

HISTORICAL REVIEW OF SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN SOUTH ASIA: A FOCUS ON INDIA

REVISÃO HISTÓRICA DAS DESIGUALDADES SOCIAIS NO SUL DA ÁSIA: UM FOCO NA
ÍNDIA

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ABSTRACT

The concept of social classification in South Asia, particularly in India, can be examined from various perspectives and encompasses a range of definitions. One context for this social division can be traced to religious origins, where members of society are categorized into several groups, each with specific duties. The caste system has served as a significant social structure in Indian society for centuries, shaping social relations. Debates and explanations regarding its origins and characteristics have been prevalent. Most social scientists believe that this system functions as a pervasive ideology that governs other relationships within society, establishing a social hierarchy based on the principles of purity and pollution. This article employs secondary analysis to investigate social inequalities and the issues arising from them. The importance of examining this topic is evident, as many economic and social disparities in India stem from this structure. The article will attempt to briefly discuss and analyze various forms of social inequality and the caste system in India.

Keywords: Social structure, Caste, Social Inequalities, India, South East Asia

RESUMO

O conceito de classificação social no sul da Ásia e especialmente na Índia pode ser examinado de diferentes pontos de vista e inclui uma variedade de definições diferentes. Um dos contextos dessa divisão social pode ser considerado de origem religiosa, no qual os membros da sociedade são divididos em vários grupos e os deveres são determinados para cada um desses grupos. O sistema de castas como um sistema de relações sociais tem sido uma questão social importante na sociedade indiana há séculos como uma importante estrutura social. Sobre a origem de suas características e seu papel na sociedade indiana, debates e explicações têm sido levantados. A maioria dos pensadores das ciências sociais acredita que esse sistema é uma ideologia generalizada que controla outras relações na sociedade e tem uma hierarquia social baseada no princípio da pureza e da poluição. Utilizando-se da análise secundária, este artigo tem como objetivo investigar as desigualdades sociais e os problemas delas decorrentes. A importância de examinar esta questão não é escondida de ninguém; porque muitas desigualdades econômicas e sociais neste país surgem dessa estrutura. Será feita uma tentativa de discutir e examinar brevemente todas as formas de desigualdade social e sistema de castas na Índia.

Palavras-chave: Estrutura social, Casta, Desigualdades Sociais, Índia, Sudeste Asiático.

1 INTRODUCTION

Inequality exists in all human societies. Even in the simplest communities—where disparities in wealth and property are minimal—inequalities persist. These may include differences between men and women, as well as between the young and the elderly. Such disparities are best understood through the concept of social stratification, which refers to the structured forms of inequality within a society.

Social inequality generally encompasses differences among individuals in terms of their social position, lifestyle, rights, opportunities, rewards, and privileges. Throughout history, inequality has been a persistent and deeply rooted issue in human societies. From the earliest periods of civilization, it has sparked extensive discussion and debate about its causes, effects, and long-term consequences. Social inequality has historically taken various forms, including slavery, feudalism, social class divisions, and caste systems.

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One particularly enduring form of social inequality is the caste system, found primarily in South Asian countries, especially India. This article seeks to briefly and historically explore the underlying and often hidden dimensions of social inequality, with a focus on the Indian context. In India, in addition to economic class, race, ethnicity, gender, and the caste system, social segregation plays a key role in perpetuating inequality.

India is a culturally diverse country that has long been home to a rich tapestry of languages, religions, and traditions. These differences manifest in a variety of ways—including variations in lifestyle, land ownership, occupations, inheritance practices, legal structures, and civil rights. A portion of this diversity and stratification is rooted in British colonialism, which profoundly reshaped India's socio-cultural and economic landscape. Social classification systems—particularly those related to caste—are deeply embedded in Indian culture, leading to the emergence of distinct and hierarchical social groups.

Numerous external and internal forces, including foreign invasions, migration, environmental factors, the Mongol presence, and British colonial rule (Satpathy, 2015), have also shaped India's social fabric. As in other societies, social classes in India are defined by shared values, levels of respect, cultural practices, wealth, possessions, and social etiquette. Alongside these classes exists a rigid caste system, a closed structure in which individuals are born into a particular caste and are typically confined to it for life. Because inter-caste marriage is generally discouraged or outright forbidden, individuals have little to no opportunity to move beyond their assigned caste (Ghurye, 1957).

There is broad scholarly agreement that class-based systems are more flexible and open than caste-based systems. In a class structure, movement from one class to another is not restricted by religious, governmental, or cultural norms. Social mobility—whether through education, hard work, or marriage—is possible. In contrast, the caste system offers no such mobility and strictly enforces social boundaries.

Moreover, natural events such as floods, droughts, and environmental shifts have historically played a role in altering societal structures, redistributing power, and affecting economic stability. These environmental changes often worsen existing inequalities, disproportionately impacting marginalized and lower-caste communities.

Despite these long-standing challenges, India has undergone profound social changes over time. The struggle for independence from colonial rule served not only to challenge the caste system and rigid gender roles but also to galvanize efforts toward social justice and equality. Today, a combination of legislation, affirmative action, and grassroots activism continues to address persistent inequalities and advocate for the rights of underrepresented groups.

In conclusion, the evolution of social inequality in India is the result of a complex interplay of historical legacies, cultural diversity, and contemporary challenges. Although past invasions and colonial rule have left lasting imprints, the country's ongoing efforts toward social reform demonstrate a continued pursuit of equity and inclusion.

2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this article is to explore and analyze the concept of inequality and socio-economic structures in India, with a particular emphasis on the dimensions of social inequality associated with the caste system. In certain cases, these dimensions differ significantly from other forms of social inequality, such as those based on social class. By contrasting these various frameworks, the study seeks to clarify the broader concept of inequality within social studies, particularly in relation to the historical and contemporary manifestations of caste-based and class-based disparities.

2.1. Specific purpose

- To understand the indicators of social inequalities in India.
- To explore the differences between social inequalities in India and those in other countries.

The current research was conducted with the aim of answering the following questions:

1. How was the class system in India formed?
2. Is the caste system present throughout all of South Asia?
3. Is the social class system in India the same as the class systems in other countries?

This article has tried to answer the mentioned questions by presenting its issues along with the goals that will be reached at the end.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research method employed in this article is descriptive-analytical. By examining the views of various theorists, it is evident that inequality must be understood in relation to temporal, spatial, economic, social, cultural, political, and ideological contexts—that is, within the broader framework of the prevailing societal system. This is because inequality is inherently a relative, dynamic, and normative concept. To interpret and justify the findings, the study draws upon theoretical frameworks and arguments found in existing literature. Data collection was conducted through documentary analysis, involving the review of published materials on social inequalities in India. This included books, academic journals, scholarly articles, and research studies that explore the different dimensions of inequality within social class and caste systems.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Inequalities exist in all types of human societies. Even in the simplest cultures, where differences in wealth and possessions are virtually nonexistent, inequality persists among people, whether based on gender, age, or other factors. For instance, an individual may hold a higher status than others due to exceptional hunting skills or because they are believed to have special access to ancestral spirits. Sociologists describe these inequalities through the concept of social stratification, which refers to structural inequalities between different groups of people. Stratification can be linked to the geological layering of the earth's crust, with societies structured into hierarchical "classes," where the more privileged are at the top and the less privileged near the bottom. While there is no consensus among scholars regarding the emergence of social classes in India, two general perspectives on the formation of social classes in India can be distinguished by examining the research conducted in this area.

The first perspective views social classes in Indian society as social and historical necessities, shaped by factors such as ethnicity and race, occupation and profession, and marriage. Most of these studies stem from the work of sociologists, particularly Western Indologists, who trace the origins of social classes to sociological and historical issues.

The second perspective, rooted in Indian traditional and religious beliefs, attributes the formation of social classes in India to the will of God, as emphasized in Indian scriptures. Both viewpoints will be examined separately. Most researchers consider caste to be a unique community or group brought together by hereditary commonalities, sharing social characteristics such as manners and occupation. However, some scholars view it as a collection of families and groups that share a common name and a shared human or divine historical background.

I will describe some important characteristics of caste here, but a more detailed analysis will be provided later in the article. Key aspects associated with castes include the belief in a common origin and root that unites all members, as well as their traditional occupations and professions. Other characteristics include endogamy, a shared name, similar jobs, and a common ethnicity—all of which contribute to the formation of a homogeneous and cohesive society. This is why there are significant restrictions on marriage between different castes, as well as limitations on food, employment, and mobility between castes (Samimi et al., 2019).

In the religious texts of the *Dharma Veda*, the formation of social classification is also addressed. These texts divide people into different groups, each with its own value and place in society. According to these texts, this division is necessary for a religious society and is believed to be divinely approved. Ancient Indian scriptures suggest that the four main castes originated from the mouth, arms, thighs, and legs of Brahma. Therefore, there is an organic correlation among the castes. Each caste is assigned a specific duty at birth. To maintain a stable and harmonious social order, it is essential that castes remain unchanged, just as the organs of the human body have fixed roles. Any alteration in the structure of castes is considered undesirable (Ghurye, 1957). However, it should be noted that changes in the social classification structure of India have been observed at both the village

and urban levels across different periods. These changes can be categorized into several stages: the precolonial stage, the colonial stage, and the postcolonial stage.

There are also important perspectives on social inequality in India. The first perspective holds that caste is primarily found in the Indian subcontinent and is a unique social phenomenon of social stratification. Proponents of this view consider caste to be a Hindu social construct, asserting that the essence of caste exists among all Hindus. Key characteristics of this perspective include heredity, hierarchy, exclusion, purity, and contamination. Scholars such as B.R. Ambedkar, Max Weber, Hutton, Bougle, Leach, Berreman, Appadurai, and Dumont have supported this viewpoint.

The second perspective posits that the caste system is not only present among Hindus but also exists in other societies and countries. This view claims that caste exemplifies rigid social stratification, where power or privilege is allocated according to a vertical ritual hierarchy. According to some Western scholars, race and class serve as the primary means of social stratification, while in Arab countries, the term "quom" is analogous to caste. This perspective can be found in the works of scholars such as Beteille, Barth, Bailey, Pocock, and Marriott.

Finally, there is a perspective that emphasizes the possibility of social and economic mobility. Proponents of this view argue that if caste still persists in India, there must be underlying truths that have yet to be revealed. Therefore, there is a need to seek new approaches and strategies to explore the hidden aspects of caste (Kumar & Kumar, 2022).

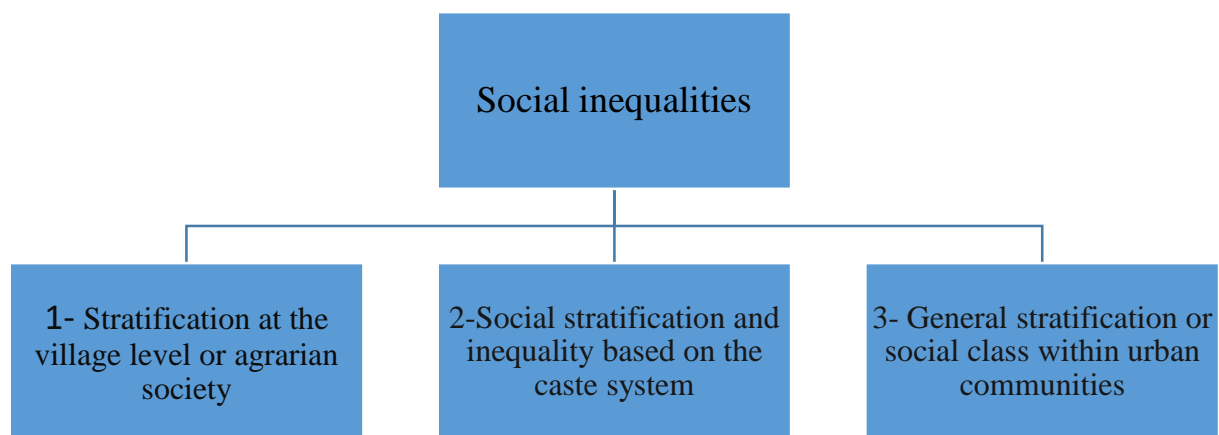
India, a nation with a thriving economy and a rich cultural legacy, is grappling with significant issues of economic inequality. Despite affirmative action policies aimed at addressing these disparities, long-standing differences in wealth, income, and access to resources persist to this day (Tariq & Iqbal, 2023). The authors of this article, while respecting the views of the aforementioned scholars, emphasize that the social classification of the caste system in India differs from social classifications in other countries and societies. Some characteristics within the castes are distinct from those found in social classifications based on race and ethnicity.

According to data from 2011-2012, inequality in India is not only significantly higher than in other countries with similar levels of economic development, but it has also been increasing over time, particularly since the early 1990s. While the pace of rising inequality appears to have slowed after 2004-2005, disparities continue to be stark and visible across Indian society. The available data also highlights the role of class, gender, region, and religion in perpetuating inequality. Unlike the 1980s, when economic growth was accompanied by a reduction in inequality, the period after 1991 clearly marks a rise in inequality across all sectors. Although the pace of inequality increased more slowly after 2004-2005—the same period that saw the fastest poverty reduction in three decades—this does not signify a fundamental shift in the growth model that fueled rising inequality after 1991 (Himanshu, 2019).

4 DISCUSSIONS AND ANALYSIS

Although the Indian government established a constitution after gaining independence that prohibits discrimination based on caste, social classification remains deeply entrenched in the country's historical and

religious foundations. As a result, these divisions continue to influence nearly all aspects of daily life. According to the Constitution of India, all citizens are guaranteed equal rights and legal protections, including access to education and the freedom to pursue any occupation, regardless of caste. However, despite governmental efforts to eliminate caste-based discrimination, social inequality persists, largely due to its deep historical roots and cultural significance. This article will briefly explore the historical background of social classification in Indian society, examining social stratification through three primary dimensions.



SOURCE: AUTHORS

5 A: STRATIFICATION AT THE VILLAGE LEVEL OR AGRARIAN SOCIETY

The structure of rural social classification in India has evolved continuously over time, with each regime and policy contributing to its transformation. While traditional Indian society was originally organized along caste lines, the onset of British colonial rule brought significant changes that gradually disrupted this structure and gave rise to new forms of classification (Rodolfo, 1975).

When examining inequality in India, it is essential to analyze the social stratification within the agricultural sector. This aspect holds particular importance in sociological studies, as agriculture remains the backbone of the Indian economy, with a substantial portion of the population dependent on it for their livelihoods. The agrarian class structure in India is marked by stark inequalities, including the unequal distribution of land, disparities in access to agricultural resources, and significant wealth gaps among different social groups.

Malik	Kisans	Mazdoors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These are the big owners and landowners who spread the lands in the villages. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This group consisted of small landowners, but their land was enough for their survival and livelihood. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This group was those who did not have land and they lived through the wages of providing food and shelter.

SOURCE: AUTHORS

6 THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN DIFFERENT PERIODS

Factors	17 th century	18 th century	19 th century	first half of 20 th century
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic structure • Dependency • Accumulation • capital/savings • Accumulated • Inequality system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agriculture • Dependent • Spent wealth on luxury. • Caste system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agriculture • Dependent • Spent wealth on luxury. • Caste system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agriculture • Intensification of Dependency • accumulated wealth was partly transferred to England • Caste system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agriculture and somewhat industries • Intensification of Dependency • accumulated wealth was partly transferred to England • Cast system

SOURCE: KHORASANI AND HASHEMI, 2011

Given the vastness and diversity of India, social stratification within village communities varies significantly across regions. In many rural areas, the agrarian class structure can generally be categorized into four main groups: landowners, rich farmers, middle farmers, and poor farmers. At the top of this hierarchy are the Zamindars, who own large tracts of land and wield substantial economic and political influence within their localities. Below them are the rich farmers, who own comparatively smaller landholdings but still enjoy a degree

of economic stability and social standing. Middle farmers, who possess modest plots of land, often find themselves particularly vulnerable to economic shifts and market fluctuations. At the lowest level are the poor farmers, many of whom are landless laborers working on the fields of wealthier landowners. This group represents the most marginalized and exploited segment within the rural agrarian hierarchy. In discussing social classification in Indian villages, the prominent scholar Utsa Patnaik offers a compelling description of independent middle peasants, which is explored below:

Landlord	Rich Peasant	Independent middle peasants	Poor Peasant
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Capitalist• Feudal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Proto-bourgeois• Proto-feudal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• They have assets yielding 1-2 times household requirements. They employ principally family labour and may sometimes engage in wage labour for others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Agricultural labourer operating land• Petty tenant

SOURCE: LATA, 2020

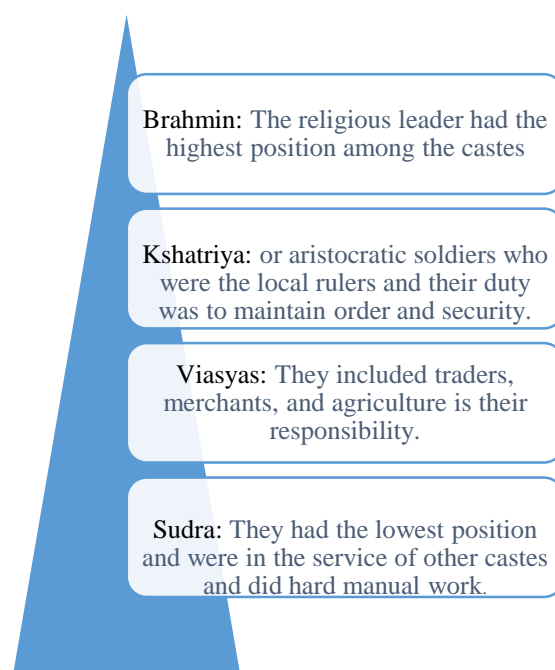
According to Utsa Patnaik, landowners occupy an extreme position, relying heavily on mechanized equipment and exclusively on hired labor. They make up less than 1% of the population but own 11% of the land. Middle peasants can be classified into three types: rich peasants and middle peasants together constitute 15% of families, holding 75% of land ownership. Wealthy peasants rely on hired labor, often adding family members during peak seasons. Middle peasants depend on family labor, sometimes even employing themselves. Poor peasants face unstable land needs, relying on the income generated by their workforce. Landless workers, on the other hand, depend solely on manual labor for their income and make up about 25 to 30 percent of rural households. There is also an unspecified class of large landowners, comprising a few families with holdings of over thirty acres. I question whether it would even be useful to categorize them as "capitalist farmers" or "feudal landowners" (Mencher, 1974).

Additionally, in some provinces, such as Haryana, there is another structure of agricultural classification in villages, which includes big landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, small peasants, and agricultural laborers. There is also an alternative classification: big bourgeoisie, medium bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, semi-proletariat, and pure proletariat. Another notable aspect that distinguishes Indian society from other societies is social stratification and inequality based on caste. The caste system in India significantly influences the agricultural class structure. Upper-class landlords and wealthy farmers exercise control over poorer, lower-class farmers. These

lower-class farmers face various forms of discrimination and exploitation, including low wages, poor working conditions, and the denial of basic rights.

This period in rural areas shares some similarities with the medieval feudal systems of countries such as France, Italy, Germany, and later England. In the feudal system, each vassal was accountable to the lord. The class structure during the feudal period was relatively straightforward due to its internal stratification, featuring a detailed hierarchy within classes and groups. This stratification and hierarchy in European feudal society were precise and orderly. For example, among the nobles, clergy, and guilds, property owners were governed by rigid, well-defined pyramids. The categories, strata, and groups exhibited significant differences in terms of rights and privileges. The most important hierarchy and structure of social stratification during the feudal period included the following: the king, feudal lords, knights, serfs, and landless serfs (Ghafarifard, 2014). The main difference between social inequalities in India and Europe is that Brahmins constituted a distinct social class with hereditary wealth for themselves, their families, and their children. In contrast, the Catholic clergy had to replenish its ranks from other classes due to the celibacy of priests. This necessity contributed to the emergence of religious institutions and organizations in European society, such as monasteries and bishoprics, which amassed considerable property from the clergy and led to the development of complex economic and financial laws (Piketty, 2020).

Caste refers to a closed social stratification system in which members cannot freely move from one social level to another. A person born into a specific caste must spend their entire life within that caste. Since marriage between different castes is prohibited, there is no opportunity for a member of a caste to transcend their assigned caste.



SOURCE: GHURYE, 1957

BRAHMIN CASTE	The Brahmins, or religious leaders and teachers, hold the highest position in the caste hierarchy. They are said to have been created from the mouth of Brahma, and they are responsible for the order and management of society.
KSHATRIYA CASTE	The Kshatriyas are elite soldiers and local rulers whose duty is to maintain order and security. They are believed to have been created from the arms of Brahma.
VAISHYA CASTE	The Vaishyas, created from the thighs of Brahma, are responsible for trade, commerce, and agriculture.
SHUDRA CASTE	The Shudras, who were created from the feet of Brahma, occupy the lowest position in the caste hierarchy. They serve the other castes and perform hard manual labor. They are often not considered religiously pure.
UNTOUCHABLES	The Untouchables, who are regarded as impure, hold the lowest social rank. They are considered outside the caste system, deprived of all social rights, and viewed as impure (Ghurye, 1957).

SOURCE: AUTHORS

7. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

For the Indian caste system, they mention six characteristics as follows:

1. The division of society into certain groups whose membership is hereditary.
2. There is a social hierarchy in which the Brahmin is at the top.
3. Prohibition of sexual relations with classes outside the caste.
4. Prejudice and religious affiliation in every caste
5. Job restrictions
6. Intragroup marriage

8. C: GENERAL STRATIFICATION OR SOCIAL CLASS WITHIN URBAN COMMUNITIES

The social structure in most societies is shaped by a multitude of small or large, active or inactive social gaps. An important issue is how to address these gaps within the social system. In India, many historical gaps have emerged over different periods and through the formation of various governments. From ancient regimes to contemporary times, the performance of governments and the balance of social forces in each period have led to social gaps at different levels, each characterized by distinct criteria of social inequality. India faces one of the highest levels of income inequality in the world, with significant disparities between social classes and between rural and urban areas in terms of income and wealth. The presence of these social inequalities at various levels has had a profound impact on Indian society.

As noted above, the criteria for social inequalities differ across levels, and the criteria for inequality in urban areas also differ from those in rural areas. In this regard, Kapur (2023) describes the social class within urban communities as consisting mainly of capitalists (both commercial and industrial), the corporate sector, the professional class, petty traders, shopkeepers, and the working class.

The following types of inequality have been particularly evident within Indian society:

CONSUMPTION INEQUALITY: In India, there are significant differences in the consumption patterns across various socioeconomic strata. While the middle class is expanding and has access to a wide range of products and services, many people still struggle to meet their basic needs. These deeply ingrained disparities are reflected in the consumption gap, where the wealthy can afford far more than what is necessary for survival, while the impoverished are often constrained by their financial circumstances.

INCOME INEQUALITY: Since the economy was liberalized in the early 1990s, India's income gap has significantly increased. Rural areas and low-skilled workers have seen stagnation or even a drop in income levels, while some industries and metropolitan areas have enjoyed fast income growth. While high-income individuals and business sectors have witnessed huge increases in wages, a large segment of the population has been trapped in cycles of poverty as a result of this wealth disparity.

WEALTH INEQUALITY: A small minority of the population in India controls a large portion of the country's assets, resulting in a highly skewed distribution of wealth. The poorer segments of society have fewer opportunities to accumulate wealth because of this wealth gap, which is frequently passed down through generations. Furthermore, wealthy people and metropolitan areas continue to have a disproportionately high concentration of asset ownership, including real estate, housing, and financial interests.

HEALTH INEQUALITY: There are deep disparities in access to quality health care in India, with significant differences between urban and rural areas as well as among different income groups. While cities may have well-funded private health institutions, the rural population often lacks basic health care facilities. Public health centers are usually underfunded, which leads to a decrease in the quality of health services for the poor. Additionally, social factors such as caste, gender, and region exacerbate health disparities, and marginalized communities face worse health outcomes.

EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY: Access to education is also a major issue in India. Only the wealthy and elites can afford to study in schools and universities that meet global standards, while the majority of the Indian population, especially lower-income groups and rural communities, face barriers to accessing quality education (Himanshu, 2019). The vast majority of children are covered by public school services. However, most of these schools lack the necessary facilities, resources, and proper infrastructure. As a result, educational progress is closely linked to socio-economic status. The perpetuation of poverty cycles and the limitation of upward mobility for disadvantaged groups are directly related to these disparities.

9. CONCLUSION

In summary, as discussed throughout this article and supported by relevant data, class structure and social stratification in India represent a highly complex and multilayered system, present in both urban environments and rural agricultural settings—particularly in relation to caste. This system is marked by unequal land distribution, limited access to resources, and disparities in wealth. These inequalities stem from structural imbalances: the uneven allocation of land in rural villages, wealth concentration in urban areas, and persistent caste-based social hierarchies.

What distinguishes social inequality in India from that in other societies is the unique and enduring influence of the caste system, along with more recent factors such as globalization, liberalization, and climate change. While substantial changes have taken place in the social structure over time—especially due to agrarian reforms and the Green Revolution—inequality and exploitation remain significant challenges in rural areas. Addressing these issues requires stronger policy interventions. The Government of India has a critical

responsibility to safeguard the interests of small and marginal farmers, ensuring equitable access to land, resources, and economic opportunities to improve their living conditions.

It is evident that the caste system in India—and more broadly across South Asia—is undergoing a process of transformation. This evolving system offers valuable insights into the dynamics of social and individual inequality, and contributes to broader discussions on reconciliation, coexistence, and social justice at both regional and global levels.

Finally, studies have shown that historically, India's agrarian class structure was deeply rooted in patterns of land ownership, with wealthy landowning castes forming the agrarian elite, and lower castes serving as landless laborers. However, economic liberalization and social change have increasingly redefined class relations around market forces and economic capital, rather than strictly caste-based hierarchies. While land tenure is in decline and contract labor systems are expanding, traditional notions such as caste purity are also gradually eroding. Nevertheless, rural India still faces a long road ahead in achieving equitable opportunities and inclusive growth for all communities.

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