

Geography of Poverty and Social Deprivation in India: A Regional Analysis

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Abstract

Poverty in India is marked not only by inadequate income or consumption but also by spatially concentrated deficits in health, education, housing, sanitation, nutrition and access to basic services. This paper examines the geography of poverty and social deprivation in India through a regional and multidimensional perspective. It seeks to identify the principal spatial concentrations of deprivation, assess changes over time, examine rural–urban and social-group inequalities, and consider the structural processes sustaining regional disadvantage. The study adopts a descriptive, analytical and comparative research design based entirely on secondary data. Its principal sources are NITI Aayog’s National Multidimensional Poverty Index: A Progress Review 2023, based on NFHS-4 (2015–16) and NFHS-5 (2019–21), the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation’s Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) 2023–24, the World Bank’s 2025 poverty estimates, and recent UNDP multidimensional-poverty evidence. The analysis demonstrates a substantial national decline in multidimensional poverty, but also a persistent geography of deprivation. Bihar, Jharkhand, Meghalaya, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh recorded particularly high multidimensional-poverty incidence in 2019–21, whereas Kerala, Goa and Tamil Nadu occupied the opposite end of the distribution. Rural deprivation remains significantly greater than urban deprivation, while consumption expenditure continues to vary systematically across social groups. The paper argues that India’s poverty geography reflects the interaction of economic structure, social stratification, uneven human-development achievements, infrastructure, urbanisation and state capacity. Consequently, poverty reduction requires spatially differentiated policies rather than uniform national interventions.

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Introduction

Poverty has a distinct geography. It is distributed unevenly among regions, settlements, social groups and households, and the spatial pattern is rarely explained by income alone. In India, rapid economic expansion, urbanisation, expansion of welfare programmes and improvements in basic infrastructure have reduced many forms of deprivation. Yet national averages conceal major subnational differences. A household's probability of experiencing nutritional deficiency, inadequate schooling, poor-quality housing or limited consumption is influenced by where it is located as well as by its social and economic position. The study of poverty from a geographical perspective therefore requires attention to the territorial organisation of opportunity, public services, labour markets, infrastructure and social relations.

Recent evidence points to major poverty reduction. India's National Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), based on NITI Aayog's methodology, shows that the proportion of the population identified as multidimensionally poor declined from 24.85% in 2015–16 to 14.96% in 2019–21. Rural multidimensional poverty fell from 32.59% to 19.28%, while the corresponding urban rate declined from 8.65% to 5.27%. NITI Aayog estimated that approximately 135.5 million people moved out of multidimensional poverty between the two survey periods. These are observed survey-based comparisons rather than estimates for 2026 (NITI Aayog, 2023).

The temporal distinction is important. The 2025 Global MPI continues to use 2019/2021 survey data for India's internationally comparable multidimensional-poverty estimate because newer nationally representative data containing all required dimensions were not yet publicly available for that calculation. It reports a global-MPI headcount of 16.4%, which should not be confused with India's National MPI estimate of 14.96%; the two indices differ in their indicators and specifications (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2025). Thus, claims that India's latest directly observed state-level multidimensional-poverty rates relate to 2025 or 2026 would be methodologically incorrect.

Monetary poverty presents an equally important but conceptually different picture. Following the World Bank's 2025 revision to purchasing-power-parity poverty lines and its incorporation of India's 2022–23 HCES, the international extreme-poverty threshold is \$3.00 per person per day at 2021 PPPs. The World Bank's October 2025 Poverty and Equity Brief estimated India's poverty rate at this threshold at 5.3% in 2022–23, down from 27.1% in 2011–12. Using the higher \$4.20 lower-middle-income-country line, however, 23.9% remained poor in 2022–23. The contrast illustrates how conclusions about the numerical magnitude of poverty depend strongly on the conceptual definition and threshold employed (World Bank, 2025a).

This measurement problem has a long history in Indian poverty research. Consumption poverty is essential for assessing command over goods and services, but deprivation also concerns people's substantive opportunities to live healthy, educated and socially secure lives. Sen's entitlement and capability-oriented approach shifted attention from commodity possession towards people's effective ability to convert resources into well-being (Sen, 1981). The Alkire–Foster methodology subsequently provided a systematic framework for identifying overlapping

household deprivations and constructing decomposable multidimensional measures (Alkire & Foster, 2011).

A geographical interpretation adds another dimension: economic and social disadvantages become embedded in particular territories. Regional differences in agricultural productivity, industrialisation, connectivity, urbanisation, ecological conditions, educational development, public-health provision, land relations and administrative capacity can produce spatially persistent patterns. Caste and tribal status may intensify these processes because historically disadvantaged populations are themselves unevenly distributed geographically. Desai and Dubey (2011), for example, demonstrated persistent caste disparities across education, income and social networks, indicating that economic change does not automatically dissolve inherited social inequalities.

Despite extensive scholarship on Indian poverty, three gaps remain particularly significant. First, monetary and multidimensional poverty are frequently discussed separately, limiting understanding of how consumption disadvantage and non-monetary deprivation intersect spatially. Second, national improvement can obscure the persistence of regional clusters in which deprivation remains considerably above the national mean. Third, analyses organised only around states may understate cross-cutting rural–urban and social-group inequalities. The present study therefore treats poverty as simultaneously economic, multidimensional, social and spatial.

The study has four related objectives: to examine the changing regional pattern of poverty and multidimensional deprivation across Indian states; to analyse rural–urban and social-group differences in material well-being; to identify structural factors associated with the persistence of regional deprivation; and to consider the implications of these geographical inequalities for spatially differentiated poverty policy. Correspondingly, it asks: How uneven is poverty and social deprivation across India's states and rural–urban spaces? Which regions continue to constitute major concentrations of deprivation despite national progress? How do social-group inequalities interact with territorial disadvantage? And what forms of regionally differentiated policy follow from these patterns?

The central argument developed below is that poverty in India is declining but remains geographically structured. The map of deprivation has changed in intensity without disappearing as a regional phenomenon.

Literature Review

The conceptual literature on poverty has progressively moved from one-dimensional resource measures towards broader assessments of deprivation. Conventional monetary approaches identify poverty by comparing income or consumption with a normative threshold. Their advantages include transparency, quantitative comparability and direct relevance to household purchasing capacity. Yet Sen (1981) argued that inadequate command over resources must be understood in relation to people's entitlements and actual capabilities. Similar resource levels can produce different human outcomes depending upon health status, gender, location, public

services and social institutions. Poverty consequently involves failures of substantive freedom as well as insufficiency of commodities.

This conceptual expansion contributed to multidimensional measurement. Alkire and Foster (2011) developed a dual-cut-off method in which deprivation is first identified separately for each indicator and then aggregated to determine whether a person or household experiences a sufficiently large weighted deprivation score to be classified as multidimensionally poor. The method is particularly useful geographically because the resulting index is decomposable across population groups and regions. It enables analysts to distinguish the incidence of poverty from its intensity, thereby recognising that two regions with similar headcounts may contain poor populations experiencing different combinations of disadvantage.

The use of a composite index is nevertheless contested. Ravallion (2011) cautions that aggregation can obscure important information and that the normative weights given to distinct dimensions are not equivalent to market valuations or necessarily to the preferences of people experiencing poverty. A high-level MPI should therefore complement rather than replace dimension-specific evidence. This criticism is particularly relevant to regional analysis: identical MPI scores could theoretically emerge from different deprivation combinations, requiring examination of the underlying indicators.

India has also been central to debates on monetary poverty measurement. Deaton and Kozel (2005) demonstrated how changes in survey design, recall periods, poverty lines and discrepancies between household surveys and national accounts could substantially affect estimates of poverty reduction. Their analysis remains relevant because recent HCES-based estimates likewise require attention to questionnaire design and intertemporal comparability. The World Bank similarly warns that improvements in the 2022–23 and 2023–24 Indian consumption surveys create challenges for strict comparisons with earlier surveys (World Bank, 2025a).

Empirical studies of multidimensional poverty reinforce the importance of spatial and social differentiation. Alkire and Seth (2015), examining India between 1999 and 2006, found substantial multidimensional-poverty reduction nationally but uneven progress across regions, castes and religious groups. They also found slower progress among several of the most deprived groups. Their findings are important because contemporary MPI data indicate that the broad process continues: rapid aggregate improvement can coexist with persistent geographical hierarchy.

Social stratification is another key component. Desai and Dubey (2011) argue that caste continued to shape educational, economic and social outcomes despite economic modernisation. This is consistent with contemporary consumption evidence showing systematic social-group differences. Such inequalities need not imply that caste or tribal status alone causes poverty; rather, they indicate cumulative disadvantage produced through unequal access to assets, education, labour markets, networks and public resources.

A related literature emphasises the role of welfare institutions. Drèze and Khera (2017) document the expansion of programmes involving food security, school meals, childcare, employment guarantees and social pensions, arguing that these initiatives contributed

meaningfully to human development while varying considerably in implementation across states. From a geographical perspective, this matters because identical centrally sponsored programmes can generate different outcomes where administrative capacity, political commitment, local institutions and baseline infrastructure vary.

Contemporary official evidence has substantially strengthened the empirical basis for regional poverty research. India's National MPI applies the Alkire–Foster framework using three equally weighted dimensions—health, education and standard of living—and 12 indicators: nutrition; child and adolescent mortality; maternal health; years of schooling; school attendance; cooking fuel; sanitation; drinking water; electricity; housing; assets; and bank accounts. A person is classified as multidimensionally poor when the household's weighted deprivation score reaches at least one-third (NITI Aayog, 2023).

The inclusion of these dimensions is particularly useful for social geography. In 2019–21, for example, the proportion of India's population deprived in the National MPI's individual indicators remained 43.90% for cooking fuel, 41.37% for housing, 31.52% for nutrition and 30.13% for sanitation. These are uncensored indicator headcounts, not poverty rates by themselves, but they show why monetary improvement cannot be assumed to eliminate non-income deprivation (NITI Aayog, 2023).

Recent international evidence reinforces this distinction. UNDP's 2025 profile reports that India's internationally comparable global-MPI headcount remains based on 2019/2021 data at 16.4%, with 18.7% additionally categorised as vulnerable to multidimensional poverty. The estimate indicates that income or consumption poverty and multidimensional deprivation identify overlapping but non-identical populations (UNDP, 2025).

The main contribution of the present study is consequently not to propose a new poverty index but to triangulate distinct, methodologically compatible forms of evidence without falsely merging them. State-level National MPI data are used to analyse multidimensional geography; HCES 2023–24 is used to analyse contemporary consumption levels and social-group disparities; and World Bank evidence provides a consistent international monetary-poverty context. This approach addresses an empirical gap between studies of national poverty decline and those concerned with the geographical persistence of social deprivation.

Research Methodology

The study employs a descriptive, analytical and comparative secondary-data research design. No field survey, questionnaire, interview or primary sample was conducted. Consequently, no primary-data sample size or respondent characteristics are reported.

India constitutes the study area, with the state and rural–urban sector functioning as the principal geographical units of comparison. The core multidimensional dataset is NITI Aayog's National Multidimensional Poverty Index: A Progress Review 2023, which compares NFHS-4 (2015–16) and NFHS-5 (2019–21) using a consistent National MPI methodology. The index measures overlapping household deprivation in health, education and standard of living (NITI Aayog, 2023).

For contemporary material living standards, the paper uses MoSPI's HCES 2023–24, which covered 261,953 households in its central sample—154,357 rural and 107,596 urban households. Average Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure (MPCE) is used as an indicator of material consumption rather than as a direct poverty headcount. Unless specified otherwise, the HCES figures reported below exclude imputed values for items received free through social-welfare programmes (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2025).

World Bank Poverty and Equity estimates are used to contextualise monetary poverty. Because the World Bank updated international poverty lines to 2021 PPPs in 2025, this paper uses the revised \$3.00 extreme-poverty and \$4.20 lower-middle-income poverty lines rather than treating older \$2.15 or \$3.65 estimates as current benchmarks (World Bank, 2025b). UNDP's 2025 Global MPI is used only for international multidimensional context.

Analysis consists of temporal comparison, state-level comparison, rural–urban differentiation, social-group comparison and interpretive regional clustering. Data from different surveys are not combined into a synthetic numerical index because they refer to different concepts, reference periods and methodologies. The study instead uses triangulation to assess whether multiple independent measures indicate similar geographical disadvantages.

Several limitations should be recognised. NFHS-5 remains the latest dataset underlying directly observed state-level National MPI comparisons, so those figures should not be described as current 2026 conditions. Nominal state MPCE does not fully adjust for interstate cost-of-living differences. HCES and NFHS do not observe identical households or identical dimensions. Moreover, the paper is descriptive rather than causal and does not undertake district-level spatial econometrics or GIS-based hotspot analysis. These constraints limit causal claims but do not invalidate the regional patterns visible across authoritative datasets.

Analysis and Discussion

National Poverty Reduction and the Persistence of Multidimensional Deprivation

India's aggregate trajectory is one of substantial improvement. National multidimensional-poverty incidence fell by almost ten percentage points between NFHS-4 and NFHS-5, from 24.85% to 14.96%, while intensity among the multidimensionally poor fell from 47.14% to 44.39%. The National MPI value consequently declined from 0.117 to 0.066 (NITI Aayog, 2023). These developments indicate that fewer people were experiencing overlapping deprivation and that the average breadth of deprivation among those who remained poor also decreased.

The underlying indicator changes help explain the decline. NITI Aayog (2023) reports improvement across all 12 National MPI indicators, with especially large reductions in sanitation and cooking-fuel deprivation. Nutrition, schooling, sanitation and cooking fuel were important contributors to the overall reduction. These improvements illustrate the interaction between household welfare and public or quasi-public infrastructure. Expansion of sanitation, electricity, financial inclusion, educational participation and clean-fuel access changes poverty even without immediately transforming household market income.

Nevertheless, the remaining deprivation profile is significant. In 2019–21, 43.90% of the population was deprived according to the MPI cooking-fuel criterion and 41.37% according to its housing criterion. Nutrition deprivation affected 31.52%, while sanitation deprivation affected 30.13% (NITI Aayog, 2023). Since these are indicator-specific figures, they should not be added together: the same household can experience multiple deprivations. Their importance lies precisely in revealing these overlaps.

Consumption-based evidence also indicates major improvement alongside continuing vulnerability. Under the World Bank's updated methodology, extreme poverty at \$3.00 a day fell to 5.3% in 2022–23, whereas 23.9% remained below the \$4.20 lower-middle-income threshold. Rural poverty at the \$4.20 line stood at 27.7%, compared with 14.3% in urban India (World Bank, 2025a). Poverty reduction therefore does not imply the disappearance of economic insecurity; conclusions depend on whether analysis is concerned with extreme destitution, broader lower-middle-income vulnerability, consumption inequality or multidimensional deprivation.

This reinforces Ravallion's (2011) argument against treating any single aggregate measure as sufficient. A geographical analysis benefits from examining multiple indicators while respecting their conceptual boundaries.

State-Level Geography: A Persistent Eastern–Central Concentration

State-level National MPI estimates reveal an exceptionally pronounced spatial gradient. In 2019–21, Bihar had India's highest state-level multidimensional-poverty incidence at 33.76%, followed by Jharkhand at 28.81%, Meghalaya at 27.79%, Uttar Pradesh at 22.93% and Madhya Pradesh at 20.63%. By contrast, Tamil Nadu recorded 2.20%, Goa 0.84% and Kerala 0.55% (NITI Aayog, 2023).

Table 1. Selected State-Level Multidimensional Poverty and Consumption Indicators

State	MPI headcount 2015–16 (%)	MPI headcount 2019–21 (%)	Rural MPCE 2023–24 (₹)	Urban MPCE 2023–24 (₹)
Bihar	51.89	33.76	3,670	5,080
Jharkhand	42.10	28.81	2,946	5,393
Meghalaya	32.54	27.79	3,852	7,839
Uttar Pradesh	37.68	22.93	3,481	5,395
Madhya Pradesh	36.57	20.63	3,441	5,538
Assam	32.65	19.35	3,793	6,794
Chhattisgarh	29.90	16.37	2,739	4,927

State	MPI headcount 2015–16 (%)	MPI headcount 2019–21 (%)	Rural MPCE 2023–24 (₹)	Urban MPCE 2023–24 (₹)
Odisha	29.34	15.68	3,357	5,825
Rajasthan	28.86	15.31	4,510	6,574
Gujarat	18.47	11.66	4,116	7,175
Maharashtra	14.80	7.81	4,145	7,363
Tamil Nadu	4.76	2.20	5,701	8,165
Kerala	0.70	0.55	6,611	7,783
India	24.85	14.96	4,122	6,996

Note. Sources: NITI Aayog (2023) and MoSPI (2025). MPCE figures exclude imputed benefits received free through specified welfare programmes.

The table reveals both continuity and change. The historically disadvantaged eastern–central belt experienced substantial poverty reduction, but many of its states remained at the upper end of the national distribution. Bihar's rate declined by more than 18 percentage points and Madhya Pradesh's by almost 16 percentage points, demonstrating that being highly deprived at the beginning of the period did not prevent rapid improvement. Yet relative regional hierarchy remained pronounced.

Uttar Pradesh is particularly important demographically. Its National MPI incidence declined from 37.68% to 22.93%, while NITI Aayog estimated that about 34.27 million residents moved out of multidimensional poverty between the two survey periods. Bihar was estimated to have reduced its multidimensionally poor population by approximately 22.51 million and Madhya Pradesh by about 13.57 million (NITI Aayog, 2023). Large-population states therefore account simultaneously for a substantial share of India's remaining deprivation and a substantial share of national poverty reduction.

The North-East cannot be treated as a homogeneous poverty region. Meghalaya's headcount of 27.79% was among India's highest, while Assam recorded 19.35%, Nagaland 15.43%, Arunachal Pradesh 13.76%, Tripura 13.11%, Manipur 8.10%, Mizoram 5.30% and Sikkim 2.60% (NITI Aayog, 2023). Such variation illustrates the danger of broad regional stereotypes. Mountainous terrain, accessibility, urbanisation, social institutions and public-service systems operate differently among northeastern states.

Southern India also displays variation, but at substantially lower MPI levels overall. Kerala's extremely low multidimensional-poverty incidence reflects its long-standing achievements in literacy, public health and social development rather than income alone. Tamil Nadu combines relatively low multidimensional poverty with comparatively high rural and urban consumption. These cases support the capability perspective: sustained provision of health, education and

social infrastructure can alter deprivation independently of merely maximising household income.

The regional pattern is therefore better understood as a core–periphery structure of human development than as a simple north–south divide. Pockets of lower and higher performance occur within every macro-region, but a marked concentration of high deprivation remains visible across parts of the Gangetic and central-eastern states.

Rural–Urban Inequality and the Geography of Consumption

Settlement geography remains a major axis of poverty. National MPI data show that rural poverty declined from 32.59% in 2015–16 to 19.28% in 2019–21, while urban poverty declined from 8.65% to 5.27% (NITI Aayog, 2023). The faster rural decline is important, but the absolute gap remained substantial.

HCES 2023–24 confirms continuing rural–urban differentiation in consumption. Average MPCE was ₹4,122 in rural India and ₹6,996 in urban India, excluding the imputed value of welfare items provided free of cost. MoSPI (2025) reported that nominal urban MPCE was approximately 70% higher than rural MPCE. When selected welfare benefits were imputed, the corresponding MPCE estimates were ₹4,247 and ₹7,078.

The rural–urban gap, however, varies geographically. HCES places the urban–rural MPCE difference at only 18% in Kerala and 27% in Punjab, compared with 80% in Chhattisgarh, 83% in Jharkhand, 79% in Assam and 78% in Maharashtra before welfare-benefit imputation (MoSPI, 2025). A simple binary distinction between rural poverty and urban prosperity therefore conceals the extent to which the benefits of urbanisation differ among states.

Jharkhand illustrates this clearly: rural MPCE was ₹2,946 against ₹5,393 in urban areas. Chhattisgarh recorded ₹2,739 and ₹4,927 respectively. In contrast, Kerala's rural MPCE of ₹6,611 approached its urban figure of ₹7,783 (MoSPI, 2025). The geography of poverty thus depends not only on whether an individual resides in a rural or urban settlement, but also on the state economy within which that settlement is embedded.

Urban residence does not automatically remove social deprivation either. Informal employment, insecure tenure, inadequate housing and unequal access to urban services can coexist with higher average consumption. Average MPCE should therefore not be interpreted as a direct measure of adequate housing, health security or employment quality.

At the national level, HCES also reports declining consumption-expenditure inequality: the rural Gini coefficient declined from 0.283 in 2011–12 to 0.266 in 2022–23 and 0.237 in 2023–24, while the urban coefficient declined from 0.363 to 0.314 and then 0.284 (MoSPI, 2025). These results are encouraging but require caution. Consumption surveys generally capture expenditure inequality more effectively than asset or top-income inequality, and the World Bank (2025a) explicitly notes the possibility that Indian consumption inequality may be understated because of sampling and data limitations.

Social Deprivation: Caste, Tribe and Unequal Material Resources

Spatial disadvantage intersects with social stratification. HCES 2023–24 provides a particularly useful contemporary indicator by reporting consumption expenditure according to social group.

Table 2. Average Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure by Social Group, India, 2023–24

Social group	Rural MPCE (₹)	Urban MPCE (₹)
Scheduled Tribe	3,363	6,030
Scheduled Caste	3,878	5,775
Other Backward Classes	4,206	6,738
Others	4,642	7,832
All groups	4,122	6,996

Note. Source: MoSPI, HCES 2023–24.

The ordering is revealing. In rural India, Scheduled Tribe households recorded the lowest average MPCE among the four categories, followed by Scheduled Castes. In urban areas, Scheduled Castes recorded lower average MPCE than ST, OBC and “other” households. The “others” category recorded the highest average in both sectors (MoSPI, 2025). These figures do not establish caste or tribal status as an isolated causal determinant. They nevertheless confirm that social identity and material inequality continue to intersect.

Geography amplifies these inequalities because Scheduled Tribe populations are disproportionately located in many forested, hilly and relatively infrastructure-deficient parts of central, eastern and northeastern India. Households can therefore experience a double disadvantage associated with both social position and spatial accessibility. The relevant mechanism may include weak transport networks, limited proximity to high-quality education and healthcare, narrower non-farm employment markets, insecure land or forest rights and historically uneven public investment.

The persistence of such differences is compatible with the findings of Desai and Dubey (2011), who observed continuing caste disparities across multiple dimensions of well-being. It also supports Alkire and Seth's (2015) finding that multidimensional-poverty reduction was uneven among social and regional groups.

A social-geographical approach therefore avoids two misleading interpretations. It rejects the assumption that all residents of a poorer state are equally deprived, and it rejects the idea that social inequality is independent of location. Poverty is produced through the interaction of place, class, caste, tribe, gender, settlement type and access to institutions.

Why Do Regional Poverty Patterns Persist?

The evidence suggests several interacting mechanisms rather than a single cause.

First, uneven economic structure matters. Regions dominated by low-productivity agriculture and informal employment offer fewer pathways towards stable non-farm income than diversified industrial and service economies. Rural households may experience seasonal employment, fragmented holdings, climate exposure and weak bargaining power. Economic growth can reduce poverty, but its spatial distribution depends upon where investment, infrastructure and employment clusters emerge.

Second, human-development differences have cumulative effects. Health and educational deficiencies affect labour productivity, employment mobility and intergenerational opportunity. When nutritional deprivation coincides with poor-quality schooling and weak healthcare, disadvantages reinforce each other rather than operating independently. This cumulative logic is precisely what multidimensional measurement seeks to capture.

Third, infrastructure has both material and capability effects. Electricity, clean cooking fuel, housing, sanitation, safe water and digital or financial access directly alter quality of life while also facilitating education, health, employment and mobility. NITI Aayog's (2023) finding that sanitation and cooking-fuel deprivation declined rapidly demonstrates how infrastructural expansion can change the geography of non-monetary poverty.

Fourth, social institutions influence access to the gains from development. Caste, tribal status, gender and social networks may condition landownership, labour-market entry, credit access, residential location and educational opportunities. Consequently, economic growth that is spatially concentrated in cities or high-productivity corridors may generate weaker poverty reduction among populations poorly connected to those opportunities.

Fifth, state capacity and welfare implementation are geographically uneven. Drèze and Khera's (2017) examination of social-security initiatives demonstrates that progress depends not simply on the formal existence of national programmes but on their reach and functioning. Differences in local administrative capacity, public expenditure priorities and institutional accountability can consequently shape regional outcomes.

Finally, environmental conditions interact with deprivation. Drought-prone agricultural districts, flood-affected plains, forested tribal areas, Himalayan regions and coastal hazard zones confront different forms of vulnerability. Environmental exposure does not automatically produce poverty, but low-income households with limited assets and inadequate public protection have lower adaptive capacity. This suggests that the future geography of poverty will increasingly need to be analysed together with climate vulnerability.

Poverty Reduction without Spatial Convergence?

One of the most significant findings is that absolute improvement does not necessarily imply complete regional convergence. Many of India's initially poorer states recorded some of the largest declines in multidimensional poverty. Between 2015–16 and 2019–21, Bihar fell from 51.89% to 33.76%, Uttar Pradesh from 37.68% to 22.93%, Madhya Pradesh from 36.57% to 20.63%, Odisha from 29.34% to 15.68% and Rajasthan from 28.86% to 15.31% (NITI Aayog, 2023).

This is substantial progress. Nevertheless, the endpoint remained highly unequal: Bihar's rate was more than sixty times Kerala's 0.55% in the same National MPI dataset. The comparison should not be read mechanically because demographic, historical and economic conditions differ profoundly, but it conveys the scale of spatial inequality.

Recent monetary-poverty evidence points in a similar direction. The World Bank's October 2025 analysis found that at the \$4.20 line, 46% of India's poor in 2022–23 lived in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Maharashtra; it further reported that 72% of poor people were concentrated in ten relatively lagging states with above-average poverty rates (World Bank, 2025a). This indicates that national poverty reduction has not eliminated territorial concentration.

Regional policy should therefore distinguish between poverty reduction and poverty convergence. The former occurs when deprivation decreases within a region; the latter requires disadvantaged regions to close the gap with better-performing regions. India has achieved strong evidence of the first, while the second remains incomplete.

Implications for Spatially Differentiated Policy

The persistence of regional poverty implies that uniform policy packages are unlikely to be sufficient. National entitlements and common minimum standards remain essential, but implementation intensity and policy composition should reflect local deprivation profiles.

In high-MPI states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, reducing poverty requires simultaneous improvement in nutrition, education, maternal and child health, housing, sanitation and productive livelihoods. These dimensions should not be treated as parallel departmental programmes with little coordination because the households experiencing them frequently overlap.

In central and tribal regions, policy requires stronger physical connectivity, school and health-service accessibility, secure livelihood and land or forest entitlements, locally appropriate employment generation, and effective implementation of social protection. Particular attention is needed where the disadvantages of remoteness and social identity coincide.

Rural development policy also requires movement beyond the assumption that agricultural income alone will close regional gaps. Agricultural productivity remains important, but diversification into processing, services, small manufacturing, rural enterprises and better-connected labour markets can reduce dependence on vulnerable low-productivity employment.

Urban policy requires a different emphasis. Higher average MPCE does not eliminate deprivation among migrants and informal workers. Affordable rental housing, portable social protection, basic urban services, public transport, childcare and access to health and education are increasingly central poverty policies in a rapidly urbanising economy.

Finally, poverty policy should become more geographically granular. State averages can conceal deprived districts within relatively prosperous states and high-performing districts within poorer states. NITI Aayog's National MPI provides district-level information for more than 700 districts, creating an institutional basis for spatial targeting (NITI Aayog, 2023). Future work

should integrate such deprivation data with GIS layers on accessibility, employment, climate vulnerability, social composition and public infrastructure to identify persistent poverty hotspots.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the geography of poverty in India is characterised by a combination of rapid national improvement and persistent regional differentiation. India's National MPI shows a substantial fall in multidimensional-poverty incidence between 2015–16 and 2019–21, while subsequent consumption and international poverty evidence also points towards major improvements in material living conditions. These gains are significant and should not be understated.

At the same time, the first research question—how uneven poverty remains spatially—has a clear answer. Multidimensional deprivation is substantially more prevalent in parts of eastern, central and northern India than in several southern and western states. Bihar, Jharkhand, Meghalaya, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh remained among the most multidimensionally deprived states in NFHS-5, whereas Kerala, Goa and Tamil Nadu exhibited comparatively low levels. The North-East itself is highly heterogeneous, demonstrating that India's poverty geography cannot be reduced to broad regional stereotypes.

The second question concerned the persistence of deprivation despite national progress. Evidence suggests that regional poverty reflects cumulative differences in economic structure, human development, accessibility, infrastructure, employment opportunities and institutional capacity. National MPI indicators show that housing, clean cooking fuel, nutrition and sanitation remained important dimensions of deprivation even as their prevalence declined. Poverty therefore cannot be interpreted exclusively as insufficient monetary consumption.

The third question concerned the interaction between territorial and social inequality. HCES 2023–24 shows clear consumption differences among Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste, OBC and other households. Social disadvantage consequently overlaps with geographical disadvantage, particularly where historically marginalised communities are concentrated in poorly connected and economically weaker territories. Rural–urban inequality adds another spatial layer: rural India continues to display both lower average consumption and substantially higher multidimensional poverty than urban India.

The fourth question concerned policy. The findings support a combination of universal social rights with geographically differentiated implementation. Lagging regions require integrated strategies connecting human development with productive employment, infrastructure, social protection and improved local institutional capacity. Rural, tribal, environmentally vulnerable and rapidly urbanising territories require different mixes of intervention rather than a uniform poverty-reduction template.

Conceptually, the analysis supports the capability and multidimensional perspectives while preserving the value of monetary measurement. Consumption poverty, MPI and dimension-specific indicators answer different questions and should be treated as complementary rather than interchangeable. The paper also demonstrates why year and methodology must accompany every

poverty statistic. The National MPI's observed state estimates refer to 2019–21; HCES consumption data refer to 2023–24; and the World Bank's most recent international monetary estimates use revised 2021-PPP thresholds. Combining these without methodological qualification would produce misleading conclusions.

The study is limited by its secondary-data design, differences in survey periods, absence of district-level spatial modelling and the inability of state averages to capture all intra-state disparities. Future research should therefore undertake district and sub-district GIS analysis linking poverty to infrastructure accessibility, social composition, labour-market structure, urban connectivity and environmental vulnerability. Longitudinal research using successive comparable surveys would also help determine whether India's poorer regions are merely reducing poverty or genuinely converging towards the human-development achievements of its better-performing regions.

India's poverty geography is consequently neither static nor disappearing. It is being transformed. The major policy challenge is to ensure that the impressive decline in aggregate deprivation develops into genuine spatial convergence, so that the opportunities associated with economic and social development depend progressively less on the region, settlement and social location into which an individual is born.

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Data comparability statement

State-level National MPI statistics refer to NFHS-5 (2019–21); HCES consumption statistics refer to 2023–24; World Bank monetary-poverty estimates cited here refer to 2022–23 under the revised 2021-PPP poverty lines. These measures are complementary and are not treated as interchangeable.