

Ethnocentrism and Negative Stereotyping: An Analysis of Caste Dynamics among Rural and Urban Students in Bihar

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.120800275>

Received: 23 Sep 2025; Accepted: 29 Sep 2025; Published: 04 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the dynamics of in-group favouritism (ethnocentrism) and out-group hostility (negative stereotyping) among school-going adolescents in Bihar, a state with a long history of caste-based conflict (Das, 2018; Heinz, n.d.; Kumar & Singh, n.d.). Drawing on data from a study of 1,400 students, the analysis reveals a dual psychological tendency: a "very high degree of ethnocentric perception," where students rate their own caste favourably, coexisting with "quite obvious" negative stereotyping of other caste groups (Kumar & Singh, n.d.). A central focus of this paper is the significant difference in these attitudes based on geographic location. The findings indicate that students from rural areas exhibit substantially higher levels of negative stereotyping, prejudice, and religiosity compared to their urban counterparts (Kumar & Singh, n.d.). This rural-urban divide suggests that while caste identity remains a powerful force for all students, the social environment of rural Bihar acts as a potent incubator for traditional prejudices and inter-group animosity, challenging the notion that casteism is uniformly declining with modernization.

Keywords: Ethnocentrism, Hostility, Adolescents, Negative stereotyping, psychological tendency, Caste, Geographic location, Rural areas, urban.

INTRODUCTION

Casteism in the Indian state of Bihar is not a historical artifact but a living social practice that continues to fragment society and fuel inter-group conflict (Jaspal, 2011; Kumar & Singh, n.d.; Sahay, 1998). The state's history is marked by violent struggles over land, dignity, and political power, often drawn along rigid caste lines (Das, 2018; Heinz, n.d.; Verma, 2019). These deep-seated conflicts have created a social landscape where perceptions between groups are frequently shaped by entrenched negative stereotypes and prejudices, which can, in turn, lead to violence and social discord (Bettelheim & Janowitz, 1964; Kumar & Singh, n.d.). It is against this backdrop of persistent tension that this study was conducted to understand how these dynamics are being reproduced, challenged, or transformed among the younger generation.

Adolescence represents a critical period for the formation of social attitudes. The views developed during these years are often carried into adulthood and can shape the future trajectory of societal relations. Therefore, understanding the attitudes of today's youth is crucial for gauging the persistence of caste-based prejudice. The primary goal of this research was to conduct a systematic examination of the caste stereotypes held by students from seven of the region's major caste groups (Brahmins, Rajput, Bhumihar, Kayastha, Yadav, Baniya, and Harijan) as they perceive each other (Kumar & Singh, n.d.). A specific objective was to analyze the complex tension between in-group favoritism—the natural tendency to view one's own group more positively—and the corresponding hostility directed toward out-groups.

Furthermore, prior literature has presented inconsistent findings regarding the impact of modernization on caste attitudes (Kumar & Singh, n.d.; Sahay, 1998). While some theories suggest that urbanization and education should lead to a decline in traditional prejudices, other evidence indicates that caste identities can adapt and even strengthen in modern contexts. To address this ambiguity, this study sought to conduct a fresh examination of the differences in stereotypes, prejudice, and religiosity between students in rural and urban settings. By analyzing the interplay of socio-economic status, gender, and geography, the research aims to

provide a nuanced understanding of the factors shaping inter-caste relations among Bihar's adolescents.

Methodology

The analysis is based on data collected from 1,400 school students in classes IX and X from the districts of Patna, Gaya, Nalanda, and Bhojpur—a region historically known for caste-based violence (Kumar & Singh, n.d.). The sample was evenly balanced between male and female students (700 each) and included participants from both rural and urban areas (Kumar & Singh, n.d.). Caste stereotypes were measured using Singh's Indian Caste Stereotype Checklist, a 100-item adjective list that generates composite positive and negative scores for how each caste rates others and itself (Kumar & Singh, n.d.).

Table 1: Summary of Research Methodology

Category	Description
Sample Size	1,400 school students
Participant Grade Level	Classes IX and X
Geographic Location	Districts of Patna, Gaya, Nalanda, and Bhojpur, Bihar
Sample Composition	- Gender: 700 male and 700 female students- Location: Evenly split between rural and urban areas
Measurement Instrument	Singh's Indian Caste Stereotype Checklist
Data Generated	Composite positive and negative stereotype scores for seven major caste groups, measuring both in-group and out-group perceptions.

Findings on Ethnocentrism (In-Group Perception)

A primary finding of the study was the powerful role of caste as a source of positive identity. Across all seven caste groups, the research identified a "very high degree of ethnocentire perception" (Kumar & Singh, n.d.). This was empirically demonstrated by the "high degree of positive perception for own caste group" (Kumar & Singh, n.d.).

Ethnocentrism, in this context, is the tendency to view one's own group as superior and as the standard for judging others (Ackerman & Jahoda, 1950; Bayton & Byoune, 1947). This phenomenon is well-explained by Social Identity Theory, which posits that individuals derive self-esteem from their group memberships (Adorno et al., 1950; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). To maintain a positive self-concept, individuals are motivated to see their own group (the in-group) in a more favorable light than other groups (out-groups). The study found that this ethnocentric tendency was positively correlated with other factors, including higher socio-economic status, religiosity, and a general prejudice orientation, suggesting that in-group pride is reinforced by economic standing and traditional belief systems (Kumar & Singh, n.d.).

Findings on Negative Stereotyping (Out-Group Perception)

Complementing the strong in-group pride was a pervasive pattern of out-group hostility. The study found that the presence of negative stereotypes was "quite obvious with each caste group for others" (Kumar & Singh, n.d.). This illustrates the other side of the social identity dynamic: the same process that enhances the in-group often leads to the derogation of out-groups, which is a cornerstone of prejudice (Bettelheim & Janowitz, 1964;

Yadav & Singha, 2025).

The stereotypes were not abstract; they appeared to reflect the region's history of conflict. For instance, the Bhumihar caste was identified as the "most negatively rated" by a majority of other groups, while the Kayastha caste received a "moderate rating" (Kumar & Singh, n.d.). This perception aligns with the historical role of Bhumihars as a dominant, land-owning caste in central Bihar, who were often central figures in violent agrarian conflicts with lower-caste laborers and peasant groups (Das, 2018; Heinz, n.d.; Verma, 2019). The negative stereotypes can thus be seen as a psychological residue of these material and political struggles. The study confirmed a direct link between prejudice and stereotyping, noting that a "more general prejudice orientation... result[s] into more negative stereotyping" of members of other castes (Kumar & Singh, n.d.).

The Rural-Urban Divide in Caste Dynamics

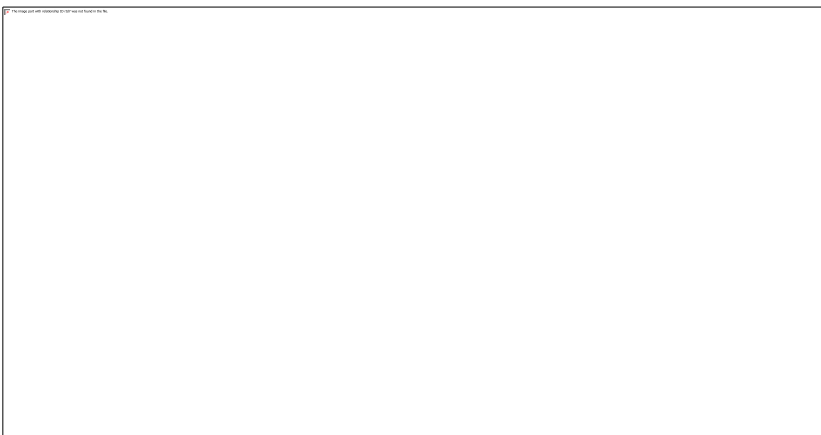
The most striking findings of the study emerged from the comparison between rural and urban students, revealing a deep chasm in social attitudes. The research found "significant differences on all the factors of the study" (Kumar & Singh, n.d.).

- **Stereotypes and Prejudice:** Rural students were found to be "high on negative stereotyping of other caste groups" and demonstrated a "greater degree of prejudice orientation." In stark contrast, urban students were more inclined to "rate other caste rather more positively" (Kumar & Singh, n.d.).
- **Religiosity:** A similar divide was observed for religiosity, with rural students found to be more religious than their urban counterparts (Kumar & Singh, n.d.).

This rural-urban divide is a powerful indicator of the social forces that either sustain or erode traditional prejudices. Urban environments in India are typically characterized by greater diversity, which necessitates more frequent inter-caste contact in schools and public life. This exposure, combined with access to modern education and media, can challenge inherited stereotypes and foster more liberal attitudes (Jaspal, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2021). Rural areas, however, often maintain more homogenous and rigid social structures where caste identity remains highly salient in daily economic and social interactions, thereby preserving and reinforcing historical prejudices (Sahay, 1998).

The diagram below provides a conceptual model of the factors contributing to this divide.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Rural-Urban Divide in Caste Attitudes This model illustrates the different social factors in rural and urban environments and their resulting impact on inter-caste perceptions as found in the study.



CONCLUSION

This analysis reveals the dual nature of caste identity among adolescents in Bihar: it serves as a powerful source of in-group pride (ethnocentrism) while simultaneously fueling hostility towards other groups (negative stereotyping). These attitudes are not uniform but are profoundly shaped by the social context in which young

people live. The stark divide between rural and urban students demonstrates that the social environment of rural Bihar, with its more rigid social structures and higher levels of religiosity and prejudice, acts as a powerful force in the reproduction of traditional caste animosities.

The findings challenge any simple narrative that modernization is automatically leading to the decline of

casteism. While urban environments may foster more tolerant attitudes, the persistence of strong ethnocentrism and negative stereotyping, particularly in rural areas, indicates that the psychological foundations of caste conflict are being actively transmitted to the next generation. This underscores the need for targeted interventions, especially within the rural educational system, that go beyond academics to actively promote critical thinking and positive inter-group contact to dismantle the deep-seated prejudices that continue to divide society.

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