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The Influence of Socio-Economic Status, Gender and Location on Inter-caste Perceptions and Prejudice in a Student Population

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Abstract

This study analyses the demographic and environmental factors that shape inter-caste attitudes among adolescents in Bihar, a region marked by historical and ongoing caste conflict. [1, 2, 3] Based on a quantitative study of 1,400 school students, this paper examines how socio-economic status (SES), gender, and rural-urban location influence caste stereotypes and prejudice. [1] The findings reveal a complex interplay of these variables. Higher SES was found to correlate with more tolerant views of other castes but was also associated with stronger in-group pride (ethnocentrism). [1] Significant disparities were observed based on geography and gender; students in rural areas and female students both exhibited higher levels of negative stereotyping, prejudice, and religiosity compared to their urban and male counterparts, respectively. [1] These

results underscore that caste prejudice is not monolithic but is significantly modulated by an individual's social, economic, and environmental context, suggesting that effective interventions must be tailored to these specific demographic realities.

Key Words

Demographic, Environmental factors, Inter-caste, Adolescents, Socio-economic status, Prejudice.

Introduction

Casteism remains a powerful and divisive social practice in India, with its influence being particularly pronounced in the state of Bihar. [4, 1, 5] Despite decades of social change, the region's social fabric is frequently strained by inter-group tensions rooted in a rigid caste hierarchy, often culminating in conflict and violence. [6, 2, 3] Understanding the persistence of these attitudes requires moving beyond broad generalizations to analyse the specific factors that nurture or mitigate prejudice, especially among the younger generation who will shape the future of inter-caste relations.

While the existence of negative stereotypes and prejudice is well-documented, less is understood about how these attitudes are shaped by the varying life circumstances of individuals. This paper, therefore, analyses data from a study of school students in Bihar to investigate the influence of three key demographic and environmental factors: socio-economic status (SES), gender, and geographic location (rural vs. urban). By dissecting how these variables correlate with inter-caste perceptions, this analysis seeks to provide a more

nuanced understanding of the architecture of prejudice and identify the conditions that either reinforce or challenge caste-based animosity.

Methodology

1. **Study Population and Demographics:** The analysis is based on data from a study conducted on a sample of 1,400 students from classes IX and X. [1] The sample was designed to be representative across key demographics, with an equal split of 700 male and 700 female students, drawn from both rural and urban areas. [1]
2. **Research Location:** The study was situated in the districts of Patna, Gaya, Nalanda, and Bhojpur. This region was deliberately chosen as it has been a locus of numerous reported incidents of caste-based violence in recent years, making it a critical area for understanding the dynamics of inter-group conflict.
3. **Measurement Instruments:** To quantify the variables of interest, the study employed a series of standardized scales: [1]
 - **Socio-Economic Status (SES) Scale:** A comprehensive scale developed by the original investigators was used to measure SES. It gathered data on multiple indicators, including family income, parental occupation and education, family size, housing type, and other physical assets. [4]
 - **Caste Stereotype and Prejudice Measures:** Singh’s Indian Caste Stereotype Checklist was used to generate positive and negative perception scores for different caste groups, while Hassan’s (1981) Caste Prejudice Scale measured a generalized prejudice orientation. [4]
 - **Religiosity Scale:** A scale adapted by Singh (1976) was used to measure attitudes toward religious faith, a variable found to be relevant in analyzing gender-based differences. [4]

Table 1: Showing Methodologies of the Study

Section	Description	Sources
Study Population and Demographics	Data collected from 1,400 students in classes IX and X, with equal representation: 700 male and 700 female students from both rural and urban areas.	[1]
Research Location	Study conducted in Patna, Gaya, Nalanda, and Bhojpur districts of Bihar, regions with a history of caste-based conflict.	—
Measurement Instruments	<i>Socio-Economic Status (SES) Scale:</i> Developed by investigators; measured income, occupation, education, family size, housing, and assets. <i>Caste Stereotype and Prejudice:</i> Singh’s <i>Indian Caste Stereotype Checklist</i> (positive & negative perceptions); Hassan’s (1981) <i>Caste Prejudice Scale</i> (generalized prejudice). <i>Religiosity Scale:</i> Adapted by Singh (1976) to assess attitudes toward religious faith.	[1], [4]

Results and Discussion

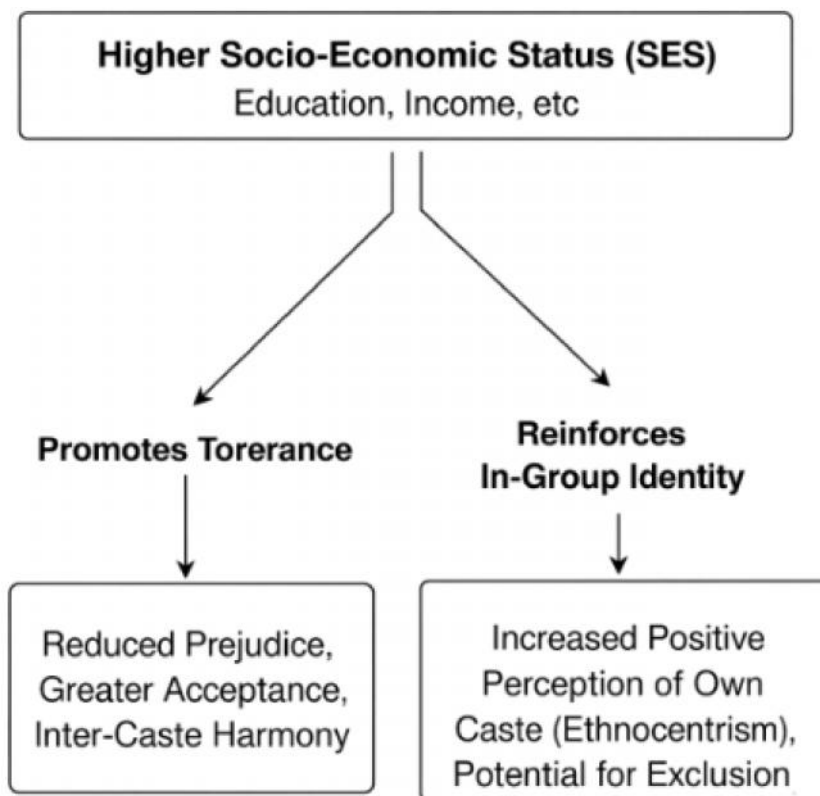
The analysis revealed that SES, gender, and location are significant predictors of students’ attitudes towards other caste groups.

1. **The Paradoxical Influence of Socio-Economic Status (SES):** SES was found to have a complex and somewhat contradictory relationship with caste prejudice. On one hand, higher SES appeared to foster tolerance towards other groups. The data showed that SES was “negatively correlated with unfavourable ratings and positively associated with favourable ratings for other castes.” [1] This suggests that factors associated with higher SES, such as greater access to education and potentially more

diverse social environments, can reduce negative stereotypes and promote a more positive outlook on out-groups. [18, 18]

On the other hand, the study also found that SES was *positively* correlated with ethnocentrism—a high degree of positive perception for one’s *own* caste group. [1] This creates a paradoxical dynamic, illustrated in Figure 1, where economic and educational advancement may lead individuals to adopt more liberal views of others while simultaneously reinforcing a stronger in-group identity. This suggests that while overt prejudice may decrease with rising SES, a strong sense of caste identity and pride remains, which can perpetuate social boundaries in more subtle forms.

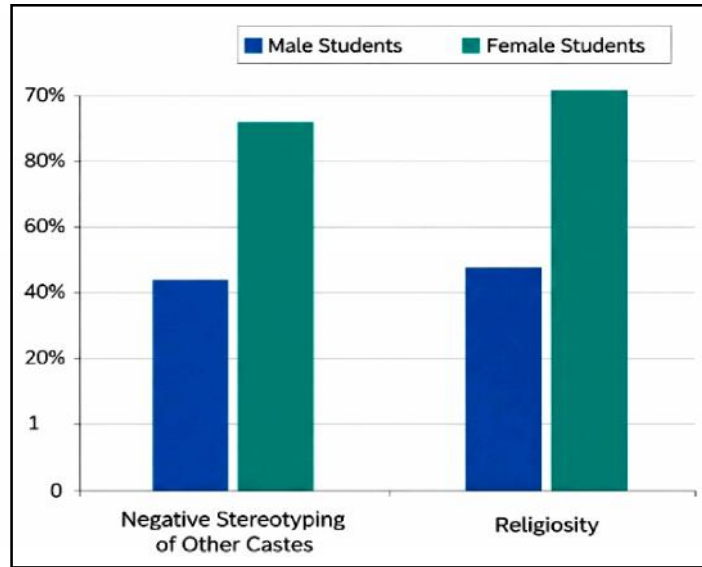
Figure 1: The Dual Effect of Socio-Economic Status on Caste Perceptions This chart illustrates the finding that higher SES correlates with more positive views of other castes but also with stronger positive views of one’s own caste.



2. **Gendered Socialization and Prejudice:** The study identified a significant gender gap in caste attitudes. Female students were found to “rate more negatively and less positively members of other caste groups” compared to their male counterparts. [1] Furthermore, the data revealed that female students “were also found to be more religious than their male counterparts.” [1]

This finding can be interpreted through the lens of patriarchal social structures prevalent in many parts of India. In these contexts, women are often socialized to be the guardians of family honor, tradition, and ritual purity all of which are central to maintaining caste boundaries. [4, 7] This role often comes with greater restrictions on social mobility and interaction outside one’s immediate community, potentially leading to a stronger internalization of traditional norms and prejudices. [8, 9] The higher religiosity among female students further supports this, as religious beliefs have historically provided justification for the caste system. [10, 7]

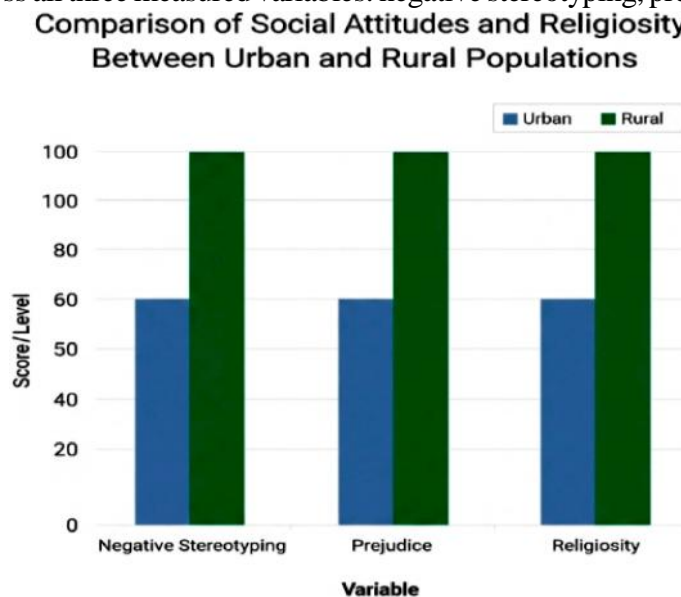
Figure 2: Comparison of Attitudes by Gender This chart provides an illustrative comparison based on the study’s findings that female students scored higher on both negative stereotyping of other castes and religiosity.



3. The Rural-Urban Divide in Caste Attitudes: Perhaps the most pronounced differences were observed between students from rural and urban areas. The study found “significant differences on all the factors of the study, namely, stereotype, prejudice and religiosity.” [1] Specifically, “rural subjects were high on negative stereotyping of other caste groups,” had a “greater degree of prejudice,” and were more religious. [1] In contrast, “urban students tend to rate other caste rather more positively.” [1]

This rural-urban chasm is consistent with broader sociological trends in India. [6, 9] Urban centers, with their greater population density and diversity, facilitate more frequent inter-caste contact in schools, public spaces, and workplaces. This increased exposure can break down stereotypes and reduce prejudice, a phenomenon known as the “contact hypothesis.” [4] Rural areas, conversely, often maintain more rigid social structures where caste identity is more salient in daily life, thus reinforcing traditional prejudices. [5] National surveys have corroborated this trend, showing that urban Indians are generally more willing to accept neighbors from different castes. [11]

Figure 3: Comparison of Attitudes by Location This chart illustrates the study’s finding that rural students scored higher across all three measured variables: negative stereotyping, prejudice, and religiosity.



Conclusion

The evidence clearly demonstrates that socio-economic status, gender, and geographic location are powerful mediators of inter-caste prejudice among adolescents in Bihar. The paradoxical effect of SES suggests that economic development alone is not a panacea for casteism; while it may foster outward tolerance, it can coexist with strong in-group identification. The higher levels of prejudice found among female and rural students highlight the profound influence of social context—patriarchal norms and the rigid social structures of rural life appear to be significant factors in perpetuating traditional biases.

These findings have critical implications for policy and social intervention. Efforts to combat caste prejudice cannot be one-size-fits-all. They must be context-sensitive, addressing the unique social dynamics at play. For instance, interventions in rural areas could focus on creating structured opportunities for positive inter-caste contact, mimicking the diversity of urban environments. Similarly, gender-specific programs that empower adolescent girls and provide them with alternative frameworks for identity beyond traditional roles may be crucial in disrupting the intergenerational transmission of prejudice. Ultimately, this analysis confirms that caste prejudice is not a static relic but a dynamic attitude shaped by the lived realities of young people, demanding a multifaceted and demographically-aware approach to foster a more equitable society.

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