

A Framework for Understanding Inequalities and Injustices in Contemporary India: Special Reference to Tamil Nadu

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**A Framework for Understanding Inequalities and Injustices in Contemporary India:
Special Reference to Tamil Nadu**

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive framework for analyzing multidimensional inequalities and injustices in contemporary India, with special reference to Tamil Nadu. It examines the historical foundations of inequality rooted in the caste system and colonial exploitation, which continue to shape present disparities.

The research identifies four key dimensions of contemporary inequality: economic (income concentration, regional imbalances, labour market stratification), social (caste-based discrimination, gender disparities), spatial (segregated housing, uneven regional development), and access-related (healthcare, education, services).

The paper highlights Tamil Nadu's distinctive cultural approaches to addressing inequality through Dravidian anti-caste politics and innovative spatial interventions like Samathuvapuram (equality villages). By analyzing the state's welfare model and policy innovations, the research demonstrates how Tamil Nadu has developed contextually responsive mechanisms for promoting social integration.

The framework synthesizes historical, structural, cultural, policy, and community factors to provide a holistic understanding of inequality, while addressing future challenges posed by globalization, economic liberalization, and the need for community-led approaches to sustainable social transformation. This multidimensional framework offers valuable insights for policy development and implementation across diverse regional contexts facing similar social justice challenges.

Keywords: Inequality, Tamil Nadu, Spatial segregation, Samathuvapuram, Dravidian movement, social justice.

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INTRODUCTION

The Constitution of India recognises each citizen as equal and guarantees the Right to Equality under the Fundamental Rights. However, despite 75+ years of independence, India continues to witness rampant inequality across multiple dimensions (Plate 1). This comprehensive framework examines the multifaceted nature of inequalities and injustices in contemporary India, with special focus on Tamil Nadu's distinctive socio-cultural context.



Plate 1. Indian Constitution and Economic Inequality

Historical Foundations of Inequality in Tamil Society

The roots of contemporary inequality in Tamil Nadu can be traced to historical social structures that institutionalised discrimination. The caste system created not only social hierarchies but also spatial segregation that persists to this day. Historically, Dalit settlements were invariably located downstream of villages in insanitary conditions, physically embodying social exclusion (2). A Government Order from the Madras Presidency (1892) described the dire conditions of Chengalpattu pariahs who were "always badly nourished; clad, if at all, in the vilest of rags; eaten up with leprosy or other horrible diseases; hutted like pigs; untaught; uncared for, and unpitied" (2, Plate 2).

Colonial rule further entrenched existing inequalities while introducing new forms of exploitation. The British administration implemented harsh taxation systems that disproportionately affected rural populations across regions, including Salem, Kambam, Dindugul, and Gudalur (10). The economic exploitation under colonial rule deteriorated the social status of Tamils through:

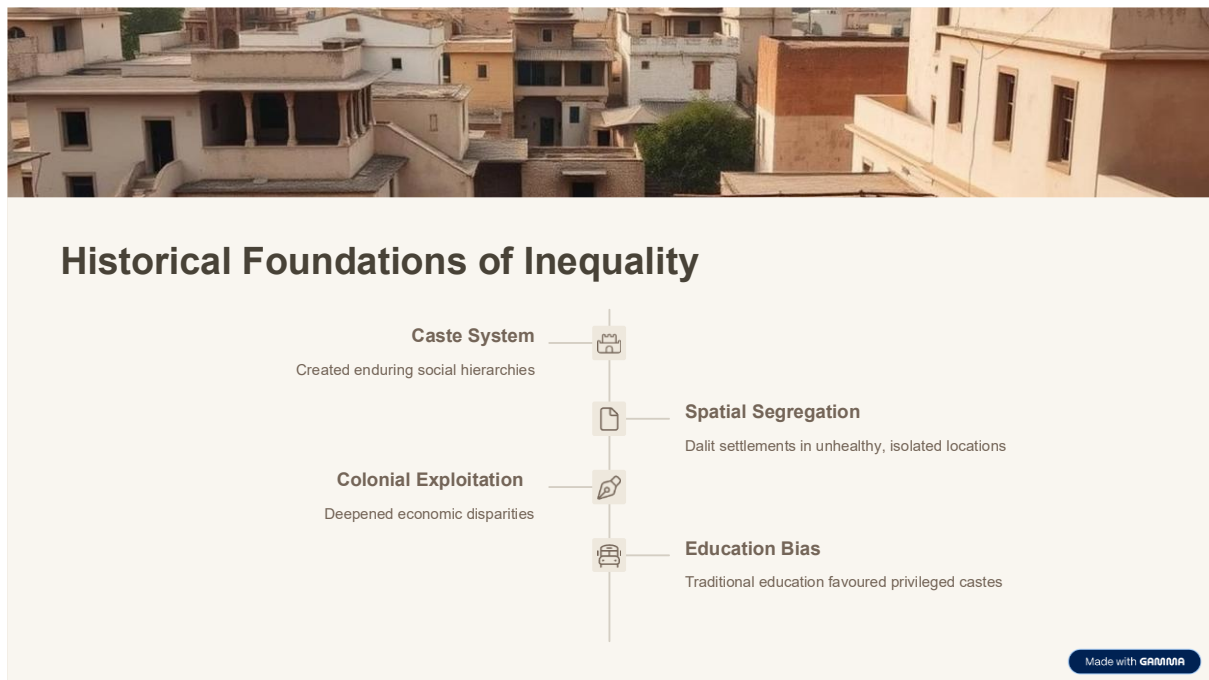


Plate 2

1. Arbitrary tax collection methods that burdened the poor
2. The bidder system that empowered intermediaries to exploit villagers
3. Forced low-price sales of commodities to the company
4. Expropriation of wealth through military force (10)

The traditional Gurukula education system existing until British arrival primarily benefited privileged high-caste pupils, further cementing educational disparities along caste lines (10). These historical foundations created entrenched patterns of inequality that continue to influence contemporary Tamil society.

Dimensions of Contemporary Inequality

Economic Inequalities

Economic disparities remain pronounced in contemporary Tamil Nadu, manifesting through income concentration, regional imbalances, and labour market stratification. The benefits of economic growth have not spread evenly across the state, with a significant group of districts on the eastern part below Kanchipuram lagging both economically and socially (6). These inter-district variations reflect deep-seated regional disparities (Plate 3).

Income concentration follows national patterns, where wealth is disproportionately held by the upper percentiles. As noted in the State of Inequality in India Report, "With a vast concentration of incomes and wealth at the top driving the forces of inequality, the solution lies in redistributive measures and building economic resilience among the poorest of households through social protection schemes" (7). Significantly, research indicates that income inequalities are substantially higher than consumption inequalities, revealing the depth of economic stratification (8).



Plate 3

Labour market inequalities represent another critical dimension, with particularly concerning gender disparities. Women's Labor Force Participation Rate stands at only 30%, reflecting significant barriers to economic participation (7). Additionally, unemployment patterns show higher rates among the educated, with 19-20% unemployment among those with diplomas, graduation, and post-graduation degrees (7). This paradoxical relationship between education and unemployment points to structural issues in the economy.

Social Inequalities

Caste-Based Discrimination

Despite constitutional protections and affirmative action policies, caste-based disparities continue to persist across education, employment, and wealth distribution in Tamil Nadu (3). The spatial organization of villages historically reflected and reinforced caste hierarchies, with Dalit settlements deliberately placed in isolation from main residential areas (Plate 4). This pattern created not only physical separation but also inequitable access to civic amenities and services (2).

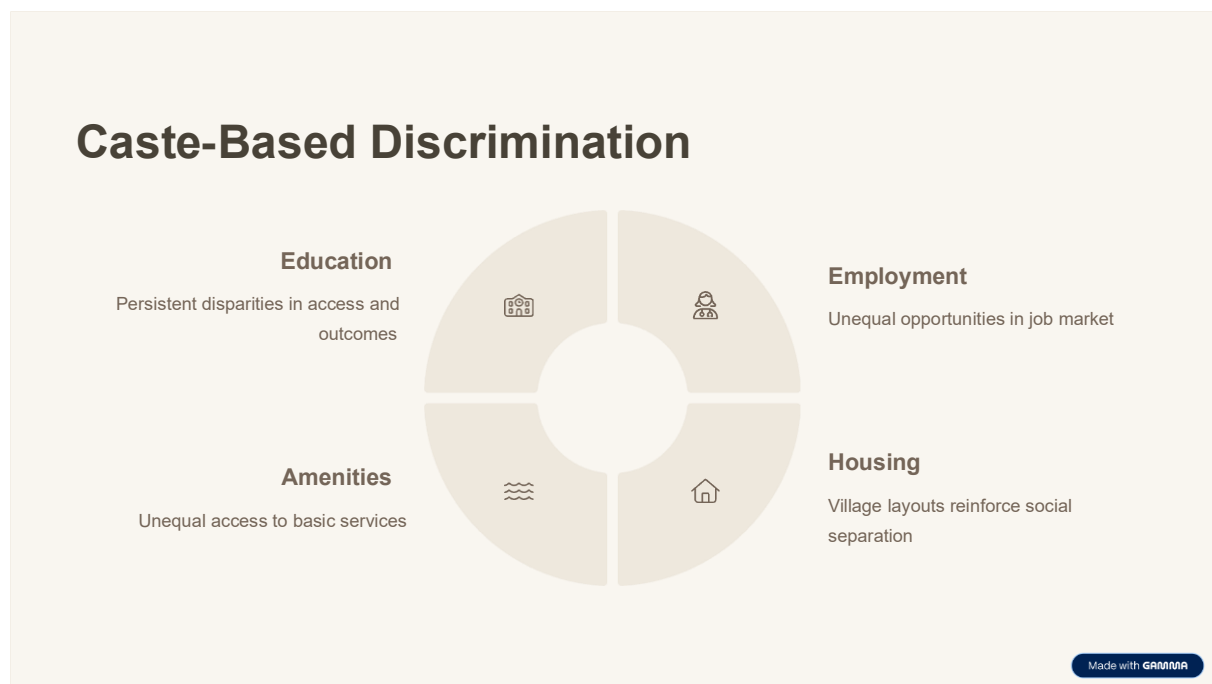


Plate 4

The Dalit and Adivasi communities face significant barriers to upward social mobility due to structural constraints. As noted in research: "The paper analyses how historical social hierarchies, economic policies, and social norms perpetuate caste-based inequality, with a specific focus on the Dalit and Adivasi communities" (3). These historical barriers continue to influence contemporary outcomes despite legal protections.

Gender Inequality

Gender inequality remains pervasive in Tamil Nadu despite the state's progressive reputation. Survey research indicates that 82.7% of respondents acknowledged the existence of gender inequality in India, with 64% reporting personal experiences of gender discrimination (13, Plate 5).

Gender disparities manifest across multiple domains:

1. Economic participation and opportunity
2. Educational attainment and outcomes
3. Political representation and decision-making
4. Health and well-being
5. Cultural norms and practices

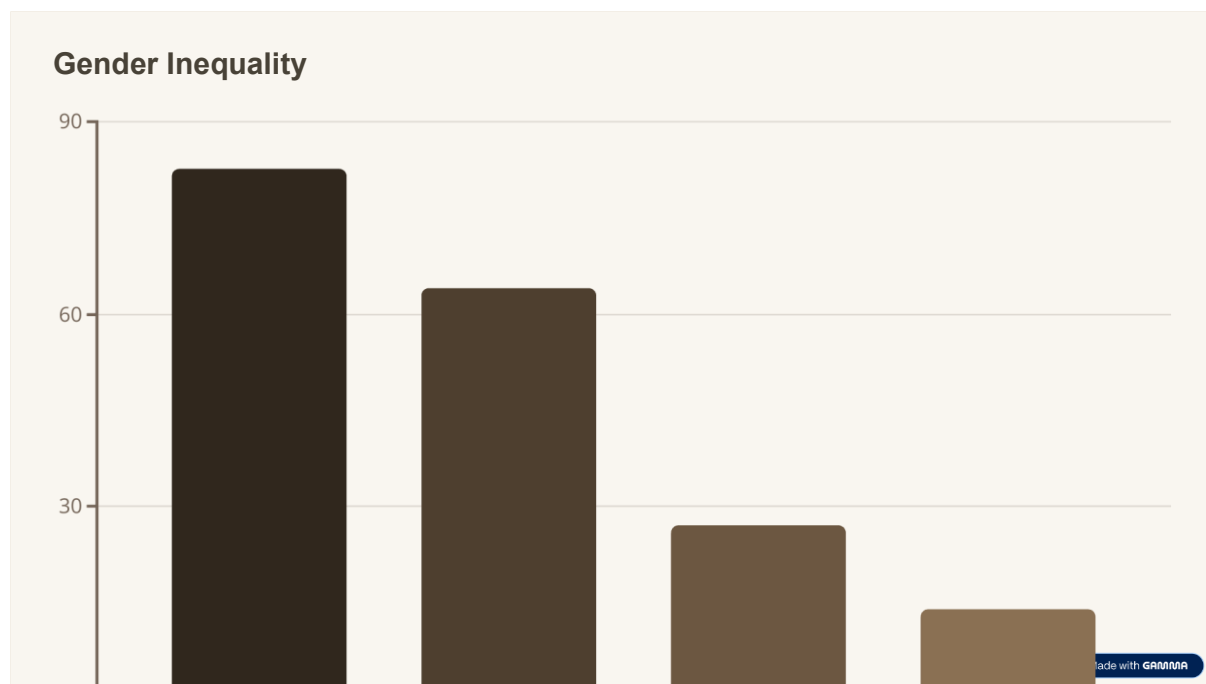


Plate 5

The study's overall findings highlight the disparities in economic, social, cultural, and legal bias, which present significant challenges for achieving gender equality (13).

Spatial Inequalities

Spatial inequalities in Tamil Nadu manifest through segregated housing patterns, uneven development between regions, and differential access to infrastructure. Historically, sheltering patterns deliberately separated marginalised communities from mainstream society, denying them equal access to civic amenities (2). This spatial segregation reflected and reinforced social hierarchies (Plate 6).

The inter-district variations in development levels reveal persistent regional disparities. Analysis shows that "the income inequality is much higher than the inequality in human development" (6).

Districts with lower income levels are associated with "low industrial development, low agricultural productivity, low human development, and larger proportion of SC/ST population and high infant mortality rate" (6). This correlation between geographic location, economic development, and social indicators demonstrates how spatial factors intersect with other dimensions of inequality.



Plate 6

Access Inequalities

Inequalities in accessing essential services form another critical dimension of injustice in Tamil Nadu. The Manual on Inequality in India identifies this as a key area of concern, with dedicated sections on "Inequalities in Accessing Essential Services" (1). Research indicates that "inequalities in non-income indicators like education and health are higher than that of income" (8), highlighting the significance of service access disparities (Plate 7).

Healthcare access inequalities persist despite targeted interventions. While there have been "concentrated efforts to strengthen the rural health infrastructure, nutritional deficiency remains an area of concern" (7). High out-of-pocket expenditure on healthcare contributes to poverty, necessitating reforms to make healthcare more inclusive (7).

Educational access inequalities manifest through disparities in infrastructure, quality, and outcomes. The loss due to inequality is highest in the education dimension (43%), followed by health (34%) and income (16%) (8). These figures underscore how educational disparities substantially constrain human development potential in India and Tamil Nadu.



Plate 7

Cultural Nuances of Inequality in Tamil Context

Dravidian Movement and Anti-Caste Politics

Tamil Nadu's approach to addressing inequality has been distinctively shaped by the Dravidian movement and its anti-caste politics. Sub-nationalism and anti-caste movements in Tamil Nadu have enabled "a more equitable delivery of public services and broad-based development" (4). The paternalist populism of the DMK and AIADMK governments since the late 1960s "made a difference to the material conditions of oppressed caste groups by offering free food, subsidies and education to the rural poor" (4).

Periyar E.V. Ramasamy Naicker, a social revolutionary of the Dravidian movement, opposed the creation of segregated settlements and introduced the concept of Samathuvapuram (equality village) (2). His approach to eradicating caste discrimination involved practical interventions like promoting inter-caste marriage, inter-dining, and common dwelling arrangements (2). This philosophical foundation continues to influence Tamil Nadu's distinct approach to addressing social inequality (Plate 8).



Plate 8

Spatial Equality as Social Justice

Tamil Nadu has developed a unique cultural understanding that connects spatial arrangements with social justice. The Samathuvapuram concept reflects the recognition that "housing, in its broadest connotation, encompasses not only shelter, economic services and facilities, but also a harmonious social environment, conducive neighbourhood and peaceful coexistence necessary not only to build social capital but also to develop to human well-being"(2).

Unlike conventional housing programs that focused exclusively on economic dimensions, Tamil Nadu's approach recognises that "Government housing policies and schemes had confined themselves till recently to the economic dimension, ignoring the social and cultural implications of housing" (2). This cultural understanding that spatial integration is necessary for social equality represents a distinctive Tamil Nadu contribution to addressing inequality.

Policy Responses and Interventions

Tamil Nadu's Distinctive Welfare Model

Tamil Nadu has developed a distinctive welfare model that addresses multiple dimensions of inequality. The state implemented an extensive public distribution system, with "Fair price shops, which are run by cooperative societies, set up all over rural Tamil Nadu and many commodities introduced at an affordable price"(4). This system has helped mitigate economic inequalities and ensure food security.

The state's welfare policies reflect what scholars describe as "paternalist populism," which has nevertheless produced tangible benefits for marginalised communities. These policies have helped create a more equitable delivery of public services and broad-based development compared to many other Indian states (4).

Innovative Housing Interventions: Samathuvapuram

The Samathuvapuram (equality village) housing scheme represents an innovative intervention that directly addresses spatial inequality to overcome social discrimination. Introduced in 1997 with a budget of Rs 35 crore to establish 100 model villages, the scheme aimed to create "model villages in rural areas with free housing and other facilities wherein people of different castes and religions could live together and share civic amenities and services without caste discrimination or differential treatment" (2).

This initiative is distinctive in focusing "for the first time on social and cultural equality in housing programmes" (2). Unlike previous housing policies that inadvertently reinforced segregation by creating separate settlements for marginalised communities, Samathuvapuram explicitly aims for integration. The plan itself "germinated in response to recurrent caste and communal clashes in the state and has received considerable acceptance among the public" (2, Plate 9).

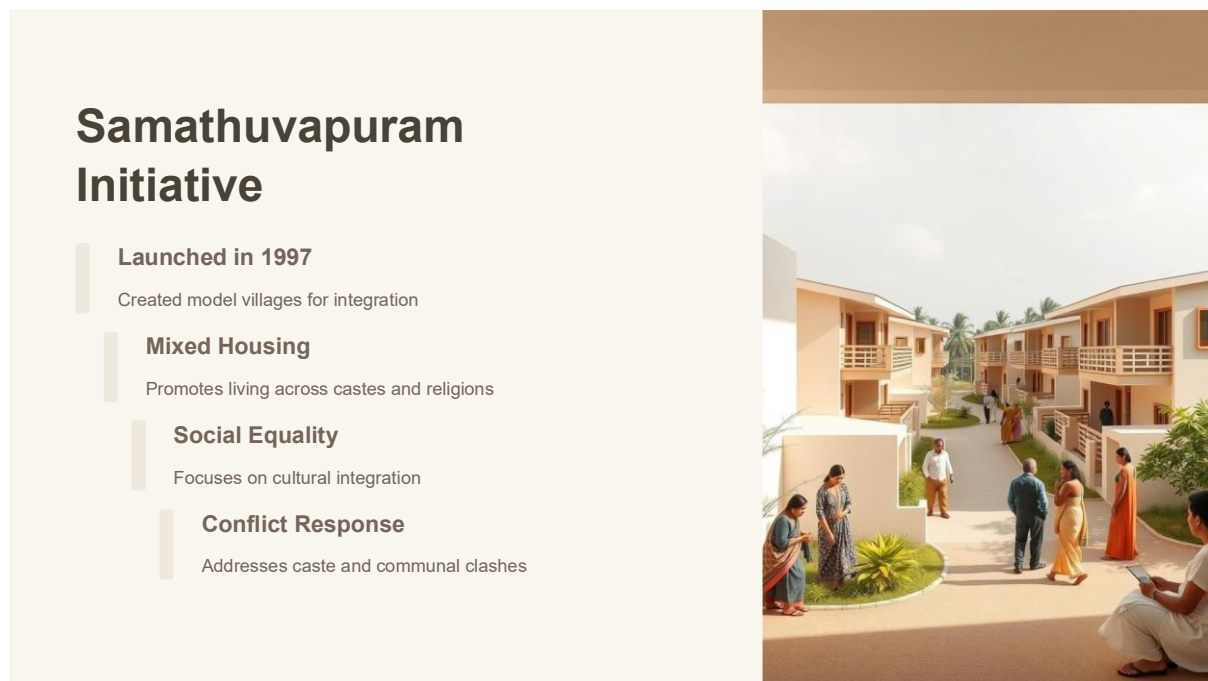


Plate 9

The implementation of Samathuvapuram involves:

- Site identification by district collectors from government lands or acquired private lands
- Development of proper layouts with equal facilities for all residents
- Diverse caste and religious representation in occupancy
- Shared civic amenities and infrastructure
- Prohibition of caste-based discrimination (2)

This approach reflects a sophisticated understanding that "social equality, which is a fundamental need to establish equality in a caste-ridden society, could be attempted through housing schemes" (2).

Framework for Understanding Inequalities and Injustices in Contemporary Tamil Nadu

The structured framework shown below synthesises the key themes and relationships discussed in the paper. Table 1 organises the main pillars and their subcomponents, reflecting the comprehensive, multidimensional approach outlined in this research.

This framework helps readers see how historical, structural, cultural, policy, and community factors interconnect to shape contemporary inequalities and injustices in Tamil Nadu and India.

Future Directions and Challenges

Globalisation and Changing Inequality Patterns

Globalisation and economic liberalisation present both challenges and opportunities for addressing inequality in Tamil Nadu. Research examines "the role of globalization and economic liberalisation in reinforcing or challenging these inequalities" (3), suggesting complex and sometimes contradictory effects. While economic growth has created new opportunities, the benefits have not been equally distributed across regions and social groups.

The changing nature of work, technological advancement, and integration into global markets may create new forms of inequality while potentially disrupting traditional hierarchies. Policy responses must evolve to address these shifting dynamics.

Comprehensive Policy Approach

Addressing inequality in Tamil Nadu requires a multidimensional approach. Studies suggest that "measures such as fiscal policy, education policy, financial inclusion, well-designed labour market and institutions can reduce inequality" (8). However, implementing these approaches must be contextually appropriate, as "there is no one-size-fits-all policy for tackling inequality" (8).

Table 1. Framework for Understanding Inequalities and Injustices in Contemporary India

Main Pillar	Subcomponents/Key Issues
Historical Foundations of Inequality	Caste system and social hierarchies - Colonial exploitation (taxation, economic burden) - Educational disparities (Gurukula system)
Dimensions of Contemporary Inequality	Economic inequalities (income, regional, labour market, gender)- Social inequalities (caste, gender, mobility) - Spatial inequalities (segregation, regional disparities) - Access inequalities (healthcare, education, services)
Cultural Nuances of Inequality	Dravidian movement and anti-caste politics - Samathuvapuram (equality villages) - Spatial equality as social justice

Policy Responses and Interventions	Distinctive welfare model (public distribution, subsidies) - Innovative housing (Samathuvapuram) - Legal/social measures (anti-caste violence, reservations)
Future Directions and Challenges	Impact of globalization and liberalization- Need for comprehensive, context-specific policy approaches- Labor market and gender reforms
Community-Led Approaches	Collective action for empowerment- Community identity and problem-solving- Grassroots leadership in policy and practice

Source: <https://ppl-ai-file-upload.s3.amazonaws.com/web/direct-files/attachments/55796466/9588ea8f-123f-4bee-9852-671a97eeb921/TV-A-Framework-for-Understanding-Inequalities-and-Injustices-in-Contemporary-India.pdf>

Future policy directions should focus on:

- Redistributive fiscal policies that address income concentration
- Educational reforms that ensure quality education for all social groups
- Enhanced social protection measures to build economic resilience
- Continued attention to spatial integration and desegregation
- Labour market reforms that increase women's participation and address educated unemployment (See Plate 10)

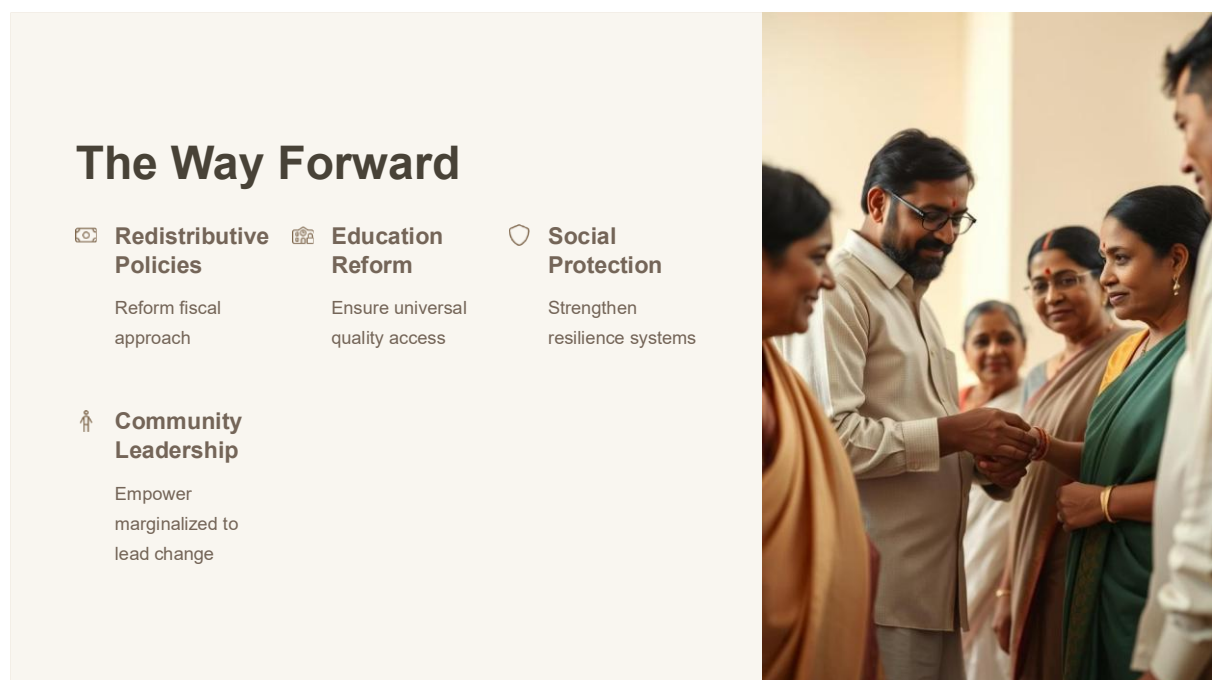


Plate 10

Community-Led Approaches to Inequality

Community-driven initiatives offer promising approaches to addressing inequality. Research highlights "the collective action taken by a group of people whose goal is to enhance their cultural values, establish their community identity and achieve other common objectives

within the political framework" (5). These collective actions, based on "perceived injustice, perceived efficacy, and resolution by collective action," can help marginalised communities assert their rights and address structural barriers (5).

Future approaches should create space for marginalised communities to lead the process of change rather than being passive recipients of top-down interventions. The "research process followed the problem-solving approach to resolve the exploitation of the subjugated by the dominant" offers a model for empowering communities to address inequalities themselves (5).

Key Questions on Inequalities in Tamil Nadu

How does caste discrimination affect political participation in Tamil Nadu? Caste discrimination continues to undermine political participation in Tamil Nadu, particularly for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and women. Despite constitutional reservations in local governance, SC women panchayat presidents face systemic exclusion, including verbal abuse, physical intimidation, and denial of basic rights like hoisting the national flag. For instance, in Cuddalore and Tiruvallur districts, SC women leaders were forced to sit on the floor during meetings or barred from official duties by dominant-caste members. A 2023 study highlights that 34% of panchayat president posts reserved for women and 25% for SCs remain symbolic, as elected representatives are often reduced to figureheads. Structural barriers, such as caste-based violence and entrenched social hierarchies, perpetuate this exclusion. Peer-reviewed research emphasizes that legal frameworks like the Prevention of Atrocities Act have limited efficacy without societal attitude shifts (Sumithra, 2023).

What are the gender disparities in access to healthcare in Tamil Nadu? Gender disparities in healthcare access persist in Tamil Nadu, particularly in maternal and reproductive health. Rural women, SC/ST communities, and religious minorities face barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, economic constraints, and cultural stigma. A 2024 bibliometric analysis found that maternal mortality rates are disproportionately high in marginalized communities due to delayed medical interventions and poor antenatal care. For example, tribal women in Chengalpattu district report limited access to prenatal services, contributing to adverse birth outcomes. Economic inequality exacerbates these disparities, as out-of-pocket healthcare expenses push low-income households deeper into poverty (Malque Publishing, 2024). Policy interventions, such as expanding rural health centres and subsidizing maternal care, are critical to bridging these gaps.

How effective are Tamil Nadu's policies in reducing caste-based violence? Tamil Nadu's policies to combat caste violence, such as the Justice K. Chandru Committee recommendations (2024), propose banning caste markers in schools and training educators on anti-discrimination norms. However, implementation remains inconsistent. While initiatives like the Samathuvapuram (equality villages) promote spatial integration, incidents like the Keeripatti panchayat case—where Dalit leaders were barred from tea shops—highlight enduring social resistance. The Prevention of Atrocities Act has not fully curbed violence, with Dalit youth unemployment and wage gaps perpetuating economic marginalization. Peer-reviewed studies argue that punitive measures must be paired with community-led initiatives to dismantle caste hierarchies (Thomas, 2024).

What are the economic inequalities between districts in Tamil Nadu? Economic disparities between districts in Tamil Nadu are stark, with eastern regions like Sivagangai lagging in

industrial development and human capital. A 2023 study found that districts with higher SC/ST populations exhibit lower per capita incomes, higher infant mortality, and poorer educational outcomes. For instance, Sivagangai's poverty rate is 28%, nearly double the state average, driven by agrarian dependence and limited access to credit (Kumar, 2023). Urban-rural divides further exacerbate inequality: urban areas contribute 70% of Tamil Nadu's GDP but house only 48% of its population. Policy solutions include boosting rural industrialization and prioritizing human development indices over purely economic metrics.

How does spatial segregation contribute to social inequality in Tamil Nadu? Spatial segregation in Tamil Nadu reinforces caste and class divides. Historically, Dalit settlements were relegated to village peripheries, denying residents access to clean water, sanitation, and education. In Chengalpattu, tribal communities report inferior housing and restricted mobility due to caste-based zoning. Urban areas mirror this pattern, with slums housing SC/ST populations often lacking basic infrastructure. The Samathuvapuram scheme, which promotes integrated neighbourhoods, has had mixed success due to resistance from dominant castes (Journal of Namibian Studies, 2023). Research underscores that spatial integration alone cannot eradicate inequality but must be paired with economic empowerment and anti-discrimination education.

Conclusion

The framework presented here offers a comprehensive approach to understanding inequalities and injustices in contemporary India, with special reference to Tamil Nadu. By examining historical foundations, multiple dimensions of inequality, cultural nuances, policy responses, and future challenges, it provides a holistic view of this complex issue.

Tamil Nadu's distinctive approach to addressing inequality—through Dravidian politics, innovative housing schemes, and robust welfare policies—offers important lessons for other regions. The state's recognition that spatial integration is necessary for social equality represents a particularly valuable insight.

Addressing inequality requires sustained commitment across multiple dimensions, economic, social, spatial, and access-related. While significant progress has been made, persistent disparities call for continued innovation in policy and practice. Future approaches must be responsive to changing circumstances while remaining grounded in principles of justice, dignity, and equal opportunity for all.

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