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# Caste, Class and Stratification

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## Abstract

This paper examines the nature and persistence of caste-based economic stratification in modern India. While the link between caste and hereditary occupation has weakened with economic modernization, caste remains a powerful axis of economic disparity. Using data from national surveys and censuses, we document significant and persistent gaps between broad caste groups—Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and Upper Castes—across key indicators such as education, occupation, income, and health. We analyze India's unique affirmative action policy ("reservation") and assess the debate on whether class has superseded caste as the primary marker of disadvantage. Our findings show that caste-based gaps persist even within economic classes. The paper also explores the intersection of caste with gender and religion, and investigates the mechanisms of social reproduction, specifically endogamy and the illegal but persistent practice of untouchability, which has tangible negative consequences for early childhood development. We conclude that caste, while transformed, continues to mediate economic outcomes and life chances in a globalizing India, presenting a complex challenge for policy aimed at achieving substantive equality.

Keywords: Caste, Stratification, Inequality, Affirmative Action, Discrimination, India, Human Capital, Development

JEL codes: J15; I24; J71; O15; Z13

## 1. Introduction

Systems of social stratification vary across the world. In many societies of the Americas and Europe, race—defined by skin color and phenotype—remains the most visible and enduring axis of inequality. Yet in large parts of the world, ascriptive divisions are organized differently. In India, the central stratifying institution is caste: a system of hereditary, endogamous groups with a hierarchical ordering historically tied to occupation and ritual purity.

Although modernization has loosened the direct link between caste and hereditary occupation, caste continues to shape life chances. This paper examines the persistence of caste-based economic disparities in contemporary India, a society that combines rapid economic growth, formal constitutional equality, and one of the world's most ambitious affirmative action programs. We ask: why does caste remain so durable despite democracy, industrialization, and globalization?

The analysis draws on multiple data sources—national surveys, censuses, and original empirical work—to document persistent gaps between Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and upper castes in education, occupations, wealth, and health. We evaluate India's caste-based affirmative action policy and interrogate the claim that class has superseded caste as the dominant marker of disadvantage. We also examine how caste intersects with gender and religion, and explore mechanisms of social reproduction such as endogamy and the continued, though illegal, practice of untouchability.

The paper makes three central contributions. First, it shows that caste-based gaps persist even within economic classes, highlighting that social identity continues to mediate outcomes independently of income or poverty status. Second, it demonstrates that while disparities in basic education have narrowed, inequalities in higher education—critical for access to high-quality employment—have widened, especially for Dalits and Adivasis. Third, it links the persistence of caste to mechanisms of reproduction that begin in early childhood, perpetuating disadvantage across generations.

The Indian case underscores how deeply entrenched systems of stratification can adapt to modern economic and political change, raising broader questions for global debates on inequality and affirmative action.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 provides a conceptual and historical background on the caste system. Section 3 details the challenges of data collection and the evolution of administrative categories. Section 4 analyzes intersectionality, focusing on gender and religion. Section 5 presents the core empirical analysis of contemporary disparities and the caste-class debate. Section 6 investigates the mechanisms of caste reproduction and the evolution of gaps over time. Section 7 concludes with a discussion of the findings and their implications.

## 2. **The Caste-Tribe stratification system**

The word caste in English translates two distinct concepts in India — *varna* and *jati.* Briefly, the varna system, believed to be approximately 3500 years old, divided the ancient Hindu society into initially four, later five, distinct varnas, which are mutually exclusive, hereditary, endogamous and occupation-specific groups. These were brahmin, the group that dealt with all textual and knowledge and worked as priests and teachers; kshatriya (warriors and royalty), vaisya (traders, merchants, moneylenders) and shudra (those engaged in menial, lowly jobs).

Over time, this fourfold classification metamorphosed into a five-fold one (approximately around 1500 years later, around 400 AD[1]), with those engaged in ritually polluting jobs considered untouchable. These were the *atishudra*. Whether it is appropriate to consider the atishudras as a part of the varna system is a moot point, as they are the '*avaranas*' (the lowliest of the low, so low that they are considered unfit to even be given a varna), in contrast to the '*savarnas*' (those with a varna). Thus, atishudras were a part of the varna system by being excluded from it.

It is clear that the occupational division under the varna system corresponds to a rudimentary economy. Over centuries, through fission and fusion of groups, migration, intermarriage and the growing complexity of economic activities, which led to new occupations, the ancient varna system metamorphosed into the contemporary *jati* system. There exist roughly 6000 jatis (exact number is not known, estimated to be between 4000-6000), also called castes (and share the basic characteristics of varnas), but they follow a much more complex system of hierarchy and rules of conduct towards each other. In reality, varnas provide a scale of status to which the jatis try to align themselves.

If a one-to-one correspondence existed between varna and jati, jatis would reduce to mere subsets of the varnas. However, this scale turns out to be fluid and ambiguous for a whole range of jatis as they present claims and counterclaims of their varna affiliations (Kothari, 1997, p.62). Srinivas (2003) refers to the 'frequent disagreement' regarding the position of a jati in the rank order: between the rank that the jati claims for itself and the rank conceded by others. These claims underlie complex debates about entitlement for the Indian policy of caste-based affirmative action called the reservation policy.

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[1] *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 7, First Edition 1946; Government of Maharashtra, 1990

A key element that defines the status hierarchy is the notion of ritual purity. Brahmins rank the highest everywhere in the country in the scale of ritual purity. Correspondingly, jatis, whose traditional occupations are considered ritually impure, are the lowest in the hierarchy everywhere. Criteria for ritual impurity include any contact with dirt, waste, bodily excretions, fluids, whether of humans or animals. These occupations include manual scavenging, dealing with dead animals (butchery or handmade leather work) or dead bodies (cremation, disposal of dead bodies), and midwifery and other similar work that is seen is "dirty".

Before India attained independence in 1947, members of these jatis were considered 'untouchable' (the atishudras) — touching them, seeing them, or even passing under their shadow were considered polluting for everyone else. Thus, these groups were ostracized and subjected to severe social restrictions. They lived in separate hamlets outside the main villages and were barred from entering upper-caste Hindu homes, temples, and accessing water sources like wells or rivers, and later publicly provided water taps for common use that were located in upper caste neighbourhoods.

Typically, the two ends of the spectrum are clearly identified; there is a definite local understanding of which jatis are dominant and which are subordinate. But a jati dominant in one state or region might not be dominant in another. For example, Jats are powerful in the northern state of Haryana, but less so in neighbouring Rajasthan. Also, dominance is not linear, in that, while Brahmins are at the top of the ritual purity status hierarchy, they might not be the dominant caste at the local level. Dominance is often defined in terms of landholding or influence in local politics.

Over 146 million[2] Indians belong to tribal communities distinct from Hindu caste society. These are the *Adivasis*, who have origins which precede the Aryans and even the Dravidians of the South. Many have lifestyles, languages and religious beliefs distinct from the more mainstream Indian religions and communities.

## 3. **Counting Caste: Data Challenges and Administrative Categories**

While all Hindus are born into a jati (the jati of their father, in endogamous marriages, of both parents), tribal status in the broadest dichotomous division consists of tribals and non-tribals. Within tribals, there are multiple groups. Thus, to take stock of inter-caste

[2] Roughly 10 percent of estimated Indian population of 1,463,865,525 according to https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/india-population/ (accessed 26 September 2025 ).

and/or tribal/non-tribal (or inter-tribal disparities across tribal communities), we need accurate data on a range of socio-economic indicators by jati or tribal status.

However, India does not have a database of comprehensive, nuanced data. Given the multiplicity of categories and lack of accurate data, careful and detailed empirical estimation of caste (jati) or tribal inequality is challenging. A pairwise comparison of jatis would be mind-boggling and have very low interpretive power, assuming this is possible at all. The basic hurdle here is that there is no definitive count of how many castes exist.

### 3.1 **Counting caste in colonial India**

The tradition of decennial censuses started under British colonial rule. While the first census was held in the late 1860s and 1870s, it was asynchronous and fragmented. The first national synchronous census was held in 1881, and has continued ever since, with the exception of 2021, discussed below.

The 1901 census published a hierarchy of castes by province but led to significant dissent. The 1911 census did not attempt to create any sort of caste ranking, choosing to just enumerate the castes. Contrary to popular belief, the 1931 census, which is the most comprehensive jati- based census of all censuses, actually did not count *all* castes. The then census commissioner, J.H. Hutton, was an anthropologist who believed that tribals, as also the 'exterior castes' (now the Scheduled Castes), 'formed a distinct element in the Indian population, which was not amenable to normal constitutional processes, but which required a strategy of intervention by the government to protect their rights and promote their welfare' (Singh, Foreword to the 1931 census). This census gave, for the first time, a comprehensive account of the number and distribution of 'primitive tribes', as well as of all 'exterior castes'. Exterior was the new nomenclature for the term 'depressed classes', which was considered derogatory, but which was used in previous censuses (and continued to be used in official documents later). The 1931 census counted 277 exterior castes, with a population share of 10.1 per cent.

The scope of this census with regard to other (non-exterior) castes was rather limited. The state census officials were told not to tabulate figures for castes for which the 'local Government did not regard such tabulation as important', as well as those which fell below a minimal demographic standard for enumeration of castes (Census of India, 1931, p.432). This resulted in the enumeration of only a dozen or so of selected castes. It also used the 1891 census method of grouping castes by their traditional occupations.

Despite its limitations, it remains the most comprehensive enumeration of castes. 1941 was conducted during the Second World War. It was fragmented and its results were not published.

### 3.2 **Post Independence data on castes and tribes**

The deeply stigmatizing, degrading and heinous practice of untouchability was deemed illegal in newly independent India in 1949 (and in Pakistan in 1953). Breaches of the ban are punishable by law. Additionally, after independence from British rule in 1947, the new Indian republic continued the colonial era policies of protective or compensatory discrimination towards a group of castes, tribes and other communities that used to be clubbed under the omnibus category of 'Depressed Classes'. The constitution of independent India identified jatis and tribes that were stigmatized for their identity, historically subjected to discrimination and deprivation and were economically the weakest, into two separate government schedules as beneficiaries of reservations in government jobs and higher educational institutions. There are also electoral quotas at all levels of government: the rise of politicians and political parties belonging to the lower-ranked caste groups has been one of the big post-independence transformations in India's political landscape.

From 1951 onwards, in keeping with the ideal of a 'casteless' India, the national census counted only the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (explained below), the target groups for the reservation policy, India's affirmative action programme. Some household survey datasets report indicators at the jati level; however, forcing a hierarchical ordering of the jatis based on an economic criterion alone would be completely erroneous, even if hypothetically possible.[3]

The formerly untouchable castes (jatis), targeted for affirmative action, are listed in a government schedule, and are grouped together in the omnibus administrative category of Scheduled Castes (SCs). Roughly at 20 percent of India's population (according to the latest nationally representative sample surveys), the SC jatis would comprise an estimated 292 million individuals.[4]

There is an analogous category of Scheduled Tribes (ST) comprising of tribal groups identified for reservations. Scheduled Tribes, unlike SCs or OBCs, defined below, often live in geographically contiguous areas, and this fact has led to a location-based approach to the formulation of special provisions for them. If individuals belonging to STs live in areas outside 'Tribal or Scheduled Areas' (defined below), they are eligible for

[3] This would be highly questionable, given the debate surrounding the validity of a strict hierarchical ordering of castes (see, for instance, Dumont, 1980; Gupta, 1984; Chatterjee, 1997).

[4] Roughly 20 percent of estimated Indian population of 1,463,865,525 according to https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/india-population/ (accessed 26 September 2025 ).

affirmative action benefits, and possibly some other targeted programmes aimed at marginalized groups, but typically no other special provisions. However, given that it is possible to identify pockets where tribals are dominant, there are two administrative arrangements in the form of the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution. These two schedules are a continuation of certain parts of the Government of India Act of 1935, under which certain backward areas had to be administered by the Governor 'in the exercise of his personal discretion'.

A third category of castes and communities identified for affirmative action is Other Backward Classes (OBCs), a large and heterogeneous collection of groups that rank low in the socioeconomic hierarchy but are not considered untouchables. Even though landowning and locally dominant groups have managed to find their way into this legal category (possibly to benefit from reservations or quotas), indicators show that the average standard of living for OBCs is still below that of the Hindu upper castes.

The national censuses till 2011 presented estimates of the SC, ST, and total populations. Even though OBCs have been identified as beneficiaries of affirmative action since 1991, the national censuses of 2001 and 2011 did not count the OBC population, making it the only instance of affirmative action in the world where a precise numerical estimate of the beneficiary group is not available. At the time of writing (2025), India is yet to embark on the national census which was due in 2021 (it has been announced for 2027). Thus, the latest official estimate of the sizes of different groups comes from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) conducted by the National Statistical Office. The 2021-22 PLFS estimates show that for India, STs, SCs, OBCs and Others are 9.8, 19.98, 45.76 and 24.43 per cent of India's population, respectively. These are sample survey estimates and are likely to differ from exact census-based population estimates.

Panel A of Table 1, based on the PLFS 2021-22, shows the rural-urban division of the four groups. We note that that the share of SC-ST groups in rural India is higher than that in urban India. 20 per cent of rural population is non-SC-ST-OBC, whereas the corresponding proportion in urban India is almost 36.

**Table 1**

| Panel A | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Dist of Indian Population by Social Group %, 2021-22 | | | | |
| | ST | SC | OBC | OTHERS | TOTAL |
| RURAL | 12.1 | 21.9 | 46 | 20 | 100 |
| URBAN | 3.9 | 15.2 | 45 | 35.9 | 100 |
| Source: PLFS, 2021-22 Report, page 73 | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| Panel B | | | | | |
| | Social Group by Religion, Row and Column %, 2021-22 | | | | |
| | ST | SC | OBC | Others | Total |
| Hinduism | 10.23 | 22.46 | 45.09 | 22.22 | 100 |
| | 86.18 | 93.05 | 81.55 | 75.28 | 82.77 |
| Islam | 1.25 | 0.69 | 59.68 | 38.38 | 100 |
| | 1.6 | 0.43 | 16.4 | 19.75 | 12.57 |
| Christianity | 42.86 | 10.69 | 27.65 | 18.8 | 100 |
| | 10.08 | 1.24 | 1.4 | 1.78 | 2.31 |
| Sikkhism | 0.25 | 41.32 | 17.68 | 40.76 | 100 |
| | 0.04 | 2.96 | 0.55 | 2.39 | 1.43 |
| Jainism | 0 | 1.21 | 7.87 | 90.93 | 100 |
| | 0 | 0.01 | 0.03 | 0.65 | 0.17 |
| Buddhism | 12.82 | 82.81 | 2.78 | 1.59 | 100 |
| | 0.72 | 2.27 | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.55 |
| Zoroastrianism | 0 | 0 | 0 | 100 | 100 |
| | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0.01 | 0 |
| Others | 71.87 | 3.91 | 9.92 | 14.3 | 100 |
| | 1.4 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.11 | 0.19 |
| Total | 9.83 | 19.98 | 45.76 | 24.43 | 100 |
| | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Source: Author's calculations based on unit-level data, PLFS, 2021-22 | | | | | |

The objection to this classification could be that these omnibus categories attempt to club a diverse set of jatis into one label that further essentialises these categories. Some would even argue, legitimately so, that these categories are meaningless, particularly the 'Others', as no Indian would self-identify her/himself as an 'Other'. Analytically, however, this three/four-way data division is appealing for its simplicity and amenability to computations. While 'Others' is clearly an unnatural, residual category, the same is not true for SC and ST categories. With all the disparity *within* them, the SC castes are united in suffering the stigma of untouchability or share a common 'stigmatized ethnic identity'.[5] The weakness of this broad classificatory scheme lies in *underestimating* the relative disadvantage of the SCs since the 'Others' is a very large, heterogeneous category containing a whole range of castes, including jatis that are socially and economically not necessarily very distinct from the SCs. Nevertheless, if empirical studies establish inter-caste disparity between SCs and Others, it is reasonable to infer an even greater disparity between castes at the two polar ends.

[5] Thorat (1979)

A key difference between the caste/tribe stratification system from the racial divisions (say in the US) is that no single group (jati or tribe) is a majority. As a matter of fact, SC-ST-OBCs (the non-upper castes) together are the numerical majority. The word "Bahujan" (meaning majority) is used to describe Shudra-Atishudra group (i.e., in administrative category terms, SCs and OBCs). This term was widely used by the 19th century social reformer and anti-caste crusader, Jotiba Phule.

On the nomenclature of stigmatized jatis, we should note that Mahatma Gandhi, who was not opposed to caste divisions per se but found the oppression of untouchables reprehensible, coined the term Harijan (people close to God) to describe the untouchables. This was challenged by several, most notably by B.R. Ambedkar (jurist, economist, social reformer, chairperson of the drafting committee of the Indian constitution and India's first law minister), as patronising, condescending and offensive. Thus, the former untouchable castes often identify themselves by the (original Sanskrit) Marathi word Dalit (meaning 'the oppressed' or 'broken people'), employed as a term of pride. While the SC/ST nomenclature has grown out of government policy, Dalit is a more loosely defined social category.

## 4. **Intersectionality: Caste, Tribe, Sex, and Religion**

### **4.1 Caste, Tribe and Sex**

Hinduism is not a monotheistic religion, and the dominant operative version is Brahminical Hinduism, which has a distinct understanding of the link between gender and caste.

Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are closely interconnected, as they are the organizing principle of the Brahmanical social order. In the Manusmriti as well as in other texts, women and Sudras are treated identically – the caste system places similar restrictions on the two, especially in terms of denial of religious privileges or denial of access to education.

Yet, neither caste scholars nor feminist scholars pay adequate attention to just how inextricable the two dimensions of the hierarchy are. Historians have also argued that the caste system not only determines the social division of labour but its sexual division as well. For instance, women in agriculture can engage in water regulation, transplanting, and weeding, but not ploughing.

Literature suggests that maintaining the purity of the caste system is possible only by controlling the sexuality of women. Thus, endogamy (a crucial feature of the caste system) should be seen as a mechanism of recruiting and retaining control over the labour and sexuality of women. The concepts of 'purity' and 'pollution' not only segregate caste groups but also regulate the mobility of women. Accordingly, while all deviations from endogamy are in principle disallowed, within inter-caste marriages,

*anuloma* marriages (upper-caste men marrying women of lower caste) are allowed, while *pratiloma* marriages (the reverse) are not.

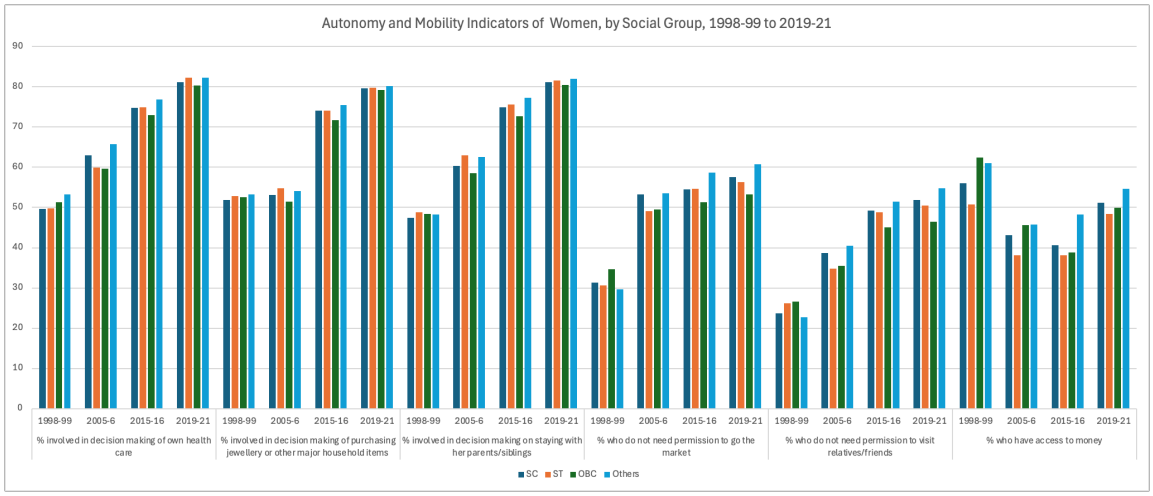
What does this suggest for the comparison of upper-caste women and Dalit/Adivasi women? A comparison of men across social groups is straightforward. However, in trying to compare the condition of women across castes, an ambiguity arises, since 'the subordination of women was crucial to the development of caste hierarchy, the women being subject to increasing constraints the higher the caste in the hierarchy' (Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi 1986). Thus, it is not uncommon to find, for instance, that as a given jat gains upward mobility, the women in it are immediately withdrawn from outside work.

The caste–religion nexus is strongest among the upper castes, as they view themselves as custodians of the established religious tradition. On the other hand, the Dalit castes have historically been relatively more egalitarian for women. Thus, in the literature, there is a debate over which group of women is really better off. There is a suggestion of a trade-off between better material conditions of living (for higher-caste women) and greater autonomy (for Dalit women).

My work shows that this trade-off has vanished and that the relative freedom of Dalit/Adivasi women may now be more illusory than real (Deshpande, 2002). While actual material improvements among the Dalit and Adivasi groups are not substantial, evidence suggests that the phenomenon of Sanskritization (lower castes' emulating upper-caste practices as symbolic of betterment in their position) may be spreading.

Based on four rounds of the National Family and Health Survey (NFHS) data between 1998-99 and 2019-21, Figure 1 Figure 1 tracks changes in women's autonomy across social groups using NFHS data, challenging the notion of a trade-off between material well-being and freedom. We see that over time, all categories of women report an increase in autonomy. Upper caste women's self-reported autonomy has increased and often exceeds that of SC or OBC women, making the trade-off redundant. Thus, Dalit and Adivasi women bear the double brunt of the marginalisation of group identity as well as gender.

Figure 1




## 4.2 Caste and Religion

While the caste system is conventionally associated with Hinduism, all religions in India, including Islam and Christianity, display inter-group disparity akin to a caste system (Jodhka and Shah, 2010). This has led to the hypothesis that perhaps caste was a system of social stratification in pre-modern India (Klass, 1980). This is also true for the so-called egalitarian religions such as Buddhism. 'The term 'Brahmana' of the Vedas is accepted by the Buddhists as a term for a saint, one who has attained final sanctification' (Radhakrishnan, 2004)[6]. Thus, Buddhism makes a distinction between Brahmins and others. This is ironic since low castes have embraced Buddhism in large numbers, believing it will provide them with the equality that Hinduism denies them.

The evidence of the overlap of caste and religion has policy implications. India's affirmative action programme is directed towards the most marginalised castes within three religions: Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism. The SC list includes stigmatized jatis from these three religious groups. While official affirmative action is restricted to Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists, in household surveys, lower-ranked Muslim or Christian individuals, when asked about their caste status, self-identify as SCs. These could be Dalits who converted from Hinduism to other religions, including Christianity and Islam, to escape discrimination and exclusion. Alternatively, self-identification as SC could reflect their marginalised state within their respective religions. There is clear evidence of untouchability practices in other religions, e.g. evidence of untouchability among Indian Muslims (Imtiaz Ahmed, 1973; Irfan Ahmed 2003; Trivedi et al, 2016 etc). Table 1, based the PLFS 2021-22 unit level data reveals that 10.69 per cent Christian identify as SC or Dalit Christians.

[6] Radhakrishnan (2004), p.177, quotes J.G. Jennings: 'It should never be forgotten that Buddhism is a reformed Brahmanism, as is evidenced by the invariably honorific use which Gautama makes of the title 'Brahmin' and it therefore takes for granted certain Vedic or Vedantic postulates.

My research with Rajesh Ramachandran (Deshpande and Ramachandran, 2023), comparing SCs across religious groups, indicates that conversion out of Hinduism seems to improve socio-economic status for everyone other than SC-Muslims. Dalit Christians' outcomes are better that Dalit Hindus, possibly due to missionary emphasis on education. This suggests that members of marginalised groups can potentially alter their stigmatised status by changing their religion. However, religious conversion does not guarantee escape out of stigmatization. The case of SC Muslims illustrates that if members move to yet another stigmatised and discriminated against group, their marginalisation can get compounded. The better outcomes of Dalit Sikhs, Buddhists and Christians (despite differences within them) suggest that concerted affirmative or protective policies, such as reservations or quotas in India or a strong focus on education, are needed to reduce the severity of marginalisation even after conversion.

In the meanwhile, Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians have persisted in their demand for reservation on account of continued stigmatisation. However, this is opposed by the central government: the affidavit filed by them in the hearings argues that Dalits who converted to Islam and Christianity ``ameliorated their social status' and ``cannot claim to be backward', since untouchability is a feature of Hindu religion and its branches alone. It also argued that conversion to Islam and Christianity has been taking place over centuries, and Dalit Muslims and Christians' original caste/community cannot be located.

## 5. **Caste or Class: What captures contemporary stratification better?**

The most common question about stratification in contemporary India is whether class has displaced caste as the main axis of disadvantage. Economic modernization has loosened the traditional caste–occupation nexus: millions of Indians now work in jobs with no hereditary or jati counterpart, and modern professional occupations are, in principle, open to anyone with the requisite skills. This apparent weakening even led M.N. Srinivas (2003) to write an "Obituary on Caste as a System."

> *A combination of wholly new technologies, institutions based on new principles and a new ideology which includes democracy, equality and the idea of human dignity and self-respect has to be in operation for a considerable time to uproot the caste system. Such a combination of forces is today bringing about the destruction of the caste-based system of production in the villages and at the local level.*

While the caste-occupation nexus in an obvious sense has significantly weakened, in that most modern-day occupations have no jati counterpart, to examine the contemporary persistence or weakening of the caste system, we should examine three key questions: one, does the overlap between jati status and occupational status persists, i.e., is it more likely that higher-ranked castes are over-represented in higher

ranked occupations? Two, has the link between traditional occupations and caste broken or considerably weakened? For example, how likely is it that Dalits will be temple priests and Brahmins will be take up manual scavenging or butchery?

Yet evidence shows that caste continues to structure opportunities in ways class alone cannot explain. Caste consciousness is strong and even extends to arenas such as charitable giving (Deshpande and Spears, 2016). We advance three observations.

First, caste-based disparities persist across multiple dimensions**.** Contemporary data reveal gaps in education, occupation, and wealth that cannot be reduced to income differences alone. Table 2 (compiled from national surveys) shows that upper castes are consistently over-represented in higher-status occupations and advanced education, while SCs and STs are concentrated in lower-status, low-paying work.

Second, caste stratifies outcomes even within class. Using the India Human Development Survey (IHDS), Deshpande and Ramachandran (2019) compared poor Brahmins with poor Scheduled Castes (SCs) and found stark differences. Across multiple socioeconomic indicators, poor Brahmins fare better than all SCs—and in many cases, better than non-poor SCs. Subjective perceptions reinforce this: while 77 percent of poor SCs saw themselves as poor in 2012, only 40 percent of poor Brahmins did. This shows that caste identity confers relative advantage independent of poverty status (Table 3)

Table 2

| | | ST | SC | OBC | Others | All |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | |
| **Average value of assets (INR '000)*** | | | | | | |
| | Rural | 884 | 879 | 1645 | 2603 | 1592 |
| | Urban | 1890 | 1315 | 2120 | 4054 | 2717 |
| **Literacy Rate, 5 and above** (% of social group)** | | | | | | |
| | Rural | 69.3 | 72.3 | 75.0 | 83.0 | 75.4 |
| | Urban | 84.0 | 81.3 | 86.1 | 91.0 | 87.1 |
| **Employment Type** (% of social group)** | | | | | | |
| | **Rural** | | | | | |
| Own account worker | | 31.6 | 30.8 | 36.7 | 49.2 | 40.1 |
| Helper in household enterprise | | 30.3 | 14.2 | 4.6 | 19.6 | 21.4 |
| Regular Wage Salaried | | 8.3 | 13 | 43.2 | 16.9 | 12.5 |
| Casual Labour | | 29.8 | 42 | 15.5 | 14.4 | 25.9 |
| | **Urban** | | | | | |
| Own account worker | | 22.5 | 25.4 | 47.1 | 35.6 | 33.1 |
| Helper in household enterprise | | 6.5 | 5 | 10.1 | 6.5 | 6.4 |
| Regular Wage Salaried | | 50.5 | 46.6 | 22.3 | 51.4 | 47.1 |
| Casual Labour | | 20.7 | 23 | 20.5 | 6.5 | 13.4 |
| **Labour Force Participation Rates, usual status**** | | | | | | |
| | Rural Male | 59.1 | 56.3 | 56.1 | 57.8 | 56.9 |
| | Rural Female | 40.6 | 26.3 | 26.4 | 21.5 | 27.2 |
| | Urban Male | 58.1 | 59.1 | 57.9 | 58.6 | 58.3 |
| | Urban Female | 28.5 | 20.2 | 18.6 | 17.3 | 18.8 |
| **Source: Statement 3.3 from Report No. 588: All India Debt and Investment Survey 2019, p. 21* | | | | | | |
| *** PLFS, Annual Report, 2021-22* | | | | | | |

*Source: Compiled by author*

## 5.1 **Affirmative Action: from group to class-based?**

The debate over the relative importance of caste and class is directly reflected in the evolution of India's affirmative action policy. Affirmative action in India until 2019 consisted of quotas or “reservation” of seats in government run higher educational institutions, public sector jobs, and elected positions. The national quota for SC-ST is 22.5 percent and for OBCs is 27 percent. The SC-ST quota is roughly proportional to their population share in the 1970s, and applies to all public institutions, and to all levels of elected positions, starting from the lowest (rural and urban local bodies). This not subject to an income (or class) cut-off.

The OBC quota is subject to an income cut-off, which is referred to as the “creamy layer exclusion”. OBC candidates whose standard of living/income is above a cut-off are designated as belonging to the creamy layer and are not eligible for reservations. OBC quota is applicable to public sector jobs and higher education, not for elected positions.

SC-ST and OBC quotas constitute vertical reservations, in that these categories are mutually exclusive. In addition to these vertical categories, there are horizontal categories eligible for reservations that cut across all vertical categories. These are gender (women are eligible in some cases), disability, offsprings of war widows, and domicile.

In 2019, a new vertical category for reservations got introduced, called “Economically Weaker Sections” or EWS, with 10 percent seats reserved While this was meant to target economic deprivation regardless of caste, by making it a vertical category, SCs, STs and OBCs were not eligible for it, thus effectively making it a quota for upper castes. Also, while the name of the quota suggests that it was directed towards the poor, the income ceiling for the cut-off was so high that over 95 percent of the population was eligible for it.

Deshpande and Ramachandran (2019) examined the validity of the EWS quota; in particular, it addressed the question of whether caste was still relevant as an axis of stratification, or if economic criteria captured deprivation more accurately compared to the administrative caste categories.

Since the EWS income criterion does not target the poor, we used the official poverty line to identify the poor and compared the poor among Brahmins, other upper castes, SCs with all SCs, across a number of socioeconomic indicators, using household survey data from India Human Development Survey (IHDS) for 2005 and 2012 (the last publicly available round of the survey). This is one of the rare surveys that allows us to unpack the residual category of non-SC-ST-OBCs into Brahmins and other upper castes. Table 3 provides a direct test of the caste-class link, comparing socioeconomic indicators for poor individuals from different caste backgrounds.

Table 3

| | 2005 | | | | 2012 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Poor Brahmins | Poor UCs | Poor SCs | All SCs | Poor Brahmins | Poor UCs | Poor SCs | All SCs |
| **Income and wealth** | | | | | | | | |
| Average (avg) annual household (hh) income | 36,372.94 | 49,496.05 | 27,870.67 | 36,505.19 | 88,069.54 | 89,011.75 | 64,652.74 | 96,567.9 |
| Own or cultivate land (%) | 59 | 39 | 35 | 37 | 91 | 75 | 48 | 56 |
| Total hh assets (0–33) | 9.31 | 9.57 | 7.18 | 9.27 | 11.94 | 11.44 | 9.68 | 12.98 |
| Self perception as: Poor | | | | | 40.44 | 66.13 | 76.92 | 57.85 |
| Middle class | | NA | | | 58.21 | 31.87 | 22.2 | 39.2 |
| Comfortable | | | | | 1.34 | 2 | 0.88 | 2.88 |
| **Education (edu)** | | | | | | | | |
| Avg edu years (yrs) of all adults | 3.46 | 3.22 | 2.36 | 3.15 | 5.55 | 4.21 | 3.61 | 4.78 |
| Edu yrs of highest educated adult | 8.38 | 6.05 | 5.16 | 5.92 | 9.72 | 6.66 | 5.61 | 6.99 |
| Hhs with at least one adult with at least 12 years of schooling (%) | 22.81 | 0 | 0 | 14.04 | 39.73 | 16.48 | 11.71 | 20.58 |
| Can read para/story (%) | 35 | 43 | 33 | 42 | 70 | 47 | 34 | 45 |
| Can divide/subtract (%) | 44 | 37 | 26 | 36 | 51 | 75 | 48 | 38 |
| **Employment** | | | | | | | | |
| Casual labourer (%) | 85 | 96 | 97 | 92 | 71 | 89 | 92 | 83 |
| Government job (%) | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Observations | 743 | 5,495 | 9,388 | 31,462 | 674 | 3,955 | 7,785 | 31,655 |

Source: Authors' calculations based on IHDS household data for 2005 and 2012.

Across all indicators, we see a clear gap between poor Brahmins and poor SCs. In fact, poor Brahmins are better-off than all SCs across most indicators. In 2012, the survey asked respondents their self-perception: if they thought of themselves as "poor", "middle-class" or "comfortable". Almost 77 percent of poor SCs and 58 percent of all SCs saw themselves as poor, compared to 40.44 of objectively poor Brahmins.

In sum, while the caste–occupation nexus has loosened, caste continues to define stratification in modern India. Caste is not reducible to class: even among the poor, upper castes hold relative advantages in education, occupation, and social standing. Policies that substitute class for caste therefore fail to address the distinctive barriers faced by stigmatized groups.

## 6. **The Persistence of Caste: Reproduction and Evolving Disparities**

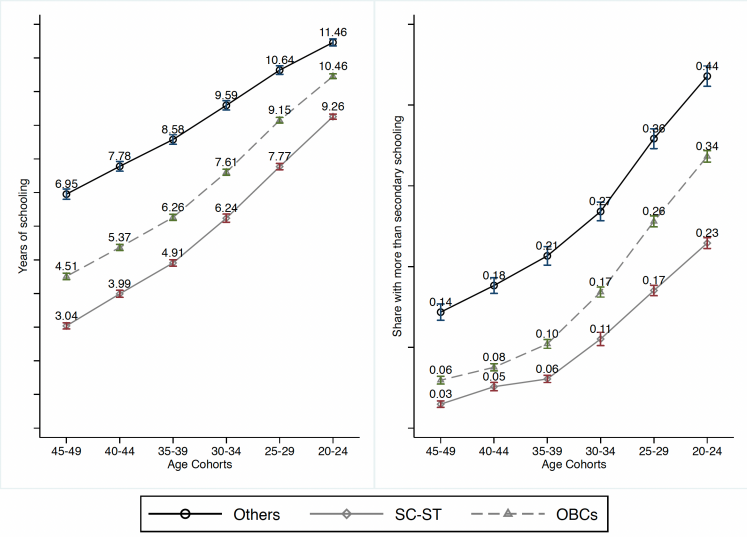
The Indian Constitution guarantees equality to all citizens regardless of caste, religion, gender, or any other social identity. Nonetheless, members of the formerly untouchable castes are still among the country's most marginalized and stigmatized groups, even

though they are entitled to preferential affirmative action in the form of quotas in government-funded higher educational institutions and public sector jobs.

### 6.1 **Caste Disparities: Contemporary or Hangovers from the Past?**

Given the long history of the caste system, the fact that recent data reveal disparities is not surprising. To assess the strength of the contemporary caste system, the more relevant question is whether the gaps have become stronger or weaker over time. In research examining the evolution of caste inequality in India, Deshpande and Ramachandran (2024) find that caste gaps in basic educational attainment (up to the secondary school level) have narrowed over the past few decades. However, in higher education—which is what matters for getting good jobs—the gaps have increased over time. Figure 2 illustrates this divergent trend, showing narrowing gaps in basic education but widening gaps in higher education attainment between social groups. Younger cohorts of OBCs have moved closer to the upper castes, but the gaps between Dalits and Adivasis on the one hand and Hindu upper castes on the other have widened in the pursuit of higher education and white-collar jobs.

Figure 2




Source: Figure 1 from Deshpande and Ramachandran, 2024

These findings might appear surprising to anyone under the impression that caste has either vanished or declined in importance in a modernizing, urbanizing, and rapidly globalizing India. To understand the persistence of caste and such conflicting views about its reality, it will be useful to briefly delve into an important pre-independence debate that continues to shape beliefs about the caste system to this day.

### 6.2 The Ambedkar–Gandhi Debate: Competing Views of Caste

The persistence of caste in contemporary India echoes a pre-independence debate between two of the country's most influential leaders: Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Bhimrao Ambedkar.

Gandhi viewed caste (varna) as a benign "division of labor." He argued that individuals should earn their living through ancestral callings, which he believed contributed to social order. Ambedkar, himself from a stigmatized caste, rejected this as both impractical and immoral. In his 1936 text *Annihilation of Caste*, he asked: "Must a man follow his ancestral calling even if it does not suit his capacities, even when it has ceased to be profitable? Must a man live by his ancestral calling even if he finds it immoral?" For Ambedkar, caste was not a division of labor but a "division of laborers"—a system of inherited status and exclusion.

This clash was not merely philosophical. It shaped the Indian Constitution itself. As chair of the drafting committee, Ambedkar argued that formal equality could not be meaningful without affirmative action to address substantive inequality. His understanding of caste—as an oppressive structure that had to be annihilated, not reformed—underpinned the reservation system for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

The debate remains relevant today. Gandhi's view, which downplays caste as a rigid hierarchy and instead portrays it as a functional division, continues to resonate among those who see caste as declining in importance. Ambedkar's view, supported by contemporary evidence, highlights caste as a durable axis of discrimination that adapts to modernization rather than dissolving in its wake.

For understanding persistence, Ambedkar's framing is more consistent with the data: widening gaps in higher education, continued endogamy, and the reproduction of disadvantage from childhood all suggest that caste is not a residue of the past but a living system of inequality.

### 6.2 **Social reproduction of caste: Endogamy and Untouchability**

The two main instruments by which caste reproduces itself in contemporary India are caste endogamy and continued practice of untouchability, despite being declared illegal.

Marriage in India is nearly universal, with more than 95 percent men and women being ever married by age 35. While this figure is based on 2011 census, and the proportion might have declined in the last 15 years, India has higher rates of marriage compared to other countries at comparable levels of development. In household survey data, only 5 per cent of Indians report inter-caste marriages, and this proportion has not changed since the 1960s. Thus, caste endogamy continues to be the norm.

IHDS data reveal that estimated 73 percent of marriages are arranged by families. However, in the last two decades, with the proliferation of the internet, online dating and marriage portals are commonly used, even for arranged marriages. In ongoing work, I am examining marriage preference from online portals. An examination of over 16,000 English language matrimonial advertisements in 2024/25 reveals that 22 percent of advertisers state "caste no bar" (i.e., they have no specific caste preference in their partner), but 73 percent state their own caste (jati), which would lead to self-selection in the responses they would receive. The proportion of the sample that did not mention their own caste and also mentioned "caste no bar" was low: over 6 percent.

Thus, while internet savvy and English-speaking Indians (higher SES than the average Indian) seem slightly more open to non-caste-based marriages, overall these (preliminary) data do not indicate a radical shift away from caste endogamy.

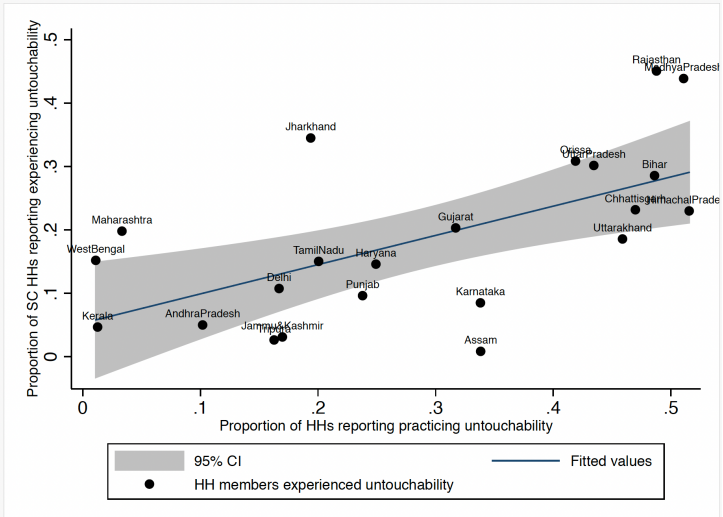
Within this small proportion of inter-caste marriages, those that cross the line of ritual purity are truly exceptional, invite the wrath of family and caste associations, and often meet a tragic end in what is euphemistically described as an 'honour killing'.

The fact that caste endogamy is an essential feature of the caste system is evident from the analysis of genetic evidence (Moorjani et al, 2013). This evidence shows that the Indian subcontinent experienced substantial intermixing of groups until about 1900 years back. As the caste system and endogamy became codified, India experienced a demographic transformation such that it moved from a region where substantial admixture of the population was common to a region where intermixing was very rare.

## Untouchability

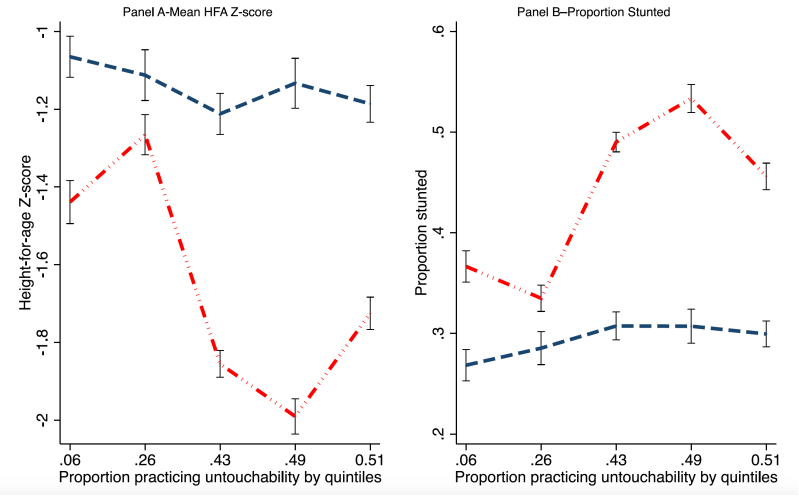
Despite untouchability being illegal and punishable, overt and covert instances of untouchability continue. The second round of the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) asked households if they practiced untouchability. Nationally, approximately 30 percent households admitted to practicing untouchability, with wider interstate variation. The survey also asked SC households if they experienced untouchability. Figure 3 plots the two proportions by state and shows a clear positive correlation.

Figure 3




There are many deleterious and toxic effects of the continuance of this inhuman practice. One of those has to do with early childhood development. Deshpande and Ramachandran (2025) show that stunting rates among SC children increase with an increase in proportion of the population practicing untouchability (Figure 4, Panel B) or have lower height-for-age Z-scores (Figure 4, Panel A).

Figure 4




Source: Figure 4 from Deshpande and Ramachandran (2025)

While India does not have longitudinal data that can track children to adulthood, there is sufficient international evidence that children with significant nutrition and health

deficits during early childhood tend to have worse adult life outcomes, manifested in lower cognitive ability, worse examination scores, lower wages etc. (Deshpande and Ramachandran, 2022).

Combining evidence from caste gaps in early childhood development indicators with lessons from international evidence suggests that adult life disparities among social groups most likely originate in early childhood malnourishment. This implies a vicious cycle of disadvantage for Dalits and Adivasis. Due to caste gaps in early childhood nutrition, children from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are 40 per cent more likely to be stunted than children from the upper castes. This has long-term implications for their educational and cognitive development and labour market outcomes.

## 7. **Discussion and Concluding Comments**

### **7.1. Summary of Findings**

This paper has documented the enduring economic significance of the caste system in India. Despite profound economic changes and a constitutional commitment to equality, caste remains a fundamental axis of stratification. Our analysis shows:

1. **Persistent Disparities:** Significant gaps in human capital, occupational status, and wealth persist between Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and Upper Castes.
2. **The Primacy of Caste over Class:** Economic deprivation alone does not capture the full extent of disadvantage. Even poor upper-caste individuals, on average, fare better than the average member of a marginalized caste, indicating that caste identity confers a relative advantage that transcends class (Table 3).
3. **Evolution of Gaps:** While gaps in basic education have narrowed, disparities in higher education—a critical gateway to high-quality employment—have widened for the most marginalized groups, particularly SCs and STs (Figure 2).
4. **Mechanisms of Reproduction:** Caste is reproduced through near-universal endogamy and the continued, albeit illegal, practice of untouchability. The latter has a measurable, negative impact on early childhood development, creating a vicious cycle of disadvantage (Figures 3 & 4).
5. **Complex Intersectionality:** The experience of stratification is shaped by the intersection of caste with gender and religion. The relative autonomy once associated with Dalit women appears to be diminishing, and religious conversion offers an incomplete escape from stigmatization, with outcomes varying by the receiving religion.

## 7.2 Caste and Race

A question of enduring interest globally is this: What, if any, is the relationship between caste and race (i.e. phenotype)? Attempts to draw parallels between race and caste have a long history, going back to the British efforts to classify castes by the alleged racial commonalities within each caste. While there are many similarities between racism and casteism as ideologies or institutions, race and caste themselves are distinct and dissimilar[7]. Prominent scholars of the caste system have decidedly rejected the racial theory of caste[8]. Ambedkar (1916) suggests that 'European students of caste have unduly emphasised the role of colour in the caste system. Themselves impregnated by colour prejudices, they very readily imagined it to be the chief factor in the caste problem. But nothing can be further from the truth….' (p.21). In his 1936 essay 'Annihilation of Caste' he asks

> What racial affinity is there between the Brahmin of the Punjab and the Brahmin of Madras? What racial affinity is there between the untouchable of Bengal and the untouchable of Madras? What racial difference is there between the Brahmin of the Punjab and the Chamar of the Punjab? What racial difference is there between the Brahmin of Madras and the Pariah of Madras? The Brahmin of the Punjab is racially of the same stock as the Chamar of the Punjab, and the Brahmin of Madras is of the same race as the Punjab is racially of the same stock as the Chamar of the Punjab, and the Brahmin of Madras is of the same race as the Pariah of Madras'…. and goes on to argue that the 'caste system is a social division of people of the same race' (p.18[9]).

In its attempt to 'prove' the racial theory of the Indian civilization, the British administration had commissioned investigations into the distinctions in skin shade and phenotypical features (such as length of the nose, cephalic index etc.). Herbert Hope Risley (1851-1911), a member of the Indian Civil Service, who served in India from 1873 to 1910, was instrumental in concretizing the racial theory of caste vide the 1901 census report (*The People of India*) and a journal article 'The study of ethnology in India' (1891). One of the most well-known statements of Risley is 'the social position of a caste varies inversely as its nasal index'. Trautmann (1997), after a detailed review of the contending theories and available evidence concludes that 'both Risley and Max Mueller

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[7]See Beteille (1990) for a concise and lucid review of the differences as well as the similarities between the two systems.

[8] Ketkar (1909, reprinted edition 2002) contains a severe critique of the 'invention of racial lines in the present varna system of Hindu society made by European scholars on the basis of Vedic literature' (p.78). Mincing no words, he says….'I shall be very sorry if a superficial acquaintance with a half-developed and hybrid ethnology, and a wrong interpretation of ancient documents, and an invented tradition should result in magnifying racial differences and in making the future consolidation and amalgamation of India more difficult and distant (p.79).

[9] B.R. Ambedkar (1936), Annihilation of Caste, pdf at:
https://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/readings/aoc_print_2004.pdf

show a tendency to exaggerate the significance of noses in ancient Indian evidence' (Aryans presumably with long, lepto-rhine noses in conflict with a 'black snub nosed – platyrhine -- race'). Klass (1980) points to the near impossibility of determining with certainty the skin colour and phenotype a given group might have had three to five thousand years ago. Ghurye summarizes the conclusions of Risley's studies and reports that a systematic relationship between jati affiliation, skin colour and phenotypical features cannot be drawn.

Trautmann (1997, p.211) analyzes the British colonial quest:

> In this fantastic back-projection of systems of racial segregation in the American South and in South Africa onto early Indian history, the relations of the British 'new invader from Europe' with the peoples of India is prefigured thousands of years before by the invading Aryans. But what the British encountered was not their Aryan brethren, as Max Mueller wanted to have it, but a 'mingled population' toward whom a supposed perduring prejudice of whites against interracial sexual relations (or rather a perduring mixture of repulsion and desire) structured those relations in a certain hypergamous way.

Caste represents a system of social stratification that pre-dates colonialism by centuries. Therefore, for caste to be colour-coded, there would have to be strong historical basis. As it turns out, the history of present day India does not offer straightforward answers to why the caste system ought to be colour-coded. The racial theory of the Indian civilization is a formation of the late nineteenth century, when 'in the wake of slave emancipation, white-black relations in the Anglo-Saxon world were being restructured with ideological support from a rush of racial essentialism' (Trautmann, 1997, p. 208).

The racial theory of the Indian civilization was extended to formulating the racial theory of caste. [10] One important basis of the racial theory of caste is that one of the meanings of 'varna' is hue, often interpreted as skin colour. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the 'varnas' are racially different among themselves. The presumed skin colours of the four varnas found in the nineteenth century discourse are difficult to justify: white for Brahmans, red for Kshatriya, yellow for Vaisyas and black for Sudras. Klass (1980) suggests that varna may not refer to complexion or supposed skin colour, but rather to some kind of spiritual colouration or aura (p.40). It is interesting to note that the *Manusmriti*, a text dated between 4th century B.C. and 2nd century A.D. that outlines the basic differences between castes and sets forth a highly detailed caste code, has no reference to skin colour as being the basis of the ranking of castes[11]. Given that today there are close to 6000 jatis, a jati-colour link is nearly impossible to establish.

The geographical variations in skin shade differences in India dominate the caste differences.[12] India is a virtual ethnographic museum, as all the major racial types can

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[10]See Klass (1980) for an excellent critical review of the theories of the origins of the caste system.
[11]See 'The Laws of Manu'.
[12] See the introduction to NFHS (1995) for broad geographical patterns.

be seen in different regions of the country: the Caucasian type, the Negroid type, the Mongoloid type and so forth. Referring to the Aryans, the Dravidians, the Mongolians, and the Scythians, Ambedkar (Rodrigues, 2002, p.242) suggests that 'these stocks of people came into India from various directions and with various cultures, centuries ago, when they were in a tribal state. They all in turn elbowed their entry into the country by fighting with the predecessors, and after a stomachful of it, settled down as peaceful neighbours'. He goes on to argue that 'the caste system cannot be said to have grown as a means of preventing the admixture of races or as a means of maintaining purity of blood'…….and thus …..'to hold that distinction of caste are really distinctions of race and to treat different castes as though they were so many different races is a gross perversion of facts'……. 'As a matter of fact, the caste system came into being long after the different races of India had comingled in blood and culture' (p.265). Klass (1980) points out how skin colour and hair colour lighten as one moves from the southeast to the northwest of the country and finds no reason to believe that this would have been otherwise three thousand years ago.

Thus, jati is not visually ascriptive in that it is not possible to identify the jati by simply looking at the individual. Thus, one important difference that emerges between caste and race is that it is not just the body that is the source of the understanding of the self. Is it then impossible to determine a stranger's jati? Often, though not always, jati is indicated by the last name (surname) of the person. However, naming conventions differ across the country: for instance, in the four southern states, traditionally the first name is written last. Some individuals often drop their surnames and use generic names such as Kumar, Lal, Singh or Chowdhary that are not jati-specific. Even when jati is indicated by the last name, since jatis are regional categories, the same surname belongs to different jatis across (even within) states; moreover, it is impossible to remember the exact placement of close to 6000 categories. However, people have a way of ascertaining the jati of an individual if they wanted to – either directly or by discreet enquiry. But this requires some effort and the corresponding inclination, which is typically not made with respect to *each* person that one interacts with, but is made when it matters. Ascertaining jati in rural settings is not difficult; there are plenty of subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which jati is determined in relatively anonymous urban settings. For a system so all-pervasive, paradoxically, it is equally possible to have life-long interactions with individuals without knowing their exact jati.

To sum up, skin shade does not form the basis for social stratification in Indian society, whereas caste does. Thus, there is no socially recognized group of fair skinned individuals in opposition to another group of darker individuals that would correspond to the established castes or religions. Existing evidence as well as the general geographical characteristics of India firmly indicates that the quest for establishing a jati-colour correlation is futile. Any such correlation certainly does not parallel the race-colour link. In other words, it is caste, rather than skin shade, that forms the basis for social stratification in Indian society.

Having said that, we must recognize that having a lighter skin shade (Indians use the English word 'fair' rather than 'white,' the latter being a term reserved for the colonizers) is considered an attribute of beauty. However, the gender angle used to be important here, in that while darkness in men was traditionally considered erotic, darkness in women is perceived as a handicap, especially in the arranged marriage scenario. Thus, one finds women using a range of beauty products—skin lotions, soaps, sunscreens, creams, etc— that are geared toward 'lightening' the skin. ('Fair and Lovely,' 'Fairglow,' and so forth). A look at the matrimonial advertisements reveals a preference for 'fair' brides *across castes and regions*[13]. However, even here a careful analysis will indicate that caste, region, and class dominate over skin shade. In other words, the girl has to match these social requirements before her skin colour becomes an issue. From the set of girls that pass these social eligibility criteria, the fairer bride would likely be preferred. But the bottom line might end up being the amount of dowry forthcoming from the girl's family. Ceteris paribus, a higher dowry will outweigh a lighter skin shade with ease.

### 7.3 Policy Implications and Concluding Thoughts

This paper has documented the enduring economic significance of caste in India. Despite profound changes in the economy, the rise of democracy, and decades of affirmative action, caste remains a central axis of inequality.

Four findings stand out. First, disparities in education, occupation, income, and assets remain large between caste groups. Second, caste continues to matter even within class: poor upper-caste households fare better than poor Dalit households, suggesting that social identity confers durable advantages. Third, inequality is evolving in complex ways: gaps in basic education have narrowed, but disparities in higher education and white-collar employment—the key pathways to upward mobility—have widened for the most marginalized groups. Fourth, caste reproduces itself through near-universal endogamy and the continued practice of untouchability, with measurable consequences for early childhood development and long-term human capital.

These patterns highlight the limits of policies that target economic deprivation alone. The introduction of the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) quota, based solely on income criteria and largely benefiting upper castes, is not supported by evidence: caste-based disadvantage is distinct from class-based poverty and requires targeted interventions.

[13] As 'global' standards of beauty and fashion have invaded the Indian scene, fairness has become an attribute of physical desirability for men as well, but that desire is mainly a consequence of the globalisation of Western standards of beauty and is not rooted in Indian tradition.

The broader lesson for an international audience is that caste operates as a form of stratification distinct from race. While both systems sustain durable hierarchies, caste is not phenotype-based, and its mechanisms of reproduction differ. Understanding caste on its own terms is essential for designing policies that address its discriminatory effects.

India's challenge remains reconciling the promise of formal constitutional equality with the reality of substantive inequality perpetuated by caste. For scholars of inequality and stratification worldwide, the Indian case offers a powerful reminder that entrenched social hierarchies adapt to modernization rather than dissolve in its wake—and that policy must be equally adaptive and robust to confront them.

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