

Nikhil Menon. *Planning Democracy: Modern India's Quest for Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022)

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Nikhil Menon has written a highly engaging account of the origins and early decades of economic planning in India. *Planning Democracy: Modern India's Quest for Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022) employs a semi-narrative structure to describe and elucidate key turning points in the evolution of the country's policymaking infrastructure. With an eye for a telling anecdote, Menon deftly blends an analysis of *institutions* (e.g., the Planning Commission, the Indian Statistical Institute), *ideas* (e.g., the rationale underlying the Nehru government's public messaging concerning its five-year plans), and leading *individuals* (most notably, P.C. Mahalanobis, the father of Indian planning, but also, in supporting roles, more familiar figures such as Gandhian stalwart Gulzarilal Nanda).

While Menon, an assistant professor of history at Notre Dame, has conducted extensive archival research for this project, unearthing a wealth of new material in the process, the resulting story is told in an accessible style, free from excessive academic jargon. A book designed to appeal to both a scholarly audience and the wider reading public risks satisfying neither: too thin on theoretical heft for specialists, too esoteric for the lay reader. Menon has skillfully avoided this pitfall. There is plenty to interest academic researchers seeking a better understanding of the crucible through which independent India's economic policy-regime emerged, but also to provide ordinary citizens (and foreign observers) a much-needed historical perspective on contemporary issues. Examples of the latter include recent controversies over the integrity (or in some cases non-availability) of government economic statistics,¹ and the Modi administration's replacement of the Planning Commission, created under Nehru, with the less independent, and less consequential, policy advisory forum, Niti Aayog.²

The book is organized, simply but effectively, into two sections. This first (titled "Data") focuses on the rise of India's capacity to collect and analyze statistics on the life and livelihoods of its people. What seems an unpromising premise for a fast-paced drama turns out to have enough twists and turns to keep the reader guessing, even when we know the outcome of a particular policy battle. The sheer scale of the effort commands our attention – the myriad languages and dialects; the disputed (or non-existent!) place names; the multitude of land measurement systems. That Menon keeps us engaged over the entire story, however, is mainly attributable to the larger-than-life figure of Mahalanobis himself. In this half of the book, the author renders an invaluable service by revealing, in vivid detail, the extraordinary scope of this once-obscure statistician's vision, not to mention the administrative skills and heroic perseverance he employed to realize it.

¹ Some of these issues are referenced in Primit Bhattacharya, *India's Statistical System: Past, Present and Future* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023).

² Critical perspectives on its performance include Ranjit Sabhiki, "The Ambitious Visionaries of NITI Aayog Are Ignorant of India's Hard Realities," *The Wire*, 9 February 2021, <https://thewire.in/government/the-ambitious-visionaries-of-niti-aayog-are-ignorant-of-indias-hard-realities>

The extent of Mahalanobis's role in developing the Indian state's capacity to "see" its people, and the pitiful information base of the British and princely administrations that preceded the Republic, will be a revelation to most readers. He was able to achieve so much not only through scientific brilliance, but also through his willingness to travel relentlessly in pursuit of his objectives. Mahalanobis targeted experts and institutions abroad who could provide guidance on the statistical methods best suited to India's circumstances (William Edwards Deming) and the mathematical bases for the input-output tables that underlay sectoral planning (Wassily Leontief).

These and other contacts were just as useful, however, as sources of external validation for Mahalanobis's revolutionary ideas concerning sampling techniques, the standardization of measurements, how to train enumerators, coding conventions, and much else besides. The centrality of the Indian Statistical Institute, and its lush campus outside Calcutta, to the enterprise of winning allies, foreign and domestic, to India's effort to build a national planning apparatus is nicely told. The text evokes the rich cultural milieu of that place and time, which attracted people of all types and provided a stage on which Mahalanobis and his circle could practice their arts of persuasion. Photographs reproduced in the book show physicist Niels Bohr and other mid-century celebrity intellectuals touring the ISI campus.

Perhaps the only downside of these early chapters is the preoccupation the author sometimes appears to have with refuting arguments that, at least in the form rendered, do not seem worth his time or energy (or, by extension, the reader's). There are, to be sure, those who have claimed that the main source of Mahalanobis's influence was his closeness to Nehru, and Menon duly cites them. But does this claim rise to the status of a myth that must – repeatedly – be dispelled? There was a bit of a strawman feel to these portions of the text.

The main theme of Part I of the book, however, is well stated by the author: that India's turn toward economic planning was inseparable from the massive effort to systematically collect and analyze a huge array of data concerning the country's vast and often inaccessible population. Mahalanobis's push for financial, technological, and human resources to undertake the first incarnation of what would become India's National Sample Survey would likely not have been successful had he not been able to impress upon leading figures in the Congress – as well as technocrats, businesspeople, academics, and others – the absolute indispensability of the information these surveys would provide to the enterprise of national planning. Menon's account of this co-dependent relationship allows us to comprehend the central place that economic planning occupied in the mid 20th century political imagination, in India and elsewhere in the non-western world. Planning represented for adherents of many nationalist movements a rational means of catching up with the colonizing powers, based on scientific principles that could remake not only societies but also the actual persons of which they were composed.

By the time of India's first plan in the early 1950s, the Soviets had accumulated decades of experience, and the results achieved, for ill and for good, had ever since been fueling debates over the suitability of planning for countries that would attain independence during the 1950s and 1960s. Helpfully, Menon takes us further back in time, to a pre-Independence India in which the idea of a muscular role for the state in allocating scarce resources – designed to maximize beneficial effects on private investment, household expenditure, and labor market participation – was widespread. It was found on the right as well as on the left; within India and abroad; among cosmopolitan

intellectuals and business tycoons. The Bombay Plan of 1944, devised by a group of leading industrialists, not only expected but actually welcomed planning, not least because it held out the promise of ensuring the private sector's timely access to land and raw materials, intermediate and capital goods, hard-to-obtain foreign currency, and a steady supply of increasingly healthy, mobile, well-trained workers.

This and other examples covered in Menon's wide-ranging study suggest that economic planning as it evolved in India was able to contain multiple meanings. For capitalists, and their supporters in the Swatantra Party, planning might mean greater predictability of industrial inputs, while for people attracted to leftist revolutionary doctrines, it constituted a central instrument for establishing a workers' state. Planning could achieve such widespread popularity because it could be sold not only as an instrument of state domination of the productive economy – determining sectoral allocations, and dictating the adoption of a licensing and regulation-heavy policy regime – but also as a means of ensuring the delivery of essential goods and services to poor and marginalized citizens. Arguably, it is as a tool for identifying and achieving social policy objectives that national planning is most widely used today in the development field.

Part I of the book concludes with a story that few readers are likely to have heard of – the far-reaching exertions of Indian scientists, during the 1950s and thereafter, to obtain computers from abroad. First among these was Mahalanobis, who followed a strategy of non-alignment in his efforts to learn about and procure these still extremely novel machines. He needed a means of efficiently crunching the masses of data the new infrastructure of surveys and censuses and other forms of information-gathering were already, even in these early days, generating. He turned to the British, via university connections; to the US aid program (then known as the Technical Cooperation Administration); to the Russians, who liked the idea of showering poor countries with modern technologies to support planning, which they considered one of their flagship exports.

Eventually Mahalanobis, like the Indian diplomats navigating the shoals of the cold war, would find himself wedged between the superpowers. His miniature version of non-alignment became at least temporarily non-viable when the American embassy in New Delhi advised Washington to deny Mahalanobis access to certain computer technology he sought. "The professor," as Mahalanobis was widely known, was seen, even by an embassy headed by a liberal such as Truman-era Ambassador to India Chester Bowles, as too chummy with various Russians. It did not help Mahalanobis's case that he emerged from what westerners would see as a leftist-inspire intellectual environment (Calcutta), and that he made no bones about his belief in the value of the planned economy not only for India but for poor countries throughout the world. Menon renders this series of episodes well, and even shows us how the Ford Foundation sought to aid Mahalanobis's technological quest.

Yet, the book also seems to cast the US's assessment of Mahalanobis as a security risk as a self-evident example of cold war paranoia. Perhaps it was. Clearly Mahalanobis was no spy, and had no ill intent. Still, the US State Department could also be seen to have acted with necessary prudence in denying Mahalanobis access to cutting-edge technology. This was a time when the scientific personnel at his institute (which had an outpost in Delhi) were closely engaged with Soviet engineers, who would surely have been interested in examining any American computer components that came into the possession of their Indian partners. And what of the uses to which the technology could potentially be put? This was another explicit concern of US policymakers.

The fear of nuclear proliferation had only increased after the Soviets broke the American nuclear monopoly in 1949. Menon suggests that any such worries in the case of India were misplaced because Mahalanobis sought computing power for non-military means. This was true enough. But we later learn that the Indian Statistical Institute's computer – the first one used in India – became in those early years a *de facto* national computing center. Among its early users was the research laboratory of Homi Bhabha, the founder and leading scientific light of India's atomic energy program, whose peaceful purposes were stated but whose weaponization was reasonably feared. What all this adds up to is unclear, of course, and the reader hopes in vain for Menon to bring his considerable expertise to bear on at least some of these questions.

Part II of the book moves us from “Data” to “Democracy?”. The question mark in the title is significant, as it indicates the extent to which Menon remains suspicious of any claim that planning in India was particularly democratic. Indeed, the very enterprise of planning rests on the idea that technical expertise – not necessarily the immediate demands of the people – will be deployed to arrive at optimal levels of resource-utilization. It was the all-too-apparent elitism of the planning process – its arcane language, reliance on equations, and massive scale – that, it was feared, would alienate ordinary citizens. It was for this reason that Nehru and other far-seeing Congress leaders sought to educate the Indian public about planning's purpose and methods. Menon shows many of the ways in which (and idioms through which) the state engaged people. Nehru, for instance, wanted to inculcate in the ordinary villager a sense of how their efforts – whatever livelihood they pursued – fit into the larger picture of planned development. Only in this way, it was felt, could short-term sacrifice in the interest of long-term economic renewal be understood, and internalized, by average citizens. This was all part of the cognitive, almost spiritual, state of mind the government actively sought to promote – a sense of “plan consciousness.”

In a roundabout way that Menon might have pursued more directly, this process of trumpeting planning's democratic roots suggests some of the means by which engagement by the Indian people in the great national experiment in economic planning did in fact help to buttress the institutional foundations of India's fledgling democracy. That is, if one of the major threats to sustaining India's democracy was the kind of demand-overload that Samuel Huntington would warn of in *Political Order in Changing Societies*³ – that is, the tendency for excessive demands from organized interests (farmers, industrial workers, unemployed urban youth) to overwhelm newly established democratic institutions – then in fact embedding notions of noble sacrifice into the public narrative of national planning may well have contributed, however indirectly, to democracy's endurance by reducing the cumulative political strain felt by India's representative bodies of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Mahalanobis, it should be noted, is not much seen in Part II of the book, and for good reason: he was the kind of intellectual that both the Government of India and the Congress leadership more broadly were eager to keep out of sight when it came to its people-centered propaganda efforts. The mascots for “democratic planning,” repeatedly portrayed in films, pamphlets, and other forms of publicity, were peasant farmers, frugal housewives, and various sorts of youth. Investing planning with a democratic sheen was in any case not something in which a man like Mahalanobis was interested.

³ Yale University Press, 1968.

Menon's key claim in this part of the book is that the stress on "democratic planning" – as demonstrated by people participating in public programs and students joining discussion groups – was a crucial element in how India positioned its economic policy model in a world riven by the ideological contest between the Soviet Union and the United States. India would use scientific planning to organize its economy, but would do so (unlike the Soviets) in the context of a democratic political system. Menon provides ample evidence to show that Nehru and other leaders actively sought to emphasize this difference between Indian and Soviet planning to burnish India's democratic credentials, a major part of its soft power. India's leaders were directing this message in large part to Western countries who feared that India might be slipping gradually into the Soviet sphere of influence.

Despite the merits of this section of the book – not least introducing us to a worrying portent of how the state might enlist religious figures to advance its policies – the text at times adopts too narrow a scope, focusing in on just one aspect of the Indian government's image-making in the field of economic policy. The story of the campaign to demonstrate planning's compatibility with democracy might have been even richer had it been told in the context of the government's parallel efforts to show that planning was no less compatible with a market-based economy, though one of the soft-socialist type then gaining ground in Western Europe. After all, was not the Nehru government's conception of the "mixed economy" – with the state controlling the commanding heights, and private-sector business playing a major role – the most visible and arguably most important way in which it signaled the country's non-partisanship in the international ideological competition between capitalism and communism then underway?

One advantage of considering Nehru's campaign to brand India's approach as *democratic* planning in the context of the simultaneous effort to tout the non-alignment, ideologically speaking, of his mixed economy model is that doing so allows a more nuanced assessment of planning's critics. For instance, the charge that planning is anti-democratic amounted to more than just populist complaints that the process tended to elevate technocrats over ordinary people, but more importantly, that the concentrated authority vested with government entities overseeing the regulatory functions used to fulfill national planning priorities would, over time, undercut the foundations of democracy. It would have been illuminating to hear, if such material exists, the responses to these sorts of critiques by those who saw planning and democracy as mutual reinforcing.

Indeed, one of the strengths of Menon's book is that it causes the reader to consider the multiple pathways through which planning and democracy affect one another. And because he reminds us that in the post-war period planning as a mode of governance was the subject of theorizing and experimentation in much of the world, we are inclined to consider these issues comparatively. One rather obscure example – not something one would expect Menon to have sought out – that this book brought to mind was the set of proposals put forth in the late 1940s by erstwhile New Deal official and University of Chicago professor Rexford Tugwell. He articulated them as a member of the Committee to Frame a Preliminary World Constitution, a panel of eminent thinkers that attempted in the immediate post-war years to specify what a worldwide constitutional order might look like.⁴ While not holding out great hope that this World Republic would come into being anytime soon, or ever, Tugwell used his participation in this group to argue that a

⁴ This is discussed in Rob Jenkins, *United States of the World: American Movements for World Government at the Dawn of Decolonization* (unpublished manuscript, 2022).

constitutionally entrenched economic planning entity need not as a matter of principle deprive people of their voice, and that it could in fact empower them by freeing decision-making from the grip of powerful special interests, which Tugwell saw as having undercut the voice of the people even in elected legislatures, and particularly in the US Congress. He proposed that a planning body be incorporated into the worldwide constitution he and his colleagues were formulating, and that it be positioned as a “fourth branch” of government to provide it legitimacy, stability, and accountability. This was not, of course, the direction chosen by the Constituent Assembly that was deliberating on the Indian Constitution around the same time. Critics of India’s Planning Commission often derisively call it an “extra-constitutional” body, since it is indeed not referenced in the constitution (though the same could be said for many public entities). Considering the course that planning might have taken had the commission made it into the constitution is more than idle speculation. It is not just India’s democratic institutions that are under assault; so are many of its institutions of economic governance.

Planning Democracy closes with a thought-provoking “Epilogue,” which briskly takes the story up through Mahalanobis’s passing from the scene in the early 1970s, all the way to more recent times. Menon raises, but wisely does not attempt to answer in any kind of definitive way, questions concerning planning’s complex legacy. One view worth considering is that, even if ordinary people were not substantively involved in the formulation of India’s early plans (except as survey respondents or participants in campaigns to promote “plan consciousness”), all this activity, and what it produced, primed the pump for citizens’ more serious engagement in later decades. For instance, the People’s Plan campaign launched by Kerala’s Left Democratic Front (LDF) state government in the 1990s involved a concerted effort to bring the principles of planning to the village level.⁵ The campaign could be seen as a delayed byproduct of all the Plan Consciousness-raising that began decades earlier, but transplanted to a new context, and positioned in defiant reaction against the liberalizing direction of India’s economic policy regime. The LDF government’s efforts in Kerala were, like the Congress’s national publicity campaigns of the 1950s, in part politically motivated. Such efforts can nevertheless generate demands for accountability that take on a life of their own. In fact, we can reasonably ask whether, over time, a growing insistence that people be allowed to participate more directly in planning set the stage for subsequent demands for their involvement in auditing how planned programs were implemented? Did this, in turn, result in, among other things, the social audit provisions built into legislation such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005?⁶

Nikhil Menon cannot be expected to have the answer to these questions. The important thing is that his book prompts us to ask them, and to rethink the answers we might provide.

⁵ An analysis of the long-term trajectory of this initiative is found at S. Mohanakumar, “From People’s Plan to Plan Sans People,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37:16 (20-26 April, 2002), pp. 1492-1497.

⁶ This issue is considered briefly in Rob Jenkins and James Manor, *Politics and the Right to Work* (Oxford University Press, 2017).