

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> London School of Economics and Political Science		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 22A – Anthropology		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Understanding and tackling the causes of social oppression in India		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2013-2018		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Alpa Shah	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Associate Professor of Anthropology	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> 2013 to present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2017-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Of the human rights abuses committed globally, caste and tribe oppression in India are among the most widespread. Research carried out jointly by LSE and SOAS has revealed the socio-economic processes that perpetuate this oppression and has had direct impacts on awareness, understanding, and policies that may counter it. In particular, the research has effectively recalibrated the work of the UN International Labour Organization (ILO), international and Indian NGOs, and UK parliamentarians. It has informed policy documents, been used in ILO training of Indian unions and social movements, and been cited in UK parliamentary questions. Research insights have also helped change the terms of relevant discourse in international and Indian media. Public awareness of issues addressed by the research has been enhanced, notably via an exhibition seen by more than 50,000 people, including the UN Secretary-General.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum of 500 words)</p> <p>In recent decades, India has been one of the world's fastest-growing major economies. Proponents of growth have argued that its benefits would “trickle down” through Indian society. However, not only have the redistributive fruits of economic growth been negligible for vast swathes of India's population, some have even fared worse as a result of growth policies. The demographics of the poor are starkly socially marked. Dalits (stigmatised as “untouchable” castes) and Adivasis (indigenous tribal people, stigmatised as “wild and savage”), account for almost 25% of the country's population and a staggering 4% of the world's population. These communities have been shown by economists to suffer disproportionate levels of poverty, being worse off than all other groups almost everywhere across the country. Whilst it is able to make this case, however, quantitative analysis is unable to explain it.</p> <p>To address this, Dr Alpa Shah and Dr Jens Lerche (Reader in Agrarian and Labour Studies, SOAS) jointly led a team of anthropologists conducting detailed ethnographic fieldwork in five different sites to understand the impact of India's political and economic transformation on the country's oppressed minorities. This work was funded by the ERC and the ESRC on two major grants (Shah PI, Lerche CI on both). The anthropologists lived with Dalits and Adivasis in Himachal Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Maharashtra between August 2015 and September 2016. Key outputs of the work are the co-authored 2018 book, <i>Ground Down by Growth</i> (hereafter, <i>GDBG</i>) [1] and a related policy brief [2]. The research also enabled Shah to complete <i>Nightmarch</i>, her 2018 monograph on Adivasis and the Indian economic boom [3].</p> <p>The research presented in <i>GDBG</i> reveals the specific ways in which the expansion of capitalist growth in India has entrenched, rather than erased, social differences based on caste and tribe. It shows how traditional forms of identity-based discrimination have transformed into new mechanisms for exploitation and oppression in the labour market and for dispossessing people of their land for mining and industries [1]. Three interrelated processes are identified as underpinning the persistence of social oppression in India [1]. First, earlier power inequalities are inherited in the new economies, as control over factors adversely affecting Adivasis and Dalits remains with locally dominant groups. Second, the vulnerability of Adivasis and Dalits is perpetuated by their disproportionate representation in a cheap, seasonal, casual migrant labour force in the new economies. Thirdly, the resulting class relations involve overlapping forms of oppression based on caste, tribe, region, and gender that fragment unity amongst the oppressed and stymie the possibility of social change. The last of these factors, in particular, supported conclusion that policy</p>		

solutions would need to focus on land and labour rights, as well as discrimination based on caste, tribe, and gender [1] [2].

*Nightmarch* [3] expands on the revelations of *GDBG* in a detailed study of Adivasis living in the mineral-rich forests and hills of central and eastern India. Shah lived with those communities for more than four and a half years to conduct the research underpinning *Nightmarch*. The book explores the relationship between India's economic growth, Adivasi mobilisation in one of the world's most intractable and underreported rebellions (a 50-year long, armed, Maoist-inspired Naxalite insurgency), and state repression of the Adivasis. The rebels are overwhelmingly portrayed by the Indian state and the international media as "terrorists", or else romanticised by activists as indigenous eco-rebels fighting the mining companies. Offering a rare insider perspective, *Nightmarch* presents a fundamental challenge to these conventional narratives. Moving beyond theories of greed, coercion, or grievance, it reveals the multiple and contradictory ways in which the emotional intimacy developed between guerrillas and the surrounding communities attracted Adivasis to the movement while simultaneously undermining its appeal. The book also shows how, in the name of counterinsurgency, the Indian state is violently and forcibly clearing Adivasis from their land to make way for national and multinational mining companies. The nuanced approach taken in *Nightmarch* has been recognised as making a significant contribution to the polarised debates which dominate Indian media on this conflict, as well as to the understandings of insurgency globally. The book emerges from ethnographic field research conducted in 2000-2002, while Shah was a doctoral student at LSE. The research continued for 18 months in 2008-2010 when Shah (by then a lecturer at Goldsmiths) lived in the guerrilla strongholds at the peak of counterinsurgency operations. Follow-on fieldwork, writing-up, and analysis took place entirely after Shah's return to LSE in 2013.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[1] Shah, A., Lerche, J., Axelby, R., Benbabaali, D., Donegan, B., Raj, J., and Thakur, V. (2018). *Ground Down by Growth: Tribe, Caste, Class and Inequality across India*. London: Pluto Press. Delhi: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780745337692. Translated into Hindi in 2019.

[2] Lerche, J., Srivastava, R., and Shah, A. (2018). Policy Brief based on *Ground Down by Growth*. Available at: <https://www.alpashah.co.uk/s/Ground-Down-by-Growth-Policy-Brief-2018.pdf>

[3] Shah, A. (2018). *Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas*. London, UK: Hurst; Chicago, USA: Chicago University Press; New Delhi, India: HarperCollins India. ISBN: 9780226590332. Translated into Italian, May 2019. Translations into Indian languages are in process. Shortlisted for the 2019 Orwell Prize, 2019 New India Book Foundation Prize, and 2019 Victor Turner Awards of the Society for Humanistic Anthropology.

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The research described here has contributed to enhanced awareness, improved understanding, and new policies supporting collective action for Adivasis and Dalits. By highlighting processes of caste and tribe inequality under economic growth in India, as well as the struggles against it, research published in [1] and [3] has catalysed and underpinned new policy work by the UN International Labour Organization (ILO). It has also informed the work of various NGOs and contributed to high-level policy debate in the UK. By showing the process through which economic growth has led to rising inequality marked by social discrimination, the work has shaped new media discourse and public awareness, especially in the UK, India, and Italy.

**Enhancing understanding of migrant worker discrimination at the UN-ILO:** the ILO exists to advance social justice and promote decent work by setting international labour standards. Research published in [1] and summarised in [2] demonstrated that India was in breach of two UN-ILO Conventions: C111 on *Discrimination (Employment and Occupation), 1958* and C107 *Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention, 1957*. Exposing this breach prompted the ILO to start a new programme of work on land and labour discrimination against Dalits and Adivasis; it also informed a shift in their thinking about caste-based discrimination in India, from a focus on narrow issues to an emphasis, instead, on structural discrimination.

The findings published in [1] and [2] had prompted several ILO departments to raise formal concerns about Dalit and Adivasi discrimination to its Committee of Experts, which oversees preparations for an annual meeting between the ILO and the Indian Government to discuss the

implementation of ILO conventions in India. In September 2018, the ILO Research Department hosted a series of events to explore the research. The Head of the ILO Equality and Migration Workers Unit wrote to the researchers to thank them for their input to these events [A]. Here, she noted that [2] had been included “*in the India file on its application of C.111 for the information of our experts as background material and my ILS Specialist colleague based in the region*”. This information is used by the ILO in their discussions with the Indian Government.

**Supporting the implementation of international labour standards:** work by the ILO to improve the implementation of C111 in India has continued to be informed by the research described here. That work has included the publication by the ILO India office of a reference guide on the status of the implementation of C111 in India. This was developed in a round table grounded in the research by Shah and Lerche, and hosted by the ILO in New Delhi (India) on 27-28 January 2020. The round table brought together 35 practitioners, academics, and policymakers to reflect on policy challenges and recommendations to address migrant worker discrimination. Shah and Lerche prepared key sections of the resulting reference guide, including policy recommendations on different dimensions of migrant labour discrimination [B].

The reference guide was finalised in late 2020 and represents the ILO’s first public assessment of structural discrimination based on caste and tribe in India. It makes a significant contribution to efforts to ensure that international anti-discrimination standards are upheld in the country. According to the ILO’s Chief Technical Officer (who oversaw its development):

*“It [the paper] is expected to play an important role in informing ILO’s staff in the region...on the gaps and opportunities for more effective application of anti-discrimination standards (ILO Convention No 111 on discrimination and Nos 107 and 169 on Indigenous and Tribal populations). In addition, the paper will articulate recommendations that will assist officials in UN agencies and international organisations to refer to existing evidence to support the application of international labour standards related to discrimination.” [B]*

**Informing campaigns of NGOs Anti-Slavery International and Aajeevika Bureau:** Anti-Slavery International (AI) works internationally to address forced and bonded labour in informal work. The research has significantly shaped its understanding of the caste and tribe-based divisions of this labour in India and particularly underpinned their 2017 flagship campaign publication “Slavery in India’s Brick Kilns”. Acknowledging the impact of the research on the brick kilns report, AI’s Asia Programme Manager states: “...in preparing this report, GDBG was the key text referred to for understanding and analysis... of the factors underpinning forced and bonded labour... Without this understanding our project would not be as effective in addressing these issues” [C].

The India-based Aajeevika Bureau, which works in the same field but focuses specifically on migrant labour, also used the research published in [1] and [2] to underpin advocacy relating to the structural oppression and discrimination faced by Adivasi labourers. They report that the work: “*informed not just our research and publications but also the perspectives of our field teams and policy advocacy work*”, including teaching and training and conversations with central government [D].

**Extension of mandate of a UK All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG):** every year since 2014, Shah and Lerche have been invited to present their findings on caste discrimination to the House of Lords by the UK APPG for Dalits. In May 2017, Shah explicitly extended the concerns of this APPG from Dalits to Adivasis, who appeared on the APPG agenda for the first time. In a letter to Shah, Lord Harries of Pentregarth (Co-Chair of the APPG for Dalits) wrote: “*The particular challenges and inequality faced by Tribal people in a fast-moving economy in India should be of huge concern to us all. I look forward to receiving and sharing the report of your research with members of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Dalits when it’s published. It will help the APPG’s work*” [E, p. 6]. A few months later, in December 2017, the APPG invited a presentation of the *Behind the Indian Boom* exhibition (see below) to the House of Lords. One result was that Lord Harries tabled two parliamentary questions regarding labour discrimination and land alienation of Dalits and Adivasis [E, pp. 4-5]. A second was that, Baroness Amos, who chaired that meeting, submitted a letter to Lord Harries requesting that the APPG formally extend its mandate to Adivasis and change its name from “APPG for Dalits” to “APPG for Dalits and

Adivasis” [E, p. 3]. Although the APPG decided in July 2018 not to do so, the research contributed to the expansion of democratic processes in the UK through the inclusion of marginalised voices in parliamentary debate, and by putting discrimination of Adivasis on the UK’s political agenda.

**Enhancing public awareness and changing understanding in the UK:** the research has enhanced public awareness and understanding about the inextricable relationship between economic growth and social oppression in India and changed understanding about Adivasis and Maoists in India. This was achieved principally through a major photography exhibition - *Behind the Indian Boom* - curated by Shah with Simon Chambers and based on visual imagery emerging from the research. This was the first public exhibition in London to explore the intersections of inequality, economic growth, and tribe-caste discrimination in India. It was held at the Brunei Gallery at SOAS from October to December 2017, where it attracted a record 10,000 visitors (typical numbers for an exhibition running over the same period were 7,000-8,000) [F, p. 2]. This wide public audience included 360 London-based secondary school students from 59 schools and visits from a large Indian diaspora, including at two special events (of 150 people each) organised to debate the issues it raised. The exhibition further attracted the attention of United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, who visited in November 2017.

A short survey of 281 visitors, conducted before and after viewing the exhibition at SOAS, showed a significant change in audience perspectives on the issues covered. The proportion of respondents who disagreed that “economic growth is good for everyone” rose from 42% before to 65% after viewing the exhibition. Disagreement with the statement “caste is a thing of the past”, increased from 75% to 86% after viewing [F, pp. 4-5]. Qualitative feedback also strongly indicated that the exhibition had prompted visitors to change their minds. Examples include: “*Moving, thought-provoking, educating.*” “*An excellent exhibition. An eye opener.*” “*Insightful and powerful. Anthropologists could make some change.*” “*I’m leaving today angry and shameful - that this exists in our society. Thank you for making me feel*” [F, p. 33]. Two thousand booklets based on the exhibition were distributed in the UK, and a short film shot in it and featuring an interview with Shah has been viewed more than 3,900 times on YouTube.

**Supporting new cultural engagement, understanding and collaboration in Italy:** following coverage of *Behind the Indian Boom* by the Italian press, the exhibition was invited to move to Turin, Italy. Between March and May 2018, it was hosted jointly by the ILO International Training Centre (ITC-ILO) and the Norberto Bobbio Library, University of Turin [G]. It was also adopted as the inaugural event of Biennale Democrazia, run annually by the Department for Culture of the Municipality of Turin to promote a culture of democracy. Popular interest was such that the exhibition was then also displayed at Palazzo Regione from May to June 2018 [G, p. 11]. Across these locations, it attracted more than 40,000 visitors. The exhibition’s Italian hosts also translated and expanded the accompanying booklet, distributing 500 additional copies.

As in London, this was the first public exhibition in Italy on inequality, economic growth, and tribe-caste discrimination. As well as engaging wide public audiences, it prompted a new collaboration between two cultural organisations (Yatra and Jarom) and an independent research centre on conflict resolution (Sereno Regis). Together, these organisations curated a series of film screenings and workshops on the theme of “Visible/Invisible”, focusing on India. The President of Jarom referred to the event as “*the most important moment of learning on the realities of Adivasi and Dalit conditions in India, to ever have landed in our city*” [G, p. 22]. The power of the exhibition as a prompt to deeper and different thinking about relevant issues was further demonstrated by the creation at the University of Turin of a new module (titled “India Invisible”) on their BA Modern and Contemporary History of South Asia around the themes of the exhibition [G, p. 15].

Praise for the exhibition from its hosts in Italy included statements that it: “*[pushed] students beyond simplistic representations and to involve them intellectually and emotionally*” [G, p. 15]. Visitor comments included descriptions of the exhibition as “*food for thought and thought-provoking*”, “*eye-opening*”, “*important*”, “*amazing*”, and “*necessary*”, and they appreciated being exposed to an “*inconvenient truth*” which generally receives little coverage [G, pp. 25-30]. At the ITC-ILO, trainees left feedback, such as “*thanks to this exhibition I was able to better understand the reality that we sometimes try to ignore*”, and “*this exhibition left me with different emotions and touched me very deeply... I came out like I had discovered a new reality*”. One trainee wrote: “*My thoughts on progress have changed a lot after attending the exhibition; I always considered*

*economic development as an opportunity of improvement of society, and not as a cause of dispossession and destruction” [G, pp. 25-30]. After hosting the exhibition, the ITC-ILO adopted its main sculpture as a permanent exhibit, to remind its staff and trainees of the importance of caste/tribe and race discrimination in their own fight for decent work across the world. The Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona has invited the exhibition to be displayed there as soon as the COVID-19 pandemic allows.*

**Wider contributions to public awareness via impacts on international media discourse:** public awareness and understanding of issues at the heart of the research has been enhanced through coverage of the work in international and national media. In December 2017, *BBC World Service Weekend* and the *BBC Asian Network* interviewed Shah about the exhibition and the research behind it. In December 2017, Indian newspaper *The Hindu* - which has more than 461,000 readers - reviewed the exhibition [H, p. 5]; it named *GDBG* as one of its top ten non-fiction books of 2018.

*Nightmarch* also received widespread media coverage in India, the UK, US, and Italy [H, pp. 11-56]. It appeared in several 2018 Book of the Year lists, including the *New Statesman*, *History Workshop*, *Hindu Year in Review*, *Scroll India*, and the *Hong Kong Free Press*. Positive reviews appeared in international news media including *The Guardian* (~134,000 readers), *The Indian Express* (~495K readers), *Foreign Affairs US* (~329,000 readers), and *La Stampa* (~193K readers), as well as on Indian news website *The Wire* and in *New Left Review*. Several media outlets also commissioned excerpts of the book, including *Foreign Policy US* (2.8 million monthly website visitors) and *BBC News*. Shah was interviewed about *Nightmarch* for, among others, the *Times of India*, the largest-selling English-language daily newspaper in the world. She gave radio interviews on *BBC Radio 4 Thinking Allowed*, *BBC Asian Network*, *Talk Radio Europe*, and *Australian SBS Radio*. Shah was twice invited to report on the issue of Adivasis, development, and Maoists for BBC Radio 4; for BBC Radio 4's *From Our Own Correspondent* (audience 1.5 million, May 2015) and for *BBC Radio Four Thought* (audience of 400,000, December 2015) [I].

Reader reviews of *Nightmarch* are explicit about the book's effects on their understanding [H, pp. 56-75]. One states: “If you are looking to understand the daily lives of Maoists, Adivasis and the people whose lives are affected without the prejudiced view of armchair thinkers in metro cities, this book fits well. It is the most real, neutral analysis by a really brave author who went for anthropological study of Marxists by living like them. A must read!” [H, p. 56].

##### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[A] Email confirming that the research was included in the ILO Committee of Experts background material, 14 December 2018.

[B] Supporting statement from the ILO's Chief Technical Advisor, corroborating the role played by Shah and Lerche in the development of the new reference guide on migrant labour discrimination, and the uses of that guide to support the better implementation of C111 in India, 9 December 2020.

[C] Email from Anti-Slavery International confirming that the research helped them understand underlying reasons for modern slavery in brick kilns in India, 18 September 2017.

[D] Email from Aajeevika Bureau outlining role of research in their work on seasonal migrant labour in India, 28 May 2020.

[E] Correspondence between Baroness Amos and APPG for Dalit Chair Lord Harries (9 January 2018 and 22 December 2017) and earlier emails from Lord Harries, acknowledging contribution of research to debate and discussion in the House of Lords (13 May 2017).

[F] *Behind the Indian Boom* exhibition, London, October-December 2017: visitor numbers, survey results, post-it notes and comments book.

[G] *Behind the Indian Boom Turin* (March-June 2018) evidence document with testimonials from hosting organisations, visitor numbers and comments.

[H] International media and social media coverage on the exhibition and *Nightmarch*.

[I] See <https://www.alpashah.co.uk/nightmarch> for radio programmes, podcasts, interviews, and excerpts.