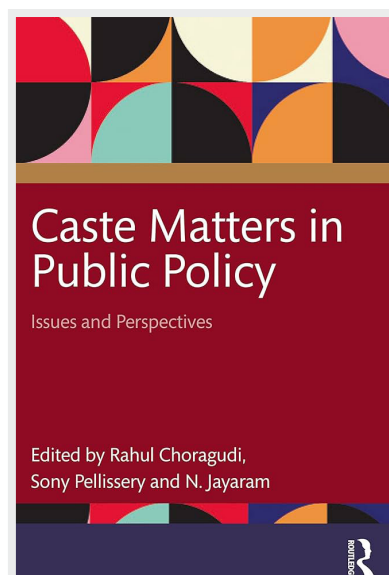


Caste Matters in Public Policy

Issues and Perspectives

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Intersection of Caste and Public Policy

Caste, as an institution, transforms with the changing lives of social groups and individuals in India. But this is not a tale confined to India alone; it has crossed oceans, taken root in faraway lands where Indians have settled. Caste, like a story, travels and changes, a riddle whispered across borders. It shifts its form, speaks in new tongues, and bends to the shape of the spaces it occupies. Yet, in some rural corners, caste reveals its cruellest face. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar once said that Indian villages are dens of ignorance, and in these places, caste can take on its most oppressive form. Despite its many disguises, one truth remains: caste denies justice, equality, and fraternity. It stands against the ideals of freedom and human dignity, as Amartya Sen explores in his reflections on justice.¹ Caste weaves itself not only into the fabric of society but also into the minds of people, forming a “caste of the mind”—a reality both social and psychological. Over time, its grip loosens, but caste persists, shaping the interests and dynamics of our society and politics.

The policy of any nation should reflect the life-worlds of its people. Yet, too often, public policy is shaped by the vision of elites, imposed from above, and far

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¹Amartya Sen. (2009). *The Idea of Justice*. Penguin Books.

removed from everyday realities. In this process, the true experiences of the people are ignored. Private interests often steer the content of policy, raising the question: how truly “public” is public policy? Scholars frequently critique this, as policy documents reveal the mindset of those in power. In India, the influence of caste is unmistakable in how the government operates. The system and the life-worlds of certain groups have become inseparable. Ideally, policy should embrace the diverse life-worlds of various communities, addressing both structural concerns and the lived realities of those on the margins. Caste, as a defining element of the Indian experience, must be recognized as a lived truth within policy. The book under review offers a clear analysis of how caste and policy intersect in India, calling for frameworks that are more inclusive and attuned to the complexities of society. It looks closely at caste in its changing forms, unravelling the subtle ways it intersects with public policy in India. It delves into matters of social security, internal reservations, the classification of “Most Backward Classes,” the presence of caste in other religions, its place in the census, its influence in markets, the role of service castes, and its mark on urban planning. The book shines a light on how caste drives policy and how, in turn, policy shapes caste. Through rich case studies and empirical stories, it explores how caste breathes and evolves across states like Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Karnataka, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and West Bengal.

There is a view that caste in India was hardened by the colonial practice of census-taking. In this view, part of the blame for caste’s persistence is placed on British rule. Yet caste existed as a core part of social life long before the British arrived. What the census did was turn caste into a political calculation, shaping its role in the years to come. Efforts at protective justice, like affirmative action, have sometimes sparked resentment toward those who benefit from these policies. The debates around the Mandal Commission in the 1990s deepened this resentment, leading to unrest, anger, and division. While the representation of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in jobs, education, and government has gradually improved, it has made only through the reservation policy. But, 27 per cent reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) marked a turning point. This has led to a sense of division in society—about half of the population falls under “general” categories, and the other half under “reserved” categories. As government jobs and opportunities shrink, elite caste groups have grown more concerned, fuelling their opposition to the reservation system. This situation reveals the deep intersectional dynamics of caste, politics, and public policy in India.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part addresses the national context of caste census and its enumeration, examining how caste is problematized within and outside its conventional boundaries, and its interfaces with the state, market, and culture. It traces the history of the census from colonial times to the present, highlighting how caste classifications have evolved. A notable aspect of the narrative is the fluidity of caste status: castes that were considered superior in one context were later reclaimed as inferior in post-Independence India. Similarly, certain groups

initially claimed higher caste status in early enumerations, only to assert a lower status in subsequent periods. This section underscores the strategic use and manipulation of caste for purposes of classification, segregation, and objectification. The second part presents diverse perspectives on caste from various Indian states. It discusses the implementation of the Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan and the Scheduled Tribe Sub-Plan in alignment with the Planning Commission's allocation of funds aimed at improving social protection measures for marginalized communities. The impact of these plans on development indices is explored through case studies from Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Delhi, each of which reflects the distinctive dynamics of caste in India. The third part examines the existence of caste beyond Hinduism, demonstrating how caste has permeated other regions and religions, operating as a rhizomatic structure. It explores caste hierarchies among Sikhs, Christians, and Muslims, providing illustrative case studies that reveal the particularities of caste in these religious contexts within India.

The chapter "Caste in and Out of Place: State, Market, and Culture" explores how caste is strategically employed both within and outside its traditional context to pursue status and social capital. While democracy ideally presupposes individual choice that collectively shapes social decisions, the practice of caste in India positions the state as an interest group, often functioning as an executor of Varna and caste systems. An illustrative example is the Jat community, which has mythologized its hereditary origins by claiming noble status as "ancient rulers," yet has also sought recognition as an Other Backward Caste (OBC) in the formation of subsequent governments. This indicates that the behaviour of the Indian state is shaped by the dynamics of caste in each region. Rather than focusing on the self-development of individuals as citizens, governmental actions are frequently driven by group interests. Consequently, public policy in such contexts often becomes a private policy serving caste-based interests. The chapter "Enumerating Caste in the Census: Is it Useful for Public Policy?" by N. Jayaram, critiques the role of caste in public policy. Jayaram argues that the modern form of caste in India is largely a colonial construct, shaped by the enumeration of census data. The British colonial administration used caste as a tool to divert Indian resistance against colonial rule, redirecting focus towards caste-specific issues, which ultimately led to the objectification and essentialization of caste in Indian society. Jayaram contends that caste-based enumeration is not conducive to the formation of sound public policy. The chapter draws on William Bruce Cameron's (1963, p. 13) observation that "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts," suggesting the intersection of caste and public policy.

D. Rajasekhar and R. Manjula's analysis of the Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan (SCSP) and Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) in Karnataka highlights the critical role of stakeholder awareness and access to various social security schemes in determining the success of these initiatives. The issue of information asymmetry is particularly significant. Although schemes aimed at the economic and social upliftment of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Karnataka existed prior

to the enactment of the Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan and Tribal Sub-Plan Act of 2013, which earmarks one-fourth of the state's budget for the development of SCs and STs, the effectiveness of these schemes largely depended on how well they were communicated to the target population. The 2013 Act, however, served as a significant governmental intervention to ensure better outreach and impact. The data analysis on awareness and access to social security schemes for eligible households reveals several key findings: (a) Awareness of pension and scholarship schemes was higher among SC/ST households compared to other caste groups. (b) In the case of contributory schemes such as old-age pensions, destitute widow pensions, and scholarships (both pre-metric and post-metric), households belonging to dominant caste groups demonstrated greater awareness. However, access to social security schemes for informal workers was comparatively higher among SC/ST households. (c) On average, disadvantaged caste groups accessed 1.18 schemes, while dominant caste groups accessed 1.88 schemes. This indicates that the introduction of the 2013 state policy has significantly benefited lower sections of society compared to the situation prior to its implementation. The progress can be observed in the increased allocation for the SC/ST Sub-Plan, rising from Rs. 6,135 crores in 2013-14 to Rs. 14,339 crores in 2016-17. This demonstrates the successful flow of social security benefits to SC and ST households as a direct result of the policy. The transition from the policy as an idea to policy as practice is thus evident in these outcomes.

The chapter titled "Addressing Graded Inequality Among the Scheduled Castes: Internal Reservation as a Strategy" by Arvind Narrain and Basawa Prasad Kunale explores the social dimensions of untouchability within the Scheduled Castes and raises concerns about equitable access to opportunities. The authors emphasize the need to address disparities among the most vulnerable sections of society, advocating for attention to the "vulnerable within the vulnerable." In the context of Andhra Pradesh, the formation of the Madiga Reservation Porata Samithi (MRPS) emerged in response to the perceived disproportionate advantages enjoyed by the Mala community, who were seen as monopolizing the benefits of the state's reservation policy, to the detriment of the Madiga and other marginalized subgroups within the SC community. The demand for internal reservations within SCs is framed as part of a broader discussion on ensuring fair distribution of benefits among all segments of the Scheduled Castes, and this issue is also relevant to discussions around other backward classes. The authors, citing various court judgments, argue that judicial decisions must be grounded in the "social and economic realities" of the country. This point is especially pertinent in the context of increasing privatization, which has led to the downsizing of government departments and a decline in public sector employment—traditionally a key avenue for implementing reservation policies. However, the paper refrains from advocating for the extension of reservation policies to the private sector as a means of dismantling the entrenched social hierarchies and challenging the meritocratic framework that disproportionately favors the upper castes in India. Instead, the authors focus on the internal dynamics within the reservation system and

the need for judicial decisions to reflect the socio-economic context in which these policies operate.²

The chapter titled “A History of Reservation Policy,” authored by R. Saravana Raja, explores the intersection of caste and politics in the context of Tamil Nadu. In addition to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), the inclusion of categories such as Backward Classes (BCs), Most Backward Classes (MBCs), denotified communities, and minorities broadens the scope of reservation in the state. The political dynamics of backward communities have driven electoral debates, and the historical conflicts between Brahmin and non-Brahmin discourses have significantly shaped Tamil Nadu’s political landscape. Tamil Nadu currently implements a reservation policy that allocates 69 per cent reservation to backward communities—26.5 per cent for BCs, 3.5 per cent for BC Muslims, 20 per cent for MBCs and denotified communities, 18 per cent for SCs, and 1 per cent for STs. This policy notably deviates from the Supreme Court’s judgment, which limits reservations to below 50 per cent. Such a framework would be inconceivable in most other states in India, raising the question of why Tamil Nadu is an exception. Answering this question requires an exploration of the historical trajectory of the Justice Party and the articulation of non-Brahmin concerns, the influence of Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement, and the political strategies of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK). The intense political mobilization around backwardness expanded the scope of reservation, positioning it as a crucial mechanism for addressing issues of social justice and safeguarding marginalized communities within the state’s policy of welfare. Why is the politics so anti-Brahmin? The answer lays behind the data that in the competitive examinations for the Provincial Civil Service which were held between 1892 and 1904, out of 16 successful candidates, 15 were Brahmins. The social reality of dominance was so intense and deep. DMK followed the politics of anti-Brahmanical formation of the state that take into account the life-world of the backward communities while ADMK took a central position accommodating conservative as well as reforming concerns of the people. The binary of Brahmin and non-Brahmin conceptual articulation has thus, paved a political trajectory to articulate backward politics in Tamil Nadu.

Rahul Chorangudi’s ethnography of a coastal village in Andhra Pradesh discusses economic prospects, protective discrimination and the changing hierarchy. It explains

²This discussion should be considered in the context of the recent Supreme Court of India judgment in Civil Appeal No. 2317 of 2011, which raises significant questions regarding the right to equal opportunity guaranteed by the Constitution. The central issue debated was whether the sub-classification of Scheduled Castes for the purposes of reservation is constitutionally permissible. While the state already has mechanisms in place to address the representation of various castes within the government system, such as special recruitment drives that extend opportunities specifically to certain castes within the Scheduled Castes, the judgment appears to misinterpret the concept of “graded inequality” in relation to reservations for the Scheduled Castes. By overlooking the nuanced socio-economic disparities within the SC community, the judgment fails to adequately address the need for a more equitable distribution of opportunities among the subgroups within this historically marginalized population.

lower caste migration to the Middle East for lucrative jobs as the principal factor that gave them better economic status in the village, while upper castes lose their economic advantages as landlord due to the failure of cultivation and changing nature of agriculture. Upper castes like Rajus and Kepus did not wish to migrate as the land is abundant and the patron-client relationship in the traditional *jati* order placed them above lower castes like Malas, Setti Balijas, and Goudas. Lower castes were able to get benefits from the government only when they made initial progress through the migration to Persian Gulf. This economic betterment changed the structures of caste and their relationship with other upper castes in the village. It is by becoming economically sound that lower castes like the Malas articulated their civil rights. The SCs and STs (prevention of atrocities) Act of 1989 gave them courage to respond to the caste atrocities inflicted upon them by Rajus and Kepus. This ethnography therefore brings forth a pattern of lower caste assertion that the economic base is the primary condition for the lower caste to articulate and seek benefits from government policies such as protective discrimination. This led to a change in the nature of hierarchy in the village. Understanding the civil rights and protective measures of the state towards SCs, upper castes came to terms with a dialogue to make issue with the humiliation and recognition of the SCs. The problem of SCs are evidently reflected in the electoral dividend of parties and candidates.

Three questions are primarily posed here to understand the caste and hierarchy dynamics in the village. What happens when a well-meaning ideal of equity encounters the fluidity of socio-economic hierarchy in a dynamic neo-liberal economy? What roles do material fortunes or lack of it, coupled with the rights guaranteed by the state, play in realising one's political ambitions? And what can the policy offer its intended beneficiaries in a neo-liberal economy when it is implemented in a political scape evolved to emphasise primordial *jati* identities? The neo-liberal possibility of getting out from the village and migrating to other regions and places to work as labour for the companies and corporations tremendously changed lower caste economic conditions and opened space for new kinds of aspirations and freedom to assert themselves to emerge as a new political self. Ethnography suggests that Lankapalli is a curious case where a neo-liberal economy has helped not the traditionally affluent *jatis* with superior social capital, but those lacking it.

The next chapter take us to the case of West Bengal and argues that caste and public policy never addressed the issues of the lower castes in the state policy. It is titled "Caste and Public Policy: A Case of West Bengal" by Antara Ray. A 34-year-old ministry led by Left Front in West Bengal eulogised class over the primary issue of caste because of the blindness of critical insights. The *bhadralok* politics of Congress as well as Communist parties had not seriously encountered the politics of caste in the state. Rather, their priorities were to solve the problems of refugees due to the partition of Bengal. However, upper caste refugees were given land on the southern parts of Kolkotta, and most of the poor and low caste people were sent off to far-flung places by the state. But, *bhadralok* politicians disregarded caste dynamics and made it invisible from public discourse. The Left, thus subverted the significance of

caste to establish its ideology of class struggle. At the same time, it is so visible in the public and private lives of Bengalis. Anthropological studies in 1980s found that, in rural areas, school feasts continued to be segregated on the basis of caste. The Left undermined the intersection of caste and class in Bengal which is similar in the case of Kerala with an exception that is upper caste's concerns were well met by the state. The proliferation of government-aided institutions mostly run by upper castes and powerful religious minorities were not ready to follow the constitutionally mandatory reservation of employment in these sectors. The salaries are paid by the state but appointments are made by caste/religious-based managements. In West Bengal, a little direction in this regard is somehow visible in the policy document of the TMC (Trinamul Congress) governments since 2011 under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee. The chapter illustrated a communist case that West Bengal has always been highly influenced by Western ideologies, but these ideologies and worldview could not dismantle the entrenched institution of caste.

In the chapter "Development Policies and Marginal Groups: Case Study of Dhobis in Delhi," Subhadra Mitra Channa examines the marginalization of dhobis (traditional washer communities) within the context of urban development policies in Delhi. Dhobis, like other marginalized occupational castes in India, have historically provided essential services that cater to society's basic needs—such as scavenging, laundering, leatherworking, and basket weaving. These occupations are traditionally associated with "untouchable" castes, a classification that spans both rural and urban India, underscoring a deeply rooted socio-cultural stigma. The dhobis in Delhi, whose labour involves laundering the clothing of upper and middle-caste residents, perform tasks that include washing garments worn by individuals, as well as bed linens, towels, and clothing from menstruating women, the sick, and new mothers—items regarded as ritually impure within caste-based belief systems. This labour-intensive process results in a symbolic transfer of pollution from the upper castes to the dhobis, reinforcing their social status as "untouchable."

Channa's analysis also traces the socio-spatial positioning of dhobis in the city's development trajectory from colonial times to the present. Historically, dhobi communities were strategically situated near the residences of elites to ensure timely services, yet their social and political visibility remained severely limited. Despite the growth of the city and the expansion of markets driven by commercial and tourism sectors, which increased the demand for dhobis' services, urban planning processes have largely neglected the needs of this group. For instance, dhobi communities lack sufficient infrastructure, such as washing Ghats and water access, critical for their work. The chapter highlights that while some dhobis have adapted by becoming intermediaries with large hotels and commercial establishments, the city's planning frameworks fail to integrate their essential services, rendering them invisible within the urban landscape. Consequently, dhobis have remained a politically marginalized group with limited capacity to advocate for their rights in the civic life of Delhi. Their exclusion from urban planning reflects broader patterns of social marginalization,

where certain labour practices, despite their importance to the city's functioning, are systematically overlooked in public policy and urban development strategies.

The third part of the book explores caste dynamics beyond Hinduism, with Paramjit S. Judge's chapter, "Despite Equality: Sikhs and the Caste Issue," focusing on the complex interactions between caste and Sikhism. Judge argues that while Sikh religious doctrine theoretically rejects caste and untouchability, the social realities among Sikhs have been shaped significantly by caste-based distinctions, particularly due to historical and colonial policies. British colonial policy reinforced caste affiliations by establishing canal colonies in East and Central Punjab, where land was allocated primarily to agriculturist castes, such as Jats, Sainis, and Rajputs. These groups benefitted substantially from land allotments, which also extended to British soldiers upon their retirement. Additionally, caste-based recruitment in the British Indian Army further entrenched caste identities by officially recognizing and promoting certain groups, notably the Sikhs, as part of the "martial races". This colonial objectification of caste reified its link to public policy, casting a long shadow on the socio-political structure within Sikh communities. This caste legacy influenced the Constituent Assembly debates, in which Sardar Patel argued for the political representation of specific Sikh castes, citing social realities that contradicted Sikhism's egalitarian ideals. We could emphasize Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's assertion that untouchability in Hinduism is a stigma that persists across other religions in India, suggesting that social stigmatization based on caste transcends religious boundaries. Thus, despite Sikhism's theoretical rejection of caste, the lived experiences of lower-caste Sikhs reveal that caste-based discrimination remains a persistent challenge, carried over from socio-historical structures into the religious and social fabric of Sikh identity in India.

The second chapter of this section examines caste discrimination among Christians and Muslims in India and advocates for a reassessment of the state's policy on affirmative action. As seen in the case of Sikhs, caste identities persist among formerly "untouchable" communities even after conversion to Christianity or Islam. Studies indicate that caste structures have survived the process of religious conversion. Within Christian communities, converts from marginalized castes are often labeled as "New Christians," while those from higher castes are recognized as "upper-caste Christians." This distinction is particularly visible in practices within these groups; for example, upper-caste Christians and those from former untouchable castes are often buried in separate cemeteries, a practice that is evident in South India. In the presence of elite Syrian Christians, Dalit Christians are still expected to remove their head coverings, reflecting enduring social hierarchies. Similarly, Pulaya Christians may not be offered food in the homes of Syrian Christians or may be served on inferior dishes. Parallel to this, Muslims in India display a varna-like caste hierarchy, where groups are classified as Ashraf, Ajlaf, and Arzal. The Ashraf group includes sub-categories such as Syed, Sheikh, Mughal, and Pathan, with internal hierarchies persisting among these subgroups. The Ajlaf category is traditionally treated as "low caste," and practices like endogamy among Siddiquis in Uttar Pradesh reinforce their group identity and higher

social standing within the caste hierarchy. These patterns indicate that caste-based discrimination, traditionally associated with Hindu society, is also replicated in other religions in India. Given these persistent caste dynamics, there is a strong case for extending protective measures and affirmative action policies to marginalized groups within Indian Christian and Muslim communities.³

In the epilogue on the intersection of caste and public policy, Sony Pellissery proposes a framework for integrating caste considerations into policy analysis. This framework addresses four key stages of the policy process: agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making and adoption, implementation, and the feedback or evaluation loop. Recognizing the critical role caste plays at each of these stages, Pellissery emphasizes the need for caste to be adequately considered within Indian public policy frameworks. The discussion in this book, therefore, critiques public policy literature, particularly that originating from American and European contexts, for its limited capacity to account for policies within socio-culturally diverse states. The book, both empirically rigorous and analytically robust, reveals the resilience of caste in the daily lives of individuals, despite its frequent invisibility within state policy in India. This analysis underscores the importance of re-evaluating policy frameworks to reflect and address the complex realities of caste, calling for a more context-sensitive approach to public policy.

³It is in this context that a report by the Justice Ranganath Mishra Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (2007) recommended Scheduled Caste (SC) reservation for Dalit converts to Christianity and Islam.