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Promising or Perfunctory? Assessing India's Achievement of Sustainable Development Goals

A recent report of the NITI Aayog, an economic advisory body of the Government of India, states that India's composite score for achieving SDGs has improved from 57 in 2018 to 71 in 2023-24. It applauds the 'significant progress' in reducing poverty, promoting decent work, economic growth, and climate action. Besides, the report highlights 'substantial progress' in other areas such as providing clean water, sanitation, and good health and well-being. A slew of welfare schemes unveiled by the Indian government seems to lend credence to these claims. The dismal ground realities, however, tell a different story. Dispassionate studies from Harvard University and other institutions have debunked India's assertion that it is on target to meet the SDGs by 2030. A detailed analysis of the 17 SGD metrics in India's 707 districts reveals gaping lacunae, half-hearted implementation of government schemes, rampant corruption, and spotty success stories. More than 75 percent of districts lag in crucial SDG indices like poverty, child marriage, domestic violence, and so on. Thus, bureaucratic exaggerations and statistical manipulations aside, India's achievements are overshadowed by staggering levels of inequality, unemployment, the emergence of precarious gig work, and limited access to decent education and healthcare. Hyper nationalistic overtones in education and social discourse, the wilful economic disenfranchisement of minorities, and the immiseration of the agrarian sector further discredit the government's hyperbolic optimism.

Based on a detailed, critical examination of India's achievements and aberrations regarding SDGs, I posit that these goals will remain illusory if India pursues precarious forms of development and ignores fostering human capabilities. A genuine political agenda committed to realizing the SDGs must prioritize dismantling the debilitating ideological framework legitimizing elitist development that makes no difference in the lives of a billion Indians. Concomitantly, it must pursue inclusive growth, invigorate the rule of law, and target the empowerment of marginalized groups.