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## TRENDS IN REGIONAL DISPARITIES IN INDIA SINCE INDEPENDENCE: A GEOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS

### Doctoral Dissertation Abstract (2009)

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The research dissertation examined the issue of regional disparities in India from a spatio-temporal perspective as an exercise in development geography. The basic preposition was that underdevelopment and large scale inequalities in India were rooted in its historical past, especially the colonial phase, and the issue had not been adequately addressed in the post-independence period. This study was motivated by a contemporary debate on the impact of the New Economic Policy on regional disparities in India.

In the light of the above, the main objectives of the study were: to analyze the trends in and patterns of regional disparities in India; to trace the historical roots of these disparities; to assess the efficacy of government policies in resolving the issue of regional disparities; and to offer a critique on the impact of the New Economic Policy in this context. On the basis of the aforesaid objectives, the following research questions were framed: What were the patterns of regional disparities during different periods of Indian history and to what extent did these persist after independence? How far were the successive Five Year Plans successful in the reduction of these disparities? How has the New Economic Policy impacted upon the regional disparities in India? Which model best explains the evolving

scenario of regional disparities in India?

Considering the required parameters appropriate methodology was evolved and four indicators namely, population above poverty line, female literacy, rural non-agricultural workers and urbanization were deemed appropriate. These were meant to represent the four most critical dimensions of development in the Indian context that is economic, social, rural development and overall modernization respectively. The district was taken as the basic spatial unit. Each indicator was assessed in terms of its relative weight and applied to the data to arrive at a composite index.

Standard historical works were searched for tracing the historical roots of regional disparities. A perusal of successive Five Year Plans helped in underlining their specific objectives and assessing what could or could not be achieved in each case. About 300 research studies on regional disparities in India over the last more than five decades were screened to obtain research premises of available literature. The post-independence Census of India counts were also studied as were Statistical Abstracts of various states, Government Reports and publications of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). The study was organized into seven chapters beginning with a comprehensive introduction to the



conceptual framework and methodology, followed by a discussion on the historical roots of regional disparities and their persistence under the Five Year Plans in the second and third chapters respectively. Chapter four provided a decade-wise comparative picture of regional disparities since independence while the fifth chapter offered a critique on the impact of the New Economic Policy on regional disparities in India. A quantitative testing of the hypotheses was carried out in chapter six while the last offered conclusive findings of the study.

The evolution of a spatial framework of regional disparities in India could be understood historically through six periods of its history. Each period having peculiarities of physical environment, resource base, settlement system, transport trade routes, and internal-external linkages, embedded in its political economy. Each period made its unique contribution to shaping the patterns of regional development.

Soon after Independence, the question of regional disparities became a serious concern for Indian democracy. Since the beginning of the planning process in 1951, the issue was focal in every plan document. It was voiced in the First and Second Plans while a full chapter was devoted on the theme in the Third Plan. Backward Area Development Programmes were conceived and launched during the Fourth and Fifth Plans. Removal of poverty emerged as a critical priority area in the Sixth and Seventh plans. The Ninth and Tenth plans emphasized the strengthening of Panchayati Raj Institutions and people's participation as a measure for balanced regional development. The Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojna (Backward Area Development Programme) was launched in 2003 to develop the most backward districts in India.

In terms of ranking of major states, on per capita income over the four decades since

1951, Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra, Gujarat and West Bengal held one among top five positions for all the successive decades. Punjab remained first since 1961. Karnataka made an entry into this group only during the 1989-90 period on the sliding down of West Bengal. In contrast, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Orissa were at the bottom five positions for most of the period, wherein Bihar remained last on all the counts. The economic distance between the top and bottom states increased steadily over time. On the eve of the adoption of the New Economic Policy in the early 1990's, the agriculturally advanced states of Punjab and Haryana, the industrially forward states of Gujarat and Maharashtra, and the socially progressive states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu attained still higher levels of development. None the less, the variant spatial contours of a weak heart-land and a strong periphery, backward mainland and more advanced coastal regions, and the lagging tribal belts along with the modernizing metropolises persisted.

In 2001, the development map of India depicted a rather mature phase of regional disparities in India. Evolving over time, the peripheral location of developed districts was manifested in development clusters occupying four corners of India. The north-western cluster of developed districts was found in Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Chandigarh, and also in some parts of Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. Agricultural development based on irrigation, electrification, and road connectivity as well as horticulture and tourism are the main planks of higher development in this region. The southern cluster of developed districts included the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu and their offshoots in the adjoining state of Karnataka. Here social indicators of development were very strong. The western cluster had Gujarat and Maharashtra in its

ambit, where industrialization had a multiplier effect. The eastern cluster of higher level of development in India was found in the Kolkata-Haora conurbation and the Christian predominant area of Mizoram.

The patterns of change in the spatial contours of development during 1991-2001 show marked conformity to the already existing development levels of different parts of the country. Regions at low development levels witnessed marginal change, areas of medium development recorded moderate change, while those at high levels of development registered significant change over the decade. The coastal states and mega cities received big investments during this period. The role of infrastructure, the situation of law and order, and the quality of governance played a crucial role in this regard. In a way, the post-reforms period has witnessed an accentuation of regional disparity. The New Economic Policy too favoured the already developed areas much more than the backward ones.

Making a contrast with the behavior of the inter-regional or inter-state disparity, intra-state disparity declined virtually in all cases, with the sole example of Orissa. This represented efforts on the part of state governments to reduce internal disparity. In general, the performance of the southern states was superior to that of the northern states on this count. The decline was fairly pronounced in the newly formed states as also in their truncated parent states. The more developed states, which were already characterized by diffusion of the development process, recorded a lower order of decline. Reduction in intra-state disparity in virtually every case showed the increasing concern of the state governments. The less developed states were, however, constrained in terms of resources in acquiring a fast pace of development. In addition to improving the quality of their

governance, they required huge financial support from the Central government. Decentralization of power to Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments was likely to stimulate their development process.

While testing the validation of certain sets of propositions with regard to regional disparities in India, it was found that in the case of role of diversity and quality of natural resources as a factor of development, it was not strongly validated. At the macro-level, the eastern half of India was richer in natural resources than the western half of India, but their development levels were in reverse order. The colonial experience caused the formation of two India's: one under the British and the other under the native princes. The level of development in the latter case was much lower, the index value being 82.27 against the national average of 100. It suffered misrule by rulers and was devoid of the impact of development on modern lines in most cases. The coastal districts were at a higher level of development while those along the international borders were generally backward. Collectively, the coastal districts had index value of 128.8 against the 75.41 for border districts. Within each group, the pattern was further influenced by the level of development of the state in which a district was located. Border districts in more developed states were comparatively at a higher level of development than those in backward states.

Similarly, coastal districts in backward states were comparatively at lower level of development than those in advanced states. The western coastal region was significantly more advanced than its eastern counterpart, the comparative index values being 110.96 and 93.86 respectively. The spread effects of the capital/million cities were not uniform. They made a strong impact in developed areas but a weak one in the backward ones. The

development was strongly associated with the infrastructure provisions and urban-rural linkages. A positive role of planning in lowering regional disparities was confirmed. The relative amount of central fiscal transfers to states was crucial in this regard. States which received higher per capita plan outlays were noted for a higher level of development, barring the case of Special Category States.

The emerging picture of regional disparities in India is, however, not so bleak. Under the impact of the New Economic Policy,

inter-state disparities did not accentuate to the extent apprehended by researchers. Moreover, the new milieu created by this policy geared up the states towards an accelerated development. During the post-reforms phase inter-state disparities did widen but intra-state disparities narrowed down virtually in every case. It was also found that Slater's (1973) model, with some modifications, found relatively the greatest validity in explanation in regional disparities in India.