

Chetan Choithani



OF LEFT-BEHIND PLACES AND PEOPLE: INEQUALITY, LABOUR MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

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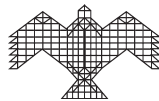


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**Inequality, labour migration and
development in India**

Chetan Choithani



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Abstract

This paper looks at the relationship between inequality, labour migration and development in India. It examines migration-inequality-development relationship with a focus on those who are left behind in the process of structural economic transformation and livelihood change in India. Processes of transformation are typically understood through the active agents that bring about that change. Migration is largely explored through the actions of migrants but there is a dearth of understanding of how those who do not migrate, either by choice or lack of options, are affected by migration. While recent years have witnessed substantial rise in labour mobility in India, socio-economic inequalities often mean migration options are not available to all individuals and households, nor are the outcomes same for all members of the participating households. But it is not adequately known whether and how migration relates to wellbeing/illbeing of the left-behind groups, and under what conditions the left-behind gain or lose from migration. This paper reviews the implications of labour migration on the left behind populations in India, and intersecting role inequalities play in the process. The discussion in this article also lays out the larger context of regional disparities in development in India that underpin much of work-related mobility – from backward regions to geographies that provide better life and livelihood opportunities. With a focus on these two interrelated aspects of inequalities that include spatial inequalities and inequalities between different socio-economic population groups, this paper, based on critical survey of literature, argues that these inequalities are creating *left-behind places* and *left-behind populations*. The paper maps out broad contours of left-behind geographies in India, and for the left-behind populations it identifies three groups who face constraints on their mobility including i) *left behind households* that are unable to migrate due to lack of financial and social capital, ii) *left behind women* who face socio-cultural restrictions on labour mobility, and iii) *left behind (educated) youth* whose mobility aspirations remain unrealised due to scarce availability of decent jobs. The paper also identifies the potential implications of being left behind and argues for the need to better understand and address the socio-political and development implications of these processes.

Keywords: migration; inequality; development; India; left-behind women; left-behind households; left-behind youth.

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1. Introduction

This paper looks at the relationship between inequality, labour migration and development in India. It examines migration-inequality-development relationship with a focus on those who are left behind in the process of structural economic transformation and livelihood change in India. The rationale for this work stems from a dearth of understanding of how those who do not migrate, either by choice or lack of options, are affected by migration. Processes of transformation are typically understood through the active agents that bring about that change. Migration is largely explored through the actions of migrants but there are also those who are affected by the migration processes even if they are not the most active participants in it. Indeed, a picture of the process of migration is incomplete if it leaves out those who are affected by the same conditions, but are unable, for material or other reasons, to migrate. Those who are left behind cannot escape the conditions that have forced the others to leave. In fact, the conditions may be worse, in that the migrants can take a substantial portion of the local economic and social capital with them. In other words, a holistic picture of migration processes and outcomes warrants an understanding of also those who are left behind.

The larger context of this work is provided by the major socio-economic transformation currently underway in India, and its inequitable effects for different regions and socio-economic groups.¹ Following the economic reforms since the early 1990s, India has witnessed rapid economic growth. This high growth has been accompanied by a structural economic change in which the importance of agriculture sector has diminished, while the nonfarm, urban-based economic activities have become more significant in the framework of national income. The shift in the sectoral composition of income from rural agriculture activities to urban nonfarm jobs has not however resulted in concomitant rise in decent alternative employment options for a large majority of India's population. Much of India's economic growth post-1990s is driven by capital and skill-intensive service and business sectors² which has created stable, formal sector employment opportunities for a small section of highly educated workers in the country, while those without the education and skills to participate in the new economy – which constitutes a sizable majority of country's population – find themselves in precarious, informal

1 Choithani, Van Duijne & Nijman 2021; Pani forthcoming

2 Datt & Ravallion 2011; Kotwal, Ramaswami & Wadhwa 2011

sector jobs and thus are excluded from the benefits of economic boom. Recent patterns of economic growth have also led to geographical concentration of economic activities and employment in a few large cities which has exacerbated spatial economic inequalities. This has led to substantial increase in labour migration from less developed regions to places that provide livelihoods. While this has inspired much research on the role of migration in reducing poverty and promoting development³, the effects of migration for those left behind has not received the attention it deserves. Socio-economic inequalities often mean migration options are not available to all individuals and households, nor are the outcomes same for all members of the participating households. Yet, it is not adequately known whether and how migration relates to wellbeing/illbeing of the left-behind groups, and under what conditions the left-behind gain or lose from migration.

Against this background, this paper reviews the implications of labour migration on the left behind populations in India, and intersecting role socio-economic inequalities play in the process. In so doing, this paper situates inequalities, marginalization and exclusion in the context of rapid economic change in India, and also

provides the larger context of regionally unbalanced development in India that underpin much of labour mobility from backward regions to geographies that provide better life and livelihood options. The discussion concentrates on two interrelated aspects of inequalities that include spatial inequalities and inequalities between different socio-economic population groups, and, based on the critical survey of literature, argues that these two forms of inequalities are creating *left-behind places* and *left-behind populations* that necessitate a comprehensive understanding of their socio-political and development implications.

The structure of this paper is as follows. The next section discusses the dynamics of structural economic transformation in India, and as such lays out the broader context and significance of this work. Section 3 focuses on the uneven regional development and places left behind. While the focus is on India, the discussion in this section places these issues in the wider global context of deepening spatial inequalities and its implications. Section 4 considers the relationship between migration, inequalities and left-behind populations, and concentrates on three left behind groups who face constraints on their mobility on account of various socio-economic inequalities. These include: i) *households* that are unable to migrate

3 Deshingker & Farrington 2009

due to lack of financial and social capital, ii) *women* who face socio-cultural restrictions on labour mobility, and iii) *youth* whose mobility aspirations remain unrealised due to scarce availability of decent jobs. In each case, the discussion also identifies the potential implications of being left behind. The final section concludes.

2. Dynamics of structural transformation in India

India is in the midst of a major socio-economic transformation. Following the liberalization reforms since the early 1990s, India has achieved rapid economic growth. These reforms have also fundamentally altered the nature of Indian economy and livelihoods. The significance of agriculture sector has diminished, and recent economic growth has been led by urban-based nonfarm sectors making use of migrant labour from rural areas. Cities and towns now account for nearly two-thirds of national income in India.⁴ At the same time, this has not resulted into more permanent migration and urbanization, and much of the labour migration in India is of temporary, circular nature.⁵ The growing importance of urban incomes in rural lives and livelihoods notwithstanding, most migrants find jobs

in the informal economy characterised by high precarity.⁶ The precariousness and uncertainty of urban jobs as well as a complex mix of socio-cultural reasons mean that migrants continue to remain connected with origin villages.⁷ In other words, structural transformation in India has created new opportunities and precarities at once. From the perspective of this research, there are three interlinked elements of this transition: livelihood shifts out of agriculture, rise in rural-urban labour migration and inequalities and precarities in the process of livelihood transition.

First, the past three decades have witnessed massive shifts of employment out of agriculture. Agriculture still remains the mainstay for the largest share of the workforce, but the sector has been under tremendous stress to support lives and livelihoods. Between 1990 and 2019, the share of agriculture sector in national income more than halved – from 33 percent to 16 percent.⁸ Although the process of structural economic change inevitably involves sectoral composition of income shifting towards nonfarm activities, agriculture sector also witnessed policy neglect, particularly in the first decade of liberalization reforms. The annual growth rate of public investment in

4 Planning Commission 2011, p. 378

5 Kundu 2003; Deshingkar & Farrington 2009; Tumbe 2012; Choithani 2017

6 Breman 1996

7 De Haan 2002

8 Mehrotra et al. 2013; World Bank 2021

agriculture was 4 percent in 1980s, which declined to 1.9 percent in 1990s.⁹ Compounding these challenges facing Indian agriculture is the progressive fragmentation of already small land parcels over time, owing to demographic pressures and intergenerational transfers of land. Farming in India has traditionally involved smallholding which means that agriculture sector has always faced the problem of underemployment, or disguised unemployment. But these pressures have intensified due to further diminution in average land size over the past few decades. In India, land transfers typically involve intergenerational inheritance of land from parents to children, and persistently high fertility over the past few decades has caused subdivision of fixed quantity of land within the family, resulting in even smaller average land parcels. Between 1970-71 and 2015-16, average landholding size more than halved from 2.28 hectare to 1.08 hectare (Figure 1). The combined effect of these processes has been that the share of people dependent on farm employment has been declining rapidly in recent years. Data from successive rounds of Indian Census show that between 1991 and 2001, over 7 million workers whose main occupation was cultivation quit farming. This trend accelerated in the

following decade, with 8.6 million main cultivators leaving farm work during 2001-2011.¹⁰ More recent estimates based on National Sample Survey and Periodic Labour Force Survey data show that between 2004 and 2016 there has been a net loss of 40 million jobs in agriculture, and for the first time in the history of independent India the share of agricultural employment has fallen to less than 50 percent.¹¹ The real magnitude of these livelihood shifts out of agriculture is perhaps even greater, and with an average household size of 5 members, 40 million jobs losses in agriculture means that 200 million people are affected in their daily lives in this transformation.¹² This transition has also produced significant distress, visible in the spate of farmers' suicides across the country.¹³

Second, this transition out of agriculture parallels substantial increase in labour migration in India. The highly seasonal nature of agriculture incomes means that India's rural past has never been sedentary, and labour migration has traditionally formed a key component of livelihoods of many rural households across India.¹⁴ But recent

9 Gillespie & Kadiyala 2012, p. 175

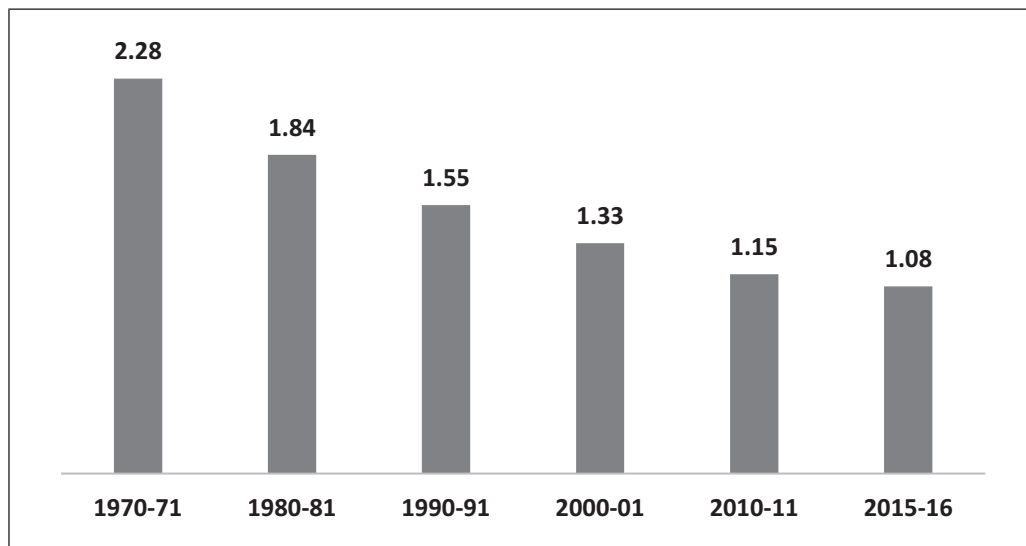
10 Census of India 1991, 2001, 2011a

11 Himanshu 2011; Thomas 2012; Mehrotra et al. 2013; Mehrotra et al. 2014; Abraham 2017; Van Duijne & Nijman 2019

12 Choithani, Van Duijne & Nijman 2021

13 Banerjee 2019; Pani & Banerjee 2019

14 De Haan 2002; Tumbe 2012

Figure 1: Average landholdings in India, 1970-71 to 2015-16 (in hectare)

Source: Ministry of Agriculture 2019.

years have witnessed unprecedented surge in labour mobility.¹⁵ It is estimated that over 100 million people remain on the move for their livelihoods, and that migrants constitute 20 percent of the total workforce of 500 million people.¹⁶ Labour migration in India predominantly involves semi-permanent, seasonal and circular moves, with migrants working outside the villages but remaining firmly connected with their origin places. Much of these temporary moves are unaccounted for in the official data sources which are geared to capture more permanent forms of migration.

This circular mobility is the reason why migrants are variously described as ‘footloose labour’¹⁷ and ‘unsettled settlers’¹⁸; this non-permanent migration has also kept the overall urbanization levels low in India.¹⁹ Although circular, recent evidence shows that migrants now spend longer duration away from their origin places, suggesting the rising significance of nonlocal incomes in households’ lives and livelihoods.²⁰ Indeed, rural India is witnessing what Rigg, Salmanca & Parnwell call as “a delocalization of life and living”.²¹ Another important change concerns

15 Deshingkar & Farrington 2009; Choithani 2017; Tumble 2018; Choithani, Van Duijne & Nijman 2021

16 Deshingkar & Akhter 2009; Government of India 2017

17 Breman 1996

18 De Haan 1997

19 Kundu 2003

20 Choithani, Van Duijne & Nijman 2021

21 Rigg, Salmanca & Parnwell 2012, p. 1470

migration destinations. Earlier migration streams in India predominantly involved rural to rural circulation of labour. While rural-rural migration continues, rising agrarian stress and urban-centric nature of economic growth are changing the patterns of migration, with rural to urban migration rising in significance.²² In India, urban economic growth has come to play a more central role in eliminating poverty in the post-reform period, and returns from migration to cities and towns have increased.²³

Third, these processes of economic transformation and livelihood change are marked by various spatial and socio-economic inequalities. These inequalities have a bearing on the course of transformation, and the transformation is, in turn, generating new inequalities.²⁴ The uneven geography of development in India means that there are huge regional variations in agrarian pressures and availability of alternative jobs. And these inequalities have grown starker since the economic reforms of early 1990s when balanced spatial development that formed part of early Indian development planning post-independence was thrown out of the window to pave way for market forces to determine economic geography

(see below). The more remunerative, alternative nonfarm jobs have come to be concentrated in large cities, mostly in western and southern Indian states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. On the other hand, the states in the northern and eastern parts of the country including Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh where agrarian decline has been most pronounced in recent years²⁵ have been left behind. It is important to note that there are wide intrastate disparities in development, too. Indeed, within the advanced states in the west and south, incomes and jobs have concentrated in a few big cities which has produced uneven spatial dividends within these states. For example, in Karnataka, the north and south diverge enormously, with the former lagging far behind the latter on income and human development indicators. In 2017-18, whereas nine of the 10 districts with highest per capita incomes were from the south, nine of the 10 districts with the lowest per capita incomes were in the north.²⁶ Karnataka's capital city of Bengaluru boasts of being the IT capital of India and is widely integrated with global economy as a key resource city²⁷,

22 National Sample Survey 2010

23 Deshingkar & Grimm 2005; Datt & Ravillion 2011

24 Pani forthcoming

25 Bajar 2020; Choithani, Van Duijne & Nijman 2021

26 Government of Karnataka 2018, p. 43

27 Pani 2009

while Yadgir district, just a few hundred kilometres north, lacks the most basic infrastructure with nearly 90 percent of households not even having toilet facility within their housing premise.²⁸ In other words, India's economic transformation that is characterised by wide geographical inequalities within and between states has created left-behind places – geographies that have experienced economic/agrarian decline but scarce alternative nonfarm employment.

The response of the individuals and households inhabiting these left-behind geographies has been to migrate for alternative jobs. However, this process of livelihood transition remains beset with precarities and inequalities. While there is compelling evidence that shows that migration can provide an important escape route out of vulnerability and promote sustainable human development outcomes²⁹, these choices are not available to all. As McDowell & De Haan note, “migration options are not, as hypothesized by individualistic theories, open to all.”³⁰ Socio-economic inequalities often determine who migrates and benefits from migration. Migration requires financial resources, social networks

and information on work destinations, and many aspirants lack these means to successfully partake in migration. Additionally, attributes such as age and gender and social roles pertaining to these demographic characteristics also play a key role. The precarious nature of India's rural transition where a majority of new nonfarm, urban-based jobs are increasingly informal with no job security and social protection can lead to aspirational-mismatch where potential participants, particularly young adults, choose to stay back in the rural areas than to migrate to the towns. In other words, inequalities of various kinds can lead to different population groups being left behind in the transition process. These can include: i) *households* that are not able to migrate, ii) *women* who face socio-cultural restrictions on their work-related mobility, and iii) *youth* who do not to migrate due to failed aspirations. In other words, structural economic change in India is creating left-behind places and populations which have huge socio-political implications. In the next two sections, I focus on these left-behind places and people.

3. Uneven regional development and places left behind

At the global level, the past few years have witnessed resurfacing of uneven development as a key policy

28 Census of India 2011b

29 Deshingkar & Akhter 2009; Deshingkar & Farrington 2009; UNDP 2009; Pani 2019

30 McDowell & De Haan 1998, p. 21

issue. Importantly, there is increasing recognition that spatially unbalanced development can leave places behind which can have significant socio-political implications. Two major events have been crucial to direct attention to geographical inequalities. These include: election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States (US) in 2016; and in the same year the referendum in the United Kingdom (UK) on European Union's (EU) membership which ultimately resulted in UK's exit from EU in early 2020, ending 47-year-long relationship. In both instances, spatial economic inequalities seem to have shaped these political outcomes, and it was the discontented voters from the geographies of despair who used ballot boxes to express their anger and frustration on being left behind. As Rodríguez-Pose notes: "In recent years the places that "don't matter" have increasingly used the ballot box (and, in some cases, outright revolt) to rebel against the feeling of being left behind; against the feeling of lacking opportunities and future prospects."³¹ In the US, Donald Trump's victory was powered by voters in rural America and industrial Midwest.³² The incidence of poverty has historically been higher in rural than in urban America which

continues to be the case today.³³ And the erstwhile industrial heartland in the Midwest that once provided high-paying manufacturing jobs has suffered from years of deindustrialisation and economic decline, population loss, and physical decay – reasons why the region came to be called the Rust Belt.³⁴ In the UK, wealth and gainful employment have come to be concentrated in the Southeast, notably London, whereas the north has fallen behind.³⁵ Analysis of the relationship between structural transformation and economic growth in 85 cities in Great Britain between 1971 and 2014 shows that "many of the fastest growing cities have been in the southern half of Britain (roughly south of a line between the Severn and Humber) and most of the slowest growing cities have been in the north."³⁶ While the Brexit Leave vote did not reflect the simple north-south divide and won right across England and Wales³⁷, there was a geography to it which closely corresponded to the socio-economic differences across regions. The Brexit Leave vote came primarily from left-behind localities where economic and social decline caused political alienation to become entrenched. Thus:

31 Rodríguez-Pose 2018, p. 190

32 Whitkar 2016; Monnat & Brown 2018

33 Theide et al. 2017

34 Hackworth 2019

35 Rowthorn 2010

36 Tyler et al. 2017, p. 430

37 BBC 2021

The public vote for Brexit was anchored predominantly, albeit not exclusively, in areas of the country that are filled with pensioners, low-skilled and less well-educated bluecollar workers and citizens who have been pushed to the margins not only by the economic transformation of the country over recent decades but also by the values that have come to dominate a more socially liberal media and political class. In this respect the vote for Brexit was delivered by the ‘left behind’ – social groups that are united by a general sense of insecurity, pessimism and marginalisation, who do not feel as though elites, whether in Brussels or Westminster, share their values, represent their interests and genuinely empathise with their intense angst about rapid social, economic and cultural change.³⁸

In terms of how economics and politics coalesce at the community level, McKay’s study using British Election Study data shows that economic context holds significance in understanding perceived community representation, and living in low-income community is associated with negative views on community participation. This, in turn, leads to grievance wherein people are particularly negative about community representation when they believe that the national economy is more successful

than that of one’s local community.³⁹ The fall of some places in rank and clout has been particularly remarkable. For instance, in the US, Detroit in Michigan which once commanded the status of “Motor Car Capital of the World”⁴⁰ now suffers from among the highest poverty, unemployment and physical decay.⁴¹ In northern UK, the city of Liverpool, once known for its global cotton industry, is among the top 10 city councils with highest proportion of neighbourhoods facing extreme deprivation⁴² (though the economy of Liverpool is reviving and the majority Brexit vote there was for Remain). To be sure, this decline has a complex history, and is also rooted in social ills, such as racial tensions.⁴³ But they are also a product of policies. For instance, in the UK many of the cities that achieved higher economic performance than the national average in the past four decades (1971-2014), such as Cambridge, Reading, Southampton, “were assisted by British spatial policy to become centres of growth.”⁴⁴

Economic globalization is at the heart of these shifts. The globalization-induced economic restructuring that

38 Goodwin and Heath 2016, p. 331

39 McKay 2019

40 Bonello 1993, p. 177

41 Sugrue 1996; Hackworth 2019.

42 Lock 2019; also see Tyler et al. 2017.

43 Sugrue 1996

44 Tyler et al. 2017, p. 432

started in 1980s and accelerated towards the end of twentieth century has had profound effects on spatial patterns of development. The shift toward a free-market economy, characterised by unobstructed trade and discouragement of state regulation, has resulted into competitive advantage for some places while marginalising other localities in the increasingly integrated global economy. Much of the manufacturing has now moved to the developing countries that provide cheap labour which has contributed to the decline of old industrial centers of the developed world. Meanwhile, the economies of the countries in the Global North have come to dominate high-value, specialised service activities, such as finance and banking, which have added to the industrial decline in these countries. Indeed, the policies that facilitated the growth of financial industry were often harmful to manufacturing and other industrial activities. Crucially, moreover, the growth of specialised services located in major cities of advanced economies which created ‘global cities’ also debilitated the economic base of other places within these countries.⁴⁵ The challenges of these places facing decline and neglect were further compounded by state’s retreat from provisioning of social goods. The US and UK led

the way in this “neoliberal turn”⁴⁶, and it is perhaps not coincidental that voices against economic globalization have been the strongest in these two countries, emanating particularly from the left-behind geographies from within these nations.

But the US and UK are not alone, and geographical inequalities between and within the countries have increased the world over. Indeed, “a number of territories across the world are being left behind, experiencing long periods of decline. Whether it is Bihar in India, the central lowlands of Thailand, parts of East Germany, Champagne-Ardenne or Lorraine in France or Michigan and Ohio in the US”.⁴⁷ Over the past few decades, the economic policies have increasingly supported concentrated growth. The idea underpinning this development model is that there is a geographical logic to economic activity. Markets favour places that allow economic production at reduced costs and generate greater returns to scale, and this fosters geographical concentration of economic activity. This also leads to population densification as economic opportunities attract people to move to these places. This spatial clustering creates *agglomeration economies* that refer to “the benefits that come

45 Sassen 1991

46 Harvey 2005, p. 9

47 Rodríguez-Pose 2018, p. 196

when firms and people locate near one another together in cities and industrial clusters”.⁴⁸ These agglomeration effects also provide a key explanation for the existence of cities.⁴⁹ These densely populated places provide a conducive environment for efficient production of goods and services because they have access to a pool of skilled labour, network of complementary firms, and a critical mass of consumers of those goods and services. The co-location of complementary firms allows for sharing of physical infrastructure that reduces production costs as well as human resources that fosters innovation.⁵⁰ The conceptual roots of this thinking lie in Paul Krugman’s seminal work on *Geography and Trade* that sought to explain large agglomerations as arising from increasing returns, trade costs, differences in factor prices in which geography (distance) plays a key role; and this was the beginning of what later came to be known as *New Economic Geography*.⁵¹ Much of the agglomeration literature is focused on manufacturing, and the theoretical-empirical work on services-led agglomeration is scarce. Nonetheless, the argument increasingly appears to extend to

services, particularly some key sub-sectors such as business services where the “classical sources of agglomeration economies, in particular localisation and urbanisation externalities” continue to have relevance.⁵² Indeed, as Saskia Sassen’s work on global cities shows, globalization and territorial dispersion of economic activity has in fact created a need for central control and command centers, and in what may seem to be a puzzle “the more globalized the economy becomes, the higher the agglomeration of central functions in a relatively few sites” that provide specialised services and innovations to support geographically dispersed economic activity.⁵³

The World Bank has been a vocal supporter of this concentrated model of economic growth, arguing that it is associated with increased prosperity. This stance is reflected in its 2009 *World Development Report: Reshaping Economic Geography* that noted that the “geographically disadvantaged people cope every day with the reality that development does not bring economic prosperity everywhere at once; markets favor some places over others. But dispersing production more broadly does not necessarily foster prosperity.”⁵⁴ The report main argument is that economic

48 Glaesar 2010, p. 1

49 Scott & Stropher 2015; Scott 2017

50 Duranton & Puga 2004; Rosenthal & Strange 2011; Scott & Stropher 2015

51 Krugman 1991, 2011; also see Fujita & Krugman 2004

52 Meliciani & Savona 2015, 389

53 Sassen 1991, p. 5

54 World Bank 2009, xiii

growth is a geographically uneven process driven by *density* (population agglomeration, scale economies), *distance* (geographic mobility) and *division* (economic integration), and growth can be fostered by policies that facilitate agglomeration, factor mobility and economic integration within and between nations. In other words, wealth concentrates in some places more than others. “To get a part of this wealth, you have to get closer to it.”⁵⁵ The World Bank’s suggestion to address spatial imbalances in development is to institute social policies, such as those related to health, education and nutrition, to promote inclusive outcomes – a stance which deviates from its earlier position of economic austerity for social sector spending it advocated through the structural adjustment programmes which produced huge discontents.⁵⁶ Moreover, institutions to deliver social protection remain weak in many countries. Not unexpectedly, this concentrated growth model has also had the effect of widening spatial disparities. This effect has been particularly severe in many developing countries where globalization has increased overall national prosperity, but the economic growth has tended to concentrate in large urban centers.

This is particularly the case in India which has witnessed widening of geographical disparities since the economic reforms of early 1990s. It is not that regional inequality surfaced as an issue only after the liberalization reforms towards the end of the twentieth century. Indeed, differences in economic performance across the various regions has been a key historical feature of India’s development.⁵⁷ But Indian policymakers were cognisant of regional economic disparities and their implications for equitable growth. In the first four decades after country’s independence from the British rule in 1947, development planning thus sought to promote balanced regional development. This thinking is reflected in the second five-year plan (1956-61) document that noted:

In any comprehensive plan of development, it is axiomatic that the special needs of the less developed areas should receive due attention. The pattern of investment must be so devised as to lead to balanced regional development...as development proceeds and large resources become available for investment, the stress of developmental programmes should be on extending the benefit of investments to underdeveloped regions.⁵⁸

55 *ibid*, xix

56 Stiglitz 2002

57 Roy 2020

58 Planning Commission 1957, p. 36

In the centrally planned economy, influenced by the Soviet model, public sector was used as an engine of economic growth, and retained ownership of key industries. Private enterprise was regulated through licensing regime which determined the scale and location of private investment. This regulation of economic activity came at a cost. For the first three decades after the independence Indian economy grew at an average rate of 3.5 percent which came to be called the Hindu rate of growth.⁵⁹ But balanced regional development remained an important goal, and public sector was viewed as key to achieving this objective. Besides, several other policy initiatives showed this commitment to equitable development. For example, the key objective of Freight Equalization Policy 1952 that subsidized transport costs of raw materials, such as iron ore and minerals, so that cost of industrial inputs was the same everywhere in India was to promote balanced industrial growth across different parts of the country. Despite these policy initiatives, regional inequalities remained widespread as differences in several geographical, historical, and institutional factors also determined patterns of regional development which continue to shape these differences. For instance, a

study that compared the economic performance of different regions of India which were put under different colonial land revenue institutions of *zamindari* (where landlords collected revenues), *raiyatwari* (in which individual cultivators paid land revenue), and *mahalwari* (whereby village bodies were jointly responsible for the land revenue) found that places where landlords were put in-charge to collect land revenues from the cultivators had poorer economic outcomes post-independence (reflected in agriculture performance, public investment in education and health, as well as health and educational outcomes) than those places where these intermediaries were avoided. The study noted that these differences potentially arose because the oppressive nature of landlord-based system meant that cultivators saw their interests as different from the landlords which, in turn, precluded the opportunity for collective action.⁶⁰ In other cases, even though equitable regional development was the stated policy aim, Indian government's own measures undermined this goal. For example, Green Revolution reforms were systematically inserted in northwest states of Haryana and Punjab which brought prosperity in these states, while the economically backward state

⁵⁹ Kar & Sakhivel 2007, p. 69.

⁶⁰ Banerjee & Iyer 2005

of Bihar, located in the same Gangetic basin and thus suited for these agrarian reforms, was bypassed. Additionally, the Freight Equalization Policy that sought to promote industrial parity also wiped out the competitive advantage of backward states in eastern India.⁶¹ Nonetheless, there was some attempt to reconcile the development differences between the regions until 1980.

This goal has been abandoned subsequently. The Indian constitution includes the provision of Finance Commission, appointed every five years, that is mandated with a task of fair distribution of tax receipts between the federal and several state governments, and backward states often receive special grants for their developmental needs.⁶² But the Indian state no longer formally regulates the location of economic activities. Beginning in the 1980s, Indian policymakers introduced a slew of reform measures, including relaxations in industrial regulations and rationalization of the tax system, to improve economic performance of the country.⁶³ Economic policy change gathered momentum in early 1990s when, faced with the balance of payment crisis, Indian government initiated more systematic reforms and liberalised its

economy. Strict regulatory controls on private entrepreneurial activities that characterized the *License Raj* were removed, and foreign capital was invited to invest in Indian industries and businesses. This liberalization of Indian economy has resulted in faster economic growth and enabled the country to break away from the pattern of Hindu rate of growth.⁶⁴ India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew at an average annual rate of 5.6 percent in 1980s and 1990s and close to 7 percent since early 2000s (Figure 2), making the country one of the fastest growing economies of the world. The faster economic growth has also led to decline in overall poverty.⁶⁵ However, this new economic trajectory has also resulted in widening of regional inequalities, as noted earlier. The evidence shows that the average incomes and living standards across Indian states have tended to diverge in the period following the liberalization reforms. Economic growth is found to be positively associated with initial levels of development, and the Indian states with better human capital and physical infrastructure have been able to attract greater investment and achieve faster growth rates.⁶⁶ The deregulation of the economy has allowed private

61 Singh & Stern 2013

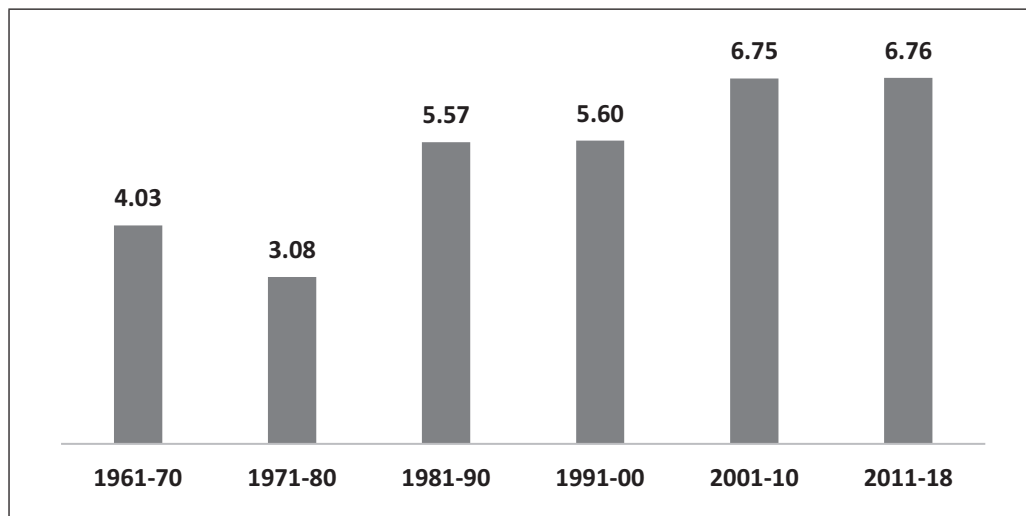
62 Government of India 1951; Finance Commission 2021

63 Rodrik 2002

64 Panagriya 2004

65 Deaton & Dreze 2002

66 Rao, Shand & Kalirajan 1999; Dasgupta et al. 2000; Kurian 2000; Sachs, Bajpai & Ramiah 2002

Figure 2: Average annual GDP growth rate in India, 1961-2018

Source: Author's calculations using data from World Bank's World Development Indicators, 2021; GDP at constant 2010 USD prices.

enterprise to flourish but private capital has favoured states that were ahead in development curve. The foreign capital shows signs of concentration in a few states, mostly in western and southern India. Between 2000 and 2012, six states including Maharashtra, Delhi, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh together accounted for over 70 per cent of foreign direct investment flows.⁶⁷

On the other hand, the backward states in the north and east of the country that include Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha have languished. Lagging far behind on demographic

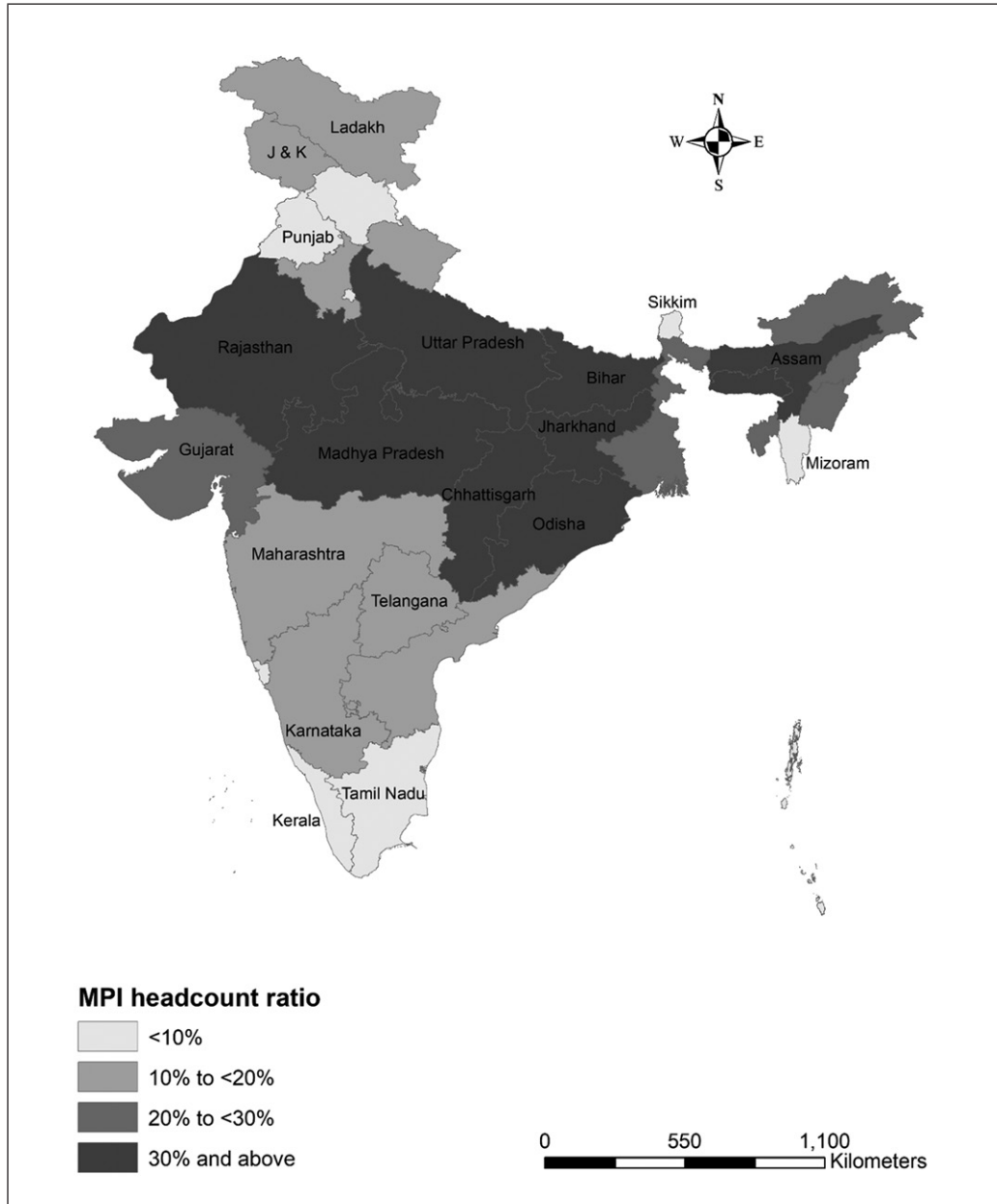
transition, these seven states account for nearly half of India's population but they rank lowest on many key social and economic indicators – reasons why they came to be called BIMARU⁶⁸; these states suffer from high population pressures, underdeveloped economies, and poor infrastructure.⁶⁹ Figure 3

⁶⁸ Census of India 2011a; Bose 2000

⁶⁹ BIMARU means morbid or sick in Hindi. The term was coined by Indian demographer, Ashish Bose, as an acronym for socio-demographically backward states for Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. In 2000, the states of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand were carved out of Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, respectively, and hence were part of BIMARU states. Although Odisha was not part of Bose's original coinage, the levels of socio-economic backwardness in the state was comparable, and the acronym thus later became BIMARUO to include Odisha in this grouping.

⁶⁷ Mukerjee 2012, p. 100

Figure 3: Population in multidimensional poverty in Indian states, 2020



Source: Author's work based on global multidimensional poverty index data by Alkire, Kanagaratnam and Suppa (2020). Notes: i) J & K = Jammu & Kashmir; ii) the data on which this MPI is based were collected in 2015-16 when Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh were one state. Hence the MPI headcount ratio for the undivided Jammu and Kashmir is applied on both.

Table 1: Human development index for Indian states, 1990-2019

	1990	2000	2010	2019
Andhra Pradesh	0.422	0.475	0.578	0.649
Assam	0.408	0.485	0.564	0.613
Bihar	0.376	0.433	0.512	0.574
Gujarat	0.469	0.525	0.604	0.672
Haryana	0.465	0.547	0.633	0.708
Himachal Pradesh	0.478	0.587	0.666	0.725
Karnataka	0.442	0.515	0.604	0.683
Kerala	0.545	0.598	0.716	0.782
Madhya Pradesh	0.403	0.455	0.535	0.603
Maharashtra	0.493	0.556	0.644	0.697
Orissa	0.397	0.455	0.533	0.605
Punjab	0.496	0.577	0.656	0.724
Rajasthan	0.401	0.465	0.546	0.628
Tamil Nadu	0.470	0.54	0.646	0.709
Uttar Pradesh	0.393	0.459	0.532	0.594
West Bengal	0.439	0.503	0.571	0.641
India	0.429	0.494	0.579	0.646

Source: Radboud university's global data lab, 2021

presents the multidimensional poverty index (MPI) for Indian states for 2020. MPI is a summary measure of wellbeing that captures acute deprivations in health, education and living standards that people face simultaneously. As is evident, poverty and deprivation remain widespread in these states, with all having 30 percent or more of their population facing multidimensional poverty. The states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh had over 40 percent of their populations

in multidimensional poverty, and these four states were home to more than half (196 million) of the 364 million multidimensionally poor in India. The contrast between some states in the north and south is striking. For example, in 2015-16 only one percent of Kerala's population was MPI poor, whereas 52 percent of population in Bihar suffered from multidimensional poverty.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative 2018; Alkire, Kanagaratnam & Suppa 2020

In recent years, these states have seen positive changes in living standards, but poverty and underdevelopment remain widespread still. This is also reflected in data in Table 1 that shows human development index (HDI) for 16 large Indian states from 1990 to 2019. There has been improvement in human development in all states over the 30-year period. At the same time, levels of human development vary widely across Indian states. Importantly, the poor states in the east and north have occupied the lowest rungs throughout this period, with Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh being consistently among the bottom four states. Indeed, some of these states have human development outcomes that are comparable to countries in sub-Saharan Africa, while average living standards in the states in the west and south, such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, mirror those of upper middle-income countries.⁷¹ Like England, there is a longstanding north-south divide in India which seems to have only sharpened in the past few years. This divide occasionally becomes a matter of regional pride, and frequently spills into political domain with rich states in the south resenting subsidizing the north. Raising the demand for a separate state flag, the former Chief Minister

71 Dreze & Sen 2013

of southern Indian state of Karnataka recently remarked:

Historically, the South has been subsidizing the north. Six states south of the Vindhyas contribute more taxes and get less. For example, for every one rupee of tax contributed by Uttar Pradesh that state receives Rs 1.79. For every one rupee of tax contributed by Karnataka, the state receives Rs 0.47. While I recognize the need for correcting regional imbalances, where is the reward for development?⁷²

Crucially, moreover, the backward states in the north and east of the country have witnessed tremendous pressure on agrarian livelihoods in recent years, but their secondary and tertiary sectors have shown no signs of development. The benefits of economic reforms seem to have largely bypassed these states, and structural economic change appears to have increased marginalization. A recent study based on district-wise analysis of Indian census occupational data shows that between 2001 and 2011 many districts in the northern and eastern states witnessed increase in *marginal workers*, defined as those who worked for less than 6 months in the year preceding the census. In fact, as per 2011 census marginal workers were highly concentrated in these states. On the other hand, states in southern and

72 Siddaramaiah 2018

western India saw decrease in work marginalization. The study summarizes the regional patterns of this livelihood “transition into marginalization” as:

In 2011, there has been a substantial increase in districts with more than 40 percent of total workers working as marginal workers and these were largely concentrated within states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, parts of Andhra Pradesh and eastern Uttar Pradesh in an almost continuous fashion. Where marginalization of work has increased in concentration in eastern parts of the country, there has been a decline in marginal workers in south India and in Maharashtra. The nature of the transition of moving away from main agriculture work and becoming a marginal worker is most visible in Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa, as well as parts of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh.⁷³

It is important to note that there are wide spatial inequalities within the economically advanced states in the south and west India. Indeed, several districts within these states resemble those in BIMARUO group. A 2015 study that analyses regional backwardness at the level of sub-district/taluk (first such attempt so far) showed that while poverty and deprivation was highly concentrated in backward states (with a large majority of 100 most backward

districts located in Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh), developed states also had pockets of deprivation within them. Thus:

...the remarkable characteristic of regional disparities in India is the presence of backward areas even within states that have grown faster and are at relatively high income levels on average... District-level poverty estimates confirm that the poorest districts in India lie not only in undivided BIMARU states and Odisha, but also in rich states such as Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.⁷⁴

In the post-1990 period India’s economic growth has been highly urban-centric in general; and within these more advanced states that have benefitted the most from India’s economic policy change, growth has been highly concentrated in large cities. Moreover, much of the recent growth is accounted for by capital and skill intensive business and service sectors⁷⁵ which have benefitted a small section of highly educated workforce in the cities, while a large majority of country’s rural populace without formal education and skills to participate in this new economy has been left behind. The growth of key service sectors, such as IT industry in

73 Bajar 2020, pp. 86-88

74 Bakshi, Chawla & Shah 2015, p. 46

75 Kotwal, Ramaswami & Wadhwa 2011

Bangalore, has led to substantial rise in disposable incomes, and has created a global middle class.⁷⁶ At the same time, poorer, geographically remote regions have not been part of India's economic boom. Indeed, some social analysts have observed that the "growth process is so biased, making the country look more and more like islands of California in a sea of sub-Saharan Africa."⁷⁷ Bangalore's while-collar, IT sector jobs have remained the preserve of "urban, middle class and high or middle caste" populations⁷⁸; and in the peripheries of the same city so widely integrated in the global economic circuits, durability of caste has prevented the traditionally disadvantaged social groups, such as Dalits, to fight historic disadvantage and sufficiently reap the benefits of digital communication technologies.⁷⁹

While India's recent economic growth has tended to favour skill-intensive tertiary sectors, some urban nonfarm sectors intensive in unskilled labour, such as construction, have also grown in the post-reform period which has increased the overall demand for unskilled labour.⁸⁰ These jobs are highly informal and precarious. But in the context of dwindling fortunes of farm-

based livelihoods, these urban informal jobs provide an important alternative to millions of people transitioning their livelihoods away from farming.⁸¹ Although exclusionary, urban economic growth has also become a significant driver of rural poverty reduction in the period following economic reforms.⁸² Agrarian stress and urban-centric growth are prompting a growing number of people from rural areas to migrate to cities and towns. Much of this labour migration involves semi-permanent, circular moves given the precarious nature of these jobs, while permanent work-related migration to cities for decent, formal sector job is predominantly undertaken by the better-off segments.⁸³ Patterns of temporary, circular migration also vary widely depending on the distance to labour markets. In rural places situated closer to towns that provide alternative nonfarm jobs commuting and short-distance migration are important forms of mobility, while migration pattern in villages located away from job centers involves people moving long distances for livelihoods.⁸⁴ There is compelling evidence to suggest that migration can provide an important route out of poverty and adversity, with remittances

76 Upadhyaya 2008

77 Dreze & Sen 2013, p. ix

78 Upadhyaya 2007, p. 1863

79 Kamath 2018

80 Datt & Ravallion 2011

81 Choithani, Van Duijne & Nijman 2021

82 Datt & Ravallion 2011

83 Tumbe 2018, p. 36

84 Pani *forthcoming*

closely tied to the wellbeing of migrant households.⁸⁵ While this is the case, migration options are not open to all. Structural economic change in India remains beset with various socio-economic inequalities that constrain mobility chances for many households and individuals. These inequalities operate at different levels, they are mediated through complex economic and socio-cultural processes, and their effects vary widely across population groups. But in effect, they create left-behind populations, defined as those individuals and/or households who lack real opportunities to benefit from migration. The next section turns attention to these left-behind populations.

4. Migration, inequalities and left-behind populations

Michael Lipton's seminal work on migration-inequality nexus showed that they share a two-way, reciprocal relationship.⁸⁶ Labour migration from rural areas often represents a response to inequality as disadvantaged groups attempt to improve their relative socio-economic position. Based on evidence from a large number of village studies, his research showed that migration rates were higher from villages with high

inequality. At the same time, migration also led to increase in income inequality within the village as better-off segments got pulled to migration to take advantage of better opportunities, while the poor were pushed out to migrate which widened the inequalities between these groups. "Thus 'push' and 'pull' migration are twin children of inequality in the same sort of village; but they are also sources of new inequality."⁸⁷ However, between these *poverty-push* and *income-pull* migrants lie those individuals and households who lack opportunities to successfully partake in migration because they face several constraints on their mobility. They can include entire households who are left-behind and unable to engage in migration, as well as individual members from within the migrant household who face the burden of social roles and expectations that constrain their mobility. Based on the literature, I identify three such left-behind groups including, i) *households* who are left-behind from migration because they lack the requisite financial means and social networks that successful migration requires, ii) *women* whose gender social roles restrict their mobility, and iii) *youth* whose life aspirations do not match the precarious, informal jobs that rural-urban migration offers. The discussion below focuses

85 UNDP 2009

86 Lipton 1980

87 Ibid, p. 4

on these left-behind groups and the key issues and implications that emerge from each.

4.1 Left-behind households

First, at the level of household, village-level studies in India show that poorest households are often least able to migrate because of their inability to bear the initial costs of migration.⁸⁸ In India, socio-economically disadvantaged social groups, particularly those belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, face high barriers to mobility; when they do move, much of the migration among them is characteristically temporary, and often distress-driven.⁸⁹ Moreover, at their work destinations, they are more vulnerable to cheating, abuse and discrimination⁹⁰ which can (and often does) have the effect of discouraging migration. In other words, “it is seldom the poorest who migrate, still less migrate successfully.”⁹¹ This inequality-induced selectivity of migration means that they are households who are unable to transition to urban-nonfarm, migration-based jobs. This can have both positive and negative effects on the households left behind. There are at least two broad set of effects: i) economic wellbeing, ii) social change.

To discuss the first issue of economic wellbeing, theoretically, with increasing number of households engaging in work migration, this may lead to farm labour shortages which can improve wages for those households who do not migrate. In other in-kind farming arrangements such as sharecropping, which typically involves landed households leasing out land to landless and land-poor households in exchange for certain quantity of the produce (typically amounting to half of the total harvest), migration-induced labour shortages may improve the economic bargaining position of tenants to demand better terms of sharecropping. Indeed, analysis of nationwide NSS data reveals that in India there has been a rise in ‘non-cultivating peasant households’ – households who are diversifying their livelihoods away from farming while holding onto land.⁹² This potentially has the effect of increasing access to land among the land-poor and landless rural households from disadvantaged social groups. Evidence on migration-tenancy linkages is scarce but research points to these linkages. Research in Bangladesh shows rural-urban migration increased the incidence of land tenancy which benefitted the “land-poor households

88 Connell et al. 1976

89 Keshri & Bhagat 2012

90 Breman 1985, 1996, 2010

91 Lipton 1980, p. 7

92 Vijay 2012

[who] got additional access to land”.⁹³ In terms of how these altered land relations relate to wellbeing of the left-behind, the access to land among the disadvantaged groups can improve their food security⁹⁴ and thus contributing positively to overall living standards. This access to land can be particularly important in the context of high volatility in food prices.⁹⁵ On the negative side, gains accruing from remittances to migrant households can further increase income inequalities between households with and without migrants. Michael Lipton’s research, cited earlier, showed that relatively better-off segments of population responded to migration “either to obtain education or to exploit the higher urban-rural income differentials to which earlier education has given access...[which] allows the better-off to advance as a group”, thus widening the economic inequalities within the same village.⁹⁶ More recent research across varied contexts corroborates this inequality-increasing tendency of migration. In Ghana, internal and international remittances were both associated with increased income inequalities in migrant-sending rural areas.⁹⁷ A recent

study in China showed that while rural-urban migration boosted average rural incomes in general, it also led to increase in ethnicity-based inequality with ethnic minorities faring poorer.⁹⁸ Thus, remittances help the poor to lift themselves out of poverty but can reinforce existing economic inequalities.

Economic remittances are important to understanding the migration-inequality relationship. But migration is simultaneously a social process, and labour migrants also transmit in origin places ideas, knowledge and exposure they gain in their work destinations, often referred to as “social remittances”.⁹⁹ These social remittances can provide important tools for marginalised groups to resist unequal power relations in origin communities.¹⁰⁰ This brings us to the second key dimension of migration-inequality relationship: that of social change. In rural India, land has traditionally remained a key axis of political power. In general, land control by the Forward Caste groups accorded them greater political power and representation in the local affairs. The disadvantaged social groups, often belonging to Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe, depended on landholding communities for their

93 Afsar 2004, pp. 80-81

94 Choithani 2015

95 Pritchard 2014

96 Lipton 1980, p. 4

97 Adams, Cuccuecha & Page 2008

98 Howell 2017

99 Levitt 1998, p. 926

100 Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan 2003a

livelihoods in exploitative relationships, such as that of attached labour.¹⁰¹ However, labour migration challenges these economic relations. A number of longitudinal studies in India have shown that access to nonfarm, non-local jobs has enabled the disadvantaged households to break free of these exploitative relations.¹⁰² Agrarian decline and growing significance of nonfarm, migration-based jobs in households' livelihood portfolios has changed the traditional, land-centric basis of local power relations. In many cases, migration has allowed the land-poor communities from disadvantaged social groups to improve their economic fortunes and alter the power relations in rural communities. Field-based, primary research in eastern Bihar shows that migration helped the land-poor Muslims households to escape the hegemony of a local landlord and become more significant political actors locally.¹⁰³ The circular nature of India in India means migrants continue to be involved in the politics at origin villages.¹⁰⁴ Research on seasonal rural-urban migrants from Golla Caste (low caste) engaged in construction industry in Andhra Pradesh shows that even though urban

jobs provide income sources, labour migrants remain politically active in their home village. In fact, it is the rural sites where migrants' struggles and demands are focused rather than cities. This is because rural areas are where state's interventions are focused in the form of various development schemes (e.g. PDS), whereas the state is virtually absent in the urban arena for the migrant workers. Indeed, in cities Golla migrants accept docility, invisibility and even dominance by other social groups, but use their migration experience to negotiate a better position within the village social power relationships.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, research in rural Maharashtra reveals that migration incomes has led to collapse of *Saldari* system of contract labour whereby farm labourers from low caste worked for dominant landlords under conditions of serfdom and has enabled the members of disadvantaged castes to resist and escape the patronage relations.¹⁰⁶ These findings highlight the transformative potential of migration for the traditionally marginalised groups. Recent evidence also shows that migration propensities among the socio-economically deprived are catching up with better-off groups.¹⁰⁷ At the same time, as noted earlier, many

101 Jodhka 1994

102 Breman 1996; Jodhka 2014; Dutta et al. 2014; Himanshu & Stern 2016

103 Haque *forthcoming*

104 Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan 2003b, p. 340

105 Picherit 2012

106 Rai 2018

107 Vartak, Tumbe & Bhide 2018

poorest households from traditionally disadvantaged social backgrounds still find it difficult to transition to migration jobs because they lack the requisite financial and social capital; they continue to have to rely on agriculture sector for livelihoods. Indeed, agriculture labour in India remains dominated by those without any education, and those from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.¹⁰⁸ We know nothing about how these left-behind households are affected in this reconfiguration of local power relations. It is perhaps the case that the rising migration propensities among the traditionally disadvantaged groups benefit the left-behind households sharing similar marginalised backgrounds from the general alteration in unequal power relations. At the same time, it is likely that their continued dependency on land-based livelihoods hampers their ability to instigate effective social change. This issue warrants more detailed and systematic research.

4.2 Left-behind women

Inequalities operate within the sphere of household, too, which can lead to differentials in migration propensities among the members of migrant households. Migration often represents a combined household strategy whereby rural households allocate labour across

a diverse set of farm and nonfarm activities to maximize income gains and minimize risks.¹⁰⁹ This means that some members of the household migrate to earn incomes at distant locations, while others stay behind to look after land and agriculture at the origin. The precariousness of rural transition in India makes holding onto land even more attractive.¹¹⁰ However, and this is important, household migration decisions are influenced by social arrangements, and interpersonal inequalities within the members of the household play an important role in the process. Prominent among them are gender-based inequalities in migration. In many parts of India, socio-cultural norms restrict the mobility and participation of women in distant locations, and labour mobility is almost exclusively a male-only activity. Nationwide data shows that this male migration pattern is prevalent in regions covering over 200 million people.¹¹¹ This male-only migration often triggers fundamental changes in gender power relations. From the perspective of migration-inequality relationship, here too, there are two broad set of effects of male migration for the women left behind. These include i) improved agency and autonomy for

108 Lanjouw & Murgai 2009

109 Stark 1991

110 Pani 2019

111 Tumble 2012, 2015

women that can reduce gender-based inequalities, and ii) increased burden of households' productive and reproductive responsibilities that can exacerbate unequal gender relations.

First, several studies show that male migration enhances the agency and autonomy of women who are left behind, as they assume greater decision-making roles within the household while the men are away.¹¹² In some cases, these autonomy effects prevail even after the return of men.¹¹³ Research also reveals that the practice of *purdah* seemed to be less common among women married to migrants than those married to non-migrants in India.¹¹⁴ As noted earlier, migrants also transmit in their home communities social remittances in the form of new ideas, norms and knowledge, and rural migrants' exposure to progressive gender social norms at urban work destinations often challenges the gender orthodoxy.¹¹⁵ Family context has a bearing on autonomy: Women in the nuclear family structure often gain more freedom than those in the joint/extended families where elder household members (e.g. father/mother-in-law) step in for absentee men to control household matters and maintain

established patriarchal norms¹¹⁶, though joint families can provide enhanced psychosocial support to women in the absence of their husband. Migration can also alter these familial structures, from joint to nuclear households and vice versa. A study in Kerala involving 132 migrants' wives showed male migration resulted in greater self-confidence among women, and that nearly half of the sample women wanted to live independently after their husbands moved because they liked the autonomy their husbands' migration brought about which would not have been available in the joint family set up.¹¹⁷ The remittances sent by migrant husbands often enhance women's position within the household, and provide resources to invest in food, education and health. Leela Gulati's pioneering study on the subject matter that focused on male-migration from Kerala, India to the Middle East documented that left-behind women spent the remittances they received in child education and women and child health.¹¹⁸ Similarly, a study on left-behind women in Garhwal district of Uttarakhand, India on involving a sample of 250 households with migrant husbands and 250 with non-migrant husbands found that the former had higher overall incomes

112 Gulati 1987, 1993; Hadi 2001; Paris et al. 2005; Choithani 2020

113 Yabiku, Agadjanian & Sevoyan 2010

114 Desai and Banerji 2008

115 Choithani 2020

116 Desai & Banerji 2008; Ahmed 2020

117 Sekhar 1996

118 Gulati 1993

and savings, and spent more on consumption, education and health.¹¹⁹ Moreover, managing remittances to run the household is also found to increase women's financial literacy as they deal with formal institutions such as banks. Recent research based on India Human Development Survey (IHDS) data covering a nationwide sample of 19,737 women found that left-behind migrants' wives were significantly more likely to have a bank account than those women married to non-migrants, in both nuclear and joint family structures.¹²⁰ This also broadens women's vision of managing household financial matters efficiently.¹²¹ Women's control over household finances can not only result in equitable gender outcomes but also maximize household welfare. This is because in many societies, women often place the interests of family over their individual welfare. For rural India, it has been observed that:

If a typical Indian rural woman was asked about her personal 'welfare', she would find the question unintelligible, and if she is able to reply, she may answer the question in terms of her reading of the welfare of her family. The idea of personal welfare may itself be unviable in such a context.¹²²

Thus, the migration of men has the potential to enhance women's agency and autonomy and produce gender-equal outcomes.

At the same time, male migration can also worsen the gender-based vulnerabilities women face. The precarious of India's ongoing rural transformation means that in many cases migrants' remittances may not be adequate to support the household, and the left-behind women may find themselves with an added burden of household's productive functions. Village level case studies in India show that male migration resulted in women performing greater tasks in family agriculture, including those that were traditionally carried out by men.¹²³ Indeed, male migration is a leading driver of feminization of agriculture in India. While women's greater involvement in productive domain is often viewed positively for improving their bargaining position¹²⁴, this can also exacerbate gender-based inequalities. Recent research on women in agriculture in India shows that women's growing participation in agriculture is occurring in the context rising stress on farm-based livelihoods which is leading instead to feminization of farm

119 Negi 2015

120 Lei and Desai 2021

121 Gulati 1987, 1993

122 Das and Nicholas 1981 cited in Sen 1987, pp. 6-7

123 Jetley 1987; Paris et al. 2005; Choithani 2020

124 Sen 1987

distress.¹²⁵ Crucially, moreover, women's growing involvement in farming adds to the already heavy demands of domestic duties and care work for most rural women in India which undermines wellbeing outcomes. For instance, research in western Bihar shows that women-headed households where men were absent due to migration had poorer food security than those headed by men.¹²⁶ It is important to note that women's involvement in agriculture does not grant them land ownership rights, and land control largely remains with men.¹²⁷ The added burden of responsibility can also affect women's health negatively, and recent research in India based on nationally representative IHDS data, cited earlier, showed that absence of husbands due to migration had an overall negative impact on left-behind women's self-reported health, and that extra burden of responsibilities contributed to poor health outcomes.¹²⁸ The gendered impacts of added burden of productive functions often extend to other family members. Children are at particular risk. For the children of Gulf male migrants in Kerala, for instance, it has been observed that:

Such children are becoming delinquents and turning to drugs. Mothers who

have to take full control of the children are finding it difficult in the absence of the supporting presence of the fathers. Psychiatrists have even coined a new term: the "Gulf Syndrome".¹²⁹

The increasing workload on migrants' wives may also alter the dynamics of family labour which oftentimes demands children having to compensate for the labour of absentee men; young girls may be adversely affected by male migration as they may have to bear additional domestic responsibilities and take care of younger siblings.¹³⁰ Aside from these impacts caused by increased work burden, the disruption of sexual life in the wake of prolonged separation of male migrants from their wives raises the likelihood of men seeking sexual relationships outside of the wedlock. The stronghold of patriarchal norms means that left-behind wives often find it difficult to exercise their agency to challenge their subjugation. In fact, migrants' wives are routinely subjected to greater surveillance by their in-laws and extended family, are expected to adhere to expected gender social roles, and in some cases even ignore their migrant husbands' other marriages.¹³¹

125 Pattnaik et al. 2018

126 Choithani 2020

127 Agarwal 1994

128 Lei & Desai 2021

129 Battistella & Conaco 1998, p. 226

130 Jetley 1987; Srivastava & Sasikumar 2003

131 Ahmed 2020

In conclusion, while male migration can create more space for women to exercise their agency, it is not always accompanied by substantial changes in unequal gender social relations. In overall terms, the available evidence suggests that male migration often intensifies women's gender-based vulnerabilities.

4.3 Left-behind youth

Finally, there may be individuals who do not face constraints on their mobility but choose to stay behind because the livelihood options available do not meet their aspirations. Young men and women with high education aspiring for regular, decent employment in a situation where most jobs are of informal, precarious nature that offer low economic (and social) returns form part of this category of left-behind. Educated unemployment among youth is a growing global problem¹³², and India is no exception to this worldwide trend.¹³³ India's rapid economic growth in the past few decades has enabled a small section of country's youth with professional education to be employed in highly remunerative, white-collar jobs and become a part of global middle class (e.g. IT workers), but it has not adequately generated decent, formal

sector jobs for a large majority of educated youth, particularly those living in small towns and villages. Structural economic change has generated images of success based on education, and young people have increasingly invested in formal education to improve their life chances. Yet unemployment among educated youth has grown.¹³⁴ Indeed, "at almost the precise moment that increasing numbers of people formerly excluded from schooling have come to recognize the possibilities held out by education for individual improvement, opportunities for these groups to benefit economically from schooling are disintegrating."¹³⁵ The jobs that are available are predominantly in the informal sector, and rising aspirations for better life among the educated youth means that they find it difficult to accept poor quality, precarious jobs. Consequently, among the educated youth (those with diploma or degree above high school) the gap between labour force participation rate (those available for work) and workforce participation (those actually working) has increased in recent years; and unemployment rates are highest among the young, educated women who face greater burden of social expectations than men to accept respectable, formal

132 Barford, Coombe & Proefke 2020

133 Mamgain & Tiwari 2016

134 Azim Premji University 2019

135 Jeffery 2009, p. 182

sector jobs.¹³⁶ Data show that there are 10 million educated unemployed in India¹³⁷, and youth are overrepresented among the unemployed.¹³⁸ It is important to note that this figure is likely to be an underestimate as stigma attached to unemployment often preclude young people to accurately report their employment status. This “Generation Nowhere”¹³⁹ of educated young men and women spend extended periods of time in search of decent, regular-salaried jobs, so much so that job search itself has become a profession of sorts.¹⁴⁰ For them, education has not translated into tangible outcome in terms of secure, regular-salaried jobs they aspire for, so they wait. Several structural factors militate against their aspirations for decent careers, including poor quality of education in provincial colleges and high competition for scarce regular jobs. Caste and class inequalities interact with these outcomes, and success in finding scarce formal sector jobs depends on social class.¹⁴¹

These educated youth are no longer concentrated in large cities as was the case earlier, but they are increasingly spread across regional towns and villages.¹⁴²

These youth away from metropolitan centres face greater marginalization due to geography.¹⁴³ Field research on unemployed educated youth in small towns in India provide important insights on the strategies deployed by these young men to navigate economic uncertainty. In his research on youth and politics of waiting in Meerut town in western Uttar Pradesh, Craig Jeffery shows young men with college education find themselves in the perennial state of ‘waiting’ for decent employment opportunities. However, they are not passive actors, and in this waiting they engage in different ‘timepass’ activities, including participation in student politics as a makeshift career. This politics is not clearly defined and often contradictory (with some unemployed student leaders protesting against corrupt practices in colleges but also colluding with university administrators to benefit from their political position) but it also provides a means through which some educated youth engage in positive social action to fight inequality and corruption in education system.¹⁴⁴ Similarly, recent research on educated youth in Dehradun documents enterprising cultures among young men facing protracted unemployment and shows that these men created

136 Azim Premji University 2019

137 Mehrotra et al. 2014, p. 57

138 Azim Premji University 2018, pp. 41-42

139 Jeffery 2008, p. 739

140 Sharone 2007 cited in Deucher & Dyson 2019

141 Jeffery, Jeffery & Jeffery 2008; Jeffery 2010

142 Azim Premji University 2019

143 Brown, Scrase & Ganguly-Scraseet 2017

144 Jeffery 2010

employment in coaching institutions through their practices, local knowledge and soft skills, though this employment was highly precarious still and most aspired for secure, well-paid jobs.¹⁴⁵ Since most of the jobs are concentrated in large Indian cities, migration features prominently in the aspiration of youth from regional towns. But their mobility aspirations are often frustrated because their parents' subjectivities still hold government jobs as central to modernity and aspiration as opposed to waged, part-time jobs.¹⁴⁶ The continued pressure of social expectations to get secure, government jobs in the context where public sector employment has shrunk, and most private sector jobs are of informal, precarious nature is leading to an ever-greater number of youth being left behind which has huge socio-political implications.

First, protracted unemployment among young people mean that they remain in a state of limbo which is delaying their transition from youth to adulthood, often for uncertain time.¹⁴⁷ Employment provides a key marker of youths' transition into adulthood. In many developing countries, including India, young men derive their masculine status from paid employment given

the widespread prevalence of "male breadwinner norms".¹⁴⁸ But inability to secure (decent) employment means that it is becoming difficult for young men to find partners and many of them are remaining unmarried¹⁴⁹, and thus are stuck in-between life stages.¹⁵⁰ Second, and relatedly, this besetting of life transition and consequent inability to assume normative responsibilities of adults causes among them feelings of anxiety, hopelessness and shame.¹⁵¹ Third, educated unemployment can forge a culture of masculine violence. Gender violence, including rape, is far too common in India, and failure to secure stable employment likely contributes to violent masculinities. Based on a study in a college in Chennai, Martyn Rogers argues that sexual harassment of female students by lower caste young men represents latter's response to subordination within higher education and white-collar jobs.¹⁵² Fourth, prolonged unemployment can also create a sense of victimhood, even among the youth from the privileged social backgrounds. In India, this sentiment of victimhood among the young belonging to better-off sections of society is increasingly visible in their

145 Deucher & Dyson 2019

146 Brown, Scrase & Ganguly-Scraseet 2017

147 Young & Jeffery 2012; Deucher & Dyson 2019

148 Jeffery 2009, p. 183

149 Chowdhary 2007, p. 457

150 Young & Jeffery 2012

151 Mains 2007; Deucher 2014

152 Rogers 2008

opposition to reservations in education and employment for historically marginalised population groups.

5. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the relationship between inequality, migration and development in India, with a focus on the impact of three decades of economic change on two key dimensions of inequalities: spatial inequalities and inequalities between different socio-economic groups. The evidence presented in this article highlights that rapid economic change in India is accompanied by increased aggregate prosperity, but the benefits of fast growth are not shared equally by different regions and population groups – far from it. The gains of India's recent economic growth have been highly concentrated, occurring in a few large cities within the more advanced states, while the laggard regions have slipped further behind. Furthermore, this concentrated, urban-centric growth has also been skill-intensive which has favoured a small section of highly educated workforce in key business and service industries, such as finance and information technology, while a large majority of India's population scrambles to find decent livelihoods. These outcomes have occurred in a context where over two-third of country's population still lives in rural

areas and where overall education levels remain dismal. The urban-based, nonfarm sector-led growth has heightened the significance of work-related migration. But urban jobs are precarious, nor are migration avenues available to all. In other words, India's recent economic growth has been highly exclusionary in its distribution of benefits across geographies and socio-economic classes and has created what this paper refers to as left-behind places and left-behind populations. This can have several socio-political and development implications.

First, spatial economic inequalities that leave places behind can create feelings of alienation and discontent which can affect cohesion. These sentiments are increasingly visible in the responses of left behind geographies to their marginalization and exclusion.¹⁵³ The Brexit referendum in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the US provide examples of how left behind places are contesting their exclusion. In India, spatial inequalities have long been a source of conflict. This divide has often created political tensions, with laggard states demanding special consideration in resource allocation for them to deal with underdevelopment while advanced states resenting not being rewarded for development.

153 Rodríguez-Pose 2018

Furthermore, within-state inequalities in development are also a key source of demands for separate statehoods. The bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh in 2014 in two states illustrates this. Second, left behind places also provide a breeding ground for social unrest. Indeed, in India Naxalite movement is most active in places that are believed to have been ignored in the development process. While early development planning in India recognised the importance of regionally balanced development, the attempts to address the spatial imbalances were largely unsuccessful. The advent of economic reforms since the early 1990s has created greater space for private sector to realize its entrepreneurial energies which is associated with improved economic performance overall. At the same time, private capital has tended to be highly concentrated which has widened the spatial divide in India. The early optimism that regional inequalities will narrow over time as economy advances seems to fade, and poorer regions are not catching up; if anything they are falling further behind. And despite the rhetoric of inclusive development, social policies to address development deficits in the laggard regions have not adequately followed. For its level of development, public expenditure on social protection in India is among

the lowest in the world¹⁵⁴, and the institution to deliver social protection remain weak.¹⁵⁵

It is in this context of spatially uneven development that the past few decades have led to substantial rise in labour migration from less developed to places that provide livelihoods. Indeed, the “immanent forces underlying migration are structural...and these structural features are embedded in the nature of development” across different parts of India.¹⁵⁶ However, socio-economic inequalities curtail the mobility chances of households and individuals. The discussion above has focused on three population groups being left behind including i) households who are unable to migrate due to weak socio-economic capital, ii) women who are left behind because socio-cultural norms restrict their participation in work-related migration, and iii) young adults whose mobility aspirations are thwarted by poor quality of jobs. The discussion also points to the ramifications pertaining to each of these left behind groups.

First, the inability of households from socio-economic marginalised backgrounds to transition to migration-based livelihoods can undermine their

154 Dreze & Sen 2013

155 Pritchard et al. 2014

156 Srivastava et al. 2020, p. 2

economic wellbeing and social status. While increasing involvement of households in labour migration can increase access to land among those who are left behind with positive impacts on their food and nutrition, the declining fortunes of farm-based livelihoods can also undermine the gains from increased land access. The continued dependency on land and agriculture also means that they remain mired in conditions of dependency and patronage.

Second, for women who are left-behind after their husbands' migration, the evidence shows that male migration intensifies the gender-based vulnerabilities of left-behind women. While absence of men results in women assuming greater decision-making roles within the household which increases their autonomy, it also leads to women shouldering added burden of responsibilities of households' productive and reproductive functions without any substantial alteration in unequal gender relations. In cases where remittances are not adequate, women often have to fend for the households aside from their care work which has overall negative impacts on left behind women's health and wellbeing.

Finally, the lack of stable, decent employment that prevents millions of educated youth in India to realize their mobility and life aspirations is retarding

the transition of youth to adulthood, with potentially huge impacts on their psychosocial health. High levels of unemployment among the youth who are arguably the most productive section of labour force is also likely to have adverse effects on India's development.

These far-reaching socio-political and development implications of inequalities between places and people means that there is a pressing policy need to understand and address these inequalities.

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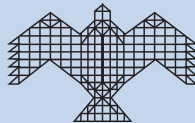
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11. **Abstract:**

This paper reviews the relationship between inequality, labour migration and development in India, with a focus on those who are left behind. The paper concentrates on spatial inequalities and inequalities between population groups and argues that these inequalities are creating left-behind places and left-behind populations. It also identifies potential implications of being left behind.
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