Research Paper

Proposed Behavioural Science Intervention: Reducing the Impact of Caste-Based Bias and Prejudice in The Workplace Through the Prejudice-Habit Breaking Model

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ABSTRACT

This article entails crucial elements of how the caste system functions in the context of professional settings in India. Socioeconomic and political differentials across different domains breed an implicit bias that impacts the professional trajectory of individuals across the socially stratified segments. This article attempts to curate an intervention using strategies drawn predominantly from the prejudice habit-breaking model (Devine et al., 2017). This behavioural science intervention is specifically tailored to fit the context of caste-based bias and prejudice to address problems corresponding to the same.

Keywords: *Caste System, Prejudice, Bias, Prejudice-Habit Breaking Model, Implicit Bias*

The caste system in the context of India incorporates elements of socioeconomic and political differentials that posit a tendency to impact different institutional domains such as education, employment and healthcare, while affecting the professional outcomes related to the same. The caste system is premised on two groups- varnas and jatis. The caste-based varna system incorporates a four-fold division with the castes of Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders and merchants) and Shudras (individuals employed in abject jobs). The forward castes incorporate the former three that constitute the varna system, and on the contrary, backward castes incorporate the Scheduled Castes (SCs), who were previously categorized as *'Shudras'*, Scheduled Tribes (STs) and the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), i.e. the lower socioeconomic groups.

Caste-based prejudice and discrimination are pertinent in the context of India across several domains, despite the existence of a 'reservation' system for the provision of jobs, legislature and education (Ajit et al., 2012). This social stratification system holds the propensity to perpetuate prejudice and discrimination on grounds of the preconceived notions individuals have regarding the different occupations that have been ascribed to the different castes, i.e. through implicit bias. Individuals tend to hold this concerning the abilities and capacities of the backward castes on grounds of the traditionally categorized hierarchical divisions; therefore, imparting more relevance to the 'status quo' via ascribed status as opposed to leveraging the merit-based achievements and qualifications. Due to this form of bias and its tacit nature, the job prospects and outcomes of backward castes are vertically affected.

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As per the discrimination theory, there prevails an aversion to cross-racial integration in the Western context (Becker, 1971). This model can be deemed to be applicable even in the context of India, wherein, heterogeneity and inclusion aren't facilitated since they are likely to raise the cost of employers in professional settings and hold the propensity to lower their profits (Figar & Murari, 2016). Thus, investing in diversity and inclusion practices is crucial; however, it is incumbent upon the organization to incorporate programs and policies to foster it in a conducive manner.

To assess this further, a study was conducted by Throat and Attewell (Throat & Attewall, 2007), through an evaluation of job advertisements in India. According to the study, it was found that between 2005 and 2007 in India, the odds of receiving an affirmative response from a Dalit person (backward caste member), getting a positive response was 0.67% as opposed to that of an upper-caste applicant. The activation of the implicit bias about the same not only affects job outcomes but also the hiring and recruitment processes, professional upward mobility and further employability prospects for individuals coming from the backward caste group.

In the proposed RCT, the impact of the implicit bias and prejudice related to caste-based distinctions that surface in the workplace is covered.

The intervention draws insights from a model in a previously conducted longitudinal study (Devine et al., 2012), which focused on facilitating the reduction of racial bias and prejudice, with the recruitment of a population of undergraduate students in an educational setting with the administration of the Implicit Association Test (IAT), followed by interventions imparting education and training sessions, independently.

However, as opposed to the previous study, our study covers a population of working individuals in the context of India in a multinational setting. It is facilitated to discern the impact of implicit bias concerning caste-based job outcomes in the workplace, and consequently, assessing the attitudes of employees through the means of two separate interventions. These incorporate an education module and a training module, imparted to employees in two independent sessions over two weeks.

The first session will entail the dissemination of information related to the prevalence of systemic and institutional differences that lead to implicit bias based on caste-based distinctions, followed by the second session which covers how the implicit bias can be mitigated in the workplace through the means of different behavioural strategies through a training module. In the second session, individuals will also be nudged to reflect on the possible situations in which their stereotypes are activated tacitly, causing them to hold 'casteist', i.e. caste-based bias and prejudice. Subsequently, the second session will incorporate a training module, which will impart the teaching of strategies through which the individuals will be nudged to reflect on the possible scenarios, and discern the activation and impact of the implicit bias in the context of the workplace to assess the extent to which raises the scope of prejudice.

The intervention will entail strategies derived from the prejudice habit-breaking model (Devine et al., 2017), however, this intervention, is tailored to fit the context of caste-based bias and prejudice that prevails in the workplace. This model essentially focuses on demonstrating how implicit bias persists in a professional setting and how it surfaces

through behavioural attitudes. The previous study, it's about racial bias, however, this study will assess the impact of caste-based bias and prejudice on the professional front in the workplace.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling of Participants

For the experimental design, we select one multinational corporation setting to represent individuals working in a professional workplace for our population through block randomization to ensure an equal number of participants. The sample size includes the randomization of individuals, divided into two groups as a comparator through the parallel arm design. The first group will initially receive the first intervention while the second group will first receive the second intervention. Consequently, the first group will receive the second intervention and the second will receive the first.

Procedure and Materials

Intervention 1

This will include the education component, wherein, the following information will be provided:

The existence of a caste system in the modern world with respect to implicit bias (such as, in terms of caste-based associations in hiring, and recruitment practices as well as job outcomes). The caste system continually impedes opportunity outcomes for individuals, explicitly as well as implicitly. The explicit prevalence can be witnessed through outright prejudice and discrimination, however, when it comes to the implicit bias through which it surfaces, it is difficult to discern where the loopholes in the system are and how, if not collectively, individuals can identify the tacit ways in which it surfaces. Such as, through the recruitment and preference of forward caste members in positions of power as opposed to the backward caste members.

Providing information on the reservation system works and doesn't work as a reparative measure in jobs (public sector and private sector). The reservation system, particularly in the public sector and educational institutions, allows for individuals from marginalized groups, and in this context, the backward caste group to seek professional and educational opportunities through a quota basis for their grades and qualifications.

Imparting information on ways in which the private sector can incorporate diverse and inclusive practices to mitigate implicit bias. The private sector (i.e. multinational corporation settings) faces a dearth of reservations in terms of employing individuals from backward caste groups, despite claims of fostering diversity and inclusion in entirety. Therefore, robust reservation criteria must be implemented for employees to understand the importance of diversity and inclusion. While also focusing on how on an individual level, implicit bias can be challenged in day-to-day professional interactions.

Intervention 2

The training session will be imparted to individuals with 2 specific strategies derived from the prejudice habit-breaking model propounded to directly break the ingrained propensity of unconsciously resorting to bias and prejudice (Devine et al., 2012). Strategies to mitigate the impact of caste-based bias:

- **Stereotype Replacement**: Replacing the stereotypes associated with certain caste groups based the occupational-based hierarchical differentiation with an unbiased

response. This will involve individuals focusing more on the personal characteristics of colleagues they work with as opposed to ascribing stereotypes in their interactions with people from seemingly different castes. Individuals will be nudged to think of the possible scenarios in which they might tend to focus on caste, for example, the 'Blind CVs' approach, wherein, the hiring process by the employees involves the scrutinising of surnames to associate them with specific caste groups.

- **Counter Stereotypic Imaging:** Here, individuals will be nudged to think of scenarios wherein, they stereotypically assign certain ascriptions to specific castes and replace their responses with non-stereotypical ones. For example, the imaging of individuals from the lower castes in positions of power, while also probing them to think of real-life examples for the same.
- **Perspective Taking:** Nudging individuals in the groups to engage in active conversations regarding what they think caste-based bias manifests through their interactions with the stigmatized group, i.e. the lower caste groups, and understanding their experiences at the workplace in terms of facing bias and prejudice concerning job outcomes, hiring and so on.

Data Collection

Using the block randomization method in the parallel arm design, the data will be collected and analysed. Our primary outcome of a measurement is the change in attitudes of individuals post the interventions are facilitated in two stages. The study will take place over 2 weeks. Each intervention will be given within a gap of 1 week, and after each intervention, a questionnaire will be administered three days post the intervention, respectively.

Data Analysis

The primary outcome of a measurement is questionnaire responses of individuals post the first, and consequently the second intervention. This will assess the change in the mindset of individuals towards the backward caste members in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

The propose intervention essentially incorporates vital elements of how the caste system functions in the context of professional settings in India. Due to the prevalence of social stratification, many opportunities for individuals are hindered, with the prevalence of an implicit bias that is dictated in the process of hiring. Thus, this behavioural science intervention is an attempt to utilize the strategies from the prejudice habit-breaking model to witness the possibility of tangible changes in organizational settings for better diversity and inclusion practices, and address problems corresponding to the pertinence of the caste-based bias in organizational settings.

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