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UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC POLICY IN INDIA

In an ideal democracy, people and their well being is at the core of an exemplary Public Policy mechanism. It is hence crucial that we demand that our policies must be in line with the existing realities of the country. But before we can do that, we must understand Public Policy. Barring all the definitions that we find ourselves burdened with, to put it simply, depending on who we are talking about, in a democracy, Public Policy can mean different things for different groups.

So what's Public Policy? It's the O factor!

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The O Factor!

To an Artist, O is a shape (a circle and/or a sphere) with multiple possibilities.
To a Mathematician, it's a digit (Zero) that will change the interpretation of various numerical representations and combinations.
To a Student of Literature, it's a letter with possibilities of the English language.
To a Philosopher it can represent the void of the empty space, amongst other things.

As with O, so with Public Policy, it is what the person in question would need it to be. So the essence of the term lies in not what it technically means but where and what its real impact is. Therefore, to understand Public Policy, we need to determine what our reference group is and how does Public Policy impact our chosen group.

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Questions Answered

What are these reference groups?

There can largely be three different reference groups to understand Public Policy in India:

- Government
- Citizens when not Beneficiaries
- Citizens when Direct Beneficiaries

What 'impact' are we talking about?

Let's find out!

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Public Policy for the Government

WHAT?

- Rules/Laws/Bills/Schemes/Programmes, i.e., Solutions that they need to devise.

HOW?

- Through addressing problems put forth and acknowledged by way of one or all of the following means:
 - ◆ Research (of Government Ministries, Bodies, Departments, Independent Researchers). **For example:** Research findings of government entities like the NITI Aayog, Economic Survey, erstwhile Planning Commissions along with those of research scholars, often form the basis of government policies.
 - ◆ Election trends are an important means of perceiving what are the issues that the masses are most keen on getting addressed. Hence it enables the Government to heed to people's direct demands for Public Policy. **For example:** Government's 2016 demonetisation

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policy was validated in the backdrop of the public's overwhelming response to its election promise of addressing the issue of black money in India.

- ◆ Direct Demand by the people. **For example:** The Anna Hazare Movement played a major role in the demand and hence the enactment of **the Lokpal and the Lokayuktas Act** to help alleviate corruption in the Indian Polity.
- ◆ Recommendations requested by the government or independently sent across by the Civil Society Organisations and Independent Research Bodies. **For example:** In light of the Nirbhaya Rape Case in December 2012, while drafting the **Criminal Law Amendment Bill**, the Justice Verma Committee called upon the Civil Society to put forth their recommendations for a comprehensive and stringent law addressing the challenge of gender based sexual violence in India.

WHY?

- For the people they represent and govern because their role in the State machinery necessitates them to do so.

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Questions Answered

What is Public Policy for the Government?

Solutions for the people as necessitated by the State, for problems recognised through research, trends, direct demands and recommendations.

How does Public Policy impact the Government?

As a means to fulfill Government's duty to smoothen the process of democratic governance.

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Public Policy for the Citizens

Since different policies are meant to directly benefit different groups of citizens, we will understand this topic by dividing them into the following two categories:

- Citizens when not beneficiaries;
- Citizens when direct beneficiaries.

For instance: The **Food Security Act** does not directly benefit the salaried middle class population of India. Why? For the simple reason, that they can afford to buy enough food to feed their families unlike the poor people of the country.

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Questions Answered

Does that mean that The Food Security Act has no relevance for the middle class?

Absolutely not!

So when a Public Policy doesn't directly benefit me, how does it impact me?

We will answer these questions in the following section.

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Public Policy for the Citizens when not Beneficiaries

WHAT?

→ A tool to assess the functioning of the State machinery.

HOW?

For example: While the **Food Security Act**, doesn't directly benefit the middle class, it helps them assess the priorities of their Government by serving as a means to assess the following questions:

Is the Government working towards poverty alleviation?

Does it care about health & nutrition needs of the poor people?

Most importantly, is my money as a taxpayer being put to good use?

Is it being used in a manner that I would approve of?

Do I consider poverty alleviation an issue important enough for the Government to even address?

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WHY?

In a democracy citizens have the constitutional right to object to the policies they don't want implemented. When citizens assess a policy that doesn't directly affect them, they also get to check their priorities vis-a-vis those of their Government and if the two don't align, they are entitled to oppose the policy in question.

This can either be done by bringing it up in the next elections or as has been the case of late, Social Media campaigns can effectively convey the public mood of opposition or support on a particular policy.

For example: The initial idea behind issuance of an Aadhaar Card (that eventually led to the **Aadhaar Act**) was to facilitate the **Direct Benefit Transfer Schemes** (also called DBT Schemes, such as providing a fixed quantity of rice and wheat to the poor at highly subsidised rates under the Antyodaya Scheme) for the poor population of the country. This was done to address the problem of non-delivery, lack of transparency and corruption in the existing system of delivery under the DBT Schemes. However, the middle class that doesn't directly get affected by the DBT Schemes made privacy rights the basis of opposing the controversial provisions of the subsequent Aadhaar Act. As a result, the policy became more about the privacy rights of the middle class, as there was a mass media opposition to the Act and less about the beneficiaries of the DBT Schemes who were supposed to be the initial beneficiaries of the policy.

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Questions Answered

What is Public Policy for the Citizens, when not Beneficiaries?

A means of keeping a check on their chosen representatives.

How does Public Policy impact the Citizens, when not Beneficiaries?

By serving as a tool for assessing and ensuring Government accountability through actively participating, engaging and understanding policies for informed opinions.

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Public Policy for the Citizens when Direct Beneficiaries

WHAT?

→ Rules/Laws/Bills/Schemes/Programmes that address a problem area which impedes their well being in a democratic welfare state.

HOW?

Public Policy solves the roadblocks that deprive the citizens, by putting them at a more equitable state than what they were at before the problem was resolved through a particular Public Policy.

Let's refer to two DBT Schemes here: The Midday Meal Scheme and the Antyodaya Yojana.

For the poor families, these resolve the fundamental problems of hunger, starvation deaths and try to address the issue of nutritional deficiencies. So on a whole, these policies intend to rid them of the burden of struggling to acquire the essential food items that the human body needs for survival.

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Problem	Intended Policy Solution
Starvation Deaths	Antyodaya Anna Yojana, Midday Meal Scheme
Nutritional Deficiencies	Antyodaya Anna Yojana, Midday Meal Scheme
Low School Enrollment Rate	Midday Meal Scheme
Low Labour Force Participation & Productivity	Antyodaya Anna Yojana

WHY?

Part IV of the Indian Constitution ordains India a Welfare State. The essence of a Welfare State lies in guaranteeing equitable status for all its people. As a result, when Public Policy addresses the problems of the underserved class of people, while their inability to directly voice their opinions remains a constant challenge, various interest groups, civil society organisations, political parties and local government bodies are required to highlight their problems so that their fundamental rights can be in line with their statutory right (Right to Vote to choose a representative) to participate in the dynamics of a democracy.

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Questions Answered

What is Public Policy for the Citizens, when Direct Beneficiaries?

Means to inclusivity as members of a democratic system.

How does Public Policy impact the Citizens, when Direct Beneficiaries?

By addressing their problems thereby elevating them to an equitable status as members of a democratic welfare state.

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Questions For You

Does India's Reservation Policy connote sound Public Policy?

Should Citizens, when not Beneficiaries, be allowed to decide the fate of a Public Policy?

Can Government lose interest in Public Policy if the Citizens, when not the Beneficiaries, do not assess government policies?

Conceptualised and Created by:

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