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Urbanization and Dalit Communities in India: Persistence of Caste-Based Inequalities Versus Opportunities for Social and Economic Mobility

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of urbanization on the Dalit community in India and explores whether urbanization offers opportunities for equality or perpetuates hidden forms of caste-based inequality. Urbanization in India has often been viewed as a new opportunity for social and economic liberation for historically marginalized communities, allowing them to improve their social status and integrate into mainstream society. Dr. Ambedkar, a strong advocate of urbanization, encouraged migration from villages to cities as a means of escaping the deeply entrenched caste system prevalent in rural areas. He believed and argued that urban environments provided better access to education, employment, governance, and healthcare, thereby facilitating upward social mobility. This study argues that caste discrimination persists in urban settings, albeit in more subtle and complex forms. Davits that migrate to urban centers seeking equality and a society free from caste-based discrimination often face exclusion, stigma, and caste-based practices in cities as well, hindering their ability to improve their social standing, even through education and professional achievements. This study emphasizes that caste operates differently in urban contexts, shaping social relations and reinforcing inequalities under the guise of modernity, thereby creating new categories of caste discrimination. Drawing on Dr. Ambedkar vision, this study concludes that urbanization presents both opportunities and challenges for Dalit communities, demonstrating a simultaneous process of progress and persistent caste-based oppression. While urbanization offers improved access to facilities, healthcare, and employment, it also reinforces growing inequalities, raising questions about whether urbanization truly empowers marginalized communities or simply presents them with new forms of inequality.

Keywords: - Dalits, Ambedkar, Inequality, Segregation, Urbanization, Marginalization

Introduction

An enduring pattern of exclusion and disadvantage in antonic society is the caste system, which has shaped the social, economic, and political lives of most people in India from antiquity to the present day. Even though all religious groups, including caste members, are treated equally in theory, in practice, they have very different opportunities and levels of wealth and status. For centuries in India and other South Asian countries, people have been rigidly categorized and segregated based on their occupation and caste.

"According to Census of India 2011 estimates" over 200 million people identify as Dalits, which is more than half of India's total population. The highest positions within the country's caste system were filled, while those classified as "Dalits" are considered to be at the bottom of the hierarchy in regard to religion and society. Since the beginning of the 21st Century, Dalits and those classified as "untouchables" have suffered from violence, discrimination, social exclusion, and all other forms of oppression, on a daily basis. Urbanization is transforming society and the economy of India significantly. The environment of cities may provide people with more opportunities and create greater equality through economic activity; however, caste inequality continues to exist despite efforts to promote equality through urbanization, posing continuing problems for Indian society in terms of social justice during the 21st century. Therefore, because urban development and smart technology have become increasingly influential in urbanization, the 21st century is typically referred to as the **"urban century."** The fact that most people on Earth now live in cities means that as more people migrate from rural areas, cities will see a major shift in population and may ultimately serve as a key factor for creating, establishing, and maintaining new forms of social and economic inequity among urban populations globally. There has been a reduction in the significance of caste among urban populations due to the influx of various new cultures, lifestyles, and peoples from multiple origins into urban centers, and, therefore, a growing possibility of urban segregation will be seen; however, within urban centers, considerable segregation still exists among the numerous cultural differentials present. The presence of slums and shantytowns inhabited primarily by Dalit groups of people in urban areas demonstrates the extreme Poverty faced by many members of society's most vulnerable and often invisible populations, such as poor Dalits, backward castes, and the young homeless population of urban areas. While the government advocates for their rights, wealthy and privileged communities often ignore and violate these rights. In the current context, the ongoing development of modern smart cities and the country's structural changes. High-class societies demonstrate their modernization; while on the other hand, people in society promote this urbanization solely for their own benefit, where they lack both political representation and adequate participation, which profoundly impacts their communities. This includes several changing influences that prevent people from fully participating in the transactions and power structures of an ultra-modern society **(Smith, 2000, p. 3).** The question of resource distribution raises the question of what and why someone receives in this urbanization, and often, more importantly, who receives what, where, and why, or how it can be restructured **(Lobo et al., 2007).** In the diverse global context of current urbanization, the inability of Dalits to attain a higher status is consistently linked to spatial inequality and highlights their disadvantages, meaning that identity and position are closely intertwined **(Harvey, 1973).** In India, caste inequalities are not limited to just four categories of communities existing on the caste scale. In China, the Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes, and a separate community further categorized into another specific caste group, are known as General Dalits or Chamars **(Tiwari et al., 2020).** Significant socio-economic disparities exist at the lower levels, while urbanization has long been considered a force for social change in the context of developing countries. Many experts believe that urbanization will have little impact on the overall socio-economic and political system structures. The urbanization of India has allowed those in marginalized groups to get away from the socio-economic barriers imposed on them by the caste system since the beginning of urbanization. For most people in India, urbanization is synonymous with progress, economic development, and improvements in quality of life on a national level for all population demographics, but also for Dalits and others in historically disadvantaged populations. A

substantial number of people in the Marginalized Population have left the country side to find escape from the in Discriminatory Castes, (Hierarchy of Rank) and the Social Inequalities that accompany them as well as to Acquire Basic Necessities (such as Food and Safe Drinking Water). The Majority of people in the Marginalized Population still reside in Rural Areas of India but continue to live in Castes, as the Rural Areas in India remain Castes-Based and are affected by the No Corrupted Cultures of Patriarchy. The lack of infrastructure in rural areas has left rural areas with inadequate availability of educational access and inadequate educational attainment. This research paper aims to show how urbanization recreates and changes caste-based socio-economic disparities and its effects on creating and maintaining Dalit and other marginalized groups' rights. Although these groups have migrated to urban areas seeking equal rights to a better life and opportunity than those they found in rural India, there is a significant portion of the population of these groups who still remain trapped in low wage occupations in urban areas, where there exists a high concentration of economic opportunity and yet a high concentration of economic inequality. The causes of this economic inequality intersect with many factors, including caste and socioeconomic status, as well as lack of education and lack of access to resources. Urban migration continues to exacerbate the gap between Dalits and other groups in India today, creating inequities in social and economic capital. Many Dalits migrate to the cities with hope of upward mobility, only to find themselves underpaid and living in poverty, due to lack of access to the opportunities available to all people living in the city today. Therefore many Dalits are still struggling to gain equal access to the opportunities in the cities due to the exploitation that they were fleeing by moving away from their villages. Dr. Ambedkar envisaged urbanization would eventually lead to elimination of the caste system and creation of casteless societies, but as the NCRB data illustrates, while a Dalit's physical location may have changed, his social marginalization and exploitation continues. Furthermore, because of caste and class distinctions, many Dalit people continue to be excluded from participating fully in society and benefiting from government-sponsored programs, services, or assistance designed to integrate them into mainstream society. Urban caste differences operate as social status symbols, with communities, and their perceptions of status in the broader society, often associated with the number of people in a community belonging to the same caste. Access to resources and power has enabled community members from higher castes to enact direct change within their communities. Ambedkar theory of urbanization seems difficult to understand in today's context. On the one hand, it uses the concept of "loose instrument purity and pollution" to explain the caste structure, suggesting that those with education, occupation, and resources can change their position in the hierarchy of inequality. However, this argument, which posits that this is necessary for the stability and integrity of Indian society, does not hold true in the context of current urbanization.

Review of literature

Sato (2025). "Caste and Economic Inequality in Contemporary India: Structural Barriers to Social Mobility and Inclusive Development" will critically examine the continuing relationship and overlap between caste and economic inequality in present-day India, with a focus on the societal and economic structures that are entrenched and prevent the opportunity of mobility for these historically oppressed citizens. While some Legal Protection against caste discrimination and affirmative action programs have been established in India since independence, inequities that historically exist within the caste system remain virtually unchanged regarding education, employment and asset ownership. The complexity of the legacy of the caste system, as well as the relational aspects of economic exclusion,

will be examined. The article will discuss the ways in which sociocultural mores and structures maintain, support and perpetuate caste systems as well as highlight the perspectives of Dalit and Adivasi communities and relate these to the larger context of neoliberal globalization, digitalization, and digital media, etc. The article will conclude that only through implementing intersectional and equity-based policies will India be able to eliminate the existing inequities of the caste system, achieve social justice and be inclusive citizens as outlined in the Indian Constitution.

Vyas Muni (2025). will explore how urbanization has changed the identity of urban Dalits. It will do this through a study of the ideals of Dr B.R. Ambedkar on how he envisioned cities being free of the caste system, which are now experiencing urbanization. Urban areas are also a place for them to develop Social mobility and Political empowerment. But, while Urbanization is helpful, we still see on going discrimination against Dalits based on Caste. The Article will address the historical & contemporary impacts of Caste on the Housing, Economic & Political participation of Dalits. The emphasis will be on the way Urbanization has encouraged Dalit activism/assertion but has not fully removed the marginalization of Dalits as a result of the caste system. The Article will also highlight the conflict between Ambedkar ideal of Urban Emancipation and the actual experience of Dalits living in Ahmedabad, where cities continue to be a place of opportunity but also a place of exclusion.

Devi, R. (2025). "Introduction Caste, Urban, and Emancipation In: **Caste and Emancipatory Quest"-** Much of the source of emergent class-based disparities is intricately entwined with the socially imposed forms of social stratification of race, gender, or caste. The forms of social exclusion often remain unseen and invisible in everyday life as discriminatory practices are not always overtly blatant. Disguised under the Pretence of objectivity, fair process, and merit, discriminatory practices appear subtler, making their mundane operation undetectable and even misleading to believe in their absolute absence in the modern world. Poised between the debates on the influence of modern urban spaces and processes on the traditional caste system and vice versa, the book explores how space and identity converse and influence the nature, manifestation, relevance, and fate of caste in the globalizing metropolis of Delhi Vis-a-Vis reorders the urban.

Jodhka, S. (2023). "Caste: Why does it still matter?"- Popular imaginings of caste as also its textbook accounts tend to view it as a closed system of social hierarchy, unique to the Hindus of India. As this popular view goes, the origins and the explanations for its existence/persistence are to be found in the Hindu religious traditions, its scriptures and modes of practice in everyday life. Caste is often also seen as a traditional structure of social hierarchy typical of the pre-modern world. Such a view ipso-facto also presumes that the processes of modernization, development of industrial capitalism and the accompanying processes of urbanization would/should end caste, helping India move from a closed system of social hierarchy to an open system of social stratification, based on merit and individual achievement. Drawing from a large volume of recent writings, including some of my own work, the chapter argues for a rejection of such a view grounded in the orientalist/colonial constructions of India and Euro-centric theories of social evolution/change. The chapter argues for an alternative theorization of caste and a need for looking at it with comparative focus on ascription-based hierarchies, also found elsewhere in the contemporary world.

Nag, K. B. B. (2014). "Understanding Caste and Social Mobility: An Analysis of Dalits Development in India" - The focus of this paper is to critically evaluate the changing status of Dalits within the framework of social mobility by focusing on the continuity and discontinuity of caste based social inequalities in Indian society. It has discussed about the theorization of caste and social mobility

in India to show a shift being made in understanding of Dalits empowerment. It has also dealt with the present crisis and difficulties faced by the Dalits in the form of untouchability, atrocities, unemployment, and social segregation and so on. In order to fulfill its objectives the paper has relied on both secondary qualitative literatures produced by social scientist and the primary one available in various government and non-government sites.

Objectives of the study

1. To Identify new forms of marginalization or hidden inequalities emerging in urban Settings.
2. To examine the caste-based discrimination persists or transforms within urban settings.

Research Methodology

This study is based on qualitative analysis of secondary sources, including academic literature, government reports (NCRB, CAG), policy documents, and published surveys on urban inequality and caste discrimination. Media reports are used selectively to illustrate patterns of institutional and structural exclusion. The analysis is interpretative and grounded in Ambedkarite and sociological perspectives on caste and urbanization.

ANALAYSIS OF OBJECTIVE -

1. To identify new forms of marginalization or inequalities arising in civic surroundings

how traditional caste hierarchies are reproduced within modern urban institutions, rooted in archaic terminology and caste structures, is already evident in both rural and urban areas through practices such as untouchability, limited access to resources, poor infrastructure, and social exclusion. On one hand, Dalit communities face increasing caste-based incidents and forms of exploitation and crime, with serious consequences that are rapidly escalating in urban settings. Marginalized Dalits continue to experience severe consequences of crime and discrimination, exacerbated by weak institutions and economic hardship in urban development. This creates a vicious cycle where vulnerable groups are disproportionately affected by crime and instability, lacking the means to protect themselves. every segment of society faces different challenges. Violence against girls and women in urban areas transcends class, income inequality, and cultural boundaries. The situation is equally alarming in rural areas, where domestic violence, rape, suicide, and dowry deaths are commonplace. Physical, sexual, and emotional violence have become part of everyday life. Everyone must take responsibility to combat these harmful social issues. Urbanization in India, driven by migration, economic opportunities, and contact with diverse populations, exhibits a high degree of social segregation based on caste. This often mirrors rural inequalities in urban settings and sometimes even exacerbates them. Data from smart cities and major metropolitan areas shows that indicators of diversity reflect limited opportunities for marginalized groups, particularly Dalits, who face discrimination in housing based on their names, dietary habits (such as not consuming meat), or other explicit biases. This forces them to live in segregated neighborhoods or informal settlements. For example, in Mumbai, Dalits are often excluded from cooperative housing societies, while in Delhi and other metropolitan areas, landlords regularly reject tenants with Dalit-sounding names, such as Paswan or Valmiki, common Scheduled Caste surnames. This has a significant impact on India's growing modernity, where this segregation persists in urban areas today.

In the years 2021-22, the government allocated ₹16,777 crore for the welfare of Dalits, providing a portion of the budget for their upliftment and welfare in society. However, a large portion of this amount, ₹10,799 crore, never actually reached them. The following year, 2022-23, was not much better for these communities. The government allocated a separate ₹19,688 crore for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, but almost all of it, ₹18,450 crore, was diverted elsewhere. This highlights a serious case of misuse of welfare funds. This pattern was repeated in 2023-24, where the government allocated ₹16,939 crore for Dalits, but ₹11,796 crore was diverted elsewhere. If we add all these amounts together, it becomes clear that the money the government intended for them disappeared before it could reach them. It is shocking that such a large sum of money, meant to improve their health and lives, simply vanished.

Even 70 years after independence and despite constitutional provisions for justice for Dalits, they are forced to live lives that are worse than before, due to the government's lack of focus on them. These urbanization statistics reveal the harsh reality of Dalit families. Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, and Chhattisgarh have the largest Dalit populations. In Bihar, 44% of Dalit families live below the poverty line, 55% lack proper housing, and 54% do not have toilet facilities in their homes. Only 5% have access to higher education. Despite Dr. Ambedkar tireless efforts, the Dalit community remains largely marginalized from mainstream society. This also highlights financial exploitation and other forms of social inequality. Can claims of equality be made despite all this a 2023 report on employment shows that nearly 90% of leadership positions in the media were held by upper-caste individuals? Representation in power, the judiciary, and administration is negligible. Scheduled Tribes still struggle immensely to reach these positions. These incidents demonstrate the obstacles faced by these communities and highlight the negative impact of urbanization. On the other hand, on October 7th, a senior IPS officer in Haryana, B. Puran Kumar, and Committed suicide in Chandigarh after his complaints of caste-based discrimination by his senior officers went unheard. Had these complaints been addressed, he might not have taken this step. Even worse, the state government's insensitivity led to a nine-day delay in his funeral, as they failed to take immediate action against the senior officers, including the Director General of Police, whom IPS officer Puran Kumar had explicitly named in his lengthy suicide note as responsible for his despair. Puran Kumar belonged to the Scheduled Caste Valmiki community in Andhra Pradesh. His family protested the post-mortem and funeral until strict action was taken against those accused of institutionalized caste-based harassment.

2. Changing forms of caste-based discrimination in the era of urbanization”

In India today, while the form of caste in urban environments remains the same, its dimensions are changing. Although the Indian Constitution, under (**Article 15)**, prohibits discrimination based on caste and guarantees the right to equality, caste-based discrimination persists in both urban and rural areas. The National Crime Records Bureau annually reports crimes committed against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, including those in urban areas, demonstrating that discrimination continues despite legal protections and constitutional provisions. The Persistence of discrimination in urban areas is evident in the fact that Dalits and lower-caste individuals are often forced to live in slums and segregated colonies, limiting their access to education, healthcare, and employment. This segregation in cities can be seen as a manifestation of caste-based discrimination. Furthermore, instances of discrimination in formal jobs in cities are also reported, affecting promotions, treatment, and workplace dignity. The average income and employment opportunities for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in urban

areas are still lower than those of the general category. While urbanization may have reduced social distance to some extent, economic inequality persists as a new form of discrimination.

According to NCRB Data, instances of caste-based harassment of Dalit employees in urban offices have been recorded in recent years. In the urban context, due to education, literacy, and diversity, untouchability and discrimination have decreased, but they have not been completely eliminated. Discrimination now manifests mostly in economic, social, and institutional forms. On the other hand, the **University Grants Commission** and other institutions, recognizing the increasing cases of caste-based discrimination, have implemented new equality and inclusion policies in higher education institutions.

According to government allocation records and CAG reports, over ₹40,000 crore allocated under the Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan between 2021 and 2024 was diverted to non-targeted expenditures, limiting its impact on Dalit welfare.

“Yeh Baba Ka Raj Hai and shortly after the Dalit Man was brutally lynched to death”-

“Recent incidents of mob violence against Dalit migrants illustrate how caste-based suspicion and criminalization continue within urban and Peri-urban spaces. Police reported that Hariom had intended to visit his wife who was employed as a sweeper at a Bank. However he apparently become lost and in advertently entered Ishwardaspur village On his way to his in laws home in dandepur jamunapur a crowd of individual surrounded him and began to assault him suspecting him of being a drone thief. His body turned purple from the brutual beatings half conscious, the attackers splashed a liquid on his face while exclaiming, **"Yeh baba Ka raj Hai"** (this is Baba’s kingdom). Seemingly referring to UP Chief Minister’s yogi adityanath, known as baba Bulldozer baba. He later succumbed to his injuries. His body was abandoned near the Prayagraj - Lucknow railway line, close to the Ishwardaspur halt.

Two in Three Rescued Bonded Workers are Dalits”-

The workers who lay the groundwork for the India’s expanding urban economy, those toiling in brick kilns, construction site, and agricultural fields, are not only subjected to exploitation but are frequently ensnared in illegal bonded labor. A report Published by the national Campaign Committee for eradication of bonded labor (NCCEBL) Sheds light on the extent of migrants bonded labor abuses in India, presenting alarming data and the real experiences of blue - collar workers throughout the country. Wage theft, debt bondage, enslavement, employer, forced hazardous labor, and gross neglect of safety, despite being illegal in India are still faced by millions of informal migrant’s workers, including women and children even today's world. What’s even more troubling is that one in three rescued workers in reintroduced to exploitative labor after their rescue. Simply to earn a basic living. This occurs due to the government failure to provide adequate rehabilitation, which constitutes a blatant violation of law.

Data from the survey indicate that 63 percent of the rescued bonded worker belongs to schedule caste (SC) Communities, while the remaining belong to Scheduled tribe (13) percent and Other Backward Classes (24%) all bonded workers belong to Socially Marginalized Groups. India is set to fall Short of its 2030 Goal to eradicate bonded labor by a Staggering 98%.

The Government Data critically indicate that, critically indicate since its Statement in 2016 has been able to release only 32,873 people from bonded labor, a yearly average of 4,896 this would mean that at the same annual rate, by 2030 the government would have achieved only 2% of its 18.4 million targets, our analysis shows, leaving 18 million Indians in bonded Labor.

Conclusion

The objective of this research is to determine if urbanization has been a genuine path of social and econ-

omic mobility for Dalit communities in India or if it has merely transformed caste inequalities into other less visible or inconspicuous forms. The research is based on secondary qualitative research, Government of India data, as well as current examples from other sources; the evidence presented indicates that urbanization creates dual impacts for Dalits—while it provides limited pathways to opportunity; it also preserves pre-existing systems of discrimination and exclusion. As a result of the development of metropolitan areas, Dalits now have greater access to Education, Employment Political participation, a variety of social settings. Through his vision for the City, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar viewed cities as locations for the liberation of caste and as places where caste barriers would be eroded due to Modernization, Industrialization and Equal Protection as established in the Constitution of India. Given that caste continues to exist in Urban India, however, the development of caste has been accommodated and transitioned into new Social/Spatial/Institutional systems. Discrimination is received through, housing type, labor market access, informal employment, workplace harassment, unequal access to welfare benefits. In many instances, these discriminatory actions are routed through the use of a language that expresses meritocracy, efficiency, and neutrality. Therefore, it should be noted that many Dalits employed within cities work within unorganized and precarious occupations within slums and separated areas of the city. Those employed in this manner have severely restricted access to social mobility compared to their higher-end counterparts.

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