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Brief No 5 – Inequality, Power and Social Exclusion in India

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1. Introduction

The state of affairs in India with regards to "inequality, power and social exclusion" is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, since its independence India has demonstrated a longstanding political willingness to recognise different forms of inequality and exclusion and to use constitutional and legislative measures to address them. On the other hand, there continue to be large disparities in poverty levels, mortality rates, educational attainments and access to resources between regions, social groups and the sexes. India today remains a country of stark contrasts and striking disparities. Some states and districts of India report levels of social development similar to leading industrialised countries. Other parts of India report achievement levels that are worse than the average of the poorest countries in the world. In this brief we will first look at examples of inequality and social exclusion in India today, followed by an analysis of constitutional and public policy measures to combat inequality and social exclusion.

2. Inequality and Social Exclusion in India Today

In India, the list of groups experiencing some form of inequality or social exclusion is great, although perhaps most frequently mentioned, and most numerous, are the *Dalits* (Scheduled Castes) and *Adivasis* (Scheduled Tribes), who together make up about a quarter of the population of India. Their exclusion is reflected in a lack of access (or unequal access) to political institutions, to public services (education, health care), to public places (police stations, government ration shops, post offices, schools, water facilities and village council offices), and to income-earning assets (in particular, land), among many others. Attempts by Dalits and Adivasis to secure their human rights and lawful entitlements have sometimes been met with resistance, and even violence, including from representatives of the state. Inequality and social exclusion have a gendered aspect as well.

Estimates from India's National Sample Survey (NSS) in 2000 suggest that Dalits constituted 20 percent of the rural population, but 38 percent of poor people in rural areas. Adivasis made up 11 percent of the rural population, but 48 percent of the poor. In urban areas Dalits were 14 percent of the population and 37 percent of the poor people, whereas Adivasis were 3 percent of the population and 35 percent of the poor people. Estimates from the same data set suggest that poverty was around 30 percent for minorities (mainly Muslims) (Kabeer 2006).

Across social groups, women face discrimination in many areas of life, though their status varies significantly according to their social and ethnic backgrounds. Disadvantage is amplified when identities overlap, such that, for example, Adivasi women are doubly excluded, both as women and as Adivasis. The following are several examples of significant inequality in India today.

2.1. Inequality Between Social Groups

Inequality between social groups refers to political and social, as well as economic, inequalities between people belonging to particular socially defined groups. The definitions of the groups can be more or less fluid over time, but the more fixed they are defined, and the more historically they are rooted, the more challenging it is to address inequalities. Caste is perhaps the most well known example of this type of inequality that is prevalent in India. A caste system is a type of social structure that divides people on the basis of inherited social status. The roots of the Indian caste system can be found in Hindu scriptures where society could be broken down into a number of different groups, known as Varnas. The system also has a space for outsiders and foreigners who do not conform to the system. Within a caste system, each member generally knows his or her place, and one's social status is usually apparently to others as well. Though the roots of the caste system are ancient, it is certainly not static but has changed over the years as a result of various social and religious reforms. These include the birth of new sects in Hinduism, as well as new religions.

India today is in the paradoxical situation that evidence of the resilience of caste system continues to be present, at the same time as there is evidence that its role as an explanatory factor in understanding inequality is diminishing. Deshpande and Palshikar identify three areas where the changing role of caste can be identified: the changing pattern of interaction between caste and politics; the change identity and the rise of caste associations and the issue of caste-occupation linkages (2008). With respect to the latter, traditionally mobility was extremely rare; one could transform from a labourer to a scholar except in very rare circumstances. Today the situation is more nuanced. In the study mentioned above, the authors found that in urban areas, space for upwards mobility exists and there is a general though modest trend towards upwards mobility. For example, the study found that Dalits record considerable upwards mobility in terms of their occupations. However, a large section of Dalits still work in the "lowest" occupations (being at the very bottom of the occupational hierarchy, even a small shift results in upwards mobility) and only few are in the upper occupations (Deshpande and Palshikar: 2008).

A significant group outside of the caste system are Adivasis, India's "tribal" people. Adivasis are concentrated in the central and north-eastern parts of the country, generally living in remote or hilly areas outside of the reach of public services, and lacking in basic infrastructure. For this reason, and also due to years of neglect and exploitation at the hands of the government and other citizens, the human development indicators (HDI) of India's Adivasi population are much lower than the HDI of the rest of the population in terms of all parameters (literacy, infant mortality, etc). For example, health care is a major problem in the isolated areas where Adivasis live. Lack of food security, sanitation, safe drinking water, poor nutrition and high income poverty levels aggravate Adivasis' poor health. Furthermore, health institutions and health professionals are few and far between. The problem of malnutrition is multi dimensional and intergenerational in nature. The following table gives health indicators for Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and others (per thousand persons).

Figure 1: Health Indicators by Social Group

	Infant Mortality Rate	Under-5 Mortality Rate	Under-nutrition
Scheduled Caste	83.0	119.3	535
Scheduled Tribe	84.2	126.6	559
All	70.0	94.9	470

(Source: GoI Draft Tribal Policy and based on data from the Bulletin on Rural Health Statistics in India, 2005)

2.2. Regional and Spatial Inequality

Inequality between regions and spaces in India provides a striking example. Regional inequalities, both between different states, within states, or between urban and rural areas in India are marked. India's poorer states, in particular the group known collectively by the acronym BIMARU (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh), consistently score below average on economic and social indicators. These states have higher than average population growth, lower than average literacy rates, below average indicators on almost all heath related measures, slower than average economic growth and below average human security. See several examples in Box 1, below.
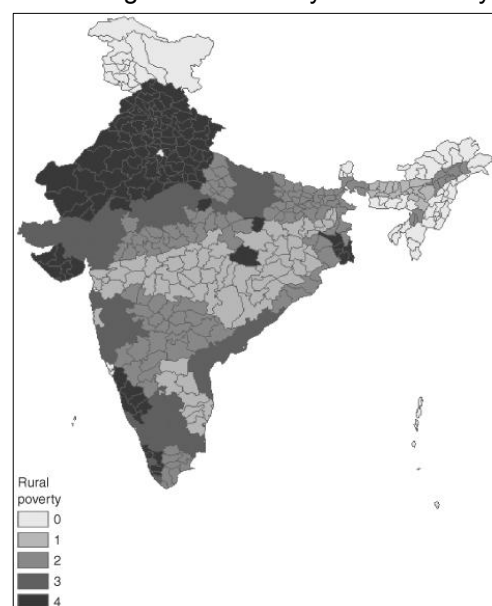
Box 1: Regional Inequality in India Today

- Some 54 % of India's poor people live in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh (although they have about a third of the population).
- The infant mortality rate of Kerala is 14; that of Orissa is 96. Child malnutrition stands at 24–28 % in the North-Eastern states and Kerala; it is 51–55 % in Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa.
- In Bihar, only 53% of children aged 6–11 attend school. In 9 other states, this figure is more than 90%.

(Source: Centre for Policy Studies, 2006)

On the map of income poverty in India, illustrated below, the poorest areas (those lightly coloured) lie in parts of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa and West Bengal. Large numbers of India's poorest people live in the country's semi-arid tropical region. In these areas shortages of water and recurrent droughts impede the transformation of agriculture that the Green Revolution has achieved elsewhere. There is also a high incidence of poverty in flood-prone areas and forested areas.

Map 1: NSS Regions Ranked by Rural Poverty

(Source: Mazumder and Sarkar, 2008 (NSS 1999-2000)

India's recent economic growth has been to a large extent concentrated on a handful of cities, such as Bangalore or Mumbai, with many other areas falling

behind. Such inequality leads to migration from rural to urban areas, which, while in itself is not necessarily a negative thing, carries with it the double risk of further decline in the rural areas and social tension in the urban areas. Although many rural people are migrating to cities, three out of four of India's poor people still live in the vast rural parts of the country.

Spatial inequality refers to inequalities related to a particular place, such as a neighbourhood. In rural areas, these places tend to be remote, with low agricultural or resource potential and poor access to services. Within urban areas, location-specific characteristics can lead to a concentration of environmental, economic and social disadvantage within a particular neighbourhood.

For example, in the financial capital of Mumbai, while slum pockets cover a mere 6% of the land, they are home to 60% of the city's population (a staggering 7 million people). This land is in the heart of the city and is among the most valuable real estates in Asia. But the residents do not have a title to the land and are considered to be illegally squatting. Slum dwellers live under a constant threat of slum demolition drive -a move that takes away the roof over their head. In addition to this chronic insecurity, the inhabitants deal regularly with issues like lack of water, no sewage or solid waste facilities, lack of public transit, pollution and housing shortages. But these slum dwellers are the backbone of Mumbai's society and economy. They work as construction workers, train operators, factory workers and do all the other low-paying jobs that keep Mumbai's economy functioning.

In many parts of rural India, people from the same caste live in the same settlement. Hence, different settlements are named after castes living there - "Brahman wada" or "Harjan wada". The Dalits settlements are on the outskirts of a village. The Dalits create separate water facilities, as they cannot draw water from the wells where other castes draw their water. In some places, even entry to village temples is restricted for the Dalits.
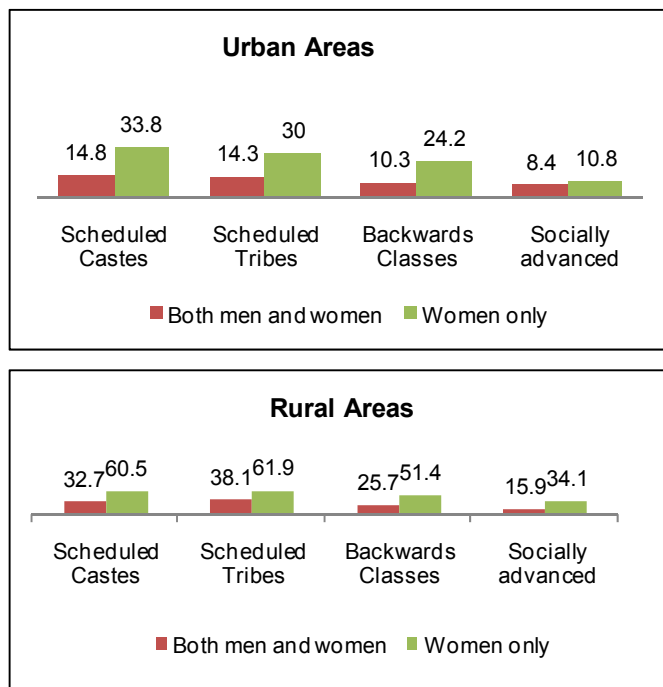
2.3. Reinforcing Inequalities

In many cases, social inequality also manifests itself in regional and spatial inequality. The various disparities overlap and reinforce each other. This is especially serious because, as Cook writes, "when a regional concentration of poverty coincides with ethnic or religious divisions, the two reinforce each other, generating intractable forms of exclusion, potentially becoming a source of social instability, or, in some circumstances, fuelling regional insurrections"(2006).

This overlapping is shown in the figures below, which present data concerning levels of education (levels of literacy) from the National Sample Survey (2004-2005). Literacy is an important measure, as unequal distribution of literacy skills is associated with both present and future economic and social inequalities. The charts show that more men than women are literate, more urban people than rural people are literate, and more members of "socially advanced"

groups are literate. Where these overlap, we can see that a very large number of rural households from particular social groups have no literate women. In other words, gender, caste and regional inequalities are clearly evident in literacy rates, and are most striking when they overlap.

Figure 2: Percentage of households with no literate adults of age 15 +, by social group

(*Source:* Krishnan, 2007)

In spite of the foregoing, which provides a general view, caution should be used in ascribing poverty or inequality to collective identities as a whole (whether they are based on geography, caste, gender, etc). When generalising across collective identities, there is a danger of overlooking inequality that exist between different individuals within the same group, often on economic grounds. In India, this manifests itself in the meteoric rise of a few from among the Dalits through benefits drawn from repeated and multiple benefits reservation policies, for example. The individuals who benefited in getting a higher education through reservations, also benefited in employment opportunities and in subsequent promotions through reservation. The children of these individuals, who are in no way economically disadvantaged with regards to children from other castes, also benefit from reservation policies. However, while a few benefit multiply from these policies, the vast majority of Dalits, continue to be economically and socially marginalized.

2.4. Social Exclusion and Adverse Incorporation

In India, widows have traditionally been confined to the house and thus cut off from all contacts with the outside world. This continues today in some places or communities, in which widows have social restrictions that limit their participation, not only in political and social life but also in religious and social functions. The widows thus confined to the house are, by default,

excluded from all forms of social life. This is an example of social exclusion.

Social exclusion describes a process by which certain groups are systematically disadvantaged because they are discriminated against on the basis of their ethnicity, religion, caste, gender, age, etc. Discrimination occurs in public institutions, such as the legal system or education and health services, as well as social institutions like the household (DFID 2005). Social exclusion is also about exclusion from political power, so sometimes groups that have adequate incomes may be excluded in this sense.

A recent study (conducted by Surinder S Jodhka and Katherine Newman) shows that well educated Dalits face difficulties in getting opportunities in the lucrative private sector job market in India due to preconceived notions of employers about their background. Thus, while not excluded from public institutions (education), they are excluded from some parts of the private sector due to discrimination. Thus the preferred choice of the educated Dalits today are the limited (and comparatively poorly paying) jobs in the Government sector. This "exclusion" from the private sector, prevents Dalits from contributing to and enjoying the fruits of the economic gains made by the country, reinforcing their economic and social inequality.

However, it is important to keep in mind that sometimes it is more relevant not that a group is excluded but that they are incorporated under unfavourable conditions, a concept termed adverse incorporation (du Toit, 2004). For example, from among those Dalits, who (due to reservations) gain admission to professional courses (engineering or medicine), very few actually complete their degrees in time. Most drop out before they graduate, due to economic or competence related considerations. For example, their education in government funded schools puts them at a competence disadvantage (command over the medium of instruction -English-both written or spoken, computer skills) when compared to their (mostly public school educated) peers. This example highlights the fact that while many provisions exist in the law (for example, reservations), in practice, as we have seen, inequality and social exclusion persist.

3. Measures to Combat Inequality and Social Exclusion

Since its independence, the Indian state has been proactive in putting in place measures to combat inequality and social exclusion. The most significant of these have been the Constitution of India, and a series of progressive public policies. However, while India has an impressive series of constitutional provisions, laws and policies, their implementation is often incomplete. India provides different examples of a range of entrenched institutional, social and political constraints to implementing the constitutional commitment to equality.

3.1. The Constitution of India

The Constitution of India clearly sets the agenda of the postcolonial state in the terms of the abolition, or at least reduction, of social inequality. The Constitution established both the collective rights of communities to maintain cultural identities and to pursue religious freedoms *and* individual rights of civil liberty to all citizens, *as fundamental rights*. Inter alia, the Preamble to the Constitution resolved to secure for all its citizens social, economic and political justice and equality of status and opportunity.

These objectives are promoted through a set of Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles of State Policy, which are vital elements of the Constitution that describe the rights and duties of citizens and the state. The Fundamental Rights guaranteed equal (i.e. non-discriminatory) access in several spheres such as the legal process, education, and public employment as well as basic civil liberties in regard to speech, association, and religious affiliation. Fundamental Duties, added by amendment in 1972, describe a citizen's duties towards themselves, the environment, the state and the nation.

The Directive Principles are guidelines to the central and state governments for policy making and for achieving social, economic and political justice. While the Constitution makers recognised that processual equality — i.e. equal treatment of all whether they were equals or unequals — was not sufficient for achieving substantive equality in outcomes. Accordingly, the Constitution included this further set of provisions aimed at creating a more just society, including affirmative action in favour of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and other socially and educationally "backward" classes of citizens, and religious and cultural minorities.

Furthermore, in recent years, the Indian Supreme Court has taken a broad view of the scope and content of some of the Fundamental Rights, such as the right to life and liberty (art. 21). This has created a space for a number of social justice issues to be brought before the court (such as the right to shelter, to education and to health) through public interest litigation.

3.2. Public Policies

In terms of public policies, the Indian government's approach towards Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes consists of three main elements. These are:
➢ *Non discrimination*: legal and other safeguards against discrimination
➢ *Affirmative action:* measures in the state and state-supported sector (reservations of seats at all levels of political representation, government jobs and places in educational institutions)
➢ *Protection and promotion:* a series of measure including both protective elements (such as ending forced labour) and promotional elements (such as allocation of housing, land, etc). (Sheth 2004)

This approach has lead to great progress being made in the last fifty years. For example, in 2002, a provision for free and compulsory education for all children was added to the Directive Principles. As abject poverty prevents many poor children from attending schools, the Government of India, since 1992 in phases, has introduced the midday meal scheme that provides a noon meal to all children turning up for school. This scheme has improved enrolment in government schools as poor people now send their children to school so that the children can at least get one proper meal during the day, which is sometimes difficult for the parents to provide.

Despite these actions, the case can be made that Indian education policies continue to favour the urban, upper-caste English-educated sections of the population, enabling their social and physical (international) mobility, but resulting in massive illiteracy for the members of the poor, lower status communities. India possesses state of the art higher institutes of management and information technology, while many rural primary schools are in a pitiful condition. Massive financial allocations were made for higher education, to which poor people did not have much access. This prevented them from effectively availing the benefits of affirmative action, as it is no use having a reserved seat at such an institute, if you don't have access to primary or secondary education of a sufficient calibre to prepare you.

A comprehensive overview of public policies in India to tackle social exclusion has identified several barriers to their effective implementation. These include technical failings in the design of policies, bureaucratic requirements to access benefits, institutionalised discrimination, and ongoing social discrimination. Political constraints are central and the hardest to overcome: while political representation of excluded groups has increased, clientelism and the chosen industrialisation strategies have been blamed for the failure of policies aimed at addressing social exclusion (Piron and Curran, 2005).

In addition to measures applied in the public sector, today the question of whether reservations should also be applied to the private sector is causing much controversy. These reservations could mean reserving jobs for Dalits or other discriminated groups, or reserving places in private educational institutes. The Constitution of India allows the government to make special provisions for "advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens", including their admission in aided or unaided private educational institutions. Governments at national and state level have indicated their commitment to gradually implement this reservation in other private sector institutions and companies as well. Many business groups, as well as non-reserved category students are opposed to such measures.

4. The Role of Power

The example above about education is a clear case of a bias in public priorities and public policy, a bias corresponding to the uneven distribution of power and influence. As Dreze and Sen wrote, "the main limitations of Indian democracy do not, however, relate so much to democratic institutions as to democratic practice. The performance of democratic institutions is contingent on a wide range of social conditions, from educational levels and political traditions to the nature of social inequalities and popular organisations (2001). Governments rarely prioritise excluded groups and are unlikely to develop and implement policies favouring these groups over more powerful groups, as they would have little to gain as a result. This bias is evident for example, in the case above, where affirmative action policies are not connected with other policies that would enable them or would be necessary in order to achieve the objectives of the affirmative action policy. Often such policy connections are improvised only when democratic pressures are mounted through political movements.

While there are complex and reinforcing processes, lack of power, or unequal power relations, is clearly at the root of every type of exclusion (and, hence, inequality). Any significant attempts to reduce social exclusion will thus involve changing power relations – confronting those institutions that are responsible for the exclusion (i.e. institutions which monopolise political power or economic opportunities and discriminate against particular groups). And, while it can reduce the exclusion of some groups, it can also continue to perpetuate existing exclusion, as we see in the case below, or can lead to new groups being excluded.

Such a case of changing power relations, took place in Bihar, where the Yadavas, who traditionally were considered among the "other backward classes" (OBCs, groups other than Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes that are identified on the basis of social and economic indicators and who benefit from certain affirmative action measures), have gained most from land reforms. This economic ascendance of the middle castes in a number of states has led to a re-grouping of these forces for political power and has changed the face of Indian politics since the 1980s. The political battles often are now between the Dalits and the other OBCs, rather than the conventional analysis of `upper vs lower caste'. However, instead of dissolving caste injustice, the new rulers have cornered special privileges for their own particular "backward" community. The Dalits, at the bottom of the ladder, continued to face day to day atrocities.

5. Conclusions

Our brief overview of inequality, power and social exclusion in India has highlighted a strong contradiction between constitutional and public policy measures and the enduring inequality and social exclusion experienced by many. Dr. Ambedkar, chief drafter of the Indian Constitution and himself a Dalit, anticipated this disparity between stated aims and actual progress in terms of equality and inclusion at the time of Independence, warning, "on the 26th January, 1950 we are going to enter into a life of

contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality." (quoted in Drèze and Sen, 2001) This tension between policies and practice remains to this day. While in some cases social and economic inequality is decreasing, those facing multiple inequalities in particular remain deeply marginalised. Furthermore, the effects of globalisation and the benefits of India's rapid economic growth are unequally distributed.

This has lead to the identification of three Indias: global India, developing India and poorest India. Global India is the India of the new service industries, a growing industrial sector, and large farmers. Global India is prosperous, linked to the global economy and reaping the benefits of globalisation. Developing India is the India of small farmers, micro-enterprises and village industries, with some links to the modern economy, but with low productivity and limited access to public services. Poorest India is the India of the marginal farmer, landless agricultural labourers and urban slum dwellers, where people live in extreme poverty and basic public services are mostly absent (DFID 2007). While India's growth and development may continue for some time despite these inequalities, in the longer term, inequality and social exclusion will reduce the rate of poverty reduction of the country as a whole and pose a threat to continued growth.

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