

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 Andhra 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 (formally Orissa), remain among the country's poorest states.

Andhra 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



Street cleaner, Mumbai. Source: Wikimedia Commons

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

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Roadside repairs, Agra. Source: Wikimedia Commons

disadvantaged. As a result, one-third of the 200 million Muslims living in India continue to live below the poverty line. More generally, the top five percent of Indian households hold 38 per cent of total assets while the bottom 60 per cent own just 13 per cent.

Also, India's caste system still casts a shadow over the lives of many Indians, especially those of the Dalit caste (the untouchable). Dalits are at the bottom of the Hindu caste system and despite laws to protect them they still face widespread discrimination in India. While India's constitution bans the practice of untouchability – in which members of India's higher castes will not touch anything that has come in physical contact with the Dalits, the lowest caste – the practice is still widespread. Examples of discrimination include the local barber refusing to cut the hair of a dalit man, a group of children being forced to eat lunch separately from their classmates, and a women who is required to walk for hours to fetch water because she are not allowed to use the public tap in their village. Very few manage to break out of the cycle of poverty and caste that they are born into. Untouchability helps to lock Dalits, who traditionally do the dirtiest manual jobs, in their occupations.

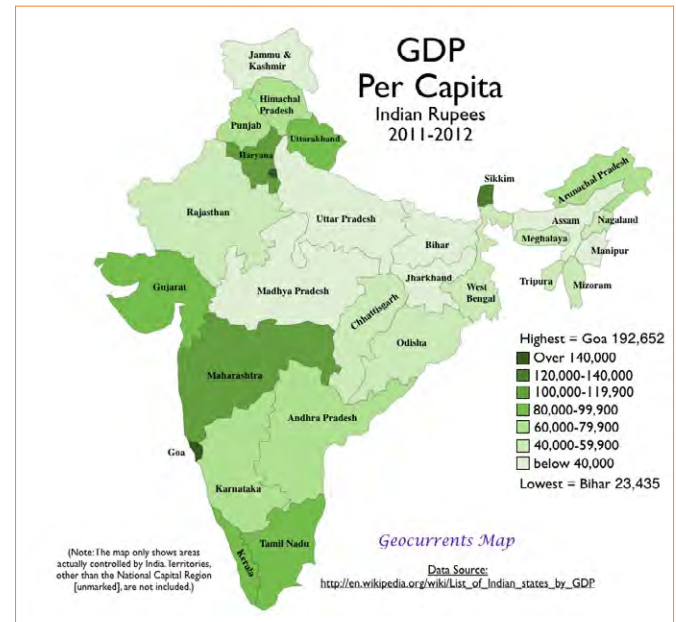
Caste still shapes the way the India is run. The Indian government and bureaucracy are dominated by the upper castes and it helps to explain why 15 per cent of the population is kept on the very margins of society by the circumstances of their birth.

Spatial patterns

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



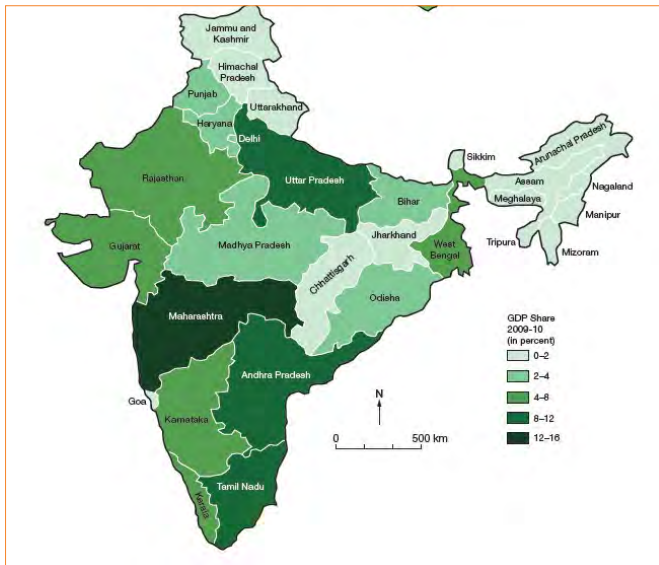
Source: <http://www.geocurrents.info/place/southeast-asia/new-maps-of-india-and-of-the-indian-economy>



Adivasi couple, Chhattisgarh. Source: Wikimedia Commons

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

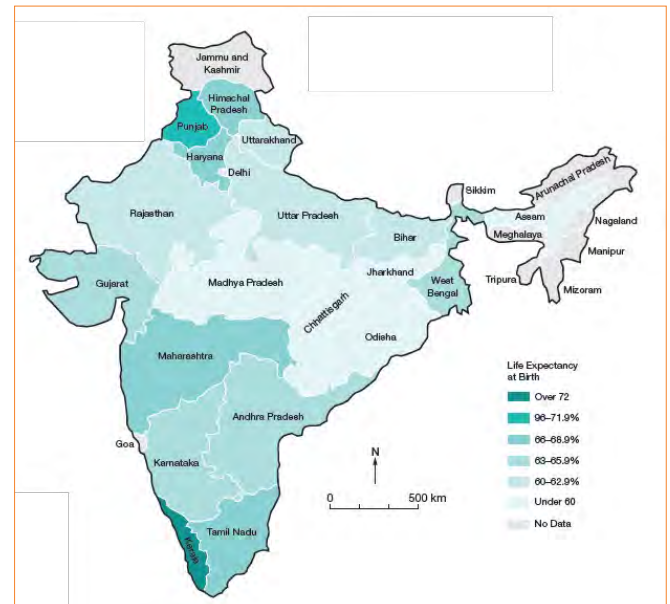


Source: Pearson Education Australia



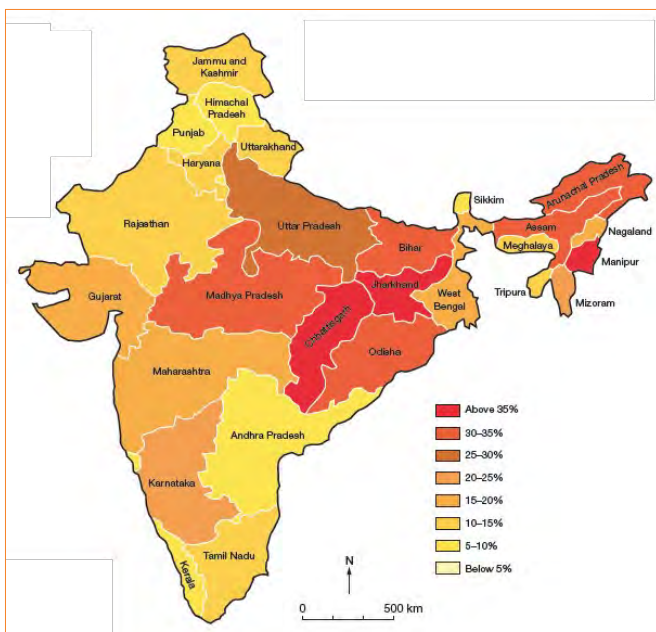
Women and children, Andhra Pradesh. Source: Wikimedia Commons

India: Life expectancy at birth, 2012



Source: Pearson Education Australia

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



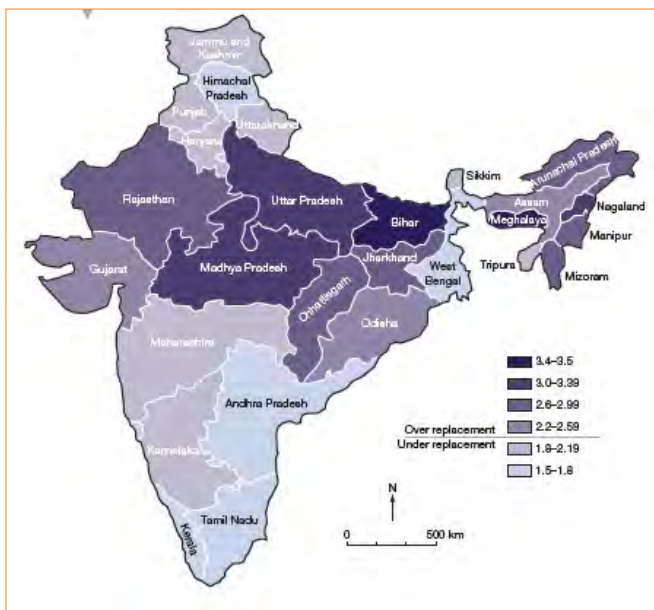
Source: Pearson Education Australia



Husking rice, Tamil Nadu. Source: Wikimedia Commons

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India: Total fertility rate, 2012

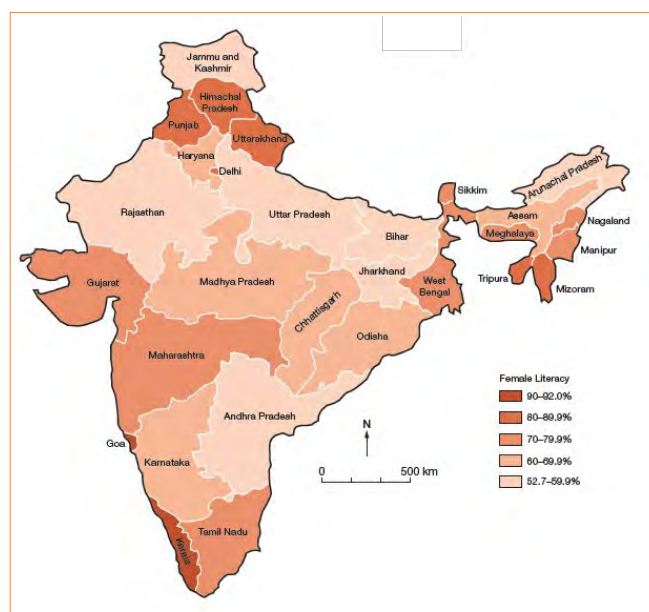


Source: Pearson Education Australia



Young girl, Tamil Nadu. Source: Wikimedia Commons

India: Female literacy rate



Source: Pearson Education Australia



Elderly street vendor, Mumbai. Source: Wikimedia Commons

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.