

## Understanding Economic Inequality in India: Causes, Consequences, and Potential Solutions - A Mixed-Methods Study

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### Abstract

*This research paper titled aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of economic inequality in India, using a mixed-method approach. The paper draws on quantitative and qualitative data sources to examine trends in income and wealth distribution, and other factors contributing to economic inequality in India. It also explores the historical, social, cultural, and political factors shaping economic inequality in India and potential solutions to address this problem. The paper is structured into six sections, starting with an introduction to the idea of inequality, followed by a discussion on inequality in India, and a detailed description of various aspects of inequality in India across different subsections. The paper also includes a section on factors contributing to economic inequality among socio-religious groups in India. The mixed-method approach employed in this study provides a more nuanced perspective on the problem and potential solutions, making it a valuable contribution to the literature on economic inequality in India.*

**Keyword:** *Identity, India, Inequality, Caste, Religion, Socioreligious group.*

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### **Introduction:**

Inequality has been a persistent problem throughout human history, with some individuals accumulating more resources, power, and influence than others, leading to social hierarchies. Inequality is a fundamental disparity that denies one individual certain material choices while allowing another individual the very same. Economic inequality, in particular, has significant implications for social and economic outcomes, limiting opportunities and undermining social mobility, and creating a vicious cycle of poverty and marginalization. India, a country with a rich cultural heritage and a rapidly growing economy, has been facing significant challenges related to economic inequality, with deep-rooted disparities in wealth, income, and access to resources persisting to this day, despite affirmative action policies designed to address these inequities. This paper aims to study the complex and multifaceted nature of economic inequality in India, its causes, consequences, and potential solutions. This paper employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of economic inequality in India. The quantitative analysis draws on data from various sources, such as the World Inequality Database, National Sample Survey, and Census of India, to examine trends in income and wealth distribution, regional disparities, and other factors contributing to economic inequality in India. The qualitative analysis draws on a range of literature, including academic articles & policy reports, to examine the historical, social, cultural, and political factors shaping economic inequality in India, as well as potential solutions to address this problem. This mixed-method approach allows for a deeper understanding of the complex nature of economic inequality in India and provides a more nuanced perspective on the problem and potential solutions. Rest of the paper is structured as follows: the next section, Section II discusses the idea of inequality, followed

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by a discussion on Inequality in India in Section III. A detailed description of various aspects of inequality in India across different subsections is provided in this section. Section IV details factors contributing to Economic Inequality among socio-religious groups in India. Section V documents some potential solutions to the pervasive issue of economic inequality in India. Section VI concludes

## **Section II: Idea Inequality**

The origin of inequality can be traced back to the earliest days of human history. It is coterminous with civilization. As societies became more complex, some individuals accumulated more resources, power, and influence than others. This led to social hierarchies, where some people had greater access to resources and opportunities than others. Over time, these hierarchies became more entrenched, with some groups enjoying greater privileges and advantages than others. Today, inequality continues to be a persistent and pressing problem.

Inequality is a fundamental disparity that allows one individual certain material choices while denying another individual the very same (McKay, A. 2002). Inequality is defined as a state of not being equal in terms of status, rights, or opportunities (Stilwell, F. 2019). It can manifest in various forms, such as political, social, cultural, religious, or economic inequality. The theoretical background of inequality is mixed, reflecting the complex nature of this phenomenon and the diverse perspectives used to understand it. The academic experience of inequality encompasses a range of perspectives from various disciplines, including sociology, economics, political science, and philosophy. From a sociological perspective, inequality results from social stratification, where individuals and groups are ranked based on their access to resources, power, and social status (Davis & Moore, 1945). Political scientists often focus on the role of power and political institutions in shaping patterns of inequality (Acemoglu & Robinson). Philosophers have explored inequality's ethical and moral dimensions, arguing that it is unjust and violates fundamental principles of fairness and equality (Anderson, 1999). In economics, inequality is often explained in terms of market forces, such as the unequal distribution of wealth and income resulting from differences in skills, education, and opportunities.

Economic inequality, narrowly, means inequality in income or wealth and broadly as inequality in the living conditions of people. Economic inequality is complex and influenced by a wide range of variables, including gender, place of residence, religion, caste, class, race, and the ability of the individuals (Lugo, 2007). The idea of inequality is often viewed as a problem or a challenge for society, as it can lead to social tension, conflict, and injustice. Economic inequalities can limit opportunities and undermine social mobility, creating a vicious cycle of poverty and marginalization (Corak, 2013).

Therefore, studying economic inequality is essential for promoting greater equality and social justice, reducing social tensions improving economic outcomes for all members of society, and building a more stable and prosperous world.

## **Section III: Economic inequality in India**

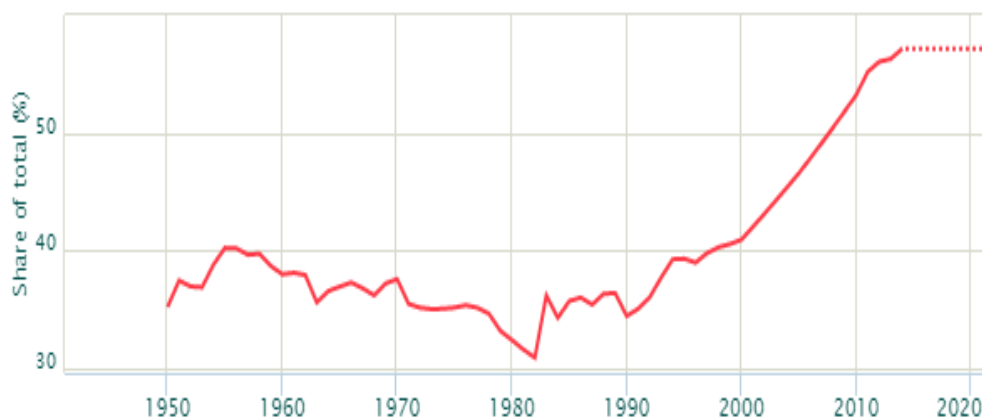
India has a rich cultural heritage and a rapidly growing economy. India's history of colonialism and social stratification has created deep-rooted disparities in wealth, income, and access to resources that persist to this day (Lucas & Thomas, 2017). Despite affirmative action policies designed to address these inequities, many marginalized communities face significant economic and social barriers.

Despite being one of the world's fastest-growing economies, economic inequality has been a persistent issue in India. Although significant progress in development indicators has

been witnessed over the past few decades, India still faces challenges related to income and wealth distribution, with a considerable portion of the population living in poverty and facing the challenges of inequality (Deaton & Dreze, 2002). Economic inequality in India is complex and multifaceted, with factors such as social and cultural barriers, regional disparities, and lack of access to education and healthcare contributing to the problem (Pal & Ghosh, 2007). This has implications for the overall well-being of the country, as well as for its economic growth and stability.

Economic inequality in India has become a topic of significant public debate and concern in recent years. Inequality in India was relatively stable from (the planning period of) the 1980s to the first half of the 1990s, but there has been an increasing trend in Indian inequality (Himanshu, 2019). The market-oriented reforms initiated in 1980's and accelerated in 1990's led to rapid economic growth. However, the benefits of this growth were largely reaped by rich leaving behind the poor (Cain et al., 2010). The rise in the rate of inequality seems to have slowed down since 2004-05 but still shows a rising trend (Himanshu, 2019). Figure 1 clearly shows the steep upward growth of income possessed by the top ten percent of population in India since independence. Similarly top 10% of India's population hold more than 50% of the country's wealth, while the bottom 50% hold only around 10% (WID-2022).

**Figure 1; Share of National Income by top 10% in India**



*Source: World Inequality database*

Economic growth in India has a positive and significant effect on inequality (Chadha & Nandwani, 2019). Inequality in India is driven due to the lack of access to education and job opportunities for large segments of the population. Economic inequality in India results from several other factors like corruption, caste-based politics, ineffective policy implementation and unequal allocation of government resources (Munir & Sultan, 2017). Recently polarisation of political discourse has also substantially contributed to India's growing economic inequality (Motiram & Sarma, 2014). Furthermore, it has been sustained by societal factors like patriarchal standards, marriage-related social norms, and historical reasons like colonialism, land ownership, and the displacement and exploitation of underprivileged populations (Chakravarty, 2015; Zacharias & Vakulabharanam, 2011). This is particularly true for marginalized communities such as ST, SC, Muslims, and women, who often face discrimination and social exclusion (Singh et al., 2019; Thorat & Newman, 2007). Another factor contributing to inequality is the concentration of wealth in a few large corporations and wealthy families, which limits competition and opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises.

The consequences of economic inequality in India are significant. It exacerbates poverty, limits social mobility, and contributes to social unrest and instability (Dev & Ravi, 2007). Moreover, it can undermine economic growth and development by limiting the purchasing power of large sections of the population, reducing demand for goods and services, and limiting investment opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the issue of economic inequality in India, as it has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable segments of the population, including informal workers, migrant workers, and those living in poverty (Arul Actovin & Kumar, 2020). The pandemic has resulted in job losses, reduced incomes, and increased food insecurity for many people, exacerbating existing inequalities (Bhalla et al., 2022). Addressing economic inequality is a deep-rooted challenge. This requires a concerted effort from policymakers, civil society organizations, and the private sector to promote inclusive growth and development, reduce disparities, and ensure that all segments of society can participate in and benefit from India's economic progress. Efforts to address economic inequality in India have included initiatives such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which provides employment opportunities and social protection for rural workers. Also various affirmative action programs aimed at promoting greater representation of marginalized communities in education and employment are initiated. Despite these measures, progress has been slow, and more needs to be done to tackle the root causes of inequality and promote inclusive growth and development.

### **Inequality and Social Identity**

Identity influences economic outcomes in various ways, such as discrimination and bias in the workplace or market or access to resources and opportunities. It also plays an essential role in determining levels of inequality (Jetten et al., 2017). Economic literature defines identity as a set of characteristics, beliefs, and values that define an individual or group. These characteristics include race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, and personal traits such as personality, preferences, and attitudes (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000). Identity, in economics, is often studied in relation to how it affects economic behaviour, such as how individuals choose to invest their money, which jobs they pursue, and how they interact with others in the market. Identity in the Indian context can be defined in various ways based on factors such as caste, religion, language, region, and ethnicity. Therefore, Individuals from particular racial or ethnic groups may face discrimination, which limit their economic opportunities and outcomes.

Inequality and social identity are closely intertwined concepts. Social identity refers to individuals categorizing themselves and others based on shared characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and social class (Hogg, 2003). These shared characteristics form the basis of social groups and can significantly impact individual experiences and opportunities (Hoff & Pandey, 2006). Inequality, on the other hand, refers to the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities within a society. This can take many forms, including economic inequality, educational inequality, and healthcare inequality. Social identity and inequality intersect in several ways (Afridi et al., 2015). Individuals belonging to certain social groups may be more likely to experience discrimination and prejudice, leading to unequal treatment and limited access to resources and opportunities (Schmitt et al., 2003). This further creates a cycle of inequality that is difficult to break out of. In addition, social identity can impact how individuals perceive and respond to inequality. For example, members of a privileged group may be less likely to recognize or acknowledge the existence of inequality.

In contrast, members of marginalized groups may be more likely to experience and be impacted by it. This can create barriers to effective communication and collaboration across

social groups. Understanding the complex interplay between social identity and inequality is crucial for addressing social and economic disparities and creating a more just and equitable society.

The relationship between inequality and social identity is deeply rooted in literature. Various researchers have provided different perspectives on the linkages between social identity and inequality. According to social identity theory, identity shapes the perception of individuals to adopt social choices due to this social categorization results into discrimination and inequality (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Whereas according to Putnam explores complex factors like identity and cultural differences and their role in shaping the persistent inequality (Putnam, 1993). Another study by Rothenberg in US has provided a comprehensive overview of how social identity intersects with inequality in the United States, including topics such as education, criminal justice, and healthcare (Rothenberg, 2004). Similarly the concept of intersectionality by Kimberle highlights how individuals can experience multiple forms of oppression and discrimination based on their intersecting social identities, and how this can compound inequality (Crenshaw, 2017). Inequality is harmful not just for the disadvantaged, but for society as a whole, and argues for policies that promote greater equality (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2010). There both systematic and structural determinants that shapes the level on inequality based on identity. It is further associated with criminal justice and political choices which perpetuate inequality and oppression among the vulnerable social groups (Alexander, 2011). To sum up, the above literature clearly highlights the complex ways in which social identity and inequality are intertwined, and the importance of addressing both in order to create a more just and equitable society. These studies also clearly illustrate the complex and multifaceted nature of the relationship between social identity and inequality, and the importance of addressing these issues from a variety of angles and perspectives.

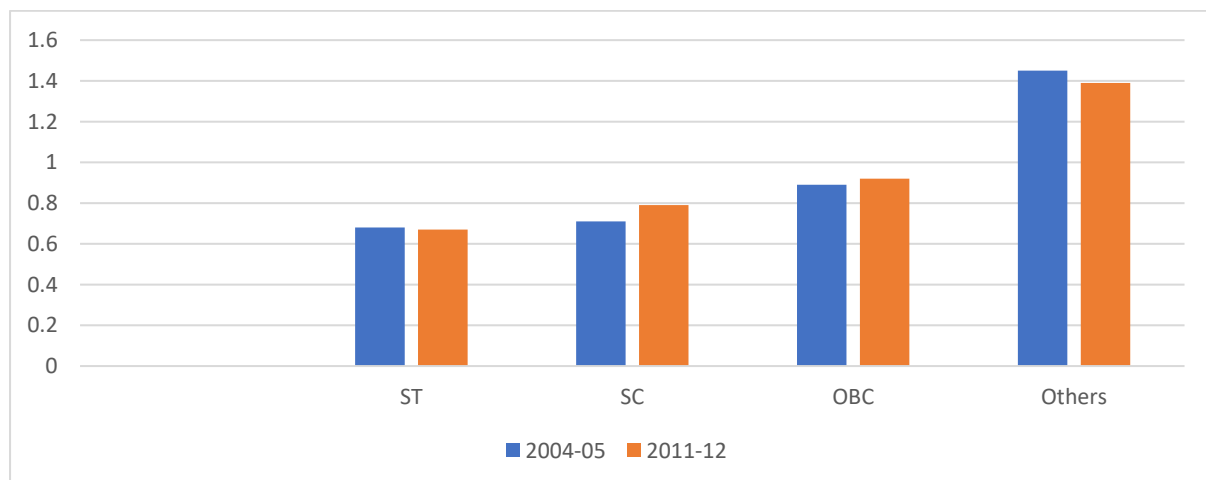
### **Economic Inequality and Religious identity**

Economic inequality and religion are also interrelated, and the relationship can be complex. Religious beliefs and practices can influence attitudes towards wealth, poverty, and inequality, as well as how economic systems are structured and operated. While many religious traditions have teachings that emphasize the importance of helping the poor and vulnerable and call for economic systems that are just and equitable. But some equally contribute to inequality as well like individualism, self-reliance, and the accumulation of wealth, which can lead to a culture that values material success above all else. Studies across countries have studied in detail the linkages between inequality and religious identity. Religious beliefs and practices can either reinforce or challenge economic inequality thus shaping the attitudes towards economic inequality (Beyerlein & Ryan, 2018). Similarly another study have examined the role of religious extremism in determining economic inequality by emphasizing that religious extremism creates a culture that values material success and perpetuates discriminatory practices against marginalized groups (Iannaccone & Berman, 2006). Economic policies and structures are critical to economic inequality since they are shaped by religious beliefs and practices thus affecting the inequality levels of minority religious groups across countries (Elgin et al., 2013). Religious beliefs and practices can either reinforce or challenge economic inequality at both individual and societal levels. Research has shown that inequality among religious groups can vary widely depending on the context and can be influenced by factors such as historical and cultural factors, government policies, and demographic changes (Fairbrother, 2013; McCarty & Pontusson, 2011). Thus, understanding the causes and consequences of inequality among religious groups is important for addressing issues of social justice and promoting greater equality and inclusion.

## **Inequality and socio religious groups in India**

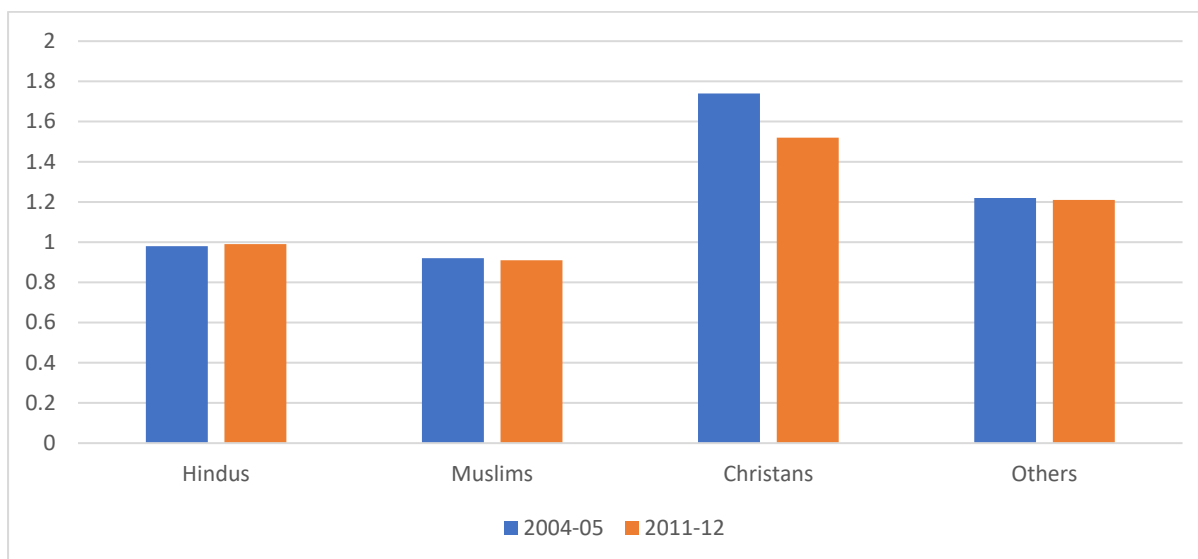
Socio-religious inequality in India is a complex and longstanding issue that has roots in the country's history and social structures. India is a diverse country with many different religions and religious traditions, including Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, and Buddhism, among others. However, some religious groups have historically been marginalized and faced discrimination in various forms, including economic, social, and political inequality (Mehta & Shree, 2017). Indian caste system is one of the prime examples of socio-religious inequality, which is a social structure that assigns individuals to different social classes based on their birth (Borooah, 2005; Kumar, 2014). The caste system has been a prominent feature of Indian society for centuries and has historically been associated with Hinduism. Members of lower castes have traditionally faced discrimination and exclusion in various areas of life, including education, employment, and access to basic services such as healthcare (Borooah, 2010; Borooah et al., 2014). Another growing aspect of socio-religious inequality in India is religious violence and communalism, which refers to tensions or conflicts between different religious groups. India has experienced several incidents of religious violence and communalism in recent decades, particularly between Hindus and Muslims. These conflicts can exacerbate existing inequalities and contribute to a sense of division and mistrust among different religious communities (Bulutgil & Prasad, 2022; Mander, 2015). There is a substantial body of empirical evidence on socio-religious inequality in India, with many studies highlighting the extent and persistence of inequalities across various dimensions of social life. Research has shown that members of certain religious groups, such as Muslims and Dalits (formerly known as "untouchables"), face significant economic disadvantages compared to other groups in India (Thorat & Attewell, 2007; Waughray, 2010). As per the Sachar Committee report Muslims in India have lower levels of education, higher rates of poverty, and lower representation in government and other key institutions than Hindus (Basant & Shariff, 2010). Another study has found that Muslims and Dalits were more likely than other groups to experience discrimination in areas such as education, employment, and housing (CES, 2018). Research has also shown that certain religious groups are underrepresented in Indian politics. A report by the Association for Democratic Reforms found that Muslims make up only 3.7% of members of parliament in India, despite comprising around 14% of the population (ADR, 2018). Fig 2 shows the share of income over share of population by different social groups in India.

**Fig 2; Income share by social groups in India (IHDS1 &II)**



*Source; Authors computation from (Bharti., 2018)*

**Fig 3; Income by population share among religious groups in India (IHDS-I &II)**



*Source; Authors computation from (Bharti., 2018)*

In India, inequality among socio-religious groups is deeply ingrained in the social fabric and has existed for centuries. India is a highly diverse country, with various ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups, each with its own unique cultural and historical background. The caste system, a hierarchical social system, and religion are one of the main sources of inequality in India. The causes of inequality among socio-religious groups are complex and multifaceted. Historical factors, such as colonialism and slavery, have contributed to the marginalization of certain groups (Rahman et al., 2018). Economic factors, such as poverty and inequality, also play a significant role, with marginalized communities often lacking access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Cultural and social factors, such as prejudice and stereotypes, also contribute to the perpetuation of inequality and discrimination.

India has a long history of caste and religion-based discrimination, which has significantly impacted the country's social, economic, and political relations. The caste system, deeply rooted in Hinduism, has historically divided Indian society into a hierarchical system of social classes (Sharma, 2019). Individuals from lower castes face significant discrimination and barriers to upward mobility. Similarly, religious discrimination has been a persistent issue in India, with violence and persecution often directed towards minority religious groups such as Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs. These divisions are further compounded by the intersection of caste and religion, which can create additional barriers to social and economic mobility for members of marginalized communities (Prakash, 2010).

The impact of caste and religion-based discrimination can be seen in various areas, including access to education, employment, healthcare, and political representation. Individuals from lower castes and minority religious groups often face significant barriers to accessing these resources, limiting their opportunities for upward mobility, and perpetuating a cycle of poverty and marginalization (Borooah & Iyer, 2002).

The consequences of inequality among socio-religious groups are profound and far-reaching. Marginalized communities often face limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, leading to lower levels of economic and social mobility. Discrimination and marginalization can also lead to social exclusion, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and marginalization (Tagade et al., 2018). Furthermore, discrimination and prejudice

can lead to social unrest and conflict, exacerbating existing inequalities and threatening social stability.

#### **Section IV**

##### **Factors contributing to Economic Inequality among socio-religious groups**

Economic inequality among socio-religious groups in India is due to various factors ranging from historical to present day denial of public good services. This historical marginalization of certain groups and barriers to economic mobility of such groups has contributed to the perpetuation of economic inequality in India (Thorat & Attewell, 2007). Education, a crucial factor in determining economic mobility, is often limited for socio-religious groups in India. Marginalized groups often lack access to quality education, with high dropout rates and low levels of literacy (Zajda et al., 2006). This in turn limits their economic opportunities and perpetuates economic inequality. Discrimination in the labor market is also a significant contributor to economic inequality among socio-religious groups in India. Marginalized groups have limited access to formal sector jobs, and often relegated to informal and low-paying jobs (Madheswaran & Attewell, 2007). Discrimination in hiring and promotion practices perpetuates the cycle of economic inequality. Land ownership is a critical factor in determining economic power and mobility, and historically marginalized groups have faced significant barriers to land ownership (Carter, 2004).

##### **Role of caste**

This caste system has been used to justify discrimination and exclusion of certain groups from economic opportunities. Historically, people from lower castes were restricted from accessing education, property ownership, and certain occupations, which resulted in lower incomes and limited economic opportunities. They were also subjected to various forms of exploitation, including forced labor and low wages. The impact of caste on economic inequality can still be seen today, even though the Indian Constitution abolished caste-based discrimination and ensured equal opportunities for all citizens. There are still many social and economic barriers that prevent people from lower castes from achieving upward mobility and accessing better education, jobs, and resources. Caste discrimination affects access to credit and financial services, which further limits economic opportunities for people from lower castes. Additionally, many people from lower castes work in low-paying and informal sectors, which offer limited job security and benefits. Overall, the role of caste in determining economic inequality in India is significant and requires ongoing efforts to address the structural barriers that perpetuate caste-based discrimination and exclusion. It is essential to promote policies and programs that ensure equal access to education, employment, and financial services for all citizens, regardless of their caste.

##### **Role of religion**

Religion plays a significant role in determining economic inequality in India. Religious identity impacts economic opportunities. The Indian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, in practice. Religion affects economic inequality through discrimination in the workplace. Some employers prefer to hire employees of a certain religion or caste, leading to limited job opportunities for people of other religions or castes. Also, people from certain religions face social stigma, making it harder for them to access education and other public services. Religion impacts economic inequality through access to resources and opportunities. Some religious groups have better access to networks and resources that can help them advance economically. Additionally, certain religious communities have a stronger presence in certain sectors of the economy, which gives them an advantage in accessing economic opportunities. To address the role of religion in



economic inequality, it is important to promote policies and programs that ensure equal access to education, employment, and other resources for all citizens, regardless of their religious background. Additionally, there should be efforts to combat discrimination and stigma based on religious identity in the workplace and other areas of society. However, it is important to note that religion is not the only factor that determines economic inequality in India. Other factors such as education, social class, and geographic location also play a significant role in shaping economic opportunities.

## **Section V**

### **Potential Solutions**

Socio-religious inequality is a pervasive issue in India, where caste and religious identities often determine access to resources and opportunities. To address this complex problem, a multi-faceted approach is required.

One potential solution is to increase access to education and job opportunities for marginalized communities. This can be achieved through targeted government policies, such as affirmative action programs, as well as through private initiatives, such as scholarships and job training programs. By providing marginalized groups with the skills and resources they need to succeed, we can help level the playing field and reduce socio-religious inequality.

Another important solution is to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding. This can be done through community-based initiatives, such as interfaith gatherings and dialogues, as well as through educational programs that teach young people about the importance of respecting diversity and valuing all people, regardless of their religious or caste backgrounds.

Strengthening laws and enforcement mechanisms against discrimination is also crucial. India has a number of laws in place to protect marginalized communities, but enforcement can be weak or non-existent. By strengthening these laws and ensuring that they are properly enforced, we can send a clear message that discrimination will not be tolerated.

Finally, it is important to address the underlying cultural and societal attitudes that perpetuate inequality. This can be done through awareness-raising campaigns and initiatives that challenge harmful stereotypes and promote more inclusive attitudes. By changing the way people think and talk about caste and religion, we can help create a more just and equitable society for all.

## **Section VI**

### **Conclusion**

Socio-religious inequality is a complex and longstanding issue in India that affects many aspects of social life, including economic, social, and political dimensions. While there have been some legal and policy reforms, as well as social and cultural initiatives aimed at promoting greater equality and understanding among different religious groups, progress has been slow and uneven. Empirical evidence suggests that members of certain religious groups, such as Muslims and Dalits, face significant disadvantages and discrimination compared to other groups in India. Addressing socio-religious inequality will require sustained efforts from government, civil society, and individuals to promote greater inclusion, tolerance, and equality for all individuals, regardless of their religious background. Overall, addressing socio-religious inequality in India is a complex and ongoing process that requires sustained efforts from all levels of society. By promoting greater inclusion, tolerance, and equality, India can build a more just and equitable society for all its citizens.

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