



Sustainable Development: Issues and Challenges in India

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Abstract

India, the largest democracy and the second most populous country, is an upcoming superpower with more than two and a half trillion dollar economy. It is also the fastest growing major economy in a world plunged into a recession by the corona virus pandemic. Dire poverty, hunger, illiteracy etc. are no longer major causes of concern before the country. India's defense, science and technology, research and innovation have reached to a new height in recent past. Despite all these achievements, India lags behind 130 countries in Human Development Index as is evident from the latest Human Development Report. Thus the story of India's development and growth remains an enigmatic to a large extent. What holds India back? Therefore, with a view to examining the actual position of India, and finding out the problems standing in the way of attaining Sustainable Development Goals a research study was undertaken. This article presents the results of the study; highlights the issues and challenges; and finally provides some policy prescriptions for achieving the global goals.

Key words: Human Development, Sustainable Development, capacity building, gender inequality, labor force participation, green technology.

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Introduction

Three decades ago William H. Draper III, the administrator of the United Nations Development Program asserted in the Foreword of the Human Development Report that, “We live in stirring times” (Draper III, 1990). Similarly, his successor Achim Steiner, the present administrator of the United Nations Development Program, wrote in the Human Development Report of 2018 that, “We are now living in a complex world” (Steiner, 2018). Both the statements are very appropriate today. Because, the entire world is now reeling under the century’s worst threat to life, health, education, and economy.

Statement of Problem

India is the largest democracy and the second most populous country with over 1.37 billion population. Also, it is the home to more than a sixth of the world’s population, and it is projected to be the world’s most populous nation within a decade, surpassing China (BBC, 2018). As per the recently released report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), “India has been declared as the sixth largest economy in the world with a GDP of \$2.6 trillion in 2017” (India Today, 2018). Further, literacy rate in India has been increased from mere 12% in 1947 to 74% in 2011 (Census of India, 2011). Gross Enrolment Ratio has been increased from 19.04% in 2010-11 to 25.02% in 2016-17. Over 270 million people in India have moved out of poverty in the decade since 2005-06, and the poverty rate in the country has nearly halved over the 10-year period. But how far India has achieved the SDGs, and what are the challenges ahead of India remains a matter of research. Therefore, with a view to gauging the trend of progress an attempt has been made by this researcher to examine how far India has achieved the SDGs, and what are the challenges ahead of the Government for attaining the SDGs.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The study primarily seeks to examine the nature and extent of achievement of Sustainable Development Goals in India, and particularly how far India has succeeded (1) to end poverty in all its forms, (2) to end hunger, (3) to ensure healthy lives, (4) to achieve quality education, and (5) to ensure gender equality. Further, after finding out the issues and challenges, some policies were prescribed to the government for removing the hurdles, and facilitating the attainment of the SDGs.

Universe of the Study

The present study was carried out in G-20 countries. It was the intention of the researcher to cover the countries through online survey. The countries being historically, geographically, linguistically, culturally and regionally varied, give a representative character of the world.

Research Methodology

The desk top research methodology has been adopted for the present study. However, the research is based on both secondary as well as primary data. Major sources of secondary data comprise books, journals, evaluative studies, reports, periodicals and newspapers. The primary sources include the Government Acts, Manuals, statues etc. Along with these, formal and informal interactions with people from different walks of life have largely enriched the study.

Understanding the Concept of Sustainable Development

The term *Sustainable Development* having originally introduced in the field of forestry was first received mention in the *World Conservation Strategy: Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development* (IUCN, 1980). The First United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm in 1972 that marked the introduction of the concept of sustainable development; although it did not fully associate environmental problems with development, it stressed the need for changes in economic development policy (Klarin, 2018).

In 1983, the UN General Assembly created the World Commission on Environment and Development which was later known as the Brundtland Commission, named after its Chair, Gro Harlem Brundtland, the then Prime Minister of Norway. In 1987, the Commission published the Brundtland Report entitled *Our Common Future*. The Commission's brief definition of sustainable development is the "ability to make development sustainable – to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987).

Results of the Study

From the study it is revealed that, in terms of area, India holds the seventh position in the world. Further, it is the second most populated country after China (Worldometers.info, 2018). In terms of density of population, Republic of Korea comes first, while India comes in the second place, and Japan is the third densely populated country in the G-20. India is the world's 6th largest economy with a GDP of \$2.59 trillion (The Economic Times, 2019), and it

is going to become the world's third largest economy by 2032. India has attained the position by defeating many High Human Development countries. The country has performed spectacularly in economic growth.

The United States of America is the richest country in terms of per capita income GDP i.e. US\$ 59,531.7, while Australia holds the second position with US\$ 53,799.9. India's GDP per capita income is shocking. Citizens in South Africa (US\$ 6,160.7) and Indonesia (US\$3,846.9) are even richer than average Indian citizens. India's GDP per capita income is the lowest i.e. \$1939.6 only.

In terms of Maternal Mortality Rate, India is again the worst performer with 174 deaths per 100,000 live births. Countries like Italy (4), Japan (5), Australia (6), Germany (6), Canada (7) and UK has less than 10 per one lakh Maternal Mortality Rate. Mexico (38), Brazil (44) and China (27) are in moderate position in the Maternal Mortality Rate. But still their position is much better than India (Human Development Report, 2018).

It comes to light from the study that, India's literacy rate is the lowest (74.0%) in comparison with other G-20 countries. Most of the countries have achieved full or nearly 100% literacy. Argentina (98.0%), Australia (99.0%), Canada (99.0%), France (99.0%), Germany (99.0%), Italy (99.0%), Republic of Korea (98.0%) and the United Kingdom (99.0%) have achieved almost 100 per cent literacy almost a decade ago. On the other hand, only a few countries such as Brazil (90.0%), China (93.0%), Indonesia (91.0%), Saudi Arabia (91.0%), Mexico (92.0%), and South Africa (92.0%) could not achieve complete literacy (Human Development Report, 2018). But where does India stand? India's total labor force participation rate for men is 78.8 per cent, while women's participation rate is only 27.2 per cent thereby making a difference of 51.6 per cent (Human Development Report, 2018). But, India has succeeded to reduce its poverty rate drastically from 55% to 28% in the last 10 years (The Indian Express, 2019).

Major Issues and Challenges of Development in India

The issues and challenges of development are many fold in India. Only a few of them are highlighted here in a very succinct manner. Corruption is a major cause of failure of government welfare plans and programs. According to the latest report of the Transparency International, India slipped two positions to 80th in the index (Bakshi, 2020). The corrupt practices of a section of politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen and officers of various government departments are turning India poorer day by day, while making themselves richer year after year. In 2019, Mr. Velarde, the Chair of the G-24 pointed out that, "people

are getting poorer and poorer as far as corruption is concerned in many countries still today existing, and corrupt politicians and business people are putting their money in Swiss banks where no accounting is so far even today. So, billions of dollars even from the Indian corrupt ministers or corrupt politicians are still sitting in the Swiss banks (Elnagar, 2019).

Loss of Faith in Judiciary

Loss of faith in judiciary is a great lapse of Indian government. It is pointed out that, “The Court has gained considerable political clout as the guardian of the Constitution and had just as quickly lost it, by proving susceptible to executive pressure both with regard to appointment of the judges as well as decision-making (Lavanya & Sengupta, 2010).

Criminalization of Politics

Criminalization of politics is a major issue in Indian politics. The Hindu reports that, “In 2019 as many as 43% of Members of Parliament had criminal cases pending against them (Shastri, 2020). In the world’s largest democracy, 43% or 233 out of 539 winning candidates in the general elections have declared criminal charges pending.

Lower Political Participation of Women

Political participation of women in India is comparatively low than their G-20 counterparts. “Participation of women in village assemblies and councils is always lesser than their male counterparts” (Mandal, 2019). Women’s position in Parliament as well as in State Legislatures is also less than 12% of total members.

Distribution of Freebies

A very serious trend in Indian politics has grown up to woo the electors by giving them some cash benefits or some economic freebies. Professor Sugata Marjit, an eminent Professor of Economics, at the Centre for Studies in Social Science, Kolkata highlighted the ‘shameless voter sycophancy,’ and wrote in the newspaper - The Anandabazar Patrika that, the major political parties are assuring the electors about the increase of income without making any clear provision or declaration of tax increase, imposition of property tax, closure of subsidies in fertilizer and non-exemption of tax relief to the large industrialists (2019).

Low Quality Education

The rapid growth and massification of India’s higher education system has resulted in various quality problems, most notably in the fast-expanding private sector. Many of the

newly established private colleges in India admit “students by using attractive websites and colorful brochures with glorified mission and vision statements,” but deliver substandard education. Majority of the private institutions are commercially oriented institutions that are run like businesses and place little emphasis on research - a fact often reflected in the retention of low-quality faculty (Mandal, 2020).

Policy Recommendations

It is said that, people are more aware of the existing problems. They merely want to know the solutions. Here I put forward some recommendations that came out from the research, for the stakeholders, which are applicable to the entire countries world over having the similar problems.

Poverty Reduction

Poverty is a disgrace upon a country. Hence, reduction of poverty is the first priority of the United Nations. For reducing poverty in India, the government might consider for (i) a productive asset grant, (ii) temporary cash consumption support, (iii) technical skills training, (iv) a savings program, and (v) health education and services (Banerjee et al., 2015). Skill development for Indian youths is the best sauce for poverty reduction. Also massive encouragement and establishment of micro small medium enterprises will turn India into a manufacturing hub. In regard to robust growth of economy and human development, sound fiscal and monetary policies are also required. India’s recent policies of “digital India” and “Self-reliant India” are good steps in this direction. National policy on skill development and entrepreneurship (2015) is a welcome step of the government of India. But the implementation of all the policies must be made properly and squarely in all states and districts of India.

Capacity Building

The Human Development Report of 2019 highlights the importance of capacity or skill development. It is a necessary prerequisite for nation building. Capacity building is the best policy for Indian Government to make Indian democracy vibrant and turn poor citizens into ‘valuable human resources’. Capacity building for governance is also crucial if states are to smoothly perform their roles to minimize the risks. The role of the state should be enhanced to build capacity, set the rules, and undertake reforms to better enable citizens to participate

in the global economy and attract capital into the country (Rondinelli, 2003). Better governance capacity would also ensure better resource mobilization and distribution.

Promotion of Green Technology

Governments can promote innovation in green technologies in several ways. First, firms should be rewarded for investing in research and development i.e. protecting their inventions with effective patents, thus mitigating the problem of market failure. Public authorities can support green innovations by granting patents more easily, reducing transaction costs for submitting new patents, and enforcing the property rights of patents (Emilio, 2017). Further, Symons and Karlsson in their seminal work pointed out that, “Eco-modernist discourse that identifies technological innovation as the most politically viable path toward addressing environmental challenges offers an important new perspective” (Symons & Karlsson, 2015).

Reduction of Malnutrition

In order to reduce malnutrition, it is imperative to promote policies for increasing food productivity as well as for enhancing land use and desirable cropping patterns. Further, supply chain needs to be strengthened, and people’s purchasing capacity of foodstuff is required to be increased. Food supplementation programs are essential for tackling hunger and food security issues, and for ensuring social equity (Human Development in India, 2010). Mid-Day-Meal program should be extended up to Class XII, instead of existing system of providing MDM from Class I up to the VIII.

Good Health and Well-Being

The public health policy should focus on the prevention of diseases by providing clean water and sanitation rather than fighting diseases by administering antibiotics. This necessitates training of public health specialists and development of health facilities at all levels. Second, crucial attention should be paid to the financing of healthcare. Third, there is also a dire shortage of healthcare staff. In order to meet these challenges, the government could forge partnerships with various stakeholders including foreign investors and Indian business community. Fourth, along with government healthcare services, India, with its vast size and population, should offer space for private healthcare providers.

A high level national steering group could be set up to address this and other critical issues emerging from this consultation (Human Development in India, 2018). It is well recognized that while “more money for health” is necessary, obtaining “more health for money” requires that national and state plans are evidence-informed and managed in an

integrated manner. Further, it is necessary to develop a health investment plan for each state to strengthen and build robust health systems in infrastructure and staffing with a focus on rural areas with comprehensive primary health care at its centre.

Quality Education

Good education is the panacea for all social evils. In terms of quality education UNICEF points out that, “The ability to claim and enjoy the rights of an informed and responsible citizen rests squarely upon a child’s access to a good basic education. A quality education – one that encourages children’s participation and critical thinking and is infused with the values of peace and human dignity – has the power to transform societies in a single generation” (2000). Actually, education starts from mother’s womb. Hence, necessary importance should be given to the mothers’ education also. .

Removal of Inequality

Inequality among states and within states irrespective of country and continent is prevalent, and India is not an exception. Achim Steiner, the UNDP Administrator in a recent seminar at the City University of New York remarked that, “Development means in many respects freeing people from poverty, from economic vulnerability, from environmental risks and so on. If we conceive development as freedom, then inequality becomes an imprisonment” (United Nations Development Programs, 2019).

Ensuring Gender Equality

Gender equality is inextricably linked to the right to decent income and quality education for all. Achieving gender equality requires a rights-based approach that ensures that girls and boys, women and men not only gain access to and complete education cycles, but are empowered equally in and through education (Incheon Declaration, 2016). India’s gender inequality can be removed only with stronger government policies and implementing the same religiously. 50% posts in all Government and private jobs should be reserved for women. With equal participation of women with their male counterparts in every sector, women’s equality and empowerment will be ensured in true sense in India.

Development of Science and Technology

Without development of science and technology, no nation can survive and sustain in today's world. Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, our former President said that, "Improving infrastructure is one way to increase GDP of India. Without investment in infrastructure there cannot be GDP growth" (Kalam & Rajan, 1998). Indian chemical industry to be transformed into a global technological innovator in clean processes and especially chemicals, and new drugs and pharmaceuticals, a major business should be created in natural products. Vast biodiversity should be transformed into wealth of people and the nation through selective technological interventions; Indian marine resources are to be transformed into economic strength. Further, there is necessary for a resurgence of Indian engineering Further, there is necessary for a resurgence of Indian engineering.

More investment in Green Infrastructure

Greening growth is required policies to establish network infrastructure suitable for next generation technologies, especially in energy, transport, water and communications. Green infrastructure investments can help avoid costly lock-in of inefficient patterns of growth. They can lift economic growth and bring social and health benefits. In developing economies, there will be opportunities for leapfrogging to new forms of infrastructure development (Towards Green Growth, 2011). We require green growth because risks to development are continued to rise because growth continues to erode natural capital. If left unchecked, this would mean increased water scarcity, worsening resource bottlenecks, greater pollution, climate change, and unrecoverable biodiversity loss.

Climate Action

For controlling environmental pollution, it is necessary to lead an eco-friendly life style. It is also necessary to campaign against solid waste, specially plastic and non-recyclable plastic materials. The wastes such as plastic materials, glasses and other types of solid waste can be sorted into several categories, recycled and used for different purposes. The people and especially the women and youths can be sensitized to the importance of responsible waste disposal. To make India clean or achieving the *Swachh Bharat* Mission or "Clean Indian Mission" a more sustained awareness campaign among the households, guesthouses, communities, restaurants and organizations in every village, city and town

should be initiated. The schools, colleges, universities, local clubs and civil society should be more sensitized to curb the menace (Mandal, 2020).

Ensuring Green Growth

Different countries in the world have already formulated strategies and undertaken innovative research projects for green growth. Like its Korean counterparts, India also needs to formulate a National Strategy for Green Growth that would provide a blueprint for government actions for implementation of the strategy, containing specific budget earmarks and detailed tasks for ministries and local government bodies. Similarly, the National Development Plan of Ireland (2007-2013) sets out indicative financial allocations for investment priorities aimed at enhancing economic competitiveness and at providing a better quality of life. Moreover, the 'Green Development' section of China's 12th Five Year Plan (FYP, 2011-2015) is a manifestation of the country's aspiration to move towards a greener economy. The Plan is a strategic national roadmap, setting priorities regarding China's future socioeconomic development, and providing guidelines and targets for policy making at the sectoral and sub-national level. The 'Green Development' theme in China has identified six strategic pillars: climate change, resource saving and management, circular economy, environmental protection, ecosystem protection and recovery, water conservation and natural disaster prevention. India must adopt and enact the same kinds of developmental theme for sustainable development. Also a similar strategy like that of Rwandan strategy for the Economic Development and Poverty Reduction (2008-2012) will help attainment of both mid-term and long-term developmental objectives in India (Towards Green Growth, 2011).

Transparency

For more business and industry, more transparency would be good. The Prevention of Corruption Act was amended in 2018 with an aim to punish the bribe givers. This is a complete absurd Act, because it is not the bribe giver; rather the bribe takers should be brought to book and give exemplary punishment so that other Government officials are afraid to accept bribe or cut money. Political corruption should also be checked by formulating stringent laws.

Indian political system needs to incorporate green democracy, which will represent a real expansion of moral community. It is necessary to provide opportunities for human representatives with non-human interests to give an opinion. We need to change the nature of political representation (in accordance with an extended moral community) that might bring forth green(ish) outcomes.

In terms of widespread manipulation in elections, it is recommended that either the voters should have a basic education for selecting their representatives, or the candidates, especially the ministerial candidates should have certain educational as well as professional qualification (Mandal, 2020). Full proof online voting arrangement and online nomination arrangements are the remedies for checking violence and rigging during elections.

Removal of Corruption

Corruption in India degenerated India's position in the world. Special courts and more numbers of courts should be set up for quick disposal of millions of cases. Strong and stringent laws should be formulated and implemented so that no guilty can escape the country. All measures are required to bring back black money and use the same for the development of India. Finally, criminals, goons, corrupt officials and corrupt politicians should be brought to book – whatever challenges may come from within or the Opposition parties or combined political forces (Mandal, 2020).

Peace and Justice

Ensuring peace and justice are prerequisite conditions for attainment of Sustainable Development Goals. Without peace there can be no sustainable progress and prosperity of any person or family or society, and the nation as a whole.

Conclusions

Despite having numerous deficits, the pace of progress in contemporary India towards achievement of Sustainable Development Goals is commendable of which many of its European and Asian counterparts are now envious of. India's robust economic growth has already attracted global attention. Besides, strong military power, vigorous infrastructure, unprecedented development in science, technology and space research, and above all, the vast majority of English speaking skilled human resources are congruous with India's target of achieving Sustainable Development Goals. Nevertheless, the questions relating to hunger, malnutrition, poverty, illiteracy, corruption, inequality, pollution etc. ask for government intervention. Unless these issues and challenges are resolved by the Government of India expeditiously, sustainable human development and economic growth in India will surely be skidded dangerously.

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