

Development without Dignity: Decoding the Link between Economic Growth and Gender Based Violence with Special Reference to Sexual Crime in India

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Abstract: *This study undertakes a critical examination of the trends in reported rape incidence in India from 2001 to 2020 and specifically seeks to explore how the incidence of rape victims varies across different Indian states and Union Territories (UTs), and how these variations may be associated with a range of development indicators namely literacy rate, sex ratio, per capita income, the ratio of urban to total population and population density. By mapping these relationships, the study aims to identify broader socio-economic patterns and structural factors that may underlie or influence the prevalence of sexual violence in different regions of the country. The findings reveal a consistent and disturbing upward trend in reported rape cases in India over the past two globalisation decades. The most vulnerable and consistently affected cohorts are women aged 19-30 years and 31-50 years indicating young women who are typically at the forefront of mobility, visibility and social engagement are disproportionately affected. Furthermore, in the vast majority of cases; ranging between 84.00 per cent to 98.00 per cent offenders were known to their victims include close family members, relatives, neighbours and other known persons. A regional analysis of rape victimization across Indian states reveals a pronounced concentration of cases in just four states i.e., Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan with approximately 50 per cent and 40 per cent of the nation's total reported rape victims, in both opening and closing of the study period (2001 and 2020, respectively). Among the Union Territories, Delhi exhibited the highest incidence of reported rape cases throughout the entire study period, often exceeding that of many full-fledged states. Of the five development variables analysed, four i.e., literacy rate, urbanisation, per capita income, and density of population exhibit an inverse correlation with rape incidence suggesting that higher levels of socio economic development are generally associated with lower rates of sexual violence and vice versa. States and UTs with better performance on growth indicators tend to report fewer rape cases emphasising the protective role of inclusive and equitable growth in India. However, a marginally positive correlation with sex ratio highlights that numerical gender balance alone is insufficient to curb violence without addressing underlying social attitudes and power structures. The findings highlight the urgent need for inclusive, gender based equity drive development policies coupled with robust legal enforcement and social reform. Sustained efforts by both central and state governments are imperative not only to ensure that the fruits of development reach the most marginalized regions but also to transform societal attitudes, enhance women's safety and ultimately eradicate this deeply entrenched form of violence. The inter-regional disparities highlight the urgent need for a differentiated policy approach that accounts for the socio-cultural and institutional variations influencing gender-based violence across India. Lastly, addressing gender based violence necessitates the active engagement of men as ending violence against women must become a collective responsibility.*

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the existence of numerous special legislations aimed at protecting women, the incidence of rape in India continues to rise at an alarming rate. This upward trend persists even though the official statistics capture only a fraction of the actual cases. According to estimates by the Marie Stopes Institute in Delhi, approximately 2 million women are raped in India each year. However, only one in every twenty

cases is reported to the police. Of those reported, merely 3 out of every 100 rapists are convicted and imprisoned, and only around half of the cases are adequately followed up, with proper arrests and prosecution (Sharma, 2009).

The vast under-reporting of rape is driven by a complex web of societal, cultural and psychological factors. Victims often remain silent due to shame, fear and the intense social stigma attached to sexual

assault. Concerns about damage to one's marital prospects, the taboo of discussing sexual violence in public and fear of media sensationalism discourage many women from seeking justice. In a predominantly conservative society like India, survivors are frequently blamed for the assault rather than the offenders. Families, particularly parents, may avoid pursuing legal action in an attempt to protect the victim's future, as rape is often perceived as a permanent stain on a woman's dignity and honour.

Moreover, victims are sometimes threatened by the perpetrators to remain silent. In some tribal, backward or underdeveloped communities, sexual violence is either trivialized or dealt with informally within the community itself without legal recourse. In rural and urban India alike, rape cases often gain visibility when they are entangled in broader caste conflicts, family feuds or political rivalries and are brought to public attention through media or social media platforms.

Many incidences are not reported because of the shame, fear, social stigma and cultural norms associated with being a victim, fear of losing marriage opportunities, revealing lost virginity, reluctant to talk about a sexual act in public, shuns publicity being given by the media and being India a largely conservative society which often blames the victim not her attackers. Alongside, parents do not want to stress the issue to the extreme for the future of the victim as rape is regarded as a blot on woman's dignity. In certain cases victim may threatens by the offender against disclose the issue whereas in certain societies (Tribal/ Backward/Under developed), such crimes are either not viewed with concern or resolve by, within the members of community. In case of Indian villages and cities, only those rape cases reported which becomes part of a larger caste battle, family feud or political game and publicised by media/social media whereas a vast number of rape cases continue to go unnoticed and unaddressed.

The persistently high rates of rape and gender based violence reflect deep rooted structural inequalities and the continued exploitation of women who are still widely viewed as subordinate or vulnerable. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the incidence of rape in India and to explore its relationship with selected socio-economic variables associated with the country's growth and development.

Objectives

The principal aim of this study is to conduct a comprehensive and systematic examination of the

trends in reported rape cases in India over a defined period. Specifically, the study seeks to analyse how the incidence of rape victims varies across different Indian states and Union Territories (UTs), and how these variations may be associated with a range of socio-economic factors namely literacy rate, sex ratio, per capita income, the ratio of urban to total population and population density. By mapping these relationships, the study aims to identify broader socio-economic patterns and structural factors that may underlie or influence the prevalence of sexual violence in different regions of the country. This, in turn, can contribute to more informed policy discourse and targeted intervention strategies aimed at prevention, legal reform and victim support.

Data Base and Methodology

The present study which spans the period from 2001 to 2020, is based entirely on secondary data sources. Information on the incidence of rape, including the age-wise and offender relationship wise distribution of victims at the all-India level, has been compiled from various annual reports published by the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) for the years 2001 to 2020.

To explore the relationship between rape incidence and selected indicators of economic growth and social development namely literacy rate, sex ratio, per capita income, the ratio of urban population and population density, correlation analysis has been employed. This analysis is conducted for two distinct census years, 2001 and 2011, using statistical data obtained from Census of India for the respective years. It is important to note that this study considers the number of reported rape victims rather than the number of reported rape cases as the primary unit of analysis. This distinction was made because, in several States and Union Territories of India, a single reported rape case may involve more than one victim. Using data related to the victim count allows for a more accurate representation of the extent of sexual violence.

Limitations of the study

Although this study undertakes a macro level analysis of rape incidence across India, its scope is inherently limited to officially reported cases. As previously discussed, a significant proportion of rape incidents remain unreported and unregistered due to prevailing socio-cultural taboos, stigma and systemic barriers faced by survivors. This underreporting poses a constraint on the generalizability of the study's findings.

Furthermore, while existing literature on sexual exploitation and crimes against women

highlights a complex interplay of political, social, economic, behavioural and psychological factors contributing to rape, the present analysis is confined to variables that are quantifiable and for which reliable data is available. Although the study acknowledges the relevance of socio-cultural and psychological dimensions, these aspects have been excluded from the statistical analysis due to the lack of standardized measurable indicators.

Additionally, the absence of updated data from Census of India 2021 presents another methodological limitation. Consequently, the statistical correlations and inferences drawn in the study are based solely on demographic and socio-economic data from the Census of India 2001 and 2011.

Review of Literature

Despite the gravity and prevalence of sexual violence in India, the body of quantitative research available on the subject remains conspicuously limited. This scarcity, however, makes it all more crucial to engage critically with the existing literature, as it offers foundational insights into the multifaceted dimensions of sexual violence in the country. The voices within these studies, though few, echo the harrowing realities faced by women across various strata of Indian society.

Taljit and Sukhjit (2011), in their seminal paper "Sexual harassment of women in public sector" draw attention to the pervasive experiences of sexual harassment faced by women, particularly in India's healthcare sector. Their findings underscore that such violations have become normalized to an alarming degree, constituting not only workplace misconduct but also a severe breach of fundamental human rights for nearly half the nation's population. Despite the landmark Vishaka judgement by the Supreme Court of India in 1997, which laid down legally binding guidelines to prevent sexual harassment at the workplace, the authors argue that implementation remains grossly inadequate. This gap between law and practice continues to endanger both female employees and service recipients, especially in the health sector. They further highlight that protracted delay in the legislative process, noting that a comprehensive bill addressing the issue has been pending parliamentary approval since 2005. The authors strongly advocate for stringent government mandates supported by robust legal mechanism, including regulation of working hours and strict penalties for offenders of sexual exploitation.

In another significant contribution, Verma and Dwivedi explore the complex terrain of gender-

based violence in Uttar Pradesh in their study titled "Violence against women in Uttar Pradesh; claims and conflicts." Drawing from a range of case studies, they examine incidents of gang rape, abduction, sexual harassment, wife beating and other forms of abuse. Their analysis categorises violence into criminal (e.g., rape and abduction), domestic (e.g., dowry-related torture and maltreatment of widows), and social (e.g., female foeticide and dowry harassment), each of which leaves lasting physical and psychological scars on women. Their research highlights how systematic patriarchy, impunity and social stigma contribute to a vicious cycle of abuse that deteriorates the mental and physical health of women.

GurmeetMaan (2012), in his critical article "What media can do and what they cannot do vis a vis mainstreaming female gender dignity" addresses the role of media in shaping public perception of women. He critiques mainstream media for its reductionist portrayal of women, emphasizing sensationalism and sexual objectification over meaningful representation. Women are often depicted as victims of crime, passive entities embroiled in scandals, or as objects in advertisements that exploit their bodies to sell products ranging from consumables to automobiles. Such portrayals not only trivialize their lived experiences but also reinforce harmful stereotypes. Maan posits that meaningful change requires active public engagement- viewers must reject demeaning depictions and demand dignified, multifaceted representations of women in media.

Harpal Khehra(2012), in her comprehensive study "Gender equality; legal protection to women against sexual harassment at workplace" delves into the legal framework governing sexual harassment in India. She critiques the inadequacy of existing laws such as the Indian Penal Code, Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act and Indecent Representation of women (Prohibition) Act, in providing specific and effective protections for women in the workplace. Khehra endorses the implementation of the Protection of Women against Sexual Harassment at workplace Bill 2012, which she considers a landmark step forward. The Bill encompasses a wide ranging definition of the workplace and employee, includes provisions for the unorganized sector and outlines a comprehensive complaints and resolution mechanism. It introduces timely investigation protocols, interim relief measures, employer and district level responsibilities, penalties for non-compliance, safeguards against malicious complaints,

and confidentially clauses, forming an integrated framework for justice.

Lastly, Sheveta Sehgal (2012), in her paper entitled "Impact of globalisation on women in India" explores the paradoxical outcomes of globalisation on women's socio-economic status. While globalisation has opened up employment opportunities, Sehgal argues that it has simultaneously exposed women to new vulnerabilities. She notes that the global demand for cheap, exploitable labour has commoditised women's bodies, leading to a surge in human trafficking, sexual exploitation and gender based violence, often perpetrated by transnational crime syndicates through both physical and digital channels. The author emphasises that many women, trapped in environments marked by constant fear, turn to substance abuse as a coping mechanism to deal with daily trauma. Despite access to employment, their agency remains limited, with little scope to voice opposition or organise against exploitation.

In sum, the reviewed literature paints a grim yet vital picture of the challenges facing women in contemporary India- whether within the workplace, the household, the media, or the broader socio-economic environment shaped by globalisation. These studies collectively call for an urgent and comprehensive approach to addressing sexual violence, including legal reform, institutional accountability, cultural transformation and public activism.

Results and Discussion

A critical examination of longitudinal crime statistics underscores a deeply unsettling trend. The incidence of rape in India has witnessed a sharp and consistent escalation over the past two decades. In 2020 alone, 28046 rape cases were officially reported, marking a significant increase from 22172 cases in 2010 and 16075 cases in 2001. This upward pattern reflects not only a growing threat to women's safety but also a systematic failure in addressing gender-based violence. A substantial majority of these cases i.e., 97.40 per cent in 2001, 97.43 per cent in 2010 and 95.28 per cent in 2020 originated from the states, with the Union Territories accounting for a relatively smaller yet gradually increasing share (2.60 per cent, 2.57 per cent and 4.70 per cent respectively). Notably, the number of rape victims has consistently surpassed the number of reported cases, indicating that several incidents involve multiple victims. In 2020, the total number of rape victims reached 28153 compared to 22193 in 2010 and 16078 in 2001. The calculated compound annual growth rate of 8.99 per

cent over this period is alarming and signifies not only the intensification of the crime but also the urgent need for more robust preventive and protective frameworks. This trend calls into question the effectiveness of existing legal, social, and institutional mechanism designed to safeguard women's rights and security.

An in-depth analysis of rape incidence reveals that age is not merely a demographic detail but a defining factor in understanding patterns of vulnerability of victimization. When examining the age-wise distribution of rape victims, it becomes evident that the most vulnerable and consistently affected cohorts are women aged 19-30 years and 31-50 years. Across the two decade span from 2001 to 2020, the majority of reported rape victims fell within the 19-30 age group followed by the 31-50 age groups, with the exception of a minor deviation observed in 2001. In contrast, women aged 50 and above consistently recorded the lowest number of victims, suggesting a strong age-based disparity in exposure of sexual violence. This trend is not incidental; it is deep rooted in the socio-behavioural roles women inhabit at different stages of life. Women between the age 19 and 50 are typically at the forefront of mobility, visibility and social engagement. They are more likely to leave their homes for education, employment, or other independent pursuits. While such activities symbolize empowerment and progress, they also increase women's exposure to a broader set of risks. Public spaces in India, particularly in semi-urban and rural areas, are still often gendered, and women's growing presence can evoke both resistance and aggression in patriarchal settings. Possibilities are also high that these women have more danger from their known persons because it is quite less possible that they can easily be trapped by strangers.

Furthermore, a growing body of evidence reveals that, in the vast majority of cases, rapists are not strangers to their victims. Instead, these heinous acts often occur within familiar and seemingly secure environments such as homes, schools, offices, educational institutions and hospitals spaces that should offer safety and trust. Statistical data reinforces this reality: in 2001, 84 per cent of reported rape cases involved offenders known to the victim. This figure sharply increased to 97.18 percent in 2005 and remained alarmingly high at 95.58 per cent in 2010. These known perpetrators include close family members, relatives, neighbours and other known persons. In contrast, the proportion of cases involving unknown offenders was significantly lower

i.e., 16 per cent in 2001, dropping drastically to 2.82 per cent in 2005 and slightly rising to 4.42 per cent in 2010. While there was a notable decline in stranger-offender rapes during this period, a marginal increase of 1.6 percentage points was observed in 2020, suggesting a possible shift or greater reporting of such cases. Nonetheless, the overarching pattern highlights a disturbing reality: the greater threat to women's bodily autonomy often lies not in the shadows of society, but within the very circles they know and trust.

A regional analysis of rape victimization across Indian states reveals a pronounced concentration of cases within a limited number of regions. In both 2001 and 2020, approximately 50 per cent and 40 per cent of the nation's total reported rape victims, respectively, were concentrated in just four states: Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. This persistent clustering over two decades indicates the presence of underlying socio-economic, demographic, and institutional factors that render women particularly vulnerable in these states. Notably, Bihar occupied the fifth position in the 2001-2010 period of time, while West Bengal emerged as the fifth-highest contributor during 2011-2020, suggesting dynamic shifts in regional prevalence patterns. At the lower end of the distribution, Sikkim, Goa, Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh consistently reported the least number of rape cases in both the opening and closing decades of the study period. However, it is important to interpret these figures cautiously, as lower reporting may also reflect deeper issues related to social stigma, inadequate legal awareness, and infrastructural limitations. Among the Union Territories, Delhi exhibited the highest incidence of reported rape cases throughout the entire study period, often exceeding that of many full-fledged states. This alarming trend underscores a critical failure of urban safety mechanism and poses serious concerns regarding the protection and security of women in the national capital. These inter-regional disparities highlight the urgent need for a differentiated policy approach that accounts for the socio-cultural and institutional variations influencing gender-based violence across India.

The persistent rise in rape victimization across India compels a deeper inquiry into its underlying causes. Is this alarming trend merely a random occurrence governed by hidden variables, or does it reflect a deeper, systematic disconnect between the nation's economic growth and the safety of its women? Has development failed to translate

into social progress and gender justice? These pressing questions demand empirical scrutiny. To unravel the factors contributing to this disturbing surge in rape cases, this study employs a correlation analysis, aiming to uncover the statistical relationships between rape incidence and key socio-economic indicators. By doing so, the research seeks to move beyond anecdotal observations and provide evidence based insights into the structural dimensions of gender-based violence in contemporary India.

Lastly, population density shows a slight negative correlation with rape incidence (-0.075 in 2001 and -0.076 in 2011), suggesting that more densely populated areas may offer deterrents such as higher visibility, community surveillance and quicker police response. In contrast, sparsely populated or isolated areas may embolden offenders due to reduced risk of being caught. Overall, the data indicates that while economic and educational advancement can contribute to lowering the incidence of rape, these factors alone do not guarantee safety for women. Without parallel progress in social attitudes, institutional accountability and gender sensitisation, development remains an incomplete shield against sexual violence. The findings thus call for a more integrated approach, where economic growth is complemented by deliberate efforts to dismantle patriarchal norms and strengthen legal and community mechanism for the protection of women.

The correlation matrix for the years 2001 and 2011 offers nuanced insights into the complex relationship between economic development indicators and rape incidence across Indian states and Union Territories. A noteworthy observation is the positive, though statistically insignificant, correlation between sex ratio and rape incidence (0.065 in 2001 and 0.59 in 2011). This suggests that as the number of females per thousand males increases (a traditionally positive indicator of gender balance), the risk of sexual violence does not necessarily decline. Infact, greater female visibility in public spaces may inadvertently raise vulnerability, especially in socio-cultural settings where patriarchal attitudes persist and women's autonomy is not universally accepted. Per capita income, another vital indicator of economic progress, exhibits a weak but negative correlation with rape cases (-0.127 in 2001 and -0.078 in 2011). This implies that in economically backward states, where poverty is more widespread, the incidence of rape is relatively higher. The likely causes include limited access to education, lack of economic opportunities, high risk of substance abuse

and a greater prevalence of regressive gender norms, all of which create an environment conducive to the subjugation and exploitation of women.

Urbanisation, measured as the ratio of urban to total population, also shows insignificantly negative correlation with rape incidence (-0.192 in 2001 and -0.097 in 2011). This highlights a troubling pattern: women in rural areas may face a higher risk of sexual violence due to traditional power hierarchies, inadequate law enforcement, lower literacy levels and greater social stigma associated with reporting sexual crimes. These factors not only enable perpetrators but also silence victims, allowing crimes to persist unchecked.

Similarly, literacy rate is inversely correlated with rape incidence (-0.151 in 2001 and -0.186 in 2011), reinforcing the idea that education can act as a protective factor. Literate populations tend to be more aware of legal rights, more receptive to gender equality and moral vocal in demanding justice, all of which contribute to an environment less tolerant of violence against women. However, this correlation too is statistically insignificant, indicating that education alone, without value-based reform, may not be sufficient to curb the problem.

The increasing tendency of rape victimization raises many issues: Is the soaring rape victimization a matter of chance, and is controlled more by unknown factors? Is there no link between rape crime and rates of growth and levels of

Conclusion

The study concludes that the number of reported rape victims in India has steadily increased over the study period (2001-2020), with a disproportionately high share of victims falling within the 19-30 years age group. This finding highlights that young women are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence compared to their older counterparts. A critical observation emerging from the analysis is that the majority of rape incidents are perpetrated by individuals known to the victims such as parents, close family members, relatives, and neighbours and other acquaintances rather than strangers. This pattern has remained consistent across both the opening and closing of the two decade period under review reflecting deeply entrenched social and cultural dynamics that shield perpetrators and silence victims. In examining the relationship between rape incidence and the country's economic development, the study found an inverse correlation between rape incidence and key indicators such as literacy rate, per capita income and urbanisation which suggest that improvements in

development the country has achieved? In order to determine what factors contribute to the increasing rape incidence in India, we carried out our analysis by using correlation technique to identify the relationship between different variables. The correlation results are presented in the form of correlation matrix in Table 1. It is found that during 2001 and 2011, the estimated correlation coefficient between sex ratio and rape incidence is positive (i.e., 0.065 and 0.59, respectively) but statistically insignificant. This shows that the reported rape incidences are more in the States and UTs with high sex ratio. In other words, the chances of getting rape increases with increase in availability of women in the State or UT. The correlation value between rape incidence and per capita income which is the measurement of economic development in the country is found to be inversely insignificant i.e., The statistical results proved that in general, the rape incidences are observed to be higher in the States/UTs with low per capita income and vice versa.

Overall, it clarifies that with the increase in economic development of India, (measures through per capita income, urbanisation, and literacy rate) rape incidence decreases. It is also highlighted that increase in number of females per thousand males though indicates a positive trend in gender equality but may not good to control the extent and magnitude of rape incidence in India.

these areas may contribute to a reduction in sexual violence.

In the light of these findings, the study strongly recommends that policy makers prioritize inclusive development strategies across all states and UTs. Special focus must be given to lagging regions to ensure equitable access to education, income opportunities and infrastructure. Rural areas, in particular, require urgent investment in basic infrastructure such as safe sanitation facilities, clean water supply and secure public spaces to reduce women's vulnerability. Moreover, addressing gender based violence necessitates the active engagement of men. Ending violence against women must become a collective responsibility. Men must not only refrain from perpetrating such violence but also actively challenge other men who do. Promoting a culture of accountability, respect and empathy is essential. Finally, a transformative shift in societal attitudes is required. Women must no longer be seen as objects or commodities. To that end, gender sensitivity and respect for women should be embedded in the educational curriculum at all levels from schools to

universities. Equally important is the cultivation of moral values and ethical behaviour particularly as the majority of rape cases involve offenders who are known to the victim. Only through a combination of

legal reform, inclusive development and social change can India hope to eliminate the scourge of sexual violence

Table 1
Correlation Matrix

Years	Variables					
2001	Rape Incidence (X1)	Sex Ratio (X2)	Per Capita Income (X3)	Ratio of Urban to total Population (X4)	Literacy rate (X5)	Density of Population (Per sq. km) (X6)
Rape Incidence (X1)	1	.065	-.127	-.192	-.151	-.075
Sex Ratio (Per thousand females) (X2)		1	-.385*	-.293	.048	-.437**
Per Capita Income (X3)			1	.811**	.655**	.695**
Ratio of Urban to total Population (X4)				1	.599**	.820**
Literacy rate (X5)					1	.348*
Density of Population (Per sq. km) (X6)						1
2011						
Rape Incidence (X1)	1	.059	-.078	-.097	-.186	-.076
Sex Ratio (Per thousand females) (X2)		1	-.173	-.360*	.000	-.304
Per Capita Income (X3)			1	.637**	.532**	.654**
Ratio of Urban to total Population (X4)				1	.547**	.772**
Literacy rate (X5)					1	.301
Density of Population (Per sq. km)						1

(X6)						
N	36	36	36	36	36	36

*correlation is significant at the 5 per cent level

**correlation is significant at the 1 per cent level

Note: “N” includes all States and UT’s and India as a whole.

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