

CONCEPTUALIZING AND MEASURING FORMS OF ETHNIC INEQUALITY: FINDINGS FROM INDIA

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Conceptualizing and Measuring Forms of Ethnic Inequality: Findings from India

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Though status inequality has been shown to be at the heart of right-wing populism and ethnic mobilizations, existing studies have largely focused on economic inequality between groups. This article draws on theories of equality in political philosophy and uses the case of caste in India to operationalize three forms of ethnic inequality: i) *economic inequality*, based on the idea of equality of outcomes, ii) *social inequality*, based on equality of opportunity, and iii) *status inequality*, based on the principles of recognition. Subnational patterns in the results show a strong North-South divide, which are consistent with the findings of a rich body of qualitative and historical research on caste politics. The findings from India further generate testable hypotheses for wider research on ethnic mobilization across the ideological spectrum – conditions of low socioeconomic-inequality along with high status-inequality between groups could predict both *elite backlash* and *subaltern mobilization*.

Keywords: Ethnic Politics; Inequality; Ethnic Inequality; Status Politics; Caste; India

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1. INTRODUCTION

The recent rise of right-wing populism, most dramatically reflected by the Trump presidency and Brexit, has reignited interest in status politics and ethnic inequality (Parker 2021; Berman 2021; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Support for Trump was driven by status anxiety rather than economic hardship (Mutz 2018). Poor-high-status individuals, like the white-working-class in the United States and Europe (Baccini and Weymouth 2021; Gidron and Hall 2020) and poor-*Brahmins* in India (Suryanarayan 2019) have been shown to vote against their material interests to preserve their ascriptive privilege. At the same time, mobilizations for the “struggle for recognition” under the banners of nationality, ethnicity, and race have become the paradigmatic form of social movements since the end of the twentieth century (Fraser 1995). Concerns of status are at the heart of ethnic mobilizations across the ideological spectrum, but research on ethnic politics has largely focused on economic inequality between groups (Baldwin and Huber 2010; Alesina, Michalopoulos, and Papaioannou 2016; Houle, Kenny, and Park 2019). Status inequality remains undertheorized and understudied in political science and development studies (Mendelberg 2022; Chakrabarti 2022).

This research addresses this gap by drawing on theories of justice to distinguish between different forms of ethnic inequality – i) economic, ii) social, and iii) status.¹ Consistent with the existing literature, I conceptualize *economic inequality* as disparity in economic outcomes, like income or wealth, while *social inequality* captures the idea in equality of opportunity, as reflected in disparity in access to public goods across groups (Sen 1999; Roemer 2009). In contrast to unequal access to material resources, *status inequality*, rooted in the idea of recognition, is manifested through segregationist norms in inter-group relations (Taylor 1994; Horowitz 1985). This research maps the existing literature on ethnic inequality along the three dimensions and operationalizes these concepts using the case of caste in India. I use difference in income and literacy between castes to measure economic and social inequality respectively and develop an original measure of status inequality through data on endogamy, untouchability, and violence against lower-castes. The results show that southern India is lower on all dimensions of ethnic inequality, confirming the findings a rich body of qualitative and historical research on caste (Jaffrelot 2003; Ahuja 2019).

¹ I use ethnicity to refer to descent-based attributes like race, language, religion, tribe, caste etc., that are acquired genetically or through cultural and historical inheritance (Chandra 2006).

This research contributes to the emerging literature on status politics by offering a theoretically grounded, contextually relevant, and generalizable measure of status inequality. The findings from India further suggest that the tension between socioeconomic-inequality and status-inequality could offer a parsimonious explanation for ethnic mobilization at either ends of the political spectrum – the relative economic decline of high-status groups has been shown to generate *elite backlash*, while upward mobility among low-status groups motivates *subaltern mobilization*. The relationship between forms of ethnic inequality generates possible hypotheses on predicting ethnic mobilization that future research may test.

The next section briefly maps the existing literature on different types of ethnic inequality from the perspective of theories of justice and outlines the limitations of existing measures. I then offer a way to operationalize status inequality based on the core principles of social hierarchy. Section three builds upon the discussion to measure caste inequality in India. The final two sections present the results and discuss the implications of the findings on inter-ethnic relations.

2. CONCEPTUALIZING FORMS OF ETHNIC INEQUALITY

The idea of equality is central to theories of justice in political philosophy (Rawls 1999; Nussbaum 2011; Taylor 1994). Thinkers have broadly conceptualized equality along three dimensions – outcome, opportunity, and recognition. I use these normative principles to conceptualize three forms of ethnic inequality – i) *economic inequality*, ii) *social inequality*, and iii) *status inequality*. Table 1 summarizes the existing literature along the theoretical underpinnings of the respective concepts of ethnic inequality.

Table 1: Concepts of Ethnic Inequality

	Principle	Theory	Outcomes	Studies
Economic Inequality	Equality of Outcome	Utilitarianism	Income and Wealth; Well-being	Huber & Suryanarayan 2016; Higashijima & Houle 2018; Baldwin & Huber 2010; Houle et al 2019; Cederman et al. 2013
Social Inequality	Equality of Opportunity	Capabilities Approach	Public goods (health/education)	Alesina et al. 2016; Omoeva et al. 2018; Coppedge et al. 2022
Status Inequality	Equality of Social Relations	Politics of Recognition	Group endowment (e.g., size); social attitude; political power	Shayo 2009; Suryanarayan 2019; Suryanarayan & White 2021; Mutz 2018; Birnir et al. 2015; Wimmer et al. 2009; Wucherpfennig et al. 2011

Economic Inequality: The most basic understanding of equality is based on *equality of outcome*, as reflected by income and wealth. This view broadly corresponds to utilitarian theories that have been especially influential in the field of economics (Ravallion 2016). Utilitarianism is premised on maximizing the overall societal well-being, reflected through Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Concerns about the distributional dimension of development led economists to examine inequality in income, commonly measured through the Gini coefficient.² In the context of ethnic groups, scholars have explored disparity between groups through *Between-Group Inequality* (BGI). BGI utilizes the principles of the Gini index but is based on the group's mean income. Existing studies have measured BGI through data on income and assets (Huber and Suryanarayan 2016; Higashijima and Houle 2018), or self-reported perception of wellbeing (Baldwin and Huber 2010; Houle, Kenny, and Park 2019) in large cross-country surveys, such as the *World Values Survey*, *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems*, and *Afro-barometer*. Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug (2013) measure ethnic marginalization by examining the ratio of the poorest and richest group relative to the country's mean income.

Social Inequality: The second approach to equality, derived from theories of social justice, utilizes the idea of *equality of opportunity* (Roemer 2009). One may not be born into wealth, but the state and social institutions can aim to ensure equitable access to public goods. Equalization of social opportunity was formally incorporated as an axis of development through the *Capabilities Approach* and the adoption of the *Human Development Index (HDI)* by the United Nations. In contrast to utilitarianism, development was conceptualized as a means to enhance human freedoms through interconnected goals of economic development, social opportunity, and expansion of political and civil rights (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2011). Publicly funded education and universal healthcare are the most common policy measures in this regard. The *HDI*, for example, uses performance in health, education, and income to measure well-being. Within this realm, Alesina et al. (2016) use differences in nighttime-luminosity across historical homelands of ethnolinguistic groups to measure inequality. Omoeva et al. (2018) focus on difference in educational attainment between groups. *V-dem* measures use expert-coded indicators of access to public services across groups (Coppedge et al. 2022).

Given the plausibility and unreliability of income data in many countries, existing studies have used innovative techniques to measure inequality. In a review of research on ethnic inequality, Leipziger

² For an intellectual history of economic inequality, see Milanovic (2023).

(2022) finds a high degree of correlation between social and economic inequality, but cross-national measures are interestingly not highly correlated, even after accounting for differences in conceptualization and aggregation.

Status Inequality: While social and economic inequality allude to forms of material deprivation, *status inequality* concerns worth or respect accorded to groups, what political philosophers broadly construe as “recognition” (Taylor 1994; Fraser 1995). Status plays a particularly salient role in societies with legacies of caste, slavery, colonialism, and apartheid where historical inegalitarian intergroup relations continue to be manifested through ascriptive discrimination. Group-based discrimination in employment, housing, law enforcement, and political institutions is well-documented in several contexts (Oskooii 2016). The idea of *status inequality* goes back to Weber’s conceptualization of inequality, that he argued is rooted in three distinct sources – resources, power, and status (Weber 1978). Not unlike resources and power, status exerts an independent effect on inequality, but has received considerably less scholarly attention (Ridgeway 2014). This is in partly due to the complexity in conceptualization and measurement. Status tends to be confused with related concepts like power, resources, class, culture, identity, and prejudice (Mendelberg 2022).

2.1 Operationalizing Status Inequality

Ideally, a measure of status should be *independent* of the economic and political power of groups. Some of the richest accounts of status politics in political science have come from ethnographic and historical studies (Cramer 2016; Koenig 2022; Gusfield 1986). In the quantitative realm, Mutz (2018) comes closest to the concept of status in social psychology by examining individual attitudes towards social dominance. Gidron and Hall (2020) rely on survey data on self-perceptions of subjective status. Shayo (2009) conceptualizes status in terms of identification with the nation or social class, based on the assumption that individuals gain psychological utility by aligning with the higher-status group. While survey data on social attitudes are conceptually accurate, individual attitudes indicate subjective status and can be prone to social desirability bias. A strand of research on ethnic conflict overcomes the challenge of subjectivity by measuring the representation of all socially and politically relevant groups in political institutions. Cross-national datasets like *Minorities at Risk* (Birnie et al. 2015) and *Ethnic Power Relations* (Wimmer et al. 2009; Wucherpfennig et al. 2011) capture group-status indirectly through ethnic exclusion. Such measures, however, use power as a proxy for status.

Finally, drawing on the literature on status threat and group-size in American politics (Craig and Richeson 2014; Cikara, Fouka, and Tabellini 2022), recent studies rely on group-endowment as a proxy for status. Suryanarayan (2019) uses *Brahmin* literacy-rate and population in 1931 to explore the legacy of *Brahmin* dominance on contemporary voting. In another study, Suryanarayan and White (2021) measure historical racial-status inequality through data on proportion of enslaved population in 1860. Measures based on demographic strength risk conflating status with resource. Minorities with comparable populations in the United States, for example, vary considerably in their political and economic power (McClain et al. 2009). Moreover, outside North America and Europe, low-status groups – like blacks in South Africa, indigenous people in Bolivia and Peru, or lower-caste groups in India, are not necessarily minorities. Overall, most existing measures of status in political science, though relevant to their specific research question, fall short on generalizability.

To avoid conflating status with other concepts, let's focus on first principles. Status inequality is essentially about ascriptive discrimination due to *social hierarchy*. As Tilly (1998) pointed out, opportunity hoarding by the dominant group and the routinized exclusion of categories of people results in “durable inequality”. Historically, hierarchy between the dominant and subordinate group has been enforced through three related, but *distinct* mechanisms: i) ethnic division of labor, ii) hierarchical belief systems, and iii) segregationist intergroup norms (Horowitz 1985; Chakrabarti 2022).³ These mechanisms can offer a way of operationalizing status inequality.

First, economic inequality is maintained through ethnic division of labor and interdependence between groups, where occupational status and ethnicity overlaps. The caste system in Hindu society was based on hereditary occupations where upper-caste groups controlled the domains of religion, politics, and trade. Similarly, laws under colonialism and slavery restricted native/black populations from pursuing prestigious professions. Horowitz (1985) refers to societies where *class and ethnicity coincide* as “ranked” ethnic systems. In unranked systems, the distinction between dominant and subordinate groups is less clear. In Canada, for example, Anglophones and Francophones are culturally distinct but equal, but the legacy of settler-colonialism makes the relations between indigenous people and European-

³ Comparative social hierarchy, in particular the parallels between caste in India and race in Jim Crow America, was the subject of influential scholarship in early twentieth century (Myrdal 1995; Davis, Gardner, and Gardner 2022; Hocart 1950). The area has seen a revival in recent years, notably with Wilkerson's *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (Wilkerson 2020; Yengde 2022; Kim 2021; Chakrabarti 2022).

Canadians “ranked”. The correlation between occupation and resource, however, presents challenges for measurement purposes. Part of the reason why research on status and right-wing populism is analytically powerful is because studying “poor-high-status” individuals circumvents this issue by decoupling status from material endowments (Suryanarayan 2019; Baccini and Weymouth 2021; Gidron and Hall 2020). Notwithstanding the challenges, changes in the occupational structure of groups can provide important insights on status politics in some contexts.

Second, belief systems or ideologies reinforce hierarchy among members of both dominant and subordinate groups. The caste system was based on a belief of spiritual merit accumulated through reincarnation – those born into lower-castes were believed to be punished for their sins in their past lives. This ideological justification for inequality served as self-imposed moral barrier on lower-castes to challenge social hierarchy (Weiner 2001). Similarly, scholars of racial/colonial capitalism emphasize the role of racist beliefs – theories of inherent differences in the ability of groups derived from scientific racism, in justifying slavery and group-based exploitation (Robinson 1983; Ince 2022; Saini 2019). Research on status beliefs is already well-established in social psychology, most notably through the *Social Dominance Theory* (Sidanius and Pratto 1999) and *System Justification Theory* (Jost and Banaji 1994; Jost 2020). Here scholars examine individual preference for hierarchy to study stereotyping, prejudice, and outgroup favoritism in the context of various social hierarchies, including race and caste (Steele and Aronson 1995; Jost and Thompson 2000; Hoff and Pandey 2006).⁴ Cotterill et al. (2014), for example, show that the caste ideology has an independent effect on individual support for social inequality and opposition to affirmative action. While psychologists primarily focus on biases through micro-level studies, sociologists examine the broader links between status beliefs and material inequality (Jackman 1994; Markus and Ridgeway 2022).

Third, hierarchy is reproduced through norms of intergroup behavior and segregation, including spatial separation, and restrictions on sex, marriage, and social contact. Such norms serve two functions, subordination and separation between groups. Low-status groups were expected to show deference to the dominant group. Subordinate groups have historically been depicted as dirty, to justify segregation. The caste system in India was based on an elaborate ideology of purity and pollution, which dictated behavioral prescriptions and prohibitions. *Dalits* were considered untouchable because

⁴ For a summary of the literature, see Pratto, Sidanius, and Levin (2006), Jost, Banaji, and Nosek (2004) and Jost (2019).

they engaged in “polluting” jobs like tanning and sanitation. They were excluded from public life and forced to live in segregated settlements in the fringes of towns and villages. The *Burakumin* in Japan, called *Eta* earlier, means “full of filth”. *Samal Luwaan* in the southern Philippines comes from the word *luwaan*, which means “that which was spat out” or “rejected by God” (Horowitz 1985). Ideas of racial purity motivated laws on segregation and anti-miscegenation in United States and Apartheid South Africa (Wilkerson 2020). Violations of such norms were even enforced through violence (Bois 1935).

Segregation offers a particularly useful way to measure status not only because it is analytically distinct from material endowments, but also because of its potential for generalizability. Even though the original beliefs about social hierarchy have loosened, segregation is observed irrespective of class, across different contexts (Yengde 2022). Segregation is an outcome of both historical social hierarchy and contemporary prejudice. Caste in India, for example, continues to be reproduced through endogamy. The rate of inter-caste marriage, as recently as 2011, was less than 6% (Ray, Roy-Chaudhuri, and Sahai 2020). Similarly, racial segregation in the United States, originally institutionalized by several policies like the Jim Crow, continues to define most cities (Uslaner 2012). A large body of work has examined the negative effects of spatial segregation on public goods provision (Trounstein 2016; Xu 2023; Bharathi et al. 2022), intergroup bias and trust (Uslaner 2012; Enos and Celaya 2018), and intergenerational mobility (Campion 2023; Massey 2008). While segregation can take different forms based on contextual factors, it is a feature of most societies with legacies of social hierarchy.

3. MEASURING ETHNIC INEQUALITY IN INDIA

The legacy of the caste system, that stratifies Hindu society into endogamous occupational groups, makes India particularly suited to examine different types of ethnic inequality. Caste is one of the most important factors that determines social and economic outcomes in India (Deshpande 2017; Mosse 2018). While lower-caste groups have made significant gains in recent decades, scholars find a predictable pattern in inequality across groups (Desai and Dubey, 2011; Zacharias and Vakulabharanam, 2011). Field experiments further provide causal evidence on caste-based discrimination (Banerjee et al. 2009).

Regardless of persistence of caste, all regions are not uniformly unequal. Anti-caste movements have been relatively more successful in reducing social inequalities in southern India. I take advantage of this subnational variation to compare different dimensions caste inequality at the state-level along. Lower-caste groups include intermediate castes called *Other Backward Classes* (OBCs), ex-untouchable groups called *Scheduled Castes* (SC), and indigenous groups or *Scheduled Tribes* (ST). Since official statistics on caste is only collected on SCs and STs, the main findings focus on SCs.

Economic Inequality: I operationalize *economic inequality* through data on income disaggregated by caste, using the *India Human Development Survey (IHDS)*. The *IHDS* is one of the few nationally representative surveys to collect data on all caste groups (see Table S1 in the Appendix). In line with existing studies, I use BGI to compute caste inequality, given by the formula below. BGI is interpreted as the expected difference in the mean income of the groups of any two randomly selected individuals.

$$BGI = \frac{1}{2\bar{y}} \sum_{m=1}^k \sum_{n=1}^k p_m p_n |\bar{y}_m - \bar{y}_n|$$

where, m and n are index groups, p_m is proportion of population in group m, $\bar{y}_m$ is average income of group m, $\bar{y}$ is average income in the society, k is number of groups in the society

Social Inequality: Education is widely regarded as an indicator of equality of opportunity (Sen 1999). To measure *social inequality*, I rely on SC and non-SC literacy-rates from the *Census of India* to calculate BGI in literacy. Though literacy-rate is a function of both public and private schooling, lower-caste students are more likely to attend government schools.⁵

Status Inequality: I draw on two specific aspects of social hierarchy to measure *status inequality*: i) social segregation, reflected by the practice of endogamy and untouchability, and ii) group-based violence. Consistent with the scholarship on caste, I assume that higher levels of inter-caste marriage indicate a breakdown of social hierarchy.⁶ Untouchability is a more severe form of social exclusion. Despite legal measures, untouchability continues to be practiced in less overt forms throughout the country (Thorat and Joshi 2020). Violence against lower-castes is another extreme measure employed by dominant groups to maintain hierarchy (Mosse 2018).

⁵ A fourth of the total enrollment in India in 2010-11 was in private schools (Kingdon 2020). Majority of public school students in the state of Haryana, for example, are SC and OBC (Tribune 2016).

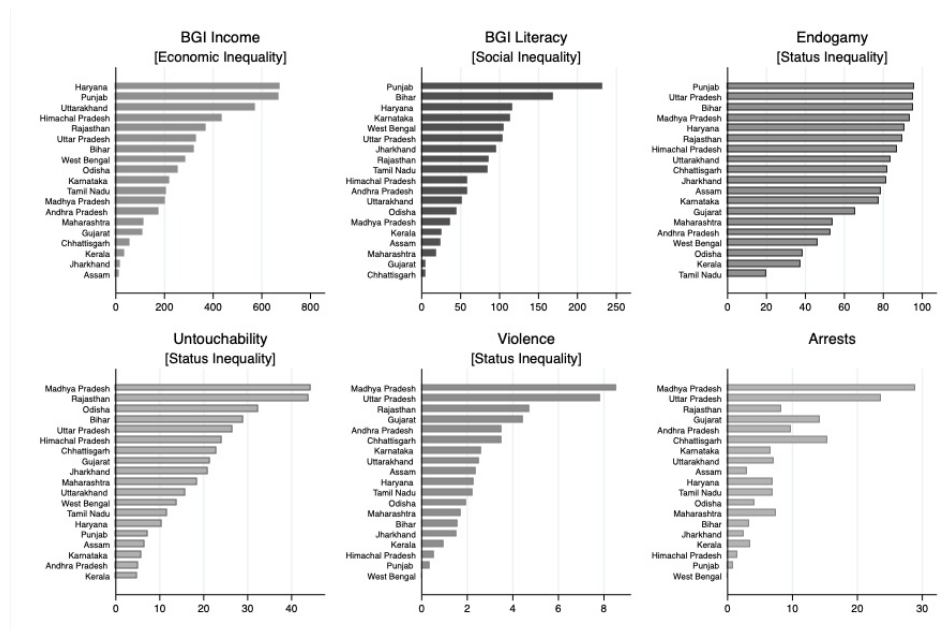
⁶ While endogamy could be a means to maintain cultural distinctiveness, scholars agree that the endogamy is main mechanisms that reproduces caste hierarchy in India. Several anti-caste thinkers have advocated inter-caste marriage in breaking down the caste system (Omvedt 2008).

The main measure on status inequality is based on prevalence of endogamy, which I operationalize through data from *IHDS*. I use the following question, focusing on SCs: “Do you know anyone in your community who has had an inter-caste marriage?” The second measure examines subnational variation in practices of untouchability. I rely on the *IHDS* again, using the following question asked to SC respondents: “In your household have some members experienced untouchability in the last 5 years?”. Finally, I use data from the *National Crime Records Bureau* to measure violence against SCs. This data uses complaints filed with the police *only* in cases when the victim is a SC and the perpetrator a non-SC. Given concerns of reporting bias, I focus on serious crimes – murders (per 1000 persons) averaged over eleven years (2001-11).⁷

4. FINDINGS AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

State-rankings on the full set of measures are presented in Figure 1. Figures S1 to S8 in the Appendix present detailed findings on other groups (OBC and ST) and time periods. Figure 2 maps the main measures – BGI income, BGI literacy, and endogamy.⁸

Figure 1: State Rankings of forms of Ethnic Inequality

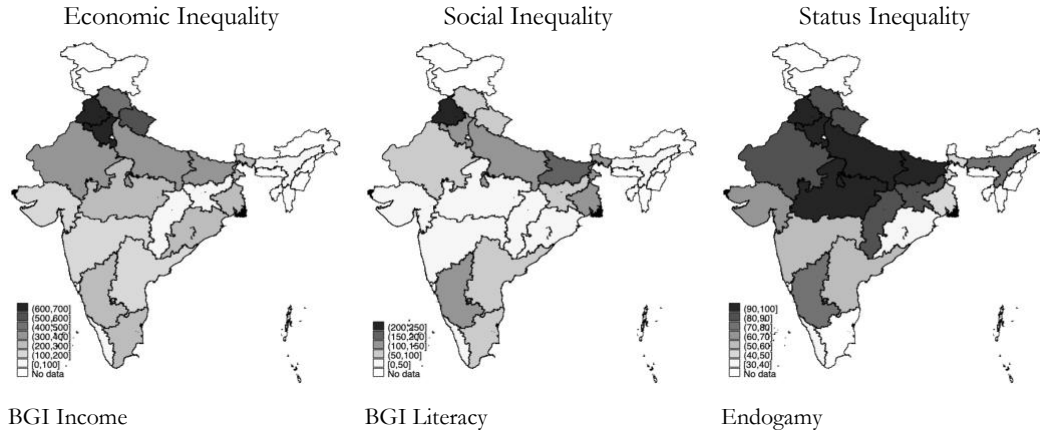


⁷ Crimes against SCs are underreported due to pressure from local elites, with a conviction of less than 28 percent (Mosse 2018). The variation in violence by types of crime possibly reflects reporting bias (see Table S6). Figure S7 further plots arrests to show state responsiveness to such violence.

⁸ These measures are internally consistent, as reflected by high correlations across sub-groups (see Tables S2, S3 and S4).

Overall, two main findings emerge. First, the North-South divide clearly stands out on all dimensions of inequality. As scholars of caste politics predict (Ahuja 2019; Varshney 2000), the southern states are indeed more egalitarian. States in the North are more unequal and have particularly high levels on status inequality. Longitudinal trends in literacy-rates show that while social inequality between groups has reduced over time, state rankings have remained consistent (see Figures S2 and S3, and Table S3).⁹

Figure 2: Forms of Ethnic Inequality in Indian States



Second, consistent with cross-national trends (Leipziger 2022), we observe a high correlation between economic and social inequality (Table 2). Status inequality, based on endogamy, is moderately correlated with economic and social inequality. Correlations between the three measures of status are positive and moderate, but the correlations between BGI income and untouchability, BGI literacy and untouchability, and BGI literacy and violence are surprisingly negative (also see Figure S8).

Table 2: Correlation Matrix: Measures of Caste Inequality

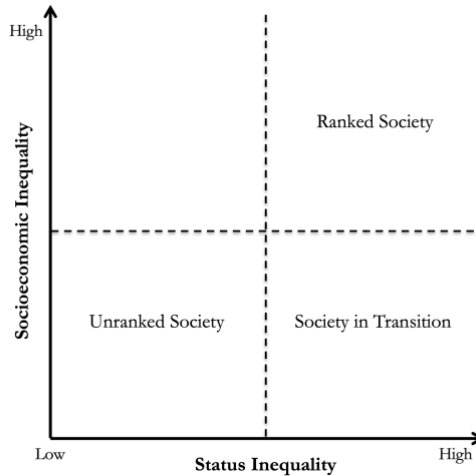
	Income	Literacy	Endogamy	Untouchability	Violence
Income	1				
Literacy	0.63**	1			
Endogamy	0.42	0.36	1		
Untouchability	-0.10	-0.22	0.37	1	
Violence	0.03	-0.08	0.26	0.42	1

Note: * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$ (Pearson's correlation)

⁹ Figure S2 shows state ranking in BGI-literacy and S3 plots the difference between SCs and non-SCs literacy-rate. Note that the two rankings don't overlap completely. While BGI is an improvement over standard measures of diversity like ethnolinguistic fractionalization (ELF), it is less useful in capturing the complexity in social hierarchy in cases of heterogeneity across units since it computes difference in income as *absolute* values. Unlike other states, SC literacy in states of Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, and Assam, for example, is higher than non-SCs, but BGI rankings absorb this difference.

How should we make sense of the findings? I interpret the results by theorizing the relationship between different forms of ethnic inequality, as illustrated in Figure 3. Given the conceptual and empirical alignment between economic and social inequality, I combine them along one axis. This scheme generates three types of cases: ranked societies, unranked societies, and societies in transition.

Figure 3: Socioeconomic Inequality versus Status Inequality



The bottom-left and top-right quadrants represent two ideal-types – cases when both socioeconomic and status inequality are low or high respectively. The former exemplifies multiethnic societies where groups are not stratified by class, or *unranked societies* (Horowitz 1985). Anglo-Saxons and Francophones in Canada, and Swiss-Germans and Swiss-French exemplify such cases. Here multicultural policies aim at recognizing the cultural rights of minorities, through say state recognition of their language in schools and bureaucracy (Taylor 1994).

In contrast, ethnic groups in the top-left quadrant are not just differentiated by cultural attributes, but are also stratified by status. Examples of *ranked societies* include India, South Africa, and the United States. Though caste inequality is prevalent throughout India, several states in the North are closer to the ideal-type of a ranked society. The long history of social movements in the southern states, in contrast, has been instrumental in reducing caste hierarchy and in making states more responsive to lower-castes (Subramanian 2000; Ahuja 2019).¹⁰ It is interesting that states like Punjab, Himachal

¹⁰ Scholars have offered structural explanations for this North-South divide. Upper-caste groups form a larger share of the population in the North and the landlord-based *zamindari* system in most northern states limited the economic independence of lower-castes, creating barriers for mobilization (Jaffrelot 2003; Banerjee and Iyer 2005). Though existing

Pradesh, and Bihar in the North have some of the highest levels of socioeconomic inequality and endogamy, but rank at the bottom in caste-based violence (see Figures 1 and 2). Violence against lower-castes may paradoxically be low in one of the two extreme contexts – when social relations are relatively egalitarian, or when the social order is so unequal that lower-castes are unable to question their position in the hierarchy. Social psychologists point to the role of status beliefs in the stability of exploitative social systems (Sidanius and Pratto 1999; Jost 2020). Jost, Banaji, and Nosek (2004, 885) argue, “hierarchy is maintained not only through mechanisms of in-group favoritism and out-group derogation exercised by members of dominant groups, but also by the complicity of members of subordinated groups, many of whom perpetuate inequality through mechanisms such as out-group favoritism.”

The bottom-right quadrant represents *societies in transition* where socioeconomic inequality between high-status and low-status groups has reduced. The divergence of socioeconomic and status inequality may predict both elite backlash and subaltern mobilization. Though the correlation between BGI income/literacy and violence is weak, the negative association between the two is only observed in the North (see Tables S7 and S8).¹¹ Evidence from secondary sources suggests that such violence reflects *backlash* against lower-caste empowerment. Sharma (2015) finds that crime against SCs is highest in districts where the difference in the standard of living between SCs and upper-castes has declined the most, i.e., where BGI is low. Inter-caste conflict further coincides with the implementation of affirmative action policies (Girard 2018; 2021). Upper-caste backlash is also manifested through arson against signs of material progress, public stripping, and attacks on social media (Mosse 2018).

These findings find resonance in other contexts where high-status groups have experienced decline in social dominance. Petersen (2002), for example, argued that the Holocaust in Lithuania was driven by occupied Lithuanians who lost their dominant status after Jews were placed in visible positions of power following the Soviet invasion. The expansion of black political rights during the Reconstruction

studies that use group-size as a proxy for status don’t measure status directly, they are able to capture such structural factors (Suryanarayan 2019).

¹¹ I focus on violence because data on untouchability is based on only one round of survey and has low internal consistency (see Table S5). Reporting rates vary considerably by crime (see Tables S6). The correlation between socioeconomic status and violence is stronger for rape and other crimes against SCs in the North (Tables S9 and S10).

era in the United States was met by unprecedented racial violence (Bois 1935). More recently, though blacks have suffered more due to deindustrialization, Baccini and Weymouth (2021) find that white voters in places with higher manufacturing layoffs were more likely to support Republican candidates in the 2016 election.

From the perspective of low-status groups, their inability to climb up the status rank despite having broken the class barrier has been shown to motivate *subaltern mobilization* (Jaffrelot 2003; Chandra 2004). The *Channar Revolt* in nineteenth century Kerala, considered one of the first lower-caste movements in India, was led by upwardly mobile *Nadars*. Mobilization in Tamil Nadu was led by wealthy lower-caste landowners who experienced “status dislocation” due to colonial policies that privileged *Brahmins* (Subramanian 2000). More recently, political mobilization in the North was led by peasant-castes who benefited from the Green Revolution (Weiner 2001; Dasgupta 2018). Again, this phenomenon is not unique to India. Well-off blacks express greater discontent about racial relations in the United States. The urban rebellion in the sixties was, in fact, largely led by middle-class blacks (Hochschild 1996). Similarly in South Africa, the black elite formed the main base of African National Congress (Marx 1998). The literature on ethnic conflict emphasizes the role of educated middle-class from low-status groups in political mobilizations in postcolonial countries (Horowitz 1985; Wimmer 2002).

6. CONCLUSIONS

There is a long lineage of scholarship on status in the social sciences, but the study of status is relatively new in political science. Understandably, most measures of status in the emerging literature pose limitations. The development of robust measurements relevant to the big questions in the discipline will take time. This research contributes to the effort by offering a theoretically grounded and generalizable measure of status inequality. In doing so, I draw on theories in political philosophy, social psychology, and ethnic studies to identify the core principle behind three different forms of ethnic inequality – economic, social, and status. Economic and social inequality are well-understood; status inequality reflects social hierarchy. This article argues that intergroup segregation, a defining characteristic of hierarchical societies, can be a useful way to measure status inequality because it is independent of the material endowment of groups. I operationalize forms of ethnic inequality through the case of caste in India, though the underlying concepts are generalizable to other contexts.

This article is primarily aimed at conceptualization and measurement, but the findings from India have wider implications for theories of collective action and inter-group relations. Recent research shows that inequality between groups can predict the strength of group identification (Higashijima and Houle 2018) and ethnic-voting (Huber and Suryanarayan 2016; Houle, Kenny, and Park 2019). Some studies have even challenged the influential “diversity deficit” thesis by demonstrating that inequality between groups and ethnic segregation are better predictors of public goods outcomes than ethnic diversity (Baldwin and Huber 2010; Kustov and Pardelli 2018; Trounstein 2016). However, due to long histories of ascriptive discrimination, economic inequality and segregation can be traced to status hierarchy in many places. Emerging research, in fact, shows that status inequality exerts an independent effect on redistribution (Chakrabarti 2003; Bharathi et al. 2024). This research also suggests that the tension interaction between status inequality and socioeconomic inequality could offer a novel way of understanding ethnic mobilization more broadly. Much of the research on status politics has focused on elite backlash by poor-high-status individuals (Suryanarayan 2019; Baccini and Weymouth 2021), but we don’t know enough about upward mobility of low-status groups shapes such dynamics. The surge in populism globally underscores the need to take status more seriously. A closer understanding of both the material and non-material sources of exclusion stands to provide valuable insights for future research on ethnic politics.

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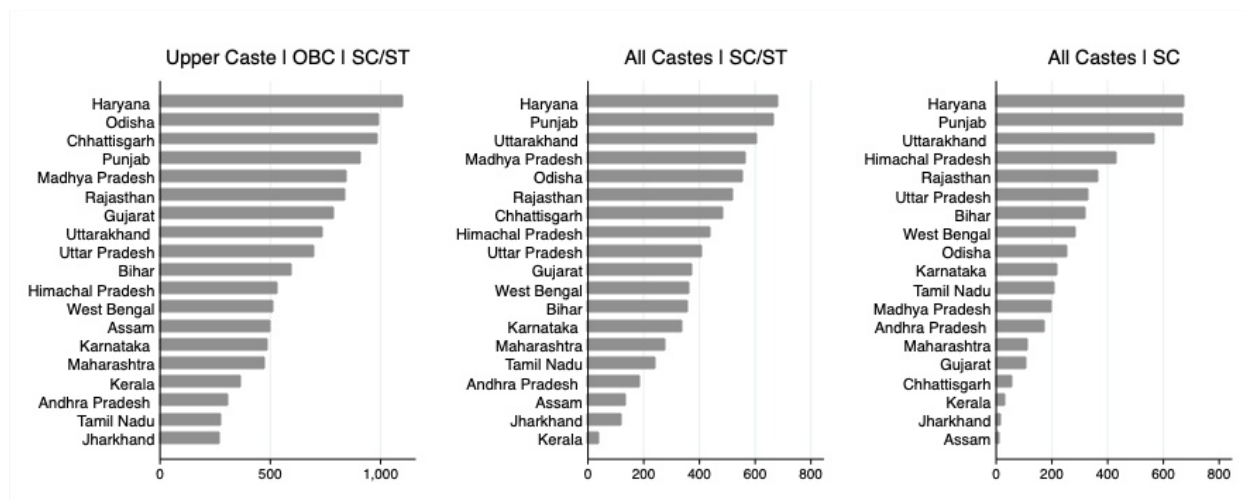
Supplemental Appendix

Conceptualizing and Measuring Forms of Ethnic Inequality: Findings from India

Table S1: Caste Distribution in IHDS Data

	N	%
Upper Caste	11857	28.19
Other Backward Classes (OBC)	17056	40.55
Scheduled Caste (SC)	8941	21.25
Scheduled Tribe (ST)	3644	8.66
Other	568	1.35
Total	42066	

Figure S1: Caste-based Inequality in Income (BGI)



Note: The first panel focuses on three groups (upper-castes, OBCs, and SCs/STs). The second presents BGI between SCs/STs and the rest the population. The third (main measure) looks at the difference between SCs and non-SCs.

Table S2: Correlation Matrix: Income (BGI)

	SC/ST & OBC	SC/ST	SC
SC/ST & OBC	1.00		
SC/ST	0.87	1.00	
SC	0.51	0.79	1.00

Figure S2: Caste-based Inequality in Literacy Rates (BGI)

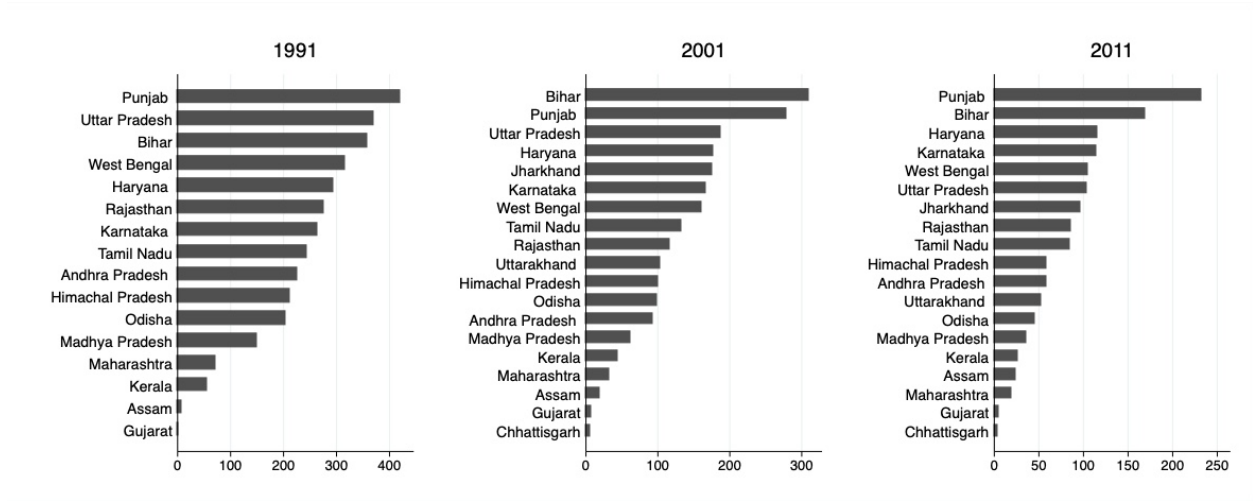


Figure S3: State-Rankings of Caste-based Difference in Literacy Rates

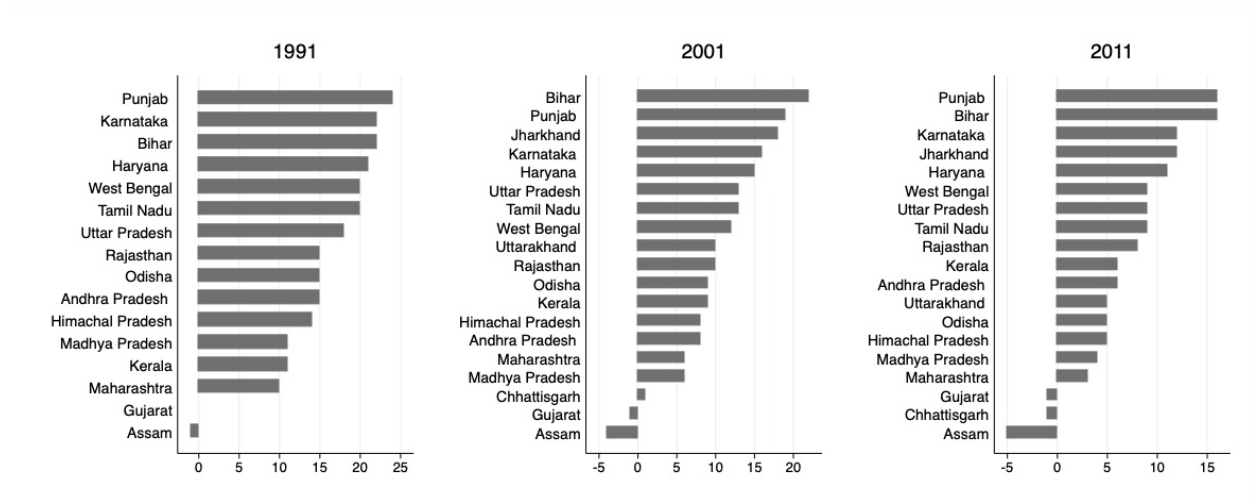
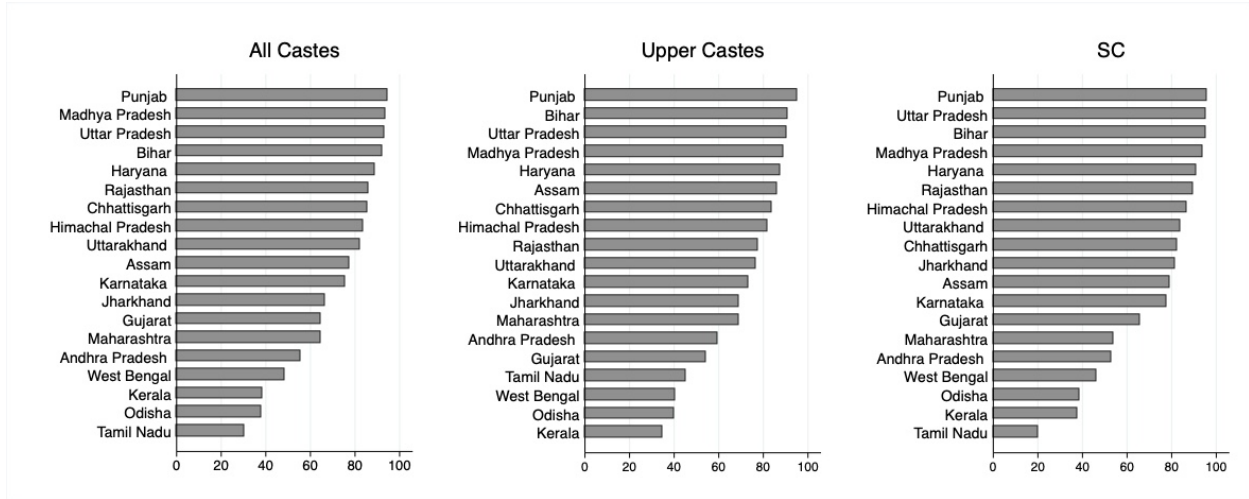


Table S3: Correlation Matrix: Literacy (BGI)

	1991	2001	2011
1991	1.00		
2001	0.92	1.00	
2011	0.89	0.96	1.00

Figure S4: Prevalence of Endogamy

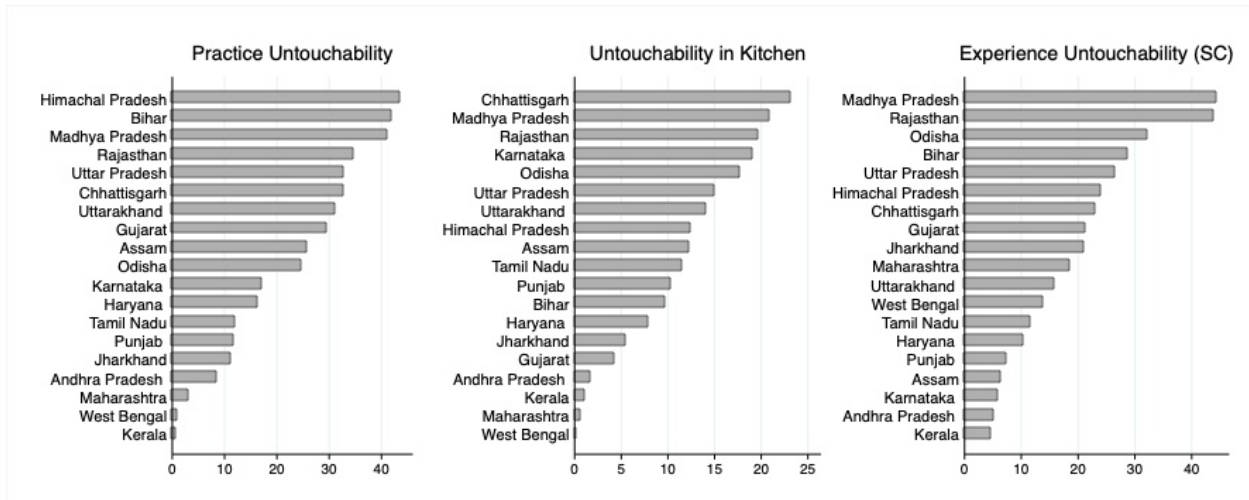


Note: The right panel is restricted to SC respondents. The first two are based on the entire sample and upper-caste respectively

Table S4: Correlation Matrix: Endogamy

	All castes	Upper Castes	SC
All castes	1.00		
Upper Castes	0.96	1.00	
SC	0.98	0.92	1.00

Figure S5: Prevalence of Untouchability

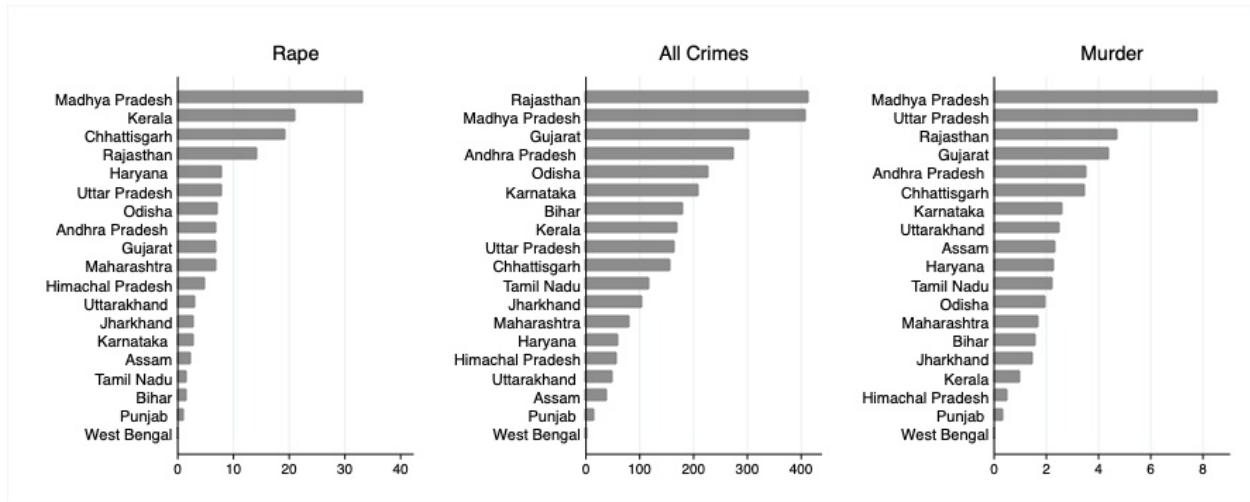


Note: The first two panels are based on questions directed at all respondents: i) “In your household do some members practice untouchability?”, and ii) a follow-up question, “If no, would there be a problem if someone who is scheduled caste were to enter your kitchen or share utensils?” The panel on right uses the following question asked to SC respondents: “In your household have some members experienced untouchability in the last 5 years?”

Table S5: Correlation Matrix: Untouchability

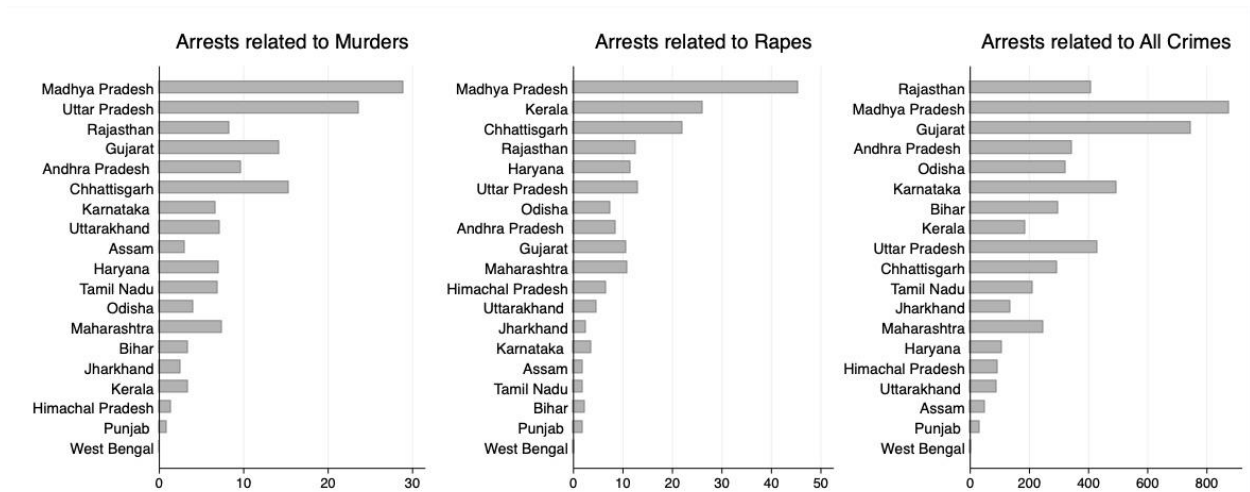
	Experience Untouchability	Practice Untouchability	Untouchability in Kitchen
Experience Untouchability	1.00		
Practice Untouchability	0.72	1.00	
Untouchability in Kitchen	0.54	0.65	1.00

Figure S6: Violence against SCs



Note: The first panel plots state rankings based on rapes. The second includes all crimes against SCs (murder, rape, crimes listed under *Protection of Civil Rights for SCs, SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act*, and other crimes against SCs)

Figure S7: State-Rankings of Arrests related to Crimes against SCs



Note: Arrests (per 1000 persons) are presented in the order of state ranking of the respective crimes (from Figure S6)

Table S6: Correlation Matrix: Violence against SCs

	Murder	Rape	All Crimes
Murder	1.00		
Rape	0.48	1.00	
All Crimes	0.62	0.59	1.00

Figure S8: Forms of Caste-based Status Inequality in Indian States

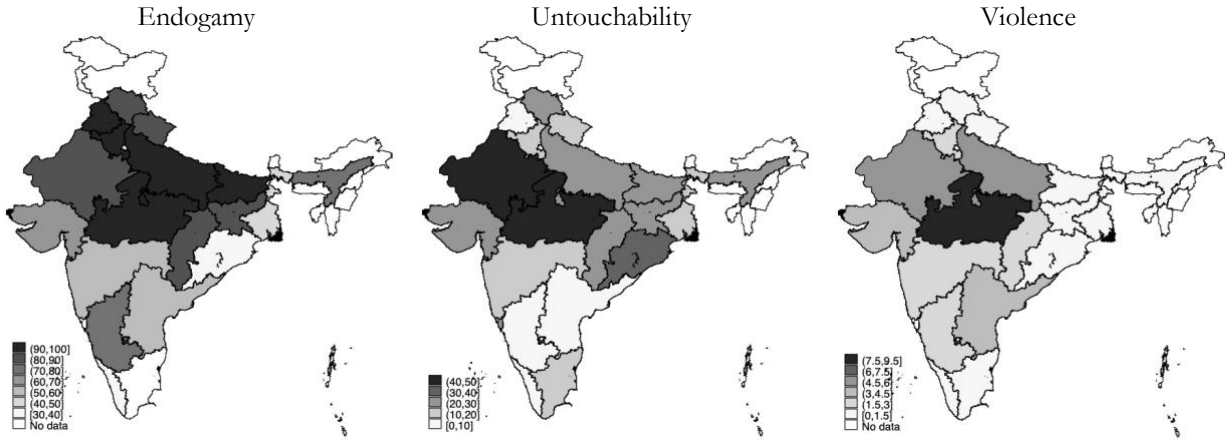


Table S7: Correlation Matrix: Measures of Caste Inequality in North India

	Income	Literacy	Endogamy	<i>Untouchability</i>	<i>Violence</i>
Income	1				
Literacy	0.51	1			
Endogamy	0.42	0.63	1		
<i>Untouchability</i>	-0.51	-0.42	0.14	1	
<i>Violence</i>	-0.14	-0.22	0.50	0.65	1

Note: States in the North include Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand.

Table S8: Correlation Matrix: Measures of Caste Inequality in South India

	Income	Literacy	Endogamy	<i>Untouchability</i>	<i>Violence</i>
Income	1				
Literacy	0.87	1			
Endogamy	0.24	0.29	1		
<i>Untouchability</i>	-0.01	-0.36	-0.17	1	
<i>Violence</i>	0.59	0.37	0.43	-0.30	1

Note: States in the South include Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu

Table S9: Correlation Matrix: Measures of Caste Inequality and Types of Violence in North India

	Income	Literacy	Murder	Rape	All Crimes
Income	1				
Literacy	0.51	1			
Murder	-0.14	-0.22	1		
Rape	-0.32	-0.48	0.79	1	
All Crimes	-0.38	-0.13	0.61	0.65	1

Note: States in the North include Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand.

Table S10: Correlation Matrix: Measures of Caste Inequality and Types of Violence in South India

	Income	Literacy	Murder	Rape	All Crimes
Income	1				
Literacy	0.87	1			
Murder	0.59	0.37	1		
Rape	-0.90	-0.61	-0.48	1	
All Crimes	-0.11	0.15	0.47	0.44	1

Note: States in the South include Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu