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## **Black Lives Matter, Capital and Ideology: Spiralling out from India**

### **Abstract**

Piketty's propositions for arresting inequality are discussed through the lens of racism/casteism. We focus on the case of India's George Floyds – the persistence of caste and tribe oppression under economic growth in India – through the insights of our long-term ethnographic research. We show that inequalities are intimately tied to dynamics of capitalist accumulation in which racial/ethnic/caste/tribe and gender difference is crucial. We argue for an analysis that truly integrates ideology and the dynamics of political economy. The wider implications, we argue are political; they lie in the question of what is to be done. Despite his ambitions to decentre economics, Piketty remains trapped in the logic of economics for what he proposes are essentially economic reforms within capitalism. Moreover, ideological change cannot be a matter of choice only, and cannot be challenged solely at the level of ideas around economic inequality. It will also have to be fought as a direct contest of oppressive ideologies such as racism, casteism and patriarchy, leading to new counter-hegemonic positions. We will argue that this takes us from a global history of ideology to a global anthropology of praxis. A first step is to genuinely centre conversations with disciplines like anthropology, sociology and subaltern history studying people and voices from below and from the margins, and the perspectives of scholars and activists from below and from the margins.

### **Keywords:**

India, race, caste, tribe, inequality, ideology, praxis, capitalism

### **Introduction**

In the summer of 2020, following the murder of the 46-year old black man George Floyd by a white police officer in Minneapolis Minnesota USA, millions of people across the world defied the COVID-19 lockdowns and social distancing rules, and joined hands to protest for Black Lives Matter, demanding that we can no longer ignore persistent racial injustice. Statues were toppled, curators forced to re-examine their exhibits and collections, university Vice-Chancellors and directors issued statements about their commitment to tackle racial inequality, and courses were scrutinised for decolonisation. Everywhere symbolic gestures were made towards anti-racism. Whether this will transform to more-deep seated meaningful structural changes remains in question and depends on the actions taken to push for it. For that, how we analyse and understand inequality are of utmost importance.

Thomas Piketty's new magisterial opus which centres the role of ideology in the perpetuation of inequality is an important step. If Piketty's (2013) *Capital in the 21st Century* was a detailed account of how income and wealth inequality in industrialised countries have increased over the last two hundred years, showing that inequality is generic to capitalism, *Capital and Ideology* is a global history attempting to explore how inequality is legitimised, made natural. Racism, he shows, is one part of that. To be clear, Piketty's concern is not racism per se, or other forms of social inequality - caste, religion etc. His overall focus is economic inequality and the more general ideology that justifies it. But analysing Piketty's arguments through the lens of racism/casteism allows an assessment of the virtues of his propositions for arresting inequality more generally.

The bursting of Black Lives Matter to the fore has highlighted the persistence of racism as an ideology in the terms described by Piketty, 'a set of a priori plausible ideas and discourses describing how society should be structured' (2020: 3), and the fight against it. Black Lives Matter has forced us to recognise that racism is not just a matter of individual experiences, or something that can be understood by a statistical mapping of race against other correlates that show racial disparities. Rather, racism remains rooted in deep seated notions of the 'ideal of organisation of society' in which all are not equal and some groups are considered inferior to others; ideas that continue to dominate around the world.

Piketty's recentering of ideology in the analysis of inequality – that is the justifications that make society's inequalities seem reasonable or even natural to people – is a much-needed departure from and contribution to mainstream economics. Mainstream economics is central to legitimising policies of institutions across the world such as the World Bank, the IMF and state governments. For decades, ideology has been tarnished as a pejorative term, a means to cast aside anyone opposing free markets or questioning the current organisation of the economy to make it more redistributive, or bring to bear a more Marxian analysis. Proposals to do things differently have been easily labelled as ideological in the negative sense. Silenced, 'Oh, you're just being ideological'. Or side-lined, 'They're just an ideologue.' *Capital and Ideology* is thus a major intellectual and political contribution. Mainstream economics and its influential proponents will be forced to confront the fact that if we want to tackle inequality, things are not going to get better by themselves, economic growth will not fix inequality by itself. Piketty proposes we must first 'choose' a different ideology of how to organise society; it must be foremost a battle of ideas.

*Capital and Ideology* is thus a detailed examination of what Piketty calls 'inequality regimes' across time and space, of the ideas those in power have used to justify their rule, and of the injustice this has entailed. We pass through slavery in Mesopotamia, in UK and French colonies, feudalism in France, colonialism in India and Africa, contemporary US, South Africa and Brazil and much else, drawing on scholarship from history, sociology, political science. Towards the end of this grand journey, Piketty reformulates Marx and Engels to conclude that 'The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of the struggle of ideologies and the quest for justice' (Piketty 2020: 1035). The point of this wide-ranging journey across continents and through history for Piketty is that understanding ideologies that have sustained inequalities in the past are crucial to understanding inequality today and how to overcome it.

Piketty's breath-taking tour and refreshing position is thus a direct attack on the primacy of the discipline of economics, on what he calls the 'autonomisation' of economics (2020: 1040) that has cut itself free of other social sciences, and has established itself as somehow being of

more importance than other social sciences. This leading position of the discipline rests on the argument that economic development is central to society, the ‘material basis’ on which everything else rests, and on its claim to be the sole discipline with a ‘scientific’ method that enables it to analyse, model, predict and provide policy advice on economic development. However, if it is the ideological choice of what we want society to be that has primacy, then that not only reduces the influence of economic methods and modelling on other disciplines which it has increasingly come to dominate such as political science, it also reduces economics to one among several important social science traditions. Indeed, in his 2013 book, Piketty says, ‘I do not consider any other place for economics than as a sub-discipline of the social science’ (Piketty 2013: 585). Here, he specifies further that it is only by ‘combining economic, historical, sociological, cultural and political approaches that progress in our understanding of socioeconomic phenomena becomes possible’ (Piketty 2020: 1040). Arguably, economics becomes even less central than those disciplines that engage directly with the phenomenon of ideology and hence can better analyse and be part of what, according to Piketty, really matters.

For all its importance, we will suggest that Piketty’s analysis should be deepened in relation to how he conceives of ideology, the dynamics through which it operates and the challenges this poses to how we think about and act against inequalities. Focusing on the contemporary persistence of caste and tribe oppression in India, we will show that inequalities are not only a matter of ideological ‘choice’ but are intimately tied to systems of wider capitalist accumulation, in which the persistence of racial/ethnic/caste/tribe and gender difference is crucial. We draw on our long term ethnographic research, and that by a team of anthropologists that we led in India, which was developed through a conversation with economists. The focus is on the persistence of the ‘India’s George Floyds’ – oppressed low caste and tribal communities at the bottom of India’s social and economic hierarchy<sup>1</sup> – and what they teach us about inequality, its perpetuation and the fight against it. We will argue for a need to return to an analysis of inequality in which ideology and the dynamics of political economy are truly integrated. This, we will show, can only take place if a genuinely inter-disciplinary conversation can re-emerge between economics and other social science disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, critical geography and subaltern history.

Crucially, the wider implications, we will argue, are political; they lie in the question of what is to be done. For Piketty, the aim is to ‘transcend today’s capitalist system’ and develop what he calls ‘a new participatory socialism’ with ‘a new egalitarian perspective based on social ownership, education and shared knowledge and power’ (2020: 967). The primary solutions lie in making a better ‘choice’ of different available options as for him the ‘realm of

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<sup>1</sup> There is a long history of debate on whether race and caste can be compared. Oliver Cox (1948) was among the first to flatly argue that racial ‘castes’ in the US were not like their Indian equivalents. But the most sustained debate on this issue came from Louis Dumont (1960) who agreed with Cox and Gerald Berreman (1960) who argued that the two caste systems were entirely similar for they were both fundamentally founded on ‘institutionalised inequality’. Aspects of this debate have been reiterated and revised since (see Beteille 1990; Sharma 1994; 1999; Fuller 2011). Our position is that the similarities today are greater than the differences and that we need more sustained cross-country comparison though this is clearly not the place to execute this. Our intention here is not to reduce social groups and social relations in India to a variation of a US phenomenon or to undertake a global comparative analysis of racism, but to highlight and analyse aspects of oppression based on race, caste and tribe. Here, we see racism and what Piketty labels ‘other identity cleavages’ (Piketty 2020: 870-71, 944-48) – in this case oppression based on caste and tribe – as comparable in the sense that, in line with Camfield’s definition of racism, they both constitute ‘oppression of a multi-gender social collectivity on the basis of differences (not limited to those surrounding sexuality or impairment) that are treated as inherited and unchangeable’ (Camfield 2016:47).

ideas...is truly autonomous' and 'many paths are possible' (2020: 7). What he in fact suggests are peaceful economic policy and democracy reforms. At the centre of these are a global participatory democratic system that can sustain a system of progressive taxation of income, wealth and carbon, the proceeds of which will be parcelled out to every citizen in the form of a universal capital endowment, basic income and educational investment, a reordering of the global economy for a transnational democratic system aimed at achieving social, fiscal and environmental justice. Though he acknowledges that the die is weighted, that the 'choice' is 'historically conditioned by the political and ideological balance of power among contending groups' (2020: 391), throughout the book the emphasis is on this being a 'choice', and the importance of the battle of ideology. But how can such a 'choice' be made to happen if the existing balance of power is stacked against it? Can an egalitarian and democratic-participatory ideology win the day? For all his focus on ideology in how to bring about social change, there is no exploration of the rich legacy of those before him who have sought to centre the relationship between ideology and economy in order to challenge inequality and/or capitalism *per se*, and who show the dynamics of why ideological change cannot be a matter simply of choice; it will have to be fought for. Drawing on this legacy of Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall, Frantz Fanon and Glen Coulthard, recentring scholarship and activists from below and from the margins, our analysis suggests that effective ideological contestation involves a good deal more, and that we need far more radical change.

### ***Adivasis and Dalits as India's George Floyds***

'The rest of the world has much to learn from India's experience,' Piketty (2020: 305) says. India, for Piketty, is of particular importance not only because it is the world's largest democracy and second most populous nation, but especially because of its caste system, which 'plays a central role in the history of inequality regimes', and is therefore essential to understand (2020: 304). Piketty is surely right that we need to understand caste and its transformations to understand inequality and how to overcome it.

However, most peculiarly Piketty's discussion of caste is devoid of any consideration of ideology (or capital for that matter). This is a shame, for exploring the persistence of caste for understanding the relationship between ideology and political economy would have been instructive for Piketty's overall project of transforming inequality.<sup>2</sup> Here we will draw on our recent anthropological research among those at the bottom of India's social-economic hierarchy Dalits (ex-untouchable communities, labelled 'Scheduled Caste' [SC] by the Indian government) and Adivasis (indigenous or tribal communities, labelled 'Scheduled Tribe' [ST] by the Indian government) to explore the persistence of oppression, discrimination and exploitation based on caste and tribe in India in order to reflect on the relationship between ideology and political economy. But before we do so, it is important to highlight the virtues and gaps in Piketty's analysis of India.

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<sup>2</sup> For many commentators of India, of which the French sociologist Luis Dumont (1970) is exemplary, caste has been the quintessential example of the recognition of fundamental and inherent inequality as a fact of life, a worldview of the ways in which society should work; an ideology. They see the division of society into castes as based on a ritual ideology of purity and pollution, commanding the consent of all. Others disagree and view caste more as material relations that are contested by those at the bottom, especially by those declared 'untouchable' (Habib 2002; Deliege 1992; Teltumbde 2010).

Piketty's, 'The Case of India' is a long, detailed exposition of how, from a society of constant flux, colonialism, in particular through the census in the late nineteenth century, 'gave the caste hierarchy an administrative existence which made the system more rigid and resistant to change' (2020: 304) in order to 'better dominate it' (2020: 318). In essence Piketty, drawing on important work in Indian history – overwhelmingly Nick Dirks (1987) and Susan Bayly (1999) – argues 'the European colonisers liked to depict the Indian caste system as frozen in time and totally alien because this allowed them to justify their civilizing mission and entrench their power' (Piketty 2020: 319). This is well-trodden ground in Indian scholarship on which there is much research and nuance (see Cohn 1987; 1996). That said, historians of early colonial and pre-colonial India are clear that oppression and exploitation along caste lines was very real back then too (see eg Kumar (1965) and Habib (1995)). Moreover, Piketty forgets to highlight that this project of colonialism was domination not just for the sake of it, governing not just for better government; but for the imperial extraction of resources (eg timber and minerals), agricultural produce and capital accumulation from labour in industry (eg grain, cotton, jute and tea) and revenue (from land). Crucially, the rigidification of caste hierarchy as ideology was intimately tied to the politico-economic project of British imperial capitalism.

Of course, the important question now, as Piketty argues, is to determine the best way to overcome this very oppressive inegalitarian heritage (2020: 352). Piketty points to the significance of India's quota policy, fought for by the Dalit leader Ambedkar, in a political struggle that led to it being put in place in independent India by the Constitution, to correct the discrimination of the past. The result, as Piketty points out, was the most systematic affirmative action policies attempted anywhere in the world (2020: 347). Among the changes were the outlawing of untouchability, the banning of all restrictions on access to temples and other public places, quotas put in place to advance the economic and educational interests of India's SCs and STs, and seats reserved for SCs and STs in all legislative elections in proportion to the share of their population. Piketty, though relying only on income data, suggests that these policies have significantly reduced inequalities between the old disadvantaged castes and the rest of the population – more so than inequalities were reduced between blacks and whites in the US in the same period from the 1950s or South Africa since end of apartheid (2020: 352-356).

Yet, he is also right to argue that 'reservations' are not enough, that they could only benefit a small minority of individuals, and that they have led to the instrumentalisation of caste identities in Indian politics. He carefully illustrates the latter point by charting the rise of a system since the 1990s in which since the Hindu nationalist anti-Muslim Bharatya Janata Party (BJP) received a disproportionate share of the upper-caste vote, while Congress (which dominated Indian democracy until the 1990s) and the left and lower caste parties got the lower-caste and the Muslim vote. He explores how under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the BJP changed its strategy from the 2000s to win over the lower-caste vote, successfully splitting off some parts of the lower-caste Hindu vote.<sup>3</sup> This he sees as an attempt to move India down the same road as Europe and the US where neoliberal elites have, since the 1970s-80s, succeeded in creating a worse inequality regime than that which existed previously, which wins over the white working class, pitching them against black and Muslim minorities and 'reinforcing identitarian cleavages'. Somewhat surprisingly, in spite of this, he also argues that in India those caste, tribe and religiously-defined groups that are

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<sup>3</sup> While Piketty claims that this has been a successful strategy (2020: 944) his own evidence shows that the BJP support amongst Dalits and Adivasis is actually still lower than that of any other Hindu group (2020: 935), a point he also acknowledges later (2020: 951).

worst off still succeed in building coalitions for policies along the lines of economic class. According to him they have avoided the identitarian cleavages of the working class groups in Europe and the US. What is at stake is the boundary definition of who does and does not belong to the national community and therefore who can be treated worse than others (Piketty 2020: 944, 951, 959).

Piketty is right to both pay tribute to the possibilities offered by reservations but also highlight their identitarian pitfalls. He suggests that such measures are no replacement for generalized anti-inequality policies and says that, ‘to have achieved truly significant reductions of Indian social inequalities, it would have been necessary to invest massively in basic public services for the most disadvantaged classes (SC-ST and OBC combined), especially in the areas of education, public health, sanitary infrastructure, and transportation’ (Piketty 2020: 355). That would cost a lot, he acknowledges, ‘and the taxes would have had to be paid by the most advantaged groups’ (Piketty 2020: 357), pointing to his solution of dealing with inequality; progressive taxation.

This is clearly a nuanced analysis. However, understanding the experiences of Adivasis and Dalits themselves across the country, as we have sought to do in recent years, reveals some important gaps in Piketty’s analysis; namely the crucial way in which capital accumulation and increasing inequalities in India are intricately tied to the reproduction of social relations, at the heart of which is the persistence of racial/caste based oppression. This racial/caste oppression has clear material outcomes well beyond the interventions of reservations, and it is kept well alive too, as an ideology that normalizes such inequality outcomes.

Between 2014 and 2018, we led a team of anthropologists who lived with Adivasi and Dalit communities in different parts of the country to understand their experiences of inequality and struggles against it. Our purpose was to understand the processes of inequality that lay behind the country-wide figures presented by economists of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector in 2007 (Kannan 2018). These showed that despite the astonishing economic growth that had accompanied economic liberalisation and the promise of ‘modernisation’ and development, Adivasis and Dalits (who made up 25% of the Indian population) suffered disproportionate levels of poverty, being worse off than all other groups, almost everywhere across the country. Poverty among Adivasis and Dalits was shown to be more than 20 percent higher than the average poverty levels in India and nearly twice as high as that of upper caste groups (Kannan 2018: 35).<sup>4</sup> At the same time inequality kept growing. Our premise was that while able to make this case, quantitative analysis was unable to explain it; for this we needed a genuine conversation between economists and anthropologists, as proposed by Pranab Bardhan (1989) as it was anthropologists with their long-term fieldwork who may be able to reveal the social processes behind statistical patterns.

We combined our experience of having lived for years with Adivasis in the forested hills of Jharkhand (Shah 2010, 2018), following them to brick factories into West Bengal (Shah 2010) and into the revolutionary armies of Marxist Leninist Maoist guerrillas (Shah 2018), and research with Dalits in the north Indian plains of Uttar Pradesh (Lerche 1995, 1999), to lead a team of five postdoctoral anthropologists. These researchers each lived for at least one year with Adivasis and Dalits in five different parts of the country, based in the tea

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<sup>4</sup> 81.9 per cent of Adivasis and Dalits were classified as poor, against 44.5 per cent of ‘others’, defined as those not belonging to Adivasis and Dalits, Muslims and OBC castes. 2009-10 figures; calculations based on the then \$2 poverty line (Kannan 2018: 35).

plantations of Kerala, in the chemical industrial developments of coastal Tamil Nadu, by a paper factory in the forests of Telangana, in the hills and cotton growing plains of the Sardar Sarovar River in Maharashtra, and in the foothills of the Himalayas.<sup>5</sup>

*Ground Down by Growth* (Shah and Lerche et al 2018), the book based on this research, revealed that neoliberal capitalist growth in India had entrenched and transformed, rather than erased, the ideology of caste/race in India, keeping Adivasis and Dalits firmly at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy. In the past, the ideology of caste kept the Dalits as ‘untouchables’: an ‘impure’ and ‘filthy’ class of slave-like, landless agricultural labourers. They were stigmatised, with their touch and even their shadows seen as polluting, compelled to do only the hardest and most demeaning jobs; treated as the higher castes saw fit. The Adivasis of the hills and forests, in comparison to the Dalits, lived in relatively independent or autonomous communities, with much more direct access to land and forest resources, without the same domination of higher caste groups that Dalits faced on a day to day basis; but they were stigmatised as ‘wild’, ‘savage’ and ‘childlike’. Our research showed that the oppression of Dalits and Adivasis has continued over time and persists in new forms in the new economies, despite the policies of affirmative action. When compared with the neighbouring upper caste households – whether it is the upper caste Hindus of the Himalayas or the Gujars of the Maharashtra plains, the Nadars of Tamil Nadu, or the Kamma and Reddies of Telangana – everywhere it was Adivasis and Dalits who did the hard, underpaid and unregulated work in the belly of the Indian economy. Indian and global business made use of existing social differences based on caste and tribe, and entrench further the divide between Adivasis and Dalits and all other social groups.

Though Dalits no longer work only for the landed castes in the villages, they had become – apart from Adivasis – the cheapest labour of economic growth, at the bottom of all the labour hierarchies. Adivasis have perhaps lost even more. Though their lands have been encroached on by people from the plains for centuries, their land rights were protected to some extent because of the historic battles they had fought. But after economic liberalisation and under the economic boom, land grabs intensified, by state dam projects, multinational and national mining companies and by other non-tribal private companies, aided and abetted by the governments. This accumulation by dispossession is dramatically undermining Adivasi local forest based and agricultural livelihoods, and forces many of them to find precarious work in the wider economy, migrating seasonally to distant locations for six to eight months of the year. What our research showed is how ethnic/caste oppression is intimately tied to the spread of global capitalism, the dispossession and the labour and class relations it produces. We identified at least three inter-related processes at work.

First, the *historical inherited inequalities of power*. Old dominant social groups still controlled how Adivasis and Dalits were integrated into the modern economy, and maintained them at their historical position at the bottom of social and economic hierarchies. In all our field sites, Dalit and Adivasis had much less access to land and education than other social groups. And even with same levels of education, other social groups got the best jobs. The higher castes, who once controlled village agricultural life now dominated the non-agricultural economy. In the Tamil Nadu field site, the export oriented Gelatine factory, a joint venture with Japanese capital, which developed with India’s economic liberalisation was run by executives from the ex-landlord Nadar caste. The local ex-landlord Nadars

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the research did not focus on the oppression of Muslims. As highlighted by Piketty, Muslims are also oppressed and while as a group they are not quite as poor as Dalits and Adivasis they are at the receiving end of extreme oppression and othering by the present BJP government in India.

controlled the local Dalit informal workforce for them. In Telangana, the huge paper factory with several thousand employees was in cahoots with a dominant local Kamma ex-landlord who doled out the precarious work at the factory to those Dalit and Adivasi groups that he considered docile. In Chamba in the Himalayas, the Gaddi and Gujjar Adivasi herdsmen had no access to city based occupations. It is the same for the Adivasi Bhils in the plains of Maharashtra; here, it was the local Gujar farmers that monopolised the good jobs. In Kerala, the Tamil Dalit plantation workers were brought in as indentured labour from Tamil Nadu. With the collapse of the tea industry from the 1990s, as they increasingly had to search for work outside the plantations, they found themselves excluded from semi-skilled jobs. As the economy was globalised, the old power relations, fractured around the meshing of caste and class, mattered for who gets what job and who earns what.

The *second* process is *the super-exploitation of Dalits and Adivasis as circular casual migrant labour* within the Indian economy (Shah and Lerche 2018; 2020). Across the world, immigrant workers undertake the hardest, lowest paid hyper-precarious informalised jobs at the bottom of society, more often than not denied citizen rights and labour rights in the country where they work (see eg Ferguson and McNally 2014). In India, the around 100 million migrant labourers are predominantly internal migrants from the poorest and most exploited regions. Capital use them to cheapen production by undercutting local labour power, thereby fragmenting and disciplining the overall labour force. For most Adivasi and Dalit rural households, men and a large proportion of women find themselves doing the worst, hardest and most insecure jobs, while being paid the least. It is far more common for Adivasis and Dalits to work as seasonal migrant labour than it is for any other group, and it is far more common for women also to work as seasonal labour.<sup>6</sup> Adivasis and Dalits dominate in the brick kiln sector where working conditions are extreme, and are overrepresented amongst construction workers, harvest workers, and low-end jobs in manufacturing. Wage theft is common as is exploitation by middlemen.

This migrant labour is super-exploited for employers don't even pay enough to cover the cost of theirs and their household's long-term social reproduction. They must also rely on the meagre assets and income of family members back in the villages. Spouses who stay back in the villages and wider kinship networks constitute an invisible economy of care essential for the exploitation of the seasonal migrant labour. Akin to international migrants, the seasonal migrants are stripped of most citizen rights where they work. They have no access to government services such as free and subsidised grains, sugar and oil through the Public Distribution System, no access to schools or housing, no voting rights, and no labour rights (Shah and Lerche et al 2018; Shah and Lerche 2020). As Covid19 has shown, they can be kicked out of work and lodgings with impunity and be treated like sub-humans by governments when expedient. In Piketty's terms, and contrary to his conclusion, they are outside the boundaries of the national community.

Third, is the persistence of the ideologies of caste and tribe in what Philippe Bourgois labelled *conjugated oppression*, to capture how 'an ideological dynamic of ethnic discrimination ... interacts explosively with an economic dynamic of class exploitation to produce an overwhelming experience of oppression that is more than the sum of the parts' (Bourgois 1995: 72). For Adivasis and Dalits, there is a direct relationship between the oppressive ideologies that are part and parcel of their conjugated oppression and the lasting,

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<sup>6</sup> Government statistics indicates that 45 percent of seasonal labour migrants are Dalits or Adivasis even though they only constitute 25 percent of the population. This though is an approximate figure only as the existing statistics significantly underreport seasonal labour migration (Srivastava 2020: 174).



unjust and cruel treatment they continue to suffer at the hands of more powerful groups, which make them, in essence, 'India's George Floyds'.

Although old practices of stigmatisation of Dalits, Adivasis and other minorities have lessened since Independence, reservations have enabled some to get good jobs, and anti-caste discrimination legislation have had some impact, oppression and stigmatising have not gone away. Moreover, they have transformed and been made to work in new ways, crucially enabling the expansion of the exploitative social division of labour and power in the modern economy as well as in the advance of accumulation by dispossession.

Our research documents that stereotyping and stigmatising still underpins who can get what jobs and the everyday use of abusive language against low castes and tribes. Adivasi and Dalits are variously stigmatised as ignorant, lazy, uncouth, savage, dishonest, dirty, and ill-educated. Importantly, these views are not only held by government officials and wealthy urban upper castes and employers, but also by fellow workers who 'kick down' on those below them in the labour hierarchy. Our research shows, for instance, how in the textiles and garment factories in Tamil Nadu, the persistence of caste and the stigmatisation of Dalits is so extreme that entire communities of Dalits hide their surnames and caste background for years, including from their non-Dalit co-workers, to get work and to stay in work. Sexual harassment and rape against women from these communities continues unabated. Lynching and murder are not uncommon (Teltumbde 2008) and are on the rise.

Meanwhile, Adivasis have suffered in particular from violent dispossession for the purposes of clearing them off their land for the entry of multinational corporations for mining (Shah 2018). In keeping with the common construction of minorities as 'dangerous classes' requiring violent oppression (Shah and Lerche 2018: 16), Adivasis have been subject to brutal police and state-supported vigilante action in central and eastern India. Entire villages have been burnt to the ground and women routinely raped, 'encounter killings' and torture are common, and thousands have been incarcerated as alleged 'Maoists'. Hundreds of thousands have been dispossessed from their land and forest based livelihoods. Moreover, organic intellectuals, who have fought against these atrocities – whether Dalit and Adivasi activists, labour and human rights activists, lawyers or scholars – have been increasingly targeted as 'anti-nationals' (that is, disloyal to the nation) and as 'urban naxalites', imprisoned without trial for sedition (Shah 2018; Shah and Lerche 2018).

Such ongoing extreme brutal 'othering' of Dalits and Adivasis and those who advocate for them, is dependent on an ideology that they 'get what they deserve', keeping them at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchies, dispossessed from their land, in the most polluting, hardest and poorly paid jobs in the modern economy. Their entire existence is made extremely vulnerable for it is underpinned by violent oppression. What we have as a result of the conjugated oppression of Adivasis and Dalits is a freeing up of land for occupation by major state backed national and multi-national corporations, and a super-exploitable workforce controlled, enforced and supported by an oppressive 'civilising' mission which is increasingly being meted out by the police and other state forces in collusion with corporate capital. As Piketty shows, the present Modi government might seek to 'woo' Dalits and Adivasis as voters; but it is clear that more fundamentally they are kept in their place not only through oppressive ideologies that has the active support of the government but also by condoning and encouraging violence against them, and using its full repressive force to quell any dissent. The ideology of caste and tribe has persisted and been reworked for the service of neoliberal capitalism which has generated not only vast income,

wealth and asset inequalities but also racialised inequalities. These are, then, the contemporary conditions of India's George Floyds.

### **From ideology to praxis**

Piketty is to be applauded for trying to chart a history of inequality from a perspective that seeks to decentre the West, to argue that the case of India is particularly instructive. While there are no doubt Indian particularisms to the persistence of caste and tribe oppression, if the events in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd have taught us anything, it is that it is impossible anywhere in the world to consider inequality purely at the level of economics (a different idea of economics) without considering how it is intimately tied to race, ethnicity or gender. Piketty's proposition to seek a new political narrative based on proper democracy and a much greater degree of economic equality – through social ownership, progressive taxation and redistribution, an ambitious social state, a carbon tax, more egalitarian educational investment – might be a part of the solution. But a reading of the Indian story from the perspective of Adivasis and Dalits, as we have tried to present in this piece, tells us at least three things.

First, an analysis of the dynamics of capitalism and race/caste must be central to the analysis of inequality and what is to be done. Caste/race/gender cannot be variables to be added on to the study but fundamentally shape capital accumulation and the inequalities and injuries generated therein. This is central to the relationship between ideology and economy. If omitted, we are left without an understanding of what propels ideology and how ideology directly influences the economy. This is a missed opportunity in Piketty's outline of the history of caste relations in India, and the omission also colours the present-day focus on India's affirmative action without considering the more fundamental, state supported, identity cleavages that ideologically underpin the conjugated oppression of Dalits and Adivasis which enables their extreme exploitation in the modern economy. This is not just an experience limited to caste and tribe based oppression but has been detailed in some depth elsewhere by a number of anthropologists such as Philip Bourgois (1988; 1989) who lived with Ameri-Indian labourers in US owned banana plantations on the Costa Rica Panama border, or Anna Tsing who studied global supply chains. Diversity in the form of gender, race, national status and other forms is structurally central to global capitalism, and not 'decoration on a common core' (Tsing 2009: 48).

Put most succinctly by the cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, 'Whenever we depart from the 'Eurocentric' model of capitalist development what we actually find is the many ways in which capital can preserve, adapt to its fundamental trajectory, harness and exploit these particularistic qualities of labour power, building them into its regimes. The ethnic and racial structuration of the labour force, like its gendered composition, may provide an inhibition to the rationalistically-conceived 'global' tendencies of capitalist development. And yet, these distinctions have been maintained, and indeed developed and refined, in the global expansion of the capitalist mode. They have provided the means for differentiated forms of exploitation of the different sectors of a fractured labour force. In that context, their economic, political and social effects have been profound' (Hall 1984: 24).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> An in-depth analysis of the relationship between racism and capitalism, and gender and capitalism, historically and in present-day US and Europe and beyond, is beyond the scope of

Second, our analysis of the relationship between ideology and political economy shows that transformation cannot be simply a matter of ‘choice’ – choosing a different ideology. The dynamics of capitalism is to a certain extent hegemonic, it is enduring. Change will have to be fought for. Almost a century before Piketty, Antonio Gramsci, the Italian communist leader writing from Mussolini’s prison from 1926 to his death in 1937, critical of the Marxist analyses that focused solely on economic contradictions and that had failed to foresee the coming to power of the fascists in Italy, argued that ideological hegemony was a central part of how ruling groups maintained power; and that the ideological battle was a necessary precondition for any revolutionary change.

Gramsci (1971) argued that in the Western European countries, the dominant social groups had been able to establish ideological hegemony, that is, a social order based on their moral leadership. The wider population from all classes accepted this leadership as they saw their own interests as ‘fundamentally compatible with the dominant group’ (Riley 2011:11). Society was ruled by consent as much as it was by coercion. This was possible through the intimate connections between ideological hegemony, liberal democracy and the existence of civil society. These institutions were necessary for a ‘dominant historical bloc’ to assert its ethical and cultural power and thus necessary for it to establish its moral leadership. Hegemony was established throughout political and cultural institutions, education, the family, religious institutions as well as through material labour relations (Hall 1986: 15, 18-19; Riley 2011: 12). For the political left, Gramsci argued that proper change was not possible without counter-hegemonic ideological struggles across all fields in society, against the hegemonic ideology. This was not a matter of replacing one high level ideology with another understanding of the world: it cannot be a choice between two ready-made ideologies. Instead, it is a struggle in the field of ‘common sense’: the field of messy and contradictory taken-for-granted views in society, the everyday field of struggle between ideologies.

Piketty’s central policy suggestion is to counter inequality regimes via a direct ideological challenge to its policy regime (i.e., who is part of the polity, what rights they have, how they are governed) and its property regime, by presenting a competing vision of a just world with extended democracy and less inequality. We recognise the importance of this but, taking a cue from Gramsci, we argue that to develop counter-hegemonic positions, the whole gamut of oppressive ideologies needs to be contested directly and specifically. This, as suggested by Stuart Hall and many others, centrally involves those oppressive ideologies based on race, gender, ethnicity, or caste. Patriarchy, racism, casteism are essential building blocks of the inequality regime and if they are not challenged too, any egalitarian solutions will be built on sand, if they can be built at all. In India, for a political alliance between Dalits and Adivasis and the Left to be viable it will need to be based on addressing the oppressive and discriminatory ideologies perpetuated from the top right down to co-workers, something that is yet to happen.

For those who are subject to the conjugated oppression of race, caste, class and gender, the impact and mystification of their ideological subjectivation runs deep (Hall 1986: 27), and affect identity, psychology and self-worth. W. E. B. Du Bois, the African-American scholar and activist, coined the term ‘double-consciousness’ to describe the feeling of ‘two-ness, - an

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the present article. For a review of some of the main works, see Camfield (2016) and Lerche and Shah (2018).

American, and a Negro', which left black people without self-consciousness, an inability to see oneself except 'through the eyes of others' (1903: 8-9). Franz Fanon (1986) likewise argues that colonised black people have been made to suffer from a deep sense of inferiority, inadequacy and self-hatred through their contact with white colonisers. To him, as to Du Bois, one-sided 'assimilation' or 'integration' is impossible and unwanted. Instead, their alienation has within it revolutionary potential (Du Bois: 1903). Indeed, for Fanon (1986), it is only through the violent struggle for proper independence that a new black self-image and new national culture could develop. It is important therefore for oppressed groups to lead the struggle to liberate themselves and shape new ideologies in their fight against oppression.

This points towards our final issue. Our ethnographic research, as well as the wider analyses of the hegemonic command of capitalism including in the subjectivation of the oppressed minorities, suggest that reform will not suffice; the battle runs deep. Returning to Piketty, this indicates that despite his ambitions to decentre economics, he remains trapped in the logic of economics. What he proposes are essentially economic reforms within capitalism, with related political reforms. To really think through the possibilities and challenges offered by other ideologies – other worldviews – he would have to turn to anthropology, sociology and related disciplines, and to those scholars and activists from below and the margins who, based on their experiences, are providing new visions to shape the world. Sustained explorations of other ways of living in and thinking about the world, other ideologies, as a critique of our own reality, has long been the project of the discipline anthropology. Indeed, one strong message of our research in India is that in our fight against inequality, we have much to learn from communities like the Adivasis who have kept alive anti-capitalist egalitarian values despite colonisation and their integration into the processes of the state and capitalism (Shah 2010, 2018) as well as from Dalits who inspired by works from the 19<sup>th</sup> century pioneer Jyotirao Phule onwards have developed a counter-hegemonic ideology against high caste dominance based on claims of belonging to the oppressed majority (*Bahujan*) (Lerche 1999). For such counter-hegemonic ideologies to transcend barriers and transform the 'common sense' amongst other exploited groups may not be easy, but seen from a Gramscian perspective this is the only feasible way forward.

A major contribution to resurrecting and revolutionising such possibilities of a new world anti-capitalist order from indigenous people has in recent years come from Glen Coulthard (2014), drawing on his own work as an indigenous activist in the Idle No More movement in Canada. Attacking the liberal 'politics of recognition' (as proposed by Taylor 1992) that has dominated actions to better 'integrate' minorities everywhere, he argues for an anti-capitalist struggle, for reclamation of land that has been colonised, in which direct action (not confined to the 'rule of law') must be a means for the oppressed to come together and recognise their own social power to bring about change. Inspired by Fanon, he argues that only a process of 'desubjectification' through rejection of compromises with the Canadian government can free the Dene nation from its colonial subjectivity and its related ongoing primitive accumulation. In this rejection and resistance, and struggle for their existing land and collectivity, indigenous people will be able to build on their social and material relationships, renew their traditions that have been stripped by colonialism and capitalism, in what he calls 'grounded normativity'. Centring the lessons and visions of such action and scholarship from the margins and from below more widely, against oppressive ideologies and of course also against the material conditions they seek to uphold has to be a crucial step in any consideration of the relationship between capital and ideology.

This is not to deny the crucial importance of the consolidation of a transformative ideology based on economic equality and participatory democracy, or, for that matter, of the importance of progressive working class ideology and related action. Yet, if there is anything to learn from the limitations of anthropological cultural offerings of other ideologies as a means to transform our reality, it is the need also in this area to take account of the politico-economic forces of history in our ideologies of social change (Shah 2014), if the latter are not to become dystopic utopia or mere rituals (Shah 2020 forthcoming). Perhaps, this suggests, that the next step for Piketty, if he is serious about transcending capitalism and challenging inequalities, is to move from a global history of ideology to a global anthropology of praxis.

The inspiration is of course Marx (1845), ‘that philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point is to change it.’ A global anthropology of praxis would try to understand the process by which imaginations to change the world get enacted and realised, and how that process in turn can change those theories themselves, in a dialectical process of reflection and action (Shah 2020 forthcoming). Inherent in this study of praxis would be the inextricable relationship between imagination, material relations and action that is involved in the active transformation of the present (Shah 2020 forthcoming). For this, we would need to begin with a genuine conversation with disciplines like anthropology, sociology or subaltern history studying people and voices from below and from the margins, and scholars and activists from the margins and from below.

Returning to Black Lives Matter, the toppling of statues is symbolically important and defunding the police will present some challenge to oppressive racialised law enforcement. If the activists and movements were to take a leaf from the pages of the radical thinkers we have discussed here, we might also see a battle for transcending capitalism in which a crucial focus will be new counter-hegemonic ideologies that confront the way oppression inextricably links race, caste, gender and class to enable capital accumulation and the inequalities it generates.

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