



## Giving All Asians a Chance!

“I’m proud to be gay, and I consider being gay among the greatest gifts God has given me,” said Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, in an essay published by *Bloomberg Businessweek*.<sup>1</sup> “Part of social progress is understanding that a person is not defined only by one’s sexuality, race, or gender ... The company that I am so fortunate to lead has long advocated for human rights and equality for all.”

The “coming-out” of Tim Cook is emblematic of the wave of openness and tolerance, and embrace of diversity that is occurring in many Western countries today. True, discrimination, prejudice and persecution of some groups of citizens still exist and may never be fully beaten. But through my own life I have witnessed a sea change in attitudes. It is ironical that on the very same day that Cook’s essay was published, Singapore’s Court of Appeal upheld the country’s ban on gay sex.

Indeed, while many Asian countries have made progress over the past few decades, social inclusion remains a distant ideal, as testified by the experiences of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, women, ethnic and religious minorities and lower castes which we explore in this chapter. Insufficient efforts to give all Asians a better chance in life will continue to cost Asia dearly in terms of both its economic development and its quest to create decent middle-class societies.

## LGBT RIGHTS IN ASIA

LGBT communities may suffer from some of the most egregious discrimination in Asia. According to a 2014 Gallup poll, most Asian countries are not LGBT friendly, and things may have since gotten worse.<sup>2</sup> The best performing Asian countries are the Philippines and Taiwan, where 58% and 39% of respondents, respectively, consider their home city or area to be LGBT friendly (indeed, in May 2017, Taiwan's top court ruled that gay couples will be allowed to marry). Scores were less than 30% for Japan, India, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, below 20% for Bangladesh, Korea and China, and 10% or below for Malaysia, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Pakistan.

Indonesia is an interesting case. Unlike its neighbors Malaysia and Singapore, it does not have national laws that punish homosexuality, although there has reportedly been a proliferation of homophobic bylaws at the local/provincial level. Nor does it have laws that protect the LGBT community from discrimination and harassment. Traditionally, Indonesia's LGBT community has lived in relative peace, in large part by keeping a low profile. They need to do so. A 2013 report by the Pew Research Center showed that over 93% of Indonesians believe that homosexuality should not be accepted<sup>3</sup> (other Asian countries with high non-acceptance rates were Pakistan, Malaysia, China and South Korea). And according to a report by a local NGO, "Arus Pelangi" (Indonesian for Rainbow Currents), over 89% of LGBT people have been victims of "psychological, physical, sexual, economic and cultural abuses".

Against this background, a wave of homophobia has been sweeping through Indonesia, and threatens to undermine its economic and social progress. "Beginning in January 2016, however, a series of anti-LGBT public comments by government officials grew into a cascade of threats and vitriol against LGBT Indonesians by state commissions, militant Islamists, and mainstream religious organizations", reports Human Rights Watch.<sup>4</sup> In response to media pressure to comment on Indonesia's homophobia, Indonesian President Joko Widodo has claimed that there is no discrimination against anyone in Indonesia. But he repeatedly qualifies such comments by noting that Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim nation and that LGBT rights are not consistent with its religious and social norms.

The regression in LGBT rights in Indonesia runs directly against the positive revolution in LGBT rights that is sweeping through the Western

world. In the same 2014 Gallup poll, some 69% or more of respondents from 14 Western countries indicated that their city or area is a good place to live for gay or lesbian people. And LGBT rights are increasingly accepted as fundamental human rights, and promoted as such by the United Nations (UN), the US foreign aid agency (USAID) and NGOs like Human Rights Watch—all of which are active in Indonesia.

In addition to being fundamental human rights, LGBT rights also make good economic sense. As Cook said, Apple is a “company that loves creativity and innovation and knows it can only flourish when you embrace people’s differences.” It is not surprising that Apple should be ranked the most innovative company.<sup>5</sup>

Indonesia, Singapore, China and other Asian countries dream of having homegrown companies like Apple. But until they embrace diversity, and fight against discrimination, prejudice and persecution of LGBT and other social groups, the dream of building successful innovative companies will remain a pious hope.

Is there any glimmer of hope for LGBT rights in Indonesia and other Asian countries? Sakdiyah Ma’ruf is a female Indonesian stand-up comedian who tackles many taboos in Islamic culture in her comedy routines, and who reminds us of the power of educated youth in fostering a more open-minded and tolerant future. We can only hope for social progress thanks to generational change through Asia’s millennials.

Under the Obama administration, USAID also worked to bolster basic LGBT rights across the continent through its “Being LGBT in Asia” initiative. Between 2012 and 2014, USAID and the United Nations Development Programme implemented a landmark review and analysis of LGBT circumstances across 18 Asian countries. It found that Asia’s LGBT people suffer not only from unsupportive policies and laws but also from high levels of stigma and discrimination, affecting every aspect of LGBT people’s lives from families and the workplace to law enforcement, the media and health and education services.

Key objectives of “Being LGBT in Asia” include working with LGBT civil society to engage with country level institutions to advocate for LGBT protective laws and policies, and supporting community empowerment and mobilization activities. The initiative also supports multi-stakeholder dialogues on LGBT rights, promoting advocacy frameworks to address discrimination and assist in legal challenges. It’s not difficult to imagine that this very important initiative could be one of the victims of President Trump’s proposed slashing of the USAID budget, along with

the agency's active work in the promotion of gender equality and advancing the status of women and girls in Asia.

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As we explored in earlier chapters, there is much to admire in Asia's economic development, even if most countries remain underachievers. But there is much less to admire when it comes to the region's social development, especially for women's rights and access to opportunity. Asia's leading economies are way down the list in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index which examines the gap between men and women in four fundamental categories—economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment.<sup>6</sup>

Singapore may have the highest GDP per capita in Asia, and one of the very highest in the world. But it only ranks 55th out of the 144 countries surveyed in the Global Gender Gap Index. Japan and Korea have long been leading Asian economies, but the relative status of women is near the bottom of Asia's list, with rankings of 111th and 116th. And while Asia's three giants of China, India and Indonesia may be ahead of Japan and Korea, they are still wallowing at ranks 87, 88 and 99, respectively, in the Global Gender Gap Index. Asia's best performers are the Philippines, which comes at 7th, and Laos at 43rd.

In the following sections, we explore a few of the very many ways in which Asian women are prevented from contributing to Asia's economic and social development.

### THE MANY TRIALS OF WOMANHOOD IN JAPAN

It would be easy to imagine that the lot of Japanese women is finally beginning to change. In July 2016, Tokyo elected its first woman mayor, Madame Yuriko Koike, who beat a male candidate supported by Japan's ruling right-wing government. In September 2016, Japan's opposition Democratic Party of Japan elected its first woman leader, Madame Renho Murata (who has since resigned from that position). And "womenomics" has been at the center of the Japanese government's Abenomics program.

But overall the lives of most Japanese women are changing ever so slowly, if at all. As the OECD reports, women's wages are much lower

than men's, with the gender wage gap being the third highest among the OECD group of advanced countries.<sup>7</sup> And as Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe once said, "Japan's corporate culture, by contrast, is still one of pinstripes and button-downs. After all, the female labour force in Japan is the most under-utilised resource. Japan must become a place where women shine".

For all Mr. Abe's ambitions for women to play a much greater role in business and government, progress has been glacial. Women still only hold 2% of seats on boards of directors in Japan, compared with 36% in Norway, around 30% in France and Finland and about 20% in Canada and the US. And women only filled 3% of managerial positions in the national government in 2014.

There are many factors that conspire to restrict the opportunity of Japanese women to succeed in business, government and politics.<sup>8</sup> Japan's gender discrimination raises its ugly head around the moment of child-birth, when the majority of women leave their careers and stop working. Japanese corporate life with its long hours, late drinking sessions with colleagues and forced transfers to other regions or countries is not readily compatible with family life.

The macho-sexist attitude of Japanese corporate life is enforced by Japanese men who can make work environment insufferable for professional Japanese women. Maternity harassment, or "matahara" in Japanese, is a growing problem in Japan. A recent government study showed that 20% of full-time working women are bullied, fired or pressured into quitting by their employers once they become pregnant, while nearly half of temporary workers suffer from matahara. The only recourse that these women have is to take their bosses to court, which most do not want to do. So the usual scenario is for Japanese women to only return to the workforce after they have raised their children. But when they do so, the majority are only able to find relatively low-paid non-regular jobs.

The plight of Japanese women imposes many costs on the Japanese economy. Japan desperately needs more workers, as its poor demographics mean that the nation's workforce has been declining for over 20 years, and now the total population is declining. The organization of the Tokyo Olympic Games in 2020 is also increasing the demand for workers. At the same time, Japan still has a cultural aversion toward substantial increases in immigration.

Improving the opportunity for Japanese women to work is an ideal response to this predicament. Indeed, the OECD has estimated if female

participation in the workforce were to converge to the same rate as men by the year 2030, the country's GDP could be almost 20% higher. Indeed, the impact might well be higher since young Japanese women are on average better educated than young Japanese men. In 2013, 67% of Japanese women aged 25–34 years had a tertiary degree compared with just 56% of men. And Japanese women have the world's highest life expectancy at 87 years (compared with 81 year for men).

There is so much that the Japanese government could do, but isn't doing, to improve the opportunity of Japanese women to pursue a career. Fundamentally, it is a matter of creating an environment that enables women to easily combine a family life with a working life. Japan's draconian immigration laws should be relaxed to enable families to hire care workers from countries like the Philippines. The government needs to substantially boost its investment in childcare and after-care facilities. Japan spends only about one-third as much as Sweden and the UK, as a share of GDP, on such facilities. And Japan's tax system should also be amended to eliminate the disincentive for women to work.

There is also much that the business sector could do. Japan's crazy work culture is in desperate need of modernization. Japanese companies should wake up to the fact that militaristic work practices may have been effective in the country's recovery from World War 2, but that today Japan has much lower productivity than most other advanced countries. Japanese companies could boost their productivity by adopting more flexible working practices, and installing childcare facilities to help their female workers. Japanese companies should also wake up to the fact that more gender diversity in their workforces can be a strength, and managers should be given diversity targets to achieve.

If Japanese men also had a more sane working life, they could do much more at home to support the lives of their working wives. The typical Japanese man doesn't do anything at home other than eating and sleeping. They spend less than one hour per day of household chores and childcare—compared with 3+ hours for Swedish and German fathers and 2.5 hours for Americans.

There are many womenomics naysayers, and one of their standard arguments is that Japan's already low birth rate would fall even lower if more Japanese women had careers. This is wrong. Today, many women are virtually forced to choose between a working life and a family life. However, the international evidence shows that countries which have family-friendly working environments—countries like Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands,

and the UK—tend to have both higher female labor force participation and higher fertility rates.

There is much pessimism about the prospects for womenomics in Japan. You can still meet many Japanese men who are convinced that Japanese women do not want to work, that they prefer a life at home, going to coffee shops with their girlfriends and package tours to Europe. Akira Matsumoto, Chairman and CEO of Calbee, advises women to be more aggressive in upending “vested interests” rooted in power, money and status — traditionally the domain of men—“Men’s mindset won’t change. ...If you wait to see change, it will probably take another 300 years”.

But having spent a lot of time in Japan, on-and-off for eight years, it seems to me that attitudes may be changing in the millennial generation. Japanese boys seem much less macho than their fathers, while Japanese girls are becoming more assertive. Female entrepreneurship also seems to be a burgeoning new trend. Ambitious women who can see the limited prospects of upward mobility in a traditional Japanese company are sometimes more willing to try starting up their own business. And if Japan does succeed in attracting more foreign investment into its market, foreign companies will surely start hiring many of Japan’s talented women. In other words, the future may not be so bleak, even if change will come slowly.

### THE PLIGHT OF SOUTH ASIA’S WOMEN

As dismaying as the situation of Japanese (and also Korean) women might be, the plight of many women in poorer Asian countries, especially in South Asia, is nothing short of tragic, as we will discuss in the next few sections. East Asia has now moved well ahead of South Asia, as the sub-continent now has more in common with Sub-Saharan Africa for things like nutrition, health, education and economic and political participation when it comes to gender equality, depriving the region of a significant source of human potential.

Half of South Asian women still cannot read. In South Asia, women are also much more vulnerable to poverty, sexual and other violence, and HIV/AIDS. Overall, the UN’s Gender Development Index for South Asia is now the lowest of all the world’s regions. Perhaps the most important thing holding South Asian women back is conservative traditional values in male-dominated societies that deprive them of both the necessary security and opportunities to lead fulfilling lives.

In the following sections, we look in detail at the issues of Asia's missing women, forced child marriage in Asia and Pakistan's dishonorable honor-killing epidemic.

### ASIA'S MISSING WOMEN

Perhaps the greatest opportunity that too many Asian women are deprived of is the right to life. From the 1990s, prenatal gender selection has resulted in a sharp decline in the proportion of girls being born, especially in China and India. This has given rise to the phenomenon of Asia's "missing women", which was first identified by Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen,<sup>9</sup> and represents a manifest violation of women's human rights.

There are three main reasons for the phenomenon of Asia's missing women.<sup>10</sup> First, in Confucian and patriarchal cultures, families have a preference for sons over daughters, because sons inherit the family name and assets, and they look after parents as they age. This is very important in countries with very weak social welfare systems. And in India, girls are seen as a bad investment because of the dowry that their marriage will require.

Then, the ability to exercise this preference for a son has been facilitated by the spread of ultrasound technology and the availability of abortion in the private healthcare system. And the general decline in fertility rates, in tandem with economic development and rising education, has heightened the need for prenatal gender selection. When family sizes were large, there was always a high likelihood of having at least one son. But as family sizes declined dramatically, there is a much greater risk of not having a son among the one or two children in the family. In this regard, China's one-child policy no doubt played in gender birth selection.

Sex ratios at birth are estimated by the UN to be 118 boys for every hundred girls in China, and 111 in each of India and Vietnam. This compares with the standard biological level of around 105 male births for every 100 female births. It is thus estimated that the world would have 117 million missing women, with 57% being attributable to China and 30% to India. According to a study by Mara Hvistendahl, the figure could be as high as 163 million.<sup>11</sup>

Please don't think that it is poor and illiterate families who are the main cause of Asia's missing children. On the contrary, it is the urban and educated middle classes who are leading the way in having smaller families and have the financial wherewithal to make prenatal gender selection. And for



those girls who are lucky enough to be born, life is not always rosy. Many suffer from discrimination in their access to healthcare, nutrition and education.

Looking ahead, it is possible, as in the case of Korea, that with economic and social development over time, Chinese and Indian families become more gender neutral in their birth preferences. But there is also a risk of a continued deterioration in gender birth ratios, as gender birth imbalances have not yet spread across the entire country in China and India.

One dramatic consequence of Asia's missing women is the increasing number of Asian men who will be unable to find a wife and have a family (surplus men are known as "bare branches" in China). According to the UN, after the year 2030, the number of single men looking for a wife in China and India could exceed the available unmarried women by 50–60% for several decades. And the men most adversely affected will likely be those who are underprivileged in terms of income and education. In other words, unequal opportunity for marriage is becoming another feature of an increasingly unequal Asia.

The potential socio-economic consequences of the rise in involuntary bachelorhood are enormous, with the likelihood of mental health problems, increased crime, violence and drug abuse. There is also evidence of abduction and trafficking of women for marriage, with Vietnamese girls often being victims of kidnapping for marriage in China. Marriage migration is also a growing trend in East Asia, but this only transfers the missing women problem from one country to another.

Governments need to implement stronger policies to prevent prenatal gender selection, and campaign against traditional patriarchal value systems. But change will only come slowly, and the impact of the past decades of prenatal gender selection will continue also for decades to come.

### FORCED CHILD MARRIAGE IN SOUTH ASIA

If a South Asian girl is lucky enough to survive prenatal gender selection, and be born, the next problem that she could face is being forced into a marriage while she is still a child.

"In South Asia, young girls are a burden, especially for poor families", an Indian colleague once explained to me. "They are just an expense item—a mouth to feed, a person to educate. And when times get tough, like when a natural disaster strikes, poor families feel obliged to look after

young boys first. Since the cost of a dowry is much lower for young girls, many families marry off their young daughters as soon as they can.”

There are also social pressures for girls to marry as soon as they reach puberty. Many families see early marriage as a means of protecting their daughter from possible abduction, and sexual violence.<sup>12</sup> There are also reports from Malaysia where men accused of rape seek to marry their alleged (usually very young) victims in order to avoid prosecution, since rape within marriage is not a crime.

Child marriage, defined by the UN as marriage under the age of 18, is endemic in South Asia.<sup>13</sup> Despite laws against child marriage, some 66% of girls from Bangladesh get married before the age of 18, while 47% of Indian and 41% of Nepalese girls do so.<sup>14</sup> What’s even worse, 29% of Bangladeshi girls get married before they reach the age of 15. And despite Asia’s rapid economic progress, there has only been a slight decrease in the prevalence of child marriage these past three decades.

The effects of child marriage can be catastrophic for the poor girls involved. Many abandon school and become pregnant, bringing an abrupt end to their education and childhood. They are more likely to die during pregnancy and childbirth than women in their twenties. Their children are more likely to be stillborn or die during their first month of life. Child brides are also more vulnerable to domestic violence and HIV/AIDS.

These South Asian governments have been making commitments to seriously tackle the issue of forced child marriage, including through a UN Girl Summit in 2014. But progress has been slow. There is much push back from conservative forces in these male-dominated societies.

### PAKISTAN’S DISHONORABLE HONOR-KILLING EPIDEMIC

While forced child marriages are a tragedy for young girls in South Asia, those girls who stand up for themselves and refuse such marriages, or allegedly bring dishonor on their families in other ways, expose themselves to the risk of being murdered in so-called honor killings. The year 2016 saw an epidemic of honor killings in Pakistan, with the murder of Pakistani social media star, Qandeel Baloch, by her brother being only the most talked about.

Indeed, it seemed like every week that a new case of an honor killing hit the international media. One Pakistani man reportedly killed his two sisters the evening before their weddings because they had chosen their own husbands, rather than settling for arranged marriages. According to another

report, a Pakistani mother-of-three and a 21-year-old man were tortured and hanged from a tree after reportedly having an affair. Similarly, a British-Pakistani beautician was allegedly killed by her ex-husband as her father held her down, while visiting relatives in her ancestral village in northern Punjab. Another Pakistani man said “I am not ashamed what I have done” after he slit his second wife’s throat, 15 years after murdering first wife.

What exactly are honor killings? The most typical example occurs when someone (usually a young woman) is deemed to have brought dishonor on a family by marrying a person of lower status or caste, by refusing to enter into an arranged marriage, having sex outside of marriage, being a rape victim or even dressing inappropriately.

In these circumstances, the family leaders might get together, and decide that it is necessary to murder the offending person(s) in order to restore the honor of the family. A family member is usually appointed to commit the murder. This is sometimes a young person, who would be subject to lesser punishment than an adult. Another frequent scenario is when one person takes it upon themselves to undertake the honor killing to the shock and horror of other family members.

There have been all too many headline cases in recent times. Another example, in 2014, was that of Farzana Parveen, who was three months pregnant, and was stoned to death in the front of the courthouse of Lahore (Pakistan’s most cultured city) by family members angry that she had married without their permission.

Honor killing is against the law in most countries. But all too often, the police turn a blind eye, considering this to be a matter for the family. Punishment could be lightened or waived, if the victim’s family forgives the murderer. In the year 2000, the UN estimated that there were about 5000 honor killings in the world annually, with 1000 taking place in each of Pakistan and India. And there is a growing number of cases in Western countries like the US, UK, Canada and Australia, in tandem with the increasing numbers of migrants from these regions. The real figure for world honor killings may be closer to 20,000, according to Amy Logan, President of the US National Committee for UN Women. Large numbers go unreported, or are falsely reported as suicides.

There is every reason to expect that these figures are growing. As economic development and urbanization proceed, young women are better educated and have aspirations for a more independent and freer life. In countries like Bangladesh, where clothing and textile manufacture is a

growth industry, many women are the principal breadwinner, something which can be a big “ego-shock” in male-dominated societies. Overall, there is a growing gap between the traditional attitudes of parents, and those of younger women, in South Asia and the Middle East.

The numbers of deaths from honor killings may seem small for highly populous countries like Pakistan and India. And indeed they are when compared with the numbers of people who die in these countries from car accidents or from air or water pollution. But the other side of the tragedy is that of the millions of women who live their life in fear, who forego marrying the person they love, who accept forced arranged marriages or who are subject to other abominable acts like acid-throwing attacks. Aspiring economic powerhouses like India and Pakistan will never succeed or achieve their potential, while ever archaic medieval practices like honor killings remain part of the social landscape.

Thankfully, the film, “A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness”,<sup>15</sup> directed by Pakistani woman filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, won the 2016 Oscar for the best documentary short subject, and attracted global attention to this problem. It really is a must-see. The girl in the river, Saba, was shot in the face and thrown into a river by her father and uncle, after she married for love and not through an arranged marriage. Miraculously, Saba survived. Saba was then pressured to forgive her father and uncle to restore peace to her village. Saba’s father remained unrepentant. “Everyone says I am more respected. They say I am an honourable man. They say what I did was right,” he said. “I have other daughters. Since this incident, each daughter has received proposals because I am called an honourable man.”

After he saw the film, Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, announced that his government was “in the process of legislating to stop such brutal and inhumane acts in the name of honor”. Then following the murder of Qandeel Baloch, the Pakistani Parliament finally revised its laws to stiffen the punishment for honor killings, as well as for rape. But of course there are loopholes that will allow killers to get off light and may be even escape punishment altogether.

What will it take for Pakistan to seriously tackle this heinous crime against women?

Fundamentally, it will require a revolution in the misogynist mind-sets of Pakistani men. But this will be difficult. Some Pakistani politicians and religious leaders criticized Obaid-Chinoy for bringing dishonor on Pakistan through her film! Right-wing political groups and Muslim clerics have

strongly resisted attempts to provide legislative protection against honor killings. Tribal leaders and family members exert immense pressure to stay quiet. As in the film, survivors of attempted honor killings are forced to forgive their aggressors. And murder is condoned in Pakistani society.

Pakistani women have a massively uphill battle in their quest for a decent life. Pakistan is an extremely backward country in many respects. It is ranked the second worst country among the 144 countries surveyed in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report.<sup>16</sup> Pakistan ranks just ahead of the unsavory case of Yemen, and just behind Syria. Pakistan would also be one of the world's worst countries for rule of law, according to the World Justice Project. And the Fragile States Index has put Pakistan on "high alert".

Most regrettably, this is the state of Pakistan. In many ways, it is the direct descendant of the great Mughal civilization, and yet today it is one of the very least civilized countries on the planet!

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Following our discussion of some of the very many ways in which Asia's women are not given a fair chance to contribute to the economy or society, we will take up the case of Asia's indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities who are similarly disadvantaged.

### ASIA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Asia's indigenous peoples are another segment of the region's citizens who are deprived of the opportunity of contributing fully to the economy and society. According to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), there are some 260 million indigenous peoples in Asia, three-quarters of the world's total.<sup>17</sup> This makes Asia the most culturally diverse region in the world.

"Asian indigenous peoples face problems such as denial of self-determination, the loss of control over their land and natural resources, discrimination and marginalization, heavy assimilation pressure and violent repression by state security forces", reports the IWGIA. In other words, they suffer from a profound lack of empowerment. The average poverty rate of Asia's indigenous peoples is three times higher than the Asian average. And education, health and other social conditions are also much worse.

While rapid economic growth has lifted millions of Asians out of poverty, most indigenous peoples have benefited little from this economic growth. Specific policy interventions will be required to improve the lives of indigenous peoples. In particular, it is necessary to fight against discrimination, prejudice and persecution even if the experiences of the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand highlight how very difficult it can be to bring indigenous peoples into the mainstream of the economy and society.

Who are Asia's indigenous peoples? Where do they live? As the IWGIA documents, indigenous peoples live in most Asian countries, for example:

- Myanmar has over 100 different ethnic groups, with Burmans making up an estimated 68% of the country's 53 million people. The other ethnic nationalities include the Shan, Karen, Rakhine, Karenni, Chin, Kachin and Mon. These indigenous groups suffered greatly from the oppressive policies of the former Burman-dominated military regimes. As the country has moved toward democracy, political prisoners have been released, and the government has engaged in ceasefire and peace talks with ethnic armed groups. However, many critical issues remain unresolved, most notably regarding the Muslim Rohingya in Arakan State, who are known as the world's most persecuted people. They have been victims of terrible state-sponsored human rights abuses for a number of years, which is not abating. The human tragedy of the Rohingya reached a head in 2015 with a human smuggling crisis, and again in 2017 as thousands of Rohingya fled to Bangladesh to escape violence from the military (we take up this issue in greater detail in Chap. 9).
- In India, 461 ethnic groups are recognized as Scheduled Tribes, "Adivasis", who are considered to be India's indigenous peoples. With an estimated population of 84.3 million, they comprise 8.2% of the total population. There are, however, many more ethnic groups that should qualify for Scheduled Tribe status but which are not officially recognized.
- Japan has two main indigenous peoples, the Ainu and the Okinawans. The Ainu mainly live in Japan's northern island of Hokkaido, although many have migrated to Japan's urban centers for work and to escape discrimination on Hokkaido. According to government surveys, Ainu population in Hokkaido would be 16,786, although Ainu observers estimate those of Ainu ancestry to be between 100

and 300,000. The Okinawans, which number over one million, live in Japan's southern islands of Okinawa.

- The Philippine national population of over 100 million includes an indigenous population of between 10% and 20%. They generally suffer from a lack of access to education and other basic social services, and few opportunities to participate in economic or political life. Since their lands are rich in minerals, forests and rivers, they are vulnerable to land grabbing and other “development aggression”.
- Vietnam's 53 recognized ethnic groups, beyond the Kinh majority, account for around 14% of the country's total population of 90 million. While Vietnam has achieved a spectacular decline in its poverty, among its ethnic minorities poverty remains very high.

The sad reality is that Asia's authoritarian regimes and fragile democracies usually see indigenous peoples as at best a nuisance, and all too often as a threat to their fragile grip on power. This is in sharp contrast to Western countries like the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, with important indigenous populations, which are often motivated by a sense of historical guilty conscious, and moral rectitude to help their indigenous populations.

In this context, we will look in a little more detail at the cases of Indonesia's West Papuans, China's Tibetans and China's Uyghurs in the following sections.

### INDONESIA'S WEST PAPUANS

Indonesia's West Papuans and China's Tibetans share similar fates in that their hopes for independent nationhood were dashed by greedy big brothers.

In many ways, Indonesia is defined by its immense ethnic diversity. Its population of 260 million includes some 50–70 million indigenous peoples, from 1128 officially recognized ethnic groups. And while the population of West Papua may only be around 3 ½ million, this people has endured a tragic history.

West Papuans, who are the neighbors and ethnic brothers and sisters of Papua New Guinea, have virtually no common cultural links with the rest of Indonesia. West Papuans are mainly Christian and Melanesian, while Indonesians are principally Muslim and of Malay race. The only thing that

tied them together was their common colonial history, as both were part of the Dutch East Indies.

Immediately following the end of World War 2, Indonesia became an independent nation, while West Papua remained a Dutch colony. The vast majority of West Papuans wanted independence for their land, and in principle West Papua was being prepared for independence. But it became entangled in Cold War political machinations involving the US, the Netherlands, Indonesia and the UN. Then, following a sham referendum in 1969, in which little more than 1000 Papuans were allowed to vote (out of a population of around 800,000), West Papuan became part of Indonesia. The Indonesian government since has turned it into two separate provinces, namely, Papua and Papua Barat, in order to weaken it politically.

Since being folded into Indonesia, West Papua has been a veritable battleground. It has been basically occupied by Indonesia military and security forces who have waged a struggle against the West Papuan pro-independence movement, the Free West Papua group. Some 500,000 West Papuans have been allegedly killed by Indonesian security forces, with many more raped, tortured or imprisoned. Some have called it a “slow motion genocide”. Some West Papuans are now refugees in Papua New Guinea, or working as virtual slaves in mines or forests. A strong undercurrent in the relationship is the attitude of arrogance and derision of Indonesians who consider West Papuans to be primitive natives.

Also at stake have been West Papua’s immense rich natural resources, especially copper, gold and timber. Some of the worst human rights abuses take place in the vicinity of major resources developments, which pay for protection from the Indonesian military forces. Abuses include land-grabs by Indonesian and international business groups, denial of land rights and severe environmental degradation. And many international companies are in a virtual race to destroy West Papua’s tropical forests.

The Grasberg Mine—the world’s largest gold mine and second largest copper mine—has been a major sore point. This is owned by the American mining giant, Freeport-McMoRan. The rights to this mine were established between the US and Indonesia four years before West Papua even became Indonesian. Some argue that this project motivated US government support for Indonesia’s takeover of West Papua. There has been much criticism of the severe environmental damage caused by its waste deposits.



By the same token, the Indonesian government has also been paying off West Papuan elites to keep them onside. Migration to West Papua from elsewhere in Indonesia has been very substantial such that West Papuans are now becoming a minority in their own land. Indonesia's actions and policies in West Papua have been facilitated by its closest neighbor, Australia, which has turned a blind eye, as it does not wish to disturb the important relationship.

Despite West Papua's immense resources, and being host to Indonesia's largest taxpayer, Freeport-McMoRan, West Papuans suffer from high poverty, poor healthcare and education, high infant and maternal mortality, and a high incidence of HIV/Aids. They also suffer from stringent restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly.

Governments like that of Indonesia usually hope that a problem like West Papua would fade away in time. They hope that restrictions on access to West Papua imposed on foreign journalists and rights monitors will keep it out of the news. But it hasn't. In 2015, West Papua was granted observer status in the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), a sub-regional coalition composed of Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and New Caledonia's Front de Liberation Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS). West Papua will now sit on the inside of the organization alongside Indonesia. This is hoped to be an historic step toward addressing the human rights atrocities committed by the Indonesian army. The MSG was founded in 1986 to promote and strengthen trade, promote Melanesian cultures, further the economic growth of its members, sustainable development, good governance and security.

There was great hope that Indonesia's President Jokowi would turn a new page in human rights in West Papua, and he has indeed released some political prisoners, and granted access to West Papua for foreign journalists. But there is virtually no likelihood of a sea change under his presidency.

## CHINA'S TIBETANS

For its part, China is also a multi-ethnic country, and all ethnic groups are considered equal before the law. Besides the Han Chinese majority, the government recognizes 55 ethnic minority peoples within its borders, who number 114 million persons, or 8.5% of the country's total population. The government has made great efforts to improve the lives of China's indigenous peoples, in the areas of education and health. They

were also allowed to have two or three children, and were thus exempt from the one-child policy. But certain groups like Tibetans and the Uighurs still suffer terrible human rights abuses.

Tibet has indeed lived through a turbulent history. There were times when it was ruled by the Mongols and Chinese, together with times when it was independent, such as through much of the first half of the twentieth century. But through all this Tibet developed and maintained a distinctive religion, culture and way of life. At the same time, economic development was minimal, and most Tibetans were desperately poor.

In 1950, following the Communist Party's victory in the Chinese Civil War, the Chinese military invaded Tibet to assert what it claimed to be centuries-old sovereignty. The Chinese government considers Tibet to be an important strategic buffer between China and India. It is also interested in Tibet's vast natural resources. Following a failed anti-Chinese uprising in 1959, the Dalai Lama fled Tibet for India where he set a government-in-exile, which has ever since been a strain on Indo-Chinese relations. Most Tibetans consider Tibet to be under occupation by a foreign power.

The Dalai Lama has been a voice for Tibetans on the international stage, and the Tibetan question has been a symbol of the tortured relations between China and the West. Human rights supporters and activists have an idealistic and almost romantic sympathy toward Tibet. This was most manifest in the Dalai Lama being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. For its part, the Chinese government reacts with hysteria when senior Western political and other personalities meet with the Dalai Lama. So most Western governments and businesses now cave into Chinese economic and political power and ignore the Dalai Lama.

China has poured literally billions of dollars of investment into Tibet. This has developed Tibet's transport, power and other infrastructure, and boosted the economy, which today is growing faster than the rest of the Chinese economy. High-speed rail links have fostered a booming tourist industry. China's state-owned enterprises have also been instructed to invest in Tibet. At the same time, there has been a large wave of immigration into Tibet of Han Chinese. It is a common assessment that these Chinese immigrants have benefited much more than the local Tibetans from this economic development, and that all the massive subsidies from Beijing have done little to promote private sector development.

But the Chinese government has also combined political repression with its economic development policies, with the Dalai Lama being a

favorite target of Chinese government vitriol. The Chinese government has aggressively suppressed Tibetan political opposition and Tibetan identity. Most of Tibet's monasteries were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Some 1.2 million Tibetans would have been killed under Chinese rule, according to the Dalai Lama, who accuses China's government of "cultural genocide". In more recent times, there was a wave of unrest in 2008, and there has been a wave of self-immolations by Tibetans opposed to Chinese rule. And under President Xi Jinping, political repression of peaceful dissent has increased in Tibet, as it has elsewhere in China.

In order to solve the current Tibet issue, the Dalai Lama has proposed the "Middle-Way Approach" through a non-violent and negotiated solution. He is not seeking independence for Tibet. Rather he is seeking to achieve a genuine autonomy for all Tibetans living in the three traditional provinces of Tibet within the framework of the People's Republic of China. According to the Dalai Lama, this approach "safeguards the vital interests of all concerned parties—for Tibetans: the protection and preservation of their culture, religion and national identity; for the Chinese: the security and territorial integrity of the motherland; and for neighbors and other third parties: peaceful borders and international relations."<sup>18</sup>

China simply rejects the Dalai Lama's Middle-Way Approach, and is clearly waiting for the 82-year-old Dalai Lama to die, hoping that this will see the end of the Tibet issue. But this may well be a miscalculation. When the Dalai Lama passes, the Chinese government will lose a voice of reason and moderation, and will likely get entangled in disputes and conflicts as it tries to control the nomination of the next Dalai Lama.

## DIRE SITUATION OF CHINA'S UIGHURS

The sentencing of Chinese Uighur scholar Ilham Tohti to life imprisonment in 2014 highlights the dire situation of this poor Muslim community. It is also a harsh reminder that China is still an empire, not a nation—an empire that employs repression and violence to control peoples within its imperial borders, and which hinders their ability to contribute to both society and the economy.

The Uighurs are a Sunni Muslim people of ten million people, of which eight million live in the vast Xinjiang region in western China, which borders five Muslim countries. They are ethnically and culturally much closer to Central Asia than to China. The region's economy was traditionally based on agriculture and trade, with towns like Kashgar being part of the

famed Silk Road. The Xinjiang region was brought under Chinese imperial administration through the Qing Dynasty conquests of 1745. But the region was left largely to its own devices. Following the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1904, Xinjiang enjoyed a few brief periods of independence.

Following the 1949 Communist Party victory in the Chinese Civil War, the new People's Republic of China reasserted control over Xinjiang. According to the Chinese government, Xinjiang has been an inseparable part of the Chinese nation for over 2000 years, since the days of the Western Han Dynasty. The Uighurs are officially recognized by the Chinese government as one of the country's 55 ethnic minorities. Back in 1949, Han Chinese only accounted for 7% of Xinjiang's population. But internal migration, especially since the 1990s, has dramatically increased the Han population to over 8 million (and may be a lot more, if Chinese police and military are fully counted), such that the Uighurs now find themselves a minority in their own province.

The Chinese government has actively developed the Xinjiang's vast mineral and oil deposits. Xinjiang accounts for 28% of China's natural gas reserves, and gas output increased sixfold between 2000 and 2012, while oil production rose by half. Some 60% of Xinjiang's GDP is now derived from petroleum. Most job opportunities are given to Han Chinese. Many job advertisements indicate that only Han Chinese or native Mandarin speakers will be considered. Uighurs are frozen out of government positions, the region's booming oil and gas industry, and many other industries because of the perceived risk of terrorism. Uighur unemployment is very high. Education favors Mandarin over Uighur. And very few local Chinese speak the Uighur language.

Poverty is high among the Uighur population. Some Uighur farmland has reportedly been confiscated for development. Their culture is also under threat through restrictions on religious practices, including bans on the observance of Ramadan, and rules that discourage women from wearing headscarves and young men from growing beards. It is difficult for Uighurs to get passports. They are routinely denied access to hotels. Heavily armed police are positioned throughout Uighur neighborhoods. There is a vast web of government informers, and Internet and cellphone surveillance. Uighurs are second-class citizens in Xinjiang.

Ethnic tension has been fueled by economic disparities, cultural repression, and the fundamental lack of trust between the Uighurs and the Chinese government. This has given rise to movements for greater autonomy and independence, as well as incidents of terrorism.

Separatist groups rose in importance after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the independence of Muslim states in Central Asia, with street protests in the 1990s, and again in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympic Games. In more recent times, there has been an escalation of violence. In 2009, there was large-scale rioting in the regional capital of Urumqi, with 200 people being killed, most of them Han Chinese. In 2012, six Uighurs reportedly tried to hijack an internal flight. In 2013, Uighurs were allegedly behind a car explosion in Tiananmen Square. In 2014, two cars crashed into an Urumqi market.

China blames the conflict on independence-seeking separatists, terrorists and the spread of radical Islam. The government believes acts of terrorism are organized by jihadists outside of China. China has used the post-9/11 war on terror to paint the Uighurs as terrorists. Authorities have stepped up campaign against terrorism, and tightened up security. Most observers believe that the Chinese authorities exaggerate the threat posed by the Uighurs, even if a small minority is radicalized.

Uighur groups claim that their discontent is a response to religious oppression and economic marginalization. Many prominent Uighurs have been imprisoned or sought asylum abroad. As China responds to its fears of fundamentalism and radicalization, it appears to be actually provoking troubles. “The entire Uighur ethnicity feels asphyxiated, having become suspect as sympathetic to extremism,” said Nicholas Bequelin of Human Rights Watch. “Xinjiang is trapped in a vicious cycle of increased repression that only leads to more violence.”

It was against this background that Ilham Tohti, an economics professor at Beijing’s Minzu University, was arrested and eventually sentenced to life imprisonment for separatism in September 2014. Ilham has long spoken critically of the Chinese government’s policies toward the Uighurs. The Chinese court found that Ilham had “bewitched and coerced young ethnic students” into writing separatist tracts for Uighur Online, a website he founded in 2006. The court found that he had “encouraged his fellow Uighurs to use violence” and that he had “internationalized” the Uighur issue by giving interviews to foreign media. The court also demanded the seizure of all his assets. Ilham has become yet another victim of Xi Jinping’s broader crackdown on activists, intellectual and lawyers.

The verdict is “a sign of further tightening of civil liberties that has been going”, said Maya Wang of Human Rights Watch. “It does not bode well for the already tense relationship between Han and Uighurs in Xinjiang”. Ironically, Ilham is a voice of moderation who wants better

treatment for Uighurs and more autonomy for Xinjiang, rather than independence. Many see the life sentence as an act of repression itself. It is much worse than sentences to be handed out to other dissidents for similar activities.

The sentence will make this previously little-known lawyer, who represented hardly any threat to the Communist Party, an international symbol for human rights activists just like Liu Xiaobo, who was awarded the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize. Dissident writer Wang Lixiang said that the Chinese government has made him a “Uighur Mandela”. Overall, the approach of the Chinese government to the Uighurs has been denial of self-determination or greater autonomy, taking control of their land and natural resources, discrimination and marginalization, heavy assimilation pressures and violent repression by state security forces.

History shows that such an approach is not only unjust, it is doomed to failure. China should employ policies of inclusive development, whereby Uighurs are given autonomy to manage their affairs within China, and have the opportunity to develop their own natural resources and the freedom to practice their own culture. Openness and dialogue, rather than repression, is necessary to achieve reconciliation between the Uighurs and the Chinese government. This would require wise leadership on both sides. It is ironical that Ilham, the man who has been imprisoned for life, is a very effective and moderate leader who may have been able to help facilitate a peaceful reconciliation between the Uighurs and the Chinese. But eliminating a voice of moderation makes it easier for the Chinese government to paint a negative image of all Uighurs.

### SRI LANKA NEEDS NATIONAL RECONCILIATION

Sri Lanka, a teardrop-shaped tropical island, would seem to have everything going for it. Delicious tea. Fragrant cinnamon and other spices. Precious gemstones. Abundant rubber. And wonderful beaches and hill country. It truly is the “great and beautiful island”. Over 90% of its population is literate, and its life expectancy of 74 years is eight years higher than India’s.

It is thus not surprising that Sri Lanka’s GDP per capita of \$12,300 in 2016 should be about double that of India, while only 15% of its population live on less than \$3.10 a day, compared with close to 60% for India. But Sri Lanka could have been even much further ahead had it not suffered from a three-decade-long civil war, which pitted the island’s minority

Tamil population (around 12% of total) against the majority Sinhalese (74%).

How could this predominantly Buddhist and Hindu nation descend into the horrific violence that ravaged the country?

In the eyes of the Buddhist-Sinhalese population, the Hindu-Tamils received favorable treatment by the British colonial administration, which ruled the country from 1802 to 1948. And so, following independence, the new Sinhalese-dominated government, propelled by Buddhist nationalistic fervor, implemented policies that favored the Sinhalese majority and discriminated against the Tamil minority. For example, in 1956 the “Sinhala Only Act” replaced English with Sinhala as the only official language of the country. This meant that it was very difficult for Sri Lankan Tamils to work in the civil service. Until then, 60% of civil service workers were Tamils.

Frustration, resentment and disenfranchisement of the Tamil population led to disintegrating communal relations. Periodic tensions and conflicts escalated into a full-blown civil war from 1983 to 2009, with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam “Tamil Tigers” opposing Sri Lanka’s national army. Despite several international attempts at peace negotiations, the conflict only came to end when former “strong-man” President Mahinda Rajapaksa launched a decisive attack by the Sri Lankan Army, which destroyed the Tamil leadership and recaptured their lands in 2009.

According to one estimate, the total economic cost of the war was \$200 billion, about 5 times the GDP of Sri Lanka in 2009. At least 100,000 people died in the bloody conflict. A report by a UN-appointed panel of experts concluded that as many as 40,000 people, mainly civilians, were killed in the final weeks of the war.<sup>19</sup> Buoyed by the final victory, which was very popular among much of the Sinhalese population, President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s regime descended into authoritarianism, nepotism, corruption, and restrictions on freedom of the press and expression. Rajapaksa’s government rejected calls by the UN and major countries to seriously investigate human rights abuses during the war. Ostracized by Western countries, Rajapaksa turned to China, which became the country’s biggest investor and second-largest trading partner.

To the surprise of most observers, and to his great dismay, Rajapaksa was defeated in the presidential election of January 2015 by Maithripala Sirisena, who had defected from Rajapaksa’s government. Sirisena now leads a national unity government, with support from all of Sri Lanka’s ethnic groups. But Rajapaksa, still a popular figure among Buddhist

nationalists, remains ever present as he has returned as a member of parliament.

Under President Sirisena, Sri Lanka has come a long way in terms of improving human rights. And the Sri Lankan government has adopted an open and cooperative approach to the UN's human rights concerns, in sharp contrast to the hostile attitude under Rajapaksa. However, a September 2015 UN report concludes that there are reasonable grounds to believe that gross violations of international human rights law, serious violations of international humanitarian law and international crimes were committed by all parties in the conflict, notably unlawful killings, arbitrary arrest and detention, abductions, enforced disappearances, torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence, recruitment of children and their use in hostilities, and more.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has recommended the establishment of a "hybrid special court", integrating international judges, prosecutors, lawyers and investigators, to try war crimes and crimes against humanity allegedly committed by all parties to the armed conflict. The UN believes that State's criminal justice system is not yet ready or equipped to do so alone.

The Sri Lankan government has committed to setting up "National Consultations on transitional justice" to investigate the atrocities committed during the conflict. But it has been very slow in honoring this commitment, and is staunchly resisting international participation. Many members of Sri Lanka's ethnic Sinhalese majority do not want foreigners to get involved in prosecuting such cases. The same nationalism that underpinned the long conflict is also undermining national reconciliation. Indeed, many Sinhalese are unrepentant, as they proudly tell you that theirs is the first country in the world to eliminate terrorism at home.

Since the cessation of the conflict, the Sri Lankan economy has enjoyed a "peace dividend", with the economy growing in the 6–7% range. But the Sri Lankan economy could be doing so much better. The civil war left deep unresolved scars and fractures on Sri Lankan society, which are also undermining the country's further economic development. As the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has said, there is much that the government could do to promote social cohesion and reconciliation.

Rebuilding trust in the state and between communities will be necessary since large parts of the country have been physically, politically, socially and economically separated from each other for much of the past three decades. Further, the military is still holding much land that it seized, and



this should be returned to its rightful owners. This would enable communities of displaced people to return home. But according to a report by the Oakland Institute, the military has engaged in large-scale property development, running luxury tourist resorts and business ventures on land seized from local populations.<sup>21</sup> This raises serious questions about the government's seriousness regarding national reconciliation.

The size of the military force in the North and the East should be reduced to a level that is less intrusive and intimidating. As the Oakland Institute also reports, some six years after the end of the war, the traditional Tamil homeland is still under heavy military occupation by at least 160,000 mostly Sinhalese soldiers, one for every six Tamil civilians. And as the International Truth and Justice Project–Sri Lanka has documented in its report on torture, sexual violence, arbitrary detention and more during the 2009–2015 period, ethnic Tamils continue to face grave and comprehensive challenges in post-war Sri Lanka.<sup>22</sup> The report highlights the comprehensive, wide-ranging and pernicious nature of Sri Lanka's state security apparatus, which continues to operate with impunity. The country's state security apparatus does not seem to have changed its ways since Sirisena assumed the presidency.

In the words of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Prince Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, "Sri Lanka must confront and defeat the demons of its past. It must create institutions that work, and ensure accountability. It must seize the great opportunity it currently has to provide all its people with truth, justice, security and prosperity."<sup>23</sup>

The Sri Lankan government has indeed a daunting agenda before it. But the stakes are high, and achieving success is imperative. We could, for example, imagine a prosperous and peaceful Sri Lanka becoming the Singapore of South Asia one day in the future. However, continued disgruntlement by the country's Tamil minority could feed future instability, and drag the country down again. President Sirisena will need to demonstrate great political will and courage than he has done to date to chart the country on a path of stability and security.

### INDIA'S CASTE SYSTEM IS STILL ALIVE AND WELL

"I can sweep your living room, Ma'am, but I cannot sweep your garden. Someone from another (lower) caste must do that".

This fragment of a conversation between an Indian maid and her Western employer reveals many things. Despite some waning in India's

caste system, it is still alive and well, even in a big city like New Delhi. The caste system is more complex than the simple four groups presented in introductions to Indian society. And it continues to divide society, restricting opportunity for large numbers of Indian citizens and preventing the nation from realizing its full human potential.

Academics are still debating the origin of India's caste system. All societies are of course shaped by social stratification, and that was more marked before modernization. India's caste system has now endured longer than most others, and seems more rigid. Some argue that it became more rigid under British colonial rule, with the British appointing only upper-caste members to its colonial government.

The caste system is typically classified into four castes, namely, Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants) and Shudras (artisans). Dalits or untouchables were excluded from this classification. In reality, there are thousands of sub-castes. And even within the Dalit, who account for over 200 million of India's total population 1.3 billion, there are reportedly more than 900 sub-castes.

The term Dalit means in Hindu "ground", "suppressed", "crushed" or "broken to pieces". Traditionally, Dalits have worked in "impure" occupations involving leatherwork, butchering, removal of rubbish, animal carcasses, and cleaning streets, latrines and sewers. Hence, there is an argument for separating them from other castes. While upper castes were happy to employ Dalit for these tasks, even today some Dalits are keen to keep their monopoly over these occupations.

Discrimination against lower castes is illegal under India's constitution. And since 1950, the government has implemented a number of affirmative action initiatives to improve socio-economic conditions, such as college entry quotas and job reservations. There certainly has been much progress in the situation of Dalits, especially in the urban environment. Some Dalit success stories include Ram Nath Kovind who was elected as India's 14th president in July 2017. Kovind is the second Dalit to become Indian president, after K. R. Narayanan who held office from 1997 to 2002. In addition, K. G. Balakrishnan was Chief Justice, Mayawati Kumari was Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and Meira Kumar was the first female speaker of the Indian parliament.

Today, Dalits are doing much better than before in terms of education, health and poverty. Inter-caste marriage is also increasing, though limited in this country where arranged marriages are still all too common. Despite these positive trends, Dalit poverty is twice the national average and dis-

crimination on the ground remains endemic, especially in rural areas where most Indians live. In parts of India, Dalit communities are still denied access to community water sources, denied service by barbers, served tea in separate cups, barred from entering shops, excluded from temples and prevented from taking part in community religious and ceremonial functions. Not surprisingly, most people of low-caste background remain low in the social order today, and most of those from the higher castes are still top of the social pecking order today.

In 2007, the UN found that “de facto segregation of Dalits persists” and highlighted systematic abuse against Dalits including torture and extrajudicial killings, an “alarming” extent of sexual violence against Dalit women, and caste discrimination in post-tsunami relief.<sup>24</sup> It called for effective measures to implement laws on discrimination and affirmative action, and sought proper protection for Dalits and tribal communities against acts of “discrimination and violence.” Human Rights Watch reports that Dalits endure segregation in housing, schools and access to public services.<sup>25</sup> They are denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions and routinely abused at the hands of the police and upper-caste community members who enjoy the state’s protection.

Manmohan Singh became the first sitting Indian prime minister to openly acknowledge the parallel between the practice of “untouchability” and the crime of apartheid. Singh described “untouchability” as a “blot on humanity” adding that “even after 60 years of constitutional and legal protection and state support, there is still social discrimination against Dalits in many parts of our country.”

Human Rights Watch documents how Indian schools persistently discriminate against Dalit, tribal and Muslim children, denying them their right to education.<sup>26</sup> Four years after an ambitious education law went into effect in India guaranteeing free schooling to every child ages 6–14, almost every child is enrolled, yet nearly half are likely to drop out before completing their elementary education because of caste or other forms of discrimination at school.

Another Human Rights Watch report from 2014 documents the coercive nature of “manual scavenging.”<sup>27</sup> Across India, “manual scavengers” collect human excrement on a daily basis, and carry it away in cane baskets for disposal, despite long-standing legislation and government policy to end manual scavenging. More than 1.3 million Dalits—mostly women—clear human waste from dry pit latrines, while men do the more physically demanding cleaning of sewers and septic tanks. The report describes the

barriers people face in leaving manual scavenging, including threats of violence and eviction from local residents but also threats, harassment and unlawful withholding of wages by local officials.

In many ways, the next phase of the Asian Century could well belong to India, which will become Asia's most populous country in 2022, and is the world's fastest-growing large economy. But for India to realize its great potential, it will be necessary to address very seriously its discrimination, prejudice and persecution of lower castes, women, indigenous people and also religious minorities, especially Muslims.

Before we complete our quick overview of India's caste system, please don't think that it is the only country with an untouchable class. Japan has a similar outcast group, the Burakumin, who are at the bottom of the Japanese social ladder. Like in India, the Burakumin worked in occupations like executioners, undertakers, workers in slaughterhouses, butchers or tanners. Japan's Burakumin can still be subject to discrimination especially in the context of marriages, for which background searches are often made. A high-profile case of discrimination was that of Hiromu Nonaka, a Chief Cabinet Secretary, a natural candidate for prime minister in the 1990s, who was reportedly sidelined because of his Burakumin origin.

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Discrimination, prejudice and persecution are some of the social ills that are holding back Asia's economic and social development. In the next chapter, we will explore another social issue, the demographic dilemmas that afflicting both Asia's rapidly aging societies and those with large youth bulges entering labor market.

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