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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Why 'Poverty Is the Only Caste' Is a Myth — Telangana's Caste Inequality Data

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INTERVIEW ANGLE



"Is caste inequality reducible to income inequality? Telangana's Socio-Economic Survey 2024 shows persistent caste-based disparities even at similar income levels. What does this mean for OBC sub-categorisation and reservation policy?"

THE CORE ARGUMENT

A common argument against caste-based reservation and social justice policy is that “poverty is the only caste” — that economic deprivation, not caste discrimination, is the real driver of disadvantage in modern India. The editorial uses data from **Telangana’s Socio-Economic Survey (2024)** — one of India’s most comprehensive state-level caste censuses — to demonstrate that this claim is empirically false: caste-based disparities in education, employment, land ownership, and institutional access persist even when controlling for income levels. The data provides the strongest empirical foundation yet for **OBC sub-categorisation** within reservations and supports the constitutional validity of caste as a unit of state intervention.

THE POLITICAL-ECONOMIC DEBATE

The “Poverty = Caste” Claim

The argument often made by those opposing caste-based reservations:

- ❶ Modern India is becoming more meritocratic — caste discrimination is declining
- ❷ The real marker of disadvantage is **economic poverty**, not caste identity
- ❸ **Economically Weaker Section (EWS) reservation** (10% for upper castes below income threshold) represents the “correct” approach — income-based rather than caste-based
- ❹ Caste-based reservations perpetuate caste identity instead of erasing it

The Counter-Evidence — What Telangana’s Data Shows

Telangana’s Socio-Economic Survey (2024, released April 2025) covered ~1.25 crore households and measured outcomes across caste categories:

INDICATOR	SC	ST	OBC-A (MOST BACKWARD)	OBC-B	FORWARD CASTES
Literacy rate	~78%	~72%	~81%	~87%	~93%
Govt. job representation	~12%	~7%	~18%	~22%	~41%
Land ownership (avg. acres)	1.2	0.9	1.8	2.4	4.6
Higher education (degree+)	~18%	~12%	~21%	~28%	~45%
Bank credit access	~34%	~28%	~41%	~52%	~68%

Key finding: Even at similar income levels, SC and ST households showed significantly lower institutional access, land ownership, and representation in government jobs — suggesting that **caste discrimination operates independently of income deprivation**.

WHAT EXPLAINS PERSISTENT CASTE INEQUALITY?

1. Social Capital and Networks

Employment — especially in government and private sector — operates through **social networks and referrals**. Upper caste dominance in government and corporate India creates **structural barriers** for SC/ST/OBC candidates beyond formal qualification requirements.

2. Land and Asset Ownership

Historically, land was distributed along caste lines. Dalits were largely excluded from land ownership under both traditional and colonial systems. This asset gap compounds across generations — **intergenerational wealth transmission** is caste-structured.

3. Educational Infrastructure Access

Residential **segregation** means Dalit-majority habitations often have lower-quality government schools, fewer qualified teachers, and poorer access to digital infrastructure. The **gap in learning outcomes** begins in primary school — not just at the level of economic poverty.

4. Discrimination in Markets

Studies (National Council of Applied Economic Research, ILO) document caste-based discrimination in:

- **Labour markets:** Same-qualification Dalit applicants receive fewer interview calls (callback discrimination)
- **Housing:** Rental discrimination based on caste identity
- **Credit markets:** Higher interest rates, lower loan approval for SC applicants at same income levels

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

OBC Sub-Categorisation

The **Supreme Court (August 2024, Pankaj Punia case)** upheld states' power to sub-categorise OBCs within the 27% reservation — allowing states to reserve a proportion exclusively for the “**creamy layer of the creamy layer**” **problem** (most backward OBCs left behind by dominant OBC groups).

Telangana's data directly supports this:

- OBC-A (most backward) groups: far worse outcomes than OBC-B groups
- OBC-B groups: approaching forward caste outcomes in some indicators

OBC sub-categorisation corrects the internal hierarchy — ensuring reservation benefit reaches the most marginalised within the OBC category.

Caste Census — National Demand

The Telangana survey is an **unofficial caste census**; India has not conducted a national caste census since 1931. Political parties — particularly OBC-led parties and the INDIA alliance — have demanded a **Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC)** update or a full caste census in the 2027 decennial census.

LAST NATIONAL CASTE COUNT	1931 (UNDER BRITISH INDIA)
2011 SECC	Conducted but caste data not officially released
Demand	Caste census in Census 2027
States that conducted own caste surveys	Bihar (2023), Telangana (2024), Karnataka (2024)

EWS Reservation — Constitutional Challenge

The **103rd Constitutional Amendment (2019)** inserted 10% EWS (Economically Weaker Section) reservation for upper castes — challenged in the Supreme Court but upheld (5:4) in **Janhit Abhiyan v. Union of India (November 2022)**. Telangana's data undermines the premise that economic criteria alone are

sufficient to capture disadvantage — empirically validating the dissenting opinion’s concern.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

PROVISION	CONTENT
Article 15(4)	State may make special provisions for SCs, STs, and socially/educationally backward classes
Article 16(4)	State may make provisions for reservation in public employment for backward classes
Article 15(6) / 16(6)	EWS reservation — 103rd Amendment (2019)
Article 17	Abolition of untouchability
Article 340	President may appoint commission to investigate conditions of backward classes

UPSC ANGLE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS1 — Society	Caste system, social inequality, OBCs, affirmative action, social mobility
GS2 — Polity	Articles 15, 16, 17, 340; OBC sub-categorisation; Mandal Commission; EWS reservation
GS2 — Social Justice	Reservation debate, caste census, SC/ST/OBC representation in government

Mains Keywords: OBC sub-categorisation, Telangana caste survey, caste census, 103rd Amendment, EWS reservation, Mandal Commission, Pankaj Punia judgment, Janhit Abhiyan case, intergenerational poverty, social capital

Probable Question: “Caste and class are distinct axes of inequality in India. Using empirical evidence, examine the limitations of income-based affirmative action.” (GS1/GS2 Mains)

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