Oxford Handbooks Online

Inequality from the Perspective of the Global South

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The Oxford Handbook of Global Studies
Edited by Mark Juergensmeyer, Saskia Sassen, Manfred B. Steger, and Victor Faessel

Print Publication Date: Dec 2018 Subject: Sociology, Economic Sociology
Online Publication Date: Dec 2018 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190630577.013.42

Abstract and Keywords

Paradoxically, at a time when people in all areas of the world have been asserting their right to equality and dignity, most governments, prodded by the global elite, have focused on achieving higher economic growth with political stability, even though such policies have generated greater inequalities and social tensions. Reducing inequality has not been their principal objective. This chapter discusses the concept of inequality and the various meanings associated with it. How the problems of economic and social inequalities have been addressed in the Global South is also discussed. The chapter examines how liberal democracy treats the issue of inequality and how it is handled in regimes governed by communist parties. It also describes the notions of deferred liberalism and acquiescent socialism.

Keywords: inequality, discrimination, reservation, deferred liberalism, acquiescent socialism, Sustainable Development Goals

TWO paradoxes of inequality stare at us glaringly in the twenty-first century. One is the discernible phenomenon of individuals, groups, regions and, even more important, nations, religions, and cultures asserting their claim to equal dignity in all areas of the world. All constitutions affirm the right to equality before law for all citizens. The United Nations Charter framed in 1945 declares all nations as equal, as do many subsequent international covenants. At the same time, the trend of increasing social and economic inequality within and between countries and regions has been prominently noticeable in recent decades. Inequality of incomes in countries such as the United States, India, and China has continued to rise, with occasional slight fluctuations. Discrimination on the basis of caste in India, race in the United States and South Africa, ethnicity in China and many other countries, and gender in all countries persists even though laws prohibit it (Human Rights Council 2016). Sexual violence continues to be a phenomenon in all areas of the world. Caste discrimination in general and atrocities on dalits—the former "untouchable" castes in India—remain a troubling trend. As the contradiction between formal political equality among citizens and actual inequality in society and economy has continued to create tensions throughout the world, the warning by B. R. Ambedkar, the social revolutionary and Chair of the Drafting Committee of the Indian constitution, while introducing the bill to adopt the constitution on November 25, 1949, acquires even greater significance not only for India and the Global South but also for the entire world. He observed that in politics, India recognized the value of "one man one vote," but in social and economic life it "continues to deny the principle of one man one value." He urged his colleagues to "remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment, or else," he warned, "those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has laboriously built up" (Ambedkar 1949).

The other paradox is the growing justification of prevailing inequalities by regimes in the name of achieving economic growth or stability of the system. The very basis of neoliberal reforms launched in the 1990s was to unleash forces of entrepreneurship and give them (p. 212) maximum incentives for profit without caring if that led to increasing inequalities. In 1991 and 1992, when there was a debate in China as to whether the expansion of a free market economy would cause greater polarization in Chinese society, Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China's reforms, said that the "reform and open door" must be pursued to achieve China's economic growth and the Communist Party of China (CPC) was there to prevent polarization (Deng Xiaoping 1992). After four decades of reforms, China—which was once one of the world's most egalitarian societies—had become one of the most unequal societies, its Gini coefficient being higher than that of the United States (Table 14.1). India has been on the same path, and reducing inequality has not been a top priority for any regime in recent decades. To avoid tensions among people resulting from the reforms, most countries introduced a set of populist measures to provide relief from destitution and hunger and to reduce the size of the population living below the "poverty line." Accomplishments such as reducing the size of the population living below the poverty line from 39% in 2001 to 29% in 2017 in India or from 30% in 1985 to 2% in 2015 in China and aiming to lift the remaining poor population above the poverty line by 2020 were indeed laudable. But these measures did not address the problem of stark inequalities of income, status, wealth, and power within these countries (Thorat and Newman 2012). The de-emphasis on equality as a goal was clearly discernible in the past two decades with the depoliticization of terms of discourse during the neoliberal era. Inequality was replaced by "exclusion," and oppressed groups were called "marginalized"; programs of "inclusion" were designed for them (Mohanty 2000).

The irony was that in many of these countries, debates stressing the value of equality had been raging for more than 2,000 years. In India in the fifth-century BCE, the Buddha challenged the caste system of Brahmanism and initiated a new cultural and spiritual movement for equality of all humans (Omvedt 2003). That has remained part of the many conflicting streams of culture and religion in India. Gandhi's concept of *swaraj* (self-rule), Ambedkar's focus on social equality, and the Indian freedom struggle's affirmation of the right to equality that was enshrined into the Indian constitution showed that equality was a cherished value. But the social and economic policies in Independent India did not uniformly reflect it, and in India's neoliberal phase there was a clear de-emphasis on equality (Dubey and Thorat 2012). Moreover, one could point to traditional societies as being distinctly unequal. Brahmanism in India stratified society into unequal groups. Confucianism presented a hierarchy of social relationships in China by defining five sets of relationships: father–son, husband–wife, elder brother–younger brother, teacher–disciple, and king–subject. With the revival of popularity of Confucianism in contemporary China, it is interesting to note how harmony and order have been highlighted more than equality (Gao 2017: 242). When Buddhism entered China and, later, when Christianity and Islam became a part of Chinese culture, they challenged that notion. But it was not just the ancient traditions of the East that were non-egalitarian. In ancient Greece, Plato, too, believed in the hierarchy of human abilities: wisdom, spirit, and appetite, respectively, possessed by philosophers, royals, and workers, with slaves outside this sphere having only physical abilities. Aristotle also believed in that stratification of humans, allowing, however, that equality among the citizens should be promoted as an ideal, for without it there would be a revolution. He advocated the exercise of power by aristocracy to manage a polity. This line of thought was challenged even then, and by the time of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, many social movements in Europe had asserted the equality of humans (Lakoff 1964). "All men were created equal" (p. 213) (p. 214) became a creed that entered political declarations in the eighteenth century. In the three ancient traditions of India, China, and Greece, the justification of inequality rested on the proclaimed need for ensuring sociopolitical stability. Maintaining order in society was the primary value for the elites, which they prescribed as the goal of the whole society. It could be peace and order or economic growth or maintenance of the elite power in one form or another. It is remarkable that these ways of thinking recurred continuously throughout history in these countries and elsewhere up to contemporary times to justify prevailing levels of inequality. In the United States and Europe, the Plato version of the argument for inequality resounds in the twenty-first century. In China, Confucius is rehabilitated as the source of humanism and moral living for social and political order, but indirectly accepting discrimination and inequality as the country rises as a global superpower with a free market economy guided by the power of a communist party. In

India, Ambedkar's reaffirmation of the Buddhist concept of equality and the liberal democratic values of the French Revolution—liberty, equality, and fraternity (fraternity to be replaced by human solidarity)—has been neglected and remains only in the thinking of social movements dedicated to this cause. The Brahmanic notion of varnashrama dharma characterizing the caste order propounded by modern-day Hindutva theorists as a "non-hierarchical functional division of labour" has had a new lease on life. Thus, in all three settings of the modern West, China, and India, the attempt to build a society of equality, freedom, and dignity for all has continued to face serious obstacles (McGill 2016).

Table 14.1 Inequality in China, India, and the United States

		Share of Income in Percent of Total Income				
Country	**Survey Year**	**Poorest 10%**	**Poorest 20%**	**Richest 20%**	**Richest 10%**	**Gini Index**
China	2001	1.8	4.7	50	33.1	44.7
	2005	1.8	5.0	47.9	32.0	42.5
	2012[a]	2.05	—	—	31.43	42.16
	2014	—	—	—	37.2[c]	0.469[d],[1]
India	1999–2000	3.9	8.9	43.3	28.5	32.5
	2005	3.8	8.6	42.4	28.3	33.4
	2011[a]	3.56	8.26	43.97	29.77	35.1
	2014	—	—	—	—	33.6
US	2000	1.9	5.4	45.8	29.9	40.46
	2010[a]	1.62	—	—	29.4	40.46
	2014[b]	1.6	5.2	45.1	29.2	0.394[d]

([a]) Data from World Data Atlas, “World and Regional Statistics, National Data, Maps, Rankings,” https://knoema.com/atlas; accessed March 3, 2017.

([b]) Data from “Release of OECD Inequality Update 2016: Income Inequality Remains High in the Face of Weak Recovery” (November 24, 2016), http://www.oecd.org/social/income-distribution-database.htm; accessed March 3, 2017.

([c]) Data from World Inequality Database, “Income Inequality, China, 1978–2015,” http://wid.world/country/china; accessed March 5, 2017.

([d]) Gini coefficient.

Sources: United Nations Development Programme, “Human Development Report,” 2006, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2015; The World Bank, “World Development Indicators,” 2012, 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “StatExtracts: Income Distribution and Poverty,” 2014.

These two paradoxes—unprecedented assertion of equality in the face of rising inequality and justifications for equality even though they have been presented and challenged from time to time for more than 2,000 years—clearly indicate that the coming decades will witness intense struggles by forces demanding faster realization of conditions of equality while other forces view them as causing disruptions in their strategies of growth and stability. Because both sets of forces possess various kinds of strength, these situations will continue to generate tensions, alienation, and dislocations including violent confrontations. Global developments in the first decades of the twenty-first century show that the struggle for equality may have emerged as the defining feature of the century.

Although this point is most conspicuous from the perspective of the Global South, it is no less evident in the Global North. In other words, the common perception that societies in the Global North are more equal than those in the Global South should also be critically examined.

It should be clarified here that the terms Global South and Global North are debated concepts, and they are used here primarily for heuristic purposes. In recent years, the term "Global South" has replaced the term "Third World," which was used during the Cold War from the 1960s through the 1980s to refer mostly to former European colonies and had a political potency with an anti-imperialist and anti-hegemony thrust (Prashad 2007). The First World and Second World then referred to the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, and their allies, respectively, whereas the Third World generally referred to developing countries. The term "developing country" is still used by many, indicating the relatively low ranking in the world in terms of gross domestic product (GDP). The United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank rank countries in terms of national income as high-income countries, middle-income, lower middle-income, and low-income countries. During the past three decades of neoliberal globalization, the terms "emerging economies" and "emerging markets" have acquired currency; these terms focus (p. 215) on the extent of expansion of the free market economy and economic growth. Incidentally, the reference to countries and nations as merely "markets," ignoring many other aspects of the lives and history of people and their civilizations, is questionable.

The term Global South mainly refers to the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (ASAFLA), even though, strictly speaking, many of them are located north of the equator. Political economies of Western Europe and North America have defined the characteristics of Global North, which has a relatively higher per capita income, free market economy, and liberal democratic polity. But there are problems in the way that these categories are defined. Japan, located in Asia, is actually part of the Global North in terms of its national income per capita. China, the world's second largest economy in terms of GDP since 2010, very much belongs to the category of developing countries or Global South in terms of national income per capita, despite its accelerated growth. More important, there are islands of Global North in terms of high income, living standards, and infrastructure in the Global South, and there are islands of Global South—poor and vulnerable sections and regions—in the Global North. When we use any of these terms—

Global South, Third World, developing country, or ASAFLA—three elements are stressed. First, located in the southern part of the world, these countries are mostly former colonies or semi-colonies that are engaged in consolidating their independence. Second, their economic conditions remains underdeveloped compared to those of the former colonial powers or developed countries of Europe and North America. Third, they are currently engaged in transforming the unequal global order, where the Global North enjoys more political, economic, technological, and cultural power than the Global South and accordingly has framed the rules of global governance during the past 200 years of colonial and postcolonial history. Undoubtedly, the term Global South has gained currency because some of the key elements in the other terms have lost centrality or have gained negative connotations (Williams, Meth, and Willis 2014).

With these clarifications, in this chapter, I first first discuss the concept of inequality and the various meanings associated with it. Then, I take up how the problems of economic and social inequalities have been addressed in the Global South. The debates over caste in India are used to illustrate some of the important questions with regard to addressing problems of structural inequalities. Next, I take up the discussion of how liberal democracy treats the issue of inequality and how it is handled in regimes governed by communist parties. I describe the experiences as deferred liberalism and acquiescent socialism. The latter is based on a discussion of China's reforms and their implications for promoting equality.

I contextualize this chapter keeping in view the century of anti-colonial struggles in ASAFLA and the postcolonial history, including the recent decades of globalization. Some key concepts define their character. One is the concept of *swaraj*, which was advocated by Mohandas Gandhi. He argued that swaraj, or self-rule, meant not only replacing colonial rule with rule by people of the country but also self-realization or self-determination of each individual, group, and region. It meant multidimensional freedom from various kinds of bondages or dominations. In the same vein, another concept is relevant—that of *jiefang*, described by Mao Zedong, which, like Gandhi's movement, focused on the struggle against political domination of all kinds, including feudalism and colonialism. In the postcolonial setting, another concept became relevant—that of *samata*, the notion of social equality propounded by Ambedkar and popularized in the 1990s even though Ambedkar had advocated it in the course of writings and acts in programs in his lifetime. It was in India in 1990 after the implementation of the Mandal Commission report, which required (p. 216) special provisions to improve the backward castes, that Ambedkar's philosophy of equality acquired great currency. Yet another critical concept is *ubuntu*, "I am because you are"—the Zulu notion of mutual interdependence of people irrespective of race and color or other social divisions. The *ubuntu* discourse of Nelson Mandela tried to establish a relationship of harmony among the Blacks and Whites and others in South Africa aimed at establishing social equality (Mohanty 2018).

In the post-Soviet era of globalization, there is a very different trend in the rising wave of capitalist free trade throughout the world. But even in the global era, capitalist economies have faced crises of one kind or another, and global political interventions of the United States and its allies have faced challenges. The debates raged around the crisis of capitalism that unfolded in 2008, and movements such as “Occupy Wall Street” and the “1% versus 99%” placed on center stage the question of growing inequality under the present phase of capitalism. The climate change crisis acquired alarming proportions, with countries of the Global South, especially China and India, contributing massively to global warming. This led thinkers who speculated on the global future to draw attention to the challenges of the era of Anthropocene (Falk 2017). Cultural and religious crises and terrorist actions that have become increasingly serious in recent years gave rise to fresh reflections on the causes of alienation of communities and regions leading to multiple cycles of violence and counterviolence (Juergensmeyer 2008). Many economists throughout the world noted the growing dangers of the rising trend of inequality (Stiglitz 2012). Piketty’s (2014) historical analysis based on statistical data on income and wealth taxes from approximately the past 200 years showed how the concentration of wealth was a persisting trend in Europe and the United States except for the period of 1913–1948 and was likely to grow in the twenty-first century. It was a powerful warning that initiated a worldwide debate, with many not sharing his conclusions. Some pointed out that he neglected the fact that capitalism in its current phase produced growth of output without providing adequate employment (Patnaik 2014, 2016). Warnings have been given at different points in time by many others (Amin 1997, 2009; dos Santos 2010; Nayyar 2013). Since these developments and debates comprised the foundation of the United Nation’s (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) formulated in 2015, they might collectively be called the SDG moment. They represented an acknowledgment of persisting problems on a global scale. Whereas equality and freedom in a multidimensional framework informed the swaraj, jiefang, samata, and ubuntu moments, the SDG moment recorded an acquiescence of prevailing inequality with dangerous consequences for the global future.

Inequality as a Power Relationship

Two issues have emerged as critical to the meaning of inequality at this point of the twenty-first century. One is that inequality is not just about the uneven possession or quantitative difference in which individuals, groups, regions, or other entities are placed. It is about the conditions that allow certain groups to dominate over others. Inequality is a power relationship. This is important to consider because unequal power relations propel the process of more inequality on increasingly more fronts. At the same time, (p. 217) unless sources of power in income, wealth, knowledge, culture, and other capacities are shared, the power relationship cannot become equitable. The second issue that has emerged in recent years is the recognition that inequality is a cumulative condition and cannot be reduced to any one aspect, even though some aspects may be more important than others in a specific context. For example, universal adult franchise, one of the most valued achievements of modern history, provided political equality to all citizens as voters irrespective of social origin, education, income, and wealth. But economic inequality, caste, gender, religion, and racial discrimination severely limit political equality in real life. Therefore, the centrality of power and the multidimensionality of inequality have stood out as the crucial elements in the definition of inequality in recent years (Mohanty 1983).

Those who dismiss the idea of equality as a utopian value that can never be attained mistake it for what Aristotle called “numerical equality” or what might be called arithmetic equality. Mechanically giving equal quantity to everyone is what is meant in this use of the concept. Proponents of this view often are heard saying “Five fingers are never equal,” “No two humans are equal,” or similar statements. Such views take equality as sameness. Justification of prevailing inequalities as “natural” results from such thinking. This view is widespread because the elites of society who wield power lend their support to such views. When such views were firmly challenged and equality became a cherished value as a result of a civilizational movement of humankind, then this view took another form. It was said that equality was the goal, but it would take time—a long time—to reach that goal. To achieve that end, the argument went, there must be economic growth and social stability, peace and order. This put equality as a lower order value preceded by peace and order.

Once we are clear that equality is not about mechanical “leveling” of living conditions, we have to identify the main elements of this concept. Equal respect for every human being and access to life conditions that a civilization at a historical moment considers necessary for the fulfillment of the creative potentiality of a human being are the two main elements of the concept of equality. Each of these elements is broad and can be subject to a variety of interpretations (Beteille 1977). Respect for a human being involves respecting his or her language, culture, and religion. This basic concept is affirmed by Buddha’s affirmation of the divinity in each being, including human beings; the declaration of “Aham Brahmashmi” (“the divine is in me”) in the ancient Indian texts, the Upanishads; and the description in the Bible and Koran that all humans are children of God. But power divisions in society have made them abstract, and inequality has persisted in multiple forms. In the twenty-first century, the demand is to set it in concrete. Even though in 1948 the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* asserted the equality of all humans, the rights of nations to self-determination, the rights of indigenous people, and many other movements for the equality of all humans have remained constrained by competition for power and the forces of economic and political hegemony. The anti-colonial struggles and the Third World movement championed this trend until the 1980s; the socialist and communist movements affirmed equality as a value and a policy objective until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since then, the worldwide spread of neoliberal reforms has subordinated equality as a value and a policy objective to achieving productivity, growth, and political stability—hence the paradox of declining equality even as the rhetoric of equality continues to resound.

(p. 218) Inequality: Multiple Sources

The multidimensional aspects of equality have had a complex history. The liberal democratic path focused on universal adult franchise and equality before law. In other words, political equality was put at the center. Modern liberal democracies such as the United States and India included it in their constitutions and have evolved elaborate structures of independent judiciary to ensure that no citizen can be denied rights on account of social origin, religion, race, caste, and gender. It was realized, however, that disadvantaged sections historically placed lower in social structures due to inherited conditions or for other reasons needed opportunities to make up for their disadvantages. Hence, the concept of equality of opportunity became popular. To provide equal opportunity to all sections of society with regard to education, the common school system emerged in the United Kingdom, which in the past had been famous for its elite schools and colleges for the aristocracy not only in the United Kingdom but also in its colonies throughout the world. In the United States, the neighborhood school system and public universities were open to all. In India and many postcolonial countries, government schools were set up to provide educational opportunities for all children irrespective of caste, class, and religion.

Similarly, the public health systems in the United Kingdom and India provided common access to health care. In addition, equal wages for equal work was a great advancement in this process. The welfare state emerged as the new agency of providing equal opportunities to all sections of society. The state was more active in the Global South because it had higher levels of poverty, malnutrition, and social inequality. It was realized, however, that in both the Global South and the Global North, “equality of opportunity” operating in an unequal social order still favored the privileged, better off, powerful sections, and unless special support was accorded to the more disadvantaged, inequality would persist. It was realized in the pre-liberalization era that in the context of economic reforms, inequalities were likely to be further widened. Hence, there was believed to be a need to set aside “reservation” of seats in the legislature and positions in government jobs and university placement in countries such as India and for “affirmative action” or “equal opportunity” initiatives in many countries of the Global North, especially the United States (Galanter 1984; Sheth 2004).

The Indian Model of Fighting Social Inequality

The Constitution of India, which came into force in 1950, provided for “reservation” of seats in the legislatures at the state assemblies and in Parliament for the Scheduled Castes (SCs; former so-called “untouchable castes” constitute approximately 16% of India’s population) and Scheduled Tribes (STs; the numerous tribes living mostly in hilly areas, which comprise approximately 7% of the population); the number of seats set aside for them was to be proportionate to their percentage of the population. It also provided reservation in civil services for the SCs and the STs proportionately. Although the constitution had provided it initially for 10 years, reservation has continued to be (p. 219) the state policy, and all political parties have been committed to continuing it. In 1990, the Indian government, with V. P. Singh as Prime Minister, implemented the Mandal Commission report, which recommended reservation in civil services and elsewhere for the “socially and educationally backward classes.” After some violent resistance from upper caste youth, this reservation for “OBCs” (other backward classes; mainly cultivating castes who were poorly represented in bureaucracy and the education sector) has also been implemented. Reservation of seats for OBCs was also gradually extended to educational institutions, schools as well as colleges. In addition to caste groups, there was reservation for women of at least one-third of the strength, also provided in rural local government and urban bodies under the 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Indian constitution in 1992. However, the campaign for a similar reservation for women in Parliament and state assemblies led to the introduction of a law in Parliament that failed to pass (Shirin Rai et al. 2006). In India, religious minorities such as Muslims have suffered much exclusion, as exposed by the Sachar Committee report in 2006. But measures to rectify this inequality have stalled in debates among political parties (Z. Hasan 2009).

The Indian experiment in reservation has exposed some important dimensions of the prevailing approaches to promoting equality. The liberal democratic approach values equality of opportunity and insists on the principle of fair competition for various positions. Therefore, the insistence on the principle of merit is common. This is where there emerge two lines of action. One is to take “affirmative action” by giving support to the weaker sections. For example, in the United States, educational facilities and some living amenities were provided to Blacks, and thereafter the policy was to employ merit-based selection. In Canada and some Scandinavian countries, government-funded public health systems and educational facilities for all residents provide an even better framework for “equality of opportunities.” But in countries such as India, these measures are considered inadequate and hence the need for reservation of seats set aside for the marginalized groups. Occasionally, the reservation system in India has invited criticism from those who think that it is an unfair system denying “equal opportunity” to many who happen to be born to upper caste families. Countering that viewpoint is the powerful argument that for centuries some castes have suffered discrimination and humiliation, and it is necessary to continue giving them protection in legislatures, services, and education. The other argument is that quality of services was affected adversely because the candidates with lower marks had been admitted to professional institutions for higher education and were poorly trained. That argument appeared specious because every educational system had to cater to an uneven group of students and train them to acquire a certain level of skill and knowledge. In India, the reservation debate has periodically been highly charged. The merit argument had much backing among the elites, who were still dominated by the upper castes. Many reserved posts remained vacant because there were not enough candidates from the SCs and STs who qualified for the posts. Even the small number who did qualify generally adopted the cultural moorings of the upper caste. Many sectors, such as the defense forces, the police, and the judiciary, remained outside the sphere of reservation. Although there were powerful laws to prevent atrocities against the SCs and STs, prescribing tough punishment—the 1989 legislation was given more teeth in 2015—the number of atrocities remained high. This showed that the prevailing policies had many gaps.

(p. 220) Reservation and Affirmative Action

Although the elites claimed that affirmative action and reservation were enough to promote equality, in fact these measures were inadequate. In reality, these measures had become an alibi for not taking fundamental measures to address long-standing inequalities of caste, race, and gender. Because such inequalities had a strong basis in the economy and culture, comprehensive reforms were required. For example, in India most dalits were landless agricultural laborers. Therefore, access to productive resources such as land and credit was key to the development of the oppressed. In order to use it profitably, they must have education and proper health conditions. But in India, land reforms have failed to provide adequate land to the poor. The SC and ST finance corporations have too few funds to provide enough credit and intervene effectively in the bleak situation. The corporate sector has firmly declined to provide reservation for the SCs, STs, and OBCs on the ground that doing so would adversely affect their global competitiveness. Some dalit entrepreneurs have taken the initiative to establish the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICCI). They take the view that they can take advantage of the opportunities provided by the globalization process and make a profit. However, the DICCI is a small initiative in the vast arena of dalit deprivation.

In India, inequality in the education and health sectors remains high, and this has been accentuated in the era of market economy globalization. State funding for education and health was cut substantially under policies of fiscal discipline, which affected the poor sections of society, especially the SCs, STs, and OBCs. Private schools, colleges, and universities sprang up, attracting students from the wealthy sections of society. The standards of education in government schools declined so badly that parents had to seek resources to send their children to expensive private schools. Due to pressure from people’s movements, the government of India enacted the Right to Education Act in 2009, which was applauded as a substantial measure to promote equality because it provided free and compulsory elementary education for children aged 6–14 years. Alas, implementation of this measure failed, and although enrollment improved significantly, the dropout rate was high, especially among SC and ST children. Poverty and social conditions of the families were clearly a factor. A similar situation occurred with regard to health care. Public hospitals were starved of resources and the quality of their services declined considerably, resulting in the mushrooming of private clinics and corporate hospitals attracting those who could afford them. Thus, the neoliberal economy generated new inequalities as the state retreated from social welfare. The argument that economic growth with free enterprise would create enough opportunities for all to buy social services was not vindicated in practice, either in the Global South or in the Global North. This new inequality was particularly evident in the case of the people in the tribal regions in South Asia (Nathan and Xaxa 2012).

In the cultural realm, attitudes toward dalits and adivasis (tribal people) remained prejudiced; just as in other areas of the world, many Whites have continued to treat people of color differently as well. Gender disparity also persists because patriarchy has had a strong basis not only in the economy but also in Indian culture. The idea that all humans, irrespective of identity, deserve equal respect was still not imparted in early education or in early childhood socialization in family and society. Debates on continuing cultural degradation (p. 221) and humiliation of the oppressed groups, especially the dalits in India, show the serious magnitude of this phenomenon (Guru, 2011; Ilaiah 2009).

Thus, the measures of reservation and affirmative action have been grossly inadequate in reducing inequality even though they must be defended as a minimum step to recognize and tackle the problem of social inequality. Many critics argued that what was needed was a "structural affirmation" involving economic, cultural, and political measures that addressed the roots of long-standing inequalities. Currently, reservation has become an alibi for not taking adequate structural measures. Advertising that one entity was "an equal opportunity organization" or that "its diversity index" was better than average or that reserve seats were filled was not enough. This is why Ambedkar gave a call for the "annihilation of caste," which was also the title of his monumental essay in 1936 in which he asked dalits to "educate, organise and agitate' " (Ambedkar 1936). Finding that the Hindu religion was not amenable to social transformation from within, he converted to Buddhism in the final years of his life. He demonstrated that economic, political, and cultural measures were equally important in addressing the question of inequality. But important issues were raised by many other liberal democrats as well as Marxists, both in theory and in practice. Whereas the former insisted that any program in the name of reducing inequality must not deny freedom to citizens, the latter debated on the stages of social development to promote equality.

Priority of Liberty over Equality: Deferred Liberalism

The discourse on justice in a democracy gave centrality to the idea of the freedom of the individual. The formulation of John Rawls that “justice was fairness” rested on this idea. Through education, employment facilities, and so on, the state had to create the minimum conditions to enable individuals to exercise freedom. But in no case should the state play this role to infringe on the rights of the individual so as to violate principles of political liberalism. The debate regarding the relationship between freedom and equality that was ongoing among the social contract theorists in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe has persisted into contemporary times. It is generally believed that John Locke gave priority to liberty, whereas Jean-Jacques Rousseau gave priority to equality, even though there are many complex arguments over their positions. The establishment of the communist party regime in Russia and fascist states in Germany and Italy greatly influenced this debate in the second half of the twentieth century. The Soviet state had undertaken tasks in the name of promoting equality that restricted freedom of citizens. The fascist regime had a program of providing welfare to all as a part of its racist agenda. Therefore, it was understandable to give priority to liberty. But as scholars such as C. B. Macpherson have noted, recalling the argument of Rousseau, such a perspective became one of possessive individualism in which individuals were mainly viewed as propertied agents engaged in making personal profit. That more likely caused greater inequalities in society. Instead, individuals could be perceived as creative beings working together with others to promote the welfare of all. This argument recorded a high point of the radical stream within liberalism. Thereafter, capitalism took the neoliberal turn, experiencing a moment of triumph with the collapse (p. 222) of the Soviet Union in 1991. The promise of resolving the dichotomy between liberty and equality by making the two interdependent, which Rousseau and his successors advocated, was given up for a new wave of capitalism that promoted individual freedom and enterprise. This era can be called one of deferred liberalism because it opted for treating equality as a second-order value, giving priority to liberty. The emergence of the United States as the single superpower exercising hegemony throughout the world and Western capital and technology, especially communication and information technology, as the driving force of global development provided the political support to the new wave of thought that asserted superiority of Western values, culture, and religion. That ran counter to the trends that had risen since the anti-colonial struggles, affirming equality and dignity of nations, cultures, religions, and people’s right to self-determination. As a result, confrontations emerged in different areas of the world regarding the question of equality. The rise of terrorism and fundamentalism, including violent terrorist attacks conducted by Islamic groups and counter-attacks by the United States and its allies, may have many causes, but the demand for equality is one of them (Mohanty 1983).

The Marxist Approach to Inequality: Acquiescent Socialism in China

China's experience during the past half century—the Cultural Revolution (CR) under the leadership of Mao Zedong (1966–1976) and the reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping—reasonably illustrates the Marxist approach to reducing inequality. The CR reaffirmed the centrality of the equality principle in socialism and communism. Capitalism, it was argued, negated the equality principle by appropriating the surplus value of labor and accumulated profit, denying labor its due. Hence, socialism sought to alter the production system by introducing collective and state ownership and used state power to ensure that workers got their due. Before the CR, the CPC under Mao's leadership had already established people's communes, recalling the model of Paris Communes of 1871, to put into practice collective ownership of land. Under this system, from 1958 until 1978, land was collectively owned by the village community, and wages were distributed according to work points given to laborers. This and many other institutions of socialist construction of the Mao era were dismantled, and a new system of what was later called "socialist market economy" was introduced with the launching of "reforms and open door" policies in 1978 under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. Mao's economic policies were criticized by Deng and colleagues for promoting equality prematurely even before material conditions of production had developed. Hence, the Deng era reforms focused on the single point of "economic construction." Reforms meant changing state and collective ownership to private, joint, and multiple forms of ownership that promoted growth of production. Making all production units oriented toward market and bearing gains and losses depending on their performance in the competitive market economy. Open door meant opening the opportunities to procure capital and technology from abroad as well as from within the country and producing for the market. Agricultural land, still owned by the village, was now contracted to households (p. 223) on a long-term basis, allowing household members the freedom to allocate labor and thus allowing many of them to join rural industries or migrate to cities for work. A principle that was enforced without exception was the "production responsibility system." Instead of workers getting fixed wages for work, now their wages depended on their contribution to the profit of the enterprise. Hard-working workers producing more output received more wages. If the unit suffered losses, the workers received less wages and less or no bonuses. Mao-era wage policy was denounced as "every one eating from the iron bowl," with the implication that both the lazy and the hard-working laborer received the same compensation. There were many other fundamental changes in the economy along this line (Mohanty 2014).

The reforms in China achieved spectacular success, raising Chinese people's living standards, introducing world-class infrastructure in the cities, allowing China to grow into the status of the world's second largest economy by 2010, and achieving a pride of place in the global community. But this path of development has given rise to many serious problems, including a growing inequality and the rise of disparities among social groups, regions, and ethnic communities, along with a persistent gender gap. Rural–urban disparities in income, educational and health facilities, and employment opportunities grew faster during the course of reforms, although they had shown encouraging signs in the first decade of reforms when rural industries and collective investment in welfare improved the conditions in the countryside. By 2000, CPC leaders were talking about the "three rural problems": environmental degradation, distress migration from the countryside, and the crisis of the floating population—urban residents who were not entitled to the same amenities as the city's registered citizens (with city *hukou*). The high degree of corruption and widespread phenomenon of consumerism, selfishness, and the breakdown of moral behavior were some of the trends recognized by China's leaders. The anti-corruption campaign of Xi Jinping exposed the magnitude of some of these problems.

The China experience showed that there were no easy ways to implement the principle of equality. Marx had made a distinction between two principles, one for the socialist stage and another for communism. The socialist principle of "from each according to his/her ability, to each according to his/her work" ("her" is added) meant that because workers will avail the results of their labor, they will work to the best of their ability. But still there would be a valuation of their work, and accordingly they would receive wages as per the value of their work. In other words, there would be inequality of wages because socialism was regarded as a transitional system to communism. In the communist stage of social development, however, the principle of distribution would be "from each according to his/her ability, to each according to his/her need." According to Marx, the productive forces would have developed well and workers' self-management system put in place, resulting in full satisfaction of every person's needs. In the socialist stage, there would be inequality, but much less than that under capitalism. This is where Mao Zedong had advocated a faster pace of reduction of inequality, and the rule was not to exceed the ratio of one to eight. Gradually, three major differences had to be addressed: manual and mental labor, rural and urban societies, and factory worker and farm peasant roles. Priority was to be given to reducing these inequalities even if it led to a slower rate of economic growth. On this issue, Deng Xiaoping radically departed from Mao. According to Deng, economic growth must be given priority. He theorized that socialism was a long historical period of transition and China was in the "primary stage of socialism," which was likely to also be a long period. (p. 224) He wanted China to adopt a market economy, management system, and science and technology from the advanced capitalist countries and apply them to China's specific conditions, maintaining full control by the communist party. Indeed, that has led to the present stage of China's development, one marked by tremendous economic success but accompanied by serious sociopolitical and ecological problems (Mohanty 2017). Today, China boasts of some of the world's top billionaires, and the income disparities are stunningly high.

Thus, socialist experiments have settled for tolerating high degrees of inequality—social, economic, and political. Political inequality is manifest in two ways. One is the monopoly of power by the communist party and the other is the rise of the new class of bourgeoisie that is a major participant in the market economy and therefore wields power. This phenomenon of what can be called "acquiescent socialism" is regarded by many as a system of developing capitalism with Chinese specificities maintaining and reproducing inequalities old and new. China's reforms have coincided with the growth of neoliberal globalization, and China has taken full advantage of it and has championed the principles of globalization and free trade while some countries have experienced nationalist and protectionist waves. The socialist agenda of promoting equality has been relegated to the background by most communist parties in power.

The SDG Moment and the Global South

Deferred liberalism that promoted free enterprise and an acquiescent socialism that focused on economic growth both converged to shape the political economy of the Global South. Neoliberal economic reforms were adopted by India, China and the other BRICS countries—Brazil, South Africa, and Russia (which although not geographically located in the south, it is economically in close proximity). Reducing inequality had become a low priority. In India under the Congress-led regime, for example, there were a spate of poverty reduction and welfare support programs, such as the Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, and the Food Security Act, 2013. Under the BJP-led regime, bank accounts for obtaining credit and support for startup programs were made available to help the poor. China had been more successful in reducing poverty by region-specific support programs. But the fact that poverty is rooted in unequal access to productive resources is not taken into account in either case. As a result, inequality persisted and even increased. Persistent inequality was a major cause of alienation, protest, and resistance.

In addition, the phenomenon of economic inequality was seen together with lack of respect for culture, religion, and knowledge systems of the communities of the Global South. Just as economic exploitation had occurred with cultural subjugation during the colonial times, the era of globalization had produced a peculiar semblance with that experience. In fact, anti-colonial struggles had largely succeeded in regaining cultural confidence of the southern countries and built up postcolonial cultural and educational systems to promote indigenous knowledge. That had been under threat in the face of a global capitalist drive that was welcomed enthusiastically by local elites. There were, no doubt, continuing challenges to the globalization policies that used the local elite to extract natural resources from the ASAFLA countries. Global corporations used the creed (p. 225) of free trade to establish themselves in the resource-rich countries—some characterize it as resource-cursed countries—and not only remove their minerals but also use those countries as markets for their products. Thus, according to critics, economic exploitation and cultural subjugation went together, making a mockery of national independence promised by the charter of the UN. Post-national global community was meant to enhance autonomy of the local, national, and regional entities to interact on terms of equality and dignity. On the other hand, inequality between the units at every level had increased.

In 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the SDGs for 2015–2030. They replaced the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals of 2000–2015), which constituted a landmark declaration in contemporary history. Yet the 17 global goals with 169 targets only marginally focused on reducing inequality. Besides a commitment to the promotion of gender inequality in goal 5, it declared a commitment to work for "reducing income inequality within and among countries" (goal 10). All the goals were certainly laudable and were necessary for human development, and they would also impact on reducing inequality (Sachs 2015). But the thrust on the specific welfare programs did not have a coherent focus on the major issues of the age, namely the demand for equality and freedom for struggling people. The fact that income inequality was part of the problem of cumulative inequalities was hardly appreciated. Reduction of arithmetic inequality or quantitative trends in raising income of the lower strata was only one aspect, whereas many other dimensions of discrimination and oppression remained active. From this viewpoint, the SDGs seemed to be meant to service the globalization agenda of the dominant global elite, which also included the elite of the Global South. These goals were meant to manage the tensions generated by the expansion of the free market economy and aid the economic growth agenda. Hence, the SDG moment represented the historic acquiescence with prevailing inequalities in the contemporary world.

Whereas the anti-colonial era upheld the movement for swaraj and jiefang and the post-colonial global society stressed the vision of samata and ubuntu, the globalization era diffused and redirected historical processes toward a new version of the unequal world. The SDGs embodied that. But forces unleashed by the movements for swaraj, jiefang, samata, and Ubuntu in the Global South had resounded in the Global North as well. Therefore, struggles for equality were bound to continue on a global scale even when the power elites throughout the world sought to dilute the equality movements to promote their agenda of economic growth driven by the free market. The Buddha's challenge presented more than 2,000 years ago has continued to confront twenty-first century elites in the Global South as well as in the Global North, who are preoccupied with economic growth and political stability. If that challenge for the equal dignity of all goes unheeded, the likelihood is greater for continued alienation and violence in the global future.

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Notes:

(1.) Hazrat Hassan, "The Gap Between China's Rich and Poor Is Growing," *Foreign Policy News* (May 17, 2016), http://foreignpolicynews.org/2016/05/17/gap-chinas-rich-poor-growing.

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