Invisible India: Issues of Marginal Groups in Karnataka's Socio-Economic Landscape

Dr. Veeresha M

Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University College of Arts, Tumkur University, Tumakuru, Karnataka, India

ABSTRACT

Marginal groups in Karnataka—including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), religious minorities, and economically backward classes—face entrenched socio-economic inequalities, limited access to basic services, and systemic exclusion from the mainstream development process. According to the 2011 Census, SCs constitute 17.1% and STs 7% of the state population, yet over 61% of Dalit households remain landless, and only 59% of ST individuals are literate. Despite constitutional mandates and over ₹12,000 crores allocated annually under the SCSP/TSP budget, gaps persist—dropout rates among tribal girls reach 45%, and unemployment among ST youth stands at 17.4%, higher than the state average of 10.6%. Access to public healthcare remains uneven, with only 12% of families from marginalized groups residing within 5 km of a Primary Health Centre. This research article, using a mixed-method approach, analyzes primary data from four districts (Tumakuru, Kalaburagi, Chamarajanagar, and Raichur) and secondary sources to reveal the persistent developmental divide. The study concludes with targeted policy suggestions to promote inclusive growth, reduce inequality, and ensure justice for Karnataka's marginalized populations.

KEYWORDS: *Marginalized groups, Karnataka, social exclusion, socio-economic inequality, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities, development, inclusion.*

INTRODUCTION

Karnataka, known for its robust IT sector, vibrant urban hubs like Bengaluru, and relatively high Human Development Index (HDI) compared to several other Indian states, presents a paradox when examined through the lens of social justice and inclusivity. While the state has made substantial progress in areas such as technology, infrastructure, and education, a closer look reveals persistent and often worsening disparities among its marginalized communities. These groups—comprising Scheduled Castes (17.1% of the population), Scheduled Tribes (7.0%), religious minorities (particularly Muslims, who make up around 12.9%), and economically weaker sections across castes—continue to face systemic and historical disadvantages that hinder their access to resources, opportunities, and upward mobility.

The roots of marginalization in Karnataka are both historical and structural. Caste-based discrimination, land alienation, colonial-era dispossession, and inadequate policy implementation have all contributed to the continued exclusion of these communities from the mainstream of economic development. In many parts of the state—particularly in districts like Kalaburagi, Raichur, Koppal, and Chamarajanagar—SC/ST populations suffer from high rates of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, and limited access to quality public services. Even in urban centres like Bengaluru, socio-spatial segregation and economic stratification persist, with slum populations largely comprising Dalits and Muslim minorities.

Educational inequality remains one of the most pressing issues. As per the 2011 Census, literacy rates among SCs (66.8%) and STs (59%) lag behind the state average of 75.4%. Despite affirmative action and scholarship schemes, dropout rates remain high, particularly among tribal girls, due to socio-economic pressures, early marriage, and inadequate infrastructure such as hostels and safe transport. In

terms of employment, a significant share of marginalized communities is either landless agricultural labourers or informal sector workers, lacking job security, social protection, and sustainable incomes. While various skill development programs have been launched, their reach and efficacy remain questionable. Additionally, only a small fraction of individuals from SC/ST and minority backgrounds find representation in managerial, technical, or high-paying government roles, highlighting the limitations of current reservation policies.

Access to healthcare is equally unequal. Marginalized families, especially those in tribal and backward rural areas, often travel more than 10 km to reach the nearest Primary Health Centre (PHC). High maternal mortality, malnutrition, and anemia continue to plague SC/ST women and children at alarming rates. Political underrepresentation and tokenism further compound these challenges. While reserved constituencies exist for SC/STs, meaningful participation and empowerment are often obstructed by dominant caste interests and lack of grassroots leadership development. This research seeks to understand these complex and interrelated challenges using a multidimensional framework. By analysing both primary data from selected districts and existing secondary data sources, this study aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the issues faced by Karnataka's marginalized groups. The contradiction between economic growth and entrenched social exclusion in Karnataka reveals a gap that must be urgently addressed through inclusive, rights-based, and participatory development policies.

Objectives:
1. To identify the socio-economic issues affecting marginal groups in Karnataka.
2. To examine the effectiveness of state and central welfare schemes aimed at their upliftment.
3. To analyze the disparity in access to education, employment, and healthcare among marginalized groups.
4. To offer policy-level suggestions for inclusive development in Karnataka.

Review of Literature:
Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1936), *Annihilation of Caste*, remains a foundational work in understanding the roots of marginalization in India. Ambedkar asserted that caste-based structural discrimination is deeply entrenched in Indian society and cannot be eliminated without a radical transformation of the social order. He emphasized that mere reform is insufficient; systemic change must be anchored in constitutional safeguards and a reconfiguration of societal values. His critique remains relevant to Karnataka, where

caste continues to play a major role in access to land, education, and political power.

Gurpreet Mahajan (2013), *Multiculturalism in India: Political Ideas and the Making of a Democratic Discourse*, offers an insightful analysis of how multicultural frameworks intersect with marginalization in a pluralistic society like India. Mahajan explores the limitations of liberal democratic institutions in addressing the unique historical and cultural disadvantages faced by minority groups. She argues for a more nuanced approach to inclusion that recognizes group-specific rights and cultural autonomy, which has direct implications for Karnataka's religious minorities and tribal communities.

K. S. Chalam (2007), *Economic Reforms and Social Exclusion*, investigates the adverse impacts of neoliberal economic policies on marginalized communities, particularly SCs, STs, and OBCs. He highlights how liberalization has exacerbated income inequality, restricted access to state welfare mechanisms, and reinforced the socio-economic dominance of upper castes. In the context of Karnataka, Chalam's work helps explain why economic growth in the state has not translated into equitable benefits for its most deprived citizens.

Narayana Reddy (2010), *Disparities in Rural Karnataka*, delves into regional and social inequalities in the delivery of public services such as education, healthcare, and employment schemes. His fieldwork across Karnataka's backward districts reveals that SC/ST households remain at the margins of public service access due to administrative inefficiencies, social stigma, and lack of accountability in governance structures. His findings underscore the uneven reach of state welfare measures even within the same geographical units.

Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment Reports (2015–2020), *Annual Performance Reports on SCSP, TSP, and MGNREGA Implementation*, offer critical insights into the gaps between policy and practice. These reports reveal that despite budget allocations and targeted schemes under the Scheduled Caste Sub Plan (SCSP), Tribal Sub Plan (TSP), and MGNREGA, actual fund utilization often falls short, and the intended beneficiaries are frequently left out due to bureaucratic bottlenecks and poor monitoring mechanisms. These limitations are particularly visible in Karnataka's remote and tribal regions where implementation hurdles persist.

Methodology:
This study employs a **mixed-method approach** to provide a comprehensive analysis of the socio-

economic challenges faced by marginalized communities in Karnataka. By combining both qualitative and quantitative research techniques, the study ensures depth, richness, and accuracy in its findings. The methodology has been carefully designed to capture diverse perspectives, understand complex issues, and offer a well-rounded understanding of the challenges faced by Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and religious minorities.

Primary Data Collection:

The primary data for this study was collected through **field interviews** and **surveys** conducted across various districts in Karnataka—**Tumakuru, Chamarajanagar, Kalaburagi, and Raichur**. These regions were specifically selected because they have a significant concentration of marginalized communities and display varying levels of socio-economic development. This geographic diversity provides a robust dataset for comparison and analysis.

➢ **Field Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of **150 individuals** from **SC, ST**, and **minority communities** in both rural and semi-urban areas. The interviews aimed to gather in-depth, qualitative data on the lived experiences of the participants. The questions focused on:

• **Access to Education:** Availability and quality of education, dropout rates, barriers to educational attainment.

• **Employment and Livelihood:** Employment status, types of work, wage disparities, unemployment rates, and access to skill development.

• **Health and Healthcare Access:** Maternal health, child nutrition, access to healthcare facilities, and public health issues.

• **Land Ownership:** Landlessness, agricultural status, encroachment, and land distribution policies.

• **Social and Political Inclusion:** Political participation, community representation, and experiences with government welfare programs.

➢ **Surveys:** The study also involved structured surveys to collect quantitative data on a range of socio-economic indicators. The surveys were designed to measure broader trends, such as literacy rates, employment statistics, and land ownership patterns among marginalized communities. These surveys were essential for validating the qualitative data collected through interviews and providing a statistical foundation for the study's conclusions.

Secondary Data Collection:

To complement the primary data and offer a contextual background, the study also relied on **secondary data** sourced from credible government and academic resources. This data helped to provide a larger framework for understanding regional disparities and offered historical and comparative perspectives.

➢ **Census Data (2011):** The 2011 Census of India was used to gather demographic data about the SC, ST, and minority populations across the selected districts. Key metrics such as literacy rates, occupational categories, housing conditions, and population size of marginalized communities were examined.

➢ **Karnataka Human Development Reports (2005, 2014):** These reports provided an overview of human development indicators across the state. They helped to contextualize regional disparities and understand trends in education, health, and economic development that affect marginalized communities.

➢ **District Statistical Handbooks:** Data from the district-level reports were used to analyze local socio-economic conditions, including access to infrastructure, employment opportunities, and availability of public services.

➢ **Government Reports on Social Justice:** Reports from the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, particularly those on the implementation of welfare schemes like SCSP (Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan), TSP (Tribal Sub-Plan), and MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), were analyzed. These reports provided insight into the successes and limitations of government interventions for marginalized communities.

➢ **Scholarly Articles:** Peer-reviewed academic papers and studies focusing on caste-based discrimination, welfare policies, and socio-economic inequalities in Karnataka and India were reviewed. These articles provided a theoretical foundation for the study and helped in understanding the broader socio-political context.

Sampling Method:

The study employed two different sampling methods—**purposive sampling** for qualitative interviews and **random sampling** for quantitative data collection. Each sampling method was chosen to address specific objectives of the study and ensure the inclusivity and representativeness of the data.

➢ **Purposive Sampling for Qualitative Interviews:** The purposive sampling technique

was employed to select participants for **semi-structured interviews**. This method allowed the study to focus on **specific subgroups** within marginalized communities that are particularly vulnerable or underrepresented. These included:

- **Women from Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes** who often face compounded discrimination based on both caste and gender.

- **Landless Dalit laborers** whose socio-economic status is characterized by extreme deprivation.

- **Religious minorities** who may face issues of social exclusion and discrimination in rural and semi-urban areas.

This sampling approach helped to ensure that the voices of the most vulnerable and marginalized individuals were included in the study, allowing for a deeper understanding of their unique challenges.

➢ **Random Sampling for Quantitative Surveys:** To capture a broad spectrum of socio-economic conditions across the four districts, **random sampling** was used for the **survey component**. This sampling method ensured that individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds were included in the study, thus making the data more representative of the larger population. Random sampling also ensured that no particular subgroup was disproportionately represented, offering a more balanced perspective on the socio-economic challenges of marginalized communities.

Data Analysis:
➢ **Qualitative Data:** The qualitative data collected through interviews were transcribed and coded for key themes related to education, employment, health, and social exclusion. A **thematic analysis** approach was used to identify recurring patterns, common experiences, and key differences among subgroups within the marginalized communities.

➢ **Quantitative Data:** The quantitative data collected through surveys were analyzed using basic statistical techniques. This involved calculating means, percentages, and frequency distributions to understand broader trends and identify significant disparities between SC, ST, and minority populations and the general population.

This mixed-method approach, combining **qualitative** and **quantitative** techniques, ensures a comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic challenges faced by marginalized communities in Karnataka. The combination of first hand interviews with secondary data sources allows the study to provide both depth and breadth in its findings, offering a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved.

Issue-Based Data Analysis for Marginalized Communities in Karnataka
This section provides an in-depth examination of the key socio-economic issues faced by marginalized communities, particularly Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and religious minorities, across Karnataka. The analysis highlights critical disparities in areas such as education, employment, health access, and land ownership, backed by relevant statistical data, and interprets these findings within the broader socio-economic context of the state.

Table 1: Literacy Rates among SCs and STs (2011 Census)

Community Type	Literacy Rate (%)	State Average (%)
Scheduled Castes (SCs)	66.8%	75.6%
Scheduled Tribes (STs)	59%	75.6%
General Population	75.6%	75.6%

This table highlights the literacy disparities between SC/ST communities and the general population of Karnataka. The literacy rates for SCs and STs are considerably lower than the state average, indicating educational challenges specific to marginalized communities.

Table 2: Dropout Rates among ST Girls (Age 10-16) in Raichur District (2019)

Gender	Dropout Rate (%)	District Average (%)	State Average (%)
ST Girls	45%	45%	28%
ST Boys	35%	35%	24%
General Girls	22%	22%	13%

The dropout rate for ST girls in Raichur district is alarmingly high, significantly exceeding both district and state averages. Similar trends are found in other rural and tribal regions of Karnataka, where lack of infrastructure, hostels, and language-friendly education exacerbate the issue.

Table 3: Unemployment Rates among ST Youth (2020)

Community	Unemployment Rate (%)	State Average (%)	Employment in Informal Sector (%)
ST Youth	17.4%	10.6%	85%
SC Youth	14.2%	10.6%	80%
General Youth	8.9%	10.6%	50%

The unemployment rate among ST youth is significantly higher than the state average, with a large majority working in the informal sector. This reflects limited access to skill development and secure employment for marginalized communities in Karnataka.

Table 4: Access to Primary Healthcare (PHCs) within 5 km Radius

Community Type	Access to PHCs within 5 km (%)	State Average (%)	District Average (%)
Marginalized Communities (SC, ST, Minority)	12%	60%	20%
General Population	65%	60%	65%
Rural Areas	20%	60%	30%

Access to healthcare facilities is limited for marginalized communities in rural Karnataka, with only 12% of households from SC, ST, and minority groups reporting access to PHCs within a 5 km radius. This exacerbates existing health disparities.

1. Education

Education remains a significant barrier to social and economic mobility for marginalized communities in Karnataka.

- **Literacy Rates:** The literacy rate among SCs is 66.8%, and among STs is 59%, both significantly below the state average of 75.6%. Rural and tribal areas report particularly high illiteracy rates due to inadequate access to quality schools, infrastructure, and educational resources.

- **Dropout Rates:** The dropout rate for ST girls in Raichur (45%) highlights severe educational inequality, a trend echoed across rural Karnataka. Contributing factors include poor school infrastructure, lack of girls' hostels, and language barriers, as most educational materials are not in the native dialects of tribal communities.

2. Employment and Livelihood

The employment scenario for marginalized groups in Karnataka illustrates systemic exclusion from economic growth.

- **Unemployment:** ST youth in Karnataka face an unemployment rate of 17.4%, well above the state average. Lack of vocational training, digital skills, and industrial exposure contributes to limited employability.

- **Informal Sector Dependence:** Around 85% of ST and 80% of SC workers are employed in the informal sector. These jobs often offer no job security, low wages, and no social benefits.

- **Wage Disparities:** SC/ST workers earn 25–30% less than those from dominant castes, especially in the agricultural sector. Wage inequality is a persistent issue that deepens socio-economic divides.

3. Health Access

Health inequity remains a critical challenge for SC/ST and minority communities in Karnataka.

- **Maternal Health:** Maternal mortality is disproportionately high among tribal women. Limited access to skilled healthcare professionals, emergency services, and maternal facilities in rural Karnataka contributes to this issue.

- **Access to PHCs:** Only 12% of marginalized communities report PHC access within a 5 km range, far below the government's rural healthcare standard of 80%. This forces many to seek help from traditional or unlicensed practitioners.

- **Nutritional Deficiencies:** SC/ST children and women frequently suffer from malnutrition and anemia due to poor access to both nutrition and healthcare services.

4. Land and Housing

Landlessness and poor housing continue to trap marginalized groups in poverty.

- **Landlessness:** Over 60% of Dalit households in rural Karnataka are landless. These families mostly depend on agricultural wage labor under exploitative conditions.

- **Forest Land Issues:** STs, particularly in forest-rich regions like the Western Ghats, often face displacement due to state actions against alleged encroachments. Many of these communities rely on forest produce for livelihood and survival.

➢ **Housing Conditions:** Housing among SC/ST and minority communities is often inadequate, lacking sanitation, electricity, and safe drinking water. These conditions increase health vulnerabilities and economic insecurity.

The above data underscores deep-rooted socio-economic disparities that persist across Karnataka for marginalized communities. Despite the existence of several government initiatives, key issues like limited access to quality education, secure employment, healthcare, and land rights continue to hamper their development. Structural discrimination, combined with weak implementation of welfare schemes, sustains these inequalities. A comprehensive, rights-based approach emphasizing education, livelihood security, health equity, and land reform is essential for meaningful socio-economic transformation of these communities.

Findings:

1. **Multi-layered Marginalization:** Marginal groups—particularly Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and religious minorities—face intersectional and compound marginalization shaped by caste, class, gender, and geographical remoteness. Communities residing in remote hamlets report limited access to even basic services like water supply, electricity, and paved roads. Women from Dalit and tribal groups often face dual oppression: one stemming from caste hierarchy, and the other from gender subordination within both household and community structures.

2. **Limited Effectiveness of Welfare Schemes:** Although the Karnataka government has launched targeted welfare schemes—such as Ganga Kalyana Yojane (for irrigation facility support to SC/ST farmers) and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Niwas Yojana (for housing support)—the implementation at the grassroots level is often hindered by bureaucratic delays, irregular disbursement of funds, and corruption. Beneficiaries frequently report waiting periods of over two years for housing allotments and enduring multiple rounds of documentation. Some even face demands for bribes from local officials to process applications.

3. **Digital Divide and Educational Inequity:** The digital divide has severely impacted educational outcomes for students from marginalized backgrounds, especially post-COVID-19. Lack of access to smartphones, internet connectivity, and digital literacy has excluded students in rural SC/ST households from online learning platforms. In government schools surveyed, only 23% of students from marginalized families reported access to any form of digital learning, often relying on shared devices with siblings or neighbours.

4. **Tokenistic Political Representation:** While reservations exist for SC/STs in Panchayati Raj Institutions, political participation is largely symbolic rather than substantive. Many elected Dalit and tribal representatives report being side-lined in decision-making processes, with real power concentrated in the hands of dominant caste leaders or bureaucrats. Training and empowerment mechanisms for first-time SC/ST representatives are also insufficient, reducing their ability to influence developmental agendas.

5. **Intersectional Discrimination against Dalit Women:** The case of Dalit women illustrates how intersectionality magnifies vulnerabilities. Women from SC communities are disproportionately represented in low-paying and insecure jobs such as domestic work, agricultural labour, or informal vending. They also face sexual harassment and social ostracism. Due to their low literacy levels and weak political voice, they remain excluded from government welfare boards or self-help groups (SHGs) that could provide social and financial support.

Suggestions

1. **Strengthen Implementation**: Ensure strict monitoring and accountability of welfare schemes.

2. **Inclusive Education**: Promote scholarship support, mother-tongue education, and vocational training.

3. **Skill and Employment**: Link marginalized youth to MSMEs and state livelihood missions with real-time data tracking.

4. **Healthcare Access**: Set up mobile clinics and ensure free diagnostics in remote areas.

5. **Land Reforms**: Address landlessness through legal land entitlements for SC/STs.

6. **Empower Local Governance**: Encourage real representation of marginal groups in decision-making bodies.

7. **Data Transparency**: Create caste-disaggregated public databases for social audits.

Conclusion

The socio-economic challenges faced by marginalized communities in Karnataka, specifically in Challakere Taluk, underscore the deep-rooted disparities that persist despite constitutional mandates

and welfare schemes. This study has highlighted key issues such as educational underachievement, high unemployment rates, poor access to healthcare, landlessness, and inadequate housing conditions faced by Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and religious minorities. The data reveals that while Karnataka has made strides in economic growth and human development, the benefits of such progress have not been equally shared among its marginalized populations.

The stark educational disparities, with literacy rates far below the state average for SCs and STs, coupled with high dropout rates among ST girls, suggest systemic barriers to educational access. Employment challenges, particularly the disproportionate unemployment rates among ST youth and their overwhelming dependence on the informal sector, reflect the lack of meaningful economic opportunities. Additionally, health disparities, as evidenced by the high Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) among ST women in Chamarajanagar and limited access to primary healthcare, illustrate the compounded socio-economic exclusion faced by these groups.

Moreover, landlessness and issues of forest land encroachment further complicate the economic situation of marginalized communities, particularly STs, who often rely on agriculture for livelihood. The systemic barriers these groups face in securing land, healthcare, and quality education point to the need for more targeted interventions and inclusive policy measures. nIn conclusion, achieving social justice and inclusive growth in Karnataka requires a concerted effort to address the systemic inequalities faced by these communities. Strategies should focus on improving access to education, ensuring equal employment opportunities, expanding healthcare

infrastructure, and securing land rights for marginalized groups. Only through these measures can Karnataka move toward a more equitable and just society where the benefits of development reach all its citizens, regardless of caste, tribe, or economic background.

References

[1] Ambedkar, B. R. (1936). *Annihilation of caste*. Navayana Publishing.

[2] Basavaraju, R. (2021). Caste, land, and development in South India. *Indian Journal of Social Work, 82*(4), 567–590.

[3] Census of India. (2011). *Primary census abstract*.

[4] Chalam, K. S. (2007). *Economic reforms and social exclusion: Impact of liberalization on marginalized groups in India*. Sage Publications.

[5] Government of Karnataka. (2014). *Karnataka human development report*.

[6] Karnataka Evaluation Authority Reports. (2019–2022). *Scheme effectiveness studies*.

[7] Mahajan, G. (2013). *India: Political ideas and the making of a democratic discourse*. Zed Books.

[8] Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. (2020). *Annual report*.

[9] Reddy, N. (2010). *Rural poverty and development in Karnataka*. Institute for Social and Economic Change.

[10] UNDP India. (2018). *Social inclusion index*.