

## Discrimination, Social Exclusion and Persisting Caste Inequalities in India

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**Abstract:** This paper makes an attempt to understand the persisting caste inequalities in India. The Scheduled Caste (Dalits) population in India is suffering from caste discrimination that excludes them from the access to resources, goods, capital and prevents them fully or partially from the participation of main stream activities in the society. The persisting poverty, denial of rights, low human development status are examined in the context of "Social Exclusion" frame work in this paper. The study is based on both published and unpublished literature and data with specific focus on concepts of discrimination and social exclusion in the Indian context.

**Keywords:** Discrimination, Persisting Caste, Inequalities.

### INTRODUCTION

The term „social exclusion“ is of relatively recent origin and is less than a half century old, though its contents very much existed in the past, but has not got reflected in any study of the poor and the marginalised people of the world. Social exclusion implies the exclusion of individuals or groups or communities from participating in certain significant functions or activities in society. Social exclusion first arose in research and policy discourse in France in the early 1970s as part of the articulation of concepts on social and economic exclusion and inclusion. Rene Lenoir in 1974 was the first to coin the term as a way to define the condition of a large portion of the population that included the poor, handicapped, vulnerable, aged, abused children, substance abusers and other marginalized groups or „social misfits“ [1, 2]. Subsequently, the term was used to describe more heterogeneous collections of individuals [3, 4], albeit still defining social exclusion by dint of the groups presumed by some metric to be excluded.

It is referred to as a dynamic process of being shut out, fully or partially, from any of the social, economic, political or cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society. Social exclusion may, therefore, be seen as the denial or non-realisation of the civil, political and social rights of

citizenship [5]. The concept of social exclusion describe various categories of people like the mentally and physically disabled, the aged, abused children, single parents, marginal, asocial persons, etc who were excluded from the employment based social security system. The term was continually redefined to encompass new problems and social groups. It was used in the 1980s to refer to various types of social disadvantage related to social problems arising from economic crises. Social exclusion is a multi-dimensional process, in which various forms of exclusion are combined: participation in decision making and political processes, access to employment and material resources, and integration into common cultural processes. When combined, they create acute forms of exclusion that find a spatial manifestation in particular neighbourhoods [6]. It is a complex notion which can be used to denote a situation or process experienced by individuals, namely their marginalisation from society through economic deprivation and social isolation [7]. Though the concepts of social exclusion were mainly in and for the circumstances of Western Europe, they are as applicable to many situations in developing countries: those of the indigenous in much of Latin America, of Scheduled Castes, and perhaps Muslims in India, of minority tribes in many African countries. The notion stresses that exclusion is a process that actors and

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institutions are involved in, and calls for institutional analysis of determinants of access. In different countries, social exclusion is defined differently. This may be inconvenient for research and policies, but it reflects reality, thus, a social exclusion approach can incorporate concerns about different perceptions of deprivation and exclusion, by stressing the context-specificity of a central notion of social exclusion [1]. One of the major criticisms of the concept of social exclusion is that it is yet another ethnocentric approach to poverty and development, which has its intellectual and policy roots in European context [8]. A number of authors have argued that the concept needs to be embedded in particular context in order to be relevant. Gore [9] recognises the need to modify the use of social exclusion analysis to take account of regional differences and global dimensions of processes of social exclusion. Many authors demonstrate that the concept of social exclusion does provide the basis for context-specific analyses [1, 2]. Social exclusion extends beyond poverty and deprivation concepts by incorporating a broader understanding of social processes and their consequences [10]. As with deprivation, one can be wealthy and still experience social exclusion, as has been the case with homosexuals in many of the world's countries [3].

Poverty and social exclusion refer to when people are prevented from participating fully in economic, social and civil life and/or when their access to income and other resources (personal, family, social and cultural) is so inadequate as to exclude them from enjoying a standard of living and quality of life that is regarded as acceptable by the society in which they live. In such situations people often are unable to fully access their fundamental rights [12]. England's Social Exclusion Unit (SEU's) defined social exclusion as: „a shorthand for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown [13]“. Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachaud [14], by way of contrast, adopted a simpler outcome based approach to define social exclusion, using population comparisons in production, consumption, savings, political engagement and social activities. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is a strong advocate of a human rights-based approach to address social exclusion. At a recent virtual round table facilitated by the UNDP [15], it was argued that translating social exclusion as the UN non-discrimination clause enables the concept to be grounded in international law applicable to the majority of states, and allows the necessary relationships between „duty bearers“ and „claim holders“ to be cultivated. From this perspective, social exclusion is understood to involve discrimination on the basis of social attributes and social identity.

The poverty in general is said to exist when a person or group of people in a particular society cannot attain a minimum level of living and well-being. The „minimum“ is at least dependent upon prevailing standards of society. According to Sen [16], poverty is the absence of one or more capabilities that are needed to achieve minimal functioning in society in which one lives. He further says that being poor is to be hungry, lack of shelter and clothing, sick and not cared for, illiterate and not schooled. Sen also adds that poor people are particularly vulnerable to adverse events outside their control. This means, poverty is a multi-dimensional socio-economic description and cultural situation that transcends economic deprivation. Poverty is a *multifaceted* concept, which may include social, economic, and political elements.

### **Social Exclusion: Indian Context**

In Indian context, social exclusion is practiced on the basis of caste, gender, religion and untouchability and the certain group of people are being excluded or denied the rights and opportunities which the majority enjoys. In India, caste as a system of stratification is not merely a principle of social division but a comprehensive system of life dealing with food, marriage, education, occupation, association and worship [18]. Similarly certain traditional practices of the system based on the principle of purity-pollution causing social inequalities are inherent and perpetuated in society. Thus, a section of the society, especially those located at the lower strata are marginalized and deprived in many ways. The idea of social exclusion described above exists with its various dimensions in the caste-based deprivations. The structural basis of caste, in practice provides conducive environment for "exclusion" to percolate in every aspect of socio-economic and political life.

Given the obvious difficulties in transplanting the concept of 'social exclusion' to developing countries, attempts have been made to modify it to suit particular contexts. For example, Appasamy *et al.* [19] in an ILO study in India, define social exclusion in terms of exclusion from a few basic welfare rights. They concentrate on the dimensions of health, education, housing, water supply, sanitation and social security. Nayak [18] in his study on India focuses on a) exclusion from basic goods; b) exclusion from employment; c) exclusion from rights and d) exclusion on the basis of caste, which the author recognises as an exclusionary dimension of central importance in India [20].

Social exclusion as capability deprivation Sen [2] argues that social exclusion can be seen as capability deprivation because, firstly, being excluded from social relations may be directly part of capability poverty, as illustrated by Adam Smith who suggested that the inability to interact freely with others is an important deprivation in itself [21]. Social exclusion

can also lead to other deprivations, thereby limiting our living opportunities. Therefore, social exclusion can be perceived as “constitutively a part of capability deprivation as well as instrumentally a cause of diverse capability failures” [2]. The real importance of the idea of social exclusion, Sen suggests, lies with the emphasis on “the role of relational features in the deprivation of capability.” Furthermore, Sen [2] makes other points on the dynamic connotations of the idea of social exclusion. First, rapid changes happening around the world and the process of globalisation produce impacts through bringing new groups of people into economic, social and cultural contact with others. Second, a subtle issue that is often neglected in the more simplistic discourse on social exclusion is the danger of “unfavourable inclusion”. There are circumstances where deprivation arises from unfavourable terms of inclusion and adverse participation, rather than as a result of direct exclusion as such.

In India, marginalized and socially excluded groups are Scheduled Castes (SCs), the Scheduled Tribes (STs), the Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and the Muslims. Historically, the SCs and STs have become the worst victims of exploitation and discrimination, and have been excluded from the mainstream of economic, social and political spheres in India. Thorat [22] explains that in India number of social groups undergo deprivation on the basis of groups' characteristics like caste and ethnicity. However, there are differences in sources and processes of deprivation. The exclusion and deprivation of Scheduled Caste, for example is closely associated with institution of caste and untouchability. The exclusion on the basis of caste is of central importance in India, as it is perceived as the fundamental form of social exclusion in Indian society. Alam explains that the vulnerable sections in India comprise those who are exploited and socially oppressed. These two categories ought to be treated as distinct. For example, a person who is exploited, say, an upper caste worker, is not necessarily socially oppressed; while an OBC peasant may not be exploited, but that the person has been historically oppressed. In the case of Dalits they are simultaneously exploited, oppressed and brutalised [23]. In Indian context, deprivation and discrimination based on caste adds to the problem of poverty with persistent and multiple disadvantages, especially for the most marginalized caste groups. This theoretical framework recognises the fact, that in any society there are vulnerable individuals and groups who have little power over events that affect them and have little power in social and cultural relations. A vulnerable population experiences a variety of dimensions of deprivation that are beyond those arising of income or consumption poverty [24]. However, although the expense of marginalization is fundamentally common to all vulnerable individuals and groups, marginalization is understood always in a context, i.e. one may be

marginalized in one context and may not be marginalized in another.

There is a common understanding among social scientists on the definite features of social exclusion and the means [25] by which it perpetuates poverty and inequality. Social exclusion is an institutionalised attempt to keep out or to „outcast“ a segment of the population from social order. Social segregation is an institutionalised form of social distancing expressed in physical separation. It signifies the convergence of physical and social forms, which also structure social distance in spatial terms. The form of social exclusion can be perceived as a process, which unfavourably denies social, political, economic, and cultural opportunities and rights to certain groups. The fundamental reality is that social exclusion not only creates a sense of superiority and inferiority among citizens of the same society or country, but also manifests itself by “wholly or partially” excluding certain groups from full participation in the activities of the society. As a result, certain groups remain excluded which further exacerbates disparities in the economic and social development. Due to discrimination and social exclusion Dalits continued to suffer being, denied all rights to decent living all through the history of human development. The convergence of this historical denial of rights to the Dalits and other lower castes still remain as residual effects and are visible in the poor representation of Dalits with regard to ownership of land, business, and in education.

#### **Discrimination and Persisting Caste Inequalities –A Case of Dalits**

The term discrimination, in general, is the differential treatment of people ascribed to particular social categories. The form of discrimination in India, which has received most attention, is the caste-based discrimination. This discrimination is subtle in urban areas rather than being blatant in rural areas, as stated earlier. There is a long history of traditional caste-based discrimination of Scheduled Castes in various forms, including untouchability practiced by the touchable castes or non-Dalits. This discrimination in social sphere, by way of differential relation and interaction, is extended to the cultural, civic, political and economic spheres. In cultural sphere, there is intolerance to worship deity, perform religious rituals and rites or to participate in festivals by Dalits. Discrimination is experienced by the SCs in their access to public services related to educational opportunities, health services, public water sources, post-office services, participation in village political institutions, etc. as stated earlier [26]. In economic sphere, Dalits are forced to undertake so-called „traditional“ and “unclean“ occupations such as scavenging or disposing of animal carcasses. There is differential treatment in various markets namely agricultural land, capital investment, employment, market in consumer goods as well as the transactions conducted through the non-market

channels. This has created lower access of the Scheduled Castes to resources like agricultural land and non-land capital assets (and/or low productivity of those assets), higher underemployment, lower daily wages particularly in non-farm activities, compared with non-SCs [27].

The SC population in India stands at 20.14 crore which constitute around 17 per cent of the country's population [28]. Of the total SC population, 79.8 per cent live in rural areas and 20.2 per cent live in urban areas. Major source of income to SCs is labour *wage*, mainly *agriculture* labour. Despite numerous schemes by the governments since independence, SCs are one of the most socially, economically and educationally deprived sections of the country. Even though Constitution of India recognises the worth of having distinctive and extraordinary provisions to reduce their discrimination, poverty, and to include them in almost all spheres of life. Unfortunately, there is still continuation of their exclusion and discrimination from the various opportunities. According to Thorat [29] the discrimination, poverty and social exclusion together or their inter-linkages have not yet been studied in social sciences, though a few studies have attempted to do so but not in a very precise manner [29].

Poverty is a multidimensional concept where a person is deprived of material possessions and basic needs. It damages life chances and reduces equal opportunity to development in the society. Poverty becomes a vicious trap which gradually ends up entailing all the members of a family and it transfers its impact over generations. Social exclusion as a root cause to poverty has become central to policy and academic discourse. It is a process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live. Social exclusion too is multidimensional and has dynamic impact at different social levels over time. It focuses on exclusion as the rupture of relationships between people and the society result in a lack of social participation, social protection, social integration and power [3].

The incidence of poverty is not uniform across social groups such as SCs, STs and Others at the aggregate level. The NSS Consumer Expenditure data have been extensively used to measure poverty and to compare its extent over time and across states. According to the NSSO survey (61<sup>st</sup> Round) data, 300 million Indians live in extreme poverty. Of which, 36.8 per cent of Scheduled Caste (SC) persons were below poverty line (BPL) in rural areas as compared to only 28.30 per cent for non-SCs [10]. The incidence of poverty is not only higher but also chronic among them, despite implementation of various poverty alleviation programmes. Thorat [30] assessed the disparities in rural poverty between SCs and non-SC/STs during

1999-2000. The poverty disparity ratio between SCs and Non-SC/STs was found at 1.7, it means the incidence of rural poverty was 70 per cent higher among SCs when compared with others (non-SC/STs). The incidence of poverty is declining among all the social groups in India. Estimates of poverty among social groups [31, 12] also show that though the incidence of poverty declined significantly among SCs/STs, they continued to experience a greater incidence of poverty, as compared to others. Vishwanatha [32] expressed that the reason for high incidence of poverty among Dalits is due to lack of asset ownership and productive resources. In another study by Vishwanatha [32] observed that 93 per cent of total surveyed SC households in Karnataka state still living under poverty line or BPL category.

The SCs are lagging behind in access to income earning assets like land and capital assets. Majority of the SC population live in rural areas, of which nearly 17 per cent only pursued cultivation, whereas among the non-SC/ST this percentage was more than double at 41 per [33]. Further, about 28 per cent of SC households had acquired some access to fixed capital assets compare to 56 per cent for other households (non-SC/ST). This data show that at what extent the SC population depends on wage labour. According to NSS survey, proportion of households depending on self-employment was highest among the others category of households (61 per cent) followed by OBC category of households (56 per cent) as compared to that among the ST (46 per cent), SC (34 per cent) households. In urban India too, proportion of households depending on self-employment was higher among the OBC households (40 per cent) and others category households (39 per cent) as compared to that among the ST (26 per cent), SC (29 per cent) households in rural India during 2004-05 [34]. This clearly indicates that significantly lower share of SC and ST in ownership of private capital. Thorat [25] in his study expressed that due to lack of access to agricultural resources and capital, majority of the Dalits remains wage labourers.

Along with the problem of poverty, the SCs are facing discrimination and exclusion in access to livelihood options such as employment, market facilities, economic resources, work participation, basic facilities etc. Several studies have provided evidences on how Dalits suffer from discrimination and exclusion at various levels. Discrimination is also experienced by the SCs in their access to owning land, trade and business, education and intellectual power, political empowerment, food security schemes, housing facilities, health services, public water sources, postal and telephonic services, road and communication, etc [35]. Madheshwaran and Paul [36] in their study, based on NSS data with using econometric model observed inequalities in employment, occupation and earnings across social groups.

The study reveals that due to caste discrimination 15 per cent lower wages for SC/STs as compared to others. Thorat and Paul Attewell [37] in their study observed caste discrimination against Dalits at the first stage of the application process itself by private sector employers, after receiving applications from the job seekers. The teachers discriminate among students by giving inferior or insufficient food to Dalit children under Mid-Day Meal scheme was observed by Thorat and Joel [38]. Chavan [39] concludes based on secondary analysis that the Dalits are facing exclusion from the formal institutions with respect to access affordable credit. Jha *et al.* [40] in their pilot survey of three villages in Udaipur district in Rajasthan observed discrimination against SC and STs in work participation under NREGA. Vishwanatha [32] in his paper, based on secondary data concludes that the caste based discrimination against Dalits not only leads denial to access various resources and but also prevents them from active participation in social, economic, political and cultural life. Thus, discrimination and exclusion practices against Dalits are clearly visible and confirmed from the above literature.

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