

Rethinking Inequality in South Asia

Veranstalter: Vasudha Bharadwaj / Maria Framke / Nikolay Kamenov / Luzia Savary (Professorship for the History of the Modern World, ETH Zurich); Jana Tschurenev (CeMIS, University of Göttingen)

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Bericht von: Jana Tschurenev, Centre for Modern Indian Studies (CeMIS), Universität Göttingen

The interdisciplinary workshop „Rethinking Inequality in South Asia“, held at ETH Zurich from 21-22 July 2014, was the fourth event in the conference series „Young South Asia Scholars Meet“ (Y-SASM). Since 2010, Y-SASM aims to promote exchange among doctoral students and early career academics in the field of South Asian Studies, and thus to further the integration of research networks across Europe and beyond.¹ This year's meeting brought together young scholars and invited commentators from history, sociology, anthropology, educational studies, political science, literature, and architecture, in order to explore new ways to address social inequality in South Asia.

After MARIA FRAMKE's (Zurich) welcome note and summary of the aims of Y-SASM, NIKOLAY KAMENOV (Zurich) introduced the thematic issue. Inequality, especially as an economic issue, has become a buzzword in public and academic debates again, with publications such as Joseph Stiglitz's „The Price of Inequality“, Thomas Piketty's „Capital in the Twenty-First Century“, and Robert Reich's documentary production „Inequality for All“. However, South Asia scholars can also draw from older debates rooted in subaltern, postcolonial, and gender studies to understand how multiple markers of difference and inequality, such as gender and sexuality, caste, or class are constructed within dynamic social relations, and how forms of inequality are challenged and changed over time. Hence, inequality should be addressed as a multidimensional, relational, and changeable phenomenon.

The first panel session centred on gender as a crucial category of inequality that the papers related to class identity, imperial power, and

caste. RAPHAEL SUSEWIND's (Bielefeld) case study of an Islamic ethic without equality in contemporary Lucknow showed how a code of behaviour for Shia Muslim middle class men – ranging from the use of dress to that of Facebook – could not only serve as a marker of distinction, but also for turning poverty into a moral issue. Analysing several legal interventions in the domestic sphere in the post-1857 period, particularly pertaining to the age of consent, SUBHASREE GHOSH (Kolkata) argued that despite a rhetoric of non-interference, the colonial state did not take the „women's question“ off its agenda. This opened up a debate on the validity of Partha Chatterjee's argument on the „nationalist resolution of the women's question“², and raised questions on how to theoretically grasp the problem of continuity and rupture. As CHARU GUPTA (Delhi) asked in her comment, how can we identify decisive moments of social change? JANA TSCHURENEV (Göttingen) equally stressed the point that gender, domesticity, and reproduction remained highly politicized issues in India throughout the nineteenth century. Tschurenev's paper on female education pointed to the tension between education as a means of keeping people „in their place“ – as displayed in the agenda to train girls as enlightened future mothers – and its liberating potential, which on the other hand showed the close connection between women's higher education, women's movements and educational politics.

In the second panel, questions of empowerment, development, and human rights were brought to the forefront. ANNA-LENA WOLF (Bern) introduced her PhD project which aims to look at contestations over the „Right to Development“ in India, and thus to trace the juridification of human rights. SABRINA REGMI (Tokyo/Bern) presented the findings from her M.Phil thesis on the impact of women's participation in micro-credit programs in rural Nepal, funded by the Asian Development Bank, on the gender relations within the family. SHALINI RANDERIA's

¹ A documentation of previous activities can be found at: <<http://y-sasm.blogspot.de/>>.

² Partha Chatterjee, *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question*, in Kumkum Sangari / Sudesh Vaid (Eds.), *Recasting women. Essays in colonial history*, New Delhi 1989, pp. 233–253.

(Geneva) comment suggested, on the one hand, that we should understand the nature of the post-colonial state and post-colonial legality as shaped by the tension between „governance and justice“: While the state will legitimize governance by referring to the „Right to Development“, activist groups do the same while establishing their claims to justice. On the other hand, she opened a debate on the question how to understand empowerment and its linkages to questions of autonomy, social control, and solidarity.

DAVID DEVADAS' (Berlin) paper on „semi-feudal hierarchies“ in the electoral politics of Jammu and Kashmir opened the third panel. With its focus on elite strategies to initiate and stabilize networks of patronage, it was the only paper which explicitly centred on the „dominant“ instead of the „dominated“ – a perspective, as Charu Gupta pointed out, equally necessary for understanding inequality. It also provided an interesting contrast to ANDREA HAGN's (Zurich) work on old and new slums in the town of Puri and the internal separations and spatial segregations of slum-dwellers, as well as to NIDA SAJID's (Toronto) work on the emergence of Dalit Muslim as a political identity. As NITIN SINHA's (York) comment pointed out, the panel showed how languages of tradition and languages of modernity and equality could be used interchangeably to construct a political sense of community, which, in turn could be used to re-enforce the demand for equality.

CHARU GUPTA's (Delhi) keynote on Dalit women's religious conversions and the ways in which they were represented in colonial North India's public sphere emphasized the importance of individual desire and the possibility of shifting one's sense of belonging from one community to another. It also brought together several strands of discussion on intersectionality, or the problem of how to grasp the complexity of power relations and struggles for empowerment in modern societies. Against the background of a rich literature on Dalits in colonial India, which is often implicitly male-centric, and of feminist studies, which tended to put upper caste women's experience to the forefront, Gupta's analysis centred on Dalit women as individual agents.

The second day's first panel on health and medicine made visible how the conditions of labour, social marginalization, and living spaces are reflected in people's health status. Moreover, the discussion turned to the linkages between the production of modern scientific knowledge and governmental institutions' access to disadvantaged communities. DOMINIK MERDES (Braunschweig) questioned the „Europeanness“ of modern chemotherapy, and argued that violence and force were crucial in the development of antimonials for the treatment of tea plantation workers in colonial Assam, the conditions of which were analysed in SUDIP SAHA's (Shillong) paper. EMILJA ZABILIUTE (Copenhagen) shifted the focus to a contemporary Primary Health Care Centre set up in the *jhuggi* cluster slum in Delhi, which, though considered „not good“ by the people when it came to general health care, was frequented by women for its reproductive health and child care offers. While the forced participation of indentured labourers in the development of tropical medicine appeared as a clear case of exploitation, the paternalistic and at times humiliating treatment of women in the Health Care Centre raised questions about the commodification of health care – and the resulting problem of over-medicalization – and tensions of modern governance. In her comment, APARNA NAIR (Göttingen) emphasised that the aspirations of the state – best reflected and most conspicuous maybe in the colonial archive – did not necessarily match the reality on the ground. The state's capacity to execute its policies should not be overestimated. Moreover, Sinha asked, if we want governments to become active in providing health care and other essential services, how do we differentiate between social disciplinary programs, which in academic parlance could mean overt state intrusion, and legitimate governmental interventions? What do people seek from governmental programs and how do they make use of disciplinary institutions, were questions that seemed relevant to ponder upon.

The following panel on education – chaired by SYLVIE GUICHARD (Geneva) – took up the discussion of a „lack of fit“ (Arun Kumar) between the agenda and supposed ef-

fects of modern „Foucauldian“ institutions. SUMEET MHASKAR's (Göttingen) study on the educational attainments and vocations of ex-mill workers' children in Mumbai demonstrated that caste, gender, and religion have a major impact on educational – and hence, later professional – opportunities; but his results also showed that across these categories, children of parents who had achieved higher education would be more likely to receive higher education themselves. ARUN KUMAR's (Göttingen) study on industrial schools for „the poor“ in colonial India and SIMONE HOLZWARTH's (Berlin) analysis of the Gandhian vision of a „Basic Education“ based on village crafts both reemphasized the point raised in the first panel that educational programs for „the poor“ often intended to prepare people for manual labour and to prevent social mobility. However, as Gupta also had pointed out earlier, the outcomes of teaching people to read were not easily controlled – hence the liberating potential of schools despite the intentions of the agencies running them.

A final point about educational institutions was made by KALYAN SHANKAR (Pune) in the last panel of the conference. Shankar's study (co-authored with Rohini Sahni) on the hidden mechanisms which at times counter both reservation policies and meritocratic selection served as a reminder that modern institutions develop their own internal dynamics. Such systemic effects, it was emphasized in the discussion, need to be looked at in relation to the institution's social environment. FRANCESCA FUOLI's (London) study on colonial ethnography and the study of Pashto broadened the focus again by taking up the question of scientific knowledge production and modern (colonial) governance, which had already been discussed in relation to tropical medicine. CAMILLE FRAZIER (California) brought the issues of neoliberal policies and collective modes of resistance into the discussion. How, she asked, did economic liberalization alter farmers' sense of risk and security? How did „new“ farmer's movements react to these developments? The relevance of risk and security for people's aspirations was again underlined in PATRICK EISENLOHR's (Göttingen) comment.

Summarizing some of the results of the two days of discussion, Tschurennev observed that many papers had pointed to the importance of an intersectionality perspective on social inequality and empowerment. While several contributions centred on communities which are disprivileged in multiple ways, other approaches to understand inequality shifted the focus to elites' strategies, or pointed to political mobilization and instability of communal categories. Moreover, the discussion underscored the point that while inequality needs to be understood in terms of everyday practice (a point Gupta had emphasized) – as produced, performed, and challenged by individual and collective agency – such a perspective needs to be complemented by a view on structural conditions and the contradictory functioning of modern governmental and disciplinary institutions. VASUDHA BHARADWAJ (Zurich) concluded by saying that the outcomes of efforts towards bringing social justice and equality can be judged quite differently, depending on whether the focus is on substantive equality or procedural equality³, which are both problematic in their own ways. While setting a goal of substantive equality is dependent on normative social value systems and hence subject to controversy and contestation, measures protecting procedural equality risk perpetuating forms of deprivation. Moreover, the gap between intentions and effects also characterizes social justice and equality initiatives. Bharadwaj emphasized that the presentations, commentaries, and Q&A sessions all have once again underlined the need for critical questioning of catchwords like „empowerment“, „development“, and „equality“. This point was further elaborated by Nikolay Kamenov. It has become clear, he argued, that efforts to seek one's own or one's community's empowerment are not necessarily oriented towards equality. People could rather seek to gain privileges and power over others, or as Ian Tyrrell has put it, „History is replete with such ironies in which the dominated become

³ A distinction introduced by Charles Taylor. Cf. Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*. Ed. and introduced by Amy Gutmann, Princeton, N.J 1994.

agents of domination."⁴ The contributions to the workshop and the discussion have shown how different aspirations can be set against each other: people's aspirations to political equality, elites' efforts to uphold traditional privileges, or the claims of adivasi groups to their land against the state's and corporations' understanding of „development“. Inequality and the struggles against it, it appears, are intimately tied to political modernity, both in South Asia and globally.

Conference Overview

Opening

Maria Framke, Nikolay Kamenov (both ETH Zurich)

Panel „Gender“

Commentator: Charu Gupta (University of Delhi)

Raphael Susewind (University of Bielefeld): Middle class moralities and masculine aspirations: anti-poor rhetoric in Lucknow's contemporary Muslim landscape

Subhasree Ghosh (Asutosh College, University of Calcutta): Countering gender inequality in 19th century colonial India: Some re-thinkings

Jana Tschurenev (Göttingen University): Between Empire, patriarchy and women's empowerment: Female education in colonial India

Panel „Empowerment/Disempowerment“

Commentator: Shalini Randeria (The Graduate Institute Geneva)

Anna-Lena Wolf (University Bern): The claim to equality and the right to development in India

Sabrina Regmi (Ochanomizu University/University Bern): Unequal development: micro-business creation and gendered outcomes in rural Nepal

Panel „State and Power“

Commentator: Nitin Sinha (University of York)

David Devadas (Humboldt University Berlin): Feudatories hierarchies in the Politics of Jammu & Kashmir

Andrea Hagn (ETH Zurich): Of „old bastis“ and „new slums“: Persistent and emerging

inequalities in the socio-spatial fabric of the temple town Puri in the context of government programmes for slum improvement
Nida Sajid (University of Toronto): Invisible Caste: Articulating Dalit-Muslim Identity in India

Keynote

Charu Gupta (University of Delhi): Intimate and Embodied Desires: Dalit Women and Religious Conversions in India

Panel „Health/Medicine“

Commentator: Aparna Nair (Göttingen University)

Dominik Merdes (Technical University Braunschweig): The Emergence of Chemotherapy in Colonial India. Modern Medicine and Inequality

Sudip Saha (North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong): Tropical Medicine and colonial enclave: issues of inequality in Assam Valley tea plantation

Emilija Zabaliute (University of Copenhagen): Affective clinic and bodies in transition: A Primary Healthcare Centre in the vicinity of the Sanjay Camp

Panel „Education“

Commentator: Sylvie Guichard (University of Geneva)

Sumeet Mhaskar (Göttingen University): Educational and occupational attainment among working class youths in post-industrial Mumbai

Arun Kumar (Göttingen University): Histories of miscalculation and the politics of the possible: The reproduction and production of subjects in colonial industrial schools

Simone Holzwarth (Humboldt-University Berlin): Equality through teaching village crafts: Gandhi's ideas on Basic Education and their representation in photographs from Sevagram

Panel „Knowledge Production“

Commentator: Patrick Eisenlohr (Göttingen University)

Kalyan Shankar (University of Pune): Who Studies What, Where and Why? Systemic In-

⁴ Ian R. Tyrrell, *Woman's world, woman's empire. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union in international perspective, 1880–1930*, Chapel Hill 1991, p. 5.

equalities beyond Affirmative Action Policies
in Indian Higher Education

Francesca Fuoli (SOAS, London): The role
of ethnography and the study of Pashto in
the construction of the Pashtun race in nine-
teenth century British colonial discourses on
Afghanistan

Camille Frazier (University of California):
Agriculture as Risky Business: Agricultural
Crisis, Inequality, and Resistance in India

Concluding Remarks

Vasudha Bharadwaj (ETH Zurich), Nikolay
Kamenov and Jana Tschurennev

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