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Reaching new policy heights: Mission Karmayogi to reshape bureaucracy

Distrust has emerged as a major barrier in policymaking across India, deeply rooted in the colonial legacy of governance

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For over two decades, various government committees—spanning different political dispensations — recommended the corporatisation of the 200-year-old Ordnance Factory Board (OFB) to modernise operations. In 1985, the UK corporatised its Royal Ordnance Factories, the precursor to the OFB. Despite this clear model, India decided to corporatise OFB only in 2020, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, highlighting the challenges of policymaking. Another example is the protracted journey of India’s data protection law, which has been under discussion since 2015 but remains unimplemented after nine years.

Policymaking’s inherent complexities can sometimes delay decision-making, impacting overarching development objectives. By addressing these challenges, we can enhance the quality of public policy, driving meaningful change and ensuring sustained long-term growth.

However, resistance to change poses a significant challenge to effective policymaking. Individuals, organisations, and communities resist change due to

fears of job loss, financial risk, or loss of influence. For instance, labour unions opposed computerisation out of job security concerns. The older a practice, the more entrenched these interests, making reforms harder.

Government policy changes are further complicated by an entrenched culture of extensive documentation — laws, rules, executive instructions, and circulars. This documentation reinforces the status quo and creates a cascading effect, forming an intricate web of interdependencies. Each document often references others, which in turn spawns additional documentation. This interconnectedness creates a complex system where any modification can have ripple effects across several others, the full extent of which is often unclear. Artificial intelligence (AI) models should be developed to analyse government regulations and identify all potential interconnections arising from policy changes.

Policy changes also require balancing the scope and timing of such change. Effective change requires fine calibration— like a ship making a gradual U-turn. Timing is crucial; even good policies may fail if introduced prematurely, while well-timed policies align with public sentiment, easing adoption and reducing opposition.

Building policy consensus among government ministries can be challenging due to each ministry's unique, and at times conflicting, priorities. For instance, while one ministry may emphasise industrial growth, another may stress environmental preservation. While Article 75(3) of the Constitution mandates collective ministerial responsibility, no standardised procedure exists to resolve inter-ministerial disagreements. This often leads ministries to independently negotiate compromises, resulting in watered-down policies. In recent years, Prime Minister Modi has addressed several inter-ministerial conflicts through direct intervention. To enhance decision efficiency, a formal mechanism for swift involvement of the Prime Minister's Office to pre-emptively resolve issues is desirable.

Crafting an effective policy framework is often complicated due to differing perspectives of bureaucrats and politicians. Bureaucrats, insulated from outcomes, are risk-averse and favour the status quo. Politicians, accountable to voters, prioritise achieving visible results aligned with electoral goals, yet must navigate bureaucratic systems often mired in process. A cultural shift towards outcome-focused evaluations within the bureaucracy could greatly improve policy-efficiency and promote results-driven governance.

A major gap in public policy decision-making is the underuse of data, a habit stemming from a historical reliance on intuition over evidence. This issue is worsened by limited training in analytical methods among civil servants and a

hierarchical work culture that prioritises authority over merit. Digital India has greatly enhanced data quality, which should now be leveraged for evidence-based policymaking. Digitisation also creates unforeseen opportunities for newer, more efficient, and productive ways of doing things. For example, digitising banks not only enhanced efficiency but also increased transparency, curbing black money. The second-order benefits of digitisation must be utilised. Leveraging AI in policymaking is also essential. AI tools can analyse health data to predict disease outbreaks or simulate policy scenarios based on historical trends, thus supporting more informed, lower-risk decision-making. Training civil servants and policymakers in AI can unlock its full potential.

Policymaking must prioritise the proactive adoption of emerging technologies in space, drones, advanced materials, and quantum computing, each holding transformative potential. Our focus is often limited to supporting research and development (R&D) in these technologies, but we tend to lag in their adoption. Countries that proactively adopt emerging technologies grow faster. Policymaking, therefore, should embrace emerging technologies for global leadership.

Policymaking also suffers from duplication and overlap. Each ministry focuses on controlling its budget and projects, often overlooking potential synergies. For example, assets under the rural jobs scheme were created without coordination with ministries for roads and housing, leading to inefficiencies. The PM Gati Shakti platform, launched in 2021, addresses these overlaps in infrastructure. Learning from the same, a centralised knowledge platform is essential to minimise duplication and promote synergy in social sectors like health and education.

Distrust has emerged as a major barrier in policymaking across India, deeply rooted in the colonial legacy of governance. Instead of cultivating a trust-based administrative culture, post-Independence practices have perpetuated the system of distrust. This lack of trust affects interactions not only between the government and the public but also among officials themselves. Bureaucrats tend to create extensive checks and balances, treating everyone as a potential cheat.

Transitioning towards trust-based governance is essential, as the costs and inefficiencies of distrust-driven systems far outweigh the potential losses caused by the dishonesty of a few. For example, the current distrust-based system has resulted in policies that favour public sector undertakings (PSUs), often at the expense of leveraging the strengths of the private sector. Or, there is willingness to incentivise small enterprises but not large enterprises. Policymaking should prioritise performance and merit, not size. The production-linked incentive scheme, for instance, aims to reward growth, a welcome change from the past.

In conclusion, effective policymaking in India grapples with a complex web of challenges. While Mr Modi has taken commendable steps, the Karmayogi mission, which focuses on a new architecture for efficient public service delivery, should also consider a more profound cultural transformation. If we can overcome these challenges, the journey to Viksit Bharat will be smoother.

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