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Using Participatory Action Research Methodologies for Engaging and Researching with Religious Minorities in Contexts of Intersecting Inequalities

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Sowmyaa Bharadwaj, Jo Howard and Pradeep Narayanan

Summary

While there is growing scholarship on the intersectional nature of people's experience of marginalisation, analyses tend to ignore religion-based inequalities. A lack of Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) undermines people's possibilities of accessing services and rights and enjoying wellbeing (World Bank 2013; Narayan *et al.* 2000, Deneulin and Shahani 2009). In this paper, we discuss how religion and faith-based inequalities intersect with other horizontal and vertical inequalities, to create further exclusions within as well as between groups. We offer our experience of using participatory action research (PAR) methodologies to enable insights into lived experiences of intersecting inequalities. In particular, we reflect on intersecting inequalities in the context of India, and share some experiences of facilitating PAR processes with marginalised groups, such as Denotified Tribes (DNT). We introduce a FoRB lens to understand how DNT communities in India experience marginalisation and oppression. The examples discussed here focus on the intersection of religious belief with caste, tribal, gender and other socially constructed identities, as well as poverty. Through taking a PAR approach to working with these communities, we show how PAR can offer space for reflection, analysis, and sometimes action with relation to religion-based and other inequalities. We share some lessons that are useful for research, policy and practice, which we have learned about methods for working with vulnerable groups, about how religion-based inequalities intersect with others, and the assumptions and blind spots that can perpetuate these inequalities.

Keywords: participatory action research; intersecting inequalities; religious minorities; Leave No One Behind; SDGs; Ground-Level Panel; Denotified Tribes.

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Acronyms

ANSA	Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific
BDO	block development officer
CAA	Citizenship (Amendment) Act
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CERD	Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
CMW	Committee on Migrant Workers
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CREID	Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DNT	Denotified Tribe
DRtD	Declaration on the Right to Development
DST	digital story telling
FoRB	Freedom of Religion and Belief
GIPE	Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics
GLP	Ground-Level Panel
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICERD	International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ICPED	International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IIs	intersecting inequalities
LNOB	leave no one behind
MHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NSSO	National Sample Survey Office
OBC	other backward classes
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

PAR	participatory action research
SC	Scheduled Caste
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
ST	Scheduled Tribe
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UP	Uttar Pradesh

1 Introduction

This paper is concerned with how participatory action research (PAR) methodologies may be used to engage with Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB), to address religion-based inequalities in development. FoRB is an important aspect of people's lives and wellbeing. Inequality experienced because of religion or belief undermines people's possibilities of accessing services and rights and enjoying wellbeing (World Bank 2013; Narayan *et al.* 2000; Deneulin and Shahani 2009). The paper takes an intersectional approach to inequalities, since religion and faith-based inequalities intersect with other horizontal and vertical inequalities, creating further exclusions within, as well as between, groups. This requires understanding how these exclusions are experienced in context, because the drivers of inequalities are structural and political, and therefore present a complex challenge for development practitioners and policymakers to address. Amongst other challenges, there is the risk of essentialising or homogenising a group as a specific minority (see presentation by Tadros 2019 in Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler 2020: 26; Howard, López-Franco and Shaw 2020), without acknowledging the dynamics within and between groups, or understanding how different inequalities feed into one another and drive further exclusions.

The paper discusses how PAR methodologies enable insights into lived experiences of intersecting inequalities. We reflect on the use of PAR in the context of India and share experiences of working with marginalised groups, such as Denotified Tribes (DNTs). This work has been carried out by Praxis, both independently and as part of the Participate initiative in collaboration with researchers at the Institute of Development Studies. Howard (IDS), and Naryanan and Bharadwaj (Praxis) reflect on their work in this CREID paper, and bring to it a new focus on FoRB as it is experienced, together with other forms of marginalisation and oppression, by DNT communities in India. The examples discussed here focus on the intersection of religious belief (in particular, Islam) with caste, tribal, gender, and other socially constructed identities, as well as poverty.

The paper is organised as follows. This introduction situates the paper in the global development context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and explains how an intersectional and participatory research approach is relevant and important. Section 2 discusses in more detail how an intersecting inequalities framing is useful for researching with people who experience marginalisation as religious minorities, taking into account the inequalities they experience through other aspects of their identities and contexts. Section 3 explains the principles of PAR and sets out why it is an appropriate methodological approach for this topic. Section 4 provides the context for researching religious inequalities in India, with a focus on DNTs, caste, and religion. Section 5 provides examples of using PAR with marginalised communities in India and demonstrates how this methodology has been used to deepen understanding of how religion-based inequalities intersect with other drivers of disadvantage. The final section reflects on what we have learnt through using PAR to inquire with people of religious minorities in contexts of intersecting inequalities, and draws out learning: about methods for working with vulnerable groups; about how religion-based inequalities intersect with others; and about assumptions and blind spots that perpetuate these inequalities. Paying attention to these, we argue, can inform and improve programmes and policies to combat exclusions experienced by religious minorities.

1.1 Background

The United Nations Agenda 2030, through its framework of interconnected SDGs, offers the opportunity to progress our understanding and improve our action in addressing inequalities and promoting inclusive and sustainable wellbeing and development for all. The SDG call to ‘leave no one behind’ (LNOB) requires researchers, practitioners, policymakers, social movements, and community-based organisations alike, to develop a more nuanced approach to ‘development’ – understood in terms of rights, identities, and dignity, as well as economic inclusion. This requires deeper knowledge of context and history to understand people’s experiences, how inequalities have intersected, deepened, or shifted over time, and possibilities for action. LNOB is an important lens which demands us to see and prioritise those who experience the intersections of vertical and horizontal inequalities (poverty, geography, class, and social and cultural identities). However, while faith and religious identity forms part of this picture, it is rarely included (Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler 2020). This omission disregards a major driver of exclusion.

An additional challenge for policymakers, donors, and practitioners developing programmes to address exclusion and reach the most marginalised, is the need to navigate power and politics in order to address religious inequalities. The risk of backlash

calls for a sensitive and multi-level approach, which needs to be informed by a deep understanding of people's experiences, strategies, and aspirations, and a careful analysis of real and potential harm. Furthermore, for those engaging in this work as a researcher, practitioner, programmer, or policymaker, attention to one's own power and positionality is needed. 'Without reflexivity about our own perspectives, blind spots and biases, training and relative privileges, we may construct research [or programming] that maintains intersectional blindness' (Howard *et al.* 2020: 2–3).

Participatory action research (PAR) is a power-sensitive approach to research, which takes as its starting point the lived realities of the people who experience the issues at stake. It largely evolved in the Global South (in particular in Latin America and India), and as a result, has been widely practised in very diverse contexts before becoming a recognised research approach in the Global North. Brought together with an intersectional analysis, its iterative approach enables individual and group reflection of both differences and commonalities and creates space for these to be brought into dialogue, and for tensions to be navigated. It links reflection to action, and in so doing builds the individual and collective agency to challenge inequalities within the group and in the wider community (*ibid.*)

2 Researching inequalities

2.1 Inequalities and intersectionality

This section introduces intersecting inequalities as a frame for researching and understanding religious inequalities. It clarifies why an inquiry needs to start with people's lived experiences.

Intersectionality is a conceptual lens which offers insight into the complex and intersecting ways in which different aspects of identity shape life experiences (Crenshaw 1989). Crenshaw first applied this lens as a way of making sense of how gender and race combine to shape the lived experiences of black women in the USA, arguing that considering race and gender separately does not provide insight into the compounding nature of the intersection of race and gender. It has since been expanded to include other socially constructed identities, such as class, caste, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, and age (Collins 2015). However, the literature makes rare reference to religious identities. Kabeer (2016) brings an inequalities analysis to this concept and argues that research and practice need to understand how socially constructed identities are compounded by additional layers of disadvantage produced through economic, political, and spatial

factors, producing intersecting inequalities. This combines Stewart's (2005) conceptualisation of inequalities as horizontal (within groups) and vertical (between groups) and refers to injustices produced through sociocultural and identity-based exclusions and discrimination, as well as through economic, political, cultural, environmental, spatial, and knowledge-based inequalities (see ISSC, IDS and UNESCO 2016).

An intersecting inequalities framing is fundamentally important for understanding the realities of people who are at risk of being left behind; here we argue that this framing needs to intersect with FoRB in order to redress religious inequalities as an essential dimension of inclusive development. As observed by Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler (2020), the inequalities literature recognises religion and belief as factors of marginalisation but goes no further. Development policies and programming cannot work effectively without a granular understanding of how the intersection of inequalities including religious inequalities is experienced, how different inequalities intersect (differently) in people's lives, in order to understand how people are included or excluded from services, rights, and livelihoods, and what their coping strategies are. To achieve this, intersectional approaches need to be grounded in context, history, and experience, taking care to avoid absorption into mainstream discourses which may co-opt or dilute the power of an intersectional analysis to critique structural injustices (Salem 2018).

An 'intersecting inequalities' approach starts from the experiential (lived experience) to understand how inequalities are experienced in the lives of the most marginalised (Burns *et al.* 2013; Howard, López-Franco and Shaw 2018; Shaw, Howard and López-Franco 2020), and the structural drivers – power relations – that are embedded in history, context, and governance. Religion and faith are thus entangled in these. Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler (2000: 26) identify the need to tackle 'the unequal power relations that people experience on account of being seen as the religious "other", be they of the same faith as the majority, of a minority faith, or of no belief'. Formal power structures interact with and reinforce exclusionary social norms, which affects how inequalities are experienced on an everyday basis. Social norms are the long-standing collective beliefs of social groups around the 'appropriate' behaviour in specific social contexts. Norms are generally reinforced by the beliefs and practices of the reference group, which may be large, such as a religion or ethnicity, or small, such as a peer group (Marcus and Harper 2014; Howard *et al.* 2020).

Critical to this frame is to understand that inequalities are not 'additive', meaning that the one marginalised identity can exacerbate another and are often mutually compounding, which creates greater disadvantage than the 'sum' of these inequalities; also that the

power relations that drive these inequalities are experienced differently in people's lives. Power relations operate within and between marginalised groups; a person's religious minority identity is part of how their experience of the social world is shaped, but together with other identities and inequalities. These are experienced in terms of different positionalities and networks of power relations – and it is important to understand these intersections to avoid deepening the marginalisation of some identities, or undermining survival strategies.

For example, within a discriminated religious minority, further differences exacerbate experiences of marginalisation in context, according to spatial, economic, and political circumstances, and norms around social identities such as gender, disability, sexuality, and age. Tensions exist in terms of addressing or challenging inequalities; what is considered to be culturally acceptable to challenge within the group; which rights should be prioritised, in which moment, and potential trade-offs. These tensions come to the fore when a group begins to build a collective identity for demanding rights, but a sub-group must lay aside their identity-based concerns in order to support the collective. An example of this is when Roma women attempt to claim rights based on gender equality when the wider group wants to focus on Roma rights without drawing attention to internal divisions (Howard and Vajda 2017). It is therefore important to consider the possibility of claiming rights within this intersectional framework.

2.2 Rights, accountability, and citizenship

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is underpinned by international human rights law, and requires the respect, protection, and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction of any kind as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, disability, or other status.

An analysis of the SDGs carried out by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) links SDG10 (Reduced Inequalities) to the following rights important to religious minorities: the right to equality and non-

discrimination;¹ the right to participate in public affairs;² and the right to social security³ (OHCHR n.d.). SDG16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) calls for access to justice rights and accountability and is similarly linked to fundamental rights: the right to life, liberty, and security of the person;⁴ the right to access to justice and due process;⁵ the right to legal personality;⁶ the right to participate in public affairs;⁷ and the right to access information.⁸ International human rights conventions are legally binding, whereas the SDGs are not, and so a rights-based approach lends legal weight to the accountability claims of persecuted minorities.

However in reality this is difficult terrain to navigate, since rights are claimed through citizenship, and often a persecuted group may not have access to full citizenship and is hence unable to demand accountability. In some settings, citizenship may be denied, or access to rights claims delegitimised and, in these circumstances, claiming rights puts people at risk of a backlash from institutions of the state, or from the social groups which contest their right to these rights. Social accountability is described as a process of collaborative engagement between citizens and government to monitor and support the correct performance of public servants in delivering services and protecting rights. Such a process is underpinned by four pillars: the existence of an organised citizenry; a responsive state; appropriate contextual political and cultural conditions; and access to information or the absence of information asymmetry between the state and its citizens (Kluvers 2003; ANSA 2010; Naryanan, Mayana Sinha and Bharadwaj 2020).

In many contexts, these premises for social accountability do not exist for all groups. Access to justice, and to the mechanisms through which accountability can be claimed, mirrors the asymmetries of power in society. Social demands against some groups are

¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) art. 2; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) art. 2(2); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) arts. 2(1), 26; Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) art. 2(2); Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) art. 2; Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) art. 2; Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) art. 5; Committee on Migrant Workers (CMW) art. 7; Declaration on the Right to Development (DRtD) art. 8(1).

² UDHR art. 21; ICCPR art. 25; CEDAW art. 7; International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) art. 5; CRPD art. 29; DRtD art. 8(2).

³ UDHR art. 22; ICESCR arts. 9–10; CRPD art. 28.

⁴ UDHR art. 3; ICCPR arts. 6(1), 9(1); International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPED) art. 1.

⁵ UDHR arts. 8, 10; ICCPR arts. 2(3), 14–15; CEDAW art. 2(c).

⁶ UDHR art. 6; ICCPR art. 16; CRPD art. 12.

⁷ UDHR art. 21; ICCPR art. 25.

⁸ UDHR art. 19; ICCPR art. 19(1).

upheld and turned into law, as is the reality of groups which experience historic forms of discrimination, such as the Denotified Tribes (DNTs) in India, who were criminalised under British colonial rule. The now prohibited activities by law come within the right to livelihood of these communities, often intergenerational, so many are forced to continue as violators of the law. The laws refrain from proposing programmes to provide alternative livelihood options. The lack of provision for their rehabilitation today, 'reflects the adverse power relationship arising out of the social, religious, economic, moral and political inequalities faced by the DNT communities' (Naryanan *et al.* 2020: 74). Left often with only 'impossible choices' for survival (Burns *et al.* 2013), people's coping strategies may force them into illegal activities, which then puts them on the wrong side of the law should they try to demand accountability around their lack of access to citizen rights such as access to public services (*ibid.*). Driven into hiding, groups such as the DNTs and other persecuted minorities often are not counted in the census, and so their numbers and status go unregistered and are not understood or analysed. To exercise social accountability and claim rights requires the four pillars mentioned above to be possible, or potential. Groups which are systematically excluded and persecuted suffer the effects of stigma, which are a loss of dignity and self-respect. This means that these groups are much less likely to have a sense of agency and rights. Without this sense of agency, the first pillar (organised civil society) cannot be achieved. The first step therefore is to build confidence and capacities within persecuted groups. This has to be deeply contextualised, working from the local reality and individual and collective experiences, to understand how rights might be claimed in ways that navigate risk and avoid backlash.

Participatory action research (PAR) is a paradigm which understands research as the generation of knowledge by and with people who experience the issues that are being researched, and that this knowledge informs actions to bring about change in these issues. The next section introduces PAR and discusses how it can be used as a way of conducting research with people in the context of intersecting inequalities.

3 Methodological approach: participatory action research

PAR approaches have been found to be successful in uncovering and building understanding of intersecting inequalities from the perspectives and experiences of those most affected (Burns *et al.* 2013; Praxis 2017; Howard, López-Franco and Wheeler 2017; Shaw *et al.* 2020). This section discusses how PAR can be used to a) understand

inequalities, including religion-based inequalities; b) build a group's capacity to reflect on their realities and analyse them; c) build agency and generate actions. It draws on research undertaken with members of the Participate initiative; a network of organisations co-convened in 2012 by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and Beyond 2015 (a global civil society campaign), to bring the perspectives of people living in extreme poverty into high-level deliberations (e.g. the High-Level Panel) of the post-2015 development agenda (Howard and Wheeler 2015; Shaw 2015).

The method of the Ground-Level Panel (GLP), discussed later in this paper, was designed to mirror this High-Level Panel, bringing people with lived experience of marginalisation together as 'experts' to analyse the SDGs. Since the SDGs were established in 2015, subsequent research with the Participate initiative has focused on piloting approaches to build accountability for groups 'left behind' in the implementation of the SDGs (Howard *et al.* 2017; Shaw 2017); and understand marginalisation and agency using an intersecting inequalities lens to analyse lived experiences, through deep contextualised knowledge generation.

A PAR approach involves the facilitation of spaces for reflection and dialogue, which enables the uncovering and critical analysis of the drivers of marginalisation. The process also uncovers the possibility of agency for those most affected, since PAR takes a participatory group-based approach to research which builds confidence and capacity through critical reflection (Ledwith and Springett 2010). Individual capacity-building approaches can generate competition between people and exacerbate social divisions (Mayo, Hoggett and Miller 2007). PAR encourages working together to achieve common goals, which increases a sense of belonging that can help to minimise divisions created through other social identities (Douthwaite 1996; Shaw *et al.* 2020). This can help to build the collective agency which is the foundation for marginalised people to claim influence (Burns *et al.* 2015).

PAR is a research paradigm that positions researchers and research participants as 'co-researchers', who together create knowledge with the intention of bringing about change with relation to the situation that is the subject of inquiry. Its epistemological basis is that different kinds of knowledge are valid beyond traditional conceptual knowledge; experiential, presentational, and practical forms of knowledge are equally valued (Heron and Reason 2008). Its methodological approach broadly seeks to engage these different kinds of knowledge in dialogue, through cycles of research, action, and reflection. Within this approach, quantitative and qualitative methods are valued, as long as they are designed and used in ways which make them accessible and meaningful to the people engaged in the research (i.e. the people who experience the issue that the research seeks

to address), and give them agency (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; Chambers 2008). In particular, many PAR processes use creative and visual methods which can help to address power inequalities and exclusions in traditional research relationships (for example, including non-literate researchers), and enable experiential knowledge to be communicated through culturally appropriate and meaningful artistic expression (e.g. drawing, photos, drama, song, dance, etc.).

Our learning from using PAR approaches is that they are relevant for engaging and researching intersecting inequalities inclusive of FoRB, because they offer iterative processes which move between first (personal), second (group-based), and third person (between the group and a wider audience/other stakeholders) reflection and dialogue. The methods that are integrated into a PAR process enable participants to bring their embodied and experiential knowledge into the group. Sharing these experiences (e.g. through storytelling, drawing, photos, etc.) enables different personal experiences to be heard and recognised. These experiences are held by the group in the safe space of the PAR exercise, where ground rules are set and practices are modelled which ensure respect for diversity (e.g. of gender, age, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, disability).

Group analysis of the individual stories is carried out using methods which encourage individual reflection and group dialogue, which builds understanding across difference. Dialogue across the stories helps to identify common and different experiences, and the multiple and intersecting drivers of exclusion, i.e. factors which are common across different stories so that patterns and structures of exclusion become apparent.

The facilitated process, starting from acknowledgement of each person's experience, builds confidence amongst people who are accustomed to being voiceless. The group work acknowledges and navigates difference, while building solidarity. In this process, the group may identify coping strategies. These are contextual approaches to navigating power relations which exclude, stigmatise, or persecute, and create impossible choices, for example, when people are forced to hide their identity in order to access employment or services, such as can be the case for religious minorities, DNTs in India, or Roma in Central and Eastern Europe.

PAR processes can be used intentionally to build group identity. In the case of religious minorities, the religious/faith-based identity may be strong but deeply stigmatised. The PAR process may offer the opportunity to reflect on common experiences of marginalisation, and from there help to build collective agency and strategy for action. Activities can be developed to identify opportunities, allies, and consider possibilities for action, transformation, and to seek accountability at different levels of governance.

In all PAR processes which engage marginalised or vulnerable groups, risk has to be assessed and monitored throughout. The facilitating organisation, as in the case study with Praxis discussed below, plays a central role in assessing risk before the process begins, in dialogue with community members and relevant actors, such as local NGOs. Throughout, the emphasis is on supporting the group to assess risk and to decide together whether and what actions can be undertaken.

4 Context

This section provides some background on marginalisation on the basis of religion in the Indian context, and the legal and policy frameworks.

The right to freedom of religion and freedom of conscience is guaranteed by the Constitution of India.⁹ However, there is a need to understand the difference between the rights of a specific community and claims on the state (Robinson 2014). The 'Schedule Caste Order of 1950', states that 'no person who professes faith other than Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism shall be deemed to be member of a Scheduled Caste (SC)' (para. 3). Dalits (the lowest caste in the caste system) who convert to Buddhism and Sikhism, are given SC status, which enables them to receive state benefits. Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims are thus explicitly excluded from accessing state support (Robinson 2014). The Indian state differentiates between 'Indic' religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism), and 'non-Indic' (e.g. Islam and Christianity). This is compounded by the religious interpretation of Islamic scholars who do not accept caste within Islam (Alam 2009).

It is well established that Muslims and Christians in India are heterogenous communities which include caste-analogues (Deshpande and Bapna 2008). For Muslim conservatives, the Islamic faith is opposed to the idea of caste, yet, despite this rhetorical emphasis on equality, caste is an effective and operative category among Muslims living in India. Caste among Christians is a well-established phenomenon as well, and specific practices of untouchability among Christian communities are subject to great variation (Deshpande and Bapna 2008). Any acknowledgement of caste among Muslims and Christians poses a challenge for an analysis of the caste system built on the intersection of polarisation owing to religion and to caste, when the practice is conceived as a matter for the Hindu religion only (Webster 1999).

⁹ See the Constitution of India 1950, Articles 25, 26, 27, and 28, www.india.gov.in/my-government/constitution-india.

While specific caste features may vary considerably across communities and regions, the following general caste features can be identified, ranging from aspects found everywhere, to aspects on which there is too much variation to permit easy generalisation. These include hereditary membership conferred by birth, endogamy (the custom of marrying only within one's caste, tribe, ethnic, or social group), social segregation, i.e. the exclusion of lower by higher all along the hierarchy, occupational segregation and economic differentiation, specific practices of untouchability and other forms of exclusion against Dalits, and belief in notions of ritual purity and pollution as the basis for caste divisions. However, what Ambedkar wrote in 1916 is still true today: 'Thus the conclusion is inevitable that *Endogamy is the only characteristic that is peculiar to caste* [emphasis in the original], and if we succeed in showing how endogamy is maintained, we shall practically have proved the genesis and also the mechanism of Caste' (unpaginated).

Social segregation and economic hierarchies are universally present, and always follow the caste hierarchy – i.e. the 'lowest' castes are always the most excluded and most resource-poor; there is never an instance where the hierarchies are reversed or even disturbed substantially (Deshpande and Bapna 2008). The lowest caste groups among both Christians and especially Muslims, find themselves left out of the networks that provide social capital, and which yield opportunities for accumulating economic capital (*ibid.*), thereby ensuring that they remain backward classes as well.

Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians suffer from the familiar vicious circle of lack of formal recognition as a social category, leading to the absence of authoritative data (especially statistical data). This lack of data in turn creates difficulties for their recognition as social categories (*ibid.*).

4.1 Tribals

According to the High-Level Committee appointed in 2013, chaired by Prof. Virginius Xaxa, tribes in India, though numerically a minority, include a vast diversity of groups, with different language and linguistic traits, ecological settings, physical features, population size, the extent of acculturation, dominant livelihoods, level of development, and social stratification (Xaxa 2014). The majority of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population is concentrated in the eastern, central, and western belt; data shows that geographical locations are linked to differential levels of development of the tribes.

Exposure to urbanisation and educational expansion has changed the economic and sociocultural systems in the north-eastern states. State-sponsored development has

particularly benefited the educated and urban elites from dominant tribes. However, internal differences need to be taken into account; women and other less dominant tribes (e.g. rural) are disadvantaged and face the greatest challenges of poverty and unemployment (Ghosh and Choudhuri 2011). In the eastern belt, the exploitation of natural resources and deforestation to meet urban and industrial demands has greatly affected the conventional livelihoods that families are involved in in these regions, and there has been large-scale displacement of the tribal population (Nathan and Xaxa 2012).

In central India, the challenges are different. Almost 90 per cent of the STs are directly or indirectly dependent upon agriculture. They normally practise primitive agriculture and the productivity is quite low. According to NSSO data (2010), in the ranking of the literacy rate of the ST population, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh occupy the 16th and 23rd positions respectively, and the poverty rate is extremely high among the STs residing in these states. Therefore, a region-specific approach is required to bring about positive change among the tribal population.

The colonial tradition classified tribes as Animists, which placed them as outside of the major religions of India. However, some classify the tribals in mainstream religious terms. For example, advocates of Hinduism who are keen to enhance Hindu population numbers, categorise them as Hindus (Xaxa 2005; Ghurye 1943). Latent discrimination towards tribals on religious grounds has surfaced in the recent attacks on tribal Christians; media coverage documents the aggressively stated view that the tribals lose their constitutional and legal entitlements (including affirmative action benefits) once they became Christians. It was argued that they must identify themselves as Christians and not as tribes when they apply for jobs and other benefits from the government, making them ineligible for state benefits as tribes (Xaxa 2005).

4.2 The Denotified Tribes

Denotified Tribes (DNTs) in India continue to struggle for their rights and identity even after 72 years of independence. These tribal communities have a long history of extreme poverty, marginalisation, neglect, and oppression – first during colonial rule, and subsequently in independent India. Their religious affiliations differ – from nature worshippers to Animists to those following state-recognised religions such as Hinduism and Islam. While the colonial era Criminal Tribes Act (first enacted in 1871)¹⁰ was

¹⁰ Several state legislature have passed special laws since 1952 for regulating the conduct, and restricting the movements of, habitual offenders and the state laws on habitual offenders are referred to as Habitual Offenders'

repealed by the Indian government in 1952 ostensibly to 'de-notify' and de-stigmatise these tribes, the Habitual Offenders Act 1956 and the Begging Act 1959 in its place, perpetuated the systematic branding of these groups as criminals, delinquents, and vagabonds and consequent harassment in a different form which continues to the present. The Prevention of Begging Act 1959, The Bombay Prevention of Begging Act 1959 (commonly known as the Beggary Law), and similar laws in urban areas all over the country criminalise and de-humanise street-performing nomadic communities such as acrobats, tight rope walkers, dancers, and singers, construing them as beggars under these Acts.

There has been no enumeration of DNTs in the Population Census and other significant statistical gatherings. It is important to note that the DNTs do not have a uniform classification across the country. There is no official data since they are not separately enumerated in the Census. They are not recognised as a separate social category under the Constitutional schedules like the SCs and the STs are. Instead, they have been spread across SCs, STs, and other backward castes (OBCs) in different states. Some of them are not even listed under any recognised marginalised category, resulting in non-uniformity across the country. They are more vulnerable in the absence of reliable scientific data and statistics about the population, geographical distribution, rural–urban ratios, and other human development indicators.

The question of their citizenship remains unanswered. Most of the DNTs do not have basic citizenship entitlements such as voting cards, ration cards, domicile certificates, caste certificates, birth certificates, etc. This does not allow them to participate in democratic political process and also acts as a hurdle in getting access to welfare schemes and enjoying their fundamental rights. When it comes to availing state-led interventions for marginalised social groups in education, health care, skills/livelihoods development, or reservations in schools, colleges, and government jobs, due to a lack of the requisite documentation, awareness, and the capacity to demand and secure rights and entitlements, these tribes have remained invisible.

The women from the DNT communities have to bear not only the stigma associated with poverty and their historically discredited community identity, but also face violence at home, within the community, and at the societal and state level. The women in the DNTs have stated (during participatory research activities such as the Ground-Level Panels facilitated by Praxis; see Section 5) that they have borne the most violent and repressive brunt of the stigma of criminalisation, continued violations, and arbitrary use of the

Acts. Similarly, the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959, was extended to a number of states across India with the intention of the prevention of begging.

Habitual Offenders Act (1956), societal non-acceptance, and the failure of the polity to include them in the mainstream social and economic fabric of the country. Over the years, the National Crime Records Bureau under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Government of India, has only recognised crimes against women in general, and among the marginalised communities has only a separate category for crimes against SC and ST women, since DNTs are not recognised. Panellists at Ground-Level Panels have attributed this to them not being a significant vote bank or a strong political and economic group, and this has further rendered violence against DNT women invisible. The gravity and contours of injustice are a prominent dimension for DNT women as academic literature and research, debates at national and state level on violence against women, key stakeholders, budgetary allocations, policy, state machinery, and justice delivery systems are marked by the stark absence of DNT voices and issues. This is mainly because of the lack of recognition of them as a category to be taken into account.

Many of the DNTs are Muslims. For example, the Banjaras in UP, the Nat in Bihar, the Chapparband in Maharashtra, the Bhartiya Afghani Muslims in Hyderabad (horse sellers), the Miyana folk singers, the Darweshi Muslims, and the Madari, among others. Besides the two mainstream categories of *ashraf* (noble) and *ajilaf* (translated as degraded or unholy but comprising the artisanal castes),¹¹ the 1901 Census indicated the presence of a third category called *arzal*, similar to the Hindu caste system. It consists of the very low castes as discussed above, the Halakhors, Lalbegi, Abdal, and Bediyar. The *arzals* are the untouchable converts who have found their way into the constitutional category of other backward classes (OBCs). Overall, the conditions of Muslim OBCs belonging to *arzals* is worse than other OBCs. The cumulative oppression that they face is compounded because of their caste and DNT status (Rao 2013).

4.3 The Citizenship (Amendment) Act

The recent Citizenship (Amendment) Act (Government of India 2019) seeks to amend the definition of illegal immigrant for Hindu, Sikh, Parsi, Buddhist, and Christian immigrants from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, who have lived in India without documentation. They will be granted fast-track Indian citizenship in six years. So far, 12 years of residence has been the standard eligibility requirement for naturalisation. The legislation applies to those who were 'forced or compelled to seek shelter in India due to persecution on the ground of religion' (*Hindustan Times* 2019, unpaginated). The cut-off

¹¹ *Ashraf* and *ajilaf* are conferred on the basis of the traditional occupation/livelihood of the family, which is directly linked with caste. This determines one's class (or economic) status and the two are directly linked since lower castes are trapped in jobs that offer very limited upward economic mobility.

date for citizenship is 31 December 2014 which means the applicant should have entered India on or before that date.

Since the time of the inception of the controversial Bill, India has been witnessing protests and petitions challenging the CAA since it excludes Muslims. The Supreme Court declined to stay the contentious law but asked central government to file its reply against the petitions that say it violates the Constitution. The petitioners say the Bill discriminates against Muslims and violates the right to equality enshrined in the Constitution, since it ensures citizenship on the basis of religion (Human Rights Watch 2020).

The Government of India responded by saying that these minority groups have come into the country escaping persecution in Muslim-majority nations. However, there are problems with this argument. The Act does not protect all persecuted religious minorities, nor does it apply to all neighbours. There are different sects in Islam too, which face severe persecution in India's neighbouring countries. In addition to Christians and Hindus, Shia Muslims, ex-Muslim Atheists, Sufis, and Ahmadiyya Muslims are amongst the minorities facing persecution in Pakistan at the hands of the Sunni Muslim-majority community. Liberal bloggers in Bangladesh have lost their lives for questioning religious practices. The Taliban in Afghanistan have been perpetrating a genocide against the Hazara Shia Muslims, Christians, and followers of the Bahai faith, among others. Rohingya Muslims, Christians, and Hindus face persecution in neighbouring Burma, as do Hindu and Christian Tamils in neighbouring Sri Lanka, and Uighur Muslims in China's Xinjiang Province.

The CAA ringfences the Muslim identity by declaring India a welcome refuge to all other religious communities. This establishes Muslims as second-class citizens of India by providing preferential treatment to other groups, and violates the Constitution (Article 14, the fundamental right to equality to all persons). Considering the SDG call to 'leave no one behind', it is important to identify those most disadvantaged in the Muslim community, in the context of the CAA. The DNTs overall and the Muslim DNTs especially as discussed above, in the absence of proper citizenship documents, will have the question of their citizenship unanswered. With the passage of the CAA and the subsequent National Population Register, the DNTs will be the first to be sent to detention centres, given that they will not have the requisite documents to prove their citizenship.

In this context, participatory processes that aim to explore and address inequalities need to consider the legal and policy challenges and opportunities.

5 Examples of using PAR with groups marginalised through intersecting inequalities, including faith identities

This section provides examples of how PAR processes facilitated by Praxis engage with intersecting inequalities, including Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB), what these processes look like, and their findings about FoRB in relation to development and the SDGs.

As a backdrop to this participatory work in India, some context on attitudes to participation is helpful. As in many other countries, the 1990s saw an increase in people's participation in policy spaces, strengthened by amendments to the Constitution that enabled local governments to facilitate citizen participation. However, critics argue that participation has been approached in an instrumental way, without building critical consciousness about the structures of oppression (Bhattacharya 2008). Furthermore, the active participation of marginalised groups in planning processes has remained minimal (Escobar 1995; Chatterjee 2004). 'Experts' invited into policy spaces are academic/professional, without necessarily having recognition of lived experience. Embedded structures of inequality, including implicit or explicit biases towards certain forms of knowledge and modes of expression, tend to limit opportunities for the participation of certain groups in these processes.

In situations in which it is challenging for people to participate as they face stigma and persecution, even the most well-intentioned civil society organisations opt for representative advocacy (Narayanan, Bharadwaj and Chandrasekharan 2015). Creating space for highly marginalised groups to engage in policy processes requires redefining expertise and who counts as an 'expert' (*ibid.*). For example, in the National Education Policy, two expert panels were formed and those panels organised consultations with diverse constituencies. The constituency that was left out was school children and children who had dropped out of education – probably the most significant stakeholders. In the case of children, it is stark, but in other cases, such as marginalised groups, the presence of a representative is considered adequate to be participatory.

5.1 Ground-Level Panels

To address these imbalances and biases, over the last seven years, Praxis has been promoting the institutionalising of 'Ground-Level Panels' (GLPs), which bring together

people facing different kinds of vulnerabilities and marginalisation to take part in a deliberative dialogue process, during which the participants discuss a significant policy initiative that affects their lives. The aim of the Ground-Level Panel process is to provide a counterpoint to the dominance of ‘professional, political and academic voices in local, national and global policymaking processes’.¹² The legitimacy of their contributions is not based on ‘expert’ knowledge, but on the participants’ familiarity with their own situations (Thomas and Narayanan 2015).

The idea is to facilitate, demonstrate, and advocate for model building which can lead to the institutionalisation of GLPs in policymaking. This will ensure the inclusion of the voices of the marginalised. Praxis occupies a unique position as an organisation that is the secretariat of several civil society watchdog mechanisms (e.g. Social Equity Watch, Corporate Responsibility Watch, and other thematic and identity-based networks). These platforms offer space for grass-roots organisations to articulate some key ground realities. Praxis also has a wide network of grass-roots organisations, NGOs, INGOs, bilateral and multilateral donors, government personnel, academics, and others that they have worked or engaged with over the last two decades. As an organisation that strives for the democratisation of development processes and institutions in order to ensure that the voices of the poor are heard and acted upon, it uses these platforms, contacts, and networks to convene the GLPs.

The GLP methodology speaks directly to the principles of ‘leave no one behind’, as it explores experiences of stigma and marginalisation from the perspective of people’s lived experiences, and relates these to local service provision, and national and sometimes global policy frameworks.

A GLP comprises approximately 15 to 20 people who, through their lived experience, have become experts in understanding barriers to equity and opportunity, and are thus uniquely placed to be able to chart a way forward for their community and for all of us (Thomas and Narayanan 2015). Once the objective for a GLP to be convened on a certain theme is clear, the organisers typically reach out to a range of community-led organisations or grass-roots movements that can link them to potential panellists. The exclusion criteria are people who hold positions of office, have strong political affiliations, have leadership positions in formal or informal institutions affiliated with known non-profits, or are local leaders. There is also a preference to have a gender skew where possible, with more women than men, and if possible, some transsexual people; a wide

¹² See Praxis: www.praxisindia.org/VoiceForChange.php.

range of age representation; some persons who are differently abled; people belonging to a range of castes; and followers of various religions. The panellists are not known to each other, and so the first step is an ice-breaking activity that is also a detailed identity mapping.

5.1.1 Identity mapping

The identities range from the ascribed and most fundamental ones including their gender, caste, religious, regional, and linguistic identities, moving through to those where they have a 'choice' such as food preferences and interests. These identities are visually depicted (as images) on cards and the participants (who might often be non-literate) are asked to tick the ones that apply to them.

While there is typically not much hesitation in revealing religion or caste (as it is often evident from one's name), this arises in indicating preferences for the 'choice'-linked identity indicators, e.g. food habits of consuming pork or beef. The hesitation stems both from a sense of respect for the others in the room as well a fear of repercussions (in light of the increasing number of lynching incidents across the country since 2015 related to beef consumption).

In certain GLPs with groups who have a shared social category identity such as Dalit or Denotified Tribe, the identity mapping is adapted to use the shared experience of stigma and discrimination as a starting point, in order to establish common ground. For example, in a GLP organised with DNTs in 2017, the starting point of the identity mapping was to get the panellists to write down/share examples of their treatment by health providers, teachers, religious leaders, caste groups, and police. The panellists had a discussion about the various stakeholders, listed these out, and for each set of stakeholders that they interacted with in their daily lives, they discussed the perceptions held by some of these stakeholders. Children from most communities shared that 'they make us sit separately from other children in schools'. Others shared that 'just because we hail from the rag-picking community, in schools, other children make fun of us and tell us we stink even though we are bathed and clean' (Praxis 2017).

Those from communities traditionally involved in sex work (irrespective of whether their families were in the trade or not) were forced to take HIV tests when they went to the hospital with any health issue. Similarly, some other communities traditionally involved with petty theft shared that 'irrespective of where in the city the crime is committed, the

police round up people from our community' (*ibid.*).¹³ Those from the Chhara community (associated with petty theft and liquor brewing) shared that 'Chhara for most people translates as a derogatory abuse and for the police it is assumed that we are thieves, even if we are doctors, lawyers or IT professionals'; 'Politicians tell us, we don't want your votes. You are too small a constituency for us'; 'Priests say that our income is from illegal/immoral sources, and therefore they don't participate in any of our functions/festivals' (*ibid.*). The panellists did a scoring exercise of the nature of discrimination they face with various stakeholders, as seen in Table 5.1:

Table 5.1 Scores ascribed to the discrimination faced from various stakeholders

Stakeholders	1 (Always discriminatory)	2 (Often discriminate)	3 (Sometimes discriminate)	4 (No discrimination)
Doctors	55%	22%	23%	0%
Teachers	30%	62%	8%	0%
Other children	38%	12%	50%	0%
Affluent neighbours	44%	33%	23%	0%
Other marginalised groups	20%	20%	50%	10%
Shopkeepers	11%	55%	33%	0%
Police	63%	37%	0%	0%
Religious leaders	50%	20%	0%	30%
Government	70%	30%	0%	0%

Source: Praxis (2017).

¹³ See this digital story for a powerful Chhara account of stigma and related harassment: www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cISVvART9w&list=PLwixYh1RL3PH_1oFrC5sb0eBUUUXkmlr5.



Picture 5.1

Participants identifying known DNTs in each state, on a map of India. *Photo: Praxis.*



Picture 5.2

Detailing the stigma and discrimination faced by DNTs from various service providers. *Photo: Praxis.*

The idea behind this exercise is to unpack the range of identities among the panellists, for them to deeply understand each other, and to find ways to relate by connecting on the similarities in their identities, as well as to appreciate the differences in the lived experiences of the group. It made them more aware of how not just the Denotified Tribe status, but within that, one's gender identity, one's physical disability, the way one chooses to worship, and a range of other practices and choices exacerbate or ease the experiences of stigma and discrimination. For instance, many women shared that 'we can fight against caste but who will give us strength to fight the gender battle we have at home?' (*ibid.*).

Further, a woman from the Kanjatbhat community talks about the undignified practice of the virginity test for all the girls from their tribe, saying that ‘as girls, we are teased about what lies ahead by society around us and as married women we have to endure it. And an all-male *panchayat* (governing body) imposes penalties and decides my fate if I fail. Men from our tribe have no such burdens to bear.’¹⁴ A Muslim participant shared that ‘we face discrimination no matter where we go – in most places in our state, my name is enough. If I get past that, my DNT identity ensures I don’t get what I came for’ (by name: he was implying that it is indicative of his religion).¹⁵

Age is often a factor that causes differential disadvantage. Older female DNT GLP participants have talked about hindrances to their widow pensions, given their lack of documentation due to their nomadic lifestyles. This produces a complex web of intersectional inequalities, and provides the starting point to discuss significant aspects of the inter-relationships among various stakeholders such as community members, service providers, and duty bearers, but also sub-groups within the DNT communities, who create, perpetuate, and engage with these inequalities in ways which deny DNT members or sub-groups therein their rights, but in different ways according to the issue at stake (Naryanan *et al.* 2020). The identity mapping is continually revisited in the course of the (typically three-to-five-day-long) ground-level panel process. The reason is that any discussion on deprivation and lack of access to basic entitlements gets more granular when viewed from the identity lens, as the examples above illustrate.

Social identities revealed by DNT participants revealed that a number of sub-castes and sub-tribes among DNT communities are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Their social ostracisation has become ‘normalised’, and the way in which non-DNTs interact with them is very transactional – requiring illegal alcohol, buying sex, non-legal entertainment, or even providing space for ‘wanted’ criminals involved in inter-gang rivalries. As a result, the community has been ghettoised within villages and slums, with a prevailing local ‘narrative’ that it is not safe to enter the areas inhabited by DNT communities (Naryanan *et al.* 2020). For example, participants hailing from traditional hunting families shared that ‘forest officers ask us to kill deer when they want to eat the meat, but when we get caught for hunting they put on an act of total innocence, deny it and ensure that they are not connected with the act at all. We have no voice anyway so it’s no point even trying to argue’ (Praxis 2017).

Identity mapping shines a light on how social identities are interwoven with religious identities, which can increase marginalisation; for example, as is the case with Tribal

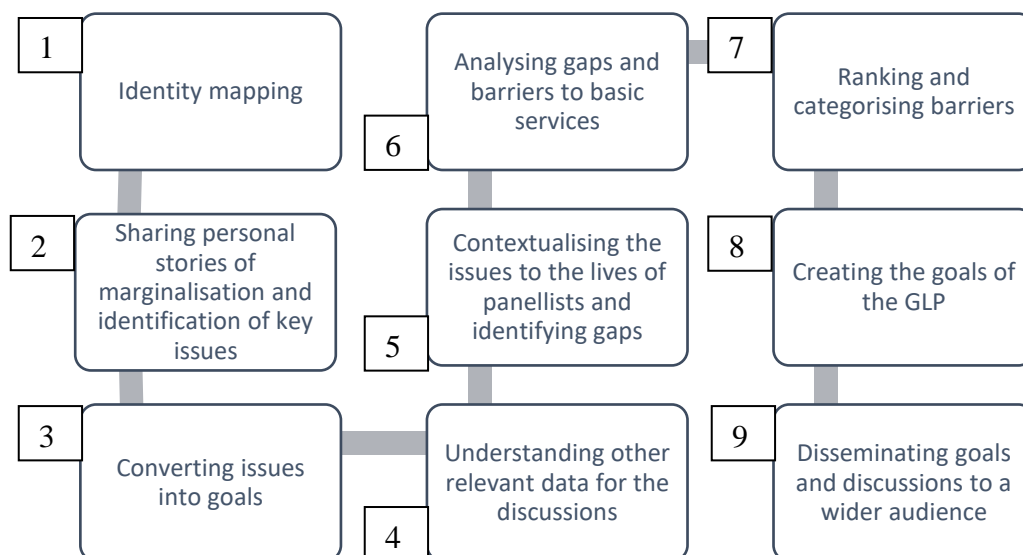
¹⁴ From interactions during data collection, prior to GLP I, June 2017.

¹⁵ From interactions during data collection, prior to GLP I, June 2017.

Muslims and Christians (see Section 4). Patriarchal practices within the community itself further marginalise women and adolescent girls; also male members of various communities are often victims of the stereotypes that are created by gendered norms. These marginalised identities intersect further: how a Hindu woman or girl experiences a deprivation is different from the experience of a woman or girl from a minority community (e.g. Muslim or Christian). Within this, given the ambiguity and the lack of acceptance of castes in religions such as Islam or Christianity, the very real discrimination of a Dalit Christian woman or Dalit Muslim woman is far more pronounced than an upper-caste Hindu, Sikh, or Buddhist woman.

The sharing of personal stories (see Figure 5.1, step 2) brought out explicit descriptions of discrimination or stigma. For example, some women from Dalit Muslim communities shared that ‘even the Muslim doctors won’t touch us, they just leave medicines on the table for us to pick up’; or ‘we are served tea in steel cups while the forward castes get the porcelain cups’; ‘Mahadalits have such a strong voice and bargaining capacity, but they do not stand with us “Banajars” or “Saperas” – they do not even talk to us’.¹⁶ This level of detail lends itself to the generation of evidence and ideas for tangible corrective action when needed. For example, a recommendation from a health-focused GLP was that ‘providers should review their practices towards Dalits, Muslims, and other marginalised groups, including all economically weaker sections’.¹⁷

Figure 5.1 Roadmap developed by Praxis for the GLP in India



Source: Naryanan et al. (2020).

¹⁶ Praxis – notes of deliberations of the first DNT GLP to analyse the SDGs (2017).

¹⁷ Praxis – Health GLP (2018).

GLPs and other forms of participatory action research which seek to transform inequalities and build inclusion, rest on some underlying assumptions and principles. Community members by virtue of their subjective experience of marginalisation have 'expertise' to deliberate on the issues they face. With support and facilitation, they can use this expertise to identify indicators (for example, to measure progress towards selected Global Goals).

Ground-level panels can be combined with other methods to generate data, based on the above principles. The data-gathering process is rooted in the logic of the iterative PAR process as described in Section 3. The starting point is the lived experiences of affected community members; they are supported to analyse their own experiences, to gather more data, to analyse these, and to decide what action to take.

5.2 Community-led action research

Another PAR technique is the facilitation of community-led research. Praxis created research fellowships for members of certain marginalised groups hailing from stigmatised identities – namely from Denotified Tribes. The fellowship was a pilot which sought to enable an organic process of selecting individuals who have a linkage with the DNT groups, to allow for peer to peer/more uninhibited research interactions. The process of selection of the fellows was in consultation with community leaders and there were no minimal qualification criteria for the fellows – just a keen interest in research. Set against the SDG call to action of 'leave no one behind', a research fellowship programme was conceived.

The objective of the programme was to generate narratives about the issues and challenges faced by DNT communities. In the first batch of fellows, eight youth from the Nat (Bihar) and Bediya communities (Madhya Pradesh) participated in a five-day workshop with sessions ranging from participatory research, gender, law, and basic video-making. Following this, over the course of one month, they collected data from their own and other DNT communities and initiated some action research discussions – conversations initiated using some basic participatory tools to ascertain the wider direction that the research should take. These began during data collection and continued even after their papers were presented. As a follow-up, a three-day workshop was held to analyse, along with the youth, the data that they had gathered. Based on this data and their experiences in the field, the fellows developed ideas for four research papers. During their time in the field, the youth also made digital stories based on selected case stories.



Picture 5.3

Data collection by Fellows.

Photo: Praxis.



Picture 5.4

Community data analysis facilitated by Fellows.

Photo: Praxis.



Picture 5.5

A session in progress during the fellowship programme.

Photo: Praxis.



Picture 5.6

Fellows sharing collated data during the follow-up workshop.

Photo: Praxis.

Peer research can uncover realities that have been hidden from traditional research. In one such process, during the fellowship workshop sessions, researchers from the Nat community delved into understanding the intersection of the varying inequalities that they had uncovered as part of their research findings. What emerged is the rarely discussed or acknowledged phenomenon of untouchability with reference to Muslims (Trivedi *et al.*, 2016). The lack of a formal dwelling (and traditionally nomadic lifestyle) had created additional barriers for people from the Nat community to access any basic entitlements, pushing the women of the community into sex work to make ends meet. A participant who hails from the Bediya community, whose traditional occupation was sex work, shared that a factor in the cycle that kept the women in sex work and away from studies or alternative employment was the mindset among the men and traditional leaders. These community elders believed that educating women was a waste of time and resources. This was probably bolstered by the fact that they were quite complacent about earning a livelihood because the women in the community had, for years, been bringing in income through sex work.

Their Nat Dalit Muslim identities also affected their education possibilities. In the action phase of the community-led action research with Nat communities, the action groups that the researchers had formed used a series of participatory methods and tools to build the rationale and action plan for collective action amongst community members on the issue of ensuring higher education for their children. The action research group had carried out 'aspiration mapping' with younger children, which revealed that many of them wanted to become police officers, doctors, engineers, civil servants, and teachers. These ambitions diminished by the time children finish elementary education. In order to understand the structural reasons behind the lack of education access and aspiration,

the community fellows generated insights on the aspects that determine the provision of education in Nat communities.

One community fellow learnt that in one of the villages, the entire Nat community had been trying to achieve a higher caste status. They were doing this by ensuring that their children got access to education and were adopting a number of fundamental lifestyle changes, including physically and socially distancing themselves from Nat communities in other villages, avoiding matrimonial alliances or participating in any collective festivals, and changing their last names to neutral or generic ones which were not indicative of their caste or hereditary profession. Through this strategy, the community is trying to achieve vertical mobility within the religion, which brings with it other social benefits. It raises questions about the strategies and trade-offs required for a marginalised community to derive the strength to create solutions within the caste hierarchy. They have had to reject their stigmatised Nat tribal identity, and instead seek to leverage opportunity through opting to behave not as untouchables, in order to move up the caste system.

As the community-led action research moved from gathering data and making sense of it to the action phase, it was necessary to build capacity and energy for collective action. It can be difficult to develop a common agenda when community members all face the stresses of living at the margins, and different sections of the community understand their problems and marginalisation differently. For example, there are varied perspectives on the versions of community history itself – some may see sex work as a historical occupation, linking it with their culture, while others say that this part of their culture is less than 200 years old and became associated with the community because of feudal relations, which need to be transformed. Others take a moral lens – which can come from Islam but also from the social morality defined by the colonial government, or Brahmanical morals which evolved before that and strengthened in subsequent times.

There are also interest groups within the community based on their current status in the economy. Some have developed a coping system so deep that often even their survival depends on that. In the absence of alternative options, this group would resist any social or economic change, irrespective of their ideological vision. For instance, some believers in women's empowerment see sex work as a manifestation of this belief. Yet, as sex workers, many women are harassed in the course of their work, and even those who believe in empowerment will continue to suffer because they cannot demand rights as a sex worker and don't have the space to articulate their demands or ideology. Conversely, those without a stake in the existing economy linked to their community have the ability to challenge certain practices. For instance, youth hailing from a community with the

traditional occupation of liquor brewing, in an attempt to distance and shield themselves from the related discrimination, began a theatre group and opened up avenues for others to build a skill and livelihood to demonstrate that it was just as lucrative and less stigmatising.

These complex and diverse positions hinder community-led action research, as it becomes clear that neither the aspirations of community members, nor the status of their marginalisation, are the same. The action research led by the community often directly surfaces these problems.

PAR processes help to politicise poverty and marginalisation, and provide communities with tools – data, indicators, issues, and claims – that can be brought to make demands, seek alliances, or inform policy discussions. As such, PAR processes can build a sense of collective agency. Participants have shared that

People who make policies are those who live safe and secure lives and that's why they don't understand our pain – if policies are being made for us, we need to be part of this process. All this while, the BDO [block development officer] kept saying that there is no data to demonstrate that our community is deprived and that's why no action was taken. Let us see what he will say when I show him all this data and these graphs. He will have no choice but to act.¹⁸

They offer participants meaningful participation in researching their own realities, debating and deliberating on these, and making decisions on whether and how to act. For instance, DNT participants of PAR have shared that ‘in our own country, we don't get one inch of space and are treated like refugees, but refugees from other countries are welcomed and provided [with] shelter’.¹⁹

These processes also enable participants to hear and recognise different positions and experiences of inequalities within their communities. Participants from a rural location shared that ‘listening to the problems that the urban poor [face], I now realise that migration to cities comes at a huge cost’ (Praxis 2013). Listening to the experiences of single women, other women participants shared that ‘there should be some schemes put in place for single women – we now know how they are ignored by all policy makers’ (*ibid.*), and ‘transgenders should get equal rights because they also pay taxes to the

¹⁸ From notes of Research Fellows from community action research group meetings.

¹⁹ From notes of Research Fellows from community action research group meetings.

government just like the rest of us' (*ibid.*). The PAR methods used in these examples therefore work towards challenging both the internalisation and the externalisation of the issues of stigmatisation and societal discrimination. GLPs, in particular, create the scope for people from the margins to share their untold stories, to discuss, dialogue, and analyse, and for their knowledge to be communicated and given weight in policy spaces.

6 Learning about engaging and researching with religious minorities in contexts of intersecting inequalities

In this final section, we reflect on what we have learnt through using PAR to inquire with people of religious minorities in contexts of intersecting inequalities. We consider the methodological insights and innovations that have enabled us to surface new insights, and we highlight three key areas of insight that these PAR processes have enabled.

6.1 Methodological innovation

Over the last eight years, through the Participate network, Praxis and other participatory research organisations have been able to collaborate and aggregate their knowledge from their experiences of working with marginalised groups in different country contexts. This collaboration enables creativity and innovation, as network members borrow, adapt, and learn from each other, reflecting on the similarities and differences encountered across the PAR processes in context. This has enabled Praxis to evolve their approach, as they have developed and experimented with GLPs and other participatory methods.

The examples discussed above of Ground-Level Panels, community fellows, and community-led action research have shown the value of using methods which start from people's everyday life experiences, in order to surface and understand the complex realities of how they navigate multiple and intersecting inequalities. These processes provide members of marginalised groups experiencing combinations of identity-based exclusions (for example, as a member of a Nomadic Tribe, religious minority, and being a woman) with the tools, skills, and confidence to research their own realities and bring their knowledge into policy spaces. They can be trained as peer researchers to collect data using both quantitative and qualitative methods, including a range of participatory visual and performative methods such as digital story telling (DST), participatory video, and community mapping. The community members themselves can analyse the data

that is generated through this research and draw inferences to understand the reasons for the marginalisation and challenges they face.

Methodological innovation is particularly important for working with marginalised and persecuted groups. Methods need to build confidence and trust, as well as generate data; capacities need to be built, and the links between research and action need to be constantly revisited so that community researchers can assess risk and identify actions. With due care, the participatory research process may culminate in an encounter with policymakers, service providers, or other stakeholders as appropriate, so that community members can present their own analysis to a wider audience. The GLP provides a structured process for this. The experience of the GLP and other participatory processes has highlighted the need to co-create guiding principles for the research process, between facilitating organisations and participants, and guided by the context.

6.2 Learning about the intersection of religious with other inequalities

PAR processes with DNT groups in India have generated three key areas of learning. First, through using PAR, we have nuanced our understanding of intersecting inequalities, generating for ourselves a new awareness of the significance of religious belief which we had not previously focused on. Second, PAR has challenged our assumptions about how people respond and strategise to address multiple exclusions; for example, by embracing caste. Third, we note that PAR has revealed some blind spots in relation to the intersection of religious with other inequalities. Attention to these blind spots could improve programming and policymaking.

1) Nuancing our understanding of intersecting inequalities

In our earlier work using PAR to explore intersecting inequalities, we had not actively engaged with religious belief and identity as a dimension of inequality. Introducing this lens has been eye-opening. Exclusion on the basis of religious belief has been strongly expressed in the experiences of discrimination and stigma shared by the GLP participants. What becomes clear through our intersectional approach is that discrimination based on religion and faith produces inequalities which exacerbate or compound other forms of marginalisation. This is because religion and belief are entangled with other social identities, which themselves intersect with vertical inequalities such as economic status or spatial disadvantage. In India, tribe and caste identity categories are particularly powerful drivers of inequality but interact in unexpected ways with religious inequalities. We have discussed how caste has been historically or strategically adopted by some non-Hindu religious communities; but also how legislation has created pressure for groups to identify as tribal or scheduled castes

and to deny their religious identities which may be in conflict with caste, in order to access benefits from the state. Exclusions are thus also entangled as well as mutually reinforcing.

The religious minority identity may be the main source of support to a group, bringing them together for reasons of faith but also shared experiences of societal prejudice, discrimination, or persecution. This sense of shared experience and values creates collective identity and potential for collective action. Yet, we have seen how other identities such as tribe and caste create tensions; with different DNT communities sharing the same religious identity taking different political positions on their tribe or caste identity, choosing (or not) to embrace caste even while their religion does not officially recognise it. The participatory research process with DNT members surfaced this challenge for building broader collective identity for organisation and movement building.

The intersectional approach also highlights the critical importance of taking into account other identities (such as gender or sexuality) which may be driving other exclusions within the group. The voices of DNT women described a different experience of marginalisation to that of the men. Participatory methods can open up space and build confidence for marginalised groups within a community to be heard. Their testimonies become data which the community can analyse together, and which may trigger greater awareness and solidarity, as shown by the responses of GLP panellists with regard to single women and transgender people. However, reducing inequalities is not a linear process, and divisions within a 'community' regarding gender norms, and different attitudes to caste, can pose a challenge to building a collective stance with regard to claiming the right to FoRB.

2) Challenging assumptions

PAR has generated substantive learning about how different identities are mobilised and in which contexts. Peer research uncovered how stigmatised and persecuted groups find strategies for survival. The example of the Nat Muslim community, which has turned away from other Nat communities, shunning traditions in order to access better education and opportunities, is instructive. Because of the baggage that caste carries of purity and pollution, and the extent of discrimination it has the potential to cause, for some, the only way to rid oneself of it is a complete reinvention – change in name, change in what one eats and drinks, how one dresses, how the women and men engage in the family and society, and the social practices of birth, marriage, and death rituals. While the research papers of the community fellows speak specifically of the Nat, there are numerous other examples. However, within a community, members may have

conflicting views on the appropriate strategy to address deprivation, based on different ideological politics. While some may wish to adopt caste as a strategy to avoid discrimination on a tribal basis, others may wish to reject the caste system, or take affirmative action (Naryanan *et al.* 2020).

Religious and other identities such as caste and gender thus are to some extent negotiated, as groups and communities seek survival strategies. We have seen that traditional livelihood practices for some DNT groups have been criminalised; the lack of formal dwelling for other groups denies them access to basic entitlements. For some women, it has meant moving into sex work (for Bediya women, this was a traditional occupation), and this is perpetuated by gender norms within the community, as men benefit from women working in the sex industry and may discourage them from studying to pursue other occupations.

Through the PAR processes, we are also building learning about the intersections of religious and tribal identities, and Covid-19. A religious gathering held by a Muslim sect called the Tablighi Jammāt before the lockdown led to accusations of ‘super-spreader’ of the virus. This led to the ‘communalisation’ of the issue (attributing the issue to the entire Muslim community), and a backlash was felt by numerous Muslims across the country. In the case of Denotified Tribes, these communities have been stigmatised for their erstwhile criminal tribe status by society as well as the administration. The pandemic has added to their vulnerability and increased their dependency on the state for accessing the most basic needs, because of the pandemic regulations which restrict their mobility and direct access to their accustomed livelihoods. The ongoing discrimination by duty bearers (e.g. the police and other authorities) towards tribal communities is more urgent than ever to address, given that it is these same officials who are now tasked with providing relief. Many don’t receive relief due to their lack of documents, but they are unwilling to challenge this injustice out of fear of police violence.

3) Blind spots

We have used PAR to generate data with marginalised communities, ensuring that marginalised voices within these communities are given the space to share and analyse their experiences. This has produced evidence that exposes some blind spots in our own thinking – in particular, our previous lack of attention to religious identity as an important aspect of intersecting inequalities. Blind spots relating to the intersection of different stigmatised identities are likely to be amplified in development programming and government policies, even while they claim to reduce poverty and promote inclusion in the framework of the SDGs. This happens when inequalities intersect – as we have seen, when DNT status intersects with religion, gender, poverty, and geography. The evidence

generated by DNT women in the Ground-Level Panels is stark; living in remote settings or informal settlements, or the street, they experience repression and ongoing discrimination through the stigma of their tribal identity, societal non-acceptance, discrimination from service providers and religious leaders, and gender-based discrimination and violence. Government data fails to record their situation or to develop policies or programmes that support them to access entitlements. Unregistered, undocumented, and ignored, such groups continue to be entirely 'left behind'.

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