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Global Capitalism’s Impact on Indian Castes and Tribes

*Ground Down by Growth: Tribe, Caste, Class and Inequality in Twenty-First-Century India* is an attempt to understand the puzzle of why the most underprivileged groups in India have not benefited from economic growth, despite India being among the top countries for fastest-growing cities and largest economies of the world. Through various case studies from some of the major populated states of India, the book shows that the trickle-down effect theorized by economists has not taken place in practice. Not only have capitalism and globalization failed to benefit these minorities, but they have in fact contributed to growing inequality on the subcontinent. The book focuses on two broad minority groups: Dalits, or “untouchables,” and Adivasis, who are ethnically tribal. In the Hindu caste system, Dalits are at the bottom of the hierarchy; coming into contact with them is considered polluting to the upper-caste groups. Similarly, Adivasis are tribal groups who live in forests and hills and who, due to dispossession of their lands, were forced to migrate and have ever since lived with deep social and economic disadvantages. Based on ethnographies of several Adivasi and Dalit groups, the book consists of eight chapters, five of which are ethnographies that focus on the Indian states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Himachal Pradesh, and Maharashtra.

According to the authors, three interrelated processes have contributed to the intensification of inequality between the “general” or advantaged castes, and the Dalits and Adivasis: inherited inequalities of power; superexploitation based on casual migrant labor; and conjugated oppression, described as “intertwined multiple oppressions based on caste, tribe, class, gender and region” (p. 2). Conjugated oppression has been differentiated from intersectionality; the authors argue that intersectionality treats categories as independent variables, whereas the book illuminates the inseparability of class, caste, gender, race, region, and tribe. The central, broad argument is that capitalist modernity has reinforced social oppressions based on caste, class, and gender. These relations of domination are grounded historically; social disparities and caste-based identities continue to persist and create new forms of subjugation, with capitalist modernization as the responsible force.

The introduction and the final chapter reflect on the impact of capitalism on the castes and tribes of India. Alpa Shah and Jens Lerche draw attention to the consequences of development—population pressure has led to displacement as well as the creation of new sites of subjugation. In an era where informal and precarious work is the new normal, Dalits and Adivasis, even with their heterogeneity, find themselves more disadvantaged. In fact, Dalits and Adivasis are only one case; patterns of extreme inequality are visible in Africa, Asia, and Latin America as well. The way forward looks grim; social movements and class-based resistance exist, but they face repression by governmental authorities and are subjected to oppres-
sion by the enforcers of neoliberal development.

The most prominent theme that figures in the ethnographies is that of seasonal migration. Casual work has rendered the Dalits and Adivasis vulnerable to exploitation. This exploitation consists of dispossession and appropriation of opportunities, wage exploitation, and limited or no state assistance. These factors lead to debt bondage, low standards of living, and even serfdom. Casualization also means detachment from traditional community networks; hence, there is little scope for mobilization of these groups for basic rights. All of these cases are a result of existing discrimination and a consequence of advancing the goals of capitalist organizations and infrastructures.

K. P. Kannan utilizes macro data from the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector to calculate disaggregated poverty and vulnerability indices as well as statistical proportions. His data, disaggregated by region and social group, pertains to the post-1990s. His descriptive statistics show that the trickle-down effect has not been effective for Dalits, Muslims, Adivasis, or groups officially classified as “Other Backward Castes.” In India, the socially, economically, and educationally disadvantaged groups are divided into three affirmative action categories, with reserved positions in employment and educational institutions: the Scheduled Castes, or SCs, such as Dalits, who are Hindus classified for having historically faced social discrimination; the Scheduled Tribes, or STs, such as Adivasis, not unlike SCs, but tribes grouped on basis of geographical isolation; and finally, the Other Backward Castes, or OBCs, who do not fit into the other two groups and include some Muslims.

The impact of education has been unequal on these groups; in fact, they have been further disadvantaged. Moreover, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Telangana, Himachal Pradesh, and Maharashtra are among the more prosperous states of the twenty-nine states that comprise India; and yet, as the ethnographies and Kannan’s data show, the Dalits and Adivasis are more impoverished in these states than others. Therefore, capitalist modernization has in fact aggravated inequality between the haves and the have-nots. This chapter, hence, not only provides a descriptive basis for the ethnographies that follow, but also stresses the importance of anthropological and sociological methods to draw out and circumvent some of the limitations with statistical methods.

The first ethnography in the book, by Jayaseelan Raj, is also a reminder of colonial labor history: the case of tea plantations in Kerala. Dalit laborers were brought to Kerala during the 1860s from Tamil Nadu for indentured work on the plantations, where they formed the primary labor force. When the state of Kerala was formed in 1956, land redistribution took place, but the native plantation owners lobbied to exempt their plantations from the redistribution measures. The 1951 Plantation Labor Act accorded the plantation workers welfare rights and social benefits that were augmented further during the 1970s and 1990s. However, after the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s, new plantation companies intensified the level of exploitation by casualizing much of the work. This not only ensured more control over the workforce but also weakened its bargaining power, especially since they faced competition from Jharkhand Adivasi and Assamese Muslim migrants. Kerala’s left-leaning politics notwithstanding, the breaking of labor laws and the inability to unionize are paradoxical. Many Dalits returned to Tamil Nadu, only to face caste discrimination in obtaining employment.

Persistent prejudice against Dalits and Adivasis points to another overarching theme: there can be little economic mobility without social mobility. Caste is central to the control of labor. Brendan Donegan’s chapter on the Dalits and Adivasis in Cuddalore’s Chemical Industrial Estate continues some of the issues discussed in Raj’s chapter. Caste discrimination bound the Dalits and Adivasis to precarious factory work, such as the unsafe tasks of bone-cleaning and waste-packing. Labor contractors are central to this. In most informal work in India since the nineteenth century, the labor contractor has been responsible for recruitment, supervision, wages, and the assignment of individual tasks at the worksite. These subcontractors wield enormous authority and belong to influential castes within the community. By implication, work within the factories becomes highly segregated. Migration from Bengal and Orissa further complicates these matters.

Although legislation for affirmative action exists, in practice basic rights are overridden. Access to government jobs is hampered by caste discrimination. Access to resources such as land has also been protected by legislation, but, as Dalel Benbabaali demonstrates in her chapter, Dalits and Adivasis are highly susceptible to dispossession. Through the study of Adivasis in Bhadrachalam, Telangana’s Scheduled Area, Benbabaali describes the process through which landowners seized control of tribal lands. Industrialization followed, as was also the case in Cuddalore. In Bhadrachalam, the Kammas migrated from the Godaveri delta and introduced commercial agriculture, and in the process threatened Adivasi...
sovereignty over the area. The landless Dalits were employed on Kamma lands for farming and forestry. Dispossession of natural resources, even though the disadvantaged groups are legally protected by the Fifth Schedule, has intensified since the Indian Tobacco Company Paper Factory was established in the area. The protests against pollution and the extraction of natural resources by the company have been futile, with the Dalits and Adivasis absorbing the brunt of the problems.

In a similar vein, Richard Axelby’s essay highlights the unequal impact of capitalism among the Dalits and Adivasis. The Gaddis and Gujjars depended on a combination of nomadic pastoralism and agriculture. With the influx of capitalism into the Chamba Valley of Himachal Pradesh, the Dalits have been more successful in obtaining government jobs than the Adivasis, Gaddis, and Gujjars. The latter in particular have suffered from a decline of their traditional livelihoods; consequently, they migrate in search of casual work on public-works construction projects. This chapter brilliantly demonstrates the different factors that affect access to job opportunities. This is also the case with the final ethnography of the book, presented by Vikramaditya Thakur. The Bhils were dispossessed of their lands when the Sardar Sarovar Project Dam was built on the Narmada River in the 1980s. Relegated to the edges of the river and the Satpura hills, the Bhils found it difficult to make a living due to deforestation and a lack of irrigation. Hence, they were forced to migrate to nearby towns and states for piecework. Of the Bhils who relocated to the plains, some have benefited from the unity fostered by the anti-dam movement and from higher levels of educational attainment, while others are dependent on seasonal labor, migration, and precarious work. In all cases, the Bhils remain at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy in Maharashtra, and their future is bleak.

The authors have drawn on several years of fieldwork for their chapters, evident in the rich and nuanced ethnographical analysis. Moreover, the contributors have worked together since 2014 on issues of methodology and theory as they pertain to poverty and inequality. Methods and sources vary from semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and reports from different organizations. While the rich ethnographies demonstrate the heterogeneity of Dalits and Adivasis themselves, the authors could have detailed further how economic indicators, such as gross domestic product or the Gini coefficient that is used to measure the degree of inequality, fail to fully capture reality. These themes are discussed only briefly in the introduction and in Kannan’s chapter. Despite the discussion of quantitative methods and its shortfalls when applied to issues of poverty, a discussion of mixed methodologies is missing.

The book in many ways is reminiscent of the edited volume by Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana, Dalit Studies (2016), which covered similar themes but was more interdisciplinary in its approach. In Ground Down by Growth, the contributors all employ similar fieldwork methodologies, that is, they rely heavily on interviews and draw on quantitative data and historical sources. In general, though, methodology is given less space than is warranted, and it is not always evident which sections draw on which sources.

The chapters are informationally rich, each with detailed historical and factual background material as well as descriptive context. The book is thus suitable for non-specialists; the introduction explains context and terms, and the chapters have been written in considerable detail, albeit with some repetition. The organization could have been improved by including the tables and graphs in the chapters themselves rather than placing them at the end in an appendix before the endnotes. The book in general could have also benefited from further theoretical discussions regarding casual labor and bondage; nevertheless, migration and its intersectionality with caste have been discussed sufficiently.

To sum up, the authors argue against the assumptions put forth by economists that neoliberal growth is a leveler. Rather, these cases demonstrate that the development goals pursued by the Indian government, including affirmative action, have done little to minimize historical inequality and discrimination. Stigma is visible in everyday actions and vocabulary, something that legal frameworks cannot keep in check. This is particularly relevant, as recently the Indian government introduced 10 percent quotas for economically weaker sections of the population (including some of the higher castes). Ground Down by Growth is therefore a much-needed and timely contribution for policymakers and scholars in the fields of development studies, anthropology, and sociology.

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