

Inequality and Exclusion: As If the System Mattered

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The study of exclusion in social terms by itself is inadequate. Any attempt to understand and explicate exclusion either historically or contemporarily has to pay attention to interdisciplinary approaches. This note emphasises that the approach should be via understanding the operation of economic forces in particular and interdisciplinarity in general.

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The predominantly postmodern enthusiasm to view exclusion in terms of “social” categories is fundamentally mistaken; both historically and contemporarily. I say this partly against my own belief. The study of exclusion in social terms by itself is inadequate and as such the approach should be via understanding the operation of the economic forces in particular and interdisciplinarily in general. The causal factors for exclusion in social terms lay largely in the economic and thereby political realms.

This proposition is not new. The postmodern imagination wants us to believe that inequality, exclusion and exploitation lay basically in non-economic realms. This also requires one to define what “social” itself is. If the term is taken in its broadest sense it includes the economic realm as well; but taken in a restrictive sense, it can mean social categories that insufficiently point to the major fault lines of any society. At the root of this problem is the dispensation that Jean-Francois Lyotard (2001) famously put, “I define postmodern as incredulity towards meta-narratives”. The

point is that the meta-narratives of earlier times have become sources of unjust power. But the question is, can we at all do without some or the other meta-narrative in talking about exclusion. This is particularly so in countries that have a vast section of poor and marginalised people. Any attempt at chalking out marginalisation in this context leads to its material causes. But of course – and at this point the postmodern approaches are relevant – that marginalisation does not stop there. Therefore, any approach to understand and explicate exclusion, either historically or contemporarily, has to pay attention to interdisciplinary approaches.

Interdisciplinary Approaches

Here we can take the example of Amartya Sen’s work (Sen 2000). Sen has firstly made a useful observation that the concept of social exclusion and the use of it lacks a certain discipline. The plasticity of the concept means that virtually any form of deprivation can be called social exclusion. While he recognises that social exclusion can be caused owing to multiple reasons, he also warns against undisciplined rhetorical use of the phrase; however important the uses of rhetoric may be. While saying the above, he has made four subtle distinctions about the concept: social exclusion as (a) constitutive; (b) instrumental; (c) active; and (d) passive. Sen has appreciated the concept

positively and has said that his own concept of capability deprivation comes close to that of social exclusion. Poverty and deprivation studies have tremendous deal to learn from the concept of social exclusion; the latter points to hitherto unincorporated dimensions of deprivation.

Then Sen provides a list of deprivations that leads to social exclusion. These, for example, are (a) inequality and relational poverty; (b) labour market exclusion; (c) credit market exclusion; (d) gender-related exclusion and inequality; (e) health-care; and (f) food market and poverty. Sen discusses how each one matters for analysis and policy. Please note that of all the forms of exclusion that are listed above, only the gender-related exclusion and inequality is not related to the category of class or economic determination.

We have hardly seen in any circumstances the well-off of a society being excluded from the food market, health-care, credit market, labour market or mired in inequality and relational poverty. Sen gives an elaborate discussion of the “east Asian strategy” of development and the consequences of its crisis. Of course, we cannot remind Sen about the primacy of the economic. But we can surely say that of all categories of exclusion “social” is largely determined by the economic primacy of the individuals belonging to one or the other economic group, i.e., a certain class. While one may completely agree with Sen on gender-related deprivation and for being sensitive to non-economic factors of exclusion, we still say that most categories of social exclusion are determined on the basis of economic exclusion. And what is more, this economic exclusion is a historically formed reality;¹ and the other aspects of it are, as Sen puts it, relational.

Having said that, we must also note that the division of the causes of social exclusion in two separate terms – historical and policy-generated – is fallacious, inasmuch as it depends on the study of policy factors in history as well as historical nature of policies themselves. Therefore, this article argues that the meaning of exclusion has to address (a) the structural causes of exclusion, and (b) how these are exacerbated through the development policies.

This is more so in the context of countries such as India where the causes of exclusion

are never just social; they are intertwined with economic and political factors. This is fortified with the fact that the study of history itself depends on how one studies it. Whenever the historicity of exclusion is traced, particularly in the Indian context, the most conspicuous category for discussion, and, rightly so, is caste. But the point is that even the caste system started as an unequal division of labour. It was never possible to delink caste from its relation to the economy and polity. The materiality of caste requires us to consider the caste system with occupational groupings; both unequal and unjust. Therefore, a historical discussion of caste cannot be separated from how it was organised in terms occupational groupings to serve a predominantly agricultural economy. This is what Wiser (1969) discussed elaborately in the book on *jajmani* system.

At present caste has become disassociated with occupational groupings to a large extent, but this is still not fully complete. The point is this depends on the pace and development of the social formation at large. To put it more bluntly, this raises the question as to what is the pace and development of capitalist economic and social relations both inside and outside the countryside. Therefore the point as to what was in history always depends on how we see it. Even today we cannot see the hierarchy totally separately from the occupational justification given to it. While the overall pace of development matters, the understanding of historical social-economic exclusion in itself does not give us sufficient clue as to how we go about the process of inclusion. Because, for example, rapid urbanisation is said to have the impact of erasing hierarchies; interestingly, this is not completely true. Rapid urbanisation, it is said, will render vertical hierarchies into horizontal difference in the social space.

Another point about the historical rootedness of exclusion/inclusion is that the evolution of policies of the State has tremendously to contribute to it. These policies of the state have come, to some extent, owing to struggles from below and to some extent owing to official policies. For example, the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu has long since established the rights of backward classes from much

before the Independence. The policies of the Mysore state prior to Independence provided reservation for backward classes in Karnataka. Similar examples can be found in Kerala too. Social and economic disadvantage and advantage are historically constituted. These are inseparable from the policies that states in specific regions have historically pursued. In postcolonial states, state-society relations are often not only in the form of societies determining the states, but states constituting the society by giving it a direction too. Not following any social policy and contributing to social stagnation, too is a policy.

Two Ramifications

This has two ramifications, and here we introduce the third factor, apart from economy and policy – the question of power. Finally, in all third world countries, at least since the end of colonialism, the state played an overwhelming role in constituting economy and society; in nurturing and developing the specific ways of capitalist development itself.² In the current dispensation, the state attempts to create a growth process which addresses a limited constituency in sharing the fruits of the “development”. Despite the leeway given to the markets in the economic processes, the state power still matters in defining the processes in inclusion and exclusion. This configuration of circumstances is not only true from above, from the vantage point of the state, but also from the side of those who bear the brunt of this development.

The crucial question in this context is what role the state plays in the redistribution of the fruits of development. The popular attention given to growth rates

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hides a huge mass of people either left behind or bearing the burden of that growth process. It is popularly talked about that there is a dilemma between “equity and growth”. But redistributive justice requires that it be taken intrinsically significant. Since the globalisation-led development process places premium on growth, the question is, who is included in growth process and who is beyond its reach. There is an added force given to economic arguments even in everyday life about economy and economic processes in this process of development. These processes, however, do not tell us what ought not to be; and also as to how exclusion created by economic growth can be addressed and the role of the state in it.

The point is that no other institution can address the question of redistributive justice other than the state. What is important in the Indian context is that globalisation and its auxiliary products such as explosion of audiovisual media have removed barriers from creating awareness about the fruits of the development process. By the same process, these have also made the state and its agencies vulnerable to popular scrutiny, hour by hour and minute by minute. This phenomenon of distribution of news without distribution of economic resources has the double impact of creating awareness about political rights of individuals and groups, while at the same time, creating an awareness of what the viewers do not have, and the awareness of brazenness of the unequal development.

For awareness of rights and the awareness of economic exclusion now even the barrier of literacy does not count. The audiovisual media tells about what one deserves, or desires, and what one does not have, and all this along with minute details of the malfunctioning of the state. This does make Aristotelian middle way about social and political processes outmoded. The ordinary and the excluded get political enfranchisement, while they are excluded from economic enfranchisement. In Indian polity it was observed even before the full bloom of globalisation that there is increased participation of the marginalised and poor in the polity. Combined with the processes that we have discussed above, this can cause Aristotelian middle-paths anathema for the excluded:³

thus resulting in increased discontent with the state. As the state cannot give away regulation and shepherding of capitalism even after globalisation, it cannot also get away from redistributive justice. An interesting fact that may be recalled is that the commodities that capitalism can or cannot play a major role in politics than social markers.

Normative Standards

The point is that the state cannot get away from the normative standards set for itself. Thus, increasingly in a situation of increasing awareness of the excluded, it is not the electoral palliatives, but redistributive effort that counts.

In this brief paper I have made the following points:

- The study of exclusion cannot just be “social”, but has to be primarily based on the economic.
- That we cannot do away entirely with meta-narratives; the meta-narrative of percolation of growth cannot replace all other previous meta-narratives.
- Social exclusion owing to historical reasons and owing to policy reasons cannot be separated. Policies are part of history and history is born out of policies.
- That state power plays a constitutive role vis-à-vis society. As states are determined by society, the postcolonial state can also determine society.
- In the context of globalisation, the mass awareness about the system increases without sufficient redressal of the economic exclusion.
- The often results in the impatient rejection of Aristotelian golden mean.
- In order to redress exclusion, political enfranchisement ought to be accompanied by economic enfranchisement in equal measure.

Finally, Louis Althusser says in *Reading Capital* that capitalism has a tendency to level social and historical particularities (Althusser and Balibar 1968). In this process of levelling, which is accompanied also by dissolving communities and families into desperate individuals, capitalism achieves a great feat of rendering historical markers irrelevant. Althusser goes a step forward in saying the history itself becomes irrelevant for the system. I have alluded the process of rapid urbanisation eroding

the community identities above. The point, however, is this process which Althusser notes depends both on the pace and quality of capitalist development. As someone who still believes that certain of the meta-narratives that social science bequeaths us are always valuable, I propose to revisit them in understanding exclusion, social, economic and political.

NOTES

- 1 The point is that the determination by the economic is an historically contingent reality. It was not so in earlier times, and likewise need not be so in the future. That the instance of the economic is dominant is no matter for revelry; it is that such determination of reality by one aspect of social life happens only in capitalist system and that in other historical times and circumstances, the economic need not be the sole determinant of the society, or perhaps it should not be; we sincerely owe this insight to Marx.
- 2 The usual point about the current situation is to view the state as retreating. This is not true in the current Indian context. Although state's share in direct economic activity has declined, the regulatory role of the state has enormously increased and the role and powers of the political and administrative executive by no means have diminished. More than all, the expectations vast numbers of ordinary people have increased upon the state.
- 3 In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1962) uses the notion of middle path largely to address practical reason. Here I use the notion specifically to address political reason including practical reason. That moderate middle paths are not preferred politically, and extremes of all kinds are popularly opted for is the characteristic feature of our times. Aristotle also used the term “good” and “goodness” in a specific normative sense of saying “the good of something is that which preserves it”; now, precisely the normative ideals that follow from this proposition are of abhorrence to political and practical reason.

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