“I’M A DALIT, SO WHAT?”

THE PRAGMATISM OF HIGHLIGHTING AND HIDING CASTE AMONG EDUCATED DALIT WOMEN

Dea Busk Larsen
Division of Social Anthropology
Department of Sociology, Lund University

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Supervisor: Ulf Johansson Dahre
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ABSTRACT

The literature on dalit women is limited and in particular knowledge on young dalit women who have completed a social mobility journey is inadequate. Redressing this, the study enquires into the role caste plays for well educated dalit women concerning being ‘cast(ed)’\(^1\) as dalits, their education, marriage and special opportunities. Moreover, this study seeks to understand how these perspectives and lived experiences are resistance to the caste system. The study draws on two months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the author in Kerala, India among a group of educated dalit women. It argues that young well educated dalit women exercise everyday resistance through pragmatic manoeuvring where they highlight and hide their caste for self-advancement.

*Key words: social anthropology, dalit, resistance, pragmatism, caste*

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\(^1\) This verb has two meanings: 1) It is my own word derived from ‘gendered’. 2) It refers to casting of actors. They are cast as dalits to fulfil a role in society they did not ask for.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>CREST</td>
<td>Centre for Research and Education for Social Transformation</td>
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<td>OBC</td>
<td>Other Backward Classes</td>
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<td>OEC</td>
<td>Other Eligible Communities</td>
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<td>SASNET</td>
<td>Swedish South Asian Studies Network</td>
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<td>SC</td>
<td>Scheduled Castes</td>
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

I’m very proud of being a dalit\(^2\). Because [as] I’m saying, they’re still struggling. I’m educated, I can do something for our society, I can change our society. That’s why I’m saying, I’m very proud of my community and being a dalit. [Just] because I’m a dalit, I don’t think I’m from a weaker society – I’m not ready to accommodate that kind of thing. *I’m a dalit, so what?* I can do something. I can achieve something. I’m proud of my community.

Haritha

Haritha\(^3\) is a 23 years old dalit\(^4\) woman who has just completed her master’s degree in journalism at a reputable college. She very well knows what it means to be dalit in a middle class she was not born into. Her dalit identity is what she is first and foremost in this new world she fought so hard to be part of. It is complex for young educated dalit women to manoeuver in a world where they by default do not belong. However, through a pragmatic use of caste, in which they sometimes highlight and at other times hide their identity, the dalit women are able to advance their position in society. The caste system is still a reality in India and informs the lives of all Indians by marginalising or privileging populations based on their caste. Dalits, who are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, suffer from and fight the system daily just by being or by claiming their constitutional and human rights. Starting with Louis Dumont (2002[1970]) many have seen dalits as being in consensus with the caste system and replicating it. This study challenges that argument. Haritha would never publicly share the opinions stated above and her actions might sometimes even seem to be contradicting her view on the caste system. Yet, educated dalit women are in daily, subtle resistance to the caste system; even if it at first glance seems they comply with it. Their experiences and perceptions of caste can be comprehended by applying James Scott’s (1985) ‘weapons of the weak’. More than 200 million dalits live in India and despite officially abolishing untouchability under the Indian Constitution in 1950, caste discrimination prevails and seeps into

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\(^2\) Formerly known as untouchables or harijans (children of God) and officially called Scheduled Castes. Dalit (meaning downtrodden or broken) is a political term, which sets dalits apart from dominant brahmanic culture and is a statement of self-representation. It has positive connotations of a people who have been oppressed but are still standing and fighting.

\(^3\) All names of informants are pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

\(^4\) Inspired by David Mosse (2012:285), I will not capitalise the term dalit to acknowledge that it is not a caste name but a collective identity claimed and used by a vast group of disadvantaged people.
all aspects of life. This is structural violence as understood by Johan Galtung (1969). This study challenges the early tradition of studying dalits from a solely male perspective and instead attempts to fill part of the gap in the literature on dalit women in India. Gopal Guru (1995) forcefully argues ‘dalit women talk differently’ as a critique of the lack of studies concerning dalit women. Today the studies of dalit women are more plentiful but we need to take it a step further and recognise that dalit women talk differently within that group. During the past twenty years, academic writing has begun to offer a narrative from the perspective of dalit women but most of it has been centred on rural uneducated dalit women’s collectives. This study looks at the young generation with university degrees, who live lives that in many ways are similar to the upper castes. The study focuses particularly on how caste plays out in these young women’s lives. Based on two months of ethnographic fieldwork in Kerala, India, using participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I explore what caste means to young dalit women who have achieved a social mobility journey through higher education. My research questions are: What role does caste play for well educated dalit women in regards to education, marriage and special opportunities? Secondly, I seek to understand: How are these women in resistance to the caste system? The study concludes that well educated dalit women are exceptionally pragmatic in how and when they highlight and hide their caste to advance themselves – this is everyday resistance against the caste system.

OUTLINE OF THESIS

The paper is structured as follows. Chapter 2, succeeding this introduction, is a review of the literature in the field. No study has been conducted on this specific topic but the review draws on literature that has dealt with aspects of the dalit question of interest to this study. In chapter 3 we are introduced to the theoretical framework, which develops from a broad outlining of caste and my understanding of it. Then the caste system as structural violence to dalit women is scrutinised. Finally, I explore the manoeuvring of dalit women as resistance to the caste system. Chapter 4 engages with the methodology and ethics. Subsequently chapter 5 helps us understand the context of Kerala and the Indian affirmative action scheme. Chapter 6-9 opens the analysis where I examine what it means to be ‘cast(ed)’ as dalit. Moreover, dalit women’s views on education, marriage and their special opportunities are considered. The analysis emphasises how the pragmatism they embody in highlighting and hiding their caste is resistance. Finally, chapter 10 stands as the concluding remarks where the main findings and arguments are stressed. Throughout the paper I
use the terms (young) dalit women, (well) educated dalit women, informants and research actors interchangeably to call attention to the complexity of their position.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is a review of the literature in the field of dalit studies. No study has been conducted on this specific topic but the review draws on literature that has dealt with aspects of the dalit question that is also under examination in my study.

Most of the research on dalit women is on middle-aged women who have received training from NGOs or joined sangams (women’s federations). These studies are often concerned with oppression and violence based on dalit women’s gender, class and caste status (Chakravarti 2008; Govinda 2009; Irudayam, Mangubhai and Lee 2011; Larsen 2014; Mangubhai 2013). The dalit women make a difference in their local, often rural, community and have become ‘aware’ late in life. They are concerned with livelihood, physical violence, caste obligations and fight to make it better for their children (Ram 2008; Still 2014). The dalit women I am studying are very different from these women. It is in the broadest understanding of it the next generation I am conducting research into.

One of the main tensions in the anthropology of dalits is whether dalits embody their own culture or whether they aspire to dominant brahmanic culture. The second is when lower castes try to seek upward social mobility through the adaptation of practices and norms belonging to upper castes. This is called sanskritisation (Srinivas 1962). Before elaborating on the debate from a theoretical angle in chapter 3 we will look at the issue from an ethnographic perspective. In a recent study, Manuela Ciotti (2010:12) supports the latter argument by suggesting that dalits who aspire to become middle class pursue an ideal, which the upper castes sought during the colonisation and today is obsolete. In other words, the dalits of contemporary Varanasi strive for the norms of upper castes that they had put behind them centuries ago. Clarinda Still’s (2014) study of dalit women in southern India is a current example of the opposite argument. Still (2014:209) contends that dalit women:

both emulate and reject high-caste values; they want to be like the upper castes and yet utterly distinct from them, too. They are drawing on a set of values heavily associated with the upper castes whilst simultaneously fashioning themselves in determined contrast to the upper castes.

5 Brahmanic refers to the brahmin priest class, which is the highest in the caste system.
Still (2014) finds that poor middle-aged dalit women in south India are occupied with status symbolised through the values honour and respect. They can obtain this by becoming so economically affluent that they do not have to work outside their home anymore. The dalit women strive to become housewives like many women in the middle class in their generation. This does not mean simply becoming like the upper castes. Instead, they are affirming a distinct, politicised dalit identity, which is even in opposition to upper caste culture. They for example celebrate beef eating, drumming and leather work, which are symbols of shame in brahmanical Hinduism. It is their ‘politics of culture’, Still (2014) argues.

In the process of advancing in society, pragmatism has been an often used tool to succeed. David Mosse (1994) and Jordan C. R. Mullard (2014) suggest that dalits accept subordination and patronage in exchange of economic security. To achieve something of priority, such as economic security, dalits are willing to negotiate other aspects, which are of less importance to them. To say that it is to accept inferiority is a stretch. I suggest that it is pragmatic negotiation of self-advancement and never an acceptance of status quo. When Clarinda Still (2011:315) examines dalit perspectives towards the state in Andhra Pradesh she finds that dalits are “essentially pragmatic: they see the state in terms of what they can extract from it”. While their encounters with the state are not always successful, they still believe they can use the state’s resources to their gain. When unsuccessful they do not accept it as subordination, but pragmatically try again. Reservations are a useful example of a public resource that is prominent to dalits’ self-assertion and their acts towards upward social mobility. To benefit from the reservation schemes they may have to endure humiliation by upper caste bureaucrats. Pragmatism does not necessarily mean they are in agreement with the caste hierarchy but it means they may tolerate injustices to achieve what is truly important to them.

Pragmatism is also expressed through language. During my interviews I often heard the research actors use ‘they’ when speaking of upper castes but also when speaking of uneducated dalits. The educated dalits are from a background that they are very different from today – the illiterate ‘backward’ dalit, that is. Their caste background at the same time means they do not readily belong to the middle class they have stepped into, which is in accord with other studies (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998:238-248; Samuelsen 2013). Educated dalits balance between their superior status
and their ascriptive status. Ciotti (2010:9) calls this phenomenon “a ‘socially schizophrenic condition’ of progressing through claims of lagging behind”. Their sense of belonging is unstable and fluid depending on the context.

D. D. Nampoothiri (2013) deals with this aspect of not belonging. He finds that dalit students prefer discretion when collecting their stipends. The recipients consider the public aspect of stipend distribution abusive. In general, these students prefer that others do not disclose their caste identity (Nampoothiri 2013:271). They want to be in charge and dislike when it is out of their hands to reveal their caste. Many of my informants learnt they were dalits and ‘different’ in the educational system, which Guro W. Samuelsen (2013:102) also establish. Anupama Rao (2006) studies lower caste politics of nineteenth-century Maharashtra and she writes that their identity was one “to be transcended, not reified, but this could only happen by identifying themselves as a stigmatized community. One had to embrace one’s status as a degraded subject in order, simultaneously, to transcend that position”. It is ironic that to transcend caste one has to be subjected to one’s caste. They have to be dalits to be more than just dalits. The reservation system works the same way. It forces them to identify their caste and that identification becomes essential for later to surpass their caste.

Moreover, pragmatism is also evident in dalits’ words of self-expression. The term dalit has replaced stigmatising terms such as harijan, Scheduled Castes (SC) and untouchables in academia and among activists. My informants, however, prefer Scheduled Castes or simply SC. I have thought long and hard about what that means to their understanding of themselves as dalits. I find that young dalit women see their caste as part of their community identity rather than as caste oppression. Using SC vis-à-vis dalit is not in opposition to that. Kalpana Ram (2008:135-136) describes the same in her research of a fishing community in Tamil Nadu. The working class dalit women do not resonate with the term dalit. To them caste most prominently means community. Only secondly they see it as subordination to upper castes. Eva-Marie Hardtmann (2009:50) asserts that the dalit label as an identity is part by birth and part by becoming ‘aware’. I find that the young well educated dalit women, without identifying with the term dalit, are aware on a local personal level of the impact of caste on their lives but not as part of a greater dalit movement. ‘Dalit’ was never used by any of my informants, except one, which also means it is an academic and elitist
label applied to people who would not use it, ironically – and I am also guilty of that. The term dalit suggests, “that the huge Untouchable population of India has been swept up into a single radical politics” (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998:4), which they of course have not. Dalits who are actively engaged as activists in the traditional sense consider themselves dalits before anything else (Samuelsen 2013), but to an ordinary dalit it is different. Alan Marriott (2003) finds that dalits in a national survey in 1998-1999 widely preferred to use harijan to dalit. In fact no one even chose dalit in their act of self-naming. Even two decades later the use of dalit is still reserved for an urban elite activist segment of the dalits, which the young dalit women’s non-use of the label shows. Today harijan is, nevertheless, outdated but SC is instead widely used.

This pragmatism in dealing with caste translates into resistance, which others before me also have been concerned with. Samuelsen (2013) studies dalit activists in north India and how they utilise their history of exclusion and dalit-hood as a resource for political assertion. In social exclusion they have found unity from where they fight the caste system. The dalit activists comprehend dalit-hood as emancipatory because it becomes a critique of brahmanical values (Samuelsen 2013:113). By embracing their background dalits manifest a criticism of the caste system. Still (2009:7) sees a similar pattern where dalits “use their caste status as a resource which can be invoked when it is beneficial, and downplayed when it is not”. These dalits both reject and exploit their caste to their advantage. Their dalit identity is also a resource when it grants them state sponsored economic and educational benefits. They manipulate caste, which emphasise an understanding of caste-as-identity rather than caste-as-hierarchy, since it is “malleable, relational and context-specific” (Still 2009:9). Through an understanding of caste-as-identity, social mobility becomes possible and dalits can enter the middle class.

Education is central to dalits’ efforts in joining the middle class and perhaps even crucial (Srinivas 2016). Notwithstanding, Craig Jeffrey, Roger Jeffery and Patricia Jeffery (2004:964) show that education is “only partially successful in raising the social standing and economic position of disadvantaged groups” in their study of unemployed educated dalit men in north India. In other words, without education dalits would not have the means to enter the middle class but education

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6 One might ask how come I use dalit to describe my informants when it obviously is not the classification they prefer. After thorough consideration I chose dalit because of the widespread use of it in academia, which this study is part of, even if my informants do not see them as that. I believe the term dalit rather than Scheduled Castes speaks on behalf of my informants in an academic text like this.
cannot do it alone. More than half a century ago Kathleen Gough (1960:32) notes that caste is a limitation to occupational choices but not determining. These observations help us understand that caste plays a role even if one has completed a social mobility journey. The dalit men studied by Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery (2004) are unemployed and cannot find jobs within their field and hence have to accept unskilled work. Their dalit background limits them in getting the jobs they are educated to fill, but they have still broken free from the caste based occupations former generations had no choice than to take.

Jules Naudet (2008) is one of the first to study the dalit elite. He examines, through interviews, how upward social mobility is perceived by dalit men who have attained prominent jobs in the private sector. He finds that at the heart of dalit identity is “an ethos of mobility” (Naudet 2008:421). This is also central to the experience in the study at hand where one characteristic they all have in common is a given belief in improvement of their condition. Moreover, Naudet (2008:434) maintains that “[s]ocial mobility can indeed hardly be conceived without a minimal identification with dominants, without a certain desire to become like them”. Again, we end up with a version of the sanskritisation argument that most of the literature advocates. This study will challenge that.

What it means to be dalit is complex, varied and at times contradictory. This is also evident in the review of the literature where different perspectives on dalits’ lived experiences in India exist. Yet, we do not know much about well educated dalit women and how they look at caste and the caste system specifically. This study attempts to fill part of that gap. Next, based on this review of relevant literature I want to explore the theoretical framework.
Choosing a theoretical framework has not been straightforward since there has not been much to lean on within the field itself. That is one of the reasons why I have chosen the inductive method and I use theories drawn from different origins. Some have already been applied to the dalit question in different contexts while I have applied others. I start broadly by framing caste and my understanding of it and then I discuss the caste system as structural violence to dalit women. Finally, I explore the resistance of dalit women against the caste system.

CASTE AS A SOCIAL STRUCTURE
To develop the theoretical framework I want to start broadly by discussing caste as a social structure. I begin where many anthropologists before me have set off with the individual’s relationship to societal structures – theoretically that means with Claude Lévi-Strauss and structuralism. As we already know, the practice of untouchability is illegal in India but it is still widely practised. It is a social structure that informs the lives of individuals. Lévi-Strauss regards structures of society to be the product of patterns formed in the human brain (Flemming 2010:155). Structures are unconscious, however, not static or inevitable as structuralism otherwise states. Dalits are only dalits because of their relationship with other castes. Without this relationship between castes, untouchability would be impossible. Dalits only become dalit when they are measured in relation to the rest of the caste system. Célestin Bouglé (1971) argued in agreement when claiming that the caste system is based on separation, hierarchy and interdependence. Joan P. Mencher (1974:470), however, emphasises that when looking at the caste system from below rather than from above, exploitation also becomes a key characteristic. Louis Dumont’s seminal work *Homo Hierarchicus* (2002) makes a similar structural argument. He finds that the particular hierarchy is a matter of the relationship to the whole. Dumont provides a broad picture, which helps one to start understanding the caste system in general, often generalised, terms (Appadurai 1988:45). I, however, find Dumont’s views problematic because they, in the context of my research, make my informants agentless and robs them the ability to resist the system and their position in it. This is partially the case because Dumont understands the caste system in binary oppositions on the basis of religious ideas of purity and impurity. Framing caste as religious has the implication that it becomes a strictly Hindu phenomenon despite having penetrated all religions. Moreover, Dumont
contends that this view of the caste system is universal and shared by Indian society as a whole. He believes dalits live in consensus with the system and replicate the dominant brahmanical Hindu culture. This viewpoint has created immense debate among scholars; most notable is the critique by Gerald D. Berreman (1971) and Mencher (1974). They find that Dumont has taken the upper castes’ view on caste and made it universal ignoring the extensive variations to this across the caste spectrum. Dumont’s perspective is brahmanical, implicating that “Brahmins produce and reproduce purity, so Untouchables are perpetual human disposal systems for the impurity of others” (Appadurai 1986:751), bluntly put. Dalits being the site of impurity vis-à-vis brahmins as purity is contested by Sundar Sarukkai (2009). He argues that untouchability is at the heart of the touchables. Touching is always a component of being touched and hence it is a reversible and relational relationship rather than a hierarchical one (Sarukkai 2009:39,47). Thus the brahmin also inhabits impurity and is in fact the “real site of untouchability” (Sarukkai 2009:43 emphasis in original).

As established, caste in India has been discussed, classified, contested and examined by many. Even so, a nearly universal way of understanding caste, though simplistic, exists. Since the British Raj, the caste system has been characterised by four hierarchical varnas (classes) with the dalits (and the adivasis⁷) below it. This hierarchical view of the caste system also implies that India stands in stark contrast to the west. It is a fundamental difference of the presence of a caste system in contrast to a lack of it. I, nevertheless, believe western categorisations of people replicate the Indian caste system but in a more subtle implicit way than the explicit by birth granted castes, which are unfamiliar to the western eye. This assumption of caste as a traditional institution opposed to the modern west “also presupposes that Indian society is at an evolutionary stage different from the West” (Jodhka 2015:3). It supposes that caste will ultimately vanish on its own when western modernity hits India. Dumont essentially understands caste and India by its difference to the west – the core of caste and thus India is fundamentally dissimilar to the west (Appadurai 1986:745). However, I find that this binary opposition downplays the caste system to being solely cultural and historical, which legitimises its existence and again ignores the perspective of those at the bottom. I find that young well educated dalit women resist the caste system, in a subtle and indirect way perhaps, but their view on caste is just as valid a definition as the broadly accepted top-down understanding of it.

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⁷ The indigenous population of India.
Furthermore, Dumont’s theory asserts that dalits replicate the caste system and uphold the same structures that suppress them. This view is supported in Michael Moffatt’s (1979) ethnographic study of dalits in south India. Moffatt (1979:3) maintains that dalits reproduce the same caste hierarchy, which marginalises them in the first place. Moffatt, however, fails to distinguish between the norm and the act. Dalits are in a unique position where they can use the brahmanical values to gain certain benefits and at other times not attach any importance to them. Thus dalits are aware of the norm and might adhere to it at times (or pretend to) but often their actions and opinions are in opposition (Mencher 1974:476). This is key to the study at hand. These young dalit women highlight and hide their caste to advance their own position. Robert Deliège (1992:156) also finds this in the example of beef eating among dalits. Dalits are stigmatised because they eat the meat of an animal regarded as sacred in Hinduism. Deliège (1992:167) observes that dalits eat beef but deny it at times to please upper castes. However, they continue to enjoy beef and thus it seems they do not believe in the polluting nature of such act. Additionally, Karin Kapadia (1995:7) asserts that dalits “have always interpreted their own identities differently from the way in which the upper castes have constructed them”. The Dumontian view on caste “has been in part an attempt to prevent the recognition, or even perhaps the conscious development, of organized class-based groups in Indian society” (Mencher 1974:478). In other words, it has been a discourse that supports continuous exploitation and oppression of the dalit community. This cultural consensus of Dumont’s simply does not exist.

As shown, Dumont and I look at caste differently. Four of the most common models of understanding caste have been shared by Satish Deshpande and Mary E. John (2010:40 emphasis in original): 1) caste as lower caste – ironically, dalits do not belong to any caste; they are below the caste system. This is certainly how Dumont views caste. 2) caste as “a complex meaning-giving institution of great importance in ordering everyday life”. This is a greatly anthropological take on caste. 3) “caste as a web of distributional relations” such as power, privilege and material resources. This definition is relational and part of the idea that caste only has meaning because of parts that make a whole. 4) caste “as the single most important obstacle to attaining modernity”. The final perspective is also part of Dumont’s idea of caste.
The concept of structural violence (Galtung 1969) can be used to understand the situation of well educated dalit women. Structural violence refers to the deprivation, oppression and inequality people face because of the social, economic, political and cultural space they inhabit. Structural violence is usually unnoticeable, embedded in the social structures and normalised through institutions and repeated experiences (Winter and Leighton 2001:1). Structural violence is exercised in a society where inequality is vast. For structural violence to occur no concrete actor needs to be identifiable (Galtung 1969:171). This makes it seem ordinary and natural because it is ‘just the way things are’. Nonetheless, structural violence can often be exemplified through direct violence, but that is not the focus of this study. Instead we need to expand our definition of violence to be more than physical acts, to understand it in this context. It is structures of inequality and oppression that hinder people in reaching their actual potentials (Galtung 1969:168). Structural violence prevents people from being and doing the best possible. The caste system is indeed an example of structural violence at work. In this study structural violence is clearest when we look at the underrepresentation of dalits in the education system and in jobs in the private sector. The argument of structural violence has been used to understand the situation of extremely marginalised groups but it can also help us understand the situation of well educated dalit women who in many ways are privileged. Understanding their situation through structural violence gives us a tool to understand their pragmatism. One of its tools is the erasing of history (Farmer 2004:308), which diminishes the needs for special attention to dalits in for example education. Johan Galtung (1990) furthers his argument by introducing the concept of cultural violence, which might be even more relevant in this context. Cultural violence means when aspects of a culture are used to legitimise structural or direct violence. Brahmanic Hindu values as the true India, in its extreme form expressed through the Hindutva movement, is cultural violence. The example of illegalisation of beef eating in several Indian states can again be highlighted. Now as an illustration of dalit culture being subject to structural violence. The mainstream devaluation of darker skin, curly hair and certain aesthetics associated with dalit culture also stress the relevance of the theory of cultural violence. The research actors speak vividly of how they live up to the culture of mainstream India – from having the right names to wearing the correct clothes to speaking articulately. They speak of how much alike they are to the upper castes; that they are not any different. This is not a devaluation of their own culture,  

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8 An ideology seeking to establish the hegemony of Hindus and the Hindu way of life.
I will argue. They are not practicing cultural violence against themselves but they are being pragmatic. They are playing the game and they are resisting the way society looks at dalits by not living up to the stereotypes. This is in contrast to Pierre Bourdieu’s (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:167 emphasis in original) symbolic violence, “*which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity*”. Bourdieu speaks of ‘knowing agents’ and complicity but the argument that dalits are part of the reason of their oppression is flawed. They are knowing agents in the way that they are aware of the power structures and hierarchy but they are not complicit. It might seem so, as I will further in the analysis, but they use the system on its terms to break the system.

**EVERYDAY RESISTANCE**

Drawing on James Scott’s (1985) understanding of resistance in everyday life by marginalised groups, I comprehend the lives of young well educated dalit women. One might question if my group of informants are in fact marginalised because they are at the top of the bottom. Nonetheless, they are a minority in a society that devalues them by birth. Yet, they ‘made it’ (of course, it will be interesting to see how it will go entering the job market) and they are examples of an immense social mobility journey. They are examples of what India thought would happen within a decade of introducing quotas – but 70 years later. They have not taken their struggle to the streets and angrily yelled with raised fists but young well educated women fight the system daily. Their resistance is local, unorganised, concerns themselves and implicit or to put it in Scott’s (1985:29) words: “They require little or no coordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms”. Just by being well educated, female and dalit they are in resistance. This study rejects Gramscian concepts of hegemony and false consciousness. Not because of a refutation that well educated dalit women do not experience this. They might in fact be bystanders of their oppression and oppressors at times, but even if this is at play, their reaction to it, as counterproductive as it might seem, is resistance. Enduring the hierarchical status quo can for example be an obtainment of bargaining power to resist something else at a later time. This is central to the argument of this study. Their resistance is pragmatism. Everyday forms of protest have been present for long but have often not been recognised because they are not readily obvious. Educated dalit women manoeuvre and destabilise the hierarchy and their oppression by making use of everyday forms of resistance. Scott’s (1985) ethnographic work on peasant resistance in rural Malaysia contends that the poor peasants are fully aware of the power relations and the ideologies presented by the rich. The weapons they use are
“foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth” (Scott 1985:29). Kapadia (1995) applies Scott’s theory to dalit women in Tamil Nadu where she finds that they reject the representations of dalits by upper castes. They create their own “normative world in which they have dignity, self-respect and power” (Kapadia 1995:5). I suggest that educated dalit women go a step further. They do not just create their own value system they also shatter the existing.

By building a theoretical framework that first scrutinises the caste system and the structural violence that is implicit in it, I sought to frame dalit women’s resistance to this system. In my analysis I will show how dalit women practice this resistance by pragmatically highlighting and hiding their caste. Next, methodological and ethical considerations will be scrutinised.
CHAPTER 4
METHODOLOGY

THE SITE

My field site was in the city of Calicut\(^9\), or Kozhikode as it is officially called, in the most southern state of India, Kerala, neighbouring Tamil Nadu and Karnataka (see figure 1). Calicut inhabits over 500,000 people.

\(^9\) I prefer to use Calicut to Kozhikode because it is the name used by the inhabitants of Calicut.
Few tourists pass through the city and soon I became known as belonging to Centre for Research and Education for Social Transformation (CREST), as most foreigners who roam this part of town have a connection to this institution. My field site unfolds from two locations in Calicut; namely the CREST campus and the women’s hostel where the female students of CREST live. CREST is an autonomous centre under the government of Kerala. They recruit 40 graduates and postgraduates from lower caste background biyearly with the mission of “help[ing] the marginalized and the underprivileged gain confidence, build competence and achieve excellence in all spheres of human endeavour, for their social, cultural and economic development through education” (CREST 2017). The campus lies on the outskirts of the city of Calicut in northern Kerala. The campus shares a building with a tribal research centre that mostly keeps to itself. CREST occupies the rooms to the right of the entrance on the first floor of the two-storey building. When one enters the classrooms and offices the piercing heat is disturbed by buzzing fans and air-condition that regulate the temperature to a degree reminding me of being back in the Swedish winter. 40 students are enrolled at CREST of which 24 are women. Most of them are dalits but a few also come from Other Backward Classes (OBC) and adivasi communities. In the middle of the campus an open concrete area dominates which one passes through to get to the library and the second classroom. The library with one table is rarely used except by the librarian – I try using it one day but the librarian seems a bit unhappy with my continuous presence so I move back into my office after lunch. The books in the library span from anthropological classics to English literary masterpieces to Excel 2002. The main classroom is also the computer lab with a disproportionately large oval table in the middle and computers decorating the space by the walls forming a u-shape. To get to the back of the classroom one has to navigate closely to squeeze through without bumping into anyone and trigger an avalanche of apologies. One never mistakes the students for outsiders because they always wear uniforms they chose the design of collectively. One of the more memorable outfits is the female students’ bright pink kurtas (tunics) that at times seemed brighter than the sun at midday.¹⁰

A ten-minute bus ride from here is the women’s hostel. I rarely take the bus by myself in sheer fear that I would get on the wrong bus and would not be able to find my way back. Near the bus stop at the end of a small side road one finds the hostel. The road can barely fit a car, which in no way limited the car traffic on it, often forcing me to step aside into piles of rubbish waiting to be burnt. All of the female students live at the hostel and they share rooms with six in each. This hostel is

¹⁰ The curious reader can experience them on the front page.
also my home during the fieldwork. I occupy a room on the floor below the students, next to the dining hall. The hostel has a dining area but at dinner most of the women prefer enjoying their food on the steps outside in the cool air instead of at the small dining table. The students are served a mix of vegetarian, fish and chicken dishes. Every Saturday we have egg curry and chappati (flatbread) – my absolute favourite. The students share small rooms, excluding cupboards and shelves, and keep their clothes in the suitcases they moved in with. Before entering the bedrooms, a big room sparsely decorated with two tables used for studying as well as for as chatting welcomes you. One of the tables is always partially covered with a cloth, used as an ironing board. The roof of the building is flat and looks like they never fully finished building it. Metal rods blossom from the concrete floor as plants across the area. The roof is used for the drying of clothes, and cords are spread out as a spider web full of colourful garments. The more unofficial use of the roof is for having private phone conversations often with boyfriends.

**ACCESS TO THE FIELD**

From earlier studies and personal experience I had an idea of my topic but I thought it would be difficult to get access to the field. It however went extraordinarily smooth because of several coincidences in my favour. I planned to get in contact with the NGO I had worked for in Tamil Nadu two years back. I, however, knew that I did not want to work with women who were actively involved with NGO work and they happened to be those they would be able to put me in contact with. I then learnt that the Swedish South Asian Studies Network (SASNET) at Lund University had a travel scholarship to CREST in Kerala. After finding out that the majority of their students were young dalit women I knew this was an excellent opportunity for me to research my topic of interest. It not only meant I had gatekeepers who took care of all the practicalities while I was in the field, it also meant direct access to my research actors from day one. I did not choose the site of Kerala or Calicut actively but I chose CREST. I was concerned about the site of Kerala because it is the most developed state in India and when I first arrived I did not meet the marginalised dalits I knew about from the literature and from my own work. These young people spoke English, were well educated, wore smart urban clothing and they were not specifically occupied with their dalit identity, it was at least not something they spoke about. They did not experience discrimination in the teashops or were victims of caste-based violence, which was the dalit reality I knew from my undergraduate dissertation studying social mobility among rural dalit women (Larsen 2014). I was surprised and confused because my idea of what I would find did not mirror reality. This meant I
had to read up on Kerala, which in many ways, and more than I had imagined, is different from the rest of India and I had to re-define for myself what I thought it meant to be dalit. I started from scratch and tried not to make assumptions but used my previous knowledge to ask insightful questions. After the initial confusion and concern I understood that this could be a strength of my research. In understanding Malayalam dalit women’s view on their caste it is valuable to remember certain qualities. The fact that Kerala generally is more developed than other Indian states, that caste plays out differently and that it is seen as a better place for dalits with less discrimination are important factors informing their perspectives.

The agreement with CREST was that they helped with the logistics of the fieldwork while I filled in an internship role when I was there. Throughout my time in the field I reflected on this relationship of being an intern and a researcher at the same time. I often guided the students in their work, discussed personal issues with them and taught them in class on topics I decided. It meant I was not merely a participant observer which one might read as problematic. Nonetheless, I believe that fieldwork and qualitative research is also a reciprocal relationship and potentially a partnership (Stacey 1988; Robben and Sluka 2007:21-22) where I give back to the community in some way or another, which I could do by filling in this role. Also, my decision to study this issue is not only an academic endeavour for me. It is indeed also because I see a fundamental injustice that I try to understand and challenge. I believe an anthropologist is also an activist (Schep-Hughes 1995) when engaging with injustices of any sort which I had a chance to in a formalised way.

**POSITIONALITY**

I am a young, white, middle class, Danish, well educated woman and that informs my outlook, my knowledge production as well as how others perceive me – or as Katarina Sjöberg (2011:120) states: “[...] knowledge is obtained by researchers, who come with luggage”. Many of my identity markers were beneficial to me during my fieldwork working with young dalit women. I am around the same age, identify with the same gender and have the same educational qualifications as them. This meant it was easy to find common ground and I quickly became someone they trusted and they would talk with me about personal matters. The greatest point of difference is that I do not belong to a caste and that truly makes me an outsider. This, however, is an advantage because they did not see me belonging to a higher caste or similar caste to them. I believe this non-caste identity of mine
made my informants more open to my caste inquiries. It put me in a situation where I could ask the ‘dumb’ questions.

Caste did, nonetheless, play a role in my interaction with them I felt. Of all the female students only one was vegetarian. Eating meat is traditionally associated with lower castes as it is seen as impure in brahmanic Hinduism, especially the consumption of beef. I was puzzled to learn that beef was not served at the female students’ hostel upon agreement among the students. I, however, found that every single one of my informants when discussing it in privacy all confirmed that they happily eat beef. I could never verify that they might have kept this secret on the first day when they did not know the others and they had to agree on the food they would have, even if it were my suspicion. I am a fish-eating vegetarian myself and I found that problematic during my fieldwork. It distanced me from my informants and it often became a topic of conversation. In practice it only meant that I ate something else when chicken was served at the hostel. Nevertheless, the fact that I did not enjoy meat as they did seemed to occupy my mind. I might have placed more importance to this than any of my informants but the last thing I wanted was to embody an upper caste value system, which I felt I became an incarnation of through my vegetarianism. At the end of my stay one of my key informants told me that she considered becoming a vegetarian herself. I strongly objected to that and insisted that she should not. Probably an overreaction but I did not want her to change her ways and certainly not because of me. I, however, think I read something political into vegetarianism in India, which she and the other students did not.

I have worked and lived in India for 16 months before my fieldwork. I have studied and worked on social conditions and caste and I wrote my undergraduate dissertation on social mobility among rural dalit women. I am accustomed to the topic, country and culture and I would call myself very street smart in an Indian context. This definitely smoothened my way in and I adapted easily without much of a culture shock in an attempt to become one with the field like Erving Goffman (1989:125) advocates. It meant few social mishaps and awkward situations where I would breach social norms. I, however, found myself too cautious of this. My social knowledge applied more to a rural context working with middle-aged women as I had before than to the urban youth I now found myself among. I took off my sandals in the dining hall at the hostel until someone discretely told me it was unnecessary. I was concerned about my lack of golden jewels and bangles, which beforehand had been an engaging topic of conversation for all women. When I worked in Tamil Nadu a female
member of staff came to me after my first week there. She sat me down and asked if my ears were not pierced since I had not been wearing earrings. I confirmed that they were and she proposed I started wearing earrings. The next day I did and I had hoards of compliments for it. Here many of the women did not wear much jewellery, which I was pleased to learn. I of course wore a kurta and churidar (trousers) when I was out to avoid any unnecessary attention but I had to become smarter wearing it. When wearing jeans under a kurta I was very fashionable I was told and soon I stopped wearing the shawl over my chest because the students rarely wore that. This suited me because I have never been great friends with those. One Sunday my informants invited me to the cinema. As we had to leave I noticed everyone else wore jeans and a western style blouse or t-shirt – and there I was in classic Indian clothing. I knew straight away that I had overdone it on this occasion and I had not understood that the style for Sundays was very different to weekdays. Paradoxically, had I been on my own in town I would have gotten more attention had I dressed in western style clothing but this day I got attention for not doing it. Moreover, I was often asked with variations why I was not ‘beauty conscious’ because I did not live up to the aesthetics of black eyeliner and long braided straight hair, which I after a while learnt not to take as an insult. Another attempt to fit in meant I went, before leaving for India, to an electronics store to get myself the plainest mobile phone they had because I did not want to express the wealth and class that an iPhone brings with it – oh the irony of buying a new phone to express less material wealth. I had two of the students help me get an Indian SIM card and when they saw the simplicity of my phone they almost rolled their eyes at it. Soon after I found out they all had smartphones with WhatsApp and camera filters that made them look fairer. My iPhone soon came out of the suitcase as I was slightly embarrassed by my phone, like a kid in school without the newest gadgets.

**INFORMANTS**

My informants are a group of 24 young women of whom 17 are SC and the rest either OBC or Scheduled Tribes (ST). They are all between the ages of 22 and 26 at the time of fieldwork and come from all parts of Kerala, both urban and rural settings with a majority from rural areas. They have graduate and postgraduate degrees in natural and social sciences from universities in Kerala.

I selected my key informants based on a few criteria that I developed along the way. Some ‘happened’ to become key informants more than I actively invited them to be. I was interested in women who were fairly comfortable speaking English, somewhat interested in my presence and
who were dalit. Some of the women whom I quickly became friends with and who lived up to the criteria were ideal candidates as informants. Others I chose because we had had fascinating conversations about caste, which they initiated. I had seven key informants whom I interviewed twice. This was fruitful because thoughts and questions have a chance to develop from the first round of interviews to the second. All of the interviews were semi-structured and took on average one hour. I also interviewed two OBC women because they had shown great interest and insights into my topic. I believed it could be valuable to get a perspective from non-dalits who are above dalits in the caste hierarchy but still relatively low. In total I conducted 16 interviews with nine informants (see table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Caste</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Self-identify as</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Scheduled Caste</td>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>Hindu Vettuvan, Scheduled Caste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divya</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Scheduled Caste</td>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>SC community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reshma</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Scheduled Caste</td>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>Thandam community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anjali</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Scheduled Caste</td>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>Hindu Kannan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saritha</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Scheduled Caste</td>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>Scheduled Caste Cheruman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Archana</td>
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<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>Hindu Pullayar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gayathri</td>
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<td>Scheduled Caste</td>
<td>Hinduism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preetha</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Other Backward Class</td>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>Hindu Ezhava</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vandana</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Other Backward Class</td>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>OEC</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
I want to reflect on being a researcher in the field and in practice because I came across challenges and observations that I had not considered beforehand (or at least only theoretically).

Before leaving Sweden I knew doing fieldwork would be hard work especially as I am somewhat of an introvert and enjoy spending time by myself. I was often tired in the evening but that was when the more informal talks with my informants could happen as well as my only opportunity to do interviews. Being an anthropologist and fieldworker full time was tougher than I had expected. Some days I just wanted to stay in my room and not see anyone even though I really enjoyed being there overall. Always having an analytic mind, being on my feet and open to any kind of spontaneity and conversation drained me from energy. Especially since I tried to apply a strategy of saying yes to any invitations coming my way. I often had to force myself to seek interactions with my informants. I believe this not only had to do with my introversion but also the fact that my field site was so different from my usual life. I dislike rice but ate variations of it three times a day. I missed wearing lipstick, nail vanish and dresses. These are banal everyday things but as an anthropologist I of course know how important they are to human life, including my own. As time went by it became easier as I started to enjoy it more and got more comfortable in my new surroundings. These women became my friends and it got easier for me to be ‘Dea’ in the setting and not only an anthropologist. I also learnt that I can be a good, and maybe better, anthropologist by being myself. Instead of probing conversation and asking questions all the time I found it more useful to observe, listen and then engage when I was approached or when I felt it was natural to interact. Many of my most meaningful and fascinating conversations started from insignificant chitchat, which suited me well.

After my return to Sweden my fieldwork has officially ended. Even so I am still in daily contact with the students of CREST. Just because I am not physically there my fieldwork has not ended I believe. It looks different now but my informants are still part of my life and I am part of theirs. Fieldwork is a never-ending process, which changes shape. The personal and the professional is intertwined and on a personal note I am excited to get news about one of my informant’s wedding preparations which does not contribute to my professional endeavour. Vered Amit (2000:9) argues that even when a researcher leaves their field, “they cannot help but take it with them”. I would not have gained these new personal relationships without my research and vice versa I would not have
collected the same material without my newfound friendships. In one way I find it difficult to balance the personal with the professional because to them I am their friend and to me they are both friends and informants, which challenges me ethically as I will discuss below.

**ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

My role as an intern and friend meant that the students saw me as that foremost and as a researcher secondly. They did not necessarily know from the start about my study’s focus or that they were in fact my informants. I did not hide what my purpose of being there was if they asked. I did, however, notice that I preferred to say I was interested in students from a disadvantaged background rather than low caste because the word is a taboo. Community often replaced the term caste in my interviews, as I will discuss later. On the other hand, I did not make a big announcement about my reasons for being there. I had the permission from the faculty who had read my proposal and had no qualms with my work. Strictly speaking I can see how that might be unethical but I think it would have jeopardised my access had I done otherwise. Whenever the subject turned to caste or I actively asked to do interviews I explained my research and ensured that I had my informants’ consent. My informants were both fascinated and confused that I was interested in them. Often they highlighted that they did not know anything about the topic and I had to ensure them that it was their perspective that I wanted to learn about. I found that everyone I asked for interviews were more than happy to share their thoughts even if they found my topic a bit odd or unnecessary. Informed consent was given orally and taped on my recorder before every interview. This balance was however more difficult outside formal interview situations.

On one occasion I spoke to an informant informally. She was disappointed that I had not interviewed her and only some of the others. She told me about a difficult situation in her family that had been inflicted because of an ideal of caste purity. I got the understanding that she was sharing this with me based on the conversation we just had about my research. Later I decided to interview her and rather quickly into the interview I asked her to share the story with me again. Then, to my surprise, she made it clear that she had only shared that information with me as a friend and not as a researcher. I had a completely different experience of that conversation than she had had. The line between friend and researcher certainly becomes blurred during participant observation (Mosse 2006). This also challenges the concept of consent in ethnographic fieldwork. How long consent lasts has occupied my thoughts. Does getting consent in a formal interview
situation mean that I have their consent during the rest of the fieldwork unless they explicitly withdraw it? Should I, every time the subject turns to anything that is of interest to my study, ask for consent? Theoretically I recognise the argument of always confirming consent but pragmatically that is not possible. I believe it would interfere with the information being shared and create unnecessary tension. Instead one has to consider if the situation calls for an explicit (re)confirmation of consent, which I never felt was necessary.

One of the basic tenets of ethical research is to ensure your informants anonymity, which I emphasised before each interview. In practise this is done by using pseudonyms and keeping my informants’ details separate from their real identities in my notes. I, however, find myself in a twenty-first century dilemma. After being in the field for a few weeks my informants one by one started adding me on Facebook. I already had an idea of what soon would happen because of my informants’ love for selfies, which I was frequently invited to take part in. Soon after an informant added a picture to Facebook depicting six other informants and me – and more would follow suit. What happens when one’s informants reveal their identity? I had never considered this before but after significant considerations I came to the conclusion that as long as I did not post pictures of them I could not control what they did. I did hide the pictures from my profile so that the pictures were only visible to their Facebook community. Caste is, in this context, a taboo and not sensitive in the sense that it can jeopardise the women’s safety and do harm so I came to the conclusion that this was a suitable solution.

I have also had to consider whether to use the name of CREST or to anonymise the location. At first I had an intention of anomyising since I did not believe the specific location had an importance to my study and that it is better to be safe than sorry. After I started my fieldwork, I felt differently. CREST as a site was important to understand my informants. As mentioned, it is a unique institution that does not exist anywhere else than in Calicut. Describing it, as a place in Kerala but through a pseudonym would mean that one would still be able to locate it through a simple Google search and then I would not be able to use the literature written about CREST in my study. This came to weigh more than the former but only because I truly believe my informants’ safety is in no way threatened by including this information. After checking with the faculty at CREST who confirmed that I could mention CREST in my paper I knew this would be the right thing to do. I
might have prioritised differently had my topic or my findings been more sensitive. If I were to publish this study I might also revise this decision.

**METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

Methodologically, my study of caste is in many ways very traditional, which Amit (2000:2) describes as “travel away, preferably to a distant locale where the ethnographer will immerse him/herself in personal face-to-face relationships with a variety of natives over an extended period of time”. This lives up to my method in broad terms. My field site, however, meant my ethnography was not that traditional in anthropological terms after all. The field site was my gateway to my informants. I knew as soon as I had decided my topic that I wanted to do an ethnographic fieldwork using overt participant observation and semi-structured interviews as my method. I had prepared an interview guide (see appendix I) but followed it very liberally and went in the direction the conversation was going for the first interview with each informant. In the second interview I often had a few questions I knew I had to ask regardless, which made it a bit more structured than the first round of interviews. All interviews were held in my room with no disturbances from others, which I believe made it a safe space to share their perspectives and lived experiences. I could only interview my informants in their free time, which meant in the evenings or on Sundays. They often cancelled on me because they had too much homework for the next day or were too tired. At one point I was concerned if I could do all the interviews I had planned before leaving for Sweden. Fortunately, it all worked out in the end. I spent two months in the field, which to a traditional anthropologist is short. Since I am not doing a holistic study of a community and considering the nature of the paper, a master’s thesis, I believe the timeframe is appropriate.

I went into the field with an inductive approach with broad research questions on my mind chosen based on dilemmas in already existing literature on the topic. Through participant observation I chose the direction that was of most relevant in the context I was in. The other topics I considered were dalits’ relationships to other dalit sub-castes or the act of migrating from rural to urban India. I felt, however, that the topic I ended with was more accessible, had interesting findings and relevance to my informants compared to the other topics. I spent the first three weeks observing and participating in a very traditional anthropological sense. From the beginning, I had decided that I would not encourage conversations about caste before I felt the informants were comfortable with me and trusted me to a certain extent. Then one might ask when is that (truly) achieved. For me,
because I had a time limitation of two months I decided that had been achieved within a month. That does not mean that I did not have any conversations about caste in the first month, it just means that I did not initiate them. After three weeks I actively started doing semi-structured interviews and I interviewed the same handful of key informants twice. In the field I felt busy, but not rushed and I had enough time for my method of choice to bear fruit. As I was wrapping up my fieldwork I indeed felt I had gathered more than enough material and that I could start seeing patterns in my informants’ lived experiences of caste.

The access I had to the field allowed me to study and live with young dalit women but the everyday life they were living was different from their life outside CREST. The five months course they were doing at CREST was not commonplace in their life or in the life of an ordinary young dalit woman. In fact this is the only programme of its kind offered in the whole of India. My study was not devalued by studying them at CREST. My participant observation, nonetheless, had to take a different focus than usual. The physical space was secondary to me and instead my informants were my site. In other words, the physical space and social life of my field site did not add significantly to my analysis. It did, however, help me narrow the focus of my study. This does not mean that the lives and experiences of my informants are atypical to other young Malayalam dalit women but it is worth noticing that several of my informants mentioned that they had become more sensitised to caste issues since they enrolled at CREST.

Another limitation of seeing my site as a typical site of participant observation was the language barrier. My informants all spoke English well but certainly found it a foreign language that they did not feel comfortable speaking unless they had to. This meant that any small talk and conversations outside class would be held in Malayalam, a language I have very limited familiarity with. When I was engaged in a conversation it would be because someone actively approached me and invited me into the conversation by speaking English or if I myself would seek a conversation or simply ask what they were talking about. Of course I could read the non-verbal clues and make qualified guesses of what was going on. I never had the opportunity to be an observer not actively participating in the site. Being with my informants all the time and living my life with them only broke down this barrier. It meant that what I was presented to was not orchestrated but it also meant that I only know of their lives at CREST and what I am told about their lives more generally. I, however, also found that as they got more comfortable around me the more they felt comfortable
with speaking Malayalam when I was around. Until the third stage when they would talk to me as they would to other friends, even if it meant speaking English.

When I learnt I was expected to iron all my clothes after an informant discreetly commented that they had an iron upstairs that I was welcome to use, it became an excellent socialising opportunity. I could make conversation with whoever was there and stay after I finished if I was engaged in conversation. If the conversation never took off after a brief exchange of pleasantries I could iron in silence and try again when someone new showed up. When I came to their rooms with no other business than to hang out it often restrained the conversation. It got very formal where I was offered a chair while everyone else was still standing. Participant observation became a tool for me to get to know my informants, build trust and understand their lives more fully than interviews could alone. Yet, most of my analysis relies on the formal interviews.

I kept a field diary where I kept my observations and thoughts. These I wrote up every morning from the day before. The interviews I transcribed in NVivo. Some parts of the interviews are quoted directly in chapter 6-9 but I have had to make adjustments to make the language easier to read. These alterations are all marked by square brackets. After completing the transcription I started coding all interviews by themes, which I had already identified during the fieldwork and transcription phase. These themes are: Caste, distancing, education, justification of caste and background, marriage, pragmatism, privilege and opportunities, realising caste, SC as identity, solidarity and the system versus anti-system. When the themes overlapped, marriage and pragmatism for example often overlapped, the quotes were coded into both. Some themes were very specific, for example SC as identity, whereas others, like caste, were broad and used when a quote was relevant but did not readily fit any other category. Based on this I developed an analysis where the informants’ views on education, marriage and special opportunities became examples of the overall argument – namely that dalit women are pragmatic when it comes to caste and that this is everyday resistance to the caste system.

The following chapter provides the reader with a context to understand Kerala and the affirmative action system in India.
CHAPTER 5
BEING YOUNG AND DALIT IN KERALA

Before diving into the analysis I find it necessary to invite the reader further into the context that the informants speak from and are a product of. The state of Kerala and the affirmative action system in India will be the focus.

KERALA
South India and Kerala in particular have more experience with affirmative action and a stronger dalit and anti-brahmin movement than north India. This means it is easier for students coming from this region to make use of the quota system, which is also politically backed more widely (Deshpande 2009:130). The literacy rates in Kerala are 93.9% as compared to 74.0% nationwide (Government of India 2011:114). The world even speaks of the Kerala Model of Development, which is an alternative model of development that draws attention to the distribution of resources rather than the growth of capitalist production (Devika 2013). The communist party is strong and there have been many social reforms. Dalits have experienced social mobility since independence that is far greater than anywhere else in India (Nampoothiri 2013:257). The literacy rates for dalits and adivasis, though lower than for Kerala in general, are higher than the average literacy rates nationwide. Moreover, dalits and adivasis attending primary and secondary education as well as university is almost the same percentage as they make up of the population (Nampoothiri 2013:259-260). However, when it comes to representation in the professional fields, especially in engineering, the number of dalits is extremely low (Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery 2004). For another study it would be fruitful to look at what happens to all these well educated dalits who are missing in the professional world.

CASTE IN KERALA
The young dalit women keep underlining that caste discrimination is almost non-existent in Kerala compared to other states, and especially the north. “It is much better here”, Anjali proclaims. It seems that many believe, from all corners of the caste system that caste is not an issue, at least relative to outside the state borders. This discourse of no caste inequality was especially dominant before the 1990s and since then caste politics have also taken its grip in Kerala. It, nonetheless, puzzled me because I was not seeing the overt caste discrimination I had earlier met in Rajasthan.
and Tamil Nadu. Paradoxically, inter-caste marriages are still frowned upon and undesired. Endogamy is the ideal and even the young progressive dalit women who despise the caste system still prefer an endogamous marriage, as we will see later. Caste still plays an important role in Kerala, but the face of it may be different.

As we already learnt, the annihilation of caste or the wish to transcend caste started with the signing of the Indian Constitution. One way the Indian state has tried to cope with caste inequality is through systematic affirmative action schemes for the dalit, tribal and OBC communities. Every year the list of communities having access to the schemes is reviewed nationally and in every state. Benefits are not identical across states or nationally because castes are locally specific. One of my informants, Vandana, belongs to a sub-caste of OBC, called Other Eligible Communities (OEC). Nationally, they are not recognised as an OBC caste but in Kerala they are and here she has received affirmative action benefits.

**ACCESS TO EDUCATION**

Formally dalits have the same access to education. However, there are other, informal and structural, barriers, which dalits face. The system is biased against the rural population, Scheduled Castes, government schooled, those not attending English medium schools or who lack economic and intellectual resources for coaching for entry exams etc. (Nampoothiri 2013:262). Or in more general terms as encapsulated by Marc Galanter (1984): A combination of economic, social and cultural resources, intrinsic ability and hard work is essential to be considered meritorious in an entry exam to a college. Dalits who may embody the last factor, i.e. hard work, will still not have merit if they lack the first two. My study is of the ‘creamy layer’ of the dalits as anti-reservationists might call them. The creamy layer are claimed to be at the top of the dalit caste whereas it is the dalits of the dalits, as they are popularly called, who actually need the reservations but who are pushed out by the creamy layer. This reasoning is however flawed because higher education by default necessitates “a minimum level of economic, cultural and political resources” (Deshpande 2006:2441). My informants have only had a chance to succeed in the educational system and gained access to it because of a certain (limited) amount of these resources. It supports those from disadvantaged backgrounds that have an actual chance of succeeding (Deshpande 2009:138). I would argue that the affirmative action system is doing exactly what it is meant to do for this group of dalits – although I do not want to argue that it is perfect as it is.
AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Dalits are still greatly underrepresented in education, especially compared to Sikhs, Christians and upper caste Hindus (Deshpande 2006). Upper caste Hindus are overrepresented by two times of their population size in higher education, whereas dalits are more than three times underrepresented nationally (Deshpande 2009:132-133). Even more so the women of low caste communities are disadvantaged compared to the men of those communities – this is in stark contrast to upper caste Hindus where the gender gap is the narrowest (Deshpande and Yadav 2006:2421-2422). Affirmative action in India is one of the largest, oldest and most elaborate systems of this kind and it is even considered one of the most successful. The question of what its success should be measured by is a relevant one. Although my informants have gotten their education with the help of this system, they are still very critical of it. They find that it is the system that has made them dalits. The quota system, which covers places in legislatures, government jobs and education in India “is not about “appeasement” but about eliminating sources of tangible disadvantage in our unequal society”, say Deshpande and Yadav (2006:2419). It was adopted with the Constitution in 1950 and was first amended in 1991 where its coverage nearly tripled by including OBC to the scheme. Today it potentially covers nearly two thirds of India’s population (Deshpande 2009:128). Since this is the case it is difficult to call it ‘reservations’ when it is reserved for a great majority for the population. India’s affirmative action schemes keep being a hot potato in the public debate, and now perhaps even more than ever.

The above discussion has provided insights into caste in India and Kerala and how caste inequality has been dealt with through affirmative action. Based on everything discussed so far the following chapters will unfold the argument that well educated dalit women are exceptionally pragmatic in how and when they highlight and hide their caste to advance themselves and that this is everyday resistance against the caste system.
CHAPTER 6

‘CAST(ED)’ AS DALIT

The subject of caste is, for my informants, complex and sensitive. They are all against the caste system when asked directly but only a few would voice those opinions publicly. As they navigate through their lives as ‘cast(ed)’ subjects they are often hypocritical and acting against their own views and opinions – it might seem. From a Dumontian perspective they are in consensus with the caste system and accept their own subordination, which is problematised in this study. One theme that runs through my analysis of caste identity among young well educated dalit women is pragmatism. They navigate the system as woke subjects that use the caste system to their advantage. By caste identity I mean their relationship to their caste – how they see themselves as dalits and what that means to them being part of Indian society and the caste system.

One can see them as having a false consciousness and mirroring their oppressor in Gramscian terms, which was rejected in the theoretical framework. They do not see themselves as part of a dalit movement and often they do not recognise caste as being part of the reason for their struggles. Poverty is more present as part of their story than caste is. Moreover, they sincerely want to be part of mainstream society – they want to be recognised and respected by it. They emphasise how alike they are to the upper castes; they dress like them, have the same names and speak articulately. These are all examples of clever pragmatism. They see their lives as defined by more than caste and that caste is not the sole reason of their poverty or gender oppression. It is intertwined and people belonging to higher castes experience similar problems of youth unemployment, community pressure and educational struggles. Actually they sometimes manage to see their minority position as a privilege that gives them special opportunities few others get. Of course this point of view is informed by them being at ‘the top of the bottom’ of the caste hierarchy. They are those who made it and they will not be re-living the poverty and illiteracy their parents and grandparents experienced. They talk about the upper castes as ‘them’ – they are different because of their caste – but they also talk about other SC as ‘them’ – they are different because of their lack of education. My informants have gotten good enough grades to get reservation seats in recognised high schools and colleges. Moreover, they received stipends that have paid their tuition fees, housing and food.

11 This verb has two meanings: 1) It is my own word derived from ‘gendered’. 2) It refers to casting of actors. They are cast as dalits to fulfil a role in society they did not ask for.
during their education. This is for the few, but in Kerala ‘the few’ is more than in other Indian states. They are not interested in hypogamy or marrying down educational wise. As we will see some of my informants (and their families) are ready to find a husband outside their caste if it means he has the same or a higher educational status than themselves. On the other hand, we also see that education is not the overruling factor if the caste perspective is completely undesirable – this is either because the castes to-be-joined in matrimony are too complicated, i.e. too many castes are united or the caste is not valued as good enough for them.

This study is not a study of agentless, voiceless, subaltern dalit women (whom I in fact do not believe exist). This is a study of young women who are dalit. They are resourceful and they manoeuvre everyday life by highlighting and hiding their caste to advance their position in society. They play the game on the premises of the system even if they are against it and do not believe in it. They are in my opinion activists in an untraditional sense. They do not go to the streets, raise their fists and protest. They are, however, educated in a (caste) system that tells them that they do not belong. They are told they are former untouchables but they are everything but, except by birth. They are not the uneducated, unsophisticated, uncultured, uncivilised, inarticulate, illiterate, violent dalits so often produced and reproduced by society. They are part of a system, which fights them. Being well educated and dalit in this system is a deconstruction of it. Educated dalit women are destroying and resisting the caste system and they are doing it by just being. It is a political act that they exist and ‘just are’. None of my informants see themselves as political and they do not see themselves as part of the greater dalit movement. They do not feel they have much in common with B. R. Ambedkar 12 or Rohith Vemula 13. Their achievements are personal and family achievements before they are community achievements.

Naudet (2014:256) believes that “[m]obility implies a choice between careerism and activism”. If that is the case then educated dalit women choose their career before they choose activism. Yet, it is not that simple. Vandana considers that she will not have a voice outside the system before she has gained a voice within it:

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12 Father of the Indian Constitution, advocate for the annihilation of caste and born dalit – today the face of the dalit movement.

13 Dalit PhD student who committed suicide last year because of caste injustice.
I think if I navigate away from the entire system there will be no one to support me initially. We will only be a few. Many low castes still believe in the system so I think [it’s] not possible to change the system initially. First of all, I should work within the system.

Vandana does not see herself as an activist yet, but she and the others are already activists by choosing a career which none of their family members have been able to before them. They were concerned about livelihood – not careers. Careers are not ‘meant’ for dalits. Vandana is, however, right in seeing that she is working within the system. She and other well educated dalit women are playing the game by the rules but by doing that they are fighting the game. To understand this argument, we need to distinguish between the norm and the act, which Moffatt (1979:3) failed to do when he maintained that dalits reproduce the same caste structure, which marginalises them in the first place.

Before digging further into the analysis I want to explore why I classify my informants as activists but untraditional ones. I use dalit to describe a collective group. The same word is often used in academia and by many dalit activists. To my great surprise I found that my informants did not relate to this word. They knew the term from the media and had heard activists use it but it was foreign to them. They did not use it at all and did not even recognise that they were part of this group. Saritha even laughed when I asked her if she identified as a dalit. Instead they would use Scheduled Caste or the abbreviation SC to describe themselves. This term is the official governmental term classifying their caste. SC is used in the Constitution and it is stamped on their caste certificate. The label is a classification made by others, which they have no ownership of. To them that is not important. They do not see the point of uniting under the term dalit, which means ‘broken or downtrodden but still standing and fighting’, because they do not see themselves as part of that narrative. Looking back at table 1 with information about my key informants I included how they self-identify. Here it is evident that they look very differently at it. They include everything from their religion, sub-caste and the general SC classification in their caste identity. Deshpande and John (2010:40) recognise this as well: “I may answer this question [of caste] differently depending on whether I am seeking a bride for my son, seeking a favour from someone, or deciding who to vote for”. It changes according to context; occasionally they even include ST as part of their ‘us’. Caste can be manipulated when it is identity rather than hierarchy (Still 2009). There is no single answer to what their caste identity is – except what it is not; it is not dalit. Anjali and Reshma even found the word discriminatory to low caste people. Anjali pointed out that I did not understand that
this distinction was unnecessary and harmful: “I don’t use it [dalit]. I prefer to use SC, the whole category. I’m totally against asking these questions. It’s stupid”. Reshma disliked the term on behalf of the dalits that she did not see herself being part of:

It’s considered the lowest, lowest, lowest class. When we talk about dalit everyone becomes racist. They are treating them as tribals. They don’t know about their background but people are blaming them without any reason. They are treating them like, I don’t know, very badly.

These statements are, in fact, extremely political and activist – in an untraditional way. They are distancing themselves from the term dalit because they do not experience that struggle. They are simply not part of it as Haritha expresses: “Sometimes we use dalits for very struggling people. But in Kerala there is no struggle. No struggle compared to others”. Their parents and grandparents might have been dalit but they are certainly not, they believe. Instead they are struggling to be recognised by mainstream society where it certainly does not help to be identifying as a dalit.

Moreover, we see this when I talk about caste with my informants. Often they replace caste with community or class as Reshma has done above. I even found myself substituting caste with community when talking to my informants as well. This has partially to do with a caste taboo – it is simply easier to speak of class and community than the infamous caste. In addition, I find this to be part of a redefinition of them as ‘cast(ed)’ subjects. It tells us something about how they understand caste. For the educated dalit women, caste is caste-as-identity rather than caste-as-hierarchy which Still (2009) propose as a distinction. It seeps through as identity when the term caste is replaced with identity-based terms. They wish that their caste were their family background and heritage, solely. Instead their caste is always part of the political debate. Everyone has an opinion about them as SC, which they always need to consider when they ‘are’ in society. It is not their need but the need of others they accommodate when caste is on the agenda. I do not want to cite examples here of the research actors’ use of community and class instead of caste because the rest of the analysis will be full of examples of exactly that.

Continuing from this essential detour scrutinising the research actors as untraditional activists we come back to defining them as part of Indian society. They exist in an unequal system that places them at the bottom as former untouchables. They are born into poverty and they have stepped out of it. They have broken the circle and their children will self-evidently tread the floors of university.
campuses. The system has ensured them education, tuition fee reductions and stipends that have broken the vicious circle. Paradoxically, it is also this system that has ‘outcasted’ and ‘cast(ed)’ them. Jodhka (2015:4) even asks if “caste prevail because of the reservations”? The system that has tried to even out the inequality is also the system that has made them unequal. It has created “compulsory identities” (Deshpande and John 2010:39) but only for the lowest castes, the upper castes are castefree in this discourse. Ironically, affirmative action that is meant to make caste mean less in fact reinforces caste identities (Deshpande and Yadav 2006:2424). It is also paradoxical that the Constitution completely dissipates caste except by doing the opposite when it comes to the explicit empowerment project of the lower castes. When allocating reservations and stipends dalits realise their caste and, more importantly, they realise that they do not belong and the defining character their caste has on their lives. Gayathri first thought her teachers called her out because she had done something extraordinary. She was excited and happy; she thought she had deserved it. As she got older she understood that this ritual of distributing stipends to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe students was there because “some discrimination is there. For SC and ST, something is there” (Gayathri). She still could not put a finger on what exactly it was although something felt wrong. Archana puts into words the shame she experienced because of this:

Up till fourth standard it wasn’t a bad thing but when I came to sixth-seventh standard it was very shameful. In childhood I didn’t think about it but then it got very shameful. Maybe then I realised that this is our condition and I started worrying about [the fact] that I’m from a poor family.

Before that Archana and Gayathri did not know there was something ‘wrong’ with them. They had not learnt that they did not belong yet, because no one had told them. The other children did not know either. It is an immense paradox that the system that tries to even out inequalities also is the system that enforces the inequalities. This might not be the intention of the system but to them it is indeed the outcome of it:

I got a scholarship and stipend based on my caste. At that time, I had to fill it out and I had to go for a caste certificate. Before that I didn’t have a caste certificate so I didn’t give any importance to that.

Vandana
When Vandana gets her caste certificate, which gives her the right to quotas and stipends that is when she becomes OBC. Before that she was not ‘cast(ed)’, at least not in her own perception. Her identity changed; how she conceived herself and others changed.

Preetha puts the dalit issue in perspective from a higher caste for us as well:

It generates inferiority [among dalits]. I have seen that. […] We can’t do anything, it’s a kind of support we are giving to them but they may feel inferior [because of it]. But we can’t stop the help because you have to bring them up, including myself. Even if I’m a little bit superior in the social ladder, still we have to be pulled up. […] When someone from college says you should go and collect your scholarship money everyone will be looking at her and she has to go and collect [them] and everyone will know that she is that girl from that category. That may irritate her.

She says that it makes them feel inferior, like they do not belong there but it is still better than not doing it. I can personally come up with ways where these stipends could be distributed less publically – that is, nonetheless, not the point of it. The point is that the students are there on different grounds, which creates inequality. It is a question of giving consent to one’s caste being publicised and that right being taken away. “All know the caste [because of the reservation system]. I think the reservation is also discriminating. […] In the education system the community identity is given”, Haritha states. This ritual is not only what made them realise and learn that they had a caste it is also the ritual that, even in adulthood, reminds them and teaches them that their caste is ‘wrong’. It keeps telling them that they are not like the rest, that they are different, do not belong, are not supposed to be there and are ‘cast(ed)’ – and that they have no control over this. However, they are there and that is an act of resistance against the caste system.

At the same time, I learn that they are proud of their caste. It is important to them because it is their family background and their heritage. None of them would want to change their caste to one with higher status because as Preetha utters:

Noo, what’s the point in that [changing caste]? This caste and that caste. Whatever is OK. I’m born in a caste, that doesn’t matter. I don’t have a problem with that. I don’t need to change. What’s the problem with my caste [laughs]?
It is clear that they distinguish between the caste system as an institution and their caste. Caste is first and foremost identity to them, then it is hierarchy – that perception destabilises the caste system. Saritha makes this apparent:

I’m born in this community. As a person it’s important for me because I’m from this community. I hate the caste system, completely hate it! But I don’t hate my caste. The caste system I don’t like because there is higher castes and lower castes.

At the same time as she underlines the importance of her caste, she simultaneously utters despise for the caste system. It is a paradox to value one’s caste in a system that tells you that it is worthless and inferior. They feel guilty because of this and they often hide their caste even when they think it is wrong to have to do that:

I think it’s not embarrassing for us but others think that. One of my cousins is married to a Nair [high caste] in Calicut and when I said I’m studying in KIRTADS [tribal research centre in the same place as CREST]. Everyone knows KIRTADS and that it belongs to SC and ST. I was wondering if he [the high caste uncle] would think something because there is a problem with talking about caste between them so I was confused if I should mention it. I don’t have a problem in mentioning it but I’m afraid others will. I’m concerned about others reactions.

Vandana

It is also a defence mechanism not to reveal their caste because when people do not know their caste it means that they cannot use it against them: “Since I belong to the lowest [caste] and when someone asks about my caste then I start doubting their intentions”, says Archana. Vandana and Archana show pragmatic resistance when they hide their caste. Archana also shares an experience from college. She was invited to visit a friend of hers. Her friend is from the highest caste and both know about their caste backgrounds. Before going, her friend confides in her that her grandmother is casteist and this troubles Archana greatly:

I was confused to go or not. Maybe the grandmother won’t know my caste. But I was concerned because I knew she followed some customs and I didn’t want to interrupt her beliefs. So I didn’t know if I should go or not. My friend said you should come and so I did. I
wasn’t very free there. I’m a talkative person and wherever I go I use the whole space as my home. But there I couldn’t do that. I silently stood in a corner.

Archana felt it was her responsibility to ensure that the grandmother did not learn about her caste and make her uncomfortable. She was open to bystand the grandmothers discriminating views on caste because she was from another generation. Instead it was Archana who was forced to feel uncomfortable because she was protecting someone else’s feelings even if she fundamentally felt they were wrong. To her, in this given situation, it was more important to maintain a good relationship to her friend and not be a killjoy, who makes statements against caste discrimination. Archana uses one of Scott’s (1985:28) weapons of resistance, namely dissimulation, when visiting the casteist grandmother.

The above exemplifies how caste identity to my informants is highly interrelated to inequality, a feeling of inferiority and striving to be part of mainstream society. It is politicised and they have to bargain and navigate intelligently with their caste identity. These feelings are natural considering the structural violence they are victims of because of the social, economic, political and cultural space they inhabit (Galtung 1969). Their feelings are, nonetheless, not exemplifications of them being in consensus with the caste system. Now I want to argue how this transforms to a pragmatic view on caste and fluid inconsistent manoeuvring in the system and society. This will be done through three main themes, namely education, marriage and special opportunities, respectively. These themes show us how young well educated dalit women are pragmatically resistant in how they navigate through society and highlight and hide their caste identity to their advantage.
When discussing caste with the informants, education kept coming up. My informants are in their early- and mid-twenties and have just finished their higher education. Their frame of reference and lived experience of caste is largely experienced through education. Especially the reservation system in education has influenced the ways they understand themselves as dalits. The reservation system is a quota system that reserves seats for low caste groups, which often mean they are giving mark relaxations, compared to the general category students. Besides this they are also exempt from paying tuition fees and receive stipends to finance their livelihood through their studies. Without these initiatives my informants emphasise that they would not have the same education as they have now, for example Archana: “Actually it means people like us have benefits to continue education. In my case the engineering field expense is very high and my family can’t afford it. So the reservation is very helpful for us”. At the same time, we learn that they are very critical towards this scheme because it is not always those who need it the most it benefits and they see that some take advantage of the system. And this falls back on them as well:

And especially the boys they don’t give importance to education. They are only being educated because they have reservation seats but they are not giving any importance to education. And soft skills they completely lack. They only opt for engineering. It’s not because they like engineering but because they believe they get higher status. So educationally I believe we are very weak.

Vandana

This frustration is part of the reality that they often have to hear from the general category that dalits are only in the universities because they do not need as high grades as the others. Divya knows this well:

Even when people get admission from SC communities and she got good marks and got admission in a good college, people might say she only got admission because she belongs to the SC community. It’s a problem. My sister told me that there is a student in her class, she had 98% or something and a student from her class said that she got admission because of her class. Even though she has 98%! It’s very difficult to hear.
This further illustrates the earlier discussion that the measures to even out inequalities are also those that create them: “Sometimes the reservation also gives the discrimination. Some friends will say ‘you’re from the reservation, that’s why you got a seat’. They’re discriminating like that” (Haritha). If they were there on the same terms as everyone else, they would not have to endure this, but they would probably not be there either. Even when Anjali knows of others who came with these hurtful comments against the reservation system, which is essentially also against her, she still does not speak up against it. It is an act of feigned ignorance (Scott 1985:28) when she disregards hurtful comments by classmates on Facebook against reservation beneficiaries:

Some of them [upper castes] are very against the reservation system. They post comments about it on Facebook. Mainly we don’t talk about it. When we are sitting together and they know we belong to that then they don’t say those things. I don’t say anything either.

There is a pattern among my informants in terms of how they look at the reservation system. First they justify that they have made use of the reservation system and often they emphasise that their grades were just as high as those from the general category. Then they go on to criticise the system and suggest that instead of benefits based on caste the system should be based on income:

I think the reservation should be in such a way that it’s based on financial background. It should not be based on caste. Reservation gives financial support so financially backward people also should have more motivation to continue their education. Also [in] our community, some of the people are rich but they [still] get reservation.

Anjali

Basing the reservation system on income instead of caste is fundamentally different. The system came with the Indian Constitution in 1950 and was meant to support the backward caste communities, who are victims of structural violence. It was thought reservations should only be needed for ten years but as we know they is still there. Changing it to benefit the poor more generally is a fundamental change of purpose. This change will mean that caste is no longer seen as the main indicator for social, class and economic status. Instead poverty would come before caste so to say. One might argue that my informants cannot see the structures that oppress their caste specifically since they believe poverty is their main problem, but to my informants this is necessary
or else their caste will never be valued equally as other castes. As long as they have these benefits exclusively as long they will be inferior to the others:

I’m against this system [the reservation system]. We don’t want caste in our society; we all are humans. We should just be considered humans. That’s why I support reservation based on income. That will help the eradication of the caste system in our society.

Haritha

If the reservation system was based on income it would still reach those in need they argue and it would not inherently mean that dalit is equivalent to backward. They would still gain the benefits of the reservations and upper castes cannot blame the quotas on a ‘pampering’ of lower castes. By making this suggestion dalit women show the world that they understand the issue with reservations seen from the general category’s perspective. They also justify that they specifically get the benefits because they need them – not because of their caste but their financial background. This viewpoint justifies their place in further education – it legitimises them and the shame the others make them feel will diminish. It clearly exemplifies their pragmatic resistance when they argue against the system that has helped their upward social mobility. Being poor is better than being dalit, at least if you claim certain rights and benefits because of it. They further this argument when they maintain that their children will not need the reservations and they would actually prefer that they do not get them: “Hmm, I think when I get a good job and is financially settled I can afford the expenses for my children’s education. So I don’t need any reservations”, Archana says.

At the same time as they do not see their caste as their main oppressive identity characteristic, but poverty, they still understand that the access to education will not bring them up alone. This is similar to what Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery (2004) find among unemployed educated dalit men in north India. Many of the research actors recognise that they do not have the necessary soft and communication skills as upper castes and thus they will not succeed as easily. They feature the fact that they did not attend English medium schools, could not afford exam tuition classes, do not come from well educated family backgrounds, had no books in the home and that they often had to help their parents to earn enough for the family’s livelihood as part of the reason they lack these skills:
SC and ST students are coming forward to study. They get more opportunities but even though they get opportunities it doesn’t ensure that they will get a good job. […] Even if I get a job I’m not confident enough to work in a [private] company.

Divya

They often speak of this as a lack of confidence or an inferiority complex. They somehow know that they do not belong in the professional world. They are especially hesitant to seek jobs in the private sector where there are no quotas for dalits. The number of dalits who work in the private sector is therefore extremely low and it is very difficult to become part of that field for them. Usha Zacharias (2013) encounters this with high caste recruiters in the private sector. They do not hire low castes because they do not believe they have anything in common with dalits. The recruiters believe dalits lack soft skills and therefore they cannot see them as part of their workplace. The research actors have accomplished more than the ordinary dalit in terms of social mobility but getting there and struggling with perspectives like the recruiters have, are examples of structural violence. Dalits can much more easily get jobs in the public sector because of the quota system as well as it being much more prestigious to work there, you do not have to speak English and you get better pay and working conditions. There really is no reason why they should not choose the safer and more comfortable public sector over the private.

They have also felt this experience of not belonging during their education. Often they have to justify their presence and they have to work much harder to achieve the same as the other students because of the aforementioned lack of soft and communication skills. Gayathri only met very few teachers from her own community but when she did she started feeling further education was also for her:

And another interesting thing is that all the teachers were from other communities, not SC or ST. In my field that is, in the science field. Only two teachers in that college belong to backward communities, but in science there is no one. My Miss, she is a Christian. When she went on maternal leave, at that time a Ma’am joined from the SC community. At that time, I’m very inspired because she reached that and then I thought about that and the privileges for us that the government provides. Then I started to study hard and somehow I completed my plus two [high school] and then I joined my degree. […] Then I got really inspired because so
many teachers were from SC/ST. I’m not looking at the caste but they can be teachers and lecturers and then why can’t I? I thought of it in that way only.

Gayathri was ready to drop out of high school because it was too hard for her to keep up. She then saw that others like her had made it and she felt she could too. At the same time as she explains this she also underlines that she does not care about caste. They always struggle with a dual complexion of not giving value to caste but at the same time giving value to themselves as dalits in a world that devalues them. By highlighting caste, they also have to excuse that act.

The pragmatism that Gayathri employs is also well known to Divya who has quite an extraordinary background. Her father is SC and her mother OBC. Until high school she was OBC and she did not know she was SC as well. Her mother told her and asked if she wanted to change to SC because it meant she would get more benefits in her education. She decided it would be better to change to a lower caste to get the benefits. OBC has a rather low caste status so giving it up for SC was not a big status loss compared to what she would gain from it. Divya expresses it in words:

When I joined twelfth standard I was in my mother’s caste. The Thiyyar [OBC sub-caste] community. Then I didn’t know my father’s caste. I didn’t know because my mom didn’t tell me. Their marriage was an arranged marriage but my mom thought I would get discouraged so she didn’t tell me. In twelfth class she told me that he’s from SC and [asked] if I had any problem [with that]. I told [her] I didn’t have any problem like that. After twelfth I didn’t get admission in college because SC and ST communities are given more preferences, then only OBC and then [the] general [category]. I didn’t get admission the first year. If both parents are from different castes then we can choose anyone of those two castes. So we can go to the village office [to change it]. [...] Now I belong to SC community for educational purposes only.

Divya is certainly the most extreme case of showing pragmatism in this study. She knew that for her to advance in life she needed a good education and she could more easily get that by changing her caste. Since the caste she changed to was not significantly lower than the one she came from she did not have much to lose. This surely shows the malleability of the caste system and that it is identity before hierarchy to dalit women. We will soon learn that Divya’s multiple caste background does, however, concern her in the case of marriage. The changing of caste clearly
shows that Divya does not want to be like the upper castes but she wants to have the status and privileges they enjoy, like education. One can question if that is not the same, but I find that there is a sizeable difference between becoming like them and wanting to enjoy what they have. Education is not an upper caste value but one reserved for way too long for the upper castes.

Even if the well educated dalit women believe that it is partially because of the reservation system that they have reached where they are today, they are still critical towards it and challenge it. They have to because else they cannot be part of the middle class and be like the others – even negotiating a lower caste status is better than not getting a good education. They are pragmatic when they criticise the reservation system, but clever in doing so when that critique still includes them in the scheme. This strategy is part of their everyday resistance. Educated dalit women highlight their caste to gain access to the affirmative action schemes but hide it when the reservation system is under condemnation. Well educated dalit women struggle with experiences of not belonging in education and not feeling they deserve to be there while still rationally knowing that they have not had the same privileges in life like most of the general category has. Marriage is another subject that truly occupies the minds of unmarried dalit women. Here their pragmatism truly comes through.
CHAPTER 8
MARRIAGE

One of my informants got married right after I left Calicut but the rest are still unmarried. They are all waiting till after they start working so they do not risk becoming housewives. Kerala is often referred to as a place where caste is not important and no one is discriminated because of caste, as we know from chapter 5. The caste system in Kerala works in a much subtler way than it does in north India but, on the other hand, it is still as rigid. Kerala does not have more inter-caste marriages than the other states in India, which one would imagine if caste really was not important. This complexity is evident in my informants’ answers – they are open to marrying anyone who they feel is right for them but they will follow their parents’ wishes even if that means endogamy. Marrying outside one’s caste in a love marriage and especially as a female can have horrific consequences from violence against the bride (Chowdhry 1997) to losing the support network their parents would have been (Grover 2009). There are different reasons for their pragmatism in marriage questions but it all comes down to that they will not want to jeopardise the status of their families. Divya is the oldest of her siblings and she feels she has to be a role model to her younger siblings by having an intra-caste marriage. Reshma and Preetha want an intra-caste marriage because their older sibling has chosen to go for a love marriage and married outside their caste. They have seen the shame it has put on their parents and they cannot bear to put them through that again:

I don’t want to hurt them, I can’t. I have seen the situation when my sister told this [the love marriage] to them and for them it was a shock. I want them to be happy. Of course they will ask my opinion, they give that freedom to me. And I can select the time when they should start looking. All that freedom I have.

Preetha

She emphasises how open an arranged marriage is and how much self-determination she has. It is not a bad option considering the stability it will provide her family. Preetha’s parents even decided to arrange the marriage of her older sister because they could not bear the social blame if the community knew they had eloped. By arranging the wedding ceremony, they could act as if they supported the decision, which would make the situation less shameful for the family.
Reshma’s older brother married outside the caste as well but the parents did not try to hide the fact to not lose face to relatives and the community. When asked if she would want her parents to take part in her marriage, she promptly replies:

Yes, yes, yes. They did everything for me, always what I wanted... They love my brother so much. They supported him during his education. They cared a lot so you can imagine their feelings when he went away from them. That’s the emotional factor. They couldn’t accept the reality. And the public, my relatives were against the decision he made and my parents were having a hard time. It’s not like in foreign countries because here in India the relationship matters a lot. A marriage is not between two people it’s between two families […] They want me to marry a person from our community. But if I don’t agree to their point of view and if I find a person from my community who is my taste then definitely I’ll marry him. If he’s from any other caste or religion then I’m very sure they won’t agree and I’ll not disappoint them and then I’ll not get married. They suffered a lot from the public blame so I don’t want to... I won’t do that to them, no. I love them very much. They are very good people.

Reshma feels that she has lost her brother because of this conflict and she cannot also lose her parents. Reshma was one of the informants who expressed the biggest hatred against the caste system but she still understands that it is a reality and if she breaks with it, it will be her parents’ burden. When both Preetha and Reshma express that they prefer an arranged marriage they also emphasise how flexible it still is. If they find a good match from their own community, they are all convinced that their parents will support that decision. Vandana emphasises that even though her family is liberal and are ready to marry outside the caste it will be difficult because of the views from the community and relatives. Vandana probably has to marry outside her caste because of a lack of suitable men within her caste:

[The men] have lower education. They are either going abroad after plus two [high school] or work as military soldiers. So it’s hard to find someone like that with the same educational qualifications. It’s a great problem in my community, it’s a small community spread across only some districts in Kerala. But we don’t have any problem; we are ready to marry from other communities. My house situation is very liberal. We can take any decision we like, [my] mother will definitely support it. But coming to the boys’ side they believe in the caste system.
For Vandana’s family, education is more important than caste. Gayathri explains the same about proposals she has gotten: “First they [her family] will ask about his job and secondly if he is from our caste”. Because they have gained a certain social status through education they are not ready to risk it by marrying someone with lower educational qualifications. It is, however, not this simple after all. Even if the education is good then the caste is still not insignificant:

In my case I’m not bothered about my caste. I’m only bothered about the social status. The caste is not a matter in our life. We are all humans. I’m considering it like that […] I’m in an affair. He’s from an upper caste society. We’re facing so many issues from the surroundings because he’s an upper caste and I’m a dalit. That’s why his family is not accepting me. That’s the first time in my life that I’m facing caste discrimination. I’m not bothered about that I’m a dalit. He’s also not bothered. It’s his family members. He’s still struggling with his family. I think this is the first time I have personal experience of being discriminated against because I’m from this society, this community. It is not only my problem. I’m telling you that marriage is seen as an essential thing in life and that’s why we’re now separate. That’s the only reason that we’re separate.

Haritha

Haritha is in a relationship with an upper caste man and both their families know. Her family is supportive while his is not. She is very well educated from prestigious universities and a top student but her caste is too low for his family to accept her. She is hoping his family will come round but there is not much she can do. Gayathri, who is now married, faced the same issue, to a lesser extent nevertheless:

He [her fiancé] was my senior [in college]. But we had no plans to elope. We wanted to engage our parents in the decision. I told him to ask my parents and if they agree then we can go forward. They told him to get a job and if the relation is still there when I have graduated then it’s fine. His father is more strict about caste but when he learnt I was educated he had no problem.

Gayathri’s fiancé is also SC but from a different sub-caste than her and his is higher in the hierarchy. Here her education spoke in her favour because the caste difference was not significant
in the first place. It is always a fine balance between different identity characteristics: caste, education, job and age being the most important.

The marriage situation seems to be even more complex than already explained, especially for women. Women are expected to live with the husband’s family after marriage and they, in turn, have the responsibility to take care of her. This means if there are any problems between her and her husband or her in-laws, her family will still step in and support her – but only if they take part in the decision. For the man it is less risky to marry against the parents’ will and the parents are probably more open. First of all because he is male and the family’s honour is placed on daughters but also because the parents rely on their sons during their old age and therefore need him to take care of them. Gayathri’s parents explained it like this to her:

They said ‘you can marry anyone but you are responsible for it. Because [if you married an] upper caste you have to suffer, if it’s from our caste itself we can better support you’. If I elope it’s OK but then they don’t have any responsibility. If my parents allow [it] then they will be ready to suffer if he dies. They will look after me but if I elope then the parents are not responsible. But sometimes because of their affection to their children they will do it anyways.

Archana has the same concerns of it having bigger consequences for women than for men to marry outside their caste:

Without [our] parents’ support we can’t do anything. In our future life if we have any trouble, our parents will help and support us more, so we have to get their support [in marriage]. Or else that much strength we need – I think, I don’t have that. […] My mother always says this, she got a lot of examples: Consider my brother and me. We are from the same SC caste. If my brother loves a girl from a Nair [upper caste] family, he will sacrifice his family or he will do anything to bring that lady to his life. The power of boys is stronger. In my case when I’m in love with a Nair family, his family won’t accept me to [their life] and at last he has to marry some other girl and I have to suffer. Whereas the Nair girl will be accepted by the SC family but a Nair family won’t accept a girl from a lower caste.
It is much more complex for women to marry upwards than for boys she argues. But most will not support their child to marry downwards compared to upwards and hence inter-caste marriages are difficult in reality because no one wants to lose status:

Whenever we discuss those things with my grandmother she used to tell us, ‘you can marry from any caste except SC and ST’. I still remember she used those words, SC and ST. We could not eat anything from their house, it’s very polluting – she still thinks that. I think many still blame the whole family if you marry a different caste. [They will say:] ‘That’s because of too much freedom. That’s because of education’. As if we did a crime, they will definitely blame. The educated people are now thinking differently but they still have barriers from the community.

Vandana

Vandana is OBC and her grandmother would not like her to marry lower than OBC. They see it as a failure, as if that was the best they could get. All this said, my informants have hordes of examples of friends and family who have married outside their caste and with time, especially when children come into the picture, the family starts to accept the situation. Divya is a great example of this. As we know her parents are from two different castes. The father who is SC understated that fact when he asked for her wife’s hand. He made her family think he was from a different caste within OBC and when the marriage was arranged they would lose face if they discontinued it. Both Divya’s parents were in their thirties when marrying which also played a role in their parents’ openness to an inter-caste marriage. Divya’s mother, on the other hand, feels very strongly that her children should marry an OBC:

I don’t have much preference I haven’t thought of it like that. But my mom always says ‘you marry an OBC, it’s better for you’. My father is the only child so there’re not many relatives in my father’s family. My father has no problem if I marry SC or OBC. My mom has a lot of relatives, lots of uncles. We have to think about them also. I want to consider their preference too. I don’t have much problems. But my mother faced some difficulties so she wishes that I should marry in her caste. […] My mom’s relatives would like me to marry an OBC. Most proposals came when I visited them and they came from other OBC. When they came we spoke with them and told them that we’re from different castes and some of them don’t have much problem. Because nowadays girls in [the] marriage age are very less. People always
look at caste and Thiyyar [the caste of her mother] community girls are not there, so they
don’t bother about the caste.

Divya

Divya’s mother experienced a lot of hardship because of her marriage to a lower caste man and she
wants to protect her daughter from that. After her parents’ marriage they went to her father’s home
to eat but many of her mother’s family members would not eat the food from a SC house, which she
does not wish happens to her daughter. One might think that Divya’s parents in particular would be
open to inter-caste marriages, yet the opposite seems to be the case:

Recently my father got some [marriage] proposal from a doctor. His parents are also from
different communities, not from my parents’ communities, but others. But the parents of his
have high salary government jobs. They didn’t think about the caste and that’s why they came
with the proposal. My father asked whether to continue and my mother said it’s difficult to
continue with because my father and mother are different castes and if I marry to a different
caste then there are four castes and it will be difficult in the future. My mother thinks like that
if I have children what caste will they be. It will be difficult in the future with the caste
system. Which caste will I give for my child? My father and mother are different castes and
his parents are also [laughs]. I think my mother thought that. It would be too complicated,
even if he were a doctor with a good job.

Divya

Her mother is pragmatic and even if the proposal came from a very good family then it was not
possible because of the caste aspect. She knows what it means in practice to engage in inter-caste
marriage and she does not want the same problems for her daughter.

Overall, their view of caste in marriage is different to their general view of caste. In this case it is
clear that they much more readily accept the active presence of caste. When asking Archana if she
would ask others about their caste, she quickly replies: “I asked two or three persons [at CREST].
[It was] not intentionally I asked them but when someone spoke about marriage proposals. Then I
just asked ‘what is the caste’, maybe I can help them.” Preetha confirms the same as a matter of
course that caste is important in marriage:
Dea: Do people ever ask you about your caste?
Preetha: No I don’t do that. No one asks. If some marriage bureau is there they may ask ‘what’s your caste and religion’ because that’s their job as matchmakers.

In marriage dalit women seem to be more conservative than earlier expressed in regards to caste. On one hand, they do not care about caste or they wish they did not have to care – they are ready to marry whomever they find suitable. On the other hand, they will not marry anyone without their parents’ consent. If they marry outside their own caste, then their family loses status. This is to them more important than expressing their anti-caste system views through inter-caste marriage. In fact, it can be yet another argument of them seeing caste-as-identity vis-à-vis caste-as-hierarchy. That the families joined in matrimony come from the same background with the same economic, social and cultural resources is important to them. Their perception of marriage is pragmatic and complex. They hide their caste by conforming to the norms of endogamy while they also highlight it by seeking a mate who is from their caste and community. With this in mind it is easy to conclude that they exercise sanskritisation. We must, however, scratch the surface. Still (2014) argues against sanskritisation and yet she interprets dalit women’s actions as emulating and accepting upper caste values at times and rejecting them at other times. I will, nonetheless, dare to make an even more radical argument and suggest that they do not emulate or subscribe to dominant social values. Rather, even the so-called emulation, for example engaging in inter-caste marriages, is always part of their resistance to those brahmanical values. Now, let us move to the last theme where the same trend is present.
Having ‘made it’ in a system that is against you from the outset is extraordinary. They have gotten special opportunities because of the affirmative action schemes in terms of access to further education, scholarships and reduction of tuition fees. Moreover, I also mean special opportunities, which are more informal. The informants believe certain opportunities are reserved for them because of their dual identity as educated and dalit. These women have gotten the most out of the opportunities they have, in particular also because they have studied at CREST, which is for the very few; only 80 students get this chance per year. They are proud of their achievements as Archana puts it:

When someone asks what is your caste I can proudly say I’m from a lower caste and I achieved something. Compared to my family we got something better than them. That is a proud moment for us.

Part of being proud of their achievement is also justifying that they needed these special opportunities. It is always a fine line for them between justifying their right to reservations and justifying that even with the reservation they deserve to be there. This paradox means they float somewhere back and forth between feeling extremely privileged and accomplished as well as always having to prove that they are not privileged after all and therefore deserve the opportunities they have gotten. They always have to justify getting special opportunities and that they made it to this level. They need to emphasise the social mobility gap and their struggles to get there. They feel they have to prove that they are above average students and that it is not only because of the reservation system that they did well. It often occurs that recipients of resource discrimination i.e. admitted because of the reservation system claim that they are admitted because of merit (Deshpande 2006:2441). I often found that my informants justified their admission to higher education not (solely) because of their dalit status but because they are actually meritorious. “[M]erit has become an ideology justifying continued upper-caste monopoly. ‘Merit’ is contrasted not with ‘incompetence’, but with ‘reservation’”, Gail Omvedt (2004) forcefully asserts. Ironically, merit discrimination is by critics of the reservation system seen as perfectly fair while resource discrimination is not. Merit as a concept has been under-theorised (Sen 2000) so that may be why it
I’m always proud I’m SC, that’s why I got reservation, that’s why I reached this level. When they [upper castes] try to defeat me by words and ‘you’re from SC’ like that, I’m not ashamed of it because it’s my right to live and my privilege because the government provides me the funds and opportunities to study. That’s for us and not for them. […] If we are from SC, other people will think she is not educated and that it is only because of the reservation that we reached up to this level. They think that kind of nonsense. That problem I often faced because when I meet people they will ask questions related to education and then ask ‘but you belong to?’ And I say we are from reservation. Then they say ‘oh, you’re reservation!’ and their face gets... Then they will say ‘you will get jobs because you have reservation’. In my case I won’t reply to those kinds of questions. Then I try to ask their [high school] mark or their daughter’s. They will proudly say they got 73 and I’ll say ‘oh, OK, 73. It’s very good. I got 83’. At that time they will freeze [laughs]. They can’t even talk to me the next time. They will change the subject. I enjoy that, because they are thinking and viewing [it] as if the SC community is not educated. Those kind of thoughts will be challenged. Hopefully they won’t say the same to another SC. It’s a lesson for them because they wouldn’t expect that kind of mark and then they will be ashamed of themselves. I’m not ashamed of my community.

Anjali

Anjali has a competitive view on progress or at least she accepts this competitive view because others use it against her. Her progress is always compared to that of others. The postulation is that Anjali’s success is a success taken from an upper caste student on unfair grounds. Other dalits struggle with injustices that are violent and perhaps even life threatening but she is also experiencing “caste indignities, albeit of a covert and subtle kind” (Nampoothiri 2013:253). Anjali returns comments against her as a dalit with facts that show that she has done extremely well and she did not get into university because of mark relaxations. Samuelsen (2013:113) writes, “[w]hile a Dalit identity is increasingly becoming something that can be presented with pride, it never stops representing deep-seated stigma, producing subjects that are vulnerable to mechanisms of social exclusion”. It is always twofold to express one’s caste. At the same time some of them also find the fact that they are the minority, and a splendid example of their dalit background, not being a limiting factor but an asset. Haritha is less concerned about the discrimination and stigma. She
rather sees her dalit identity as giving her certain advantages in life. She studied journalism where only very few dalits enter. Haritha explains why:

The journalism field is very powerful and a kind of spectacular field. Not only dalits [are few but] women are also few. When I tell people I’m studying journalism people say ‘oooh, you are studying journalism?’ That kind of attitude is there. In dalit communities very few are journalists. I know the opportunities for dalits and women in journalism are very less. I’m also dalit so it’s double marginalisation.

Interestingly, Haritha sees this marginalisation, as she calls it, a strength to her personally. She is the top 1% of dalits and by revealing her caste she wins solidarity and respect:

I’m from the dalit community so I got full coverage from others. Because I’m from the dalit society the media is also projecting me. That’s a very exciting thing. Because I’m a dalit journalist I get more opportunities. Because the minority representatives get more writing opportunities. I’m from the dalit community and got to this level – that gives exclusivity. I got so many opportunities; sometimes dalit identity gives more opportunities. I think I got so many opportunities because I’m from the dalit community and educated. I get attention for that because we are considered a different group. Others want to know how I made it; got to this level. I have so many opportunities because I’m dalit and doing so well.

Haritha

She truly sees herself as privileged and her situation as very exclusive and therefore people are very open to her and she has a voice in society only few dalits get. Nonetheless, to gain this status she will always be a dalit journalist, never just a journalist. She cannot escape her dalit identity – “the dalit never grows even today in the eyes of the upper caste”, Gopal Guru (2012) affirms. Haritha, moreover, feels her own community looks at her differently because she has been well educated; it has gained her status she would not otherwise have:

In my community they see me as [an] achieved and free person. They are respecting me, also the elders because I have achieved [something]. What I wanted to do, I did that. That’s why they are respecting me. I got a space in society. In all situations I’m a graduate and a postgraduate and studying a course that’s why I got a space in society. Only because of my education I got respect and I got a space in society. […] In the weekend I went home and my
mother works in a supermarket. The man who runs the supermarket is afraid to talk to me because he is not much educated. He talks to my mother and says he’s proud of her daughter.

She believes that others look differently at her because she is educated – that she is educated before she is dalit in the eyes of others. Whether that is the perception others actually have or her self-perception alone is beyond the scope of this study. One example that points in the second direction is, however, Zacharias’s (2013) study that maintains that high caste recruiters in the private sector in India will not hire dalits because they in fact see them as the inarticulate and unsophisticated dalits that has been depicted throughout history.

Educated dalit women do indeed have to cope with the perception of others seeing them as dalits first and foremost. All my informants recognise that battle especially through their university years when they often had to listen to insults because they had entered universities as dalits on different grounds than others:

We got so many opportunities. We are considered the struggling people, that way we get the reservations and reward from the government. Some people are saying we are not able and apt persons to get those kind of things. That’s why they’re discriminating us, they are saying it’s not fair for other students but they are not considering that our community is very... low, so the government is supporting us to study. They’re saying you’re from that kind of society that’s why you got the seats and the grants. We are still struggling that’s why the government still gives the opportunities.

Saritha

Contrastingly, some of the other informants see their achievements as their own more than because of the reservation system:

It’s only because of my strength I reached this. Until plus two [high school] I was in OBC and I didn’t get the benefits of SC. I think I’m an above average student. I don’t think it’s only because of the reservation that I reached this.

Divya

They always have to justify that they had special opportunities, both to others and to themselves. If they do not tell themselves that they have deserved the opportunities then they will be struggling to
convince others. Gayathri shares an incident where she is juggling between proving that she is doing well despite of her caste as well as justifying the benefits she has received because of her caste. On a train ride from her home back to Calicut she engages in a conversation with an upper caste man and his family:

They asked me if I’m studying. I told them about my MSci and now I’m doing CREST. They asked what is that and I explained... I didn’t explain that it is for reservation, I actually forgot. I said ‘it’s for communication and to empower women’. I told ‘it’s a very good institution, CREST that is, and it’s beneficial for our future life and [you get] 6,000 INR in stipend per month’. He was very surprised about that. His daughter completed BCom [Bachelor of Commerce] and is now preparing for some exam. He said ‘it would be good for her’. I said ‘yes it’s very nice and look out for the next notification for applications’. We are very friendly. Then he said ‘I heard that these kinds of courses are only for reservation students from SC/ST’. Then at that time I remembered and confirmed. Then his face changed and he asked me ‘it’s reservation? You belong to?’ I just looked at him, I didn’t give an answer. I didn’t like the situation. He told me ‘we’re in upper caste’. I could understand his face. But I just left it. I don’t have a problem with belonging to my caste. Then they started saying ‘we have no reservation’. I was surprised, for what he needed the reservation? He was a retired officer and his two daughters were very well educated and the first daughter had a government job and one [was] doing a PhD. He was saying because of the reservation system we couldn’t get any opportunities. I didn’t want to reply to that. Before, I had told him that my dad was working in the railway and he was saying I didn’t need the reservation. He asked me ‘for what you need the reservation when your dad is a railway employee’. Then I told him, ‘actually my dad is working as a coolie and my would-be husband he is working in the railway’. Then he got more happy [laughs]. After the conversation he kept some mental space from me, I felt.

Gayathri

First Gayathri tells a lie to the stranger to gain social status and feel like she belongs in his social world. As he realises she is a dalit he starts to blame her for the lack of opportunities he feels his upper caste daughters have. Then Gayathri changes her story and tells the truth that in fact her father is a coolie but her fiancé has a good job in the railway services. Then he can suddenly accept more easily that she has certain opportunities his children do not. Gayathri utilises false compliance as a weapon (Scott 1985:28) since she tries to live up to the backward dalit stereotype when she changes her story. She balances between her superior status and her ascriptive status.
Non-dalit peers often, as shown, invalidate the reservation system because it is giving dalits an unfair advantage based solely on the caste they are born into. The ‘injustice’ of the reservation system has been used by upper castes to legitimise discrimination against dalits (Still 2013). A stand against this viewpoint is not to see affirmative action as a birthright but instead to understand it through the empirical social and economic systematic disadvantage experienced by people belonging to the lowest castes. I second Deshpande and Yadav’s (2006:2420) reasoning that this way of understanding the need of affirmative action “helps to de-essentialise identity markers like caste and religion – i.e., it provides a rational explanation why specific castes or communities are entitled to compensatory discrimination and undermines attitudes that treat such entitlements as a “birthright””. The reason that the upper castes’ critique is so widely spread is that the system as it is only identifies group disadvantages and only based on caste. This means that sometimes people who might not need the entitlements still get them, also called the creamy layer of the lower castes, and that is today the source of the uproar for critique and the movement to expand the system to include more castes – the debate especially concerns the expansion of the category OBC – because then others who are disadvantaged and upper caste also deserve the extra help. Another critique goes on abandoning affirmative action all together. There is an “[…] upper caste belief that they have left caste behind and were now caste less” (Deshpande and John 2010:42). Therefore, it bothers upper castes when dalits and the state focus on caste – they are done with caste but the status quo is not neutral. Much of upper castes’ lived experience of castelessness is because of their caste. They are not seen as ‘cast(ed)’ subjects like dalits are. In education you have the general category and then you have those who got in on reservation seats. The general category is casteless in education opposed to the lower castes who “are forced to intensify their caste identities” (Deshpande 2013:32). It is a binary opposition of caste invisibility and hyper-visibility.

These special opportunities they feel go hand in hand with a feeling of responsibility for their families and society more generally:

I got a lot of chance to reach this level because the reservation system also helped me. The government supported me to reach this level so I have the responsibility to return back to the society. I think it’s my duty to do something for society.

Saritha
Saritha wants to give back by becoming a district collector, which is a very prestigious job, and I later learn that she dropped out of CREST to pursue that dream. Reshma, on the other hand, is much more family oriented:

My biggest dream is to… if I get a job I want to pay all the debt my family is in because now I think it’s 12 lakh debt to [the] government. So first I want to pay all the debt. My father has been working since he was 12 [years old]. His father died so he had the responsibility to look after the family. He is still working, now he’s 50. He does coconut climbing, it’s very difficult and now he has allergy for the coconut [trees]. So I want to repay the debt and then after [that] I want to give back to the community.

Saritha and Reshma want to pay back differently but they both want to help the underprivileged, it being strangers or their family. These are acts that conflict with the caste system because it destabilises it if the people at the bottom ‘get up’. It is everyday resistance.

Having achieved what these women have, they are aware that it is unique and they are talented, privileged and lucky. Dealing with this is a complex endeavour where they seek to assert their position in the middle class among the upper castes while still emphasising their unprivileged background. They struggle with their twofold identity and paying back to society in one way or another is their duty. They break and resist the system by being dalit and a journalist like Haritha or by being proud of their dalit background and their achievements. The fact that they are successful is in fundamental conflict with the caste hierarchy.
CHAPTER 10
CONCLUSION

Based on two months of ethnographic fieldwork in Kerala, India living with a group of well educated dalit women I scrutinise the role caste plays for well educated dalit women in regards to education, marriage and special opportunities. As well as how these women are in resistance to the caste system. I have inquired into these two matters by examining one experience of caste among a group of young dalit women in one location in Kerala and this is an analysis of that experience. Others have found different struggles and different tools to deal with them among the rural poor middle-aged dalit women. This is a look into the future of caste in India where more and more dalits will resemble my informants. It is a changing social reality where caste has come to be different than what Dumont (2002) and others saw when they theorised caste. The caste system is wobbling and being dalit means much more than the caste hierarchy grants them. Dalit identity is varied, contradictory and changing and it is breaking the rigid caste system. At first glance it may indeed look like dalits replicate a system that has forced them to the bottom, however, by taking a more holistic look at dalit experiences and perceptions our understandings are nuanced.

Young well educated dalit women exercise everyday resistance and break with norms of caste and the caste system. They are ‘cast(ed)’ as dalits by others so the upper castes can claim to be castefree and that is structural and cultural violence, both coined by Galtung (1969; 1990). The part of upper caste culture that cast dalits is cultural violence and used to legitimise structural violence against dalits. By asserting themselves in contrast to the uneducated, unsophisticated, uncultured, uncivilised, inarticulate, illiterate, violent (and so on) dalit so often produced and reproduced by society, they resist. Yet, when they bystand the premises of the caste hierarchy, where they are ranked the lowest, they also resist. This is, in contrast to what others have argued before me, not an example of compliance with the caste system or sanskritisation. I believe we have to be very careful when assuming it is acceptance of subordination. We must not confuse similarity with consensus. This dynamic of juggling between highlighting and hiding caste according to what is most beneficial to them is a pragmatic view on social mobility. They use it to advance themselves as dalits in a system that is against them by default. They manipulate caste and the caste system and shake the caste hierarchy by changing the understanding and value of caste in different contexts. It is everyday resistance, as understood by Scott (1985), which lets them gain status or bargaining
power to use at a later time. This happens when they marry whom the society and their family expects them to marry, when they criticise the reservation system that is partially responsible for their educational success and when they focus on their dalit background to break stereotypes about their community. Their resistance is local, unorganised, concerns themselves, implicit and rarely confrontational. Their perception of caste can be summarised in Haritha’s statement: “I’m a dalit, so what?” which is testimony of the resistance, indifference and agency she feels – all at the same time. Their dalit identity is something they use to gain social status – regardless of hiding or highlighting it.

For future inquiry I suggest three aspects that can help further knowledge on the subject at hand. The first suggestion is to research well educated dalit men where one could undertake a gender analysis to see how the gender variable plays a role. Secondly, I invite an inquiry into how upper castes look at dalits who have been well educated. The dalits in this study express that they have gained a higher status and respect from others but how outsiders reflect this perception will be valuable to learn more about. Lastly, I propose a study of the group I have studied but five to ten years later when they have married and settled in the professional world to learn how their perspectives might have altered.
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APPENDIX I
GENERAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Consent and basic information
   - Can I record the interview?
   - Do you consent to the use of the interview in my master’s thesis? [Explain consent and about the study]
   - What is your name?
   - How old are you?
   - Where are you from? Is it rural or urban?
   - Which community are you from?
   - What is your religion?
   - What do your parents do?
     - What education do they have?
   - Do you have any siblings? Age? What do they do? Education?

2. Caste
   - How do you identify?
   - Do you know the term dalit?
     - Do you identify as a dalit?
   - Do you ever think about being SC?
     - When are you most conscious of you being SC? Can you think of a specific situation. What happened?
   - Can you think of examples where you ever felt discrimination?
   - What do you think of the caste system?
   - What do you think of your caste?
     - How does it influence your life?
   - Would anything be different for you if you were upper caste?
   - How do you hope things are different for your children?
   - Is your caste important to you?
   - When did you learn that you were SC?
• Is your relationship to your caste different from your parents? Grandparents?
• Do you prefer that others don’t know your caste?
• Do you ever hide your caste?
• Do you ever feel ashamed of your background? Give examples.

3. Education

• What is your education? Why did you choose that?
• What do you think of the reservation system in education?
• Should poor upper castes also have reservations?
• Do you need reservations? Why? [caste or poverty?]
• What is the difference between being poor and SC AND being poor and upper caste?
• Do you feel you have a responsibility for making it better for the generations to come because you have had these opportunities?

4. Marriage

• Have you started thinking about marriage?
• What is important for you in marriage?
• What is important to your parents?
• Could you marry someone from a different caste or religion?