

# **The 14<sup>th</sup> Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Lecture**

## ***Entrenching Inequality: Dalits, Adivasis and Class inside the Indian Economic Miracle***

by

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## **Entrenching Inequality: Dalits, Adivasis and Class inside the Indian Economic Miracle**

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Ambedkar Chair, CSSS, JNU, 17 March 2017**

*Jens Lerche*

### **Introduction**

Colleagues, friends, Chairman, Ambedkar Chair, Organisers – I am honoured to deliver this the 14<sup>th</sup> Ambedkar Memorial lecture.

For the last few years the Research Programme ‘Inequality and Poverty of Adivasis and Dalits in India’, led by Dr Alpa Shah of the LSE, that I am part of, has been organising an event celebrating the birthday of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, at the LSE in London where Dr Ambedkar studied. We have done so together with UK based Ambedkarite organisations. We have also been speaking regularly at the Ambedkar annual birth anniversary event at the House of Lords in London. But to be delivering the Annual Ambedkar Memorial lecture of the Dr Ambedkar Chair, here, at JNU, is something else and I hope I can do justice to the event.

In this lecture I will take stock of some aspects of the oppression of Dalits and Adivasis in India today.

In some ways, the time since independence has been one of diminishing discrimination against Dalits. Talk to any Dalit villager and you will be told that untouchability practices are less harsh than one, two and three generations ago and that things are better.

So far so good. But as Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar made clear in ‘Annihilation of caste’, caste discrimination will not disappear as long as it exists as a ‘state of mind’. He said: ‘caste is nothing but Brahminism incarnate’; and: ‘you will succeed in saving Hinduism if you kill Brahminism’ (301). Until that happens, discrimination based on descent will continue to exist. And it is, indeed, well known that caste based discrimination is alive and kicking. In the last few years, several National and International reports have highlighted this, as has the increase in reported atrocities against Dalits and Adivasis. The high profile caste based confrontations across India during the last year, including the attacks on Ambedkarite student organisations, and the suicides of Dalit students – including, sadly, the very recent alleged suicide of the PhD student Muthukrishnan here at JNU who in his last facebook post stated “When equality is denied everything is denied”- are clearly only the tip of the iceberg.

Academic works have made serious contributions to our understanding of discrimination against Dalits and Adivasis, not the least the work of a number of JNU based economists and sociologists such as Professors Vivek Kumar, Shukdeo Thorat, Gopal Guru, Surinder Jodkha and, regarding Adivasis, scholars such as Virginius Xaxa.

Today I hope to build on these analyses and argue that caste based discrimination is very much alive but, importantly, that it is changing, and that this is because it is made to serve specific, new purposes. Drawing inspiration from global analyses of the intersection of class, race, and ethnicity with the spread of capitalism, I argue that today, alliances between (global

and domestic) capital, and entrenched caste based interests, keep Dalits and Adivasis at the bottom of society.

It is well known that since the onset of neo-liberalism, inequality has increased in most countries across the globe, including in India. The share of national income going to workers is falling globally, meaning workers are capturing less and less of the gains from growth. As argued by Barbara-Harriss-White, capitalism produces more and more wealth for some but at the same time it also creates processes that displace people, that dispossess people, and turns them into paupers (see Harriss-White 2006).

India's economic growth of the last 25 years has gone hand in hand with increased inequalities, to the detriment especially of Dalits and Adivasis. New ways of entrenching social difference have occurred as the classic village based oppression of *Dalit* labourers (who often were bonded to their higher caste landowning masters) has been loosened and the oppressive discourse of purity-pollution and untouchability has become somewhat less extreme. If we look at the discriminatory practices of 'village India' that Dr Ambedkar highlights in his work 'Outside the Fold' – he lists a code that the Touchables have laid down and that 'Untouchables' must follow, consisting of 20 points, all enforcing the social, cultural and ritual inferiority and poverty of 'Untouchables' - if we look at this it is clear that many of these specific practices do not exist any longer or, at least, are rare nowadays (take, for example, the idea that the shadow of an 'Untouchable' could be polluting, their compulsory inferior dress code, or the prohibition against acquiring any wealth).

The *Adivasi* groups of the hills and forests used to live in relatively isolated communities, with a more direct access to the means of their social reproduction than the Dalits (through cultivating their own land, accessing their own forest resources). They were stereotyped as wild and savage but the forest isolation also enabled them to be somewhat outside the Hindu caste system. As interactions with Hindu societies of the plains have increased, their domination and exploitation have become closer to that of the 'Dalits' so that some scholars have even called them 'tribal castes' (as Jan Breman has of the Dublas of Gujarat).

We argue in this lecture that, today, as the social relations and work relations of Dalits and Adivasis are shifting out of the village and into the wider economy -which itself is by now part of global neo-liberal capitalism -social difference, inequality and poverty of Adivasis and Dalits are being entrenched through what we call **class social discrimination**. This consists of three interrelated processes

- Stigmatisation of Adivasis and Dalits and an underlying threat of direct violence
- Inherited inequalities of caste based power
- Super-exploitation of seasonal Adivasi and Dalit casual migrant labour

We also suggest that caste based discrimination is such a central aspect of the Indian society and economy today that it is hard to see how conditions can be significantly improved for the common people unless this discrimination is dealt with.

My presentation is based on the work of the Programme of Research on Inequality and Poverty, of the Department of Anthropology at the LSE, led by Dr Alpa Shah and involving, at its core, 5 post doctoral scholars as well as myself. KP Kannan, Ravi Srivastava, Barbara Harriss-White and Clarinda Still (Oxford) were also part of the programme. Today's talk is a version of the introduction to the collaborative book manuscript of this research, an introduction written jointly by Alpa Shah and myself. So what I present here today is a joint

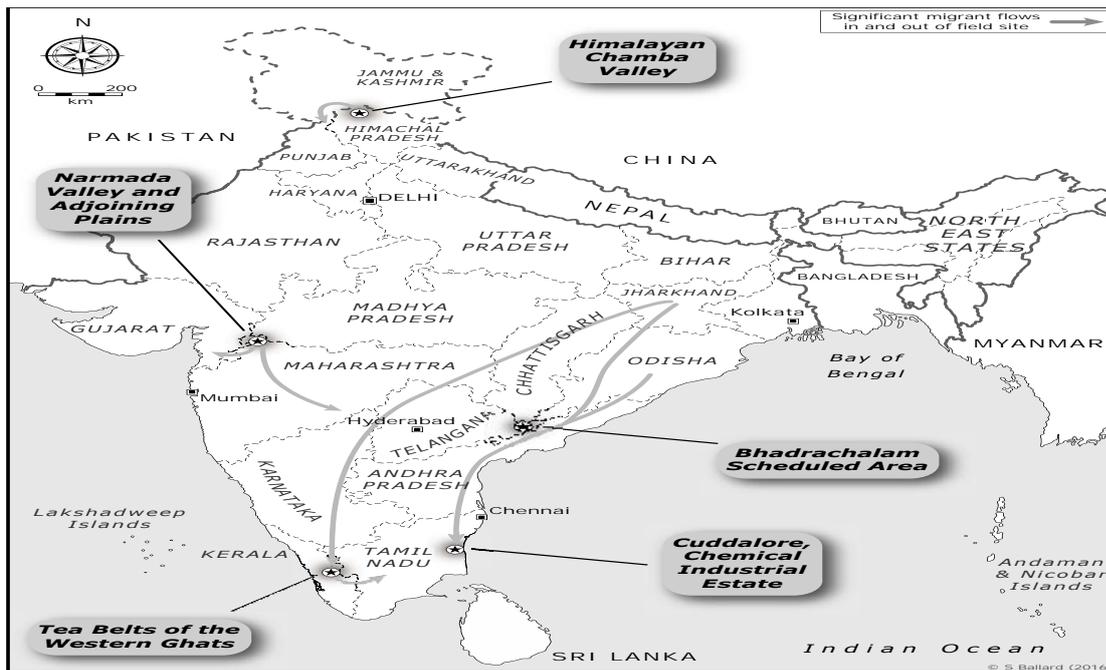
effort by Alpa Shah and myself, and also draws on the chapters of the book written by the five post doctoral scholars.

The title of lecture is “Entrenching Inequality: Dalits, Adivasis and Class inside the Indian Economic Miracle”. The point of departure is that several important macro-economic analyses, using large datasets, have documented that even as India’s extraordinary economic growth have been on-going for a quarter of a century, poverty in India not only still exists, it is marked by the social characteristics of caste, tribe and religion (KP Kannan 2011). Everywhere across the country Dalits and Adivasis are worse off than all other groups. Social discrimination, that is discrimination based on identity, marks the contours of poverty.

If fact not only Dalits and Adivasis are hit by this: some Muslim groups are nearly as poorly off and as discriminated against as them. But I will not analyse the position of Muslim groups here, in this lecture; that would be one step too far.

However important the macroeconomic dataset analyses are, by their very nature they are *descriptive* and can only *speculate* about causal mechanisms. As argued by Pranab Bardhan in the late eighties, it is in-depth studies that are best placed to capture dynamics, processes and relations. This means that we need to move to a qualitative, situated analysis. Poverty must be understood relationally, through social relations, as John Harriss and others suggest. We must put the *social relations* between Adivasis/Dalits and other groups at the centre of the analysis and we do so by focussing on ‘social class discrimination’ (as already said).

As part of the Inequality and Poverty Research Programme, the five post doc scholars, in close collaboration with Alpa Shah and myself, undertook one year of long-term fine-grained detailed studies in five different parts of India. The research was collaborative: we had a proper collective preparation phase, and during the fieldwork Alpa Shah and I visited them in the field, as they visited each other’s sites; and we discussed the research as it progressed in two workshops. I will now briefly introduce the field sites and some of the issues arising from the studies.



### The studies

In the Peermade belt in Kerala, from the 1860s onwards, Tamil Dalits were brought in as indentured labourers in the tea plantations. This is the site of Jayaseelan Raj's research. Here, the cutbacks in the terms and conditions of labour that accompanied economic liberalisation were sharpened by a global collapse of the tea economy in the 1990s. While some plantations closed down, others were taken over by Indian multinational companies. Predominantly older Dalit women continued to work as permanent pluckers. The Dalit youth tried to find better jobs in the cities back in Tamil Nadu, dying textiles and stitching and making garments or machinery. Many have chosen to hide their caste names in the face of overt caste discrimination; it is difficult for them to get a house or a job when people know that they are Dalits.

Raj also details how the local trade unions have been co-opted by the management. However, in August 2015, 12,000 Dalit women tea pickers in the Munnar tea belt showed remarkable courage in autonomously mobilizing against the deteriorating terms and conditions of work, in a one month long strike. But their bargaining— and their access to this kind of work — is increasingly undercut as the plantation owners have brought in migrant Adivasi migrant labour who is even cheaper than the local Dalits. Brought in for eight months a year or so, displaced from their kinship support networks, and not speaking the local language, they are not in a position to mobilise — as the Dalit women have — against the plantation management.

Brendan Donegan worked in the coastal belt of Cuddalore District in Tamil Nadu. With economic liberalisation it was targeted by the State Industries Promotion Corporation for Tamil Nadu as allocation for highly toxic chemical and pharmaceutical industries which, by now line the Bay of Bengal. Close to Donegan's site is a gelatine factory whose entire production is for export. It is run with a Japanese business partner and makes gelatine from cow bones for gelling agents in food, pharmaceuticals, photography and cosmetics, and hence locally is called 'the bone factory'.

The shift from agriculture to industry has meant that the Paraiyar Dalit labour are no longer bonded in agricultural servitude to high caste landlords. Most Dalit men are now working as daily contract labour cleaning bones with toxic chemical, the most precarious of jobs. The erstwhile landlords whose relatives own the factories, get the permanent jobs, and dominate and control the supply of labour and material to the factories. Meanwhile the local Adivasi Irulas, who have not acquired formal ST status, stick to agricultural labour and fishery work: none do factory work.

Affirmative action has enabled some Dalits to achieve a degree of upward mobility, to occupy low-level state sector jobs and also to work hard to develop Dalit caste and class consciousness. However, as the Dalits in the factories try to rise against their exploitation, their bargaining power is being cut by migrant Adivasi and Dalit labour brought in from Odisha. Super-exploited, these migrants live in squalid conditions and work longer hours for less pay than the local low caste labour.

Our next site is the heart of the country on the banks of the Godaveri in Bhadrachalam, Telangana where Dalel Benbabaali was based. Typical of the Adivasi dominated areas of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha, Adivasi land rights has been constitutionally protected. But despite a long history of social movements, including the Naxalite struggle and the formation of the new state of Telangana, Adivasi land and forest rights in these areas have been eroded.

Kamma and Reddy landlords took over major chunks of their land and controlled their labour, and that of the Dalits (Madigas), through relations of servitude. Subsequently, and under the control of these new dominant caste landlords, Adivasis were further dispossessed of land as a paper factory of the ITC Paperboards and Speciality Division, the largest manufacturer of Packaging and Graphics Boards in South Asia, was set up.

Benbabaali shows that the main local beneficiaries of this have been the Kamma and Reddy landlords whose sons and daughters now aspire to move not only out of the area but also out of India to live in the US. The son of one particular, large, Kamma landlord, a well-heeled doctor, in fact now owns seven different private hospitals in the US and has his own private jet plane to get from one hospital to the next. Meanwhile the mainly landless Lambadas and Madigas are doing casual contract work in the factories and in the cotton fields of the Kammas, their access to work controlled by the Kamma lords and at their beck and call. The Koyas have more land to fall back on, enabling them to keep some autonomy from the factory work which they don't like. None of these Dalits and Adivasis are likely to get the permanent factory jobs that people from non-Dalit/Adivasi communities monopolise.

We now move to the high mountains of Chamba in Himachal Pradesh where Richard Axelby worked. Here, Muslim Gujjar STs and Hindu Gaddi STs have survived with their buffaloes, sheep and goats for centuries in the extreme climes of the Saal valley and in the high Himalayas as nomadic agro-pastoralists.

Unlike in Telangana or in the coastal belt of Tamil Nadu, there is no immediate oppressor of the Gaddis and Gujjars. They are nevertheless marooned at the bottom of the social hierarchy compared with the upper castes and even the SCs of the same hills and valleys. The higher castes continue to own the best agricultural land, get the best education, and get significantly more and better government and private sector jobs. Axelby argues that the historically close ties of the upper castes to the old Court and businessmen in the nearby Chamba town enabled

them to access profitable new positions as they emerged post-Independence and as the urban economy developed, while for Gaddis and Gujjars there were no easy way to move away from an existence as herdsmen, petty farmers and labourers.

The final port of call is the Narmada River in Maharashtra where Vikramditya Thakur worked with the Bhil Adivasi people from near the Sardar Sarovar Dam in the Satpura hills. Displacing more than 30,000 people, its reservoir flooded the surrounding villages despite huge international protests. Thakur compares the Bhils who are still in the hills, with those who were moved to resettlement colonies in the agricultural plains, and with those who have lived for generations in caste-dominated villages in those plains. In the deforested hills, the Bhils still rely on the meagre outcomes from tilling the land and migrate as seasonal labour to the sugar cane fields of Maharashtra. Displaced by the dam, their counterparts of the resettlement colonies were given unalienable land and have inserted themselves into the insecurities of the cash crop economy – farming BT cotton, papaya and bananas. In the nearby Gujar villages, we find a different group of Bhils who have historically been the agricultural serfs of the Gujar landlords but, in more recent times, have ‘freed’ themselves to work as manual labour in the brick factories.

Though the resettlement Bhils have embarked on the kind of farming which was once the domain of the Gujjars, and there are some signs of class differentiation among the Bhils, there is little significant upward mobility. Without the cooperative agro-industrial moorings of Gujar farmers and with no class and caste based access to government and business circles, Bhil farmers are at the mercy of moneylenders and shrewd traders. Meanwhile, the sons and daughters of the Gujar landlords now seek well-paid government or private jobs outside the village and even in the US. Thakur predicts that the Bhil youth face the same fate as their counterparts in the caste-dominated nearby village and as those in the hills. That is, cycles of the back-breaking work of migrant agricultural labour and migrant brick kiln workers.

### **Capitalism, Precarious Work and Social Difference**

The processes which keep Adivasis and Dalits at the bottom of the Indian social and economic hierarchy are dependent both on inherited inequalities of power and directly linked to the ways in which capitalism is expanding across the country.

Importantly, the sites of exploitation and discrimination for India’s Dalits have shifted, out of the villages. Adivasis also face new sites of exploitation and oppression. Both groups now enter multiple strategies of livelihoods which mix farm work with hard manual labour in the most uncertain precarious exploitative work conditions, within the India-wide informal economy, to the benefit of Capital. Today, the biggest work based divide within the labouring classes is between the eight per cent working in formal sector regular jobs (those who have *naukri*, as Parry puts it) and the rest (those who have *kam*, that is, are engaged in precarious work, either in the small-scale informal sector or in informalised employment for formal sector enterprises). These are workers trapped in low wages or vulnerable self-employment and miserable work conditions, often hired through labour contractors and fired at a moment’s notice.

This expansion of unprotected, informal work is part of the global trend since the 1980s. In most parts of the world, we have not seen, for long, what was expected to be the standard development trajectory namely, a replication of the European and American path: a move from agriculture to industry and the formation of a ‘proletarian’ condition with workers solely reproducing through labour relations with the potential to self-identify as proletarians.

Full-time work in agriculture has, indeed, declined rapidly across the global South, but there is no overall move towards a mainly *industrial* labour force. Instead, labourers often have one foot in agriculture; and outside of agriculture they are restricted to informal and insecure work and precarious petty commodity production.<sup>1</sup> This non-proletarian condition, which Henry Bernstein calls ‘classes of labour’, can be viewed as a new permanent reserve army of labour (Bremen), facing ‘terminal marginality within global capitalism’ (Davis). This is the fate of most of the working populations of Latin America, Africa and Asia, and, according to some, even in China.

What our work highlights is the identity based segmentation of these ‘classes of labour’ and the ways in which the intersection of class, caste and tribe marks the spread of capitalism. When compared with the neighbouring upper-caste households, everywhere it is Adivasis and Dalits who occupy the most precarious rungs of the occupational ladder. Industrialisation has not led to a generalised proletarian condition for them, not even in the village of the industrial belt in Cuddalore or in the Bhadrachalam village in Telangana, dominated by the ITC factory. Formal sector regular employment is dominated by the higher castes. In comparison to the dominant castes, Adivasis and Dalits overwhelmingly have just *kam*. The cases presented here suggest that Adivasis and Dalits have little choice but to enter a global pattern of capitalist accumulation which appropriates (rather than negates) social differences and entrenches them. It is clear that one needs to consider class and other forms of social difference together.

In fact – and unknown to many – even Karl Marx did that, in the last decades of his life as shown by Kevin Anderson. Somewhat more recently, in 1986, Stuart Hall deliberated on the inter-relationship between class and race in the expansion of capitalism. Hall urged us to see the ways in which capitalist development can ‘preserve, adapt, harness and exploit the culturally specific character of labour power, building them into its regimes ... *rather than – as the classical theory would have us believe – by systematically eroding these distinctions*’. He said that, ‘The ethnic and racial structuration of the labour force, like its gendered composition (...) have provided the means for *differentiated forms of exploitation of the different sectors of a fractured labour force*’. This centrality of the social fragmentation of the workforce has also been highlighted by the important work of Etienne Balibar (1991) and put forth recently in a special volume of the Journal of World Systems Research which argues that the racialised subordination and creation of ‘redundant’ populations, including along lines of ethnicity, is an essential part of global capitalism. Others like Anna Tsing also argue that diversity in the form of gender, race, national status and other forms is structurally central to global capitalism.

In India, the inseparability of caste and class in the processes of capitalism is a point increasingly voiced by Dalit scholars (see for example Guru and Chakravarty, and Anand Teltumbde). In line with such work, our studies show the ways in which capitalism, far from eroding social difference, actually appropriates and entrenches such difference. We label this ‘**class social discrimination**’ and argue that this is key to how and why Adivasis and Dalits remain at the bottom of societal hierarchies. By coining the term ‘class social discrimination’, we want to stress the centrality of the intersection of class and identity *with* the processes of capitalist accumulation. Specifically, we argue that the entrenchment of social difference in the expansion of capitalism – class social discrimination – takes place through three interrelated processes across our sites. The first is through historical *inherited inequalities of power*. Historically developed social relations between Adivasis/Dalits and other groups tend to be unequal power relations, as most recently argued by Parry (2014) and today, locally dominant groups actively continue to mediate and control the adverse incorporation and

marginalisation of Adivasis and Dalits into the new economy. Relatedly, the second is through the stigmatisation of Adivasis and Dalits in what we call '*class casteism*'. Without this 'modern' stigmatisation, without class casteism, Adivasis and Dalits could not be kept at the bottom of society. And the last is through the *super-exploitation of seasonal casual migrant labour* which enables capitalists to pitch ethnically and regionally different sections of the labouring classes against each other, to squeeze them and undermine the power they have as workers.

### ***Focussing first on Capitalism and inherited inequalities of power***

It is striking across our sites how the global expansion of capitalism work through locally dominant caste groups and how this impacts on Adivasis and Dalits. Though out of the old bounds of village hierarchies, access to livelihoods in the informal economy for Dalits and Adivasis is thus still shaped by processes of inequality involving their inherited powerlessness in relation to the power of the old dominant social groups and institutions.

The forces shaping such developments are often very visible and violent. For instance, for the Adivasis and Dalits of the Telangana village, the processes reinforcing existing inequalities are centred around the old local Kamma landlord who not only controls access to informalised jobs in the nearby paper factory but who also tries to determine to what level Adivasis and Dalits can be educated. Similarly, the Dalits of Tamil Nadu used to work as bonded labour for the Nadar landlords and now this group control their access to industrial work. The dominant castes colonise the best jobs and ensure that Dalits only have access to the worst jobs in the most polluted circumstances. In the Kerala tea plantations, the conditions of the Dalit workers are shaped by the class of higher caste plantation administrators who cut their wages and pensions, and undermine their permanent work status.

Even where Dalits and Adivasis do not face overt discrimination they are still disadvantaged. The historical disadvantage and powerlessness is extreme for Irulas in Tamil Nadu, who had little recourse when government officials deny them their tribal certificates. The Bhil farmers were forced to watch their papaya crop rot as traders unpunished renege on deals to pick it up and only get relief when Gujar farmers use the strength that only they have, to force government to provide a minimum of support to all papaya growers. Elsewhere the disadvantage is more mundane as for the ST Gaddi and Gujjars whose historical position at the social and physical extremes of society left them only able to add road construction work, local petty business or migration to the Punjab to their livelihood strategies.

The inherited inequalities of power, underwritten by caste relations, marks the ways in which capitalism in India has spread and thus reproduces the poverty of Dalits and Adivasis. Poverty and inequality are effects of the inherited structural ability of certain social groups to continue to assert power and shape social and economic relations accordingly.

### ***Moving on to Capitalism and class casteism, we argue that***

the inherited inequalities are underpinned by and, in fact, could not exist, if it was not for the stigmatisation of Adivasis and Dalits. But discrimination based on stigmatisation against specific sections of the labouring classes is not unique to India, it is central to the processes of global capitalism. Balibar has called this process of stigmatisation of the working classes by the ruling elites for 'class racism'. He has shown how this worked in Western Europe, where the ruling classes constructed themselves as a pure race, thus enabling their mastery over the labour of those they constructed as races inferior to themselves. He argues that this process was first at work in Spain when it became a colonial power. The primitive

accumulation of capital in the colonies was based on the ‘fictive nobility [of the Spanish race] to make it a “people of masters” at the very point in time when, by terror, genocide, slavery and enforced Christianisation, Spain was conquering and dominating the largest of colonial empires’.

Balibar argues, further, that the industrial revolution and the expansion of capitalist relations of production, gave rise to ‘the new racism of the bourgeois era which has at its target the working classes in its dual status as the exploited population and politically threatening population’. Balibar argues that stigmatization discursively created the ‘labouring classes’ as the ‘dangerous classes’. The term ‘Dangerous classes’ was first used as a derogatory category to stigmatise the bottom of society in 19<sup>th</sup> century France – as a ‘breeding ground’ for thieves, prostitutes, beggars and ‘evildoers of all sorts’ who was an ‘object of fear to society’ and therefore ‘dangerous’ (Fregier 1840). Balibar argues that after the industrial revolution, not only were the labouring classes discursively created as a degenerate and dangerous race, they were divided into two: those who were made to be no longer dangerous and those to whom ‘dangerous’ characteristics were displaced, i.e., primarily foreigners, immigrants and colonial subjects. The privileges of the first group might include citizenship, voting rights etc. while the latter were excluded from such positions. Balibar argues that today, in the global North (he focuses on France) the divide runs between immigrant workers and those considered proper national workers, and this relates closely to hierarchies of work. The relative privileges – real or perceived – of the national workers can only be maintained if kept exclusive and restricted. Those groups of the working class who see themselves as privileged compared to the immigrant workers plays a major part in reinforcing racism. *Working class racism*, i.e., racism by those groups who perceive themselves linked to the dominant classes, towards the ‘dangerous’ parts of the labouring classes, is a necessary part of class racism in capitalist accumulation.

We argue that in India a similar stigmatisation of certain sections of the labouring classes is also central to the workings of capitalism and especially affects the position of Adivasis and Dalits. We call this process of stigmatisation ‘class casteism’. We do so in order to capture the India specific ways in which the dominant classes and castes ally with segments of the working population who join the stigmatisation of those below them in the social hierarchy. These segments of the working population do so in order to reinforce difference and defend the (for many, quite meagre) privileges and resources that they have from those below them.

Let me be clear here: we do not suggest that race, ethnicity and caste and tribe are ‘the same’. What we argue is that capital across the globe makes use of existing differences within the working populations. Descent based differences are easy to put to use for purposes of stigmatisation, and thus for increased vilification, oppression and exploitation; and this is the case for race and ethnicity as well as for caste and tribe. The processes and means used across the globe – what we call class racism and class casteism -are pretty similar even if the historical forms of descent based difference to which they are applied are not the same.

Class castiesm of course does not describe the *actual character* of those who are oppressed but is the process of stigmatisation by the ruling elites – how they construct themselves and their alliances with others in relation to those below them in the social hierarchy – that underwrites their domination. In India, class casteism is not a product of external immigration (as in the French case) but internal alien-ness based on low caste and tribe status.

It is well documented by historians and by Dr Ambedkar's writings that stigmatisation of Dalits has a long history. Long before the arrival of capitalism, stigmatisation contributed to keeping Dalits across India's villages in a state of oppression and helped landowners to maintain a class of agricultural labourers. But stigmatisation it has changed from serving the purpose of keeping Dalits at bay in the village economies. It now works across the wider, modern economy and many of the extreme purity-pollution rules and cultural ways of showing the inferiority of Dalits have gone. For example, several of the specific characteristics about untouchability that Ambedkar outlines are no longer there: he writes (in 'Outside the Fold'): "an untouchable must conform to the status of an inferior and he must wear the marks of his inferiority for the public to know and identify him such as –

- a) Having a contemptible name
- b) Not wearing clean clothes
- c) Not having tiled roof
- d) Not wearing silver and gold ornaments"

Such direct extreme marks of inferiority are no longer enforced. That said, modern day stigmatisation can be very explicit too - so explicit that it excludes Dalits and Adivasis from certain jobs. Raj, for instance, documented some of the most clear-cut cases of overt work related discrimination. The textiles and garment sector factories were unwilling to employ semi-skilled Dalits and there were cases of entire communities of Dalits hiding their name and caste background for years in order to get work. For others, for example a Dalit plumber in a Kerala town it was the everyday discriminatory behaviour of work colleagues and bosses that made it impossible for him to stay in the job – had he stayed on it would have been at the cost of his sanity and self-respect. Meanwhile, at the bone factory in Tamil Nadu the dirtiest jobs are done by local Dalits and Adivasis, as well as migrant workers who also mainly are Dalits and Adivasis, dealing with animal bones in the smelly, unhygienic hart of the factory. In the plains of Nardurbar, the Gujar farmers hurl abuse and taunts at their ST Bhil labourers. And in Himalayan Chamba, Axelby reports how a government official described his fellow caste-Hindus as 'hardworking' and 'progressive' in contrast to the 'ignorant and lazy' ST Gaddis and 'dishonest' ST Gujjars, while wealthy upper castes and upper Muslim groups of Chamba town stigmatised the rural (likewise Muslim) Gujjars as dirty, ill-educated and dishonest.

Class casteism keeps Adivasis and Dalits in low-end work. It takes place in different ways for the different communities. For instance, stereotypes of Dalits, despite the outlawing of untouchability, often ascribe to Dalits impurity and filth, whereas those attributed to Adivasis often mark them as childlike, savage and wild. The specific manifestations of class casteism will be locally different. For instance, the tea plantation Dalits in Kerala are stigmatised not only as Dalits but also, as Raj argues, because of their history of having been enslaved bonded labour, because they were Tamil speakers in Malayali Kerala, and because they were from the "wild" highlands rather than from the settled and "civilized" lowland valley. In Telengana, Benbabaali reports how stigmatisation is used to divide and rule workers – so Koyas are constructed as 'rebellious' by the Kamma landlord and Lambadas as 'obedient', thus enhancing the preferential employment of the latter on his fields or to get contracts in ITC. Stigmas of class casteism are also likely to be gendered and differentially experienced by men and women from these communities.

Class casteism reinforce the divide between, on the one hand, the mainly urban middle classes and regular formal sector workers who disproportionately belong to higher and middle castes, and, on the other hand, the informalised classes. However, the informalised classes are

also not united. While Adivasis and Dalits (as well as Muslims) are overwhelmingly informalised, so are major sections of other relatively lowly ranking castes. Class casteism often maintains and strengthens the divides even between these groups. The non-Dalit/Adivasi low ranking castes may kick downwards, as highlighted by Raj concerning urban informalised workers' discrimination against Dalits, and as reported by Donegan from Tamil Nadu where the ST Irulas suspect that it was culprits from the OBC Natter fishing caste that stole the engines and destroyed the nets of their new fishing dinghies, getting away scot free. The OBC Vanniyar caste, with tacit understanding from the Nadar factory management, has monopolised the semi-skilled contract work at the bone factory, keeping the Dalit Paraiyars confined to the more hazardous and poorly paid factory work. Class casteism enables a broad acceptance of the economic system by those classes and castes which are not at the bottom of the hierarchy and is therefore essential to the social relations of inequality on the ground.

But class casteism stigmatisation goes further than this. Adivasis and Dalits are not only 'othered', in many instances they are the non-humans of India, the ones who can be discriminated against, the ones with no rights and the ones against whom atrocities can be committed with near-impunity. Some of the most serious stigmatising is exposed through how Adivasis have been treated in Central and Eastern India, as the 'dangerous classes' joining the Naxalite revolutionary struggle. We have also seen extremely negative stereotyping in the ways in which Dalits across the country have been targeted as 'anti-national' in recent years (take for example the struggles around the suicide of Rohit Vehmula in 2016 and other Campus related events during the last year, and anti-cow vigilante actions, also targeting Dalits such as in Una). The dominant classes in society still view the lives, lifestyles and customs of Adivasis and Dalits (and of Muslims) as dirty or uncivilised, they decry emancipatory politics from the midst of these groups as anti-national, and consider them in need of civilisatory education before they can join the 'nation'. What we have as a result of the construction of Adivasis and Dalits as 'dangerous classes,' based on class casteism, is a super-exploitable workforce controlled and enforced by an oppressive 'civilising' mission which is increasingly being meted out by the police and other state forces in collusion with corporate capital. This is crucial to the division of the labouring classes and hence their domination under capitalism.

However, there are also significant differences in the kinds of inequalities experienced by the different groups at the bottom of the hierarchy. NSSO data show that Adivasis are poorer than Dalits; that their poverty is falling particularly slowly; and they are hardly represented among private sector regular formal workers, when compared to Dalits (who are themselves also underrepresented). But aspects of our work challenge that Adivasis are worse off than Dalits. Landlessness is less common among Adivasis, and we suggest that whether Adivasis are worse off than Dalits depends largely on whether Adivasis have historically had access to land in their home areas or not. In the central and eastern Indian belt – as we find in Benbabaali's case of Northern Telangana – local Adivasis are often in a better position than local Dalits for that very reason. This gives the Adivasis some autonomy from landlords or factories. That said, when Adivasis migrate for work to other parts of India, they do so on worse terms and conditions than local Dalits. This was the case for the migrant Adivasi tea plantation workers and for the migrant Adivasi and Dalit workers in the Tamil Nadu factory. When they end up staying on in their places of migration – as in the case of Oriya dwellers in Bhadrachalam - they usually become the most marginalised of local communities; landless, uneducated and with not even a caste certificate to their name.

Intra-household differences between men and women within Dalit and Adivasi groups are as important to consider. Across all our sites, in comparison to higher caste households where women are withdrawn from paid work, into household work, there is no such overall trend at the bottom of the hierarchy. In fact, in some of our sites, such as that of the Kerala tea plantations, the neo-liberal cutbacks have meant a feminisation of the workforce. Patriarchy is also more muted within Dalit and Adivasi households. But working outside the household exposes SC and ST women to the class casteism of higher caste employers and contractors. For instance, in Thakur's site women report sexual exploitation, in particular when migrating for work. So though gender specific paths of integration into production and reproduction under capitalism are important to understand, both Adivasi and Dalit men and women are as likely to suffer from the stigmas of class casteism.

This takes us on to the third element of **class social discrimination**: *The super-exploitation of circular migrant workers*.

Business crucially uses the low status of migrant labour: ie, their alien-ness by way of region and language, to undercut local low caste workers and make the overall labour force completely insecure and super-exploitable. Every year people migrate to new places where they do not speak the local language, doing manual labour in living conditions and with wages that few locals would agree to, and at the same time holding on to what little assets they might have back at home. With an estimated 80 million circular migrant workers across India (Srivastava 2011)– and the 2017 Economic Survey 2016-17 argues that the number is closer to 140 million, this is central to cheapen and control labour inside and outside the labour process.

Seasonal labour migration is a huge part of the everyday life of poor Adivasis and Dalits as well as of other low castes and Muslims. Unless year round work is at their doorstep (as in the Telangana and the Tamil Nadu case), both Adivasis and Dalits will have at least one or more member of the household migrating to work in brick factories, agricultural fields, construction or garment work – overwhelmingly jobs that are classified as low skilled and are lowly remunerated. The main migration patterns from our studies are shown in our map and mentioned already.

Seasonal migration can be a way out, away from local oppressive relations. This, for example, was the case for the Bhils of the Gujar dominated village of Mankheda, where it was a means to escape oppressive *saldar* (bonded farm servant) relations and violent oppression from the Gujars, and it helped transforming the Gujar dominance into a less visibly violent form of domination. Similar situations are reported from across India. However, labour migration involves new forms of oppression and exploitation. Chains of labour contractors organise long distance seasonal migration and for many at the bottom end of the labour hierarchy, such as the Bhils, advance lump sums tie them to a specific contractor. Everywhere the migrant workers live in squalid conditions. The Oriya workers at the bone factory in Melpuram in Tamil Nadu work longer shifts than the local workers, are paid less, and live in an overcrowded village house room where there is only space for them to sleep in shifts. The Gaddis of Saal valley working on road construction sleep in tents and huts, often under freezing conditions in the high passes of the Himalayas. The Bhils live in straw and plastic tent camps at the brick kilns or in the sugar cane fields.

Migrant workers are excluded from even the modicum of rights of local labourers also when not working. The Jharkhandi migrant plantation workers are not eligible for welfare measures

outside the plantations as officially, for the Kerala authorities, they simply do not exist. Migrant workers rarely have access to pro-poor amenities such as subsidised rice as that is only for local residents; and while local construction workers have won rights to Welfare Board Schemes, seasonal migrants are overwhelmingly excluded from these. They are treated along the same lines as immigrants are in many other countries – or as Chinese circular migrants working in the big cities in China but not granted the same rights as those with urban *hokou* - with next to no rights and always there to take the blame. In today's India, seasonal casual labour migration reinforces, and is reinforced by, class casteism. It is the heart of capitalist accumulation and it keeps Adivasis and Dalits at the bottom of the Indian hierarchy.

The anthropologist Claude Meillasoux (1975) some time ago, in Southern Africa, pointed out how labour migration involves a distinctive mode of exploitation. Following Meillasoux we see also in India how Adivasi and Dalit migrant workers are paid much less than local workers and it is expected that they will rely on the support of their kinfolk back at home. Crucially Meillasoux argues that this system depends on various forms of discrimination, what we have here called 'class casteism'. This involves, he argues, a racist ideology that classifies the migrant workers as *a priori* unskilled and therefore relegated to low pay and unstable employment. Racism – here casteism – also creates a hostile social environment making it difficult for them to put forward demands, demonstrate publically or ally with local workers. It is in this sense that capitalism relies on a super-exploited migrant workforce of Adivasis and Dalits, underwritten by class casteism.

Amidst this bleak situation, it is of course true that the country has for many years also produced high-profile, well-to-do Dalit and Adivasis, from chief ministers to state officials and activists. There is also evidence of some class differentiation within Dalits and Adivasis in our sites. A combination of education and affirmative action has enabled some degree of upward mobility for a minority of them, and has nurtured a degree of class differentiation within Adivasis and Dalit communities. But the indications from our sites are that most Adivasis and Dalits have not and will not succeed in becoming significantly upwardly mobile in comparison to their higher caste counterparts. The neo-liberal cut-back and informalisation trends of the last 25 years have shrunk the government sector and frozen private sector formal blue collar jobs and have made such class mobility even more unlikely. The overwhelming majority of Adivasis and Dalits will negotiate the opportunities available to them in the best possible way, within the structural limits set by the absence of sufficient assets and capital, limited levels of education, absence of political connections and the very real constraints placed on them by caste discriminatory practices – in short, by class social discrimination underpinned by class casteism.

### **The Struggles Ahead**

What is to be done to challenge this entrenching of social inequality in India? Clearly one cannot rely on the market to address poverty, inequality and discrimination; but at the same time there are no other easy answers. Globally today there are several proposals to counter inequality relating to taxing the rich and delivering welfare to the poor. However, in a situation where even MGNREGA is only supported half-heartedly, serious redistributive policies do not seem to be on the cards. Moreover, welfare efforts have rarely specifically tried to address India's caste based discrimination. India's Affirmative Action policy has been a radical departure from that, but it was always insufficient and it has been further blunted with the shrinking of the public sector. Similarly, the protection that has existed for Adivasi land rights is now under more threat than ever.

Perhaps the greatest hope in challenges to class social discrimination is the social struggles from below. Scholars argue that India has seen an increase in such struggles during the last decade (Pratap and Bose 2015; Ness 2016; Sundar 2012). These have included campaigns for proper implementation of pro-poor legislation, especially the employment guarantee, struggles against land grabs, for labour rights; fights against discrimination, oppression and mass rape and killings of Adivasis and Dalits and the widening reach, with economic liberalisation, of India's half-a-century-old armed Naxalite or Maoist movement fighting for a communist society.

The classic challenge to capitalism was of course to come from working class struggles. But in India, as elsewhere, trade unions have rightly been criticised for only really addressing the concerns of formally employed workers. In the case of the plantations union of Raj's field site there are even serious issues of the unions being closer to the management than to the workers while Benbabaali reports from Telangana that the ITC unions are more interested in exercising caste-based patronage than in fighting for the rights of the workers. This is not helped by the fact that informalised labour often will get the sack should they join a union, as highlighted by Donegan from the bone factory.

Barring a few exceptions, India's Naxalite revolutionary struggle has also found it difficult to mobilise informalised workers in their workplace and has neglected the huge seasonal migrant workforce in its own guerrilla strongholds. It *is* true that in the last decade organisations such as the New Trade Union Initiative have brought some of these concerns to the fore. And occasionally struggles organized outside the unions have bridged the formal-informal divide by cross-cutting labour action, sometimes resulting in informal labour being formalised, or improving pay and conditions of these workers. The most well-known case is that of the Maruti factory in Manesar where several years of struggles for the right to organise and for pay and conditions involved joint action by formal sector regular workers and contract workers. At the bone factory in Tamil Nadu such joint action also occurred, but the outcome was disastrous for the informalised workers. Not only were they – and only they – beaten up after the strike, their leaders were also sacked while those who had sought to end the strike were given permanent jobs. In addition, the factory management brought in migrant workers as strike breakers and have kept them at the factory ever since, potentially keeping the local contract labour from taking action again.

Significantly, it is rare that labour struggles will address the specific concerns of Adivasis and Dalits. This is 'left out' in the desire to focus on the universal category, the proletariat. And Dalit activists have legitimately questioned the dominance of Brahmins and caste Hindus in leadership positions in Marxist and Naxalite organisations (see Rawat and Satyanarayan 2016). India, though, has a long and rich history of social struggles, some of which have been fore-fronted by Adivasis and Dalits. In the nineteenth and twentieth century Adivasis in Eastern India spearheaded some of the most remarkable resistances against outsiders taking over their land and forests for colonial revenue collection and in 1927 in Mahad, Maharashtra, Dalits led a struggle against upper caste dominance and chicanery in what Anand Teltumbde (2016) has called the making of the first Dalit revolt. In more recent years, emulation of the African-American US Black Panthers by the Dalits in Tamil Nadu and the resurrection of Dalit heroes by the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh created as much attention as did Adivasis hugging trees in the Himalayas to prevent deforestation, resisting their displacement by big dam projects in the Narmada valley, and by mines, and fighting for the rights of indigenous people in international fora. Conversion to religious sects, Hindu

right wing movements or Christianity have run parallel to the struggles of groups such as the Gujjars of Rajasthan, the Gaddis in the Himalayas or the Santhals in Assam to claim the 'tribal slot' (Li 2000).

Our studies report many such struggles. The struggle against the Sardar Savovar Project dam forms the backdrop of Thakur's work with the Bhils of Nandurbar. Attempts to stop expropriation of Adivasi land is a major issue in Benbabaali's field site. There are also cases of Dalits organising. Raj details the story of Sundaram, a Dalit plantation worker. Returning to the plantation after having worked as migrant labour elsewhere, he found caste discrimination unbearable and this led him to join the Dalit Panthers and become a community leader for the Paraiyar caste group. In Melpuram in Tamil Nadu, figureheads of Dravidian, Dalit and class-based struggles for liberation are on the walls of the Dalit-run voluntary educational centre for Dalit youth. And Benbabaali details a months-long struggle for housing near the ITC factory of mainly low caste people which split along a Dalit and a Maoist line, as protestors formed two separate groups: one small group organized by a Madiga leader from the TRS, and one bigger group organized by a BC leader from the CPI (ML)-New Democracy. The Indian Evangelical Mission is also active in the village where she worked and one quarter of the Adivasi Koyas recently converted to Christianity. The remaining Koyas continue to worship deities like Saramma and Sarakka, female warriors who fought a Telugu dynasty that the Kammas, including their own dominant landlord, claim to be descendants of. Meanwhile in the Saal valley the Muslim ST Gujjars, disadvantaged both as an ethnic and religious community, has reached out and made links with other places and people, not the least through the 'reformist' Islam of Deoband School. This has led to a rise in education levels through madrassas and to the hope that wider Muslim business network now available and, potentially, migration to the Gulf, will benefit the next generation.

We should, of course, be wary of identity focused politics when it is devoid of a concern for material transformations and devoid of alliances with groups facing similar problems. Critiques of identity based politics have pointed out that it is the structures of neoliberal capitalism that have created an 'identity machine' or an 'ethnicity inc' (Comaroff and Comaroff). Yet this 'self-racialisation' of the working class, as Balibar calls it, is also an attempt to turn back against elite society the signifiers of class racism, or here class casteism.

It is still rare that informal workers strike back through categorical terms such as caste, indigeneity or gender. This makes the strike of the Tamil Dalit women tea pluckers in Munnar reported by Raj a highly symbolic one. Led by the Tamil Dalit women tea pluckers themselves, it stands out as a struggle not only for labour rights and against trade unions but also against discrimination, infantilization and vilification of Dalits, Tamils and Dalit women in particular.

We must caution though against an overly optimistic reading of struggles from below. The Maoist armed struggles, and the increase in actions taken by Dalits, Adivasis and other sections of the informalised classes of labour are often rear-guard action against increased oppression, and are generally not met with success but with increased oppression and smart counter-tactics. India's working poor, and Dalits and Adivasis in particular, are up against strong enemies.

Workers face open and brutal collusion between capital, the state justice and police system, and elected politicians, with workers languishing in jail for years on trumped-up charges

(Ness 2016). Moreover, the vilification and oppression of Dalits, Adivasis and the informal labouring classes is, if anything, increasing across India. The everyday ignoring of labour rights is being legalised by the rolling back of labour laws, land protection legislation is watered down, domestic migrant labour is mocked and insulted by the powers that be and political actions by Dalits and Adivasis and their organic intellectuals are branded as anti-national, with what that entails of very real threats of landing up in prison or of extra-judicial killings. All this is on top of the persistence of the most brutal form of everyday violence against Adivasis and Dalits, often targeted at their women as in the horrific cases of rape, murder and burning in Kharilanj in 2006 (Teltumbde 2010).

Also, armed struggle against the processes generating inequality is getting more and more difficult. From 2010 we have seen entire areas of central and eastern India militarised in Operation Green Hunt, in the process, it seems, clearing out the Adivasis from the lands that are needed for mining. Adivasis have been branded terrorists or supporting terrorists and have been subject to the most brutal acts of vigilante and police action. Entire villages have been burnt and displaced, women raped, and thousands arrested, tortured and killed, under the guise of the 'civilising' mission of development.

We hear very little about these protests and what is going on, here in the dark belly of India. All sorts of means are used to keep it under wraps, including the murder charge by the Bastar police against the well known academic Nandini Sundar; and sadly, it is actually amazing that the scholar-activist Bela Bhatia is still staying on in Chhattisgarh in spite of extreme threats. Taking up arms to fight for a different model of development comes with its own human costs and also enables government to clamp down hard on other activists and struggles including labour related struggles.

Clearly there are no easy answers. But perhaps we do need to think of better models of development which will challenge the structures of power instigating current forms of capitalist growth that make some people wealthy while at the same time making others poor.

A core aspect of this must be to overcome what is here labelled class casteism and class social discrimination - which is so central for the present social and economic order. Dr Ambedkar showed that 'a caste is an enclosed class'. To continue quoting from Ambedkar's 'caste in India', "caste is a parcelling into bits of a larger cultural unit" through "imitation and excommunication". Unless this is dealt with head-on, social progress will continue to be facing an uphill struggle.

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<sup>i</sup> 52% were self-employed, i.e. working in household enterprises, in 2011/12. For the non-agricultural economy the figure was 40% (NSS GoI 2013).