

# **Balancing Growth and Development: A Comprehensive Study of Economic Challenges in India**

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## **ABSTRACT**

India, one of the world's fastest-growing economies, faces a critical juncture in its development trajectory. While growth figures have been promising, with consistent GDP expansion over the past decade, the path to holistic development—ensuring inclusivity, equitable distribution of resources, and sustainable progress—remains fraught with challenges. This review paper examines India's economic growth patterns and the impediments to balanced development, focusing on employment, inequality, infrastructure, environmental sustainability, and social welfare. Recent policy initiatives are also critically analysed for their efficacy in addressing these multifaceted challenges.

**Keywords-** Economic Growth, Inclusive Development, Income Inequality Environmental Sustainability, Policy Initiatives

## **1. Introduction**

India has consistently demonstrated robust economic growth over the past few decades, emerging as one of the world's leading economies. This transformation has propelled the nation into the ranks of major global players in the 21st century, influencing global trade, politics, and technological innovation. With a vast and rapidly growing population, India boasts a dynamic market that presents numerous opportunities for economic expansion. In addition, the country's advancements in technology and industrial capacity have further bolstered its economic standing [1]. India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has maintained a steady growth rate, oscillating between 5% to 7% in recent years, making it one of the fastest-growing major economies in the world [2]. However, economic growth—often measured by GDP—while significant, does not necessarily equate to development. Growth refers to the quantitative increase in economic output,

whereas development is a broader concept that includes improvements in living standards, poverty reduction, education, health, equality, and environmental sustainability. It is in this broader context of development that India faces a multitude of challenges. The renowned

Pakistani economist, Mahbub ul Haq, who played a pivotal role in developing the Human Development Index (HDI), famously emphasized that “the real wealth of a nation is its people.” This perspective shifts the focus from economic output alone to the well-being of a country's citizens. It reminds policymakers and economists that, for growth to be meaningful, it must translate into tangible improvements in the quality of life for all people, including the marginalized and vulnerable sections of society. In India's case, despite impressive growth figures, the question remains: Has this growth been inclusive and sustainable? Has it led to meaningful progress in the areas of human

development, income equality, social welfare, and environmental sustainability [3]?

India's path to balanced development has been fraught with challenges. While the economy has expanded, disparities between different regions, social groups, and economic classes have persisted, and in some cases, widened. For instance, while urban centres like Mumbai, Bangalore, and Delhi have flourished, contributing significantly to national GDP, rural areas—where a majority of the population resides—continue to struggle with inadequate infrastructure, poor access to healthcare and education, and limited employment opportunities. Additionally, while industries like information technology and services have grown rapidly, other critical sectors like agriculture, which employs nearly half of the population, have stagnated. This uneven growth has resulted in economic and social inequalities that pose significant hurdles to long-term development. India's demographic profile presents both an opportunity and a challenge. The country's large working-age population, known as the demographic dividend, can potentially drive further economic growth. However, the extent to which this potential can be realized depends on the availability of quality jobs, skills training, and education. Currently, the labor market is unable to absorb the growing number of job seekers, leading to rising unemployment, particularly among the youth. Additionally, the large informal sector, which employs a vast majority of the workforce, lacks basic protections such as social security, fair wages, and job security [4].

Furthermore, income inequality remains a pressing issue. According to Oxfam's 2024 India Inequality Report, the wealthiest 1% of the population owns a disproportionate share of the nation's wealth, while the poorest continue to struggle with basic needs. This stark inequality not only hampers social cohesion but also impedes the nation's overall development.

Infrastructure development is another critical challenge. While India has made significant

strides in improving its road networks, railways, and digital infrastructure, many areas—particularly rural regions—still suffer from inadequate infrastructure. This limits economic opportunities and perpetuates regional disparities. Moreover, rapid urbanization is placing immense pressure on cities, leading to issues such as overcrowding, inadequate housing, and poor sanitation, which, in turn, affect the overall quality of life in urban areas [5].

Environmental sustainability has also emerged as a crucial area of concern. India's rapid industrialization and urbanization have come at the cost of environmental degradation, including deforestation, pollution, and depletion of natural resources. The impact of climate change has become increasingly evident, with more frequent extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, and heatwaves, disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities, particularly in rural areas. Balancing economic growth with environmental sustainability is essential for ensuring long-term development, but it remains a formidable challenge for policymakers. In addition to these challenges, the country's social welfare systems, although extensive, face significant gaps in coverage and efficiency. While India has launched numerous welfare programs aimed at poverty alleviation, healthcare, and education, their implementation has often been marred by inefficiencies, corruption, and lack of resources, preventing them from reaching the most disadvantaged sections of society. The central objective of this review paper is to critically examine these complex and interrelated economic challenges. It seeks to understand how India can balance its impressive economic growth with broader developmental goals, ensuring that progress is inclusive, equitable, and sustainable. This paper will delve into key areas such as:

Employment generation and labor market challenges: With particular attention to the growing unemployment rate, the informal

sector, and the potential impacts of technological advancements.

**Income inequality:** Analysing the root causes of growing economic disparities, and evaluating the effectiveness of existing policies aimed at addressing this issue.

**Infrastructure development:** Examining India's progress in building physical and digital infrastructure, and identifying areas where further investment is needed to bridge the urban-rural divide.

**Environmental sustainability:** Assessing India's environmental challenges, with a focus on climate change, resource depletion, and the transition to renewable energy sources.

**Social welfare systems:** A critical analysis of the existing welfare programs and policies aimed at healthcare, education, and poverty reduction, highlighting areas for reform and improvement.

This review incorporates the most recent data, reports, and policy measures to provide an updated and comprehensive picture of India's current economic and developmental landscape. By doing so, it aims to offer insights and recommendations that could guide future policy formulation in balancing growth with development, ensuring that India's progress benefits all sections of society while safeguarding the environment for future generations [6].

## **2. Economic Growth: A Brief Overview**

India has been witnessing significant and consistent economic growth over the last few decades, positioning itself as one of the world's leading emerging markets. This growth has been driven by the expansion of various sectors, most notably information technology (IT), services, manufacturing, and exports. These sectors have contributed to India's rapid rise as a global economic powerhouse, attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), boosting employment, and increasing income levels for certain sections of society.

According to the World Bank, India's GDP grew by approximately 6.8% in 2022. This robust growth continued even in the face of global economic challenges such as supply chain

disruptions, inflation, and geopolitical tensions, making India one of the fastest-growing major economies. Projections for the future remain optimistic, with the GDP expected to grow at a rate of around 5.9% in 2024. This is notable in light of the global economic slowdown, rising interest rates, and uncertainties in international trade. India's growth story has been hailed as a testament to its resilience and the ability of its economy to adapt to both internal and external challenges. However, despite these strong macroeconomic indicators, India's growth trajectory has been uneven across different sectors and regions. For instance, the services and technology sectors, particularly the IT industry, have experienced exponential growth. India has become a global hub for IT services, with cities like Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Pune being major centres for tech innovation and outsourcing. The export of IT services has brought significant foreign exchange into the country and contributed to the rise of a growing middle class.

Similarly, the manufacturing sector has seen progress through initiatives like Make in India, which aims to turn India into a global manufacturing hub. Sectors such as automotive, electronics, and pharmaceuticals have benefitted from both domestic demand and export opportunities. The rise of India as a manufacturing center for mobile phones, electronics, and automobiles has been a key driver of economic activity in recent years [7]. However, while these sectors have thrived, others, particularly agriculture, have faced stagnation. Agriculture, which still employs nearly half of India's workforce, contributes only about 15-18% to the country's GDP. This imbalance is a reflection of the challenges faced by the agricultural sector, including low productivity, lack of access to modern technology, water scarcity, small landholdings, and vulnerability to climate change. The sector's limited contribution to GDP highlights a structural issue in the economy, where a large portion of the population is engaged in low-income, low-productivity activities, while high-

growth sectors employ relatively fewer people but generate significant wealth.

Another key challenge facing India's economic growth is its reliance on consumption-driven growth rather than investment-led growth. Consumption has been a major driver of India's economic expansion, with rising incomes and an expanding middle class fueling demand for goods and services. However, while consumption can provide short-term boosts to the economy, it does not necessarily lead to sustained long-term development. Investment, particularly in infrastructure, education, healthcare, and innovation, is critical for ensuring sustained economic growth that is both inclusive and resilient [8].

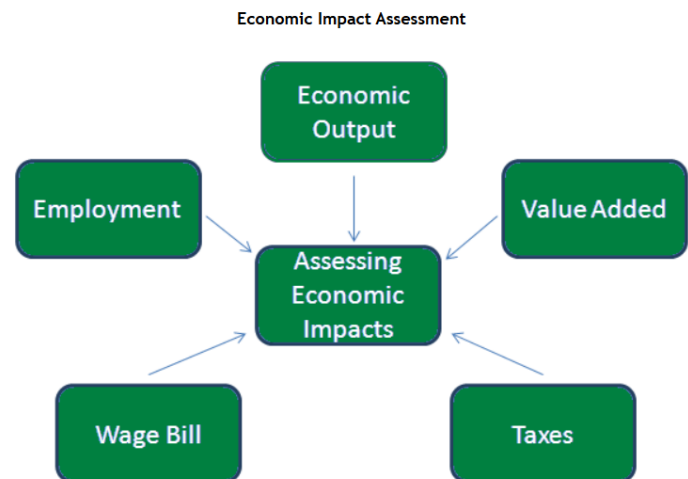
The recent slowdown in private investment is a cause for concern. Businesses are hesitant to invest in capacity expansion, partly due to global uncertainties and domestic challenges such as regulatory hurdles and infrastructure bottlenecks. Public investment, while robust in some areas, has not been able to fully compensate for the shortfall in private sector investment. Without adequate investment in key sectors like infrastructure, energy, and human capital, India's long-term growth potential may be constrained.

Furthermore, the uneven growth pattern across different regions of India has exacerbated economic disparities. While certain states such as Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat have become economic powerhouses, attracting significant investment and generating substantial economic activity, other regions, particularly in northern and eastern India, lag behind. This regional imbalance is reflected in indicators such as per capita income, infrastructure development, and access to services like education and healthcare. Addressing these disparities is crucial for ensuring balanced development across the country [9].

India's reliance on informal labor is another structural weakness that impacts its growth.

The informal sector, which includes small and medium enterprises, agriculture, and unorganized labor, makes up a large portion of the economy. However, it is characterized by low productivity, lack of access to formal credit, and poor working conditions. Formalizing the economy through improved access to credit, financial inclusion, and regulatory reforms is essential for improving productivity and ensuring that economic growth translates into better livelihoods for all citizens.

Despite these challenges, India's economic future remains promising due to its demographic advantages, a growing consumer market, and the government's push for reforms and infrastructure development. Initiatives such as Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-reliant India) aim to strengthen domestic industries, reduce dependency on imports, and promote local manufacturing. The government's focus on renewable energy, digital infrastructure, and urban development is expected to provide long-term benefits [10].



However, for growth to be sustainable and inclusive, India must address the structural challenges that limit its development potential. This includes investing in education, healthcare, and skill development to ensure that its vast workforce is equipped for the demands of a modern economy. Additionally, improving the ease of doing business, enhancing regulatory transparency, and

addressing infrastructure bottlenecks are critical for attracting investment and fostering long-term growth.

In summary, while India's economic growth has been significant and is expected to remain strong in the coming years, it faces several challenges that need to be addressed to ensure that this growth translates into sustained development. These challenges include sectoral imbalances, the reliance on consumption rather than investment, regional disparities, and the need to formalize the economy. Tackling these issues will be crucial for balancing growth with development and ensuring that India's economic success benefits all sections of society[11].

**Fig 1 Economic impact assignment (source GD economics)**

### **3. Challenges in Balancing Growth and Development**

India's rapid economic growth, while impressive, presents multiple challenges when it comes to translating that growth into holistic development. The gap between economic expansion and socio-economic improvements, particularly in terms of employment, income equality, infrastructure, environmental sustainability, and social welfare, remains significant. This section explores the key challenges that India faces in balancing growth with development [12].

#### **3.1 Employment and Labor Market Challenges**

India's demographic dividend—the large and growing working-age population—presents both significant opportunities and formidable challenges. While the expanding workforce has the potential to drive economic growth, the economy has not been able to generate sufficient jobs to match the growing number of job seekers. The unemployment rate stood at 7.8% in August 2024, reflecting ongoing strains in the labor market, especially among young people and in rural areas where economic opportunities are more limited.

#### **Informal Employment**

One of the most significant challenges is the dominance of the informal sector, which comprises about 80% of India's workforce. Workers in this sector lack access to social security, healthcare benefits, and formal labor rights, making them particularly vulnerable to economic shocks, such as those brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The informal sector's dominance also limits the ability of the government to enforce labor laws, collect taxes, and ensure that economic growth translates into stable employment and economic security for workers.

#### **Technological Displacement**

Automation and technological advancements, particularly in industries like manufacturing, are displacing low-skill jobs. The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and automation threatens jobs in sectors like textiles, retail, and manufacturing, which traditionally provided employment to large numbers of low-skilled workers. While high-skill jobs are increasing, the rate of upskilling the workforce is insufficient to meet the rising demand for technologically proficient workers. As a result, many workers find themselves unable to transition to new roles, exacerbating unemployment and underemployment.

#### **3.2 Income Inequality and Disparities**

India has one of the highest levels of income inequality in Asia, and this inequality continues to deepen. According to Oxfam's 2024 report, the wealthiest 1% of the population owns more than four times the combined wealth of the bottom 50%. Despite strong GDP growth, the benefits of economic expansion have been unevenly distributed, with a significant portion of the population not experiencing the improvements in income and living standards that should accompany such growth.

#### **Rural-Urban Divide**

The disparity between urban and rural areas is one of the most glaring examples of inequality

in India. Urban centers such as Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore have seen rapid development, benefiting from better infrastructure, job opportunities, and access to services like education and healthcare. In contrast, rural areas, where over 65% of the population resides, continue to struggle with inadequate infrastructure, poor access to quality healthcare and education, and limited employment opportunities. This rural-urban divide not only perpetuates income disparities but also fuels rural-to-urban migration, contributing to the growing pressures on urban infrastructure [13].

### **Gender and Caste Disparities**

Gender inequality and caste-based disparities further complicate the issue of income inequality. Women in India face significant barriers in terms of employment opportunities, pay parity, and educational access. Labor force participation rates among women remain low, and when women are employed, they often face wage discrimination. Additionally, marginalized communities, such as Dalits and Adivasis, suffer from poverty, lack of opportunities, and social exclusion. These groups experience higher rates of unemployment, lower access to education, and poorer health outcomes, all of which hinder their ability to benefit from the country's economic growth [14].

### **3.3 Infrastructure and Urbanization Challenges**

While India has made significant strides in infrastructure development, many areas, particularly rural regions, still lag far behind. Rapid urbanization is placing immense pressure on cities, leading to overcrowding, traffic congestion, inadequate housing, and poor sanitation.

### **Transportation and Connectivity**

A lack of modern transportation infrastructure, especially in rural areas, hampers economic development. While India has launched

ambitious programs like the Bharat Mala project, aimed at improving road connectivity, the implementation has been slow due to funding constraints, land acquisition challenges, and logistical bottlenecks. Improved transportation networks are crucial for connecting rural areas to economic hubs, facilitating trade, and providing access to essential services.

### **Smart Cities Mission**

India's Smart Cities Mission, launched to modernize urban infrastructure, aims to improve livability through better planning, transportation, water supply, and digital infrastructure. However, progress has been uneven, and only a small fraction of the 100 cities targeted under this initiative have shown tangible improvements. The slow pace of implementation is often attributed to a lack of funding, bureaucratic inefficiency, and coordination issues between central and local governments.

### **3.4 Environmental Sustainability**

India's rapid economic growth has come at a significant cost to the environment. Industrialization, urbanization, and the reliance on fossil fuels for energy have led to widespread environmental degradation, including deforestation, air and water pollution, and loss of biodiversity.

### **Climate Change Impact**

India is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, which has resulted in erratic rainfall patterns, more frequent and severe floods, droughts, and heatwaves. These climate-related events disproportionately affect rural areas, especially farmers who rely on predictable weather patterns for their livelihoods. The agricultural sector, already struggling with low productivity, faces additional threats from climate change, exacerbating food insecurity and poverty in rural regions [15].

### **Renewable Energy Transition**

India has made significant strides in its transition to renewable energy. The country has set ambitious goals, including achieving 500 GW of renewable energy capacity by 2030. Solar and wind energy sectors have seen rapid growth, driven by government policies and investments. However, challenges remain, including issues related to grid stability, the financial viability of renewable projects, and the acquisition of land for large-scale renewable energy installations. While the renewable energy transition is critical for India's environmental sustainability, achieving these goals requires overcoming logistical and financial obstacles.

### 3.5 Social Welfare and Health

India's social welfare programs, while extensive, are often plagued by inefficiencies in implementation and distribution. While schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) aim to provide social security and healthcare to the most vulnerable populations, gaps in

like Ayushman Bharat, which aims to provide health insurance to over 100 million low-income families, are critical steps toward improving healthcare access, but the implementation has been uneven, and many beneficiaries still struggle to access quality care.

### Education and Skill Development

India's education system has seen significant reforms, including the introduction of the New Education Policy (2020), which aims to modernize the education system and increase access to vocational training. However, there is still a significant gap between the skills that the education system provides and the demands of the labor market. Rural youth, in particular, lack access to quality education and vocational training programs, making it difficult for them to compete in the increasingly skill-based job market. Closing this skills gap is crucial for ensuring that India's demographic dividend translates into sustainable economic growth[17].

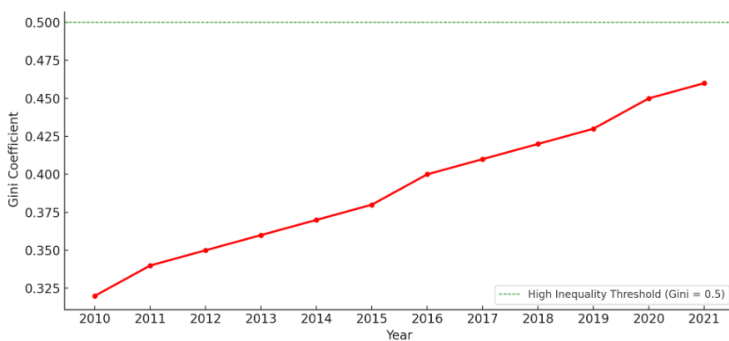


Fig 2 GDP per capita vs Gini coefficient.

These challenges in employment, income inequality, infrastructure, environmental sustainability, and social welfare reflect the complexity of balancing rapid economic growth with inclusive and sustainable development. Addressing these challenges requires targeted policy interventions, improved governance, and a focus on long-term, equitable development strategies.

### 4. Policy Initiatives and Their Efficacy

India has implemented several policy initiatives in recent years aimed at addressing the various economic and developmental challenges discussed above. These initiatives span a range of areas including industrial growth, self-reliance, environmental sustainability, and social welfare. However, the effectiveness of these policies in achieving their stated goals

execution prevent these programs from achieving their full potential [16].

### Healthcare Accessibility

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the deep disparities in India's healthcare system. Urban areas, particularly in metropolitan cities, have access to modern healthcare facilities, while rural regions remain underserved. This lack of access to healthcare exacerbates health outcomes for rural populations, particularly for women, children, and the elderly. Initiatives

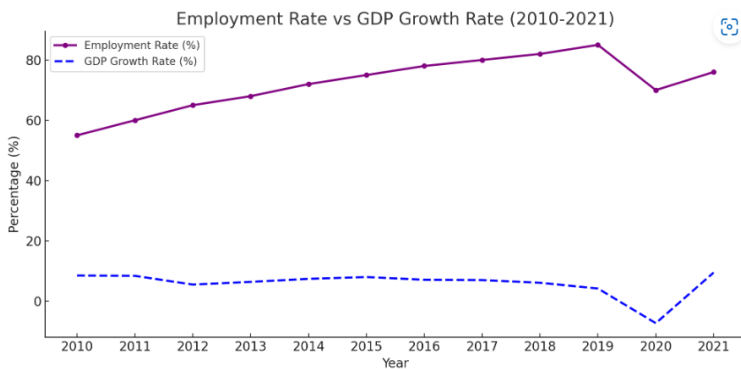
has been mixed, with both successes and limitations.

### Make in India

Launched in 2014, the Make in India initiative was designed to transform India into a global manufacturing hub, encourage foreign investment, and generate employment. The policy sought to foster industrial growth in key sectors such as automobiles, electronics, defense, and pharmaceuticals, with the goal of increasing manufacturing's contribution to GDP from around 16% to 25%.

#### Efficacy:

While make in India has successfully attracted significant foreign direct investment (FDI), particularly in the automotive and electronics sectors, its broader goals of boosting domestic manufacturing and job creation have not been fully realized. Structural issues in the manufacturing sector—such as poor infrastructure, complex regulatory frameworks, and labor market inefficiencies—



have hindered the initiative's progress. Furthermore, India's manufacturing sector continues to face stiff competition from countries like China, which have more established manufacturing ecosystems. As a result, while the initiative has spurred some growth, it has not been able to substantially boost India's industrial base or create the large number of jobs originally envisioned.

### Atmanirbhar Bharat

The Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-Reliant India) campaign, launched in 2020, is aimed at promoting self-reliance through a combination of policy reforms, stimulus packages, and incentives for local manufacturing. The program focuses on sectors such as defense, electronics, and pharmaceuticals, and seeks to reduce India's dependency on imports, particularly from China. The initiative also includes measures to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which form the backbone of India's economy.

#### Efficacy:

In the short term, Atmanirbhar Bharat has provided much-needed support to domestic industries, particularly during the economic disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Stimulus packages and production-linked incentive (PLI) schemes have helped local manufacturers by providing financial incentives for increasing production capacity. However, the long-term success of the initiative remains uncertain. India's domestic industries face significant challenges in scaling up to meet global competition, particularly in sectors like electronics, where supply chains are heavily reliant on imported components. To achieve sustained growth and self-reliance, India will need to address structural issues such as poor infrastructure, high logistics costs, and regulatory hurdles that continue to hamper industrial growth.

Fig 3 Employment rate vs GDP rate in India

### Green Growth Initiatives

India has demonstrated a strong commitment to environmental sustainability through various green growth initiatives. The National Solar Mission, part of the National Action Plan on Climate Change, aims to promote solar energy production and achieve an ambitious target of 100 GW of solar energy capacity by 2022. Additionally, India's climate action plan under the Paris Agreement includes targets for



reducing the carbon intensity of the economy, increasing the share of renewable energy, and expanding forest cover.

**Efficacy:**

India has made significant progress in expanding its renewable energy capacity, particularly in solar and wind energy. As of 2023, India's renewable energy capacity stood at approximately 175 GW, with solar energy accounting for a substantial portion of this growth. The National Solar Mission has been a major driver of this expansion, supported by policy measures such as feed-in tariffs, subsidies, and incentives for solar energy producers. India's efforts to transition away from coal and other fossil fuels have also been bolstered by international partnerships and financing for green projects.

However, there are still challenges to be addressed. Achieving the government's ambitious target of 500 GW of renewable energy capacity by 2030 will require substantial investments in grid infrastructure to ensure stability and reliability. Additionally, issues such as land acquisition for large-scale renewable projects, financing challenges for smaller developers, and delays in policy implementation have slowed progress in some areas. More robust financial support and streamlined execution processes are needed to meet these targets and ensure that India's green growth initiatives can contribute effectively to both economic growth and environmental sustainability.

**Skill India and New Education Policy (NEP) 2020**

The Skill India initiative, launched in 2015, aims to upskill India's workforce to meet the demands of a rapidly changing economy. This includes improving vocational training and providing opportunities for continuous learning in sectors like manufacturing, IT, and healthcare. Complementing this initiative, the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to overhaul the education system by promoting

multidisciplinary learning, improving access to education, and fostering innovation and critical thinking [18].

**Efficacy:**

While Skill India has made some progress in providing vocational training to millions of people, the scale of the initiative has not matched the growing demand for skilled workers. The skills gap remains significant, particularly in rural areas, where access to quality training programs is limited. Many sectors, such as manufacturing and IT, are still experiencing shortages of qualified professionals, particularly in high-skill roles. Furthermore, many of the jobs being created in these sectors require specialized technical knowledge, which is not adequately addressed by current vocational training programs.

The NEP 2020 has been widely praised for its ambitious vision of transforming India's education system, particularly through its emphasis on digital learning, vocational training, and early childhood education. However, effective implementation of the policy remains a challenge, especially in under-resourced rural areas. There is also a need for greater investment in teacher training, infrastructure, and access to technology to ensure that the policy's goals are met [19].

**National Health Mission and Ayushman Bharat**

The National Health Mission (NHM) and Ayushman Bharat are flagship initiatives aimed at improving healthcare access, particularly for vulnerable populations. Ayushman Bharat seeks to provide health insurance coverage to over 500 million people, making it one of the largest healthcare programs in the world [20].

**Efficacy:**

The Ayushman Bharat scheme has been a game changer in terms of providing financial protection to low-income families, covering the cost of hospital care for millions of people. The introduction of health and wellness centres under this initiative has also improved access

to primary healthcare in rural areas. However, the healthcare system continues to face challenges in terms of infrastructure, availability of healthcare professionals, and the quality of care in public hospitals. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the gaps in India's healthcare infrastructure, particularly in rural areas where access to critical care facilities is limited. Greater investment in healthcare infrastructure, capacity building, and the training of healthcare workers is required to ensure that these initiatives can be fully effective [23-22]. While India's policy initiatives have been ambitious and well-targeted, their effectiveness has been hindered by structural challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, regulatory inefficiencies, and insufficient investment in key areas like education and healthcare. To ensure that these policies translate into sustained and inclusive development, there is a need for stronger execution, better governance, and a long-term vision that balances economic growth with

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#### 5. Conclusion

India's economic growth trajectory is indeed impressive, but it faces significant challenges in ensuring that this growth is inclusive and sustainable. Issues such as employment generation, income inequality, environmental sustainability, infrastructure deficits, and social welfare need urgent attention through targeted and efficient policy measures. Growth that benefits all sections of society must be driven by a focus on human development—particularly in education, healthcare, and skill-building. For long-term prosperity, India's future economic strategies must integrate environmental resilience and social equity, fostering a holistic development model that uplifts all citizens and creates a sustainable, equitable future.

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