Rising Inequality in India: The Role of Class and Global Capitalist Dynamics

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Abstract

The Indian growth process has witnessed two qualitatively different periods during the last three decades. First, in the 1980s, the Indian economy witnessed high growth with more or less stagnant inequality. Second, in the 1990s and later, the economy has tended to witness an inequality-inducing growth phenomenon. The major sources of inequality are - rising rural-urban gap (with rising agrarian distress), rising intra-urban inequality, rising inter-provincial inequality, and rising inter-class inequality. These internal processes have tended to also cause a growing instability in the economy through a lop-sided structure of aggregate demand. In this paper, I present a deeper analysis of the class and other structural factors that have contributed to the worsening of the distributional processes in the overall Indian growth story.

At present, the effects of the worsening distribution are visible in terms of multiple crises that have begun to affect the Indian economy. The Indian story of inequality is similar to the within-country patterns of changes in inequality in the European countries too. I argue in this paper that there is a pattern of global capitalist dynamics over the last three decades that has governed the various within-country regimes of inequality across the world. In this sense, a deeper analysis of the Indian inequality also throws light on similar factors that operate across the world, including in the European economies.
I. Introduction

That the Indian growth process since the 1980s has been uneven is now well understood. This unevenness has both a spatial (rural-urban axis or across Indian states) as well as temporal dimension (1980s vs later), along with growing disparities across classes and castes in India (Vakulabharanam and De, 2014; Motiram and Vakulabharanam, 2012). However, there is no single paper that documents the temporal unevenness across classes since 1980s until today. There was a major change in the Indian policy space during this period. While the Indian economy experienced a significant growth spurt primarily due to the fiscal push and pro-business attitude adopted by the state in the early 1980s (Kohli 2010), economic policies were still largely guided by the Indian state towards achieving higher growth as well as relatively equal distribution. The policy reforms of the 1990s, however, made a radical break from the past by bringing a new regime of private capital-led growth introducing various internal and external liberalization initiatives, large-scale privatization and rapid primitive accumulation. This paper shows the emergence of inequalities during this whole period, paying particular attention to the contrast between the 1980s and 1990s in arguing that the Indian economy entered a new regime of accumulation after the liberalization policies were introduced.

Indian inequality analyses have tended to be focused on the inter-personal or sectoral (rural-urban) and inter-state axes until recently. There have been some recent interventions that have analyzed Indian inequality along the class or caste dimension, in the process bringing the importance of group-based disparities to the fore (Vakulabharanam 2010, Zacharias and Vakulabharanam 2012). However, I claim and show in this paper that increasing inequality in India can be explained almost entirely by the growing disparities among different classes.

This phenomenon of growing inequality among classes is, of course, not confined to India. Several countries across the world, including the European countries, have witnessed a rise in inequality among different classes since 1980s or 1990s (for instance, Italy, see OECD 2011). It is certainly the case that the top 1% are garnering significant gains from economic growth, capital gains, and returns from capital (Piketty 2014) but even without the top 1% story, we can see a larger phenomenon of rising inequality among the rest of the population, which is what I present for the Indian case. However, this is clearly a phenomenon that transcends any one country, and this is where there is a place to think of the larger common structures that have been operational across countries that is contributing to the increasing within-country inequality phenomenon.
The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section II discusses the data sources, their limitations and the methodology. Section III delineates the inequality trends since 1980s and their decompositions along multiple dimensions. Section IV presents the role of class (local political economy) and the larger capitalist dynamics (global political economy) in the story of rising inequality. Section V presents the conclusions.

II. Data and Methodology

II.1 Data Source

The data used for this paper are from the quinquennial consumer expenditure surveys of the Indian National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO). Three surveys are used for the computations of the inequality and its decompositions. The first survey is from the 38th round, conducted in 1983-84. The second survey is from the 50th round, conducted in 1993-94. The third round is from the 66th round, conducted in 2009-10. In these surveys, detailed expenditure of the sampled households is collected based on which average monthly per capita expenditure (MPCE) values are computed for various levels of aggregation (such as whole country, or states or classes or rural-urban). This is the basis for the computation of interpersonal inequality or group inequalities.

There are limitations in the data that are used. Like in the case of most household surveys across countries, there is an under-sampling of the upper income groups, which would typically imply that the inequality values presented are underestimated. This has similar implications for the inter-class inequality that is discussed in the paper. Moreover, because consumption data are being used, the stated inequality levels would typically be lower than the corresponding income inequality among the sampled households.

II.2 Class Definitions

Different class groups are arrived at for urban and rural areas separately. Two class schemas are discussed in this paper based on an earlier similar exercise (Vakulabharanam 2010), the details of which are presented below. The basis for class definition in the rural and urban areas is based on a Marxian understanding of surplus production and appropriation.

In rural areas, in agriculture, a distinction is made between agricultural workers, farmers, merchants, moneylenders and landlords. Agricultural workers contribute to surplus production
that is then appropriated by one of the remaining groups. There are different classes of farmers. The small and marginal farmers work their own land but also contribute to the required labor in larger farms so part of their surplus labor is appropriated by the large farmers or landlords. Similarly, middle and large farmers hire wage labor and therefore they appropriate the surplus produced by the workers and typically, marginal farmers. The landlords, merchants and moneylenders get the distributions of the surplus produced in agriculture in the form of rent, merchant profit or interest income. In the non-agricultural sector in the rural areas, the classes to be found are the non-agricultural workers, professional workers (who work for the state or a private agency) and owners and managers of private enterprises. Based on the occupational category provided for each household, these classifications are made.

In urban areas, the basic distinction is between the working groups and those that live off the surplus of the working groups. This is determined by the occupational categories provided in the survey (NCO-Classification). Within workers, distinctions are present. Three classes of workers are identified - the unskilled workers (most of the informal workers in urban areas would figure in this group), skilled workers (craftsmen and women, and workers with specialized skill in the factory), and professionals (who have greater autonomy at work, and those that have higher levels of education such as engineers, doctors, bureaucrats) and so forth. These classes of workers are separately identified for services and industry. The non-working groups who live off the surplus of workers are identified in two broad classes - formal owners and managers and informal owners and managers, based on the nature of enterprise that they work for. The Petty commodity producers would fall under one of the working groups or the informal owner and manager category.

Based on these definitions of classes, two class schemas are arrived at. The first class schema, which is a simplified one uses categories of consciousness to arrive at definitions of classes. In the urban areas, two classes are arrived at - Elites and workers. Elites consist of owners and managers, and professional workers. Workers consist of skilled and unskilled workers. In rural areas, four classes are arrived at - elites, small farmers, agricultural workers and non-agricultural workers. The last two categories correspond to the discussion above. The rural elites consist of landlords, merchants, moneylenders, large and medium farmers, owners and managers and professionals. The small farmers are a combination of the small and marginal farmers.

The second class schema is defined in terms of the detailed definitions of classes that are discussed above based on a Marxian classification. The rural areas have a total of 12 classes and urban areas have a total of 10 classes (please refer to the tables presented).
II.3 Group-based Inequality Decompositions

The inequality values are typically presented in terms of the Gini coefficient for this paper. However, as is well known, Gini coefficient is not sub-group decomposable readily as has been well-documented in the literature. If Gini is decomposed like the GE measures, three terms are obtained - the within group decomposition, the between-group decomposition and a third, overlapping term. However, Yitzhaki (1994) presents an alternative decomposition methodology (discussed in Vakulabharanam 2010), that allows for a decomposition of the Gini into two terms - the between term and the remainder term. The within-group term is like the regular within-term for the GE measures, except that instead of a weighted average of the Ginis of various sub-groups, Yitzhaki captures the within-term as a weighted sum of the product of the sub-group Ginis, the sub-group population shares and the overlapping of the sub-groups with the overall population. Similarly, the between term is not exactly a Gini of the sub-group means but it takes into account the range of values in each of the sub-groups while computing the Gini-like term that defines the between-group term for Yitzhaki. On top of this, the overlapping terms of each of the sub-groups is interpreted as the opposite of stratification. A sub-group overlapping value of 0-1 for a sub-group would indicate its stratification (at the top or at the bottom) vis-a-vis the overall population. A sub-group overlapping value of 1 indicates perfect overlap. A sub-group overlapping value of 1-2 indicates polarization within the subgroup around the mean of the group.

III. Inequality Trends and Decompositions

The detailed inequality computations for India over the last three decades are presented below. The contrast between the 1980s and the later period is also brought out in these numbers. In the different sections below, inequality increases along different axes are presented.

III.1 Overall Inequality: Inter-personal

From Table 1, it can be noted that during the 1980s (i.e. between 1983-84 and 1993-94) inequality was almost stagnant, although growth rates picked up significantly. This phenomenon of relatively equal growth during the 1980s is discussed in the next section. Between 1993-94 and 2009-10, however, inequality levels, measured in Gini coefficient, jumped by over 10% for the whole country. This is a fairly significant phenomenon. How do we make sense of this?

[Insert Table 1 Around Here]
III.2 Inequality: Rural-Urban Axis

From table 2, it can be seen that urban inequality registered a substantial increase while rural inequality remained more or less stagnant during this period. From this table, it would appear as though it is the rising urban inequality that is causing the increase in the country-wide inequality but that is not the entire story.

[Insert Table 2 Around Here]

From table 3, three things can be further noted. First, the rural-urban gap has been rising through the whole period. Combined with the increasing urban inequality, this completes the understanding of Indian inequality (in statistical terms) along the rural-urban axis. Second, it can also be noted that the between term of the rural-urban inequality has been rising both in absolute terms as well as in terms of the proportion of the total inequality being explained. Third, the within term actually declined during the 1980s in absolute terms and rose again after 1993-94. In fact, the reason for the mild decline in the overall inequality lies in the decline of the within term. This is explained in the next section.

[Insert Table 3 Around Here]

III.3 Inequality: Inter-State Axis

From table 4, two interesting observations can be made. First, the between term is increasing over time both in its absolute value as well as in the proportion to which it is contributing to the overall inequality. Second, the within term declined during the 1980s and then has increased in its absolute value during the 1990s and later. The within-state inequality showed a decline in the 1980s indicating that within the local political economies of Indian states, there was a declining trend of inequality, and this is reversed during the 1990s and later. Economic reforms era contributed to a rising inequality among the Indian states.

[Insert Table 4 Around Here]
III.4 Inequality: Class Decompositions

From table 5, the most overarching observation is that during the entire period, the absolute increase (both in the simplified class schema as well as detailed class schema) in the between class term explains the total increase in the overall inequality. In this sense the class schemas are able to better explain what happens to overall inequality in India than the other axes discussed above. In both the class schemas too, the within-class term shows a decline in the 1980s, and an increase thereafter.

[Insert Tables 5 and 6 Around Here]

All in all, class dynamics are extremely important in understanding the post-1980s growth process, while the other cleavages are also significant. In order to make sense of inequality these cleavages have to be taken into account in a more substantive way, while also considering the larger dynamics of the particular regime of global capitalism that replicates and intertwines itself with the local political economy of national economies.

IV. Class and Global Capitalist Dynamics

In this section, I present a case for analyzing the local political economy in the Indian context in the overall context of a neoliberal global capitalist regime.

IV.1 Local Political Economy in India

One significant phenomenon that is visible in the Indian context since the 1990s is that the agricultural sector has slowed down considerably relative to other sectors. This has also resulted in the outbreak of a major phenomenon of agrarian distress, wherein thousands of farmers have committed suicide across the country. This is very different from the 1980s, when agricultural sector grew rapidly along with the consumption levels of the poorest in India - the agricultural workers and small peasants. This dramatic reversal of the fortunes of the agricultural sector has been caused both by a significant change in agricultural policies (introduction of internal and external liberalization policies) that has adversely affected the agricultural poor and a slowdown in the green revolution performance (Vakulabharanam and Motiram 2011). This is one of the important causes of the increase in overall inequality.
This post-1990s phenomenon is very different from the 1980s economic growth, which was broad-based and distributionally progressive. In the 1980s, the state was also seriously engaged in various redistributive policies such as poverty alleviation and integrated rural development programs. As a result of these and various radical movements and progressive legislation in communist-ruled states like West Bengal and Kerala, agricultural wages rose in several states. The within-term decline during the 1980s along the rural-urban, inter-state and class axes is a result of these progressive policies and movements.

During the post-1990s period, high growth sectors have not created enough jobs. Although there is little absorption into the formal sector, increased absorption rates are visible in the urban informal sector and the rural non-agricultural sector. According to the Indian employment-unemployment statistics, more than 93% of the Indian labor force prevails in the informal sector (including agricultural employment). The share of the organized employment in the overall employment has only declined since the 1990s (from NSS report on the informal sector in India in 2004-05, Report 519). This has created an enclave effect where the small proportion of the workers and non-workers in the formal/organized sector have witnessed a phenomenal growth in their incomes/consumption while the rest of the working people are left out of the rising prosperity. There is also an unequal exchange between the formal and the informal sectors, whereby those engaged in the formal sector get various services and commodities from the informal workers at a comparatively low price (relative to the price of the same commodity in the formal sector) - this results in a transfer of value from the informal to the formal sector. This further exacerbates inequalities.

In general it has been found that the tertiary sector has witnessed a higher increase in earnings relative to the secondary and primary sectors. This sector has not created enough jobs. Within the manufacturing sector, an earnings differential has emerged between the organized and unorganized sectors contributing to higher inequality (OECD 2010).

Even within the organized formal/organized sector, there is evidence of a Marxian rapid surplus extraction story. Productivity rise has been not matched by a rise in earnings. This implies that profits rise much faster. While the professional workers have generally done well, the surplus extracting and propertied classes have done even better (Patnaik, 2009).

Over the last twenty years there has also been an acceleration of the processes that have been referred to as accumulation through dispossession and speculation. Accumulation by dispossession works through privatization of public sector enterprises, privatization of commons,
and accumulation through dispossessing petty commodity producers. All these processes have been at work in the Indian economy. At the same time, there has been a significant increase in property speculation practices in the real estate and stock market (Vakulabharanam 2010). These practices are fairly common across the world in various countries, and will be discussed in the next sub-section.

Over the last thirty years, a new dominant class coalition has emerged in the Indian economy. From the earlier coalition among rural landlords, urban middle classes and urban capitalist classes, the rural landlords have played a secondary role in the overall growth process in India. Rural elites in most of the high growth states have also started urbanizing themselves. This has also resulted in a redrawing of the relation between the State and the dominant classes. The state used to balance the interests of the working poor and the peasants in rural areas with the interests of the three dominant classes earlier. Over the last twenty years the State has tended to support the new dominant class coalition among urban capitalists and urban middle classes, and has also abetted accumulation by dispossession in the interests of domestic and multinational capital. The bureaucrats and politicians have tended to enter business, and businessmen have tended to enter the political domain. This crossover has heightened the enclave-like growth process creating a vast increase in inequality. The Indian State has also occasionally responded to popular demands by instituting policies such as the rural employment guarantee scheme and so forth but these do not interfere with the fundamentally exclusionary and inequality-inducing policies and processes that characterize the Indian economy over the last two decades (Vakulabharanam 2010). These policies tend to provide legitimacy to the Indian state in the eyes of the rural working poor, who still constitute the majority, in India.

Some of the effects of these policies can be seen in Table 7. Over this entire period, if we analyze the relative gains that different classes have made, it is clear that the urban elites (owners, managers and professionals) have monopolized the gains from growth very significantly over the last two decades, while the rural classes and urban workers have tended to see a decline in their relative position.

[Insert Table 7 Around Here]

IV.2 Global Capitalist Dynamics

The argument for the influence of global regimes dominating within-country inequality is as follows. Deep crises (such as Great Depression) tend to cause a shake-up of the existing
institutional regime in a capitalist center through class struggle or through prolonged downturns and so forth. The new institutional regime that comes into being, to address the specific crisis, would then tend to influence the inequality regime in the capitalist center. From the centers, these institutional regimes or broader policy stances travel to different countries across the world through trade or outsourcing or financial capital mobility or through the conditionalities of international institutions (such as IMF or World Bank) and so forth.

Deep crises in Capitalism seem to have followed a particular pattern over the last 150 years. They have been oscillating between profitability crises and realization crises, accompanied by financial instability. The long depression of 1873-96 was a profitability crisis. The Great Depression of 1929-39 was a case of a realization crisis and financial collapse. The stagflationary crisis of the early 1970s was a profitability crisis. The Great Recession of 2008 is that of dormant effective demand crisis and a financial collapse. Each crisis has led to a shedding of the existing institutions and the growing of new ones through a prolonged class struggle. This has implications for within-country inequality.

For instance, in this pattern, the period that followed the long depression led to an increase in inequality. The period that followed the Great Depression witnessed a decline in inequality. The period that followed the 1970s crisis witnessed an escalation of inequality. The period that has followed 2008 is still in the making. However, the profitability crises have typically created a class struggle, where the capitalist classes strike back and institute a regime that brings profits back and is distributionally adverse for the working population. The effective demand crises have generally been accompanied by the call for more egalitarian redistribution, greater national policy autonomy, and so forth (Vakulabharanam 2011; 2014).

The period after 1940s (broadly Keynesian-Welfare State period) was progressively redistributive in the developed world but it was also equalizing in several parts of the developing world - especially if we focus on the Asian experience. In the policy autonomy that they had in an overall progressive environment, national governments tended to introduce progressive land reforms, estate taxes, labor-intensive growth processes and policies toward rural-urban parity. In this sense, the two major Kuznets mechanisms (huge concentrations of savings and wealth, and rural-urban disparities at a time of rural-urban migration) associated with early growth were counteracted against. Given these policies, inequality levels tended to decline within most countries.
These *Great Transformations* (Blyth 2002) in the global capitalist economy have implications for within-country inequality regimes. The emergence of the neoliberal regime in response to the profitability crisis of the 1970s was accompanied by attacks on the earnings of the working people (and their unions), accumulation through dispossession, rollback of the welfare state and emergence of unproductive capital (finance and merchant capital) to the fore. This has led to a rise in within-country inequality in most parts of the world.

In India too, the emergence of the neoliberal regime in the 1990s, which was pushed through by the IMF and the World Bank has led to an inequality-inducing regime. However, the late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed the coming together of the local political economy (the emerging new class coalition) and the inequality-inducing dynamics of the neo-liberal regime. It is this confluence, therefore, that helps us understand the logic of the rising inequality in India, post-1990s.

**V. Conclusion**

The Indian experience of worsening distribution is not different from what the majority of the OECD countries experienced in the post-1980s period (or Italy in the post-1990s period). The similarity across these very different sets of countries precisely arises out of the particular regime that comes into play in the capitalist center (s) and how it is transmitted to different parts of the world. It is the coming together of the global capitalist dynamics (e.g. emergence of a footloose financial capital, inflation targeting central banks, austerity-focused governments and significant rollbacks of the welfare state) and the local political economy (the emergence of new dominant class coalitions) that really has an impact on the within-country inequality regimes. This is not a deterministic model. One can potentially perceive a situation wherein the local political economic configuration is strong and at loggerheads with the global dynamics, in which case, other within-country regimes can prevail in particular countries. However, the last 30 years have been characterized by greater homogeneity across countries rather than heterogeneous national spaces that allow for greater policy autonomy.

Like in the case of Southern European countries, which have become crisis-prone, the Indian economy (although not with the same severity) has also entered a crisis-prone period over the last 5 years or so. Growth rates have slowed down, current account deficits have tended to rise, unemployment has been very high, and there is a need to revamp the existing regime. It has also created a lot of political uncertainty, even in the electoral realm, and it is being played out right now. But there is a need to reimagine a new set of institutions, in response to the deeper crisis in
global capitalism that will answer to the call for more progressive redistribution, and a development friendly policy structure.

References


Tables and Figures

Table 1: Indian Consumption Inequality (Gini) Over Three Decades

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<th>2009-10</th>
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<td>Gini</td>
<td>0.327</td>
<td>0.326</td>
<td>0.370</td>
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Note: All Tables presented here are based on author's own computations from NSS quinquennial rounds 38 (1983-84), 50 (1993-94) and 66(2009-10).

Table 2: Rural and Urban Inequality Over Three Decades

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>0.327</td>
<td>0.326</td>
<td>0.370</td>
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<td>0.306</td>
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<td>0.340</td>
<td>0.344</td>
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Table 3: Inequality Decomposition Based on Yitzhaki Methodology

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<td>Gini</td>
<td>0.327</td>
<td>0.326</td>
<td>0.370</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within</td>
<td>0.301 (92.1%)</td>
<td>0.281 (86.3%)</td>
<td>0.295 (79.7%)</td>
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<td>Between</td>
<td>0.026 (7.9%)</td>
<td>0.045 (13.7%)</td>
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**Table 4: Inter-State Decomposition of Inequality**

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<td>0.326</td>
<td>0.370</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within</td>
<td>0.306 (93.5%)</td>
<td>0.292 (89.6%)</td>
<td>0.309 (83.6%)</td>
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<td>Between</td>
<td>0.021 (6.5%)</td>
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Table 5: Simplified Class Decomposition

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<td>Gini</td>
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<td>0.326</td>
<td>0.370</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within</td>
<td>0.280 (85.6%)</td>
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<td>Between</td>
<td>0.047 (14.4%)</td>
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Table 6: Detailed Class Decomposition

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<td>0.326</td>
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<td>Between</td>
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Table 7: Simplified Class Structure

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<tr>
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<th>1993-94 Mean</th>
<th>Ratio to Mean</th>
<th>2009-10 Mean</th>
<th>Ratio to Mean</th>
<th>84-94 Ratio growth</th>
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<td>1.59</td>
<td>1681</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>2500</td>
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<td>1196</td>
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<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<td>1.00</td>
<td>1045</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>-5%</td>
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