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## INNOVATING FOR INDIA A LIFE IN PUBLIC SERVICE

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India's G20 Sherpa & Ex-CEO, NITI Aayog

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# INNOVATING FOR INDIA

## A Life in Public Service

Reflecting on my journey from an inquisitive young student to a dedicated public servant committed to driving India's growth and development, I realize it began quite early in my youth. My decision to pursue public service was influenced by various factors, including my upbringing, experiences, and interactions during my formative years. Growing up in Delhi and attending Modern School, I developed a keen interest in the world around me. My parents instilled in me the values of compassion, empathy, and the importance of giving back to society. Our home was a space of exploration and curiosity, where learning about the world was encouraged, and nothing seemed impossible.

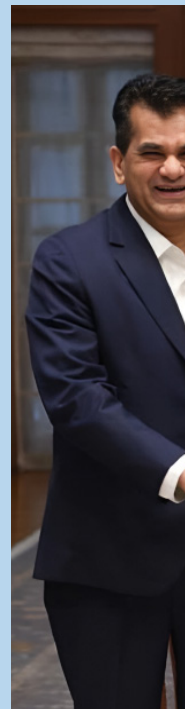
My mother was the biggest source of inspiration and motivation for me. An academician, poet, writer, Ph.D. in Political Science, Principal of a Delhi University college, Professor at BHU, and a Fulbright Scholar, she embodied the pursuit of knowledge and the impact one can have through education and dedication. I owe everything to her, as her achievements and values profoundly shaped my outlook on life and my career aspirations.

At St. Stephen's College, I pursued a degree in Economics (Hons), which provided me with analytical skills and a broader understanding of socio-economic issues. At Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), I was

immersed in an environment of intellectual fervor and academic rigor. Living on the same floor as Dr. S. Jaishankar, India's current External Affairs Minister, exemplified the caliber of JNU's cohorts. The vibrant debates, discussions, and interactions with peers from diverse backgrounds fostered critical thinking and a holistic perspective. These experiences inspired me to channel my passion for policy and governance into a career in the Indian Administrative Service, preparing me well for the challenges and responsibilities I would face in the IAS.

### Early Days in the IAS

As I began my journey as a civil servant, I experienced a mix of excitement and apprehension. Joining the Indian Administrative Service opened a world of opportunities to make a tangible difference in people's lives, but it also came with significant responsibilities. My initial days in Kerala, particularly in Tellicherry, were eye-opening. I faced unique challenges, such as navigating the complexities of local governance and cultural nuances. Despite initial disheartenment about my posting, I quickly immersed myself in the vibrant



community and dedicated myself to making a positive impact.

One of the most significant challenges early in my career involved a tragic medical emergency where a man fell into the sea and required urgent medical attention. Despite our best efforts, the individual succumbed to his injuries due to a delay in medical care. This incident led to an investigation revealing systemic issues, including malpractice and negligence by the attending physician. Despite facing accusations from the medical fraternity, I remained focused on seeking justice and preventing such incidents in the future. For me, this experience highlighted the importance of integrity, professionalism, and humility in public service.



Amitabh Kant

### Transition to National Projects – Incredible India

Transitioning from my role as Tourism Secretary in Kerala to leading national

projects like the 'Incredible India' campaign required a blend of adaptability, strategic vision, and leveraging past experiences. My tenure in Kerala provided invaluable insights into the tourism industry's intricacies and the importance of collaboration between the government and the private sector. This experience equipped me with the knowledge and skills necessary to tackle larger-scale projects at the national level.

The success of initiatives in Kerala, such as the 'God's Own Country' campaign,

demonstrated the power of innovative

marketing strategies in promoting tourism. This served as a solid foundation to build and expand my vision for promoting India as a global tourist destination. By showcasing tangible results from my work in Kerala, I gained the trust and confidence of decision-makers in the central government. I approached the 'Incredible India' campaign with the same passion, dedication, and attention to detail that characterized my efforts in Kerala. Drawing on my past experiences and applying lessons learned, I effectively led the campaign and navigated the challenges that arose.

The vision behind the 'Incredible India' campaign was inspired by a desire to showcase India's rich cultural heritage, diverse landscapes, and vibrant traditions to the world. In the wake of the global tourism crisis post-9/11, there was a pressing need to revitalize India's tourism industry and change perceptions about the country as a tourist destination.

One key strategy was to create a unified branding strategy that would convey the essence of India in a compelling and memorable way. This involved collaborating with creative agencies to develop visually stunning campaigns that captured the imagination of audiences worldwide. Despite initial resistance and skepticism, I remained certain of the power of marketing to drive tourism growth. Through strategic advocacy and persuasion, I garnered support for the campaign and secured the necessary resources to bring it to fruition.

Ultimately, the success of the 'Incredible India' campaign was a testament to the power of innovative thinking, strategic vision, and effective collaboration between government agencies, creative partners, and other stakeholders. By leveraging India's unique strengths and addressing the challenges head-on, we were able to overcome the global



tourism crisis and position India as one of the world's leading tourist destinations.

### Make in India

The 'Make in India' initiative aimed to catalyze economic growth by promoting indigenous manufacturing, attracting foreign investment, and creating job opportunities. By reducing reliance on imports and enhancing self-reliance in critical sectors, the initiative sought to create a conducive business environment. Tracking key performance indicators like Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows and job creation helped measure the initiative's success, positioning India as a globally competitive manufacturing hub.

The 'Make in India' initiative was a complex project requiring a multifaceted approach. We worked on simplifying regulatory frameworks, enhancing infrastructure, and fostering innovation. Establishing special economic zones and providing incentives for startups were among the measures that contributed to the initiative's success. Engaging with

industry leaders and maintaining an open dialogue with stakeholders were crucial for overcoming challenges and driving progress.

Building on the foundation of 'Make in India,' the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme is designed to transform India into the world's most efficient economy within five years by fostering the growth of large companies. I believe these companies play a crucial role in driving economic growth by creating backward and forward linkages with micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Such linkages enable MSMEs to increase production, generate employment, and expand business opportunities. Ensuring prompt payments to MSMEs further strengthens these relationships, fostering a supportive environment for entrepreneurship, innovation, and job creation.

The PLI scheme, offering financial incentives to promote domestic manufacturing in key sectors like electronics, pharmaceuticals, and automobiles, has already attracted significant investments from global giants such as Apple and Samsung. I am confident this initiative aims to create a more productive and competitive economy, positioning India to surpass China in efficiency. India must focus on the growth of large companies and their collaboration with MSMEs, pushing for sustainable economic growth and elevating our global economic standing.

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### Tenure at NITI Aayog

As the CEO of NITI Aayog, overseeing initiatives aimed at inclusive and equitable development was paramount. The Aspirational Districts Program (ADP) stands out as a transformative project that elevated the lives of people in 112 of the most underdeveloped districts of India. Lauded by UNDP in 2021, the program's success was achieved through a 3Cs approach: convergence, collaboration, and competition. This approach ensured a holistic effort towards upliftment, leveraging technology for real-time progress monitoring.

One of the key lessons from the ADP was the importance of data-driven decision-making. By establishing a robust framework for data collection and analysis, we identified the specific needs of each district and tailored our interventions accordingly. This improved efficiency and ensured that resources were utilized effectively. Building on the success of the ADP, the launch of the Aspirational Blocks Program further underscores our commitment to grassroots development. By empowering officials at the block level and leveraging technology for data-driven decision-making, we aim to replicate the ADP model's success in lagging blocks across the country. The ADP serves as a compelling example of how competition can foster innovation – by pitting districts against each other in a friendly race for progress, the ADP incentivizes local leaders to implement innovative solutions to uplift their communities.

Handling cross-sectoral policies required a nuanced approach. It involved bringing together diverse stakeholders, fostering collaboration, and aligning objectives towards a common goal. At NITI Aayog, we prioritized effective communication, stakeholder engagement, and leveraging technology to facilitate coordination and



implementation. By focusing on initiatives like the ADP and the Aspirational Blocks Program, we addressed regional disparities and laid the foundation for sustainable and inclusive growth. These projects exemplify the power of coordinated efforts in driving meaningful change at the grassroots level, and I am immensely proud to have been a part of their journey.

Further, I had the privilege of establishing India's National Mission on Transformative Mobility and Battery Storage, which facilitated the uptake of clean mobility and supported millions in transitioning to electric mobility, including overseeing the procurement of 5,500 E-buses. I introduced competitive federation by ranking States and Union Territories across sectors such as Ease of Doing Business, Learning and Health Outcomes, and Water Management, making these rankings transparent and publicly accessible. My work on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was extensive, developing India's first regional district SDG monitoring system, the SDG Urban Index & Dashboard, and launching the SDG India

Index and National Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). I conceptualized the USD 81 bn National Asset Monetization Pipeline, which exceeded its target in the first year, and drove the development of indices like the School Education and Quality Index (SEQI), Water Management, and Health Outcome.

I also established the Behavioral Insights Unit (BIU) and helped launch the Lifestyle For Environment (LiFE) movement, focusing on individual behavior for climate action. We also presented LiFE as one of India's key priorities at the G20, and it was mainstreamed under the Green Development Pact in the Leaders' Declaration.

Additionally, I led initiatives in Online Dispute Resolution and Easing Compliance Burden, and drove progress in sunrise sectors such as Mobile Manufacturing, Green Hydrogen, Advanced Chemistry Cell Batteries, and Electric Mobility for climate adaptation and mitigation.

Serving as Director on the Board of the National Highways Authority of India, Member of India's National Statistical Commission, Member of the Digital Communications Commission of India, and Chairman of the Executive Council of the National Institute of Labor Economics, Research and Development, among other roles, enriched my career and contributed significantly to India's development.

**At NITI Aayog, we prioritized effective communication, stakeholder engagement, and leveraging technology to facilitate coordination and implementation.**

### International Cooperation and Crises Management

The need for international cooperation was highlighted within the G20 context,



where emerging economies had to stand together as a unified bloc to advocate for their collective interests. As India's Sherpa, I recognized the importance of balancing relationships between major global powers while representing India's unique position as a bridge and peacemaker on the world stage. Emerging economies, including India, form a critical bloc within the G20, representing a significant portion of the world's population and economic output. It was essential for us to remain united and cohesive to ensure our voices were heard and our priorities addressed. By standing together, we could leverage our collective influence to push for policies and initiatives that reflected the needs and aspirations of developing nations. Advocating for environmental sustainability and social well-being was central to our approach.

Managing a national or international



crisis often requires quick thinking, decisive action, and effective negotiation skills. One such instance occurred during the final stages of preparations for the G20 Summit, where I found myself at the center of intense negotiations to finalize the summit declaration. Tensions arose over the inclusion of certain language, particularly regarding US sanctions. Through perseverance and strategic negotiation, we secured unanimous consent for the summit declaration, highlighting the importance of bold and

efficiency. The landscape of public service has transformed dramatically, now emphasizing predictability, policy consistency, and robust support for the private sector. The introduction of digital public infrastructure (DPI) has been a game-changer. Initiatives like Prime Minister Narendra Modi's direct benefit transfer using the JAM trinity (Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile) have revolutionized service delivery, ensuring that more than 90 paise of every rupee transferred from the Centre reaches the intended beneficiaries. This marks a significant improvement from the past and represents a silent revolution in public service delivery.

Looking ahead, the future of public service is likely to be driven by continued advancements in technology and a greater emphasis on capacity building. Initiatives such as Mission Karmyogi, which focuses on developing a citizen-centric civil service, are crucial. This mission aims to enhance the skills, motivation, and professionalism of civil servants across all levels, ensuring they are equipped to meet modern challenges and serve the public effectively. Furthermore, the integration of a "Whole Government" approach, where training and resources are shared across departments, is breaking down silos and fostering greater collaboration.

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assertive negotiation tactics. Prime Minister Modi's trust in our ability to navigate these challenges empowered us to pursue these tactics, ultimately leading to a successful outcome.

### Developments in the Public Service Sector

Over the years, there have been significant changes in public service, reflecting a shift from a control-oriented approach to one focused on facilitation, transparency, and

### The Future of Governance and Public Policy

- **Investing in education:** Prioritizing primary and secondary education and integrating innovation-focused curriculum and activities will nurture a future generation of innovators and problem solvers.
- **Upskilling and reskilling initiatives:** These initiatives will help the workforce thrive in an innovation-driven economy and adapt to emerging technologies and changing market demands.

- **Promoting a culture of collaboration and knowledge sharing:** Partnerships between government agencies, academia, industry, and research institutions foster an ecosystem where innovation can flourish.
- **An enabling policy environment:** Incentivizing innovation and entrepreneurship through tax incentives, research and development grants, and intellectual property protection is crucial.
- **Embracing digital transformation:** This is a key aspect of fostering innovation within public policy and administration, driving efficiency, and spurring innovation across sectors.
- **Encouraging competition:** Promoting competition among individuals, organizations, and regions creates incentives for continuous improvement and the pursuit of excellence.
- **Promoting inclusivity and diversity:** Ensuring equal access to resources and opportunities brings a broader range of perspectives and talents to the table, addressing the diverse needs of our communities.

### Mentors and Influences

Several thinkers and authors have significantly shaped my approach to leadership and policymaking, particularly through their explorations of technology and its intersection with society. Anu Bradford's "Digital Empires," Jamie Susskind's "Future Politics," and Dr. Fei-Fei Li's "The Worlds I See" have deeply influenced my views. Thinkers like Nandan Nilekani, with his work on digital identity and public policy, and Arun Maira, with his insights on governance and organizational change, have also shaped my understanding and approach to technology policy.

During the most crucial moments in my career, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been a significant mentor to me. His absolute

clarity of mind and vision coupled with his rigorous expectations have profoundly shaped my professional development. Working on initiatives like Make in India, Startup India, the Aspirational District Program in NITI, and the G20 under his guidance has taught me invaluable lessons. One of the best pieces of advice he has imparted is the importance of thoroughly understanding and effectively communicating your ideas. If he doesn't grasp a concept immediately, he will ask for further explanation until it is clear, ensuring that you, too, know your concept inside out. This process has ingrained in me the necessity of thorough preparation and clear communication.

PM Modi's approach to leadership emphasizes the impact of policies on the common man, the importance of meticulous planning to avoid failure, and the need for integration and teamwork. This multidimensional and multidisciplinary approach is something I had not encountered to such a degree in my previous roles in state and central government. Since then, there has been no looking back.

During my time as CEO at NITI Aayog in 2017, Prime Minister Modi tasked us with organizing 100 Digital Melas across 100 cities in 100 days to rapidly promote digital payments adoption. This directive has been a cornerstone of our ongoing efforts ever since – we never looked back.



To mark the African Union's  
Membership of the G20



I have also had the pleasure of working with Mr. Arun Jaitley, Ms. Nirmala Sitharaman, and Dr. S. Jaishankar, among other leaders, who have all provided invaluable insights and support, reinforcing the importance of sound leadership and clear direction in their respective fields.

These experiences have highlighted the critical role of mentorship in my career, and they shape how I approach mentoring others. I strive to offer the same clarity, rigor, and holistic perspective to those I mentor, ensuring they are well-prepared, focused on impact, encouraged to innovate, and capable of working effectively within a team.

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**Advice for the Next Generation**

I believe that the youth hold the key to global progress. India, with its young population and dynamic start-up ecosystem, is emerging as a major driver of technology and economic growth. For aspiring entrepreneurs, focusing on emerging industries poised for substantial future growth is paramount. Deep tech sectors such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and quantum computing offer opportunities to drive innovation, tackle complex challenges, and create sustainable solutions. The digital economy also presents vast entrepreneurial prospects – from the expanding realms of e-commerce and digital finance to cybersecurity and online

education, there's ample room for young innovators to disrupt traditional industries and generate new value. Additionally, sustainability and environmental conservation sectors, encompassing green technology, renewable energy, waste management, and sustainable agriculture, present promising avenues where innovative solutions can address urgent global issues like climate change and resource depletion.

Future leaders in public administration will require a robust skill set to navigate the complexities of our evolving world. Technological proficiency, particularly in AI and digital tools, is crucial, alongside essential soft skills such as empathy, effective communication, and the ability to collaborate across diverse teams. Leaders must be proactive, continually learning, and receptive to innovative approaches that drive substantial change in public policy and governance. These competencies are pivotal for making meaningful contributions to public service.

Maintaining resilience and motivation in demanding, high-stakes roles requires a blend of passion, purpose, and practical strategies. My approach involves staying optimistic about India's transformative journey. I remind myself constantly that our nation is undergoing remarkable evolution, presenting numerous opportunities to create significant impact. This sense of purpose fuels my motivation. My advice to others is to stay organized, delegate responsibilities when necessary, and never lose sight of their initial motivations.

For those aspiring to make a difference through public service, I encourage proactivity in seizing the diverse array of available opportunities today. Whether through initiatives like Mudra, SVANidhi, or pioneering ventures like Drone Didi, there are myriad pathways to contribute effectively. Keeping abreast of technological



advancements and exploring ways to harness them to improve people's lives is crucial. Identify your passions and dedicate yourself fully to them. Your commitment and innovative thinking are indispensable to India's ongoing growth and transformation. 🌟

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amitabh Kant is India's G20 Sherpa, and a distinguished and influential policymaker, celebrated for his dynamic leadership and visionary approach to economic development and public administration. With a career spanning over four decades, he has played a pivotal role in transforming India's tourism and industrial sectors, driving innovative national initiatives that have had a lasting impact on the country's growth.

A retired Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer of the Kerala cadre, Amitabh Kant has held numerous high-profile positions, including Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of NITI Aayog, Secretary of the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion, and CEO of the Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor Development Corporation. His pioneering efforts in launching and promoting initiatives such as 'Make in India,' 'Startup India,' and 'Incredible India' have earned him national and international acclaim. His educational background is equally impressive, with degrees from St. Stephen's College, Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Harvard University, and the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.

As G20 Sherpa, Amitabh Kant played a crucial role in steering the country's G20 presidency, successfully navigating complex geopolitical challenges and achieving consensus on critical global issues. His leadership during this period was marked by inclusivity, decisive action, and a commitment to showcasing India's digital and economic advancements on the global stage. He continues his role for Brazil's G20 Presidency, overseeing the transition and leading efforts to sustain cooperation among emerging markets.

Known for his clarity of vision, proactive approach, and dedication to public service, his work highlights his unwavering commitment to India's progress and development. He is the recipient of numerous awards and recognitions, and India Today's High & Mighty rankings of 2019 featured him as one of the most powerful people in India under the category of "The Supercrats – India's Top Bureaucrats." He remains a significant figure in shaping the future of India's economic and social landscape.