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A man for all seasons: Here's what makes Amitabh Kant one of India's finest policymakers

Amitabh Kant, an expert policymaker known for his clarity of vision and hard work, was a key player in making India's G20 presidency a resounding success as its Sherpa

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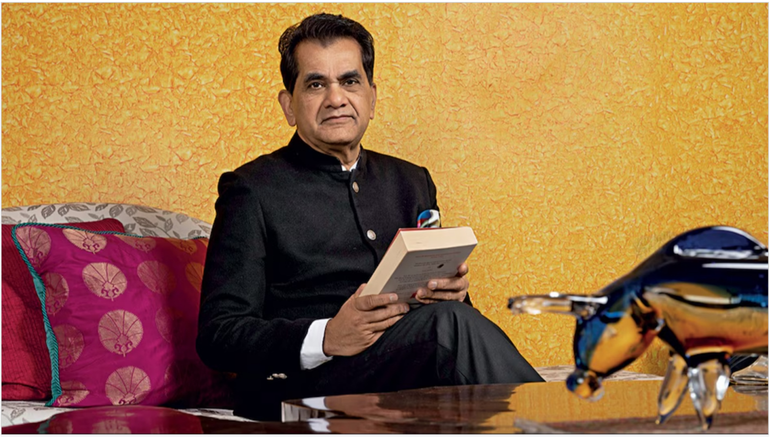
Print Edition: Mar 17, 2024



Amitabh Kant, an expert policymaker known for his clarity of vision and hard work, was a key player in making India's G20 presidency a resounding success as its Sherpa

Very few people can boast of a career spanning more than four decades that has seen them soar from one zenith to another, taking on bigger challenges in each successive assignment. But that’s natural progression for Amitabh Kant. India’s G20 Sherpa was also responsible for the Incredible India tourism campaign in the early part of this millennium and played a driving role in the country’s pursuit of becoming a global manufacturing hub with the Make in India initiative.

A retired 1980-batch Indian Administrative Service officer from the Kerala cadre, 67-year-old Kant is known for being an administrator par excellence, who has managed to thrive in diverse assignments. Known as a decisive thinker and clear speaker with a ‘can do’ attitude, he has worked across various ministries in his state cadre as well as at the Centre. His list of assignments includes Secretary, Kerala

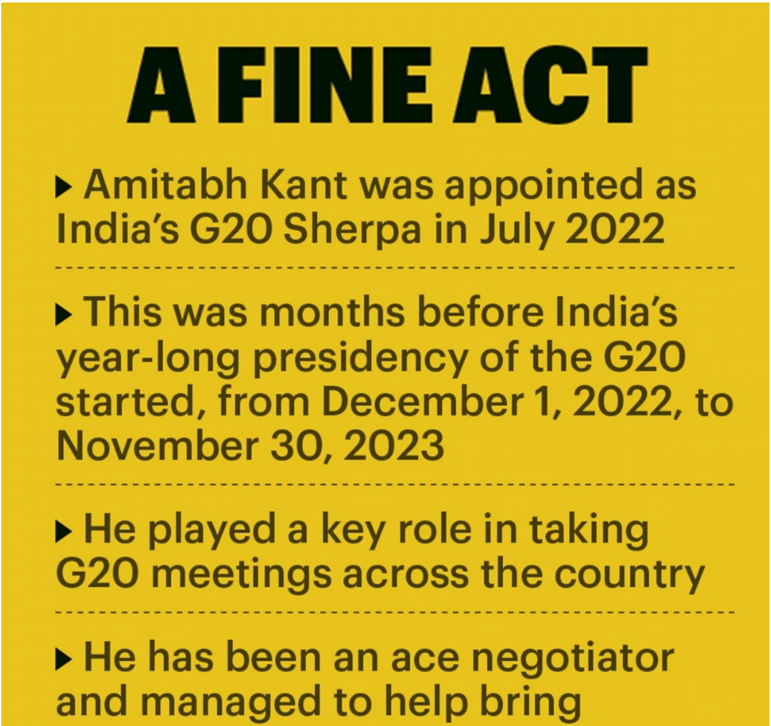
Tourism; CMD, India Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC); and Joint Secretary, Tourism in the Government of India. He has also worked as Chairman of the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Development Corporation (2009-14); Secretary, Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (2014-16); and the Chief Executive Officer of the NITI Aayog (2016-22).

Throughout his career, he has helped mould and take forward flagship national initiatives such as Startup India, Make in India, Incredible India, Kerala: God's Own Country and the Aspirational Districts programme.

But perhaps his most successful stint has been as India's G20 Sherpa. Kant was appointed to the role in July 2022, months ahead of India assuming the presidency of this multilateral forum from December 1, 2022, to November 30, 2023. He took over from Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal, when the need was felt for a full-time G20 Sherpa.

Bringing G20 to the people

When India assumed the G20 presidency, not many in the country were aware of what the G20 was or what the role of the Sherpa entailed. But by the end of India's presidency, G20 was a household term with meetings being held in as many as 60 locations across the country. And the presidency is considered a bona fide success, delivering the Delhi Declaration at the Leaders' Summit in New Delhi in September despite concerns and a sharp global divide over the Russia-Ukraine war



A FINE ACT

- Amitabh Kant was appointed as India's G20 Sherpa in July 2022
- This was months before India's year-long presidency of the G20 started, from December 1, 2022, to November 30, 2023
- He played a key role in taking G20 meetings across the country
- He has been an ace negotiator and managed to help bring

consensus for the Delhi Declaration

▶ Kant is currently working on taking forward India's agenda during Brazil's presidency and assisting the South American country as part of the G20 troika (Indonesia is the third member of this grouping)

Kant recalls that there were a number of challenges when India took over the presidency. "There was a global slowdown—75 countries were in a debt crisis; it was the post-Covid era and only 12% of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) were on track. And there was the huge challenge of climate action and climate finance, and both SDGs and climate finance required a reorientation of the multilateral financial institutions," he says.

But it was also an opportunity to highlight India's achievements in digital public infrastructure (DPI) and its stellar growth story. Kant says that Prime Minister Narendra Modi wanted the presidency to be inclusive, decisive, ambitious, and action oriented. And unlike other presidencies that were restricted to the capital or cities like Delhi and Mumbai, the PM wanted this one to be taken to all the states.

"So, we ended up doing about 220 meetings in all the states and Union Territories. He wanted it to be a people's presidency," Kant says, adding that this required huge logistics and students from schools and colleges had to be involved. "This was the first time that foreign policy was taken to the people of India," he adds.

The next big challenge was arriving at a consensus as multilateralism had taken a back seat. "We struggled with it throughout the year… all ministerials had failed. But in the final round, we were able to build a consensus on all key issues—with 83 paras and 217 outcomes!" Kant says, adding that the most important of these was reaching a consensus on the Russia-Ukraine conflict paragraph—something that even the UN had failed to do. This paragraph took "about 300 hours of negotiations, about 250 bilaterals and 17 drafts", he shares.

No wonder then that the high-powered jury that picked the winners of the *BT*-PwC India's Best CEOs ranking this year recommended that he be given a special Impact Leader of the Year award.

Kant who can

Those who know Kant say he has great clarity of mind and is a decisive speaker with a proactive approach, who works as hard—if not harder—than his team. He is also known to be extremely generous and helpful.

THE RIGHT MAN FOR TOUGH JOBS

- Kant worked on several tourism campaigns, including Kerala: God's Own Country and Incredible India
- During his tenure as DIPP Secretary, he worked on Make in India and Startup India and drove the Ease of Doing Business initiative
- As CEO of NITI Aayog, Kant was associated with the Aspirational Districts programme, the PLI scheme, India's National Mission on Transformative Mobility and Battery Storage, and SDGs
- He also served as Chairman and CEO of the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor Development Corporation

"Amitabh is a brilliant guy and a wonderful human being, and we both reach out to each other when we need advice on something," says Piyush Pandey, Chief Advisor of Ogilvy India, who has known Kant for 50 years.

The advertising veteran, who was the G20 Sherpa's batchmate at Delhi's St. Stephen's College, says they did not know each other too well in college as he was a cricketer, while Kant was more academically oriented. But later, they worked together on the Incredible India campaign in 2002, where O&M was the ad agency, with V. Sunil as the Creative Director. "Amitabh was able to take it through to the government and then Tourism Minister Jagmohan and convince them to use it even though it was so different from other government campaigns that had a lot of copy," Pandey recalls.

"We have all seen the fantastic job he did at NITI Aayog as well as what he achieved in India's presidency of the G20. I credit him with also improving my English vocabulary as I did not know that a Sherpa can be someone apart from the person who helps another person climb a mountain," adds Pandey.

When asked about the secret of his success, Kant credits his out-of-the-box thinking and leadership skills to his mindset and hard work. "My view always has been that you need to think about 30 years ahead on how you want to shape the country or the particular sector that you want to work in. Don't be a status quoist; you need to be a visionary. Second, always study and see how the world is changing," he says, adding that it is essential to keep abreast of new technologies and keep reading.

Kant's passion for knowledge is evident from the fact that he has constantly worked to refresh his views and learn more. A master's from Jawaharlal Nehru University, he is also a Chevening Scholar. He has undertaken a mid-term course with the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and IIM Ahmedabad.

An experienced policymaker, he also believes in taking his team along and striving for excellence. "I believe, in government, that you have your good days [and] bad days; but you should always take your team along. Taking your team along is very critical; they must be a part of your whole strategy of growth," he says, adding that he believes in always working with young people.

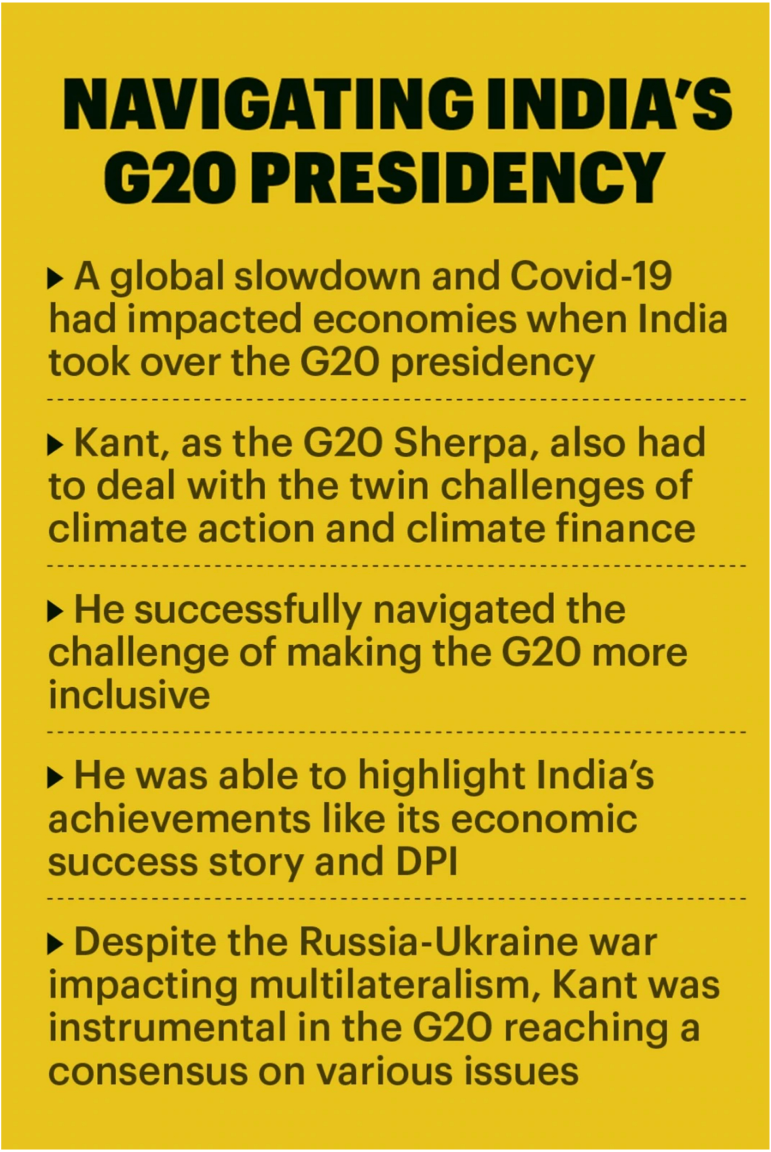
"They bring in a lot of fresh ideas and creativity. And lastly, I would say that I've never worked with mediocrity; I will always work with the best people," Kant underscores.

So, even as India was winning global accolades for clinching the Delhi Declaration, Kant took out time to thank his colleagues across the G20 Secretariat for their work in reaching consensus on the communiqué; officers of the Finance Track; as well as the Indian Foreign Service officers who assisted in drafting the paragraphs on the Russia-Ukraine war.

"Phenomenal team of young officers who delivered the #G20. Tremendous energy, vibrancy, dynamism and always raring to go. All of them bright, brilliant and determined to succeed. Has been a real pleasure working with them...," said one of his posts on X (formerly known as Twitter).

A stellar sherpa

Chandrajit Banerjee, Director General of trade body Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), has known Kant for years and worked closely with him during the G20. Banerjee says that as the G20 Sherpa, Kant played a pivotal role in highlighting India's strengths, as well as the interests of the Global South.



NAVIGATING INDIA'S G20 PRESIDENCY

- A global slowdown and Covid-19 had impacted economies when India took over the G20 presidency
- Kant, as the G20 Sherpa, also had to deal with the twin challenges of climate action and climate finance
- He successfully navigated the challenge of making the G20 more inclusive
- He was able to highlight India's achievements like its economic success story and DPI
- Despite the Russia-Ukraine war impacting multilateralism, Kant was instrumental in the G20 reaching a consensus on various issues

“As PM Modi’s emissary, he steered India’s successful G20 presidency, facilitating the unanimous adoption of the ambitious New Delhi Leaders' Declaration. He guided the CII Business20 (B20) India Secretariat in advocating for policies benefitting Indian and global businesses, while also aligning B20 objectives with broader G20 goals and priorities," he says.

Kant's contributions as India's G20 Sherpa were instrumental in driving global economic collaboration and fostering inclusive and sustainable development, elevating India's influence and leadership on the world stage, adds Banerjee. "Kant has not only spearheaded pivotal reforms but has also left an indelible mark on the landscape of national initiatives," he notes.

A multi-faceted personality, Kant is also a regular contributor of opinion pieces in newspapers. He is also an author with a number of titles under his belt; a recent one is Made in India: 75 years of Business and Enterprise, which came out last year and was longlisted for the 2023 Tata Literature Live! Business Book of the Year award. His latest book—co-authored with Amit Kapoor—The Elephant Moves : India's New Place in the World, was released recently.

Apart from writing, he enjoys reading. He is also a keen golfer and a fitness enthusiast who spends at least an hour and a half daily on exercise. "Physical fitness is the key to mental and intellectual fitness. I believe in sweating. And I believe that every young officer must sweat and keep physically fit," he says, adding that all young people must have one sport that they love and one extracurricular activity that they enjoy.

This also forms a part of his advice to the new generation of bureaucrats. "My advice to all UPSC aspirants is that they must read a lot and constantly keep abreast of new trends. Second, always think ahead, think of the future, and never look at the past. The past may be a guide to the future. But always think of how you want to shape the country. And third, if you are knowledgeable, if you are convinced, you should be able to work with your political masters and tell them that this is how the country needs to grow and change," he underlines.

Pandey brilliantly sums up Kant's personality. "He is a true gentleman. He is what our Founder David Ogilvy called 'a gentleman with brains'," he says. That, for you, is Amitabh Kant.

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