"It's just a name tag": The Persistence of Caste Through Caste-Blind Discourses in U.S. STEM Education

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1. Introduction

The caste system is a rigid hierarchy that assigns individuals their status and opportunities based on birth. With 5.4 million South Asians and 11% representing the graduate student population in the U.S., caste-based oppression has infiltrated U.S. academic and professional spaces [1]. In recognition of the presence of caste oppression, cities like Seattle and Fresno made caste discrimination illegal in 2023, while many universities, including Brandeis, Brown, and Harvard, included castes in their Title IX protections, largely due to grassroots activism [2], [3]. However, in November 2023, California Governor Gavin Newsom vetoed the Caste Discrimination Bill SB 403, arguing that protections against "ancestry" adequately cover caste. Newsom's reasoning overlooks a critical issue: Two in three *Dalit* (out-casted groups, formerly "untouchables") individuals in the U.S. face caste discrimination in their workplaces, and one in three Dalit Students experience discrimination in U.S educational spaces because caste is not explicitly recognized as a protected category [4].

Caste blindness [5]*,* the erasure of caste's influence under the guise of cultural identity allows biases to persist unchecked, particularly in U.S. STEM fields, where hiring and promotion practices disproportionately harm caste-oppressed individuals [6]. The prevalence of Indians, especially from privileged "upper" castes termed *savarnas*, in influential positions within U.S. STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) academia, coupled with the alarming caste discrimination statistics, underscores the urgency of understanding how caste blindness operates. This research seeks to uncover the hidden dynamics of caste in U.S. STEM education by critically examining the discourse patterns and talk moves through which caste privilege, thereby caste blindness, is upheld. Through this work, we aspire to contribute to the ongoing discussions of the critical caste and STEM scholarship and to be in solidarity with the caste equity movement.

Two key research questions guide this study:

(1) How does one upper caste man speak about educational and career equity issues in the U.S. and South Asia?
(2) How does that discourse reflect and enact caste blindness?

Addressing these questions will allow a deeper examination of caste privilege and its implications in U.S. STEM education.

2. Background and Literature Review

2.1 Historical and Socio-Religious Foundations of the Caste System

The caste system, which dates back over 2,000 years, is a deeply rooted social hierarchy that has marginalized South Asian communities across their entire lives, from birth to death [7], [8]. The caste system originated from Hindu religious texts and divides people into rigid categories based on birth, assigning them social status, occupation, and privilege [9]. Central to this hierarchy are the religious ideas of spiritual purity (*dharma*) and pollution (*karma*) [7], [10]. These concepts, derived from ancient Hindu texts such as the Manusmriti, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vedas, and Upanishads, provide moral and ethical justifications for the caste system through the concept of

reincarnation and spiritual purity/pollution [8], [10], [11]. These religious affiliations have made the caste system difficult to challenge because it is perceived as divinely ordained [7], [9].

Historically, the caste system legitimized the oppression of Dalit communities, relegating them to the lowest social roles and subjecting them to severe discrimination and exclusion, such as being denied access to education [8], [11]. One prominent outcome of the caste system is untouchability, a practice that prohibits social interactions, resource sharing, and even physical contact with members of Dalit communities [12], [13], [14]. While legal progress has been made to outlaw explicit forms of untouchability, cultural practices enforcing its principles continue within South Asian and diasporic communities worldwide, including in the U.S. [12], [13], [14]. The Dalit communities have been systematically deprived of resources, education, and access to better jobs, resulting in entrenched poverty and limited upward mobility [7], [11], [15]. This intersection of historical, religious, and socioeconomic factors continues to affect millions of people in India and among the Indian diaspora, including in the U.S., UK, and Australia [16], [17], [18], [19]. However, the research-based investigations on how caste is reproduced, maintained, and upheld within these diasporic communities remain limited. Through this study, we intend to contribute to this body of research by presenting how savarna future professionals maintain and enforce caste within U.S. STEM education and workspaces.

Studies highlight that caste-based exclusion and discrimination still exist within South Asian diasporic communities within educational and professional spaces [4], [15], [20]. For instance, Subramanian [15] highlights that a savarna social network pipeline operates within elite engineering institutions and U.S. professional spaces, particularly within STEM. Furthermore, Dutt [20] in her recent work, has also highlighted the caste based discriminatory experiences of Dalit workers within the U.S. Silicon Valley. Furthermore, Dutt [20] presents evidence that subtle forms of caste discrimination, such as discriminating against religious affiliations, food preferences, etc., exist within the U.S. tech workspaces, where savarnas claim caste is absent. Hence, there is a need for understanding how caste-based discrimination exists overtly in a space where it is claimed to be irrelevant.

2.2 Caste in the U.S. Diaspora: Persistence of Discrimination and Caste Blindness

When South Asians migrate to the U.S., they bring aspects of the caste system with them, such as intra-caste arranged marriages and ideas of spiritual pollution and purity [4], [21]. Though the American context differs, caste still shapes social relations within the Indian community [4], [21]. Indian immigrants are frequently viewed as a "model minority," excelling in fields like STEM [20], [22], [23]. However, this stereotype hides internal disparities and the continued impact of caste-based exclusion, especially in U.S. workplaces and educational institutions [24], [25]. Dutt [20] positions this denial and/ or ignorance of caste in the U.S. as a discursive strategy that allows savarnas to occupy both model minority and meritocratic subject positions while erasing historical privilege.

Critical caste scholars argue that caste blindness, the refusal to recognize or acknowledge caste dynamics, perpetuates these inequities [5], [20], [26], [27], [28]. For example, in 2020, the California Civil Rights Department (CRD) filed a civil rights lawsuit against Cisco Systems and two of its savarna supervisors for caste discrimination and harassment, including isolating and belittling a Dalit employee [6]. Although the case against the two savarna supervisors was dismissed in 2023, the dismissal of the case reinforces the meritocratic narratives, thereby ignoring the social dimension of caste, perpetuating caste blindness in the STEM disciplines.

This case underscores the persistence of caste-based discrimination and the divide within the Indian diaspora, where caste blindness prevents many from acknowledging such inequities, complicating efforts to address caste oppression. Hence, there is an urgent need to unveil caste blindness as the mechanism to uphold the caste system and thereby critically examine the systemic caste oppression often ignored within U.S. scholarship.

While much of the critical caste literature [28], [29], [30] focuses on the experiences of Dalit student experiences in India, these patterns of exclusion and subtle caste bias extend into U.S. educational contexts. The persistence of caste discrimination within U.S. diaspora communities makes it even more critical to address caste as an urgent and distinct factor in broader equity and inclusion efforts in education.

2.3 Caste Blindness in Education

Critical Caste Theory (CCT) integrates scholarship and activism focused on caste and race [11], [31], drawing inspiration from Critical Race Theory. CCT views caste as a structural system of power that dictates access to resources, opportunities, and social mobility based on birth, challenging the idea that inequality is solely the result of individual ability. It highlights how caste-based discrimination intersects with other forms of oppression, such as gender and class, and critiques meritocracy in educational contexts. By exposing the biases inherent in so-called "neutral" measures of merit, CCT shows how caste-privileged groups maintain dominance while marginalized groups, including the Dalit communities, are disproportionately disadvantaged [5], [11], [15], [28].

CCT scholars define caste blindness as a phenomenon where savarnas deny or ignore caste-based privileges, framing themselves as "beyond caste" [5]. This erasure of caste dynamics is particularly evident in elite educational and professional spaces, where meritocracy is framed to obscure structural inequalities [15], [28]. Subramanian [15] critiques how caste blindness conceals caste privilege, positioning merit as a neutral measure of intelligence and effort, which disguises the influence of caste on educational outcomes. Despite significant literature documenting caste discrimination in South Asia, there is little focus on how caste blindness is reproduced by the savarnas in global contexts, particularly in U.S. higher education. This research addresses this theoretical gap by investigating how future Indian STEM professionals in the U.S. reinforce caste blindness through discourses of merit and smartness.

3. Caste Blindness and the Colorblind Racism Framework: A Theoretical Grounding

Drawing on both CCT and CRT, we articulate caste blindness as a mechanism that similarly perpetuates social inequalities by cloaking them in seemingly neutral or merit-based rhetoric. Bonilla-Silva [32] argues that in contemporary society, overt expressions of racism have become less acceptable, giving rise to subtler forms of racial discrimination. Similarly, caste discrimination persists in both overt and concealed forms and is downplayed or denied altogether in U.S. academic and professional spaces. First, according to Bonilla-Silva, abstract liberal beliefs suggest that everyone should be treated equally and that individuals should be judged based on their merits rather than their race. While this sounds fair in theory, it overlooks the historical and systemic barriers that certain racial groups face, effectively maintaining the racial hierarchy. Second, Bonilla-Silva emphasizes that colorblind racists may attribute racial inequalities to cultural differences rather than structural factors. They may argue that certain racial groups are responsible for their disadvantages due to supposed cultural deficiencies,

ignoring how societal structures contribute to inequality. Third, he mentions that this aspect involves the belief that racial segregation and inequality are natural outcomes rather than products of historical and institutional factors. He posits that colorblind racists may argue that racial disparities exist because people naturally prefer to associate with others who are similar to themselves, ignoring the role of systemic discrimination. Finally, Bonilla-Silva points out that colorblind racism often downplays the significance of racism by suggesting that it is no longer a significant issue or that it only exists in isolated incidents. This minimization dismisses the ongoing impact of racism on individuals and communities.

By integrating Bonilla-Silva's colorblind racism framework into the analysis of caste blindness, this study addresses a crucial gap to illuminate the mechanisms of caste blindness. Adapting the following Bonilla Silva's frames of colorblind racism as a working framework, Table 1 shows the adapted frames of caste blindness.

Table 1. Frames of Caste Blindness (adapted from Bonilla-Silva, 2006)

Frames/Themes	Caste-Blind Frame	Example
Abstract Liberalism	Emphasize formal equality and individual merit while ignoring the entrenched social and economic disparities rooted in caste hierarchies.	Attributing equal opportunity to be achieved through affirmative action and refusing to accept that casteism exists within an educational institution is an example of abstract liberalism in the context of caste blindness.
Naturalization of casteism	Suggest that caste divisions are natural or inevitable outcomes of social preferences rather than results of historical and systemic oppression.	Justifying segregation based on caste as a matter of personal preference rather than acknowledging discriminatory practices.
Cultural casteism	Attributes the socio-economic status of lower castes to cultural deficiencies or lifestyle choices rather than systemic exclusion.	Blaming the lower socio-economic status of Dalits on their cultural practices rather than recognizing the impact of historical exclusion and discrimination.
Minimization of casteism	Downplays the significance of caste discrimination, suggesting it is no longer a significant barrier and that caste-based affirmative action is unnecessary.	Claiming that caste discrimination is a thing of the past and that contemporary disparities are due to other factors, thereby undermining the need for policies specifically targeting caste-based inequalities.

By examining discourse on caste through the lens of Bonilla-Silva's framework, this study highlights how caste blindness manifests through abstract liberalism, cultural casteism, naturalization, and/or minimization of caste.

4. Methods: Critical Discourse Analysis

By employing critical discourse analysis (CDA) as outlined by Willig [33], this research unpacks how discourse on caste reflects and reproduces caste blindness, contributing to a broader understanding of how caste inequities persist in transnational contexts. We use critical discourse analysis (CDA) [33] because it can give us insights into the relations between discourse and social factors like power, ideology, religion, social identities, etc. Hence, the relations between the participants' views on various social contexts of the caste system can be understood through the discourse utilized by the participants. Within engineering education, discourse analysis has been utilized to understand how civil industry engineers in Chile interpret the term 'human' [34] to interpret the depth and relevance of three engineering programs that connect research and professional pathways [35] and to uncover the undergraduate STEM instructors' views on gender

equity [36]. In a previous research paper [37], we utilized discourse analysis and narrative analysis to help understand the participants' tone, context, and self-positioning in computing to reveal the different narratives of a participant's (Rachel) experiences in a computing classroom. Similarly, CDA was employed to analyze Rahul's interview transcript. CDA allows for examining how language constructs and reproduces social inequalities, making it particularly suited for exploring caste-blindness. Our analytic process is explained in the following sections after setting up the context of the study and author positionalities.

4.1 Context and Data Collection

This study is part of a doctoral dissertation research that investigates the persistence of caste inequities in U.S. STEM education and professional spaces. The study participants were STEM graduate students who identified as of Indian origin (both immigrants and international students on visas) recruited locally within my university and nationally (across the U.S.) through student listservs, professional networks, and social media posts. The participants were asked to fill out a demographic survey along with their consent to participate in an interview. A total of 15 participants were interviewed, with each interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The audio was transcribed using Otter AI, and Nivedita listened to the interview recording and edited the transcripts for clarity. The interviews were semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interview was designed to elicit the participants' perceptions and experiences regarding caste in both Indian and U.S. contexts, with specific attention to their views on engineering educational and career opportunities.

For the purposes of this research paper, we are focusing on one participant, Rahul (pseudonym). Rahul is an Indian graduate student pursuing his master's in Cybersecurity at a Southern Public University in the U.S. He identifies as "OC" (Open Category), the governmental classification for the savarna communities for affirmative action, i.e., the Reservation Quota for governmental jobs and higher education admissions in India. We are using Rahul's interview data as he was the first focal participant of the dissertation, and Nivedita intends to add more meaning to the findings as the dissertation data analysis progresses.

4.2 Author Positionalities

Nivedita is a doctoral candidate in engineering and computing education and identifies as an Indian savarna woman who is actively resisting and unlearning caste-based oppression and is pursuing critical caste scholarship. Stephen is the dissertation chair of Nivedita, a white male professor in engineering education who actively resists and challenges dominant narratives within engineering education through his scholarship. Stephen has actively participated in learning about caste supremacy and oppression while supporting Nivedita in their doctoral journey. As this is a part of Nivedita's dissertation, Stephen played a supportive and mentoring role in this research paper. That is, Nivedita handled participant recruitment and conceptualizing the research design. At the same time, Stephen played the role of a critical peer and mentor by actively engaging and shaping the data analysis process. Hence, we view these findings and analysis as an active collaborative process contributing to the co-creation of knowledge.

4.3 Data Analysis Approach

We utilize Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how Rahul reasons about caste, merit, and engineering education in the U.S. Drawing on Willig's [33] interpretive framework, our

analysis focuses on three dimensions: how Rahul constructed key concepts like merit and caste (discursive constructions), how he positioned himself and others in relation to these ideas (subject positions), and what broader ideologies these discourses reinforce or resist (ideological implications). The analysis was led by Nivedita, who listened to the interview recordings and reviewed transcripts multiple times while memoing discursive patterns, tonal shifts, and interviewer-participant dynamics. These initial observations included emotional tone, hesitation, and conversational structure. Nivedita then shared these memos with Stephen, who engaged as a critical peer to prompt deeper reflection on the assumptions embedded in the discourse and the analytical framing. This dialogic and reflexive process helped push the analysis beyond surface-level patterns to interrogate how caste-blindness operated through language, confident declarations of merit, minimization of structural casteism, or careful moral hedging. The interview is not only a site of data, but a space that reveals how caste conditioning is deeply embedded, even in silence or discomfort. This approach allowed us to critically explore how privilege is reproduced not just through institutions, but through everyday talk.

5. Findings

In the following subsections, we answer our research questions by analyzing quotes that emerged from the participants' discussion of their viewpoints and experiences on the role of caste within society, education, and engineering educational and professional spaces. For brevity, we present three themes with at least one representative quote for each theme: Caste as an Obsolete Construct, Meritocracy and the Denial of Structural Inequalities, and Caste as Localized and Traditional in South Asia.

5.1 Theme 1: Caste as an Obsolete Construct

Rahul framed caste as a thought of the ancient past in various instances during the interview. For instance, when asked what caste means to him, Rahul answered:

> **Interviewer:** *What does caste mean to you?*

> **Rahul:** *For me, it's a kind of a community, I can say so, but once you come out of your place, I don't think it has [any] value. So, if you stay in your place, you give more preference to it. It's like we are grouped by country names, and then we [are] grouped by states. And in the States, we have districts, we have villages. In the village, we have community, community names [are] the caste. That's what I feel. So that's how it is. But a typical Indian caste is something more than that. So, if I talk about my parents' point of view, like they had, they wanted to take caste somewhere else on the next level. But [the] good part of them is like they stop the thing with them, as I said earlier, right, you know the world now, the world is not about caste. It is something else. So if [you're] just stuck to that, you're behind something so I think maybe I was being all the time outside my place. So, from the very beginning, I used to be like that, so I think I don't have this thing in my mind at all. So, it's just a name tag, something, whatever. It's the name of the community you come from.*

Rahul expresses that caste is the "name of the community" one belongs to. He rationalizes it further by seeing the divisions we have created as different countries, which are then divided into states, states into districts, districts into villages, and in the villages, which are then divided into various communities, that is, one's caste identity, according to him. However, he then agrees that

a "typical Indian caste is something more" than just a community identity from his parents' perspective. He says that his parents would take the notion of caste to "the next level"; that is, caste identity/ pride has more salience for them, organizes their lives and who they will associate with, and sticks together as a community for their survival. However, Rahul claims that his parents stopped these views of caste and community with them; that is, they did not pass their views or enforce these views on him; so, in turn, he is not impacted or affected by their opinions on caste identity. Since he has traveled away from his hometown, he recognizes that "the world is not about caste" and that if one holds tightly to pride in caste identity, they cannot become modern, implying that caste is an obsolete construct. Hence, to be more relevant to the contemporary cosmopolitan world, Rahul declares that he doesn't "have it [caste] in his mind." So, as someone who wants to fit in the cosmopolitan modern world around him, Rahul thinks of caste as only a "name tag," the community one comes from, and irrelevant in this modern world.

This quote shows Rahul's perception that caste is irrelevant in the modern cosmopolitan world and has no significance beyond his parents' generation. On a surface level, it communicates a belief in a cosmopolitan identity free from caste divisions. However, this narrative allows him to reinforce caste privilege beliefs by denying its continued relevance and material influence in social and professional networks across the world. Rahul's positionality as a savarna man enables him to experience transnational mobility without the barriers that oppressed caste individuals continue to face. This denial and minimization of caste demonstrate how caste blindness is enacted through Rahul's discourse.

5.2 Theme 2: Meritocracy and the Denial of Structural Inequalities

Rahul frequently emphasizes the belief that success is solely the result of individual effort and merit and so rationalizes that affirmative action policies hinder the meritocratic system. For example, when the interviewer probes him further about the reservations, trying to understand his stance on the system and his resistance to discussing caste and education earlier:

> **Interviewer:** *so what? What does this all make you feel? Yeah, how do you view this like, what? What is your point of view on all these? Or, what is one message you would say from all these reservation policies?*

> **Rahul:** *It is going as an-- in as far as I know this, reservations are meant to improve the minor sections to be like, to make it equalize all the caste, all the religions, so, but it's been a very long time. Maybe it is not impacting right now, but if it goes a little further, people will lose interest because even though they're studying hard, they're not getting seats, they lose interest, and all the people without knowledge will be in good positions. It will definitely impact the development of our country, or anything, or anything, I can say so obviously, when and also, people flew away from the countries because of it, they don't find good opportunities. They just want to get away from this place. They feel like government jobs are not at all for us. They feel that way, definitely, and I haven't seen anyone in my caste try for some government job. It's been some 20 years; I haven't seen anyone because they feel like it's hard; man, it's hard. You cannot. It's high competition. It's like there's nothing I can do. So, I think there's no point in doing we'll lose the best, and it will affect the development at the end when you have the best. So, for example, he had some of the best teams for cricket, so he could use them to win the World Cup. So, remove all the Top 11 and use the rest 11, someone from the State team. It's hard to win*

the World Cup. So, in the end, you need to compete with someone from some other world who is better than you. So, when we put aside our best and try to focus on others, so it will affect our overall development.

In this quote, Rahul views reservations (affirmative action policy) as a mechanism initially intended to uplift marginalized groups and "equalize all the caste, all the religions." However, he argues that these policies have persisted for "a very long time" and are now counterproductive, as exemplified by the cricket team. He points out that in a cricket team of 11 members, one would choose the best 11 in the country to showcase their cricket skills, not the second-best 11 members. This comparison further reinforces a hierarchy of "the best" versus "the others," implying that reservations undermine merit by excluding the most talented individuals from opportunities. In a sport like cricket, perhaps selecting the nation's best players is okay; however, it is not a logical analogy and an appropriate view of education. This implies meritocratic thinking, where success is framed as dependent solely on individual effort and ability rather than acknowledging structural inequities that reservations aim to address. Furthermore, Rahul draws on a discourse of national development, claiming that reservations lead to "people without knowledge" occupying "good positions," which harms the nation's progress. He extends this critique to argue that reservations create disillusionment among those from his caste (upper caste/savarna), driving them away from government jobs and even out of the country. This discourse constructs reservations as a barrier to national competitiveness and frames upper-caste migration as a rational response to systemic unfairness. Rahul seems to be positioning himself as part of a group unfairly excluded from opportunities due to reservations, emphasizing how his caste experiences intense competition and disincentives for pursuing specific roles. By suggesting that reservations "are not impacting right now" or are no longer necessary, Rahul implies that the reservations are not causing any societal damage yet. Still, if they keep continuing, they might disincentivize hard work. Therefore, Rahul appears to be constructing reservations as a threat to fairness and progress, positioning the savarnas as victims of these policies. Earlier in our conversation, he suggested that the unfairness of these reservations in government jobs drives many savarna people away from their home country to other countries in search of job opportunities.

This quote shows us that Rahul's narrative aligns with the abstract liberalism tenet of caste blindness, which upholds meritocracy as a justification for maintaining existing inequalities. His framing of affirmative action as unfair reveals a lack of awareness of historical and structural barriers that lower-caste individuals continue to face. This perspective perpetuates caste privilege by framing systemic inequities as personal shortcomings of marginalized groups. Rahul's language enacts caste blindness by reinforcing the idea that opportunity is equally available to all.

5.3 Theme 3: Caste as Localized and Traditional in South Asia

Despite Rahul's insistence that caste does not influence his experiences in the U.S., his reasons for the claim, being denial or minimization of caste, indicate the transnational persistence of caste privilege. For example, when asked about his opinion on caste and its impact on the US engineering and computing education/ professional workspaces:

> **Interviewer:** *Do you think caste plays or caste has a [role] in the US? If yes or no, also think about thinking about a lot of like, particularly engineering and software industries, and thinking about the number of Indians and South Asians in those industries, so*

thinking all about that, and do you still think caste has a role to play? If yes or no, why or why not?

Rahul: I think they're not at all [caring about caste identity]. Because here people once come out of the country, they look for the people with the same country that 'Are you from India? Hi. How are you?' [Caste] doesn't matter. [People in the US] don't care for caste at all. As of now, I haven't come across this thing, so maybe I have been not here for a very long time. As far as I know, I think it's not a big deal. I don't think no one cares here or bothers about it.

In this quote, Rahul expresses his perspective on caste within the U.S. Though he has only been in the country for a year, he observes that caste identity is not at the forefront of a conversation. Even when he meets people from India, they do not talk directly about caste ("caste doesn't matter"). Rahul admits that he has not come across the caste conversation even amongst Indians, and that leads him to believe that one's caste identity does not matter in a foreign country, where there is a culmination of many cultures. Since it is not at the front of the conversation, as for his parents/ family members in India, he believes it does not matter here in the U.S. However, by expressing caste as an irrelevant factor in the social lives of Indians in the U.S., Rahul sidesteps the privilege and access that caste provides, even in a foreign land. This reflects a discourse of transnational unity, where national origin becomes a primary identity marker, overshadowing caste distinctions.

Rahul portrays Indian immigrants as prioritizing commonality and shared cultural experiences in a foreign context, suggesting that caste hierarchies lose their significance once individuals leave India. By claiming, "I haven't come across this thing," Rahul presumes that caste discrimination/ dynamics are absent in the U.S. However, as a savarna man, there is very little chance that he is discriminated against by his caste identity, even in another country. His underlying logic that caste discrimination is absent since he has not experienced it reveals how he decides to see the world and what he is/not curious about. That is, since he has not encountered caste-based discrimination and thinks that caste is an obsolete construct (as seen in Theme 1), he lets himself view the world as void of caste-based discrimination. Implying that his experiences of caste are representative of the larger South Asian communities is problematic. It is also supportive of the fact that he allows himself not to be curious about caste-based experiences, and his identity as a savarna man reinforces these caste-blind ideas and beliefs.

This framing aligns with a caste-blind perspective, denying the persistence of caste-based inequities and minimization of caste within the diaspora. Rahul's language, such as "I don't think no one cares," reinforces the idea that caste is not actively practiced or discussed, suggesting it is not a "big deal" in the U.S. context. This discourse lets Rahul rationalize that caste discrimination is absent and strategically positions him away from the caste-oppressed communities and their experiences. In turn, this discourse erases how caste privilege and marginalization can be reproduced transnationally, such as through social networks, professional opportunities, and access to resources. For example, the Cisco Case and the statistics showing caste discrimination in U.S. educational institutions [4], [6]. By emphasizing shared nationality, Rahul allows himself to overlook how caste hierarchies can subtly shape interactions and opportunities, such as hiring and promotion practices, as seen in the Cisco case, even among Indians abroad.

6. Discussion and Future Work

Our analysis has offered insights into how caste blindness is articulated in the discourse on U.S. engineering and computing education. This analysis shows how caste is rendered invisible, naturalized, reframed, or situated within meritocratic narratives that deny structural inequities. The findings reveal that caste blindness does not simply manifest as a refusal to acknowledge caste but operates through complex rhetorical strategies that reassert privilege while renouncing responsibility.

One of the critical takeaways from this one-participant analysis is how caste blindness functions as a discursive mechanism that allows individuals to maintain caste privilege while framing their success as individualistic and purely meritocratic. We also encountered methodological and conceptual challenges with studying caste in spaces where it is presumed not to exist. Throughout this research process, Nivedita grapples with their position as an Indian savarna woman studying caste in U.S. STEM education. Their proximity to the subject matter, both personally and academically, has shaped their reading of the data and deepened their understanding of how caste blindness operates. Engaging with this topic has reinforced the importance of reflexivity in their research practice, particularly in recognizing how their own positionality influences the questions they ask and the conclusions they draw. As Nivedita continues this work, they intend to further explore how researchers studying caste negotiate their locations within these caste structures. This one-participant analysis has raised questions for them about how caste is made visible and invisible in engineering and computing education. These questions will guide their next steps as Nivedita continues investigating how caste operates in spaces where it is presumed absent. Their future work will continue to engage critically with caste blindness, not as a static concept but as an active process that takes shape in discourse, interactions, and institutional cultures.

While this study has focused on one savarna man's discourse, future work will engage with multiple perspectives to better understand how caste operates in engineering and computing spaces in the U.S. We plan to expand the analysis with how caste blindness manifests across caste-oppressed individuals who must navigate these dominant frameworks. We also aim to refine our analytical approach, exploring how to study caste-blindness not only through direct statements but also through silences, omissions, and implicit assumptions that shape how caste is discussed or avoided.

7. Conclusion

In this study, we used critical discourse analysis to explore how caste blindness operates in U.S. engineering and computing education. Our findings show that denying or ignoring caste and promoting a supposedly neutral meritocracy might inadvertently uphold existing systems of privilege. By extending Bonilla-Silva's color-blindness framework to include caste, we have sought to reveal the subtle biases woven into the language and narratives that shape our educational spaces. Furthermore, combining insights from color-blindness theory with our critical discourse analysis challenges the common belief in a neutral meritocracy. Our findings suggest that racial and caste-based systems of oppression are deeply connected, inviting us to rethink traditional ideas about equity and inclusion in education. We hope this approach not only enriches the theoretical conversation but also offers a practical, methodological insight for future research into everyday exclusion. Finally, we invite the readers to reflect on their own roles within these systems. Whether we are aware of it or not, each of us plays a part in reproducing the narratives that define our educational experiences. We sincerely hope that by acknowledging

and questioning the language and assumptions we have long taken for granted, we can take meaningful steps toward a more inclusive and equitable future.

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