

A Shortening of Democracy – How Social Exclusion and State Power Works in India

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Women in Patna district of Bihar. Credit: Mohd Imran Khan

Rahul Ramagundam's *Including the Socially Excluded: India's Experiences with Caste, Gender and Poverty* is a difficult read. Part of it comes from the nature of the book. Based on years of field experiences, Ramagundam delivers a very up-close view of how the state functions – or rather malfunctions – in parts of the country often only covered in the briefest details by the national press.

Setting the tone, the book begins with the experience of the author himself in Bihar in 2009, when he becomes a victim of this dysfunctionality. Watching the police rip apart bamboo huts of Musahars who had been named as accused in a massacre, Ramagundam asks a question to a policeman, “I raised my head to humbly ask if his party had an order to rip huts apart, even if it belonged to an absconding accused.” The question resulted in abuses and accusations, and an assault on the poor fellow on whose motorcycle the author had arrived in the village. When he filed an FIR against the policemen, and raised it with the National Human Rights Commission, the NHRC “acted just like a post office: it forwarded the complaint to the same authority which was complained against, making the whole exercise a mockery.”

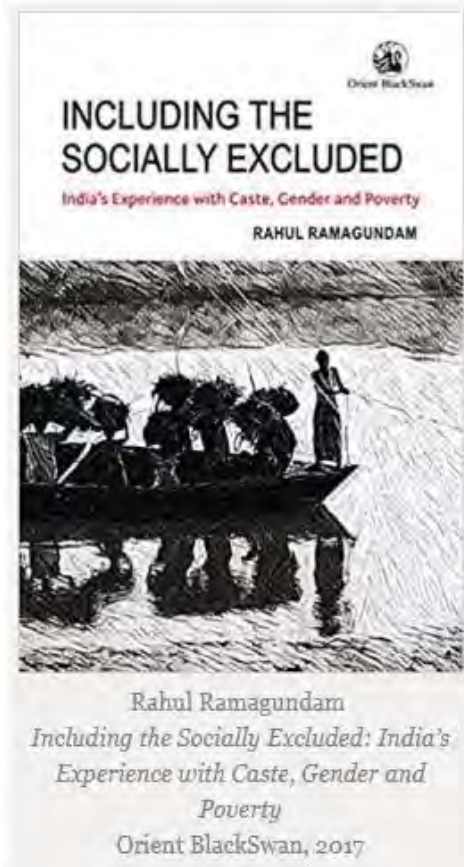
This experience tells us a great deal about how exclusion and state power works in India. As the author notes in his detailed overview of the topic, social exclusion as a topic developed in Europe and really looked at the few people who fell between the cracks. In India, the situation is remarkably different as the excluded are, in a way, the majority. Unfortunately the author does not elaborate on this topic. There is a difference between studying exclusion in polities that have developed their democracies from the ground up, rather than countries like India where democratic systems have been set down over colonial structures that were explicitly exclusionary to begin with, without largescale reform of social structures which were also non-equitable.

That said, the book, through its examples brings this reality vividly alive. Possibly no aspect of this is as well shown as the politics of Bihar, where the emergence of the local *dabang*, who organises en bloc voting for a village or smaller community, by booth capturing.

A dabang, therefore, is a substitute for the more elaborate democratic process of electioneering and campaigning for the attention of the electorates... It is a shortening of democracy.

A dabang, by virtue of being one, represents in his person the unspoken choice of the local population... A dabang carries an informal authority in him, which is informally recognised even by formal institutions and authorities.

Plurality is gone, in such a situation, as is a considered political choice. Democracy itself falters. But then did democracy work at all in Bihar? Ramgundam’s delineation of how Lalu Prasad Yadav, who dominated the politics of Bihar for so long, shows how the capture of electoral



power did not necessarily translate into power over the state structure, because much of the state structure remained in the hands of the most powerful groups – primarily upper castes. In his regime, he hobbled the state, which allowed the growth of informal associations of authority, whether through dabangs, or through groups like the Maoist Communist Centre and the Ranvir Sena. “By not enabling the state to intervene in the production of the common cake, he punctuated its appropriation by the most able groups.”

This, though, did not change the institutions themselves. The new government led by Nitish Kumar remains caught in this game. Despite 12 years in power, [the basic indices](#) have not changed all that much, how can they if the major constraint is to do with land, much of which is owned through illegal means by a small number of large landholders. Yadav’s revolution and Kumar’s good governance have done little to change the basic exclusionary principles at play, although the attack on the state institutions by Yadav did, briefly, illumine how much of it was dominated by a very small section of society. But this did not translate into the economic or social well-being of the most marginalised.

It is not as if those with land have managed to remain untouched. The Bodh Gaya Math, which controlled massive amounts of land, on which tenants that resided were forced to work, was challenged in the 1980s. The land was redistributed, ostensibly to tenants, and the Bhudan movement, also in Bihar, gathered land from large landholders, who gave it away on the request of social activist Vinoba Bhave, to redistribute it to the poor. But, as Ramagundam shows, the land often did not reach the recipients. State and other institutions that were put in charge of the land redistribution (some of it which was illusory – those making claims of large gifts of land sometimes lied – or was infertile land with no access to irrigation) ended up not doing their job properly. The recipients ended up often with a useless gift – a parcel of land too small, too stony, and with no water to farm. Some land changed hands, but no power did.

This has a reflection even in India’s most celebrated campaigns. “The Right to Food Campaign, run by a constellation of India’s very well-meaning people, has a poster which says ‘give me so much as to keep me alive’. This is the thought process of those fighting for the poor! ... The poor are poor because they have been getting only so much as to keep them alive and no more, for several centuries.”

This theme also runs through the chapters on education and women’s self-help groups – that the core problem encountered by the marginalised is the lack of formal access to the state and its institutions, or to the formal economy. This is a problem of power, not mere economic tinkering, but, as illustrated by resilience of exclusionary economic and state practices in Bihar, even when political power is accessed it may not lead to the transformation of the state into an inclusionary one.

This is the question that the book leaves us with, and it is a difficult one. As India’s economy continues to grow without adequate number of jobs in the formal sector, the state of exclusion that the vast majority of the country lives in, is unlikely to ease. The state, and its apparatuses,

will remain utilised as a means to access or exploit resources rather than to create a cooperative framework. The tryst of destiny, in which we redeemed our pledge, has not happened wholly or even very substantially, and we remain locked in a state where lower caste representatives may be more visible, but systems of marginalisation remain robust, if harder to see because the presence of the very visible, symbolic representatives obscures the view of those living in extreme deprivation.