

## **Political Inequality in India: Nature, Challenges, and Solutions**

**Dr. Amarnath Paswan\***

### **Abstract**

The existence, nature, and development of democratic politics in any country depend on the amount of equality, balance, harmony, and effective participation among the various components of the political system. Where all these conditions exist, democracy and democratic politics are strong, where there is a lack of them; not only the entire democratic political system but democracy itself faces a consistent danger. Among the factors that have played a dominant role in shaping the political system in India, political inequality is a major factor. In simple terms, political inequality is a situation in which theoretically democratic politics is governed by universal suffrage in elections, but in practice, it is dominated by certain groups, classes or individuals, who influence the whole political system and public policy in their favour. In India, political inequality is the combined result of various social, economic and political factors. Along with the caste factor, the tremendous increase in the influence of money, mafia and (biased) media has endangered the core value of democracy as well as the entire political system. The political inequality in India is also responsible for promoting non-inclusive policies in the country, whose outcome could be seen in the form of uneven development, farmers' distress, youth discontent, and communal division. Although India has made some efforts to deal with this situation in the past, this problem is not only intact but has become more gigantic. This paper attempts to explore and analyze these diverse dimensions of political inequality, the dangers involved with them, the reformatory efforts made so far in this direction and the future strategy to reverse this phenomenon in India.

*Keywords: Inequality, India, Democracy, Political, Empowerment*

---

\* Associate Professor Centre for the study of Social Inclusion Faculty of Social Sciences Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi - India

### **Definition of Political Inequality**

Political inequality is currently a big challenge to most of the states striving to be a democracy and a democratic society. It denies the claim of political equality by creating a distinction between privileged and non-privileged, common and special, empowered and devoid of rights in the political process. Political inequality has been defined by different thinkers in their own way, but as JK Dubrow has defined in his article - "Political inequality refers to the unequal influence over decisions made by political bodies and the unequal outcomes of those decisions. Political inequality is a subtype of power inequality, visible within the political processes of all kinds of political structures. In modern democracies, political inequality is simultaneously a dimension of democracy and a dimension of stratification." "It is closely related to differences in the distribution of political resources, which can lead to the exclusion of particular groups from participating in political processes." In short, political inequality refers to a condition that gives privilege, power, access and representation to a particular group in the entire political system and empowers them to take decisions in and about that system.

### **Dangers of Political Inequality**

Political inequality is against the idea of equal political participation and equal decision-making authority in a democratic political system, which is a major obstacle in the way of implementing democracy in a substantive manner. Owing to the political inequality, the section of society which gets an opportunity to participate in the political decision-making process successfully formulates policies in its own interest, whereas those who are denied to participate in this process more often than not complain of their interests being ignored. If we have a glance at it in India's scenario, we can easily find various examples as well as the outcome of this political inequality. Whether it is the ongoing Naxalite movement in a large part of the country or the separatist movement or even terrorism, there is one common thread which connects all these, and that is political inequality, either in the form of denying political representation and political rights of a group, community, sect and territory or in the form of non inclusive policy decisions in the favour of privileged class, group, society etc.

Democracy and democratic politics cannot be measured on the parameter of timely election and electing government by universal suffrage only. Its meaning is much broader. Real democracy is the one where all democratic rights of the individual and the community are respected. They should not be subjected to the constant pressure, attacks and sanctions of the state as

we see in many states in India like Jammu and Kashmir, Northeast and even Uttar Pradesh where governments are brutally suppressing the fundamental rights of the people. Labelling political opponents and anti-government protesters as traitors by governments and ruling parties, especially by the right-wing political parties is a new growing and disturbing trend in India. On several occasions, political inequality seems to favour the idea of "full surrender of minority to majority" which is a threat to healthy democracy. Respect and sensitivity to political differences and minorities' views and concerns are proof of vibrant democracy. Unfortunately, in India, we are just walking to the opposite pole, which could be explosive at any time.

### **India's position on the scale of Political Inequality**

1. Political Participation - Political participation is considered an important parameter to measure the political inequality. If we evaluate India on this scale, the situation does not look encouraging. A large part of the country's population is still completely ignorant of the political events affecting their lives or is a victim of either little information or misinformation. Opinions on political participation cannot be formed by looking at the crowd in election rallies, raised by paying money or lured by dance and magic shows. The level of political consciousness of such a crowd is often zero.
2. Respect for Civil Rights - Political equality requires participation in political demonstrations in peaceful and equitable ways but concerns have increased over the rights of the people in India due to frequent and unnecessary restrictions by the government. There has been a steady increase in such cases in the last few years in which central and state governments have tried and are trying to impose restrictions on these democratic rights of the people simply because the governments are not ready to listen to their criticism. We have seen the double standard of action by various states and central government in handling the pro and anti Citizenship Amendment Act & National Register of Citizens groups. Despite this fact that the law is equal for all and all are equal before the law, governments are favouring and opposing peoples' demonstrations or protests as per their political ideologies instead of constitutional provisions.
3. Level of Democracy - Political equality or inequality can be assessed in a country by the level of democracy. To this purpose we evaluate the

democracy on the benchmark of election process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture and civil liberties etc. Unfortunately according to the Global Democracy Index 2019, in the last few years, there has been a decline in the state of democracy in India on all these parameters. The way Election Commission's role has been questioned in various elections from the last general election to the recently concluded Delhi Assembly elections is unprecedented in the history of independent India.

The "Caged Parrot" phrase used so far to explain the status of CBI is now also being used for Enforcement Directorate, Election Commission, Reserve Bank of India and even for the highest judiciary of the country. Cases such as mob violence, religious and caste-related crimes are witnessing tremendous growth and respect for pluralism is at stake. After a long time, there is a new political culture emerging in the country, in which the government is completely ignoring the opposition. Every decision of the government in the country is being justified only on the ground that the government has a majority. In any democracy, neither the government could be synonymous with the political system, nor could it be considered as treason to criticize or differ from the government. But in India, we are entering an era where governments' attitude towards political differences is becoming more and more intolerant. This is the proof that we are moving towards the peak of political inequality.

4. Political Inclusion - Under Political Inclusion, we mainly place the stake of various groups in political roles. Whether it is the leadership of the political parties or the membership of Central Executive or the Politburo of the party or the position of Prime Minister/Chief Minister or a berth in council of ministers, diversity is the key. There should be diversity at each and every level. But when we talk about Indian political scenario it is nothing but non inclusive. Most of the political parties have not adequate representation of the deprived sections of the society like Scheduled Cast, Schedule Tribe, women and minorities at the top places. Lack of social diversity can be clearly seen in the list of current ministers of the Government of India. Though people belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Classes get more importance in parties founded by leaders of these castes, there is often a big problem of dynasty politics in these parties. So, there is no complete political inclusion here either. Many parties are just like representatives of a particular caste or religion which barely provides equal role and importance to the members of other castes and religions.

## **Causes of Political Inequality in India**

1. Caste, Religion and Gender - Even in 21st century India, caste, religion and gender are significant enough to determine the role, participation and status of a person in the political system. Despite all efforts of modernity and inclusion, it is relatively more difficult for women, minorities, Dalits and tribals to make their place in the political system. It is not a coincidence that even today in the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha, rarely a person coming from Dalit or Adivasi society can win the election from the general seat. Similarly, most of the female representatives are also identified with their father, husband, father-in-law or other male members of the family, because it is more difficult for them to make their independent identity than their male counterpart. Same adverse situation also happens with the religiously minority, due to which many religious communities are not adequately represented in the political process, or they are unheard of.
2. Corporate Funding - Corporate funding is instrumental in destroying India's political sanctity. The way big political parties are being funded by corporate houses in the form of donations for their direct and indirect benefits and in return, the government is favouring them by making policies in their favour or by writing off their debts or by relaxing the rules and giving huge loans at nominal interest rates with many lucrative incentives and waivers etc. is a big threat to our democracy and democratic ethos. It limits the powers of ordinary citizens in the political system. In any democracy, the ultimate power lies in the hands of the public, so the government should be accountable to the people, but as corporate funding is increasing in India, we can see the high numbers of complaints that the government's policies are increasingly turning out to be in the interest of corporate houses rather than in the interest of the public, or in the interest of the marginalized sections of the society. Corporate funding has not only promoted political inequality by giving corporate houses a decisive role in the political system at the expense of ordinary citizens but has also attacked the foundations of democracy.
3. Media - The role of the biased media is also largely responsible for preparing and expanding the ground of political inequality in India. After the control of corporate houses and political parties over media institutions, the media no longer acts politically neutral. Now it is an open secret that several media houses in India work to promote the

interests of their operators and owners with planted news. The result of this is unethical behavior of media comes in form of ill-informed public opinion which is fatal for democratic functioning as well as the democracy in India. In a country like India where even universal literacy is a dream to be realized, a common man believes media reports as final truth, in this condition if the media works as the spokesperson of their politically motivated owners, political masters or the government, how can we have a level playing field for all in our political system?

4. Administrative Machinery – In principle all administrative institutions in India have been formed in the line of western countries but as the great administrative thinker Riggs has explained the administrative characteristics of developing countries in his Sala model, Indian administrative institutions also work in dual manner. On the one hand they work under the constitutional or legal set up of the country, on the other hand they are committed to the traditional loyalty towards their political masters or reference subject. Here the politician-bureaucrat coalition goes outside the purview of law and constitution to provide undue benefits to each other. Perhaps this is the reason that whenever the government changes in the center and especially in the states, first of all officers are transferred on a large scale.
5. Costly Elections - Contesting election in India is a costly affair. The expenditure on supporters, posters, banners, rallies, field trips and media management in elections has increased so much that it is no longer possible for a common man to contest election in India. Officially the Election Commission has set the limit of election expenses for the candidates but that is only to appear on paper. In reality, no competent candidate or party rarely follows it. The biggest evidence of this was seen in June 2013 when senior BJP leader Gopinath Munde admitted in a public meeting that he spent 4 crore rupees in the Lok Sabha elections, beyond the official spending limit of 40 lakhs. In a country like India where even today every fifth person is forced to live below the poverty line, it is not possible for everyone to join this expensive election process.

### **Challenges of Political Inequality in India**

1. Economic Disparities and Political Power: Economic inequality has a direct impact on political participation as wealthy individuals and

corporations wield disproportionate influence through lobbying, media control, and campaign financing, creating a vicious cycle where political decisions favor the wealthy, further entrenching inequality.

2. **Caste-Based Discrimination:** India's political landscape is still influenced by the deeply ingrained caste system, in which dominant castes often control political parties and decision-making processes, leaving lower castes with limited opportunities for participation. Dalits and other lower-caste groups face stigma and discrimination, which makes it difficult for them to assert their political rights as well.
3. **Corruption and clientelism:** Political corruption undermines democratic institutions. In clientelist systems, politicians provide targeted benefits to specific groups or individuals in exchange for political support, sidelining broader policy concerns and equitable resource distribution.
4. **Voter Suppression and Accessibility:** Many citizens, particularly those in rural areas, face barriers like voter intimidation, lack of transportation to polling stations, and misinformation. Other problems like migrant workers' and urban poor people's disenfranchisement also lower political participation.
5. **Illiteracy and Lack of Political Awareness:** A large portion of the population lacks access to education, which limits their knowledge of political systems, candidates, and their rights. Voters who are illiterate are more vulnerable to manipulation through false promises or financial incentives.

### **Solutions to Political Inequality in India**

1. **Strengthening Grassroots Democracy:** Encouraging Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local bodies by giving them sufficient funding, autonomy, and training will strengthen grassroots democracy. It is also important to make sure that representatives from underrepresented groups have the assistance they need to do their jobs well.
2. **Electoral reform:** Introduce proportional representation to ensure that political parties representing smaller or marginalized groups gain adequate representation. Public funding for elections and restrictions on corporate donations are two examples of campaign finance reforms that can lessen the power of money in politics.
3. **Promoting Political Awareness:** Conduct sustained awareness campaigns, particularly in rural and underprivileged areas, to educate

people about their voting rights, the importance of political participation, and the electoral process.

4. Digital and Technological Interventions: Use technology to improve voter registration processes and ensure greater accessibility. Initiatives such as mobile polling units and online voting options can help reach underserved populations, including migrant workers and persons with disabilities.
5. Accountability mechanisms: Strengthen anti-corruption agencies and empower institutions like the Election Commission of India to monitor campaign finances and enforce transparency. Whistleblower protection laws can encourage the reporting of corrupt practices.
6. Addressing regional imbalances: Allocate more resources to underdeveloped regions for infrastructure, education, and job creation. Programs that promote equitable development can help reduce the sense of political neglect among citizens in these areas.

## References

1. Banerjee, Abhijit, Bardhan, Pranab et al. (eds.). Poverty and Income Distribution in India. New Delhi: Juggernaut. 2017
2. Dreze, Jean, and Amartya Sen (2003). India: Development and Participation. Oxford University Press, New Delhi
3. Dubrow, JK (2015) Political inequality is international, interdisciplinary, and intersectional. *Sociology Compass* 9(6),p.477
4. Dubey, Amaresh (2016), “Growth, Poverty and Inequality in India”, power point presentation, GIGA, Hamburg, Germany
5. Himanshu (2015), “Inequality in India”, Seminar, No. 672, August, 2015
6. Milanovic, Branko (2016), “Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization”, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press
7. Motiram, Sripad and V. Vakulabharanam (2013), ‘Indian Inequality: Patterns and Changes, 1993- 2010’, in Dev, S. Mahendra (ed., 2013), India Development Report 2012-13, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
8. Ocampo J. A. (2007). Global challenges of inequality. *IDS Bulletin*, 38(2), 26–30.
9. Paswan, A.(2016) Decoding Democracy: Development of Democratic Politics in Independent India, *Social and Political*

*Aspects of Community Consciousness*, Victorious Publishers (India) PP. 1-238

10. Paswan, A., & Gupta, V. (2024). Chat GPT And Academic Integrity: Analyzing Its Influence On College Students' Study Practices And Performance. *Library of Progress-Library Science, Information Technology & Computer*, PP.1671-1681
11. Paswan, A. (2024). SDG-16 and Access to Justice for Marginalized Dalit: A Study of Patepur Village of Ghazipur District of Uttar Pradesh. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 8(8), 2261-2269.
12. Radhakrishna, R. (2018). Inequality in India: Trends, Emerging Challenges and Path Ways for Reduction of Inequality: Introduction to the Special Issue. *Indian Journal of Human Development*, 12(2), 121-126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973703018794311>.
13. Reducing inequality, [https://ec.europa.eu/internationalpartnerships/sdg/reducing-inequality\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/internationalpartnerships/sdg/reducing-inequality_en)
14. Sen and Himanshu (2004), "Poverty and Inequality in India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vo.39, No.38, 39.
15. Thorat, Sukhadeo and Paul Attewell (2010) 'The Legacy of Social Exclusion: A Correspondence Study of Job Discrimination in India's Urban Private Sector', in Sukhadeo Thorat and Katherine S. Newman (eds), *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press.
16. Triesman, D. (2007), "What have we learned about the causes of corruption from ten years of CrossNational Empirical Research?", *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 10, pp. 211-244