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Jindal School of  
Liberal Arts & Humanities  
India's First Transnational Humanities School



CENTRE FOR NEW ECONOMICS STUDIES  
CONVERSATIONS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES  
ISDS WORKSHOP 2021  
SPECIAL ISSUE

ACCESS (IN)EQUALITY INDEX

*Cover Image: Jignesh Mistry*

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# CONVERSATIONS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES (CIDS)

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## ISDS WORKSHOP 2021 ACCESS (IN)EQUALITY INDEX

### ABOUT CIDS

CIDS (Conversations in Development Studies) is a peer-reviewed, quarterly research journal publication produced by the research team of Centre for New Economics Studies, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, O.P. Jindal Global University. This student-led editorial journal features solicited research commentaries (between 2500-3000 words) from scholars currently working in the cross-section of development studies. Each published CIDS Issue seeks to offer a comprehensive analysis on a specific theme identified within development scholarship.

The editorial team's vision is to let CIDS organically evolve as a space for cultivating creative ideas for research scholars (within and outside the University) to broaden the development discourse through conceptual engagement and methodological experimentation on contemporary issues. Any research commentary submission features: a) brief review of the literature on a research problem; b) the argument made by the author with details on the method used; c) documenting the findings and relevance of them in the larger scope of the literature; and (in some instances) d) present a brief policy action plan for agencies of the state (to address the issue highlighted in the commentary). There are no pre-identified limitations or restrictions to methodological frameworks used by solicited scholars (*i.e.*, those writing the commentary). However, the research method incorporated in any accepted submission must be explained along with its relevance in context to the study undertaken.

### ABOUT ISDS WORKSHOPS

The Interdisciplinary Workshop in Development Studies (ISDS), organised by the Centre for New Economics Studies, brings together scholars, domain experts, journalists, and social activists to deliberate on some of the most pressing developmental issues of our time, in a workshop-format panel discussion. The Workshop organized its fourth annual edition this year. Previous ISDS workshops have focussed on themes such as “Urban Transformation — A Transnational Perspective” and “Acclimatised Emergencies”, among others.

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## ABOUT THIS ISSUE

### ACCESS (IN)EQUALITY INDEX

Despite India currently being one of the fastest-growing economies globally, 68.8% of the Indian population lives on less than Rs.21 a day. This discrepancy is caused by a highly skewed income distribution and inequitable access to essential social and economic services. These factors contribute to India having one of the highest levels of inequality in the developing world which affects delivery mechanisms and access to basic social services such as education, healthcare, and credit institutions. The increase in individuals' dependency on technology as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequalities. With a number of public services being digitised, the existing disparities in individuals' access to services — such as healthcare, justice, and basic amenities have surged.

The 2021 ISDS Workshop aimed to solicit discussion on the various themes and findings of the Index relating to the “access” to social and economic opportunities across the states — from access to basic amenities and healthcare to physical and legal security. The Workshop sought to broaden the discourse on inequality by diversifying the criteria for assessing inequality, inviting experts from diverse disciplines to contribute and further the cause, enabling a better approach to developmental policy. The Index aimed to provide an in-depth assessment of each Indian state's performance in ensuring access to basic social and economic services.

This year's edition of the ISDS Workshop introduced the “Access (In)equality Index” (AEI), which measures inequality across states and Union Territories in India, followed by a panel discussion on the Access (In)equality Index, and this CIDS Issue is the end product of the same, through this Issue the CIDS Team aims to document the comments and findings of the 2021 ISDS panel discussions.

The discourse on inequality is often limited to income or wealth inequality. There is a lack of data on the indicators that describe an individual's access to opportunities, which in itself reproduces inequality. The AEI seeks to bridge this gap by measuring the extent of households' access to “basic opportunities” — from physical and spatial distribution of opportunities to the nuances of “access”—like availability and approachability.

The first-panel discussion “**Access (In)equality Index: An Analytical Study for States and Union Territories across India**”, introduced the Index, followed by a reflection on the report published by four brilliant minds in the field of Politics and Economics; first panellist for this session was *Dean Ramaswamy Sudarshan, Dean, Jindal School of Government and Public Policy, O.P. Jindal Global University*, the second panellist for this session was *Mr. Mangalam Kesavan Venu, Founding Editor, The Wire*, the third panellist for this discussion was *Dr. Indranil Mukhopadhyay, Associate Professor of Developmental Economics and Public Health, O.P. Jindal Global University*, and the fourth panellist for this discussion was *Dr. Siddhi Gyan Pandey, Assistant Professor, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, O.P. Jindal Global University*; and the session was moderated by *Deepanshu Mohan,*

*Associate Professor, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, O.P. Jindal Global University & Director, Centre for New Economics Studies.*

The second panel discussion was titled “**Frontiers of Digitalisation: Potential and Limitations from an Access Prism**”. Technology adoption, particularly digitalisation, is often seen as a silver bullet for market-led inadequacies and inefficiencies. However, the adoption of digital technologies has been known to both alleviate and exacerbate existing inequalities, depending on where and how they are applied. This panel discussed the potential and limitations of digitalisation in building inclusive societies. Examining the digital elements in the Access Inequality Index, the panellists deliberated on the impact of three event catalysts on the digital economy. First, the sharp decline in data prices and exponential growth in data consumption in the past five years. Second, the push towards digital payments in the context of the government’s demonetisation decision in 2016. Finally, the increasing reliance on digital services in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The panel was composed of *Mr. Osama Manzar, Founder & Director, Digital Empowerment Foundation; Ms. Sarayu Natarajan, Founder, Aapti Institute; Mr. Aayush Rathbi, Senior Researcher, Centre for Internet and Society, and Ms. Charu Pragya, Research Associate, Tandem Research.* This session was moderated by *Mansi Kedia, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations.*

The Oxfam Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index ranked India 141 out of 158 countries. Despite the severe inequality within the country, research has largely focused only on inequality of outcome – that is wealth and income inequality. Policies aiming to reduce only inequality of outcomes will not succeed unless they ensure more equal access to opportunity in the form of affordable quality education, health care and basic infrastructure, which currently remain unevenly spread both socially and geographically. The Access (In)equality Index (AEI) attempts to perform an in-depth assessment of each Indian states’ provision of access to these opportunities to its citizens, which will aid in the drafting of policy measures that are appropriate, feasible and effective in enhancing equal access to opportunities.

The third panel, titled “**Conceptualizing Access to (In)equality: Moving forward with AEI**”, brought together panelists from across sectors to discuss and analyze the role of the AEI in future research and policy. The first panellist for this session was *Dr. Maitreesh Ghatak, Professor of Economics, London School of Economics and Political Science*, the second panellist for this discussion was *Mr. Roshan Kishore, Data & Political Economy Editor, The Hindustan Times*, and the third panellist for this discussion was *Dr. Neelanjan Sircar, Assistant Professor, Ashoka University & Senior Visiting Fellow, Centre for Policy Research (CPR).* This session was moderated by *Deepanshu Mohan, Associate Professor, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, O.P. Jindal Global University & Director, Centre for New Economics Studies.*

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## IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS AND LINKS RELATED TO ISDS WORKSHOP - 2021 & CIDS - VOLUME 4 ISSUE I

### Access (In)Equality Index

[https://jgu.s3.ap-south-1.amazonaws.com/jslh/Access+\(In\)Equality+Index+Report+2021.pdf](https://jgu.s3.ap-south-1.amazonaws.com/jslh/Access+(In)Equality+Index+Report+2021.pdf)

### Access (In)Equality Index – Executive Summary

<https://jgu.edu.in/jslh/centre-for-new-economics-studies/>

**Panel Discussion – 1: Access (In)equality Index: An Analytical Study for States and Union Territories across India**

<https://youtu.be/m4FxuOva8eg>

**Panel Discussion – 2: Frontiers of Digitalisation: Potential and Limitations from an Access Prism**

<https://youtu.be/BvLmOvOyxCg>

**Panel Discussion – 3: Conceptualizing Access to (In)equality: Moving forward with AEI**

<https://youtu.be/1mdn5VDwwd0>

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## **‘Access (In)equality Index’: An Analytical Study for States and Union Territories across India**

*The 2021 edition of the ISDS Workshop introduced the “Access (In)equality Index” (AEI), which measures inequality across states and Union Territories in India, followed by a panel discussion on the Access (In)equality Index. The index aimed to provide an in-depth assessment of each Indian state’s performance in ensuring access to basic social and economic services. The first panel discussion introduced the Index, followed by a reflection on the report published by four brilliant minds in the field of Politics and Economics.*

*First panellist for this session was **Dean Ramaswamy Sudarshan**, Dean, Jindal School of Government and Public Policy, O.P. Jindal Global University.*

*The second panellist for this session was **Mr. Mangalam Kesavan Venu**, Founding Editor, The Wire.*

*The third panellist for this discussion was **Dr. Indranil Mukhopadhyay**, Associate Professor of Developmental Economics and Public Health, O.P. Jindal Global University.*

*The fourth panellist for this discussion was **Dr. Siddhi Gyan Pandey**, Assistant Professor, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, O.P. Jindal Global University.*

*This session was moderated by **Deepanshu Mohan**, Associate Professor, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, O.P. Jindal Global University & Director, Centre for New Economics Studies.*

**In the analytical framework of this Index, five fundamental pillars of assessment *i.e.*, access to education, access to healthcare, access to basic amenities, and access to socio-economic security and access to justice were selected to rank Indian States and Union Territories based on performance in each of these pillars. Our report also delves deeper into the existing gaps within access performance observed across different segments of our population based on the area of residence, the divide between the rural and urban, caste groups, and gender. We invited our esteemed panellist, for some key observations and comments on the “Access (In)equality Index” (AEI).**

**Dean Ramaswamy Sudarshan:** The first thing I would like mention is, I don’t think that any government in this country will take a notice of your findings at all. I say this with some experience when I worked in UNDP. I joined UNDP because I was so excited by the first Human Development Report<sup>1</sup> and the articulation of the capabilities approach by Amartya Sen. One of my major concerns was that we should produce human development reports for the states of India and then I had a big argument with the headquarters in UNDP because they wanted the Human Development Report to be prepared by an independent set of scholars and not done with the government. I argued that given the way the Indian government works, and Amartya Sen might have the most brilliant ideas, but nobody will take any notice of it unless he’s been asked to head an official committee and produces a report that is official. He (Amartya Sen) prides himself in saying that he’s never participated in any official committee and has never accepted any such

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<sup>1</sup> UNDP (1990) “Human Development Report 1990: Concept and Measurement of Human Development”, New York, available at: <http://www.hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr1990>.

government portfolio to work. I argued that the report should be official and should be owned by different governments.

Having won that battle, we had a large project where we started off with Madhya Pradesh. We also had a project with the Planning Commission which was headed by Rohini Nair. The Planning Commission encouraged and supported several states to produce Human Development Reports. One of the good things about the way the government did the human development reports is that it stuck to the principle of independence of the ship in a sense because they were not produced departmentally, they had the implementer or the official status of the report, but they were prepared by scholars in different states. For instance, Mahender Lama worked on the report for Sikkim, leading a team of independent scholars. In that sense, the contents of the report were not manipulated or biased to paint a rosy picture that one might expect from the political class and the bureaucracy who might wish to have that. Those reports have been prepared by teams that are independent and had editorial independence and were also official reports. The whole thing was that since it was an official report tabled in the assembly and different departments were involved, they would take notice of it.

However, as it often happens the human development report is a means to an end and the end is that you have a set of policies that address the serious gaps and shortfalls that these reports highlight. Now did that happen? I'm afraid not because producing the report became an industry in itself. Therefore, what is meant to be the means became an end. Even though we started off assuming that if it is an official report owned by the government the chances of its findings and its policy recommendations will be taken seriously, were belied. Then there's a fat chance that reports of this kind that we produced are going to get noticed. Therefore, I emphasize that we should do these reports but do them because we want more people and students capable of doing this kind of thinking and analysis. Even if no government shows any interest in this report, I don't see that as any reason to be disappointed, they don't show any interest in their own official reports either. So, bringing about policy changes and getting governments to act on findings require different set of strategies and reports won't do that.

Therefore, there is enormous value for the work that you do because it's a great training ground for the kinds of things that we want students to learn and to accomplish. These are skills and techniques such as drawing inferences from data being able to produce something that summarises the findings of a very large data set. All of these are very valuable, and they would come into use in many works of life. Multiple skills are demonstrated in this including the presentation, the graphics, the summary of findings, all of that is extremely valuable. It is a very important part of our pedagogy.

These approaches are very good because the problem with the human development index is it has two outcomes - life expectancy and access to knowledge and then it has *per capita* income, which is means to an end. It mixes up; however, you've been discarding as you know opportunities and outcomes. In the capabilities approach, there is a well-reasoned basis for focusing on opportunities. I would like to compliment you for introducing justice but also say that it's very unsatisfactory.

Firstly, when it comes to justice, a great majority of people in this country use the justice system to harass one another. They don't expect the dispute to be resolved. Very often cases are filed only to harass the other side and to continually appeal, not to accept the verdict and unfortunately the government also has the same tendency, which is never to accept a lower court's decision and to appeal to the High Court and appeal it again to the Supreme Court because you have the right to appeal and bureaucrats think that because the right to appeal if they didn't appeal they would be

causing a loss to the revenue of the state and they must file the appeal. We are making a dysfunctional use of the justice system. With the result there's a kind of a Parkinson's law, if you increase the number of judges that doesn't somehow make much of a difference to pendency rates, the number of cases that continually keep piling up even though you steadily increase the number of judges. We need much more anthropological sensibility about what people do to resolve disputes.

**Mangalam Kesavan Venu:** I would endorse the framework that you have adopted, to assess both access to opportunities and its capability of development of capacity and its outcome. As you go along, you must do a lot of creative refinement within each of these verticals, whether it's access to health, or access to education, access to justice, access to sanitation and basic amenities.

There have been structured research projects on these lines by Devesh Kapoor and other researchers, as part of their own exercise of understanding both access and outcomes. They are taking districts which are dominated by backwards or tribal's where there has been very little progress, relative to other districts which are dominated by the upper caste. We are a very complex society, while the framework that you have devised is a very good starting point, but from here for more detailed and nuanced learning you must go to the ground level.

To understand the subtext of different regions, different cultures, different caste dynamics. For instance, I'm not surprised that the South on most indicators comes up ahead of the Northern states or the landlocked states. Some of the complex issues that exist should be understood. This can be done through surveys. I am puzzled by women's participation in labour. In India, there is a South and North divide. The southern state's average *per capita* income is around \$3000 or more. While the northern states have \$1000 to \$1200 or lesser. Your research pointed out that there is a correlation between *per capita* income and other social indicators. That is one aspect which is pure data studying correlation. It's important to understand why in Bihar, the labour participant ratio is 4%. I cannot fathom that only four out of 100 women are in the labour market. The question is what are the other 96 doing?

Several economists during 2011 came up with a finding regarding the drop in women's labour participation, they came with an expression that India is progressing and becoming more prosperous. Women are voluntarily falling off the labour force because they're trying to retrain themselves. This was the narrative in 2010-2011. The women who fell off the labour force voluntarily should be coming back now, however, this is not happening. In reality, it is falling even further.

I think you must study demographics and within that, gender. While there is a broader framework, but inside each vertical, there is a need to refine the learnings. I think this exercise should be purely driven as a means for your own learning, for your own researchers getting at the truth as far as possible, through various means and methodology, and figure where India is headed in terms of the Gandhian objective of access to the poor, access to the underprivileged, access to the lower caste. These are issues that are very much alive today. Whether it is a digital divide or whether it's access to education or access to health.

Some of the flagship schemes of the government, whether it's the low-cost housing or Ayushman Bharat, the insurance scheme you might want to study the outcome of these schemes. For instance, during the pandemic, the southern states performed very well in terms of the Ayushman Bharat insurance scheme because in the southern states even before the scheme was announced it was very well covering about 70% of the population. The state was paying the premium, but the private

hospitals are also participating. In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the numbers of hospitalisation under the scheme were barely hundreds.

**Dr. Indranil Mukhopadhyay:** First I would like to congratulate the team on this hugely commendable feat. It is not easy bringing in 58 different indicators, linking them conceptually, grounding them in data and weaving a narrative out of them. In such exercises, the most critical part is to periodically make improvements. How can this be made better?

There are several nuances to that question. The conceptualization of access is not easy — it is an intermediate outcome and less of a final goal. It is one of the enablers. At the same time, access is not at the same level of output and inputs that the system tends to measure and provide for. In this complexity, the final outcome which is much easier to measure than measuring at all the levels. Access conceptualization is therefore a multidimensional and fairly complex task. There are, however, methodological improvements and newer indicators that the report can include.

As one of the panelists earlier pointed out, there is data on the supply-side, but the demand side still needs to be measured. The conceptualization of justice, in particular, needs to be linked with the nature of the Indian State. Favoring interests of the powerful classes (class interests) and the semi-feudal nature of the state are two tendencies which when kept aside by a particular state, has led to it doing well.

Even though income is much higher in Gujarat and Haryana compared to Chhattisgarh, they are doing as bad in terms of providing access due to the favoring of class interests and the semi-feudal nature of the state respectively. Democratization and participation are critical enablers of access to justice.

**Dr. Siddhi Gyan Pandey:** My research is exclusively in the area of theoretical economics, where I rely largely on game-theoretical analysis. Reviewing this report has been a learning experience for me. Even if the governments don't take notice of this report in their policymaking, the Index is a powerful tool to hold the governments accountable. We can use this Index to better articulate their demands and expectations.

After reading the report, I have a list of remarks or questions. The importance and relevance of this Index has already been highlighted and I wholeheartedly agree with everything that has been said. The report and presentation as well as the discussion motivates the need for such an Index focusing on the unequal access that people in this country have to basic amenities, education, healthcare, social security, and justice. These inequalities exist across States and Union Territories but also across social groups, across rural-urban spaces and across genders. The analysis of inequalities across social groups, genders, and rural-urban spaces is done in the report by comparing various measures of access along these five pillars.

However, the AEI, ranks only States and Union territories by the overall degree of access along the five pillars. To that extend, I found the name access inequality index to be a bit of a misnomer because the nature of the index is like that of the Human Development Index<sup>2</sup> and not like that of the Gini Index<sup>3</sup> which is an inequality index. I understand that to an extent greater access to things like amenities and secondary education translates to lower quality and higher equality of access across the population of the state or union territory. Ultimately, the inequality of access

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<sup>2</sup> UNDP (2020) "Human Development Index", New York, *available at:* <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>.

<sup>3</sup> World Bank (2021) "GINI Index", Washington, D.C., *available at:* <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?view=map>.

across states is being measured by looking at the variation in the index values - with higher variation implying higher inequality and lower variation implying lower inequality. The Index number corresponding to any State or Union Territory tells us very little in terms of equality or inequality within the state, and it can be a bit misleading because here we are interested in inequality that was looking at access between distinct groups and different genders and with rural-urban spaces.

However, the Index number gives us information only about access and from that I understand the policy goal then for a state with a low rank would be to climb up the rankings or to improve their index value since increased access may not immediately do better ranking but the goal would be to increase the index value. Hence, the name “Access (In)equality Index” might be misinterpreted as this being an index of inequality, whereas indices are used that way to look at inequality.

Secondly, there are four as in which access is being understood and conceptualised-approachability, availability, appropriateness, and affordability. However, while going over the list of indicators, I find that affordability is not being measured by as many indicators as the number of indicators that are used to measure the rest. In particular, I found four indicators - two for health, out of which one of them was solely focusing on reproductive health, there was one for secondary education and there’s a small note on that as well in the limitation section and there was a note on piped water. I’m sure there are a lot of data constraints and other reasons for this, but there are not any distinctions between these four as when we are saying access. In today’s era, I think affordability is a real challenge. For instance, National Sample Survey (NSS) data on out-of-pocket health expenditure could be used to supplement the existing framework of measuring affordability. I was wondering if there is somewhere that can be also used as we are already using average expenditure per delivery as one of the indicators. If there were more indicators that reflect affordability that would be great.

Thirdly, in the current form, the Index does not make any distinction between the public and private provision of healthcare, education, and amenities. Beyond the fact that state expenditure contributes positively to access, and high average expenditures made by people. For example, in secondary education, this is seen as an indicator of low affordability but that is the extent to which they are looking at the public-private dynamic in the index. If one were to assume that a high average expenditure made by people is higher, because of the reliance on the private sector, but that’s not very clear. The report itself points to two things - firstly, the fact that 30% of secondary schools are private which creates an affordability problem. The report also finds that urban areas rely on the private sector for health services which is linked with healthcare being less affordable in the rural-urban area. Although it is more available but less affordable.

There is a tension between availability and affordability the moment we bring the private sector in. The AEI, therefore, needs to deliver a more nuanced take on the policy implications. There are several indicators of availability and appropriateness, which look at this volume. Therefore, if the affordability indicators are very few and there is no distinction between public and private provision, then in principle states could expand access while relying solely on the private sector. What this does to affordability, does not get captured by the index. In terms of education, the index primarily looks at secondary education. In lieu of that, it should increase its scope to higher education as well, which is most often the vehicle of upward social mobility.

Last, one of the biggest challenges, climate change, must also figure in the index in some way. A great body of literature links climate change with increasing poverty and in negative ways. It will only continue to undermine poverty reduction efforts if left unchecked. Therefore, consequences

of climate change bear larger costs for the ones living in poverty—who are particularly vulnerable. To include the equation of climate change in the index is therefore extremely important.

**The response of the authors of the “Access (In)equality Index” (Prof. Deepanshu Mohan, Ms. Richa Sekhani, and Ms. Latika Sharma) to the comments and queries raised by Dr. Siddhi Gyan Pandey.**

**Deepanshu Mohan:** In response to the first point that you made, on the naming of the index, there have been several debates over this for at least a month. I would like to borrow from what Dr. Indranil mentioned about access in its own conceptual basis being an intermediate enabler. The question that often comes then is an intermediate enabler of what? I think it’s because maybe as an individual or as a collective or as a group of people, I’m not just talking about the educated class, and I distinguish between the educated class and the intellectual class.

Somewhere you would find that a tendency to think in a consequentialist frame is so normatively embedded in every thought process. What is the subsequent effect or consequence of what you’re trying to measure is something that overrides everything else, rather than saying you know what you’re trying to do. At some point in time, you think of calling it the state of access. However, then the question arises - if this accessibility to these happens then what? Somewhere we had to embed this in established discourse, where in fact even when you were responding to the other observations you were saying that you know education for achieving a certain sense of status equality whether it is higher education or others. There is a tendency to link, and I think that distinction is vital.

We can do a better task in terms of explaining that more as we go forward. There are certain times where certain silences speak louder than words and words themselves that may fall short. On the four As you’ve mentioned and that’s something which we have discussed internally as well. The frame of these four As is prevalent in the healthcare policy discourse and we have sort of derived that in context to what we are talking about. This was a bone of contention, however, going forward I think this will be brought about. The distinction between public and private higher education, climate change into all these points are excellent anecdotes. I’ll just say this before I pass it on to the team to respond. Our effort is that going forward each pillar becomes an index report by itself. For instance, the access to education becomes by itself like a sub-part which has an independent body of work, and then there’s a team of five to six people who just work on this. For access to justice, we need jurists, and we also need policy-level applied practitioners or those who can look to better understand how we can conceptualize this. At the same time, access to healthcare, Dr. Indranil’s observations that we got, gave a great sense of how we can do better.

**Richa Sekhani:** Looking at climate change and how it affects the quality of life, I think we could look at some of the indicators like air quality or the water quality. Also looking at how the number of disasters in the states and union territories has affected the quality of life.

In terms of looking at the affordability, as a team, it took months to come out with a set of indicators but there was a lack of data. For instance, some of the indicators that we did want to capture were - how much does it cost to get the justice, but given the unavailability of data, your observation is bang on, that we have a very limited number of indicators that are looking at the affordability.

However, I think going ahead we can include one of the indicators that you pointed out looking at the expenditure on health. Regarding the focus on secondary education instead of higher education - you rightly pointed out that primary education is already taking care of India, so we

wanted to firstly look at how are some of the indicators and states are performing in secondary education and then in the next report take up how the states are performing in terms of higher education. In terms of the title of the Index, as Mr. Mohan pointed out, there has been a lot of debate over this. I can understand as a reader, the title can be misrepresented. However, the way the team wanted to look at inequality was how unequal the states are or at the persistence of inequalities in terms of access.

**Latika Sharma:** In terms of the axis dimension, the core of the Index is looking at the access and the findings themselves is left to the interpretation of the reader - whether there is inequality or equality and what is the score performance and how you put it in terms of the equality paradigm. Looking at public *versus* private comparison, definitely, when we were looking at indicators, we had two indicators which included private healthcare, but since India is welfare state, we are looking at the responsibility of the government in providing basic amenities or basic services to citizens. Due to the role of the government itself, we thought that we should include and focus on the public institutions or the government's services rather than private institutions. The data of the private institutions are dynamic in nature. Even in the future versions when we do our time series analysis or longitudinal between various years' indexes it would be helpful to see the public sector growth itself as we are targeting the policy recommendations.

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## Frontiers of Digitalisation: Potential and Limitations from an Access Prism

*Technology adoption, particularly digitalisation, is often seen as a silver bullet for market-led inadequacies and inefficiencies. However, the adoption of digital technologies has been known to both alleviate and exacerbate existing inequalities, depending on where and how they are applied. This panel discussed the potential and limitations of digitalisation in building inclusive societies. Examining the digital elements in the Access Inequality Index, the panellists deliberated on the impact of three event catalysts on the digital economy. First, the sharp decline in data prices and exponential growth in data consumption in the past five years. Second, the push towards digital payments in the context of the government's demonetisation decision in 2016. Finally, the increasing reliance on digital services in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.*

*First panellist for this session was **Mr. Osama Manzar, Founder & Director, Digital Empowerment Foundation.***

*The second panellist for this session was **Ms. Sarayu Natarajan, Founder, Aapti Institute.***

*The third panellist for this discussion was **Mr. Aayush Rathi, Senior Researcher, Centre for Internet and Society.***

*The fourth panellist for this discussion was **Ms. Charu Pragya, Research Associate, Tandem Research.***

*This session was moderated by **Ms. Mansi Kedia, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations.***

**One of your columns<sup>4</sup> talks about how an information-packed mobile phone will be the end of patriarchy one day. Our report finds that only 21% of women are mobile internet users compared to 42% of men. What are some reasons for this skewed distribution? What are some interventions that can help in this regard?**

**Osama Manzar:** The more delay in the number to become otherwise, the more assertive our patriarchy is. You can ask all the girls in your college — did they or their brothers get a mobile first? Did your father or your mother get the mobile first? Patriarchy, in that sense, is DNA. It is subtle. The question however, is how do we reverse this statistic? This can be done through schemes and mechanisms designed to provide mobiles to women as a priority. We require feminist schemes.

For instance, we work in more than a thousand locations with 'Soochnapreneurs' at the grass root levels, who are basically village level digital entrepreneurs. First, as the work demanded lots of moving around, only boys came. Then we started reserving the Soochnapreneur positions for girls. Now, we have the policy that 100 percent of our Soochnapreneurs must be women. This is how

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<sup>4</sup> Osama Manzar (2019) "Information-packed Mobile Phone Will Be the End of Patriarchy One Day", India, available at: <https://www.defindia.org/information-packed-mobile-phone-will-be-the-end-of-patriarchy-one-day/>.

we make policies that are completely women oriented. All the excuses — from transportation, movement at night, don't know how to cycle, etc. are all patriarchal *babanas* (excuses). You can easily change the working hours from late night to early morning so that the women can work.

The Internet is feminine but is being handled by men. This has made access to the internet for women more difficult. How many telecom policy makers are women? How can one expect to solve women's problems if they fail to see things from their point of view in the first place?

Access to digital infrastructure is fundamental now. Access in Pre-COVID to Post-COVID times has defined the terminologies from inclusion to exclusion. Even though exclusion was in place since the advent of digitization, we talked about the digital as some complementarity to something larger. Most of the time people did not approach the digital with the perspective that without it one cannot live. It still hasn't come to the category of *Roti, Kapda, and Makaan* (food, clothing, and shelter).

We, at the Digital Empowerment Foundation, knew that people who were physically remote (from the State) were dependent on the access to technology to receive state benefits. Apart from this, we feel the quality of connectivity and access is divided too. For instance, there are 530 million WhatsApp users in India — but we cannot call them digitally undivided. Out of this only a certain percent is in rural India where connectivity issues hinder even basic things like a video call or online transactions. Therefore, access certainly has to be seen not only from the perspective of quality of infrastructure, its availability but also its contextualization, inequalities arising from gendered norms, and behavioral inclusion, we must look at connectivity from the non-technological perspective.

**Corruption, discrimination among others, negatively impact the “appropriateness” of access for marginalized communities, as a result of which they have to rely on informal channels or intermediaries. Can the digital be leveraged to address this lacuna in service delivery or can we use the intermediaries themselves for improving access?**

**Sarayu Natarajan:** That is a difficult question. There is now some emerging literature on intermediaries in the context of the digital. I am very wary of broad-brush stroke depiction of community relations as being corrupt, venal, or problematic. There are, at certain times, problematic elements to it, like when access to state benefits is mediated by political intermediaries. But having said that, there are quite a lot of instances to show that local intermediaries can play a critical role in bridging the gap between citizens and the state.

It is hard to say if it is entirely good or bad — there are variations with respect to geography, context, who the ruling party is, etc. However, with the digital, there is an additional layer of complication which is the idea that geography, in certain cases, might not matter at all. There, this question of intermediaries becomes more difficult to analyze. Regardless, the community is very important in the question of negotiation. As individuals, we are disempowered — even in the offline world. What has led to constructive change in many policy domains is the coming together of people to make claims on the state. Therefore, I think there is something to think about the positive good that intermediaries can bring — without seeing them as corrupt — but one must pay attention to the ways in which these incentives might change as we go forward.

Our research shows access, apart from the ways discussed and laid out in the index, is determined by how digital spaces in themselves are structured and mediated. We have to focus on not just pre-existing structural inequalities that inhibit access but also the ways in which digital spaces are

themselves structured — the language in which material is available, for instance — which create new forms of inequalities.

The question of access to the digital as a right and its intersection with the state is an interesting one too. For instance, in the case of digitizing justice, which is a right for all citizens and can be thought of as a state function. In such a case, who is responsible for ensuring access to this right — which might be different from accessing digital marketplaces — is a critical concern. Social intermediaries in such cases play a critical role in ensuring access regardless of whether the type of access is digitally mediated or not. Paying attention to this kind of ‘network social capital’ — who is one connected with and what kind of socio-political relations those connections foster — is another deeper dimension of access worth pondering about. I think communities and particularly network social capital needs to be given more attention to address the breakdowns in access infrastructure.

**The informal economy faced severe losses in livelihood as a result of the pandemic, which is a critical metric of “access to decent work”. Can digital platforms be used to alleviate the dismal situation of the informal economy? Does digitalization enable or disable a bottom-up approach?**

**Aayush Rathi:** The question here assumes that platform work is not informal work — it is informal work with a digital interface. It has the same kind of precarity, sub-contractor chains, lack of social security provisions — ones with which informal work is traditionally associated. I think platform work is here to stay. We need to rethink what platform work should look like — for who are these platforms made for and how — to make it a feasible pathway for decent work opportunities. There are also ongoing proposals for urban employment guarantee schemes — the urban equivalent of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005<sup>5</sup> (MGNREGA). This is also where platform work can fit in but that must not happen without fundamentally reorienting the working conditions of the platform workers.

About the bottom-up approach, I think we are seeing interesting approaches to workers’ organisation and resistance. This is where the bottom-up approach currently lies for me — in terms of pushing back corporate policies, government policies around labour, etc. Historically, it has been a challenge to organize platform workers due to the absence of shared space like in the factory. Workers are intentionally atomized. In the absence of the factory, solidarity emerges from the shared networks, for instance, how cab drivers stay connected with their fellow drivers through the phone and share their experiences. Moreover, much of the platform workforce come from pockets where the urban poor reside. These again become the site of organisation for platform workers.

Access is multidimensional and intersectional. Traditional labour market segregation often maps onto the digital labour economy. Masculinized and feminized job segregations continue to remain rampant in the digital labour market. However, in certain cases, work that has been historically feminized is also becoming masculinized. For instance, on-demand cleaning work — which has been historically associated with females — has now become synonymous with male workers in the digital labour economy. This points to other nuances of access — whether you own a smartphone or not and whether you have mobility.

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<sup>5</sup> Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (Act 42 of 2005), *available at:* [https://nrega.nic.in/amendments\\_2005\\_2018.pdf](https://nrega.nic.in/amendments_2005_2018.pdf).

Another aspect is the narrative of disruption that is often attributed to the digital platform economy and how that is considered as the right approach. In such cases, one must reorient their focus on what is being disrupted. For instance, the online food delivery platforms have undercut women's home-based catering enterprises, among others. Therefore, it is important to think about platformization through this perspective as well.

**Does Artificial Intelligence address the lacunae in access from a policy perspective? What are the pitfalls of such an approach?**

**Charu Pragya:** I would start with the point that the Index raises — the lack of inclusive growth. Moving forward, we must look at the right to digital access or the right to internet access. India is one of the three countries in the global south with the largest digital divide, in terms of gendered access to digital infrastructure and services. We must ask ourselves, how this isolation is created from information and communication processes — and in such a case, how one would negotiate one's citizenry

The Index, although indirectly, points out how information and communication have come to be core processes by which individuals negotiate power, between themselves and the state, private players, and others. Being cut off, therefore, because the existing infrastructure does not cover you, impacts your access to other necessary social security mechanisms as well as opportunities.

My work at Tandem Research focuses on the future of work. A recent virtual gathering of activists, unionists, and researchers on the issue of the new 'E-Shram' portal, brought about how women are not able to register themselves on it — partly due to normative restrictions, and non-recognition of certain forms of labour by the portal. Even the women were unaware that their work qualified as work for the portal, particularly domestic work.

In terms of social security or welfare, these technical mechanisms have become more attractive for governments across the board. It is partly due to the fact that it seems more benevolent, and that the beneficiaries hold certain positions in the larger political economy that makes it difficult to demand accountability. Policy response sometimes rests on the assumption that there is adequate digital penetration and access. There are sophisticated technologies that are being instituted at very select realms while we are still dealing with issues of workers not being able to understand what an OTP is, or how it works. An entire system — in particular the E-Shram portal that covers crores of informal workers — can crash, failing to send an OTP, similar to our experience with COWIN.

Therefore, the question is, why should we leapfrog from a policy perspective. Internet access is not a privilege but a right, and when one creates so many layers of exclusion, only a select few can filter through. Are we targeting efficiency over equal access? Quite clearly, we are. But the question is who is this efficient for. For policymakers, this however can be very efficient, since failures can then be attributed to system crashes rather than their political intentions.

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## Conceptualising ‘Access (In)Equality Index’: Moving forward with Access (In)Equality Index

*The Oxfam Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index<sup>6</sup> ranked India 141 out of 158 countries. Despite the severe inequality within the country, research has largely focused only on inequality of outcome - that is wealth and income inequality. Policies aiming to reduce only inequality of outcomes will not succeed unless they ensure more equal access to opportunity in the form of affordable, quality education, health care and basic infrastructure, which currently remain unevenly spread both socially and geographically. The Access (In)equality Index (AEI) attempts to perform an in-depth assessment of each Indian states’ provision of access to these opportunities to its citizens, which will aid in the drafting of policy measures that are appropriate, feasible and effective in enhancing equal access to opportunities. The third panel, titled “Conceptualizing Access to (in)equality: Moving forward with AEI”, brought together panelists from across sectors to discuss and analyse the role of the AEI in future research and policy.*

*First panellist for this session was **Dr. Maitreesh Ghatak, Professor of Economics, London School of Economics and Political Science.***

*The second panellist for this discussion was **Mr. Roshan Kishore, Data & Political Economy Editor, The Hindustan Times.***

*The third panellist for this discussion was **Dr. Neelanjan Sircar, Assistant Professor, Ashoka University & Senior Visiting Fellow, Centre for Policy Research (CPR).***

*This session was moderated by **Deepanshu Mohan, Associate Professor, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, O.P. Jindal Global University & Director, Centre for New Economics Studies.***

The Access (In)equality Index has been conceptualised as a continuous annual exercise and will allow for the comparison of states’ and an assessment of their relative performance over time. Further, to capture the state’s progress over time, a dashboard can be created to present both disaggregated and aggregated data for interpretation and analysis by the larger research community. The best practices of the states in the form of case studies would also act as a useful resource for underperforming states to cross-learn jointly. Additionally, the recent pandemic has increased our reliance on digital means. Therefore, future work on the Index will also try to capture indicators that assess the role of digitisation across indicators. The CIDS Team invited the panellists to comment on specific areas of the report, that will act as key changes for the upcoming year’s Index.

**Maitreesh Ghatak:** Inequality is typically measured through outcomes such as consumption, wealth, and income. However, as this report (AEI) has accurately pinpointed, it is inequality of opportunities that results in the persistence of inequality. Conceptually this has been known, it is recently that we have attempted to create empirical measures of inequality of opportunity. It is important to distinguish between static measures and those that capture the evolution of inequality. Static measures such as annual equality reports paint an incomplete picture, and it reduces our tendency for change.

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew Martin *et. al.* (2020) “The Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index 2020”, India, available at: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/fighting-inequality-time-covid-19-commitment-reducing-inequality-index-2020>.

The foundation of this Index is “with more equality of opportunity through better provision of public goods and services, governance and safety net, one can achieve a decrease in inequality over time”. Anytime one comes up with a new measure, a number of different sub-measurements and statistical calculations go into it. However, it is important to consider the possible utilities when analyzing a new index. To look at the questions on which the indices might throw new light. I have built a table to visually compare the 2018 - 2019 Per Capita Income (PCI) rankings<sup>7</sup> from the Economic Survey, the 2020-2021 SDG Index by NITI Aayog<sup>8</sup>, and the 2021 Access (In)Equality Index (AEI) by Centre for New Economics Studies.

Comparing across columns, the rankings are not identical across the indexes. There are six (6) high-performing states and nine (9) poorly performing states that rank roughly similarly. It would be important to look at the states where the rankings are distorted. Gujarat, *for example*, does reasonably well on income and growth rankings but drops when you consider SDG or AEI. Focusing on income or wealth equality would have been appropriate if there were no access, governance, or public goods issues since people would be able to buy services. The AEI has many measures and is, therefore, a more solid and rounded index. It would be valuable to have an understanding of how the AEI differs from the SDG rankings.

**Neelanjan Sircar:** For those of us that work with Indian data, we understand that this is an extraordinary undertaking. It’s not easy to find these indicators at disaggregate levels, or to compile them, clean them and work with them. I would like to split my comments into two broad categories - analyzing how the Index has been constructed and its aspirational utilizations. Looking into the Index will build a clearer understanding of what it’s picking up and how to analyze various aspects.

The Index has been created by normalizing the five (5) larger categories between 0-1 and putting them into the geometric mean concept. As you have correctly recognized, it should not be assumed that there is equal substitution between these categories. One thing that can be seen is that when you calculate the logarithm of the sum of the five (5) categories, it equals the average of the sum of the logarithms. On that scale, a State is being penalized more for a large deviation in one of the categories than if it was spread across the categories.

In a technical sense, health is likely to be related to education and social security. So, if a State does well in one of the categories, they are likely to do well in others. There is a certain degree of correlation between the sub-indices. There exist techniques to work through and correct for the correlation across the pillars. Instinctually, the results won’t differ dramatically. However, it is important to go through the exercise to better examine the index.

The data included in this Index is of course not easy to compile, however, is it possible to acquire it at a lower level of aggregation, *for example*, the district level. It is a huge contribution to produce a district-level data set around a key set of data. Calculating within-state variations would be interesting as many states have a fair amount of inequality internally. It would be wrong to look at the Index in terms of the causal interpretation of specific indicators. Instead, it would be interesting to understand how the pillars relate to an outcome of interest such as gender or caste representation. Use the measure of inequality as the predictor of certain outcomes that we care about. This would be a good way to demonstrate the value of inequality of opportunity, by correlating it with social outcomes we care about.

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<sup>7</sup> International Monetary Fund & World Bank (2020) “World GDP Per Capita Ranking”, *available at:* <https://statisticstimes.com/economy/world-gdp-capita-ranking.php>.

<sup>8</sup> NITI Aayog (2021) “SDG India Index & Dashboard 2020 – 2021”, India, *available at:* [https://www.niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/SDG\\_3.0\\_Final\\_04.03.2021\\_Web\\_Spreads.pdf](https://www.niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/SDG_3.0_Final_04.03.2021_Web_Spreads.pdf).

**Roshan Kishore:** I would like to congratulate the CNES Team on the fantastic work. If, I and my team had had the time, this is something we would have put together. It is a welcome trend for academics in universities to be creating reports and indices. The incentives are higher academically to put together a peer-reviewed article. There is a social responsibility involved in taking up these projects since they enable and initiate discussions and it is heartening to see it happen.

Equality in modern economics has always been seen as a binary to growth. Right now, India is in an era of zero (0) growth. The economy has contracted because of the pandemic and we don't know if it will recover. There is a section of economists in India with a considerable amount of public influence that has been arguing that irrespective of the moral predicament posed by inequality, as far as growth is concerned, inequality doesn't matter. They claim that the rich in India have the purchasing power and the capacity to demand and consume. Thus, we must focus on the rich and they will save the economy. For students, who are beginning to do economics and social sciences, these are very troubling times. The impressions formed about the public debate and the discipline, in general, will linger probably for our lifetime. It is very important thus that we're discussing this.

The Index goes beyond issues relating to inequality of consumption and income. There is very little data about these kinds of inequalities. We should have had data relating to consumption inequality but with the current government, we don't know when we'd be able to get that data. The report talks about "inequality of what" and "inequality of whom". It takes a hard-nosed approach to economic growth and development, which has dominated the current news cycle and public debates. Everyone is interested in growth and development right now.

I would say that these topics are very important. Take the example of Afghanistan. If you had the same level of income or consumption in Afghanistan before the Taliban took over and after, and your business is not affected by the political change, would your life have changed? The answer is yes. Justice, rights, gender equality, and similar factors have been affected by the Taliban taking over. If an individual's father could pay for private education, but they were a young woman, they still wouldn't be able to attend the university. These factors matter immensely, they are the basis of equality.

The data in the Index is comprehensive. Data, especially in the current time, is an important tool to have on your side. As a result of social media, everyone from the richest people to the poorest people, irrespective of their level of privilege, have very strong opinions. These are polarizing times. Sometimes, even with data and facts, it is difficult to argue. This is worsened by the fact that the credibility of public sector data has dropped.

India was one of the few underdeveloped countries that produced good data. We have not done justice to that legacy, as things get more difficult, it helps to have as much data as possible on our side. Additionally, it is beneficial for it to be officially recognized data because the government is becoming increasingly hostile to criticism.

As students and social scientists, it is important that we also recognize the limitations of data. *For example*, we say that this report measures equality in access to education, looking at a middle school or high school in the village. Consider two individuals - one has a high school right next to their house, and the other goes to a private school in Delhi. The report shows both of their access to education is equal, but that would not be accurate.

Some factors lend themselves to quantitative measures and others do not. There is a limit to which it is possible to quantify things. When using these quantitative measures, it is important to be mindful of what they measure, and what they cannot measure. I think it would be important to critically analyze the utility of each of the indicators in addressing the concerns the report attempts to. The indicators must be examined for their use, relevance, and pertinence.

My last comment is directed towards the authors. Let's consider, for example, access to the banking sectors, within financial equality and wellbeing. It is a fact that one of the biggest roots of bank nationalization in India was bringing banking to the doorsteps of the poor, especially in the villages. There's definitely an element of truth there, in that it gave people accounts. But, if we were to consider demonetization, we would have to ask whether the poor really had access to the formal banking system and whether it helped them.

One could make the argument that during the pandemic because the government had access to the information, they were able to quickly transfer money to the citizens' accounts. Yet, at the same time, the government is completely virtualizing these processes, an example of which would be the LPG transfer. LPG prices are the highest in the country and the government taxes are playing a big role, the government is discouraging subsidies. These indicators might sometimes work in the ways they are expected to, but they might also not. The question of whether the indicators are able to measure inequality at a particular point in time, is, I believe, pertinent here. Similarly, with the social security indicator. The report says that Delhi has the least social security in its villages. This does not mean that Delhi's villages are the worst off in the country.

I want to make two larger political points. When we talk about equality of justice and states like Bihar score low, it is important to recognize that politics can change things fundamentally. I grew up in Bihar in the '90s, which is a polarizing topic. People will be either extremely supportive or critical of Lalu Prasad Yadav as Chief Minister of the State. In Bihar prior to those ten (10) years, an upper-caste individual with sway, land ownership, or social status could get away with committing injustice or violence against a lower caste individual.

Theoretically, even if the state of the criminal justice system in Bihar has become worse because hirings have not been happening and state government offices haven't been done right, I would argue that for the lower caste person in the state access to justice has increased. I would recommend Jeffrey Witsoe's book called "Democracy against Development"<sup>9</sup>. Politics matter, even if these indicators might not be visible in the way we want to measure them. When Mayawati became Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, the fortunes of the Dalits changed. Now that Punjab has its first Dalit Chief Minister, the gains the Dalits are going to make no politician will dare to take back. In India, once a prolific social change has been made, especially in relation to the caste system, it cannot be undone without committing political suicide.

I was sent by my parents to study in a college in Delhi. Not because Bihar did not have colleges but because my parents knew that studying in a college in Delhi and studying in a college in Bihar differ in terms of the possible academic or career trajectories available. This process results in a significant drain on wealth, a significant part of the earnings and savings are being taken out of that state, which already has a smaller pool of savings. That money is coming to Delhi, which has colonies where thousands of students from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan states with worse education systems - reside.

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<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Witsoe, *Democracy Against Development: Lower-Caste Politics, and Political Modernity in Postcolonial India* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

For something like childbirth also, people travel from villages to cities. Every city in India has localities and ecosystems that thrive on private healthcare. Patients and attendants come into the city and spend money on shelter, food, etc. If this drain on wealth could be stopped, inequality would be reduced. The money would get spent in the original state and money when spent generates more money.

In our country, economic and social inequality is deeply linked as a result of the way we have structured our society for centuries. Apart from a few localized pockets, we have not seen successful social reforms in the country. The effect of which is visible on the ground and in the minds of the people. Inequality is definitely a problem as far as access is concerned, however, an equally big problem with accessing social services in India is the fact that the rich and socially privileged have withdrawn from availing these services.

The collapse of especially public health and education in India is directly tied to elite withdrawal. The public schools don't function well not simply because the teachers are incentivized to engage in absenteeism but also because there is no social pressure. When the elite are invested in public sector facilities, there are more successful pressures on the facility to function better. We will now enter into a phase where demands around extending reservation - without taking a side on that debate - will result in a social rupture in India. I come from a generation that saw Mandal one when I was just beginning to go to primary school, and Mandal two when I was entering university.

I now think we are going to see another one, even though we cannot predict when or how it will take place. When these ruptures widen, it is important to recognize the need to reverse the elite withdrawal. Unless the social and economic elite are encouraged to invest in public sector facilities, inequality cannot be significantly reduced. In order to reduce qualitative inequality, these larger themes need to be discussed.

**Roshan Kishore mentioned “elite withdrawal” and stated “the collapse of especially public health and education in India is directly tied to elite withdrawal”. Mr. Mohan took an opportunity to add a few more points to his arguments, and tried to draw a connection between the concept and the Centre for New Economics Studies’ recent findings.**

**Deepanshu Mohan:** Elite withdrawal is a topic we have been discussing for a while now. It reminds me of the work of Thomas Weber who says that there is some reasoning to the concept that when deep-rooted inequalities exacerbate, a certain class then starts to lose that sense of intersubjectivity of expressions and connections. Deepanshu Gupta talks about this intersubjectivity and the way in which a household in Delhi treats their domestic worker as against the experiences of domestic workers.

The Centre for New Economics Studies is actually doing a project cataloging the experiences of domestic workers in five cities including Bhopal, Lucknow, and Pune. The project was done right when the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was slowing, and was taking place at the same time as the AEI. Interesting parallels were formed through the study between women as employers and women as domestic workers and the dynamics between them. One group was perpetuating harm on the other and it was affecting the bargaining power of the latter. It would be interesting to look at the concept of elite withdrawal from a psychological perspective.

**Professor Ghatak, in the way you situate the AEI, how do you see it moving away from static measures and evolving into a more dynamic measure. One of the panelists in the first session brought up an interesting idea. He suggested looking parallelly at certain states and how they rank on issues such as democratization and participation in the**

**context of how they rank according to the AEI. How would we expand this to be able to draw insights into the political economy dimensions of the debate? Could you elaborate a little bit about how you see the Index going forward?**

**Maitreesh Ghatak:** You don't need to do anything to make the Index dynamic except to keep doing it. In order to have better data on mobility, rather than having NSS data published and then withdrawn, it would be better to have these reports published over time. Through these series of reports, we would be able to get an idea of the dynamics of the concept since changes in the indicators will get captured.

In another substantive point, if I was to take an abstract economic framework and collapse all private goods into food and all public goods into infrastructure and hypothesize on the levels of each that people have access to, and the disparity in access. That's why I was curious about how the rankings align with Per Capita Index (PCI) and SDG Index.

If a state has lots of income lying around then presumably, they do better on the other indicators. Therefore, it is important to filter out the general prosperity level in order to examine the inequality prevalent. *For example*, Saudi Arabia can afford to invest in a number of options because they have oil money, but this does not mean they have access equality. Similarly, where average levels of public goods and services are high, presumably some of those benefits are enjoyed by everybody. However, from the perspective of access equality, more analysis is necessary.

The same things are not accessible to a relatively affluent upper-caste male as to others. In order to show the additional value. As I was saying, through the table, the comparison shows the value of the Index. If the three rankings were aligned then it would boil down to the fact that while there are other measures, GDP *per capita* is a sufficient measure because the other measures align with it. I would say that the case needs to be made that these indexes aren't aligned but it allows for the study of additional inequality factors.

**The response of the authors of the “Access (In)equality Index” (Ms. Richa Sekhani, Ms. Advaita Singh and Ms. Latika Sharma) to the comments and queries raised by the panellists.**

**Richa Sekhani:** Professor Ghatak, I was really interested in the table you presented. I think it has given us a way forward to analyze the SDG report and how it is different from the AEI. Professor Sircar, I do want to say that we did try the exercise of using principal component analysis, and there is definitely merit in that approach. Mr. Kishore, I also come from Patna and I agree with the point you made. While making the presentation, we also considered the merits of examining the effect of politics and the stability of the government on the ranking. It is something we would want to analyze once 3 - 4 AEI reports have been published.

**Advaita Singh:** I was most interested in the point made by Mr. Kishore about justice. We have had a lot of internal deliberation around the indicator – examining how we could include factors such as social justice and the quality of justice. Unfortunately, we couldn't quantify those factors with the data we had available, and in the future, we will need to work on that pillar.

**Latika Sharma:** In an addition to previous comments, within the definition of access we looked at the supply side, which is how the government delivers various services. Examining the demand side, we believed would be possible within the next few versions of the index. These would capture a lot of the factors discussed by the panelists. *For example*, how citizens perceive the police is an

indicator of equality which is arrived at through an analysis of the demand side of access. Other political factors, which are more qualitative than quantitative, we weren't able to find sufficient data on. Going forward the AEI will attempt to include surveys and create more data at the state and district level, capturing more political and social factors.

**To conclude the panel discussion, the esteemed panelists were invited to offer final comments on the Access (In)Equality Index.**

**Roshan Kishore:** I think the demand side analysis is extremely important. The MGNREGA<sup>10</sup> scheme, where it works efficiently, has made a significant impact. The Right to Education, because of which one does not even have to examine primary education. These are achievements that have come through movements that are non-political. No MLA's have been able to be actively involved in these movements and still win elections. The question we need to ask is whether people are willing to politically encourage these demands? What is the political incentive to fight for these tedious demands?

**Neelanjan Sircar:** I mentioned the idea of thinking of social and political outcomes as something that needs to be correlated with the Index. As Roshan mentioned, there are issues relating to hierarchy and dignity which are general problems in India that are difficult to measure and can be conceptualized in many ways. Rather than thinking of them in terms of quantitative measures, think of a more abstract way to measure it and relate it back to the Index. Additionally, when you go forward and refine the Index through adding data, also make sure to go backward and make sure the same Index can be used over time.

**Maitreesh Ghatak:** I would say that while you can augment the report, you should also keep intact the core indices. That way you can build up the time series. In terms of the political and social dimensions, there is no harm in having supplements that you build on. The AEI is an important enterprise, and I hope it continues similar to the Human Development Index (HDI).

**Deepanshu Mohan:** Definitely, we want to augment the report and we will have an annual study published. Everything about the Index - including the raw data - has been made publicly available, and we want to continue to build on the AEI.

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<sup>10</sup> Employment Guarantee Act (n 5).

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