

# THE QUEST FOR 'HAPPINESS' IN THE VIKSIT BHARAT ODYSSEY

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'The need to include social indicators for development becomes more pertinent as GDP estimates fail to consider life's human and social aspects' | Photo Credit: ANI

Viksit Bharat has now been formally launched. The idea of making India a developed nation by 2047, the 100th year of its Independence, sounds exciting. This goal looks achievable, given the pace with which the country is moving ahead. This moment also gives us an opportunity to assess the idea of development intended. The focus and priorities in the choice of development planning are crucial and complex. In Viksit Bharat, economic development is overemphasised. But post-developmentalists argue that this is a Euro-centric notion of development which reflects the interests of its practitioners.

The aspects included in Viksit Bharat are structural transformation; organising labour markets; increasing competitiveness; improving financial and social inclusion; governance reforms, and seizing opportunities in the Green Revolution. Aspiring to claim the title of being the world's largest economy will not fulfil every desire and ambition this country holds dear. The need for material development can be accepted, but this will be one of many things India will aspire for by 2047. Critics of development have consistently raised concerns about the conventional models of economic growth, challenging the contentious notions surrounding modernity and progress. The current idea of Viksit Bharat needs to be reimaged to assess what other aspects of development would assume importance for India.

Instead of 'Viksit Bharat', the theme ought to be 'Happy India-Developed India' (Khushhal Bharat-Viksit Bharat). Happiness ought to be the central pursuit in this journey. Without achieving happiness, development has no meaning. Ironically, the nations have developed, but people are not happy. Rich nations are not essentially happy nations. Wealthy nations have only performed on GDP and per capita income but have failed miserably in the context of social and psychological well-being indicators. This development scheme conveniently overlooks mental health and wellness. The World Happiness Report 2023 shows many developed nations have poor happiness markers. Some nations have attained both in a balanced way. India's case is also crucial because it is ranked 126 out of 137 countries despite being the fifth-largest economy. The curious question would be whether India will have a better rank in the happiness index in the years to come. Development and the Viksit Bharat agenda will remain a dream if we fail to imagine how to rise in the happiness index.

Happiness measures have already become the goals of public policy in many countries. Happiness is no longer a subjective matter. Since its inception in 2012, the World Happiness Report has devised a robust method to measure and calculate it. The happiness matrix includes six variables: GDP per capita; healthy life expectancy at birth; generosity; social support; freedom to make life choices, and perception of corruption. The Happiness Report of 2023 placed extra emphasis on trust and benevolence in crisis situations such as COVID-19.

Lara B. Akinin, one of the co-authors of the Happiness Report 2023, has said, “We see those various forms of everyday kindness, such as helping a stranger, donating to charity, and volunteering, are above pre-pandemic levels.” The report found that despite the pandemic, economic crisis, and personal losses, acts of kindness have increased globally. The report also highlighted the importance of social connections and relationships in contributing to happiness and well-being.

According to the report’s parameters, Finland, Denmark, Iceland and the Netherlands are the happiest countries. These countries achieved development not at the cost of social disruption. Instead, they have built up social connections and support systems.

A happiness-induced development model for India is highly pertinent as we are significantly governed by social relationships and cultural mandates. On the contrary, the current model of mere economic development is highly disruptive to our social order. This form of development leads to disorders and crime. All aspects of life in this development cycle do not change simultaneously, creating imbalances and contradictions. Such things are visible in our society, where industrial and economic developments are changing alarmingly, but quality aspects of life continue to lag.

The need to include social indicators for development becomes more pertinent as GDP estimates fail to consider life’s human and social aspects. The European Commission’s focus is also moving beyond GDP, shifting to a measurement of economic performance and social progress. Specific indices already developed could make the agenda for Viksit Bharat@2047 more inclusive and comprehensive. For instance, a weightage to the Human Development Index, which consists of life expectancy, educational attainment, and income level, could be considered. Further, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development in 1970 created a Social Development Index with 16 core indicators could be another inclusion.

Similarly, the World Bank’s Environmentally Sustainable Development Division has developed a ‘Green Index’ that measures a nation’s wealth by incorporating three components: produced assets, natural resources and human resources. An International Human Suffering Index also measures the country on different parameters of human suffering. In conceiving a national vision for development, indices such as the Global Innovation Index, Rule of Law Index, Poverty Index, Corruption Perceptions Index, Gender Equality Index, and World Press Freedom Index will be pretty significant to give effect to the idea of a happy India, revisiting the pursuit of a developed India as Happy-India will be pivotal in Viksit Bharat’s journey.

***G.S. Bajpai is Vice-Chancellor, National Law University Delhi. The views expressed are personal***

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