

NEWSMAKER/AMITABH KANT/CEO/ NITI AAYOG

# Man for all reasons

The CEO of Niti Aayog has created for himself the role of a forceful presenter of the government's positioning on key economic goals

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As extensions go, that of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Niti Aayog of Amitabh Kant did not create any ripple. An order of the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet last week extended his two-year term, due to end this February, to June 30, 2019. That it did not cause surprise shows how fluently Kant has moved into his role. Is there also something more to read in the terminal date of his term? Erstwhile Planning Commission terms were co-terminus with that of the political executive, and that of Niti Aayog would also be expected to be the same. So is this an indication that the Modi government expects to be in the chair for its full term and not call early elections as some political analysts suggest?

There is no way to detach the role of political inputs from the functioning of the top incumbents of Niti Aayog, the government's own think tank. Between them, Amitabh Kant, the CEO, Rajiv Kumar, the vice-chairman, and Bibek Debroy, member, Niti Aayog and chairman of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, are expected to be the advisor to the political executive—providing both “directional and policy inputs” as the terms of reference of the Aayog notes.

It is easy to end up replicating each other's work in this broad canvas. Kant has instead carved for himself the role of a forceful presenter of the government's positioning on key long-term economic goals. Remember this government has eschewed the practice of writing a plan document (the 12th Five-Year Plan ended in April 2017). So, there is no written template to act as guide for the government position on overlapping economic challenges. Kant has taken up some of that role of articulating the position of the state. He has a unique ability to brand the policies as marketing tools to make them appeal to investors and create support among the larger population for the goals they want to achieve. The positioning for the policies is important for results.

It helps that his designation is that of CEO, which differentiates the role from

that of the member secretary in the Planning Commission. Despite the cap of a think tank, the Aayog is meant to be an organisation that delivers actionable results even though it still does not really have administrative powers over any resources, but can only chivy the states and the central ministries along. The most visible of those that Kant steered was the state-wise Ease of Doing Business rankings. It has helped. State bureaucracies, unused to being made to compete publicly, which they perpetuate by holding the results of their policies close to their chest, suddenly found their

data held out in public to dry. Kant promises to do another of those by ranking states for their education and health. It promises to be interesting.

He has made these possible by virtue of his experience of having come up from the state within the state. As a Kerala cadre officer of the 1980 batch of the Indian Administrative Services, he scripted the “God's Own Country” campaign to make the tourism sector, considered an outlier within any state administration, a highly visible one. And that model has held steady.

Kant does not blush about the adoption

of this model to his later roles in Incredible India, when he was joint secretary, tourism, to his subsequent role as chairman & CEO, Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corporation (DMIC) and then as secretary, department of industrial policy and promotion. So even though Make in India and Startup India spanned wider spheres of infrastructure development, product enhancement and private-public partnership, the model held. Each has been deliberately positioned and branded to make them attract business interest and, consequently, become successful policy goals.

Such a visible method of functioning has its detractors, of course. As the Make in India campaign demonstrates, while it has quickly captured the imagination, success on the ground has been slow. It has been a long climb for the DMIC project too, now subsumed under the National Industrial Corridor Development and Implementation Trust. The progress has slowed due to land

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acquisition problems as a *Business Standard* report noted (<http://mybs.in/2UZVUle>). The government had sanctioned ₹4.95 billion to DMIC alone in FY17, it has sanctioned just about double the amount of ₹10.3 billion to the new trust in FY18. The money has to be divided among four corridor projects.

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You can be sure the St. Stephen's, Delhi University, and Jawaharlal Nehru University alumnus will bring a massive degree of enthusiasm to his outreach. It is his signature. It spills over to the Aayog, too, of which he is also the administrative chief. It is a much smaller organisation at 704 people, almost half the size of the Planning Commission. At his desk, where he is rarely available as the Niti Aayog is now part of the decision-making in any ministry, there is a steady stream of papers, and officers with competing agendas lining up, hours before he arrives. Kant will go through all of them and yet rarely turn away a visitor before he calls it a day.



ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY