

Social Inequality and Exclusion

I. Understanding Social Inequality and Exclusion

Social inequality and exclusion are not merely individual problems but are **social phenomena** because they are about groups rather than individuals.

While personal effort and talent matter, "all other things are not equal" in society; group differences explain why some have greater life chances than others. Sociologists distinguish between three forms of capital that determine a person's social position:

economic capital (material assets and income), **cultural capital** (educational qualifications and status), and **social capital** (networks of contacts and social associations).

These forms of capital often overlap; for instance, economic capital can be used to acquire cultural capital through expensive higher education.

Social Stratification is the systematic pattern of inequalities between different groups of people. It has three key features:

1. It is a characteristic of society, not just a function of individual differences.
2. It **persists over generations**, with social positions often being **ascribed** (inherited from parents).
3. It is supported by **patterns of belief or ideology**, such as the concepts of purity and pollution that justify the caste system.

II. Caste Prejudice, Scheduled Castes, and Other Backward Classes

1. The Caste System as a Discriminatory Institution

The caste system is a unique social institution that legitimises and enforces humiliating, exclusionary, and exploitative practices. Historically, it was defined by **hereditary occupation**, **endogamy** (marriage within the group), and a strict **hierarchy** based on ritual rank.

- **Prejudice and Discrimination:** **Prejudice** refers to pre-conceived opinions or "pre-judgements" held by members of one group towards another, often based on hearsay rather than evidence. **Discrimination** refers to actual behavior, such as practices that disqualify members of a group from opportunities like jobs or housing.
- **Stereotypes:** These are fixed, inflexible characterisations of a group (e.g., viewing an entire community as "lazy" or "cunning"). Many Indian stereotypes were colonial creations, such as the classification of certain groups as "martial races".

2. Untouchability and the Dalit Movement

Untouchability is an extreme form of the caste system prescribing stringent social sanctions against those at the bottom of the scale.

It has three main dimensions: **exclusion** (prohibition from sharing water or religious worship), **humiliation-subordination**, and **exploitation** (forced labor).

- **The Term 'Dalit':** Derived from words meaning "**downtrodden**" or "broken," the term conveys a sense of an oppressed people and was popularised by the **Dalit Panthers** in the 1970s.
- **Leaders:** Key reformers included **Jyotiba Phule**, who founded the Satyashodhak Samaj; **Ayyankali**, who fought for Dalit access to schools and roads in Kerala; and **B.R. Ambedkar**, the chief architect of the Constitution who spent his life fighting caste injustice.

3. Other Backward Classes (OBCs)

The **OBCs** are defined negatively as those who are neither part of the "forward" castes nor the Dalits. The Constitution refers to them as "**socially and educationally backward classes**".

- **Rural vs. Urban:** While upper OBCs may be dominant in rural sectors due to landholding, the situation of **urban OBCs** is often much worse, closer to that of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes.
- **Reservations:** The early 1990s saw the extension of special reservation programmes to the OBCs, most recently through the **93rd Amendment** in 2006 for higher education.

- **Resource Alienation:** Large-scale projects like the **Sardar Sarovar dam** on the Narmada and the **Polavaram dam** on the Godavari have displaced hundreds of thousands of Adivasis.
- **The 'Diku' Factor:** In regions like Jharkhand, Adivasis shared a common resentment toward '**dikus**' (outsiders like migrant traders and moneylenders) who grabbed local wealth.

2. Tribal Movements and Statehood

Unlike Dalit movements, tribal struggles were often concentrated in contiguous areas, allowing them to demand separate states.

- **Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh:** The formation of these states in 2000 was the result of over a century of resistance.
- **Identity Assertion:** The emergence of an **educated Adivasi middle class** has led to new assertions of identity based on culture, tradition, and control over resources.



III. Marginalisation of Tribal Communities

1. Historical Context and Displacement

Tribal communities, or **Adivasis** ("original inhabitants"), were historically shaped by their distinctive forest habitats. However, the process of development in India has often acted as a form of **internal colonialism**, alienating tribes from their land and resources.

IV. The Struggle for Women's Equality

1. Gender as a Social Construct

Sociologists argue that gender inequality is **socially produced**, not a biological given. If women were biologically unfit to lead, **matrilineal societies** like the Khasis of Meghalaya or the Nairs of Kerala would not have functioned for centuries.

2. Key Reform Movements

- **19th Century Reform:** Early efforts were often led by western-educated middle-class men like **Raja Rammohun Roy** (anti-sati) and **M.G. Ranade** (widow remarriage).
- **Women's Voices:** Women also fought for their own equality. **Tarabai Shinde** wrote

Stree Purush Tulana (1882) to protest the double standards of a male-dominated society. **Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain** wrote *Sultana's Dream* (1905), a science fiction piece where gender roles were reversed.

- **Savitri Bai Phule:** She was the first headmistress of India's first school for girls in Pune and devoted her life to educating those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy.

3. Contemporary Challenges

Modern women's movements focus on issues like **representation in popular media, land rights, and domestic violence**. A major new challenge is the sharp fall in the **child sex ratio**, reflecting an implicit social bias against the girl child. The '**Beti-Bachao, Beti-Padhao**' programme is a state initiative aimed at addressing this.

V. The Protection of Religious Minorities

1. Defining Minority Groups

In sociology, a **minority** is not just a numerical distinction but implies a sense of **relative disadvantage** and **group solidarity**. Religious minorities need special protection because of the demographic dominance of the majority community.

- **Diversity of Minorities:** Muslims are the largest religious minority in India (14.2%), followed by Christians (2.3%), Sikhs (1.7%), Buddhists (0.7%), and Jains (0.4%).
- **Regional Concentration:** Some minorities are majorities in specific states, such as Sikhs in Punjab or Christians in Nagaland and Mizoram.

2. Constitutional Framework

The Indian Constitution provides strong protections for minorities to ensure a united, democratic nation:

- **Article 29:** Protects the right of any section of citizens to conserve their distinct language, script, or culture.
- **Article 30:** Guarantees the right of all minorities to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice.

3. Communalism and Secularism

Communalism in India refers to aggressive chauvinism based on religious identity, where one's own group is seen as the only legitimate one.

In contrast, Indian **secularism** is understood as the state showing equal respect to all religions and not discriminating against any.



VI. Caring for the Differently Abled

1. Social Construction of Disability

The "disabled" are rendered so not just by physical or mental impairment, but because **society is built in a manner that does not cater to their needs**. For example, buildings without ramps disable those who use wheelchairs.

- **Cultural Bias:** In India, disability is often viewed through the lens of **retribution for past karma**, leading to the disabled being seen as victims or "becharas".

- **Nomenclature:** There has been a shift from negative terms like "retarded" or "blind" to more sensitive terms like "**visually impaired**" or "**differently abled**".

2. Disability and Poverty

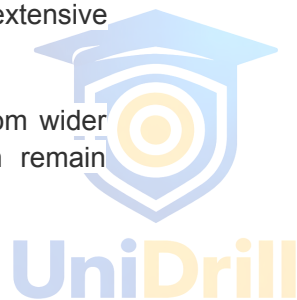
There is a close relationship between disability and poverty. Malnutrition, inadequate immunisation, and overcrowded homes increase the incidence of disability among the poor.

Conversely, disability can exacerbate poverty by increasing economic strain on a family.

3. Recognition and Rights

Rights for the disabled have been recognised only recently. The **Census 2011** made significant efforts to collect better data on disability through extensive deliberation with civil society.

However, disability is still largely absent from wider educational discourse, and students often remain segregated into separate streams.



VII. Role of the State and Civil Society

The **Constitution of India** is the primary vehicle for social change, providing the legal basis for social justice.

- **State Initiatives:** The system of **reservations** in legislatures, government jobs, and educational institutions is a key state initiative to compensate for historical discrimination. Laws like the **Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989)** provide legal protection against violence for SCs and STs.
- **Civil Society:** This refers to the sphere of voluntary associations, NGOs, and movements that lie beyond the family, state, and market. Civil society organisations take up diverse issues, from tribal land rights to campaigns against violence against women.