

When Protection Becomes Persecution: Social Liability, Identity, and Democratic Decline in India

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ABSTRACT

In India, caste and religious affiliation have long served as pillars of social capital, offering protection, opportunity, and belonging. Yet when individuals defy social expectations—through interfaith marriage, conversion, or caste mobility—these same networks can become punitive. This paper explores the concept of social liability: the transformation of community ties into mechanisms of exclusion and harm. Drawing on sociological theory and anonymized case studies from recent expert witness reports, it illustrates how social capital turns against individuals who step outside prescribed roles. As Hindu nationalism rises, this reversal is increasingly reinforced by state policies, deepening the risks for religious and caste minorities. The consequences are not only personal but structural, contributing to migration, social fragmentation, and the erosion of democratic values. Understanding how belonging can become betrayal is essential to addressing India's growing crisis of pluralism and to ensuring that community ties do not come at the cost of individual freedom.

Keywords: social liability, social capital, caste, religion, India, Hindu nationalism, interfaith marriage, discrimination, pluralism, democratic erosion.

INTRODUCTION

In India, social capital has historically served as a powerful form of protection. Caste identity, religious affiliation, family networks, and community relationships have long provided individuals with access to employment, education, marriage prospects, and safety. These social structures are deeply embedded in the daily lives of Indians, influencing not only private behavior but also the allocation of public and institutional resources. In traditional contexts, these forms of capital offer belonging and stability, ensuring survival in an environment where state protections may be weak or unevenly applied.

Yet under certain conditions, these same networks can transform into sources of danger. When individuals violate long-standing social or religious norms—by marrying outside of their caste, converting to another religion, or resisting community expectations—their once-protective affiliations can turn punitive. This reversal is what this paper refers to as social liability: when networks that once functioned as buffers against harm become mechanisms of exclusion, punishment, and even violence. As I explored with my co-author in *Corporate Social Capital and Liability* [1], social capital is not inherently benign; it becomes a liability when the very relationships that tie individuals to a community are used to enforce conformity or penalize deviation.

Scholars have long examined the dual nature of social capital. Bourdieu emphasized its role in reproducing privilege across generations [2] while Coleman [3] highlighted its potential to support cooperative behavior and opportunity. In India, the context is more complex and often more perilous. Caste-based systems remain a dominant organizing force. Researchers like Teltumbde and Yengde have shown how Dalit communities in particular face both institutional exclusion and intra-community discipline, especially when individuals transgress caste boundaries through marriage. [4] [5] Chowdhry documents the role of village panchayats in enforcing caste purity, often with violent consequences [6] Menon and [7] adds that women are especially vulnerable, as gender and caste norms intersect to limit their autonomy and punish nonconformity [7].

Religious identity compounds this vulnerability. As India shifts further toward Hindu nationalism under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the state itself has begun to reinforce social liabilities for religious minorities. Nussbaum and Jaffrelot argue that under the guise of national unity, sectarian policies such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) have undermined constitutional protections and created new forms of legal discrimination, particularly against Muslims [8]. Christians, too, face increasing threats, including mob attacks on churches, false accusations of forced conversions, and growing hostility toward missionaries and faith-based organizations (Watch, India: Events of 2023, 2024)[11]. In this environment, merely belonging to a minority faith group can shift from being a source of communal identity to a dangerous liability.

This paper examines how, in contemporary India, traditional sources of social capital—especially caste and religious affiliation—can transform into social liabilities that expose individuals to exclusion, violence, and state-sanctioned persecution when they violate deeply held social or legal norms. It draws on prior theoretical work on social capital and liability and applies that framework to current Indian case studies, with a focus on the lived experiences of those who defy expected norms in marriage, faith, or social behavior.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FROM SOCIAL CAPITAL TO SOCIAL LIABILITY

The concept of social capital is widely understood as the value generated through relationships, networks, and group membership. It has been central to the study of sociology, political science, and economics, offering a way to explain how individuals and groups gain access to resources, opportunities, and social legitimacy. Bourdieu defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources” linked to a network of mutual recognition [2], while Coleman viewed it as a mechanism that enables individuals to achieve goals they could not accomplish alone [3]. These theories emphasize the benefits of social embeddedness—such as trust, reputation, and mutual support.

However, as noted in *Corporate Social Capital and Liability* [1], social capital is not universally beneficial. It can also become a source of constraint or danger. When group loyalty is tied to rigid social expectations—such as endogamy, caste purity, or religious conformity—an individual’s actions can lead not to support, but to punishment. As one of the co-authors of this framework, I have argued that social liability emerges when the same networks that provide status and support also enforce obedience, and may retaliate when an individual defies those

norms [1]. This transformation is particularly evident in societies where group identity is prioritized over individual autonomy.

Social liability becomes most visible in tightly knit communities, where deviation from group norms—whether by interfaith marriage, caste transgression, or conversion—can trigger consequences ranging from social ostracization to violence. In earlier work on honor-based violence in Muslim societies, I documented how familial and tribal networks that typically protect individuals can become deadly when norms surrounding honor or faith are broken [12]. In these contexts, group belonging becomes conditional and fragile. Individuals may find themselves targeted by the very people and institutions that once offered protection.

In India, social capital is deeply entangled with caste hierarchies, religious affiliation, and family reputation. These networks have long functioned as sources of opportunity and protection, especially in rural areas where state support is weak. But when individuals defy caste boundaries or religious traditions—through marriage, mobility, or personal belief—these same networks can rapidly convert into mechanisms of surveillance and punishment. Families may disown their children. Local *panchayats* (village councils) may impose sanctions or violence. State authorities may look the other way, or in some cases, align with the aggressors. These patterns are not anomalies—they are manifestations of a broader structural inversion in which social capital becomes social liability.

FROM CAPITAL TO LIABILITY: THE FRAGILE PROMISE OF BELONGING

Case Studies of Social Liability in Contemporary India

In India, social capital is embedded in rigid yet protective networks of caste, religion, family, and community. These relationships have historically offered individuals a strong sense of place and purpose, providing employment opportunities, marriage prospects, dispute resolution, and basic safety. However, these same networks become perilous when a person challenges the traditional order—by marrying outside of caste or religion, converting to another faith, rejecting gender norms, or simply voicing dissent. In such cases, what once served as social capital transforms into social liability. The community may ostracize the individual, deny protection, or even facilitate violence against them. In the following case studies, we examine how these reversals occur, drawing from my recent expert witness reports. For privacy and safety, all names and identifying details have been anonymized.

An Ismaili Muslim Caught in the Crosshairs of Hindutva¹ and Sectarianism

Kareem Latif (a pseudonym) was born into a prominent Ismaili Muslim family in a historically pluralistic city in India's southern interior region. His father, a well-known businessman and informal community leader, headed a local Jama'at Khana and provided services to the small but visible Ismaili population in the region. The family enjoyed considerable standing, both economically and socially, which protected them from the occasional flare-ups of religious tension common in post-Partition India. For decades, their social capital provided insulation from harm.

¹ *Hindutva* is a political ideology rooted in Hindu nationalism that seeks to define India as a Hindu-only state. It differs from Hinduism as a religion, emphasizing ethnonationalist identity over pluralistic tradition.

But in recent years, this insulation not only failed—it backfired. As the political climate in India shifted toward religious majoritarianism, especially under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Muslims in general—and vocal, educated Muslims in particular—became targets of state-sanctioned hostility. The Latif family’s visibility, once an asset, rendered them vulnerable. Their religious identity and leadership roles marked them as enemies in the eyes of rising Hindu nationalist groups, some of whom spread conspiracy theories accusing Muslim men of converting Hindu women through “love jihad.”

Kareem’s marriage to a Christian woman further fueled suspicion. The marriage—an act of love and interfaith tolerance—was, in the eyes of Hindu extremists, an unforgivable violation of cultural and religious purity.

Social liability began to manifest through harassment and threats. Stones were thrown at the family’s cars and windows. Protestors—both Hindu and Sunni Muslim—gathered outside their place of worship to chant threats. Law enforcement offered no protection; on the contrary, police dismissed the family’s complaints and labeled them “anti-Hindu.” Friends and neighbors, once part of their protective social circle, fell silent or distanced themselves.

Kareem Latif’s case illustrates the shift from social capital to social liability. His family’s once-respected position in their religious and professional communities became the very reason for their exposure. His profession as a lawyer made him even more visible, and therefore more vulnerable, under laws targeting religious conversion and dissent. Kareem’s story underscores a dangerous reality: in today’s India, visibility within a minority group—especially one that embraces pluralism and education—can itself be a risk factor.

A Sunni Muslim Targeted for Interfaith Marriage and Accused of Conversion

Adil Qureshi (a pseudonym), a Sunni Muslim man from a modest urban neighborhood in northern India, built a life around education, professional growth, and quiet devotion to his faith. His family, well-regarded in their community for running a small printing business, had always been cautious to avoid political or religious controversy. Their standing provided stability—social capital that helped Adil secure employment and community support as he pursued a career in marketing.

That changed the moment he married *Priya*, a Hindu woman. Their interfaith union, though legal under India’s Special Marriage Act, provoked outrage among both Hindu nationalist groups and members of Priya’s extended family. Almost immediately, Adil was accused of luring Priya into marriage as part of a deliberate attempt to convert her to Islam—a suspicion fueled by growing nationalist rhetoric that frames such unions as cultural subversion.

Within weeks of their wedding, Adil faced threats at his workplace and anonymous messages warning him to leave town. Hindu vigilante groups circulated his photo on social media, accusing him of using marriage as a means to convert Hindu women. Though Priya publicly affirmed that their relationship was consensual and grounded in mutual respect, this did not stop the rumors or the harassment. Their union was framed not as an act of personal freedom, but as a calculated attempt to undermine Hindu identity.

As fear mounted, the couple moved cities twice, abandoning their careers and family ties. Yet even in their new location, Priya's distant relatives tracked them down, pressuring her to annul the marriage and return to her "own kind." Adil's community, once a source of identity and protection, now offered no safe harbor. His former allies feared guilt by association.

Adil's story is emblematic of how social capital can reverse course. His identity as a Sunni Muslim, once unremarkable in the diverse fabric of Indian society, became a liability in the context of rising Hindutva ideology. His marriage—meant as an expression of love—was recast as a political threat. And the institutions designed to protect citizens, from the courts to the police, became passive or active enforcers of this hostility.

A Dalit Man Punished for Aspiring Beyond His Place

Ravi Kumar (a pseudonym) was born into a Dalit community in a rural district of Madhya Pradesh, where caste structures still shape the boundaries of daily life. Dalits—historically labeled "untouchables"—occupy the lowest rung in India's traditional Hindu caste hierarchy. Though caste discrimination is officially outlawed, it remains deeply embedded in rural and social life, often manifesting through exclusion, stigma, and violence. For generations, Ravi's family worked as agricultural laborers on land owned by upper-caste Hindus. Despite poverty and limited opportunity, Ravi excelled in school, earning scholarships and eventually completing a university degree in social work.

At first, his success brought pride to his village. Elders praised his achievements, and his education was seen as a collective accomplishment. He became a liaison between local government officials and his community, helping neighbors navigate bureaucratic systems and apply for basic rights. His work reflected not only individual merit but also the strength of his caste-based social capital.

But that goodwill quickly turned. When Ravi began organizing Dalit families to demand legal titles for the land they had tilled for decades, his former supporters—both within his caste and above it—grew uneasy. Local elites saw him as a threat to the natural order, and even some community members feared that his activism would bring unwanted attention or retribution. "He's gone too far," one relative reportedly said. "This is not our place."

The backlash came swiftly. Ravi's father was publicly beaten by members of a dominant caste for his son's "arrogance." A small office Ravi opened to host literacy classes for Dalit children was vandalized and burned. Government grants he had secured for the village were revoked without explanation. Worse still, people he had once considered allies—local shopkeepers, childhood friends, extended family—began to shun him. His social network collapsed.

Ravi's story shows the fragility of social capital when it is tethered to rigid hierarchies. His rise was tolerated only as long as it did not challenge the norms that governed his expected place. The same relationships that once fueled his ascent became tools of coercion when he defied the unwritten rules of caste. His experience reflects a core argument of this paper: in contexts where identity is collective and deeply codified, individual ambition can trigger a reversal of fortune—from protection to punishment.

IMPLICATIONS AND THE EROSION OF DEMOCRACY

The transformation of social capital into social liability in India has profound implications that extend beyond individual experiences, threatening the very foundations of the nation's democracy. This shift manifests in various forms, including alienation, violence, suicide, migration, and social fragmentation.

Alienation and Social Fragmentation

As individuals deviate from prescribed social norms, they often face ostracism from their communities, leading to a sense of alienation. This exclusion erodes the social fabric, fostering divisions and weakening communal bonds. The resulting social fragmentation undermines the collective identity essential for a cohesive society.

Violence and Mental Health Consequences

The punitive measures associated with social liability can escalate into violence, both physical and psychological. Victims of such exclusion may experience heightened stress, anxiety, and depression, potentially leading to suicide. The pervasive fear of retribution stifles free expression and dissent, essential components of a healthy democracy. [13]

Migration and Displacement

Individuals facing social liability may be compelled to migrate, either internally or internationally, to escape persecution. This displacement not only disrupts lives but also contributes to demographic shifts that can strain resources and exacerbate tensions in host communities.

Undermining Democratic Principles

The enforcement of conformity through social liability mechanisms challenges the democratic ideals of freedom, equality, and justice. When societal norms dictate acceptance, and deviation invites punishment, the promise of equal citizenship becomes hollow. [13] This environment discourages participation and silences diverse voices, weakening the democratic process.

Deepening Polarization and Erosion of Pluralism

The rigid enforcement of homogeneity fosters polarization, dividing society along ideological, religious, and cultural lines. Such divisions erode pluralism, a cornerstone of India's democratic ethos, and pave the way for majoritarianism, where the rights of minorities are marginalized. In sum, the pervasive nature of social liability poses a significant threat to India's democratic integrity. Addressing this issue requires a recommitment to pluralistic values, protection of individual rights, and the promotion of inclusive policies that celebrate diversity and encourage open dialogue.

CONCLUSION

In India today, the traditional foundations of social capital—caste, religion, family, and community—remain deeply embedded in public and private life. These networks have long offered protection and access to opportunity, particularly in contexts where state infrastructure is weak or uneven. Yet, as this paper demonstrates, these same networks can swiftly transform into instruments of punishment when individuals deviate from sanctioned norms. Through the concept of social liability, we see how protective relationships can become punitive: inclusion is conditional, and belonging can quickly reverse into betrayal.

This transformation is not merely a social phenomenon—it has become increasingly politicized, particularly under the rise of Hindu nationalism. As India drifts toward ideological conformity, religious minorities and caste-oppressed individuals face escalating risks, including violence, state neglect, and forced displacement. The case studies presented here reflect this inversion of protection into peril. In each, individuals who once benefited from strong communal ties were targeted when they exercised personal autonomy—whether in choosing a spouse, practicing their faith, or seeking justice.

Social liability thus exposes a central tension in Indian society: between collective identity and individual freedom. The very networks that uphold belonging can become tools of exclusion and repression. When deviation is punished not only by community members but also by the state, democratic values such as pluralism, equality, and dissent are imperiled. To preserve the integrity of India's democracy, policymakers, civil society, and scholars must recognize the double-edged nature of social capital. Reforms must focus not only on strengthening rights-based protections but also on dismantling the social and political structures that enable group-based punishment. Only then can the promise of belonging be decoupled from the threat of betrayal—and only then can India move toward a more inclusive, pluralistic future.

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