Is There an Indian Policy Process? An Investigation into Two Social Policy Processes

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Abstract

India is a huge, poor, fast developing, centralized and increasingly unequal, democratic country. The core argument of this article is that these and other contextual factors have an impact on the way in which social policies are formulated and implemented. The focus of the article is on two such policies on food and primary education. Based on secondary material and own fieldwork, the shaping of these two policies is discussed and some major characteristics of the two social policy processes are highlighted. This analysis brings to light the existence of two paradoxes present in social policy processes in India: one related to the fact that social policies are important for regime legitimacy but nevertheless suffer from a lack of political commitment; the other related to the fact that centralized decision-making goes together with the widespread involvement of local politicians in policy implementation. These two paradoxes, the article concludes, are the result of the wider context in which social policies are shaped and are hence not easily resolved.

Keywords

Education; Food Policy; India; Policy Process; Social Policy

Introduction

Within policy studies there is a vast and increasing body of literature stressing the fact that policies should be understood as the products of social processes. Rather than the logical outcomes of rational selection procedures of the best policy alternatives, policies are formulated and implemented in particular social and historical contexts, and these contexts matter – for which issues are put on the policy agenda, for the kind of policies that are developed, for the shape of policy institutions, for budget allocations and for the implementation process and the outcome of these policies.¹

It is this notion of a policy process that forms the point of departure of this article. This notion will be applied to the theme of this special issue of Social Policy & Administration, ‘Social policies in South Asia’. The aim of this
article is, hence, to show how social policies are shaped by the context in which they have emerged and exist. The verb ‘to shape’ is not used here in the strong sense of a clear mono-causal relationship, where the context is assumed to explain the social policy process entirely. Rather, it is used in the sense of ‘to mould’, or ‘to enable’. What the article will show, therefore, is how the context is reflected in the way in which social policies are phrased, institutionalized and implemented. The article focuses on India and the question is therefore: what is Indian about India’s social policy processes?

The article concentrates on two different social policies: the public food distribution system (a targeted social safety intervention that is simultaneously a mechanism to support food-producing farmers) and education, where the main focus is on primary education. Of course, these two policies are just two out of a much larger set, but they are both important, cover large numbers of people and are sufficiently different to make the similarities in their process of formulation or implementation significant. The argument in this article is based on secondary sources as well as fieldwork, conducted between 1991 and 2005, on food and education.

In the next section, some of the main features of the Indian policy context are described. Given the diversity in India – across regions, sectors, population – it is obvious that this section cannot do full justice to ‘the diversity that is India’. Nevertheless, I hope to be able to highlight some important dimensions of the Indian context against which the specific characteristics of social policies can be understood. The third section describes food and educational policies in India. This gives rise to a number of more general observations (in section four) about the main features of social policy processes in India. The article ends with a short discussion, focusing particularly on two paradoxes present in social policy processes.

### The Indian Policy Context: A Brief Description

In order to structure the description of the policy context, four different, partially overlapping dimensions are distinguished, that together make up this context. The first is the socio-economic dimension, which refers to the main characteristics of a country’s economy and society. The second is the political dimension, defining the ways in which representative powers are allocated. The third is the administrative dimension: the specific characteristics of the bureaucracy; and the last is the international dimension: the way in which, and the extent to which processes of globalization and international relations impinge on domestic policies.

**Socio-economically**, one of the important transformations that has taken place is related to India’s class structure. When India became independent in 1947 there was a small elite, consisting of urban-based industrialists and rural landlords, and a mass of poor people, primarily landless labourers and marginal farmers. As a result of some changes in land distribution, the green revolution in the mid-1960s and economic growth more generally, a considerable middle class has gradually emerged. Estimates of its size, that vary depending on the indicators used, are that it is between 100 and 300 million, but there is no doubt that this new middle class has become economically dynamic and politically important.
This changing class configuration is one of the reasons behind a shift in India’s economic development model (Corbridge and Harriss 2000). After India’s Independence there was a strong ideology of state-led development and central planning. From the mid-1980s onwards, and especially from the early 1990s, this development model has been replaced by a new, market-oriented development strategy. This shift was strongly supported by some sections of India’s expanding middle class (Kochanek 1996; Pedersen 2000; Sridharan 2004), who have benefited from this economic re-orientation in no insignificant way. Corbridge and Harriss (2000: 161) describe the reforms therefore as biased or partial: they have benefited the richer sections of the population much more than the poorer.

Whether poverty has decreased or not as a result of the reforms is a contested issue, but it is a fact that, despite high levels of economic growth (about 7 per cent between 2002/3 and 2006/7), poverty is still widespread. According to the Government of India, almost 28 per cent of the Indian population was living below the poverty line in 2004/5 (Government of India 2006a). This would mean that about 300 million people live in extreme poverty, i.e. with an income that is not sufficient to consume the required minimum number of calories. Many of these poor people are Dalits or Adivasis (tribal population). Casteism, i.e. discrimination linked to an idea of ‘purity’ and on the basis of descent, is still widespread in India, and stands in the way of the full participation of ‘lower’ caste groups, Adivasis or poor Muslims in mainstream economic, social and political life.

Poverty in India has many dimensions other than just income. In 2001, 35 per cent of the population above seven years of age, and 46 per cent of all women were still illiterate; about one out of 10 children die before they are five years old and about half of the children are moderately or severely malnourished. A more inclusive poverty line, based not on calories, but on nutritious food, plus safe shelter, sanitation, healthcare, education and clothing, results in a poverty headcount of nearly 69 per cent (Guruswami and Abraham 2006: 2539). The social needs are, hence, huge and widespread. Government expenditures on the social sector have increased in the reform period, according to most indicators, but the trend growth rate in the 1990s was considerably lower than in the 1980s (Dev and Mooij 2005).

In connection with the political dimension, it is, of course, important to mention that India is a democracy, even ‘the largest democracy in the world’, as is often proudly stated. There is universal suffrage, elections are held regularly and there is a free press. In the first years after Independence, Indian politics was almost completely dominated by the Congress party, but from the mid-1960s onwards regional parties came up and challenged the dominance of Congress, first only at the state level, later also at the centre (see Kothari [1970] and Sarangi [2005]).

The Indian electoral system is based on constituencies. This means that politicians maintain close links with their constituencies, and, especially in the case of members of the state legislative assembly (MLAs), constituency-related work is what their job is really about, rather than legislating. Potter’s description from 1986 still holds: a successful politician ‘is a “fixer” in the eyes of many people, someone who can get a man a job, divert development
monies into the constituency, help secure a contract, find a place in a school or a hospital’ (Potter 1986: 152; see also Wit 1996).

Politicians are, hence, closely involved in activities that are primarily administrative in nature. This practice is seen as ‘political interference’ by many administrators, but considered as perfectly legitimate and the core task of elected representatives by others.

Often, however, this ‘interference’ is not fully legal. MLAs and ministers sometimes demand money for their cooperation in transfers and postings; they may facilitate in contracting specific contractors while receiving a percentage of the deal; they may themselves be the contractor, or be closely related to him. ‘Interference’ may, hence, come with substantial financial benefits. Indian politicians also do, indeed, need a lot of money. According to Suri (2004: 5497), MLA candidates of the main political parties in one of the south Indian states spent about Rs10–20 million (£130,000–250,000) on the 2004 election. Candidates of the national parliament were estimated to spend about double this amount. This money was mainly utilized for securing a party ticket and mobilizing votes. Given these large (and illegal) expenses, it is not very surprising that politicians search for ways to increase their income.

Equally worrisome is the criminalization of politics. About 10 per cent of the candidates contesting the 1996 election had a criminal record (Bardhan 2001: 237). In certain states there is a clear nexus between politicians, bureaucrats and the mafia (see, for example, Mooij 2001). In one of the north Indian states, Uttar Pradesh, according to Bardhan (2001: 238), ‘[m]ore than half of the near-hundred mafia gangs reportedly enjoy the political patronage of one political party or another’.

An important point with regard to the administrative dimension of the policy context is that, even though there has been a shift towards a more market-oriented development model, the notion of a powerful and interventionist state has not fully lost its relevance. This is reflected, for instance, in the way in which the reforms have been presented to the public. From the start onwards, it was claimed that the government was committed to ‘adjustment with a human face’, (see, for instance, the 1991 Budget Speech, points 8 and 15) and that shedding responsibilities for poverty alleviation and social development was not the objective. The continuing importance of the state is also clear from the fact that a large-scale dismantling of the public sector has not (yet) taken place.5

India is a federation with a central government and state governments. As laid out in the Constitution, the central government is responsible for a large number of issues, including India’s defence and international relations. The states are responsible for law and order, most social policies and some economic and other activities. Education is a shared responsibility, but in actual practice, primary education is seen as a state responsibility. Food trade and price controls are also shared tasks. Yet, despite a long list of state responsibilities, ‘the federal system is only weakly entrenched’ (Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 28). States are financially dependent on the centre; the representative of the central government in the states (the governor) has the power to suspend state governments and the apex of the bureaucracy and police belong to all India services (Corbridge and Harriss 2000: 28). In the economic sphere, the possibilities of state governments developing their own economic strategies have, however, increased as a result of the reform process.
With regard to social policies, the centre remains very important in setting the agenda, even though it is not formally responsible for this. One of the mechanisms through which this dominance is reproduced is through centrally sponsored schemes. These schemes are designed by a central ministry, but implemented by state agencies. On average only about 20 per cent of social sector expenditure is met by the centre (the rest is met by the states), but the centre has a disproportionate say in the way in which the money is utilized.6

In the early 1990s, there were two constitutional amendments, giving more powers to lower-level councils (at district and panchayat – village level, or municipal) (the 73rd and 74th Amendments). Many social sector issues are now officially the responsibility of lower-level bodies. In most states, however, in the absence of fiscal decentralization, this new legislation has not yet resulted in a significant transfer of power. Almost all policy decisions are still taken at higher levels, and administrative control remains firmly in the hands of the state government. It might be, however, that the involvement of local political leaders in day-to-day implementation described above has intensified and percolated down to lower levels of politics as a result of these amendments (Mitra 2001).

Corruption is widespread in most Indian states, especially in sectors where there is a lot of money for infrastructural development. Wade (1985) described some of these practices with the help of a model in which civil servants enter into deals with contractors, and in which a redistribution of the illegally earned income happens in the bureaucracy and with politicians, partly in the form of payments for transfers and postings (see also Das 2001 on corruption).

While, as a result of entrenched corruption and, in the case of the bureaucracy perhaps also because of ideological shifts, the legislature and executive have lost some of their legitimacy, the judiciary, on the other hand, has gained in popular credibility (Srinivasulu 2006). This could be related to the more pro-active role that the judiciary has assumed from the mid-1990s onwards. This judicial activism, Srinivasulu suggests, might have been induced, and come to the rescue of, a poorly functioning executive and legislature (see also Rudolph and Rudolph [2001] about judicial activism and power shifts within the Indian state).

The international dimension of the overall social policy context consists mainly of international agencies (and investors) supporting the reform programme, but also pressurizing India to work towards the Millennium Development Goals. International agencies also contribute financially to reform policies in many areas, including the social sector; and while the country proudly refused aid from foreign governments after the Tsunami, it accepts these funds for education or health (Menon 2005). As a result, the proportion of the union budget for child-related social development that comes from external aid has increased from less than one per cent in 1990/1 to about a quarter in 1999/2000 (HAQ 2001: table 1.8). Since donors pay for some of the social sector policies, they are also involved in their formulation.

Social Policies in India

In this section, two sets of social policies, related to food and primary education, are discussed. Both are crucial for enhancing social opportunities (Drèze and
Sen 2002), and in that sense they are social policies, even though the Indian budget makes a different classification.7

Food policy

India has a history of intervening in food distribution that goes back to World War II. Over time, the system has gradually expanded and changed. At present, the basic characteristics are as follows. The central government fixes a procurement price for rice and wheat, and the Food Corporation of India (FCI) purchases food grains (more or less) at that rate. This procurement takes place mainly in five states (Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in north India, and Andhra Pradesh in south India), in which the bulk of India’s food grain is produced. The FCI then stores and distributes the food grain to other states, where it is sold to consumers, i.e. to households with a ration card. These cardholders buy from special shops, called ration shops or fair-price shops. The amount that they can buy has varied over time, and from state to state, but is generally between 10 and 25 kg per household per month. The price at which they buy this food depends on their economic status. For households below the poverty line the price is lower than the open market price.8 For those above the poverty line, the price is about the same as the open market price.

The public distribution system (PDS) is a multi-purpose policy: it is a means to protect rice- and wheat-growing farmers (since it guarantees them a minimum price), it contributes to national food security (since it involves the maintenance of a buffer stock and can function as a mechanism to stabilize rice and wheat prices) and it provides a social safety net for poor households. This multitude of objectives makes the PDS also a multi-stakeholder policy. Many different kinds of groups have an interest in the continuation of the PDS – some, primarily in enhancing procurement prices; others, primarily in raising distribution prices; many in increasing the volume of food grains handled.

Over the years the PDS has become a huge food intervention. In 2004/5, about 29 per cent of the rice produced and 23 per cent of the wheat produced was procured for the central pool. It is also a costly intervention. In 2004/5, the food subsidy came to Rs258 billion, i.e., around £3.4 billion, or 0.83 per cent of India’s GDP. This food subsidy is the result of the difference between the expenditure incurred by the government on food grain procurement, storage etc., and the revenues through sale of these food grains.9

The effects of food distribution on consumers vary across India. In 1999/2000 about 20 per cent of the rice consumed in rural Andhra Pradesh; 32 per cent consumed in Tamil Nadu and 47 per cent consumed in Kerala (all south Indian states) came from the PDS. In many north Indian states, the contribution is marginal (Dev et al. 2004: table 24). This, as I have argued elsewhere, has to do with the quality of the delivery system and with state-level political strategies. In south India, politicians have seen the advantages of large-scale food distribution and have tried to get political mileage out of it. In the 1980s, states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and especially Andhra Pradesh complemented national food distribution with state-level subsidies. They increased the amount of food grains distributed, enlarged the number
of beneficiaries and/or distributed at a lower price. This went together with
the reinforcement of a ‘donative’ discourse, in which the chief ministers were
presented as benefactors handing out food to the poor. As one observer
noted in the 1980s:

The [food] scheme is used as ongoing propaganda for the [ruling party].
Several colourful pamphlets advertising the scheme, each [the] Chief
Minister’s . . . photo on the front, are available free from the AP State
Public Relations Office. The scheme is nicknamed ‘Anna-Varam’, in these
pamphlets, a pun meaning both ‘big brother’s gift’ and ‘rice gift’, with
the word ‘varam’ (gift) having a religious connotation. (Olson 1989: 1598)

This kind of welfare populism has developed less in north India, where
politicians deploy different tactics to appeal to the electorate (Mooij 1999c).
Already for years, the PDS has been regarded as an excessively costly
programme, especially because it fails to reach poor consumers in the poor-
est (and most poorly governed) regions of India. Serious reform or the down-
sizing of the programme is, however, difficult. The introduction of targeting
in 1997 was a case in point. The decision was very hard to take because no
politician wanted to be blamed for excluding needy people from cheap food
– an allegation immediately made by political opponents. When the decision
was finally taken in the context of an ongoing reform process, it was done
only half-heartedly, since the matter of government procurement was not
addressed. Procurement benefits mainly rich farmers in a small number of
states. These farmers are well represented in almost all political parties.
Moreover, the states that benefit from procurement have also been politically
important for the ruling governments at the centre. These political reasons
make it very difficult to touch the issue of procurement.

Because procurement was not addressed, targeting led to a major crisis in
the PDS. The overall demand for PDS food grain came down, as foreseen.
Given continuous procurement, the result was, however, an enormous and
unmanageable buffer stock that was costly to maintain. The food subsidy did
not decline. However, the legitimacy of the state as a ‘protector’ of poor people
suffered. There was a large amount of negative publicity about the fact that
poor people were starving while warehouses were overflowing. Social activists
who campaigned for a right to food went to the Supreme Court and
obtained a favourable ruling saying that the government has the obligation
to provide food to people who are starving, even when this has to be for free.
In the years that followed the food stock has gradually come down again, but
this was not the result of a reduction in procurement or a reversal to the
earlier single price system, but because of huge exports from the PDS stock
and the implementation of other food-based welfare programmes, such as
food-for-work programmes and a midday meal scheme for schoolchildren.

Education

When India became independent, less than one-fifth of the population was
literate. It was primarily the upper caste and male population that had gone
to school under British colonialism. The Constitution that was drafted at the
time of Independence intended to put an end to this exclusion of marginalized
groups, and directed that within a period of 10 years there should be free and compulsory education for all children.

Unfortunately, this principle has had little impact on educational provisions. It was only from the 1980s onwards that systematic efforts have been undertaken to universalize primary education, with the National Policy on Education (1986) and the Operation Blackboard scheme in 1987. The real push came in the 1990s with the introduction of a large integrated scheme, the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), initially in a restricted number of districts, but expanded in the course of time. In the first decade of the new millennium, the DPEP was replaced by SSA (Sarva siksha abhiyan, meaning education for all), which is implemented all over India and focuses also on the upper primary (class 6 and 7) years of schooling. Both the DPEP and SSA are, first and foremost, attempts to universalize education. They are centrally sponsored schemes, meaning that they have been formulated at the central level. Most of the funds come from the centre, although the states co-finance the programmes (15 per cent in the case of the DPEP; 25 in the case of SSA). For both the DPEP and SSA, the Government of India receives external support from donor organizations, including the World Bank, the EU and the UK Department for International Development. For these donor organizations, these programmes are a way of contributing to the Millennium Development Goals.

The most important aspect of the DPEP and SSA is the campaign to get all children into school. Teachers and community members are stimulated to convince parents to send their children to school, and special bridge courses have been set up to mainstream older children who dropped out or have never been to school. New schools have been built, existing schools have been upgraded with additional classrooms or other infrastructural improvements and there has been an intensification of in-service teacher training.

The 1990s have witnessed some improvements. Between 1991 and 2001, the overall literacy rate increased by 13 percentage points from 52 to 65 per cent, while the previous decade had witnessed an increase of only nine percentage points. By 1998/9, 82 per cent of the population between 10 and 14 years old was literate (87 for boys, 76 for girls) (International Institute for Population Sciences 2000: table 2.7), and girls are catching up with boys. The number of primary and upper primary schools increased by 18.6 per cent in the 1990s (having increased by 16.2 per cent in the 1980s). The increase in the numbers of teachers in these schools was 19.8 per cent (a decline as compared with the 1980s, when the increase was 21.5 per cent). Enrolment has continued to go up. Gross enrolment in primary schools was 114 per cent in the 2000/1, but in middle/upper primary (class 6–8) it was still only 43 per cent.

Hence, most Indian children at some point in their childhood do go to school. Apart from the increasing accessibility of schools, this is also related to changing demands and attitudes. Various surveys have indicated that poor people want (or perhaps can now afford) to send their children to go to school. The PROBE report, for instance, based on a survey in five states, found that many parents (also low-caste, poor and illiterate parents) regard
education as indispensable in modern society (PROBE 1999: chapter 3). Also among other segments of the population, ideas about the necessity of ‘Education for All’ have changed. This is reflected, for instance, in the adoption in 2002 of the 84th Constitutional Amendment, making free and compulsory education a fundamental right.

The needs are, however, far from fulfilled and many problems continue to exist. DPEP and SSA are target-driven programmes, focusing primarily on getting all children to school and pushing up enrolment statistics. In our own research in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal, we found attendance figures far below enrolment figures. The attitude of teachers towards children who attend classes irregularly and their parents was often outright insensitive. There is very little reflection on the part of the teachers about the (in)appropriateness of teaching methods and the special measures that may be required to address the needs of first-generation learners. To some extent, DPEP and SSA training pay attention to these aspects but in a top-down manner that teachers cannot relate to sufficiently (Mooij 2006).

The quality of teaching in government schools is far from satisfactory. Many of the problems are documented by the PROBE team and others. In our own study we also observed poor school facilities (no furniture, not enough classrooms and often no sanitary facilities); teachers’ attendance cannot be taken for granted; teaching methods rely primarily on learning by rote and there is sometimes evident discrimination in the classroom, for instance, against so-called ‘slow learners’.

Financial allocations are far from sufficient. In 1966 it was recommended that 6 per cent of the country’s GDP should be allocated to education. This commitment has often been repeated in various policy documents and budget speeches, but actual expenditure is still a far cry from this target. In 1990/1, 4.1 per cent of GDP was spent on education, and this declined over the 1990s and was only 3.8 in 1998/9 (Dev and Mooij 2005: table 6.3).

About 90 per cent of this expenditure comes from the states while the rest comes from the centre. The states take the responsibility for almost all recurrent expenditure (such as teachers’ salaries), while the funds for schemes (such as DPEP and SSA) come mainly from the centre. The educational policy agenda is mainly set at the central level. Given the fact that states contribute much more to education than the centre, it is an interesting question why state government take so little policy initiative.

Despite the ‘Education for All’ policies and rhetoric, there is a lack of sustained commitment to guarantee good quality education for all children. This lack of commitment exists at different levels of government: in the top bureaucracy, where allocations are made (Drèze and Sen 2002; Tilak 2006); in the implementing bureaucracy, where targets are seen as more important than actual achievements in terms of learning processes and among teachers, who have accepted the fact that it is almost impossible to teach first-generation learners.

This lack of commitment is no doubt reinforced by the fact that the more well-to-do people do not depend on government schools, since their children go to private schools. During the last two decades private schools have materialized in large numbers, initially mainly in urban areas, but increasingly
also in rural areas.\textsuperscript{17} Even government schoolteachers often prefer to send their children to private schools rather than to the schools in which they teach themselves (Mooij 2006).

Apart from a lack of real commitment, there is also a systematic accountability failure, again related to the fact that it is mainly poor and often illiterate people whose children depend on government schooling. One of the policy initiatives to counter this problem is a drive towards the decentralization of school management. The idea, strongly promoted as part of DPEP and SSA, is that making parents more involved would help to overcome some of the problems at the local level. Different modalities of decentralized school management have been developed in different parts of India (linked to the elected village councils or not; involving mainly parents or a wider canvas of interested persons) (see, for instance, the collection edited by Govinda and Diwan [2003]). Although it may be that these new forms of school governance will be instrumental in empowering poor people and in raising accountability in schools, it remains important to realize that the basic set-up of the educational system is extremely centralized, with very few decision-making powers at the school level. Not even the teachers or headmasters can make decisions with regard, for instance, to the use of funds, the recruitment of teachers, the implementation of schemes at the local level, the choice of textbooks and the implementation of the syllabus.

**Salient Features of Social Policy Processes in India**

How are social policies in India shaped by the context in which they have emerged and now exist? There are at least seven features of the social policy process in India in which one can see the social context reflected.

The first is that social policies do not just address welfare issues or social development; they also play a role in the creation of regime legitimacy.\textsuperscript{18} Social policies are high on political agendas and mentioned prominently in budget speeches and other public policy statements, and large claims and promises are repeatedly made. The recurrent public commitment to allocate 6 per cent of the country’s GDP to education is a case in point. Food policy illustrates the point even more clearly. Proposed policy changes can rely on being subjected to intensive debates (in fact, often immediate protests). Individual politicians, especially in south India, have tried to get political mileage out of presenting themselves as patron-rulers looking after the welfare of their subjects. This fact that social policies are important for regime legitimacy and individual popularity of politicians can be easily understood against the background of high levels of poverty and deprivation. For tens of millions of poor households, the PDS supply may be their most secure food entitlement.

However, despite such claims and promises, there is an inability to allocate sufficient funds and give due priority to social policies. This is especially clear in the case of education where, again and again, claims and policy objectives are not translated into significant increases in financial allocations. Even in the 1990s, the decade in which universal elementary education became a clearly stated policy objective, financial allocations did not go up (as percentage of GDP). This may, of course, be related to a resource deficit. After all, 6 per
cent of GDP is not a small amount and there are many competing needs. Several economists (and not just activists) have, however, argued that it would not have been impossible to give more priority to education (Drèze and Sen 2002) and that even 6 per cent is feasible (Tilak 2006). There is, hence, insufficient commitment to this goal which, in the end, reflects the social divisions within Indian society. The more privileged and influential sections of the population do not depend on government schools for their children and are not affected by the public neglect of these state services.

This class division does not lead only to an inability to mobilize sufficient resources, but also to indifference, lack of accountability and corruption in implementation. What can be observed is that services for the poor end up being poor services. PDS dealers as well as government teachers can get away with a poor show. This is not to say that they all perform very badly: there are certainly teachers in government schools and PDS dealers who take their tasks seriously. The point is that there are no big risks involved when they do not. Moreover, the fact that corruption money is one of the ingredients of the parliamentary democracy means that, for some (in some states and in some sectors more than in others), there may be an incentive – or even considerable pressure – to be corrupt. Schoolteachers do not have many opportunities to earn illegal incomes. DPEP- and SSA-related construction work, however, like all public works, offers opportunities for those who are involved in the allocation of the work, and these opportunities are sometimes misused. Subsidized food distribution offers significant scope for black-marketing at almost all levels of the chain, and this also happens.

To a certain extent, the judiciary steps in where the administration fails. One example is that groups of activists, shocked by deaths from starvation and a failing state and convinced that it is the responsibility of the state to protect vulnerable people, have gone to the Supreme Court to reinforce the duty of the government to protect people from hunger. The Court ruled in their favour. There are many examples of smaller struggles around food policy implementation where administrative impasses were resolved with the help of the judiciary (Mooij 1999a).19

A fifth characteristic is that social policy processes in India are highly centralized. Food policies, as well as educational policies, are basically made in Delhi and there is little flexibility at lower levels. Programmes, such as SSA, for instance, come with guidelines specifying exactly what percentage of the money has to be spent on construction work or on teacher training. The PDS is also a highly centralized scheme dealing only with two types of food grain (rice and wheat), without much flexibility for making alternative arrangements involving local food producers, local grain banks or local institutions in the delivery system. In the 1980s some south Indian states started to give additional state-level subsidies but the basic parameters of the PDS have remained unaltered.

This centralization goes together with high levels of involvement on the part of local politicians in policy implementation. MLAs, as described above, are not primarily legislators. Rather, they are middlemen in a whole range of policy implementation practices. It is with their help that contractors are selected to build new schools, or that poor people get access to ration cards. Food distribution in Bihar in the late 1990s at the time of my fieldwork was almost
completely dominated by local politicians. The selection of the dealers and members of so-called vigilance committees was done by politicians. The situation in other sectors and other states may be less extreme, but the fact remains that politicians are very present at the local level and remain closely involved in policy implementation.

A final feature has to do with the international dimension of the policy context. Unlike some other developing countries, in India social policy-making – and most policy-making, for that matter – is not primarily a product of donor preferences and money. Yet there are examples of international pressure or international discourses finding their way into Indian social policy-making. The introduction of the targeted PDS scheme in 1997 was strongly supported by the World Bank. In the case of education, the international discourse concerning the Millennium Development Goals and universal elementary education has become common parlance in India. A perceptive senior administrator in the education department in one of the south Indian states said that:

Our present educational system . . . educates people who can survive in the market. The dream of almost everybody is to come up in the mainstream. Our country’s dependence on agriculture declines. Industrial development is not happening sufficiently. So, people have to move into the service sector. What the educational system aims to do is to prepare people for this kind of employment. The international community, the MDGs, but also many of our own educationists and NGOs are working in this direction. There is no independent articulate framework.20

Whether, indeed, the Indian educational system fulfils the needs of global capitalism or whether it will contribute to an empowered citizenry, or both, is still to be seen. But I think the civil servant quoted above was right in pointing out the present convergence between the international educational agenda and the mainstream Indian one.21 In addition, the currently internationally accepted practice of formulating very concrete targets and measurable outputs has become the dominant way of assessing progress in the Indian educational sector.

By Way of Conclusion: Paradoxes in Social Policy-making in India

This article has tried to illustrate how two important social policies in India, food policy and educational policy, are shaped by the wider context in which they emerged and exist. The way in which these policies are phrased: how they are described in public, the promises and claims that continue to be made, the type of debate that is possible or impossible with regard to policy reforms, can be understood against the background of poverty, deprivation, a one-person-one-vote electoral system and, to a certain extent, the international debates about social policies. Similarly, the institutionalization of these policies – centralization of all decision-making regarding basic policy parameters, but local-level political involvement in implementation – reflects the administrative and political dimensions of the policy context. Implementation is
further shaped by the social divisions in Indian society, where the well-to-do do not need most government provisions and are insufficiently interested and committed to improve their quality.

The article has highlighted seven characteristics of Indian social policy processes. These will not be repeated here. Rather, I would like to point at two paradoxes that exist in social policy processes and that have become apparent in this discussion. The first is related to the importance of social policies for regime legitimacy and individual popularity on the one hand, and the inability to allocate sufficient resources, and indifference and mismanagement during implementation on the other. The second paradox is related to the essentially centralized nature of policy-making on the one hand, and the widespread involvement of local-level politicians in implementation on the other hand.

The first paradox expresses itself as double-speak. One thing is claimed and another thing is done. Social policies are used to reach out to the less privileged sections of the population, but it is the gesture of reaching out that may be enough, rather than the outcomes in terms of social development, welfare or expenditure levels. Contradictory as it may be, this double-speak serves a purpose. It solves a problem that any democratic regime in a socially divided society faces: the necessity to attract votes from the poor majority without estranging itself from the middle and upper classes.

The second paradox expresses itself as a difficult relationship between the administration and local politicians, where the former blames the latter for interfering in policy implementation. This paradox also has a different side: while officials complain about political interference, they also depend on local elites for facilitating the implementation process. In fact, the more centralized policy formulation is, and the more centrally controlled the administration functions, the more dependent the implementing officials are on local politicians to smooth the implementation process.

Neither paradox is, hence, easily resolved. They are not just organizational errors, woven into the policy process. Rather, they reflect contradictions in the wider context of social policy-making and are, in that sense, structurally determined. For those in India who work in the area of social policy and administration, it is these paradoxes that pose the main challenge in their work.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

2. There has been an intense debate in India about this issue. The 1999/2000 poverty estimates seemed to show that there was a rather steep decline. It was soon pointed out, however, that the method used in the 1999/2000 survey was not comparable to the one used earlier on. Drèze and Sen (2002: 327) review the
literature and evidence, and conclude that the most optimistic interpretation is that ‘poverty reduction in the nineties has proceeded at a similar rate as in earlier decades’.


4. Data from Indian Census, National Family Health Survey and National Centre for Health Statistics. See Mooij (2005).

5. Employment in the public sector has declined only slightly between 1990/1 and 2001/2, from 19.1 million to 18.8 million. The proportion of public employment in overall employment in the formal sector is still 69 per cent (based on Sridharan 2004: table 5), but the formal sector itself comprises less than 10 per cent of the workforce.

6. See Dev and Mooij (2002) about the still ongoing encroachment, the various arguments for or against this disproportionate say of the centre and the interests involved.

7. According to the classification used in the Indian budget, the food subsidy is not part of ‘social services’, but education is. More generally, the budget classification in ‘social’ and ‘economic’ services is a little arbitrary. Most anti-poverty programmes, for instance, come under rural development, and therefore under ‘economic services’.

8. Sugar, edible oil and kerosene are also distributed through this public distribution system, but this is outside the scope of the article.

9. All data in this paragraph are from, or are based on, the Economic Survey 2005/06 (Government of India 2006b).

10. See Mooij (1999b) on discussion around, and early practice of, the targeted PDS.

11. The Millennium Development Goals are goals to which the donor community committed itself in 2000. The two goals concerning education are (i) ensuring that by 2015, all children will be able to complete a full course of education, and (ii) eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and at all levels of education no later than 2015.

12. These figures come from the Department of Education, Government of India, downloadable from http://www.education.nic.in/htmlweb/edusta.htm (accessed on 26 May 2006). Enrolment figures are probably unreliable. The push to increase enrolment has resulted in widespread practices of over-reporting. The Annual Status of Education Report (based on sample studies conducted by nongovernmental organizations) mentioned that 6.6 per cent of the rural children between 6 and 14 years of age are not in school. More than half of these have never been enrolled (ASER 2006).

13. This study, ‘Palanquin bearers. Education, inequality and decentralization’, was coordinated by Manabi Majumdar and myself and funded by the Indo-Dutch Programme for Alternatives in Development. Data collection took place in 2004 and 2005.

14. See, for instance, the various contributions in Seminar No. 536 (2004).

15. We observed, for instance, a class where ‘slow learners’ had to sit outside the classroom. See also Chopra and Jeffery (2005) for various examples of discrimination against Dalits, Adivasis or girls.

16. This percentage includes centre and state expenditure and expenditure from the Department of Education as well as from other departments.

17. In 2005, about one-sixth of all school-going children in rural areas went to private schools (ASER 2006).

18. This characteristic is also mentioned by Horowitz (1989), who compared policy processes in developed and developing countries.

19. The judicial involvement in the case of food distribution has been positive. There are, however, other examples of increased judicial involvement, where the courts have supported pro-urban middle- and upper-class positions against street vendors, street dwellers or slum populations.
20. Interview with one of the directors in the educational department (belonging to the Indian Administrative Service), 19 July 2005, Hyderabad.
21. There are, however, dissenting voices. See, for instance, various contributions in *Contemporary Education Dialogue*.
22. See also Weiner (1962) about the dependence of implementing officials on local politicians.

References


