

INDIA:

Ambedkar and democracy

LSE's connections with India date back almost to the School's foundation. Today, academic and alumni links are just as strong.

John Harriss describes some of the research themes, while alumnus **Selman Ansari** recounts his first trip back.



INDIA update

- The School is further developing its academic and alumni links in India. During a trip to India in March, Howard Davies gave a lecture on higher education at the British Council, while LSE co-hosted events on privatisation and trade. Ashwajit Singh, chairman of the LSE Alumni Society, Delhi, and fellow members are coordinating many more future alumni events.

Academically, the School's Asia Research Centre is the focus of various India related research projects. The School has a short term formal link with the Indian Institute of Health and Family Welfare, and is looking to develop other strategic partnerships. For more information see www.lse.ac.in

- DESTIN, along with the Asia Research Centre and academics in other departments, have a range of research links with India.

- *Ambedkar: towards an enlightened India* (Penguin in India) was published this year, written by Gail Oivert.

I often wonder how many of those who walk through the foyer outside the Hong Kong Theatre in Clement House recognise or know anything about the man whose bust stands there. It is a statue of Dr BR Ambedkar, who was a graduate student at the School in the early 1920s. Ambedkar was one of the most outstanding political leaders of 20th century India. Trained as a lawyer and an economist, he is often described as having been the principal architect of the Constitution of independent India, drawn up by the Constituent Assembly which began its deliberations in December 1946. But Ambedkar was also the accepted leader of India's so called Untouchables, and an opponent of Gandhi's conservative attitude towards this large, historically oppressed minority of India's population.

Gandhi's paternalism was reflected in his adoption of the term 'Harijan', meaning 'children of God', for those who were considered 'untouchable' to orthodox higher caste Hindus. Towards the end of his life Ambedkar led his followers to convert to Buddhism in order to resist their exclusion and oppression within the Hindu caste system. Now, through much of India, the observant visitor will see many statues of Ambedkar, often crude and almost unrecognisable, but still important public markers of the resistance of Untouchables to their treatment.

In the closing debate held in the Constituent Assembly in November 1949, speaking of the new Constitution of India, Ambedkar said: 'On the 26 January 1950 [when the Constitution was to come into effect], we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognising the principle of one man, one vote. In our social and economic life we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man, one value. How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions?'

These remarks point to a central problem which may be characteristic of democracy in

general, and which is certainly of rather fundamental importance for understanding democracy and development in contemporary India. And in one way or another it has been a formative concern for a lot of research on India based in the School.

This is true, for example, of the work which was initiated by Amartya Sen and carried on through his long association with Jean Dreze and the Suntory and Toyota interdisciplinary research centres (STICERD) in the School, and which are concerned with exploring constraints upon, and the conditions for the realisation of greater 'social opportunity' for the masses of India for whom Ambedkar was such a powerful spokesman.

This is true also in other ways of the work of many of the research students who have written their PhDs under the supervision of Chris Fuller and Johnny Parry in the Anthropology Department, including most recently Lucia Michelutti. Her research concerns the rise of political leaders from lower castes (though not Untouchables) in North India. They seem to be responsible for a silent revolution as power is at last transferred (perhaps) from the upper caste élites to subaltern groups – though as Lucia shows, the leaders of these groups are hardly paragons of democracy themselves in the politics that they espouse.

My own research also has to do with the character of India's democracy and with the contradictions that Ambedkar pointed out. With Stuart Corbridge in the Geography Department, I wrote a book called *Reinventing India: liberalisation, Hindu nationalism and popular democracy* (Polity, 2000) which describes and analyses the history of what are thought of as the founding premises of the modern Indian state: socialism, secularism, federalism and democracy. Now the Indian economy is being re-imagined in terms of the market and the secular state in terms of religious nationalism – partly in response to the development of popular democracy which, for all its flaws and inconsistencies, is still found challenging by

old established élites and by many in the burgeoning middle classes. Some of the latter are members of a transnational class who are drawn strongly, in the context of globalisation, to the assertion of their identities as Hindus and to the argument that it is by 'being themselves, as Hindus' that Indians can take their rightful place as members of a powerful nation.

Stuart Corbridge and I engage with the arguments of several leading Indian scholars who interpret the trends in contemporary Indian politics and society in terms of the failures of modernity and of the oppressive nature of the modern state, and who seek to advance in its place a conception of a society based on a strong sense of community. Without in any way denying the many flaws of the Indian state, we argue that values of citizenship and of democracy are by now deeply rooted in Indian society, and that the prospects for the poor and excluded, like the Untouchables, continue to depend upon the state.

Most recently, I have been researching representation and the poor in India – in Delhi with Professor Neera Chandhoke of Delhi University, and in Bangalore with Professor K Nagaraj. Our work is part of a comparative study which also embraces Sao Paulo and Mexico City. The context of the project is in arguments about political trends associated with globalisation, trends which some scholars see as being marked by the decline of programmatic political parties and of class politics, and their replacement by neighbourhood organisation, social movements and NGOs. Some regard this change as being positive with regard to the representation of the poor, and others as negative.

Our research, so far, seems to show a great deal of associational activity in the Indian cities, but much of it is very fluid and fragmented, certainly by comparison with Sao Paulo, under the influence of President Lula's Workers' Party. And in the Indian cities personalised, clientelistic relations with powerful individuals remain perhaps the main way in which poor people seek to represent themselves and their interests – confirming the tenacity of the 'life of contradictions' of which Ambedkar spoke. ■



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A personal view

I recently made my first visit to the land of my ancestors. I fancied myself something of a VS Naipaul. In the 1960s and '70s Naipaul had interpreted India against his experience of being part of the Indian diaspora and knowing India only as an 'area of darkness'. His first visits resulted in some fairly vitriolic and pessimistic books. Thankfully, my trip was not to end in trial, although sometimes Naipaul's cutting words about India would haunt me.

Although making one's way into downtown Mumbai in the early hours is not quite the stuff of urban nightmare that one might expect, poverty is everywhere and the poor sleep amongst shrines dedicated to Hindu, Muslim and Christian saints. Naipaul's central thesis was that Indians accept their fate and this results in stasis. In rural Hindi my taxi driver told me 'only the poor suffer'. Was this so different from what a poor man in any other country would say? Was it an acceptance of his fate?

The next day I stumbled upon the law courts. I was greeted by Dickensian chaos in a suitably contemporary and dramatic building. Proceedings were in English (India's official legal language), Hindi and Marathi (the language local to Maharashtra state). The dual nature of India's culture came through. As judges swept through the corridors, guards gently pushed us back so that their lordships might pass in unimpeded Victorian splendour. At the same time, in the courtyard, prisoners stood not handcuffed but holding the hands of their guards, the lathi taking the place of the sub-machine gun. Acceptance of one's fate and position in life can be both a good thing and a bad thing, I suppose.

Wandering around in the upmarket Colaba area, I decided to try to walk to the Arabian Sea, which I could see tantalisingly from my hotel window. But the beachfront was obscured by a seemingly never ending series of slums. I wandered in among them and was soon lost. Initially rather concerned, I soon realised that the residents were far too occupied in early evening life to bother about me. The slum was a low rise mixture of brick built (or pukka) buildings and less well established structures built out of corrugated sheets of plastic and metal. There was a man sleeping off a harsh working day, still in his road worker's uniform of singlet and dhoti, while his children watched an enormous colour television

in their only room. Young men sat drinking bottles of Coke and tea in a stereo repair shop as Indian film music boomed out of the shop's open front. A school was in session, the schoolmaster alternately pointing at letters on the board and hitting his young students when they got it wrong.

Of a similar grandeur to the courthouse is Victoria Terminus, or VT, Mumbai's great railway hub. Eventually I made it out of the mélange of chaos and bureaucracy that is VT to my train and then out past the Western Ghats – the hills and jagged rock formations that cut Mumbai off from the rest of Maharashtra state and India.

Delhi was a different proposition to Mumbai. A city of power and, within it, the powerless. The imperial avenues and grand vistas of Lutyens' New Delhi clash with the equally impersonal but teeming Old Delhi.

Here I met another alumnus, Mr Ashwajit Singh. A director of a local firm that gives advice on infrastructure and development projects, his view was that India was inevitably moving and moving in the right way. 'Reform has to happen now' but 'politics is holding reform back'. Politicians were often not of the right calibre. Yogesh Soman, a Mumbai engineer, told me that the Indira Gandhi era is seen as 'history'. The national idea had gone, regionalism was becoming the future. Mumbai dwellers did not see much advantage in paying for national projects in poorer, less developed states such as Assam. He saw this as a consequence of the 'maturing of democracy' in India.

India's wide acres are littered with the evidence of human civilisation and progress. Sometimes brutal, often self-obsessed and almost always painfully slow in bringing benefits to India's masses, it is, however, an undeniable civilisation and an inexorable progress. ■



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