

Opportunity in Disparity

- By Amartya Sen

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“Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale/her infinite variety” wrote Shakespeare in praise of great feminine beauty. India's variety in many different forms has also been a source of its strength, perhaps even beauty, and yet some of our regional variations are reflections of huge disparities in basic living conditions that are reasons for shame rather than pride. The average figures for India as a whole can, thus, be extremely deceptive as a guide to the lives of the people of India — a great many people in some parts of the country do dramatically worse than that. These disparities are not getting smaller, and often enough, those states that are ahead are getting further ahead while the states down below lag more and more behind. For example, those states that were already ahead in education, health care and other features of human development have been able to, by and large, make much fuller use of the opportunities offered by economic reform, and this has helped them to increase their incomes as well as allowed them the means of going further forward, compared with those left even more firmly at the rear. There are reasons to be concerned about this problem of divided fortunes and reasons too for looking for ways and means of reducing regional disparities through enhancing the opportunities that the more problematic regions have.

And yet, Shakespeare's praise has some resonance even for the “infinite variety” of India. A regional disparity is a variation from which something can be learnt by the backward regions about what to do and what to avoid. But there is manifest evidence of a disinclination or inability to learn from the high performers. There is, for example, much to learn from the priorities given to school education and health care in Kerala, from which others have typically been less than willing to learn. There are lessons in agriculture from Punjab, industrialisation, commerce and finance from Maharashtra, land reform from West Bengal, use of information technology from Karnataka and the Integrated Child Development Services from Tamil Nadu. India as a whole could have been doing much better if those left behind were willing to learn more — and faster — from those who went straight ahead.

Some of the contributions that The Economic Times has put together for this number draws our attention to the fact that India has fallen behind our Asian neighbours. That is a wise and important pointer. And yet, had India been not one country but as many as the number of states we have (many of them have more people than the majority of countries in the world), then in nearly every field, the highest performers would have included Indian states.

For example, in the reduction of the fertility rate India as a whole, with its average figure closer to 3.0 than to the replacement rate of 2.1, may be much behind China with its distinctly below-replacement fertility rate, and yet we see from the current National Family Health Survey (NFHS 3) that six of our 22 states have fertility rates at or below the replacement rate (three of them — Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh — significantly below it). And this applies even to the rate of progress over time. In 1979, at the time of the Chinese economic reforms, Kerala and China both had the same infant mortality rate of 37 per 1,000. And now? While the number is lower, just below 30 in China, it is around 12 in Kerala. This does nothing much to wash away India's bad record of an average figure of 58 per 1,000, but more importantly, it also raises the question: why is the rest of India so slow in learning from its better performing regions? The “teachers” and potential “learners”, of course, differ from field to field. For example, Kerala may still have something to learn from elsewhere on how to make better use of the market economy — defective as the process would be if that were the only thing to use (happily it is not, but the market too is certainly one thing to use). To take another example, we have good reason to worry about the terrible state of health and nutrition of the average Indian child, and yet making use of lessons from Punjab, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh or Tamil Nadu could have helped the worse-performing states do a great deal more for their own children.

In many ways, this is one of the basic challenges that India faces today. India has reason to seek what we can call “foreign education” to perform better (for example, there is still a lot to learn from China). And yet, learning — like charity — can also begin, inter alia, at home. That recognition may look like patriotism. But it is — more sensibly — seen as wisdom.