

# Understanding Gender, Equity and Social Justice in India

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**Abstract**—According to the Indian Law and Constitution, every human being is equal. In reality the picture is quite different as gender equity, social justice is still very hard to attain in modern India because of deep-seated patriarchy, caste, and economic differences. There are problems in areas like the gender pay gap, where women are paid less money than men for the same work and political under-representation, even though there are policies available to make sure that women have a co-equal voice in local government. Different forms of violence against women, child marriages, infanticides and women's less access to education and healthcare are big problems which India is facing from time immemorial. To help with these problems, the Indian government has started a number of programs and laws, like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao encourages the education of girls, and the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam reserves one-third of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. The Support for Marginalised Individuals for Livelihood and Enterprise (SMILE) program is one example of a social justice initiative that aims to improve the lives of marginalised groups, such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and transgender people, through education, skill development and economic empowerment. These measures show a desire for change, but real equity will only happen if people keep fighting against deeply held social beliefs and make sure that policies are carried out correctly.

**Keywords**—Patriarchy, Gender Equity, Caste, Government Policies, Social Justice

## I. UNDERSTANDING GENDER, EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Gender, equity and social justice are interconnected concepts that are crucial for analysing the complexities of contemporary India. Understanding their definitions and their relevance is the first step toward addressing the deep-seated inequalities that persist in the country over a span of time. These issues have affected India from time immemorial and

requires active actions by the state and its people to do away with it in this present times.

## II. DEFINITION OF GENDER, EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

**Gender:** Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of girls, women, boys, men and gender-diverse people. It is different from the concept of biological sex. Gender roles are learned behaviours within a given society and can change over time. In India, gender is not a simple binary; it is shaped by complex social norms, religious beliefs and cultural practices that often dictate the expected roles and behaviours of individuals. For example, traditional roles often confine women to the domestic sphere while men are seen as breadwinners. Women are confined within the household and Men participate in the outside world.

**Equity:** Equity means fairness and justice in the distribution of resources and opportunities. Unlike equality, which treats everyone the same, equity recognizes that people start from different positions and that some groups may need additional support to achieve a level to perform better. It is about providing a proportional allocation of resources to address systemic disadvantages. In the Indian context, equity is essential for addressing historical inequalities based on caste, class, gender and religion. For instance, affirmative action policies for marginalized groups are a form of equity.

**Social Justice:** Social justice is the principle that everyone deserves equal access to opportunities and rights, regardless of their background. It aims to rectify historical and ongoing injustices by challenging and transforming unequal power structures. It's a broad term that encompasses the fair treatment of all people and the equitable distribution of wealth, opportunities and privileges within a

society. In India, the fight for social justice has been at the heart of various movements, from the anti-caste struggles led by figures like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to contemporary activism for the rights of women and tribal communities.

### III. IMPORTANCE OF ADDRESSING THESE ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Addressing gender, equity and social justice is not just a moral imperative; it is crucial for India's development and stability.

- **Economic Development:** Gender inequality and social injustice act as a significant drag on India's economic potential. When a large portion of the population, such as women or marginalized castes, is denied access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities, the country loses out on a vast pool of talent and productivity. Empowering women and ensuring social justice can lead to a more inclusive and robust economy.
- **Political Stability:** Deep-seated social and economic inequalities can fuel social unrest, conflict and political instability. The rise of identity-based politics and ongoing protests against discrimination highlight the urgency of addressing these issues. A society that provides fairness and opportunity for all is more likely to be politically stable and harmonious.
- **Demographic Dividend:** India's large youth population is often cited as a potential demographic dividend. However, this potential can only be realized if these young people have equitable access to education and jobs. Failing to address gender and social inequities could turn this demographic dividend into a liability, leading to widespread unemployment and disillusionment.
- **Human Rights and Dignity:** Finally, the most compelling reason to address these issues is the fundamental human rights of every individual. A truly democratic society must guarantee the dignity and rights of all its citizens, not just a privileged few. Upholding gender equity and social justice is essential for fulfilling the promises of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees equality and non-discrimination to all.

### Gender Inequality in India

Gender inequality in India is a pervasive and complex issue with deep roots in social, economic and cultural structures. While India has made progress in certain areas, significant disparities persist, particularly for women and gender-diverse individuals. These inequalities are evident in various sectors, from education and employment to political representation and are perpetuated by deeply ingrained societal norms.

#### Statistics on Gender Disparities

Gender disparities in India are well-documented across multiple indicators:

- **Education:** While India has seen a rise in female enrolment in primary schools, a significant gap emerges at higher levels. The female literacy rate in India is 79.2%, compared to 81.3% for males, according to the 2023 Census. This gap widens in rural areas and among marginalized communities. Additionally, dropout rates for girls remain higher than for boys, often due to social pressures, early marriage and the need to contribute to domestic labor.
- **Employment:** The female labor force participation rate (FLFPR) in India is among the lowest in the world. According to World Bank data, it was just 25% in 2021, a significant drop from 32% in 2005. Women are disproportionately employed in the informal sector, where they face low wages, job insecurity and a lack of social protection. Even in the formal sector, a gender pay gap persists, with women earning significantly less than their male counterparts for the same work.
- **Political Representation:** Despite the constitutional provision for a 33% reservation for women in local bodies (Panchayati Raj institutions), their representation at the national and state levels remains low. As of 2024, women constitute only about 15.2% of the Lok Sabha (the lower house of Parliament), far below the global average. This lack of representation limits women's ability to influence policy-making on issues directly affecting them.

## Cultural and Societal Norms that Perpetuate Gender Inequality

Gender inequality is deeply ingrained in India's socio-cultural fabric. Several norms and practices perpetuate these disparities:

- **Patriarchal Structures:** Indian society is largely patriarchal, where men hold primary power and authority in both the family and the community. This system reinforces traditional gender roles, where a woman's value is often tied to her domestic skills and her role as a wife and mother.
- **Son Preference:** A strong cultural preference for male children persists in many parts of India. This leads to practices such as female feticide, which has resulted in a skewed sex ratio. In some states, the child sex ratio (0-6 years) is alarmingly low, reflecting the ongoing devaluation of girls.
- **Limited Mobility and Autonomy:** Girls and women often face restrictions on their mobility and autonomy. They may not be allowed to travel or work independently, attend school in other villages, or make decisions about their own lives and bodies. This lack of freedom directly impacts their access to education and employment.
- **Caste and Class Intersectionality:** Gender inequality is compounded by caste and class. Women from marginalized castes and lower-income groups face multiple layers of discrimination. They are often subject to social exclusion, economic exploitation and a higher risk of gender-based violence.

## Impact of Gender Inequality on Women's Rights and Well-being

The pervasive gender inequality in India has severe consequences for women's rights and overall well-being. There is a concern regarding the protection of Women's rights and freedom, potential efforts are being made to protect the rights and freedom of the women's.

- **Violation of Rights:** Gender inequality is a fundamental violation of human rights. It denies women their right to education, health and economic independence, as enshrined in the Indian Constitution and various international human rights conventions. Rights are denied and violated.

- **Increased Vulnerability to Violence:** Women in India are at a higher risk of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, sexual assault and harassment. The deeply entrenched patriarchal norms often make it difficult for survivors to report crimes or seek justice. Women fail to get proper access to their rights, they are deeply burdened with patriarchal norms of the society.
- **Poor Health Outcomes:** Gender inequality directly impacts women's health. Due to a lack of autonomy, women often have limited control over their reproductive health and access to quality healthcare. This leads to higher rates of maternal mortality, infant mortality and other health issues.
- **Limited Agency:** Ultimately, gender inequality strips women of their agency—their ability to make choices and act independently. This lack of autonomy affects every aspect of their lives, from whom they marry and how many children they have to their career choices and political participation.

## Equity Issues in India

Equity issues in India are a major challenge to its democratic and developmental aspirations. Despite constitutional guarantees and various government initiatives, deep-seated disparities in access to resources and opportunities persist, driven by systemic inequalities related to gender, caste, class and religion.

## Disparities in Access to Resources and Opportunities

Access to fundamental resources and opportunities in India remains highly unequal, with one's social identity often determining one's life chances.

- **Caste-Based Disparities:** The legacy of the caste system, though outlawed, continues to create stark divisions. Dalits (formerly known as untouchables) and Adivasis (tribal communities) face significant discrimination in accessing land, education and employment. They have lower literacy rates, poorer health outcomes and are more likely to live below the poverty line.
- **Gender-Based Disparities:** Women face systemic barriers in education, employment and political participation. This translates to

limited access to financial resources, decision-making power and legal rights.

- **Class-Based Disparities:** Economic inequality is rampant. The top 1% of the population holds a disproportionate share of the national wealth. This creates a vast chasm in access to quality education, healthcare and infrastructure, with the poor often trapped in a cycle of poverty.
- **Religion-Based Disparities:** While the constitution guarantees religious freedom, religious minorities, particularly Muslims, often face discrimination in housing, employment and personal security. This can lead to socio-economic marginalization and a lack of trust in state institutions.

#### Government Policies and Programs

The Indian government has a long history of implementing policies to address these inequities, rooted in the constitutional principles of social justice.

- **Affirmative Action:** The most significant policy is Reservation, a system of affirmative action that reserves a certain percentage of government jobs and seats in educational institutions and legislative bodies for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This policy is aimed at redressing historical injustices and ensuring proportional representation.
- **Social Welfare Schemes:** The government runs numerous schemes to promote economic equity, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which guarantees 100 days of wage employment to rural households. Other programs provide subsidized food grains, housing and scholarships to low-income and marginalized communities.
- **Legal Protections:** Laws like the Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955) and the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989) aim to prevent and punish discrimination and violence against marginalized groups.

#### IV. CHALLENGES IN ACHIEVING EQUITABLE OUTCOMES

India faces challenges to equitable outcomes including deeply entrenched socioeconomic divides like the caste system and urban-rural gap, leading to unequal access to quality education, healthcare and employment opportunities. Issues such as poverty, lack of skilled jobs, inadequate infrastructure and regional disparities also hinder inclusive growth.

- **Implementation Gaps:** The effectiveness of many policies is hampered by poor implementation, bureaucratic red tape and corruption. Benefits often fail to reach the most deserving individuals and funds are sometimes siphoned off.
- **Entrenched Social Norms:** Legal reforms alone cannot erase centuries of social conditioning. Deeply ingrained prejudices based on caste and gender continue to undermine the spirit of the law, making social mobility difficult for marginalized communities.
- **Judicial and Political Resistance:** Reservation policies have faced legal challenges and political opposition, with some arguing that they are a form of reverse discrimination and are based on identity rather than merit.
- **Lack of Intersectional Approach:** Many policies fail to account for the intersectionality of identities. For example, a woman from a marginalized caste faces a double layer of discrimination that a policy focused solely on gender or caste might not adequately address.
- **Data and Accountability:** There is often a lack of reliable data to track the effectiveness of equity programs. Without proper monitoring and evaluation, it is difficult to hold government bodies accountable for achieving equitable outcomes.

#### Social Justice Efforts in India

Grassroots movements, legal reforms and civil society organizations are the key pillars of social justice efforts in India. They work in tandem to challenge discrimination, promote equality and ensure human rights for marginalized groups.

#### Grassroots Movements

Grassroots movements are community-driven initiatives that originate at the local level to address specific injustices. They are a powerful force for social change in India, bringing the voices of the most marginalized to the forefront.

- **Chipko Movement:** This iconic environmental movement in the 1970s saw villagers, particularly women, hugging trees to prevent deforestation. While primarily an environmental movement, it also empowered rural women and highlighted their role in local governance and resource management.
- **Narmada Bachao Andolan:** Led by social activist Medha Patkar, this movement protested the construction of large dams on the Narmada River, which would have displaced thousands of tribal and rural communities. It brought international attention to the rights of marginalized groups and the environmental impact of large-scale development projects.
- **Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA):** Founded by Ela Bhatt, SEWA is a trade union and grassroots movement that organizes women working in the informal sector. It has been instrumental in advocating for the rights of these women, providing them with access to credit, legal aid and social security.
- **Anti-Caste Movements:** Various grassroots movements continue the legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, fighting against caste-based discrimination and advocating for the rights of Dalits and other marginalized castes. These movements organize protests and campaigns to challenge social exclusion and demand justice.

#### Legal Reforms and Initiatives

The Indian state, through its legislative and judicial systems, has made significant efforts to combat discrimination and violence.

- **Constitutional Provisions:** The Indian Constitution is the foundational document for social justice, with key articles prohibiting discrimination and abolishing untouchability. Article 17 legally abolishes "untouchability" in all forms and Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth.

- **Affirmative Action (Reservation):** This policy reserves a percentage of government jobs and seats in educational institutions for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) to address historical injustices.
- **Laws to Prevent Atrocities:** The Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, is a crucial legal tool that makes it a criminal offense to commit certain acts of discrimination and violence against members of these communities.
- **Laws on Gender-Based Violence:** Legislation like the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 and amendments to the Indian Penal Code, particularly after the 2012 Nirbhaya case, have strengthened legal protections for women against domestic violence and sexual assault.

#### Role of Civil Society Organizations

Civil society organizations (CSOs) act as a vital bridge between the state and the citizens, playing a multi-faceted role in promoting social justice.

- **Advocacy and Policy Influence:** CSOs conduct research, organize campaigns and lobby policymakers to advocate for the rights of marginalized groups. The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), for example, was instrumental in the passage of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in 2005.
- **Service Delivery:** Many CSOs provide essential services, such as legal aid, education, healthcare and skill development, in areas where government services are lacking. Organizations like Pratham and Goonj work to fill critical gaps in education and disaster relief.
- **Accountability and Monitoring:** CSOs serve as watchdogs, monitoring government programs and exposing corruption and human rights violations. They often use tools like Public Interest Litigation (PIL) to hold the government and corporations accountable.
- **Empowering Citizens:** CSOs play a crucial role in empowering citizens by raising awareness of their rights and encouraging them to participate in democratic processes. They help marginalized communities

navigate legal systems and demand accountability from authorities.

## V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion it can be said that the essential concepts of gender, equity and social justice have been examined, emphasising their significant importance in modern India. It has been looked upon how long-standing inequalities, based on patriarchal norms and historical hierarchies like the caste system, still show up as big differences in education, jobs and political representation. It has been observed that despite the Indian government's implementation of various policies, including affirmative action and social welfare initiatives, these endeavours encounter significant obstacles in execution due to bureaucratic impediments and enduring social biases.

### A Call to Action

To build a truly just and equitable society, a concerted and multi-pronged approach is necessary.

- **Reforming and Strengthening Governance:** We must demand greater accountability from government institutions and work to improve the delivery of social justice programs. This includes simplifying bureaucratic processes and ensuring that benefits reach the most vulnerable, rather than being siphoned off by intermediaries.
- **Empowering Civil Society:** We must continue to support and strengthen grassroots movements and civil society organizations. These groups are vital for raising awareness, providing essential services and holding power to account.
- **Challenging Social Norms:** The fight for justice cannot be won through policy alone. It requires a fundamental shift in cultural and societal norms. We must challenge patriarchal attitudes, caste-based discrimination and religious prejudices in our daily lives, in our homes and in our communities. Education, especially for the youth, is a powerful tool for this transformation.
- **Promoting Intersectional Solutions:** We must adopt an intersectional approach that recognizes how different forms of inequality—gender, caste, class and religion—intersect and compound each

other. Policies should be designed to address these overlapping disadvantages simultaneously.

### Reflection on the Potential Impact

Addressing these issues is not a matter of charity but a necessity for India's future. A society that actively promotes gender equity and social justice will unleash its full human potential. An inclusive society is a more stable and prosperous one. When women and marginalized communities are empowered, they become active participants in the economy, politics and social life. This leads to reduced poverty, increased innovation and a more harmonious nation. Ultimately, by dedicating ourselves to the principles of equity and justice, we can help India fulfil the democratic promise enshrined in its constitution—a promise of liberty, equality and fraternity for all.

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