



# Are human rights and economic well-being substitutes? The evidence from migration patterns across the Indian states



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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to study the relationship between the demand for human rights and the demand for economic prosperity from the “exit” perspective, looking at migration patterns. We investigate intra-national migration in India, which is a federation of various states that feature significant economic and political differences. The paper finds that the quality of human rights protection and the economic well-being in the target state are substitutes with respect to determining patterns of migration. These results depend on framing effects; human rights complaints appear to be interpreted differently by migrants, depending on the trust in the government in the target state.

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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between income and demand for democracy or human rights has been actively discussed in the extant literature in economics and political science. This relationship appears to be theoretically ambiguous; moreover, the analysis of this relationship poses a serious challenge for the empirical literature because it is extremely difficult to identify the actual demand for democracy. Several papers attempt to extract this information from public opinion surveys (e.g., Duch, 1995; Evans and Whitefield, 1995; Kotzian, 2001; Bratton and Mattes, 2001; Inglehart, 2003), the emergence of pro-democratic political movements (Minier, 2001) or public protests (Kricheli et al., 2011; Moeller, 2011). A significant portion of the aforementioned literature examines this topic by assessing the “voice” (i.e., the political activity within a country or a sub-national jurisdiction); however, an alternative approach must be considered, namely, an analysis of the “exit”, which refers to the *migration* of a population to various countries and regions as a result of economic and political factors. An advantage of studying “exit” rather than “voice” is that the former type of analysis is able to capture *revealed preferences* for democracy by examining migration decisions, which may account for democracy-related considerations (or which may ignore these issues, if the demand for democracy is insufficiently important in a particular situation). In addition, in contrast to “voice”, “exit” decisions are rarely

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“strategic”; i.e., migrants do not expect their country of destination (or origin) to change as a result of their migration decisions. With certain exceptions, it is generally accurate to assume that migrants regard the economic and political conditions of their destination as fixed traits that will remain unchanged, independent of migration flows.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the policies and regulations of many nations render it rather difficult to use international migration patterns to study the research question of this paper. Most developed countries impose severe restrictions on immigration, whereas many non-democracies restrict emigration<sup>2</sup>; in general, migration-related restrictions are often correlated with political regimes. Thus, an interesting alternative approach involves considering the *intra-national* movements of a population with respect to democracy-related variations. Although certain countries impose intra-national restrictions on the freedom of movement of their residents, these restrictions are rarely as severe as the regulations that are routinely created on the international level (moreover, even severe intra-national restrictions can typically be evaded because of the presence of enforcement gaps with respect to these restrictions). In addition, strong variations in *sub-national* political regimes and environments may exist; for most federations in the developing world, the co-existence of not only “isles of autocracy” and more democratic sub-national governments but also territories with widely varying levels of protection of human rights is the rule rather than the exception (McMann, 2006; Gel'man, 2010). There are two further advantages of examining intra-national migration rather than international migration. First, the use of intra-national data rather than international data reduces the unobserved heterogeneity (Snyder, 2001). Second, democracy and well-being are frequently correlated in international samples (although there are certain non-democratic, high-income countries that attract migrants, such as the United Arab Emirates or, during the past ten years, Russia). On the sub-national level, the association between human rights and income may be less clear; more important, this association may be perceived in a more ambiguous fashion by intra-national migrants than by international migrants.

This paper attempts to apply the strategy that is described above by analyzing the determinants of migration flows across Indian states. There are several factors that influence the choice of this country for the current study. First, Indian states differ substantially with respect to income. Second, strong political distinctions exist among Indian states (Harriss, 1999; Besley and Burgess, 2002; Beer and Mitchell, 2006; Chen and Sil, 2007). Thus, this study is feasible because the Indian states provide substantial variations in both of the explanatory variables that are of interest to us. A decisive argument in favor of the examination of India is that this country not only is characterized by a diverse array of sub-national political environments but also provides us with quantitative data that allow these environments to be measured; this feature is absent in many federations that include multiple regional political systems. A further argument that supports the analysis of the Indian case is the presence of information regarding intra-national cross-regional migration; these data are unavailable for many developing countries that possess diverse sub-national political systems.<sup>3</sup>

More specifically, we intend to discover whether migrants view human rights and income as complementary factors or as substitutes (i.e., whether these migrants are willing to accept higher levels of human rights violations in exchange for higher incomes). In this paper, we address a rather narrow aspect of democracy; in particular, we examine only the protection of human rights.<sup>4</sup> The choice of this variable is motivated by two factors. First, quantitative data on human rights violation complaints in Indian states are available and have been reported by a *federal* institution (the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)); therefore, information regarding human rights violations for individual states is relatively reliable.<sup>5</sup> More importantly, restricting this study to the examination of only one aspect of democracy facilitates theorizing about the demand for human rights because this focus removes several additional uncertainties that are associated with the broader concept of democratization. The willingness of individuals to relinquish basic human rights in exchange for economic wealth is likely to be less than their willingness to surrender other aspects of democracy, such as political freedoms (e.g., the right to vote), because human rights violations *directly* affect the everyday life of each individual and can be extremely deleterious. Thus, we subject the possibility of a substitutive relationship between (this aspect of) democracy and economic well-being to an extreme case test.

It is important to initially explain the meaning of “human rights” in the context of the paper and describe how these rights may be violated. From the perspective of this paper and in accordance with the literature, human rights violations refer to repressive action by the government, by its institutions or by individual officials against the population of a country. This repressive action can be associated with direct violence (e.g., illegal arrests or beatings by the police); the expropriation of property; limitations on movement, self-expression, speech or religious freedom; discrimination in terms of access to governmental facilities; and the violation of legal procedures associated with arrest, bail, courts, treatment of convicts and accused individuals, and the use of torture. A specific catalog of human rights under international law (which also guides the activities of the NHRC) and the problem of measuring human rights violations are discussed by Stohl et al. (1986) and Green (2001). Human rights violations are *defined* such that they can be committed only by the government: for example, if an arrested individual is beaten in a police department, this action constitutes a human rights violation, whereas if a group of citizens beat a policeman, it is (although illegal) not a

<sup>1</sup> This reasoning does not imply that target countries or locations exhibit no change resulting from migration; in fact, a substantial part of the political economy of migration is dedicated to the analysis of the alterations that occur in target locations as a result of migration (Borjas, 1999; Gaston and Rajaguru, 2013). However, in most situations, these changes do not appear to be intended or even anticipated by migrants.

<sup>2</sup> For further studies regarding the effects of migration restrictions on different groups of migrants and on the perception of migrants by native populations, see O'Connell (2011).

<sup>3</sup> However, the extant literature addressing inter-state migration in India appears to be rather limited (Greenwood, 1971; Srindar et al., 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Typically, human rights are considered a core element of democracy, but some papers argue that political democracy and violations of human rights may exhibit a more complex interrelation (Davenport and Armstrong, 2004; Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005).

<sup>5</sup> If such information were reported by a local institution, one would expect the institution to manipulate information in favor of the state governments. For a federal institution, this manipulation is unlikely.

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