

Aspirational District Program and Good Governance: A Case Study of Chandauli and Nawada Districts

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Abstract

Public policy in India addresses socio-economic development through regulatory, distributive, and redistributive policies. Regulatory frameworks like those by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India manage industries, while distributive initiatives such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan target specific societal needs. Redistributive policies focus on reducing inequality through wealth and opportunity distribution. The Aspirational District Program (ADP), launched in 2018, aims to uplift India's most underdeveloped districts by fostering collaboration between central, state, and local governments. The program emphasizes a "bottom-up" approach, promoting development across sectors like health, education, and infrastructure. It uses data-driven governance to encourage competition between districts, driving socio-economic progress.

Case studies of Nawada and Chandauli districts illustrate the program's efforts to reduce disparities, though challenges remain, such as financial limitations and the need for improved progress metrics. ADP shows promise in transforming these regions but requires refinements to fully realize its potential.

Keywords: *Public policy, Aspirational District Program, Good Governance*

1. Introduction

A public policy is the vision document and a strategic measure plan of a government to pursue governance goals. It encompasses socio-economic development, political measures as well as international affairs. As such it has action-oriented dynamic element as well as theoretical, analytical elements pertaining to identifying and understanding issue areas. Thus, a public policy is basically a cyclical process which involves different stages of analyzing a problem area, planning and implementation of action and subsequent analysis of outcome in order to rectify the deficiencies leading towards policy modification or altogether new policies.

Public policies fall largely in three categories depending on the major socio-economic and political purpose they serve. Regulatory policies tend to regulate the functioning of industries and projects in order to govern the conduct of business in a country. For example, in India the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), the Pharmacy Council of India, Reserve Bank of India, Securities and Exchange Board of India etc. are all regulatory authorities functioning in different spheres of economy that frame policies for governance of business under the law of the land. Distributive policies are such policies framed for targeted benefit of certain groups. In case of India Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan, Mid- Day Meal initiative, different scholarships for students, are few examples of distributive policies. The prime focus on economic development has led to uneven progress in the socio-economic lives of people who could not be a part of the process due to several social, cultural impediments. Redistributive policies are the third most important category of public policy, that aspire to rectify such fault lines and are directed chiefly towards redistribution of wealth, civil rights, economic rights towards different social groups. Embedded in the idea of welfarism, these are targeted action plans framed to ameliorate the situation of marginalized sections of society. Income tax policies, Corporate Social Responsibility policies are framed by keeping the idea of redistribution at the center of policy making.

Transformation of Aspiration District Program (ADP) is the most recent policy initiative of government of India that aspires to create socio-economic parity among different regions of the country. It was launched in 2018 by prime minister Narendra Modi with an objective to accelerate development process in 115 most underdeveloped from the total 615 districts across states to usher in transformational changes. The policy is running under the direct oversight of NITI Aayog, the apex nodal agency of government of India tasked to bring economic development. In synch with the economic philosophy of NITI Aayog, ADP is anchored in the philosophy of cooperative federalism, competitive federalism with a focus on 'bottom-up' approach towards development planning. It focuses on five thematic sectors of economy-health and nutrition, education, agriculture and water resources, financial inclusion and skill development and basic infrastructure to bring about social progress of the people leading to holistic development. The choice of themes reflects the problem at the heart in the selected districts, i.e. poor human development indices.

2. Battling Historical Inertias: Continuities and Changes in Public Policy and Governance Model

In a study conducted by Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Gautam Chikermane assesses the role of seventy policies in shaping India since 1947 to 2017. The research uncovers the specific roles each of these policies played in shaping the socio-political and economic landscape of India, be it the era of import-substitution model or export-led growth. The socialist leanings of the Nehruvian era, political journey from a single-party system to coalition government and not least the colonial past all played significant role in paying the way for major public policy initiatives in India. In the first decade of Independence some regulatory policies such as setting up of Planning Commission in 1950, Finance Commission in 1951, State Bank of India Act 1955 etc. became the founding stones of Indian economic governance deeply linked with socio-political transformation of the country. Subsequently, enactment of Institutes of Technology Act in 1961 to build world class technological research and education centers keeping innovation for economic development at the heart of this project. Setting up of Food Corporation of India in 1965 to achieve food security and accessibility of food grains to the weaker sections of society through public distribution system is one of the major distributive public policies. It has proved its relevance till today, as the PDS system became the one sole platform through which country could provide food grains to its poor population during unprecedented situations that emerged due to lockdown in the wake of Covid 19 pandemic. Consumer Protection Act of 1986, Prevention of Corruption Act 1988, to Disinvestment of 1991 and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 all these major acts and policies mirror the changing nature of and needs of Indian state to meet its need of economic progress as well as to curb the unwanted side-effects or loopholes that over decades have weakened the development process. In recent decade, public policies such as Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojna 2014, Aadhar of 2016, Demonetization in the same year and Goods and Services Tax of 2017 have emerged as regulatory policies aimed at regulation of economy in order to harness distributive gains as well as purging out corrupt practices.

In the same line of policies, the Aspirational District policy can be seen as a state initiative to curb the problem of unequal development in the country. In that sense it can be understood as a regulatory policy however it is also anchored in the ideas of distributive Justice. However, it is a radical departure from previous development policies in various aspects. Firstly, it is based on the idea of cooperative federalism accordingly the central, state and district level officials and functionaries all cooperate to chart out best suitable ways and methods to bring about needed changes in selected districts. Secondly, it is not 'one size fits all' in its scope i.e. each district is studied for its areas of strength and accordingly urged to adopt schemes for its growth. Thirdly, it follows bottom-up approach to development i.e. people are encouraged by district collectors and other local officials to take active part in development process, by initiating awareness drives. In addition to this, partnership with civil society organizations is a key aspect of this policy that helps augment the initiatives of government in terms of technical support, sharing know-how. These organizations include Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, L&T etc. The novelty

of this policy is linked to its radically new conceptualization of governance according to which convergence, competition and collaboration are the three core ideas of this scheme. It stipulates that the convergence of existing development schemes at different levels of government should be undertaken through collaboration of public functionaries and also including people in the direct governance process by creating awareness. The third most crucial element of this scheme is data-driven governance, real-time data collection on 49 indicators of socio-economic development spread across five themes. This data is displayed on 'champions of change' Dashboard on month-on-month basis as delta-rankings to foster a healthy sense of competitiveness among districts to lead and succeed.

3. Nawada District under Aspirational District Program

The district of Nawada in Bihar is one of the thirteen districts selected by Niti Aayog under the Aspirational District Program for the State of Bihar. This district is situated in the eastern part of the Magadh division. And shares boundaries with the state of Jharkhand. Nawada has been divided into two sub-divisions for administrative efficiency: Nawada itself and Rajauli. These two sub-divisions are further divided into 14 Blocks. It has six legislative assembly seats: Nawada, Rajauli, Gobindpur, Warisaliganj, and Barbigaha. Currently, five of the six seats are with the Mahagathbandhan, with Warisaliganj lone represented by BJP's Aruna Devi. Chandan Singh of the Rashtriya Lok Jan shakti Party represents the Lok Sabha constituency of Nawada. As per the 2011 census, the district has a sex ratio of 936 females per 1000 males and a literacy rate of 61 percent. Demographically it has around 88 percent of the Hindu population and approximately 11 percent followers of Islam. The dominant castes among Hindus are Bhumihars, Yadav, and Kurmi. Twenty-five percent of the Hindu population is of Scheduled Castes, and less than one percent of the Scheduled Tribes. Though Scheduled Caste and Extremely Backward caste consist of a significant portion of the population, economic, social, and political power in the district remains in the clutches of Bhumihars, Yadav, and Kurmis, with Muslims being influential in some urban areas.

The district economy primarily revolves around agriculture, with seventy-eight percent of livelihood dependent upon it. The principal occupations that engage people are rainfed agriculture, animal husbandry, and casual labor. The district is backward, lacking large functional industries and lackluster educational and Health institutions. This made its entry into the list of aspirational district programs.

Under the aspirational district program district is getting broader attention in education, Health, Agriculture, Water Resources, financial inclusion, and Basic infrastructure. For this paper, I had a telephonic interview with some responsible individuals to learn how the aspirational district program works.

Aruna Devi, MLA from BJP, representing Warisaliganj constituency, when asked about the aspirational district program, replied that this program of Niti Aayog theoretically is in tune with the saath Nischay Yojana (seven commitments) of the Bihar government, under which much of the emphasis is being on the same subjects of education, infrastructure, Health, etc. However, she hinted at the extreme bureaucratic control and limited say of elected representatives in implementing government schemes.

Satyabhama Devi, who was the Gram Pradhan (Called Mukhiya) in Bihar of Kutri Gram Panchayat from 2011 to 2021, said that in the meetings District Magistrate and Sub-divisional Magistrate asked them to implement systematic manner schemes like har Ghar Nal Jal, (tap water in every house), har Gali Nali (Proper sewage in every street), 24 ghante Bijli (24-hour electricity). She further highlighted that she had completed 75 percent of the work in her Gram Panchayat. However, she also argues that there has not been any specific fund for this scheme.

To gauge the impact of this program in the education sector, I talked to Kiran Kumari, Principal at Rajkiye Madhya Vidyalaya, Kurti, a village under the Warisaliganj block of Nawada district. When asked about this

program, she said that all the school principals had been instructed to ensure 80 percent of school attendance. She also highlighted a provision in Bihar where teachers are entrusted with going to children's homes and convincing parents to send their wards to school. She further illustrates the extra emphasis on providing quality nutritious food under the mid-day meal scheme. She shared how, on the day of this interview, her school was supervised by the District Education Officer. According to her, the D. E. O and other officials had lunch at her school and found everything ranging from students' presence to food quality, up to the mark. She was happy with her school, maintaining the optimum standard and achieving excellence. However, when enquired about the difficulties in maintaining the bars, she said it's challenging and a new experience especially engaging actively with the parents. She is hopeful these incentives will increase enrollment and check the dropout after a certain level, especially for girls. Sunita Kumari, an Anganwadi supervisor, echoed the same sentiments about government policies related to child care in rural areas. When asked about her mandate as the supervisor, she jubilantly replied that as a supervisor, she is to oversee the functioning of approx. 30 centers in the block and ensure they maintain the minimum bars, and report to the Child Development Project Officer. (CDPO). When explicitly asked about the Aspirational District Program, she said their higher authority had asked them to ensure a proper vigil so that children in rural areas don't suffer from malnutrition. Guddi Kumari, a homemaker and a ward leader of village Kurti, doesn't know explicitly about the Aspirational District Program but argues that under the skill development program, various incentives women are getting. She talked about one such Stree Shakti program cooperatively run by them, under which they all are getting training in sewing machines and spinning wheels. Women working in this group also help one another financially by putting a share of their money in an informal cooperative bank and allowing the needy to use them and return them later.

On inquired about Nawada district in general and this program in particular, Rupesh Ranjan, research scholar at the Centre for Political Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University and a native of this district, argues that Nawada, over the years, has suffered from political discrimination. He alluded to developmental works in the neighboring district of Nalanda. According to him, most of the big projects whether, it's dairy products or government polytechnic college, are in Nalanda. There has been a glaring absence of political will when it comes to bringing any big-budget developmental project to Nawada. He further elaborates that since 1999 none of Nawada's Lok Sabha representatives were residents of the district. Over the years, with the rising political and economic power of the middle castes like Yadav's and Kurmis, the district has virtually become a political battleground between Bhumihars and these castes. Ultimately it is the masses who have to face the brunt of it.

He appreciated that a national think tank like Niti Aayog has decided to monitor the slow progress of districts like Nawada. He also informed me about the district being awarded the first rank among all districts under this program in December 2020. However, he referred to the lack of any specific funds under this program.

4. Chandauli district under aspirational district program

The district of Chandauli is one of the eight districts in Uttar Pradesh selected under the Aspirational District Programme. In Lok Sabha, it is represented by Mahendra Nath Pandey of the Bharatiya Janata Party. The district has five Assembly Constituencies namely, Mughalsarai, Sakaldiha, Saiyadraja, Ajagara, and Shivpur. Four of the five assembly constituencies are represented by BJP, while Sakaldiha is represented by Prabhunarayan Yadav of the Samajwadi Party. Chandauli is surrounded by Ghazipur, Sonbhadra, Mirzapur, and Bihar. Karmnasa river separates Chandauli from the state of Bihar.

For administrative efficiency, this district was carved out from Varanasi in 1997. It is situated on the coast of the holy river Ganga.

To get a better understanding of this district, I had a telephone interview with Chandan Singh, Ph.D. candidate at the department of public administration, Baba Saheb Bhim Rao Ambedkar University, Lucknow. When asked about this district, he said that the district does not possess any extraordinary history like Balia which was home to many revolutionary figures like Mangal Pandey, Chittu Pandey, etc. Regarding Chandauli, he said that the district's most celebrated annual affair is the Magh Mela, celebrated every year in January. Regarding politics, he argued that post-Mandal Commission, there has been a gradual rise in the criminalization of politics in the entire Poorvanchal region and Chandauli is no exception to this. The political assertion from backward caste forced social elites to look for other avenues to maintain their dominance and government tenders, especially in Railways and road construction emerged as a major sector of power contestation. This led to the rise of Bhaubalis like Brajesh Singh, Tribhuvan Singh, etc. According to Chandan, it is this criminalization of politics that had played a major role in the backwardness of districts in Chandauli in particular and the entire poorvanchal region in general. In this context, it's understandable to have a district like Chandauli as the aspirational district program.

Vivek Mishra, a journalist with Jansatta working in the region of Poorvanchal argues that with the inclusion in the aspirational district program Chandauli has certainly gotten the attention of the Uttar Pradesh Government. He draws attention to the newly inaugurated medical and engineering colleges in the district. NH 19 which passes through this district is also being widened. In all development has gathered momentum in the district.

In June 2021, United Nations Development Program has lauded the district of Chandauli as the aspirational district. In the report, UNDP lauded Chandauli as a successful model of local area development that could serve as the model practice for other states. The report praised Chandauli, known as the rice bowl of eastern Uttar Pradesh for its experimentation with black rice to fulfill the growing global demand for consumption. This project has succeeded and high-quality black rice is being exported to countries like Australia, New Zealand, Canada, etc. The aspirational district of Niti Aayog is in congruence with the export policy 2020- 2025 which aims at doubling the income of farmers and increasing exports from the agricultural sector and encouraging the 'Make in India' brand. The report has also named Chandauli as top five districts with the maximum change in net resilience since 2018.

5. Conclusion

In his celebrated work "A Theory of Justice," John Rawls argued that the aim of Justice should be to bring fairness into society. Justice should not be limited to the procedural aspect but should benefit the least advantaged section of society. As Rawls himself argued, this theory of Justice will result in the functioning of a just society. The idea of India envisioned by our forefathers after Independence was similar to what theorists like Rawls later. The transformation of India from a police state under British rule to a welfare state after Independence resulted in affirmative action policies becoming central to the functioning of the Indian state. The aspirational district program continues this trend of giving preference to the most backward regions of India. The aspirational district program launched in 2018 aimed at transforming districts that have lagged over the years in the key indicators of development. The aspirational district idea was mooted by Prime Minister in a Niti Aayog meeting. It can be safely said aspirational districts are those districts in India that have poor social and economic indicators.

The program is largely based on the notion of convergence of central and state schemes, a collaboration between the central officials (in charge of the program) and state level (district magistrate), and competition among districts through monthly generated Delta ranking. The Delta ranking of the aspirational districts combines the innovative use of data with pragmatic administration, keeping the district at the locus of inclusive development. After four years of its implementation, a careful study of this program reveals certain areas which

need improvement like the ranking parameter needs to be simplified with a few carefully chosen outputs and outcome measures that are more in tune with national targets as far as development is concerned. At this point, this program lacks financial autonomy. This is a crucial aspect that in years to come will play a key role in the success of this program. Similarly, to gauge real-time progress independent surveys can be efficiently utilized to substantiate administrative data. This will enhance the data quality.

To conclude one could say that this program is a good vision as it pushes the administration of some of the most backward districts of the country to look for newer avenues of development. At this point, it is an evolving program and certain areas of improvement as mentioned above have emerged. If properly followed it can enhance the living standards of those living in this district.

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