Fabian Hempel and Krutika Patri

Resentment from Below: Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* as a Subaltern Prism on Indian Modernity

ABSTRACT Based on a thematic analysis, we propose a sociological reading of Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* that explores the relationship between modern science and Indian society. The novel reflects, among other aspects, on the Janus-faced impact of the institutionalization of science and higher education in modern India from a subaltern perspective. In that regard, Joseph's contemporary story of lower-class Dalits offers at least two interpretative angles: on the one hand, a hegemonic position of collision avoidance as incumbent forces redirect the organization of science to preserve the traditional social order; and on the other hand, a subaltern position that attempts to break the wheel of social stratification as characters excluded from institutional positions of power exercise their agency to manipulate the political strife within their workplace. In the first reading, the autonomy of science degrades into social irresponsibility; in the second, the autonomy of science is used, for right or for wrong, as a weapon against multiple structures of oppression. From both angles, the novel deconstructs the conventional view of an autonomous science as a self-evident ideal of India's postcolonial modernity.

KEYWORDS caste, Dalits, India, Indian writing in English, science in society

Over seventy years after India's independence, largely democratic and republican forms of government, the rule of law, and inclusive policies have not only failed to undermine the grip of traditional hierarchical structures, but have also contributed to the emergence of new forms of stratification that continue to shape Indian society. The caste system, in particular, persists across nearly every facet of Indian social structure, perpetuating both overt and covert hierarchies. Caste, as a contemporary phenomenon, manifests along multiple codependent dimensions: as a

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traditional status hierarchy organized around ascribed notions of purity and pollution, as a constitutive element of social and political power in everyday life, and as a system that institutionalizes practices of discrimination and violence (Jodhka 2018, 5–15). Manifest and latent forms of caste-based discrimination are deeply embedded in India's traditional institutions. While there are competing narratives on whether caste still matters in modern Indian society, many argue that caste disparities—intertwined with other forms of social exclusion based on, for example, gender, ethnicity, or class—also permeate in its modern institutions (Desai and Dubey 2012; Mosse 2018, 425–31), including those operating in the fields of science, education, and technology.

In line with many of their counterparts across the globe, Indian science and higher education primarily position themselves as catalysts of economic development, often subordinating academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and social responsibility to the imperatives of growth—thereby marginalizing their roles as spaces for basic research, critical inquiry, and potential political reform (Sundar 2018, 50). Nevertheless, Indian science continues to present itself as an autonomous, merit-based system that rejects identity-based exclusions such as caste or gender discrimination. To increase social mobility, the most educationally, politically, and socially disadvantaged castes and tribes—that is, Dalits and Adivasis, recognized by the Indian state as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), as well as other disadvantaged castes officially termed Other Backward Classes (OBCs)—have been receiving substantial reservations in public employment and higher education for decades. But despite their rhetoric of merit and continued reservation policies, India's research and higher education institutions are "often found to be gated universes that are accessible largely to upper-caste, middle-class people in India" (Chadha and Achuthan 2017, 33). This lack of inclusivity, primarily entangled with caste and other systems of stratification, has significantly affected the social impact and, potentially, the productivity of India's science and higher education system.

Among modern forms of cultural production, pertinent Indian writing in English occasionally reflects on these phenomena by portraying Indian science as a social institution that links local and global identities while challenging distinctions between tradition and modernity in Indian society. In that sense, we propose a sociological interpretation of Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* (2011), grounded in an in-depth reading and a thematic analysis of the novel, to explore the relationship between modern science and Indian society. Joseph's novel is set in the fictional Institute of Theory and Research, a Mumbai-based center for basic and applied research in

the astronomical sciences. The story follows the main protagonist, Ayyan Mani, a Dalit assistant to the upper-caste Brahmin director of the Institute, Aravind Acharya. Acharya, along with Oparna Goshmaulik—an astrobiologist and the only female scientist at the Institute—is searching for evidence of extraterrestrial life. He frequently clashes with the Institute's deputy director, Jana Nambodri, a radio astronomer who seeks to direct the Institute's research toward his own area of expertise.

The story traces various political, cultural, and institutional discords within Indian science, as Mani and Goshmaulik—who are socially and professionally marginalized along different axes—attempt to manipulate these tensions and assert their individual agency. Caste and class conflicts shape Mani's marginalization, while Goshmaulik, despite matching or even surpassing the research contributions of the Institute's senior scientists, regularly faces challenges due to her gender. The Institute, a fictional representation of a prototypical Indian science institution, also participates in the merit-versus-reservation debate that shrouds Indian science and higher education policy. In its social realism, *Serious Men* illustrates the Janus-faced effects of the institutionalization of science in modern India from various subaltern perspectives. In that regard, our interpretation of Joseph's novel offers at least two interpretative angles:

— A hegemonic position of collision avoidance as incumbent forces redirect the organization and practice of science to preserve the traditional social order.
— A subaltern position that considers this subversion of the institution of science as an emancipatory act by local subalterns to overcome their marginal positions within both traditional and modern social systems.

In the first reading, the autonomy of science degrades into social irresponsibility; in the second, it is used as a weapon against multiple structures of oppression. Based on both angles, the novel deconstructs the conventional view of an autonomous science as a self-evident component of the package of postcolonial modernities (Bhambra 2023). The following sections provide background on social stratification and the institutionalization of science in modern India, establish a methodological foundation for employing fiction as a sociological tool, and explore *Serious Men* in light of theoretical and empirical research on caste- and gender-based inequalities in Indian science and society. As the novel thematizes caste and gender discrimination in both society and the institution of science, the discussion in the next two sections underscores the continuity between traditional and modern systems of social exclusion as well as the ongoing

underrepresentation of Dalits, women, and other marginalized groups in Indian science and higher education.

On Social Exclusion in Modern India

Any account of social stratification in India must acknowledge its variation and change. Rooted in a complex interplay of historical and contemporary factors, Indian society exhibits a wide diversity of social groups, cultural and religious practices, and both traditional and modern institutions. A distinctive feature of its social landscape is the predominance and hierarchical structuration of collective identities such as religion, caste, ethnicity, gender, and language (Béteille 1991b; Gupta 2007). The organization of hierarchies is continually negotiated and contested, both between and within conflicting communities across various social spheres. Two (post-) colonial developments, in particular, have reshaped India's traditional communal relations: first, the expansion of modern institutions such as secular legal systems, electoral politics, schools, universities, public health systems, and news media; and second—in part as an outcome of the former—the emergence of a substantial middle class, mass education, public spheres, and new professions (Béteille 1991a; 2015, 79).

This has resulted in an ambivalent configuration of traditional and modern parameters of stratification—specifically, how caste and gender relations co-produce educational and occupational opportunities (Velaskar 2016, 398). To understand how caste operates within modern Indian institutions, a few essential points about its underlying mechanics must be emphasized. What we commonly refer to as the caste system is rooted in one of Hinduism's foundational pillars: the *chaturvarna*, or the four-fold system of *varnas*. These *varnas* are hierarchically arranged, with Brahmins (priests) at the top, followed by Kshatriyas (soldiers), Vaishyas (traders), and Shudras (servants). Dalits—meaning downtrodden, broken, or crushed—are positioned outside the *varna* system as "the Untouchables, the Unseeables, the Unapproachables—whose presence, whose touch, whose very shadow is considered to be polluting by privileged-caste Hindus" (Roy 2016, 24). While *varnas* function primarily as conceptual categories, *jatis*—thousands of subgroups organized around lineage, kinship, and occupation—constitute the empirical manifestations of the *varna* divisions (Dharampal-Frick and Götzen 2014; Dharampal-Frick and Sitharaman 2015).

The caste system is postulated as operating on a sacred principle of graded distinction between purity and pollution, with the pure positioned

at the top of this hierarchical scale, endowed with privileges and the power to police those at lower levels—those deemed polluted. Because caste is primarily determined by birth and sustained through endogamous marriage practices, it functions as a social construct that entrenches marginalized caste groups in a perpetual cycle of status disadvantage and inequitable opportunity structures (Atrey 2019, 64). Accordingly, Bhimrao R. Ambedkar succinctly defines caste as "an enclosed class" (2004, 253) and an "ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt" (2014, 167). Beyond being merely a traditional marker of cultural and social difference, caste matters significantly in contemporary India as a critical dimension that reinforces social, political, and economic power. Furthermore, caste institutionalizes social discrimination, humiliation, and violence (Jodhka 2018, 10–12).

Traditionally, the dominance of caste has been most evident in structuring communal and economic relations in rural India (Srinivas 1966). Moreover, caste has also become a crucial factor in modern Indian politics, particularly due to its differentiated national and regional party systems, public interest litigation, caste-based reservation policies, and the rise of Hindu nationalism (Jaffrelot 2021, 2–6; Teltumbe 2019, 364–66). However, there is less scholarly and political consensus on how caste operates within other modern institutions. Some argue that caste plays a diminished role in reproducing inequality in modern sectors of India's economy, citing the perceived disconnect between caste obligations and professional responsibilities (Béteille 1991b, 25; 1996, 162). In contrast, others contend that upper castes—dominant in almost every social field in India—have transformed traditional caste capital into modern forms of social and cultural capital, thereby reinforcing historical caste hierarchies in contemporary contexts (Deshpande 2013). This transformation has rendered many modern organizations seemingly casteless while concealing latent casteist structures. Correspondingly, both conceptual and empirical evidence suggests the persistence of caste privilege in these institutions, often intersecting with gender- and class-based patterns of discrimination (Chakravarti and Krishnaraj 2018, 132–61; Islam et al. 2021).

On the Institution of Science in Modern India

The differentiation of substantial science and higher education systems is a paradigmatic feature of the social formation of modernity. Science is modern society's principal means of producing and certifying new knowledge about the physical and social world—knowledge that is of epistemic

and, potentially, practical interest (Mavalankar 2014). Moreover, the social consequences of scientific research and education are closely connected to the political, cultural, technological, and economic development of modern societies. Although some scholars argue that India is still in the process of becoming modern and continues to articulate its own postcolonial trajectory (Gupta 2000, 217), its science and higher education institutions are largely modern inventions. While India has long been a center of knowledge production and higher learning, its first modern science and higher education institutions were established with the advent of the British Raj in the second half of the nineteenth century (Chakrabarti 2004; Prakash 1999; Raj 2007).

The expansion of Indian science and higher education into large-scale social institutions began after the country's independence in 1947, when local and national began aligning scientific research and higher education with long-term economic development goals (Arnold 2013; Sikka 1990). Since then, India has developed a highly compartmentalized system marked by sharp contrasts. Due in part to federal, regional, and functional differentiation, this system encompasses a wide variety of institutional types—ranging from research institutes deemed universities to several hundred (mostly public, some private) universities, most of which prioritize teaching (Padma 2015; van Noorden 2015). Relative to its size, India's research output remains modest; however, it hosts several research-intensive universities such as the Indian Institutes of Technology as well as prominent non-university research institutes, including the Tata Institute for Fundamental Research and the Indian Institute of Science, which produce substantial, internationally recognized basic and applied research. We consider these prototypical science organizations to be real-world references to the institute depicted in Joseph's novel.

Science and higher education have become core elements of India's package of modernity. In the process, its institutions have also adopted—at least rhetorically—varied conceptions of autonomy and social responsibility as ideal-typical prerequisites for the production and application of scientific knowledge (Grover 2020, 1889–90; Sundar 2018, 51). A fundamental dimension of any science system is its capacity to implement reward structures that incentivize scientific innovation and research quality while addressing specific basic and applied research problems (Stephan 1996, 1201–9). The margin of autonomy within the institution of science hinges on such structures to distinguish—based on self-contained intellectual criteria—good science from bad (Merton 1973, 134). Accordingly, productive research and education should primarily rest on merit, at least according to normative idealizations that are embedded in the institutionalized

self-image of many, if not all, modern science and higher education systems, including India's. Yet the concept and application of merit in science, higher education, and other institutions—built on the conviction that individuals deserve whatever rewards social markets bestow on their output—can have ambivalent consequences for the productivity, solidarity, equity, and equality of modern societies (Sandel 2020, 227).

In the context of Indian science and higher education, the notion of meritocracy implies that any system of marginalization not based purely on performance should be considered irrelevant—or even detrimental—to its functionality. However, most research on its social structure reveals that individuals with upper-caste, male, and middle-class backgrounds dominate these institutions, at least in numerical terms. At the same time, remarkably few individuals from the marginalized sections of Indian society appear to gain access to Indian science and higher education (Chadha and Achuthan 2017; Kondaiah, Mahadev, and Wahlgang 2017). Ethnographic, historical, and limited survey-based evidence also points to the persistence of caste-, gender-, and class-based discrimination among Indian researchers and their students (Pathania and Tierney 2018; Rathod 2021; Subramanian 2015; 2019; Sur 2011; Thomas 2020; 2021; Thorat et al. 2020; Tierney, Sabharwal, and Malish 2019). From a perspective informed by social and cultural studies, these findings prompt a turn to literary narratives and other forms of cultural production that illuminate how the marginalization of subaltern groups unfolds in Indian institutions of science and higher education.

On the Social Knowledge of Fiction

Using Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* to explore subalternity in modern Indian institutions rests on the premise that literary fiction can function both as a source and a tool for social inquiry. Therefore, our methodological starting point is the understanding that literary imaginations are produced by individual and collective perceptions. In particular, modern literary narratives that center on diverse social actors, actor constellations, and the structuring of social institutions may offer valuable sociological insights. To some extent, many approaches within cultural, literary, social, and postcolonial studies that incorporate literary texts into their analyses—whether explicitly or implicitly—share this standpoint (Misztal 2016). Our approach draws on the so-called strong program in the sociology of literature (Váňa 2020), integrating the social knowledge embedded in works of fiction with postcolonial and sociological thinking. This allows us to treat fictional texts

as documents "with which to probe into reality, testing certain features of the world as described in the text" (Longo 2015, 140). Our methodological argument builds on the relationship between modern literary forms and society, literary fiction's evolving engagement with modern science, and the social realism of contemporary Indian literature.

The scholarly potential of fictional literature rests on its context of production, the aesthetic quality of its communicative forms, and its engagement with and by the reader. In general, reading literary texts—whether for entertainment or for explicit analytical purposes—can involve experiences of recognition and enchantment, both through their aesthetic impact and their distinctive configurations of social knowledge (Felski 2008, 14). Like any cultural artifact, fiction is shaped by its aesthetic, cultural, and social contexts of production. It can, therefore, process knowledge of the social worlds in which it is embedded (Sevänen 2018, 52). However, fiction does not merely display existing knowledge. By linking manifest and latent observations with the logic of its aesthetic practices, writing fiction can also generate distinct forms of knowledge. These practices create imaginary blueprints of social worlds that both mirror and diverge from ordinary reality (Luhmann 2000, 129–30). Sociological perspectives such as ours treat literary narratives as thick 'as if' descriptions of society, offering space for reflection on empirically perceptible social realities (Koschorke 2018, 47; Váňa 2021, 218–22).[1]

The novel we examine belongs to a small but distinct segment of contemporary Indian writing in English that increasingly engages with various aspects of modern science and postcolonial India. More broadly, science has become a salient element in modern world literature (Roxburgh and Clayton 2021). Such fiction explores, for instance, the social and cultural context of scientific research, its impact on society, the lived experiences of researchers, and scientific concepts as crucial elements of the narrative (Gaines, Farzin and Haynes 2021; Pilkington 2019). Simultaneously, caste oppression, caste consciousness, and other forms of subalternity have been central themes in India's various postcolonial literatures —whether in English, Hindi, or other vernacular languages (Gajarawala 2012; Thiara and Misrahi-Barak 2019). Particularly, Dalit literature—fictional, non-fiction, and autobiographical writing about Dalit protagonists, authored by Dalit writers—often exhibits a (self-)reflexive form of social realism (Gajarawala

1 In ethnography, 'thick description' refers to a specific mode of processing observations of social interactions and events. Its aim is to not only explain how something occurs but also interpret its meaning or significance (Geertz 1973, 9–10; Rubin 2021, 148).

2013, 164–65). These texts can be read both as a social history of caste elision and as a form of critique by Dalits and other subaltern groups. While *Serious Men* does not represent a classical form of Dalit literature, it centers on Dalit and other subaltern conditions in contemporary India.[2] It thus offers a distinctive literary imagination through which to rework the hegemonic logics of caste, gender, and class in Indian institutions of science and higher education.

A Literary Depiction of Subalternity in Indian Science

Even though *Serious Men* has received praise in Indian literary reviews (Sharma 2010) and was recently adapted into a Hindi-language film (Thakur 2020), literary scholarship has been more reserved, offering a somewhat critical perspective. This criticism revolves around the novel's allegedly problematic depiction of gender roles, the individualism of its Dalit protagonist, and a perceived lack of progressive politics (Yadav 2022, 314–16). Indeed, as the following analysis of the novel demonstrates, it deliberately foregrounds the ambivalence within progressive discourses of modernization and empowerment. It portrays a subversively assertive Dalit character who navigates and manipulates both privileged and subaltern figures to counteract India's overlapping traditional and modern systems of marginalization. In doing so, *Serious Men* links the hypervisibility of subaltern groups—particularly Dalits—with the alleged invisibility of upper castes, a social paradox that sociological and cultural studies of contemporary India continue to emphasize (Deshpande 2013, 32). Moreover, we argue that the novel's story, its character construction, and its satirical elements contribute to a distinctly realist portrayal of caste, gender, modern science, and contemporary India—precisely because it presents flawed protagonists, institutions, politics, and actions.

Serious Men can be read as a deliberate satire. Almost all—if not all—of its fictional events fall squarely within the realm of the familiar in postcolonial India, and precisely for this reason, Joseph's novel offers a resourceful literary imagination of what Gupta calls "India's mistaken modernity" (2000, 8)—a condition marked by the absence, thus far, of any meaningful transition from inequality among and within communities to equality both among communal groups and between individuals. As noted in the introductory section, the novel centers on Ayyan Mani, a Dalit man who works

2 As far as we know, the author of *Serious Men*, Manu Joseph, has not made his caste status public.

as a clerk at the Institute of Theory and Research, a fictitious astronomical research institute located in Mumbai. Both in his role as an administrative assistant to the Institute's director, Aravind Acharya, and in his everyday life, Ayyan is subjected to the panopticon of modern and traditional India's social, economic, and scientific hierarchies.

Mani lives with his wife, Oja, and their ten-year-old, partially deaf son, Adi, in a small one-room flat in a typical Mumbai chawl.[3] He realizes that the gridlocked system of social exclusion will never allow him or his wife any substantial social, educational, or economic mobility. Recognizing that the game of stratification is rigged, he decides to rig it himself by falsely presenting his son as a child prodigy to improve Adi's educational prospects. His ulterior goal is for Adi to pass the joint entrance test (JET) of the Institute—an excruciatingly selective screening process for its highly prestigious undergraduate program. Mani's plan hinges on gaining access to the various versions of the test sheets, which contain hundreds of questions in physics, chemistry, and mathematics. After spending several nights searching nearly every room in the Institute for the well-secured question papers, he leverages his tacit knowledge of the Institute's internal affairs and collaborates with Acharya to obtain the JET templates.

Acharya, an upper-caste Brahmin and senior researcher more interested in basic than applied astronomical research, seeks to concentrate the Institute's resources on what he considers real science—specifically, the search for evidence of extraterrestrial microbes in Earth's stratosphere. However, other senior researchers are vying to replace him as director, including Jana Nambodri, the deputy director and a radio astronomer who aims to divert the Institute's focus from basic to more applied—and better-funded—areas of research aligned with his expertise. Completing this internal power constellation is Oparna Ghosmaulik, a young astrobiologist and the Institute's only female scientist, who seeks to advance her career and research interests. Acharya, along with several other male researchers, is enamored with her. Following a brief affair with Acharya, Ghosmaulik manipulates scientific data and strategically accuses him of research misconduct, leading to his removal as director and Nambodri's subsequent promotion. Throughout these events, Mani—by virtue of his status as a Dalit, a clerk, and a non-scientist—is an 'invisible visible' witness. His routine presence in closed-door situations goes largely unacknowledged by those in power, who disregard him on account of his

3 While generally characterized by poor sanitation and substandard living conditions, the tenants of such residential buildings often belong to the (lower) middle class.

institutional position and caste. Eventually, Mani forms an alliance with the disgraced Acharya, which enables him to obtain copies of the JET papers while helping Acharya reclaim the directorship of the Institute.

Questioning how different dimensions of subalternity intersect in contemporary India, we conducted an in-depth reading of *Serious Men* that resembles, in sociological terms, a thematic analysis and related forms of qualitative content analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Schreier 2017). Our analysis of the story focuses on the constellations between Mani, the Dalit man; Ghosmaulik, the young female scientist; Acharya; Nambodri; and other upper-caste, male, and senior scientists. First, we identified and reviewed relevant passages from the novel. These were then compared to uncover recurring themes and patterns that address our research question. The following sections present the interpretative angles of our analysis without claiming to offer a definitive exegesis of the literary text. Rather, we approach *Serious Men* as a literary prism through which we examine the complexities of caste-, gender-, and class-based discrimination in modern Indian science.

Caste: Merit Cannot Be Compromised

As a fictional representation of an Indian science institution, the novel's Institute of Theory and Research also reflects the merit-versus-reservation debate that permeates Indian science and higher education. Various forms of quota and affirmative action policies favoring marginalized communities—particularly those officially recognized by the Indian government as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes—have been a feature of India's social and educational policy at least since independence. At the same time, the Indian Constitution guarantees the right to equality, aiming to prevent discrimination on various grounds and to ensure equal treatment of its citizens in matters of public employment (Khosla 2012, 87–106). Some, including the Institute's senior researchers in the novel, argue that the principle of reservation contradicts egalitarian ideals, as it facilitates the social mobility of specific groups rather than benefiting society as a whole. However, the institutional objective of such policies is to equalize access to educational and occupational opportunities both between—and, when approached intersectionally, within—different communal groups.

Allocating research positions based on degree of social marginalization may certainly reduce the research output of the Institute—but only within a system that is genuinely structured around actual performance

and provides equitable access to educational, epistemic, and institutional resources, enabling all participants to compete on comparable grounds:

> Matters slowly moved to another simmering issue: quotas for backward castes in colleges. There was a fear that the Institute of Theory and Research might be asked to allocate seats for the lower castes in the faculty and research positions. The general mood in the room turned sombre. Some men threw cautious glances at the secretaries and stray peons when there were comments on the political aggression of backward castes. Ayyan looked on impassively. He had heard all these arguments before and knew what their conclusion would be. The Brahmins would say graciously, "Past mistakes must be corrected; opportunities must be created," and then they would say, "But merit cannot be compromised." (Joseph 2011, 73)

No matter the injustices, the gated nature of the Indian science institutions ignores the deep-rooted social disparities within their walls while upholding the illusion of the fallible and often unquestioned ideal of uncompromisable merit. This literary perspective from within the institution aligns with ethnographic research on the Indian Institute of Science—one of India's most productive research institutions in terms of publication output—which documents how scientists from Brahmin and upper-caste communities not only dominate various scientific professions and shape institutional culture along caste-based lines, but also often resist acknowledging the caste and class dimensions of their own dispositions and actions (Thomas 2020). These observations further underscore how, historically, science institutions, scientists, and science biographers have either dismissed the caste question or failed to take it seriously (Kondaiah, Mahadev, and Wahlgang 2017).

Unlike race, caste may not be immediately evident to those unfamiliar with Indian culture and traditions. Caste markers—framed within the pollution–purity matrix—can be found in names, professions, clothes, marriage and death customs, neighborhoods, and even the languages spoken. In contemporary India, caste asserts itself along three interrelated dimensions: as tradition; as a form of political, economic, and social power; and as an institutionalized system of discrimination and humiliation (Jodhka 2018). In *Serious Men*, the names of the male scientists serve as clear caste markers for Indian readers. The director of the Institute of Theory and Research, Aravind Acharya, bears a surname commonly found among Vishwabrahmin communities, which translates to 'teacher' or 'guru'—occupations traditionally associated with upper-caste Brahmins. Similarly, his deputy, Jana Nambodri, has a surname that signals affiliation with Kerala's feudal elite, the Namboodiri Brahmin community. Through

these unmistakably Brahminical surnames, the novel foregrounds caste identity and conflict as central to its narrative.

Mani's servility and submission are demanded by the scientists, who assert not only intellectual authority but also a moral, philosophical, and sacralized mandate:

> Ayyan had a haunting desire to escape from this madhouse. Thirteen years was too long. He could not bear the grandness of their vocation any more, the way they debated whether universe must be spelt with a capital U or a small u, and the magnificence with which they said, after spending crores of public money, "Man knows nothing yet. Nothing." And the phoney grace with which they hid their incurable chauvinism and told reporters, "A physicist is ultimately judged through citations. She has to constantly publish." They were highminded; they secretly believed that their purpose was greater; they were certain that only scientists had the right today to be philosophers. But they counted cash like everyone else. With a wet index finger and a sudden meditative seriousness. (Joseph 2011, 29)

The novel presents instance after instance of scientists either openly asserting their caste identities by policing those they deem beneath them, or trivializing caste by ignoring its enduring grip on science—a field they portray as a singular force of truth through the offering, extension, or presentation of facts. Moreover, these leading members of the Indian astronomy community invoke flawed, refuted, and pseudoscientific theories of human intelligence and cognitive ability to justify their dismissal of Dalits as potential epistemic peers. The scientist Jana Nambodri, after a confrontation with the protagonist Ayyan Mani, exclaims to his colleagues:

> "IQ of 148," the voice of Nambodri was saying. "If Dalits can have that sort of an IQ, would they be begging for reservations?"
> "Did you see the way he was talking?" Jal said. "I can't believe this. That's what happens when you put someone who is meant to clean toilets in a white-collar job."
> "He was in Mensa," Nambodri said, and there was a crackle of laughter. "Just because his son is some kind of a freak, he thinks even he is."
> "Something fishy about his son," someone said. "I have never come across a Dalit genius. It's odd, you know."
> The astronomers continued in this vein. They spoke of the racial character of intelligence and the unmistakable cerebral limitations of the Dalits, Africans, Eastern Europeans, and women. (Joseph 2011, 367)

Nambodri is surprised that a Dalit could possess a higher IQ than his own and dare to challenge his authority. His remarks reveal a deep-seated contempt

for Dalits, whom he associates with reservation policies and characterizes as "begging" for inclusion. His orthodox mentality displays a form of institutional protectionism, whereby he seeks to safeguard caste hierarchies by demeaning the subaltern's attempts to challenge his authority—an authority he reinforces through references to 'scientific' metrics such as IQ and genetics. This mindset echoes broader discursive patterns in contemporary India and beyond that justify existing social hierarchies not only through appeals to tradition but also through ostensibly modern frameworks. In particular, several strands of Hindutva ideology combine the modern with the archaic, and scientific rhetoric with religious notions of indigeneity, community, and heritage (Subramaniam 2019, 7–10).

Aravind Acharya also shows little interest in the merit-versus-reservation argument and largely ignores the structural inequalities that plague the Institute. However, when directly confronted with the issue, his discomfort becomes apparent:

> [Ayyan] always spoke in Tamil to the Director because he knew it annoyed him. It linked them intimately in their common past, though their fates vastly different. Ayyan's dialect, particularly, distracted Acharaya. It reminded him of the miserable landless labourers, and their sad eyes that used to haunt him in his childhood when he watched the world go by from the back seat of a black Morris Oxford. (Joseph 2011, 51)

Compared to Nambodri, Acharya comes across as the lesser evil; yet the subtle markers of caste and class—evident in Mani's particular Tamil dialect—make him visibly uncomfortable, as they recall a childhood guilt tied to witnessing poverty from behind the privileged windows of a chauffeured car.[4] Acharya sees himself as pursuing a nobler path: science in its purest form, driven by curiosity and discovery—an ideal that echoes normative self-conceptions of traditional Brahmin occupations. Throughout the novel, his personal quest to discover extraterrestrial microbes and satisfy his scientific curiosity repeatedly clashes with the institutional and epistemic interests of his peers as well as the emotional needs of his family. Time and again, he chooses the pursuit of his own intellectual and professional concerns over interpersonal relationships and institutional responsibilities.

Finally, the novel's primary subaltern figure, Mani, manipulates the 'War of Brahmins' to topple both the ignorant and the ignoble within the

4 Both being driven by a servant and the choice of car—a Hindustan Ambassador—serve as clear markers of Acharya's upper-middle-class upbringing during the License Raj era.

Institute of Theory and Research. He watches as Acharya is removed from his directorial position. Later, he helps Acharya reclaim his role and clear his name—but only when he needs the scientist's assistance to secure access to the JET examination papers, allowing his son to cheat and be publicly recognized as a child genius.

Gender: Women in Science on the Margins

The other marginalized character highlighted in the novel is Oparna Goshmaulik, the only female scientist at the Institute. A young astrobiologist, Goshmaulik works with Acharya on a 'balloon experiment' aimed at detecting the DNA of extraterrestrial microbes. Within the Institute, both the other scientists and Mani view her through a sexualized lens, consistently overlooking her professional competence. She is acutely aware of the male gaze and frequently finds herself the subject of sexist banter, as well as offhand comments and behaviors from colleagues that contribute to a pervasive sense of discomfort in her workplace:

> Some pretended to continue chatting while looking at her rear in respectful non-chalance.
> "She is a Bengali?" a man intended to whisper, but the silence was so deep that everybody heard it. (The man probably was a Bengali.) Faint chuckles filled the air.
> "Historically," Nambodri said aloud, "the only just punishment for a Bengali male has been a Bengali female." A round of laughter went through the room. "We forgot to mention it before, gentlemen, she is our first female faculty," Nambodri declared. (Joseph 2011, 70)

Oparna Goshmaulik is introduced as "almost beautiful in a deliberately modest cream salwar chosen to calm the men, she was an event" (Joseph 2011, 35)—a presence that Acharya and others at the Institute are consistently drawn to. For reasons not made entirely clear in the novel, she enters into an extramarital affair with Acharya, which ultimately contributes to his downfall when she publicly discloses the relationship alongside allegations of manipulated experimental data (Joseph 2011, 307–8). As the only female faculty member, Goshmaulik experiences persistent gender-based discrimination: She endures hushed remarks, is subjected to patronizing behavior, and frequently finds herself pushed to the margins of institutional life. Gender often appears as an anomaly within the purview of various scientific fields (Chadha and Achuthan 2017, 34). Yet it is not simply repressed as a silent facet of professional life: it is actively sustained as an anomaly, compelling those within these institutions to confront its

disruptive presence. Goshmaulik, as the anomaly within the Institute—nominally equal in authority and responsibility to her colleagues—is continually patronized and diminished by her male peers, who downplay both her presence and her legitimacy as a scientific equal:

> The three walked down the interminable corridor. The woody sound of Oparna's heels was still so alien to the Institute, which was used to the unremarkable silence of men, that Acharya looked back at her and at her feet. She smiled meekly and tried to walk softly. That made her feel stupid, and, for a moment, angry with herself. She was not accustomed to being servile and she wondered why she was so in the presence of this man. […]. She walked faster to keep up with him, and thought of something friendly to say, something equal. "This corridor is endless," she said. (Joseph 2011, 45)

Following the breakdown of her affair with Acharya, Goshmaulik manipulates scientific data and provides false testimony accusing him of malpractice. The blurring of personal and professional boundaries triggers a crisis within the Institute, as the two marginalized characters—Mani and Goshmaulik—assert their individual positions by leveraging the internal political conflict for their own ends. Although their interests converge around Acharya's eventual reinstatement as director, the novel makes clear—primarily from Mani's perspective—that Mani and Goshmaulik, both rendered subalterns for different reasons, inhabit fundamentally different social worlds. While Goshmaulik is marginalized on account of her gender, her upper-caste, upper-class background and professional status stand in sharp contrast to Mani's lived reality. Aware of her comparative privilege, yet simultaneously revealing his own gender bias, Mani fails—or refuses—to recognize any meaningful parallel between her struggles and the structural injustices faced by himself, his son, or his wife:

> Ayyan was watching her surreptitiously as she stared thoughtfully at the door. Another high-caste woman beyond his reach. She went to the Cathedral School in the back seat of her father's car. Then onto Stanford. Now she was here: the Head of Astrobiology, the solitary queen of the basement lab. So easy it was for these women. Soon, some stupid reporter would write that she had "stormed the male bastion." All these women were doing that these days. Storming the male bastion. "Rising against the odds"—they all were. But what great subjugations did these women suffer, what were they denied by their fathers, what opportunities didn't they get, what weren't they fed, why were they so obsessed with their own womanhood? (Joseph 2011, 36)

But this lack of recognition for the marginalization of others is, to some extent, also shared by Goshmaulik—as illustrated in her first interaction with Mani: "She thought he smelled exactly like a room freshener. But at least he didn't stink like other men" (Joseph 2011, 46). Thus, while both characters succeed in navigating and, to some degree, overcoming their own marginalized positions, they also reinforce the traditional social order of the Institute by enabling the return of a former upper-caste male director and facilitating the removal of his emerging upper-caste male rival. Throughout the novel, we are offered a perspective on intersectional subalternity within the institution of science in modern India—an institution that selectively adapts or discards traditional hierarchies according to convenience. In this homologous reading of Goshmaulik's and Mani's interactions, *Serious Men* explores the dynamic between sameness and difference in subaltern experiences of individual and collective disadvantage, shaped by their enduring inability to fully recognize and confront one another's distinct forms of marginalization.

As a modern establishment, the Institute of Theory and Research is expected to deliver cutting-edge research and contribute to socio-economic development—in other words, economic modernization. It promotes a merit-based selection process, ostensibly allowing the "best of the best" to participate in scientific production. However, this ideal proves illusory, as the Institute's unequal treatment of individuals from marginalized backgrounds effectively transforms it into a small, gated community. In Mani's case, as a non-scientist, he emancipates himself by subverting the power structures of the Institute's scientists without participating in the actual production of epistemic knowledge. Goshmaulik, by contrast, is a scientist who ultimately manipulates data and places blame on Acharya, leading to his removal as director. The novel does not explicitly disclose her motivations. On the one hand, her actions may stem from unresolved relational tensions with Acharya following the abrupt end of their affair; on the other, they may reflect a deliberate attempt to challenge the epistemic and institutional hierarchies that have marginalized her as a woman in a Brahmin-dominated space. Both Mani and Goshmaulik emerge as disruptive forces within the Institute, choosing reactionary strategies in response to their circumstances rather than accepting submissive roles.

Conclusion

The central theme of *Serious Men* revolves around how subalterns—such as Dalits and women—navigate and potentially ascend the social hierarchies of traditional and modern India. From this interpretative angle, Oparna Goshmaulik seeks to advance her research and career prospects at the Institute, while Ayyan Mani's prerogative extends beyond his own biography, as nearly all his actions are directed toward improving the educational opportunities available to his son. While taking their respective actions, both characters remain acutely aware of the structural disadvantages attached to their identities—Dalit and lower-class in Mani's case, and woman in Goshmaulik's—within institutions shaped by Brahmanical patriarchy (Arya 2020). While much of the scholarly criticism of *Serious Men* has focused on Mani's sexism and instrumentalism, we suggest that both Mani and Goshmaulik enact a form of subversive individualism that, given their differing positions within similar institutional and cultural contexts, appears not only intelligible but also justified. Our conclusion is informed by a postcolonial sociological perspective that approaches the novel not as a normative tale but as a critical narrative of the structural roadblocks embedded in contemporary Indian society.

In Goshmaulik's case, her research output alone does not determine her fate within the Institute—a social reality shaped by both modern and traditional forces. On the one hand, while reliant on collaboration, modern science is also an intensely competitive enterprise, constrained by a limited supply of rewards such as funding and tenure. This dynamic can negatively impact resource sharing, research integrity, and creativity (Fang and Casadevall 2015). On the other hand, Goshmaulik seeks to advance within a science system that operates as a microcosm of Indian society—one that remains, among other things, sexist, casteist, ableist, racist, and classist (Kondaiah, Mahadev, and Wahlgang 2017). Despite her privileged caste and class background, her gender becomes a significant impediment to career advancement in an institution dominated by Brahmin men. In contrast, the barriers Mani encounters—both within and beyond the Institute—are primarily rooted in caste and class, as India's reservation, social, and education policies have failed to adequately support marginalized castes and economically disadvantaged communities (Patel 2014). These challenges are further compounded by the current political dynamics in India, where the layered expansion of the Hindutva project has intensified the marginalization and violence experienced by Dalits in educational and other modern institutions (Thorat 2019, 221).

What is more, both Mani and Goshmaulik repeatedly witness how dominant figures within the Institute—such as Acharya and Nambodri—habitually exploit the institutional environment to control inclusion and exclusion. Given that both have been socialized in traditional and modern institutions that do not reward intersectional solidarity, their individualism and instrumentalism are hardly surprising. In the end, their subaltern assertions mirror those of the hegemonic forces and show little indication of cooperation that transcends immediate, instrumental, and individual gain. While their attempts to break the cycle of social stratification and exclusion may prove successful—at least in terms of their individual life trajectories (and, potentially, that of Adi)—their failure to foster any coalition or collaborative framework among different subaltern groups ultimately reproduces the entrenched social hierarchies of Indian science and society.

ORCID®

Fabian Hempel https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5325-3939

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