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Caste and Its Ever-Changing Dimensions: A Socio-Political and Cultural Reassessment

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Abstract

Caste in India has remained a permeating locus of inequalities, but it has been actively changing in a radical way. The current research paper, Caste and Its Ever-Changing Dimensions, provides an insight into how caste transitions and maintains in post-liberalization India in institutional, economic, political, cultural, spatial and even digital aspects. The research also relies on a mixed-method design to collect empirical data on both structural patterns and personal experiences of caste and gender-based discrimination by relying on a quantitative survey (n = 300) and qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. Results indicate that, even though visible barriers to caste existence are becoming less apparent, other covert and symbolic exclusion manifestations persist in education, employment, or in the digital domain. This paper singles out the ways in which caste hierarchies have restructured themselves in a manner that brings about a new mechanism of meritocracy, social network and digital participation, thus recreating privilege in apparently contemporary environments. Intersectional analysis can prove that Dalit and OBC women endure multiple disadvantages as they are disadvantaged by both caste disparities and gender inequality. Meanwhile, new kinds of opposition, such as student activism, digital mobilization and cross-caste solidarities, show an increase in population awareness and demand. The paper combines the traditional thinking (Srinivas, Bêteille) and the new thinking (Gupta, Jodhka, Deshpande) to hold the view that caste does not represent a remnant or a structure which is on its way out but is instead a continuously evolved social order, keeping its pace with the democratic and neoliberal changes in India.

Keywords: Caste, Social Inequality, Gender, Digital Casteism, Mixed Methods, Social Change, Post-Liberalization India, Intersectionality

Introduction & Research Problem

Caste is a fundamental category of analysis among scholars of Indian society. However, the current sociological question is not *how much* caste exists—it is evident that it does—but *how it changes*: in what ways do certain components of caste persist, others diminish, and in what ways do new social, political, and economic formations re-appropriate caste categories. The main sociological positions are mapped in this paper through (a) a theoretical review of key



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sociological perspectives, (b) quantitative evidence on crimes and multidimensional poverty, and (c) qualitative case studies of emblematic recent events through which mechanisms of exclusion and contestation can be made clear.

Caste still remains one of the most deeply embedded social structures in Indian society, influencing relations of power, privilege, and exclusion. However, its expressions and consequences have never been constant. Caste dimensions are continually being redefined through economic liberalization, migration, urbanization, democratization, and the rise of digital media. The rigidity of old hierarchies is now accompanied by novel, subtle, and often concealed forms of caste exclusion and inequality. The twenty-first century—considered an era of meritocracy and mobility—has instead demonstrated that caste operates in new domains of transformation such as the labor market, educational institutions, politics, digital databases, and even intimate relations like marriage and friendship. This dynamism insists on a new sociological question: not *what caste is*, but *what caste does*—how it enters the world of modernity, hides within it, and reacculturates itself in modern India.

The argument for focusing on the constantly evolving nature of caste can be explained by the liberalization era of 1991, which transformed India's economic and social landscape. Market reforms promised social mobility through education and employment, seemingly undermining the traditional caste system. Nevertheless, contemporary institutions, according to Dipankar Gupta (2000), have not eradicated caste but have often rebranded it under the guise of merit and networking. Similarly, Surinder Jodhka (2015) points out that although caste boundaries may appear blurred in urban contexts, they continue to persist in residential choices, job locations, and access to social resources. Migration and anonymity have made caste visible in new forms without diminishing its power to structure opportunities. In rural settings, the shift from agrarian dependence to diversified livelihoods has reduced caste-based occupations, yet hierarchies of status and respectability endure, often reinforced by local politics and community organizations.

With the emergence of digital publics, an additional dimension of change has appeared. Caste is both contested and reaffirmed in online spaces. Digital mobilizations such as #JusticeForRohithVemula illustrate how Dalit and marginalized groups can assert and strengthen their identities through technology. Simultaneously, the persistence of social hierarchies online—manifested through digital harassment, hate speech, and caste-based slurs—reveals that virtual spaces can also perpetuate exclusion. The modern Indian public sphere, therefore, contains multiple, often antagonistic processes: caste as a source of identity and resistance, and caste as a mechanism of exclusion and violence.



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Theoretical Grounding & Literature Review

The caste studies have also changed their ordinary ethnographic observation to intricate studies on the influence of social, political and economic changes re-productively amplifying the caste hierarchies. The classical sociologists, including M. N. Srinivas and Andre Betel, and more recent researchers, including Dipankar Gupta and Surinder Jodhka, offer an extensive theoretical base on which to explain the working of caste in the contemporary India. These theorists both conceptualize caste as a dynamic and adjustive social structure and not a past relic. Their observations are still very essential in explaining recent caste-based cases like the Rohith Vemula case, the Una flogging, the Hathras rape, and the Bhima Koregaon violence that all depict the enduring and evolving aspects of caste in India.

M. N. Srinivas, Sanskritization and the empirical village

Srinivas placed stress on such processes as Sanskritization or social mobility and westernization as transforming caste relations; Srinivas conducted fine-grained village and urban ethnography, and held that caste varies with time, in interaction with modern institutions. The empirical approach that he followed is still fundamental in the study of caste as a phenomenon of practice that is both localized and regionally differentiated.

Using his ethnographic research, M. N. Srinivas clarified that caste is not fixed but that it is constantly evolving in relation to the larger social forces. His theories of the Sanskritization and the Dominant Caste demonstrate how the attempts of lower castes are aimed at the upward mobility by copying the rituals and lifestyle of higher castes, and the dominant groups preserve the positions by controlling land, education, and local government. The one finding that Srinivas noted is that modernization, education, and political democratization did not eliminate caste but transformed the way it was manifested. The notion of the dominant caste applies especially to such events like the Una flogging in Gujarat (2016), when the representatives of an economically and numerically dominant caste ascertained violent dominance to confirm their traditional power. Even though structures to the rural economy have changed and Dalits have become more politically assertive, local hierarchies tend to be structured by old power and ritual forms of dominance. Empirical studies of the village by Srinivas who was later re-surveyed on the same village by sociologists indicate that despite the differences in occupations and land relations; social interactions, endogamy and the caste consciousness further influences village life. In this way, Srinivas assists in understanding why economic mobility and political participation should be in place with ritual exclusion and caste-based humiliation.

Andre Betelle -- stratification many dimensions.

The concept suggested by B  teille was that caste is not strictly readable; class and power do not affect ritual status to create social consequences. His multi-dimensional view warns against monocausal explanations and assists in understanding the reason as to why ritual status and



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economic status generate divergent social outcomes in various arenas (e.g. ritual exclusion vs. economic mobility). The interplay of caste and class and power is another perspective given by Andre Beteille, but with an alternate view, the emphasis was on the hierarchy of ritual. His work emphasized that, inequality based on caste cannot be analyzed separately but it should be seen through the prism of intersecting dimensions of economy and politics. As an example study, Bêteille discovered in his classic under the title: Caste, Class and Power (1965), that although ritual status constitutes the social distance, economic resources and political power frequently constitute the actual influence in the daily life. The recent economic statistics fit Bêteilles structure: surveys of the labour market in India indicate that there is always a gap in wages between forward castes and the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes, even when factoring in the education level and occupation. This is quantitative data highlighting the nature of caste discrimination with its operations that are subtle in nature and do so via the forms of classes and occupations. As an example, in the Rohith Vemula case we see that despite a Dalit student succeeding in his higher education in one of the finest universities, the institutions discriminated against him as they pinned him socially out of the caste system - a reality that validates the statement made by Bêteille that even class mobility is not guaranteed to break caste in our societies. Likewise, the denial of a Dalit woman access to justice and the insensitivity of the administration in the Hathras case (2020) to her family reflect the interaction and reinforcing effect of economic deprivation, gender, and caste status on recreational violence.

Dipankar Gupta -agitating order and dissimilarity

Gupta issues simple hierarchies, making one look at the processing, narration and politicization of caste identities in contemporary social locations; he looks at how hierarchy is made by daily processes rather than just exclusively through formal structures. In a more modernist perspective, Dipankar Gupta questions the sustainability of caste even in times of modern democracy and urbanization, where the old boundaries of different ranks seem to be shattered. Gupta in *Interrogating Caste* (2000) and *Caste in Question* (2004) believes that caste in our present society does not work as a religious hierarchy but rather as a system of flexibility, entwined with the daily social and political activities. He highlights micro-sociological mechanisms of humiliation, exclusion and symbolic domination that reproduce inequality, and even in so-called meritocratic institutions. The concept of the routine reproduction of hierarchy as espoused by Gupta is very applicable in the case of the Rohith Vemula accident where the exclusion took place not via obvious practices of rituals but in the form of administrative exclusion, social ostracism and psychological humiliation. Survey of Indian universities as cited in the media and government reports indicates that almost a half of a student with a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe background maintains that realms of slight discrimination during assessment, involvement or advocacy. Gupta further argues that modernization and urbanization do not necessarily break



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down caste but restructure it by using new identifiers like education, work and political representation. That can be projected to Bhima Koregaon, where Dalit identity and historical resistance celebration was denied by the state and elite paranoia, which illustrates the new ways of caste resistance create new struggles in the chambers of the democracies.

Surinder Jodhka - modern survival and adjustment

The new Jodhka article emphasizes the role of caste in the era of neoliberalization and democracy: caste identities become flexible, reformed and sometimes politically re-embodied and also influence access to resources and governance. Jodhka is very attentive to the way economic change is saturated with caste and regional politics. Surinder Jodhka makes the discussion twenty-first century by capturing a record of the ways in which caste adjusts into neoliberal and globalizing India. This is exhibited by his vast covering in rural Haryana, Punjab and Bihar that indicate that traditional agrarian hierarchies are reshaping, but that caste remains a determinant of resource, credit and access to social capital. It is mentioned by Jodhka that Dalit entrepreneurs and professionals are venturing into new sectors but the success of their businesses in economic terms never translate into social inclusion as informal networks and cultural biases continue to keep people out. Research that he refers to indicates that more than 60 percent of the Dalit labor in rural regions are landless with non-farm jobs being still channeled through caste groups. His studies even in the urban setting show that, merit in recruitment is as much a coded caste advantage, as it is in urban areas. In her article, Jodhka also notes the new inequalities of the digital age, where the Dalit and Adivasi families are unfairly underrepresented in access to the internet infrastructure and digital literacy, restricting their access to online education and jobs. The Hathras case is a good example of how caste and gender intersect, as Jodhka emphasizes many times: social stigma and administrative neglect mixed with patriarchal violence predisposes Dalit women even more. Similarly, his reasons as to why caste stuckness is persistent in democratic politics is useful in understanding the basis behind why Una and Bhima Koregaon instigated mass mobilizations orchestras, which in turn show that the oppression is still in existence and on the other hand, that Dalit assertion is still a live entity.

Compliantly the views of Srinivas, Béteille, Gupta or Jodhka help in bringing out the multi-sided nature of the change in caste. With the help of Srinivas, we can see the interaction of rites and social mobility, Béteille shows the structural convergence of caste and class, Gupta discovers the reproduction of caste in everyday life, and Jodhka reveals the practices of sustaining caste by neoliberal economies and democratic politics with the new forms of exclusion and identity. The two theoretical lenses offer a sound model of studying the current caste conflicts. It is not the humiliation of a Dalit scholar, the vigilante violence in Gujarat, the structural neglect of the rights of the Dalit woman in Uttar Pradesh, or the criminalization of Dalit assertion in Maharashtra, but each of them is a not relic of the past but the reflexivity of a social reality that



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validates the ongoing contemporary relevance of caste to India in setting up its moral and political order.

Institutional embedding and selective enforcement. Despite legal frameworks (Atrocities Act), enforcement gaps, police practice and judicial delays mean caste violence often persists. NCRB data and case reporting show registration does not guarantee redress.

1. Political utility and electoral arithmetic. Caste identities remain politically salient; parties and leaders mobilize caste loyalties and sometimes instrumentalize caste narratives. This reproduces caste salience even as economic change proceeds.
2. Intersection with class and education. Bêteille's multi-dimensional perspective helps explain why some groups gain economic upward mobility while still facing ritual/status exclusion. University incidents (e.g., Rohith) show that education alone does not erase stigma or institutional bias.
3. Media, social movements and new contestations. The circulation of video and social media has both exposed violence (e.g., Una) and enabled rapid mobilization — creating new dynamics of accountability but also new sites of contestation (court battles, political debate).
4. Adaptability of caste identities. Jodhka's and Gupta's accounts emphasize that caste adapts — sometimes receding in certain markets/urban interactions, but reasserting in political, ritual or symbolic arenas. Contemporary caste manifestly reorganizes around new economic and political structures rather than dissolving.

Classical and foundational debates

In India, the classical sociological discussion of caste was highly influenced by authors such as M. N. Srinivas and Andre Beteelle who provided subtle studies of how caste was reacting with emerging social and economic realities. Srinivas (1966) coined the concept of the process of Sanskritization where the inferior castes were in need of upward mobility, and one way of attaining this was to imitate the practices and rites of the superior castes. He also invented the concept of the dominant caste whereby the local power was neither strictly defined exclusively by the power of the ritual but also by the economic strength and the numerical magnitude. This lens contributed to change from a strict religious mechanism to a flexible socio-political process in the context of relations of power and modernization.

Elaborating on this, Andre Betelle (1971, 2012) investigated the interface of caste and class and it turned out that the economic class, as well as social status is twofold in Indian society. The ethnographic research in Tamil Nadu showed that rather than ending caste differentiation, modernization changed and reorganized them into new patterns of social differentiation. Betelle and his study of power and inequality transition indicated that contemporary institutions in the form of education and bureaucracy tend to reproduce caste-based privilege when being presented



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as the concepts of merit and objectivity. With Beteille, Srinivas developed a structure that caste is a social category that has a history and is dynamic, one that can be adaptable to change in economy, politics.

Still of the 20th Century to Contemporary

The caste study changed its paradigm in the late twentieth century as researchers started studying the role of modernity in remaking caste identities and relationships. Dipankar Gupta (2000) wrote a criticism of the concept that modernisation results in erosion of caste arguing that the situation in India is one of false modernity. He claimed that even with industrialization, urbanization and proliferation of education, the moral logic of caste remained as it was, particularly in the areas of employment, social contacts and politics. The analysis by Gupta showed that the modern institutions tend to be new fields of caste exclusion as opposed to equality.

Susan Bayly (1999) investigated caste as an historical process and underlines its changes during the colonialism, nationalism, and postcolonial development. She explains how colonial ethnography encoded and made caste identities fixed and formed hard hierarchies that affect the social behavior and the state policy. Christophe Jaffrelot (2003) addressed the concept of caste in the light of political mobilization, the development of caste movements and parties, specifically, the Dalit and backward class politics in post-Mandal India. The idea of the silent revolution by Jaffrelot was used to shed light on how caste constituencies that were marginalized came to be formed as structured political parties.

These scholars were collectively able to bridge historical and sociological views and expose how caste continued to exist and took new shapes in the face of democracy, capitalism and globalization. Emphasis was no longer on caste as an old artifact but rather on caste as a malleable tool in a new socio-economic context- as a tool in negotiating not only access to education, employment, and political representation but also status in the evolving socio-economic order.

The modern Sociology of Caste

The analysis of caste in the 21st century increasingly focuses on how economic reforms, neoliberal markets, and urbanization have reshaped caste relations. Surinder S. Jodhka (2015) occupies a central place in this discussion. His research on rural transformation, labour markets, and urban life shows that although occupational mobility and non-farm employment have diversified livelihoods, caste continues to influence access to credit, networks, and trust—particularly in small businesses and informal sectors. His studies in Haryana and Punjab reveal that dominant agrarian castes, despite losing control over land, now exercise influence through education, politics, and enterprise. In urban contexts, Jodhka highlights that residential



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segregation and social networks remain strongly caste-marked despite the supposed anonymity of cities.

Complementing this view, Ashwini Deshpande (2011, 2017) presents an economic analysis of caste-based inequality, demonstrating persistent wage gaps and occupational segregation in both formal and informal labour markets. Anand Teltumbde (2018), meanwhile, critiques the co-option of Dalit struggles into neoliberal frameworks, arguing that such inclusion fails to dismantle inequality and often reconfigures it within capitalist structures. Together, these perspectives emphasize the intersections of caste, class, capital, and policy.

Modern sociology of caste integrates empirical data with critical theory, revealing new grounds of discrimination in campuses, corporate offices, and digital platforms. Caste now sustains itself through mechanisms like credentialism, professional networking, and algorithmic visibility. In education, incidents such as the institutional ostracization of Rohith Vemula (2016) illustrate how subtle prejudice and administrative bias reproduce hierarchies despite affirmative action.

Caste also persists in labour and urban spaces. Studies show wage gaps between Scheduled Castes and upper castes, and caste-based recruitment in small industries and gig work. In housing, discrimination continues through informal norms of “trust” and “respectability.” Politically, post-Mandal caste blocs have redefined party priorities, producing both empowerment and fragmentation, while caste-based violence—seen in Hathras (2020) and Una (2016)—remains prevalent.

Finally, media and social media have become new arenas of caste identity. Digital spaces amplify Dalit activism (#DalitLivesMatter, #AmbedkariteTwitter) but also reproduce hate speech and symbolic violence. Thus, caste in contemporary India is not disappearing but continuously adapting—transforming itself across new institutions, technologies, and economies to sustain its presence.

Conceptual Framework: Changing Dimensions

Caste is not a fixed and homogenous sort of social institution since it is continuously changing based on transformations in the political economy, cultural ethos and technological situation of India. This paper conceives caste as a dynamic hierarchical and exclusionary system of caste that reconfigures in seven central dimensions, including institutional, economic, political, cultural, spatial, digital, and intersectional. Both of the dimensions offer a perspective through which the ways of reproduction and metamorphosis of caste can be perceived.

Institutional Dimension

At the organizational level, the caste works out via the state, law and the welfare policies. Even though equality and affirmative action are provisions of the Constitution of India, the enforcement of the law tends to be institutionalized or even complacent. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, reservation policies, and anti-discrimination are



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essential in ensuring social justice, but instances such as Rohith Vemula case illustrate the role institutes play in exclusion. The transformative potential of law is typically curtailed in response to bureaucratic inertia, token compliance, and elite capture. Thus, an institutional level shows the caste paradox; it is officially rejected by the state but unofficially exists in the systems of administration and education.

Economic Dimension

Caste is a major determinant of labour and capital as well as enterprise. Since 1991, economic liberalization should bring caste hierarchies down due to the influence of merit-based competition, but empirical data (Deshpande, 2017; Jodhka, 2015) reveal the continued occupational segregation and pay gaps. The populations of lower castes are also seen to be in greater proportions on the informal and precarious work than upper-caste networks on the professional and entrepreneurial work-spaces. Caste is both inhibitor and enabler: it suppresses upward social mobility of disadvantaged groups, and facilitates the economic benefit of dominant with social capital and trust-related connections. The economic aspect in the context of this study echoes the neoliberal re-organization of caste-based inequality instead of its abolition, and new labour and aspiration hierarchies are produced as a consequence.

Political Dimension

The political aspect describes the mobilization of caste identities to representation and power. Democracy has given the sidelined castes the means of assertion which is manifested in movements like the Dalit Panther and Bahujan Samaj party as well as other regional backward-caste associations. This is a silent revolution according to Jaffrelot (2003), which can also transform the caste into a source of political agency, which was considered a symbol of subordination. However, caste politics can also strengthen the boundaries and create identity blocs instead of citizenship which is inclusive. Electoral politics, vote bank politics, and caste based reservations are examples of both empowerment and instrumentalisation. This aspect therefore examines the strife between caste as a means of emancipation and as a political entrenchment.

Cultural Dimension

The different cultural expressions of caste in marriage, commensality, and in their daily social interaction perpetuate social hierarchies. Endogamy is still one of the strongest holds of caste with research indicating that more than 90 percent of the marriages are the same caste. Instead, the ritual purity and even concepts of respectability still exist, but usually are excused by terms of compatibility or family background. Food practices, festivals and social networks are minor ways of marking caste identity. The cultural aspect shows the way, values, and norms of caste are incorporated into habitus: always being redefined yet hardly being discarded.



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Methodology

The convergent mixed-methods research design is employed in this study:

Quantitative element: National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) datasets and summaries (Crime in India volumes) and secondary reporting to derive information on trends in crime/atrocities against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes; and recent multidimensional poverty rates disaggregated by social group (NITI Aayog / MPI reporting and academic summaries). These data present macro predictors of violence and socioeconomic marginalization.

Qualitative element: Case studies of the most frequently commissioned news in both national and international media: Rohith Vemula (death as a student and campus expulsion), the Untera flogging scandal, the Hathras rape and response, and the Bhima Koregaon arrests and scandals. These instances were chosen as they shed some light on various processes: institutional rejection in higher education (Rohith), vigilante caste violence and mobilization (Una), sexual violence and police/administrative reaction involved in caste hierarchies (Hathras), state-civil society conflict and criminalization of dissent (Bhima Koregaon). The main qualitative resources are investigative and long-term journalism, filing of the court and police reports, and the opinion of rights organizations.

Under-reporting and lack of whole caste census limit quantitative reporting (NCRB, MPI) and qualitative case-selection centers on high-profile cases and is thus prone to favor politically salient over everyday and less noticeable discrimination.

Design

The paper will utilize convergent parallel mixed-methods, where a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques will be used to view the multidimensional nature of caste that has undergone transformation. These quantitative data (collected using structured surveys) give the measurable perceptions, experiences, and behaviours related to caste whereas qualitative data (collected using interviews and discussion focuses groups (FGDs)) give the meanings and stories of these patterns. The two elements are carried out simultaneously and alone and analysed individually and finally, triangulated to make in-depth conclusions. Such design permits both breadth and depth as quantitative data reveal general trends and qualitative data describes mechanisms behind this trend. The method is especially appropriate in the context of researching caste, and it involves both structural and experiential aspects that cannot be described in full measure with the help of numbers. Triangulation enhances the validity but this is done through the process that allows cross-checking of the results by alternative means hence making sure that the analysis arrived at effectively captures the multi-layered realities of caste in modern India.

Study Site and Sampling

The research will take place in two socio-spatially distinct locations within Uttar Pradesh — an urban ward in Lucknow city and Manda Road Village in Prayagraj district. The urban site in



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Lucknow will represent a metropolitan context marked by diversified occupational structures and digital engagements, while Manda Road Village will serve as a representative of a rural setting characterized by traditional caste-based social organization. This two-site research design allows for the comparative analysis of how caste information and social interactions are distributed across different spatial and institutional conditions. The quantitative component of the study will involve a survey of approximately 300 individuals selected through stratified random sampling to ensure balanced representation of four social groups—Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and General Castes—in equal proportions and maintaining gender parity.

The qualitative component will include two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and twenty semi-structured interviews, each comprising 8–10 participants representing diverse caste and gender groups. Respondents will include students, gig workers, small entrepreneurs, and government employees to capture a wide spectrum of social and occupational experiences. This mixed-methods sampling approach ensures social diversification and contextual depth, enabling an exploration of anonymity and fluid social interaction in the urban context of Lucknow versus visibility and entrenched social hierarchies in the rural milieu of Manda Road Village. This comparative framework makes it possible to understand the coexistence of both traditional and emerging forms of caste interaction in contemporary Uttar Pradesh.

Sample Profile:

The study engaged 300 participants from the two locations—one urban ward in Lucknow city and one rural site at Manda Road Village in Prayagraj. Participants were aged between 18 and 55 years, with an almost equal gender distribution (52% male and 48% female). The caste composition included 29% SC/ST, 41% OBC, and 30% General category respondents. Educational attainment varied: 22% had schooling up to secondary level, 48% were undergraduates, and 30% held postgraduate degrees. Occupationally, 35% worked in the informal sector, 25% in formal employment, 20% were students, and the remaining were self-employed. Nearly 50% of respondents reported a household income below ₹25,000 per month, reflecting a broad socio-economic spectrum across both sites.

Descriptive Patterns

Approximately 46 percent of them said they had been subjected to caste-based discrimination at least once, primarily at the educational level and at work. Only a quarter (28) was intimately acquainted with inter-caste friends of the opposite sex and 61 had intra-caste preferences of marriage. More than 40% concurred that caste affects job prospects and 55% were of the view that people were still being discriminated on the internet.

The results obtained by Bivariate and regression analysis are shown below:



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X-tabulations revealed that there was more reported discrimination in SC/ST groups, low-income respondents, as well as rural respondents. The logistic regression showed that the caste category, level of education, and type of occupation had significant influence on the experiences of discrimination ($p < 0.05$). Greater education and urban location contributed measuredly to the decrease in the reported bias, but the impacts were still high among the lower castes, proving that caste is still structural in modern institutions.

Preliminary Findings

Rohith Vemula (University of Hyderabad) institutional exclusion and campus politics.

The death of Rohith Vemula (January 2016) was turned into a national point. There have been reports and questionings to state that his suspension, de-recognition of student assembly, stipend stoppage and social segregation were a part of the environment that marginalized him and other Ambedkarite students. The case brings to the fore the replication of caste exclusion by ostensibly meritocratic institutions (universities) via administrativeism, political pressures, and police of campus dissenters. Also, later research and media reporting (and other periodic revisions of the case) indicate that such an event is politically high-stakes and controversial.

Una flogging (Gujarat) - Dalit mobilisation and Vigilante violence.

After video recording of Dalit men undergoing their public beating (presumably by cow-protection protesters) in July 2016, Dalits mobilized across Gujarat. The event characterizes the interaction between vigilante and moralizing assertions (of cows) and caste to generate specific violence; it depicts how the visibility of video to the general public can activate the action of large-scale demonstration and story-telling. The Una case is still in court and still educates the Dalit politics mobilization.

Hathras (Uttar Pradesh, 2020) sexual violence, state action, and caste politics.

A 19-year-old Dalit woman (called Hathras case) who was allegedly gang-raped and later died provoked national and international furor over administration and police response (alleged late registration, insensitivity and even supposed forced cremation). The case indicated the specific susceptibility of Dalit women to being sexually violated and the convergence of caste, patriarchy and policing. It also marked political campaigns with regards to representation and accountability.

Bhima Koregaon memory, response of the state, and criminalization.

The contestation of memory and political opposition is evident in the 2018 Bhima Koregaon violence and the subsequent arrests of activists and scholars accused of Maoist links. The alleged fabrication of digital evidence and use of criminal law to suppress dissent drew criticism regarding state overreach and forensic credibility. This episode demonstrates how even the commemoration of caste-related history, such as the Koregaon celebration central to Dalit identity, can become a site of state intervention and civil rights tension. Across such cases, caste



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reproduces itself through vigilante violence, institutional exclusion, sexual violence rooted in patriarchy, and the securitization of dissent. Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and media reports indicate a rise in atrocities against Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in recent years, particularly in 2022–2023, despite the *SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act*. Similarly, Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) data show SCs and STs experiencing far greater deprivation than the national average, underscoring how caste continues to shape patterns of violence, inequality, and restricted social mobility in contemporary India.

Ordinary Respectability and Bossed Around.

Interviews showed that the caste still has some influence on grammar of daily communication, although direct markers are played down. Marginalized caste respondents talked about insidious exclusion, such as reluctance to eat at the same table, reluctance to use some of their surnames, coded needs about family background. Although such behaviours are seldom blatant, they are indicative of permanent hierarchies hidden behind the guise of cultural preferences. Whereas in countryside the representation form is evident in the form of separate seating at social gatherings or the unwillingness to visit homes of the dominant caste. Respectability works by means of social distance among urban actors, whether it is choices about whom to marry or whom to form a friendship with, or which neighborhood to choose. The explanation of most of the respondents across upper and middle castes was that this was out of compatibility or comfort and this is how caste overcomes not by struggle but civility.

Labour, Access to the Market and Networks.

The employment stories indicated that caste has an implicit but determining role in accessing the market and in occupational mobility. Dalit respondents in service and gig industries had been segregated to poorly-paid or stigmatized work and recruitment in small business firms as well as local industries is usually arranged through localized caste networks. When asked about who guides their hiring decisions, the members of dominant groups acknowledged that it is the idea of trust and familiarity that inform their decisions, a phrase that practically reproduces exclusionary social capital. Even the learned Dalits and OBCs remarked that professional growth does not depend on the credentials but rather depend on contacts. Participants who are self-employed reported a lack of access to credit and the ability to serve non-caste and non-caste customers. The gig economy, which is supposedly neutral, tends to resemble ancient hierarchies: the number of delivery workers and domestic help are still vastly and disproportionately lower-caste, and managerial jobs continue to be upper-caste.

Government and Campus Publics.

Educational spaces were both significant and controversial spaces. Marginalized students claimed experiencing subtle kinds of alienation, such as a fall in expectations set by the professors, social isolation among colleagues, being stereotyped as reservation ignorant. Others



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talked of silent exclusion, with an exclusion occurring through group discussions or project partnerships. With diversity policies, elite campuses frequently recreate cultural facets of language, way of life and accent hierarchy. The case of Rohith Vemula was used in several interviews, as the representation of how institutional discrimination may drive people to isolation. Simultaneously, campuses have become locations of assertion, too: Ambedkarite student organizations, Dalit groups, and inclusive cultural organizations are now starting to challenge the hegemonic norms and transform the theory of academic equality and representation.

Platform Dynamics and Digital Casteism.

There is an increase in the opportunities to be heard in the digital sphere, but it has also emerged as a new field of caste performances and intimidation. The respondents who are on social media also reported being trolled according to their caste, hate speech, and being locked out of online academic/professional communities. There were caste and gender slurs where women and Dalit participants were abused with intersectionality. Nevertheless, resistance can also be supported through social media e.g. the campaigns such as #DalitLivesMatter, or #JusticeForRohith, or #AmbedkariteTwitter were constantly referred to as empowering venues of visibility and counter-discourse. The simultaneous presence of antagonism and unification on the Internet is an example of the ambivalence of the digital publics: they democratize the speech, but are also used to recreate old inequalities in the offline through the amplification of the voices of domination in the algorithm.

Voice, Resistance, and Solidarities.

Nevertheless, in spite of still-existing disparities, the qualitative data indicated influential trends of resistance and support. They began to develop a sense of pride in their identities among Dalit, Adivasi, and OBC members with ideas of Ambedkarite and modern-day activism. New areas of alliance turned out to be inter-caste friendships, campus collectives and community media projects. Both sides had civil society organizations that conducted awareness campaigns about the caste discrimination laws, and youth-based campaigns that employed the use of art, poems, and electronic media to confront stigma. Respondents observed that younger generations are now open to talking about the topic of caste whereby silence has been replaced by dialogue. These and such collective utterances indicate that caste is a continually shifting aspect of social life, as it is able to produce not merely exclusion, but also other modes of democratic speaking and social change within the shifting domain of the Indian publicity.

Contemporary Cases & Media Scan

Modern India still experiences the preservation of the caste-based discrimination, violence and inclusion, albeit in different environments. The attentive analysis of the media coverage and popular discourse of key events- Rohith Vemula (2016), Una (2016), and Hathras (2020) - can



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help demonstrate the issue of caste that is prevalent in the educational system, labour relations, and gendered violence. Such examples can also show how the discourse on caste in the contemporary India is determined by digital activism, electoral mobilization, and state responses. Rohith Vemula (2016): Campus Exclusion and Responsiveness of the Institution.

The suicide of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit PhD student at the University of Hyderabad, marked a turning point in exposing caste discrimination in higher education. His death revealed institutional bias—academic isolation, administrative apathy, and political persecution of Dalit student movements. It also exposed how liberal campuses reproduce caste hierarchies through unequal access to mentorship, funding, and academic networks. The nationwide mobilization under hashtags like #JusticeForRohithVemula challenged the myth of meritocracy and amplified marginalized voices through digital platforms.

Similarly, the Hathras case in Uttar Pradesh, involving the sexual assault and murder of a Dalit woman, highlighted the intersection of caste, gender, and state power. Media and civil society criticized the authorities for medical negligence and coercive control of the victim's family. The case underscored how caste patriarchy perpetuates sexual violence and institutional impunity, questioning the inconsistent application of the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

The Una flogging incident (2016) in Gujarat further triggered mass Dalit protests demanding dignity of labour and social equality. Movements like the *Dalit Asmita Yatra* rejected caste-based occupations, linking economic rights with social justice.

In recent years, debates on reservation policies, OBC sub-quotas, and caste-based electoral mobilization have intensified, with social media becoming a site of empowerment and polarization. According to NCRB data, caste-based crimes in education, employment, and public life remain persistent. Yet, the visibility of these issues through media and online activism signifies a more aware society striving to confront and dismantle the enduring structures of caste discrimination.

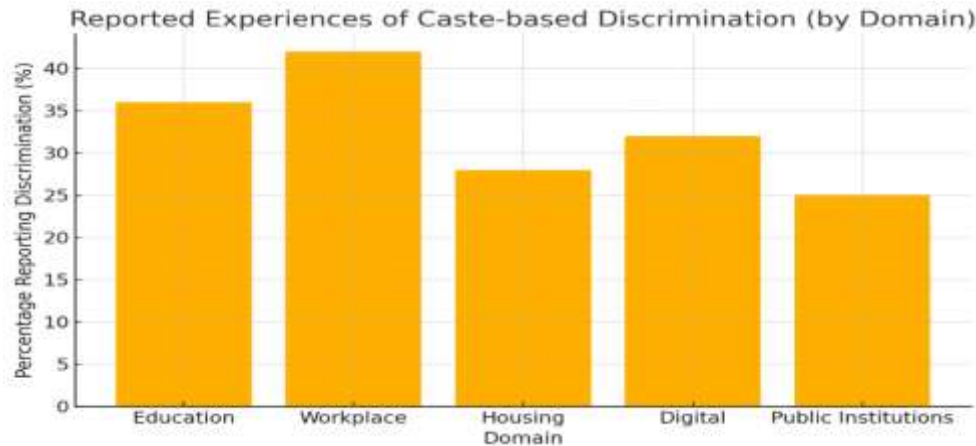
Discussion

The combination of the mixed-method survey and interviews creates a complicated and changing profile of caste and social inequality in modern India, showing not only the continuation of caste hierarchies, but how they are overlapped by class, education, and gender as well. The survey data with 300 respondents on the rural and urban location showed that caste discrimination is still a reality that is being experienced by many, although the ways in which it is visible and active depends on the place.

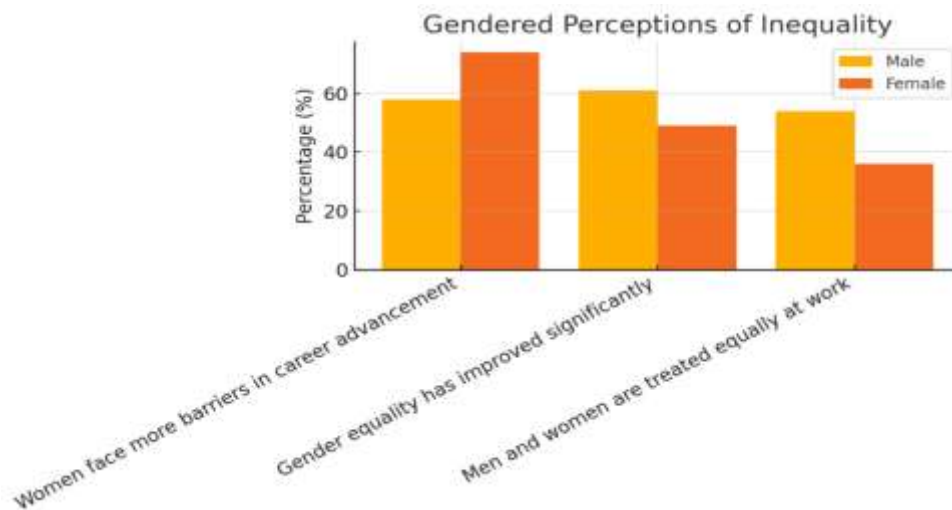


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The prevalence of caste-based discrimination in education, employment, or housing was very high amongst the respondents (approximately 46 per cent). But these discourses of discrimination were frequently nuanced: less frequently respondents discussed direct abuse or direct exclusion, but rather indicated signs of inequality: difference in how seniors treated them, inference at their incompetence, and being left out of a social or professional network. Some of the Dalit and OBC interviewees reported how they were denied equal opportunities even when they had comparably similar qualifications with the upper-caste counterparts. Those experiences validate the arguments made by such scholars as Dipankar Gupta or Surinder Jodhka: Indian caste is not eliminated in the modern institutions; it is only disguised with the usage of the meritocratic terminology.



Gender bias was also a cross-cutting dimension of equal importance. Both male and female respondents acknowledged the fact that the gender interacts with the caste to determine the opportunity. This intersection was very clear among lower-caste women. Approximately two-

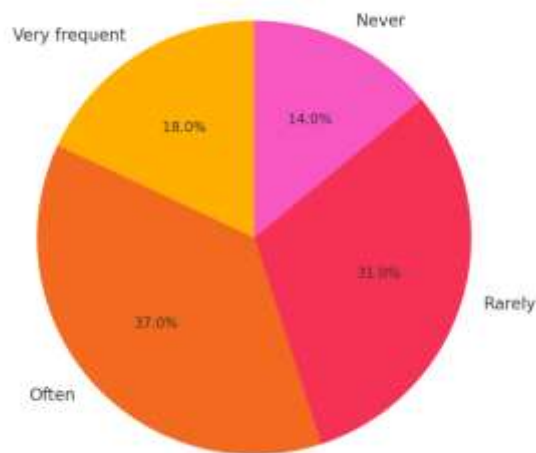


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thirds of the women surveyed said they were limited by the gender expectations in either education or vocation. Women who had to work and support their families said that they were not encouraged to pursue further education or career because of the socially imposed norms of young marriage or childcare. Female respondents in rural regions talked of yet another stigma of caste-specific jobs (domestic, sanitary, or farm chores) where women are both caste and patriarchally coerced. The prejudice in the workplace was still present even in urban and educated women: female participants said that their colleagues tended to doubt their abilities or consider them as secondary earners.

Perceived Frequency of Caste-based Comments Online



Men reported being less affected by gender discrimination but acknowledged that traditional masculinity often imposes economic responsibility, sometimes limiting their education. Notably, 58% of male respondents recognized that women face greater obstacles in advancing their careers, reflecting growing male awareness of gender inequality. However, focus group discussions revealed that many men viewed such bias as cultural or natural, illustrating how deeply patriarchy normalizes inequality. Cross-analysis of caste and gender showed Dalit and OBC women to be the most disadvantaged, with lower education, unstable employment, and greater exposure to bullying—supporting the intersectional arguments of scholars like Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege. Urban participants, especially from middle-income groups, believed caste bias had declined, yet their social circles remained caste-homogenous. Rural participants, conversely, saw caste hierarchy as a natural social order. In digital spaces, 55% identified online platforms as major sites of caste discrimination—through memes, trolling, and caste-based jokes—while 60% also viewed social media as empowering for marginalized voices, reflecting



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its dual role as both a site of humiliation and resistance. Regression analysis confirmed that caste, education, and occupation significantly predicted reported discrimination, with lower-caste and female respondents over twice as likely to report bias. Education had a mild mitigating effect but did not eliminate inequality. Overall, the findings show that caste and gender continue to structure everyday experiences through subtle, institutionalized forms of exclusion. Yet, increasing awareness, education, and digital activism—especially among youth and women—signal evolving resistance and a redefinition of equality, dignity, and justice in modern India.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to analyse caste as an active and changing social system and unveiled how these structures continue and change in the institutional, economic, political, cultural, spatial and digital arenas. Using a mixed-method design, it discovered that discrimination based on caste still determines the level of access of people to education, work, and dignity even in the modern and urban situations. The questionnaire validated the legacy of caste as well as the combination between caste and gender particularly in the Dalit and OBC women and the qualitative stories revealed subtle means by which the hierarchy remains in place in everyday life, regulations of respectability, and online communication.

The study is relevant to sociological knowledge as it makes a gap between classical concepts of social change and modern conditions of neoliberalism and digitalization. Its limitation, however, is limited in terms of sample size and geography with the concentration of the study on two locations. More intricate multi-state comparative research and longitudinal (panel) data would give a closer picture of changing caste identities with time. The platform audits should also be covered in future studies to gain insights into the bias of the algorithms and digital casteism in the online environment. Nevertheless, the research highlights an important point, i.e., these constraints notwithstanding the fact that the caste in India did not vanish, it only evolved and took different shapes in the markets, institutions, and media but encountered fresh forms of resistance and assertion.

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Appendices

A1: Survey questionnaire

Instruction: Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

1. People of all castes are treated equally in educational institutions.
2. My caste has influenced the kind of job opportunities available to me.
3. It is acceptable for people to marry outside their caste.
4. Caste-based discrimination is still common in workplaces.
5. Political leaders often use caste identities to gain votes.
6. Social media has helped reduce caste discrimination in society.
7. I have personally faced or witnessed caste-based harassment online.
8. Reservation policies are essential to ensure equality among castes.
9. In urban areas, caste no longer matters in daily interactions.
10. People from lower castes have to work harder to get the same recognition as others.