

An
Uncertain
Glory

INDIA
AND ITS
CONTRADICTIONS

JEAN DRÈZE &
AMARTYA SEN

JEAN DRÈZE AND AMARTYA SEN

An Uncertain Glory

India and Its Contradictions

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

Princeton & Oxford

Copyright © Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, 2013

Published in the United States and Canada by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540

In the United Kingdom, published by the Penguin Group, Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

press.princeton.edu

All rights reserved

ISBN: 978-0-691-16079-5

LCCN: 2013942038

This book has been composed in Sabon LT Std

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

The Grip of Inequality

All countries in the world have inequalities of various kinds. India, however, has a unique cocktail of lethal divisions and disparities. Few countries have to contend with such extreme inequalities in so many dimensions, including large economic inequalities as well as major disparities of caste, class and gender. Caste has a peculiar role in India that separates it out from the rest of the world. Many countries, to be sure, have had in the past (and to some extent even right now) caste-like institutions that place people in confined boxes. But India seems to be quite unique both in terms of the centrality of caste hierarchies and in terms of their continuing hold in modern society (despite a great many pieces of legislation outlawing any practice of caste discrimination). And caste stratification often reinforces class inequality, giving it a resilience that is harder to conquer. Gender inequality, too, is exceptionally high in India, particularly in large parts of the northern and western regions, where the subjugation of women is fairly comprehensive. It is the mutual reinforcement of severe inequalities of different kinds that creates an extremely oppressive social system, where those at the bottom of these multiple layers of disadvantage live in conditions of extreme disempowerment.

India's heavy historical legacy of multiple inequalities is illustrated in [Table 8.1](#), which compares literacy rates among Brahmins and Dalits (formerly called untouchables and now known as 'scheduled castes' with certain legally guaranteed opportunities) at the beginning of the twentieth century in different regions of British India. In most regions, a majority of Brahmin men (up to 73 per cent, in Baroda State) were already literate at that time. At the other extreme, the literacy rate among Dalit women was *zero* in most regions. This reflects a massive gender gap within each community (with men having a virtual monopoly of education within each group) as well as enormous caste-based disparities, with even Dalit men achieving literacy rates of at most 1 per cent at that time in each region – barely 1 per cent of the literacy rates of Brahmin men.

Table 8.1
Caste, Gender and Literacy in 1901

Region (Province or State)	Literacy Rates, 1901 (%) Brahmin ^a		Literacy Rates, 1901 (%) 'Scheduled Castes' ^b	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Baroda State	73.0	5.6	1.2	0
Mysore State	68.1	6.4	0.9	0.1
Bombay Province	58.0	5.4	0.7	0
Madras Province	57.8	4.4	1.0	0
United Provinces	55.3	4.6	0.2	0
Central Provinces	36.5	0.9	0.4	0

^a Kayashta, in United Provinces.

^b Chamar in United Provinces and Central Provinces; Dhed and Mahar in Baroda State; Paraiyan in Madras Province; Holaya in Mysore; Dhed, Mahar and Vankar (combined) in Bombay. Because of changes in the classification of castes over time, it was not possible to estimate the overall literacy rates of all 'scheduled castes' (as they came to be known later) in 1901; an effort was made to identify the main scheduled castes in each region, among the castes listed in the 1901 Census.

Source: Census of India 1901, Subsidiary Tables, Table VI (see Risley and Gait, 1903).

It is the mutual reinforcement of different inequalities (in this case, caste and gender) that creates such enormous disparities in Indian society. The disparities would look even worse if the class dimension were added in the picture. And just as inequalities of caste and gender tend to reinforce each other, so do those of, say, caste and class. For instance, caste divisions make it much harder for the economically underprivileged to organize and bargain for a better deal. As B. R. Ambedkar perceptively remarked, '... the Caste System is not merely a division of *labour*. It is a division of *labourers*.'*

The figures presented in [Table 8.1](#) would look quite different today, especially in the younger age groups.¹ In fact, as the country approaches universal literacy in the younger age groups, the caste and gender gaps in literacy rates are bound to shrink. In historical perspective, this end of the virtual 'male upper-caste monopoly' of educational opportunities is an important breakthrough – and a useful reminder that, all said and done, some significant social change is taking place in India. However, it would be a big mistake to think that these historical inequalities have been overcome. For one thing, as we saw in [Chapter 3](#), a large proportion of Indian children (mainly from underprivileged families) learn very little at school, and if one were to look at more advanced educational achievements than mere literacy, sharp disparities of class, caste and gender would re-emerge quite forcefully. For another, the social norms and value systems underlying these historical inequalities are still alive, even if their manifestations are moderated by modern laws, norms and institutions.

To this picture must be added the fact that educational inequalities are also important in their own right. Educational inequalities are partly, but only partly, a reflection of class, caste and gender inequalities. They also have an influence of their own, reflecting differences in access to schooling, learning abilities, parental education, and so on. For instance, there are often significant differences in educational achievements between siblings, even of the same sex, and of course (since they belong to the same family) of the same caste and class. And here again, India seems to fare very badly in international perspective, in terms of the extent of educational inequalities – both overall educational inequalities and inequalities among siblings.² For instance, the dispersion of years of schooling within a specific age group tends to be very high in India, especially among women.³

There are also other important social divisions in India, often reinforcing those already discussed. For instance, there is the division between those who know English and those who don't, emphasized for example by the socialist thinker Rammanohar Lohia, who even argued that 'high-caste, wealth, and knowledge of English are the three requisites, with anyone possessing two of these

belonging to the ruling class'.⁴ Indeed, knowing English opens all sorts of doors in India, even to someone who may not be particularly qualified otherwise. English is the language of the courts (from High Courts upwards), of higher education, of modern business, of high-level official documents, and to a large extent still, of the Internet. This division is increasingly reflected in the schooling system, split as it is between privileged 'English-medium' schools and the rest. It is a major barrier against the integration of all children in a common schooling system. Here again, one form of inequality stands in the way of tackling another.⁵

The mutual reinforcement of class, caste, gender and other inequalities has been particularly strong in the northern heartland, and is quite possibly an important clue to the tendency of that region to lag behind the rest of the country in many respects.⁶ Elsewhere, recent experiences of rapid and broad-based social progress have involved dealing, in one way or another, with the historical burden of mutually reinforcing inequalities. We have discussed this in [Chapter 3](#), with reference to recent experiences of rapid development in Kerala, Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. For India as a whole, this integrative task remains largely unaccomplished.

INCOME INEQUALITY AND ECONOMIC DIVISIONS

How unequal is India in terms of income distribution? The conventional economic reading in this respect has been that India is *not* particularly unequal, compared with other countries. This common impression is largely based on comparing the Gini coefficient of per capita *expenditure* in India with that of per capita *income* in other countries (because of the absence of reliable income data for India). This is a biased comparison, because the distribution of per capita expenditure, across the world, tends to be less unequal than that of per capita income. However, the India Human Development Survey, dated 2004–5, includes income data and makes it possible to estimate the Gini coefficient of per capita income for India, which turns out to be 0.54 (much higher than the values of 0.35 or so that typically emerge from per capita expenditure data). This suggests, as a World Bank study concludes, that 'inequality in India appears to be in the same league as that in Brazil and South Africa, both high-inequality countries'.⁷ This conclusion is based on a single survey, and calls for further scrutiny, but what is clear is that the general belief that income distribution in India is less unequal than in many of the other developing countries in the world is very seriously open to question.

There is also much evidence of *growing* economic inequality in India in recent decades. For instance, per capita expenditure data suggest an increase in rural-urban disparities as well as growing inequality in urban areas. The comparatively affluent in urban areas have been the main beneficiaries of rapid economic growth in India in recent years. Similarly, per capita income data indicate a growing concentration of incomes at the top, and wealth data, patchy as they are, also point to growing disparities in the post-reform period.⁸

Had the distribution of incomes and expenditures remained unchanged (or improved) instead of becoming more unequal, poor people would have gained much more from India's rapid economic growth than they have. Instead, poverty decline has continued at a sluggish pace, more or less in line with earlier trends, even as growth has vastly accelerated.⁹ Aside from this discouraging pattern, there are other reasons to be concerned with the growth of economic inequality in India, even if it goes hand in hand with continued poverty decline. Indeed, recent investigations across the world have brought out many adverse social consequences of inequality in itself, including economic inequality. For instance, economic inequality tends to be associated with lower health achievements – not just for the poor but also for the population as a whole.¹⁰ There is also some evidence that high economic

inequality makes a country more prone to crime. Economic disparities also tend to undermine social solidarity and civic cooperation. Further, a high concentration of wealth gives disproportionate political power to a privileged minority, often reinforcing the elitist biases of public policy and democratic politics.¹¹ And last but not the least, the continuation of caste and other inequalities depends greatly on their partial congruence with economic disparities, reinforcing each other. For these and other reasons, there is a case for doing more – much more – to prevent further growth of income inequality in India, and indeed, to reverse it. Recent experiences of economic redistribution in Latin America (where inequality has declined, not increased, in recent years), and even India's own recent experience with income support programmes (discussed in the preceding chapter), suggest that much can indeed be done in this respect.

Having said this, however, it can be argued that the main issue is not the recent intensification of economic inequality, but the extent and nature of the continuing inequalities from earlier on – not only class-based inequality but also other types of inequality (related for instance to caste and gender). As will be discussed presently, mutually reinforcing inequalities have created a resilient division between the privileged and the rest in Indian society.

As far as the economic dimension is concerned, the worst infringement of principles of equity in India is not so much the unseemly wealth of the rich or super-rich, but the fact that so many people still lack the basic requirements of dignified living – food, shelter, clothing, sanitation, health care, and schools for their children. It is against this background of mass deprivation that the opulence of the rich seems particularly grotesque. Indeed, China's economic inequality *per se* is no less than India's, and yet there is a real difference made by the fact that the poorer Chinese do not typically lack the basic amenities of life in the way that poor Indians do (we shall return to this issue in the last chapter). The first step towards more social justice in India is surely to guarantee the essentials to everyone, rather than leaving a vast number of people to face persistent deprivations in daily living.

THE CONTINUING HOLD OF CASTE

It is often argued that caste discrimination has subsided a great deal in the twentieth century.¹² Given the intensity of caste discrimination in India's past, this is true enough, without making the present situation particularly close to equality. In large parts of India, in the old days, Dalits were not allowed to wear sandals, ride bicycles, enter temples, or sit on a chair in the presence of higher castes – to give just a few examples of the vicious system of humiliation and subjugation that had developed around the caste system.¹³ Many of these discriminatory practices have indeed declined or disappeared, thanks to the spread of education, movements of social reform, constitutional safeguards, as well as economic development, and also, of course, growing political resistance from the victims of discrimination.

This trend is far from uniform. Some caste prejudices, such as the disapproval of inter-caste marriages, remain rather strong today among many social groups. And while caste divisions are subsiding in large parts of the country and society, they have also been making inroads where they did not exist earlier, for instance among various Adivasi, Muslim, Sikh and Christian communities. More importantly, however, caste continues to be an important instrument of power in Indian society, even where the caste system has lost some of its earlier barbarity and brutality.

The continuing hold of the upper castes on public institutions is illustrated in [Table 8.2](#), based on survey data collected in Allahabad – a sizeable city in northern India. The entries in the table indicate the share of the upper castes in positions of power and influence – the press club, the university

faculty, the bar association, the top echelons of the police, and the commanding posts in trade unions, NGOs, media houses, among other public institutions. It turns out that this share is around 75 per cent, compared with a share of around 20 per cent for the upper castes in the population of Uttar Pradesh as a whole. Brahmins and Kayashtas alone (the two highest-ranked castes in Allahabad) have cornered about half of the posts – more than four times their share in the state’s population.¹⁴ These are approximate figures, partly based on guessing castes from surnames, but the pattern is clear enough: the upper castes continue to have overwhelming control over public institutions. It is not that other castes (or communities) are completely unrepresented, but with such a large majority, it is not surprising that members of the upper castes have remarkably unequal power. There was no evidence of any significant presence of Dalits in any of the sample institutions, with the partial exception of the university faculty, partly due to mandatory quotas.

It is worth noting that the dominance of the upper castes seems to be, if anything, even stronger in institutions of ‘civil society’ than in state institutions. For instance, in Allahabad the share of the upper castes is around 80 per cent among NGO representatives and trade union leaders, close to 90 per cent in the executive committee of the Bar Association, and a full 100 per cent among office bearers of the Press Club (which is, in fact, made up almost entirely of Brahmins and Kayashtas). Even trade unions of workers who belong mainly to disadvantaged castes are often under the control of upper-caste leaders. There is some food for thought here about the tendency even of anti-establishment movements in India to reproduce, within their own political activities, images of the old divisions.

Table 8.2
Share of Upper Castes in Selected Groups, Allahabad (%)

Reference group ^a	Upper castes		Brahmin and Kayashta	
	In entire group	Among those 'identified'	In entire group	Among those 'identified'
Allahabad Press Club, office bearers (16)	100	100	75	75
Leaders of teachers' unions (17)	100	100	76	76
Proprietors of advertisement agencies (11)	91	91	55	55
Senior doctors (99)	89	94	37	39
Bar Association, executive committee (28)	86	96	68	76
Prominent publishers (12)	83	100	42	50
GB Pant Social Science Institute faculty (15)	80	80	60	67
Advocate Association executive committee (14)	79	100	57	73
NGO representatives (30)	77	88	47	54
Trade union leaders (clerical & manual workers) (49)	76	88	55	64
Allahabad University faculty* (112)	76	77	54	55
CDOs and BDOs (20)	75	88	40	53
Ashok Nagar residents (62)	74	82	32	36
Reporters of media houses (62)	74	85	53	61
Former presidents, AU students' union (79)	73	89	44	54
Prominent artists (55)	71	89	47	59
Allahabad Press Club, members (104)	71	80	56	63
Police officers (district and block levels) (28)	68	100	39	58
IIT faculty (47)	68	100	36	56
High Court judges (75)	68	81	32	38
High Court lawyers* (100)	67	88	44	58
Traders' association (6)	67	80	0	0
College principals (16)	56	69	19	23
Junior engineer, Allahabad municipality (20)	55	79	30	43
Total (1,077)	75	87	46	54

AU = Allahabad University.
BDO = Block Development Officer.
CDO = Chief Development Officer.
IIT = Indian Institute of Information Technology.

Note: The first column indicates the proportion of persons identified (with reasonable confidence) as upper-caste in the entire group. The second column indicates their proportion in the sub-set of all those (within the relevant group) whose caste could be identified. These figures can be interpreted as lower and upper bounds, respectively, on the actual proportion of upper-caste persons in the relevant group. Similarly with Brahmins and Kayashtas in the third and fourth columns.

Source: Survey data collected in August 2012 by Anika Aggarwal, Jean Drèze and Aashish Gupta (see Aggarwal et al., 2013).

Perhaps Allahabad is particularly conservative in this respect. It is, of course, just one city, though it is worth mentioning that Allahabad is a centre of power in its own right. For instance, alumni of Allahabad University, one of India's oldest and largest universities, are found in large numbers in the civil services and other public institutions across India.¹⁵ Still, there is no intention here of singling out Allahabad (merely because we happen to have more data on it). The point is to illustrate a general pattern that also applies to varying extents in many other parts of India, especially in the north of the country.

Indeed, a number of recent studies have brought out, in similar ways, the continued dominance of the upper castes (and virtual absence of Dalits, Adivasis and other disadvantaged communities) in media houses, corporate boards, judicial institutions, and even cricket or polo teams.¹⁶ For instance, a recent survey of 315 editors and other leading members of the print and electronic media in Delhi, by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, found that *not one* of them belonged to a scheduled caste or scheduled tribe. In fact, about 85 per cent belonged to a small coterie of upper castes (accounting for only 16 per cent of India's population), and about half were Brahmins.¹⁷ Obviously, this does not help to ensure that the concerns and views of Dalits and Adivasis are adequately represented in public debates (especially, but not only, public debates on issues like reservation policies). Very similar patterns emerged in a recent study of corporate boards in India: more than 90 per cent of their members were upper-caste, and almost half (45 per cent to be precise) were Brahmins. Interestingly, in this case Brahmins were slightly outnumbered by Vaishyas (the traditional business and trading castes, also known as Baniyas), who accounted for 46 per cent of the seats on corporate boards.¹⁸ Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, for their part, get only 3.5 per cent of the seats, a small fraction of their share (about 24 per cent) in the population. In fact, in a *large majority* (70 per cent) of corporate boards, there was no 'diversity' at all, in the sense that *all* members belonged to the same caste group.

One of the barriers to rectifying caste-based discrimination is that caste has become virtually unmentionable in polite society in India, not just because any caste-based practice has to face legal challenge, but also because any kind of caste consciousness is taken to be socially retrograde and reactionary. This can be superficially justified as a contribution to the obliteration of caste consciousness, but it does not help to understand the world for what it is, let alone change it.

A similar problem exists for the poorer Muslims in India. Many Muslims are, of course, solidly part of the upper stratum of Indian society, including business tycoons, political leaders and professional classes, as we might expect from India's largely secular politics and the historical fact that the upper classes in pre-British India had a high proportion of Muslims, many of whom did not migrate to Pakistan when the country was divided in 1947. And yet at the other end, the poorer Muslims, often descendants of lower-caste Hindus who had converted to Islam (sometimes to escape caste-based discrimination), can have economic and social disadvantages comparable to those of lower-caste Hindus.¹⁹ And in the affirmative legal provisions in post-independent India which give the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes preferential treatment in various spheres (including civil service appointments and entry into institutions of higher education), poorer Muslims as a category are not included. This gross injustice, resulting from treating caste discrimination as a unique problem that applies to the Hindus, is being rectified to some extent, but there is need for more speed there,

and also a necessity to re-examine the structure of affirmative action, taking note of the fact that the continuation of caste inequality as well as inequality between poor Muslims and the less poor Indians (Muslims as well as others) is crucially dependent on the overlap of social stratification with economic inequality.

GENDER INEQUALITIES: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Gender inequality is among the social disparities that keep large numbers of people on the margin of the 'new India' – not only women themselves, but also men and children who would benefit from a more active, informed and equal participation of women in social and public life. Like caste relations, gender relations too have changed in the recent past, and in some respects gender disparities have significantly diminished. For instance, as was noted earlier, girls (even among the higher castes) used to be virtually excluded from the education system a hundred years ago, but are now flocking to school across the country. As a result, the gender bias in school participation is now relatively small at the primary level, and is narrowing rapidly at other levels as well.

Seen from this angle, it might look as if India is well on its way towards removing traditional gender disparities. Furthermore, women occupy positions of importance in many walks of life in India, including academia and the professions as well as in politics, literature, arts and music. Given all this, the thesis of a hugely unequal deprivation of women in India often looks quite implausible to outside observers of the Indian society. And yet gender inequality is a very significant part of the Indian social reality.

One of the old problems of gender inequality in India is the larger incidence of mortality of female children over male. This is not because of female infanticide, or any form of deliberate killing, but largely due to the quiet – and not clearly perceived – neglect of the interests of female children in health care and nutrition. There are huge regional differences in the treatment of girls within India, but the average picture that emerges from the all-India figures is truly shocking.²⁰ The mortality rates of Indian girls are substantially higher, on average, than those of Indian boys – with a larger differential (in favour of boys) than in most other countries for which estimates are available.²¹ Among the regional contrasts within India in this respect, there is more excess female mortality in the north-west, and less – or none – in many of the eastern and southern states. Given the regional differences, the average picture indicates how adverse the conditions of girls are compared with boys in the particularly gender-biased states – mainly in the north and the west of India. The states in the north and the west also show a dismally high incidence of 'natality discrimination' against girls – we shall turn to that subject presently.

There are many other ways in which gender inequality in India remains strong. For instance, women's workforce participation (conventionally defined, i.e. excluding household work within the family) remains extremely low by international standards, and shows little sign of increasing.²² This is in sharp contrast to what has happened in many other Asian countries (including, as we saw in [Chapter 3](#), Bangladesh) in their phase of rapid growth, which has usually been accompanied by a major increase in women's employment opportunities.* This contrast is partly a reflection of India's general problem of 'jobless growth', discussed in [Chapter 2](#), but also a reflection of negative social attitudes towards women's work outside the household in large parts of the society. In fact, increases in income or education in India are often associated with a *decline* in women's workforce participation.

As was discussed in [Chapter 3](#) (and also in [Chapters 5](#) and [6](#)), Bangladesh has not only

progressed much more than India in many areas of human development, this progress has been led, to a great extent, by the role of women's agency – particularly in the provision and use of public services and in the social sector, from family planning and health care to teaching in schools. India has to be concerned not only with what can be done for women (important as it is), but also with what women can do for India, which remains, to a great extent, an untapped resource that can make India a very different country.

Another example of continuing gender disparity can be seen in women's political representation, even though the record here is rather mixed. On the one hand, women are now entitled to a minimum share of 33 per cent (even 50 per cent in some states) of elected posts in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) – a very positive development.²³ This has enabled millions of women to take active part in local politics, and there is some evidence of this having led to significant changes in the priorities, activities and perceptions of PRIs.²⁴ On the other hand, the Indian Parliament and state assemblies continue to be male bastions. Women's share of all seats in the Lok Sabha has never been higher than 10 per cent or so (the highest share so far was 10.9 per cent, in 2009); the share of women in state assemblies is also below 10 per cent in a majority of cases, and not higher than 14 per cent in any of the major states for which data are available.²⁵

There are many other manifestations of India's patriarchal form of social and cultural relations: property inheritance is resolutely patrilineal, post-marital residence remains overwhelmingly patrilocal, women's freedom of movement continues to be quite restricted, and violence against women (including domestic violence) is still pervasive in large parts of the society. In fact, some of these patriarchal norms have had a tendency to spread rather than to vanish. For instance, the practice of dowry (which contributes to many gender-related social problems, including the well-known phenomenon of 'boy preference' and the harassment of married women on grounds of having brought an inadequate dowry) has steadily spread during the twentieth century to communities where it did not exist earlier. One possible reason for this is that many of these patriarchal norms, including dowry, which used to be confined only to parts of the upper-caste groups, are seen as markers of social status and upward mobility.²⁶ We surely have a long way to go in achieving anything like gender parity in vitally important aspects of economic, social and political life in India.

RAPE, VIOLENCE AND PROTEST

The aspect of gender inequality that has received most vocal attention in recent days is that of violence against women and in particular the high incidence of rape, and this issue has had a sudden and gigantic prominence which it did not have earlier. The transforming moment was the occurrence of an extremely brutal gang-rape in a closed bus in Delhi on 16th December 2012 (which ultimately also led to the death of the victim). Massive demonstrations against violence perpetrated on women continued for many days in Delhi as well as in some other cities, bringing out protesting crowds incomparably larger than any seen before involved in the rejection of gender inequity. There were large clashes with the police as well. Among the vocal complaints were those against the police for not providing adequate protection to women – and in this case also for not acting at all promptly even when the raped victim and her beaten male friend were found lying on the street. The lack of security and deep vulnerability of women to rape and harassment became overnight a national issue in a way it had never been earlier.

Whether this will prove to be a long-run turning point in bringing about greater security for women remains to be seen. Predictably, there was also some airing of male prejudice and sexism in

blaming the victim, making such impertinent suggestions as that women should dress more modestly, should not offer temptation to vulnerable men, and must not go out at night. The fact that these apologia were immediately and loudly rebutted in public discussion indicates that at least for now the movement has not lost its reasoned basis. There were suggestions also that this kind of rape occurs only in modern India (what is sometimes called ‘India, not Bharat’) and does not happen so frequently – or at all – in rural areas, which is of course empirical nonsense given what we know both about violation and rape of Dalit women by upper-caste men (often landlords), and of marital rape of unwilling wives to do what their husbands may want. One of the positive consequences of this extremely tragic and barbaric incident is to draw attention both to the prevalence of sexual brutality and rape and to the fact that even known phenomena of the violation of women had tended to receive so little attention in the past. As the newspapers reinvented themselves as rape-reporting vehicles, many of them across the country have been devoting much space, often several pages every day, to reports of rape gathered together in a way they never had been before.

How frequent is rape in India? If there are pages and pages of rapes to report in the newspapers from across the country, the incidence cannot but be large. And yet it did not seem like that at all even a short while ago. One of the reasons for this subdued perception must be the underreporting of rapes, which is common because the police are often quite unfriendly to the victims, the courts are slow to act, and convictions are hard to secure. It has been frequently speculated that the majority of rapes go unreported, and the actual incidence of rape may be five or ten times what gets recorded by the police. This is very likely true, and it might be quite correct to conclude, as many observers have done, that India does indeed have a ‘rape problem.’

However, whether or not India has a problem of extremely high incidence of rape, it surely has another problem in the form of victims getting little support from the police or the legal system. If we go by the rate of police-recorded rape, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime gives the incidence of rape in India for 2010 as 1.8 per 100,000 people – among the lowest in the world. India’s figure of 1.8 can be compared with, for example, 27.3 in the USA, 28.8 in the United Kingdom, 63.5 in Sweden, or 120.0 in South Africa.²⁷ India’s recorded number is certainly a huge underestimate, but even if we take 10 times that figure, the corrected number of rapes would still be lower in India than in the USA or UK or Sweden or South Africa (even with the assumption that there is no underreporting in these other countries). Of course the multiple required to correct for underreporting in India could be, quite possibly (we do not really know), much higher than 10. We cannot be sure whether India has a special rape problem or not, but all the evidence suggests that India has a huge problem with making rape a seriously monitored and reported issue, with all that implies about the lack of preventive planning. India’s main problem can well lie – consistently with what we do know – not so much in any exceptional frequency of rapes, but in having an uncaring police, bad security arrangements, an unfunctioning judicial system, and ultimately an uncaring society. India does not have to be ‘the rape capital of the world’ for it to be severely indicted.

What is also clear is that Delhi has a special problem that may not apply to the other megacities in India. The rate of recorded rapes per 100,000 people is 2.8 for Delhi in 2011, compared with 1.2 in Mumbai, 1.1 in Bangalore, 0.9 in Chennai, and 0.3 in Kolkata. Since there is nothing to indicate that recording of rape is much more efficient in Delhi than in the other cities, it is indeed remarkable that Delhi has a record that is more than 9 times worse than Kolkata. Indeed, no matter how unfriendly to women the Indian society might or might not be, there is no reason why Delhi cannot even come close to making the city at least as safe as some of the other cities of India already are. The problems of administration, policing, trials and social indifference remain large for India as a whole, but there

are parts of India that have bigger problems in the security of women than other parts. Huge heterogeneities within India can be seen in other areas of gender inequality as well, as will be presently discussed.

COOPERATIVE CONFLICT AND WOMEN'S AGENCY

The force and effectiveness of women's agency depend on a number of social influences of which the nature of the family is a significant component. A family is a system of cooperation that has elements of congruent interest as well as divergent priorities. The divisions within the family can be seen as a combination of cooperation (everyone may benefit from living together) and conflict (the benefits and chores generated by living together can be divided in many different ways, and in this respect men and women may have competitive, rather than congruent interests). Models of 'cooperative conflicts' can be fruitfully used in explaining intra-family divisions.²⁸

In traditional arrangements, women tend to get a smaller share of benefits (for example, less favourable medical and educational attention) and a very much larger share of the chores (particularly in the frequently unshared burden of housework and the care of children and old people). There is, however, empirical evidence that the sharing of both the benefits and burdens can become more equitable when women – particularly young women – have a stronger voice, related, for example, to being literate and schooled, and to having recognizably gainful employment, rather than only unremunerated housework and unrecognized drudgery.²⁹

The perception of who is doing how much 'productive' work, or who is 'contributing' how much to the family's prosperity, can be, in this context, very influential, even though the underlying 'theory' regarding how contributions or productivity are to be assessed may be rarely discussed explicitly.³⁰ Such interpretations of individual contributions and appropriate entitlements of women and men play a major role in the division of a family's joint benefits between them; and the circumstances that influence these perceptions of contributions and appropriate entitlements (such as women's ability to earn an independent income, to work outside the home, to be educated, to own property) often have a crucial bearing on these divisions. The impact of greater empowerment and agency of women, thus, includes the correction of the iniquities that blight the lives and well-being of women vis-à-vis men. For example, Bina Agarwal has shown, in her well argued book *A Field of One's Own*, how the asymmetry in land ownership – with women often owning very little land – can make a major difference to gender inequalities of various kinds.³¹ Similarly, the positive impact of female education in resisting widespread gender inequality has also been shown to be quite large.³²

The consequences of gender asymmetry can extend well beyond the domain of gender inequality itself, since the lives of other people are also involved. In this context, it is particularly important to see the role of women's agency in reducing child mortality, and restraining fertility. Both relate to concerns that are central to the process of development, and while they clearly do influence the well-being of women as well, their relevance is undoubtedly very much wider.

The adverse effects of very high birth rates include the denial of women's freedom to do other things – through persistent bearing and rearing of children – routinely imposed on many Asian and African women. It is, thus, not surprising that reductions in birth rates have often followed the enhancement of women's status and power. The lives that are most constrained by over-frequent bearing and rearing of children are those of young women, and any social change that increases their voice and influence on fertility decisions can be expected to have the effect of reducing the frequency of births.

Recent demographic work has also brought out the influence of women's agency and of women's empowerment in reducing child mortality.³³ The influence works through many channels, but perhaps most immediately it works through the importance that mothers typically attach to the welfare of the children, and the opportunity they have, when their agency is respected and empowered, to influence family decisions in that direction, away from being dominated by the lifestyles of adult males.

The positive impact of women's agency may extend well beyond the connection between women's empowerment and demographic change. As discussed in [Chapter 3](#), women's agency seems to have played a crucial role in the recent progress of many aspects of living standards in Bangladesh, and also in recent experiences of relatively rapid social progress in India – notably in Himachal Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Many aspects of this far-reaching influence are becoming increasingly clear.

SELECTIVE ABORTION, SOCIETY AND ENLIGHTENMENT

Even though the impact of women's agency is remarkably extensive, there is a need to understand how the reach of that agency is also qualified – and sometimes restrained – by an inadequate understanding of social inequities and a reluctance to re-examine traditional values (for example, 'boy preference'). This lack of clarity and confidence may be influenced by a lack of awareness of the oddness of seeing girls as inferior to boys (including an inadequate knowledge of what happens in many countries or regions where these types of gender inequalities are not present). But even with increased knowledge, the reach of women's agency may be limited also by the need for courage and temerity to think differently – without which it may not be powerful enough to overturn iniquitous but entrenched practices and societal arrangements that are often accepted as part and parcel of an assumed 'natural order'.

The restrained reach of women's agency is illustrated, for example, in China or South Korea, where the standard routes to women's empowerment, such as female literacy and economic independence, have had major achievements. This progress has certainly contributed to many of the social advances in those countries and has done a great deal to remove some standard forms of gender inequality, such as survival asymmetry (the unnaturally high mortality rates of women relative to those of men have been largely eliminated in both South Korea and China). And yet women's agency alone has not been able to stem the tide of sex-specific abortions which specially target female foetuses (this can be called 'natality discrimination'). As the scientific techniques of determination of the sex of the foetus advanced in the 1980s, natality discrimination through sex-selective abortion became surprisingly common in Korea and China. This has led to initiatives in these countries consciously to cultivate the value of having daughters and not just sons. There is a complex issue of enlightened agency involved here, which takes the discussion beyond only seeking more power for women to exercise their agency.

In India too, the tendency to use new technology to abort female foetuses has grown in many parts of the country (particularly in the northern and western states), and women's education alone has not been able to serve as a strong barrier to this regressive movement.³⁴ Indeed, there is some evidence that decisions of sex-selective abortions are often taken by the mothers themselves. What is crucially important in this context is to overcome what Justice Leila Seth has aptly called the 'patriarchal mindset'.³⁵

This raises questions as to how to interpret the agency of women and its social influence. It is important to see the concept of agency as stretching beyond immediate 'control' over decisions. The

fuller sense of the crucial idea of ‘agency’ must, among other things, involve the freedom to question established values and traditional priorities.³⁶ Agency freedom must, in fact, include the freedom to think freely, without being severely restrained by pressured conformism, or by the ignorance of how the prevailing practices in the rest of the world differ from what can be observed locally. What is particularly critical in remedying the terrible biases involved in natality discrimination and sex-specific abortions is the role of women’s informed and enlightened agency, including the power of women to overcome unquestioningly inherited values and attitudes. What may make a real difference in dealing with this new – and ‘high tech’ – face of gender disparity is the willingness, ability and courage to challenge the dominance of received and entrenched norms. When anti-female bias in action reflects the hold of traditional patriarchal values from which mothers themselves may not be immune, what is crucial is not just freedom of *action* but also freedom of *thought and its practice*. Informed critical agency is important in combating inequality of every kind, and gender inequality is no exception.

Regional patterns of sex-selective abortion in India are consistent with this understanding of the influence of patriarchal values (and of women’s freedom – or the lack of it – to resist them). Looking first at the all-India picture, the situation looks most alarming. As is well known, the female-male ratio in the age group of 0–6 years (hereafter the ‘child sex ratio’) has been going down over time, and in the last decade it has fallen further, from 927 girls per 1,000 boys in 2001 to 914 girls per 1,000 boys in 2011. Further, there is evidence that this decline is largely driven by the spread of sex-selective abortion. The latest demographic analysis of census as well as National Family Health Survey data from 1990 onwards suggests that the number of selective abortions of girls between 1980 and 2010 was somewhere between 4 and 12 million, and that the *annual* number of sex-selective abortions is now around 0.3 to 0.6 million (or roughly 2 to 4 per cent of all pregnancies).³⁷ In the worst-affected districts (e.g. Jhajjar, Mahendragarh and Rewari in Haryana), the child sex ratio is now below 800 girls per 1,000 boys.³⁸

There are no reliable birth statistics in India from which the female-male ratios at birth can be directly established. However, we can look instead at the female-male ratios in the age group of 0–6 years for which more reliable data exist, and which tend to be quite close to female-male ratios at birth, though they would of course be somewhat distorted by child mortality differentials.³⁹ Female-male ratios in the age group of 0–6 years are available from the Indian censuses, and estimates of female-male ratios at birth obtained by ‘correcting’ the census-based child sex ratios using sex-specific child mortality rates are also available from a recent demographic study (Kumar and Sathyanarayana, 2012). We shall use both sets of estimates – the female-male ratios of the 0–6 year age-group, and the estimated birth ratios after mortality rate corrections.

But how should an appropriate cut-off ratio of female to male children be identified? To make a reasoned identification, we can use the European demographic statistics. However, there are variations between different European countries as well. It is necessary to understand the demographic variations across the world of the number of girls born per 1,000 boys in order to be able to fix an appropriate cut-off point for diagnosing the likely presence of sex-selective abortion of female foetuses in an Indian state.

Everywhere in the world more boys are born than girls, and the female-male ratio at conception is even more sharply biased in the direction of males (the standard ratio is often taken to be 910 female foetuses to 1,000 male conceptions). But females do better than males in survival given symmetric care (which they tend to get in the uterus), and by the time births take place, the female-male ratio is around 940 to 950 females per 1,000 males in the European countries. During 2005–10,

the average ratio of females to males at birth for Europe as a whole was 943 females per 1,000 males. There are, as noted, variations within the European countries, but these cannot be attributed to the effects of a presumed practice of sex-selective abortion. To be reasonably confident that the figure for a particular state in India indicates a significant prevalence of sex-selective abortion, we have to identify a cut-off ratio that would be consistent with the lower ranges *within* the European spectrum.

Among the larger European countries towards the lower end, the female-male ratio at birth is 941 in Italy, 940 in Spain, 939 in Greece and 935 in Ireland. There are some countries with even lower ratios than these figures, including Macedonia (926), Montenegro (926), and others, but in some of these cases the data and the causal influences behind them can perhaps be questioned. There is, however, a strong case for choosing the average of Italy, Spain and Greece, and taking the cut-off line to be 940.

Using this cut-off ratio and applying it to the 2011 census figures for female-male ratios among children of 0–6 years in age, it appears that all the states in the north and west of India show clear evidence of a strong hold of sex-selective abortion in a way that the states in the east and south do not, in general, show (see [Table 8.3](#)). The first thing to note is that we can draw a dividing line to cut India into two halves, with the states in the west and north of India (with clear evidence of sex-selective abortion) being separated from states in the east and south (without such evidence, except for Odisha).⁴⁰ The former group – with female-male ratios below 940 per 1,000 in 2011 – include Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarkhand, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir and Bihar, whereas the ones with ratios above 940 per 1,000 are Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. The state of Odisha fails to qualify in the latter list marginally, with a female-male ratio of 934 per 1,000, even though – like the other states in the east and the south – Odisha has a higher female-male ratio than every major state in the north and the west.

Table 8.3

Child Sex Ratios and Sex Ratio at Birth

State	Female-male ratio, age 0–6 years, 2001	Female-male ratio, age 0–6 years, 2011	Indirect estimates of female-male ratio at birth, 2011 ^a
Haryana	819	830	842
Punjab	798	846	854
Jammu & Kashmir	941	859	870
Rajasthan	909	883	889
Maharashtra	913	883	902
Gujarat	883	886	891
Uttarakhand	908	886	890
Uttar Pradesh	916	899	911
Himachal Pradesh	896	906	916
Madhya Pradesh	932	912	917
Bihar	942	933	941
Odisha	953	934	936
Andhra Pradesh	961	943	942
Jharkhand	965	943	953
Karnataka	946	943	944
Tamil Nadu	942	946	946
West Bengal	960	950	947
Assam	965	957	952
Kerala	960	959	959
Chhattisgarh	975	964	963
India	927	914	919

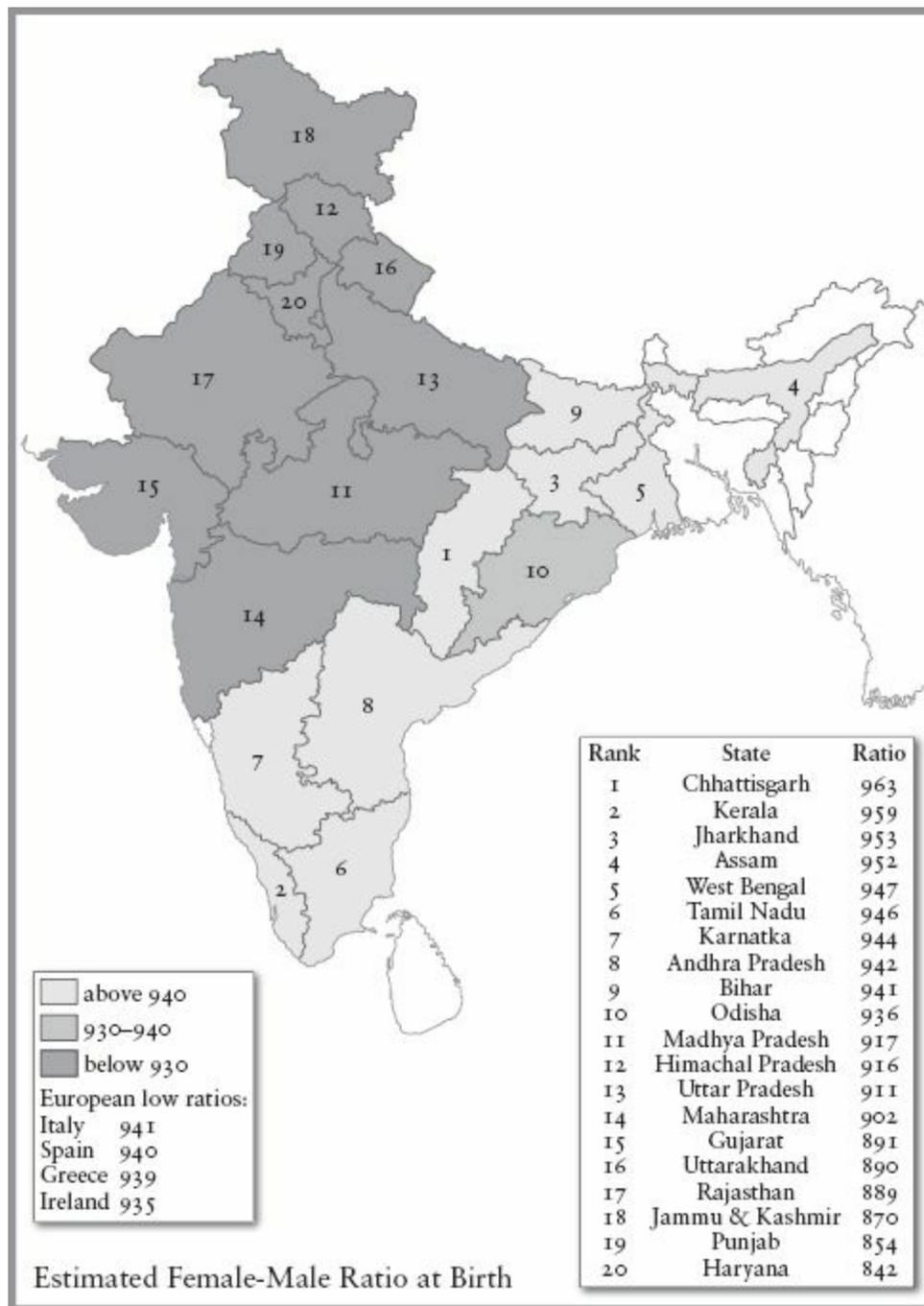
^a Estimated by combining Census data on female-male ratio data with Sample Registration System (SRS) estimates of age- and sex-specific mortality rates.

Sources: Government of India (2011b), Statement 13. The indirect estimates of sex ratio at birth are due to Kumar and Sathyanarayana (2012). States are ranked in increasing order of female-male ratio in the age group of 0–6 years in 2011 (second column).

If we use instead the indirect estimates of birth ratios, we get a very similar picture (see [Table 8.3](#), last column, and also the map opposite). A small exception, however, can be seen in Bihar, which was at the top of the list for the low female-male ratios in terms of statistics for children aged 0–6 years, and now, with a ratio of 941, crosses the cut-off line of 940 (and so places itself in the ‘eastern and southern’ league), whereas Odisha remains below the cut-off line with a ratio of 936. These minor exceptions to the overall picture do not significantly alter the basic contrast between the south and east on the one hand, and the north and west on the other, particularly since every major state in the east and south has a higher female-male ratio than each major state in the north and the west in terms of the solid count of children between the ages of 0 and 6.

This contrast was already apparent in 2001 census data as well.⁴¹ Indeed, as [Table 8.3](#) shows, it was already the case at that time that every major state in the north and west had a lower child sex ratio than every state in the south and east. Having said this, there have also been some important changes between the two census years as far as the absolute values of child sex ratios are concerned. Among other changes is a significant decline in the child sex ratio between 2001 and 2011 in many states, including some in the south and east. For instance, Odisha’s child sex ratio fell from 953 in 2001 to 934 in 2011, with a particularly large fall (from 933 to 909) in urban areas, where sex-selective abortion is likely to be concentrated. In urban Jharkhand, too, the child sex ratio fell from 930 in 2001 to 904 in 2011. These are some indications that sex-selective abortion may be spreading beyond the north and west.⁴² There is an important warning here of the possible danger of further spread of sex-selective abortion in India. That warning must be taken seriously, even though the picture is far from uniform (for example, the child sex ratio went up, rather than down, in the southern

state of Tamil Nadu).



It seems quite likely that in every state – even in the south and the east – there will be some takers of the opportunity of selective abortion in line with whatever ‘boy preference’ particular families have, using new and expanding facilities of sex determination of foetuses. While this may explain small changes of the child sex ratio in the unfavourable direction, the real question is whether this would remain mainly an aberration in the south and east, or whether the small beginning will translate itself into much more widespread use of selective abortion in the south and in the east (as seems to have happened in urban Jharkhand and urban Odisha). The explanation of the sharp regional divide is itself a very challenging issue, especially since even in the census of 2011, it remains true that every state in the south and east has a higher ratio of girls to boys than every state in the north and west.

Why is there such a regional difference – indeed such a striking contrast? This is only one of many such questions to which we do not have a ready-made answer, but the issue of cultural contrast is certainly worth investigating. There has been work on related aspects of gender relations in which

similar contrasts, including variants of a broad contrast between the north and west on the one hand, and the south and east on the other, have received attention.⁴³ But what is emerging here is a particularly sharp contrast between two halves of the country, with no obvious explanation. Incidentally, the data from Bangladesh (the corresponding ratio there is 972, for the age group of 0–4 years) conforms robustly to the ‘eastern’ regional pattern within India – and more.

No matter how we slice the story, there is a general problem of the valuation of female children in India as a whole, and strong evidence of it in the north and west of India.* It is particularly discouraging that the traditional ally of gender justice – the education of girls – does not seem to do much to reduce the natality discrimination from which female foetuses suffer. This draws particular attention to the importance of enlightened public reasoning – free from prejudices of all kinds. And that, of course, is a central part of the general thesis of this book.

POWER IMBALANCES, OLD AND NEW

So far in this chapter, we have focused mainly on inequalities of the traditional kind, such as those of class, caste and gender. These old and deep-rooted inequalities continue to have a paramount influence on Indian society and politics. Some of them, as we saw, are subsiding in significant respects. However, new or rising inequalities are also reinforcing the vicious circle of disempowerment and deprivation. For instance, the last twenty years have seen a massive growth of corporate power in India, a force that is largely driven – with some honourable exceptions – by the unrestrained search for profits. The growing influence of corporate interests on public policy and democratic institutions does not particularly facilitate the reorientation of policy priorities towards the needs of the underprivileged.*

It is important to recognize the influence of elements of the corporate sector on the balance of public policies, but it would be wrong to take that to be something like an irresistible natural force. India’s democratic system offers ways of resisting the new biases that may emanate from the pressure of business firms. One instructive example both of a blatant attempt to denude an established public service and of the possibility of defeating such an attempt is the long saga of an attempted takeover of India’s school meal programme by some biscuit-making firms.⁴⁴ India’s midday meal programme, which provides hot cooked meals prepared by local women to some 120 million children with a substantial impact on both nutrition and school attendance, had been eyed for many years by packaged-food manufacturers, especially the biscuits industry. A few years ago, a ‘Biscuit Manufacturers’ Association’ (BMA) launched a massive campaign for the replacement of cooked school meals with branded biscuit packets. The BMA wrote to all Members of Parliament, asking them to plead the case for biscuits with the concerned minister and assisting them in this task with a neat pseudo-scientific précis of the wonders of manufactured biscuits. Dozens of Members of Parliament, across most of the political spectrum (with the notable exception of Communist parties), promptly obliged and wrote to the minister, often just rehashing the BMA’s bogus claims. According to one senior official, the Ministry was ‘flooded’ with such letters, 29 of which were obtained later under the Right to Information Act. Fortunately, the proposal was firmly shot down by the Ministry after being referred to state governments and nutrition experts, and public vigilance exposed what was going on. The minister, in fact, wrote to a state chief minister who sympathized with the biscuit lobby: ‘We are, indeed, dismayed at the growing requests for introduction of pre-cooked foods, emanating largely from suppliers/marketers of packaged foods, and aimed essentially at penetrating and deepening the market for such foods.’

The bigger battle is still on. The BMA itself did not give up after being rebuked by the Minister for Human Resource Development, but proceeded to write to the Minister for Women and Child Development, with a similar proposal for supplying biscuits to children below the age of six years under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). Other food manufacturers are also on the job, and despite much vigilance and resistance from activist quarters (and the Supreme Court), they have made significant inroads into child feeding programmes in several states.

Similar concerns apply in other fields of social policy. For instance, the prospects of building an effective public health care system in India are unlikely to be helped by the growing influence of commercial insurance companies, very active in the field of health. As discussed in [Chapter 6](#), India's health system is already one of the most privatized in the world, with predictable consequences – high expenditure, low achievements and massive inequalities. Yet there is much pressure to embrace the American model of health care provision, based on commercial insurance, despite the international recognition in the health community of its comparatively low achievement and significantly high cost.

However, recent events have also shown the possibility not just of winning isolated battles against inappropriate corporate influence, as happened with the biscuits lobby, but also of building institutional safeguards against abuses of corporate power. The Right to Information Act, for instance, though not directly applicable to information held by private corporations, is a powerful means of watching and containing the state-corporate nexus, as the biscuits story illustrates. Regulations and legislations pertaining to corporate funding of political parties, corporate lobbying, financial transparency, environmental standards and workers' rights also have an important role to play in bringing the Indian corporate sector into the discipline of the elementary norms of social justice.

THE PRIVILEGED AND THE REST

As we have discussed and extensively illustrated, India is full of inequalities of various kinds. Some Indians are comparatively rich; most are not. Some are fairly well educated; others are illiterate. Some lead easy lives; others toil hard for little reward. Some are politically powerful; others cannot influence anything outside their immediate sphere. Some have substantial opportunities for advancement in life; others lack them altogether. Some are treated with respect by the police no matter what they have done; others are treated like dirt at the slightest suspicion of transgression. These diverse contrasts reflect different kinds of inequality, and each of them individually requires serious attention.

But going beyond that – and this is a central issue in understanding the nature of inequality in India – it can be seen that the same people, often enough, are poor in income and wealth, suffer from illiteracy and bad schooling, work hard for little remuneration, have little influence on the administration of the country, lack social and economic opportunities that would allow them to move forward, and are treated with brutal callousness by the class-conscious police. The dividing line of 'haves' and 'have-nots' in India is not just a rhetorical cliché, but also an important part of diagnostic analysis, pointing us towards a pre-eminent division that is extremely important for an understanding of Indian society. The congruence of deprivations only increases the disparity between the privileged and the rest in distinct spheres, and places different people in altogether distinct compartments. There is a real challenge here for the pursuit of equity in India.

* Ambedkar (1936), p. 47; emphasis added. He went further: 'The Caste System is not merely a division of labourers which is quite different from division of labour – it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other.' This feature of the caste hierarchy, as a system of 'graded inequality' (as Ambedkar called it), makes it even more pernicious as a division of labourers, and even more resistant to change.

* Only 17 out of 184 countries for which data on women's workforce participation rates are given in *World Development Indicators* have a lower 'female labour force participation rate' (age 15 years and above) than India's abysmal 29 per

cent. Most of these countries are in North Africa and West Asia.

* A bit of a silver lining, if rather thin, is that the female-male ratio among children aged 0–6 years has improved in four of the most female-short states between 2001 and 2011 (Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat, and Jammu & Kashmir), even though the ratios for each of these states still show massive evidence of a continuing hold of selective abortion of female foetuses.

* As early as 1776, long before corporate power acquired anything like the influence it has today, Adam Smith had warned against the interference of commercial interests in public policy: 'The interest of the dealers, however, in any particular branch of trade or manufactures, is always in some respects different from, and even opposite to, that of the public ... The proposal of any new law or regulation of commerce which comes from this order, ought always to be listened to with great precaution, and ought never to be adopted till after having been long and carefully examined, not only with the most scrupulous, but with the most suspicious attention.' (Adam Smith, 1776, p. 292).