

THE WIDE DISPARITIES IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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India is now one of the fastest-growing economies globally. However, this growth has not resulted in a corresponding increase in its Human Development Index (HDI). The HDI is a composite statistical measure created by the United Nations Development Programme to evaluate and compare the level of human development in different regions around the world. It was introduced in 1990 as an alternative to conventional economic measures such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which do not consider the broader aspects of human development. The HDI assesses a country's average accomplishment in three aspects: a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. According to the Human Development Report of 2021-22, India ranks 132 out of 191 countries, behind Bangladesh (129) and Sri Lanka (73).

Given India's size and large population, it is critical to address the subnational or State-wise disparities in human development. Doing so will help India realise its demographic dividend. For this purpose, I have developed a new index using the methodology suggested by the UNDP and the National Statistical Office (NSO) which measures human development on a subnational level for 2019-20.

The HDI is calculated using four indicators: life expectancy at birth, mean years of schooling, expected years of schooling, and Gross National Income (GNI) per capita. Life expectancy estimates are taken from the Sample Registration System, and mean and expected years of schooling are extracted from National Family Health Survey-5. Since estimates for GNI per capita are unavailable at the subnational level, gross state domestic product (GSDP) per capita is used as a proxy indicator to measure the standard of living. GSDP (PPP at constant prices 2011-12) is gathered from the Reserve Bank of India's Handbook of Statistics on Indian States. GSDP per capita is estimated using the population projection provided by the Registrar General of India's office. The methodology involves calculating the geometric mean of the normalised indices for the three dimensions of human development while applying the maximum and minimum values recommended by the UNDP and NSO. HDI scores range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating higher levels of human development.

The subnational HDI shows that while some States have made considerable progress, others continue to struggle. Delhi occupies the top spot and Bihar occupies the bottom spot. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that Bihar, unlike the previous HDI reports, is no longer considered a low human development State.

The five States with the highest HDI scores are Delhi, Goa, Kerala, Sikkim, and Chandigarh. Delhi and Goa have HDI scores above 0.799, which makes them equivalent to countries in Eastern Europe with a very high level of human development. Nineteen States, including Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Haryana, Punjab, Telangana, Gujarat, and Andhra Pradesh, have scores ranging between 0.7 and 0.799 and are classified as high human development States.

The bottom five States are Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Assam, with medium levels of human development. This category also includes States such as Odisha, Rajasthan, and West Bengal, which have HDI scores below the national average. The scores of these low-performing States resemble those of African countries such as Congo, Kenya, Ghana, and Namibia.

Despite having the highest SGDP per capita among larger States, Gujarat and Haryana have failed to translate this advantage into human development and rank 21 and 10, respectively. Conversely, Kerala stands out with consistently high HDI values over the years, which can be attributed to its high literacy rates, robust healthcare infrastructure, and relatively high income levels. Bihar, however, has consistently held the lowest HDI value among the States, with high poverty levels, low literacy rates, and poor healthcare infrastructure being the contributing factors. It is worth noting that the impact of COVID-19 on subnational HDI is not captured here. The full impact of COVID-19 on human development will be known when post-pandemic estimates are available.

One of the main reasons for this discrepancy is that economic growth has been unevenly distributed. The top 10% of the Indian population holds over 77% of the wealth. This has resulted in significant disparities in access to basic amenities, healthcare and education. Another reason is that while India has made significant progress in reducing poverty and increasing access to healthcare and education, the quality of such services remains a concern. For example, while the country has achieved near-universal enrolment in primary education, the quality of education remains low.

Governments must prioritise human development alongside economic growth to ensure that the benefits of growth are more evenly distributed. This requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses income inequality and gender inequality; improves access to quality social services; addresses environmental challenges; and provides for greater investment in social infrastructure such as healthcare, education, and basic household amenities including access to clean water, improved sanitation facility, clean fuel, electricity and Internet in underdeveloped States. India must prioritise investments in human development and job creation, particularly for its youth.

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