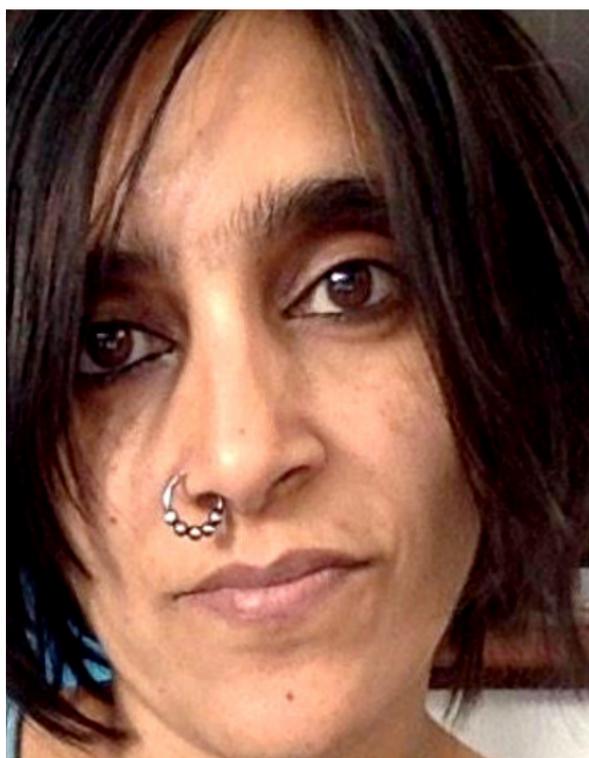


## ISAS Public Lecture Series



# Meritocracy and Democracy: The Social Life of Caste in India

a talk by

**Ajantha Subramanian**

Professor of Anthropology and South Asian Studies  
Harvard University

### Abstract

How does the utopian democratic ideal of meritocracy reproduce historical inequality? My larger project pursues this question through a historical anthropology of technical education in India. It looks at the operations of caste, the social institution most emblematic of ascriptive hierarchy, within the modern field of engineering education. At the heart of the study are the Indian Institutes of Technology, or IITs, a set of highly coveted engineering colleges that are equally representative of Indian meritocracy and, until recently, of caste exclusivity. In this talk, I hope to show that the politics of meritocracy at the IITs illuminates the social life of caste in contemporary India. Rather than the progressive erasure of ascribed identities in favor of putatively universal ones, what we are witnessing is the rearticulation of caste as an explicit basis for merit and the generation of newly consolidated forms of upper casteness.

### Speaker Bio

Ajantha Subramanian is Professor of Anthropology and South Asian Studies at Harvard University. Her first book, *Shorelines: Space and Rights in South India*, chronicles the struggles for resource rights by Catholic fishers on India's southwestern coast, with a focus on how they have used spatial imaginaries and practices to constitute themselves as political subjects. Her forthcoming book, *The Caste of Merit: Engineering Education in India*, is on meritocracy as a terrain of caste struggle in India and its implications for democratic transformation.

**Thursday, March 21, 2019**

**4-6 pm**

**10 Stephens Hall, ( For directions look up "Institute for South Asia Studies" on Google Maps )**