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Commission and Committees as means of Public Policy: Vision and Public Policy in the 21st Century India

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Abstract

The earlier attempts regarding articulating India's Vision for the future relate to the Target Year of 2020. This paper shifts the target year to the next thirty years, that is, to the year 2050. Vision 2050, as articulated in this paper, envisions a structural change in the Indian economy in favour of the 'services sector' as it has the maximum potential to provide employment opportunities. This, in turn, would call for public policies to be pursued on different fronts commensurate with the Vision 2050. The paper argues that Commissions and Committees are the right kind of bodies to formulate sound public policies.

Keywords

Development strategy, Technological innovation, Globalisation, Gosplan, Cabinet Committees.

I. Introduction

Some similarity could be drawn between 'strategic management' followed by corporations and 'development strategy' pursued by governments. Strategic management is known to involve the three steps of: (a) strategy formulation, (b) strategy implementation and (c) strategy evaluation and recalibration. Strategy formulation by companies, in turn, requires formulating the company's vision for the future based on technological changes, competition in the market, changes in interest rates, changes in tax rates, mega demographic trends and changes in commodity prices etc.

Development strategy of governments, likewise, may be said to involve (a) strategy formulation, (b) strategy implementation and (c) strategy evaluation and recalibration. While strategy formulation in the context of development strategy would imply formulating the country's vision for the future, public policy may be looked like a tool for strategy implementation. In other words, if vision implies 'what all to achieve', public policy entails 'how to achieve' the vision.

The preamble of the Constitution of India - is a vision of sorts - envisioning 'a democratic, secular and socialist society and to secure to all its citizens **Justice**: social, economic and political; **Liberty**: of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; **Equality**: of status and opportunity'. That there is a close relationship between vision and public policy is evident from the Directive Principles of State Policy in the Constitution that mentions the followings:

(a) The State shall strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of the national life,
(b) That the citizens, men and women equally, have the right to an adequate means of livelihood,
(c) That the State shall within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age sickness and disablement, and in other cases of undeserved want,
(d) That children are given opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity and that childhood and youth are protected against exploitation and against moral and material abandonment.

In the absence of a linkage between vision and public policy, however, public policy becomes 'a rule – a guide for decision making of the government that affects public at large, or people, or all members of the community' (Chakravarty, 2017). Four possible outcomes may, moreover, be expected of any public policy, namely, (a) it promotes the interests of one group at the cost of other members of the society, (b) it promotes the wellbeing of all the people, although some benefit more and some less, (c) it secures the good of all the people equally and (d) it benefits the target group, that is, those who have been left behind.

It may also give rise to a trade-off between benefit today and benefit tomorrow. While subsidised food through public distribution system provides relief in the present, research in science and technology yield results in the long run. A policy choice may, similarly, have to be made between greater allocation of public expenditure to 'physical infrastructure' in comparison to 'social sector' or vice versa. Equally important is the policy choice between economic development and environmental protection.

2. Vision and Public Policy in the 21st Century

Concerned with the poor human development index in the country, the former President of India Dr A. P. J. Abdul Kalam observed, 'Every year about twenty million Indians are being added to the nation. What vision can they have? Should we, like some question the very concept of development and leave our people to the same condition of stagnation which existed for centuries.... Where should we see India (and its people) going in the next two decades? In the next five decades? And more?' (Kalam, 1998). In his book titled 'India 2020: A Vision for the New Millennium' that was published in 1998, he emphasizes the role of technology in transforming the society.

2.1 '<u>India 2020: A Vision for the New Millennium'</u>, by A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (1998)

The thrust of his book is, therefore, to accord technology the central place in the country's vision. He draws attention to the 'green revolution in agriculture'; pointing out how technology made India self-sufficient in food production and reduced our dependence on imports. He wants India to further extend this bio-technological revolution to fruits, vegetables, livestock and dairy production.

He then discusses the possibilities of technological revolution in the field of 'metals' such as iron, aluminium, titanium, rare earths, photonic materials, super conductivity materials and ceramics that are in abundance in India. Since ceramic is used in construction, he looks forward to a big transformation of the construction sector. Next, he discusses 'chemicals' and the related chemical industries like petro-chemicals, rubber, polymers, polymer additives and lubricants that promise great technological possibilities.

He, furthermore, argues for research and innovation in the areas of textiles, engineering industries, electrical equipment and transport equipment. These are followed by his emphasis on generation of power through renewable sources of energy and nuclear energy. Health occupies a very high position in his priority where he sees technology transforming the lives of an average Indian - whether that be in the realm of safe drinking water, drainage system, waste disposal, pollution control or clean energy.

He attaches equal importance to development of information and communication technology (ICT) for benefiting the society as it has cut down costs and increased productivity, across the economy. He also looks up to innovation in the fields of marketing communication (advertising, media, consulting), trading and distribution, repair and maintenance, tourism, sports, security, leisure and old age care in the 'services sector'.

2.2 '<u>Report of the Committee on India Vision – 2020'</u> by the Planning Commission (2002)

The Planning Commission brought out the 'Report of the Committee on India Vision – 2020' in 2002, which is a collection of articles by domain experts in the different sectors. The vision document of the Planning Commission endorses the significant role played by technology in transforming economies. It acknowledges, in particular, the role of ICT in bringing India on the global map. The vision document attaches great importance to education and recommends 'general education for all children from class one to ten'. It also emphasizes vocational education and skilling of the rural population engaged in agriculture through 'Krishi Vikash Kendras'.

In the area of health, the document argues for improvement in health status of the population through better access to health services, especially so, by the underprivileged segments of the society. It also draws attention to massive differences in fertility, mortality and health care services across the different states. Recognizing the large size of the population in the reproductive age group, the vision document emphasizes on addressing the unmet needs of contraception/contraceptives in the country.

In order to bridge the wide gap between urban areas and rural areas, the vision document recommends for strengthening the rural infrastructure such as road, water, electricity, transport, telecom, education and health care. It also proposes for linking a cluster of villages - comprising 100, 000 or more people - through a circular highway and developing them into urban agglomerates whereby services of various kinds such as markets, schools and hospitals etc. could all be accessed within thirty minutes.

The vision document also draws attention to social issues such as neglect of girl child and plight of vulnerable sections of the society such as the scheduled tribes, the scheduled castes, other backward castes and the minorities. Regarding national security, the vision document contends that while external security depends on the military preparedness of the country, internal security depends on preservation of core values and fairness in administration.

A great deal of attention has also been paid to employment situation in the country – both wage employment and self-employment – as these are the main sources of livelihood for the people in the country. The majority of the people are, however, engaged in low income generating pursuits with very low productivity. The current unemployment rate at around seven to eight (per thousand) of the total work force - equal to around thirty-five lakh people remaining unemployed during the year - continues to be similarly very worrying. Large scale unemployment and low-income sources of livelihood are the root cause of widespread poverty in the country.

According to the vision document ‘education, technological innovation and globalisation’ have been the main drivers of growth in most economies. These are also considered the way out from the widespread poverty in the country. Although capital accumulation or ‘savings’ in the economy has traditionally been thought to be the main driver of economic growth, the Planning commission document attaches greater importance to ‘Knowledge Resource’. Such a view is based on the growth experience of advanced countries as it was observed, ‘while only one-eighth of the growth in the USA - from 1900 to 1950 - was on account of increase in capital, seven-eighth of the growth was due to technical progresses’.

3. Commissions and Committees as Means of Public Policy

Since public policy is also regarding ‘governance’, it has much to do with the concept of ‘the state’. In the eyes of the Marxists scholars, however, the state represents class interests, and it is naïve to expect that people in power will take a non-partisan view in respect to their decisions. Yet, we have the architect of Russian Revolution, namely V.I. Lenin who set up the Gosplan (State Planning Committee) soon after the Russian Revolution in 1917, as a parallel institution to administrative ministries, for giving ‘non-partisan and expert advice’ to the government.

Both ‘Commissions’ and ‘Committees’ are constituted to give expert advice on varied and complex issues. The essential difference between the two being that while the former is an external body, the latter is an internal body. The first step in setting up a committee or a commission is to identify the problem. At the second stage, the ‘terms of reference’

(TOR) for the committee/commission has to be articulated. Next, the members (the experts) of the committee/commission need to be selected/ nominated. At the fourth stage, the meetings have to be organised along with all that is necessary to address the different areas of concern mentioned in the TOR. Finally, the report has to be prepared that includes the 'executive summary' of the recommendations.

3.1 Planning Commission (NITI Aayog) – A Case Study

Article 246 of the Constitution of India, in the Concurrent List (List III, Item 20), provides for enactment of laws by both the Parliament and the State Legislatures regarding the subject matter of 'Economic and Social Planning'. In his Budget Speech (February 1950), the then Finance Minister announced the setting up of the Planning Commission to: (a) assess the material, capital and human resources of the country, (b) formulate a Plan for the most effective and balanced utilization of the country's resources. The Planning Commission was subsequently set up through a Government of India (Cabinet) Resolution in March 1950.

The Planning Commission was, moreover, modelled on the Gosplan of Soviet Russia. Accordingly, Subject Divisions of Agriculture, Industry, Transport, Power, Education and Health etc. were created in the Planning Commission as counterparts to the different administrative ministries. (Later on State Plan Divisions for the State Governments and the non-subject divisions of Perspective Planning Division, Financial Resources Division and Development Policy Division were set up). The Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission was, moreover, accorded the status of a Cabinet Minister and he participated in all the meetings of the Union Cabinet.

Significantly, however, whereas the Gosplan in Soviet Russia maintained an arm's length distance from the Ministries, the Planning Commission in India came to work together with the Central Ministries and the State Governments. This was most evident during the formulation of the Five-Year Plans. Accordingly, while the Advisers of the Planning Commission were made the Member-Secretary and Convener of the Steering Committees/Working Groups, the Secretaries of the different Ministries were made the Chairman of the Steering Committees/Working Groups. The advantage of associating the Ministries was that the Steering Committees could thus have easy access to the resources of the sectoral ministries. It ought to be mentioned that in comparison to the Central Ministries, the Subject Divisions comprised a very small group of officials/ subject matter experts.

The decision regarding the Terms of Reference and the selection of experts on these Committees was, however, the prerogative of the Planning Commission. The exercise on the Five-Year Plans, moreover, involved numerous Steering Committees/Working Groups/ Sub-groups working simultaneously for the Pan, spread across different sectors.

More than three to four thousand experts have thus been associated with the formulation of the successive Five-Year Plans[1].

The quality of the different reports, however, depended greatly on (a) the design of the TOR and (b) the calibre of the experts/members on the Committee. The experts selected/nominated on the Steering Committees/Working Groups/Sub-groups have generally been the Heads of the specialised institutions (Director-Generals), academics from universities, bureaucrats with long experience and of repute (both serving and retired), dedicated public servants of renown and individuals having publications in important journals. The Planning Commission thus functioned as a "think tank" of the Government and played a very important role in policy formulation for the country.

3.2 Other notable Commissions of Government of India

Some of the other notable Commissions of Government of India have been Commission on Agricultural Costs and Prices (1965), Tariff Commission (1951/1997), Law Commission (1955), Telecom Commission (1989), Pay Commission (various years) and Knowledge Commission (2005). These were set up in different years to address public policy issues in the different areas.

Unlike the above-mentioned Commissions that were set up through the Government of India Resolutions, the Finance Commission is set up under Article 280 of the Constitution of India after every five years. There have been fifteen Finance Commissions, so far. The Finance Commissions have primarily made policy recommendations regarding (a) the financial transfers from the Government of India to the State Governments, (b) the principles, which should govern the grants-in-aid of the revenues of the States out of the Consolidated Fund of India, (c) the measures needed to augment the Consolidated Fund of India of a State, to supplement the resources of the Panchayats and the Municipalities of the States.

3.3 Committees constituted by the Legislative Bodies

A perusal of the functioning of the Parliament (Lok Sabha/ Rajya Sabha) and the State Legislatures (Vidhan Sabha/Vidhan Parishad) also shows that they too have depended heavily on 'Committees'. There are broadly two types of these Committees, namely (a) Permanent Committees and (b) Ad hoc Committees. Ad hoc Committees are constituted for a specific purpose, and on completion of the work assigned they cease to exist. At times they may function as enquiry committees; however, when they are required to deliberate on the merits of a legislative bill, they perform the function of policy formulation.

The work of the Permanent Committees, on the other hand, are of continuous nature. Amongst the Permanent Committees, mention may be made of Estimates Committee, Committee on Public Accounts, Business Advisory Committee, Committee on Public

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[1] These exercises have been very cost effective as well for the country since the members/experts on these Committees worked in an honorary capacity receiving a nominal honorarium and were not paid fees for their services as 'consultants'.

Undertaking and Committee on Private Member's Bill. In addition, there are the Department Related Standing Committees (for the different Departments of Government of India), which function both as watchdogs as well as recommend policy reforms for necessary improvements.

Except for the Estimates Committee, all the other Committees mentioned above have members from both the Houses of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha; the number of members from Lok Sabha being more than from the Rajya Sabha. The tenure of membership on these Committees is for one year. Further, two approaches are adopted for selecting the members on these Committees, that is, either (a) through elections by members of the respective Houses (based on single transferable vote) or (b) through nomination by the Speakers of the respective Houses.

3.4 Committees of the Union Cabinet (Government of India)

India being a democracy, its government functions based on ''collective responsibility''. This is exhibited by governance through 'the cabinet'. There are, at the same time, different cabinet committees to address different pressing issues of the day, such as, those related to 'economy', 'political affairs' and 'foreign relations'. The more prominent of the policy making cabinet committees of the Government of India today are: the Cabinet Committee on Economic affairs (CCEA), the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs (CCPA), the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), the Cabinet Committee on Investment and Growth (CCIG) and the Cabinet Committee on Skill Development (CCSD).

The obvious advantage of these committees is that of 'broad consultation' within the government before any major policy decision is taken. A set procedure is followed, along with the required confidentiality. In the first stage the draft Cabinet Note is prepared by the administrative Ministry seeking the policy decision, which is vetted by the Cabinet Secretariat in respect to the procedure to be followed for submitting the Cabinet Note. The draft Note is then circulated to all the related Ministries for their comments on each of the recommendations of the proposal.

The comments of all the concerned Departments/Ministries are then consolidated, and the Ministry piloting the policy decision is required to reply to each of these comments. Once this exercise is complete and the modifications made, the final Note is placed before the Cabinet for discussion. Since the Union Cabinet is the highest (policy) decision making body, the cabinet notes and the cabinet meetings get all the necessary attention in the government. The system of policy decisions at the level of State Governments, similarly, is a replica of the practise followed in the Central Government.

3.5 Committees of Political Parties and Public Policy

The history of the Indian National Congress (INC) from1885 to 1947 is also the history of the freedom struggle of India. As it is well known, the INC started as a pan-Indian assembly of intellectuals concerned with the welfare of the country. From the Third Session onward in 1887, the Reception Committee of the INC constituted 'Standing

Congress Committees' to ascertain the subjects the people wished to be brought forward at the next Congress. (Pandey, 1986).

The political parties in post-Independent India have been also playing an important role in sustaining India's democracy. As part of the multi-party system, each party vies with other parties to get a larger per cent share of votes in the elections. Election promises are made to appeal the electorate through the party manifestoes. In this connection, it has been suggested that every party should constitute 'standing committees' on different pressing issues – political, social and economic. The recommendations of these committees could subsequently form the basis of the promises to be made in the party manifestoes (Kumar, 2019). These electoral promises eventually acquire the character of public policy when the party concerned is able to win the elections and form the government.

4. Conclusion (India Vision: 2050)

All human beings have physiological needs (food, water, warmth, rest), safety needs (safety, security), psychological needs (love and be loved) and self-fulfilment needs (self-esteem, achieve one's full potential); this is the well-known 'Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs' – irrespective of religion, caste, community or gender. We may superimpose on this the expectation of a decent source of income, a good education and health care system, assured supply of electricity and an efficient transport and telecommunication system. Since provision of all these goods and services form the basis of a happy society, it could very much be the vision of India - as for any other country - in the 21st Century.

All these requirements are, however, possible when 'the economy' is doing well. This may, furthermore, call for a higher gross domestic product (GDP) than what it currently obtains. In this context, the vision of a US$ 5 trillion economy for India by 2024, as being envisaged in some quarters, is significant. Earlier, Dun & Bradstreet - an American multi-national company - working on the Indian economy had forecasted about India becoming a US$ 5 trillion economy by 2020. Their paper titled 'India 2020: Economy Outlook' was circulated in 2011; but, the forecast remains unrealized as India's GDP currently (in 2020) hovers around US$ 2.5 to 3 trillion.

Perhaps, it would be better to set the vision for the future in terms of 'per capita income', since it reflects the economic welfare of individuals better– notwithstanding the income inequality in the society. The figures of per capita income, in terms of purchasing power parity, for the different countries stood at Intl. $ 55,864 for USA, at Intl. $46, 550 for Germany, at Intl. $ 40,645 for U.K., at Intl. $ 16,098 for China and at Intl.$6, 984 for India in 2018 (Source: IMF World Economic Outlook, October 2019). This also explains the strong tendency of people from low-income countries in North Africa to migrate to high income economies of Europe, and the trend in the rest of the world to migrate to the USA.

There are historical, institutional and geographic reasons for these differences in per capita income amongst the different countries. Nevertheless, possibilities exist for 'the low-income economies' to catch up with 'the high-income economies'. The explanation for such a convergence lies in higher economic growth in 'the low-income economies' compared to 'the high-income economies' (which often face higher capital depreciation because of past investments). This, however, necessitates right kind of policies to be pursued by the low-income economies.

Regarding vision of India, let us say, for 2050, it could be said that we ought to harness technology for higher economic growth. Technology contributes towards this goal through reducing cost of production and increasing productivity (per unit of capital/labour). Technology, at the same time, is a big disrupter; advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI), for instance, is feared to take away jobs when 'unemployment' is a huge challenge before the country.

The silver lining in all this is the steady growth of the services sector with huge employment opportunities in the known and the unknown (newer) areas. The share of the services sector in India that was 37 per cent of GDP in 1991 has gone up to 49 per cent in 2018 (Source: World Bank). The growth of the services sector, however, is contingent upon increase in per capita income. The per capita income of India that was Intl. $1,786 in 1991 grew four times by 2018 to Intl. $ 6,983 in 2018 (in purchasing power parity, at constant prices).

Higher per capita income is observed to spur demand across sectors such as education, health care, retail trade, transportation, travel and tourism, banking and finance, insurance, telecommunication, media, sports, entertainment industry and numerous other areas. It was, therefore, remarked that 'the need to "restructure" economic relations is now seen to be at the heart of international as well as national problem of development' (Chenary, 1979).

The experience of advanced countries is a pointer to such a development as their economies underwent a structural transition from having a larger share of agriculture in GDP initially to a larger share of industry and then to a much larger share of services. The share of the service sector in the US economy today, both in terms of employment and GDP is as high as eighty per cent.

In a way - the Vision 2050 – has to be that of an all-embracing ten per cent economic growth every year. This, in turn, would require commensurate public policies on all fronts. The several aims and objectives - integral to the ten per cent growth - may be expanded to include global impact such as good relations with other countries and concern for climate change. Commissions and committees are well proven bodies for formulating public policies. They can be useful in helping India achieve her vision. Care ought to be taken, however, to select the wisest on these bodies for best outcomes as it was advised, 'Recognize the best and get the best out of the best' (Kalam, 1998).

Note: The paper was presented at the International Seminar on 'Democracy and Public Policy in India: Choices and Outcomes' at the Jamia Milia Islamia University, New Delhi, 26-27 February 2020.

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