designed with a different purpose; this highlights the clear need for further institutional research on equity and conferences. Limitations already mentioned were the potential inaccuracy of the conferences data owing to the difficulty of recording this information when not part of the official monitoring strategy; the necessity of using a case institution for this analysis rather than the full data set, thus potentially reflecting regional and institutional characteristics. A further limitation was the unavailability of the conferences data disaggregated by seniority. This limitation means that our calculations are likely to include a seniority effect, where more men and dominant caste academics are senior and so likely to access more conferences. However this effect contains multiple relevant causalities – do men access more conferences *because* they are senior and/or *because* they are men, and/or are they senior *because* they are men? Likewise with caste. While we cannot rule out the seniority effect, we also cannot rule out that the seniority effect is intrinsically gendered. Even with this potential effect, the data produce a clear finding: those in more need of assistance in climbing the career ladder are not being given more access to conferences. We were also unable to retrospectively access either faculty representation or conference participation data disaggregated by gender *and* caste group. However we can see from our discrete calculations that women from SC groups are likely to be severely under-represented in both faculty representation and conference participation. For example, only two full professors were women and two were from the SC group. It is therefore highly unlikely that both of these full professors were women *and* SC. The proportions

of conference participation for women and SC academics were almost the same, at just over 7% of conferences attended being attended by women or SC academics – it is likely that the combined effect of gender and caste would result in a much lower statistic for academics who are both women and from SC groups. Finally, our analysis here only captures the experiences of permanent staff. The University Grants Commission (UGC) guidelines (2012-2017) on the participation of academics in academic conferences specify that only academics on permanent contracts are eligible for availing financial resources to participate in conferences and other related professional development activities (UGC, n.d., p. 8). It should however be noted that this policy directive particularly disadvantages academics from socially excluded groups, especially women, as they are less likely to enjoy the status of permanent faculty members as compared to men (Sabharwal & Malish, 2016). If we place these findings together with other existing research on benefits accrued from participating in conferences (e.g. Wang et al. 2017), a wider picture begins to emerge, where we can see that social exclusion in conferences for women academics and academics from marginalised caste groups also contributes to heightened social exclusion in the academic profession at large.

How does social exclusion operate in practice?

As explained above, social exclusion incorporates more than material means, going beyond economic exclusion to include the social relations which mean that some groups can gain more from their material means than others. There are two separate but linked layers of social exclusion involved in access to conferences and professional development opportunities. These are exclusion i) from the academic workforce and ii) from conferences. The instrumental analysis from the previous section shows that i) reservation policies for marginalised groups and affirmative action schemes for women are resulting in more access to academic jobs, but that progress is still slow and senior ranks are occupied predominantly by dominant groups; ii) likewise women and marginalised groups are gaining access to conferences but in proportion to or lower than their representation at faculty level.

However an instrumental analysis disguises relational processes by which community belonging is established. As such, i) women and marginalised groups may be accessing academic jobs, but they may be excluded from the dominant culture of the institution (Ahmed, 2012; Hyers *et al*, 2012; Morley, 1999; Stockfelt, 2018); ii) likewise, women and marginalised groups may be accessing conferences, but they may be excluded from the informal networking and feeling of belonging at conferences (King *et al*, 2018; Stanley, 1995). A lack of access to dominant culture within the institution means in part a lack of access to extra-institutional spaces such as conferences – which in turn means that the benefits of conferences may be inaccessible both through lack of access to conferences and relational exclusion at conferences.

As acknowledged in other analyses of micropolitics in academic practice (Ahmed, 2012; Mirza, 1995; Morley, 1999), a perennial issue is that it is difficult to capture evidence of exclusionary practices, as they occur through informal, at times hidden interactions and processes. There may be a reservation policy in place, but there is no regulation of, for example, whom the head of department chooses to invite for a sociable interaction. Our way of addressing this is firstly to explore which issues were raised across the participant sample in relation to accessing conferences, and then to explore whether any conclusions can be drawn regarding who is more adversely affected by these issues. The first issue raised across the interviews concerns gaining permission for academic leave to attend conferences, a system followed across higher education institutions in India. Participants across social groups opined that the days allotted in a year for officially attending programmes are limited, for example:

A teacher [academic] will get only seven duty leaves in a year to attend the programmes, and usually seminars are two or three days long; thus a teacher can attend only three seminars in a year, at most. (Man assistant professor, SC)

It was further shared that conference participation was being encouraged mostly only on Saturdays and not during weekdays, meaning that only some conferences were accessible. A second issue concerning participants across social groups was the perceived absence of official guidance on conference participation, meaning that information and guidance was not shared as part of official procedure – other than informing staff of the requirement of attending conferences for academic progression and promotion. For example, a participant stated, ‘I feel college teachers are not getting enough training regarding an orientation towards the potential of professional development activities on their personal and academic growth’ (woman associate professor, non-SC/ST/OBC). A third and final common issue related to the workings of the academic hierarchy, where senior members of staff (even without leadership roles) were seen to exercise surveillance over junior members of staff, for example reporting missed classes to line managers, enforcing strict leave calculations, and becoming informally involved in other administrative procedures.

While policies and management structures are put in place to ensure the standardisation of operations, instrumental exclusion is also layered with relational exclusion. As such, while the leave policy was in theory standard practice, participants identified ways in which line managers subverted the policy by, for example, refusing leave on seemingly reasonable but unsubstantiated grounds such as unavailability of teaching cover. 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 in the name of completion of syllabus or other college activities which are considered more important than their professional growth. (Man assistant professor, OBC)

Although it is difficult to obtain concrete evidence that women and marginalised groups are more susceptible to these issues than men and dominant caste groups, wider evidence from the study showed concrete evidence that policies are enforced more strictly and more obstacles are created by the institution for students from marginalised groups (Sabharwal & Malish, 2016). This is because any process of instrumental inclusion/exclusion is susceptible to relational inclusion/exclusion, with regards to smoothing the way or creating obstacles. 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 their promotion (woman assistant professor, non-SC/ST/OBC), and an SC participant explained that academics who come from a ‘poor background’ find that conferences and professional development activities ‘are too expensive’ for them to be able to self-fund these opportunities if institutional resources are not made available (man, assistant professor, SC)^{iv}. While policies may be in place for the allocation of funding, the granting of this funding tends to be at the discretion of the line manager or a senior administrator, with the implication that again there is a susceptibility to relational exclusion.

Regarding the second common issue experienced across the participant groups, guidance and the provision of information on conferences and professional development was mentioned as not being provided as part of institutional procedure. However here informal networks (*jaan-pehchaan* in Hindi) and social interactions over a ‘cup of tea’ with administration during or after office hours play a clear role. Women participants felt that such informal social interactions would be frowned upon and women’s reputation would be at stake if they were to transgress the codes of sexual propriety by engaging in sociable activities with senior leaders, who tended to be men. Hence, valuable social networking is restricted for women faculty members (Durbin, 2011). Regarding caste-based exclusion, SC faculty members reflected on lobbying on the basis of caste to access professional development opportunities, and ‘caste-based biases of their upper-caste Head of Departments’ (man

assistant professor, SC). Faculty members from the marginalised groups shared that ‘favouritism on caste basis takes place here also’, and that they ‘feel discriminated when it comes to projects, conferences, seminars, and symposium’ (woman professor, SC). One of the SC male faculty expressed, ‘caste-based lobbying affects the professional growth, as the dominant caste favours and promote the faculty members of their own caste’ (man professor, SC). Given the inextricable link in the Indian academy between accessing professional development opportunities and promotion, relational exclusion occurring in both areas constructs a vicious cycle of social exclusion for women and marginalised groups.

The third common issue identified across the sample was the sense that senior faculty members were policing junior academics’ activities. This issue is particularly difficult to assess regarding social exclusion, as the hierarchy structure of the academic profession means that senior ranks are overwhelmingly occupied by men and dominant groups, while junior ranks have a higher proportion of women and marginalised groups. Furthermore, it is not necessarily the case that a woman or SC academic will exercise positive discrimination towards fellow junior colleagues, as academics who have struggled to attain seniority may have done so by adopting the views and behaviour of the dominant group (Haeruddin, Pick and Thein, 2019). However women and marginalised group participants expressed suspicions that they were being surveilled by senior academics and that they were being given particularly onerous workloads which would anyway prevent them from accessing conferences and other opportunities, regardless of leave applications. In combination with the leave issue and the guidance issue, it is possible to deduce the ways in which the dominance of privileged groups in senior positions may be passed from one generation of academics to the next.

It should be noted that there were gender-specific factors which were mentioned in conjunction with women’s access to conferences. For women academics, social exclusion involves gendered familial

and institutional culture which serves and promotes the interests of men (Ardener, 1986; Chanana, 2015). In line with a similar model of academic womanhood in Indonesia (Haeruddin, Pick and Thein, 2019), women in this study were unable to fully occupy an academic identity, instead splitting their identity between work and home duties. This became evident through the need to maintain ‘household responsibilities’ (woman assistant professor, non-SC/ST/OBC) being an obstacle to travelling for conferences and professional development opportunities, as well as ‘restrictions imposed by their families to go out of station [i.e. away from the home/workplace]’ (woman assistant professor, non-SC/ST/OBC), and lack of family support and encouragement for career advancement. As such it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which women’s participation in conferences is associated with the workplace institution or the family as institution, particularly since norms enforced in both institutions overlap. However since this article takes an institutional perspective (as opposed to a conference-based perspective, where other inclusivity concerns apply), we could advance an argument that a supportive and inclusive institutional culture could work to alter the familial expectations of appropriate activities for women academics. Finally, the fact that the sample of 200 interviewed academics only included seven SC women has clear implications for the possibility of drawing conclusions about this severely under-represented group. However, it was clear from the interviews with these few participants that they experienced ‘hostile work conditions’ (woman assistant professor, SC), ‘segregation and exclusion’ (woman assistant professor, SC), ‘discrimination in work allocation’ (woman assistant professor, SC) and ‘lack of growth opportunities’ (woman assistant professor, SC) in the workplace. One participant noted, ‘We have to face the threefold burden of class, caste and gender more than the SC men and the rest of the women’ (woman assistant professor, SC).

Conclusion

This article set out to analyse a hitherto unexplored area in relation to Indian academia, namely

social exclusion via conference participation. Specifically, the article asked, *is social exclusion in academia manifested in conference participation; if so, to what extent; how does social exclusion operate in practice?* We used a social exclusion lens to explore how conferences and professional development activities are affected by wider processes of instrumental and relational exclusion that are known to play out across Indian society. While the social exclusion lens is well adapted to analyse Indian society, both the lens and the findings have wider applicability across other country contexts. In response to our research questions for this article, our analysis of administrative records found that access to conferences was proportionally lower for women and marginalised caste groups than their representation at faculty level. Our analysis of interview data showed that there were common issues experienced across the sample regarding for example, academic leave, guidance and information, and hierarchy-based surveillance. However closer inspection of the data showed that these common issues were further exacerbated by gendered and caste-based micropolitics. As such, while policies are in place which appear to guarantee fairness and representation, such as reservation policies and allocations for academic leave, these processes are themselves open to relational exclusion where the policies are implemented differently for different social groups.

Based on the findings from our article, we can infer that initiatives for institutional transformation would be beneficial for exploring fair access to conferences and professional development opportunities – and that these initiatives would also benefit research and knowledge production. We recommend that institutions consider instating special support mechanisms which track the participation of academic staff in conferences and other activities, and which are tuned to identify patterns in unequal participation which reflect social exclusion in the institutional culture. A further recommendation is that institutional committees could be founded (along the lines of those already in place for the well-being of students). The committees could provide an accountability structure for participation in activities which would be located outside of departmental structures. However it

should be borne in mind that any of these recommendations would be susceptible to the same issues of relational exclusion without explicit training and guidance regarding gendered and caste-based prejudices.

Finally this article sets an agenda for further research into this area, both within India and across other country contexts. The article is based on the analysis of data which was collected for another study – while the data provided rare and valuable evidence on this topic, it would be beneficial to conduct further empirical research on this topic which sets out with this explicit goal, so as to further explore the nuances, as well as exploring how the issue plays out across a variety of higher education institution types and other intersecting inequalities such as religion and social class. Access to conferences is an issue which has tended to focus on the accessibility of conferences, rather than the institutional gatekeepers and policies which support or hinder the academics' conference participation. It will be vital to conduct further institution-based conferences research to complete this picture, in addition to research that seeks to understand how institutional factors related to conference access intersect with societal factors such as gendered family roles; we argue that, without a holistic view of how hidden inequalities in the academic profession further perpetuate inequalities, instituting change will remain an elusive ambition.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors are not aware of any conflict of interest.

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Notes

ⁱ The authors would like to note that religion is an important aspect of diversity in India. While this paper focuses on caste and gender aspects, religion-based social exclusion lens can also be applied to understand nature of social inter-relations and how it impacts groups' access to equal opportunities, and this would provide a useful extension for the topic of this paper in future research. Furthermore, the data collected for this article does not reflect the nuances of caste/class intersectionality. This would be a further issue to explore.

ⁱⁱ For more background on the caste system and economic and social exclusion, see eg. Thorat and Neuman (2010), Thorat and Sabharwal (2014), Borooah et al. (2015).

ⁱⁱⁱ There was no option for third gender in the data collection (in part because the law to recognise third gender in official data was established in 2014, and the data was gathered from administrative records), and no data was coded as gender unknown or not stated.

^{iv} Here we can glimpse the intersection of caste and social class, where it is difficult to distinguish between caste-based and economic disadvantage; this issue requires further dedicated research in relation to the Indian academic profession.