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**Social Stratification in Modern India:  
A Sociological Study  
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**ABSTRACT:**

Social stratification in modern India remains one of the most enduring subjects of sociological inquiry, reflecting both historical continuity and contemporary transformation. Despite decades of constitutional reforms, democratization, and economic liberalization, inequalities of caste, class, gender, and region continue to define life chances and social mobility. This article examines the persistence and reconfiguration of social stratification in India through a synthesis of secondary data and theoretical perspectives. Drawing upon classical theories by M. N. Srinivas, André Beteille, Marx, and Weber, along with recent evidence from the World Inequality Lab, Oxfam India, and the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), the study explores how caste hierarchies have intersected with emerging class inequalities since the 1990s. Findings indicate that while affirmative action and welfare policies have improved representation and human development outcomes for historically marginalized groups, the concentration of wealth and opportunities among the upper economic echelons has intensified. The paper concludes that India's stratification system today is best understood as a hybrid structure simultaneously caste anchored and class driven demanding integrated redistributive, educational, and institutional reforms.

**KEYWORDS:**

Social Stratification, Caste, Class, Inequality, Reservations, Social  
Mobility, Wealth Concentration.

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## 1. Introduction

Social stratification refers to the patterned, hierarchical distribution of resources, privileges, and power within a society. In the Indian context, stratification has long been defined by the institution of caste a system of hereditary social ordering that dictated occupation, marriage, and ritual purity (Srinivas, 1957). Over the past seven decades, however, economic liberalization, urbanization, and democratization have transformed the social landscape, giving rise to new forms of class differentiation while retaining traces of the traditional order.

Modern India's rapid economic growth has created a visible middle class and a wealthy elite, yet secondary data reveal that inequality has widened sharply. According to the World Inequality Report 2022, the top 1 percent of Indians captured a disproportionately large share of national income and wealth, with wealth concentration at the highest levels since the 1920s (Chancel et al., 2022). Meanwhile, lower caste and rural populations continue to face structural disadvantages in access to education, healthcare, and formal employment (NFHS-5, 2021).

This study revisits the sociological problem of stratification in light of these developments. By analyzing secondary data and theoretical perspectives, it asks how caste and class interact in shaping modern inequality and what this means for social justice and mobility.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### Structural-Functional and Weberian Perspectives

Srinivas's (1957) concept of Sanskritization and Weber's multi dimensional view of stratification provide the functional status dimension of this analysis. Weber's distinction between class (economic position), status (social honour), and party (political power) explains why economic mobility alone does not erase caste based discrimination. Status barriers persist even as occupational patterns change.

### Marxian and Political-Economy Perspectives

From a Marxian lens, stratification is rooted in the ownership of productive assets and control over labour. Post-1991 liberalization generated a capitalist class that wields both economic and political power. The World Inequality Report shows that profit and rentier incomes grew faster than wages, reflecting a classical Marxian concentration of capital. This explains the emergence of urban elite distinct from, yet often overlapping

with, upper caste groups.

### **Intersectionality and Cumulative Inequality**

André Béteille's idea of cumulative advantage aligns with intersectional theories that stress overlapping systems of oppression caste, class, gender, and region. A Dalit woman in rural Bihar experiences multiple disadvantages absent for an upper caste man in metropolitan Bengaluru. Hence, inequality must be analyzed across interacting axes rather than within isolated categories.

### **Institutionalist and Policy Perspectives**

Finally, institutional frameworks particularly reservations, welfare policies, and public services shape opportunity structures. Their success depends on both administrative design and broader economic conditions. Weak state capacity or elite capture can blunt redistributive intent.

### **Patterns of Social Stratification in Contemporary India:**

India's current stratification structure is a hybrid formation where caste and class co-exist and reinforce each other. NFHS-5 data reveal that Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) remain over-represented among the poorest wealth quintile, while upper caste groups dominate the richest. Educational attainment, though rising overall, shows persistent gaps: nearly 27 percent of Dalit women are still illiterate compared with 11 percent among "others" (NFHS-5, 2021).

Urbanization has diversified occupations, but caste often shapes entry into higher status jobs through social networks and discrimination. Studies of labour markets indicate that identical résumés with Dalit identifying surnames receive fewer interview calls than upper caste ones (Thorat & Attewell, 2007). In rural areas, land ownership remains the central determinant of class position; National Sample Survey data show that over 80 percent of Dalit households are landless or marginal farmers.

At the top, a globalized upper-middle class has emerged, benefiting from access to private education, English proficiency, and technology sectors. Yet even here, representation is skewed: surveys of corporate boards and start up founders reveal dominance by upper caste men (Jodhka & Sethi, 2020). Thus, structural inequalities manifest both in traditional agrarian hierarchies and new urban economies.

In sum, the empirical picture supports Béteille's notion of

cumulative inequality old hierarchies persist within new economic forms. The caste class intersection defines modern India's stratification more accurately than either category alone.

### **Income and Wealth Concentration, Mobility, and Regional Inequality:**

Secondary data provide unequivocal evidence of intensifying economic concentration. According to Chancel et al. (2024), the share of national income accruing to the top 1 percent increased from about 6 percent in 1980 to 22 percent in 2022, while the bottom 50 percent's share declined to 13 percent. The top 10 percent now own approximately 65 percent of total wealth (World Inequality Lab, 2024).

This economic polarization constrains social mobility. Oxfam India (2023) estimates that it would take over 1, 000 years for a person from the bottom decile to earn what the top decile earns in one year, assuming current trends persist. Wealth accumulation among elites enables intergenerational transmission of privilege through private education and inheritance.

Mobility studies show regional divergence: southern states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, with stronger welfare systems, exhibit relatively higher educational mobility among lower castes than northern states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Urban rural divides also mirror regional inequality; urban areas host a growing informal sector of precarious workers largely from disadvantaged castes, while formal employment remains limited.

Hence, India's inequality is multidimensional not merely economic but spatial and social. Liberalization has expanded opportunities for some, yet structural and cultural barriers impede broad based mobility. Without significant redistribution, stratification risks hardening into a semi permanent class structure superimposed on caste identities.

### **Effectiveness of Reservations and Welfare Policies:**

Affirmative action policies represent India's most explicit attempt to redress historical injustices. Constitutional provisions reserve 15 percent of public sector jobs and higher education seats for SCs, 7. 5 percent for STs, and 27 percent for OBCs. Evidence suggests these measures have improved access to education and representation in government. For example, SC/ST enrolment in universities rose from 14 percent in 2000 to over 25 percent by 2020 (University Grants Commission, 2021).

Yet their economic impact remains uneven. Public-sector employment now constitutes less than 15 percent of total jobs, while the private sector which contributes over 80 percent of GDP remains largely outside reservation policies. Consequently, income and wealth gaps persist. Moreover, within reserved categories, benefits often accrue to relatively better off sub groups (“creamy layer”), leaving the poorest under represented (Sowell, 2020).

Welfare schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana have expanded basic livelihood support and financial inclusion, but challenges in implementation, leakages, and underfunding limit their transformative potential. NFHS-5 findings confirm improvements in health and sanitation, yet disparities remain in maternal mortality and child nutrition between SC/ST and upper caste households.

For policies to mitigate stratification effectively, reforms must combine group based affirmative action with income-sensitive targeting, expand quality public education, and incentivize inclusive private sector hiring. Without such integration, affirmative action risks becoming symbolic rather than structural.

### **3. Findings**

#### **Key Findings**

- **Persistent Structural Inequality:** Despite economic growth, caste continues to shape access to assets and opportunities.
- **Rising Economic Concentration:** The top 1 percent and top 10 percent control unprecedented shares of income and wealth, reinforcing class stratification.
- **Partial Success of Affirmative Action:** Reservations improved representation but failed to equalize outcomes across sectors.
- **Regional Disparities:** Welfare effectiveness varies by state capacity and governance quality.
- **Intersectional Vulnerabilities:** Women from lower castes and rural areas experience compounded marginalization.

#### **4. Suggestions**

- **Progressive Fiscal Reforms:** Introduce wealth and inheritance taxes to finance social-protection and education Programmes.

- Strengthen Public Education: Universalize quality schooling and digital access to reduce the private-education divide.
- Reform Reservation Policy: Introduce socioeconomic sub quotas within castes to ensure benefits reach the poorest.
- Inclusive Private Sector Incentives: Encourage diversity through tax rebates, procurement preferences, and corporate social responsibility mandates.
- Robust Data Systems: Develop integrated inequality databases linking tax, census, and social survey data to monitor policy impacts.

## 5. Conclusion

Social stratification in modern India embodies both continuity and change. The old hierarchies of caste persist, yet they now operate through and are reinforced by new forms of class inequality born of liberalization. While constitutional measures have reduced overt discrimination and expanded opportunities for many, they have not dismantled the structural logic of cumulative advantage. Wealth concentration, private-sector exclusion, and regional disparities perpetuate inequality.

From a sociological standpoint, India illustrates the coexistence of ascribed and achieved stratification: birth continues to shape destiny, even as meritocratic ideals proliferate. To achieve a genuinely equitable society, redistributive fiscal policies must complement affirmative action, and inclusive institutions must replace token representation with substantive equality. The task before sociologists and policymakers alike is to imagine an India where historical disadvantages are neither denied nor determinative. s

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