# Narratives of Merit and Privilege in Admissions to Elite Universities:

## Perspectives of Indian Undergraduates at Oxford

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**MSc in Education (Higher Education), 2024**

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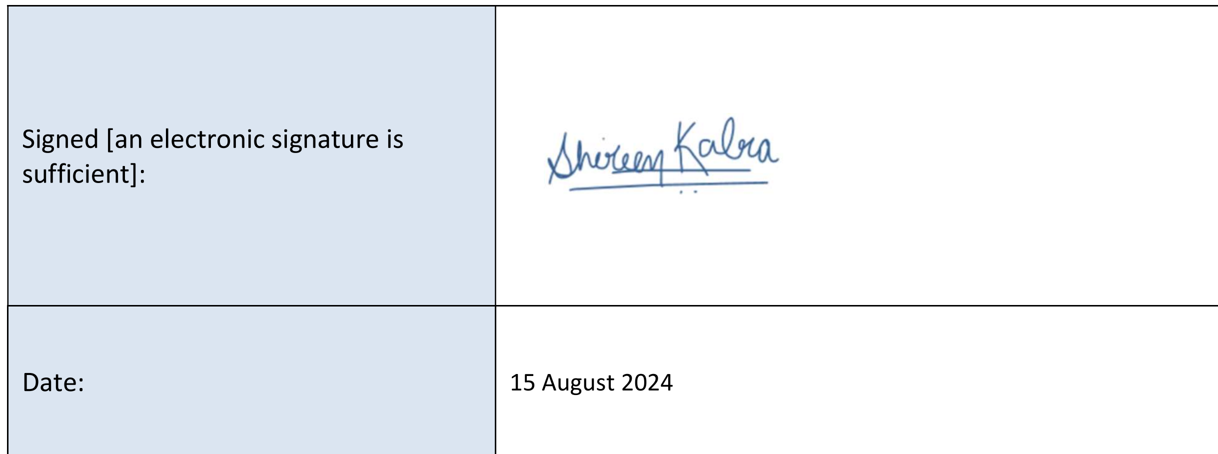

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# Abstract

Access to elite universities is grounded in the meritocratic discourse. Meritocracy emphasises merit as an outcome of talent and hard work, placing the burden of achievement and social mobility solely on individuals while disregarding the influence of societal structures in perpetuating a dominant upper-class habitus that benefits the privileged in merit-based admissions (Bourdieu, 1977; Sandel, 2020). Consequently, while meritocracy does not overtly bar access due to lack of privilege, it effectively uses merit as a proxy for privilege. The meritocratic discourse thus legitimises social stratification, masking systemic inequality as individual accomplishment.

This dissertation captures the narratives of Indian undergraduate students at Oxford on the role of structural privilege in merit-based admissions to understand how students in elite HEIs—the new elite—legitimise their success in a dynamic meritocratic discourse. In my narrative inquiry, I focus on class and caste privilege while delving into the structural and agentic factors Indian undergraduates at Oxford hold responsible for their success in merit-based admission to an elite HEI (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008).

Based on my narrative interviews with fourteen participants, I find that while students express concerns about how privilege may facilitate merit, they generally attribute their admission to their own efforts and do not believe that significant reforms are necessary for the merit-based admissions process in which they successfully emerged. In doing so, they create a narrative that emphasises individual responsibility for their success while attributing the failure of others to structural inequalities. By replacing the meritocratic dichotomy of winners and losers with a more considerate language of winners and non-winners, the new elite maintains the legitimacy of their privileged positions while also partaking in the competing discourse of social justice and caste allyship that challenges meritocratic legitimacy. The new elite thus appears to say merit while doing privilege (Khan, 2011).

Through this dissertation, I aim to delve into the underexplored nuances of Indian student narratives in educational research on meritocracy. Further, in focusing on the narratives of caste privilege in merit-based admissions to Oxford, I contribute to a better understanding of the systemic disadvantages marginalised castes encounter in merit-based admissions, which can help enhance the efficacy of contextual admissions policies for applicants entangled in the intricate and insufficiently understood dynamics of the caste system.

# List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| CBSE | Central Board of Secondary Education |
| CLAT | Common Law Admission Test |
| HE | Higher Education |
| HEI | Higher Education Institutions |
| IB | International Baccalaureate |
| ICSE | Indian Certificate of Secondary Education |
| IGCSE | International General Certificate of Secondary Education |
| JEE | Joint Entrance Examination |
| LNAT | Law National Aptitude Test |
| MEM | Multiple Equality Measures |
| MUN | Model United Nations |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organization |
| OBC | Other Backward Class |
| OIS | Oxford India Society |
| PAT | Physics Aptitude Test |
| PPE | Philosophy, Politics, and Economics |
| SC | Scheduled Castes |
| SOP | Statement of Purpose |

| | |
|---|---|
| STEM | Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics |
| UCAS | Universities and Colleges Admissions Service |

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# 1

# INTRODUCTION

Every October, a globally diverse cohort of around 3250 incoming undergraduates is formally admitted to the University of Oxford. Standing before the Vice-Chancellor on Matriculation Day, the incoming undergraduates are congratulated for *earning* their place at Oxford from an average pool of 20,000 applicants. Among these select students are approximately sixty Indians. They represent 3.5% of the total applicants from India, which ranks the fourth highest in the number of applicants to Oxford (University of Oxford, 2022).

Marching through the storied streets of Oxford in their traditional subfusc, these freshly inducted Oxonians rejoice in their remarkable achievement of gaining admission into an elite HEI. Their admission into Oxford is celebrated as a testament to their talent. Of their effort. Of their *merit*.

Access to elite HEIs is deeply rooted in the neoliberal discourse of meritocracy—a system in which rewards are supposed to be distributed based on individual merit rather than inheritance or wealth (Young, 1958; Weber, 1968). The notion of merit-based admissions to elite HEIs gained prominence in the 1940s when James Conant, the then president of Harvard University, advocated for admitting the most "deserving" students, irrespective of their background (Sandel, 2020, p. 148). Today, elite HEIs legitimise socioeconomic hierarchies based on the meritocratic tenants of fairness and equality of opportunity (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). However, in a structurally stratified society, is meritocracy fair? Is it justifiable?

From Micheal Young (1958) to Micheal Sandel (2020), three key perceptions underpinning meritocracy have drawn scholarly scrutiny. First, meritocracy promotes equality of opportunity by rewarding individuals based solely on merit, thereby fostering fairness. Second, it facilitates freedom, enabling meritorious individuals to exercise agency in overcoming structural constraints

and achieving social mobility. Third, meritocracy upholds standards for excellence by rewarding individuals with the highest merit.

British sociologist Michael Young (1958), who is credited for coining the term meritocracy, predicted that a system rooted in the premise that people get "what they deserve" based on their talent and effort would legitimise new forms of social stratification, masking structural inequality as individual achievement (Sandel, 2020, p. 129). Despite Young's concern about merit being used as a guise for privilege, the neoliberalist political rhetoric in Anglo-American democracies presents meritocracy as a vehicle for social mobility. The fairness of meritocracy has also remained a topical issue of political contention in welfare democracies in the Global South, including India, where merit-based admissions exams cause heated debates on the educational advantages enjoyed by the privileged castes. In a groundbreaking ruling in August 2024, the Supreme Court of India garnered both praise and criticism by recommending the exclusion of economically advantaged individuals within marginalised caste groups from accessing affirmative action benefits in merit-based admissions. Considering the ever-evolving meritocratic discourse, it becomes essential to understand how the current generation of students in elite HEIs portrays their success in merit-based admissions.

The motivation for my dissertation is further rooted in personal curiosity. I was raised in a middle-class family in a small Indian town. My friends and I grew up watching Bollywood movies where the protagonists would attend state-of-the-art HEIs abroad. Oxford, to us, reflected what I call the Indian dream: The dream to reinvent oneself by attending an elite HEI of global prestige. Of acquiring the exposure and expertise to excel in competitive job markets. Of earning more than one's parents. But who were these people who went to elite HEIs abroad? How could we be them? We did not know. All we knew was that they were not us. We dreamt of studying at Oxford, yet no one from our school applied abroad, let alone to elite HEIs, which seem like a mirage to students in my hometown.

Given my circumstances, I wonder if I could have secured a place at Oxford without the academic prowess and global outlook I developed as a scholarship undergraduate student at one of India's elite HEIs. Would I have even applied to Oxford if not for peers applying to the top graduate schools in the world? At the same time, I wonder if I would have applied to my undergraduate university if not for a distant relative in metropolitan Mumbai who heard about their

contextual admissions at a neighbourhood gathering. Would I have been able to get in if I did not have supportive and educated parents who sent me to an English-medium school? I will never know.

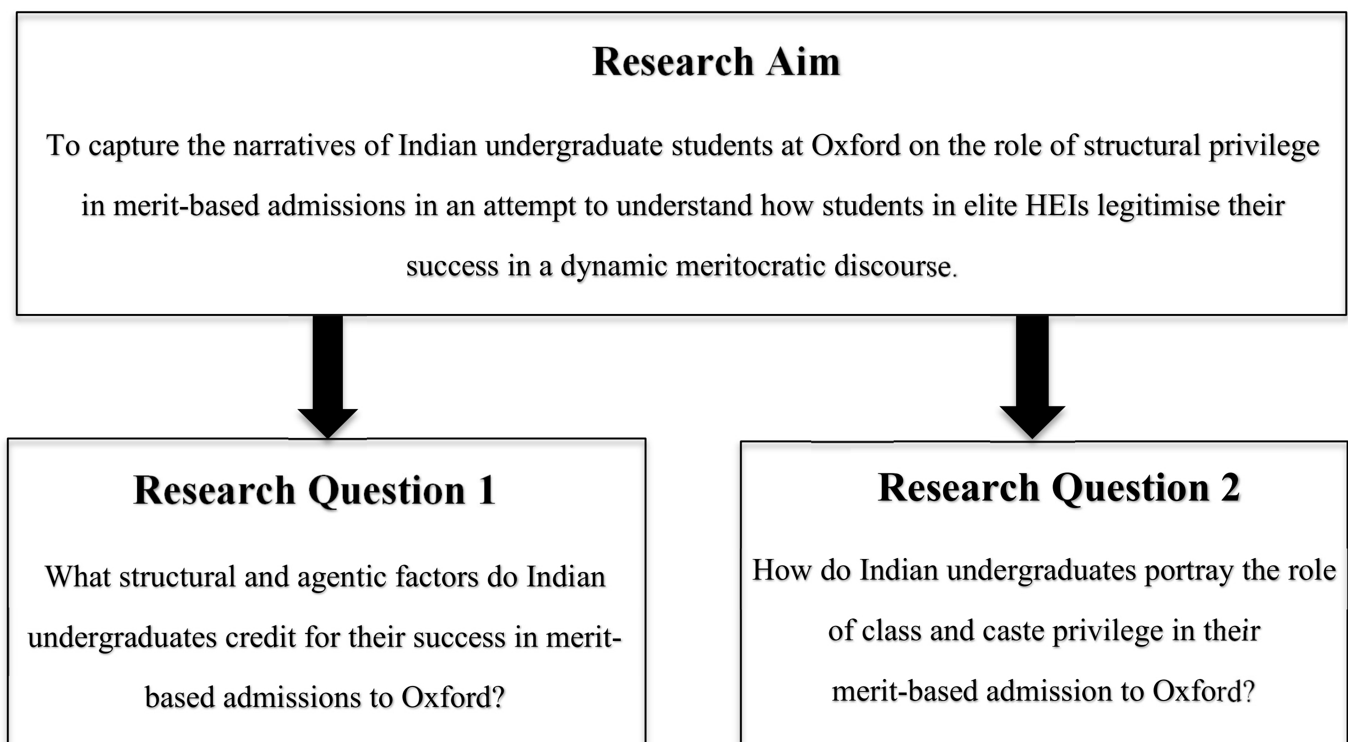
My undergraduate experience thus made me question the role of inherited economic, social and cultural capital in merit-based admissions (Bourdieu, 1977). How is merit measured? Is merit innate, or can it be cultivated through privilege? Who gets to be meritorious in the highly unequal Indian society stratified by a hierarchical caste system? How do the meritorious define merit?

## 1.1 Research Aim and Questions

In my dissertation, I aim to capture the narratives of Indian undergraduate students at Oxford on the role of structural privilege in merit-based admissions in an attempt to understand how students in elite HEIs legitimise their success in a dynamic meritocratic discourse. My narrative inquiry emphasises class and caste privilege while delving into the structural and agentic factors Indian undergraduates hold responsible for their admission to Oxford (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). Figure 1.1 presents my research aim and questions.

**Figure 1.1**

**Research Aim and Questions**



## 1.1. Defining Key Terms

I intend to capture student narratives on the interplay of merit and privilege in elite HEI admissions. Thus, while I critically discuss academic literature on merit and privilege, I refrain from adopting a single scholarly definition of these terms. However, it is necessary to define other significant terms in the dissertation for increased clarity.

*Elite Higher Education Institutions*

Elite HEIs refer to higher education institutes with highly competitive admissions and low acceptance rates (Liu, 2011). These HEIs enjoy global prestige for their academic excellence, renowned faculty, extensive resources, and influential alumni networks (Zimdars et al., 2009; Croxford & Raffe, 2015). The Ivy League in the US, G5 (Oxford, Cambridge, London School of Economics, University College London, Imperial College London) and Indian Institutes of National Importance could be considered elite HEIs.

*Caste*

Caste is a system of social stratification prevalent in South Asian societies, particularly India and its diaspora, that categorises individuals into rigid hierarchical groups based on inherited occupational status (Roy, 2014). The historic oppression faced by Scheduled Caste (SC)—groups at the bottom of the caste hierarchy—has resulted in their systematic marginalisation from education and economic sectors (Piketty, 2020). Despite constitutional safeguards and affirmative action policies implemented by the Government of India, SC individuals continue to suffer systemic spatial and socio-economic disadvantages, allowing the upper-castes to reproduce their privileges (Sahgal et al., 2021).

*Indian Students*

For the study, Indian undergraduate students refer to individuals with an Indian passport who completed their schooling in India before pursuing their undergraduate degree at Oxford.

## 1.2 Research Contributions

During my research, I have often asked myself: Why would anyone care about what a young Indian student has to say about the meritocratic admissions process at Oxford? How does an individual student's perspective make for a valuable academic contribution to the debates surrounding meritocratic access to elite HEIs? Why focus on Indian students at Oxford, and why now?

Guided by literature and empirical observations, this dissertation aims to make five contributions. Firstly, scholarly engagement with merit-based admissions predominantly revolves around the holistic admissions criteria used by the Ivy League, with limited research emphasis on Oxbridge's "academic excellence" framework (University of Oxford, 2024). The manner in which the operationalisation of merit as academic excellence affects the meritocratic discourse is comparatively underexplored.

Secondly, despite the extensive educational research on merit-based admissions to elite HIEs, research on how students at these elite HEIs portray their success in highly competitive merit-based admissions is limited. Students at elite HEIs, including Oxford, become important State, market and academic stakeholders. Student voices and activism significantly shape the meritocratic discourse (McLeod, 2011; Blair & Noel, 2014). Insights from students at elite HEIs are thus particularly helpful in understanding how the new generation of elite — "new elite" — reinforces or challenges the narratives of merit and privilege associated with their admission (Khan, 2011, p. 30).

Thirdly, within educational research representing student voices, the perspectives of international students, especially from the Global South, are underrepresented. By capturing the narratives of Indian students, I aim to contribute to the academia striving to decentre the colonial gaze when studying elite HEIs (Arday et al., 2020). Furthermore, considering that Indian students form the second most mobile population of international students globally and in the UK, the narratives of Indian students at Oxford can offer nuanced insights into the global meritocratic discourse within HE.

Fourthly, the narratives of Indian students are equally significant for the Indian HE academia. While reviewing the literature on meritocracy in Indian HE, caste emerged as a predominant

socioeconomic cleavage determining access to elite HEIs. Existing literature on the impact of caste privilege on merit-based admissions to elite HEIs is limited to the context of competitive admissions to Indian Institutions of National Eminence. However, the systemic marginalisation suffered by SC students may disadvantage them in merit-based admissions beyond India's borders. In investigating how caste identity influences the mobility of Indian students to meritocratic elite HEIs abroad, my research brings attention to the interaction between local, national and global scales in HE (Marginson, 2022).

Lastly, the global meritocratic discourse does not recognise caste as a distinct category of analysis. Caste-based discrimination is frequently subsumed under broader ethnic or economic categories. Corresponding to the Equality Act of 2010, caste remains a grey zone in the UK's HEIs. Policies on widening participation are primarily limited to home contexts and do not encompass international contexts, including caste. Therefore, Indian students' narratives of caste privilege within merit-based admissions to elite HEIs in societies perceived as casteless can enrich the global meritocratic discourse, which informs contextual admissions policies (Dhanda et al., 2014; Mosse, 2020a).

## 1.3 Dissertation Outline

The present chapter has provided an overview of the context and motivations of my research. It has discussed the research aim and questions, defined significant terms, and highlighted the contributions I aspire to make through this dissertation. Chapter 2 offers a comparative review of scholarly literature relevant to my research. Next, Chapter 3 discusses the research design and the rationale behind methodological choices. It also details the process and challenges of data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 provides a comprehensive analysis of my research findings, incorporating detailed descriptions of student narratives, thematic discussions, and juxtaposition with relevant literature. Chapter 5 offers concluding thoughts by summarising research findings, discussing limitations, and exploring the scope for future research.

# 2

# LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter offers a comprehensive overview of the academic literature that underpins my research. By comparing and contrasting seminal works and contemporary scholarly studies, I identify three prevailing trends in the existing literature: Comparing Measures of Merit across Elite HEIs, the Interplay of Merit and Privilege in Elite HEIs and Caste-Privilege and Meritocracy in Elite HEIs.

## 2.1 Comparing Measures of Merit across Elite HEIs

"The idea of meritocracy probably has many virtues, but certainly not clarity," writes Amartya Sen (1999). The meritocratic model for admitting students to elite HEIs is deeply ingrained in the distribution framework of neoliberal societies (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; Littler, 2017). The perceived positive correlation between HE and upward mobility has resulted in credential inflation (Burke, 2015). The diminishing value of an HE degree due to an oversupply of graduates in the job market has, in turn, heightened social demand for the prestige and employability outcomes of elite HEIs (Marginson, 2016). Consequently, elite HEIs, including Oxford, are held accountable for the distribution of socioeconomic rewards in society, continually prompting reforms in their merit-based admissions process (Fray et al., 2022). However, the precise definition of merit elite HEIs adopt to determine merit in their admissions processes is ambiguous.

This section traces the evolution of Oxford undergraduate admissions to the present meritocratic process. It highlights the differences in the operationalisation of merit in HEIs by comparing the merit-based admissions criteria at Oxford to the Ivy League.

### *2.1.1 Evolution of Meritocratic Admissions at Oxford*

***Merit in Oxford Then***

Until the 1960s, a "commoner" status enabled those with familial ties to bypass entry exams (Soares, 2002, p. 32). However, increased advocacy for opening access to elite institutions after the Second World War prompted meritocratic reforms in Oxford admissions, including standardised applications and entrance exams (Soares, 2002). Oxford raised its admissions standards in the 1970s by using A-level grades to measure academic excellence, aiming to give applicants from all backgrounds an equal opportunity to showcase their merit. However, despite the shift towards meritocratic entry requirements, Oxford continued to be dominated by wealthy students through the 1990s (Ashwin, 2005). The Sutton Trust Annual Report (2003) found that many state school applicants interviewing for Oxford found the experience academically and socially intimidating.

In response to pressure from the Office for Fair Access in the early 2000s, Oxford initiated widening participation reforms through expanded outreach programs, access agreements, and enhanced financial support. The 2004 Schwartz Review of University Admissions recommended considering contextual factors in admissions and emphasised a holistic assessment of socioeconomic indicators and individual circumstances to ensure "fair" admissions (UCAS, 2019, p. 8). Complying with guidelines from the Office of Students, Oxford introduced a Foundation Year program in 2018 to increase the admission of "academically talented students from under-represented backgrounds" (Robson, 2019). These measures align with the objectives of the Equality Act 2010, which encourages policy reform to ensure admissions criteria do not discriminate against applicants based on any of the nine "protected characteristics" (Millward, 2024; Government of UK, 2024). Furthermore, the University demonstrated a strong dedication to "fostering a more diverse and inclusive academic environment" by committing to admit a quarter of its intake of the 2023 admissions cycle from "disadvantaged backgrounds" (University of Oxford, 2024). In this manner, the current admissions process at Oxford aims to reward academically meritorious candidates while being considerate of their circumstances.

### *Merit in Oxford Now*

Admissions responsibilities at the undergraduate level are divided among faculty members serving as college and subject tutors. Subject tutors work together to manage admissions across the thirty-one self-governing Oxford colleges that admit undergraduates. This system enables applicants who have applied to a particular college to be part of a shared applicant pool, potentially allowing them to be interviewed by more than one college.

The application process consists of two stages: A written application filled-out through the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and interviews with potential tutors. The written application includes a statement of purpose (SOP), an academic letter of reference, along with achieved and predicted high school grades. Candidates must take a standardised admissions test for subjects such as Classics, English, History, Law, Maths, Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE), and Physics. Meanwhile, written work needs to be submitted for Archaeology, History, and Modern Languages. Applicants whose first language is not English must also submit standardised English Test results. Successful written applications and admissions test scores result in candidates being summoned for interviews.

The academic interview is unique to Oxbridge and is designed to assess a candidate's "academic ability and potential" (University of Oxford, 2024). According to Oxford's (2024) undergraduate admissions page, the University is "looking for candidates with a strong academic background. Tutors are looking for self-motivation and enthusiasm for the subject, as well as the ability to study, think, and learn". However, Oxford's criteria for determining merit through academic excellence differs from those of the Ivy League universities (Zimdars, 2010).

Oxford only considers extracurricular activities when they help demonstrate how candidates meet the academic standards for their course (University of Oxford, 2024). Conversely, in addition to academic excellence, the Ivy League universities also consider "community involvement, leadership, and distinction in extracurricular activities" in what is called "holistic admissions" (Hernández, 2009, p. 11; Hossler et al., 2019). As per Harvard University undergraduate admissions (2024) webpage:

> We seek promising students who will contribute to the Harvard community during their college years and to society. While academic accomplishment is significant, the Admissions Committee considers many other factors—strong personal qualities, special talents or excellences of all kinds.

In this manner, elite HEIs claim to admit the "best and the brightest" applicants through merit-based admissions (Stevens, 2009, p. 263), but the markers used to identify these applicants vary, underlining the lack of a standardised framework to determine merit (Alon & Tienda, 2007).

### *2.1.2 Ambiguity in Operationalising Merit in Elite HEI Admissions*

Meritocracy utilises the concept of merit as a tool to allocate rewards, including HE. The use of merit as a conceptual tool emphasises the necessity of a clear and universally accepted definition of merit; however, competing definitions persist. Liu (2011) interprets merit as the quality of being exceptionally praiseworthy or deserving of a reward, although the specific quality being referred to is unclear. McCowan (2016) employs the terms "talent" and "merit" interchangeably, while Civil and Himsworth (2020, p.1) offer a simplistic definition: "I.Q. + Effort = Merit". Daniels (1978) argues that the variance in defining merit perpetuates the notion that meritocracy is fundamentally contingent and dependent on societal values of what constitutes good. Merit is dynamic and cannot be uniformly defined across societies with varying notions of goodness. Despite a shared ethos of admitting the most meritorious, the lack of consensus in defining merit results in variations in the operationalisation of merit in the admissions process of elite HEIs, including the Ivy League and Oxbridge (McCowan, 2016).

Extensive academic literature exists on the implications of operationalising merit within Ivy League admissions (Tobin et al., 2005; Stevens, 2009; Kahlenberg, 2010). Much of this literature argues that what is routinely classified as merit in admissions is inextricable from privilege (Rivera, 2015; Posselt, 2016; Friedman & Laurison, 2020). Steinberg (2003), Hernández (2009), and Selingo (2020) scrutinise legacy admissions at Ivy League while drawing attention to how affluent families invest resources in extracurriculars to tailor holistic profiles for their children.

Conversely, the body of literature examining the consequences of a merit rubric based on "academic excellence," as utilised by Oxford, is sparse. Zimdars (2007), Nicolo (2013) and Nahai (2013) critically assess the criteria used in Oxford's undergraduate admissions to underline equity

challenges. Lybeck (2017) and Reay (2021) emphasise the comparative advantages upper-class applicants enjoy within the Russell Group.

Additionally, Lazin et al. (2010) and Eggins (2010) offer cross-national perspectives on minority access to elite HEIs, whereas Warikoo (2020) focuses on Harvard, Brown, and Oxford to capture student perspectives on the role of race in merit cultivation.

The ambiguity in defining merit has resulted in varying markers of merit in elite HEIs in the UK and the US. However, while literature underlines the underpinnings of privilege in cultivating merit in holistic Ivy League admissions, there is insufficient examination of how academic excellence sought by Oxford is cultivated and legitimised as meritorious.

## 2.2 Interplay of Merit and Privilege in Elite HEIs

Literature highlights concern about elite HEIs functioning as a critical site for "meritocratic legitimacy" (Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2007, as cited in Friedman & Laurison, 2020, p. 8). The argument of meritocratic legitimacy suggests that if admissions are merit-based, the resulting inequality in outcomes is justified. In doing so, it places the responsibility for outcomes on individual students. However, scholarly scrutiny has raised the concern that meritocratic processes, including admissions to elite HEIs, inherently favour the socially privileged, legitimising the reproduction of structural inequalities under the guise of merit (Liste, 2006; Littler, 2017). These concerns have led to three critical debates in the literature on meritocracy in HE: fairness, legitimacy, and equity. While separated for conceptual clarity, the three debates flow into each other, shaping an interconnected discussion.

### *2.2.1 The Debate on Fairness: Innate Merit VS Inherited Privilege*

Proponents of merit-based admissions assert the fairness of a process that gives all individuals an equal opportunity to showcase their merit. The perceived equality of opportunity in merit-based admissions promotes a transformation thesis: HE is an effective instrument for social mobility. Merit-based admissions allow individuals with merit to disrupt the status quo and ascend the class hierarchy. While there has undoubtedly been an increase in the absolute number of people enjoying upward mobility, the relative chances of a working-class individual succeeding in a meritocratic competition with someone from a privileged background remain consistently low (Goldthorpe &

Jackson, 2007). Yet, Friedman and Laurison (2020) assert that “everyone knows someone who has experienced upward mobility” (p. 6). Successful examples of individuals ascending class hierarchy thus promote a perception of fairness of meritocracy. Consequently, the rhetoric of meritocratic transformation through HE is championed across political spectrums.

However, a competing reproduction rhetoric underpins the rhetoric of meritocratic transformation. Collins (1979) points to the persistent positive correlation between parents' socioeconomic status and their children's educational achievements while acknowledging exceptional cases of high-achieving individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, which mask the system's inherent biases towards the privileged. Rooted in Bourdieu's (1977) description of the dominant class habitus, the reproduction thesis argues that privileged groups shape structural discourses to justify their own class advantages to those less privileged.

The Bordieuan theory of capital and habitus lies at the core of the transformation and reproduction thesis conflict. Bourdieu (1977) insists that success in a meritocratic system is influenced by three primary forms of inherited capital: economic capital (property and income), social capital (valuable social connections and familial networks) and cultural capital. Cultural capital is the “linguistic and cultural competence and a relationship of familiarity with culture”, which can only be produced by structural conditions of upbringing (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 494). Cultural capital manifests in three primary forms. Firstly, the embodied form of cultural capital refers to an individual's habits and demeanour. Secondly, in the institutionalised form, it takes the form of recognised educational qualifications, especially the ability to understand and use educated language. Finally, cultural capital exists in the objectified form as familiarity with upper-class aesthetics (Bourdieu, 1986).

The forms of inherited capital are fungible and passed from parents to children, such that individuals from privileged families have a comparative advantage in developing dispositions and interpersonal skills that benefit them within a meritocratic system. Inherited economic capital facilitates access to high-quality formal schooling, personal tutoring, counselling, and extracurricular engagement. Similarly, social capital provides access to networks offering exposure and guidance for admissions (Burke, 2015).

However, the transmission of cultural capital is more intricate and often subtle (Costa et al., 2019). Bourdieu (1990) suggests that the privileged class's inherited cultural capital cultivates in them a dominant class habitus — durable dispositions that influence their behaviours, perceptions, and social interactions. He asserts that individuals with dominant class habitus behave in ways that reinforce their class status by shaping structural discourses to justify their privileged positions (Jackman & Muha, 2014).

Meritocratic discourse thus comes to be shaped to "express the interests" of the dominant class (Alon & Tienda, 2007, p. 507). Thus, even though structural conditions of upbringing develop dominant class habitus, the meritocratic discourse assumes its universal possession such that merit-based admissions reward privileged students for dispositions native to them (Zimdars et al., 2009). In this manner, what comes to be considered natural and self-cultivated in merit-based admissions is, in fact, structurally cultivated dominant class habitus (Burns et al., 2022, p. 53).

Reay (2004) opines that educational research overuses the concept of habitus like "intellectual hairspray" (p. 432). She criticises Bourdieu's vague conceptualisation of habitus but acknowledges that "paradoxically the conceptual looseness of habitus" offers it a potential strength to adapt to diverse social contexts (Reay, 2004, p. 441).

In this manner, Bourdieu's theory offers valuable insights into the perpetuation of class advantages within a meritocratic system and has sparked numerous empirical studies (McDonough, 2004; Noble & Davies, 2009). Educational research reverts to Bourdieu's capital theory to explain the underrepresentation of marginalised races and economic groups in meritocratic HEIs (Blanden & Machin, 2004; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Webb et al., 2017). Boliver (2013) uses data from UCAS from 1996 to 2006 to show that applicants from lower-class backgrounds and state schools were much less likely to secure admission to Russell Group universities. Kelly (2019) uses the argument of cultural capital to theorise why white students are twice as likely as their black counterparts to secure a place at Oxbridge. Furthermore, Zimdars et al. (2009) adapt Sullivan's (2001) concept of cultural knowledge to explain that individuals who possess the cultural capital valued by the education system tend to excel in merit-based Oxford admissions.

In this manner, the literature underlines that while meritocracy does not explicitly exclude any applicant for lack of privilege, it employs merit as a proxy for privilege (Karen, 2017). By

portraying merit as natural, the privileged legitimise their success within a meritocratic discourse. In doing so, they present an "exhilarating vision of human agency" that downplays the impact of structural privileges on individual capabilities (Sen, 2000; Sandel, 2020, p. 33).

### *2.2.2 The Debate on Legitimacy: Structural Privilege VS Individual Agency*

Social structure refers to organised patterns of social interaction that can be understood on interdependent macro, meso, and micro scales. On the macro level, social structure encompasses the social systems of hierarchy — including class and caste systems — rooted in economic, political, and religious institutions. The meso level involves intermediate social networks and organisations, including educational institutions and occupational communities, while the micro level of social structure refers to the influence of societal norms on the behaviour of individuals within social systems (Merton, 2017). The interaction between the three levels of social structures generates discourses—systems of knowledge, practice, and communication through which individuals assign meaning to reality (Foucault, 1982).

Structuralists argue that individual actions can only be understood within social structures (Durkheim, 1952; Sewell, 1992). As a result, individuals' actions are shaped by a collective social reality. Contrarily, methodological individualists Weber (1922) and Hayek (1955) deny the causal power of social structure and emphasise human agency, highlighting the autonomy of individuals to act and change social structures (Callinicos, 2004). Bourdieu (1977) and Archer (1996) argue that not all social outcomes, including success in a meritocratic system, can be fully explained by individual actions alone.

However, Bourdieu (1977) and Archer (1996) propose seemingly incompatible theories to "transcend the dualism of agency and structure" (Reay, 2004). Their ontological views of agency diverge based on the extent to which individuals shape their life outcomes. Bourdieu (1990, p. 56) views human action as propelled "without consciousness or will" by a socially formed habitus. Habitus is socially constructed and constrained such that socially mobile individuals experience habitus cleft — a conflict within their habitus that distorts their sense of self and society (Bourdieu, 1990). Archer (1996) challenges the lack of agency in Bourdieu's habitus theory by highlighting the pivotal role of reflexivity in allowing individuals to shape themselves and their social structures. Central to her argument is the assertion of the fundamental distinction between structure

and agency, which she considers crucial for comprehending the complexities of social dynamics. In doing so, Archer also contrasts Giddens' (1984) central conflation stance, which suggests the inseparability of structure and agency at an ontological level.

Elder-Vass (2010) reconciles the debate between Bourdieu and Archer by proposing that social structures have emergent properties that influence individual behaviour while also being sustained and transformed by the actions of individuals. Emergent property theory argues that social structures have causal powers influencing human behaviour and societal events, moving beyond the notion that social outcomes are solely the sum of individual actions (Costa et al., 2019). Agency is thus hardwired into individuals such that they are both "socially embedded and socially separated" (Vygotsky, 1978, as cited in Marginson, 2023, p. 69).

Further, Sen (2000) emphasises the significant role of structures in enabling or restricting agency. Sen's capability approach asserts that an individual's capability—freedoms, opportunities, and abilities—to pursue and achieve functionings—what they value, such as receiving an education at an elite HEI— is influenced by structural institutions and discourses. Discourses, as systems of knowledge and practice shaped by structures, constrain agency because individuals internalise and embody the norms of dominant discourses. However, agency is not entirely absent, as individuals can practise agency by using language and behaviour to reinforce, resist, or evolve discourses (Foucault, 1982; Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017).

Theorising the interplay of agency and structure within the meritocratic discourse, Sandel (2020) argues that portraying outcomes acquired through structural privilege as products of practising agency gives rise to intertwined rhetoric of rising and responsibility. By presenting merit as an outcome of innate talent and effort, the meritocratic discourse places the responsibility for achievement, and thus upward mobility, on individuals. In doing so, it negates the role of structures in nurturing a dominant upper-class habitus that inherently advantages the privileged in merit-based admission. Consequently, the meritocratic discourse creates a stark distinction between proud "winners" who "earn" their success and "losers" who are blamed for their failure in a system rooted in the equality of opportunity (Sandel, 2020. pp. 15-17).

Furthermore, Khan (2011) asserts that the meritocratic emphasis on agency gives rise to a "new elite"—students entering elite education—that portrays their position as "deserved" rather than

"inherited" (p. 52). The new elites legitimise their success by embodying an "ease of privilege": a sense of self and a mode of interaction that portrays their advantages in a merit-based system as outcomes of their efforts (Khan, 2011, p. 92). Khan and Jerolmack (2016) call this portrayal of the new elite "saying meritocracy, doing privilege". The new elite thus reinforces the neoliberal meritocratic discourse by placing individual agency over structural constraints. In doing so, they redirect the focus from universal collectivism to individual determinism, which, in turn, accentuates the debate between the ideals of meritocratic equality of opportunity and equity.

### *2.2.3 The Debate on Equity: Equality of Opportunity VS Widening Participation*

Narratives of the new elite legitimise meritocracy in a milieu where rising inequalities have challenged the meritocratic claims of fairness and equality of opportunity (Zimdars et al., 2016). While fairness in accessing elite HEIs is widely acknowledged as crucial, significant debate persists over what constitutes a fair system. The discussions are closely connected to broader political debates about balancing excellence and equity. Elite HEIs seem to strive to strike a balance by enrolling students with outstanding merit (excellence) while also widening participation of underrepresented populations (equity) through the adoption of positive discrimination measures and contextual data (Boliver et al., 2015; Harrison, 2020).

The debate between equality of opportunity and widening participation highlights two competing arguments. The equality of opportunity perspective promotes admissions solely on merit, advocating for equal admissions criteria (Roemer, 2000). Proponents of this perspective echo the narrative that the outcome of an application is a product of efforts and, thus, the individual's responsibility (Son et al., 2011; Bell, 2012). They support a non-discrimination view, which maintains that any form of discrimination contradicts the principles of meritocracy by allowing social structures to influence merit-based admissions (Markovits, 2019). In opposition, Rawls (1971) and Daniel (1978) advocate an egalitarian approach of positive discrimination, supporting inequalities in the form of affirmative action only if they benefit society's most disadvantaged members.

Conventional political arguments suggest that increasing access to education through widening participation can reduce socioeconomic disparities by providing more equal educational

opportunities (Boliver, 2013). However, the theories of Effectively Maintained Inequality argue that despite the expansion in access to HEIs, educational inequalities tend to persist because individuals with economic advantages, even within historically disadvantaged social groups, are more capable of taking advantage of new educational opportunities and obtaining higher-quality education (Boliver, 2017; Sen, 2000). Consequently, despite similar levels of aspiration between different socioeconomic groups, differences in their academic attainment in school restrict access to elite HEIs (Harrison & Waller, 2018; Rainford, 2019). Higher academic attainment is also associated with a student's self-confidence and belief in their own agency, which Fuller (2014) found to be lower in economically disadvantaged groups. Harrison and Waller (2018) argue that there is not a "problem with young people's aspirations but that they *expect* to achieve markedly lower outcomes than they *desire*." The goal of widening participation in HE policy thus places much emphasis on students' aspirations rather than their academic attainment or expectations, underlining a need to reassess strategies to increase access to merit-based elite HEIs (Boliver, 2017).

Further, the use of contextual data adds nuances to merit-based admissions, signifying a departure from the traditional meritocratic model, which prioritises the most qualified applicants regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances, toward a more progressive admissions approach aiming for higher distributive fairness (Zimdars, 2016; Boliver et al., 2021). In admissions to UK HEIs, the UCAS Multiple Equality Measures account for contextual factors such as attending non-selective state schools, receiving free school meals, and living in economically disadvantaged areas to comprehend an applicant's prior educational attainment and potential to succeed in HE within their circumstances. Universities have also advanced contextual admissions policies by lowering academic entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants and introducing a Foundation Year program, allowing these learners to enrol in the initial year of a degree course with lower grades than the standard requirements (Boliver & Powell, 2023).

However, utilising contextual data to widen participation in HEIs in the UK, including Oxford, primarily focuses on domestic contexts. Contexts of international students, including those from highly unequal countries like India, are poorly understood. The extensive literature on equity in merit-based access to elite HEIs primarily addresses questions of class and race. Caste—a crucial aspect of social stratification in India—is often subsumed under the broader category of race,

resulting in an insufficient exploration of disadvantages unique to caste. While educational research on merit-based admissions delves into student narratives surrounding class and racial privileges, it tends to overlook the nuances of student narratives on caste privilege.

## 2.3 Caste-Privilege and Meritocracy in Elite HEIs

Caste in contemporary India is largely considered a traditional institution which "gradually declined and eventually disappeared" (Jodhka, 2017, p. 25). However, despite the affirmative action policies of the Indian government, caste remains a potent social cleavage perpetuating overlapping forms of systemic oppression for the SC (Young, 2011; Varghese et al., 2022). The influence of caste in meritocratic admissions extends beyond overt discrimination, encompassing broader effects of material deprivation and social exclusion in developing markers of merit valued by elite HEIs (Deshpande, 2007). Consequently, historic caste-based disadvantages have systematically marginalised SC students in Indian HEIs (Tierney et al., 2018).

On the other hand, caste privilege enjoyed by *upper*-caste groups is reproduced across generations, giving them a comparative advantage in the merit-based admissions processes of India's elite HEIs (Thorat & Newman, 2010). For instance, Ramanathan (1999), Hoff (2016), and Jayadeva (2018) argue that following the liberalisation and globalisation economic reforms of 1991, the predominantly upper-caste Indian middle classes increasingly invested in English-medium education. Resultantly, demonstrating proficiency in educated English became an institutionalised form of cultural capital which enabled the upper-castes to reproduce caste privilege in the competitive admissions to India's elite HEIs, where English serves as the medium of instruction.

Further, Subramanian (2019) interviewed upper-caste students at the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras, to reveal that upper-caste students justify their positions in elite HEIs by framing the dispositions and skills, including English proficiency, acquired through their caste privilege as merit. They attribute their success not only to individual effort but also to inherent, divinely ordained genealogical talent. Subramanian's (2019) research aligns with Khan and Jerolmack's (2016) argument that privileged students at elite HEIs say meritocracy while doing privilege. However, while there are numerous educational studies on the framing of merit by the

privileged classes and ethnicities, research on upper-caste student narratives on the meritocracy of caste privilege is limited.

The dominant upper-caste narrative on the role of caste privilege in merit-based admissions seems to be indirectly reflected in the prevailing public sentiment towards affirmative action in Indian HEIs. Affirmative action policies in India primarily entail reserving a portion of places in public HEIs for SC applicants, such that they have a lower cut-off score in merit-based admissions (Singh, 2021). However, the reservation model has faced significant challenges, particularly from upper-castes. Jalote and Krishna (2015) observe that the reservation model elicits resentment from privileged castes, which further increases the stigmatisation of SC students. Subramaniam (2020) highlights a common sentiment among privileged caste students who believe that, without reservations, SC students would not have been able to attain the level of merit necessary for admission into elite HEIs. This reveals a dichotomy where privileged students perceive SC students as lacking in merit while portraying their admission as solely “merit-based” (Subramanian, 2015, p. 298). In doing so, the upper-caste students adopt a “casteless” cosmopolitan identity by presenting their position as earned through merit without acknowledging the role of their caste privilege in cultivating said merit (Mosse, 2020a).

Furthermore, extending affirmative action to economically affluent members of the SC solely based on their SC affiliation has encountered criticism from neoliberals (Munshi, 2019; Mosse, 2020b). The criticism is also echoed in the Supreme Court of India’s recent judgement, which recommended excluding economically privileged SC students from receiving affirmative action benefits in merit-based admissions (The Wire, 2024).

In their anthropological study of caste, Davis et al. (2009) discovered that caste in modern India intersects with class, leading to a higher likelihood of an SC individual being economically disadvantaged than an upper-caste individual. Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase (2008) and Ahmad (2010) assert that with the rise of the upper-middle classes post-1990 liberalisation of the Indian market economy, the disadvantages of caste came to be perceived primarily in economic terms, promoting a perception that caste disadvantages disappear with upward mobility. However, Yengde (2018) argues that this notion is rooted in an upper-caste perspective of caste disadvantage, which overlooks the broader aspects of social exclusion. The limited understanding of caste as an

economic category thus reflects a lack of upper-caste familiarity with the stickiness of caste disadvantages (Deshpande & Darity, 2016).

Studies on the interplay of caste privilege and merit in elite HEIs are primarily conducted within the framework of affirmative action in India. The impact of social cleavages, including race, on the mobility of international students has been extensively researched. However, nuances of caste privilege in meritocratic admissions abroad are particularly underexplored because social exclusion based on caste is often categorised under racial exclusion (Thorat, 2002).

In its reports to the International Convention to End All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Indian government argued that caste-based marginalisation should not fall under the purview of racism as caste-based marginalisation is majorly practised by members of the same race. Caste-based marginalisation is thus fundamentally different from racial marginalisation (Hart, 2010; Ovichegan, 2015). However, educational research on the global meritocratic discourse does not adequately consider caste as a distinct category of analysis. Consequently, existing literature insufficiently addresses the impact of caste on merit-based admissions of Indian students to elite HEIs abroad, underscoring the necessity of exploring Indian student narratives on merit and caste privilege in societies that do not inherently recognise caste. A better grasp of the challenges that marginalised castes encounter in merit-based admissions can improve the effectiveness of contextual admissions policies for applicants navigating the complexities of caste identity in the global meritocratic discourse.

## 2.4 Summary

The themes discussed in this review can be summarised in four key points.

1. The neoliberal wave after World War II prompted meritocratic reforms in Oxford's admissions process, which currently involves a UCAS application, standardised admissions tests for specific subjects, and an academic interview (Soares, 2002).

2. Despite being employed as a conceptual tool, merit's definition remains ambiguous. Competing definitions of merit cause variations in operationalising merit in the admissions process of elite HEIs (Liu, 2011). While Oxford measures merit academically, the Ivy Leagues adopt a more holistic approach that also factors extracurricular excellence.

**3.** By emphasising merit as a product of innate talent and hard work, the meritocratic discourse places the responsibility for achievement and upward mobility on individuals, negating the role of structures in nurturing a dominant upper-class habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) that advantages the privileged in merit-based admissions (Sandel, 2020).

**4.** The meritocratic emphasis on individual achievement gives rise to a new elite who portray their position in elite HEIs as deserved rather than inherited, thereby legitimising their positions by saying meritocracy while doing privilege (Khan & Jerolmack, 2016).

**5.** The debate surrounding admissions to elite HEIs emphasises non-discrimination in merit-based admissions while also considering widening participation for underrepresented groups through affirmative action and the use of contextual data.

**6.** Upper-caste students in India’s elite HEIs adopt a casteless identity by framing their success as merit-based, attributing their achievements to divinely ordained talent and individual effort while overlooking their systemic advantages in meritocratic admissions (Subramanium, 2013).

In this manner, the literature review highlights how educational research primarily captures narratives on meritocracy through the lens of class and race. I adopt a narrative inquiry approach to add nuances of Indian student perspectives on the role of privilege, including caste privilege, in the merit-based admissions process at elite HEIs.

# 3

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I outline my research design, including the participation selection process, data collection methods, and data analysis. I also address the measures taken to improve research quality. I discuss the inherent challenges in data collection and analysis before critically exploring potential methodological limitations.

My study employed a naturalist narrative approach to gather in-depth insight into how Indian students, in specific contexts, portray their success in merit-based admission to Oxford (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). For my study, a narrative is defined as a way of organising and interpreting individual experiences by telling stories. I adopted a narrative research design based on the premise that methods should be tailored to research questions (Punch & Oancea, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Narrative inquiry is particularly suited for capturing the subjective lived experiences of a small number of individuals, providing an understanding of a participant's unique identity and worldview by focusing on the structural discourses that shape their narratives (Riessman, 2008; McAlpine, 2016).

## 3.1 Underlying Assumptions

The narrative research design is grounded in a naturalist interpretative paradigm, which entails that reality is intricate and shaped by social constructs (Crotty, 1998; Phothongsunan, 2010; Pring, 2000). Interpretivist methodology involves double hermeneutics, with the participants "trying to make sense of their world" and the researcher "trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 33).

Two methodological implications underpinned my research: Firstly, by adopting an interpretivist ontology, I recognised the dynamic nature of the researched and the researcher, who

exist within specific contexts, bringing their unique socially constructed worldviews with them. Secondly, as a narrative inquirer, I was cognizant of the variable nature of knowledge and valued how narrative inquiry allowed alternative views to co-exist in research (Creswell, 2013, p. 62).

## 3.2 Methods

I gathered narratives through a multimethod qualitative study (Creswell, 2021; Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2015). I used the narrative interview as the primary method to enable participants to provide a "theorisation of themselves" by answering questions about the development of events, relations between events, and their viewpoints on those events (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Flick, 2014, p. 266; Schutze, 2016). I treated the narrative interview as an engaging conversation with active listening on the interviewer's part (Creswell & Baez, 2021). I gave participants a broad generative question on whether Oxford admissions are meritocratic to stimulate their central narrative (Bauer & Gaskell, 2020). The narrative question was followed by open-ended probes seeking description and argumentation. Semi-structured interviews seemed most appropriate, allowing me to uncover common themes across all interviews while offering flexibility to tailor questions to the interviewees' responses (Creswell, 2013).

The narrative interview was supplemented with a creative verbal and a visual arts-based method: rapid-fire game and doodling or writing (Bagnoli, 2009; Rainford, 2020). The rapid-fire game at the beginning of the narrative interview served as an icebreaker to help participants feel at ease when sharing personal experiences. The game also elicited participants' primary thoughts about a subject when they may not have had time to think and sort through them. The answers provided in the icebreaker game informed subsequent questions.

Further, incorporating visual arts-based methods reduced reliance on spoken words as the sole data source, enriching analysis (Gauntlett, 2007; Kara, 2015). Presenting the writings and doodles created by participants presented a medium for them to speak for themselves without relying on the researcher's interpretation (Bagnoli, 2009).

## 3.3 Participant Selection Process

The research was conducted with fourteen participants. A small number of participants allowed for in-depth interviews and a critical engagement with each narrative (Creswell, 2015).

### *3.3.1 Participant Sections Methods*

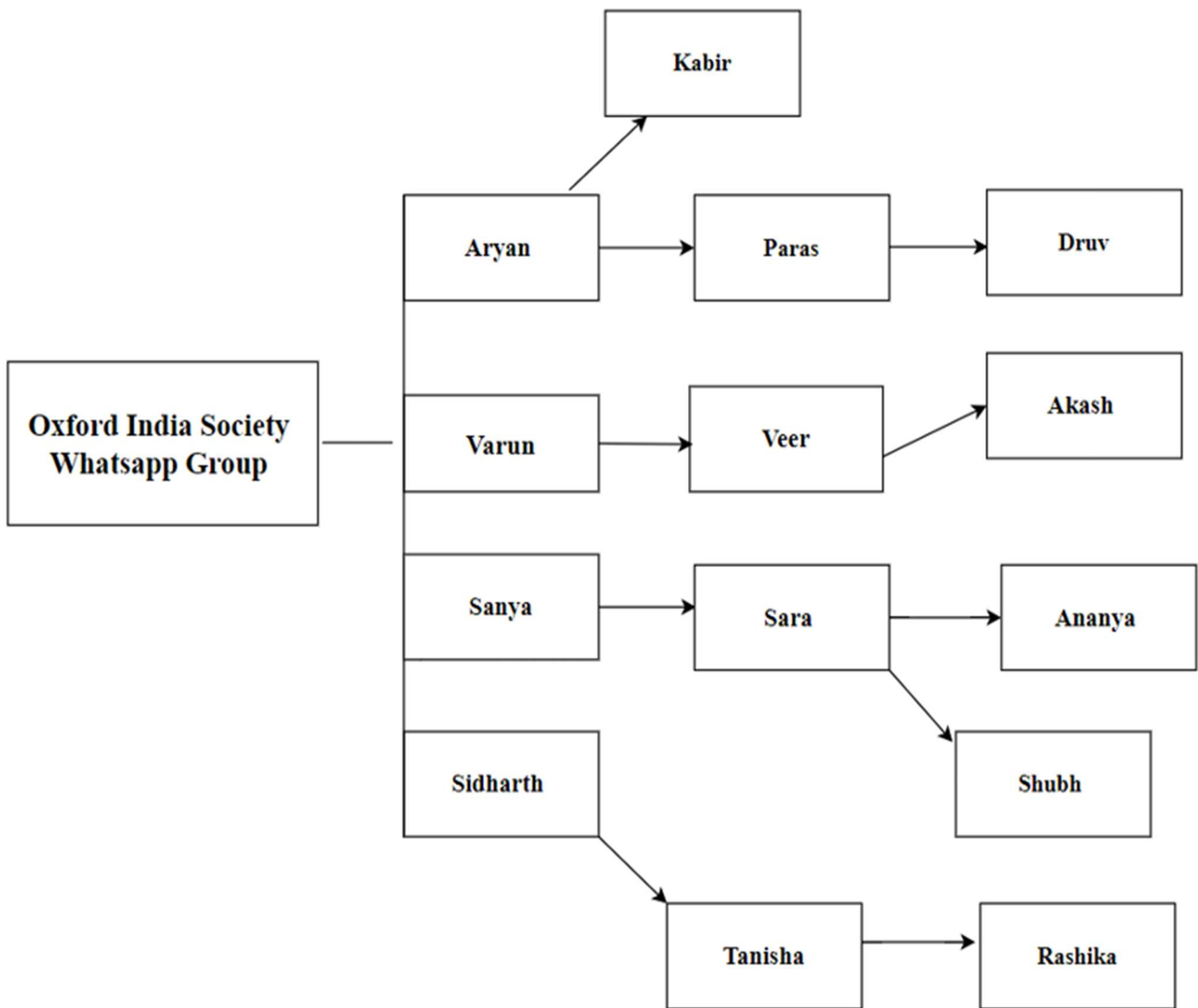
Participants were recruited through nonprobability sampling techniques. Figure 3.1 showcases patterns of convenience sampling combined with the next step of non-discriminative snowball sampling (Flick, 2014).

According to the University of Oxford Undergraduate Admissions Statistical Report (2023), around sixty Indian undergraduates enrol at Oxford annually, making the total number of Indian undergraduates across three years of study around a hundred twenty. However, it is unclear whether the number refers to Indian passport holders residing in India or all Indian nationals, including those living abroad. Determining the population eligible for the study was difficult, but it would likely be less than a hundred. Convenience and snowball sampling were thus useful recruitment practices for a small population that is challenging to find (Bryman, 2012).

I initiated recruitment by contacting the Oxford India Society (OIS) and sharing my participant recruitment circular through their undergraduate WhatsApp group (Refer to Appendix B). I found that the OIS membership is primarily comprised of Indian undergraduates. Therefore, reaching out to OIS was a practical way to connect with potential participants. Four participants responded through the OIS WhatsApp group, representing convenience sampling. I then asked these participants to share the recruitment circular with other eligible individuals in their network, employing snowball sampling to reach additional participants and creating a chain of referrals until the intended number of participants was reached.

**Figure 3.1**

**Participation Recruitment Process**



### *3.3.2 Participant Inclusion Criteria*

Interested participants filled out a Microsoft Form to check their eligibility for the study. Table 3.1 presents the participant inclusion criteria.

**Table 3.1**
**Participant Inclusion Criteria**

| Inclusion Criteria | Eligibility |
|---|---|
| Institution | University of Oxford |
| Citizenship | Indian |
| Schooling | Education before Oxford must be pursued in India |
| Level of Study | Undergraduate |
| Year of Study | Any |
| Course | Any |
| Oxford College | Any |

The University of Oxford was chosen as the focus of this study due to its status as an elite HEI admitting students through merit-based admissions. Throughout its extensive history, Oxford has maintained a position of prestige and influence, both academically and within broader societal contexts, serving as a prime example of global academic elitism (Bolton, 2009; Best & Higley, 2010).

Further, the decision to include only participants with educational experience in India was made to account for differences in familiarity with Indian social contexts. It is crucial for the research that participants were raised in a society stratified by caste. While it is recognised that experiences within Indian society may vary significantly due to its vast geography and diverse cultures, the study operated under the assumption that participants from India have a degree of shared exposure and interaction with social structures, including discourses on caste privilege in merit-based admissions. The research particularly benefited from participants who shared experiences transitioning from a schooling system in India to an elite HEI abroad.

Furthermore, I focused on undergraduates because they are generally of a similar age and have limited job market experience, having transitioned directly from high school to Oxford without employment gaps. The selection suggests that their experiences with educational institutions predominantly shape perspectives on meritocracy, providing a more focused understanding of student narratives not skewed by employment-related conceptions of meritocracy, which is more directly linked to the distribution of economic rewards in society. Eligibility was not restricted based on the year of study, course, or Oxford College, as the multiplicity of years and subjects of study can offer diverse perspectives that enrich analyses.

### *3.3.3 Participant Description*

I recruited eight STEM and six Social Sciences participants, contributing to a balanced representation of academic disciplines. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 21. Recruited participants were from different years of study, ensuring a comprehensive range of perspectives across different stages of undergraduate education. The study included eight male and six female participants. Additionally, participants were affiliated with eight different colleges at Oxford. Most participants hailed from metropolitan cities in India. Participants represented a balance between

the multiple boards managing school curricula and examinations recognised by the Indian Ministry of Education, including the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE), Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), and International Baccalaureate (IB). Most applicants had experience applying to universities in the US and Russell Group Universities.

It is important to note that the study does not claim to be representative of the entire population of Indian undergraduate students at Oxford. Thus, it refrains from adopting the positivist understanding of participants as a generalisable sample (Cohen et al., 2002). However, the diversity in participant backgrounds aspires to offer multifarious perspectives to address research questions.

Table 3.2 provides a brief overview of the participants' details.

**Table 3.2**

**Participant Details**

| Participant | Year of Study | Subject of Study | City | School Board |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Akash | 1st | Law | New Delhi | ICSE |
| Ananya | 1st | Law | Bangalore | CBSE |
| Aryan | 2nd | Physics | Pune | CBSE |
| Druv | 3rd | Physics | New Delhi | ICSE |
| Kabir | 1st | Computer Science | Pune | ICSE |
| Paras | 2nd | Maths | Pune | CBSE |
| Rashika | 2nd | Human Sciences | Bangalore | IB |
| Rohit | 1st | Biochemistry | Mumbai | IB |
| Sanya | 4th | Biochemistry | Chikmagalur | ICSE |
| Sara | 3rd | Biology | Ghaziabad | CBSE/ICSE |
| Sidharth | 1st | PPE | New Delhi | IGCSE |
| Tanisha | 3rd | PPE | Mumbai | IB/ICSE |
| Veer | 2nd | Law | Mumbai | IB |
| Varun | 2nd | Law | New Delhi | IGCSE |

## 3.4 Data Collection

All interviews were conducted in person at a location of the participant's choosing. These included gardens in Oxford Colleges, empty Junior Common Rooms, and an Oxford Union meeting room. Special attention was given to choosing a public space that was secluded, quiet, and convenient for the participant.

### *3.4.1 Interview Protocol*

To prepare for data collection, I made an interview protocol informed by insights from the literature and structured to systematically address my research questions (Refer to Appendix E). I conducted a pilot interview with a third-year Math student to brainstorm interview questions and identify potential challenges that could arise during participant interviews. The pilot interview was instrumental in helping me organise the interview schedule into four distinct sections: Introductory Questions, Experiences with the Oxford Admissions Process, Narratives on Merit and Privilege, and Narratives on Merit and Caste Privilege.

The first section included introductory closed-ended questions on the participants' hometown, school, and family demographics. This was followed by a rapid-fire game in which participants were prompted to spontaneously share the first word or sentence that came to mind in response to words such as fairness, meritocracy, and privilege. These responses were used as prompts to delve into participant definitions of these terms and to guide subsequent questions.

The second section began by asking participants to define merit and was followed by open-ended questions about their experiences with Oxford admissions. It also included a visual arts-based method, where I asked participants to doodle or write the factors they believed helped them gain admission to Oxford.

The third section revolved around questions on meritocracy and the role of privilege in cultivating merit, including their perspectives on whether they believe Oxford admissions are meritocratic.

The final section focused on participants' awareness of caste privilege and their narratives on its role in merit-based Oxford admissions. The semi-structured approach offered flexibility to

formulate questions based on the participant’s responses, thereby ensuring a dynamic and participant-driven interview process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

### *3.4.2 Interview Process*

Each interview lasted approximately an hour, with the shortest lasting 48 minutes and the longest extending to 1 hour and 19 minutes. Before the formal commencement of each interview, I dedicated five to ten minutes to building rapport with the participants.

The formal interview began after signing the written consent form (Refer to Appendix D). Questions in the interview protocol were often rephrased or followed up to ensure the seamless flow of the conversation and enhance the depth of the insights gathered from the participants. Participants could illustrate their responses using pen and paper for the visual arts-based question. I took handwritten notes during the interviews to capture essential details, and I maintained a reflexive research journal (Refer to Appendix F). The practice of writing my immediate thoughts, observations and challenges in 100-150 words after each interview facilitated accurate records of my reflections rather than relying solely on my memory (Meyer & Willis, 2019).

## 3.5 Data Analysis

I conducted my data analysis by combining Riessman’s (2008) narrative analysis approach with Creswell’s (2013) five-step Data Analysis Spiral approach. The approach views the data analysis process as a spiral, where each step is interconnected and relies on the others, emphasising that qualitative data analysis is not linear.

*Organising Data*

I initiated data analysis by transcribing the interview recordings using the live transcription feature on Microsoft Teams. The transcription process also involved translating sentences from Hindi to English. When the English translation failed to convey the meaning of a word fully, I included the original word in parentheses to preserve its intended meaning and cultural context more accurately. Additionally, I identified and incorporated natural pauses and silences into the

transcript to faithfully capture the nuances of the conversations. By retaining the organic speech pauses, the transcript effectively captured the participants' expressions, thereby enriching my interpretation of their narratives (Creswell & Baez, 2021). Following transcription, I cleaned the data by eliminating information that did not pertain to the interview and could hinder the code creation process (Thomas, 2003).

*Reading and Memoing*

After the initial reading of the transcripts for data cleaning, I proceeded with a critical reading approach outlined by Huberman and Miles (1994). Critical reading involved highlighting quotations that stood out and creating a side margin for phrases, key ideas, and thoughts that occurred to me while reading. I revisited the transcripts twice, following a specific reading order: I read the transcripts in the order in which the interviews were conducted and then reviewed the STEM transcripts separately from the Social Science transcripts to better identify similarities and variations in narratives. Subsequently, I re-read the transcripts alongside my margin notes, interview notes and reflexive journal entries. Reflective journaling significantly improved my reading process by allowing me to revisit my preliminary thoughts when reviewing interview transcripts to identify codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

*Describing, Classifying and Interpreting the Data into Codes*

Next, I used a three-step approach to create detailed participant cameos, priori and open codes.

1. Participant Cameo Creation

Cameos are low-inference participant summaries that provide a 200–300-word depiction of each participant. Cameo creation was guided by the question: What is the participant saying or doing? (Creswell, 2013). Participant cameos were created in two steps: individual-case cameos and cross-case cameos (McAlpine, 2016).

In the first step, I created individual participant cameos to introduce each participant, incorporating thick descriptions to comprehensively understand their context and experience

(Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). After creating the participant summaries, I sought patterns of similarities and differences between individual cameos. I identified participants with similar perspectives and evaluated the degree of similarity. I also examined participants with differing perspectives and assessed the extent of their differences.

2. Priori Coding

I used MAXQDA to create priori codes during the literature review. Identifying prefigured codes gave my analysis a structured framework rooted in scholarship (Creswell, 2015). While priori coding provides a directional guideline, it may limit analysis depth (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). Therefore, I combined priori coding with open coding, ensuring a thorough analysis that benefited from predefined codes while remaining open to new insights and patterns (Saldaña, 2021).

3. Open Coding

With MAXQDA, I identified emergent codes encompassing the exact words used by multiple participants (in-vivo codes) and codes based on terms that best described the conveyed information. To ensure clarity of analysis, I separately coded for questions asked during the interview. I differentiated between codes that emerged in response to terms used as probes during the interviews and codes that emerged without being posed as explicit questions. For example, the code "US admissions" emerged without being part of the interview questions. On the other hand, the code "caste privilege" almost always emerged in response to a probe. Open coding was also employed to code visual data collected during the interview.

Initially, I created 35-40 codes, which were later refined to 15-20 codes, grouped into categories, and further refined into themes for analysis.

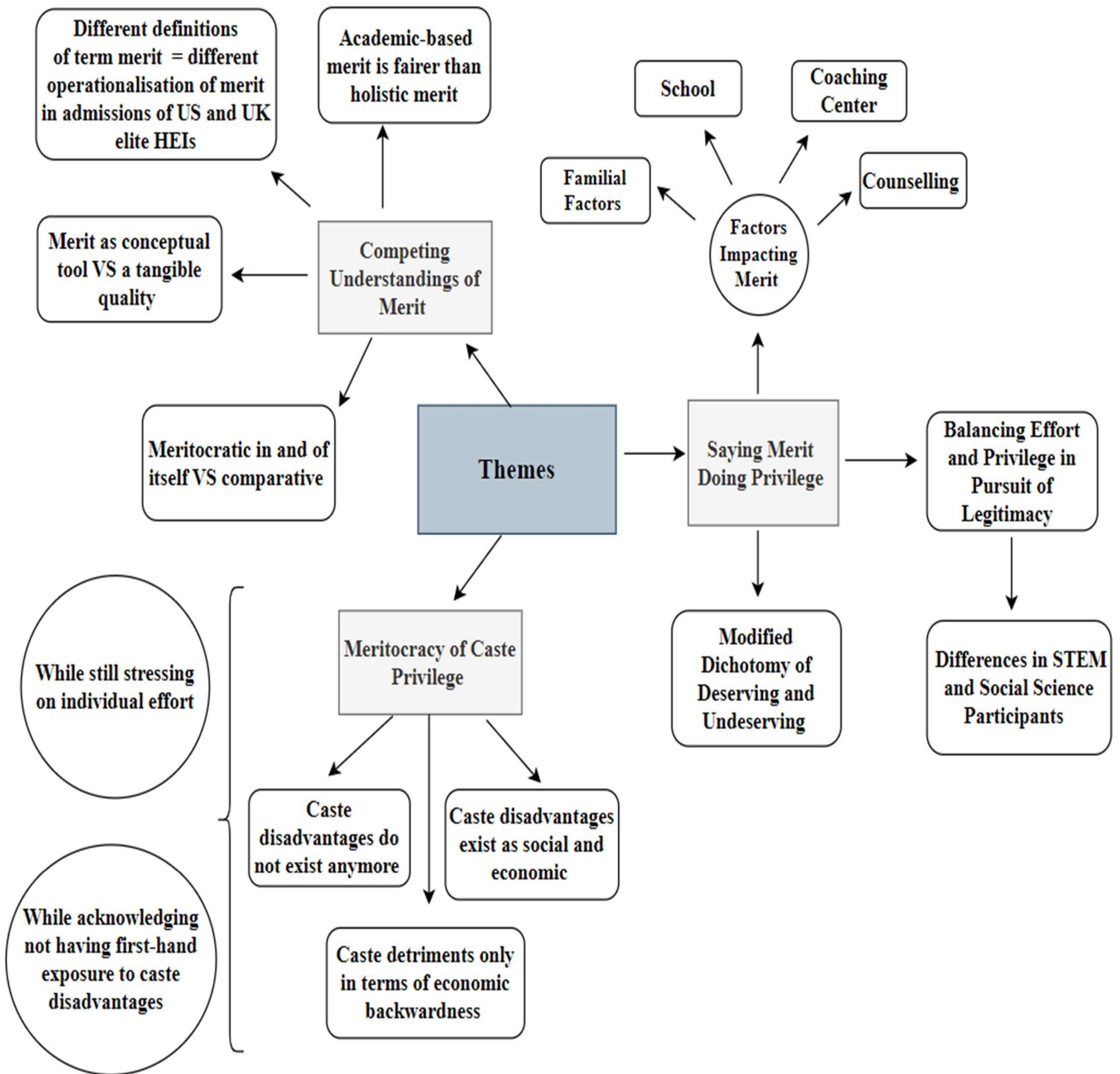
*Visualisation of Data*

In my data analysis process, I rearranged the steps in Creswell (2013) by prioritising visual data representation a step earlier to streamline codes to facilitate theme creation. Within this revised step, I implemented data reduction techniques to develop multiple easy-to-grasp visual

maps (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Denzin, 2011). Figure 3.2 shows the final visual map I created to guide my thematic narrative analysis.

**Figure 3.2**

**Thematic Map**



*Thematic Narrative Analysis*

I employed Reisman's (2008) thematic narrative analysis strategy to identify three overarching themes: Competing Understandings of Merit, Meritocracy and Everything in Between; Saying Meritocracy and Doing Privilege; and the Meritocracy of Caste Privilege. Subsequently, I developed thematic passages for each theme, utilising codes and participant quotations as evidence.

Juxtaposing my themes with existing literature, I considered potential scholarly explanations to interpret participant narratives. Throughout this process, I also considered anomalies and narratives that did not "neatly" align with the identified themes (Creswell & Baez, 2021, p. 169).

## 3.6 Considerations for Research Quality

In line with Tracy's (2010) eight Big Tent Criteria for Qualitative Research, I adopted measures to improve research quality—rich rigour, meaningful coherence, sincerity and credibility.

*Rich Rigour*

I prioritised thorough data collection by creating a detailed interview protocol, conducting a pilot interview, and interviewing participants in person to build rapport and create a comfortable interview setting (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). Given that only audio was recorded, I took written notes about facial expressions and body language to understand participant responses better (Denham & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Additionally, I kept a reflexive journal to record interview experiences after each interview to minimise bias related to memory recollection (Creswell, 2013).

*Meaningful Coherence*

I sought meaningful coherence by ensuring my research aim, questions and methodology aligned with the underlying epistemological assumptions of my research. Based on an interpretive

ontology, which acknowledges the coexistence of multiple social realities, I avoided data triangulation in my methodology (Ellis, 2007).

*Credibility and Sincerity*

I aimed for credibility in three ways (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, I provided a thick description of student narratives to capture culturally situated meanings (Geertz, 1973). Second, I aimed to crystallise data by employing multiple methods. The goal of crystallisation was not to provide a more reliable singular truth but to aid a detailed and nuanced analysis (Tracy, 2010).

Thirdly, I aimed for multivocality by providing space for diverse opinions and attending to viewpoints diverging from the researchers (Law, 2004). This was promoted by fostering engaging conversation as a type of participant collaboration, which marked a shift from “studying you” to “studying us” (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 735).

Lastly, I prioritised transparency by being honest about the research process, challenges, and limitations. I also addressed potential areas of researcher bias through critical self-reflection (Seale, 1999).

## 3.7 Challenges in Data Collection and Analysis

### *3.7.1 Logistical Challenges*

The research faced three logistical challenges. Firstly, recruiting participants was difficult due to the busy schedules of undergraduates during Trinity Term at Oxford. Secondly, finding a quiet, secluded space for in-person interviews was challenging to ensure no disturbances and clear recordings, as public settings could inhibit participants from sharing personal information. Lastly, the transcription process was tedious. Microsoft Teams did not consistently capture the Indian accent, and participants’ switching between Hindi and English made translating and transcribing time-consuming.

### *3.7.2 Methodological Challenges*

Firstly, I realised that a visual arts-based method might not suit every participant. For instance, a participant’s hesitance prompted me to reframe the word “doodle” with “write” in my question.

Further, most participants chose to explain the thought process behind what they doodled or wrote. In this manner, I spotted possible limitations of adopting a visual arts-based method and how participants naturally supplemented a visual arts-based question with verbal answers.

Additionally, sometimes, participants' answers did not directly address the questions, which presented a dilemma of when and whether to intervene. This challenge required balancing the need to let participants narrate freely and the necessity of steering the conversation back to the question.

### *3.7.3 Ethical Challenges and Considerations*

Navigating ethical challenges in studying a small group of Indian undergraduates at Oxford involved complexities related to participant anonymity and researcher reflexivity, which shaped data collection and analysis.

*Participant Anonymity and Data Protection*

To ensure participant anonymity, all names were pseudonymised, and all identifiable details were omitted. Situational ethical challenges, including participant concerns regarding anonymity, were addressed with the understanding that each circumstance is different (Ellis, 2007).

The interviews were audio recorded with participants' permission using Microsoft Teams and securely stored on a University's Nexus 365 Drive until the dissertation was submitted. After transcribing and anonymising the recordings, they were permanently deleted to follow the UK Data Protection Act (General Data Protection Regulation, 2018). Anonymised transcripts were shared with my supervisor in a password-protected file.

*Participant Consent and Well-Being*

Participants received the information sheet (Refer to Appendix C) and written consent form via email at least twenty-four hours before their interview. They were asked to sign a printed Written Consent form before the interview. Any questions or concerns were addressed before obtaining signatures. The research did not raise specific sensitivity-related issues, but the questions on caste could be potentially sensitive. To mitigate potential distress, participants were given the option to skip questions or withdraw their answers from the research without explanation.

*Positionality*

Practising reflexivity is essential for research ethics and quality (Pillow, 2003). As a twenty-two-year-old Indian student, my position at Oxford makes me an insider to my research interests (Beals et al., 2020). Given my familiarity with the research setting and topic, I consciously avoided disclosing my value judgments in my open-ended questions or steering participant responses with my personal input or confirmations (Savolainen et al., 2023). I also remained mindful of the possibility of projecting my experiences with Oxford's merit-based admissions onto those of my participants.

I recognised the benefits and potential risks of my "dual identity as a researcher and as a member of the community being researched" (Chaudhry, 2000, p. 96). My shared experiences with participants, including language, nationality, and age, establish a close familiarity which can enhance data collection by fostering rapport and facilitating nuanced insights into participants' perceptions. For instance, the comfort of using Hindi and GenZ slang like mid (meaning mediocre) facilitated clearer participant self-expression (Berger, 2015). However, having a shared identity and experiences with participants may also lead them to assume my understanding of specific contexts, potentially resulting in withheld information or prompting them to conform to perceived expectations. To mitigate this, I employed follow-up questions to seek clarity and elaboration (Punch & Oancea, 2014).

Lastly, I acknowledged that my identity as an upper-caste individual inevitably shapes my interpretations of caste privilege. By admitting my caste privilege, I do not claim to speak for the lived experiences of students from marginalised castes but rather intend to capture how students in positions of privilege in elite HEIs portray the role of caste privilege in merit-based admissions (Khanal, 2021; Massoud, 2022; Dixit, 2023).

## 3.8 Limitations in Research Methodology

As I reflect on the steps I took to enhance the quality of my research, I am also self-critical about potential limitations in my methodology. I utilised a snowball sampling method, which is effective for recruiting from a small population but relies heavily on initial participants.

Moreover, snowball sampling may create a homophily effect, where participants tend to have similar socioeconomic and demographic characteristics due to network connections (Wagner et al., 2017). While my sample represented various aspects like year of study, subject, college, and gender, it lacked diversity regarding the geographical locations of participant hometowns and academic divisions such as Medicine or Humanities. As recruitment progressed, the snowball method reached a saturation point where participants referred others within their networks, potentially overlooking individuals outside these circles.

# 4

# FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

“I was in the JEE jail at a very young age,” Aryan described his experience preparing for the Joint Entrance Exam (JEE) to enter one of India’s elite engineering HEIs. Aryan is a second-year undergraduate studying Physics on a scholarship. He was twelve when he moved to Kota—a tier 2 Indian city renowned for JEE coaching institutes. In line with “Kota culture”, Aryan attended a “dummy school” from sixth grade onwards, only attending school to take exams while spending the rest of the year at a leading JEE coaching institute.

Having prepared for JEE all his life, he termed getting into Oxford as *tukke se* (a nonchalant way of saying by chance in Hindi). He felt “lucky” that a friend from his days as team India at the International Junior Science Olympiad went on to study physics at Oxford, advising him to consider applying to Oxbridge and the Ivy Leagues as “backups”. Aryan claimed he received an offer because of his outstanding Physics Aptitude Test (PAT) performance.

Figure 4.1 illustrates the factors Aryan held responsible for his admission to Oxford. These include the dedicated support of his mother, who relocated to Kota with him, and the rigorous preparation he received for JEE and Olympiads at his coaching institute within the competitive Kota environment.

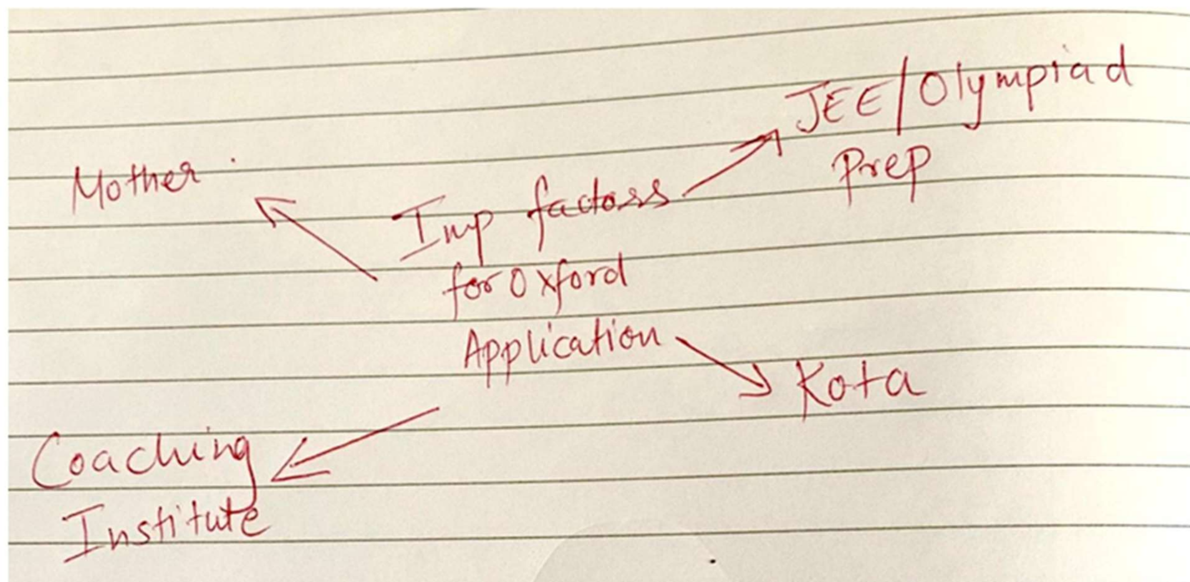



**Figure 4.1**

**Factors Aryan Credited for Getting into Oxford**

Merit to Aryan is being good at what he applied for: "If I'm doing physics, I should be good at physics". Aryan stressed that Oxford admits students based on academic merit, "If you're good academically, Oxford will take you. They don't care about anything else." However, he believed merit is defined differently in the US, such that while he got into Oxford, he did not satisfactorily meet the admissions criteria for the Ivy Leagues, "The US couldn't get in. I did have a good academic profile. But they need a hell lot of extracurriculars." In line with his definition of merit, Aryan said that Oxford admissions are meritocratic because they are based on academics, not extracurriculars. "For extracurricular activities needed for the US, you need a school that offers all those. You can still be good in academics on your own; you just have access to the internet and some books".

Aryan credited his success in Oxford admissions to his hard work: "I worked, I got in. No secret ingredient." Yet, explaining the pivotal role external coaching played in helping him develop analytical and conceptual clarity, he also admitted that he "couldn't have done it (PAT) without the coaching at Kota." However, when asked about the degree to which privilege facilitates merit, Aryan maintained that merit-based admissions, "at least in Oxford STEM, are just about the

amount of effort you put in. Privilege does not really play a role". He further opined that caste privilege "definitely does not matter in STEM. Oxford is purely meritocratic."

In contrast, Veer, a second-year Law student from a leading IB school in Mumbai, called meritocracy "funny". He argued:

> Students are responsible for their hard work, but their circumstances bind them. The fact that I'm here is not only a consequence of my hard work but also of the privilege I was born into, something I had no control over. So, saying that merit exists as a standalone institution based on effort is a myth.

Like Aryan, Veer stressed his hard work. However, he also acknowledged the role of privilege in cultivating merit. Figure 4.2 presents factors Veer believed helped him get into Oxford. He credited his admission to his IB school, underlining the "huge impact" of attending a school that solidified his command of English. Veer argued that English proficiency helped him do well in the UK's Law National Aptitude Test (LNAT), which he labelled "an English comprehension test." He pointed out the importance of his school in offering him international perspectives. "I was surrounded by seniors who had made these applications…it's like hearing advice directly from the horse's mouth". Lastly, he considered having mock interviews with a counselling team specialising in Oxbridge admissions an "instrumental help".

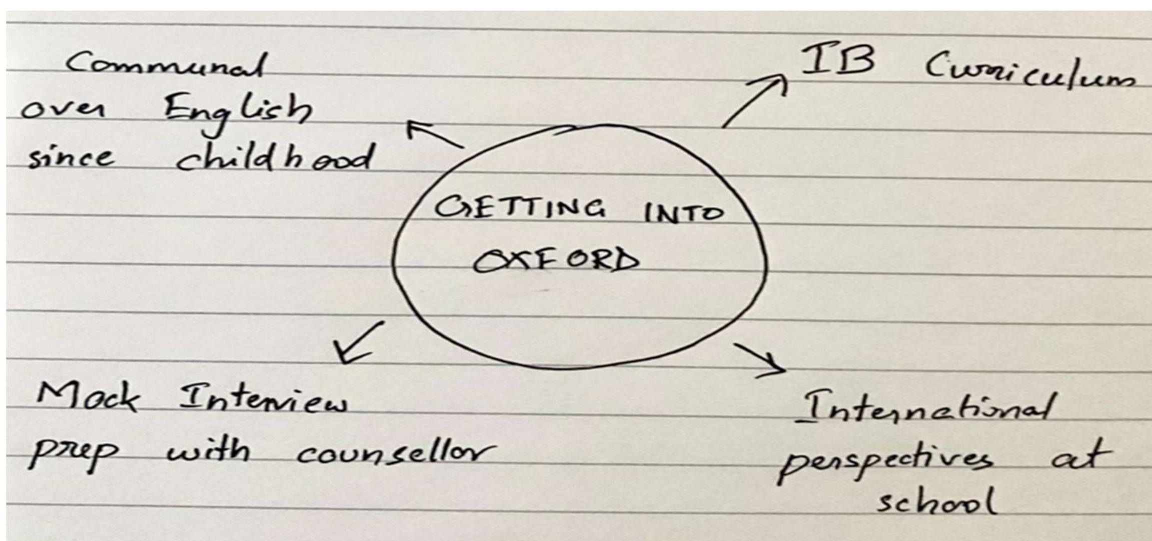



**Figure 4.2**

**Factors Veer Credited for Getting into Oxford**

In contention with Aryan, Veer posited that caste privilege facilitates the cultivation of merit. He underlined the high correlation between caste and class in India, where class determines access to opportunities to "become better at what you like." However, he also accentuated that even if an SC student is upper-class, caste still influences social networks and "indirectly affects an individual's confidence to apply to Oxford."

Figure 4.3 shows factors Sara, a third-year Biology undergraduate, attributed to her admission to Oxford. She considered changing schools to "one of the best schools in Delhi" in Grade 11, a decision made by her father "enhanced (her) chances of getting into Oxford". The academic rigour at Sara's new school fostered her critical engagement with Biology. The school's well-equipped biology lab cultivated a "genuine interest in botany", which Sara claimed helped during her Oxford interview.

Sara held that while two years in her new school were not enough to build "the kind of profile for top US schools (HEIs)", her new school did help her develop the academic excellence sought by Oxford. She recognised the impact of privilege, stating that "had (she) not changed schools (she) would not have even applied to Oxford….so privilege does help."

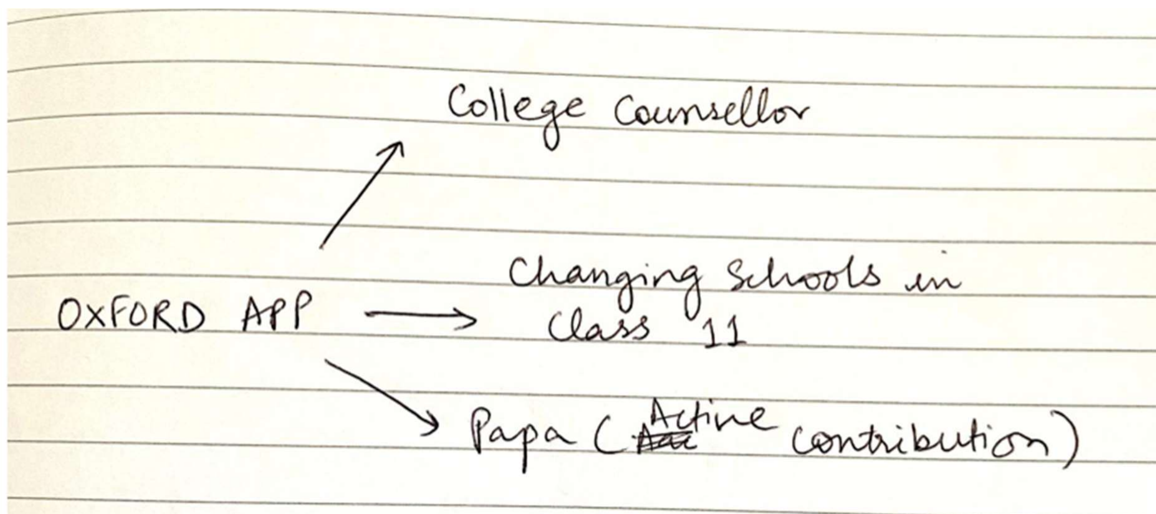



**Figure 4.3**

**Factors Sara Credited for Getting into Oxford**

However, Sara also maintained the legitimacy of Oxford's merit-based admissions, emphasising that it is "still possible to be good at your subject in schools that aren't super high-end". Underscoring the importance of effort in being "good at your subject", she thought that while privilege, including caste privilege, may facilitate merit, it does not significantly influence an applicant's ability to be successful in Oxford's admission.

In doing so, Sara modified Aryan's opinion to assert that the detriments of caste in merit-based admissions, if any, would be primarily limited to the rural poor and are no longer prevalent in urban middle-class India. However, unlike Veer, she contended that the effects of caste can be mitigated through social mobility, stating, "If you're rich but *lower-caste* (SC), you still have access to the same schools, same counsellors, so your caste does not make a difference anymore."

Aryan, Veer and Sara highlight the nuances of student portrayal of merit-based admissions. When asked to list the factors they believed helped them get into Oxford, they mentioned institutions they accessed through privilege. However, when asked if they believe Oxford admissions are meritocratic, they primarily emphasised their own hard work. Despite varying emphasis on the role of privilege, including caste privilege, in merit-based admissions, all participants tried to legitimise their space in Oxford by stressing their efforts. The tendency to legitimise success in merit-based admissions can be understood through three broad themes: Competing Understandings of Merit, Balancing Effort and Privilege in the Pursuit of Legitimacy, and the Meritocracy of Caste Privilege.

## 4.1 Competing Understandings of Merit, Meritocracy and Everything in Between

To understand how Indian undergraduates at Oxford portray their success in merit-based admissions, I begin by analysing what they understand by the term merit.

Four competing interpretations of merit emerged from the participants' perspectives. Firstly, several participants defined merit as a quality of being particularly *good*. Shubh, a first-year Biochemistry student, defined merit as "how good are you at what you're doing?" Tanisha, a

second-year PPE student, concurred with Sara's understanding of merit as "being good at your subject."

However, the definition of *good* remained ambiguous. What is implied by "how good"? Is being *good* at your subject a benchmark — a set academic standard to be met to be considered meritorious? If yes, is the benchmark defined by the elite HEI in question? Is the quality of being *good* at your subject absolute or comparative? Or both? When asked what she meant by *good*, Tanisha said, "Have excellent subject knowledge." On the contrary, Shubh said *good* is "being better (at your subject) than other applicants."

Secondly, some participants viewed merit as academic ability or potential. In line with the Oxford undergraduate admissions website (2024), Varun, a second-year Law student, described merit as "academic potential," while Sara saw merit as "the ability to perform academically." Again, the manner in which potential and ability are measured is different for Varun and Sara. While Varun stressed educational attainment as a measure of academic potential, Sara referred to "genuine interest in your subject."

Thirdly, a few participants broke their definition of merit into a quality acquired through talent and/or effort. Adi, a Law student in his first year, emphasised that merit is "the hard work put into improving subject knowledge." Kabir, a first-year Computer Science student, defined merit as "talent in one's area of interest." In contrast, Sidharth, a first-year student pursuing PPE, opined that "merit equals talent plus hard work," Thus, participants who defined merit as an outcome of its components stressed different components. For Adi, merit is hard work; for Kabir, it is talent, whereas for Sidharth, merit is both.

Lastly, some participants defined merit within the specific context of their academic disciplines. Druv, a third-year Physics student, asserted, "Merit in STEM is basically your marks. The higher your marks, the more merit you have." Ananya, a first-year Law student, added, "Merit would differ from course to course; merit in my course is very much about expressing yourself well".

The differences in the definitions of merit offered by students reflected an ambiguity and lack of consensus, which is also visible in the literature on meritocracy (Liu, 2011; McCowan, 2016). However, student perceptions differ from scholarly arguments in two considerable ways. Firstly, in educational theory, merit is understood as a dynamic conceptual tool used to distribute rewards based on shifting societal values. Merit is an inherently instrumental framework contingent on

prevailing societal concepts of goodness (Daniels, 1978). However, students often seemed to understand merit as a tangible quality an individual “has” or possesses. They viewed it as a concrete attribute that can be cultivated and improved through personal effort. In doing so, they regarded merit not as a conceptual tool but as agentic capital (Pham, 2021). Thus, while scholars see merit as a flexible and context-dependent mechanism for distributing rewards, students perceive it as an intrinsic and individualistic attribute. The distinction between the theoretical understanding and student perception of merit highlights the intricacy involved in operationalising indicators of merit in admissions (McCowan, 2016).

Secondly, literature predominantly assesses the legitimacy of merit-based admissions in elite HEIs or their national HE systems in and of themselves (Zimdars, 2007; Nicolo, 2013; Lybeck, 2017; Reay, 2021). In contrast, all students appeared to assess the legitimacy of merit-based admissions by comparing the criteria they believed are used by different elite HEIs to evaluate merit. It is important to note that the comparison comes unprompted. Students were only asked whether, based on their definition of merit, they believed Oxford admissions are meritocratic.

However, the manner in which students phrased their responses revealed that they considered Oxford admissions meritocratic not in and of itself but when compared to merit-based admissions for elite HEIs in the US. Aryan said Oxford admissions are “more meritocratic than most”. Druv opined, “It (merit-based admissions at Oxford) is not ideal, but it’s the best we got,” he further elaborated, “The Oxford process is one of the closest to a true meritocracy. The US process has certain limits,” said Druv. Paras, a first-year pursuing Maths, concurred:

> If I wanna do Maths, they check my merit for Maths and nothing else. Oxford admissions prioritise curiosity and a passion for learning the subject. For the US, they will check multiple things, extracurriculars and all.

In their comparison of merit-based admissions, participants viewed academic excellence, and therefore the Oxford admissions process, as a “fairer” measure of merit because it can be attained independently through hard work, whereas excelling at extracurriculars often required “external help”, particularly from school, making it unfair to evaluate extracurricular achievements in merit-based admissions. Druv emphasised:

> For Oxford, you don’t need anything other than being good at your subjects. You can be good at physics even in kind of a mid-school. The merit sought by Oxford can be acquired by reading about your subject and taking online courses… things you can do on your own. I

> think it's better for STEM subjects because it's easier to be good at physics without external help. In the US, you probably need to run a child rights NGO while training for the Olympics… for that, you need resources.

While some participants acknowledged the potential influence of privilege on academic excellence, they believed it is less significant than the impact of privilege in facilitating extracurricular achievements. Thus, they argued that Oxford is more meritocratic than the Ivy League.

In line with their argument for calling Oxford admissions more merit-based than the US, participants expressed that admissions should measure effort, not privilege. Tanisha stated, "Universities should account for merit while controlling for access." Sanya, a fourth-year Biochemistry student, agreed, "Getting in should be a measure of how much effort you've put in. I wish it were the only variable."

Kabir explained using a physics analogy. Referring to velocity as his effort and displacement as his subject knowledge, he argued that a fair way of assessing merit is to measure velocity (effort) by dividing the change in displacement (subject knowledge) with time. However, Kabir admitted that objectively quantifying effort is complex and current metrics often default to measuring outcomes rather than effort, which can disproportionately reflect structural advantages.

Furthermore, participants had notably sparse insights when asked how merit-based admissions at Oxford can be made fairer. Ananya stated, "Oxford is doing as well as you can in the real world." Rohit thought Oxford admissions were already "optimally fair". The changes suggested by most participants were limited to the academic interview, including increasing online information and giving candidates a reading list to aid preparation. No participant discussed the use of contextual data or affirmative action policies in merit-based admissions.

Participant narrative of considering Oxford more merit-based and therefore fairer, with limited need for admission reform, offers crucial insights: Participants portray the admissions at their elite HEI as meritocratic while rejecting potential alternative practices of assessing merit. Their perspective on what is considered "fair" in merit-based admissions is influenced by their personal experiences within the meritocratic discourse. Participants often interpret merit primarily within the context of academic excellence in their specific subject, reflecting their perception of how

Oxford measures merit. The relatively restricted scope of suggestions for improvement perhaps highlights a potential underlying conflict. Participants may be hesitant to be too critical of the meritocratic nature of Oxford admissions, as doing so could contradict their claims of its merit-based admission's fairness. By suggesting minimal changes in the current admissions process, participants maintain that their own admission to Oxford was merit-based while suggesting minor improvements. Sara's statement aptly captured this sentiment: "Oxford is a fair meritocratic system that rewards effort, and privilege does not matter as much." However, she also acknowledged, "but maybe I am only saying that because I got in, and had I not gotten in, I would have said, oh, it's not." Thus, the merit-based process participants consider fair is the one in which they emerged successful.

In this manner, refraining from critiquing Oxford's merit-based admissions may imply an attempt to maintain the legitimacy of the meritocratic process they benefited from despite acknowledging the potential role of privilege in merit cultivation.

## 4.2 Saying Meritocracy and Doing Privilege

The pursuit of legitimising positions is further underlined by how students balanced the emphasis on privilege and effort in their narratives of successful admission to Oxford. Participants attached varying importance to how privilege fosters academic merit by highlighting four factors: family, school, admission counselling, and coaching centres. In doing so, they hinted at the role of economic, social, and cultural capital in developing a dominant class habitus that helped them in Oxford's merit-based admissions. However, the importance attributed to privilege in merit-based admissions differed between STEM and Social Sciences participants.

### *4.2.1 Factors Impacting Merit*

*Family*

Firstly, participants implied they had inherited a habitus of prioritising and valuing education from their families. Akash said, "The mentality of your parents has a huge impact. I had the privilege of having supportive parents who encouraged me to apply to Oxford." Varun agreed, "How your parents view things matters in how you end up viewing things." Kabir shared that he got the idea of "applying abroad" when his dad introduced him to a student from their caste social

network who was preparing for JEE but got into Stanford. Veer explained, "Having a well-to-do family sort of elevates your aspiration. It determines what you aim for…family influences you very much."

Further, families impact merit cultivation by guiding decisions about schooling, counselling, and coaching. Aryan mentioned how it was his mother's idea to shift to move to Kota for JEE coaching. Druv recounted that since his mother is a professor, he grew up in an academically oriented home, stimulating his research interest. Sara mentioned that her dad, working a corporate job in New Delhi, was actively involved in her admissions process and regularly sought advice from his colleagues.

*School*

Most participants hinted that their school played a crucial part in cultivating what may be interpreted as dominant class habitus, especially within the Indian context: academic prowess, English proficiency, international perspectives, and the development of transferable skills through extracurricular activities.

Firstly, the academic curriculum followed by their school board significantly impacts rigour and subject engagement. Social Science students from IB and IGCSE schools expressed how their school fostered a deeper understanding of subjects and facilitated the exploration of academic interests. Tanisha shifted from an ICSE high school to a prestigious IB school in Mumbai. She foregrounded the effect of the IB curriculum on her interview preparation, stating, "I was exposed to the rigour of academic discipline…studying high-level economics, history, and maths positively impacted my interview."

Furthermore, students highlighted that attending a school following the Indian education boards may pose challenges in the Oxford application process. Akash, who studied in an ICSE school in New Delhi, explained the potential difficulty national board students face in Oxford admissions, using Law as an example, "CBSE and ICSE students have no practice writing essays. So, applying for Law, I would have had to get external help to write my SOP." Sidharth attended an IGCSE boarding school in Dehradun. He opined, "You're almost inherently disadvantaged coming from a CBSE background. You just don't have access to the same free flow of critical thinking or the depth and breadth of reading that IB kids do." Ananya concurred, adding, "If you

went to a board where you weren't encouraged to think and argue, you wouldn't learn the skills to do an Oxford interview."

Similarly, students from STEM backgrounds seemed to acknowledge differences in academic rigour amongst school boards in India but believed these differences do not disadvantage STEM applicants as the differences in STEM curriculum across school boards are not significant. Rashika, a second-year Human Sciences student who attended a CBSE school in Bangalore, noted:

> The CBSE system is quite similar to what they study here in A-levels for Physics and Maths, which we're tested on when applying for Engineering. For Oxford STEM, you will not be disadvantaged as a CBSE student. In fact, I think you might even be advantaged because the science curriculum in India is very rigorous.

Kabir, who attended a CBSE school in Pune, agreed, "You're not learning very different things in CBSE and A-Levels, but how you're applying that knowledge is different. How well you have learned what you were taught depends on how much you practise. It doesn't have much to do with the resources of your school."

Overall, most participants recognised the influence of their educational background on their readiness for the academic-based admission requirements at Oxford. However, even while doing so, STEM students appeared to particularly highlight the importance of effort.

Secondly, Social Sciences students specifically discussed the importance of extracurriculars offered in their school, emphasising that while Oxford admissions do not factor extracurriculars in themselves, the tangible skills learned from extracurriculars help demonstrate academic excellence. Ananya revealed that her school encouraged her to participate in Model UN, stressing that the value of extracurricular lies, "Not the name of the MUN, but the skills you get out of it…learning how to construct an argument, for example, helped me in my Law interview." Sidharth established that participating in the World Debate Competition as part of Team India "opened his political worldview and taught him argumentation central to Philosophy."

On the other hand, STEM students proposed that extracurriculars only matter in US admissions. They seemed to opine that skills learned through extracurriculars are not necessarily limited to opportunities provided by one's school. Rashika gave the example of using LinkedIn to participate in robotics competitions and argued that "Being at a school that did nothing for extra-curricular does not mean you cannot become good at them on your own."

Thirdly, Social Science participants particularly underlined the combined influence of the academic curriculum and extracurriculars on their grasp of English. They emphasised the role of English proficiency in Oxford's academic interview. Varun remarked, "The interview is also a lot about just your ability to deal with language. Because, again, the way interviews are structured it is one thing that you can think; what is more important is how you express what you were thinking." Veer reflected on his experience with IB English to discuss the potential challenge for CBSE students applying to Oxford, noting that "CBSE students generally find it difficult to get into Oxford simply because they don't have adequate English to get in. Your comprehension isn't as good as an IB student."

Furthermore, students cited the influence of the school environment on English proficiency. Varun observed, "If you have been educated in an environment where people speak English all the time, of course, you'll be more confident in articulating yourself, right? Yes, you can learn by watching YouTube, but it's not the same if you're not surrounded by people who speak the language." Sidharth acknowledged, "The fact that I have been conversing in English ever since I remember, which just meant that I have an excellent grasp on the language. It's difficult to have that exposure without a good English-medium school." However, some STEM students hinted that articulation skills can be developed independently. Kabir opined, "Interview skills in STEM can be acquired with practice." At the same time, Aryan shared that recording JEE problem-solving videos for YouTube gave him the skills to explain how he solved a given problem during his Oxford interview.

Lastly, in addition to improving English, the school is credited with providing a competitive environment and global perspectives. Social Science students seemed to value the "international exposure" offered by their school. Tanisha expressed that the competitive environment pushed her to work harder. Sanya underlined the importance of exposure, declaring, "People with privilege are exposed to a lot of cool stuff, so they know what kind of course they want to do and how to become better at it." She was a scholarship student at a CBSE school run by an educational NGO that prepared students for admission into elite HEIs abroad. In Grade 11, Sanya was sponsored to study at the Somerville Summer School; she stressed that she did not know about Biochemistry until she attended the summer school. Sidharth underlined the value of getting guidance from

school seniors, "Having seniors who have gone through the process will help you get the right information to craft the right type of recipe." Participants also stated their preference for joining the same admissions counselling and coaching centres as their batchmates and seniors.

*Admissions Counselling*

All but one participant mentioned hiring an external counsellor to assist them with their Oxford admissions. Sara pointed out that it was "culturally normal" at her school to have an external admissions counsellor:

> My counsellors spoke to me in these very long sessions where they were like, oh, talk about the experiences in your school. Oh, maybe go a little bit deeper into that particular experience because that sounds like something you should discuss in your personal statement. So they suggested what I shouldn't read and write and how I should write it.

Varun declared applying to study Law at Oxford twice. In his first attempt, he was not accepted. However, during his second attempt, his parents hired a counsellor with extensive knowledge of the Oxbridge system to help him prepare.

> I think she (the counsellor) is probably the most qualified person to help with Oxbridge applications in the Indian landscape. She herself did PPE at Oxford and is in the Oxford Cambridge Society of India. She's been in the Oxford system for decades, so she knows what to do.

Interestingly, Akash, who joined the same counsellor a year after Varun, was connected to Varun through the counsellor. Upon the counsellor's request, Varun guided Akash in his Oxford Law interview preparation.

Tanisha also shared her experience with one of India's leading counselling agencies, mentioning how they "basically helped polish and iron me up for the interview in a manner that would be easily impressive to the interviewers. Also, in terms of breaking down the interview process and ensuring I understood what it was like and had significant practice."

Conversely, Ananya said she did not "feel the need to get a counsellor", highlighting her initiative to find current Oxford students on Student Room and LinkedIn. While most non-STEM students attach importance to their counselling service, STEM students, including Kabir, seemed to opine that counselling is not a "make or break" factor. Most STEM participants referred to the

global education departments in their coaching centres. Rather than admissions counselling, they stressed the significance of their coaching centre in preparing them with the critical thinking and problem-solving skills needed for their Oxford admissions test.

*Coaching Centres*

Students discussed the positive impact of coaching centres on their Oxford admissions test. Social Science students mention the importance of coaching. Varun received two years of coaching for India's Common Law Admission Test (CLAT). In preparation for CLAT, he appeared for the LNAT. However, after scoring "decently high" on LNAT, he applied to Oxford.

Multiple STEM students spoke of a similar trajectory. Their preparation for JEE helped them perform well in Oxford's admissions tests. Druv opined that his coaching centre prepared him for the "best of the best," while Paras supposed that once his coaching centre prepared him "for the worst (JEE), PAT felt easy." Many STEM students credited the guidance of teachers at their coaching institute, with Aryan asserting that "Oxford would not have been possible without them."

In this manner, Social Science and STEM students recognised the impact of privilege in gaining access to institutions which aid merit cultivation. However, while most students highlighted the significance of individual effort when discussing privilege, Social Science students seemed to perceive privilege as outweighing individual effort. In the absence of privilege, effort may be misdirected and not yield fruitful results. Varun reasoned that while effort is crucial, privilege fundamentally shapes the effectiveness of that effort:

> Anyone can work hard. For someone who's privileged, you can work hard and be meritorious. For someone who's not from a very privileged background, they will have to work a lot harder, often in a misdirected manner…there are two things when you're looking at someone who's not privileged. One is you have to work harder than the other person because you have to catch up more. The second is you have to work harder because you've got less guidance, so you're going to be going haywire a lot more.

In contrast, STEM students were likely to believe that effort plays a more significant role in their admission. Kabir articulated, "It is indeed hard work. However, privilege plays a role. First is hard work, and second is privilege." Sanya opined that privilege could reduce the hard work required to achieve the "same level of merit"; however, its absence is not detrimental to merit-based admissions. Increased effort can thus compensate for a lack of privilege. Kabir added, "If

you have a mentor or a senior who's done this before and can help you, it 100% makes a difference. If you don't have any outside help, means you have to put in more effort."

Moreover, multiple STEM students mentioned that the Internet is diminishing the impact of privilege by democratising access to resources that were historically only available to individuals with privilege. Aryan underscored, "Access to resources is easier now because of the internet. It is gradually evening the playing field." Ananya agreed, "Everything you need to know about getting into Oxford is available online." Their perspectives appeared to suggest that in the digital age, with sufficient effort, an individual could acquire the same advantages privilege offers in developing academic merit.

In summary, while Social Science participants highlighted the predominant role of privilege in shaping success whilst stressing their effort, STEM students evoked effort as the primary determinant of their success. They acknowledged the impact of privilege but appeared to argue that the absence of it can be minimised through greater effort and access to information, primarily facilitated by the Internet.

The differences in emphasis between STEM and Social Science participants regarding the role of structural privilege in cultivating a dominant class habitus, which provides a comparative advantage in merit-based admission, may be due to the different underlying assumptions related to Social Science and STEM subjects. It could be useful to highlight how these disciplines perceive knowledge. STEM primarily perceives knowledge as revealed, rooted in a positivist paradigm that believes in a single reality that can be measured and falsified through a scientific method. Conversely, in Social Science, knowledge is commonly perceived as actively constructed and interpreted (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Social Sciences thus engage more freely with the idea of multiple realities shaped by interaction with social structures. This might suggest why Social Science participants were more likely to stress the role of structural privilege in their narrative. Participants from the Social Sciences are also more likely to be familiar with critical scholarship on meritocracy, which could potentially inform their responses.

However, it is essential to note the lack of extensive research on why participants from different disciplines might attach different significances to structural privilege in their portrayal of merit-

based admissions. Further research into the same could enrich the scholarly understanding of meritocracy in HE.

Nevertheless, both STEM and Social Sciences students appeared to share similar perspectives on whether they deserve their place at Oxford. Aryan seemed reluctant to endorse the idea that individuals deserve what they earn through effort, “A student is responsible for the hard work and effort they put in, so they deserve the place they have here, but students are also bound by their circumstances. There is a box drawn around them well; how well they fill up the box is up to them, but the strength of the box bounds them nine times out of ten.” Sidharth agreed, “If you get in, you deserve it. But people who did not get in are not necessarily undeserving”.

Thus, despite different opinions on the role of structural privilege in merit-based admissions, participants from both disciplines legitimised their position in Oxford by claiming they deserved it because it was “earned” through effort. They, however, disagreed that those who did not get into Oxford were undeserving of being there. In analysing these narratives, two critical discussions emerge: the Modified Dichotomy of Deserving and Undeserving, and Balancing Effort and Privilege in the Pursuit of Legitimacy.

### *4.2.2 Modified Dichotomy of Deserving and Undeserving*

Student narratives on the role of privilege in meritocratic admissions are notably complex and contradictory. In contention with Khan’s (2011) assertion that the new elite failed to recognise their privilege, participants showcased a sophisticated understanding of the role of structural institutions in their success within Oxford’s meritocratic framework. They were conscious of their privilege in accessing these institutions. By discussing the influence of family and socio-cultural networks in helping them demonstrate academic excellence successfully, most participants implicitly acknowledged the role of their inherited capital in cultivating a dominant class habitus that offered them a comparative advantage in merit-based admission to Oxford (Zimdars et al., 2009). As a result, students affirmed the impact of privilege in merit-based, challenging Khan’s conclusion.

However, Khan’s argument that the new elite legitimises their positions in elite HEIs by emphasising their effort remains valid. While students acknowledged varying degrees in which privilege impacted their success in merit-based admissions, they also stressed the importance of

their hard work. They did not claim that success solely depends on hard work but saw it as crucial in gaining admission to Oxford.

Social Science students attributed their privilege to providing an informed direction to their efforts, recognising that external guidance is often necessary and that the lack of such guidance disadvantages certain groups. Conversely, STEM students appeared to be contradictory. They acknowledged the privilege of attending coaching centres, which prepared them for merit-based Oxford admissions. Yet, they asserted that with increased effort and access to the Internet, anyone can cultivate merit irrespective of their privilege. In doing so, they also seemed to assume that digital literacy is universally accessible and independent of structural privilege.

Notably, when participants were asked to write or doodle factors that they believe aided their Oxford admission, students primarily mentioned institutions—schools, admissions counselling, and coaching centres—without explicitly mentioning their effort as a factor. However, the role of effort was repeatedly referenced when students were asked if they believed Oxford admissions were meritocratic. Thus, while students credited institutions in response to factors that contributed to their admission, individual effort took precedence in discussions about meritocracy.

The participants' emphasis on effort in responding to whether Oxford is a meritocracy aligns with the dominant meritocratic discourse, which seeks to legitimise positions in elite HEIs by portraying them as individual responsibility (Sandel, 2020). However, the student framing of their success slightly diverges from the meritocratic dichotomy of deserving and undeserving. Although their emphasis on effort portrays them as deserving, they are also aware of their privilege and do not regard those not admitted as undeserving. Instead, multiple students portray their achievement as an outcome of their effort within social structures that conferred them comparative advantages beyond their control. In doing so, they seem to suggest that those who were not admitted to Oxford did not lack effort but were disadvantaged by a lack of privilege. This creates a narrative where they emphasise individual responsibility for earning their success while attributing the "failure" of others to structural inequalities. Thus, I find that the new elite maintains a sense of accomplishment despite existing inequalities, justifying their status while recognising that structural barriers can hinder the success of others.

### *4.2.2 Balancing Effort and Privilege in the Pursuit of Legitimacy*

The findings highlight a crucial tension in the participants' narratives on the interplay of effort and privilege in the context of Oxford admissions. While they acknowledge the potential impact of privilege in fostering merit, they tend to justify their place at Oxford by emphasising the institution's academic-merit-based admissions process as fair, largely dependent on effort rather than privilege. This portrayal of merit-based admissions at Oxford raises two significant questions: Why do students' narratives tend to legitimise merit-based Oxford admissions, and why do their portrayals of success differ from the scholarly argument that the new elite does not recognise the role of privilege in their success (Khan, 2011; Sandel, 2020)?

Students construct ideas of themselves and their admission into an elite HEI within an ever-evolving meritocratic discourse. While meritocracy celebrates the importance of individual agency in overcoming structural constraints, it is important to acknowledge that meritocracy itself is a dominant structural discourse (Foucault, 1982). The narratives of the new elite thus work within a dominant structural discourse that seeks to replace the entitlement frame with achievement via merit (Sandel, 2020). Bourdieu's theory of dominant class habitus (1977) suggests that the elite behave in a manner that seeks to retain their privilege by shaping and reinforcing dominant discourses. As members of a meritocratic elite in higher education institutions, it is beneficial for the new elite to reinforce the concept of meritocracy by legitimising their privileged positions.

However, the students' portrayal of merit does not neatly align with the scholarly argument that the new elite presents merit as an outcome of effort rather than privilege (Khan, 2011). This variance can be ascribed to the dynamic nature of discourses. Discourses transform interactions between individuals and structures, such that individual narratives shape discourses, and discourses shape individual narratives (Foucault, 1982; Jackman & Muha, 2014). The new elite today seeks to reinforce the dominant meritocratic discourse within a competing discourse that challenges the legitimacy of meritocracy (Singh, 2011). The competing discourse, in turn, necessitates adjustments in how the narratives of the new elite legitimise their positions in elite HEIs.

Further, privileged group allyship has seen a significant rise in recent years, with a focus on advocating for equality for disadvantaged groups. While still an emerging concept, some studies have raised concerns about this form of allyship, labelling it as performative due to its perceived inability to drive meaningful societal change (Kalina, 2020; Philips, 2020). Performative allyship typically encompasses the use of language that gives the appearance of allyship without challenging the status quo (Kutlaca & Radke, 2023). Allyship from the privileged can indeed be genuinely rooted in altruistic commitments to social justice. However, in line with Bourdieu's (1977) theory of dominant class habitus, privileged groups may engage in performative allyship with the intention of maintaining their existing privilege rather than creating meaningful change (Thimsen, 2022).

Consequently, the new elite seems to replace the overt sense of pride and achievement associated with earning positions at an elite HEI with a performative allyship of acknowledging privilege while still subtly celebrating their individual effort. By doing so, they replace the idea of winners and losers with a more considerate language of winners and non-winners. In a world marked by greater openness, the new elites recognise the importance of embracing the fairness of meritocracy whilst expressing equity concerns (Khan, 2011). Thus, although participants voice apprehensions about merit-based admissions that proxy merit as a privilege, they attribute their admission as an outcome of their efforts and do not believe the merit-based admissions in which they emerged successful require significant reform. In doing so, the new elite maintains the legitimacy of their position while also partaking in the emerging discourse that seeks to debunk meritocracy.

However, while the evolving discourse prompts the new elite to acknowledge undertones of privilege in what is perceived as merit by the meritocratic discourse, their acknowledgement of privilege is nuanced.

## 4.3 Meritocracy of Caste Privilege

Most participants reflected a limited understanding of privilege, presenting it primarily as opportunities that stem from class identity. In their narratives, participants referred to the fungibility of economic capital into social and cultural capital and how inherited economic capital leads to comparative advantages in merit-based admissions for elite HEIs (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Reay, 2004). Although participants initially discussed privilege with a focus on economic

class, their conversations also hinted at caste privilege, even if it is not directly discussed until prompted.

For instance, while students discuss the role played by their school in facilitating academic excellence, they overlook how caste identity can implicitly affect access to elite schools. Proximity to school is a common factor affecting admission decisions in Indian metropolitans. In a point-based system, schools prefer applicants living within five or ten miles of the school. However, localities in India have historically been segregated by caste, leading to a situation where elite schools are often situated in upper-caste localities. Marginalised castes, including those who can afford the high fees of English-medium schools, are less likely to live near these institutions, thus highlighting the contemporary disadvantages of systemic caste-based spatial segregation (Jeffrey et al., 2005; Vaid, 2014).

Furthermore, participants' perception of caste privilege closely paralleled class privilege. Although they directly highlighted the positive role of class privilege in merit-based admission, caste privilege remained unmentioned until specifically prompted. When discussing the impact of caste privilege on success in Oxford admissions, students' responses can be categorised into three distinct perspectives. While differences between Social Science and STEM disciplines were evident in the emphasis participants placed on the influence of caste privilege in merit-based admissions, these differences are not as pronounced as those regarding privilege and effort.

Firstly, a subset of STEM students seemed to believe that caste does not affect merit cultivation, especially in the context of STEM admissions at Oxford. Kabir exemplified this view. He shared how his father connected him with a peer from the same caste network who was pursuing engineering at Stanford and advised him to apply to selective HEIs abroad. Despite this apparent instance of caste-based social capital, Kabir maintained that the impact of privilege, particularly one stemming from caste identity in Oxford admissions, is "none whatsoever". Treating caste as an archaic system of social exclusion, Kabir stated, "Caste privilege doesn't exist anymore." He further questioned, "Why would caste make a difference? Makes no sense to me!" Aryan concurred, reflecting on his experiences, "From what I've seen, no, caste privilege doesn't matter, especially in top unis. They are purely meritocratic." Paras claimed that admission to Oxford is based on effort and is not significantly impacted by social structures, including caste. While Paras did not entirely dismiss the possibility of systemic disadvantages associated with SC

applicants, he did not consider them detrimental to Oxford's merit-based admissions. "Marginalisation is ending, especially in tier 1 cities. So caste probably does not affect admissions."

Rohit's argument pointed towards a second perspective of participants who argued that the rise of the middle classes in urban India in the past three decades has diluted any detrimental impact marginalised caste identity might have had in merit-based admissions. Sara posited, "I feel caste privilege doesn't play such an important role in very urban settings anymore." Sanya echoed, "Class is what caste manifests today." Participants think that in urban spaces, potential caste disparities are mediated by class. Sidharth noted, "Caste only affects your admission to Oxford if it overlaps with class. If you have the money, the chance that your caste would preclude you from getting into top schools abroad is slim to none."

Two participants who identified as "mixed-caste" — one parent belonging to a marginalised caste—also suggested that as individuals from marginalised castes achieve economic parity with historically upper-caste groups, the impact of caste diminishes. Druv shared this viewpoint: "In urban settings, caste can be hidden by class."

The third perspective stood in contention to the first two. Participants, particularly from Social Sciences, suggested that caste negatively impacted access to economic capital in contemporary India, creating disadvantages for marginalised applicants in merit-based admissions, especially to elite HEIs abroad that function without the "reservation system". Tanisha strongly opined that "the idea that in urban India, caste does not incur any privilege is bullshit…castelessness is a privilege only upper-castes can afford." She illuminated the interconnected nature of caste and class, observing that "in urban India, access to resources is determined by class, but class has been historically correlated with caste. How rich you are directly depending on your caste." Tanisha further underscored the persistence of caste within elite social circles: "Everybody now says that caste does not matter in upper-class circles in Bombay, but being in those circles is itself a function of caste." Veer expanded the argument by accepting the social aspect of caste-based disadvantages as separate from its economic impact. Implying the experience of habitus cleft, he emphasised that despite upward social mobility, the social effects of caste hinder success in merit-based admissions

HEIs (Bourdieu, 1990). “It is not just economic…a large part of it is social. Caste identity affects aspiration...it affects your confidence, which would also translate to applications abroad.”

However, participants from all three perspectives disclosed that their opinions were based on passive exposure rather than first-hand observations. While participants from perspectives one and two perceived the invisibility of caste-based systemic disadvantage as indicative of its inconsequential impact, participants holding the third perspective acknowledged that their absence is an indication of the insulation offered by their own caste privilege. Rashika admitted, “I come from a relatively nice place in Bangalore, a modern city, and I definitely didn’t see it around me.” Rohit added, “I have grown up in such a homogenous space where I think everyone has a pretty similar background. So I never saw that, oh, maybe this hampered someone or was a disadvantage.” Contrarily, Varun stated, “Caste privilege still exists. Just because I don’t see it doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen. The fact that I don’t see it is a result of my caste privilege.”

Furthermore, Sara and Veer accepted their upper-caste positionality in their opinions of caste, pointing out the limitations to their exposure to systemic caste disadvantages. Sara reflected, “I am from one of the highest castes in India. So, asking me to talk about casteism is like asking a white person to talk about racism. Obviously, they don’t know the full extent of it.” Veer concurred, “I genuinely would not know. I came from a very privileged background where everyone is upper-caste. So it would be unfair to say anything about it.”

Participant responses offered interesting insights into how Indian students interpret the interplay of merit and caste privilege. These perspectives can be understood through Bourdieu’s habitus theory. Reay (2004, p. 441) argues that the conceptual flexibility of habitus makes the concept adaptable to diverse contexts. Bourdieu (1977) refers to the upper class as the dominant (privileged) group. Given the systemic disadvantages of the caste system, upper-castes in contemporary India are also more likely to be upper class (Davis et al., 2009). The upper-castes can, therefore, be considered the dominant group within the context of Indian society (Jeffrey et al., 2005).

According to Bordieuan habitus theory, privileged groups use language and behaviour to shape the dominant discourse to legitimise and reinforce their position of privilege. The upper-castes thus adapt their portrayal of merit to align with the emerging discourse of neoliberalism and caste

allyship, which challenges the dominant upper-caste discourse of meritocratic legitimacy (Mosse, 2018; Munshi, 2019).

The first perspective suggests that caste disadvantages no longer exist, particularly in urban India. Even in cases where they do, systemic caste disadvantages are considered irrelevant in merit-based admissions. Participants uphold the dominant meritocratic discourse by asserting that individual effort is the primary criterion for selection in meritocratic admissions. This downplays the significance of structural privilege, including caste privilege. However, participants move away from the traditional upper-caste narrative of merit as they do not explicitly credit their success to divinely ordained talent (Subramanium, 2013). Instead, they stress the neoliberal idea of achievement through effort (Sandel, 2020).

The second perspective presents a nuanced shift from the traditional upper-caste narrative of meritocracy by acknowledging that caste impacts merit only when it intersects with economic class. Participants thus portray caste-based disadvantages as insignificant unless considered within the context of economic class. In doing so, they modify the upper-caste meritocratic discourse to align with the dominant neoliberal narrative that emerged in India following the free market reforms of the 1990s and continues to be amplified three decades later, as reflected in the Indian Supreme Court's (2024) suggestion for excluding economically advantaged SC students from affirmative action benefits in merit-based admissions.

The current neoliberal narrative thus promotes the idea of upward mobility through education and subsequent employment to alleviate the historical disadvantages of caste (Ahmad, 2010). Resultantly, despite the limited proportion of marginalised castes that have achieved upward mobility, the predominance of the neoliberal narrative is successfully replacing the frame of caste-based disadvantages with secular class-based disadvantages. Participants are thus more inclined to agree that class and not caste disparities can affect merit-based admissions.

One potential explanation is that participants who acknowledge their upper-middle class and upper-caste privilege often express that they have not personally witnessed the detrimental effects of caste disparities within their urban upper-class school or social circles. Rather than attributing the lack of visibility of systemic caste disadvantages to their privilege, several participants tend to interpret their absence as indicative of their non-existence. In doing so, they do not account for the

overlapping nature of caste and class, reflected by the potential upper-caste homogeneity of upper-class circles in India. It is essential to recognise that in urban India, privilege is primarily determined by class, which has historically been correlated with caste (Davis et al., 2009).

The third perspective acknowledges the systemic disadvantages resulting from caste privilege in cultivating merit for elite HEIs, regardless of its intersection with economic class. Those subscribing to this viewpoint interpret the absence of visible caste disparities within their upper-middle-class circles not as an indication of their non-existence but rather as a reflection of their upper-caste privilege. By being aware of their privileged position, they acknowledge the limitations of their upper-caste gaze in understanding the effects of caste disparities. In doing so, their portrayal of success in merit-based admissions aligns with the prevailing narrative of caste allyship, encouraging privileged groups to demonstrate awareness and heightened sensitivity to caste disadvantages that restrict access to HE.

However, while these participants demonstrate a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding caste privilege within the context of elite HEIs than the other two perspectives, it is essential to note the limitations of their portrayal of performative caste allyship. Participants seek to maintain the legitimacy of their positions in an elite HEI by emphasising individual effort, even while acknowledging that privilege, particularly caste privilege, may facilitate merit. They express caution towards operationalisations of merit that disguise privilege while arguing that the operationalisation of merit in their elite HEI is fair because academic merit is a better measure of effort. While acknowledging privilege and the structural barriers that may limit others, they do not advocate for significant changes to the current merit-based admissions process in their elite HEI. In doing so, their narratives come across as saying meritocracy and doing privilege (Khan, 2011).

# 5

# CONCLUSION

Through this dissertation, I captured the narratives of Indian undergraduates at Oxford on the role of structural privilege in merit-based admissions to understand how students in elite HEIs — the new elite — legitimise their success in a dynamic meritocratic discourse. In my narrative inquiry, I focused on class and caste privilege while exploring the structural and agentic factors Indian undergraduate students at Oxford credit for their merit-based admission to an elite HEI (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008).

In doing so, I delved into the underexplored nuances of Indian student narratives in educational research on meritocracy in HE. Further, in focusing on narratives of caste privilege in merit-based admissions to Oxford, I aimed to contribute to a better understanding of the systemic disadvantages marginalised castes face in merit-based admissions, which can inform contextual admissions policies for applicants entangled in the intricate and insufficiently understood dynamics of the caste system.

By emphasising merit as a product of innate talent and hard work, the meritocratic discourse places the responsibility for achievement and upward mobility on individuals, negating the role of structures in nurturing a dominant upper-class habitus that advantages the privileged in merit-based admissions (Bourdieu, 1977; Sandel, 2020). Thus, while meritocracy does not explicitly exclude any applicant for lack of privilege, it employs merit as a proxy for privilege.

Literature suggests that the new elite downplay the influence of privilege and attribute their success in merit-based admissions to their efforts (Khan, 2011; Khan & Jerolmack, 2016; Sandel, 2020). In emphasising individual responsibility, they legitimise their position in elite HEIs by portraying it as deserved rather than inherited. Based on my analysis of narrative interviews with fourteen participants, I conclude that while students tend to legitimise their positions in elite HEI,

they adapt their portrayal of merit-based admissions to align with the emerging discourses of social justice and caste allyship, which challenges meritocratic legitimacy.

The modified framing of merit-based admissions adopted by the new elite can be ascribed to the dynamic nature of the meritocratic discourse. Discourses transform interactions between individuals and structures, such that individual narratives shape discourses, and discourses shape individual narratives (Foucault, 1982). Bourdieu's (1977) theory of dominant class habitus argues that privileged groups use language and behaviour to shape the structural discourses to legitimise and, thus, reproduce their position of privilege. As elucidated in my research findings, the new elite does so by portraying their success in merit-based admissions as individual responsibility while attributing the failure of other applicants to structural inequalities.

Firstly, participants legitimise their position at Oxford not by portraying Oxford admissions as meritocratic in and of itself but when compared to holistic merit-based admissions for elite HEIs in the US. The comparison works with the belief that merit-based admissions should measure effort, not privilege. Participants view academic excellence, and therefore Oxford admissions, as a fairer measure of merit by implying that academic merit is likelier to be attained independently through individual effort, whereas excelling at extracurriculars often requires access to structural institutions. Thus, the admissions process they consider meritocratic and thus legitimate is one in which they emerged successful.

Further, participants acknowledge their privilege in accessing institutions — family, school, counselling agencies and coaching centres — that contributed to their success in Oxford's academic-merit framework. However, while STEM and Social Science participants place varying emphasis on privilege's role in their Oxford admission, most participants stress the importance of their hard work. However, in emphasising individual responsibility, participants' framing of success slightly diverges from the language of the meritocratic dichotomy of deserving and undeserving. Although their emphasis on effort portrays them as deserving, they are also aware of their privilege and do not regard those not admitted as undeserving. In doing so, the new elite replaces the meritocratic notions of winners and losers with a more considerate language of winners and non-winners.

However, although participants express concerns about merit-based admissions that equate merit with privilege they do not advocate for significant reform in the academic merit-based

admissions in which they were successful. Participants are cautious about criticising the meritocratic nature of Oxford admissions too strongly, as doing so could undermine their assertion of the admissions' legitimacy. By proposing minimal alterations to Oxford admissions, participants perhaps reflect performative allyship for disadvantaged applicants in merit-based admissions while maintaining that their own admission to Oxford was merit-based. In this manner, their narratives say meritocracy while doing privilege (Khan, 2011).

The narrative of saying meritocracy while doing privilege is further reflected in how students portray the role of caste privilege in merit-based admissions. The emerging neoliberal meritocratic discourse in India promotes upward mobility by downplaying systemic caste disadvantages and emphasizing class-based disadvantages instead. As a result, the new elite shifts away from the traditional upper-caste narratives that portray merit as divinely given talent. By engaging in performative caste allyship, they acknowledge the positive impact of overlapping class and caste privilege in merit-based admissions while still highlighting individual effort. The new elite thus appears to maintain the legitimacy of their success in merit-based elite HEIs by partaking in competing discourses that seek to challenge meritocracy.

While this study has illuminated the way the narratives of new elites shape the ever-evolving meritocratic discourse to legitimise their success within merit-based elite HEIs, it also opens avenues for further research. First, capturing narratives of Indian students who applied to Oxford but were not admitted could enrich the current study. Second, while my dissertation focused on class and caste privilege in merit-based admissions, further exploration of how the intersectionality of gender, region, and religion might compound class and caste privilege within the context of merit-based admissions to elite HEIs can be helpful (Crenshaw et al., 2013).

Furthermore, considering the increasing political discussions on caste in the UK, the research could benefit from a widened scope that also includes the narratives of Indian diaspora students at Oxford. Lastly, a few participants hinted at their encounters with caste-based systemic disadvantages and discrimination at Oxford. Exploring the perceptions of Indian undergraduates at Oxford regarding caste privilege within meritocratic elite HEIs in ostensibly casteless societies presents an intriguing area for future research.

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# Appendix A
## CUREC 1B Approval

**CUREC 1B - Accessing Elite Higher Education Institutions: Reflections of Indian Undergraduates at Oxford**
Student CUREC <student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk>
Sat 3/2/2024 8:40 PM
To:Shireen Kalra
Cc:James Robson;Student CUREC
student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk

Dear Shireen Kalra,

I am writing to acknowledge receipt of your CUREC 1B application entitled '*Accessing Elite Higher Education Institutions: Reflections of Indian Undergraduates at Oxford*'.[1] The application was reviewed and approved by Dr James Robson, your supervisor. No further approval from the Education DREC is required for applications reviewed under the CUREC 1B process. As such, the project will not receive a formal letter of ethical approval from the SSH IDREC.

The ethics reference for your application is C1B-24HT-Educ-011. Please add this reference to your CUREC 1B form and include it on documents for the research participants such as the participant information sheet.

Please note that this is contingent on the research project adhering to the criteria set out in the CUREC 1B guidance. Please ensure, therefore, that you comply with the conditions of this process and, should anything change in the course of the project, you should discuss this with your supervisor to determine whether this requires further review and approval by the Education DREC.

Please see below a few small comments, which I would appreciate if you could take into account. Please send us any revised documents, for our records:

[1] An updated dissertation title has been approved after 3/2/2024 through the MSc Notification of Dissertation Title form.

- I understand that your interviews will be conducted in person; as you will be asking your participants to share demographic information and other personal information, for their comfort it might be better to use a private room/quiet space in the department or a college for the interview, rather than a busy public place such as a café, where people could overhear your conversation and the quality of your recording could also be impacted.
- You mention DocuSign - do you have a licence for that? Alternatively, you could get their written consent in person, just before the interview. That doesn't mean you shouldn't send them a template for the consent form with the information sheet, prior to meeting them.
- Your consent form states "I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs." but there is no information on that in the participant information sheet. Are the recordings going to be used in research outputs?
- In the participant information sheet, for the question **Who has reviewed this research?** please write:

The application was reviewed and approved by my supervisor on behalf of the Departmental of Education's Research Ethics Committee.

- And under **Who do I contact if I have a concern or I wish to complain?** replace SSH IDREC with:

The Chair, Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee

Address: 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY

All the best for your research – we hope it goes well.

Irina

**Irina Lepadatu**
**Research Manager**
Department of Education, University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY
Research SharePoint site
LinkedIn | X | YouTube

# Appendix B
# Participant Recruitment Circular

Department of Education
University of Oxford,
15 Norham Gardens,
Oxford OX2 6PY

Dr James Robson

Ethics Approval Reference: [C1B-24HT-Educ-011]

**VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR DISSERTATION RESEARCH**

I am looking for volunteers to participate in my dissertation research on the topic "Accessing Elite Higher Education Institutions: Reflections of Indian Undergraduates at Oxford". My research aims to capture the perspectives of Indian undergraduates at the University of Oxford regarding their preparation process for applying to an elite higher education institution.

To participate, you must be a current undergraduate student at the University of Oxford who is born and educated in India. Participants from all disciplines and years of undergraduate study are welcome. You will be asked to participate in a short, relaxed interview, which would take about 1 hour of your time and would be conducted in person at an Oxford café or college of your convenience. You would be asked to verbally describe and doodle the factors you think contributed to the success of your application to the University of Oxford.

If you are interested and would like more information, please contact Shireen Kalra at ______________________________ . There is no obligation to take part.

Thank you!

# Appendix C
# Participant Information Sheet

Department of Education
University of Oxford, 1
5 Norham Gardens,
Oxford OX2 6PY

Dr James Robson

**Accessing Elite Higher Education Institutions: Reflections of Indian Undergraduates at Oxford**

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: [C1B-24HT-Educ-011]

**1. Introductory paragraph**

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

**2. Why is this research being conducted?**

The research is being conducted as part of the MSc Education (Higher Education) dissertation of Miss Shireen Kalra. The research aims to capture the perspectives of Indian undergraduates at the University of Oxford regarding their preparation process for applying to an elite higher education institution. It aims to understand the factors they think contributed to the success of their applications to the University of Oxford.

**3. Why have I been invited to take part?**

You are being invited as you responded to the circular calling for volunteers and meet the criteria required to participate in the research. You are a current undergraduate student at the University of Oxford who was born and educated in India before joining Oxford. Participants from all disciplines and year of undergraduate student are eligible if they meet the previously mentioned criteria. A total of 14 participants are being recruited for the research.

**4. Do I have to take part?**

No. It is up to you to decide whether to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the research without giving a reason by advising us of this decision. The deadline by which you can withdraw any information you have contributed to the research is 6 July. Any data obtained will be deleted and not used towards the dissertation.

**5. What will happen to me if I take part in the research?**

You will be asked to participate in a short, relaxed interview, which would take about 1 hour of your time and would be conducted in person at an Oxford café or college of your convenience. The interview will draw on your experiences and answers to the initial questions. You would be asked to verbally describe and doodle the factors you think contributed to the success of your application to the University of Oxford. You can also show the same through an object, a song, or a photograph on your phone. The photograph will not be collected as part of the research. After reading this information sheet, you will be asked to sign a written form to give consent to participate in the study.

With your consent, I would like to audio record the interview on Microsoft Teams so I can have an accurate record of our conversation. You can ask to pause or stop the interview at any time. You can also withdraw from participating in the research without giving any reason any time before or after the interview until 06/07/2024 end of the day. You may be contacted a second time to respond to short questions via email if any clarification or further information is required.

**6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?**

There are no foreseeable discomforts, disadvantages and risks in taking part.

**7. Are there any benefits in taking part?**

While there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the research, it is hoped that this research will give the opportunity for self-reflection and enhance the participants'

self-awareness about how they prepared to apply to an elite higher education institution, and what factors, in their opinion might have aided their application.

8. **What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?**

During the interview, you will be asked to provide relevant information about your experience preparing for applying to the University of Oxford. Data about your demographics, family background, and high school life, including but not limited to academic and extracurricular engagements, will be collected. If applicable, you may also be asked about how you think the pandemic affected your ability to prepare for Oxford admissions. During the interview you can choose to refrain from answering any question you do not wish to give information about. You are also welcome to provide any additional information which you may believe will help answering an interview question.

Only the researcher (Shireen Kalra) and her supervisor (Dr James Robson) from the Department of Education, University of Oxford, will have access to the research data.
Identifiable data (including consent forms) will be stored on the University Nexus 365 One Drive. Other research data will be stored for three years after publication or public release of the work of the research. All audio recordings of in-person interviews will be deleted after transcription and before 6 July 2024. Any drawings and doodles will also be destroyed post-analysis.
The names of participants and any other details giving away your identity will be changed, and you will not be identifiable from the research output.

**9. Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?**

The findings from the research will be written up in a dissertation. You will not be identifiable from the outputs. I would like your permission to use direct quotations but without identifying you in any research outputs. A copy of my dissertation will be deposited both in print and online in the Oxford University Research Archive where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research.

**10. Data Protection**

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance web site at https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

**11. Who has reviewed this research?**

The application was reviewed and approved by my supervisor on behalf of the Department of Education's Research Ethics Committee.

**12. Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact Shireen Kalra, shireen.kalra@education.ac.ox.uk, and I will do my best to answer your query. I will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford, who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

The Chair, Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee
Email: student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk
Address: 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY

**13. Further Information and Contact Details**

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Shireen Kalra

Department of Education
University of Oxford,
15 Norham Gardens,
Oxford OX2 6PY

# Appendix D
# Written Consent Form

Department of Education
University of Oxford,
15 Norham Gardens,
Oxford OX2 6PY

Dr James Robson

**Consent to take part in**

**Accessing Elite Higher Education Institutions: Reflections of Indian Undergraduates at Oxford**

Central University Research Ethics Committee approval reference: [redacted]

**Purpose of Study**: The research aims to capture the perspectives of Indian undergraduates at the University of Oxford regarding their preparation process for applying to an elite higher education institution and understand the factors they think contributed to their applications' success.

| | **Please initial each box if you agree with the statement** |
|---|---|
| I confirm that I have read and understand the information dated 07/01/2024 for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. | |

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point 06/07/2024, without giving any reason.

I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

I understand that I will not be identifiable from any publications

I consent to being audio recorded.

I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs.

Use of quotations: Please indicate your preference (select *one* option):

a) I do not wish to be quoted. **or**

b) I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable.

I give permission for you to contact me again to clarify information.

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint. ☐

I agree to take part. ☐

| Name of participant | Date | Signature |
|---|---|---|
| Name of person taking consent | Date | Signature |

# Appendix E
# Interview Protocol

The interview protocol included a set of questions to guide participant interviews. However, the direction of the interview was primarily determined by the responses and narratives provided by the participants, allowing for flexibility

**Section 1: Introductory Questions**

**Rapid fire game:**

What is the first word that comes to your mind when I say the following (in no particular order):

- Education abroad
-Admissions
-Application process
- Identity
- Meritocracy
-Oxford
-School
-Fairness
-Caste
-Privilege
- Access

**Introductory questions**

- Where in India are you from?
- Schooling (school name, school board, subjects)
- Have you moved cities/towns/villages and/or schools
- What do your parents do?
- Do you have a sibling? If yes, what do they do?

**Section 2: Experiences with the Admissions Process**

- Can you please doodle or write the factors you think helped you get into Oxford?
- What challenges, if any, did you face during Oxford admissions?

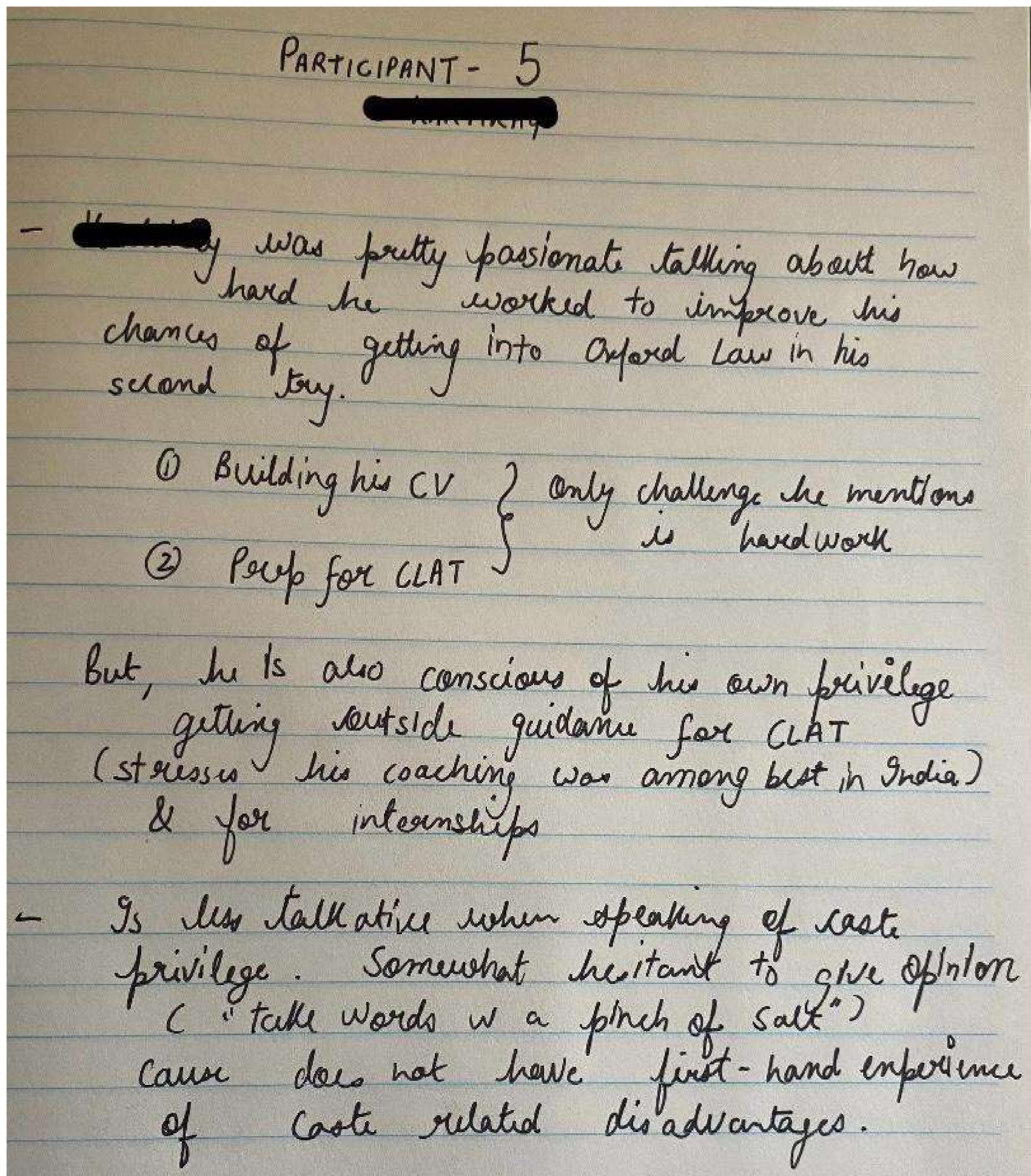
**Section 3: Narratives on Merit and Privilege**

- What does the word “merit” mean according to you?
- Do you believe that the Oxford admissions process is meritocratic?
- Do you think privilege plays a role in merit-based admissions?
- What do you think of the phrase “students deserve the palace they earn at Oxford”?
- How can Oxford admissions be made more meritocratic?

**Section 4: Narratives on Merit and Caste Privilege.**

- Are you aware of your caste?
- Do you think privilege plays a role in Oxford admissions?

# Appendix F
# Reflexive Journal Page Sample



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[redacted]

- [redacted]y was pretty passionate talking about how hard he worked to improve his chances of getting into Oxford Law in his second try.

① Building his CV
② Prep for CLAT
} Only challenge he mentions is hardwork

But, he is also conscious of his own privilege getting outside guidance for CLAT (stresses his coaching was among best in India) & for internships

- Is less talkative when speaking of caste privilege. Somewhat hesitant to give opinion ("take words w a pinch of salt") cause does not have first-hand experience of caste related disadvantages.