

The Role of Pressure Groups in Public Policy Formation in India

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Abstract

Pressure groups constitute an important, though often informally organised, component of democratic policy-making in India. Situated between citizens, political parties and governmental institutions, they articulate sectoral, occupational, economic and public-interest demands without ordinarily seeking direct control of political office. This paper examines the role of pressure groups in the formation of public policy in India, with particular attention to the institutional channels through which they operate, their changing strategies, and the democratic tensions associated with unequal access to decision-makers. The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive and analytical research design based entirely on secondary sources, including constitutional provisions, legislation, parliamentary material, government documents and peer-reviewed scholarship. It draws on pluralist interest-group theory, collective-action theory and an unequal-resources perspective to assess the influence of business associations, farmers' organisations, trade unions, professional bodies and civil-society movements. The analysis finds that pressure groups influence Indian public policy through pre-legislative consultation, parliamentary committees, direct representation to ministries, public campaigns, protest, litigation, media engagement and coalition-building. Cases concerning the Right to Information, Lokpal legislation and the 2020–2021 farmers' mobilisation demonstrate that organised pressure can place neglected issues on the policy agenda and, under particular political circumstances, contribute to legislative change. However, influence is highly uneven. Organised economic interests generally possess greater financial, informational and institutional resources than marginalised groups. The study concludes that pressure-group participation strengthens democratic responsiveness when accompanied by disclosure, inclusive consultation and institutional accountability, but can undermine equality in policy-making when influence operates through opaque or privileged channels.

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Introduction

Public policy in a democracy is rarely produced by elected representatives and civil servants acting in isolation. Policy-making involves continuing interaction among the state, political parties, organised interests, professional communities, social movements, citizens, courts, media organisations and other non-state actors. Pressure groups occupy a particularly significant place in this process because they seek to influence the content, timing or implementation of public decisions without normally attempting to assume governmental power themselves. Their political importance therefore lies less in electoral competition than in interest articulation, agenda-setting, representation and persuasion.

The constitutional framework of India provides significant space for collective political activity. Article 19(1) protects, among other freedoms, speech and expression, peaceful assembly and the formation of associations or unions. These freedoms create a constitutional basis for citizens to organise collectively, communicate demands and challenge governmental policies, subject to constitutionally permissible restrictions. Pressure-group politics should therefore not be treated merely as activity taking place outside the constitutional order. Much of it is part of the wider democratic process through which social demands are transmitted to the state.

Pressure groups differ from political parties in an important respect. Political parties ordinarily seek control of government through elections and develop programmes covering a broad range of public issues. Pressure groups generally concentrate on narrower sets of interests or causes. A farmers' organisation may campaign over agricultural prices and procurement; a trade union may focus on wages and labour regulation; an industry association may seek taxation or regulatory changes; and a civil-society coalition may campaign for transparency, environmental safeguards or institutional reform. Yet the dividing line is not always absolute. Pressure groups frequently cooperate with political parties, support electoral campaigns, mobilise voting constituencies or transform themselves into wider political movements.

The analytical importance of pressure groups has increased with the changing character of governance in India. Liberalisation expanded the interaction between government and private economic actors; the growth of civil society enlarged rights-based advocacy; digital communication lowered some barriers to mobilisation; public-interest litigation created additional institutional routes of influence; and parliamentary and ministerial consultations have provided organised interests with opportunities to submit evidence. At the same time, these developments have generated questions about inequality of access, corporate influence, political finance, transparency and regulatory capture.

The central research problem addressed here is therefore not simply whether pressure groups influence Indian policy. It is how, through which institutions, under what conditions and with what democratic consequences such influence is exercised. Existing research provides important studies of business lobbying, agrarian politics, anti-corruption mobilisation and rights-based advocacy,

but these areas are frequently examined separately. A broader analytical account connecting different categories of pressure groups with stages of the contemporary Indian policy process remains useful.

Accordingly, the paper pursues four objectives: to examine the conceptual and constitutional position of pressure groups in Indian democracy; to identify the principal institutional and extra-institutional channels through which organised interests influence policy; to analyse selected examples involving business, agriculture and civil-society mobilisation; and to evaluate the democratic advantages and limitations of pressure-group participation. Correspondingly, it asks four questions: How do pressure groups participate in the Indian public-policy process? Which forms of organisation and strategy appear most capable of affecting policy agendas and decisions? Under what conditions does organised mobilisation translate into policy influence? Finally, does pressure-group participation broaden democratic representation, or does unequal access allow resource-rich interests to exercise disproportionate influence?

The central argument is that pressure groups have become integral to Indian policy formation but their influence is neither uniform nor automatically democratic. Their contribution depends upon their organisational capacity, access to decision-makers, ability to generate expertise or public support, and the institutional openness of the policy process.

Literature Review

Interest-group theory has long occupied an important position in political science. Truman (1951) viewed organised groups as a normal product of complex societies in which individuals possess overlapping interests. From a pluralist perspective, political outcomes emerge through interaction and competition among multiple organised interests rather than from the unchecked authority of a single political elite. Such an interpretation gives pressure groups a democratic function: they transmit social demands to government and provide additional channels of representation between elections.

Pluralism, however, does not adequately explain why some interests are more effectively organised than others. Olson's (1965) theory of collective action demonstrated that individuals sharing a common interest do not automatically organise successfully. Large and dispersed groups face incentives to free-ride, whereas smaller groups with concentrated benefits may organise more easily. This insight is particularly relevant in India. A relatively compact industrial sector, professional association or organised occupational group may maintain permanent representation and technical expertise, while millions of citizens affected by a policy may lack comparable organisational resources.

Indian scholarship has similarly recognised that politics operates through formal institutions as well as networks of social and organised interests. Kothari's (1970) analysis of Indian politics located political mobilisation within a wider system of social cleavages, organisations, factions and bargaining. Fadia (1980) subsequently provided a specialised treatment of pressure groups in

Indian politics, drawing attention to informal political forces beyond parties and legislatures. Kochanek's (1974) study of business and politics demonstrated that business associations developed multiple routes of access to bureaucratic and political decision-makers. His later research on liberalisation argued that economic reforms altered business lobbying, encouraging more collective and specialised forms of representation by major industry associations (Kochanek, 1996).

Research on social movements further broadens the understanding of pressure-group politics. Jha's (2015) study of the Anna Hazare movement interprets anti-corruption mobilisation as an example of a pressure group seeking institutional change rather than governmental office. Parliamentary records confirm that the Standing Committee examining the Lokpal Bill in 2011 heard evidence from industry associations, rights organisations, experts and civil-society representatives, including the civil-society group associated with Anna Hazare. The eventual Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act created a statutory anti-corruption institution, although it would be simplistic to attribute the legislation entirely to one movement because the issue had a much longer legislative history.

The right-to-information movement provides another example of sustained non-state agenda-building. Relly and Pakanati (2021) emphasise collaboration among activists, journalists and civil-society organisations in constructing a rights-based information agenda. The Right to Information Act, 2005 established a statutory regime enabling citizens to seek information held by public authorities, explicitly linking access to information with transparency and accountability. Rather than viewing the legislation as a simple response to pressure, the literature suggests a longer process involving social mobilisation, advocacy, experimentation at subnational levels and institutional negotiation.

Agrarian mobilisation has generated a particularly substantial body of recent scholarship. Fadaee (2022) shows how farmers' organisations increasingly formed alliances with workers, activists, students and other political actors. Mehta and Sinha (2022) locate recent mobilisation within the longer historical evolution of agrarian populism, while Suthar and Kumar (2022) interpret the 2020–2021 mobilisation as combining traditional collective action with newer organisational and communication strategies. These studies underline that the effectiveness of pressure politics often depends on coalition-building rather than on a single organisation operating alone.

Recent scholarship has also returned to the problem of lobbying transparency. Barathi and Renganathan (2026) argue that India lacks a comprehensive statutory framework specifically regulating lobbying and call for disclosure-oriented regulation capable of distinguishing legitimate policy advocacy from opaque influence. This concern illustrates a central tension in the literature: organised participation can enrich policy with expertise and representation, but unequal resources and undisclosed relationships may simultaneously create opportunities for privileged access.

The principal gap addressed by this study lies in connecting these different bodies of scholarship within a common public-policy framework. Instead of treating business lobbying, farmers' mobilisation and civil-society advocacy as entirely separate phenomena, the present paper examines them as different forms of organised interest articulation operating at different points in the policy cycle.

Research Methodology

The study follows a qualitative, descriptive and analytical research design. It is entirely secondary-data based; no survey, interview, questionnaire or original fieldwork is claimed. The evidence consists of peer-reviewed journal literature, recognised academic books, constitutional and statutory material, parliamentary documentation and government publications.

The analytical method combines thematic analysis with limited process tracing of selected policy episodes. The cases were chosen because they illustrate different types of pressure politics rather than because they constitute a statistically representative sample. Business associations demonstrate institutionalised access and expertise-based advocacy; farmers' organisations illustrate mass mobilisation and bargaining; and transparency and anti-corruption campaigns illustrate civil-society agenda-setting and legislative advocacy.

Three theoretical perspectives guide the analysis. Pluralism provides a framework for examining interest articulation and competition. Collective-action theory helps explain why organisational capacity differs across social groups. Finally, an unequal-resources perspective is used to evaluate whether formal opportunities for consultation necessarily produce equality of political influence.

The principal methodological limitation is that influence is difficult to measure directly. Governments frequently make decisions for several reasons simultaneously. Public mobilisation, electoral incentives, administrative preferences, judicial decisions, economic conditions and party ideology can interact. Consequently, this study avoids claiming that a pressure group "caused" a policy merely because mobilisation preceded policy change. Influence is inferred cautiously from documented access, consultation, agenda-setting, changes in political responses and, where official sources explicitly acknowledge it, governmental action.

Analysis and Discussion

Pressure Groups within India's Constitutional and Institutional Policy Process

Pressure groups operate through both institutionalised and extra-institutional mechanisms. Institutional methods include submitting memoranda, participating in consultations, appearing before parliamentary committees, providing specialised information to ministries, meeting political representatives and engaging regulatory bodies. Extra-institutional strategies include demonstrations, strikes, public campaigns, petitions, media advocacy, social-media mobilisation and litigation.

India's Pre-Legislative Consultation Policy, formulated in 2014, is particularly significant because it recognises consultation as a legitimate part of legislative preparation. Government information indicates that the policy was circulated to ministries and departments for compliance, although pre-legislative consultation has not been made legally mandatory for every major legislative proposal. This distinction is important. Pressure-group access exists, but it is not guaranteed uniformly across ministries or policy areas.

Parliamentary committees create another important arena. Committees may invite experts, associations and affected stakeholders to submit views or give oral evidence. Recent committee schedules continue to show consultations with domain experts, employee associations and other stakeholders. Committees therefore provide a structured channel through which organised interests can place evidence before legislators without themselves becoming political parties.

These mechanisms complicate the idea that pressure politics is inherently informal or undesirable. Much organised representation occurs openly within official processes. The democratic question is therefore less whether organised interests should have access than whether opportunities for participation are transparent, sufficiently broad and balanced across competing groups.

Business Associations, Expertise and Policy Access

Industry associations such as the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Confederation of Indian Industry and ASSOCHAM illustrate the institutionalised end of pressure-group politics. Their influence ordinarily rests less on street mobilisation than on organisational continuity, technical expertise, economic resources and regular contact with ministries.

Kochanek's work showed that business-government relations in India developed long before liberalisation. During the heavily regulated economy, firms and associations devoted considerable attention to licences, taxation, import controls and administrative decisions. Economic liberalisation changed rather than eliminated business lobbying. Policy engagement increasingly involved sector-specific regulation, trade, investment, infrastructure, taxation, technology and global competitiveness (Kochanek, 1996).

Business associations can contribute positively to policy formation by supplying information that government agencies may not possess internally. Complex regulation in sectors such as telecommunications, manufacturing, finance or digital services requires detailed knowledge about costs, technological feasibility and market conditions. Consultation with affected industries can therefore reduce implementation errors.

Current government practice illustrates this continuing role of organised stakeholders. For example, a Ministry of Textiles consultation in April 2026 brought together more than 200 participants including state governments, industry bodies, entrepreneurs, researchers, export councils, weavers and artisans to discuss implementation of Union Budget measures. Such processes demonstrate

that organised interests can function as sources of implementation knowledge rather than merely as actors seeking private benefits.

Nevertheless, expertise and influence are not synonymous with neutrality. Industry organisations represent constituencies with material interests in regulatory outcomes. When some sectors enjoy continuous access while dispersed consumers, informal workers or smaller producers cannot participate on comparable terms, consultation may reproduce structural inequalities. The appropriate policy response is therefore not exclusion of industry but transparent disclosure, publication of submissions where feasible, plural stakeholder representation and reasoned governmental responses.

Farmers' Organisations and the Politics of Mass Mobilisation

Agrarian pressure groups reveal a different mechanism of influence. Farmers are numerous and internally differentiated by landholding, crop, region, caste, irrigation, market access and class position. Olson's collective-action problem is therefore particularly relevant: the category "farmers" does not automatically generate a unified organisation. Successful mobilisation frequently depends upon federations, regional leadership, shared policy grievances and coalition-building.

Post-independence India has witnessed numerous farmers' organisations and movements campaigning around prices, debt, electricity tariffs, procurement, trade, land and agricultural regulation. The 2018 farmers' march examined by Fadaee (2022), for instance, brought together a wide range of farmers' organisations and allied actors. The capacity to construct broader alliances transformed agrarian demands into matters of national political debate.

The 2020–2021 protests against three central farm laws demonstrate the potential of sustained pressure to affect national policy. Scholarship identifies organisational innovation, regional networks, protest camps, digital communication and coalition-building as important features of the mobilisation (Mehta & Sinha, 2022; Suthar & Kumar, 2022). The movement cannot be understood purely as spontaneous opposition. It involved sustained organisation and negotiation over many months.

The eventual policy reversal was unusually explicit. In November 2021, the Prime Minister announced the decision to withdraw the three laws. The Farm Laws Repeal Act, 2021 subsequently repealed all three statutes on 30 November 2021. A government parliamentary-session summary itself referred to protests by farmers when explaining the repeal measure. This makes the episode one of the clearest contemporary examples in which organised pressure formed part of the documented political context of legislative reversal.

Yet the case also demonstrates limits to simple causal interpretation. Electoral considerations, federal politics, regional conditions, governmental calculations and implementation difficulties may also shape responses to mobilisation. Pressure-group influence is therefore best understood

as part of a multi-causal political process. Its significance lies in changing the political costs and benefits surrounding a policy rather than exercising a formal veto.

Civil Society, Transparency and Anti-Corruption Policy

Civil-society pressure groups differ from many occupational organisations because they often claim to advocate diffuse public interests rather than the material interests of their members. Their effectiveness depends heavily on framing an issue as one of rights, accountability or justice and linking technical reform to wider public concern.

The right-to-information campaign is illustrative. Civil-society organisations, grassroots activists and journalists helped transform access to government information into a democratic-rights question. Relly and Pakanati (2021) show how collaboration and co-production among non-state actors contributed to agenda-building. The Right to Information Act, 2005 ultimately established a legal regime for citizen access to information under public authorities. The significance of the movement lies not simply in lobbying legislators but in redefining transparency as an entitlement connected to accountability.

The anti-corruption movement associated with Anna Hazare offers a second case. Large public demonstrations and extensive media attention placed the design of a national anti-corruption ombudsman at the centre of political debate in 2011. Jha (2015) treats the movement as a significant example of contemporary pressure politics. Parliamentary committee records demonstrate that civil-society representatives were directly heard during legislative scrutiny, alongside industry bodies, commissions, advocacy organisations and experts.

The eventual Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013 established the Lokpal at the Union level and provided for Lokayuktas in the states. However, the movement should not be portrayed as the sole origin of Lokpal legislation. Proposals for such an institution pre-dated the 2011 protests by decades. What the mobilisation demonstrably achieved was a dramatic intensification of agenda salience and political pressure. This distinction between agenda influence and sole legislative causation is crucial for rigorous analysis of pressure groups.

Media, Litigation and Digital Mobilisation as Indirect Channels

Pressure groups increasingly seek to influence not only policymakers directly but also the informational environment within which policy decisions are made. Media campaigns can convert a specialised dispute into a publicly visible political issue. Digital platforms have further accelerated this process by enabling rapid communication across geographically dispersed groups.

These developments lower some traditional barriers to mobilisation. Organisations with limited resources can circulate petitions, documents and campaign material at relatively low cost. Social media also makes it easier to coordinate collective action and contest official narratives. Recent farmers' movements, environmental campaigns and transparency initiatives have combined conventional organisational structures with digital communication.

At the same time, digital visibility should not be confused with policy influence. Online campaigns may produce attention without institutional access, sustained organisation or policy expertise. Digital communication can also fragment debate, intensify misinformation and privilege actors with greater communication resources. Successful pressure politics therefore continues to depend on the relationship between public mobilisation and institutional pathways such as ministries, legislatures, courts and regulatory bodies.

Litigation provides an additional indirect route. Advocacy organisations can challenge policies constitutionally and thereby influence the broader regulatory environment. The 2024 Supreme Court judgment concerning electoral bonds is relevant to the wider question of transparency and organised influence. The Court held that non-disclosure of political funding under the Electoral Bond Scheme violated citizens' right to information under Article 19(1)(a), and it also held that changes permitting unlimited corporate political funding were arbitrary. Although political finance is analytically distinct from ordinary pressure-group activity, the judgment underscores a fundamental democratic concern: policy influence becomes difficult to evaluate where relationships between economic resources and political actors remain opaque.

Democratic Contribution, Unequal Influence and the Need for Transparency

Pressure groups perform several democratic functions. They aggregate interests, supply expertise, identify implementation problems, mobilise citizens and provide channels of participation between elections. They can also represent groups whose concerns receive insufficient attention through party competition. Farmers' campaigns, workers' organisations, disability-rights groups, environmental organisations, professional associations and citizen movements may all bring specialised knowledge or neglected grievances into public debate.

Pressure groups also contribute to accountability by challenging governmental decisions. Their capacity to criticise, petition, protest and litigate prevents public policy from becoming exclusively a top-down administrative process. In this sense, organised pressure is not an aberration within democracy; it is one of the mechanisms through which democracy operates.

Yet pluralist competition does not occur on an equal playing field. Financial resources, organisational permanence, legal expertise, technical information, media access and personal networks are unevenly distributed. Large corporations and established professional organisations may be able to maintain dedicated policy teams, while unorganised workers, small farmers, migrants or marginalised communities may struggle to participate in technical consultations.

Collective-action theory reinforces this concern. Policies imposing small costs on millions of people while conferring concentrated benefits on a small organised sector may produce asymmetrical mobilisation. The beneficiaries have strong incentives to organise, whereas each individual citizen bears too small a share of the cost to justify sustained participation. Thus, the existence of many groups does not necessarily ensure political equality.

A second concern is opacity. Lobbying itself should not automatically be equated with corruption: informing policymakers, submitting policy proposals and advocating particular interests are normal democratic activities. The problem arises when the identity of those seeking influence, the interests represented or significant financial relationships remain hidden. Recent legal scholarship therefore argues for clearer regulation and disclosure of lobbying activity in India (Barathi & Renganathan, 2026).

The appropriate reform agenda is consequently one of institutionalisation rather than suppression. Pre-legislative consultation should be applied more consistently; draft laws should ordinarily allow meaningful periods for public comment; parliamentary committees should continue to hear diverse stakeholders; consultation documents and major submissions should be publicly accessible where confidentiality is not genuinely necessary; and policymakers should disclose relevant meetings or representations in high-stakes regulatory matters. Special attention is needed to include groups that lack professional lobbying capacity.

Such reforms would not eliminate differences in political power. They could, however, make influence more visible and create stronger opportunities for competing interests to be heard.

Major Findings

The analysis produces five principal findings. First, pressure groups are embedded in India's democratic and constitutional structure rather than existing entirely outside formal politics. Freedoms of speech, association and peaceful assembly provide important foundations for collective interest articulation.

Second, the methods of pressure-group influence differ sharply according to organisational resources. Business associations and professional organisations commonly rely on technical submissions and institutional access, whereas farmers' organisations and mass movements depend more heavily on mobilisation, coalition-building and political pressure. Civil-society organisations frequently combine public campaigning with legislative advocacy, research and litigation.

Third, access does not automatically translate into policy influence. Effective influence generally requires some combination of organisational continuity, policy expertise, public legitimacy, strategic alliances and favourable political circumstances.

Fourth, selected cases demonstrate meaningful agenda and policy effects. Civil-society mobilisation contributed to the public salience of transparency and anti-corruption reforms, while the 2020–2021 farmers' mobilisation formed part of the political context culminating in the repeal of three central farm laws. These cases nevertheless confirm that policy change is usually multi-causal.

Finally, pressure-group politics contains an inherent democratic tension. Organised representation can make policy more informed and responsive, yet unequal resources can permit concentrated interests to secure greater access than dispersed or marginalised citizens. Transparency, disclosure

and inclusive consultation are therefore essential if pressure-group participation is to strengthen rather than distort democratic policy-making.

Conclusion

Pressure groups have become indispensable actors in the formation and contestation of public policy in India. Their importance derives from their ability to connect social and economic interests with institutions of the state between elections. They participate in policy through formal consultation, parliamentary evidence, representations to ministries, expert knowledge, protest, public campaigns, media engagement and litigation. Their strategies vary according to organisational structure and resources, but their presence is visible across economic, agricultural, labour, professional and rights-based policy domains.

The first research question concerned how pressure groups participate in public policy. The evidence demonstrates that Indian pressure politics combines institutional and extra-institutional methods. Consultation and committee processes coexist with protest and public mobilisation rather than functioning as mutually exclusive strategies.

The second question concerned effectiveness. Groups appear most influential when organisational strength is combined with expertise, public support or electoral significance. The experience of farmers' organisations demonstrates the importance of sustained coalition-building, while business associations illustrate the advantages of institutional continuity and specialised policy knowledge.

The third question concerned the conditions under which pressure produces policy change. No universal formula exists. Political opportunity, governmental responsiveness, electoral calculations, media visibility, institutional access and the ability to sustain mobilisation all matter. This explains why some large protests have limited policy effects while relatively less visible professional groups may shape technical regulation.

The final question concerned democratic consequences. Pressure groups clearly broaden participation beyond electoral politics, but pluralism should not be romanticised. Citizens and organisations enter the policy arena with profoundly unequal financial, informational and organisational resources. The democratic legitimacy of pressure-group politics therefore depends not merely on allowing interests to organise, but on ensuring that the process of influence is visible, contestable and reasonably inclusive.

India would benefit from strengthening rather than restricting transparent interest articulation. More consistent pre-legislative consultation, broader stakeholder representation, disclosure of significant lobbying activity and stronger publication of consultation processes would help distinguish legitimate advocacy from covert influence. The goal should not be a policy system insulated from social pressure—an unrealistic and undesirable objective—but one in which competing interests can be heard under rules that preserve accountability and political equality.

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and by the difficulty of measuring informal influence empirically. Future research could therefore compare particular policy sectors, examine consultation records systematically, or analyse the relative access of corporate, occupational and marginalised groups. Such research would deepen understanding of one of the most important questions in Indian democracy: not simply who participates in policy-making, but whose participation is most likely to matter.

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