Social Oppression and Exploitation of Adivasis and Dalits in Contemporary India

Abstract

At the 2019 General Election in India, the BJP succeeded in gaining more of the Dalit, Adivasi and OBC vote. This chapter highlights the everyday politics of social oppression and exploitation faced by Dalits and Adivasis in India. India is a society of graded inequalities, with Adivasis and Dalits - who make up 25 per cent of the population – at the bottom of the economic hierarchy. They continue to fare worse than all other groups on all main social and economic standard indicators. Our focus is on how historical relations of oppression of Dalits and Adivasis have been given new life and new meanings in modern India. Contrary to the expectations of founders of Independent India, caste as a social category and caste based discrimination has not withered away. Modi's regime has exacerbated this but the modern oppression of Dalits and Adivasis was in place well before the BJP came to power: the previous Congress party-led governments have been part and parcel of this development as well.

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At the 2019 General Election in India, the BJP succeeded in gaining more of the Dalit, Adivasi and OBC vote (Jaffrelot, 2019). While the politics of wooing voters for elections is often different to the everyday politics faced by communities, electoral politics cannot be abstracted from people's lived realities. This chapter highlights the everyday politics of social oppression and exploitation faced by Dalits and Adivasis in India.

India is a society of graded inequalities (Thorat and Madheswaran, 2018), with Adivasis and Dalits - who make up 25 per cent of the population – at the bottom of the economic hierarchy. They continue to fare worse than all other groups on all main social and economic standard indicators.[1] Our focus is on how historical relations of oppression of Dalits and Adivasis have been given new life and new meanings in modern India, shaping the passionate politics depicted by authors of this volume. Contrary to the expectations of founders of Independent India, caste as a social category and caste based discrimination has not withered away (Shah et al., 2006). Modi's regime has exacerbated this but the modern oppression of Dalits and Adivasis was in place well before the BJP came to power: the previous Congress party-led governments have been part and parcel of this development as well.

The chapter is based on a research programme we led that investigated the reasons for the continued oppression and exploitation of Adivasis and Dalits, drawing on fieldwork living

[1] Measured by the multidimensional poverty index MPI that covers deprivations in health, education, and living standards, 81% of Adivasis and 66% of Dalits were poor, compared to only 33% of Others (primarily 'higher' (non-OBC) Hindu castes). 55% of Adivasi and 48% of Dalit children under five suffered of malnutrition compared to 34% of Others. The literacy rates were 59% and 66% for Adivasis and Dalits compared to an all India average of 73% (no figures for Others available) (Daniel et al., 2017).

with Dalits and Adivasis in sites in Telangana, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Himachal Pradesh as well as our long-term field research in Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh.[2] Here, we draw on the main publication of the research programme, the book "Ground Down by Growth: Tribe, Caste, Class and Inequality in 21st Century India" (Shah and Lerche et.al., 2018) and reproduce some of the arguments we have presented in other forms (Lerche and Shah (2018, 2021), and Shah and Lerche (2020; 2021)).

The Changing Oppression and Exploitation of Adivasis and Dalit

It is well known that historically, caste as a system of ritual purity and impurity kept the Dalits firmly at the bottom of society as 'untouchables', an 'impure' and 'filthy' class of agrestic slaves, i.e., hereditary unfree agricultural labourers (Habib, 1963; Kumar, 1992). The Adivasis, in comparison, lived in relatively independent communities, with much more direct access to land and forest resources, without the same domination from higher caste groups faced by Dalits; but were stereotyped as 'wild' and 'savage'.

The oppression of Dalits and Adivasis has changed over time but it continues to be pervasive. Most notably, in spite of the rapid economic growth from the mid 1990s, Adivasis and Dalits continue to be economically worse off than all other groups across India, with significantly higher levels of poverty. While the economic growth did lead to some decrease in poverty it also entailed rapidly growing inequality that to a large extent followed broad lines of caste, tribe and ethnicity. Using the World Bank poverty line of $ 2 a day in 2009-10, 82% of Adivasis and Dalits were poor, compared to 45% of the high castes (Kannan, 2018: 35). One important reason for this is that formal sector regular employment, government service and high-end business and capital is dominated by the higher castes. But the overwhelming majority of the Indian working population – 92 per cent – are treated as second-class labourers as they work in the small-scale informal sector or on short-term contracts for Indian and foreign owned formal sector enterprises as informal and precarious casual labour, without job security, social security of sick pay. Dalits and Adivasis are overrepresented in this kind of work.[3] They are historically disadvantaged and they suffer from discrimination in the labour market and in access to skill (see e.g. Thorat and Newman, 2010; Deshpande, 2011; Kannan, 2018). Adivasis' exploitation is exacerbated by land grabs by government and private sector interests, often at odds with the constitutional protection of their lands (Shah,

[2] The Programme of Research on Poverty and Inequality of Dalits and Adivasis was based in the Anthropology Department at the LSE and was led by Alpa Shah (PI) and Jens Lerche. The five post doc scholars were: Richard Axelby (whose research site were in Himachal), Dalel Benbabaali (Telangana), Brendan Donegan (Tamil Nadu), Jayaseelan Raj (Kerala) and Vikramaditya Thakur (Maharashtra). We are grateful to the ESRC (ES/K002341/1) and the ERC (ERC-2012- RtG_20111124) for funding the research.

[3] In 2017-18, working as casual labourer was several times more common among Dalits (41%) and Adivasis (31%) than among high castes (14%) (the statistical group 'Other'). 26% of Muslims and 23% of OBCs were casual labourers (Government of India, 2019: A-401-402, A-440).

2018). All this means that a huge pay gap is maintained. Adivasis earn less than half of general castes, and Dalits not much more.[4] No wonder they are poorer than all other groups.

We have argued elsewhere that the exploitation, oppression and discrimination of Dalits and Adivasis take place through three interrelated processes:

The first is that ***inherited inequalities of power*** continue to enable dominant groups to control the adverse incorporation of Adivasis and Dalits in the modern economy, keeping them at the bottom of social and economic hierarchies. In all the study areas of our research programme, access to land and assets, to education, and to networks of power differ, leaving the Dalits and Adivasis significantly worse off than all other social groups. All-India data shows this too (access to land, assets, education source) with the exception that Adivasis in their heartland tend, still, to have access to plots of mainly poor lands. Even where Dalits and Adivasis have the same levels of education as castes above them in the traditional hierarchy, it the study areas as well as per all India data (Kannan, 2018: 41) it is the latter who get the better jobs. Our research shows that the top managerial jobs in the modern non-agricultural economy are the preserve of higher castes, who are close to – or come from - the groups that dominated village life. In line with All-India data, semi-skilled and skilled jobs mainly go to non-Dalit/Adivasi castes, while Dalits and Adivasis must make do with the lowest skilled segments, with lowest social status and poorest remuneration. In many of our sites the old local dominant groups were also actively regulating access for Dalits and Adivasis even to the low-end jobs in the modern economy.

The second interlinked process is the exploitation of Dalits and Adivasis as ***circular seasonal migrant casual labour*** within the Indian economy. Across India, from the 1980s onwards, there has been a rise in circular seasonal labour migration, with labourers travelling to far-away states for a part of the year for work. Estimates suggest that each year up to 100 million people work as circular migrant labour (Deshingker & Akter, 2009). Adivasis and Dalits are overwhelmingly represented among the circular migrant labour force, with both men and women migrating for work in sectors such as brick kilns, construction, agricultural labour and low-end informalised factory work. [5] They are often hired through labour contractors, and with those in the most precarious conditions becoming bonded through advance loans and delayed payments (Lerche, 2007; Shah and Lerche, 2020). Across our field sites, Adivasi seasonal migrant labour from central and eastern India was employed on worse terms and conditions even than local Dalit labour.[6] Seasonal migrant labour also has no access to Fair Price Shops which provide cheap food to local people, nor to schools.[7] They have no local

[4] In 2017-18, the average wage income of Adivasis, Dalits, Muslims, and OBCs were only, respectively, 48%, 57%, 66% and 67% of the average wage income of general caste people (Kannan, 2019).

[5] Government statistics suggest that Dalits and Adivasis constitute 45 percent of seasonal labour migrants even though they only constitute 25% of the population (Srivastava, 2020: 174). However, the statistics significantly underreport seasonal labour migration and this figure is therefore approximate.

[6] See Jain and Sharma (2019) for a comparable study of Adivasi and other seasonal migrants from Rajasthan to Gujarat.

[7] Recent changes that formally allows seasonal migrants to access Fair Price Shops unfortunately means that households must choose between either the seasonal migrant or the family back in the village accessing these shops (Srinivasan, 2020).

voting rights, and they often do not speak the local language which makes it even more difficult for them to be heard. Our research (Shah and Lerche, 2020) as well as other studies show that everywhere their living conditions are appalling, they are worked harder than the local workers, and often paid less (Abbas, 2016; Jain and Sharma, 2019; Mander et al., 2019). They are treated as second class citizens, if citizens at all.

The income of low-end seasonal migrant workers is not sufficient to cover the basic needs of them and their households throughout the year – and even less so to provide for the full life-cycle of the household from childhood to old age. They are super-exploited, i.e., paid less than the cost of their own reproduction. This is only possible because their household back in the home areas provides for the reproduction of the seasonal worker, from childhood to retirement age, in what we have called an 'invisible economy of care' (Shah and Lerche, 2020). At the same time, seasonal labour migration is also driven by the conditions in the home areas. Land alienation by government and corporate development and mining projects is undermining Adivasi local forest based and agricultural livelihoods (Shah, 2018). In other parts of India, such as East Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, economic inequality, oppressive social relations and the absence of non-agricultural work opportunities likewise leave Dalits and others with little choice but to seek seasonal work elsewhere. Most Dalit and Adivasi rural households from these parts of India are involved in seasonal migration, as are significant numbers of Muslim and OBCs (Lerche, 1999; de Haan, 2002; Roy, 2016).

Thirdly, these exploitative class relations are inextricably linked with social oppression on lines of caste, tribe, gender and region. This produces an overall experience of what Philippe Bourgois labelled ***conjugated oppression*****:** when class based exploitation and ethnic discrimination 'interact explosively' and produces 'an overwhelming experience of oppression that is more than the sum of its parts' (1988, 1989, 1995: 72).

Our research documents that while direct untouchability has declined, stereotyping and stigmatising of Adivasis and Dalits still provide the backdrop for labour discrimination. This includes everyday use of abusive language and taunts and the stigma that Adivasi and Dalits are ignorant, lazy, dishonest, dirty, and ill-educated (Shah and Lerche, 2018). The consequence can be extreme. For example, in Tamil Nadu textiles and garment factories Dalits hide their surnames and caste background for years, including from their non-Dalit co-workers, to get work and accommodation (Raj, 2018). Importantly this is set in the context of both implicit and increasingly also explicit government support of the such oppression. Vigilante beatings, rape and even killings of Adivasis and Dalits, reinforcing conjugated oppression, more often than not go unpunished. Swathes of the Adivasi lands in central and eastern India are militarised, villages burnt, rape is weaponised and locals killed in so-called 'encounters', justified as part of the fight against the Naxalite Maoist insurgency by government forces and vigilante groups (Shah, 2018). Recent Congress governments have played a major role in amplifying these policies. However, since the Modi led BJP government came to power in 2014, things have gone from bad to worse.

On the one hand, there is the BJP's project of rewriting history to consolidate a Hindu identity (Sharma, this volume), promising certainty in uncertain times (Gudavarthy, this volume) and

the prospects for equality and solidarity within the Hindu fold (Waghmore, this volume). On the other hand, oppressive social and economic conditions of the overwhelming majority of Adivasis and Dalits are cemented. Apart from the attacks on Adivasis in their home regions, there has been a marked increase in organised vigilante attacks with impunity on seasonal migrants, Muslims and Dalits across India (Jogdand et al., 2020), and 'encounter' killings of Muslims and Dalits (Dixit, 2018). Moreover, a number of intellectuals and human rights activists protesting this oppression are jailed for being 'antinational' and silenced, the most high profile case today being that of the 'Bhima Koregaon 16'. The government has even sought to ban the term 'Dalit' from public media discourse (Sahu, 2018). The message to Dalits, Adivasis and activists is that no protest will be tolerated, while the oppression of them, on the other hand, is acceptable.

Politics for and against conjugated oppression in India and beyond

India has some of the world's most comprehensive affirmative action policies for Dalits and Adivasis. There are reserved quotas for government jobs and in higher education, and certain parliamentary seats and other elected posts are reserved for Dalits and Adivasis. There are anti-discrimination laws in place such as the Prevention of Atrocities Against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Act 1989, as well as constitutional guarantees for Adivasi land rights in some states.[8] These policies have been fought for over generations and should not be belittled. They have benefited many individual Dalits and Adivasis, have secured spaces for their voices and serve as platforms to claim their rights. Many grassroots groups and activists undertake important work in fighting against oppression and for better conditions for Dalits and Adivasis. However, in spite of all this, Dalits and Adivasis remain economically at the bottom of society. In fact, it is hard to see how their situation can be significantly improved if the existing inherited inequalities of power are left untouched, if super-exploitation of seasonal migrant labour is encouraged, and if all of this is underpinned by government sanctioned conjugated oppression.

India is not unique in its oppression and exploitation of minority groups. Conjugated oppression is common across the world. Inequality and discrimination along the lines of race, ethnicity and gender are well documented in many countries, including in the UK and the US (Lerche and Shah, 2021). The treatment of migrant labour as second class citizens are all too familiar, globally (see e.g., Ferguson and McNally, 2014). In fact, a number of scholars concerned with race, gender, ethnicity and migration across the world has long been arguing that there are systemic reasons for this. They argue that 'othering' parts of the labour force: the oppression and exploitation along the lines of existing difference, be they based on race, ethnicity, caste, tribe, or gender, etc., is inherent to capitalism.[9] This indicates that sweeping

[8] Some of these affirmative actions have also been extended to other groups, including quotas for the OBCs and reserved constituencies for local government institutions for women.
[9] See Shah and Lerche (2018) and Lerche and Shah (2018) for reviews.

changes to this are not easy to achieve as they would go to the core of existing economic and social systems.

In India, no government has tried to go down this route. Still, some governments have done more than others. The affirmative action that was put in place just after Independence, under immense pressure from the Dalit leader Dr Ambedkar and his movement, is one important positive example. The Congress-Left UPA alliance 2004-2009 is another, albeit smaller, example. Its Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee led to a fall in poverty amongst Dalits and Adivasis, somewhat mitigating the abysmal poverty reduction record for these groups in the earlier phases of neoliberal growth under shifting Congress and BJP governments (Kannan, 2018).

The 2014-2019 BJP government, has gone in the other direction and starved the MGNREGA for funds. After that followed the demonetisation and the introduction of the General Sales Tax in 2017, which together had serious impact on especially low-end employment such as the cash-in-hand based construction sector. Finally, the government began work on watering down existing labour laws.[10] For the first time, employment in India actually fell. Dalits and Adivasis were hit by the fall in construction work, sometimes with severe consequences (Dewan and Segal, 2018), but the wider impact on Dalits and Adivasis is not known.[11]

Commentators and scholars must take these developments extremely seriously. But there is also a need to put in perspective the economic hardship that no doubt was felt by at least some Dalits and Adivasis as a result of demonetisation. For most Dalits and Adivasis such hardship is nothing new. Illness, disability, bad harvests or being cheated out of wages by an employer are part of life.

There is little doubt that the BJP government also increased the conjugated oppression of Dalits and Adivasis. The rights of Dalits and Adivasis and activists working with them have been even more under attack under the Modi government. But it also remains that no government has seriously sought to bring an end to the oppression and exploitation of Dalits and Adivasis. In this sense, the BJPs policies are not entirely out of line with the already existing oppressive regimes before it, however serious their increased oppression is.

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[10] During the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic the BJP government went even further and allowed the suspension of the now reformed labour laws. This means that states like Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab and Madhya Pradesh have now legalised 12 hour working days! (Madhavan, 2020).

[11] The only available statistical data, the Periodic Labour Force Survey, shows that while employment for other groups (OBCs, Muslim) fell from 2012 to 2017-18, Dalits and Adivasis did not see an overall fall in employment (Kannan and Raveendran, 2019; see also chapter X). It is too early to know how to interpret this, and it is not *necessarily* a positive sign: the holding up of employment amongst Dalits and Adivasis could be because people on the breadline simply have to make do with whatever work is available, irrespective of how poor conditions and pay may be, to survive. Since then, things have gone from bad to worse as the compassionless Covid policies of the government is estimated to have led to an additional 75 million people fallen into poverty (measured as falling below a $2 poverty line in 2020)(Kochhar 2021). This is unprecedented in Independent India and among the worst pandemic records in the world.

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