Ground Down by Growth

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Tribe, Caste, Class and Inequality in Twenty-first-century India

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Preface

Alpa Shah and Jens Lerche

Growing inequality is undoubtedly one of the most significant political challenges of our time. Income inequality, the gap between the rich and everyone else, has dramatically escalated in the last 30 years in many parts of the world, not least the US and the UK. Oxfam (2016) recently reported that the richest 1 per cent now have more wealth than the rest of the world combined.

India, once to some extent shielded from the market forces of global expansion, is now no longer an exception. Right behind the US, China and Germany, and ahead of the UK, India ranks fourth on the list of dollar billionaires.[1] The Indian wealthy now increasingly mark the country's landscape with their air-conditioned malls, gated communities and high-rise apartments with swimming pools. But there is also an India of dislocation and despair. The 'trickle down' of India's spectacular growth rate is a very slow drip. Armies of migrants from the countryside live under tarpaulin tents, with almost no citizenship rights, while building the infrastructure that is to sustain the Indian boom. Indebted farmers are committing suicide. Protests are increasing against displacement for mining and industrial development. Marking poverty in a land of plenty, around 800 million Indians survive on less than $2 a day (Kannan 2012: 36). Indeed, it is now no longer news that 8 Indian states have more poor people than 26 of Africa's poorest countries put together (Alkire and Santos 2010).

What is less well known is that social discrimination marks the contours of poverty in India; that certain social groups – India's low castes and tribes – are overwhelmingly represented among the poor. *Ground Down by Growth* asks how and why, despite India's celebrated economic growth, the marginalisation of low castes and tribes persists in the country. It explores the inextricability of identity-based oppression – of caste and tribe in particular, but also region and gender – and class relations in the belly of the Indian boom. In this Preface, we provide the backdrop to the questions we ask in this book and how we seek to address them.

ECONOMIC GROWTH, INEQUALITY AND POVERTY

Alongside China, India is the world's fastest growing major economy and the two are predicted to become the world's largest and most dynamic

economies of the future. Marking a stark contrast to a European climate of sluggish growth and economies falling in and out of recession, the story of Indian growth has been celebrated since the 1990s when the country liberalised and opened up its economy, and Coca Cola, McDonald's and the global IT sector came marching in. India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, riding the wave of GDP figures, marked his first anniversary in power in 2015 with further promises of dazzling growth, strengthening his central policies to attract foreign investment and ensure ease of conducting and expanding business in the country.

The forces of neoliberalism, underpinned by a liberal political commitment to maximum individual autonomy entwined with a laissez-faire economic ideology, have been sweeping the world since the 1980s.[2] This absolute commitment to the free market and state-sponsored privatisation started to take root in India in the same period and spread from the 1990s on, when the country officially liberalised its economy. International trade burgeoned, multinational companies lined up to enter India's mineral-rich resource areas and outsourced to the country to make use of its cheap labour for the global market, while state controlled industries and sectors were privatised.

Proponents of high growth rates claim that economic liberalisation is also good for the poor;[3] that eventually its benefits will trickle down even to those who are right at the bottom of the economic pile. The idea that growth inevitably leads to reduction of poverty has a long history, despite those who have powerfully argued that development and underdevelopment constitute two sides of the same coin.[4] The 'inclusive growth' that is promoted by the World Bank (2002) and others is the latest incarnation of these neoliberal policies. For these policies, there is no bar to growth, and poverty reduction replaces equity[5] as the central moral concern. In India, 'inclusive growth', placing economic growth and deregulated markets at the centre of poverty reduction, have been backed by eminent economists. Jagdish Bhagwati, Professor of Economics and Law at Columbia University, claimed to be the intellectual inspiration behind the economic reforms of 1991 which liberalised the Indian economy (Bhagwati 1993). With his co-author, Arvind Panagariya, in *Why Growth Matters*, Bhagwati has reinforced his case for privatisation and liberalisation with less protection for labour (Bhagwati and Panagariya 2013).

Critiques of inclusive growth argue that inclusion in these models is thought of in the very narrow sense of enabling everyone to take part in markets; there is little consideration of whether this growth increases inequalities (Saad Filho 2011) and yet evidence from across the world indicates that inequality is rising (Piketty 2013). A new paradigm challenging inclusive growth is emerging. In 2017 Oxfam followed up the previous year's report on the 'economy for the 1%' with one on the 'economy of the 99%',

now showing that just eight men owned the same amount of wealth as the poorest half of the world (Oxfam 2016, 2017). It also argued that the incomes of the poorest 10 per cent of people increased by less that $3 a year between 1988 and 2011, while the incomes of the richest 1 per cent increased 182 times as much.[6]

Indeed, economists commenting on India – not least Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (2013) – have challenged India's so-called inclusive growth policies of alleged trickle down, dubbing it an 'uncertain glory'. The Cornell economist, Kaushik Basu (2008), has warned that most of India's aggregate growth has led to a rise in incomes at the upper end of the income ladder. In 2010, India's 100 wealthiest people had increased their combined worth to $300 billion, a quarter of the country's GDP, while income inequality, as measured by the Gini index, had also grown (Kannan 2012: 44; Anand et al. 2014: 4). The fruits of economic growth barely reached the poor. Throughout more than 20 years of neoliberal reforms, the rate of poverty reduction has been much less than the rate of economic growth.[7]

Notably, in 2004, the Indian government set up a National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector headed by some of its best applied economists – (the late) Arjun Sengupta, K.P. Kannan, Ravi Srivastava and the civil servant V.K. Malhotra. The commission published a series of important and controversial reports that challenged India's 'inclusive growth' policies. K.P. Kannan (2014) has recently brought out some of its conclusions in his book *Interrogating Inclusive Growth* and the key arguments are also presented in this book. The commission's economists showed that by 2004–05, despite decades of economic growth, 77 per cent of Indians were poor and vulnerable, living on less than Rs.20 (30 cents US)[8] a day; that less than a quarter of Indians enjoyed the fruits of India's economic growth, and that the most vulnerable of Indians were bypassed (NCEUS 2009).[9]

These conclusions were reached even though India has many pro-poor schemes, which include the distribution of food staples at subsidised prices through the 'fair price' or 'ration shops' of the public distribution system. There is also a rights-based public employment guarantee scheme, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act which, since 2005, has provided up to 100 days of paid employment per year for members of rural households.[10] A social health insurance scheme was introduced in 2008 to cover segments of informal/unorganised workers and poor households, but has had limited impact.[11]

The reports of the commission were, unsurprisingly, not appreciated by the government of the time; the commission's work was cold-shouldered and its website was closed as soon as it had finished its work in 2009, making its reports harder to obtain.[12] Nevertheless, the messages are out there and they are remarkably clear. By 2010 a little more than two-thirds of the

population was still poor and vulnerable (Kannan 2012). Some advances have been made in reduction of absolute levels of poverty. But – although people are slightly better off – they are less equal than before. Income and wealth inequality is increasing in the India that is being celebrated for its growth rates.

THE ECONOMIC DATA ON SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION IN THE BELLY OF INDIA

Significantly, as K.P. Kannan argues in this book, the economists of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector showed that Indian poverty was marked by certain social characteristics based on caste and religion (more than others which also mattered, like gender or region).[13] Throughout the country Dalits (or Scheduled Castes; those who were previously called Untouchables), Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes) and Muslims were worse off than all other groups. Social discrimination, that is, discrimination based on identity, marks the contours of poverty.

The persistence of discrimination based on identity in twenty-first-century India is particularly disappointing because at the time of Independence, the founders of the modern Indian made a range of radical efforts to eliminate it. In 1949/50 'reservations' (a form of affirmative action that relies on quotas), first introduced as colonial policy at the turn of the twentieth century, became a comprehensive nationwide system through the post-Independence Constitution of India, written by the Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar; 15 and 7.5 per cent of government sector jobs and higher education seats were reserved for the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities respectively; together they were called 'Backward Classes'.[14] Seats were also reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the national Lower House of Parliament (Lok Sabha) and in the state legislative assemblies, based on the percentage of their population in each state. These policies were intended to be temporary, but, following the recommendations of the 1980 Mandal Commission report, which evaluated the system, in the 1990s the quotas were extended; 49.5 per cent of all jobs in central government services and public undertakings were now reserved for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and a poorly defined category of 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs). There were other protective policies also targeted at Dalits and/or Adivasis, such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribe Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989, various policies to protect Adivasi land rights in the Fifth and Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, and budgetary allocations though the Tribal and Scheduled Caste Sub-Plans.

However, despite all these measures to address the discrimination caused by caste and tribe, 60 years after Independence, the 2011 Census, for the

first time since 1931, collected data on caste, in the recognition that caste remains a significant maker of disparity. Some activists and scholars have gone as far as to argue that there is a hidden apartheid in India.[15] Inequalities based on caste and tribe continue to be deeply implicated in the contours of poverty in India[16] and especially affect the position of Adivasis and Dalits.[17] The rate of poverty decline among Adivasis and Dalits between 1999 and 2009 was just over half the rate for all other communities[18] and in 2009–10, 82 per cent of Adivasis and Dalits were still below the international poverty line of PPP$2 a day (purchasing power parity). While incidence of poverty varies across the regions of India, Dalits and Adivasis are even worse off than Muslims almost everywhere (Kannan's chapter, this book). In 2004–05, 15 of India's 21 major states had 85 per cent or more of their Adivasis and Dalits living in poverty, and everywhere at least two-thirds of Adivasis and Dalits were poor (below the PPP$2 poverty line) (Kannan 2011; see also Kannan's chapter in this book). Being born Adivasi or Dalit appears to determine poverty more than where one comes from.

A rich heritage of scholarship within and on India means that poverty analyses of the country are some of the most sophisticated in the world. Senior planners, policymakers and economists, both in and outside government, pay great attention to counting the poor.[19] But as Sukhdeo Thorat (2017) laments, social discrimination in the Indian labour market – which has a vast impact on income distribution and poverty – has not received much attention in mainstream discourse in the social sciences in India (except in relation to gender discrimination).[20] Some recent studies have been increasingly interested in mapping the concentration of poverty among Adivasis and Dalits,[21] exploring discrimination against Adivasis and Dalits through macro-economic data and large-scale household surveys. Some have also paid attention to mapping discrimination in relation to work and employment.[22] They use the National Sample Survey Office consumer expenditure surveys to analyse the standard of living of Adivasis and Dalits in relation to other groups, or to map inequality and poverty for the two groups.[23] Others have used National Family and Health Surveys to construct 'caste development indices' for exploring regional disparities between Adivasis and Dalits and other groups. Still others have used the Economic Census to show that across all states Adivasis and Dalits are significantly under-represented in self-employment, the ownership of enterprises and the share of the workforce employed by them.[24] The more ambitious have tried to separate the particular spheres in which Dalits and Adivasis experience discrimination over and above households with the same profile, for example in education or housing.[25]

These 'disparity studies' – largely by economists – have been extremely important in highlighting the social characteristics of poverty in India. However, most have some limitations. They are, of course, inhibited by the nature and quality of the data collected. One small example is that one of the most comprehensive studies on Dalit and Adivasi inequality (Kijima 2006) concludes that education enables upwardly mobile migration but relies on data on permanent migrants and therefore cannot capture the massive importance of seasonal, casual labour migration of illiterate Dalits and Adivasis, which goes unrecorded. In addition, studies which depend on official poverty line figures in India are compromised because these figures have been based on the outdated cost of a basket of food necessary for the minimum calorie intake a person needs a day that was set in the 1970s.[26] More significantly, most of the studies are limited to descriptive analysis; for instance, whether a particular development input (such as landownership or access to education) decreases the welfare disparities between Adivasis and Dalits and the rest. They can only speculate about causal mechanisms.

Comparative developments in the study of race, class and inequality in the US have recently highlighted the limitations of disparity studies. Political scientist Adolph Reed Jr and Merlin Chowkwanyun, a historian of racial inequality, write:

> Research precisely specifying racial disparities in the distribution of advantages and disadvantages, well-being and suffering has become common enough to have generated a distinctive, *pro forma* narrative structure. Quantitative data, usually culled from large aggregate data sets, is parsed to generate accounts of the many facets of apparent disparity along racial lines with respect to … wealth, income and economic security, incarceration, employment, access to medical care, and health and educational outcomes … [These accounts] tend not to add up to much beyond fleshing out the contours of the disproportionate relations, which are predictable by common sense understanding. Explanations of the sources of disparities tend to dribble into vague and often sanctimonious calls to recognize the role of race, and on the left, the flailing around of phrases like 'institutional racism' that on closer examination add up to little more than signifying one's radical credentials on race issues. (Reed and Chowkwanyun 2012: 150)

These quantitative studies tracing racial disparity across different metrics thus only serve to flesh out a picture we already see but, ultimately, political-economic relations and power are too easily reduced to statistical distributions and decontextualised indices of economic attainment. Reed

and Chowkwanyun (2012) thus identify an impasse in the literature on race in the US stemming from its sidestepping of the potentially thorny causal questions about how such disparities are produced and reproduced in particular historical configurations through the changing forces of American capitalist social relations.

The problem of the inadequacy of analysing causes, processes and relations when faced with macro-economic data obtained through large surveys was well recognised by Pranab Bardhan (1989), who sought to encourage *Conversations between Economists and Anthropologists.* Bardhan and his collaborators proposed that anthropologists, with their in-depth studies, were better placed to capture the dynamics, processes and relations that it was not possible to reveal through the surveys. Fine-grained, detailed studies explaining rather than describing durable poverty are often called for by the research community but are rarely found in the established literature.[27] John Harriss (2007), some time ago, pointed out that poverty is more often than not thought of almost as a condition that one falls into, or is trapped into, or that one escapes from. Poverty research tended to focus on the characteristics of the poor, equating the study of poverty with studying poor people; looking at the outcome but not the means through which poverty persists, as David Mosse (2010) put it.

To explore how and why India's Adivasis and Dalits are at the bottom of the Indian social and economic hierarchy this book shows that we need to move beyond the measurement focus of much of the poverty research (whether it addresses absolute or relative poverty or takes on multidimensional indicators of poverty). Economic data needs to be complemented by an understanding of the lived reality of the poor, in particular a more grassroots approach to processes of inequality and how particular groups experience them. In doing so, this book embraces Bardhan's (1989) call for a conversation between economists and anthropologists, and explores the trends that economists have presented to us by undertaking country-wide detailed ethnographic studies. It takes as its starting point the proposition by Henry Bernstein (1992), John Harriss (2007) and, more recently, David Mosse (2010) that poverty must be understood through social relations, relationally. That is, it puts the historically developed social relations between Adivasis/Dalits and other groups at the centre of the analysis. These relations are, as most recently argued by Jonathan Parry (2014), more often than not unequal power relations and it is through them that poverty is produced and persists. This is something which cannot be captured through quantitative measurements alone. In short, we need to move to a qualitative, historically situated analysis of the relationship between inequality and poverty and social discrimination.

OUR PROGRAMME OF RESEARCH

To explore the processes of inequality, we – Alpa Shah and Jens Lerche – conceived, led and executed a Programme of Research on Inequality and Poverty from the Department of Anthropology at LSE.[28] The Programme of Research was based on long-term in-depth ethnographic research, living with Adivasis and Dalits, placing their perspectives and experiences at its centre, and understanding their situation in relation to that of other local groups and in relation to the wider political economy of the region, with the aim of comparing across sites in the country. Our focus – across the sites – was to understand and compare the changing situation of Adivasis and Dalits in the context of oppression, exploitation and discrimination; livelihood patterns and related land and labour and migration patterns; intra-caste/tribe and gender relations; and also in relation to their own social struggles.

We should note at the outset that we have not worked with Adivasis in the north-east states of India who, at a national level (as shown in Kannan's chapter), fare much better than the Adivasis of peninsular India. We should also note that Adivasis and Dalits are not the only groups that suffer disproportionally high levels of poverty. Low-status Muslim groups, in particular, are also at the receiving end of economic and social discrimination (as Kannan also shows). The groups called 'Denotified Tribes' (previously classified by the British as 'Criminal Tribes') also live in deplorable conditions and are stigmatised, but are not discussed in this book. In this book we limit ourselves to the study of relations of class and ethnicity/identity in the context of Adivasis and Dalits in peninsular India, while acknowledging, where possible, wider trends involving other social groups.

We recruited a team with previous ethnographic field research experience of either having worked with Adivasis or Dalits or on issues of inequality and poverty through serious long-term field research.[29] The choice of our sites of field research (Himachal, Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Telangana) drew on the strengths of the previous experiences of this team (Richard Axelby, Jayaseelan Raj, Vikramaditya Thakur, Brendan Donegan and Dalel Benbabaali), and we of course brought our comparative experience from Jharkhand and Bihar (Alpa Shah) and Uttar Pradesh (Jens Lerche) to the mix.

We developed a programme of research that would allow each researcher to follow their interests, develop and write articles and books of their own in the more classical approach of anthropological field research, which relies on the 'lone anthropologist', but we also designed a programme of research training, research questions, research methods and writing to generate

research that was explicitly comparative. Our first six months were based in London, from January 2014, when we ran workshops and a series of intensive fortnightly, sometimes weekly, seminars to develop our collective research questions, themes and methods, discussing the work of economists, sociologists, development studies specialists, geographers and anthropologists who have deliberated on questions of inequality, poverty, labour, tribe, caste and class with them to develop our own collective programme of work. In this period, we established a set of methods to be used across each site – a collectively designed household survey, genealogical and generational histories, archival research, key interviews – to explore an agreed set of issues, themes and dimensions of social transformation. Alongside these collectively designed methods, most importantly, all the ethnographers were to live as participant observers amid the Adivasi and Dalit families they write about.

The following year, the ethnographers of the chapters of this book immersed themselves in their field sites, conducting in-depth field research. While these were all situated studies, most often in a village context, they were by no means bounded village ethnographies.[30] As this book will show, all of our studies began with the premise that a deep understanding of a particular locality in relation to its wider context was necessary to understand the changes taking place across the country. Every study both contextualised and used the in-depth understanding of particular localities in relation to the processes of a much wider regional political economy. All the ethnographers moved in and out of the localities where they were based, to understand the movement of people and processes across the country – whether it was following Adivasi migrant labour found in the tea plantations of Kerala back to their homelands in the Santhal Parganas in Jharkhand, or whether it was to follow Gujjar herders who had moved from the High Himalayas to the plains of Punjab.

We met throughout the course of fieldwork to discuss, share, compare and develop analyses. As a team, we met three months into fieldwork to assess and reshape a piloted household survey and then again six months into field research to compare findings, discuss emerging analysis and themes. We also shared and discussed regular field reports from each site. The postdoctoral researchers visited one other ethnographer from the group and had a different ethnographer visit their site. To nurture better questions and comparative analysis we, Alpa Shah and Jens Lerche, visited each of the five field sites and worked closely with all the ethnographers over the course of the research. In all cases we were actively involved in the choice and delineation of field sites, working on the focus of the specific areas of research in each site, and, as the research evolved, encouraging the exploration of particular research questions as they became evident from

the sites and following specific directions, such as moving with migrant labour to their home or to distant labouring sites.

Finally, on return from fieldwork, we embarked on a 15-month programme of writing together, holding three formal book writing workshops, developing the emerging comparative analysis through every draft of the book, presenting together at one conference. Throughout the two years of writing that have gone into this book, we were actively involved in developing and rewriting each chapter in light of the overall analysis that was emerging and in relation to the other chapters. From this has grown the overall analysis of *Ground Down by Growth* presented in the chapter that follows. Our Programme of Research on Inequality and Poverty is therefore one of the first concerted efforts by a team of anthropologists to work closely together across different sites to comparatively address a collective research question and to write together about it. To reflect the collective nature of our research and writing, we therefore present our book not as an edited but as a multi-authored one.[31]