

UNEVEN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA: A SOCIAL POWER
PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

In this research we will try to apply the social power perspective to the analysis of unevenness. The social power perspective has three major components it treats basic structure as a central element of the analysis of human development; it understands difference as structural difference and structural inequality, rather than as identity; it understands agency as collective attempts to reconfigure matrices of social power. Of course, all this underlies a specific notion of social power. Without repeating the discussion let briefly mention that we take social power to be analytically distinct from political and economic power, and to represent an alternative form of power mobilized and accessed by those who do not typically have access to the bases from which other forms of power emanate. While the mobilization of social power may have many goals and many trajectories, we are most interested in the mobilization of social power for the redresser of structural inequality

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Introduction

There are two views that are dominant in the Indian public discourse about the situation of Muslims. The first is the majoritarian view that Muslims have been heavily 'appeased'. There is little evidence, that such appeasement - even if attempted for the purpose of electoral gains has culminated in tangible improvements in the social, economic or political condition of the vast majority of the Muslim community. A very similar situation characterizes other communities, such as the scheduled castes and tribes, who are also believed to have been 'appeased'. In direct contrast to this view of appeasement, there exists a second view held by the Muslim community, in particular Muslim elites, which claims that Muslims as a community have been subject to religious discrimination. The Muslim elite has thus pursued an identity politics with the objective of 'reversing' this discrimination with focus on issues such as the destruction of the Babri Masjid, Muslim Personal Law and the use of Urdu. The purpose here is not to assess the validity of these claims. Rather, purpose is to shift the focus from the politics of identity to explore the issue of structural inequality, or to an understanding of identity in the structural/relational sense; specifically, my purpose is to examine how structural inequality between Hindus and Muslims has evolved. Indeed, here are also significant and often greater degrees of structural inequality between Muslims and other religious groups with respect to human development. In addition, there are significant levels of inequality within communities. This is exactly the concern that has been raised by the burgeoning Dalit Muslim movement in India the movement clearly claims structural inequality and rejects identity politics is its political focus. The preferred notion of human development also centres on the notion of structural inequality both within and between communities. In this research we wish to pursue the argument that the unevenness of human development that we see in India cannot be redressed through in identity politics (or affirmative action) that is premised solely on religious and ethnic difference. Neither can it be redressed through the standard human development policies which are blind to the myriad ways in which religious and ethnic difference translate into structural inequality.

One can identify three separate moments in the history of India with three significantly different approaches to the politicization of religious difference. These are the colonial rule and the nationalist movement; independent India and secularism; and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) years. We will briefly discuss the dynamic of structural inequality produced by these three moments and their associated premises. The paper is organized accordingly: the first three

sections will discuss these three historical moments and the final section will offer some concluding observations.

The Colonial Rule & Partition

It is well known that 'divide and rule' was essential to colonial policy. There are two important issues to note here. The first is the essentialization and homogenization of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' as monolithic entities; the second is the competition between Hindu and Muslim elites that such homogenization helped unleash. Of course, the colonial discourse denied such divisions, and chose to emphasize strategies of essentialization so as to engender ideological conflict between the two communities. The conflict at the realm of ideology was accompanied by a rather pervasive social upheaval that further facilitated colonial policy. For instance, intense competition between Hindu and Muslim elites emerged over issues such as representation in the local self-government, positions in the public sector and, more importantly, over political power. The Muslim upper classes, who until then were socially very well-entrenched (at least in certain regions such as North India), felt threatened by aspiring Hindu elites and especially those who had acquired Western education. Engineer sees the motivation to preserve these social locations as one important variable in explaining Muslim separatism. He argues that it is erroneous to interpret Muslim separatism as a religious response as is most often done. Similarly, Alavi has argued that the Partition and the creation of Pakistan and India was a direct outcome of the historical development of intra-elite competition. He unequivocally identifies the 'dominant Muslim 'ashraf (upper classes) of northern India, the descendents of the immigrants from central Asia, Arabia and Iran' as the main protagonists of the movement. The movement, in this sense, was a clear response of the elite to the threats to the bases of their social power emerging from colonialism. Alavi goes on to show how two different social classes within the ashrafs were affected by this change.

The pervasive marginalization that this intra-elite competition bred was most visible in some of the key human development indicators, such as education. At stake is not only the question of access to education, or its quality, but how the system of education came to reinforce the stratifications in social location and vice versa. This happened in both communities. One direct consequence of this elitism, which had enduring multiple effects, was that the many ordinary Muslim citizens were left with no other educational option than the madrassas. For the feudal elite, the main function of the madrassas was to create a new and potentially powerful

political base with a unified religious identity that would engender a specific kind of minority politics useful for the consolidation of elite power. Given the abundance of anti-British sentiments in madrassas established during the colonial times, they were perfectly suited for providing such a base. The British, in their turn, saw madrassas as non-secular, 'pre'-modern institutions which they refused to support. As such madrassas underwent a fairly significant transformation from the centers of learning they were during the Mughal rule to become small, fragmented and community-funded organizations which were relegated to delivering only 'elementary religious knowledge'.

The particular orientation that madrassas took on was related in large part to the fact that they had to be popularly financed by the small, often poor communities where they were located. Madrassas came to manifest a pattern of social exclusion of the Muslim masses from the educational system that was accessible to other social groups. A very similar pattern of exclusion also became prevalent among the low-caste Hindus. We find abundant references to such exclusion in the writings of Ambedkar, the main author of India's constitution; the Simon Commission Report, where he develops a scathing critique of colonial educational policy with respect to its elitist biases. The concern here was not only about having 'a qualified body of natives', but also about the possible consequences of mass education on colonial rule. Ambedkar then goes on to show that this objection towards education of the lower classes comes not only from the colonial rulers but from the domestic upper classes as well.

Several important conclusions emerge from the above discussion with respect to human development. As education is one of the central tenets of human development, it is helpful to orient our discussion around that issue. As we saw, for the Muslim community as well as for the system of education as a whole, there was a strong elitist bias among policymakers and upper classes. These exclusionary biases, which were of course only a microcosm of the broader processes of social exclusion, led to a clear tiering of the education system. In this tiered structure, the mere possession of literacy or more advanced formal education did little to reverse these patterns of exclusion. As the quality of education to which a person had access was predetermined by her social location and associated patterns of structural inequality, education did not function as a means for addressing inequality. This was indeed the main concern for a number of social reformers in colonial India. These patterns of exclusion were also naturally reflected in the political sphere. In other words, to a large extent the question of Muslim

participation in politics was determined by the overall trends in elite competition and separatism during the colonial rule. A central tenet of the separatist position was the demand for separate electorates. This was for some time the main point of disagreement between the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress the Congress demanded 'joint electorates' and the Muslim League insisted on 'separate' electorates. In 1916, the Congress agreed on separate electorates. However, that separation of electorates hardly proved beneficial to the cause of increasing political participation among Muslims.

The above discussion gives us a good indication as to how the dynamic of colonial rule contributed to the unevenness of human development. There is need to emphasize here the complex symbiosis between its two facets the unevenness within and between communities. This conflict between communities was in turn twofold. The first is the conflict between the elites of the two communities; the second was the conflict between the masses manifest often in violence as we saw during the Partition. The most common and enduring interpretation of this violence is that it represents a clash of religious worldviews between 'Hindus' and 'Muslims'. In India's popular parlance, this is what we have come to refer to as communalism. Following the above, it is perhaps useful to understand communalism as the reflection "of a struggle between different religious communities for share in political power, government jobs and other economic needs". While in the Indian parlance communalism generally refers to a Hindu-Muslim relationship, the notion can indeed be more broadly applied. The critical point to note here is that communalism is not driven only (or even primarily) by an essentialized cultural and religious consciousness perceived by the members of an ethnic group. Surely, cultural/religious consciousness plays a role; but whether a heightened religious consciousness leads to the political struggle between the two communities or vice versa remains an open question. Understanding communalism in this way also requires a different way of thinking about difference as identity vis-a-vis a structural view of difference.

Independent India: Difference & Structural Inequality

In independent India, secularism and non-discrimination, in conjunction with provisions for affirmative action, were the primary political responses to the issue of difference. Taken together, these policies also set the context for human development. At one level, they framed the context in which policies related to education, employment and political participation were formulated. At another level, they defined the relationship between different entities according to

religion, caste, language etc., and hence helped define the nature of structural inequality. The dynamic through which these definitions evolved can in part be traced back to the famous Constituent Assembly debates in the late 1940s. In the assembly's deliberations, three kinds of claim of were considered from religious minorities, 'backward' castes, and from tribal communities. British colonial policy had included several protective measures for these entities, for reasons consistent with the broad logic of colonial rule. It is interesting to note how these different constituencies now came to assert their claims to the decolonized state.

The representatives of most religious minorities reflected concerns regarding their ability to preserve a distinct cultural identity in independent India. It was argued that only through the retention of their own distinct cultures could members of these communities contribute effectively to the nation. By contrast, representatives of backward castes/classes emphasized in their claims that they were culturally part of the Hindu community; in their claim, the 'backwardness' within the Hindu community had a greater need for redress. 'Claims from tribal groups resembled those of the backward castes on several counts. Representatives of both groups would declare that they were the original inhabitants of the land and that their claims were therefore antecedent to all others. In both cases, arguments for special treatment referred to a history of injustice' and exploitation by Hindus and invoked the notion that justice required reparation in some form. The situation was quite different with religious minorities, especially Muslims. As Bajpai summarizes, the dominant nationalist position did not argue for political safeguards for religious minorities. However, such safeguards were considered appropriate for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in order to 'enable them to overcome historical disabilities'. For scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, it was deemed that affirmative action would facilitate their economic and social advancement. Most importantly, within the nationalist framework, they were regarded as 'temporary' and intended as 'self-liquidating, as creating conditions for their own extinction'.

In the nationalist scheme, the role envisaged for political safeguards for minorities was to facilitate the eradication of distinctions between groups rather than to preserve or encourage distinctions. Political safeguards were intended to facilitate the eventual integration into the nation of communities that were not immediately in a position to integrate. While the safeguards for the scheduled castes were amenable to such an interpretation, those for the religious minorities were more problematic, given their implicit grounding in the notion of the cultural

distinctness of groups. Bereft of legitimacy in the nationalist scheme, their presence in the future Constitution was precarious from the outset. This distinction between the articulation of claims for 'backward Hindus' and non-Hindu religious minorities is critical and explains somewhat the problematic nature of the policies that were put in place in independent India. Muslim elites were always opposed to the eradication of group distinctions that was so central to the nationalist secular ethic. They were not interested in obtaining safeguards which might otherwise have been useful for socially or economically disadvantaged Muslims. As such, with the majority of Muslims not directly represented in the constituent assembly debates, they were unable to secure any of the safeguards which they might have been legitimately entitled to by virtue of the structural inequality they suffered. Thus, the particular version of secular nationalism endorsed by the Hindu elite gave them freedom of religion without any of the positive discrimination that was available to other groups.

The point, however, is that neither of these social groups non-elite Muslims, scheduled castes, tribes and other backward castes have been able to overcome patterns of structural inequality despite the existence of policies intended specifically for that purpose. How can we explain this? In some sense, we see the same patterns of structural inequality elsewhere in the world. Policies of formal non-discrimination and even affirmative action are unable to redress structural inequality almost everywhere else in the world. Canada provides a good example; Canada has had an official multiculturalism policy since 1971, combined with a very strong record of human development. And yet, the record of racial inequality in Canada is quite problematic, even though much less severe in contrast to the US. There seems to be little evidence that trends in racial inequality are reversed when levels of education are equalized. This suggests some limitations of education as a human development strategy and raises questions about the notion of capability equality as well if capability equality cannot overcome other forms of inequality, then the human development approach must be able to identify the factors that prevent such equality. A rudimentary analysis of the relationships between capability equality and other forms of equality suggest that 'capability' may be a social/cultural construct constituted and reinforced through institutional and social relations of power. It is these relations of power that devalue education of one person and valorizes another's even when technically the levels of education are equal. Race, gender and ethnicity can quite directly mediate the social processes which ascribe value to capability - and help legitimize the type of inequalities we saw above.

The role of education in the context of structural inequality is thus revealed to be a complex one. For Indian Muslims, we saw the emergence of a tiered education system, where poorer Muslims were left with few alternatives to the madrassa. In a society where secular education was explicitly valorized, this then put the madrassa-educated masses in a position of systematic social disadvantage. In the West, the process of social disadvantage unfolded somewhat differently. In most Western nations such as Canada education has been universalized all social groups have access to the same kind of education; yet, as we saw above, this equal access does not help overcome structural inequality. The systemic nature of these inequalities also raises questions about the feasibility of legal strategy and official policy, which constitutes one of the primary ways in which governments respond to the problem of structural inequality. While there is much discussion on the implementation of these policies, there is much less discussion of the structural and historical context of racism within which these policies are embedded. As such, these policies may well have the effect of legalizing or institutionalizing racism, rather than in protecting citizens against it.

In India, three different approaches were tried. The secular nationalist elites endorsed a framework in which it was assumed that caste, religion and ethnicity would cease to matter if indeed material advancement and political participation could be guaranteed. This unificatory project of the secular nationalists was based on an assumption that a community could be 'constructed' on the basis of a transformational project, irrespective of difference. In fact, many held that any emphasis on difference would detract from this transformational project. To some extent, this project did take basic structure seriously however, its limitations lay in two critical areas. First, at a conceptual level, it failed to acknowledge that difference is an intrinsic element of the basic structure and structural inequality. Second, the actual trajectory of political and economic development that evolved in independent India did not engender the kind of human development or redistributive justice that could render difference irrelevant. A vigorous debate already exists in India as to the problematic nature of this trajectory.

Notwithstanding this debate, two outcomes of the approach are important to our analysis of structural inequality. First, while the approach was successful in its goal of supporting capital accumulation, it was much less successful in enhancing human development, as measured by indices such as mortality, literacy, and income or capability poverty. Second, successive regimes in independent India attempted to manage the political cost of these failures by resorting to a

politics of communalism. Communalism helped displace the demands for economic equality to demands for other forms of equality, most notably formal equality and political participation. As is well known, caste-based mobilization became particularly visible in electoral politics a development obviously not without its contradictions. Members of the SC/ST groups were also able to make some gains through affirmative action, albeit not without the unleashing of a huge class/caste conflict between them and the upper castes. While these types of mobilization redressed some problems related to political exclusion, they did little to alter the structural location of the SC/ST populace; in brief, they drew upon a distributive rather than a transformative paradigm of social justice which replaced one set of conflicts with another but did little to alter the structures that produce them. The Muslim poor also gained little from this politics of communalism.

Yet another major contradiction of communal politics was reflected in the structural location of different social groups within the productive economy, especially Muslims. As Harris-White concludes, religion remains dominant in the Indian public domain because of the 'flawed formal and its practical rationality' that informs the Indian state's treatment of religion. The Indian model of secularism, she argues, fails to 'desacralize' the economy. By defining secularism the way it did, the state neutrality towards religion essentially reduced the state's ability to ensure that religion did not become a source of advantage or disadvantage in the economy (or more broadly, in the public realm). While a full examination of these production relations are beyond the scope of the present endeavor, it is clear that the secular model engendered a number of contradictions. The exclusionary model of communal politics juxtaposed with an economic model that privileged large capital eventually gave way to another exclusionary regime, that of Hindutva. The sharp distinction between the secular moment of independent India and Hindutva was that in the latter discrimination based on religion was justified and was to be promoted. We turn to this discussion now.

The Spectre of Hindutva

Hindutva's religious nationalism, however, went hand in hand with a rather aggressive and contradictory policy of courting global capital. The latter was couched carefully within a misleading discourse of Swadeshi. Together, these two approaches had a devastating effect on human development, seen in terms of basic civil rights; fiscal allocations away from human development priorities resulting from obsession with national security; and, most importantly, a

worsening of the socio-political location of those groups which it constituted as its 'enemy'.

The Hindutva regime effectively put India in a 'state of war'. In this state of war, countries and populations are always asked to remain in the expectation of, and preparation for, war; as a result, an impending threat to national security comes to dominate national policies and discourses. There are two dimensions of the state of war: a political dimension and an economic dimension. The political dimension speaks directly to the threat of war, from external aggression as well as internal dissent; to protect citizens from this threat, the requirement is a well armed state. The economic dimension invokes the need for a strong economy, with high levels of macroeconomic growth, which in turn would justify policies which enhance growth rather than those which enhance human development. It is critical to consider the economic and political dimensions of the 'state of war' together as inseparable elements of the same problematic.

Stunning as they are, even these figures do not reflect the full implications of militarization. Among the broader implications of militarization are: the intensification of a costly and dangerous arms race in the region, as well as unprecedented insecurity; war between India and Pakistan within 12 months of the tests (contrast with the claim made, at that time, that nuclear deterrence had made war 'impossible'); rising authoritarianism and propaganda in both countries, the collapse of democracy in Pakistan, and the emergence of a distinct trend of de-secularization in India. Further, Navlakha points to another critical dimension of this regime, namely, the increasing fusion of internal and external wars leading to a near-complete criminalization and crackdown on domestic dissent. Of central import here is the discourse on the 'threats to security' which is used to legitimize militarism. During BJP's regime, this discourse became ineluctably connected to an anti-Islam discourse, which in turn was predicated on a symbiotic relationship to the global 'War on Terror' led by the US. Not surprisingly, then, this had a definite impact of social dislocation of the Muslim communities everywhere in the world, although in India it was by no means limited to the Muslims. The most tragic manifestation of this was the events in Gujarat in 2003. The dimension of physical violence and destruction that were inflicted on the Muslims of Gujarat and the role of the state in that destruction have been well documented. However, the violence and destruction was only one dimension of the social dislocation experienced by Muslims.

In the wake of 9/11, this emergence of Hindu fundamentalism gained momentum and legitimacy perhaps in a perverse fashion - in the context of the 'War on Terror'. In West Bengal,

a state in India where communal violence has historically been at a low level, a sudden rise in fundamentalist activities was reported. It was acknowledged, even by the avowedly secular leftist government in power in West Bengal, that madrassas in the state may have been functioning as the epicentres for such fundamentalism. The controversy that followed brought on a closer inspection of the madrassas and the quality of education they impart. Several apparently contradictory facts emerged from these explorations.

As the West Bengal Human Development Report of 2004 points out, there is some inequality in access to literacy and education across religious groups, although not as marked as in the rest of India. The more significant differences that were present in urban West Bengal reflect the general malaise of the social conditions in urban areas. These were confirmed in the reviews of educational opportunities for Muslims that followed as a consequence of the post 9/11 controversy. At the centre of this controversy was the role of madrassas as providers of education to Muslim children. In particular, it appears that just as in the colonial era, adequate opportunities for secular education had not been opened up so as to completely render madrassa education irrelevant to the most disadvantaged among Muslims. In this respect, one of the major contradictions of education policy has been the increasing allocation of funds to the 'reform' or 'modernization' of madrassas with relatively less attention paid to provision of educational opportunities across all deprived social groups irrespective of ethnicity or religion. Underlying this, again, is the contradiction of the Indian secular model itself and its liberal premise which regards religious equality as the choice of being educated in one's own religious system, but not a choice to partake in one educational system irrespective of one's religion, ethnicity or social location. This would require perhaps a coexistence of secular and religious education rather than a tiering. What needs to be acknowledged here is that religious institutions are not necessarily the first choice of parents; it is often the only option. As a recent study by the World Bank demonstrates with respect to Pakistan, no automatic or necessary causal relationship can be established between income levels and preference for religious education.

These contradictions of secularism also reflect a problem at a deeper level with respect to the content of secular education. In societies with large numerical majority populations, moves towards 'secularization' or 'integration' often embody an extension of the majority worldview rather than an authentic inclusion of all relevant worldviews. This was certainly the trend during the BJP regime and was reflected in a number of important steps taken by the government such

as the rewriting of history. However, it need not always be as explicitly ideologically driven as in this instance; examples of more subtle forms of religious/cultural/ethnic domination are certainly not rare. It appears that the representation of history and the narratives of nation building are particular elements on which the project of secularization of education must focus. In summary, it needs to be pointed out that the thesis that poverty and/or illiteracy are what 'causes' fundamentalism is open to question. While the poor may be recruits for fundamentalist causes, this does not validate the oft-advanced corollary that the poor and illiterate are 'natural' fundamentalists. What must be acknowledged is that there is a general resurgence of all kinds of fundamentalisms in various parts of the globe, and this resurgence is a specific and integral aspect of contemporary imperialism.

Conclusion

Needless to say, these processes are a culmination of the history that we traced from the colonial era. Two important conclusions emerge from this exploration. The first is that the developmental models/strategies that were chosen in India at different points of time did not have human development, either in the sense of capability development, or social protection, as their central focus. In the framework that we have attempted to develop, this is not simply a failure of social policy but an outcome of the broader political economy of development in which social policy was embedded. The second is that the elite domination and intra-elite competition has generated a systematic unevenness between and within communities. The contradictions between the reality of communalism and the rhetoric of secularism have obscured the systematic nature of this unevenness. Focusing on this contradiction directs our attention to the importance of social power. As discussed above, the social power perspective on human development requires that we focus attention on three issues the basic structure; an understanding of difference as structural difference and structural inequality, rather than as identity; an understanding of agency as collective attempts to reconfigure matrices of social power.

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