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Holistic Inclusive Growth in India:Bridging Income and Non-Income Disparities

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Abstract

Inclusive growth or the modern version of it as "SabkaSathSabkaVikas," has been a buzz word in the political circles as well as in academia. Often 'poverty eradication' and 'income distribution' are assumed to represent the measure of inclusive growth and reduction. However, such an approach is not holistic as inclusive growth is multi-dimensional. This paper examines the diverse approaches to inclusive growth as developed at the international level and the parameters of inclusive growth in India; and seeks to juxtapose the missing dimensions of inclusive development. The paper then delves into the critical dimensions requisite for a holistic inclusive development in India and brings to the fore the policy implications to achieve inclusive development.

Keywords: Inclusive Growth, Development Economics, Human Development, Gender, Inequality, Poverty, Health, Education and Fiscal Policy for Development.

1. Introduction

Philosophically the principle of inclusive growth stems from the perception and acceptance of inequality in different spheres of socio-economic life. Income inequality has overshadowed other aspects of inequality in inclusive development discourse. An OECD (2014) document rightly observes, when discussing inequality, it's essential to consider a broader scope than just income. A comprehensive approach must also examine employment opportunities, job security and quality, health disparities, educational equity, and access to wealth-building opportunities as these factors collectively impact individuals' overall well-being and quality of life.

India's economic stature- fifth largest by market exchange rate and third largest by PPP- belies its underwhelming performance in inclusive development compared to neighbouring countries. India continues to grapple with persistent challenges, including sluggish agricultural growth, poor-quality job creation, inadequate human development and entrenched disparities across rural-urban, gender, social and regional lines, which collectively hinder the nation's inclusive development. Therefore, inclusive growth and development is not only about income inequality, it should encompass also other key variables which lead to socio-economic exclusion. World Economic Forum stressed in its report in 2018, as the world grapples with rising polarization and social disintegration, a growing chorus of voices is demanding a fundamental rethink of the current economic growth paradigm to prioritize human well-being, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability.

2. Objectives and Methodology

The present paper seeks to provide a comprehensive examination of inclusive growth and development,

deconstructing its conceptual edifice, identifying its salient features, and probing its theoretical underpinnings to inform policy and practice.

Furthermore, this paper aims to investigate the international community's efforts to foster inclusive development evaluating various approaches and strategies. In this exercise the paper decisively looks at the dimensions requite for holistic inclusive growth and development.

The third objective is to highlight the achievements of India in certain dimensions as well as the failure in other dimensions. The methodology of this paper is analytical.

This paper employs an analytical methodology, drawing extensively on existing literature and secondary sources to critically examine the key aspects of inclusive growth and development. The methodology, therefore, is in the nature of literature review. This paper is developed in three parts. The first part examines the status of inclusive growth in India. The second part is devoted to holistic dimensions of inclusive growth and development. This part provides the theoretical foundation to inclusive growth. The third part focuses on the policy implications and recent developments in policy making in India for inclusive development.

3. India's Status in Inclusive Index

World Economic Forum (WEF) releases the Inclusive Development Index (IDI) a benchmarking tool that measures countries' progress towards inclusive growth and development. The recent index of 2023 places India at 62nd position out of 74 in the category of emerging economies. IDI scores are ranges from 1 to7, with higher score indicating greater progress towards inclusive growth and development. India's improved performance in the IDI is overshadowed by its lower ranking compared to neighbouring countries- Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal- with the index evaluating countries across three critical dimensions: Growth and Development, Inclusion and Intergenerational Equity and Sustainability.

The World Economic Forum notes that India's strongest performance (44th) is in Intergenerational Equity and Sustainability, driven by its demographic advantages. Nevertheless, the countries progress in poverty reduction is offset by persistent income and wealth inequalities, underscoring the need for sustained development initiatives to address these disparities. Among the BRICS economies India's dismal performance renders it a low position. The Russian Federation (19) is ahead of China (26) and Brazil (37). India (62) is just ahead of only South Africa (69), which points to the fact that India has to make conscious and sustained efforts to ensure inclusive development.

4. Holistic Dimensions of Inclusive Growth and Development

The World Bank defines inclusive growth (OECD, 2014) an encompassing both the location and nature of economic expansion, prioritizing productive employment opportunities over mere job creation or income redistribution. This approach takes a long term view, emphasizing sustained growth and equal access to resources, markets and a fair regulatory environment for individuals and businesses, thereby fostering inclusiveness through equal opportunities.

The Asian Development Bank's Strategy 2020 (CDPR/SOAS, 2010 and OECD 2014) presents two perspectives on inclusive growth. The first, a narrower view, sees human development as a tool to drive economic growth. In contrast, the broader view, termed inclusive development, prioritizes equitable access to non-income dimensions of well-being including: Education, Healthcare, Nutrition and Social

inclusion. This approach focuses on the outcomes of growth, seeking to reduce inequality in these areas to foster greater economic opportunities and promote comprehensive development.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2014) proposes a comprehensive approach to inclusive development, built on three core pillars:

a. Multidimensionality: Recognizing 11essential aspects of well-being, including: Income and wealth, Employment and jobs, Skills and education, Health, Social connections, Environmental quality, Security and four additional dimensions.
b. Distribution: Developing innovative methods to compare and analyze multidimensional well-being outcomes across the population, ensuring a nuanced understanding of inequalities.
c. Policy Relevance: Carefully "mapping" policies to multidimensional outcomes, ensuring effective alignment and impact.

This approach provides a holistic framework for promoting inclusive development and improving well-being outcomes.

The World Economic Forum's Index of Inclusive Growth and Development is based on three dimensions as given in the table.

Table 1: Inclusive Growth and Development Indicators (WEF 2018)

Growth and Development	GDP Per Capita
	Employment
	Labour Productivity
	Healthy Life Expectancy
Inclusion	Median Household Income
	Poverty Rate
	Income GINI
	Wealth GINI
Intergenerational Equity and Sustainability	Adjusted Net Savings
	Public Debt as a share of GDP
	Dependency Ratio
	Carbon intensity of GDP

Designed as an alternative to GDP, the Inclusive Development Index (IDI) reflects more closely the criteria by which people evaluate their countries' economic progress. It ranks economies in two groups – advanced and emerging.

India's economic growth has been unevenly distributed, leaving many behind. This disparity has highlighted the need for inclusive growth, ensuring all Indians share in the country's GDP. India's 11th Five Year Plan (2007-2012) pioneered the concept of "inclusive growth," acknowledging the pressing need to address the country's stark inequalities and uneven development. The plan's assessment revealed that economic growth had bypassed numerous segments of society, disproportionately affecting Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities, and women, who continued to face entrenched gender-based discrimination. By acknowledging these disparities, the plan aimed to bridge the gap and create a more equitable society.

A closer look at the diverse approaches suggest that income inequality is just one factor among others and there has to be an approach that includes non-income measures to gauge inequality for a meaningful

discourse on inclusive development. A few dimensions have been highlighted in the following analysis.

Per Capita Income and Employment: Inclusive growth hinges on the crucial factor of rising income per person. However, in India, the per capita income of the poor has stagnated, exacerbating relative poverty and widening the wealth gap between the rich and the poor. A striking illustration of this trend is the soaring share of national income captured by the top 1%, which ballooned from 6.2% in 1982-83 to 21.3% in 2014-15, according to Chancel and Piketty's 2018 estimates. This further increased to 22.6% in 2022-23 (Bharti et al., 2024). This surge in income inequality is not unique to India, as the World Inequality Report 2018 notes that income inequality has risen sharply in several major economies, including North America, China, India, and Russia, since 1980 (World Inequality Report 2018).

The Human Development Report 2025 reveals a stark reality of income disparity, with the top 10% of the population cornering a significant share of national income: 32.2% in the United States, 50% in South Africa, 28.2% in China, and 25.5% in India reflecting a 28.8% of income disparity in the world. Furthermore, in India the National Financial Inclusion Survey 2016-17 by NABARD highlights the rural-urban divide, with rural households struggling to make ends meet. The survey reveals that:

- Average annual income of rural households was a modest Rs. 96,708
- Agricultural households fared slightly better, with an average annual income of Rs. 1,07,172
- Non-agricultural households lagged behind, with an average annual income of Rs. 87,228

These statistics paint a dismal picture of inclusive development, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to bridge the income gap and promote equitable growth.

Measuring the quality of employment poses a challenge due to the lack of direct indicators. Therefore, we must rely on proxy indicators to gauge the effectiveness of inclusive growth. Two potential indicators can serve as substitutes:

1. Share of employed individuals in the industrial sector: This metric can approximate "productive employment" and reflect the degree of structural transformation or economic diversification.
2. Share of workers in non-agricultural paid employment: This complementary indicator provides further insight into the quality of employment, as it highlights the proportion of workers engaged in formal, non-agricultural sectors.

These proxy indicators, as suggested by CDPR/SOAS (2010), can help assess the extent to which employment opportunities are being created in more productive and diversified sectors, aligning with the goals of inclusive growth. Though it is an important dimension of inclusive growth, ‘quality of employment’ cannot be estimated from the data published by the NSO on the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) in India. The recent data from PLFS published in 2023 puts unemployment rate at 3.2 percent under Usual Status (PS +SS).

Poverty: In addition to tracking rising income inequality, it's essential to measure relative poverty by calculating the proportion of individuals living on less than half of the national median income. In India, notable progress has been made in reducing absolute poverty, with the percentage of the population living below the official poverty line declining significantly, from 36% in 1993-94 to 21.9% in 2011-12.This achievement is based on the Suresh Tendulkar methodology, which uses an income-based approach to estimate poverty levels.

The Economic Survey 2018-19 highlighted the need for a robust minimum wage system to safeguard workers' interests and combat poverty, given that a significant proportion of India's workforce - approximately 1 in 3 wage workers - remains unprotected by minimum wage laws. In response, the Code on Wages Act 2019 was enacted to address this issue and ensure fair compensation for workers in

India. This legislation aims to provide a comprehensive framework for minimum wages, thereby protecting vulnerable workers and helping to alleviate poverty.

In 2019, the Government of India received recommendations from an Expert Committee chaired by Dr. Anoop Sathpathy, which conducted a comprehensive review of minimum wages. The committee proposed:

1. A national minimum wage rate of Rs 375 per day,
2. A monthly wage of Rs 9,750 and
3. An additional housing allowance of Rs 1,430 for urban workers. However, the government's subsequent increase in minimum wage from Rs 176 to Rs 178 in 2019 fell significantly short of the committee's recommended levels, highlighting a gap between suggested and implemented minimum wage rates.

NITI Aayog in its Multidimension Poverty Index has stated that headcount poverty ration in India has come down to 14.96 percent for the period 2019-21 based on National Family Health Survey (NFHS - 5). However, the NFHS is only a small sample survey and its data cannot reveal the poverty scenario. The Asian Development Bank's Strategy 2020 recognizes that monitoring poverty is not enough for inclusive growth. It requires a broader approach that addresses inequality and social exclusion beyond just extreme poverty (CDPR/SOAS, 2010).

Human Development Indicators: Amartya Sen's capability approach underpins the Human Development Reports, which utilize human development indicators as a proxy for inclusive development. Life expectancy, a key indicator of health, is a reliable measure of longevity and health status. In India, life expectancy has risen significantly from 32 years in 1951 to 72.0 years (HDR, 2025), yet it still lags behind:

- Industrialized countries, where life expectancy averages around 80 years
- China, where life expectancy has reached 78.0 years

This gap highlights the need for continued efforts to improve healthcare and well-being in India. India stands at 130 out of 193 countries in the recent HDI release by UNDP, 2025. According to the Human Development Index, India has attained a score of 0.685, thereby falling within the medium human development classification. Human development is at the heart of inclusive development and India’s performance on this front needs susbtantial improvement.

Health, Water and Sanitation: The health sector prioritizes addressing key areas of concern, including under-nutrition, infant mortality, maternal mortality, and anaemia among women. The Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) provides a critical metric, quantifying the number of maternal deaths per 100,000 live births attributable to pregnancy-related complications or inadequate healthcare, underscoring the imperative for enhanced maternal healthcare services. India has made significant strides in improving its healthcare outcomes between 2011-2013 and 2018-2020. The Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) has declined from 167 to 97, indicating a 42% reduction in pregnancy-related deaths. Similarly, the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) has shown remarkable progress, dropping to 28 infant deaths per thousand live births in 2020, a mere quarter of the 129 deaths reported in 1971. These encouraging trends suggest that India's healthcare system is moving in the right direction, although there is still room for further improvement.

In emerging economies and developing countries namely India, Indonesia and China (OECD, 2014), the provision of fundamental environmental services continues to pose a significant challenge.

In a move to enhance water management and accessibility, the Government of India has taken a significant step by consolidating two key ministries - the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development, and Ganga Rejuvenation, and the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation - to create the Ministry of 'Jal Shakti'. This merger aims to streamline efforts, optimize resources, and improve the overall efficiency in managing India's water resources and providing clean drinking water facilities to its citizens. In December 2019, the Ministry of Jal Shakti released the operational guidelines for the JalJeevan Mission.Jal Shakti ministry has set a target of providing pipeline water to all by 2024. In fact, IMR, MMR,clean drinking water and sanitation are good indicators of inclusive development.

Literacy Rate and Education: Notwithstanding the notable advancements in literacy rates, from 18.3% in 1951 to 64.8% in 2001 and roughly 75% as of the 2011 census, India's literacy levels remain suboptimal. It is to be noted that the male-female difference in achievements has to be reduced for inclusive development. The human development index also deals with enrolment rates in schools for which maximum and minimum values are allocated. In the 'Mean Years of Schooling' indicator the maximum value is 15 years while India's score stands at 6.57. In the 'Expected Years of Schooling' indicator the maximum value is 18 years while India's score stands at 12.6. Education is both a necessary tool and condition for livelihood, social integration and inclusive development. Inter-state disparity in literacy rate exposes the meagre efforts on the part of some state governments and the lack financial support from the central government.

Economic Infrastructure: Ensuring equitable access to economic infrastructure is a vital aspect of inclusive growth, yet it has often been overlooked in favour of social infrastructure development, such as education, health, water, and sanitation, over the past two decades (CDPR/SOAS, 2010). As a result, there is a significant gap in data availability for key indicators measuring population access to essential economic infrastructure like electricity, energy, roads, and information and communication technologies (ICTs). Addressing this data deficit is crucial to understanding and improving economic infrastructure accessibility, which is essential for promoting inclusive growth and development.

India faces a significant energy challenge, with a disproportionate share of the global population (17%) but limited energy resources, holding only 0.6% of global gas reserves, 0.4% of oil reserves, and 7% of coal reserves. Furthermore, India's energy landscape is marked by stark contrasts, with low per capita energy consumption and a substantial urban-rural divide. A quarter of the population still lacks access to electricity, while 40% rely on unclean cooking fuels, highlighting the need for sustained efforts to bridge this energy gap and ensure equitable access to modern energy services for all (NITI, NEP 2040). The government in the last few years has been actively working on electricity to all households and the target was set to be achieved by 2019. In fact, four times increase in per capita energy consumption is needed for India to achieve a 0.8 HDI score according to Economic Survey 2018-19. This is a daunting task but needed to be achieved for inclusive development.

Political Participation of Women: Empowering women in politics is a vital catalyst for development and progress, serving as a key indicator of a nation's commitment to gender equality. Worldwide, the status of women is closely tied to their representation in leadership positions and their ability to shape decision-making processes. However, women continue to face significant barriers to political participation, resulting in persistent underrepresentation in decision-making roles. In 1962, the LokSabha had about 6 per cent women in the Parliament. As reported by *The Hindu* in May 2019, a total of 78 women were elected to the LokSabha which put the percentage share at 14.39 for women. The

government has recently passed the bill to provide 33 percent reservation to women in Lok Sabha and Assembly elections.

Sex Ratio: Sex ratio reflects the mind set and attitude towards the girl child and indirectly it reveals the gender bias. Based on the 2011 Indian Government's census there are 943 females to every 1000 males. This is extremely low and pathetic for a country that is a regional power. Table 2 clearly points to the fact that sex ratio has fallen considerably since 1951 and has just begun to improve in the last decade.

Table 2: Sex Ratio and Child Sex Ratio

Sr. No.	Year	Sex Ratio	Child Sex Ratio
1	1951	946	983
2	1961	941	976
3	1971	930	964
4	1981	934	962
5	1991	927	945
6	2001	933	927
7	2011	943	918
Source: MoSPI and Census 2011			

Financial Inclusion: "Financial inclusion is crucial for achieving economic growth, reducing poverty, and promoting social equality, as highlighted in the NAFIS report (2016-17). According to the Committee on Financial Inclusion, led by Dr. C. Rangarajan (2008), financial inclusion encompasses a multifaceted approach that guarantees vulnerable populations, including low-income and marginalized groups, have access to affordable financial services and timely credit. At its core, financial inclusion aims to bridge the gap in financial accessibility, enabling every individual to understand, access, and utilize appropriate financial services, thereby promoting economic equality and opportunity for all. The groundbreaking NABARD All India Rural Financial Inclusion Survey (NAFIS) 2016-17 reveals a mixed picture of rural financial health. While rural households have made significant strides in accessing banking services and building savings, there is a concerning lack of progress in critical areas such as investment, pension coverage, and insurance adoption. Alarmingly, high levels of indebtedness persist, with debt burdens nearing annual income levels, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address these disparities and promote comprehensive financial well-being in rural communities.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) unveiled the National Strategy for Financial Inclusion 2019-2024 in January 2020, providing a framework for advancing financial inclusion initiatives in India. The strategy is built around six core objectives: (i) ensuring universal access to financial services, (ii) providing a basic suite of financial products, (iii) supporting livelihood and skill development, (iv) promoting financial literacy and education, (v) safeguarding customer interests through effective grievance redressal, and (vi) fostering interagency coordination. However, the RBI also identified key challenges hindering financial inclusion, including infrastructure gaps in rural and remote areas, poor digital connectivity, socio-cultural barriers, and a lack of market players in the payment sector.

Addressing these gaps is crucial, as financial inclusion is a vital component of India's inclusive development agenda, and the government is committed to driving progress in this area.

(x) Gender Equality: Achieving gender equality encompasses far more than economic empowerment; it's about ensuring fairness, equity, and equal opportunities across political, social, and cultural spheres. The

Gender Inequality Index (GII) provides a comprehensive measure of gender-based disparities, assessing reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity. India's GII score of 0.437 ranks it 108th out of 193 countries in the 2023/24 report, showing some progress from its 127th ranking in 2014. However, the Gender Development Index (GDI) reveals persistent gender gaps in human development, with India's female HDI value (0.582) lagging behind the male HDI value (0.684), resulting in a GDI value of 0.852. This places India in Group 5, indicating the highest level of inequality between males and females. Addressing these disparities is crucial for achieving true gender equality and inclusive development.

5. Policy Implications for India

Achieving inclusive development has many policy implications. India's growth story has been shaped by the Planning Commission. One of the reasons for the failure to achieve inclusive development has been the lop-sided development and regional imbalance during the planning era. To foster inclusive development, balanced regional development is crucial and is the first policy implication. However, India faces significant regional disparities, including a pronounced rural-urban divide, with substantial income and access gaps to essential public services across states and between rural and urban areas. To address this, the Government of India has initiated the Transforming Aspirational Districts Programme, targeting 112 underdeveloped districts. The NITI Aayog has established a baseline ranking for these Aspirational Districts, assessing 49 indicators across five key development areas: Health and Nutrition, Education, Agriculture and Water Resources, Financial Inclusion and Skill Development, and Basic Infrastructure (NITI, 2019). This comprehensive approach aims to bridge the development gap and promote inclusive growth, ensuring that all regions and communities have access to equal opportunities and resources. This initiative covers the main dimensions of inclusive development. The Central Government needs to collaborate with the State Governments efficiently to reap the benefits this programme to ensure inclusive development lest it should remain one of the programmes on paper.

The second policy implication is a model of development which is inclusive in design. India's new model of development, namely, 'Competitive, Cooperative Federalism' propelled by NITI Aayog has the potential to foster inclusive development. NITI Aayog has created a competitive environment among the states to excel in various parameters. The measuring indices developed by NITI Aayog and other Departments of the government focus on inclusive development dimensions.

NITI has introduced a robust outcome-based monitoring framework to track progress in vital sectors such as Healthcare, Education, and Water, leveraging indices like the Composite Water Management Index, Health Index, School Education Quality Index, India Innovation Index, and SDG India Index. This framework fosters a competitive spirit, encouraging states and districts to strive for excellence. The key challenge now lies in maintaining this momentum, ensuring sustained competition, and driving continuous improvement to achieve transformative outcomes in these critical development areas.

The third policy implication is the sharing of finance between centre and states and enabling the states to take the responsibility for inclusive development. The Fourteenth Finance Commission brought about a major change in India's 'Fiscal Federalism' by promoting 'Fiscal Autonomy'(Economic Survey 2014-15) of the states. It increased the automatic transfers to the states and granted them freedom (untied funds) to utilize the funds at their disposal. This policy enables the states to prioritise the local needs and focus on inclusive development. Thus, the centre-state financial relation is a vital policy element in inclusive development. The Fifteenth Finance Commission covering five years from 2021-2026 has

recommended 'Sector-Specific Grants' and 'Performance Based-Grants' to states. From the point of view of inclusive development, this is a significant policy-oriented step. Sector specific grants include nutrition, health, pre-primary education, judiciary, rural connectivity, railways, police training and housing which are requisite dimensions of inclusive development. Performance-based Grants include implementing agricultural reforms, undertaking power sector reforms, developing Aspirational Districts, enhancing trade, incentivising education and promoting tourism. Both these grants will benefit the rural population and pave the way for inclusive development. However, the implementation of these is at the hands of the State Governments.

The fourth policy implication is the call for reform in fiscal policy. The OECD Economic Survey of India (2017) pinpoints some reforms in fiscal policy for inclusive growth. The document suggests a comprehensive tax reform to promote inclusive growth. It implies reforms in property and personal income taxes to raise more revenue to promote social justice and to empower the State Governments to better respond to local needs (OECD Economic Surveys, India 2017). The government, therefore, has to revisit its fiscal policy to achieve equitable distribution of wealth and design policy framework with specific targets to be achieved.

The fifth policy implication is to design central sector schemes and centrally sponsored schemes aimed at inclusive development. Schemes are part of fiscal policy of the government. The Government of India has been actively pushing the agenda of 'SabkaSathSabkaVikas' through employment schemes, welfare schemes and social security schemes such as insurance schemes and pension schemes. The schemes to develop agriculture (PM Fasal BimaYojana, MSP, Soil Health Card, Model Contract Farming Act 2018, etc.) and MSME (MSEM procurement, Credit Guarantee, Stand-up India, etc.) are focused on helping the economically and socially weaker sections. The successful implantation of schemes in a corrupt system is an uphill task for the government.

6. Conclusion

The focus on inclusive growth and development has been a recent phenomenon in India emerging as the main theme of the eleventh and twelfth five-year plans. It has since been taken up by the NDA government under the slogan 'SabkaSaathSabkaVikas'. However, a closer examination of the dimensions of inclusive development reveals that India's growth story has failed to be inclusive. Indian policy making targeted eradication of poverty while being oblivious of other critical dimensions, though isolated targets were set in the eleventh and twelfth plans.

Crafting a successful inclusive growth strategy hinges on identifying the critical components of a growth pattern that genuinely drive inclusivity, moving beyond the sole focus on poverty reduction (CDPR/SOAS, 2010). Inclusive development demands a holistic approach that tackles the complex interplay of factors, ensuring equitable access to opportunities and benefits for all, rather than merely addressing poverty symptoms.

The OECD's insightful observation (2014) highlights a crucial truth: inequality hampers prosperity for all, while inclusive growth fuels economic resilience and longevity. To unlock sustained prosperity, India must embrace a holistic approach to development, one that prioritizes equal opportunities, social equity, and economic empowerment for all. By doing so, India can harness the transformative power of inclusive growth, creating a more robust and resilient economy that benefits every citizen and ensures a brighter future for generations to come.

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