Faith, Stigma, and Disability: Intersectional Marginalization of Religious Minorities within Marginalized Castes in India

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Abstract

As a framework, intersectionality shows how marginalization is exacerbated by overlapping identities. Although research has looked at the relationship between caste and gender or disability and gender, little is known about how religion, caste, and disability interact. Religious minorities from underprivileged castes in India face multi- layered discrimination, and their marginalization increases when a disability is present. This essay uses an intersectional perspective to examine these communities' lived realities. It illustrates how caste stigma, minority identity, and disability come together to limit access to welfare benefits, mobility, and dignity using secondary data, policy documents, and qualitative narratives. The study makes the case for rethinking inclusion strategies in order to identify compounded vulnerabilities. To guarantee that these marginalized groups are visible, policy recommendations include inter-sectional quotas, targeted welfare programs, and sensitization campaigns.

Keywords: Social justice, Minorities, Religion, Caste, Disability, Intersectionality, India

1. Introduction

In India, marginalization is seldom an easy problem. Overlapping forms of exclusion are produced by the deeply ingrained caste system, gender inequality, religious differences, and the stigma associated with disabilities (Chakravarti, 2003).

The intersection of caste, religion, and disability has not gotten much scholarly attention, despite the fact that some studies have examined intersections like caste and gender or caste and class. This is crucial because religious minorities from marginalized castes suffer from two major disadvantages: they are subjected to religious marginalization and are not

eligible for caste-based reservation benefits. Exclusion intensifies when caste and religion are combined with disability.

Disability is often perceived through cultural and religious analyses. That link them to sin, karma, or divine punishment are very few (Ghai, 2002). For people with disabilities who come from marginalized groups, even within caste groups of minority religions, these beliefs add to the existing stigmas. Women at this intersection also experience increased pressure from patriarchy and Gender-based violence (Rege, 1998). This paper examines the interlinkages of caste, religion, and disability, which give rise to a complex set of issues and perspectives types of exclusion in India. The text also discusses why such experiences are commonly overlooked in policy and academic discussions.

2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of inter-sectionality, first proposed by Crenshaw (1989), denotes how Intersecting identities create certain unique experiences of marginalization. Taking it further, Indian scholars such as Rege (1998) and Guru (1995) discussed an analysis using Dalit feminist thought, bringing out in particular the interaction effects of caste- cum-gender.

This study revolves around three key dimensions:

1. The relationship between caste and disability
2. Religion as a factor of exclusion
3. People who identify at the intersection of all three

Ghai (2002) noted that caste and religion are rarely taken into account in disability studies in India, and vice versa. The research is either done in total isolation or at cross- purposes with one another, so leading to disjointed research that ignores the intricate interrelationships of oppression. This paper will examine how axes interact in lived experiences using an intersectional approach.

3. Literature Review

The specific types of structural and physical violence that Dalit women face are extensively documented in research on caste and gender in India. Therefore, academics such as U. Chakravarti (2003) and Sharmila Rege

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(1998, 2006) argue that neither caste nor gender are useful categories to comprehend Dalit women's experiences; rather, their intersection results in what Rege refers to as a Dalit feminist standpoint. The latter highlights the necessity of centering caste in feminist analysis and opposes both caste- blind gender studies and upper-caste feminism.

In parallel, ableist presumptions ingrained in law, policy, and social norms have been contested by disability studies in India, which have been shaped by academics such as Anita Ghai (2002, 2015), Renu Adlakha (2013), and Nandini Ghosh (2016). Nevertheless, these studies frequently treat disability as a universal category, failing to adequately examine the ways in which caste, class, and religion influence the lived realities of people with disabilities. Disability is not experienced equally in India, as Ghosh (2018) points out; rather, it is filtered through social hierarchies that dictate access to resources, education, and dignity.

Regarding religious minorities, studies like the Ranganath Misra Commission Report (2007) and the Sachar Committee Report (2006) demonstrated the ongoing socioeconomic marginalization of Christians and Muslims in India (Ranganath Misra Commission, 2007; Government of India, 2006). However, these discourses frequently ignore the internal hierarchies within minority communities, especially the existence of Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians, who still experience caste-based discrimination despite formal conversion, according to Paswan and Jaoul (2019).

Dalits who practice Buddhism (since 1990), Sikhism (since 1956), and Hinduism (since 1956) are not eligible for Scheduled Caste status or reservation benefits under the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 (Government of India, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 1950). Despite the constitutional guarantee of equality for all citizens (Articles 14–17), the exclusion of Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians sustains institutional marginalization. It increases their social and economic vulnerability by denying them access to affirmative action in politics, work, and education. The compounded disadvantage that results from the intersection of disability and this layered marginalization is rarely acknowledged in academic research or state policy.

There is very little empirical data and analysis that can be found on the subject of caste and disability intersect in minority religions, or in fact, in the way that Dalits and backward caste Muslims and Christians. navigate social stigma, social welfare provision, and justice. The absence of particularly data

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and analysis, as the issue involves caste as well as disablement of exclusion in religious as well as in lay institutions. Therefore, this paper seeks to fill this intersectional research gap by examining intersections of caste, religion, and disability in constructing marginalization of the Dalit and backward classes from the minority communities' religions. It argues that the key to grasping these intersecting identities lies in the combination this is imperative for developing an inclusive framework of social justice in consonance with the constitutional principles of equality, fraternity, and dignity.

4. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, conceptual framework that encompasses the following:

- Secondary data, including census documents and NSSO disability surveys
- Policy analysis, covering reservation laws, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, and minority welfare programs
- Narrative accounts from NGO reports, media documentation, and public case studies
- An intersectional lens is used to assess the overlapping structures of inequality.

5. Findings and Analysis

Denial of Benefit of Reservation

The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1950 lists Scheduled Caste communities in relation to recognition to individuals belonging to the Hindu, Sikh (since 1956), and Buddhist (since 1990) religions (Government of India, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 1950). At the same time, therefore, and Dalit Muslims- although socially and occupationally no different from other Dalits- "do not have access to the benefits of affirmative action at the" level of government employment, although they constitutional level. This legal exclusion was reiterated in several government reactions to petitions, including those filed with the Supreme Court of India; e.g. Centre for Public Interest Litigation v. Union of India, ongoing since 2004. This would lead further to entrench the deprivation economic and educational-wise. When coupled with disability, members of such communities experience Triple marginalization based on caste, religion, and bodily ability,

this is resulting in intersectional invisibility, as scholars describe it. It is a phenomenon common across the world, as recent research has maintained in developing countries (Crenshaw 1991; Ghai 2015).

Stigma and Cultural Beliefs

As Anita Ghai (2002, 2015) points out, within Indian contexts, disability becomes associated with karma, sin, or divine punishment and, therefore, is framed as a moral issue, rather than as a structural one. In marginalized caste and minority religious groups, these beliefs intersect with that of caste stigma labelling in terms of certain bodies being "impure" or "unfit".

This leads to the social concealment of disabled individuals, especially girls, from public spaces, education, and community involvement. Fieldwork-based research conducted by Adlakha, 2013; Ghosh, 2018 has also reported that school admission is either refused or children with disabilities among Dalits/ minorities are relegated to segregated, under resourced schools. The denial of education reinforces generational poverty and dependence.

Educational and Employment Barriers

The Dalits and Adivasi minorities with disabilities face discrimination at every level, from educational to employment opportunities.

Educational Institutions: Lack of accessible infrastructure like ramps, Braille materials, and sign language interpreters, and insensitive educators continue to promote exclusion. A review by University Grants Commission in 2022 found less than 30% of Indian higher education institutions followed the accessibility norms under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 (Varshney & Chandra, 2025).

- ***Employment:*** Discrimination in both government and private sectors remains high. Without caste-based affirmative action or disability based affirmative action, the disabled Dalit Muslims and Christians are by and large excluded from formal-sector employment.
- ***Economic Marginalization:*** Due to lack of access to social capital or networks, many are confined to informal labour or caregiving roles.
- The intersectionality of caste, religion, disability, and poverty thus leads to compounded structural exclusion, where the overcoming of one form of marginalization does not mitigate the others.

Gendered Vulnerabilities

Gender deepens this layered marginalization. Sharmila Rege (1998) and Uma Chakravarti (2003) documented how Dalit women face patriarchal oppression

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both within and outside their communities. When disability is factored in, it increases women's vulnerabilities as it restricts their autonomy, healthcare accessibility, and participation in decision-making processes.

Triple exclusion affects Dalit Christian and Muslim women with disabilities, as they are faced with many difficulties.

1. Patriarchal family systems deprive them of education and independence.
2. Religious organizations can perpetuate moral stigma associated with one's disability.
3. They lack recognition from the state and are thus denied beneficent schemes or reservations.

Recent data from the National Family Health Survey, 2021 reveals that women belonging to disabled and marginalized castes suffer from domestic violence and lower literacy rates relative to their male and abled counterparts (International Institute for Population Sciences & ICF, 2022).

This is a general essay; perhaps further research would be required if points in the essay were to be expanded on.

Digital Exclusion

In the era of digital governance, such as Digital India and online systems for the delivery of various forms of welfare, the problem of digital exclusion has become the new axis of inequality.

- ***Access Barriers:*** Dalit minorities with disabilities often lack devices, internet connectivity, or digital literacy.
- ***Assistive Technologies:*** The absence of accessible software, screen readers available in regional languages, or sign-language-friendly interfaces makes even government portals inaccessible.
- ***Policy Oversight:*** Government initiatives, under auspices like the Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan), have restricted rural outreach with limited effort to link caste or religious disadvantage with digital accessibility. In effect, this means that digital systems, designed to democratize access to education and welfare, regularly reproduce structural inequalities in the form of online scholarships, disability certificates, and job portals. The inability to navigate these digital platforms excludes them from state benefits and citizenship rights, a phenomenon scholars describe as

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"digital casteism" (Rao & Sreekumar, 2022).

6. Policy Gaps and Recommendations

Gaps in Policy

- Exclusion of Dalit minorities from the reservation facilities availed by Scheduled Castes.
- Lack of intersectional frameworks in current social justice policies.
- Fragmented welfare schemes which treat caste, religion, gender, and disability as separate silos.
- Lack of disaggregated data on caste–religion–disability intersections make targeted interventions hard to design.
- Digital inequities have been overlooked in welfare and education policy design.
- It is clear that the nation's food system has several problems related to nutrition, health, and natural resource use.

Recommendations

1. Constitutional Recognition: Grant Scheduled Caste status to Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians, as proposed by the Ranganath Misra Commission (2007).
2. Intersectional Quotas: Introduce targeted sub-quotas or horizontal reservations that take into consideration caste, religion, gender, and disability in combination.
3. Integrated Welfare Programs: Develop unified schemes combining education, employment, and health benefits for multiply marginalized groups.
4. Data Disaggregation: The government or academic institutions should be required to collect and publish data cross-referencing caste, religion, gender, and disability.
5. Community Sensitization Campaigns: Advocate for sensitization campaigns in schools, workplaces, and places of worship to fight stigma.
6. Digital Inclusion Initiatives: Expand the Accessible India Campaign by providing multilingual assistive technologies, subsidizing devices, and digital literacy programs for marginalised disabled groups.
7. Participatory Policymaking: Representation of Dalit minorities with disabilities should be ensured in policymaking bodies, advisory

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councils, and academic research.

7. Conclusion

The experiences of religious minorities with disabilities from the marginalized castes are largely rendered invisible within the social justice discourse in India. Most mainstream studies related to caste, religion, gender, and disability have focused on one category in isolation from the others, hence obscuring how they interact in producing compounded marginalization. This paper develops an argument on the urgency of adopting intersectional frameworks theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and extended by scholars such as Rege (1998) and Ghai (2015) to understand the lived realities of persons positioned at multiple axes of oppression.

The Indian Constitution, being guided by the Preamble and Fundamental Rights, is intended to provide a democratic structure founded on equality, liberty, fraternity, and dignity. However, being denied equal benefits of the Scheduled Castes, such as Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians, apart from being denied other benefits, runs counter to this constitutional structure. The imposition of disability and gender on this deprivation is nothing but increasing inequality rooted in being silent on this matter in the constitution a structure that can be labelled structural inequality.

The time has now come to progress towards real equality, which demands an ideological and academic transition from inclusion through categories to inclusion through context. “Intersectional justice views discrimination as embedded within and produced through the overlapping structures of caste, patriarchy, religious marginalization, and ableism.” There is a need to “Recognize overlapping vulnerabilities, not isolated disadvantages.”

Interdepartmental coordination of policy design in the following departments: Social Justice, Minority Affairs, Disability Empowerment, and Women and Child Development; and the involvement of marginalized communities in the decision-making process so that their voices are heard in the formulation of policies that aim to empower them.

These, in turn, are exacerbated by the forces of digitalization, globalization, and the present trends in welfare governance. Digital divide has the potential for widening the divide that has historically existed on the basis of “caste and religion” as India moves ever close to the knowledge economy. Closing the

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divide will require investments in accessible technologies, in learning, and in designing, while ensuring the inclusion of the “disabled” Dalit minorities.

Finally, the attainment of the constitutional vision of equality, dignity, and justice for all requires the recognition and rectification of intersectional inequalities. Social change, therefore, would occur less through adjustments in policies, through changes in the institutional imagination itself—where disability, caste, gender, and religion are treated less as compartments la carte but rather as interwoven aspects of human existence. In this manner, an intersectional approach profoundly suggests not simply an intellectual paradigm of research but rather a morally constitutional imperative to build a more inclusive India, which embodies its commitment to "liberty, equality, and fraternity" in substance, rather than mere words.

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