



# Grand Challenges and Forward Looking Activities

A perspective from India

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# Understanding India – Cultural Context

- India is 'different' and the best way we may be able to learn anything from India is by understanding and appreciating this difference
- A civilization going back about 6000 years, proud of its past glory
- Hinduism - practiced by more than 80 per cent of the Indians – is perceived as '*sanaatan dharma*' – 'eternal' religion or way of life
- The largest democratic country that values human freedoms, diversity, co-existence and tolerance of differences. A tremendously adaptive, diverse, tolerant and syncretic culture.

# Understanding India - II

- One cannot understand India without understanding **the numbers**: 1.2 billion people
- Our largest state, Uttar Pradesh, is over 200 million! Only 4 countries in the world (China, India, US, Indonesia) have a larger population!
- 9 other states - population more than 60 million each!
- This influences politics, policy-making, the grand challenges we face as well as forward-looking activities
- India is a society **in transition**. The bullock-cart age, the industrial age and the information age **co-exist**.
- Any generalization about India is difficult. Any proposition as well as its opposite are true about India!

# The future beckons!

- 1991 was a landmark year in India's evolution: the end of the 'licence-permit raj' – closed and government-controlled economy
- Indian grew at 3.5 per cent per annum between 1947 and 1991. Since then it has grown at 7 to 8 per cent (average) per annum
- A 'middle' class of about 200 m people, with another 150 m to be added every decade for the next few decades
- A very young country (median age 24) with an attitude of confidence, hope and optimism and entrepreneurial spirit in India, especially among the youth

# The Grand Challenges

- **Economy + Ecology** – growth, food security and energy security for 1.5 billion people by 2050 without destroying the environment; facing the challenge of climate change (adaptation + mitigation)
- **Governance** – making sure that the ‘thriving anarchy’ does not lead to fragmentation and real anarchy; dealing with threats and challenges from neighbours
- **Society** – An ‘inclusive’ society that does not create huge inequalities and can take good care of all sections of its population
- **Culture** – keeping alive the strengths of traditional culture and knowledge

# Grand Challenges: Economy + Ecology

- Creating employable skills among youth to reap the demographic dividend (Median age in India is 24!)
- Rising inequality – pockets of affluence (Gini coefficient increasing, close to 40)
- Food security for 1.5 billion or more population by 2050
- Energy security (low consumption at present) and sustainable energy considering much higher rates of urbanization and industrialization
- Structural transition from agriculture → industry → services
- Melting Himalayan glaciers and growing population and demand – may lead to water stress unless demand is managed and recycling and reuse is done

# Grand Challenges - Governance

- India is characterized by a soft state but a strong, self-organizing society
- Challenge is to move from a 'soft state' to an effective state that can legislate and regulate effectively
- Overcoming competitive populism due to the compulsions of vote bank politics
- Weak centre with coalition governments and shift of power to states/regions
- Crony capitalism and corruption

# Grand Challenges - Society

- Overcoming the challenge of scarcity amid plenty
- Nutrition
- Healthcare, public health, road safety
- Dealing with terror, identity-based politics and violence
- Dealing with the 'reds'/Maoists
- Overcoming a declining adverse sex ratio, especially in the 0-4 age group
- Affirmative action (within limits) to create an inclusive society
- Keeping alive the strengths of civil society

# Grand Challenges - Culture

- Keeping alive the spirit of co-existence, tolerance and diversity
- Keeping alive the strengths of family and community networks (for instance, nearly all the aged are looked after at home)
- Cultural creativity based on the enormous cultural diversity and knowledge
- Creating a knowledge society
- Keeping alive the spiritual quest and the techniques of spirituality and self-control
- Dealing with a poor civic culture

# Forward-Looking Activities: The Agencies and Players

- Not many institutional mechanisms to do this, especially in an integrated or coordinated way:
  - Planning Commission, with a mandate for five-year plans but not for long-term perspective planning
  - Technology Information Forecasting and Assessment Council (TIFAC)
  - The National Knowledge Commission
  - Foreign banks and investment funds
  - UN Agencies and Multi-lateral institutions
  - International foundations and NGOs
  - Some corporations and Industry Associations
  - A few private consultancy firms and think tanks
  - Very few and insignificant university level courses involving foresight studies or activities

# FLA: Examples

- The **implicit** FLAs are initiated or carried out at the national level primarily by the Planning Commission, the Prime Minister's Office and the concerned government ministries
- Some good, practical initiatives with important implications for the future (and often in response to crises) are:
  - National Skill Development Corporation (to deal with the skill deficit among the large youth population)
  - **National Rural Health Mission**
  - National Action Plan on Climate Change
  - **Delhi-Mumbai Industrial corridor – will create large manufacturing hubs along the corridor**

# Forward-Looking Activities: Visionaries and Innovators

- Sri Aurobindo and the Mother – Auroville – city of the future (supported by Unesco)
- Verghese Kurien – The ‘white revolution’
- Dr Devi Shetty – Narayan Hridudalaya: Health Insurance and affordable health-care for the poor in Karnataka (61 m population) at an insurance premium of USD 2 per annum!
- Ratan Tata: Nano – the Rs <2000 Euro car
- Abdul Kalam (Nuclear scientist and ex-President) – Vision for a developed India 2020
- Right to Information (civil society campaign)
- A large number of local or small inspiring initiatives for change

# Forward-Looking Activities: Characteristics

- FLAs and how these lead to the identification of grand challenges – FLAs are **implicit** in policy-making, not carried out explicitly as a futuristic activity
- Policies and initiatives very significant for the future emerge from political-social engagement that is **often a delayed response to crisis**
- The demand for these initiatives is from:
  - The ‘public’ – aspirations of the people and interest groups as articulated and understood by political leaders
  - **A very vibrant and active civil society and media campaigns; the intelligentsia**
- Political and national compulsions for the party and government in power are critical in defining and initiating these activities
- **Creating the future is a policy-related but practical task – and often poorly implemented**



Thank you!