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One notch up, but India still has miles to go

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NEW DELHI: The Human Development Report (HDR) 2006, released by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on Thursday provides the opponents of globalisation, particularly in India, with useful ammunition.

What it shows is that in most countries including India, improvement in the human development index has slowed down in the period 1990 to 2004, compared to the pace in the previous 15 years.

In India's case for instance, the period from 1975 to 1990 saw the HDI score improve by close to 25%. In the next 14 years, that figure has come down to 18.6%. Given the fact that the latter period is more or less the post-reforms period in India, this is bound to be used as a strong argument by those opposed to the reforms.

India is by no means an isolated example. The HDR gives index scores for 177 UN member countries. For as many as 79 of these, comparative figures are not available over the two periods we are looking at.

This could be because some countries simply did not exist in 1975 — Slovenia, Bosnia or Turkmenistan for instance — or in some cases because the HDR has not been tracking them since that time.

Of the 98 countries for which data is available for both periods, however, only 24 have seen their HDI scores improving more rapidly since 1990 than they did between 1975 and 1990.

It might seem that this is because countries that had already attained very high levels of human development by the mid-90s would have had little scope for improvement later.

That, however, is not the case. In fact, Norway, which tops the latest HDI index, is among the few that have improved more in the later period.

Other developed countries in this select list include the UK, Italy, Sweden, Luxembourg, Australia, Ireland, Denmark and New Zealand, all of which are ranked in the top 20.

Switzerland's HDI score has improved exactly as much between 1990 and 2004 as it did in the 1975-90 period, which actually means the Swiss have done just a bit better in the later period since it is shorter by one year.

China and Bangladesh are among the developing countries that have seen a more rapid improvement in HDI score in recent years than in the past.

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