

A career in public policy

Understanding complex public problems and designing effective solutions for them are challenging tasks. However, there is no single social-science or management subject which addresses this. A public problem may be something as basic as garbage crisis in the neighbourhood, potholes on the roads or the dominance of money power in elections. But finding solutions to problems like these is neither simple nor straightforward as experience shows us. A number of subjects like political science and public administration do deal with public affairs in general but their central focus is not solving these public problems or analysing how public institutions go about solving such problems. It is this gap which Public Policy as a subject of inquiry seeks to fill.

Although relatively new in India, public policy courses are becoming popular. Earlier, only mid-career civil servants used to enrol in public policy courses. Now, fresh graduates, and professionals from a variety of backgrounds seek a master's in public policy.

Solutions to public problems are no longer worked out only in the power corridors of Delhi and state capitals or only in offices of Panchayats and Municipalities. Governments are increasingly seeking professional assistance from consultancy firms, non-governmental organisations and individual experts. Private and voluntary sector agencies often supplement the government in several tasks in public affairs. These developments have created the need for trained public policy experts who have requisite knowledge and skills:

- (i) To understand public problems,
- (ii) To offer professional advice to agencies engaged in finding solutions to such problems
- (iii) To evaluate the efficacy of the solutions applied. As a senior civil servant with the Government of India put it in a recent consultation on public policy education, "the government is recruiting a large number of professionals outside the civil service these days and these opportunities are only going to increase."

Governance experts

However, it is not just the executive branch of the government which is looking out for public policy professionals. Challenging opportunities beckon them in politics.

- Just as civil service is not only for civil servants, politics is not just for politicians. The ways in which politics is practiced and elections are fought are changing in several ways. Winning elections and staying in power require the assistance of professionals. **Political consultancy is an emerging business in India.** Political parties and even individual politicians seek professional assistance in policy matters as part of their larger strategy to build a brand image among the electorate.
- **Branding strategies in politics need policy and governance experts, not just MBAs and marketing gurus.** In addition, welfare functions where the state used to be the sole player once are now being performed by a new class of investors called social entrepreneurs. From creating gainful employment for skilled and semi-skilled workers

to providing the poor with affordable housing, a large number of privately-funded innovations are dotting the social sector today. According to media reports as of 2015 more than 100 companies have invested a total of \$ 1.6 billion in 220 for-profit social enterprise ventures in India.

New programmes

A good public policy programme today therefore combines quantitative skill building courses such as policy analysis, programme evaluation and the like with courses on politics and political economy, governance and institutional analysis, public administration, anthropology and ethics to gain insights into the lived experience of people with the state on the ground.

The World Development Report 2015 draws on findings from even disciplines such as neurosciences, cognitive sciences, psychology and behavioural economics to argue that public policy should be integrated with insights from behavioural sciences to understand what kind of policies work, what do not, and why.

A good post-graduate degree in public policy thus should provide students with a well-balanced synthesis of social science, humanities, management, research methods and quantitative skills. With such a holistic approach to the curriculum, public policy graduates will also be better equipped to handle policy-related jobs in consultancy firms, government and non-governmental organisations, private companies, the media, and funding agencies. Above all else, a public policy master's will be ideal for those who are passionate about contributing to social change by engaging with the public institutions.

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