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Introduction: Towards an Analysis of Regional and Class Disparity in India

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Abstract:

This introduction serves as a note to an analysis of regional and class disparity in India, with particular focus on Bihar, a backward state in India. We briefly summarize the existing literature on the causes of backwardness in Bihar. Albeit poor, it has increasingly been reported in recent years that the state has witnessed higher economic growth and that the implementation of rural employment and development programmes has accelerated. At the same time, out-migration has increased and the provision of political reservations for lower castes at the grassroots level has been introduced. The agrarian structure might also have been transformed by economic growth, the increase in migration, and the new political opportunities for the lower castes.

In this research project, an attempt will be made to understand, one, why particular regions or classes lag behind in development, two, the effect of changes, such as economic growth, larger volumes of out-migration and lower castes' political participation, on regional and class disparity, and, three, the processes and mechanisms behind disparity in India. We will then draw some policy implications.

Key words: India, disparity, Bihar, castes, development programme, migration, political participation

1. Introduction

The Indian economy, the second largest consumer market in the world, has enjoyed high economic growth in recent years. Consequently, its role in the world, both economically and politically, has been expanding. At the same time, India has the largest population of poor people. It is widely acknowledged that the chasm between the haves and the have-nots has increased in recent years. Weisskopf (2011) summarized the empirical studies on economic inequality in India, pointing out that inequality in terms of individuals and caste/religion groups has been growing, particularly after the 1990s.

A growth process that reduces inequality is important in many ways. Empirical evidence suggests that inequality in income and assets has an adverse effect on a wide

range of socio-economic deprivations (e.g. Wilkinson and Pickett, 2007). Inequality is also associated with unequal opportunities, further leading to wasted productive potential and the inefficient allocation of resources while also inhibiting sound institutional development (World Bank, 2005a). As widely argued in the literature, instability is detrimental to economic growth and poses a more serious threat to a heterogeneous country like India that is composed of various religious, ethnic, and linguistic groups.

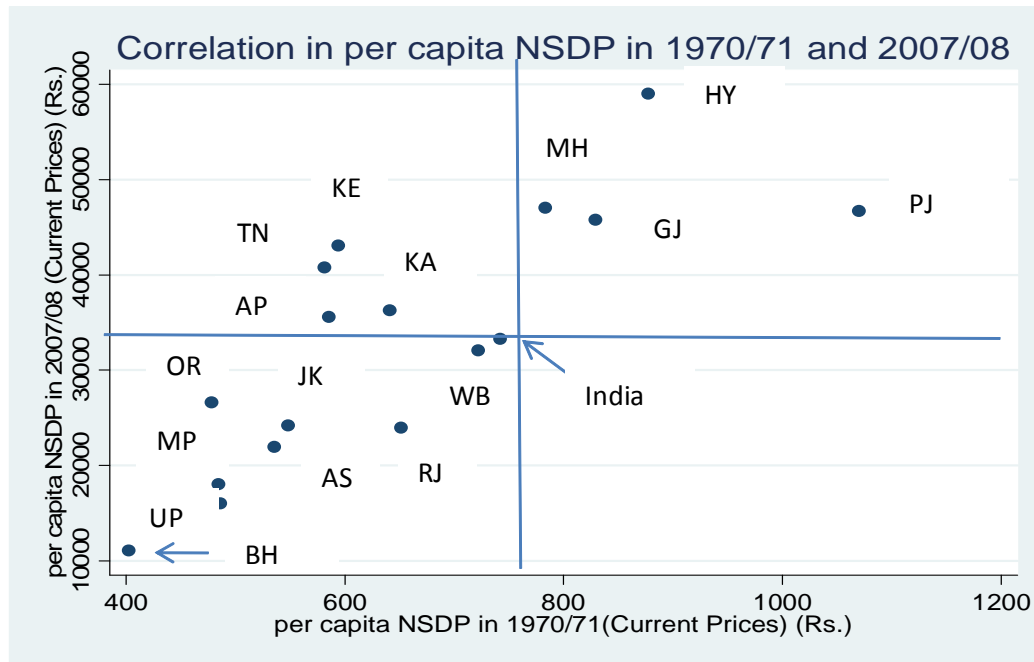
In this research project, we do not intend to empirically examine the trend and extent of regional, caste/religion, household, and individual disparity in India again. With a focus on Bihar or the eastern part of India, one of the most backward states/regions in India, we try rather to (1) discuss why particular regions or classes lagged behind in development, (2) examine the impact of recent economic, political and social changes on disparities, and ultimately (3) understand the processes and mechanisms of disparity in India, and draw some policy implications.

This introductory note consists of the following sections. The first section will summarize the existing literature on the causes of backwardness in Bihar or the eastern regions of India. The second section will briefly recount the recent economic growth and development programmes that have been financed by the public sector. The third section will discuss some issues on out-migration. The fourth section will deal with political changes in the state. The last section will summarize this introduction.

2. Causes of backwardness

Bihar, with a population of 103.8 million according to the Census of India 2011, is considered to be one of the more underdeveloped states in India. Per capita net state domestic product (NSDP) is the lowest of all India's states, only one third of the national average. As Figure 1 shows, Bihar was already behind other states in the 1970s and the state lags still further behind in terms of per capita NSDP. The incidence of poverty, defined as the percentage of the population below the poverty line in terms of monthly per capita expenditure in 2004/05 is 55.7% in rural Bihar, which is far higher than the 41.8% in rural India as a whole (Government of India, 2009). The state is also behind in social development. For example, the adult literacy rate (63.8%) in the Census of India 2011 is the lowest of all states. The under-five mortality rate per 1,000 births in Bihar (84.8) in the National Family Health Survey 2005-06 is worse than the national average (74.3).

Figure 1 Correlation in per capita NSDP in 1970/71 and 2007/08



Note: Figures are based on 16 major states: Andhra Pradesh (AP), Assam (AS), Bihar (BH), Gujarat (GJ), Haryana (HY), Karnataka (KA), Madhya Pradesh (MP), Maharashtra (MH), Orissa (OR), Punjab (PJ), Rajasthan (RJ), Tamil Nadu (TN), Uttar Pradesh (UP) and West Bengal (WB). The vertical and horizontal lines indicate national average.

Source: EPW Research Foundation (2009); Government of India (2011).

It is not so well acknowledged that alongside its underdevelopment, Bihar is suffering from growing intra-state disparity. The per capita Gross District Domestic Product (GDDP) for Patna district, where the capital city of the state is located, is by far the highest of the state's 38 districts. The difference has rapidly increased in recent years with the disparity in per capita GDDP between Patna District and that of Sheohar District, which has the lowest GDDP in Bihar, increasing sharply from 3.3 times in 1998-99 to 8.8 times in 2007-08 (Government of Bihar, 2007, 2012). Worse still, the allocation of public expenditure to social and economic development has been extremely skewed to only one district, i.e. Patna district (Government of Bihar, 2010). Anybody who has visited rural Bihar probably does not disagree that economic progress in the villages is not as visible as development in Patna. The effect of recent economic growth in the predominantly agrarian economy as a whole is still limited.

Disparities also show up along social and gender lines. Scheduled Castes (SC) and Muslims, who make up approximately 15.7% and 16.5% of the population, are

often regarded as socio-economically backward classes. The literacy rates in 2001, for example, clearly reveal the disparity across gender and caste within the state: 59.7% for males, 33.6% for females, 31.5% for Muslim females, 15.6% for SC females, and only 3.9% for female Mushar, one of the most deprived SCs in Bihar¹.

Approximately 90% of the state's population resides in the rural areas, and nearly 80% of the state's rural workforce is engaged in the agricultural sector. The share of this primary sector has drastically declined to one fifth of NSDP (Government of Bihar, 2012). It is, however, still regarded as a critical sector in the state's economic development (World Bank, 2005b). Various attempts have been made to explain the causes of poverty, backwardness and deprivation in Bihar, particularly in terms of agriculture.

Bhaduri (1973) argued that agriculture backwardness in the eastern part of India is attributed to the semi-feudalistic relations of production between a minority of landowners and a majority of sharecroppers (marginal and small peasants), in which landowners are discouraged from improving agricultural technology. Since large and rich landowners exploit sharecroppers through landownership and usury, technological improvement makes it difficult for semi-feudal landowners to control sharecroppers in a situation of inter-linked credit and labour markets.

Even today, land distribution is extremely skewed. Table 1 is based on our recent door-to-door all households survey in four villages in East Champaran district in November, 2011. It clearly shows that landholding and caste are closely associated². Only 9.5% of upper castes are landless, while this is the case for 87.3% of Scheduled Castes (SCs). The difference in size of landholding by caste is also apparent. Since independence, land reform legislation, including the abolition of *zamindari*, tenancy reforms, land consolidation and the redistribution of surplus land, has been passed by the state assembly, and land reform was again recommended for implementation to the government during the late 2000s. These changes have, however, remained unexecuted due to political and administrative difficulties (Bandyopadhyay, 2009). This contrasts with some success in land reforms in neighbouring states, including land reforms in West Bengal and land consolidation in Uttar Pradesh.

¹ The latest Census figures on literacy rates by caste, religion and area are not available at the time of writing.

² East Champaran district is located in the northwestern part of Bihar. In the southern part of Bihar, upper other backward classes (OBC) may have more land (see, for example, Kohli, 2009).

Table 1 Landholding and migration patterns by caste group including Muslims

| Caste groups | <u>Landless households</u> | | | | <u>Households with migrants</u> | | | |
|----------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|---------------------------------|--|-------------------|------------------|
| | No. of households | Average size of household members | No. of households | % in caste group | Average landholding (acre) | Average landholding (acre) excluding landless households | No. of households | % in caste group |
| General Castes | 262 | 5.69 | 25 | 9.54 | 6.29 | 6.99 | 118 | 45.04 |
| OBCs | 390 | 6.09 | 48 | 12.31 | 1.07 | 1.22 | 183 | 46.92 |
| EBCs | 740 | 5.74 | 483 | 65.27 | 0.20 | 0.58 | 367 | 49.59 |
| SCs | 283 | 5.26 | 247 | 87.28 | 0.04 | 0.26 | 100 | 35.34 |
| Total | 1675 | 5.73 | 793 | 47.34 | 1.33 | 2.52 | 768 | 45.85 |

Source: IDE-ADRI Survey 2011-12.

As the “Green Revolution” has gradually penetrated the eastern part of India, including Bihar, the importance of technology and groundwater has been emphasized, rather than the constraints stemming from the agrarian structure. Shallow tubewells have increased in Bihar, and the state witnessed higher growth in agriculture in the 1980s. As agriculture was intensified and employment opportunities expanded in the eastern part of India, the exploitative land and labour market has also changed so that landowners have less power to stipulate the conditions of labour contracts (Ballabh and Pandey, 1999). At the same time, Wilson (2002) demonstrated how the adoption of new technology for high yield crops since the 1980s has resulted in small and marginal cultivators being forced to depend more on the minority of large landholders for high-interest production and consumption loans. Landowners have constantly renewed their strategies to reverse gains made by small peasants and agricultural labourers (Wilson, 1999).

Despite expanded access to irrigation and the leverage of pump sets, agricultural growth has stagnated since the 1990s. Clearly, the development of tube-well irrigation is not enough to sustain agricultural growth. Kishore (2004) argued that this agricultural stagnation is a result of the lack of an adequate infrastructure, such as electricity and economic incentives rather than the agrarian structure.

Bordering Nepal to the north, the state, particularly the northern part of the state, is prone to recurring floods that affect more than 70% of the area and population (Government of Bihar, 2008). This has also had an adverse impact on the state’s primarily agrarian economy. Farmers reject the use of high-yield varieties of rice which do not stand up to flooding (Rorabacher, 2008). Anecdotal evidence from our recent

survey in Bihar villages shows that farmers also have no incentive to introduce hybrid varieties, because the cost of seed for these varieties is much higher than that for high yield varieties. There is also a lack of marketing for hybrid varieties, which, according to the villagers, do not suit local people's tastes, and this also discourages farmers from adopting hybrid varieties of rice.

Banerjeet and Iyer (2005) showed that there has been a much greater effect on economic and social performance in independent India from the land revenue system set up during the British colonial rule. The areas of the *zamindari* system, where a single landlord is liable for revenue collection, which include today's Bihar, are not only significantly lower in terms of investment and productivity in agriculture but also with respect to investment in health and education than is the case in areas where other land revenue systems were introduced. This implies that colonial legacies have had a long-term impact on development in independent India, although the processes and mechanisms of such long-term effects have not been completely clarified.

A list of the causes of backwardness include poor peasants' lack of control over state policy and a reciprocal lack of administrative response to poor peasants (Wood, 1975), the central government's agricultural and industrial policies (Ghosh, 2011), and the negative interaction between the state's politics and the economy (Minato, 2011).

The question arises as to whether changes such as the recent higher economic growth, the larger volume of out-migration and the political empowerment of lower castes still accord with the explanations of Bihar's backwardness as provided by the existing literature. We will describe some of these important changes below.

3. Accelerated Economic Growth and Development Programmes

Ever since the state assembly election in 2006, when the National Democratic Alliance was elected, the media have reported that Bihar's economic performance has accelerated because of improvements in law and order, and various development initiatives, particularly in the development of physical infrastructure.

The compound annual growth rate of NSDP between 2005-06 to 2009-10 is 12.62%, which is higher than the 8.17% at the national level over the same period³. As opposed to the dominant explanation that economic growth has been accelerated by "good governance" since the new state government was sworn in, Das Gupta (2010) argued that high growth has been a continuous trend since the mid-1990s but has been interrupted by the bifurcation of states into Bihar and Jharkhand in 2000. She further

³ All values mentioned are constant prices as obtained from the Central Statistical Office website.

stated that the trade, hotel and restaurant sector has been the single largest contributor to growth since the late 1990s, while the dominant account is that growth has mainly been led by the construction sector, such as road construction, which was financed by the public sector (e.g. Nagaraj and Rahman, 2010). The implication of recent growth, the leading sectors in that growth and accelerating disparities pose a further question of whether the pattern of agrarian accumulation has changed.

The media have reported that the implementation of rural employment and development programmes has accelerated in recent years. However, the extent of the implementation of rural employment and development programmes, which aim to improve the livelihoods of the poor, differs from village to village. According to our village survey in 2008-09, rural development programmes tend to run in relatively more accessible and developed villages (Tsujita et al., 2010). Oda and Tsujita (2011) found that villages closer to the state capital were more likely to be electrified in the recent national rural electrification programme.

The central and state governments, with a series of legal provisions on decentralization and for reserved seats for the lower casts at the *panchayat* level, to be discussed below, have tried to improve programme implementation for the poor, such as by creating new institutions for new programmes, introducing bank transfers for a variety of beneficiaries of various programmes, among other innovations. They, however, do not necessarily provide a panacea for a wide range of problems facing people at the grassroots level.

The uneven distribution of benefits from public investment and development initiatives at the village level seems generally to reflect the existing socio-economic structure⁴. This implies that public investment, paradoxically, reinforces the existing rural socio economic structure if the state's development strategies cannot adequately address inequality. In fact, deep-rooted fundamental problems of inequality, such as the distribution of landholdings and the empowerment of lower castes, have not been rigorously dealt with by the state's policies. Insufficient attention as to how development and poverty alleviation programmes can be implemented adequately, efficiently, accountably and transparently at the village level may leave Bihar just as a source of labour for the rest of India, as migration has increased in recent years.

⁴ Mooij (2001) has documented how the Public Distribution System (PDS) in Bihar and Jharkhand works. Any policy and programme proposed by the central government will take a particular form that reflects the wider political economy at the state and grassroots level.

4. Migration

It should be emphasized that poverty in Bihar has declined, albeit at a slower rate than other states over the long run (Figure 1), and the state has experienced positive economic growth at a slower pace than elsewhere. In our survey conducted in 80 villages in five districts in Bihar in 2008-09, *Muhiyas*, the heads of the *Gram Panchayat* (the lowest tier in the rural self-government system) and village leaders assessed changes in their villages in the past decades through focus group discussions. 77 out of the 80 villages concluded that their villages were relatively better off than ten years ago (Table 2). The main reasons given for this assessment were increased employment opportunities outside the village, followed by access to education. It was reported that all villages supplied seasonal labour to prosperous areas outside the state. Bihar has had a long tradition of out-migration ever since the British colonial period (De Haan 2002). Longitudinal surveys have pointed out that both the volume of out-migration and its length have increased in recent years (Sharma, 2005; Rogers and Rogers, 2011). The Census of India shows that not only has the outflow of migration increased, but the destinations of Bihari migrants have also changed from east to west (Table 3)⁵. Traditionally, Bengal (including most of what is now Bangladesh) has been the main destination, while Delhi has emerged as the main destination in the 1990s. Table 3 also indicates that the overall proportion of migration to the main destinations has gradually declined. To put this the other way round, destinations might have increasingly diversified in recent years. In fact, our recent rural household survey indicated that the southern region, where the language is completely different, is emerging as a destination.

When it comes to migration at the household level, Scheduled Castes (SCs) are less likely to migrate from villages, even when 87.3% of them are landless (Table 1). On the other hand, it has been acknowledged that Muslims, comprising approximately 16.5% of the population in Bihar, who are regarded as a socio-economic backward class, are more likely to seek employment opportunities outside the state⁶. If landless SCs do not or cannot migrate, inequality might increase in the villages. We need to explore how and to what extent out-migration has had an impact on inequality in the rural areas.

⁵ It is noted that the Census is likely to underestimate seasonal migration. The reason why we focus solely on male migration in the table is that female migration in search of (better) employment from Bihar is uncommon.

⁶ A comprehensive picture of the socio-economic situation of Muslims is provided by the Government of India (2006) for the whole country and by ADRI (2006) for Bihar.

Table 2 Evaluation of Change over Time by *Mukhiya* or Village Leaders in Bihar

| Name of district | Per capita GDDP (Rs.) | No. of surveyed villages | No. of better-off villages | <u>Most important reasons (up to three) for being better-off in the last ten years</u> | | | | | |
|------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------|------------|-------------------|
| | | | | Outside jobs | Access to education | Access to roads | Agricultural productivity | Wage rates | Social conditions |
| Bhagalpur | 8,059 | 16 | 16 | 7 | 12 | 9 | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| Rohtas | 7,056 | 16 | 15 | 5 | 11 | 8 | 6 | 3 | 2 |
| East Champaran | 6,784 | 16 | 14 | 9 | 4 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 3 |
| Madhubani | 5,639 | 16 | 16 | 11 | 8 | 9 | 7 | 3 | 4 |
| Kishanganj | 5,355 | 16 | 16 | 14 | 8 | 2 | 11 | 3 | 2 |
| Total | 7,168 | 80 | 77 | 46 | 43 | 34 | 33 | 21 | 17 |

Note: The per capita Gross District Domestic Product is an average of GDDP 2003-04 and 2004-05 at 1999/00 prices. The GDDP total is the state average. Other reasons receiving few responses, such as access to electricity (7), private irrigation (6), political conditions (6), public irrigation (6), access to health (5), and so on, are excluded from the table.

Source: IDE-ADRI Survey 2008-09 and Government of Bihar (2009).

Table 3 Prominent States of Destination of Male out-migrants from Bihar

| 1971-1981 | | | 1981-1991 | | | 1991-2001 | | |
|---------------|-----------------|-----------|---------------|-----------------|-----------|---------------|-----------------|-----------|
| State | No. of Migrants | Share (%) | State | No. of Migrants | Share (%) | State | No. of Migrants | Share (%) |
| West Bengal | 256,695 | 42.01 | West Bengal | 182,264 | 26.03 | Delhi | 335,638 | 15.38 |
| Uttar Pradesh | 71,201 | 11.65 | Delhi | 121,398 | 17.33 | West Bengal | 227,573 | 10.43 |
| Delhi | 53,296 | 8.72 | Uttar Pradesh | 81,684 | 11.66 | Maharashtra | 208,768 | 9.57 |
| Punjab | 32,751 | 5.36 | Punjab | 44,278 | 6.32 | Uttar Pradesh | 150,883 | 6.91 |
| Maharashtra | 26,491 | 4.34 | Assam | 41,390 | 5.91 | Punjab | 124,085 | 5.69 |
| Haryana | 19,927 | 3.26 | Maharashtra | 40,730 | 5.82 | Haryana | 112,977 | 5.18 |
| Gujarat | 8,030 | 1.31 | Haryana | 28,850 | 4.12 | Gujarat | 93,294 | 4.27 |
| Assam | - | - | Gujarat | 17,180 | 2.45 | Assam | 23,927 | 1.10 |
| All India | 610,988 | 100 | All India | 700,317 | 100 | All India | 2,182,328 | 100 |

Note: For the year between 1991 and 2001, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh include Jharkhand and Uttaranchal (renamed Uttarakhand now), respectively.

Migrants are defined as those whose last place of resident is Bihar and reached the destination during the last nine years before the Census.

The purpose of migration is not necessarily for employment. The Census in 1981 was not conducted in Assam due to undisturbed conditions.

Source: Census of India 1981; 1991; 2001 Tables D-2.

5. The Political Empowerment of Lower Castes

Bihar's traditional agrarian structure was characterized by a monopoly of both socio-political power and economic resources by the upper caste (Frankel, 1989). There have been considerable changes as a result of agrarian struggles. One struggle is the mobilization over socio-economic issues of lower class peasants (mainly SCs) emerging from caste oppression against landowners (upper and backward castes). Prasad (1987) argued that semi-feudalism is linked to agrarian struggle between landowners and peasants. Another struggle is the political struggle at the state level, which is putting upper castes in competition against upper backward castes (Frankel, 1989; Kohli, 2009; Nakamizo, 2010). According to Choudhry (1988), this has mainly been brought about after the birth of regional parties by the green revolution, which empowers upper backward castes as peasants. The question remains whether, and if so how, the agrarian struggle has been able to redress disparity in the rural areas.

Since the 2000s, political reservations for lower castes and women for *panchayats* seats have also been implemented in Bihar. According to the Bihar Panchayat Raj Ordinance 2006, seats at all three levels of *Panchayat* (i.e. village, block and district) are reserved for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Classes for as near as but not exceeding fifty percent of the total number of seats in the *Panchayat*⁷. Gupta (2001) reported that lower castes emerged as representatives in local politics when the *panchayat* election was held in 2001 after a lapse of 23 years. As of 2006, the proportion of SC-elected *panchayat* representatives at the village, block and district levels account for 14.4%, 20.0% and 16.6%, respectively (Table 4). Having said this, the mid- or long-term transformation of changes in agrarian relations and political empowerment in the rural areas is still under-researched.

⁷ Seats are also reserved for women for as near as but not exceeding fifty percent of the total number of seats both for reserved seats for SCs, STs and Backward Classes and for non-reserved seats for SCs, STs and the Backward Classes.

Table 4 No. of Elected Panchayat Representatives (as of 1 Dec. 2006)

| Bihar | | | | | |
|--------------------|-------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------|
| | No. of Panchayats | No. of representatives | Scheduled Castes (SCs) | Scheduled Tribes (STs) | Women |
| Gram | 8,463 | 117,397 | 16,941 | 784 | 64,152 |
| Share in total (%) | | | (14.43) | (0.67) | (54.65) |
| Intermediate | 531 | 11,537 | 2,307 | 91 | 5,671 |
| Share in total (%) | | | (20.00) | (0.79) | (49.15) |
| District | 38 | 1,157 | 192 | 9 | 577 |
| Share in total (%) | | | (16.59) | (0.78) | (49.87) |
| India | | | | | |
| | No. of Panchayats | No. of representatives | Scheduled Castes (SCs) | Scheduled Tribes (STs) | Women |
| Gram | 233,251 | 2,657,112 | 491,305 | 314,942 | 975,723 |
| Share in total (%) | | | (18.49) | (11.85) | (36.72) |
| Intermediate | 6,105 | 157,175 | 33,128 | 11,538 | 58,328 |
| Share in total (%) | | | (21.08) | (7.34) | (37.11) |
| District | 539 | 15,759 | 2,769 | 1,680 | 15,759 |
| Share in total (%) | | | (17.57) | (10.66) | (36.94) |

Note: According to the 2001 Census, the proportion of SCs to the total population is 15.7% and 16.2% in Bihar and India, respectively. The proportion of STs to the total population is 0.9% and 8.1%, respectively in Bihar and India.

Source: indiastat.com (<http://www.indiastat.com>), originally from Ministry of Rural Development data.

6. Conclusion

This introduction provides a note on our analysis of regional and class disparity in India, with a particular focus on Bihar, a backward state in India. We briefly summarize the existing literature on the causes of the backwardness in Bihar. Albeit poor, it has increasingly been reported in recent years that the state has witnessed higher economic growth and the implementation of rural employment and development programmes has accelerated. At the same time, out-migration has increased and the provision of political reservations for lower castes at the grassroots level has been introduced. The agrarian structure might also have been transformed by economic growth, the increase in migration, and the new political opportunities for the lower castes.

In our final report, we will try to re-examine the causes of Bihar's backwardness, to investigate the impact of higher economic growth on disparity, and the effect of economic and political changes on inequality. Ultimately, we will try to understand the processes and mechanisms behind disparity in India, and draw some policy implications. In this way, we can deepen our insight into whether and how impoverished and oppressed people living in backward regions, including Bihar, shall overcome one day.

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