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Q17

What is regional disparity? How does it differ from diversity? How serious is the issue of regional disparity in India?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · GS I · 15 marks · Indian Society and Diversity

Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India.

Core demand of the question

- Define regional disparity
- Distinguish it from diversity
- Assess how serious regional disparity is in India

Revision summary

Regional disparity is systematic inequality of development outcomes by place.

Diversity is cultural, linguistic, and ecological plurality, which the Constitution protects.

A diverse region can be prosperous. A culturally compact region can be poor.

India's inter-State and intra-State gaps in income, health, and infrastructure remain large.

Colonial geography, agrarian revolutions, and metro services helped freeze the map.

Finance Commissions and aspirational-district missions admit the seriousness. They have not ended it.

Introduction

Regional disparity means systematic gaps in income, health, education, and infrastructure between different parts of a country. India is also culturally diverse in language, faith, ecology, and custom. Those two facts are not the same. Treating them as the same hides the development gap behind a slogan. Diversity is protected by the Constitution under the **Eighth Schedule** and federalism. Disparity remains a serious problem even after decades of **Finance Commissions** and area programmes.

Body**Regional disparity**

Disparity means systematic gaps among regions, including States, districts, hills, forests, and interiors, in income, jobs, infrastructure, health, education, and voice. It is measured in per capita income, poverty, IMR, literacy, urbanisation, bank credit, and quality of public goods. It can be inter-State, as between the coastal south and west and pockets of the north and east. It can also be intra-State, as between a booming capital district and a neglected hinterland. It is produced by history. Colonial ports, post-Independence industrial licensing, **Green Revolution geography**, and the later services boom in a few metros all helped to produce it.

- **Outcome gaps:** The issue is not taste or dialect. It is who lives longer and who earns more.
- **Scales:** Gaps appear at State, district, and rural-urban levels inside the same State.

- **Persistence:** Rankings move slowly. Some old BIMARU labels aged. They did not all vanish.

How it differs from diversity

Diversity is plurality. It means many languages, faiths, cuisines, kinship forms, and agro-climates. The Constitution protects it through **Articles 29-30**, linguistic States, and the **Fifth and Sixth Schedules**. A diverse region can be rich. Parts of the south are culturally distinct and have strong human-development numbers. A homogeneous region can be poor. Mixing the two treats the Northeast's cultures or tribal difference as if they were the cause of poverty. The cause is often political incorporation, connectivity, and resource rights.

- **Diversity:** Difference is to be recognised.
- **Disparity:** Difference in advantage is to be reduced.
- **Policy error:** Unity that flattens culture, or diversity used as an excuse for neglect, both fail.

How serious in India

The gap is serious enough to shape migration, politics, and insurgency. Per capita NSDP still differs several-fold across States. Aspirational Districts exist because intra-State failure is clear. The east and interior lag on industry and sometimes on health. The Himalayan and tribal belts lag on infrastructure. Urban agglomerations pull talent away. **Finance Commission** devolution, GST compensation politics, and special category memory all admit the gap. Women's labour force and nutrition maps often follow regional development, not only culture.

It is not hopeless. Several once-lagging States have improved literacy and growth. It is not trivial. A single national labour market without comparable schools keeps disparity in place. Climate stress will widen water and heat gaps.

- **High seriousness:** Life outcomes still track region strongly.
- **Federal tools exist:** Transfers, area schemes, and local government exist. Implementation is the leak.
- **Political stake:** Regional parties and demands for special packages are symptoms. They are not only noise.

Regional disparity is therefore a first-order GS-I society and geography problem. It is distinct from the celebration of diversity.

Flow diagram

Diversity language culture ecology -> Federal recognition
 Disparity income health jobs -> Gap in life chances
 History ports Green Revolution metros -> Disparity income health jobs
 Finance Commission area schemes -> Gap in life chances

Conclusion

Diversity is India's plurality. Disparity is India's uneven development. The second remains serious. States and districts still offer unequal lives. Federal **finance** and area missions are the constitutional response. They work only if diversity is respected as identity and disparity is reduced as injustice.

Facts & figures

Finance Commission

Constitutional body that recommends Union-to-State transfers, a principal instrument against fiscal disparity.

Aspirational Districts Programme

A **NITI Aayog**-led effort to raise health, education and infrastructure in selected lagging districts, evidence that intra-State disparity is officially recognised.

Articles 29-30

Protect cultural and educational rights of minorities - a diversity clause, not a disparity clause.

Fifth and Sixth Schedules

Special arrangements for some tribal and northeastern areas; they recognise difference, while development gaps in those areas remain a disparity issue.

Green Revolution geography

Irrigated north-west plains gained first; many rainfed and eastern districts did not, a lasting source of agrarian disparity.

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