



INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT CALCUTTA

Academic Careers in an Indian Context

By

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Abstract

Career studies was disrupted by the boundaryless careers discourse. However, due to its inability to withstand the criticism of several scholars who pointed out the unclear definition of boundaries and the over-emphasis on agency, boundaryless careers remained an incomplete conception of careers. It was pointed out that boundaryless careers research was ignoring structural constraints that limited the agency of an individual, sometimes even nullifying it as far as career is concerned. Scholars recognized that careers now must be studied as phenomena that are shaped by the interplay of environmental constraints and individual choices. In this study I attempt to investigate academic careers in the context of business schools in India and discuss various underlying themes that influence them.

Following the constructivist grounded theory method, I conducted in-depth interviews of thirty-seven faculty members across four Indian Institutes of Managements (IIMs) and collected relevant additional data in the form of the government's review committee reports. Four themes emerged from the analysis of data, namely, a conflict between the ideals of austerity and the neoliberalizing business school, desire for autonomy, a discomfort with the commercialization of education and a contentious relationship between merit and privilege.

Using interview data, and with the help of the vast literature on caste, I argue that in a society like India that is reconciling tradition and modernity, pre-modern identities such as caste persist through avenues that allow for re-articulation of such identities in a modern setting. This is achieved through secularization of caste as an identity, which is performed privately and is shunned in public. The business schools under study are exalted for their adherence to meritocracy, however, the historicity of said merit in the Indian context is often obscured. On the other hand, the role of occupational prestige in the construction of caste makes academia a

caste-d space. These caste-d notions of occupational prestige not only draw individuals into academic careers but also inform their conduct of said careers. Individuals who are subjects of a macro-structure such as caste exercise their agency in finding a space for themselves in a relatively newly legitimated institutional structure.

I also present a discussion of neoliberalization of management education in India, and its impact on how academic careers are conducted. The normalization and internalization of neoliberalist logic has resulted in a discursive shift among younger/early career academics, such that the managerialist policies are rationalized and research ‘output’ is viewed as a definite indicator of ‘performance’. This has also resulted in a rearrangement of constituents of academic work, and research has replaced teaching as the primary task, and teaching is increasingly viewed as an obligation. I present a few contrasting perceptions of the ‘new regime’ between younger and older faculty members to demonstrate the same. However, the desire for career autonomy, intellectual freedom and ideals of austerity (whether practiced or not) persist through generations in the face of a major paradigm-shift affected by neoliberalization. Early career academics enable the persistence of aforementioned ideals by adapting to the language and rules of the ‘new regime’.

While neoliberalization has resulted in a change of the institutional structure, caste is a structure that has persisted, and I argue that individuals have navigated both, by internalizing as well as by manipulating structural forces to conduct their careers, and have moved on with their work lives.