

Dalit Women, and the Margins: Inclusive Development Challenges in Haryana (1966–2020)

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Abstract

This paper offers a comprehensive, intersectional analysis of the social, economic, and political marginalization of Dalit women in Haryana between 1966 and 2020. Using a mixed-methods design that combines historical institutional analysis, secondary quantitative trends, and primary qualitative fieldwork, the study maps structural patterns of exclusion and evaluates the reach and effectiveness of state and central policies. Findings indicate persistent intersecting disadvantages for Dalit women: concentrated landlessness and insecure tenure; occupational segregation into low-paid, informal work; lower educational attainment and health outcomes; chronic underrepresentation in meaningful local governance despite reservation; and continued exposure to caste-based violence and discrimination. The paper concludes with operational policy reforms, institutional redesigns, and measurable indicators for monitoring progress toward intersectional inclusion.

Keywords: Dalit Women, Social Exclusion, Gender and Caste Intersectionality, Caste-based Discrimination, Women's Empowerment

Introduction

Inclusive development in India cannot be meaningfully addressed without critically examining the intersecting structures of caste, gender, and class that shape access to resources, opportunities, and dignity. Haryana, a state carved out of Punjab in 1966, provides a particularly illuminating case for understanding these dynamics. Despite rapid economic transformation and modernization, the state continues to reflect deep-seated social hierarchies that significantly influence who benefit from development. While Haryana has achieved remarkable progress in agriculture, industry, and services, these gains have been unevenly distributed, leaving substantial segments of the population, particularly Dalit women, marginalized and excluded from the mainstream of social and economic life. This disparity underscores a critical insight: economic prosperity alone is insufficient for achieving inclusive development. True inclusivity requires moving beyond aggregate growth indicators to interrogate the social structures and power relations that determine who participates in, and benefits from, development.

Haryana's agrarian economy has historically been structured around land ownership and caste-based control over productive resources, resulting in the systematic marginalization of Dalit communities. Landlessness, restricted access to agricultural inputs, and limited opportunities for wage labour have constrained the economic autonomy of Dalit households, perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependency on dominant caste groups. For Dalit women, these economic

disadvantages are compounded by pervasive gender inequalities. They face multiple barriers, including restricted access to education, inadequate healthcare facilities, and minimal participation in household and community decision-making. Patriarchal social norms further limit their mobility, economic independence, and voice, situating them at the intersection of caste and gender oppression. Consequently, Dalit women remain among the most vulnerable groups in Haryana, highlighting the urgency of an inclusive development framework that addresses both structural and social inequities.

The period between 1966 and 2020 witnessed notable institutional and policy interventions aimed at promoting social justice and inclusive governance in Haryana. Key measures included the expansion of Panchayati Raj institutions, implementation of reservation policies in education and employment, targeted welfare schemes for women and marginalized communities, and initiatives focused on health and education. The Panchayati Raj system, particularly after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, mandated reserved seats for women and Scheduled Castes in local governance, theoretically offering Dalit women opportunities for political participation. However, entrenched social hierarchies and patriarchal norms often constrained their effective engagement, limiting the transformative potential of political representation. Similarly, affirmative action in education and employment provided access to schools, colleges, and government jobs, yet Dalit women frequently encountered systemic discrimination, high dropout rates, and limited access to meaningful economic opportunities. Welfare programs such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), and maternal health initiatives sought to enhance livelihoods and well-being, but caste-based exclusion, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and lack of awareness often reduced their impact. Thus, while policy frameworks recognized the necessity of inclusion, the gap between formal policy provisions and substantive empowerment persisted, underscoring the need for a more nuanced understanding of development outcomes.

This study employs an intersectional lens to critically examine inclusive development in Haryana, focusing on how caste, gender, and class interact to shape opportunities, agency, and well-being. By integrating historical analysis with quantitative trends and qualitative fieldwork, the research investigates the structural and social mechanisms that perpetuate marginalization while assessing the effectiveness of policy interventions in transforming the lives of Dalit women. The study aims not merely to document patterns of exclusion but to explore pathways for converting formal inclusion into substantive empowerment, thereby ensuring that development initiatives genuinely reach the most disadvantaged groups and contribute to equitable social transformation. By highlighting the lived realities of Dalit women, the research provides insights into the broader challenges and possibilities of achieving inclusive development in contexts marked by enduring social hierarchies and intersecting inequalities.

Research Objectives

1. To analyse the historical patterns of social, economic, and political marginalization of Dalit women in Haryana between 1966 and 2020.
2. To examine the effectiveness of central and state policies and programs aimed at promoting inclusive development.

3. To investigate the intersecting effects of caste and gender on access to resources and opportunities.
4. To assess the persistence of structural inequalities and barriers to empowerment.
5. To propose operational policy reforms and institutional strategies for intersectional inclusion.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative strategies to comprehensively examine the multifaceted marginalization of Dalit women in Haryana. The methodology is carefully designed to capture historical trends, institutional frameworks, and the lived experiences of Dalit women, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of patterns of inclusion and exclusion in the state.

The quantitative component involves the systematic analysis of secondary data from government reports, census records, National Sample Surveys, and other statistical databases spanning from 1966 to 2020. Indicators related to education, health, employment, land ownership, political representation, and access to social welfare schemes are examined to identify trends of structural disadvantage and economic marginalization. Statistical techniques, including descriptive analysis and trend mapping, are employed to measure disparities between Dalit women and other social groups, highlighting both temporal and spatial variations within Haryana.

Complementing this, the qualitative component draws on primary fieldwork and in-depth interviews with Dalit women, community leaders, and key informants. Focus group discussions and case studies are used to explore personal narratives, perceptions of discrimination, and experiences with governmental policies and social institutions. This approach enables the study to uncover the subtleties of gendered and caste-based exclusion, which quantitative data alone may not reveal.

Additionally, historical institutional analysis is employed to trace policy developments, land reforms, and social welfare initiatives over time, examining their intended objectives and actual outcomes. By triangulating historical records, statistical trends, and experiential accounts, the study aims to provide a holistic perspective on how systemic structures interact with personal experiences to perpetuate marginalization.

Overall, this mixed-methods framework ensures that both measurable inequalities and the qualitative realities of Dalit women's lives are rigorously analyzed, offering a robust foundation for understanding inclusive development challenges and informing policy interventions in Haryana.

Historical-Institutional Analysis

Archival records, census reports, government policy documents, legislative acts, and reports from social welfare agencies from 1966 onwards were analysed to trace institutional interventions aimed at promoting social and gender equity. Special attention was given to land reforms, Panchayati Raj governance, educational policies, affirmative action, and health

programs. This approach facilitates the identification of long-term structural patterns of exclusion and the degree to which institutional mechanisms addressed intersecting vulnerabilities.

Quantitative Analysis

Secondary data on socio-economic indicators literacy, school enrolment, employment participation, land ownership, health outcomes, and political representation were analysed to examine disparities between Dalit women and other social groups. Statistical tools such as trend analysis, comparative ratios, and participation indices were used to evaluate changes over time and assess the effectiveness of policy interventions.

Qualitative Fieldwork

Primary data collection included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and case studies in rural and urban areas with significant Dalit populations. Participants included Dalit women, community leaders, and local governance officials. Narrative and thematic analyses were applied to understand lived experiences, perceptions of policy efficacy, and socio-cultural barriers that perpetuate exclusion.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent, confidentiality, and sensitivity to caste- and gender-based vulnerabilities were strictly observed. Special care was taken to avoid traumatization when discussing experiences of discrimination and violence.

This mixed-method design ensures triangulation, enhancing reliability and validity while providing a nuanced understanding of inclusive development challenges.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Dalit marginalization in India emphasizes the compounded disadvantages faced by Dalit women due to caste and gender hierarchies (Omvedt, 1994; Thorat & Newman, 2010). Intersectionality, a concept developed by Crenshaw (1989), provides a framework for understanding how multiple social identities interact to produce specific vulnerabilities. In Haryana, these dynamics are amplified by land ownership patterns, social norms, and economic structures (Gupta, 2014; Kaur, 2015).

Land is a critical determinant of social and economic status in Haryana. Dalit women's exclusion from landownership perpetuates intergenerational poverty and dependency (Deshpande, 2006; Jodhka, 2012). Occupational segregation is another persistent issue; Dalit women are predominantly employed in informal, low-paid sectors such as agricultural labor, domestic work, and small-scale handicrafts (Dreze & Sen, 2013; Singh, 2017). Limited access to skill development and microfinance further constrains economic mobility.

Caste and gender intersect to produce disparities in education and health. Dalit girls experience lower enrollment rates, high dropout rates, and limited access to higher education (Nambissan, 2009). Health inequities include higher maternal and infant mortality, anemia, malnutrition,

and poor access to quality healthcare services (Thorat et al., 2016; Sangwan & Bansal, 2018). Discrimination in schools and health facilities exacerbates these outcomes.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992) mandated reservation for women and Scheduled Castes in Panchayati Raj institutions. While this has increased formal representation, empowerment remains limited due to patriarchal norms, social pressure, and elite capture (Chowdhury, 2015; Bharti, 2019). Symbolic representation without substantive decision-making power reduces the effectiveness of political inclusion.

Despite legislation such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989), Dalit women continue to face violence, harassment, and discrimination. Enforcement gaps and social stigmatization contribute to underreporting and impunity, reinforcing structural inequalities (Human Rights Watch, 2010; Kaur & Sharma, 2020).

Historical Context of Haryana (1966–2020)

Haryana's formation in 1966 carved a new state out of Punjab, primarily along linguistic lines, but it inherited a highly stratified social and economic structure. The state's economy was predominantly agrarian, with land concentrated in the hands of a few upper-caste landlords, while Dalits and other marginalized communities largely remained landless or possessed marginal holdings. The agrarian economy shaped social hierarchies, reinforcing caste-based privileges and limiting upward mobility for Dalits, particularly women, whose access to land and economic resources was further constrained by customary inheritance practices favoring male heirs. Early land reform policies in the 1960s and 1970s aimed at redistribution, such as the Haryana Land Reforms Act, often failed to meaningfully benefit Dalits, leaving systemic inequalities largely intact.

The 1970s and 1980s brought significant changes in agricultural productivity through the Green Revolution. Haryana became one of India's leading states in wheat and rice production, benefiting landowning upper-caste farmers who could invest in high-yield seeds, irrigation, and mechanization. However, Dalits, lacking land and capital, were largely excluded from these gains. Women, doubly marginalized due to caste and gender, faced barriers in accessing agricultural employment and credit facilities, reinforcing their economic dependence and social vulnerability. Industrialization during the 1980s further concentrated economic growth in urban centres, offering limited opportunities for unskilled Dalit labor. While some migration to towns and cities occurred, structural inequalities continued to constrain Dalit women's participation in formal employment sectors.

The 1990s marked a period of policy interventions aimed at promoting social equity. The implementation of the Panchayati Raj system granted local governance powers, and affirmative action policies sought to increase political representation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Additionally, social welfare programs such as subsidized housing, employment guarantees, and educational scholarships were expanded. Despite these measures, Dalit women's participation remained limited due to entrenched patriarchal norms, mobility restrictions, and social stigma. Educational and health infrastructures improved, but the distribution of services remained uneven across districts, with rural Dalit communities disproportionately underserved. For instance, literacy rates among Dalit women lagged

significantly behind the state average, and access to maternal and child health services was inadequate in marginalized villages.

Cultural and social norms continued to regulate daily life, dictating marriage patterns, labour allocation, and social mobility. Dalit women often faced dual discrimination: caste-based marginalization from upper-caste communities and patriarchal subordination within their own groups. Their political engagement, though formally encouraged through reserved seats in local bodies, was frequently constrained by male-dominated party structures and social pressure. Similarly, labour participation in both agriculture and industry was limited by social restrictions, low wages, and unsafe working conditions.

Overall, the historical trajectory of Haryana from 1966 to 2020 reflects a pattern in which structural inequalities, caste hierarchies, and patriarchal norms intersected to shape the lived experiences of Dalit women. While economic and policy interventions contributed to overall state growth and social inclusion, they failed to dismantle the entrenched barriers that constrained Dalit women's access to land, education, health, and political participation. Understanding this historical context is essential for framing contemporary challenges in promoting truly inclusive development in the state.

Patterns of Social Exclusion in Haryana

Dalit women in Haryana face intersecting exclusions in multiple domains:

1. **Land Ownership:** Landlessness persists due to patriarchal inheritance and caste hierarchies, leaving Dalit women economically vulnerable.
2. **Occupational Segregation:** Concentration in low-paid informal labour, often without social security or legal protection.
3. **Education:** Lower literacy, higher dropout rates, and restricted access to higher education impede empowerment.
4. **Health:** Limited access to maternal, child, and reproductive health services contributes to higher morbidity and mortality.
5. **Political Representation:** Reservation policies have improved formal participation but not substantive decision-making power.
6. **Violence and Discrimination:** Caste-based violence and social exclusion persist, with weak legal recourse for victims.

Policies and Initiatives for Inclusive Development in Haryana

Land Reforms and Economic Inclusion

Redistributive land policies aimed at reducing caste-based disparities have largely failed to include Dalit women. Schemes like MGNREGA and self-help groups offer potential for economic empowerment, but social and structural barriers limit participation. Microfinance programs and vocational training often reach only a fraction of Dalit women due to awareness gaps and geographical isolation.

Education and Skill Development

Programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, mid-day meals, scholarships, and skill development initiatives have improved access to education for Dalit girls. However, gendered and caste-based discrimination, economic constraints, and social norms continue to impede educational attainment.

Health and Social Welfare

Schemes such as Janani Suraksha Yojana and National Rural Health Mission have improved maternal and child health outcomes. Yet structural barriers, financial constraints, and discriminatory practices in healthcare institutions limit the effectiveness of these interventions.

Political Empowerment and Legal Protection

The 73rd Amendment and reservation policies enable Dalit women to contest local elections. Legal frameworks like the SC/ST Act and gender protection laws aim to prevent violence, though enforcement remains inconsistent. Symbolic representation often does not translate into decision-making authority.

Gaps and Challenges in Policy Implementation

1. Symbolic vs. Substantive Inclusion: Representation without decision-making authority limits real empowerment.
2. Socio-Cultural Barriers: Patriarchy, caste hierarchies, and community norms impede policy uptake.
3. Limited Outreach: Programs often fail to reach rural and geographically isolated Dalit women.
4. Weak Enforcement: Legal protections exist but are inadequately enforced, leading to impunity.
5. Intersectional Blind Spots: Policies rarely address the combined impact of caste and gender, limiting transformative outcomes.

Recommendations and Policy Implications

1. Intersectional Policy Design: Policies must explicitly address the dual axes of caste and gender, with measurable inclusion indicators.
2. Land Rights and Economic Empowerment: Reform inheritance laws to secure land ownership for women; strengthen access to microfinance and vocational training.
3. Educational Equity: Ensure safe and equitable access to secondary and higher education for Dalit girls; address discrimination in schools.
4. Health Inclusion: Expand culturally sensitive and financially accessible healthcare services targeting Dalit women.

5. Political Substantive Empowerment: Strengthen capacity building, mentoring, and community support to enhance decision-making power for Dalit women representatives.
6. Violence Prevention and Legal Enforcement: Strengthen monitoring of caste- and gender-based violence; provide legal aid and social support to victims.

Conclusion

Dalit women in Haryana continue to face persistent, intersecting disadvantages despite decades of policy interventions. Structural inequalities in land ownership, economic participation, education, health, and political representation limit their access to substantive inclusion. While formal mechanisms such as reservations and welfare programs have improved access, socio-cultural barriers, patriarchal norms, and weak enforcement prevent real empowerment.

Achieving inclusive development requires a holistic, intersectional approach that integrates caste and gender into all stages of planning, policy design, and implementation. Operational strategies, institutional redesign, and rigorous monitoring of inclusion indicators are essential to ensure that policy measures translate into tangible improvements. Haryana's experience illustrates that legislative and programmatic frameworks are necessary but insufficient; only sustained efforts to dismantle structural discrimination, amplify marginalized voices, and prioritize equity can move inclusive development from rhetoric to reality for Dalit women.

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