Research Article

The Complexity of Leaving No One Behind: Unmasking and Emphasizing Multiple and Intersectional Marginalisation in India

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The global efforts towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals are now turning to cover the under-served and excluded people and places. Such efforts are also targeted towards people who are most likely to be left behind and unreached because of economic, social, and political marginalisation. This calls for a wider exploration of intersecting inequalities emanating from the confluence of spatial, economic and identity-based forms of marginalisation. This paper explores the intersectionality of geography and socioeconomic status in India at subnational levels using the multidimensional poverty Index (MPI) as a proxy measure of poverty and development. The mapping exercise indicated that most of the low-performing districts are clustered around administrative borders to form pockets of poor development, neglect and deprivations. This spatial marginalisation intersects with economic, ecological and social marginalisation. Addressing such complex marginalisation requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges and addresses intersecting discrimination and disadvantage. By centring on social inclusion and equity in policy frameworks, embracing data-driven decision-making, and fostering collaborative partnerships, India can pave the way for sustainable and transformative development that truly leaves no one behind.

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) over the last two decades have provided the global impetus for improvement in a range of development indicators, including health and its determinants. The second principle of SDG – Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) – emphasizes eliminating poverty, ending discrimination and exclusions, and reducing inequalities and vulnerabilities for all. (Nations, 2017) The SDG 10 calls for reducing inequality within and between countries, and the promotion of the social, economic and political inclusion of all. At midway through the 2030 agenda, the recent focus on SDG is therefore on the last mile. The UNDP defined the last mile as "not only to the poorest of the poor, but also to the people, places and

small enterprise levels that are under-served and excluded, where development needs are greatest, and where resources are most scarce". (Pedrajas & Choritz, 2016) Accordingly, it calls for moving beyond assessing average and aggregate progress and disaggregating data to identify who, how, and why of exclusion, focusing on multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and inequalities. The framework for gathering evidence on LNOB highlights five factors that influence exclusion viz. Geography (isolation or risk of exclusion due to location), socioeconomic status (multidimensional poverty and access to public services and resources), vulnerability to shocks (conflicts, climate, and environmental), discrimination (based on assumed or subscribed identity or status), and governance (including laws, policies and institutions and participation therein). It is also argued that the people who are at the intersections of these multiple factors are most likely to be left behind and unreached because of economic, social, and political marginalisation. (UNSDG, 2022) Marginalisation is a process and a condition that causes individuals and groups to be excluded from the benefits of economic, social and political life in ways that can vary across time and place. (Dwivedi et al., 2007) When different drivers of marginalisation come together and overlap, they mutually reinforce each other, exacerbating the vulnerabilities of the marginalised. It is therefore important to understand poverty and marginalisation from perspectives of intersectionality and inequalities. (Crenshaw, 2013) The intersecting inequalities could be the result of the confluence of spatial, economic and identity-based forms of marginalisation. (Kabeer, 2016)

The intersectionality of space, society, state, market, and nature makes certain communities systematically marginalised as compared to the others who are at the centre of actions. For example, India's Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index (MPI) estimation indicated that five out of six multidimensionally poor people are from lower tribes or castes. Half of the scheduled tribe (ST) population and one-third of the Scheduled Caste (SC) population are multidimensionally poor, as compared to 28% overall incidence and 15% among general categories. (UNDP, 2021) Among the ST populations, for example, the indigenous tribal communities living in hilly terrains located at border areas of various Indian states could be worse off as compared to their mainland counterparts. The complex realities of multiple layers of deprivation, disadvantage and discrimination at these intersections of society remain hidden in the otherwise well-performing state and district aggregate parameters of health and development indicators. It is important to identify and address such intersecting inequalities and marginalisation for the last mile action to realise the cross-cutting ambition of the SDGs to 'leave no one behind' by 2030. (ISSC et al., 2016)More interdisciplinary research is needed to identify the root cause of such intersecting inequalities and multi-pronged transformative approaches to address them. This paper is a beginning in this direction to explore the intersectionality of geography and socioeconomic status in India at subnational levels.

We mapped the most deprived districts of major Indian states using a multidimensional poverty Index (MPI) as a proxy measure of poverty and development. (NITI Aayog, 2021) All Indian districts were divided into four quartiles based on MPI (High Development, High Medium Development low medium development, and low development). First, the 640 districts were broadly divided into four quartiles of 160 districts each. The MPI values corresponding to the 160th district was taken as cut-offs for the four ranges, and the districts with MPI value equal to the cut-off were included in the same range. This yielded 159 districts under the lowest quartile of poorest districts spread over 14 states. In addition to the classification at the national level, state-specific quartiles were also developed to understand subgroup differences and intra-state distribution of poverty and development. This yielded 139 low-performing districts spread across 29 states. The low-performing districts were then depicted on a map to understand spatial representation. These poor districts were then mapped to explore their geospatial locations, and their demographic characteristics were studied to explore the intersecting vulnerabilities of the population.

Revisiting the poorest in India

At a national level, the 159 low-development districts are distributed across 14 Indian states; however, two third of these districts are located in just four Indian states, i.e., Bihar (32), Uttar Pradesh (31), Madhya Pradesh (28), Jharkhand (17). Such skewed distribution hides the intrastate distribution of poor-performing districts. Therefore, the intrastate distribution of low-performing districts was justified. The remaining discussion in this paper is based on this classification of districts from different states, details of which are presented in Table 1 below.

Categories based on MPI	Districts	Proportion of all districts
High Development – Low MPI	177	28%
High Medium Development – Low Medium MPI	152	24%
Low medium development - High medium MPI	172	27%
Low development – High MPI	139	22%
Total	640	

Table 1. Classification of districts of India by MPI

Next, an interesting pattern was observed while mapping the low-performing districts. Most of the low-performing districts of different states are situated at the margins of respective states, i.e., they are away from the centre of action and power – i.e., state capital or metro cities that are economic hubs. As can be seen from Graph 1 below, most of the low-performing districts in different states are located at borders with other states or countries, and some others are adjacent to other low-performing districts within the states. Very few low-performing districts are mainland and landlocked districts with other good-performing districts.
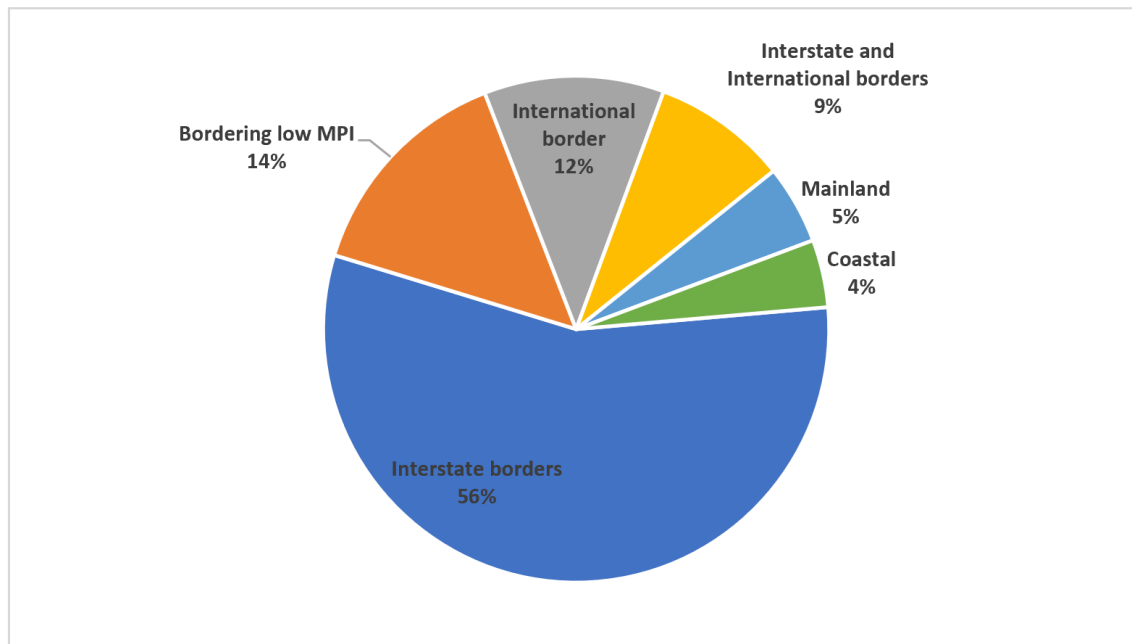
Graph 1. Geospatial distribution of high MPI districts in India (n=139)

Being away from the centre of action and power in the centre makes some places and people deprived of opportunities and developmental outcomes that are concentrated in mainland areas. This spatial marginalisation forms the basis of and intersects with other forms of marginalisation, as described below.

Low development clusters – intersecting marginalities

The mapping exercise also revealed that the adjoining high MPI districts that are clustered around certain state boundaries form pockets of poor development. This interstate cluster indicates that while governed by different states administratively, the place and people share neglect and deprivations alike. We identified seven such interstate clusters spread across the states in western, central, southern, eastern, and north-eastern India as well as the Indo-Nepal border. They are a) the western cluster (17 high MPI districts of

Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, b) the Central cluster (14 high MPI districts of Maharashtra, Telangana, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha), c) the eastern cluster (15 high MPI districts of Jharkhand, West Bengal and Bihar), d) north-central cluster (nine high MPI districts of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh), e) Northern cluster (nine high MPI districts of Uttar Pradesh and one high MPI district of Uttarakhand bordering Nepal), f) North-eastern cluster (18 high MPI districts of seven northeastern states sharing borders as well as with Bangladesh, China and Myanmar), and g) Southern cluster (eight high MPI districts bordering northern Karnataka, southern Telangana, and western Andhra Pradesh). This can be seen in Figure 1 below.
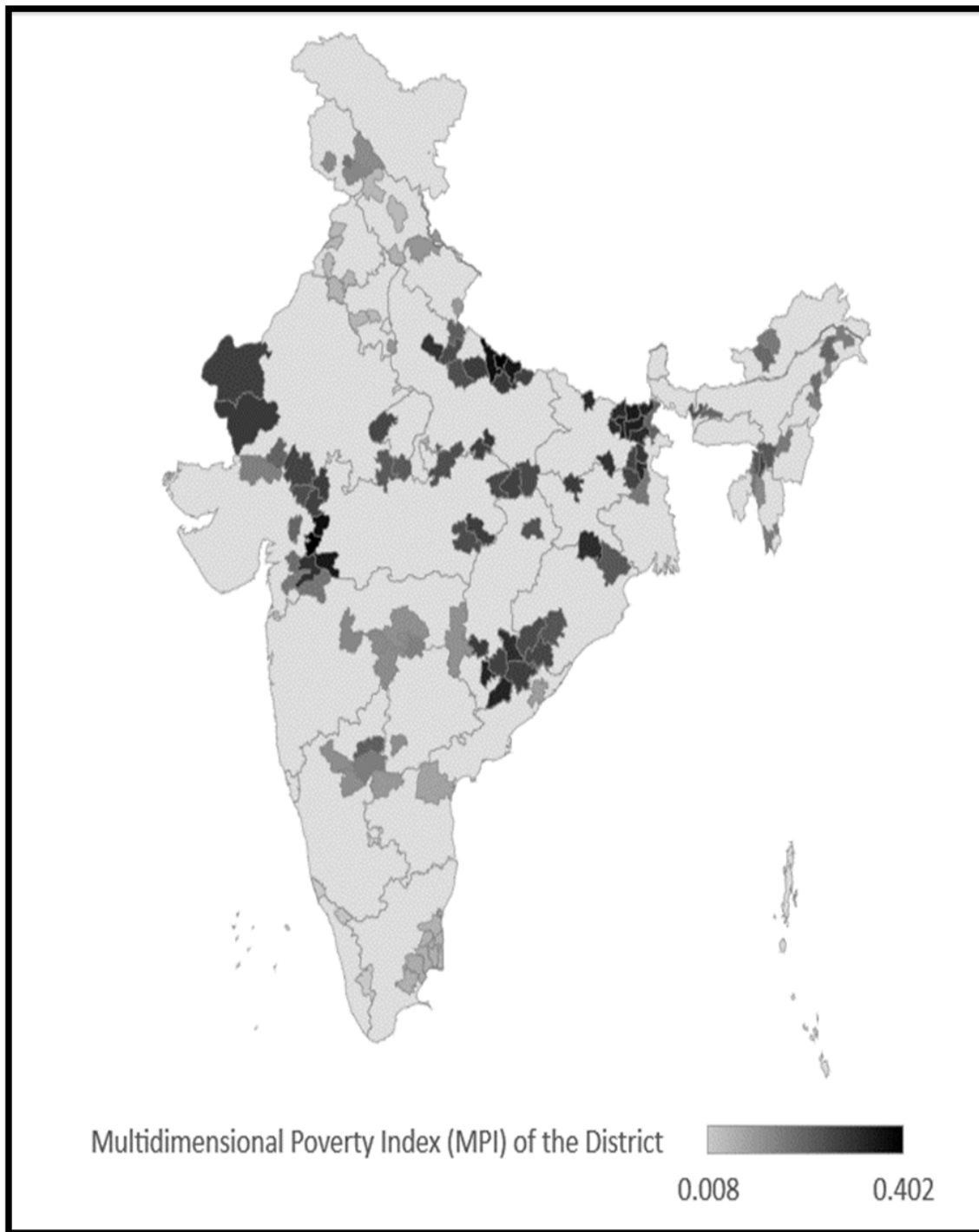
Figure 1. Indian districts with low development (measured as high multi-dimensional poverty Index)

All 32 districts in the high MPI quartile in states of the western cluster, except three, share interstate or international boundaries. The 17 poorest districts of Rajasthan (6), Gujarat (6), Madhya Pradesh (3), and Maharashtra (2) are at the interstate boundaries of these states. This cluster includes all high MPI districts

of Gujarat and Rajasthan (except Barmer and Jaisalmer, which share international boundaries), and some Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra districts. Most of these districts include hilly terrain from Aravalli, Satpura and Vindhya ranges. The remaining poor districts share boundaries with Uttar Pradesh on the northern side and Chhattisgarh on the eastern side to form the north-central cluster covering the Chambal belt region. The remaining high MPI districts of Maharashtra (4) form the 14-district central cluster with high MPI districts of Chhattisgarh (3), Telangana (1), and Odisha (6). These districts are spread in and around the hilly terrains of Dandakaranya and Bastar. The only remaining high MPI district of Odisha – Mayurbhanj – also shares an interstate boundary with another high MPI district of Jharkhand, i.e., Pashchimi Singbhum, which is situated in south Jharkhand, as against all other high MPI districts of the state that are located on north-eastern borders with Bihar and West Bengal to from the eastern cluster of fifteen high MPI districts, some of which also shares international borders with Nepal and Bangladesh. These districts also have hilly terrains of Rajmahal and Garhjat Hills. The high MPI districts of the northeastern state are located on hilly terrains, host wide ranges of tribal populations and share interstate and international boundaries. Similarly, many high MPI districts of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand are also clustered at the foothills of the Shivalik range and share international borders with Nepal. All high MPI districts of Karnataka are located on the northern side sharing interstate borders with similar poorest districts of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. While these districts do not have hilly terrains, they are among the tribal districts of these states. Additionally, from the other southern states, most of the high MPI districts of Tamil Nadu are coastal districts and three high MPI districts of Kerala share interstate boundaries in the hilly terrain of western Ghats and Annamalai hills.

As elaborated above, many of these marginalised border districts also share other peculiar characteristics viz. a large portion of these districts is hilly terrain and a large proportion of the population living in these areas belongs to vulnerable sections of society, i.e., scheduled tribes (ST) or scheduled castes (SC) categories.

As the place, space, and people of these districts face multiple and intersecting marginalities of geo-political, socio-economic, and ecological nature, they warrant special attention. While these populations often have different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, multiple marginalisations can intensify the cultural challenges faced by these communities. The districts at the margin also experience economic disparities due to limited infrastructure, lack of development initiatives, and limited access to resources. These economic inequalities are further exacerbated for subgroups when coupled with other forms of marginalisation such as caste, gender, or disability. Communities in these areas might face social and political exclusion and thus have limited representation and participation in decision-making processes and policymaking on issues that affect their lives. Lastly, the border areas often face security challenges, including cross-border conflicts, insurgency, or displacement due to political or territorial disputes. The

marginalised communities living in these areas are disproportionately affected by such conflicts. Such multiple marginalisations can impede access to basic services such as healthcare, education, sanitation, and infrastructure development in border districts. Limited availability and inadequate provision of these services can worsen the living conditions and well-being of marginalised communities.

Revisiting intersecting margins

The people who experience multiple marginalities are generally outside mainstream socio-economic and geographical systems, reside in sensitive socio-ecological systems and are dependent on government-regulated resources like forests and hills. They, therefore, continue to remain affected by skewed development opportunities and outcomes and are excluded economically, socially, geographically, and administratively. Being in disadvantaged positions for generations, these exclusions do not merely add to them; they overlap and reinforce each other and create a peculiar and severe form of arginalizedon. This kind of intersecting arginalizedon has made these communities invisible, unheard, and devoid of any influence over decision-making on issues that creates or alleviates the root cause of the multiple marginalisations. (Andreou, 2021) Addressing multiple marginalisations requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges and addresses the intersecting forms of discrimination and disadvantage. This includes promoting inclusive policies, empowering arginalized communities, investing in infrastructure and development initiatives, and ensuring equitable access to services and opportunities.

As India prepares to achieve SDG goals by reaching the last mile, it is imperative to revisit the means to this end as well. As the successful strategies for the mainland are inadequate for the people at the margins, a novel approach to the exploration of the web of the causes of their underdevelopment is needed to devise contextual, acceptable, and sustainable solutions. More research is needed to understand the who, why, and how of the multiple and intersecting margins at the last mile. The exploration of culture, context, views, and experiences of people in the last mile must be central to such research. Such efforts must involve moving away from studying the community as an instrument of research in the form of passive respondents to involving them as active elements in all stages including designing, executing and interpreting research results through participatory approaches. (Davison et al., 2021)

The socially diverse India is increasingly becoming a socially divided society with the mostarginalizedd facing systematic discrimination, despite rights-based approaches to various developmental interventions. While such groups are found throughout the country in urban and rural settings, certain clusters face stagnation because of their unique intersecting inequalities. The traditional administrative governance has proven inadequate to recognize and address their most-disadvantagedarginalizedd position. India needs to devise ways to see these places and people away from silos of district-state boundaries and socio-economic,

i.e., caste and poverty identities. These clusters need to be studied from an intersectionality perspective by using group-based approaches. India needs to set up an autonomous agency to explore and address such complex issues.

Conclusion

This commentary has shed light on the complex web of challenges of multiple and intersectional marginalisations experienced by multidimensionally poor communities, which are often overlooked when relying solely on average indicators of progress. To achieve meaningful and sustainable development, India's SDG agenda must adopt an inclusive approach that recognizes the diverse experiences and vulnerabilities of these communities. More research on the intersectional dimensions of marginalisation, such as gender, caste, ethnicity, geography, and socioeconomic status, is essential to effectively address the unique barriers and inequalities faced by different social groups. While striving towards the SDGs, data collection and analysis must go beyond averages so that deeper insights into the specific challenges faced by marginalised communities and targeted strategies that are sensitive to their distinct needs are developed. Such an effort calls for mutually respected collaboration and partnerships among government bodies, civil society organizations, academia, and marginalised communities themselves. By centring on social inclusion and equity in policy frameworks, embracing data-driven decision-making, and fostering collaborative partnerships, India can pave the way for sustainable and transformative development that truly leaves no one behind.

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Declarations