



Policy Brief

no. 3 | 2019

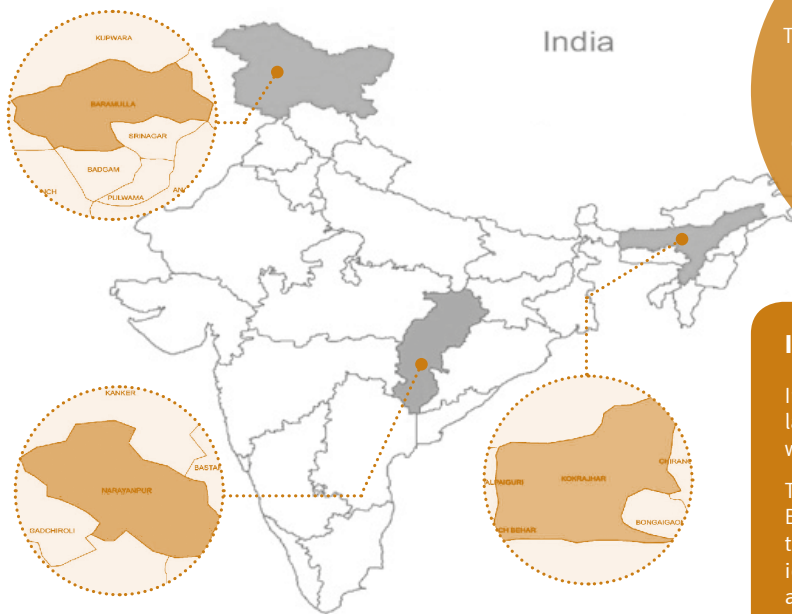
How perceived inequality can lead to political unrest: Lessons from India

The perception of inequality is often more important than objectively measured inequalities. Research conducted in India, one of the most diverse countries in the world, helps us to understand exactly what feeds the perception of injustice, which often results in political unrest. Research on perceived inequalities contributes to a better understanding of how democratic institutions may prevent ethnic conflict escalation.

KEY MESSAGES

- Perceived inequalities, rather than structural inequalities, are better predictors of the political mobilisation of ethnic groups and potential political unrest.
- Democratic institutions that include minority groups, such as power-sharing agreements, may contribute to preventing ethnic conflict escalation.
- While structural inequality measures help to quantitatively examine the effects of inequalities, policy initiatives also need to account for perceived inequalities.

The image above shows the Nepean Sea Road in Mumbai, which is regarded as one of India's most expensive neighbourhoods due to its location by the ocean and a large park; two factors which significantly contribute to better air quality. Due to the construction of the skyscrapers, the adjacent slums and former settlements are not directly visible to many of the wealthy inhabitants. © Ritesh Uttamchandani



The study was conducted in three different zones in India: Kokrajhar district in the state of Assam, Sopore and adjoining districts in the Kashmir valley of Jammu and Kashmir state, and Narayanpur district of the Chhattisgarh state.

The three case-study areas reflect three types of perceived inequalities that drive political pressures in the country: First, the Bodo conflict in Assam, largely an ethnic conflict due to the perception of marginality of Bodo tribes in the region; second, the Naxal uprising in Chhattisgarh, which has a significant underdeveloped tribal population and experiences many forest and mining activities; and third, the Jammu and Kashmir region, that is witnessing a political conflict.

UNDERSTANDING THE ANGER OVER INEQUALITY

Inequalities between groups, known as horizontal inequalities, are often important drivers of political unrest and conflict. As a result, decreasing the inequality within different groups has become a major focus in work and activities aiming for sustainable development and more peaceful societies. Problems associated with cultural, economic or political marginalisation of social groups have received much scholarly attention. When it comes to inequality, however, perceptions often matter more than bare facts and figures; the feeling of being discriminated as a group often lays the ground for grievances, political conflict and violence. It is therefore crucial to learn more about when and why social groups perceive themselves as politically and economically disadvantaged and how this potential for unrest and conflict might be mitigated.

***Ethnic groups** are defined as self-perceived communities with a shared culture and a common history. The socially constructed ethnic group membership can be based on a common language, religion or somatic features (see Cederman et al., 2010; Horowitz, 1985; Weber, 1978). We acknowledge the heterogeneity within ethnic communities, as they often are hierarchically nested, meaning they comprise several levels of differentiation which are unequally relevant. For instance, members of an ethnic group based on a shared language may have different religious faiths. Also, individual perceptions of ethnic group membership might vary strongly and different people may feel more or less related to their ethnic group. Furthermore, individuals may consider themselves members of multiple communities at once.*

India offers ideal conditions to study how perceived inequalities challenge democratic institutions. It is an ethnically, linguistically and religiously highly diverse country, with differences often running parallel to the social contrasts that could not be greater. Yet, India has strong democratic institutions and practices. In this context, it is crucial to understand how inter-group inequalities affect political processes.

INDIA: FACTS AND FIGURES

India is the second largest country after China and the seventh largest country in the world by surface area. In 2017, the population was estimated at around 1.32 billion people.

The country is the birthplace of four great religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Two hundred million people in the country, equivalent to about 14% of the country's population, identify themselves as adherents of Islam (estimated in 2018) and form the second largest religious group. This makes India the country with the largest Muslim population outside the Muslim-majority countries. Christianity is the third largest religion in India. The country is therefore a truly socio-cultural mosaic variously labeled as "multi-caste, multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-lingual". These multiplicities represent a significant ethnic plurality reflecting co-existence and 'togetherness' on the one hand, but divulging differences, diversities and divisiveness on the other.

The three districts under consideration in this study reflect India's diversity: Kokrajhar hosts a Bodo majority, with considerable Bengali, Assamese and Santhal populations. The majority of inhabitants are Hindu, yet there are also many Muslims and Christians in the district. Sopore is inhabited by a Kashmiri majority, with many Hindi, Dogri and others. Religiously the district is divided among a Muslim majority and a Hindu minority, as well as Sikhs, Buddhists and others. The Narayanpur district consists of many Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes and Other Classes, of which the vast majority are Hindu. The Scheduled Tribes adhere to the traditional Indian animistic religion, often syncretized to one or more major religious traditions of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism. Scheduled Castes, on the contrary, mostly practice Hinduism, though many profess various other religious beliefs, including Buddhism (Neo-Buddhists), Sikhism and Christianity.

Several hundred languages are actively spoken in India. It has all four major families of languages (Indo-European, Dravidian, Austroasiatic and Sino-Tibetan languages) as well as two language isolates (the Nihali language spoken in parts of Maharashtra and the Burushaski language spoken in parts of Kashmir).

STRUCTURAL AND PERCEIVED INEQUALITIES

- **Structural inequalities** refer to systematic political or economic (or other) differences between social groups. For example, if an ethnic group is systematically excluded from political decision-making in a region or state, it is structurally disadvantaged. Structural or objective inequalities are measured by standardised indicators. A well-known statistical measure of inequality is the Gini index, which is often used to quantify individual income inequalities in a country.
- **Perceived inequalities** are sensed by individuals or groups owing to their own socio-economic and cultural conditions and experiences, in comparison to other groups. The ethnic groups that took part in this research had perceived inequalities due to (i) resource-linked, livelihood and socio-economic inequality perceptions seen in comparison to others in the case-study regions; and (ii) the difference of perceptions based on access to and control of political power, e.g. perceived inequalities of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and religious minorities. Perceptions of inequality can be measured through population surveys, such as the Afrobarometer or Asiabarometer or through qualitative methods, such as observations and focus group discussions. For example, members of a community might earn much less than the country's average, yet they may not perceive this inequality as long as they do not compare themselves to other richer communities. Policy initiatives that address inequalities have to consider these different perceptions.

The picture displays a case-study site, showing a 'Haata' – a village weekly market. © Madhushree Sekher



When do social tensions turn into violent conflicts?

Water, land, natural resources: Conflicts between local social groups and the central government often arise with regard to distribution and influence. In the following, we present our research results by focusing first on the cultural markers that define diversity in India, and on how the state institutionalises them, for example as minority language rights. Second, we identify the conditions that foster feelings of unfairness and inequality, such as the disagreement about resource distribution. Finally, we examine how democratic institutions, such as representative bargaining and power-sharing may contribute to preventing violent conflicts.

Diversity and institutions

Representation and diversity are two topics that are currently much discussed globally. The sophisticated democratic structure of India shows how this can work in politics. India became independent from the British Empire in 1947. Today it is the largest democratic country in the world with strong institutions and practices.

Due to the federal parliamentary system and the diversity of the population, India portrays a peculiar picture of democracy: There are different sub-states to which the Indian democratic state interacts in a unique way. The Indian constitution guarantees the protection of the cultural peculiarity of a tribe, regardless of its economic situation, so that the tribes can preserve their identity without coercion and exploitation. Also, there are several autonomous administrative divisions in the country to which the central government has given varying degrees of autonomy to meet demands for self-administration by various ethnic groups within the state legislature.

For example, territorial or cultural autonomy is provided in many regions by establishing sub-state autonomous administrative divisions to accommodate the claims of ethnic groups, like the Bodoland Territorial Council in Kokrajhar in the province of Assam; the Special status of Kashmir, granting the province autonomy under Article 370¹ of the Indian Consti-

FIELD RESEARCH IN INDIA

Research in the r4d project aimed at recording perceived inequalities between different ethnic groups, and not comparing individual inequalities. Therefore, our data is based on a combination of information obtained from a survey conducted in three case-study regions in the provinces of Jammu and Kashmir, Chhattisgarh, and Assam, and from discussions in focus groups with the target population. Instead of exploring inequality in representation in a purely objective way, an attempt was made to evaluate perceived inequalities by asking people whether and how adequately they feel politically represented at the national, state and local level; and if not, why.

We worked in an intercultural team, with researchers from India and Switzerland involved in the project, which required mutual consideration of language and cultural differences. The data collection took place over a period of several months in 2017 and 2018, covering sixty households from each of the regions. Besides, local administrators, local leaders and elected representatives were interviewed during the field survey.

tution; and the special status given to scheduled areas under Section V and VI of the Constitution, which are forest-rich regions with significant tribal populations. There are also affirmative action provisions for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and religious minorities in India, which are administered through special statutory provisions.

When do groups consider themselves as disadvantaged?

India's prosperity is extremely unevenly distributed. The wealth of the Indian billionaires has increased almost tenfold in a decade and now accounts for 15% of India's GDP. At the same time, the share of national wealth in the lower half of the working population is declining. But what people perceive as real injustice in their own lives does not necessarily have to correspond to the structurally measured inequalities.

¹ Article 370 has now been abrogated.

Preventing conflict by reducing perceived and structural inequalities through political participation

In general, societies with fewer inequalities, whether perceived or objectively measured, are more peaceful. Political rights, such as co-determination in local or regional decisions, reduce the sense of injustice among ethnic groups. Actual political integration is therefore a decisive factor in channeling conflicts. But there are also other political institutions that help address complaints and prevent conflict escalation, such as location-specific community-based networks for collective action that function as informal pressure groups.

Taking into account different ethnic identities is a crucial factor in defining policies that have a positive and inclusive impact on justice and development. Our findings help in identifying cultural markers and defining the diversity of state institutions, such as the different language rights of ethnic minorities. Furthermore, we can state that democratic institutions such as representative bargaining and power-sharing play a crucial role in preventing the escalation of ethnic conflicts due to perceived inequalities.

THE AUTHORS

Seraina Rügger

Senior researcher, Center for Comparative and International Studies, ETH Zurich, Switzerland
ruegger@icr.gess.ethz.ch



Madhushree Sekher

Professor, Centre for Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India
madhusekher@tiss.edu



Sarah Bütikofer

Scientific journalist and political scientist, University of Zurich, Switzerland
sarah.buetikofer@ipz.uzh.ch



FURTHER INFORMATION

Afrobarometer

www.afrobarometer.org

Asiabarometer

www.asiabarometer.org

Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) Dataset

<https://icr.ethz.ch/data/epr>

r4d Ethnic Power Relations Project Page

<https://r4d.epr.ethz.ch/>

References

- Cederman, Lars-Erik, Andreas Wimmer and Brian Min. 2010. "Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel? New Data and Analysis." *World Politics* 62(1): 87–119.
- Forbes and World Inequality Report, 2018.
- Horowitz, Donald L. 1985. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.
- Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Vol. 1). Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

Further reading

- Awasthi, Mansi and Mirjam Hirzel. 2016. "Ethnic Power Relations in India: The Relevance of Local Politics and the Nuances of Historically Disadvantaged Identity." EPR Working Paper Series No. 2. Online: <https://r4d.epr.ethz.ch/publications/epr-working-paper-series.html>
- Hug, Simon. 2019. Measuring Perceived and Objective Inequalities and Their Links to Conflict, in: Hug, Simon and Madhushree Sekher (eds.). *Perceived and Objective Inequalities and Conflict: Global Insights from Dispersed Cases*. EPR Working Paper.
- Sekher, Madhushree, Mansi Awasthi, Thomas Allen, Rajesh Kumar and Subhankar Nayak. 2019. Negotiating Ethnic Conflict in Deeply Divided Societies: Political Bargaining and Power-Sharing as Institutional Strategies, in: Ratuva, Steven (ed.). *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sekher, Madhushree, Rajesh Kumar, Subhankar Nayak, Mansi Awasthi and Mirjam Hirzel. 2019. Perceptions of Inequality and Grievances: Case Study of India, in: Hug, Simon and Madhushree Sekher (eds.). *Perceived and Objective Inequalities and Conflict: Global Insights from Dispersed Cases*. EPR Working Paper.
- Stewart, Frances. 2008. *Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Vogt, Manuel, Nils-Christian Bormann, Seraina Rügger, Lars-Erik Cederman, Philipp Hunziker and Luc Girardin. 2015. "Integrating Data on Ethnicity, Geography, and Conflict: The Ethnic Power Relations Data Set Family." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59(7): 1327–42.

DISCLAIMER

This policy brief has been financed by the Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development (r4d programme). Responsibility for the content rests entirely with the authors. The r4d programme does not necessarily share the expressed views and interpretations.

PUBLISHER



**Swiss Programme for Research
on Global Issues for Development**

Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for
Development (r4d programme) > www.r4d.ch
Wildhainweg 3, CH-3001 Bern

November 2019