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Social Inequality in India

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ABSTRACT: While the latest GDP growth rate of 13.5 per cent in the first quarter of the current fiscal year (Q1FY23) may have been a reason for rejoicing for many in India, a new report by the Institute of Competitiveness reflected the poor performance of the country in terms of social inequality.

The Competitiveness Roadmap for India@100 shows that inequality in India has increased sharply since 2000 in contrast with most other countries in the world. India has scored low marks in almost all social progress categories for nourishment, education, gender equality, and healthcare. "While poverty has fallen, inequality has significantly increased, especially since 2000. This trend has been in contrast with the dynamics globally and in other emerging economies," the report said. The share of the top 10 per cent of the population in total wealth rose above the global average after 2000 and has remained above it ever since. On the other hand, neighbouring countries like the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia have reduced the share of the top 10 per cent of the population in their total wealth. The global average has also been declining, opposite India's trajectory. "India has low levels of intergenerational mobility, both in terms of income and education. Those born into poor and uneducated families tend to stay that way," the report added. In terms of equal access to quality education, India ranked at 135th spot out of 163 countries. The report gave a score of 0.96 to India, where 0 denotes inequality and 4 denotes equality in access to education. The situation is much worse for women, with India ranking 139 in the gender parity in secondary education attainment. "There are still 186 million women who are unable to read or write a simple sentence in any language, and the female literacy rate is at 65 per cent, more than 15 per cent-points behind men," the report read.

KEYWORDS: social inequality, women, poverty, report, dynamics, India, population

I. INTRODUCTION

Apart from education, the country also performed poorly in healthcare. In terms of equal access to quality healthcare, India was ranked at a lowly 145th spot out of 163 countries. In terms of access to essential health services, the country's rank was 123.

India spends 2.3 per cent of its GDP less on healthcare compared to an average middle-income country. Further, the gap has increased by 0.5 per cent since 2010. The report shows that India's healthcare budget as a per cent of the GDP is even lower than the lower-middle-income countries.

World Bank data shows that the healthcare sector's share in India's budgeted expenditure has fallen from 4.24 per cent in 2002 to 3.01 per cent .

The United Nations describes inequality as "the state of not being equal, especially in status, rights and opportunities". Inequality can be broadly classified in to:

Economic inequality: Economic inequality is the unequal distribution of income and opportunity between individuals or different groups in society.

Social inequality: It occurs when resources in a given society are distributed unevenly based on norms of a society that creates specific patterns along lines of socially defined categories e.g. religion, kinship, prestige, race, caste, ethnicity, gender etc. have different access to resources of power, prestige and wealth depending on the norms of a society.

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Both these categories are deeply intertwined and inequality of one type affects the inequality in another e.g. Social Inequality due to gender have large impact on income of women. In patriarchal societies large gender wage gap tends to exist.

Dimensions of Inequality in India

In India, following are distinctive forms of social inequality:

Gender:The Global Gender Gap Report, ranks India at 142 among 149 countries.Four parameters for measuring gender inequality are economic participation and opportunity, health and survival, educational attainment and political empowerment.Gender wage gap is highest in India according International Labor Organization women are paid 34% less than men.

Women comprise over 42 per cent of the agricultural labour force in the country, yet they own less than 2 percent of its farm land according to the India Human Development Survey (IHDS).

Caste:Caste is significant factor for determining access to resources like education, income, health valued by individuals.India's upper caste households earned nearly 47% more than the national average annual household income, the top 10% within these castes owned 60% of the wealth within the group in 2012, as per the World Inequality Database.

Religion:Religious identities are significant for an individual's ability to mobilize resources.Religious identities can cause prejudices which may lead to economic exclusion and other forms of discrimination which can impact jobs and livelihood opportunities.While minorities such as Christians, Parsis and Jains have a larger share of income/consumption than their population share, Muslim and Buddhist populations have significantly lower access to economic resources.

Ethnicity:Tribal communities in India have been identified as ethnic group on the basis of their unique culture, language, dialect, geographical location, customs etc.The National Family Health Survey 2015-16 (NFHS-4) showed that 45.9% of ST population were in the lowest wealth bracket as compared to 26.6% of SC population, 18.3% of OBCs, 9.7% of other castes.

Economic Inequality:The report by Oxfam, titled "Public good or Private Wealth?" showed that India's top 10% holds 77.4% of the total national wealth, while the top 1% holds 51.53% of the wealth.The bottom 60% population holds only 4.8% of the national wealth.13.6 crore Indians, who make up the poorest 10% of the country, have continued to remain in debt for the past 15 years.The Gini coefficient of wealth in India is at 0.83, which puts India among the countries with highest inequality countries.

Consequences of Inequalities:Inequalities tend to produce social conflict among the social groups e.g. caste groups like Jaats, Maratha, Patels are demanding reservations but this demand is opposed by caste groups already claiming the benefits of reservations, such clash of interest due to perceived inequality tend to produce violent conflicts between opposing caste groups.Inequalities among ethnic groups have led to various ethnic movements demanding separate states or autonomous regions or even outright secession from India. North East has been rocked by numerous such ethnic movement e.g. by Nagas for greater Nagalim etc.Religious inequality tends to generate feeling of exclusion among religious minority groups. This reduces their participation in mainstream, in India religious minorities have large population their economic exclusion compromises the GDP growth of nation as whole.Poor development indicators like IMR, MMR, low per capita income, lower education and learning outcomes at schools, high rate of population growth can be traced to existing socio-economic inequalities. High economic inequality is detrimental to

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public healthcare and education. Upper and Middle classes do not have vested interest in well functioning public healthcare and education as they have means to access private healthcare and education.

II. DISCUSSION

Measures to Deal with Inequalities:Constitutional Provision-Enforcement of Constitutional Guarantee of equality as enshrined in fundamental rights. Articles 14, 15 and 16 form part of a scheme of the Constitutional Right to Equality. Article 15 and 16 are incidents of guarantees of Equality, and gives effect to Article 14.Promoting Civil Society- Provide a greater voice to traditionally oppressed and suppressed groups, including by enabling civil society groups like unions and association with in these groups.Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes should be motivated to become entrepreneurs, schemes like Stand up India need to be expanded to widen its reach by increasing funding.

Women Empowerment:For gender equality policies like affirmative action by reserving seats in legislatures, increasing reservation at Local self government both at Urban and village level to 50% in all states, strict implementation of The Equal Remuneration act,1976 to remove wage gap, making education curriculum gender sensitive, raising awareness about women right, changing social norms through schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao etc.**Inclusion of Religious Minorities:**Religious minority groups need special attention through representation in government jobs, provision of institutional credit, improvement of their education access, protection of their human rights by empowering National commission for Minority, strengthening rule of law etc.**Progressive Taxes:**Additional public resources for public services by progressive taxes on wealthy more and by increasing the effective taxation on corporations, more importantly broadening the tax base through better monitoring of financial transactions.**Economic Policies:**By ensuring universal access to public funded high quality services like Public health and education, social security benefits, employment guarantee schemes; inequality can be reduced to great extent.**Employment Generation:**The failure to grow manufacturing sectors like Textile, Clothing, automobiles, consumer goods etc. is the important reason of rising inequalities.The Labor-intensive manufacturing has the potential to absorb millions of people who are leaving farming while service sector tend to benefit majorly urban middle class.

India has committed to attaining the Sustainable Development Goals by future prospects and to end extreme poverty by that year.According to Oxfam if India stops inequality from rising further, it could end extreme poverty for 90 million people. If it goes further and reduces inequality by 36%, it could virtually eliminate extreme poverty.

Social inequality has been prevalent in India for a long time. Various measures were undertaken to reduce these inequalities. There are various provisions in the constitution as well as statutes that aim to reduce inequality in Indian society. Still, the rank of India in the global mobility index indicates inequality that still persists in the country. There are various types of social inequalities existing in India like gender inequality, deprivations, etc. Some of the major inequalities are-

- Regional disparity increased in the 1990s with southern and western parts doing better than northern or eastern parts. The economic disparity also increased within states.
- The most persistent inequality in India is in the income and distribution of income and resources among the people. This is due to factors like family influence and inheritance etc.
- There exists a large scale difference between people employed in the formal and non-formal sector. People received less money in the informal sector when compared to formal sectors.
- There have been inequalities faced by various communities in the country. This has often led to various conflicts within groups or between one social group and the other.

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- People are still fighting on the basis of religion. There exists inequality between these groups on various fronts like employment and education. For instance, upper-caste Sikhs and Christians are more affluent than upper-caste Hindus in both urban and rural areas.
- The caste system followed in India has been abolished but only on paper. People still practice the same. There exist wide inequalities between upper caste people and lower caste people.

Thus, to sum up, India is facing social inequality in the country in the present scenario as well. The government took various steps like reservations for special groups. However, these steps have not worked to a great extent. Instead, it has led to more conflicts among the communities. Even various land reforms and wealth redistribution could not help in eliminating the existing income inequality in the country.

IV. RESULTS

Social inequality in society has led to decreased social mobility in society. No country can develop if they have less social mobility in their society. People need to have equal opportunities to succeed in their life. The condition should not be such that only privileged classes enjoy privileges and there is no room for other disadvantaged groups to come in the main-stream. Equal opportunities would lead to generating the true potential of the people of a country. Especially in India where most of the people are young, there is an ardent need to work towards increasing social mobility in the country.

As per the latest Sustainable Development Goals Index (SDG) of the NITI Aayog, India reported fewer poor and more fed people, but it is nearly as unequal as last year it was. Inequality in India is not new and it is noticed on various fronts. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown us the inequality prevailing in India through various instances whether it is increased income of the richer people or inequality in accessibility to vaccines. The pandemic has also shown widespread gender inequality across various sectors. There has been an alarming rise in inequality in India despite government efforts. It is high time that the causes and consequences of inequality are paid attention to and a suitable way forward is looked into.

- Social inequality – Social inequality means exclusion. Patterns of unequal access to social resources are commonly called social inequality. This includes:
 - Inequality based on caste – It refers to the unequal treatment of people and their unequal access to opportunities based on caste.
 - Inequality based on gender – It refers to the unequal treatment of people and their unequal access to opportunities based on gender.
 - Inequality based on education – This refers to unequal access to education based on other dimensions such as caste, gender and income.
 - Others – Inequality in access to social goods and services in society, access to opportunities, access to health care, quality housing, travelling, transportation, vacationing etc.

Prevalence of inequality in India

- While India is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, it is also one of the most unequal countries.
- Inequality has been rising sharply for the last three decades.
- The richer are getting richer at a much faster pace while the poor are still struggling to earn a minimum wage and access quality education and healthcare services, which continue to suffer from chronic under-investment.
- As per World Inequality Database, the share of the top 10% of India's national income was about 56%, much higher than comparable countries like Indonesia (41%), Vietnam (42%), and even China (41%).

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- India has the third-highest number of billionaires in the world after the US and China. Yet, India's share of the world's extreme poor is higher than its population share.
- India accounts for 139 million of the total 689 million people (20.17 per cent) living in extreme poverty, according to World Bank estimates, while its population is 17.8 per cent of the world population.
- In terms of wealth inequality, the share of the top 1 per cent of total wealth since 1991, the year of liberalisation, has steadily increased and reached 42.5 per cent.
- Compared with other major economies, India has a relatively large gap between the top 1 per cent and bottom 50 per cent on wealth inequality.
- In terms of income inequality, the share of the top 1 per cent in total income was 21.7 per cent. The share of the bottom 50 per cent in total income was 14.7 per cent.
- The share of the middle 40 per cent shows a similar pattern—it fell from 42.6 per cent in 1961 to 30 per cent.
- In terms of the gap between the top 1 per cent and the bottom 50 per cent, India stands apart among major economies—it is higher, for example than the US, China, Russia, France, and the UK on income inequality.
- In the past decade, while Indian GDP has grown by around 6%, there has been a large decline in female labour force participation from 34% to 27%.
- The male-female wage gap has been stagnant at 50%.
- India's education landscape is extremely unequal. These inequalities manifest themselves in the form of differences based on caste, class and, in some cases, gender.
- As per a nationally representative survey conducted by the National Statistical Office (NSO) those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder are more likely to be studying humanities than a professional course. They are also much less likely to have access to English medium education.
- On the health front, decent healthcare is a luxury only available to those who have the money to pay for it. While the country is a top destination for medical tourism, the poorest Indian states have infant mortality rates higher than those in sub-Saharan Africa.
- India accounts for 17% of global maternal deaths, and 21% of deaths among children below five years.
- These make India one of the unequal countries in the world and people on lower strata, women and children, the weakest members of Indian society.

V. CONCLUSIONS

India's efforts towards reducing inequality

- Constitutional provisions
- The right to equality has been included as a fundamental right in the Indian constitution granting equality before the law (Article 14), prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them (Article 15), equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State (Article 16), abolition of untouchability (Article 17) etc.
- The Indian Constitution recognized the principle of 'Equal Pay for Equal Work' for both men and women, and 'Right to Work' through Article 39(d) and 41. These Articles are inserted as Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP).
- Under Part IV of the Indian Constitution, Article 45 and Article 39(f) of DPSP, had a provision for state-funded as well as equitable and accessible education. The 86th amendment to the constitution of India in 2002, provided the Right to Education as a fundamental right in Part-III of the Constitution.
- Reservation for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Socially and Educationally Backward Classes to bring them at par with the mainstream society are other such efforts.
- Government measures
 - Women empowerment measures
 - Employment generation schemes

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- Poverty alleviation measures
- Schemes for minorities for social inclusion
- Economic policies
 - Reforms in agriculture – Land reforms, crop insurance schemes, Minimum Support Price (MSP) and others.
 - Social security schemes
 - Progressive taxation measures

Recommendations

- Investment in public infrastructure (especially social infrastructure) and education.
- Progressive taxation.
- Better labour laws.
- Increasing employment opportunities.
- Ensuring equitable access to public goods and services.
- Inclusion of socially backward sections of society into the mainstream society.
- Proper implementation of constitutional provisions and government schemes.

Although India has made considerable progress in reducing inequality, the recent pandemic has worsened the existing situation. It is time to introspect to know the shortcomings which drive inequality in India and make plans accordingly. India as a society needs a resource flow from rich to poor through a smooth process and ensure social and economic mobilisation of its population.

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