



## Gender, caste and class: Understanding multiple marginalities of Indian Women

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### Abstract

Indian women are subjected to compounded levels of marginalization that come as a combination of gender, caste, and class. Affirmative actions and interventions in tumult regulations by the constitution do not eliminate structural imbalances that influence the social, economic, and cultural worlds of women impartially. This paper uses the intersectional marginality to address the issue of how the combination of these systems of oppression drives the differentiated experiences among women in India. The aim is to examine the intersectionality of gender, caste hierarchy, and class position in women (their living circumstances). The paper is a study that assumes a qualitative and theoretical approach that relies on secondary data, and argues that women cannot be marginalized under specific categories, and concludes that policies and social justice need intersection-sensitive frameworks.

**Keywords:** Gender, caste, class, intersectionality, Indian Women, marginalization, social stratification

### Introduction

The historical background of these societies has developed social structures that have been historical impediments to women being granted their social position in India based on deep-rooted patriarchal, caste-stratified, and class-based inequality. Despite constitutional documents, legislative changes, and development policies aiming at fostering gender equality, large-scale discrimination is still evident against Indian women in terms of social, economic, and political domains. But the experience of marginalization in women is not consistent. The experiences of a woman belonging to a high caste, middle-class woman is by far different than those of a Dalit, Adivasi, or economically poor woman (Bhatia & Tomer, 2024) <sup>[1]</sup>. This diversity contributes to the necessity of transcending any one concept of gender oppression and multitasking the various and overlapping types of marginality that organize the lives of women. When gender meets caste and class, complex systems of disadvantage are formed, which support each other. The mechanism of gender-based subordination is based on patriarchal norms, which control the movement of women, their labour, sexuality, and their access to resources. At the same time, the caste system is characterized by strict social stratification, different status and dignity, as well as by occupational division, where Dalit and Adivasi women are excluded and disempowered at a systemic scale through violence. The inequalities are further enhanced by class, which dictates access to education, employment, healthcare, and politics (Kumar & Bakshi, 2022) <sup>[2]</sup>. These structures, when combined, bring about stratified vulnerabilities that cannot be effectively explained using gender alone. These overlapping ways to oppress are conveniently viewed through the prism of the concept of multiple or intersectional marginalities to understand them. It also emphasises the interaction of social identities within wider power relations, the situation in which individuals have different experiences of domination and opposition. India is a culture in which intersectionality is certainly applicable because caste-based discrimination pervades the society, as well as economic disparities and male domination (Pandey & Shrivastava, 2022) <sup>[3]</sup>. This paper attempts to study the intersection of gender, caste, and class

to create different and differentiated experiences of Indian women. The paper is expected to make some contribution both to feminist and sociological discussions on this matter, as well as to highlight the importance of inclusive and contextual policies on policy-making and social reform.

### Research objective

- To examine the role of gender as a primary structure of inequality shaping women's social, economic, and cultural status in Indian society.
- To analyse how caste hierarchies, intersect with gender to produce distinct forms of marginalization among Dalit, Adivasi, and other marginalized women.
- To assess the impact of class and economic inequality on women's access to resources, including education, employment, healthcare, and political participation.
- To explore the interlinkage of gender, caste, and class as intersecting systems of oppression, highlighting how these factors collectively influence women's lived experiences.
- To evaluate the relevance of an intersectional approach in understanding women's marginalization and in informing inclusive social policies and gender-just interventions in India.

### Status of Women in Indian Society

The conditions under which women are placed in the Indian society are the result of a multifaceted arrangement of historical traditions, cultural rules, socio-economic systems, and legal regulations. In some periods, women had a dignified status in the Indian civilization, especially in the family and religious institutions. But as time progressed, patriarchal social structures were cemented in place, and restricted women in their freedom and limited them to housework to a great extent. Child marriage, purdah, dowry, and lack of access to education are some of the practices in the past that were used to support the low status of women (Patil, 2025) <sup>[4]</sup>. The role of women in modern-day India is a sign of development and also stigma. The constitutional entitlements put in place equality in the face of the law, non-discrimination based on sex, and special consideration to women's empowerment. The availability of more education,

more experience in the labour market, and a higher share in political representation via local self-governance have all helped women to become more visible in the world of politics. The introduction of legal reforms to deal with intra-household power asymmetries, gender-based misconduct, and property rights has been an indication that women's rights have been given preference. In spite of these developments, gender inequalities are frequent (Patnaik & Jha, 2020) <sup>[5]</sup>. There is still unequal access to education, healthcare, and opportunities to work, especially for rural and marginalized communities, for women. Economic imbalances are evident in the gender wage gap, low participation of women in the labour force, and the fact that they are confined to informal and unpaid labour. Other social problems that weaken the security and dignity of women include gender-based harm, dowry harassment, and honour-based limits. Also, well-established patriarchal beliefs usually restrict the ability of women to make decisions in their families and in society. There is also a lot of internal diversity with regard to the status of women in India. Women experience different levels of marginalization and empowerment as a result of how caste, class, religion, and region influence the experiences of women. Women who are Dalit, Adivasi, and economically disadvantaged usually face compounded discrimination (Sahu & Chauhan, 2024) <sup>[6]</sup>. In this way, legal and social reforms have made women better placed in the Indian society; however, to attain substantive gender equity, there is a need to address structural disparities and dominant patriarchal values in every segment of society.

### **Persistence of Inequality Despite Constitutional Safeguards**

The Indian constitution offers a detailed framework for removing inequalities and injustices to women based on rights guaranteed, directives, and principles, as well as affirmative action. Articles 14, 15, and 16 provide equality before the law and forbid discrimination based on sex, although Article 15(3) gave the State the power to make special provisions for women. Other constitutional provisions, such as equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)) and the right to dignity and personal liberty, demonstrate an idea of high gender justice. In spite of this liberal legal system, Indian society still carries inequality (Singh, 2024) <sup>[7]</sup>. A significant cause of this continuation is the discrepancy between constitutional ideals and social realities. Unfriendly patriarchal values and traditions against the successful application of the legal provisions just happen to be deep-rooted. Son preference, dowry, early marriage, and limitation of movement of women are practices that still influence daily life, especially within rural and conservative circles. Bad enforcement, ignorance, and social resistance often undermine pro-women laws in terms of protected rights of women, limiting their revolutionary potential. The situation is further worsened by structural disparities, which are caste and class-based. The women in the marginalized communities are, more so, the Dalit and Adivasi women who are subjected to multiple levels of discrimination, which cannot be done away with merely by constitutional protection (Vandana & Vezhaventhan, 2024) <sup>[8]</sup>. Such factors as economic lack of resources, low access to education, and reliance on informal employment diminish the right of women to make claims. Furthermore, the perceptions of women as unworthy of justice at an institutional level, common in the law enforcement and

judicial systems, usually prejudice women against justice. There is also inequality in the political representation and decision-making. Although the policies on reservations have made women more active at the local level, their power is limited by patriarchy and tokenism. In this way, the persistence of inequality, even with constitutional protection, exposes its weaknesses to be safeguarded by other means, even without social change (Choudhary, 2025) <sup>[9]</sup>. This gap can be addressed not merely by increasing the strength with which laws are applied but through long-term actions that confront patriarchy, create social consciousness, and make policies that are intersectional, such that they accommodate the diverse faces of the Indian shadow.

### **Interlinkage of Gender, Caste, and Class**

The Indian society is characterized by strong intertwining of gender, caste, and class, as social stratification structures, which influence life prospects and social experience of individuals. Instead of functioning as different categories, these dimensions overlap and support each other, giving rise to complex and stratified forms of inequality, especially for women. This interlinkage is very important when understanding how social exclusion and marginalization have persisted in India. The inequality between the genders is based on a patriarchy that designates unequal roles, responsibilities, and power to both men and women. Social patriarchal practices define how the women of the community are allowed to access education, acquire jobs, own property, and make decisions, which in most cases leaves them to domesticity and care work (Hegade & Andalgavkarkulkarni, 2025) <sup>[10]</sup>. The influence of patriarchy, however, differs between locations of caste and class. Women of the upper caste can be confined in terms of movement and sexual activities, whereas women of the lower caste can be economically exploited in addition to the gender suppression. Caste is an inherited pattern of the social hierarchies governing status, occupation, and social relationships. Caste discrimination is an added problem that Dalit and Adivasi women have to grapple with, together with their gender subordination, which renders them extremely exposed to violence, marginalization, and degradation. Their work is often undervalued, and they are over- and underprepared in low-paying, insecure, and stigmatized jobs. Gender inequality is therefore overwhelmed by caste, as it determines the types of work women do and how much respect they are accorded in society (Khanna & Mukherjee, 2024) <sup>[11]</sup>. Class also contributes towards these inequalities by affecting access to material resources and opportunities. Women in poor economic backgrounds have less access to education, health care, and secure jobs, and thus are unable to confront oppressive institutions. Women usually end up in informal and unpaid labour due to poverty, making them dependent and vulnerable. In the case of marginalized caste groups, the issue of class inequity is typically a direct result of caste-based exclusion in the past. Gender, caste, and class are intersecting modes of oppression that cannot be viewed alone. The way that they interrelate produces unique experiences of marginalization to various groups of women, a fact that makes an intersectional approach so critical in the study of sociology and policy-making.

### **Gender as a Site of Marginalization**

The idea of gender serves as a key marginalization space in Indian culture that lies in the highly established patriarchal

norms and practices. Patriarchy influences socialization functions early in life and gives strict gender roles that give men the upper hand and women the lower hand. Girls tend to be taught to give priority to domestic duties, obedience, and self-sacrifice, whereas boys are given motivation to exercise authority and self-sufficiency. Such imbalanced socialization restrains the ambitions of women, curtails their freedom of movement, and makes gender-based superiority in families and societies the new norm. One of the most evident and ubiquitous forms of gender-based marginalization is systemic harm against women. Women are still at risk of intra-household power asymmetries, gender-based misconduct, severe forms of gender-based harm, exploitative labour and mobility constraints, and restrictive socio-cultural sanctions. This violence is not just personal but structural, as it acts as a system of imposing patriarchal control on women who go against the status quo and discipline them. Women are usually afraid to get justice because of fear of social stigma, institutional failure, and the absence of appropriate enforcing laws (Mitra, 2025) <sup>[12]</sup>. The equality between women and men is also strengthened by controlling the sexuality and reproductive rights of women. The bodies of women are monitored using standards of chastity, marriage, fertility, and motherhood. In most cases, marriage, contraception, and childbirth choices are strongly affected or determined by the family and community pressure, and not the independence of women. Her devaluation stems from the continued devaluation of the lives of women, sporadically displayed through limited access to reproductive healthcare, coupled with son preference and sex-selective abortion as one of its manifestations. Disparity in education and medical care has remained a way of marginalizing women, especially those with disadvantaged backgrounds. The disparities in gender regarding literacy, school retention, and higher education are very high, and the health needs of women are usually overlooked due to the consideration of other household demands (Pragna, 2024) <sup>[13]</sup>. These inequalities decrease the economic autonomy of women and create dependency and exclusion circles. Gender, therefore, acts as a core surface of marginalization, and thus, its intersection with other social formations has a formative effect on women living in India.

### **Caste and Gender Intersection**

Caste and gender intersection give rise to disparate and heightened marginalization of Dalit and Adivasi women in the Indian society. Not only is their experience determined by patriarchal subordination, but it is also governed by systemic caste-based discrimination, which is implemented at the social, cultural, and economic levels. Dalit and Adivasi women, unlike their upper-caste counterparts, are both castes stigmatized and gender oppressed, which makes them more vulnerable and socially excluded. Poor access to schooling, health, and safe economic prospects characterizes the daily lives of Dalit and Adivasi women. They usually have been concentrated around the rural and marginalized areas where they are limited by poverty and illiteracy, and no institutions to back them up (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015) <sup>[14]</sup>. Their voices are often silenced in mainstream feminist discussion, which has always been a domain where the upper-caste point of view is prevailing, making their particular plights unrecognized. Severe forms of oppression that are intersecting caste and gender are caste-based coercion or caste-based violations and structural vulnerability and abuse. Coercive social practices are

especially prevalent and targeted against Dalit women who are being used as a method of caste control and social domination. This kind of violence is used to assert dominance over subjugated bodies as a means of reinforcing caste hierarchies, and impunity and lax enforcement of the law are other elements that encourage injustices. Adivasi women are also subjected to structural vulnerability and abuse in matters that include displacement, conflict, and resource extraction. The social, religious, and economic spaces continue to be excluded. Dalit women suffered denial of access to temples, open areas, and communal institutes, and the Adivasi women have lost their culture and depreciated customary livelihoods (Sahu & Chauhan, 2024) <sup>[6]</sup>. Caste is also important in the labor pattern, as Dalit women are disproportionately in the stigmatized, resultless, low-paying, and risky jobs like manual scavenging, agricultural labour, and domestic work. This occupation division deprives them of their dignity and strengthens social inequality. Therefore, the interaction between caste and gender can clearly mean that the structures of exclusion are deeply ingrained, and intersectional interventions at social and policy levels are required.

### **Multiple Marginalities: Interlocking Structures of Oppression**

Marginalization of Indian women cannot be viewed in a unidimensional axis of identity because gender, caste, and class are all interlocking systems of oppression that support each other. The subordination of gender restricts access to resources and decision-making of women, caste hierarchy is inherently socially and occupationally ranked, and class standing defines the economic stability and life opportunities. Collectively, these structures form some compounded disadvantages, especially to the women who represent marginal castes and those who are economically less stable. To give an example, a Dalit woman born in an impoverished family is not merely oppressed by her husband, but also marginalized based on her caste and poverty, which makes her weaker. Empirical analysis and case examples point to the way that these intersectional inequalities work in daily life (Singh, 2024) <sup>[7]</sup>. Dalit and Adivasi women experience low wages, job insecurity, and exploitation in informal and hazardous types of labor, including agricultural work, construction, and domestic service, which are overrepresented. Cases of caste based coercive social practices are usually not reported because of the fear and social stigma, and because of the inability to access justice, which is a combination of gender, caste, and class disadvantage. Women are also marginalized because of rural-urban disparities. Women are further dependent and marginalized in rural communities through the annulgence of traditional norms, dominance of caste, and lack of access to education and healthcare services. Offering more workplaces, but informally perpetuating inequality, unsafe living situations, and exploitation of migrant women, urban places tend to reproduce inequality. Rural-to-urban migrant women are often at the bottom of the labor market, devoid of a legal framework and community. Intersectional vulnerabilities are more acute with pandemics like the COVID-19 epidemic, with forced migration by development projects. Marginalized women experienced loss of livelihoods, more unpaid care, food insecurity, and intra-household power asymmetries during the pandemic (Vandana & Vezhaventhan, 2024) <sup>[8]</sup>. Displacement and migration also lead to the destruction of social networks and

access to welfare, and women of the Dalit and Adivasi become disproportionately affected. These events illustrate how overlapping systems of oppression can be aggravated in times of crisis, and police and social interventions address issues through intersectional policy.

### State, Law and Policy Responses

The Indian state has implemented various constitutional, legal, and policy provisions that attempt to overcome the issue of gender inequality and safeguard the rights of women. Equality before the law (Article 14), the barring of discrimination based on sex, caste, or class (Article 15), and equality of opportunities in public employment (Article 16) are examples of the provisions of equal opportunity to both genders in the Constitution of India. Article 15(3) authorizes the State to make a special provision that concerns women, and the Directive Principles focus on the safety of equal pay, maternity relief, as well as the dignity of women. There are further legislations on intra-household power asymmetries, gender-based misconduct, child marriage, and caste-based atrocities that aim at protecting women against abuse and exploitation. Another significant part of the state intervention is the affirmative action and welfare schemes. Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women's reservation in education, employment, and local government (Choudhary, 2025) <sup>[9]</sup>. Reservation policies are set to increase the representation and social inclusion. The welfare programs in the form of health, nutrition, education, and livelihood, including maternity benefit programs, self-help groups programs, and skills development programs, are aimed at bettering the socio-economic situation of women. To such women who are marginalized, these steps are essential in terms of getting access to the basic services and opportunities. Although this is a comprehensive legal and policy framework, major gaps in practice still tend to exist. Laws and schemes are usually hampered due to weak enforcement, lack of awareness, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and deep-rooted attitudes of a social situation. Women who are marginalized and especially Dalit, Adivasi, and economically disadvantaged women are barred from realizing justice and welfare because they are discriminated against, poor, and have restricted institutional outreach. There is a lack of accessibility and ineffectiveness of legal remedies in dealing with the variety of daily oppressions (Hegade & Andalgavkarkulkarni, 2025) <sup>[10]</sup>. These difficulties demonstrate the necessity to focus on intersection-sensitive policy frameworks that can be sensitive to the joint impact of gender, caste, and class. One-size-fits-all policies do not respond to different realities. According to the intersectional analysis, it is necessary to incorporate into the law-making, implementation, and evaluation to guarantee that all women in India are covered in the inclusive governance and substantive equality.

### Resistance, Agency and Movements

Indian women have been able to exhibit agency notwithstanding the persistent systems of marginalization by resisting, working together, and forming social movements. The women's movements in India have been instrumental in opposing the patriarchal system, caste system, and economic exploitation. Since the dawn of the reform movements and efforts to tackle social evils like child marriage and women's education, to the present-day campaigns against gender-based violence and work discrimination, the role of women's activism has broadened the rights, dignity, and

equality discussion on the subject (Pandey & Shrivastava, 2022) <sup>[3]</sup>. These activists have led to major legislative changes and increased the knowledge of the public on women and their issues. There is a specific and important place of activism of Dalit and Adivasi women in the wider arena of resistance. The struggles of Dalit women not only oppose caste as well as gender inequality, but also emphasize the experiences that have been unnoticed historically in mainstream feminist and Dalit movements. Issues such as caste-based coercion or caste-based violations, land claims, labour exploitation, and political representation have been foregrounded by leaders and collectives. Likewise, Adivasi women have been concerned with opposing displacement, environmental degradation, and erosion of traditional livelihood as well as claiming cultural identity and independence. This has been especially true of grassroots resistance, which has empowered marginalized women. Local cooperatives, women's groups, and self-help groups have helped women gain access to credit, livelihood, and social support patterns. Through these efforts, economic autonomy, creation of decision-making capabilities, and collective voice in the neighbourhoods are attained. Women have continued to confront the conventional power system by taking part in local forms of governance and development (Patnaik & Jha, 2020) <sup>[5]</sup>. Collective mobilization and education have a transformative effect in maintaining resistance and agency. Through education, awareness is improved on rights, confidence is developed, and social mobility is increased. Collective mobilization, be it in the form of unions, movements, and community organizations, helps women to present their collective grievances and negotiate with the state and social institutions. All these processes help to reinforce the ability of women to fight oppression and promote social change, underlining the idea that marginalized women are not passive victims but active participants in changing Indian society.

### Discussion

This paper is a synthesis of a discussion of gender, caste, and class to show that the marginalization of Indian women is a product of interlocking and mutually reinforcing inequality structures. The results indicate that gender-based oppression does not exist in its own world since it is strongly embedded in caste hierarchies and classes. Patriarchal cultures constrain the agency of women, caste systems assign different levels of status and dignity, and ranks of classes determine who can access the material resources. Such multiplied and compounded forms of disadvantage are brought about by these forces, especially to women (Dalit, Adivasi, and economically marginalized women). The paper identifies the ways these overlapping inequalities reveal how women experience their lives in various areas of education, labor, health, violence, and political representation (Sahu & Chauhan, 2024) <sup>[6]</sup>. Theoretically, the analysis supports the importance of intersectionality as the critical concept in the explanation of social stratification in India. It confronts single-axis strategies that see women as a homogenous group and rather argues that different social locations must be taken into consideration. Another aspect highlighted in the study is the weaknesses of the universalist feminist approaches, in that the study shows how caste and class directly change the nature of gender oppression. The results empirically attract interest to enduring trends of marginalization, discrepant

policy implications, and increased vulnerability in times of crisis, and the insufficiency of piecemeal or gender-neutral responses (Singh, 2024) <sup>[7]</sup>. The work contributes to the feminist and sociological discussion by pre-empting the voices and experiences of the oppressed women and making caste and class a more central gender issue. It corresponds to the Dalit and postcolonial feminist critiques, which urge us to understand the issues of oppression contextually and location-specifically. The paper contributes a more subtle concept of inequality in Indian society by connecting the feminist theory with sociological knowledge about stratification (Vandana & Vezhaventhan, 2024) <sup>[8]</sup>. In general, it is revealed in the discussion that to tackle the issue of women's marginalization, it is important to shift the symbolic inclusion to structural change. The key to substantive equality and social justice is to tackle marginalized populations with intersection-sensitive policies, social movements with inclusivity, and long-term contact between marginalized communities and the policy implementation team.

### Conclusion

This paper has explored the compound marginalities that Indian women have gone through due to the intertwined nature of gender, caste, and class. It has been opined that the issues of women's marginalization in India cannot be interpreted by one gender perspective alone, since caste suppression and class inequality are major determinants of what women have access to resources, dignity, and opportunities. Analysis based on the cumulative impact of these intersecting systems of oppression shows that Dalit, Adivasi, and economically disadvantaged women are further marginalized by the compounded form of feminist oppression. The paper highlights the significance of an intersectional approach both in theory and practice. Intersectionality allows understanding the social inequality more refined, in the perception of the diversity of women, where power conflicts across various axes. In the absence of such a strategy, policies and interventions will be reinforcing inequalities that are already there, because they will only consider the partial aspects of marginalization. On policy implications, findings can be taken to imply the necessity of intersection-sensitive frameworks, which are coupled with gender justice alongside caste equity and economic inclusion. This should be achieved by means of effective implementation, targeted welfare measures, and inclusive governance to ensure that unprivileged women have meaningful access to rights as well as opportunities. In the case of research, the analysis reveals a necessity to overcome a quantitative approach and to reach the local and community-based reality. Further studies in the field should aim at empirical and field studies that would reflect lived experiences within areas, communities, and professions. Such studies in comparison, longitudinal, and interdisciplinary would also add knowledge and lead to more inclusive and transformative social policies.

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