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Empowering Governance with Outcome-Driven Data: A Path to Viksit Bharat

Context:

India is shifting toward outcome-driven monitoring to enhance governance effectiveness, with several states piloting innovative data use frameworks to improve public service delivery.

Introduction: Shaping Viksit Bharat through Better Data Use

- In the journey toward a “Viksit Bharat” (Developed India), public service delivery must transcend traditional bureaucratic frameworks to become outcome-oriented, citizen-centric, and transparent.
- This transformation hinges on the effective use of data, not as a tool for inspection, but as a catalyst for improvement.
- While India generates extensive data across sectors, nutrition, education, health, and livelihoods, the **current system often focuses on inputs rather than results.**
- The call is clear: move from data fatigue to meaningful, informed action that supports better decision-making, empowers frontline workers, and addresses local needs dynamically.

India’s Expansive but Fragmented Data Ecosystem

- India’s governance ecosystem is replete with data sources:
 - **Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE+)**
 - **Health Management Information System (HMIS)**
 - **National Family Health Survey (NFHS)**
 - **National Sample Survey (NSS)**
- Despite these efforts, the emphasis largely remains on input tracking, school enrolments, food distribution, or health supplies, while outcome measures (like literacy, nutrition, or treatment success) receive less attention.
- Furthermore, **national surveys are often too broad, infrequent, and disconnected from local programs.**
- This results in frontline workers feeding data upwards without clarity on its practical relevance.

The 4As Framework: Making Data Actionable

- To reimagine monitoring, a **4As framework** is proposed:
 - **Ascertain** – Identify the few critical outcomes that matter most.
 - **Assess** – Embed regular, low-burden assessments to track progress.
 - **Assist** – Support field workers through mentoring, training, and feedback.
 - **Adapt** – Modify strategies based on real-time feedback and citizen needs.
- This shift reorients monitoring from quantity to quality, creating feedback loops that not only track progress but also drive it.

Learning from State-Level Innovations

- States like **Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Odisha** are already experimenting with outcome-oriented data systems.
- **Uttar Pradesh** launched the **NIPUN Bharat Mission**, starting with the fundamental question, “What should a child learn by the end of each grade?”
- Weekly learning goals, termed Lakshyas, were integrated into teacher training and review meetings. No new structures were created, existing ones were streamlined to work in coherence.
- **Andhra Pradesh**, under a pilot programme, integrated real-time dashboards with mentoring and field visits. This approach led to a **20% improvement in foundational learning** in just one year.
- **Telangana** uses its **Human Development and Livelihood Survey (HDLS)** to track annual citizen outcomes. This has enabled dynamic resource allocation and rapid course correction.
 - Similarly, self-reporting, managerial oversight, and citizen feedback in the rural development department have built a culture of accountability without blame.
- **Odisha’s schools** now conduct quarterly block-level teacher meetings, not just for data reporting but for collaborative problem-solving based on that data.

Embedding Analytics for Institutional Capacity

- To move from episodic to systemic improvements, the authors propose setting up **Data Analytics Units (DAUs)** within planning departments.
- These units can synthesise data from multiple sources, routine programme records, citizen feedback, and real-time surveys, to offer integrated insights that inform policy.
- This shift enables departments to not only measure impact but also evolve based on what the data reveals. Rather than being passive collectors, these DAUs can become active agents in improving governance outcomes.

Reserved Faculty Posts are Still Vacant and Out of Reach

Context

- **India's constitutional commitment to social justice is more than a moral or ideological framework**, it is a legal and ethical obligation aimed at correcting deep-rooted historical injustices.
- With quotas of 15%, 7.5%, 27%, and 10% respectively, **these policies are particularly critical in higher education, where representation shapes not just access, but also the production and dissemination of knowledge.**
- However, a persistent and troubling trend has emerged: **premier institutions consistently fail to fill reserved faculty positions.**
- This **shortfall raises urgent questions about the systemic barriers** thwarting India's social justice agenda.

A Persistent Gap in Representation

- Despite the clear constitutional mandate, **the data reveals an alarming shortfall.**
- According to figures presented by Union Education Minister in April 2021, **out of 45 central universities, there were 2,389 vacant SC faculty positions, 1,199 for STs, and 4,251 for OBCs.**
- While targeted recruitment drives at institutions like Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and the University of Delhi have made marginal progress, **the broader picture remains bleak.**
- The 2023 University Grants Commission (UGC) report confirmed that **nearly 30% of reserved teaching posts remain unfilled**, particularly at senior levels such as associate professor and professor.
- This **deficit contrasts sharply with other public sectors**, such as railways and banking, where reserved posts in lower-level jobs (Groups C and D) are routinely filled.

Systemic Barriers to Inclusion

- **Institutional Autonomy and Accountability Gaps**
 - Central universities and institutes of national importance operate with significant autonomy.
 - While the UGC mandates reservation compliance, **enforcement is weak and inconsistent.**
 - **Selection committees and Vice-Chancellors**, often composed of members from dominant social groups, **exhibit insufficient urgency in advancing social justice goals.**
 - The **lack of oversight mechanisms allows these institutions to circumvent constitutional obligations** with impunity.
- **The 13-Point Roster System**
 - The 2018 introduction of the **13-point roster system marked a significant regression.**
 - Unlike the previous 200-point system that calculated reservations across the entire institution, **the new system considers departments as individual units.**
 - This **change disproportionately affects smaller departments**, which often do not reach the critical threshold for mandatory reserved posts, especially for STs and SCs.
 - **Legal challenges and nationwide protests reflect the backlash this system has generated** for undermining representation.
- **Discretionary Rejection and Institutional Bias**
 - A less visible but equally damaging barrier is the **prevalence of discretionary rejections.**

- **Candidates from SC, ST, and OBC backgrounds**, even when qualified, are **often denied positions on ambiguous grounds such as not found suitable**.
- According to a 2022 study by the Ambedkar University Faculty Association, **over 60% of vacancies in reserved categories were attributed to such arbitrary assessments**.
- These practices develop **a culture of exclusion and disillusionment**, discouraging potential candidates from pursuing academic careers.

Recommendation of Policy and Practice Toward a More Inclusive Academia

• Strengthen Enforcement Mechanisms

- UGC guidelines on reservation **must be stringently enforced through regular audits** and publicly accessible compliance reports.
- Institutions **should be held accountable for lapses in fulfilling reservation quotas**, with penalties for non-compliance.

• Reform the Roster System

- The **13-point roster must be revisited and restructured** to align with the spirit of constitutional equality.
- The **Supreme Court's ongoing hearings may offer legal clarity**, but proactive legislative or regulatory amendments can pre-empt further delays and disruptions.

• Institutionalise Fair and Transparent Recruitment

- **Diversity in selection committees** and clearly defined evaluation criteria can reduce subjective biases.
- Moreover, **training programmes for academic administrators on social justice principles** can shift institutional culture toward greater inclusivity.

• Political Will and Ethical Commitment

- Ultimately, bridging this gap requires **genuine political commitment**.
- **Social justice must move beyond rhetoric** and be embedded as a core value in policy implementation.
- The **ruling establishment** that often frames itself as a proponent of inclusive nationalism, **must demonstrate through action its commitment to pluralism and equity** in higher education.

Conclusion

- The **chronic underrepresentation of marginalised communities in university faculties is not just a policy failure**, it is a moral and democratic crisis.
- **Universities are not mere centres of professional training** but are spaces of social transformation.
- They **must reflect the diversity of the society they serve**, and their governance must be informed by the principles of justice, equity, and inclusion.
- **Only through decisive reform, greater institutional accountability**, and visionary leadership can India hope **to realise its foundational promise of social justice** and build a truly inclusive knowledge society.

A Triangular Dynamic in South Asia's Power Politics

Context

- In the intricate matrix of South Asian geopolitics, **the triangular relationship between the United States, India, and Pakistan presents a complex narrative**, one shaped by strategic necessity, ideological contests, national interests, and deep-rooted historical legacies.
- Recent developments, particularly during **Donald Trump's return to power, have cast new light on longstanding alliances**, emerging fractures, and evolving national doctrines.
- **Against this volatile backdrop**, each actor navigates the treacherous waters of diplomacy, security, and influence, **recalibrating old partnerships while striving to redefine their place in a rapidly changing world order.**

The Triangular Dynamic in South Asian Geopolitics

- **The U.S. Pivot**
 - The **Trump administration's foreign policy approach represents a stark departure** from traditional diplomacy.
 - Eschewing long-term doctrines in favour of short-term strategic gains, **Trump's transactional style has developed a renewed engagement with Pakistan.**
 - **His overtures, notably a symbolic lunch with Pakistan's Army Chief Field Marshal Asim Munir** and his repeated claims of brokering peace between India and Pakistan, **have evoked memories of Cold War-era realpolitik.**
 - These **gestures underscore an American willingness to employ shortcut diplomacy**, even at the cost of previous strategic alignments.
- **Revival of US Pakistan Relations**
 - The revival of U.S.-Pakistan ties under Trump's second term, particularly **the authorisation of \$397 million to sustain Islamabad's F-16 fleet and public commendation of Pakistan as a phenomenal partner**, signals a notable recalibration.
 - **Pakistan's military**, portrayed as a knowledgeable interlocutor on Iran, **is being positioned as a potential regional asset**, especially amid tensions involving Iran and Israel.
 - This **strategic shift threatens to erode decades of U.S.-India cooperation** built on shared counterterrorism interests and converging concerns about China's regional ambitions.
- **India's Disillusionment and Doctrinal Shift**
 - **India's initial synergy with Trump**, rooted in a shared condemnation of Pakistan's double-dealing on terrorism, **has begun to fray in light of Washington's overtures toward Islamabad.**
 - India's security doctrine has evolved in response. The devastating terror attack in Pahalgam catalysed **Operation Sindoor, an assertive military response that marked a clear break from India's traditional policy** of strategic restraint.
 - India's declaration of a new normal exemplifies a doctrinal shift: **one that combines hard military retaliation with global diplomatic campaigns aimed at isolating Pakistan.**

- This **assertiveness coincides with growing fears of a two-front conflict**, given Pakistan's deepening ties with Beijing, whose adversarial posture towards New Delhi adds a dangerous layer of complexity to the region's security calculus.

Pakistan's Strategic Recalibration and Diplomatic Offensives

- Amidst internal political turmoil and external pressures, **Pakistan is pursuing a multi-pronged strategy that blends military strength with diplomatic manoeuvring.**
- The **promotion of Asim Munir to field marshal signifies the formal consolidation of military dominance** in Pakistan's national security framework.
- This **entrenchment of a hard state approach, resistant to civilian oversight, reflects Rawalpindi's determination to assert control** at home and abroad.
- Simultaneously, **Pakistan is leveraging its geographical centrality**, straddling South Asia, West Asia, and Central Asia, to position itself as indispensable to U.S. strategic interests.
- **Economic negotiations, rare earth mineral deals, and personal diplomacy have become tools** in a charm offensive designed to restore Pakistan's relevance and gain economic lifelines.
- While Pakistan lacks the economic and demographic heft of India, **it compensates through its geographic utility and agility in diplomatic corridors.**

America's Balancing Act and Pakistan's Enduring Relevance

- **America's Balancing Act and Strategic Ambivalence**
 - The **United States now finds itself in a position of strategic ambivalence.** On one hand, India's role in the Indo-Pacific and its participation in frameworks like the Quad should anchor it firmly within American strategic priorities.
 - Yet, **Trump's America appears increasingly preoccupied with trade deals** and personal diplomacy, often at the expense of broader ideological or institutional commitments.
 - **Any American move to equate the two rivals, the so-called hyphenation, undermines India's global aspirations** and risks alienating one of its most natural democratic partners in the region.
- **Pakistan's Enduring Relevance**
 - **Pakistan's continued relevance** in American foreign policy **rests not only on its location but also on the military's sophisticated use of personal diplomacy.**
 - **Proximity to flashpoints** like Iran, Afghanistan, and China **makes Pakistan a geographically strategic player.**
 - This, **combined with its intelligence and logistical capabilities, ensures that some factions in Washington view Pakistan as a vital cog** in their regional machinery.
 - This **perception fuels Pakistan's confidence in counterbalancing India**, even as the latter boasts superior economic and demographic indicators.

Conclusion

- **The triangular dynamic** among the United States, India, and Pakistan **is marked by shifting allegiances, strategic opportunism, and competing visions for regional order.**
- **For the U.S., the challenge lies in balancing short-term strategic imperatives** with long-term values and partnerships.
- **For India, it means navigating a recalibrated regional order** without compromising its sovereign stance or strategic autonomy.

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