The Myth of Caste-Free Neoliberalism

Anand Teltumbde

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Why did the global Occupy movement of 2011 fail to take root in India? Despite widespread income inequality in the country, the Occupy movement didn't provoke many Indians to stand up and say, "We are the 99 per cent!" All we saw by way of that was a small rally in Kolkata on 19 October 2011, and an attempt to stage an "Occupy Dalal Street" in Mumbai on 4 November which made no headway because it lacked support, and was also marked by the prompt arrest of a significant section of protesters by the Mumbai police. The middle (caste and) class youth who had excitedly thronged behind the fasting Anna Hazare in April the same year to demand a Jan Lokpal Bill, simply ignored the wide-angle picture of corruption put forward by the Occupy Wall Street movement, linking government to corporations, financial institutions and the media. It is ironic that some commentators mistakenly traced the inspiration of the Occupy movement to the Anna Hazare-led campaign, without accounting for the fact that Hazare's movement sought a surreal solution to the real problem of corruption, and even that within the confines of the status quo, whereas the Occupy movement symbolically challenged the rubric of capitalism itself.

The cue for the OWS movement came from the Arab Spring protests in Tunisia. The mass dissent against feudal regimes in the Arab world spread like wildfire from country to country. Taking inspiration from this collective rage, an artist at the Adbusters magazine in Vancouver designed a poster of a ballerina executing a graceful move upon the back of the Wall Street bull, with a legend above her head that asked in red lettering, "What do we want?" Under the bull, in white, came the tag "Occupy Wall Street". The poster appeared in July 2011, and its terse closing line—"Bring tent"—resonated with people. More than 1,500 protest actions took place on 15 October 2011, the "global day of action", in eighty-two countries. At one such protest, hundreds of police officers in riot gear clamped down on the OWS encampment at Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan, New York City, in the predawn darkness of Tuesday, 15 November 2011. They demolished the tent city that had come up there since mid-September as the epicentre of a protest against corporate greed and economic inequality. Around two hundred people were arrested—their tents, sleeping bags and equipment were carted away, and by 4:30 am the park was empty.

The protests the OWS movement fanned soon spread to over a hundred cities in the US. This leaderless movement sprouted across the world from Australia through Asia, Europe, and, of course, the Americas. Although these demonstrations were crushed at various places, their spirit will live on to inspire future struggles. Such forms of spontaneous mass upsurge, indeed, do not have a beginning or an end; they signify the beginning of the end of what they rally against.

Every mode of production in every historical phase provokes its own form of struggle. Previously, the anti-capitalist movements were marked by militant workers' strikes. But things altered fast with changes in the form of capitalism. It has, on the one hand, nearly succeeded in marginalising the proletariat and, on the other, adopted increasingly predatory forms of exploitation. Advances in technology that not only displaced human labour but also set human labourers further apart in the sphere of production have helped blur the exploitative contours of neoliberal globalisation. At the same time, resistance has begun to manifest itself in novel forms. One of the first major protests of this kind was in 1999 during the ministerial conference of the World Trade Organisation in Seattle, Washington. The crowd of protesters numbering no less than forty thousand was mobilised outside the hotels and conference venue through informal networks in the pre-social media days of resistance. They effectively stalled the meeting and shook the citadel of global capital.

The WTO protests led to the formation of the World Social Forum in 2001 that acted as a vent with its illusory slogan, "Another world is possible". After nine annual WSFs by the end of the decade, and scores of regional social fora, the roughshod march of global capital had not only left "another world" trailing in the dust but also brought the immediate world to the brink of collapse. The massive financialisation of economies enacted to facilitate accumulation—via cheap credit for instance, and mutually reinforcing circles of institutional investment, alongside the deregulation of financial institutions—intensified the multiple resulting crises to unprecedented magnitude. The Asian financial crisis of 1997, the sub-prime lending crisis of 2008 in the US, and the European sovereign debt crisis that began the

following year are but flagposts in this continuing process of the concentration of global capital. Each successive crisis was followed by a massive transfer of public funds to save the crumbling banking system. Estimates of public funds harnessed to resuscitate corporations in the wake of the American sub-prime crisis put the figure as high as $16-23 trillion. It serves as a neat illustration of the Marxian dictum that the state is but a committee of the bourgeoisie to advance its own interests at the expense of the public. Such transfers of public funds into private hands provoked mass outrage. The slogan of the OWS movement—"We are the 99 per cent"—pointed to the extreme concentration of wealth in the hands of the top one per cent of income earners, and drove home the message majority of the people were paying the price for the speculative dealings of a tiny minority.

The Nobel-prize winning economist Paul Krugman said that the 99 per cent slogan was an understatement. Writing in the New York Times on 1 November 2011, he pointed out that a large fraction of the top one per cent's gains have actually gone to an even smaller group, the top 0.1 per cent—the richest one-thousandth of the population. In a number of opinion pieces written for the New York Times at the time, he noted that the top 0.1 per cent of the population saw the sharpest increase in income share, taking home over 10.4 per cent of the nation's earnings in 2008 as against a share of 1 per cent in 1970 and 2.6 per cent in 1975, During the last two decades of neoliberal globalisation, inequality has been growing all over the globe. Krugman cited a Congressional report which held that between 1979 and 2005, the inflation-adjusted after-tax income of Americans in the middle-income group rose by 21 per cent; the corresponding increase for the richest 0.1 per cent was 400 per cent. Deepening inequality in the so-called emerging economies like Brazil, China and India has been still worse.

In December 2017, the "Report on Global Inequality 2018" coordinated by economists Thomas Piketty, Facundo Alvaredo, Lucas Chancel, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, was released. Among its findings is a damning assessment of income distribution in India. By 2014, the year at which the report's data ends, the top 0.1 per cent of India's earners had captured more growth than the bottom 50 per cent combined. The richest 10 per cent of the adult population shared around 56 per cent of national income, while the bottom 50 per cent had a share of just over 16 per cent. This is in contrast to the first thirty years after independence, when income inequality was actually reduced and the earnings of the bottom 50 per cent grew at a faster rate than the national average. The reversal in the fortunes of the poor coincided exactly with liberalising measures undertaken by the government, and has accelerated with the entrenchment of the neoliberal system.

India's brazen embrace of inequality

If corporate greed and inequality were the targets of the Occupy movement, India should have been fertile ground for such protests. Income inequality, both in rural and urban areas, has gone up since the 1990s. Consider the index of inequality, the Gini coefficient. Its values go from zero to one, with zero signifying perfect equality and one the highest level of inequality. In a society where everybody's earnings are the same, a Gini coefficient of zero would indicate the absence of any difference of income; whereas a Gini coefficient of one would mean that all earnings are monopolised by a single person. Corresponding to this is the Gini index, its span expressed from zero to hundred, with hundred signifying the highest possible inequality. The Gini coefficient of consumption expenditure in India, as measured by the National Sample Survey, reports a rise in consumption inequality from 0.32 in 1993-94 to 0.38 in 2011-12, for urban areas. Corresponding Gini estimates of consumption expenditure in rural areas were 0.26 in 1993 94, and 0.29 in 2011-12. An interesting point to note is that inequality based on consumption expenditure as measured by the Gini index between 1983 and 1993-94 had either declined or remained more or less at the same level (from 27.1 to 25.8 for rural areas, and from 31.4 to 31.9 for urban areas), but thereafter it rose steeply to 28.7 for rural and 37.7 for urban areas.

The consumption expenditure surveys of the National Sample Survey Office have been the primary source to track inequality in India, despite the non-comparability of its data with other countries (whose

data tracks income instead). In this half light, India with a Gini index of 34.7 looked better than some of the high-inequality countries, such as Brazil (56.9), China (42.5), Mexico (46.05), Malaysia (37.9), Russia (40.8), United Kingdom (37.6), United States (40.6) and Vietnam (36.8) in 2004-05, or South Africa (67.4 in 2006), despite the visibly stark inequalities of Indian society. This continued until the India Human Development Surveys (the first for 2004-05, and the second 2011-12) made data available to compute income-based Ginis, which exposed India as the second most unequal country in the world, next only to South Africa. As against the consumption-based Gini of 34.7 (which may be expressed alternatively as 0.34), the income-based Gini was 0.53 in 2004–05, while the gap between the two in 2011–12 stood at 0.35 (or 35.9) to 0.55. This inequality is also confirmed by the asset-based Gini, which in 2002 was 0.73 for per capita land holding, for per capita asset holding was 0.65, and per capita holding of financial assets an astounding 0.99 (Jayadev et al., 2007).

If one comprehends the social Darwinist character of neoliberalism, the broad trend of increasing inequality in the world is quite predictable. It favours the strong and condemns the poor as uncompetitive. The world over, the trend of a weakening working class vis-à-vis the capitalist is glaringly visible. In India, the government has systematically fuelled corporate greed by valorising the private sector. In just six years from 2005–06 to 2011, it wrote off corporate income tax worth Rs. 3,74,937 crore in successive union budgets. Besides these direct transfers, there have been massive transfers to the private corporate sector through disinvestment, giving away natural resource and opening up business opportunities for public services like healthcare and education. Corporate plunder has provoked people's resistance movements in various parts of the country. But the self-indulgence of the corporate honchos, evident in their billion dollar residences, private planes and so on, knows no end. According to the Union Budget of 2017, the government provided the corporate sector Rs. 76,857 crore in tax breaks or exemptions in 2015-16, and a projected tax exemption worth Rs 83,492 crore in 2016-17. Compare this with the 2016-17 allocation for agriculture and farmers' welfare at Rs. 35,984 crore, and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme's Rs. 38,500 crore. Bibek Debroy, chairman of the prime minister's Economic Advisory Council, himself admitted on 8 December 2017 that revenue worth 5 per cent of GDP is lost to corporate tax exemptions. In the twelve-year period between 2004–5 and 2015–16, the estimated total tax concessions given to the industry works out to a whopping Rs. 50 lakh crore. The rulers of emerging economies such as ours have fooled the people by saying that their free market policies would bring economic growth that would in turn trickle down to the lower strata, making everybody better off in the long run. These policies have instead led to an unprecedented accumulation of wealth in the hands of the elite, even as they simultaneously dispossessed the vast majority. The resultant inequality would not have been a problem so long as people experienced a reasonable degree of improvement in their living standards. However, this has not been the case for the majority of people. The processes of deindustrialisation, jobless growth, devastation of the environment, and commercialisation of public services unleashed by these policies have eroded living standards. The politics shaped by these policies has undermined democratic expression among the working classes and weakened the security of the middle class, who have also felt the jolts of repeated economic crises.

However, the latter have been jubilant over these policies. After all, they extricated the economy from the five-decade-long syndrome of the 'Hindu rate of growth', brought recognition to the rich immigrant community in the US—their El Dorado—catapulted many of them to the top of the corporate ladder and bolstered a megalomaniacal pride in the nation.

A crucial factor is still missing from this account. The Indian middle class is infused with the ideology of the caste system. The post-1991 economic boom and the recognition of India by the Western world, particularly the USA, boosted the latent consciousness in the middle classes, the majority of whom belong to the upper castes, that they were regaining their past mythical glory. For decades they were made to feel ashamed of their traditions and customs and forced to speak apologetically of their faith but the neoliberal paradigm has restored their self-assurance. It manifests in their speaking proudly about the irrationalities of India's past, justifying everything in its tradition and customs by its great antiquity—including the caste system—and flaunting their Hindu-ness with religious marks on their

forehead and coloured strands wrapped around their wrists. Even as they experience erosion in their living standards, pride in their recovered sense of superiority suppresses the articulation of it. This resurgent caste consciousness, this sense of superiority, will never allow them to make common cause with the lower strata of society or persuade them to say, "We are the 99 per cent!"

What about the dalits, crushed at the bottom of the caste pyramid? Why aren't they speaking out against the neoliberal globalisation that is clearly against the lower strata? The answer to these questions may be attempted in two parts: One, the apathetic response of the dalits towards economic matters is a holdover from the formative days of the movement when they had positioned themselves in rivalry with the communists, and two, the incoherence caused by the movement's subsequent disintegration over a long period. Politically, the dalits are splintered into numerous fragments; socially, they have reverted to their subcaste identities; ideologically, they have lost coherence; and economically, they represent a mixed bag—while the invisible majority suffers from extreme deprivation, a more visible, articulate middle class in urban areas represents an aspirational ideal of prosperity. Some self-seekers from this section have stepped forward to sing the praises, of neoliberalism and celebrate the rise of a 'dalit bourgeoisie'.

The demographic profile of the dalits reveals that they are a predominantly rural people (at 81 per cent) linked to the soil as landless labourers and marginal farmers. As for the remainder in urban areas, the majority lives in slums and works in the informal sector. Under the new order, they have been found to be 'uncompetitive' and are being pushed off the margins. They are undeniably victims of the new elitist and social Darwinist policies of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism holds that progress accrues through free competition among individuals, the globalisers' free market on a microcosmic scale. It follows that the mightier an individual proves to be the greater would be his gain, and the sum of personal gains is abstracted as economic growth. Needless to say, this economic growth benefits mostly the upper layers, (which neoliberalism accepts as natural). It counsels the poor to wait for the benefits to come trickling down to them. This 'trickle-down' theory, both theoretically untenable and empirically false, was the theme song of the rulers in the early years of globalisation. In the face of reality it has since faded away. Over the last three decades, globalisation has produced an alarming degree of inequality, a crisis of well-being for the world's poor, an upsurge of primordial identities, and the erosion of democracy. Extreme concentration of wealth in the hands of a few can only be celebrated if one deliberately chooses to ignore the marginalisation of the multitude.

The precept that processes of capitalist modernisation automatically undermine the significance of social identities like caste, creed and race and their role in affecting economic outcomes, is not new. One could intuitively agree that social identities restrict market competition, impede institutional change, raise transaction costs and make markets non-competitive, and that market-driven economies would undermine ascription-based social identities. Writing in the *New York Daily Tribune* (5 August 1853), Marx had prophesied that modern industrialisation would destroy the Indian castes:

> The railway-system will therefore become, in India, truly the forerunner of modern industry [...] Modern industry, resulting from the railway system, will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labour, upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power.

India has come to possess the fourth largest railway network in the world, just behind the US, Russia and China, and a large industrial base with many global companies; but the caste system, instead of collapsing, is menacingly alive and kicking. Although many may relish pointing out how Marx was wrong, capitalism did affect the caste system insofar as it largely dissolved the ritualistic aspects of caste among the dwija castes (as discussed in the chapters "Reservations" and "The Caste and Class Dialectic"). It has also benefited dalits immensely in terms of drawing them out of the village and providing opportunities for their economic uplift. Indeed, the making of the dalit movement can be traced to these developments in colonial times. But capitalism also saw the utility of caste as a powerful divider of the working classes

and embedded it in the postcolonial state. It has strengthened the traditionally dominant castes and accentuated power asymmetry, as well as generating new points of friction between dalits and non-dalits, making the former more vulnerable than before. Unfortunately, economic considerations were sidelined by the dalit movement in favour of social, political and religious concerns. Paradoxically, this happened under the leadership of Ambedkar who was primarily an economist.

The apathy can be traced to the altercation between Ambedkar and the early communists who had made a dogma out of the Marxian metaphor of base and superstructure and employed it to ridicule the dalit struggle as trivial, lying within the superstructural realm of culture. Although Ambedkar had ignored neither economic factors nor Marxism, he was a political rival of the communists who saw him as a divisive influence on the proletariat. A certain vested interest in the dalit movement skilfully capitalised on his occasional polemics against the communists to reorient the movement away from economic concerns. They devised a crude syllogism: Ambedkar was against the communists, the communists privileged economics, so Ambedkarites who engage with economics are ideologically suspect. The very first split of the Republican Party of India that had been formed in deference to Ambedkar's wishes in 1957, was over this issue. Dadasaheb Gaikwad, close lieutenant of Ambedkar, was castigated by B.C. Kamble who accused him of going over to the communists because of his concern for issues of livelihood of the dalit masses. Even the Dalit Panther split on the same issue, with Raja Dhale accusing Namdeo Dhasal of being influenced by the communists. The anti-communist obsession has only increased with the growing dalit middle class.

The dalit apologists of capitalism

Dalit apathy towards economic issues manifested itself when Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party members of parliament first absented themselves from voting in the Lok Sabha on 5 December 2012, and then, two days later, voted in the Rajya Sabha in favour of 51 per cent foreign direct investment in multi-brand retail, with the sole purpose of supporting the United Progressive Alliance government. Of course, the economic merits of the case had nothing to do with it. Ostensibly, it was done "to keep communal forces at bay", a pious phrase useful for excusing any vagaries of political conduct. In this context, an article in the *Times of India* (5 December 2012)—"To Empower Dalits, Do Away with India's Antiquated Retail Trading System"—written by Chandra Bhan Prasad and Milind Kamble, both evangelists of dalit capitalism, presented a curious economic argument. Expectedly, the duo lauded the government's decision to allow up to 51 per cent FDI in multi-brand retail that would pave the way for the entry of global retail chains like Walmart and Texaco. They argued that FDI in retail would have a favourable effect "on the fledgling class of dalit entrepreneurs in India". The main thrust of their case was that FDI, being caste neutral, would be more favourable to dalit entrepreneurship than the existing caste-bound retail sector. In support of their argument, the authors cited two studies.

The first was a study of dalit enterprise by the Centre for the Advanced Study of India at the University of Pennsylvania. The CASI project—that resulted in a book, *Defying the Odds: The Rise of Dalit Entrepreneurs* (2014)—tried to prove how neoliberal reforms have been greatly beneficial to dalits in general and dalit entrepreneurs in particular. A second study, supplementing the first, was conducted by members of the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and concerned a search for adhatiyas (middlemen or brokers) from dalit communities in Delhi's Azadpur fruit and vegetable mandi; that expectedly led to none. No one should have been surprised at the findings because it is a truism that caste networks have been central to the conduct of business in India, whether to mobilise capital and investments, collect and conserve information, or secure political patronage, which is why so much of early modern and colonial capital is identifiable by caste. In the post-Independence period, these groups of Marwaris, Gujaratis, Kutchis and so on were joined by others such as nadars, patels, gounders, Sindhis, etc, whose businesses today enjoy the support of global networks of their caste group. Both these studies could be easily faulted for their glaring methodological deficiencies and outlandish inferences but

that is besides the point here. The basic premise of the article, that the retail sector was caste bound and FDI would bring casteless retail chains to India, betrays an ignorance of reality. The fact is that the retail sector in India—ranging from pedlars to street vendors to road side kirana shops, large corporate retail chains being just the newest additions (and the only ones to crave FDI)—cannot be termed caste bound, and the intrusion of FDI would only spell the expansion of corporate retail chains that would root out the existing retailers, the majority of whom may be dalits and backward caste people. It is not likely to change the complexion of corporate retail to a caste neutral shade. That such preposterous views not only find space in the corporate media but also get respectability in neoliberal scholarly circles is a testament to their usefulness to global capital. The protagonists of dalit capital along with their neoliberal backers in University of Pennsylvania spread a deliberate falsehood that dalit entrepreneurship is a post-1991 phenomenon. Among the many castes comprising 'dalit' there are always one or two in every region of the subcontinent who are numerically dominant such as the mahars in Maharashtra, chamars in UP, malas in Andhra Pradesh, holiyas in Karnataka and parayas in Tamil Nadu. In a closed village system, all castes were bound to their traditional vocations but no single vocation could be assigned to the caste group with a large population. How and why these castes came to possess such large populations is a matter of speculation involving theories either of the collapse of many castes into a single consolidated entity or the disappearance of many traditional vocations in the course of history, but resolving this is not our concern here. What is important to understand is that since most people of these castes were not restricted to a single assigned vocation, in order to survive they adopted any line of work that came their way. It is these people who left the village for the towns and cities when opportunities arose during Mughal and subsequently colonial rule. They took up weaving, peddled their wares, opened kirana and cycle shops, and then graduated to contracting and allied businesses. Even in the villages, although they remained preponderantly farm labourers and general workmen, there were also weavers, masons, carpenters, tailors, pedlars, manufacturers, shopkeepers, moneylenders, contractors and so on from among the dalits. The DICCI, inordinately proud of the success of its entrepreneurs, can be shown examples of such entrepreneurs that would exceed its entire membership, all in existence since long before 1991. One could easily find hugely wealthy dalit individuals in every part of the country in the decades before 1990. There were extremely rich dalit individuals even in colonial times, although they did not flash their possessions in the self-congratulatory way that some DICCI members strut their Mercs and BMWs. On 4 January 2011, the *Wall Street Journal* reported Chandra Bhan Prasad asking, "Who is going to buy a helicopter next year?" and almost in answer by 14 April the same year, as if to mark Ambedkar's birth anniversary, the *Washington Post* reported that Ashok Khade, heading a flourishing $32 million construction business in Mumbai and in possession of a BMW, now wished to buy a chopper. Then, as now, their wealth made little difference to their status as dalits, and still less to the well-being of their community. During colonial times (and earlier), dalits displayed ample entrepreneurial prowess by accepting new vocations, setting up petty businesses or modernising their caste vocations and making huge progress. The dalit movement was actually the by-product of this process as it is precisely these relatively well-off people, either with some entrepreneurial background or as employees in the organised sector, who constituted the base of the Ambedkar-led dalit movement (as mentioned in the chapter "Dalit Protests in Gujarat"). Therefore, to attribute dalit enterprise or its success to globalisation is misleading. If dalit youth are at all impelled towards entrepreneurship, the reason is the unavailability of job opportunities due to the constriction of public sector jobs. In 1997, employment in the public sector peaked at 19.7 million, consistently declined thereafter and came down to 18 million in 2007, ringing the death knell of reservations as a career prospect. While entrepreneurship among the higher castes is associated with risk-taking towards the multiplication of wealth, it spells a reverse syndrome for dalits—the compulsion of survival. Whereas caste Hindus become entrepreneurs by choice, dalits are entrepreneurs by compulsion. In the absence of jobs, this remains the only available option. The Economic Censuses of 1990, 1998, and 2005 reveal a more truthful picture than that of motivated ad hoc studies. Caste-wise data relating to the ownership of enterprises are available for 1990, 1998 and 2005, and have been put together in a 2011 Harvard Business School study.

As per the study, the average employment per enterprise for 2005 was 2.3, indicating that the vast majority of firms were a single-person enterprise. The incidence of such enterprises was far higher among the SC and ST categories. In the context of dalits, the scale of enterprise ranges from a roadside cobbler to a millionaire member of the DICCI. As the data clearly shows, over the period since liberalisation began, the share of dalit ownership of enterprise remained more or less the same, refuting the claim that globalisation has boosted dalit entrepreneurship. The study observed that the dalit millionaires claimed by the DICCI do not represent the broad swathe of SC/ST entrepreneurship.

While the growth of ancillary industries or outsourcing has surely been accelerated by globalisation, it is presumptuous to assume that dalit entrepreneurs will beat others on price competitiveness to grab a share of outsourced processes or products. Given the social handicap they suffer from, they can only make costs competitive by extra-exploitation of their employees. The dalit capitalists lack faith in the free-market meritocracy of their slogans and in emancipation as a value. This is betrayed by the fact that they not only retain their caste epithet, but also exploit it to the hilt—as a bargaining chip and business opportunity. Their entire effort is to seek reservation in government purchases. The newly launched magazine Dalit Enterprise (2017) uses business jargon—"supplier diversity"—to express this overriding aim. To the political parties that constitute governments, the opportunity to oblige wealthy dalits is godsent. On the strength of these gestures, they can project a caring image to the larger dalit masses, while withdrawing support from schemes of social uplift. It is no accident that the same government that did not hesitate to thrash dalit youth demanding scholarship funds owed to them, readily accepted the DICCI's demand and reserved 4 per cent of purchases from Micro Small and Medium Enterprises for businesses belonging to dalits and tribals (who together account 25 per cent of the population), which means a whopping quantum of Rs. 25,000 to Rs. 94,000 crore worth of business may eventually come to dalit-run units (*Economic Times*, 12 September 2011). Nor does it stop at that. The government that arrests and incarcerates genuine dalit activists as Maoists, turns to shower honours on handpicked dalit capitalists, some of whom, like DICCI's Kamble, have been awarded the Padmashri and are then obliged to meet the RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat.

The difference between rhetoric and reality is a different matter however. At the end of March 2017, government procurement from SC/ST-owned MSME (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises) was a mere 0.37 per cent of its purchases from the sector, far short of the 4 per cent quota announced with fanfare in October 2016. A report titled "Modi Government Has Near 'Zero Effect' in Meeting Procurement Quota From Dalit, Adivasi Enterprises" in the *Wire* (9 February 2018) said that according to an estimate by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, government purchases account for 30 per cent of the GDP.

Prasad and Kamble's arguments make a mess of concepts. For instance, they claim that dalit entrepreneurs tend to succeed in the modern sectors—building bridges, tunnels, machines, etc. In fact, these enterprises are an extension of the traditional (brick and mortar) sector in which dalits have operated for ages. The modern sector in this age of information comprises knowledge-based enterprises in which dalit entrepreneurs still do not exist. The putative success of dalits in the brick and mortar industry may perhaps indicate non-dalits moving up the value chain, leaving the low end for dalits—a replication, not repudiation, of Manu. Next, modernisation is erroneously understood as undermining the caste system. It actually represents a cultural hybridisation which can coexist with tradition, as a change in lifestyle does not necessarily imply a reformed social outlook. The simplest example of such superficial hybridisation can be seen in the matrimonial advertisements of highly educated Indian-Americans working in frontier industries who seek brides from their own subcastes. Let dalit individuals become big bureaucrats, the haute bourgeoisie or make it big elsewhere in the system, this caste conscious society does not relax the stigma associated with their name. As individuals, they cannot count for much in the emancipation project of the dalit community, which requires nothing less than a thoroughgoing social transformation. While a few dalit business tycoons are adequate representatives of the winner-takes-all message of globalisation, it is reckless to propose that their wealth makes globalisation

an agent of economic justice, or that its logic of increasing concentrations of wealth and of inequality in a world divided between winners and losers—is working towards a revolution for dalits.

If globalisation has been such a facilitator of dalit enterprise, why should the DICCI seek "reservation", the non-market dole, for itself? The protagonists of DICCI are blinded by life under the spotlight and infatuated with the rhetoric of being 'job givers and not job seekers'. They fail to see that they are essentially an SC/ST wing of FICCI almost like the SC/ST 'cell' in the Congress or the BJP. The very fact that DICCI exists and demands a dalit share in capital—seeking doles/reservation of a kind—punctures their boasts about power as well as refuting their rhetoric of emancipation. The idea of dalit capitalism is analogous to that of black capitalism—and the magazine Dalit Enterprise proudly claims inspiration from Black Enterprise—which enriched certain black individuals in the US but flopped demonstrably in empowering the black masses. The argument for symbolic representation undergirds policies that rely upon the rise of certain individuals from the disadvantaged communities in the belief that they would ultimately benefit 'their' masses. It is an unsound position. When a black or dalit person transcends class, they cease to identify with their fellow people left behind:

> You know, everybody looks down their noses at poor Black people. They fault them for their own poverty, suffering and even deaths. They "lie, cheat and steal", both the smug well-to-do whites and suburban upper class Blacks say about the poor. They, of course, feel themselves every bit superior to "those people". If they hear about the mass of Black youth now gone off [or going] to prison, if Black people are homeless and living in the streets, or if they are slain by a racist cop, then good enough for them! "They deserve it", say the Black bourgeoisie (Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, 2001).

In *The Color of Money: Black Banks and the Racial Wealth Gap* (2017), Mehrsa Baradaran, a professor of law at the University of Georgia, argues how the idea of black capitalism was developed by Nixon as an answer—by way of a détente—to the possible attraction communism had for blacks, since he viewed the Black Power movement as a major 'internal security threat'. Nixon linked discrimination-free employment, specifically with regard to black people, as part of battling communism and aiding national security. It received the backing of corporate America. The entire idea of black capitalism, Baradaran says, was "more a way to mollify black activists and assure white voters that racial tension and upheaval would soon end than they were an actual effort to erase racial economic inequality." The African American sociologist Robert L. Allen, who along with the Black Panther was an outspoken critic of black capitalism, writes in *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* (1969) that "the urban uprisings of 1967 made it painfully obvious to American corporate leaders that the 'race problem' was out of control and posed a threat to the continued existence of the present society." Allen says institutions like the Danforth Foundation (now defunct) and later the Ford Foundation worked towards ensuring that urban centres remained riot-free so that the interest of business was not affected. And so it came to be that law and order, or more specifically riot control, was one of motives behind state support to black capitalism initiatives.

It must also be remembered that the blacks in the US could call for and effect boycotts (starting with the iconic year-long Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-56 sparked by Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat for a white person). In contrast, India's dalits, lacking in any economic power, are often themselves the object of various kinds of social boycott, and pose no such threat to law and order. However, the state had begun to sense a looming discontent with globalisation in general and with its adverse impact on reservations in particular. In a pre-emptive move, the Congress government of Madhya Pradesh initiated the Bhopal conference (12–13 January 2002), helmed by dalit activists and intellectuals, and came out with a Bhopal Declaration, announcing proposals to promote dalit enterprise and seeding an inchoate idea of reservations in the private sector. It served its purpose by diverting public attention from the legitimate target of globalisation, and towards the moonshine of reservations in the private sector and the promotion of entrepreneurship. Terms borrowed from the American discourse—such as supplier diversity—were used liberally in the document.

The move reversed an incipient discourse of discontent into affirmation, creating propaganda through the claims of some dalit intellectuals that neoliberal policies promoted dalit mobility and enterprise. Quite like dalit capitalism, the term black capitalism disregards a long history of black entrepreneurship that preceded the immediate phenomenon. Such entrepreneurship, even in the form of significantly large establishments, existed among the blacks as early the dawn of the last century. For example, after the 1905 oil boom, the black Greenwood section of Tulsa, Oklahoma, housed a variety of commercial establishments, including nine hotels, thirty-one groceries and meat shops, and two theatres. The community's boom ended in 1923 when spurious reports of a black man's attempted rape of a white woman touched off a violent white invasion in which fifty people died. A thousand homes were destroyed and the business district was left in ruins. Such islands did exist at many places in the US, at the mercy of the surrounding elements. The coinage 'black capitalism' is different merely in signifying the addition of state patronage or political brokerage.

Since DICCI and other votaries of dalit capitalism hark back to the imagined success of black capitalism, it is worth a fact check. The Nixon administration meant nothing by creating the Office of Minority Business Enterprise in the Commerce Department in 1969. As Gillian B. White says in her review (*Atlantic*, 21 September 2017) of Baradaran's book, no funds were allocated to it; these programs and others that followed were set up to fail.

> The board that oversaw the OMBE was largely white ... and indifferent to the outcome. The head of the black-capitalism program, Maurice Stans, derided an early proposal by one of the highest ranking black members at OMBE, Abe Venable, to invest $8.6 billion in the creation of 400,000 minority businesses, and then promptly shut it [OMBE] down. In 1979, the OMBE was rebranded as the Minority Business Development Agency by the Carter administration, and still exists with the mission of advancing minority-owned business operations. By 1971, a Small Business Administration program had doled out $66 million to minority firms, but that accounted for one-tenth of 1 per cent of the government contracts granted that year.

As a matter of fact, the theory behind developing a separate black economy had been that economic power would lead to political power, but as Baradaran argues, the opposite happened. Dalits enamoured of such ideas ought to understand this. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Booker I. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois represented mutually distinct visions of an emancipatory programme for African Americans. DuBois called for a class politics of the blacks that would integrate them into the nation's political, social and economic fabric, whereas Washington called for identity politics orienting black development via the building of basic skills and a strong economic base for the black community. The latter push culminates in such ideas as black capitalism, the kind of tokenism that allows a handful of privileged blacks like Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice and Barack Obama to figure prominently on the stage, while the position of the great majority of working class and poor black people has not substantially improved, indeed continues to generate shocking data in terms of the concentrated prevalence of poverty, unemployment, poor access to healthcare, high rates of incarceration, or any other axis along which discrimination may be assessed.

The capitalists and the entire neoliberal camp rushed in to celebrate the phenomenon of dalit millionaires. The who's who of the corporate world marked their presence at the conferences and fairs organised by DICCI. Influential economic journalists like Swaminathan Anklesaria Aiyar showered praise on the idea through media columns especially since DICCI spokespersons glibly announced dalits no longer needed reservation (deemed a foul word) but merely the opportunity to prove their merit. Some people came out with suggestions on how instead of targeting castes, the dalits should use them in building social capital. The success stories of certain castes like the Marwaris, Kutchhis, khojas, patels and others who built industrial empires using their caste network and, in recent times, those of the gounders and nadars in Tamil Nadu were hitched to this narrative. The gounders are known to have established a global knitwear industry in Tiruppur, and the nadars the matches and printing industries

in and around the Sivakasi district. The idea coheres well with the identity-obsessed among dalits. However, a simple fact eludes them—what is possible for the resourceful castes and communities is not an available option for resource-starved people like dalits. A proletarian cannot become bourgeois for his emancipation, first because it is not within his means to do so, and more importantly it would not count as emancipation if he did. It is akin to selling the dream of exploitation to the exploited. The logic could be extended to politics, that dalits cannot institute an organisation like the RSS and still claim a coherent identity or progressive political programme for themselves.

As the popular online magazine *Madame Noire* expressed in February 2016, the reality is that all the money in the world could not keep Oprah Winfrey from being racially profiled at an upscale boutique in 2013. And all the graciousness in the world did not protect President Obama and his family from racist jeers and jibes. Likewise, not all the combined wealth of black millionaires has brought about "the political force needed to ensure that clean and drinkable water gets to the most disenfranchised among us in Flint, Michigan."

Poster boys and whipping boys

Notwithstanding the airy dismissals of our burgeoning neoliberal middle class that caste is of no consequence in modern India, it remains pervasive as ever. It requires only an ordinary degree of sensitivity to feel its presence. A section of the middle class haughtily claims that caste is the excuse of the non-meritorious and the staple food of politicians. Maybe, but for dalits—not all of whom are on the way to securing the good things in life—caste still is the biggest bane. This difference of perspective on the caste question between dalits and non-dalits itself proves the existence of the problem. The vast majority of dalits, those who slog in the countryside and urban slums to eke out an existence, are hardly in a position to compete with anyone. They do not lack merit in their domain. Yet this mass of dalits suffers humiliation and is the victim of atrocities on account of its caste. The market, contrary to middle class notions, is not caste neutral. Thorat et al. (2012) provided empirical evidence on how in the neoliberal economy, caste discrimination in job applications is rampant and unceasing.

That dalits continue to be discounted or objectified is evident from the breezy manner in which they have been utilised as propaganda figures for the neoliberal economy; and still more evident in light of the deprivations suffered by the majority under these new economic arrangements and the concomitant withdrawal of the government from employment and public services. Now, just as the objectification of dalits underlies their celebration as lions of entrepreneurship—Milind Kamble, founder of the DICCI, is flashed on prime minister Modi's website—it is also made obvious by the old uses to which dalits are put in this supposedly new story: as objects of stigmatisation.

A sidelight of the post-liberalisation period has been the number and scale of corruption scandals in quick succession that have arrested public attention and fuelled protests. As noted before, the protesters in India have been fixated upon miracle cures, whether in Anna Hazare's "India Against Corruption" movement which sought remedy in the institution of a Jan Lokpal, or in the yoga tycoon Ramdev's attempt to steal Hazare's thunder by launching his own anti-corruption movement the same year, telling the public mouth-watering stories about the quantities of cash in Swiss accounts that could be repatriated to change the fortunes of every family in this country. (His own enterprise, Patanjali Ayurved, run with his friend Acharya Balakrishna, ended the 2017 fiscal year with an overall turnover of Rs. 10,561 crores amidst accusations of nepotism and misdemeanours). Another curious and telling aspect of the corruption scandals, however, is the light they throw on casteism in the public discourse and institutional arrangements of this globalising economy.

Corruption cannot be the monopoly of any caste, creed, race or nationality. Broadly, corruption is the product of a market transaction between those who have discretionary power and those who have the resources to swing decisions their way; in India, the domain of the upper castes is the locus classicus of corruption as they enjoy both privileges. The entry of dalits into the precincts of power is a relatively

recent phenomenon. So, it becomes essential to ask: what is the part of caste in the play of corruption? When corruption is traced to a dalit, it gets amplified; when non-dalits engage in it, corruption appears muted or is simply dismissed as being of little consequence. In a society where reservation (and not caste) is seen as the root of all its ills, at a literary festival held in Jaipur (January 2013), political psychologist Ashis Nandy claimed: "It is a fact that most of the corrupt come from the OBCs, and the Scheduled Castes and now increasingly Scheduled Tribes." It caused an uproar, and someone was affronted enough to file an FIR against him under the PoA Act. A rattled Nandy subsequently tried to disown his statement by saying he had been misunderstood.

Of course, caste does not play out as neatly as this might suggest. Those dalit individuals who become part of the power web—and their numbers ever increasing—get disproportionate rewards because they serve not only the web but the entire institutional structure. They prove more reliable—because of their subservience—compared to others; and, more importantly, they provide legitimacy to the system to claim non-discrimination. Although dalits become highly visible in this location against the backdrop of social prejudice, they still lack the clout to counter upper-caste hegemony and seldom rise to the highest positions. Given their prudently limited ambition and restricted scope for corruption, they generally find their opportunities in petty misdemeanours, instances like small bribes or pilferages. But when they are caught, all hell breaks loose.

Over the course of 2012, a spate of exposés of the corrupt deals of Robert Vadra, Salman Khurshid and Nitin Gadkari by Arvind Kejrival and other activists of IAC confirmed what was already known to Indians—how depraved our political class is. When Vadra, a nondescript trader, emerged as a notable business tycoon—thanks to his 1997 entry by marriage into the Nehru-Gandhi family—with a series of shady land-grab deals, and duly received a clean chit from a Haryana government panel in 2013, nobody was surprised. When the senior Congress leader Salman Khurshid could not stomach allegations of financial irregularities against a non-governmental organisation—the Dr. Zakir Hussain Memorial Trust, meant to serve the physically handicapped—being run by his wife and chaired by his mother, his behaviour was no different from a mafia don's. He was captured by television channels indulging in crass falsifications and issuing an unbecoming threat of death to Kejriwal, who had made the accusations. Yet, soon thereafter, he got a promotion in the UPA-IT cabinet reshuffle of October 2012, being shifted from the ministry of law to external affairs, and again no one was surprised.

On the other side of the aisle, the exposé against Nitin Gadkari, where it was alleged that he was lobbying for certain contractors in the building of a dam in Vidarbha—obviously intended as a balancing act to demonstrate that Kejriwal and his fellow activists were targeting both the Congress and the BJP—did not have much of an initial sting. However, upon further probing by the media, it snowballed into a mega malfeasance. Those who were surprised expected him at least to tender his resignation as president of the BJP, in keeping with the precedent set by Bangaru Laxman, a madiga dalit from Andhra Pradesh, who had also then president of the BJP before he was forced to resign upon being implicated in corruption in a dramatic 2001 sting operation by *Tehelka.com*. But Gadkari would not follow in Laxman's footsteps, and thus the part of caste in the play of corruption came to the fore.

Bangaru Laxman joined the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a brahminical organisation, at the age of 12 in 1953, and in 1969 became a member of the Jana Sangh, precursor to the BJP. He went on to become one of the showpieces of its window display, useful for the saffron brigade to camouflage its brahminical core. The party further embellished its credentials in the perpetual one-upmanship game with the Congress by making him its fifth president in August 2000. But the man was careless enough to be caught in a sting operation, ostensibly to facilitate an arms deal, taking a bribe of Rs. 1 lakh. Foolish on several counts, but how could he have fallen so far beneath his stature as the president of the main opposition party for such a paltry sum of money? Recall the faux pas of another dalit leader, Beni Prasad Varma, a ministerial colleague of Salman Khurshid, who defended him against the charge of embezzling Rs. 71 lakh via his NGO, by saying it was too small an amount for a cabinet minister to take such trouble over. Laxman found no such champions and was forced to resign his post by the BJP. He underwent a criminal trial, was convicted by a Special Central Bureau of Investigation court on 27

April 2012 at the age of 72, under the Prevention of Corruption Act, and was sentenced to four years in jail. The only person who defended Laxman and deposed in his favour in court, it turns out, was Ram Nath Kovind, the BJP's new dalit face and now the president of India. Out on bail on an alibi of old age and poor health, Laxman died on 1 March 2014,

No citizen, leave alone a dalit, should ever follow in the footsteps of Laxman. That said, even self-seeking, unscrupulous dalits do not succeed in escaping their caste, as is revealed in this case. Laxman was no scapegoat, nor a victim of the system. At the same time, we have to recognise that the system does not pursue all malefactors alike. The National Crime Records Bureau's data on prison statistics for 2015 make this case pithily. The data show that Muslims, dalits and tribals—who together constitute 39 per cent of India's population, and the most disempowered sections of it—make up over 55 per cent of all undertrials and 50.4 per cent of the country's convict population. What is their crime? It's not just theft, murder, rape, arson, or corruption; many of them are labelled as terrorist and Maoist. Government propaganda has made these labels up to be self-fulfilling, not requiring further explanation. The bearers of these tags are demonised, not deserving of access to the law. They are to be killed, if not summarily via 'encounters', then by having their lives waste away in the recesses of the jail and judicial systems. It is for the expediencies of governance that they are held within jails worse than the proverbial hell. Let us not forget that most of them are there for a notional crime without any evidence, as the data on numerous concluded cases would reveal.

And those who get away

Now contrast this picture with some of the blatant crimes committed by so-called respectable people. The rule of law, said to be the back bone of democracy, is conspicuous only in its absence when self-styled "Art of Living" guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, who—iconised by the nationalist middle class—gets away with multiple infringements of the law in full public view, and indeed with a very public defiance. On the other hand, a Ramesh Pandhariram Netam of Gadchiroli is left to rot in the Nagpur jail for eight years for no crime, just because he is a tribal. (On this as well as other instances of the witch-hunt of Maoists, see the chapter "Manufacturing Maoists".)

In April 2017, the expert committee formed by the National Green Tribunal submitted its report on the damage done by Ravi Shankar's Art of Living Foundation to the Yamuna floodplains of Delhi in the course of a three-day international jamboree of self promotion (11-13 March 2016) attended by prime minister Narendra Modi and virtually all BJP members of parliament. The report pegs the cost of restoration at Rs. 42 crore and states that it may take up to ten years to undo the environmental damage.

The extravaganza began as a blatant violation of law in defiance of the constitutional authority of the NGT. Once the controversy erupted, many acts of omission came out into the open, showing how authorities had erred in acceding to the organisers' demands. The Delhi Development Authority under the Union Ministry of Urban Development had granted organisers of the event permission based on an application that had suppressed facts. The NGT that was against any event on the ecologically fragile Yamuna floodplains—based on an understanding derived from a February 2016 report of a committee headed by Shashi Shekhar and including A.K. Gosain of the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi—had wanted the Art of Living Foundation to deposit Rs. 120 crore as reparations for damage. The organisers simply ignored the demand. The NGT stepped back and lowered the reparations to Rs. 5 crore. But Ravi Shankar denied causing any damage to the banks, alleging that the Art of Living "has neither polluted air or water or earth. We have left the World Culture Festival site in a better condition than what we had got" and that it was the victim of a "conspiracy". Although the god-man eventually paid up Rs. 5 crore, resolving to get it back through the Supreme Court, this was more of a face-saver for the NGT than an embarrassment for the Sri Sri, who, unlike Bangaru Laxman, needed no 'sting' to expose him as he could flout the law openly and, what is more, stare down the forces of law.

Let us consider the case of Vijay Mallya, serial defaulter on loans and famed hedonist, who revels in merrymaking at the public's expense. Mallya's loans turned non-performing assets way back in 2011, and in 2014 the Kolkata-based United Bank of India declared him a wilful defaulter. This stricture was, however, short-lived as the Kolkata High Court invalidated it. Deepak Narang, the upright executive director of the bank who had initiated the move against Mallya, was hounded by various authorities with a litany of charges, and his pension was stopped after he retired in March 2015. Later, the State Bank of India and the Punjab National Bank also declared Mallya a wilful defaulter. Mallya, who not only defaulted on bank loans and the payment of employees' salaries, but also on statutory dues like income tax, service tax and provident fund monies, could easily have been arrested. Instead, he was able to retain his membership of the Rajya Sabha till he resigned on 2 May 2016, exactly three months after he had fled the country, owing money to his countless employees and seventeen banks.

There was much outrage after he left the country, a large part of which was over irrelevant details and suppressed the basic fact of the government's complicity in letting Mallya go free in spite of his many financial crimes. Mallya, however, is neither the only such defaulter nor is he the biggest of them. Gautam Adani, a friend of Modi's, who is seen everywhere he goes, owes the banks in excess of Rs. 72,000 crore, more than eighteen times what Mallya does. In the teeth of the Mallya crisis, the SBI allegedly at Modi's behest, was made to sign a memorandum of understanding to lend Adani $1 billion for his Carmichael coal mine project in the Galilee Basin in Queensland, Australia. In 2017, a spate of newspaper reports in Australia exposed this project for cases of alleged bribery, corruption and potential environmental danger to the Great Barrier Reef, provoking nationwide rallies against Adani in all major Australian cities like Sydney, Brishane, Melbourne, the Gold Coast and Port Douglas in North Queensland.

In all, corporate India owes PSU banks more than Rs. 5 lakh crore. The Mallya episode, and high-end diamond merchant Nirav Modi's defrauding of banks merrily to the tune of Rs. 14,500 crore and going undiscovered by government watchdogs till February 2018, are merely symptomatic of the ills of crony capitalism, now coming out into the open. In India, capitalists do not invest in productive capital; they invest in the networks of complicity that allow them to loot public money. According to a report by ICICI Securities issued on 16 March 2015, the total problematic assets of banks stood at a whopping Rs. 10.31 lakh crore, the public-sector banks accounting for most of the amount. The State Bank of India, the strongest of them, has 60 per cent of its net worth as stressed assets and the Indian Overseas Bank, 221 per cent. It is this profligacy and stealing of public money by corporations against which the Occupy movement was ignited by *Adbusters*. India had almost become a textbook case for the issues raised there but they did not evoke much response from the public.

Middle class outrage at individual instances of corruption has a wilful blind spot built into it, in choosing not to view them as a systemic failing and in not recognising the real victims of the banditry facilitated by the system—the poor of India. This again is the reason we do not and probably will not see Occupy-style protests in India. An illustration of this would be the contrast between the public indignation over the Commonwealth Games scam of 2010 and the accompanying silence over India's failure to meet its Millennium Development Goals commitments in the same period. On 22 September, barely a fortnight before the CWG, the MDG Summit had concluded in New York with the adoption of a joint resolution by the General Assembly of the United Nations. This event received little attention in India as, the previous day, a footbridge under construction had collapsed at the principal stadium for the then-upcoming games. Media and public fury was directed towards the prospective loss of face for India and the expression of nationwide disgust over stories of corruption among the officials tasked with organising the large-scale sporting event. The news about India's dismal progress in meeting its millennium development goals, flashed briefly by the print media on the eve of the MDG Summit in New York, now went totally ignored.

Back at the Millennium Summit in September 2000, 192 UN member-states and some twenty-three international organisations had unanimously adopted the Millennium Declaration, which was elaborated upon at the fifty-sixth session of the UN General Assembly in 2001 by the Secretary-General's report

entitled "Road Map towards the Implementation of the UN Millennium Declaration". This report spelt out eight development goals with eighteen targets and forty-eight indicators, commonly known as the MDG. The first seven goals focus on the following: eradicating poverty and hunger, universalising primary education, promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating diseases like malaria and AIDS, reducing the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water, and ensuring environmental sustainability. The final goal outlines measures to build a global partnership for development. The UN succeeded in motivating most countries to take these goals seriously. It carried out its first comprehensive review of the MDG in 2005, which considered further efforts required to achieve the goals. Over $50 billion per year was promised by 2010 to fight poverty and to support education, healthcare and anti-malaria efforts. This UN initiative has indeed significantly improved the human development situation in many countries. In 2010, a working paper for the Centre for Global Development, "Who Are the MDG Trailblazers? A New MDG Progress Index" by Benjamin Leo and Julia Barmeier noted dramatic achievements by many poor countries such as Honduras, Laos, Ethiopia, Uganda, Burkina Faso, Nepal, Cambodia, and Ghana. Incidentally, Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for many star performers. The list of laggards largely consisted of countries devastated by conflict, such as Afghanistan, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Guinea-Bissau. In contrast to this, based on the "India Country Report 2009" it was inferred that India "as a whole will not be on track for a majority of the targets related to poverty, hunger, health, gender equality and environmental sustainability."

Although India had incorporated MDG targets into the national Tenth Five Year Plan (2002–7) in the form of National Development Goals, despite its much hyped economic advances in the two decades since liberalisation the human development indicators have barely improved. In 2015, India remained the world leader in child mortality, accounting for 20 per cent of the 5.9 million deaths of children under the age of five. Of the 26 million children born in India each year, nearly two million die before the age of five, half of them within a month of birth, from preventable causes like malnutrition, diarrhoea and pneumonia. On eliminating hunger, India's record is just as dismal. In 2015, it topped global charts in the number of people living with chronic hunger. The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN put the number at 194.6 million, or over 15 per cent of the country's population. The global average is 10.9 per cent of the **world's population**. On the Global Hunger Index compiled by the International Food Policy Research Institute, India's ranking in 1992 was 76 out of a total of 96 countries for which data was available; in 2017 India stood at 100 out of a total of 119 countries, behind even North Korea (93), Bangladesh (88) and Nepal (72). The report claimed that India's GHI score "brings to the fore the disturbing reality of the country's stubbornly high proportions of malnourished children." It lies at "the high end of the serious category, and is one of the main factors pushing South Asia to the category of the worst performing region on the GHI this year." On the sanitation front, its record is much worse. Only 15 per cent of the rural and 61 per cent of urban population had access to a toilet. It is said that some 21 million people will need to gain access to basic sanitation every year if the MDG of just halving the proportion of people without sanitation is to be met. For a country that had committed to fully meet the MDG by 2015, even meeting the 2020 deadline of the Swachh Bharat Mission seems like a distant dream. (For a progress report on this, see the chapter "Swachh Bharat".)

The poor and their needs are no more visible than before; and still less remarked is the social composition of the poor—the overwhelming proportion of dalits, tribals and Muslims it contains. Meanwhile, new vanity projects involving bullet trains and colossal statuary exercise the imagination of the middle class. The myth of a caste-free new economy devoid of such vast inequalities is as powerful as ever. The neoliberal obsession of the rulers for GDP growth is enriching a few and pauperising the vast masses for whom the crisis of living has intensified through galloping unemployment, insecurity, inflation, the neo-fascist turn of the polity, and pervasive corruption. The stench of the rotting system comes into the open each time with the exposure of a scam or corruption scandal, but given the disturbing frequency with which such incidents occur, our nostrils have gotten used to the odour by now. Nothing ever hap-

pens in the country to those who have pelf and power, even as millions get pushed to the margins to be finally enveloped in the peace of the dead.

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