

March 14, 2024, Thursday

Session VIII

3.15 pm to 4.15 pm

Parallel Session A: Convergences and Divergences: Mapping the Local over the Global

Venue: Main Hall

REPORT BY

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Chair: Indrani Mukherjee

The Chair, Prof. Mukherjee introduces the two paper presenters for this panel who are namely Prof. Misra, a Professor of English at Sambalpur University, Odisha, and Dr. Samik Malla who is an Asst. Professor at Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai.

The Song of the Siren: The Lure of Global Capitalism and the Deaths of Despair

Kalidas Misra

Prof. Misra opens his presentation by introducing the attendees to the book by Anne Case and Nobel Laureate, Angus Deaton titled, “*Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*” and highlights how capitalism has failed as it has led to issues such as death, suicide and depression, addictions etc and draws a parallel to how a similar situation has played in our country where the lure of capital sidelines global concerns such as mindless mining etc for power and dominance. He then references the movie, *The Jengaburu Curse*, which has been projected as India’s first climate-fiction thriller which covers the story of nexus between crime, mining, and environmental consequences.

He then highlights how the lure of the capital witnesses thousands of young minds move to Kota, Rajasthan every year in hopes of clearing the exams which is underlined with cut-throat competition. He relates how the lure of capitalism is as alluring as the song of the siren which you cannot resist but it leads to only self-destruction. He elucidates this with the example of how tech cities lure young persons with attractive pay packages but do not advertise that this is at the cost of working 12 hours a day or more which eventually leads to adverse effects in one’s health.

He also talks about the mass displacement of tribals in Odisha due to the rapid mining in various tribal areas but the state is indifferent and does not provide adequate rehabilitation or

other provisions. He mentions how capitalism is so focused on profit and loss, production and consumption that it does not take into consideration the environmental consequences nor the human element. Even in USA which is founded on the ideals of capitalism, the focus is on profit such as how big pharma there dictates the health sector without accounting for the human component and thus humane cost.

He concludes by mentioning how in India, writers like Vandana Shiva, Arundhati Roy and Amitab Ghosh talk about the rapid industrialisation without keeping environmental concerns in mind and he has followed their work to make the above observations.

Theorising Decline: Bengal in the Twilight of Late Capitalism

Samik Malla

Dr. Malla introduces how his paper is the result of a series of conversations and discussions he has had with various friends who are Bengalis based out of Bengal, especially in South India.

He introduces how Bengal which was once most of the industrialised provinces of the country holding a share of 27% of the country's national production output in 1950-51 dropped to 3.9% in 2007-08. Economic reforms brought by the left-front government benefitted farmers and small-scaled industries in the state but it coincided with the reduction of large-scale industrial output and the exodus of prominent business houses – the Birlas being a prominent example, who shifted to Bombay. Signs of decline had started to show from the 1950s itself in the wake of partition which was on communal lines and additionally, the dependence on agrarian economy.

Dr. Malla focuses on post-partition and post-independence Bengal, aiming to analyse its decline in the context of global critiques of capitalism. Internal contradictions and paradoxes marked Bengal's deindustrialization, leading to new forms of precarity. Drawing from Inderjit Roy's, "*The Decline of British Industrial Hegemony: Bengal Industries 1914-1946*", he outlines four phases of growth and decline in Bengal's industry. These phases included i) an absolute decline of traditional industries, followed by ii) slow growth in coal mining, jute textiles, and the tea industry; iii) a vigorous growth period occurred until around 1960, followed by iv) a steady decline in modern industry, which continues today. Despite global changes in capitalism, Bengal's deindustrialisation has not reverted to a pre-industrial state. Instead, it has led to newer forms of precarity, including financialization, the rise of gig economy, and technological shifts towards rapid delivery services, transitioning from a product-centric to a subscription-driven model.

Dr. Malla talks about how changes in the labour market, such as automation pose challenges to theoretical understanding and how automation, including the potential for fully autonomous cars and delivery drones present uncertainties in different industries. He

questions the applicability of existing economic theories, particularly Marxist models, in a scenario where human labour diminishes. He states that recent data on Bengal reflect its socio-economic decline, with indicators like debt-to-GDP ratio and prevalence of beggars and child marriages and how the state also faces challenges in the quality of secondary education which has contributed to migration of unskilled labourers to other regions. He also mentions how despite interventions to prevent famines in post-colonial Bengal, the devastating famine of 1943 killed millions of people.

He talks about how due to economic expansion and political interventions there were improvements in living standards since 1947, but the absolute decline of the economy continued and by the 1960s, the gross industrial output of Bengal was 7.5% from 27% in the 1950s. This decline of Bengal, from once being a celebrated industrial heartland, has drawn attention from scholars and policymakers alike. Factors contributing to this decline include labour militancy, inadequate infrastructure, and bureaucratic inefficiencies. Neoliberal reforms in later years brought mixed consequences, with benefits for some the market but adverse effects on the marginalised and vulnerable, thus exacerbating existing inequalities.

The attempted reforms led to controversy, notably the political earthquake in 2008-2011 and the Tata Group's exit, marking another shift in the crisis. Signs of decline were visible as early as the 1950s, compounded by factors like the state's reduced tax shares which was slashed from unlike the similarly populated province of Bombay which increased the tax share. Dr. Malla references to all this through Ranajit Roy's book, *"The Agony of West Bengal."* Dr. Malla continues to question the difference in taxation between Bengal and Bombay despite the similarity in development levels and population size during that period. This imbalance had serious consequences, especially considering Bengal's struggles with post-partition refugee issues. By 1972, the central government termed most regions of Bengal as 'backward area'.

Dr. Malla highlights how despite a period of rapid expansion, Bengal failed to achieve what Kuznet termed a "modern economic growth." This entails a restructuring of the economy where the secondary sector, like manufacturing, should surpass the primary sector, predominantly agriculture. However, agriculture remained the primary job provider, hindering the growth of modern industries and exacerbating unemployment caused by the decline of traditional craft industries.

Economic activity in India shifted notably to the western and southern regions, prompting a re-evaluation of economic growth's impact on inequality. The common belief, summarized by the "rising tide raises all boats" notion from the Kuznets curve theory, suggests that initial economic development leads to rapid increase in inequality, which later slowly decreases. However, this theory's applicability is now questioned given ongoing disparities in economic growth.

Dr. Malla then references Thomas Piketty's 2014 book *"Capital in the Twenty First Century,"* which he states is the most recent attempt at theorising the capital and inequality. Piketty challenges the notion that continued industrial growth guarantees reduced inequality by

analysing data from 1814 to 2000 and questions previous theories, such as Kuznet's argument "*Economic Growth and Income Inequality (1955)*" that income from labour could offset income from capital, leading to a more equitable society—a concept now considered outdated.

Dr. Malla thus advises that theorizing the decline in Bengal necessitates considering the contradictions inherent in the spread of capitalist systems in societies without a dominant bourgeois culture. He states how Dipesh Chakrabarty's work on Bengal's colonial period highlights the persistence of hierarchical structures despite capitalist influences. Even as Bengal underwent industrialization, it retained hierarchical social norms, challenging the assumption of a shift towards individualism. Chakrabarty's work shows that capitalist production strikes in a variety of cultures and does not seamlessly lead to the disappearance of the feudal trappings of hierarchy and inequality. So even when Bengal was industrialising and was most industrialised between 1913-1960, it does not mean that it stopped being hierarchical or focused on individual instead of community.

He concludes by stating how in today's global context, societies grapple with the challenges of late capitalism, including automation, virtual reality, and the dominance of technology like large language models. Traditional theories struggle to explain these new dynamics, highlighting the need for updated analyses.