



Intersectionality and policy design: Reimagining social empowerment in contemporary India

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Abstract

This study examines the role of intersectionality in reshaping policy design and advancing social empowerment in contemporary India. It argues that persistent inequalities rooted in caste, gender, class, religion, and regional disparities are not isolated phenomena but interconnected structures that produce layered forms of exclusion. Drawing on a qualitative and literature-driven research approach, the study synthesizes recent scholarly and policy debates to analyze how development interventions, welfare schemes, digital governance, and economic reforms engage with—or overlook—intersectional vulnerabilities. The findings indicate that conventional single-axis policy frameworks are inadequate to address the complexity of social stratification. While economic growth and technological transformation have expanded opportunities, marginalized groups continue to face structural and institutional barriers in accessing state resources and development benefits. The study highlights the importance of participatory governance, disaggregated data systems, and context-sensitive implementation strategies in promoting substantive equality. It concludes that integrating intersectionality into policy formulation and evaluation can strengthen institutional accountability, improve inclusivity, and foster transformative empowerment. By reimagining social empowerment through an intersectional lens, the research contributes to broader debates on equitable development and inclusive governance in India.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Social Empowerment, Policy Design, Caste, Gender Inequality, Inclusive Governance, Neoliberal Reforms, India

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, social empowerment in India is increasingly shaped by complex and overlapping structures of inequality. While public policy has historically addressed poverty, caste discrimination, gender disparity, and regional imbalance through targeted welfare schemes, contemporary scholarship argues that these dimensions cannot be treated in isolation. Instead, they intersect to produce layered forms of marginalization that require more nuanced and integrative policy frameworks (Avinash & Joseph, 2024^[2]; A. Banerjee & Mazzarella, 2022)^[3]. The concept of intersectionality—originally rooted in critical social theory—offers a powerful analytical lens for understanding how caste, class, gender, religion, disability, and geography interact to shape life chances and access to resources (Wright & Lovatt, 2024; Nkansah-Dwamena, 2025)^[15, 21]. In the Indian context, where historical hierarchies and rapid socio-economic transformation coexist, intersectional policy design becomes essential for achieving substantive, rather than merely formal, equality.

India's developmental trajectory since economic liberalization has generated significant economic growth and technological advancement. However, growth has not uniformly translated into equitable social outcomes. Persistent inequalities in education, healthcare, digital access, labor markets, and political participation reveal that structural barriers remain deeply embedded (S. Banerjee *et al.*, 2023; Gangal *et al.*, 2023)^[4, 10]. For instance, women from Scheduled Castes or minority religious communities in rural regions experience compounded disadvantages that differ qualitatively from those faced by urban upper-caste women. Such differentiated vulnerabilities highlight the inadequacy of single-axis policy approaches (Fatima & Batta, 2025; Hariyani *et al.*, 2025)^[9, 12].

Recent empirical studies emphasize that social protection mechanisms, skill development initiatives, and digital inclusion programs often fail to account for intersectional disparities, leading to uneven policy outcomes (Dam *et al.*, 2025; Raman *et al.*, 2025)^[6, 16]. For example, access to digital platforms for welfare delivery may be constrained not only by income but also by gender norms, literacy levels, and regional infrastructure deficits (Ghosh, 2025)^[11]. Similarly, public health interventions may inadequately address the specific needs of marginalized communities if caste-based exclusion or cultural stigmas are overlooked (Deivanayagam *et al.*, 2025; Donald *et al.*, 2025)^[7, 8]. These findings underscore the necessity of integrating intersectional analysis into policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation.

At the theoretical level, intersectionality challenges policymakers to move beyond additive frameworks of disadvantage. Rather than viewing inequalities as cumulative but separable, it conceptualizes them as mutually constitutive and context-dependent (Aschner Rosselli *et al.*, 2025; Wright & Lovatt, 2024)^[1, 21]. This perspective has significant implications for policy design. It calls for participatory governance structures, disaggregated data collection, and localized interventions that reflect the lived realities of marginalized groups (Biju & Gayathri, 2025; Sirolli *et al.*, 2025)^[5, 18]. Moreover, intersectional approaches encourage collaborative models involving civil society, grassroots organizations, and community leaders to ensure that empowerment initiatives are culturally sensitive and socially responsive (Timpanaro *et al.*, 2025; Waggy & Yousuf, 2025)^[19, 20].

In contemporary India, policy debates increasingly engage with questions of representation, inclusive growth, and social justice. Initiatives in education reform, women's

entrepreneurship, digital public infrastructure, and public health demonstrate the state's commitment to inclusive development. However, without an intersectional lens, such initiatives risk reinforcing existing hierarchies or excluding the most vulnerable subgroups (Hegade & Andalgavkarkulkarni, 2025; Shafique *et al.*, 2025) ^[13, 17]. Intersectionality thus becomes not merely a theoretical framework but a practical tool for reimagining governance in a diverse and plural society.

Reimagining social empowerment through intersectional policy design entails recognizing diversity within marginalized categories, addressing structural discrimination, and fostering institutional accountability. It requires policies that are adaptive, evidence-based, and attentive to socio-cultural contexts. As global development discourse increasingly emphasizes equity, resilience, and sustainability, India's experience offers a critical site for examining how intersectionality can inform inclusive statecraft (Leknoi *et al.*, 2025; Nkansah-Dwamena, 2025) ^[14, 15].

This study situates itself within this evolving discourse by exploring how intersectionality can reshape policy design to advance social empowerment in contemporary India. By synthesizing recent theoretical and empirical contributions, it seeks to bridge the gap between normative ideals of inclusion and the practical challenges of implementation. In doing so, the paper contributes to broader debates on governance, justice, and transformative development in complex, stratified societies.

Literature Review

The growing body of scholarship on intersectionality and public policy underscores the urgency of rethinking social empowerment frameworks in deeply stratified societies such as India. Originally conceptualized within critical feminist and race theory, intersectionality provides an analytical lens to examine how multiple axes of identity—such as caste, class, gender, religion, disability, and geography—interact to produce complex and context-specific forms of disadvantage. Recent interdisciplinary studies have extended this framework to development policy, governance, and social justice, arguing that conventional welfare approaches often fail to address the mutually constitutive nature of inequalities (Wright & Lovatt, 2024; Aschner Rosselli *et al.*, 2025) ^[1, 21].

Theoretical Foundations of Intersectionality in Policy

The theoretical evolution of intersectionality highlights a shift from single-axis frameworks toward multidimensional analyses of power structures. Wright and Lovatt (2024) ^[21] emphasize that intersectionality is not merely about adding categories of disadvantage but about understanding how structural systems—patriarchy, capitalism, caste hierarchies, and state institutions—interact dynamically. Aschner Rosselli *et al.* (2025) ^[1] further argue that intersectional policy design requires embedding equity principles into institutional architecture rather than treating marginalized identities as isolated beneficiaries of welfare programs.

In the Indian context, scholars have drawn attention to the historically entrenched nature of caste-based stratification and its intersection with gender and economic inequality (A. Banerjee & Mazzarella, 2022) ^[3]. Their work suggests that neoliberal reforms, while promoting growth, have not sufficiently dismantled inherited hierarchies. Instead,

market-led development has sometimes reproduced or intensified vulnerabilities among socially disadvantaged groups. S. Banerjee *et al.* (2023) ^[4] extend this critique by analyzing how labor market reforms and informalization disproportionately affect women from marginalized caste backgrounds, demonstrating the need for policy instruments sensitive to intersecting exclusions.

Intersectionality and Social Protection

Social protection and welfare programs have been central to India's development agenda. However, empirical evidence indicates that their outcomes are uneven across social groups. Dam *et al.* (2025) ^[6] highlight that targeted poverty alleviation schemes often rely on income-based criteria that overlook social stigmas, cultural barriers, and geographic isolation. Similarly, Hariyani *et al.* (2025) ^[12] argue that rural women from minority communities face barriers in accessing entitlements due to patriarchal norms and limited mobility, factors rarely incorporated into policy assessments.

Gangal *et al.* (2023) ^[10] emphasize the importance of disaggregated data in identifying intersectional vulnerabilities. Without granular data on caste, gender, disability, and regional location, policymakers risk designing "one-size-fits-all" interventions. Raman *et al.* (2025) ^[16] support this argument, demonstrating that digital governance platforms—although intended to enhance transparency—may inadvertently exclude populations lacking digital literacy or infrastructure access. Such findings underscore the importance of integrating intersectional analysis into welfare delivery mechanisms.

Public Health and Intersectional Inequality

Public health scholarship increasingly recognizes the interplay between social determinants and identity-based exclusion. Deivanayagam *et al.* (2025) ^[7] illustrate how caste and gender biases shape healthcare access and health outcomes in marginalized communities. Their analysis reveals that structural discrimination within institutions often limits the effectiveness of universal health programs. Donald *et al.* (2025) ^[8] further contend that intersectional inequities became more visible during public health crises, where vulnerabilities were amplified along lines of occupation, housing conditions, and social stigma.

Fatima and Batta (2025) ^[9] highlight the intersection of religion, gender, and poverty in shaping maternal and child health outcomes. They argue that culturally insensitive health policies can undermine trust in public institutions, reinforcing exclusion rather than empowerment. These insights suggest that intersectional policy design must go beyond technical service provision to address structural biases embedded in governance systems.

Gender, Labor, and Economic Empowerment

The intersection of gender with caste and class remains a focal point in the literature on economic empowerment. Hegade and Andalgavkarkulkarni (2025) ^[13] note that entrepreneurship programs targeting women often assume homogeneous experiences of discrimination. However, women from Scheduled Castes or tribal communities face distinct barriers in accessing credit, markets, and networks. Ghosh (2025) ^[11] similarly observes that digital financial inclusion initiatives may disproportionately benefit urban,

educated women, leaving rural and low-literacy groups behind.

Nkansah-Dwamena (2025) ^[15] expands the discussion by situating intersectionality within global development discourse, arguing that empowerment strategies must account for structural power asymmetries embedded in transnational economic systems. In India, this translates into examining how global supply chains, informal labor markets, and migration patterns intersect with local hierarchies. Leknoi *et al.* (2025) ^[14] reinforce this perspective by demonstrating that inclusive economic growth requires coordinated policies across education, labor regulation, and social security systems.

Governance, Participation, and Institutional Reform

Intersectional policy design also necessitates participatory governance models. Sirolli *et al.* (2025) ^[18] advocate for co-creation approaches that involve marginalized communities in policy formulation and evaluation. This participatory paradigm challenges top-down welfare delivery systems and encourages contextualized interventions. Waggy and Yousuf (2025) ^[20] argue that intersectionality enhances institutional accountability by foregrounding voices traditionally excluded from decision-making processes.

Shafique *et al.* (2025) ^[17] highlight the role of civil society organizations in bridging the gap between state institutions and marginalized communities. Their findings suggest that partnerships between government agencies and grassroots actors can mitigate implementation gaps and enhance trust. Biju and Gayathri (2025) ^[5] further stress the need for policy coherence across sectors, noting that fragmented governance structures often dilute the impact of empowerment initiatives.

Data, Measurement, and Policy Evaluation

A recurring theme in the literature concerns the methodological challenges of operationalizing intersectionality. Timpanaro *et al.* (2025) ^[19] caution that quantitative metrics alone cannot capture lived experiences of compounded disadvantage. Instead, mixed-method approaches combining statistical analysis with qualitative insights are necessary to understand contextual nuances. This aligns with Wright and Lovatt's (2024) ^[21] assertion that intersectionality must inform not only policy goals but also evaluation frameworks.

Donald *et al.* (2025) and Gangal *et al.* (2023) ^[8, 10] advocate for improved data systems that disaggregate indicators across multiple identity markers. Such data enable policymakers to identify hidden disparities and tailor interventions accordingly. However, scholars warn against technocratic reductionism; data collection must be accompanied by institutional reforms that address structural discrimination.

Toward Transformative Social Empowerment

Collectively, the literature converges on the idea that intersectionality offers a transformative framework for reimagining social empowerment in India. Rather than viewing empowerment as mere access to services, scholars conceptualize it as the redistribution of power, recognition, and resources across intersecting hierarchies (A. Banerjee & Mazzarella, 2022; Nkansah-Dwamena, 2025) ^[3, 15]. This transformative approach requires structural reforms in

education, healthcare, labor markets, and governance institutions.

Recent studies suggest that digital public infrastructure, gender-responsive budgeting, and localized governance reforms hold potential for advancing intersectional equity (Raman *et al.*, 2025 ^[16]; Hegade & Andalgavkarkulkarni, 2025) ^[13]. However, these initiatives must be grounded in participatory and evidence-based frameworks to avoid reinforcing existing exclusions.

In summary, the literature underscores that intersectionality is both an analytical tool and a normative commitment to justice. It challenges policymakers to recognize the complexity of social hierarchies and to design adaptive, context-sensitive interventions. For contemporary India, characterized by rapid socio-economic transformation alongside persistent structural inequalities, integrating intersectional perspectives into policy design is not optional but imperative. The convergence of theoretical insights and empirical findings across disciplines provides a robust foundation for reimagining social empowerment as a multidimensional, inclusive, and transformative process.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the role of intersectionality in shaping policy design and social empowerment in contemporary India. Given the focus on overlapping structures of inequality—caste, gender, class, religion, disability, and regional disparities—a qualitative design enables an in-depth exploration of socio-cultural, institutional, and political dynamics that quantitative methods may insufficiently capture. Intersectionality, as both an analytical and normative framework, requires attention to lived experiences, structural power relations, and contextual variations; thus, a qualitative methodology is particularly suited to unpacking these complexities.

The research relies primarily on a critical and systematic review of scholarly literature, public policy documents, government reports, and empirical studies published between 2022 and 2025 ^[1]. Key academic sources include contemporary studies on intersectional governance, gendered labor markets, digital exclusion, health inequities, and inclusive development (Aschner Rosselli *et al.*, 2025 ^[1]; A. Banerjee & Mazzarella, 2022; S. Banerjee *et al.*, 2023; Deivanayagam *et al.*, 2025; Raman *et al.*, 2025; Wright & Lovatt, 2024) ^[3, 4, 7, 16, 21]. In addition, policy analyses, development reports, and case-based research on welfare implementation, public health systems, digital governance platforms, and women's economic participation were reviewed to contextualize theoretical arguments within Indian policy frameworks.

The study follows a structured review process. First, relevant literature was identified using thematic keywords such as “intersectionality,” “social empowerment,” “inclusive policy,” “caste and gender inequality,” and “neoliberal reforms in India.” Second, selected studies were categorized based on thematic domains including social protection, labor markets, digital governance, public health, education, and participatory governance. Third, recurring patterns of marginalization, institutional responses, and policy gaps were extracted and organized for analytical synthesis.

The objectives guiding this methodology are as follows:

- To examine how intersecting identities—caste, gender, class, religion, and region—shape access to state resources and development opportunities in contemporary India.
- To analyze how policy design and implementation frameworks account for or overlook intersectional vulnerabilities.
- To identify structural, institutional, and cultural mechanisms through which development interventions reproduce or mitigate historical inequalities.
- To synthesize insights from academic and policy literature to propose an intersectional framework for reimagining social empowerment.

Data collection involved systematic extraction of qualitative evidence from peer-reviewed journal articles, edited volumes, government policy documents, and credible institutional reports. Particular emphasis was placed on studies examining marginalized communities in rural and urban contexts, digital public infrastructure, gender-responsive policies, and welfare delivery systems. The inclusion criteria prioritized recent empirical and theoretical contributions that explicitly engaged with intersectionality or multidimensional inequality.

For analysis, the study employs thematic content analysis. Extracted data were coded according to key themes such as intersectional disadvantage, institutional bias, participatory governance, digital divide, laborprecarity, and policy responsiveness. These themes were further organized into broader analytical categories reflecting structural inequalities (e.g., caste hierarchies, patriarchy), institutional frameworks (e.g., welfare delivery systems, public health infrastructure), and socio-economic transformations (e.g., urbanization, digitalization, labor market reforms). This approach enables the identification of both macro-level structural patterns and micro-level experiential dimensions of exclusion and empowerment.

The analytical framework integrates intersectionality theory with policy analysis. Rather than treating caste, gender, or class as isolated variables, the study examines how these axes interact within governance systems to shape differentiated outcomes. This framework allows for a critical assessment of whether contemporary policy instruments promote substantive equality or inadvertently reinforce stratification. It also facilitates comparative reflection across sectors—such as health, education, and economic empowerment—to identify areas of convergence and divergence in policy performance.

The methodological approach is interpretive and critical in orientation. It does not seek to generate statistical generalizations but to construct a theoretically grounded understanding of how intersectionality can inform transformative policy design. By situating contemporary Indian policy debates within broader discussions on equity, social justice, and institutional reform, the study highlights the normative and practical implications of adopting an intersectional lens. This qualitative, literature-driven methodology provides a comprehensive and context-sensitive examination of social empowerment in India. By synthesizing theoretical insights and empirical findings, the research maps the multidimensional mechanisms through which intersecting inequalities operate and evaluates the capacity of policy frameworks to address them. The approach ultimately contributes to developing a more

inclusive and structurally aware model of policy design capable of advancing equitable and sustainable social transformation.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore that intersectionality is not merely a theoretical construct but a critical framework for rethinking policy design and social empowerment in contemporary India. The review of literature reveals that inequalities rooted in caste, gender, class, religion, and region are not independent or additive; rather, they interact in complex ways to produce differentiated and layered experiences of marginalization. Policies designed along single-axis frameworks—such as income-based poverty alleviation or gender-specific entrepreneurship schemes—often fail to address the compounded disadvantages experienced by individuals located at multiple axes of exclusion (Wright & Lovatt, 2024^[21]; A. Banerjee & Mazzarella, 2022)^[3].

The discussion highlights that neoliberal development policies, while fostering economic growth and digital transformation, have not uniformly translated into inclusive empowerment. Studies reviewed indicate that digital governance platforms, welfare delivery systems, and labor market reforms sometimes reproduce structural hierarchies when intersectional vulnerabilities are overlooked (Raman *et al.*, 2025; S. Banerjee *et al.*, 2023)^[4, 16]. For example, digital inclusion initiatives may benefit educated urban populations but exclude rural women, marginalized caste groups, or individuals with limited digital literacy. Similarly, public health and social protection policies often lack culturally sensitive and context-specific approaches, limiting their transformative potential (Deivanayagam *et al.*, 2025)^[7].

Another important insight emerging from the analysis is the need for institutional reform and participatory governance. Intersectional policy design requires disaggregated data, community participation, and accountability mechanisms that recognize diversity within marginalized groups (Gangal *et al.*, 2023; Sirolli *et al.*, 2025)^[10, 18]. Without inclusive consultation processes, policies risk reinforcing elite biases and administrative centralization. The literature suggests that empowerment must be understood as redistribution of power and recognition, rather than mere access to services. Overall, the discussion points to a critical shift from welfare-based inclusion to structurally transformative policy frameworks. Intersectionality encourages policymakers to move beyond technocratic solutions and address deep-rooted social hierarchies embedded in institutions. In the Indian context—marked by historical stratification and rapid socio-economic change—adopting an intersectional lens can strengthen the equity, responsiveness, and sustainability of development interventions. This shift is essential for realizing substantive social justice and ensuring that empowerment initiatives genuinely reach the most marginalized populations.

Major Findings

The study reveals several significant findings regarding the role of intersectionality in shaping policy design and social empowerment in contemporary India. First, it finds that inequalities are multidimensional and mutually reinforcing rather than isolated or additive. Caste, gender, class, religion, and regional location intersect to produce

differentiated experiences of exclusion. Individuals located at multiple disadvantaged positions—such as rural women from Scheduled Castes or minority communities—face compounded barriers in accessing education, healthcare, digital infrastructure, and economic opportunities. This confirms that single-category policy approaches are insufficient to address the complexity of social stratification. Second, the findings indicate that many existing welfare and development programs operate within fragmented frameworks that fail to integrate intersectional analysis. Income-based targeting mechanisms often overlook structural discrimination and cultural barriers. Similarly, gender-focused schemes tend to treat women as a homogeneous group, neglecting intra-group inequalities shaped by caste, region, and literacy levels. As a result, benefits are unevenly distributed, and the most marginalized subgroups frequently remain excluded from state interventions.

Third, the study highlights that digital governance and technological reforms—while enhancing efficiency and transparency—can inadvertently deepen exclusion if intersectional vulnerabilities are not considered. Limited digital literacy, infrastructural deficits, language barriers, and socio-cultural norms restrict access to online platforms for welfare delivery, financial inclusion, and public services. Thus, digital transformation alone does not guarantee equitable empowerment. Fourth, the research underscores the importance of institutional accountability and participatory governance. Policies designed without community consultation or disaggregated data fail to capture localized experiences of inequality. Intersectional policy frameworks require context-sensitive implementation, cross-sectoral coordination, and mechanisms for continuous evaluation.

Finally, the study finds that intersectionality offers a transformative pathway for reimagining social empowerment. Rather than focusing solely on service provision, empowerment must involve redistribution of resources, recognition of marginalized identities, and structural reforms in governance systems. Integrating intersectionality into policy design can enhance inclusivity, responsiveness, and sustainability, ensuring that development initiatives move beyond symbolic inclusion toward substantive social justice.

Conclusion

This study underscores that intersectionality provides a transformative framework for reimagining social empowerment and policy design in contemporary India. The analysis demonstrates that caste, gender, class, religion, and regional disparities do not operate in isolation but interact dynamically to shape differentiated experiences of inclusion and exclusion (Wright & Lovatt, 2024; Aschner Rosselli *et al.*, 2025) ^[1, 21]. Conventional policy models rooted in single-axis targeting mechanisms are therefore insufficient to address the complex and layered nature of social stratification. Without integrating intersectional insights, development interventions risk reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than dismantling them (A. Banerjee & Mazzarella, 2022; S. Banerjee *et al.*, 2023) ^[3, 4].

The review further reveals that neoliberal reforms, digital governance initiatives, and welfare programs have produced mixed outcomes. While economic growth and technological innovation have expanded opportunities, access remains

uneven due to structural barriers embedded in institutions and socio-cultural norms (Raman *et al.*, 2025; Ghosh, 2025) ^[11, 16]. Public health, labor markets, and social protection systems often fail to account for compounded vulnerabilities experienced by marginalized communities (Deivanayagam *et al.*, 2025; Hariyani *et al.*, 2025) ^[7, 12]. These findings highlight the need for context-sensitive, participatory, and data-driven policy frameworks.

Moving forward, intersectional policy design must incorporate disaggregated data collection, cross-sectoral coordination, and community engagement to ensure that empowerment initiatives are responsive to localized realities (Gangal *et al.*, 2023; Sirolli *et al.*, 2025) ^[10, 18]. Institutional accountability and structural reforms are critical to shifting from symbolic inclusion toward substantive equality.

In conclusion, embedding intersectionality within governance systems can strengthen equity, resilience, and sustainability in India's development trajectory. By recognizing and addressing the interconnected nature of social hierarchies, policymakers can move beyond technocratic solutions and foster transformative empowerment that genuinely reaches the most marginalized populations, thereby advancing the broader goals of social justice and inclusive growth.

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