

Is NITI Aayog old wine in a new bottle?

There must be a review of what the think tank has achieved to adopt the new role described in its charter



ARUN MAIRA

The Narendra Modi government has its plate full. It needs to increase employment and incomes; revive investments and growth; untangle the financial sector; navigate muddled-up international trade; solve the perennial problems of poor education and health, and the growing problems of environmental pollution and water scarcity. Even though statistical confusion was created in the run-up to the election to deny that problems of unemployment and growth were serious, high-powered Cabinet committees have been formed to tackle them.

Regardless of whether or not India has the fastest growing GDP, it has a long way to go to achieve economic and social inclusion, and restore environmental sustainability. India's problems are complex because they are all interrelated. Fixing one part of the system alone can make matters worse. For example, providing skills to millions of youth before there are enough employment opportunities is a bold fix that can backfire. The complexity of the task demands a good plan and a good strategy.

Under scrutiny

Does the Indian government have the capability to make good plans and strategies to address its complex challenges? Since India has not done as well as it should have to produce faster growth with more inclusion and sustainability, one would have to surmise that it has not developed the requisite capabilities. Mr. Modi has known this. Indeed, the first major reform he announced in his first term was to abolish the Planning Commission. He replaced it with the lofty titled 'National Institution for Transforming India' (NITI Aayog).

Now, when the country's economy has not performed to the high expectations Mr. Modi had created, and citizens' aspirations for 'acche din' have not been realised, the performance of the NITI Aayog is under scrutiny, as it should be. Many people are even nostalgically recalling the Planning Commission, including



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some who were very critical of it and wanted it overhauled.

Mr. Modi's predecessors, Manmohan Singh and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, had faced similar, large, economic, social, political and global challenges. When Vajpayee was presented a nine-point plan by a global think-tank to increase the economy's growth to 9%, he famously retorted, "We know all that. The question is, how will it all be done?" He highlighted that many stakeholders must be involved in the implementation of a plan in a large, diversified and democratic country – the States, the private sector, civil society and even the political Opposition. Therefore, it is not good enough to have a plan, there must also be a strategy for its cooperative implementation too.

Dr. Singh declared that reform of the Planning Commission was long overdue. An intensive exercise was undertaken. Many stakeholders were consulted. International practices were examined. An outline was drawn of a substantially reformed institution which would, in Dr. Singh's words, have a capability for "systems reform" rather than making of Five-Year Plans, and which would have the "power of persuasion" without providing budgets.

A commission chaired by C. Rangarajan, then Chairman of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, examined budgetary processes, divisions of responsibilities between the Finance Ministry and the Planning Commission, and distinctions between 'plan' and 'non-plan' expenditures. It concluded that budgetary responsibility must be concentrated in the Finance Ministry, and it was no longer desirable for the Plan-

ning Commission to have powers for financial provisions.

Some in the Planning Commission were worried that it would lose its teeth if it did not have any financial power. How else would it persuade the States to do what it wanted them to do? Chief Ministers retorted that the Planning Commission must improve its ability to understand their needs and to develop ideas that they would want to adopt because they accepted the ideas as good for them, not because they would have to if they wanted the money. Mr. Modi, as a powerful Chief Minister, understood well the limitations in the Planning Commission's capabilities and what it needed to do to reform itself, which the investigations commissioned by Dr. Singh had also revealed. It is not surprising, therefore, that the bold charter of NITI Aayog that Mr. Modi announced in 2015 was consistent with Dr. Singh's and Vajpayee's insights. He was implementing an idea whose time had come.

A good starting point

Implementation of radical change is never easy. If things don't go well soon, nostalgia will rise for the old order – even though there was dissatisfaction with it. And the change-maker will be blamed for the disruption. The NITI Aayog charter is a good starting point for a new journey in transforming the governance of the Indian economy. The NITI Aayog and the government would do well to conduct an open-minded review of what NITI Aayog has achieved so far to adopt the new role described in its charter – that of a catalyst of change in a complex, federal, socioeconomic system. And assess whether it has

transformed its capabilities sufficiently to become an effective systems reformer and persuader of stakeholders, rather than merely be an announcer of lofty multi-year goals and manager of projects, which many suspect it is.

There is deep concern that NITI Aayog has lost its integrity as an independent institution to guide the government; that it has become a mouthpiece of the government and an implementer of the government's projects. Many insist that NITI Aayog must have the ability to independently evaluate the government's programmes at the Centre and in the States. Some recall that an Independent Evaluation Office set up in the last days of the UPA-II government was swiftly closed by the NDA government. Others counter that the Planning Commission had a Programme Evaluation Organisation all along and which continues. They miss the need for fundamental transformation in the approach to planning and change.

The traditional approach of after-the-fact evaluation sits in the old paradigm of numbers, budgets and controls. The transformational approach to planning and implementation that 21st century India needs, which is alluded to in NITI's charter, requires evaluations and course-corrections in the midst of action. It requires new methods to speed up 'organisational learning' among stakeholders in the system who must make plans together and implement them together.

The NITI Aayog's charter has provided a new bottle. It points to the need for new methods of cooperative learning and cooperative implementation by stakeholders who are not controlled by any central body of technical experts with political and/or budgetary authority over them. Merely filling this new bottle with old ideas of budgets, controls and expert solutions from above will not transform India. The debate about NITI Aayog's efficacy must focus on whether or not it is performing the new role it must, and what progress it has made in acquiring capabilities to perform this role, rather than slipping back into the ruts of yesterday's debates about the need for a Planning Commission.

Arun Maira was a member of the Planning Commission

FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

A debate that divides

An ideological prism should not be used to malign a journalistic inquiry



A.S. PANNEERSELVAM

Polarisation is not restricted to our body politic alone; it is seeping into the vitals of our social fabric, leading to a situation where there is little dialogue. Nothing exemplifies this divide better than the debate over the feature, "The politics of food" (Magazine, June 2).

A range of interviews

As a news ombudsman, I have to address two questions. One, what did the story say that provoked such angry responses and counter-responses? And two, did the story meet the crucial requirements of journalism or was it just lazy opinion masquerading as a feature? The story asked why Akshaya Patra Foundation (APF), run by Iskon, refuses to add onion or garlic to the mid-day meals (MDM) it provides in Karnataka even though the children crave the familiar taste.

It was a story based on interactions with the beneficiaries of the affirmative action, the children. It was neither a quick opinion piece quoting just one critical expert, nor did it black out the opinions of those who support the programme. If children find the food unpalatable, is it right for anyone else to say that they should not complain and instead eat what is provided to them? Isn't this an indication that the purpose of the affirmative action has been turned on its head? The report drew its larger conclusion based on interviews with a range of people, including the children, the director of the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN), the principal secretary of education in Karnataka, and Right to Food activists. It also quoted APF.

Was the story hurriedly written as some Twitter warriors claim? If it failed to provide the arguments advanced by the defenders of the scheme, then it would be fair to term it an attack. But the report recorded the opinions of most of the agencies involved. It cited what NIN said when it gave a formal nod to APF's menu: "The nutritive values of menus with ingredients used in the mentioned amounts certainly meet and often exceed the prescribed energy (Kcal) and protein requirements prescribed by MHRD (Ministry of Human Resource Development) for the MDM." It also recorded the view of the principal secretary of education in Karnataka:

"Under the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, what the government has prescribed are the nutrient levels required in a meal – the level of carbohydrates, proteins, etc. They have not prescribed the ingredients. So when we got this particular complaint, we referred it to CFTRI and NIN asking them about the advantages of onion and garlic and if we have to use them. NIN has said that APF meets the nutrition standards, so why should we cancel the contract with APF? Except for this one small reason (the refusal to use onion and garlic), there are a lot of advantages for the govern-



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ment to continue its contract with Iskon. They provide hygienic meals and cater to a large group of children in the State as well as in the country. We aren't delving into philosophical and religious issues. And we cannot punish them unnecessarily for somebody's objections."

Understanding a complex reality

In a fair journalistic manner, the report questioned the arguments advanced by the defenders of the scheme but never did it attempt to silence any one of them. In fact, it is the only place where we find the technical reading of the NIN: "We computed macronutrients and micronutrients from the MDM menus recommended by the Karnataka government and the MDM menus provided by APF from the published scientific data of the Institute (Indian Food Composition Table and Nutritive Value of Indian Foods). It is an accepted norm to assess the nutritional quantity and quality of food using the computational methods from the quantities of ingredients that go into making it."

Partisanship and polarisation should not come in the way of our understanding a complex reality. A few years ago, a story dealing with the nutrient content of a noon-meal scheme meant for underprivileged children would not have drawn the ire of anyone. An ideological prism should not be used to malign a journalistic inquiry.

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SINGLE FILE

Crossing the barrier

PM Modi has adopted an aspect of the presidential system by appointing S. Jaishankar as External Affairs Minister

T.P. SREENIVASAN



In the management of international affairs in parliamentary democracies, there is a barrier between politicians who formulate policies and the professionals who implement it. To cross the barrier, professionals have to join politics and move up the hard way to ministerial positions. By appointing former Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar as the Minister of External Affairs, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has created history by adopting an aspect of the presidential system, in which professionals do not need to go through the parliamentary process. A rare chemistry between the Prime Minister and his former Foreign Secretary has led to this step, about which there are dissenting murmurs in political and bureaucratic circles. Therefore, this is likely to be an isolated event. But its significance will be discussed in the days to come.

Diplomatic outcomes are difficult to measure and no one person can claim credit or blame, as many people work over time to ensure that initiatives fructify. For instance, the nuclear deal took several years to accomplish right from the days of the Vajpayee government. Many diplomats, scientists and politicians worked at different levels. But as the point person for the U.S., Mr. Jaishankar was credited with the success of the negotiations. Though much of the 123 Agreement was not implemented, every word was fiercely fought. The deal still remains a major accomplishment of Indian diplomacy. Mr. Jaishankar has a consistent record of successful tenures in Moscow, Colombo, Budapest, Prague, Singapore, Beijing and Washington with intermittent key postings at headquarters. Successive governments rated Mr. Jaishankar high, and finally Mr. Modi appointed him Foreign Secretary by curtailing the tenure of his predecessor. Mr. Jaishankar provided the professional touch to Mr. Modi's disruptive and innovative ideas, which made waves around the globe. It is no wonder that Mr. Jaishankar was inducted as a Cabinet Minister in Mr. Modi's second term.

When Mr. Jaishankar was appointed the Foreign Secretary in 2015, I had written, "The 60th year in Jaishankar's life is just an important landmark and it is too early to assess his lifetime achievements. He has much more to do and to tell before he hangs his diplomatic boots." As predicted, he has to do much more in his new post. Indian foreign policy is at a crossroads. The present trajectory needs to be changed because of the unpredictability of the U.S., and the growth of influence of China and Russia. The spirit of Wuhan and Sochi needs to be nurtured with a view to creating a niche for India in an emerging multipolar world. It is here that Mr. Jaishankar will be an asset to Mr. Modi.

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DATA POINT

State of NEET

States with a higher proportion of CBSE schools have a good NEET qualification rate in general. Despite having the lowest student dropout rate by Class XII, Tamil Nadu has a relatively low NEET qualification rate (better by 9 percentage points since 2018), unlike Punjab and Kerala. By **Varun B. Krishnan**

| State | Children aged 17-18 (lakh)* | Dropout rate (%) | NEET qualification rate 2019 (%) | Change since 2018 | % aged 17-18 who cleared NEET 2019 | No. of students per CBSE school |
|----------------|-----------------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Delhi | 6.54 | 21.4 | 73.73 | -1.19 | 3.46% | 305 |
| Haryana | 10.43 | 14.8 | 72.59 | -0.82 | 2.16% | 628 |
| Andhra Pradesh | 29.81 | N/A | 72.55 | 1.83 | 1.31% | 9,033 |
| Rajasthan | 33.77 | 20.4 | 69.66 | -4.64 | 1.92% | 2,981 |
| Punjab | 10.00 | 16 | 68.61 | 2.68 | 0.95% | 733 |
| Kerala | 11.00 | 14.4 | 66.74 | 0.15 | 6.67% | 819 |
| Karnataka | 20.74 | N/A | 63.51 | 0.26 | 3.13% | 2,121 |
| Bihar | 63.08 | 53.6 | 60.15 | 2.54 | 0.70% | 7,119 |
| Odisha | 16.90 | 32.1 | 59.44 | -1.24 | 1.14% | 3,657 |
| West Bengal | 35.75 | 44.9 | 59.38 | 0.8 | 1.03% | 10,578 |
| Uttar Pradesh | 106.96 | 25.8 | 58.61 | -1.22 | 0.79% | 3,180 |
| Madhya Pradesh | 35.04 | 28.1 | 50.15 | -0.79 | 0.76% | 2,830 |
| Tamil Nadu | 24.30 | 13.8 | 48.57 | 9.01 | 2.46% | 2,500 |
| Gujarat | 24.46 | 31.7 | 45.09 | -1.26 | 1.44% | 5,150 |
| Maharashtra | 42.76 | 14.4 | 39.26 | -0.31 | 1.90% | 4,559 |

* No. of students aged 17-18 is projected from the 2011 Census. Figures in the table are approximations based on this. Dropout rates for Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh were not available in the District Information System for Education

■ In States such as Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan, the NEET qualification percentage could be higher because of coaching centres despite the availability of CBSE schools being lower

■ Calculations projected from the Census 2011 figures show that Tamil Nadu and Kerala are among the States where the proportion of 17-18-year-olds who appear and qualify for NEET is high (compared to the total no. of 17-18-year-olds in other States). This is because these States have a low dropout rate

■ Tamil Nadu has shown the highest improvement in NEET qualification percentage since 2018. With comparatively lower dropout rates, States like Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra have the potential to train a higher percentage of 17-18-year-olds

Source: NEET results, Census 2011, DISE, CBSE

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 10, 1969

Nixon announces troops withdrawal from Viet Nam

President Nixon yesterday [June 8] announced at his summit talks here [Midway Island] with the South Viet Nam's President Nguyen Van Thieu that 25,000 American troops would be withdrawn from Viet Nam by the end of August and that more pullbacks would take place as events justified. Shortly after Mr. Nixon disclosed the first unilateral U.S. withdrawal in the war, President Thieu denied that he and Mr. Nixon had differences over political problems blocking a peace settlement. The two Presidents displayed a united front when they appeared before reporters to issue a joint communique after their five hours of talks on this desolate mid-Pacific island. The two Presidents rejected any attempt to impose a coalition Government on South Viet Nam, but said they would respect any decision arrived at by the South Viet Namese people through free elections.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 10, 1919.

Education of Mahomedans.

The subject of improving the education of the Mahomedan community is receiving the anxious attention of the Travancore Government. It is reported that the number of Mahomedans of school-going age is about 34,000 and the number attending schools and colleges is 11,106, of which 10,505 are in vernacular schools, and 556 in English schools. The educational opportunities offered to the community, such as free primary education, and half-fees in higher classes of schools and colleges, have not helped to raise the community out of the slough of apathy. The Director of Public Instruction in Travancore was requested to enquire into the reasons for this indifference. He has come to the conclusion, and Government agree with him, that for securing better attendance of Mahomedan pupils, it is necessary to afford facilities for teaching the Koran.

CONCEPTUAL

Miracle of aggregation

POLITICS

This refers to a theory in favour of democracy which states that even when a large number of uninformed people vote in an election, the policy outcomes of such an election can turn out to be rational. This is said to happen because the ignorant choices of some voters, it is believed, will be more than compensated for by the intelligent choices of the rest of the voters who will sufficiently influence the final verdict. The miracle of aggregation theorem is considered to be an example of the wisdom of crowds. It has, however, been criticised by certain political scientists who claim that voting data suggest irrational voters heavily influence election outcomes.

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