

MAKING CIVIL SERVANTS THINK LIKE A PRIME MINISTER

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Provisions related to UPSC, State PSCs and Civil Services in India, and their Role in Democracy

In early June, Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a meeting of top bureaucrats in which he flagged three key priorities — ‘Make in India’, ‘Ease of Doing Business’ and, a new priority of ‘Ease of Living’. Exhorting the Secretaries to “think of themselves as the Prime Minister”, he stressed on the need for the civil servants to break down silos, deploy Information Technology tools and make interaction with the people smoother. Though it is necessary to address these concerns, that alone will not be sufficient for India, considering the complexity inherent in a country which, while having the largest number of poor people, also aims to be a \$5 trillion economy by 2024.

Here, the role of the NITI Aayog assumes significance. The organisation, set up as a ‘think tank of the government’, is best placed to identify areas that require transformational change and can also provide a template for adoption of innovative technology for a seamless interaction among the Centre, the States, the district administrations and the citizens. Silos will be removed when each Secretary fits sectoral priorities to a framework of infrastructure, services and employment, and District Magistrates are provided specific activities for ensuring ‘ease of living’.

Five reform proposals

Here, five transformational reforms, with NITI Aayog in the lead, will be needed.

First, the ‘Agenda 2022’ of the NITI Aayog needs to focus on the policy implementation link. The Aayog is now looking at tardy execution of infrastructure projects in terms of management issues rather than structural deficiencies and the related corruption. Preventive action against increasing corruption in infrastructure projects is not the remit of the enforcement bodies alone and must also be a central concern of NITI Aayog through effective concurrent evaluation and swift action against lapses at the supervisory level.

Second, we need to increase infrastructure spending, at least doubling it from its current level, which is at about 10% of GDP. The Chinese recognised early that infrastructure is the foundation of both well-being and growth. On a per capita basis, their infrastructure spending is equal to that of European countries, two-thirds that of the U.S. and five times that of India. Infrastructure development in China peaked at 54% of GDP in 2013 and, by then, the country’s GDP was nearly \$10 trillion.

Third, we need an Intellectual Property and data analytics strategy. China, like the U.S., recognised early that data is the new oil, and restricted the entry of Amazon and Google, did not allow ride-sharing services like Uber to gain a foothold in its territory and built up applications like its indigenous search engine Baidu and the chat service WeChat. We are only now debating national ownership of public data and are yet to develop our own applications that will lead to progress in Artificial Intelligence and other technologies that will be the backbone of the fourth industrial revolution.

Fourth, we have to extend digital services to non-traditional sectors like tele-medicine, rural credit, education, retail value chains and logistics. Most importantly, we need to develop labour market information, matching skills with jobs. China’s working age population has peaked while

two-thirds of Indians are below 30 years of age, creating the potential for India to overtake the United States.

Fifth, the government should adopt a more holistic approach while embarking on development projects. Can the Jal Shakti Ministry provide piped drinking water without conservation of monsoon run-off? Doesn't the 'Smart Cities' programme need to be aligned to 'ease of living' — including issues related to provision of drinking water and sewage and waste management? Are we saving forests *for* the tribal people or *from* them? Can we mandate that half of Corporate Social Responsibility funds be spent on libraries? When it comes to education, the recently released National Education Policy does not assess why past policies were not implemented.

Military, judicial and land reform

The Prime Minister had told the Combined Commanders Conference in 2014 that the most important task was to bring about increased jointness in the defence forces, prepare them for short conflicts and seek domination of cyberspace. In 2016, China established three joint commands, developed precision anti-ship missiles and downsized the land Army. We have world-class capability in missiles, space and cyberspace, but continue to be the second-largest arms importer. India is the only BRICS nation which does not manufacture its own civil aircraft.

Another transformational change will be achieved by increasing the digitisation of land records with ownership. Doing away with the system of registration of sale deeds, instead of land titles will require legislative changes. Two-thirds of civil cases deal with inconclusive titles and boundaries and less than 5% of land is leveraged for capital, compared with 40% in the United States. Moving towards digital, GPS-based boundaries and title documents will more than double farm incomes and productivity.

Also, a comprehensive judicial reform is long overdue. Currently, the judiciary gives more emphasis to procedural rather than substantive aspects. The focus should be on forensic investigation, as half the cases end in acquittal. We need to replace the Environmental with Sustainable Development Law with a new law, doing away with the need for courts to adjudicate the trade-offs, especially in infrastructure projects.

Till the beginning of the 19th century, India was richer than China. We can take a leaf out of the Chinese strategists' play-book by using the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership to reform industry and bidding our time by downplaying military expenditure and focussing on infrastructure led-growth and well-being to double per-capita incomes by 2024.

Mukul Sanwal is a former civil servant and UN diplomat

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The Trump administration's successive punitive actions against Iran can only be interpreted as a desire for direct conflict

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