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thewire.in/news/access-inequality-index-the-widening-rural-urban-divide-across-basic-amenities-social-security



Representational image of Mumbai. Photo: Bernard Gagnon/Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 4.0.

This is the final essay in a three-part series, disseminating the observations and findings from the latest edition of Access (In)Equality Index, AEI 2024, produced by the researchers at Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES), with IDEAS, O.P. Jindal Global University. Read the first and second parts.

The Access (In)Equality Index study sheds light on the stark inequalities plaguing India, across both geographic regions and social groups. Examining livelihoods through this spatial lens is imperative for implementing inclusive policies. It is interesting to note that approximately 70% of the population, constituting 68% of households, resides in rural areas, whereas 29.2% of the population, comprising 32% of households, resides in urban areas.

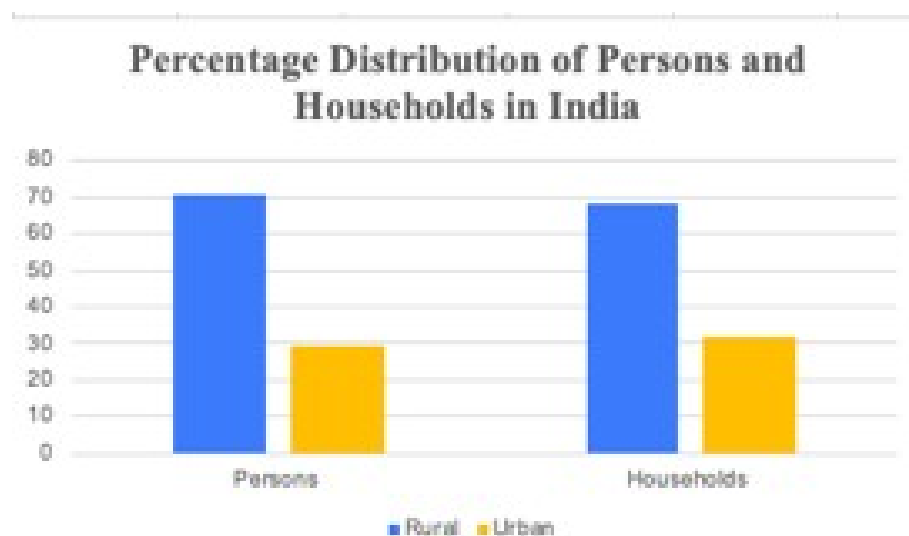


Figure 1: Percentage Distribution of Persons and Households in India

This divide is particularly evident when examining basic amenities. Despite government initiatives like the Jal Jeevan Mission aimed at providing safe drinking water, a mere 22.5% of rural households have access to piped water within their plot or yard throughout the year, while a significantly higher 58.9% of the urban population enjoys such access. This implies that rural India is forced to rely on groundwater and untreated surface water.

While sanitation has seen progress in both areas, the disparity remains. Over 80% of urban households have access to latrines, compared to 68.8% in rural areas. However, challenges like limited infrastructure, geography, and poverty make securing latrines more difficult for rural communities.

The gap extends to clean cooking fuel. Nearly all urban households (92%) utilise cleaner options, while only half (49.8%) of rural households have done so. Interestingly, mobile phone usage is nearly equal across both areas (93.3% rural vs. 96.6% urban). However, the digital divide becomes clear when looking at internet adoption. Just 41% of rural residents have internet access, compared to 64.6% in urban areas.

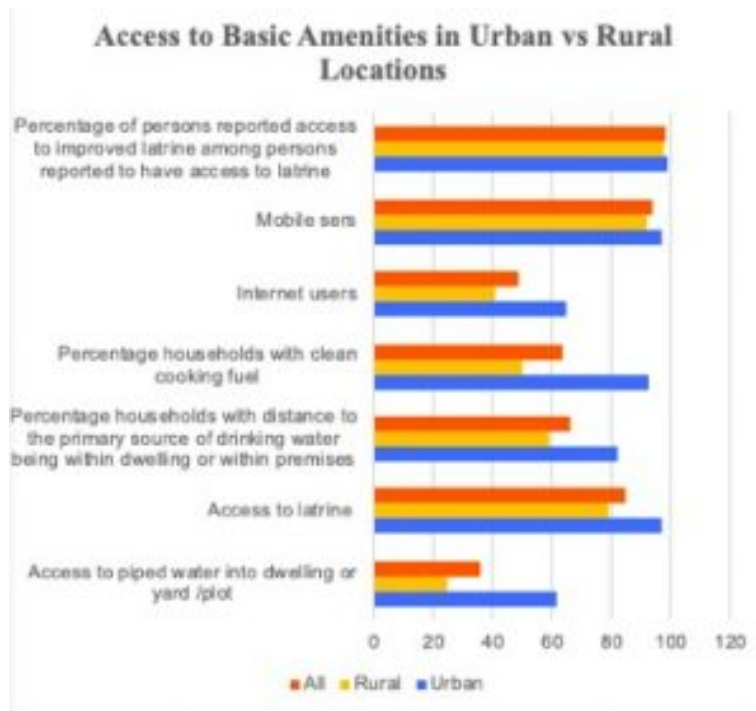


Figure 2: Access to Basic Amenities in Urban vs Rural Locations

In the case of social identities, less than 50% of households from SCs, STs, OBCs, and other categories have consistent access to piped water throughout the year. Notably, only 19.5% of the ST population has sufficient access to piped water annually, emphasising their acute marginalisation. Similarly, access to sanitation facilities shows improvement, with 60-80% having access, but STs remain the most underserved, with just 66% having access.

In housing, around 50% of households, irrespective of category, purchased or constructed a house for the first time. This indicates challenges in securing housing. These statistics highlight the pressing need for targeted initiatives to bridge gaps and ensure equitable access to water, sanitation, and housing for all social groups.

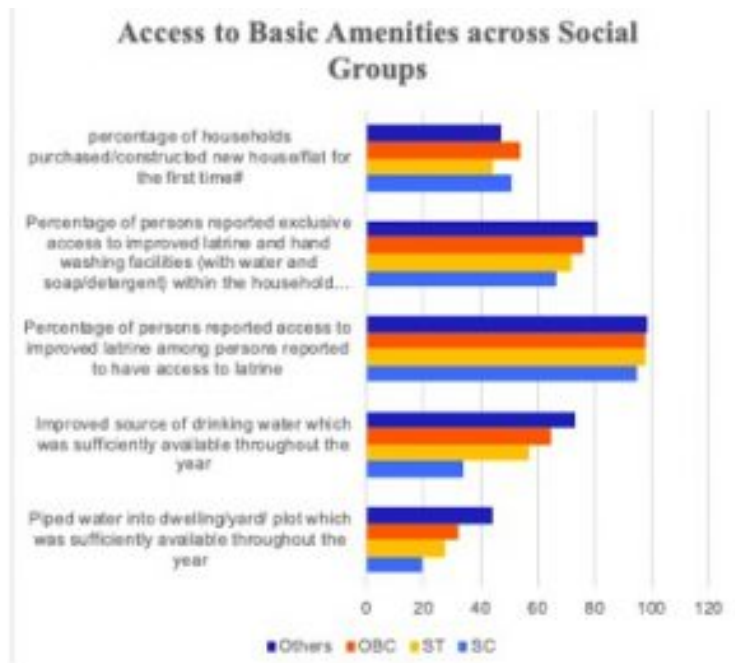


Figure 3: Access to Basic Amenities across Social Groups

The healthcare scenario reveals that urban mothers (84.6%) receive more postnatal care compared to rural mothers (75.4%). Surprisingly, rural surpasses the urban in terms of health insurance coverage and childhood immunisation. In the case of health insurance coverage rate is 42.4% in rural areas compared to 38.1% in urban areas and childhood immunization rates are 57.0% in rural areas compared to 43.1% in urban areas.

There is a significant gap in social identities with the number of mothers attending at least four antenatal care visits during pregnancy, mothers classified as “Others” have the highest rate (64.4%), while Scheduled Caste (SC) mothers have the lowest (55.3%). The issue extends to healthcare financing. Only 42.7% of SC households have health insurance or financial support for medical expenses, compared to 46.8% for Scheduled Tribes (ST) households. Scheduled-Caste and Other Backward Class (OBC) individuals have lower immunization rates compared to Scheduled Tribes and Others.



Figure 4: Access to Healthcare in Urban vs Rural Locations

Access to Health Across Social Groups

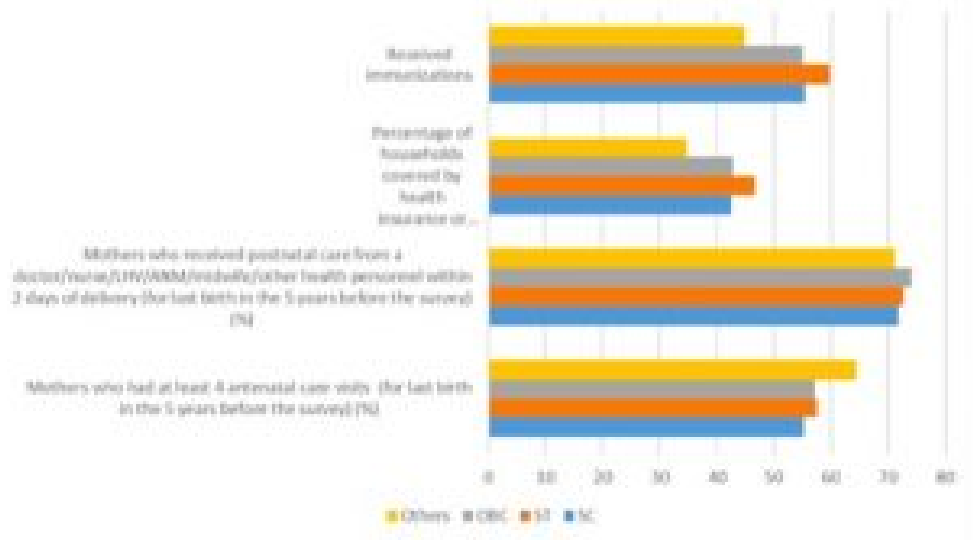


Figure 5: Access to Healthcare across Social Identities

In terms of socio-economic security rural areas boast a higher worker population ratio (59.4% vs. 47.7% urban), and most lack social security benefits (59.9% non-agricultural rural vs. 49.4% urban). Financial inclusion shows a positive trend with nearly 95% of both rural and urban households having access to bank accounts. However, a cause for concern is the low utilisation of government support programmes. Only 19.9% of urban and 22.4% of rural people with disabilities benefit from such schemes.

Socio-Economic Security Across Urban vs Rural Locations

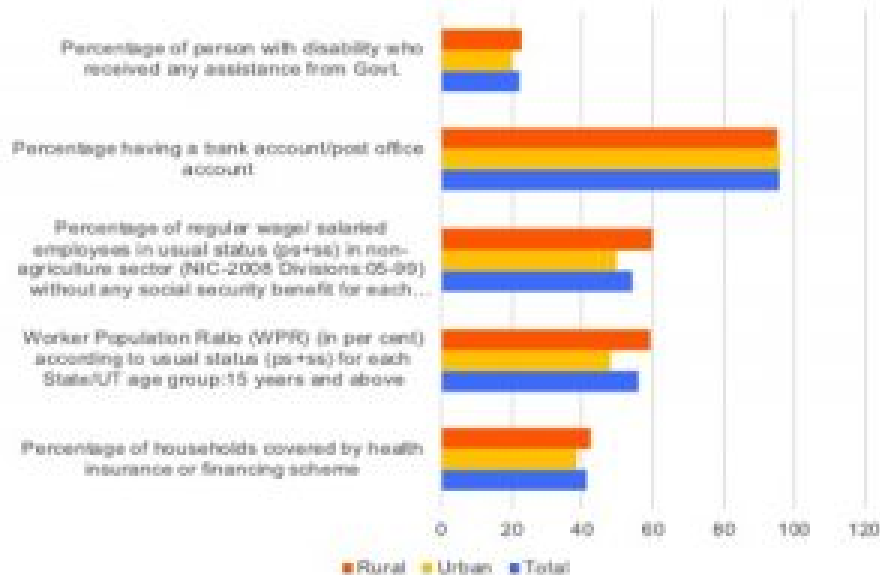


Figure 6: Access to Socio-Economic Security in Urban vs Rural Locations

The presented statistics on Worker Population Ratio (WPR) and Unemployment Rate (UR) across various social groups in India underscore the existing disparities in employment opportunities and joblessness. Notably, STs exhibit a relatively higher WPR at 51%, suggesting a significant proportion engaged in the workforce, yet a UR of 18% indicates persistent unemployment challenges.

In contrast, SCs face both lower WPR (41%) and a higher UR (32%), reflecting a more constrained labour market and elevated unemployment rates. OBC display a modestly higher WPR (42%) but still contends with a considerable UR of 33%. The 'Others' category, representing the general population, grapples with a lower WPR (37%) and the highest UR at 34%, indicating a complex employment scenario.

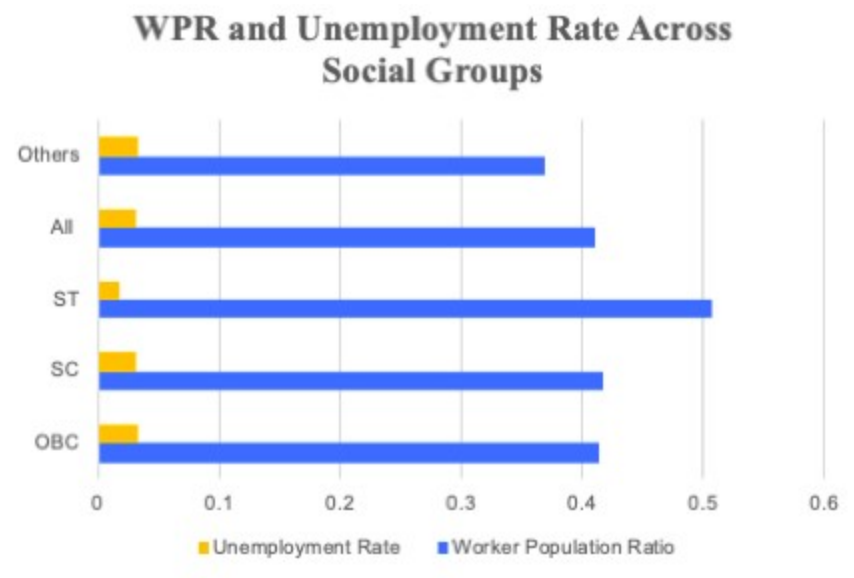
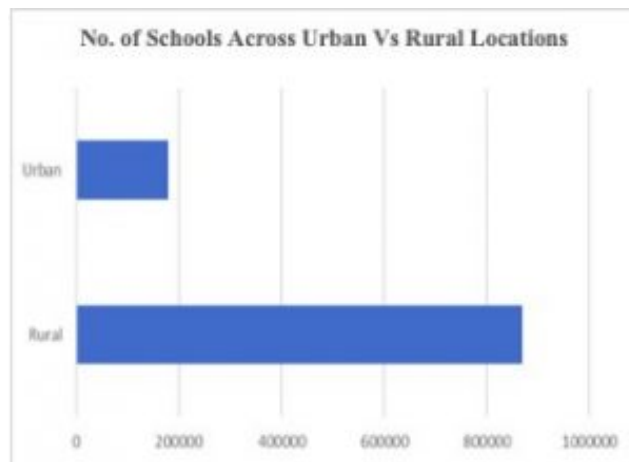


Figure 7: WPR and UR Across Social Groups

The rural-urban educational landscape exhibits a distinct pattern in the prevalence of government and private schools. In rural areas, the predominance of government schools underscores a reliance on publicly funded institutions to provide accessible education, especially, for economically disadvantaged families dispersed across expansive landscapes. In contrast, urban regions, characterised by greater economic opportunities, witness a higher proportion of private schools. Conversely, while private schools are more prevalent in urban areas, there is a notable presence in rural regions as well, indicating an evolving trend.



In terms of the social divide in education, a divide in total school enrolment is evident across different categories, reflecting historical and socio-economic disparities. OBC communities showcase a notably higher enrolment ratio compared to SC and ST.

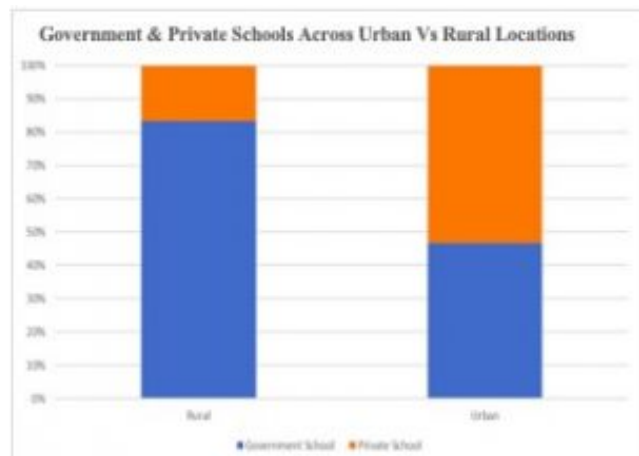


Figure 8 & 9: Number and Type of Schools Across Urban vs Rural Locations

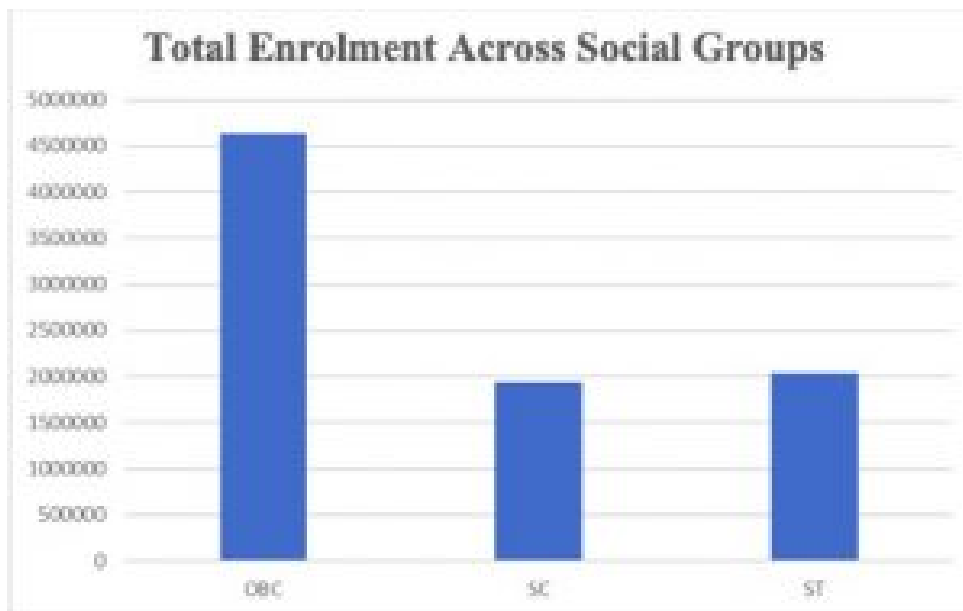


Figure 10: Total Enrolment Across Social Groups

The picture worsens when examining legal recourse. Rural police stations cover a staggering 16.7 times the area compared to urban stations (337.4 sq. km vs. 20.2 sq. km).

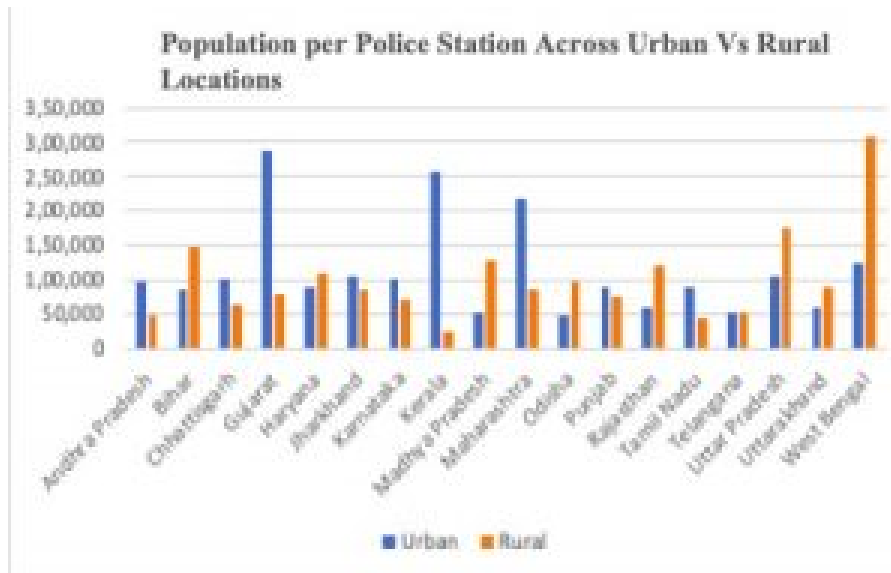


Figure 11: Population per Police Station Across Urban vs Rural Locations

As of January 2022, SCs make up 15.99 % of the total working police strength (against 16% share in population), STs 11.77 % and OBCs 30.79%. Gujarat and Manipur stood out for meeting their SC quotas at both the officer and constabulary levels, whereas Bihar, Telangana, and Himachal Pradesh for fulfilling their ST quotas. States fare relatively better when it comes to OBCs. At least nine states (Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, Odisha, Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala) met their OBC quotas.

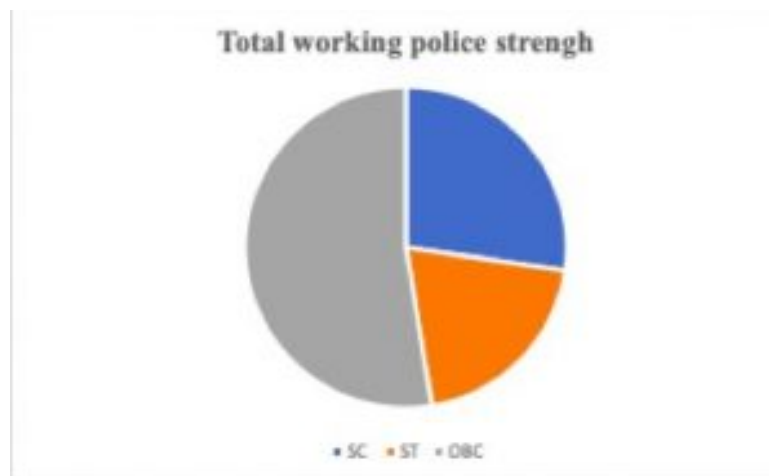


Figure 12: Total Working Police Strength

These findings emphasise the need for targeted policies and collaborative action from governments and authorities. Bridging these divides requires addressing regional imbalances, promoting inclusive economic growth, strengthening social safety nets, investing

in education, and fostering equal opportunities for all sections of Indian society.

Unfortunately, the current status quo, inertia in governmentality and the quest for a clear, coherent evidence-based economic policymaking remains bankrupted of a vision to address deep-rooted structural inequities. AEI provides a clearer reflection of a stronger need to reverse that – and (hopefully) make state governments exercise more pressure on the Union (and Central government institutions) to do more in addressing the highlighted gaps (across pillars).

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