

14 Left-Behind Places and People

Inequality, Labour Migration and Development in India

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Introduction

This chapter looks at the relationship between inequality, labour migration and development in India. It examines the 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 broader context of this research is provided by the major socio-economic transformation currently underway in India, and its inequitable effects for different regions and socio-economic groups (Choithani, Van Duijne and Nijman, 2021; Pani, 2022). Rapid economic growth in India since the early 1990s has been accompanied by a structural economic change in which the importance of the agriculture sector has diminished, while the urban-non-farm economic activities have become more significant in the framework of national income. Recent patterns of economic growth have also led to geographical concentration of economic activities and employment in a few pockets, which has exacerbated spatial economic inequalities. This has led to a substantial increase in labour migration from less-developed regions to places that provide livelihoods. At the same time, socio-economic inequalities often mean migration options are not available to all individuals and households, nor are the outcomes the same for all members of the participating

households. Yet, it is not adequately known whether and how migration affects those who remain behind, under what conditions the left-behind gain or lose from migration.

Against this background, this chapter reviews the implications of labour migration on the left behind populations in India, and the intersecting role socio-economic inequalities play in the process. In so doing, this chapter 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 underpins much of labour mobility. 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 chapter 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. The section “Uneven Regional Development and Places Left Behind” focuses on the uneven regional development and places left behind. The section “Migration, Inequalities and Left-Behind Populations” 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 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 unrealized 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.

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 the Indian economy and livelihoods. The significance of the agriculture sector has diminished, and recent economic growth has been led by urban-based non-farm sectors making use of migrant labour from rural areas. Cities and towns now account for nearly two-thirds of national income in India (Planning Commission, 2011). At the same time, this has not resulted in more permanent migration and urbanization, and much of the labour migration in India is of a temporary, circular nature (Deshingkar and Farrington, 2009; Tumble, 2018; Van Duijne, Nijman and Choithani, 2023). The growing importance of urban incomes in rural lives and livelihoods notwithstanding, most migrants find jobs in the informal economy characterized by

high precarity (Breman, 1996, 2010). 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 their origin villages (Choithani, 2022). 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, a 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 2023, the share of agriculture sector in national income more than halved – from 33 per cent to 16 per cent (Mehrotra *et al.*, 2013; World Bank, 2025). Although the process of structural economic change inevitably involves the sectoral composition of income shifting towards non-farm activities, the agriculture sector also witnessed policy neglect, particularly in the first decade of liberalization reforms. The annual growth rate of public investment in agriculture was 4 per cent in the 1980s, which declined to 1.9 per cent in the 1990s (Gillespie and Kadiyala, 2012). Compounding these challenges facing Indian agriculture is the progressive fragmentation of already small land parcels over time. Farming in India has traditionally involved smallholding, which means that the 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 generally high fertility in the past (which has declined in recent years) has caused the subdivision of a fixed quantity of land within the family, resulting in even smaller average land parcels. Between 1970–71 and 2015–16, the average landholding size more than halved from 2.28 hectares to 1.08 hectares (Figure 14.1). 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 the 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 2001–11 (Census of India, 1991, 2001, 2011b). 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 (see the discussion in Van Duijne and Nijman, 2019), and for the first time in the history of independent India, the share of agricultural employment has fallen to less than 50 per cent (Mehrotra *et al.*, 2013, 2014). The real magnitude of these livelihood shifts out of agriculture is perhaps even greater, and with an average household size of five members, 40 million job losses in agriculture means that 200 million people are affected in their

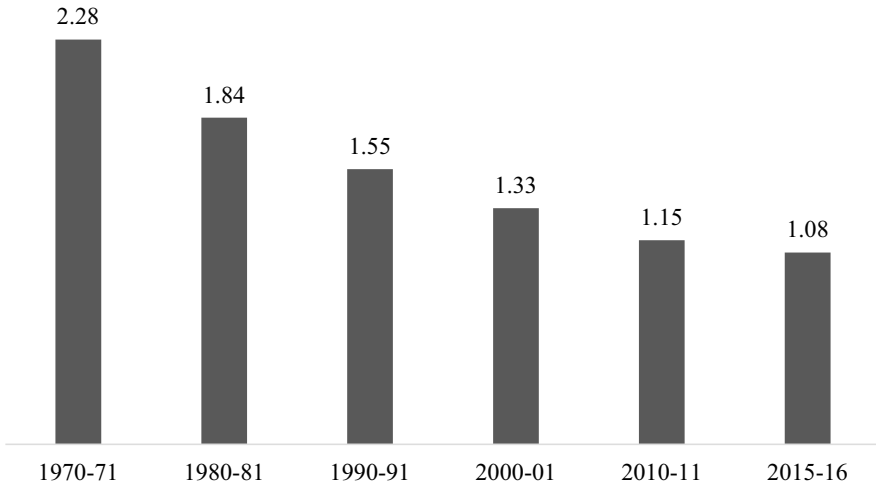


Figure 14.1 Average landholdings in India, 1970–71 to 2015–16 (in hectares)

Source: Ministry of Agriculture (2019).

daily lives in this transformation (Choithani, Van Duijne and Nijman, 2021). This transition has also produced significant distress, visible in the spate of farmers’ suicides across the country (Banerjee, 2022).

Second, this transition out of agriculture parallels a substantial increase in labour migration in India. The highly seasonal nature of agricultural incomes means that India’s rural past has never been sedentary, and labour migration has traditionally formed a key component of the livelihoods of many rural households across India (Tumbe, 2012, 2018). But recent years have witnessed an unprecedented surge in labour mobility. It is estimated that over 100 million people remain on the move for their livelihoods, and that migrants constitute 20 per cent of the total workforce of 500 million people (Deshingkar and Akter, 2009; Government of India, 2017). 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” (Breman, 1996) and “unsettled settlers” (De Haan, 1997); this non-permanent migration has also kept the overall urbanization levels low in India (Kundu, 2003; Choithani, Jaleel CP and Rajan, 2024). Although circular, recent evidence shows that migrants now spend a longer duration away from their origin places, suggesting the rising significance of non-local incomes in households’ lives and livelihoods (Choithani, Van Duijne and Nijman, 2021). Indeed, rural India is witnessing what Rigg, Salamanca and Parnwell (2012, p. 1470) call as “a

delocalization of life and living”. Another important change concerns migration destinations. Earlier migration streams in India predominantly involved rural to rural circulation of labour. While rural-to-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 (National Sample Survey, 2010). 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 (Datt, Ravallion and Murgai, 2020).

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 in turn generates new inequalities (Pani, 2022). 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 the early 1990s, when balanced spatial development that formed part of early Indian development planning post-independence was thrown out of the window to pave the way for market forces to determine economic geography (see below). The more remunerative, alternative non-farm 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 years 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 have 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. The districts with the highest per capita income are located in the south, while those with the lowest per capita income are in the north (Government of Karnataka, 2024). Karnataka’s capital city of Bengaluru boasts of being the IT capital of India and is widely integrated with the global economy as a key resource city, while Yadgir district, just a few hundred kilometres north, lacks the most basic infrastructure with nearly 90 per cent of households not even having toilet facilities within their housing premises (Census of India, 2011a). In other words, India’s economic transformation, which is characterized by wide geographical inequalities within and between states, has created *left-behind places* – defined here as geographies that have experienced economic/agrarian decline but scarce alternative non-farm 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

migration can provide an important escape route out of vulnerability and promote sustainable human development outcomes (UNDP, 2009), these choices are not available to all. As McDowell and De Haan (1997, p. 21) note, “migration options are not, as hypothesized by individualistic theories, open to all”. 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 non-farm, 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 rather than 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 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. The next two sections focus on these left-behind places and people.

Uneven Regional Development and Places Left Behind

At the global level, the past few years have witnessed the resurfacing of uneven development as a key policy issue. Importantly, there is increasing recognition that spatially unbalanced development can leave places behind, which can have significant socio-political implications (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Over the past few decades, 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 when firms and people locate near one another together in cities and industrial clusters” (Glaeser, 2010, p. 1). These agglomeration effects also provide a key explanation for the existence of cities. These densely populated places provide a conducive environment for the efficient production of goods and services because they have access to a pool of skilled labour, a network of complementary firms, and a critical mass of consumers of those goods and services. The co-location of complementary firms allows for the sharing of physical infrastructure that reduces production costs as well as human resources that foster innovation (Rosenthal and Strange, 2001; Duranton and Puga, 2004; Scott, 2017).

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” (World Bank, 2009, p. xiii). The report’s main argument is that economic 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” (World Bank, 2009, p. xix). 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 (Stiglitz, 2002). 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 centres.

This is especially the case in India, which has witnessed widening geographical disparities since the economic reforms of the 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 have been a key historical feature of India’s development (Roy, 2020). But Indian policymakers were cognisant of regional economic disparities and their implications for equitable growth. In the first four decades after the country’s independence from 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.

(Planning Commission, 1957, p. 36)

In the centrally planned economy, influenced by the Soviet model, the public sector was used as an engine of economic growth and retained ownership of key industries. Private enterprise was regulated through a 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 independence, the Indian economy grew at an average rate of 3.5 per cent, which came to be called the Hindu rate of growth (Kar and Sakthivel, 2007, p. 69). But balanced regional development remained an important goal, and the 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 the Freight Equalization Policy 1952, which subsidized transport costs of raw materials such as iron ore and minerals to ensure uniform costs of industrial inputs across 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, Banerjee and Iyer's (2005) study which 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 of collecting land revenues from the cultivators had poorer economic outcomes post-independence (reflected in agricultural performance, public investment in education and health, as well as health and educational outcomes) than those places where these intermediaries were avoided. These differences potentially arose because the oppressive nature of the landlord-based system meant that cultivators saw their interests as different from the landlords which, in turn, precluded the opportunity for collective action. In other cases, even though equitable regional development was the stated policy aim, the Indian government's own measures undermined this goal. For example, Green Revolution reforms were systematically inserted in the northwest states of Haryana and Punjab, which brought prosperity in these states, while the economically backward state 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 (Singh and Stern, 2014). 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 for a Finance Commission, appointed every five years, which is tasked with fair distribution of tax receipts between the federal and several state governments, with backward states often receiving special grants for their developmental needs. 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 the economic performance of the country (Rodrik, 2003). Economic policy change gathered momentum in the early 1990s when, faced with the balance of payments crisis, the Indian government initiated more systematic reforms and liberalized its economy. Strict regulatory controls on private entrepreneurial activities that characterized the *Licence Raj* were removed, and foreign capital was invited to invest in Indian industries and businesses. This liberalization of the Indian economy has resulted in faster economic growth and enabled the country to break away from the pattern of Hindu rate of growth. India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew at an average annual rate of 5.6 per cent in the 1980s and 1990s and close to 7 per cent since the early 2000s (Figure 14.2), making the country one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. The faster economic growth has also led to a decline in overall poverty (Datt, Ravallion and Murgai, 2020). However, this new economic trajectory has also resulted in the 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 (Rao, Shand and Kalirajan, 1999;

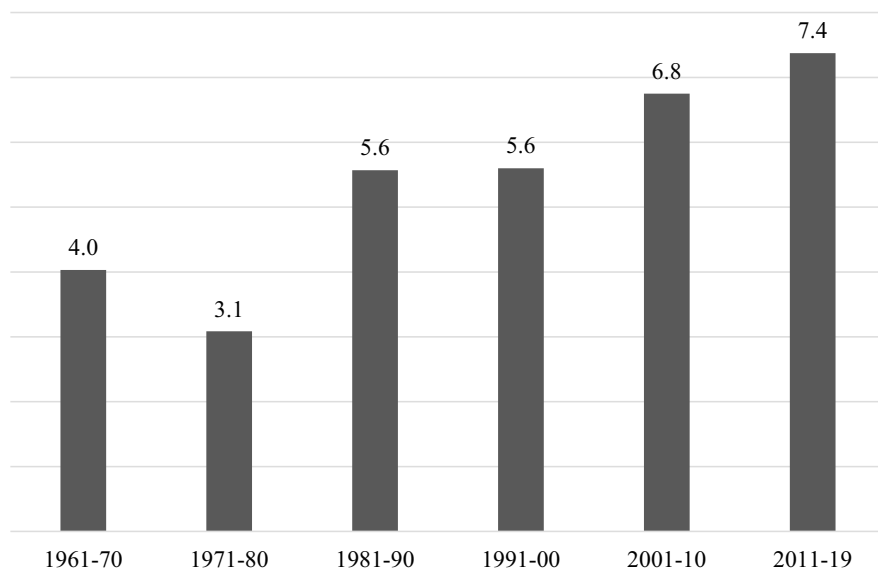


Figure 14.2 Average annual GDP growth rate in India, 1961–2019

Source: Author's calculations using data from World Bank's (2025) World Development Indicators; GDP at constant 2015 USD prices.

Dasgupta *et al.*, 2000; N. J. Kurian, 2000; Sachs, Bajpai and Ramiah, 2002; Ghosh and Kaustubh, 2025). The deregulation of the economy has allowed private enterprise to flourish but private capital has favoured states that were ahead in the 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 (Mukherjee, 2011, p. 100).

On the other hand, the backward states in the north and east of the country, which include Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and 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 BIMARU; these states suffer from high population pressures, underdeveloped economies and poor infrastructure (Bose, 2000; Census of India, 2011b).¹ Figure 14.3 presents the multidimensional poverty index (MPI) for Indian states for 2019–21. MPI is a summary measure of well-being 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 15 per cent or more of their population facing multidimensional poverty. The states of Bihar and Jharkhand had over 30 per cent of their populations in multidimensional poverty. The contrast between some states in the north and south is striking. For example, in 2019–21 less than one per cent of Kerala's population was MPI poor, whereas nearly 35 per cent of the population in Bihar suffered from multidimensional poverty (Alkire, Kanagaratnam and Suppa, 2024).

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 14.1 that shows the human development index (HDI) for 16 large Indian states from 1992 to 2022. 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 (Drèze and Sen, 2013). There is a long-standing 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 the political domain with rich states

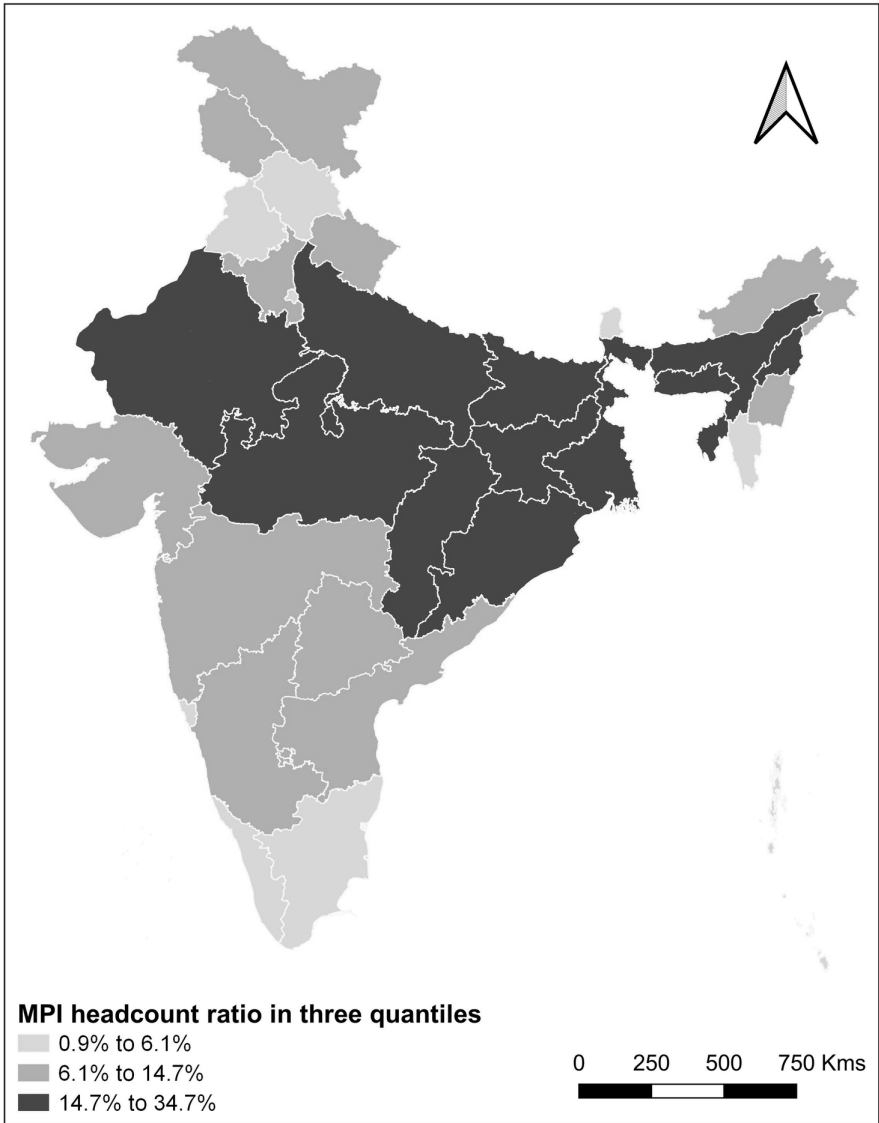


Figure 14.3 Percentage of population in multidimensional poverty in Indian states, 2019–21

Source: Author’s work based on global multidimensional poverty index data by Alkire et al., (2024).

in the south resenting subsidizing the north. Raising the demand for a separate state flag, the Chief Minister of the southern Indian state of Karnataka remarked: Historically, the South has been subsidizing

Table 14.1 Human Development Index for Indian States, 1992–2022

State	1992	2002	2012	2022
Andhra Pradesh	0.435	0.487	0.595	0.642
Assam	0.420	0.493	0.576	0.615
Bihar	0.387	0.437	0.527	0.577
Gujarat	0.483	0.533	0.614	0.646
Haryana	0.479	0.553	0.648	0.696
Himachal Pradesh	0.493	0.598	0.670	0.715
Karnataka	0.455	0.524	0.617	0.673
Kerala	0.560	0.618	0.723	0.758
Madhya Pradesh	0.415	0.463	0.547	0.611
Maharashtra	0.507	0.563	0.657	0.695
Orissa	0.409	0.460	0.548	0.610
Punjab	0.510	0.580	0.670	0.698
Rajasthan	0.413	0.472	0.559	0.652
Tamil Nadu	0.484	0.552	0.662	0.692
Uttar Pradesh	0.405	0.466	0.541	0.609
West Bengal	0.452	0.506	0.582	0.635
India	0.442	0.501	0.594	0.644

Source: Radboud University's Global Data Lab, 2024

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?

(Siddaramaiah, 2018)

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 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 an increase in *marginal workers*, defined as those who worked for less than six months in the year preceding the census. In fact, as per the 2011 census, marginal workers were highly concentrated in these states. On the other hand, states in southern and western India saw a 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.

(Bajar, 2022, pp. 86–88)

It is important to note that there are wide spatial inequalities within the economically advanced states in the south and west of India. Indeed, several districts within these states resemble those in the BIMARU 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 were highly concentrated in backward states (with a large majority of the 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.

(Bakshi, Chawla and Shah, 2015, p. 46)

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 sectors, which have benefitted a small section of highly educated workforce in the cities, while a large majority of the 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 the IT industry in Bangalore, has led to a substantial rise in disposable incomes and has created a global middle class (Upadhyaya, 2008). 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" (Drèze and Sen, 2013, p. ix). Bangalore's white-collar IT sector jobs have remained the preserve of "urban, middle class and high or middle caste" populations (Upadhyaya, 2007, p. 1863); and in the peripheries of the same city, so

widely integrated into the global economic circuits, the durability of caste has prevented the traditionally disadvantaged social groups, such as Dalits, from fighting historic disadvantage and sufficiently reaping the benefits of digital communication technologies (Kamath, 2018).

While India's recent economic growth has tended to favour skill-intensive tertiary sectors, some urban non-farm 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 (Government of India, 2024). 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 (Choithani, Van Duijne and Nijman, 2021). Although exclusionary, urban economic growth has also become a significant driver of rural poverty reduction in the period following economic reforms (Datt and Ravallion, 2011; Datt, Ravallion and Murgai, 2020). 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, whereas permanent work-related migration to cities for decent, formal sector jobs is predominantly undertaken by the better-off segments (Tumbe, 2018, p. 36). 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 non-farm jobs, commuting and short-distance migration are important forms of mobility, while migration patterns in villages located away from job centres involve people moving long distances for livelihoods (Pani, 2022). There is compelling evidence to suggest that migration can provide an important route out of poverty and adversity, with remittances closely tied to the well-being of migrant households (UNDP, 2009; World Bank, 2023). 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 in this chapter as those individuals and/or households who lack real opportunities to benefit from migration. The next section turns attention to these left-behind populations.

Migration, Inequalities and Left-Behind Populations

Michael Lipton's seminal work on the migration-inequality nexus showed that they share a two-way, reciprocal relationship (Lipton, 1980). 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 an increase in income inequality within the village as better-off segments got pulled to migrate 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” (Lipton, 1980, p. 4). 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 the entire household 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 on these left-behind groups and the key issues and implications that emerge from each.

Left-Behind Households

First, at the level of the household, village-level studies in India show that the poorest households are often least able to migrate because of their inability to bear the initial costs of migration (Connell *et al.*, 1976). 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 (Keshri and Bhagat, 2012). Moreover, at their work destinations, they are more vulnerable to cheating, abuse and discrimination (Breman, 1996, 2010) 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” (Lipton, 1980, p. 7). This inequality-induced selectivity of migration means that they are households who are unable to transition to urban non-farm, migration-based jobs. This can have both positive and negative effects on the households left behind. There are at least two broad sets of effects: (i) economic well-being and (ii) social change.

To discuss the first issue of economic well-being, theoretically, with an 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 a 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 National Sample Survey data reveals that in India there has been a rise in “non-cultivating peasant households” – households that are diversifying their livelihoods away from farming while holding onto land (Vijay, 2012). 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 rural Bihar shows that rural–urban migration increased the incidence of land tenancy which benefitted land-poor and landless households. In terms of how these altered land relations relate to the well-being of the left-behind, access to land among the disadvantaged groups can improve their food security and thus contribute positively to overall living standards; this access to land can be particularly important in the context of high volatility in food prices (Choithani, 2022). On the negative side, gains accruing from remittances to migrant households can further increase income inequalities between households with and without migrants. Recent research in India corroborates this inequality-increasing tendency of migration, though migration also benefits the poor (Tiwari *et al.*, 2022; Van Duijne, Nijman and Choithani, 2023). 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” (Levitt, 1998, p. 926). These social remittances can provide important tools for marginalized groups to resist unequal power relations in origin communities. This brings us to the second key dimension of the 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 local affairs. The disadvantaged social groups, often belonging to Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe, depended on landholding communities for their livelihoods in exploitative relationships, such as that of attached labour (Jodhka, 1994). However, labour migration challenges these economic relations. A number of longitudinal studies in India have shown that access to non-farm, non-local jobs has enabled the disadvantaged households to break free of these exploitative relations (Breman, 1996; Datta *et al.*, 2014; Jodhka, 2014; Himanshu and Stern, 2016). Agrarian decline and the growing significance of non-farm, migration-based jobs in households’ livelihood portfolios have 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 Muslim

households to escape the hegemony of a local landlord and become more significant political actors locally (Haque, 2022). The circular nature of India in India means migrants continue to be involved in the politics at origin villages. Research on seasonal rural–urban migrants from the Golla Caste (low caste) engaged in the 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 the 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’s social power relationships (Picherit, 2012). Similarly, research in rural Maharashtra reveals that migration incomes have led to the collapse of the *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 (Rai, 2018). These findings highlight the transformative potential of migration for the traditionally marginalized groups. Recent evidence also shows that migration propensities among the socio-economically deprived are catching up with better-off groups (Vartak, Tumbe and Bhide, 2019). At the same time, as noted earlier, many of the 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 the agricultural sector for livelihoods. Indeed, agricultural labour in India remains dominated by those without any education and those from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Lanjouw and Murgai, 2009). 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 marginalized 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.

Left-Behind Women

Inequalities operate within the sphere of the 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 non-farm activities to maximize income gains and minimise risks (Stark, 1991). 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. 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 (Choithani, 2020). Nationwide data show that this male migration pattern is prevalent in regions covering over 200 million people (Tumbe, 2012, 2015). This male-only migration often triggers fundamental changes in gender power relations. From the perspective of the migration-inequality relationship, here too, there are two broad sets of effects of male migration for the women left behind. These include (i) improved agency and autonomy for 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 (Gulati, 1993; Paris *et al.*, 2005; Choithani, 2020). In some cases, these autonomy effects prevail even after the return of men (Yabiku, Agadjanian and Sevoyan, 2010). 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 (Desai and Banerji, 2008). 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 (Choithani, 2020). 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 (father/mother-in-law) step in for absentee men to control household matters and maintain established patriarchal norms (Desai and Banerji, 2008; Ahmed, 2020), though joint families can provide enhanced psychosocial support to women in the absence of their husbands. Migration can also alter these familial structures, from joint to nuclear households and vice versa. Sekhar's (1996) 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 setup. 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 on child education and women and child health (Gulati, 1993). Similarly, a study on left-behind women in Garhwal district of Uttarakhand, India involving a sample of 250 households with migrant husbands and 250 with non-migrant husbands found that the former had higher overall incomes and savings, and spent more on consumption, education and health (Negi, 2015). 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 (Lei and Desai, 2021); this also broadens women's vision of managing household financial matters efficiently (Gulati, 1993). 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 their 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.

(Das and Nicholas, 1981 cited in Sen, 1987, pp. 6–7)

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 precariousness 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 (Jetley, 1987; Paris *et al.*, 2005; Choithani, 2020). Indeed, male migration is a leading driver of the feminization of agriculture in India. While women's greater involvement in the productive domain is often viewed positively for improving their bargaining position, 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 of rising stress on farm-based livelihoods, which is leading to the feminization of farm distress (Pattnaik *et al.*, 2018). 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 well-being 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 (Choithani, 2020). 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 the absence of husbands due to migration had an overall negative impact on left-behind women's self-reported health, and that the extra burden of responsibilities contributed to poor health outcomes (Lei and Desai, 2021). The gendered impacts of the added burden of productive functions often extend to other family members. Children are at particular risk. The increasing workload on migrants' wives may also alter the dynamics of family labour, which oftentimes demands children 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 (Jetley, 1987; Srivastava and Sasikumar, 2003). 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 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 (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.

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. The left-behind population consists of many young men and women with high education aspiring for regular, decent employment in a situation where most jobs are of an informal, precarious nature and offer low economic (and social) returns. Educated unemployment among youth is a growing global problem (Barford, Coombe and Proefke, 2021), and India is no exception to this worldwide trend (Mamgain and Tiwari, 2016). India's rapid economic growth in the past few decades has enabled a small section of the country's youth with professional education to be employed in highly remunerative, white-collar jobs and become a part of the global middle class (e.g. IT workers). However, 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 (Azim Premji University, 2019). 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” (Jeffrey, 2009, p. 182). The jobs that are available are predominantly in the informal sector, and rising aspirations for a better life among the educated youth mean that they find it difficult to accept poor quality, precarious jobs. Consequently, among the educated youth (those with a 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 a greater burden of social expectations than men to accept respectable, formal sector jobs (Azim Premji University, 2019). Data show that there are 10 million educated unemployed in India (Mehrotra *et al.*, 2014, p. 57), and youth are overrepresented among the unemployed (Azim Premji University, 2018, pp. 41–42). It is important to note that this figure is likely to be an underestimate as the stigma attached to unemployment often precludes young people from accurately reporting their employment status. This “Generation Nowhere” (Jeffrey, 2008, p. 739) of educated young men and women spend extended periods of time in search of decent, regular-salaried jobs, so much so that the job search itself has become a profession of sorts (Sharone, 2007 cited in Deuchar and Dyson, 2020). For them, education has not translated into tangible outcomes in terms of secure, regular-salaried jobs they aspire to, 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 (Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery, 2008; Jeffrey, 2010).

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 (Azim Premji University, 2019). These youth away from metropolitan centres face greater marginalization due to geography (Brown, Scrase and Ganguly-Scrase, 2017). Field research on unemployed educated youth in small towns in India provides important insights on the strategies deployed by these young men to navigate economic uncertainty. In his research on youth and the politics of waiting in Meerut town in western Uttar Pradesh, Craig Jeffery shows that 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 the education system (Jeffrey, 2010). Similarly, recent research on educated youth in Dehradun documents enterprising cultures among young men facing protracted unemployment and shows that these men created 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 (Deuchar and Dyson, 2020). 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 (Brown, Scrase and Ganguly-Scrase, 2017). The continued pressure of social expectations to get secure, government jobs in a 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 means that they remain in a state of limbo which is delaying their transition from youth to adulthood, often for an uncertain time (Young and Jeffrey, 2008; Deuchar and Dyson, 2020). 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" (Jeffrey, 2009, p. 183). But the inability to secure (decent) employment means that it is becoming difficult for young men to find partners and many of them are remaining unmarried, and thus are stuck in between life stages (Young and Jeffrey, 2008; Chowdhry, 2009). Second, and relatedly, this besetting of life transitions and consequent inability to assume normative responsibilities of adults causes among them feelings of anxiety, hopelessness and shame (Mains, 2007; Deuchar, 2014). 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, Rogers (2008) argues that sexual harassment of female students by lower-caste young men represents the latter's response to subordination within higher education and white-collar jobs. Fourth, prolonged unemployment can also create a sense of victimhood, even among the youth from privileged social backgrounds. In India, this sentiment of victimhood among the young belonging to better-off sections of society is increasingly visible in their opposition to reservations in education and employment for historically marginalized population groups.

Conclusion

This chapter has assessed the relationship between structural economic transformation, inequality and development in the context of 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 chapter 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-thirds of the country's population still lives in rural areas and where overall education levels remain dismal. The urban-based, non-farm sector-led growth has heightened the significance of work-related migration. But urban jobs are highly precarious, and migration avenues are not 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 chapter 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 (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). 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 resent not being rewarded for development. 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, the Naxalite movement, although petering out, is most active in places that are believed to have been ignored in the development process. While early development planning in India recognized 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 the 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 the 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 been adequately followed.

It is in this context of spatially uneven development that the past few decades have led to a 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 (Srivastava *et al.*, 2020). 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 that 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 marginalized backgrounds to transition to migration-based livelihoods can undermine their economic well-being and social status. While increasing the 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 likely 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 the absence of men results in women assuming greater decision-making roles within the household, which increases their autonomy, it also leads to women shouldering the 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 well-being.

Finally, the lack of stable, decent employment that prevents millions of educated youth in India from realizing 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 the labour force are also likely to have adverse effects on India’s development.

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

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Note

- 1 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 were comparable, and the acronym thus later became BIMARU to include Odisha in this grouping.

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