

**India Observatory Public Debate:**  
**Sustaining Growth and Promoting Inclusion in India's Economy and Society**

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Professor Lord Meghnad Desai, Professor Sir Nicholas Stern, Professor Corbridge, Mr Hasan, distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I feel deeply privileged to be present here today to mark the commencement of a new, and what promises to be an exciting and fruitful, intellectual partnership between two highly distinguished institutions, the London School of Economics and Political Science and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. It is indeed only fitting that we reflect today on the challenge of sustaining growth and promoting inclusion in India's economy and society. And at the very outset let me state that barring some obvious specificity the challenges of sustainable growth and social and economic inclusion in India are challenges facing the global south at large and indeed has everything to do with the global north in particular.

It almost goes without saying that our democratic and plural future depends on how widely and how deeply we can entrench inclusiveness in our governance, institutions and indeed society in general. Even while we are on the threshold of global supremacy in fields such as information technology and knowledge production, we continue to be haunted by internal contradictions. As the world looks to us for leadership, large parts of India are in the grip of social *anomie*, economic distress, political instability and cultural insecurity. India's nuclear prowess cannot make us blind to the fact that we are threatened by even more powerful bombs—deprivation and unfreedom.

As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a distinguished alumnus of this institution warned us, glaring socio-economic inequalities can undermine not just our political equality but tear asunder the very fabric of our society. Caste and gender discrimination, religious intolerance, moral policing and mindless violence threaten to accentuate social divisions and exclusions. It merits constant reiteration that no ethos of *Bharat* can be protected at the cost of ideas of India born out of the substance and spirit of over 50 years of Constitutional democracy.

The assertion of identity—gender, religious, caste, sexual, linguistic, national, regional—have also posed significant challenges to the politics and practices of multiculturalism and pluralism in India. Studying the ‘globalization of culture’ and the role of new media and communications technologies and the mass media in shaping not only ‘popular culture’ but also identity and consciousness of self and society are vital to shape meaningful responses to the challenges to social inclusion posed by the threat of homogenization and cultures of intolerance.

The pervasiveness of violence and the use of force have in many cases translated into increasing militarization of social and international relations. A major characteristic of State and in many instances societal responses to conflict and violence has been to criminalize it. As a result what are essentially socio-political conflicts are being sought to be resolved using force rather than appropriate social and political mechanisms. It is vital to understand in what ways this has impacted the justice system itself, whose autonomy and professional role is increasingly seen as being overrun by political expediency.

In the context of market led economic globalization, development and its impact on society and economy, people’s health, socio-cultural institutions and the environment continue to be a major arena of debate and conflict between scholars, policy makers and activists. It is important to critically assess the apparent paradigm shift involved in post-development ideas such as ‘human security’. The imperatives of a Southern response to global warming and the political implications thereof, most definitively articulated in the context of Britain and the global North by Prof Stern, presents another area of significant challenge to sustainable growth. While the causes for climate turbulence are to be found mainly in the North, yet their destructive effects will mainly hit the South. For the global South, climate change is likely to become a not-so invisible hand behind agricultural decline, social disruption, and migration.

The post-industrial social, economic and technological context has also created a new class of entrepreneurs—both commercial and social. The socio-economic, institutional and cultural factors and capabilities that determine the direction and growth of entrepreneurship are important to understand to ensure a more effective and equitable diffusion of entrepreneurship capacities that can drive an expansion of economic growth as well as social opportunities.

In the development- as-growth ideology, growth is taken as a natural imperative, all efforts become focused on reforming the means of growth, i.e. technologies, forms of organization, incentive structures etc., while the ends of growth, i.e. those levels of comfort, choice, and consumption reached by the most advanced country, are taken for granted. In such a scheme of things, awareness of nature's carrying capacity was bound to be a casualty. Also stemming from this is displacement of people from lands, forest and livelihoods to provide for economic expansion is unleashing conflicts in several parts country. The challenges posed by the conflicts over right to access natural resources, in particular land, water and forests, often at the root of social and political conflicts across rural and urban India.

The challenge of inclusion in India is most pronounced in the sphere of education and health. India's famed knowledge economy is yet to grapple effectively with the challenge of denial of access to quality education and inequality of opportunities. Similarly the critical question of how an expanding health care market in the country can also create affordable and accessible services to the poor and marginalised sections of the population is still blowing very much in the wind.

Enhancing accountability, the quality of governance and strengthening and deepening democratization has been the primary thrust of most civil society initiatives. However the social deficit in Indian democracy—now being somewhat addressed through dramatic political realignments as in Uttar Pradesh; the democratic deficit in public policy making; and the accountability deficit in governance continue to be areas that merit close scrutiny. This is especially so given the repeated failure of the State to democratize public policy making and to consistently and effectively implement pro-poor elements of public policy. On the other hand civil society is struggling to hold the state accountable to both its policy and in many cases even Constitutional obligations. The emergence of social and political movements spanning a wide range of ideological, political, geographical locales is perhaps one of the most important socio-political developments that will influence social inclusion in India.

No single phenomenon epitomises these varied challenges like the acute agrarian distress sweeping across the country. There is adequate evidence that this distress is a mass distress (affecting all sections of the society) in the affected regions. However, it has found place in studies and media reports due to the occurrence of a large number of suicides by farmers.

The agrarian distress has been due to many reasons and has taken many forms. Farmers' suicides are essentially cases of entitlement crises. Changes in macro policies in agriculture have had a direct impact on the livelihoods of cultivators. It is no surprise that the first of the suicides occurred in 1997, when import duties on cotton were significantly lowered, resulting in a sharp fall in cotton prices. In the 1990s and after, the state has significantly retreated from direct interventions in the countryside. The steady erosion of systems of state procurement of cotton and other agricultural products is a case in point. The breakdown of institutional support structures in rural areas has also taken other forms, most notably the substantial weakening of the extension machinery of the government, substantial weakening of the public credit provision system in rural areas, and noticeable decrease in real investment in irrigation and sustainable harnessing of water resources. Coupled with this is the declining opportunity in non-farm employment in distress areas that has further aggravated the crisis.

In context such as this, institutions in particular those like the TISS or the LSE cannot remain isolated in our pursuit of excellence in knowledge. It is only to our collective detriment that we ignore the despair and anger that is building among the poor, the displaced and the dispossessed, whether in the urban slums or refugee camps, among forest dwelling communities, or the large mass of unorganized rural and urban workforce or indeed amongst migrants and discriminated minorities. The challenge before us is making our excellence count. The TISS-LSE partnership, a journey that we have 'officially' embarked on today is but yet another step towards reaffirming and strengthening our institutional commitment to seeking knowledge that not merely explains and understands but also actually helps transform the world. The TISS-LSE partnership also offers a new paradigm in international academic relations one which is not only driven by resources from and agendas of the global South but more importantly one in which both institutions are equal.