Social Inequality in India

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Abstract: This paper examines the multifaceted nature of social inequality in India. It focuses on the relationship between historical legacies and contemporary dynamics. It investigates how the caste system, shaped by late colonial and postcolonial states, continues to impact social structures in rural and urban settings. An in-depth analysis of contemporary village hierarchy, social class, and habitus formation aims to highlight the complex interplay between caste, class, and sociocultural elements.

The study identifies 14 social types across three sociocultures, forming distinct yet co-existing hierarchies. It reveals the persistence of pre-capitalist and postcolonial habitus traits and the formation of hybrid habitus resulting from the encroachment of the capitalist urban economy into rural areas. The research emphasizes the significant impact of caste membership on social class, with the marginalized class predominantly consisting of Dalits and other underprivileged communities.

The paper concludes that while capitalist transformation facilitates social mobility, the legacy of precolonial structures, colonialism, caste, and the developmentalist state persist and shape social classes, indicating the reproduction of social inequality from colonial to postcolonial times. To fully understand the nature of inequality in India, examining the interplay between historical legacies and contemporary dynamics is crucial.

This paper aims to examine the multifaceted nature of social inequality in India. In doing so, it transcends the conventional definition of social inequality, which is commonly limited to socioeconomic markers, such as income distribution or educational attainment, or the secondary interpretation of one particular aspect, such as caste. Instead, the study seeks to understand social inequality in its entirety, with a focus on the hierarchical structure of the Indian nation state. To achieve this objective, the study relied on primary data obtained from 120 life-course interviews conducted between 2015 and 2020 in nearly all Indian states. By drawing on this fieldwork, this study aims to shed light on the social and political factors that perpetuate social inequality in India. The research aims to contribute to an understanding of the dynamics of social inequality in the Indian context.

The theoretical and methodological approach used in this study is informed by a comparative research program on social inequality, as outlined by Jodhka et al. (2017). This program focuses on the emergence of social classes in capitalist societies across the globe. The program's central thesis contends that the transition to a capitalist democracy does not eliminate pre-existing structures of inequality, referred to as sociocultures, which persist despite the formal equality of

citizens in a fully developed democracy. This perspective posits that structures of social inequality and domination are more fundamental than capitalism, democracy, or the market. The accompanying theoretical framework provides a comprehensive understanding of social inequality that goes beyond economic markers such as income or education. By taking a comparative approach to the study of social inequality, the research aims to identify the underlying factors and processes that shape social inequality in different societies.

The study found that precolonial village and state structures continue to have a significant impact on contemporary inequalities, albeit through a colonial and postcolonial transformation. These earlier sociocultures only partially overlap with the rural-urban divide and are linked to the extent of the capitalist transformation. It is crucial to distinguish between a complex precapitalist socioculture and an emerging capitalist class society that reproduces some of the earlier inequalities. While caste, mainly in its late colonial and early postcolonial form, remains relevant in the precapitalist socioculture, it significantly influences class structures without being evident. The research identified four strata in the rural setting, two in the postcolonial state, five emerging social classes, and three transitional groups. These findings reveal the complexity and nuances of social inequality in contemporary India and highlight the need to understand the historical, cultural, and economic factors that contribute to its persistence. By delving deeper into the ways in which these structures interact, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of social inequality in India and develop more effective policies to address them.

The paper is organized into four main sections, each with a specific purpose. The first section defines the key concepts and theoretical framework used in the analysis, providing the reader with an understanding of the analytical tools employed. This ensures that the reader is equipped to engage critically with the results presented in the subsequent sections. The second section of the paper focuses on the methodology employed, which is described in detail to promote transparency and enable the reader to assess the validity of the findings. The third section of the paper is dedicated to outlining the emergence of the current class structure in India, drawing on both secondary literature and fieldwork data. This section provides a historical perspective on the development of social inequality in India, highlighting the key factors that have contributed to its current form. The final section introduces the social structure of contemporary India, emphasizing the types of habitus and the distribution of capital. By providing a comprehensive overview of the social and economic structure of contemporary India, this section sheds light on the complex and dynamic nature of social inequality in the country. Through its organization and content, this paper aims to provide an analysis of social inequality in India that is grounded in empirical evidence and supported by a theoretical framework.

Concepts

The theoretical framework used in this research on inequality is based on Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, although it has been adapted in several ways. Firstly, Bourdieu developed his theory in the context of a European society with a longstanding history of capitalism, whereas most societies studied have experienced the transition to capitalism more recently and have a colonial past. Secondly, Bourdieu's frame of reference did not yet take into account the effects of globalization, neoliberalism, and mass migration. Thirdly, Bourdieu did not effectively operationalize his concepts. In light of these shortcomings and the results of our research in non-European countries (Jodhka, Rehbein and Souza, 2017), the following paragraphs will revise Bourdieu's framework, thus providing a more comprehensive understanding of inequality in contemporary societies and

its relationship to social class, education, and cultural practices. Through these revisions, we will address the gaps in Bourdieu's framework and offer a more nuanced understanding of the social dynamics of inequality.

The focus of our research is on social inequality, which is a multifaceted phenomenon that extends beyond the distribution of economic resources and encompasses access to valued activities, positions, and forms of capital. Bourdieu's work has been instrumental in shaping our understanding of social inequality as a complex system that is determined not only by economic resources, but also by other forms of capital and habitus. In his book Distinction, Bourdieu argues that social inequality is the result of differential access to these forms of capital, which are often passed down from one generation to the next. Given the role of inheritance in perpetuating these inequalities, social inequality is best understood as a structure rather than a result of individual competition. By adopting this broad view of social inequality as a complex and entrenched system, our research aims to shed light on the multiple dimensions of inequality and identify opportunities for addressing its underlying structural causes (Bourdieu 1984).

In a capitalist society, the unequal distribution of resources has significant implications for social structures, access to valuable goods, positions, and activities. As Bourdieu has argued, resources can be analyzed as different forms of capital: economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital. For example, possessing economic capital alone is not sufficient for gaining entry into exclusive circles of the elite or achieving political influence, as other forms of capital such as cultural and social capital are necessary to complement economic capital. Those who lack social, cultural, and symbolic capital, regardless of their economic status, may find themselves excluded from the upper social class. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of social inequality must take into account not only the total amount of capital but also the relative strength of each type of capital and the history of their acquisition. By examining the role of various forms of capital in shaping social inequality, our research aims to identify the underlying factors that perpetuate these inequalities and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of their impact on society as a whole (Bourdieu 1984, 109).

Conversely, it is apparent that these Bourdieusian categories of capital are only relevant to European capitalist nation-states. Cultural capital, for instance, is evaluated differently in non-European contexts, whereas social and symbolic capital are formed in a distinct manner. Nevertheless, the fundamental categories remain surprisingly comparable to those found in European societies. This is because almost all societies have undergone a capitalist transformation, and many have a colonial history. In our research conducted in India, we found that wealth, income, educational title, quality of school, social networks, and organizational memberships are significant indicators of capital. However, we had to add caste, community, and family indicators, while leaving out European highbrow culture.

The concept of habitus, as defined by Bourdieu, plays a crucial role in understanding the reproduction of social inequality. Habiti are embodied cultures that act as a psychosomatic memory, which is acquired through repeated practice and tends to become a stable pattern of behavior (Bourdieu 1977). This pattern is activated when similar situations arise, and the environment is stable, resulting in a permanent pattern of activity. Social conditions are inscribed onto the body, producing expectations and patterns of action that are adapted to the conditions. Therefore, habitus is generated by social conditions and, in turn, produces and reproduces the social world. This psychosomatic memory, which is embodied in the habitus, is a vital link between the individual and the larger social structures that they are situated in. Understanding the habitus

allows us to analyze how social structures are reproduced through the actions of individuals.

The concept of habitus in the Bourdieusian sense, has been criticized for its imprecise use and lack of operationalization. While the concept has been applied to all societies and contexts, the absence of a defined scope for the concept leads to weak statistical correlations and an imprecise understanding of its function. Furthermore, in minimally differentiated societies, the concept of habitus does not make much sense in sociological terms, as social conditions are similar for everyone, and there is only one habitus without social distinction. To address these shortcomings, we restrict the term habitus to differentiated societies and the function of distinguishing social groups, and limit our study to the social habitus. This more specific use of the concept will help to provide a clearer understanding of the role of habitus in shaping patterns of action and social distinctions in different societies.

Our research suggests the need for a more precise delimitation and definition of the explanandum. Attempting to explain highly specific and variable dispositions - such as wine preferences - solely through the lens of habitus is not necessarily productive. Life-styles are multifaceted, partially conscious, and inherently fluid, and are therefore less relevant to explaining social structure than more fundamental aspects of habitus. Our proposed approach is to focus on deeply ingrained social attitudes, which are typically acquired in early childhood and are resistant to conscious modification. These attitudes are often shaped by the social environment of one's upbringing, typically within the family unit. Attitudes such as selfconfidence, independence, an appreciation for education and culture, ambition, and discipline are among the dispositions that prove relevant in a capitalist society, where they represent key resources in determining an individual's success or failure according to prevailing values and assessments. We refer to these early-acquired dispositions as the primary habitus, and operationalize our analysis by identifying habitus traits expressed by our interview partners that are rooted in their educational background and that they have consciously or unconsciously deemed significant in their lives.

Bourdieu's work has faced criticism for its relative neglect of the historical dimension and its failure to address the concept of sociocultures. Our research has revealed that social classes play a crucial role in structuring social inequality and reproducing it across generations within capitalist societies. Our definition of social class centers on a tradition line that perpetuates itself through the intergenerational transmission of relevant capital and habitus traits, while simultaneously establishing symbolic boundaries to distinguish itself from other social classes. We propose operationalizing our concept of social class by determining the limits of social mobility. In practice, these limits are seldom surpassed, indicating the existence of a common class culture based on both habitus and capital. As Thompson (1963) has noted, tradition lines serve as the foundation of this culture, perpetuating social stratification and class-based inequality through the reproduction of class-specific dispositions and resources.

While social class can provide a valuable lens for understanding inequality in nation-states with long histories of capitalism, it may not fully capture the complexity of social stratification in other societies. Indeed, many structures of inequality from the precapitalist era continue to shape social relations and must be interpreted within their unique historical, cultural, and societal contexts. To address this challenge, scholars have proposed the concept of socioculture as a means of interpreting social inequality in non-capitalist societies (Jodhka, Rehbein and Souza, 2017). Sociocultures are the predecessors and foundation of contemporary social classes, serving as social structures that configure inequality in capitalist and democratic societies. It is important to note that the concept of socioculture is not tied to any modernization theory, but rather

reflects the fact that almost all societies around the world have adopted some form of capitalism. As such, social classes are preconfigured by earlier sociocultures, and some of these structures of inequality persist even after the emergence of a class society. The concept of socioculture provides a framework for interpreting these structures and their impact on social inequality.

Methodology

Bourdieu did not utilize a methodology in the proper sense to study habitus. In our own research, we sought to address this issue and developed a methodological approach that extends beyond Bourdieu's original framework. Our methodology draws inspiration from the habitus hermeneutic (Lange-Vester and Teiwes-Kügler 2013) and the documentary method (Bohnsack 2014), both of which aimed at establishing a method of empirically studying habitus. The analysis of precapitalist sociocultures in our research makes use of the work by Thompson (1963) and Vester and Gardemin (2001), which requires a combination of historical research with ethnographic and life-course research. While these methodologies were originally developed for the study of Europe, we have adapted them to a non-European setting.

In order to gain insight into the primary habitus and its formation, we employ a life-course interview approach. This approach involves asking open-ended questions about various life stages, such as childhood, education, family, and future aspirations, as well as closed questions regarding social data and specific information related to capital and various aspects of habitus. It is important to note that interviews not only provide information but also constitute a social practice. As such, they reveal embodied patterns of action and speech, with the interaction between interviewer and interviewee influencing the way in which information is shared. Categories such as age, gender, education, and respect, which are closely linked to the primary habitus, play a crucial role in shaping the social relation between the interviewer and interviewee. By utilizing this life-course interview approach, we are able to gain a more nuanced understanding of the formation and manifestation of habitus in individuals' lives.

Karl Mannheim's (1964, 104) seminal study on habitus and his differentiation between what-meaning (information) and how-meaning (habitus) has been further developed into a refined methodology by Ralf Bohnsack (2014) in the context of Bourdieu's concept of habitus. In our study, we employed Bohnsack's "documentary method" to interpret our life-course interviews, with some modifications. The documentary method aims to construct habitus types in an inductive manner. The interpretation of the interviews involves a group discussion using a sequence analysis approach, which entails a sentence-by-sentence review of the interview. This methodology is closely related to other qualitative approaches, particularly the habitus hermeneutic, which also builds on Bourdieu's work and endeavors to inductively construct habitus traits as binary oppositions. By utilizing Bohnsack's documentary method in conjunction with other qualitative methods, we were able to construct a more comprehensive understanding of habitus and its manifestation in individuals' lives.

The interpretation of life-course interviews involves a four-step process. In the first step, the group conducts a sequence analysis to establish the what-meaning of one interview in a descriptive way. The second step focuses on the how-meaning and identifies characteristic categories. The third step involves comparing the categories and their combinations in the interpreted interviews to establish the relevant categories and their combinations. In the fourth and final step, types are constructed by identifying the actual combinations of characteristics in the interviews and

contrasting them with the results of statistical analyses, mainly a multiple correspondence analysis. This process allows for a thorough and systematic approach to the interpretation of the interviews, ensuring that the habitus traits identified are based on solid evidence and can be used to understand social structures and inequalities.

The final step, the construction of habitus types, is not very clear in the documentary method and theoretically problematic. Often, social research is limited to isolated items and their correlation. In research on social structure and inequality, this is often the correlation between education and income. We, however, look at a combination of habitus traits and capital categories. Only certain combinations of factors occur in reality while others are rare or even non-existent. In order to understand the probability of all possible combinations, we draw on Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1984) concept of family resemblance. Members of the same group share many characteristics but not all and not necessarily the same. Any particular characteristic may be absent but the majority will be present. Wittgenstein illustrates the varying combination of changing characteristics with regard to a family: All members of a family have some things in common but no two members share exactly the same characteristics. "Different similarities between the members of a family overlap and crisscross: stature, face, eye colour, walk, temper" (1984, aphorism 67). Family members share certain characteristics but not (all of them) in the same combination. It is not possible to reduce the characteristics to general categories shared by all members of the family. The characteristics embodied in the primary habitus can be understood as family resemblances. To identify likely combinations, construct social groups and establish habitus types, we apply a multiple correspondence analysis, which was also used by Bourdieu (1984).

Social classes emerge in a historical process out of pre-capitalist hierarchies, which partly persist as sociocultures, which are mainly theoretical constructions, even though they are rooted in historical formations. We studied sociocultures in four steps, linking it to the study of social class in a fifth step. The first step comprised the study of historical sources. The second step consisted in the generation of hypotheses about the recent social structures and their persistence as sociocultures. In the third step, the sociocultures were traced in the interview material. This is possible since some aspects of the primary habitus are passed on from at least one earlier generation, which has incorporated the structures of earlier historical times. It is possible to go back a century or so, as the oldest possible interviewees acquired their primary habitus up to around 80 years ago from their parents. The fourth step identifies typical family histories in the interview material. Finally, a hypothesis combining class structure, habitus types and sociocultures can be generated by linking sociocultures to habitus and capital in contemporary society. A multiple correspondence analysis will show clusters belonging to different sociocultures, if these are still relevant in contemporary society.

Caste

Caste seems to be at the core of inequality in India. Indeed, it is hard to overestimate the significance of caste for social inequality even in contemporary India. However, it is less exotic and peculiar than it seems. Caste, as we know it today, was at least partly shaped by colonial rule, while many aspects of caste exist in societies outside of South Asia as well. "Caste" itself is not even an Indian term. It was introduced by Portuguese seafarers in the early sixteenth century. But if we seek to establish the 'true' Indian meaning of caste, the result will be equally misleading. When and where would we locate the 'original' definition of caste? Certainly, caste existed before the arrival of the Portuguese but it varied greatly between regions and over time. Available

documents are scarce and shaped by immediate interests (Dirks, 1992).

Prior to the arrival of the Portuguese, the Indian concepts of varna and jati were used to refer to the same reality as caste. Varna was a textual notion that suggested a clear hierarchical order, while jatis and their sub-units were empirical groupings that were fluid and constantly evolving. Jatis were not always clearly hierarchical and were often marked by cooperation and community spirit in their everyday practice. Furthermore, not all individuals subscribed to the idea of varna hierarchy and Brahmanical social divisions, with some living outside of this system (Lorenzen 1987, 1999; Thapar 1989). Over the centuries, the institution of jati has undergone significant changes and is still undergoing transformation. In contrast, the varna order presents itself as stable over time within the ideological frame of Brahmanical Hindu order, but has largely been confined to texts, theory, and colonial rule and has not played a significant role in Indian practice.

The classification of the four varnas, namely priests (Brahman), warriors (Kshatriya), merchants (Vaishya), and farmers (Shudra), has been documented in the Vedic scriptures written after 1200 BC (Bose and Jalal 1998, 10). Scholars have traced the origin of these varnas back to the IndoAryan immigration to South Asia, where they were linked to the social order of the Aryan peoples of that time, consisting of warriors, priests, and peasants. However, the validity of this theory is currently subject to academic debate. It is more probable that this social order was limited to a small region or section of the population for a specific period, rather than being imposed on the entire subcontinent by invading forces that did not establish an all-encompassing empire. The Vedas offer a clear explanation of the varna system (Rigveda 10.90), which has two fundamental characteristics that remain significant today. Firstly, it is a hierarchical stratification comparable to a corporative society. Secondly, this stratification is based on religious legitimacy, with the classification of the varnas being determined by ritual purity. As per this classification, members of each varna are prohibited from sharing water and food with individuals from different varnas due to the risk of contamination.

In South Asia, the term "caste" generally refers to jati rather than to varna. Jati, which can be translated as "birth," is an innate identity, and a person's jati is usually assigned at birth. While a jati can be assigned to one of the four varnas or to an excluded group, the assignment is often contested and subject to change. In the past, jatis were not always seen within the framework of varna. While the colonial census of 1870 began to classify jatis within the varna system, this classification was not always accurate or consistent across regions of the subcontinent. Many jatis have contested their assigned positions within the varna system, and their origin myths and self-narratives do not always align with the varna system's neatly defined divisions. Additionally, people often only knew their jati and not their broader varna category. In ancient times, the Chinese traveler Faxian mentioned several jatis in his Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms (c. 400 CE), but he did not use the terms varna and jati and only mentioned the Vaishyas and the Brahmins (Faxian 1886). Today, Kshatriyas are found only in a few regions of India, while Brahmins are often considered a jati rather than a varna, meaning that they are seen more as a local community rather than an all-Indian class.

There are thousands of jatis in South Asia, characterized by professions, religions, local origins, or tribes. In practice, the jati system constitutes a local and often hierarchical configuration of communities. Historically, tribes or other communities have likely entered spaces already occupied by other communities and either merged with them or formed an unequal relationship, with the dominated community providing services to the dominant. In recent centuries, this dichotomy has revolved around landowners versus landless communities forced to work for them. Nonetheless,

the configuration of jatis remains confined to a small locality or even a village to this day.

The jati system determines various aspects of everyday life, including possible spouses, professions, rituals, and social status (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1999). Ideally, jatis form endogamous communities that eat together. In contemporary times, desired jati is often mentioned in partner advertisements. However, in earlier times, partnerships were established within the immediate vicinity, and the individuals were known to belong to the same community, rendering such advertisements unnecessary. Sharing food and water is still largely determined by jati, particularly in rural areas.

Sociocultures

Caste remains a significant factor in perpetuating social inequality in India, despite its incompatibility with a democratic society. However, a closer analysis reveals that caste is intertwined with other sociocultural factors and has been reconfigured in the numerous transformations of recent Indian history. These transformations have resulted in layers of social organization, known as sociocultures. Rather than aiming for a comprehensive history of Indian social structure, this section adopts a genealogical approach to identify the sociocultures that are relevant in contemporary India. These sociocultures include the local configuration, the precolonial state, colonialism, and the postcolonial state. In recent times, a hierarchy of social classes has begun to emerge, which will be examined in the following section.

While villages are often considered the basic unit of Indian social organization, they are linked through jatis, which connect similar groups across different villages, forming translocal communities (Srinivas 1955). Jatis have also been part of regional political formations and are connected to regional urban centers through the market and land revenue system. The practice of partnering and marrying within the same community is not unique to India but is found in many communities worldwide. The number, size, and type of jatis vary from village to village, with some villages in Punjab and Rajasthan inhabited by only one jati, while others have multiple jatis, particularly in central India. At the village level, the configuration is shaped by community relations, family relations, specialization, and land ownership. Landless individuals are often dependent on landowners, and specialists provide services to agriculturalists, while families may have patrimonial relationships with each other. Over time, if these relationships are reproduced across generations along endogamous lines, a jati structure emerges.

The Mughal Empire, which ruled northern South Asia from the sixteenth century onwards, transformed social structures through their efforts to integrate all entities and individuals into a territorial state. The state was structured according to a military order, the Mansabdari system, in which each nobleman received a rank number corresponding to the number of people he had to make available to the cavalry (Bose and Jalal 1998, 30). This system was later extended to the administration and the rest of the population, as the Mughals attempted to replace the caste system with the Mansabdari system. Non-Muslims were classified as Hindus by the Mughals and excluded from the centers of power. However, Islamic society in South Asia is also hierarchical, similar to the caste system. Those who came from outside the region and those who converted from the local higher castes continue to view themselves as superior to the Muslim masses who converted from relatively lower caste communities. As a result, the caste system did not weaken with the introduction of Islam (Teltumbde 2010, 19).

The Portuguese arrived on the Indian coast around the beginning of Mughal rule and encountered people whose social organization and cultural traditions were unfamiliar to them. Unlike later colonial powers such as Great Britain, the Portuguese made little effort to eliminate their ignorance. However, they introduced the concept of caste, which laid the foundation for a biological and rigid interpretation of the caste system. Subsequently, the Spanish, Dutch, and French also settled on the coasts of South Asia but were eventually ousted by the British in the eighteenth century. The British East India Company conquered territories previously occupied by other Europeans and expanded its rule over Bengal and much of South Asia. However, 40% of South Asia's territory remained independent, allowing precolonial structures to persist in many regions well into the postcolonial period. Despite this, Britain gradually transformed much of present-day South Asia into the colony known as India (Ludden 2002).

Until the mid-nineteenth century, India was under the ownership and control of the British East India Company. The Company's territory grew from its base in Bengal to encompass much of present-day South Asia and Myanmar. The East India Company primarily financed its rule through taxes (Bose and Jalal 1998, 48). After India was transformed into a crown colony in 1857, it became a supplier of raw materials and a sales market for British-manufactured goods. This led to the development of an unequal core-periphery structure, which was identified by dependency theory as a characteristic of the colonial system.

The British colonial rulers accomplished what the Mughals had failed to do, which was to integrate the inhabitants of their South Asian empire into a unified system. This system was increasingly defined by caste (Cohn 2008). Initially, the British attempted to classify Indians by race, and then by religion. From 1865, they started to classify by varna, and from the late 1870s, increasingly by jati (Banerjee-Dube 2008). Jati was perceived as a guild that emerged from a tribe and played a role in the division of labor. While racist biology underpinned the classification in general, functionalism in the social sciences provided the framework for the interpretation of jati's function in society.

The British, upon arriving in India, initially had limited knowledge of the functioning of Indian society. To overcome this, they relied heavily on texts and Brahmins who were knowledgeable about Indian scriptures (Das 1995, 35). The British considered the classification system to be historically fixed and unchangeable. However, each interpretation was rooted in the perspectives of the Indian elite. The Brahmin interpretation was also adopted by Indologists, leading Western scholars from Karl Marx to Louis Dumont to view Indian society as static, with present categories rooted in the Vedas. Starting in 1871, the British classified all Indians as either Hindus or non-Hindus, and identified caste as a unique feature of Hinduism. They attempted to group all Hindus into varnas, while classifying all non-Hindus as Muslims (Bose and Jalal 1998, 87). It was only in the early twentieth century that other religious minorities were included as independent categories in the census.

Pre-colonial caste in India was influenced by three sociocultures: the village system, states, and empires. However, during colonial rule, these structures were deeply transformed, but not completely replaced. Even today, remnants of these structures can still be seen. The impact of both Mughal and British rule on South Asia was variable, and as a result, the caste configurations were highly unsystematic. Despite the British spending over a century trying to systematize caste across British India, it remained largely decentralized.

During the British colonial period, the classification of the Indian population into Hindus and non-Hindus, and the subsequent use of the varna system, resulted in a more hierarchical society, with religion becoming increasingly relevant (Banerjee-Dube 2008). Following India's independence, the state apparatus added another dimension to the existing social hierarchies, namely the bureaucracy (Dirks 2001). The British classification of Hindus into varnas and the division of the population into Hindus and non-Hindus persisted into the postcolonial period (Guha 2007). Today, all these hierarchies continue to play a role in shaping Indian society.

During the struggle against colonialism, the Indian population was mobilized by means of nationalism. In the process, a single identity was constructed with a unified history, and the promotion of a national culture that aimed to transcend the two-nation theory. Although India chose not to become a Hindu nation like Pakistan, nationalism largely accepted the reified view of religious communities, such as Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and others. The model of the nationstate was imported from the West and adapted to local realities. All segments of the independence movement, including the communists, were nationalists. As part of the nationstate, categories of people, national borders, and ethnic groups were established. After gaining independence, some ethnic and regional groups have aspired to achieve autonomy from the Indian nation and establish their own nation-state.

After India gained independence in 1947, political leaders had differing views about the role of the caste system. The modernist faction led by Jawaharlal Nehru called for the official abolition of the caste system. However, Gandhi had a different stance and considered caste as a noncapitalist and non-Western system of cooperation and solidarity (Banerjee-Dube 2008, XLIII). While he opposed untouchability and rejected the idea of hierarchy associated with it, he wanted the caste system to be preserved as an independent Indian structure.

According to Ambedkar (2013, 16), hierarchy, as a form of domination, is a prominent feature of the caste system. However, this characteristic is not unique to Indian society, but can be observed in all state-organized societies. Moreover, it was introduced in its current form by the British. This form of hierarchy is a feature of capitalist societies and is characterized by an order of social classes under the condition of individualization of politics and economy. This individualization refers to the construction of the liberal individual, which is less diverse in capitalist societies compared to India, where a greater diversity of life forms can be observed, although this diversity diminishes as a result of normalization under capitalist conditions.

Socioculture	Local Configuration	State	Colonialism	Postcolonial State	Capitalism
Hierarchies	Jati, landownership, patrimonialism	Ranks	Varna, religion	Bureaucratic positions	Social classes

Table 1: ***Sociocultures in India***

Table 1 presents a summary of the various sociocultures and their corresponding principles of hierarchical distinction. Although each socioculture has its roots in a different historical period, they continue to exist in transformed forms in the present day. Together, they comprise an unsystematic system. In addition to local configurations of jatis, patrimonial relations between individuals, families, and jatis, as well as landownership (or lack thereof) have played important roles. It is worth noting that none of these three categories may have held predominance or

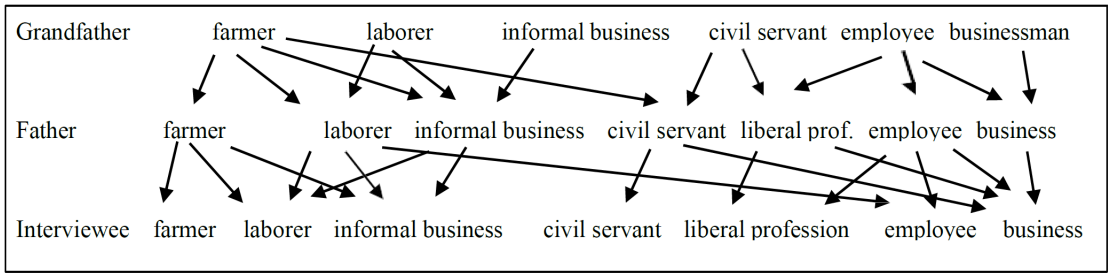
relevance in some regions of South Asia prior to the advent of colonialism, but they have since gained significance in nearly every part of the region due to colonial rule. In areas that resisted colonial rule, the structures of precolonial states remain relevant even today. For example, it is impossible to comprehend the structures of Jodhpur or Mysore without taking into account the maharajas, their aristocracies, and their administrations. The contemporary form of religion and caste in India is largely a consequence of colonial rule, while the enormous state apparatus of India, including state-owned enterprises and the railway, continues to be influenced by the postcolonial, pre-liberalization era (Chatterjee 1993).

Sociocultures and social classes

Since the colonial era, but particularly since 1991, India's social structures have been shifting towards a hierarchical organization of social classes, primarily driven by rural-urban migration and economic transformation. To some extent, all Indians have been assimilated into capitalism. However, only the younger generation and older urban families are firmly established within a social class, whereas many others are primarily or concurrently linked to a precapitalist socioculture, including the village, pre-independence state, bureaucratic state, and the colonial constructions of caste and religion. Within these sociocultures, several hierarchical segments are in the process of transitioning to a social class.

In contemporary India, the social hierarchy is largely informed by pre-capitalist hierarchies. The marginalized class predominantly comprises Dalits, landless individuals, urban slum dwellers, remote ethnic minorities, and others who are socially disadvantaged. Conversely, members of the dominant class include former maharajas, political leaders, large landowners, and managers of state-owned enterprises. Meanwhile, the colonial and postcolonial administrative elites form an upper-middle class. The middle and lower-middle classes have strong rural roots, with many members having been raised as farmers, rural traders, craftspeople, or administrators. The remaining members of these social classes are drawn from the ranks of workers and employees of the postcolonial state.

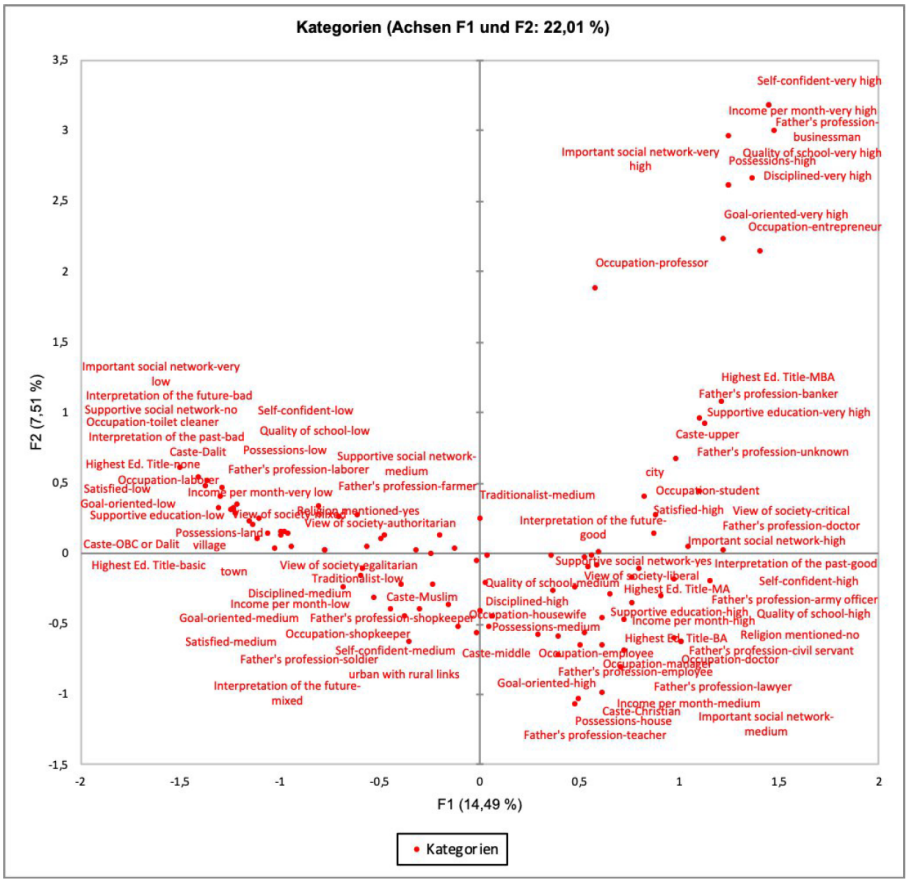
The process of transformation, or a series of transformations, is evidenced by the histories of families. In our research, the establishment of family histories is integral to our methodology for identifying sociocultures. However, these histories also offer insight into the perpetuation of social inequality and the pre-determined composition of contemporary social classes. Notably, our interview histories indicate that only particular combinations of occupations are common. Graph 1 depicts the correlations between grandfathers, fathers, and interviewees, providing further evidence of these patterns.



Graph 1: ***Professions over three generations***

Arrows in the graph connect occupations in the different generations. One has to take into consideration that our interviewees were between 18 and 69 years old, which means that the grandfather's year of birth can be anywhere between 1900 and 1960. The graph clearly shows that no arrows lead to the occupation of farmer and no arrows lead from the occupation of business. It also indicates that farmers' sons tend to become farmers, laborers or informal petty businessmen, such as street vendors or shopkeepers. In some instances, a conversion to an urban profession as an employee is possible, mainly via education. However, the step from farmer to civil servant is rare and usually involves reservations. The transition from farmer, laborer or informal business to a liberal profession (such as doctor or lawyer) or business basically never happens. Those businessmen and doctors who have a farming grandfather have a father who was an employee or a civil servant. Apart from the occupational mobility away from farming and into urban professions, most people remain in a similar occupation as their parents.

The generations of father and grandfather are restricted to the male line because an excessive number of women classified themselves or were classified as housewives. This gender inequality is extreme in the Indian case, we have not seen this anywhere else – but we have not yet studied Middle Eastern countries. It persists into the present but decreases in the young generation. Many of our female interviewees had an occupation but classified their mothers and grandmothers as housewives – even if they were farmers.



Graph 2: ***Multiple correspondence analysis***

Graph 2 shows the result of a multiple correspondence analysis of the data extracted from our interviews. We encoded our interviews according to the indicators of capital, habitus and socioculture that our group interpretation revealed as relevant. For many indicators, a scale of three values (yes, medium, no) and for some a scale of five values (very much, much, medium, little, very little) was used, while for some (such as income, age or profession) more values were possible. The resulting spreadsheet was the basis of the multiple correspondence analysis (MCA). This statistical procedure calculates correlations similar to a principle component analysis and presents them in a two-dimensional space. The first dimension determines the correlations the most, the second a bit less and the other dimensions are not really represented in the graph even though they are also calculated. Each dot represents a characteristic that is socially relevant. Those characteristics that appear close to each other are likely to exist in the same person or social group, those that are distant from each other are not.

Graph 2 shows three clusters. The lower social groups are clustered on the left side. The upper social groups are in the upper right-hand quadrant and the lower groups on the lower right. If we look at the single indicators and correlations, we see that there is an overlap of the groups with space, caste, wealth and class. The cluster on the left is more rural but it also includes firstgeneration migrants, who perform despised jobs in the city. They are poor, mostly Dalits and can be classified as marginalized. The other two groups are urban, belong to OBC or upper castes, are not poor and can be classified as middle and upper classes. The vertical x-axis basically represents the dividing line between the marginalized and the rest of the population, which we call the "line of dignity" (which we explain at the end of this section). The horizontal y-axis on the right basically shows the division between upper and lower middle classes. The upper middle and dominant class not only have a high level of education, wealth and family support, they also have an important social network.

If we disaggregate the clusters, we clearly see that the right half of graph 2 is rooted in rural structures. Village structures do not disappear overnight but they have been changing rapidly due to economic growth, initially with programs such as the Land Reforms and Green Revolution and later with the process of economic liberalization and the comprehensive introduction of capitalism since 1991, despite the existence of the caste system. The configuration of jatis is always different. The allocation of a jati to a varna varies as well. It is by no means certain that the varna order within the village is actually structured as in the Vedic literature but it depends on local configurations of numbers, power, wealth, political functions and history (Dirks 1992). The members of high varnas are mostly landowners, often Brahmins. This is the main reason for their high status. Where they are not landowners, Brahmins can have a low status (Jodhka 2012, 42). In some villages the Brahmins are even considered a poor and despised group. In a typical village there are landowners, traders, specialists, farmers, workers and Dalits (Marriott 1955). They belong to different varnas. Their residential areas are separated from each other (Tirtha 1996, 64). The groups are differentiated by and connected through patrimonial relationships, land ownership and money lending, but also ritual relationships.

The first transformation in the villages concerns landownership. The rural elites have migrated to the cities and left the country to newly rich OBCs (Teltumbde 2010, 55). In the Indian Middle Ages, much of the arable land belonged to the nobility, who did not live in the villages, or to the villages as communities. In the villages, patrimonial relations dominated, in which the dependents were paid in kind. The British replaced the nobility with a colonial administration and turned land almost completely into private property (Jodhka and Prakash 2016, 30). Forms of common property have largely disappeared today (cf. Sharma 2012). Many landless now replicate the

landowners' exodus to the cities.

The second transformation concerns caste. Democracy and capitalism weaken the caste system. Lower castes from rural areas leave the village to get out of oppressive patrimonial and bondage relations. They can now move to urban areas to find employment, which is not primarily in a patrimonial and/or caste dependency relation. Upper castes lose some of their power on the village level, since any excess on their part can lead to the emigration of the lower castes. Furthermore, many functions within the village are no longer determined by caste but by money and profession. Services are provided by professionals for money and not by caste specialists in patrimonial relations.

However, there are tendencies that strengthen the institution of caste. Firstly, reservations have led to the use caste in order to gain advantages (Gupta 2000, 144). Secondly, caste plays a significant role in identity construction. "Each caste is proud of its caste heritage and has no hesitation in showing off its difference from other castes." (Ibid., 124). More and more inhabitants of India have become aware of their caste (varna and jati). Thirdly, caste is being mobilized for an increasing number of goals. Jati becomes a micro-collective determined by kinship, while large collectives (associations) are formed through alliances (Banerjee-Dube 2008, XXXI). Jati associations run more and more parallel to the administrative structures and are organized at the district, state and federal levels.

Contemporary village structures display the caste structure that has been established by the late colonial state and adopted by the postcolonial state: Dalit, OBC and upper caste (Jodhka 2014). In addition, a dominant caste often appears, which is the most numerous and/or most powerful caste and has first been observed by Srinivas (1955). Furthermore, landownership is still the most relevant category in rural India but it changes with the encroachment of the capitalist, mostly urban economy into the villages. Many villagers start to work in capitalist enterprises and, most importantly, many leave: the rich landowners become absentee landowners, the educated become employees in the towns and Dalits try to escape oppression by migrating into urban areas. Contemporary village hierarchy consists of upper stratum, rural middle class, dominant caste and dependent groups. The upper stratum are typically landlords, the dominant caste comprises farmers and the dependent are landless laborers.

Whereas the structures of the precapitalist states persist in some areas, the social groups seem to have transformed into social classes. Maharajas have become capitalists, while some of their entourage and administration have joined them or (more commonly) have taken up upper-middle class professions. It makes sense to point to the socioculture of precapitalist states but we have found little indication of the persistence of specific habitus traits rooted in this socioculture. This is different with regards to the postcolonial state. Some Indians alive today acquired their primary habitus before 1991, while others grew up in families that lived and cherished the values of postcolonial India. In the Indian bureaucracy and associated spheres of the society, these values persist to some degree. Moreover, the bureaucracy itself is structured according to a particular hierarchy. Many of the bureaucrats have transformed into stereotypical members of the middle classes but many retain important traits of the postcolonial socioculture, namely a sense of hierarchy combined with a sense of justice, an anti-liberalism, which is partly an opposition to the West and an emphasis on Indian-ness, little autonomy and flexibility but a significant level of discipline.

In the urban setting, we detect a hierarchy of five social classes: marginalized, lower middle, middle, established and dominant class. The marginalized are clearly rooted in the Dalit caste

and peripheral population groups, such as the scheduled tribes. The lower middle class comprises descendants of the laboring population of the postcolonial period, often with significant skills. The middle class is recruited from the employees and rural upper castes of the postcolonial socioculture. The established, or the upper middle class, comprise of the highly educated, mostly with an upper-caste background, often Brahmins. The dominant class consists of capitalists and the postcolonial elite. Basically all of them seem to belong to the upper castes but they are not necessarily Brahmins, since many members of the trading castes are among India's very rich.

Caste membership clearly impacts membership in social class. The overwhelming majority of Dalits become marginalized. "[T]he occupations identified with the ex-untouchables are still carried out almost exclusively by them" (Jodhka 2012, 95). In today's economy, Dalits mostly work in connection with garbage, dirt and noise with only two percent of Dalits working in wellpaid professions with regular employment contracts (ibid., 162). Seen from below, untouchability is the decisive dimension, an absolute barrier. Dalits transform into a class which lives below the "line of dignity" (Jodhka, Rehbein and Souza 2017). They are considered unworthy members of society. This dividing line is specific to capitalist societies and increasingly refers to the productive contribution of a social class in the historical implementation of capitalism. The class below this dividing line, the marginalized, is characterized by the fact that it does not pursue any professional work and is therefore considered worthless. In India, we see the organization of the informal sector as a transformation of marginalized castes into a marginalized class. The jatis affected by this are castes, who are becoming members of a new class with the individualization and formalization of the economy.

Today, scheduled castes account for around 16 percent of the population. A recent empirical study finds that in more than 70 percent of the cases examined, Dalits are not allowed to enter the homes of members of the four varnas and cannot eat with them (Shah et al. 2006, 65). The most easily observable form of discrimination in rural India is the separation of residential areas (ibid., 73). In practice, the central belief is that the Dalits pollute the water. Therefore, in many villages, Dalits are not allowed use water resources. They often live near the waste water. Most of our rural interviewees above the "line of dignity" confirmed that they would not share their water with Dalits.

Types

Interesting about habitus and social class in India is the fact that most people seem to combine elements of a capitalist habitus with elements from precapitalist sociocultures. However, this is not peculiar to India. Many nation states have begun the full-fledged transformation to capitalism only in recent times. A considerable portion of the world population grew up in conditions that cannot be characterized as capitalist,but most Indians have already moved into conditions that are capitalist, either physically or socially or both. They have a hybrid habitus, which can be analyzed into its sociocultural components. However, it is still possible to identify types, which combine many key characteristics and actually find many empirical examples – real people – who fit the types. We distinguish between 11 types that are rooted in three sociocultures with three additional types being rural-urban hybrids. These types represent hierarchical strata – but only five of them represent social classes.

	Pre-independence	*Postcolonial*	*Hybrid*	*Capitalist*
Upper				Dominant
Upper middle	Upper stratum	High bureaucracy		Established
Middle	Rural middle class	Low bureaucracy	First generation middle	Middle
Lower middle	OBC/dominant caste		First generation lower middle	Lower middle
Lower	Dependent		Circular migrant	Marginalized

Table 2: ***Types and sociocultures***

Table 2 lists the types we identified inductively in our interviews. They form a hierarchical order, albeit not a homogeneous one. Rather, the respective hierarchies co-exist. The tendency is for the entire population to migrate – socially and physically – from left to right,but it will take another couple of generations until the precapitalist sociocultures become invisible. The hybrid groups could already be subsumed under the corresponding social classes, since they live in capitalist conditions,however, their members are first-generation migrants. They still have a primary habitus that is firmly shaped by rural realities and therefore differs significantly from the habitus of people who grew up in an urban environment.

	Supportive education	*Self-confidence*	*Social capital*	*Quality of schooling*	*Wealth*
Rural dependent	--	--	--	--	--
Rural dominant	-/--	-	0	-	-
Rural middle	0	0	-	0	-
Rural upper	+	+	0	0	+
Low bureaucracy	0	0	0	+	-
High bureaucracy	+	+	+	+	+
Circular migrant	-	-	-	--	-
New lower middle	-	-	-	0	-
New middle	0	0	-	0	0
Marginalized	--	--	--	--	--
Lower middle	0	0	-	0	-
Middle	+	+	0	+	0
Established	++	++	+	++	+
Dominant	+/++	++	++	++	++

Table 3: ***Key characteristics of the types***

Table 3 contrasts some of the important differences in capital and habitus between the types we distinguish. A minus symbolizes a low score on the indicator, the zero a medium score and a plus a high one. From the comparison between the patterns, one will remark that rural dependent and urban marginalized have identical characteristics and so do rural middle class and lower middle class. These two groups respectively actually have a lot in common but their life-worlds differ, as do their skills, attitudes and occupational activities,but they will converge into a single

marginalized, viz. a single lower middle class in the near future.

Some characteristic quotes from our interviews may illustrate the types and their life-worlds: the dominant class consists of people who have a lot of capital of all types and are rooted in earlier upper classes. Their habitus is characterized by self-confidence, goal-orientation and satisfaction: they are becoming capitalists. One very rich businessman says: "India is a huge opportunity."

The established class comprises the functional elites, who have occupied leading positions in society, most of the families at least since independence. They have a lot of capital, especially cultural capital and not as much economic and social capital as the dominant. Their habitus revolves around goal-orientation and discipline. One member of this class says: "Time is money." Goal-orientation is reflected in the following quote: "I want to reach the top."

The dividing line between established and middle class can be traced to the past generations. While the middle class is rooted in the lower bureaucracy and skilled labor, its members never had access to the higher positions in society. They are as disciplined but less confident and goalo-riented than the established. One interviewee said: "I enjoyed my childhood a lot. I topped my school." The members of the middle class usually have very supportive parents, good education and security in terms of planning and finances. This allows for a relaxed childhood with a focus on advancement. The social networks to make it into the established class are missing but the position is stable enough to not worry about relegation.

The lower middle class shares the possibility of planning and discipline with the middle class but has to struggle to make ends meet and to maintain its social position. There is little ambition because opportunities are scarce. One member of this class speaks about his childhood: "Nothing is special in my life." The lower middle class comprises the bulk of India's laboring population in the urban regions.

The marginalized class consists mainly of Dalits and other underprivileged communities. "I spent my childhood in poverty and the situation has not improved. I earn 2700 Rupees per month cleaning toilets." This quote summarizes the situation of people in this class,they have little capital and no opportunities.

The high bureaucracy slowly transforms into the established class,but many of its members were trained before 1991 and any bureaucratic culture is slow to change. India's large state apparatus is still partly inspired by postcolonial ideas and resists capitalist values. One bureaucrat says: "I joined the ministry to do something for the advancement of women." This attitude reflects idealism but also a social position that allows personal choice, is not concerned with immediate survival and benefits from a decent level of education. Compared to members of the established class, the bureaucrats have less economic capital.

This lack becomes pressing in the lower ranks of the bureaucracy. One of its members says: "The Indian government treats us like slaves, my son should work in the private sector and become a billionaire." However, it is much more likely that the son becomes a member of the middle class, since he will have a comparatively high level of education, parental support and planning security.

The members of the new middle class are those of the first generation, mostly rural-urban migrants. Their habitus is formed in a rural environment. People in this class and the new lower middle class are usually much more community- and subsistence-oriented and less competitive

and individualistic than the old middle classes. What distinguishes new middle from new lower middle class is the parental capital and parental support: "My parents supported me a lot even though they could not teach me much." Even if they cannot teach many useful things about the urban economy, they can provide for an education that does.

Members of the new lower middle class are very similar to the old lower middle class in most regards. They only differ in their roots, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. They are content with little, since expectations are low: "I only need a good job and a good wife, then all problems are solved."

Circular migrants are typically people who migrate to the city in order to support their rural family with additional income. They are from the poorer sections and underprivileged communities. It is a tough life between worlds but not between classes; one rickshaw puller says: "All my dreams are shattered." Their habitus and their capital are characterized by lack but discipline is often very high.

The rural upper stratum has been thinning out, since many landowners and rural elites have started to migrate to towns in order to start a business and/or enjoy the benefits of an urban lifestyle. This group consists of landlords.

The rural middle class comprises those people who perform capitalist jobs and hold capitalist functions in a rural setting, from the local dealer of agricultural appliances to the office worker commuting from his village to the city. This group will converge with the middle class within the next two generations but for now, it remains tied to the rural community structures. The rural dominant caste is the community that holds political power in a particular village or locality. It is the most numerous group and usually consists of land-owning farmers. One local politician says: "I have to carry the burden of my community."

The rural dependents are the landless laborers, usually Dalits. They have to fight for mere survival by renting their services out to landowning groups. At the same time, Dalits are despised and do not have access to the more privileged sections of the village. One woman says: "If I survive, I would be lying on the floor fighting with diseases ... I have no more hopes now." It may be possible to switch quotes between a few of the types but most of the quotes only fit this particular social group and possibly the neighboring group. The social classes clearly live on different planets, even if they often dwell only a few hundred yards from each other. There are links and similarities on the horizontal levels between the hierarchical segments in the different sociocultures. This indicates the reproduction of social inequality from colonial via postcolonial into capitalist times. The capitalist transformation has been facilitating a lot of mobility, but this mobility is mostly physical and socially horizontal.

Conclusion

This study found 14 social types in India that are rooted in three different sociocultures. The types do not form a homogeneous hierarchy but rather three hierarchies with the hierarchy of capitalist social classes becoming dominant and most relevant. However, earlier sociocultures clearly persist. They also continue to shape social classes both in their internal composition as well as in their configuration. The legacy of precolonial structures, colonialism, caste and the developmentalist state may become hardly visible in the distant future but they will not be erased. In order

to understand inequality in India, it is important to study the relation between this legacy and contemporary dynamics.

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Notes

[1]Prior to the sudden passing of Boike Rehbein in June 2022, we had been collaboratively engaged in the development of this manuscript. Our aim in finalizing it is to pay tribute to his research. Throughout the drafting process, we endeavored to remain faithful to Boike Rehbein's ideas as expressed in his earlier work. Where we have deviated from this intention, any errors or inconsistencies are solely our own responsibility.

[2]Tamer Soyler presently holds a managerial role in the Global Studies Programme in Berlin and the Transcience journal, combined with teaching duties and research obligations. His primary areas of research interest include social inequality, critical thought, and societal transformations.

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