

The Ford Foundation and India's Planning Commission

by Nikhil Menon

University of Notre Dame



© 2021 by Nikhil Menon



Abstract

I consulted the records of the Ford Foundation at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) in January 2015 as part of research for my dissertation titled “Planned Democracy: Development, Citizenship, and the Practices of Planning in Independent India, c. 1947–1966.” My research at the RAC focused on the Ford Foundation’s grants towards certain projects in India. These included ones supporting research on development, the training of economists, and the funding of a computer center at the Planning Commission. These archives offered me new insights into the depth of the Ford Foundation’s involvement in postcolonial India’s early experiments in economic development. They were especially useful in throwing light on how non-government institutions partnered with the Indian state in its quest to ramp up its research and data capacities.

The Ford Foundation and India's Planning Commission

Development has been a theme in Indian economic history for close to a century and half. As several scholars have noted, since the late nineteenth century, the Indian anti-colonial nationalist critique of the British Empire revolved around development. The colonial state was attacked not just for being a foreign power, but also for undermining the development of the Indian economy. Over the course of the early twentieth century, this discourse on development became a crucial component of the Indian National Congress' platform. In the inter-war years, the institutional form this took was the National Planning Committee—created by the then Congress President Subhas Chandra Bose, and led by future Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Inspired by the experiments in state-led economic planning in different parts of the world (the Bolshevik Soviet Union and the New Deal America, among others) the National Planning Committee sought to conduct studies on different aspects of the Indian economy and chart the course for planned development in a politically independent future.

My dissertation, “Planned Democracy: Development, Citizenship, and the Practices of Planning in Independent India, c. 1947–1966,” studies how planning and development shaped the Indian state. From 1950, the Planning Commission of India negotiated an unlikely marriage between parliamentary democracy and centralized economic planning—precisely when the Cold War pitted them as fundamentally incompatible. My research argues that India's Five Year Plans were more than a means of regulating an economy; planning was also an expansive project to shape the nature of Indian democracy and society in the aftermath of colonialism. Planning was simultaneously a technocratic exercise in directing the economy, a means of modern state building, and an attempt at state-directed social transformation. This dissertation examines India's experience with economic planning through the frames of technology and social science on the one hand, and the political projects of citizenship and nation building on the other. Establishing a planned economy required certain technologies and social-scientific capacities.

India's "democratic planning" approach, however, also necessitated governmental efforts to draw citizens into the planning project—educating them about it to build "plan-consciousness," and eliciting their support in implementation. Anchored in the subcontinent, my study situates India within global post-war debates about development and maps transnational flows of ideas, individuals, and institutions between India, the United States, Europe, and the Soviet Union. It places South Asia within the Cold War context, and links this experience with patterns of development in the Global South.

As part of my research, on planning and the Indian state in the postcolonial period, I looked to the archival collections of the Rockefeller Archive Center in Sleepy Hollow, New York. More specifically, I was interested in the records of the Ford Foundation, and those of the organization's highly influential representative in India, Douglas Ensminger. As the work of scholars such as Corinna Unger and Nicole Sackley have made clear, the Ford Foundation played an important role in India's development exercise. There has been debate over what the global role of philanthropic organizations in "Third World" countries, like the activities of the Ford Foundation in India. Did the foundations simply represent American foreign policy interests; a way to battle a rising tide of communism through battling hunger and poverty in regions that might otherwise "go red"? Or were they more independent agents who promoted certain social scientific ideologies through their research programs and funding? While my research does not directly engage with these questions, they remained at the background during my archival research. The Cold War, anti-communism, development economics, and modernization theory all influenced the nature of the Ford Foundation's activities in India. And independent India was fertile terrain for the work of the Ford Foundation. As Nicole Sackley has pointed out, the New Delhi office was the Ford Foundation's first field office and, in the mid-century decades, nowhere was its overseas footprint greater than in India. Partly, this was due to its poverty and need for resources. As Corinna Unger has argued, India "became a test case for solving the interrelated problems of hunger, population growth, and poverty that characterized the "Third World" at large."¹ But it was also due to the nature of its national leadership, with Jawaharlal Nehru at its helm; one who privileged technocratic expertise.

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru sought out the Ford Foundation's assistance in development in 1951. This resulted in an exploratory summer visit to India by Paul Hoffman, president of the Ford Foundation. A formal agreement between government and foundation followed early the next year, committing the Ford Foundation's resources to the rural sphere—community development and agrarian extension (projects the American government was also investing in). The Community Development program and rural reconstruction were perhaps the arena in which the Ford Foundation's New Delhi Office invested the most. Douglas Ensminger, the Ford Foundation's long-serving India representative, wrote that community development was:

for the physical and psychological transformation of a depressed and tradition-bound rural society. These ends were to be sought through work to increase villagers' agricultural productivity, raise their incomes and living levels, and create health, educational, and institutional services. Some 300 million villagers were to be the direct participants and beneficiaries, and all India would profit.²

In 1966, despite lackluster performance, he retained that optimism, describing it as “offering great promise of democracy taking roots in Indian villages.”³ Over the subsequent years, the Ford Foundation added public administration, urban planning, family planning, and the training of economists to its India portfolio.

During my brief archival stay at the Rockefeller Archive Center, I concentrated my search on the Ford Foundation's grants towards specific projects. These included grants funding research and economists' training (especially in planning techniques), and the funding of a computer center at the Planning Commission in New Delhi. In 1957, The Ford Foundation made the first of multiple grants to MIT's Center for International Studies (CENIS) for research on social and economic development in India.⁴ Directed by Max F. Millikan, the program paid for international experts to conduct research in India on the country's economic development, and trained Indian economists and bureaucrats at the Center for International Studies. Its objectives were to learn more about the nature of development and modernization, and assist Indian planners by making research expertise available and helping augment domestic research capacities. The CENIS

projects launched joint research projects with the Planning Commission, the Institute for Economic Growth, and the Indian Statistical Institute. It also led to a fund for the expansion of research capacities on social and economic development at four institutions—the Delhi School of Economics, the National Council of Applied Economic Research, the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, and the Indian Statistical Institute.

Among the various programs that the Ford Foundation funded, one that caught my attention related to computers and computer training. Computers had been brought to India in the 1950s—when it was still a new, rare, and enormously expensive technology—in order to deal with the data requirements of centralized planning. In the 1960s, Indian technocrats and planners, like P.C. Mahalanobis and Tarlok Singh, were requesting from the Ford Foundation to make a grant of digital computers. After much lobbying, computing facilities (consisting of IBM 1620 machines) were finally granted to the Program Evaluation Organization of the Planning Commission, the Delhi School of Economics, the Institute of Agricultural Research Statistics, and the University of Bombay.⁵ Apart from setting up the Planning Commission's Computer Centre in 1965, Ford Foundation grants also enabled officers in the Computer Centre to participate in both local and international computer-training programs. For example, B. S. Chanda, the deputy director of the Computer Centre, was sent to the United States for several months to train at universities like MIT, Stanford University, and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, alongside government institutions such as the US Bureau of Census, the US Department of Agriculture, and the US Department of Commerce.

The time I spent at the Rockefeller Archive Center with the Ford Foundation records offered me new insights into just how deeply involved this philanthropy was in postcolonial India's early experiments in economic development. It was especially useful in throwing light on how non-government institutions partnered with the Indian state in its quest to ramp up its capacities in research and computation.

¹ Corinna R. Unger, "Towards global equilibrium: American foundations and Indian modernization, 1950s to 1970s," *Journal of Global History* (2011) 6, p. 131.

² Douglas Ensminger, "Faith in the People," March 1964, Catalogued Reports, 017741, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC).

³ Douglas Ensminger, The Ford Foundation Overseas Development Self-Study of the India Program, 1966, Catalogued Report, 002348, Ford Foundation Records, RAC.

⁴ Microfilm Reels 2522 and 3224, Grant 05700408, Ford Foundation Records, RAC.

⁵ Computer Installations for New Delhi Area, Catalogued Reports, 017762, Ford Foundation Records, RAC.