

Assessing Skill development in India: Study of 112 Aspirational Districts of India from March 2018 to March 2022

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Abstract

The apex planning body of India, NITI Aayog launched an Aspirational District Program in January 2018. This programme aimed to the quick and effective transformation of 112 least backward districts of the country. This programme is based on three dimensions i.e. Convergence of Central & State schemes, Collaboration of 'Prabhari' officers of States with District Collectors and Competition among districts through a ranking that is done on monthly basis. This ranking is based on 49 KPIs across five broad socio-economic themes. This programme considers states as responsible agencies for the capacity development of district administration by using data-driven techniques primarily used to capture and assess challenges and identify bottlenecks. After the identification of such bottlenecks, tailor-made policy intervention is devised for each specific district. NITI Aayog at the apex level monitors the progress of each aspirational district by using rigorous statistical models and ICTs. Based on the output or achievement of these districts, all districts are ranked. The highly ranked districts are rewarded while laggard districts are further scrutinized for locating developmental issues. Instead of ranking districts with delta rank or composite scores, the study divorce from NITI Aayog's methodology of monthly delta ranking and attempts to grasp progress made by 112 districts under the Education and Skill Development theme from March 2018 to March 2022. For this purpose, the study explores 14 indicators under the education theme and 10 indicators under the skill development theme. Under the Skill development, theme 10 indicators are selected to trace progress made by districts in terms of youth, employment, skilling of vulnerable youth etc. The progress made by the states and districts represents the progress made in achieving Sustainable Development Goals at local levels.

1. Introduction and Background

The economic growth of India since 1950s has been noteworthy, with substantial progress in terms of translating economic progress into social development. Despite the challenges, the Indian economy continues to grow and has become one of the world's fastest-growing economies. The government, businesses, and individuals alike have a crucial role to play in ensuring that the growth is inclusive and sustainable, and that all segments of society share the benefits of economic growth.

Socio-Economic growth of India has been a subject of intense study and analysis by economists, policymakers, and the public alike. The Indian economy has undergone significant changes and transformations over the last seven decades, resulting in a remarkable level of economic growth and development. In this article, we will examine the economic growth of India since 1950s, highlighting the major drivers of growth, the challenges faced, and the impact of economic growth on the society.

Post-Independence, India faced several economic and social challenges, including poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment. The country's leaders were aware of the importance of economic development in overcoming these challenges, and thus, India's first five-year plan was launched in 1951, focused on developing the agricultural sector, promoting industrialization, and increasing employment opportunities.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Indian economy experienced a slow growth rate of around 3% per annum. The green revolution in the late 1960s, which improved the agricultural productivity, marked the beginning of a more substantial growth phase. The growth rate increased to around 5% per annum in the 1970s, primarily driven by the expansion of the services sector and the development of the manufacturing industry.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a major shift in India's economic policy, with the introduction of market-oriented reforms aimed at liberalizing the economy. These reforms included the liberalization of trade policies, the reduction of government intervention in the economy, and the introduction of measures to attract foreign investment. The result was a significant increase in economic growth, with an average growth rate of around 7% per annum in the 1990s.

In the 21st century, India has continued to maintain a high growth rate, with an average growth rate of around 8% per annum. The growth has been driven by a combination of factors, including rapid expansion in the services sector, technological advancements, and favorable demographic trends. The government has also continued to implement economic reforms aimed at promoting entrepreneurship, attracting foreign investment, and enhancing the country's competitiveness (Shaban, 2016).

However, the growth of the Indian economy has not been without its challenges. One of the major challenges has been the unequal distribution of wealth and income, with a significant proportion of the population still living in poverty. The government has implemented various poverty alleviation programs aimed at reducing poverty and promoting social equality, but progress has been slow.

Another challenge has been the inadequacy of infrastructure, particularly in the rural areas. This has limited the ability of rural communities to participate in the economic growth and has contributed to regional disparities. The government has been investing heavily in the development of rural infrastructure, but much more needs to be done to bridge the gap between rural and urban areas.

1.1. Development of districts

In India, the history of empowering local governments through planning dates back to the colonial period. The British introduced the concept of local self-government and urban planning through the Bengal Municipal Act of 1884. After independence, the Indian government further strengthened the local governance system through the introduction of the 74th Amendment of the Constitution in 1992. This amendment created three-tier Panchayati Raj institutions and Nagar Panchayats for rural and urban areas, respectively, with the aim of decentralizing power and empowering local communities. The amendment also mandated the creation of State Finance Commissions to ensure financial autonomy for local governments. In recent years, various initiatives such as the Smart Cities Mission and Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation have been launched to promote urban planning and development, further empowering local governments in India.

the vacillation of India's Five Year Plans over different periods can be attributed to the changing political leadership and ideologies, changing economic conditions, and challenges of implementing large-scale development programs (Mukherji, 2009). India's Five Year Plans are the country's primary tool for economic planning and development. The plans were first introduced in 1951, with the aim of guiding the country's economic growth and development over five-year periods. The plans have been amended and revised several times over the years, reflecting changes in economic conditions, government priorities, and political ideologies.

One reason why the Five Year Plans have been inconsistent over time is the change in political leadership and the varying political ideologies of different Prime Ministers. The Five Year Plans are ultimately a reflection of the government's priorities and agenda, and changes in political leadership can result in changes in the direction and focus of the plans. For example, a Prime Minister who prioritizes agriculture and rural development may focus more resources and attention on these areas, while a Prime Minister who prioritizes industrial development may focus more resources and attention on this sector.

Another reason why the Five Year Plans have been inconsistent is the changing economic conditions in the country. The Indian economy has undergone significant changes over the past few decades, and the government's priorities and focus have had to adapt to these changes. For example, the liberalization and globalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s led to significant changes in the focus and direction of the Five Year Plans, as the government had to shift its priorities to

accommodate these changes. The inconsistent nature of the Five Year Plans can also be attributed to the challenges of implementing and executing large-scale economic development programs. The Indian government has faced challenges such as corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and limited resources, which have made it difficult to consistently and effectively implement the plans over time.

All attempts to analyse development are mostly made at global, national level or sub-national levels. There exists very scarce academic and scientific literature that grasps efforts made for development at local or district levels. There are several reasons why attempts to analyze development in India mostly focus on the global, national, or state level, and lack district-level analysis:

1. **Data Availability:** One of the major challenges in analyzing development at the district level is the availability of data. Data collection at the district level is often inadequate and unreliable, making it difficult to get a clear picture of the actual situation. This is especially true for rural areas where data collection mechanisms are often weaker.
2. **Lack of standardization:** Another issue is the lack of standardization in data collection and reporting practices across districts. This leads to inconsistencies in the data, making it difficult to make meaningful comparisons between districts.
3. **Infrastructure Challenges:** Infrastructure challenges in remote areas can also make data collection difficult. The lack of electricity, communication networks, and other basic infrastructure can make it difficult to collect and transmit data.
4. **Data Analysis Capabilities:** The lack of data analysis capabilities is also a major challenge in district-level analysis. Most development agencies and policymakers lack the expertise and resources to conduct district-level analysis, which can lead to an incomplete understanding of the situation.
5. **Political Will:** There is often a lack of political will to undertake district-level analysis. Some policymakers may prefer to focus on larger geographical areas to avoid focusing on more localized issues that may not align with their political interests.

Overall, these challenges make it difficult to conduct a comprehensive and meaningful analysis of development at the district level. This lack of analysis means that key development issues are not addressed and important opportunities for social and economic growth are missed. But it is not entirely true case for India.

1.1. Aspirational District Program

India's Aspirational District Program, launched by NITI Aayog in January 2018, aims to quicken and effectively transform the 112 least developed districts of the country. This program operates on three dimensions, including convergence, collaboration, and competition. The program considers states as responsible agencies for capacity development, utilizing data-driven techniques to capture and assess challenges and identify bottlenecks. NITI Aayog monitors the progress of each aspirational district through rigorous statistical models and ICTs and ranks them based on their achievements. The study explores the progress made by the 112 districts under the Education and Skill Development theme from March 2018 to March 2022. The program is considered one of the world's largest result-based governance initiatives, reaching up to 250 million people.

The Aspirational District Program has enabled states to take responsibility for the development of district administration through data-driven techniques. The program's focus on convergence, collaboration, and competition among districts has led to progress in education and skill development. The study's findings highlight the importance of monitoring progress at the local level to achieve Sustainable Development Goals. The study's results could be used to inform policy interventions in aspirational districts to further enhance progress in education and skill development.

It is important to grasp progress that has been made in both education and skill development in the 112 aspirational districts. In terms of education, districts have shown progress in areas such as

enrolment rates, student retention, and infrastructure development. In terms of skill development, districts have made progress in areas such as youth employment, skilling of vulnerable youth, and availability of training institutions. This progress represents a positive step towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals at the local level. For example, in the district of Kupwara in Jammu and Kashmir, the education theme score improved from 42.2 to 56.2 between March 2018 and March 2022, with significant improvements in student enrollment and retention rates. In terms of skill development, districts have made progress in areas such as youth employment, skilling of vulnerable youth, and availability of training institutions. For instance, in the district of Bijapur in Chhattisgarh, the skill development theme score improved from 25.8 to 47.6 between March 2018 and March 2022, with significant improvements in the number of people trained and placed in jobs.

The ADP is based on three dimensions: convergence of central and state schemes, collaboration between state-level officers and district collectors, and competition among districts through monthly rankings. The rankings are based on 49 key performance indicators (KPIs) across six socio-economic themes: health and nutrition, education, agriculture, basic infrastructure, financial inclusion, and skill development.

The use of data is central to the ADP, with districts ranked based on their monthly progress against these KPIs. The monthly data provided by the district administration and ministries provides insight into the progress made by each district, allowing policymakers to design and assess the effectiveness of policy interventions. The ADP is a significant step towards empowering local governments in India and promoting inclusive and sustainable development. By using a data-driven approach and fostering collaboration between different levels of government, the program aims to create a platform for the rapid and effective transformation of historically backward districts in India.

Since independence, India has scarcely focused on development at district level. Provide a list of attempts Indian governments in history to address development of districts for addressing regional disparities. These are some of the major attempts made by the Indian government to address regional disparities and promote development at the district level. However, the effectiveness of these programs has varied from place to place, and more needs to be done to ensure that the benefits reach the intended populations.

1. Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY): Launched in 1985, the IAY provides financial assistance for construction of houses to the economically weaker sections of rural areas, especially in backward districts.
2. Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS): Launched in 1975, the ICDS aims to provide supplementary nutrition, pre-school education and health care services to children in rural areas, especially in backward districts.
3. District Planning Committee (DPC): The DPCs were formed in 1996 as part of the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution. The aim was to promote decentralized planning and to ensure that the planning process is more inclusive and participatory.
4. Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY): Launched in 2000, the PMGSY aims to provide all-weather road connectivity to unconnected habitations in rural areas, with a special emphasis on backward regions.
5. Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojana (RSVY): Launched in 2005, the RSVY provides support for the development of economically weaker sections of society, especially in backward districts.
6. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA): Launched in 2005, the MGNREGA provides guaranteed employment to rural households, with a focus on backward districts.
7. Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF): Launched in 2006, the BRGF aims to reduce disparities among districts by addressing the development needs of backward regions.

In terms of skilling and development human resources, government of India made numerous attempts at national and state (or sometimes at rural level) some popular attempts includes

1. Atal Tinkering Laboratories (ATLs): Launched in 2016, ATLs aim to promote hands-on learning and innovation among students in schools.
2. National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS): Launched in 2016, NAPS aims to encourage employers to engage apprentices and provide practical training to students.
3. National Skill Development Agency (NSDA): Established in 2009, NSDA is responsible for creating a unified and integrated national skill development framework and overseeing its implementation.
4. National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC): Established in 2009, NSDC aims to promote skill development and entrepreneurship through a public-private partnership model.
5. National Skill Development Fund (NSDF): Established in 2009, NSDF provides financial assistance to organizations working towards skill development.
6. Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY): Launched in 2015, PMKVY is a skill certification and reward scheme aimed at providing job-oriented training to youth.
7. Rural Skills Centres: Established in rural areas, these centres aim to provide skill training to the rural population and increase employment opportunities in the rural sector.
8. Sector Skill Councils (SSCs): Established in partnership with industry bodies, SSCs aim to identify skill gaps in different sectors and develop training programmes to address them.
9. Short-term Training (STT) Programmes: These programmes aim to provide basic skills to individuals in a short period of time and prepare them for employment.
10. Skill India Mission: Launched in 2015, Skill India Mission aims to train over 400 million people in India in different skills by 2022.
11. Udaan Scheme: Launched in 2014, Udaan is a skill development scheme for Jammu & Kashmir aimed at providing training and employment opportunities to the youth in the region.

Reach of these initiatives at district levels has always remained sceptical.

2. Skill development under Aspirational Districts

The skill development theme under the ADP seeks to enhance the employability of the workforce and improve their economic prospects. By providing relevant and practical skill training and promoting apprenticeships, the program aims to create a skilled and employable workforce, which in turn drives economic growth and development in the aspirational districts.

Under the skill development theme, the program aims to enhance the employability of the workforce and improve their economic prospects. The program seeks to achieve this by focusing on various aspects of skill development such as skill mapping, skill training, and apprenticeships. One of the key objectives of the skill development theme is to map the skill requirements of various sectors in the districts and align the skills of the workforce accordingly. This helps to ensure that the skills being imparted are relevant to the local job market and increase the chances of employability for the trained individuals. The ADP also focuses on providing skill training to individuals through various training institutions and programs. This includes providing training in traditional skills such as agriculture, craft, and construction, as well as new-age skills such as digital skills and industry-specific skills. The program also aims to provide training to women, marginalized groups, and individuals from economically weaker sections to increase their employability. In addition, the ADP also promotes apprenticeships as a means of skill development. This involves on-the-job training with an employer, where individuals can acquire practical skills while also earning a livelihood. This approach helps to bridge the gap between the skills being taught in training institutions and the skills required in the job market.

3. Method

Instead of ranking districts with delta rank or composite scores, the study divorce from NITI Aayog's methodology of monthly delta ranking. The study explores 8 indicators under the basic infrastructure theme and 16 indicators under the financial inclusion and skill development themes.

Every district is provided with the target as per national development priority, the study makes an effort to grasp the distance of each district from the national target. This allows researchers to develop a scale Very Far, Far, Near, Very Near, Achieved with descriptive statistics techniques. Juxtaposing the scale with timelines results in a pattern of progress made by these 112 districts.

4. Result and Findings

Figure - 1: Distance of districts from the benchmark/target set in March 2018

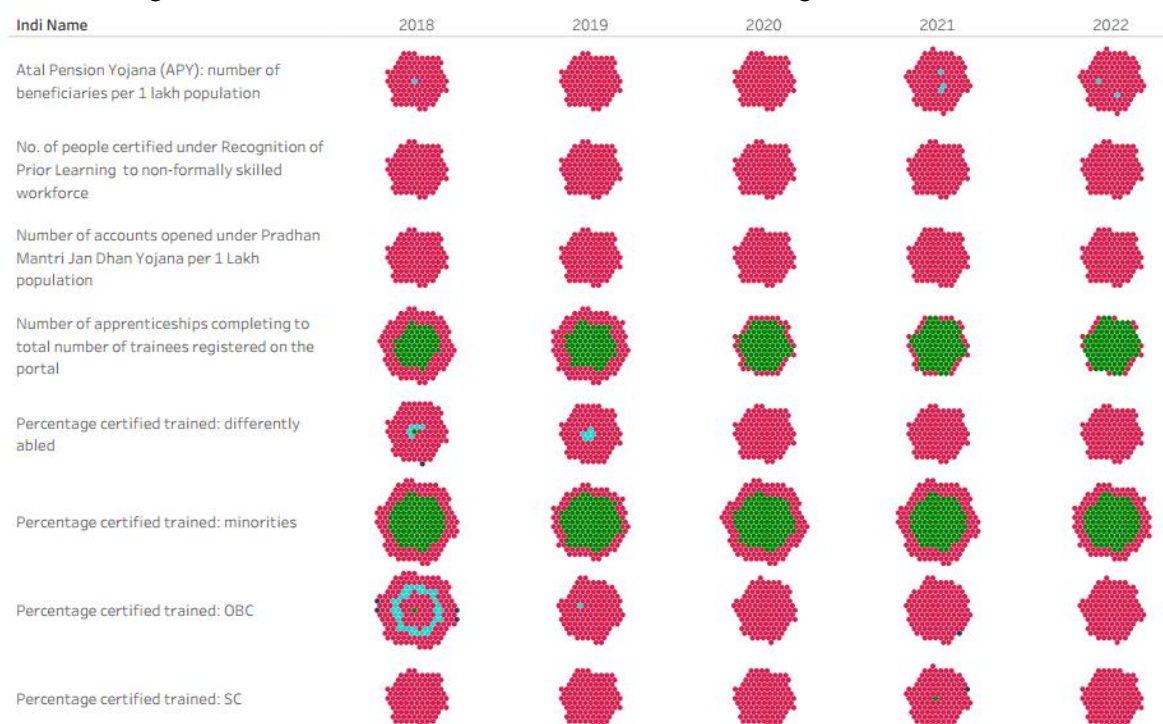


Table-1: districts under “target achieved” category

Indicators	No. of Districts that have achieved 75% to 100% targets				
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
“certified persons under Recognition of Prior Learning to non-formally skilled workforce (in numbers)”	1	2	1		
“Certified trained-differently abled persons(in %)”			1		1
“Certified OBC persons trained (in %)”		1	3	2	2
“Certified SC Persons trained (in %)”	5	4	1	6	1

Table-2: districts under “Very Far” category

Indicators	No. of Districts that have achieved less than 0% targets				
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
“youth certified in short term or long term training schemes to no. of youth in district in age group 15-29 (in%)”	100	111	111	105	108
“Certified Minority Persons trained (in %)”	102	111	110	102	101
“Certified ST Persons trained (in %)”	89	109	107	103	100
“apprenticeships completing to total number of trainees registered on the portal(in numbers)”	64	78	85	93	98

Indicators	No. of Districts that have achieved less than 0% targets				
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
"Certified youth employed to no. of youth trained under short term or long term training (in %)"	46	106	106	105	71
"Certified trained women (in %)"	39	105	43	55	59
"Certified OBC persons trained (in %)"	53	77	21	28	14
"Certified SC Persons trained (in %)"	1	13	2	9	5
"certified persons under Recognition of Prior Learning to non-formally skilled workforce (in numbers)"		1			
"Certified trained-differently abled persons (in %)"	3				

Table-3: districts under "Far" category

Indicators	No. of Districts that have achieved 1% to 25% targets				
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
"Certified SC Persons trained (in %)"	52	79	62	54	65
"Certified OBC persons trained (in %)"	45	25	62	53	64
"Certified trained women (in %)"	56	6	65	48	43
"Certified youth employed to no. of youth trained under short term or long term training (in %)"	36	3	4	6	40
"certified persons under Recognition of Prior Learning to non-formally skilled workforce (in numbers)"		3			

Table-4: districts under "Near" category

Indicators	No. of Districts that have achieved 26% to 50% targets				
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
"Certified SC Persons trained (in %)"	7	5	11	8	10
"Certified OBC persons trained (in %)"	1	1	5	6	4
"Certified trained-differently abled persons (in %)"	1	4			1
"Certified trained women (in %)"	5		2	4	1
"Certified youth employed to no. of youth trained under short term or long term training (in %)"		1	1		

Table-5: districts under "Very Near" category

Indicators	No. of Districts that have achieved 51% to 75% targets				
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
"Certified OBC persons trained (in %)"		1	1	1	4
"Certified SC Persons trained (in %)"	6	2	4	5	4
"Certified trained women (in %)"	2				1
"certified persons under Recognition of Prior Learning to non-formally skilled workforce (in numbers)"	1	5			
"Certified trained-differently abled persons (in %)"			2		
"Certified youth employed to no. of youth trained under short term or"	2				

Indicators	No. of Districts that have achieved 51% to 75% targets				
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<i>long term training (in %)</i>					

Percentage certified trained: OBC: One district achieved 75% to 100% of the target in 2022, four districts achieved 51% to 75% of the target in 2022, and one district achieved 2019 and 2020 targets, but not in 2021 or 2022. Percentage certified trained: SC: Six districts achieved 75% to 100% of the target in 2018, two districts achieved 51% to 75% of the target in 2019, four districts achieved 51% to 75% of the target in 2020, five districts achieved 51% to 75% of the target in 2021, and four districts achieved 51% to 75% of the target in 2022. Percentage certified trained: women: Two districts achieved 51% to 75% of the target in 2018, and one district achieved the target in 2022. For indicator, “*No. of people certified under Recognition of Prior Learning to non-formally skilled workforce*”: One district achieved 75% to 100% of the target in 2018, and five districts achieved the target in 2019.

5. Discussion

The data shows that there is still room for improvement in meeting the targets set for the aspirational districts program. More targeted efforts may be needed to improve the participation and success of certain groups in skill development programs, and to increase the number of districts achieving their targets under various indicators.

The data shows that the number of districts achieving their targets under various indicators has been inconsistent across the years, and more targeted efforts may be needed to improve the participation and success of certain groups in skill development programs. For instance, the percentage of certified training for differently-abled individuals is relatively low, with only one district achieving the target in 2020 and 2022. Similarly, the percentage of certified training for SC and OBC groups is generally low, although some progress has been made in 2019 and 2022. The percentage of certified trained women has been mixed across districts, indicating inconsistent efforts to increase their participation in skill development programs.

In terms of the “*number of people certified under Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to non-formally skilled workforce*”, only a few districts have achieved their targets across the years, suggesting the need for more efforts in this area. Additionally, the number of districts achieving their targets for indicators such as “Percentage of youth certified in short-term or long-term training schemes” and “Number of apprenticeships completing to the total number of trainees registered on the portal” has been low in the past, although there has been some improvement in recent years.

5.1. Districts under “target achieved” category

In terms of the “*number of people certified under Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to non-formally skilled workforce*”, there was only one district that achieved 75% to 100% of its target in 2018, two districts in 2019, and one district in 2020. There is no data available for 2021 and 2022. This indicates that there may be challenges in achieving the RPL targets, and more efforts may be needed to improve the certification of non-formally skilled workers.

In terms of the percentage of certified training for differently-abled individuals, there is no data available for 2018, 2019, and 2021. Only one district achieved the target in 2020. In 2022, one district achieved the target. This suggests that more attention may be needed to ensure that differently-abled individuals are receiving sufficient training and certification. The percentage of certified training for Other Backward Classes (OBC) was achieved by one district in 2018, three districts in 2019, two districts in 2020, and two districts in 2021. This indicates that the certification of OBC individuals is improving, but more districts may need to achieve the target in the coming years. The percentage of certified training for Scheduled Castes (SC) was achieved by five districts in 2018, four districts in 2019, one district in 2020, six districts in 2021, and one

district in 2022. The data shows that the certification of SC individuals has been inconsistent over the years. More attention may be needed to ensure that a larger number of districts achieve the SC training target in the future.

5.2. Districts under “Very Far” category

For the indicator "Percentage of youth certified in short term or long term training schemes to no. of youth in district in age group 15-29", the number of districts achieving less than 0% targets decreased from 100 in 2018 to 108 in 2022. For the indicator "Percentage certified trained: minorities", the number of districts achieving less than 0% targets decreased from 102 in 2018 to 101 in 2022. For the indicator "Percentage certified trained: ST", the number of districts achieving less than 0% targets decreased from 89 in 2018 to 100 in 2022. For the indicator "Number of apprenticeships completing to total number of trainees registered on the portal", the number of districts achieving less than 0% targets increased from 64 in 2018 to 98 in 2022. For the indicator "Percentage of certified youth employed to no. of youth trained under short term or long term training", the number of districts achieving less than 0% targets decreased from 46 in 2018 to 71 in 2022. For the indicator "Percentage certified trained: women", the number of districts achieving less than 0% targets decreased from 39 in 2018 to 59 in 2022. For the indicator "Percentage certified trained: OBC", the number of districts achieving less than 0% targets decreased from 53 in 2018 to 14 in 2022. For the indicator "Percentage certified trained: SC", the number of districts achieving less than 0% targets decreased from 1 in 2018 to 5 in 2022. For the indicator "No. of people certified under Recognition of Prior Learning to non-formally skilled workforce", only one district achieved the target in 2018. For the indicator "Percentage certified trained: differently abled", only three districts achieved the target in 2020.

5.3. Districts under “Far” category

The percentage of certified training for SC and OBC groups is relatively low in all years, with more districts achieving their targets in 2019 and 2022. This suggests a need for more targeted efforts to increase the participation and success of these groups in skill development programs. The percentage of certified trained women has been mixed, with more districts achieving their targets in 2020 and fewer in 2019 and 2021. This may indicate that efforts to increase the participation of women in skill development programs have been inconsistent across districts. The proportion of certified youth, who are employed, compared to the young people trained for short/long term training is very low in the first three years but increases significantly in 2022. This may be due to a lag in employment opportunities following training, or to improved job market conditions in 2022. While three districts have successfully met their targets for the number of people certified under Recognition of Prior Learning to non-formally skilled workforce, there is still a need for more efforts in this area.

5.4. Districts under “Near” category

The number of districts that have achieved between 26% to 50% of their targets is generally low across indicators and years, indicating that there is still room for improvement in terms of meeting the targets set for the aspirational districts program. In terms of "Percentage certified trained" for SC and OBC categories, we can see that a small number of districts have achieved between 26% to 50% of their targets across all years. For "Percentage certified trained" for differently abled individuals, only one district achieved between 26% to 50% of their target in 2018 and 2019. For the "Percentage of certified youth employed" indicator, we can see that only one district achieved between 26% to 50% of their target in 2019 and 2020. Lastly, for the "Percentage of area under micro-irrigation" indicator, the number of districts that have achieved between 26% to 50% of their targets has remained relatively stable across years.

5.5. Districts under “Very Near” category

Percentage certified trained: OBC: One district achieved 75% to 100% of the target in 2022, four districts achieved 51% to 75% of the target in 2022, and one district achieved 2019 and 2020 targets, but not in 2021 or 2022. Percentage certified trained: SC: Six districts achieved 75% to 100% of the target in 2018, two districts achieved 51% to 75% of the target in 2019, four districts achieved 51% to 75% of the target in 2020, five districts achieved 51% to 75% of the target in 2021, and four districts achieved 51% to 75% of the target in 2022. Percentage certified trained: women: Two districts achieved 51% to 75% of the target in 2018, and one district achieved the target in 2022. For many individuals have received certification through the Recognition of Prior Learning program for non-formally skilled workers: One district achieved 75% to 100% of the target in 2018, and five districts achieved the target in 2019.

6. Conclusion

Public sociology is a sub-discipline of sociology that emphasizes expanding the boundaries of the discipline to engage with non-academic audiences. Michael Burawoy championed this approach in 2005, who argued that sociologists should move beyond their traditional role as detached observers and actively engage with social issues in the public sphere. Public sociology involves using empirical methods, such as statistics, mathematics, and computational tools, to understand not just what has happened in the past, but also what might happen in the future. One of the key goals of public sociology is to use sociological theories and methods to inform public policies, governance, and political activism. By engaging with non-academic audiences, such as policymakers, community organizations, and the public, sociologists can help shape public discourse and influence social change. However, it is important to note that most versions of public sociology are normative and political in nature. This means that they are grounded in a particular set of values and beliefs about what is right or wrong, just or unjust, and seek to promote a particular vision of the future (Burawoy, 2005). As such, public sociology is often criticized for being biased and lacking objectivity. This stem of sociology advantage over empirical methods (mostly statistics, mathematics or computational) linked with sociological theoretical frameworks to grasp not just “what is” or “what has been” but also “what might be”. The majority of versions of public sociology have remained normative and political (Piven, 2007). The study grounds its rationale on such a theoretical perspective.

In India, local governments have a history of empowerment through planning dating back to the colonial period. The 74th Amendment of the Constitution in 1992 further strengthened the local governance system, creating Panchayati Raj institutions and Nagar Panchayats for rural and urban areas, respectively. However, attempts to analyze development in India mostly focus on the global, national, or state level and lack district-level analysis due to challenges in data availability, lack of standardization, infrastructure challenges, data analysis capabilities, and political will. While these challenges make it difficult to conduct comprehensive and meaningful analysis of development at the district level, initiatives such as the Smart Cities Mission and Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation have been launched to further empower local governments in India.

The Aspirational District Program was launched in India in January 2018 to transform the country's 112 least developed districts. The program operates on three dimensions, including convergence, collaboration, and competition. The progress of each district is monitored through rigorous statistical models and ICTs, and NITI Aayog ranks them based on their achievements. The program's focus on convergence, collaboration, and competition among districts has led to progress in education and skill development. The ADP uses data-driven techniques to capture and assess challenges and identify bottlenecks, and states are responsible for capacity development. The program has enabled local governments in India to promote inclusive and sustainable development. Since independence, India has made various attempts to address regional disparities and promote development at the district level. In terms of skilling and development of human resources, the government of India has made numerous attempts at the national and state levels, including the

Atal Tinkering Laboratories and the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme. But, Reach of these initiatives at district levels has always remained sceptical.

The ADP's skill development theme aims to improve the economic prospects of the workforce in aspirational districts through skill training and apprenticeships. The program maps the skill requirements of various sectors and aligns the skills of the workforce accordingly to increase employability. It provides training in traditional and new age skills to women, marginalized groups, and economically weaker individuals. The program also promotes apprenticeships to bridge the gap between training institutions and the job market, allowing individuals to acquire practical skills while earning a livelihood. The ultimate goal is to create a skilled and employable workforce that drives economic growth and development in the aspirational districts.

The Skill Development Theme of the Aspirational District Programme (ADP) under the NITI Aayog seeks to enhance the employability of the workforce and improve their economic prospects. The program focuses on various aspects of skill development, such as skill mapping, skill training, and apprenticeships, with the aim of creating a skilled and employable workforce, which in turn drives economic growth and development in the aspirational districts.

The performance of the districts under the Skill Development Theme has been quite encouraging, with several success stories emerging from various regions. One of the key objectives of the Skill Development Theme is to map the skill requirements of various sectors in the districts and align the skills of the workforce accordingly. This helps to ensure that the skills being imparted are relevant to the local job market and increase the chances of employability for the trained individuals.

Several districts have shown remarkable progress in this regard. For instance, in the district of Giridih in Jharkhand, the Skill Development Theme has played a significant role in enhancing the employability of the local youth. The district has established several training institutions that provide training in traditional skills such as agriculture, craft, and construction, as well as new-age skills such as digital skills and industry-specific skills. The program has also focused on providing training to women, marginalized groups, and individuals from economically weaker sections to increase their employability.

Similarly, in the district of Bahraich in Uttar Pradesh, the Skill Development Theme has played a vital role in improving the economic prospects of the local youth. The program has focused on providing skill training in sectors such as healthcare, construction, and hospitality, which are in high demand in the district. The program has also promoted apprenticeships as a means of skill development, which has helped to bridge the gap between the skills being taught in training institutions and the skills required in the job market.

Apart from these success stories, several other districts have also shown significant progress under the Skill Development Theme of the ADP. However, there is still a long way to go, and the program must continue to focus on enhancing the employability of the workforce in the aspirational districts. This can be achieved by strengthening the existing training institutions, providing better access to training programs, and promoting apprenticeships as a means of skill development. With sustained efforts, the Skill Development Theme of the ADP has the potential to create a skilled and employable workforce, which can drive economic growth and development in the aspirational districts of India.

Important drawback of data-driven transformation reforms is that such reforms may miss the opportunity to pay detailed attention to the quality of implementation. Considering the Aspirational Districts Program as a district database that enables and encourages district and state administration to diagnose needs and customize solutions for targeted interventions fails to align with an idea ranking districts. Competition rather creates a psyche of focusing on targets rather than focusing on solutions. Even while considering competition as a better mechanism for development, one needs to look at the incentives attached to competition. The induced competition of improving district ranks is forced on IAS officers serving as District Development Officers, District Collectors and District Magistrates. These officers serve their office generally for three years dealing with more than 100 ongoing schemes/programs. Such a scenario creates a

sceptical viewpoint on the improvement of implementation quality as focusing on visible political priority rather than competing with fellow districts may be a rational choice for such officers. Additionally, a centralized monitoring system that aligns with politically inclined target settings is being monitored closely and realistically resisted. The Aspirational District Program in such a sense also fails to promote decentralization as rural local bodies as panchayats have not been given any role. It is clear that developing such systems takes the planning process to new levels but assuming data as a substitute for engrained administrative failures can rise an urgent need to focus on actual administrative reforms and developing implementation capacity. Many such intriguing questions raised during studying open an arena for undertaking sociologically driven research.

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