

# The Reality of Mass Poverty and Social Exclusion: “How is India?”

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“How is India?” asked an erudite friend of mine from North America soon after I reached India last December.

How indeed? I write this piece this week as India goes to the polls: a mammoth process involving 714 million voters is about to unfold over the next one month. The polity looks fractured as never before. Each state – and India has 35 of them – has its own political dynamic shaped by a complex gamut of regional political parties. Relentless opportunism and political ambition, bolstered often by massive private wealth appears to have given rise to a multiplicity of candidates and parties who are able to cull a platform sometimes out of thin air, or even worse, by fuelling caste or ethnic conflict or abusing divisive ‘local’ issues. So deep is the fracture this time, that it looks like 543 discrete elections are being held for the 543 parliamentary seats. No party is able to shape or capture the national imagination, as it were.

Underneath this fractured polity, lies of course, a deeply exclusionary and unequal material reality. Some 200 million are chronically hungry, more than 90 percent of the workforce have no option but informal work with abysmal wages and no security; 80 percent live under \$2 a day; 70 percent depend on agriculture for their livelihood; 182,936 farmers have committed suicide; and so on.

The global meltdown has brought yet another level of decimation for the ordinary people. It is estimated that at least half a million jobs have been lost in the export sectors, where barring the IT sector, those affected are informal wage workers, primarily migrants who are forced to return home as they are retrenched. There is little by way of employment opportunity there and entire families are in acute distress due to the sudden end to their remittance incomes. A secondary and more insidious effect is perhaps the fear such retrenchment generates amongst workers who are somehow able to retain their jobs. If migrant workers come from homes where opportunities are decimated and other family members are returning home as they are retrenched, they are very likely to work under conditions they otherwise would not. The fear of retrenchment is a disciplinary mechanism *par excellence*. Industry leaders thus routinely call for greater labour market flexibility, citing the fact that competition from countries such as Bangladesh – based on low labour costs – are hurting profitability of Indian exports.

Under these circumstances, a fractured polity plays a highly contradictory role. On the one hand, it helps resist the tyranny of a ‘center.’ It can provide the autonomy that a state or local government might require if it wishes to experiment with alternatives (this has been the case of Kerala, the state with the best development record). On the other hand, it vastly

reduces the possibility of constructing resistance to problematic policy frameworks on a scale that can actually shift the direction of things. This happens via two causal mechanisms: first, that the fracture hides the constellations of power; and second, it vastly diminishes the possibilities of solidarity.

First about power. There are many dimensions of power – and many constellations that we can speak of. But given the election season, let me take one here: the dimension of private wealth and the manner in which it is facilitating access to political office.

### **Millionaire Candidates**

[National Election Watch](#), a civil society watchdog doing exemplary work on the elections, has released a report which analyses the criminal records, financial assets and educational background of all candidates. Most still refuse to declare their wealth, but even declared wealth has grown by [400 per cent since 2002](#). According to National Election Watch report, in Karnataka, the state which is home to India's Silicon Valley, one out of every four contestants is a multi-millionaire. In Maharashtra, home to Mumbai, about 12 percent are multi-millionaires. Seven multi-millionaires are contesting from one the poorest regions in the country in the state of Orissa (a region known historically for the incidence of famine and starvation deaths).

Quite apart from these multi-millionaires, a number of wealthy business professionals have joined the fray as independent candidates. Their mission, as they proclaim, is to “clean politics.” While the political fate is not expected to shine too much in the current elections, they are playing an important role in numbing any possible critique of corporate power. Indeed, the idea that ‘politics’ is unrelated to ‘business’ and vice-versa and that business has the tools and the ethos to solve major social problems has been a critical element of the normative order of neoliberalism, in India and worldwide.

The material reality accompanying this normative order is quite extraordinary. The wealth of 40 richest Indians have come to equal about 30 percent of its trillion-dollar GDP. Of the 47 Indian companies that have made it to the [Forbes List](#) of the Global 2000 this year, the sales of each of the top two equal the GDP of India's poorest 12 states taken together. In a list of the top 50 economic entities in India – comprising of Indian states and Indian corporations – 28 are corporations. Reliance Industries, the corporation that tops the list, has an annual revenue that exceeds the gross domestic product of Kerala by about \$2-billion.

The fracturing of the polity not only obscures these constellations of power, but also diminishes the possibility of solidarity and the construction of alternatives.

Consider for example, the resistance to Special Economic Zones (SEZs) or more generally, the resistance to industrialization which displaces small peasants without compensating them adequately or without their consent. In the state of West Bengal, which has been ruled by a Left government since 1977, this conflict came to a head over two projects. The Left Front government actively solicited these projects. Thereafter, it was found deficient in the way it planned these projects, – and worse, took recourse to violence when faced with resistance. It is likely that the Left is going to be punished for this failure of governance in the current elections, as it should be, if electoral politics is to have any substance.

But this is only half the story. What is likely to replace the Left, or dent its prowess, is not a progressive pro-people political configuration – but a constellation of opportunists of various

shades. The latter has no agenda for growth or development, industrial or otherwise. The irony in these events is worth noting. While particular factors in West Bengal brought the SEZ/industrialization issue to such a head, the resistance to SEZ did not occur in West Bengal alone. The demand for appropriate designed and democratically governed models of industrialization was voiced by many different communities across India. This was not an opposition to one or two isolated projects, but a more fundamental opposition to the false choice between displacement on the one hand and absence of livelihood opportunities on the other. The deep fracturing of politics is systematically marginalizing precisely such issues, and in doing so is very effectively pre-empting solidarity. Indeed, solidarity has been critical in the recent successes in engendering change, such as the Right to Food movement, the Right to Information movement, the movement for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, etc.

So how is India? Fractured, harassed, trapped within a series of power games orchestrated by its elite? Though poignant and cinematic and Oscar-savvy, this *Slumdog* narrative is not entirely representative of India. By and large, people continue to struggle, negotiate and survive as best as they can, often winning victories that defy textbook understandings of agency or politics.

As voters, the average Indian remains incredibly astute. As the last elections showed us, all political calculations of an overconfident anti-poor government were revealed to be entirely incorrect, causing them electoral losses they had not imagined. Last week in Hyderabad, India's hi-tech city, a young man who drives taxis for a living gave me a brilliant analysis. I asked him what according to him "India" is. Without a moment's hesitation he said, "India is that place where the common man is perpetually looking for justice. There is no justice here, no justice at all." •

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