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Title: *Caste and Me: A Self-Reflective Essay*

Course: Social Stratification – Assignment 1

Part One: The Quiet Lessons of Caste

Growing up in a fast-paced city, caste wasn't something people talked about openly. It wasn't part of school lessons or dinner table conversations. But it was always there—quietly shaping how people behaved, who they trusted, and how they made decisions. I didn't learn about caste through lectures. I learned through glances, silences, and the way people reacted to certain surnames.

At home, caste was never named directly, but it showed up in subtle ways. When my parents browsed matrimonial ads, they filtered by caste before anything else. I didn't think much of it then—it felt routine. During festivals, we invited priests who were always from upper castes. Our domestic help, often from marginalized backgrounds, were treated kindly but never as equals. They weren't invited to sit with us or share meals. It wasn't hostility—it was habit. But habits speak volumes.

Even food practices reflected caste boundaries. I remember being told not to eat food from certain homes, not because of hygiene but because of "background." I didn't question it then, but now I see how caste was being enforced through everyday choices. These weren't rules written on paper—they were passed down through tone, gesture, and repetition.

In school, caste was invisible on paper. We wore the same uniforms, sat in the same classrooms, and were taught that India was a democracy built on equality. But reality didn't match the textbook. One boy in my class was often left out of group activities. His last name marked him as Dalit. No one said it out loud, but the exclusion was real. Teachers didn't intervene, and I didn't understand enough to question it.

Later, I noticed how caste shaped friendships. Most of my close friends came from similar backgrounds. We didn't talk about caste, but we lived within its boundaries. When someone from a different caste joined our group, there was hesitation—not open rejection, but subtle distancing. Looking back, I realize how caste operated through social comfort zones.

Media added to the confusion. Bollywood rarely showed Dalit characters unless they were victims or rebels. News channels covered caste violence, but only in villages. That made me think caste was a rural issue—something outdated and far away. But that illusion broke during college admissions. Debates around reservation policies were intense. I used to think reservations were unfair. I didn't realize that I was speaking from a place of privilege, shaped by a system I hadn't even noticed.

Even in college, caste is present in ways I didn't expect. Student groups often formed along caste lines. Some students spoke about discrimination they faced in hostels and classrooms. I began to see how caste wasn't just a relic of the past—it was alive, adapting to modern spaces. Housing societies had unwritten rules about whom to rent to. Job referrals flowed

through networks that were often caste-based. Even in progressive spaces, caste operated silently.

I absorbed the idea that caste was best ignored. That it was impolite to bring it up. But ignoring it didn't make it disappear—it just made it harder to challenge. I now realize that silence is not neutrality. It's complicity.

Part Two: Rewriting the Script

Now, when I look back, I realize that my understanding of caste was shaped more by what wasn't said than by what was. The silence around it made it seem irrelevant, even though it was quietly influencing everything. I want to change that—not just in how I think, but in how I act.

I've started by paying attention to the small things. I don't use caste as a label when talking about people. I speak up when casteist jokes are made, even if they're disguised as humour. I've begun reading Dalit literature and learning about thinkers whose ideas were never part of my school syllabus but are essential to understanding justice in India.

I've also changed how I behave. I treat domestic workers with respect—not just in words, but in actions. I share meals, celebrate festivals together, and make sure they feel included. I've come to support affirmative action, recognizing it as a way to level the playing field, not as a handout.

My attitude has shifted from passive acceptance to active awareness. I've joined reading groups that explore caste and intersectionality. I mentor students from marginalized backgrounds, knowing that access isn't equal for everyone. At work, I advocate for inclusive hiring practices and caste-sensitive policies. I've started conversations with colleagues about unconscious bias and how caste can shape professional networks.

I've also changed how I celebrate. Ambedkar Jayanti is now as important to me as Diwali. I share Dalit poetry and essays with friends. I've stopped pretending caste doesn't exist in cities—it does, just in quieter ways. I've begun following Dalit creators and activists on social media to learn from their lived experiences. I've realized that allyship means listening, amplifying, and stepping back when needed.

I've started questioning the spaces I occupy. Are they inclusive? Who gets to speak? Who gets left out? These questions have made me more mindful of how privilege works—not just in theory, but in practice. I've learned that being anti-caste is not a label—it's a daily commitment.

This journey is ongoing. I still catch myself making assumptions. I still have blind spots. But reflection is the first step toward change. I believe caste can be reimagined—not as a system of exclusion, but as a call for justice. And that reimagining begins with me.

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