Caste and Distributive Justice: Can Social Policy Address Durable Inequalities?\textsuperscript{1}

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of social policy interventions on caste inequalities. The article accepts the proposition by Charles Tilly that durable inequalities are entrenched solutions while addressing organizational problems of society. The political economy approach to caste enables us to understand how the discriminatory practices around caste are durable. The article examines two types of social policies set up to deal with caste discrimination. The first type of policies are particularistic policies which directly address the concerns of the members of the depressed castes. The second type of policies are aimed at the general population, but from which a large number of depressed caste members benefit. The article concludes that both types of policies have only an ameliorative function rather than an emancipation role. It is argued here that ‘social policy’ in the context of durable inequality requires redefinition to include political interventions. The administrative view of social policy focuses heavily on the state, and in the context of durable inequality, the legitimacy of the state itself is in question. On the other hand, mobilization around politics addresses the organizational anomaly of the society, which is at the root of durable inequality.

Keywords

Caste; Durable inequality; Welfare state; Political economy

Introduction

Social policy conceptualization in the Indian sub-continent is hugely influenced by the British legacy due to post-colonial continuities. This has had a detrimental effect on scholarship, particularly because the ‘British literature on the welfare state focuses on “social administration” or, more recently, on policies and not on politics’ (Kaufmann 2013: 7). On the other hand, the continental European approach towards social policy was more dynamic and viewed social policy as a political responsibility for the production of welfare. In this article, a departure is made from the British approach

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in order to examine the social and cultural foundations of welfare systems in India.

As an ancient civilization, whose diversity is represented by a variety of languages, culture, geo-climatic regions, path-dependency left by dynastic rulers in different kingdoms (which were later merged into one country), and religions, ‘India’ as an idea has definitely been constructed through the colonization process (Khilnani 2010). In the same vein, ‘Indian social policy’ too is heterogeneous particularly due to the federal arrangement of governance and ‘social welfare’ allocated as a state-subject (rather than a central subject) for the regional governments under the Indian Constitution. Despite these difficulties, there is a common agreement that across the Indian sub-continent (also throughout South Asia), poverty and deprivation are concentrated among lower caste population due to historical injustice, as justified by the socio-religious traditions. This article examines how social policy has been effective to address caste inequality in India. Social policy, viewed as an administrative arrangement, has a limited role to deal with inequalities created through generations of societal practices (Pellissery 2007a). It is argued that in order to redefine social policy as a political responsibility for welfare, caste as an area where social questions and politics converge, needs to be reinvestigated. We conclude that the British approach of focusing on ‘policies’ has been less effective, and the political route to the problem of caste inequality is efficacious.

The article is divided into three sections. The first part of the article presents evidence to show why caste is a case of durable inequality and its impact on the human development of members of the lower caste. In the second part, based on the meta-analysis of the performance of policies to deal with caste inequality, the way in which their function is ameliorative is argued. In the final part of the article, the way in which political mobilization is deployed to deal with caste inequality is elaborated. We argue that political mobilization provides access to policies and laws, and thus moves from an entrenched solution of durable inequality which is hierarchical arrangement of society to revalorization of identity.

Caste as a System of Durable Inequality

Charles Tilly (1998) in his ground-breaking work, *Durable Inequality*, theorizes why certain inequalities are difficult to wipe out. He argues that inequality, which is based on categorical distinctions, arises initially as a solution to the organizational problems of society. Eventually, society accepts those stratifications of categorical distinctions to create an order, since it is an easy solution to organizational problems, and thus inequalities manage to persist. A variety of institutions mutually reinforce such a system. To understand this interdependency of institutions, Frye’s (1983) comparison of ‘oppression’ to that of a ‘bird cage’ is very useful. The causes of a bird’s lack of freedom are not clear by studying only one wire of the cage. It is both the number of wires as well as the arrangement of wires that explain why the bird is not free. Similarly, understanding caste as a system of durable inequality requires a historical analysis of what organizational problems existed, and how stratification was
a solution. Prominent academic works on caste have not taken the political economy approach seriously. The works of Max Weber or Louis Dumont have emphasized the cultural dimensions of caste. Therefore, these works are not useful to understand how caste inequality as a solution emerged in Indian context. On the other hand, a political economy approach enables us to connect the cultural factors with economic factors:

India has a unique social division, the (endogamous) caste system. Caste is class at primitive level of production, a religious method of forming social consciousness in such a manner that the primary producer is deprived of his surplus with the minimum coercion (Kosambi 1954: 14; original emphasis)

Until 800 BC, caste was not seen as an institution of discrimination (or a ‘social problem’ in the sense that we understand today) since inter-dining and inter-marriage was possible. During the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age, pastoral-nomadic communities developed into four castes (Gupta 1999). Kosambi (1955: 42) explains this development as follows:

The reason for caste stratification is the new productive basis, which had led to relations of production between groups, higher than in the tribal stage but with still primitive tools. Thus, we have a tenant of Brahminism for state policy that each caste and subcaste (jati), tribal district, guild, and even large family group had to be judged by its own particular laws, obviously because it was then a unit of production. Therefore, the state could not uniformize the juridical structure within groups, but only regulate transactions between groups.

Religion as a source of power was used to valorize some and devalorize some other functions. In other words, the actions of the highest caste (Brahmins) to offer sacrifices were the most noble, compared to the activities of the labouring caste (Shudras):

Brahminism had constructed the acts of tilling the land, removing a carcass from the village, skinning a carcass, and transforming hide into leather as filthy. In other words, the whole process of human intercourse with nature, land, plants and animals in productive and creative modes was constructed as unclean (Iliah 2007: 303)

The caste system may essentially be considered a class system in that it entails division of labour, wherein Brahmin is the priestly class, Kshatriya is the military class, Vaishya is the merchant class and Shudra comprises artisans and menial workers. Outside this varna system falls the untouchables or ‘dalits’. This rigid caste structure that prevented mobility warranted a revolt.

The roots of rationalist challenge to authority-systems (religion) (comparable to the Enlightenment in Europe) took place when Buddha rejected God as well as the Hindu social order. Without a brief examination of this legacy, the story of social reform in India would be incomplete.
Buddhism was a revolution in Aryan society circa 400 BC. It began as a religious revolution and evolved as a social and political revolution (Ambedkar 1956/1987). As a revolution, it challenged the caste system and accepted members from the lower caste in the position of priest (a role reserved for Brahmins – the highest caste) and gave equal positions for women. These were explicit challenges to the power structure of the society, which were legitimized by the Upanishadic and Puranic scriptures. At the core of Buddhist revolution was the principle of social equality. This was possible because of the reasoned rejection of God. King Ashoka (304–234 BC) accepts these Buddhist ideals and puts them into practice, and religious revolution as social revolution receives the patronage of the state.

As a counter-revolution to this, Brahminical forces solidified the caste system with much more stringent laws through Manusmriti (Ambedkar 1956/1987). Eventually, the regime that succeeded King Ashoka persecuted Buddhism by accepting the code of law by Manusmriti (compiled during 200 BC–200 AD). The biggest assault is on rationality itself when reason was to be rejected in favour of religious precepts. ‘Hindu observed untouchability and caste not because they are inhuman or wrong-headed. They observed caste because they are deeply religious’ (Ambedkar 1936: 68).

These religious legitimations were features of the Indian political economy. In this sense, ‘caste system is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers’ (Ambedkar 1936: 34). While one’s class is based on one’s training and occupation, caste is assigned to one by virtue of birth as a result of which, division of labour under the caste system is not based on choice. Thus Ambedkar concludes that while the class system has an open-door character, castes are ‘self-enclosed units’ (Ambedkar 1916). A Shudra, the fourth or the last in the four-tiered caste system, according to Manu’s Laws is denied the opportunity to own capital or acquire knowledge and is forcefully confined within the same class because of his caste identity. The condition of the untouchables or dalits (literally ‘broken’ people), who were not even accepted within the folds of Manu’s four-tier structure, was even worse.

Impact of Caste on Human Development

The Constitution of the Republic of India (adopted in 1950) made an important step to address the caste question. Article 16 of the Constitution guaranteed equality of opportunity and Article 17 abolished the practice of untouchability. However, plagued by the evil of casteism for centuries, the Constitution could not repeal it with its ink alone. Thus, despite the existence of the Constitution for over 60 years, the situation of dalits has been a saga of discrimination and social ostracism.

Rather than using the term ‘inequality’, it is more appropriate to refer to those differences created due to one’s position in the caste hierarchy as ‘inequalities’, because the caste system leads to an array of different kinds of inequality, spread across different domains and hence the differences thus created are multi-dimensional. The dalits face high economic deprivation and social discrimination. This deprivation with reference to education,
health, employment and child mortality are well established in the existing literature (see a summary in World Bank 2011). The key aspect of deprivation is what is called ‘group inequality’, i.e. the social group is discriminated against, rather than individual members of the group. The practice of untouchability in relation to scheduled castes is what makes caste-based inequality very distinct from other forms of inequality. Therefore, the status of the group has to be assessed in comparison to other groups. Since over 70 per cent of dalits live in rural India, it is important to look at data on group inequality in rural areas, which is presented in table 1.

The economic deprivation experienced by dalits is related to control over the means of production and employment. Landlessness as presented in table 1 substantiates the issue of means of production. The question of employment is very difficult. Most of the dalits earn their livelihood from casual labour. Thorat and Senapati (2007) estimate that only 28 per cent of dalits have some form of access to capital assets (self-cultivation or farming business). However, in the context of India where over 90 per cent of the population is engaged in informal labour, economic discrimination cannot be assessed only through the size of representation in the labour market, but the value of representation must also be considered.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Upper caste</th>
<th>Other backward castes</th>
<th>Scheduled castes</th>
<th>Scheduled tribes</th>
<th>All groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of population (total)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>49.2</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean household per capita consumption (INR)</td>
<td>1037</td>
<td>748</td>
<td>657</td>
<td>511</td>
<td>776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of households owning or cultivating land</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average area owned (high caste = 100)**</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from the Census of India, 2011 and the analysis (by Borooah et al. 2014) of household survey data collected during 2004–05 by the University of Maryland in collaboration with the National Council of Applied Economic Research from 41,554 households of 1,504 villages and 971 urban areas across 33 states of India. This table presents data relevant for rural areas to show the relationship between landlessness and poverty with reference to social groups. Data from urban households shows the same pattern of poverty measured as per capita consumption, i.e. highest in upper caste households and lowest among scheduled tribes. Note: * the percentages of upper caste and other backward castes are approximate, since the Census does not collect data on caste systematically. However, a process called ‘Caste Census’ is presently underway in India. Other religions such as Muslims and Christians are also divided into different castes; ** since this is an estimation, other groups’ landownership is estimated in proportion to that of high castes.
The dalits are highly under-represented in corporate boardrooms, in which rest corporate power. The empirical results from a study conducted by three researchers associated with the University of Northern British Columbia on the top 1,000 companies listed in the Indian stock exchanges in 2010, show that scheduled castes and scheduled tribes together account for only 3.5 per cent of Indian corporate board members (Donker et al. 2012: 39). Social networking plays an important role in the corporate sector and the above statistics are a testimony to the fact that networking is concentrated mainly within one’s caste circle, thus leading to ‘opportunity hoarding’ by members of the elite castes.

At the same time, representation of scheduled castes in the informal (unorganized) sector is more than their representation in the total population. While the scheduled caste population accounts for only 16.6 per cent of the total population in India, their representation in the unorganized sector is 20.2 per cent (NCEUS 2007). Participation in the informal economy implies minimal state control and therefore high levels of vulnerability of the participants on various fronts, some of them being high livelihood insecurity, bad working conditions, the absence of social security and lack of scope for unionization. In addition, the division of ‘labourers’ within the informal sector into caste-based groups accentuates the problem as it prevents collectivization and unionization, the presence of which could have led to better bargaining power to the informal sector workers. This account of the job market shows how the caste system reinforces the durable inequality through its interaction with market forces. Therefore, state intervention is essential to understand how durable inequality could be addressed.

Two Types of Interventions to Deal with Caste Inequalities

In this section, we assess the effectiveness of two types of policy interventions to deal with caste inequalities. The key parameter for effectiveness is the inclusion of members of depressed castes in social programmes, particularly using the approach of political mobilization.

The first type of policy intervention is particularistic and provides special protection to dalits. These are the Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989 (PoA) and Positive Discrimination (popularly known as the ‘reservation policy’ based on the quota principle in jobs). A brief analysis of each policy reveals how far these policies have addressed caste inequalities. The second type of programmes are universal programmes aimed at the general population. We examine the share of participation by dalit communities in such universal programmes after we analyze the particularistic interventions.

Particularistic policies

Violence against dalits is one of the ways to perpetuate dominance and oppression. The very threat of violence is used as a social control to exploit labour and to restrict the dalits from making claims on public spaces. In this context, the PoA’s Statement of Objects and Reasons refered to the growing number of instances where atrocities such as mass killings, rape
and humiliating practices had been committed against dalits who had resisted the practice of untouchability or refused to perform bonded labour. The PoA specifically pointed out atrocities such as the forced eating of obnoxious substances, being forced to parade naked, sexual exploitation, wrongful occupation of land belonging to a scheduled caste as instances that warrant the application of the Act. The PoA created special courts (166 in total) for speedy trial of the cases registered under this law. Not only is the Act penal in nature, it also provides for relief and compensation to victims of atrocities or their legal heirs, and the rules also provide for travel allowance and maintenance expenses to be paid during the trial.

In the year 2013 alone, across India, 39,327 cases were reported as crimes committed against dalits. Out of these, 13,975 cases were registered under the PoA. Table 2 provides data for ten years, and as evidenced from the table, the acquittal percentage is very high.\textsuperscript{10} Delay in judicial procedures is also another aspect that makes the Act ineffective. The government has admitted that the PoA has not had the desired deterrent effect on crimes against dalits.\textsuperscript{11}

A second important policy is positive discrimination for dalits relative to their population in the recruitment for government jobs and publicly funded educational institutions. Although the promise was made when the Constitution was adopted (in 1950), specific implementation has happened since 1982. Citizens from all over India can apply for any of the government jobs, and while this happens in relation to Class A and Class B jobs (managerial functions with decision making and allocation responsibilities), Class C and Class D positions (clerical jobs and cleaning jobs) tend to attract people who are local to the area where the office is located. In the latter case, i.e. Class C and Class D, the government takes into account the population of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in the area or state in order to provide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Cases registered</th>
<th>Cases convicted</th>
<th>Persons convicted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>10,770</td>
<td>2,217</td>
<td>5,993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>8,048</td>
<td>1,896</td>
<td>4,089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>8,891</td>
<td>1,670</td>
<td>4,352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>8,497</td>
<td>1,764</td>
<td>3,942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>8,581</td>
<td>1,538</td>
<td>4,148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>9,819</td>
<td>1,817</td>
<td>4,009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>11,602</td>
<td>2,124</td>
<td>6,027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>11,143</td>
<td>1,711</td>
<td>4,910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>10,513</td>
<td>3,225</td>
<td>7,982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>11,342</td>
<td>2,333</td>
<td>5,132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>12,576</td>
<td>1,074</td>
<td>2,357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>13,975</td>
<td>984</td>
<td>2,048</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled by the authors from National Crime Records Bureau (2002–13).
reservation. Table 3 provides data on the reservation of jobs by category. The reservation policy over the years has hugely benefited dalits to get access to public jobs and educational opportunities. However, the jobs have largely been in Class C and Class D, which have the characteristics of traditional dalit jobs (e.g. sweeping). Thus, despite access to public sector jobs, the stigma of caste identity still remains.

There are three issues which have defeated the efficacy of the positive discrimination policy in addressing the question of caste inequality. First, the liberalization policies that the Government of India has adopted since 1991 have led to limited job creation in the public sector. Therefore, reservation is not meaningful when the total number of jobs is reducing. Second, job creation is happening in the private sector. The private sector has resisted the idea of positive discrimination on the ground that such a policy will lead to inefficiency. This argument of meritocracy in the post-liberalization era has virtually perpetuated the bias and discrimination on identity by market forces (Pellissery 2007b). Third, the quality of public educational institutions has substantially reduced in the past decade. This has resulted in dalits and other reserved category students (indigenous people and economically backward classes) ending up in public educational institutions, and other classes receiving better quality education in private institutions. Thus, social segregation and the widening gap in the quality of services lead to a segmented society.

**Universal programmes**

In the second type, two flagship programmes of the Government of India are considered where dalit participation is high. The two programmes considered here are employment generation and nutrition programmes, both of which are designed for the general population.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is one flagship programme that was introduced in 2005 to provide employment of 100 days

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year On 1 January</th>
<th>Class A</th>
<th>Class B</th>
<th>Class C</th>
<th>Class D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>79.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>57.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>50.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>40.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>30.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

for able-bodied persons demanding work. This was designed as a self-targeted programme. On average, the government has spent INR 350,000 million per year on the programme. Table 4 shows that dalits’ participation in employment is consistently way above the proportion of the population. The NREGA, designed as a self-targeted programme, works on the basis of demand for work. High participation by dalit communities is a reflection that dalits experience high levels of poverty and demand for work.

Do these impressive figures say anything about social policy achieving equality? We need to examine what kind of work is being done under the NREGA to answer this question. The NREGA is designed to create durable assets such as roads, water tanks, preparation of agricultural land, etc. These assets are neither owned nor used by dalits and other community members in an equitable manner. In other words, as with the question of property rights, there is huge inequality. The dalit communities have a limited voice in participating in the decision-making process on what work is to be undertaken. Thus dalit labour in relation to asset building and the resultant inequitable use of assets perpetuate the inequality rather than reducing it. Some scholars have argued that wages paid through the NREGA have stopped bonded labour and seasonal migration, since jobs are readily available in local areas. However, the evidence is too scant to support this, since administrative delay and corruption prevent wages reaching the labourers, and labourers often depend on traditional mechanisms for their livelihoods.

The second intervention under the universal programmes, which has high participation and relevance for the dalits, is Mid-day Meal Scheme (MMS). In the context of poor nutrition and rampant starvation, parents send their children to work rather than to school. Cooked meals served in public schools provide an incentive for parents to send their children to school. The

### Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of households provided employment</th>
<th>Total person days of employment</th>
<th>Total person days of work done by dalits</th>
<th>Person days for dalits (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006–07</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>905.0</td>
<td>229.5</td>
<td>25.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007–08</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>1,435.9</td>
<td>393.6</td>
<td>27.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008–09</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>2,163.2</td>
<td>633.6</td>
<td>29.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009–10</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>2,835.9</td>
<td>864.5</td>
<td>30.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010–11</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>2,571.5</td>
<td>787.6</td>
<td>30.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011–12</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>2,188.2</td>
<td>484.6</td>
<td>22.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012–13</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>2,304.8</td>
<td>512.1</td>
<td>22.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013–14</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>2,203.4</td>
<td>498.1</td>
<td>22.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

programme was initiated in 1995 by the central government, and it has had active support from different state governments since 2001 when the Supreme Court gave an order to implement the scheme.

Since MMS is a programme at school level, disaggregated information on the social background of beneficiaries (who have access to MMS) is not collected by the central government. Therefore, for information on the utilization of MMS to combat caste inequality we need to rely on evaluations of the programme and other micro-level studies. Evaluations by the central government on the programme have shown that discrimination is experienced by children from dalit communities in terms of being made to sit in separate places (due to the fact of social pollution by the lower caste) than other children. Children of high caste families have boycotted MMS when an adult from the dalit community was engaged to cook the food (PEO 2010). Micro-level studies have shown that in the North Indian states, in over 80 per cent of schools, MMS is served in residential localities of high castes (Thorat and Lee 2005), therefore intimidating and inducing fear among the dalit children (Pellissery and Mathew 2013).

Political Mobilization as a Method to Combat Caste Inequalities

As noted in the foregoing section, it is evident that policy interventions designed both as particularistic and universal have not made a serious difference to caste inequality. What does this mean in the light of the theoretical exposition of Charles Tilly’s claim of durable inequality? To reiterate what we stated in the earlier section, inequality has come into existence through the entrenched solution of organizational challenges. We noted how the origin of the caste is linked to political economy issues, and how religio-cultural traditions have entrenched such a challenge. Social policy as an administrative response in such context is possible only when a strong state exists through meaningful social contract. In the absence of an effectively functioning state, as is the case in India, an administrative response to durable inequality will be ameliorative. That is, administrative responses legitimize the political regime rather than addressing the substantive inequality. Yet, positive changes are happening to the scenario of caste inequality. What framework is useful to redefine social policy by learning from these driving forces of change?

The nature of durable inequality in India that has resulted from a caste system is different from the kinds of inequality created by market forces which came into existence only few centuries ago. In Western societies, social policy is commonly understood from a political economy perspective as a response to the stratification created through industrialization and capitalist market intervention (Esping-Andersen 1990). This view of social policy as a response to correct the defects of capitalism is not suitable for the Indian context, where feudalism is still compatible with modern democracy (Pellissery 2014). Further, unlike Western countries, the proportion of the workforce in formal jobs is very limited. Since commodification in the mode of formal jobs is limited, and exploitation in the informal sector is significant, the state cannot ensure welfare to mitigate risks merely by regulating the formal economy.
We argue that to understand the substantive changes to durable inequalities (caste), through the lens of social policy, a novel approach is required. Kaufmann (2013) borrows from Niklas Luhmann’s theory of functional differentiation to provide a sociological understanding of social policy. He states that social policy originated as political interventions in ‘response to the disruptive sides of the functional differentiation of society’ (Kaufmann 2013: 17). Although caste inequality is not functional differentiation, the insight provided by Kaufmann could be used to develop a framework to include political mobilization as social policy response. Haggard and Kaufman (2008) maintain that a key condition for the origin of social policy in a national context is the ‘distribution of underlying preferences over the policy in question and the strength of the contending social groups in the political process’. Politicization of caste and assertion of the voices of marginalized castes by claiming social differences as political resources (Young 2000) is forceful enough for these processes to be considered as social policy interventions in South Asia.

The electoral politics in India have always given more privileges to the dominant castes in the fundamentals of representation, access and control over government institutions. Most of the political parties in India are seen as representatives of the caste or regional interests. Caste plays an important role in the political outcomes of the elections, as voting trends and representativeness are largely also based on the caste of the candidates.

If one looks at the social background of the Members of Parliament (MPs) elected in North India (where caste institution is very strong) between 1952 and 2014, one observes, first, the decline in the numbers of upper caste MPs. In 1952, 64 per cent were upper caste MPs, which declined to 30 per cent in 2014. This trend could be predominantly due to the steady increase in representations from the other backward castes (OBCs) (typically called middle caste, since their social position is below upper caste and above dalits), which went from 4 per cent in 1952 to 28 per cent in 2014. The share of MPs from dalit communities has remained steady throughout, hovering around 18 per cent (see figure 1). This is the mandated number of seats for dalits as per the reservation in the Constitution according to the proportion of population.

Rudolph (1986) states that, with democratization, the social institution of caste was transformed into an interest group. He argues that caste-based politics was responsible for creating consensus among the different sub-castes. This consensus enables a caste with significant numbers towards collective bargaining power and representation in electoral politics. Thus, the politicization of caste has played an important role in the identity formation of caste groups and the consolidation of sub-groups into meta-categories such as ‘dalits’.

The Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, where caste-induced poverty, exploitation and violence is rampant, has witnessed dramatic shifts in political regimes due to caste politics. In an astonishing achievement, lower caste members were able to consolidate votes and gain the support of other weaker sections in order that a dalit woman could be elected as Chief Minister of the state for a six-year duration (in the time frame 1995–2012). The socio-economic impact on dalit communities during this regime was tremendous. Particularly, violence against dalits was substantially checked. Balasundaram and Ahamed (2010)
have shown that the political mobilization of dalits in the state of Tamil Nadu has also substantially checked violence. The regimes that came to power with the support of dalit votes were able to increase access to legal and social provisions, which were under-utilized in the previous regimes.

Source: Jaffrelot 2003 for the period 1952–2004; for 2009 and 2014, the authors relied on media profiles of parliamentarians.

This evidence substantiates the argument this article is making. That is, without political mobilization, the policies and social programmes designed for communities that have experienced durable inequality (dalits in this case) would be ineffective. Political mobilization challenges the entrenched solution of the organizational problems of society. Social groups of dalits, which were assigned the position of the lowest strata, challenge the very notion of hierarchy, and claim their social status as one of the identities just like the identities of the dominant castes.

Conclusion

As argued in this article, group inequality based on caste (rather than inequality when atomized individuals are measured) has been a pressing problem in the Indian context. This has led to the formulation of policies
recognizing particular groups of people as targets, rather than issues. The path-dependency of a long historical injustice is likely to prevent the Indian state (at least for a considerable period in the future) to frame ‘social questions’ in the universalistic sense that Europe has done. Yet, this need not be viewed as a pessimistic scenario for the welfare state in India. As Young (2000: 119) argues:

inclusion ought not to mean simply the formal and abstract equality of all members of the polity as citizens. It means explicitly acknowledging social differentiations and divisions and encouraging differently situated groups to give voice to their needs, interests, and perspectives on the society in ways that meet conditions of reasonableness and publicity.

Durable inequality is a threat to substantive democracy, since it challenges the very notion of communication and representation in the decision-making process. However, the politicization of social differences is revealing an alternative route. The very foundation of durable inequality – society’s reliance on an entrenched solution to organizational problems – is challenged and reorganized through a revalorization of roles of its members.

The politicization of marginalized groups and their voices in the space of civil society has forced the state to recognize the problem. This is an indication that plurality, as evidenced through social differentiation, as a feature of publicness rather than unity (Arendt 1998) is serving as a resource for India to emerge as a vibrant democracy. Democracy where inclusion is demanded and attained, using social differences, is heralding an era of new solidarity. Here, the legitimacy of the state is not because its policies are responding to the needs of the marginalized citizens, but because of the political responsibility that the regime has discursively taken upon itself.

Notes

1. This article was first presented at the conference, ‘Understanding Southern Welfare’, held at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research, at the University of Bielefeld, 24–26 November 2014. We acknowledge intellectual support provided by the FLOOR group based at the University of Bielefeld, Germany in the process of developing this article. The authors also benefited from the comments by James Midgley and Franz-Xaver Kaufmann during the conference.

2. Thus, some of the philosophical writing from the Vedic age are extremely social. For instance, Rig Veda (Mandala 5 Sukta 60 Mantra 5) states, ‘No one is superior or inferior. All are brothers. All should progress collectively’. Similarly, Ishopanishad (Shloka 1), ‘Your consumption shall solely depend upon the sacrifice or distribution that you render. Never desire for the wealth of another’. Taitiriyopanishad (III Valli 7, 10, Anuvaka shloka 1) emphasizes the importance of production and distribution simultaneously, ‘It he gives food amply, food is given to him amply. If he gives food meanly, food is given to him meanly. Man should acquire food in order to distribute’. Many scholars quote these texts to misrepresent how Indian society is egalitarian in its philosophical roots. As we show in this article, these social values were to change in the contexts of change of mode production after 800 BC.

3. Note that Kosambi uses the term as ‘caste-class’. Ambedkar and subsequent writers (e.g. Omvedt 2007) have emphasized that caste’s origin is not in the ‘functional
differentiation’ as it happened in the capitalist stage of European development. Caste originated in the pre-capitalist mode of production. Ambedkar repeatedly maintained that caste is not ‘division of labour, but division of labourers’.

4. There are similar challenges to Hindu social order from time to time such as Jainism, which was a revolt against the caste system, or Sikhism. During the Medieval period, Bhakti saints (such as Kabir and Nanak) preached about social equality and castelessness. In the 19th century, there was an intellectual renaissance during which many reformers (some influenced by Western thoughts) appealed for liberation and abandonment of class and caste. For details, see Thapar (1966).

5. Ambedkar argues that the reason for the disappearance of Buddhism from India is the Brahminical persecution, rather than the Islamic invasion.

6. Note that Gandhi differed from this view, and maintained that the caste system was not an essential feature of Hinduism. Yet, from a practical point of view, many progressive Hindus have rejected the Gandhian view (to attribute a glorious position to the Varna system of the Prevedic age and to treat caste as a caricature) as utopian. These are evident from discussions printed in Harijan (dated 18 July 1936 and 15 August 1936) in the debates following the publication of Annihilation of Caste (Ambedkar 1936).

7. The Constitutional term for the former untouchables is ‘scheduled castes’ – a list of social groups as recognized in the Constitution for positive discrimination. ‘Dalit’ as a term comes from the social movements of lower castes, often encompassing more subaltern social groups.

8. Another important intervention is the Scheduled Castes Sub Plan. This policy commenced in 1979 when states were directed to allocate funds in proportion to the population of dalits for development purposes. Various reviews have revealed that no state in India has adhered to this policy guideline.

9. Public spaces here mean claims made for equal rights through assertions such as the right to draw water from public wells or the right to make complaints in police stations, etc.

10. While conviction rates for the cases against dalits under the PoA is 23.8 per cent, conviction rates for Indian Penal Code cases is 40.2 per cent.


12. Some scholars make the argument that reservation had done a disservice to dalit unity by creating a ‘creamy layer’ within an otherwise oppressed group, i.e. the relatively wealthier members of the group, who are ineligible for reservation provided for their social group.

13. See Pellissery (2015, forthcoming) in relation to how the inequality in property ownership drives the socio-economic inequality in India.

14. It is worth recalling the Hegelian position that ‘an inequality of humans … which is inherent in the idea of civil society … (and) confronting this inequality with the call for equality is feeble minded’ (Hegel 1821/2008: 200).


16. This accounts for little more than 50 per cent of the seats in the Indian Parliament.

17. Jaffrelot (2003) describes the ascent of the OBCs without reservation as a ‘silent revolution’. There are many more variables at play apart from numerical strength, including access to wealth and resources, in this process. This political success of the OBCs is detrimental to the interests of dalits, as evident from the increased conflicts between OBCs and dalits (Pai 2010). In these conflicts, access to land has been the central issue since traditionally OBCs were cultivators and dalits were labourers.

18. Today, from a total of 543 seats in India’s Parliament, 84 (18.42 per cent) are reserved for dalits.
References


