Three States, Three Destinies: A Political Economy Analysis of SDG Performance in Gujarat, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract - India's federal system provides opportunities for each state to follow different paths of development. This analysis examines three critical states that follow different paradigms: Gujarat, characterized by its swift yet divisive capital-intensive growth model; West Bengal, a state grappling with the repercussions of deindustrialization; and Uttar Pradesh, a densely populated state whose advancement is crucial for India's national development. This study aims to conduct a political economy analysis to examine how the unique political characteristics, historical contexts, and ideological priorities of these three states influence their performance on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A comparative case study methodology was used, combining quantitative data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), and the NITI Aayog SDG Index with a qualitative evaluation of each state's political history, governance frameworks, and prevailing policy decisions. The comparative case study analysis reveals three divergent developmental trajectories for the three states. The trajectory of Gujarat is characterized by a preference for state-driven, capital-intensive growth, resulting in advanced infrastructure but revealing a significant deficit in human capital development. The development experience of West Bengal illustrates the contradiction of "welfarism without growth," wherein comprehensive social safety nets establish a baseline for numerous citizens, yet a stagnant economy presents limited opportunities for upward mobility. Influenced by a history of foundational neglect, governance has posed the greatest challenge to the development of Uttar Pradesh, which requires immediate attention to realize its potential. The study concludes that Sustainable Development Goal outcomes are not only a result of fiscal calculations but also of a complex mix of political choices, historical legacies, and ideological priorities. This underscores the importance of political economy in shaping development and provides valuable insights for federal nations on how to achieve equitable and sustainable progress.
Keywords: Political Economy, Sustainable Development Goals (Sdgs), Comparative Case Study, Governance, Federalism in India

I. INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda is more than 17 goals; it is a global pledge of dignity, prosperity, and peace on a healthy planet (United Nations, 2015). For India, a country with a population of 1.4 billion, making good on this promise is a civilizational challenge. The country's development narrative is written in the urban and rural spaces of its 28 states and 8 union territories. In India's federal system, the states are the engines of change-the ones responsible for the health of mothers, the education of children, the productivity of farms, and the vitality of cities. This subnational heterogeneity is such that any national mean is a statistical convenience that conceals the underlying truth of substantial divergence.

To bring these differences to light, NITI Aayog's SDG India Index and Dashboard act as a national mirror, reflecting how each state is performing and fostering a dynamic of "competitive and cooperative federalism" (NITI Aayog, 2021). But this mirror merely displays the reflection. It shows what happens, but not why. Is it simply a matter of wealth, or is the whole truth darker-a story about political will, historical burdens, and the very soul of how a state governs itself? This article argues that the story is profoundly political.

We look beyond the numbers into the clashing destinies of three critical states: Gujarat, the showpiece of a high-growth model; West Bengal, a state caught between its industrial past and its welfarist present; and Uttar Pradesh, the giant whose future will shape India's own. Rooting our analysis in the extensive literature on India's subnational political economy, we aim to explore how political priorities, governance design, and historical context contribute to SDG outcomes.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws inspiration from extensive research that documents interstate differences and the political economy of subnational governance in India.

A. The Foundational Role of Public Action and Historical Legacies

To understand why Indian states are on such divergent paths of development, one must begin with an examination of their different baselines. The pioneering study of Drèze and Sen (2013) provides the conceptual and methodological foundation in this context. They argue that the substantial disparities in social outcomes within India are not recent; rather, they have been long in the making and reflect varied histories of public action. Public action refers to the agency

of the public-whether through civil society movements or political pressure on the state-to demand and access basic public services.

A state like Kerala, with its rich history of social reform movements, anti-caste struggles, and early state-led investments in public health and education, had already built a strong social infrastructure before the SDG era. This created a virtuous cycle of high literacy, health, and public awareness, setting a high floor for development. In contrast, in the Hindi heartland, states such as Uttar Pradesh were more often marked by deep-rooted feudal and patriarchal social relations, low levels of public investment in the social sector, and a weak politics of organized demand for public services from a fragmented civil society. This created a "path dependency" of underdevelopment, a historical inertia that continues to pose significant challenges. This historical lens is crucial; it reminds us that states are not running the same race but are on different tracks with different historical burdens and advantages.

B. Competing Models of Subnational Political Economy

Beyond historical context, contemporary performance is shaped by distinct, often ideologically driven, models of development pursued by state governments. The literature offers several archetypes relevant to our case studies.

1. The "Gujarat Model": State-Led Capitalism and Its Social Costs

The "Gujarat Model" of development gained national prominence in the 2000s. It remains one of the most highly debated topics in India's political economy. Its advocates present it as a paradigm of decisive governance, rapid infrastructural development, and a highly pro-business environment. This model is characterized by an active state role in promoting large-scale private investment through fiscal incentives, streamlined bureaucratic procedures, and aggressive marketing via events such as the *Vibrant Gujarat* summits (Debroy, 2012). The underlying philosophy is that high economic growth is the panacea for development, with its benefits expected to eventually "trickle down" to the masses.

However, a substantial body of critical scholarship presents a counternarrative. Most notably, Jaffrelot (2021) argues that the Gujarat model represents a form of state-led capitalism that disproportionately benefits large, capital-intensive corporations over small and medium enterprises. While successful in boosting gross state domestic product, this strategy results in limited formal job creation for the local population. Furthermore, critics contend that the emphasis on physical infrastructure and industrial promotion has come at the opportunity cost of public investment in social sectors. This has led to a "social deficit," where economic prosperity coexists with troubling weaknesses in human development indicators such as child nutrition and the quality of public education. This framework provides a critical lens to assess

Gujarat's paradoxical SDG performance: strong on economic goals but weak on social ones.

2. West Bengal: Deindustrialization and the Rise of "Jobless Welfarism"

West Bengal's development narrative is a poignant story of industrial decline and political adaptation. Once an industrial powerhouse, the state underwent a protracted deindustrialization beginning in the 1970s, a process scholars attribute to militant trade unionism, capital flight, and adverse national policies such as freight equalization that eroded its competitive advantage (Sarkar, 2011).

The mass agitation against the acquisition of agricultural land for the Tata Nano car factory in Singur (2006-2008) marked a turning point in the state's political economy. According to Roy (2011) and Chatterjee (2009), this episode had a significant "chilling effect" on private investment and cemented the state's image as unfriendly to business, even though it was politically advantageous for the opposition at the time. Unable to spark an industrial revival, the state's governance model shifted abruptly in the subsequent political era.

The political leadership embraced a strategy of populist welfarism, relying on an expanding array of direct benefit transfer schemes and social programs such as *Kanyashree* (scholarship for female students) and *Lakshmir Bhandar* (direct benefit transfer for women). This model is sustained by a robust and politically mobilized local government (panchayat) system, which acts as an effective delivery mechanism. This literature highlights West Bengal's central paradox: a state with a sputtering economic engine that has become remarkably proficient at social distribution-a model of "jobless welfarism."

3. Uttar Pradesh: The Politics of Scale, Identity, and Foundational Governance

The mobilization of caste and religious identities has dominated state politics for decades, frequently dictating administrative priorities and resource allocation beyond developmental metrics. According to Wilkinson (2004), the state's size and diversity make it extremely difficult to implement effective governance and deliver consistent public services, especially given that its population exceeds that of most countries.

This legacy has produced a state known for dysfunctional public services, weak law enforcement, and what Drèze and Sen (2013) describe as entrenched social hierarchies and administrative inertia. The modern political narrative has sought to counter this by emphasizing law and order to improve the investment climate and implementing highly visible, large-scale infrastructure projects. The SDG journey of Uttar Pradesh is thus framed in the literature as a monumental task of "foundational state-building" in the face of deep structural and historical obstacles.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study follows a qualitative, comparative case study approach, focusing on the rich and contrasting development experiences of Gujarat, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh. The methodology integrates a primary quantitative framework with additional data sources to enable a deeper political economy analysis.

A. Case Selection Justification

The three states-Gujarat (the high-growth "Front Runner"), West Bengal (the welfarist "Performer"), and Uttar Pradesh (the lower-tier "Performer" facing foundational challenges)- were chosen to reflect different junctures on India's political and developmental spectrum.

B. The Primary Measurement Tool: The SDG India Index

The primary quantitative measure used in this paper is the NITI Aayog SDG India Index.

1. *Purpose and Creation:* The index was created by NITI Aayog as India's official instrument for monitoring the progress of its states and union territories toward the SDGs. Its main goals are to foster competitive sub nationalism and improve performance through the creation of a uniform tracking system.
2. *Brief Methodology:* The index employs a composite approach. It derives a set of national-level indicators from official data sources (e.g., NFHS, PLFS) relevant to the responsibilities of the states. For each of these indicators, a state's performance is scored on a scale of 0 to 100. A score of 100 indicates that the state has fully achieved the national goal set for 2030, while 0 signifies that the state was the worst performer in the baseline year.
3. *Scoring and Classification:* The normalized scores for indicators are averaged to create scores for each SDG. These goal-level scores are further averaged to produce a final composite SDG score for each state. Based on this composite score, states are classified into four categories.
4. *Relevance for this Study:* The index provides a government-endorsed, standardized quantitative baseline that allows for a direct, like-for-like comparison of the overall performance of Gujarat, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh. It serves as the essential starting point from which our deeper qualitative and triangulated analysis proceeds.

C. Triangulating Data for Deeper Insights

While the SDG Index provides the foundation, we triangulate its findings with more granular data to unpack the scores and reveal the human stories behind them. These sources include the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), and the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER).

D. Analytical Strategy

The analysis unfolds in two stages. First, we present the quantitative patterns using the SDG Index and triangulated data. Second, we interpret these patterns through the qualitative lens of the political economy frameworks outlined in the literature review, linking empirical outcomes to political choices.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: UNPACKING THE DIVERGENT DESTINIES

Our analysis begins with the overall SDG performance before delving into two critical thematic clusters: the economic engine and the human capital foundation.

A. Overall Performance: A Snapshot of Divergence

The composite SDG scores place the three states on different rungs of the development ladder, reflecting their divergent paths and capacities. Table 1 provides a clear and focused view of their relative positions.

TABLE I OVERALL SDG PERFORMANCE AND KEY STATE RANKINGS (2020-21)

State	Overall Score (out of 100)	Category	All India Rank (Among States)
Gujarat	69	Front Runner	10
West Bengal	62	Performer	16
Uttar Pradesh	60	Performer	22

Source: Adapted from NITI Aayog (2021)

While Gujarat is clearly a "Front Runner," the seemingly small two-point gap between West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh masks profoundly different underlying stories-a truth revealed through deeper analysis.

B. The Economic Engine: A Tale of Growth, Stagnation, and Struggle (SDGs 1, 8, and 9)

This cluster of goals gets to the heart of each state's economic philosophy. Table II contrasts their performance, highlighting starkly different economic realities.

TABLE II CONTRASTING ECONOMIC REALITIES - PERFORMANCE ON KEY ECONOMIC SDGS

Sustainable Development Goal	Gujarat	West Bengal	Uttar Pradesh
	2020-21	2020-21	2020-21
SDG 1: No Poverty	62 (Performer)	60 (Performer)	52 (Performer)
SDG 8: Decent Work & Economic Growth	70 (Front Runner)	59 (Performer)	54 (Performer)
SDG 9: Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure	79 (Front Runner)	68 (Front Runner)	55 (Performer)

Source: Adapted from NITI Aayog (2021)

Table II shows the distinct trajectories of the three states. Gujarat has demonstrated the performance of a self-assured leader, solidifying its position as a "Front Runner" in industrial infrastructure and economic growth. This is not just about factories and ports but about a thriving, developed economy that continuously stimulates innovation and job creation. Its high economic scores demonstrate a state that has mastered the art of creating and sustaining the engine of development, setting a high standard for the rest of the nation while also making notable progress in reducing poverty. The narrative of West Bengal is one of deliberate and strategic advancement. Its ascent into the "Front Runner" category for infrastructure and industry is an important milestone that suggests a successful effort to improve roads and expand its citizens' access to digital information. This establishes a vital basis for further expansion. In addition to its consistent "Performer" ranking in economic growth and poverty alleviation, the state demonstrates a comprehensive approach by establishing a reliable foundation for its long-term economic goals.

Uttar Pradesh presents a compelling narrative of fundamental transformation and rapid progress. Through the launch of its One District One Product initiative and the aggressive development of new infrastructure, the state has created a new environment of opportunity for local industries. Its consistent "Performer" rating across the three objectives is an impressive accomplishment, signifying a broad and successful effort to lift its people out of poverty and lay the foundation for a more prosperous future. This is more than just advancement; it is evidence of how determined action can radically alter a state's developmental trajectory.

C. The Human Capital Foundation: A Story of Investment, Neglect, and Crisis (SDG 3, 4)

This cluster reveals whether economic strength translates into well-being for citizens. Table III presents a narrative often in stark contrast to the economic one.

TABLE III THE HUMAN CAPITAL DIVIDE - PERFORMANCE ON KEY SOCIAL SDGS

Sustainable Development Goal	Gujarat (Score & Category)	West Bengal (Score & Category)	Uttar Pradesh (Score & Category)
SDG 3: Good Health & Well-being	86(Front Runner)	76 (Front Runner)	60 (Performer)
SDG 4: Quality Education	52 (Performer)	54 (Performer)	41 (Aspirant)

Source: Adapted from NITI Aayog (2021)

A notable developmental paradox can be seen in Gujarat's performance. Its poor "Performer" ranking in Quality Education (52) is concerning for an economic leader, even though it is a "Front Runner" in Health (86). The state's long-standing policy priorities-sometimes referred to as the Gujarat Model-have traditionally emphasized physical infrastructure and industrial growth, often at the expense of social sector spending, which explains this subpar performance (Drèze & Sen, 2013). According to budget analyses, Gujarat's per capita education spending often falls short of that of many other Indian states, so this criticism is not limited to academia (PRS Legislative Research, 2022). As a result, the low score is a direct outcome of a development strategy that has undervalued human capital investment, potentially leaving the state vulnerable to long-term, equitable growth challenges.

West Bengal offers a different example, where the historical legacy of the Left Front government can be linked to its impressive performance in Health (76) and Education (54),

despite a more modest economy. This government placed a high priority on creating a strong, publicly funded system for accessible and affordable health and education that reached far into rural areas. This political commitment to mass education-often implemented through strengthened local governance structures-established a solid basis for human development (Kohli, 1987). Therefore, the state's ongoing success is not a paradox but rather the outcome of a distinct development philosophy that has historically prioritized grassroots delivery and direct state intervention in social sectors, enabling it to achieve strong results despite financial constraints.

Though it shares a surface-level similarity with Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh's educational struggles-where it remains classified as an "Aspirant" (41)-have very different causes. Its poor performance stems from massive scale and deep systemic flaws. The state, which has the largest student population in the nation, faces severe governance issues, such as teacher absenteeism and inadequate training, that significantly impair

the system's effectiveness (World Bank, 2017). Importantly, this results in a serious foundational learning crisis, as evidenced by the fact that many primary school students struggle with basic reading and math skills each year (ASER Centre, 2022). In contrast to Gujarat, where the problem lies primarily in policy priorities, Uttar Pradesh faces a complex web of implementation failures and a startling learning deficit.

D. Beyond the Index: Triangulating Data to Reveal Ground Realities

To move beyond the composite scores and understand the human story, we must triangulate the NITI Aayog data with ground-level indicators. Table IV does precisely this, unpacking the SDG scores to reveal what they mean in practice.

TABLE IV UNPACKING THE SCORES - A TRIANGULATED DATA DASHBOARD

State	SDG Goal (NITI Aayog Score & Category)	Key Corroborating Indicator	Source
Gujarat	SDG 4: Quality Education (52, Performer)	Foundational Learning is weak: 41.3% of Class V can read Class II text.	ASER 2022
	SDG 4: Quality Education (52, Performer)	Higher Education Enrolment is the highest of the three at 31.7%.	AISHE 2021-22
	SDG 8: Decent Work (70, Front Runner)	Female Labour Force Participation is a very low 25.6%.	PLFS 2022-23
	SDG 3: Good Health (80, Front Runner)	Life Expectancy at Birth is 70.1 years.	SRS 2016-20
West Bengal	SDG 4: Quality Education (52, Performer)	Foundational Learning is the weak: Only 32.7%. of Class V can read Class II text.	ASER 2022
	SDG 4: Quality Education (52, Performer)	Higher Education Enrolment is the lowest of the three at 24.1%.	AISHE 2021-22
	SDG 8: Decent Work (59, Performer)	Female Labour Force Participation is a moderate 31.0%.	PLFS 2022-23
	SDG 3: Good Health (76, Front Runner)	Life Expectancy is the highest of the three at 71.6 years.	SRS 2016-20
Uttar Pradesh	SDG 4: Quality Education (41, Aspirant)	Foundational Learning is very low: 25.0% of Class V can read Class II text.	ASER 2022
	SDG 4: Quality Education (41, Aspirant)	Higher Education Enrolment is a low 25.8%.	AISHE 2021-22
	SDG 8: Decent Work (54, Performer)	Female Labour Force Participation is the highest of the three at 32.1%.	PLFS 2022-23
	SDG 3: Good Health (60, Performer)	Life Expectancy is the lowest of the three at 66.1 years.	SRS 2016-20

In Table IV, the data from Gujarat illustrate the well-known Gujarat Paradox, in which deficiencies in social and human development coexist with robust economic indicators. Its economy, which requires a skilled workforce for its industries, is reflected in its highest among the three states in higher education enrolment (31.7%). Its inadequate foundational education, however, stands in sharp contrast, suggesting a system that emphasizes postsecondary education more than addressing the quality crisis at the primary level. The U-shaped hypothesis of female employment explains a well-researched economic phenomenon that accounts for Gujarat's lowest female labour force participation rate (25.6%).

As household incomes rise from a low base, women typically leave manual or low-status labour to concentrate on household responsibilities, which is often interpreted as an indication of improved family status. Gujarat, being more prosperous than the other two states, is on this downward-sloping portion of the "U," where increasing income causes a temporary decline in female participation before it may rise again with greater opportunities in the formal sector and higher education (Klasen & Pieters, 2015).

West Bengal is characterized as a state with a strong history of public systems but is currently dealing with serious issues related to quality and economic dynamism. Its life

expectancy (71.6 years) is evidence of a historically strong public health system. However, with the lowest foundational learning score among the three states (32.7%), it faces a serious crisis. This low level of foundational learning is often attributed to a system that, under the Left Front, prioritized access and enrolment over quality and learning outcomes.

The result was a large educational system with weak outcomes, due to systemic issues such as outdated pedagogy, lack of accountability, and politicization of teacher appointments (Mukhopadhyay & Sanyal, 2011). Demand-side factors also explain the state's low higher education enrolment rate of 24.1%.

Uttar Pradesh presents a complex story of both striking new trends and long-standing challenges. Its poor foundational learning scores and lowest life expectancy demonstrate the enormity of its developmental obstacles. Despite widespread patriarchy, it has the highest female labour force participation rate (32.1%) among the three states, which is generally interpreted as a sign of economic distress rather than empowerment. Analyses of PLFS data indicate that women's self-employment and low-paying, precarious work in agriculture and other forms of self-employment-often as unpaid family helpers-are the main contributors to this trend. Women are compelled to enter the workforce for survival

rather than opportunity as other household income sources become unstable (Mehrotra & Sinha, 2023).

V. CONCLUSION

The comparative journey of Gujarat, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh confirms that there is no single Indian path to development. The destinies of these states are being forged in the crucible of their unique political economies. Our analysis shows that their SDG performance directly reflects their dominant ideologies, historical burdens, and concrete political choices. This study reveals three archetypal models of development, each the result of its own political economy. Gujarat exemplifies a "Growth-First, Social-Later" strategy, in which state-led capitalism produces remarkable economic figures but leaves behind a sizable social deficit.

West Bengal, in sharp contrast, adheres to a "Welfarism-Without-Growth" model, demonstrating an impressive ability to provide social services rooted in its political past, while remaining stuck in a low-growth equilibrium.

Finally, Uttar Pradesh represents a "Foundational State-Building" model, fighting a difficult battle to establish fundamental systems despite the overwhelming force of history and population. Ultimately, this comparison demonstrates that the SDGs are a deeply politicized endeavor, with the final rankings reflecting not merely technical scores but the outcomes of competing political wills and ideologies.

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