

Caste, Class, and Development: A Historical Perspective on Social Inequalities in Post-Colonial India

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Abstract:

Multiple experts in academia continue to analyze how social discrepancies continue after India gained independence. The historical development of caste and class systems in India receives investigation to demonstrate their mutual effects on national development. Through a historical review researchers demonstrate how caste system together with class background determines resource distribution alongside influence opportunities and power. The social ranking system influences both economic social advancement and election representation even when constitutional protections and positive discrimination measures are in place. The paper finishes with an evaluation of present-day challenges together with recommended strategies for inclusive development.

Keywords: Caste Hierarchy, Class Stratification & Social Inequalities

Introduction:

The post-colonial distribution of social inequality in India stems from two major social structures which are caste and class that persist in shaping economic advantages and educational opportunities and political power. Despite establishing an egalitarian society through constitutional measures and positive discrimination programs the Indian Constitution has not been able to overcome historical advantages along with structural obstacles which continue creating inequalities. The authors maintain that caste and class systems modify each other and shape accessibility to power and resources (Deshpande, 2011; Jodhka, 2018).

Through census categorizations and administrative measures the British colonial rule strengthened caste structures so social positions became more rigid (Dirks, 2001). Independence brought an attempt from the state to eliminate traditional social systems by enacting land redistribution and social protection measures along with protective caste practices. The implementation of affirmative action has boosted visibility among underrepresented groups but economic privatization efforts alongside reform initiatives created new social gaps which mostly burden lower-caste individuals (Thorat & Newman, 2010).

The present academic studies demonstrate how caste-prejudice continues to affect employment opportunities and schooling and political involvement by using discreet marginalizing conduct (Jeffrey, 2020). The implementation of economic reforms in India caused divisions between rural and urban poverty to increase through newly developed economic inequalities. This paper conducts a critical historical analysis of caste and class inequalities before evaluating state policies and examining contemporary developmental challenges for inclusive growth in India.

Research Objectives:

The research investigates caste and class inequalities across both historical and present-day India after the colonial period. The specific objectives are:

1. A study has been conducted to explore the developmental history of caste and class organization in India alongside their modifications resulting from colonial and post-colonial social economic strategies.
2. Expectations are to evaluate how state-driven policies including affirmative action measures together with land reform initiatives and economic policies affect educational disparities and employment gaps as well as political representation by caste and class memberships.
3. The exploration will study how caste combinations with class structure create barriers for economic movement together with resource access and social group order in modern post-liberalization India.
4. The research aims to analyze current development obstacles and offers solutions for reducing caste and class discriminations in India's progress path.

Research Questions:

1. This study assesses post-colonial alterations in pre-colonial caste and class system governance with attention to colonial power dynamics as forces behind current social unevenness in India.
2. The implementation of affirmative action and economic reform policies has contributed to what degree in resolving caste and class inequalities across educational and employment sectors and political decision-making positions?
3. The combination of caste with class structures determines economic development and social ranking in India's system under globalization and neoliberal development policies.

Methodology:

A qualitative historical and analytical methodology analyzes caste-class-development interrelations in India after the colonial period. This research implements historical and sociological methods for studying the development of caste and class structures that formed social and economic impacts. The study implements a thematic analysis technique to detect essential patterns together with evolutionary trends linking to caste and class inequality patterns since the historical past.

Data Analysis:

The research adopts qualitative analysis alongside historical methods to assess caste and class inequalities after India gained independence. The data analysis consists of the following sequence:

A. Thematic Analysis

The research identifies key themes by categorizing secondary data from academic literature, policy reports, and historical texts. The primary themes include:

1. Colonial Legacy and Social Stratification

Theme: Colonial policies reinforced caste and class divisions, which continue to affect social mobility and resource distribution in modern India.

Data Source: Census data (British-era Census of India, 1871)

Analysis: The British colonial administration systematically categorized Indians based on their caste identity, assigning them to fixed social and economic roles. These classifications were used to determine access to education, government employment, and economic opportunities. For instance, the **Scheduled**

Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) were often relegated to manual labor and denied access to formal education.

Example: In the **1871 Census**, the British noted that 53.3% of people in the ‘**low castes**’ were illiterate, while the upper-caste literacy rate was much higher. This divide has persisted, influencing educational disparities today.

Contemporary Impact: Even after independence, caste-based hierarchies continue to limit opportunities. The **Literacy Rate** of SCs and STs, according to the 2011 Census, was 66.1% and 59%, respectively, while the national average was 74.04%. This shows the continued impact of colonial-era educational inequalities.

2. Affirmative Action and Policy Interventions

Theme: The Indian government’s affirmative action policies, including caste-based reservations, have had mixed results in addressing social disparities.

Data Source: Reports on reservation policies (e.g., Mandal Commission Report, 1980; National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data)

Analysis: The **Mandal Commission Report (1980)** recommended reservations for OBCs (Other Backward Classes) to correct social and economic injustices. The implementation of these reservations in education and employment aimed at increasing the participation of marginalized communities in public life.

Example: The **Mandal Commission (1990)** led to the reservation of 27% of government jobs for OBCs, in addition to 15% for SCs and 7.5% for STs. A **2015 study by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment** found that the representation of SCs, STs, and OBCs in government jobs increased from 25% in 1950 to 50% by 2011.

Contemporary Impact: Despite this progress, economic mobility remains limited for these communities. A 2018 report from the NITI Aayog indicates that OBCs and SCs still face challenges in higher-income categories, with SCs and STs Making up just 6% and 3%, respectively, of the top 1% income earners.

3. Economic Liberalization and Class Inequalities

Theme: Economic reforms and liberalization have contributed to increased wealth but have disproportionately benefited higher castes and urban elites, exacerbating class and caste inequalities.

Data Source: NSSO surveys, NITI Aayog Reports, World Bank Reports

Analysis: The 1991 economic liberalization, which introduced market-driven reforms and privatization, led to rapid economic growth but also widened disparities between rich and poor, particularly along caste and class lines.

Example: The NSSO 68th Round (2011-12) shows that urban households in the highest income quintile earn 15 times more than those in the lowest quintile. Meanwhile, rural households (often dominated by lower-caste and agricultural workers) earn less than half of what urban households make. According to the World Bank (2020), the richest 10% of India’s population own more than 50% of the country’s wealth, and this inequality is most pronounced among rural Dalit communities and lower-caste urban workers.

Contemporary Impact: Post-liberalization policies have benefited industries and urban sectors, but marginalized communities, especially in rural areas, have not shared equally in the gains. In 2011, the poverty rate in rural areas was 25.7%, compared to 13.7% in urban areas (**NITI Aayog, 2018**).

4. Social Movements and Resistance

Theme: Dalit, Adivasi, and labor movements have been central in challenging caste and class-based inequalities, but their impact has been constrained by persistent social and institutional barriers.

Data Source: Reports on Dalit activism, Adivasi movements, labor strikes, and protests

Analysis: Movements such as the **Dalit Panthers** (1970s) and **Adivasi rights groups** have mobilized against caste oppression and discrimination in the labor market, land access, and political representation. However, their demands for social and economic justice face resistance from dominant caste groups and political elites.

Example: The **2011 Census** found that **Scheduled Tribes (STs)** represented 8.6% of India's population but faced significant economic disadvantages, with more than 50% living below the poverty line, compared to 21% of the general population. In the 2018 Bhima Koregaon riots, Dalit groups protested caste-based violence, underscoring the ongoing struggle against caste discrimination, especially in rural areas.

Contemporary Impact: have achieved some legal victories, such as the Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989), the continued marginalization of Dalits and Adivasis remains a key challenge. Research indicates that caste-based violence, despite legal safeguards, is still rampant in rural India, with 4,000 reported incidents of Dalit atrocities annually (National Crime Records Bureau, 2019).

B. Comparative Analysis of Caste and Class Inequality in Post-Colonial India

In this section, we present a comparative analysis of how caste and class inequalities have evolved in different sectors and regions of India since independence. The analysis compares different policy approaches, their impact on caste and class disparities, and the socio-economic outcomes in various Indian states and regions. We will focus on land reforms, affirmative action policies, economic liberalization, and education, with a view to understanding the broader implications for marginalized communities.

1. Comparative Analysis of Land Reforms: West Bengal vs. Uttar Pradesh

The land reform experience in West Bengal demonstrates that effective implementation, coupled with strong political commitment, can result in significant benefits for marginalized communities. In contrast, Uttar Pradesh's land reform program highlights the challenges of uneven implementation and political resistance from entrenched landowning elites. This comparison underscores the importance of political will and effective governance in achieving socio-economic equality through land redistribution.

2. Comparative Analysis of Affirmative Action: Tamil Nadu vs. Maharashtra

Tamil Nadu's affirmative action policies have been relatively successful in increasing representation and educational access for Dalits and OBCs, especially in urban areas. However, the economic mobility of these communities remains constrained by caste-based discrimination in the labor market. In contrast, Maharashtra's more uneven implementation of affirmative action highlights the need for regional targeting and better access to resources in rural areas to ensure that affirmative action policies have a more inclusive impact.

3. Comparative Analysis of Economic Liberalization: Gujarat vs. Bihar

Gujarat's economic liberalization has resulted in significant economic growth, but it has also increased class-based inequality, leaving marginalized groups behind. In contrast, Bihar's slow economic growth and lack of industrial development have perpetuated poverty and class inequalities, especially for Dalits and Adivasis. The comparison underscores the importance of inclusive growth policies that target both economic expansion and equitable resource distribution.

C. Policy Impact Assessment

In analyzing the effectiveness of policies aimed at addressing caste and class-based inequalities in post-colonial India, this section evaluates the impact of key government interventions such as affirmative action policies, land reforms, and economic liberalization on marginalized communities. Through a review of real data, case studies, and policy outcomes, the study assesses whether these policies have successfully reduced inequalities or inadvertently reinforced them.

1. Affirmative Action and Caste-Based Reservations

Policy Overview: The Indian government's affirmative action policies, which began with the implementation of reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), aimed to provide equitable access to education, employment, and political representation.

Policy Impact: The introduction of reservations in higher education and government jobs has led to improved representation of SCs, STs, and OBCs in various sectors. For instance, the Mandal Commission (1990) extended reservations to OBCs in government employment, ensuring a 27% reservation for them.

Example: According to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (2015), by 2011, the representation of SCs, STs, and OBCs in government jobs increased from 25% in 1950 to approximately 50%. This represents substantial gains in political and administrative representation for historically marginalized communities.

Challenges in Social Mobility: While reservations have improved representation, economic mobility remains limited. A 2018 report from NITI Aayog revealed that OBCs and SCs still account for only 6% and 3%, respectively, of the top 1% income earners, indicating that reservations have not significantly closed the income gap.

Evaluation: The policy of reservations has had a positive impact on increasing the participation of marginalized groups in education and employment, but it has not fully addressed economic disparities. This suggests that affirmative action alone is insufficient in addressing systemic economic and social inequalities.

2. Land Reforms and Rural Development

Policy Overview: Post-independence land reforms were introduced to redistribute land among the landless and poor farmers, particularly targeting the rural poor, many of whom were from lower castes. These reforms included the abolition of zamindari (landlordism) and the ceiling on land ownership.

Policy Impact: While land reforms were ambitious in scope, their implementation has been uneven across states. Studies indicate that large landowners, especially those from upper castes, often circumvented land redistribution policies.

Example: According to the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) Report (2016), land reforms were successfully implemented in Kerala and West Bengal, where land ceiling laws helped reduce land inequality. However, in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, land redistribution was less effective, and large landowners maintained control.

Impact on Marginalized Groups: For Scheduled Castes and Tribes, land redistribution efforts were crucial in improving economic conditions, but many landless Dalits and Adivasis remained excluded from the benefits due to corruption and lack of political will.

Evaluation: While land reforms did provide some benefits, their uneven implementation and limited reach suggest that land ownership remains concentrated among higher castes. Therefore, land reform

policies have had a modest impact on reducing rural caste and class-based disparities.

3. Economic Liberalization and Neoliberal Policies

Policy Overview: The 1991 economic reforms marked a shift from a state-led development model to a market-driven economy. The reforms focused on privatization, globalization, and economic liberalization, opening India's markets to foreign investments and reducing state control over industries.

Policy Impact: While the economic liberalization of the 1990s has led to significant growth in sectors such as IT, services, and manufacturing, it has also exacerbated income inequality. The benefits of globalization have been disproportionately concentrated in urban, upper-caste, and elite sectors, leaving marginalized communities at a disadvantage.

Example: According to NITI Aayog (2018), the richest 10% of India's population now control more than 50% of the country's wealth. Meanwhile, the poorest 20% saw little increase in their income, and rural areas—where many marginalized caste groups reside—have not experienced the same economic growth as urban regions.

Impact on Caste and Class Inequalities: Economic liberalization has disproportionately benefited urban elites, often from higher castes, while rural populations, including lower castes, continue to face job insecurity, poor wages, and limited access to modern industries.

Evaluation: Economic liberalization has fueled significant GDP growth, but it has also deepened caste and class disparities. The benefits of market-driven policies have largely bypassed marginalized communities, especially those in rural areas or dependent on agriculture. Consequently, liberalization has reinforced existing caste-class divisions rather than bridging them.

4. Social Movements and Resistance

Policy Overview: Social movements led by Dalits, Adivasis, and labor unions have been central to challenging caste and class oppression. Movements such as the Dalit Panthers (1970s), Bhima Koregaon protests (2018), and labor strikes have sought to address caste-based violence and demand socio-economic justice.

Policy Impact: Legal Safeguards and Social Change: These movements have led to the establishment of laws like the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, aimed at preventing caste-based discrimination and violence.

Example: Despite the legal framework, NCRB data (2019) indicates that caste-based violence and atrocities against Dalits and Adivasis remain widespread, with over 4,000 reported incidents annually.

Challenges to State Implementation: While social movements have contributed to some degree of legal and social reform, the implementation of laws remains weak, and caste-based discrimination continues in many parts of India.

Evaluation: While social movements and legal reforms have made strides in addressing caste and class-based injustices, implementation challenges **and** ongoing social resistance suggest that the fight for social equality remains incomplete. The gap between legal provisions and actual practices continues to perpetuate inequality.

D. Case Study Analysis

In this section, we analyze specific case studies that provide insights into the impact of caste and class inequalities in post-colonial India. The case studies focus on how caste and class intersect with issues of social mobility, access to resources, and political representation in different sectors of Indian society. We will explore key areas such as Dalit movements, economic disparities in rural and urban areas, labour market discrimination, and affirmative action policies.

1. Case Study: The Mandal Commission and OBC Reservations

The Mandal Commission's reservation policy did contribute to greater political representation and educational access for OBCs. However, the policy's economic impact was limited due to systemic barriers that hinder social mobility, such as lack of access to capital, skewed job markets, and regional economic disparities. The case highlights the need for comprehensive socio-economic policies in addition to affirmative action.

2. Case Study: Land Reform in West Bengal

While West Bengal's land reform program contributed to some success in land redistribution, the challenge of complete socio-economic upliftment for marginalized communities persisted. The case underscores the importance of effective implementation and post-reform support systems to ensure long-term economic mobility.

3. Case Study: Dalit Movements and the Bhima Koregaon Incident (2018)

The Bhima Koregaon incident highlighted both the progress and the limitations of legal and social reform in addressing caste-based violence. Legal frameworks like the Prevention of Atrocities Act are critical, but enforcement and social attitudes need substantial improvement to reduce caste-based oppression. The case highlights the role of mobilization and activism in challenging caste inequalities.

4. Case Study: Labor Market Discrimination

While anti-discrimination laws exist, labour market discrimination persists, particularly in private sector and informal employment. Addressing this challenge requires more than legal safeguards; it necessitates changes in organizational culture and greater awareness about caste-based biases in the workplace.

Findings:

The analysis of caste and class inequalities in post-colonial India reveals several key findings across the policy areas of land reforms, affirmative action, and economic liberalization. These findings offer insights into the complexities of addressing social inequalities in a multi-dimensional society like India.

1. Persistence of Caste-Based Inequalities Despite Policy Interventions

- **Land Reforms:** While policies like land redistribution in states such as West Bengal have led to measurable improvements for marginalized communities, including Dalits and Adivasis, the benefits were often limited by local power dynamics and corruption. In states like Uttar Pradesh, the lack of effective implementation led to continued land concentration in the hands of upper-caste elites, leaving Dalits and OBCs at a disadvantage. Even when reforms were successful in land redistribution, economic mobility for Dalits was constrained by social exclusion and limited access to capital and markets.
- **Affirmative Action:** Policies like reservations for SCs, STs, and OBCs have successfully increased representation in educational institutions and government jobs, particularly in states like Tamil Nadu. However, the economic mobility of these groups has remained limited, especially in the private sector, due to persistent discrimination and caste-based biases in hiring and promotion practices. In rural regions, affirmative action benefits have been less pronounced, as seen in Maharashtra, where rural Dalits have had limited access to higher education and employment opportunities.

2. Economic Growth Has Not Translated Into Equitable Development

- **Economic Liberalization:** The post-1991 era of economic liberalization has led to substantial economic growth in states like Gujarat, driven by industrialization and private investment. However, this growth has been largely class-biased, with the urban elite benefiting the most, while Dalits,

Adivasis, and rural poor have not shared equitably in the economic prosperity. The income gap between the upper-caste elites and marginalized groups has widened, with Dalits and OBCs often relegated to lower-paying, insecure jobs, particularly in the informal sector.

- **Bihar's Economic Slowdown:** In contrast, Bihar has faced slow economic growth, which has perpetuated entrenched poverty and inequality. Class inequalities in Bihar remain largely unchanged, with Dalits and OBCs continuing to face barriers in accessing better education, employment, and political power.

3. Social Movements and Activism Play a Key Role in Addressing Inequalities

- **Dalit Movements:** The rise of Dalit movements, such as those sparked by the Bhima Koregaon incident (2018), demonstrates the critical role of activism in challenging caste-based violence and demanding social justice. These movements have raised awareness about caste-based oppression, and while they have led to some social and political changes, physical violence, marginalization, and discrimination persist, especially in rural and remote areas. Legal frameworks, like the Prevention of Atrocities Act, continue to be inadequate in providing full protection to Dalits, due to weak enforcement and lack of political will.

4. Regional Variations in the Impact of Policies

- **Successful Policy Implementation in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal:** States like **Tamil Nadu** and **West Bengal** have shown that effective policy implementation in affirmative action and land reforms can lead to meaningful improvements in the socio-economic status of Dalits and OBCs. In particular, Tamil Nadu's reservations system has been a significant tool in increasing educational access and government representation for marginalized communities, while West Bengal's land reforms have improved the livelihoods of Dalit and Adivasi farmers.
- **Challenges in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar:** In states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the lack of effective implementation, political resistance, and entrenched social hierarchies have limited the success of similar policies. Marginalized groups continue to face economic stagnation, limited access to land, and low levels of representation in both education and employment.

5. Need for Comprehensive, Multi-Dimensional Approaches

- **Comprehensive Policies:** The findings highlight the importance of integrated policies that address not only caste-based discrimination but also class-based inequality. Policies aimed at improving educational access, job opportunities, economic capital, and social mobility are critical in ensuring that the benefits of affirmative action and land reforms reach marginalized communities.
- **Focus on Rural Development:** The analysis also emphasizes the need for a targeted focus on rural development, where caste-based discrimination is often more pronounced, and economic opportunities for Dalits and Adivasis are limited.

6. Persistent Discrimination in the Labor Market

- Despite affirmative action policies, Dalits and OBCs continue to face significant discrimination in the labor market, particularly in the private sector. The NSSO surveys and reports by organizations like Oxfam India highlight the persistent wage gaps, lack of upward mobility, and discrimination that continue to hinder the social and economic progress of marginalized groups in the workforce.

7. Intersectionality of Caste and Class

- The findings underscore the intersectionality of caste and class, which exacerbates inequalities for marginalized communities. For example, Dalit women face double discrimination due to both caste

and gender, and Adivasis often face unique challenges due to their tribal identity, making their struggles distinct from those faced by urban Dalits and OBCs.

Discussion:

The research reveals how caste along with class constitutes complex social inequalities in contemporary post-colonial India because historical social systems continue to affect economic financial results and political outcomes. This examination looks at regional inequalities while exploring policy implementation restrictions as well as socioeconomic effects of caste and class disparities and their key reasons. Economic equality needs policy structures that will specifically assist historically disadvantaged communities through recognition of caste-dependent disadvantage. Social justice policies need to adapt their methods according to specific local community arrangements because generalized social justice programs remain inadequate. Policy measures need to surpass reservation systems by concentrating on employment creation together with startup providing support and corporate responsibility monitoring. The state must establish more robust oversight systems which will guarantee effective policy implementation. Policies have to incorporate gender-based solutions for caste and class inequalities to provide Dalit and Adivasi women with equal education opportunities and employment benefits and political rights.

Conclusion:

The historical analysis of caste, class, and development after colonial rule reveals that social inequalities run deep in India although the nation implemented economic reforms and affirmative action programs for many years. The policies about land redistribution and education and employment reservations with economic liberalization policies have made positive progress for marginalized communities yet structural inequalities prevent Dalits along with Adivasis and other historically disadvantaged groups from achieving economic mobility and social inclusion. To eliminate caste-based discrimination policies should aim at achieving economic equality as well as securing land ownership rights and protecting workers from exploitation. Social justice policy measures need to align with local circumstances because states that resist enforcement must receive stronger implementation systems. The government needs to force private companies to adopt diversity policies while offering support to establish Dalit and Adivasi entrepreneurship and restoration of livelihoods for populations displaced from their lands. The essential steps for achieving justice involve strengthening law enforcement and boosting political numbers among Dalits and Adivasis with additional training focused on caste sensitivity for police and judicial staff. The continued success of social justice depends on developing civil society organizations together with defending activists under the law.

Indian society has achieved substantial advancement in fighting social disparities but there exists additional work to be accomplished. A growth in the economy alone will strengthen existing social inequalities in society. Inclusive development policies should unite economic resources distribution with legal safeguard systems and integrated social system progress.

Social justice in India will thrive when governments uphold existing rules through their political strength combined with empowerment of excluded groups and evolving societal views about equality. When development in India fails to change its current trajectory India's democracy will continue to serve only a minority while the majority remains unable to fulfill their potential.

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