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Q7(c)

What explains India's modest improvements in social development outcomes even as the rate of growth has accelerated since the initiation of economic reforms?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · PSIR GS 1 · 15 marks · Planning and Economic Development

Planning and Economic Development: Nehruvian and Gandhian perspectives; role of planning and public sector; Green Revolution, land reforms and agrarian relations; liberalization and economic reforms.

Core demand of the question

- What explains India's modest improvements in social development outcomes even as the rate of growth has accelerated since the initiation of economic reforms? (15 marks)

Revision summary

Growth after 1991 outpaced improvements in health, nutrition, and learning.

Explanations include informal employment, weak public-goods bureaucracies, and federal unevenness.

Caste and gender still filter who benefits from clinics and schools.

Ambedkar's social-democracy lag and **Rawls's** least-advantaged test both fit the puzzle.

Modest is not nil; it is slow relative to income growth and to public-goods successes elsewhere.

Introduction

After 1991, growth of national income quickened. Health, nutrition, learning, and gender outcomes improved more slowly and unevenly. The gap is explained by the kind of growth, the kind of state, and the kind of social structure, not by a mystery of culture alone.

Body

What changed, and what did not

- Reforms opened trade and industry and raised GDP. They did not automatically build public health, primary schools, or sanitation at the same speed.
- **Marx** would say growth under capitalist relations can expand output while leaving labour informal and social reproduction unpaid, which feminist political economy, after **Pateman**, also notes.
- **Rawls's** difference principle would ask whether the least advantaged gained in capabilities, not only whether averages rose.

Political-economy explanations

- Jobless or informal-heavy growth limited the wage path out of undernutrition.
- Fiscal priority often favoured capital spending and subsidies with weak last-mile health and education bureaucracies.

- **Federal inequality:** some states used growth to fund social power; others did not. The Union's rights laws (education, food) came late relative to 1991.
- **Easton's** outputs were growth-heavy; support still had to be bought with transfers rather than with public goods of equal quality.

Social-structural explanations

- Caste and gender govern who eats, who stays in school, and who reaches a clinic. **Jaffrelot** and the **Rudolphs** show that political mobilisation of caste need not equal social development.
- **Ambedkar's** lag of social democracy behind political democracy remains a research finding in nutrition and sanitation data.
- Elite capture of local institutions, including weak **PRIs**, leaks social spending.

Modest, not zero

- Literacy, longevity, and some poverty measures did move. The question is relative to growth and to East Asia's public-goods path.
- **Explanation is therefore:** growth without comparable public-health and schooling states, plus cleavage-structured access to whatever services exist.

Flow diagram

Post-1991 growth -> Faster Faster GDP
 Post-1991 growth -> Modest social outcomes
 Modest social outcomes -> Informal labour
 Modest social outcomes -> Thin public goods
 Modest social outcomes -> Caste gender capture

Conclusion

Accelerated post-1991 growth was real. Modest social-development gains follow from **informal labour**, thin public-goods states, federal unevenness, and caste-gender filters on access. Rights-based laws and local government tried to close the gap later; they have not yet matched the growth story.

Facts & figures

1991 reforms

Liberalisation of trade, industry, and finance that raised growth relative to the prior decades.

Informal labour

A large share of employment remained outside secure contracts and social insurance.

RTE / NFSA

Later rights-based attempts to force social outcomes the growth path had not delivered by itself.

Federal variation

Some states combined growth with stronger social indicators; national averages stayed modest.

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