

*A Summary of the Workshop on  
‘Tracing Patterns of Inequalities and Grievances in South Asia’  
Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, February 2016*

In the month of February 2016, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) conducted a workshop titled 'Tracing Patterns of Inequalities & Grievances in South Asia' under the R4D project. Focusing particularly on South Asia, the workshop successfully hosted a wide array of debates and discussions around the multiple dimensions of inequalities and grievances, and how these can result in either peaceful or violent outcomes. While recent empirical studies have shown that political and economic inequalities along ethnic lines increase the risk of violence, we know much less about the mechanisms by which ethnic grievances are translated into political actions. In view of this, the workshop brought together researchers, civil society activists and media representatives to explore a range of topics, including ethnic identity and conflict, democracy and the position of marginalised communities, as well as the post-conflict context and the role of civil society. The two-day workshop at TISS also functioned as an incubator for researchers of conflict in the South Asian community, as it allowed experts across the fields to exchange notes. It also provided an opportunity to TISS to forge preliminary research partnerships. The key insights that were captured in the workshop are highlighted as follows.

As the workshop hosted experts beyond the academic context, the discussions proved to be profoundly interdisciplinary in nature. Besides the multitude of topics that were discussed and debated at the event, there seemed to be a near consensus on the fact that the vast majority of the literature has previously undermined the role of people's grievances in propelling conflict, at the expense of giving more importance to economic issues. It was argued that grievances leading to inequalities also revolve around issues of political and social interests, which ought to be given equal mention.

Tracing the historicity to understand the ethnic inequalities in a number of South Asian countries, including India, there seems to be a growing recognition of the fact that there is a colonial legacy to present day manifestations, be they ethnic, religious or livelihood related. The colonial pattern now also seems to be repeating itself through current waves of globalisation in terms of creating conditions for non-inclusive growth.

It was discussed that division along ethnic lines is one of the reasons leading to inequality and grievances. While numerous ethnic divisions have divided countries into minority and majority clusters, it was noted that this dichotomy cannot be viewed as a binary opposition, since it is spatially determined and hence fluid in nature. The participants cautioned against considering ethnic communities as a homogenous, emphasising instead their internal heterogeneity. This is evident in countries like India, wherein many ethnic groups are divided into sub-groups with

very distinct identities. With such widespread inequalities across communities, the participants stressed that the effort should rather be concentrated on recognizing and managing the differences than seeking to eliminate them. A multi-dimensional integrating approach built on recognizing ethnic differences can prove a useful strategy to address ethnic contestation and conflict within the constitutional framework of the country concerned.

During the discussions, the reasons cited for grievances leading to conflict were varied. However, the majority of the participants viewed a sense of inequity and injustice as one of the major cause of grievances: for example, it was shown that the perception of fear among all the communities in the Assam state of India is considered to be the main reason for the persisting volatile situation there. This sense of fear is the result of perceived injustice prevailing among the various ethnic communities in the state due to their exclusion and marginalisation. This in turn has widened the trust deficit between the state and the different ethnic groups as well as between different ethnic communities themselves.

Similarly, the control of resources by the state and the accumulation of resources by private interests, directly or indirectly, too were recognised as conditions for creating ethnic inequalities and grievances. This leads to unequal distribution of resources, as is evident in many conflict prone regions in India, e.g. in the North-eastern part of India and the Central Indian provinces experiencing Maoists/Naxalite activities. This unequal distribution in turn often leads to exclusion which eventually becomes an important cause of conflict or contestation. An equally important source of ethnic inequality and grievances that was highlighted in the workshop pertains to the unequal power sharing structure. Contestations suggest that the higher the incidence of political inequality, leading to a sense of non-representation, the higher is the perceived sense of ethnic inequality and in turn the higher the probability of ethnic clashes. An interesting case is that of Nepal, where the distribution of political power and perceived ethnic domination, combined with economic disparities and cultural marginalisation, have led to rising ethnic tensions and sustained agitation by the Madhesi group.

The state and its institutions, while addressing inequalities, in many cases facilitate the further widening of inequalities between ethnic groups. The role of the state therefore also needs to be understood with regard to its potential to create conditions of ethnic inequality and grievances. The practices or the conditions that create monolingualism, non-inclusive growth and so on, which increase social distance, as observed in the case of Jammu & Kashmir and the North-eastern region of India as well as in Sri Lanka, where even after the end of civil war, the tensions have not subsided, need to be probed to a greater depth. Last but not the least, not only the state's asymmetric policies, but also its often brutal response was considered to be a key reason in aggravating people's perception of grievances.

However, to understand the exact nature and causes of conflict, it is important to study not only the aggrieved but also those who benefit from the conflict, often referred to as *conflict entrepreneurs*. Since conflict entrepreneurs

have vested interest in conflicts, it is they who manufacture and sustain it. So it becomes pertinent to focus on them alongside the aggrieved to reach any plausible solution.

The role of the media too, was recognized as an equally important factor in mobilising people along ethnic lines. The existence of a free, independent and powerful media is the cornerstone of a democracy and hence should be used as an important means to create democratic spaces in the society. However, the role of the media today, in many societies, is driven by certain dominant interests and hence it has become undemocratic in nature. There are many regions/voices that are unheard, for instance from Chhattisgarh, a central Indian state, which has witnessed Maoist/Naxalite violence because of the lack of a platform of communication for the masses. In absence of any such platform in these areas, the grievances of the people largely go unnoticed. As a consequence, in most cases, these people resort to, often violent, protest against the state.