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Climate Change, Caste, and Everyday Life: A Sociological Study of Dalit Culture and Food Practices in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

Climate change in India is often discussed through indicators such as temperature rise, rainfall variability or environmental degradation yet its most profound consequences unfold quietly within everyday social life. This paper is an attempt to examine climate change as a lived social experience by focusing on Dalit communities whose cultural practices and food systems are deeply intertwined with local ecologies, informal labour and collective life. Rather than treating climate change as a neutral or universal crisis, the study argues that its effects are unevenly distributed and strongly shaped by caste-based inequalities that structure access to land, water, livelihoods and state support. Drawing on secondary sources and sociological interpretation, this paper explores how climate stress manifested through droughts, floods, heatwaves, ecological degradation etc. disrupts Dalit livelihoods and gradually reshapes everyday cultural life. Seasonal festivals, collective labour practices, food-sharing traditions and oral knowledge systems linked to local environments are increasingly fractured under conditions of migration, economic insecurity and ecological uncertainty. Particular attention is paid to food practices showing how climate change accelerates the decline of traditional, diverse, climate-resilient diets based on millets, pulses and wild foods while increasing dependence on standardized public food systems with limited nutritional diversity. The analysis further highlights the gendered

dimensions of climate vulnerability noting how Dalit women bear disproportionate responsibility for managing food scarcity, water access, household survival. The paper concludes by arguing that climate change functions as a social amplifier of caste inequality in contemporary India. Addressing climate change, therefore, requires moving beyond technical solutions toward a framework of climate justice that recognizes caste, culture and everyday life as central to environmental policy and social transformation.

Introduction

Climate change is usually described through charts, projections and policy language but for many people in India it is experienced quietly and persistently in daily life. It appears in the uncertainty of work, in the struggle to secure water, in the shrinking variety of food on the plate, and in the slow weakening of community routines that once gave rhythm to ordinary existence. In India, these experiences do not unfold in a social vacuum. They are shaped by long-standing hierarchies that determine who lives close to fragile land who depends on manual and insecure work, and who is most exposed when environmental conditions become unstable. Climate change is not an occasional disruption for Dalit communities but a continuous pressure that settles into everyday life. Widespread landlessness means that many Dalits rely on daily wage labour in agriculture, sanitation, construction or informal urban work, all of which are highly sensitive to heat, rainfall and seasonal change. When rains fail, crops decline and work disappears; when floods arrive, settlements and livelihoods are damaged; when temperatures rise labour becomes physically dangerous. These environmental shifts are felt directly because Dalit households remain closely tied to local ecologies for water, fuel and food, and because alternative sources of security are often limited (Baviskar, 2011; Ghosh, 2019). Unlike socially advantaged groups who can draw on land ownership, savings or institutional connections, Dalit communities frequently encounter climate stress with minimal protection, uneven access to relief and weak inclusion in adaptation planning (Jodhka, 2015; Shah et al., 2018). The consequences extend well beyond income loss. Climate stress gradually reshapes everyday social life by unsettling cultural practices linked to agricultural cycles disrupting collective labour and mutual support and transforming food habits that were once diverse, seasonal, locally grounded. Traditional diets based on millets, pulses, wild foods etc. decline as ecological conditions worsen and dependence on standardized public food systems increases often with serious nutritional effects. These shifts also carry a gendered weight as

women shoulder greater responsibility for managing scarcity and household survival under changing environmental conditions. This paper argues that climate change operates as a social process that reorganizes everyday life for Dalits through small, cumulative disruptions rather than dramatic catastrophe alone. Based on secondary data and sociological interpretation the study highlights how environmental change interacts with entrenched inequality to reshape culture, food practices and social relations. By focusing on lived experience rather than abstract indicators this paper contributes to debates on development and climate justice, emphasizing that meaningful responses to climate change in India must engage with the social realities through which environmental stress is actually endured.

Caste, Ecology and Structural Vulnerability in India

Caste in India has never been merely a matter of belief, ritual or cultural difference; it has functioned historically as a durable social structure that organized access to resources, shaped relations to nature and distributed risk unevenly across society. As a system of stratification caste determined who could own land, who could control water and who would perform forms of labour most exposed to environmental uncertainty. Dalit communities were largely positioned outside land ownership, pushed toward marginal plots, village edges, flood-prone zones or ecologically fragile spaces while being tied to occupations that depended directly on natural cycles such as agricultural labour, animal-related work, sanitation and other forms of manual service (Jodhka, 2015). This spatial and occupational arrangement was not accidental. It ensured that environmental insecurity like crop failure, water scarcity, seasonal hunger was absorbed disproportionately by those already placed at the bottom of the social order. Access to wells, ponds, grazing lands and forests was historically regulated through caste norms limiting the ability of Dalits to respond flexibly when ecological conditions shifted (Baviskar, 2011). These patterns created a long-term relationship between caste location and ecological exposure that continues to shape vulnerability in the present. Climate change intensifies this inherited vulnerability rather than disrupting it. Droughts reduce agricultural employment for landless workers first; floods damage settlements located on low-lying or poorly serviced land; heatwaves make outdoor and manual labour increasingly dangerous for those with little choice but to continue working. Dalit neighbourhoods, whether in rural villages or informal urban settlements are often the least protected from environmental extremes, lacking durable housing, drainage, shade or reliable water access. When climate-related disasters occur relief and recovery processes frequently mirror existing power relations with socially advantaged groups better positioned to access compensation, insurance or state assistance while Dalits face delays, exclusion or bureaucratic obstacles (Shah et al., 2018). Environmental stress thus becomes a cumulative process in which small losses missed workdays, declining health, damaged dwellings add up to long-term

insecurity. From a sociological perspective, this pattern challenges the assumption that climate change is a universal risk that affects all social groups in similar ways. The language of shared vulnerability often hides the fact that some lives are systematically exposed to danger while others are buffered by assets, connections and institutional support. Approaches rooted in political ecology show that environmental problems are inseparable from questions of power and access while studies of inequality emphasize that exposure to risk follows established social lines rather than natural ones (Beck, 1992; Omvedt, 2011). Climate change, in this sense, does not erase hierarchy; it works through it. Existing arrangements of land ownership, settlement and labour determine who bears the cost of environmental disruption and who can adapt with relative ease. Understanding caste as a structural condition rather than a cultural remnant is therefore crucial for analysing climate vulnerability in India. The impacts of droughts, floods, rising temperatures cannot be understood solely through meteorological data or economic loss. They must be read through the social arrangements that decide whose work is expendable, whose homes are considered temporary, and whose suffering remains politically marginal. Climate change magnifies these arrangements by placing additional strain on lives already organized around uncertainty. Recognizing this dynamic shifts the discussion from abstract resilience toward questions of responsibility, inclusion and justice highlighting that meaningful climate responses must confront the social structures that have long shaped unequal relations between people and their environments.

Climate Stress and the Transformation of Dalit Cultural Life

Dalit culture in India has historically been grounded less in abstract symbols and more in everyday practices shaped by community life, work and ecology. Cultural life emerges through shared labour, seasonal rhythms, food preparation, local rituals, collective responses to hardship. Festivals linked to sowing and harvesting cycles, community gatherings around water sources and reciprocal exchanges of labour and food have long formed the fabric of Dalit social life. These practices were not merely expressions of belief; they were ways of sustaining dignity, solidarity, continuity etc. under conditions of material constraint. Culture, in this sense, functioned as a practical resource that helped communities cope with uncertainty and exclusion while maintaining social bonds across generations. Climate stress increasingly unsettles this practice-based cultural world. Changes in rainfall patterns disrupt agricultural calendars making it difficult to sustain seasonal festivals tied to monsoon cycles, harvests and local deities associated with land and water. When crops fail or agricultural work becomes irregular, the collective pauses that once marked the year lose their material foundation. Festivals become shorter, symbolic or are postponed altogether gradually weakening their role as moments of shared renewal. Similarly, traditions of collective labour such as shared harvesting, house construction or

community repair work etc. decline as livelihoods become fragmented and work becomes more individualized under conditions of scarcity and migration. Reciprocal exchanges that once depended on stable presence and predictable seasons are harder to maintain when households struggle simply to secure daily survival (Baviskar, 2011). Climate change also affects oral traditions and local knowledge systems that have long circulated within Dalit communities. Knowledge about soils, crops, weather signs, wild foods and water management was transmitted through everyday interaction, storytelling, observation. As ecological conditions become less predictable this knowledge appears less reliable while younger generations find fewer opportunities to learn it in practice. What is lost is not only information but a sense of continuity between past experience and present action. Climate stress thus weakens the social spaces in which knowledge is shared, even when the need for such knowledge becomes more urgent. Migration intensifies these cultural disruptions. Droughts, floods and declining rural employment push Dalit households toward urban centres or distant regions in search of work. Migration reshapes cultural life by stretching communities across space and time. In cities, migrants often live in crowded settlements where long working hours and insecure housing leave little room for collective rituals or shared celebrations. Community cohesion becomes fragile as people rotate in and out of villages weakening everyday interaction and mutual support. Inter-generational transmission of culture is particularly affected, as children grow up away from village settings where festivals, stories and practices were once learned through participation rather than instruction (Jodhka, 2015). Everyday rituals like shared meals, community gatherings, informal social visits also change under climate pressure. Scarcity narrows social interaction, encouraging households to turn inward as resources shrink. Women who often carry responsibility for maintaining cultural continuity through food preparation and ritual observance, face additional strain as climate stress increases domestic labour and reduces time for communal engagement. These changes do not signal the disappearance of Dalit culture but its fragmentation. Cultural practices persist in altered forms, adapted to new constraints, unevenly remembered, selectively performed or transformed into markers of identity rather than shared routines. Climate change therefore reshapes Dalit cultural life through gradual cumulative disruption rather than sudden erasure. Identity is renegotiated under stress drawing selectively on memory, experience, necessity. Understanding this process requires moving beyond the idea of culture as static heritage and recognizing it as something lived, adjusted, reworked in response to material conditions. Climate stress reveals how deeply culture is tied to ecology and everyday life, and how environmental change unsettles not only livelihoods but the social worlds through which people make sense of belonging and continuity.

Food Practices, Nutrition and Survival under Climate Change

Food practices among Dalit communities in India have historically been shaped by close engagement with local environments and seasonal rhythms rather than by market abundance or choice. Traditional diets were rooted in millets such as jowar, bajra, ragi and small local grains supplemented by pulses, oilseeds, wild greens, tubers, fruits and forest-based foods gathered from commons. These food systems were not merely responses to poverty; they represented forms of ecological adaptation developed over generations. Seasonal availability guided what was eaten, when it was eaten and how it was prepared. Knowledge of wild edible plants, drought-resistant crops and low-water cultivation allowed households to stretch limited resources while maintaining nutritional balance. Food was deeply embedded in social life, shared during festivals, collective labour and everyday interactions, reinforcing community bonds alongside bodily sustenance. (Mitra; Kumar 2025) Climate change steadily undermines these food systems by altering the ecological conditions on which they depend. Erratic rainfall, prolonged dry spells and rising temperatures have led to the decline of many traditional crops that once thrived in marginal soils with minimal irrigation. Millets, despite their resilience have been displaced not only by changing climate conditions but also by policy priorities that favour water-intensive crops and standardized procurement. As commons shrink due to ecological degradation, privatization or enclosure, access to wild greens, forest foods, grazing spaces becomes increasingly restricted. Biodiversity loss further narrows the range of edible plants available to rural households reducing dietary options precisely at a time when climatic uncertainty increases the need for flexibility (Baviskar, 2011). These environmental changes interact with economic pressure pushing Dalit households toward purchased food and state-supported systems as traditional sources become unreliable. One of the most significant shifts has been the growing dependence on the Public Distribution System. While the PDS provides essential caloric security through rice and wheat, it also contributes to the gradual erosion of dietary diversity. Meals become heavier in carbohydrates and lighter in proteins, micronutrients and seasonal variation. This transition is not simply a matter of preference; it reflects constrained choices under conditions of scarcity and insecurity. Climate stress reduces the time, energy, resources required to cultivate or gather diverse foods making standardized grains the most accessible option. Over time, food moves away from being a culturally embedded practice toward a minimal strategy for managing hunger. The nutritional consequences of this shift are unevenly distributed within households. Reduced dietary diversity contributes to rising levels of malnutrition, particularly among Dalit women and children. Women often manage food scarcity by adjusting their own intake eating last or least to ensure that children and working members of the household are fed. Climate-induced food

stress thus deepens existing nutritional vulnerabilities, with long-term implications for health, reproductive outcomes, and inter-generational well-being (Shah et al., 2018). For children, inadequate nutrition affects physical growth, cognitive development, educational outcomes etc. reinforcing cycles of disadvantage that extend beyond the immediate moment of scarcity. Food insecurity in this context is not an occasional crisis triggered by extreme events alone. It becomes an everyday condition marked by uncertainty, compromise and continual adjustment. Households plan meals around what is affordable and available rather than what is culturally valued or nutritionally optimal. The social meaning of food shifts as sharing practices declined under pressure. Communal meals become rarer, portion sizes shrink and food-related rituals lose their centrality in social life. These changes subtly reshape relationships within families and communities narrowing the social spaces through which care and solidarity were once expressed. The gendered dimensions of these transformations are especially significant. Women not only bear the physical burden of nutritional deprivation but also carry the emotional and social responsibility of managing scarcity. They stretch ingredients, substitute foods and negotiate household expectations while maintaining a sense of normalcy amid instability. Climate stress increases unpaid labour through longer journeys for water or fuel and reduces time available for food preparation and cultural observance. Food practices thus become sites where environmental pressure, social inequality and gendered responsibility intersect most visibly. From a sociological perspective climate change transforms food from a shared cultural practice into a strategy of survival. What was once a medium of social connection become a calculation shaped by risk, access and endurance. This transformation does not erase cultural memory but it limits the conditions under which food can function as a source of identity, pleasure and community. Understanding these shifts reveals how climate change reaches into the most intimate aspects of everyday life altering not only what people eat but how they relate to one another through food. In doing so, it underscores that addressing climate vulnerability requires attention to nutrition, gender, cultural practice, rather than focusing solely on production or distribution in isolation.

Conclusion

This paper has approached climate change not as a distant environmental threat but as a process that quietly reshapes everyday life for Dalit communities in India. Across livelihoods, cultural practices and food systems, climate stress appears as a continuous pressure rather than an exceptional crisis. Declining agricultural employment increased exposure to heat and environmental risk and the fragility of informal work make survival increasingly uncertain for households already positioned at the margins of security. These material pressures ripple outward unsettling the rhythms of community life that once provided stability through shared labour, seasonal rituals and reciprocal support. Cultural practices tied to

land, water, ecological cycles are shortened, fragmented or reshaped under conditions of scarcity and migration while food habits shift from diverse locally grounded diets toward standardized and nutritionally limited forms of sustenance. Together, these changes reveal how climate change reorganizes daily life in ways that are social as much as environmental. The central argument of this study is that climate change operates as a social amplifier of caste inequality in contemporary India. Environmental stress does not arrive on an equal social field; it moves through inherited arrangements of land ownership, settlement, labour, and access to institutional protection. Dalit communities encounter climate stress with fewer buffers and greater exposure turning ecological change into a mechanism that deepens existing disadvantage rather than disrupting it. This process is cumulative. Small disruptions like missed workdays, declining food quality, weakened community ties accumulate over time shaping life chances in ways that are rarely captured by disaster statistics or policy frameworks focused on short-term shocks. The implications of this analysis extend beyond descriptive concern. For climate policy, it suggests that technical solutions centred on infrastructure, efficiency or carbon reduction are insufficient if they ignore the social terrain on which climate impacts unfold. Adaptation strategies must recognize who bears the everyday costs of environmental change and why. For debates on social justice, the findings highlight that environmental vulnerability is not separate from broader questions of dignity, participation and recognition. Climate stress intensifies struggles over food, work, belonging making it impossible to treat environmental and social policy as separate domains. For Dalit studies and environmental sociology, this paper underscores the importance of everyday life as an analytical lens showing how large-scale ecological processes reshape culture, identity and social relations through ordinary routines rather than dramatic rupture. Addressing these challenges requires caste-sensitive climate responses. This includes recognizing the value of indigenous and traditional food systems that have long offered resilience under ecological uncertainty protecting commons and shared resources that sustain collective lif, and ensuring that Dalit voices are meaningfully included in climate planning and governance rather than treated as passive recipients of aid. Such measures are not merely compensatory; they are essential for building forms of adaptation that are socially grounded and sustainable. Ultimately, climate justice in India cannot be separated from social and cultural justice. Environmental change reaches into kitchens, neighbourhoods, relationships shaping how people eat, work and relate to one another. Any serious response to climate change must therefore engage with the structures that organize everyday inequality. Recognizing this connection moves the conversation beyond vulnerability toward responsibility insisting that a just response to climate change must also confront the social conditions through which its impacts are lived.

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