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Human Development in India: Past Trends and Future Challenges

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9.1 Introduction
It is now 16 years since economic reforms were launched in India. The Indian economy has grown remarkably over this period; indeed, in the last decade, it has been one of the fastest growing economies in the world. The robust growth of the economy has certainly reduced poverty — with poverty incidence falling from 32 per cent in 1993–94 to 23 per cent in 2004–05 in the rural areas and from 28 per cent to 22 per cent in the urban areas (Sundaram 2007). But how has the Indian economy performed on broader indicators of human and social development? This paper looks at India’s performance on five dimensions of human development — infant mortality, child nutrition, nutrient intake, educational attainment, and sex ratios — especially during the decade of the 1990s. The paper also discusses the challenges that remain going forward.

9.2 Infant Mortality
Health conditions have improved considerably in India over the last several decades. The infant mortality rate, which is one of the best indicators of overall health outcomes in a nation, has fallen from about 140 deaths per 1,000 live births in the early 1970s to only 58 in 2005, representing an annual rate of decline of 2.3 per cent per year (Figure 9.1). Infant mortality rates in the rural areas have fallen at approximately the same rate as those in the urban areas, so that the rural–urban divide has not narrowed appreciably during this period.

While a decline in the infant mortality rate of 2.3 per cent per annum is respectable, it is certainly not impressive in comparison to the experience of other low- and middle-income countries in Asia. Figure 9.2 shows that, over a comparable period, infant mortality rates in South Korea and Indonesia declined by about 3 per cent annually, while those in Sri Lanka and Thailand declined at 4 per cent annually. Most impressive, however, is the experience of neighboring Bangladesh — a country that is not only significantly poorer than India but whose economy has grown much less rapidly than India’s over the last 2–3 decades. During the period 1970–2000, Bangladesh saw its infant mortality rate fall by 5.6 per cent annually! Thus, India’s performance in infant mortality reduction has fallen significantly short of the experience of other developing countries.
An average infant mortality rate for India of 58 deaths per 1,000 live births masks very large intra-national variations. Kerala has an infant mortality rate of 14 — comparable to that observed for Russia, Macedonia, Thailand and Uruguay — while Orissa’s infant mortality rate of 75 is as high as Zimbabwe’s, Tanzania’s and Senegal’s infant mortality.