



Pathways to Greater Social Mobility for India's Dalit and Adivasi Communities

Equity-focused funders tailor efforts to support caste and tribal communities

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Executive Summary

Despite constitutional guarantees, well-intentioned government policies, and dedicated efforts by funders and NGOs, social mobility remains out of reach for most members of India's 300 million Dalit and Adivasi communities. Abundant evidence shows that these two historically marginalised groups remain at the bottom of a "broken ladder" for upward economic and social mobility. For them, the status quo isn't working.

Dalit individuals are officially recognised as Scheduled Castes; and Adivasi communities, India's Indigenous population, are officially designated as Scheduled Tribes. Most experience material poverty throughout their lives: in 8 out of 10 Dalit and Adivasi households, the highest earning member brings home less than Rs 5,000 – roughly \$65 – per month.

The Bridgespan Group set out to identify ways for funders and NGOs to support Dalit and Adivasi communities in their quest to improve their economic and social well-being. In short, how can philanthropy partner with NGOs in creating effective ladders of mobility?

The answer we heard over and over again in interviews with about 40 NGO leaders, academics, and intermediaries with experience supporting Dalit and Adivasi communities: centre equity to maximise the conditions for social mobility. An equity-centred approach starts by taking the unique histories, aspirations, and needs of Dalit and Adivasi communities into account when funding, designing, and implementing programmes. And it means co-creating solutions with these communities, giving them the training and support to step into their own power.

Equity also means confronting "a history of inequality based on a belief system which has systematically led to intergenerational transfer of privilege, wealth, education, and income for some, and denial of others," says Professor Amit Thorat of Jawaharlal Nehru University. NGO leaders we interviewed agree. They call India's historical caste and tribal-based inequity the "elephant in the room," a complex societal problem that most people are not comfortable talking about.

To date, broad efforts amongst funders to make equity a guiding principle remain nascent in India. Even so, we have profiled a variety of steps that a number of funders and NGOs have taken to put equity at the centre of their work. These efforts fall into three categories: **strengthening individual agency and developing community leaders, ensuring quality education and appropriate occupational training, and incorporating equity in grantmaking and programme design.** In different ways, all three approaches create pathways for greater economic and social mobility for Dalit and Adivasi individuals.

Equity in other forms is a familiar topic for most funders. Over the past two decades, gender equity has emerged as a broadly accepted concern for the social sector. Based on our analysis of publicly available data, roughly three-quarters of the 62 largest philanthropic organisations operating in India have an intentional gender focus in their programmes. Many of the NGO leaders we spoke with noted that this has spurred the right conversations about the intersection of gender, caste, and tribal issues, resulting in positive action. It is time, they say, to elevate Dalit and Adivasi communities' concerns for their social and economic equity.

While a number of funders already have taken steps to do just that, most have yet to begin. To date, funders typically focus their support on programmes that aim for

immediate benefit to recipients. While the programmes may succeed, failure to centre equity in design and implementation risks overlooking the unique needs of marginalised communities.

Our hope is that our report increases awareness and understanding of the role equity plays in advancing upward mobility. As that happens, more members of Dalit and Adivasi communities will find rungs of the mobility ladder coming within reach.

Introduction

While studying household poverty in a remote Andhra Pradesh village, Anirudh Krishna had a chance encounter with a math-obsessed 14-year-old boy who aspired to become an engineer – a goal not shared by his father. “No one from here has ever been an engineer,” protested the father, a subsistence farmer. “No one from here *can* be an engineer,” he said – a dispiriting declaration that inspired Krishna, a Duke University professor, to investigate the occupations of residents of 10 nearby villages over the previous decade. The result: not one had advanced to a professional career.¹

Across India, similar stories of stymied individual ambitions are commonplace. “The ladder leading upwards is broken in many places,” Krishna writes in *The Broken Ladder*. “Very few are able to climb high from a low position.” In fact, social mobility in India is so out of reach for most that it would take seven generations for a member of an impoverished Indian family to achieve average household income, currently Rs 204,200 (approximately \$2,600).^{2,3}

Two historically marginalised groups in India have experienced entrenched inequities with the most persistence: Dalit individuals, whom some still refer to as “untouchables,” are officially recognised as Scheduled Castes; and Adivasi community members, India’s Indigenous population, are officially designated as Scheduled Tribes.⁴ (See “[The Different Histories Shaping Dalit and Adivasi Experiences](#).”) Together these communities constitute one-quarter of India’s 1.3 billion population and are the focus of this report.⁵ Most experience material poverty throughout their lives: in 8 out of 10 Dalit and Adivasi households, the highest-earning member brings home less than Rs 5,000 – roughly \$65 – per month.⁶

There’s no shortage of opportunities for government, business, and civil society to address the breadth of roadblocks faced by Dalit and Adivasi communities. For our part, The Bridgespan Group set out to identify ways for *funders and NGOs* to support Dalit and Adivasi communities in their quest to improve their economic and social well-being. In short, how can philanthropy partner with NGOs in creating effective ladders of mobility?

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- 1 Anirudh Krishna, *The Broken Ladder: The Paradox and Potential of India’s One-Billion* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
 - 2 [The Global Social Mobility Report 2020: Equality, Opportunity and a New Economic Imperative](#) (World Economic Forum, January 2020). Lucas Chancel, et al., [World Inequality Report 2022](#) (World Inequality Lab, 2021).
 - 3 US dollars based on 23 June 2022 Rs to US dollars currency exchange rate.
 - 4 Only Hindu communities can be deemed Scheduled Castes in India, according to the [Constitution \(Scheduled Castes\) Order, 1950](#); see Vishnu Gopinath, “[Who Are the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs and EBCs?](#),” *The Quint*, 12 June 2018; “Adivasi” is a legal and constitutional term that differs from state to state, and therefore excludes some groups who might be considered Indigenous; see “[Adivasis \(Scheduled Tribes\) are the largest tribal population in the world – World Directory of Minorities](#),” Tribal Cultural Heritage in India Foundation, 1 January 2022.
 - 5 In India, two other large groups have historically been marginalised: those officially designated as Other Backward Classes, roughly 500 million, and Muslims, another 200 million. They are not included in the scope of this report.
 - 6 [Delayed and Denied: Injustice in COVID-19 Relief](#) (National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, Dalit Human Rights Defenders Network and Indo-Global Social Service Society, 25 May 2020).

The answer we heard over and over again in interviews with about 40 Dalit and Adivasi leaders, funders, academics, and intermediaries: centre equity to maximise the conditions for social mobility. An equity-centred approach starts by taking the unique histories, aspirations, and needs of Dalit and Adivasi individuals and communities into account when funding, designing, and implementing programmes. And it also means [co-creating solutions with these communities](#), giving them the training and support to step into their own power. We document below some examples of approaches to centring equity which stand in contrast to more traditional technocratic approaches that involve subject-matter experts pushing solutions down to communities. Equity-centred approaches are drawing increasing attention amongst funders, NGOs, and other changemakers.

Social Mobility: Swimming against the Current of Power and Privilege

The concept of social mobility most often takes shape as a simple question: do children grow up to a better standard of living than their parents? This approach emphasises the importance of education, occupation, and income, all of which are essential for upward mobility. But there's another dimension to social mobility that for Dalit and Adivasi communities is equally, if not more, important. Their collective ambition is not just for economic benefit, but also for dignity and agency – the ability to take action, be effective, and influence their own lives. Reaching these goals calls for changes in the societal mindsets and values that perpetuate their marginalisation.

In this report, we consider economic and social status mobility as interlinked and essential for an equitable society. As a result, no matter how talented and determined, most Dalit and Adivasi children face pressure to follow in their parents' footsteps, rather than climb the income *or* social status ladder. The reasons? There are many.

To start, decades of rapid industrialisation and economic growth have benefited the country as a whole while leaving most Dalit and Adivasi communities behind. A rising economic tide has not lifted all boats. "In 2020, India's top 10 percent held close to 45 percent of the country's total national wealth," according to an Oxfam India report.⁷ The report found that the rich prospered even during the depths of the pandemic. The number of Indian billionaires grew from 102 in 2020 to 142 in 2021, while 84 percent of households in the country suffered a decline in their income.

And even when members of the Dalit and Adivasi communities experience rising income, their social status remains unchanged, concludes a World Economic Forum report.⁸ In fact, the nation's development agenda has produced downward mobility for Adivasi communities as their tribal land rights have come into conflict with mining interests and dam construction projects, says Virginius Xaxa, visiting professor at the Institute for Human Development in New Delhi, who chaired the government committee that authored a 2014 report on the socioeconomic, health, and educational status of tribal communities.⁹

7 [Inequality Kills: India Supplement 2022](#) (Oxfam India, January 2022).

8 [Global Social Mobility Report 2020](#), World Economic Forum.

9 [Report of the High-Level Committee on Socioeconomic, Health, and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India](#) (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, May 2014).

Moreover, government actions aimed at rectifying historical wrongs perpetrated by India's caste hierarchy and marginalisation of tribal communities have not worked as well as intended. For example, constitutionally guaranteed reservation programmes set quotas for Dalit and Adivasi candidates for government jobs and admission to higher education. In addition, a number of well-intentioned laws seek to mitigate the harmful effects of endemic discrimination. (See Appendix 1 – [“Upholding the law: Advocate for implementation.”](#))

While many Dalit and Adivasi individuals have benefited from quotas and achieved middle-class standing, the total number remains small for communities that represent a quarter of the nation's population. Government job quotas represent less than one-tenth of one percent of all jobs (formal and informal) in the economy, and quotas in higher education represent less than 5 percent of total enrolment. (See [Figures 1](#) and [2](#).)

Moreover, national laws have had limited effect at a population level, says Dr. Anand Bang, joint director at the Society for Education, Action and Research in Community Health (SEARCH), which provides healthcare to rural and tribal people. Thus, amongst Scheduled Castes, only 3.3 percent of labourers' sons become professionals, while 68.4 percent remain labourers. Similarly, amongst Scheduled Tribes, only 2.5 percent of labourers' sons become professionals, while 67.5 percent remain labourers.¹⁰ By comparison, amongst forward castes, 7.1 percent of labourers' sons become professionals, while 43.1 percent remain labourers.

For their part, funders typically focus on sectoral programmes that address enormous needs in areas such as education, job training, or healthcare, says Professor Amit Thorat of Jawaharlal Nehru University. But programmes alone are not enough, he adds: “You are just treating the symptoms of the problem” rather than taking on its origin. For Thorat, the root cause of India's social challenges lies in systemic discrimination stemming from historical injustices that have conferred economic and social privilege to certain groups at the cost of others. This continued unabated until the dawn of independence, without any restitution or reparations.

Figure 1

Amongst Scheduled Castes, only **3.3%** of labourers' sons become professionals, while **68.4%** remain labourers.



Similarly, amongst Scheduled Tribes, only **2.5%** of labourers' sons become professionals, while

67.5% remain labourers.

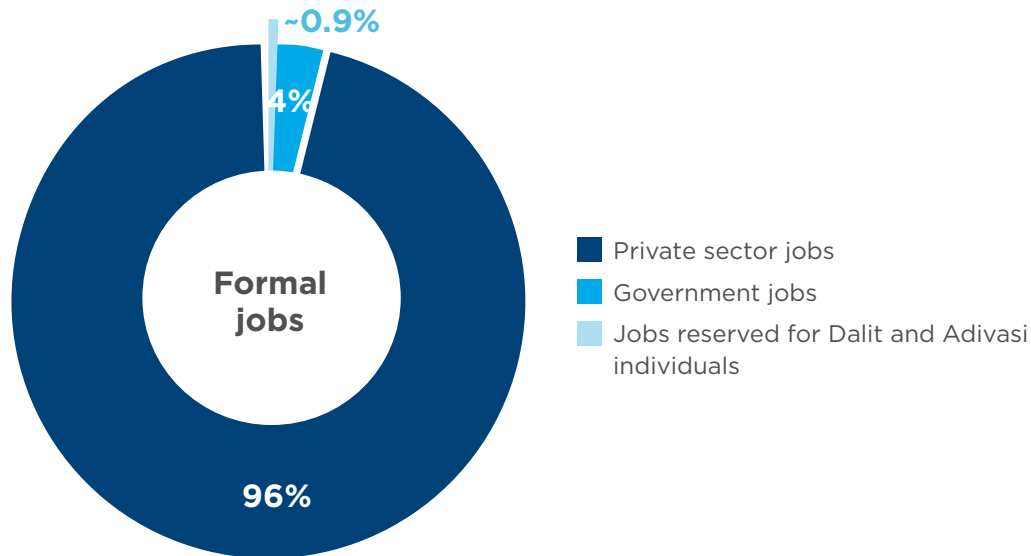


Source: Vegard Iversen et al., [“Rags to riches? Understanding social mobility in India,”](#) *Ideas for India*, 13 November 2017.

¹⁰ Vegard Iversen, Anirudh Krishna, and Kunal Sen, [“Rags to Riches? Understanding Social Mobility in India,”](#) *Ideas for India*, 13 November 2017.

Figure 2: The scope of employment and education quotas

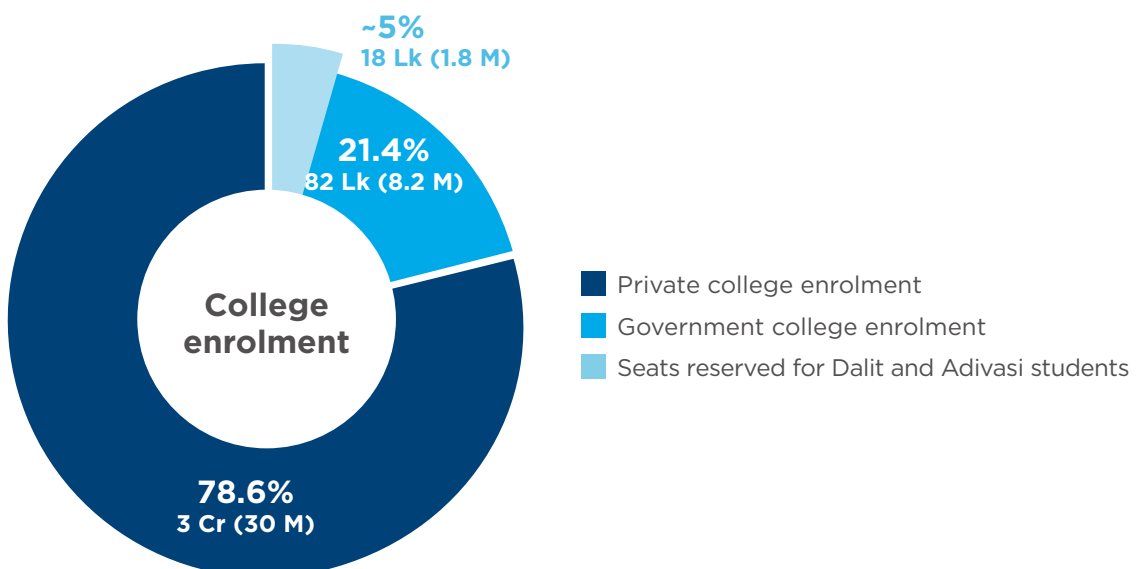
Quotas for Dalit and Adivasi individuals is mandated only in government jobs, which represent only 4% of all formal jobs in India.



Note: Formal sector jobs constitute about 10% of all jobs in the country.

Source: [Formal sector employment data 2017-18, ILO](#), from *Women and Men in The Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture* (International Labour Office, 2018); [Public sector employment rate in 2012](#), Reserve Bank of India. [Reservations in government jobs](#) through direct recruitment is 15% for Scheduled Castes, 7.5% for Scheduled Tribes, from "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on the Policy of Reservation to SCs, STs and OBCs," Government of India: Department of Personnel and Training.

Admission quotas for Dalit and Adivasi individuals are mandated only in government institutes for higher education.



Note: Higher education refers to both undergraduate and graduate programmes. Total seats refers to the total enrolment in all colleges. Number of seats in government colleges is calculated based on the proportion of government colleges to total colleges, assuming equal number of seats per college in India.

Source: The Bridgespan Group. Data from [All India Survey on Higher Education 2019-20](#) (Government of India-Ministry of Education: Department of Higher Education, New Delhi, 2020); [Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQs\) on the Policy of Reservations for SCs, STs, and OBCs](#). (Seats reserved for Scheduled Castes calculated at 22.5%; for Scheduled Tribes at 7.5%.)

“Yes, there has been a history of inequality based on a belief system which has systematically led to intergenerational transfer of privilege, wealth, education, and income for some, and denial of others,” Thorat elaborates. NGO leaders we interviewed agree. They call India’s historical caste and tribal-based inequity the “elephant in the room,” a complex societal problem that most people are not comfortable talking about.

Amongst our interviewees, a consensus emerged that those who benefit from privileged positions in society are the least inclined to question their status and power. In fact, our scan of the social sector failed to find an example of a philanthropically funded effort to engage upper castes in examining the impact of privilege on inequality.

“The sense that I get from the philanthropies in India is that they are very afraid to address caste,” says Beena Pallical, general secretary at National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights. More broadly, she continues, “We’re refusing as a society [to address caste inequity] because it’s also about our own privilege and the positions that we hold. So, the burden of addressing inequality continues to lie on us who are the oppressed.”

Ironically, says Paul Divakar Namala, convenor of Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (GFoD), many privileged individuals “talk with ease about apartheid racism in South Africa, and completely do not talk about casteism in India. We have our own ‘hidden apartheid.’”

“We’re refusing as a society [to address caste inequity] because it’s also about our own privilege and the positions that we hold. So, the burden of addressing inequality continues to lie on us who are the oppressed.”

BEENA PALLICAL, GENERAL SECRETARY,
NATIONAL CAMPAIGN ON DALIT HUMAN RIGHTS

Admittedly, privilege is a fraught topic. For instance, some interviewees suggested that NGOs could pilot school-based projects to sensitise upper-caste students during their formative years to Dalit and Adivasi lived experiences. Any such effort, however, would swim against a powerful current. A 2021 analysis of caste bias in 10 Odisha textbooks “found caste matters were either being erased, removed from context, falsified, or entrenching stereotypes,” the *Times of India* summarised.¹¹ The report pointed out that caste bias in textbooks violates recommendations of the 2005 National Curriculum Framework and “systematically creates an illusion that Indian society is an equitable one.”¹² Conversely, presenting students with explanatory information about caste and tribes challenges that illusion and may change mindsets and behaviours.

Understanding bias, conscious or unconscious, takes concentrated work, learning, and honest reflection. Such work is an ongoing journey that can cause discomfort along the way, but rewards those who pursue it with greater understanding of systemic and structural inequalities. Philanthropy can play an active role in funding efforts to support individuals and groups who choose to begin their own learning journeys.

11 Chandrima Banerjee, “[In Caste Bias, School Texts Don’t Represent SCs: Study](#),” *The Times of India*, 5 August 2021.

12 Subhadarshree Nayak and Aardra Surendran, “[Caste Biases in School Textbooks: A Case Study from Odisha, India](#),” *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 20 July 2021.

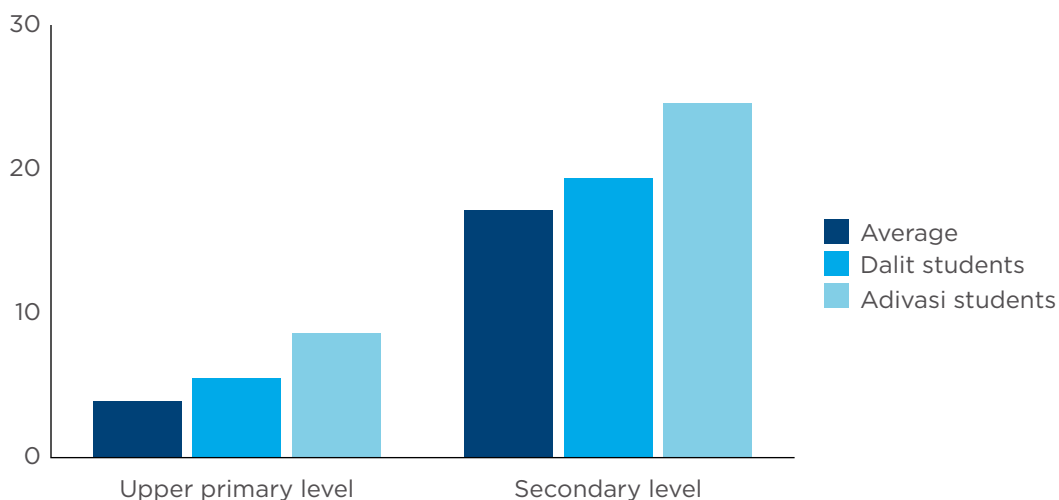
The Different Histories Shaping Dalit and Adivasi Experiences

At first glance, the day-to-day social and economic struggles of members of the Dalit and Adivasi communities look much the same. Most experience material poverty profoundly. The [Socio-Economic Caste Census of 2011](#), the only such official study, revealed that 84 percent of Scheduled Caste and 87 percent of Scheduled Tribe households' highest-earning members bring home less than Rs 5,000 – roughly \$65 – a month.¹³

Few Dalit and Adivasi students complete their public schooling with the knowledge and skills that would prepare them for jobs that pay more than poverty-level wages. In fact, Dalit and Adivasi youth have the nation's highest student dropout rates. (See [Figure 3](#).) In 2019-20, nearly a quarter of Adivasi students and a fifth of Dalit students dropped out of secondary school classes IX and X, nearly three times the rates of “general” category students.¹⁴ Critics cite poor-quality education for driving students away. Moreover, most young people end up working in low-paying, informal-sector jobs, such as street vending, construction and domestic work, and agricultural labour.

Figure 3: Dalit and Adivasi students drop out of school at higher rates than average

Average dropout rate in school education, 2014-15 (%)



Source: The Bridgespan Group. Data from [Educational Statistics: At a Glance](#) (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Department of School Education & Literacy, Statistics Division, New Delhi, 2018). See Table-16.

Yet, for all their statistical similarities, Dalit and Adivasi communities suffer oppression and marginalisation in different ways and for different reasons.

¹³ *Delayed and Denied: Injustice in COVID-19 Relief* (National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, 25 May 2020).

¹⁴ Rema Nagarajan, “[1/4th of tribals, 1/5th of Dalits quit Class IX & X in 2019-2020](#),” The Time of India, 6 July 2021.

Some 200 million members of Dalit communities share a common history of discrimination rooted in the Hindu caste system. Within that system, Dalit individuals are outsiders, still considered by some as “untouchables,” relegated to occupations considered unclean or polluting, such as scavenging, cremation, and skinning dead animals. The term Dalit literally means oppressed, broken, or crushed. Many prefer the term over the official government designation of Scheduled Castes. The Indian constitution abolished untouchability in 1950, when India became a republic. Yet, seven decades later, it remains embedded in India’s zeitgeist.

However, not all Dalit community members live at the social and economic margins of society. The government recognises more than 1,100 castes¹⁵ typically identified by occupation, such as manual scavengers, agricultural labourers, stone workers, barbers, and street vendors. Within these diverse subgroups, a relatively small number have managed to attain middle-class lifestyles, many of whom benefitted from quotas for higher education and government jobs. Given the limited number of available government jobs, however, Dalit advocacy groups increasingly promote entrepreneurship.

By contrast, members of Adivasi communities are not as closely bound by a common experience. Rather, tribal communities in India represent an enormous diversity of groups. For centuries, these groups have lived in India’s forested regions and based their livelihoods on the land and the natural environment. The 2011 census, the most recent, identified 705 tribes numbering 104 million people, with large communities in northeastern states. Along with diversity in tribal identity comes a plethora of languages. For example, Odisha alone is home to 62 tribes that speak 21 languages and 74 dialects.¹⁶

The Indian constitution and various laws describe Adivasi community members collectively as “backward” and “primitive,” a holdover from the colonial era. While the government has implemented various laws to protect individual and community land rights, those rights often come into conflict with the government and business interests to promote economic development projects, such as mining or dam construction.

Dalit and Adivasi communities aspire to assert their identities and gain control over their lives, but in different ways. In general, Dalit communities’ struggle for identity places greater emphasis on building a sense of agency – the ability to act and have influence over one’s life – to counteract centuries of oppression. For Adivasi communities, “the fight for identity can be seen as the struggle for autonomy and self-rule” over ancestral lands and village governance, says Ramesh Sharma, general secretary of Ekta Parishad, a people’s movement for land rights. Within both groups, priorities vary from state to state and even within states, says Virginus Xaxa, tribal expert and visiting professor at the Institute for Human Development in Delhi. “Even if one is focusing on one state, one probably has to look at the regional context, its historical context,” to identify local issues and assist tribal communities to build the capacity to solve their own problems, he explains.

15 The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950.

16 “[Odisha Publishes 21 Bilingual Tribal Dictionaries to Preserve and Promote Languages](#),” *Scroll.in*, 25 November 2018.

How Equity Broadens the Conversation about Social Mobility

In the broadest sense, funders aim to improve the lives of the populations they serve. In India, philanthropically funded programmes typically target glaring deficiencies in areas such as education, healthcare, and sanitation, where problems run deep and so any progress looks like success.

As programmes mature, however, some funders have stepped back and acknowledged the need for a more focused approach towards marginalised groups. “I don’t think we have, in every strategy, a very specific, intentional analysis of who is most disadvantaged and what kinds of differential policies or programmatic interventions are required to address those drivers of disadvantage,” says Suneeta Krishnan, deputy director for strategy, planning, management, and evaluation at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation office in Delhi.

Bridgespan has seen through its research that, when funders fail to centre equity in programme design and implementation, they risk failing to address the needs of the most marginalised populations even as they fulfil stated goals. Likewise, failure to consider the unique needs of every Dalit and Adivasi community, which differ greatly from location to location, can put the apparent “success” of a programme in question.¹⁷

As a case in point, The Rockefeller Foundation backed a project to bring electricity to rural Indian villages. The foundation realised afterwards that the poles and wiring ended up serving the relatively well-off, leaving Dalit community members living in segregated quarters on village outskirts without access to power. This led to a pivot and redesign to serve all. Failure to consider equity in programme design – in this case, electricity for Dalit families – meant that the community members were further marginalised and it was a lost opportunity, says Deepali Khanna, vice president, Asia, at The Rockefeller Foundation.

An equity-centred approach also acknowledges that the lived experiences and specific needs of Dalit and Adivasi communities differ by state and within states. Hence the importance of recognising the capacity of individuals and groups to identify their own solutions. This view logically leads to working with NGOs whose leaders are closest to the problems that funders seek to address. Initiatives led by people from the communities they serve are more likely to be successful and sustainable.

To date, broad efforts amongst funders to make equity a guiding principle remain nascent in India. Even so, we have identified a number of funders and NGOs whose examples show the variety of steps that can lead both groups to put equity at the centre of their work.

“An equity-centred approach also acknowledges that the lived experiences and specific needs of Dalit and Adivasi communities differ by state and within states. Hence the importance of recognising the capacity of individuals and groups to identify their own solutions.”

17 Cheryl Dorsey, Jeff Bradach, and Peter Kim, *Racial Equity and Philanthropy: Disparities in Funding for Leaders of Color Leave Impact on the Table* (The Bridgespan Group, May 2020).

The approaches share a commitment to equity by centring Dalit and Adivasi communities. They fall into three categories: **strengthening individual agency and developing community leaders, ensuring quality education and appropriate occupational training, and incorporating equity in grantmaking and programme design.** In different ways, all three approaches create pathways for greater economic and social mobility for Dalit and Adivasi individuals and communities. What follows are a few examples of organisations and programmes that model the kind of equity-centred approaches funders would do well to seek. (See Appendix 2 – “[Barriers to social mobility: Root causes shape individual experiences.](#)”)

Strengthen Dalit and Adivasi agency and develop community leaders

“Everybody made me understand that I was the worst caste. I can’t do this, I can’t do that. I felt I was trash. I had no value.”

MUMTAZ SHAIKH

The quote above describes one woman’s crushing experience growing up in a rural community before migrating to Mumbai in hopes of a better life. The hostility and degradation she experienced reflect the reality of daily life for millions of members of Dalit communities.

“You are always given the sense that you are lesser human beings, that you are not equal, that you are not entitled to be anyone,” says Sujata Khandekar, founding director of the Committee of Resource Organizations, known as CORO, an NGO that empowers leaders in marginalised communities. Divakar of GFoD agrees: “The agency of Dalits and Adivasis has been systematically and institutionally negated.”

“The agency of Dalits and Adivasis has been systematically and institutionally negated.”

PAUL DIVAKAR NAMALA, CONVENOR, GLOBAL FORUM OF COMMUNITIES DISCRIMINATED ON WORK AND DESCENT (GFOD)

Agency directly counters marginalisation. It nourishes the self-confidence needed to push back against barriers and see themselves as changemakers. “When identity gets triggered, and people feel worthy, they believe they can effect change,” CORO’s Khandekar explained in a 2018 interview with *IDR*.¹⁸ Consider Mumtaz Shaikh, the woman who felt like “trash” when she arrived in Mumbai two decades ago seeking help to deal with a violent husband. Shaikh joined CORO’s team and, over time, navigated an internal transformation as she took on increasingly demanding roles.¹⁹ “Now, I’m not afraid of my caste,” she told Khandekar. The *BBC* named Mumtaz one of the world’s most inspirational women in 2015 for her work. Today, Mumtaz leads CORO’s Women’s Empowerment programme.

18 Rachita Vora and Smarinita Shetty, “[IDR Interviews Sujata Khandekar](#),” 12 July 2018.

19 The *BBC* reports that 75 percent of India’s Muslims are descended from “untouchable” Hindus who converted to Islam to escape Hindu upper-caste oppression. However, these converts did not escape caste and untouchability, and today are called Dalit Muslims. Soutik Biswas, “[Why Are Many Indian Muslims Seen as Untouchable?](#)” *BBC News*, 10 May 2016.

A modest number of Dalit entrepreneurs have found success starting businesses, one form of agency. “I am very proud to apprise you that amongst our members, there are 20 SC-ST [Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe] entrepreneurs whose enterprise turnover is more than Rs 500 crores and who are our members,” says Ravi Kumar Narra, national president of the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICC). “Further, there are around 150 entrepreneurs whose turnover is more than Rs 100 crores. We are striving to create more success stories for the one-fourth of the Indian population belonging to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities. You must understand that if such a large number of people in a nation remain incapacitated, then the nation is bound to remain paralysed.”

For Adivasi communities, the struggle for agency also manifests a push for autonomy. While education and jobs are primary levers to enable more social mobility, self-rule over their constitutionally guaranteed land and natural resources are levers of equal, if not greater, importance, says Ramesh Sharma, general secretary of Ekta Parishad, a people’s movement for land rights. “Nearly 100 million people are directly dependent on natural resources for getting their livelihood, and for them, their livelihood is their culture, their identity, their dignity – their everything,” he explains.

To date, the government’s efforts to support tribal self-rule have not resulted in adequate action and outcomes. Parliament in 1996 enacted the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, or PESA, to ensure self-governance through *gram sabhas* (village assemblies) for communities in 10 states with substantial tribal (Fifth Schedule) areas. As of late 2021, 25 years since its passage, four states still had not enacted rules to implement PESA, an exercise in decentralising power from governmental structures back to the village residents. In states that have enacted rules, low participation and widespread confusion about the power of *gram sabhas* have limited their effectiveness.²⁰

The organisations and programmes we cite below draw attention to a sample of undertakings that address identity, community leadership, and mindset change. While the programmes differ in specifics, they share a common approach. They focus on hard-to-measure “soft” factors, such as self-esteem, that create the enabling conditions for change.

Developing leaders and role models at the community level

CORO – which has predominantly Dalit and Muslim leaders – builds leadership from within marginalised communities through a fellowship programme that strengthens individual identity and supports participants to act as agents of change.²¹ Participants choose between 12-month and 18-month programmes that each provide training on several modules, such as understanding of self and community, communication, and facilitation. Throughout, they continue to work with their organisations and communities, creating a “learning lab” during the programme. Participants receive a stipend from CORO as they work to identify local needs and mobilise support for change.

Since 2008, CORO’s fellowship programme has trained 1,300 grassroots leaders, who have reached an estimated 2.5 million people. In rural areas, fellows work with two to three villages. In urban areas, they work with up to 500 households. All the initiatives they support are community-driven.

20 Suvojit Chattopadhyay, “[Democracy Depends on Vibrant ‘Gram Sabhas’](#),” *Live Mint*, 1 May 2018.

21 Pritha Venkatachalam and Niloufer Memon, [Community Engagement to Tackle COVID-19 in the Slums of Mumbai](#) (The Bridgespan Group, 29 July 2020).



Leaders in CORO India's Grassroots Leadership Development Programme participate in training on people-centric advocacy. (Photo: CORO)

More than two-thirds of fellows are women, 41 percent have minimal or no formal schooling, and most are from marginalised castes and religious minorities. Fellows also often become mentors to aspiring leaders; many become leaders in community service organisations. For a small organisation, CORO's fellowship programme has demonstrated the ability to have a significant multiplier effect, so much so that it has decided to expand the programme.

Strengthening Adivasi identity by celebrating their culture and accomplishment

[Samvaad](#), initiated in 2014 by the Tata Steel Foundation, is a platform for tribal communities across the world to come together with their collective wisdom to stimulate a valuable cross-pollination of ideas and co-create solutions to their development challenges. "It brings together tribal communities in commiseration and celebration of their identity, shared experiences, and culture," says Sourav Roy, chief of corporate social responsibility at Tata Steel.

Throughout the year, Samvaad hosts regional tribal meetings to discuss issues and formulate solutions, culminating each November in a multiday global conference of tribal groups. In 2020, the conference attracted over 3,000 people from 114 tribes across 23 states, 5 union territories, and 17 countries for a virtual gathering. The convening drew tribal artists, scholars, thinkers, development practitioners, and other experts. Throughout the year, Samvaad celebrates the rich culture and creativity of tribal communities by promoting tribal handicraft, cuisine, music, and films.

Samvaad has also established a Tribal Leadership Programme that provides fellowships to bring youth from tribal communities together for a residential leadership training experience. The programme strives to provide participants with the confidence, knowledge, and network support to speak on behalf of people from the tribes of the world as they confront development challenges that erode their cultural heritage and development outcomes.

Platforms like Samvaad strengthen the core identity of tribal and other marginalised communities and help them build the internal leadership capacity to champion their own needs.

Strengthening collective voice and agency for rights and entitlements

[Ekta Parishad](#) is a people's movement for land rights supported by some 250,000 landless poor across 15,000 villages. It serves as an umbrella organisation that unites and mobilises activists, community leaders, and more than 2,000 organisations to campaign for equality by providing poor and landless villagers (most of whom are members of the Dalit or Adivasi communities) with access to land and resources they are entitled to by law.

Since its inception as a Gandhian organisation in 1989, Ekta Parishad has promoted nonviolence as a route to change. It mobilises and collectivises people along several pillars that are core to its approach: *sangharsh* (struggle), *rachna* (constructive engagement), *shramdan* (contribution to constructive work), and *samvad* (dialogue).

For example, in 2007, Ekta Parishad mobilised organisations in its network to mount a peaceful 350-kilometre march of 25,000 landless poor people from Gwalior to Delhi in support of the proposed Forest Rights Act. The march played a key role in securing approval of the act, which ensures land tenure, livelihood, and food security for Adivasi and other communities in forested regions.

Umbrella organisations like Ekta Parishad help to build awareness and broad support for equity-based change. The small, grassroots NGOs that partner with Ekta Parishad listen to the voices of the people they serve to steer their work, but they struggle to find their financial footing. This is fertile ground for equity-minded funders to develop new relationships with organisations normally outside their scope of funding.



A long foot march (called Jan Satyagraha 2012) of 50,000 landless poor to demand enactment of the National Land Reforms Policy and Land Guarantee Act. (Photo: Ekta Parishad)

Support quality education and appropriate occupational training

“Often when I would be on the way to school, members of the [upper-caste] Thakur community would humiliate me, stop me, and ask me to work in their fields. I couldn’t even refuse lest they beat me up.”

SHOBH NATH, A HEALTH AND EDUCATION ACTIVIST²²

Dalit and Adivasi children face systemic barriers and social stigma every step of the way through their educational, job training, and hiring experiences. Obstacles to educational achievement come from many directions, including at home. Most Dalit and Adivasi children today are the first or second generation of their families to attend school, so their parents may provide less support for studies at home than parents with multigenerational school experiences. Moreover, some children do not attend school in order to support their families.

The landmark Right to Education Act (RTE) passed in 2009 made education free and compulsory for children between the ages 6 and 14. But vastly different school environments lead to educational experiences that undercut the act’s ambition to provide equitable education for all. Over and over again, our interviewees noted the absence of quality education as a major barrier to Dalit and Adivasi social mobility, a source of frustration to many parents who view education as the path to a better life.

“Educational aspiration is very, very high,” says Apoorva Oza, chief executive officer at Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India). “People are willing to do a lot for their kids’ education.” He cites the example of Bihar, where people are “sold on education because Bihar has fewer opportunities, low urbanisation and industrialisation, and agriculture periodically impacted by floods. Hence education remains the main passport for upward economic and social mobility.”

In school, teachers and administrators often blatantly discriminate against Dalit children and expose them and their families to cruelly disparaging remarks. Adivasi children often find themselves in classrooms where teachers and textbooks don’t use their native language or reference their cultural heritage. Given their rural, often remote village locations, Adivasi communities cope with “the worst education infrastructure in the country,” says Oza.

For example, the Internet and mobile phones, essential for at-home learning during the COVID lockdown, are either not available or beyond the financial reach of many Adivasi households. Only 4 percent of rural Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe students were able to study online on a regular basis during the pandemic, found the Oxfam India report. Forty-three percent of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe students were not able to study at all.²³

Vocational skills training also falls short. Most training programmes take place in urban settings. Critics point out that much of that training concentrates on low-wage, informal-sector jobs that reflect existing caste status – thus reinforcing inequity. When urban

22 Asmita Nandy, “[Documentary ‘Apna Time Aayega’: When Dalits Fight for Dignity](#),” *The Quint*, 19 Nov 2021.

23 *Inequality Kills*, Oxfam India.

skilling agencies try to transplant their models to rural areas, they typically fail because of a mismatch between instruction and local needs, says Oza. For example, while training for retail and other service jobs fits the urban environment, rural areas would benefit from programmes that relate to local job opportunities and promote entrepreneurship as a livelihood pursuit. NGOs that create bespoke rural job training programmes have more success linking vocational programmes with local needs.

Dalit and Adivasi entrepreneurs have found opportunities in traditional craft or agricultural products collectives, opening a small repair shop, or running a *dhaba* selling street food, as well as tech-savvy niches in data processing and communications. Such new ventures create additional local jobs. But would-be entrepreneurs need mentors to help them navigate the social and financial challenges to running a small business. “Children from vulnerable or underprivileged segments often have little to no financial literacy, practical knowledge, or experience of how to stand on their own feet financially, even if they have the skills to do something economically useful,” says Shalabh Srivastava, country director of RTI International India.

The evident shortcomings in education and livelihood training pose societal challenges that funders alone cannot fix. But they can advance understanding of what works by supporting model programmes that put equity at the centre of their efforts.

Delivering contextual and quality education for marginalised communities

[Shiksharth](#) aims to improve the quality of education for rural and tribal children living in one of the most impoverished and violent regions of India. Established in 2015, Shiksharth is based in the Sukma district in Chhattisgarh, an area prone to violence in the struggle with the Naxalite-Maoist insurgency.

The organisation’s pedagogical approach develops contextually relevant personalised learning opportunities for children, building on the culture and skills of tribal communities and students. Shiksharth is now working on an ecology curriculum which integrates 21st-century skills with local knowledge of biodiversity. The curriculum also aims to teach about combating climate change. Inspired by Gandhian thought, the organisation engages parents and community in designing and implementing high-quality educational experiences.

Shiksharth also recognises the need to address the social and emotional well-being of students growing up in conflict zones. When teachers asked grade four students to draw an object of their choosing from everyday life, “out of 53 students, 47 drew a combat scene,” says Ashish S. Shrivastava, Shiksharth’s founder. Hence, the focus on creating safe spaces and positive childhood experiences for children to learn and thrive emotionally.



A group of young students from a region affected by the Naxalite-Maoist insurgency participate in an out-of-school programme where they engage in creative peer learning. (Photo: Shiksharth)

After more than six years of experimentation and learning, Shiksharth is in the process of distilling its insights into a standard, replicable template for serving similar geographies in adversity and conflict.

Promoting job training that matches aspirations

[Aga Khan Rural Support Programme \(India\) \(AKRSP-I\)](#) provides skill development and entrepreneurship programmes to members of Dalit and Adivasi communities (and those from other historically marginalised groups) in rural locations across three states – Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar. These programmes are part of an overall goal to develop self-reliant communities and institutions.

Young people in rural areas have rising aspirations, stoked by increasing access to the Internet, smart phones, and television. Their changing aspirations, the limited scope of traditional livelihood programmes, and challenges such as climate change led AKRSP-I “to diversify its livelihood programme and incorporate a new kind of programme built around skills and entrepreneurship,” says Vivek Singh, senior manager of youth development.

Today, AKRSP-I’s youth skills and entrepreneurship development programme offers a portfolio of options, called Yuva Junction, that try to harness those aspirations. “If they want to go for a job, we have programmes,” says Singh. “If they want to start their own enterprises, we have programmes. If they want to do some small things in their land, we have a programme.”

Yuva Junction takes a holistic approach. In addition to specific skill training, such as basic IT literacy, it provides English-language instruction plus life skills and career modules – essential for the success of young people from marginalised communities. Over the past 10 years, Yuva Junction has trained more than 25,000 young people and partnered with



Trainees of Yuva Junction Centre in the tribal dominated district of Narmada, Gujarat secure work at a restaurant chain in the city of Surat. (Photo: AKRSP-I, Ahmedabad)

several employers to provide post-training job placement. The nature of the work requires starting small and building on success.

“The first year of a skill-training programme, we may do 70-80 kids, but if those do well, they get jobs that create a multiplier effect,” says AKRSP-I’s Oza. “They send remittances back home to their parents, and soon every parent in that village wants to send kids to this class. It just takes that one employment cycle and then the remittance cycle to be completed for the word to spread.”

Yuva Junction also provides support to ease the transition of Dalit and Adivasi young people to cities and corporate job settings, an issue of particular importance for the safety of young women. Graduates get low-cost, safe housing for the first 100 days upon arrival in a city, giving them time to adjust to the urban environment and secure long-term housing. Without transitional assistance, many young people give up and return to their villages, says Oza. With it, however, “retention levels have increased dramatically,” he adds. But funding remains a challenge. Oza has appealed to a number of CEOs for support, but none pitched in despite the fact that they “wholeheartedly agree with me,” Oza says, about the need for such assistance.

Promoting entrepreneurship amongst Dalit and Adivasi communities

The Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICCII) is the voice of Scheduled Castes’ and Scheduled Tribes’ entrepreneurial aspirations. It proactively promotes entrepreneurship amongst the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities as a solution to the relatively small and falling number of jobs set aside for them in the government sector. While wide-ranging economic liberalisation and globalisation in the early nineties created a surge of jobs in white-collar, manufacturing, and professional services occupations, the surge has played out and tipped into decline, says Ravi Kumar Narra, DICCII’s national president.

In addition, India’s Union Government and individual states in recent years have increasingly opted for contractual employees rather than permanent workers. “Today, even for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe students with university degrees, once they graduate, there are no jobs available,” says Narra. As a result, he says, “We feel that entrepreneurship is the only way for them to take charge of their future” – a view the organisation succinctly expresses as “fight caste with capital.”

Narra affirms that entrepreneurship is a tough sell. Parents discourage it, partly because they have no family background or friends in business, and partly because it tends to break the caste mould, which is something they’re hesitant to do. Aspiring entrepreneurs typically lack the social capital – a supportive and propitious network that provides advice, role models, and access to capital – that encourages them to walk the path of entrepreneurial success. Those who step forward and participate in DICCII’s Entrepreneurship Development Programme can access extensive mentoring, Narra explains.

As part of its efforts to create a favourable Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe entrepreneurship ecosystem in the country, DICCII has entered into agreements with multiple nationalised banks to ensure ease of credit access for entrepreneurs. By building successful entrepreneurs, DICCII has evolved as a catalyst for the change in societal perception towards these communities, which is revered Dalit civil rights advocate B.R. Ambedkar’s vision of economic empowerment for the liberation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Promote equity in grantmaking and programme design

“If I think about social mobility or change that is sustainable in slums, I need data on caste and religion. But for a funder, such data is untouchable.”

ARUN KUMAR, FORMER CEO, APNALAYA

Funders care deeply about improving the quality of life for India's vast number of urban and rural poor. But as Arun Kumar suggests, grantmaking often happens without the benefit of data-driven insights about those being served. Grants typically concentrate on project delivery and short-term results, while not supporting and harnessing the innate assets of the community to create lasting social change for itself.

“There is no dearth of good intentions, it's just the manner of funding that doesn't result in very sustainable outcomes,” says Paromita Chowdhury, programme officer with the Oak Foundation. “There is a growing realisation that we need to engage stakeholders, including community-led organisations and residents, in a manner which is deeper in order to create ownership and sustainability.” Unfortunately, Chowdhury continues, “the group of [funder] organisations in India that hold these skills and experience is a minority at this time.”

“There is growing realisation that we need to engage stakeholders, including community-led organisations and residents, in a manner which is deeper in order to create ownership and sustainability.”

PAROMITA CHOWDHURY, PROGRAMME OFFICER,
OAK FOUNDATION

Professor Virginius Xaxa, a leading authority on India's tribal communities, sees an opportunity for funders to help grassroots NGOs with Adivasi leaders access funders and support networks, and build organisational capacity, such as assistance with grant writing, leadership training, and accounting skills. Funders also could be more inclusive by permitting Dalit- and Adivasi-led NGOs to submit grant proposals in local languages. “As of now, I find that their access to funders is extremely negligible,” says Xaxa.

Good intentions also leave a sizable gap in resources flowing to NGOs led by members of Dalit, Bahujan,²⁴ and Adivasi (DBA) communities, and those based in rural areas. Amongst 60 NGOs self-identifying as DBA-led in a 2021 Bridgespan report, 70 percent reported no budget surpluses over the previous three years, compared to 45 percent for non-DBA-led NGOs. And more DBA-led NGOs reported fewer than three months of reserves than those with non-DBA led leaders.²⁵

Moreover, few funders track whether NGO leadership reflects the communities they support. Only four funders out of 77 responding to a 2022 Bridgespan survey could say whether

24 Bahujans comprise Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and religious minorities; see Wikipedia, “[Bahujan Samaj Party](#).”

25 Pritha Venkatachalam, Donald Yeh, Shashank Rastogi, Anushka Siddiqui, Umang Manchanda, Kanika Gupta, and Roger Thompson, [Building Strong, Resilient NGOs in India: Time for New Funding Practices](#) (The Bridgespan Group, 17 March 2021).

their grantee leaders come from DBA communities.²⁶ As we found while conducting these surveys, there's a dearth of research and data analysis on marginalised groups that leaves funders without a solid knowledge base to inform their grantmaking practices.

Funders that move towards centring their work on equity also acknowledge the need to hire a more diverse team and engage all staff in examining how internal and external policies and practices can better support equity-centred grantmaking. "We have very well-articulated documents around equity and inclusiveness, but struggle when it comes to practice," says Chowdhury of the Oak Foundation. Striving to improve, the foundation wrestled with questions like: Do we have a diverse team in place? Do we have HR procedures that allow a multicultural environment, and is that environment respectful for everybody? "Once you have a diverse team, it really changes the lens with which you see a programme," Chowdhury adds.

Focusing on equity feeds a community-driven approach to programme design

[Ekjut](#), which means "togetherness," works with Adivasi and other marginalised communities on issues related to maternal and newborn health and nutrition. Ekjut has pioneered a unique process of community engagement called Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) through structured monthly women's group meetings, conducted by a local female facilitator to improve the health and nutritional outcomes of mothers, newborns, and young children. This process involves mobilising the community to identify and prioritise their problems, democratically find and implement solutions, and then evaluate their progress.

The focus of PLA is to develop critical abilities of problem solving amongst marginalised communities to enable them to identify and solve issues on their own and seek services they need. PLA uses nondiscriminatory and inclusive approaches. Everyone in the community participates, while those who are most in need remain the focus. The facilitators are trained local women, frontline health workers, or adolescent peer facilitators. Meetings are conducted in the local dialect, respecting visual and cognitive abilities, and the venue and timing of the meetings are decided by the participants.

Ekjut's participatory process has resulted in safer home birth practices that have reduced newborn mortality by 45 percent amongst women in Jharkhand and Orissa in the last two years of a three-year intervention. The organisation gained international attention by publishing its findings in [The Lancet](#) medical journal, and Ekjut received recognition as a Public Health Champion by the World Health Organisation. Ekjut subsequently partnered with the Jharkhand government to scale the enhanced safety measures across the entire state. Several other states now have followed Jharkhand's example.

Participatory approaches such as Ekjut's can take time to produce results. "We are upfront with our funders that we can't create short-term results or outputs," says co-founder Dr. Nirmala Nair. Ekjut allays funder anxiety and impatience with robust data collection and analysis, reporting both negative and positive results. Collaborations and partnerships, including one with University College London, have played a role in promoting strong measurement and evaluation practices.

26 Pritha Venkatachalam, Donald Yeh, Shashank Rastogi, Anushka Siddiqui, Kanika Gupta, Lahari Shekar, and Roger Thompson, [Bridging the Gap on Funding the True Costs of NGOs in India](#) (The Bridgespan Group, 22 June 2022).

Seeking community participation and ownership²⁷

When [Anamaya](#), a tribal health collaborative, launched on 7 April 2021 (World Health Day), it boldly declared its goal to “end preventable deaths for tribal and other marginalised people in India.” Tribal populations across the country score consistently lower on health and nutrition indicators and wider determinants of health. With equity as a guiding principle, Anamaya plans to engage tribal communities in identifying their health needs and to partner with community members to take ownership of implementing solutions.

The collaborative has adopted a holistic approach that goes beyond primary and preventive care. It also seeks to strengthen tribal healthcare by addressing issues such as inadequate engagement with communities, lack of transport, inadequate health facilities, and scarce resources. Anamaya identifies health needs specific to tribal communities where it works rather than assume all tribal communities have the same needs.

As a multi-stakeholder collaborative, Anamaya brings together government, funders, NGOs, and community-based organisations. Its core partners, including the Piramal Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, have committed long-term funding as well as their expertise and support in designing, implementing, and governing the collaborative.²⁸ Anamaya shows that multiple organisations working collaboratively can centre equity together.

Filling the data and research gap

A consensus emerged amongst our interviewees that lack of data is a major barrier to developing and evaluating programmes and policies that serve the Dalit and Adivasi communities. For instance, when millions of migrant city dwellers returned to their rural villages during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown, the government could only estimate who and how many were affected. “When the migration was happening, none of them [central or state governments] knew how many people were involved, which trades they were engaged in, where they came from, and where they went,” says Bharti Dewan, who leads the urban poor initiatives for the Azim Premji Foundation.

For Adivasi communities, in particular, there’s a general lack of good data and evaluation studies, says Naresh C. Saxena, a former member of the Planning Commission of India. “You find that the Ministry of Tribal Affairs or the Department of Tribal Development have never been able to monitor or evaluate programmes,” Saxena adds. He sees an opportunity for funders to help fill the research gap. “I think civil society can play a role, but I do not know why ... [funders] are not coming up with good studies.”

To date, much of the social mobility research in India has been conducted by academics whose work is not explicitly designed for formulating policies or programmes. Divya Vaid, an assistant professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University and author of *Uneven Odds: Social Mobility in Contemporary India*, notes that the UK has a Social Mobility Commission tasked with conducting research that may influence policy. Absent a similar commission in India, she suggests that funders may want to invest in bringing academics and social-sector players together to explore ways to fill some of the existing research gaps that hamper funding agencies and NGOs alike.

27 Also see “[Lifting Rural Farmers Out of Poverty: Lakhpatti Kisan](#),” The Bridgespan Group, 17 September 2018.

28 Dr. Shailendra Kumar B. Hegde and Pritha Venkatachalam, “[A Collaborative Effort to Solve India’s Tribal Health Conundrum](#),” The Bridgespan Group, 16 April 2021.

Steps funders and NGOs can take to put equity at the centre of their work

Strengthening agency and developing community leaders

- Develop leaders and role models at the community level.
- Strengthen identity of individuals from marginalised communities by celebrating their culture and accomplishments.
- Strengthen collective voice and agency for rights and entitlements.

Supporting quality education and appropriate occupational training

- Deliver contextual and quality education for marginalised communities.
- Promote job training that matches aspirations.
- Promote entrepreneurship amongst Dalit and Adivasi communities.

Promoting equity in grantmaking and programme design

- Have a community-driven approach to programme design.
- Seek community participation and ownership.
- Ensure representation of Dalit and Adivasi communities within the organisation.
- Fill the data and research gap.
- Change mindsets and behaviours of privileged communities.

The Ladder for Upward Mobility Is within Reach

Despite constitutional guarantees, well-intentioned government policies, and dedicated efforts by funders and NGOs, lack of social mobility persists. Abundant evidence shows that members of Dalit and Adivasi communities – a quarter of India’s population – remain at the bottom of a “broken ladder” for upward economic and social mobility. For them, the status quo isn’t working.

While the Indian government has a major role to play in shaping policies and practices that benefit Dalit and Adivasi communities, this report focuses on the role of philanthropy. As we heard from multiple NGO interviewees, that role has the potential to more directly address caste and tribal inequalities by adopting an equity-centred approach to programme design and implementation. Centring on equity directs attention to the specific needs, dignity, and active agency of the most marginalised groups. For funders, an explicit commitment to equity has implications for staffing as well as grantmaking policies and practices.

Equity in other forms is a familiar topic for most funders. Over the past two decades, gender equity has emerged as a broadly accepted concern for the social sector. Based on our analysis of publicly available data, roughly three-quarters of the largest 62 philanthropic organisations operating in India (including global, domestic, and corporate social responsibility foundations) have an intentional gender focus in their programmes. Many of the NGO leaders we spoke with noted that this has spurred the right conversations. It is time, they say, to elevate equity for the DBA community.

While a number of funders already have taken steps to do just that, their efforts remain nascent. Most have yet to begin. To date, few funders have made social mobility an explicit goal. Nor is equity for Dalit and Adivasi communities a widely adopted guiding principle. Our hope is that this report increases awareness and understanding of the role equity plays in advancing upward mobility. As that happens, more members of Dalit and Adivasi communities will find rungs of the mobility ladder coming within reach.



Riti Mohapatra and **Soumitra Pandey** are partners, **Rishabh Tomar** is a manager, **Chanda Jain** is a consultant, and **Jigyasa Khattar** is a senior associate consultant in The Bridgespan Group’s Mumbai office. **Roger Thompson** is an editorial director in Bridgespan’s Boston office.

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Appendices

APPENDIX 1

Upholding the law: Advocate for implementation

The Indian government over the years has enacted measures to address the historical injustices experienced by Dalit and Adivasi communities. Our interviewees praised the intent behind provisions in the Constitution and various laws, but also pointed out that they have not had their intended effect. Arun Kumar, former CEO of Apnalaya, an advocacy organization for the urban poor, summed up the consensus: “Policies exist, but they’re not getting implemented, so let’s advocate for implementation.”

Underscoring that lapse, people who should benefit from government schemes often don’t even know they exist, says Bharti Dewan, who leads the urban poor initiatives of the Azim Premji Foundation, “and when they do, they are not able to access them.” Such is the case, for example, with PESA, the act which promotes self-governance (see below). Misperceptions about the power of *gram sabhas* (village assemblies) have undercut their ability to function as vibrant self-governance bodies.²⁹

Here’s a summary of six measures intended to benefit Dalit, Adivasi, and other marginalised communities:

1. The Indian Constitution enshrines **reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes** to address historical caste and tribal-based discrimination and oppression. India’s reservation system is the oldest such programme in the world. In practice, reservations establish quotas for government jobs and government-funded higher education institutions, 15 percent for Scheduled Castes and 7.5 percent for Scheduled Tribes. The quotas also apply to job promotions.
2. **The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act** enacted in 2009 translated into law the Indian Constitution’s 2002 amendment to provide free and compulsory education for all children age 6 to 14. For the first time, many children in remote areas attended school.
3. **The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act** was enacted in 2013 to end the primarily caste-based employment of people for manual scavenging, which involves entering pits, latrines, drains, and ditches to handle and clean waste, often including raw excreta.
4. **The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act** of 2006 aims to protect the individual and community rights of tribal people in forest areas. It also ensures the right to prior informed consent should their displacement and resettlement be called for.
5. **The Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, or PESA**, enacted in 1996, provides for self-governance through *gram sabhas* for people living in scheduled areas, primarily members of Adivasi communities. It legally recognises the right of tribal communities to govern themselves and acknowledges their traditional rights over natural resources.

29 Suvojit Chattopadhyay, “[Democracy Depends on Vibrant ‘Gram Sabhas,’](#)” *Live Mint*, 1 May 2018.

- 6. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989**
was implemented to address crimes and atrocities, including humiliating and degrading treatment, against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

APPENDIX 2

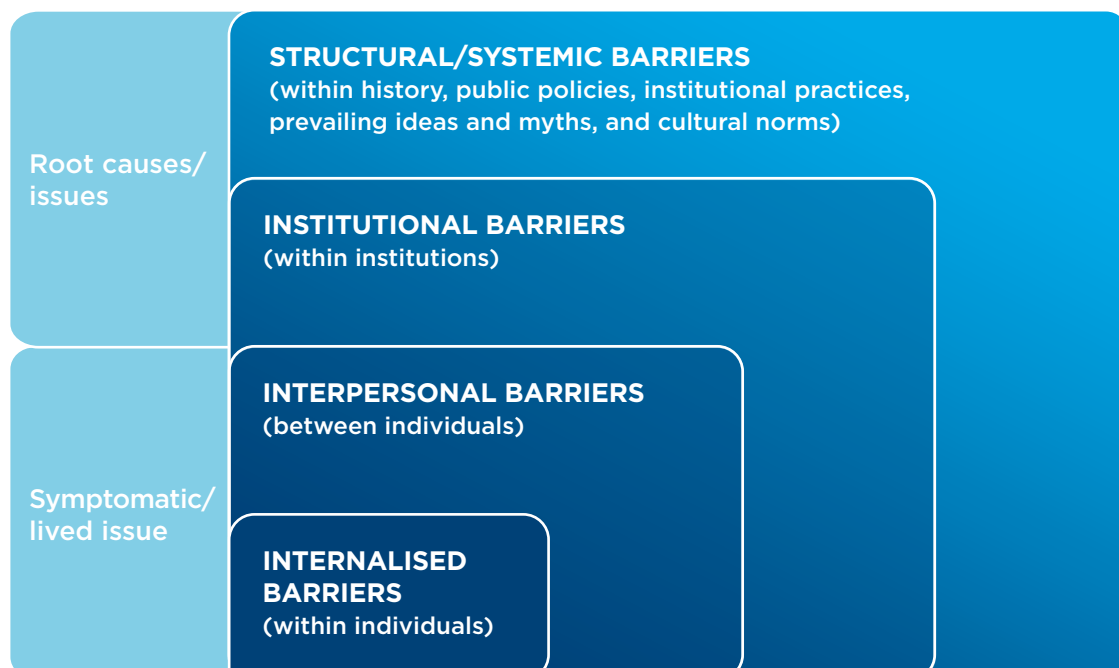
Barriers to social mobility: Root causes shape individual experiences

Based on our research, we developed a tiered framework for social mobility barriers (see below) that traces everyday lived “symptoms” of discrimination to an overarching set of root causes. Root causes manifest as structural, systemic, and institutional barriers that shape public policy, cultural norms, and institutional practices. Symptoms manifest as the lived experiences of discrimination in education, healthcare, jobs, housing, and the like. The harmful effects cascade from systems and institutions to individual experiences. Accordingly, real changes are needed at the top, including changing the narratives and mindsets of privileged groups that perpetuate the marginalisation of Dalit and Adivasi communities.

We found it helpful to keep this framework in mind as we listened to NGO leaders and funders describe interventions highlighted in this report that work to advance social mobility for members of Dalit and Adivasi communities. Efforts that centre equity take root causes into account when designing programmes that address everyday discrimination.

Multiple barriers block Dalit and Adivasi social mobility

Interpersonal and internalised barriers can be seen as the symptom, driven by the root cause of structural and institutional barriers.



Source: The Bridgespan Group. Adapted from the [Interaction Institute for Social Change](#), Racial Equity Tools.

Root causes/issues

Structural and systemic barriers often manifest as inherited disadvantages codified in institutions, laws, and practices. Such barriers include:

- Limited political voice and capacity of individuals to have the power and resources to fulfil their potential
- Limited or restricted autonomy, decision-making power, and financial resources
- Lack of effective policy implementation and enforcement
- Religious beliefs that lend legitimacy to discriminatory and exclusionary cultural norms and social practices

Institutional barriers exclude groups and individuals by intentional policy or programme design, and by failure to adequately implement measures designed to counteract those barriers.

Symptomatic/lived issues

Interpersonal barriers spring from root causes and manifest as discrimination by some groups against other groups. Such barriers include:

- Beliefs and perceptions handed down through generations that confer economic and social privilege to certain groups while denying those privileges to others
- Physical violence and torture used to oppress marginalised communities and individuals
- Limited social and economic capital that restricts the ability of marginalised communities and individuals to make the connections needed to secure a formal sector job, start a business, buy land, or accumulate wealth

Internalised barriers:

- Lack of positive self-identity and self-confidence due to internalisation of endemic discrimination and exclusion
- Limited aspirations based on lived experiences that discourage reaching for a higher rung on the mobility ladder

APPENDIX 3

List of interviewees

We would like to thank the 39 individuals we interviewed for their contributions to this report. We are grateful to all the people we spoke to during this research, without whom this report would not have been possible.

Organisation	Interviewee	Title
NGOs and intermediaries		
Aga Khan Rural Support Programme-India (AKRSP-I)	Apoorva Oza	Chief Executive
	Vivek Singh	Senior Manager, Youth Development
Apnalaya	Arun Kumar	Former CEO
CORO	Shivani Mehta	Executive Director
	Sujata Khandekar	Co-founder and Director
Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICC)	Ravi Kumar Narra	National President
Disom – The Leadership School	Biren Bhuta	Core team member
Ekjut	Shibanand Rath	Evaluation Manager
	Dr. Nirmala Nair	Secretary/Chief Functionary
Ekta Parishad	Ramesh Sharma	General Secretary
Foundation for Ecological Security (FES)	Jagdeesh Rao Puppala	Former Chief Executive, currently Anchor and Curator
Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (GFoD)	Paul Divakar Namala	Convenor
Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS)	Apratim Tiwari	Faculty in Charge (Coaching class)
	Sabyasachi Rout	Senior Project Manager, Life Skills Education, and Project Officer, Mission UDAY
	Debendra Swain	Project Officer (Skill Development)
Led By Foundation	Deepanjali Lahiri	Chief Operating Officer
	Shabeena Shaik	Chief Technology Officer
National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR)	Beena Pallical	General Secretary
Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN)	Dibyendu Chaudhuri	Integrator, Research and Advocacy Unit
	Narendranath Damodaran	Ex-officio Member-Secretary and Executive Director
	Satish Patnaik	Team Coordinator

continued overleaf

Organisation	Interviewee	Title
NGOs and intermediaries		
RTI International India	Shalabh Srivastava	Country Director
	Urvi Shriram	Consultant
Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS)	PS Vijayshankar	Co-founder
Self-Reliant Initiatives through Joint Action (SRIJAN)	Ved Arya	Founder
Shiksharth	Asish Shrivastava	Founder
Society for Education, Action and Research in Community Health (SEARCH)	Dr. Anand Bang	Joint Director

Organisation	Interviewee	Title
Funders		
Azim Premji Foundation	Bharti Dewan	Lead, Urban Poor
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Suneeta Krishnan	Deputy Director for Strategy, Planning, Management, and Evaluation, India office
	Saachi Bhalla	Senior Program Officer, India office
Ford Foundation	Samar Verma	Program Officer
Oak Foundation	Paromita Chowdhury	Programme Officer
Open Society Foundations	Vinay Viswanatha	South Asia Regional Director
Piramal Swasthya	Dr. Shailendra Kumar B. Hegde	Head, Public Health Innovations
The Rockefeller Foundation	Deepali Khanna	Vice President, Asia Region Office
TATA Steel	Sourav Roy	Chief of Corporate Social Responsibility
Academics and experts		
Jawaharlal Nehru University	Amit Thorat	Assistant Professor, Centre for the Study of Regional Development
Jawaharlal Nehru University	Divya Vaid	Assistant Professor, Centre for the Study of Social Systems
	Naresh C. Saxena	Former member, Planning Commission of India
	Virginus Xaxa	Visiting professor, Institute for Human Development; Chairman, High-Level Committee on Socio-economic, Health and Educational Status of Tribal Communities in India

APPENDIX 4

Studies, data sources, and additional readings

Social mobility studies

- [*Global Social Mobility Index 2020: Why Economies Benefit from Fixing Inequality*](#) (World Economic Forum, 19 January 2020).
- [*A Broken Social Elevator? How to Promote Social Mobility*](#) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 15 June 2018).
- [*India Social Mobility Study 2020-21: Enabling India's Youth to Drive the Country's Socio-economic Turnaround*](#) (RTI International, Confederation of India Industry, 2021).
- [*Report of the High-Level Committee on Socio-Economic, Health, and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India*](#) (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, May 2014).
- Mehtabul Azam and Vipul Bhatt, "[Like Father, Like Son? Intergenerational Educational Mobility in India](#)," SSRN, 20 August 2014.
- Kaivan Munshi and Mark Rosenzweig, "[Why is Mobility in India So Low? Social Insurance, Inequality, and Growth](#)," No. 14850, NBER Working Papers from National Bureau of Economic Research, April 2009.
- Amit Thorat, "[Ethnicity, Caste and Religion: Implications for Poverty Outcomes](#)," *Economic and Political Weekly* 45, no. 51 (2010): 47–53.
- [*Inequality Kills: India Supplement 2022*](#) (Oxfam India, January 2022).
- [*Inequality Report 2021: India's Unequal Healthcare Story*](#) (Oxfam India, July 2021).
- [*On Women's Backs: India Inequality Report 2020*](#) (Oxfam India, January 2020).
- Angela Glover Blackwell, "[The Curb-Cut Effect](#)," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2017.

Overview of acts and legislation

- [Forest Rights Act](#)
- [The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes \(Prevention of Atrocities\) Rules, 1995](#)
- [The Panchayats \(Extension to Scheduled Areas\) \(PESA\) Act](#)

Studies on reservation as affirmative action

- "[Scheduled Caste Welfare in India](#)," Vikaspedia, India Development Gateway, Government of India.
- [Schemes Launched by Ministry of Tribal Affairs for the Welfare of Scheduled Tribes](#), Press Information Bureau, Government of India Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 23 July 2018.
- Alexander Lee, "[Does Affirmative Action Work? Evaluating India's Quota System](#)," Department of Political Science, University of Rochester, 8 April 2019.
- [Representation of Reserved Categories](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions, 17 July 2019.
- Ashwini Deshpande, "[Affirmative Action in India and the United States](#)," Equity and Development World Bank Background Paper, January 2005.

Historical context

- Manali S. Deshpande, [*History of the Indian Caste System and Its Impact on India Today*](#) (California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, Fall 2010).
- Nitin Kumar Bharti, [*Wealth Inequality, Class and Caste in India, 1951-2012*](#) (Paris School of Economics, 28 June 2018).

Suggested books

- Sukhdeo Thorat and K.S. Nueman, [*Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India*](#) (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- Divya Vaid, [*Uneven Odds: Social Mobility in Contemporary India*](#) (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- Anirudh Krishna, [*The Broken Ladder: The Paradox and Potential of India's One-Billion*](#) (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- Ajantha Subramanian, [*The Caste of Merit: Engineering Education in India*](#) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).
- Vegard Iversen, Anirudh Krishna, and Kunal Sen, [*Social Mobility in Developing Countries: Concepts, Methods, and Determinants*](#) (Oxford University Press, December 2021).

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