

Numbers for a Nation: Statistics and India's Five-Year Plans

In the decade following decolonization in 1947, India witnessed an explosion of national statistics. These years saw the establishment of an unprecedented national statistical infrastructure that included the office of the Statistical Adviser to the Union Government, the Central Statistical Organisation, National Income Committees, bi-annual National Sample Surveys, and even a new bureaucracy—the Statistical Service cadre within the Indian Civil Services. This burst of national statistics in the 1950s, I argue, was a response to the Indian government's decision to centrally plan the economy through Five Year Plans. Planning required abstracting the economy quantitatively (to comprehend and intervene in it) and the development of India's national statistical infrastructure was an answer to that call.

At the heart of these developments were statistician-turned-planner P. C. Mahalanobis and his brainchild, the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) in Calcutta. My paper tracks the careers of Mahalanobis and the Indian Statistical Institute, and their involvement in India's planning process, to reveal the relationship between economic planning and national statistics. It begins by tracing Mahalanobis' ascent within Indian planning circles, questioning the widely held view that attributes this primarily to his association with Prime Minister Nehru. While this no doubt helped, I will argue that it was not as significant as other contextual developments—the rise of statistics to the status of a scientific discipline in mid-century India, ISI's involvement in establishing a national statistical infrastructure, and the transformation of ISI into the premier think-tank for planning in India. This paper demonstrates that the intimacy between economic planning and national statistics opened the door for Mahalanobis and the Indian Statistical Institute to exert an influence over economic planning, culminating in them effectively authoring the pivotal Second Five Year Plan (1956-61). More broadly, this paper suggests that these rapid statistical developments made the economy visible and coherent to the independent Indian state. By developing the instruments by which the nebulous concept of 'the economy' could be precisely measured and comprehended, national statistics provided it fixity of meaning through new numerical descriptors.