

# ഇശൽ വൈതുകം

ത്രൈമാസിക ലക്കം: 40

## Ishal Paithrkam

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## **From Breadbaskets to Battlegrounds: India's Polarised Prospect**

**Lulu Farshana M  
Dr. Namrata**

*In India, the growing disparity between rich and the poor is considerably more visible than it was during British colonial rule. Economic inequality is marked by gaps in income, wealth distribution, and access to resources, which fuels resentment and discontent among various socioeconomic groups. This sense of discontent frequently manifests as political polarisation, in which opposing factions align with conflicting ideas and parties ends up in increasing societal differences. Inequality and polarisation have historical connections to the potential for social conflict. A highly unequal or polarized society may be more prone to conflicts, highlighting the social implications of economic disparities. Politicians use these disparities for electoral support, resulting in policies and rhetoric that exacerbate economic inequities. In India, economic inequality and political polarisation are deeply intertwined, exerting significant influence on the nation's socio-political landscape. Thus, addressing economic inequality is crucial for mitigating political polarisation and fostering a more inclusive and stable democratic environment in India.*

**Key words:** economic disparity, income inequality, political polarisation, social conflict

## Background

India, the world's largest democracy, has long been a nation of contrasts (Guha, 2017). From its bustling metropolises to its remote rural villages, the disparities in wealth and opportunity are striking. Over the past few decades, economic disparity in India has grown (Sharma & Vidyapith 2023), creating fertile ground for political polarisation (Thampi & Anand 2017). The vast and growing gap of political attitudes and identities among the public that undermine the pursuit of a common good (Levin et al., 2021). The upsurge is often compounded by the rise of ideologically divided masses and radical political parties. In recent decades, political polarisation has intensified globally and has been a disruptive force in societies across the world, from advanced countries including the US and those in Europe to the developing world such as India, Korea and Turkey etc (Moraes & Béjar 2023; Bou-Hamad & Yehya 2020). Understanding the connection between economic inequality and political polarisation is essential to address the root causes of this phenomenon and to seek sustainable solutions (Suhay, 2022; Church, 2020). The issue of political polarisation linked to economic disparities in India is critical due to its potential to undermine the nation's democratic fabric and socio-economic stability (Schneider & Shevchuk, 2020).

India, beyond the emerging economy also faces unique challenges where economic inequalities and social stratifications can significantly influence political dynamics. To examine the driving forces behind political polarisation, the current well-developed scholarship has mainly examined factors such as the changes in socio-demographic cleavages. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these disparities (Zhao et al., 2023), disproportionately affecting the poorer sections of society, leading to heightened frustration and alienation (Raphael & Schneider, 2023). This economic distress has translated into deeper political divides, as marginalized groups feel increasingly neglected by mainstream political entities (Nandwani, 2023; Varghese, 2023). This situation calls for urgent and effective policy interventions to address economic inequalities and foster inclusive development, which are crucial for maintaining the stability and integrity of India's democracy.

Since the 1990s, there has been a rise in both bipolarization and multidimensional polarisation, which has widened inequality in tandem with rapid economic growth (Motiram & Sarma, 2014). The liberalisation policies brought about considerable changes to the Indian economy (Jayadev et al., 2007). Rapid economic growth was sparked by these reforms, lifting millions out of poverty and fostering the emergence of a growing middle class.

Economic disparities and political polarisation have markedly intensified since the landslide electoral victories in 2014 (Sahoo, 2020). The era has witnessed significant economic growth, yet the benefits have disproportionately favoured the wealthy, exacerbating income and wealth inequality. The advantages of this expansion, nevertheless, have not been felt equally by everybody. The wealthiest 1% of Indians own more than four times as much as the poorest 70% of the population (Himanshu, 2022). The World Inequality Report (2022) states that only 13% of the nation's income is held by the poorest 50% of the population, while the top 10% owns 57% of it. The fact that 53% of India's wealth is owned by the richest 1% of the population, especially after the pandemic, serves as more evidence of this widening wealth disparity. India currently has more billionaires per capita than any other country in the world, with a sharp rise in income disparity that has surpassed that of the United States, Brazil, and South Africa (Bharti et al., 2024). The widening divide in India between the rich and the poor is even more noticeable than it was during British colonial control (World Inequality lab, 2024). Social and political divisions are exacerbated by such glaring economic inequality between various economic classes, which is a major factor contributing to political polarisation.

These results in tensions between different social groups, central and state governments, and supporters and dissenters of the ruling party. The permanence of coalition politics in India can partly be explained by these economic disparities and political polarisations. The deterioration of economic conditions is impacted by political engagement in a way that goes beyond conventional institutional bounds to include economic goals and concerns about inequality. It has been typically examined from an economic perspective. However, it becomes

more and more politicized in recent decades, causing a wide range of detrimental political consequences. Moreover, income inequality can lead to political inequality by affecting preferences for redistribution, political participation, and policy responsiveness, ultimately undermining democracy (Polacko, 2022). Growing inequality could undermine social mobility, induce violent conflicts, and generate political tensions (Justino, 2004). At the same time, there is widespread concern that the “vicious cycle of poverty” and rising income inequality constitute an important cause of political polarisation that threatens to divide and even destabilize a nation (Sen, 2018; Guha-Khasnobis & Agarwal 2014; Sen & Himanshu 2004).

Moreover, the enduring disparities in electoral participation between different socioeconomic groups are partly explained by the mediating role of health, where poor health resulting from socio-economic disadvantage demobilizes eligible voters, limiting the political voice of the disadvantaged (Nelson, 2023). This interplay between economic conditions, inequalities, and political engagement underscores the complex relationship between economic disparities and political participation in India. The privatization and globalization policies have primarily benefited those with higher education, often accessible to the already privileged sections of society, leaving the middle and lower classes with dwindling opportunities for upward mobility. By fostering majoritarian politics, intensified communal and ideological divisions. The rise in majoritarian rhetoric and policies has often marginalized minority communities, further polarising the political landscape.

Economic inequality causes individuals who feel left behind to become disillusioned, which in turn exacerbates political polarisation in a number of ways. Marginalised groups frequently feel abandoned by the political system because they experience long-term unemployment, inadequate healthcare, and inadequate education (Varghese, 2023). Voter dissatisfaction may take the form of apathy or, on the other hand, support for populist leaders who offer drastic reforms. People who are afraid about their financial situation frequently turn to their identity groups whether they are regional, religious, or caste-based for comfort (Bauernschuster et al., 2009). Political parties use these identities as a means of building voter bases, which

exacerbates division (Huber & Suryanarayan, 2016). Economically disadvantaged groups, for example, might unite behind leaders who swear to defend their interests, while wealthier segments might back those who promise to uphold the status quo. Growth in the economy has been disproportionately concentrated in cities, widening the gap between them and rural areas (Anand & Thampi, 2016). Rural residents feel more and more isolated since they frequently lack access to basic infrastructure and employment possibilities. Political polarisation is largely a result of the urban-rural divide, as evidenced by the different political priorities and preferences of urban and rural voters.

### **Theoretical background**

A comprehensive overview of various theoretical frameworks that elucidate the relationship between economic disparity and political polarization (Table 1). Political polarization, the increasing ideological distance and hostility between different political groups, has been a growing concern globally. Understanding the theoretical underpinnings can help in dissecting how economic inequality influences political behaviour and societal divisions (Figure 1).

### **Conceptual understanding from the theories**

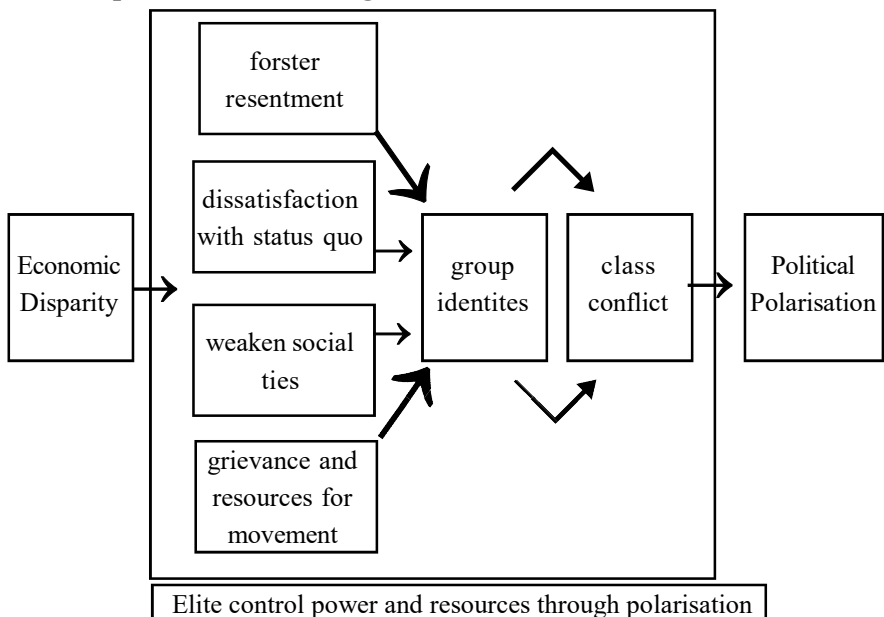


Figure 1. The conceptual factors contributing the relationship between economic disparity and political polarisation

Table 1. Shows the important theories

Theoretical Framework	Key Proponents	Core Concepts	Relationship between Economic Disparity and Political Polarization
Relative Deprivation Theory	Ted Robert Gurr	Focuses on the perception of inequality and deprivation relative to others.	Economic disparity leads to feelings of relative deprivation, which can foster resentment and political polarization.
Economic Voting Theory	Anthony Downs, Douglas Hibbs	Economic self-interest and economic performance are the main factors that influence voters' political decisions..	Increased economic inequality can cause discontent with the current state of affairs, which fuels polarisation as various groups push for reform.
Social Identity Theory	Henri Tajfel, John Turner	Belonging to a group gives people a sense of identity and self-worth..	Economic inequality can intensify group identities (such as class and ethnicity), increasing polarisation and the differences between in-groups and out-groups.
Class Conflict Theory	Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels	There are competing classes in society, especially between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.	Class conflict is exacerbated by economic inequality, which fuels political polarisation between the status quo's supporters and detractors.
Modernization Theory	Seymour Martin Lipset	Social structures and political institutions change as a result of economic development and modernisation..	Development might theoretically lessen polarisation by reducing economic gaps, but quick changes can sometimes momentarily make polarisation worse.
Elite Theory	C. Wright Mills, Gaetano Mosca	There is a constrained ruling elite and the general populace in society.	The elite, who frequently profit from economic inequality, may utilise political division as a tactic to hold onto power and control over resources.
Social Fragmentation Theory	Robert Putnam, Francis Fukuyama	Social dispersion brought on by economic inequality can erode trust and social cohesiveness.	As various groups pursue their interests, growing economic disparity can cause social bonds to deteriorate and political polarisation to increase.
Rational Choice Theory	Gary Becker, James Buchanan	People make decisions based on reasoned calculations in order to maximise their gains..	Because groups may make different logical decisions as a result of economic inequality, political polarisation may result when they support policies that serve their interests..
Resource Mobilization Theory	John McCarthy, Mayer Zald	Resources become available and are mobilised to form social movements.	Economic inequality can fuel political movements by providing the complaints and resources they need to get organised, which can polarise society..



## Insight from V-Dem data

The analysis conducted by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute underscores the growing political polarisation in India, which has been further aggravated by the amplification of economic inequities subsequent to the COVID-19 outbreak (Figure 2). V-Dem's reports indicate that India's political division has gotten more extreme recently. The COVID-19 epidemic has exacerbated already-existing economic disparities, which have contributed to this polarisation. Lower-income groups have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic's economic effects, which have also widened already-existing economic gaps. The economic recession brought on by the pandemic resulted in a large number of job losses and income reductions, especially for the most disadvantaged groups. The public's discontent and mistrust of governmental institutions have been exacerbated by this economic strain, further polarising the political landscape. Disinformation and inflammatory rhetoric from political leaders exacerbate the heightened partisan differences and social tensions that reflect the rising polarisation. The results also indicate that these economic and social differences pose serious threats to democracies like India. However, when it comes to resolving these concerns, democratic institutions typically outperform authoritarian regimes since they tend to guarantee greater public health, economic growth, security, and the supply of public goods. Overall, there is cause

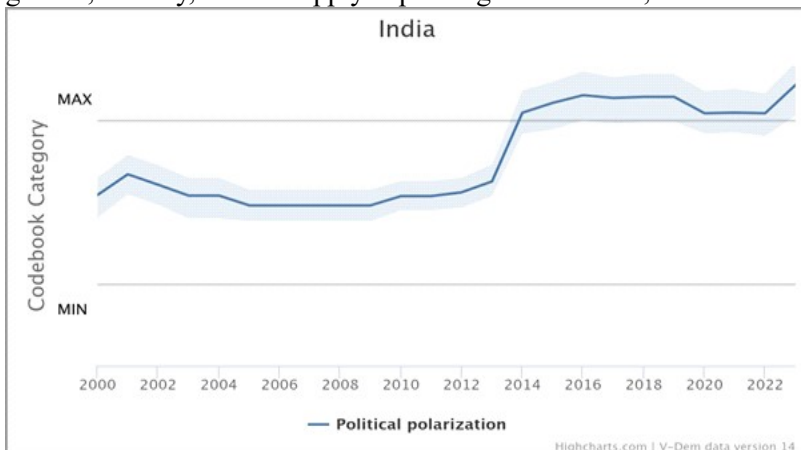


Figure 2. Graph of political polarisation (V-Dem, 2024)

for concern regarding the relationship between political polarisation and economic inequality in India, particularly in light of the recent pandemic.

### **Political polarisation and Gini coefficient**

Political polarisation and income inequality in India reveals several significant insights and raises important questions about the socio-political dynamics at play. The data shows a clear trend where rising income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, is associated with increasing political polarisation (Figure 3). Initially, from 2000 to 2013, political polarisation remained relatively low and stable despite the steady rise in inequality. This period of political stability might be attributed to various factors such as economic growth, social policies, or a lack of significant political upheavals. Political polarisation has sharply increased since 2013, albeit this could be attributed to a combination of factors such as the long-term effects of inequality, growing dissatisfaction across various socioeconomic groups, and possibly the rise of more divisive political rhetoric and policies. Even while the Gini coefficient has continued to climb, the variations in political polarisation that have been seen since 2016 indicate that other factors may possibly be influencing political dynamics. These could include significant political developments, governmental transitions, choices made on public policy, or even external factors like geopolitical tensions or economic crises. Though this does not immediately translate into less polarisation, it may point to a plateau in income inequality or to effective measures taken to address extreme disparities. This illustrates the complex and gradual influence of economic policies on political sentiments. The unmistakable factual link that has been shown over a significant amount of time between growing political polarisation and wealth disparity in India. In addition to emphasising patterns, this research also shows the potential lag effect of economic disparities on political dynamics, providing a unique longitudinal viewpoint. This analysis offers a thorough overview extending over two decades, in contrast to many other studies that concentrate only on short-term data or isolated instances. This insight into how long-term economic patterns impact political landscapes.

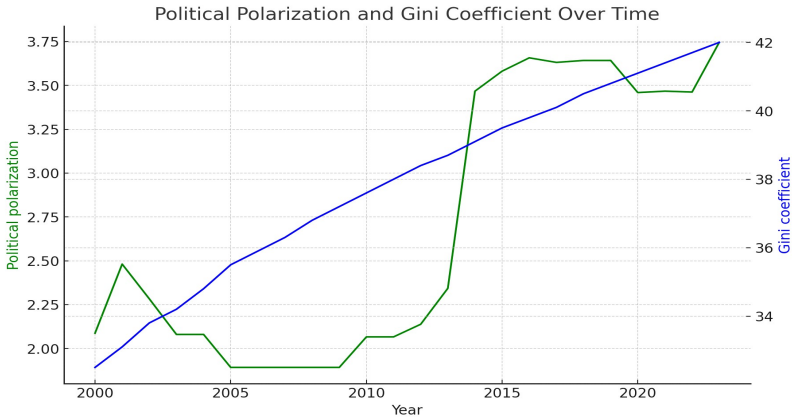


Figure 3. Combined graph of Political polarisation and Gini coefficient

New theories regarding the connection between political behaviour and economic inequality may arise as a result of the interconnectedness. One such argument, for example, is that long-term economic inequality feeds the public's sense of disenfranchisement and division, which feeds political polarisation. A different hypothesis would investigate how policy choices and political discourse might either lessen or exacerbate the impact of inequality on political divide. Moreover, the results indicate that mitigating income inequality via equitable economic policies and social justice campaigns may be crucial in diminishing political division and thus fostering a more unified and steady community.

Future research and the development of policies targeted at tackling political and economic issues in concert may build on this integrated approach. Future projections show that unless substantial efforts are taken to address the underlying causes of inequality, political polarisation may either stay high or even worsen if income disparity keeps rising. Polarisation may be lessened by policies that support social fairness, equitable resource allocation, and inclusive economic growth. Political stability also depends on encouraging political discourse and minimising divisive speech. It would be essential to comprehend and deal with the interaction of political and economic elements in order to guarantee a more cohesive and stable socio-political climate in India. Between the years 2000 and 2022. Political

polarisation and the Gini coefficient show an increasing trend over this time. Up until about 2005, political polarisation was comparatively constant. Then, it started to climb dramatically, peaked around 2015, then slightly declined before rising once more by 2022. Simultaneously, the Gini coefficient exhibits a consistent upward trend, signifying a growth in income disparity. The concurrent increase in both measures raises the possibility of a link and shows that the widening political gulf may be exacerbated by rising income disparity. This association highlights how crucial it is to solve economic inequality in order to perhaps lessen political division.

### **Notable Cases and Key Incidents**

A detailed chronological examination of significant incidents and policy developments in India (Table 2) reveals the complex connection between economic inequality and political polarisation. Covers the early 1990s to the present, highlights notable events that have had a substantial impact on the country's economic and political environments. The narrative begins with 1991's historic economic liberalisation, which heralded a new age of rapid economic growth, increasing foreign direct investment (FDI), and job creation. This time marked the creation of a wealthy elite and intensified the urban-rural split, setting the framework for future socioeconomic inequities. The Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 stands as a critical juncture, religious polarisation is rising and impacting the political discourse, with long-term consequences for community ties and political alignment (Chandhoke & Priyadarshi, 2009).

As India transitioned into the 2000s, the IT and service industry boom highlighted the country's economic dynamism, resulting in significant wealth creation in metropolitan areas. However, this growth revealed differences between geographies and social groupings. Concurrently, substantial governmental interventions, such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and the implementation of reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs), attempted to redress some of these discrepancies. Despite these efforts, events such as the Gujarat riots and the anti-corruption campaign highlight the persistent conflict between economic

advancement and social fairness (Jaffrelot, 2015). Following 2014, a new government emerged with promises of economic reforms, most notably the “Make in India” initiative and the controversial demonetisation policy of 2016. These measures, while intended to stimulate economic growth, generated political polarisation and arguments about their efficacy and goal (Mahmood, 2017). The Goods and Services Tax (GST) implementation serves as an example of the challenges associated with striking a balance between economic changes and regional disparities. However, its effect on economic inequality has come under fire because, notwithstanding exemptions for necessities, the regressive nature of the tax system unfairly impacts lower-income people (Mukherjee, 2020). This discrepancy deepens ideological rifts, escalating political polarisation and marginalised groups’ sense of economic unfairness. Regional inequities have been exacerbated by the GST’s implementation issues, such as the costs placed on small enterprises to comply with the law. This has led to heated discussions between political ideologies that support decentralised versus centralised fiscal policies. As a result, the GST has not only changed the economic landscape of India but also the socio-political landscape, intensifying ideological and economic divisions.

Recent years have seen substantial social movements and legal advancements that intersect with economic and political challenges. Farmers’ rallies against controversial agriculture policies, as well as Dalit protests (Bharat Bandh), underscore the continuous battle for economic equity and social justice. The repeal of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, as well as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlight the complexities of governmental decisions and their broader socioeconomic consequences. Recent developments from 2022 and 2023, including ethnic unrest in Manipur and the Supreme Court’s decision on the SC/ST Atrocities Act. These events demonstrate the ongoing impact of economic and social inequities on political polarisation, illustrating both their permanence and change in modern India. Caste plays a significant role in economic inequality, with lower caste groups such as Dalits facing structural disadvantages. This issue has been highlighted by movements such as the Bhim Army’s

action in Uttar Pradesh and the Dalit marches in Maharashtra in 2018 against caste-based violence and prejudice. Political polarisation arises as a result of caste-based economic imbalances, when marginalised groups mobilise against legislation and political parties they believe will perpetuate their economic and social enslavement. The rise of Dalit political movements, as well as their support for social justice and economic redistribution parties, demonstrate how caste-based economic inequities aggravate political polarisation (Weiner, 2001; Jaffrelot, 2015).

Farmer Protests and the Agrarian Crisis (2020–2021) Protests erupted across the country in 2020 in response to three agriculture bills passed by the Indian government that were perceived to promote large corporations over local farms. For more than a year, farmers, largely from Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, occupied Delhi's borders and demanded that the rules be lifted. This episode highlights how long-standing issues such as low crop prices, debt, and insufficient support may cause economic hardship for farmers (Kumar, 2021; 2024). The protests' widespread support from opposition parties has created a visible political schism between the incumbent government and its opponents. The agricultural crisis exposed the link between political division and economic grievances. This overview gives a nuanced viewpoint on how economic policies, social disparities, and political polarisation overlap and grow over time.

Year	Event/Case	Economic Impact	Political Impact
1991	Economic Liberalization Begins	Rapid economic growth, increasing FDI and employment creation.	The rise of an affluent elite has deepened the urban-rural gap.
1992	Babri Masjid Demolition and Subsequent Riots	Economic disruption due to the communal conflicts.	Increased religious polarisation, emergence of Hindutva politics.

2000-2010	IT and Service Sector Boom	Creating new wealth in urban areas and IT hubs.	Political power transfers towards metropolitan regions; the middle class emerges as a crucial voter base.
2002	Gujarat Riots	Economic losses in impacted towns, and long-term distrust affecting local economies	Political consolidation of Gujarat Government, polarisation along religious lines
2005	NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act)	Ensured economic security for rural populations	Political mobilization of rural poor
2006	OBC Reservations in Educational Institutions	Increased access to education for backward classes	Political polarisation over reservation policy has a tremendous impact on student politics.
2014	General Election	Promises of economic reforms, "Make in India" initiative	Strong mandate, polarisation based on economic promises, and development of Hindutva politics.
2016	Demonetization	Disruptions in the informal sector, cash shortages	Political polarisation, dispute on economic efficacy, and intention.
2017	Implementation of GST (Goods and Services Tax)	Simplification of tax structure, compliance costs	Mixed reactions, economic differences among states, and political disagreement
2018-2019	Farmer Protests	Highlighted agrarian distress	Political mobilization of farmers, impact on 2019 elections
2018	Dalit Protests (Bharat Bandh)	Highlighted economic and social issues faced by Dalits	Political mobilisation of Dalit communities, challenging government.
2019	Abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir	Economic uncertainty in Jammu and Kashmir, impact on tourism and businesses	Political polarisation, heightened tension in Jammu and Kashmir, national debate on autonomy and security

2020	COVID-19 Pandemic	Economic contraction, job losses, migrant crisis	Political debates about crisis management and polarisation over lockdown tactics.
2020-2021	Farmers' Protest against Farm Bills	Perceived threat to small farmers' incomes	Large-scale demonstrations, political coalitions, and polarisation over agricultural reforms
2020	Delhi Riots	Economic losses in affected areas, impact on local businesses	Increased communal tensions, political discussions on law and order, and religious polarisation
2022	Anti-Muslim Riots in Karnataka	Economic impact on affected communities and disruption in local businesses	Increased communal polarisation, political disagreements regarding state and national government responses
2022	Release of the film "The Kashmir Files"	Increased interest in Kashmir - related tourism, disagreement over the film's representation of historical events.	Political and communal polarisation, impact on the discourse about Kashmir
2023	Manipur Ethnic Violence	Severe economic upheaval, population displacement, and effects on local economies	Increased ethnic and political polarisation, leading to examination of state and federal government actions.



2023	Supreme Court Verdict on SC/ST Atrocities Act	Potential effects on social and economic protections for marginalised communities	Political reactions surrounding the preservation of Dalit and tribal populations, and their impact on upcoming elections
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## **Conclusion**

The central thesis posited that growing economic disparities significantly contribute to the intensifying political divide, with marginalized groups seeking greater representation and wealthy strata consolidating their influence. The analysis revealed that regions with higher levels of economic inequality tend to exhibit more pronounced political polarisation, driven by socio-economic grievances and competing interests. This phenomenon is primarily driven by the disenfranchised segments of the population rallying behind populist leaders who promise economic reforms and social justice, while the affluent segments support policies that favour economic liberalization and growth, leading to a polarised political landscape.

The broader implications of these insight are profound for Indian society and politics. The growing divide poses a significant challenge to India's democratic fabric, as it undermines social cohesion and effective governance. Political polarisation fuelled by economic inequality can lead to policy gridlock, where crucial reforms are stalled due to partisan conflicts. This not only hampers economic development but also exacerbates social tensions, making it difficult to address pressing issues such as poverty, healthcare, and education. To mitigate these effects, it is imperative for policymakers to implement measures that promote economic inclusivity and equitable growth. Strategies such as progressive taxation, which can help to reduce income inequality, are essential. Additionally, substantial investments in education and healthcare can empower the economically disadvantaged, providing them with better opportunities and reducing the socio-economic divide. Strengthening social safety nets, such as unemployment benefits and food security programs, can also play a crucial role in alleviating economic distress and fostering social stability.

Furthermore, bridging the gap between wealthy and marginalised places can be achieved by tackling regional economic imbalances through focused development projects. To promote more equitable and inclusive economic growth, undeveloped regions can benefit from the establishment of special economic zones (SEZs), which can boost local economies, provide employment, and lessen the burden of migration on urban centres. Future studies should examine how the media contributes to political polarisation, considering its enormous impact on voter sentiment and election results. Further understanding of the causal links between political behaviour and economic inequality may come by examining the effects of regional economic policy on local political dynamics. Longitudinal studies examining the long-term effects of economic policies on political polarisation would be particularly valuable in understanding these dynamics over time. In sum, addressing economic inequality is not only crucial for economic justice but also for ensuring a more harmonious and less polarized political landscape in India. This emphasises how crucial it is to launch coordinated policy initiatives to close the economic gap in order to promote social cohesiveness and democratic stability. Addressing these discrepancies through well-informed policy interventions would be crucial to securing a more egalitarian and politically peaceful future as India grows and changes. Economic inclusion will open the door to a more robust and resilient democracy that can meet the needs and ambitions of all of its people.

## **Appendix**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Political polarization</b>	<b>Political polarization CI (Low)</b>	<b>Political polarization CI (High)</b>
<b>2000</b>	2.087	1.658	2.415
<b>2001</b>	2.481	2.107	2.838
<b>2002</b>	2.283	1.913	2.648
<b>2003</b>	2.08	1.677	2.43
<b>2004</b>	2.08	1.677	2.43
<b>2005</b>	1.892	1.591	2.178
<b>2006</b>	1.892	1.591	2.178
<b>2007</b>	1.892	1.591	2.178
<b>2008</b>	1.892	1.591	2.178
<b>2009</b>	1.892	1.591	2.178
<b>2010</b>	2.066	1.798	2.355
<b>2011</b>	2.066	1.798	2.355
<b>2012</b>	2.138	1.867	2.432
<b>2013</b>	2.343	2.084	2.664
<b>2014</b>	3.467	3.225	3.753
<b>2015</b>	3.581	3.394	3.882
<b>2016</b>	3.657	3.506	3.932
<b>2017</b>	3.631	3.446	3.875
<b>2018</b>	3.642	3.485	3.914
<b>2019</b>	3.642	3.485	3.914
<b>2020</b>	3.459	3.25	3.752
<b>2021</b>	3.467	3.206	3.727
<b>2022</b>	3.462	3.223	3.739
<b>2023</b>	3.745	3.631	3.983

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