CASTE A Global Journal on Social Exclusion

Volume 7 :: Number 2
October 2026
ISSN 2639-4928
brandeis.edu/j-caste

EXPLOITATIVE RELATIONS

Caste and its Systemic Challenges in Sri Lanka within a Multispecies Perspective *Kalinga Tudor Silva*

Who Gets to Work, and How? Caste, Religion, and Time Allocation in Employment in India *Balhasan Ali*

Indian Diplomacy: Caste, Ambedkar and Buddhist Diplomacy *Chandra Sen*

Sustainable Tribal Consciousness through Women's Leadership: Motherhood, Gender and a Tribal Resistance Movement in Contemporary Odisha, India *Madhusmita Dungdung, Ashok Kumar Mocherla*

Religious Identity Matters in Access to the Labour Market in India: Challenges Experienced by Muslims in Search of Livelihood *Tauqueer Ali Sabri*

Caste and the Division of Laborer's Linkage in the Indian Labor Market: Special Reference to the Rickshaw Pullers in Lucknow City, Uttar Pradesh, India *Milind Sen, K. Raja Mohan Rao, Devi Prasad*

Dalit Boredom and the Promises of Modern Time: Caste, Pedagogy, Institution *Anshul*

The Brahmanical Panopticon: History of Reproduction of Caste and Sanitation Labour in India *Mayur Helia, Sally Cawood, Kai Heron*

Gendered Margins: Lived Experiences of Women in Institutional Housekeeping Roles in India *Sadaf, K. M. Ziyauddin*

FORUM

Class *Gaurav J. Pathania*

BOOK REVIEWS

'The Deras: Culture, Diversity and Politics' by Santosh K. Singh *Ameet Kumar*

'Occupational Caste Groups' Illness and Health in India: Lessons from the Lives of Conservancy Workers' by K. M. Ziyaudddin *Madhuja Bhattacharya*



DRY POINT; 42CM X 25CM; SAVI SAWARKAR

JSTOR

CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve, and extend access to our journal

CENTER FOR GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT + SUSTAINABILITY
THE HELLER SCHOOL AT BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY

Brandeis | LIBRARY

CASTE

A GLOBAL JOURNAL ON SOCIAL EXCLUSION

EXPLOITATIVE RELATIONS

VOLUME 7, NUMBER 2

JOINT EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Laurence R. Simon (*Professor Emeritus),* Brandeis University, USA

Sukhadeo Thorat (*Professor Emeritus),* Jawaharlal Nehru University, India

BOOK REVIEWS EDITOR

Yashpal Jogdand**,** Indian Institute of Technology Delhi

PRODUCTION EDITOR

Vinod Kumar Mishra, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad, India

ASSOCIATE EDITOR, PRE-PRODUCTION

Afia A. Adaboh, Brandeis University, USA

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Ryan Lansing, Brandeis University, USA

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT FOR PUBLIC OUTREACH & COMMUNICATIONS

TBA

ASSOCIATE EDITOR FOR LAW

Anurag Bhaskar, Deputy Registrar, Supreme Court of India

ASSOCIATE EDITOR FOR PSYCHOLOGY

Yashpal Jogdand, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, India

ASSOCIATE EDITOR FOR SOCIOLOGY

Dhaneswar Bhoi, University of Edinburgh, UK

ASSOCIATE EDITOR FOR ECONOMICS

Amit Thorat, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIAN

Matthew Sheehy, Brandeis University, USA

OJS TECHNICAL MANAGER

Wendy Shook, Brandeis University Library, USA

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

Kaushik Basu, C. Marks Professor of International Studies and Professor of Economics, Cornell University, USA; former Chief Economist of the World Bank; President, International Economics Association; former Chief Economic Adviser to the Government of India

Kevin D. Brown, Professor of Law, Maurer School of Law, Indiana University, USA

Ipsita Chatterjee, Associate Professor, Department of Geography and the Environment, University of North Texas, USA

Ashwini Deshpande, Professor of Economics, Ashoka University, India

Meena Dhanda, Professor in Philosophy and Cultural Politics, University of Wolverhampton, United Kingdom

Jean Drèze, Honorary Professor, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, India

Ashok Gurung, Associate Professor, Julien J. Studley Graduate Program in International Affairs , The New School, New York, USA

John Harriss, Professorial Research Associate, Department of Development Studies, SOAS, University of London, United Kingdom

Eva-Maria Hardtmann, Associate Professor and Director of Studies, Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University, Sweden

Susan Holcombe, Professor Emerita of the Practice, Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University, USA

Sushrut Jadhav, Professor of Cultural Psychiatry, University College London; Consultant Psychiatrist & Medical Lead, Focus Homeless Services, C & I NHS Foundation Trust; Clinical Lead, C & I Cultural Consultation Service; Founding Editor & Editor-in-Chief, Anthropology & Medicine (Taylor and Francis, UK); Research Associate, Department of Anthropology, SOAS, London, United Kingdom

Chinnaiah Jangam, Assistant Professor of History, Carleton University, Canada

S. Japhet, Visiting Professor, National Law School of India University; formerly Founding Vice Chancellor, Bengaluru City University, Bengalore, India

Sangeeta Kamat, Professor of Education, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, USA

Joel Lee, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Williams College, USA

David Mosse, Professor of Social Anthropology, SOAS, University of London, United Kingdom

Samuel L. Myers, Jr., Roy Wilkens Professor of Human Relations and Social Justice and Director, Roy Wilkins Center for Human Relations and Social Justice, Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, USA

Balmurli Natrajan, Professor and Chair, Department of Anthropology, William Patterson University, USA

Purna Nepali, Associate Professor, Kathmandu University, Nepal

Katherine S. Newman, Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, University of Massachusetts system, Torrey Little Professor of Sociology, USA

Martha C. Nussbaum, Ernst Freund Distinguished Services Professor of Law and Ethics, Law School and Philosophy Department, University of Chicago, USA

Devan Pillay, Associate Professor and Head, Department of Sociology, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Thomas Pogge, Leitner Professor of Philosophy and International Affairs, Yale University, USA

Christopher Queen, Lecturer on the Study of Religion, and Dean of Students for Continuing Education (Retired), Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Harvard University, USA

Anupama Rao, Associate Professor of History, Barnard and Columbia Universities, USA

Amilcar Shabazz, Professor, W.E.B. Du Bois Department for Afro-American Studies, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, USA

A.B. Shamsul, Distinguished Professor and Founding Director, Institute for Ethnic Studies, The National University of Malaysia

Kalinga Tudor Silva, Professor Emeritus of Sociology, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka; Research Director, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Harleen Singh, Associate Professor of Literature, and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Brandeis University, USA

Ajantha Subramanian, Professor of Anthropology and South Asian Studies, Social Anthropology Program Director, Harvard University, USA

Abha Sur, Scientist in the Science, Technology and Society Program; Senior Lecturer, Program in Women and Gender Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA

Goolam Vahed, Associate Professor, History, Society & Social Change Cluster, University of Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa

Gowri Vijayakumar, Assistant Professor of Sociology and South Asian Studies, Brandeis University, USA

Annapurna Waughray, Reader in Human Rights Law, Manchester Law School, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

Cornel West, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Professor of Philosophy and Christian Practice, Union Theological Seminary, USA

Copyright © 2026 CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
ISSN 2639-4928

brandeis.edu/j-caste

Disclaimer: The views, opinions, and analysis expressed in journal articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion, its Editors and Advisors, or of Brandeis University.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Caste and its Systemic Challenges in Sri Lanka within a Multispecies Perspective *Kalinga Tudor Silva*
..... 223-238

Who Gets to Work, and How? Caste, Religion, and Time Allocation in Employment in India *Balhasan Ali*
..... 239-271

Indian Diplomacy: Caste, Ambedkar and Buddhist Diplomacy *Chandra Sen*
..... 272-290

Sustainable Tribal Consciousness through Women's Leadership: Motherhood, Gender and a Tribal Resistance Movement in Contemporary Odisha, India *Madhusmita Dungdung, Ashok Kumar Mocherla*
..... 291-309

Religious Identity Matters in Access to the Labour Market in India: Challenges Experienced by Muslims in Search of Livelihood *Tauqueer Ali Sabri*
..... 310-327

Caste and the Division of Laborer's Linkage in the Indian Labor Market: Special Reference to the Rickshaw Pullers in Lucknow City, Uttar Pradesh, India *Milind Sen, K. Raja Mohan Rao, Devi Prasad*
..... 328-342

Dalit Boredom and the Promises of Modern Time: Caste, Pedagogy, Institution *Anshul*
..... 343-361

The Brahmanical Panopticon: History of Reproduction of Caste and Sanitation Labour in India *Mayur Helia, Sally Cawood, Kai Heron*
..... 362-386

Gendered Margins: Lived Experiences of Women in Institutional Housekeeping Roles in India *Sadaf, K. M. Ziyauddin*
..... 387-409

FORUM

Class *Gaurav J. Pathania*
..... 410-411

BOOK REVIEWS

'The Deras: Culture, Diversity and Politics' by Santosh K. Singh *Ameet Kumar*
..... 412-415

'Occupational Caste Groups' Illness and Health in India: Lessons from the Lives of Conservancy Workers' by K. M. Ziyaudddin *Madhuja Bhattacharya*
..... 416-420

Article

Brandeis | LIBRARY
brandeis.edu/j-caste

CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 7 No. 2 pp. 223-238
October 2026
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v7i2.2802

Caste and its Systemic Challenges in Sri Lanka within a Multispecies Perspective

Kalinga Tudor Silva[1]

Abstract

Building on earlier research (Silva, 2025), this paper argues that caste in Sinhala society is not merely a human affair, but a multispecies entanglement in a tropical setting involving humans, animals, plants and spirits. It follows that dynamics within these other species are equally relevant for understanding the nature, extent and the challenges of caste in contemporary society. Drawing from a variety of ethnographic research in different contexts, the paper elaborates how human-spirit, human-animal and human-plant relations are mediated by caste in Sinhala society and the challenges resulting from the breakdown of hierarchies in each of these domains, the reluctance of young people from subordinate castes to perform what they perceive as demeaning tasks in public and the decline in domesticated elephant stocks needed for sustaining elaborate rituals such as the Kandy Asala Perahara involving a public display of human and non-human hierarchies.

Keywords

Hierarchy, Caste, Multispecies approach, Temple of the Tooth, Sri Maha Bodhi

Introduction

Caste is typically understood as a frozen hierarchical arrangement operated and transmitted intergenerationally among humans. This paper interrogates this long-held view by demonstrating that caste in Sinhala society can also be viewed as an established but potentially malleable framework defining exploitative relations between humans as well as between humans and non-humans inclusive of animals, plants and spiritual beings. Drawing from ethnographic studies in several communities in Sri Lanka at different points in time, this paper argues that animals like fish, cattle, and elephants,

[1]Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka
Email: kalingatudorsilva@gmail.com

© 2026 Kalinga Tudor Silva. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

and plants like the bo tree, palm trees, paddy and cinnamon form a larger interactive process where humans interact with nature as well as culture inclusive of spirits who inhabit their real and imagined universe. Anthropocene is evident in the taxonomies of people, plants and animals. At the same time, agency of animals has exploded in recent episodes or human-elephant conflicts, problems caused by stray animals, and the depletion of fish in popular fishing grounds in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, continuation of certain caste occupations is increasingly challenged by the progressive decline in biodiversity with reduced availability of plants such as palm trees utilized by toddy tappers and endemic hana (*Crotalaria juncea*) plants artistically assembled by mat weavers posing serious threats to the survival of these hereditary caste groups. This is indeed a positive trend in terms of deconstruction of caste and the breaking down of its barriers. However, it has the effect of disempowering subaltern caste groups like Wahumpura toddy tappers and Kinnara mat weavers too. Finally, these threats must be viewed as the fallout of global disorders entangled with Anthropocene ultimately rooted in caste, class and overarching species hierarchies.

In this paper we explore how spirits, animals and plants relate to the Sinhala caste system in Sri Lanka. In some ways the caste system can be seen as a device for exploiting not only humans but also other agents such as spirits, animals and plants. This becomes an Anthropocene to the extent various caste groups serve as intermediaries in exploiting natural as well as spiritual resources for human benefit. However, in this paper we argue that the caste system provides only limited opportunities for asserting the agency of non-human actors as well as human actors at the lower end of the caste hierarchy. First, we will elaborate how the non-human actors align with the Sinhala caste system in a way that reinforces the caste order as a certain natural order in the world. Next, we will deal with certain ruptures in this social and natural orders that interrogates both these orders and indeed the Anthropocene that underlie both types of orders in the world. Finally, we will take up the issues of social transformation and liberation as a potential remedy for current global problems.

Human Hierarchy and Non-Human Extensions

We argue here that the human hierarchy in Sinhala society is aligned with three non-human hierarchies, namely spirit hierarchy, animal hierarchy and plant hierarchy. A hierarchical framework is used in Sinhala society not only to establish divisions among humans but also among animals and plants. Among these different hierarchies not only there is an alignment with each other but also mutual reinforcement or weakening. In the multispecies research so far, the focus has been on how humans interact with plants and animals in ways that interrogate the Anthropocene characteristic of social order and corresponding social analysis (Harraway, 2015; Tsing, 2015). We however need to introduce spirit hierarchy into the social analysis particularly in South Asia where spirits are connected with humans not only in terms of social interaction but also in

terms of cosmologies connected with rebirth particularly in the case of humans, spirits and animals. In Buddhism and other South Asian religions while spirits and animals are considered living entities with a life of their own, plants are not considered living organisms (*jeeveen*) similar to humans. For instance, a human cannot be reborn as a plant in the Buddhist, Hindu or Jaina cosmologies. However, it is recognized that plants give life to humans and animals and, therefore, are closely connected with the survival of both humans and animals. Thus, the multispecies approach used in our analysis incorporates both spirits not included in the conventional multispecies approach used in social analysis and plants not included as living beings in the same sense as humans and animals in South Asia cosmologies. Already there are some useful multispecies initiatives to unpack caste in South Asia, so far they have focused on how animals such as pigs (Narayanan, 2021) and oysters (Fernando, 2021) are connected with human caste dynamics, to the neglect of plants and spirits. In contrast, in the current study animal, plant and spirit species are analyzed jointly in relation to the caste dynamics among humans (see also Silva, 2025).

Sinhala Caste System

Historically, the Sinhala caste system had a feudal character with status, hereditary occupation and position in landownership and tenure reinforcing each other in a way the dominant upper caste commanding the services of the so-called service castes. This pattern is presented in Table 1.

As evident from Table 1, in Sinhala society there is an alignment between hereditary caste status and position within production relations. Aristocratic Radala authorities are typically non-working landlords, the next levels in the caste hierarchy are owner farmers, tenants and workers respectively. The Radala landlords had their farmlands cultivated by the service caste tenants/sharecroppers who often were required to provide a distinctive caste service, e.g. supplying pottery to the Radala and other households as a hereditary caste obligation. The real feudal character of the Kandyan Sinhala society rested on the fact that the Radalas and often ordinary Goigamas (referred to as 'rate aththo' in core Kandyan areas) that they could influence their subjects in multiple ways through their official positions (e.g. as dissavas, korales, Basnayaka Nilames, village headman, etc.), as landlords and dignitaries in general. In other words, they could exert extra-economic pressure on those subordinate to them in the caste hierarchy. Another important feature of the Sinhala caste system was that those at the lower end of the caste hierarchy were numerically smaller groups, their smaller size, (with the possible exception of Bathgama and Wahumpura castes in Sinhala society) giving them a certain bargaining power vis-à-vis the numerically large Goigama caste in society as elaborated by some analysts (e.g. Leach, 1960). Another important feature of the Sinhala caste system was that Karawa, Salagama and Durawa castes of South Indian origin with effect from the tenth century onwards and who

were largely concentrated in the South-western coastal belt known as the low country, were primarily engaged in commercial activities not connected with the subsistence economy of rice farming where caste-based land tenure and social relations prevailed (Pieris, 1956; Silva, 1982; Ryan, 1993).

Table 1: Guesstimated Caste Composition in Sinhala Society, 2026

Caste Name	Traditional Occupation	Hereditary Position in Farming	Guesstimated Percentage of Population
Radala	Aristocracy	Landlord	.001
Goigama/ Rate Atto	Farmers	Owner Farmer/Landlord	49
Patti	Herdsmen	Owner Farmer	.001
Karawa	Fishermen	Limited involvement in farming	5
Durawa	Toddy makers	Limited involvement in farming	2
Salagama	Cinnamon work	Owner farmer/ worker	3
Navandanna	Smiths/crafts	Owner farmer	0.5
Wahumpura	Jaggery makers	Tenant/owner farmer	
Kumbal	Potters	Owner farmer/ Worker	2.5
Rada	Washers	Owner farmer	3
Berakara	Drummers	Tenant/owner farmer	12.5
Bathgama	Farm worker, palanquin bearer, royal guards, domestic helper	Tenant/owner farmer/ farm worker	18
Welladura	Guardians of the bodhi tree	Worker	.005
Pannadura	Elephant catchers & handlers	Workers	
Kinnara	Mat weavers	Workers	0.3
Rodi	Garbage handlers, beggars	No involvement in farming	.001
Other			4.0
Total			100.0

Source: Adapted from Silva, 2025.

The multispecies nature of the Sinhala caste system stems from its intersectionality with three other hierarchies, namely, spirit, animal and plant. In the next three sections we will explore the interplay between the human hierarchy and these three forms of non-human hierarchies. This will help us understand the ways in which and the extent to which human caste hierarchy relies on human engagements with these other species.

Human Hierarchy and Spirit Hierarchy

In this section first we will explore how human hierarchy is broadly aligned with the spirit hierarchy in Sinhala Buddhism, the predominant religious ideology in Sinhala society. Second, we will examine what this alignment means in multispecies terms in understanding the Sinhala caste system. As identified by Obeyesekere in 1966, the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon consists of several layers inclusive of benevolent or malevolent spirits and those with mixed qualities. Its alignment with caste is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Distribution of Spirits, their Quality and Association with Different Castes in Sinhala Society

Caste	Category	Quality
Ksastriya	Buddha	Benevolent
Radala/ Goigama	Deva	Benevolent
Berawa	Deva/Yaksha/Preta/Bhutha	Mixed
Oli	Yaksha/Preta/Bhutha	Malevolent
Rodi	Yaksha/Preta/Bhutha	Malevolent

Source: Adapted from Obeyesekere, 1966

According to Table 2, Radalas are aligned with Deva category of spirits. This is reflected in mandatory assignment of managerial positions in Devales and also the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy to Radala officials offering them positions such as Basnayaka Nilame responsible for governance of Devales and Diyavadana Nilame responsible for the administration of the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy (Silva, 1982). This entitled them to administer temple/shrine lands as well as securing the services of all categories of temple service providers under the Rajakariya scheme. This defines the position of Radala as a land-owning aristocracy in Kandyan society. Similarly, Kapuralas in deity shrines (*devales)* perform services to the visitors to these shrines and this is a hereditary position held by Goigama caste people who hold landholdings in temple lands in view of their positions. Kapuralas are basically brokers between humans and spirits, enabling the former to negotiate with the deities (*devas*) who are benevolent spirits who can heal, bless or help overcome hardships faced by the humans.[1] On the other hand, the drummer caste berawas are engaged in drumming and dancing, healing rituals such as bali ceremonies or exorcisms and anti-sorcery rituals for the benefit of those superior or inferior to them in the caste hierarchy (Silva, 1982, 2011; Silva, Sivapragasam and Thanges, 2009). They are in rituals connected with Temple of the Tooth and deity shrines with hereditary landholdings assigned to them by the relevant establishments in lieu of the respective services. Oli and Rodiyas serve

[1]Similarly the word kapuwa is used to refer to marriage brokers in Sinhala society. These kapuwas need not necessarily come from Goigama caste as they arrange marriages between those outside Goigama caste as well.

as ritual specialists dealing with yaksas, pretas and bhutas, namely inferior categories of spirits who afflict persons and cause *apala upadrava* (bad fortune, distress and disease) to these people (Silva, 2011). Rodi caste specialists conduct rituals (generally referred to as *yanthra matra gurukam)* or different type of charms under the request of those suffering from the specific ailments. Mostly they engage in exorcisms and charms and anti-sorcery work for the benefit of their paid clients; Rodi therapists possess the relevant knowledge in dealing with the malevolent spirits who cause suffering among humans. In their advertisements for these occult services in print and electronic media and social media, they identify themselves in caste terms and refer to the black magic and white magic they advertise as "secret charms performed by the powerful lowest of the low castes" (*nichakula rahas gurukam*) in one of the few instances of publicly self-recognizing the low caste status in modern Sri Lanka. The fact that the Rodiyas are located at the lowest end of the caste hierarchy has enabled them to interact with evil spirits and manipulate and master them using their hereditary secret knowledge and the subaltern lowest position in the Sinhala caste hierarchy.

In the same way that the Radala position is perceived as a karmic consequence, so is the position of Rodi. In other words, birth as a Radala is an outcome of good karmas committed in the past births. Similarly, birth as a Rodiya is the result of accumulated bad karmas inherited from previous births (Obeyesekere, 2002). Malevolent spirits such as yakshas, pretas and bhutas are condemned to the respective positions as they cannot escape these positions by themselves. Humans must transfer merits earned by them to these subaltern categories of spirits so that the latter can be redeemed from their plight. This is in some ways similar to the plight of Rodiyas in the human world as beggars who at least partially survive on donations given to them by those in better-off castes. These rituals involve exorcism, anti-sorcery activities connected with evil spirits. They may or may not have their own shrines (*devales*) which are different from community devales where the priests often hold the position of kapurala on a hereditary basis. In this case the human caste system may be seen as a set of formula for negotiating or interacting with spirits who may be helpful or harmful to humans depending on the context.

All humans, high caste and low caste, are vulnerable to the attacks by yaksas, pretas and bhutas, which in turn hang around the world invisibly causing humans multiple ailments that call for the intervention of ritual healers. This is when specialized Rodi services are needed in the form of performing healing rituals, the removal of spells and bandana (bond). This may be seen as an affirmation of the caste order in which a low status caste performs a service to a person typically from a higher status. At the same time, persons of higher caste status are compelled to appeal to and reward the lowest of the low. This may be seen as a reversal of the hierarchical caste order in the sense that a person of highest status seeks the help of a person of the lowest status. In a sense this paradoxical situation is built into the Sinhala caste system, undermining

the stability of the hierarchical order. This is one instance where a high-status person is compelled to seek the assistance of a low status person in the hierarchy to overcome a personal calamity caused by yaksha or bhuta attacks or a preta spell. Thus, while the power and authority of benevolent devas are in line with the caste hierarchy, the capacity of yaksha, preta and bhuta to harm humans irrespective of their caste position makes us realize that it can jolt the caste order and subject higher status humans to the authority of lower status spirits and humans from time to time. This is, however, not a case of communitas, a reversal of status limited to a particular ritual occasion but a permanent feature of society seen as a multispecies entity where humans and non-humans including spirits interact with each other (Turner, 1969).

The spirit hierarchy overrides the human hierarchy, so that even the lowest in the spirit hierarchy, such as pretas or bhutas can cause harm to even the highest in the human hierarchy like Radalas. In other words, humans are subject to the authority of the spirit world[2]. Some community healing rituals like Kohomba Kandkariya were invented to heal distresses and ailments in royal families caused by spirits (e.g. *dividos*). This in turn implies that Anthropocene was not possible under this scheme. Even royal families were subjected to the spiritual world and laws of nature (*sanathana dharma*) in a way they could not disregard the non-human species as well.

On the other hand, all people irrespective of their caste should have equal opportunities for spiritual liberation as Buddhism was open to all castes. However, this was obviously not the case with Sinhala Buddhism. Anybody could become a novice monk but higher ordination was initially limited to those of Goigama caste inclusive of its three subdivisions (Radala, Rate Aththo and Patti). Later the community leaders from other castes campaigned for opening of higher ordination for members of their castes too. This campaign was successful in establishing two new sects in Buddhist Sasana in Sri Lanka, namely Ramanna Nikaya and Amarapura Nikaya, which opened the opportunity for higher ordination for selected members of other castes as well. Even though this has opened up higher ordination prospects for all castes, as of now this remains largely restricted to the upwardly mobile middle-level low country caste groups like Karawa, Durawa and Salagama with those from lower castes still having difficulties in entering the monastic order. Similarly lay opportunities for alms giving to the Sangha may or may not be open to the subaltern castes in an area depending on the caste status of the monks. Unlike in India where Buddhism actually became a pathway for liberation of the Dalits under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar spiritually, socially and politically, Sinhala Buddhism has failed to bring members of different castes into a level playing field in regard to participation in Buddhism and, indirectly, salvation. This has also affected the secular liberation including paths of upward social mobility through education and government employment through entry to the monastic order as

[2]This, however, does not necessarily dilute Anthropocene as humans can influence and ultimately redeem the spirits through the mechanism of merit transfer.

a regular means of working towards upward social mobility, especially by rural youth from disadvantaged backgrounds (Spencer et al., 2016). In other words, even though multispecies dynamics are at work and caste is not merely a human affair driven by human interests, the spirits have replicated the caste order among themselves instead of opening up a pathway out of the caste order.

Human Hierarchy and Animal Hierarchy

Animals have become an important part of the Sinhala caste system at several points in the caste hierarchy. These animals include elephants, cattle, fish, and pigs. Of these, elephants are considered sacred animals, cattle utility animals, pigs and fish used for human consumption. There are specific caste groups in Sinhala society responsible for the capture, protection, and harvesting of these animals. The relevant industries have encountered some serious challenges in recent times due to a variety of legal, environmental and logistic issues we will take up in this section. Finally, we will consider the implications of these challenges in respect of continuation of the Sinhala caste system.

Table 3: Animal Alignment with Sinhala Caste System

Caste	Animal Alignment	Role
Radala	Elephants	Owners of herds of domesticated elephants as a status symbol
Patti	Cattle and buffaloes	Raising them for milk and as draft animals
Karawa	Fish	Fishing in sea and inland waters and fish processing
Pannadura	Elephants	Handlers of elephants for ritual purposes and as draft animals
Rodi	Pigs and elephants	Raising of pigs as a livelihood in some areas, Setting traps to catch elephants in the wild before it was legally banned

Several caste-based livelihoods are connected with animals in different ways. Cattle belonging to different castes were branded with specific caste symbols identifying the caste of the owners in the dry zone areas as an extension of the multispecies conceptualization of caste in Sinhala society.

We analyze the role of elephants in Sinhala caste system, because several Sinhala castes are connected with elephants in one way or the other.

Elephants

In Sri Lanka elephant (*Elephas maximus maximus*) is considered a sacred animal because elephants figure in Buddha's life story and elephants perform sacred functions in the Kandy Asala Perahara where the casket containing a replica of the sacred tooth relic is carried by one of the decorated tusker elephants. Elephants connect with the Sinhala caste system in numerous ways. Elephants are an essential component of the

Kandy Asala Perahara, two weeks long celebration and a procession along the streets of Kandy, parading decorated drummers and dancers, and decorated elephants along with officials connected with the Temple of Tooth and the four devales in a full display of the Kandyan caste hierarchy consisting of the Radala aristocracy and its retinue along with their respective flags and insignia (Seneviratne, 1978). The decorated and illuminated elephants majestically march to the tune of drumming and human dancing, carrying religious insignia and sacred objects venerated by Kandyan society, identifying them as the core of the course of celebrations considered essential for ensuring their fertility and prosperity inclusive of timely rain, good harvest, and control of epidemic diseases. In this sense the value of elephants in Sinhala society exceeds their economic utility and touches on the very survival of all entities including humans, animals, plants and even spirits. Second, elephants have been seen as a part of the symbolic capital of the Kandyan aristocracy responsible for governance at central and provincial levels. From the angle of the Radala aristocracy, larger the herd of elephants in one's possession, higher the status entitling them for prestigious administrative positions like Diyawadana Nilame in the Temple of the Tooth and Basnayayaka Nilame in deity shrines (*devales*). Elephants add to the legitimacy of the aristocracy so far as these elephants perform their expected duties in the Perahara and other rituals. Elephants, however, are not merely a symbolic capital as they are also deployed as draft animals in Kandyan areas particularly for carrying of logs for various purposes on a terrain where motorable transport is inhibited due the steep slopes in the mountainous landscape. Third, historically the Rodiya caste was involved in the capturing of elephants in the wild by setting traps for them, using locally available plant material and hereditary knowledge about making elephant traps. This is how the royal family and the Radala aristocracy recruited new elephants for embellishing their herds in the precolonial era. Capturing of wild elephants was made a punishable offense in the British period and since then Rodiyas have been relieved of this function. Finally, Pannadura caste in Kandyan society has been responsible for taking care of domesticated elephants by feeding them with the necessary plant leaves, washing them in the rivers, and navigating them during events like Peraharas. Thus, at least four different castes in Kandyan society were connected with the mobilization of elephants for ritual and at times military operations by the ruling elites. In the Kandyan period, there was a separate arm of the state called Kuruwe Badde to coordinate these diverse activities and deploy elephants along with their keepers in military and ritual operations as needed by the establishment (Pieris, 1956). With the demise of the Kandyan kingdom Kuruwe Badde was abandoned and presently the ruling establishment in Kandy faces several challenges in securing of elephants for ritual operations (Fernando, 2015; Gunawansa, 2023). The decline of the elephant population has posed a serious problem for all the Sinhala castes connected with them as well as sustaining the traditional Kandy

Perahara that legitimizes the caste order and the multispecies coexistence built around it (Seneviratne, 1978; Pieris, 1956).

Presently the Kandy Asala Perahara has become a major attraction for local visitors as well as foreign tourists, quite apart from its significance as a cultural pageantry. The Perahara continues to be the largest parade of domesticated elephants anywhere in the world. According to records in the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy roughly about 80 domesticated elephants are currently available with a pool of elephants available in the elephant herd kept by the Temple of the Tooth, elephants available with other temples, and Radala owners of elephants. The temple authorities experience difficulties in retaining adequate number of elephants for the annual procession due to a combination of factors, including the gradual reduction of the available stock of domesticated elephants, the inability to capture wild elephants for domestication purposes due to legal barriers, backed by the environmental lobbies, the poor reproduction of elephants in captivity and the difficulty of feeding large elephant herds due to gradual decline in the number of kittul palm trees producing the staple food of elephants. An elephant orphanage was established in Pinnawela in 1975 to accommodate elephants including baby elephants displaced by developments projects such as the Mahaweli Development Program and attract foreign tourists and local visitors to see the large herd of elephants in captivity but it has not been able to add to the stock of domesticated elephants available for economic and ritual purposes. The Temple of the Tooth continues to employ Pannadura caste mahouts from around Kandy to look after and utilize the elephants in their herds, but the younger generations in these communities have become increasingly reluctant to take up the position of mahouts due to status considerations. In many instances, the temple authorities have been compelled to replace hereditary mahouts with non-hereditary hired personnel hurriedly trained for the purpose. Elephant attacks on elephant keepers and elephants suddenly breaking away from processions causing stampede in some instances have become a recurring problem. In the meantime, the human-elephant conflict in areas bordering wild elephant reserves has led to many human deaths and even more elephant deaths in recent years (Gunawamsa et al., 2023). This has served to undermine the sanctity of elephants at least in some sections of the population. Together these diverse developments point to the new challenges encountered in the deployment of elephants for Perahara and other purposes as well as a tendency towards weakening of the hold of caste on popular ritual activities in society. In spite of the challenges faced in securing elephants and mahouts who handle these elephants, the Temple of the Tooth has continued to function and the annual Asala Perahara has continued largely due to its popularity among local visitors as well as international tourists who bring foreign currency into the country. While Perahara is much in demand among tourists and Sinhala Buddhist nationalists in particular, groups such as environment lobbies, human rights and animal rights activists have come forward at times to protest against the abuses and animal right violations caused by these rituals (Fernando, 2015; Reed, 2010).

Human Hierarchy and Plant Hierarchy

Plants are used in several caste occupations in Sinhala society. For instance, Durawa toddy tappers tap coconut flowers to obtain toddy, Salagama cinnamon peelers peel cinnamon bark and produce cinnamon for export and local use, and Panna Dura mahouts obtain kitual leaves for feeding elephants. A list of castes by plant material used in their caste occupations is given in Table 4.

Table 4: Plant Alignment with Sinhala Caste System

Caste	**Plant**	**Role**
Goigama	Paddy	Cultivation of paddy
Durawa	Coconut	Manufacture of toddy extracted from the coconut flower
Salagama	Cinnamon	Peeling of the cinnamon bark and processing it
Wahumpura	Kitul palm tree	Manufacture of toddy and a local sweetener called jaggory
Welli Dura	Bodhi tree	Looking after Sri Maha Bodhi against predatory birds and wild animals
Kinnara	Hana plant	Used to produce Dumbara mats

Thus, extracting some value and applications from locally available mostly tropical plant material or plants cultivated by the respective castes is important for a number of castes in Sinhala society. Each such caste has a body of hereditary knowledge about the relevant plants, hereditary skills about harvesting and processing the relevant products, an inherited practical knowledge about their cultivation and processing and a set of tools needed to do the tasks (for instance tools used by cinnamon peelers) are possessed by the respective castes. The plants used are mostly endemic to Sri Lanka. For instance, cinnamon (Silva, 2025) is endemic to Sri Lanka and grew in the wild before cinnamon cultivation began during the Dutch period. All the caste groups engaged in cultivation of a crop as their main livelihood, such as Govigama, Bathgama, Salagama, have their caste names ending with the suffix, gama (village), perhaps indicating a settled livelihood, as against castes collecting plant material or animals in the wild such as Kinnara or Rodi caste. Similarly, in the Indian case, there was a clear distinction between caste and tribe, the latter primarily engaged in collection and processing of forest products as pointed out by Kosamby (1944). In the analysis pursued here we will concentrate on the bodhi tree because of its historical relevance, ritual significance and cultural role in Sinhala Buddhist society.

Jaya Srimaha Bodhi

The Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*) is sacred in Sri Lanka because of its association with Buddha's life story. The Jaya Srimaha Bodhi (JSB) located in Mahameuna Uyana in Anuradhapura is particularly sacred to Sri Lanka as it is believed to have grown from a cutting of the sacred bodhi tree under which Buddha achieved Buddhahood in India. Sri Maha Bodhi tree became politically significant in the same way as the tooth relic of

Buddha as the ruler who was the custodian of these two sacred objects was recognized as the legitimate heir to kingship in the country. After achieving Buddhahood, Siddartha Gautama himself performed Animisa Lochana Puja (Sanctification of the bodhi tree by the gaze of Lord Buddha} after he achieved Buddhahood, as a mark of gratitude and respect. The history of JSB constitutes an important chapter in the history of Sasana in Sri Lanka. Sinhala Bodhi Wamsa was composed in 10th century AD in order to narrate the story of how the sapling of the Bodhi tree was sent to Sri Lanka by the great Indian emperor Darmasoka under the guardianship of his daughter Sangamitta thera as a part of his campaign to disseminate Buddhism throughout the region. The Bodhi tree was accompanied by 16 clans of humans (Wamsa) from India, who were responsible for protecting the sapling during its transmission according to some Buddhist chronicles. Some of them were settled in the area and continued to serve the Bodhi tree once it was established in Anuradahapura. One such group came to be known as Bodhi Wamsa as they were assigned the responsibility of taking care of the Bodhi plant by watering it, protecting it against wild animals and birds, and regularly reporting any problems to the relevant authorities. Some scholars have identified this as the beginning of the Sinhala caste system way back in the third century BC. If this was indeed the case, the Sinhala caste system began as a sanctified hierarchical order serving the sacred Bodhi tree itself (Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988). In any case the present-day care takers of the Bodhi tree, the Welli Dura caste, has a legendary history connecting their origin to the arrival of the Bodhi sapling from India. We must remember that JSB and the Tooth relic are officially recognized sacred objects where mandatory caste services continue to prevail despite abolition of Rajakariya in secular domains in 1832. Some villages assigned to the service castes performing rituals in the sacred Bodhi tree such as Vihara Tirappane, Vihara Kallanchiya and Vihara Bulankulama, continute to exist near the Anuradhapura city until today.[3]

A living bodhi tree worshiped by devotees is a central landmark in any Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka.[4] Since late 1970s Bodhi puja consisting of lighting of oil lamps, watering of the root of the Bodhi tree sometimes using milk, shared collective chanting of popular Sinhala verses about the Bodhi tree led by animated monks became a popular ritual particularly among youth (Seneviratne and Wickremeratne, 1981). These chants may be punctuated by drumming conducted by the drummer from the relevant caste from the appropriate villages. However, Bodhi Pujas are by no means

[3]Personal communication with Mr. Jayalath Bandara from Anuradhapura.

[4]The bodhi trees that are actually venerated by the Buddhists are referred to as 'Bodhin Vahanse' (venerated one) as distinct from 'kaka bodhiya' (bodhi tree occupied by the crows) inhabited and polluted by the ubiquitous crows in Sri Lanka. The venerated bodhi trees are cleaned of fallen leaves and other debris by sweeping (*bomaluwa athuganawa*) by the devotees. This is, however, different from mandatory caste services assigned to land holders in establishments like the JSB.

a caste ritual as young people from different castes are likely to participate in these prayer-like collective rituals. What is important, however, is that the Bodhi tree figures in the collective consciousness of history among Sinhala Buddhist as well as in the Wamsa history of at least one caste, namely Bodhi Wamsa or Welli Durayi. In a recent study focusing on coming of Brahmin migrants to Sri Lanka from the fifteenth century onwards, Obeyesekere (2013) reported that some of these families too claim that their original ancestors came to Sri Lanka as part of the larger entourage accompanying the Bodhi tree from India. Thus, it appears that the caste histories of several groups in Sri Lanka is entangled with the arrival of the JSB and the tooth relic from India. The fact that the royal family was considered the custodian of the JSB and the tooth relic and routinely venerated them indicates that humans were subjected to the power and authority of the plant kingdom with the Sri Maha Bodhi identified as a companion species of the royal family and indeed the nation as a whole. The sacred Bodhi tree encountered a series of problems such as land tenure issues in the relevant villages, infection of plant diseases from time to time, a terrorist attack from the LTTE in 1985, protecting the Bodhi tree from hordes of predatory wild animals and birds. and administrative and management difficulties relating to caste-based service providers catering to the ritual complex. Despite these difficulties, the popularity of the ritual complex seems to have increased over time.

What is important is that plants are associated with the history and the upkeep of certain castes in Sinhala society. JSB is particularly significant as it solidifies the Buddhist heritage in Sri Lanka and continues to sanctify the caste order, complimenting and supplementing the role of the Temple of Tooth already described. In the same way animal kingdom including elephants brought under the purview of Buddhist cosmology through the sacred Temple of the Tooth, the plant kingdom in Sri Lanka inclusive of the Bodhi tree is incorporated in the Buddhist cosmology of Sri Lanka through the history of the JSB. A significant number of castes in Sinhala society are connected with these two ritual complexes highlighting their symbolic significance in perpetuating the caste order quite apart from the material base of temple lands and other resources. Further research is necessary to identify how genealogies of other Sinhala castes listed in Table 1, may be connected with various local plants in the plant kingdom.

Conclusion

This paper identified how spirits, animals and plants are connected and aligned with specific caste groups in Sinhala society. This in turn points to the importance of a multispecies interpretation of the Sinhala caste system as identified in prior studies (Silva, 2025; McKinley, 2024; Fernando, 2021). Thus, the caste system is not merely a human taxonomy based on whatever criteria people use. Rather it is a mix of human, spirit, animal and plant taxonomies prevailing in the local culture and related human behaviors. Historically the Sinhala caste system has been legitimized and sustained by

four factors, namely ideological, cultural, economic and environmental. Its ideological foundations include religious ideas such as karma, rebirth, dharma and spirit cult firmly rooted in popular Buddhism in Sri Lanka. While the early Buddhist doctrine in India was highly critical of caste as stressed by Ambedkar (1957) prior to his conversion to Buddhism and its adoption as the ideological foundation of the Dalit struggle in India, popular Buddhism in Sri Lanka legitimized and adopted caste in its religious ideology, ritual complex, service extraction and as documented by multiple authors (Pieris, 1956; Seneviratne, 1978; Reed, 2010; Silva, Sivapragasam and Thanges, 2009). The cultural refers to Sinhala Buddhist rituals such as Kandy Asala Perahara, Bodhi Puja, life cycle ceremonies and the monastic order in Buddhism. The economic parameters include land tenure and caste-based livelihoods, resource use patterns and inter-caste exchanges at the community level. The environmental basis has to do with natural resource utilization, reliance on tropical plants of Sri Lanka like bo tree, coconut products, palm trees and cinnamon as well as indigenous wildlife including elephants, marine resources including fish and local species of cattle and buffaloes. The multispecies approach to the Sinhala caste order pursued in this essay stressed the significance of hither to unexplored role of animals and plants in the formation and functioning of the Sinhala caste system.

The stability and durability of the Sinhala caste system have rested on its firm foundation in all these domains and its localized nature and embeddedness in popular culture and the ecology of local plant and animal species. As multiple studies have highlighted some of the Sinhala castes in the coastal areas (e.g. Karawa, Salagama, and Durawa) as well as interior regions (e.g. Radala layer of the dominant Goigama caste) evolved from various migrant groups from India particularly after the tenth century or so (Obeyesekere, 2013; Silva, Sivpragasam and Thanges, 2009; Ryan, 1993). Their successful adaptation to the Sinhala caste system and assimilation to Sinhala society often involved the adoption of indigenous animals like elephants, or indigenous plants like coconut, cinnamon and Bo tree as the basis of their caste-based livelihoods as well documented in the literature (Silva, 2025; Obeyesekere, 2013; and Ryan, 1993). The present study points to the way in which human hierarchy was aligned with and reinforced by hierarchies of spirits, animals and plants recognized locally. There were also some Anthropocene tendencies within the Sinhala caste system (Syke, 2018). Certain castes were assigned the task of handling endemic animal categories like cows, buffaloes, elephants and fish or endemic plants like coconut, palm trees and cinnamon. There were also counter tendencies, including rulers being subject to the authority of spirits of all kinds, The veneration of the Bodhi tree by all humans including the ruling elite is another feature of human subordination to nature. The tendency to consider all components of nature as subject to human will, desire and interventions was certainly not inherent to the Sinhala belief system.

That said, this study also brought out several systemic challenges confronting the Sinhala caste system stemming from political, social and environmental constraints. There is a strong resistance against caste inequality and caste occupations on the part of educated youth, including those from the lowest end of the caste hierarchy (Reed, 2010; Silva, Sivpragasam and Thanges, 2009). This is particularly evident in political mobilizations such as Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, National Peoples Power and Frontline Socialist Party which are in the forefront of national politics in Sri Lanka at present. The rapid decline of biodiversity as an outcome of developments over time has undermined some hereditary livelihoods among caste groups like Karawa fishermen, Wahumpura, Bathgama and Kinnara castes. These factors have contributed to radicalization of youth at middle and lower levels of the caste hierarchy in particular (Douglas, 2017; Jiggins, 1979). While caste continues to play an important role in the selection of marriage partners, ritual domains and politics, its hold in other domains has gradually declined in contemporary Sri Lanka. Beside humans, animals, plants and spirits too have posed new challenges to the continuation of the caste order in livelihoods, politics, ritual life and social relations in general. For instance, the annual conduct of the Asala Perahara in Kandy has been affected by a complex array of issues. They include growing refusal of people from different castes to perform in the perahara as drummers, dancers, mahouts, whistle blowers, etc., perpetual debates about astrological determination of perahara schedule and routes, progressive decrease in the number of elephants who parade in the perahara, shortage of elephant feeds, including leaves of the tropical kitul tree to feed a large number of elephants, agitated elephants who occasionally stampede people during the performance of perahara, and implications of all these for attracting sufficient crowds to participate in perahara. The systemic nature of these constrains arise from their association with human, animal, plant and occasionally spirit domains. Similar systemic constraints have arisen in respect of the governance of JSB, Dumbara kalala industry associated with the Kinnara caste and the Laksha industry in Matale District associated with the Nawandanna caste whose livelihoods are connected with a range of craft industries. In the post-human world, people must learn to live with each other and non-human species in a spirit of equality, peaceful coexistence and planetary pluralism (McKinley, 2024).

References

Ambedkar, B.R. (1957). *The Buddha and His Dhamma.* Bombay: R.R. Bhole.

Douglas, Aimee. (2017). *Caste in the same mold again: Artisans and the indignities of inheritance in Sri Lanka*. PhD thesis in Anthropology, Cornell University.

Fernando, P. (2015). Managing elephants in Sri Lanka: where we are and where we need to be. *Ceylon J Sci (Biological Sciences)* 44(1).

Fernando, Tamara. (2021). Seeing like the sea: A multispecies history of the Ceylon pearl fishery 1800-1925. *Past and Present*, 254, 127–160.

Gombrich, R. and Obeyesekere, G. (1988). *Buddhism transformed: Religious change in Sri Lanka.* Princeton University Press.

Gunawansa, Thakshila T. et al. (2023). The Human-elephant conflict in Sri Lanka: History and present status. *Biodiversity and Conservation*. 32: 3025–3052.

Haraway, D. (2015). Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making kin. *Environmental Humanities*, 6 (1):159–65

Jiggins, J. (1979). *Caste and family in the politics of the Sinhalese*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kosambi, D.D. (1944). Caste and class in India. *Science and Society* 8 (3): 243-249.

Leach, E.R. (1960). Introduction: what should we mean by caste? In E.R. Leach ed. *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and West Pakistan.* Cambridge University Press. Pp. 1-10

McKinley, Alexander. (2024). *Mountain at a center of the world: Pilgrimage and pluralism in Sri Lanka*. New York: Colombia University Press.

Narayanan, Y. (2021). Animating caste: Visceral geographies of pigs, caste, and violent nationalisms in Chennai City. *Urban Geography* 44: 2185-2205.

Obeyesekere, Gananath. (1966). The Buddhist pantheon in Ceylon and Its extensions, in *Anthropological Studies in Theravada Buddhism*, Manning Nash, ed. Yale University, Southeast Asia Studies, Cultural Report Series No. 13, 1-26.

Obeyesekere, Gananath (2002). *Imagining karma: Ethical transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist and Greek rebirt*h. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Obeyesekere, Gananath (2013). *The coming of Brahmin migrants: The Sudra fate of an Indian elite in Sri Lanka*. South Asian University

Peiris, Ralph. (1956). *Sinhalese social organisation: the Kandyan Period.* University of Ceylon Press.

Reed, Susan A. (2010). *Dance the nation: performance, ritual and politics in Sri Lanka.* University of Wisconsin Press.

Ryan, Bryce. (1993). *Caste in modern Ceylon*. Navrang.

Seneviratne, H.L. (1978). *Rituals of the Kandyan State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Seneviratne, H.L. & Wickremeratne, S. (1981). Bodhipuja: Collective Representations of Sri Lankan Youth. *American Ethnologist* 7 (4): 734-743.

Silva, K.T. (1982). *Caste, class and capitalist transformation in Central Sri Lanka.* PhD thesis, Monash University

Silva, K.T. (2011), Globalization, marginality and cultural challenges of the Rodiya Communities in Sri Lanka. *SAARC Culture* 2: 106-126.

Silva, K.T. (2025). Towards a multispecies approach to caste in Sinhala Society. *J-Caste* 6 (1): 8-31.

Silva,K.T.,Sivapragasam, P.P. and Thanges, P. (2009). *Caste discrimination and social justice in Sri Lanka: An overview*. Indian Institute of Dalit Studies.

Spencer, Jonathan et al. (2016). *Checkpoint, temple, church and mosque: A collaborative ethnography of war and peace*. London: Pluto Press.

Sykes, Jim. (2018). *The musical gift: Sonic generosity in post-war Sri Lanka*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The Mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton University Press.

Turner, Victor (1969). *The ritual process*. New York; Aldine Publishing.

Brandeis | LIBRARY
brandeis.edu/j-caste

CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 7 No. 2 pp. 239-271
October 2026
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v7i2.2875

Who Gets to Work, and How? Caste, Religion, and Time Allocation in Employment in India

Balhasan Ali[1]

Abstract

Lasting labour market inequalities in India are scaffolded by social institutions, within which individuals continue to experience market exclusion and a "social closure" from economic opportunities on the basis of caste and religion. This study examines labour market inequalities among Hindu Scheduled Castes (SCs), Hindu Upper Castes (UCs), and Muslims, with particular focus on institutional exclusion, socio-religious stratification, and market discrimination. Using national Time Use Survey (TUS, 2019 & 2024) of India, this study investigates daily participation and time allocation in employment activities, with temporal change between 2019-24. The analysis conceptualises labour market inequality as a cumulative outcome of social closure, institutional exclusion, market-level discrimination, and time allocation, which provide advantages to dominant groups, while disserving marginalised groups. The study found that Hindu SCs and Muslim continue to cluster in low paid industries, while Hindu UCs dominate high paid jobs. The evidence also shows that socio-economic and regional effects on participation persist in India. Lastly, despite disparities in participation rate, there is negligible difference in time allocation within industry. However, sectoral variations demonstrate that individuals working in the tertiary sector allocate much higher time compared to primary and secondary workers. Together, the findings suggest that social identity intersects with human capital and labour-market institutions to shape participation and time allocation in employment activities.

Keywords

Exclusion, Institution, Identity, Labour, Inequality, Time allocation

[1]Assistant Professor, School of Public Policy and Governance, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad, Campus, Hyderabad, India
Email: alihasancs92@gmail.com

© 2026 Balhasan Ali. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

Introduction

The labour market in India is subject to its own dispositions. Its institutionalised and socially stratified nature stands at odds with the monolithic rendering of labour being a mere economic phenomenon in Western countries. Instead of being scalar, it is deeply embedded in social institutions and historical relations of power and ownership, which continue to reproduce economic inequality (Jodhka, 2002; Darity & Deshpande, 2003; Thorat, 2004; Jodhka & Newman, 2007). In India, economic opportunities are borne of a nexus of social structure, resource ownership and market operations underpinned by social hegemony and exclusion. One of the most important social institutions amongst these is the caste system, which shapes an individual's access to education, employment, asset, and opportunities (Deshpande, 2006; Deshpande & Yadav, 2006; Mohanty, 2006). These practices persist despite the prohibition of all forms of caste and religious discrimination in post-Independence India. The textures of labour markets are not merely outcomes of market competition but a reflection of historically embedded systems of social and cultural stratification, which have inter-generational effects (Das, 2006). The examination of socio-religious discrimination, therefore, is pertinent for understanding policy developments related to non-labour market outcomes, including human capital, housing, living standards, and equal opportunities for marginalised communities.

Labour market discrimination in India cannot be understood in silos of education, productivity, or pure market mechanisms. It instead functions as an outcome of a historically constituted, socially stratified system, in which institutions such as caste and religion function as formal instruments that control accessibility of resources, social and cultural networks, institutional and state operations (Das, 2006; Jodhka & Newman, 2007; Thorat, 2004, 2009). While numerous studies have documented social discrimination in labour market, many of which have focused on intra-Hindu social system, peripheralising Muslim economic transformation (Deshpande & Newman, 2007; Madheswaran & Attewell, 2007). Das (2008) suggests that whilst Muslims cluster in self-employment, simultaneously they are disproportionally excluded from the regular salaried market. Unlike Muslims, Hindu Scheduled Caste face difficulty in setting up small business, but have greater representation in regular salaried jobs because of reserved quota (Das, 2008). Post-independence affirmative programmes catered to a certain section, while similar measures were absent for the Muslim community (Thorat, 2004; Sachar, 2006).

Despite these reservation policies, Thorat and Umakant (2004) found that most of the Hindu SC are concentrated in agriculture and low paid manual jobs. Similarly, studies have suggested that Muslims are crowded into self-employment clusters, with a disproportionately low share in the service sector compared to Hindu UC (Sachar committee, 2006; Thorat & Neuman, 2012). In contrast, the Hindu upper caste dominated

the service sector, owing to better access to a decent job market and social capital that assured higher representation in top positions and businesses (Deshpande & Newman, 2007). The larger question for comparison between Hindu SC and the Muslim in the labour market is: are Muslim and Hindu SC comparable in the current development scenario? In this context, Sachar (2006) suggests that Muslims fare much worse than Hindu SC on multiple development indicators, especially in the institutional arena. Moreover, this disadvantage in Muslim and Hindu SC goes beyond socio-cultural exclusion and agency-level discrimination. Although institutional discrimination can aggravate pre-existing labour market inequalities, it further interacts with other socio-economic factors that play a major role. For instance, literature suggests low levels of educational attainment and resource accumulation among Hindu SC and Muslims, compared to the Hindu upper caste, which has a higher adverse impact on employment opportunities (Deshpande, 2006; Deshpande & Yadav, 2006; Mohanty, 2006).

Max Weber (1978) conceptualised a social closure framework which states that dominant social groups fence out economic advantages by restricting outsiders' access to resources. Caste system in India is an extension of this social closure itself. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) idea of 'cultural capital' denotes the accumulation of skills, education, language, and 'social capital' which includes values, language and cultural competencies that an individual acquires through family and social institutions. This cultural capital, in turn, breeds social inequality, as it is transmitted amongst dominant groups, alongside exclusive access to life opportunities. In contrast, marginalised groups suffer from intergenerational deprivation because of a lack of cultural capital, which compounds over generations. As Sen (1999) argued, freedom from any institutional barrier is pertinent for development. Therefore, income is not the metric for employment; dignity, autonomy, social participation, economic security, and overall well-being are. Similarly, Becker (1957) suggests that income disparities are attributed to systematic bias and prejudice. Nonetheless, Becker (1965) argued that there exists a tradeoff between leisure and labour and suggested that individuals try to maximise their welfare by spending their time in the most optimal activities. In this context, time allocation can be seen as a measure of optimal capacity to produce. For example, participation rate of a person is a general indicator of economic outcome in the labour market, while wage return on their participation is another important indicator, which reflects their human capital and labour market discrimination dynamics. Another indicator in this dynamic could be time spent in employment activities, since it is important to assess whether there is any difference in time allocation apart from participation rate.

As time is money, understanding time allocation in employment can offer a novel perspective about labour market discrimination. In this regard, this study contributes in several ways. First, this study contributes to time use literature by utilising the national Time Use Survey, which provides information on daily employment, as well

as insights about the time allocation of an individual across daily activities, capturing both participation and its intensity in the labour market. Second, this study contributes to the scholarship on socio-religious marginalisation through investigation of labour market participation, occupational segregation and time allocation among Hindu SC, Hindu UC, and Muslim. In this context, it will try to investigate the labour market discrimination within the framework of social closure and cultural capital that plays part in the exclusion of marginalised groups and sustaining the hegemony of the upper-caste. To investigate labour market segregation, this study looks at industry-level participation to understand the hegemony and concentration of communities in different occupations, with their time allocation. Third, in line with Becker's (1965) arguments, this study examines the tradeoffs of time allocation between economic and non-economic activities. It will be interesting to examine whether employment participation differs from time allocation across groups. Fourth, this study investigates the temporal effect on employment activities among Hindu SC, Hindu UC and Muslim.

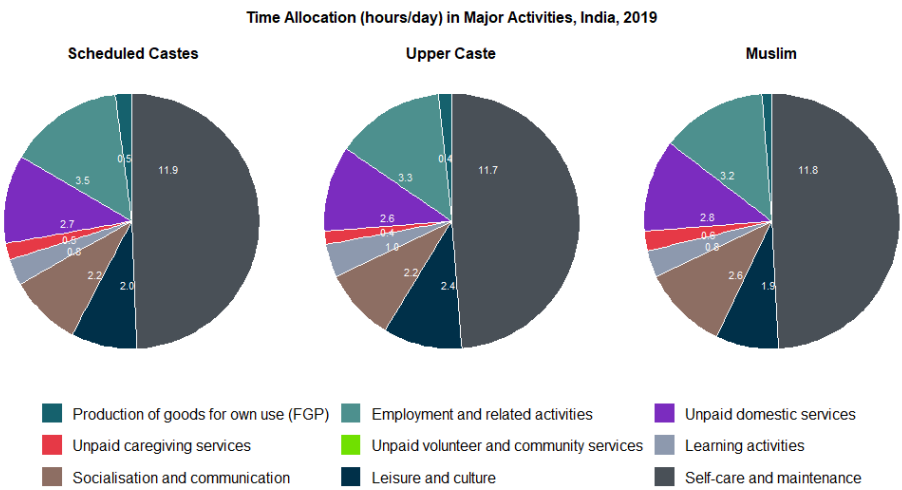


Fig. 1: Time Allocation (Hours/Day) in Major Activities Among Hindu SC, Hindu UC, and Muslim, 2019

Note: Author's calculations based on Time Use Survey data (GoI, 2019).

The paper is organised as follows. The next section on data and methods discusses data sources, sampling design, analytical sampling, outcome, and explanatory factors with econometric strategy. Result section presents and interprets the descriptive and empirical findings followed by the discussion and conclusion section. The preliminary analysis of daily time allocation activities based on Time Use Survey (2019 and 2024) for Hindu Scheduled Caste (SC), Hindu Upper Caste (UC) and Muslim have been shown in Figures (1) and (2). The preliminary findings reveal that Hindu SC allocated 3.5 hours in daily employment activities followed by Hindu UC (3.23 hours) and Muslim (3.2 hours) in 2019. The findings show a marginal increase in their time spent during 2019-24. Muslim individuals continue to spend highest time in unpaid

domestic work as well as socialisation and communication. In contrast, Hindu UC continue to allocate highest time in leisure and cultural activities as well as learning activities compare to Hindu SC and Muslim. Hindu SC spent slightly higher times in daily self-care and maintenance.

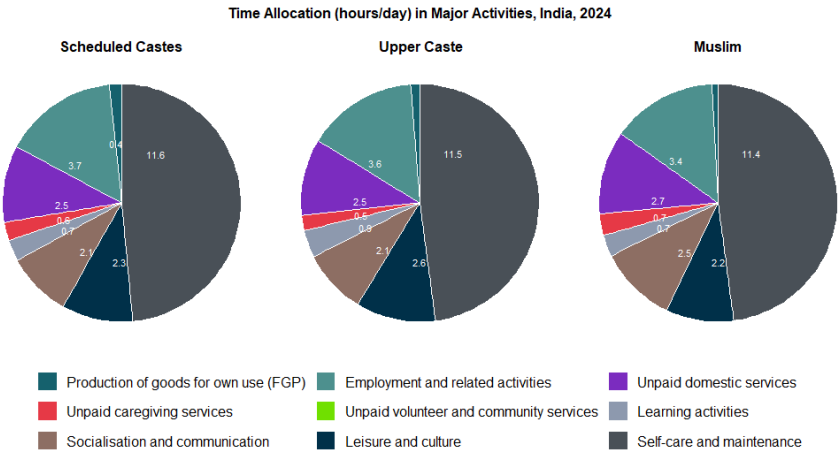


Fig. 2: Time Allocation (Hours/Day) in Major Activities Among Hindu SC, Hindu UC, and Muslim, 2024

Note: Author's calculations based on Time Use Survey data (GoI, 2024).

Data and Methods

Data Sources

This study used nationally representative unit level time-use survey data obtained from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), Government of India conducted in 2019 and 2024 (GoI 2019, 2024). The Time Use Survey provides nationally representative information on how individuals allocate their time across paid work, unpaid domestic and caregiving activities, education, leisure, self-care, and other daily activities over a 24-hour reference period. The survey adopted a stratified multi-stage sampling design based on the sampling framework of the National Sample Survey (NSS). In rural areas, villages served as the First Stage Units (FSUs), whereas Urban Frame Survey (UFS) blocks constituted the FSUs in urban areas. Within each selected FSU, households were chosen through systematic random sampling after stratification. All usual members aged six years and above residing in the selected households were eligible for the time-use interview. The sampling design ensured adequate representation across states, Union Territories, rural and urban sectors, and socio-economic groups through appropriate sampling weights. The TUS 2019 covered 138,799 households (82,897 rural and 55,902 urban) across all States and Union Territories, collecting information for 447,250 individuals, of whom

445,299 persons aged six years and above successfully completed the time diary. The TUS 2024 expanded the coverage to 139,487 households (83,247 rural and 56,240 urban), providing time-use information for 454,192 individuals. The large nationally representative samples permit robust comparisons across demographic and socio-economic groups over time.

Data were collected using a 24-hour time diary, in which respondents reported all activities performed during the previous day, beginning at 04:00 a.m. and ending at 04:00 a.m. the following day. The day was divided into 48 consecutive intervals of 30 minutes, and respondents recorded their primary activity for each interval. Whenever applicable, information on simultaneous (secondary) activities was also collected, particularly for caregiving and domestic responsibilities, enabling a more comprehensive assessment of unpaid work that often overlaps with other activities. Trained field investigators conducted face-to-face interviews using standardized questionnaires and activity coding manuals to ensure consistency in recording and classification. Activities were classified according to International Classification of Activities for Time-Use Statistics (ICATUS), which groups time into broad categories such as employment and related activities, production of goods for own final use, unpaid domestic services, unpaid caregiving services, learning, socializing and communication, culture and leisure, self-care, and travel associated with these activities. This internationally comparable classification enhances the consistency and comparability of time-use statistics across countries (ICATUS, 2016).

Socio-religious Groups for Outcome

This study considers three socio-religious groups namely Hindu Upper Caste (UC), Hindu Scheduled Caste (SC) and Muslim. Upper Caste is positioned on the top of caste hierarchy, while scheduled caste is positioned on the bottom of this hierarchy within the Hindu religion. The Muslim group in this study includes all Muslim subgroups, including scheduled tribes, scheduled caste,[1] other backward classes and Others. In the context of the present study, Hindu UC is considered as reference group for socio-religious comparison in employment to understand Muslim and Hindu SC marginalisation in employment and related activities.

[1]Constitution of India does not recognise Scheduled Caste among Muslim under Article 341. The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 restricts who can be recognized as a Scheduled Caste based on religion. Under the current law (1) a person who professes Islam is not legally entitled to Scheduled Caste status, even if they belong to a caste that is recognised as an SC among Hindus, Sikhs, or Buddhists; (2) if an individual converts from Hinduism (or Sikhism/Buddhism) to Islam, they generally lose eligibility for SC status under the existing legal framework.

Sample Selection for this Study

As the purpose of this study is to understand marginalisation of Hindu SC and Muslims compared with Hindu UC, I considered household and individual samples from these groups and remove other socio-religious categories. In addition, I excluded children (6-14 years) and elderly (65 years and above) for analysis. Both rounds (2019, 2024) of time-use survey data have been utilised to understand the temporal changes in employment related activities. The sample selection for present study is shown in Figure 3.

Outcome Variable

Participation in employment activities is a major division of daily activities based on ICATUS 2016 classification. Although time use survey also provides employment participation based usual principal status, this study utilises activity-level division on daily basis to define employment participation. The employment activities cover major activity division no. 2, which consists of minor and a subdivision of daily activities.

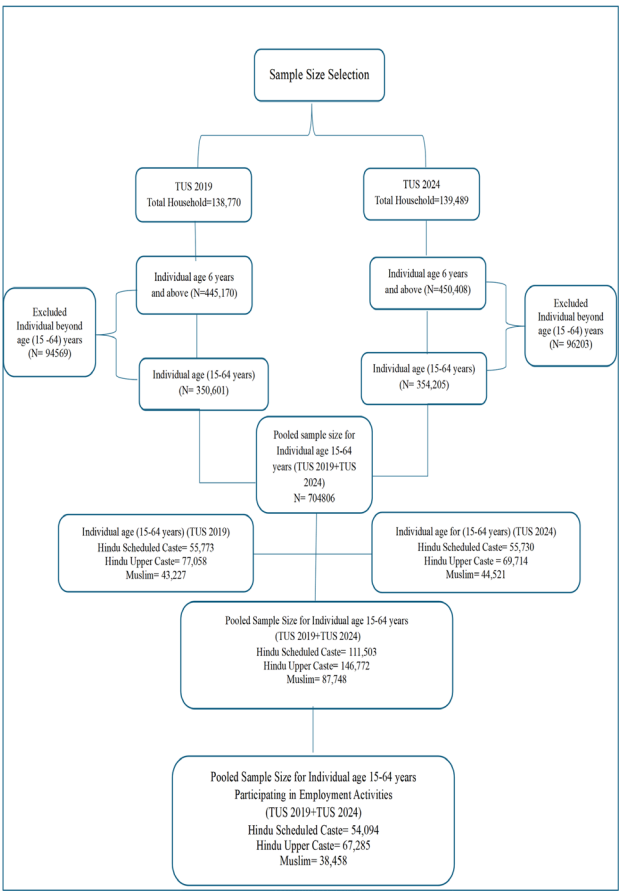


Fig. 3: Sampling Flow Chart for 2019 and 2024 Time Use Survey for Final Analytical Sample

The primary analysis is based on two outcome variables. First, participation in employment activities as a binary variable which takes the value of one if the individual spent time in employment and related activities participation and zero otherwise. Second, the time allocation (in minutes) in employment participation if individual spent any time in employment related activities during the last 24 hours.

Explanatory Factors

Numerous socio-economic and demographic factors influence employment outcome in India. In this study, age group, gender, marital status, level of education, and place of residence, monthly per capita consumption expenditure (MPCE), region, and household size are determining factors in participation and time allocation in employment related activities in it.

Methods

This study employed pooled Two-Part Model to understand heterogeneity and determinants of participation and time allocation in employment activities among Hindu SC, Hindu UC and Muslim. The first part of two-part model employed probit regression method to estimate the probabilities of participation in employment. The second part provides ordinary least squares (OLS) estimates for determinants of time allocation in employment related activities for understanding the impact of determinants on work participation. In the first step, pooled probit model is estimated to understand probability of participation. In the second step, pooled OLS is estimated to understand intensity of time spent in employment activities. This model is widely used for the outcomes with many zeros. It is most suitable in present case, when outcome deal with two issues: (1) do individuals participate in the employment activities and; (2) conditional on participation, how much time an individual allocates in employment (Cameron & Trivedi, 2005; Wooldridge, 2010).

To deal with an outcome with many zeros, Tobin (1958) offered Tobit model and assumes that zeros arise from censoring the underlying latent variable. However, this assumption becomes very restrictive in behavioural areas such as labour market, which intensively involves decision-making and uncertainty. For example, if an individual allocates zero hours in employment, it does not arise due to censoring, but because he or she does not participate in the market. To address this censoring issue, Duan et al. (1983) provided the 'Two-Part Model', in which medical care demand was analysed in two separate processes, namely the decision to use care services and the amount spent on it which was conditional to use. The Two-Part Model assumes independence between the two parts, and if unobserved factors jointly affect participation and intensity, selection models may be more appropriate (Newhouse, 1974; Duan et al., 1983; Belotti et al., 2015; Cameron & Trivedi, 2005).

First Part: Pooled Probit Regression Model

A pooled regression model is specified and preferred over single-year estimation. First, data pooling increases the sample size, which can improve precision and efficiency of parameter estimates. Second, pooled probit model with interaction terms provides a unique framework to examine whether the effect of independent variables differs over time. Estimating separate model for each year only provides coefficient that are not directly comparable, whereas the pooled interaction model allows statistical inferences on the equality of coefficient through the interaction terms. Third, pooling of data helps distinguish between compositional and structural changes, which become difficult to disentangle in separate estimations. Also, it helps in temporal transformational analysis.

In this study, I have combined time use survey 2019 and 2024 to examine the determinants of employment participation in India. The outcome variable, employment participation, is binary and take the value 1 if the individual participates in employment and 0 otherwise. Given the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, I adopt a latent variable framework in which observed participation is driven by an unobserved propensity. In this study, the model of interest is specified as below:

$$Y_{it}^{*} = \alpha + \delta Year_t + \beta X_{it}' + \gamma(Year_t \times X_{it}') + \varepsilon_{it}, \quad \varepsilon_{it} \sim N(0,1)$$

Where Y_{it}^{*} denotes the latent disposition towards participation in employment related activities of individuals belonging to Hindu SC, Hindu UC or Muslim communities and ε_{it} is error term which follows $\varepsilon_{it} \sim N(0,1)$. The observed outcome can be as following:

$$Y_{it}^{*} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } Y_{it}^{*} > 0 \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

The model formulation implies that the probability can be stated using the standard normal cumulative distribution function as below:

$$P(Y_{it} = 1 \mid X_{it}, Year_t) = \Phi(Z_{it})$$

Where $(Z_{it}) = \alpha + \delta Year_t + \beta X_{it}' + \gamma(Year_t \times X_{it}') + \varepsilon_{it}.\beta$ is coefficient which capture the effects of covariates in the base year (Year=2019), while interaction terms γ capture how these effects change in the subsequent survey period (Year=2024). X_{it}' includes a set of socio-economic variables which includes gender, age, level of education, marital status, place of residence, MPCE, region, and household size. ε_{it} is error term and $\Phi(.)$ is standard normal cumulative distribution function.

The non-linear relationship between outcome and regressor, this study reports average marginal effect (AMEs), which is better for the interpretation of the impact of regressors on participation probabilities. In this model, the regressors are either binary or categorical, so marginal effects are computed as average discrete change in

predicted probabilities. The AMEs for these binary/categorical variables is estimates as follows:

$$AME_k = \frac{\partial P(Y_{it} = 1)}{\partial X_{k,it}} = \frac{1}{N}\sum_{i=1}^{N}[\,\phi(Z_{it}|X_k = j) - \phi(Z_{it}|X_k = ref)]$$

The year specific AMEs capture the temporal changes in the probability of participation in work. For the base survey year (2019), the AME can be written as follows:

$$AME_k^{(2019)} = \frac{1}{N}\sum_{i\in t=2019}^{N}[\,\phi(Z_{i2019}|X_k = j) - \phi(Z_{i2019}|X_k = ref)]$$

For the subsequent survey year (Year=2024):

$$AME_k^{(2024)} = \frac{1}{N}\sum_{i\in t=2024}^{N}[\,\phi(Z_{i2024}|X_k = j) - \phi(Z_{i2024}|X_k = ref)]$$

where the index functions integrate interaction effects, such as:

$$Z_{i,2024} = X_i'(\beta + \gamma).$$

and the term γ captures the change in the effect of β in the later period. The change in marginal effects between the two periods (2019 and 24) can be defined as:

$$\Delta AME_k = AME_{2024} - AME_{2019}$$

Second Part: Pooled Ordinary Least Squares Method

In the second part of econometric specification, ordinary least squares (OLS) method is utilised to investigate the impact of socio-economic factors on time allocation in employment activities. The conditional linear regression model is employed to examine the determinants of time spent in employment activities among individuals who participate in employment activities in a day. If i denotes individual and $t \in$ 2019,2024 denote the survey period, the model can be specified as:

$$y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 Year_t + X_{it}'\beta + (Year_t \times X_{it}')\gamma + \varepsilon_{it}, \qquad \text{for } y_{it} > 0.$$

where y_{it} represents the total time spent in employment activities by individual i in a day in period t conditional on those individuals who report to participate in employment activities. The vector X_{it}' comprises socio-economic characteristics of an individual. The coefficient β captures the impact of the socio-economic factors on time spent in employment activities in base period (Year=2019). β_1 reflects the overall shift in average time spent between 2019-24 for the reference group. γ represents the interaction between survey year and regressors, which captures how the relationship

between socio-economic characteristics and time spent in employment evolves over time. ε_{it} is error term. Furthermore, as this model is linear, marginal effects can be directly interpreted from the estimated coefficients. For example, for any covariate X_k, the effect in the base survey period (2019) can be written as:

$$MarginalEffect_k^{2019} = \beta_k$$

and in the subsequent survey period (Year=2024):

$$MarginalEffect_k^{2024} = \beta_k + \gamma_k$$

Thus, the interaction coefficient γ_k captures the temporal change in the marginal effect of the regressor and can be expressed as:

$$\Delta MarginalEffect_k = \gamma_k$$

Descriptive Results

Table 1 shows the participation rate of individuals belonging to Hindu SC, Hindu UC and Muslim in employment activities in India during 2019-24. Overall, participation rate increased across all socio-religious groups, with the highest improvement in Hindu SCs (3.7 per cent) followed by Hindu UCs (2.9 per cent) and Muslims (2.3 per cent) during 2019-24. For example, participation rate among Hindu SCs increased from 46.8 per cent to 50.5 per cent, while it increased from 44.3 per cent to 47.2 per cent among Hindu UCs overtime. Similarly, participation rate among Muslims increased from 42.9 per cent to 47.2 per cent in the same period. Despite the participation increase among male and female across groups, males fared better than females.

Additionally, gender differences in employment activities remained substantial in both periods, with a higher gender gap in the Muslim community. Muslim males had a higher participation rate than Hindu SCs and Hindu UCs, while Muslim females had the lowest participation rate in both periods. Education shows a mixed relationship with employment participation. Individuals with secondary education had the lowest participation across groups in both years, while those with primary and middle education experienced notable increases. Graduates and above generally recorded relatively high participation. During 2019-24, individuals belonging to Hindu SC and Muslim groups with graduate and above education experienced a decline of 0.6 per cent and 1.5 per cent in participation rate, respectively. In contrast, Hindu UC individuals with a graduate and above degree experienced a 3.1 per cent increase in employment activities participation in same period. Widowed individuals from all these socio-religious groups recorded highest participation rate followed by currently married, divorced, and never married individuals.

Place of residence has a major role in determining employment opportunities. The results demonstrate that urban areas record a higher participation rate than rural

setting among all socio-religious groups. The participation increase was higher for Hindu SC in rural areas, while Hindu UC recorded the highest increase in urban settings. In 2019, individuals belonging to poor households had a higher participation rate across socio-religious groups, which shifted to the richest stratum in 2024. Hindu SC individuals from the richer and richest strata recorded a 7.5 and 10.9 percent of participation increase over time. Similarly, individuals belonging to Hindu UC and Muslim from the richest stratum recorded absolute increases in participation of 5.7 per cent and 6.7 per cent, respectively. Regional differences in employment activities participation can be observed. Hindu SC had a higher participation rate in all regions across years. In addition, Hindu SC recorded the highest participation rate in South India, with a higher growth rate than Hindu UC and Muslims. Although an increase in participation rate across regions and socio-religious groups can be observed during 2019-24, Muslim from North India experienced a decline in participation rate.

Table 1: Participation Rate (%) in Employment Activities among Hindu SC, Hindu UC, and Muslim in India

	2019			2024		
	Hindu SC	**Hindu UC**	**Muslim**	**Hindu SC**	**Hindu UC**	**Muslim**
Gender						
Male	70.9	**68.5**	74.2	**74.9**	72.7	76.6
Female	22.4	19.3	12.5	**26.2**	20.9	14.9
Age Group						
15–24 years	27.5	23.0	28.2	**28.1**	22.4	28.7
25–34 years	51.5	49.8	48.2	**53.3**	52.0	50.0
35–44 years	59.0	54.6	52.7	**64.4**	59.3	56.0
45–54 years	57.3	53.5	49.8	**62.4**	56.9	52.6
55–64 years	44.2	41.3	41.3	**52.6**	43.0	44.6
Education Level						
Illiterate	44.9	41.4	40.6	**50.3**	44.1	43.8
Primary	51.5	46.6	47.3	**56.5**	49.3	51.7
Middle	48.2	43.4	43.3	**51.3**	46.6	45.7
Secondary	42.3	40.0	38.8	**45.0**	42.1	38.9
Graduate and above	52.8	52.0	50.7	**52.2**	55.1	49.2
Marital Status						
Never Married	35.1	34.3	35.6	**36.9**	36.8	36.6
Currently Married	50.5	48.3	46.1	**55.0**	51.4	48.5
Divorced/Separated	47.1	35.1	32.0	**51.8**	36.3	36.8
Widowed	64.6	60.9	52.1	**68.5**	64.8	58.1
Place of Residence						
Rural	46.0	43.5	42.1	**49.9**	47.0	45.0
Urban	49.1	45.4	44.4	**52.3**	47.5	45.6
Household Size						
Household with less than 5 members	48.8	45.7	44.3	**52.9**	48.2	47.0

	2019			2024		
	Hindu SC	**Hindu UC**	**Muslim**	**Hindu SC**	**Hindu UC**	**Muslim**
Household with 5 or more members	44.1	41.7	41.5	**47.6**	45.6	43.6
MPCE						
Poorest	46.5	**45.8**	43.0	**47.1**	45.1	44.8
Poor	48.7	46.2	44.0	**49.6**	47.1	45.1
Middle	46.3	44.3	43.2	**52.2**	46.5	44.7
Richer	46.2	43.9	42.5	**53.7**	46.9	44.9
Richest	45.4	43.6	42.0	**56.3**	49.2	48.7
Region						
North	44.8	40.8	45.2	**49.9**	45.3	44.8
Central	41.3	36.5	38.5	**46.4**	42.1	44.6
East	45.5	42.1	44.6	**48.1**	43.3	46.5
Northeast	43.9	42.9	40.9	**47.3**	45.3	43.8
West	54.0	53.1	47.9	**56.0**	55.6	48.9
South	54.8	48.5	42.7	**59.0**	51.0	42.6
Total	46.8	44.3	42.9	50.5	47.2	45.2

Table 2: Average Time Allocation (In hours) in Daily Employment Activities among Participant across Socio-Religious Groups in India

	2019			2024		
	Hindu SC	**Hindu UC**	**Muslim**	**Hindu SC**	**Hindu UC**	**Muslim**
Gender						
Male	7.9	8.0	7.9	8.0	8.1	8.0
Female	5.9	5.6	5.0	5.8	6.0	4.8
Age Group						
15–24 years	7.1	6.8	7.3	7.4	7.3	7.3
25–34 years	7.6	7.8	7.7	7.7	8.0	7.6
35–44 years	7.5	7.6	7.6	7.4	7.8	7.5
45–54 years	7.4	7.4	7.4	7.3	7.7	7.3
55–64 years	6.9	6.9	6.9	6.8	7.0	6.8
Education Level						
Illiterate	7.1	6.7	7.2	6.9	6.9	6.9
Primary	7.5	7.2	7.4	7.3	7.3	7.5
Middle	7.5	7.4	7.7	7.6	7.6	7.5
Secondary	7.6	7.5	7.7	7.7	7.8	7.6
Graduate and above	7.6	7.9	7.7	7.7	8.0	7.5
Marital Status						
Never Married	7.3	7.4	7.6	7.7	7.8	7.6
Currently Married	7.5	7.5	7.5	7.4	7.7	7.4
Divorced/Separated	6.9	6.2	6.0	6.8	6.7	6.4
Widowed	7.4	7.6	6.8	6.9	7.5	7.0
Place of Residence						
Rural	7.2	6.7	7.0	7.1	7.0	7.1
Urban	8.1	8.3	8.3	8.2	8.4	8.0

	2019			2024		
	Hindu SC	Hindu UC	Muslim	Hindu SC	Hindu UC	Muslim
Household Size						
Household with less than 5 members	7.4	7.5	7.4	7.4	7.7	7.4
Household with 5 or more members	7.4	7.3	7.5	7.4	7.5	7.4
MPCE						
Poorest	7.1	6.7	6.8	7.3	7.3	7.4
Poor	7.3	7.0	7.1	7.2	7.3	7.3
Middle	7.3	7.2	7.4	7.4	7.5	7.3
Richer	7.6	7.5	7.8	7.5	7.7	7.4
Richest	7.8	7.9	8.0	8.1	8.2	8.1
Region						
North	8.0	7.6	7.7	7.9	8.1	7.3
Central	7.2	6.8	7.5	7.4	7.3	7.7
East	7.2	7.5	7.4	7.0	7.4	6.9
Northeast	6.3	6.7	5.5	7.2	7.6	7.4
West	7.7	7.7	8.1	7.9	8.0	8.0
South	7.5	7.5	7.9	7.4	7.4	7.7
Total	7.4	7.5	7.5	7.4	7.7	7.4

Table 2 presents the average daily time allocation on employment activities among individual those participated in employment activities across socio-religious groups. Overall, participants allocated 7.4 hours to 7.7 hours daily in employment activities, which remained stable overtime despite an increase in participation rate. Hindu UC recorded a modest increase in average time spent in employment activities from 7.5 hours to 7.7 hours, while Hindu SC maintained their time allocation in both years. In contrast, Muslim experienced a negligible decline from 7.5 hours to 7.4 hours during 2019-24. Gender inequality in daily time allocation is pronounced across socio-religious groups in both years. For example, female from Hindu SC allocate 2 hours less than their male counterpart, and this gap remained stable overtime. Similarly, Hindu UC females spent 2.4 hours less than their male counterparts, however, this gap reduced over time. In contrast, Muslim females spent the lowest time in daily employment activities across socio-religious groups, with 2.9 hours less than their male counterparts. This gender disparity in time allocation among Muslim females increased over time. Across all socio-religious groups, illiterate individuals allocated less time in employment activities, while individuals with graduate and above education spent the highest time. The time allocation to employment activities increases with education level, and Hindu UC with graduate degree or above degree spent the highest time in employment activities. Rural individuals spent less time than urban individuals across socio-religious groups. Interestingly, Hindu UC spent less time in rural areas

and highest time in urban settings. In smaller families, Hindus spent more time in employment activities, while Muslims with larger family size spent the most. The findings show that time allocation in employment activities increases with increasing household MPCE, and individuals belonging to the richest stratum allocate the highest time in daily employment activities. Hindu SC from North India allocate highest time in employment activities, while Muslims from the North-East region allocated the least time. Interestingly, time allocation of Hindu SC and Muslim declined in North India during 2019-24, with a substantial decline in Muslim community.

Empirical Results

Impact of Socio-Religious Groups on Participation in Employment Activities

Figure 4 presents the AMEs of socio-religious categories on the probability of participation in employment activities. In the unadjusted model, Hindu UC exhibit a positive and statistically significant association with participation in employment activities in both years. The findings show that probability of participation in employment activities of Hindu SC was 2.1 percentage points higher than Hindu UC, which increased 3.0 percentage points in 2024. In contrast, the probability of participation of Muslim was 1.9 percentage points lower than Hindu UC, which further deteriorated in 2024. In contrast, the adjusted model controls for the socio-economic factors and shows that the probability of participation of Hindu SC becomes stronger as it was 6-7 percentage points higher than Hindu UC. The findings also suggest that after controlling for the other factors, Muslims had a positive probability of participation in employment activities compared to Hindu UC. The adjusted results show a 3 percentage points higher participation than Hindu UC; however, this advantage declined to 2 percentage points by 2024. Corresponding to probit regression results, the OLS estimates are shown in Appendix Table A1.

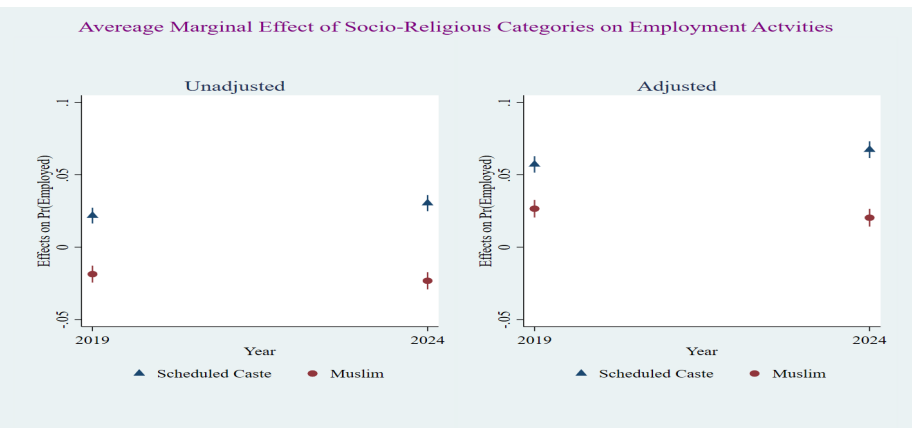


Fig. 4: Average Marginal Effects (Unadjusted vs Adjusted) of Socio-Religious Group on Participation in Employment Activities in India, 2019-24

Impact of Non-Employment Activities of Participation in Employment Activities

Figure 5 presents AMEs of participation in non-employment activities—including food production for own use, unpaid domestic services, unpaid care, learning, socialisation and communication, and leisure and cultural activities—on the probability of employment participation among Hindu SC, Hindu UC, and Muslim individuals in India during 2019–24. Overall, participation in non-employment activities is negatively associated with employment participation across all socio-religious groups, although the magnitude varies by activity and year.

Among Hindu SCs (Figure 5a), unpaid domestic work reduces the probability of employment by 37.8 percentage points in 2019 and 34.7 percentage points in 2024. Learning has an even stronger negative association, increasing from 40.4 to 50.3 percentage points over the same period. Food production for own use reduces employment participation by 13.6 and 13.1 percentage points, while unpaid caregiving reduces it by approximately 11.5–13.1 percentage points. Socialisation and leisure show comparatively smaller negative effects. For Hindu UCs (Figure 5b), unpaid domestic work remains strongly associated with lower employment participation, with effects of 39.0 and 39.2 percentage points in 2019 and 2024, respectively. The negative association of learning increases from 39.2 to 46.3 percentage points. Food production and unpaid caregiving reduce employment participation by approximately 11–13 percentage points, while socialisation and leisure also show significant negative effects. Among Muslims (Figure 5c), unpaid domestic work has the largest negative association, reducing employment probability by 47.1 percentage points in 2019 and 44.8 percentage points in 2024. Learning shows an increasing negative association, from 39.5 to 47.0 percentage points. Unlike the other groups, the effect of food production becomes stronger, increasing from 8.4 to 14.3 percentage points.

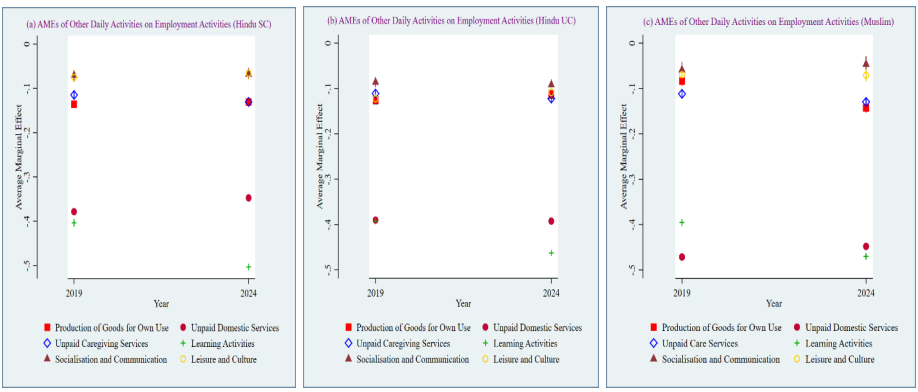


Fig. 5: Average Marginal Effects of Other Daily Life Activities Participation on Employment Activities across Hindu SC, Hindu UC, and Muslim in India, 2019-24

The OLS estimates in Appendix Table A2 support these findings. Learning is associated with the largest reduction in employment time—4.59 hours among SCs, 3.98 hours among UCs, and 4.14 hours among Muslims. Food production reduces employment time by 1.81–2.46 hours, while unpaid domestic work reduces it by approximately 1.52–1.75 hours. Overall, the results indicate substantial trade-offs between employment and competing activities, particularly learning and unpaid domestic work, with meaningful differences across socio-religious groups and over time (see Appendix Table A2).

Determinants of Participation and Time Allocation in Employment Activities

Table 3 presents the average marginal effects (AMEs) from pooled probit models, estimated separately for Hindu SC, Hindu UC, and Muslim individuals to examine the determinants of employment participation. Overall, age, marital status, education, household consumption expenditure (MPCE), household size, and region significantly influence employment participation, although the magnitude and direction of effects vary across socio-religious groups and over time. The period effect is positive and significant for Hindu SC and Hindu UC, with employment probability increasing by about 2.4 percentage points, while no significant change is observed among Muslims.

Education is positively associated with employment participation relative to illiteracy. Primary and middle education generally increase participation, while graduates retain a substantial advantage, particularly among Hindu UCs. In 2019, graduate participation was 15.5 percentage points higher among Hindu UCs, compared with 12.4 points among Hindu SCs and 10.7 points among Muslims. Although the positive effect persisted in 2024, its magnitude declined across all groups, suggesting that educational expansion has not translated proportionately into employment opportunities. Urban residence has limited effects. It is insignificant for Hindu SCs, negatively associated with Hindu UC participation, and provides only a modest advantage for Muslims in 2019 that disappears by 2024. Higher MPCE was associated with lower participation in 2019, particularly among Hindu UCs and Muslims, but these differences weakened by 2024. Larger households generally reduce participation, especially among Hindu SCs and Muslims. Regional disparities remain substantial. Western and Southern regions generally show higher participation, while Central, Eastern, and Northeastern regions report lower participation than the North. The Western region shows the largest advantage, whereas Muslims in the Southern region exhibit lower participation despite positive regional effects among Hindu SCs and Hindu UCs.

Table 3: Average Marginal Effects (Estimates of Pooled Probit Regression) of Socio-Economic Characteristics on Participation in Employment Activities among Hindu SC, Hindu UC, and Muslim in India, 2019-24

Background Characteristics	Hindu SC		Hindu UC		Muslim	
	2019	2024	2019	2024	2019	2024
	AME (SE)	AME (SE)	AME (SE)	AME (SE)	AME (SE)	AME (SE)
Age Group 15–24®						
25–34	0.273*** (0.006)	0.292*** (0.007)	0.315*** (0.005)	0.335*** (0.005)	0.254*** (0.007)	0.280*** (0.007)
35–44	0.373*** (0.007)	0.418*** (0.007)	0.397*** (0.006)	0.451*** (0.006)	0.333*** (0.008)	0.359*** (0.008)
45–54	0.373*** (0.008)	0.408*** (0.008)	0.400*** (0.006)	0.447*** (0.006)	0.319*** (0.009)	0.339*** (0.009)
55–64	0.255*** (0.009)	0.323*** (0.009)	0.292*** (0.007)	0.330*** (0.007)	0.244*** (0.010)	0.273*** (0.010)
Marital Status Never Married®						
Currently Married	−0.065*** (0.007)	−0.078*** (0.007)	−0.116*** (0.006)	−0.136*** (0.006)	−0.114*** (0.008)	−0.126*** (0.007)
Divorced/ Separated	−0.115*** (0.011)	−0.134*** (0.011)	−0.229*** (0.010)	−0.241*** (0.010)	−0.253*** (0.013)	−0.242*** (0.013)
Widowed	0.044* (0.026)	−0.002 (0.026)	−0.034 (0.024)	−0.035 (0.025)	−0.100*** (0.034)	−0.038 (0.031)
Education Level Illiterate®						
Primary	0.094*** (0.006)	0.075*** (0.006)	0.057*** (0.007)	0.052*** (0.008)	0.083*** (0.007)	0.098*** (0.007)
Middle	0.108*** (0.006)	0.084*** (0.006)	0.066*** (0.007)	0.055*** (0.008)	0.074*** (0.007)	0.081*** (0.008)
Secondary	0.073*** (0.006)	0.045*** (0.007)	0.067*** (0.006)	0.049*** (0.007)	0.042*** (0.007)	0.032*** (0.008)
Graduate and above	0.124*** (0.009)	0.056*** (0.009)	0.155*** (0.007)	0.137*** (0.008)	0.107*** (0.010)	0.083*** (0.010)
Place of Residence Rural®						
Urban	0.007 (0.005)	−0.007 (0.005)	−0.010** (0.004)	−0.040*** (0.004)	0.022*** (0.005)	−0.000 (0.005)
MPCE Poorest®						
Poor	0.002 (0.007)	0.010* (0.006)	−0.004 (0.008)	0.004 (0.007)	−0.015* (0.009)	0.001 (0.007)
Middle	−0.024*** (0.007)	0.011* (0.006)	−0.032*** (0.008)	−0.013* (0.007)	−0.031*** (0.009)	−0.003 (0.007)
Richer	−0.045*** (0.007)	0.005 (0.007)	−0.057*** (0.007)	−0.026*** (0.007)	−0.040*** (0.009)	−0.013* (0.008)
Richest	−0.068*** (0.008)	0.005 (0.009)	−0.097*** (0.008)	−0.039*** (0.007)	−0.068*** (0.010)	0.008 (0.010)

Background Characteristics	Hindu SC		Hindu UC		Muslim	
	2019	2024	2019	2024	2019	2024
	AME (SE)	AME (SE)	AME (SE)	AME (SE)	AME (SE)	AME (SE)
Household Size <5 members®						
5 members or more	−0.008* (0.004)	−0.028*** (0.004)	0.004 (0.004)	−0.016*** (0.004)	−0.014*** (0.005)	−0.030*** (0.005)
Region North®						
Central	−0.044*** (0.007)	−0.021*** (0.007)	−0.056*** (0.006)	−0.035*** (0.006)	−0.057*** (0.008)	0.015* (0.008)
East	−0.022*** (0.007)	−0.027*** (0.006)	−0.022*** (0.005)	−0.033*** (0.006)	−0.013 (0.009)	0.031*** (0.008)
Northeast	−0.041*** (0.010)	−0.059*** (0.010)	0.012 (0.008)	0.006 (0.008)	−0.038*** (0.010)	−0.001 (0.009)
West	0.059*** (0.009)	0.041*** (0.009)	0.103*** (0.005)	0.096*** (0.006)	0.025** (0.010)	0.035*** (0.009)
South	0.057*** (0.007)	0.057*** (0.007)	0.048*** (0.006)	0.045*** (0.007)	−0.053*** (0.009)	−0.040*** (0.008)

Note: Standard errors are reported in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

Table 4 presents OLS estimates of differences in the determinants of time allocation to employment activities across Hindu SC, Hindu UC, and Muslim individuals. The period effect is insignificant for Hindu SCs and Muslims, while Hindu UCs experienced a significant increase in working hours in 2024 relative to 2019. Employment time is higher among prime-age individuals but declines among those aged 55–64. Widowed, divorced, and separated individuals consistently report fewer working hours than never-married individuals. Urban residence is positively associated with employment hours across all groups, with the largest effect among Hindu UCs. Education generally increases work intensity among Hindu SCs and Hindu UCs, while among Muslims, primary and middle education increase working hours but graduate education is associated with fewer hours. Higher MPCE is positively associated with work intensity, particularly among Muslims. In contrast, individuals from larger households consistently report fewer employment hours across all groups. Substantial regional differences are also observed. Compared with the Northern region, Central and Northeastern residents generally report fewer working hours, while the effects of Eastern, Western, and Southern regions vary across socio-religious groups.

The interaction effects indicate that changes in work intensity between 2019 and 2024 were uneven across socio-economic groups. Among Hindu UCs, increases in working hours were moderated for older, urban, and Eastern and Southern residents. Among Hindu SCs, year effects were stronger for individuals with secondary and higher education, larger households, and residents of Central, Northeastern, and Western regions. Among Muslims, significant interactions with education, household

size, MPCE, and region indicate heterogeneous changes, including increased work hours among educated individuals and those in larger households, while the positive association with higher MPCE weakened in 2024.

Table 4: Estimates of Pooled OLS Regression for Time Allocation (in Hours) in Daily Employment Activities Among Hindu SC, Hindu UC, and Muslim in India, 2019-24

	Hindu SC	Hindu UC	Muslim
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Survey Year (Ref: 2019)			
2024	0.106 (0.111)	0.929*** (0.131)	-0.175 (0.141)
Age Group (Ref: 15–24)			
25–34	0.586*** (0.061)	0.982*** (0.059)	0.544*** (0.069)
35–44	0.558*** (0.067)	0.863*** (0.066)	0.445*** (0.078)
45–54	0.464*** (0.072)	0.769*** (0.068)	0.339*** (0.084)
55–64	0.067 (0.080)	0.428*** (0.073)	-0.051 (0.094)
Marital Status (Ref: Never married)			
Currently Married	0.008 (0.057)	0.000 (0.049)	0.013 (0.066)
Divorced/Separated	-0.559*** (0.094)	-0.961*** (0.096)	-1.172*** (0.132)
Widowed	-0.206 (0.183)	0.184 (0.184)	-0.830** (0.274)
Place of Residence (Ref: Rural)			
Urban	0.809*** (0.037)	1.497*** (0.034)	0.992*** (0.043)
Education (Ref: Illiterate)			
Primary	0.324*** (0.048)	0.322*** (0.063)	0.145* (0.057)
Middle	0.365*** (0.051)	0.458*** (0.062)	0.257*** (0.062)
Secondary	0.244*** (0.051)	0.355*** (0.057)	0.072 (0.061)
Graduate and above	0.037 (0.069)	0.150* (0.062)	-0.319*** (0.083)
MPCE Quintile (Ref: Poorest)			
Poorer	0.108* (0.052)	-0.058 (0.067)	0.115 (0.072)
Middle	0.081 (0.053)	0.064 (0.065)	0.348*** (0.071)
Richer	0.158** (0.057)	0.154* (0.064)	0.497*** (0.073)
Richest	0.157* (0.065)	0.153* (0.065)	0.549*** (0.079)
Household Size (Ref: <5 members)			
5 members or more	-0.086* (0.036)	-0.083* (0.033)	-0.181*** (0.043)
Region (Ref: North)			
Central	-0.603*** (0.055)	-0.502*** (0.053)	-0.266*** (0.069)
East	-0.565*** (0.055)	0.113* (0.049)	-0.261*** (0.070)
Northeast	-1.172*** (0.079)	-0.898*** (0.065)	-1.625*** (0.082)
West	-0.285*** (0.067)	0.104* (0.045)	-0.062 (0.077)
South	-0.408*** (0.054)	0.010 (0.051)	-0.166* (0.072)

	Hindu SC	Hindu UC	Muslim
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Survey Year × Age Group			
2024 × 25–34	-0.090 (0.086)	-0.248** (0.087)	-0.074 (0.098)
2024 × 35–44	-0.109 (0.095)	-0.210* (0.097)	-0.043 (0.110)
2024 × 45–54	-0.052 (0.101)	-0.163 (0.100)	-0.109 (0.119)
2024 × 55–64	0.077 (0.111)	-0.227* (0.107)	-0.020 (0.132)
Survey Year × Marital Status			
2024 × Currently Married	-0.303*** (0.079)	-0.156* (0.070)	-0.170 (0.092)
2024 × Divorced/Separated	-0.178 (0.129)	0.028 (0.136)	0.152 (0.184)
2024 × Widowed	-0.606* (0.256)	-0.697** (0.262)	-0.106 (0.356)
Survey Year × Place of Residence			
2024 × Urban	0.039 (0.052)	-0.318*** (0.048)	-0.315*** (0.059)
Survey Year × Education			
2024 × Primary	-0.041 (0.068)	-0.170 (0.095)	0.203* (0.082)
2024 × Middle	0.153* (0.073)	-0.144 (0.094)	0.006 (0.090)
2024 × Secondary	0.303*** (0.071)	0.045 (0.086)	0.210* (0.088)
2024 × Graduate & Above	0.317*** (0.095)	0.016 (0.092)	0.238* (0.115)
Survey Year × MPCE			
2024 × Poorer	-0.216** (0.068)	-0.011 (0.089)	-0.072 (0.090)
2024 × Middle	-0.136 (0.072)	-0.146 (0.087)	-0.308*** (0.091)
2024 × Richer	-0.247** (0.079)	-0.221* (0.087)	-0.525*** (0.097)
2024 × Richest	-0.070 (0.095)	-0.130 (0.091)	-0.152 (0.114)
Survey Year × Household Size			
2024 × 5 members or more	0.172*** (0.050)	0.074 (0.048)	0.193*** (0.060)
Survey Year × Region			
2024 × Central	0.285*** (0.075)	0.177* (0.075)	0.766*** (0.095)
2024 × East	-0.050 (0.074)	-0.471*** (0.069)	0.077 (0.095)
2024 × Northeast	0.508*** (0.111)	0.287** (0.093)	1.789*** (0.112)
2024 × West	0.276** (0.094)	0.057 (0.065)	0.781*** (0.107)
2024 × South	0.061 (0.075)	-0.390*** (0.075)	0.369*** (0.099)
Constant	6.961*** (0.079)	5.708*** (0.088)	6.708*** (0.100)

Note: Standard errors are reported in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

Heterogeneity in Labour Market Participation in Different Sectors

Table 5 shows distinct patterns of industrial employment among Hindu SC, Hindu UC, and Muslim workers during 2019–24. Hindu SCs remained concentrated in the primary sector, although their share declined slightly from 34.8 per cent in 2019 to

33.4 per cent in 2024, indicating continued dependence on agriculture. Hindu UCs had the highest concentration in the tertiary sector, increasing from 46.9 per cent to 49.8 per cent, reflecting greater participation in service-oriented and relatively skilled activities. Muslims remained strongly concentrated in the secondary sector, although their share declined marginally from 40.6 percent to 40.0 percent.

At the detailed industry level, agriculture, forestry, and fishing remained the largest employer of Hindu SCs, followed by construction and manufacturing. Their declining shares in agriculture and construction, alongside increases in manufacturing and retail trade, indicate gradual employment diversification. However, their representation remained limited in information and communication, finance, and professional and technical activities. Hindu UCs showed greater participation in higher-value service activities. Alongside agriculture and manufacturing, their employment increased in wholesale and retail trade and information and communication, while construction declined. They also maintained comparatively higher shares in education, finance, and professional activities. Muslims displayed a distinct concentration in manufacturing, construction, and wholesale and retail trade. Manufacturing increased from 19.7 per cent to 20.3 per cent, while trade rose from 15.3 per cent to 17.6 per cent. Transportation and storage also remained important. However, Muslim participation continued to be relatively low in information and communication, financial, professional, technical, and public administration activities (Appendix Table A3).

Table (6) shows time allocation across major industries and socio-religious groups during 2019–24. Time spent in primary activities declined slightly, particularly among Muslims. Secondary-sector time remained stable for Hindu SC and Hindu Others but declined among Muslims. Tertiary-sector time was largely stable, indicating persistent differences in work-time allocation across industries and groups. Corresponding to this, average time spent in employment activities varied modestly across industries and socio-religious groups between 2019 and 2024 (see Appendix Table A4). Longer working hours were generally observed in transportation, accommodation and food services, information and communication, wholesale and retail trade, construction, and mining, where workers typically spent 8–9 hours per day. In contrast, agriculture and education recorded comparatively shorter working hours, averaging 6–7 hours across all groups. Hindu Upper Castes generally reported slightly longer working hours in knowledge-intensive and formal sectors, while Hindu SCs and Muslims exhibited similar work durations in manual occupations. Overall, average daily working hours remained relatively stable over time despite minor sector-specific changes (see Appendix Table A4).

Table 5: Major Industry division of Labour Market Participation (%) across Socio-Religious Groups in India (2019-24)

	2019			2024		
	Hindu SC	**Hindu UC**	**Muslim**	**Hindu SC**	**Hindu UC**	**Muslim**
Primary	34.8	28.9	21.7	33.4	27.2	20.6
Secondary	37.5	24.2	40.6	36.7	23.0	40.0
Tertiary	27.8	46.9	37.7	29.9	49.8	39.4

Table 6: Time Allocation (in hours) across Major Industry and Socio-Religious Groups, 2019-24

	2019			2024		
	Hindu SC	**Hindu UC**	**Muslim**	**Hindu SC**	**Hindu UC**	**Muslim**
Primary	6.7	6.3	6.4	6.5	6.4	6.1
Secondary	8.2	8.5	8.1	8.2	8.5	7.7
Tertiary	8.2	8.4	8.2	8.1	8.4	8.2

Discussion and Conclusions

The study has attempted to investigate the disparities in participation and time allocation among Hindu SC, Hindu UC, and Muslim in employment activities, by positing that socio-religious identity plays a critical role in labour market outcomes through entrenched historical and social division of labour (Jodhka, 2002; Darity & Deshpande, 2003; Thorat, 2004). Although Hindu SC and Muslim both experience socio-religious discrimination, the nature and extent of it varies (Thorat, 2004, 2009; Das, 2006). Household characteristics intersect with socio-religious institutions in ways that upward mobility remains out of reach, restricting marginalised communities to low-return occupations (Das & Dutta, 2007; Agrawal, 2011; Thorat et al., 2021).

Social and cultural capital continues to ration out better labour opportunities to Hindu UC (Thorat et al., 2021; Tiwari et al., 2022). While scholarship has focused on caste, labour market, and wage, fewer studies have investigated the time-use-employment nexus beyond the gendered aspect (Eswaran et al., 2013; Dasgupta & Datta, 2023). Modelling on Becker's (1965) labour-leisure thesis, time investment as proxy for employment could help to understand productivity and investment in employment activities.

Several important findings emerged from this study. First, overall participation in employment activities increased across socio-religious groups during 2019-24 with highest participation among Hindu SC followed by Hindu UC. Improvement in Muslim's employment activities is also evident, yet they have the lowest participation rate, and where it exists, it is largely distress-driven and led by women, particularly after COVID-19. This is a classic case of the 'added worker effect', whereby women join the labour market to compensate for male income loss (Lundberg, 1985). Despite

this increase, the gender gap in labour market is clear across all groups, with highest gender gap among Muslims (62 per cent) in both periods. For instance, Hindu SC women entered in the labour market in greater numbers, as compared to Hindu UC and Muslim women, because of poor household financial condition as well low status issues (Eswaran et al., 2013). In contrast, women from Hindu UC category, might not join labour market, especially agricultural sector to maintain their household social status. Similarly, low participation of Muslims reflects that despite distressed household economic condition, Muslim women experienced more restrictions on their employment activities (Eswaran et al., 2013). This is evident in the fact that the gap remained stable in Hindu SC and Muslim, while it increased for Hindu UC from 49 per cent to 52 per cent during 2019-24.

Education is another vector of labour market outcomes, with returns to education differing across socio-religious groups (Thorat & Attewell, 2007; Thorat et al., 2021). The findings demonstrate that Hindu UC with higher education record the highest participation rate, followed by Hindu SC and Muslims. This is consistent with other Indian studies which suggest a low return on education for Muslims (Sachar, 2006; Das, 2008; Thorat & Neuman, 2012; Deshpande & Newman, 2007). In contrast, Hindu UC with higher education experienced an improvement of 3.1 per cent in labour force participation over time, a trend that is consistent with the literature on hegemonic domination of the Hindu UC (Thorat & Newman, 2007; Deshpande & Newman, 2007; Mamgain, 2018).

Urban areas illustrate another aspect of market discrimination, where Muslim participation trailed during 2019-24 (Shaban, 2016; Thorat & Attewell, 2007; Thorat et al., 2021). Interestingly, labour market participation improved across all regions and socio-religious groups. However, Muslim experienced a 0.5 per cent decline in North India during 2019-24, which reflects negligible but important market exclusion. This could reflect the emergence of recent Hindu majoritarian local institutions in North and Central India. The empirical evidence suggests that Muslims had the lowest probabilities of labour market participation compared to Hindu UC, while Hindu SC show higher chances of participation. In addition, the period effect shows an adverse effect on Muslim labour market and a positive effect on Hindu SC. The findings substantiate the labour market exclusion of Muslims in India, which could be an appendage of the rise in Hindu majoritarian institutions and the subsequent social closure they breed, leading to the exclusion of Muslim workers due to historical regard of them as outsiders (Weber, 1978). In contrast, Hindu SC show higher probabilities of participation than Hindu UC with an increase over time, characteristic of distress participation as well as social closure. For example, Hindu SCs concentrate in low-skilled jobs due to lower economic capital and less bargaining power. First, it is possible that the recorded positive effect of period is an impact of COVID-19 induced economic marginalisation which compelled many women and younger people to

participate in the labour market. Second, under the aegis of the recent development of Hindutva led institution, firms or local market preferring Hindu SC in the secondary sector remain excluded.

This study also explored how non-economic activities influence individuals' employment activities across Hindu SC, Hindu UC and Muslim with temporal changes. The findings suggest a massive adverse effect of non-economic activities on employment activities across socio-religious groups. Although all major non-economic activities had a strong and negative effect, learning and unpaid domestic work occupy the lion's share in deciding employment activities. Importantly, learning activities had the highest impact on Hindu SC, followed by Hindu UC and Muslims. A possible explanation could be the increasing enrolment of Hindu SC and Hindu UC in educational institutions, subsequently affecting their participation in the labour market. Although Muslims also demonstrate adverse effect of learning activities on employment, it is lower than that of Hindu SC and Hindu UC. Unpaid domestic work also showed higher adverse impact on employment activities across all socio-religious groups. However, the extent and nature of impact varied across all groups. For example, unpaid domestic work had a strong negative impact on employment activities for Hindu UC, followed by Muslim and Hindu SC.

Indian feminist scholarship suggests that women from upper castes do not participate in the low skilled labour market to preserve their household social status (Eswaran et al., 2013). Additionally, post COVID-19 a spike in female work participation has largely been concentrated in the agricultural sector, where Hindu SCs have historically been engaged due to poverty and economic distress, while Hindu UC and Muslims record lesser participation. Therefore, Hindu SC women can enter in and out of the workforce much more easily, a pattern that is consistent with the added worker theory.

Another important finding emerged from changes over time across groups. Compared with 2019, the adverse impact of unpaid domestic work was reduced among Hindu SC and Hindu UC, but it increased among Muslims. It is possible that Hindu UC and Hindu SC transitioned into the informal market or agriculture, while Muslims are placed far worse in the informal market. Time allocation behaviour in employment activities among Hindu SC, Hindu UC and Muslim is also one of the findings of the study. Negligible differences in daily time spent in employment activities among socio-religious groups are noted, with almost a stagnant trend. It reflects that although participation rate increased across socio-religious groups, the time investment remained unchanged. However, intra-group disparities in time allocation are clearly visible. The gender gap in time allocation is pronounced across all groups, with a massive gender difference among the Muslim category, suggesting marginalisation of Muslim women in the labour market overtime. Importantly, amongst educated Hindu SC and UC, time spent on unpaid domestic work decreased over time, a direct outcome of better returns

to their education. In contrast, the time spent in employment activities by educated Muslim individuals reduced over time, especially among those with a graduate degree or above. This could be a result of high concentration of Muslims in the informal sector and self-employment, which might restrict their access to decent labour market and service sector (Thorat & Newman, 2007; Das, 2008). It is also possible that because of their low educational attainment (Deshpande, 2006; Deshpande & Yadav, 2006; Mohanty, 2006), Muslims are highly concentrated in sectors where returns on their education and requirement of time investment are low.

Urban-rural differences in time allocation are prevalent across all socio-religious groups, notwithstanding that the location difference reduced over time. Amongst Muslims, this reduction emerged due to a decline in time spent in urban areas, where they might experience discrimination in the labour market due to perceived labourer preferences, housing segregation, and restriction in some sectors (Mishra, 2023; Thorat & Attewell, 2007; Thorat et al., 2021). This study also suggests that rich individuals across all socio-religious groups spent greater time, owing to their higher human and social capital, with the returns on their capital encouraging them to spend more time in employment activities. Regional differences in time allocation within groups are highly visible. Individuals from the North-East spent the lowest time in employment activities, with Muslims accounting for the least time spent among socio-religious groups in 2019. However, time spent by all socio-religious groups from the North-East increased massively in 2024, with maximum gains among Muslims. In contrast, Muslims experienced a substantial decline in time spent in North India, while time spent by Hindu UC and SC increased during 2019-24, which strengthened the exclusionary labour market state for Muslims. Although the period effect shows an insignificant impact on Muslim time allocation, the direction suggests an adverse impact on it. This study clearly shows that Hindu SC and Hindu UC received the advantage of period, with strong and significant positive impact on time allocation among Hindu UC. This study also suggests a positive and strong association of time allocation and education among Hindu SC and Muslim, although the period effect had a more positive impact on educated Hindu SC.

Although participation rate and time allocation are able to explain the market discrimination across socio-religious groups, the industry-level participation can strengthen the above findings through the classification of individual participation and time allocation across groups. This study reconfirms the findings of previous scholarship that Hindu SC were highly concentrated in the primary sector (Thorat & Umakant, 2004; Thorat, 2009). In contrast, Hindu UC were highly concentrated in the tertiary sector which increased over time. This finding is also consistent with other Indian scholarship that suggested a high concentration of upper caste Hindus in the tertiary or service sector (Deshpande & Newman, 2007), while lower representation of Hindu SC and Muslim (Thorat, 2009). In addition, Muslim were highly concentrated

in the secondary sector (Sachar, 2006; Thorat & Neuman, 2012; Thorat & Attewell, 2007). Further segregation of industrial engagement reconfirms labour market discrimination and hegemony of upper caste in decent and service sector. For example, high-paid jobs such as real estate, professional, scientific services, public administration, administrative positions, health and social services, and education sectors are highly occupied by Hindu UC. These jobs required high skills, social networks, human, cultural, and social capital, where Hindu UC get an advantage due to their intergenerational hegemony, social hierarchy, better human capital and social closure in these top positions and businesses (Das, 2006; Deshpande, 2006; Deshpande & Yadav, 2006; Mohanty, 2006; Jodhka & Newman, 2007).

These findings are consistent with the Weberian framework of social closure, where dominant groups maintain their economic hegemony by restricting weaker groups' access to resources and markets (Weber, 1978). The study also tailgates Bourdieu's (1986) idea of cultural and social capital, which are preserved by dominant groups to fence off the gains of the market. For instance, the tertiary sector's occupations require a specific and high-skilled human capital, which is easily available to the Hindu upper castes through their social, economic and political hegemony, with an entrenched caste-system making the scaffolding. The idea of cultural capital also extends to communication and information, which is again dominated by Hindu UC. In contrast, Hindu SC and Muslim face difficulty in acquiring such advantages due to their intergenerational capital deprivation and social closure, as well as low education and poor human capital. For example, Bourdieu (1986) suggested that family and social institutions are the main contributors in human capital development through transmission of health, knowledge, language and values, all highly regarded in top market positions. In India, this is apparent in the hegemony of upper castes over social and cultural institutions as an appendage of their economic hegemony and caste hierarchy.

Furthermore, while the representation of Hindu SC in the tertiary sector is low, their representation is higher than Muslims, which reflects a positive impact of mandatory caste reservation. The low participation of Muslims in agriculture and the tertiary sector, and their higher concentration in manufacturing and construction is consistent with previous scholarship. Ali and Mondal (2025) suggested that landholding among Muslims is lower compared with that of Hindu UC and SC, which restricts their participation in agriculture sector. Similarly, due to low human capital and market discrimination, Muslims are compelled to work in construction and manufacturing sector, which need semi-skilled workers (Deshpande, 2006; Deshpande & Yadav, 2006; Mohanty, 2006). In addition, Muslims have the least representation in white-collar occupations such as professional, scientific services, public administration, administrative position, health and social services and education sector. This exclusion could be a reflection of repeated discrimination, poor social networks, and

intergenerational experiences, which over time created a perception of low return on education and discrimination among Muslims.

While this study does not find differences in time allocation within sector among Hindu SC, Hindu UC and Muslims, inter-sectoral disparities are clearly visible, with individuals engaged in the primary sector spending less time than those in the secondary and tertiary sectors. Further sectoral segregation suggests time allocation with visible differences. Individual working in high paid jobs spent more time than those involved in agriculture across all social groups. Interestingly, this study suggests that individuals engaged in the education sector spent the least time than any other industry. Overall, this study finds and substantiates massive differences and representation in the labour market participation. This study concludes that Hindu UC have maintained their market hegemony through their strong hold on social and economic institutions. The social walls of the market restrict Hindu SC and Muslims, prevent them from accessing upward mobility, and provide an advantage to Hindu UC in decent work. Hindu SC continue to work in informal and low-paid jobs, while Muslims crowd in the secondary sector, reflecting their low human capital as well as market exclusion.

References

Agrawal, T. (2011). Returns to education in India: Some recent evidence (Working Paper No. 2011-017). *Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research (IGIDR).*

Ali, B., & Mondal, N.A. (2025). Landholdings in Uttar Pradesh: Distributional inequalities among socio-religious categories. In *Muslims of Uttar Pradesh* (pp. 293-308). Routledge India.

Becker, G.S. (1957). The Economics of Discrimination. University of Chicago Press..

Becker, G.S. (1965). A Theory of the Allocation of Time. *The Economic Journal*, *75*(299), 493–517.

Belotti, F., Deb, P., Manning, W.G., & Norton, E.C. (2015). twopm: Two-part models. *The Stata Journal*, *15*(1), 3–20.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. *Cultural theory: An anthology*, *1*(81-93), 949.

Cameron, A.C., & Trivedi, P.K. (2005). *Microeconometrics: Methods and applications.* Cambridge University Press. http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511811241

Darity, W., & Deshpande, A. (Eds.). (2003). *Boundaries of Clan and Colour*. Routledge.

Das, M.B. (2006). Do traditional axes of exclusion affect labor market outcomes in India? Social Science Research Network.

Das, M.B. (2008). *Minority Status and Labor Market Outcomes: Does India Have Minority Enclaves?*. (Policy Research Working Paper No. 4653). World Bank.

Das, M.B., & Dutta, P.V. (2007). Does caste matter for wages in the Indian labor market. World Bank.

Dasgupta, A., & Datta, A. (2023). *Geography, religion, caste and gendered lives: Evidence from an Indian Time Use Survey* (Working Paper No. 98). Ashoka University, Department of Economics.

Deshpande, A. (2006). [Review of the book *Caste in question: Identity or hierarchy?*, edited by D. Gupta]. *Pacific Affairs*, *79*(2), 345–347.

Deshpande, A., & Newman, K. (2007). Where the path leads: The role of caste in post-university employment expectations. *Economic and Political Weekly*,*42*(41), 4133–4140.

Deshpande, S., & Yadav, Y. (2006). Redesigning affirmative action: Castes and benefits in higher education. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *41*(24), 2419–2424.

Duan, N., Manning, W.G., Morris, C.N., & Newhouse, J. P. (1983). A comparison of alternative models for the demand for medical care. *Journal of business & economic statistics*, *1*(2), 115–126. https://doi.org/10.2307/1391852

Eswaran, M., Ramaswami, B., & Wadhwa, W. (2013). Status, caste, and the time allocation of women in rural India. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, *61*(2), 311–333. https://doi.org/10.1086/668282

Jodhka, S.S. (2002). Caste and untouchability in rural Punjab. *Economic and political weekly*, *37*(19), 1813–1823.

Jodhka, S.S., & Newman, K. (2007). In the name of globalisation: Meritocracy, productivity and the hidden language of caste. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *42*(41), 4125–4132.

Lundberg, S. (1985). The added worker effect. *Journal of Labor Economics*, *3*(1), 11–37.

Madheswaran, S., & Attewell, P. (2007). Caste discrimination in the Indian urban labour market: Evidence from the National Sample Survey. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *42*(41), 4146–4153.

Mamgain, R.P. (2018). New forms of recruitment processes and discrimination in urban labour market in India. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies*, *4*(1), 131–150. https://doi.org/10.1177/2394481118775180

Mishra, V.K. (2023). Caste and religion matters in access to housing, drinking water, and toilets: Empirical evidence from National Sample Surveys, India *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, *4*(1), 24–45.

Mohanty, M. (2006). Social inequality, labour market dynamics and reservation. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *41*(35), 3777-3789.

National Statistical Office. (2020). *Time use in India, 2019*. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.

National Statistical Office. (2025). *Time use in India, 2024*. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.

Newhouse, J.P. (1974). A design for a health insurance experiment. *Inquiry*, *11*(1), 5–27.Sachar, R. (2006). *Social, economic and educational status of the Muslim community of India: A report.* Prime Minister's High Level Committee, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India. Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom.* Oxford University Press.

Shaban, A. (2016). Muslim citizenship, identity and violence in India. In K. Kannabiran (Ed.), *Violence Studies* (pp. 142–169). Oxford University Press.

Thorat, S. (2004). On reservation policy for private sector. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *39*(25), 2560–2563. Thorat, S. (2009). *Dalits in India: Search for a common destiny*. SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9788132101086.

Thorat, S., & Attewell, P. (2007). The legacy of social exclusion: A correspondence study of job discrimination in India. *Economic and political weekly*, 4141-4145.

Thorat, S. Umakant. (Eds.). (2004). *Caste, race, and discrimination: discourses in international context*.Thorat, S., & Neuman, K. S. (2012). *Blocked by caste: Economic discrimination in modern India*. Oxford University Press.

Thorat, S., & Newman, K.S. (2007). Caste and economic discrimination: Causes, consequences and remedies. *Economic and political weekly*, 4121–4124.Thorat, S., Madheswaran, S., & Vani, B. P. (2021). Employment Discrimination and Its Impact on Poverty: Caste and Labour Market. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *56*(21).

Tiwari, C., Goli, S., Siddiqui, M.Z., & Salve, P. S. (2022). Poverty, wealth inequality and financial inclusion among castes in Hindu and Muslim communities in Uttar Pradesh, India. *Journal of International Development*, *34*(6), 1227–1255. https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3626

Tobin, J. (1958). Estimation of relationships for limited dependent variables. *Econometrica, 26*(1), *24*–36. https://doi.org/10.2307/1907382

United Nations Statistics Division. (2017). *International classification of activities for time-use statistics 2016* (Statistical Papers Series M, No. 98). United Nations.

Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). University of California Press. (Original work published 1922)Wooldridge, J. M. (2010). *Econometric analysis of cross section and panel data*. The MIT Press.

Appendices

Table A1: Estimates for Impact of Socio-Religious Groups on Time Allocation (in Hours) in India, 2019-24

Independent Variables	Unadjusted Model	Adjusted Model
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Survey year (Ref: 2019)		
2024	0.207*** (0.021)	0.535*** (0.076)
Caste group (Ref: Hindu UC)		
Hindu SC	-0.001 (012)	0.312*** (0.024)
Muslim	0.006 (0.025)	0.205*** (0.026)
Survey year × Caste group		
2024 × Hindu SC	-0.237*** (0.032)	-0.210*** (0.034)
2024 × Muslim	-0.233*** (0.035)	-0.254*** (0.037)
Control variables	No	Yes
Constant	7.480*** (0.015)	6.239*** (0.053)

Notes: Standard errors are reported in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

Table A2: Estimates for Impact of Non-Employment Activity Engagement on Time Allocation (in Hours) of Hindu SC, Hindu UC, and Muslim in India, 2019-24

Independent Variables	Hindu SC	Hindu UC	Muslim
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Survey year (Ref: 2019)			
2024	0.053 (0.096)	-0.223** (0.090)	-0.100 (0.127)
Food production	-1.807*** (0.043)	-2.102*** (0.043)	-2.461*** (0.056)
Unpaid domestic services	-1.522*** (0.030)	-1.753*** (0.027)	-1.739*** (0.037)
Unpaid caregiving	-0.504*** (0.038)	-0.723*** (0.037)	-0.528*** (0.044)
Learning	-4.593*** (0.097)	-3.979*** (0.074)	-4.141*** (0.117)
Socialisation	-1.005*** (0.054)	-1.131*** (0.045)	-1.143*** (0.078)
Leisure	-1.112*** (0.039)	-1.462*** (0.041)	-1.042*** (0.046)
Survey year × Activity participation			
2024 × Food production	0.781*** (0.058)	0.802*** (0.062)	1.384*** (0.081)
2024 × Unpaid domestic services	-0.031 (0.041)	0.112*** (0.039)	-0.172*** (0.050)
2024 × Unpaid caregiving	-0.096 (0.049)	0.080 (0.048)	-0.063 (0.057)
2024 × Learning	1.242*** (0.164)	0.945*** (0.121)	0.832*** (0.200)
2024 × Socialisation	-0.246** (0.078)	-0.052 (0.066)	-0.103 (0.109)
2024 × Leisure	0.271*** (0.062)	0.437*** (0.068)	0.268*** (0.074)
Control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: Standard errors are reported in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

Table A3: Minor Industry Division of Labour Market Participation (%) across Socio-Religious Groups in India, 2019-24

	2019			2024		
	Hindu SC	Hindu UC	Muslim	Hindu SC	Hindu UC	Muslim
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	34.76	28.88	21.73	33.36	27.22	20.57
Mining and Quarrying	0.58	0.59	0.36	0.38	0.22	0.22
Manufacturing	10.96	14.39	19.69	12.69	14.47	20.33
Electricity, Gas, Steam and Air Conditioning Supply	0.43	0.57	0.35	0.36	0.55	0.22
Water Supply; Sewerage, Waste Management and Remediation Activities	0.56	0.41	0.48	0.79	0.37	0.54

	2019			2024		
	Hindu SC	**Hindu UC**	**Muslim**	**Hindu SC**	**Hindu UC**	**Muslim**
Construction	24.93	8.28	19.74	22.5	7.42	18.72
Wholesale and Retail Trade; Repair of Motor Vehicles and Motorcycles	7.32	13.18	15.29	8.41	14.97	17.62
Transportation and Storage	4.82	4.99	7.64	5.14	5.68	7.98
Accommodation and Food Service Activities	1.52	2.42	1.86	1.92	2.84	2.37
Information and Communication	0.93	3.39	0.98	0.98	4.49	0.99
Financial and Insurance Activities	0.8	2.78	0.57	0.93	2.89	0.52
Real Estate Activities	0.09	0.34	0.11	0.09	0.45	0.18
Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities	0.64	2.04	0.57	0.49	2.15	0.56
Administrative and Support Service Activities	2.19	3.81	1.9	2.07	2.87	1.46
Public Administration and Defence; Compulsory Social Security	1.72	2.11	0.7	1.53	1.84	0.82
Education	2.53	5.83	2.61	2.52	5.63	2.46
Human Health and Social Work Activities	1.36	2.32	1.19	1.75	2.28	1.08
Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	0.36	0.42	0.3	0.29	0.34	0.19
Other Service Activities	2.16	2.46	2.99	2.49	2.64	2.63
Activities of Households as Employers; Undifferentiated Goods- and Services-Producing Activities of Households for Own Use	1.33	0.78	0.94	1.27	0.68	0.56
Activities of Extraterritorial Organizations and Bodies	0.02	0.02	0	0.01	0	0

Table A4: Time Allocation (in Hours) across Minor Industry and Socio-Religious Groups, 2019-24

Industry	2019			2024		
	Hindu SC	Hindu UC	Muslim	Hindu SC	Hindu UC	Muslim
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	6.7	6.3	6.4	6.5	6.4	6.1
Mining and Quarrying	7.5	8.3	7.5	8.5	9.1	8.7
Manufacturing	8.3	8.6	7.9	8.1	8.5	7.4
Electricity, Gas, Steam and Air Conditioning Supply	8.7	8.1	8.3	9.1	8.6	7.9
Water Supply; Sewerage, Waste Management and Remediation Activities	7.6	8.3	8.4	7.6	7.7	7.6
Construction	8.2	8.4	8.2	8.2	8.3	8.1
Wholesale and Retail Trade; Repair of Motor Vehicles and Motorcycles	8.7	8.8	8.4	8.5	8.8	8.5
Transportation and Storage	9.0	8.9	8.9	8.7	9.0	8.5
Accommodation and Food Service Activities	9.0	8.9	8.8	8.7	9.1	8.7
Information and Communication	8.8	9.1	8.5	8.4	8.5	8.6
Financial and Insurance Activities	8.0	8.6	8.9	8.0	8.3	7.9
Real Estate Activities	7.7	8.0	6.7	7.8	7.9	6.9
Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities	8.3	8.4	7.9	7.8	8.3	8.0
Administrative and Support Service Activities	8.4	8.9	8.4	8.4	8.8	8.1
Public Administration and Defence; Compulsory Social Security	8.1	8.2	8.0	8.2	8.7	7.8
Education	6.5	6.6	6.4	6.6	6.5	6.2
Human Health and Social Work Activities	7.8	7.9	7.6	8.2	8.1	8.1
Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	7.9	7.8	7.8	7.9	8.2	8.5
Other Service Activities	7.6	7.6	7.3	7.4	7.6	7.8
Activities of Households as Employers; Undifferentiated Goods- and Services-Producing Activities of Households for Own Use	6.9	7.5	6.0	6.5	7.0	6.3
Activities of Extraterritorial Organizations and Bodies	7.8	8.7	7.3	8.3	NA	NA

Brandeis | LIBRARY
brandeis.edu/j-caste

CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 7 No. 2 pp. 272-290
October 2026
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v7i2.2772

Indian Diplomacy: Caste, Ambedkar and Buddhist Diplomacy

Chandra Sen[1]

Abstract

In postcolonial nations like India, foreign policy and diplomacy have traditionally held a normative space apart from the supposedly "hard" power politics of the Cold War era. Following Pt. Nehru, also referred to as Nehruvian Socialism, the ruling elites in India have historically hegemonized discourse and policies in accordance with the subcontinent's hierarchical Brahmanical framework. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's departure from the Nehru administration signalled his disapproval of Indian diplomacy that was tilted towards authoritarian communism and socialism. The pragmatic approach, advocacy for the unity of "leagues of democracies," and his conversion to Buddhism further underscored the need for an alternative perspective of the Indian state in handling international affairs. While the Indian establishment tried to understand the importance of Buddhism in reaching out to other worlds especially South-East Asian societies, the current regime went one step further in displaying its keen interests to engage other world with the ideals and identity of Buddha. Interestingly, the Modi regime and his ideological underpinnings not only have serious limitations over Buddhist philosophy but it mischievously propagated Brahmanical Hinduism in better light through Buddhist roots and civilisation.

Keywords

Diplomacy, Buddhism, Caste, Ambedkar

Introduction

In the 1950s and 1960s, the process of decolonization saw the emergence of numerous independent nations all over the world. For the first time, the world recognised India as an independent country with several other Asian and African countries. At that time,

[1]Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science & International Relations, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Gautam Buddha University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India
Email: chandrasen10@mail.com

© 2026 Chandra Sen. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

the globe was divided ideologically into two camps: the Soviet Union and the United States of America. Realism and neo-realism were the major approaches and paradigms developed to comprehend world power politics and international diplomacy up until the collapse of the USSR. In order to promote South-South collaboration with African and Asian nations, India, the young state, did so under Pt. Nehru's leadership. Since India's independence, Pandit Nehru has promoted his foreign policy under the auspices of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), attempting to provide newly emerging African and other third world communities with an alternative to the Communist and Capitalist blocs.

A new paradigm emerged in international politics, i.e. State-security (realist/neo-realist) versus constructivist and culturalist or societal security, especially after the demise of the USSR. New questions were raised such as: can we perceive the state always as a universal and singular identity across the world? Are these states with reference to their nature, grievances and demands similar to Afro-Asian states?

After the 1990s, people were being brought in the centre of global political discourse rather than the state in the globalised new world order. Furthermore, new social realities such as ethnicity, religion, culture, and caste, began to emerge, providing a normative response to existing ideas of global diplomacy.

In the Indian context, a major challenge is how to analytically incorporate caste, a profoundly ingrained hierarchal social structure, into international relations. This poses an additional question: to what extent do prevailing, mostly Eurocentric theoretical frameworks have the conceptual imagination to take on caste-based structures on a global scale? However, is the caste question commonly disregarded in diplomatic language under the guise of "neutrality" and "objectivity," revealing underlying Brahmanical epistemic dominance?

Andrew Tan (2002) rightly observes: "National identity is invariably defined in terms of "the dominant group's values and culture, with other groups on the periphery tending to be left out". Global institutions related to international relations have long transgressed the watertight disciplinary boundaries. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholars have been devising interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary approaches specially in the arena of International Relations to engage with the various burning issues of the time.

Interestingly, Indian foreign policy has lately been cited as an appropriate illustration of how, under the cover of 'methodological restrictions', introducing caste problems into the subject is something highly unusual and unwanted.

Braj Ranjan Mani, the author of Debrahmanising History, assertively reacts with this sort of argumentation questioning the 'established Knowledge' system and raising the problems of recorded history. In the same manner that historian *E. H Carr*[1] asked,

[1]See E. H. Carr: All historical facts come to us because of interpretative choices by historians influenced by the standards of their age. Yet if absolute objectivity is impossible, the role of the

in 'What is history?': 'Nothing can be more hypocritical than the claims of academic neutrality and objectivity (with the tantalising premise of not 'stating' anything) that is often invoked by 'disinterested' social science. There is a writer behind every writing, and it matters from where one writes, to whom one writes, and with what objective and perspective.'[2]

What impact has caste had on Indian diplomacy, which is viewed as a puritan endeavour that uses strategic thinking and objective concepts to further national interests abroad? There hasn't been much research done in this area, however Priya Chacko and Vineet Thakur's recent works attempted to comprehend the institutions like the 'Ministry of External Affairs' and 'bureaucracy' involved in the conceptualizing and making of Indian Diplomacy.

They state that 'P.N. Haksar, himself a Kashmiri brahmin, called the MEA bureaucracy 'Brahmanical' in their mentality'. Digging deeper, they state, 'When Chokila Iyer became the foreign secretary in 2002, she was the first woman and the first SC/ST candidate to rise to the top position' (2025, 385).

In the same line, Gopal Guru explains how Hindu culture has been seen and upheld over the years while upholding the principles of "theorizing Brahmin" and "Empirical Shudra".

It is noteworthy to highlight the significant role that institutions like the Prime Minister's office, the Ministry of External Affairs, and ambassadors play in conceptualising and executing any policies pertaining to international actors.

As a result, the role of social elites and their socio-political orientation in designing, disseminating, and justifying diplomacy in today's world events has been called into question.

Methodologically, this study would focus on the historical analysis of Indian foreign policy and diplomacy form critical caste perspective. A analytical method would be devised to explore the production of Brahmanical knowledge system, historically. The knowledge based on experience will be utilised to understand how Indian diplomacy was created in order to understand the systematic marginalisation and deterrence of new knowledge generation in the South Asian setting.

Caste Beyond the Border

Caste has always been considered and portrayed as an 'archaic' concept in mainstream Indian intellectual and political discourses. At the global level, this inertia has been broken by a galaxy of academics from each burgeoning discipline. Interestingly, caste has now transcended national borders and spread around the world. However, in order to traverse the roots of Indian diplomacy and strategic thinking, disciplines such as

historian need in no way suffer; nor does history lose its fascination.

[2]See also 'Beyond the Fairy Tales of India' by Braj Ranjan Mani, 07 March 2015, https://countercurrents.org/mani070415.htm

International Relations and diplomacy often condemn, disregard, and reject any form of critical approach established on the premise of "locating" caste.

Gajendran Ayyathurai elucidates that "it is time for a new subfield: Critical Caste Studies" in his ground-breaking proposal. 'The global academy needs a new interdisciplinary field, Critical Caste Studies, to rethink caste-power in civil society, state, and academy in India and overseas,'[3] he asserts. When asked, 'What is Critical Caste Studies?' he replies that 'It is an interdisciplinary field in which caste is seen as an entrenched social crisis'.

The exclusion of marginalised communities, particularly Dalit lives and their value system at a pedagogical level is a product of the Indian educational system. On the nature of methodology and hierarchy of social sciences in India, Gopal Guru emphasises that 'Social science practice in India has harboured a cultural hierarchy dividing it into a vast, inferior mass of academics who pursue empirical social science and a privileged few who are considered the theoretical pundits with reflective capacity which makes them intellectually superior to the former. To use a familiar analogy, Indian social science represents a pernicious divide between theoretical Brahmins and empirical Shudras' (Guru, 2002: 5003).

It's intriguing how Indian academics has upheld the *Chaturvarna* system, which Ambedkar emphasizes is based on the notion of "graded inequality," while the fixity of place, duty, and occupation is predetermined.

The Indian sociologist, Vivek Kumar, aptly elucidates that "even after completing a hundred years, Indian sociology is practised in the milieu of domination. British, European and American domination has been well documented while the domination of the so-called twice-born castes has not been analysed" (Kumar, 2016: 33).

Although, Indian social elites maneuverer very carefully to make International relations caste- neutral yet the ideology of caste pervades every field. In his seminal work, 'Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development', in 1916, during his studies at Columbia University, New York, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar asserts that, it is a local problem, but one capable of much wider mischief, for "as long as caste in India does exist, Hindus will hardly intermarry or have any social intercourse with outsiders; and if Hindus migrate to other regions on earth, Indian caste would become a world problem[4]" (1916, pp. 5-6). More than a century after Ambedkar's warning, the footprints of castes are being felt, in a more nuanced but upsetting way.

Ambedkar's prophecy has been successfully brought to light by the inclusion of caste abuse and prejudice in the California (State Board of Education) curriculum in

[3]Ayyathurai: 'It is time this new field sees the caste-free and anti-caste cultural, religious, economic, historical, and cosmopolitan aspects of vernacular communities in India and in the Indian diaspora.' at LSE, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2021/07/05/it-is-time-for-a-new-subfield-critical-caste-studies/-

[4]https://akscusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/lecture-2-collated-readings.pdf

USA. The conflict started when the upper caste Hindu Group of America challenged the Board to exclude caste from the curriculum because it denigrates India. Human rights advocates and Dalits lobbied for the system to incorporate caste, a severe feature of Indian society.

Michael Witzel, a Harvard University professor of Sanskrit who has also been pressing California for changes that Hindu advocates have objected to for nearly a decade, said the entire controversy was one of image protection. "Castes are a hot-button issue, and people living in the United States don't want to talk about it or want to deny it," he said. "But it's ingrained in the society, and it has its roots in sacred texts" (*The New York Times*, May 4, 2016). 'On May 19 (2016), the California education officials "approved a curriculum that includes teachings about the caste system and uses the term India rather than South Asia[5]''.

Caste-based prejudice against Dalit-Bahujan by caste-Hindus in the American multinational technology company CISCO exploded on a global scale. The Dalit diaspora's 'Equality Labs' made it abundantly evident that caste-Hindu workers in firms often discriminated against and degraded their fellow Indians in the country. '40% of Dalits and 14% of Shudra respondents were made feel unwelcome at their place of worship because of their caste. 60% of Dalits report experiencing caste based derogatory jokes or comments'. 'Equality Labs', who conducted this study, argues that this report came out of a community-driven survey conducted in 2016, surveying more than 1,500 respondents, and has now emerged as a crucial document that both presents the first evidence of caste discrimination in the US and helps to map the internal hegemonies within Indian communities.'[6]

Interestingly, caste-based discrimination and exclusion is not only ancient, but it is now worldwide, with Hindus migrating across the globe.

The historical fight was for the "Equality Act," which Britain attempted to enact in 2011 to make caste discrimination and untouchability illegal. However, stubborn caste-Hindus prevented it from occurring there. The promised "Equality Act" encompassed discrimination based on gender, race, and ethnicity. However, the UK (United Kingdom) government was only able to incorporate caste as another criterion of discrimination into the Equality Act in 2017 as a result of the Dalit-Bahujan community's persistent efforts and persuasion.

It is not surprising that now caste-based discrimination has become a global issue. Thus, Seattle has become the first US city to ban discrimination based on caste after a vote by the city council in 2023. According to the Migration Policy Institute think tank, the US is the second-most popular destination for Indians living abroad and thus the banning of any caste-based discrimination outside the Indian soil is a remarkable victory of Dalits/Bahujan groups.[7]

[5]https://thewire.in/education/caste-wont-be-erased-from-california-textbooks-says-committee
[6]https://www.equalitylabs.org/castesurvey/#key-findings
[7]https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-64727735

While highlighting caste and its function in the Indian Diaspora, Vivek Kumar categorises caste-Hindus in three groups in USA. According to him, 'However, caste is not totally absent. Three different shades of caste can be observed among Indians in the US. One, caste exists among Indians as an endogamous grouping….Second, caste also exists as an institution of discrimination...The third shade of caste among Indians in diaspora in the US can be seen as different castes cut across their caste and regional and religious boundaries and transcend to form a community for emancipation and assertion'. (Kumar, 2021, p. 2).

Nonetheless, Dr. Ambedkar attempted to politicize and internationalize untouchability throughout his lifetime, lobbying for Dalit rights with British politicians like as Churchill. For Ambedkar, internationalism was the solution to India's inequalities. Prior to India's partition and independence, Ambedkar lost faith in the so-called upper-caste leadership of the Indian National Congress. Thus, he approached the British leaders to address the issues of caste and Dalits before leaving the country. Ambedkar had three main demands for Attlee: first, he wanted Dalits to be recognised as a political minority in their own right, just as Muslims and Sikhs were; second, he demanded the provision of constitutional safeguards for Dalits; and third, he demanded that at least two representatives of the Schedule Caste Federation (SCF) should be included in the interim government. However, Attlee dismissed the demands.

Moreover, Ambedkar left no stone unturned for raising issues of Dalits globally. He reached out to the UN as well but failed. 'Ambedkar failed to find enough support within and outside the UN to present his case because the international system was more interested in Gandhi's fight for independence than untouchability' (Chairez- J., 2019, p. 22).

Similarly, in the famous Durban Conference debate (2002) where human right activists and Dalits raised their concerns, they demanded the recognition of castiesm and humiliation of Dalits as considered similar to racial discrimination across the globe. The Indian government has denied these allegations arguing that they are India's domestic issues. It was in 2009 that the UN recognized discrimination and humiliation of Dalits as a major problem. The UN draft, which has been opposed by India, pledges to work for the "effective elimination of discrimination based on work and descent". The Indian government had lobbied heavily at the Human Rights Council to remove the word "caste" from a draft earlier this year" (*The Telegraph*, 29 September 2009).

Historically, India had the upper hand prior to independence, when Mahatma Gandhi became well-known for fighting a war against racism and apartheid in Africa. This heritage was continued in the form of the Non-Aligned Movement, following independence, evoking the a *Gandhian* past. Nonetheless, Indian diplomacy and the Indian state proudly demonstrated themselves as the head of a third-world nation in such a powerful historical heritage. However, when Dalits made such demands during

the Durban Conference,[8] the Indian state's higher moral standards and diplomacy were startled.

'We were official advocates condemning racism, colonialism, apartheid in every international conference. Suddenly our great role is being threatened and threatened from within. India is being condemned in the name of universal freedoms as a violator and all along for what we glibly thought was 'an internal affair'-caste' (2001, p. 2512).

Ambedkar the Pragmatist and Indian Diplomacy

Ambedkar's interest in more direct aspects of foreign policy had emerged in his resignation letter from the Union Cabinet on 10 October 1951. Ambedkar questioned Nehru over several issues including his idealism and NAM (Non-Alignment Movement) policy. He repeatedly expressed the desirability of a 'league of democracies' in Asia and beyond. He asserts: "Do you want parliamentary government?... If you want it, then you must be friendly with those who have parliamentary government".

On 8 November 1952 while addressing the students of Lucknow University he remarked, "Nehru's foreign policy has remained unsuccessful in strengthening India …. India would now have to make a choice between Pro-Democratic America and Western countries or countries like China or Russia where the system of dictatorship is prevailing."[9]

Ambedkar was not only in favour of 'league of democracies' but he confronted the communist system for its authoritarian nature, i.e. 'dictatorship of Proletariat'. While questioning Pt. Nehru, the first Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of India for his idealist foreign policy through NAM, the editors of *Kesari* and *Maratha*, Poona wrote a letter to Dr. Ambedkar on 5 July 1954, to which Dr. Ambedkar replied on 15 July 1954. Accordingly, '[in] the present day with one man's traffic in public affairs it is very difficult to maintain one's interest in the foreign affairs as the country is not prepared to listen to any view which does not concur with that of the Prime Minister' (Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings And Speeches Vol. 17 Part II:, p. 386).

During a parliamentary Session on August 26, 1954, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar warned Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru against taking an excessively conciliatory approach toward Communist China.

---

[8]See Thorat (2008). '*Dalits in India: Search for a Common Destiny: Cambridge University Press*'. The World Conference (WCAR) held at Durban in South Africa in 2001 gave an opportunity for Dalits in India to represent the issue of caste discrimination and practice of untouchability on an international platform. With their demand that the UN should recognize caste and caste-based discrimination on par with racial discrimination.

[9]https://kashmirobserver.net/2022/04/16/prophetic-ambedkar-and-indias-current-foreign-policy/

He states that, 'Communism is like a forest fire; it goes on burning and consuming anything and everything that comes in its way. Stay away from China. Even if not today, danger of invading India by China will about to occur in the future.'[10]

The social elites of India did not pay attention to Ambedkar's thought and India faced the 1962 war with China. Additionally, it shows how the term "*Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai*," which was popularised during the Nehruvian era, signified an idealist internationalism based on anti-colonial solidarity and a normative vision of Asian unity that could not last for a longer length of time.

In his writings and speeches, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar emphasized the importance of both newly independent India's foreign policy and worldwide trends. Important ideas that consistently appear in his entire approach were pragmatism, national interest, solidarity with democracies, and fraternity.

'The All India Scheduled Caste Federation (AISCF), in its election manifesto in 1951 authored by Ambedkar, had a column titled 'Problems of Foreign Policy', referring to the collapsing state of the Indian foreign programme' (Yengde, 2018, p. 88). Moreover 'in it, Ambedkar made suggestions about the Kashmir issue that had been plaguing the South Asian region. He had also proposed India getting permanent membership of the United Nations Organization way back in 1951, making him perhaps the first person who considered India had a legitimate and rightful place in the international body' (ibid.: 88-89). He observed 'foreign affairs' to be the 'most important subject from [a] social, political and financial point of view'.

It is lesser known fact that Ambedkar's prime reason for his resignation from Nehru's cabinet was on the direction of Indian Foreign Policy. The resignation made headlines the world over, with even *The New York Times* reporting the incident. Ambedkar stated in his resignation letter dated 10 October 1951: 'It may be said that my resignation is out of time and that if I was dissatisfied with the Foreign Policy of the Government and the treatment accorded to Backward Classes and the Scheduled Castes I should have gone earlier' (ibid,. p. 93).

On the India-China relations, Communist regime, *Panchsheel* agreement and Tibet, Ambedkar warned Nehru and suggested pragmatic and realistic measures to be dealt with.

"I am indeed surprised that our Hon'ble Prime Minister is taking this '*Panchsheel'* seriously… If Shri Mao had even an iota of faith in *Panchsheel* (both the agreement as well as the Buddhist code) he would have treated the Buddhists in his country in a different manner."[11]

---

[10]See Prof. Hari Narke: China is a Forest fire for democracy: Threat of Chinese aggression to India https://harinarke.blogspot.com/2020/06/china-is-forestfire-for-democracy.html

[11]See Haris Rashid and Anuraag Khaund: 'Prophetic Ambedkar and India's Current Foreign Policy,. https://kashmirobserver.net/2022/04/16/prophetic-ambedkar-and-indias-current-foreign-policy/

Moreover, he too highlighted the nature of international relations, power politics and idealism in the Nehruvian approach to deal with global affairs. According to Haris Rashid and Anuraag Khaund (April 16, 2022), Ambedkar asserts that "*Panchsheel* (The Buddhist code of five principles) has no place in politics. The truth inherent in *Panchsheel* is that Morality is forever changing. There is nothing called Morality. You can abide by your promises in accordance with today's Morality and by the same propriety you may violate your own promise simply because tomorrow's morality will have different demands."

While addressing the issues of foreign policy in his resignation letter Dr Ambedkar raised some pertinent questions:

'First, he notes that in 1946 he had prepared a report on the condition of the scheduled castes for submission to the UN but did not do so because he felt that "it would be better to wait until the constituent assembly and the future Parliament was given a chance to deal with the matter". Second, he wrote that the foreign policy of the country has given him "cause, not merely for dissatisfaction but for actual anxiety and even worry". He opined: "How dangerous it has been to us this policy of doing the impossible and of being too good". Third, he expressed deep dissatisfaction with "our quarrel with Pakistan" that he termed "a part of our foreign policy".

He wrote: "There are two grounds which have disturbed our relations with Pakistan- one is Kashmir and the other is the condition of our people in East Bengal. I felt that we should be more deeply concerned with East Bengal-than with Kashmir. My view has always been that the right solution is to partition Kashmir... Or if you like, divide it into three parts; the cease-fire zone, the Valley and the Jammu-Ladakh Region and have a plebiscite only in the Valley[12].'

Mahatma Gandhi was promoted by the Indian regime from early on as an ambassador to form an alliance in the name of an historically strong Black-Indian unity and South-South cooperation. However, there has been a new phenomenon in African nations where Black people have destroyed Gandhi sculpture in the continent. In 2016 in Ghana, Black people raised the slogan, "Gandhi must fall," to protest his racial profiling. Notably, 'During Mahatma Gandhi's South African days, he distanced the struggle for equality of the Indians from that of the Black Africans, Gandhi has characterised Africans as uncivilised, troublesome, dirty and living like animals' (Brown, 2018, p. 49).

The first-generation leadership was sharply criticised by academics and politicians, especially those from India, on numerous issues following the fall of the Soviet Union.

However, it was B. R. Ambedkar who cautioned Jawaharlal Nehru about several foreign policy complexities both inside and outside of Parliament. Rather than relying on the frameworks of Mahatma Gandhi or others, India's engagement with Black

[12]http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/what-if-ambedkar-had-shaped-india-s-foreign-policy-/434288/

people should be based on Dalit intellectual and ethical traditions, notably those expressed by Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule.

Furthermore, Dr. Ambedkar's personal historical linkages, his demanding academic background at Columbia University, and strong relationships with academics like Professor Seligman and John Dewey might have greatly benefited India's democratic structure, institutional development, and educational system. Similarly, it is said that Dr. Ambedkar brought the "concept of supreme court" and "fundamental rights" from the American constitution to the Indian one through his American experiences.

On the pattern of 'black lives matter', Dalits are also mobilizing under the banner of 'Dalit lives matter' across the globe. But the root of the analogy between the Blacks and Dalits goes back to American and Indian History. Afro-American scholar and activist, W.E.B. Dubois and Dr. Ambedkar exchanging their letters is one such historical episode in human history where two scholars exchanged their thoughts and empathy to each other. 'The Black-centric magazine the Crisis, started by W.E.B. Du Bois and later edited by Roy Wilkins, carried stories of the 'Negroes of India' in its 1942 and 1943 editions, explaining the resonance between Indian Untouchables and the Negroes in the US. It credited Ambedkar for being 'one of the finest scholars of the country' and a 'single leader of sixty million untouchables' (Yengde, 2018, p. 96).

The analogy between racism and the caste system has a much longer and sustained history. In 1873, Jotirao Phule, dedicated his book *Gulamgiri* (*Slavery*) to American abolitionists. It did not end here, but in the 1960s, a 'Dalit Panther,' organization came into existence under the leadership of radical Dalit writers who named themselves in reference to the Black Panthers in the U.S. In their manifesto, issued in 1971, the Panthers wrote: 'From the Black Panthers, Black Power was established. We claim a close relationship with this struggle.'

'Black Capitalism' is cited by several scholars as the source for the concept of 'Dalit Capitalism,'[13] which aims to economically liberate the oppressed Indian masses.

From Nehru to Modi and Buddhist Diplomacy

During Jawaharlal Nehru's tenure as Prime Minister of India, he employed a diplomatic approach known as "Buddhist diplomacy" to foster relations with other Asian countries, particularly those with Buddhist traditions. This approach aimed to emphasize common cultural and philosophical ties rooted in Buddhism. Even if there aren't any particular allusions to "Buddhist diplomacy" during Nehru's administration, the values of promoting intercultural understanding and regional cooperation are reflected in his policies and interactions. Here are some notable instances:

[13]See Chandra Bhan Prasad, author of '*Dalit Capitalism, A Memoir: A Self-Respect Movement*'- emphasise that the urbanisation and market economy have played better and emancipatory role from feudal society.

Asian Relations Conference (1947): Nehru organised the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi in 1947 to bring Asian nations together to discuss shared issues and foster cultural interaction. Similarly, for the International Buddhist Conference of 1952, while Jawaharlal Nehru was India's prime minister, Sanchi played host, drawing over 3,000 Buddhist nuns, monks, and historians to promote communication among members across sectarian and national boundaries. Scholars find the *Panchsheel* Agreement with China (1954) that has its root in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence which were founded on Buddhist ideals, placed an emphasis on respect for each other's sovereignties, non-interference, and peaceful coexistence.

However, the Nehruvian era and succeeding governments were distinguished by a consistent emphasis on Third World solidarity, active engagement in the Non-Aligned Movement, and the methodical strengthening of strategic and diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.

Current Scenario under Modi Regime

In an attempt to strengthen India's cultural diplomacy and solidify its place as a moral and spiritual centre of Buddhism, the Modi administration hosted several Buddhist conferences to enhance India's soft power and standing abroad. The Prime Minister inaugurated the Hindu-Buddhist Initiative on Conflict Avoidance, which was organised in Bodh Gaya (2015) by the Tokyo Foundation and the Vivekananda International Foundation. The Ministry of Tourism's 5th International Buddhist Convention in Varanasi (2016) and the Buddhism in the 21st Century conference in Rajgir (2017) came next. Of particular note was the March 2017 worldwide Buddhist summit held at Nalanda by the Ministry of Culture, which was attended by prominent monks from over 30 nations, including Bangladesh, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam. These initiatives were designed to consolidate India's image as a nation committed to the principles and teachings of the Buddha. Prime Minister Modi at UNGA, 27 Sept 2019 said that 'India has given the world not '*Yuddh*' (war) but 'Buddha'.

Buddhism has drawn a huge following despite emphasising the importance of religion in each person's individual faith. The significance of Buddhism and its applicability in the modern world have been succinctly stated, 'the established transnational network for Buddhism, and the important role played by the faith in the lives of millions across the world, is what gives it potential for Indian foreign policy. The pan-Asian presence of the religion and its importance for national identities in the region, coupled with its image as a peaceful religion makes it ideal for soft power diplomacy, with its focus on non-coercive power.'[14]

The ascendance of Narendra Modi in 2014 marked a renewed emphasis on Buddhism as a cornerstone of India's soft power diplomacy. Modi's official visits

[14]https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/07/the-growing-role-of-buddhism-in-india-s-soft-power-strategy/

to Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Mongolia, Japan, and Korea strategically foregrounded Buddhist heritage as a shared civilizational bond. P. Stobdan asserts that after 2014, 'the Modi government undertook several diplomatic measures, mainly organising Buddhist cultural festivals—gathering Buddhist leaders and experts from Asian countries to attend conferences, conventions and shows. But two years down the line, these efforts show no mark of desired progress on the ground. The reasons could be many, but India's lack of a credible institution for espousing Buddhism or a traditional sangha order leads to the recurring failure of Indian cultural diplomacy.'[15]

China is fostering Buddhism as a form of future religious diplomacy through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Given its history, it has been noted that India isn't leveraging its legacy as China promotes a "Buddhist" globalisation. The Belt and Road Initiative, which was launched in 2013, has a number of ambitions. In its efforts to assert dominance over Buddhist heritage and pilgrimage networks, China has begun developing and promoting Buddhist pilgrimage sites to strengthen its influence over the global Buddhist community.

Under this project, P. Stobdan, former ambassador and a scholar of Asian affairs argues that 'Nepal is proposing to link the OBOR with Buddha's birthplace, Lumbini. Pakistan is reviving the '*Gandhara* trail' to link the Lahore, Taxila and Peshawar networks. Taxila relics are being sent to Sri Lanka for a public exposition during the Vesak month. If Sri Lankan monks visit Taxila to celebrate Purnima, top Bhutanese monks visit the Saidu Sharif monastery in Swat Valley (the birthplace of Guru Padmasambava).'[16]

India might beat everyone for obvious reasons even if any nation, like China or Nepal, tried to advance Buddhism and develop a diplomatic tool. The fact that Buddhism originated in India gives it a special claim to historical legitimacy. Second, Buddhism places a high value on a number of India's sites, such as Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Nalanda. The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan parliament-in-exile are both present in Dharamshala, which has contributed to India's international reputation as a sincere supporter of Buddhist beliefs and a saviour of the oppressed Buddhist minority. Significantly, the mass conversion of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his followers to Buddhism in 1956 represents not only a revival of Buddhism within India but also a reinterpretation of the faith as a vehicle of social justice and emancipation. This development provides India with a renewed platform to project Buddhist diplomacy as both a civilizational heritage and a contemporary ethical resource in international affairs.

Moreover, the Modi regime recently brought back India's sacred Buddhist relics, *Piprahwa* after 127 years, thus making headlines among the few Buddhist organisations and media. The relics were successfully repatriated to India on July 30,

[15]https://thewire.in/uncategorised/buddhism-soft-power-india-china

[16]https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-china-buddhist

2025, through a public-private partnership involving the Government of India and the Godrej Industries Group.[17]

Remarkably, there has been a slight noticeable incorporation of Buddhist theory and Buddha in Indian diplomacy from the Nehru era to the current Modi rule. The explanations are clear. It was important for Indian social elites to periodically promote Buddhism globally through polemics because of ethical and civilizational benefits. With disastrous results, India's ruling elites attempted to strategically link with other Buddhist countries in South East Asia. Yet, this appropriation is not without tension, as the current regime often articulates Buddhist diplomacy through a Brahmanical idiom that risks diluting its egalitarian and universalist appeal.

'Hindutva therefore revises India's diplomatic identity: away from a Nehruvian postcolonial Indian-ness premised on transnational solidarity across the global South and towards a saffronization of the Indian self, insistent on uniform civilizational and religious identity' (Hall, 2019, p. 428).

Hardline Hindu religious preachers have historically attempted to preserve Hinduism while labelling it as '*Sanatan*' (ever-existing), which refers to closely adhering to the Vedas and Smritis. Nevertheless, ideologues and other reformists are constantly willing to appropriate any previous revolutionary, like Buddha, and claim him as the tenth Avatar of the Hindu deity Vishnu. In politics, the Modi government attempted to present Buddhism as part of the same comprehensive Hindu umbrella.

In effect, Modi made the Buddha into a national asset by incorporating his life into a Hindu context: "Buddha is the crown jewel of the Indian nation [...]. So, Hinduism after the Buddha's advent became Buddhist Hinduism or Hindu Buddhism" (Scott, 2016, p. 150).

Moreover, it is unsurprising that the current establishment—particularly under Prime Minister Modi—tends to temporarily sideline contentious social issues during both domestic and international negotiations. While the symbolic veneration of B. R. Ambedkar, ranging from *Dandavat Pranam (prostrated obeisance)* to parliamentary tributes, is prominently displayed, the structural marginalization of historically oppressed communities persists. Indeed, over several decades, such inequities have often been exacerbated by the continued entrenchment of Brahmanical hierarchies, reflecting a persistent gap between symbolic gestures and substantive social reform.

Globally, talks and speeches on Buddhism and the push of Buddhist diplomacy in the Modi regime has followed the same path of co-option and distortion of philosophy and teachings of Buddhism. 'Modi has publicly embraced the Buddha as a reformer whose message has been reabsorbed back into Hinduism. Of course, this devalues the independent development of Buddhism as a religious tradition, but it enables Modi to

[17]See A Joyous Homecoming India's Sacred Buddhist Relics Return After 127 Years https://www.pib.gov.in/PressNoteDetails.aspx?NoteId=154972& ModuleId=3&reg=3&lang=2

use the Buddha to portray Hinduism in a better light and to shape a more Indian focus for Buddhism' (Scott, 2016, p. 150).

The similar argument could be seen in the his piece, 'How Ambedkar Bridged the gap Between Religious Identity and Western Modernity Through Buddhism' by an Ambedkarite scholar, Harish Wankhede:

'Though Ambedkar envisaged that the Dalit-Bahujan groups would utilise the ancient religious resources to counter the Brahmanical cultural hegemony effectively, it is the conventional social elites who have instrumentalised the Hindu religious and cultural symbols more effectively, including the appropriation of neo-Buddhism than the others.' (Wankhede, 2023)

At home, however, Buddhism and the Buddhist community have been relentlessly disowned. Hindu festivals, Bollywood, and Hindu cultural and religious linkages with South-East Asian civilizations have been portrayed as 'Soft Power'. Engagement with foreign governments on the 'Buddhist-cultural' legacy and the use of Buddhist principles in Indian diplomacy was uncommon, and if it did occur, it was only for display.

Ambedkar and Conversion to Buddhism: Significance for IR

By formally converting to Buddhism in 1956 and garnering a substantial following, B. R. Ambedkar effectively reinterpreted and revitalized the tradition for contemporary India. Today, the Asian continent remains a central locus for Buddhist practice, encompassing nearly 97 per cent of the region's Buddhist population. In this context, Ambedkarite Buddhism functions not only as a site of social reform but also as a potential conduit linking India to the broader Buddhist world.

'Even though I was born a Hindu, I shall not die one', Dr. Ambedkar said in 1935 at the impoverished classes conference in Yeola, Nasik district. His statement had a significant impact. The conversion not only brought new facets to Buddhist theory but also revived Buddhism in India. At a press conference on October 13, 1956, he declared that his brand of Buddhism would be Navayana rather than Hinayana or Mahayana. Moreover, representatives of the Buddhists of Burma, Thailand, Tibet and China welcomed Ambedkar's decision and invited him to join the Buddhist community. The Mahabodhi Society, Sarnath, secretary sent a telegram saying, "You with your community are most cordially welcome to embrace Buddhism which is professed by the greater part of Asia".

India's international relations with Buddhist nations were greatly impacted by the conversion of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his supporters to Buddhism, which promoted a more cordial interaction. Major Buddhist nations around the world took notice of this historic conversion. Ambedkar attended conferences in Ceylon (1950), Myanmar (1954), and Nepal (1956) before and after his conversion, when he urged the Buddhist community to focus on India in their attempts to bring Buddhism back to its birthplace. India was perceived positively with Buddhist countries and regional

Buddhist groups as a result of these efforts. Additionally, this movement promoted tourism to important Buddhist locations, drawing tourists from abroad to the Buddha's birthplace. Along with giving recognition of India as a Buddhist country, the neo-Buddhism of Ambedkar has a social and philosophical significance too. 'Thus, the impact Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism and impact of his conversion is said to be the liberation of the untouchables from the Hindu social order'[18].

The hard power—economic and military—count as the source of strength that make up a state's whole capability to endure in the crude realist dimension of international politics. By bandwagon, each state aims to maximize its full capability. However, Buddhism has helped the downtrodden by giving them access to philosophical and economic opportunities. Ambedkar also suggests that Buddhist thought may be a cure-all for the new world.

'In other words Buddhism is the only religion which world can have. If the new world-which be it realised is very different from the old-must have a religion-and the new world needs religion far more than the old world did-then it can only be religion of the Buddha (Ambedkar: 105).

Furthermore, in the business of global politics, India has long presented itself as a civilization state striving for a fair role in global power structure. The phrase 'Vaisdhaiva Kutumbakam' (The World is One Family) is commonly used in Indian diplomacy and global discourse, and has been reflected in India's philosophical attitude in forums such as the G20. Nonetheless, caste and other Indian social structures have clashed with Hindu *Dharmashatra* teachings like the one described above. Rhetorically, Indian officials—most notably Prime Minister Modi—often use Buddhist principles to settle issues in foreign nations, 'The world needs Buddha, not *Yuddha*.'

While in the context of conversion: 'Buddhism has also exposed communities in Maharashtra to Buddhist societies around the world and fostered connections with them. This exposure to the broader global context, along with a sense of welcome from international Buddhist organisations, has significantly boosted the confidence of Buddhist communities in Maharashtra'[19].

Therefore, Buddhism can be used as a tool and, moreover, may be conceptualized as a form of soft power to connect broader Buddhist communities and foster stronger diplomatic bonds through people-to-people engagement.

To highlight the strategic significance of Buddhism, Stobdan (2016) emphasised:

'Buddhism is now definitely gaining a strategic dimension and, to be a serious player in the game, India needs more than posturing. Initiatives like fixing events

[18]https://www.dailypioneer.com/2014/state-editions/ambedkar-embracing-buddhism-a-social-event-of-major-significance.html

[19]https://thewire.in/caste/how-ambedkars-vision-on-buddhist-conversion-has-changed-dalit-lives-in-maharashtra

and conferences through NGO-style outfits that enjoy neither the spiritualism nor the depth of Buddhist scholarship are doomed to end in failure. For India to seriously reaffirm its central role, it must facilitate its own Buddhist sangha (Buddhist council) to emerge in strength'.

Furthermore, it is ironic that the current leadership extols India as the birthplace of Buddhism or claims that India as a nation has been endowed with a philosophy of tolerance, compassion, and love. However, it is a truth that the country's Buddhist community has been marginalised by the Brahmanical nature of the governing class and the majority of Hindus. 'But even under a secular government the position of Buddhism remains weakest, for its followers are among the poorest and most disorganised' (Joshi, 2012, p. 7).

The French Revolution gave the world community the idea of "liberty, equality, and fraternity," which Dr. Ambedkar strove to underline as the architect of the Indian constitution. Ambedkar asserts that he holds these principles in the highest regard not because he personally believes in them but rather because they link Buddhism to its Indian origins. Ambedkar, according to Jafferlot, finds the Buddhist philosophy and the Sangh to be the source of all democratic values. According to him. 'If the teaching of the Buddha was democratic, then democracy is not an invention of the West—as the manner in which Dr Ambedkar drew his inspiration from so many European and American scholars and leaders suggested—, but it's a product of the Indian history. In his historic speech of 25 November 1949 where Dr. Ambedkar presented the final draft of the Indian Constitution to the Assembly which was to pass it on 26 January 1950, he pointed out that by becoming a parliamentary constituency "again", India is back to its Buddhist roots.'[20] (Jaffrelot, Dec. 2017).

Conclusion

From the beginning of its diplomatic journey, the post-colonial Indian state was entangled in the "High Politics" of the ideologically conflicted Cold War-era between the USSR and the US. The "Non-Aligned Movement," led by Pandit Nehru in particular, was the route chosen by the first generation of Indian leaders. India's overall diplomatic ties with the USSR and the US, however, are dominated by their Afro-Asian solidarity and balance. The dissolution of the former Soviet Union generated issues regarding how identity, race, and ethnicity may be employed as supplementary sources of knowledge to comprehend international affairs and diplomacy. In India, Indian foreign policy could be sought as the apt example where under the disguise of the 'methodological constraints', bringing caste issues has been unconventional and undesirable in the discipline.

Dr. Ambedkar cautioned about the tendency of post-colonial Indian states to back communist countries such as the USSR and PRC. Moreover, he insisted that the current

[20]https://thewire.in/books/ambedkar-democracy-buddhism

Indian establishment maintain sound relations with the league of democracies in more pragmatic ways to foster the national interest of the country. From a geographical and philosophical standpoint, India's diplomatic failures are brought to light by China's ascent and aspirations to become the world's leading (Buddhist) nation. India's Buddhist tradition was revived by none other than Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's 1956 conversion and his outreach to global Buddhist world.

In post-colonial India, Buddhism as a cultural-religious philosophy may have been employed as a tool and even envisioned as a form of soft power to establish better diplomatic relations and link broader Buddhist communities through people-to-people engagement. Regretfully, from Nehru to Modi, Indian states reluctantly advocated for it but never took a comprehensive approach in diplomatic affairs.

References

Ambedkar, B.R. (1979). Castes in India: Their mechanism, genesis and development, Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1, Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, pp. 3-22. Edited by Frances W. Pritchett.

Ambedkar, Babasaheb Writings And Speeches Vol. 17 Part Two, https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/attach/amb/Volume_17_02.pdf.

Andrew, Tan. (2000). Armed Muslim separatist rebellion in Southeast Asia: Persistence, prospects, and implications. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. Vol. 23. pp. 267-288.

Ayyathurai, Gajendran. (2021). It is time for a new subfield: 'Critical Caste Studies' LSE Blogs. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2021/07/05/it-is-time-for-a-new-subfield-critical-caste-studies/

BBC NEWS (13.12.2018). Racist' Gandhi statue removed from University of Ghana. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46552614.

BBC. (Feb., 22, 2023). Seattle becomes first US city to ban caste discrimination. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-64727735.

Bhasme, Suhas. (14/Oct/2025). How Ambedkar's vision on Buddhist conversion has changed Dalit lives in Maharashtra'. *The Wire*. https://thewire.in/caste/how-ambedkars-vision-on-buddhist-conversion-has-changed-dalit-lives-in-maharashtra

Brown, Kevin D. (2018). African American perspective on common struggle: Benefits from African American comparing their struggle with Dalit liberation efforts. *The Radical in Ambedkar*. Yengde, Suraj and Anand Teltumbde (Gurugram: Random House, pp. 43-60.

Carr, E.H. (1991). *What is History*? Penguin. UK. Caste Won't Be Erased from California Textbooks, Says Committee. (May 21, 2016). *The Wire*, https://thewire.in/education/caste-wont-be-erased-from-california-textbooks-says-committee.

Caste in United States of America, A survey of caste in the united states (2018). *Equality Labs*. https://www.equalitylabs.org/castesurvey.

Chairez-Garza, J. B.R. (2019). Ambedkar, Partition and the internationalisation of Untouchability 1939–1947. *South Asia: Journal of South Asia Studies* 42 (1). pp. 80-96. https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2019.1554618.

Chakravarti, Uma. (April 3, 1999). Conceptualising Brahmanical patriarchy in early India: Gender, caste, class and state. special issue. *Economic and Political Weekly*. pp. 579-585, cited from People's Archive of Rural India.

Chacko, Priya and Vineet Thakur. (2025). Civilisation-washing caste and Indian diplomacy at the G20 Summit. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*. 20. pp. 636–663.

Desai, Madan. (April 22, 2014). What B.R. Ambedkar wrote to W.E.B. DuBois. *SAAD, South Asian American Digital Archive*.

Guru, Gopal (1993). Dalit movement in mainstream sociology. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 28, No. 14. pp. 570-573.

Guru, Gopal (2002). How egalitarian are the social sciences. *Economic and Political Weekly*. pp. 5003-5009.

Haris Rashid and Anuraag Khaund. Prophetic Ambedkar and India's current foreign policy, https://kashmirobserver.net/2022/04/16/prophetic-ambedkar-and-indias-current-foreign-policy/. Accessed on April 16, 2022.

Kohli, Tanvir. (November, 2020). Kamala Harris's "American Journey:" Caste, global mobility, and state power, *JAMHOOR*. cited on 10/12/2020.

Kumar, Vivek. (2016). How egalitarian Is Indian sociology?. *Economic & Political Weekly*. Vol. LI. No. 25. pp. 33-39.

Kumar, Vivek (2021). Different shades of caste among the Indian diaspora in the US. *Transcience*, Vol. 12. Issue. 1 ISSN. pp. 2191-1150.

Joshi, L M. (2012). *Aspect of Buddhism in Indian History*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.

Mani, Ranjan Braj. (2007). *Resurgent Buddhism*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.-------(07 March, 2015). Beyond the fairy tales of India. https://countercurrents.org/mani070415.htm

Medina, Jennifer. (May 4, 2016). Debate erupts in California over curriculum on India's history. *The New York Times*. (Online: Web). Accessed 10 April, 2023 URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/06/us/debate-erupts-over-californias-india-history-curriculum.html

Ministry of Culture (April, 17, 2023). https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1917432

Mohanty, Bimaiendu. (April 14, 2014). Ambedkar embracing Buddhism: A social event of major significance. *The Pioneer*. https://www.dailypioneer.com/2014/state-editions/ambedkar-embracing-buddhism-a-social-event-of-major-significance.html

Narke, Hari (22 June, 2020). China is a forest fire for democracy: Threat of Chinese aggression to India https://harinarke.blogspot.com/2020/06/china-is-forestfire-for-democracy.html

Parvatheneni, Harish. (March 14, 2009). What if Ambedkar had shaped India's foreign policy? http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/what-if-ambedkar-had-shaped-india-s-foreign-policy-/434288/

P.G. Patil. (November 28, 1991). (Translator). Slavery': Collected Works of Mahatma Jotiba Phule. Education Department, Government of Maharashtra.

Rohan, Gunaratna, et al. (2010). *Ethnic identity and national conflict in China*. Palgrave McMillan.

Prasad, Chandra Bhan (2022). *Dalit Capitalism, A Memoir: A self-respect movement*.

Ray, Tinku (March 8, 2019). 'The US isn't safe from the trauma of caste bias', Produced with funding from the Pulitzer Center and in partnership with WGBH, https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-03-08/us-isn-t-safe-trauma-caste-bias.

Stobdan, P. (May 11, 2017). As China pushes for a 'Buddhist' globalisation, India isn't making the most of its legacy. *The Wire*. https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-china-buddhist.

Stobdan, P. (Nov. 26, 2016). To deploy the soft power of Buddhism, India needs to embrace the Sangha. *The Wire.* https://thewire.in/uncategorised/buddhism-soft-power-india-china

Sundararajan, Thenmozhi. (July 14, 2020). 'A new lawsuit shines a light on caste discrimination in the U.S. and around the world. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/07/13/new-lawsuit-shines-light-caste-discrimination-us-around-world/, The Washington Post.

Tayler, Derric Bryson. (July10, 2020). George Floyd protests: A timeline. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd-protests-timeline.html.

The growing role of Buddhism in India's soft-power strategy (July 18, 2018). https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/07/the-growing-role-of-buddhism-in-india-s-soft-power-strategy/

The Indian Express. (October 2020). 'No place for Dalit and tribal girls in India, says NCRB data; UP fares worst'. https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/oct/01/no-place-for- dalit-and-tribal-girls-in-india-says-ncrb-data-up-fares-worst-2204228.html.

The Telegraph (Sept., 29, 2009). 'UN says caste system is a human rights abuse'. (Online: Web). Accessed 10 June, 2017 URL:http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/6239842/UN-says-caste-system-is-a-human-rights-abuse.html.

The Times of India (Nov. 11, 2020). 'Citizenship Amendment Act'. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/citizenship-amendment-act.

Thorat, Sukhdev. (2008). *Dalits in India: Search for a Common Destiny:* Cambridge University Press.

Varma, Meena. The UK Parliament outlaws caste-based discrimination. *Dalit Solidarity Network UK*. (April, 25, 2013), (Online: Web) Accessed 12 May, 2017 URL: http://dsnuk.org/2013/04/25/the-uk-parliament-outlaws-caste-baseddiscrimination/.

Visvanathan, Shiv. (July 07, 2001). The race for caste: Prolegomena to the Durban Conference. *Economic and Political Weekly*. *36*(27). pp. 2512-2516.

Wankhede Harish S. (2023). How Ambedkar bridged the gap between religious identity and Western modernity through Buddhism. *The Wire.* (Online: Web) Accessed on 15 October, 2023. https://thewire.in/society/how-ambedkar-bridged-the-gap-between-religious-identity-and-western-modernity-through-buddhism

Yengde, Suraj. (2018). Ambedkar's Foreign Policy and the ellipsis of the 'Dalit' from international activism. *The Radical in Ambedkar*. Yengde, Suraj and Anand Teltumbde. Gurugram: Random House. pp. 87-104.

Brandeis | LIBRARY
brandeis.edu/j-caste

CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 7 No. 2 pp. 291-309
October 2026
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v7i2.2839

Sustainable Tribal Consciousness through Women's Leadership: Motherhood, Gender and a Tribal Resistance Movement in Contemporary Odisha, India

Madhusmita Dungdung[1], Ashok Kumar Mocherla[2]

Abstract

Tribal women are transforming motherhood into a source of political legitimacy and collective action to resist land acquisition and safeguard their ancestral land, forests, cultural identity, and, ultimately, their children's future. This study explores the crucial role of tribal women leaders in sustaining tribal consciousness by articulating their voices and engaging in collective action for the tribal resistance movement. Within the context of tribal women in the Sundargarh district of Odisha, their leadership demonstrates grassroots-level resistance to the dominant political economy, in which resistance is understood as a response to economic marginalisation and social exclusion. This study examines how tribal women utilise Self-Help Groups (SHGs) as a socio-political space to produce political awareness and women's collective action and agency. Furthermore, it argues that tribal women sustain resistance through everyday negotiations within households and kinship networks, influencing domestic and communitarian decision-making processes regarding land ownership and sales. Therefore, this study highlights the role of tribal women's leadership in mobilising communities, maintaining non-violent forms of protest, and sustaining tribal consciousness, which often remains invisible or unrecognised.

Keywords

Tribal women's leadership, Motherhood, SHG, Collective action, Political mobilisation, Protest, Kinship conflict

[1]PhD Scholar, IIT Indore
[2]Associate Professor, IIT Indore
E-mail: [1]madhusmitadungdung@gmail.com; phd2101261007@iiti.ac.in, [2]ashokmocherla@iiti.ac.in

© 2026 Madhusmita Dungdung, Ashok Kumar Mocherla. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

Introduction

Tribal women are transforming motherhood from being a site of caregiving into a source of political legitimacy and collective action by situating their maternal roles within broader tribal struggles over land and identity. In this context, collective tribal consciousness and tribal identity in India emerge not merely from claims of original inhabitation but from the ongoing experiences of dispossession and displacement from control and ownership over *jal, jungle* and *jameen* (water, forest and land). This consciousness is strongly articulated in tribal regions where the degree of marginalisation and powerlessness is higher (Xaxa, 1999). *Jal, jungle, and jameen* are not merely natural resources for tribal communities in India; over time, they have emerged as central issues in tribal discourse. Since questions of development are closely intertwined with land ownership and forests, the interest in protecting these natural resources brands the tribal communities as ecological warriors (Singh, 2024). The expansion of the mining and timber industries naturally leads to deforestation and the destruction of the economic base of tribal life (Bardhan, 1984). Most tribal resistance movements emerged in response to state-led land acquisition for industrial development (Xaxa, 2008).

This study contributes to the broader debates on social exclusion and structural inequalities. During the colonial period, tribal communities experienced what Xaxa (2019) describes as a form of dual colonialism: one from British rule and administration and the other from the non-tribal population. As tribal communities were integrated into the mainstream political and economic system under colonial rule, this integration was intertwined with exclusion, as tribal people lost access to and control over their livelihoods, land, forests, and other natural resources, as well as decision-making over their own lives. They were pushed to the margins of the new political and economic system. The concept of social exclusion was first developed by Lenoir in the mid-1970s. He categorised the 'excluded' as mentally and physically challenged, delinquents, single parents, multiple-problem households, marginal, and other 'misfits' (Sen, 2000, p. 1; Thorat, 2008). Later in social science literature, the excluded group is categorised as those denied "a livelihood, permanent employment, property, credit or land, housing, consumption level, education and cultural capital, the welfare state, citizenship and legal equality, democratic participation, humanity, fulfilment and understanding" (Sen, 2000; Thorat, 2008).

For Sen (2000), social exclusion can take the form of either 'unfavourable exclusion' or 'unfavourable inclusion'. The former is the situation where some people are kept out, and the latter is the situation where people are included but on unfavourable terms. This distinction is particularly relevant to the context of tribal land acquisition in Sundargarh district, where tribal communities participate in the decision-making process through Gram Sabha, yet their decisions and objections do

not influence the outcome of state-led land acquisition processes. Thus, participation may exist at the procedural level, while the meaningful stake in the decisions affecting tribal land and livelihood remains limited. This form of unfavourable inclusion provides an important context to analyse the role of tribal women's[1] leadership in sustaining the tribal consciousness.

Furthermore, Harvey's (2004, pp. 73-74) concept of "accumulation by dispossession" further locates the process of social exclusion within the political economy of capitalist development. Extending on Marx's concept of primitive accumulation, Harvey argues that dispossession remains a continuing process under contemporary capitalism, through the commodification and privatisation of land. He further argues that the state, through its monopoly of violence and "definitions of legality", plays an important role in supporting and fostering the processes of dispossession. In the context of tribal land acquisition in Sundargarh district, the state's authority to acquire land brings competing understandings of statutory ownership and customary laws into conflict, rendering the idea of land ownership contested with multiple legal entanglements. This highlights the gap between the traditional tribal land ownership through customary laws and the modern legal system that state machinery follows.

And the state-authorised acquisition procedures can enable the transfer of tribal land into the hands of private corporations in the field of mining. In these debates on tribal land ownership, privatization of tribal lands and resistance movements, often the role of tribal women is left unexplored. Therefore, it becomes crucial to understand the leadership of tribal women and their collective resistance to examine how tribal communities respond to the dispossession of their ancestral land and the associated threats to their livelihoods, identity and children's future. A significant amount of literature examines tribal resistance to land acquisition and displacement. However, less attention has been given to the gendered dimensions of such tribal struggles, specifically the role of tribal women's leadership within these movements.

Indigenous[2] women leaders occupy a unique yet invisible position within contemporary social structures, serving as a bridge between ancestral knowledge systems and modern institutional frameworks (Johncilla, 2006; Nayak, 2025). Indigenous epistemologies of leadership are rooted in reciprocity, communal responsibility, and social accountability. In this context, tribal women's leadership extends beyond the mainstream 'women in leadership' framework, shaped by competitive or hierarchical logics (Evans & Sinclair, 2016). Instead, it is grounded in

[1]The term "Tribal women" is not used as a homogeneous entity. In this context, "tribal women" refers specifically to women in the Sundargarh district.

[2]The term indigenous, also known as "Adivasi" in Hindi, refers to the tribal people since the turn of the present century (Xaxa, 1999). Many scholars also use the term indigenous and tribal interchangeably; accordingly, this paper uses these terms synonymously.

cultural stewardship,[3] relational accountability, and intergenerational care, reflecting women's responsibilities toward their community, culture, and future generations (Nayak, 2025). However, tribal women leaders also face interconnected oppressions, including cultural norms, colonial patriarchy, and systemic invisibility (Lavallee, 2022; Ryan, 2020). At the same time, tribal women are viewed as cultural guardians, community activists, and knowledge keepers, drawing on their ecological belonging and family networks for leadership (Chamberlain et al., 2016; Evans & Sinclair, 2016). Tribal women's leadership is not accidental; it articulates a decolonial modernity that restructures what counts as legitimate knowledge, competence, and leadership in postcolonial India and reclaims the condition of collective life (Nayak, 2025).

This essay argues that the tribal women's leadership in the Sundargarh district plays a crucial role in sustaining tribal consciousness through collective action and resistance to land acquisition. In this context, tribal consciousness is understood as a shared sense of identity, belonging, and moral responsibility rooted in land, kinship, and sustainable community life (Xaxa, 2008). We have explored how tribal women are utilising Self-Help Groups (SHGs)[4] not merely as financial institutions but as important socio-political spaces where women transmit knowledge of constitutional rights, sustainability, and strategies for land resistance. It further examines how tribal women use their maternal identity as a form of political legitimacy, thereby transforming motherhood from a site of caregiving into a resource of collective action. We further analysed how resistance is sustained through everyday negotiations within households and kinship networks, where women influence domestic decision-making procedures related to land ownership and sales. Finally, it analyses the tribal women's leadership in mobilising communities and sustaining non-violent forms of protest. When women are at the forefront of the protest and in the leading position, this mode of leadership is different from the context when women are not at the forefront, where protests often risk diversion from the main issues and encounter a different set of challenges.[5] Thus, this essay contributes to broader debates in feminist theory and tribal studies by arguing that leadership is not merely an individual aspect but a collective, relational, and culturally ingrained practice. It redefines the argument that tribal women are not merely participants in the land resistance movement against land acquisitions but key agents in sustaining tribal consciousness, resisting land acquisition, and articulating ideas of tribal development and empowerment.

[3]Cultural stewardship is the active, responsible management and preservation of cultural heritage, traditions, and community assets for future generations.

[4]A Self-Help Group (SHG) is a small, voluntary association of 10–20 individuals often from similar socio-economic backgrounds who come together to improve their living conditions through regular savings, internal lending, and mutual support.

[5]Challenges refers to some common charge protestors are likely to face, such as trespassing, disorderly conduct and also serious criminal charges like assaulting Police officers, and attempted murder, etc.

Research Methodology

This study is based on data collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions during one month of ethnographic field research conducted in November 2025, in the Sundargarh district of Odisha, India. The tribal women in Sundargarh district are resisting the ongoing land acquisition process by the Government of Odisha and a private company. The Land Resistance Movement began in 2020 and continues to date in 2026. For this study, we have focused on the Rajgangpur block of Sundargarh district. The Government of Odisha issued notices in February 2020 and February 2021 to acquire 990.67 acres of private agricultural land in seven revenue villages across five Gram Panchayats under Kutra and Rajgangpur Tehsils. We use purposive sampling to select participants by choosing tribal women in leadership positions within the resistance movement who actively resist the land acquisition process. Having previously built a rapport with the tribal women during our visits in 2024, it was easy for us to conduct in-depth interviews with them.

The tribal women who participated in the in-depth interviews were between 30 and 50 years old. Our sampling is thoroughly diverse in terms of different tribal groups, caste and religious backgrounds. The prominent participants in the interview include 12 married women, 1 unmarried woman, and 2 widows. Additionally, focus group discussions were conducted. As part of the participant observations, we attended public rallies, protests, Gram Sabha meetings, training workshops for community members, and women's gatherings throughout our stay in the field.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. For this study, approval was obtained from the Institute Human Ethics Committee (IHEC), IIT Indore (approval no. BSBE/IITI/IHEC-11/2025/11) on September 12, 2025. All interviews were recorded on a phone, with the interviewees' consent taken in advance. The recordings were transcribed manually for all the interviews. The transcribed data were read carefully, and the interview recordings were listened to several times to identify similarities and social patterns. The insights from participant observation and focus group discussions were merged with the interview data and subsequently categorised into conceptual themes, which are used in this research essay.

SHG and Tribal Women's Leadership

SHGs are small, economically homogeneous, affinity groups of poor people who gather to regularly save small amounts and mutually agree to contribute to a common fund to meet their emergency and livelihood needs (Singh, 2008; Nayak & Pattnaik, 2019). These groups aim to empower (at social, economic, and political levels) the

deprived and powerless masses (mostly women). It follows a savings-first approach and touches on the social, political, and health aspects of members, as well as their economic aspects. SHGs have a collective decision-making system to resolve conflict through women's collective leadership (Nayak & Pattnaik, 2019).

In Odisha, SHGs are largely operated and promoted under the Mission Shakti programme of the Government of Odisha. Usually, an SHG consists of 10-15 women members from the village who hold regular meetings to pool savings and provide internal loans for livelihood activities. The SHG-Bank Linkage Programme provides hassle-free services to the SHG members and promotes financial inclusion and sustainable livelihoods. Through the Odisha Livelihood Mission (OLM), SHGs in Odisha support women in various income-generating activities, including agriculture, vegetable cultivation, millet farming, livestock rearing, tailoring, and paper/leaf plate making. Membership in SHGs is voluntary, and only one member per family is allowed, ensuring wider participation of the women in the community. SHGs can be broadly credit-oriented or livelihood-oriented (Department of Mission Shakti, Government of Odisha)

In Odisha, specifically in the Sundargarh district, women are taking the lead in safeguarding their ancestral land. Tribal women's leadership is rooted in communal responsibility, social accountability, cultural guardians, community activists and knowledge keepers (Nayak, 2025; Chamberlain et al., 2016; Evans & Sinclair, 2016). Tribal women in Sundargarh district have an active Self-Help Group (SHG) that is primarily credit-oriented. They use this group not merely as a financial group but also as a space where women engage in dialogue, share experiences, and strategise how to effectively negotiate and contest unlawful land acquisition procedures. Non-governmental organisations like Swayam[6] play an important role in grassroots legal and social empowerment within the Fifth Schedule area. The initiative is led by a group of social activists from the tribal community. Their work focuses on educating tribal people, specifically tribal women, about their constitutional rights, entitlements, and land rights under the Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution (Article 244(1)).

The core feature of this initiative includes mobilising tribal women as agents of change. The NGO encourages tribal women to use SHG meetings to disseminate knowledge within their households and village communities, thereby promoting a culture of civil rights awareness at the community level. It is enabling tribal women to actively participate in community decision-making processes, take leadership roles in spreading awareness of their legal land rights, and mobilise women.

[6]I am using a pseudonym for this NGO and the names of its members to protect their original identity, privacy and interests.

One of the respondents in the field says:[7]

> *Every year, we celebrate International Women's Day as a big event. An NGO in our area started this celebration. Earlier, it was celebrated across three panchayats, but we realised we should take it to the community level instead of just a few panchayats. All women should be included in this celebration, irrespective of religion and caste. We hold it at a large playground, and all the women of the Rajgangpur block participate. We carry soil in an earthy plate and walk on foot to a certain distance on the road and take an oath to save our land, identity, culture and existence.*

These actions show how tribal women serve as cultural guardians. Their leadership is rooted in social connectivity rather than competitiveness and power. Tribal women are taking the initiative to protect their land, forests, culture, and identity. They are not relying on men; they are taking the initiative to safeguard their land for the betterment of their children's future, their identity, culture, and, most importantly, to secure their sustainable livelihood, which has been largely dependent on forest lands for generations.

Several feminist authors have emphasised the importance of women entering the public sphere in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment (Hooks, 1984; Fraser, 1992; Butler, 2006; De Beauvoir, 2015; Arendt, 2018). Another body of scholars highlights that entering a public sphere does not render women's empowerment if the oppressive social structures related to gender, race, class and sexuality are not sufficiently addressed (Collins, 1990; Federici, 2003; Gay, 2014; Ahmed, 2017; Lorde, 2018; Setterquist, A 2024). In this study, tribal women's entry into the public sphere is understood as a form of resistance to the oppressive power imbalance between the state and tribal communities. In contrast to the above scholars, who emphasise structural oppression, these tribal women utilise their maternal identity as a form of political legitimacy to enter public spaces, safeguard their land (their sustainable source of livelihood), and secure the future of their children. In the next section, we discussed how tribal women use motherhood as a form of political legitimacy.

Mothers First: Motherhood as a Source of Political Legitimacy

Mothering refers to women's lived experience of giving birth or taking care of children (Rich, 1986), whereas Motherhood has been defined by a section of scholars as a social construct and patriarchal institution that controls and dictates women's thoughts

[7]Respondent name is Sharmila; she is 36 years old mother of one girl child. She is a member of panchayat Samiti. She is one of the leading members of the tribal resistance movement against land acquisition by Dalmia Cement Bharat Ltd (DCBL) company. This interview was conducted at her house because she is a very active member, and it is difficult to meet her during the daytime, so we visited her in the late evening.

and actions (Rich, 1986; Butler, 1993; O' Reilly, 2021; Setterquist, 2024). By framing motherhood as a cultural and political construct rather than a biological one, Rich (1986) observes its role in sustaining gendered power relations.

Shiva (1988) rightly argues that in rural and tribal contexts, women's role is not merely biological to produce and reproduce life, but also, they have a social role in providing sustenance, food and water. She further argues that rural and tribal women bear the actual cost of the development projects in the name of national interest. Women who depend on nature for the daily sustenance of their households, as they are the primary providers of food, water and fodder. Drawing on Shiva's (1988) works, this study analyses how tribal women redefine motherhood and their role as caretakers of their families within the context of a power struggle between the state and the tribal community, with reference to questions of land acquisition. Rather than experiencing motherhood as a subordination in a patriarchal society (Rich, 1986), tribal women mobilise themselves as a source of political legitimacy. They are positioning themselves as "mothers first" in the resistance movement against the state and Dalmia Cement Bharat Ltd (DCBL), which has a moral responsibility to protect their ancestral land, forest, and ultimately their children's future.

During the fieldwork, while interviewing women about their thoughts on using motherhood as their political identity in this tribal resistance movement,[8] one of the respondents in the field says:[9]

> *We, mothers, are worried about our children's future. We can't see our children's future getting destroyed. We have no other options but to come forward to save our land, as we have given birth to our children, it is our responsibility to understand their pain and secure their future. Without land, without our source of livelihood, we can't think of creating a better future for our children. Fathers are less engaged with their children's futures because they are busy working to put food on the table. We, as mothers, have to think about our children, land, forests, etc. My kids are telling me, "Don't let them take our land away from us." I feel sad when I think about how my kids are also worried about our land instead of focusing on their studies. We have to secure our children's future, and we will fight to save our land.*

Tribal women are taking leadership roles that have emerged from their maternal responsibility, continuously addressing themselves as "we mothers" who are 'fighting

[8]Tribal Resistance Movement in this context refers to the ongoing resistance to the expansion of mining areas for industrial development by the Adivasi people of the Rajgangpur block of Sundargarh district, Odisha.

[9]Respondent's name is Kavita. She is a ward member of her village. A mother of two, who lives with her husband, children and in-laws. This interview was taken in November 2025 at the respondent's house.

to save our land for our children's future, which is the only source of sustainable livelihood.' This suggests that women often perceived themselves as guardians of the family's survival. As Rich (1986) described, motherhood was imposed by patriarchal institutions on women's thought and action. However, for tribal women in Sundargarh district, motherhood has become a source of legitimacy, encouraging them to participate in the public sphere.[10] The gendered role expectations about caregiving are both reproduced and transformed in moments of crisis. Tribal women are making motherhood their identity to lead in protecting the ancestral land from the DCBL company and the state. The land titles are in men's names, and women show a deeper concern for saving their land, as it is intergenerational security. The above interview shows that men are busy earning a living for their families, which reveals that women (mothers) bear the burden of caring for the family, children's futures, and their ancestral land. Land is always the cultural identity, livelihood, and way of life. Tribal women are not merely protecting the land but also working to preserve the future of future generations.

Schirmer (1993) introduces the theory of political motherhood to encompass and reflect the lived experience of mothers actively using motherhood identities to engage in political resistance against oppressive regimes. In this study, we see that tribal women's maternal identity is not merely confined to the private sphere but becomes a strategic resource for collective resistance. Tribal women do not merely participate in the resistance movement for land acquisition, but transform the motherhood into a legitimate source of political action.

In the following section, we examine how tribal women engage in collective action to safeguard their ancestral land and their negotiation of internal conflict within the household and kinship members.

Tribal Women's Collective Action and Household-level Negotiation

In this section, we focus on how tribal women utilise the SHG meetings to discuss strategies to prevent land acquisition and land sales to the government. Tribal women's access to SHGs is usually associated with economic activities. However, during the interviews, tribal women leaders revealed that these groups are also used as spaces for political awareness. SHG provides a space for collective action and processes of change in how tribal women who hold positions in SHGs perceive and experience their personal power within households and village communities. They also contribute to a sense of women's agency in articulating their community's future and visions

[10]Pilcher and Whelehan (2016) defined the public sphere as a space where activities that are related to politics, law, labour and government take place. Men have historically been able to engage in both the public and private spheres, whereas women have been confined to the private sphere (Setterquist, 2024).

(Finnis, 2017). It is argued that collective action refers to mobilising people around shared concerns (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Evans & Nambiar, 2013). Among tribal women in Sundargarh district, collective action is routine, taking place through SHGs and Gram Sabhas (Village Councils). Women use these spaces to discuss community issues, educate each other about tribal constitutional rights and the protection of their land and forests.

Tribal women's collective actions expand a set of opportunities and enhance women's decision-making power within the household and community. For instance, the tribal women in Sundargarh actively participate through SHGs and Gram Sabha meetings and have taken leading roles in the resistance movement against land acquisition for the expansion of a private company's mining project. The actions also explicitly challenge the social norms and behaviours that continue to constrain female agency within the family context, particularly evident in tribal women's engagement in land-related decisions. Tribal women question their husbands regarding land sales, persuade their male family members not to sell land, discuss land issues in SHGs meetings, and warn relatives not to sign consent forms when *dalals* (brokers) approach them. These actions seek to significantly shift the balance of local norms, thereby creating new space for women to articulate their agency (Pandolfelli et al., 2008; Contreras-Arias et al., 2013; Meier Zu Selhausen, 2012; Evans & Nambiar, 2013).

One of the respondents from the field says:[11]

> *In our SHG group, we always discuss how we can protect our land, and every month I share my views. We think about how we keep our husbands under control. Through our husbands, the land is being sold,[12] with the influence of alcohol and other intoxicating substances, and greed for money. So, how can we make our husbands, our family's men, understand and persuade them not to be influenced by outsiders? I encourage other women in my group to talk to their husbands and other male family members about this so they know what's on their minds. If we don't know, then they might quietly sell their land. And we should also tell our married daughters or sisters not to sign any form when a Dalal (broker) comes to them and offers money. We should make them aware and ask them to inform us if [a] Dalal approaches them to sign the consent form.*

The interview demonstrates how SHGs serve as spaces for women's collective agency and collective action. The resistance to land acquisition is not solely confined to political spaces or public protests. However, it is ingrained in household negotiation and

[11]Respondent's name is Sunita, a 36-year-old woman. She is the President of an SHG group and also an active member in the tribal resistance movement.

[12]Two landowners in the village sold their land by going to the collector's office without informing the villagers. As the land titles are in the male members of the family, hence the respondent is specifically mentioning that through the husbands, the land is being sold.

everyday life. Women's collective agency emphasises regulating the decision-making process within the household, as men hold formal land ownership and authority over land transactions. Women recognised that land is being sold through husbands, often under the influence of alcohol, neighbours and monetary temptations. Before 2020, SHGs functioned solely as sites for financial activities aimed at promoting women's social, economic, and political empowerment through various government programs. However, after the government's proposal to acquire land in the gram panchayat for mining expansion in 2020, the tribal community in Sundargarh district began to organise collectively to resist the land acquisition process and decided not to give consent.

Tribal women leaders actively participated and shared leadership roles in the gram sabha meetings alongside male leaders. Over time, tribal women shifted the discussion around resistance also into SHGs, as these groups provide a regular and accessible platform for women's interaction. The shift of SHGs from a site of financial activity to a site of active politics plays a crucial role in mobilising women to protect their land and tribal identity, and to secure the future of their children. In this way, resistance to land acquisition is not only confined to public protest or legal actions but also in everyday household negotiations, illustrating how women exercise collective agency within the constraints of patriarchal land ownership structures.

Tribal Women's Ways of Negotiating Intra-Household and Kinship Conflicts

From the above section, it is evident that resistance to land acquisition is not confined to the political sphere but also embedded in household negotiation and everyday domestic life. This section focuses on how women negotiate with the internal conflicts within their families and kinship networks. Feminist scholars have highlighted that intra-household interaction is characterised by both cooperation and conflict (Agarwal, 1997). While household members cooperate to sustain livelihoods and maintain the social structure, there is also an underlying conflict over decision-making regarding their ancestral land. In this context, the tribal women's bargaining power (Agarwal, 1997) is shaped by their maternal responsibility to safeguard their children's future, land, forest, and their tribal identity. Thus, the outcome of the negotiations with their family and kin regarding the ancestral land largely depends on tribal women's relative bargaining power within the household. One of the respondents narrates her conversations at home,[13]

> *When we learned that two people from our village had sold their land, my husband and I had a fight over saving the land. He said you are regularly conducting meetings, leaving the house, but people are still selling their*

[13]ibid.

> *land, so what is the benefit of conducting meetings? Don't conduct meetings anymore. If people want to sell their land, let them sell it. Most people don't come to the village meetings and sell their land, so why will you fight for them? Leave this. But I said, only two people have sold their land. If the men do not go to the collector's office and sign, the land will not be sold. The land is yours, and for you people, we women are fighting to save it. Men are the ones selling the land out of greed for money. There are 136 families in this village, and of those, only 2 have sold their land. But others have not sold the land, 80% of us will not give consent, so our land can't be acquired.*

This narrative illustrates that resistance to land acquisition is negotiated not merely in the public spaces but also in the private spaces of the household. The negotiation over land acquisitions starts in the domestic and private spaces. The conflict between the respondent and her husband reflects competing rationalities regarding land ownership and livelihood. The husband's rationality is based on an individualised, short-term cost-benefit approach. For instance, the husband argues that those who have sold their land are better off, while those resisting land acquisition incur financial costs and psychological strain. In contrast, the respondent articulates an alternative rationality that is collective well-being and moral responsibility. By emphasising that only 2 of 136 families have sold their land and that the majority have not given their consent, she redefines the situation as a collective strength rather than a failure. She further argues that sustained collective resistance can secure long-term benefits rather than the immediate gains prioritised by her husband. These differences in rationality between the respondents and her husband do not represent fixed gender differences; rather, they reveal a gendered dynamic in which men hold formal ownership of land, while women actively participate in meetings, negotiations, and protests, etc., to save the land as a source of livelihood.

During interviews, women expressed their frustrations over the ongoing resistance to land acquisitions, and sometimes asked the women leaders how long they had to resist, especially when some members of the village community sold their land to the government for personal gain. They believe these actions are gradually breaking women's confidence. Tribal women leaders have to make an extra effort to educate their fellow community and family members.

One of the respondents in the field narrated:[14]

> *One day, I made all the male members of my family sit down and asked for their opinions. I told them, "You have 1 acre of land, and you are getting Rs. 36,000 per dismil from the company." If you divide among yourselves, then think about how much each one of you gets, and how many sons you have.*

[14]Respondent's name is Sangeeta, she is 40 years old, mother of two children. She is also an active member in the resistance against land acquisition.

> *Keep that also in mind. They said we will not sell our land. We don't need money from the company. Just as our ancestors worked and lived off the land, we will also live that way.*

The above narrative reflects the emotional labour and extra effort women have to put in to sustain tribal consciousness and resistance to land acquisition. The expression of fatigue and frustration among women shows, in part, the fragility of collective action. Despite this, tribal women leaders continue to play a vital role in the tribal resistance movement by taking the responsibility of mobilising the community and persuading their own families. The way the respondent discussed with their male family members indicates that support from family and kinship is vital to sustaining the resistance movement over a longer period. By situating the discussion within kinship structures and intergenerational considerations, women effectively help them understand land as a long-term livelihood resource rather than a short-term monetary benefit. The family's eventual decision not to sell their land reflects their moral and social values regarding land that prioritise collective identity, livelihood, and way of life. Thus, the narrative highlights the central role of tribal women in sustaining collective tribal consciousness and resistance through everyday household-level negotiations.

In the next section, we discuss the women's role in mobilising communities for the land resistance movement and analyse how positioning women at the forefront of a protest significantly sustains non-violent forms of resistance.

Tribal Women's Leadership and Homogeneous Political Outlook

Women's Role in Political Mobilisation

It is argued that urbanisation, industrialisation, and education directly resulted in an increase in women's mobilisation (Chafetz & Dworkin, 1986; Margolis, 1993). Women's rights to land are an important variable in understanding the nature of women's resistance (Kandiyoti, 1988). Structural arguments that tend to emphasise the forces of capitalism (Gordon, 1995; Robertson, 1996), or long-term processes of modernisation, which are slow to change (Chafetz & Dworkin, 1986; Margolis, 1993), at the expense of more immediate political, local and cultural practices (Ray & Korteweg, 1995).

In contrast, this study argues that, for tribal women, mobilisation is shaped by factors such as SHGs, gram sabha meetings, village networks, interpersonal relationships, and everyday domestic communication. Women's mobilisation in these contexts cannot be fully explained by urbanisation, industrialisation and formal education alone, but must be understood in terms of localised social and political dynamics.

A respondent from the field says:[15]

> *We are holding a meeting in our village to inform people about the rally or protest we are planning to hold. Those people who have not attended the meeting, and are not aware of this, don't want to come, so we asked the villagers who had attended the meeting to tell their neighbours, and they tell their neighbours, so everyone informs each other how important it is to participate in the rally/protest. We also collect money to organise a rally/protest by going door to door and telling people the date and time of the rally. We make it compulsory for at least one member from each family to take part in these rallies. Mostly, men don't come forward for this[16] so we women in our villages take responsibility to inform everyone and mobilise people by asking them to come to the rally/protest, to save our land and fight for our rights. Women from all the villages collect money, and each villages make their own arrangements for transportation to reach the protest venue. If anyone falls ill or needs first-aid medication during the protest, that will also be handled by women.*

To mobilise people, tribal women do not need any educational qualification, exposure to urban life or modernisation. At the community level, participation in protests is seen not merely as a voluntary political act but as a moral obligation; one member from each household is expected to participate. This reflects that for tribal people, unity in political outlook is their only source of collective strength and survival to safeguard their lands. Despite the availability of various advanced modes of communication and social media, women rely on face-to-face, door-to-door mobilisation, which generates a sense of ownership, moral obligation, and collective responsibility among tribal community members, encouraging them to participate in the protest. Such practices help sustain tribal consciousness among tribal community members, highlighting how deeply the idea of dissent is rooted in kinship and neighbourhood ties. These forms of mobilisation reflect the importance of social networks in sustaining grassroots collective action and in building a homogeneous political outlook.

Women's Role in Protest

Tribal women are the organisational backbone of the protest and movements. From the above section, we can see that women undertake the labour of mobilisation, collection of financial contributions, and make necessary arrangements for protests. This demonstrates that women play an important role during the protest and that their role in household management extends into the political space. The leadership roles

[15]Respondent's name is Madhuri; she is a secretary in the Self-Help Group. She is a 37-year-old woman, mother of two children. This Interview was conducted in her courtyard outside her house.

[16]Because men are often engaged in work, they are unable to spare time for these activities.

are automatically expected to be taken up by women, with some male leaders also leading the protest. Furthermore, women's leadership results in non-violent protest and indirectly shields the other protestors from potential state violence by the police.

Mhajne and Whetstone (2018) explain that the state's role as protectors of mothers and women can shield protest actions from violence when mothers and women participate. That means as long as women and mothers are leading protests, other protestors can be partially shielded from state violence. They also built the theoretical argument that mothers' participation in social movements can legitimise these and mobilise others to join. Drawing on Mhajne and Whetstone's (2018) theoretical argument, this study argues that within India's democratic framework, the right to protest is formally recognised. However, in practice, women protestors are often subjected to various forms of state violence. In the Sundargarh district, the situation shows a contrasting dynamic. The visible presence of tribal women's leadership roles, combined with the numerical strength of the tribal women in protests, appears to have played a crucial role in preventing the use of state violence during these mobilisations. The tribal women's leadership, alongside male leaders in the protests, has structurally helped maintain non-violent forms of protest.

One of the respondents from the field explained an incident during a protest, how the presence of women at the forefront is a strategy not to divert the protest from its main agenda:[17]

> *We are always at the front of the protests, or during road blockades, because the police do not dare to say or do anything to us. Men are mostly hot-blooded by nature. When police personnel say something, they respond immediately, so the chances of violence (lathi charge) are high, and they can be arrested easily on false charges. One day, while we were collecting money from our people as a contribution toward the protest expenses, a policewoman approached us and asked us to move off the road. We said we are already standing on the side of the road, and our permission is until 4 pm; now it's only 3 pm. The policewoman replied to us, "Why don't you sleep on the road?" We told them that if it's needed, we will also sleep on the road. We have permission to be on the road till 4 pm; that's why we are standing here. Otherwise, we would have cleared the road by now. The police officer left after that. If men had been in our place, they would have got angry, and a heated argument or maybe some conflict would have occurred. That's why men in the front are quite risky. The male leaders who have a calm nature and have patience stand with us at the front.*

Mhajne and Whetstone (2018) believed that the state's role as protector of women can be understood as an extension of the patriarchal family unit, where men are the

[17]Respondent's name is Mary. She is 37 years old and a mother of three children. This interview was taken at her house.

family heads and the protectors of women and children, and women are nurturers of the family (Werbner, 1999, p. 231; Hall, 2023; Setterquist, 2024). In contrast, this study shows that tribal women often act as protectors during protests, standing in large numbers at the forefront and occupying visible leadership positions. This strategy helps minimise confrontation and prevent escalation by shielding other protestors from potential state violence. Women's active participation and leadership encourage disciplined collective action that reduces the likelihood of reactive and aggressive responses, particularly in situations involving police and administrative authorities. This analysis shows that tribal women's role in mobilisation and protest extends beyond the conventional understanding of participation in movements, positioning them as key actors in sustaining collective resistance.

Conclusion

This research study highlights the multifaceted nature of tribal women's leadership in the Sundargarh district of Odisha, demonstrating that women's leadership plays a crucial role in sustaining tribal consciousness within the tribal community. The tribal women's leadership cannot be fully understood through the mainstream framework of women's empowerment through education, economic independence, and legal reforms, but is instead deeply rooted in cultural stewardship, relational accountability, and intergenerational care (Nayak, 2025). In this sense, tribal women's leadership reflects an alternative paradigm that challenges the dominant framework of women's leadership by redefining agency, authority, and resistance within a postcolonial context. Through SHGs and Gram Sabha meetings, tribal women actively participate in the grassroots-level decision-making processes and mobilise collective resistance against land acquisition. These public spaces serve as significant sites for tribal women to share awareness, disseminate knowledge of constitutional rights, and reinforce community-specific cultural and moral values, thereby actively sustaining tribal consciousness.

This study further argues that there is a growing need to view motherhood as a source of political legitimacy for tribal women's participation and leadership in the resistance movement rather than subordination within a patriarchal society (Rich, 1986). Tribal women of Sundargarh district utilise maternal identity as a strategic resource, morally and politically, to save their land, tribal identity and the future of their children. Furthermore, the study explored the importance of collective action and intra-household level negotiation. Tribal women are actively challenging patriarchal norms by influencing decision-making within families, particularly regarding land ownership and sale, demonstrating that resistance is embedded in everyday domestic life as much as in the public sphere.

Therefore, tribal women play a vital role in mobilising communities and sustaining non-violent forms of protest by occupying leadership positions during protests, a unique strategic practice that minimises the potential for state violence and

prevents the derailment of the resistance agenda. Hence, tribal women are key agents in preserving tribal unity, cultural identity, rituals and traditions. Tribal women's leadership in the Sundargarh district redefines the mainstream women's leadership framework by foregrounding care, communal responsibility, and social accountability, thereby helping sustain tribal consciousness within the context of land resistance movements in India.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the broader discussions on Indigenous studies, gender, and social exclusion by illustrating the interconnectedness among these social dimensions of tribal land resistance. First, it broadens an understanding of indigenous leadership by framing it as a communal, relational, and culturally embedded practice rather than an individual form of authority. Second, it contributes to feminist debates on gender and agency by revealing how motherhood, care, and intergenerational responsibility can serve as sources of political legitimacy and collective action rather than being perceived solely as arenas of gendered subordination. Finally, this study contributes to debates on social exclusion by highlighting the relationship between structural vulnerability and political agency. Tribal women are in a particularly vulnerable position within the process of dispossession, experiencing different forms of marginalisation in relation to land, gender, and decision-making. Their vulnerability does not indicate mere political powerlessness. Rather, the experience of tribal women demonstrates how socially marginalised groups can exercise agency through mobilisation, household negotiation and culturally embedded forms of leadership. Through collective action, mobilising communities, and sustaining tribal consciousness, tribal women are increasingly asserting their claims to land, identity, and livelihood to secure the future of generation next.

References

Ahmed, S. (2017). Living a feminist life. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Arendt, H. (2018). The human condition (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Agarwal, B. (1997). 'Bargaining' and gender relations: Within and beyond the household. *Feminist Economics*, *3*(1), 1–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/135457097338799

Butler, J. (1993). Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex." New York, Routledge.

Butler, J. (2006). Gender trouble. London, England: Routledge.

Bardhan, P. (1984). The political economy of development in India. Oxford University Press.

Chamberlain, C., Fergie, D., Sinclair, A. et al. (2016). Traditional midwifery or 'wise women' models of leadership: learning from indigenous cultures: '… Lead so the mother is helped, yet still free and in charge…' Lao Tzu, 5th century BC. Leadership 12(3), 346–363.

Contreras-Arias, C., C. Pernet & S. Rist, S. (2013). The case of El Color de la Tierra: An indigenous collective initiative in Western Mexico. UNRISD.

Chafetz, J.S., & Dworkin, A.G. (1986). Female revolt: Women's movements in world and historical perspective. Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld

Collins, P.H. (1990). Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

De Beauvoir, S. (2015). *The second sex*. London: Vintage Classics.

Department of Mission Shakti, Government of Odisha (n.d.). Mission Shakti. https://missionshakti.odisha.gov.in/en

Evans, M.M & Sinclair, A. (2016). Navigating the territories of Indigenous leadership: exploring the experiences and practices of Australian Indigenous arts leaders. Leadership 12(4), 470–490.

Evans, A., Nambiar, D. (2013). Collective action and women's agency: A background paper. Women's Voice, Agency, & Participation Research Series 2013 No.4

Fraser, N. (1992). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. In C. Calhoun (Eds.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, Maryland: MIT Press, pp. 109–142.

Finnis, E. (2017). Collective action, envisioning the future and women's self-help groups: A case study from south India. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 24(1), 1–23. SAGE Publications.

Federici, S. (2003). *Caliban and the witch: Women, the body and primitive accumulation*. New York, London: Pluto.

Gay, R. (2014). *Bad feminist: Essays*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Gordon, A. (1995). Gender, ethnicity, and class in Kenya: 'Burying Otieno' revisited. *Signs,* 20(4), pp. 883-912.

Hill Collins, P. (1990). *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Hooks, B. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to centre*. Cambridge, Maryland: South End Press.

Hall, L. (2023). Motherhood, agency, and violence: The personal is political. In Arıboğan, U.D. and Khelghat-Doost, H. (Eds.) *Constructing motherhood identity against political violence*. Cham: Springer, pp. 5–20.

Harvey, D. (2004). The 'new' imperialism: Accumulation by dispossession. *Socialist Register*, *40*, 63–87.

Johncilla, M.P. (2006). *Black women's leadership: Indigenous knowledges for empowerment*. Sage Publications.

Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with patriarchy. Gender Soc. 2(3), pp. 274-290.

Lorde, A. (2018). *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. London: Penguin Classics.

Lavallee, J. (2022). How to be biased in the classroom: Kwayeskastasowin-setting things right? *Mitchell Hamline Law. Review* 48: 771.

Meier Zu Selhausen. (2012). Does agency matter and do microfinance self-help groups empower women? A case study of a joint-microfinance and coffee cooperative from the Mountains of the Moon in Uganda. CITY: Mountains of the Moon University and Utrecht University.

Margolis, D.R. (1993). Women's movements around the world: cross-cultural comparisons. *Gender Soc*. 7(3), pp. 379-399.

Mhajne, A., & Whetstone, C. (2018). The use of political motherhood in Egypt's Arab Spring uprising and aftermath. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20 (1), 54–68.

Mansuri, G. & V. Rao (2013). Localising development: Does participation work? World Bank Policy Research Report. Washington DC: The World Bank.

Nayak, K.V. (2025). Breaking barriers: Indigenous women in leadership. *Leadership 2025*, Vol. 0(0), 1–25, DOI: 10.1177/17427150251406741 journals.sagepub.com/home/le

Nayak, A.K., & Pattnaik, B.K. (2019). SHGs and SHG banking in Odisha. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (2019), pp. 110-139

O'Reilly, A. (2021). *Matricentric feminism: Theory, activism, practice*. 2nd edition. Braford: Demeter Press.

Pilcher, J. & Whelehan, I. (2016). *Key concepts in gender studies*. London. Sage.

Pandolfelli, L., Ruth, M.D., & Dohrn, S. (2008). Gender and collective action: Motivations, effectiveness, and impact. *Journal of International Development* 20 (1), 1–11.

Ray, R. & Korteweg, A.C. (1999). Women's movements in the Third World: Identity, mobilisation, and autonomy. *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 25 (1999), pp. 47–71. https://www.jstor.org/stable/223497

Ryan, T. (2020). The intersectional challenges of Indigenous women's leadership. ab-Original 3(2), 149–171

Rich, A. (1986). *Of woman born: Motherhood as experience and institution*. 2nd ed. New York, London: Norton.

Robertson, C. (1996). Grassroots in Kenya: Women, genital mutilation, and collective action, 1920-1990. *Signs* 21(3), pp. 615-642.

Singh, A. (2024). Adivasis as ecological warriors: Colonial laws and post-colonial adivasi resistance in India's Jharkhand. *Genealogy* 2024, 8(4), 130 https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy8040130

Schirmer, J. (1993). The seeking of truth and the gendering of consciousness: The Co Madres of El Salvador and the CONAVIGUA widows of Guatemala. In Radcliffe, S.A., Westwood, D.S., and Westwood, S. (Eds.) *Viva: Women and popular protest in Latin America*. 1st ed. London: Routledge, pp. 30-64.

Setterquist, A. (2024). *Motherhood as resistance*. Lund University Publications. http://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/record/9151703

Singh, S. (2008). SHG-bank linkage programme: Progress and prospects, in K.G. Kar makar (ed.) *Microfinance in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publication, pp. 113–124.

Sen, A. (2000). Social exclusion: Concept, application, and scrutiny, Working Paper, Social Development Paper No. 1, Asian Development Bank, Bangkok, June.

Shiva, V. (1988). *Staying alive: Women, ecology and survival in India*. Kali for Women.

Thorat, S. (2008). Social exclusion in the Indian context: Theoretical basis of inclusive policies. *Indian Journal of Human Development*. Vol. 2, No. 1.

Wolfgramm, R., Spiller, C., & Voyageur, C. (2016). Indigenous leadership: Editors' introduction. *Leadership* 12(3), pp. 263–269.

Werbner, P. (1999). Political motherhood and the feminisation of citizenship: Women's activism and the transformation of the public sphere. Women, citizenship and difference, pp. 221–245.

Xaxa, V. (1999). Tribes as Indigenous people of India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Dec. 18-24, 1999, Vol. 34, No. 51, pp. 3589-3595.

Xaxa, V. (2008). State, society, and tribes: Issues in post-colonial India. Pearson Education India.

Xaxa, V. (2019). Isolation, inclusion and exclusion: The case of Adivasis in India. In Rao Srinivas (Eds.) *Adivasi rights and exclusion in India.* Routledge. London: Routledge. pp. 27-40.

Brandeis | LIBRARY
brandeis.edu/j-caste

CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 7 No. 2 pp. 310-327
October 2026
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v7i2.2868

Religious Identity Matters in Access to the Labour Market in India: Challenges Experienced by Muslims in Search of Livelihood

Tauqueer Ali Sabri[1]

Abstract

This study examines labour market inequalities faced by Muslims in India, highlighting the role of structural exclusion and religious discrimination in shaping employment outcomes. The findings show that Muslims are disproportionately concentrated in self-employment and casual wage labour, with limited access to regular salaried jobs, social security, paid leave, and stable workplaces, contributing to economic vulnerability. Decomposition analysis indicates that discrimination significantly influences labour market disparities, including lower labour force participation, higher informality, and lower wages. The study emphasizes the need for targeted public policies, including anti-discrimination measures, entrepreneurship support, skill development programmes, social security expansion, and gender-sensitive employment initiatives to improve labour market inclusion.

Keywords

Social Exclusion, Labour Market Discrimination, Vulnerability, Informal Employment

Introduction

Labour markets are not neutral spaces; they stand on shifting axes of social, religious and economic identity. The economic growth of India in the past two decades has only compounded this imbalance, as headline figures have not translated into equitable income distribution. This outcome is hardly anomalous. As Harvey (2005) argues, the asymmetries between capital, land and labour are not accidental by-products of market processes, but the very crux of the political project inherent to neoliberal capitalism. The past few decades of expansion have unfolded alongside weak job

[1]Project Manager, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, South Asia
Email: tauqueer.sabri@rosalux.org; tauqueer.sabri@gmail.com

© 2026 Tauqueer Ali Sabri. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

creation, stagnant earnings and rising precarity, renewing debates on jobless and employment-poor growth. This rupture, however, is not merely a macroeconomic catch. Employment remains the principal mechanism that economic growth leverages to reduce poverty, enable social mobility and secure livelihoods. When economic growth bypasses the realities of the labour market, the promise of poverty reduction, whether expressed through national programmes or global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is significantly compromised.

These interactions are best elucidated in the concept of 'embeddedness', the assertion by Polanyi (1984) that economics is embedded in social relations and vice versa. By warning against the treatment of labour as a mere object commodity governed entirely by market logic, Polanyi foregrounds the social dislocations such an approach produces. A reading of the labour market in this context changes the very semantics of exclusion—framing it not as incidental to the market, but as a structural consequence of it.

India's constitutional framework formally commits to the idea of equality among citizens and prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion and promises preservation, protection, and assurance of the rights of minorities (Articles 14, 15, 29 and 30). However, in a scenario where markets themselves exhibit, establish, and replicate hierarchies, the continued existence of fragmented labour markets exposes the confines of formal statutes. The gap between legal frameworks and the realities of material exclusion is made clear by the fact that Muslims, in particular, keep falling behind national averages on key measures of human development. Inclusive development, therefore, cannot be relegated to aggregate growth or subjected to the black box of *ceteris paribus* (all things being equal); it requires meaningful participation of all religious communities in the economic processes in order to minimise inter-religious inequalities.

Empirical scholarship corroborates these arguments; that economic distribution in market and non-market institutions, often mediated by social and religious identities, produces adverse outcomes for growth, income distribution and poverty among marginalised groups. In India, alongside caste, religion remains a decisive axis of social differentiation, shaping access to employment and livelihoods. While a corpus of literature has examined the role of caste and gender in determining economic outcomes, comparatively little attention has been paid to the impact of religion-based identity on economic outcomes in India (Thorat & Newman, 2010; Mishra 2023, 2020).

It is within this calculus of fragmented labour markets that discrimination acquires concrete forms. Employers often base hiring decisions on social identities such as caste, religion, gender, and race as opposed to productivity or qualifications alone. Consequently, labour markets frequently act as marketplaces of inequality, converting social hierarchies into economic exclusion despite the fact that they are the primary source of income and livelihoods (Papola, 2012). While a substantial body

of theoretical and empirical work is available on the economics of discrimination in the labour market, this literature is largely concentrated on caste, race and sex, with religion-based discrimination remaining relatively understudied.

Discrimination in the labour market unfolds across multiple stages of labour market participation. At the entry level, employment discrimination occurs when access to jobs is rationed out to a select few, irrespective of skill or productivity levels. This exclusion shows hiring preferences of privileged groups and the resultant filtering out of marginalised communities from formal employment at the earliest stage. An appendage to this is wage discrimination—whereby workers performing comparable tasks receive unequal remuneration, which further manifests into daily earnings, erratic payment schedules or skewed wage instalments. Beyond wages, discriminatory practices also mould terms and conditions for work, such as different hours of work, including hours, job security and environment within workplaces.

These market-based systems in India are maintained by entrenched forms of exclusion. Access to a particular type of work continues to be governed by caste norms or occupational segregation, historically rooted in the notions of purity and pollution (Thorat, 2008).

As evidenced by the above arguments, much of the existing literature on inequality in the labour market in India has coalesced around the question of caste identities, particularly in urban contexts. In this scenario, religion-based discrimination exists in vignettes. Within this sparse body of work, Das (2012) has made a critical intervention by examining whether religious and caste minorities, specifically Dalits and Muslims, build economic 'enclaves', provided they have the requisite wherewithal. Drawing on data from the 61st round of the National Sample Survey on employment and unemployment, the study probes what happens to educated individuals from these groups who are unable to access salaried jobs; whether they transition into self-employment, withdraw from the labour force, or adopt alternative livelihood strategies.

The findings reveal a vast gulf between Dalits and Muslims. The enclave hypothesis appears to work more effectively among Muslims than it does among Dalits, largely because they lack broad access to capital and networks. As noted by Das, educated Muslims who are excluded from salaried jobs are more likely to enter self-employment, particularly in urban areas, and establish businesses in concentrated clusters. These geographical and occupational enclaves, which allow Muslims to avoid discriminatory hiring practices, typify adaptive responses to exclusion from the labour market. Additionally, some educated Muslims opt out of the labour force completely and choose to remain unemployed while awaiting opportunities that align with their qualifications.

This pattern of labour market dislocation is related to broader forms of social and spatial marginalisation. Studies document systematic discrimination against Muslims in access to public goods, including education, housing, banking, sanitation and

transport infrastructure (Pandya, 2010; Das et al., 2011). Thorat et al (2015), in their analysis of urban rental housing markets, demonstrate how Dalits and Muslims face discriminatory treatment by landlords, with Muslims experiencing more severe forms of discrimination. In many cases, Muslim households are pressured into accepting unfavourable terms and conditions, merely to secure rental housing.

Together, these findings substantiate the claim that labour markets are not abysses existing in a vacuum, but meticulously programmed structures, in which inequality is organised and sustained. Discrimination against marginalised groups, whether deprived castes, religious or gender minorities, is not episodic, but thoroughly institutionalised, often operating via extra-legal methods and informal chains of power, networks and access. The aforementioned patterns show how occupational clustering, self-employment enclaves, and systematic exclusion from formal employment and urban housing are all consequences of labour market inequalities. These connections demonstrate how social and economic institutions are intertwined and how they put people at the bottom of the social pyramid at further risk. In this context, discrimination is not just an outcome of pre-existing inequalities. It is a process, ongoing and persistent, shaping who gets access to work, on what terms and with what results.

Labour market discrimination operates through three principal modes. First, it manifests at the entry level stage, rationing access to certain occupations or segments of the labour market and effectively filtering marginalised groups out at the point of entrance. Second, it constrains occupational mobility within internal labour markets, impeding any growth even after entry has been secured. Third, discrimination unfolds through unequal returns to work, whereby individuals engaged in the same occupation receive differential wages and benefits. While wages and earnings constitute what Abraham (2012) describes as a 'premium for tastes,' social exclusion presents a direct barrier to gaining access to the labour market and simultaneously reiterates the undesirability of particular groups within specific job market segments.

This body of evidence reflects how labour markets serve as zones of social differentiation, where inequalities proliferate and morph into economic disadvantage. It underlines the shortcomings of existing research in highlighting the full range of identity-based exclusion and the regulatory structures that facilitate it.

Theoretical Framework of Exclusion and Discrimination in the Labour Market

Trapped in the absolutist logic of *ceteris paribus*, standard economic models work on the presumption that markets act independently of social identities and treat individuals as replaceable units defined only by their productivity. However, a substantial body of work contests this assumption by demonstrating that identity, shaped by class, religion, race and gender, plays a decisive role in structuring labour market outcomes.

Within this literature, two leading neo-classical theories of discrimination provide foundational explanations for identity-based exclusion.

The first theory, propounded by Becker (1957), is based on taste-based discrimination. It posits that discrimination occurs because of employers' preferences rather than productivity considerations. It elaborates that some employer's experience disutility from interacting with certain social groups and are willing to incur financial cost to avoid such interactions, despite the knowledge of reduced profits. Importantly, the model establishes that the privileged group does not assume that discriminated groups are less capable; rather, it is an aversion towards social proximity. This 'taste for discrimination' can be measured along various vectors, such as intensity, duration and levels of contact with members of the other group. Resultantly, the intensity and persistence of such discrimination may vary depending on the extent of contact between groups, perceived social hierarchies or anxieties related to demographic or occupational displacement.

Kreuger (1963) provided one of the major critiques of Becker's thesis, by arguing that exclusion can exist even when individual prejudice is absent. Sometimes employers act so as to multiply group-level advantage rather than enhance individual profit, resulting in collective forms of exclusion (Deshpande, 2011). Hence, discrimination is sustained via coordinated behaviour that preserves the hegemony of privileged groups.

Complementing this approach, Arrow's (1972) theory of statistical discrimination attributes discriminatory outcomes to imperfect information. In a scenario where employers lack precise knowledge about an individual's skill, they often act on their proclivity for group-level stereotypes and use them as proxies for gauging ability. Therefore, group identity becomes a heuristic for decision-making, increasing prejudiced hiring and wage outcomes for equally productive individuals (Chakravarty & Somanathan, 2008). While this may reduce screening costs for employers, it strengthens stereotypes that naturalise skewed metrics for assessing capability based on group identities.

For instance, some employers assume that women are less productive than men and use this criterion to offer different wages without knowing the actual productivity of female candidates. In this way, employers use the group identity of employees as a proxy for ability. This causes adverse effects on the wages of the discriminated group on one hand, while saving the economic cost of hiring. Therefore, unlike Becker's model, the statistical discrimination framework treats discrimination as a rational response to information asymmetries rather than outward prejudice.

Although assuming different metrics of analysis, both neoclassical theories converge at a critical insight: that identity matters in the market. However, a major criticism of the theories is their narrow focus on market-stage discrimination, primarily hiring and wage differentials. These frameworks bypass critical pre-market disadvantages such as unequal access to education, networks, spatial segregation and

institutional bias, which define who will enter the labour market long before individual transaction happens.

To offset this undue emphasis on the economic aspect of this discourse, there are sociological and political economy perspectives that offer a broader understanding of inter-group discrimination beyond the question of the market.

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) explains discriminatory behaviour as a function of inter-group social comparison, suggesting that people classify themselves into hierarchical social identities wherein behaviour and attitude take the shape of 'us' (in-group) versus 'them' (out-group). Group favouritism and exclusion of out-groups emerge as devices of social differentiation (Vijayalakshmi et al, 2006). Thurow (1968) and Bergmann (1971), in their critical appraisal of taste-based discrimination, argue that discrimination reflects the collective power of the dominant groups. Likewise, the bargaining theory of Baran and Sweezy (1966) links discrimination to the bargaining strength of the unions (cited in Tilak, 1980).

The sociological literature on discrimination in the labour market further extends this analysis by locating it within the greater tides of institutional and social processes. Rather than treating discrimination as occurring in silos of individual prejudice, these perspectives place it within the pulls of norm, organisational practices and social structures that reproduce inequality across both micro and macro levels (Piore, 1983). However, precise identification of discrimination is empirically complex, as there is a risk of accepting symptoms as the structural causes of discrimination. Furthermore, identifying the plane of discrimination—whether at the individual level, household, community, or labour market is a lasting Achilles heel (Das, 2015).

A more recent and integrative contribution is offered by Akerlof and Kranton's (2010) framework of *Identity Economics,* which deftly bridges economic and sociological perspectives by demonstrating how norms, social categories, and identities shape economic decision making.

These theoretical perspectives highlight that labour markets are not transactional, static entities. Moreover, the inequalities that are borne of them cannot be relegated to isolated acts of bias or information failures. Rather, it is seeded within social identities, institutions, and power relations that support employment, mobility and returns. In this sense, they are whirlpool spaces that defy being straitjacketed into black-boxes—the ones which pose immense dangers, especially for marginalised identities which operate as distinct and consequential axes of labour market exclusion in India.

The constitution of India is committed to the idea of equality among citizens and prohibits discrimination on the ground of religion and promises preservation, protection, and assurance of the rights of minorities (Articles 14, 15, 29 and 30). Studies by government, policymakers and researchers have shown that Muslims lag behind in most indicators of human development. For an inclusive development it is necessary

that each religious community is benefitted and takes part in the development process so that inter-religious inequalities are minimised.

Methodology and Data Source

This article uses quantitative research methods to analyse inter-religious inequality in access to access to labour market and social security benefits to religious minority. Periodic labour force survey data has been analysed through cross-tabulation for three successive years—2021-22, 2022-23, 2023-24. Cross-tabulation analysis has helped to understand relationship with religious identity and various indicators of labour market. The study has also calculated binary logistic relationship between independent variable religious identity and dependent variables such as labour force participation, work participation, unemployment and social security indicators. The results of binary logistic regression have been discussed using odds ratio with 95 per cent confidence interval. Discrimination experienced by Muslims in accessing to labour market has been analysed using decomposition method.

Analysis

Labour Force Participation Rate by Religious Groups in India

As per periodic labour force survey, Labour Force Participation Rate is the percentage of persons in the labour force which include both working and seeking employment. The table 1 presents the labour force participation in rural India by gender for major religious groups in India for three rounds of periodic labour force surveys 2021-22 to 2023-34. Analysis of the data indicate that Muslims constantly lag behind other religious groups in labour force participation. This trend is visible for all three rounds of labour market. Gender-wise analysis also shows that labour force participation rates for Muslim women remain abysmal in comparison to other social groups. Among all major religious groups in rural India, labour force participation remains lowest for Muslims and highest for Sikhism.

Table 1: Labour Force Participation Rate (in per cent) according to usual status (ps+ss) for major religious groups in India: Rural

Religion	M	F	P	M	F	P	M	F	P
	PLFS (2023-24)			PLFS (2022-23)			PLFS (2021-22)		
Hinduism	58.4	37.0	47.8	57.8	33.6	45.9	57.2	28.4	43.0
Muslim	53.7	25.0	39.3	45.3	14.7	31.7	53.6	16.5	35.3
Christianity	57.2	42.7	49.8	57.8	38.0	47.7	57.0	36.8	46.8
Sikhism	61.8	29.3	46.1	63.1	25.7	44.6	61.5	20.4	42.2
All	57.9	35.5	46.8	55.5	30.5	43.4	56.9	27.2	42.2

Source: PLFS (2023-24), PLFS (2022-23), PLFS (2021-22)

Labour force participation rate for urban areas is slightly higher than rural areas for all religious groups. However, for urban areas also, the labour force participation rate is lowest for Muslims among all major religions in India. Similar to rural areas, urban areas also has higher gender inequality in labour participation. Despite higher availability of livelihood opportunities in urban areas, Muslims continue to have lower labour force participation.

Table 2: Labour Force Participation Rate (in per cent) according to usual status (ps+ss) for major religious groups in India: Urban

Religion	M	F	P	M	F	P	M	F	P
	PLFS (2023-24)			PLFS (2022-23)			PLFS (2021-22)		
Hinduism	59.4	23.6	41.9	58.9	21.5	40.8	58.8	19.6	39.7
Muslim	57.1	14.6	36.2	55.8	12.6	34.7	56.4	12.0	34.7
Christianity	56.7	30.3	42.8	55.4	29.2	42.0	55.8	29.6	42.3
Sikhism	60.6	19.1	39.6	61.8	16.6	39.3	58.4	17.6	38.9
All	59.0	22.3	41.0	58.3	20.2	39.8	58.3	18.8	39.0

Source: PLFS (2023-24), PLFS (2022-23), PLFS (2021-22)

Table 3: Labour Force Participation Rate (in per cent) according to usual status (ps+ss) for major religious groups in India: Total

Religion	M	F	P	M	F	P	M	F	P
	PLFS (2023-24)			PLFS (2022-23)			PLFS (2021-22)		
Hinduism	58.7	33.3	46.2	58.1	30.5	44.5	57.6	26.1	42.1
Islam	54.9	21.4	38.2	47.7	14.2	32.5	54.6	15.0	35.1
Christianity	57.1	38.3	47.4	57.0	35.1	45.8	56.6	34.2	45.2
Sikhism	61.5	26.7	44.5	62.8	23.5	43.3	60.8	19.8	41.4
All	58.2	31.7	45.1	56.2	27.8	42.4	57.3	24.8	41.3

Source: PLFS (2023-24), PLFS (2022-23), PLFS (2021-22)

Work Participation Rate by Religious Groups in India

Work Participation rate is defined as percentage of people employed in population. As far as the work participation rate is concerned, table shows that WPR also remains lower for Muslims in comparison to other religious groups in India. Gender disparity in work participation rate is also quite visible like labour force participation. From 2021-22 to 2023-34, the rural work participation rate remains lower for Muslims in comparison to other religious groups.

Table 4: WPR (in per cent) according to usual status (ps+ss) for major religious groups in India: Rural

Religion	M	F	P	M	F	P	M	F	P
	PLFS (2023-24)			PLFS (2022-23)			PLFS (2021-22)		
Hinduism	56.9	36.3	46.7	56.1	33.1	44.7	55.1	27.8	41.6
Muslim	52.4	24.3	38.3	44.6	14.5	31.3	51.6	16.2	34.1
Christianity	55.3	40.7	47.9	56.0	36.4	46.0	54.4	35.0	44.6
Sikhism	58.7	27.2	43.4	60.3	24.2	42.4	58.0	19.0	39.7
All	56.3	34.8	45.6	54.0	30.0	42.3	54.7	26.6	40.8

Source: PLFS (2023-24), PLFS (2022-23), PLFS (2021-22)

For urban areas also, the work participation rate for Muslims is lower than other religious groups. The gender disparity is more acute for Muslims in urban areas in comparison to rural areas. For Muslim women, the work participation rate remains very low and lowest among all religious groups in India. The work participation rate among Muslims has slightly increased in last three rounds of PLFS. However, it remains lowest for Muslims among all religious groups in India.

Table 5: WPR (in per cent) according to usual status (ps+ss) for major religious groups in India: Urban

Religion	M	F	P	M	F	P	M	F	P
	PLFS (2023-24)			PLFS (2022-23)			PLFS (2021-22)		
Hinduism	56.8	21.9	39.7	56.1	19.9	38.5	55.4	18.2	37.3
Muslim	54.8	13.7	34.6	53.5	11.7	33.1	53.0	11.0	32.5
Christianity	53.4	27.9	40.0	52.5	26.7	39.3	51.9	26.5	38.9
Sikhism	57.7	17.1	37.2	58.6	14.8	36.8	55.1	15.4	36.1
All	56.4	20.7	38.9	55.6	18.7	37.7	55.0	17.3	36.6

Source: PLFS (2023-24), PLFS (2022-23), PLFS (2021-22)

At aggregate level also, the work participation rate remains lowest for Muslims in comparison to other social groups. Gender disparity in work participation for Muslim women also remains high. Approximately one-fifth women are in workforce among Muslims in comparison to Hinduism.

Table 6: WPR (in per cent) according to usual status (ps+ss) for major religious groups in India: Total

Religion	M	F	P	M	F	P	M	F	P
	PLFS (2023-24)			PLFS (2022-23)			PLFS (2021-22)		
Hinduism	56.9	32.3	44.7	56.1	29.6	43.1	55.2	25.2	40.5
Muslim	53.2	20.7	37.0	46.6	13.8	31.7	52.1	14.4	33.5
Christianity	54.6	36.3	45.2	54.8	33.2	43.8	53.6	32.0	42.6
Sikhism	58.5	24.6	41.9	59.9	22.0	41.1	57.4	18.2	38.9
All	56.4	30.7	43.7	54.4	27.0	41.1	54.8	24.0	39.6

Source: PLFS (2023-24), PLFS (2022-23), PLFS (2021-22)

Unemployment Rate by Religious Groups in India

As per periodic labour force survey, unemployment is defined as percentage of labour force which is not working currently but actively looking for the employment opportunities. The unemployment rate remains lower for rural areas than urban areas. Since majority of working age population gets some employment in primary activities in rural areas, the unemployment rate remains low. Unemployment rate for Muslims is higher than Hindus but remains lower than Christians and Muslims. However, gender disparity is not very high among Muslims as far as unemployment rate is concerned.

Table 7: Unemployment rate in usual status (ps+ss) for major religious groups: Rural

Religion	M	F	P	M	F	P	M	F	P
	PLFS (2023-24)			PLFS (2022-23)			PLFS (2021-22)		
Hinduism	2.6	1.9	2.4	2.9	1.8	2.5	3.7	2.0	3.2
Muslim	2.6	2.7	2.6	1.6	1.2	1.5	3.7	2.1	3.3
Christianity	3.4	4.5	3.9	3.2	4.2	3.6	4.5	4.8	4.6
Sikhism	5.1	7.2	5.7	4.5	5.6	4.8	5.7	6.9	6.0
All	2.7	2.1	2.5	2.8	1.8	2.4	3.8	2.1	3.3

Source: PLFS (2023-24), PLFS (2022-23), PLFS (2021-22)

As discussed earlier, the unemployment rate remains higher in urban areas as employment opportunities are limited in urban areas in comparison to rural areas. Among all religious groups, unemployment rate remains lowest for Muslims and highest among Christians.

Table 8: Unemployment rate in usual status (ps+ss) for major religious groups: Urban

Religion	M	F	P	M	F	P	M	F	P
	PLFS (2023-24)			PLFS (2022-23)			PLFS (2021-22)		
Hinduism	4.3	7.1	5.1	4.7	7.4	5.4	5.7	7.6	6.2
Muslim	4.0	6.5	4.5	4.1	7.3	4.7	6.0	8.2	6.4
Christianity	5.9	7.8	6.6	5.2	8.7	6.5	6.9	10.4	8.2
Sikhism	4.7	10.8	6.2	5.2	10.7	6.4	5.7	12.6	7.2
All	4.4	7.1	5.1	4.7	7.5	5.4	5.8	7.9	6.3

Source: PLFS (2023-24), PLFS (2022-23), PLFS (2021-22)

At aggregate level also, unemployment rate for Muslims has increased in 2023-24 in comparison to 2022-23. However, unemployment rent is lower than other minority religion in India.

Table 9: Unemployment rate in usual status (ps+ss) for major religious groups: Total

Religion	M	F	P	M	F	P	M	F	P
	PLFS (2023-24)			PLFS (2022-23)			PLFS (2021-22)		
Hinduism	3.1	2.9	3.1	3.4	2.8	3.2	4.3	3.1	3.9
Muslim	3.1	3.6	3.2	2.3	2.6	2.4	4.5	3.8	4.4
Christianity	4.3	5.4	4.7	3.9	5.4	4.5	5.3	6.5	5.8
Sikhism	5.0	7.9	5.8	4.7	6.5	5.1	5.7	8.0	6.2
All	3.2	3.1	3.2	3.3	2.9	3.2	4.4	3.3	4.1

Source: PLFS (2023-24), PLFS (2022-23), PLFS (2021-22)

Distribution of Workers by Broad Status in Employment

In this section, an analysis of workers by employment categories has been done. The broad categories of employment are—self-employed, regular wage salary and casual labour. Self-employed workers have been categorized into own-account workers/ employer, helper in household enterprises. In comparison to other religious groups, Muslims have lowest proportion to regular/wage salary. The proportion of casual labour is also highest among Muslims. Thus, in comparison to other religions, Muslim workers are more vulnerable as the proportion of casual labour is highest and regular wage salary workers are lowest.

Table 10: Percentage Distribution of Workers in Usual Status (ps+ss) by Broad Status in Employment: Rural

Category of Persons	Self-Employed			Regular Wage/ Salary	Casual Labour	All
	Own Account Worker, Employer	Helper in Household Enterprise	All Self Employed			
Hinduism						
Male	46.9	12.9	59.8	15.8	24.4	100.0
Female	29.0	43.7	72.7	7.6	19.7	100.0
Total	40.0	24.8	64.8	12.7	22.6	100.0
Muslim						
Male	49.3	9.7	59.0	13.5	27.5	100.0
Female	50.4	36.4	86.8	5.6	7.6	100.0
Total	49.6	18.2	67.9	11.0	21.1	100.0
Christianity						
Male	46.8	10.5	57.3	17.7	25.0	100.0
Female	34.1	32.8	66.8	15.7	17.5	100.0
Total	41.3	20.1	61.4	16.8	21.8	100.0
Sikhism						
Male	39.7	10.4	50.1	21.8	28.1	100.0
Female	44.2	13.9	58.1	20.4	21.5	100.0
Total	41.0	11.5	52.5	21.4	26.1	100.0

Category of Persons	Self-Employed			Regular Wage/ Salary	Casual Labour	All
	Own Account Worker, Employer	Helper in Household Enterprise	All Self Employed			
all Religions						
Male	47.0	12.4	59.4	15.8	24.9	100.0
Female	31.2	42.3	73.5	7.8	18.7	100.0
Total	41.0	23.7	64.7	12.7	22.5	100.0

Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2023-24

In comparison to other religious groups, proportion of self-employed workers is highest among Muslims. Among self-employed workers, the proportion of own account worker is highest among Muslims. Due to lack of regular salaried employment, Muslims depends on self- employment opportunities such as small enterprises/ shops in which they sometime work alone or employ some workers.

Table 11: Percentage Distribution of Workers in Usual Status (ps+ss) by Broad Status in Employment: Urban

Category of Persons	Self-Employed			Regular Wage/ Salary	Casual Labour	All
	Own Account Worker, Employer	Helper in Household Enterprise	All Self Employed			
Hinduism						
Male	33.9	4.5	38.4	49.4	12.3	100.0
Female	26.0	13.8	39.9	51.6	8.6	100.0
Total	31.8	7.0	38.8	50.0	11.3	100.0
Muslim						
Male	41.6	5.7	47.3	33.6	19.1	100.0
Female	47.4	16.3	63.7	29.1	7.2	100.0
Total	42.7	7.7	50.5	32.7	16.8	100.0
Christianity						
Male	31.3	1.2	32.5	50.8	16.7	100.0
Female	28.4	8.3	36.8	55.4	7.9	100.0
Total	30.3	3.8	34.1	52.4	13.5	100.0
Sikhism						
Male	38.8	8.7	47.5	42.3	10.2	100.0
Female	31.9	9.4	41.3	56.9	1.8	100.0
Total	37.2	8.9	46.1	45.7	8.2	100.0
all Religions						
Male	35.1	4.7	39.8	46.8	13.4	100.0
Female	28.5	13.8	42.3	49.4	8.3	100.0
Total	33.4	7.0	40.4	47.5	12.1	100.0

Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2023-24

Similar pattern is also observed for urban areas, proportion of regular wage salary worker is lowest for Muslims in comparison to other religious groups. For Muslims, less than one-third proportion of workers have regular wage salary. Again, for urban areas as well, the proportion of casual wage labour is highest for Muslims in comparison to other religious groups. More than half of the work force among Muslims are dependent on some form of self-employment which is highest among all religious groups in India.

Factors Determining Vulnerability of Muslims in Labour Market in India

As discussed in previous section, Muslims workers are exposed to vulnerability due to higher proportion of casual wage workers and lower proportion of regular salaried workers. Vulnerabilities experienced by Muslims have been analysed through four major indicators: unemployment, type of work location-fix-non fixed, eligibility of paid leave and access to social security benefits. Logistic regression method has been used to analyse nature of vulnerabilities.

Table 12 shows the probability of being unemployed by religious groups in India. Analysis of odds ratio shows that in comparison to Hindus, Muslims have 23 per cent higher odds of being unemployed. However, the odds of being unemployed are lower for Muslims in comparison to other minority religions in India.

Table 12: Probability of being unemployed by religious groups in India

Unemployment	Odds Ratio	Std. err.	z	P>|z|	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Religious Group						
Muslim	1.23	.0396972	6.41	0.000	1.154605	1.310319
Christianity	1.549913	.0691627	9.82	0.000	1.420116	1.691574
Sikhism	1.269196	.0962918	3.14	0.002	1.093829	1.472678
Others	1.579824	.1015135	7.12	0.000	1.39288	1.791858

Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2023-24

Likelihood of Having Fixed Work Location

Table 13 shows the odds ratio of having fixed work location. Inability to have fixed work location further adds to the vulnerability of workers. The analysis shows that in comparison to Hindu workers, Muslim workers have 33 per cent lower probability of having fixed work location. This reflects the vulnerability of Muslims workers in comparison to Hindu workers.

Table 13: Likelihood of having Access to fixed Work Location

Fixed Work Location	Odds Ratio	Std. err.	z	P>z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Muslim	.6773499	.0251392	-10.50	0.000	.6298274	.7284582
Christianity	1.274421	.0899632	3.44	0.001	1.10975	1.463526
Sikhism	.4751553	.0373955	-9.45	0.000	.4072346	.5544041
Others	.676066	.0637377	-4.15	0.000	.5620049	.8132764
_cons	19.81163	.487943	121.25	0.000	18.87799	20.79144

Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2023-24

Likelihood of Having Eligibility of Paid Leave

Eligibility of availing paid leave protects the workers from wage deduction during the event of illness and other conditions when they are unable to work. This also protects the workers from economic vulnerability and ensures household well-being. The odds ratio of eligibility of paid leave shows that in comparison to Hindu workers, Muslims have 55 per cent lower probability of availing paid leave. This is lowest among all religions.

Table 14: Likelihood of Availing Paid Leave

Paid Leave	Odds Ratio	Std. err.	z	P>z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Religion						
Muslim	.4514839	.0106394	-33.75	0.000	.4311053	.4728258
Christianity	1.518018	.0328026	19.32	0.000	1.455068	1.58369
Sikhism	1.054802	.0487544	1.15	0.248	.9634453	1.154821
Others	1.280167	.0518394	6.10	0.000	1.182491	1.385911
_cons	.0541455	.0006725	-234.77	0.000	.0528433	.0554799

Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2023-24

Likelihood of Accessing any Social Benefits

Access to social security benefits such as provident fund, insurance, gratuity etc. provides social protection to workers and reduced vulnerability. The odds ration given in table 11 indicate that in comparison to Hindu workers, Muslim workers have 50 per cent lower probability of getting access to any social security benefits.

Table 15: Likelihood of Accessing any Social Benefits

Access to Social Benefits	Odds Ratio	Std. err.	z	P>z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Muslim	.5003441	.0148984	-23.26	0.000	.4719796	.5304132
Christianity	2.44184	.0752282	28.98	0.000	2.298759	2.593827
Sikhism	.5614338	.0369688	-8.77	0.000	.493457	.6387748
Others	1.731427	.093583	10.16	0.000	1.557389	1.924914
_cons	.2270507	.0034412	-97.82	0.000	.2204054	.2338965

Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2023-24

Religious-based Discrimination in Employment

Decomposition analysis is used to show whether the difference in employment indicators among various religious groups is due to identity or unequal endowments. The decomposition method in useful in exploring discrimination**.** The decomposition method disaggregate the factors explaining access to employment for various religious groups.

Table 16: Religion Based Discrimination in Employment: 2023-24

Probability of Employment: HHC	0.078
Probability of Employment: Muslims	0.020
Difference	0.058
Total explained	0.050
% Explained	86.0
% Unexplained	14.0

Source: Based on Periodic Labour Force Survey data, 2023-24

Apart from the endowment factors such as level of education, training, income level, sectors, access to social and capital assets, etc., the religious identity of labour also determines labour market outcomes. Table 16 shows the religious-based discrimination in employment for Muslims in comparison to privileged Hindu high caste**.** The decomposition analysis based on the Fairlee method (1999) explains the discrimination experienced by Muslims in the Labour Market. The result shows the gap in employment for Hindu high caste and Muslims. The analysis reflects that 86 per cent difference in employment indicators for Muslims and Hindu high caste is due to endowment factors while 14 per cent differences are due to unexplained factors. These unexplained factors are religious identity based discrimination experienced by Muslims in labour market.

Discussion and Policy Suggestions

The article highlights that minority social groups, especially Muslims, face structural exclusion and deprivation in access labour markets. Discrimination and prejudices based on religious identities minimizes opportunities for religious minorities in India. Majority of Muslim labour force is concentrated in self-employment and casual wage labour and a very low proportion of them get access to regular salaried employment which aggravates economic vulnerabilities among Muslims. Lack of benefit of eligibility to paid leave and social security benefit increases the precariousness of Muslims in the Labour Market. Due to higher proportion of casual wage labour and self-employment, fixed work location is also limited to Muslims in labour market. The analysis in this article highlights the precariousness of Muslims in the labour market. Structural inequality in access to livelihood and employment opportunities adversely affect economic and household well-being of Muslims in India. Muslims are almost similar to other marginalised social groups. Discrimination in accessing education and vocational training opportunities further reduces chances of getting good paid employment opportunities. As explained by Thorat and Newman (2010), Muslims experience religion-based discrimination in accessing labour market and at work place due to religion-based discrimination. Decomposition analysis in this article also shows that discrimination affects the labour market outcomes for Muslims in India. As discussed in this article, Muslims have lower labour force participation, higher informal workers and comparatively lower wages. This required urgent need to designing and implementing specific public policies for preventing discrimination based on social identities. Muslims should be provided special incentives for creating entrepreneurship opportunities. We need to create targeted skill development programme for Muslims. Traditional skill development should be linked to employability. As a higher proportion of Muslim workforce are in self-employment, social security should also be expended to self-employment sectors. As indicated through data analysis in this article, gender disparity is higher for Muslims in various indicators of labour market. Women specific skill and employment opportunities should be created to improve work participation of Muslim women in labour market.

Acknowledgement

Author expresses his sincere gratitude to Prof S K Thorat for his motivation and guidance in writing this article.

References

Alam M.S. (2022). Muslims in the labour market, *Seminar*, 758, October 2022,

Becker, Gary S. (1957). The economics of discrimination, Phoenix publication.

Borooah V.K. (2010). Social exclusion and jobs reservation in India, *Economic and Political Weekly,* December 25-31, *45*(52), 31-35.

Das, M.B. (2012). Minority status and labour market outcomes: Does India have minority enclaves? In Thorat, S., and Newman, K. (eds), *Blocked by caste: economic discrimination in modern India*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Das, M.B. (2015). All in my head? The play of exclusion and discrimination in the labour market, Policy Research working paper, WPS7468, World Bank.

Das, M.B. and P. Dutta. (2008). Does caste matter for wages in the Indian labour market? Caste pay gaps in India, Third IZA/World Bank Conference on Employment and Development. May 5 and 6, Morocco.

Das, P.K., Kar, S., and Kayal, M. (2011). Religious minorities and provision of public goods: evidence from rural West Bengal. Discussion Paper No. 6154, IZA, Germany: Bonn.

De Haan, A. (1997). Poverty and social exclusion: A comparison of debates on deprivation. Working Paper No. 2, Poverty Research Unit, Sussex University, Brighton, United Kingdom.

De Haan, A. (2000). Social exclusion: Enriching the understanding of deprivation. *Studies in Social and Political Thought*, 2(2), 22-40.

Deshpande, A. (2011). *The grammar of caste: economic discrimination in contemporary India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Hameed U. (2020). Footprints of fascism in India: Implications for local Muslims, *Policy Perspectives*, *17*(2), 27-46

Hasan M. (1988). In search of integration and identity: Indian Muslims since Independence, Economic *and Political Weekly*, Nov., 1988, 23(45/47), Special Number, 2467-2478

Irfan Habib (2006). Muslims in India: Some issues for state action, *Social Scientist*, Mar. - Apr., 2006, *34* (3/4) 82-89

Islam M. (2012). Rethinking the Muslim question in post-colonial India, *Social Scientist*, 40 (7/8), 61-84

Jessica Field J., A.D. Tiwari & Y Mookherjee (2017). Urban refugees in Delhi: Identity, entitlements and well-being, *International Institute for Environment and Development*, Working Paper 2017.

Jodhka, Surinder S. (2002). Community and identities: contemporary discourses on culture and politics in India, Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications.

Kesar S. & Rosa Abraham (2023). Religious identity-based inequality in the labour market: Policy challenges in India in Mariz Tadros, Philip Mader, Kathryn Cheeseman (Eds), *Poverty and Prejudice*: *Religious Inequality and the Struggle for Sustainable Development,* Bristol University Press.

Kreuger, Anne O. (1963). The economics of discrimination, Journal of Political Economy, 71:5, 481-486.

Lackshmanasamy, T. and Madheswaran, S. (1995). Caste discrimination: evidence from Indian scientific and technical labour market, Indian Journal of Social Sciences, 8(1), 59-77.

Mishra V.K. (2020). Caste, religion and ethnicity: Role of social determinants in accessing rental, housing, *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, Vol. 1 No. 1, Brandeis University, USA. 2020

Mishra V.K. (2023). Determinants of discrimination in access to housing for marginalised social groups in India, *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies*, Vol. 9, No 1, 2023.

Mishra V.K. (2023). Caste and religion matters in access to housing, drinking water and toilet: Empirical evidence from National Sample Surveys; *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, Vol. 4 No. 1, Brandeis University, USA. 2023.

Mohanty M. (2006). Social inequality, labour market dynamics and reservation, *Economic and Political Weekly,* Sep. 2-8, 2006, 41(35), 3777-3789.

Mukherjee, D., and Majumdar, R. (2011). Occupational pattern, wage rates, and earning disparities in India: a decomposition analysis, *Indian Economic Review*, *46*:1, 131-152.

Papola, T.S. (2012). Social exclusion and discrimination in the labour market, Working paper no. 2012/04. New Delhi: Institute for Studies in Industrial Development.

S. Thorat & P. Attewell (2007). The legacy of social exclusion: A correspondence study of job discrimination in India, *Economic and Political Weekly,* 42(41) 4141-4145.

Thorat, S. (2008). Labour market discrimination concept, forms and remedies in the Indian situations, The Indian Journal of Labour Economics, 51:1, 31-52.

Brandeis | LIBRARY
brandeis.edu/j-caste

CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 7 No. 2 pp. 328-342
October 2026
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v7i2.2557

Caste and the Division of Laborer's Linkage in the Indian Labor Market: Special Reference to the Rickshaw Pullers in Lucknow City, Uttar Pradesh, India

Milind Sen[1], K. Raja Mohan Rao[2], Devi Prasad[3]

Abstract

This study attempts to understand the Indian labor market specially the occupation of rickshaw pullers, which is primarily concerned with marginal communities who have been constitutionally identified as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribe (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and religious minorities. In this regard, the essay articulates how a persistence caste system influences the choice of opting for any occupation in the Indian labor market despite constitutional guarantees (see. India's Article 19 [1] [g]) to practice any occupation, trade or business. To examine the above social issue, this study applies survey method, which was conducted from March 2021 to October 2022 with 350 rickshaw pullers in Lucknow city, India. This present study concludes by examining Ambedkar's views on caste and occupational preferences, focusing on how occupations such as rickshaw pulling, manual scavenging, cremation-related services, septic tank cleaning, waste collection, leatherwork, barbering, and fishing remain associated with historically marginalised social groups, whose limited access to landownership, education, property, and other assets has weakened their economic opportunities.

Keywords

Ambedkar, Caste, Division of Laborers, Rickshaw Pullers, Lucknow City

[1]Independent Scholar and Resource Person in Geography at DACE: Dr. Ambedkar Center of Excellence at BBAU, Lucknow, India
[2]Professor, Center for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy (CSSEIP), University of Hyderabad, Telangana, India
[3]Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, School of Liberal Arts, Noida International University, Greater Noida, India
Email: [1]senmilindsen@gmail.com, [2]rmrao.bdu@gmail.com, [3]dpsocio@gmail.com

© 2026 Milind Sen, K. Raja Mohan Rao, Devi Prasad. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

Introduction

"Productive castes", shaped by historical oppression and socio-economic inequality, can be typified by lowest income levels, leading to low savings, limited investment, reduced creativity and a healthy life (Ilaiah, 2018, 1996). These low-income caste groups are compelled to survive as unskilled laborers, working as agricultural workers, daily wage workers, manual scavengers, rickshaw pullers, etc. These laborers have been considered the backbone of the Indian informal economy, but suffer from a 'vicious circle of poverty' or 'poverty trap' (Prasad, 2018). Oscar Lewis (1959) argued that a 'culture of poverty' among laborers is not merely an economic condition; rather, it is a complex set of values, attitudes, and behaviors that is transmitted from one generation to the next. Key factors within this framework include fatalism, a present-time orientation (characterized by a lack of long-term planning), weak institutional participation, marginalization, and social exclusion.

Since independence, India has upheld the freedom to choose one's occupation, regardless of one's religion or community affiliation. A glance at the statistics reveals that most individuals engaged in manual scavenging belong to the Dalit and OBC communities (Lakshman, 2024). A similar trend is observable in the occupation of rickshaw pulling. While it is obvious that these professions are not strictly restricted to any specific caste or religion and theoretically, anyone can undertake them an examination of primary data indicates that most rickshaw pullers engage in this work out of sheer compulsion. They do so from necessity rather than by choice. Moreover, it appears that due to structured socio-economic multi-layered inequalities, they are unable to secure equal opportunities in other professions (Sen, 2025; Prasad & Akundy, 2021). Historically, the society of Uttar Pradesh is woven into a complex tapestry of caste, class, land relations, and socio-cultural traditions. Within its social structure, the caste hierarchy not only determines social status but also profoundly influences socio-political behavior and economic patterns. These unequal socio-economic patterns and crisis of belonging also have been highlighted by noted writer and poet Omprakash Valmiki in his writing titled "*Joothan*"[1] as well as "*Thakur ka Kuan*"[2] (Valmiki, 1989, 1997).

John Kujur and Amarendra Das (2026) point out that there are many barriers to a school education for SCs and STs in eastern India with reference to SDG4. Similarly, many studies show that more than 40 per cent dropout cases are still found among OBCs, SCs, and STs in India. If we look through an economic lens, it is found that the false idea of meritocracy undermines institutional diversity and social correction or 'positive discrimination'. According to World Inequality Report 2026, the top 10 per cent own more than 60 per cent of the total wealth of India. This concentrated wealth is heavily skewed toward so-called Upper Castes (World Inequality Lab, 2026).

[1]Joothan means (leftovers) symbolizing humiliation and caste oppression.

[2]This poem indicates toward rooted structural socio-economic inequality in Indian society.

Looking at caste and economic opportunities, both have significant correlations. For instance, we can cite manual scavenging as another pertinent example, a field in which the workforce consists predominantly of individuals from Dalit and marginalized communities. This is largely because they do not find it easy to secure employment in other sectors. Furthermore, due to the social stigma associated with this onerous profession, members of so-called "upper castes" tend to refrain from engaging in manual scavenging, as it has historically been regarded as a socially degrading occupation and is viewed through the lens of social stigma (Prasad & Srihari, 2017). This implies that, in India, the "division of labor" that is, the allocation of work remains, to a significant extent, caste-based, thereby profoundly influencing the social and economic opportunities available to individual.

Social Identity and Anguish of Labors

B.R. Ambedkar's critique of the caste system and its implications on Indian society has remained foundational to get an understanding on the persistent inequalities in the social stratification (Ambedkar, 1936). He presented a seminar paper on, *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*, at Columbia University (in 1916), wherein he proposed an extreme analysis of the caste system as a strict hierarchical division of society aligned with hereditary occupations and endogamy (Ambedkar, 1916). This mechanism predetermined social position and established repressive circumstances that delayed development, equal treatment, and self-sufficiency. Later on, in his writings, including (*Annihilation of Caste 1936*), Ambedkar developed his criticism, believing that the caste system reinforced social, cultural, economic, and political inequalities primarily through the stratification of laborers, which was not only functional but also highly hierarchical (Ambedkar, 1936). Ambedkar emphasized the distinction between the 'division of labor' and the division of laborers by pointing out that the caste system is a reaffirmation of a graded inequality among laborers. The division of labor is vital in the progress of society as is the case in many civilizations. The caste system in India goes a step further though as even the laborers are in a hierarchical order. The caste system is not merely a division of labor; it is a system of assigning people to certain roles based on their birth, so that a certain set of people could not be in higher positions, and that inequality would be practiced. This graded hierarchy is supported by the historical foundations of the caste system which are discussed in the ancient manuscripts, the Rig Veda, namely, the Purusha Sukta. The classification of society into four varnas (Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders), and Shudras (laborers)) established the basis of a social arrangement that placed the Brahmins at the top and Shudras at the bottom of menial labor. The caste system also excluded those not included in the Varna system, referred to as Ati-Shudras or untouchables, who were not part of the Varna system at all, and

had to do the work thought to be unclean or contaminating such as scavenging and skinning dead animals.

Ambedkar explained that caste and its effect on work is especially influential in the context of the historical and modern Indian labor market. There not only has limited career options of the individuals depending on their births, but have also been structural imbalances that continue to be experienced even to the next generations. The labor market is exaggerated by caste, despite the legal changes and the introduction of a democratic constitution, which is based on equal rights. However, according to caste hierarchy, certain divisions of laborers are rated at one level higher than the other (Ambedkar, 1936). These inequalities have not been eliminated due to the shift of a traditional caste-based economy to a modern industrial one (Madheswaran & Attewell, 2007).

Identity and Sociological Imagination

The construction of 'social identity' as a 'rickshaw wala' becomes significant in the context of rickshaw pulling occupation. The idea of 'social identity' proposes that a person's sense of 'self' and 'others' are built upon group memberships, creating an "us vs. them" mentality. People often categorize themselves into in-groups, compare them favorably to out-groups to boost self-esteem, and align behavior with group norms. The term '*wala'* is often used for a certain identity with different contexts. For instance, '*dodh wala*' (for a milkman or Yadav community), '*choodi-wala*' (for a glass-seller or Manihar caste), '*rickshaw wala*' (for a rickshaw puller or downtrodden people), among others. The above words are emphasised to indicate occupation identity. The word '*wala'* also identifies the area to which a person belongs, for example, '*gaon-wala*' (for villagers) and '*shahar-wala*' (for urbanites) (Prasad, 2018). Article 19 (1) (g) of the Indian constitution allows for one to carry on any occupation/business without any social obligation. Sociologists and anthropologists in India have examined both the hereditary nature of certain occupations and the possibilities for occupational mobility. An overlap in choosing any occupation can be seen at present (Lewis, 1959; Prasad, 2015) and no anthropologists have so far claimed that the stigma or social identity which is based on occupations has been removed.

Social thinker and activist Kancha Ilaiah argues that 'productive' and hard work have been devalued by Brahmanism. Therefore, such castes who have been directly involved in material production (agriculture, animal husbandry, weaving, etc.) could not get social recognition or pride. He critiques the Hindu social order and offers a new perspective on dignity of labor, division of labor and indigenous knowledge of marginalized communities (Ilaiah, 2018). The anguish (that arises from social stigma or social identity) of the hardworking working class (Dalit and Backward castes) who often migrate to cities can be heard through the medium of '*birha* folklore' (Prasad, 2022, pp. 142-145).

Revisiting the Discourse on Caste

Two important books by Ambedkar, '*Annihilation of Caste*' (1936), and '*Who Were the Shudras*?' (1946) offer powerful and radical critiques on the Hindu caste system. It is a landmark work that significantly shaped academic discourse and social movements in India. His critical examination of caste and the historical construction of social hierarchies provide a vital framework for understanding the origins and persistence of caste-based discrimination. Similarly, Louis Dumont's work *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980) posits that the caste system was deeply rooted in a religious worldview, which governed not only social relations but also occupational roles. According to Dumont's analysis, caste was both a social and economic order, exemplified by the elevated status of Brahmins in religious roles and the systematic exclusion of Dalits from certain occupations and social spaces. Therefore, Ambedkar made a few constitutional provisions to remove stagnancy in rigid caste system.

Social Mobility and Caste System

The impact of constitutional provisions on caste and social change have been observed by M.N. Srinivas after 1947. He introduced the concept of Sanskritization, describing how lower castes attempt to improve their social standing by adopting the customs and occupations of higher castes. Sanskritization, Westernization, Modernization, Secularization of caste, etc., are a few concepts which explore the entire saga of social mobility (in the caste system) in contemporary India. Similarly, his seminal book "Remembered Village" highlights that Okkaligas (a landowning caste) are an influential factor and play a greater role in power processes because a caste becomes dominant when it owns a few attributes like an influential social network, wealth, prestige, political power and high ritual or social status (Srinivas, 1955). Rural economic structures have remained relatively unchanged, as lower-caste communities continue to be concentrated in low-paying, unskilled occupations.

Nevertheless, the concept of socio-economic changes starts following the introduction and implementation of the Community Development Programme (Dube, 1958), yet marginalised groups (like the OBCs, SCs, STs and landless laborers) tend to stay disadvantaged and the relation between caste, class, and modernity occurs in new forms (Jodhka, 2017). Equally, Thorat and Newman (2009) recorded how caste-based discrimination is still practiced during hiring procedures and how occupational immobility has imprisoned the marginalized communities in low-wage jobs. According to Breman (2007), the informal economy tends to exploit the lower-caste workers. The first author, having spent over two years in the field during his PhD, found that the majority of rickshaw pullers belong to lower castes; this clustering of castes indicates that the problem of systemic marginalization persists. Madan (1971) expounds that rickshaw pullers are usually the marginalized in society with

a significant number of them living in rural regions where poverty levels are at a high of 68 per cent. These sections are plagued by unemployment, illiteracy, poor health and unequal distribution of resources; although the rickshaw pulling activity is relatively better paid in comparison to rural working options (Strand, 1989). Rickshaw pulling is still strenuous, and people engaged in this activity are subjected to severe health issues, financial crisis and marginalization. Most rickshaw pullers come from a disadvantaged economic background, which complies with the features of chronic poverty. Rickshaw pullers, despite a certain upward mobility, have had high health risks and their children tend to have low intergenerational economic mobility which restricts their future labor opportunities (Begum & Sen, 2012). Thus, the above issue raised causes the phenomenon of 'cognitive dissonance' among rickshaw pullers since they contrast (their previous unemployed and social stigma) with less fortunate groups and they tend to defend inequality as the only natural reason.

Discussion of Social Stratification and Caste-based Inequality

The research attempts to understand the consequences of caste-based orientation of choosing a job and economic growth, especially in the informal sector. Although legal changes have taken place and the constitution has been amended to guarantee equal treatment to all caste groups, the caste system continues to be a major impediment towards the realization of a truly egalitarian society in India as envisioned by Ambedkar more than 100 years ago. Ambedkar's work on the caste system in Indian society highlights the persistence of graded inequality as a foundational element in the structure of caste-based discrimination. It is found that even when economically poor *dvij-caste* ("twice-born") persons retain higher socio-cultural status and respect, their lower economic condition is often seen as '*daridra-narayan*' (dignified) rather than 'polluting'. Being poor often has been correlated or glorified with the myth of Sudama and Krishna's friendship. A poor Brahmin traditionally can become a priest (even if poor) but a poor Dalit is subjected to and has to engage with so-called 'unclean' occupations.

Even if individuals from marginalized castes wish to adopt a new occupation, such as becoming a priest or a *kathakar* (religious storyteller) or even opening a restaurant in their hometown, the caste system historically restricts them through socio-cultural norms and caste-based discrimination. If someone transgresses the traditional occupational ascribed custom, he/she has to face humiliation and social boycott (Yadav, 2025). In contrast to a flexible division of labour based on ability, caste enforces a rigid division of a labourer's system in which occupations are assigned by birth rather than merit. According to B.R. Ambedkar, this system restricts social mobility and deprives people of the opportunity to choose their career paths based on their talents and aspirations. It is a 'social fact' that caste not only paves the way for the division of labor but also promotes the division of laborers. Resultantly, due to lack of education and stable jobs, Dalits and Adivasis are still languishing in poverty and disenfranchisement.

Methodology

The research is based on survey method. The survey was performed in Lucknow city of Uttar Pradesh, and a sample size of 350 rickshaw pullers was chosen (for the doctoral thesis of the first author). Field survey was used to get the demographic profile and economic status which included caste affiliation, income levels, landholding, marital status and education level. The lived experiences of the rickshaw puller have been understood using a few case studies.

This work attempts to understand the wider connotations of caste-based orientation of occupational choice and economic formation in the informal sector. Regardless of reforms in the law and constitutionalism, the caste system continues to be a major obstacle to the realization of a genuinely egalitarian nation in India as described by Ambedkar. This study applies Ambedkar's framework on caste and labor to the case of rickshaw pullers with reference to Lucknow city.

Contemporaneity of Ambedkar's Framework on Caste

Sociologically, rickshaw pulling represents an important site for examining the intersection of caste, class, migration, and informal labour. Although this occupation is not exclusively associated with scheduled castes, the historical marginalization of Dalit communities, combined with landlessness, limited educational opportunities, and restricted access to formal employment, has contributed to their significant presence in such precarious urban occupations. The relevance of Ambedkar's works on the critique of caste in modern India becomes particularly evident when examining marginalized laborers, such as rickshaw pullers in cities like Lucknow. Historically, menial works associated with lower-caste groups are unsustainable and lack social upward mobility (Kurosaki et. al., 2012). The rickshaw pulling profession is a symbol of helplessness and poverty trap in which caste-based labor divisions persist, where those from marginalized communities are often relegated to informal, precarious jobs with little chance of upward mobility. A few studies on the cycle rickshaw sector highlights that the representation of SCs, STs and OBCs is higher than other caste groups (Census of India, 1981). Similar results also recurred from our primary data collected in Lucknow city (see. Table 1). However, the presence of lower and backward castes is often higher in such jobs (fisheries, piggery, barbering, shoe polishing, manual scavenging, etc.) which are stigmatised with 'lower social status' (Nandhi, 2011). For instance, Government of India conducted a survey as per the provisions of MS Act, 2013 for the identification of manual scavengers and it was found that more than 97 per cent (i.e. 43,797 out of 58,098) manual scavengers are from Dalits and Backward castes.[3]

[3]Retrieved from https://www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1776847&utm_source=chatgpt.com&reg=3&lang=2

Table 1: The socio-economic profile of the rickshaw pullers in Lucknow city

Variables	**Categories**	**Percentage (%)**
Migration	Migrant	86.0
	Non-migrant	14.0
Marital status	Married	82.6
	Unmarried	12.3
	Widower	4.0
	Divorce	1.1
Age-group	18-25	7.1
	26-35	24.6
	36-45	38.6
	46-55	20.9
	56-65	7.1
	66-70	1.7
Social categories	SCs	42.3
	OBCs	41.7
	General	15.4
	STs	0.6
Education	Illiterate	53.4
	Primary	20.3
	Secondary	12.9
	High School	12.0
	>High School	1.4
Monthly Income	<3000	14.0
	3000-4500	40.3
	4500-6000	27.1
	6000-7500	14.3
	>7500	4.3
Landholding	Landless	55.1
	<20 Biswa	30.9
	20 Biswa to 1 Bigha	8.9
	1 Bigha to 2 Bigha	3.1
	>2 Bigha	2.0

Source: Field Survey, 2021 to 2022

Table 1 shows that 86 per cent of rickshaw pullers are migrants and 14 per cent are inhabitants of Lucknow city. The migrant workers predominantly originate from neighboring districts or states. Regarding marital status, over 82 per cent of the rickshaw pullers are married, 13 per cent are unmarried, 4 per cent are widowers, and 1.1 per cent are divorced. Age distribution reveals that a large majority of the rickshaw pullers (most of whom are between the ages of 26 and 45 years) are in their working ages, 7.1 per cent of them are between 18 and 25 years of age and only 1.7 per cent above 66 years. The social structure of the respondents shows that 42.3 per cent are

Scheduled Castes (SC), 41.7 per cent are Other Backward Classes (OBC), 15.4 per cent belong to General Castes, and a few (0.6 per cent) to a small minority Scheduled Tribes (ST). The rickshaw pullers have a very low educational background. The primary data shows that 53.4 per cent of them never attended school, 20.3 per cent received education up to the primary level, 12.9 per cent completed secondary education, 12 per cent completing high school, and only 1.4 per cent pursued education above high school. The study found that rickshaw pulling is a low-income profession, exacerbated by the development of advanced transportation technologies, such as e-rickshaws and battery-powered rickshaws, which render traditional rickshaws obsolete. Income distribution among the rickshaw pullers shows that 14 per cent earn less than ₹3000 per month, 40.3 per cent earn between ₹3000 and ₹4500, 27.1 per cent earn between ₹4500 and ₹6000, 14.3 per cent earn between ₹6000 and ₹7500, and only 4.3 per cent earn more than ₹7500 per month. A significant finding of the study is the deprivation in landholding among rickshaw pullers. Due to the non-implementation of landholding acts, a majority (55.1 per cent) are landless. Among the rest, 30.9 per cent hold less than 20 Biswa, 8.9 per cent hold between 20 Biswa and one bigha, 3.1 per cent hold between 1 and 2 bighas, and only 2 percent hold more than two bighas of land.

Case Study and Observations

The study has found a strong relationship between caste and rickshaw pulling occupations, which is significant in their lives. Caste contributes to their continued socio-economic culture and political deprivation. Several affirmative policies, such as reservations, have improved the educational status of a few rickshaw pullers. The main objective of this research is to make hidden social realities visible. Sometime, hidden realities could not be mapped numerically or statically. Therefore, it becomes important to understand the lived experiences through narratives and case study.

Case 1: A Migrant Rickshaw Puller, Pappu, who Earlier was Working as Brick Kiln Worker

Pappu, aged 44 years, spent his childhood in Sitapur with his parents. He was thirty years old when he moved to Lucknow. He is from the Chamar caste, which is considered the lowest in social strata or caste-based social hierarchies. Earlier, he worked as child labour at a local brick kiln with his family members. He narrated that after the completion of schooling, he was subsequently forced to leave because of the financial constraints of his family. So, he began working as an unskilled labourer in the nearby *bhattha* (brick kiln). He was forced into a child marriage due to ignorance, and he now has three children. At present, Pappu is engaged in the rickshaw pulling occupation in the capital of Uttar Pradesh. He says, “Lucknow city offers a wider scope for daily earning,” while also doing seasonal work that allows him to earn extra money for his daily expenses.

Pappu took the help of his friend Ramesh when he went to Lucknow for the first time. Interestingly, because of Ramesh, he got a guarantee and could hire a rickshaw without paying any extra charges. Now he does not need a guarantor because he has established trust and has contact with rickshaw owners. At the end of the day, he frequently naps on his rickshaw. Due to his low earnings, he usually has his breakfast at a roadside stall to save money. The *thelas* (roadside stalls) often offer unhygienic low priced food. Like him, many rickshaw pullers are compelled to use unsanitary public restrooms daily. Due to intense rivalry in the rickshaw pulling industry and insecure employment, rickshaw pullers have been forced to live in a world of dim prospects. A famous poet Munawwar Rana writes, "*So jaate hain phutapaath pe akhabaar bichha kar, mazadoor kabhee neend kee golee nahin khaate"* (Spreading out a newspaper on the sidewalk, laborers fall asleep, they never take sleeping pills). Due to an unhealthy daily routine, Pappu has been suffering from a sleeping disorder and mental health struggles. He is not only facing an economic crisis, but also deals with social stigma after engaging in rickshaw pulling occupation. As a result, his social and personal life has become more vulnerable. He says, "There is a popular belief that if a person cannot perform other business, he joins rickshaw pulling occupation. Such beliefs and derogatory remarks create an inferiority complex among a hard working community. Lack of job opportunity in other occupations,[4] helplessness and family obligation are push factors by which a person is compelled for rickshaw pulling."

Case 2: A Migrant, Jagatpal, who Migrated from Rae Bareilly to Lucknow to Survive

It would be appropriate to bring up Jagatpal's story. He is 40-years-old and hails from Gaderiya caste (shepherd community), which is an Other Backward Class. The cycle or rickshaw is as a valued item that gave him a way to upward mobility. Talking about how 'rickshaw pulling occupation protected him from a life of absolute poverty,' he completed primary education from his native place Rajapur village, Rae Bareilly, but due to child marriage and parental responsibilities, migrated to Lucknow. During a financial crisis, he saw rickshaw pulling as a "money voucher" or an immediate source of revenue. After working for a month, he sent some money to his wife as per obligatory Indian social customs. He was roughly 16-years-old when he moved from Rae Bareilly to Lucknow in search of livelihood. He narrated how his joint family members depended on one bigha (0.25 acre) of fertile land. He started pushing rickshaws with the help of his friends because it was simple to get to the nearby city and offered quick money. With seven members in his family at his native place, economically, they are dependent on him. Therefore, he is required to send between ₹5000 – ₹6000 each

[4]Land is considered as backbone of rural economy. If we see the land holding pattern among Dalits, we find that half of the scheduled caste population in rural areas is still landless laborers.

month for domestic expenses. Although this amount is insufficient for the survival of seven people, it prevents his family from famine and hunger. He roams Lucknow in search of passengers from early morning till midnight. A study of his expenses and daily earnings reveals that it depends on the number of passengers he entertains in a day. Intense competition can be seen in rickshaw pulling profession. However, he accepted that there was a sufficient earning before e-rickshaws or battery rickshaws were introduced. He said, "I earned around ₹ 700 to 900 in a day, and occasionally more than 1000 rupees, but nowadays especially after Covid-19, I only make around ₹300 to 400." Throughout the conversation with him, we noticed that in the absence of a passenger, a rickshaw-puller parks nearby or under trees to rest and smoke *bidi* to combat fatigue.

Jagatpal mentioned that he spends the night at the rickshaw garage where he cooks food with other fellow rickshaw pullers. To make ends meet, they make do with cow dung or wood as fuel. He mentioned that he had gastrointestinal problems because he is compelled to eat tainted roadside food due to shortage of time. Like Pappu, he too sends home remittances with the help of his friends or neighbours. After a month or an emergency period, he goes back to his hometown if there is any get-together, celebrations or harvesting season. However, despite not having a higher education, he is inspired and has a vision for education. His son and daughter pursue higher education and he hopes that his children will have successful careers. He said, "Nobody ever assumes that the kinds of a rickshaw-wala can pursue higher education and live quality of life." However, he is planning to open a shop in Rae Bareilly because of his ill health.

Case 3: A Muslim Migrant, Mohammed Rafik, a 45-year-old Rickshaw Puller

Mohammed Rafik and his father have long been residing in the old city of Lucknow. His social profile reveals that he is uneducated, landless, and the owner of a modest home in Lucknow. His wife, six children, parents, and siblings share a home with him. He told me that his father was also a rickshaw puller, and Mohammed Rafik has now continued the same occupation. He does not hold any formal education and it compelled him to pull a rickshaw from early morning till late night, and still only earns ₹ 150 to 200 daily. Rafik has realized that driving a rickshaw does not earn him enough money. When I asked him how he manages family expenses, especially a large family, he became quiet and with tears in his eyes, did not say anything. After a pause, he informed me about his loan and other sources of income. He opines that if the government will provide him with some financial assistance, he could be free from the shackles of debt and extreme poverty. He will be able to operate his own business for a sustainable existence. Furthermore he added, "If the Uttar Pradesh government will offer simple and low-interest loans, my bad days would perish." His elderly parents get pension and are another source of income for him. Besides, he does not have health

or social security insurance. He said, "We are illiterate, poor and have less knowledge of government policies. The price of products and services (inflation) rises daily while sources of income are stagnant for quite long time." An examination of his personal habits and expenses reveals that he indulges in smoking *bidi*, and occasionally drinks alcohol.

Mohammed Rafik goes to Charbagh Railway Station from his residence early morning and has to pay a daily rent of approximately ₹ 40/- to the rickshaw owner. If he does not pay the rent on time, the rickshaw owner may abuse him. If he violates a red traffic light to save time, the police beat and arrest him, and seize the rickshaw. Even the Lucknow Nagar Nigam officers demand bribes.

To sum up, if members of a marginal community have no other option for livelihood, they choose rickshaw pulling occupation as a survival strategy. This is an occupation in which a rickshaw puller can make money based on how much time he spends on pulling. Rickshaw pullers begin their day early and continue late into the night, a practice which creates health issues. Most rickshaw pullers hail from neighbouring districts and spend their lives in Lucknow. They send remittances to their families and remain in the city alone because they cannot afford the living cost if they bring their family. Due to an unhealthy living style, most rickshaw pullers suffer from chronic diseases. Many of them consume *ganja* (cannabis), *bidi*, alcohol, *paan, gutkha* (betel quid or chew tobacco), which creates not only health issues, but also creates 'social stigma' and 'economic burden' additionally.

Discussion

The above case studies found that rickshaw pullers were deprived of socio-economic status and continue to face exclusion and hardship to get basic services. Though essential for urban transport, their work is undervalued, and their social condition reflects structural inequalities. India has made a significant step towards achieving the vision of a "Viksit Bharat" (Developed India) with the 'sustainable development goal' of an inclusive society. However, caste-based disparities remain deeply ingrained in its social fabric. Addressing social inequalities requires a concerted effort to dismantle not just economic poverty but also the social structures that perpetuate exclusion and marginalization.

The study counted that caste identity as grounded in social realities play a great role in public affairs, but the preferences of adapting caste-based occupation are disappearing gradually. For rickshaw pulling, most of the rickshaw pullers predominantly come from disadvantaged caste groups and lower socio-economic backgrounds. Moreover, rickshaw pulling is still a 'social fact' and needs to be explored further from different perspectives including 'subaltern' or 'below'. The seminal works of Nicholas Dirks are crucial to understand 'caste of mind'. As Dirks (2001) argues that the modern Indian caste system is not an ancient, unchanging tradition, but rather a product of

British colonial rule. Dirks contends that the British "systematized" diverse social identities into a rigid caste framework for administrative control. We observe similar patterns in the process of 'politicization of caste' in which caste identities are used by political actors to mobilize voters, influence policies, and secure power, transforming traditional social hierarchies into political tools. It involves caste-based mobilization for representation, influencing candidate selection, and driving electoral strategies rather than just governance (Kothari, 1970). As a result, both democratic values and modern politics are embedded within local cultural practices, often leading to the rise of specific caste identities (like OBCs) as powerful political actors (Michelutti, 2020). This involves the "politicization of caste," where caste groups organize for power and representation.

Ambedkar argued that caste in India is not only a division of labor but also a division of laborers. It means the lower castes were historically confined to menial labor and social hierarchy placed Brahmins at the top, followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, with Dalits (formerly untouchables) occupying the lowest rung of the social ladder. The above referenced Ambedkar's writing suggests that Dalits have been historically excluded from access to natural resources and education. However, many new changes have been pointed out by contemporary political thinkers, such as, Christophe Jaffrelot (2003) who found that a wave of social change occurred after the emergence of caste politics led by Lalu Prasad in Bihar. To get rid of rooted inferiority and political exclusion of backward castes, former chief minister of Bihar, Lalu Prasad Yadav often gave "wake-up calls" in his speech: "*O gai charane walon / O bakri charane walon / O tadi peene walon / Vote dena seekho* (O! Cattle-grazers, O! Toddy drinkers, learn to vote) (Prasad, 2019). His ambition to break the socio-economic barriers and empower the lower sections could be heard in public addresses during his tenure.

Many studies show that upper caste individuals still occupy the majority of top positions in society (*The Hindu*, 2022; Pradeep & Goli, 2025). In contrast, lower caste individuals continue to be employed in menial and labour-intensive jobs such as rickshaw pulling, construction work, daily wage labor, agricultural work, brick-making, scavenging, and other marginalized occupations (Kumar & Gupta, 2025; Saxena & Alha, 2025). Moreover, rickshaw pullers from the general caste are also economically disadvantaged, but their socio-economic, cultural, and political status differs significantly from that of Dalit rickshaw pullers.

Ambedkar argued that caste continues to be a divisive force in entrenching inequalities. Therefore, the perspective from below in Indian sociology orchestrates the dissimilar social saga and ingrained subalternity attached to the rickshaw pulling profession.

Conclusion

India's demographic dividend and human resources hold immense potential for nation-building. However, this potential can only be realized if marginalized groups are empowered through equitable access to education, employment, and opportunities for skill development. Collaborating with private ventures and non-governmental organizations, the government can uplift rickshaw pullers and other deprived classes through targeted skill development programs and training. India is a welfare state that primarily aims to create a more equitable and prosperous society through the vision of Viksit Bharat@2047(Developed India) and Inclusive Bharat. This vision provides a roadmap for addressing existing disparities and promoting social and economic justice for all citizens. Yet, many other social reforms need to be incorporated to get rid of 'division of laborers' in India.

References

Ambedkar, B.R. (1916). *Castes in India: Their mechanism, genesis and development*. Paper presented at the Anthropology Seminar of Dr. A. A. Goldenweiser, Columbia University.

Ambedkar, B.R. (1936). *Annihilation of caste*. Navayana Publishing.

Ambedkar, B.R. (1946). *Who were the Shudra?* Thacker and Company.

Begum, S., & Sen, B. (2012). Unsustainable livelihoods, health shocks and urban chronic poverty: Rickshaw pullers as a case study. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1754402

Breman, J. (2007). *The poverty regime in village India*. Oxford University Press.

Census of India. (1981). *Census of India 1981: Series 26, Chandigarh, Part X-E: Rickshaw pullers*. Census Operations, Chandigarh.

Dube, S.C. (1958). *India's changing villages: Human factors in community development*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Dumont, L. (1980). *Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications*. University of Chicago Press.

Ilaiah, K. (1996). *Why I am not a Hindu: A Sudra critique of Hindutva philosophy, culture and political economy*. Samya.

Ilaiah, K. (2018). *Post-Hindu India: A discourse in Dalit-Bahujan, socio-spiritual and scientific revolution* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Jodhka, S.S. (2017). *Caste in contemporary India*. Routledge.

Kurosaki, T., Banerji, A., Mishra, S.N., & Mangal, A.K. (2012). *Unorganized enterprises and rural-urban migration in India: The case of the cycle rickshaw sector in Delhi* (PRIMCED Discussion Paper Series No. 28). Institute of Economic Research, Hitotsubashi University.

Kujur, J., & Das, A. (2026). *Barriers to school education of tribals in eastern India and implications for SDG 4*. *Discover Global Society, 4*, Article 22. https://doi.org/10.1007/s44282-026-00346-1

Kumar, P., & Gupta, U. (2015). Unsustainable livelihood: An intergenerational mobility of cycle rickshaw pullers of Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh, India. *DU Journal of Undergraduate Research and Innovation, 1*(2), 275–290. https://journals.du.ac.in/ugresearch/pdf/Puneet%2017.pdf

Lakshman, Abhinay (2024; December 18). *92% of workers* The Hindu. cleaning urban *sewers, septic tanks are from SC, ST, OBC groups*. The Hindu. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/92-of-workers-cleaning-urban-sewers-septic-tanks-are-from-sc-st-obc-groups/article68697861.ece

Lewis, Oscar (1959). Five families: Mexican case studies in the culture of poverty.

Madan, G.R. (1971). *Social changes and problems of development in India*. Allied Publishers.

Madheswaran, S. and Paul Attewell (2007). Caste discrimination in the Indian Labour Market: Evidence from the National Sample Survey. *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLII: 4146-4153.

Nandhi, M.A. (2011). *The urban poor and their money: A study of cycle rickshaw pullers in Delhi (Final Report)*. Institute of Financial Management and Research (IFMR). Retreated on 23/09/2026 from https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3053r37q

Pradeep, R., & Goli, S. (2025, April 11). Caste and careers: Limited mobility over three generations. *The India Forum*. https://www.theindiaforum.in/caste/caste-and-careers-limited-mobility-over-three-generations

Prasad, D. (2015). Thinking against caste hierarchies: An analysis through Yadav Community. *Man in India*, *95*(03), 527-539.

Prasad, Devi (2018). Caste identity and community feast among Yadavs: An interpretation. In S. Banerjee and N. Ghosh (Eds.), *Caste and Gender in Contemporary India: Power, Privilege and Politics.* Routledge.

Prasad, D. & Akundy, A. (2021). Assessing issues of caste and selfhood in rural society: Some reflections. *Social Change, 51*(4), 554–565. https://doi.org/10.1177/00490857211040649

Prasad, D. (2022). *Caste, ritual and politics among Yadav community of Eastern Uttar Pradesh: A sociological analysis* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Hyderabad). http://igmlnet.uohyd.ac.in/docs/hi-res/hcu_images/TH12629.pdf

Prasad, D. & Srihari, G. (2017). *Mapping the politics of shauchalaya in Dalit localities: An inquiry*. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit, 9*(1), 19–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X17689863

Saxena, K.B., & Alha, A. (2026). Caste, credit, and social capital: Constraints on Dalit entrepreneurship in India's leather industry. *Journal of Government and Economics, 21*, 100171. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jge.2026.100171

Sen, M. (2025). *Migration and development: A study of rickshaw pullers in Lucknow city* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Hyderabad).

Srinivas, M.N. (1955). The social system of a Mysore village. In M. Marriott (Ed.), *Village India: Studies in the Little Community* (pp. 1-35). University of Chicago Press.

Strand, D. (1989). *Rickshaw Beijing: City, people and politics in the 1920s*. University of California Press.

The Hindu. (2022, October 28). 90% of leadership positions in Indian media occupied by upper caste groups: Report. *The Hindu*. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/90-of-leadership-positions-in-indian-media-occupied-by-upper-caste-groups-report/article66010136.ece

Thorat, S., & Newman, K. S. (2009). *Blocked by caste: Economic discrimination in modern India*. Oxford University Press.

Valmiki, Omprakash (1989). *Sadiyon ka santap* (Agony of Centuries). Radhakrishna Publication.

Valmiki, Omprakash (1997). *Joothan* (Leftover Food). Radhakrishna Publication.

World Inequality Report 2026. (2026). *World inequality report 2026*. World Inequality Lab. Retrieved on from https://wir2026.wid.world/

Yadav, S. (2025) Jagran News. *UP mein kathavachak ka sir mundvaya, naak ragadkar maafi mangne ko kaha*. Retrieved on 11/04/2026 from https://www.jagran.com/uttar-pradesh/etawah-in-up-narrator-head-was-shaved-he-was-asked-to-apologize-after-rubbing-his-nose-40001788.html (Published on June 24)

Brandeis | LIBRARY
brandeis.edu/j-caste

CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 7 No. 2 pp. 343-361
October 2026
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v7i2.2801

Dalit Boredom and the Promises of Modern Time: Caste, Pedagogy, Institution

Anshul[1]

Abstract

Boredom is generally considered a bourgeois concern, and pairing it with the political category of Dalit appears awkward. This paper retains that awkwardness. It reads Elizabeth S. Goodstein's genealogy of boredom as a modern rhetoric of reflection and extends the inquiry to postcolonial India, where her account stops. The paper does not ask whether Dalits are bored, but how their reflection is authorised and timed under caste. Dalit boredom is developed as an analytical category of a subject exposed to varied temporal realities, rather than as a shared Dalit mood. The modern institutions promise inclusion that will arrive, but that arrival is timed by caste, and any disaffection of Dalit subjects in their inability to deal with a promise of inclusion that is timed to be delayed is seen as a prior incapacity or incompetence to deal with a structure that stands for merit. The paper develops this argument through four connected discussions. It discusses the differentiated histories of labour and leisure in India, from courtly and artisanal time to industrial rhythms and educated timepass. The Guru-Sarukkai debate is reread to assess the debate on experience that is timed, and in which reflection may be seen as an incapacity. It examines caste as a modern formation, ranging from colonial school verandah to contemporary labour markets. And finally, the trials and tribulations of inhabiting the Indian Public University, where residential segregation and unequal assessment form a breeding ground for this feeling of Dalit Boredom.

Keywords

Dalit boredom, Caste and temporality, Indian modernity, Higher education, Anti-caste pedagogy, Waiting, Institutional time

[1]Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India
Email: ansh9557@gmail.com

© 2026 Anshul. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

Introduction

Boredom is generally considered a bourgeois concern. Concatenating the term "boredom" with the political category of "Dalit" appears almost awkward and, at best, an uneasy observation. It seems to restrict a history of violence to a passive reception, as boredom seems to exclude violence by pairing Dalit with an affect usually associated with minor irritations or privileged idle behaviour. The paper is informed by Elizabeth S. Goodstein's (2005) method, as outlined in her text *Experience Without Qualities*, which reads boredom as a modern language of self-reflection (ibid., p. 4). This language is shaped by the temporal control and affective dis-locations of European modernity and industrial capitalism (ibid., pp. 1–7). The paper here asks what happens when boredom is read from below, from Dalit locations within Indian modernity, and more specifically, from the classroom and the curriculum that claim to teach Dalit life.

Hereafter, boredom is not only a mood to be analysed, but it is an enquiry into and a resource for pedagogy. The paper hence provincialises modernity in the Dalit and Indian context, and attempts to look at caste as a modern formation rather than just a feudal residue. Following Dirks (2001), Mosse (2020), and Rao (2009), Dalit modernity appears not as a belated entry into neutral modern time, but as being inside modern institutions and temporalities on structurally unequal terms. The postcolonial democracy of India and its neoliberal reforms highlight this contradiction, where Dalit aspirations and exclusion coexist simultaneously.

Dalit existence, therefore, is marked by a paradoxical presence within the modern apparatus. The Indian public university is taken here as a site to represent this modern apparatus. The paper engages with its promises of progressive politics and its posturing as an avenue for equal opportunity, as advertised by the market, while also examining its caste-marked practices within the guise of constitutional language and the reconfiguration of hegemony in discourses of equality. The university platforms a politics of distribution of unequal time as Dalit students deal with waiting outside admin offices, delayed fellowships, and peripheral housing in low-income neighbourhoods far from university campuses. Therefore, it becomes important to ask, what kind of teaching is possible when the very institutions that house Dalit Studies also choreograph such unequal time?

Dalit boredom, as used here, is an analytical category grounded in temporal experience rather than an attribution of mood. Modern institutions promise inclusion, mobility, or recognition that will take its time to arrive, and that time is controlled by the caste-structured institution itself. Until that promise takes its time to arrive, every shortcoming of a Dalit subject to tolerate the casteist underpinnings of an institution that is merely delaying a future promise is read as her personal incompetence to survive a competitive space that she does not belong to. The disaffection caused in the Dalit subject is read as boredom.

The paper primarily addresses four issues. The first will be to recover boredom historically as a rhetoric of reflective time, reading the English word against the differentiated vocabularies of valued and ranked unfilled time used in India: courtly leisure, artisanal *mauj, adda* and *timepass*. Next, it reads in conjunction with Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai's (2012) debate on experience, placing Goodstein's (2005) genealogy of boredom in relation to it, to argue that authority to interpret unfilled time is distributed as disproportionately as the space to experience it is. It further analyses Dalit boredom in accounts of caste as a modern phenomenon, from the colonial school verandah to the labour market. It will conclude its argument at the Indian university by discussing Committee reports, survey evidence, and disciplinary decrees on the assignment of time, from undisbursed fellowships and hostel accommodation to examinations and suspensions.

From Etymology to Differentiated Time in India

The Modern Vocabulary of Boredom

Boredom, as an English word, is fairly new. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the first use of "boredom" in 1829, in the *Court Journal*, as a noun formed within English from "bore" plus the suffix "-dom", meaning "state or condition" (Oxford English Dictionary [OED], n.d.-e).

The older layers of the word-family complicate this picture. The adjective bored appears in English by 1553 with the meaning "pierced, perforated; cylindrically hollow," used technically of gun barrels; this sense belongs to bore in its Germanic meaning "to drill, pierce" (OED, n.d.-a, n.d.-c). A different verb, bore, "to weary by dullness," is attested only from 1768. From this social sense comes bored as an emotional adjective, first cited in Byron's *Don Juan* in 1823, and then boredom in 1829 (OED, n.d.-b, n.d.-d).

Although the feeling does not come etymologically from drilling, there seems to remain such residue; the bored subject of modernity appears to be one that has been drilled and become hollow, empty because of the effects of routine on one hand and the pressure by society on the other. It is because boredom is so easily expressed in casual idioms that it is often trivialised, considered as a petty nuisance that may be remedied by entertainment. Mashuq Ally (2008) observes that its "reputation as an inconsequential emotion" has meant that its significance in social life is "often … minimised if not ignored", and that an Enlightenment discourse treating boredom as "a univocal psychic disorder of lack" remains influential, even as recent work has recast it as a historical phenomenon and a cultural construct of modernity (ibid., p. 36). From the perspective of Dalit experience in Indian universities, this trivialisation is problematic. The feeling of being "bored" in a classroom that is formally open yet socially closed is not simply a decline of interest. It seems to be closer to the older

"bored" in the sense of hollowed out, where one's presence is drilled through by the routines and exclusions of the place.

However, theorising Dalit boredom as more than a private mood requires more than just an English-word history. The category is centred on a judgement. Its starting point is the fact that the delay produced by the institution is read as incapacitation of the one experiencing it. Judgements are never improvised in that way. They derive from a borrowed body of techniques by which the time of unproductive labour was seen. This collection of techniques is contained in India, though not in the word *boredom*, within leisure, idleness, *adda* and *timepass*. Searching for a literary equivalent would conflate cultural differences with an inadequacy of the concept. On the other hand, culturally apt terminology helps us see that it is not the interval spent that determines the correct utility of time, but the person sitting in it, who has been historically traced by it.

Courtly Leisure and the Calibration of Free Time

In the earliest repertoire of leisure activities, we see glimpses of it in the vocabulary. In Sanskrit, there is no one word for leisure, stresses Seema Bawa (2023); this sense is approximated by *avakāśa* and *akarmaṇ*, states of nonactivity. This sense is expressed differently by the words *bhoga* and *vilāsa*, signifying recreation with pleasure and luxuriance. In popular imagination, bhoga and vilāsa are often conflated with śauq (indulgence); when elevated to rājasi, they signify royal tastes and sports (ibid., p. 7). What this vocabulary records is not an absence of empty time, but the ethical, aesthetic and occupational frameworks within which leisure was interpreted and ranked.

The frameworks of these terms were not evenly distributed conceptually. Bawa (2023) remarks that in the premodern archive: "privileges elite male leisure which gets described, celebrated and projected", while "the producers and providers of the same, the toiling lower classes and women are marginalised or voyeuristically projected" (ibid., p. 2). Leisure, Bawa sums up, is "a calibrated activity and appropriate as per class, caste, gender, position and status" (ibid., p. 16). Smita Sahgal (2023) makes this calibration more lucid by discussing hunting, an elite court sport on the one hand and a livelihood for the forest peoples among whom the textual tradition placed the *niṣādas*, *śabaras,* and *caṇḍālas*.

Artisan Time and the Social Valuation of Leisure

This stratified relationship between work and non-work time is seen in artisan life in Benaras, as shown by Nita Kumar (1988), where artisans have a home-based setup and a greater control over their working conditions. Their time is their own, as payment is per piece (ibid., p.47). Such control did not amount to economic independence. The toymaker Shiv Prasad represents, perhaps, the most restricted freedom of all the craftsmen portrayed by Kumar. He owns his working times, but not his prices. He fears the shopkeepers' control over the toymakers' union: if he asks for more, they

may buy elsewhere or withhold money already owed to him (ibid., p. 46). Without the protection of any institution, he can not argue against them, only excuse their different aptitudes: pricing is "not his job but the shopkeeper's", who "deserves whatever profit he makes as a prize for his special skills" (ibid., p. 46). Freedom is, however, as real as these artisans distinguished themselves from other equally poor due to the command of their own times and, what the author calls, an "ideology of freedom" (ibid., p. 13).

The social meaning of this autonomy depended upon the observer's position. Non-Ansaris, who usually held a position of dominance over Ansari weavers, complained that they were excessively fond of *mauj* and *masti* and would close their workshops to go for a stroll (Kumar, 1988, pp. 55–56). Kumar, however, observed looms operating from seven in the morning until seven at night, and sometimes later. She summarises the divergence: "all weavers report that they work very hard and very long, and all others claim that they don't" (Kumar, 1988, p. 56). Historical classifications also represented Julahas as "poor, illiterate, stupid" (Kumar, 1988, p. 49).

A related contest appears in Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) history of *adda* in colonial and twentieth-century Calcutta. Older dictionaries associated *adda* with "marginalized existence" and gatherings of "'bad' people or people of bad occupations," while other sources connected it with opium and ganja dens (ibid., p. 190). *Majlish*, by contrast, signified gatherings involving wealth and patronage (ibid., p. 190). The distinction concerned social location, space and patronage, not merely two names for the same activity. Chakrabarty reports finding no nineteenth-century use of *adda* that conferred respectability upon it; its association with a modern Bengali reading public made it respectable in the twentieth century (ibid., p. 188). He nevertheless describes modern public *adda* as predominantly male and middle-class, and often forgetful of the working classes (ibid., p. 181).

The opposition between leisured elites and continuously labouring subordinates is complicated in these histories. There was thus an unequal distribution of control over time and of the authority to define its use, which colonial modernity did not create from nothing, Victorian disciplines meshing with pre-existing understandings of work and idleness (Chakrabarty, 2000, pp. 186–187), and it is this background that offers comparatives with the boredom of contemporary Dalits; what is shared is the mechanism of judgement, not the temporalities themselves.

Industrial Time, Educational Mobility, and Timepass

With Industrial Modernity also came varied temporal disciplines. According to Parry (1999), E. P. Thompson's notion of clock-governed work, "not only romanticises task-oriented peasant agriculture but also effaces the extremely variable nature of industrial production" (ibid., p. 107). At the Bhilai Steel Plant, "a good deal" of apparent shirking resulted from breakdowns, failures of supply and essential maintenance, although Parry adds, "A good deal, but not everything" (ibid., pp. 125–126). Many members of

the overwhelmingly non-Chhattisgarhi management regarded local men as work-shy. Chhattisgarhi women, by contrast, had a "Stakhanovite reputation" but were generally recruited only as temporary contract labour for "the most laborious and menial tasks", a pattern Parry attributes more to gender than ethnicity (ibid., pp. 114–115). Industrial time was therefore differentiated by region, gender and employment status rather than governed by a single discipline.

In Jeffrey's (2010) ethnography of Meerut, timepass is an idiom of being left behind by declining education and shortage of salaried jobs and waiting while they have surplus time away from studying (ibid., p. 466). There was a hierarchy involved in this term. Students distinguished their educated timepass from the *timewaste* of urban "illiterates," while Jats occasionally used uneducated, Chamar and Muslim interchangeably (Jeffrey, 2010, p. 475). In rural Bijnor, many Jat men called temporary clerical employment or small businesses *timepass* rather than "serious" work (Jeffrey et al., 2008, p. 91). Whereas Jats applied the term to particularly "meaningless" study or work, Chamars seemed to use it for "a whole style of life and disposition toward the future"; most Chamar young men lacked the resources necessary to sustain prolonged educated unemployment (Jeffrey et al., 2008, p. 183). Yet such practices could also challenge the expectation that Chamars should remain confined to manual labour and caste-segregated spaces.

Such critiques were not symmetrical. Influenced by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and development narratives, the new Dalit politicians criticised timepass as inconsistent with the responsibilities of educated Dalits; educated Jats read Dalit timepass as a failure to appreciate education's "true value" (Jeffrey et al., 2008, p. 204). Timepass could occasion youthful solidarities "sometimes across caste and class boundaries" (Jeffrey, 2010, p. 465), which, however, were necessarily partial and fragile ones (Jeffrey, 2010, pp. 474–477). The central inequality was not simply who had time to waste, then, but who had the resources and social power to define it as transition, sociability, failure or resistance. Modern boredom both measures and obscures that uneven power to interpret the meaning of empty time.

Goodstein, Guru and Sarukkai, and the Rhetoric of Boredom

Goodstein's Project and Archive

Goodstein (2005) sets out to write a genealogy of boredom as a distinctively modern way of reflecting on subjective malaise, rather than as a timeless psychological state. She takes along the notion that boredom implies both an experience and a discourse and reads it as an "experience without qualities" in which the deficits of the self masquerade as the poverty of the world, and vice versa; boredom exists in that relational enterprise. The point here is not just to make a phenomenological observation. It is to locate boredom in a historically specific configuration of malaise. And Goodstein situates

that crisis of meaning in the Enlightenment, secularisation, industrial capitalism, and the dissolution of traditional frameworks of faith and authority (ibid., pp. 3–4, 18–21). It is the everyday affect in which the "democratization of skepticism" in modernity becomes lived as a crisis of experience itself (ibid., pp. 10–11, 21).

Methodologically, rather than determining boredom as a complete definition, Goodstein (2005) tracks how different discourses, that are literary, philosophical, sociological, and psychoanalytic, have used the word to figure subjective malaise since the late eighteenth century. Because boredom is simultaneously a private feeling and a socially legible idiom, that is, as historically specific as the language in which modern subjects interpret what it means to suffer, desire, and fail to find meaning (ibid., pp. 11–14). The book is structured accordingly: Part I reconstructs the emergence of boredom within Western literature and the human sciences; Part II re-reads Simmel, Heidegger, and Musil in order to show how boredom crystallises the aporetic relation between sociological and philosophical accounts of modern subjectivity (ibid., pp. ix–x, 14–18).

Time, Modernisation, and the Discourse of Boredom

The concept of the language of boredom is rooted in the notion of time. Goodstein (2005) claims that modern boredom is inseparable from modern temporality. Boredom, according to her reading, emerges as Enlightenment gives way to industrial capitalism (ibid., pp. 3–4, 18–20). This modern experience thrives with the notion of "clock time" as its backdrop, as it coordinates work, leisure, and human life itself (ibid., pp. 5–6). The subjects of modernity inhabit the empty units of mechanical time. And a new, secular historicity is imagined where life is a continuous progress towards improvement. In contrast to this narrative of continuous linear improvement, a formation of temporal regimes of clock-time emerges, and the narrative of progress and boredom arises from the disconnect between the two.

Boredom can therefore be read as an everyday phenomenology of disenchantment. It registers the possibility that rational mastery of time, scientific progress, and the organisation of work and leisure may fail to secure meaning. It is both symptom and strategy: it registers discontents associated with modernisation while offering the subject a way to stabilise a relation to a world that no longer seems engaging (Goodstein, 2005, pp. 2–5). In this sense, boredom is not simply a feeling caused by empty time. It is a historically constituted way of interpreting time as empty, through which the material transformations of nineteenth-century Europe, including industrialisation and urbanisation, come to be expressed as subjective malaise (Goodstein, 2005, pp. 3–6, 18–20).

On Class, Gender, Race, Centre, and Periphery

At the level of whose experience can be represented and interpreted, Goodstein (2005) shows that the modern rhetoric of boredom is not evenly distributed. She observes that male boredom has often been valorised while female boredom is devalued, and that evaluations of boredom may also follow class, racial, and national divisions (ibid., pp. 21–22). This does not mean that the canonical bored subject is invariably male. In nineteenth-century French literature, *ennui* was, according to Goodstein, a sign of "spiritual distinction" for an élite (ibid., pp. 172–173, 184–185); yet Flaubert also depicted it in *Madame Bovary* as the condition of a woman in provincial life. They differed in their authoritative reception and interpretation.

Goodstein (2005) develops this distinction through a close reading of Reinhard Kuhn's study of ennui. In her account, Kuhn treats canonical literary ennui as philosophically significant but describes a housewife waiting at a supermarket as experiencing only transient idleness. He assigns the more persistent unhappiness of a suburban woman to psychological and psychiatric attention (ibid., pp. 53–58). Goodstein's objection is that these classifications presume, rather than demonstrate, the absence of an existential problem. They leave insufficiently examined how the restrictions of the bourgeois family may shape the woman's experience of meaninglessness (ibid., pp. 57–58, 61).

Kuhn associates the industrial worker's boredom with the *monotony* of routine labour and assigns it to sociology and human-relations expertise. Goodstein (2005) asks why the movement from meaningless work to unfulfilling leisure could not also raise a question of meaning (ibid., pp. 59–61). Kuhn's category of *anomie* is different: he projects it onto an exoticised Polynesian figure and refers it to anthropology, rather than examining it as a condition of modern Western society (ibid., pp. 61–63). These figures are representations in Kuhn's argument, not testimony from the people he depicts. The Indian material of the previous section shows the same operation without the European archive: Kumar's outsiders, Parry's management and Jeffrey's Jat students each judge another group's unfilled time by a standard from which they exempt themselves.

Goodstein (2005) notes that the valuation of boredom can be mapped onto racial and national positions, but she does not offer a historical account of boredom in colonial settings (ibid., pp. 6–7, 21–22). What her book offers is not a finished work but more of a question: that of the determination by the social position over whose boredom poses the reflective question of meaning, and whose is nothing more than a case to be explained.

On Colonial and Postcolonial Modernities

Goodstein (2005) is explicit, however, about the historical and geographical limits of her genealogy. In a footnote, she states that she "shall not attempt to extend" her claims

about boredom to colonial or postcolonial contexts, even though anecdotal evidence suggests that the structures of experience she analyses appear "at the 'periphery' as well as the 'centre' of the modernisation process" (ibid., pp. 6–7). Modern boredom, she argues, is a function of a "modernized temporality," the shift from traditional to mechanical time as it is integrated into industrialisation and the rationalisation of everyday life (ibid., p. 6). In colonial settings, this shift is inseparable from the "discursive occupation and resignification of subjective experience," as modernisation is always imposed in the language and categories of the colonising power (ibid., pp. 6–7). Where the agent of modernisation "speaks the language of boredom," similar configurations of self-understanding can be expected to arise at the periphery, but Goodstein leaves this as a conjecture rather than a worked-out argument (ibid., p. 6).

Caste has no place in the modernity that Goodstein (2005) describes. Her text is European and metropolitan. This essay borrows the idea of how different authorities time the marginalised subject and brings that politics of governing time from nineteenth-century European literature to the institutions in the postcolonial state. Agrarian crisis, state violence and the uneven delivery of equal opportunity in universities that present themselves as the most progressive of modern apparatuses are what time Dalit existence after independence. Dalit boredom is therefore not a derivative of a European sense of reflection. It is what the modern rhetoric of reflection becomes when the time reflected upon is governed by somebody else, and it carries, for that reason, a pedagogical potential that the European version does not.

Reading Goodstein with Guru and Sarukkai: From a Theory of Boredom to Boredom with Theory

Goodstein (2005) treats boredom as mediating between the subjective and objective, as well as the spiritual and material, consequences of modernisation (ibid., p. 407). She argues that boredom can appear to express a timeless human fate even though its language and temporal assumptions are historically produced (ibid., pp. 4–6, 407–413). Her description of the "democratization of skepticism" speaks only of the spread of categories through which people reflect on experiences of subjective malaise but not of their equal authoritative hold to formulate and spread an interpretation of that experience (ibid., p. 413). The issue of the line being drawn between access to an idiom of reflection and authority to speak in/through it is what follows here by extension.

The debate between Guru (2012) and Sarukkai (2012) in *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* returns this question to the conditions under which experience is lived and theorised. Sarukkai argues that the Dalit lived experience is not a condition an outsider can choose to enter and leave. It is marked by "the lack of freedom in an experience" (Sarukkai, 2012, p. 36). Yet he also questions whether the ethical significance of lived experience entails Guru's stronger claim about who may theorise it (Sarukkai, 2012, pp. 36–37). Their positions should therefore not be treated as identical. Guru gives the relation between experience and

social arrangement a spatial form, arguing that "production of experience hinges on the reproduction of spaces" (Guru, 2012, p. 72). Spatial arrangements shape both the experiences people undergo and the conditions in which those experiences can acquire conceptual expression (Guru, 2012, pp. 72–74).

Read together, Goodstein (2005) on the modern rhetoric of reflection, Sarukkai (2012) on unchosen lived experience, and Guru (2012) on socially produced space allow an inference: thinking time is not equally free across all social locations. Furthermore, Guru posits that although the tormentor and the theoretician have different purposes, each can reduce the victim to merely an object of their action (Guru, 2012, p. 72). Taking the relationship and his words into mind allows exploration of the question of whose descriptions of caste-structured times come to be accepted as concepts, and whose narratives come to be accessed only as narratives. Constrained time does not mean absence of thought; caste determines the terms on which thought is made, heard, and authorised.

This is the sense in which a theory of modern boredom meets, and must be reconsidered through, Dalit experiences of time in caste-structured spaces. The speaking of Dalit boredom nevertheless risks anachronism, unless one first clarifies what modernity means in the Indian context and how Dalit modernity coincides neither with, nor simply lags behind, a nationalist narrative of progress.

Modernity, Indian Modernity, and Dalit Modernity

Boredom's Historicity and the Question of Indian Modernity

Goodstein's (2005) attempt is to trace a historicity to the logic of boredom that leads to its articulation. The attempt is not just to trace that historicity but to find the point of intersection between that and the discourse that tries to explain that socio-historical feeling (ibid., pp. 13, 25). As we have established above, for Goodstein, that intersection point lies within the realm of modernity. She argues that the larger umbrella of boredom exemplifies a new mode of reflection centred on the embodied individual who struggles to ascribe meaning and purpose in a world "increasingly bereft of both religious and worldly certainties," and that boredom comes to function as a key term in a rhetoric where malaise is understood as an objective response to external realities rather than an inner flaw (ibid., pp. 402–404). Bringing Goodstein into conversation with Dalit studies thus already means treating Western industrial modernity as one of the forces that shape the temporalities and affective languages available to Dalit subjects, even if caste imposes a very different set of historical conditions than those in her Western archive.

Caste as a Modern Formation

This comparative reading, however, is only defensible if Indian modernity itself is provincialised. Nicholas Dirks's (2001) argument, in his book *Castes of Mind:*

Colonialism and the Making of Modern India, is that "caste (again, as we know it today) is a modern phenomenon," produced through the colonial state's attempt to classify, enumerate, and regulate Indian social life (ibid., p. 5). In his account, the ethnographic state transforms fluid, localised hierarchies into a single, systematised order called "caste," so that caste becomes one of the central social technologies through which colonial modernity rules. Furthermore, David Mosse (2020) extends this argument to the illusory promise of equality and castelessness that surrounds the development claims of the contemporary labour markets (ibid., pp. 1226–1227). He takes the example of elite jobs that conform to the social structure, where upper-end jobs are reserved for the middle class/upper-caste people, and lower-end jobs are categorised for Dalit and Adivasi workers. The skill differentiation and subsequent job allocations happen on the grounds of caste. Upper-caste groups continue to monopolise the job market through their networking caste methods and the categorical caste-based exclusion that follows through in the labour market as prominently as it used to before all of this (ibid., pp. 1251, 1253). Caste is not a residue that modernity has failed to clear away; it is made and remade in and through the economy itself, which means that Indian modernity is saturated with caste from the outset (ibid., p. 1263).

Caste Radicalism and the Dalit Public Sphere

Anupama Rao's (2009) history prevents Dalit modernity from appearing as a passive admission to institutions made by others. Between 1877 and 1929, Dalit publicists used newspapers and petitions to present untouchability as "contingent and wrong", rather than a ritual destiny (ibid., p. 40). Valangkar combined petitions for civic and employment rights with *kirtan* performances opposing the treatment of Dalit communities (ibid., pp. 47–48). Print, bureaucratic claim-making and performance worked alongside one another.

This Dalit public developed in relation to, but cannot be collapsed into, wider non-Brahmin politics. The Satyashodhak Samaj's exclusion of Dalit members in 1895 showed that opposition to Brahmin dominance did not guarantee Dalit equality (Rao, 2009, p. 47). Dalit reformers consequently developed their own forms of self-representation and claims to rights. Their actions were part of making modern political life, not merely demands to enter it after others.

Verandah as an Institutional Form

While sustaining the demanded distance from elite caste families, the colonial schools granted access to Dalit children. According to an 1887 report from Satara district, the Mahar children were kept out of schoolrooms, scribbling on their slates in the sun (Rao, 2009, p. 71). The verandah, however, acted as a larger institutional compromise for Rao, through which the Dalit children could achieve access, while being kept away from their elite caste schoolmates, while having a deteriorated access to sight and

hearing of what was spoken and read out in the schools. More than two decades later, in Tale in 1916, R. B. More attended his first-floor class while sitting on a scaffold constructed by the school authorities. The scaffold and verandah were analogous to each other (Rao, 2009, p. 72), as in the analysis of Rao.

Military pensioners in Dapoli (Mahar, Chambhar) petitioned in 1892 for their children's admission to a municipal school (Rao, 2009, p. 72). When Ambedkar began studying in 1894 as a Dalit child, Dalit students sat in a room of their own, placed their slates on the ground for the teacher to inspect, and were barred from the common water supply (Rao, 2009, p. 72). The inspections that happened in late 1894 showed that Dalit students and their upper-caste classmates sat three to four feet apart. More such allegations of explicit discrimination resurfaced in a 1901 petition (Rao, 2009, p. 73). And amidst these very apparent accounts of injustice, the formal setup of education was touted to be equally accessible for all.

The time consumed by such access was evidenced by families petitioning in Dapoli in 1892. Officials offered to extend the school verandah, provided the petitioners stumped up fifty rupees; the extension was still unapproved in November 1894 (Rao, 2009, pp. 72–73), and still more families were being segregated according to a 1901 petition. Families wanted to be educated with others, while officials continually twisted and repackaged this intention into segregated solutions. The verandah, writes Rao (2009), "preserved the illusion of equal education" even as it restricted a clear sight and sound of proceedings in class for the children (ibid., p. 72). Dalit communities also opened independent schools and hostels to tackle such issues of exclusion (ibid., pp. 72–73).

These petitions serve as evidence of temporal and spatial segregation based on caste; they do not tell us about boredom as a primary symptom of exclusion, but something that goes unnoticed as the subject keeps losing her egalitarian rights over legality and time.

Vernacular Modernity and Dalit Mobility

Caste has not escaped the conscious decision-making of people who inhabit newer locales and are hesitant participants in modernity. Waghmore and Contractor (2015) write about urban matrimonial advertisements that ironically have the phrase "Caste No-Bar" while simultaneously mentioning explicitly, "SC/STs please excuse" (ibid., p. 229). Rather than disappearing from urban life, caste is presented as making "modernity vernacular" (ibid., p. 229). The authors also focus on the pressure to make Dalit-ness invisible for some upwardly mobile people of Dalit origin, as well as the possibility of asserting Dalit selfhood and resistance (ibid., pp. 229–230). Through the accounts of Pankaj and Jha (2024) for the city of Navi Mumbai, Dalits acquire education and mobility and carve dignity and self-expression (ibid., pp. 2545–2546,

2552). Dalit modernity is neither a simple narrative of liberation from the shackles of caste, nor one of discrimination and oppression without expression of agency.

As histories, these are not, in spite of themselves, histories of boredom. They show how caste structures terms within modern institutions, which offer the promise of entry, and how actors contest those terms. When caste-structured delay suspends a promise of inclusion, the resulting disaffection can be treated as incapacity. The higher-education cases that follow examine this sequence through fellowship time, residence, assessment and discipline.

Dalit Boredom and the Indian University

Promise and Administrative "Waiting"

Higher education introduces the above argument into institutions which explicitly promise mobility and equal citizenship. Reservations, fellowships, and anti-discrimination rules are what formally substantiate that promise, but admission alone does not secure the conditions of study that fulfilling it requires. This evidence does not prove that all Dalit students grow bored or even that the students cited below used that word. What it does is show how the delayed arrival of resources, inhibited access to space, and the skewed tutoring and recoding of those obstacles as deficiencies in character on the part of the students can make a promised futurity lie outside a Dalit student's reach. Dalit boredom might be a way of thinking on that arrangement, not a cypher for any exclusion.

Waiting for fellowship/scholarship money is a common thread in these testimonies by Dalit students. One respondent, in Sukumar's (2023) study, talks about waiting eight months for a 5000 rupee MPhil scholarship while she had to borrow money, and struggles for books and photocopies (Sukumar, 2023, pp. 31, 85). Later, while negotiating the paperwork for doctoral funding, an ICSSR clerk told her that "people like you gobble up the chances of other meritorious students" (ibid., p. 86). Her response was that files needed to be cleared on time "so that students like us can survive" (ibid., p. 86).

The University Grants Commission's 2012 equity regulations make clear that institutional time can itself become a medium of discrimination. Among the practices prohibited when based on caste or other protected grounds were differential access to faculty, keeping a student idle in a laboratory, delaying examination results, withholding information about fellowships or stopping fellowships, and segregating students in hostels or messes (University Grants Commission, 2012, reg. 3(2)(b)-(e)). The regulations do not show that each of these practices occurred in every university. What they do show is that the gap between formal entry and usable educational time was already legible to the regulator.

Residence, Information and the Time to Prepare

The 2007 Thorat Committee inquiry at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi, examined complaints through interviews, visits and a questionnaire completed by 25 SC/ST students, about half of those at the institution (Thorat et al., 2007, pp. 11, 18, 33). Its figures describe this limited group of respondents, not Indian higher education generally. Because the report combines SC and ST students, its findings cannot be assigned to Dalit students alone.

The committee found that 29 SC/ST students were shifted from Hostels 1 and 2 to 4 and 5, and almost half stated caste harassment to be the cause; 88 per cent of those who answered the questionnaire reported facing social isolation in various ways. 76 per cent of SC/ST students told the committee that restrictions were imposed upon them about joining private messes (Thorat et al., 2007, pp. 34–36). Hostels, therefore, were much more than lodging alone. Exclusion from conversations, sharing books, and notes was also among their experiences (Thorat et al., 2007, p. 36).

A separate finding concerns the circulation of academic information. Students reported that class representatives failed to pass on decisions about teaching and deadlines in time, sometimes leaving SC/ST students to learn of them only after due dates had passed (Thorat et al., 2007, pp. 30–31). The report does not establish that hostel segregation caused this informational delay. Taken together, however, its findings show how being present on campus can coexist with reduced time to prepare, seek advice and meet a deadline. What is lost is not simply social company but a fair opportunity to anticipate and meet the institution's requirements.

Assessment and Merit Explanation

The notion of merit is itself contingent upon very practical factors of proximity to institutional resources that are officially claimed to be available for all. At AIIMS, 84 per cent people amongst the survey of 25 mentioned that practical evaluation and viva happened under unfair circumstances. 76 percent spoke of having been asked their caste by examiners, and 85 percent amongst the complainants mentioned that they were given less time by the examiner as opposed to their upper-caste colleagues (Thorat et al., 2007, pp. 5, 24, 42). A literal case of compromised time allowed to students speaks volumes about the institutional promise of being allowed equal time and opportunity to everyone. And adds an even expository light on aptitude-oriented marking that is translated to a fair merit system that claims to segregate students equally on the neutral system of marking them ahead of one another.

Sukumar's (2023) multi-campus survey finds the same pattern. One research scholar reports that "only two-three faculties asked relevant questions relating to the topic, others asked where am I from and what am I doing in the campus?" (ibid., p. 82). The student, rather than the research, was examined.

An awareness of such risks can explain how such events obtain their social meaning, as in Ajantha Subramanian's (2015) study of the Indian Institutes of Technology. The opposition between "general"/ "merit-based" admission on the one hand and "reserved" admission on the other can convert inherited upper-caste advantage into ostensible castelessness, casting the second in the role of the caste-marked student (Subramanian, 2015, p. 298). Subramanian's case may be concerned with IITs and not with AIIMS. However, she presents one general danger posed by such narratives. It becomes easy in such cases to interpret the student as not being good enough to keep up, rather than someone who might not have received an equal measure of attention or help as his peers. Goodstein's (2005) account explains why the two readings are available at all. Where the bored subject appears to reflect "in an enlightened and unemotional way upon the senselessness of life", she writes, "ennui comes to be regarded as a philosophically or spiritually significant mark of distinction" (ibid., p. 403). No study cited here compares two students who describe themselves as bored, and none is claimed. What Goodstein supplies is the reason that distinction is unlikely to be extended to a caste-marked student: it is granted to a subject already credited with the capacity to reflect.

Disciplinary Time at the University of Hyderabad

The University of Hyderabad had a different temporal arrangement. Rohith Vemula and four other ASA research scholars were barred from residing in hostel rooms and entering the administration building because of an order passed by the administration in December 2015, following a dispute between the Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA) and the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP). They were also prohibited from meeting anywhere in groups in common places. However, they were allowed to pursue their academic courses, library use (Sukumar, 2023, p. 158), and other academic-related programs. While remaining students who were still enrolled, they found the routine avenues through which enrolment translated into life on campus became inaccessible to them.

The place they found to reside in, a camp, became notorious as the *velivaada* (place of caste exclusion) (Sukumar, 2016, p. 452). The name was a political diagnosis of the situation, not evidence of any passivity. It was the immediate spatial forms of exclusion that, even as they were contested by students, became entrenched with the order and the locking of the room doors (Sukumar, 2023, pp. 158–159). Rohith Vemula hanged himself on 17 January 2016. Boredom is not the point of suicide, nor is boredom the breadth of the political actions staged by the five students. More narrowly, this is how membership in an institution may continue in formal ways, even as it is excluded from its life.

Beyond Curricular Inclusion

These examples suggest why an anti-caste pedagogy cannot be limited to adding a Dalit text to a reading list. Sharmila Rege (2010) argues that women, Dalits and Adivasis may enter sociology as topics while its "cognitive structures" remain largely unaltered (ibid., p. 90). She recalls a Dalit doctoral student's account of how ostensibly affirmative moments (an Ambedkar lesson, an elocution competition and the award of a UGC Junior Research Fellowship) could each reproduce caste by reducing him to a "stigmatised particular" (ibid., p. 89). Educational achievement is real; the institution's way of recognising it can still constrain the student's authority to interpret that achievement.

Phule's "trutiya ratna," or "third eye," is used by Rege (2010) to think about education as a means of understanding and transforming relations between power and knowledge. She interprets Ambedkar's intervention in the debates over university reform: examination-centred teaching is correlated to understaffing and inadequate representation on the governing bodies (ibid., p. 93). She also demonstrates that pedagogy and institutional reform cannot be decoupled. For Rege, the act of pedagogy should incorporate attention to classrooms, to funding (on time or late), to access to faculty and friends (or lack thereof), to conducting examinations, and to who is interpreted as knowing versus resenting an obstacle. One must pay attention not merely to the curriculum. This must also include respecting the analysis by students, as is evident in the naming of *Velivaada*.

Institutional evidence helps set boundaries and limits on the boredom being talked about here. Students will not necessarily complain of boredom if tuition fees are not paid, rooms remain separate, or viva calls come unevenly; none of these, by themselves, are reports of boredom. But they may upset the promise of the future delivered by virtue of being included in the education, making the student's study period contingent on decisions made elsewhere. These cases interrupt the possibility of a common temporality. And what we determine as boredom exists not in punishment but in delay in waiting to not be punished, while the student is told that the future that was promised is already here. And she is supposed to adjust and succumb to the narrative of merit to personalise every wrong that is an institutional injustice. Dalit boredom speaks of that personalisation where a social injustice is forced to be interpreted as an individual shortcoming.

Conclusion: A Category and a Field

Goodstein (2005) starts her analysis of boredom with a disturbed relation between the self and the world, "the deficits of the self masquerading as the poverty of the world" (p. 1). Her insistence that this relation is historically produced raises a further question for this paper: How do caste-structured institutions organise a student's time, and whose

account of the disaffection they produce is authorised? The problem of reflection turns on whose account is acknowledged. For a Dalit student, such reflections may be returned as a failure of aptitude or motivation, of adjustment or adaptation.

Histories of courtly leisure, of artisan autonomy, adda, factory work and timepass do not offer a single Indian equivalent of modern boredom. They report an uneven distribution of resources to control time and of the authority to describe its use. In the university, this assumes the form of an institutional inequality. Admission to a university can overlap with deferral of funds, segregated residence, unequal supply of information and reduced academic attention. A hostel order or examination decision happens at a given time; the conditions created by it remain thereafter. The phrase "Dalit boredom" does not reduce these experiences to one another; it draws attention to the gap between formal inclusion and the time and conditions needed for study.

None of the evidence discussed here establishes that the students themselves described these experiences as boredom. For the student who waited eight months for an awarded scholarship, that period was filled with work, borrowing and efforts to obtain the money due to her (Sukumar, 2023, pp. 85–86). The category does not diagnose how she felt during the wait. It asks why she was expected to continue studying while the conditions needed for study were withheld.

The public university is answerable for this issue as it promises access and mobility. Access also refers to the time during which education can proceed. The rules discussed in the article recognise some delays and disruptions as institutional wrongs; temporal injury is not entirely outside the context of injustice. A complaint might eventually be resolved by the university through a decision or payment, which does not necessarily restore the supervision, preparation or opportunity lost during the delay. The issue of anti-caste pedagogy, thus, constitutes more than curricular inclusion; it also entails addressing the institutional and material conditions that allow students to study, participate, and have their interpretations taken seriously.

What opportunities to study or prepare are lost between the university's promise and its fulfilment? And how does one account for the losses that the payment or decision does not put right? When students explain how that time was for them, will what they say be heard as an analysis of the institution or as evidence that the students could not keep up? If gaining a place at a university does not give students the time to learn and the facilities needed for studying, what would a right to learn demand from the university beyond the right to enter?

References

Ally, M. (2008). What is wrong with current theorisations of 'boredom'? *Acta Academica, 40*(3), 35–66. https://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/aa/article/view/1182

Bawa, S. (2023). Introduction: Delights and disquiets of leisure in premodern India. In S. Bawa (Ed.), *Delights and disquiets of leisure in premodern India* (pp. 1–20). Bloomsbury India.

Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference.* Princeton University Press.

Dirks, N. B. (2001). *Castes of mind: Colonialism and the making of modern India.* Princeton University Press.

Goodstein, E. S. (2005). *Experience without qualities: Boredom and modernity*. Stanford University Press.

Guru, G. (2012). Experience, space, and justice. In G. Guru & S. Sarukkai, *The cracked mirror: An Indian debate on experience and theory* (pp. 71–106). Oxford University Press.

Jeffrey, C. (2010). Timepass: Youth, class, and time among unemployed young men in India. *American Ethnologist, 37*(3), 465–481. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2010.01266.x

Jeffrey, C., Jeffery, P., & Jeffery, R. (2008). *Degrees without freedom? Education, masculinities, and unemployment in north India*. Stanford University Press.

Kumar, N. (1988). *The artisans of Banaras: Popular culture and identity, 1880–1986.* Princeton University Press.

Mosse, D. (2020). The modernity of caste and the market economy. *Modern Asian Studies, 54*(4), 1225–1271. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X19000039

Oxford English Dictionary. (n.d.-a). Bore, v.1. In *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved September 25, 2026, from https://www.oed.com/dictionary/bore_v1

Oxford English Dictionary. (n.d.-b). Bore, v.2. In *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved September 25, 2026, from https://www.oed.com/dictionary/bore_v2

Oxford English Dictionary. (n.d.-c). Bored, adj.1. In *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved September 25, 2026, from https://www.oed.com/dictionary/bored_adj1

Oxford English Dictionary. (n.d.-d). Bored, adj.2. In *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved September 25, 2026, from https://www.oed.com/dictionary/bored_adj2

Oxford English Dictionary. (n.d.-e). Boredom, n. In *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved September 25, 2026, from https://www.oed.com/dictionary/boredom_n

Pankaj, A.K., & Jha, M.K. (2024). The making of new Dalit middle class: Struggle, aspirations and changing lifestyle in Navi Mumbai, India. *Journal of Asian and African Studies, 59*(8), 2543–2555. https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231158344

Parry, J.P. (1999). Lords of labour: Working and shirking in Bhilai. *Contributions to Indian Sociology, 33*(1–2), 107–140. https://doi.org/10.1177/006996679903300107

Rao, A. (2009). *The caste question: Dalits and the politics of modern India*. University of California Press.

Rege, S. (2010). Education as trutiya ratna: Towards Phule-Ambedkarite feminist pedagogical practice. *Economic and Political Weekly, 45*(44), 88–98.

Sahgal, S. (2023). Hunting and dicing: Where leisure intersected with masculine aspiration in early India. In S. Bawa (Ed.), *Delights and disquiets of leisure in premodern India* (pp. 75–106). Bloomsbury India.

Sarukkai, S. (2012). Experience and theory: From Habermas to Gopal Guru. In G. Guru & S. Sarukkai, *The cracked mirror: An Indian debate on experience and theory* (pp. 29–43). Oxford University Press.

Subramanian, A. (2015). Making merit: The Indian Institutes of Technology and the social life of caste. *Comparative Studies in Society and History, 57*(2), 291–322. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417515000043

Sukumar, N. (2016). 'Red sun in the blue sky': Rohith Vemula's utopian republic. *Social Change, 46*(3), 451–457. https://doi.org/10.1177/0049085716654819

Sukumar, N. (2023). Caste discrimination and exclusion in Indian universities: A critical reflection. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003095293

Thorat, S., Shyamprasad, K. M., & Srivastava, R. K. (2007). *Report of the committee to enquire into the allegation of differential treatment of SC/ST students in AIIMS*. Government of India. https://fmesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Annex-5_2007_Thorat-Committee-Report_AIIMS-ST-ST-Discrimination.pdf

University Grants Commission. (2012). *UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations, 2012.* https://www.ugc.gov.in/pdfnews/4360105_UGC-Promotion-of-Equity-in-Higher-Educational-Institutions-Regulations-2012.pdf

Waghmore, S., & Contractor, Q. (2015). On the madness of caste: Dalits, Muslims, and normalized incivilities in neoliberal India. In B. Mohan (Ed.), *Global frontiers of social development in theory and practice: Climate, economy, and justice* (pp. 223–240). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137460714_12

Brandeis | LIBRARY
brandeis.edu/j-caste

CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 7 No. 2 pp. 362-386
October 2026
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v7i2.2785

The Brahmanical Panopticon: History of Reproduction of Caste and Sanitation Labour in India

Mayur Helia[1], Sally Cawood[2], Kai Heron[3]

Abstract

This study draws on oral histories from those engaged in caste-based sanitation work in Mumbai for many generations. We conceptualise and argue that Dalits are "trapped" in the basement of a—'Brahmanical Panopticon'—with entrapment mediated through *dharma*, *karma*, and rebirth. This study brings Michel Foucault in critical conversation with Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and makes four key theoretical and methodological contributions to Surveillance, Critical Caste and Migration Studies. First, the study contributes to ongoing debates on historical surveillance; we look at one of the earliest models of biometric surveillance (ways in which power and control is exercised on bodies and spaces) that was imposed on Dalits by the privileged castes. Second, centring caste in our analysis, we demonstrate how Dalits were forced into "dirty" and precarious labour through caste slavery and were geographically othered. Third, we show migration induced through caste-based incentives. Finally, we make a unique methodological contribution combining community research approach with autoethnography, drawing on the lead author's family's past. Community researchers were also involved to provide an insiders' understanding. Overall, this paper presents a Brahmanical Panopticon model which can be seen replicated across multiple areas (education, livelihood, access to basic amenities, etc.,) to keep Dalits severed from opportunities to progress and dignity. This panopticon further exemplifies why there is a contemporary rise of surveillance on Dalit sanitation workers across India.

Keywords

Dalits, Oral histories, Incentivised migration, Surveillance, Brahmanical panopticon

[1-3]Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University, United Kingdom
Email: [1]mayur.helia1992@gmail.com

© 2026 Mayur Helia, Sally Cawood, Kai Heron. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

Introduction

Across South Asia, caste-based labour such as sanitation work was imposed on Dalits[1] (Butt, 2019; Cawood & Mishra, 2025; Chaplin, 2011; Darokar, 2020; Guru, 2011; J. Lee, 2021a; Pais, 2021; Prashad, 2000; Sreenath, 2023; Thorat, 2021), creating what scholars such as Ambedkar (2014a, p. 47) refer to as a "division of labourers." This division of labourers is "the dogma of predestination" (Ambedkar, 2014a, p. 48) and not a matter of ability or skills. The caste system is a fixed or frozen class system within which Dalits have continued to be the outcastes (Ambedkar, 2014a). To date, there is limited research on caste and sanitation work that builds on insiders' knowledge—specifically research led by a person who is from a Dalit community and has worked as a sanitation worker. I[2] am from a Dalit sub-caste, and I am a fourth-generation ex-sanitation worker employed by Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) for over 12 years. This study, using a constructivist grounded approach, demonstrates how Dalits remain trapped in what we conceptualise as the "Brahmanical Panopticon." Brahmanism is an ideology that legitimises and enforces the caste-based division of labour leading to practice of structural birth-based inequality and rigid untouchability and discrimination.

Exploring the past of Dalits who are forced to live under constant surveillance and violent disciplining is critical because it elucidates the contemporary rise of surveillance on Dalit sanitation workers in India (Hafiz, 2023; Inzamam & Qadri, 2022; Khaira, 2020). Thus, this paper takes a historical approach and draws on oral histories to demonstrate how privileged castes imposed one of the earliest biometric surveillance methods on Dalits (discussed in section four). It also highlights how the Brahmanical Panopticon functions, and how caste inequality is reproduced and maintained through surveillance. This study is crucial because caste has not only transcended religious boundaries in South Asia (Butt, 2019; Jeremiah, 2019; J. Lee, 2018, 2021a; Mosse, 2012) but has crossed over regional boundaries as well. Yengde (2025), through his archival and ethnographic work, traces the presence of caste-

[1]The word 'Dalit' was first used by Mahatma Jyotiba Phule in the 19th century. It was popularised by Dalit Panthers in 1970s (Narayan, 2006). It means, "oppressed or broken," so it is contested among scholars. However, constitutional term, "scheduled castes" does not include people who converted from ex-untouchable castes to other religion, like Dalit Christian and Dalit Muslims. I use the word Dalit in this study because most respondents used it to self-identify, including Dalit Muslims. Furthermore, Guru (2017) rightly mentioned that the word "Dalit" is a proper noun, but scholars have started using it as an adjective. Dalit is a proper noun, but I personally feel that it can be used as an adjective only by Dalits because the aim is to not to other, like privileged castes/outsiders usage of "Dalit Scholar" or "Dalit Activist." The word Dalit can only be used as an adjective, to highlight a problem or otherwise, if at least one author is a Dalit.

[2]"I" or "My" is used throughout this paper to refer to the lead author and Principal Investigator of this research. We reflect further on author positionality in the methodology section.

based social order across the world. Dutt (2019) shows how caste affects Dalits in Silicon Valley, USA, and Kanjilal (2024) discusses how untouchability—a practice linked with the caste system—has gone beyond physicality to replication in virtual and digital spaces through evidence from Singapore and India. Furthermore, studies have shown how caste and caste-based discrimination have travelled to the UK (Dhanda & Waughray, 2014; Mosse, 2020). Across the globe more than 270 million people are affected by caste and caste-based discrimination (Mosse, 2018; Waughray, 2009), most being in India. Therefore, we trace the history of reproduction of the caste system through oral histories of Dalits living in one of the largest cities in India—Mumbai—to demonstrate how they are trapped in the basement of the Brahmanical Panopticon.

This paper makes four key theoretical and methodological contributions to existing literature on surveillance, critical caste and migration studies. First, it brings Foucault into conversation with Ambedkar to explain the historical reproduction of caste through surveillance—we conceptualise this as the Brahmanical Panopticon. We claim that, throughout history, systemic surveillance has trapped Dalits in their caste location and reproduced and maintained the caste-based social structure. Therefore, combining Foucault's theorisation of the panopticon with Ambedkar's understanding of the caste system provides a new conceptual framework that explains the reproduction and continuity of harmful practices within the caste system through surveillance. Surveillance has been studied from a racial, gender, religious, and class perspective (Anand, 2022; Browne, 2015; Dubrofsky & Magnet, 2015; Gill, 2024; M. Lee & Yazici, 2023; Lyon, 2008; Marx, 2016; Monahan, 2022; Stevens et al., 2023), but it has not been explored enough through a critical caste lens. This study addresses that gap by highlighting the critical intersection and transition of societal, human, digital factors that can exacerbate surveillance and its deployment.

Second, drawing upon nuanced literature from Dalit-Bahujan[3] scholarship on caste, this study contributes to the emergent field of Critical Caste Studies (CCS). Ayyathuria (2021, para. 3) defines CCS as, "an interdisciplinary field in which caste is seen as an entrenched social crisis. From its inception, caste has become a primary contradiction, i.e., *othering* fellow women, men and children." Our contribution to CCS is identifying and theorising the presence of caste in modern day and highlights how it adapts itself to newer systems and changing social relationships despite law, affirmative action and better understanding of its damages. Furthermore, caste has largely been studied from a class or race perspective, which is understandable as there are similarities in their systemic oppression (Wilkerson, 2020; Yengde, 2022), but they are not the same. Caste system in India can be traced back to over 2000 years ago, with the practice of untouchability being its primary *modus operandi* (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012); The caste structure stands on rigid and punishable conformity of people within

[3]Ilaiah (2000) uses this term, "Dalit-Bahujan," which includes Dalits, Tribals and Other Backwards Castes (OBCs)

one single religious group (Sanatan Dharma/Hindus); the discrimination met out is meticulously outlined in religious texts in vivid details. Even today, caste in India is reproduced through affect, be it through reinforcing of inferiority amongst Dalits via clothing or even diminishing dignity through otherization in public spaces; it is systemic, consistent and violent in its delivery (Bhoi, 2025, 2026; Bhoi & Gorringe, 2023). Therefore, by centring caste in all its forms and specifically using insiders' knowledge, we present the unique ways in which Dalits continue to be systemically trapped in sanitation work despite India's socio-political and economical advancements.

Third, some studies have explored reasons that triggered Dalit migration to the urban—such as natural calamities, famine, industrialisation (Kidambi, 2007; Pankaj, 2023; Shaikh, 2021; D. Solanki, 2016)—while others show how Dalits were specifically "obtained by recruitment in the mofusil" (mofussil in this case refers to rural Bombay Presidency) (Masselos, 1982, p. 109) to build the urban sanitation system by replicating the existing caste-based occupation in the rural (Cawood & Mishra, 2025; Mirza, 2018; D. Solanki, 2016). Interestingly, this migration of large numbers of Dalits to the urban only to systematically end up in sanitation labour has not been explained in its entirety. Our third contribution is to chart how Dalit migration to Mumbai city from the rural was encouraged through a local and strategic incentive system which has been undertheorized till now. The Brahmanical Panopticon can migrate with people across geographical location through caste and kinship network.

Fourth, we combine Community Research Approach (CRA) with autoethnography to build a framework grounded in detailed empirical fieldwork from insiders' understanding. We hired community researchers (CRs) from the communities involved in this study and they identified respondents for oral histories in Mumbai. This is critical because most studies on caste in Mumbai and across South Asia have been conducted by privileged castes or outsiders—without any participation of the communities at the heart of the research. By combining CRA with autoethnography, our study offers a novel approach rooted in insiders' understanding. Moreover, tracing oral histories from Mumbai is crucial because the city's populace—except the tribes in Aarey forest and the Kolis (a fishing community)—migrated or were brought to the present-day city (Kidambi, 2007; Pankaj, 2023; Shaikh, 2021; D. Solanki, 2016), which was built by connecting seven islands during British colonial rule (Chopra, 2011; Riding, 2018). This paper is part of a larger study that explores contemporary surveillance and the resistance against it.

We have divided this paper into seven sections: Following this introduction, the second section elaborates on the Brahmanical Panopticon. The third section outlines the methodology and approach chosen. Next, we highlight how Dalits were enslaved and othered historically. Subsequently, we explore segregated residences and the system of caste slavery based on their caste positioning in the village. The penultimate section explores how the Brahmanical Panopticon was replicated in the urban setting

by luring Dalits through dubious social and financial incentives. We then conclude with a reflection on avenues for further research into the contemporary impacts of the Brahmanical Panopticon.

Conceptualisation of Brahmanical Panopticon

Foucault (1991, p. 204) notes that, "the panopticon is a privileged place for experiments on men, and for analysing with complete certainty the transformations that may be obtained from them." Foucault's (1991, p. 205) panopticon functions as "a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organization," and it is "polyvalent in its applications." Foucault's application of panopticon was limited to physical institutes, like a prison, school or hospital. Before going into this reformulation through a critical caste lens, it is important to understand the caste system and how it is used to other Dalits.

The caste system, also known as the *varna* system, is a rigid structure of social hierarchies. It consists of five major hierarchical categories: brahmins,[4] kshatriyas, vaishyas, Shudras, and Ati-shudras (Ambedkar, 2014a); brahmins are on the top—self-proclaimed gods on earth—the "knowledge producers"; then, kshatriyas as "rulers and warriors"; finally, vaishyas were traders and merchants. These three castes are referred to as *dwijas* or twice born, once during physical birth and another time through a religious ceremony (Müller, 1967). Many scholars have referred to the twice-born as "upper" or "higher" castes indicating a natural superiority. However, we use the term "privileged castes," and it is a more accurate description. Fourth, Shudras, now known as Other Backward Castes (OBCs), were peasants and workers such as potters, goldsmiths, farmers, shepherds, etc. (Ilaiah Shepherd & Karuppusamy, 2021). Finally, Ati-shudras or Ex-untouchables, now known as Schedule Castes or Dalits, were the outcastes. They were forced into cleaning all types of waste (Chaplin, 2011; Guru & Sarukkai, 2012; Pais, 2021; Walters, 2019).

The caste system is further divided into sub-castes or *jatis* in all five categories. Each Dalit sub-caste was ascribed one or two specific types of labour religiously linked with some form of impurity, including cleaning human excreta, picking-up dead animals, producing leather and leather goods. Scholars, like Omvedt (1994) and Darokar (2018, 2020) have used terms like caste-based occupation to explain this predetermined division of labourers. Mirza (2018) has preferred the term "hereditary occupation." We will use caste-based occupation or caste labour interchangeably because the word "hereditary" has a neutral connotation.

[4]Following Gajendra Ayyathurai (2011, p. 20), who used lower-case "b" for brahmins "to problematize the legitimacy that this category has gained among English speaking writers, academics, and the public (of brahmin caste origin mostly) as well as the dictionary meanings that occlude the domineering power behind it." We use lower cases while mentioning all privileged castes (brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya). We further attempt to reverse this domineering power by using upper-case "D" for Dalits and lower cases for privileged castes.

In the Indian context, a different panoptic model can be illustrated through Ambedkar's metaphorization, "Hindu society is just like a tower which has several stories without a ladder or an entrance," (Ambedkar, 1920, para. 5). For Ambedkar, the caste system is like a four-storey building, where each varna occupies one floor on the basis of birth or caste order, without any possibility or access to upward movement or inter-mingling. We expand Ambedkar's imagination of the caste system by combining it with Foucault's theorisation of the panopticon to show that the Dalits were and are still trapped in the basement of this four-storey building. The Brahmanical Panopticon functions through rigid religious principles of *dharma*, *karma*, and rebirth to consistently reproduce the caste-based social order. As indicated in Figure 1.



Fig. 1: Brahmanical Panopticon

Source: Created by Preeti Kuber in Collaboration with Authors

The Brahmanical Panopticon is a half luxury apartment—top three floors, for privileged castes, and the other half, including the basement, for Dalit-Bahujan—with hierarchical prison cells as per their sub-castes. The privileged castes on the top three floors comprise around 10-15 per cent of the total population living in the luxury building. The first guards of this panopticon are 33 million Hindu gods, then the brahmins, followed by other three caste groups. The floor, that is, the base, of the third

and fourth storeys are made up of see-through glass, so privileged castes can share amongst them their knowledge generated through constant surveillance of those below to maintain their hegemony over this building.

The hierarchical prison starts from the first—referred to as the ground floor throughout the paper, wherein OBCs (50-60 per cent of the population) reside. The floors of the second and ground storey are one-sided see-through glass, allowing visibility only from the top. Similarly, each sub-caste is in a cell—one above another—with one-sided see-through glass. There is a strict division of castes and sub-castes on the four floors based on caste labour and endogamy (Ambedkar, 2014b). Dalits are separated from the top four by one additional aspect—untouchability—that connects to politics of purity and pollution (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012). We show how each sub-caste within Dalits are confined to hierarchical cells in the basement with one-sided see-through glass, here the visibility also exists only from the top. This is so that each sub-caste and individual above and below truly feel that their position is predestined by God; and that if they fulfil their caste labour in this life, then in the next, they will be born into a privileged caste, as espoused in the principles of *karma* and rebirth.

The Brahmanical Panopticon is dictated by *dharma*, *karma*, and rebirth—foundational principles of Hinduism. Ilaiah Shepherd (2000, p. 86) writes:

> It was in defence of brahminical ideology that he [Krishna] taught,[5] as is evident in the Gita,[6] the theory of violence, varnadharma and karma. This is the reason why Krishna was so acceptable to brahminical forces. After the defeat of the majority in the struggle for land the Gita was used to create a much stronger consent system to ensure that no serious revolts emerged from the Dalitbahujan social base.

Ilaiah Shepherd's explanation of *varnadharma* (law or duty attached to one's caste) and *karma* (deeds from current or past life/s) is central in the Brahmanical Panopticon. Ambedkar has extensively written on *dharma*, *karma*, and rebirth to explain how untouchables were subdued and controlled under Brahmanism. "If a man is born in a poor family it is because of his past bad karma. If a man is born in a rich family it is because of his past good karma… Everything is predetermined for him by his past karma," wrote Ambedkar (2014c, p. 339). In this way, being born as Dalit is justified as a punishment resulting from *karma* from the past life. So, *dharma* works as Foucault's sovereign power, used to punish, and *karma* as a disciplining tactic with conformity being rewarded in the next life—an illusion of upward social movement.

Though Sonavane et al.'s (2023, under building a digital caste panopticon) "digital caste panopticon" framework creates "encoding of casteist carceral spatiality",

[5]One of the Hindu gods

[6]One of the Hindu religious texts

it does not consider core Hindu principles that the Brahmanical Panopticon does. Furthermore, it builds on Cawood et al.'s (2025) concept of "entrapment", experience of being trapped with escape being difficult. In the Brahmanical Panopticon, Dalits are systematically entrapped in the basement through Brahmanical Surveillance[7] and Brahmanical Governmentality. Brahmanical Surveillance connects to societal, human and digital surveillance, where top four castes and their sub-castes keep watch on Dalits to prevent escape. It works toward reproducing caste and caste-based labour in a systematic manner to maintain the structural and fixed caste inequality, with use of *dharma*, direct violence, against those who resist these inequalities. Brahmanical Governmentality is Dalits self-disciplining via fear created through Brahmanical Surveillance because the cost of trying to break the panopticon is severe and permanent. This fear of retaliation maintains Brahmanical Governmentality. Chandrashekhar (2023) combines Ambedkar's concept of Brahmanism with Foucault's Governmentality to demonstrate how it is perpetuated by the State. We extend their theorisation to claim that Brahmanical Governmentality is not just created and maintained by the State but also society. Thus, Dalits are confined in the basement of the Brahmanical Panopticon not only conceptually, but with real and lived implications through Brahmanical Surveillance and Brahmanical Governmentality. In the later sections, we show how Brahmanical Surveillance and Brahmanical Governmentality function in the village model, and how it was brought in the urban setting. Before elaborating on this, we first outline the methodology.

Methodology

This paper draws on qualitative research conducted from June 2024 to January 2025 in Mumbai, India. This included recording of nine oral histories of four major Dalit sub-castes: 1) Rukhi, derogatorily called Bhangi;[8] 2) Rohit, Ravidasiya, or Chamar; 3) Mahar, now converted to Navayana Buddhism (NB); 4) Meghwal, Vankar, derogatorily referred as, Dedh; that historically engage in sanitation work, specifically in the Solid Waste Management (SWM) department in Mumbai—previously known as Bombay (Pradhan, 1938; Masselos, 1982; Mirza, 2018). Through oral histories, we trace the past of these communities from before and after their migration to the city and provide a deeper understanding of caste and surveillance. Oral histories are important because many sub-castes within Dalits do not have any written history associated to their existence, and the archives only show partial truth. So, centring these voices in the

[7]Abhinaya Ramesh used the term 'Brahmanical Surveillance', cited by Rege (2013). She writes, "Ramesh pointed to the limits of border crossing through a detailing of structures and process of Brahmanical Surveillance" (Rege, 2013, p. 21). However, we could not find the details regarding Brahmanical Surveillance is and how it functions, but we want to give her credit for her work.

[8]We use the derogatory name only because respondents used it to highlight discriminatory practice.

paper along with autoethnography brings out insiders' knowledge, which has been overlooked till now.

The background of the researcher/s plays a key role in data collection and generation, and wider knowledge production, especially in an ethnographic study. Scholars have talked about reflexivity in research, but positionality—especially in the South Asian context—is not highlighted enough. Scholars in/from the Northwest region also largely fail to problematise the dominance of privileged caste/outsider researchers who "study" marginalised communities in South Asia. Privileged castes, regardless of their religion, are still the direct oppressors of Dalits in South Asia. Therefore, when working with marginalised communities, positionality of the researcher/s must be mentioned upfront, with details of their caste and sub-caste. This gives the readers a clear view of who is conducting the study and on whom, and how the researcher/s have navigated their positionality—especially if they are privileged caste/outsiders. Most importantly, privileged castes and outsiders studying marginalised communities, like Dalits and Tribals, without meaningful collaboration is a form of epistemic violence. We call for providing researchers with lived experiences from marginalised background opportunities to theorise from their unique positionalities, which this study does.

I belong to a Dalit sub-caste called Meghwal-Vankar. I am a cisgender man. My ancestors were forced to migrate from Gujarat[9] to Mumbai during *Chappaniyo Dukal* (famine of 1899-1900 in western India). The second and third authors do not come from the communities under study and are privileged by race and their position within UK's higher education. We wish to openly acknowledge and reflect critically on the historical harms and inequalities arising from these positions and hope that centring voices via oral histories and a Community Research Approach (CRA)—elaborated below—can start to address some of these central ethical dilemmas in regard to how lived experience is "captured" and wider knowledge production and circulation.

We used CRA approach to provide a holistic view by including all sub-caste narratives via CRs.[10] CRA "ultimately involves collaboration between professional social researchers, funding agencies and the group or organisation being researched" (Goodson & Phillimore, 2012, p. 4), and "a fundamental requirement is that community researchers belong to, or at least share common ground with the intended participants" (Goodson & Phillimore, 2012, p. 4).

To start, we selected three BMC staff quarters in Mumbai. CRs were hired from these staff quarters. They are all from Dalit sub-castes,[11] and our team was mixed

[9]From Saurashtra region.

[10]All CRs ancestors, grandfather or someone from their family, came to Mumbai pre- or post-independence and ended up in sanitation labour

[11]One female CR from NB background had left in the starting phase, and due to time constraints, I was unable to get someone else. To cover that, I did one extra interview with a scholar from

gender. We wanted to cover diverse narratives and experiences through oral histories. CRs were given salaries for participating in the evidence-gathering for this research. Barring one respondent—Vishwas (see Table 1)—the family members or extended family members of all respondents and CRs still work in BMC. Though this paper largely uses oral histories, the wider study includes focus group discussions (FGDs), interviews, and participatory observations to understand the past and present of surveillance along with resistance.

Table 1: Respondent Details

No.	Respondent details	Names (Pseudonym)	Background Information of Respondents
1	Male (Buddhist)	Siddharth	Started as a sanitation worker, now supervisor. Family came to Mumbai pre-independence (1947) from rural Maharashtra.
2	Female (Buddhist)	Sandhya	Started as a sanitation worker, and now she is Junior Oversees officer. Family came to Mumbai pre-independence (1947) from rural Maharashtra.
3	Male (Sub-caste Rukhi)	Ramesh	A sanitation worker in the BMC. His grandfather came to Mumbai pre-independence (1947) from rural Gujarat.
4	Rukhi Female (Sub-caste Rukhi)	Savitaben	Retired sanitation worker. Her husband's family came to Bombay approximately in 1920's from rural Gujarat.
5	Male (Sub-caste Vankar)	Ravi	Grandfather joined BMC during Chappaniyo Dukal (famine of 1899-1900 in western India), who came from rural Gujarat.
6	Male (Sub-caste Vankar)	Prakash	Retired BMC officer. His family came to Mumbai pre-independence (1947) from rural Gujarat.
7	Female (Sub-caste Rohidas)	Jiviben	Retired sanitation worker. She joined BMC in late 1950's as a sanitation worker. Family came to Mumbai during Chappaniyo Dukal (famine of 1899-1900 in western India) from rural Gujarat.
8	Male (Sub-caste Rohidas)	Dhanji	Retired sanitation worker. He joined BMC after 1947. Family came pre-independence in Mumbai from rural Gujarat.
9	Male (Scholar, Buddhist)	Vishwash	Researcher studying caste in urban (Mumbai).

Source: Authors Own

CRs used a snowball sampling method to find respondents, and later I deployed purposive sampling to conduct oral histories. We consciously selected one male and one female respondent for oral histories from Rukhi, NB, Rohidas communities and

NB background.

two males from Vankar community. This is because I also use the oral history of my family through my grandmother's narratives, recalling her stories from my memory. She was the head of my family, thus, her narratives are central to the autoethnography.

A total of nine oral histories, six male and three female respondents, age range 30-95 years, were conducted. Two from each community and one of a scholar.

All respondents' names are changed to pseudonyms to protect their identity. This project received ethical approval from the university and, permission from BMC officials was taken.

Enslaving, Controlling, and Surveilling: Bodies, Souls, and Shadows

"Aryans enslaved the indigenous community of this land… They created the caste system and destroyed the indigenous community and their culture," said Ravi whose family also migrated to Mumbai more than a century ago. Phule (2002), in his book *Slavery*, wrote about the Aryan invasion. According to this, privileged castes came from the West and enslaved Dalits and Tribals, who were the indigenous people of South Asia. This was later theorised by Thapar (1996), who called it Aryan Invasion Theory providing archaeological evidences. This theory was contested among scholars, but recent studies of genetics show that Aryans migrated from the West to South Asia around 4000 years ago and strict endogamy started approximately 2000 years ago (Joseph, 2017; Narasimhan et al., 2018; Reich, 2018). Studies of genetics also highlights that privileged castes have higher steppe genes while Dalits and tribals have low (Debortoli et al., 2020), indicating a clear relation between privileged castes and Aryans. Siddharth said, "Privileged castes after establishing Shunga dynasty [185 to 78 BCE] made four restrictions on the indigenous people: [1] *roti bandi* [restriction on food], [2] *bheti bandi* [restriction on meeting them] and [3] *beti bandi* [restricted on marriage; endogamy], and [4] *looti bandi* [restriction on water]." Ambedkar (2014e) has extensively discussed the Shunga dynasty and how it led to a strict caste-based social order. Ambedkar disagreed with Aryan invasion; rather for him, the birth of the caste system was from the struggle between Buddhism and Brahmanism.

In both the Aryan invasion or cultural colonisation, Dalits were enslaved with laws and restrictions by the *Manu Smriti*—which is a Hindu law or rule book—put in place by privileged castes around 2000 years ago. As shown above, genetic studies also found that strict endogamy began around 2000 years ago. This was the first colonisation, physical or cultural, that created the structure of the Brahmanical Panopticon, where Dalits were outcasted and othered. In the racial context, Fanon (2008, p. 90) defines othering as "[f]or not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man." In the Brahmanical Panopticon, Dalits must not

only be Dalits but in relation to everyone above them to do their menial jobs as slaves of the caste system. For implementation of this, it required perpetual and systemic surveillance and disciplining. Siddharth notes:

> We had a broom tied to our back, so when we walk our footprints would be wiped out. There were no concrete roads at that time, and we were not allowed to wear footwears… From the footprints, privileged castes living inside the village would know, was it a monkey, a lion, or a Dalit that had entered the village…

Here, Siddharth explains one recurring narrative that all respondents talked about. For example, Vishwash said, "There was broom on the back and pot on the neck, they were the clear identifiers of Mahars and Mangs."[12] Another respondent, Jiviben explained the used of the pot. She said, "Pot on the neck because we cannot spit on the ground as it would pollute the entire area. So, we were not allowed to spit anywhere but, in the pot, tied to our necks."

Historically, Dalits have always lived outside of the village (Ambedkar, 2014d, 2014f; Ramaiah, 2017), which we will discuss in the next section. Dalits were not allowed to enter villages without a broom and a pot (Ambedkar, 2014d). With the broom tied low on the back, the ground would be marked as one walked to show their trajectory to the rest of the privileged castes so they would know where Dalits had crossed. Jiviben further added before the broom, they used to "tie branches of tree around the waist." In Foucault's (1991) understanding of the panopticon model, an individual, in the cell would feel that he is always being watched. For Dalits, the village itself becomes a panopticon, where they, not just feel that they are being watched in real-time, but they also fear that they could be tracked through the marks from the broom. The broom on the back worked like a Global Positioning System (GPS) tracker attached to Dalit bodies. The pot was to humiliate and punish them, symbol of untouchability. It made visible and concretised the idea of purity and pollution.

Ravi, whose ancestors were from Gujarat, said, "We also had a 'Shingi' tied to our neck, it is a whistle… This whistle was to notify the privileged caste that we are coming." Ambedkar (2014d, p. 720) notes, "In Gujarat the Untouchables were compelled to wear a horn as their distinguishing mark". The horn was not just a distinctive identifier on Dalit bodies but also worked as a notifier.

Browne (2015) discusses racial surveillance through Lantern Law in New York City in the eighteenth century, where Black, mixed-race, and Indigenous people had to carry lanterns with them after sunset. She referred to this practice as one of the first biometric model of surveillance. The broom, pot, horn on Dalit bodies pre-date the Lantern Law and has been understudied to date. These tools were the earliest biometric tools that were attached to Dalits to identify and track them.

---

[12]Mang is another sub-caste within Dalits from Maharashtra, India.

This practice was eradicated with the Indian Slavery Act (ISA) (Indian Slavery Act, 1843, 1843). Post that, privileged castes used other bodily identifiers to locate and track Dalits. One of them was the use of threads and bangles. Siddharth said that "black threads on the arms, waist, and ankles were there to identify us. This is not just about Mahars, but most Dalits like those from Gujarat, had a different kind of bangle from which they were identified." Savitaben, shared about such bangles and also differences in the attire of men and women used for surveilling them. She said, "There were bangles on the arms of the women from my community [Rukhi]. There were also, 'Ughdi,' metal bangles on the ankles. For men, the head must be covered with white cloth all the time." The pot and broom were inhuman universal markers—for both men and women—were replaced by more subtle and gendered identifiers by privileged castes. These threads, bangles, and coverings of the head with white cloth though enforced socially in the past became systemic biometric tools during the British colonial period and were recorded as such. Some of these practices continue to exist, for example, in the documentary *India Untouched* (Stalin, 2007), Dalits in some villages of southern India are still not allowed to wear footwear in specific sections of the village where privileged castes reside. This demonstrates how the Brahmanical Panopticon is adaptive, and it constantly works toward finding new ways to monitoring Dalits, to keep them in their places.

Ambedkar highlights the importance of punishment in reinforcing the caste system, noting that "for only by punishing the outcast[es] can the caste system be maintained," (Ambedkar, 2014e, p. 304). Punishment links with *dharma* and is crucial for maintaining the Brahmanical Panopticon. Prakash shared an incident of his uncle—who was still living in a village in Gujarat—from the 1980s. Prakash said,

> A son of a Darbar [kshatriya caste], hardly 7-8 years old, was walking half-naked on the road… My uncle came out of his house, which was on the road that went to the village. Darbars lived separately from us. They lived inside the village, but the road was one to go in and out. They came near our locality to shit. This child saw my uncle coming out of his house and that his head was not covered. The child picked a stone and hit my uncle. My uncle got hurt badly on his head… This child then went home to complain to his father, that this Dedh disrespected him… My uncle was in his late seventies.

Even a half-naked child knows well that a Dalit must cover his head in front of him. This is how the concept of *dharma* works; it is the use of violence to protect one's caste superiority.

In the Brahmanical Panopticon, not just Dalit bodies were monitored and controlled, but also their reflection falling on the ground was seen as impure and polluting. So, privileged castes found a way to prevent shadows of Dalits falling on them through

time restrictions on entry and exit in the village (Ambedkar, 2014d). Siddharth said, "In the past, we were not allowed to enter the villages in the afternoon because our shadows would be long and were considered polluting." Another respondent, Ravi said, "Our entering in the village had specific timings and, in some villages, there were separate roads."

In the Foucauldian (1991) analysis of the body and soul—monitoring of the physical body and to modifying its behaviour—the aim is to produce a certain kind of human being. However, in this Panopticon, the Brahmanical Surveillance techniques were deployed on natural and uncontrollable things such as shadows which cannot be modified. The end goal is not to modify the behaviour of Dalits in this life but to make them suffer for any reason that the privileged castes can make up to justify their violence. The punishment is not to change or improve their behaviour; rather, being born as a Dalit itself is a punishment based on the deeds or *karma* from a past life. So, the life of a Dalit is ordained to be full of suffering without any escape—based on the cyclical principles of *karma* and rebirth. The hope and methods sought to escape this loop result in establishment of self-disciplining behaviours, which result in obedience towards Brahmanical Governmentality. Each Dalit sub-caste was systematically divided, separated and monitored in the basement not only in terms of bodily markers and through their shadows, but they were also separated and divided residentially and occupationally.

Art of Distribution of Caste and Sub-castes: Divided Residences and Labour

Foucault's (1991) art of distribution is where each individual is confined in a cell, essential for disciplining by keeping them separate. In the Brahmanical Panopticon, these cells or distribution is done through sub-castes within Dalits. To implement this, first, Dalits should be separated at a certain fixed geographic location, then divided further into different cells. Ravi said, "We were forced to live outside of the village. We were called '*Simaliyas*,' *sima* means boundary or limit of the village." Ravi is explaining how residences of Dalits were othered to make them outcastes. Geographically, Dalits have historically been kept outside of the Indian village. Even at present, in my grandfather and grandmother's ancestral village in Gujarat, Dalits still reside outside of the village. This has been studied by scholars like Ambedkar (2014d, 2014f), Thorat (2009), and Ramaiah (2017). Ravi added a nuanced perspective, "Dalits in the villages [in Gujarat] also have had their houses on the side from where sun rises… The wind flows from west to east." Dalits were not just forced to live outside but were assigned a specific geographic location to reside. Furthermore, each sub-caste of Dalits was systematically divided to create separation, like the cells in the basement of the Brahmanical Panopticon.

Ramesh said, "In Mehsana [Gujarat], Vankar and Rukhi live outside of the village but separately." My grandmother used to narrate how in her village Vankar, Rohidas, and Rukhi lived separately. Another respondent, Sandhya explained how, "Mahar and Mang used to not live in the same part" outside of her village. Here, each sub-caste was provided a cell by the privileged castes to live in isolation with each other. This shows how the caste cells were finely engineered—confining each sub-caste in space and time—outside of the village.

Furthermore, each sub-caste was also provided a particular caste-labour. For example, Savitaben said, "When a dog dies, they [villagers] say, 'call a Bhangi, they will take it out.' If a cow or bull dies, they will call Dedh." One of the occupations of Vankars and Mahars was to remove the dead domesticated animals, like cows, bulls, and goats, from the village (Parmar 1987). However, "wherever they [Rukhi community] were not there in any village, their work was imposed on us [Vankars]," said Ravi. Dhanji provides insights linked with caste-labour and untouchability. He said, "We [Rohidas] used to make and stitch footwear [for privileged castes] … They would sprinkle water on the [new] footwears as it has got impure [by our touch], and then only wear it." Thus, Dalits were forced into a strict residential boundary with dualistic occupational structure dictated and controlled by *dharma*, *karma* and rebirth with the practice of untouchability attached to all Dalit bodies. Creating a systematic way of exploiting and controlling Dalits through the system of caste slavery.

> An Untouchable must not own and cultivate land and lead an independent life. For his livelihood he must depend upon stale remnants of food left over by the Hindu households and upon meat of cattle that die in the village. These remnants of food he must collect from door to door. (Ambedkar, 2014f, p. 134)

The above quote explains the systemic oppression of Dalits without formal payment or ownership. Vishwash talked about *Maharki*, where leftover food was given as part of the payment. In all four sub-castes, giving leftover food as payment was common. Another respondent, Ramesh talked about *Waalu.*[13] "Suppose I am working in a *Wadi* [a piece of land] … Then the privileged caste owner will say, 'At night, take food after people finish eating.' After that, they give us the leftover food. This is Waalu." Vankars and Rohidas called this *Veth.*[14] "The meaning of Veth, is to not give money, if one feels he should give some bread… If anyone tried to refuse, they would beat them to death. The whole family would face a social boycott," said Ravi. This highlights a system of caste slavery with punishment of death or social boycott for a simple refusal. One does the hard labour and then, must beg for leftover food in their own utensils as payment. Three different names for the system of caste slavery. This shows how Dalits

[13] *Waalu* also means as dinner as mostly they get leftover food in the evening.

[14] *Veth* translates as suffer, and *Vethvanu* as suffering.

only had right to exist to perform their caste duty or slavery, as this life itself becomes punishment, with hope of betterment only in the next life through *karma* and rebirth. Singh (2014) shows how this practice is still ongoing across India, where manual scavengers, mostly Dalits, are given tiny payment with leftover food. Lakra (2025) highlights that the present precarious situation of Dalits is linked with their past, where they were denied access to basic resources.

If Dalits tried to break out of the Brahmanical Panopticon, they would also be punished via violence by anyone above them, as defending their *dharma*. Vishwash explains, using contemporary example of atrocities against Dalits,

> There is a saying in Marathi, "*Payari ne waga*." *Payari* means *dehliz* [threshold], means caste here. One must behave as per their caste lines. If you cross the line or ask questions, you will be punished. This is the main reason, if we look at the Khairlanji Massacre. Because that family had land, their children were studying, and they were not listening to the privilege castes [and OBCs] in the village because they were not dependent on them anymore… They were not listening to the village, which is why they were punished.

In the Khairlanji Massacre, 2006, four members of a Dalit family were killed by a mob of OBCs (Khandizod, 2024). Historically, the power of violence in the Brahmanical Panopticon always flowed vertically, meaning the residents of the same cell cannot use direct violence on people in their cell or above. Therefore, Dalits were divided and trapped in their hierarchical cells with systematic surveillance and governmentality deployed on them through principles of *dharma*, *karma* and rebirth with the practice of caste slavery, so they could never be free. The next section shows how privileged caste along with British created a replica of the Brahmanical Panopticon in the urban setting.

A Collaborative Effort of Colonisers: Creation of an Urban Model of the Brahmanical Panopticon

Industrialisation in India came alongside urbanisation (Davis, 1951; Chandavarkar, 1994), and it required sanitation labourers. In the nineteenth century, British administration created a new post called Mukadam[15] to recruit and discipline Dalit sanitation workers in the city. Prashad (2000) discusses the same post in Delhi, where Mukadams were called Jamadars, ex-army men, who were hired to discipline sanitation workers. This post of Mukadam or Jamadar marked the formal creation of human surveillance systems to oversee and monitor sanitation workers in the city.

In 1865, Bombay, "the labour for urban sanitation was recruited on the basis of existing caste structures, where cleaning was a traditionally hereditary occupation

[15]The term Mukadam comes from village, where it meant a village headman.

performed by castes such as Dheds, Mahars, Mangs, and Bhangis," (Mirza, 2018, p. 81). In 1866, Mahars "were obtained by recruitment in the mofussil," writes Masselos (1982, p. 109). Masselos's archival work is valuable, but does not provide answers to how and who brought Dalits into sanitation labour in the city—something we explore further here. Masselos also does not see caste as a central form of entrapment, which we see as fundamental.

From 1860s to 1880s, Bombay's sanitation was handled via the contractual/ outsourcing system and it was in crisis (Masselos, 1982). In 1888, the Municipal Corporation Act was passed, where the corporation took complete control (Masselos, 1982). After that, wages, especially, of sweepers' that were already low, were further reduced. So, 1899 marked the first major strikes by BMC sweepers', dominated by Mahar sub-castes (Masselos, 1982). The Municipal Servants Bill, in 1890, was passed to curb strikes, with legal action used to threaten strikers (Masselos, 1982). Also, sweepers from Kathiawad or Saurashtra region of Gujarat were "slowly brought into the force from the 1890s to counterbalance the Mahars," (Masselos, 1982, p. 129). My ancestors and sub-caste were brought from the Kathiawad region and are referred as Kathiawadis in Mumbai, even today. In other words, Mahars were united fighting till 1889, and so other Dalit sub-castes, like mine, were "brought" from Gujarat to break the unity, utilising and reinforcing the art of division—central to the functioning of the Brahmanical Panopticon.

During that period, most of the contractors, Mukadam, and other higher officers were from privileged castes. "In the past, BMC officers and Mukadams were from privileged castes," said Ravi. These officers systematically recruited only Dalits for sanitation work. "They [Mukadams] gave some money to workers to bring their friends and family [caste members] to join this work," said Ravi. Other respondents, Jiviben, Savitaben, and Ramesh also talked about the incentive system. Like, Ramesh said, "Mukadams gave money, if we brought others [from same caste] to work." Privileged caste Mukadams created an incentive system to bring and trap Dalits into this caste-based occupation. This system worked towards bringing those who were uneducated and unemployed from untouchable castes into sanitation work. This was the first incentive model that was used to reproduce caste and caste labour in the urban setting.

In the past, another way of alluring Dalits into sanitation was to give them housing attached with their caste-based occupation. Siddharth talking of the past said, "our people also joined this work because of the house." My grandmother's elder brother joined BMC as a sweeper. Her brother had no intention of joining BMC but one of his friends took him by saying, "Mukadam was saying that, they will also give us house with the job." Dalits were thus lured into sanitation work with incentives and BMC housing by privileged caste officers. This housing was and is intrinsically linked with the job, like in the village (D. Solanki, 2016). For instance, if the family wish to live in the residence, then one person has to become a sanitation worker. Even today, many families are trapped in sanitation labour because of this.

From 1889 to 1922, a new category clubbed under an umbrella of *Safai Karmacharis* (sanitation workers) emerged, which exists today. Jiviben said, "We had identity cards on our necks by which they [people in the city] would identify us all as zaaduwala [people of broom]. They gave us BMC uniform as well." The broom and pot, and then threads, bangles were replaced by the identity card and uniform in the city. This new technique of Brahmanical Surveillance reinforced the unified identity for both genders, like broom and pot. Here, Dalits and sanitation labour became synonymous in the city.

Caste slavery was also reinvented, where Dalits sanitation workers were provided tiny amounts as salaries in the city (Masselos, 1982; Pradhan, 1938), which meant they had to rely on leftover food. Ramesh said, "Here, also, we were given leftover food as part of our work." Similarly, in terms of untouchability, "In this, Mumbai! For our caste people the teacups were separate, and this was not just in the Hindu hotels [Hotels means restaurants] but even in Irani hotels and Muslim owned hotels," said Ravi. Savita noted that, "There were separate cups outside of the hotel in which we were served in them from a distance." Like the caste-based labour and caste slavery, untouchability also found its way into the city. Siddharth concluded by saying that, "Exploitation and forced labour for generations has conditioned Dalits to think that sanitation work is their [only] occupation," linking it to contemporary realities of Dalit sanitation workers—a form of Brahmanical Governmentality. Overall, privileged castes systematically worked with the British to create an urban model of the Brahmanical Panopticon to maintain their hegemony.

Conclusion

At present, India is utilising the world's largest biometric surveillance system, that is, Aadhar (Solanki, 2019; Masiero & Shakthi, 2020). The Indian government, under Swachh Bharat (clean India) Mission, is deploying biometric surveillance by using smartwatches and face recognition system to track Dalit sanitation workers (Hafiz, 2023; Inzamam & Qadri, 2022; Khaira, 2020) which are also linked to Aadhar. Furthermore, a recent report by National Campaign Committee for Eradication of Bonded Labour across 19 states found that every 2 out of 3 bonded labourers are Dalits (Handa, 2025). The report specifically mentioned that this is not just an economic but rather a structural issue linked with the historical oppression of Dalits (*The Hindu*, 2025). Hence, exploring the past helps us understand the present realities of Dalits in India and across South Asia. This hierarchical structure of caste is being reproduced across the globe through endogamy and kinship networks (Dutt, 2019; Roohi, 2017; Yengde, 2025), making caste a global problem, and the implications of this study significant beyond India alone.

Dalits are one of the earliest communities on whom biometric surveillance was deployed. They were not just othered physically, outside of the village, but were also

separated psychologically; making them believe that their caste location is the result of their deeds from a past life, through *dharma*, *karma* and rebirth. Each sub-caste was given a cell and a specific caste-based labour to maintain the hierarchy, where the village itself became a panopticon for them. *Dharma* worked to punish them with physical violence and assault, where being a Dalit itself became a punishment—a result of deeds from one's past life. Here, Dalits were treated worse than animals through caste slavery; they were forced to survive on leftover food as payment, forcing them to become and remain socially and economically marginalised. This system migrated to the city, where privileged caste Mukadams and higher officers worked to systematically maintain the hierarchy by reproducing the old social order in new territories, such as Mumbai. In Mumbai, Dalits became synonymous with sanitation labour.

The Brahmanical Panopticon model—bringing Foucault into conversation with Ambedkar—provides a new way of understanding the reproduction of the caste-based social order through surveillance and governmentality. Brahmanical Surveillance and Brahmanical Governmentality provide a more nuanced lens to understand how social hierarchies are replicated and maintained. This was possible by centring caste in understanding the past of Dalits engaged in sanitation work. Methodologically, it combines CRA with autoethnography to generate a multifaceted insiders' narratives. It calls for ending the epistemic violence against marginalised communities and providing them space not just in South Asia but also in the Northwest region. Furthermore, it provides a detailed insight that contributes to migration studies where we show how privileged castes, the first colonisers, used the financial incentive model to bring Dalits to the city along with luring them with housing. The Brahmanical Panopticon provides a new and more nuanced lens to understand the past and present of Dalits.

The framework introduced here opens new avenues to understanding the reproduction of caste through surveillance. Moving forward, there is a crucial need for further research by insiders' and/or in collaboration with Dalits to explore and understand the marginalisation through reproduction of caste and caste-based labour, how Dalits are fixed in their location, more importantly, ways in which Dalits were and are resisting.

Acknowledgement

This work is dedicated to all four communities involved in this study and to Viru[ben] Hiralal Heliya (lead author's grandmother). We are grateful to all our respondents and community researchers for dedicating their time and energy to this project. Thanks to Preeti Kuber for her digital artwork presenting our concept of the Brahmanical Panopticon. Thanks to Shreyas Sreenath, Nikita Mehta, Ankita Rathi, Md. Touhidul Alam, and Joel Suni Sakhi for their reflections. Thanks to Michael Moses and Antara Mukherjee for their valuable feedback and discussions. We are thankful to the

anonymous reviewers for their comments that strengthened this paper. I personally want to thank my mother Shanta Palji Helia for her wholehearted support. Lastly, I want to thank my aunt, Pushpa Rajaram Sosa, and uncle—Girish Hiralal Heliya—for helping me verify my grandmother's story. All errors are mine.

References

Ambedkar, B.R. (1920). Read the First Editorial Written by Babasaheb Ambedkar for Mooknayak [Blog Post]. *Velivada*. https://velivada.com/2020/01/31/read-the-first-editorial-written-by-babasaheb-ambedkar-for-mooknayak/

Ambedkar, B.R. (2014a). Annihilation of caste with a reply to Mahatma Gandhi. In V. Moon (Ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 1, pp. 23–96). Dr. Ambedkar Foundation.

Ambedkar, B.R. (2014b). Caste in India: Their mechanism, genesis and development. In V. Moon (Ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 1, pp. 3–22). Dr. Ambedkar Foundation.

Ambedkar, B.R. (2014c). Enlightenment and the vision of a new way. In V. Moon (Ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 11, pp. 315–414). Dr. Ambedkar Foundation.

Ambedkar, B.R. (2014d). Miscellaneous notes. In V. Moon (Ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 12, pp. 693–741). Dr. Ambedkar Foundation.

Ambedkar, B.R. (2014e). Revolution and counter-revolution. In V. Moon (Ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 3, pp. 151–440). Dr. Ambedkar Foundation.

Ambedkar, B.R. (2014f). Untouchables or the children of India's ghetto. In V. Moon (Ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 5, pp. 3–100). Dr. Ambedkar Foundation.

Anand, A. (2022). Repression of Uyghur Muslims and the freedom of religious beliefs in China. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies*, *8*(1), 23–36. https://doi.org/10.1177/23944811221085680

Ayyathurai, G. (2011). *Foundations of anti-caste consciousness: Pandit Iyothee Thass, Tamil Buddhism, and the Marginalized in South India* [Thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy]. Columbia University.

Ayyathurai, G. (2021, July 5). It is time for a new subfield: 'Critical Caste Studies' [Academic Blog]. *It Is Time for a New Subfield: 'Critical Caste Studies'*. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2021/07/05/it-is-time-for-a-new-subfield-critical-caste-studies/

Bhoi, D. (2025). Caste, mental health and self-harm: Emotive experiences of Dalit students at the Indian University. *Contemporary South Asia*, *33*(4), 681–702. https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2025.2536247

Bhoi, D. (2026). Mentality and psychological construction of cast(ed) social in making of caste village: Dalits affective encounters in university space. *National Identities*, 1–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2026.2688105

Bhoi, D., & Gorringe, H. (Eds). (2023). *Caste in everyday life: Experience and affect in Indian society* (1st ed). Palgrave Macmillan.

Browne, S. (2015). *Dark matters: On the surveillance of Blackness*. Duke University Press.

Butt, W.H. (2019). Beyond the abject: Caste and the organization of work in Pakistan's waste economy. *International Labor and Working-Class History*, *95*, 18–33. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547919000061

Cawood, S., Farzana, M., & Naeem, K.M.F. (2025). Nongra Kaj / 'dirty work': Caste, colonialism and entrapment in Bangladesh. *Contemporary South Asia*, *33*(4), 537–558. https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2025.2575161

Cawood, S., & Mishra, P. (2025). Historicising sanitation work: Value, infrastructural labour and representation in colonial Bengal. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 1–22.

Chandavarkar, R. (1994). The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940 (1st edn). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511583551

Chandrasekhar, S.V.D. (2023). The quest for horizontal transgender reservations under the spectre of Brahmanical Governmentality. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X231198712

Chaplin, S.E. (2011). Indian cities, sanitation and the state: The politics of the failure to provide. *Environment and Urbanization*, *23*(1), 57–70. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247810396277

Chopra, P. (2011). *A joint enterprise* (NED-New edition). University of Minnesota Press. JSTOR. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttsrnj

Darokar, S. (2018). Manual scavengers: A blind spot in urban development discourse. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *53*(22).

Darokar, S. (2020). The complexities of liberation from caste. *Economic and Political Weekly*, (9), 55–62.

Davis, K. (1951). *The population of India and Pakistan* (Vol. 1). Princeton University Press.

Debortoli, G., Abbatangelo, C., Ceballos, F., Fortes-Lima, C., Norton, H. L., Ozarkar, S., Parra, E. J., & Jonnalagadda, M. (2020). Novel insights on demographic history of tribal and caste groups from West Maharashtra (India) using genome-wide data. *Scientific Reports*, *10*(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-66953-3

Dhanda, M., & Waughray, A. (Eds). (2014). *Caste in Britain: Socio-legal review*. Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Dubrofsky, R.E., & Magnet, S.A. (Eds). (2015). *Feminist Surveillance Studies*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1198x2b

Dutt, Y. (2019). *Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir*. Aleph Book Company.

Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white masks* (1st ed., new ed). Grove Press; Distributed by Publishers Group West.

Foucault, M. (1991). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.; Reprint). Penguin Books.

Gill, B. (2024). The social life of illegality: Suspicion and surveillance against African migrants in urban India. *American Anthropologist*, *126*(3), 422–433. https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13979

Goodson, L., & Phillimore, J. (Eds). (2012). *Community research for participation: From theory to method* (1st edn). Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1r33pzb

Guru, G. (Ed.). (2011). *Humiliation: Claims and context*. Oxford University Press.

Guru, G. (2017, July 19). *Dalit is 'proper noun', not an 'adjective'* [NewsClickin]. https://www.newsclick.in/dalit-proper-noun-not-adjective-prof-gopal-guru

Guru, G., & Sarukkai, S. (2012). *The cracked mirror: An Indian debate on experience and theory*. Oxford University Press.

Hafiz, A. (2023, February 13). On your watch. *New Internationalist*. https://newint.org/features/2023/02/13/your-watch

Handa, Aa. (2025, December 9). 2 in 3 rescued bonded workers Dalit: Survey shows how India fails the oppressed. *The Quint*. https://www.thequint.com/jobs/migrant-bonded-labour-abolition-rescued-workers-dalit-adivasi-obc-rehabilitation-survey-data-latest-news#read-more

Ilaiah Shepherd, K. (2000). *Why I am not a Hindu: A Sudra critique of Hindutva philosophy, culture and political economy* (4. repr). Samya.

Ilaiah Shepherd, K., & Karuppusamy, K.R. (2021). *The Shudras: Vision for a new path*. Vintage, an imprint of Penguin Random House.

Indian Slavery Act, 1843, Pub. L. No. Act No. V of 1843 (1843). https://www.indiacode.nic.in/repealedfileopen?rfilename=A1843-05.pdf

Inzamam, Q., & Qadri, H. (2022, February 5). In India, digital snooping on sanitation workers. *Undark*. https://undark.org/2022/05/02/in-india-digital-snooping-on-sanitation-workers/

Jeremiah, A. (2019). Caste and Christianity in India. In K.R. Ross, D. Jeyaraj, & T.M. Johnson (Eds), *Christianity in South and Central Asia* (pp. 408–419). Edinburgh University Press. Cambridge Core.

Joseph, T. (2017). *How genetics is settling the Aryan migration debate*. *The Hindu*. https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/science/how-genetics-is-settling-the-aryan-migration-debate/article19090301.ece

Kanjilal, S. (2024). The digital life of caste: Affect, synesthesia and the social body online. *Feminist Media Studies*, *24*(5), 1112–1127. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2229053

Khaira, R. (2020, February 18). Surveillance slavery: Swachh Bharat tags sanitation workers to live-track their every move. *Huff Post*. https://www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/swacch-bharat-tags-sanitation-workers-to-live-track-their-every-move_in_5e4c98a9c5b6b0f6bff11f9b

Khandizod, A.S. (2024). The Khairlanji Massacre: Unveiling the intersection of caste, gender, and violence in modern India [Journal]. *Round Table India*. https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/the-khairlanji-massacre-unveiling-the-intersection-of-caste-gender-and-violence-in-modern-india/

Kidambi, P. (2007). *The making of an Indian metropolis: Colonial governance and public culture in Bombay, 1890-1920*. Taylor and Francis.

Lakra, N.R. (2025). Transitioning from caste-bound village occupations to peri-urban jobs: Experiences of Dalit migrant labourer. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 2455328X251314225. https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X251314225

Lee, J. (2018). Who is the true *Halalkhor* ? Genealogy and ethics in dalit Muslim oral traditions. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, *52*(1), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/0069966717742223

Lee, J. (2021a). *Deceptive majority: Hinduism, untouchability, and underground religion*. Cambridge University Press.

Lee, J. (2021b). Disgust and untouchability: Towards an affective theory of caste. *South Asian History and Culture*, *12*(2–3), 310–327. https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2021.1878784

Lee, M., & Yazici, E. (2023). China's surveillance and repression in Xinjiang. In M. Kwet (Ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Race and Surveillance* (1st edn, pp. 166–189). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108241304.009

Lyon, D. (Ed.). (2008). *Surveillance as social sorting: Privacy, risk, and digital discrimination*. Routledge.

Marx, G.T. (2016). *Windows into the soul: Surveillance and society in an age of high technology*. The University of Chicago press.

Masiero, S., & Shakthi, S. (2020). Grappling with Aadhaar: Biometrics, social identity and the Indian State. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, (23). https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.6279

Masselos, J. (1982). Jobs and jobbery: The sweeper in Bombay under the raj. *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, *19*(2), 101–139. https://doi.org/10.1177/001946468201900201

Mirza, S. (2018). Caste and stigmatised labour in colonial Bombay. *Economic and Political Weekly, Special Issue*, *53*(31), 79–85.

Monahan, T. (2022). *Crisis vision: Race and the cultural production of surveillance*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2vr9d0b

Mosse, D. (2012). *The saint in the banyan tree: Christianity and caste society in India*. University of California Press.

Mosse, D. (2018). Caste and development: Contemporary perspectives on a structure of discrimination and advantage. *World Development*, *110*, 422–436. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.06.003

Mosse, D. (2020). Outside caste? The enclosure of caste and claims to castelessness in India and the United Kingdom. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *62*(1), 4–34. Cambridge Core. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417519000392

Müller, F.M. (1967). *The sacred books of the East: Laws of Manu*. Motilal Banarsidass. https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=XpIwRMFUcVcC

Narasimhan, V. M., Patterson, N., Moorjani, P., Lazaridis, I., Lipson, M., Mallick, S., Rohland, N., Bernardos, R., Kim, A. M., Nakatsuka, N., Olalde, I., Coppa, A., Mallory, J., Moiseyev, V., Monge, J., Olivieri, L. M., Adamski, N., Broomandkhoshbacht, N., Candilio, F., … Reich, D. (2018). *The Genomic Formation of South and Central Asia*. Genomics. https://doi.org/10.1101/292581

Narayan, B. (2006). *Women heroes and Dalit assertion in north India: Culture, identity, and politics*. SAGE Publications.

Omvedt, G. (1994). *Dalits and the democratic revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit movement in colonial India* (1st edn). Sage.

Pais, R. (2021). Sanitation and unchanging role of caste. *Indian Anthropological Association*, *51*(2), 57–69.

Pankaj, A.K. (2023). Mumbai/Bombay migration, caste, and Dalits. In A.K. Pankaj, *Dalit Migrants* (pp. 17–33). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-39225-2_2

Phule, J. (2002). *Selected writings of Jotirao Phule* (1. publ). Leftword.

Pradhan, G.R. (1938). *Untouchable workers of Bombay City* (Vol. 1). Karnatak Publishing House.

Prashad, V. (2000). *Untouchable freedom: A social history of a Dalit community*. Oxford University Press.

Ramaiah, A. (2017). Why Dr. Ambedkar demanded separate settlements for the Depressed Classes? In A. Ramaiah (Ed.), *Contemporary relevance of Ambedkar's thoughts* (pp. 219–259). Rawat Publications.

Rege, S. (Ed.). (2013). *Against the madness of Manu*. Navayana publication.

Reich, D. (2018). *Who we are and how we got here: Ancient DNA and the new science of the human past.* Pantheon books.

Riding, T. (2018). 'Making Bombay Island': Land reclamation and geographical conceptions of Bombay, 1661–1728. *Journal of Historical Geography*, *59*, 27–39. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2017.08.005

Roohi, S. (2017). Caste, kinship and the realisation of 'American Dream': High-skilled Telugu migrants in the U.S.A. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *43*(16), 2756–2770. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1314598

Sarukkai, S. (2009). Phenomenology of Untouchability. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *44*(37), 39–48.

Shaikh, J. (2021). *Outcaste Bombay: City making and the politics of the poor*. University of Washington Press.

Singh, B. (2014). *Unseen: The truth about India's manual scavengers* (1st edn). Penguin Books.

Solanki, A. (2019). Management of performance and performance of management: Getting to work on time in the Indian Bureaucracy. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, *42*(3), 588–605. https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2019.1603262

Solanki, D. (2016). Cast(e)ing Life: The Experience of Living in Peripheral Caste Quarters. In Peripheral Visions in the Globalizing Present (pp. 109–125). BRILL. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004323056_008

Sonavane, N., R., R., Rawat, A., Mohanakrishnan, R., & Yadav, V. (2023, December 13). Building blocks of a digital caste panopticon: Everyday Brahminical policing in India. *Logic(s)*, (20). https://logicmag.io/policy/building-blocks-of-a-digital-caste-panopticon-everyday-brahminical-policing/

Sreenath, S. (2023). (Un)making the manual scavenger: Caste, contract, and ecological uncertainty in Bengaluru, India. *American Ethnologist*, *50*(3), 491–505. https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13202

Stalin, K. (Director). (2007). *India Untouched: Stories of a people apart* [Social issues documentary; Exploritory]. Drishti-Media, Arts and Human Rights. https://www.cultureunplugged.com/documentary/watch-online/play/5752/india-untouched-stories-of-a-people-apart. https://www.cultureunplugged.com/documentary/watch-online/play/5752/india-untouched-stories-of-a-people-apart

Stevens, A., Fussey, P., Murray, D., Hove, K., & Saki, O. (2023). 'I started seeing shadows everywhere': The diverse chilling effects of surveillance in Zimbabwe. *Big Data & Society*, *10*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/20539517231158631

Thapar, R. (1996). The theory of Aryan race and India: History and politics. *Social Scientist*, *24*(1/3), 3. https://doi.org/10.2307/3520116

The Hindu. (2025, November 29). Report on rescued bonded labourers flags rehabilitation failures. *The Hindu*. https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/report-on-rescued-bonded-labourers-flags-rehabilitation-failures/article70336383.ece

Thorat, S. (2009). Access to civil amenities: Housing, water and electricity. In *Dalits in India: Search for a Common Destiny* (pp. 122–128). SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9788132101086.n12

Thorat, S. (2021). *Challenges and policies to address the persisting problems of sanitation workers in South Asia* (pp. 1–43). International Labour Organization. https://bdd.pseau.org/outils/ouvrages/ilo_challenges_and_policies_to_address_the_persisting_problems_of_sanitation_workers_in_south_asia_2021.pdf

Walters, V. (2019). Parenting from the 'polluted' margins: Stigma, education and social (im) mobility for the children of India's out-casted sanitation workers. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, *42*(1), 51–68. https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2019.1556377

Waughray, A. (2009). Caste discrimination: A twenty-first century challenge for UK Discrimination Law?[1]. *The Modern Law Review*, *72*(2), 182–219. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2230.2009.00740.x

Wilkerson, I. (2020). *Caste: The origins of our discontents*. Random House.

Yengde, S. (2022). Global castes. *Ethnic and racial studies*, *45*(2), 340–360. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1924394

Yengde, S. (2025). *Caste: A global story*. Hurst & Company.

Article

Brandeis | LIBRARY
brandeis.edu/j-caste

CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 7 No. 2 pp. 387-409
October 2026
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v7i2.2883

Gendered Margins: Lived Experiences of Women in Institutional Housekeeping Roles in India

Sadaf[1], K. M. Ziyauddin[2]

Abstract

The present study aims to examine the lived experiences, challenges, and mobility of women employed as housekeeping workers in institutional settings. A large number of the women belong to low caste groups, thus indicating how caste reinforces occupational conditioning even in modern and educational institutions in India. It covers the obstacles, suggests adaptive strategies and ambitions that influence their work and personal experience. These women often face unstable working conditions, inadequate compensation, limited job security, and restricted opportunities for advancement. Societal expectations and gendered roles add to their misfortune. Qualitative methods of data collection and participatory methods are employed to record the narratives of structural inequalities experienced by the targeted respondents. The data reveals the presence of discrimination in the workplace, health risks, inadequate social protection, low wages, and the marginalisation of their labour within institutional hierarchies. The study highlights the need for policy reforms to incorporate inclusive frameworks that acknowledge the contributions of women in housekeeping roles. There is a need to contextualise their experiences within the larger discourse of labour rights and gender equity. The study aims to understand the gendered labour dynamics and inform practical initiatives for achieving equitable work conditions and dignified working environments. It also examines how institutions can bring inclusion as a mechanism by countering exclusionary processes within the institutional setup.

Keywords

Gender based exclusion, Aspirations, Lower Castes, Sanitation as occupation, Lived experiences, Structural inequalities, Lack of social protection

[1]Research Scholar, Dept. of Sociology, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad-500032 India
[2]Associate Professor, Dept. of Sociology, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad-500032 India
Email: [1]siddiquesadaf2@gmail.com, [2]ziyadse@gmail.com

© 2026 Sadaf, K. M. Ziyauddin. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

Introduction

Women's increasing participation in the workforce reflects a shift toward gender inclusivity; yet, their labour, particularly in low-paid, labour-intensive roles, remains undervalued and stigmatised (Bhongale & Bhattacharya, 2023). There are more than 5 million people in India working as sanitation workers, with 50 per cent of them employed in urban settings, including as manual scavengers who manually clean and carry human excreta every day (DAAA, 2022). The bulk of them belong to Hindu families coming from low caste born in the caste strata. Such women from marginalised caste and class backgrounds are disproportionately employed in sanitation and housekeeping roles, facing continuous systemic discrimination and exploitative conditions (PRIA, 2019). The existing presence of women from lower castes group does raise questions about urban mobility where discrimination has not declined, rather the evidence of rural discrimination engulfs the urban spaces and urban workplaces. Rural India is not only a site of caste-based atrocities, but new policies, new industry, new forms of capitalism and newer institutions have also adopted caste-based discrimination. Sukhadeo Thorat and Paul Attewel (2007) in their landmark field experiment study, «The Legacy of Social Exclusion: A Correspondence Study of Job Discrimination in India» properly addressed how new forms of capitalism adopted caste discrimination and it remains visible.

A large number of these women are employed in the unorganised sector, where they perform labour-intensive and low-paid tasks, often without job security or basic facilities (Ranjithkumar, 2024; Kumar& Arathi, 2024). Sanitation and housekeeping work includes toilet cleaning, waste management, domestic rubbish collection and disposal, road sweeping, gathering trash and disposal of these (UMC, 2023). While a large number of research studies focus on manual scavenging, sanitation works in the unorganised sector receive little attention. Consequently, there has been a lack of focus on the working and living conditions of sanitation workers employed in organised institutions, such as universities, hospitals, banks, and public sector offices. These are often supposed to provide safe and more dignified work environments, but this assumption remains untested and unexamined through empirical fieldwork. The women sanitation workers experience poor socio-economic conditions; their health, work-life balance, and safety need to be focused on by the government and non-government organisations. The present study addresses the gap, through an intersectional lens; it examines how gender, caste, and class shape their socio-economic condition, working experiences and institutional challenges focusing on the institutional sector: Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU), a central university in Hyderabad, India.

Literature Review

Women sanitation workers are one of the most vulnerable groups in India because they are hired as temporary and contract employees who receive no benefits (Kumar & Arathi, 2024). Surprisingly, the workforce employed in sanitation jobs across India does depend on women from lower Hindu caste families, making the lives of Dalits more vulnerable and increasing the level of suffering. Although the government report shows that the data of manual scavengers are almost zero, but when it comes to reality, we can see they still exist with different names, i.e., sanitation worker, cleaning worker, housekeeping worker, etc. The roles of housekeeping and sanitation workers in India are deeply rooted in caste-based discrimination, with Dalits and other marginalised communities excessively engaged in manual cleaning (Wilson, 2019; Shyamlal, 1981; Ziyauddin, 2022; Shahid, 2015). Women sanitation workers have to face social stigma, economic exploitation and health risks, these experiences being intersecting forms of oppression based on gender and caste (Kadlak et al., 2019). Other socio-economic factors heavily impact the familial and individual health of women employed in sanitation job, such that it does not matter even if they are working in modern institutions like an educational set-up. Health, well-being and illness does impact the entire family (Ziyauddin, 2025). A study by Borooah, Sabharwal, and Thorat in 2012 shows a higher impact on women who are engaged in caste-based hazardous occupations like sanitation, working without safety gears and health security, and how mortality among women from the Dalit community is higher than women from Hindu high castes. Further, on an average a Dalit woman lives 39.5 years of age as against upper caste women who live 54.1 years on an average.

Legislative efforts for marginalised women, such as the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act (2013), have aimed to eradicate manual scavenging. It has been implemented but remains weak; women are still engaged in manual cleaning (Gupta, 2016; Saldanha et al., 2022). Studies on sanitation work in urban settings, such as Mumbai, emphasise how neoliberal policies and contractual employment increased exploitation (Dubey & Murphy, 2021). Within organised and technologically advanced institutions, gendered labour hierarchies persist in subtler forms, where women disproportionately perform invisible and undervalued "institutional housekeeping" work that sustains organizational functioning. As highlighted by Bird et al. (2004), even data-driven and meritocratic institutions rely on women's unrecognised labour for coordination, monitoring, and reporting, while technological rationality privileges measurable outputs and efficiency, thereby obscuring gendered inequalities rather than abolish them. Despite expectations of better working conditions in institutional spaces such as universities, women housekeeping workers remain marginalised within organisational hierarchies. This

study seeks to address this gap by focusing on the lived experiences of housekeeping staff at MANUU.

Research Objectives

- To look over the socio-economic conditions of women sanitation workers at MANUU.
- To explore the institutional support and facilities available to these workers.
- To explore the challenges and difficulties they face in their roles.
- To assess whether these workers experience discrimination within the institutional setup.

Methodology

This study is qualitative research using both primary and secondary material, and the primary data was collected from the field, i.e., Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad. Hyderabad occupies an acclaim of having various premier educational institutions and organizations through which the questionnaire, interviews, case studies tools were used to collect data in this research process. In this research process magazine, articles and journals, reports and handbooks have been used as secondary sources to collect data. This study uses random sampling method in probability sampling, in which data has been collected by reaching the respondent randomly, which helps reduce bias and ensure diversity in responses. Random sampling is a subset of sampling techniques in which each sample has an equal chance of being selected.

There are a total of 80 women sanitation workers on the MANUU campus, out of which 50 per cent, i.e., 40 women, were selected for sampling. In this research, in-depth interviews (n=20) were conducted. Data were organised and presented in a tabular form for clarity. Data was collected in different departments, in hostels, in Osmania Central Park, in the admin building, in the Open Air Theatre, in the garden, etc., of the MANUU campus through observation and discussion. These workers do the work of cleaning in every building barring the boys' hostel. They clean the Civil Services Examinations Building, Directorate of Distance Education Centre for Distance and Online Education, CPDUMT, the library, the polytechnic, the guest house, the VC cottage, HRDC CSIT, etc. This research has been presented in a tabulated format.

Ethical Consideration

During the data collection from the respondent all efforts were made to comply with ethical principles and steps undertaken not to reduce the dignity and comfort of all respondents. The respondents were informed about the study, its academic purpose, and how the data would be used. All personal information shared by the respondent

has been kept confidential. Interviews and observations were conducted at times convenient for the respondents so as not to interfere with their work. The respondents were treated with respect during the research. Feelings and emotions, opinions and experiences of these workers were admitted and valued without any judgement. Prior to data collection, the purpose and objectives of the research were clearly explained to the respondents and, where applicable, to their supervisors. Data was collected only after obtaining their voluntary consent.

Theoretical Background

The study employed an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) to examine how women sanitation workers confront the intersecting oppressions of caste, class, and gender. Their experiences cannot be seen through a single lens but must be analysed through the interaction of multiple social hierarchies. Marx (1867) helps explain the Reserve Army of Labour, characterised by contractual, insecure employment and low pay, where women are seen as easily replaceable. Their economic status and marginalised caste push them into exploitative roles, reinforcing their vulnerability.

Silvia Federici (1975) argues that women's labour is underrated due to patriarchal norms; likewise, sanitation workers' cleaning work is considered a natural and normal duty rather than skilled labour. Furthermore, the field data and the manifestation of the context through Goffman's (1963) stigma theory reveal how these women are socially excluded due to their association with "impure" caste-based occupations. Their work is seen as filthy and dirty, reinforcing discrimination and seclusion. Together, these perspectives explain the structural and symbolic oppression faced by women sanitation workers.

In the context of bringing a larger social change among the life of workers involved into sanitation, a few policies are being brought in make their life world better. A sociological lens to these policies helps to showcase how policies could improve the overall living conditions of sanitation workers but it also raises questions to policymakers among civil society from the vantage point of dignity of labour, equality of life and employment opportunities and so on.

The explorations to such national level schemes are essentially needed here to examine the kind of intervention planned for the betterment of women sanitation workers and to sanitation workers countrywide.

Gender, Technology, and Institutional Labour Regimes

In discussions on gender and technology within institutional labour regimes, mechanised cleaning equipment is often presented as a marker of modernisation and efficiency in housekeeping work. However, field evidence from Central Universities such as Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU) reveals a significant

absence of such technological interventions in everyday cleaning practices. Despite the technological advancement, cleaning work continues to be carried out largely through manual labour, relying on traditional tools, chemical detergents, and prolonged physical effort.

This absence of mechanised cleaning technologies has distinctly gendered implications. Women workers, who constitute a substantial segment of the housekeeping workforce, are disproportionately exposed to harsh cleaning chemicals, contaminated surfaces, and repetitive manual tasks. Prolonged contact with chemical disinfectants without protective equipment frequently results in skin allergies, rashes, respiratory discomfort, and chronic health issues. The lack of mechanisation thus intensifies bodily strain rather than alleviating it, reinforcing the physical vulnerability of women workers within institutional spaces.

From a gendered labour perspective, the non-adoption of mechanised equipment is closely linked to the outsourced and contractual nature of housekeeping employment. Since workers are employed through private contractors, investments in technology, safety gear, or skill training remain minimal. Women workers have little to no say in decisions related to work processes or technological adoption, further marginalising them within the institutional hierarchy. Technology, in this context, is not merely absent but selectively withheld, reflecting cost-cutting priorities that override workers' health and dignity.

Moreover, the lack of mechanised cleaning equipment highlights the gap between institutional regulations and lived realities. While Central Universities are governed by labour laws and public accountability frameworks, outsourced women workers remain excluded from effective social security, health safeguards, and grievance redressal mechanisms. Viewing this through the lens of gender and technology reveals how institutional labour regimes reproduce inequality not only through technological surveillance where it exists, but also through technological neglect where it is most needed. The continued reliance on manual cleaning labour underscores how gendered bodies absorb the costs of institutional efficiency in the absence of inclusive and worker-centric technological interventions.

A new section titled "Gender, Technology, and Institutional Labour Regimes" has been added to address the theme of the special issue on Gender and Inclusion. This section critically examines the absence of mechanised cleaning technologies in Central Universities, with specific reference to MANUU, and analyses how manual cleaning practices disproportionately affect women housekeeping workers through increased health risks, job insecurity, and exclusion from decision-making processes.

Policies and Interventions

The policies also help to understand the living conditions of women workers in urban spaces, especially in institutional set ups. One does find that the does not have formal

written documents about the management of workers in the instruction as they are completely outsourced.

By going through the texts of the policies framed to improve working conditions and uplift the social security of a sanitation worker's life and life-world, the following points emerge in the present context. The implementation of prohibition acts by the government of India did generate significant civil society demand towards dignified and caste-free occupational activities. Safai Karamchari Andolan is an example that could highlight the plight of earlier manual scavengers to the policy makers, generated parliamentary debates and put social pressure on the judicial scrutiny connecting caste-based occupational association as against human rights.

The manual scavenging Act 2013 prohibits the employment of persons as manual scavengers and bans hazardous manual cleaning and also mandates protective gear and gives rehabilitation and beneficial financial assistance, and an alternative livelihood for those engaged in this practice. According to this, all sanitation workers should be provided PPE (gloves, masks, boots, etc.), as is mandatory for all solid waste handlers as per the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers & their Rehabilitation Act 2013.It is the duty of the employers, either ULBs or a private agency, to provide PPEs to sanitation workers.

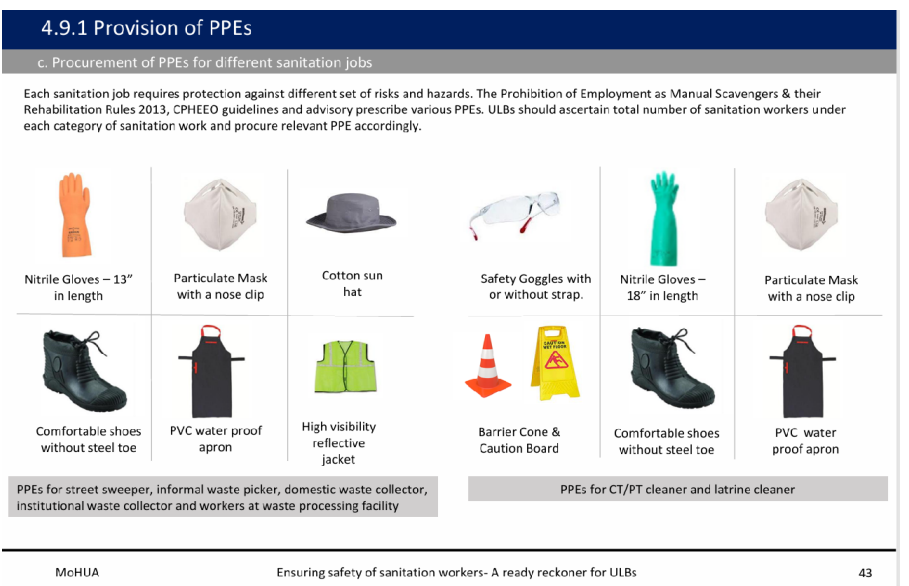


Fig. 1

Source: Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), 2020.

The Supreme Court order (2014) for ₹10 lakh compensation to be provided to the families of deceased manual scavengers since 1993 is a landmark ruling. The Swachh Bharat Mission 2.**0** guidelines focus on welfare and occupational safety of sanitation workers through access to PPE, while training and awareness points to a

continued attention to the policy-making processes though much had to be attended and implemented. The safety to the worker's life must be ensured as per the various provisions of the enacted law. In fact, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) issued a notification in 2019 that all cities must set up Emergency Response Sanitation Units (ERSUs) for quick response during dangerous cleaning operations, to promote mechanised cleaning. A micro scrutiny to the implementation of the policies narrates utter disregard to the spirit of the policies and parliamentary provisions that does not only show failure to the objectives, rather also how social concerns are ignorant and apathetic towards menial workers of India.

Grand Nomenclature: NAMASTE Scheme (2023–2026)

National Action for Mechanized Sanitation Ecosystem is a government initiative in India to ensure safety and dignity of sanitation workers, launched in 2023-24 with a plan to run from April 2025 to March 2026. The focus of this scheme is zero fatalities in sanitation work, only skilled/formalised work (no informal, unsafe jobs), no direct contact with faecal matter, Strengthen Sanitation Response Units (SRU), form SHGs of sanitation workers (called "Sanipreneurs"), provide PPE (mask, gloves shoes, glasses, etc.) safety devices, mechanised equipment and training. The NAMASTE scheme was introduced to extend financial & skill development support including loans/subsidies for mechanised equipment.

The provisioning of an impressive Provisions and Recommendations of NAMASTE Scheme moves to the health and safety of the workers. Apart from health insurance under AB-PMJAY extended to sanitation workers, manual scavengers and their family members also have safety devices worth ₹2 lakh. There are efforts built into this towards behavioural changes and IEC as awareness campaigns to engage only authorised workers and report unsafe practices taking place. Efforts are also being made to sensitize citizens and ensure recognition to effective individuals. The urban level bodies (ULBs) can motivate sanitation workers with awards, vouchers, Good Practice Days, and public recognition, providing incentives and acknowledgment whenever needed.

A good commendable initiative for sanitation and housekeeping workers are noted in a few states of the country. The government of Odisha launched Garima Scheme (Odisha, 2020) for comprehensive safety and dignity package for sanitation workers that includes health & life insurance, support for pucca housing. It also adds educational grants for children, and enhancing mobility through two wheeler support, special category of wages, reduced working hours, risk and hardship allowance, disability support, EPF & post-retirement benefit and making alternative livelihoods accessible. Appropriate PPEs and mechanised cleaning, standardised contracts for empowering sanitation workers & mandatory registration of private service providers are also listed in this. In Warangal district of Telangana, GWMC provides mandatory

licensing of desludgers plus PPE provision (reusable gloves, cloth mast stitched & uniforms). The Municipal Corporation of Indore (in Madhya Pradesh), launched the Swachh card in 2019 to reward workers performing best in certain parameters. The card can be redeemed monthly at malls, restaurants, movie halls, salons, medicine stores, and other shops. In Hyderabad, under the Swachh Bharat Mission, initiatives like national recognition (e.g. T. Venkaiah's award) and GHMC's monthly "Good Practice Day" honours sanitation workers and NGOs. These efforts enhances morale, improve public respect, and adds value to the dignity and visibility of sanitation workers. A standing success story of the DICCI, Telangana chapter helped 134 manual scavengers transition into entrepreneurs by providing support with loans, machinery, and tendering. This eliminated direct contact with faecal matter and secured them contracts with HMWSSB, creating a successful model of safe and dignified livelihood.

In short these efforts and policy framework are about ending unsafe manual scavenging, shifting to mechanised, skilled work, providing health and insurance, and financial support, also reducing stigma and increasing dignity, converting workers into "Sanipreneurs" (self-reliant entrepreneurs).

Findings

The findings are thematically organized to reflect the experiences and lived realities of the respondents, mainly focusing on their working conditions, interaction at workplace, health and treatment condition, and job security and if there are aspects of discrimination.

Socio-Economic Profile

The total number of housekeeping and sanitation women working in MANUU is 80, where a majority of women sanitation workers at MANUU are aged 31–40 (45%) or

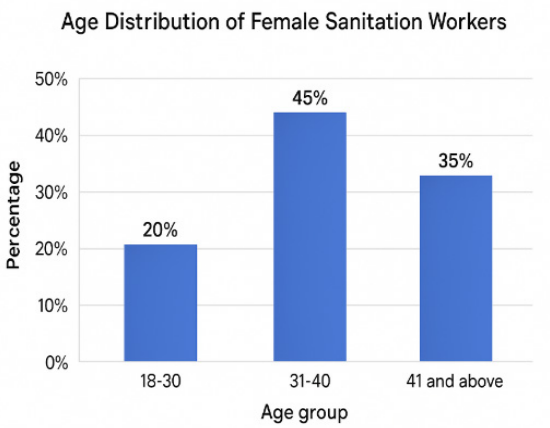


Fig. 2

Source: Field Work 2024

41 years and above (35%), with only 20% aged 18–30 years. Most of the women are married, i.e. 72.5% or widowed, i.e. 25%, reflecting their roles as primary earners for their families. Approximately 62.5% are from the local district, while 25% have migrated from other states, women who have toddlers leave their children behind. Housing data indicate a majority of workers, i.e. 70% live in a rented house, spending huge portions of their income (up to one-third) on fares and rents. Their family's occupations are also low-wage, with 45% engaged in labour work and 27.5% in sanitation-related jobs. Their household incomes are very low, with 50% earning between Rs. 15000-20,000/- monthly, aggravating their financial condition due to expenses like rent, utilities, and children's education.

In the above graph it shows that, 20 percent women aged 18 to 30 years, i.e. 8 in number are engaged in this work, while 18 women between 31 to 40 years, i.e. 45 percent and 14 women in the age group of 41 years and above or 35 percent serve as cleaning and sanitation worker. The total number of workers at MANUU are 120, out of which 80 are women workers of Maulana Azad National Urdu University, in which 40 workers have been engaged for this study. This shows that the largest number of workers here are young women who have gone out to work for their home and children. Thereafter, there are numerous old people who are widows and whose children are not helping.

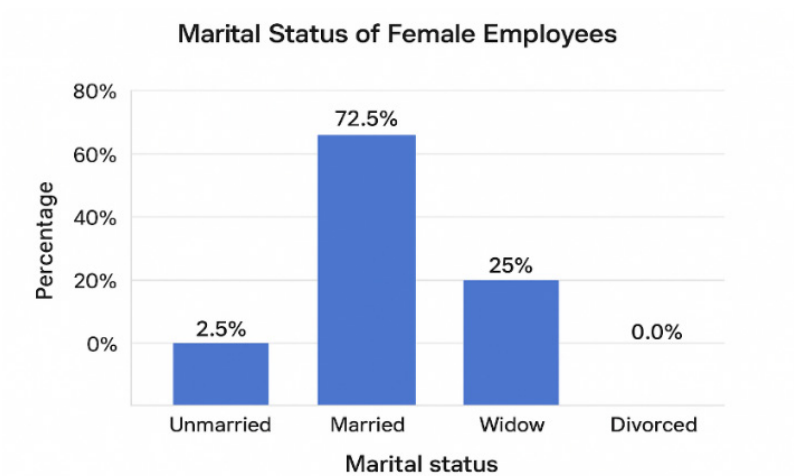


Fig. 3

Source: Field Work 2024

In the above graph, out of 80 women workers of Maulana Azad National Urdu University, 40 workers have been taken in which unmarried 2.5%, i.e. 1 woman. The proportion of married women is 29, i.e. 72.5% percent and among widow's 25 percent, i.e. 10 women are serving. This shows that most of the married women with

small children have left home to work and there are some widows who have no other livelihood to live on.

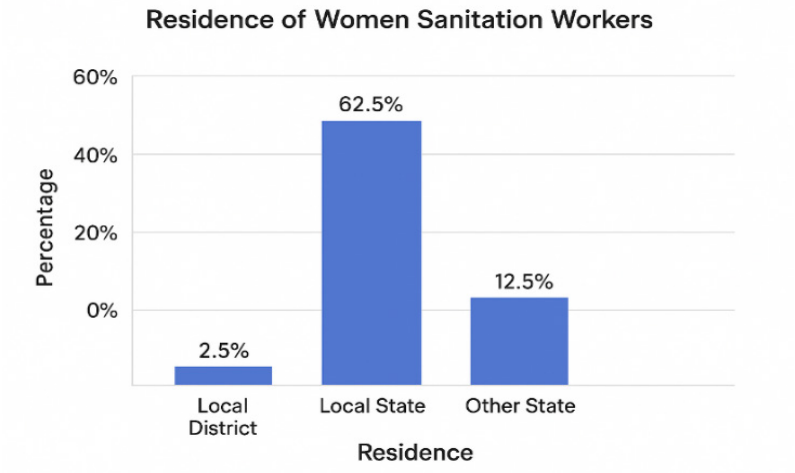


Fig. 4

Source: Field Work 2024

In the graph above, out of 80 women workers of Maulana Azad National Urdu University, 40 workers have been taken, in which 62.5% women i.e. 25 women are from the local district, 12.5% women i.e. 05 women are from the local state and 25% i.e. 10 women are from other states. This shows that women from the local district usually find work in their own district. But if facilities are not available everywhere, one has to migrate to other places. It is a very difficult task for a woman to leave her parents' home after getting married and then leave her house to earn a livelihood. She has to go to another place and leave behind young children.

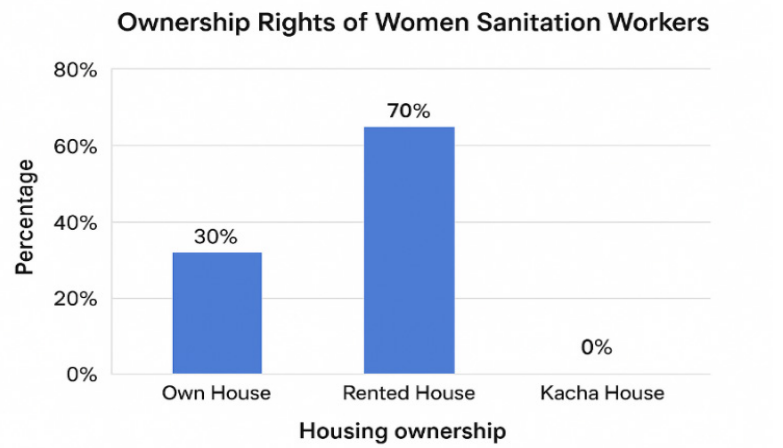


Fig. 5

Source: Field Work 2024

In the given graph, out of 80 female workers of Maulana Azad National Urdu University, 40 workers have been taken, in which 30 per cent of women i.e. 12 workers have their own house and 70 per cent i.e. 28 women are living in rented houses. This suggests that a large number of these workers are living in rented accommodation and spend one-third of their salary on rent.

Family Members' Occupation of Respondents

The data shows that 70% of the women's family occupations are low-wage and poor compensation occupations, with no government jobs. From the table below, it can be seen how cramped the home conditions of these sanitation workers are. Women's husbands are also involved in some menial work, whether they are working as labourers, doing other small jobs like selling vegetables, rikshaw pulling etc.

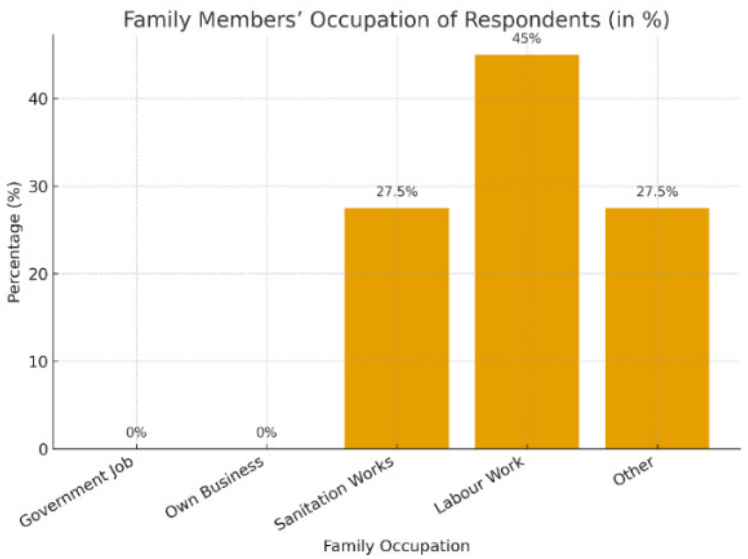


Fig. 6

Source: Field Work 2024

Income of Female Sanitation Workers

From the below graph, it is found that the household income of most of the women is less than Rs. 30,000. At the same time, they will have to spend on house rent, electricity, water, bus fare, children's school fees, food expenses and other needs with difficulty. They also tend to take loans due to expenses during festivals, medicines, etc., when sick. When I talked to some of the workers, I found that many workers are surrounded by lakhs of debts.

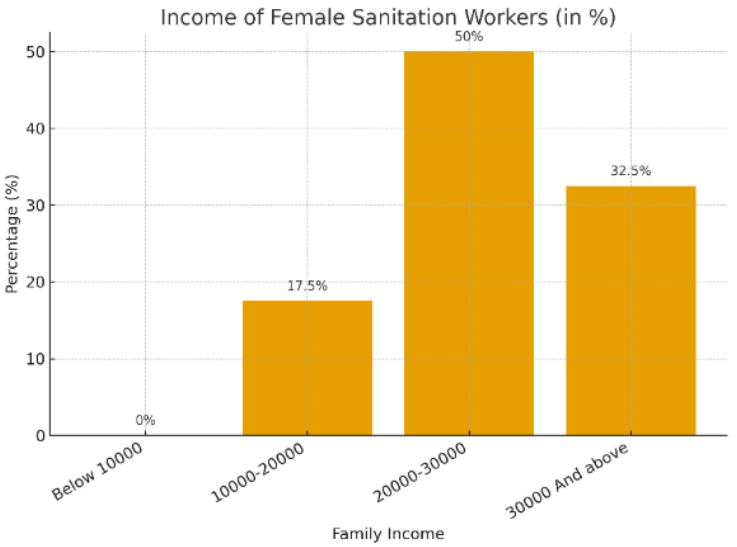


Fig. 7

Source: Field Work 2024

Working Conditions and Challenges

Women sanitation workers perform multiple tasks, including toilet cleaning (15%), room cleaning/mopping (45%), and waste collection (50%), road cleaning (15%), and weeding (7.5%). These overlapping responsibilities, often without additional compensation, increase their workload.

The indicates that these sanitation workers get only one day for leave in week, apart from which there is no leave on festivals although some additional workload does arrive every day which in turn causes anxiety and frustration.

Worker's Leisure at Institutional Spaces

What they do while free at the workplace was a general inquiry to every participant. The notion of leisure at work is something that could differ significantly at every institutional space and location. *Rest* is a common standardized word that stands out as a generalized concept to refer to an informal break, free after finishing the assigned tasked every day, and also to catch up with co-workers for few minutes and at times half an hour. It is a different fact that during the leisure time of women workers after finishing their work when the need some rest, there is no proper room or place where the can even sit comfortably. They are used to sitting in the veranda, on the stairs, under the stairs and spaces near the washroom. Most of the women get self-conscious every time a staff and or university professor passes through the stairs or there is movement in the walking gallery. This research comes out with a conceptual notion

to make understand that how women from low caste categories as a sanitation worker do spend their time whenever there is little time during the working hours. Therefore, *Free Space* is a space in almost all the academic and administrative building of the university where women workers sit during morning tiffin and lunch hours and also relax while chatting amongst them.



Fig. 8

Source: Field Work 2024

Functions of Women Sanitation Workers

From the below graph, it is seen that when a woman is involved in more than one work, in such a large organization, without having separate workers for each task, the same women workers are responsible for each work. That is, some tasks are shared, like sweeping, cleaning the toilets, etc., when it rains, they go for sweeping the streets, cleaning it when the overgrowth increases. They have to clean the cobwebs in a month, and have to do all this extra work for which there is no extra money.

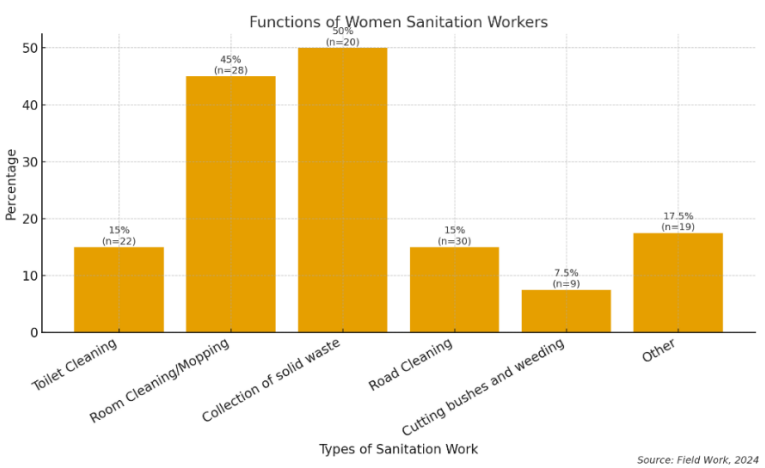


Fig. 9

Source: Field Work 2024

Facilities Available to Female Sanitation Workers and Access to Them

The study shows that more than ninety per cent of women cleaners indicated that they face problems with facilities like rest, changing of clothes, bathroom and washroom, dining space, clean drinking water, etc. In the hours between 7 am to 4 pm, any human being should get some time to breathe and recharge oneself, and for this at least one room is essential. If the women ever need to change clothes, there is no room available for that. There is a storeroom in only the girls' hostel for workers in which they can sit, rest, and eat. This facility is not available to the women working in other buildings. There are no toilets for them, and they hesitate as to enter the common washroom; to overcome this fear, it is important to clarify that the common washroom is for everyone, and they have as much right on it as the students. Some of the workers who work outside the buildings like on the university road and in the gardens do not have toilets. There is no place to eat, and no drinking water facility is provided. Apart from gardening workers, other workers are not allowed to sit in the park or even near the park, the reason is that university faculty, staff, pass by, and they don't feel comfortable sitting there.

The health care or attention to provide health is a buzz word to the workers life. Women often get sick at workplaces due to their weak body, a long day's work and at times dehydration due to lack of proper water and food. Even women workers feel unwell and fall sick, mostly they would report to the work except when serious health breakdowns.

In the below image, we see a women worker taking rest with high fever, but does not have the courage to request leave due to the pressure of salary deduction which is only source of her family to live.



Fig. 10

Source: Field Work 2024

Availability of Health and other Emergency Facilities

The graph below shows the health facilities available to women, in which about 82 per cent of women are not able to benefit from MANUU Health Centre. Some women have mentioned being able to get medicine on occasions, however, they don't get leave when pregnant or unwell. Infact, they face salary deductions when they take leave, which makes them suffer even more. When children are small, there is no crèche facility here, nor are they allowed to bring them. Among these 40 women, only one woman got help from her own PF money when her husband had an accident.

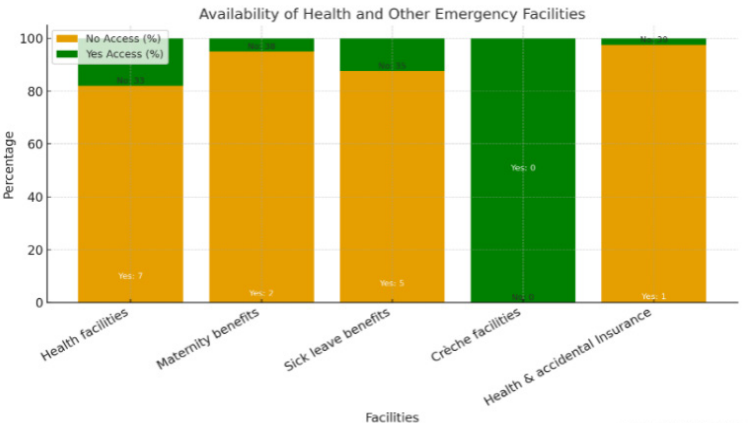


Fig. 11

Source: Field Work, 2024

Female Sanitation Workers Face Unfavourable Attitudes

The below graph shows that despite this being a central university with well-educated people, most working here have a bad attitude. It came across while researching that 80%

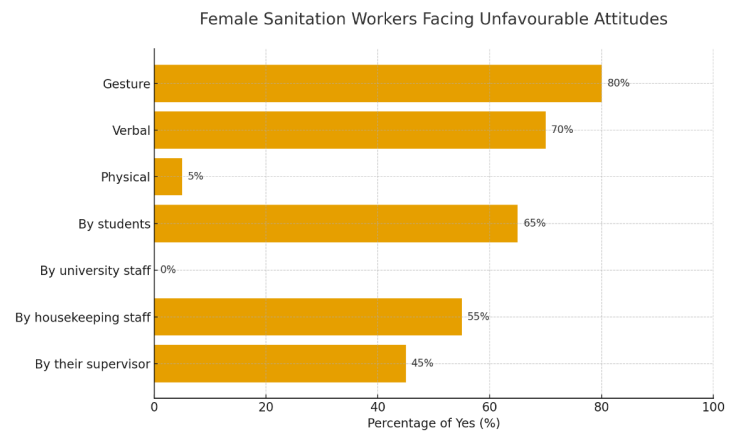


Fig. 12

Source: Field Work, 2024

of the 40 workers suffered gesture abuse, 70% verbal abuse, and 5% physical violence. The content shows that they are mostly used by students in their approach to workers a hint in the wrong, or bad manners with them, 62% of women are victims of their words. And not only by students but also by other working staff, they have a bad attitude towards these sanitation workers, and many workers are abused by their supervisor.

Frisking as Humiliation

Humiliation Happens when the Self-Respect of an Individual is Publicly or Individually not Provided

According to the Oxford dictionary, humiliation is the act of making someone feel ashamed and lose respect, or the feeling of being ashamed and losing respect. It can refer to the feeling itself or a specific act or event that causes this shame and loss of esteem. Sociologically, the feeling

According to Collins English Dictionary, the feeling of being ashamed or having lost the respect of others, or the act of causing someone to feel this way.

The closing hour of the workers is also a sociological phenomenon that provides a sense of ill-treatment as frisking creates a self-humiliation among the women because such frisking is unequal and not done to men workers.



Fig. 13

Source: Field Work 2024

The image shows women sanitation workers being subjected to frisking before leaving their workplace. Such practices often result in humiliation and a loss of dignity, reinforcing the unequal and discriminatory treatment faced by these workers.

Positive Effects of Working in an Educational Institution

From the below data it comes to known that most of the women working in the university experience some positive effects of working in the university. This research has shown us that all the women involved in housekeeping working here dream of giving their children higher education. Some of them who are young, are still passionate about studying.

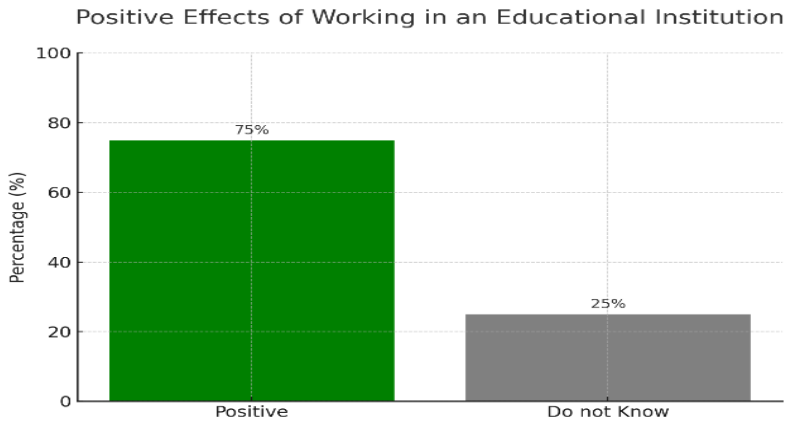


Fig. 14

Source: Field Work 2024

Key Challenges Include

- *Lack of Facilities:* Over 90% of women workers don't have rest areas, changing rooms, dining spaces, clean drinking water, and dedicated toilets. The workers working in hostels have access to a storeroom for rest, but cramped and poorly maintained.
- *Health Risks:* Use cleaning chemicals without adequate protective equipment (e.g., gloves, masks) leads to skin and respiratory issues. But there are very few workers who have PPE (gloves, masks) i.e. only 18% have access to the university's health centre, and 95% lack maternity benefits or sick leave.
- *Discrimination and Harassment:* 80% women workers report gesture-based abuse, 70% verbal abuse, primarily from students (62.5%) and by their supervisors (45%). These workers face routine frisking upon exiting the campus, it feels as humiliating and discriminatory.
- *Job Insecurity:* Total number of women workers reported contractual employment through private agencies results in low wages (Rs. 12,000–15,000 monthly), with deductions for provident funds and there no job security and health insurance.

Positive Impact

Despite these challenges faced by women sanitation workers, they still have some hopes and dreams. 75% of workers report positive effects working at educational institution, including aspirations for their children's education and, for younger workers, a personal interest in learning. This suggests social mobility and attitudinal change within an educational environment.

Case Studies

A 52-year-old woman from the Padma Shali caste which is a Hindu caste. This caste is located in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu and their traditional occupation is weaving. Her husband is a *mistri* (construction work) by occupation who builds houses. She is originally from Tandur, Vikarabad district, Telangana and spent her childhood in Karnataka, then married in Telangana. She is living in Lingampally, Hyderabad to work and live. She has a daughter and a son, both are married but she still has the debt of their marriage expenses. She is working to repay the debts incurred from her children's marriages and lives with her son and daughter-in-law in a rented house. Before her housekeeping job in MANUU, she was working in a canteen, where she was paid less but had food. They used to give her breakfast, lunch and a snacks in the evening. She is a toilet cleaner in girls hostel MANUU and earns Rs. 13,000/- monthly, out of which Rs. 8,000/- goes to rent and Rs. 2,000/- to transportation. Her schooling stopped after class 5, and because of an accident, she suffers from chronic pain and avoids heavy tasks. She doesn't have enough money to get proper treatment. Despite their essential contribution, healthcare access is negligible. She receives no proper medical care in MANUU, only basic medicines from the university health centre. When she asked for treatment she got the reply, "*Apka accident yha kaam krne se ya yaha kaam krte huye nhi hua hai to ye responsibility humari nhi hai.*" In brief, if you meet with an accident or injury elsewhere than the workplace, then the responsibility does not belong to the employers. She also faces discrimination from her supervisor, doesn't have a proper place to rest after finishing her work, and is resigned to sit at the verandas or stairs. It reflects the harsh realities of caste, economic pressure, lack of healthcare, and biased treatment at the workplace.

Anonymous 2 has been working at MANUU for eight years. During COVID-19, she was fired after students sympathized (with some money) with her struggles, and someone led to a complaint to the supervisor, she faced many difficulties. She was re-hired after the lockdown, and now earns Rs. 13,000/-. Her husband is bedridden because he got injured in an accident, when he fell from the fourth floor building 20 years ago and did not recover till today. At that time he was taken to Osmania Hospital, Hyderabad, but could not be properly treated and was supposed to be treated in another government hospital. However, due to not being able to get a card there, he was treated in a private hospital, which cost Rs. 12 lakhs, and he had to take a loan with 1 rupee interest and needs Rs. 6,000/- per month for medicines. She still has the burden of that loan of Rs. 12 lakh which was taken for her husband's treatment, with Rs. 6 lakh in interest still unpaid. She has three children, one son and two daughter, all are married. She has the responsibility of her widowed daughter and grandchildren. She needs more salary but whenever she asks her supervisor to raise her salary, she is

told to leave the job. With such a low salary and so many expenses, they have to face many problems. One day while cleaning she touched a chair to sweep. The chair was covered with clothes and mistakenly a girl started to shout, "*Aapne kaise mera kapda touch kiya apko wait karna hoga." (How did you dare to touch my clothes, you should wait.)* The cleaning worker and other workers face constant disrespect, especially from hostel students who insult or scold them, if they mistakenly touch student items while cleaning. Once she said, *"Humein hi har taraf se Sunna padta hai, humari koi nahi sunta.*" I have to hear peoples scolding and abuses and none bothers to hear me out'. This reflects the emotional exhaustion and invisibility they experience.

While conducting interviews I talked 40 women workers almost all of them were complaining of frisking, a woman worker in her late age 40, says, "We do work for the campus to make it neat and clean, and when we leave, it feels like we are being suspected of theft. Everyday guards instruct us to open our bags to check our belongings. We feel humiliated, disrespected, insulted. 'Why only us?'" this was the question from a sanitation worker.

Discussion

The findings of this research reveals that women workers at MANUU face systemic marginalization, encounter challenges documented in unorganized sectors (Ziyauddin, 2022; Shahid, 2015). The intersection of caste, class and gender indicates their vulnerability and the isolation of women, almost all of whom belong to lower castes (e.g. Scheduled Castes) and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The lack of facilities in the campus, such as rest areas, dining spaces, changing room, etc., reflects institutional neglect, while discriminatory practices like frisking and verbal abuse undermine their dignity. These conditions align with Dubey and Murphy's (2021) critique of contractual employment as a mechanism of oppression in urban settings. However, there are some positive aspirations of these workers, particularly for their children's education also for the young worker, suggest resilience and potential for social change, consistent with Saldanha et al.'s (2022) emphasis on community-driven empowerment. The study which focuses on an organized institution like MANUU highlights a paradox. Despite the educational environment as a central university which is considered with a better conditions, women workers face many issues. This emphasises the need for stronger institutional accountability and enforcement of labour rights, as current outsourcing to private agencies dilutes responsibility (Gupta, 2016).

Sanitation and housekeeping roles are taken as feminized, underrated and limited upward mobility, because they are considered as only the women's responsibility similar to domestic work which traditionally has been done by the women. Sanitation and housekeeping roles often received low wages compared to men, because cleaning is considered as low skilled. Contribution of cleaning and sanitation workers are crucial,

but they always remain unacknowledged and invisible. Sanitation and cleaning work if often performed by women and this gendered division of labours is also tied with caste hierarchies, because women from Dalit and other marginalized communities are disproportionately employed with cleaning and sanitation (Gosh & Banerjee, 2018). While educational institutions policies advocate for equality and inclusion, these workers remain excluded from opportunities for skill development, decision making process, social interactions, etc. (Raghavendra & Kumar, 2022).

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the lived realities of women sanitation workers at MANUU, revealing continuous structural inequalities rooted in gender, caste, and class. Despite their crucial and critical role in maintaining a clean and hygienic campus for the students and other, these women workers face lack of numerous facilities, health risks because of chemical usage, and discriminatory treatment from students and other staffs. Despite facing so many discrimination, these workers have positive aspirations also. This aspiration suggests potential for social mobility, but systemic reforms are urgently needed to address their challenges. The study contributes to the literature by highlighting the under-researched experiences of women in institutional housekeeping roles, calling for further investigation into organized sectors.

Recommendations

- *Institutional Facilities:* Maulana Azad National Urdu University should provide designated rest areas, changing rooms, toilets, and dining spaces especially to womensanitation workers.
- *Health and Safety:* It should be ensure access to PPE (e.g., gloves, masks, shoes) and health facilities, including sick leave and maternity benefits for female.
- *Anti-Discrimination Training:* Implement mandatory training for students and staff to address discriminatory attitudes and behaviours with the workers working in the university.
- *Policy Reforms:* Strengthen oversight of private housekeeping agencies to ensure fair wages, job security, and compliance with labour laws to fulfil their needs.
- *Crèche Facilities:* Establish crèche services to support workers with young children because they deprived from mother's affection and love.
- *Community Empowerment:* It should be ensure to engage workers in decision-making processes to address their needs and foster a supportive work environment.

Acknowledgments

We thank the ICSSR, New Delhi, for funding a major research project on 'Health, Sanitation, Occupation and Life-world: A sociological study on Intervention of Swachh Bharat Mission and desirable change amongst the people in two states – Jharkhand and Telangana ', which helped us conduct fieldwork, and we also acknowledge the support given by Dr Hilal Ahmed then teaching faculty in the Sociology department of MANUU for his support in this research and all research field staff. We also thank all of our respondents for providing data and interviews for this study, as well as MANUU officials, particularly Mr. Nauman, for his assistance.

References

Borooah, V.K., Sabharwal, N.S., & Thorat, S. (2012). Caste and social exclusion in India. In S. Thorat & K. S. Newman (Eds.), Blocked by caste: Economic discrimination in modern India (Reprint ed.). Oxford University Press India.

Bhongale, J., & Bhattacharya, O. (2023). Exploring the plight of manual scavengers: A research study on the challenges and suffering faced by sanitation workers in India. Revista PSIPRO, *2*(3), 1–21.

Biswakarma, K., & Varghese, J. (2022). *Dalit Women and Girl Sanitation Workers: Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent*. National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights – Dalit Arthik Adhikar Andolan.

Curtis, V. (2019). Explaining the outcomes of the'CleanIndia'campaign: institutional behaviour and sanitation transformation in India. *BMJ global health*, *4*(5).

Dubey, S.Y., & Murphy, J. W. (2021). Manual scavenging in Mumbai: The systems of oppression. Humanity & Society, *45*(4), 533–555.

Dwivedi, A., Kumar, A., & Dasgupta, S. (2023). *Understanding enablers and barriers for social protection of sanitation workers in Dhenkanal, Odisha, India* (Research Report).

Ghosh, N., & Banerjee, S. 19| 2018 Caste-Gender Intersections in Contemporary India.

Gupta, A. (2016). Manual scavenging: A case of denied rights. SSRN Electronic Journal, 36–58.

Kadlak, H., Salve, P. S., & Karwade, P. (2019). Intersectionality of caste, gender, and occupation: A study of Safai Karamchari women in Maharashtra. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, *11*(2), 130–138.

Kumar, A. (2014). *Manual scavenging in India: A degrading practice*. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, *2*(3), 154–158.

Kumar, B.V., & Arathi, J.R. (2024). *Sanitation work for sustenance: Condition of women sanitary workers in Erode City Municipal Corporation*. In *Futuristic Trends in Social Sciences* (Vol. 3, Book 24, Part 4, Chapter 2, pp. 240–248). IIP Series.

Lal, S. (1981). Occupational Mobility among Urban Bhangis. *Indian Anthropologist*, *11*(1), 11–20. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41919411

Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA). (2020). *ensuring safety of sanitation workers: A ready reckoner for urban local bodies.* Urban Management Centre. Retrieved from https://www.mohua.gov.in

PRIA. (2019). Lived realities of women sanitation workers in India. Participatory Research in Asia.

Ranjithkumar, A. (2024). Socio-Economic Factors Influencing Health Risks and Access to Healthcare Services Among Women Sanitation Workers in Tamil Nadu. International Journal of Gender & Women's Studies, 12, 29-42. Retrieve on 18th May 2025 https://doi.org/10.15640/ijgws.v12a4

Retrieve on 26thJune2024 fromhttps://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/25/cleaning-human-waste/manual-scavenging-caste-and-discrimination-india

Saldanha, S., Kirchhelle, C., Webster, E., Vanderslott, S., & Vaz, M. (2022). Between paternalism and illegality: A longitudinal analysis of the role and condition of manual scavengers in India. BMJ Global Health, *7*(7), e008733.

Shahid, M. (2015). Manual scavenging: Issues of caste, culture, and violence. *Social Change*, *45*(2), 242–255.

Thorat, A., & Ahmed, N. (2015). *Caste and religion in sanitation work: A study of Delhi's sanitation workforce*. New Delhi: Indian Institute of Dalit Studies.

Thorat, Sukhadeo & Attewell, Paul. (2007). The legacy of social exclusion: A correspondence study of job discrimination in India. *Economic and Political Weekly. 42*. 4141-4145. 10.2307/40276548.

Urban Management Centre. (2023). *Sanitation worker's handbook: On safety, security, and responsibilities of rural sanitation workers*. Urban Management Centre. Retrieve on 07th august 2024 https://www.umcasia.org

Wilson, B. (2019). *The long march to eliminate manual scavenging: A documentation of the campaign led by Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA)*. Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA).

Ziyauddin, K.M. (2022). Unread history of an erstwhile manual scavenging community: From being an urban to a marginalized. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies*, *8*(1), 115–133.

Ziyauddin, K.M. (2025). Occupational caste groups' illness and health in India: Lessons from the lives of conservancy workers. *Springer Nature Singapore*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-8967-5

Brandeis | LIBRARY
brandeis.edu/j-caste

CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 7 No. 2 pp. 410-411
October 2026
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v7i2.2607

क्लास / वर्ग

Gaurav J. Pathania[1]

कहते हैं कि- रिश्ते अपनी बराबरी वालों में होने चाहियें

ये सोचकर एक बहुत ही शिक्षित-वर्ग के मित्र

चल दिए ढूँढ़ने अपने जैसा एक जीवनसाथी

घूमे-भटके बरसों बरस

सारे मेट्रो शहर छान मारे

जब खुद थक-हार गए

तब अख़बार में इश्तिहार दिए

पर सारे प्रयास बेकार गए

बहुत देर से समझे

कि ये दौलत, शोहरत, लव, रोमांस वाली

ग्लोबली एजुकेटेड मॉडर्न "क्लास" भी

फ्रीडम, इक्वेलिटी, बराबरी रटते-रटते

आख़िर में जाति के मंदिर में घुटने टेक देती है।

... जब से मित्र ये जान गए हैं, काफी चुप रहते हैं

आजकल सरनेम और गौत्रों का मैनिफेस्टो समझ रहे हैं।

अपने रे-बैन सनग्लासेस लगाए

अक्सर बड़बड़ाते रहते हैं कि

हमारे यहाँ जोड़ियाँ वर्ग में नहीं,

स्वर्ग में बनती है।।

[1]Assistant Professor of Sociology & Peacebuilding, Eastern Mennonite University, Virginia
E-mail: gaurav.pathania@emu.edu

© 2026 Gaurav J. Pathania. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

Class

Relationships should be among equals, so they say.
With this in mind, an educated friend
Set forth to find
A life partner like himself.
He roamed around for years and years,
From city to city,
Until, at last, frustrated, he
Turned to matrimonial ads.
Yet all efforts were in vain
For he finally realized that
This globally educated, so-called modern class,
With their wealth, fame, love, and romance,
While rambling on about freedom and equality
Ultimately kneels at the temples of caste.

Since then, he chose silence as a companion,
Reluctantly delving into surnames and lineages (*jati & gotras*)
Glancing at me through his Ray-Ban sunglasses,
I hear him mutter,
"In this casteist world,
matches are not made through one's class
But in heaven."
****

Acknowledgment

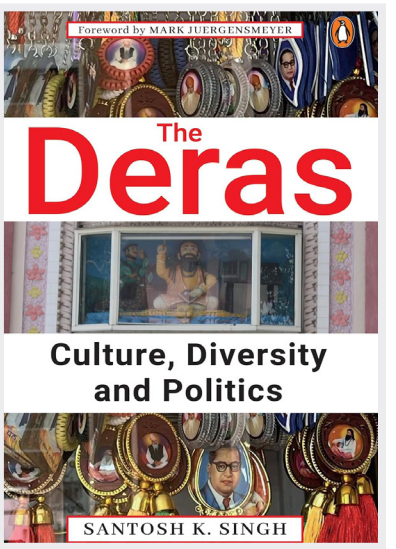
The author is indebted to Dr. Kevin Seidel (PMC, Portland) for the English translation

Brandeis | LIBRARY
brandeis.edu/j-caste

CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 7 No. 2 pp. 412-415
October 2026
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v7i2.2837

The Deras: Culture, Diversity and Politics



Author: Santosh K. Singh
Publisher: Penguin Random House India
Year: 2025

Reviewer: Ameet Kumar[1]

The Deras: Culture, Diversity, and Politics by Santosh K. Singh is an important contribution to the study of *deras* (spiritual centres) tradition and its complex connections with politics, caste, religion, and regional identity in Punjab. The work fits within broader scholarship on caste, Dalit assertion, and religious identity in Punjab. Existing scholarship such as Ram (2004) highlights the importance of Ad Dharm movement led by Babu Mangoo and Ravidass *deras* in challenging caste-based exclusion and fostering collective identity among the marginalised communities (Ram, 2004; 2008; 2011). Additionally, Jodhka (2004) shows the continuing significance of caste within Sikh society and religious institutions (Jodhka, 2004). Recent scholarship has examined *deras* as spaces of Dalit mobilisation and religious identity formation. Singh's study on *dera* highlights the role of transnational networks in shaping Ravidassia identity and supporting social and religious institutions in Punjab (G. Singh, 2012a; 2012b; 2013). Building on these strands of scholarship, Singh (2025) work focuses on the diverse roles of *deras* and their significance for marginalised communities' aspirations for emancipation, cultural assertion, and social negotiation, while also examining their relationship with wider structures of caste and power.

[1]Doctoral Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, Uttarakhand, India
Email: ameet_k@hs.iitr.ac.in

© 2026 Ameet Kumar. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

Singh's study makes a significant contribution to draw attention to the persistent gap between Sikhism's egalitarianism theological principles and the continued reproduction of caste distinction within the social and religious life of Punjab. It demonstrates how caste inequality affects access to religious places, the formation of community identities, and the emergence of alternative forms of religious authority, rather than seeing religion as a uniform or exclusively spiritual domain. The discussion of Gehuan village, in this context is noteworthy, even though the village has a varied sacred landscape, with religious sites associated with various communities. While the Jatt Sikhs occupy a dominant position in terms of population and land ownership, the Dalits and other marginalised groups remain socially and spatially peripheral. Singh uses this setting to highlight the persistence of caste inequality and the circumstances that led marginalised communities to look for religious spaces through which they can express their dignity, identity, and collective assertion.

Furthermore, Singh argues that the formation of *deras* was due to the inability of mainstream religious institutions in addressing caste inequality. Singh traces this process through the history of Dalit religious assertion, beginning from Ad Dharm movement and the later development of Ravidass *deras*, with Dera Sachkhand Ballan emerging as a particularly significant example. The book presents Ballan not simply as a spiritual centre but as a site where religious identity, Dalit assertion, and political mobilisation converge. Its declaration of Ravidassia Dharma following the 2009 Vienna incident (Sant Ramanand Ji was killed in an attack during a religious gathering in Vienna) and the acceptance of the *Amritbani* illustrate an attempt to establish a distinct religious identity. However, Singh shows that this process has not produced a unified community. Differences among local adherents, diaspora communities, and religious leaders reveal continuing debates over religious symbols, scriptures, and the relationship between Sikh and Ravidassia identities.

This complexity becomes particularly visible in, chapter six "*Myth of a Monolith: The Ravidassia Identity and its Reality*," where Singh dismantles the assumption of a single Ravidassia identity from three opposing viewpoints: L.R. Bailey's Buddhist-Ambedkarite stance, Manohar Lal Mahey's Ravidassia-Ambedkarite synthesis, and Paramjit Kainth's Sikh-Ambedkarite pragmatism. Singh observes that the discomfort felt by SC groups such as Valmikis, Kabirpanthis and others with the idea of a particular tradition being imposed on them, which is seen as a sign of dominance and arrogance, is quite evident on the ground (p. 117). He also shows the failure of Channi experiment (a Dalit political mobilisation effort) exemplifies the numerical strength of Punjab's SC population but its political fragmentation (S. K. Singh, 2023). Moreover, the discussion could have gone further by examining differences and relationships among different Dalit groups; and how such internal divisions shape the question of collective identity and unity in Punjab? The chapter addresses how *deras* like Ballan

empower Dalits globally but struggle to address local socio-economic disparities, revealing the limits of identity-based mobilisation.

Singh's treatment of these debates also raises a broader question about the relationship between religious identity and material forms of mobilisation, particularly around land, employment, education, and socio-economic inequality. The book extends this argument beyond institutional religious spaces by examining pilgrimage, popular culture, and transnational networks. The discussion on the Shri Guru Ravidass *Janam Asthan Mandir* (birthplace of Guru Ravidass) in Varanasi shows how pilgrimage can become a means of strengthening collective identity and connecting Dalit communities across Punjab and the diaspora. The annual Begumpura Express (train that carries devotees from Punjab to Varanasi for the annual Ravidass Jayanti pilgrimage) highlights these transnational connections. While differences exists between *nirguni* (which emphasises the formless divine), and *saguni* (which understands the divine in manifest form) interpretations of Ravidass, as well as between diaspora and local communities demonstrate that such spaces also contain ideological and social tensions. Similarly, the discussion of protest music, posters, and mission singers in chapter seven shows how popular cultural forms become resources for caste assertion and resistance to dominant social identities. These cultural expressions allow marginalised communities to reclaim stigmatised identities while negotiating changing forms of political and religious expression.

Singh's argument that *deras* in Punjab cannot be treated as a homogeneous religious category is one of the book's strength, supported by his assessment of the wider variety of *deras* in Punjab. Their diverse social, political, and spiritual roles, along with their different approaches to caste, religious authority, and community mobilisation, shows the complexity of Punjab's religious landscape. Singh explains how marginalised communities, such as Dalits resist oppression and assert their identity through *deras*. It successfully shows mainstream Sikhism's failings in combating caste discrimination and highlights how *deras* give Dalits dignity and voice. The book also analyses the influence of migration, globalisation, and diaspora in influencing these processes. This study has a few shortcomings, including a strong regional bias, giving the Doaba region prominence while paying less attention to other parts of Punjab. A few other *deras* are also mentioned and one chapter entirely looks at Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS). An important limitation of the book is less engagement with gender, in its analysis of *deras*, caste and religion. Although the book delves deeply into caste, religion, identity, and political mobilisation, the book does not examine how men and women experience, participate in and negotiate *deras* spaces differently. Although these spaces may provide collective empowerment and community mobilisation, they can also produce gendered hierarchies. A more in-depth attention to women's role in religious practices, community activities, their role in leadership and decision-making would have provided a significant gendered dimension to the book's examination

of power and the social change in Punjab. Overall, Singh's work is valuable for academicians working on caste, *deras*, identity politics in Punjab, and socio-cultural movements in South Asia.

References

Jodhka, S.S. (2004). Sikhism and the Caste Question: Dalits and their Politics in Contemporary Punjab. *Contributions to Indian Sociology, 38*(1–2), 165–192.

Ram, R. (2004). Untouchability in India with a Difference: Ad Dharm, Dalit Assertion, and Caste Conflicts in Punjab. *Asian Survey*, *44*(6), 895-912.

Ram, R. (2008). Ravidass Deras and Social Protest: Making Sense of Dalit Consciousness in Punjab (India). *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *67*(4), 1341-1364.

Ram, R. (2011). Guru Ravidass: Prophet of Dalit liberation. *Voice of Dalit, 4*(1), 29-48.

Singh, G. (2012a). Religious Transnationalism and Development Initiatives: The Dera Sachkhand Ballan. *Economic and Political Weekly, 47*(1), 53–60.

Singh, G. (2012b). Religious Transnationalism, Ravidasi Identity and the Dera Sant Sarwan Dass, Ballan. *Sikh Formations, 8*(1), 21–36.

Singh, G. (2013). Religious Transnationalism, Development and the Construction of Religious Boundaries: The case of the Dera Sachkhand Ballan and the Ravidass Dharm. *Global Networks, 13*(2), 183–199.

Singh, S. Kumar. (2023). Deras, Dalits, and Caste Politics in Punjab: Decoding the Channi Experiment. *Economic and Political Weekly, 58*(19), 26-29.

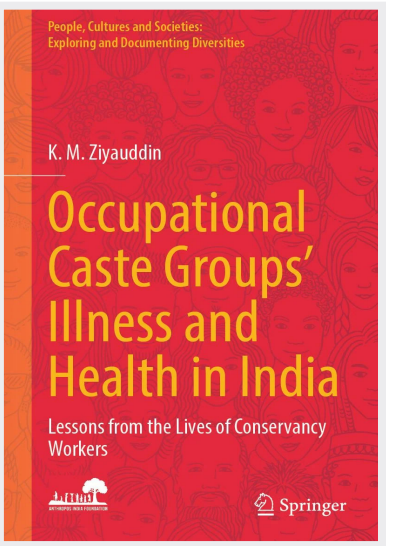
Brandeis | LIBRARY
brandeis.edu/j-caste

CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 7 No. 2 pp. 416-420
October 2026
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v7i2.2886

Occupational Caste Groups' Illness and Health in India

Lessons from the Lives of Conservancy Workers



Author: K.M. Ziyauddin
Publisher: Springer
Year: 2025

Reviewer: Madhuja Bhattacharya[1]

K.M. Ziyauddin's *"Occupational Caste Groups' Illness and Health in India: Lessons from the Lives of Conservancy Workers"* (2025) is an ethnographic account that critically examines the relationship between caste-identity and access to healthcare in India. At the heart of the ethnography are the Hadis of Jharkhand, a Scheduled Caste community traditionally engaged in manual scavenging. Situated in the Hadi Cooli in the municipal town of Chas at Bokaro district, the study focuses on the perceptions of illness and the health-seeking practices among the Hadis. The monograph makes an ambitious claim as the first dedicated ethnographic study of the Hadis of Jharkhand, marking a clear departure from previous scholarship that largely focused on macro-analyses of dominant castes, leaving smaller sub-castes unexamined. Moving beyond simplistic economic analyses, the study illustrates how stigma and caste identity shape illness perception and healthcare resource utilisation.

Instead of treating illness as simply as a biological phenomenon, chapter one, foregrounds how 'perception' functions as a framework which determines how illness is socially constructed at familial and community levels. Perceptions determine how disease is to be navigated through and negotiated with, often creating an iceberg phenomenon where common symptoms such as joint pain, tiredness or headaches

[1]PhD Scholar at the Department of Sociology, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India
Email: bhattacharyam1996@gmail.com

© 2026 Madhuja Bhattacharya. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

are not reported due to linguistic hierarchies in the clinical settings. Here the author uses '*iceberg phenomenon'* to describe a situation wherein clinically visible cases of a disease show or form merely a small proportion of the larger total cases, while a vast majority remain hidden and unseen in the community. Dismissal of Khortha terms such as *'tatainee'*, constant body pain; *'adhkapari'*, partial headache; *'karjawa-faet jaa hau'*, extreme pain and suffering; and, '*gaud-haath peera haua re'*, pain in the legs and arms, by biomedically trained doctors leads to institutional alienation and feelings of deep mistrust among the Hadis, forcing them to seek alternative solutions for their illness at medicine shops, traditional healers and quacks (p. 9). Such empirical findings corroborate those of Gopal Guru (2013), who argues that dominant forces inhibit Dalits' freedom of expression in public spheres, thereby creating a social ecology where Dalits' experience severe marginalisation (pp. 40-41). The chapter's significance lies in its challenge to the Parsonian model of the sick role (1951). The Parsonian framework (1951) of voluntary rest fails to capture the nuanced illness behaviour among the Hadis. The Hadis' hand-to-mouth existence prevents them from adopting the sick role until they are able to work. Moreover, adoption of the sick role is a gendered activity as Hadi women prioritise the health of the male breadwinners over themselves, producing inequalities within the caste-group.

The second chapter highlights the severe material constraints that the Hadis face in their Cooli. Among the 22 Scheduled Castes in Jharkhand, as notified in the Census of India 2011, the Hadis are positioned at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Historically, categorised as a sub-caste of the Methars, they have experienced systemic erasure of the Hadi identity through lack of government acknowledgement and routine misspelling of their names as Hair or Hari. The community dissociates itself from the government-imposed Hari identity and assert themselves as members of the Hadi Jati who trace their origin to the royal patronage of the Maharaja of Kashipur in erstwhile Purulia, West Bengal. The decline in the royal patronage during the British rule, along with the redrawing of geographical boundaries of states in post-Independent India, significantly impacted the lifeworld of the Hadis, who were forced to leave their occupations as royal caretakers and start cleaning nightsoil in the rapidly expanding Bokaro Steel Plant Township, a city under the government of India managed by a public sector unit. Cramped in small *Kutchha* or semi-permanent houses, without ventilation, electricity, and running water, the Hadis depend on small ponds near their neighbourhood for cooking, cleaning, and bathing. However, the drying up of ponds and lack of direct water pipelines to the Cooli disrupt such daily activities. Drinking water is procured through groundwater pumps, which the discussion claims contain significant quantities of metals and minerals which cause frequent stomach infections among the Hadis (pp. 72-80). Moreover, the lack of toilets exposes the Hadis to increased bacterial infections and socially undermines their dignity (p. 75). Fear and lack of awareness also pose as obstacles in the Hadis' path to claim government-

sponsored schemes and security benefits (p. 79). However, reliance on narratives and macro-level statistical data, such as the Census of India 2011, without actual water-quality testing poses a serious methodological limitation of the study.

Chapters three, four and five underscore the monograph's central argument by highlighting the tension in the Hadis' intersecting dual identities: first that of a patient seeking healthcare, and the second identity of a socioeconomically marginalised caste-group performing conservancy work (p. 96). These identities significantly impact their health-seeking practices and the relationships they establish to seek help. Brief consultations filled with indifference and lack of empathy; lack of doctors and medical facilities such as X-ray and MRI testing; high treatment costs compel Hadis to seek treatment from Registered Medical Practitioners (RMP) who are not biomedically trained doctors or visit the *davaee dukan* or the medicine shop. RMPs play an important role in the health-care seeking process as they are frontline healthcare providers across rural and urban settings (pp. 126-134). Unlike MBBS doctors, RMPs patiently listen to the Hadis and treat them at lower costs, hence strong bonds of trust are developed with the RMPs. While the Hadis perceive public and, to an extent, private hospitals as sites of caste discrimination and hostility, they perceive local medicine shops and RMP clinics with trust as they are treated with dignity despite their stigmatised occupational background. This directly translates into the popularity of *suya*, injections and *goli*, tablets among the Hadis as methods of cure (p. 156).

Chapter four formulates a three-stage model of health-care seeking behaviour among the Hadis. First, the Hadis attempt to manage pain and discomfort using home remedies. When home remedies fail, the Hadis seek help from over-the-counter drugs or golis at the local medicine shop. If *golis* fail to provide relief, the Hadis visit local RMP clinics where they seek to be administered a suya or injection which they believe can cure prolonged illness without having to spend money on further investigations such as blood tests, X-rays and hospitalisation. Trust and dependence on injections are shaped by economic constraints (p. 159). Getting an injection quickly soothes bodily pain and helps Hadis return to work or continue working without losing daily wages. Similar reliance on informal healthcare agents is observed during childbirth as well. The cost of delivery at nursing homes is significantly high, rendering it inaccessible to the Hadis. Therefore, the Hadis rely on home births assisted by a Dai or female birth attendant. These attendants usually belong to the Bauri community and lack formal training to deal with post-natal complications. However, they remain a critical part of the Hadi woman's support system across generations due to a lack of resources to afford better health care services. The chapter provides critical insights into health cultures and their vital role in the community's overall culture, which often shapes them (p. 179).

Based on a multi-sited analysis of the Hadis' interactions and encounters at four distinct healthcare locations: public health institutions such as public hospitals and

health centres; private clinics of qualified doctors; traditional healers; and local RMP clinics (pp. 185-204), limited medical facilities, shortage of drugs, absenteeism among government doctors (p. 185), inflexible OPD timings emerge as common problems that the Hadis face. As a result, the Hadis are compelled to frequent the shrines of Ojhas and Tantrik Babas (traditional healers) and the RMP clinics to seek treatment (p. 201) and find immediate relief.

Chapter six condenses the monograph's empirical findings into policy recommendations. Based on the empirical findings, the author advocates for four primary changes – increased administrative sensitisation, restructuring and flexibilization of OPD timings to accommodate daily wage earners, increased civil entitlements such as the construction of water pipelines and toilets in the Hadi Cooli; lastly, increased availability of biomedically trained doctors and quality medical amenities at public hospitals and healthcare centres to render medical treatment accessible to all sections of the Indian population. However, a slight dissonance emerges in his recommendations. The core of the argument primarily emphasises the need to strengthen the formal biomedical healthcare system, but Chapters two to five highlight how informal healthcare professionals provide the greatest healthcare support for the Hadis. By focusing solely on the formal healthcare system, the monograph does not consider the futures of informal healthcare professionals or how they can be integrated into a formalised structure.

Earlier scholarship on sanitation work, from Shyamlal's (1984) ethnography on the Bhangis to more contemporary studies on the impact of caste on spatial segregation and cultural marginalisation (Guru, 2013; Jodhka, 2018), has primarily examined the socio-economic inequalities associated with caste-based occupations. However, Ziyauddin's monograph moves beyond this traditionalist perspective and foregrounds the biopolitical dimensions of manual scavenging, highlighting how structural inequalities enable distinct health risks. In consonance with Jodhka (2018), the monograph examines how modernisation as a social force reproduces caste inequalities. In the modernising landscape of Bokaro, the Hadis' body emerges as an archive of historical caste-based oppression, bearing evidence of inter-generational occupational marginalisation and structural exclusion.

The monograph makes an important contribution to the field of medical sociology by addressing a significant gap in the literature on the sick role. Unlike the Parsonian model of the sick role (1951), Ziyauddin observed that the performance of the sick role is considered a hindrance in the Hadis and is delayed for as long as possible. Additionally, the performance of the sick role, as he highlights, is a gendered construct. Women rarely adopt the sick role, thereby creating an intra-caste hierarchy which favours earning male populations to seek health-care facilities, followed by the young and the old, and lastly the women. Ziyauddin's work does not engage deeply with the gendered dimensions of the sick role. By treating women's reluctance to prioritise their own health as an economic decision, the monograph underexplores

the distinct and layered sufferings of women. However, his work remains significant because it not only highlights health inequalities across caste groups but also within intra-caste settings.

The monograph focuses only on a single community of manual scavengers in a regionally specific location. The study's analysis may be limited in scope, preventing a holistic picture of healthcare conditions among Dalits across the nation. Moreover, a comparative study with other communities of conservancy workers could reveal the cultural similarities and differences among various caste groups, thereby producing a more enriching account of the socioeconomic conditions and health-seeking behaviour of these groups within the state of Jharkhand.

Based on employment patterns, the Hadis constitute a unique case. Unlike the majority of India, where women predominantly work as sanitation workers (Kumar and Preet, 2020), in the Hadi community of Bokaro, men are primarily involved in sanitation work. This gendered division of labour remains underexplored in Ziyauddin's work. The monograph does not address why Hadi women are less visible in formal sanitation work – whether it is due to patriarchal notions within the community that restrict women's entry into the public sphere, or whether employers prefer males over females. As a result, the study can be critiqued for its limited ability to capture the Hadi women's lifeworld and everyday life perceptions.

In spite of these limitations, the book illustrates how illness is deeply constructed through caste-based occupational association of communities and how caste identity actually navigates the lifeworld of oppressed caste groups. Therefore, the book is a timely intervention, highlighting the dearth of ethnographic attention to marginalised sub-castes and offering critical methodological insights on future studies on caste in contemporary India.

References

Guru, G. (2013). Freedom of expression and the life of Dalit mind. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 49(10), 39-45. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23391357.

Jodhka, Surinder S. (2018). *Caste in Contemporary India*. Routledge India.

Kumar, S. & Preet, P. (2020). Manual Scavenging: Women Face Double Discrimination as Caste and Gender Inequalities Converge. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 55(26-27). Retrieved from https://www.epw.in/engage/article/manual-scavenging-women-face-double-discrimination-caste-gender.

Last, J.M. (1963). The iceberg: Completing the clinical picture in general practice. *The Lancet*, 282(7297), 28-31.

Parsons, T. (1951). *The social system*. Free Press.

Patel, T. (2008). Stigma Goes Backstage: Reservation in jobs and education. *Sociological Bulletin*, 57(1), 97-114.

Shyamlal. (1984). *The Bhangis in Transition*. New Delhi: Inter India Publications.

Srinivas, M.N. (2003). An obituary on caste as a system. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38(5), 455-459.