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Séminaire recherche. Culture, Institutions, and the Roots
of Gender Inequality: 450 Years of Portuguese
Colonialism in India

Culture, Institutions, and the Roots of Gender Inequality: 450 Years of Portuguese Colonialism in India

RÉSUMÉ

When are economic phenomena persistent over time, and when are they not? If they are, do inequalities persist forever, or do they converge, and if so, at what speed? By analyzing the Indian state of Goa, this research makes use of a historical quasi-natural experiment to document the persistent effect of Portuguese (catholic) colonialism in a South Asian context. To achieve econometric identification, I apply a spatial regression discontinuity design alongside a border that was abandoned in the 18th century. The same institutions were in place on both sides of this former border for almost 250 years. However, only on one side, the colonizers imposed what I characterize as a “cultural treatment”, which mainly pertained to education and societal gender norms. This provides a rare opportunity to isolate and identify the effect of culture, holding constant geography, income, and institutions. I find that historically induced gaps in male education can be closed within roughly one generation. Outcomes pertaining to females, on the other hand, are far more rigid, highlighting the differential degree of persistence. Inequalities in female education do converge, albeit at a much slower speed, while male-biased sex ratios appear not to move at all. I conclude that institutions, combined with the right incentives and equal infrastructural investment, can be able to overcome differences in specific important outcomes. Yet, when it comes to deep-rooted cultural norms such as male son preferences, they appear to be little effective.

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