

Caste, Class & Gender: A Trilogy

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Abstract

Gender and Caste-based discrimination have plagued India's women for eons. Through the course of this paper, we shall attempt to dive into the lives of India's lower caste women and analyse their lives through a social and economic lens. We will look at different factors, such as education, access to basic amenities, society, freedom, etc. to highlight the inequality that all women, but especially lower caste women face in spite of measures supposedly taken by the government. We will be looking at both rural as well as urban India for our analysis. We will culminate this paper with a brief look at some shortcomings.

Introduction

Liberté, égalité, fraternité- are ideals enshrined in the constitution of India. In applying these great ideals, various governments across periods have brought up policies, schemes, measures to ensure that all its citizens experience these ideals to its fullest. While decisions are mostly taken in good faith- they often don't always solve problems. These problems not only tarnish India's reputation but also hinder the country's scope for economic growth and development.

One such problem that continues even today is the nation's treatment of its women.

A 2018 report by the McKinsey Global Institute shows that India could add up to \$770 billion—more than 18%—to its GDP by 2025, simply by giving equal opportunities to women. Unfortunately, India has seen a long history of women not enjoying the same rights and privileges as men. From parochial social practices such as *Sati* and child marriages to programs and campaigns aimed at educating the girl child- women in India have seen their share of ups and downs. One highly visible indicator of this is the terribly skewed sex ratio in most Indian states- especially the Northern states. This ratio stems from the country's age old preference for the male child, resulting in not only the distortion of the gender ratio but also in the reduction of resources available for the female child (underprivileged families may tend to divert funds to educate their male child whilst wholly ignoring their girl child).

This inequality also displays itself in the workplace where India is infamous for women having fewer professional jobs than their male counterparts. As per research backed by McKinsey, 97% of all female workers in India are active in the informal sector, in low paying activities and domestic work.

As it may appear, women do face various forms of hardship and discrimination in India- something that is immensely affecting the nation's reputed culture and economic development. Nonetheless, many claim that certain indicators have shown an incredible level of involvement of women in many sectors, leading to considerable improvement in reaching gender inequality. We now have government involvement trying to come up with policies aimed at curbing gender inequality in India. In fact, it

is the result of such concerted efforts of people, policy and the country's changing mindset that India's women now see themselves living in better situations, with scope for improvement.

Now, in this discussion of women in India, we must ask ourselves one incredibly pressing question:

Do all women in India face the same struggles?

Or, in other words- even if the average Indian woman's life has gotten much better, can we just as easily call it better for *every* Indian woman?

Let's bring up a relatively new but highly talked about term- intersectionality. Coined in 1989 by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality serves to describe how characteristics such as race and gender 'intersect' and overlap. The term came to be what it is now because of the pressing need to broaden the reach of mainstream feminism to include the needs and wants of women from every race, section and class.

One widely provided example to describe the need for a discussion on intersectional feminism is of the dissimilarity in wages earned, in the United States, by men and women (for every dollar he makes, she makes 80 cents), and how this gap widens when women of different races enter the picture. For every dollar a man makes in the US, an Asian-American woman makes 85 cents, Caucasian woman makes 77 cents, an African-American woman makes 61 cents, Hispanic or Latina women make 53 cents and Native American women make 58 cents. In order to highlight such differences that go beyond gender and tackle the issue of inequality is why intersectionality and intersectional feminism is so widely talked about in contemporary politics, and it is for the same reason that our focus shall now turn to intersectionality in the Indian framework.

Social Factors:

Education

From families marrying their daughters off instead of allowing them to be educated to policies like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, female education has come a long way in India.

Literacy Rate

According to the 68th NSS round, the overall literacy rate in India (considering those above the age of 5) was 74.1%. This essentially means that 74.1% of Indians were able to both read and write and comprehend a simple message in at least one language. At the all-India level, the estimated literacy rate was the highest among those in the 'general' category (83.2%), followed by OBC (72.8%), SC (67.4%) and then ST (64.8%).

A similar trend is followed for female education. More men in India are literate than women. As per the above mentioned NSSO data, female literacy rate was 17.5 percentage points lower than that of male literacy rate in rural India. This differential also varied across different social groups- with female literacy being 19 percentage points lower than that of male's for SCs, 18.5 percentage points lower for OBCs, 17.7 percentage points among the ST population and finally, 13.9 percentage points among the 'others' category.

Urban India saw female literacy rate being 16 percentage points lower than male literacy rate among the SC population, 14.3 percentage points among the ST population, 11.6 percentage points lower in OBCs and finally, only 6.8 percentage points lower in the general category.

Statement 3.12: Literacy rate among persons of age 5 years and above for different social groups in NSS 61st (July 2004 - June 2005), 66th (July 2009- June 2010) and 68th (July 2011-June 2012) rounds

social group	rural			urban			rural+urban		
	male	female	person	male	female	person	male	female	person
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
61 st round (2004-05)									
ST	603	395	501	828	658	743	624	420	524
SC	645	426	538	813	607	715	679	461	573
OBC	718	489	605	850	704	780	749	537	645
others	800	629	716	919	839	880	846	709	780
all (incl. n.r.)	712	502	609	875	751	816	755	566	663
66 th round (2009-10)									
ST	701	526	615	880	720	804	717	544	631
SC	721	523	623	831	691	764	743	555	654
OBC	780	575	679	886	753	822	808	621	716
others	842	685	767	935	860	900	879	757	821
all (incl. n.r.)	773	585	682	900	789	848	811	640	728
68 th round (2011-12)									
ST	714	537	627	872	729	806	733	558	648
SC	735	545	643	862	702	785	763	580	674
OBC	779	594	688	887	771	832	809	642	728
others	849	710	781	934	866	902	885	775	832
all (incl. n.r.)	780	605	694	903	799	853	816	661	741

Source- NSS Report No.563: Employment and unemployment situation among social groups in India

Despite the abysmal gender gap in literacy rates, the above table highlights that upon comparing literacy rates from 2004-05, it is made evident that female literacy rates (across all regions and social groups) are increasing much faster than male literacy rates- an indication that the gender gap is getting narrower.

Distribution by Educational Level

Now we look at discrepancies in education based on gender and caste. For this, we have looked at NSS data for people aged 15 and above.

The data shows that the percentage of those who were not at all literate was lowest among the unreserved population for both females and males in both rural and urban areas. Conversely, the same rates were highest among India's ST population for both males and females in rural areas, and highest among SCs regardless of gender in urban India. Even then, lower caste women have the worst share- with ST and SC women having the highest shares of illiteracy pan-India (56.7% of rural ST women and 34.4% of urban SC women were found to be illiterate) and the lowest rates of graduates and postgraduates (1 out of 1000 SC women in rural India was found to have a postgraduate degree as compared to 10 women from the general category). In short, levels of education all over India have been lower for women than for men, but women from lower castes (especially SC and ST women) have had it worse.

Attendance Rates

We will now look at current attendance rates, which is defined as the number of persons currently attending an educational institution per 1000 of a given population.

In rural areas, the current attendance rate among women aged between 5-14 years was the highest (at 91.5%) for those under the 'others' category, followed by 88.1% for OBCs, 87.9% for SC women and least for ST women (at 87.5%). In urban India, among females, the rate was the lowest among SC women (at 90.8%) and highest among the non SC/ST/OBC women (at 95.1%).

Among women in the age group 15-19 years, we see a dramatic decline in current attendance rates- especially for women. This is perhaps due to factors such as poverty (due to which families are unable to afford senior secondary or higher education), bias towards educating the male child, or early marriages of females. In rural areas, the current attendance rate among women aged between 15-19 years followed a similar pattern to the previous age group- the highest (at 63.1%) was for those under the 'others' category, followed by 55.1% for OBCs, 50.2% for SC women and least for ST women (at 46%). In urban India, among females, the rate was the lowest among SC women (at 64.3%) and highest among the non SC/ST/OBC women (at 75.1%).

These values are even lower for women aged between 20-24 years, with rates being as low as 6% for rural-living ST women and as high as 15.6% for rural-living women under the 'others' category. One anomaly to this pattern appears in the rates of urban women in this age group where while the highest rates are of women under 'others' (at 32.3%), **ST women** come next (at 27.4%), followed by OBC (21.3%). SC women still have the lowest current attendance rates (at 18.4%).

Health & Demography

India's Dalit population is lagging in demographic transition (*Mukherjee, Sabharwal-2015*). Hence, fertility and mortality rates in all age groups are higher in this social group as compared to the non-SC/ST population. Also extremely high are infant and child mortality rates, as indicated in the table below.

	SC	ST	OBC	Others	Total
Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)	66.4	62.1	61.1	55.7	57.0
Neo-Natal Mortality Rate (NMR)	46.3	39.9	42.1	38.1	39.0
Child Mortality Rate (CMR)	23.2	35.8	18.7	13.3	18.4
Under Five Mortality Rate (U5MR)	88.1	95.7	78.7	68.2	74.3

Source- National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2005-06

Another rising worry is that of underage marriages. A significant number of SC women are underage brides (i.e. they are married while under the legal age of 18). This is highly prevalent in northern India, especially in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. However, even places that otherwise have a higher mean marriage

age (i.e. most North-East states, Jammu & Kashmir, Kerala) record a reverse trend among SC girls, with a considerable number of these girls being married before they turn 18. This has been further inducing adolescent pregnancies, which has a detrimental effect on the health of these young women.

Percentage of Married Men and Women under the age of 18 (2011)			
	Age Group	Male	Female
All	15	2.7	7
	16	3.2	8.6
	17	3.8	14.0
SC	15	2.6	6.8
	16	3.0	8.8
	17	3.6	15.0
ST	15	3.6	6.9
	16	3.4	9.3
	17	4.7	16.1

Source- Census 2011

Health has always been an indicator very closely linked to socio-economic conditions. In a caste-divided land such as India's, it comes as no surprise that India too is bound to have varied health conditions and facilities depending on social groups. Surprising, however, is the extent to which these facilities are varied.

For this analysis, we will solely be looking at female health across all social groups.

Access to Facilities

The United Nations Millennium Development Goal incorporated eight goals which all UN member states had agreed to attempt to reach by the year 2015. This included aims such as combating poverty, hunger, disease and discrimination against women. One of India's biggest hurdles in meeting these goals was the highly prevalent socio-economic disparity in the access to healthcare facilities.

Percentage of women with less than 3 ANC visits					
	1992-93	1998-99	2005-06	1992-93 to 1998-99	1998-99 to 2005-06
SC	63.55	61.70	54.12	1.84	7.58
ST	71.48	71.63	59.28	-0.15	12.35
Others	52.66	50.24	36.41	2.42	13.82
All India	55.87	55.49	47.61	0.38	7.87

Source- NFHS 1, 2 & 3

The percentage of women having fewer than 3 antenatal care (ANC) visits has declined with time across all social groups. The SC population saw a slight decrease of 1.84% from 1992-93 to 1998-99 and a decrease of 7.58% from 1998-99 to 2005-06. Amongst women, the percentage of women with less than 3 ANC visits initially rose slightly until 1998-99, after which it showed a substantial decline. Despite this considerable decline, the percentage of ST women with less than 3 visits is still the highest as compared to any other social group, with SC women next in line. This, coupled with the fact that SCs did not see a very large decrease (7.58%) from 1998-99 to 2005-06, is indicative that most SC women still do not have access to three or more ANC visits.

Time of Receiving Post Natal Care After Delivery					
	Less than 4 hours	4-23 hours	1-2 days	3-41 days	No Check Up
SC	23.7	3.9	4.8	3.8	62.9
ST	16.3	2.3	4.4	7.4	68.6
OBC	26.4	4.5	4.7	3.7	59.8
Others	34.5	7.0	6.1	3.3	47.4
All India	27.3	4.9	5.1	3.9	57.6

Source- NFHS-3 Report

The percentage of women receiving post-natal care (PNC) has increased from 31.2% to 42.8% (NFHS 2-3), however, women of higher castes are more likely to be able to access PNC than women belonging to a lower caste. In spite of the rising number of women accessing PNC, SC and ST women still lag behind. More than 60% SC and ST women (the latter being closer to 70%) do not receive any PNC after giving birth. Furthermore, only 24% of SC women and 16% of ST women receive any care within 4 hours of having a child, as compared to 35% among non SC/ST/OBC women.

Decision Making in Healthcare Facilities

Decision Makers					
	Woman Alone	Respondent Jointly with Husband/ Partner	Husband/ Partner Alone	Someone Else	Other
SC	29.17	33.97	30.06	5.54	1.26
ST	24.68	35.02	35.77	4.09	0.45
OBC	24.63	35.24	30.13	8.44	1.55
Others	29.68	35.74	28.78	4.73	1.08
All India	27.14	35.15	30.13	6.33	1.25

Source- NFHS-3, 2005-06

Very few Indian women have the power to make independent decisions regarding their own health. Among OBC and non SC/ST/OBC households, it is more common for women to make decisions jointly with their partners rather than not have a say at all. This, however, is not the case for SC and ST women, who are likely to have absolutely no say in their own health (with their significant others making their decisions for them). In some cases, someone else (in many cases, in-laws) make health care decisions for women.

Voice and Violence

The Indian constitution provides several legal safeguards to SC/ST people to shield them against the atrocities committed against them. However, even today a large number of SC and ST men and especially women face scores of violence. Women belonging to lower castes face discrimination on two grounds- gender and caste. Not only are they exploited in the name of caste but are also vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Another horrifying form of torture and violence is that of witch hunting. Even in today's day and age, there exist villages that have branded for ages and continue to brand poor SC and ST women as witches- leading to either these women being exiled or in some cases, even killed. As per various newspaper reports, around 2556 women have been killed in India in the name of witch hunting between 1987 and 2003 (Meena Kandasamy, 2011). Despite the aforementioned legal safeguards, victims of atrocities (especially women) hardly get justice due to institutional prejudices and social stigmatization of victims of sexual assault.

A survey conducted on 500 Dalit women revealed that 62.4% faced verbal abuse from both uppercaste men and women, 54.8% faced physical assault, 46.8% faced sexual harassment and 43% faced domestic violence. These women were likely to face such atrocities in three places- public places, in their own homes (due to relatives) and in government places (i.e. police stations, etc.). In less than 1% of these cases were the perpetrators convicted by courts; in 17.4% instances, the women saw justice being obstructed by the police; and in 26.5% of the instances, justice was obstructed by either the perpetrators or supporters (or the community) of the perpetrators. Moreover, in over 40% of these cases, there was no attempt for legal or communal justice solely due to the stigma surrounding victims of such atrocities. These women refused a chance at justice in order to avoid being 'dishonoured'. Many women decide against going to the police or to court due to their belief that they would not receive justice.

Economic Factors:

There's nothing better than economic freedom. When women have adequate finances for themselves, they are in the right positions to make decisions as her choices aren't influenced/dependent upon others. For e.g, we know for a fact that most women stay in violent/unhappy marriages as they are scared of their future economic prospects if they leave said marriages. Keeping that in mind, we explore the following economic factors.

Unemployment

A growing trend in the current scenario, unemployment has hit everyone in India. While studies show the unemployment rate (UR) is more for Indian women compared to men, we think due to the dynamics of intersectionality, UR affects the marginalised women the most.

Unemployment rate (UR) (number of persons unemployed per 1000 persons in the labour force) for urban+rural women of age 15 years and above according to usual status (adjusted) for different general educational levels for each social group, all-India.

Social group	Literate up to to primary	Middle	Secondary	Higher-Secondary	Diploma/certificate	Graduate	Post graduate & above
ST	2	27	157	100	46	227	210
SC	51	17	55	117	187	206	171
OBC	6	31	58	85	190	160	158
Others	8	24	43	77	84	129	113

Source- NSS Report No.563: Employment and unemployment situation among social groups in India

The URs differ among women for different groups. The table shows UR is lowest for the Others group while it's highest amongst the marginal groups. In the middle level group- UR is highest for OBC women, at the secondary level- UR is highest for ST women, at the higher secondary level- UR is highest for SC women, at the diploma level- UR is highest for OBC women and for the graduate and post-graduate level, UR is highest for ST women. The only exception we see is for the literate upto primary level wherein, the UR is highest for the Others category.

Share Across Industry Groups

This section analyses the share of women employed (of different social groups) across the three industry groups.

Per 1000 distribution of (rural+urban) women workers across social groups by broad industry of work

Groups	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
ST	783	145	72
SC	636	206	158
OBC	639	206	155
Others	501	218	282

Source- NSS Report No.563: Employment and unemployment situation among social groups in India

We see that the majority of ST,SC,OBC women are employed in occupations like agriculture,forestry and fishing(Primary). In the Secondary industry, which includes occupations like manufacturing, construction activities, civil engineering etc., the majority of “Others” women are employed. However, the SC and OBC aren't very far behind. The tertiary industry offers the most saddening results. The employment of ST women in this industry is nearly one-fourth of “Others” while the OBC and SC employment is nearly half of “Others”.

Type of Work

The type of work you do has implicit revelations. It shows your social standing, level of dependence, control over finances, job security etc. This section analyses the type of work women across social groups do.

Per 1000 distribution of (rural+urban)women workers by statuses in employment

Social Group	Self- employment	Regular wage/salaried	Casual labour
ST	560	52	388
SC	424	118	458
OBC	590	111	299
Others	636	213	151

Source- NSS Report No.563: Employment and unemployment situation among social groups in India

Self-employment and a regular, salaried job is highest among “Others” women while casual labour is highest among SC women with ST women trailing behind. OBC women do nearly twice the casual labour than “Others” women while SC women do nearly thrice the casual labour of “Others” women.

Here are some of the reasons for the above economic analysis:

1. The marginal groups are often relegated to jobs like casual labour due to existing caste notions.
2. Poor levels of education and even low attendance rate means tertiary and secondary industry jobs and regular wage jobs remain outside acquisition of the marginal groups.
3. Poor access to financial schemes like micro-credit schemes- hindering a path towards self-employment.

Finance

While there are schemes to promote financial prosperity for low-income groups- the government recognises that Scheduled Caste groups might need special,specific schemes for their financial prosperity. The National Scheduled Caste Finance and

Development Corporation (NSFDC) was instituted to improve the flow of financial assistance for the SCs.

In this section, we analyse how men and women have fared under various schemes.

Men and women coverage of beneficiaries and disbursement for the financial year 2018-19.

	Number of Male Beneficiaries	Number of Female Beneficiaries	Amount given to Male Beneficiaries	Amount given to Female Beneficiaries
*Term Loan	1369	792	7868.10	4540.61
Micro Credit Finance	5129	4137	2235.50	1825.96
Mahila Samridhi Yojana	0	30694	0.00	3273.60
Educational Loan Scheme	121	60	418.78	207.81
Laghu Vyavsay Yojana	21036	15621	27447.95	16826.17
Ajivika Micro Credit Yojana	0	122	0.00	59.29
Green Business Scheme	1450	900	1490.50	927.00

*Includes Mahila Kissan Yojana

Source- NSFDC

Except for one scheme, i.e. that Mahila Samridhi Yojana which is a women-specific Micro-Finance scheme and the Ajeevika Yojana, all other schemes have more male beneficiaries than women. The Term Loan has nearly twice the male beneficiaries than women and this is despite the fact that the data includes the beneficiaries of the Mahila Kissan Yojana(a scheme meant for rural women in agri related activities only). The Education Loan scheme also has twice male beneficiaries than women.

Another corporation we looked into was the National Safai Karamchari Finance & Development Corporation. This corporation was instituted for the socio-economic upliftment of safai karamcharis, scavengers and their dependents. The corporation provides financial assistance through various loan based schemes and non-loan based schemes (e.g. Skill training).

Note: While the eligibility criteria to avail schemes under this corporation is not based on caste per say, it's a known fact that this line of work is caste-based discriminatory occupation which is why we think its apt to look into this corporation for intersectionality analysis.

Women make up 50% of safai karamcharis in India. However, they aren't 50% beneficiaries for various schemes.

The Scheme-wise details of beneficiaries/units for which funds were disbursed by the Corporation, financial year 2017-18

Scheme	Total Beneficiaries	Female Beneficiaries
General Term Loan*	6295	2110
Micro Credit Finance	6697	NA
Mahila Samridhi Yojana	7947	7947
Mahila Adhikarita Yojana	1234	1234
Education Loan	19	7
Swachhta Udyami Yojana	10	NA
Sanitary Mart	0	0

*Includes Green Business Scheme

Source- National Safai Karamcharis Finance and Development Corporation

For the General Term Loan scheme, women make up approx 34% of the total beneficiaries. Similarly, for the Education Loan scheme, women make up approx. 36% of the total beneficiaries. We were unable to find data to comment on other schemes.

It's commendable that the corporation has women-specific schemes, however, we noticed that the corporation falls short on achieving some of its targets for these women-specific schemes. For e.g., the corporation had a target of sanctioning 17.11 crores for the Mahila Adhikarita Yojana of which it was able to disburse only 9.42 crores in financial year 2017-18, thus achieving 55% of its target.

Observations

We made some observations after perusing the 2017-18 annual report of the National Safai Karamchari Commission and we think these observations can be applied broadly to understand why schemes don't effectively reach the target population and how it affects particularly women.

1. The Commission had received a total of 551 complaints out of which 89 and 204 were of harassment and service related complaints. The report stated some complaints were also of exploitation, nonpayment of minimum wages, atrocity and furthermore.
2. The Commission recommended that cumbersome loan procedures must be simplified and no security must be insisted. Insisting security from women is especially unfair as they don't own any security or their guarantee is under the ownership of their husbands. They also lack basic education to understand loan procedures.

3. The Commission noticed that even in families where the men have been liberated from this work, men still permit, rather coerce the women to continue this work to supplement family income. *“They are the most vulnerable section of the society as they face discrimination on the basis of caste and gender in all spheres of life and are subjected to gross violations of their physical integrity, including sexual abuse by dominant castes.”*

Conclusion

We don't know if governments truly grasp the dynamics of double/triple oppression- however, some of their policies hint toward some understanding. Under the micro-credit schemes meant for marginalized, women do have interest rebates and there are women specific schemes available. Yet, it falls short and there are many reasons for this. They involve cultural, political changes and we are in no position to give solutions for such multidimensional problems. Furthermore, we have not included other extremely important intersectionalities such as the LGBTQIA+ and differently abled women due to certain constraints.

Returning to Dalit women, there is remarkable work being done by various organisations such as the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikari Manch, National Federation of Dalit Women and other grass root level organisations to bridge this multiple struggle gap. In conclusion, India has yet to reach the periphery of a developed nation. Unfortunately, India's road to development will only get longer unless we start concentrating on all of *its* people.

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