

Rebolting the Steel Frame



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It is not feasible for India to progress through the 21st century with 19th-century administrative systems. In the last three years, several innovative measures have been launched. They signal GoI's intent to make the administrative machinery far more efficient, decisive and cohesive.

The first key reform is the shift in administrative focus from inputs and outputs to outcomes reviewed and monitored by the prime minister. Capacity, mobility, quality and safety have, for example, been identified as key outcome dimensions for road projects. In the case of railways, the key outcomes are operating ratio, passenger and freight yields, capital spending, redevelopment of railway stations and safety measures. For the first time, an outcome-based budget prepared by the Niti Aayog was presented to Parliament along with the Union Budget.

Minutes of meetings, along with clear ownership and implementation timelines, are released and followed up periodically. Outcome-based reviews have a broad sweep: 15 infrastructure and social sectors have been reviewed, covering 72% of the total budget outlay. Key decisions have also been taken post-review. It was decided, for example, to increase the modal share of railways from 33% to 35% in 2016-17 in line with the long-term goal of 50% by 2032.

The second key initiative, Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation (Pragati), is an initiative where key infrastructure and social sector projects facing bottlenecks are taken up for review at the PM's level. Pragati provides a forum for all stakeholders of key projects to voice their views, assigns clear responsibilities with strict timelines, expedites developmental projects

by bringing the Centre and states on the same platform, and brings key projects under close supervision of the highest officials.

It is also a means to break walls between different government agencies and enable best practices being shared. Since its launch, 18 Pragati meetings have been held and state projects worth over ₹8.31 lakh crore across critical infrastructure sectors have been fast-tracked across states. Besides projects, 38 flagship programmes and schemes, along with grievances of 16 ministries and departments, have been reviewed.

The third reform has been the creation of an immense sense of competitive spirit among states and districts by ranking them, and increasingly selecting them for projects through a challenge method. The 'ease of doing business' ranking of states has led them to initiate radical reforms by eliminating a vast number of rules, regulations and procedures. Competitive pressure has led to newer states like Telangana, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh making a quantum jump forward.

The ranking of districts on cleanliness under the Swachh Bharat initiative has also had a major impact, spurring change at the municipal level. The selection of cities for the Smart City programme through a challenge methodology has led cities to undertake reforms in urbanisation and implement projects by forming special purpose vehicles (SPVs) and housing all appro-

vals in the SPVs.

The fourth key reform has been the formation of Groups of Secretaries (GoSs) to break silos, stimulate thinking across ministries and develop a roadmap for growth with commitment from all stakeholders.

Last year, eight GoSs were constituted to work on themes ranging from 'Accelerated Growth with Inclusion and Equity' to 'Employment Generation Strategies' and 'Energy Conservation and Efficiency'. An innovative aspect of these groups was that they involved senior officials whose departments were not directly related to the theme. This encouraged cross-sectoral thinking.

Reforms are not possible if mindsets don't change. Doing away with the resource allocation-focused Planning Commission, the scrapping of 1,175 obsolete laws, the merging of the railway budget and Union Budget, are all steps to make India an easier place to do business in and to enhance the quality of governance.

Measures like scrapping the distinction between planned and non-Plan expenditures in the annual Budget will also help shift focus from reducing revenue deficit to increasing capital spending, thereby setting in motion the process for improving the quality of fiscal deficit.

Lateral entry has been instituted at senior levels at the Niti Aayog. Young professionals were the ones who primarily shouldered the task of explaining the different modes of digital payments across central ministries and states via digi-dhan melas after demonetisation. Secondments have also been introduced so that talented individuals from the private sector can bring about meaningful change through GoI while keeping their career path intact.

It may take time for these reforms to manifest fully. But the direction is right and the pace is brisk. Administrative reforms will have to remain a continuous process, even as a lot has been achieved quietly in the last three years.



Welding governance

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