



Caste, capital, and the state: Mapping new regimes of stratification in neoliberal India

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolving dynamics of social stratification in neoliberal India, focusing on the intersections of caste, capital, and state policies. It explores how economic liberalization, policy interventions, and urbanization have reshaped historical hierarchies while generating new forms of marginalization. Dispossessed peasants, migrant laborers, and women in informal sectors emerge as particularly vulnerable groups, navigating structural inequalities that are both spatially and socially mediated. Gendered labor and educational mobility are identified as critical axes through which caste and class inequalities are reproduced and contested. State policies, including land titling and climate adaptation programs, while designed to promote inclusion, often reinforce existing disparities by privileging socially and economically advantaged groups. Cultural and political arenas, such as media, protest theatre, and digital activism, serve both to reproduce hierarchical norms and provide spaces for resistance and contestation. The study highlights the multi-dimensionality of contemporary inequalities, emphasizing the complex interplay between structural, cultural, and institutional factors. The findings underscore the necessity of context-sensitive and intersectional approaches to policy and research, emphasizing the role of grassroots mobilization and inclusive interventions in addressing stratification. Future research should focus on the long-term impacts of neoliberal reforms, comparative regional analyses, and the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at promoting equitable social transformation in India.

Keywords: Caste, capital, state, neoliberalism, stratification, gender, urbanization, social inequality

Introduction

The transformations of Indian society under neoliberal economic reforms have intensified existing hierarchies while producing new forms of social stratification, where caste, capital, and state policies intersect to shape patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Recent scholarship highlights how marginalized communities—particularly dispossessed peasants and migrant laborers—navigate urban spaces under precarious conditions, reflecting the entanglement of economic restructuring and social marginality. Das and Kumar (2025)^[4] argue that urban North India exemplifies “fragmented marginalities,” where the dispossession of agrarian communities is compounded by labor migration, generating conditions of heightened vulnerability and social invisibility. These dynamics underscore the centrality of both structural inequalities and spatial arrangements in understanding contemporary stratification.

Gendered dimensions of inequality further complicate these intersections. Mathew and Martin (2025)^[9] provide an inter-Asia comparative lens, demonstrating how educational mobility in India is deeply mediated by gendered expectations, social capital, and family networks. Women’s access to resources and opportunities remains closely linked to caste and class, which in turn shapes long-term trajectories of empowerment and socio-economic inclusion. Singh (2025)^[15] similarly highlights gender as a critical axis in policy interventions, demonstrating how rights-based frameworks, such as the Right to Food, are mediated by social hierarchies that influence who benefits from state schemes. At the same time, Sathi (2023)^[14] and Wittmer (2023)^[16] illustrate the labor and organizing efforts of women in the health and informal recycling sectors, revealing both the structural precarity and resilience of women who operate at the margins of the formal economy.

State interventions and development programmes, while often framed as inclusive, can paradoxically exacerbate existing inequalities. Pritchard *et al.* (2025)^[11] show that climate adaptation and drought mitigation schemes in Maharashtra disproportionately benefit certain landowning groups, reinforcing patterns of rural inequality and marginalization. Likewise, Rao, Royo-Olid, and Turkstra (2022)^[13] examine urban tenure and property rights, revealing that formal land titling initiatives frequently privilege recognized settlements while sidelining informal slum dwellers, reflecting the uneven application of state-sanctioned benefits. These findings suggest that the state plays a dual role: as an enabler of socio-economic advancement for some, and as a mechanism of exclusion for others.

Cultural and political arenas also remain significant sites where caste and class intersect. Biswas and Banerjee (2023)^[2] analyze Indian cinema and protest theatre to show how narratives of hierarchy and Hindutva reproduce socio-political exclusion, while Nair (2024)^[10] emphasizes intersectional mobilizations against sexual violence that contest both spatial and social marginalization. Dey and Mendes (2022)^[5] trace similar dynamics in the context of higher education, demonstrating how digital activism (#MeToo) provides avenues for contesting entrenched patriarchal and caste-based structures. These studies collectively reveal that social hierarchies are maintained, reproduced, and at times contested across multiple scales—from households and neighborhoods to national policy and cultural discourse.

Finally, processes of urbanization further entrench social stratification. Goodburn and Knoerich (2022)^[6] highlight how the replication of export-oriented urbanization models in rural South India produces uneven development, where marginalized populations often face displacement,

inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to formal employment. These intersections of caste, capital, and state interventions thus produce a complex landscape of social inequality in contemporary India, where neoliberal reforms both exacerbate and restructure traditional hierarchies.

By mapping these overlapping regimes of stratification, this paper seeks to critically examine how caste, capital, and state policies collectively shape socio-economic inequalities in neoliberal India, highlighting the interplay of gender, labor, and urbanization as key lenses for understanding emerging patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

Literature Review

The reconfiguration of social hierarchies in contemporary India is deeply entwined with processes of neoliberal economic restructuring, state intervention, and cultural politics. Recent scholarship underscores that caste, class, gender, and urbanization intersect to produce complex and multi-scalar patterns of stratification. The concept of “fragmented marginalities” articulated by Das and Kumar (2025) ^[4] provides a foundational lens to understand these dynamics. Their study on dispossessed peasantry and migrant labor communities in urban North India highlights how agrarian dispossession and labor migration produce layered vulnerabilities, wherein economic precariousness is compounded by social exclusion and limited access to urban resources. This framing emphasizes that urban marginality is neither uniform nor accidental, but rather the outcome of structural inequalities and spatial arrangements that favor capital-intensive development and privileged social groups.

The intersection of caste and gender in mediating access to resources and mobility is particularly salient. Mathew and Martin (2025) ^[9] examine educational mobility in China and India, showing that gendered socialization, family networks, and caste identity shape long-term trajectories in education and labor markets. In India, these factors manifest as both barriers and enablers, with women from marginalized castes experiencing compounded disadvantages. Singh (2025) ^[15] similarly foregrounds gender in relation to social entitlements, analyzing the Right to Food and demonstrating that women’s access to nutrition and food security is mediated by both caste and socio-economic positioning. These findings resonate with Sathi’s (2023) ^[14] exploration of women health workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the labor contributions of women were both indispensable and under-recognized, reflecting systemic undervaluation of gendered labor at the intersections of caste and class. Wittmer (2023) ^[16] extends this analysis in urban informal economies, showing how women recyclers in Ahmedabad negotiate inclusion within city spaces through collective organization, yet remain constrained by socio-spatial marginalization. Collectively, these studies highlight that gendered stratification in India is inseparable from caste hierarchies and urban labor dynamics.

State policies and development programs, while often framed as equitable or inclusive, frequently exacerbate inequalities by privileging certain social or economic groups. Pritchard *et al.* (2025) ^[11] investigate drought mitigation schemes in Maharashtra, revealing that programmatic benefits disproportionately accrue to relatively advantaged landholders, thereby reinforcing rural inequities. Similarly, Rao, Royo-Olid, and Turkstra (2022) ^[13] study land titling initiatives for slum dwellers in Odisha, highlighting how formal property rights often exclude

informal settlements, perpetuating socio-economic vulnerability. These studies underscore a paradox: state interventions intended to promote inclusion frequently reproduce and deepen structural disparities. Lerche and Shah (2018) ^[8] conceptualize this as “conjugated oppression,” wherein caste, class, and tribal identities intersect with agrarian transformations under contemporary capitalism, generating systemic inequalities that are both historical and contemporaneously reinforced by neoliberal policies.

Cultural and political processes also operate as arenas where stratification is reproduced and contested. Biswas and Banerjee (2023) ^[2] examine Indian cinema and protest theatre, demonstrating how narratives of caste, hierarchy, and Hindutva consolidate socio-political exclusion, shaping public imaginaries and legitimizing inequality. Nair (2024) ^[10] investigates speak-out movements against sexual violence, employing intersectional and spatial analyses to reveal how marginalized groups mobilize against structural violence, contesting the very hierarchies that render them vulnerable. Dey and Mendes (2022) ^[5] analyze the #MeToo movement in higher education, illustrating how digital activism enables challenges to entrenched patriarchal and caste-based structures, yet simultaneously highlights the limits of inclusion within institutional hierarchies. These studies collectively emphasize that cultural and political spheres are critical in shaping experiences of marginalization and contestation in contemporary India.

The effects of neoliberal urbanization further complicate these dynamics. Goodburn and Knoerich (2022) ^[6] examine the replication of export-oriented urbanization models from China in rural South India, showing how urban expansion displaces local communities, disrupts traditional livelihoods, and creates uneven access to resources. Das and Kumar (2025) ^[4] similarly highlight how rural-to-urban migration exposes dispossessed populations to precarious labor conditions and informal housing, reflecting the spatial entrenchment of inequality. Rao, Royo-Olid, and Turkstra (2022) ^[13] underscore the role of urban planning and tenure security in mediating access to urban resources, revealing that formalization processes often privilege affluent and organized settlements while marginalizing informal communities. These studies suggest that urbanization, far from being a neutral development process, actively shapes socio-economic hierarchies in ways that reinforce pre-existing caste and class inequalities.

Agrarian distress remains a critical factor in understanding contemporary stratification. Kannuri and Jadhav (2021) ^[7] document cotton cultivation and caste-linked farmer suicides, revealing how economic pressures, caste discrimination, and debt cycles intersect to produce rural vulnerability. Rai (2020) ^[12] examines seasonal labor migration and masculinities in western India, highlighting how migration is structured by caste hierarchies and gendered expectations, and how labor mobility reinforces social stratification both at origin and destination sites. Chattoo (2018) ^[3] explores the framing of inherited blood disorders in India, showing how public health narratives intersect with caste and socio-economic hierarchies to mediate access to health interventions. Basu (2018) ^[1] situates these debates within broader questions of democracy, secularism, and minority rights, emphasizing the political dimensions of structural inequality and the role of state policies in either mitigating or reproducing disadvantage.

Taken together, this body of literature underscores that stratification in contemporary India is neither linear nor monolithic. It is produced through the intersection of caste, capital, and state interventions, while being mediated by gender, urbanization, and cultural-political processes. Das and Kumar (2025) ^[4], Mathew and Martin (2025) ^[9], and Lerche and Shah (2018) ^[8] collectively suggest that social hierarchies are simultaneously historical, economic, and spatial, rendering marginal populations particularly vulnerable to neoliberal transformations. State policies, whether in land rights, climate adaptation, or welfare provision, often reproduce rather than resolve these inequalities (Pritchard *et al.*, 2025; Rao, Royo-Olido, & Turkstra, 2022) ^[11, 13]. Simultaneously, cultural and political mobilizations, from protest theatre to digital activism, provide mechanisms for resistance and contestation (Biswas & Banerjee, 2023; Dey & Mendes, 2022; Nair, 2024) ^[2, 5, 10].

This review demonstrates the necessity of an integrated analytical framework that considers the interplay of caste, capital, gender, and state policies in understanding contemporary regimes of stratification. By situating neoliberal economic reforms within historical and socio-cultural contexts, and examining their differential impacts across gendered and caste-based hierarchies, this study seeks to map the complex landscape of inequality in contemporary India. Such an approach emphasizes not only the persistence of traditional forms of marginalization but also the emergence of new axes of stratification, shaped by urbanization, labor migration, and policy interventions.

The interrelation of caste, capital, and state is further complicated by processes of economic liberalization, which have restructured labor markets and deepened socio-economic hierarchies. Das and Kumar (2025) ^[4] note that neoliberal urbanization not only dispossesses rural populations but also subjects them to precarious employment in informal urban sectors, where labor protections are minimal. This mirrors the findings of Goodburn and Knoerich (2022) ^[6], who demonstrate that the replication of export-oriented urban development models in South India produces spatial and economic exclusions, disproportionately affecting low-caste and migrant communities. Urban growth in India, therefore, does not operate as an equalizing force; rather, it consolidates social stratification by privileging those with economic and social capital while marginalizing the dispossessed.

Gendered labor remains a critical axis through which stratification manifests. Wittmer (2023) ^[16] shows that women recyclers in Ahmedabad engage in both precarious work and collective organization, negotiating recognition and agency in urban spaces that are otherwise exclusionary. Similarly, Sathi (2023) ^[14] highlights the gendered vulnerabilities of health workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing how state reliance on women's labor often coincides with structural neglect and limited socio-economic rewards. Singh (2025) ^[15] emphasizes that access to fundamental entitlements, such as food, is mediated by gender and caste, reinforcing that structural inequalities operate not only economically but also socially and institutionally. Mathew and Martin (2025) ^[9] extend this argument to educational mobility, showing that the interplay of caste and gender shapes opportunities and life trajectories, thus reproducing intergenerational inequality.

State interventions, though often framed as inclusive, have complex and sometimes contradictory effects. Pritchard *et al.* (2025) ^[11] illustrate how climate adaptation programs in Maharashtra can exacerbate rural inequities by disproportionately benefiting wealthier households with more capital and political connections. Rao, Royo-Olido, and Turkstra (2022) ^[13] similarly find that urban land titling programs often privilege recognized settlements while neglecting informal communities, reflecting systemic biases in governance and bureaucratic processes. These studies highlight a pattern in which state-mediated redistribution or development schemes, rather than leveling disparities, frequently reinforce the advantages of dominant social groups while marginal populations remain vulnerable. Lerche and Shah (2018) ^[8] conceptualize these dynamics as "conjugated oppression," wherein caste, class, and economic restructuring operate simultaneously to shape unequal access to resources, opportunities, and social mobility.

Cultural and political arenas also serve as sites for both the reproduction and contestation of social hierarchies. Biswas and Banerjee (2023) ^[2] demonstrate how media and performance arts reinforce caste hierarchies and Hindutva politics, shaping public consciousness and legitimizing exclusionary ideologies. In contrast, Nair (2024) ^[10] and Dey and Mendes (2022) ^[5] explore mechanisms of resistance, including grassroots mobilizations and digital activism (#MeToo), which challenge entrenched caste and gendered hierarchies. These examples suggest that social stratification is not only maintained through material and policy structures but also through symbolic and discursive practices that normalize inequality, while resistance emerges as a critical counterforce.

Agrarian distress and labor migration remain central to understanding the reproduction of inequality in rural contexts. Kannuri and Jadhav (2021) ^[7] analyze the links between caste, cotton cultivation, and farmer suicides, highlighting how debt cycles and structural neglect disproportionately affect lower-caste farmers. Rai (2020) ^[12] further emphasizes the gendered and caste-mediated dimensions of seasonal labor migration, demonstrating how mobility is structured by social hierarchies, which simultaneously constrain opportunities and perpetuate vulnerabilities. Chattoo (2018) ^[3] shows that health interventions, including public health framing of inherited disorders, are often influenced by socio-cultural hierarchies, thereby mediating who benefits from scientific and medical advancements. Basu (2018) ^[1] situates these inequalities within broader political debates around secularism, democracy, and minority rights, underscoring that structural disadvantage is reinforced by institutional and policy frameworks that fail to address systemic exclusions.

Taken together, these studies illustrate that contemporary stratification in India is multi-dimensional, encompassing economic, social, spatial, and cultural forms. Caste and gender intersect with capital accumulation and state policies to shape access to resources, labor opportunities, and political representation. Urbanization, neoliberal reforms, and development interventions create both new vulnerabilities and avenues for agency, highlighting the uneven and contested nature of social inclusion. As such, understanding inequality in neoliberal India requires a holistic framework that accounts for structural, cultural, and

political processes, as well as the intergenerational and spatial dimensions of stratification.

By situating these diverse strands of literature in relation to each other, this review underscores the need for an integrated analytical lens that can capture the complex interplay between caste, capital, and state. Such an approach not only illuminates the mechanisms through which inequality is reproduced but also points to sites of potential resistance, mobilization, and policy intervention. The persistence of entrenched hierarchies, coupled with the emergence of new forms of exclusion and contestation, suggests that the social landscape of India under neoliberalism is both layered and dynamic, necessitating nuanced and context-sensitive analysis.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the interplay of caste, capital, and state policies in shaping contemporary social stratification in neoliberal India. Given the focus on structural inequalities, gendered labor, urbanization, and policy interventions, a qualitative design allows for an in-depth exploration of socio-cultural, economic, and political dimensions that quantitative approaches may overlook. The research relies on a critical review of scholarly literature, policy documents, and empirical studies to map patterns of marginalization and inclusion across rural and urban contexts. Key sources include studies on dispossessed peasantry and migrant labor (Das & Kumar, 2025) ^[4], gendered educational mobilities (Mathew & Martin, 2025) ^[9], climate adaptation and rural inequality (Pritchard *et al.*, 2025) ^[11], and urban tenure and property rights (Rao, Royo-Olid, & Turkstra, 2022) ^[13].

Objectives

- To examine how caste, capital, and state policies interact to shape new regimes of social stratification in neoliberal India.
- To analyze the role of gendered labor, urbanization, and policy interventions in mediating processes of inclusion and exclusion.
- To identify structural and cultural mechanisms through which neoliberal reforms reproduce or challenge historical inequalities.
- To synthesize insights from scholarly and policy literature to develop a comprehensive understanding of contemporary social hierarchies in India.

Data collection involved systematic extraction of information from peer-reviewed journals, government reports, and urban and rural development case studies. This enabled the identification of recurring themes, including intersectional vulnerabilities, state-mediated benefits, laborprecarity, and cultural mechanisms of stratification. The study employs thematic content analysis to synthesize findings, focusing on the intersections of caste, gender, capital, and state interventions. This analytical framework allows for the identification of both structural patterns and localized experiences of inequality, highlighting areas where neoliberal policies reproduce or contest historical hierarchies.

The objectives guiding this methodology are twofold: first, to critically map how caste, capital, and state intersect to create new regimes of stratification in India; and second, to

explore the ways in which gendered labor, urbanization, and policy interventions mediate social inclusion and exclusion. By prioritizing a qualitative, literature-driven approach, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms and consequences of stratification, situating contemporary inequalities within broader socio-economic, political, and cultural frameworks.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that contemporary social stratification in India is shaped by a complex interplay of caste, capital, and state interventions, producing both continuity and transformation in historical hierarchies. Das and Kumar (2025) ^[4] highlight how dispossessed peasantry and migrant laborers face layered vulnerabilities in urban spaces, reflecting the structural entrenchment of inequality under neoliberal reforms. These insights suggest that economic liberalization, while generating new opportunities for some, disproportionately disadvantages marginalized populations, particularly lower-caste and migrant communities.

Gender emerges as a critical lens in understanding stratification. Mathew and Martin (2025) ^[9] and Singh (2025) ^[15] show that women's access to education and basic entitlements is mediated by both caste and socio-economic status, demonstrating how multiple axes of inequality intersect to shape life outcomes. Sathi (2023) ^[14] and Wittmer (2023) ^[16] further illustrate that women's labor, whether in healthcare or informal urban economies, remains undervalued, despite being central to urban functioning and social reproduction. These studies underscore that gendered vulnerabilities are embedded within broader caste and class hierarchies, reinforcing systemic exclusion.

State interventions, including land titling (Rao, Royo-Olid, & Turkstra, 2022) ^[13] and climate adaptation programs (Pritchard *et al.*, 2025) ^[11], play a paradoxical role: while intended to promote inclusion, they often privilege socially and economically advantaged groups, exacerbating inequalities. Cultural and political arenas also mediate stratification, with media, protest theatre, and digital activism both reproducing and contesting hierarchical norms (Biswas & Banerjee, 2023; Dey & Mendes, 2022; Nair, 2024) ^[2, 5, 10].

Overall, the literature demonstrates that neoliberal India is characterized by multi-dimensional and intersecting forms of inequality, where caste, capital, gender, and state policies operate simultaneously to shape access to resources, labor opportunities, and social mobility. This discussion highlights the need for integrated policy approaches that account for these intersections, emphasizing both structural reform and social empowerment. The findings also suggest that resistance and mobilization, whether through grassroots movements or digital platforms, remain vital mechanisms for contesting entrenched hierarchies.

Major Findings

1. Persistence of Structural Inequality

Despite decades of economic liberalization, caste-based hierarchies continue to shape access to land, education, and employment. The neoliberal state's market-oriented reforms have failed to dismantle these deep-rooted structures, often reinforcing them through selective inclusion.

2. Marginalization of Agrarian and Migrant Communities

Dispossessed peasants and seasonal migrant workers remain among the most vulnerable groups, caught between agrarian distress and precarious urban livelihoods. Their displacement reflects the uneven spatial impact of capitalist development and urban expansion.

3. Gendered Dimensions of Stratification

Women, particularly from lower castes and marginalized regions, experience multiple forms of exclusion. Their labor contributions, especially in informal and care sectors, remain undervalued, while their access to mobility, education, and health resources is restricted by both gender and caste norms.

4. Urbanization and the New Hierarchies of Labor

The expansion of urban centers and export-oriented zones has created new class distinctions within the working population. Informal laborers, recyclers, and domestic workers are systematically excluded from the benefits of urban development and state welfare.

5. Contradictory Role of State Policies

Programs aimed at inclusion—such as land titling, climate adaptation, and rural employment schemes—often reproduce inequality by favoring already privileged groups. Bureaucratic inefficiencies and elite capture undermine their redistributive intent.

6. Cultural Resistance and Counter-Narratives

Cinema, protest theatre, and social media movements have become sites of resistance, articulating counter-narratives against caste oppression, gender violence, and neoliberal exploitation. However, these spaces also face state surveillance and ideological co-option.

7. Intersectionality as a Framework for Analysis

The study reveals that caste, class, tribe, and gender are not isolated categories but intersect dynamically. Understanding inequality in contemporary India requires analyzing these overlapping systems of power rather than treating them as separate domains.

8. Need for Inclusive and Participatory Policy Design

Sustainable social transformation demands participatory policy frameworks that prioritize grassroots voices, recognize intersectional realities, and challenge neoliberal logics that privilege market efficiency over equity and justice.

Conclusion

This study highlights the multifaceted and intersecting nature of social stratification in contemporary India, emphasizing the ways in which caste, capital, and state interventions shape access to resources, opportunities, and social mobility. The literature reviewed demonstrates that neoliberal economic reforms, while generating growth and urban development, have simultaneously reproduced and intensified existing hierarchies. Dispossessed peasants, migrant laborers, and women in informal sectors experience heightened vulnerabilities, reflecting the persistence of historical inequalities alongside the emergence of new forms of marginalization (Das & Kumar, 2025; Wittmer, 2023; Sathi, 2023) [4, 14, 16].

Gendered dimensions of labor and social inclusion emerge as critical in understanding these stratifications. Studies indicate that women's access to education, employment, and basic entitlements is mediated by caste, class, and socio-economic status, revealing the intersecting barriers that shape social and economic outcomes (Mathew & Martin, 2025; Singh, 2025) [9, 15]. Similarly, state policies such as land titling and climate adaptation programs, while ostensibly inclusive, often privilege economically or socially advantaged groups, thereby reinforcing structural inequalities (Pritchard *et al.*, 2025; Rao, Royo-Olid, & Turkstra, 2022) [11, 13].

Cultural and political arenas offer both mechanisms for reproduction and contestation of hierarchies. Media, protest theatre, and digital activism demonstrate the potential for marginalized groups to challenge entrenched norms, *yet also* highlight the limits of institutional inclusion (Biswas & Banerjee, 2023; Dey & Mendes, 2022; Nair, 2024) [2, 5, 10]. These findings collectively underscore the need for policies and interventions that are context-sensitive, intersectional, and attentive to historical and structural inequalities. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of neoliberal reforms on caste and gender hierarchies, with particular focus on rural-to-urban migration, informal labor markets, and digital mobilization. Comparative studies across states and regions could elucidate how local governance and policy frameworks mediate inclusion or exclusion. Additionally, there is scope for investigating the effectiveness of grassroots resistance, advocacy movements, and inclusive urban planning in addressing structural inequalities. Such research would inform interventions that not only mitigate the adverse effects of neoliberalism but also promote equitable social transformation in India.

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