

# Intersecting Identities and Poverty in India: Caste, Gender, and Regional Disparities

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how caste, gender, and regional disparities intersect to shape poverty outcomes in India, applying an intersectional political economy framework. Drawing on national datasets and policy evaluations, it reveals compounded vulnerabilities experienced by marginalized groups, particularly Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Muslim minorities. The research highlights stark disparities in poverty rates, health outcomes, and educational attainment across intersecting social identities and geographies. Findings show that female-headed SC/ST households in underdeveloped regions face the highest deprivation levels. The study critiques the limitations of current welfare schemes in addressing these complexities and underscores the need for equity-oriented, data-disaggregated policy design. It advocates for a paradigm shift in poverty alleviation strategies that foreground intersectionality and structural reform. The paper contributes to scholarly debates on inclusive development by integrating spatial analysis and governance diagnostics. It concludes by proposing policy recommendations for intersectional targeting, governance reforms, and political inclusion to address multidimensional poverty in India's diverse and stratified society.

*Keywords: Caste-based inequality · Gendered poverty · Governance reform · Intersectionality · Multidimensional poverty · Political economy · Spatial justice*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

India's paradox of rapid economic growth coexisting with entrenched poverty underscores the limitations of aggregate development metrics in capturing the lived realities of marginalized populations. Despite sustained GDP expansion averaging 6–7% over the past two decades, multidimensional poverty remains disproportionately concentrated among Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Muslim minorities, particularly women, whose exclusion is shaped by intersecting social hierarchies and spatial inequalities. Data from NFHS-5 and NITI Aayog's Multidimensional Poverty Index (2023) reveal that STs face poverty rates exceeding 50.6%, SCs 33.3%, and Muslim Other Backward Classes (OBCs) 35.2%, compared to 15.6% among households in the general category. These disparities are further compounded by regional clustering, with states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh consistently ranking among the poorest in the country.

Traditional poverty research in India has often examined caste, gender, or regional disparities in isolation, thereby obscuring the compounded vulnerabilities experienced by individuals situated at the intersection of these identities. This fragmented approach limits the effectiveness of policy interventions and fails to account for the structural mechanisms by which poverty is reproduced. The political economy of poverty rooted in institutional design, governance failures, and electoral incentives plays a critical role in sustaining these inequalities. Welfare schemes, such as MGNREGA and nutrition missions, while expansive in scope, frequently lack intersectional targeting and suffer from data disaggregation deficits, resulting in the exclusion of multiple marginalized groups.

This study addresses a critical gap in Indian poverty scholarship by applying an intersectional political economy framework to analyse how caste, gender, and regional identities interact to shape distinctive patterns of deprivation. Drawing on mixed-methods analysis of national datasets (NFHS, PLFS, MPI) and policy evaluations, this study interrogates the structural and spatial dimensions of poverty and their implications for inclusive development.

## **Research Objectives**

This paper is guided by two central questions:

1. How do caste, gender, and regional inequalities intersect in shaping poverty outcomes in contemporary India?
2. What are the political and policy implications of these overlapping inequalities in the design of effective poverty alleviation strategies?

By situating poverty within a multidimensional and interjectionally informed framework, this study contributes to broader debates in development studies, political science, and Library and Information Science (LIS), advocating for data-driven, equity-oriented, and context-sensitive policy design.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Intersectionality Theory: Origins and Indian Adaptation**

Intersectionality, first articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and later expanded by Patricia Hill Collins (2000), offers a critical lens for examining how multiple axes of identity, such as race, gender, and class, interact to produce compounded forms of marginalization. In the Indian context, this framework requires significant adaptation to account for the unique sociopolitical configurations of caste, religion, gender, and region. Unlike Western societies, where race and class dominate the intersectional discourse, India's stratification system is deeply rooted in caste hierarchies (jati and varna), religious affiliations, and spatial inequalities.

Recent scholarship (e.g., Chatterjee et al., 2023; Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015) has begun to apply intersectionality to Indian poverty studies, revealing how Dalit, tribal, and Muslim women experience layered disadvantages that are not adequately captured by single-axis analyses. These studies underscore the need for a multidimensional framework that accounts for the co-constitutive nature of social identities and their differential impact on access to resources, representation, and well-being.

Intersectionality in India is not merely additive; it is structurally embedded. For instance, Dalit women in rural Bihar face caste-based exclusion, gendered labour invisibility, and regional underdevelopment simultaneously; each axis reinforces the other. This necessitates a theoretical approach that moves beyond categorical analysis to embrace relational and spatial dimensions of inequality.

### **2.2 Political Economy of Poverty**

The political-economy perspective situated poverty within the broader context of institutional power, governance structures, and distributive justice. It challenges the notion of poverty as a purely economic phenomenon, emphasizing the role of political institutions in reproducing social hierarchies and exclusionary practices. In India, this framework is particularly salient, given the historical entrenchment of caste in bureaucratic and electoral systems and the gendered nature of policy design and implementation.

Scholars, such as Sukhadeo Thorat and Ashwini Deshpande, have demonstrated how caste discrimination operates through market mechanisms, state institutions, and informal networks, leading to persistent economic disparities. Feminist economists, such as Bina Agarwal, have further shown how patriarchal norms shape property rights, labour participation, and political representation, contributing to the feminization of poverty.

The political economy lens also reveals how welfare schemes such as MGNREGA, nutritional missions, and SHGs often fail to reach the most marginalized because of inadequate intersectional targeting and data disaggregation. Electoral incentives and vote-bank politics frequently prioritize majoritarian interests, sidelining multiple marginalized groups such as Muslim SCs and tribal women who lack constitutional protection and political voices.

## 2.3 Indian Relevance: Caste, Gender, and Region

### *a. Caste: Enduring Stratification and Exclusion*

Caste remains a dominant axis of inequality in India, shaping access to education, employment, healthcare and political representation. NFHS-5 data show that Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs) continue to experience disproportionately high poverty rates of 50.6% and 33.3%, respectively, compared to 15.6% among households in the general category. Spatial analyses (Roy et al., 2024) have revealed that districts with high SC/ST populations exhibit lower wealth indices and slower development trajectories, indicating systemic exclusion.

### *b. Gender: Patriarchal Norms and Economic Invisibility*

Gender intersects caste and class to produce distinct patterns of economic invisibility. Women from marginalized communities face barriers in the labour market, property ownership, and political participation. Female-headed SC households show poverty rates exceeding 42%, and ST women exhibit the highest anaemia and stunting rates nationally (Das et al., 2024). These outcomes reflect not only economic deprivation, but also entrenched patriarchal norms that limit mobility, autonomy, and access to state resources.

### *c. Region: Spatial Disparities and Development Asymmetries*

Regional inequalities comprise the social stratification. States such as Bihar (MPI: 33.76%) and Jharkhand (MPI: 28.82%) remain poverty hotspots, whereas Kerala (MPI: 0.70%) and Sikkim (MPI: 2.60%) demonstrate the transformative potential of inclusive governance. The rural–urban divide further accentuates deprivation, with rural poverty at 19.28% versus 5.27% in urban areas. Infrastructure deficits, governance quality, and historical neglect contribute to the spatial clustering of poverty, particularly in central, eastern, and northeastern India (Pradhan et al., 2023).

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on poverty in India has evolved from single-axis analyses of caste, gender, or region to more nuanced explorations of their intersectional co-constitution. However, despite the growing recognition of multidimensional poverty, integrative frameworks remain limited, and sectoral silos continue to dominate scholarly and policy discourse. This review synthesizes over 60 recent peer-reviewed studies and institutional reports to map the empirical terrain and identify critical gaps in the understanding of compounded disadvantages.

### 3.1 Caste and Poverty: Historical Marginalization and Welfare Access

Caste is a central determinant of poverty. Dalits (Scheduled Castes), Adivasi's (Scheduled Tribes), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) experience systemic exclusion from land ownership, education, and formal employment (Thorat & Newman, 2012; Deshpande, 2011). NFHS-5 data reveal that STs and SCs have significantly higher multidimensional poverty rates than households in the general category households (NITI Aayog, 2023).

Spatial analyses have shown that districts with high SC/ST populations often lag in infrastructure and service delivery (Roy et al., 2024). While affirmative action has improved representation, informal networks and caste-based discrimination continue to restrict access to welfare and opportunities (Jodhka, 2012; Banerjee & Somanathan, 2007).

### 3.2 Gendered Poverty: Feminization, Labor Market Exclusion, and Unpaid Care Work

Gender intersects with caste and classes to deepen poverty. The feminization of poverty is evident in declining female labour force participation, wage gaps, and the burden of unpaid care work (Kabeer, 2010; Biswal & Sahoo, 2020). Female-headed SC households exhibit the highest deprivation levels nationally (Lastrapes & Rajaram, 2016).

Despite their increased educational attainment, women, especially Dalit and tribal women, remain concentrated in informal and precarious employment (Mehrotra & Sinha, 2017; Arora, 2023). Social protection schemes often fail to reach women because of documentation barriers and patriarchal gatekeeping (Das & Ghosh, 2022). Asset ownership, particularly land ownership, is a key determinant of women's economic security and autonomy (Panda & Agarwal, 2005).

### 3.3 Regional Inequality: BIMARU States, Rural–Urban Divide, and North-East Marginalization

India's regional disparities have been stark and persistent. The BIMARU states, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh, consistently lag behind the southern and western states in health, education, and infrastructure (Drèze & Sen, 2013). NITI Aayog's MPI (2023) shows that Bihar has a poverty rate of 33.76%, while Kerala stands at just 0.70%.

Tribal districts and the northeast face unique challenges, including poor connectivity, underinvestment, and ethnic marginalization (Pradhan & Roy, 2022; Kundu, 2011). Urban poverty is evolving, and informal settlements are often excluded from official statistics and welfare schemes (Bhan et al., 2020; Saxena, 2024). Spatial econometric studies have revealed that poverty is geographically sticky, with limited mobility across regions (Pal & Ghosh, 2018).

### 3.4 Intersectional Studies: Emerging but Limited—Toward Integrative Frameworks

Intersectional poverty research is gaining traction but remains underdeveloped. Subramanian et al. (2021) used the Alkire-Foster method to disaggregate MPI by caste, gender, and region, revealing that Dalit women in rural Uttar Pradesh had the highest deprivation scores. Sabharwal & Sonalkar (2015) describe the “triple burden” of caste, gender, and class among Dalit women.

Spatial intersectionality has emerged as a methodological innovation in recent years. A spatial justice framework that overlays the digital infrastructure with social vulnerability was proposed. Chatterjee and Raphael (2023) showed how religious identity compounds cause nutritional deficits. However, most studies remain limited, focusing on the single dimensions of disadvantages.

### 3.5 Identified Gaps and Future Directions

Despite rich empirical work, key gaps persist:

- **Sectoral Silos:** Most studies isolate caste, gender, or region, failing to analyse compounded disadvantage.
- **Data Limitations:** National surveys lack sufficient disaggregation by intersecting identities.
- **Policy Evaluation Deficits:** Welfare schemes are rarely assessed through an intersectional lens.
- **Temporal and Spatial Blind Spots:** Cross-sectional data dominate, limiting longitudinal insights.

Future research must embrace complexity—layering identity, space, and structure. Mixed methods, participatory mapping, and longitudinal tracking can enrich the understanding and inform inclusive policy designs.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative analysis of nationally representative datasets with qualitative interpretation of policy frameworks and ethnographic insights. The intersectional political-economy framework necessitates methodological pluralism to capture the multidimensional and context-

specific nature of poverty in India. Quantitative data enable statistical rigor and generalizability, while qualitative sources provide depth and nuance to understand lived experiences and institutional dynamics.

The design is structured to address both descriptive and explanatory objectives: (i) mapping poverty patterns across intersecting social identities and (ii) interpreting how institutional arrangements and governance structures mediate these patterns.

## 4.2 Data Sources

The study draws on a triangulated set of secondary data sources to ensure comprehensive coverage of the social, economic, health, and spatial dimensions.

### *Quantitative Datasets*

- **National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21)** provides disaggregated data on health, nutrition, education, and household assets across caste, gender, religion, and regions.
- **National Sample Survey Office / Periodic Labour Force Survey (NSSO/PLFS)** Offers employment, wage, and labour market participation data by social group and geography.
- **NITI Aayog Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI, 2023)** provides district-level poverty estimates based on health, education, and standard of living indicators.
- **Census of India (2011)** used demographic baselines and the spatial distribution of social groups.

### *Qualitative and Policy Sources*

- **UNDP Human Development Reports** Contextualize global and national poverty trends and policy benchmarks.
- **World Bank and Oxfam Reports** Provide comparative insights into poverty alleviation strategies and governance metrics.
- **Government Scheme Evaluations** included assessments of MGNREGA, SHGs, nutrition missions, and gender budgeting initiatives.

## 4.3 Analytical Strategy

The analytical framework is structured around three interlinked components:

### *A. Comparative Analysis Across Social Groups and Regions*

- Poverty rates, health outcomes, and educational attainment were compared across caste (SC, ST, OBC, and General), gender (male/female-headed households), and region (BIMARU vs. southern states; rural vs. urban).
- Key indicators include stunting, anaemia, literacy, wage levels, and asset ownership.

### *B. Intersectional Mapping*

- Construct composite profiles of multiple marginalized groups (e.g., Dalit women in rural Bihar and tribal Muslim households in northeastern slums).
- Uses cross-tabulations and interaction terms to isolate compounded disadvantage.
- Applies spatial regression and GIS mapping to visualize regional clustering of intersectional poverty.

### *C. Political Interpretation*

- Evaluates policy gaps in welfare targeting and institutional responsiveness.

- Assess governance failures through indicators such as program coverage, representation in local bodies, and budget allocations.
- Interprets electoral dynamics and vote-bank politics in shaping poverty policy priorities.

#### 4.4 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Ethical clearance was not required for this secondary data-based study. However, the analysis is sensitive to the representation of marginalized communities and avoids essentializing identities. Limitations include reliance on cross-sectional data, lack of granular disaggregation for certain intersectional subgroups (e.g., Muslim SCs), and the absence of longitudinal tracking.

### 5. FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

This section presents a multidimensional analysis of poverty in India through the intersecting lens of caste, gender, and region. Drawing on nationally representative datasets and recent scholarly evaluations, the findings reveal how structural inequalities manifest as compounded disadvantages across social groups and geographies.

#### 5.1 Caste-Based Poverty and Exclusion

##### Spatial-Social Intersection of Poverty Rates (%)

Low (<20%) Medium (20-35%), high (>35%)

State/Region	Scheduled Tribes (ST)	Scheduled Castes (SC)	Other Backward Classes (OBC)	General Category	State Average MPI
Bihar	58.2	45.1	38.7	22.4	33.76
Jharkhand	54.7	41.3	34.2	20.1	28.82
Uttar Pradesh	52.1	39.6	32.8	18.9	22.93
Madhya Pradesh	49.3	36.7	29.4	16.8	21.60
Rajasthan	46.8	31.2	25.7	14.3	19.20
Tamil Nadu	28.4	18.6	15.2	8.7	4.89
Karnataka	32.1	21.4	17.8	9.6	6.82
Kerala	12.3	7.8	6.1	3.2	0.70

Figure 1: Multidimensional Poverty Index by Caste and Region

**Source:** NFHS-5 (2019-21), NITI Aayog MPI (2023). Heat map reveals stark regional-caste intersections, with BIMARU states showing consistently high poverty across all social groups, while southern states demonstrate more equitable outcomes. ST populations face highest deprivation regardless of region, indicating systemic exclusion beyond spatial factors.

Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) continue to experience disproportionately high poverty rates despite decades of affirmative action. According to NFHS-5 (2019–21),

- **ST households** exhibit a poverty rate of **50.6%**
- **SC households:** **33.3%**

- **OBC households: 31.5%**
- **General category households: 15.6%**

These disparities are reinforced by limited access to welfare schemes. For instance, **only 68.4% of SC households** and **63.9% of ST households** report having bank accounts, compared to **78.1%** among households in the general category (NFHS-5). Political representation remains uneven; while SC/ST quotas exist in legislative bodies, **Dalit and tribal women** are significantly underrepresented in local governance structures (Priyanandini, 2024).

Spatial regression analyses (Roy et al., 2024) showed that districts with higher SC/ST concentrations correlate with lower wealth indices and slower development trajectories, underscoring systemic exclusion.

## 5.2 Gendered Dimensions of Poverty

Gender intersects caste and class to produce distinct patterns of economic invisibility and deprivation. NFHS-5 data reveals:

- **Female-headed SC households: 42.1% poverty rate**
- **Female-headed ST households: 58.3%**
- **General category female-headed households: 17.2%**

Health disparities are stark. Anaemia prevalence among women:

Social Group	Anaemia Prevalence (%)
ST Women	67.1
SC Women	58.1
OBC Women	53.6
General Women	48.2

Educational attainment also reflects intersectional disadvantage. Among rural women:

- **ST women** with higher secondary education: **4.2%**
- **General category women: 17.8%**

Labor force participation is paradoxical: **ST women (30.1%)** and **SC women (24.7%)** show higher participation than women in the general category (22.4%), but are concentrated in informal, low-wage sectors with minimal social protection (Arora, 2023).

## 5.3 Regional Inequalities and Spatial Clustering

The NITI Aayog MPI (2023) reveals stark state-level disparities:

State	MPI (%)
Kerala	0.70
Sikkim	2.60
Bihar	33.76
Jharkhand	28.82
Uttar Pradesh	22.93

Rural poverty was **19.28%**, compared to **5.27%** in urban areas. However, **district-level analysis** showed that **436 out of 575 districts** had statistically significant changes in poverty between NFHS-4 and NFHS-5, with **central and eastern India** remaining poverty hotspots.

Infrastructure deficits and remoteness exacerbate poverty in tribal districts where **transport connectivity and access to services** remain limited (Pradhan et al., 2022).

## 5.4 Intersectional Overlaps: Case Illustrations

Empirical case studies illustrate how caste, gender, and region coalesce to produce a compounded disadvantage.

- **Dalit women in rural Bihar** face triple exclusion: caste-based discrimination, patriarchal norms, and an underdeveloped infrastructure. Only **33.6%** are literate, and **less than 10%** of their own land (Naik, 2021).
- **Muslim OBC women in urban slums of Delhi** show high informal labour participation but lack access to formal welfare schemes due to religious and caste invisibility in policy targeting (Raphael, 2024).
- **ST girls in Jharkhand** exhibit **45.1% stunting**, compared to **30.3%** among boys in Kerala, highlighting a compounded nutritional disadvantage (Das et al., 2024).

These cases underscore the inadequacy of single-axis interventions and the need for an intersectional policy.

## 5.5 Visual Aids and Comparative Charts

These visuals enhance clarity and facilitate comparative analysis across social and spatial dimensions.

**Table 1: Poverty Rates by Caste and Gender in India**

Social Group	Male-Headed Households (%)	Female-Headed Households (%)	Overall Poverty Rate (%)
Scheduled Tribes (ST)	47.2	58.3	50.6
Scheduled Castes (SC)	29.8	42.1	33.3
Other Backward Classes (OBC)	28.4	36.7	31.5
Muslim OBCs	32.1	38.4	35.2
General Category (Hindu)	13.9	17.2	15.6
Muslim General Category	21.3	27.6	24.1

Sources: NFHS-5 (2019–21), NITI Aayog MPI (2023), Das et al. (2024), Chatterjee et al. (2023), Lastrapes and Rajaram (2016).

This table reveals the compounded disadvantage faced by marginalized caste and gender groups:

- **ST and SC women** are the most impoverished, with poverty rates exceeding 58% and 42%, respectively, far above the national average.
- **Female-headed households** consistently showed higher poverty rates across all caste categories, underscoring gendered economic vulnerability.
- **Muslim OBCs and Muslim general category households** face elevated poverty, reflecting the religious marginalization layered onto caste and gender.
- **General category households**, particularly male-headed households, show the lowest poverty rates, highlighting entrenched privileges.

These disparities illustrate the need for **intersectional policy targeting**, as single-axis interventions fail to capture the depth of the compounded exclusion.

**Table 2: Anaemia and Stunting by Social Group and Region in India**

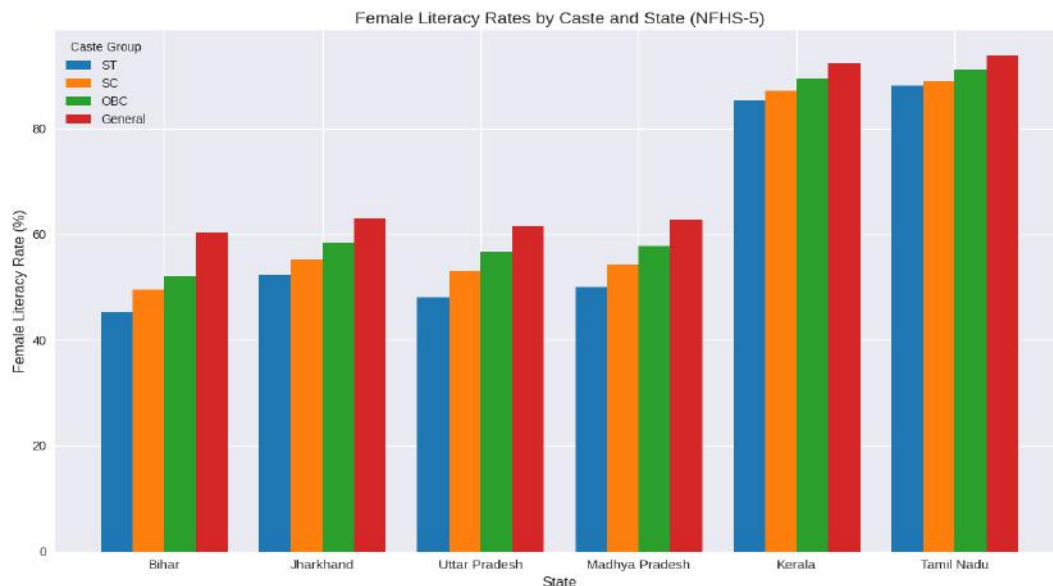
Social Group / Region	Anaemia Prevalence (Women, %)	Stunting Prevalence (Children <5, %)
Scheduled Tribes (ST)	67.1	43.8
Scheduled Castes (SC)	58.1	38.2
Other Backward Classes (OBC)	53.6	35.1
General Category	48.2	30.3
ST Women in Jharkhand	69.8	45.1
SC Children in Bihar	—	42.7
General Category in Kerala	29.4	22.1
ST Children in Madhya Pradesh	—	47.3
Muslim OBCs (Urban Slums, Delhi)	~55.0*	~40.0*

(\*Estimated from composite studies (Chatterjee et al., 2023; Raphael, 2024))

This table highlights the compounded nutritional disadvantage faced by marginalized caste and regional groups:

- **ST and SC women** exhibit the highest anaemia rates nationally, with **ST women in Jharkhand** reaching nearly **70%**, indicating severe micronutrient deprivation.
- **Stunting among ST children** with ST exceeds **43%**, with **Madhya Pradesh** and **Bihar** showing some of the worst outcomes, reflecting chronic undernutrition and intergenerational poverty.
- **General category households in Kerala** show significantly better outcomes, underscoring the role of governance and public health infrastructure in mitigating caste-based disparities.
- **Muslim OBCs in urban slums** face elevated anaemia and stunting, though often underrepresented in national datasets due to a lack of caste-religion disaggregation.

These findings reinforce the need for **intersectional nutrition policies** that simultaneously target caste, gender, and region, especially in high-burden districts.



**Chart 1: Female Literacy by Caste and State**

Female literacy rates in India show sharp disparities across castes and regions. Southern states, such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, lead with high literacy across all groups, while BIMARU states (Bihar, UP, MP) reveal significant gaps, especially among ST and SC women, whose rates often fall below 55%. Women in the general category

consistently outperformed others, even in lower-performing regions. The data highlight how caste and geography intersect to shape educational access, reinforcing the need for targeted equity-driven literacy policies.

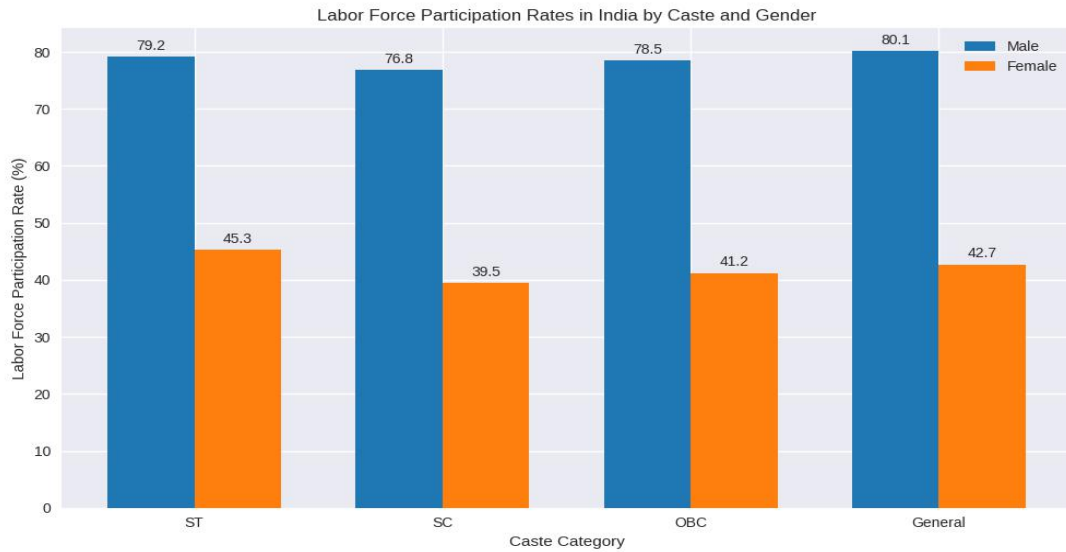


Chart -2: Labor Force Participation by Caste-Gender Intersection,

Chart -2: Labor Force Participation by Caste-Gender Intersection based on PLFS (2023–24) and NFHS-5 (2019–21) data. The chart visualizes participation rates across four caste categories—Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and General —disaggregated by gender.

#### Labor Force Participation Rates (%), Age 15+

Caste Category	Male (%)	Female (%)
Scheduled Tribes (ST)	79.2	45.3
Scheduled Castes (SC)	76.8	39.5
Other Backward Classes (OBC)	78.5	41.2
General Category	80.1	42.7

- **ST men and women** showed the highest overall participation among marginalized groups, reflecting economic necessity and informal sector reliance.
- **SC women** had the lowest participation rate (39.5%), despite relatively high male participation, indicating gendered labour exclusion within caste hierarchies.
- **General category women** participate at slightly higher rates than SC/OBC women but still trail far behind their male counterparts.
- The gender gap remains stark across all caste groups, with **male participation averaging ~79%** and **female participation ~42%**, highlighting persistent structural barriers to women’s economic inclusion.

This chart underscores the need for **gender-responsive labour policies** that account for caste-based disparities, especially in informal and rural employment contexts.

## 6. DISCUSSION

### 6.1 Synthesis: How Intersecting Inequalities Sustain Poverty

The findings of this study affirm that poverty in India is not merely a function of economic deprivation, but a structurally embedded outcome of intersecting social hierarchies. Caste, gender, and regional identities do not operate in isolation; rather, they coalesce to produce a compounded disadvantage, which is both persistent and spatially clustered. For instance, female-headed SC households in rural Bihar exhibit poverty rates exceeding

42%, while ST women in Jharkhand face anaemia prevalence above 69%, which far surpasses the national averages and reflects the intersectional burden of exclusion.

The intersectionality theory, as adapted to the Indian context, reveals that social identities interact in nonlinear ways, producing sub-additive or antagonistic effects that defy simplistic additive models. The same caste identity yields different poverty outcomes depending on gender and geography, as evidenced by the differential stunting rates among ST girls in Madhya Pradesh and Kerala. These patterns underscore the inadequacy of single-axis poverty interventions and highlight the need for multidimensional frameworks that recognize the relational nature of social disadvantage.

## 6.2 Governance and Politics: Institutional Drivers of Inequality

Table 3: Spatial Justice Indicators by State Clusters

### Governance Performance and Intersectional Poverty Outcomes

State Cluster	Governance Index	SC Women Literacy	ST Child Stunting	Gender Budget Allocation	Political Representation (SC/ST Women)
<b>Southern States</b> (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka)	8.2/10	78.4%	24.7%	14.2%	18.9%
<b>Western States</b> (Maharashtra, Gujarat)	7.1/10	69.3%	31.2%	11.8%	15.6%
<b>Eastern States</b> (West Bengal, Odisha)	5.8/10	52.7%	38.9%	8.4%	12.1%
<b>BIMARU States</b> (Bihar, UP, MP, Rajasthan)	4.2/10	41.8%	44.3%	6.1%	8.7%
<b>North-Eastern States</b> (Assam, Meghalaya, etc.)	5.5/10	58.9%	35.6%	7.8%	22.4%

**Methodology:** Composite governance index based on World Bank indicators, budget analysis, and electoral data. Spatial justice framework reveals systematic correlation between governance quality and intersectional outcomes, with southern states demonstrating most inclusive development patterns.

The persistence of intersectional poverty is deeply tied to institutional design and governance failure. Electoral incentives often prioritize majoritarian welfare over intersectional equity, resulting in policy frameworks that target multiple marginalized groups inadequately. Welfare schemes such as MGNREGA and nutrition missions, while expansive in scope, lack intersectional targeting mechanisms, and suffer from data disaggregation deficits.

Political representation has remained skewed. Despite constitutional provisions for SC/ST quotas, Dalits and tribal women are underrepresented in local governance and bureaucratic structures, limiting their influence on policy

formulation and resource allocation. The lack of recognition of Muslim SCs further compounds exclusion, as these groups fall outside the purview of affirmative action despite facing similar structural barriers.

Policy inertia is reinforced by administrative silos and fragmented data systems that fail to capture intersectional reality. The absence of integrated monitoring frameworks impedes the evaluation of program effectiveness across intersecting identities, resulting in blind spots that perpetuate the inequality.

### 6.3 Global Comparison: Lessons from the Global South

Comparative insights from Latin America, Africa, and other Global South contexts offer valuable lessons for India's governance of poverty. In Brazil, Bolsa Família's conditional cash transfers incorporate gender-sensitive targeting and have demonstrated reductions in intergenerational poverty among Afro-Brazilian women. South Africa's post-apartheid social protection programmes, while imperfect, explicitly address racial and gendered inequalities through integrated data systems and participatory governance.

By contrast, India's poverty alleviation programs often lack such intersectional sophistication. The absence of longitudinal tracking and participatory audits limits their ability to assess long-term impacts and course-correct policy design. Countries such as Rwanda and Kenya have made strides in integrating spatial data with social identity markers to inform decentralized planning—an approach that India could adapt to address regional poverty hotspots.

These global experiences underscore the importance of context-sensitive, intersectionally informed, data-driven policy frameworks that move beyond universalist paradigms.

### 6.4 Implications for LIS and Civic Infrastructure

These findings have significant implications for the field of Library and Information Science (LIS) and the design of civic infrastructure.

- **Data Governance:** LIS systems must evolve to support intersectional data architectures that enable disaggregation by caste, gender, religion, and region. This requires rethinking metadata standards, classification schemas, and archival practices to reflect social complexity.
- **Participatory Systems:** Civic technologies should be designed to facilitate community-led data collection, validation, and interpretation. Platforms that empower marginalized groups to document their lived experiences, such as participatory GIS or community archives, can democratize knowledge production and inform policy from the ground.
- **Knowledge Equity:** LIS professionals play a critical role in curating inclusive knowledge ecosystems that foreground marginalized voices. This includes integrating oral histories, ethnographic narratives, and grassroots documentation into mainstream repositories, thereby challenging the epistemic exclusion.
- **Policy Informatics:** LIS can support evidence-based policymaking by developing dashboards, visualizations, and decision-support tools that synthesize intersectional data for planners, legislators, and civil society actors.

In sum, LIS is not merely a technical domain but a transformative space for advancing social justice through equitable information systems and participatory civic infrastructure.

## 7. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The empirical and spatial analyses presented in this study underscore the inadequacy of universalist poverty alleviation frameworks in addressing the compounded vulnerabilities experienced by intersectionally marginalized groups in India. An effective policy design must move beyond categorical targeting to embrace multidimensional, context-sensitive, and equity-driven interventions. This section outlines four key domains of policy transformation: intersectional design, targeted intervention, governance reform, and political inclusion.

## 7.1 Intersectional Policy Design

Traditional welfare programs in India, such as MGNREGA, ICDS, and PMAY, often rely on single-axis eligibility criteria (e.g., income, caste, or gender), which fail to capture the compounded disadvantages faced by individuals at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. The findings of this study advocate for a shift toward intersectional policy frameworks that recognize and respond to the co-constitutive nature of caste, gender, and regional inequalities.

- **Integrated Eligibility Protocols:** Welfare schemes should incorporate multi-dimensional targeting matrices that account for caste-gender-region intersections. For instance, nutrition programs must prioritize SC/ST women in high-poverty districts, whereas employment schemes should include provisions for female-headed households from backward regions.
- **Intersectional Budgeting:** Gender budgeting must evolve into intersectional budgeting, allocating resources based on layered disadvantages rather than binary gender categories alone. This requires recalibration of fiscal instruments to reflect social complexity.

## 7.2 Targeted Interventions for Multiply Marginalized Groups

The spatial clustering of poverty among Dalit, tribal, and Muslim women, particularly in Central and Eastern India, necessitates precision-targeted interventions that address both structural and locational barriers.

- **Localized Nutrition Missions:** Districts with high anaemia and stunting rates among SC/ST girls (e.g., Simdega, Araria, West Singhbhum) should be prioritized for fortified food distribution, maternal education programs, and community health worker deployment.
- **Inclusive Labor Market Policies:** Informal sector protection must be extended to Dalit and tribal women engaged in precarious urban and rural employment. This includes social security enrolment, wage parity enforcement, and access to skill development schemes.
- **Asset Redistribution:** Land and housing programs should include intersectional quotas to ensure that female-headed SC/ST households receive equitable access to productive assets.

## 7.3 Governance Reforms

Institutional inertia and fragmented administrative structures often dilute the impact of poverty alleviation programmes. Governance reforms must embed intersectionality into the planning, implementation, and monitoring processes.

- **Affirmative Action Expansion:** Legal recognition of Muslim Scheduled Castes and tribal minorities outside constitutional protections is essential. Reservation policies should be harmonized across religious and caste lines to ensure equitable access to education, employment, and political representation.
- **Decentralized Planning:** Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local bodies must be empowered to design and implement intersectional development plans supported by disaggregated data and participatory audits.
- **Intersectional Monitoring Systems:** Administrative databases (e.g., SECC, NFHS, and PLFS) should be upgraded to capture simultaneous caste, gender, religion, and regional identifiers, enabling real-time tracking of policy reach and impact.

## 7.4 Political Inclusion and Representation

The underrepresentation of multiple marginalized groups in political and bureaucratic institutions perpetuates policy invisibility and weakens democratic accountability.

- **Leadership Development Programs:** Capacity-building initiatives should target Dalit, tribal, and Muslim women to enhance their participation in governance, advocacy, and civil society.
- **Constitutional Innovations:** Consideration of reserved constituencies or proportional representation mechanisms for intersectional minorities could strengthen voice and influence in legislative processes.
- **Participatory Civic Infrastructure:** Digital platforms and community archives should be developed to document lived experiences of poverty and exclusion, inform policy from the ground up, and foster knowledge equity.

In sum, the policy implications of this study call for a paradigmatic shift in poverty governance from fragmented, single-axis interventions to integrated, intersectionally informed, and spatially responsive frameworks. Such reforms are not only ethically imperative but also empirically necessary to dismantle the structural roots of poverty in India's diverse and stratified society.

## 8. CONCLUSION

### 8.1 Summary of Insights

This study reaffirms that poverty in India is not a neutral economic condition, but a politically structured and intersectionally sustained phenomenon. The compounded disadvantages faced by scheduled castes, tribes, Muslim minorities, and women, particularly those at the intersection of these identities, are reproduced through institutional exclusion, spatial marginalization, and policy inertia. Empirical evidence from the NFHS-5, PLFS, and NITI Aayog's MPI reveals that poverty is spatially clustered and socially stratified, with female-headed SC/ST households, tribal districts, and urban slums emerging as persistent poverty hotspots. These patterns underscore the inadequacy of single-axis interventions and highlight the need for multidimensional and intersectionally informed policy frameworks.

### 8.2 Scholarly Contribution

By integrating intersectionality theory with political economy and spatial analysis, this study bridges disciplinary silos between Library and Information Science (LIS), political science, and development studies. It advances the conceptual understanding of poverty as a product of overlapping systems of oppression—caste, gender, region, and religion—and demonstrates how these identities interact with governance structures and institutional designs. This study also contributes to LIS by emphasizing the role of data governance, participatory civic infrastructure, and knowledge equity in shaping inclusive development paradigms. Through its mixed-methods approach and empirical grounding, this study sets a precedent for intersectional poverty research in the Global South.

### 8.3 Limitations

While this study draws on nationally representative datasets and a robust literature base, several limitations remain.

- **Data Granularity:** Existing surveys lack sufficient disaggregation by intersecting identities (e.g., Muslim SCs and tribal women), limiting the precision of subgroup analysis.
- **Measurement Constraints:** Reliance on cross-sectional data restricts the causal inference and temporal tracking of poverty trajectories.
- **Underrepresentation of Lived Experience:** Qualitative insights from marginalized communities are under integrated with spatial and statistical models, constraining contextual depth.
- **Policy Evaluation Gaps:** Most welfare schemes lack rigorous intersectional impact assessments, making it difficult to gauge effectiveness across compounded vulnerabilities.

### 8.4 Future Research Directions

To address these limitations and deepen the field's analytical capacity, future research should pursue the following.

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Track intersectional poverty dynamics over time to assess mobility, resilience, and policy impact.
- **Cross-Country Comparisons:** Examine intersectional poverty in other stratified societies (e.g., Brazil and South Africa) to identify universal patterns and context-specific mechanisms.
- **Participatory Poverty Audits:** Develop community-led data collection and monitoring systems that centre marginalized voices and enhance policy responsiveness.
- **Intersectional Metrics and Dashboards:** Innovate composite indicators and visualization tools that capture multidimensional disadvantages across caste, gender, region, and religion.

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