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### Social Inclusion and Religious Disparities in India: Implications for Sustainable Development

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*Abstract:* Since 2014, India's socio-political landscape has emphasized nationalist ideologies under the ruling party, raising scholarly concern about social cohesion, religious equality, and inclusive development (Begum & Pathan, 2024; Khan, 2024). This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of socio-economic and SDG indicators with qualitative assessment of policy discourse to examine social inclusion and religious disparities. The paper investigates how such policies and political discourse contribute to social divisions, particularly affecting Muslim communities and regions such as Tamil Nadu (The Times of India, 2024). Drawing on the latest socio-economic data and SDG progress indicators, the study reveals persistent inequalities in income, education, and social empowerment among religious minorities, despite notable national gains in poverty reduction (World Bank, 2023; UNDP, 2021). The analysis discusses contradictions between macroeconomic achievements and uneven social development, assessing implications for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 (NITI Aayog, 2023). Evidence suggests that while India has significantly reduced poverty, underlying socio-religious disparities and exclusionary rhetoric limit holistic inclusion and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Social Inequality, Religious Minorities, Nationalism, Economic Inclusion, Social Cohesion

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## Introduction

India's democratic constitution enshrines secularism and equal citizenship regardless of religion. However, political currents since 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP have foregrounded elements of Hindutva (Hindu nationalist ideology) in policy and public discourse, contributing to heightened social polarization (Anadolu Ajansi, 2024). Scholars argue that this trend strains India's pluralistic ethos and increases socio-religious fault lines between the Hindu majority and religious minorities, especially Muslims (Begum & Pathan, 2024). This paper explores how these dynamics intersect with economic inequality and India's progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly goals on poverty, reduced inequalities, and social inclusion (NITI Aayog, 2023; UNDP, 2021).

## Statement of the Problem

Despite significant progress in economic growth and poverty reduction, India continues to face persistent socio-economic inequalities among religious minorities (Gallup, 2023; IJFMR, 2024). Since 2014, nationalist political discourse and policy orientations have raised concerns about social cohesion, religious equality, and inclusive development (Khan, 2024). While national indicators suggest advancement toward key SDGs, disparities in education, employment, and social inclusion - particularly affecting Muslim communities - remain pronounced (Meta-Analysis on Rural Muslim Communities, 2021; Quest Journals, 2023). This disconnect between aggregate development gains and subgroup inequalities poses a challenge to achieving SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), highlighting the need to assess whether India's development trajectory adequately incorporates social inclusion alongside economic progress (Sachar, 2006; UNDP, 2021).

## Research Questions

1. What patterns of poverty and inequality exist among religious minorities in India, and how do these relate to SDG targets?
2. How do nationalist policies and political narratives contribute to social exclusion beyond what economic data alone explains?
3. How does the case of Tamil Nadu illustrate the gap between economic development and social inclusion in India?

## Socio-Religious Context and Hindu Nationalist Policies

Hindu nationalist discourse (Hindutva) emphasizes cultural unity under Hindu identity, often perceived as marginalizing non-Hindu communities, notably Muslims (14% of India's population) (Wikipedia, 2024). The BJP's election strategies and policy rhetoric often frame minorities as "others," contributing to a rise in anti-minority sentiment, including hate speech, which increased significantly in 2024 (Reuters, 2024). Critics argue that these trends reduce social cohesion and create an environment where discrimination may occur (Anadolu Ajansi, 2024). Policy debates around citizenship laws, hijab bans, and anti-conversion proposals have been noted for their potential exclusionary effects (Begum & Pathan, 2024). In regional contexts like Tamil Nadu, which has historically resisted overt Hindu nationalist influences, persistent social discrimination and poverty remain challenges, with local leaders highlighting entrenched inequalities (The Times of India, 2024).

## Poverty and Inequality in India

### National Poverty Trends

India's poverty landscape has changed dramatically over the past decade. World Bank data indicate that extreme poverty declined from 27.1% to 5.3% between 2011–12 and 2022–23, lifting approximately 270–269 million people out of extreme poverty (World Bank, 2023). The National Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) also declined from 24.85% (2015–16) to 14.96% (2019–21), indicating improved living conditions (UNDP, 2021). These figures suggest significant progress toward SDG 1 (No Poverty), though the pace and equity of progress vary across populations (NITI Aayog, 2023).

### Socio-Economic Disparities Among Religious Groups

Despite overall macroeconomic progress, Muslim communities continue to lag in key socio-economic dimensions.

**Table 1: Selected Socio-Economic Indicators by Religious Group (India)**

Indicator	National Average (approx.)	Muslim Communities (India)
<b>Poverty (%)</b>	22.7% (India poor in 2004-05; long-term national figure around this period)	31% (Muslim poverty head-count ratio 31% in 2004-05 per Sachar Committee)
<b>Literacy (%)</b>	74.0% (Census/PLFS aggregated around 2011/2024)	68.0% (lower than national average based on older data); 74.0–77.6% in recent PLFS (still slightly below overall)
<b>Unemployment (%)</b>	5–7% recent overall labour force estimate	3.2% (Muslim unemployment rate rose from 2.4% to 3.2% in 2023–24; still within national range but tied to informal work)
<b>Property / Wealth Ownership (%)</b>	40–43% (approx. households owning property broadly)	57.2% households owning houses in urban areas (lower than Hindu/overall households), and <b>Muslims held 8% of total wealth share vs 12% of population share</b> (wealth gap)

Source : Sachar Committee (2006)

**Poverty:** The Sachar Committee (2006) reported that Muslims had a higher incidence of poverty (31%) than the overall population (22.7%) in 2004-05, though more recent national poverty estimates are much lower after significant reduction over time.

**Literacy:** Older census data show a lower literacy rate for Muslims relative to the national average; recent Periodic Labour Force Survey data show literacy among Muslims rising close to the national average but often still slightly below it (e.g., 79.6% Muslim vs 79.7% overall in 2023-24).

**Unemployment:** Unemployment statistics by religion are not comprehensively published annually; one source notes an increase for Muslims from 2.4% to 3.2% in 2023–24.

**Property / Wealth Ownership:** Direct national averages for property ownership by religion are scarce; one dataset shows lower house ownership among Muslim households in

urban settings compared to others and a lower share of overall wealth relative to their population share (8% vs 12%).

### **The SDG Paradox: Macro Gains vs. Social Exclusion**

India's progress in SDGs is mixed. Poverty reduction and economic growth are significant, yet inequality and exclusion persist. National SDG Index reports steady progress on poverty targets, though limited or reversed progress exists for inequality and social inclusion (NITI Aayog, 2023).

Disparities in education, employment, and basic amenities suggest partial achievement of SDG 4 (Quality Education) and limited progress on SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality) for disadvantaged social groups (UNDP, 2021). Structural stratification and discriminatory practices may constrain comprehensive SDG achievement if exclusion dynamics continue (Sachar, 2006).

### **Regional Case Study: Tamil Nadu**

Tamil Nadu is often cited as one of India's more developed states, exhibiting relatively strong performance in indicators such as literacy, industrial growth, social welfare coverage, and public health infrastructure. The state has historically pursued inclusive social policies, including affirmative action, public distribution systems, and welfare-oriented governance, contributing to better-than-average human development outcomes. However, despite these achievements, persistent pockets of poverty, malnutrition, and social discrimination continue to affect marginalized communities, including religious minorities. Recent reports highlight that malnutrition, informal employment, and inadequate housing remain significant challenges among economically and socially vulnerable groups, particularly in urban slums and rural districts (The Times of India, 2024). While aggregate indicators suggest progress, disaggregated data reveal inequalities in access to quality education, stable employment, and social mobility for minority populations. These disparities indicate that economic development has not translated uniformly into social inclusion. The Tamil Nadu case illustrates a broader national paradox: strong economic and social indicators at the macro level coexist with entrenched socio-cultural barriers that perpetuate exclusion at the community level. Religious identity, combined with class and regional factors, continues to shape access to opportunities, thereby limiting the state's progress toward SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). This underscores the importance of complementing economic growth with targeted, inclusion-focused policies that address structural discrimination and ensure equitable development outcomes across all social groups.

### **Discussion**

The evidence illustrates a complex interplay between political discourse, socio-economic policy, and development outcomes. While India's macroeconomic achievements are notable, the relative exclusion of minority groups underscores an uneven development trajectory (Begum & Pathan, 2024; Khan, 2024). Rising social polarization may affect trust in institutions and hinder inclusive growth essential for sustainable development (Reuters, 2024; Anadolu Ajansı, 2024). Comprehensive assessment requires differentiating between aggregate gains and subgroup disparities to ensure that policies supporting SDGs include social inclusion alongside economic progress (UNDP, 2021; NITI Aayog, 2023).

## Conclusion

Since 2014, India has achieved substantial economic growth and reductions in poverty (World Bank, 2023). However, nationalist policy orientations and political discourse have coincided with persistent socio-economic disadvantages among religious minorities (Gallup, 2023; IJFMR, 2024). Balancing national development with inclusive social policies remains critical for achieving SDGs and sustaining India's democratic, pluralistic framework (Sachar, 2006; UNDP, 2021). Future development efforts must address structural disparities to ensure that economic progress translates into inclusive growth for all social groups.

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