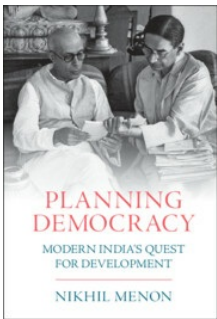


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Nikhil Menon

Planning Democracy

Review by: Corinna Unger



Authors: Nikhil Menon

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Independent India's experiment with planning in the early decades after 1947 has long fascinated historians and social scientists. How a former colony that prided itself in its democratic character could strategically accelerate its socioeconomic development process without falling prey to authoritarianism was a question that greatly concerned Indian and international politicians, intellectuals, and strategists at the time. It gained particular relevance in the context of the remaking of the international order after the Second World War, with the ongoing process of decolonization, the global Cold War, and the emergence of the non-aligned movement putting high expectations on so-called new nations.

Nikhil Menon aims to expand our understanding of this important phase in Indian history by addressing the key tension which contemporaries tried to dissolve: how to align independent India's democratic aspirations with the elite, top-down elements of planning. To do so, in the first part of the book Menon presents an overview of the early history of Indian planning ideas leading up to independence. Most members of the Indian elite shared the belief in the need for development planning, yet opinions differed regarding the role of the state and its position vis-à-vis private business and other actors. Under the Nehru government, a state-centric approach was privileged over others. Menon describes the establishment of the Indian planning apparatus in the 1950s, with the Planning Commission and the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) under the leadership of Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis as its key units. Given that most of the

internal documents of the Planning Commission seem to have been lost or destroyed, and at any rate are inaccessible to historians, the account Menon provides based on private papers, newspaper articles, contemporary publications, and archival evidence from other sources is immensely valuable.

Against this background, the analysis and interpretation of Indian development planning in the 1950s remains a bit disappointing. The fact that Mahalanobis's personality and his strong connections to India's political elite gave him an unusual amount of influence on the country's planning approach is rather well known but described in great detail in the book. The author's fascination with Mahalanobis at times overshadows broader historical questions: How were statistics and planning related to each other in the Indian case? Which statistical traditions did the Institute embrace or reject, and why? How reliable was the data produced by the ISI, and what did this mean for India's planning practice? The book's part on the introduction of computers into the Institute's statistical work and the ways in which computing influenced Indian planning is fresher, though unfortunately the relevant work by Michael Homberg is not included in the discussion^[1].

The second part of the book is devoted to the question how the Indian government tried to balance the top-down character of planning with its democratic aspirations. This is perhaps the most original element of the book. It allows readers to learn much about the creative and, at times, unconventional ways in which Indian politicians and administrators of the highest ranks thought of means by which the Indian public could be convinced that planning was not an abstract elite affair but a participatory exercise that would produce direct effects on everyday life. From university groups to theater plays to the incorporation of religious organizations into political propaganda efforts: the Indian government did much to inform Indian citizens of all backgrounds about the benefits of planning, not even shying away from undermining its self-declared secular character. As Menon argues persuasively, the notion of democratic planning did not mean that planning became democratized. Planning remained an elite, top-down affair with strong technocratic leanings. However, it is notable that the Indian elite in charge believed that Indian society should at least be informed about planning and the expectations Indian citizens of different backgrounds could have with regard to the proposed development.

Given the political importance the authors grants to the tension between planning and democracy, it is unfortunate that he does not discuss these terms critically but seems to assume a shared understanding of them. «Democracy» carries strong normative assumptions, and it needs to be contextualized historically if it is to serve as an analytical category. In the book, readers learn little about what kind of democratic regime emerged in postcolonial India, and which expectations towards democratic participation, representation, and legitimization Indian citizens and politicians had. Since these questions are not addressed, the nature of the tension between democracy and planning remains somewhat vague. Something similar is true of the term «planning». Menon writes about Mahalanobis's and other Indians' fascination with the Soviet planning experience but does not analyze in detail what the particularities of Indian planning were compared to other approaches. In the mid-twentieth century, a large number of countries across the globe opted for at least a degree of planning and observed each other closely in this regard. It would have been immensely valuable to contextualize India in this broader history, which covered a range of political systems and ideological positions. Similarly, it would have been of great use to relate the propaganda activities the Indian government organized to promote its planning activities to those of the USSR (think of the famous Soviet posters and films), the United States (think of the TVA's publicity campaigns), fascist Italy and Germany, postwar Great Britain and France, and many former colonies that embraced economic planning upon independence. All of them engaged in elaborate information campaigns, some more and some less manipulative, and many of them copied each other in doing so. Contextualizing the Indian history of planning and communicating planning in this global history would have made it possible to investigate more specifically the particular tension between democracy and planning which India faced in the post-1947 period.

In sum, this book makes original and important contributions to scholarship on Indian history, the history of statistics and planning, and the history of development. It will be of interest to a large audience, and it will surely inspire new research that will address some of the issues pointed out above.

[1] M. Homberg, *Digitale Unabhängigkeit: Indiens Weg ins Computerzeitalter – eine internationale Geschichte*, Göttingen, Wallstein Verlag, 2022); M. Homberg, *Digital India: Swadeshi-Computing in India since 1947*, in D. van Lente (ed.), *Prophets of Computing: Visions of Society Transformed by Computing*, New York, ACM Press, 2022, pp. 279-323.