

THEME 02:
INTERACTIONS AND INTERSECTIONS
BETWEEN CASTE, CLASS AND GENDER
INEQUALITIES IN SOUTH ASIA

Caste, Class, and Gender: Intersecting Inequalities

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South Asia, in general, and India, in particular, has been home to multiple forms of inequality, the main among these being based on caste, class, and gender. The essence of these forms of inequality is the hierarchical distribution of the population into identifiable groups and the hierarchical relations among individuals belonging to different groups. The hierarchical distribution of the population may be across the country or in specific geographical locales like villages or urban centres. However, the hierarchical relations between individuals belonging to different groups are, by and large, specific to geographical locales or socio-economic contexts.

It is, no doubt, possible to analyse the nature and dynamics of these different forms of inequality in isolation of each other. However, the understanding resulting from such an analysis would be one-sided and inadequate theoretically and infructuous for policy formulation. This is so because, in reality, these forms of group inequality do not exist independent of each other; they intersect and interact with each other. Thus, the nature and dynamics of inequality in South Asian societies is understandably complex. The complexity of inequality is further confounded by the differences in the ontological basis of different forms of inequality: *caste* is based on the religious ideology of purity-pollution and membership in a caste group being determined by birth into it, which, in turn, is guarded by the principle of caste (and even sub-caste) endogamy; class is based on the secular ideology of achievement, though under conditions of transmission of privileges or disabilities across generations; and gender is based on the ideology of patriarchy, which views and treats women as being inferior to men. Moreover, the different forms of inequality as also the intersection and interaction among them do not remain static; they change over time, making for both changing patterns of inequality among a population and changing degrees of severity. This also implies that social dialectics is characterised by forces maintaining status quo in patterns of inequality and those striving for change in it. All this has theoretical significance for social sciences and for formulating policies for reducing, if not, eliminating inequalities.

Based on a review of the empirical literature on inequality in India, this paper delineates the intersections and interactions between caste, class, and gender inequalities. While the paper is based on available empirical evidence on the subject, it goes beyond portraying the nature of inequality today. The effort here is to arrive at theoretical propositions which may help capture the nature of social dynamics in the South Asian region.

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