

## BEYOND GDP:

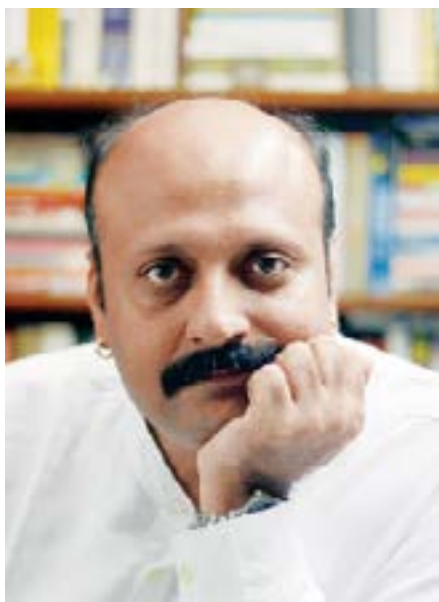
# Why Social Progress Will Decide India's Future



Clockwise from the left: Amit Kapoor  
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**T**HE ECONOMIC SURVEY 2025-26 marks a significant moment in how India understands its place in a rapidly

changing world, amidst geopolitical tensions, trade and tariff uncertainties, climate stress and swift technological advancements. It reflects a broader understanding of development in which economic growth and social progress are not parallel tracks. They are mutually reinforcing elements of a single system, shaped by the interaction of state setting direction, markets allocating effort, and society providing legitimacy, a dynamic that has historically enabled progress from early settlements to modern economies.



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### Improving Fast Enough?

The recent Global Social Progress Index, released in 2026 by Social Imperative and measuring 171 countries, showed that nearly a third recorded a decline in social progress over the past year, highlighting how fragile progress in well-being related to social development has become amid global uncertainty.

Against this backdrop, India's continued improvement, even at a lower rate, stands out. This is why India's performance in the recently released Social Progress Index, a comprehensive tool that measures social progress independently of GDP, matters more than ever.

Between 2021 and 2025, India's Social Progress Index score increased by 1.5 points, indicating a slowdown from the 8.49-point rise seen in the previous decade, 2011-2022. Yet, in a global context where the performance of advanced economies

### The Social Progress Index

As the world's fourth-largest economy, India must navigate a much more fragmented global economy than it has ever faced. This era is not merely about producing more but about strengthening the social foundations that allow growth to be sustained and shared across the country. As acknowledged by European Commission President Ursula von Der Leyen, "when India succeeds, the world is more stable, prosperous and secure." This observation itself carries an important implication: India's success will not be solely judged by its headline IMF growth rates. But by how effectively that high growth is reflected in economic opportunities and in the country's prosperity levels, which indicate whether the growth translates into improved quality of life and social well-being.

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Photograph by Manoejp7



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is declining or stagnant, India's rise matters.

India remains among the 36 economies that continue to make progress, albeit at a slower pace. The challenge, therefore, today is not whether India is advancing on social progress but whether it is improving fast enough on the dimensions to match its ambition of becoming a developed economy and meeting the Sustainable Development Goals of 2030.

### **A Crucial Distinction**

The SPI makes a crucial distinction between an economy's performance, which is especially important when a country's performance needs to be understood in relation to its stage of development. Countries with simi-

lar GDP per capita levels often show markedly different social progress outcomes in improving well-being. Therefore, making a clear point in the report that economic growth is an important driver of social progress, but it is not a destiny.

### **India's Strongest Pillars**

India's overall score is 58.79 out of 100, and a global rank of 109 out of 171; it performs in line with what might be expected at its income level, measured by GDP per capita PPP of \$9,817. Its strongest pillars remain basic human needs, with the country scoring 72.31, driven by relatively high performance on indicators for housing, safety, and medical care.

The transition challenge becomes evident in the foundations of wellbe-

ing pillar, where India scores 54.72 and ranks 125th out of 171, with environmental quality emerging as the most significant constraint. A low score of 38.56 on the environment indicator places India near the bottom globally, despite improvements in basic education and information and communication indicators.

### **Air Pollution**

The low performance on environmental outcomes is driven by poor performance on particulate matter pollution, outdoor air pollution and lead exposure, which repeatedly reflect the well-documented and current lived realities of Indian cities, where air pollution has become a binding constraint on further social progress, particularly in metropoli-

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### Climate Vulnerabilities

Air pollution is only the most visible expression of the current stress on

India’s environment. While cities suffer from hazardous air quality, climate vulnerabilities are not stopping; they are unfolding simultaneously.

In early 2026, parts of the western Himalayas remained snow-free through January for the first time in decades. Scientists have issued a warning that Himalayan peaks such as Tungnath in Uttarakhand’s Garhwal remained snow-free throughout January, marking the first time this has happened since systematic observations started in 1985.

This has implications for the region’s ecology and water systems. Together, these trends show why India’s low Environmental Quality score on the Social Progress Index reflects not just one issue but a growing set of ecological pressures that affect the living conditions of millions across

covering all states and more than 700 districts.

### Swachh Bharat Mission

The Social Progress Index report 2022 also highlights visible improvements in the basic human needs dimension, with increased access to sanitation under the Swachh Bharat Mission reflected in better sanitation coverage.

Similarly, the report notes that although most states and Union territories have performed well in water and sanitation due to concerted efforts under the Jal Jeevan Mission, there remains room for further improvement across other dimen-

sions.

India’s future will be shaped not by the speed of its GDP growth but by the resilience and strength of its social outcomes. Till then, the shared prosperity goal of India will remain an unfinished business in its tryst to become a developed economy in 2047. **BW**



Photograph by Harshvardhan Roy

the country.

### Promising Future

The next chapter of India’s story will be promising because it is standing still while continuing to improve, even as global peers falter. India is also among the few countries that have equipped its decision-makers with the necessary tools and data to guide subnational social progress since 2017.

It is among the few countries globally which also measure social progress at the state and district level,

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