

Citizens' Agenda 2050

For Rebuilding a New India

Ashok Khosla | Vijay Mahajan | Rajesh Tandon

I The Founding Vision of India

Building a New India after 2050 is the short name we give to the most urgent task of our time. It is 70 years after the formal adoption of the Constitution and its underlying vision, based on the values stated in the preamble – Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity – to be achieved through a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic. It is clearly time to evaluate whether these aspirations expressed in the preamble of the nation's Constitution have been met and, if they have not been realised significantly, to design a future that will be able to help the country achieve them.

It is no one's case that India has made no progress over these decades. On the contrary, there are manifestly many more citizens of our country who live longer, healthier, better educated and more productive lives than ever before. More than doubling of the life expectancy from 32 to 69 years is just one outstanding example. We can be proud that some among our fellow citizens are capable of competing in the spheres of business, finance, science, medicine, engineering, information technology and many other domains, even some sports, with the very best in the world. And we have built up an enviable infrastructure, production capacity, institutional framework and economy.

At the same time, we continue to have more hungry, undernourished and mal-nourished, frequently sick, illiterate, jobless, poor and marginalised people than any other country in the world. The opening resolve of the Constitution does not seem to have adequately transformed the lives of these huge numbers of our fellow citizens. They got left out of the mainstream economy and survive beyond the edges of regular society, continuing basically to be "sub-citizens. The first job of all of us, those in politics and Government, those in industry and business, and those in civil society institutions, including the academia and the media, is to bring these several hundred millions of people up to full citizenship, with decent lives and livelihoods for themselves and a better life for their children.

The country adopted a socialist mixed economy model in its first four decades, and moved to a "liberalised, privatised and globalised" model after 1991. Both delivered many good things for part of the citizenry, but neither could address pervasive poverty and massive destruction of the environment and depletion of natural resources, as also the community social capital that existed before these models were implemented. The evident structural flaws in the nation's economic systems and governance institutions that Covid-19 exposed should make it hard for anyone to justify going back to Business as Before. The pandemic presents us with a rare opportunity to embrace development pathways that are more suited to fulfilling India's founding vision, duly contemporised and updated.

2 The Gap between the Vision and the Prevailing Situation

The pandemic and the lockdown have laid bare the inadequacy of the predominantly state-led model of development with state controlling the commanding heights, in the name of providing welfare to the poor, practiced from 1951 to 1991; as well of the primarily market-led model of development as growth first, equity later and environment sustainability last, practiced from 1991 to 2019. Thus neither the Sarkar as the dominant organising force, nor the Bazaar as the growth vector, has led to Sarvodaya, leave alone Antyodaya – it is time for Samaj to step in as the third pillar. Our key argument is that the current problems are so complex that their resolution requires a tri-sector collaboration.

The intent of the Constitution and its subsequent articulation in policies and laws was to bring about a fundamental socio-economic transformation in India by an act of political empowerment through universal adult franchise. But the Constitution put the State at the helm of the transformational role and gave little scope for individuals, or associations of individuals, to participate in realising the vision of India embodied in the Constitution. Indeed, even local governments were, for a long time, marginal and largely dysfunctional.

For much of India's first half century, governance was almost entirely top-down – decisions and money flowed mainly from the Centre to the State and from the State to the District. The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution created, in 1993, local bodies capable of responding to the aspirations of local communities, though they are still to come of age.

The reforms of 1991 lifted the place of private market institutions in the economy, ceding several roles of the State to market institutions through liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. In the process, the ambitious, hungry for growth private corporate sector adopted a number of practices which harmed several segments of society, such as tribals, whose habitats were taken over for mining, industrial or infrastructure purposes, while the tribals were displaced without any recompense for their habitat or livelihoods. Workers lost in terms of wage share of value added, most of which went to service capital. Technological changes enabled companies to displace labour, break up unions and avoid social security benefits. Many industries also harmed the environment through untreated pollution, and many others exploited consumers through monopolistic practices. In 28 years since reforms, the private corporate sector and market institutions became dominant in national affairs.

In contrast, the place of civil society institutions was steadily diminished. Though the right to association was enshrined as a Fundamental Right under Article 19 (c) of the Constitution, in practice it was increasingly curtailed by a succession of laws. The registration law is from the colonial-era, enacted to keep the voices and actions of the people under check. To this, successive Indian governments added further control through Income Tax and Foreign Contribution laws. We need a radical review of these laws to ensure Civil Society Institutions can play a coequal role in nation building and socio-economic progress.

3 Values and Principles for Rebuilding a New India

Let us rebuild India based on the founding vision, the experience gained so far, the people's contemporary realities, and the unfolding opportunities and threats. There is now an emerging consensus that people and planet, citizens and ecology need to become co-drivers of progress. These

are BIG issues involving BIG conflicting demands among BIG players and interests. They will require BIG compromises and trade-offs. And these in turn will necessarily need new mindsets and attitudes, listed below:

- i. **“Putting the Liberty and Dignity of the Individual First”**, irrespective of caste, creed, religion, ethnic, gender, financial or other status as a non-negotiable element of the social compact. In current idiom: “Fundamental Rights”. In the Mahatma’s language: “Swaraj”.
- ii. **“Putting Politics into Civic Action and vice versa”** – Politics is not party or electoral affairs but influencing the political economy of our nation to ensure equity, fairness and justice for all segments of society. In current idiom: “Active Citizenship”. In the Mahatma’s language: “Satyagraha”.
- iii. **“Putting the Last First”**. We need to rededicate our commitment to creating such a society through focussed attention and affirmative action to ensure that SCs, STs, OBCs and minorities, and within these, the poor, the women, the aged and the youth are our prime focus. In current idiom: “Inclusion”. In the Mahatma’s language: “Antyodaya”.
- iv. **“Putting the Local at the Top in Decision-making”** through commitment to building up small and community-based economies. Likewise, the principle of subsidiarity – that problems should be solved at as local a level as appropriate, rather than centralising authority and resources. In current terminology: “Subsidiarity, Bottom-Up”. In the Mahatma’s words: “Gram Swaraj”. Local skills and ability to do things will have to be valued more as we build local economies.
- v. **“Putting the Future at par with the Present”** to ensure that the nation’s enormous endowments – people, institutions, natural resources and cultural heritage -- are enhanced rather than destroyed, and the assets we leave as our legacy for our children is at least as good as the inheritance we got from our parents. In current idiom: “Sustainability or Resilience”. In the Mahatma’s language: “Trusteeship”.
- vi. **“Putting Human and Natural capital at no less a level than financial and physical capital”** in our development choices and investments so that we evolve a sane and resilient pathway to a better future for ALL. In current idiom: “People-centric, Eco-friendly Solutions”. In the Mahatma’s language: “Buniyadi Taleem, Aparigraha”.
- vii. **“Putting Need above Greed”**, to ensure that the demands placed by people on other people and by people on nature do not destroy society or ecology. In current idiom: “Conservation of Resources”. Paraphrasing the Mahatma: “Asteya, Aswada”.
- viii. **“Putting Responsibilities on a par with Rights”**. Long denied our rights, the Constitution emphasised these, putting responsibilities in the form of “Fundamental Duties” in Article 51-A only under the 42nd Amendment in 1976. In current idiom: “Social Responsibility, Duty”. In the Mahatma’s language: “Dharma”.
- ix. **“Putting Technology at the Service of All People”**, not just the rich. In current idiom: “Innovation for the Masses, Appropriate Technology”. The Mahatma exemplified this

with Khadi and Gramodyog (village industries).

- x. **“Putting Resolution of Internal Conflicts and Conflict with Our Neighbours on Top Priority”** and redeploying the enormous amount spent on defence and internal security to address the problems of livelihoods and the environment. In the Mahatma’s words “Ahimsa”.
- xi. **“Putting Global Alliances into Play When Appropriate”** – for example in problems of cross-border trafficking, refugees, climate change, and lately, pandemics.

4 Challenges in Realising These Values and Principles

The above vision of the future faces some critical challenges. We summarise these and suggest how they could be addressed through new institutional frameworks that bring together a mix of policies, laws and regulations, norms, and the means to enforce them.

- i. **Difficulty in Switching to Sustainable Lifestyles:** Current life-styles have become unsustainable. The system of production and consumption of goods and services has now to be altered dramatically to re-direct policies and investments towards sustainable economic activity. New societal consensus around values of conserving our ecological resources and operational norms (such as Reduce, Reuse and Recycle) to practice them would need to be built. India’s youth can be valuable allies for this.
- ii. **Dependence on and Subservience to the State:** A vast majority of us have become dependent on the government for subsidies, and have also become subservient in face of pervasive state control. We have lost faith in our individual and collective capacity to drive change. Horizontal relationships amongst people and their local associations have been displaced by vertical relationship of each individual vis-a-vis the state. This is not right, as citizens have rights and obligations towards each other first. The values of justice, liberty, equality, fraternity and sustainability have to be first protected and promoted by and amongst citizens! Change will entail re-constructing the notion of active citizenship and a sense of community amongst us, especially with those who have been marginalised through caste, religion, gender, region, language and age.
- iii. **Attitude of Controlling rather than Enabling:** Inherited from colonial attitudes and policies, most of the interactions between governments and the people, and particularly people’s organisations, is based on prohibitions and penalties for transgressing them, rather than rewards for innovation and performance. Instead government should be responsible for enabling businesses, civil society organisations and community associations to take collaborative initiatives and pursue innovative solutions.
- iv. **Inadequacy of Local Institutions and Civil Society Institutions (CSIs):** Indigenous local institutions based on family, tribe, caste and religion have declined in importance, even as these cleavages are being used for political mobilisation. Newer local institutions have not emerged or matured to serve the range of human needs across all segments. For example, Gram Sabhas, Zilla Parishads and Municipalities, are still used as the last link in the patronage distribution chain, rather than as the first rung in the ladder of representation

and empowerment. The same is true for Cooperatives, school management and town vendor committees. Outside the state system, CSIs are often inadequate in building the capacity of local institutions, or playing a significant watchdog or alternative building role as they often lack the resources and talent required to do so.

- v. **Attitude of State and Market Institutions towards CSIs:** Today, a majority of CSIs, including the most iconic ones, feel significant antagonism from government towards their work and under constant threat of ever-new legal or regulatory measures and cumbersome, never-ending procedures designed to prevent them from doing anything useful. Likewise, market institutions see them as anti-growth irritants or at best low-cost service providers for tasks dealing with poor communities. The need to rebuild post Covid is the apt moment for engaging assertively and meaningfully with State and Market Institutions. This will have to be done at different levels of political leaders and officials, on the one hand, and regulators, financial sector players, large corporates and their associations nationally and internationally, on the other.

5 Civil Society Institutions to Lead the Citizens' Agenda 2050

How tenuous is the social contract and the Constitutional promises, became evident in the Covid crisis, but it was eroding over decades earlier. Institutions established to realise the constitutional vision have not proved to be robust. Thus we urgently need to fix the institutional mechanisms that will ensure realisation of the values in the Constitution. Who will lead this process? CSIs are uniquely qualified to do so. We should not forget that the independence movement was an aggregation of local civil society efforts. Like elected leaders, but unlike administrators and businesspersons, we have our ears closest to the people and their problems. CSIs have been the pioneers who, in the face of considerable resistance, have got the BIG issues onto the political agenda and into government policy: human rights, community development, poverty alleviation, gender empowerment, local self-government, appropriate technology, the right to education, the right to information, employment guarantee, environmental protection, financial inclusion, and so on. None of these were addressed by market institutions, and the State took these up after decades of grassroots work and advocacy by CSIs. And the best of CSIs have remained independent of both the state and the market institutions, and even held them to account.

Civil society normally includes citizens' associations, often registered as non-political, non-profit organisations. But we need to conceive Civil Society more broadly today. CSIs comprise a wider spectrum of institutions that are concerned with "social purpose" and "the causes of the less powerful". Merely being non-profit does not qualify an entity to be a CSI, if it is just a service provider to a government or a CSR program. On the other hand, in our definition of CSIs, we would like to include:

- Social movements, set up for a particular cause or for a broader purpose, for advocating, lobbying, influencing discourses and policies in the interest of a better future for all.
- Those entities whose output is more in the intellectual realm and innovation domain: the Think Tanks, research institutions, innovation labs and others with data, analysis and advocacy capability who can build knowledge to support sustainable development initiatives.

- The free-thinking academic institutions for critical thinking and enabling discourse and dissemination on alternative solution to socio-economic problems
- The independent media, of which some are left from the older ones and many new ones have emerged, particularly on digital platforms
- Cooperatives—producers, agricultural, consumers, credit, etc. – who provide democratic economic models for small producers and consumers to coalesce together with shared aims and interests.
- Labour unions, workers associations, farmers’ organisations, self-help group federations, street vendors’ groups, resident welfare associations, and professional associations.
- Philanthropies, which generally use profits made by business and Social Enterprises, who address social issues employing business-like methods and are structured as for-profit entities, are possible allies or affiliates of CSIs.
- International alliances on various themes where issues need such collaborative action.

Addressing the challenges outlined in the previous section need to be the foremost tasks for the CSI community. The wider coalition of institutions listed above and the networks of such associations should have a leading role to play in rebuilding the new India. This partly stems out of the fact that they are neither driven by the power motive of state institutions, nor the profit motive of market institutions. CSIs work towards a positive normative vision: that of widespread, equitable social welfare, which is in sustainable harmony with nature and based on participatory democracy, accountable institutions and individual liberty.

For all of the above to be possible, CSIs, their networks and coalitions need to enhance various capacities – Intellectual, Organisational and Material – and need to also hold themselves more accountable to each other and to “We the People”. These capacities can only be strengthened, and the role of civil society can only be played effectively, if an enabling eco-system of regulations, policies and investments is put in place, which derives its inspiration from recognising the unique and critical roles of CSIs in rebuilding new India.

While we may continue to protect our current space by ensuring that the existing regulatory framework does not become even more restrictive, we should aim for CSIs’ role to be formally supported by appropriate measures by governments and by the sector itself. Thus an enabling legislative framework is urgently needed, to replace the current regulatory framework. The characteristics and provisions of such a framework should at least be:

- i. Enacting legislation that both enables and specifies expectations and regulations for the sector to be able to maximise the positive and constructive contribution it can make to society; and while doing so, resisting any regressive attempts at enhancing State control. One way to achieve this is to establish transparent criteria for approvals, with time limits and written explanations for rejections
- ii. Establishing formal and informal mechanisms for effective, constructive and value-adding partnerships among the major sectors, i.e., government, business and civil society. This will

enable addressing today's complex problems, which are beyond the capacity of just the state or market institutions to address and require the community connect and innovative approaches that CSIs can bring

- iii. Creating a one-window Ombudsperson for ensuring that conflicts among the different sectors can be resolved expeditiously and rationally. The present situation where the government is both the perpetrator, the prosecutor and the judge cannot be accepted.
- iv. Helping strengthen the Sector's mechanisms and capacity for self-regulation to ensure integrity, transparency, and accountability. The CSI sector has been increasingly vulnerable to the actions of many of its members which cause disrepute and take away trust from the sector as whole.
- v. Setting up mechanisms to ensure that the most valuable and result producing CSIs have a reasonably secure access to funds to ensure their resilience and continuity of operations, even at times of economic uncertainty. The income-generating activities of CSIs should be protected from taxation or adverse action, as long as the net income is demonstrably used for social causes and public purpose;
- vi. Encouraging the youth, particularly those with University or professional education to work for at least a few years, in CSIs to ensure that they get a good understanding of the people's problems, and can carry this empathy with them in any sector they later work in – government, corporate or civil society.
- vii. Eventually, to constitutionally acknowledge CSIs as key actors in nation-building and social and economic progress. The article 19 - I (c) already states the right of citizens to form associations is a fundamental right. This can be strengthened by inserting a new Part IX-C by amending the Constitution, as was done for Panchayats when the 73rd Amendment inserted Part IX, for Municipalities when the 74th Amendment inserted Part IX-A, and for Cooperatives when the 97th Amendment inserted Part IX-B.

6 The Citizens' Agenda 2050

Now we move to answering the question – how do we bring about the desired changes in the institutional mechanisms so that the founding vision of India can be realised. How would this structural, systemic and transformational change come about? And who will mobilise for it? This is a generational task and will take several decades. Yet we have to begin acting NOW. So laid out below is the agenda for action at three time horizons – three months, three years and three decades.

6.1 Three Months' Agenda (Oct - Dec 2020)

- a. Establish a core group to work on developing the Agenda2050 and acting on it.
- b. Establish a working group on immediate “defence of the sector” issues, such as the proposed changes in Income Tax, Foreign Contribution and CSR related regulations.
- c. Establish a broad alliance of civil society actors, far beyond the NGO fraternity, to include
 - people's movements,
 - faith-based groups,
 - trade unions,

- cooperatives,
- producers' organisations,
- trade and industry associations,
- professional associations
- free-thinking academia
- independent media
- artists' and cultural groups
- other forms of citizen's associations

For this, we will have to reach out to leading individuals and bridgehead/nodal organisations among each of these groups. In the process, the Agenda2050 may have to be modified.

- d. Issue this Agenda2050 document in various languages to trigger wider discussion both at the level of values, principles and vision on the one hand, and strategy, structure, financing and the organisational mechanisms.
- e. Seek commitments of time, funds, infrastructure and moral support from a wide range of individuals and organisations towards realising the Agenda2050
- f. Set up multiple nodes, each capable of independent existence (with a mission, programs, funding, staff, etc.) and independent action, but working in a coordinated manner. In this sense, we mimic the structure of the Internet, where each node is self-sufficient in itself but enormously multiplies its efficacy by being interconnected. Even if one node stops functioning, the internet continues to work, because of multiple ways of interconnectivity. This is a radically different structure than the hierarchical Sun-surrounded-by planets-surrounded-by-moons structure often followed so far.

6.2 Three Year Agenda (2020-2022)

- a. Accepting the Gandhian precept "Be the change you want to see", the core group members commit themselves to live by the values that we espouse including moving to lower consumption lifestyles, engaging in non-party political action when necessary, collaborating with state and market institutions while sticking to our principles, etc.
- b. Establish a ground level dialogue with leaders of widespread peoples' structures such as Self-Help Groups, Farmers' Producer Organisations, Handloom and Handicraft Associations, Construction Workers Informal Unions, Vendors and Hawkers Unions, ASHA and Anganwadi workers' unions, Teachers' Associations. Etc. to understand what their issues are and what solutions do they suggest for better functioning of the institutions they work with.
- c. Establish a high level dialogue with Industry, Business and Financial Sector leaders to both impress upon them the need for inclusive, responsible and sustainable corporate behaviour and to hear their side of issues in terms of what comes in the way of their wealth generating instincts. Establish a joint front for policy advocacy with the government, which is both pro-growth and pro-dignified employment. As a part of this activity, establish norms for CSR funding so that it becomes truly more developmental for the country.

- d. Mobilise local community and outside financial resources, to ensure independence of CSIs and citizen groups from state and market institutions. One way to enforce this is to limit the expenditure of the organisation to no more than a one to one match of resources so mobilised with resources from state and market institutions.
- e. Establish Citizens' Action for Collaborative Transformation - CitizensACT Forums - for each and every Constitutional, Statutory or otherwise significant Institution. Each Citizens ACT Forum would have members who are independent and have expertise in those respective areas. They would analyse institutional outcomes and establish a dialogue with the respective institutions to provide feedback and suggestions for improvement. As many of the transformations will need changes in citizens' behaviours (such as paying taxes, changing consumption patterns, and accepting diversity of views and lifestyles), the Forums mobilise wider public support. The Citizens ACT Forums would not hesitate from calling out regressive or dysfunctional steps by the State or Market institutions or indeed by CSIs. Thus they would act as countervailing forces to each other while collaborating with each other.
- f. Mobilise and train a large number of volunteers and workers, especially from among the Youth and Women, as well as the disadvantaged segments – Dalits, Tribals, Minorities, the Disabled and the Elderly. Instead of an hierarchal cadre, a set of intersecting circles would be established, with individuals opting for multiple memberships.

6.3 Three Decade Agenda (2020-2050)

Establishing new values and principles is a long term agenda, sometimes requiring a whole generation. This kind of transformation can only be brought about through the leadership of CSIs, working in collaboration with the State and Market institutions. "We the People" will need to be mobilised to begin to develop a consensus on emerging principles and priorities outlined in previous sections. That discourse needs fertile ground of 'civic space'....for conversations, dialogues, debates, confrontations, conscientization, all following the value premises and principles mentioned earlier. It is unlikely that either the State or the corporate sector will kindle or promote this discourse. Thus the lead will have to be taken by CSIs undertaking the following transformational tasks

- Inculcating these values in the younger generation through formal and informal education and activities like sports, community service and local problem solving.
- Public education and capacity building of the masses, to ensure that local institutions- self-help groups, school management committees, rogi kalyan samitis, town vending committees, farmers' groups, artisans guilds, gram sabhas, resident welfare associations, etc., all work effectively. These are the building blocks of democracy as well as a functioning institutional framework.
- Supporting institutional development and reform as needed, including evangelising behavioural change among citizens – from simple things like segregating recyclable and compostable solid waste at source, to paying utility bills and taxes. Similarly, community action to promote local problem solving will be encouraged, from taking care of the disabled and the elderly in small localities, to cooperating with the police in crime prevention, to tree planting and water

harvesting.

- Playing a watchdog role, all the way from monitoring the performance of civic services, schools, hospitals to monitoring whether elected representatives are trying to fulfil pre-election promises, and otherwise playing their role effectively. Putting politics into civic action will be practiced here, holding regular dialogues with various political party representatives and letting them know the pulse of the people.
- Calling out any violations of fundamental rights and constitutional guarantees, particularly when those effect the liberty and dignity of the individual. This would be done at increasing level of intensity in ever growing circles of concern, if necessary eventually to seek alliances at the regional, national and international levels.
- Constantly examining whether society is progressing along a path which is based on the values of justice, liberty, equality, fraternity and sustainability, and taking corrective action through citizen participation when we diverge significantly.

We invite you join us in this purposeful journey so that a new India is built by 2050.