

# DEMOCRATIZING POLICY ACTION IN INDIA

AMIT KAPOOR, BIBEK DEBROY, AND MEENAKSHI AJITH

Over the years, the Indian state has responded to changing domestic and international circumstances through reforms, the most notable being the liberalization measures of 1991. The substratum for reforms was steadily built using a reservoir of knowledge drawn from ancient texts, the colonial state, and the Indian constitution, which eventually shaped the contours of public policy. Since independence, various governments have constituted and reconstituted India through reforms. As a developing country, in a world riddled with cascading crises ranging from the COVID-19 pandemic to climate change, India needs a smart mix of innovative reforms for the future. Public policy has a critical role to play in shaping this new vision of a human economy—to bequest the “India way” of reforms for people and the planet. The idea of growth and development in India today is human-centric and it resonates with the global discourse on sustainable development and transitions for a resilient future.

Continued policy reforms are needed to ensure a thriving human economy and to close opportunity gaps that lead to social fragmentation. A human economy is one in which the thoughts, actions, and lives of people are valued above everything else. When people thrive and are able to live up to their full potential as workers, creators, and engaged citizens, the economy and society benefit greatly. Against a backdrop of the emerging and persistent challenges the world is currently facing, reforms to achieve resilient growth go beyond mere structural transformation. They call for using a multi-level and multi-stakeholder approach to build an environment that en-

ables the transition to an economy that is human-centric, socially inclusive, and environment friendly. To live up to this ideal, India needs reforms that include significant investments in infrastructure, sustainability, and education.

So what should today’s citizens expect from policy reforms in India? The mantra for today’s rapidly developing India is “Everyone’s Partnership, Everyone’s Prosperity, and Everyone’s Trust.” This is a call to action for the citizenry to shape future reforms. It is the active democratization of the policy space in India, a process that began much before the rise of human economy. Contrary to popular belief, the

Indian state has already built a robust platform for citizen engagement, thus the onus is now on citizens and state governments to drive transformational initiatives. In this paper, we look into the high-impact sectors of change in India and briefly describe the country's policy heritage, as well as the way forward.

## THE SUBSTRATUM OF REFORMS IN INDIA

The Indian Government had a lucid mandate for nation-building immediately after independence. Growth agendas were comprehensible, tradeoffs were justified, and the country was poised to become a global superpower. The idea of reform in a newly independent India was nascent, or perhaps

an intrinsic element of the mundane activities of the government. Everything from unveiling the constitution to economic planning was synonymous with reformation for the newborn state. Seventy-five years and many governments later, the citizens' and the state's understanding and expectations from policy reforms have been changing rapidly. Since the 1990s, policy reform has been perceived as the basis for vitalizing and sustaining growth. Today's government policies have become the mast and touchstone of research and action in India. Good governance and participatory democracy have become buzzwords for India's growth strategy. However, growth is directly proportional to the functioning, efficiency, and behavior of the government and the citizens. How

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Amit Kapoor** is the Honorary Chairman of the Institute for Competitiveness, India. He is an affiliate faculty member teaching the Microeconomics of Competitiveness & Value Based Health Care Delivery courses at the Institute of Strategy and Competitiveness, Harvard Business School, where he has also been inducted into the Competitiveness Hall of Fame. Kapoor lectures at Stanford University, where he has launched a new course "Reimagining Capitalism/Rebalancing Economic Systems" with Professor Richard Dasher. With Michael Porter and Christian Ketels, he is co-author of *The Competitiveness Roadmap for India at 100*.

**Bibek Debroy** currently serves as Chairman of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister of India. He has made significant contributions to the study of game theory; economic theory; income and social inequality; poverty; legal reforms; railway reforms; and Indology, among other topics. Debroy was a member of NITI Aayog, the think tank of the Indian Government, from its inception in January 2015 to June 2019. He was awarded the Padma Shri (the fourth-highest civilian honor in India) in 2015.

**Meenakshi Ajith** is a researcher at the Institute for Competitiveness and is currently consulting with the Sherpa track of India's G20 presidency. She was associated with the Development Monitoring and Evaluation Office of NITI Aayog, working on areas of regulatory governance. Ajith has experience on a range of development policy issues, with particular expertise in climate action, environment, and clean energy transitions.

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do we streamline and synergize the efforts of various stakeholders for better policy outcomes? What is the one “big bang” reform that will bring about positive transformation in India? In this article, we discuss the substratum for reforms in India, the high-impact sectors for action, and how citizens can engage with the policy space to effect reforms in India.

## **GENESIS OF THE INDIAN POLICY SPACE**

Even the unassailable countries of the Global North were stunned by the COVID-19 pandemic. India responded quickly to the situation with a broad spectrum of policy changes across sectors. Along with dealing effectively with this and other catastrophes, India has been growing as a complex society and an economy with unbridled aspirations. Therefore, policy reforms in India are a continuous process, and all governments and citizens must work toward this end. Think tanks and NGOs are also emerging as key partners in articulating reform agendas for the nation. In 2009, a study commissioned by the central government and carried out by CSO Partners, an NGO based in Chennai, revealed that India had one NGO for every 400 citizens, a ratio that has since increased. This figure suggests a highly aspirational Indian citizenry. Literacy rates have shot up, and grassroots democracy has been institutionalized through the 72<sup>nd</sup> and 73<sup>rd</sup> amendments. Therefore, expectations now go beyond the economy to encompass social policy, health, education, and infrastructure. It is critical to note that every country has its unique heritage, resources, and growth trajectory, and that building a context-specific repository of information and raising the right questions can help free India from the shackles of restrictive policies and boost possibilities for a quantum leap to a five trillion-dollar future economy.

The genesis of parliamentary structures and legislative procedures in India did not begin with colonial rule. In fact, ancient Indian literature contains innumerable passages on every known theory of contemporary governance and policymaking. It can be traced back to the Vedic age, when India was home to republican forms of government, self-governing institutions, and deliberative bodies like the Sabha and Samiti. The Ramayana, Mahabharata, Kautilya’s Arthasasthra, Panini’s Ashtadhyayi, the Ashokan Pillar inscriptions, and the Buddhist and Jain texts hold pearls of wisdom from the past. Colonial rule introduced Western premises and precepts, but the foundations of Indian traditions were not swept away by values from the West. They were enshrined in the Indian constitution by leaders of the constituent assembly. This includes modern laws relating to dispute resolution, punishment, governance, and federalism, which can be traced back to Shantiparva in Mahabharata. The idea of respecting the wealth creators in an economy has been attributed to the Chicago School of thinking, but it also finds resonance in ancient Indian literature. Therefore, Indians can and must contemplate “India ways” of reform for the future.

To build the preliminary arguments, it is essential to distinguish between policy change and policy reform. The scope of this article is limited to public policy reforms. In simple terms, public policy is associated with government actions or plans for reaching a particular goal. While policies guide the activities of all kinds of organizations, public policy relates specifically to the government, and changes in that realm refer to incremental shifts in existing structures or to new and innovative policies (Bennett & Howlett, 1992). Reform, on the other hand, refers to a significant policy change. Reich (1995) notes that policy reforms are possible when there is sufficient political will to represent

a selection of values that express a particular social view. A policy reform that allocates benefits and costs has significant consequences for a regime's political stability. For example, the Goods and Services Act in India, which reflected values such as transparency and efficiency through measures like the anti-profiteering and E-way bills, transformed the landscape of indirect taxation. The Union Budget affects policy changes every year, but significant reforms like GST require political will and stability. This is not to say that reform and change are airtight categories; they are but two sides of the same coin. Tinkering changes in policy eventually set the context for a big-bang reform. The next sections address the change and reform aspects of public policy in India, including such questions as, What does the future hold for India? What are the high-impact sectors that demand immediate attention?

## **REFORMS FOR SURVIVAL, PROSPERITY, AND EQUALITY**

### **Survival**

Climate change has real and immediate human costs that are increasing with each passing day. There is little doubt that the painful effects of climate change will be experienced most by the people who contribute to it the least.

Recurring catastrophes and soaring temperatures have exposed the callousness and obstinacy of global climate leadership. India has expressed an unwavering commitment to climate adaptation by completely aligning its national agenda with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The government has made commendable policy changes toward this commitment, but major policy reform has yet to be formulated. The good news is that incremental progress facilitated by the central leadership has created a sturdy platform on

which to enact reforms. India's national strategy emphasizes energy efficiency, resilient urban infrastructure, and planned eco-restoration, among other interventions. Since 2015, clean cooking fuel has reached an additional 80 million households through the Ujjwala Scheme. Between 2016 and 2021, liquefied petroleum gas coverage in the country increased from 62 percent to 99.8 percent. Installed capacity for renewable energy has grown by 75 percent since 2014, currently third-best in the world. India also has leveraged global partnerships to augment disaster resilience and solar power infrastructure.

However, responsibility does not end after policies are passed or infrastructure is built. The onus is now on states and communities to take India's sustainability movement forward. The central government can provide enabling infrastructure for sustainability, but the ultimate behavioral revolution in climate action must begin at the state and household levels. As the prime minister reiterated at the UN Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC COP26), India should begin the move toward Lifestyle for Environment.<sup>1</sup>

Investment in climate action undoubtedly creates a positive chain reaction across sectors, ranging from food, energy, and livelihoods to the very survival of human life. India cannot consider inclusive growth without first factoring in the costs of climate change and pushing for reforms to address these issues. Currently, floods, droughts, tropical cyclones, and other extreme weather events are damaging India's infrastructure, and its economic activity. The climate is unquestionably a high-priority area for reform, as the positive impact of eco-friendly planning far exceeds the immediate financial costs.

### **Prosperity**

Sound infrastructure facilitates the conversion of wealth into well-being. It is a time-tested indicator of civilization and progress

going back to the Harappans, who appear in the history textbooks because of their extensive network of roads and meticulously designed drainage systems. COVID-19 presented a tricky opportunity for infrastructure, especially in countries like India (Abadie, 2020). The government's fiscal capacities shrank while infrastructural needs increased. During the pandemic, the demand for healthcare, transport connectivity, and digitized services were suddenly rudimentary needs for conducting life. Fortunately, India had made considerable headway in infrastructural growth before the pandemic. From 2015 to 2019, investment in developing roads tripled. The Bharatmala project, for instance, revolutionized India's road infrastructure by building corridors, feeder routes, and international connectivity. In the telecom sector, the internet user base expanded from 252 million in 2014 to 655 million in 2019. Similar policy changes were implemented in primary healthcare, education, urban mobility, etc. The Government of India launched the Smart Cities Mission in 2015 to enhance the quality of life in 100 cities and towns. All of these improvements enabled the country to quickly scale up its response to COVID-19.

Developing good infrastructure demands a substantial investment, but it also has a multiplier effect in terms of creating employment opportunities, connecting people, and boosting socioeconomic activity. An extensive literature review by the World Bank Group on the multiplier effects of infrastructure investments revealed that the largest multipliers are associated with public spending, rather than other types of spending (Foster, Vagliasindi, & Gorgulu, 2022). The degree of change varies for each sector. For example, investment in renewable energy infrastructure will create immediate multipliers in employment for the short term, but developing digital infrastructure can yield more benefits over the long run. Evidence also

points to the fact that achieving the desired social benefits relies on the productivity of the public investment. Strengthening institutions and the economy's competitiveness is essential to making substantial infrastructure policy reform. Moreover, infrastructural reforms hold the key to unlocking prosperous growth in India.

### **Equality**

This section briefly outlines certain key areas for social reform in India, although the broad spectrum of topics falling under social-sector reforms makes it an arduous task to explore the scope of this sector merely as a subsection. Social-sector reforms generally aspire to eliminate poverty and inequality. However, the elimination of poverty cannot be achieved merely by redistributing existing wealth, nor can a program aimed only at raising production remove existing inequalities. The two must be considered together, as only a simultaneous advance along both lines can create the conditions under which the community can make its best effort to promote development (Debroy & Jhurani, 2020). In other words, social reform is not only about pulling people out of poverty but ensuring that they do not easily slide back into it. In today's world, all the aspects mentioned above, including infrastructure and climate governance, play a key role in sustaining social-sector reforms in India.

India has a young population, with an average age of 29. Tapping into the demographic dividend through reforms in the education sector can enhance job creation and employability in the country. Again, India needs simultaneous interventions wherein opportunities for education, job creation, and social mobility grow alongside each other. To enhance overall productivity, policy reform in education should provide comprehensive coverage, from primary education to higher education research degrees. The paradox of female participation in the workforce in

India also calls for attention; as literacy rates and women's enrollment in higher education have risen, participation in the workforce has declined. The U-curve thesis correlates economic development with women's participation in the workforce (Goldin, 1995, 61-90), leading to the question of whether India is now on this trajectory or if there are other reasons for the dip in women's workforce participation.

India today has sufficient resources and political will to design and execute smart interventions, but the question remains of how the government and its citizens will approach policy reforms for the future.

### **RESPONSIBLE CITIZENSHIP**

With India's diverse population, an argument can be made against the feasibility of participatory democracy. India is a noisy democracy with pockets of resistance, institutions for articulation, and platforms for citizen engagement, and we are quick to point toward high voter turnout as an excuse for the non-performance of citizenship duties the rest of the year. However, the real arena for engagement opens when words turn into action. The foremost exercise in meaningful citizen participation in India is keeping an open mind. As a country with multiple ideologies and diverse interests at play, fostering an atmosphere of acceptance and dialogue is crucial for participation, although that does not mean having a one-on-one with every Indian citizen. Passage of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments has strengthened the country's democratic institutions, making it easier to find that sweet spot between deliberation and participation. Citizens should be aware of India's efforts to democratize data and improve public access to information. Reviewing government reports and policy documents will enable them to ask the right questions to push reforms.

### **GOOD GOVERNANCE AT THE GRASSROOTS**

Does India need a second state reorganization commission? Now that the idea of good governance and efficient delivery of services is gaining traction, is there a need to revisit state boundaries in India? The Indian states are essentially a product of colonial whims and military or political exigencies. The 1953 state reorganization commission, which was largely fueled by emotion, laid out "successful working of the national plan" as a criterion for carving out states. Times have changed, and since 2014, India has moved away from the one-size-fits-all approach. Policy changes have focused on localization and decentralization. With such modifications, citizens and the states should contemplate strategies to optimize outcomes. Efficiency is a critical pillar of good governance, and some states in India are too large to govern, while others are too small. India's constitution states that every citizen has an equal right to access a minimum basket of goods and services, but if the states, with their present territorial boundaries, calculate the cost of delivering this minimum basket, glaring disparities are bound to emerge.

In 1958, India set up the National Productivity Council as an autonomous body under the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade. Can today's Council calculate the cost of providing the "minimum basket" in a way that will minimize disparities? It is not uncommon to witness inequalities in health, education, and access to other essential services in Indian states, and these disparities need to be addressed, both between and within state boundaries. India's citizens and the states should work as equal partners to promote competitive governance across the country.

This is the "India way" of reforms—a dynamic and equitable policy space, adaptive and responsive institutions and invest-

ments for a sustainable and inclusive future. The investments to be made are not just financial but also in building human capital and social capital for the human economy in India. It is a constant expansion of human capabilities that empowers citizens to be agents of change while actively shaping an enabling environment through policy reforms.

Reforming a country like India, with its size and diverse population, requires a humanistic approach to reform that considers the interlocking factors of culture, environment, policy-making, and more. A nation's greatest asset in doing this is its human resources, which are a crucial indicator of its potential for growth. The good news is that the momentum, stability, and political will for monumental transformation does exist in India. The next step in creating a sustainable human economy is to build partnerships that realize the full potential of citizen participation.

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<sup>1</sup> This initiative encourages a lifestyle focused on the mindful and deliberate use of resources and aims to change present-day "use and dispose of" consumption habits. The idea is to encourage individuals to adopt simple changes in their daily life that can help to slow climate change. <https://amritmahotsav.nic.in/lifestyle-for-environment-life.htm>