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Need for Innovative Public Service Leadership in India

Abstract
Public service in India is a challenge. Innovation and leadership is essential to ensure that good quality service is delivered to citizens. The paper lists the initiatives required and the areas needing attention to enable the government to deliver public services efficiently to citizens. It also defines new roles and responsibilities of leaders in government to ensure the delivery of public services. Some details about the Prime Minister’s Award for Excellence in Public Administration is also covered in this paper.

Introduction
Public service delivery in India is a challenge. India is the seventh largest country by area (3.29 Mn. Km²) and is the second most populous country (1.18 bn.). Indians pride themselves in being a part of the most vibrant democracy in the world. A democracy, as is easy to imagine, brings with it, its own share of issues and challenges in governance. India’s parliamentary system with federal structure brings into its fold, a pluralistic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-belief society with eight major religions, two official languages and twenty-two recognized regional languages (8th Schedule of the Constitution) configured into twenty-eight states and seven union territories. There are subjects of governance under the Union List, State List and Concurrent List (7th Schedule, Article 246) imposing ground rules on the jurisdiction and responsibilities of the central and state governments.

The governance challenges are evident, if one considers the socio-economic parameters too of India. At a GDP level (PPP, 2009 figure) pegged at a total $3.53 trillion (4th highest) while there is reason for cheer, the fact that the per capita is a low $2,941 (128th) and the Gini coefficient is 0.37, highlights the miles that India needs to go in improving the standards of life. The GDP (nominal) figures stand at $1.24 trillion (11th place), with a per capita level of $1,031 (139th position).

The national human sex ratio is 944 females per 1000 males. India’s median age is 24.9, and the population growth rate is 1.38% per annum. There are 22.01 births per 1000 people per year. While there is much talk about the demographic dividend with 95% of the population below the age of 65, literacy rates are still a cause for worry, hovering around 65% (55% for females and 75% for males). Though the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005 is aimed at enhancing the livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of

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guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work, an estimated 25% of India’s population still lives on less than USD 1.25 a day!

Though India has one of the world’s most diverse and modern healthcare systems, the country continues to face several public health-related challenges. According to the World Health Organization, 900,000 Indians die each year from drinking contaminated water and breathing in polluted air. As a matter of fact, there are just about 60 physicians per 100,000 people in India!

In output terms, India’s success story on the services front is now all too well known, while the agricultural sector, the lifeline for millions continues to cause anxiety and sleepless nights to the rulers. This is because the agricultural sector accounts for a mere 17% of GDP (52% of employment). While the industrial sector is still not a force to reckon with accounting for just 28% of GDP (14% of employment), the real contributor has been the services sector, accounting for the lion’s share of 55% of GDP (34% of employment). India has the 2nd largest labor force (approx. 0.50 bn. people), though its employability has been a subject much debate and criticism, owing to the rather poor skill sets. On the trade front, India is the 15th largest importer (USD 270 Bn.) and 18th largest exporter (USD 170 Bn.), with a rather adverse balance of trade position. It is however the country’s fastest growing telecom sector (0.69 bn. phones of which 0.65 bn. are mobile connections) that holds the beacon of light, growing @20 mn. new subscribers per month, a phenomenon which no other country can possibly match, making waves across the globe. The rise of India on the global business scene and the attraction it holds for high technology companies of the world is also on account of its 2nd fastest growing automobile industry and its emergence as a software powerhouse, with yearly exports exceeding USD 50 bn.

Reforms in India

In a country as large, populous, diverse, complex, intricate, ambitious and demanding as India, the governments in the centre and states have their hands full in ensuring that good governance is delivered, at least with a semblance of fairness, equality and orderliness. It is of course imperative for any country faced with gigantic development challenges of the proportion that India is beset with, to make sincere efforts to rise to and even partially match the expectations of its citizenry and industry. Any endeavor towards this end should be directed at (a) making public delivery systems efficient and corruption free (ushering in, as it is often called, SMART governance - Simple, Measurable, Accountable, Responsive and Transparent); (b) making citizens appreciate and understand their rights and obligations under the laws; (c) promoting participation through grass-root level involvement of stakeholders; (d) facilitating and fostering of democratic functioning; (e) synergizing the geographical, social and cultural conditions available and (f) providing socio-economic security for vulnerable sections.

To this end, the governments at the centre and states have been making efforts, with partial commitment and impact though with the intent of bringing about improvements in governance and public service delivery. These steps include: (a) de-regulating government and public sector; (b) transitioning from a regulatory role to a promotional role; (c) doing away with the permit-quota-license “Raj”; (c) decentralizing public service delivery; (d) introducing information and communication technology (ICT) based service delivery; (e) encouraging
public-private-partnerships (PPPs); (f) extending community outreach; (g) paying better attention to those at the “bottom of the pyramid”; and (i) committing resources that are demand-driven rather than being allocation-based.

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments brought about by the central government envisaged that many subjects and functions be transferred to the rural and urban local bodies of the country and that powers, resources and responsibility for local public services be predominantly vested with local bodies. This meant that local bodies could function as autonomous institutions of self governance, empowered to bring about the much-delayed and needed improvements in the quantity and quality of local services.

On the human development front too the governments have been trying to do their bit towards uplifting the quality of life of citizens. There is a flagship National Rural Health Mission of the central government to provide basic healthcare to millions who cannot otherwise afford it (allocation in 2010–11 of USD 3 Bn.). On the food front too there is a National Food Security Act in the offing, which, as is envisaged, would benefit an estimated 105 Mn. impoverished under-nourished families that cannot afford two square meals a day. On the subject of education, there is a Right to Education Act, 2009 with the aim of benefitting 10 mn. out-of-school children in the age group of 6-14 out of a total 220 Mn. in that age bracket. On the gender dimension, there is an Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 and enactments on free education for the girl child, right up master’s degree level.

However, the impact and effects of these initiatives and interventions is yet to be felt in any significant or substantive measure.

**Areas Needing Attention**

Recognizing the deficiencies in governance and highlighting the need for public service delivery to be more innovative, the Thirteenth Finance Commission in its report documented the felt needs and unmet gaps as: (a) not enough effort to imbibe the conceptual and operational lessons from different experiments and successful policies across the states; (b) no database on innovative best practices in different sectors and at different levels in the states; (c) cross-fertilization of ideas not taking place at a sufficient rate and scale; (d) many good ideas attempted once are aborted and, given short public memory, are not recalled; (e) incentives for innovations in public systems are not enough; (f) sufficient visibility is not given to change-agents; (g) systems of training and education in public administration not incorporating lessons of various innovations adequately; and, (h) sufficient mechanisms for achieving synergy among public, private and civil society organizations do not exist.

In other words, what is called for is a changed paradigm which ushers in a new way of orientation and action on the part of political leadership in terms of:

- Envisioning the public-service innovations
- Engaging the stakeholders
- Enabling the right environment
- Energizing positive efforts
Similarly, the administrators too need to play a supporting role in terms of:

- Spearheading the public service innovations
- Spotting, stimulating, shepherding and steering them
- Strengthening and sustaining them
- Spawning them

**Shortages, Deficiencies and Gaps**

However, building and sustaining capacities for such new role-responsibilities to be discharged by the leadership is easier said than done. There are a variety of factors, political, social, economic, structural and systemic that deserve reform, if the environment is to be raised from its current sub-optimal level to a more dynamic and responsive state.

There is of course criticism that is often heaped on the Indian bureaucracy about its inefficiency and bloated strength. However, one is compelled to take note of the ground realities when Bajpai (2010) highlights that the Indian Bureaucracy is abysmally understaffed. Bajpai drives home the point that with the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) of just 5,000-officer strong for 1,200 million people, (which works out to just 4 officers per million people), one should not expect miracles to happen on the governance front. Similarly, on the police force front, with 1.13 million policemen accounting for a police to population ratio of 0.08, the scenario is no better. Bajpai rue the manpower crisis when he highlights that China has 1.7-million strong police and the US, which is one-quarter of India’s size in terms of population, boasts of over 800,000 policemen. Germany, with a population that is one-fifteenth that of India, is said to have a force of 250,000. The ratio of policemen to the population in India, it is argued, is lower than that of Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka, Jamaica, Estonia, Moldova, Slovenia, Kyrgyzstan and Lithuania. In a list of 48 countries, India reportedly ranks 47th in terms of the policemen to population ratio.

**Characteristics of Public Service Leadership**

Despite its constraints of strength in terms of absolute numbers, it is incumbent upon the executive leadership that it works towards reducing the red-tape and thereby, corruption. Ensuring economy of resource-use, efficiency of service delivery and effectiveness of outcomes is the acid test of any successful leadership. Simple and easily understandable processes and procedures that are devoid of mysticism convolution, transparency, equity and equality of opportunity, universality, accountability and answerability should be the building blocks of any governmental endeavor. Any intervention should seek to maximize only the public good. It therefore becomes incumbent upon the political leaders and administrators that they bring about measurable and verifiable improvements in the quality of services and governance, implement unique ideas and distinctively new approaches to enhance the role of citizens, seek their involvement and participation in policymaking and programme implementation, facilitate and foster democratic processes and functioning, synergize geographical, social and cultural conditions obtaining locally, create productive assets of lasting nature, and, institute imaginative public-private partnerships for more efficient and effective realization of public-purpose aims and objectives.

To be able to rise to and meet such a challenge even partially, the leadership should have (and adopt) (a) clarity of goals and objectives; (b) consensus-based approach involving
consultations; (c) criteria-based focus with specific, measurable improvements; (d) consolidation of plans and work programmes; (e) convergence of funds, facilities, functions and functionaries; (f) communication to stakeholders right from concept till completion; (g) coordination with all stakeholders; (h) capacity building of the functionaries with calibrated content with convenient calendar; (i) complaint redress through convincing, prompt and exemplary actions; and, (j) compliance with the laws of the land in letter and spirit. Only then would the political and executive leadership be able to reinforce the faith of citizens in public institutions, helping them to become responsible, informed and discerning in the process.

For their actions to be so meaningful and purposeful the leaders should (a) understand and appreciate the laws, policies, regulations, measurement mechanisms, contexts, circumstances, culture and communications; (b) respect and create space for diverse perspectives and positions when collecting, collating and considering a host of complex, conflicting elements that might demand negotiation or compromises of one kind or the other; (c) synergize and leverage resources and capacities; (d) adopt a facilitative and persuasive (i.e. less of directed) style of functioning, and, (e) learn to rule with people rather than over people.

To draw upon the theory of McNamara (2003), the quality of public service leadership depends on how strong, effective, principled and accountable the executive leadership is, to what extent they are willing to (a) walk the talk; (b) look beyond the rule book; (c) fight (passive) systemic inertia; (d) overcome (active) pressures for maintaining status quo; (e) build identity upon credibility; (f) navigate unstable and unpredictable waters; (g) develop risk appetite; (h) recognize and honor their duty and responsibility to inform, advise and warn the political leadership; and, (i) manage successfully the challenges of culture, capacities and change and (j) demonstrate sincerity of purpose, a sense of ownership, commitment and propriety.

**Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Public Administration**

It should go to the credit of the central government that it took a proactive step and introduced in 2005-06, an award scheme to recognize and reward such excellent leadership of civil servants engaged in public service. These awards are on the lines of those instituted by the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management (CAPAM) and the United Nations. The genesis for introduction of such an award scheme in India, called the Prime Minister’s Awards for Excellence in Public Administration (PMA-EPA) lay in the feedback received in the Conference of District Collectors held in 2004, when several young administrators represented that while penalties and punitive actions were promptly forthcoming in cases of acts of commission and omission on their part, no positive motivation or recognition existed for them to come out of the comfort zone of average performance and put in extra efforts, think out-of-the-box, take active interest or contribute something positive and significant to the governance process. The PMA-EPA was thus formulated to celebrate the performance of civil servants, found extraordinary, exemplary, exceptional, excellent and/or emulation-worthy.

While the implementation of a project or initiative as given is the basic responsibility and duty of the official(s) concerned, to be worthy of consideration under the award scheme, accomplishments are required to be truly outstanding in areas such as: (a) implementation of innovative schemes and projects; (b) bringing perceptible systemic changes and building
institutions; (c) making public delivery systems efficient and corruption free; (d) showing innovation and adaptation to meet stakeholders’ requirements; (e) performance in emergent situations like floods, earthquakes etc.; (f) setting high standards of services and ensuring continued improvement; and, (g) demonstrating high leadership qualities, bringing about visible improvement in employee motivation etc.

Accordingly, a rich variety of innovative and proven initiatives and endeavors won the awards over the past five years in individual, team and institutional categories in as diverse disciplines as:

- **Health, Medical & Family Welfare**
  - Screening and early action against cancer
  - Safe motherhood and child survival program
  - Improved health and sanitation practices
  - Making medicines affordable

- **Infrastructure**
  - River-linking
  - Urban governance and civic amenities
  - Participative drinking water delivery approaches
  - Financial sustainability of metro transport

- **Environment**
  - Recognition of forest rights of tribal populace
  - Effective management of protected areas

- **Enforcing Rule of Law**
  - Community policing
  - Maintaining communal harmony
  - Involving communities in disturbed and insurgency-affected areas

- **Poverty eradication**
  - Destitute identification, rehabilitation and monitoring

- **Transforming of India Post** (largest network of 156,000 outlets with 90% in rural areas)

- **Education**
  - Introduction of activity-based learning in primary schools
  - Radical all-round improvements in government schools
  - Child ‘tracking’ in primary education

- **Efficient handling of natural calamities and emergencies**

- **E-Governance in:**
  - Tax administration
  - Land survey, records, registration, settlement
  - Corporate affairs
- Personnel information systems
- Risk management systems
- Public services delivery
- Citizen empowerment
- Information-technology audits
- Computerization of railway ticketing
- Paddy procurement and public distribution

Table-1 below gives the results of the Award scheme thus far. Though the number of awardees is still rather low, the very fact that the scheme has generated positive interest and enthusiastic response is in itself a desirable phenomenon.

Table-1: **Prime Minister’s Awards for Excellence in Public Administration**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Eligible</th>
<th>Short-listed</th>
<th>Awarded</th>
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<td>243</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>02</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006-07</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-09</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>28</td>
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Source: Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances, Govt. of India; http://darpg.nic.in

**New Role-Responsibilities of Leaders**

Such recognitions and awards however, emphasize the need for the new-age executive leadership assuming newer role-responsibilities. In the words of Albert Einstein, the significant problems we face today cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at, when we created them.

The Economist, in its edition/issue of 14th August 2010 highlights the role and importance of social innovations as a new approach to alleviating society’s problems. Social innovations are structured in the form of new collaborations and partnerships between/among the government, private enterprises, social entrepreneurs, philanthropic foundations, charities, voluntary groups, non-profit organizations and civil society, since the task at hand of bringing about an improvement in the quality and standards of life of the underprivileged and disadvantaged sections of the society is too huge, complex and intricate to be handled successfully in entirety by any single entity. Thus, it is time that the political and executive leadership realized, recognized and resolutely pursued the path of constructive and collaborative endeavor by involving all the stakeholders.

McNamara (2003) describes such collaborative effort as evocative of passion, intensity, interactivity and purpose. It is strategic in nature, taking one to new heights and engaging
in new ways that one would not otherwise be able to accomplish. It is a creative process of knowledge- and wisdom-sharing within a community of common interest; in pursuit of a new level of excellence in service provision or policy formulation, which would be unattainable on one’s own.

Chrislip (2002) opines that the quality of public decisions stems directly from the quality of the engagement used to make them. Public decisions must respond to the real needs of the communities and, people should have some control over the forces that affect their lives. Understanding of essential information about public concerns comes before judgment and decision and, in that sense leaders have a bounden responsibility to fulfil. Collaborations are a powerful tool in this context as they go beyond communication, cooperation and coordination. Collaborations foster mutually beneficial relationships between two or more parties to achieve common goals. They create a shared vision and joint strategies to address concerns that go beyond the purview of any particular party. In order for collaborations to work however, all participants must engage as peers.

The Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management (CAPAM) describes collaboration from the perspective of transcending boundaries, be they inter-organizational, inter-border or jurisdictional.

To enter into and implement a collaborative endeavour for addressing the demands of public services, it is essential that all the stakeholders viz. the central and state governments, non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, charitable and public-purpose institutions, business houses keen on fulfilling social responsibilities and most importantly, citizens - should join hands in a constructive effort that leverages (a) shared vision on common outcomes; (b) furtherance of mutual interests; (c) collective effort; (d) pooled expertise; (e) social capital; and, (f) formal and informal networks.

Leadership Capacity Building

Kotter (1990) describes “management” from the perspective of coping with complexity and “leadership”, as coping with change. Trompenaars and Turner (1998) propound that the world is full of dualities that there is no “either...or” syndrome but only the certainty of “and...and” situation. There should be dynamic co-existence of conformity and creativity, formality and informality, experience and experiment, competition and collaboration. To draw an analogy from Yeakey (2002), political leaders should be social specialists who focus on relationships and administrators should be task specialists who accomplish actions.

It is pertinent in this context to recall what John F. Kennedy has said – that leadership and learning are indispensable to each other. While in addition to formal education, the executive leadership does receive “continuing education” in the form of on-the-job training, job rotation, exposure to special projects and situations and mentoring from seniors, it is important that their capacities are enhanced in a formal, structured and conscious manner enabling them to make a meaningful contribution to governance and public service. The Chief Secretary of a major state, the highest civil servant in the state government, once shared at a public forum in August 2010 that in a study, it was found that a file in the government goes on average through eight levels, without any contribution by any of the higher levels. The entire effort, the entire intelligence, is exercised by the lowest clerk at the first level; and the file goes through the next seven levels for just signatures!
When Jawaharlal Nehru, the statesman and first Prime Minister of India described the Indian Civil Service (ICS) as neither Indian, nor civil, nor service, he was only echoing the common view and sentiment held by millions of Indians. While we do see around us, rather in scarce numbers though, bright, genuinely-concerned, committed, humane and game-changing civil servants who attain demigod status through their good deeds and public welfare measures, the common image and perception about a bureaucrat in the minds of the Indian citizenry is that of a laid-back, file-pushing, risk-averse, precedent-seeking, blame-shifting, apple-shining, pompous, arrogant, insensitive (and increasingly these days unethical and immoral too) individual who could not care less whether the world swung one way or the other.

It follows that it is essential that the political and executive leadership to be exposed to the new paradigm of public service leadership. This means formal and structured grounding to start with, on the various nuances and agents of good governance such as (a) the oversight role of the parliament and state legislatures; (b) public disclosures, participation and scrutiny; (c) vigilance administration and enabling legislation like the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988; (d) role of independent international watchdogs such as Transparency International (India was ranked in 2009 at a rather embarrassing 84th position among 180 countries); (e) institution of ‘Lokayukta’, the “people-commissioned” anti-corruption authority; (f) importance of compliance-, financial-, system-, management- and performance audits; (g) grievance redress mechanisms such as the ombudsman facility; (h) human rights commissions at national and state levels; (i) social audits; (j) integrity Pacts; and, (k) Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005.

The New Learning Paradigm

This means that the new-age leadership requires capacity-building not as a standard, mandatory training, but as an intervention that is not a run-of-the-mill general skill-building exercise. It should be modelled on the lines the programme of the Kennedy School of Government of the Harvard University - “Leadership for the 21st Century: Chaos, Conflict and Courage”. It would be beneficial if such learning events conceptualized and customized in India could include all stakeholders – whether helping or hindering a particular effort, which helps in de-personalization, and, prevention, avoidance, resolution and/or management of conflicts. It also helps in the reduction of mistrust as well as building of bridges, consensus and coalition. The content of such learning interventions should be designed to address current and emerging challenges. They should extensively involve experience-sharing and group interactions encouraging and promoting participative learning. Participants in such events should be able to critically analyze what worked and what didn’t and why. Relevant live-case study illustrations and analyses should bring them closer to real-life challenges of the common citizenry, as they exist on the ground.

Such knowledge enhancing training programmes and learning events help hasten the process of governance-reform. The focus of these efforts and endeavours should therefore be to bring about a reorientation in the attitudes and mindsets of the stakeholders concerned, in a manner their resistance levels to change are attenuated and their openness to bring in more efficient and effective procedures, processes and practices is accentuated non-invasively and unobtrusively, ensuring their support and buy-in for the reform agenda. There should thus be platforms created for rekindling the thought processes, advancing the innovation-priorities of the country as well as catalyzing the ideation-to-implementation cycle of pro-citizen endeavours.
For any innovative idea to get generated, translated into implementation and also get diffused for wider public use and benefit, a host of change-friendly support systems are necessary. There should be strong encouragement for innovative eco-systems to emerge and gain ground. There should be space created for reality checks, so that there is scope for the true-impact of the grounded initiatives to come to the fore. Only then there is hope for public service delivery and governance to attain a degree of respect and recognition.

References


