Gaps in opportunity sets available to rural youth vis a vis their urban counterparts

A synthesis

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1. **Introduction**

A popular perception is that significant proportion of households in rural areas who aspire for a “better” life for themselves or more pertinently for their children and can afford to do so, move their residence to urban areas. This perception is based on and tends to reinforce the sense that the set of opportunities for a better lifetime and inter-generational progression exist in urban areas. When this phenomenon repeats itself on a large, virtually all pervasive manner covering all regions and communities, two consequences follow. The first consequence is the increasing trend of urbanization. The second is an insidious creation division of the society in two societies. The motivation for this study came from reading portions of the book “One Country-Two societies” (Whyte, 2010)[[1]](#footnote-1); which focuses on inequality of opportunities in rural and urban China. Increasing urbanization; prompted presumably by the perception of sharp inequality in opportunities available to individuals; is a reality in India as well. We, therefore, wished to explore whether there, in fact, is a cleavage in opportunity sets available to rural youth vis a vis their urban counterparts.

Five fieldwork based studies were conducted in this exploration. These are two studies conducted in Mandla and in Rourkela by Minaj Singh, Londhe, 2018; Jaipal Singh 2018 and Katakee 2018. This paper is an attempt to make a synthesis of these studies. While preparing this synthesis, we have added our interpretation of what constitute “opportunities” as well as what tends to shape these opportunities.

1. **Conceptualising opportunities**

Conceptualizing rural and urban:

Census of India defines a habitation as urban if it has a population of over 5000 persons and population density of over 400 persons per square kilometre and if 75% of the male workers there are engaged in non-agricultural occupations. (Census of India, 2011). Rural is the residual category. There is an undeniable element of confusing fuzziness here. For instance, in most of the districts in Eastern UP and North Bihar, the first two criteria would be met but not the third. And yet they are considered the epitome of rurality.

On the other hand, spaced out and elite Lavasa would perhaps not meet the first two criteria, and yet it is an extension of urban luxury! This fuzziness is a continuation of the way “rural” is defined the world over. Hence for our purpose suffice it to say that the rural locations were considered to be what we normally in common parlance take to be villages and urban areas as what we normally take to be towns; usually governed by Nagar Panchayat or above. We also note that the attributes of vibrancy and dynamism differ widely across towns and urban habitations just as the extent of “rurality” differs across villages.

Life progression a resultant of Aspiration + opportunities + efforts

Life progression is a summative movement from one type of life situation to another. A superior life situation typically comprises more of the following: higher disposable income, better living conditions, easier access amenities such as educational institutions, healthcare facilities, electricity supply, these days better data connectivity, drinking water and sanitation, means of communication and a cultural ethos that permits articulation, participation and greater personal fulfilment. Economists have tended to assume income by itself as being a strong indicator of life situation as also a strong influence on other parameters we have suggested above. In consequence, significant scholarly literature on measuring levels of income inequalities as well as relationship between income inequalities and economic growth has ensued (e.g. Kuznet, 1955) We believe that individuals make complex trade-offs between these attributes and there is no easy and universally acceptable definition of superior life situation; income being a somewhat crude though pertinent indicator. Culture tends to influence such trade-offs. The broad term culture has a complex influence on economic development: neither can its influence be completely negated or ignored nor can its influence be considered peremptorily deterministic. (Amartya Sen; 2004).

For an individual to make a progression to a superior life situation, she must aspire to do so, must have relevant opportunities to make the transition and also make needed efforts to make use of these opportunities. Several factors tend to shape aspirations, opportunities and efforts. Appadurai (2004) states that culture influences what he calls “capacity to aspire”. This capacity to aspire is not uniformly distributed, but according to Appadurai, the better off seem to have a greater capacity to aspire. The poor and the marginalized have a streak of both: meek if ironic resignation to extant social norms as well as a strong desire to shake off the shackles which these very norms impose on them.

We interpret this to greater granularity. The extent to which individuals in different households aspire depends both on their parents’ ambition as well as the strength of the socialization process that tends to define their identity even for themselves. When “jajmani” or “bara balutdari” social systems ruled villages and continuation of hereditary occupation was a strong social norm, an individual had neither the aspiration nor the social sanction to aspire for anything else. Even in this day India, powerful local elites of a village may tend to influence what a Dalit girl “ought to” do in her life and may tend to enforce their views on the households. Some of the key factors influencing these three facets of aspirations, efforts and opportunities are:

* income of the household,
* parental background as well as the extent of their awareness, ambition and ideology;
* social customs that influence socialization within the family and form norms of behaviour;
* location in terms of proximity or remoteness from “poles of opportunities”;
* means of communication and
* finally social network and presence of a facilitative ethos.

Remoteness, the presence of institutional infrastructure, the presence of means of communication and their costs all together define the set of opportunities that exist around an individual. While social customs, her identity and parental income, awareness, ambition and ideology tend to influence which among these opportunities she will access. Neither aspirations by themselves nor the combination of aspiration and opportunities can result in life progression. Efforts to reap full benefit of opportunities and to push the boundaries to expand the opportunity set are the third dimension. Examples of rural individuals breaking the typically presumed glass ceilings and making stellar achievements like Late President Narayanan exist; but these exceptions shone in the backdrop of the dark reality to be inferred by our narration above and lived in by millions.

Whether viewed only in terms only of income or regarding the bundle of goods and services to be considered as forming the set of opportunities, the presence of inequality across individuals within one locale and for communities across locales is a matter of reality. There is much populist justification for creating “equality of opportunity” across individuals. So dominant is this strand of thinking in global social policy; broadly to be termed as policies for inclusion; that it would practically be blasphemous to challenge it. Having made a distinction between morally justifiable and morally reprehensible inequalities, there is a significant weight of opinion that says that a measure of inequality is necessary to spur individual effort ( Roemer and Trannoy, 2013). There is something to be said for the view that while a drive towards excellence potentially leads to changing the trajectory of national development, blind force of inclusion could lead to sharing mediocrity and stagnation.

In the studies synthesized here, no view about the desirability of or desirable levels of differences in opportunities has been taken. The effort is in the main to look at the current situation on differences in opportunities. Aside from “initial wealth situation”; which admittedly differs in a big way across individuals as well as across groups in different locales; education is considered to be a key instrumental factor facilitating life progression both for an individual in her own life as also for inter-generational progression. Sen views human development as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy, expressed as their capabilities in doing so (Sen, 1999). In this latter approach, real poverty is identified not only as a deprivation of income but also as a deprivation of capability. Education is referred to as foundational to other capabilities by providing access to education and promoting a concrete set of basic learning outcomes, such as the abilities to read and write. However, from the point of view of the Capability Approach, one can also argue that learning that stops at the level of providing only basic reading and writing skills would be insufficient to advance sustainable development and fighting poverty in its full sense, *i.e.* addressing capability poverty (Bakhshi *et al.* 2003, Bakhshi *et al.* 2004,). Education opens up gates to mobility as also creates the capacity to accept and perform in occupations different from parental occupations. Asadullah and Yalonetzky (2010) have looked at changes in educational inequalities across time and states at the macro-level in India. They took States of the Union as units of comparison and report that Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh have shown a worsening trend in inequality of educational opportunities among its citizens while Kerala has done very well in reducing these. Common sense leads us to believe that individuals in rural areas will face an environment of difficulties and would have fewer opportunities compared to those in urban areas. It is this belief that forms the basic hypothesis for the group of studies done and synthesized here.

III Method, materials and inferences

The primary method of investigation was to survey comparable number of youth (age group 18-25 years) drawn from chosen villages as well as from a proximate urban centre. The initial study to test out the schedule of interviews and method was done with the help of students of IIM Udaipur in Rajasthan study. In each of the other 5 studies (done by Jaipal Singh in Rajasthan Minaj Singh in Mandla, by her in Odisha, by Katakee in Assam and by Londhe in Telangana); the youth interviewed were drawn from essentially the same social milieu. The only or at least the main difference, therefore, was their location. Drawing youth from the same community / social milieu was thus expected to control for the all-pervading influence of culture allowing comparison of opportunity sets across the parameter of rural-urban divide. Attention was focused on educational opportunities. The location of the school, the “quality” of the school in terms of institutional ownership / governance; efforts made by teachers and guidance received from them, access to other facilities such as sports, extra-curricular activities, sources of information about career choices and career counselling, tuition classes for improving academic performance, coaching classes for preparing for competitive examination all together were seen to define the opportunity set available to a child and a young person. Three possible situations can arise: the first is where a facility is not available within the village or a distance reachable by the child. The second is where the facility in question is available, but for reasons of low income or family circumstance, the child /youth was unable to access and exploit the opportunity. The third situation is the happy one where facilities are available and the child/youth was able to avail it. Questions related to these diverse aspects are connected with education of the youth. Data were also obtained on social status and about education, occupation and income status of the parents of the focal youth. Comparisons about the level of educational attainment and about the availability of opportunity sets were made. During the analysis the rural, as well as urban samples, were partitioned in three strata each. The strata were defined using parental education, parental occupation and income.

Inferences from data:

1. Sample characterization: Sample was generally dominated by candidates from the OBC and SC communities. Muslim students were represented well in rural Rajasthan and urban Assam and Telangana while absent in Mandla, MP; which had a much larger proportion of students from ST communities. All rural respondents came dominantly from farm households. Rural as well as urban household incomes were the highest in Telangana and lowest in MP. The proportion of married respondents was high in Rajasthan and MP. Women formed a significant proportion of respondents in Mandla, Assam and Telangana while males dominated the sample in Rajasthan due to social issues.
2. Average educational attainment and comment on the relationship with livelihoods

Educational attainment of respondents was high in Telangana, Rajasthan and rural Assam ( a majority of respondents having studied beyond HSLC) land in these locales “rural” location did not introduce a significant difference in educational attainment. In MP, there was a sharp difference, and urban respondents showed higher educational attainment compared to rural youth.

1. Parental education: In general parental education levels were low; a majority below matriculation levels. 50% and more respondents in rural areas of all the four states reported that the parents were illiterate. However, in none of the places, this appeared to influence educational attainment of respondents significantly.
2. Parental occupation

Farming and irregular wage employment were dominant parental occupations of rural respondents while urban respondents reported a diversified parental occupation including salaried jobs, regular wage work and small self -owned and managed enterprises.

1. Type of school attended

Over 60% respondents studied in Government schools; with Telangana reporting the highest proportion of respondents studying in private institutions. In Rajasthan, the respondents themselves opined about Government schools having lower “quality” of education. MP and Assam respondents did not have any complaints about the teacher attendance and effort. More urban respondents reported having studied in private institutions.

1. Distance to school/college

Over 50% rural respondents and Telangana respondents having studied in private institutions reported distances above 5 km for secondary and high school level education. Education beyond matriculation required journeys longer than 10 km for most rural respondents while the reported distance to these was much smaller for urban respondents.

1. Discontinuity in schooling and causes

A significant number of those rural respondents who could not complete matriculation or could not go beyond matriculation reported issues connected with the family. Parents nudging them to start earning was the reason for stopping studies beyond matriculation while the need to look after younger siblings, helping parents in their work, financial problems the other reasons reported for stopping studies before matriculation. Most Telangana respondents stated that they would not want to study beyond matriculation if they got a job! There was a Special Economic Zone close to the site of the rural survey in Telangana and youth easily got a job after 10th. For the respondents, the purpose of Education was to get a job, and for that if they had to, they went up to graduation. Rural respondents in MP appeared to show a remarkably casual attitude as several students discontinued for reasons which were not as serious. One even reported having discontinued because in the previous class he forgot there was an examination, dropped out and then never felt like resuming!

1. Marital status and Age at marriage

A higher proportion of all respondents in Rajasthan as well as urban respondents in Assam reported their being married. This happened for both for women and men and was ascribed to the social customs there. Several women reported that marriage and consequent responsibilities were reasons that came in the way of continuing or taking up higher education.

1. Perceived regularity of teachers

MP and Assam respondents said there was in general no issue regarding attendance of teachers. Rajasthan respondents reported issues with attendance and diligence of teachers in Government schools. The difficulty was about having teachers and educational institutions for science and commerce stream and that caused a majority to take arts subjects.

1. Availability of tuition classes

Barring Telangana respondents, other respondents did not at all report availability of tuition or coaching classes. Rural respondents, in general, had to manage on their own. In particular, awareness or access to assistance for preparing for competitive examination was much lower in rural respondents in all states except Telangana. In Telangana too, the access was lower than that reported by the urban respondents.

1. Availability of role models, career guidance and counselling and an ethos of higher attainment: This was a huge missing factor in rural areas of Rajasthan and rural areas of MP. Getting a Government job was the ultimate ambition of the rural and urban children in Rajasthan, Assam and MP and no one reported having ambitions or desire to follow some known role model. Career counselling was also in general missing for the rural respondents.
2. Libraries: The presence, access, awareness and a felt need for libraries was in general simply non-existent in rural respondents as well as urban respondents in Rajasthan, Assam and MP. Telangana urban respondents showed distinctly superior access to books, magazines and newspapers compared to their rural counterparts.
3. Availability of sports facilities; facilities and for extra-curricular activities: Formal sports facilities such as for football were present to an extent in Assam but not reported in other states. Facilities for other extra-curricular activities were in general not listed by rural respondents.

Overall inferences

Rural respondents reported a relatively poorer set of opportunities in Rajasthan and MP. This was regarding distance to schools, poorer parental awareness, income and education and in case of Rajasthan inferior diligence of teachers. Assam rural respondents reported superior educational attainments and the difference could perhaps be ascribed to differences in communities represented: urban sample had a much higher representation of Muslims. Assam did not report any gap in educational opportunities. In Telangana too the educational opportunities were not very different in rural area sample as compared to urban counterparts. Parental education level had virtually no influence on educational attainment of children in our respondents from either in rural or urban areas. A majority of youth reported studying in Government schools except in Telangana where a significant number of respondents travelled larger distances but preferred going to private institutions. It may be noted that income levels for both rural and urban households in the sample were far higher in Telangana while they were the lowest in MP. Family pressures, difficulties and expectations for early work participation were reported as reasons for discontinuing education in rural areas. In Rajasthan alone, there was a positive and significant correlation between educational level and income of working respondents. Assam and Telangana respondents appeared to focus/aspire for / participate more on skill oriented short-term training programs as they perceived these to open career opportunities. Surprisingly in Telangana, participation in such programs was only a shade higher in urban areas, even though the facilities for such were only in urban centres.

We infer that within the same broad geographic locale there are some but not very large gaps in the opportunity gaps experienced by youth in rural areas and the youth in proximate urban centres.

IV Transitions across strata

The sample of respondents was divided in three strata using scores on education and occupation. The High stratum comprised respondents whose parents were (relatively) better educated, whose income was (relatively) high and whose earnings were (relatively) more regular or certain. The Low stratum comprised the respondents whose parents exhibited the opposite attributes etc. The respondents were also classified using the same indicators about themselves. The first classification was based on the attributes about parents of the respondents and the second to respondents themselves. This then gave a way of seeing inter-generational mobility across strata. By Using historical frequencies, probabilities of transiting from low stratum to medium or to high and vice versa were estimated. The exercises was done separately for rural and urban samples. Should sheer fact of urban locations indicate higher opportunities, then one would expect the probability of upwards transition to be higher for urban sample. Such a difference, though in the right direction, was too small to confirm the above hypothesis.

Thus we infer that not only do comparisons of the opportunity set as a nominal category not yield a conclusion of high difference between rural and areas and proximate urban centres; we can not assert that urban location makes inter-generational upward mobility more likely.

V Discussion

There is a popular belief that both circular and near permanent migration from rural areas towards urban areas, and thus the whole process of urbanization, is propelled by the differences in opportunities in rural and in urban areas. Our is that the opportunity sets faced by individuals in rural areas do not differ very widely from the opportunity sets available in proximate urban. We further find that chances of inter-generational mobility also do not differ much when compared between rural and urban areas. Three possible factors lead to these unexpected findings..

* Weak differential enablers and larger than presumed role of culture: If the enabling factors of education, career guidance, presence of role models etc. were present to a much larger extent in urban centres compared to the surrounding rural areas, then one would see a larger effect in terms of educational attainment between rural brethren and their urban counterpart. These enablers are environmental rather than organizational. The sheer presence of better schools or colleges closer to the location of residence is a physical, organizational facet. We note that the above is a facilitative factor which does not need organizational presence so significantly. We had argued that aspects of identity, perception about “what is good enough for me”, aspirations and the effective efforts which an individual puts in are all possibly influenced by the cultural ethos in which an individual lives. It appears by implication that any urban centre and the villages around it, the same socio-cultural ethos pervades. Thus aspirations, as well as efforts, are similarly affected in urban and rural areas reducing the demand for factors which define opportunities.
* Transport and communication facilities have reduced material differences

One simple leveller is the access to affordable and convenient transport and communication infrastructure. When such a communication network is present, distance does not pose an insurmountable challenge and the individuals seem to show similar access to opportunities.

* Weak incentives to education due to reducing wage differentials in occupations: The third facet why average educational attainment may not show big differences is that there are fewer incentives to educational attainment than one conjectures. This may happen because of weak wage differential between occupations which can be taken with lower education and occupations which require better education. Considering that educational streams of science and commerce both were more difficult to access in rural areas and hence the children had to opt for arts education, higher education perhaps does not add to employability much and hence youth experience little or no incentive to take to higher education whether in rural areas or proximate urban centres.

Conclusion

The field studies indicate that the gaps between opportunity set available to youth in rural areas and those available to youth in urban areas are not remarkably wide. The gaps appear wide in relatively under-developed areas such as Mandla in MP than in a better-developed locale such as Hyderabad in Telangana. We infer that there is not too much difference between the so-called rural and the so called urban in proximate geographies primarily because of continuation of the same cultural ethos in both the areas, weakness of the differential enablers and significant improvement in transport and communication networks which reduces the effective differences as experienced by rural youth. It is, however, important to note that this conclusion of “not very wide gaps in opportunities” is valid for rural and urban areas contiguous to each other. The studies do not throw any data to disprove the belief that opportunity sets available to highly developed urban centres such as the metro-cities are vastly different from those available in remote and far flung rural areas in say the Central Indian tribal heartlands.

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1. Our efforts to read the full book were thwarted by the fact that the publisher Harvard University Press informed us that this book is not for sale to India and returned our payment after first we placed the order. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)