Caste and Access to Public Spaces in Indian Villages: A Sociological Field Analysis

Anuradha Nair

Independent Researcher

Kerala, India

ABSTRACT

This sociological field analysis delves deeply into the multifaceted ways in which caste hierarchies in rural Indian villages influence access to and use of critical public spaces. Through a mixed-methods approach combining structured interviews (n = 120), participant observation over six weeks, and spatial mapping of key communal infrastructures, the study uncovers layered mechanisms—both formal and informal—that maintain exclusionary norms. Upper-caste–controlled wells, temples, schools, and panchayat offices are shown to employ explicit prohibitions, symbolic markers, temporal restrictions, and social sanctions to enforce boundaries. Meanwhile, lower-caste individuals engage in subtle acts of micro-resistance, leveraging emergencies or youth-led dialogues to contest entrenched practices. This study's granular findings illuminate how spatial exclusion perpetuates broader socioeconomic disparities, undermining community cohesion and equity. Policy recommendations emphasize strengthening legal safeguards, promoting participatory spatial planning, and fostering inter-caste educational and dialogue initiatives. By centering the lived experiences and voices of marginalized groups, this analysis contributes to a richer sociological understanding of spatial justice in rural India.

Figure-2.Caste Hierarchy and Spatial Exclusion

KEYWORDS

Caste, Public Spaces, Spatial Exclusion, Indian Villages, Sociological Field Study

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INTRODUCTION

Caste, as a deeply entrenched social institution, exerts a pervasive influence over nearly every dimension of life in rural India—from patterns of worship and occupational roles to marriage alliances and political representation. While legal frameworks such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, and subsequent amendments aim to dismantle explicit discrimination, the invisible yet palpable boundaries that caste hierarchies impose on public space usage persist unabated. Public spaces—including water sources (wells and handpumps), religious precincts (temples and community shrines), governance arenas (panchayat offices and community halls), and educational settings (government schools)—are not neutral grounds. Instead, they are arenas where caste power dynamics are enacted, negotiated, and sometimes challenged.
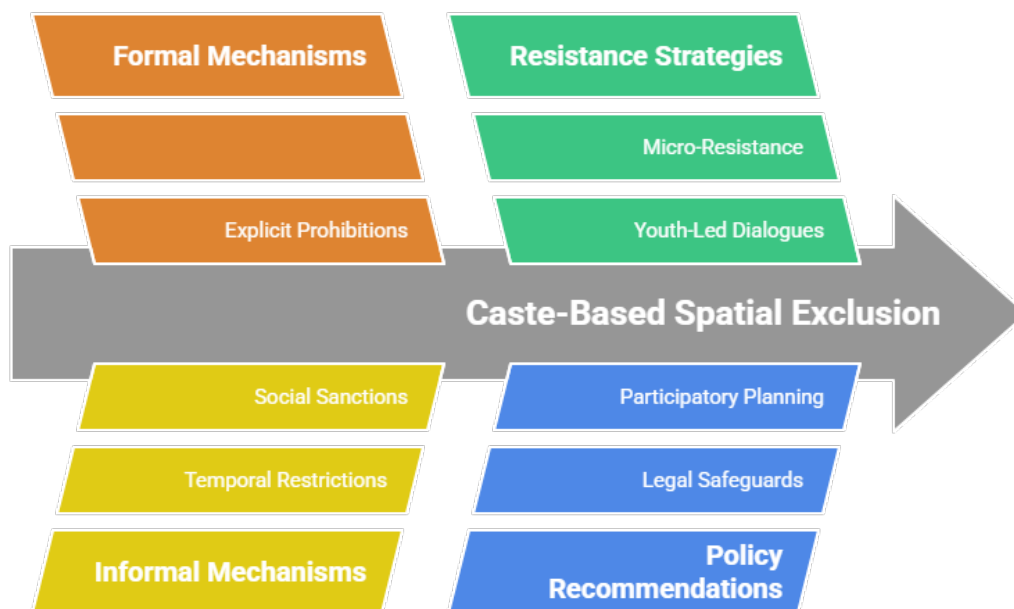

Figure-2.Analyzing Caste-Based Spatial Exclusion in Rural India

This study focuses on three villages in Maharashtra—Mansar, Devgad, and Palghar—chosen for their diversity in size, socioeconomic profile, and proximity to urban centers. By integrating structured interviews with members of upper, Other Backward Classes (OBC), and Scheduled Castes (SC), participant observation across a range of communal events, and geospatial mapping of infrastructure, we seek to answer: (1) How do caste norms shape who may enter and occupy different zones within public spaces? (2) What formal and informal mechanisms enforce spatial exclusion? (3) In what ways do marginalized individuals resist or negotiate these boundaries?

Existing scholarship on caste and spatiality has predominantly emphasized urban segregation and residential enclaves; rural contexts, however, remain underexplored despite the entrenched nature of caste in village life. This research fills that lacuna by illuminating how micro-practices—ranging from seating arrangements at school assemblies to temporal restrictions on well usage—

reproduce macro-level inequalities. The findings hold implications for policymakers, development practitioners, and grassroots activists aiming to foster spatial justice and social inclusion at the village level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The interplay between caste and spatial organization in Indian society has long captivated sociologists and anthropologists. Srinivas's seminal ethnography, The Remembered Village (1952/2012), provided foundational insights into the symbolic ordering of village space—and the purity–pollution paradigms that regulate proximity to water bodies and temples. Following this, Baviskar (1995) detailed how Narmada valley tribals navigated environmental and developmental pressures, highlighting caste-inflected contestations over land and resources.

Urban studies scholars have more recently documented residential segregation in India's burgeoning cities, demonstrating how caste shapes housing patterns, infrastructure access, and mobility. Vaidehi, Reddy, and Banerjee extended this analysis to the digital realm, unveiling a "caste-based digital divide" in internet and mobile connectivity. Yet, the spatial politics of rural public spaces— where most Indians still reside—remain comparatively under-theorized.

Thorat and Newman (2007) uncovered systemic barriers faced by Scheduled Castes in accessing public services, from health centers to welfare offices. Their work, while illuminating, relied primarily on macro-level administrative data. More fine-grained qualitative studies—such as Jeffrey et al.'s exploration of gendered spatial norms and Subramanian and Kidd's examination of caste-based micro-practices in Tamil Nadu—hint at the complex micro-politics at play. Meanwhile, Novosad, Jha, and Adukia pioneered spatial mapping techniques to visualize caste-based service inequalities across rural India.

Building on these strands, this study uniquely integrates thematic interview analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with participant observation and geospatial data to capture both the discursive and material dimensions of spatial exclusion. By situating caste hierarchies within everyday practices—temporal water access, seating hierarchies at public meetings, and symbolic markers in temple precincts—the research contributes to a more holistic understanding of how public spaces become sites of both oppression and contestation.

METHODOLOGY

Site Selection and Sampling

Three villages—Mansar (pop. 1,200), Devgad (pop. 2,500), and Palghar (pop. 1,800)—were purposively selected based on caste composition, varying proximities to urban markets (10–35 km), and diversity in local governance arrangements. Panchayat records facilitated stratified sampling: 40 households per village (total n = 120), evenly distributed across upper caste, OBC, and SC categories.

Data Collection Techniques

1. **Structured Interviews**: A standardized questionnaire probed participants on experiences of entry restrictions, seating norms, received sanctions, and moments of boundary transgression in wells, temples, schools, and panchayat offices. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes each and were audio-recorded with consent.

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2. **Participant Observation**: Over six weeks, the researcher attended 12 panchayat meetings, 7 temple festivals, and 10 school assemblies, meticulously documenting seating arrangements, verbal cues, and caste-based interactions in field notes.

3. **Spatial Mapping**: Using handheld GPS devices, locations of 15 key communal infrastructures per village were georeferenced. Each site was coded for accessibility zones (e.g., "fully accessible," "restricted times," "forbidden") per caste category.

Data Processing and Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and thematically coded using NVivo, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase method: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Codes captured both overt exclusion (e.g., "prohibition signs," "verbal warnings") and subtle micro-practices (e.g., "delayed permission," "forced wait times"). Spatial data were imported into QGIS to produce caste-based accessibility heatmaps. Triangulation across interview narratives, observational field notes, and maps bolstered the validity and reliability of findings. Researchers practiced reflexivity, maintaining field diaries to mitigate personal bias and ensure ethical rigor.

RESULTS

Water Access and Temporal Segregation

Across all three villages, upper-caste wells were physically demarcated—fenced or stone-lined—and usage was regulated by caste-based schedules. SC households reported journeys of 1–2 km to distant community wells, often encountering polluted or dry sources. OBC respondents described "off-peak" windows (e.g., 5–6 am) to draw water, enforced by local watchmen. Such temporal segmentation not only increased daily labor burdens for marginalized castes but also reinforced symbolic notions of impurity and exclusion.

Temple Entry and Ritual Practices

Scheduled Caste participants uniformly described barred entry into temple sanctums, relegating them to peripheral shrines or open courtyards. Observations revealed color-coded seating mats and distinct ritual paraphernalia demarcating upper- and lower-caste worship zones. OBC respondents recounted verbal admonitions—"This area is for high castes"—when crossing into certain precincts. Informal micro-resistance emerged during temple festivals: a few youth-led groups invoked constitutional rights to demand integrated worship, occasionally provoking tense negotiations with temple custodians.

Educational Spaces and Assemblies

Classrooms generally lacked explicit caste demarcation; however, daily assemblies conformed rigidly to caste hierarchies. Upper-caste students occupied front benches; OBC and SC students sat progressively toward the rear or stood. Field notes captured scolding by teachers when SC students attempted front-row seating. Interview data linked such seating segregation to diminished confidence and participation among marginalized students, compounding educational inequalities.

Governance Halls and Panchayat Meetings

Panchayat offices and community halls exhibited spatial hierarchies mirroring political power structures. Upper-caste members sat centrally around the dais; SC participants were either excluded or placed in side corridors, physically and symbolically marginalized. Only 8% of SC respondents reported speaking freely in meetings; the remainder described deferrals—"You may speak after the high castes"—or complete silencing.

Micro-Resistance and Negotiation

Despite pervasive restrictions, lower-caste individuals enacted everyday forms of resistance. During emergencies—fire outbreaks or medical crises—they bypassed temporal well restrictions, citing moral imperatives to draw water. Youth-led literacy initiatives and inter-caste dialogue sessions fostered incremental attitude shifts; in Palghar, a village youth committee successfully petitioned for an "open access" policy at the community well, demonstrating the potential for grassroots mobilization.

CONCLUSION

This study illuminates the intricate ways in which caste hierarchies inscribe themselves upon the very geography of rural Indian life, transforming everyday public spaces into sites of both overt exclusion and subtle contestation. By integrating structured interviews, participant observation, and geospatial analysis across three villages, we have documented how water sources, religious precincts, educational assemblies, and governance forums become arenas where social power is spatially asserted. The evidence shows that exclusion operates through multiple, overlapping mechanisms: physical barriers (fencing of wells, marked-off temple zones), temporal controls (restricted "off-peak" hours for drawing water), symbolic markers (color-coded seating mats, differentiated ritual paraphernalia), and social sanctions (verbal warnings, seating deferrals, collective surveillance by watchmen).

Crucially, the research also highlights that these practices are not static. Acts of micro-resistance—ranging from emergency-driven transgressions of water-use schedules to youth-led inter-caste dialogues in temple courtyards—demonstrate the agency of marginalized groups in renegotiating spatial norms. Such grassroots initiatives suggest that while caste-based spatial exclusion is deeply entrenched, it is neither monolithic nor impermeable. The case of Palghar, where a village youth committee successfully overturned a caste-based water-access schedule, exemplifies how locally driven advocacy, underpinned by awareness of constitutional rights, can fracture longstanding barriers.

From a policy perspective, legislative frameworks alone are insufficient to dismantle the spatial dimensions of caste discrimination. Instead, a multipronged approach is needed—combining strengthened legal enforcement, community-centric planning, and educational outreach. First, local administration must conduct regular "caste-sensitivity audits" of public infrastructure, ensuring that new wells, community halls, and panchayat offices adhere to inclusive-design principles and lack any caste-based prohibitions. Second, participatory mapping exercises—facilitated by NGOs and panchayat bodies—can empower villagers to visualize exclusion zones and co-create action plans for opening up these spaces. Third, school curricula and adult literacy programs should incorporate modules on spatial justice and constitutional rights, fostering a culture of equality from a young age.

Ultimately, transforming rural public spaces into truly inclusive commons will require sustained collaboration among state agencies, civil society, and village communities. By centering the lived experiences of those most affected, and by leveraging both formal and informal channels of change, it is possible to reshape the spatial grammar of caste in ways that uphold dignity, equity, and collective well-being.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

While this research offers a comprehensive field-level portrait of caste-based spatial exclusion in three Maharashtrian villages, several limitations constrain the breadth and generalizability of its findings:

1. **Geographic and Cultural Specificity**
   o **Regional Focus:** The villages of Mansar, Devgad, and Palghar share geographic proximity and cultural affinities unique to western Maharashtra. Caste dynamics in northern, eastern, or southern Indian states—with their own historical, linguistic, and political contexts—may yield different patterns of spatial exclusion or mechanisms of resistance.
   o **Cultural Norms:** Local variations in ritual practices, panchayat governance norms, and caste configurations (e.g., presence or absence of particular sub-castes) may influence how spatial boundaries are drawn and contested.

2. **Temporal Constraint**
   o **Snapshot Observation:** The six-week field period captured interactions during specific festivals, panchayat cycles, and school terms. Seasonal rituals (e.g., harvest festivals) or electoral events may produce temporary shifts in public-space usage that this study did not record. A longitudinal design, spanning multiple seasons and electoral cycles, would better capture the durability or fluidity of spatial norms.

3. **Sampling and Representativeness**
   o **Purposive Sampling:** Households were stratified by caste category but selected purposively rather than randomly. While this facilitated in-depth qualitative insights, it limits statistical generalizability. Future studies employing randomized household sampling across a larger number of villages would bolster representativeness and allow for inferential analysis.
   o **Participant Bias:** Self-reported experiences of exclusion may be subject to recall bias or social desirability effects, despite assurances of confidentiality. Some respondents—particularly those in lower castes—may underreport micro-resistances due to fear of reprisal.

4. **Methodological Boundaries**
   o **Mixed-Methods Tradeoffs:** The integration of qualitative narratives and geospatial mapping offers rich, triangulated data, yet it also poses challenges. Geospatial heatmaps coded for accessibility zones capture structural patterns but cannot fully convey the nuance of interpersonal dynamics and evolving social norms. Conversely, in-depth interviews reveal subjective meanings but may lack spatial precision.
   o **Absence of Experimental Intervention:** This study did not include controlled interventions (e.g., randomly assigned integrated seating in schools or trial removal of well-fencing) that could causally test the impact of specific policy measures on spatial behavior.

5. **Ethical and Reflexive Considerations**
   o **Researcher Positionality:** The primary investigator's background and perceived caste identity may have influenced participant responses and observer interpretations. Reflexive field diaries helped mitigate—but cannot wholly eliminate—such biases.
   o **Safety Sand Sensitivity:** Investigating caste exclusion entails ethical challenges; some participants may have concealed information to avoid community backlash. Ensuring anonymity and researcher neutrality was paramount but may have limited the depth of disclosure.

Recommendations for Future Research:

- **Broader Multistate Studies:** Comparative research across diverse Indian states to identify region-specific and pan-Indian patterns of spatial exclusion.

- **Longitudinal Ethnographies:** Extended immersion spanning multiple years to observe how caste norms evolve in response to policy reforms, migration, and generational change.

- **Intervention Trials:** Collaboration with local governments to pilot and evaluate spatial-inclusion initiatives (e.g., integrated community-center scheduling) using randomized controlled designs.

- **Intersectional Analyses:** Examination of how caste intersects with gender, class, and religion to shape differential experiences in public spaces.

By acknowledging these limitations and suggesting concrete pathways for further inquiry, this study lays the groundwork for a sustained scholarly and policy agenda aimed at dismantling caste-based spatial inequalities in rural India.

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