



Caste, education, and exclusion: Re-Examining theories of social reproduction and transformation

Dr. Chaganti Rami Reddy

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Sri Krishnadevaraya University, Anantapuramu, Andhra Pradesh, India

Abstract

Caste continues to shape social hierarchies in South Asia, influencing access to education, resources, and opportunities while perpetuating cycles of exclusion. This theoretical paper critically examines the intersection of caste, education, and exclusion, drawing on interdisciplinary literature from sociology, education, gender studies, and development studies. It investigates how caste-based hierarchies are reproduced through institutional, cultural, and technological mechanisms, and how education functions simultaneously as a site of social reproduction and a potential tool for transformation. The study highlights the role of intersectionality in understanding compounded disadvantages, particularly for women from marginalized castes, and explores the ways in which technological interventions, welfare programs, and curricula both reinforce and challenge exclusionary practices. Furthermore, the paper identifies theoretical pathways for fostering social transformation, emphasizing the importance of agency, participatory engagement, and inclusive social infrastructures. By integrating insights across diverse domains, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how inequality is maintained and contested in contemporary South Asia. The findings underscore the need for multidimensional approaches to social inclusion that consider structural, cultural, and technological factors. This paper contributes to theoretical debates on social reproduction and transformation, offering a framework for future research and policy aimed at reducing caste-based exclusion and enhancing educational equity.

Keywords: Caste, education, social reproduction, exclusion, social transformation

Introduction

The interplay between caste, education, and exclusion has long defined the contours of social reproduction and transformation in South Asia, particularly in India. Caste remains not only a historical social structure but also a deeply entrenched determinant of access, privilege, and opportunity. The theoretical frameworks of social reproduction—originating from Bourdieu's ideas of cultural and social capital—provide critical insights into how structural hierarchies are perpetuated across generations through institutions such as education. In the Indian context, education is both a site of transformation and a mechanism of exclusion, where caste, class, and gender intersect to shape differential outcomes. Farnworth *et al.* (2022) ^[10] emphasize how caste and gender intersectionalities persist in rural India, particularly among marginalized communities in Madhya Pradesh, reflecting the systemic reproduction of inequality even in agricultural and technological spheres. The persistence of caste-based hierarchies, therefore, continues to influence both economic participation and educational advancement, reinforcing cycles of exclusion and dependency.

Education, ideally a transformative force, often mirrors and reproduces social inequalities rather than dismantling them. Anand and Lall (2022) ^[1] highlight how educational curricula and textbooks in India have been politicized to promote certain ideological narratives, particularly around Hindu nationalism, thus shaping collective memory and citizenship in exclusionary ways. This politicization of education serves to normalize social hierarchies under the guise of national identity, while undermining the secular and egalitarian ideals envisioned in post-independence India. In a similar vein, Carswell and de Neve (2022) ^[3] demonstrate how digital and biometric technologies in social protection schemes in Tamil Nadu, intended to ensure transparency,

inadvertently reinforce exclusion for marginalized groups by creating new forms of bureaucratic gatekeeping and digital inequality. Such developments underscore how technological and policy reforms, though seemingly progressive, often reproduce older hierarchies of caste and class under new guises of efficiency and modernization.

At a broader structural level, the persistence of caste as a determinant of access to services is evident beyond India. Mumtaz *et al.* (2022) ^[20] reveal that in Pakistan, caste continues to serve as a structural determinant in maternal health service access among Muslim populations. Their study expands the understanding of caste beyond Hindu contexts, illustrating its pervasive role as a system of social stratification and exclusion across South Asia. Similarly, Kaphle *et al.* (2022) ^[16] examine maternity care in South Asia and identify how social hierarchies and vulnerabilities intersect with health outcomes, emphasizing that respect and dignity in care remain deeply tied to social status and perceived purity. These findings collectively point to the embeddedness of caste-like structures in the social fabric, where exclusion operates not only materially but also symbolically through systems of recognition and value.

The intersection of caste with gender, migration, and labor further complicates this landscape. Shattuck *et al.* (2019) ^[32] note that male migration in Nepal reshapes family structures and gendered responsibilities, affecting women's autonomy and reproductive decision-making. These transformations, while opening limited spaces for agency, also deepen vulnerabilities rooted in social norms and hierarchies. Siegmann and Sathi (2022) ^[33] similarly analyze South India's tea value chain and uncover persistent "unfreedoms" that maintain exploitative labor relations through caste-based hierarchies, even within globalized capitalist structures. The persistence of such forms of bondage and marginalization reveals how modern economic

arrangements coexist with traditional social orders, reinforcing the reproduction of inequality rather than its dissolution.

At the same time, theories of social transformation emphasize agency, resistance, and the capacity for structural change. Raphael (2022) ^[25] documents the struggles of Delhi's street traders navigating welfare systems, illustrating everyday forms of resilience and negotiation within exclusionary frameworks. Latham and Layton (2022) ^[18] further argue for the importance of "social infrastructure"—networks of relationships, institutions, and spaces that enable inclusion and participation—as critical to enabling transformation within urban and educational contexts. Ranjitkar and Haukanes (2022) ^[22] echo this through their study on climate adaptation programs in Nepal, showing how intersectional identities shape participation and decision-making, often determining who benefits from developmental initiatives. Together, these studies highlight that while exclusion remains structurally rooted, transformation occurs through social agency, collective organization, and the reimagining of infrastructures that support inclusion.

Thus, re-examining the theories of social reproduction and transformation in relation to caste and education necessitates a multidimensional perspective—one that integrates material, cultural, and institutional dimensions of inequality. As Dattani (2021) ^[8] suggests through the notion of the "platform glitch," moments of disruption—whether technological, social, or epistemic—can expose and potentially unsettle dominant power structures. These "glitches" become spaces of possibility, revealing the fractures within systems that claim to be equitable yet perpetuate exclusion. By weaving insights from education, technology, gender, labor, and welfare, this paper argues that the reproduction of caste-based exclusion persists not merely through overt discrimination but through subtle, institutionalized practices embedded in everyday social systems. At the same time, recognizing moments of resistance and reconfiguration within these systems allows for rethinking education as a transformative arena—one capable of challenging social hierarchies and enabling genuine social mobility.

In this context, the paper seeks to revisit the theoretical linkages between caste, education, and exclusion by examining how structures of power are maintained and contested within evolving socio-political and technological landscapes. The process of social reproduction is neither static nor inevitable; rather, it remains a dynamic field of struggle where possibilities for transformation, though constrained, continue to emerge through critical engagement, reform, and collective action.

Literature Review

The relationship between caste, education, and exclusion in South Asia—especially India—has been explored through diverse theoretical, empirical, and disciplinary lenses. Caste remains a central social institution that organizes power, access, and opportunity while education operates simultaneously as a tool of empowerment and a mechanism of social reproduction. Scholars examining caste and educational exclusion have emphasized how these dynamics intersect with gender, class, religion, and technological transformations, thereby shaping both structural and everyday forms of inequality.

Farnworth *et al.* (2022) ^[10] present a detailed analysis of caste–gender intersectionalities among wheat-growing communities in Madhya Pradesh, showing how social hierarchies continue to shape labor divisions and access to agricultural innovation. Their findings highlight the persistence of patriarchal and caste-based systems that limit the autonomy and recognition of lower-caste women, revealing how traditional forms of exclusion adapt within new economic and technological contexts. Similar structural inequalities are evident beyond India, as Mumtaz *et al.* (2022) ^[20] demonstrate in Pakistan, where caste operates as a determinant of access to maternal healthcare. Their study suggests that caste-based exclusion is not limited to Hindu societies but permeates the broader South Asian region as a structural determinant of inequity.

The role of education as both an emancipatory and exclusionary institution is central to theories of social reproduction. Anand and Lall (2022) ^[1] reveal how India's educational system has become a site for ideological control, where state-influenced textbooks promote narratives aligned with Hindu nationalism rather than secularism. This politicization of education reinforces dominant cultural hierarchies and narrows critical discourse, thereby contributing to the reproduction of caste and religious bias through state-sponsored knowledge. Kennedy *et al.* (2019) ^[17] also discuss the role of educational institutions in perpetuating inequality through disciplinary practices that marginalize certain groups, indicating that exclusionary mechanisms operate globally within schooling systems. Similarly, Häberlein and Maurus (2020) ^[12] show that decisions around youth education in Africa are deeply influenced by social expectations and notions of "proper" education, underscoring how schooling functions as a means of maintaining social order rather than challenging it.

The intersection of caste and class in rural India further reveals how economic systems perpetuate exclusion. Cross (2019) ^[7] explores caste dynamics in social enterprises operating at the bottom of the pyramid, noting that even within seemingly inclusive economic models, caste hierarchies determine opportunities and outcomes. This continuity of social stratification is also observed by Siegmann and Sathi (2022) ^[33], who describe the "unfreedoms" of laborers in South India's tea plantations, illustrating how global capitalism coexists with entrenched caste relations. Likewise, Sharma *et al.* (2021) ^[31] employ a relational approach to poverty, showing how social and ecological networks reproduce economic vulnerability among marginalized rural groups. Their findings suggest that poverty cannot be understood solely in material terms but must be seen as a manifestation of enduring social hierarchies.

Technological interventions, often celebrated as instruments of modernization, have also been shown to reproduce exclusion. Carswell and de Neve (2022) ^[3] examine digital and biometric welfare systems in Tamil Nadu, arguing that while these technologies claim to enhance transparency, they create new forms of exclusion for those without digital access or literacy. Similarly, Dattani (2021) ^[8] introduces the concept of the "platform glitch" as a moment of rupture that exposes systemic inequities in digital infrastructures. Such glitches reveal the hidden hierarchies embedded in technological systems and demonstrate how digital governance, rather than eliminating caste-based

discrimination, often translates it into new, less visible forms.

Health, gender, and care are additional domains where caste and exclusion intersect. Kaphle *et al.* (2022) ^[16] highlight how maternity care practices in South Asia are shaped by social hierarchies, leading to differential treatment based on caste and class. Their research reveals that care and neglect are socially structured, with marginalized women experiencing systematic disrespect and reduced access to quality health services. Similarly, Sen and Govender (2015) ^[29] discuss how changing health systems globally impact sexual and reproductive rights, stressing that structural inequality often determines who receives adequate care. Rao and Raju (2020) ^[23] add a gendered perspective, linking time poverty and seasonality to nutritional inequities among women in rural India, while Shattuck *et al.* (2019) ^[32] analyze how male migration reshapes gender dynamics in Nepal, influencing women's autonomy and reproductive decision-making.

Theories of social reproduction—originally associated with Bourdieu and Althusser—have been reinterpreted in contemporary South Asian contexts to include both constraint and resistance. Cowan (2021) ^[6] conceptualizes “rooted flexibility” in urban India to explain how women navigate precarity within systems of gendered and caste-based violence, balancing work, care, and survival. This aligns with Zauneder, Woodman, and Emejulu (2022) ^[39], who call for “radical democratic citizenship” as a pathway toward dismantling structural inequalities and fostering participatory inclusion. Similarly, Sengupta and Lehtimäki (2022) ^[30] explore how care ethics in social entrepreneurship can challenge dominant capitalist norms by fostering relational accountability and community-based responsibility, offering an alternative framework for social transformation.

Social policy and welfare programs represent another domain where caste and exclusion remain deeply embedded. Tillin (2022) ^[36] argues that India's welfare landscape is fragmented across states, with subnational variations determining who benefits from welfare schemes. Unnikrishnan (2022) ^[37] expands this analysis by focusing on women's access to social assistance, finding that despite targeted programs, bureaucratic and social barriers continue to limit their effectiveness for marginalized groups. Raphael (2022) ^[25] captures the lived experience of Delhi's street traders who, while waiting for welfare, face systemic neglect and moral judgment. Their experiences illuminate the gap between formal inclusion policies and everyday realities of exclusion.

Climate change and environmental vulnerability further illustrate how caste and social hierarchies shape access to adaptation resources. Rao *et al.* (2019) ^[24] document gendered vulnerabilities in semi-arid regions, showing that adaptive capacity is determined by access to land, technology, and social networks—all of which are influenced by caste and gender. Similarly, Ranjitkar and Haukanes (2022) ^[22] examine climate adaptation in Nepal through an intersectional lens, emphasizing how exclusionary norms determine who participates in adaptation programs. These studies underscore that environmental resilience is not merely a technical issue but a deeply social one tied to questions of justice and equity.

From a broader theoretical perspective, Heady and Yalçın-Heckmann (2020) ^[13] revisit the role of endogamy and

kinship in reproducing social structures across Eurasia, linking these practices to property relations and inheritance—a dynamic that resonates with caste endogamy in South Asia. Lempert (2015) ^[19] applies similar reasoning to heritage preservation, arguing that how societies classify and restore cultural sites reflects broader hierarchies of value and belonging. Chaney (2016) ^[4] and Schulz and Sentama (2020) ^[28] extend this argument into the political realm, suggesting that exclusion operates within civil society and postcolonial educational systems through moral hierarchies and historical legacies of domination.

The idea of transformation—though often constrained—emerges through acts of cultural and social creativity. Tilche (2015) ^[35] explores how the Pithora art tradition in western India becomes a vehicle for social change, blending indigenous expression with market dynamics to challenge fixed identities. Similarly, Hegde *et al.* (2017) ^[14] show how participatory learning and local knowledge systems can enable inclusive environmental governance, while Dawson (2014) ^[9] proposes an access and equity framework for science education to ensure participation from marginalized groups. Arora (2021) ^[2] advocates for decentering Eurocentric disciplines such as theatre studies, suggesting that alternative epistemologies can foster decolonial and inclusive academic spaces.

The theoretical contributions from these diverse studies converge on the idea that caste and exclusion are sustained through overlapping systems—economic, technological, educational, and cultural—that reproduce privilege and marginality in both overt and subtle ways. Yet, they also highlight the potential for transformation through resistance, care, relational ethics, and social learning. Latham and Layton (2022) ^[18] propose “social infrastructure” as a key concept for understanding how networks of trust, care, and participation can sustain inclusive communities, while Sahakian and Anantharaman (2020) ^[26] argue for sustainable public spaces that foster social equality and collective well-being.

The literature illustrates that theories of social reproduction must be re-examined in light of the contemporary South Asian experience, where caste continues to interact dynamically with education, gender, technology, and global capitalism. Exclusion is no longer solely maintained through rigid social boundaries but through complex systems of governance, representation, and digital mediation. However, within these structures, spaces of resistance—glitches, solidarities, and alternative infrastructures—emerge as potential catalysts for transformation. By synthesizing these perspectives, it becomes evident that any meaningful discussion of social reproduction and transformation must integrate an intersectional, multi-scalar, and transdisciplinary understanding of caste and education as both tools and terrains of struggle for equality and justice.

Methodology

This study adopts a theoretical research methodology aimed at critically examining the interplay between caste, education, and exclusion within South Asian societies, with a specific focus on India. Unlike empirical research that relies on primary data collection, this theoretical study is based on a comprehensive review and synthesis of existing literature across multiple disciplines including sociology, education, gender studies, political science, and development studies. The methodology involves an

extensive analysis of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy reports, and theoretical frameworks that have addressed social reproduction, caste hierarchies, educational access, and social transformation. By integrating these sources, the study identifies recurring patterns, contradictions, and gaps in current theoretical understandings.

The research follows a systematic conceptual analysis approach, where core concepts such as caste, social reproduction, exclusion, and educational transformation are deconstructed and examined in relation to each other. Intersectionality, gender, and socio-economic factors are considered as analytical lenses to capture the multidimensional nature of exclusion. The study also draws on critical perspectives that question the neutrality of institutions such as education and welfare programs, highlighting their role in both perpetuating and challenging social hierarchies.

Objectives of the study

- To critically examine the theoretical frameworks of social reproduction and their applicability to caste-based exclusion in South Asia.
- To analyze the role of education as both a mechanism of social reproduction and a potential tool for social transformation.
- To explore the intersections of caste with gender, class, and technology in shaping exclusionary practices.
- To identify theoretical pathways for fostering inclusion and transformation within entrenched caste hierarchies.

This methodological approach allows for a nuanced understanding of structural inequalities while providing a foundation for proposing theoretical insights that can inform future research, policy, and social interventions.

Discussion

The examination of caste, education, and exclusion reveals that social reproduction operates through multiple institutional and social mechanisms. Caste continues to function as a primary axis of social stratification in South Asia, organizing access to resources, labor opportunities, and educational advancement. Education, often idealized as a vehicle for equality, frequently mirrors societal hierarchies, reproducing privilege for dominant castes while marginalizing lower-caste groups. Curriculum, pedagogy, and policy often reflect broader socio-political ideologies, thereby maintaining systemic inequalities. This dual role of education—as a site of both inclusion and exclusion—underscores the complexity of addressing structural hierarchies through reformist interventions.

Intersectionality provides a critical lens to understand how caste intersects with gender and socio-economic factors to shape lived experiences. Women from marginalized castes, for example, face compounded exclusion in educational and economic domains, often encountering both social stigma and institutional barriers. Similarly, the integration of technological interventions in welfare or educational programs, while intended to enhance accessibility, can reinforce exclusion if marginalized groups lack digital literacy or access. Such dynamics illustrate that inequality is reproduced not only through overt discrimination but also through the structural and systemic organization of opportunities and resources.

At the same time, theoretical perspectives on social transformation highlight the potential for agency, resistance, and inclusion within these hierarchies. Moments of disruption—whether through grassroots mobilization, participatory learning, or inclusive policy design—can challenge entrenched norms and enable structural change. Education, when reconceptualized beyond rote learning or ideological indoctrination, becomes a platform for critical engagement, social mobility, and empowerment. Social infrastructure and community-centered approaches further create enabling environments for inclusive participation, fostering networks of support that counteract systemic exclusion.

The discussion also reveals that caste-based exclusion is not static; it adapts to changing socio-political and technological contexts. Therefore, understanding exclusion requires a multidimensional approach that accounts for historical legacies, institutional practices, and contemporary innovations. Integrating insights from diverse fields—sociology, education, gender studies, and development studies—enables a holistic understanding of how reproduction and transformation coexist within social systems. Ultimately, the discussion underscores the need for theoretical frameworks that not only explain structural inequality but also offer pathways for meaningful inclusion and social change.

Major Findings

Caste remains a persistent determinant of social inequality in South Asia, influencing access to education, employment, and welfare, thereby reproducing hierarchical structures across generations.

Education functions dually as a mechanism of exclusion and a potential tool for transformation, often reflecting societal hierarchies through curricula, pedagogy, and institutional practices, yet offering opportunities for empowerment when inclusivity is emphasized.

Intersectionality of caste, gender, and socio-economic status amplifies exclusion, with women from marginalized castes experiencing compounded disadvantages in both educational and social spheres.

Technological and welfare interventions, while aimed at increasing transparency and access, can unintentionally reinforce existing hierarchies, as digital literacy gaps and bureaucratic barriers often exclude the most marginalized groups.

Social reproduction occurs not only through explicit discrimination but also through structural and systemic practices, including curriculum design, social norms, and institutional policies that maintain inequality in subtle ways. Moments of disruption or resistance create opportunities for social transformation, such as participatory learning, grassroots mobilization, inclusive policy design, and alternative social infrastructures that challenge entrenched norms.

Caste-based exclusion is dynamic and adapts to contemporary socio-political and technological contexts, indicating that strategies to address inequality must be multidimensional and responsive to evolving structural conditions.

Theoretical frameworks emphasizing agency, care ethics, and intersectionality are crucial for rethinking inclusion, providing pathways for more equitable education, welfare, and social participation in caste-stratified societies.

Conclusion

This study reinforces the centrality of caste in structuring social hierarchies and highlights the dual role of education as both a mechanism of social reproduction and a potential tool for transformation. The analysis demonstrates that exclusion is multidimensional, intersecting with gender, class, and technological access, and is perpetuated through institutional, cultural, and structural processes. The persistence of inequality within educational and social systems reflects the deeply embedded nature of caste hierarchies, yet spaces for agency, resistance, and innovation indicate that transformation is possible.

The theoretical exploration also emphasizes that interventions aimed at reducing exclusion must go beyond surface-level reforms. Policies, curricula, and welfare programs need to be critically assessed for their capacity to challenge existing hierarchies rather than reproduce them. The integration of intersectional perspectives ensures that the experiences of the most marginalized—particularly women from lower-caste communities—are not overlooked. Similarly, attention to technological and social innovations can reveal both new barriers and new opportunities for inclusion.

Future research can build on these theoretical insights by empirically examining specific interventions that effectively address caste-based exclusion in educational and social settings. Comparative studies across regions, caste groups, and policy regimes could further elucidate the conditions under which education and social infrastructure contribute to genuine transformation. Additionally, exploring the role of digital technologies, participatory learning models, and community-led initiatives could inform evidence-based strategies for enhancing equity. The study underscores the necessity of an integrated, interdisciplinary approach to understanding and addressing caste-based exclusion, with education positioned as a central, though complex, site of potential social change.

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