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Matrix Of Marginality: An Intersectional Analysis Of Disability Across Gender, Caste, And Socioeconomic Stratifications In India

PRAKASHA

Associate Professor

Department of Commerce

Government First Grade College for Women, Vijaynagar, Mysore

Dr NAVEEN KUMAR H

Faculty

Department of Business Administration

Maharaja's College, University of Mysore, Mysore

Abstract

Despite the worldwide movement toward including people with disabilities, disability is frequently viewed through a "single-axis" lens. This perspective fails to acknowledge the "hierarchy of suffering," where individuals with disabilities encounter compounded oppression resulting from intersecting identities. This research explores the "Matrix of Marginality," analyzing how disability interacts with gender, caste, and socioeconomic status to create distinct forms of systemic exclusion. It also aims to determine how these identities influence access to essential resources and to suggest a comprehensive framework for inclusive policy development. Ultimately, this study offers a model for comprehending disability as a dynamic and socially stratified experience in the Global South.

Key Words : Caste, Disability, Gender, Matrix of Marginality, Socioeconomic

Introduction

Intersectionality is defined as a theoretical framework that considers the impact of heterogeneity across different intersections of social positions on lived experience (Bauer et al., 2021). The concept was first introduced by Crenshaw (1989) to explore experiences of marginalization of Black women in the United States by drawing on theoretical understandings from Black feminism and critical race theory. Her ideas were further developed by considering how due to the intersection of their identity, Black women (and particularly those from disadvantaged communities) are often excluded from social movements and

advocacy efforts (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectional approaches have informed current understandings of how multiple and overlapping identities can reinforce deprivation and marginalization, and may also strengthen divisions that exist between groups, and how these experiences may vary according to context and may change over time (Stewart, 2016). Building on her earlier work, Crenshaw (2015) argues that intersectionality is essentially a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power.

Disability In India

Disability, as explained by the UN CRPD, is understood as a concept resulting from the interaction between impairment and attitudinal and environmental barriers that may impact their participation in society on an equal basis with others (UN, 2006). The constitution of India ensures equality, freedom, justice and dignity of all individuals and implicitly mandates an inclusive society for all including persons with disabilities. To achieve this various missions and programs (namely Smart Cities Mission and Accessible India) from GoI have been launched. This has resulted in an increased recognition and emphasis on the needs and rights of people with disabilities across sectors and society at large. Despite the positive trends in the realm of advocacy, rights, and social inclusion, much efforts are required to homogenize the definitions of disability (especially in the Indian context), improve the enumeration process (w.r.t quality of data and basic features) of people with disabilities, create robust politico-legal environment, improve economic opportunities in the IT, AT and other such sectors, and as a consequence lead to a better overall quality of life for Persons with Disabilities. Enabling these positive actions require concrete know how of the problem as well as the past efforts in that direction. However, it is often seen that efforts in mapping the landscape of disabilities have often limited themselves to either certain types of disabilities or have focused on the purely the statistics (numbers) and have missed out on the context. The report on “Status of Persons with Disability in India” will draw inspiration from these previous endeavors to map the global and the Indian landscape w.r.t to standards, and practices attempt to improve it by adding dimensions of policy, legislature, and socio-cultural factors into the foray. It will also attempt to analyse the national and international trends in disability including concepts that support upward social mobility of Persons with Disabilities. The report will also probe the national data set of Census 2011 with focus on disability indicators. The report is not an attempt to provide a comprehensive narrative of the multi-dimensional concepts of disability and inclusion. Rather the report endeavors to focus on the key interventions locally and globally that have pushed people, institutions, and processes towards becoming more sensitive to the needs of Persons with Disabilities. As an outcome of the process, it is envisaged that this holistic approach will support the roadmap of interventions that the BASIIC project has planned, draw comprehensive, descriptive and inferential conclusions on the current state of affairs on universal access, safety, and inclusion in India, and map the way forward for sustainable solutions for Persons with Disabilities in urban India.

Religion In India

Religion as a complex concept is understood to involve belief, faith, spirituality, institutions, behavior, and practice (Tadros & Sabates-Wheeler, 2020). From both a historical and a contemporary perspective, religion plays a major role in shaping Indian society, with more than 99% of the population reporting having a religion; 80% of the population are Hindu. Muslims represent the largest minority religion with 14% of the population, with the remainder of people identifying as Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, or other religions (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2011). Technically, according to its Constitution, India is a secular nation. Despite this, the links between religious identity and political power have become more pronounced in recent years (Robinson, 2010). The dominance of the Hindu majority is manifested in many aspects of life, including society, culture, and politics. Indian politics and religious affiliation have become

increasingly intertwined, and under the leadership of the Hindu Nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi, there have been growing reports of discrimination, intolerance, and persecution of religious minorities (Haq et al., 2020; Kim, 2017). As well as the political sphere, religion also influences social experience in India. For example, the concept of Karma (which is grounded in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism) shapes societal perception towards people with disabilities, resulting in their persecution and marginalization (Ghai, 2015; Gupta, 2011). Caste is the ancient and entrenched social system in India that provides groupings that are used to order society into a hierarchy (Das & Mehta, 2012). Caste is intertwined with religion—it is of Hindu origins. However, caste-related identity politics also impacts non-Hindus through social norms and practices. Vaid (2012, p. 396) states that even though “no caste has ever been homogeneous with regard to class criteria, congruence between the two has often been highlighted.” The relationship between class and caste is intricate and sensitive. However, it is clear that caste remains an important aspect of identity in India, influencing social and economic relations between social groups (Pal, 2011). Dalits are the lowest stratum in the system and represents 16.6% of the total population of India (Raghavendra, 2020). Caste-based stereotypes and stigma result in Dalits experiencing disadvantage, marginalisation, and exclusion (Pal, 2010). This caste-based discrimination has an impact on multiple factors including land ownership, employment, marriage prospects, and access to justice. Dalits are disproportionately poor, unemployed, and uneducated compared to others (Mehrotra, 2013). The prevalence rate of disability is also higher among Dalits compared with the general population, and they experience lower levels of education, employment, and poverty than people with disabilities from other castes (Pal, 2011).

Gender In India

Gender equality is a central feature of the UN Charter agreed upon in 1945, yet the world remains deeply unequal with women and girls continuing to experience marginalization due to their gender (UN, 2020). Socio-cultural traditions in India heavily influence how gender intersects with other identities resulting in complexities (Haq, 2013). Gender inequality is deeply entrenched in India's social and cultural fabric with division based on socially constructed predefined roles, which have an impact on various aspects of society including family life, work, and politics (Batra & Reio, 2016). In the Indian context, gender is often constructed hetero normatively, failing to recognize gender identity as diverse and fluid (Kakar et al., 2021). Kumar (2021) explains how women who have intersecting identities, such as caste and religious status, are often denied their social, economic, cultural, and political rights in India. Haq et al. (2020, p. 586) describe how “women are treated as second-class citizens facing multiple intersectional discriminations and limited individual rights within India's highly patriarchal and conservative societal norms.” For women with disabilities in India, the situation is exacerbated, as they often experience a wide spectrum of violence including neglect, physical abuse, and denial of traditional duties such as marriage and motherhood on account of their intersecting identities (Jogdand & Narke, 2022). Singh (2017, p. 139) argues: “Traditional patriarchal customs and norms have relegated women to a secondary status within the household and workplace.” Gender inequity in India, along with intersecting factors, is marginalizing women, limiting their access to resources and opportunities. Interlinkage of Gender, Caste, and Class

The Indian society is characterized by strong intertwining of gender, caste, and class, as social stratification structures, which influence life prospects and social experience of individuals. Instead of functioning as different categories, these dimensions overlap and support each other, giving rise to complex and stratified forms of inequality, especially for women. This interlinkage is very important when understanding how social exclusion and marginalization have persisted in India. The inequality between the genders is based on a patriarchy that designates unequal roles, responsibilities, and power to both men and women. Social

patriarchal practices define how the women of the community are allowed to access education, acquire jobs, own property, and make decisions, which in most cases leaves them to domesticity and care work (Hegade & Andalgavkarkulkarni, 2025) [10]. The influence of patriarchy, however, differs between locations of caste and class. Women of the upper caste can be confined in terms of movement and sexual activities, whereas women of the lower caste can be economically exploited in addition to the gender suppression. Caste is an inherited pattern of the social hierarchies governing status, occupation, and social relationships. Caste discrimination is an added problem that Dalit and Adivasi women have to grapple with, together with their gender subordination, which renders them extremely exposed to violence, marginalization, and degradation. Their work is often undervalued, and they are over- and underprepared in low-paying, insecure, and destigmatized jobs. Gender inequality is therefore overwhelmed by caste, as it determines the types of work women do and how much respect they are accorded in society (Khanna & Mukherjee, 2024) [11]. Class also contributes towards these inequalities by affecting access to material resources and opportunities. Women in poor economic backgrounds have less access to education, health care, and secure jobs, and thus are unable to confront oppressive institutions. Women usually end up in informal and unpaid labour due to poverty, making them dependent and vulnerable. In the case of marginalized caste groups, the issue of class inequity is typically a direct result of caste based exclusion in the past. Gender, caste, and class are intersecting modes of oppression that cannot be viewed alone. The way that they interrelate produces unique experiences of marginalization to various groups of women, a fact that makes an intersectional approach so critical in the study of sociology and policy-making.

Review of Literature

Das & Agnihotri (1999) This research demonstrates that gender has a significant impact on the prevalence and experience of disability. It draws attention to the fact that, compared to disabled sons, disabled daughters are more likely to be neglected and excluded in Indian culture because they are frequently seen as a major burden.

Mehrotra (2013) investigates the relationship between economic participation and social stratification. Only 34.49 percent of disabled people in India are employed, according to the study, with the biggest differences occurring at the intersection of disability and Dalit status. It contends that gender and caste serve as "structuring principles" that determine a person's ability to find employment and earn a living.

Ghosh (2016) the lived experiences of disabled women in India are examined in this groundbreaking ethnographic study, which emphasizes how gender stereotypes and patriarchal standards obscure their abilities. According to Ghosh, disabled women are frequently seen as "helpless dependents," which causes them to be excluded from family formation and developmental processes.

Kothari, Shaikh, & Agrawal (2020) The Centre for Law and Policy Research (CLPR) has identified a significant legal gap in India. It notes that while the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act exist, neither fully address.

Devkota et al. (2021) This study focused on maternal healthcare, discovered that disabled women used healthcare services at significantly lower rates than non-disabled women, regardless of caste. However, it implies that in certain healthcare contexts, disability frequently "overrides" caste, creating a universal barrier for disabled women seeking maternal care.

Haq, Singal, & Janakiraman (2023) This study explores the ways in which caste and religion are intertwined identities that influence inclusion in Indian society. It advances knowledge of how "overlapping aspects of identity" lead to unique experiences of exclusion, especially when it comes to community resources and public spaces.

Problem Statement

Disability in India is primarily viewed through a "single-axis" lens that ignores the "hierarchy of suffering" created by intersecting social identities, despite constitutional mandates for equality. Women with disabilities face compounded systemic exclusion that limits their access to work, healthcare, and education, especially those from marginalized castes like Dalits and Adivasis. Investigating how gender, caste, and class operate as overlapping modes of oppression that result in distinct and stratified experiences of marginalization that is not addressed by current disability policies is the main research challenge.

Objectives

1. To analyze how intersecting identities—specifically gender, caste, and socioeconomic status.
2. To evaluate the extent to which these intersecting social stratifications influence an individual's access to essential resources

Source of Data:

Primary Data: Collected directly from respondents through field surveys and interviews.

Secondary Data: Census 2011 data, WHO & World Bank reports, UN CRPD guidelines, and existing systematic reviews on disability prevalence in India.

Scope of the study

The study focuses on how social stratifications (Caste, Gender, and Socioeconomic Status) and physical/sensory disabilities intersect. Focused on India, with specific emphasis on rural areas, where caste-based discrimination is still pervasive and where 70% of the disabled population lives. Investigating how patriarchal norms and religious ideas like karma affect the marginalization of women with disabilities.

Research Methodology

In this study, Descriptive and Analytical Design is used. Primary and Secondary data source were used for this study. Collection was done through survey questionnaire and secondary data were collected through various Census 2011 data, WHO & World Bank report and related website. A sample of 200 respondents was chosen for the present study. Purposive Stratified Sampling has been adopted. The collected data was analyzed with SPSS. The statistical tools used are Spearman's Rank Correlation, One-Way ANOVA, Chi-Square Test and Independent Samples T-Tests.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics (categorized by Gender)

The descriptive statistics survey highlight a significant gender imbalance in the perceived experiences of social and domestic issues. The findings show that female participants consistently express higher levels of distress and limitations compared to male participants, with the greatest pressures found in domestic and interpersonal domains. In particular, the mean values for Restrictions to Domestic Work at 4.17 and Household Financial Decision-making at 4.04 stand out as the main sources of stress for women, indicating a lack of economic autonomy and the weight of traditional gender expectations. Additionally, elevated mean scores for Verbal or Physical Abuse at 4.02 and Access to Healthcare & Technology at 3.94 reveal a serious vulnerability among women related to physical safety and systemic marginalization.

Variable / Item Number	Mean (Female)	Mean (Male)	Overall Mean
Caste-based Community Exclusion	2.86	1.92	2.58
Neighborhood Social Avoidance	2.84	2.07	2.61
Double Discrimination (Gender + Disability)	3.9	2.48	3.54
Access to Healthcare & Technology	3.94	2.50	3.51
Household Financial Decision-making	4.04	2.60	3.61
Job/Education Denial due to Caste	2.86	2.10	2.63
Verbal or Physical Abuse ("Burden")	4.02	2.52	3.57
Difficulty in Benefits due to Caste	2.86	2.10	2.63
Restriction to Domestic Work	4.17	2.67	3.72
Acceptance of Situation (Karma)	3.43	3.62	3.49

Male respondents, on the other hand, reported lower mean scores in almost every category, usually falling between 1.92 and 2.67. The Acceptance of Situation (Karma), where males 3.62 demonstrated a greater propensity toward fatalistic acceptance than females 3.43, is the lone exception to this pattern. The severe pressures of Double Discrimination (Gender + Disability), which reached an overall mean of 3.54, statistically outweighed the variables pertaining to direct Caste-based Community Exclusion and Job/Education Denial, which remained significant (averaging roughly 2.60 overall). All of these results point to a disproportionately high "burden" for female participants in the study area due to the intersection of gender with financial and domestic constraints, even though caste is still a persistent factor.

Table 2
Spearman's Rank Correlation

Test Parameter	Caste Rank	Caste Exclusion Score
Spearman's Rho	1.000	0.848
Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
N	200	200

From the above table the correlation coefficient between Caste Hierarchy and Caste-based Exclusion is (0.848) is positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). This indicating that as an individual's caste status

moves toward marginalized groups (SC/ST), the severity of social and systemic exclusion increases significantly.

Table 3
Independent Samples T-Test

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Gender Exclusion Score	Female	140	20.16	23.332	0.000
	Male	60	12.87		

There is a highly significant difference ($p < 0.001$) between men and women, according to the t-test. Women with disabilities score significantly higher on the exclusion scale than men, confirming patriarchal norms deeply exacerbate the marginalization of disabled women.

Table 4
One-Way ANOVA (Caste Groups)

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1772.37	2	886.18	380.33	0.000
Within Groups (Residual)	459.02	197	2.33		
Total	2231.39	199			

From the above table it analyzes the variance of Caste Exclusion across three groups: SC/ST, OBC/Gen, and Mixed-Male. The "Matrix of Marginality" is not uniform, according to the ANOVA result ($F(2, 197) = 380.33$, $p < 0.05$). The "hierarchy of suffering" theory is supported by the fact that caste identification strongly stratifies the experience of disability.

Table 5
Chi-Square Test for Association

Statistic	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	58.822	2	0.000
Likelihood Ratio	64.120	2	0.000
N of Valid Cases	200		

From the above table Tests association between Caste Category and Employment/Education Denial .The Chi-Square test confirms that person's caste is strongly correlated with being denied employment and education rather than being random

Summary of Findings

- **Gendered Marginalization:** Female respondents consistently reported higher distress levels than males, particularly regarding Restriction to Domestic Work (Mean = 4.17) and Household Financial Decision-making (Mean = 4.04).
- **Patriarchal Pressure:** A T-test confirmed a highly significant difference ($p < 0.001$) between genders, with women scoring significantly higher on the exclusion scale, validating that patriarchal norms exacerbate the marginalization of disabled women.
- **Caste-Based Systemic Exclusion:** Spearman's Rank Correlation (0.848) indicates that as an individual's status moves toward marginalized groups (SC/ST), the severity of social exclusion increases significantly.
- **Employment & Education Barriers:** Chi-Square tests confirmed that a person's caste is strongly correlated with being denied employment and education rather than these occurrences being random.
- **The "Karma" Exception:** Male respondents (Mean = 3.62) demonstrated a greater propensity toward fatalistic acceptance of their situation (Karma) than females (Mean = 3.43).
- **Intersectional Gravity:** The pressure of Double Discrimination (Gender + Disability) reached an overall mean of 3.54, statistically outweighing single-axis variables like direct caste exclusion or job denial.

Suggestions

- **Intersectional Policy Framework:** Adopt a comprehensive framework that specifically addresses the particular obstacles faced by Dalit and Adivasi women with disabilities, replacing "single-axis" disability policies.
- **Economic Empowerment Programs:** To combat the high scores in Household Financial Decision-making and Domestic Restriction, develop focused financial inclusion and vocational training for disabled women.
- **Community-Based Sensitization:** Conduct awareness campaigns with a rural focus to combat religious fatalism (Karma) and patriarchal norms that support the marginalization and persecution of people with disabilities.
- **Inclusive Healthcare Access:** To address the high exclusion scores (Mean = 3.94) reported by female respondents, give priority to healthcare infrastructure and technology in rural areas.
- **Legal Enforcement:** Enforce the 2016 Disability Rights Law more strictly, keeping a close eye out for discrimination based on caste in the workplace and in the classroom.

Conclusion

Disability in India is a dynamic and socially stratified "Matrix of Marginality" rather than a uniform experience. It is impossible to view the overlapping forms of oppression that result from the intersection of gender, caste, and class separately. Gender is the main factor that determines domestic and physical vulnerability, even though caste status greatly influences systemic access. In order to achieve true inclusion, policy-making must adopt an intersectional approach that breaks down the structural hierarchies that currently trap disabled women in cycles of abuse and poverty, going beyond the social model of disability.

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