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AN ANALYSIS OF CASTE-BASED SOCIAL EXCLUSION
AND SEGREGATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT:

Caste-based discrimination in India through the framework of social exclusion and segregation. The caste system in India represents one of the most deeply entrenched forms of social stratification, shaping the country's social, economic, and political dynamics. While social differentiation based on class, religion, region, tribe, gender, and language exists globally, in India, caste acts as a rigid and closed system of hierarchy. Additionally, this structure perpetuates systemic exclusion by predetermining an individual's access to essential resources such as wealth, power, education, and

social mobility based solely on birth. Although, the caste system classifies individuals into four hierarchical varnas Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras with Dalits (previously called "untouchables") placed outside and beneath this hierarchy, subject to extreme marginalization. Those engaged in stigmatized occupations such as manual scavenging or handling of the dead face institutionalized exclusion, social stigma, and limited interaction with higher castes. Also, this exclusion extends to residential segregation, denial of access to public goods, educational discrimination, and political underrepresentation. This paper examines how caste functions as a mechanism of exclusion and how it reinforces inequality in contemporary India. It also analyses the implications of caste-based segregation on national integration and social cohesion. In addition, the study evaluates the legal frameworks and affirmative action policies aimed at dismantling caste discrimination, highlighting both their achievements and ongoing limitations. Ultimately, the dissertation offers policy recommendations to address the persistent challenges of caste-based exclusion in India and to promote a more inclusive society.

KEYWORDS: social exclusion, cast-base, caste functions, *inclusive society*.

INTRODUCTION:

India's caste system is one of the most well-documented and enduring examples of social exclusion and segregation in the world. Although rooted in ancient traditions, the system was significantly reshaped by various ruling powers over time, particularly during the Mughal Empire and British colonial rule. The caste system's evolution into a rigid and exclusionary structure institutionalized unequal access to rights, resources, and opportunities for entire segments of the population. Today, the remnants of this system continue to affect social dynamics, despite constitutional and legal efforts to eliminate discrimination. The caste system operates through two key concepts: *varna*, the broader division of society into four hierarchical groups, and *jati*, the more localized and occupation-based communities. During the decline of the Mughal

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Empire, new elites emerged who aligned themselves with religious and political authorities, reinforcing caste identities and creating boundaries that excluded previously casteless groups. This form of exclusion intensified under British rule. From 1860 to 1920, the British colonial administration adopted caste as a central organizing principle for governance, allocating administrative privileges and access to public office based on caste identity. This rigid categorization denied lower-caste communities' access to resources and formal power, reinforcing social segregation. Legal reforms began in 1948 with the abolition of untouchability and were further solidified in the 1950 Indian Constitution, caste-based exclusion remains deeply embedded in many aspects of Indian life. India is home to more than 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub-castes, each historically linked to specific occupations and social roles. This stratification limits social mobility and reinforces patterns of exclusion in education, employment, housing, and political representation. The effects of caste-based segregation are not confined to Hindu society. Social exclusion based on caste or caste-like hierarchies has also been observed among Indian Muslims, Christians, Jews, Sikhs, and Buddhists. Although many reformists religious movements including Sikhism, modern Indian Buddhism, and progressive Hindu organizations have sought to challenge caste hierarchies, the social stigma attached to lower castes persists. Moreover, the influence of Indian caste structures extends beyond India into neighbouring countries like Nepal, and culturally influenced regions such as Bali, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. In response to this historical injustice, India has implemented affirmative action policies since independence in 1947. These measures aim to uplift historically marginalized communities by reserving quotas in public employment, education, and political representation. While these policies represent significant progress, the persistence of caste-based exclusion and social segregation highlights the ongoing need for systemic change and social awareness.

NATURE AND PRACTICE OF CASTE-BASED SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND SEGREGATION

The caste system in India represents a deeply entrenched form of social exclusion and segregation, rooted in a complex history of cultural, racial, and political influences. While its precise origins are difficult to trace due to the mixture of various racial groups such as Aryans, Dravidians, Mongols, and Scythians, the system has evolved into a powerful mechanism of social division and exclusion (Purane, 2000). At its core, the caste system is driven by three fundamental features i.e. repulsion (social distance between castes), hierarchy (graded inequality), and heredity (status by birth). These characteristics, as identified by scholars like Pocock, create a rigid framework that limits individual agency and social mobility (Pocock, 1971). Through these mechanisms, caste discrimination influences every aspect of life like social, economic, political, and cultural producing widespread structural inequalities. Not only but, this systemic exclusion is most apparent in the treatment of lower castes, especially Shudras and Dalits (formerly "untouchables"), who are historically segregated and denied access to shared spaces, education, employment, and public resources. These communities are excluded from full participation in society, thereby reinforcing their marginalization and limiting their capacity to contribute to national development (Sarkin & Koenig, 2010).

From a sociological perspective, the caste system functions as a fixed hierarchy that impedes individual advancement. Social mobility is nearly impossible due to the hereditary nature of caste identity and the subdivision into numerous sub-castes and sub-sub-castes (Louis, 2003). Economically, caste operates as a rigid division of labor, assigning entire communities to certain occupations often degrading or exploitative based solely on birth, regardless of skill or aptitude. Thus, caste is not merely a cultural construct but a socioeconomic system that dictates one's access to resources, rights, and opportunities (Jodhka & Shah, 2010). The cultural and symbolic dimensions of caste further reinforce exclusion. Risley describes caste as a collection of families united by mythical ancestry and community validation, which maintains group boundaries and justifies exclusion from social mixing (Risley, 2007).

Caste-Based Violence and Legal Redress

Caste-based exclusion often manifests violently. Despite legal protections, lower castes frequently face physical, emotional, and sexual violence. A 2005 UN report documented over 31,000 violent incidents

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against Dalits in 1996 alone an alarming figure compared to violence rates in developed countries. The 2006 Khairlanji massacre is one tragic example of how caste exclusion can turn into deadly violence. India's Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 was designed to protect these communities from discrimination and violence. It explicitly criminalizes actions such as forced consumption of harmful substances, public humiliation, land dispossession, and sexual assault. However, enforcement remains weak. Although the number of reported cases has increased, conviction rates are still low, reflecting systemic failures in ensuring justice. In 2019 alone, crimes against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes rose by 7.3% and 26.5%, respectively.

Caste and Political Segregation

Caste-based social exclusion also shapes political participation. While affirmative action policies such as caste-based reservations in education and government employment seek to reduce inequality, they have also become a contested aspect of Indian democracy. Some critics argue that these policies perpetuate caste identities, while others emphasize that without such measures, upper castes would dominate public institutions, leaving marginalized groups without representation (Arvind Shah). The Mandal Commission (1979) sought to address this imbalance by expanding reservations to Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Its 1980 report led to the allocation of an additional 27% of government jobs and educational seats for these groups. Despite widespread protests in 1990, the policy remains a cornerstone of India's effort to reduce caste-based exclusion.

Social Reform Perspectives: Gandhi and Ambedkar

India's leading social reformers had divergent views on caste. Mahatma Gandhi saw the caste system's original Varna structure as natural and functional but condemned the sub-caste divisions (*jatis*) and the idea of superiority. He argued that assuming superiority over others was a moral sin and that caste should not dictate social status. In contrast, B. R. Ambedkar, born into a Dalit community, viewed caste as a system of enforced exclusion rooted in endogamy and the monopolization of privilege by Brahmins. He believed that caste was spread and sustained through imitation and the institutionalization of oppressive practices like sati and child marriage. Ambedkar saw caste not as a religious or racial system, but as a socially engineered structure of perpetual segregation, reinforced by scriptures and rituals. He was instrumental in embedding anti-discrimination protections into India's Constitution and remains a symbol of resistance against caste oppression.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Mandal, (2010) emphasizes that Dalits are often relegated to menial jobs and face significant barriers to upward mobility. The paper discusses how globalization has exacerbated the inequalities faced by Dalits. Economic reforms have led to job losses in the public sector, further marginalizing Dalits and widening the gap between them and the upper castes. Education is identified as a crucial tool for empowering Dalits and improving their socioeconomic status. However, some progress in literacy rates, significant gaps remain, and Dalit students continue to face discrimination in educational settings.

Negi, (2011) emphasizes the relational and constitutive dynamics of caste-based discrimination. It explores how caste is not just a static category but is shaped by interactions and social processes, which helps in understanding the complexities of caste relations in contemporary India. It undertakes an analysis of the typology of exclusion, categorizing different forms of caste-based discrimination. This typology aids in understanding the various dimensions of disadvantage that individuals from lower castes face, thus providing a structured approach to studying caste-related issues. Also, discusses the cultural devaluation of certain groups and how this leads to the internalization of inferiority among marginalized communities. This aspect is crucial for understanding the psychological impacts of caste discrimination. It also addresses the economic dimensions of caste-based exclusion, highlighting how economic disadvantages are intertwined

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with social and cultural factors. This multifaceted approach helps in recognizing the broader implications of caste discrimination on economic opportunities.

Pal, (2015) delves into the socio-psychological constructs of caste-based discrimination and violence, highlighting how these issues are not just social phenomena but also deeply psychological in nature. It emphasizes the need to understand the psychological impacts of caste identity on individuals and groups. It establishes a clear connection between caste-based discrimination, social exclusion, and mental health. Also, discusses how experiences of discrimination lead to feelings of despair, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal among lower caste groups, thereby affecting their mental health. Not only but, it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding social exclusion in the context of caste. It identifies the mechanisms through which caste discrimination leads to social exclusion, including denial of rights and opportunities, and the relational dynamics that perpetuate these exclusions. It also examines the psychological consequences of caste violence, detailing how such violence instils fear and trauma in victims and their communities, further entrenching social divisions and mental health issues.

Waughray & Keane, (2017) emphasizes that caste discrimination is a significant contemporary human rights issue affecting millions, particularly in South Asia. It discusses the historical context and ongoing challenges faced by Dalits, who are often subjected to severe socio-economic deprivation and violence due to their caste status. It outlines the crucial role of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in recognizing caste discrimination as a form of descent-based racial discrimination under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). This recognition is vital for framing caste discrimination within international human rights law. It discusses how Dalit activists have sought to internationalize the issue of caste discrimination, engaging with various UN bodies to raise awareness and push for recognition of their rights. This activism has led to increased visibility of caste discrimination in international human rights discussions. It examines the responses of different states, particularly India, to CERD's interpretations and recommendations regarding caste discrimination. It highlights the ongoing resistance from India, which argues that caste should not be equated with race, thus complicating the international legal landscape surrounding caste discrimination.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The title of the present study is "A Study on Caste-Based Discrimination in India Through the Lens of Social Exclusion and Segregation." The study aims to achieve several key objectives: to understand the historical origins and development of the caste system in India, analyze the influence of Aryan culture in establishing caste-based hierarchies, and examine how social exclusion has been embedded within caste practices to shape Indian society. Additionally, the research explores how major Indian religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism have either reinforced or challenged caste-based exclusion. The study also evaluates the lived experiences of lower caste individuals in contemporary India and investigates public perceptions of caste-based discrimination in critical areas such as education, religion, marriage, and employment. Also, a descriptive and exploratory research design was adopted. The methodology incorporated both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nature and impact of caste-based social exclusion. Structured questionnaires and a review of relevant secondary literature were used to examine variables and identify modern manifestations of caste discrimination, including limited access to opportunities, social marginalization, and persistent inequality. Additionally, the research universe for this study was Vadodara, India, chosen for its socio-cultural diversity. A simple random sampling method was used to select a sample of 70 respondents from varying caste backgrounds, age groups, and education levels. This sampling strategy ensured that a broad range of perspectives on caste-based exclusion could be captured and analysed. The study identified both independent and dependent variables. Independent variables included demographic information such as age, gender, education, occupation, and marital status. Dependent variables encompassed awareness,

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personal attitudes, and lived experiences related to caste-based discrimination and exclusion across social settings. Moreover, the data collection, primary data were gathered through structured Google Forms distributed to the selected respondents. In addition, secondary data were sourced from internet-based academic databases, previously published dissertations, and relevant journal articles focused on caste discrimination. Together, these methods provided a holistic view of how caste-based exclusion continues to shape individual lives and societal structures in contemporary India.

FINDINGS

The demographic breakdown of the study revealed that the majority of respondents were between the ages of 18 and 25 (48.6%), with females comprising 51.4% of the sample and 55.7% identified as graduates. When it came to caste awareness, 47.1% of respondents expressed disbelief in the caste system, yet only 51.4% reported being moderately informed about it primarily through educational institutions, as 54.3% learned about caste issues in school or college. In terms of exclusion in practice, a significant 71.4% claimed they had not personally experienced caste discrimination, which may indicate underreporting or a lack of awareness about what constitutes such discrimination. A concerning 55.7% were unaware of where to report caste discrimination, while 54.3% were uncertain about online reporting mechanisms, suggesting a serious gap in access to justice. Notably, 54.3% of respondents had either witnessed or experienced caste-based discrimination in religious spaces, highlighting the persistence of exclusion in both public and sacred domains. Regarding education and employment, 70% of participants believed the caste system negatively impacts the education system. However, the same percentage remained neutral about whether lower caste individuals receive equal opportunities in employment, pointing to a general sense of uncertainty or indifference. Public opinion on inclusion showed more encouraging signs: 60% supported equal opportunities for all castes, 54.3% endorsed inter-caste marriage and opposed restrictive laws on such unions, and 64.3% agreed that caste discrimination is a barrier to national development. However, knowledge of reservation policies remained limited; only 47.1% reported having some understanding of caste-based reservations in education, and 54.3% were unsure whether lower castes truly benefit from these systems. These findings underscore the continued presence of caste-based social exclusion and the need for greater awareness and institutional support to promote equity and inclusion.

CONCLUSION

Caste in India functions as a deeply rooted form of structural exclusion, shaping access to power, privilege, and opportunity based on hereditary identity. Despite constitutional guarantees and affirmative action, social segregation continues to manifest in religious spaces, educational institutions, and public discourse. Caste discrimination limits social mobility, denies equal access to justice, and marginalizes communities from the broader developmental process. Educational reforms are crucial. Schools must revise textbooks and curricular content to emphasize that caste is a man-made system of inequality, not a divine or immutable order. Community-based programs such as inclusive communal meals can foster integration and challenge everyday segregation. Politically, caste remains a double-edged sword. While it has empowered marginalized groups to participate in governance, it also entrenches identity-based politics. Reservation policies have enabled lower castes to access education and public sector jobs, but political manipulation and vote-bank tactics continue to reinforce caste boundaries rather than dismantle them. Social reformers like Gandhi and Ambedkar had differing views, but both recognized caste as a critical obstacle to unity. Ambedkar, in particular, highlighted caste as a system of exclusion through endogamy and ritual segregation, and he laid the foundation for legal protections that remain vital today. caste-based discrimination is a persistent form of social exclusion that contradicts democratic ideals. True national integration requires a shift in public consciousness, institutional accountability, and a commitment to equity that transcends caste, religion, or region. India's future depends on building an inclusive society where opportunities are not limited by birth, but empowered by justice and equality for all.

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