

The Casted Infrastructure: Towards a Theoretical Framework for Geographical Patterns of Public Goods Access in North India

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Abstract

Why does there exist such stark variations in the availability of public goods like piped water, electricity, and all-season roads in North Indian districts? Prior literature stresses the role of economic growth, state capabilities, and political competition as drivers of public goods provision. The current paper advances another conceptual framework, one rooted in caste. Building on insights from political ecology, sociology of durable inequalities, and postcolonialism, we propose that caste functions as a form of infrastructural mediation, a set of social processes that determines the spatial allocation of public goods through three mechanisms: marginalization of politically high-Scheduled Castes (SCs), bureaucratic arbitrariness that mirrors the logic of caste hierarchies, and capture of local governments by the elite. We develop this conceptual framework, illustrate it with empirical examples from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Punjab, and derive twelve testable hypotheses for further inquiry. Finally, the paper reflects on how this framework applies to infrastructure policy-making in present-day India, particularly with respect to the Jal Jeevan Mission and Saubhagya scheme.

Keywords: *Caste, infrastructure, public goods, political ecology, Uttar Pradesh, spatial inequality*

1. Introduction

1.1 The Puzzle That Demands Theory

In rural North India, a Dalit woman walks two kilometres each morning to a handpump that often runs dry. A few kilometres away, an upper-caste farmer turns on a piped tap in

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