

Beyond the Averages | A Look at Economic Disparities Within Eastern India

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(This is a part of a special series disseminating the findings of the Access (In)Equality Index report, produced by researchers at the Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES) at Jindal Global University. Access the report here.)

India's development is a story of contrasts.

While some regions boast booming economies, others face entrenched challenges. This disparity isn't limited to geography. Even within individual states, there can be vast differences, with some districts enjoying prosperity while others struggle. This uneven development presents a complex picture for the nation's future, highlighting the need for targeted policies to ensure inclusive growth across all regions and communities.

A recent study by the Centre for New Economic Studies at OP Jindal Global University sought to answer this very question. We attempted to conceptualise the creation of an index envisioning to measure and study differential inequality of access in terms of access to basic social and economic services and opportunities in the states and union territories of India.

The previous part of this series highlighted the complexities of regional inequality within seemingly well-performing states of Southern India. Now, we shift our focus eastward to examine how access to basic services and opportunities vary across Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal.

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Eastern India's Struggle for Access

The [Access Inequality Report 2024](#) paints a concerning picture for eastern India, highlighting significant disparities in access to basic amenities, healthcare, education, and socio-economic security. Bihar emerges as the lowest-ranked state nationally, with Jharkhand (rank 18), and Odisha (16) following closely behind. These states, categorised as "Aspirants" in the report, have a long way to go in bridging the access gap.

All of the Eastern Indian states except West Bengal (15) rank in the category of Aspirants. The report exposes a severe lack of basic infrastructure in these states with a mere 42.8% of Jharkhand households living in *pucca* houses, with a meagre 9.2% having piped water supply. The situation in Bihar (34% *pucca* houses, 13.3% piped water) and Odisha (59% *pucca* houses, 13.5% piped water) isn't much better.



Percentage of households with piped water supply connections into dwelling or yard across the states.

(Source: [Access Inequality Report 2024](#))

Healthcare access paints a similarly concerning picture. Only 25.2% of mothers in Bihar receive adequate prenatal care, and a mere 17.4% of households have a member with any health insurance or finance scheme coverage. Jharkhand fares slightly better with 38.6% of mothers receiving proper prenatal care and healthcare coverage. Although Odisha performs

well compared to other states, health insurance coverage remains low. West Bengal, while boasting high child immunisation rates (95.8%), lags behind with only 33.7% of households having a member with any health insurance or finance scheme coverage.

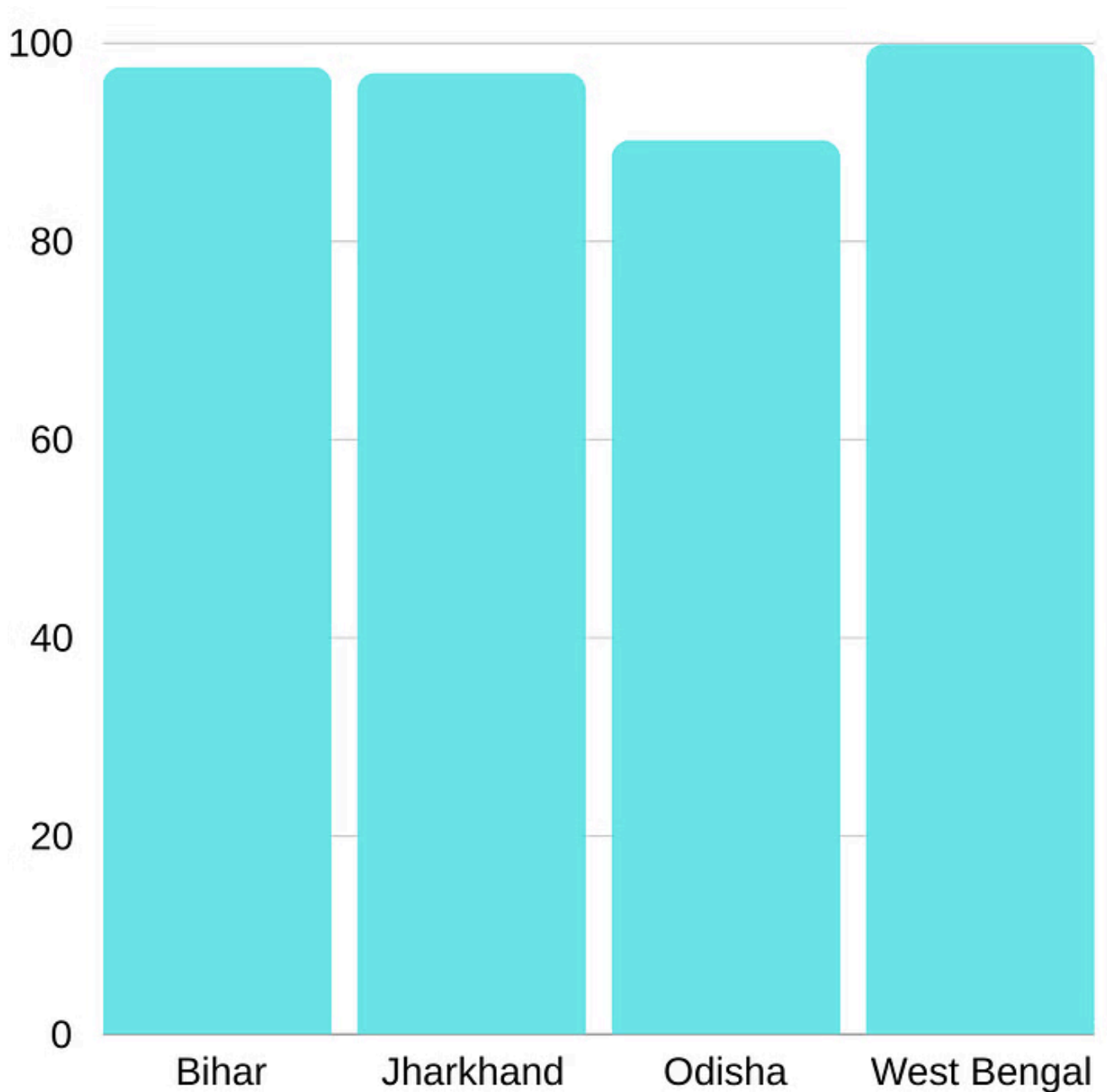


Percentage of households with at least one usual member covered by any health insurance/financing scheme across the states.

(Source: [Access Inequality Report 2024](#))

Education presents a mixed bag. While Bihar prioritises female toilets in schools (97.6%), a dismal 11.1% have functional internet, and vocational training programs are entirely absent. Jharkhand struggles with a low net enrolment ratio (41.3%). Odisha shares similar issues

with net enrolment (49.4%) but lags in schools with female toilets (90.2%). West Bengal emerges as the leader in net enrolment ratio (69.4%) and female toilets (99.9%), but vocational training programs remain underutilised with only 5.84% covered under the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF).



Percentage of schools with female toilets.

(Source: [Access Inequality Report 2024](#))

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A positive trend emerges in socio-economic security, with bank account penetration exceeding 88% across all states where Odisha leads with 93.5% followed by West Bengal at 92.6% and Jharkhand at 90.4%.

However, prison overcrowding casts a shadow. Bihar has the highest occupancy rate (140.1%), followed by Jharkhand (121.5%) and West Bengal (120%).

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Uneven Progress: A Look Within Bihar and West Bengal

Despite an overall low ranking in development and its indicators, states like Bihar and West Bengal present a complex picture with significant variations between their districts. Bihar's capital, Patna, outperforms the state average across various indicators.

Data from the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) reveals that preschool attendance for children aged 2-4 years is significantly higher in Patna (41.7%) and Siwan (44.5%) compared to Nalanda (38.2%). Similarly, the percentage of women receiving antenatal care (ANC) during pregnancy is much higher in Patna (573) compared to Nalanda (348). However, districts like Sheohar and Sheikhpura paint a bleaker picture with even lower ANC rates (92 and 72 respectively).

	Patna	Nalanda
Percentage of children attending preschool aged 2 - 4 years	41.7	38.2
Number of Women receiving antenatal care	573	348

However, the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2021 - 2022) paints a concerning picture for Bihar. The state's unemployment rate of 6% significantly exceeds the national average of 4.1%. This disparity is even more stark for young people (aged 15-29) where the unemployment rate in Bihar reaches a staggering 20.1%, compared to the national average of 12.4%.

Similar to Bihar, West Bengal displays a significant urban advantage. Preschool attendance for young children is higher in Purba Medinipur (50.1%) compared to Kolkata (46.3%), though the disparity isn't as pronounced. However, antenatal care paints a starker picture. While Purba Medinipur shows a higher rate of women receiving ANC (268), the numbers in Kolkata (141) and Darjeeling (82) are considerably lower. These stark disparities call for immediate targeted interventions for overall development of the states.

	Purba Medinipur	Kolkata	Darjeeling
Total number of women receiving antenatal care	268	141	82

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The Road Ahead

The Access Inequality Report, while exposing the stark disparities within eastern Indian states, also offers a roadmap for targeted interventions. Addressing infrastructure deficits require a district-specific approach. Priority should be given to building *pucca* houses and improving piped water supply in districts with the lowest percentages, like Jharkhand. Similarly, rural electrification and improved road connectivity should be prioritised in underserved areas.

Healthcare access demands a multi-pronged strategy. Expanding health insurance coverage, especially in states with low penetration like Bihar is crucial. Increasing government hospitals and ensuring they are adequately staffed and equipped is vital, particularly in districts like Jharkhand which fall below the national average. Additionally, promoting prenatal care across the region, with a specific focus on states like Bihar, particularly districts like Sheohar and Sheikhpura, is essential.

Education reform at the district level necessitates improving internet connectivity in schools – a pressing issue in Bihar. Expanding vocational training programs and aligning them with local job market needs is critical. While West Bengal leads in net enrolment and female toilets, districts within the state need to address the low utilisation rate of vocational training programs and preschool enrolment. The government, by focusing on specific interventions, can bridge the access gap and foster inclusive growth.

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