

Challenges of universalising social policy: India in comparative perspective



A workshop

Convened by **Dr. Indrajit Roy**
Wednesday 16 November 2016

Private Dining Room, Wolfson College, Linton Road, Oxford, OX2 6UD

To offset the challenge posed by the persistence and production of global poverty, a number of countries in the Global South have established social policy programs, or policies aimed to protect people from falling into poverty and to help raise those in poverty out of it. Such programs transcend short-term poverty alleviation strategies and are of particular importance in regions where forms of equity-focused collective action are rare or weak. Some are potentially transformative in that they well-resourced, state-based, demand-driven and rights-based. However, they remain uneven and variegated in their scope and reach. The experience of social policy in India illustrates the variegated and fragmented nature of social policy. The recent India Exclusion Report authored by actors in India's civil society bears this out. The Report examines key questions pertaining to social exclusion in India: who is excluded from equitable access to public goods, why and by what processes is such exclusion or adverse inclusion accomplished, and what can be done to achieve a more just and equitable society? This is not to deny the existence of wide-ranging social policies in the country. For instance, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act benefits no fewer than 50 million families. Additionally, the Indian government has instituted old age pensions, maternity benefits, and subsidised food and housing, albeit for populations targeted as living 'below the poverty line' rather than as a universal social right. Proponents of inclusive social policy have taken heart from the universalisation of food security promised under the National Food Security Act. Recent conversations have turned to a focus on universalising basic incomes. Nevertheless, universal coverage of social policy pertaining to such critical areas such as education, health, incomes and insurance and food security remain outside the purview of political and public policy discourse. Furthermore, social policies are rarely embedded in vocabularies of inclusion, rights and social justice. Although the Indian Government espouses the principle of inclusive growth, universal social policy remains a distant dream.

The objective of the workshop is, thus, to collectively reflect on the political and social drivers for the adoption of inclusive social policy. How and why do governments institute inclusive social policy? Although the empirical focus of the workshop is India, the discussions will situate the Indian case in comparative perspective. The thrust towards universalisation in Latin American countries and the debates in southern Africa around universalising basic incomes are important points of reference. What lessons can be learnt from these countries for the Indian case? What does the Indian experience with social policy teach us about social policy more broadly? These are some of the questions with which the consultation will engage.

Harsh Mander, human rights activist and Director of the Delhi-based Center for Equity Studies, will draw out key findings from the *India Exclusion Report 2015* (of which he is one of the authors) for the participants' consideration.

Please find an outline agenda overleaf.

Agenda

09:00–09:45 **Registration and light breakfast**

09:45–10:00 **Welcome remarks and introductions**

Indrajit Roy, ESRC Research Fellow, University of Oxford

10:00–10:45 **India Exclusion Report 2015**

30-minute presentation by Harsh Mander, Director, Centre for Equity Studies
Followed by 15-minute Q&A

10:45–11:45 **The challenge of universalising social policy in India**

Social exclusion in India is produced and perpetuated by a complex of social attitudes, political manoeuvres, bureaucratic capacities and policy choices. A key feature of social policy in India is its limited reach. The objective of this session is to analyse the constraints to the universalisation of social policy in India.

Why, despite high rates of economic growth, does social policy remain fragmented in India? What political factors restrain the universalisation of social policy in India? What positive lessons can Indian States learn from one another? Are there any successful social programs that have in fact reduced social exclusion? If so, what can we learn from them in terms of instituting universal social programs that respect people's dignity? What, in particular, can we learn about the social inclusion of people who confront chronic forms of exclusion, such as itinerant labour migrants, denotified tribal groups and street children? These are some of the questions which the participants will consider during this session.

Principal speakers: Amrita Chhachhi, Barbara Harriss-White, Harsh Mander, Jan Breman, Jonathan Pattenden (TBC), Judith Heyer, Matthew McCartney

11:45–12:00 **Tea/ coffee break**

12:00–12:45 **Global perspectives**

Universalising social policy is not a challenge faced by India alone. Other regions across the world face and have faced similar challenges. What lessons can we learn from the cases where social policies have been universalised: what political and social factors facilitated universalisation? What can we learn from other contexts where universalisation has been limited and fragmentation continues to be the norm: what political and social factors hinder universalisation? What, in particular, can we learn about the social inclusion of people who confront chronic forms of exclusion, such as migrant populations? What lessons can we glean from a study of other contexts in terms of instituting universal social programs that protect and promote human dignity? Participants will consider these questions during this session.

Principal speakers: Diego Sanchez-Ancochea, Elaine Chase, Ilcheong Yi, Jonathan Wolff, Lucy Scott, Marie Godin, Oliver Bakewell (TBC), Stephanie de Chasse

12:45–13:00 **Conclusions and ways forward**

13:00–14:00 **Lunch**

In the afternoon, Harsh Mander will talk about his new book *Looking Away: Inequality, Prejudice and Indifference in the New India*. The book talk is scheduled from 14:00–15:30. Consultation participants are very welcome to attend.

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