Thinking through Meritocracy

Caste in Indian Institute of Technology Bombay

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Guide: Prof. Raja Mohanty

Meritocracy

Meritocracy is a social system in which people hold positions exclusively based on their abilities.

Caste

Caste is a closed system of stratification in which social divisions based on the occupation of people are followed strictly according to a code of behaviour in marriage and kinship.

Indian Institutes of Technology

The Indian Institutes of Technology were established after Independence to create trained technical personnel of international standards for the nation.

IIT and Merit

In order to establish “merit” as the only criterion for admission into these institutes, they were originally exempted from policies of reservations.

Extant structural inequalities ensured that only the “already-privileged” could find their way into these spaces of “merit”.

Caste Capital to Modern Capital

As a result, these institutions have until recently been almost exclusively populated by the upper castes, who, through the instruments of merit, were able to transform their caste capital to modern, “caste-less” capital.

Reservations and Change

All this changed with the introduction of a 22.5% reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in 1973 and 27% for Other Backward Castes in 2006.

This has transformed the IITs into heterogeneous, complex and often volatile, politically-charged spaces.

A Documentary Film

The encounter of the ideologies of meritocracy and of caste in the spaces of IIT Bombay throws up interesting, difficult questions. This film is an attempt to identify, articulate and interrogate some of them.

Almost 50% of the students in this campus have made use of caste-based reservations.
It has divided the student community into victims and oppressors.

First Steps

1. A trip to the Humanities and Social Sciences department
2. Meeting the Ambedkar Periyar Phule study circle members
3. Reading materials available online and in the library on caste and reservations
4. Attending the 40 day ‘Reading Gandhi’ activity with Prof. Sudarshan Iyengar
5. Reading the texts of Gandhi and Ambedkar
6. Understanding the existing caste related incidents in IIT, particularly the suicide of Aniket Ambhore

Books

1. Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development
2. India's new capitalists. Caste, business, and industry in a modern nation
3. Contemporary India. A sociological view
4. The Annihilation of Caste
5. Story of my experiments with truth
6. Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule
7. From yeravda mandir
8. Homo deus. A brief history of tomorrow
9. The Oxford companion to politics in India
10. Brahmin and non-Brahmin. Genealogies of the Tamil political present
11. Being Brahmin, being modern. Exploring the lives of caste today
12. Caste: Oxford India Short Introductions

Methodology

Meet people, seek help!

Got common friends to introduce me to potential candidates days, sometimes weeks before any planned on-camera conversation

Looked at their backgrounds – rural/urban, upper-caste/lower-caste, gender, program of study etc.

Became friends, introduced the project to them and got them comfortable to share their stories on-camera someday

Just Listen

I met almost 50 individuals and most of my conversations lasted at least an hour. There have been instances where conversations lasted three hours at a stretch.

I sometimes took notes with the interviewee's permission, and a few times voice-recorded the conversations for reference.

Sunganna Velpula
Post-doctoral Fellow

Subhalakshmi
B.Des., 1st year

Stanzin
B.Tech., 2nd year

Shubham Chouhan
B.Tech., 4th year

Rajat Chandrahasa
Int. M.Sc., 4th year

Prashant Kumar
B.Tech., 4th year

Palash Waghmare
B.Tech., 4th year

Leffin Christopher
B.Tech., 4th year

Kranti Kumar
Research Scholar

Gulam Sarwar
B.Tech., 3rd year

Deepak Pandiaraj
Research Scholar

Charvi Rastogi
B.Tech., 3rd year

Ayush Ravi
B.Tech., 4th year

Akash Kumar
B.Tech., 3rd year

Shuvam Bharti	Subhalakshmi	Arun Jayaramakrishnan	Akash Kumar	Harshit Sahay	Leffin Christopoher	Gulam Sarwar	Rajath Chandrahasa
Palash Waghmare	Stanzin Tsundus	Ayush Ravi	Charvi Rastogi	Prashant Kumar	Shubham Chouhan	Anshul Verma	Laxman Kumar
Pandya	Sagar Nikam	Kranti Kumar	Naveen Gurrapu	Deepak Pandiaraj	Sunkanna Velpula	Prof. Sudharshan Iyengar	Parth Shrimali
Shreerang Javadekar	Shivam Kumar	Harsh Parmar	Pranjal Batra	Abhijeet KR	Herold PC	Chandni Rajendran	Pradeep Adhisekar
Vivek Paul Joseph	Shirali Tyabji	Paankhi Agrawal	Prathamesh Murkute	Feba Varghese	Tanmay Tathagat	Ananth Krishna	Prof. Ramesh Bairy
		Prof. Kushal Deb	Dr. Krishnamurthy K	Prof. Sharmila	Sudharak Olwe		

Bring the machines much later

I invited them for another one-to-one interaction on camera. About 24 of those people agreed to be recorded and these were done over a period of three months. The interviews on camera lasted anywhere between an hour and two hours.

Name	Institution	Designation	Note	Year	Video interview	Cat
Shuvam Bharti	IIT Bombay	Student	B.Des.	1	Yes	SC
Subhalakshmi	IIT Bombay	Student	B.Des.	1	Yes	SC
Arun Jayaramakrishnan	IIT Bombay	Student	B.Des.	1	Yes	OBC
Akash Kumar	IIT Bombay	Student	B.Tech.	2	Yes	SC
Harshit Sahay	IIT Bombay	Student	B.Tech.	4	Yes	Gen
Leffin Christopoher	IIT Bombay	Student	B.Tech.	4	Yes	OBC
Gulam Sarwar	IIT Bombay	Student	B.Tech.	3	Yes	OBC
Rajath Chandrahasa	IIT Bombay	Student	B.Tech.	4	Yes	Gen
Palash Waghmare	IIT Bombay	Student	B.Tech.	4	Yes	SC
Stanzin Tsundus	IIT Bombay	Student	B.Tech.	2	Yes	ST
Ayush Ravi	IIT Bombay	Student	B.Tech.	4	Yes	OBC
Charvi Rastogi	IIT Bombay	Student	B.Tech.	3	Yes	Gen
Prashant Kumar	IIT Bombay	Student	B.Tech.	4	Yes	SC
Shubham Chouhan	IIT Bombay	Student	B.Tech.	4	Yes	Gen
Anshul Verma	IIT Bombay	Student	B.Tech.	1	Yes	SC
Laxman Kumar	IIT Bombay	Student	B.Tech.	1	Yes	SC
Pandya	IIT Bombay	Staff	Gardener		Yes	SC
Sagar Nikam	IIT Bombay	Staff	Housekeeper		Yes	SC
Kranti Kumar	IIT Bombay	Student	Ph.D.	3	Yes	SC
Naveen Gurrapu	IIT Bombay	Student	Ph.D.	2	Yes	SC
Deepak Pandiaraj	IIT Bombay	Student	Ph.D.	3	Yes	OBC
Sunkanna Velpula	IIT Bombay	Faculty	Post-doctoral Fellow		Yes	SC

After Recording Interviews

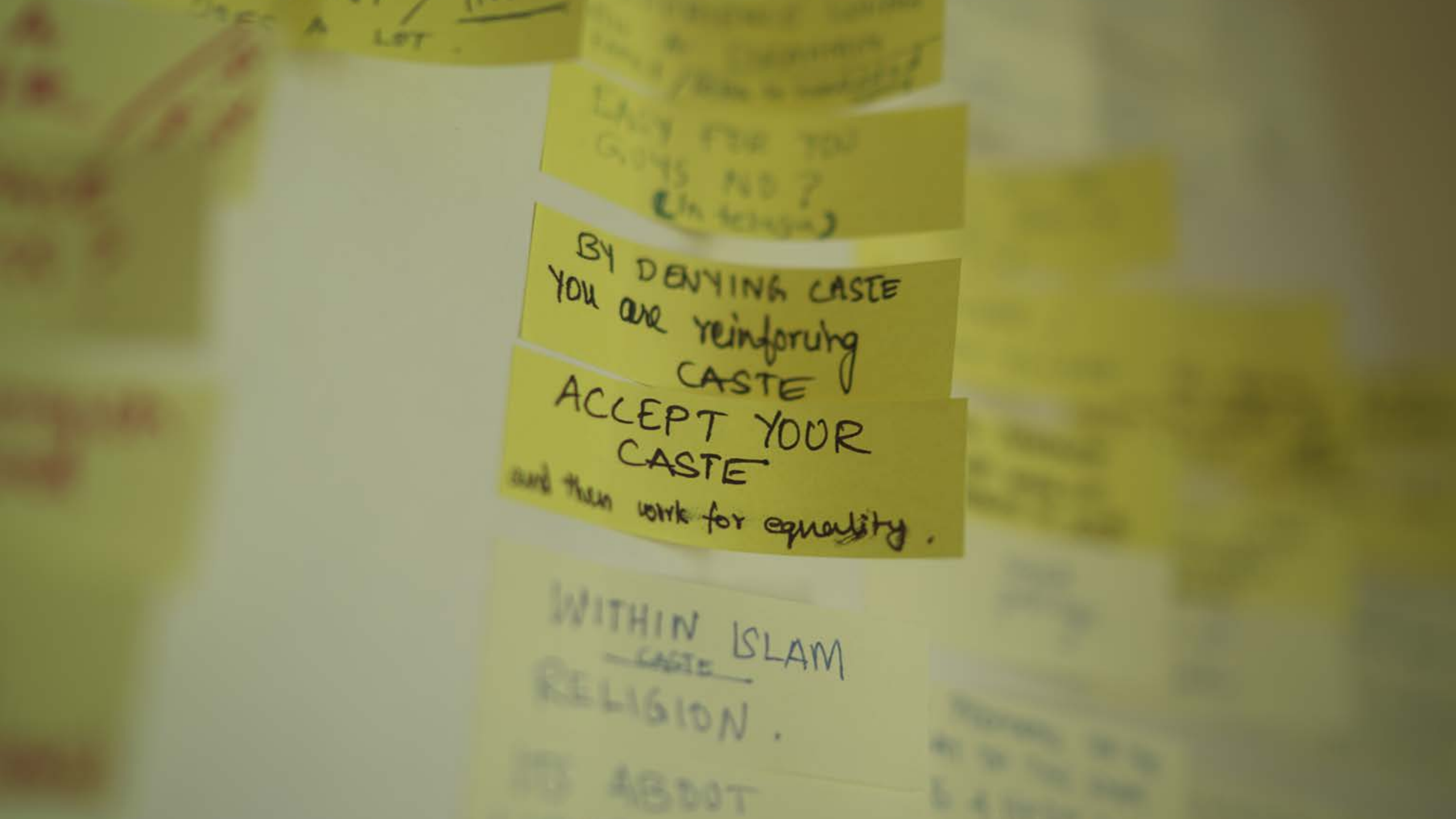
I trimmed the recorded footage on the editing desk.
Summaries of what was being shared by the interviewee went on my wall as stick-notes along with the ones from other interviews.

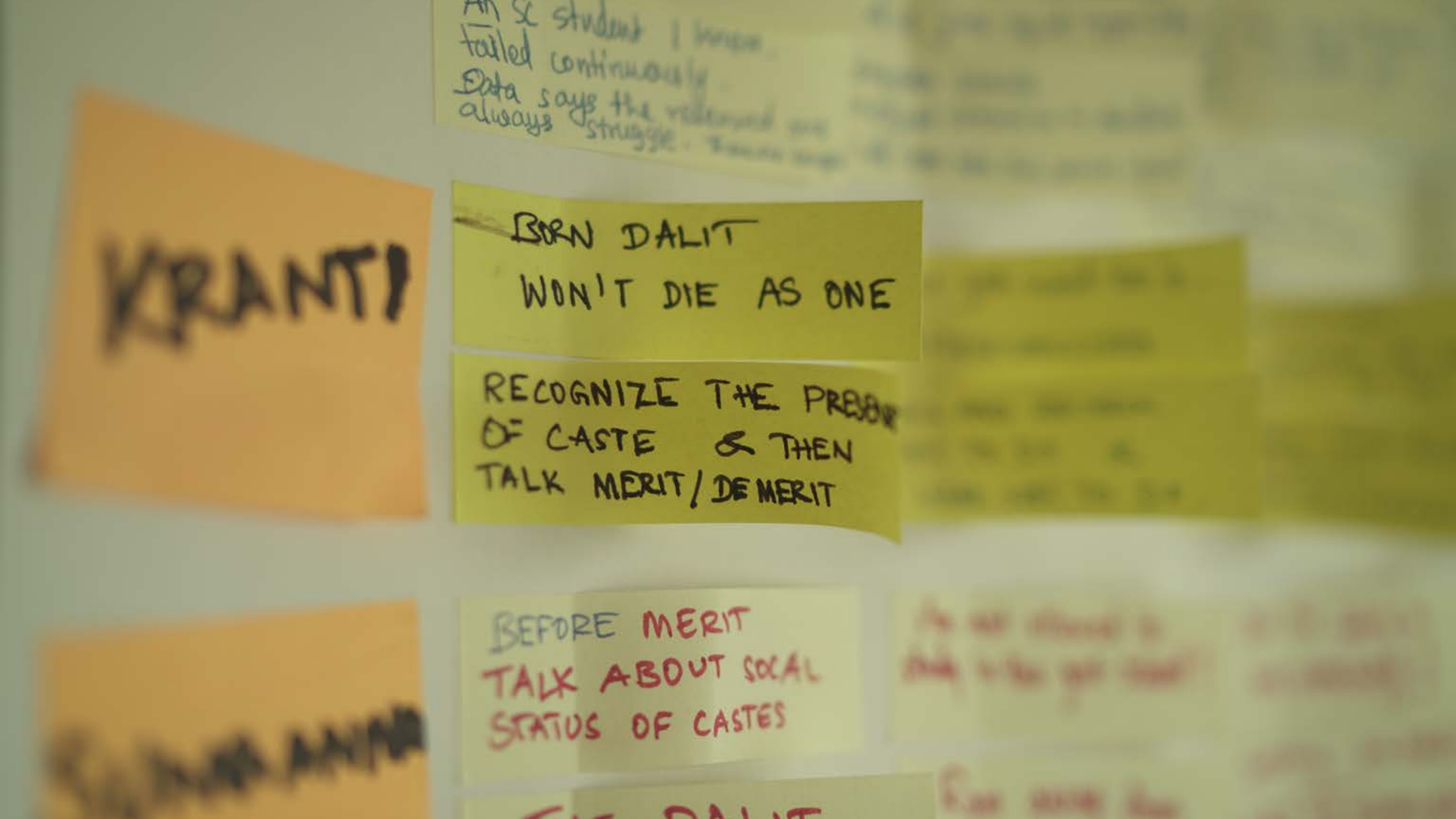
Externalized, chunked and organized the thoughts shared by the many people.

Transcriptions and translations were made for 5 of those interviews.

Total recorded footage of interviews: 22 hrs 40 mins

AKASH
SUBHA
ARUN
PALASH
GULAM
KRANTI
SUNRANNA
STAN
CHARVI
RAJAT
THE DALIT GHETTOS
POLLUTION
ROLE OF A TEACHER
NOT A SPACE TO EXPRESS?
The absent conversation
I wanted to be a Pilot
Encourage lower castes
Depression
Primary Education
Castrist Abuses
CHAMAR


BY DENYING CASTE
YOU are reinforcing
CASTE
ACCEPT YOUR
CASTE
and then work for equality.
WITHIN ISLAM
CASTE
RELIGION.


KRANTI
BORN DALIT
WON'T DIE AS ONE
RECOGNIZE THE PRESE
OF CASTE & THEN
TALK MERIT/DEMERIT
BEFORE MERIT
TALK ABOUT SOCAL
STATUS OF CASTES

Identifying Common Themes

1. Introductions
2. Formations
3. Imagining IIT
4. Destination IIT
5. Victims and Oppressors
6. 'Special' Programs
7. Professors
8. Relationships

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   Distinguished Chair Professor in Gandhian Philosophy, IIT Bombay

4. **Tanmay Thatagat**

   Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Bombay

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Length: 1 hr 4 mins