An Analytical Review of Caste Stereotypes, Prejudice, and Religiosity among Adolescents in Bihar

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of a seminal study by Kumar and Singh on caste stereotypes among school students in Bihar, contextualizing its findings within the region's socio-historical landscape and contemporary social psychology. The original study, conducted on 1,400 adolescents in the districts of Patna, Gaya, Nalanda, and Bhojpur, revealed the profound entrenchment of caste-based prejudice, negative stereotyping, and strong ethnocentrism among the youth. This analysis situates these psychological findings within Bihar's deeply rooted history of agrarian conflict and caste-based violence, arguing that the measured stereotypes are not abstract biases but living artifacts of material and political struggles. The report interprets the study's results through the theoretical framework of social identity theory, which explains the observed in-group favoritism and out-group derogation as fundamental processes of identity maintenance. Furthermore, it critically examines the paradoxical roles of several key variables. Higher socio-economic status (SES) was found to correlate with greater tolerance towards other castes, yet simultaneously reinforced in-group pride. Conversely, higher religiosity was associated with increased prejudice, highlighting a tension between modernizing economic forces and traditional ideological ones. The analysis also explores significant demographic cleavages, finding that rural students and female students exhibited higher levels of prejudice, linking these attitudes to the social structures of geography and patriarchy. The central implication of this synthesis is that caste prejudice is a dynamic and actively reproduced phenomenon among the

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younger generation, challenging any linear assumption that modernization and economic development alone will lead to its natural decline.

KEY WORDS

The Architecture of Caste Perception Among Bihari Youth: Study Overview and Methodology

Introduction to the Problem

Caste consideration, or casteism, remains one of the most pronounced and resilient social practices in India, particularly within the state of Bihar, where the forces of modernization have had a limited effect on its persistence. This enduring system of social stratification has led to the fragmentation of society into numerous distinct caste groups, creating significant psycho-social challenges in inter-group relations. These relations are frequently characterized by negative stereotypes and deep-seated prejudices, which in turn fuel social conflict and, in many cases, erupt into overt violence. It was against this backdrop of pervasive social tension that the study by Kumar and Singh was conceived.

Objectives of the Study

The research was designed with five specific aims to comprehensively map the landscape of caste attitudes among school-going adolescents :

1. To examine the caste stereotypes held by students from seven specified caste groups (Brahmins, Rajput, Bhumihar, Kayastha, Yadav, Baniya, and Harijan) for one another.
2. To explore the relationship between the students' socio-economic status (SES) and their expression of caste stereotypes.
3. To investigate differences in caste stereotypes based on rural-urban geography and gender.
4. To explore the relationship between religiosity and the prevalence of caste stereotypes and prejudice.
5. To understand the fundamental relationship between holding stereotypes and expressing prejudice.

Research Setting and Rationale

The study was strategically conducted in the districts of Patna, Gaya, Nalanda, and Bhojpur in central Bihar. The authors' rationale for selecting this region was explicit and critical: "a number of caste violence were reported in recent years from these areas". This region has historically been a flashpoint for some of the most intense agrarian and caste-based conflicts in post-independence India. It was the epicenter of Naxalite movements, where landless lower-caste laborers mobilized against the dominance of upper-caste landlords. In response, dominant landowning castes, particularly Bhumihars and Rajputs, formed private militias, or *senas*, to violently suppress these assertions for land rights and fair wages. These conflicts resulted in a cycle of brutal massacres and retaliations that have left a deep imprint on the collective memory and social fabric of the region, making it a uniquely relevant setting for studying the psychological residues of caste conflict.

Sample Demographics

The research was conducted on a substantial sample of 1,400 school students from classes IX and X. The sample was balanced in terms of gender, comprising 700 male and 700 female students, and was drawn from both rural and urban areas within the four specified districts. The participants belonged to seven key caste groups that represent a cross-section of the traditional social hierarchy in Bihar: Brahmins, Rajput, Bhumihar, Kayastha, Yadav, Baniya, and Harijan.

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Measurement Instruments

To measure the study's key variables, the investigators employed a suite of four standardized and self-developed scales:

➢ **Singh's Indian Caste Stereotype Checklist:** This instrument was used to quantify stereotypes. It consists of a 100-item adjective checklist, containing 60 negative and 40 positive attributes. Participants rated the various caste groups using this list, which generated a composite positive score and a composite negative score for each target group.

➢ **Caste Prejudice Scale:** Developed by Hassan (1981), this 10-item scale was used to measure a generalized orientation of prejudice towards other castes and communities.

➢ **Religiosity Scale:** Originally developed by Bardin (1961) and later adapted by Singh (1976), this 25-item scale measured the participants' attitudes toward religious faith and the degree of their religiosity.

➢ **Socio-Economic Status (SES) Scale:** This scale was developed by the investigators themselves to capture a holistic picture of the students' economic background. It collected information on family income, parental occupation and education, family size and educational level, type of housing, and possession of other physical assets.

Methodological Note on Visualizations

While the user query requested a pie diagram, it is important to note that the primary quantitative findings of this study which involve comparisons of mean scores between groups and correlations between variables are more effectively represented through bar charts and scatter plots. Bar charts would be ideal for visually comparing the average prejudice scores across rural vs. urban populations, males vs. females, and among the seven different caste groups. Scatter plots would be best suited to illustrating the positive and negative correlations found between variables like SES, religiosity, and stereotype ratings.

However, to fulfill the user's specific request, a pie diagram representing the distribution of the study's participants across the seven caste groups is presented below. As the source document does not provide the exact number of students from each caste, this diagram is based on the necessary assumption of an equal distribution (200 students per group) for illustrative purposes.

Caste Group	Number of Participants	Percentage of Total
Brahmin	200	14.3%
Rajput	200	14.3%
Bhumihar	200	14.3%
Kayastha	200	14.3%
Yadav	200	14.3%
Baniya	200	14.3%
Harijan	200	14.3%

This visualization represents the seven caste communities investigated in the study, each forming an equal segment of the total sample size of 1,400 students.

Ethnocentrism and Out-Group Derogation: Mapping the Stereotypes

Core Finding: Pervasive Ethnocentrism

A foundational observation of the study was the powerful presence of in-group bias across all communities. The research found that "each group had a very high degree of ethnocentric perception," which was empirically "reflected from the high degree of positive perception for own caste group". This phenomenon is a central tenet of social identity theory, which posits that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-esteem and identity from their membership in social groups. To maintain a positive social identity, individuals tend to view their own group (the in-group) more favorably than other groups (out-groups). Ethnocentrism, therefore, is

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not simply a learned bias but a fundamental psychological mechanism for preserving a positive self-concept through group affiliation.

Core Finding: Negative Stereotyping of Out-Groups

Complementing the strong in-group favoritism was a clear tendency toward out-group derogation. The study reported that negative stereotyping, in the form of assigning unfavorable traits, was "quite obvious with each caste group for others". This finding illustrates the other side of the social identity coin: the same process that enhances the perception of the in-group often leads to the denigration of out-groups. This dynamic is a cornerstone of prejudice, where negative feelings and beliefs are generalized to an entire category of people.

Case Study in Negative Perception: The Bhumihar Caste

The study's most specific and revealing finding regarding stereotypes was that the "Bhumihar was found to be most negatively rated by the majority of caste groups". This perception is not an abstract cultural artifact but is deeply rooted in the material history and political economy of the study's specific geographical location. The negative stereotypes directed at the Bhumihar community can be understood as a direct psychosocial reflection of their historical role as a dominant, land-owning caste in central Bihar. In the very districts where the study was conducted, Bhumihars were central figures in the violent agrarian conflicts of the late 20th century. As the political and economic mobilization of 'backward-caste' and Dalit peasants grew, often through Naxalite movements demanding land reform and fair wages, Bhumihar landlords organized powerful and ruthless private armies, such as the infamous Ranvir Sena, to violently suppress this assertion. The cycle of massacres and retaliations that defined this era of "caste wars" cemented a perception of the Bhumihar community as enforcers of an oppressive and violent hierarchical order. Therefore, the negative rating captured by the study is less a "stereotype" in the sense of a baseless generalization and more a cognitive and emotional residue of historical trauma and ongoing structural conflict.

Case Study in Moderate Perception: The Kayastha Caste

In stark contrast, the study noted that the Kayastha caste "obtained a moderate rating in general". This finding can also be understood through a socio-historical lens. Unlike the Bhumihars, whose power was tied directly to land ownership and the control of agricultural labor, the Kayasthas have historically functioned as an administrative and professional caste of scribes, record-keepers, and bureaucrats. This occupational niche placed them largely outside the primary axis of rural agrarian conflict between landowners and landless laborers. The recent Bihar Caste Census corroborates their distinct socio-economic position, noting that while numerically small, they have the lowest poverty rates among General Category castes, suggesting a profile more aligned with urban, professional life than rural, land-based power struggles. Their moderate rating likely reflects this different positioning within the region's conflict-ridden social structure.

Table 1: Summary of Inter-Caste Perceptions and Historical Context in Central Bihar

Caste Group	Study's General Perception Finding	Historical/Socio-Economic Role (from supplementary research)	Key Conflicts/Alliances (from supplementary research)
Bhumihar	Most negatively rated by other groups.	Dominant land-owning upper caste in central Bihar.	Formed private militias (*senas*) to violently suppress lower-caste and Naxalite movements for land and wage rights.

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Rajput	(Not specified)	Dominant land-owning upper caste, often in conflict with rising backward castes.	Also formed private militias and were key actors in agrarian violence against lower castes.
Brahmin	Found to be most religious; high on prejudice.	Priestly and scholarly upper caste; traditionally at the top of the ritual hierarchy.	Historically allied with other upper castes in maintaining social dominance.
Kayastha	Obtained a moderate rating.	Administrative and professional "scribe" caste; not primarily large landowners.	Generally outside the main landowner-laborer axis of conflict; high socio-economic status.
Yadav	(Not specified)	Dominant "upper backward" cultivating caste; politically mobilized and assertive.	Often in conflict with Bhumihars for land and political power; sometimes allied with Dalits, sometimes in conflict with them.
Baniya	(Not specified)	Merchant and trading caste.	Primarily involved in commercial activities, less directly in agrarian labor disputes.
Harijan (Dalit)	Found to be least religious.	Landless laborers at the bottom of the hierarchy; subject to exploitation and violence.	Formed the base of Naxalite movements and peasant resistance against upper-caste landlords.

The Correlates of Prejudice: Socio-Economic Status, Religiosity, and In-Group Bias

The study moved beyond mapping stereotypes to investigate the underlying factors that correlate with these prejudiced attitudes. The findings reveal a complex interplay between economic status, religious belief, and a general psychological predisposition towards prejudice, painting a nuanced picture of the drivers of casteism among adolescents.

Socio-Economic Status as a Catalyst for Tolerance

One of the most significant findings was the moderating effect of socio-economic status (SES) on inter-caste prejudice. The research concluded that higher SES "reduced negative and promotes positive perceptions for other caste groups". More specifically, SES was found to be "negatively correlated with unfavourable ratings and positively associated with favourable ratings for other castes". This suggests that the attributes often associated with higher SES in contemporary India—such as better and more prolonged education, greater exposure to diverse urban environments, and professional aspirations—may function as liberalizing forces. Higher education, in particular, is known to foster critical thinking skills that can empower individuals to question and challenge inherited social hierarchies and prejudices. This finding complicates a purely class-based conflict model, indicating that economic advancement, under certain conditions, can foster greater social tolerance.

However, this liberalizing effect is not without its contradictions. While higher SES appeared to reduce prejudice against *out-groups*, the study also found that SES was *positively* correlated with *ethnocentric*

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perception that is, a more favorable view of one's *own* caste. This points to a complex psychological dynamic where economic and educational advancement may lead individuals to adopt more tolerant public attitudes while simultaneously solidifying a stronger, more confident in-group identity. This is consistent with observations in other contexts, such as elite universities, where caste identity may be publicly downplayed but is privately reinforced through new idioms of "merit" and achievement, which can serve as a proxy for traditional caste privilege. This reveals a fundamental tension in modern India: economic progress and traditional ideology can exert opposing forces on caste prejudice. An individual's attitudes may be shaped by the relative strength of these competing influences, explaining the persistence of subtle prejudice even among the educated and affluent.

The Reinforcing Roles of Religiosity and Prejudice

In direct contrast to the effect of SES, the study found that religiosity amplified prejudice. The report states that religiosity "works otherwise," meaning it did not reduce negative perceptions of other castes and was, like SES, positively correlated with ethnocentrism. The research also established a hierarchy of religious observance, finding that "Brahmins compared to other caste groups were higher on religiosity," followed in order by Bhumihar, Rajput, and Kayastha, with Harijans ranking last. The chart below provides an illustrative visualization of this finding.

This correlation can be understood in the context of religion's historical role in sanctioning the caste system. Hindu scriptures and traditions have long provided the ideological and metaphysical justification for a hierarchical social order based on concepts of purity, pollution, and karma. Therefore, a higher degree of religiosity among adolescents may signify a stronger internalization of a traditional worldview that accepts and legitimizes caste distinctions. This aligns with other quantitative studies in India that have found positive correlations between religiosity and various forms of social prejudice.

Finally, the study confirmed a basic principle of social psychology: prejudice is often a generalized trait. It found that "a more general prejudice orientation in viewing other case members result into more negative stereotyping". This is consistent with classic psychological theories, such as the work on the "authoritarian personality," which propose that prejudice is frequently not specific to a single target group but is part of a broader cognitive and personality framework that is hostile towards out-groups in general.

The Influence of Social Demography: Gender and Geography

The study's analysis of demographic variables revealed that the expression of caste prejudice is not uniform but is significantly shaped by an individual's social context, particularly their gender and geographic location (rural or urban).

Gendered Socialization and Prejudice

The research uncovered two crucial gender-based differences. First, "females tend to rate more negatively and less positively members of other caste groups" compared to their male peers. Second, "They were also found to be more religious than their male counterparts". This finding of higher prejudice among adolescent girls is best understood not as an inherent characteristic, but as a consequence of deeply entrenched gendered socialization in a patriarchal society. The chart below illustrates these reported differences.

In many traditional Indian contexts, women and girls are designated as the primary guardians of family honor, ritual purity, and cultural continuity. The maintenance of the caste system itself hinges on the strict regulation of social interactions to prevent impurity, with the ultimate line of defense being caste endogamy—the prohibition of inter-caste marriage. Because women's choices and bodies are central to this reproductive and social control, their socialization often involves more restrictions on their mobility and social circles compared to boys. This can lead to reduced inter-group contact and a greater reliance on the narratives and norms transmitted within the family and immediate community. The finding that girls are also more religious reinforces

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this interpretation, as religious teachings often prescribe the very rules of purity and separation that underpin caste boundaries. Thus, the higher prejudice observed in female students is a reflection of their socialized role as custodians of a traditional order, demonstrating a powerful intersection between the hierarchies of caste and patriarchy.

The Rural-Urban Chasm in Social Attitudes

The study also identified a stark divide based on geography, finding "significant differences on all the factors of the study, namely, stereotype, prejudice and religiosity" between rural and urban students. The results were unequivocal: "rural subjects were high on negative stereotyping of other caste groups, whereas urban students tend to rate other caste rather more positively". Furthermore, rural students exhibited a "greater degree of prejudice orientation" and higher levels of religiosity compared to their urban counterparts.

This rural-urban chasm is a powerful indicator of social change and the factors that can mitigate prejudice. Urban centers in India are typically characterized by greater population density and diversity, which necessitates more frequent and unavoidable inter-caste contact in schools, neighborhoods, and public spaces. This increased interaction, as described by the "contact hypothesis" in social psychology, can reduce prejudice by breaking down stereotypes and fostering empathy. Urban areas also offer greater exposure to diverse media and alternative worldviews that can challenge traditional norms. Conversely, rural areas often maintain more rigid social structures where caste identity is highly salient in daily economic and social life, thereby preserving and reinforcing historical patterns of prejudice. The study's finding that urban students hold more positive views of other castes aligns with broader national surveys, such as a Pew Research Center study which found that urban Indians are significantly more willing to accept neighbors from Scheduled Castes than their rural counterparts.

Synthesis and Implications for Contemporary Indian Society

Synthesizing the Findings

The findings of the Kumar and Singh study, when synthesized, present a compelling model of how caste prejudice is sustained and reproduced in contemporary India. It is not a static relic of a bygone era but a dynamic psychosocial construct, actively shaped by a confluence of powerful forces. These include the historical memory of violent agrarian conflict, fundamental group identity processes like ethnocentrism, the competing modern and traditional value systems represented by socio-economic status and religiosity, and the specific social contexts of gender roles and the rural-urban divide. This multi-faceted reality demonstrates that prejudice among adolescents is learned, reinforced, and modulated through numerous interconnected channels.

Implications for Social Cohesion

The study's results offer a sobering outlook for the future of social harmony in Bihar and, by extension, other parts of India with similar social structures. The high levels of ethnocentrism and the prevalence of negative stereotyping among school-going youth indicate that the psychological underpinnings of caste conflict are being effectively transmitted to the next generation. This suggests that without targeted intervention, the potential for social friction, discrimination, and conflict remains high, challenging the narrative of a modernizing India that is naturally overcoming its historical divisions.

Critique and Limitations of the Study

While insightful, the study has several limitations that must be acknowledged:

➢ **Lack of Specificity:** The report summarizes findings in general terms (e.g., "Bhumihar was found to be most negatively rated") but omits the specific quantitative data, such as mean stereotype scores or the results of statistical significance tests. This lack of granular data prevents a deeper analysis of the precise nature and intensity of the stereotypes.

➢ **Sample Representativeness:** The sample, though large, is confined to four districts in central Bihar. This region was chosen specifically for its history of conflict, which means the findings, while critically

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important for understanding such areas, may not be generalizable to all of India, where caste dynamics can vary significantly by region.

➢ **Cross-Sectional Design:** The study provides a snapshot at a single point in time. While it reveals strong correlations between variables (e.g., religiosity and prejudice), its design cannot definitively establish causality. It is unclear, for instance, whether higher religiosity causes prejudice or if a personality type prone to prejudice is also more drawn to religion.

Enduring Relevance

Despite these limitations, the study's relevance endures. It provides crucial empirical evidence from a conflict-prone region, demonstrating the complex psychological mechanisms that perpetuate casteism among youth. It powerfully underscores that prejudice is not a simple issue of ignorance but is deeply intertwined with identity, history, religion, and social structure. The research highlights the inadequacy of relying solely on economic development or modernization to solve the problem of caste, pointing instead to the stubborn persistence of attitudes that are actively maintained through multiple social and psychological channels.

Recommendations for Intervention and Avenues for Future Inquiry

Based on the comprehensive analysis of the study's findings, several actionable recommendations for policy and future research can be formulated to address the challenge of caste prejudice among youth.

Recommendations for Policy and Intervention

1. **Curriculum Reform:** Educational interventions must move beyond superficial lessons on equality. Curricula should incorporate a critical social history that directly addresses the material and political roots of caste conflict, helping students understand the historical context of contemporary prejudices. This should be paired with pedagogy that actively promotes critical thinking and media literacy to deconstruct stereotypes and challenge inherited biases.

2. **Promoting Inter-Group Contact:** Given the stark rural-urban divide in attitudes, educational policies should focus on creating structured, positive, and collaborative inter-caste contact opportunities, especially in rural schools. Well-designed programs involving cooperative projects, sports, and cultural activities can effectively break down in-group/out-group boundaries and reduce prejudice.

3. **Gender-Specific Interventions:** Recognizing that patriarchal norms socialize girls to be custodians of tradition and thus more prejudiced, interventions must be gender-sensitive. Programs aimed at empowering adolescent girls, expanding their social exposure, and offering alternative frameworks for identity and self-worth beyond traditional roles are crucial for disrupting the intergenerational transfer of prejudice.

4. **Leveraging Socio-Economic Pathways:** The finding that higher SES correlates with greater tolerance suggests that policies promoting broad-based educational and economic opportunities are a vital long-term strategy. However, this must be complemented by the direct social and educational interventions outlined above, as the study makes clear that economic growth alone is insufficient to overcome deeply ingrained prejudice.

Avenues for Future Research

1. **Longitudinal Studies:** Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track how caste attitudes develop and change as adolescents transition into adulthood. This would provide stronger evidence of causality and identify critical periods for intervention.

2. **Qualitative and Ethnographic Research:** To complement large-scale quantitative surveys, in-depth qualitative and ethnographic studies are needed. Such research can provide a richer understanding of how young people navigate, experience, and talk about caste in their daily lives, friendships, and family environments.

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3. **Interventional Studies:** There is a pressing need for the development and rigorous evaluation of prejudice-reduction interventions specifically designed for the Indian school context. Such studies should measure changes in both explicit (self-reported) and implicit (automatic) bias to assess their true efficacy.

4. **Deeper Intersectionality Analysis:** Future studies should explore the intersection of caste with other significant social identities, such as religion (examining caste dynamics among Indian Muslims and Christians) and class, to build a more complex and nuanced model of how prejudice operates in a diverse society.

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