

From Formulation to Implementation: Understanding the Public Policy Cycle in India

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Abstract:

Public policy in India is often judged by the ambition of its design, yet the distance between design and delivery is where most policy outcomes are decided. This paper examines the public policy cycle in India, tracing the journey from agenda setting and formulation through adoption, implementation, and evaluation. Using the stages heuristic and its principal critiques as a conceptual lens, the study applies qualitative, document-based analysis to statutes, institutional reforms, and secondary data from the National Family Health Survey and the Annual Status of Education Report. Four policy episodes, namely the Right to Information Act, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the Right to Education Act, and the Swachh Bharat Mission, illustrate how the cycle operates in practice. The analysis shows that formulation has become more consultative and more open to civic and judicial influence, while implementation remains shaped by federal fragmentation, uneven state capacity, frontline discretion, and weak feedback from evaluation. Gains in access indicators frequently outpace gains in quality and outcomes. The paper argues that the cycle in India is best understood as an iterative and contested process rather than a linear sequence, and proposes reforms in implementation planning, fiscal transfers, frontline capacity, and independent evaluation.

Keywords: public policy cycle, policy formulation, policy implementation, India, federalism, state capacity, policy evaluation.

1. Introduction

India presents one of the most demanding environments for public policy in the world. It is a federal democracy of more than 1.4 billion people, with constitutional commitments to social justice, an administrative machinery that stretches across the Union, twenty-eight states, eight Union Territories, and roughly 250,000 panchayats and urban local bodies, and a political system in which policy is contested through elections, courts, the media, and civil society movements. Since 1950 the Indian state has pursued planned industrialisation, land and welfare reforms, market liberalisation, statutory guarantees of rights, and, more recently, large-scale digital public infrastructure. Each venture required decisions about what to do (formulation) and how to do it (implementation).

A recurring observation in scholarship on the Indian state is the gap between the two. The country can organise the world's largest elections, enrol over a billion residents in a biometric identity system, and move funds into tens of millions of bank accounts, yet it struggles to ensure that teachers teach, that clinics

are staffed, and that wages are paid on time (Drèze & Sen, 2013; Kapur, 2020; Pritchett, 2009). Understanding why requires looking at the entire chain of activities through which a public problem becomes a policy and a policy becomes a service. The public policy cycle, a heuristic that divides the policy process into stages, offers a convenient device for doing so.

The cycle is not a description of how policy always unfolds, and its limits have been debated since it was first proposed (Nakamura, 1987; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Nevertheless, as Jann and Wegrich (2007) observe, it remains the organising framework for most textbooks and much empirical research because it directs attention to distinct actors, institutions, and problems at each point in the process. In India it helps to separate the arenas in which policies are conceived, such as the Union Cabinet, NITI Aayog, and the Supreme Court, from those in which they are delivered, such as district administrations, panchayats, and frontline workers. Mathur (2013) has argued that institutions matter greatly in shaping Indian policy outcomes. This paper builds on that insight by tracing how institutional arrangements operate at each stage of the cycle.

The paper has four objectives: to outline the conceptual foundations of the policy cycle and its critiques; to map its stages onto Indian institutions; to examine the implementation gap using illustrative episodes and survey data; and to draw implications for reform.

The study adopts a qualitative, analytical design based on secondary sources. It draws on peer-reviewed scholarship, statutes and constitutional provisions, official reports, and two nationally representative data sources: the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) and the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER). Four policy episodes serve as illustrative cases: the Right to Information (RTI) Act 2005, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) 2005, the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009, and the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) launched in 2014. They were selected because they differ in policy type, covering transparency regulation, an employment guarantee, an education entitlement, and behaviour-oriented infrastructure, and because each has generated a substantial body of evidence. The analysis is interpretive rather than causal. Survey indicators illustrate patterns of access and outcomes; they are not used to attribute change to any single programme.

The paper first sets out the conceptual framework, then examines each stage of the cycle in India, and closes with a discussion, recommendations, and a conclusion.

2. Conceptual Framework: The Policy Cycle and Its Critics

2.1. The Stages Heuristic

The idea that public decision making can be analysed as a sequence of functional activities is usually traced to Lasswell (1956), who identified seven: intelligence, promotion, prescription, invocation, application, termination, and appraisal. Later writers simplified and modified the sequence. Anderson (1975) distinguished problem identification and agenda formation, formulation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation. Dye (2017) presents the policy process as a set of political activities: identification of problems, agenda setting, formulation, legitimisation, implementation, and evaluation. Jann and Wegrich (2007) organise their account around agenda setting, policy formulation, decision making, implementation, and evaluation, and add that termination and policy redefinition can feed back into new rounds of agenda setting. Howlett et al. (2020) offer a comparable framework. Table 1 summarises these formulations.

Table 1
Selected Models of the Policy Cycle

Author(s)	Stages or functions	Central emphasis
Lasswell (1956)	Intelligence; promotion; prescription; invocation; application; termination; appraisal	Functional analysis of the decision process
Anderson (1975)	Problem identification and agenda formation; formulation; adoption; implementation; evaluation	Sequential phases of policymaking
Dye (2017)	Problem identification; agenda setting; formulation; legitimation; implementation; evaluation	Policy as a set of political activities
Jann & Wegrich (2007)	Agenda setting; formulation; decision making; implementation; evaluation; termination	Cyclical flow with feedback and redefinition

Note. Compiled by the author from the sources cited.

2.2. Critiques of the Cycle

Despite its popularity, the stages heuristic has attracted sustained criticism. Nakamura (1987) described it as the textbook approach and noted that real policy processes rarely follow neat sequences: implementation can begin before formulation is complete, evaluation may occur continuously, and problems are redefined as policies are applied. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) argued that the framework offers a taxonomy rather than a causal theory, generates few testable hypotheses, and privileges a top-down view in which the legislature is the central actor. deLeon (1999) acknowledged these limitations while crediting the heuristic with giving the field a shared vocabulary.

Alternative theories emphasise different features of policy change. Lindblom (1959) held that decision makers rarely pursue comprehensive rational analysis; instead they proceed through successive limited comparisons, making incremental adjustments to existing policy. Kingdon (2011) proposed that agenda setting occurs when separate streams of problems, policies, and politics converge, opening a policy window that entrepreneurs can exploit. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) described long periods of stability punctuated by rapid change when new ways of defining an issue attract attention. The Advocacy Coalition Framework of Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) explains change through competing coalitions that share beliefs and learn over time. Each of these theories is relevant to India, where agenda-setting windows have opened following elections, judicial interventions, and mass mobilisation.

This paper therefore treats the cycle as an analytical lens rather than an empirical law. The stages draw attention to different actors and problems, but they overlap, loop back, and are sometimes skipped.

2.3. Implementation Theory

Implementation deserves separate treatment because it is where policies encounter reality. Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), in their study of a federal economic development programme in Oakland, California, showed that implementation involves a long chain of decisions and clearances; even when the probability of agreement at each link is high, the joint probability of success can be low. Two broad traditions

followed. The top-down approach of Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) identified the conditions for effective implementation: clear and consistent objectives, a sound causal theory, a supportive legal structure, committed implementing officials, and stable support from constituencies. The bottom-up tradition, associated with Lipsky (2010), stressed that street-level bureaucrats, faced with limited resources and ambiguous mandates, exercise discretion and in effect make policy through their routine coping strategies. Sabatier (1986) proposed a synthesis of the two, and Matland (1995) offered a contingency model that links implementation to the degree of ambiguity and conflict surrounding a policy. Table 2 summarises these approaches and their relevance to India.

Table 2
Major Approaches to Policy Implementation

Approach	Central claim	Relevance to India
Implementation as a chain (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973)	Multiple decision points reduce the probability of success	Union, state, district, block, and panchayat tiers multiply veto points and delays
Top-down (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980)	Success depends on clear objectives, legal structure, and committed officials	Statutory rights such as MGNREGA and RTE provide stronger legal leverage than executive schemes
Bottom-up (Lipsky, 2010)	Frontline discretion shapes policy in practice	Teachers, health workers, and local functionaries mediate citizens' access to entitlements
Ambiguity–conflict (Matland, 1995)	Implementation type varies with the level of ambiguity and conflict	Conflict-laden policies require political bargaining; low-conflict schemes depend on administrative capacity

Note. The third column reflects the author's analysis.

3. Agenda Setting and Policy Formulation in India

3.1. Sources of the Policy Agenda

Policy problems do not become public priorities automatically. In India, at least five sources have shaped the agenda. The first is civil society mobilisation. The campaign of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan in Rajasthan during the 1990s, which demanded access to muster rolls and expenditure records in villages, grew into a national movement that culminated in the Right to Information Act (2005). Similarly, the Right to Food campaign, which began with a petition in the Supreme Court in 2001 (People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India, 2001), pushed hunger and entitlements onto the national agenda and contributed to the National Food Security Act (2013; Drèze & Sen, 2013).

The second source is electoral and coalition politics. Kingdon's (2011) politics stream is visible in the formation of the United Progressive Alliance government in 2004, whose Common Minimum Programme committed it to an employment guarantee and to transparency in governance. The National Advisory Council, which brought activists and academics into the policy process, helped convert these commitments into draft legislation (Jenkins & Manor, 2017; Khera, 2011). The third source is the judiciary. Through

public interest litigation, the Supreme Court has set agendas on subjects ranging from workplace sexual harassment, where its guidelines in *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan* (1997) preceded the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (2013), to education, where the recognition of a right to education in *Unni Krishnan, J.P. v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (1993) prepared the ground for Article 21A, inserted by the Constitution (Eighty-sixth Amendment) Act (2002), and eventually for the RTE Act (Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009).

The fourth source is the executive itself, particularly when the Prime Minister's Office adopts a mission-mode priority, as with the SBM and the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) in 2014. The fifth is international commitments, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, which supply targets and reporting frameworks.

3.2. Formulation: Institutions and Processes

For more than six decades the Planning Commission was the central formulation body. Established by executive resolution in 1950, it prepared Five-Year Plans that set sectoral priorities and allocations. It was replaced on 1 January 2015 by NITI Aayog, a policy think tank intended to foster cooperative federalism and to provide strategic direction to the Union and state governments (NITI Aayog, n.d.). The change signalled a move from allocation-driven planning towards advisory and coordinating roles, although the fiscal authority to approve schemes remains with the Ministry of Finance and the Union Cabinet.

Within the Union government, formulation typically begins in the administrative ministry, which prepares a concept note or draft Cabinet note. For schemes involving significant expenditure, the proposal is appraised by the Expenditure Finance Committee, circulated to concerned ministries, and then submitted for Cabinet approval. Since 2014, the Pre-Legislative Consultation Policy has required ministries to place draft bills, along with an explanation of their financial and social implications, in the public domain for at least thirty days (Department of Legal Affairs, 2014). Expert committees and commissions supplement this process. The committee chaired by K. Kasturirangan, for example, prepared the draft that, after wide consultation, became the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Formulation practice nevertheless remains uneven, and consultation is often compressed or bypassed. The three farm laws of 2020, introduced initially as ordinances and passed within weeks, were repealed in 2021 after prolonged protests, an episode widely read as a lesson in the costs of limited engagement with affected stakeholders. In contrast, the NREGA and RTI legislation benefited from extended drafting, civil society inputs, and parliamentary committee scrutiny, which contributed to statutes with detailed operational provisions such as social audits and time-bound disclosure of information. Table 3 maps the stages of the cycle onto the principal institutions of the Indian policy system.

Table 3
Stages of the Policy Cycle and Principal Institutions in India

Stage	Principal institutions and instruments	Typical constraints
Agenda setting	Social movements; political parties and manifestos; advisory councils; courts through public interest litigation; media	Uneven voice for marginal groups; shifting issue attention

Formulation	Line ministries; NITI Aayog; expert committees; Expenditure Finance Committee; Law Commission	Limited consultation; weak costing of administrative capacity
Adoption and legitimization	Union Cabinet; Parliament and standing committees; state legislatures; GST Council; ordinances	Low committee referral; executive dominance
Implementation	State departments; district administration; panchayats and urban local bodies; frontline workers; NGOs	Fiscal dependence; vacancies; discretion; coordination failures
Monitoring and evaluation	Comptroller and Auditor General; DMEO; parliamentary committees; social audits; RTI; courts; management information systems	Data quality; limited use of findings

Note. Compiled by the author.

4. Adoption and Legitimation

Adoption is the stage at which a preferred option receives formal authority. In India's parliamentary system the executive dominates this stage because the government usually commands a legislative majority. Bills are introduced by ministers, and the depth of legislative scrutiny depends largely on whether they are referred to departmentally related standing committees. According to PRS Legislative Research (n.d.), roughly 71 per cent of bills introduced in the 15th Lok Sabha (2009–2014) were referred to committees, compared with about a quarter in the 16th (2014–2019) and about 16 per cent in the 17th (2019–2024). Lower referral rates reduce opportunities for technical scrutiny and stakeholder testimony, which weakens the information base on which implementation later depends.

Ordinances under Article 123 of the Constitution allow the executive to legislate when Parliament is not in session, and their use for major reforms has drawn criticism. Much policy is also adopted without any statute. Flagship programmes such as the SBM and the PMJDY operate as executive schemes governed by Cabinet decisions, budget allocations, and operational guidelines. The distinction matters. Statutory entitlements such as those under MGNREGA, the RTE Act, and the National Food Security Act create enforceable claims and reporting obligations, whereas executive schemes can be modified or wound down through administrative decisions and are more exposed to shifts in budgets and priorities (Drèze & Khera, 2017).

Adoption is also a multi-level process. Subjects on the State List and Concurrent List, such as public health, agriculture, police, education, and local government, require state legislation or state cooperation for central initiatives to take effect. The constitutional amendment that enabled the Goods and Services Tax in 2016, and the GST Council that followed, is a distinctive example of formal shared decision making in which the Union and the states jointly adopt tax policy. The Supreme Court is a further arena of legitimation. Its interim orders in the right to food case converted several food and nutrition schemes, including the midday meal programme and the Integrated Child Development Services, into legal entitlements monitored by commissioners appointed by the Court (Drèze & Sen, 2013).

5. Implementation: Where Policy Meets the State

5.1. Federalism and Fiscal Architecture

Implementation in India is a shared responsibility. Under the Seventh Schedule, states are responsible for many of the subjects that matter most to citizens, including public health, agriculture, and law and order, while the Union influences state action through centrally sponsored schemes and fiscal transfers. Fiscal arrangements have changed considerably. The Fourteenth Finance Commission (2014) raised the states' share of the divisible pool of central taxes from 32 to 42 per cent for 2015–2020, giving states greater untied resources, and the Fifteenth Finance Commission (2020) set the share at 41 per cent for 2021–2026 following the reorganisation of Jammu and Kashmir. Even so, conditional transfers through centrally sponsored schemes remain a major instrument, and fund releases tied to matching contributions, guidelines, and reporting requirements can delay implementation, particularly in fiscally weaker states. The Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Constitutional Amendments of 1992 (Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992; Constitution (Seventy-fourth Amendment) Act, 1992) gave constitutional status to panchayats and urban local bodies and listed 29 and 18 functions, respectively, that states could devolve to them. Devolution of functions, funds, and functionaries has been uneven across states. Where local bodies lack staff and predictable resources, they cannot perform the delivery roles that schemes such as MGNREGA and SBM assign to them. Policies designed at the top thus assume implementing capacity at the bottom that may not exist.

5.2. State Capacity and the Implementation Gap

Pritchett (2009) described India as a flailing state, one whose head is strong but whose limbs do not respond reliably to it. Pritchett et al. (2013) later argued that many developing states engage in isomorphic mimicry, adopting the forms of effective institutions, such as organisational charts, laws, and reporting systems, without acquiring their functions. Kapur (2020) offers a more nuanced account. In his analysis the Indian state performs well in tasks that are episodic, centrally directed, and low in discretion, such as conducting elections, but struggles with tasks that require sustained, transaction-intensive, and discretion-laden delivery, such as schooling and policing.

Evidence on specific administrative weaknesses is considerable. Muralidharan et al. (2017) estimated that roughly a quarter of teachers in government primary schools were absent on a given day, imposing large fiscal costs without corresponding learning gains. Iyer and Mani (2012) found that senior civil servants are frequently transferred, often in response to political change, which limits accountability for long-term programme results. Vacancies in health, education, and local administration compound the problem. Corbridge et al. (2005) and Gupta (2012) show through ethnographic work how citizens encounter the state through fragmented, discretionary, and often paper-driven interactions in which access to entitlements can depend on documentation, intermediaries, and personal connections.

5.3. Technology and Implementation

Digital technologies have been advanced as a means of narrowing the implementation gap. Muralidharan et al. (2016) evaluated the introduction of biometric smartcards for payments under MGNREGA and social security pensions in Andhra Pradesh. Payments became faster and more predictable, and leakage declined substantially, at a modest cost. Direct benefit transfers, Aadhaar-based authentication, and management information systems now underpin many schemes. Yet technology does not eliminate the underlying

problems of capacity and discretion. Field studies of public distribution and employment schemes have documented cases in which authentication failures and linkage requirements excluded eligible beneficiaries, showing that digital systems can introduce new implementation risks even as they address old ones.

5.4. Evidence from National Surveys

National survey data illustrate both the achievements and the limits of implementation. Table 4 compares selected household and health indicators from NFHS-4 (2015–16) and NFHS-5 (2019–21). Access to sanitation, clean cooking fuel, electricity, and financial services rose markedly over the period in which flagship missions such as the SBM (2014), the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (2016), Saubhagya (2017), and the PMJDY (2014) were introduced. Institutional deliveries also increased, continuing a trend associated with the National Health Mission and the Janani Suraksha Yojana.

Table 4
Selected Household and Health Indicators in India, NFHS-4 and NFHS-5

Indicator (%)	NFHS-4 (2015–16)	NFHS-5 (2019–21)	Change (pp)	Associated initiative
Population in households with improved sanitation facility	48.4	70.2	+21.8	Swachh Bharat Mission (2014)
Households using clean fuel for cooking	43.8	58.6	+14.8	PM Ujjwala Yojana (2016)
Households with electricity	88.0	96.8	+8.8	Saubhagya (2017)
Population with improved drinking-water source	89.9	95.9	+6.0	Rural and urban drinking-water programmes
Women with a bank or savings account they use	53.0	78.6	+25.6	PM Jan Dhan Yojana (2014)
Institutional births	78.9	88.6	+9.7	National Health Mission; Janani Suraksha Yojana

Note. Data from IIPS and ICF (2017, 2021). pp = percentage points. The initiatives listed are associated with, not proven causes of, the changes shown.

These figures show that where the delivery chain is simple and centrally supported, as with physical infrastructure and account opening, implementation can be fast. Three cautions nonetheless apply. First, access indicators capture inputs or outputs rather than sustained use or quality: an improved toilet counted in a survey is not necessarily a toilet that is used consistently and maintained. Second, the NFHS comparisons cannot isolate the effect of any single programme, since earlier schemes, state initiatives, and economic growth also contributed. Third, access gains do not automatically translate into better outcomes in domains that depend on frontline behaviour.

Education illustrates the last point most clearly. The RTE Act guaranteed free and compulsory elementary education, and enrolment is now nearly universal. Learning outcomes, however, have not improved correspondingly. As Table 5 shows, ASER data indicate that enrolment among rural children aged 6 to 14 has remained above 96 per cent, yet the proportion of Grade V children who can read a Grade II level text has stayed below half and declined between 2014 and 2022.

Table 5
Enrolment and Reading Levels in Rural India, ASER 2014–2022

Indicator (%)	2014	2016	2018	2022
Children aged 6–14 enrolled in school	96.7	96.9	97.2	98.4
Grade V children who can read a Grade II level text	48.1	47.8	44.2	42.8

Note. Data from ASER Centre (2015, 2017, 2019, 2023); figures are rounded. The 2022 survey followed prolonged pandemic-related school closures.

The gap between near-universal enrolment and weak foundational learning suggests that RTE implementation concentrated on inputs, such as school buildings, teacher appointments, and infrastructure norms, and gave less attention to pedagogy, teacher support, and accountability for learning. The decline between 2014 and 2018 predates the pandemic, pointing to underlying weaknesses.

5.5. Four Policy Episodes Compared

Table 6 compares the four policy episodes across the stages of the cycle. Three patterns emerge. First, the two policies that originated in sustained civil society campaigns, the RTI Act and MGNREGA, produced statutes with unusually detailed implementation provisions, including social audits, time limits, and penalties. Second, all four episodes encountered implementation problems that were not anticipated at the formulation stage, such as delays in wage payments, backlogs in information commissions, teacher vacancies, and doubts about sustained toilet use. Third, the policies most dependent on frontline behaviour, RTE and the behavioural component of SBM, show the widest divergence between outputs and outcomes.

Table 6
Four Policy Episodes Across the Policy Cycle

Policy	Agenda-setting origin	Formulation and adoption	Key implementation challenges
RTI Act 2005	Grassroots movement and national campaign	Civil society draft; National Advisory Council; parliamentary committee scrutiny; statutory right	Backlogs and vacancies in information commissions; harassment of applicants; contested 2019 amendment on commissioners' terms
MGNREGA 2005	Right to work campaign; coalition Common	Advisory council draft; standing committee review; demand-driven	Delayed wage payments; rationing of work despite demand; muster roll

	Minimum Programme	guarantee of 100 days of work	manipulation; budget constraints
RTE Act 2009	Judicial recognition of the right; Article 21A	Statute with norms and standards; 25 per cent entry-level reservation in private schools	Teacher vacancies; input-focused norms; weak learning outcomes
SBM 2014	Prime ministerial priority; sanitation deficits	Executive mission without statute; financial incentives for toilet construction	Sustained use and behaviour change; faecal sludge management; reliability of self-reported status

Note. Compiled by the author from the statutes and sources cited in the text.

6. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Feedback

Evaluation is meant to close the cycle by generating evidence on whether policies should be continued, modified, or terminated. India has a long institutional history of evaluation. The Planning Commission established the Programme Evaluation Organisation in 1952 to assess development programmes, and this function was later subsumed into the Development Monitoring and Evaluation Office (DMEO) under NITI Aayog. The Comptroller and Auditor General conducts performance audits that are tabled in Parliament, the Public Accounts Committee reviews them, and standing committees examine demands for grants and scheme performance. Statutory social audits, mandated for MGNREGA under Section 17 of the Act, place evaluation partly in the hands of communities, and the RTI Act gives citizens a tool for obtaining records on programme spending.

Yet the link between evaluation and decision making is weak. Weiss (1979) distinguished several ways in which research is used, from direct problem solving to enlightenment and political ammunition. In India, evaluation findings are more often absorbed conceptually, or used to defend existing positions, than applied to redesign schemes. Several factors explain this. Evaluations are frequently commissioned by the same departments that implement schemes, are completed after budgetary decisions have been taken, and rely on administrative data of uneven quality. Monitoring systems tend to track physical and financial progress, such as toilets constructed, accounts opened, and funds spent, rather than outcomes. Termination is rare; schemes are more commonly renamed, merged, or extended. Since 2016 the Ministry of Finance has sought to align the continuation of schemes with Finance Commission cycles, requiring appraisal and third-party evaluation before extension, which is a step towards institutionalising review.

There are also examples of feedback working. Evidence on weak foundational learning informed the emphasis of NEP 2020 on early literacy and numeracy and the launch of the NIPUN Bharat Mission in 2021, which set time-bound targets for foundational skills. Sustained civil society monitoring of MGNREGA wage delays contributed to changes in payment systems, and social audits in states such as Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have exposed irregularities in muster rolls and material expenditure. These examples suggest that feedback works best when independent actors, including researchers, auditors, communities, and courts, can generate credible evidence and when a political window for reform exists.

7. Discussion

Reading the four episodes together with the survey evidence yields five observations. First, formulation in India has become more open than implementation planning. Civil society movements, judicial interventions, and expert committees have shaped the content of policies, particularly rights-based statutes. However, the costs and administrative capacity required for delivery are rarely assessed at the formulation stage. Statutes often assign new functions to local bodies and frontline workers without providing staff, training, or predictable funds, which produces the implementation gaps documented in MGNREGA and RTE.

Second, the legal form of a policy shapes its resilience. Statutory entitlements give citizens a basis for claims that courts can enforce, whereas executive missions such as the SBM can move quickly but depend on sustained political attention.

Third, the implementation record is stronger where delivery is simple, centralised, and measurable. Account opening, electrification, and fuel connections involve fewer discretionary transactions than teaching or care. Policies that depend on sustained interaction between a frontline worker and a citizen, such as education and health, show slower and less certain progress. This pattern is consistent with Kapur's (2020) distinction between episodic and routine state capability.

Fourth, federalism is both a constraint and a resource. Fiscal transfers, conditionality, and the division of responsibilities produce delays and bargaining, but state-level innovations, such as the smartcard payments and social audit systems of Andhra Pradesh, have generated evidence and models that were later scaled or adapted elsewhere. Fifth, the cycle is iterative in practice. The RTI Act has been amended, MGNREGA's guidelines have been revised many times, NEP 2020 responded to learning data, and the farm laws were withdrawn. Policies are continually reformulated, and the boundaries between stages are porous, which supports the critiques of the linear model discussed earlier.

8. Policy Recommendations

The analysis points to five reform priorities.

1. *Embed implementation readiness in formulation.* Cabinet notes and Expenditure Finance Committee appraisals should include an explicit assessment of the administrative capacity, staffing, and time required at each level of government, together with a costed implementation plan and a pilot phase for novel schemes.
2. *Strengthen fiscal federalism for delivery.* Reducing the number and conditionality of centrally sponsored schemes, ensuring timely fund releases, and giving states and local governments flexibility in the use of funds would reduce delays. Devolution of functions, funds, and functionaries to panchayats and urban local bodies should be accompanied by capacity building.
3. *Invest in frontline capacity and administrative stability.* Longer tenures for officers in key implementing posts, filling of vacancies, and better training and supervision of teachers, health workers, and local officials would address the discretion and absenteeism problems documented in the literature.
4. *Institutionalise independent evaluation.* Evaluation agencies should have functional independence, publish findings in the public domain, and be linked to budget cycles so that results influence the continuation, redesign, or termination of schemes. Outcome measures such as learning levels and sustained use of facilities should complement input and output data.

5. *Improve legislative and civic scrutiny.* Referring more bills to standing committees, adopting post-legislative scrutiny, and protecting social audits and RTI mechanisms would enhance transparency and give citizens a voice at every stage of the cycle.

9. Conclusion

This paper has traced the public policy cycle in India from the emergence of problems on the agenda to the evaluation of results. The analysis shows that the cycle offers a useful organising framework for the Indian policy system, provided it is treated as a heuristic and not as a strict sequence. Agenda setting is shaped by civil society, coalition politics, and the judiciary as much as by formal planning. Formulation has become more consultative, though unevenly so, and adoption is dominated by the executive, with committee scrutiny declining.

The most consequential findings concern implementation. The evidence from national surveys shows that the Indian state can deliver quickly where tasks are simple, centrally supported, and easily counted. It is less successful where outcomes depend on the sustained, discretionary work of frontline staff embedded in a federal system with uneven fiscal and administrative capacity. The contrast between near-universal school enrolment and stagnant foundational learning is the clearest illustration of a wider pattern in which access outpaces quality. Evaluation remains weakly connected to decisions on budgets and design, although social audits, learning assessments, and civil society monitoring offer encouraging examples of feedback.

The central lesson is that policy success depends less on the ambition of a formulation than on the fit between design and the delivery system that must carry it. Treating implementation as an integral part of formulation, funding it predictably, staffing it stably, and evaluating it independently would shorten the distance between policy intention and public benefit. Future research could complement this document-based analysis with field studies of district-level implementation.

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