Spatial patterns of human wellbeing

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This article builds on an examination of India: A nation in transition published in the Geography Bulletin Vol. 47, No. 1 2015. In doing so, it examines the spatial and social patterns of wellbeing evident in India today. In a subsequent article we examine the factors that contribute to these spatial patterns.

There are great variations in the wellbeing experienced by people across India. These differences have both a spatial and social dimension. In other words, how Indians live depends, to a large extent, on where they live and their social circumstances.

A tale of ‘two India’s’

Economic growth and development has been most rapid in India’s southern, western and northwestern states, while the core-north, central and eastern states have experienced deteriorating socioeconomic standards. This ‘tale of two countries’ is a legacy of India’s socioeconomic, political and cultural complexity.

Historically, some princely states were more prosperous than others, resulting in variations in socioeconomic development across the various regions of India. The south and the west of India have traditionally been much more affluent than the north and the east. Also, the various invasions experienced by the north (including those of the Greeks, Mongols and Muslims) held back the developmental prospects of the region for centuries. The north was also the part of the country that suffered the most exploitative aspects of British colonialism, a legacy that continues to be reflected in terms of regional socioeconomic polarization with the south and western regions achieving advances in human wellbeing while the north and east struggle to deliver improvements in people’s quality of life. The south largely avoided the disruptive impacts of invasion and colonialism has less poverty.

The economic and development policies pursued by the Indian Government post 1991 have tended to reinforce existing patterns of spatial inequality. This is because the economic growth, which resulted from the policy change, has been focused in particular regions. While western states such as Maharashtra and Gujarat and southern states including Andhara Pradesh and Kerala are making progress in reducing poverty and raising living standards, India’s northern states, especially Uttar Pradesh and eastern ones including Bihar and Odisha (formerly Orissa), remain among the country’s poorest states.

Andhara Pradesh is an example of a state that has benefited from the shift in economic policy. It is one India’s most developed states, with a booming IT industry based in its capital city, Hyderabad. There has also been an effort to develop the state’s rural areas. As a result, it has been able to lower its poverty rate to 9 per cent, well below the India-wide average of 22 per cent. By way of contrast, Odisha, a state in which corruption is widespread, the poverty rate is 33 per cent. This can, at least in part, can be explained by the entrenched culture of feudalism found in rural areas.

While India has experienced relatively high rates of economic growth over the past decade or so, many minorities (and regions) appear to have been marginalised by the policies. For example, India’s focus on the promotion of corporate services such as telephony and ICT rather than on developing the country’s manufacturing base has resulted in large segments of the Indian population being excluded from the development process. In opening its markets to global competition, India’s small-scale self-employed population (a large percentage of which are Muslims) has been especially
The map below shows the GDP per capita for each of India's states. Goa, on the west coast, has the highest GDP per capita. Bihar in the northeast has the lowest. Generally, states in the north and northeast are the most disadvantaged on these measures. The next map show that states such as Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu dominate India's economy in terms of their share of total GDP. The subsequent map shows the percentage of each state's population living below the poverty line. Chhattisgarh is the worst state on this measure with nearly 40 per cent of its population below the poverty line. There are also maps showing the pattern of life expectancy, the pattern of fertility and the pattern of female literacy.

**GDP per capita, Indian states, 2011–2012**
INDIA: Spatial patterns of human wellbeing

Share of India’s GDP by state, 2009–2010

India: Percentage of the population below the poverty line, 2012.

There are, as the maps illustrate, very significant spatial variations in the level human wellbeing experienced by people in India. Some states have been better positioned to enhance the standard of living of their people than others.