

4.2 Interplay of Culture and Data in Targeted Policy Making

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Abstract

This article begins with delineating the rise of data-based policy making, particularly in India. It highlights the limitations of relying exclusively on quantitative, aggregated data—especially the neglect of cultural factors that shape behaviour, social norms and policy outcomes. The paper argues for integrating cultural context into evidence-based policymaking and analyses the complex and reciprocal relationship between culture and data. Through illustrative examples from India, it demonstrates how similar datasets can mask divergent cultural realities and how culturally sensitive approaches can strengthen policy efficacy. Using a qualitative and interpretive methodological approach, the study combines (a) a conceptual analysis of culture and data within governance frameworks, (b) a comparative case examination of alcohol prohibition outcomes in Gujarat and Bihar, and (c) interpretive analysis of demographic datasets such as Census 2011 to highlight how similar data patterns can mask divergent cultural realities. It further draws on documented field experiences and secondary literature to enumerate the reciprocal relationship between culture and data. The article concludes by advocating for localised, mixed-method policy design that combines quantitative and qualitative insights for more inclusive governance.

Keywords

Evidence-Based Policy Making, Data-Driven Governance, Cultural Analytics, Public Administration, Localised Interventions, Inclusive Governance, Behavioural Insights

Introduction: The Upsurge of Data-Centric Governance

The 21st century brought with it the ever-widening data revolution. Its divergent connotations are still evolving. The large corpus of empirical data and available tools for data collection and analysis is changing the ways knowledge is produced. (Weinberg, 2013; Meter and Schroeder, 2015). This has a profound impact on governance structures worldwide. Such a shift is particularly visible in a country like India which is making huge strides in its journey of digital revolution and transformation, through its robust digital public infrastructure.

Built upon this architecture, administration is increasingly moving towards data-driven service delivery. Examples include the upcoming Census, various reports and indices published by NITI Ayog, e-Shram database etc. This is touted as an essential step towards increasing transparency, administrative efficiency and accountability, effectively leading to good governance towards a Viksit Bharat.

The utility of such evidence-based policy making is unquestionable. However, such broad-based data collection overlooks the nuances hiding beneath them. One such aspect is that of ‘culture’.

Culture: The Missing Layer in Data Analysis

Culture is the ‘complex whole of shared beliefs, customs, arts, and social behaviours that characterize a particular group or society. It encompasses both tangible aspects like material possessions and intangible ones like knowledge, values, and traditions. Culture is learned and passed down through generations, shaping how people live, think, and interact with one another.’

In a highly diverse society like India cultural underpinning of data becomes all the more important. This is so, because macro-data analysis doesn’t account for the causal behavioural trends. Even if sometimes it does, it doesn’t account for the differences and diversity of such trends. This leads to uniform policies divorced from cultural realities, thereby limiting its overall impact.

The Utility of Cultural Context: A Comparative Analyses

An appropriate example of the same would be the contrast in the results of a similar policy effort aiming at alcohol prohibition, in Gujarat and Bihar. While in Gujarat, prohibition efforts were largely successful due to historical reasons and aversive behavioural tendencies of the people towards alcohol, reinforcing policy actions. On the other hand, the evidential data of Gujarat’s success led Bihar to adopt the same policy, whilst accounting for its own social realities. Such an adoption couldn’t replicate the same success as the cultural base was missing, leading to policy failure. Data from one context cannot be transplanted into another without cultural analysis. This explains the significance of accounting cultural factors in evidence-based policy making.

Interpreting Data Through a Cultural Lens

Apart from the shortcomings of culture-data divorce, there’s also a lot of merit in their interplay. Culture in India’s context signifies diversity in terms of practices. This in turn highlights diversity in data sets collected and the need for differential analysis.

Take for instance, the 2011 Census Data which shows that some tribal areas have higher or balanced gender ratio resembling the ratio in some non-tribal areas. The data is similar, but reasons differ. Among the tribal groups, reasons can vary from lower son meta preference, greater gender equity in inheritance roles, lower access to sex selective technology etc. However, in non-tribal districts the balanced female ratio could be due to skewed migration patterns, better enforcement of sex selective laws etc. Without cultural understanding one might interpret that both societies are gender progressive which might be far removed from social reality.

Therefore, identical quantitative patterns may signify divergent social realities. The interplay of culture and data is essential. Because mere data collection may not provide the whole picture unless seen through a cultural lens.

Culture and Data: The Interrelationships

The interplay of culture and data has greater connotations. It has a role in:

- Selection/omission of data
- In defining our tools and methodologies for data collection
- Interpretation of that data

This is the very reason why some societies categorise identity while collecting data on the basis of clan or tribe while some on the basis of religion or caste. In fact, in some tribal societies land ownership records are based on the community and not individuals. Such an intricate relationship is bound to have culturally determined impacts on the policy made through such data collection.

The relation between data and culture is mutualistic. As much as culture should corroborate data, even data can be used for cultural documentation and preservation, both having profound impact on policy making. A term widely recognised as ‘cultural analytics’ (Lev Manovich 2017). The policy of targeted cultural preservation can have data led efforts. It is the very basis of the *Gyan Bharatam Mission*, trying to preserve cultural identity through the use of evolving technology for institutionalising cultural data.

Culturally Sensitive Policymaking: Evidence from Practise

The benefits of integrating cultural insights into policymaking became evident during the COVID vaccination campaigns in India. Initially vaccine hesitancy was visible in certain regions of Haryana. As a result, the administration appointed local vaccine ambassadors drawn from among the socially prestigious people of the society leading to more than 10% increase in vaccine adoption. This shows the

success of culturally aligned policy making corroborated by numerical outcomes.

However, one needs to be cautious. Data can have a ‘cultural bias’ specially algorithmically enabled data which is slowly gaining traction in an AI driven world. This is particularly evident in technologies like facial recognition which can have biases against particular race, region, gender etc. Therefore holistically inclusive data sets which are culturally sensitive can be a solution for such policy incentives. AI can in turn be used for furthering such action as well. Building AI models on local and diverse data sets instead of westernised uniform models can be an apt example of the same. For furthering such a goal, AI can be used for translating, interpreting and analysing data from various languages in a linguistically diverse region like India to have a broad data set on which Large Language Models can be built for various policy interventions. *IndiaAI Mission* can integrate such an aspect.

Toward Localized and Mixed-Method Policy Design- a Way Forward

Data remains indispensable, but it should be as inclusive as possible and must cater to the cultural sensitivities of the populace to counter such a bias. Broad trends based on data are important, but for more targeted policy making, we need localised data and localised interventions. Qualitative and quantitative policy making should go hand in hand.

It is for this very reason that administrators must not lose touch with the general public. Interaction with the people or the ‘*Janapada*’ as *Kautilya* puts it in his *Arthashastra* is of utmost importance for an administrator. In Chapter XXXV, *Kautilya* gives a detailed description of how revenue collectors and spies have an indispensable role in getting to understand the real problem of the people based on ground reality. The same lessons we must apply today.

Administrators must increase their understanding of local problems, culturally embedded practices and localised solutions as much as possible. This is a true form of sustainable development. They must delve into cultural study of the various regions wherever the policy is targeted. They must also keep an open mind towards cultural insights in the form of traditional indigenous knowledge for inclusive governance.

Conclusion

The interplay between culture and data is fundamental to designing targeted and effective public policies. Data provides scale, measurability, and structure, while culture offers essential context for interpretation and implementation. Policies rooted in both dimensions—qualitative and quantitative—are more likely to achieve meaningful outcomes. An integrated approach embodies the principles of

a *Bhartiya* model of inclusive development and strengthens the foundations of culturally informed governance.

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Author's Profile

Ms. Ayushi Thakur is an Officer Trainee of the Indian Revenue Service (Income Tax), 2025 batch, who has undergone the Special Foundation Course at the National Communications Academy – Finance (NCA-F), Ghitori, New Delhi. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from Miranda House, University of Delhi, and has additionally completed a diploma in *Women Empowerment and Development*, reflecting her longstanding engagement with gender issues and social equity.

She was awarded the 'Best Intern' under the Government of India's Swachh Bharat Summer Internship programme, a recognition of her initiative, leadership, and commitment to community-oriented work. Her interests lie in governance and public policy, with a particular focus on integrating ground realities and societal nuances into institutional decision-making.

A keen observer with a creative bent of mind, she seeks to blend policy thinking with grassroots understanding. Her article reflects this vision—emphasizing holistic, people-centric administration and the importance of aligning public policy with lived social experiences.