



STUDYING IDEAS AND INSTITUTIONS OF POLICY MAKING IN INDIA

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Introduction

India is the world's second largest democracy. When the Constituent Assembly took charge to draft the Constitution of India on December 9, 1946, it declared its firm resolve to proclaim India as an independent sovereign republic and set out on the task of drafting for her, a Constitution, for her governance. India is a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic, with a parliamentary form of government and governed in terms of the Constitution of India, which came into force on January 26, 1950. The Indian Constitution was influenced by the US Constitution. India was not only declared as a 'Union of States', but also, ideas like individual freedom, equality, progress, democracy, etc, became the cornerstones of the governing process.

Democracy, literally, means rule by the people¹. In a democratic setup, as exists in India, the manner of governing a State, has considerable socio, economic and political implications. Earlier, governance was typically associated with merely institutions of national government. However, governance not only includes institutions of national government, but also local and global governance. Governance is a much more broad-based process and includes a range of organizations, both public and private, and the complex relationships between them. Since the 1980s, ideas of neo-liberalism had scripted the end of the welfare state, an ideology that had enjoyed an eminent position for over forty years. In India, however, such claims were far-fetched, till the time other events and factors propelled it in this direction.

¹ The term is derived from the Greek *dēmokratiā*, which was coined from *dēmos* ("people") and *kratos* ("rule") in the middle of the 5th century BC to denote the political systems then existing in some Greek city-states.

Institutions of local governance, civil society organizations, private corporations and other market institutions, all became relevant actors in the new lexicon of governance. Thus, governance concerns necessarily have a wide ambit and encompass a variety of spheres. The government of a State has the responsibility of taking forward the development process. To achieve a set of goals and objectives, it undertakes a proposed course of action. In common parlance, this form of policy action, to serve public interest, which is guided by the law of the land, say, the Constitution, can be understood as public policy.

Understanding Public Policy

In its simplest sense, the term 'policy' refers to a course of action proposed or adopted by an organization or an individual or a group, which reflect future goals and aspirations and provides guidelines for achieving those goals within a given environment. In a democratic setup with the notion of welfare state, the primary responsibility of policy making, to take the country on the path of development, has been attributed to the government. However, contrary to popular perception, public policy is not merely a technical task of the government. Rather, it involves a complex interactive process, which are influenced by the diverse nature of environ forces, thereby not only shaping different policies but also influencing the resultant impact of it. As the relationships between the different agents of the society, not only became more and more complex but also interdependent, there arose a need to assess what governments do – that is to say, why certain policy alternatives were chosen over others?

It is in this light that we should first understand 'public policy'. With the evolution of representative governments and increased participation in the political process by large sections of the population, public policy assumed great significance. Successful policies paved way for successful governments and administration. Public policy is concerned with what is actually done by the government and public officials as against what it intended to do. It is different from a decision, which is a choice among competing alternatives. It is concerned with purposive actions pursued by the government to serve public interests. It is a dynamic process, which lays down guidelines for achieving the goals, which are in public interest, in the best possible way. Though mainly developed by the government, it is also influenced by the non-government factors and other socio, economic and political considerations of the times. Needless to say, public policies have a legal and an authoritative foundation. This feature of public policy stems from the fact the it is formulated by the authorities in the political system, namely, the legislature, the executive and the judiciary,

which are accepted and recognized by the members of the society as having responsibility of these matters and which they perceive as obligatory as long as they are formulated within the limits of the law of the land.

The term 'public policy' enters our lives on an everyday basis. Education policy, health policy, foreign policy, economic policy, tax laws, etc are the terms that we encounter through various means in our day to day life. The role that public policy plays in shaping a better future for our society makes it an important component of the political system. Public policy is not merely concerned with efficient and effective delivery of goods and services. It involves advancement of democratic and political capabilities of individuals in the society by creating awareness and by being participatory in nature. Public policy also plays a developmental role in the economy. Well-planned policies have been able to achieve socio-economic transformation in a nation. Since Independence, India has formulated a number of policies related to agricultural development, industrial growth, poverty eradication, improving various quality of life indices, social inclusion, etc, through programmes. Through the decades we have seen not only seen improvements in different sectors of the economy but also greater participation of the deprived and the marginalized sections. Strong policies have also enabled India to maintain national unity and integration and stave off external aggression.

Types of Public Policy

As mentioned earlier, public policy plays an important role in shaping a better future for the society. The government uses public policy as a tool to perform a number of functions. Each type of policy is linked to a particular political process like development or equality or social inclusion. Public policies can be broadly classified into four broad categories. First, there are regulatory policies, which aim at regulation and control of the conduct of socio-economic agents through coercive methods. The need for such policies arises because of the fact that there is a conflict of interest between different agents within a society. And to sort out such conflicts and to maintain harmony there is a need of a regulator. The regulatory policies are mainly concerned with regulation of different health indicators, education, trade, safety measures, etc. Generally, regulation is done by independent regulatory authorities that are establishes for that particular purpose by the government. In India, Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) (regulating the Stock Exchange trading), Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) (regulating the telecommunication sector) and Reserve Bank of

India (RBI) (regulating the flow of currency and other commercial banks) are some examples of regulatory agencies.

Second are the distributive policies, which aim to provide goods and services to specific sections of the population. These policies are required because there are certain sections of the society that need special attention in order to have an inclusive growth and development process. Distributive policies are important in a developing economy where problems like poverty, unemployment, low income, etc, are prevalent. Public welfare programmes are examples of such policies. In India, many such policies like agricultural subsidies to farmers, public distribution system to below poverty line families, employment facilities (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act – MNREGA), cheap government health service, etc, are some examples of distributive policies. Thirdly, we have the redistributive policies which aim at distributing resources from one group to another. In most of the countries, there exists economic as well as social inequality i.e. there exists in societies ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’. Thus, it becomes the responsibility of the State to work towards an equitable society through redistribution of social and economic rewards. Either through special concessions or through economic decisions, the governments try to bring about equality among the different sections of the society. Income tax policies, affirmative action policies, the recently launched cash transfer policy, etc, are some examples of redistribution policy in India.

Lastly, we have the ethical policies. In every society there are some ethical and moral issues accompanied by superstitions. This is more prevalent in a developing country, where a large proportion of the population is either uneducated or even with education continues to hold on to the social taboos. It thus, becomes imperative for the government to establish and promote correct social practices. Ethical policies establish what should be done in circumstances marred by moral conflicts, rather than trying to settle those moral issues. Making abortion a legally acceptable alternative, banning sex determination, promoting family welfare programs like vasectomy, etc are some of the public policies that have been formulated with regard to the ethical and moral issues in Indian society.

Models of Policy Making

Public policy is a term that we use and see in environ. Over the years, as social science developed, public policy has become more relevant. It became important to understand about political forces, nature and functioning of governments and the manner in which society reacts and responds to different policies. In the modern era, the sustenance and relevance of

various political forces depends on the response that society and economy as a whole gives to the governing process and the relative success and failure of it. Different groups, in a society like ours, have different interests and the key challenge of any democratic government is to simultaneously satiate the demand of such groups. Different social scientists have tried and to explain public policy. A brief explanation is discussed below.

Discussion about public policy has revolved around trying to explain events and outcomes. Over the years, different explanations have been given for analyzing the likely impacts of public policy. Traditionally, public policy was analyzed from an institutional view point. That is to say that the legitimate and universal character of public policy came from the authority of the government institutions, namely, the legislature, the executive and the courts. However, as behavioural studies emerged, the institutional approach was considered inadequate to explain public policy. The behavioural model tried to explain public policy in terms of human nature. Public policy was perceived as an outcome of struggle between different interest groups, with the actual policy of the said time reflecting the interests of the dominant group. Public policy has also been seen emerging from the thought process of the ruling elites. Opinions of the ruling elite are shaped as policy issues and are implemented by different arms of the governing elite. Another variant of the behavioural analysis of public policy has been look at it on rational grounds. In this analysis, the chosen public policy should be one which is the most rational and being the most efficient in terms of social cost and benefits. Social scientists have also analyzed public policy as a continuous process. Policy makers generally accept the earlier working policies and do not make significant changes in them. Instead of planning an entire new set of policies, successive governments tend to continue with the existing one for a variety of reason like nature and amount of investment, low possibility of conflicts between different groups, uncertainty about the success of new policies, fear of unfavourable public response against closure of a working public policy, etc. In cases of interdependence, public policy has also been given a game-theoretical² approach, especially in cases on international diplomacy and bargaining. While the approaches are mutually exclusive, they all try and explain different facets of public policy followed across the globe.

² Game theory studies conflict and co-operation between rational decision makers.