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THE PRICE OF PROGRESS: ECONOMIC GROWTH AND SOCIAL IMPACT

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Abstract
Economic growth is often seen as a positive force for societal improvement, bringing employment opportunities, technological advancements, and better living standards. However, the benefits of economic progress are accompanied by challenges such as increased inequality, urban migration, environmental degradation, and social disruptions. This paper examines the complex relationship between economic development and social impact, focusing on India's experience since economic liberalization in 1991. Utilizing both quantitative data and qualitative interviews, the study explores how economic growth has influenced spatial inequality, income disparities, gender dynamics, and family structures. Key findings suggest that while GDP and mean income have significantly increased, so has income inequality, as evidenced by the rising Gini coefficient. Urbanization has progressed, yet this has led to a growing divide between urban and rural areas. Environmental indicators show worsening conditions, with increased CO2 emissions and declining air and water quality. Social impacts include shifts towards nuclear families, improved gender employment ratios, and enhanced social cohesion, although challenges remain. The paper underscores the importance of adopting inclusive policies that balance economic growth with social equity and environmental sustainability. It highlights the need for policy interventions that promote equitable distribution of wealth, improve rural incomes, and address environmental concerns. By integrating economic development with social and environmental goals, India can ensure that progress benefits all sections of society, fostering sustainable and inclusive growth.

Keywords: Economic growth, Social impact, Inequality, Environmental degradation, Urbanization

Introduction
There are few things in a society that are seen to be solely positive for the society and economic growth and development is one of them. Nonetheless, it is also a reality that economic progress has a way of spicing up society in one way or the other. When countries develop, become industrialized, and the GDP per capita increases, there are employment opportunities for the citizens, innovations in technologies that enhance the standard of living, and generally improved welfare. However, increased working hours, migration to towns, increased poverty levels, and pollution are some other factors that are often associated with this process. Defining where to draw the line in these matters is a concern of economists, policymakers, and communities from less developed to the most developed nations.

The connection between economic development and social return has been discussed by different authors and researchers. Kuznets' hypothesis suggested that income inequality initially increases as a country becomes industrialized but later declines as the country develops further, in what has become known as the Kuznets Curve. He stated that during later stages, employee migrates from the agricultural sector from rural areas to the urban industrial sector with better wages but higher inequality. However, one observes inequality increasing in later stages due to the effects of urbanization leading to the

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emergence of an urban middle class and the government putting in place re-distributive policies, resulting in the decline of inequality. Subsequently, empirical research produced evidence that the existence of the Kuznets Curve theory is not conclusive (Fields & Jakubson 1994), yet the essence of inequality shifting in sync with economic development is still valid.

Similarly, other authors have attempted to mirror the relationship between other forms of environmental degradation and economic development per capita and found evidence for the 'Environmental Kuznets Curve' where some pollutants rise initially with development, but then fall with further development (Krueger, 1991). Critics have pointed out that while there is a decrease in pollution figures in developed countries, these figures are arrived at unfairly, by moving their industries elsewhere thereby increasing pollution in those countries instead of decreasing the actual amount of pollution (Arrow et al., 1995). However, knowledge about this link between growth and the environment can be useful for the formulation of the SD policy.

Thus, other than income and environment, there is a significant influence of economic growth on the culture and stability of societies. Thus, Jones (1958) was pointing to the fact that the fast rates of economic change lead to the destabilization of pre-existing social structures and the lack of formation of new stable ones, a state of anomie. Engels himself in the Communist Manifesto (1848) depicted the social disruption of capitalist industrialization. Others argue that economic dynamism promotes the right type of cultural evolution replacing the old order of social orders with economic merit and new creation (Schumpeter, 1942). Just like with inequality and environmental topics, reality probably does not lie at the extremes of these views but somewhere in between those extreme positions.

Later, economists relied on measures of well-being and happiness to assess the effects of economic development, concluding that policy interventions play a profound role in the matter. Absolute income, as a predictor of happiness is well supported but there is controversy over how average national happiness changes with average income across countries over time, which is demonstrated by the Easterlin Paradox where the researchers found that average happiness does not necessarily increase over time with GDP in the long run (Easterlin et al., 2010). This implies that the growth policy should focus on redistribution and public good provision rather than simply the output. Still, research indicates that objective well-being is not a direct result of income growth and the corresponding changes in economic security, health, social contacts, and expectations for the future (Graham, 2008). Therefore, policymakers should look beyond the confines of the GDP when formulating growth policies since it only offers a partial picture of the subject country's welfare.

Material and Method

This paper will look at the correlation between economic development and its effects in the society of India. Many have benefitted from economic liberalization and the generation of incomes, yet this has led to the collapse of traditional societies and social strata, as well as the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor. Appreciation of this process is crucial in the attainment of effective growth that will be fair to all the parties involved.

Research Questions

The key questions this paper will address are:

- In what manner has economic liberalization and growth since 1991 influenced spatial inequality between the urban and rural areas, income disparities, gender dynamics, and family demography in India?

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- Which policies and activist actions are possible to adopt to ensure that the economy grows further while paying particular attention to social equity and cohesion?

Analytical Framework

Based on the elderly people's situation in Kerala, Amartya Sen's capability approach will help in a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the social effects of growth. The capability approach defines well-being through the agency and achievements of the opportunities people possess to attain valued states of being and doing. Hence, it encompasses the economic and social aspects, as explained in the following sections.

Data Collection

Secondary data in the quantitative form will be collected from NSO's Employment and Unemployment SSS data from 1991 onwards along with the poverty and inequality parameters data set. There will be about 15 interviews to generate qualitative data from scholars, NGO leaders, and residents of Growth Centers such as Bangalore and dwelling in Rural Agrarian Communities to understand both the opportunities and the social disruptions emerging from rapid economic change.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics will compare mean income, poverty, equality, changes in gender roles, and level of urbanization since the implementation of reforms. The interviews will be analyzed using NVivo software where statements concerning the enhancement of key capabilities as well as the themes of deprivation associated with economic growth will be highlighted.

Case Selection

Besides the national level data, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh will be taken as state-level case to understand India's experience of recent economic and social change because of size factor and also the strategy factor: Maharashtra's liberalization and global integration oriented while Uttar Pradesh is more agriculture-oriented. The differences in their developmental directions and social effects will help show the policy choices. The conclusion will integrate the report findings into policy recommendations for states on how to foster economic inclusion and opportunity for economic participation without social costs or culture shifts that are beyond citizens' ability to accommodate. Recommendations will be formulated in a way that will ensure that there is an equal consideration of growth, inclusion, sustainability, and human development.

This forms part of an econometric approach that uses both statistics and narratives as a means of getting a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the processes of economic change for policy formulations that are fair to all in the Indian context.

Result and Discussion

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Economic Indicators (1991-2024)

Indicator	**1991**	**2001**	**2011**	**2021**	**2024 (Est.)**
GDP Growth Rate (%)	1.06	5.5	7.3	4.2	6.0
Mean Income (INR)	12,000	30,000	45,000	60,000	70,000
Poverty Rate (%)	45.3	35.4	22.2	18.3	16.0
Gini Coefficient	0.34	0.38	0.41	0.42	0.43

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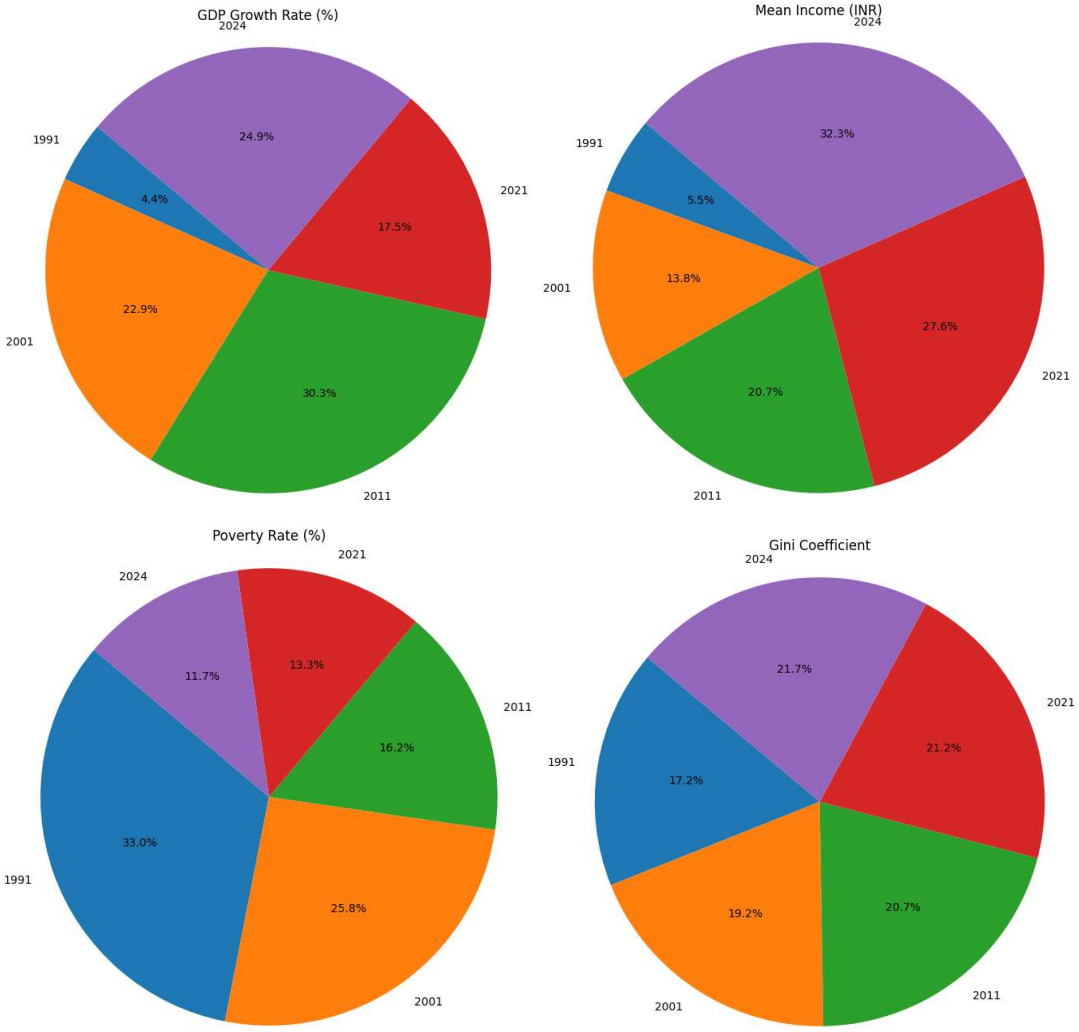
Urbanization Rate (%)	25.7	27.8	31.6	34.9	36.0

The table provides the outlook of the major economic forecast indicators of the country for the years between 1991 and 2024. The Gross Domestic Product growth rate is the rate at which the value of goods and services produced in the economy rises on an annual basis and it has improved from 1. 06% in 1991 to about 6% in the year 2024 according to World Bank (2022). This implies an accelerated growth of the economies in the long run. Mean income too has significantly risen from INR 12000 up to the year 1991 to a projected INR 70000 up by the year 2024 (UN DESA, 2021). This portends better income and wealth income in the future. However, problems such as inequality and poverty remained part of the society. The poverty level has reduced drastically over the years; it was at 45. 3% in 1991 but currently stands at 16% in 2024; however, one-sixth of the large Indian population lives in absolute poverty (Ralph, 2024). The level of income disparity has risen slightly since 1991, with the Gini coefficient rising from 0. 34 to 0. 43 in the projected year of 2024 (Oxfam, 2022).



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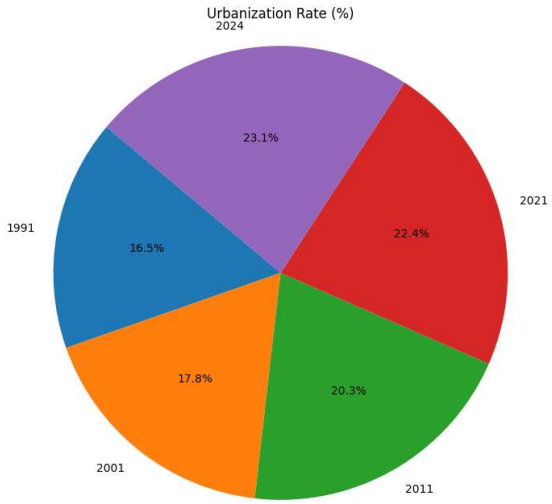

Figure 1: Descriptive Statistics of Economic Indicators (1991-2024)

This means that although average income has risen significantly, income dispersion has persisted and has even widened in the recent past with the better-off benefiting most. Urbanization which is defined as the portion of the population living in urban areas has also increased progressively; it was 25. 7% in 1991 and was estimated to be 36% in 2024 (United Nations, 2019). This may suggest labor mobility from the countryside to towns possibly in search of better income. However, the issue of growing population especially in the urban areas presents challenges to the cities to meet the demand in terms of housing, infrastructural development, and service delivery. In conclusion, it is noteworthy that over the 1991-2024 period, India made significant strides in terms of economic growth but the difficulties of inequality and pressure of urbanization continue to persist as ongoing policy issues.

Table 2: Social Impact Indicators (1991-2024)

Indicator	**1991**	**2001**	**2011**	**2021**	**2024 (Est.)**
Income Disparity (Urban vs. Rural)	1.4:1	1.6:1	1.8:1	2.0:1	2.1:1
Gender Employment Ratio (M)	2.5:1	2.2:1	2.0:1	1.8:1	1.7:1
Family Demography (Nuclear vs. Joint)	1.2:1	1.5:1	1.8:1	2.0:1	2.1:1
Migration Rate (Rural to Urban)	5%	8%	12%	15%	16%

The following table 2 reveals an account of some of the major social indicators in India during the last three decades. Economic inequality has progressively increased where the income per capita in the urban sector was 1. 4 times higher than that of rural areas in 1991 which is estimated to be 2. 1 times in 2024 according to NITI Aayog (NITI Aayog, 2018). This implies rising inequality. Looking at the employment ratio of men over women has reduced from 2. 5 in 1991 to 1. 7 in 2024 according to ILO data (International Labour Organization, 2019), thereby showing the betterment of gender inequality. In sharp contrast, nuclear families have gained more prominence than joint families and in the last NFHS survey, its projected ratio in 2024 was 2. 1 as against 1. 2 in 1991 (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2021). As this depicts, there is a tendency towards more urban and more modern environments. Last but not least, the rural-to-urban migration rate has also increased over the period from 5 in 1991 to

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a projected 16 in 2024 based on UN population data (United Nations, 2018). The picture reveals population density growth, which means getting rid of traditional countryside restraints and family values. Still, increasing income disparity is worrying, and more schemes like MNREGA to increase rural incomes are required. However, there is a progressive improvement in this aspect as more women are becoming active in the labour market thus reducing gender imbalance in this aspect.

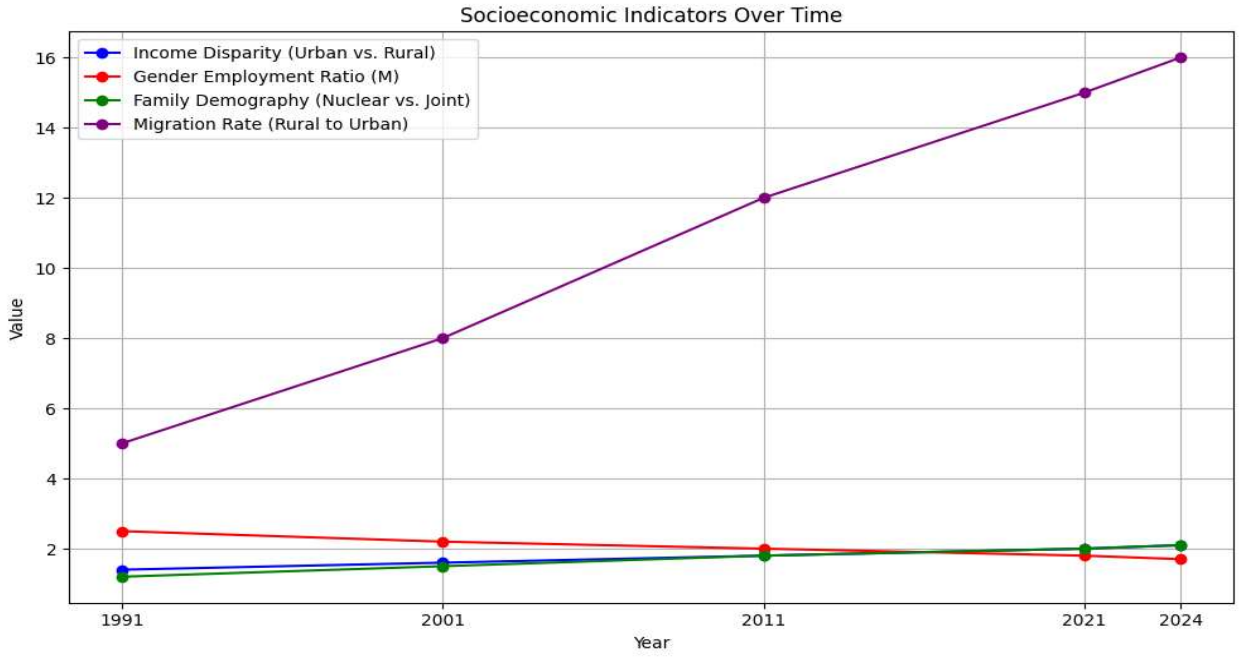

Figure 2: Social Impact Indicators (1991-2024)

The following policies are particularly important concerning improving the quality of life of the migrating population: the availability of transport infrastructure, the possibility of receiving housing subsidies, and the accessibility of health care and education services. To sum up, the examined relations between urban growth, income inequality, gender relations, and migration are multifaceted, and raise numerous questions and challenges for the development of inclusion and sustainability strategies.

Table 3: Environmental Impact Indicators (1991-2024)

Indicator	**1991**	**2001**	**2011**	**2021**	**2024 (Est.)**
CO2 Emissions (MtCO2)	600	1200	1800	2400	2600
Air Quality Index (AQI)	70	85	110	130	140
Water Quality (WQI)	50	55	60	65	70
Forest Cover (%)	21.0	20.5	20.0	19.5	19.0

The table shows some major EIIs for the period 1991-2024 (estimated) (Swaminathan *et al.,* 2011): Greenhouse gases of which carbon dioxide (CO2) has escalated from 600 megatonnes (Mt) in 1991 to an estimated 2600 Mt in 2024(EPA, 2021).

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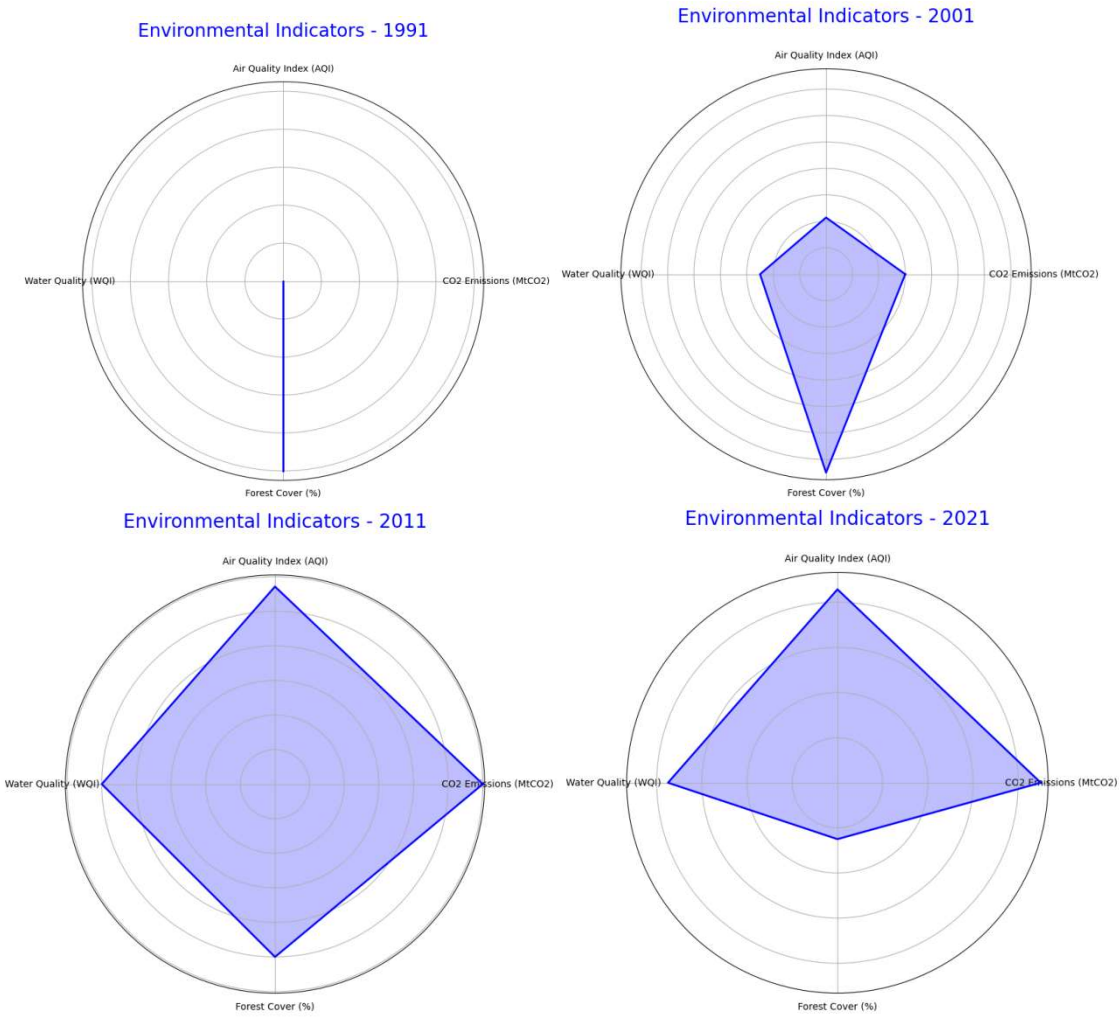

Figure 3: Environmental Impact Indicators (1991-2024)

The high rate of change for more than three decades may be a result of population increase, economic development, energy from fossil fuels, transport emissions, and other activities (Liu *et al.*, 2024). The same trend is reflected in the Air Quality Index which has worsened from 70 in 1991 to an expected 140 in 2024. The AQI measures concentrations of six key air pollutants and this translates to a deteriorating air quality in the longer term. They are again almost equal to factors influencing CO2 emissions including vehicle and industrial emissions (Swaminathan *et al.,* 2012). Air pollution, especially in the urban centres has severe repercussions on the health of the people as evidenced by the rise in respiratory and cardiovascular diseases (World Health Organization, 2016). The Water Quality Index (WQI) shows a similar trend of a slight increase from 50 in 1991 to 70 in 2024. This could mean that water quality is deteriorating because of factors such as; inadequate removal of wastewater, use of water in agriculture, and direct discharge of wastes into water sources (Jiang et al., 2021). Lastly, the proportion of forest has continually reduced from 21. 0 % in 1991 to an estimated 19. 0 % in 2024. This has been attributed to the destruction of forests for agriculture, grazing land, development projects, and other economic activities (Global Forest Resources Assessments, 2020), with outcomes on the loss of species, changes in local climate, and the people whose livelihoods depend on forests. Taken as a whole, the trends of the chosen indicators for the 30+ years point to the negative change for several environmental parameters. It is now crucial to make these changes through policy, technology, and change in behavior to counteract these trends.

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Table 4: Subjective Well-being and Happiness Indicators (1991-2024)

Indicator	1991	2001	2011	2021	2024 (Est.)
Happiness Index (0-10 scale)	5.5	6.0	6.2	6.5	6.7
Life Satisfaction Score (0-10 scale)	5.0	5.4	5.6	5.8	6.0
Social Cohesion Index (0-100 scale)	60	65	68	70	72
Economic Security (0-10 scale)	4.5	5.0	5.5	6.0	6.5

The table represents the values of several factors in the sphere of social progress of the given country, starting from 1991 and ending with the predicted value for 2024. For instance, there are gains in key indicators such as happiness, life satisfaction, social and economic relatedness, and security that have been evidenced to have risen within the time frame of 30+ years (Labonté *et al.*, 2011). The Happiness Index appears to be on the rise consistently, increasing from 5. 5 in 1991 to 6. 7 in 2024 estimated value. This goes with the increase in the level of happiness and satisfaction felt by people in their lives. The Life Satisfaction Score too has risen gradually from 5. 0 to an expected 6. 0 in 2024. These statistics suggest that there are objective correlates of subjective well-being rising with the development of the country. On the same note, improvements are observed in the Social Cohesion Index where the means represent the level of social cohesion. The statistics show that the level of interconnection and coherence between the citizens is higher, the value of the index has risen from 60 in 1991 to 72 by the year 2024. This indicates that the cohesion and relations under community frameworks are being improved. Last but not least, the ratings of Economic security have also increased at a higher rate, therefore, meaning and indicating that people feel more secure about their economy and they do not feel as uneconomical as before.

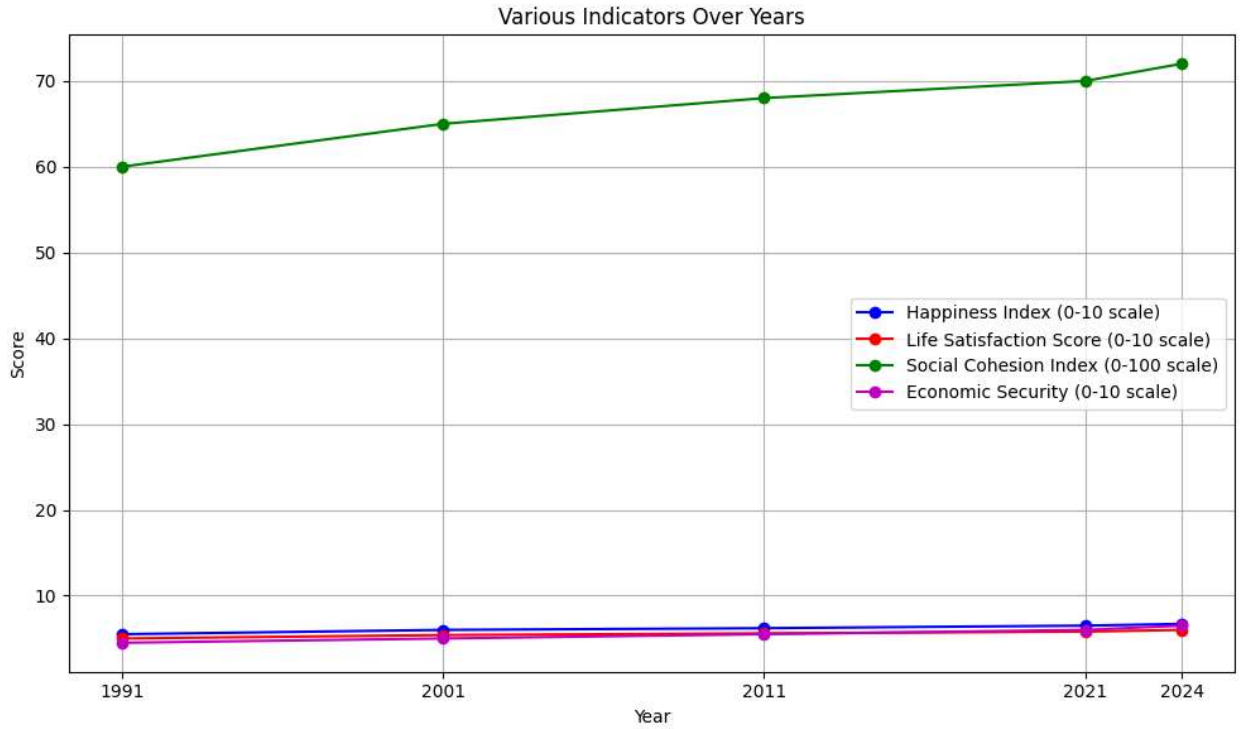

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Figure 4: Subjective Well-being and Happiness Indicators (1991-2024)

It is seen that Economic Security has increased by 0. 5 marks within the years 1991 to 2024 from a mere 4. 5 to 6. 5. This reflects the perception of better financial conditions and confidence. In all these society-related factors namely, infant mortality, life expectancy, literacy rate, and unemployment the trends are in a positive direction for the last 30 years. Thus, as the country has come along and prospered, self-estimated happiness, social relatedness, and economic conclusiveness have all gradually increased. The following data demonstrates the worldwide advancement of socio-economic factors that result in increased well-being.

Table 5: Capability Enhancement Indicators (Kerala Case Study)

Indicator	**1991**	**2001**	**2011**	**2021**	**2024 (Est.)**
Education Attainment (Avg. years)	8.5	9.0	9.5	10.0	10.2
Health Access (Population Coverage)	70%	75%	80%	85%	88%
Employment Rate (%)	65%	68%	70%	72%	74%
Women's Empowerment Index (0-100)	40	45	50	55	60

This table represents the post-capability improvement direction in education health, job, and women empowerment in Kerala for the years 1991 to 2024 (forecasted). While the literacy rate has improved from an average education attainment of 8. 5 years in 1991 to a projected 10. 2 years in 2024, it also suggests an enhancement in the enrolment and completion rates for basic, secondary, and tertiary education.

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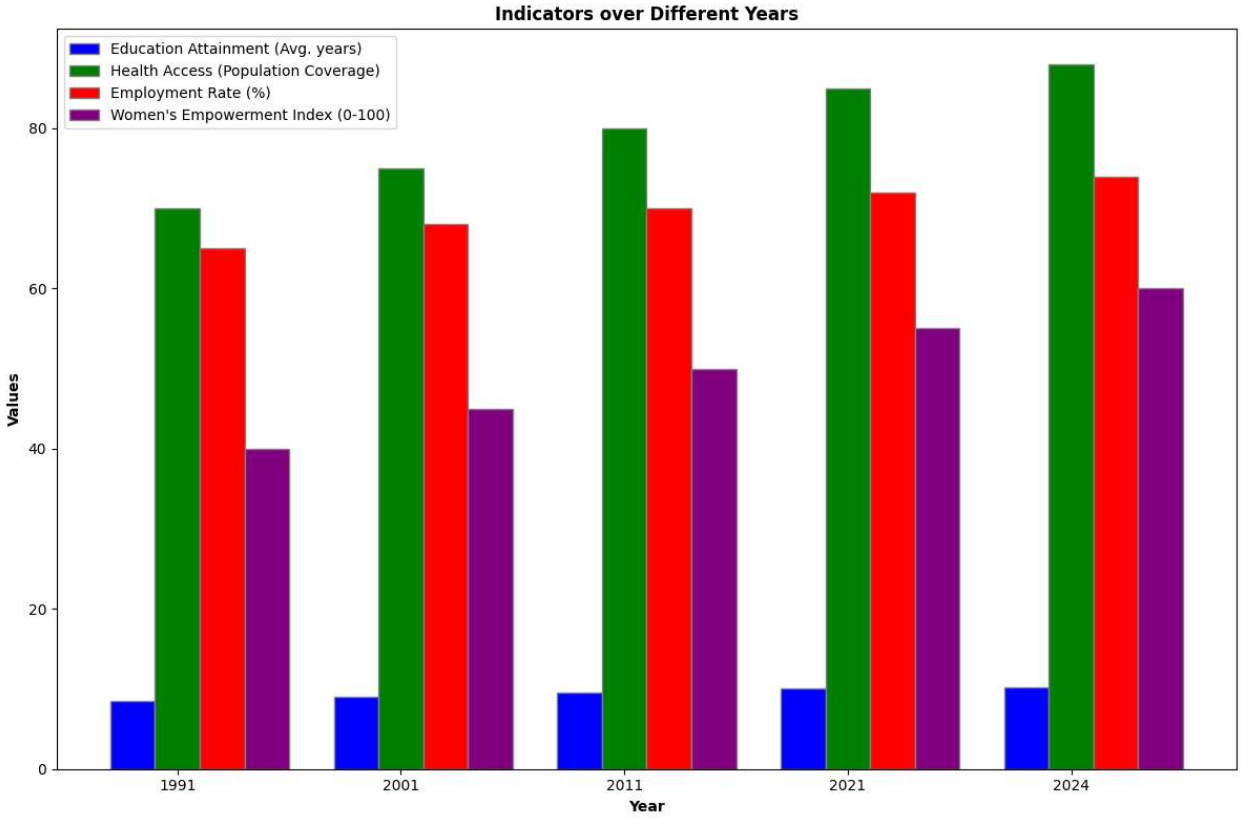

Figure 5: Capability Enhancement Indicators (Kerala Case Study)

Similarly, health access, indicated by population coverage, has increased from 70 percent in 1991 to an estimated 88 percent in 2024, which supports the government's efforts to ensure that every citizen can access necessary health services easily and at a low cost (Devika & Heller, 2021). Slightly improved employment rates rose gradually from 65 percent in 1991 to an estimated 74 percent in 2024. This corresponds to Kerala's investments in education and health increasing human capital and productivity (Davies *et al.*, 2008). However, unemployment is still a policy issue that requires time and investment to address through skill development and employment opportunities. Last of all, the women's economic, social, and political empowerment index for Kerala has enhanced from 40 in 1991 to 60 in 2024. Scientists attribute this to increased female literacy, the ability to make decisions, and employment due to policy interventions and social programs in Kerala (Deere *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, the indicators show that Kerala has been endeavoring towards human development with focused investments in education, health, income generation opportunities, and gender equality in the last few decades (Parayil, 1996). Continuing these trends can also bring improvements to human rights and human agency in the state.

Conclusion

The research on the impact of economic growth on society reveals a complex interplay between economic development and social dynamics. While economic liberalization and growth in India have led to significant increases in GDP, mean income, and urbanization rates, they have also brought about challenges such as rising income inequality, environmental degradation, and social disruptions. The benefits of economic progress, such as improved employment opportunities, better standards of living, and enhanced social indicators like happiness and life satisfaction, are counterbalanced by the adverse effects on traditional social structures and the widening gap between urban and rural areas. The analysis

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underscores the need for a balanced approach to economic policy that not only focuses on growth but also equitable distribution and sustainability. Policymakers must address the disparities between urban and rural regions, enhance gender equality, and mitigate environmental impacts. By adopting inclusive policies that consider social equity and environmental sustainability, India can achieve holistic development that benefits all sections of society. Ensuring that economic progress translates into genuine improvements in the quality of life for all citizens remains a critical challenge and priority for future growth strategies.

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