



GUEST COLUMN

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Minimum Government maximum governance; fixing deliverables

We were all exhilarated with the wave of change that the Narendra Modi-led NDA Government promised to bring with it after winning the 2014 elections with a thumping majority. What followed was a string of catchy slogans like 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan', 'Namame Gange', 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao', and many more that captured the imagination of a 'change starved' India. The Prime Minister's initiative 'Mann Ki Baat' has also been hugely appreciated, and rightly so as it has been successful in bridging the communication gap between the political leadership and the masses, thanks to the not so vocal opaque UPA top brass in power for two terms. All this clearly indicates the noble intentions and the vision that the new Government has for the country.

If intentions were the sole benchmark for measuring the performance of the new Government so far, Modi and his team would rank high for wanting to take off from the base to the top. As they say 'it isn't bragging if you can back it up' and that is in fact what the critics and the impatient citizens have been stuck to. Due to the massive amount of time spent on designing catchy slogans to make people aware, the expectations of people is on the rise and when the gap between expectation and performance increases fingers are bound to be raised.

With the risk of sounding critical, a question that always vexes the mind is if indeed the Government is trying something new, and even if it is, how do they plan to achieve it? One of the views in this regards is that the Government has been immensely successful in developing a grand vision for the country but is failing on sharing the next stage of its grand vision, perhaps because it does not have it. Whether it is Swachh Bharat or Make in India there is no specific roadmap.

From the outlook of a cockeyed optimist one does feel that under such an indomitable leadership transitions are bound to happen. Transitions, however, cannot be simple, leave alone transformation. Especially if one is not seeking merely a cosmetic change but change in the nation's DNA which involves remodeling the policy walls and shaking up the iron frame of the nation's belief of what we are and what we could be.

Experts believe that devising policies and slogans has never been the problem; the problem is effective implementation. Unless and until there is a proper accountability mechanism which holds senior bureaucrats accountable for delivery and effective follow up mechanisms to ensure delivery of targets, the Government will always fall short of achieving its targets.

HOW TO FIX ACCOUNTABILITY?

To answer this question we will have to start with the genesis of fixing accountability through the use of Monitoring and Evaluation System, if any that existed after independence, as one feels strange to believe that the Government of the largest democracy in the world was going un-monitored and un-evaluated since 1947. Interestingly, the first tool ever used to evaluate, was the Budget which was introduced as early as November 26, 1947 by Independent India's first Finance Minister and noted Economist Dr RK Shanmukham. This 'budget' primarily comprised of Financial Inputs.

In the late 90s to early 2000, from Budgets as a tool to evaluate we moved briefly to Performance Budget also referred to in some cases as Program & Performance Budgeting (PPB) with three major parameter Financial

Inputs, Activities and Outputs, but it was only time that the Government realised that it is not Outputs but Outcomes which would affect development directly.

Hence on August 25, 2005 the then Finance Minister, P Chidambaram (UPA Government) introduced the Outcome Budget having the following parameters; Financial Inputs, Activities, Outputs and Outcomes. It should be noted that with the changes in time, priorities, and economic, non-economic parameters not only the Government of India but Government's around the globe have tried to evolve and hence it is only natural to have system reforms and transformation from one stage to the other.

Keeping this in mind and with the increasing pressure to perform better, the Government introduced the Performance Monitoring and Evaluation System (PMES) in 2009 with Performance Agreements called the Results Framework Document as the primary tool to measure the performance of different Departments and Ministries of the Government of India. It should be noted that RFD as a tool to monitor and evaluate goes a step beyond the Outcome Budget.

Where the Outcome Budget only focused on Outcomes (Financial) along with the other three parameter (Financial Inputs, Activities, Outputs), RFD also covers the Non-Financial Outcomes which could not be evaluated or measured in any of the above mentioned tools. It should be noted that in Context of the Indian Government which we want to be Citizen Centric, parameters like redressal of grievances or complaints, turnaround time, Citizen Satisfaction etc cannot be ignored and the departments should be evaluated on these parameters too which is not possible with any other tool but the RFD. In its five years of implementation the Central Government was able to cover 79 departments and 800 responsibility centers. 17 states including Punjab voluntarily implemented the system successfully and others showed interest. The reason this system was not advertised and publicized was because the UPA was a coalition government and the Government could not afford upsetting its stakeholders by publicizing their performance. What bothers me most is why the current Government with a full majority is refraining from implementing a system which ranks its departments based on concrete evaluation. If performance was the key agenda why is it being neglected?

One reason could be the Government's view that this entire idea was a UPA manifestation. Probe the matter further and one realises that countries around the world like USA, Brazil, New Zealand, Kenya, Bhutan etc have consistently been using Performance Agreements as an accountability mechanism.

One can just hope that a day will come when accountability becomes the top priority for policy makers as there is no specific recipe for development, but the consensus is that countries develop when the gap between actions and rhetoric is minimum, which can only happen through concrete accountability and delivery mechanisms.

(Ritvik Mishra has been working for the cause of good governance through effective implementation and Monitoring & Evaluation. His job profile as Member Resource Team, Cabinet Secretariat had him working very closely with senior policy makers on various issues. He is also associated with Indian School of Business on Public Policy related Research.)