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ETHNIC POWER RELATIONS IN INDIA: THE RELEVANCE OF LOCAL POLITICS AND THE NUANCES OF HISTORICALLY DISADVANTAGED IDENTITY

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The EPR Core Dataset 2014 captures the degree of access to executive state power of politically relevant ethnic groups in all countries around the world for the time span of 1946 to 2013¹ (Vogt et al., 2015). What motivated this data project was the absence of a comprehensive collection of data on the subject that not only builds on a broader sample composition than minority groups who are at risk but also considers the political relevance of the groups that are included (Cederman, Girardin and Wucherpfennig, 2014). Hence, the EPR Core Dataset includes groups whose interests are represented by a political organisation at the national level as well as those who are systematically and intentionally discriminated against by the state.

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¹ The dataset is limited to countries with a population, in 1990, of at least 500,000. Besides listing politically relevant ethnic groups and their access to executive state power, the dataset also provides data on their relative sizes as a share of the total population.

Allowing for varying institutionalisations of political power, it considers access to the executive in different forms, be it through the president, the prime minister and cabinet ministers in democracies or the army command in the case of military regimes. Groups are coded either to have exclusive power (monopoly or dominance), to share power (senior partner or junior partner) or to be excluded from power (powerless, discrimination or self-exclusion). In addition, the EPR Core Dataset also takes into account ethnic group's access to political power at the regional level (specifically above the local administrative level). Here, the dataset includes a binary variable that indicates whether an ethnic group enjoys regional autonomy, meaning that it is meaningfully represented by and can influence the decision-making of a regional executive organ (Vogt et al., 2015).

To map the constellation of ethno-political power in India, the EPR Core Dataset covers twenty politically relevant ethnic groups, which have been identified mainly along linguistic/regional, religious and caste lines, for the period 1947-2013. Looking at the offices of the President, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, which together comprise the country's executive power at the central level, the overall picture that emerges with regard to the distribution of political power is that, overwhelmingly, these posts have been held by individuals representing forward/upper caste groups. Of thirteen Presidential tenures, eight were held by members of upper castes, while marginalised groups such as the Scheduled Castes (SC) were represented during only one term. The Scheduled Tribes (ST), though comprising a significant part of the population (8%), have thus far not enjoyed representation at the Presidential level at all (President's Secretariat, Government of India, 2016). A similar picture emerges with regard to the office of the Prime Minister, which has likewise been ruled predominantly by Hindu upper caste representatives from North India (Prime Minister's Office, 2016). Lastly, concerning the Cabinet, the upper caste category holds 259 ministerial berths whereas the OBCs (Other Backward Classes), the SCs/STs and Muslims hold 21, 24 and 23 seats, respectively. Particularly striking is that regionally defined groups such as the Indigenous Tripuri, Manipuri, Mizos and Nagas, all from India's Northeast, have to-date never been represented in the Cabinet (computed from information retrieved from Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2016). Summarising this information by assigning a power status to each group, the EPR Core Dataset considers the Hindi (non-SC/ST/OBC) group as the senior partner in India's executive, whereas the other groups participate either as junior partners or remain powerless, the latter pertaining to ethnic groups from the Northeast and Kashmir (see Table 1).

Concerning the pattern of regional autonomy in India, this largely mirrors the states that comprise the country's federal structure, the result of a decentralization process that began with the States Reorganisation Act of 1956. This Act produced a gradual devolution of political power to the state level, as a result of which all politically relevant ethnic groups bar three – Kashmiri Muslims, Other Muslims and the OBCs – are considered in the EPR Core Dataset to currently enjoy regional autonomy as defined above (Vogt et al., 2015).

ETHNIC GROUP	POWER STATUS	ETHNIC GROUP	POWER STATUS
Assamese*	<i>Junior partner</i>	Marathi*	<i>Junior partner</i>
Bengali*	<i>Junior partner</i>	Mizo	<i>Powerless</i>
Bodo	<i>Powerless</i>	Other Muslims	<i>Junior partner</i>
Gujarati*	<i>Junior partner</i>	Naga	<i>Powerless</i>
Hindi*	<i>Senior partner</i>	Oriya*	<i>Junior partner</i>
Kashmiri Muslims	<i>Powerless</i>	OBC (Castes)	<i>Junior partner</i>
Indigenous Tripuri	<i>Powerless</i>	Punjabi-Sikhs*	<i>Junior partner</i>
Kannada*	<i>Junior partner</i>	SCs & STs	<i>Junior partner</i>
Malayalam*	<i>Junior partner</i>	Tamil*	<i>Junior partner</i>
Manipuri	<i>Powerless</i>	Telugu*	<i>Junior partner</i>

*Excluding Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC & ST).

Table 1: Power status of India's politically relevant ethnic groups as per the EPR Core Dataset 2014

The EPR Core Dataset hence undoubtedly offers a valuable overview of the distribution and devolution of political power in India, highlighting the persisting inequality in political representation among the country's various ethnic groups. Nevertheless, projecting the EPR Core Dataset framework onto the diverse ethno-political landscape of this country raises two important issues; on the one hand, given its focus on the national executive, the dataset overlooks the local level, as a result of which, bearing in mind that India's political system is constituted as a three-tier system, it neglects a crucial avenue of political representation and participation. On the other hand, the dataset combines the SC and ST groups into a single category, which not only merges two groups that are ethnically very different but also inhibits distinct analysis of their individual political trajectories.

In the Indian context, democracy is practiced at three levels – the national, regional and local level. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992) for rural and urban local bodies, respectively, which effectively came into operation in 1995, and provisions of the Panchayat Act (PESA) (1996) gave constitutional recognition to the self-government institutions of the third tier of the federal structure of India. Specifically, these Acts made it mandatory for all state governments to introduce legislative measures to reinvigorate the local representative institutions. As such, they provided constitutional legitimacy to the Panchayati Raj in rural areas and the urban municipal bodies, which have since become a salient feature of the Indian political system.

As initiatives for the consolidation of local democracy, they have represented a concerted effort to combat the socio-political inequalities that have compromised democratic practice in the past, enhancing both representation and participation by bringing the government closer to the people and by more directly involving citizens in policy-making. In short, they expand the democratic space in a way that makes the political system relatively accessible to those at the periphery (Sen and Dreze, 2002). In this sense, the Panchayati Raj and municipal bodies highlight the importance of social equity

for local democracy, and vice versa, as well as of social accountability in the context of effective and equitable management of public services. Indeed, such local representation is of great significance to people at the grassroots level because local self-governing institutions design policies keeping the magnitude of social and political marginalization in mind and develop plans and programmes based on local needs and resources.

As such, these institutions, along with local political mobilization and social activism associated with them, have provided new avenues through which traditional inequalities have been recognized, voiced and challenged. The local level is thus an important dimension to account for in assessing the extent of political exclusion, its impact on related socio-economic asymmetries, and political agitation in India. While extending the whole EPR dataset to the local level is unlikely to be feasible given its vast cross-national and temporal coverage, doing so for a selection of countries may be well worthwhile given that analyses of grievances, group-level mobilisation, and ethnic conflict are the subject of an extensive research agenda which is based on these data. As suggested by the Indian example, this would allow for a much more nuanced analysis of ethnic power relations that would reveal important patterns and dynamics that are likely to be missed by an exclusive focus on the macro-level.

Regarding the SC/ST categorisation, one issue relates to the ethnic distinctiveness of the two concerned groups. The SCs and the STs, though both strongly marginalised in Indian society, do not share a common political and social history: whereas the Tribes have remained largely excluded from mainstream society, the lower caste groups have been marginalised within that society. The two groups are also culturally, linguistically and religiously distinct – all fundamental aspects in the definition of ethnicity used in the EPR data project². Secondly, while their political position is similar, and hence would unlikely result in different coding-decisions with regard to their political status in the executive, the positive regional autonomy coding as of the year 2000 solely applies to the situation of the STs, reflecting the creation of the states of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh – both which have substantial Tribal populations – based on the distinct socio-cultural regional identity. The SCs, on the other hand, are dispersed throughout the country and hence do not have a particular state in which they are afforded political autonomy as a group.

Furthermore, a separate listing of the two groups would also be very valuable bearing in mind that, as mentioned above, the EPR Core Dataset is predominantly used for analyses of collective political action. Merging the two groups into a single category inhibits separate analysis of each group's political engagement, which is imperative given that each has clearly manifested in very different ways:

² The EPR data project builds on the following definition of ethnicity: "We define ethnicity as a subjectively experienced sense of commonality based on a belief in common ancestry and shared culture. Different markers may be used to indicate such shared ancestry and culture: common language, similar phenotypical features, adherence to the same faith, and so on. Our definition of ethnicity thus includes ethnolinguistic, ethnosomatic (or "racial"), and ethnoreligious groups[...]" (Vogt, 2014).

"Unlike the 'Scheduled Castes', the protests of the 'Scheduled Tribes' have still not consolidated into a social, political programme with the potential of impacting the policy-making systems of the State.... Unlike the 'Scheduled Castes', who have successfully managed to bring themselves into a bargaining position, the Adivasis [Tribes] are still pinned down to the periphery" (Chauhan, 2009:57).

In conclusion, given that achieving greater democracy at the local level has been a crucial component of transforming the practice and quality of democracy in India, and that the respective executive organs have come to play a significant role in representing local communities, their influence on the patterns of the distribution of political power in the country is important to take into account when mapping the Indian ethno-political landscape. Furthermore, as our discussion of the Indian case suggests, expanding the EPR data to include local government institutions, even if for a selection of countries, would be a valuable endeavour not only to achieve a more complete empirical coverage of ethnic power relations in those settings, but also to allow for the systematic analysis of pertinent theoretical issues. These include questions pertaining to the ways contemporary political institutions can be designed to foster the kind of power-sharing that can fulfil popular demands for participation and social justice, and how the accountability of governments and their responsiveness to the interests of different ethnic groups can be increased. In turn, such data would also facilitate an analysis of the potential of political representation at the local level as a strategy for reducing ethnic conflict risk. Moreover, as implied just above, a separate listing and coding of the SC and ST groups in the EPR Core Dataset would be important, not only to give full appreciation to their distinct ethnic identities but also to allow for the differentiated study of their political representation and participation.

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