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Beyond Access: How University Life Shapes Inequality

A university degree is often the best chance at upward mobility. Yet, university life treats and rewards cultural, social, and economic capital as merit, thereby reproducing inequality. My doctoral work examines this contradictory quality of higher education through an ethnographic case study of Delhi University. Delhi University implements the world's most comprehensive affirmative action program, making the university the only institutional space in contemporary India where *all* social groups are represented somewhat proportional to their population in the country. Despite this widening of access, however, inequities remain. Using 18 months of ethnographic immersion and 45 in-depth interviews with students, my work investigates the routinized practices and dominant discourses that shape inequality *inside* the university, beyond the widening of access. It also pays attention to how students navigate these inequities. In doing so, it closely examines the conflicts, collaborations, and solidarities between students across social groups. In centering students' sociality, I approach caste as a highly adaptable practice of inequality that thrives in urban spaces and take seriously its intersections with other axes of inequality. In approaching caste as an urban and intersectional institution of inequality, my research reframes students' sociality as an account of a new urban citizenship that reconfigures divides of caste, class, region, and language, and produces new imaginaries that both challenge and reproduce inequality at the university.