

Inequality in a Rising Asia: Environment, History and Culture

The problem of inequality affects our individual and public life but it is important to recognize that it comes out of social and economic systems and cannot be addressed at the individual level. In Asia, there have been a number of models that offer the ideal of a society based on equality.

To take three examples, Japan, has projected itself as a homogeneous middle class society with little 'class' difference, where education served as a mechanism for upward mobility. The Chinese project of the revolutionary transformation of society to usher in a classless society was another powerful idea with a global impact. In India, the much used 'unity in diversity' serves to identify the idea that preserving plurality was the way to maintain equality.

The objective of this conference is to explore the question of inequality within a historical comparative perspective, to provide an empirically grounded and theoretically sound basis to understand the varied ways in which inequalities are created and sustained.

Japan, an Asian country, modernized much before its neighbours, and went on to achieve parity with the developed nations by the early twentieth century. Taking the path of modernity with great enthusiasm, Japan built a colonial empire where the rhetoric of equality was in constant tension with the practice of discrimination. In the postwar period, two ideas defined the axis of Japanese society, the idea of homogeneity and the idea of an island nation, both reinforcing each other to demarcate—a Japanese exceptionalism. Flowing from this was the idea of Japanese capitalism as a shared project between managers and workers, with few social and economic differences. The two ideas sustained a dominant view that Japan was culturally, linguistically and ethnically a 'homogeneous' country.

Yet even within Japan there were differences: the burakumin (literally—people living in villages—earlier they were forced to live in designated villages) were an outcaste group, and though equal in law, were discriminated and marginalized. The relationship of the Ainu, the indigenous people, and that of the people of Okinawa, with their different history and experience of the war, to the 'mainlanders' (that is those who live on the four main islands) have served to highlight the tenuous nature of homogeneity.

In the last two decades, Japan has also seen, as in other parts of the world, a rise in economic inequality and the increase in immigrants. Income differences and asset differences mean that a fewer number of people control a larger share of assets. The collapse of the seniority based wage system and the rise of temporary workers has contributed to changes in the family structure, increasing wage differences, and what is being called the ‘precariat’, people whose jobs are always on the line. Gender and generational inequalities, and with the entry of foreign workers the tensions between citizen and foreigner, has led to political and social movements that see the ‘opening’ of Japan as a threat to its foundational values and culture. The entry of immigrants, long resisted, and still not easy, has changed Japanese society in many ways but it has led to a backlash and created new debates about the nature of citizenship.

The debates around the question of inequality touch on the core of issues of the economic and social regimes that constitute nation states and their relationship with their citizens, as well as with the environment and its exploitation.

A trans-national comparison provides a way to examine how similar processes are giving rise to comparable problems. The conference will examine the question of inequality, through a cross-disciplinary and comparative perspective, with the idea of identifying areas for comparative study that go beyond national and regional boundaries. It will also address the question of how to meet the challenges posed by the adverse impact of growing inequality.

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