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SOCIAL INCLUSION UNVEILED: EXPLORING CONTEXTS AND DIMENSIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the theoretical and empirical dimensions of social inclusion in the Indian context, presenting it as an essential multidimensional response to systemic social exclusion. Social inclusion is a multidimensional process aimed at ensuring equal participation, opportunities, and dignity for all individuals, particularly those marginalized by caste, gender, disability, religion, or socioeconomic status. Rooted in the response to social exclusion, the concept emphasizes access to resources, representation, and respect for rights. In the Indian context, social inclusion is critical due to the country's deep diversity and persistent inequalities. Despite progress in poverty reduction and constitutional safeguards, structural barriers continue to marginalize Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women, and religious minorities. Inclusion policies address poverty alleviation, caste-based inequality, gender equity, and democratic participation, while fostering social harmony and educational transformation. The dimensions of social inclusion extend beyond economic participation to encompass political, social, cultural, digital, health, and legal spheres. Together, these dimensions highlight that inclusion is not merely about access but about building cohesive, equitable, and resilient societies where no one is left behind.

KEYWORDS: *Social Inclusion, Social Exclusion, Caste Discrimination, Multidimensional Poverty, India, Marginalized Communities, Affirmative Action.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The literature on social inclusion and exclusion is extensive and growing. Before understanding social inclusion, it is important to understand social exclusion, because inclusion is basically the response to exclusion. Social exclusion refers to a condition in which individuals or groups are marginalized, deprived of opportunities, or hindered from fully participating in society. The United Nations (2016) defines social exclusion as *"a state in which individuals are unable to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life, as well as the process leading to and sustaining such a state."* According to Kabeer (2000), social exclusion is the experience of some groups who are "locked out" or "set apart" from social life. This concept encompasses a remarkably broad spectrum of social and economic issues (Sen, 2000). In India, social exclusion manifests in various forms, including caste discrimination and gender inequalities (Das, 2006; Thorat, 2014). The research conducted by Ramakrishnappa (2025) reveals that the level of social exclusion related to illiteracy among the working population was most pronounced among Scheduled Castes (SCs) at 33.8 percent, followed by Scheduled Tribes (STs) at 25.42 percent. In contrast, Other Backward Classes (OBCs) represented 18.18 percent, while the category labeled as Others accounted for 16.25 percent. People who are poor and marginalized are typically more likely to be shut out of the mainstream. Scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, landless people, migrant workers, remote, disabled, unmarried women, and communities residing in isolated, hilly, and unstable regions are among India's marginalized groups. These marginalized communities face social, economic, political, or cultural exclusion due to systemic disadvantages. As a result, governments introduce various policies and programs to promote social inclusion and ensure equal opportunities for all citizens.

The notion of social inclusion was initially developed in France during the 1970s to address the needs of groups that were being marginalized from the social security system (Burchardt, Le Grand, & Piachaurd, 2002). Social inclusion pertains to the process of improving societal participation for individuals who are marginalized due to factors such as age, gender, disability, origin, race, religion, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. This is achieved by offering enhanced opportunities, access to resources, a platform for self-expression, and respect for individual rights. Social inclusion includes aspects of social connectedness, meaningful engagement in community life, and liberation from stigma and discrimination (Puschne, 2023; Rosenheck, 2023). The World Bank report titled "Inclusion Matters: The Foundation for Shared Prosperity" defines social inclusion in two distinct manners: Firstly, it refers to the process of enhancing the conditions for individuals and groups to engage in society. Secondly, it pertains to the process of augmenting the capacity, opportunity, and dignity of individuals who are disadvantaged due to their identity, enabling them to participate in society (World Bank, 2013). The Global Summit for Social Development (1995) defines an inclusive society as one that is accessible to all. This implies that every individual holds the same rights and responsibilities, and factors such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, or geographical location do not influence a person's right to pursue every opportunity in life. A socially inclusive society is built upon a collective sense of belonging and mutual respect. In this context, social inclusion pertains to the process of ensuring that all individuals and

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groups are provided with equal opportunities, access, and the ability to participate fully in society.

II. IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL INCLUSION: INDIAN CONTEXT

Social inclusion holds significant importance in India, given its extensive diversity encompassing caste, religion, language, gender, region, and economic status. It ensures that no one is left behind and that every individual has the opportunity to contribute to and benefit from societal progress. Despite significant sociopolitical shifts over the past 75 years, caste identity still predominates among both individuals and groups. Dalits continue to experience discrimination and violence (Paul and Dowling 2018), while upper castes continued dominance in educational and employment opportunities, pushing Dalits to the margins (Thorat and Newman 2013; Deshpande 2019). According to Mishra's (2024) research on rural-urban migration in India, "vulnerable social groups continue to face stigma, discrimination, and exclusion based on their social identity despite constitutional safeguards against discrimination.". The key matters for social inclusion are explained below:

Poverty Reduction

Since poverty rates are higher among excluded groups (particularly SCs and STs), social inclusion is essential to converting GDP growth into tangible gains in living standards. Although multidimensional poverty in India has greatly decreased, there are still significant caste and religious disparities, with Muslims and Scheduled Tribes (STs) experiencing the highest rates of deprivation. While the India's multidimensional poverty (MPI) rate fell to 19.28% in rural areas and 5.27% in urban areas by 2019-21, STs remain the most disadvantaged, with 44.4% in poverty, followed by SCs (29.2%), OBCs (24.5%), and others (14.9%). Despite India's remarkable progress in reducing poverty, caste and religiously motivated structural inequality still exists (Table 1). The need for focused policies in infrastructure, healthcare, and education is highlighted by the fact that STs continue to be the most disadvantaged group, followed by SCs and Muslims.

Table 1: Multidimensional poverty in India across social groups

Scheduled Tribes (STs)	Highest poverty rates; face geographic isolation, limited access to education, healthcare, and markets.	Poverty reduction has been slow compared to other groups.
Scheduled Castes (SCs)	Significant poverty burden due to social exclusion, discrimination, and limited occupational mobility.	Improvement seen, but disparities remain compared to upper castes.
Other Backward Classes (OBCs)	Moderate poverty levels; better than SCs/STs but worse than upper castes.	Some progress due to affirmative action and economic opportunities.
General/Upper Castes	Lowest poverty rates; benefit from historical advantages in land ownership, education, and employment.	Fastest decline in poverty over the past two decades.
Religious Minorities (Muslims, etc.)	Concentration of poverty in urban areas; issues of discrimination and lack of representation in formal employment.	Poverty reduction slower than among Hindus.

Source: Prepared by the Author, drawn from Arora and Md Zakaria (2025) and Niti Aayog (2024).

Addressing Historical Marginalization

India has a long history of economic, gender, and caste-based exclusion. For marginalized children and other vulnerable groups, exclusion has a serious negative impact on their physical and mental health; inclusive, holistic education and social policies are associated with improved mental and social well-being. Rural workers, particularly those employed in agriculture; experience multiple forms of exclusion in the job market, the financial system, and social interactions, multilevel inclusion policies are essential. Policies promoting social inclusion seek to eliminate these structural obstacles and guarantee equal opportunities.

Reducing Caste-Based Inequality

India has a long history of caste-based discrimination. Social inclusion helps uplift marginalized communities such as: Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs),Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Constitutional safeguards provided by the Government of India aim to ensure equal rights and opportunities for these groups.

Economic Growth and Equity

For underprivileged groups, including women, people with disabilities, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes, inclusive growth guarantees access to jobs, healthcare, and education. Inclusive growth ensures that the benefits of economic development reach all sections of society, including rural populations, urban poor and informal workers.

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Government programmes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act contribute to poverty reduction and livelihood security.

Promoting Gender Equality

Women in India often face discrimination in education, employment, wages, and decision-making. In most regions, women constitute the majority of the lowest paid workers across all sectors, often occupying the most precarious jobs (OXFAM, 2023). Social inclusion promotes gender equality by ensuring that all genders have equal rights, opportunities, and access to resources in society. This strengthens families and contributes to national growth.

Strengthening Democracy

India is the world's largest democracy and true democracy requires that all citizens have a voice. The social inclusion encourages participation of all communities in elections, promotes representation of marginalized groups and builds trust in democratic institutions. This supports the principles of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity in the Indian Constitution.

Social Harmony

By reducing inequalities and discrimination, inclusion fosters unity and reduces social tensions, which is vital in a multicultural society like India. Social inclusion promotes social harmony by creating a society where people from different backgrounds live together peacefully and respectfully.

Educational Transformation

Inclusive education integrates children of all abilities and backgrounds into mainstream schools, promoting empathy, equality, and preparing future citizens for a diverse society.

III. DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL INCLUSION IN INDIA

Social inclusion in India is multi-dimensional, reflecting the country's diversity and historical inequalities. It goes beyond economic participation to encompass social, cultural, political, and digital aspects of life. Here's a structured summary:

Economic Inclusion

- Access to employment opportunities through reservation policies, skill development, and entrepreneurship support.
- Financial inclusion via schemes like Jan Dhan Yojana, microfinance, and rural banking.
- Bridging rural–urban disparities in income and opportunities.

Educational Inclusion

- Universal access to quality education regardless of caste, gender, or disability.
- Inclusive classrooms integrating children with special needs.
- Scholarships and affirmative action for marginalized groups.

Political Inclusion

- Representation of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women in legislatures through reserved seats.
- Participation in local governance via Panchayati Raj institutions.
- Empowering marginalized voices in policymaking.

Social & Cultural Inclusion

- Eradication of caste-based discrimination and untouchability.
- Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.
- Respecting linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity.

Digital Inclusion

- Bridging the digital divide by expanding internet access in rural areas.
- Digital literacy programs to empower disadvantaged communities.
- Ensuring equitable access to e-governance, online education, and healthcare services.

Health Inclusion

- Universal healthcare initiatives like Ayushman Bharat.
- Focus on maternal and child health in rural and marginalized communities.
- Addressing mental health and disability inclusion in healthcare systems.

Legal & Institutional Inclusion

- Constitutional safeguards against discrimination.
- Laws promoting rights of women, minorities, and persons with disabilities.
- Strengthening institutions of justice to ensure equal protection.

CONCLUSION

Social inclusion in India is essential for achieving equality, justice, and sustainable development. In a diverse society shaped by caste, gender, religion, and regional differences, inclusion ensures that every individual has equal opportunities to participate in economic, social, political, and cultural life. Despite progress in poverty reduction, education, and healthcare, structural inequalities continue to marginalize Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women, and religious minorities. Social inclusion empowers marginalized communities, fosters national unity, and fortifies democracy by redressing historical injustices and defending constitutional rights. The dimensions of social inclusion extend beyond economic participation to encompass political, social, cultural, digital, health, and legal spheres. A truly inclusive society is one where diversity is respected, rights are protected, and no individual or group is left behind.

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