

Ep 341: The Steady Determination of Yamini Aiyar from The Seen and...

Summary

The key idea of the video is that improving the Indian state and bringing about social change requires nurturing the idea of citizenship, embracing cultural diversity, addressing policy challenges, and building sustainable institutions.

- - [00:00](#) □ Yamini Aiyar actively works to reform the Indian state, shaped by childhood experiences and political events, leading to a career in the NGO sector, reflecting on self-discovery and parenting approaches.
 - Yamini Aiyar recognizes the faults of the Indian state and actively engages in the hard work of reforming it, rather than condemning it from a distance.
 - Childhood experiences, including friendships, travels, and political events, shaped the speaker's identity and political awareness, leading to their participation in protests and their understanding of being a diverse Indian.
 - Growing up in a privileged but sheltered environment, the speaker gradually realized the complexity of the real world and the illiberal nature of Indian society, which was shaped by conversations, exposure to different parts of India, and the questioning of their own beliefs.
 - Yamini Aiyar's developing conception of herself and her career path was influenced by her parents' storytelling, her curiosity to explore different fields, her mother's reinvention, her interest in social change and transformation, and the opportunities that emerged in Delhi during the 1990s, ultimately leading her to pursue a degree in philosophy, sociology, and a career in the NGO sector.
 - The speaker discusses the concept of forming oneself based on validation from others and the distinction between thin desires (mimetic desires) and thick desires (intrinsic desires), reflecting on their own journey of self-discovery and rebellion.
 - The speaker reflects on the different approaches to parenting their older and younger children, with the older one being encouraged to study while the younger one is left to absorb information and become clever.
- - [33:02](#) □ The speaker reflects on their journey of self-discovery, studying social and political sciences, working with NGOs, and emphasizing the importance of improving the state to make a practical difference at scale.
 - The speaker discusses their journey of self-discovery and finding their sense of purpose, starting from their rebellious nature in school to eventually finding fulfillment and affirmation in the professional world.
 - The speaker struggled with underconfidence but became passionate about studying social and political sciences, navigating a new cultural context, and developing analytical skills to understand and make sense of real-world transformations.
 - The speaker reflects on her journey of working with NGOs in India, specifically focusing on the self-help group movement and the empowerment it brings to women, while also highlighting the changing landscape of India and the role of the state in people's lives.
 - The speaker's curiosity about the role of government in rural India led them to pursue a career in development studies, with a focus on understanding the limitations of NGOs and the potential for

social transformation through the state.

- The speaker discusses different approaches to solving problems, such as through markets, the state, or NGOs, and emphasizes the importance of improving the state to make a practical difference at scale, while also highlighting the limitations of conventional frameworks and the need for personal discovery and resistance to fit into any particular orthodoxy.
- The speaker emphasizes the importance of the state in delivering public goods and enabling the market to function effectively, while also recognizing the need to check and balance the state's power and address its potential for misuse.

• [01:07:24](#) □ The speaker discusses the shift in perception of the state in India towards poverty alleviation, the role of citizen voice in shaping the state, and the importance of citizen activism in bringing about social change.

- The speaker discusses the shift in the perception of the state in India, highlighting the need for a strong state that focuses on poverty alleviation rather than a weak state that hinders progress, and explores the changing global approach to development and the role of institutions in defining the state's responsibilities.
- The social movements in India recognized the need for the state to fulfill its responsibilities towards citizens and advocated for socio-economic rights, leading to a shift in the governance and accountability of the state towards a more citizen-centric approach.
- Citizen voice plays a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of the state, and there is a consensus on the need for citizen-led checks and balances for governments to deliver effectively.
- The speaker discusses the importance of analyzing and understanding societal conditions and actions in order to make sense of events and create effective governance frameworks.
- The speaker discusses the shift from a "myob" mentality to a citizenship mentality in India, where people are still largely seen as subjects of the state rather than citizens, and questions whether the aspiration for citizenship is merely a framing done by elites or if there are signs of it happening on the ground.
- The speaker discusses the expectations of social change placed on the state by the Constitution and argues that while the state may not be able to bring about deep social change, democracy provides the space for dialogue with society and the framing of the social contract, emphasizing the importance of citizen activism and placing claims on the state.

• [01:38:33](#) □ The speaker emphasizes the need to nurture the idea of citizenship outside of elections, embrace cultural diversity, understand state-society dynamics, consider design principles in policy decisions, and address larger issues like pollution and climate change.

- The act of voting is deeply ingrained in Indian society, despite the disregard for electoral outcomes, and there is a need to nurture the idea of citizenship outside of elections and debate the broader aspects of governance and the state.
- The speaker acknowledges the contradictions and challenges of the Indian state, but believes that keeping the conversation of citizenship alive is the only way to find a settlement and build a genuinely democratic society that nurtures tolerance.
- The speaker discusses the importance of embracing the diverse cultural influences in India and the need for a normative framework to address societal inequalities and the role of the state in creating equitable opportunities.
- The speaker explores the reasons behind the repeated failures of the state and emphasizes the importance of understanding the complex dynamics of state-society interactions and social structures in order to achieve equitable outcomes and improve accountability.

- The speaker discusses the importance of considering design principles and their interaction with real-world context when making policy decisions, using the example of the right to education and the compromises made in implementing it.
- The state's focus on incentivizing electric vehicles without considering the larger urbanization trajectory and infrastructure needs does not effectively address the issues of pollution, climate change, and energy transitions.

•

[02:08:56](#) □ Society should find alternative ways to achieve better education as the absence of political ownership and jostling of ideas in education reform has led to broken policies, while Yamini Aiyar emphasizes the importance of using privilege to contribute to India's transformative moment.

- The absence of political ownership and the jostling of ideas in education reform has led to broken and confused policies, and instead of relying on the state, society should find alternative ways to achieve better education.
- Yamini Ayer enjoys unwinding by watching silly TV shows, spending time with friends, and exploring her city with her children before they reach their teenage years.
- As we age, we become more patient and grounded, but still maintain a hunger for achievement and a willingness to adapt, although there may be concerns about flexibility and the desire to reinvent oneself.
- Yamini Aiyar discusses her deep connection and sense of purpose in working in India, despite the challenges, and emphasizes the importance of using privilege to contribute to the country's transformative moment.
- The speaker discusses the importance of intentionality in shaping one's life and the balance between professional growth and personal life, emphasizing the diverse opportunities for exploration and learning in their current role.
- Yamini Aiyar discusses her journey of joining a think tank, the experiences and adventures she had, and the challenges of leading and nurturing an environment for ideas to flourish.

•

[02:44:27](#) □ The speaker discusses the challenges and importance of integrating intellectual and policy spaces, maintaining core values, fostering collaboration, and addressing big questions in public policy.

- The speaker discusses the institutional transformation and the integration of intellectual and policy spaces with the space of action, as witnessed through their experience at CPR and influenced by the work of Pratham and the ASER Center.
- The speaker discusses the challenges of balancing the public and private aspects of an institution, the need for long-term thinking in policy making, the struggle for autonomy while maintaining academic freedom, and the tension between decentralization and maintaining a cohesive identity.
- The speaker discusses the changing relationship between the state and citizens in India, the role of public policy in building discourse, the tension between being part of the discourse and having a seat at the table, and the importance of a multi-disciplinary approach to policy-making.
- Maintaining core values and fostering cross-disciplinary collaboration in an institutional context is challenging due to decentralized structures and conflicting incentives, but it is essential for fostering creativity and excellence.
- The speaker emphasizes the importance of creating spaces for conversation and coordination in order to achieve structural reform and highlights the drawbacks of hyper-specialization in academia.
- The speaker discusses the tension between broad thinking and hyper-specialization in the policy world, emphasizing the importance of collaboration and the need for analytical tools to

address big questions in public policy.

•

[03:12:44](#) □ The speaker emphasizes the importance of journalists and policy professionals in shaping norms and values, discusses the challenges faced by their organization, the engagement of Indian think tanks with the state, the need for rigorous public communication, the creation of long-term institutions of excellence, and the role of international and Indian philanthropy in supporting these institutions.

- The speaker discusses the importance of journalists and public policy professionals in shaping norms and values, engaging with the public, and building institutions, while also expressing hope for the hunger to learn among young people in India, but expresses despair over the politics of the day and the challenges faced by their organization.
- Policy research and think tanks in India engage with the state to either encourage it to step aside or to improve itself, and while India lacks the revolving door phenomenon seen in US think tanks, it does have a constant engagement with a wide community and seeks diverse perspectives through committees, research commissions, and outsourcing, although this outsourcing may lead to a hollowing out of the state.
- The speaker discusses the importance of maintaining rigorous public communication and debate in the face of quick branding and PR tactics, emphasizing the need to delve into the complexities of policy-making and engage with the details of the state.
- The speaker discusses the core principles and challenges of creating long-term institutions of excellence, including attracting talent, negotiating grants, and navigating government rules and non-state funding, with examples of international philanthropic institutions and Indian philanthropists playing a crucial role in supporting and sustaining these institutions.
- International philanthropists, particularly those from Silicon Valley, have shifted their focus from supporting institutions to supporting projects and ideas, leading to the availability of project funds for initiatives like accountability, climate, and urban issues, while Indian philanthropy is still navigating its role in supporting institutions and generating knowledge.
- Investing in institutions that prioritize autonomy, academic freedom, and excellence is crucial for India's progress, as society must value knowledge generation, contributions to public discourse, and long-term engagement with policy free from political agendas and external influences.

•

[03:36:09](#) □ Yamini Aiyar discusses the challenges of fundraising and building sustainable institutions, the need for decentralization in the Indian education system, addressing cultural and organizational aspects for state capacity building, and the importance of patience and persistence in creating impact.

- Fundraising and building sustainable institutions have been major challenges for Yamini Aiyar, as she believes that funding should focus on strengthening the institutional backbone rather than individual projects, and that research plays a crucial role in shaping policy and promoting critical engagement.
- The lack of information and trust in the Indian education system hinders the ability of local governments to make effective plans and address issues such as school maintenance, highlighting the need for decentralization and engagement with local officials.
- The state's lack of trust in its own lower officers and its disempowering internal hierarchy hinder its ability to effectively function and fulfill its purpose, highlighting the need to address cultural and organizational aspects rather than solely focusing on rules and incentives for state capacity building.
- The speaker discusses the need for the Indian state to address structural issues, engage with politics, build consensus, and

develop bottom-up solutions in order to improve state capacity and effectiveness.

- Young people interested in policy and solving important problems should immerse themselves in the real world, gain diverse perspectives, recognize the public nature of their work, be open to observation and learning, and approach their work with curiosity and a constant search for knowledge.
- The speaker emphasizes the importance of patience and persistence in creating impact, finding satisfaction in seeding ideas and building legitimacy, and recommends books and TV shows that explore important contemporary stories about India.

Key Insights

State-Society Interactions and Governance

- □ Growing up in a tumultuous time in India, Yamini Aiyar's experiences during the 1984 riots and witnessing political changes shaped her awareness of her identity as an Indian with diverse cultural backgrounds.
- □ Growing up in a diverse and questioning environment, Aiyar's exposure to different parts of India and conversations with peers shaped her confidence in her own views and instilled a sense of pride in the country's diversity.
- □ Conversations with women in rural India revealed the central role of the state in their lives, highlighting the importance of understanding the impact of government policies on marginalized communities.
- □ Aiyar believes in the significance of better navigation of the state and the governance question, recognizing the need to check and balance the state's power while acknowledging the limits and potential distortions it can have on markets.
- □ The engagement of citizens and the state is crucial in poverty alleviation, with the state's responsibility and citizens' active claim making playing a central role in governance and accountability.
- □ The idea of citizen voice and the relationship between politics and bureaucracy crystallized during the World Bank's world development report, leading to a rethinking of the social contract embedded in ideas of democracy.
- □ The importance of understanding the conditions under which actions take place and how societies function in order to make sense of events and create effective policies.
- □ The speaker suggests that the state plays a central role in building equitable opportunities and overcoming societal categories such as gender, religion, and economic well-being, but questions why the state often fails to effectively achieve these goals.
- □ The speaker questions why the state repeatedly fails and seeks to understand the complex dynamics of state-society interactions and social structures that shape institutions.
- □ Aiyar highlights the importance of elites staying in India and using their privilege to participate in shaping society and seeking answers to the country's big questions, rather than seeking alternative options abroad.

Personal and Professional Development

- □ A pivotal moment for Yamini Aiyar was navigating a completely different cultural context in the late 1990s, where computers were just emerging and she had to learn to navigate on her own, sparking her passion for learning and understanding change.
- □ Yamini Aiyar describes her work at the think tank as a "think/do tank," highlighting the importance of actively working with people to make a difference in society.
- □ Policy should be shaped by a multidisciplinary approach, involving

economists, sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, and environmentalists, to ensure inclusivity and effectiveness.

- □ The importance of interdisciplinary thinking: "You're not looking at a narrow Economist point of view or a sociologist's point of view or whatever but you are accepting that the world is complex. Everything is interlinked one way of looking at anything one hammer for any particular nail will just be insufficient."

Democracy and Citizenship

- □ The shift from a "myobob mentality" to a citizenship mentality is an aspirational framing that aims to make people demand their rights as citizens, rather than relying on handouts from the state.
- □ The act of voting is deeply ingrained in Indian society, despite the social disregard for the outcomes of democracy, and it is a core aspect of citizenship.
- □ The project of democracy in India is audacious and aspirational, despite its distortions and challenges, and the only way to navigate its contradictions is through the practice of citizenship and nurturing the kernel of tolerance.

Q&A

Q: How do Indian think tanks engage with the state, and what are the potential consequences of outsourcing policy research to these institutions?

A: Indian think tanks engage with the state in various ways, either to encourage the state to step aside or to help improve its functioning. Unlike the revolving door phenomenon seen in US think tanks, Indian think tanks engage with a wide community and seek diverse perspectives through committees, research commissions, and outsourcing. Outsourcing policy research to these institutions can have potential consequences.

One consequence is the potential hollowing out of the state. While outsourcing allows for diverse perspectives and expertise to be brought into policy-making, an over-reliance on external think tanks may lead to a decline in the state's own capacity to conduct research and analyze policy issues. This can result in a reduced ability to understand and address the unique challenges of the Indian context.

Additionally, outsourcing policy research may limit the democratic accountability of these institutions. If research and policy recommendations are predominantly influenced by external think tanks, the voices and needs of the wider public may be excluded. This can undermine the democratic principle of having policies that are responsive to the needs and aspirations of the citizens.

It is important to maintain a balance between outsourcing policy research and building internal research capacity within the state. This can ensure a diversity of perspectives while also enabling the state to retain its autonomy and accountability in policy-making processes. Collaborative partnerships between think tanks and the state, rather than complete outsourcing, can facilitate this balance and foster a more inclusive and effective policy environment.

Q: What role do journalists and policy professionals play in shaping societal norms and values in India?

A: Journalists and policy professionals play a crucial role in shaping societal norms and values in India. They are instrumental in engaging with the public, building institutions, and fostering rigorous public communication

and debate.

They contribute to shaping norms and values by investigating issues, reporting news, and providing analysis and commentary on various social, political, and economic issues. Through their work, they bring attention to important issues, shed light on diverse perspectives, and hold institutions and individuals accountable for their actions.

By delving into the complexities of policy-making and engaging with the details of the state, journalists and policy professionals enrich public discourse and contribute to the formation of informed opinions. They play a vital role in exposing corruption, advocating for social justice, and highlighting the need for equitable opportunities.

Furthermore, their engagement with the state and participation in think tanks and research organizations allow them to contribute to policy development, providing evidence-based analysis and recommendations for addressing societal challenges. Their expertise and insights help shape policy decisions and explore alternative approaches to social and governance issues.

In addition, journalists and policy professionals contribute to fostering a culture of transparency and accountability in the Indian society. Through their reporting and analysis, they help expose wrongdoing, promote ethical practices, and encourage public participation in governance.

Overall, journalists and policy professionals in India play a critical role in shaping societal norms and values by informing the public, fostering public discourse, advocating for social change, and contributing to evidence-based policy development.

Q: How did Yamini Aiyar's personal background and interests lead her to pursue a career in the NGO sector?

A: Yamini Aiyar's personal background and interests played a crucial role in leading her to pursue a career in the NGO sector. Growing up in a privileged but sheltered environment, Aiyar gradually discovered the complexities of the real world and the illiberal nature of Indian society. Her childhood experiences, including friendships, travels, and exposure to political events, shaped her identity and political awareness, leading her to actively engage in reforming the Indian state instead of condemning it from a distance.

Aiyar's parents' storytelling, her curiosity to explore different fields, her interest in social change and transformation, and the opportunities that emerged in Delhi during the 1990s influenced her career path. She pursued a degree in philosophy and sociology, which served as a foundation for her later work in the NGO sector. Aiyar's journey of self-discovery and rebellion in school further solidified her passion for social and political sciences.

Moreover, Aiyar's curiosity about the role of the government in rural India drove her to pursue a career in development studies, with a specific focus on understanding the limitations of NGOs and the potential for social transformation through the state. She recognized the faults of the Indian state and actively engaged in the hard work of reforming it, rather than merely criticizing it. Her experiences and adventures while working with NGOs in India allowed her to witness the changing landscape of the country and the role of the state in people's lives.

In summary, Yamini Aiyar's personal background, including her exposure to different experiences and political events, and her interests in social change and transformation, combined with her curiosity about the role of government and her belief in reforming the state, led her to pursue a career in the NGO sector.

Q: What challenges are faced when creating and sustaining long-term institutions of excellence, and how do philanthropy organizations support these efforts?

A: Creating and sustaining long-term institutions of excellence faces several challenges. One challenge is attracting and retaining talented individuals, which requires providing competitive compensation packages and an environment that fosters professional growth and innovation. Another challenge is negotiating grants and navigating government rules, which can be complex and time-consuming. Furthermore, maintaining autonomy and academic freedom while engaging with the state and avoiding political agendas is crucial for the long-term success of these institutions.

Philanthropy organizations play a vital role in supporting these efforts. International philanthropic institutions, particularly those from Silicon Valley, have shifted their focus from supporting institutions to supporting specific projects and ideas. This has led to the availability of project funds for initiatives like accountability, climate, and urban issues. On the other hand, Indian philanthropy is still navigating its role in supporting institutions and generating knowledge.

Philanthropic organizations provide funding to strengthen the institutional backbone of these long-term institutions, rather than focusing on individual projects. Their financial support helps build sustainable resources and infrastructure necessary for excellence. Additionally, philanthropy organizations support these institutions by promoting critical engagement, research, and knowledge generation, which in turn shapes policy and contributes to public discourse.

In essence, philanthropy organizations provide crucial financial support and promote an environment conducive to long-term success by supporting the institutional backbone, fostering critical engagement, and facilitating knowledge generation.

Q: How can conventional frameworks for problem-solving be limited, and why is resistance to orthodoxy important?

A: Conventional frameworks for problem-solving can be limited in several ways. Firstly, they often rely on established norms and orthodox approaches that may not provide the best solutions for complex and evolving challenges. These frameworks tend to reinforce existing practices without considering alternative perspectives or innovative solutions. Additionally, conventional frameworks may overlook the cultural, social, and contextual complexities of a problem, leading to a narrow and incomplete understanding of the issue at hand.

Resistance to orthodoxy is important because it allows for the exploration of new ideas, perspectives, and approaches to problem-solving. It challenges the status quo and encourages critical thinking, creativity, and innovation. By resisting orthodoxy, individuals and institutions can break free from rigid structures and embrace diversity and inclusivity in problem-solving processes. This leads to a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues and opens up possibilities for unconventional and effective solutions.

Yamini Aiyar highlights the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to policy-making, which involves economists, sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, and environmentalists. This approach challenges conventional frameworks by integrating diverse perspectives and expertise, enabling a more holistic understanding of the problem and promoting innovative solutions.

Furthermore, Aiyar emphasizes the need to engage with politics and develop bottom-up solutions to tackle issues and improve state capacity and effectiveness in India. This resistance to orthodox top-down approaches allows for the inclusion of local voices and experiences, leading to more contextually appropriate and sustainable solutions.

In summary, conventional frameworks for problem-solving can be limited due to their reliance on established norms and orthodox approaches. Resistance to orthodoxy is crucial as it encourages critical thinking, creativity, and innovation, enabling the exploration of new ideas and perspectives. By resisting orthodoxy, individuals and institutions can develop more comprehensive and effective solutions to complex challenges.

Note

- This content is generated by AI, we believe it is accurate, but we don't claim any liability of inaccuracies in the AI generated content.

Listen to the entire episode here

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cK5mDVGx_M

[Newer](#)

[Older](#)

15th August 2023

Ep #8 | WTF is Going on in the ...

12th August 2023

Ep. 41: Money in Cricket from T...

Manoj Nayak © 2022-2025

[Archive](#) [RSS feed](#) [Twitter](#) [Email](#) [QR Code](#)

Made with [Montaigne](#) and by [anton](#) 