



"Fostering Trust, Securing Borders is Essential for Impactful Governance Amid International Challenges"

Dr Nivedita Haran (PhD)
Former IAS Officer

Tech Innovation and Self-Reliance: Ex-IAS Officer's Formula for Socio-Economically-Effective Governance

Intro: This week on Socio-economic voices, **former IAS officer Dr. Nivedita Haran**, who has a vast expertise in governance and societal betterment, offers deep insights into India's governance challenges and opportunities in a comprehensive interview to **senior journalist Mahima Sharma**. From addressing security concerns in troubled regions like the North-East and Naxal-affected areas to fostering trust and harmony along international borders, she emphasises the critical role of public participation and the need for adaptive governance to tackle emerging global challenges. Speaking to Indiastat, her keen focus remains on collaboration, innovation, and accountability, reflecting a nuanced understanding of the complexities facing India in the 21st century.

MS: What are the key challenges facing the Indian government in ensuring effective governance especially in the North East and similar trouble torn Naxal-lands? And what measures can be taken to address each of these two key issues?

NH: Let me start with the North-East since I have some recent first-hand experience there: I was among the experts advising and assisting an Apex Court Committee set up to suggest the action needed to be taken to bring Manipur back to a state of normalcy. There had resulted in a breakdown in services, administration and most seriously security structure. **It is not a simple matter when arms and ammunition get looted from the security forces in thousands and lakhs respectively. It is evident that the problem is not a mere law and order one, if it were so the police and the para military forces would be capable of handling it. The problem pertains to cross-border smuggling of drugs, arms and humans.**

Let us understand that not every country in the region or outside is happy to see India grow and prosper. **So we need to protect and seal our borders with utmost priority. Second, poor or inept land administration is often at the root of many of the problems in the above-mentioned regions. So, the land laws need to be based on the needs of a secular democratic society and enforced strictly and uniformly.** Similar solutions will emerge for every strife-torn region but will need to be handled with alacrity so that the problems do not get deep-rooted that then weaken the bedrock of our societal structure.

MS: What governance measures are needed in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh amidst China's persistent border militarisation? How can trust-building and infrastructure development be prioritised, and what's the timeline for implementation?

NH: In order to allow day-to-day administration to function and to bring in a semblance of good and impactful governance, peace and harmony within and along the international borders is a must. We need to accept that trust-deficit with our neighbours is a given. For each country their national interest comes first and to protect their interest

they could even do illegal underhand activities. So just as in personal life no country should be trusted implicitly. The best lesson can be found in Kautilya's Arthashastra. And development of our country and improving the quality of life of our citizens is possible only when our borders are reasonably secure. So our top-most priority needs to be to secure our borders that include good hardware-software, infrastructure and trained manpower. For me the target year was yesterday. But I am neither from the professional forces nor a diplomat who would be better placed to answer this question.

MS: In your opinion, what role can public participation and civil society play in improving governance practices in India in such regions as stated above?

NH: In these regions the public and all other non-state actors play a dual role: they perform their civic duties such as protecting the public services and keeping them well-maintained; in addition they also need to ensure that if anything untoward comes to their notice from across the border they bring it to the notice of the authorities. Patriotism and security of their own country should come first and all else is secondary.

MS: In your opinion, what should the India government do for the next decade to adapt their governance structures to effectively address emerging global challenges such as climate change, cybersecurity threats, and pandemics?

NH: Let me deal with all these challenges one by one:

Climate change - The graph on use of renewable energy needs to go up and up with geometric progression to catch up on the time we have already lost. The tendency to rely on reports and submitted figures should stop, **emphasis should be on actual execution and impact**. Regrettably, there has been a trend among our technocrats to submit reports that may not accurately reflect the ground reality. There is a need to discourage such practices, promoting transparency and accuracy in reporting, or the culprits need to be caught and exposed. The emphasis should be on actual implementation of different facets of activities that can arrest or reduce the speed of climate change in every sector, viz., energy, transportation, agriculture, industry, conservation of public lands and others.

Cybersecurity threats - This is to be taken very seriously. India is fortunate to have trained professionals who are often poached upon by other countries. **With cooperation from the private sector the government needs to stay a step ahead of such threat-producers.**

Pandemics - India did reasonably well in handling the COVID19 situation created by the recent pandemic. Two areas where we could have done better are:

- a. **Better coordination between the state and the centre in handling issues** such as the severe impact faced by the migrant workers; their large-scale unplanned movement was unwarranted and the states proved to be totally incompetent in handling it (the labour departments displays total incompetence and deserve to be blamed);
- b. **Though the CoWin App was a hit, the collection and collation of data was not done systematically**, as a result we lost the opportunity to benefit from some good epidemiological analysis and studies that could be of immense value in future.

MS: How can India collaborate with global partners to adopt best practices in governance, and global supply chains to address both local challenges and contribute to global initiatives by 2030?

We as a nation need to realise that **no best practices adopted from outside can work in total**, they need to be suitably adapted to the location. Also there are **many practices that exist in our own country that we need to revive**, these can prove to be extremely efficacious especially since they are local-based and tried and tested.

I can give a very good example: every religious place in the south had a system for water harvesting but the practice died out and the water tanks were filled up illegally over time. A pond close to the Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Thiruvananthapuram was assigned on lease to a Trust run by the family of an ex-Chief Secretary. The Trust filled up the pond and started renting out the space for exhibitions in violation of the lease conditions. As Revenue Secretary when I cancelled the lease ordering resumption of the land the violators went upto the Supreme Court but fortunately lost the case. The argument that the pond was the catchment for rainwater around the temple that prevented flash floods in that part of the state capital was thankfully accepted. There are many such examples but both the government and the public need to be aware and conscious of their responsibilities.

MS: How can India enhance collaboration with global law enforcement and judicial bodies to combat transnational crimes like human trafficking, drug smuggling, and cyber fraud by 2030?

NH: Better security on our borders, sealing our borders are the obvious replies. But let's remember that when a country develops, all children go to school, the youth find gainful employment, have pucca roofs over their heads, have access to clean drinking water, electricity and a transportation system with good health services, the temptation to indulge in illegal activities will reduce.

This is especially relevant for India with our high demographic dividend. Unfortunately we have a surfeit of statutes and often poor or half-hearted enforcements. With my experience in the UN, I can say with confidence that such preponderance of statutes as well as the wide chasm between acts and rules on the one hand and their application on the other is not uncommon especially in developing countries. Action by the government to weed out the statutes that have become anachronistic in an independent country and to update them is action in the right direction.

MS: How can India accelerate technology exchange and capacity-building for implementing projects in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and digital connectivity, fostering global development partnerships by 2035?

NH: Until recently project implementation was our weakest link, there was absence of time-scheduling, ensuring good project design, good quality of work and better maintenance post-construction. Execution has definitely improved of late. But there remains room for improvement.

Each person engaged in a project should put in their best and take pride in their contribution; at the same time they should be accountable if anything is sub-par. Also laying emphasis on self-reliance is very relevant. After all, a country that is humungous in size with the largest population also boasts of the largest number of trained professionals that are no less than their counterparts elsewhere in designing, manufacturing, servicing or managing. **So the need is to give our own country-persons a chance.** This can take India to it's pinnacle of glory.

MS: What's your take on social media regulations for better governance, curbing rumors and chaos? What swift measures are needed in India to prevent socio-economic disruption?

NH: Social media can be a double-edged sword: while it provides a great platform for quick dissemination it can also be a tool for rumour-mongers. This needs to be curbed through regulations that are strictly enforced. We need to use social media for sharing information and alerts (in a disaster situation), generating awareness, removing data disparity, and others. Any misuse should be strictly dealt with with strong punitive action.

MS: How can Artificial Intelligence and such innovations be leveraged to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of law enforcement processes in the country?

NH: Innovations can be the force multipliers for better governance. We are fortunate to be living in times when IT is at its peak. I would recommend anyone interested in governance to read Yuval Noah Harari's 21 Lessons for the 21st Century.

A good example of innovations is the application of AI and BDA in land administration that can make land data accurate and tamper-proof. Some work is on in this regard and I am engaged with a few. Our litmus test should always remain: will the application improve the system? Will it simplify the processes and make life simpler for the common man? **A word of caution: In our hurry to adopt these innovations let us not create more avenues for corrupt practices! But a detailed explanation to that I will keep for another occasion.**

About Dr Nivedita Haran

She is a PhD and a retired IAS officer, who is now engaged in various activities related to land administration, good governance, education, public health, disaster management and climate change among others.

About the Interviewer

Mahima Sharma is an Independent Journalist based in Delhi NCR. She has been in the field of TV, Print & Online Journalism since 2005 and previously an additional three years in allied media. In her span of work she has been associated with CNN-News18, ANI - Asian News International (A collaboration with Reuters), Voice of India, Hindustan Times and various other top media brands of their times. In recent times, she has diversified her work as a Digital Media Marketing Consultant & Content Strategist as well. Starting March 2021, she is also a pan-India Entrepreneurship Education Mentor at Women Will - An Entrepreneurship Program by Google in Collaboration with SHEROES. Mahima can be reached at media@indiastat.com

Disclaimer : The opinions expressed within this interview are the personal opinions of the interviewee. The facts and opinions appearing in the answers do not reflect the views of Indiastat or the interviewer. Indiastat does not hold any responsibility or liability for the same.

INDIASTAT INITIATIVES

indiastatdistricts

A storehouse of socio-economic statistical of 620 districts. A cluster of 11 associate websites

indiastatelections

Provides election data for all 543 parliamentary and 4120 state assembly constituencies

indiastatpublications

A collection of election and reference books in print, ebook & web based access formats

indiastatmedia

Provides infographics and short-videos on socio-economic and electoral topics

indiastatpro

An e-resource providing socio-economic statistical information about India, its states, sectors, regions, and districts.

indiastatfacts

A one-stop-app for all who are craving for the latest economic facts and figures of India.

indiastatedu

One-of-a-kind online learning platform offering specialised courses and also providing interactive learning.

24 years of serving socio-economic and electoral research fraternity in india and abroad

© Datanet India Pvt. Ltd.