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Reassessing Inequality in India: A Contemporary Sociological review

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Abstract

India, as one of the fastest-growing economies, also remains one of the most unequal societies. Over the past three decades, economic inequality has widened significantly, with the wealthiest individuals accumulating wealth at an unprecedented rate while marginalized communities continue to struggle for fair wages, quality education, and healthcare. This growing disparity disproportionately impacts women and children, exacerbating social vulnerabilities. The Time to Care report, released before the 50^{th} annual meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF), highlights that the wealthiest 1% of India's population holds four times more wealth than 70% (approximately 950 million people) of the population. Furthermore, the global billionaire count has doubled in the past decade, intensifying socioeconomic divisions. Gender inequality, a critical dimension of this disparity, is evident in political representation, economic participation, and healthcare access. Reports indicate a consistent decline in India's gender equality rankings: 108^{th} among 153 countries in 2019, 112^{th} in 2020, 140^{th} in 2021, 135^{th} in 2022, 127^{th} in 2023, and 129^{th} in 2024. This growing inequality, particularly gender-based disparities, raises significant sociological concerns. This article, therefore, offers a sociological analysis of economic, gender, education and Healthcare inequality in India, structured into these key discussions.

Keywords: ***Social Inequality, Gender Disparity, Structural Inequality, Affirmative Action, Inclusive Growth,***

Introduction

Inequality denotes the uneven distribution of resources, opportunities, and privileges across society. In India, this takes multiple forms, economic inequality, evident in the gap between high and low-income groups; gender inequality, reflected in disparities in wages, political representation, and social status; educational inequality, seen in uneven access to quality schooling; and healthcare inequality, marked by disparities in medical infrastructure and outcomes. Each of these dimensions interacts with factors such as caste, region, and religion to shape people's life chances. This work provides a sectoral assessment of inequality in contemporary India. In four main sections, it evaluates (1) economic disparities in income and wealth distribution, (2) gender-based gaps in employment and empowerment, (3) educational divides in enrollment and attainment, and (4) healthcare inequities in access and expenditure. By systematically reviewing data and sociological analyses in each sector, the study highlights both the scale of inequality and the mechanisms that sustain it, laying the groundwork for targeted policy interventions.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive approach, anchored in critical and discourse analysis. By engaging with secondary sources, it examines how inequality in India is conceptualized, institutionalized, and experienced across the different sections of Indian society. The analysis reassesses dominant frameworks to offer interpretations of inequality. The research applies critical discourse analysis to academic literature, policy documents, and official narratives, revealing how inequalities are embedded and sustained. Select secondary data from the Census of India, National Sample Survey (NSS), and government reports are used not for statistical generalization but to highlight structural disparities. An interdisciplinary lens, drawing from cultural studies, gender theory, and political economy, ensures a nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of contemporary Indian inequality. This approach facilitates a reflexive and conceptually rich analysis of societal hierarchies.

Key Findings (Presented in a Table)

Category	Indicator	Statistic	Source
Economic	Wealthiest 1% vs. Bottom 70%	Holds 4x more wealth	Time to Care Report (WEF)
	Top 10% income share	57% of national income	World Inequality Report (2021)
	Bottom 50% income share	13% of national income	World Inequality Report (2021)
Gender	Billionaire growth (past decade)	Doubled	WEF
	Global Gender Gap Rank (2024)	129th (from 108th in 2019)	Global Gender Gap Report
	Women's income share	18% of total labor income	World Inequality Report (2021)
	Senior roles held by women	14.6%	Global Gender Gap Report (2021)
	Female top executives	8.9% of firms	Global Gender Gap Report (2021)
	Missing girls (annual)	1.5 million	NFHS & UN Reports
Education	Upper secondary education (men)	29.6% attainment	UNESCO (2024)
	Upper secondary education (women)	20.1% attainment	UNESCO (2024)
	Adults with < primary education	30.4% (aged 25-64)	UNESCO (2024)
	Gender Literacy Gap	17.2% points (India ranks 124th globally)	World Bank (2024)
	Rural internet penetration	37% (vs. 69% urban)	TRAI (2024)
Healthcare	Public health spending	2% of GDP (among lowest globally)	WHO (2024)
	Out-of-pocket healthcare costs	49.82% of total expenses	NHA 2024
	Doctor-to-patient ratio	1:1511 (WHO recommends 1:1000)	MoHFW (2024)
	Infant mortality rate	27 per 1,000 live births	UNICEF (2024)

Governance	Women in Parliament (2024)	15% seats	Election Commission of India

Discussion

The processes of globalization and liberalization led to an import-dependent economy in India, disrupting the traditional economic structure. This shift contributed to the rise of urban poverty while simultaneously dismantling the self-sufficient village economy without providing an adequate alternative. Consequently, India's development policies have only been partially effective in addressing poverty. Instead of eradication, poverty and social inequality became deeply embedded in the societal framework, reinforced by religious, caste-based, and regional ideologies, along with the doctrines of karma and rebirth. Legal scholar Marc Galanter highlights that the state's failure to implement social justice effectively has institutionalized poverty, making it an unavoidable reality for Dalits, minorities, and rural communities. This structural inequality perpetuates economic marginalization, limiting upward mobility and reinforcing socio-economic hierarchies.

French economist Thomas Piketty, in his book Capital and Ideology, introduces the concept of participatory socialism, emphasizing that everyone should have the power to engage in economic processes. He argues that workers must have a greater role in decision-making within their companies, regardless of their ownership stake in the capital. However, in reality, economic disparities remain stark, while the bottom 50% of the population inherits little to no wealth, a privileged few inherit millions or even billions.

Historical evidence suggests that investing in education and addressing structural inequalities are crucial for economic growth. In societies where wealth, resources, and power are disproportionately distributed, radical policy interventions are necessary to dismantle institutional inequality. This challenge is particularly complex in India, where preexisting disparities based on caste, religion, language, gender, and region further entrench economic exclusion. The World Inequality Report 2021 paints a grim picture of India's economic disparity. It highlights that India is both an economically unequal and poor country, with extreme concentration of wealth. The top 10% of the population controls 57% of the national income, while the bottom 50% has access to only 13%. Meanwhile, the middle 40% holds 29.5% of total income. Alarmingly, the wealthiest 1% alone commands 22% of the country's income. Such stark economic inequality has profound social, cultural, and political implications, fueling unrest and limiting opportunities for upward mobility. Addressing these disparities requires a development model that prioritizes education, healthcare, and the equitable redistribution of resources. Without such measures, reducing or eliminating economic inequality remains an unattainable goal, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization.

The World Inequality Report 2021 also highlights severe gender disparities in India, with female workers earning only 18% of the total income. This stark inequality reflects the broader systemic barriers that limit women's economic participation. It is widely recognized that a nation's prosperity is best achieved through investments in equality, education, and healthcare, rather than through the concentration of wealth among a handful of individuals.

Economic inequality

Economist Thomas Piketty, who played a significant role in drafting this report, argues that while private property and market forces can contribute to economic growth, they alone are insufficient. He contends that India must move beyond offering tax exemptions to industries and instead implement stronger redistributive measures. To address the economic crisis, Piketty emphasizes the need for income guarantees for poor families, alongside substantial government investments in public infrastructure.

A society cannot progress If a large segment of its population struggles to meet basic needs. Every individual possesses the potential to contribute to national development, but this potential remains underutilized due to systemic inequalities. By ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities, India can take meaningful steps toward reducing economic disparity and removing itself from the list of the world's most unequal countries. The fundamental question arises: Is inequality a natural phenomenon or a product of human-made systems? Why does this disparity exist, and whom does it serve? If inequality were truly essential for development, then countries that have experienced persistent disparities for decades should have attained developed status by now, but this has not been the case. The reality is that inequality is not a prerequisite for progress; rather, it acts as a barrier to sustainable and inclusive development.
Just as a human being is born with both a body and a mind that must develop in harmony, a society or nation can only achieve true progress when all its members have access to equal opportunities. An imbalance, whether in individual

growth or societal development, leads to stagnation and dysfunction. If education, healthcare, politics, economic resources, and prosperity remain concentrated in the hands of a few, the overall progress of a country remains stunted. If national development were solely dependent on the advancement of a small elite, India's position in global rankings such as the *World Inequality Report* and the *Human Development Index* would not be as dismal as it is. Instead, these indices would have been calibrated to reflect only the wealth and success of the top 10%. However, persistent inequality clearly obstructs progress, limiting social mobility and economic expansion. Rising inequality is directly linked to various social problems, including poverty, unemployment, crime, and family instability. Without corrective measures, these issues will continue to escalate, undermining the social fabric of the nation. Therefore, urgent and proactive steps are needed to address systemic inequalities, ensuring a more just and equitable society for all.

Social scientist Peter Saunders argues that no society can ever be completely socialist, but every society can establish systems that ensure all groups receive some benefits. He identifies three forms of equality: formal or legal equality, meaning that all members of society should be governed by the same laws; equality of opportunity, ensuring that everyone has the chance to compete and succeed; and equality of outcomes, which suggests that if equal opportunities exist, societal results will eventually reflect this fairness. Saunders believes that implementing these principles can help create an egalitarian society to some extent. He also notes that the ruling class largely emerges through private ownership of capital, and there has been a rapid increase in white-collar workers. One of the key reasons for wealth inequality in any society is the power held by the ruling class, which typically constitutes around 5-10% of the population. Many members of this class transfer their wealth to relatives or close associates, creating an economic monopoly. In contrast, the subordinate class consists of wage and salary earners, while the middle class attempts to gain market benefits by investing a significant portion of their earnings. This cycle perpetuates wealth and power inequality and poses a risk to democratic values. If democracy is undermined, the consequences can be observed in contemporary society.

Gender Inequality and Social Vulnerabilities

Regarding gender inequality, a crucial question arises: will discussions and writings on the issue continue indefinitely, or will concrete steps be taken toward its resolution? The Global Gender Gap Report 2021 reveals a significant decline in India’s ranking, dropping from 112th place in 2020 to 140th among 156 countries. This decline is alarming, especially given that gender equality is enshrined in the Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties, and Directive Principles of the Indian Constitution. Although the subsequent reports show marginal improvements with India ranking 135th in 2022, 127th in 2023, and 119th in 2024, the country continues to remain in the lower half of the index. These figures expose the persistent and deep-rooted gender inequalities in Indian society, particularly in areas like economic participation, wage parity, health, and political representation. The slow pace of progress reflects systemic failures and insufficient implementation of gender-sensitive policies, raising serious concerns about the nation’s commitment to achieving genuine gender equality. The World Economic Forum has published the Gender Gap Report since 2006, assessing countries based on four key dimensions: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. The report indicates that the gender gap across South Asia remains severe, with

Bangladesh ranking 65th, Nepal 106th, Bhutan 130th, Sri Lanka 116th, Pakistan 153rd, and Afghanistan 156th. In India, women’s political and economic empowerment continues to face serious setbacks. The proportion of female ministers dropped sharply from 23.1% in 2019 to less than 7% by 2023, highlighting a troubling decline In political representation. Although women now hold 15.1% of parliamentary seats, the highest since 2006, this figure remains far from parity. Economic participation is equally concerning, with only 36.7% gender parity achieved in 2023. Despite some progress at the local level, where women hold 44.4% of governance roles, the overall picture reflects persistent structural barriers. Most strikingly, women’s estimated income remains just one-fifth of men’s, underscoring the deep-rooted gender inequality that continues to define the Indian workforce and leadership landscape. Another critical issue is the prevalence of sex-selective practices. Approximately 1.5 million girls go missing annually due to prenatal sex determination, with 90-95% of such cases occurring in India and China. This reflects deep-rooted societal biases against female children and contributes to the broader issue of gender inequality.

We often assume that progress means transitioning from bullock carts to airplanes, replacing manual labor with modern machinery, and prioritizing artificial intelligence over human effort. But what kind of development is this? Despite material prosperity, today’s society is plagued by pessimism. In the past, humans enslaved one another; now, machines have taken over that role. This highlights our limited understanding of true development. Amartya Sen argues that development, freedom, openness, and liberalism together expand the capabilities of both individuals and society. If this expansion is not happening, then development, freedom, and openness remain superficial concepts rather than lived realities. This is evident in how deeply rooted gender discrimination continues to be, despite centuries of social progress. Instead of diminishing, discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, and gender has increased, raising fundamental questions about the very nature of our so-called development. If this is progress, then how do we define backwardness? It is undeniable that in the context of gender relations in India, men position themselves as the elite, using various justifications to legitimize gender inequality at every level. Despite this, women have historically played significant roles in political leadership and intellectual discourse. Even today, they contribute meaningfully to many political parties. When comparing historical movements, the participation of Indian women in the freedom struggle was arguably more significant than that of women in the revolutions of Russia and China.

Why, then, is their contribution still ignored? This gender inequality is not limited to India; it is a global phenomenon. Women constitute only 25% of parliamentary members worldwide, and only four countries have achieved more than 50% female representation in their legislatures. According to newspaper reports, the Indian Parliament has 788 members across both houses, but only 103 are women, which accounts for just 13%. This raises an essential question: What kind of democracy allows women to be worshipped as goddesses while simultaneously being subjected to exploitation and marginalization? Women are considered a valuable vote bank, yet they are rarely granted the autonomy to make independent political decisions. They build and nurture homes, yet many do not own a home themselves and live under constant fear of displacement. Why does this disparity persist? Two key factors are directly responsible for the exploitation of women: the lack of private property ownership and the absence of control over the means of production. Because women generally do not own property or possess economic control, their subjugation becomes institutionalized and self-perpetuating.

According to the National Family Health Survey, around 70% of women in 11 states and union territories in India never report the violence they experience or seek help. Boys have greater access to education than girls, leading to long-term, far-reaching consequences. Similar disparities exist globally, where unequal opportunities in politics and commerce continue to persist. Women's roles are often restricted to social participation within traditional family structures, reinforcing their dependency. Furthermore, many essential facilities remain inaccessible to women. A lack of public restrooms and toilets for women is a widespread issue, which significantly restricts their mobility and participation in various public and professional domains. Over time, such restrictions discourage women from stepping into new fields, reinforcing gendered limitations. In society, men continue to act as arbiters of women's rights, deciding which facilities and freedoms they should have. Women's voices are silenced, raising one's voice is considered inappropriate for them, and their exclusion from property ownership renders them powerless. In many ways, this dynamic turns women into private property, with men acting as their masters. Such an arrangement represents one of the most degrading and oppressive forms of ownership and control.

A significant portion of a woman's labor Is devoted to fulfilling family responsibilities. Even during social gatherings and events, she is either expected to take pleasure in household chores or is reduced to a source of entertainment. The physical abuse she endures within the family, whether through domestic violence, harassment, or marital rape, is a cruel and reprehensible reality that marginalizes her in every sphere of life. Such violence is inflicted upon her to instill the belief that only a man can provide security, reinforcing her dependence on him. This system functions by embedding a culture of fear, violence, and deprivation into her consciousness, leading her to accept the authority of her father, brother, husband, or even son as an inescapable part of her cultural fate. This oppressive cycle has persisted for generations and continues to this day. Perhaps this is why Mahatma Gandhi once said, "The day a woman can walk freely on the streets at night, that day we can say that India has achieved independence." His words highlight the fundamental issue of women's safety and autonomy.

Another crucial point is the limitation of statistical data. While numbers provide quantitative insights, they do not capture qualitative realities. Statistical averages often fail to depict the true picture of development. Since government policies are formulated based on such data, any inaccuracy or manipulation in statistics naturally raises concerns about the effectiveness of these policies. Therefore, it is imperative that the state, economists, and intellectuals take decisive action to address the growing inequality in society. Only through concrete efforts can a truly just and equitable society be realized.

Education and Healthcare Disparities

Education and healthcare remain two of the most unequal sectors in India, reinforcing and perpetuating broader socio-economic inequalities. Despite policy interventions such as the Right to Education (RTE) Act, access to quality education remains heavily skewed along lines of geography, gender, caste, and income. As of 2024, only 29.6% of men and 20.1% of women in India have attained at least upper secondary education, ranking the country among the lowest globally. Additionally, 30.4% of adults aged 25-64 have less than primary education, a situation that disproportionately affects rural and marginalized communities. Poor school infrastructure, lack of trained teachers (with a teacher vacancy rate exceeding 20% in many states), and high dropout rates especially beyond Class 8 worsen the problem. The literacy gap between men and women remains 17.2 percentage points, placing India 124th in global educational attainment rankings. These disparities are even more pronounced among tribal and minority communities, where language barriers, discrimination, and economic pressures force children to leave school early to support their families. Children from Scheduled Tribes, for instance, show a dropout rate of over 35% at the secondary level. This lack of educational access directly limits employment opportunities and traps marginalized communities in cycles of poverty, contributing to intergenerational inequality.

The healthcare sector exhibits similarly stark inequalities that mirror and deepen these socio-economic divides. India's public healthcare spending stands at only 2% of GDP, one of the lowest among emerging economies, resulting in chronically underfunded government hospitals and primary health centers, especially in rural and remote regions. While urban centers are better served with private and tertiary care institutions, rural populations struggle with a severe shortage of doctors and basic medical infrastructure. India has only 1.4 hospital beds per 1,000 people, far below the WHO's recommended 3.5 beds per 1,000 people, and rural areas bear the brunt of this shortage. Moreover, the doctor-topatient ratio in rural regions is nearly four times worse than in urban areas. Out-of-pocket healthcare spending remains alarmingly high, with individuals bearing 49.82% of healthcare costs. This financial burden often pushes families, particularly those from lower-income groups, into poverty. A 2023 NITI Aayog report found that over 17% of Indian households experienced catastrophic health expenditures annually. Hospitalization expenses, especially for chronic illnesses and extended treatments, not only drain savings but also lead to increased indebtedness and economic vulnerability, further entrenching inequality. The lack of universal health coverage and unequal access to preventive and curative services results in vast health disparities, reducing life expectancy and quality of life for the underprivileged.

Conclusion and Recommendations

India's socio-economic structure continues to be marked by stark inequalities, particularly in the areas of education and healthcare. Despite considerable economic growth and the introduction of various welfare schemes, these benefits have not been equitably distributed across all sections of society. Marginalized groups, especially those in rural and economically backward areas, continue to face significant barriers to accessing quality education and healthcare. Wealth concentration is also a growing concern, with the richest 1% of the population owning more than 40% of the country's wealth, while the bottom half share only 13%. Educational attainment remains low, particularly for women, and healthcare spending is inadequate, contributing to poor infrastructure and limited medical access in rural India. Investing in education is crucial for addressing these disparities. Enhancing public spending on primary and secondary schooling, especially in underprivileged areas, can significantly improve learning outcomes. Marginalized communities face educational exclusion due to poor infrastructure and social barriers, which need to be addressed through stronger implementation of laws like the Right to Education Act. Moreover, bridging the digital divide is vital as online education becomes more prevalent, requiring expansion of internet access and development of mobile-based learning solutions. Ensuring linguistic inclusion and affordable higher education through scholarships and financial aid is also essential to promote equitable opportunities.

The healthcare system similarly demands urgent reforms. A major portion of healthcare costs is borne out-of-pocket by citizens, putting low-income families at risk of financial distress. Increasing public health spending to at least 4% of GDP and strengthening rural health infrastructure can ensure broader access. The shortage of doctors, especially in rural areas, must be addressed through targeted medical education policies and rural incentives. Expanding telemedicine and maternal-child health programs can further improve outcomes and reduce mortality rates. Strengthening government schemes like Ayushman Bharat can play a crucial role in enhancing affordability and accessibility. Economic inequality, closely linked with social disparities, needs structural policy changes. Implementing progressive taxation and redistributive economic policies can help reduce the growing income gap. Employment schemes like MGNREGA provide essential income support to rural households and must be expanded. Additionally, land reforms and social security measures such as universal basic income and food subsidies can uplift the most vulnerable sections of society. These interventions are vital to create a more balanced economic structure and provide all citizens with a fair chance at financial stability.

To ensure that these initiatives succeed, governance structures need to be made more transparent, accountable, and inclusive. Many welfare programs fail due to inefficient implementation, corruption, and poor monitoring. Strengthening digital governance, involving local communities in policy execution, and ensuring representation of marginalized groups, particularly women, in decision-making bodies are key to effective change. In conclusion, achieving true social equity in India requires coordinated efforts across education, healthcare, economy, and governance. Only with strong political will and participatory development can India realize a future where resources and opportunities are fairly shared across all strata of society.

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