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## Start-up India's Squirrel Syndrome

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Delivering big bang results for Startup India will need deliberate focus and here's a 5-point action plan

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05 May, 2018 by Dr M Muneer

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Three years of the ambitious Start-up India initiative, and the jury is still out there. Gol has spent humongous resources driving the incubation centres, EICs and AIMs, most of which probably ended up in the normal, less-than-optimal way. For want of good metrics and reliable data, the jury will likely be a hung one.

While the NDA has overcome the policy paralysis of the UPA, it has what I call the Squirrel Syndrome, although critics may term it differently. This syndrome is a big dampener to embracing an ecosystem for innovation and entrepreneurship. The final budget of this government too has not provided remedy for the Squirrel Syndrome, which affects not just Start-up India but start-ups of all genres – brand new to corporate.

The squirrel may be an awesome animal; nature has put together wonderful features in this species: Fast like an entrepreneur; strong like a well-funded start-up; agile like a seasoned investor; clever like a policymaker; intelligent like a technocrat; friendly like a new employee; visionary like a strategist and so on. But as it is with all creation of nature, it too comes with one significant flaw: The inability to stick to a decision.

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Imagine driving down a country road and you will witness the impact of this disastrous flaw. You see a small dot in the distance that darts quickly to the middle of the road with enough time to cross to the other side, but then something happens and it stops midway, wondering whether to cross or not. As you get closer, you still don't apply the breaks judging that there is enough time for it to cross. That's when it decides not to cross the road and turns back. Your mind screams at it to take a decision. And yes, it does decide... to once again change its decision.

Although Start-up India is abuzz with activities, does it know it has Squirrel Syndrome and that the activities it does are mere distractions? Normally if you have been in a business for 2-3 years, and you are yet to see monumental results, you are likely being affected by it. Businesses don't get to where they want because they don't know what they want, or they simply lose sight of what they want.

What is the overarching objective of Start-up India? Is it economic growth for India? Generating large-scale employment opportunities? Building ecosystems to drive startup culture? Does anyone know? Assuming that someone – at least the CEO – knows, does he drive it with cause-and-effect processes and KPIs? As always, execution is missing. Depending on the specific objective, the process drivers and metrics will change; and the squirrel syndrome will affect the final decision-making on the overarching objective. Without stymying it, data points will be jeopardized, leading to a hung jury.

The Cure for the syndrome differs for individuals and entities; and we will focus on entities here. For Start-up India, first, from its multitude of strategic and macro-economic choices, it should decide on the most appropriate one as its strategic destination. Whether it uses McGrath, Porter, Prahlad/Hamel or Hammer frameworks, it should decide on the one path to success and how. This should guide everything it does. Use of an alignment framework such as the "balanced execution agenda" will strengthen the resistance against the syndrome at multiple levels.

Assuming the objective of Startup India as building an entrepreneurial ecosystem – in conjunction with Make-in India and Skill India – to grow the economy, do we yet see such an ecosystem in any of our cities as we see in Austin, San Francisco or San Jose? Launching a multitude of initiatives (such as AIM, Tinkering Labs, EIC) without fully comprehending the overall strategy is a sign that squirrel syndrome is at large. Instead of planning the entire gamut of processes needed to build a sustainable ecosystem, a few initiatives here and there will not deliver real results but just brownie points for publicity. For instance, a marathon for building awareness for Tinkering Labs is a vague idea sans alignment to either innovation or motivation of kids. Acute dislike for any physical activity amongst the current young generation may actually result in an aversion to innovation if they equate marathon with innovation!

The idea of government giving money to private entities to set up incubation centres is probably another sporadic action not connected to the whole context. As all things governmental and Indian, strings are always attached; and ecosystems need entirely different metrics.

Delivering big bang results for Startup India will need deliberate focus and here's a 5-point action plan:

- Start with what exists already and close the gaps. Bangalore or [Pune](#) didn't build IT parks with government help. IT happened because there was a business where entities could make money. Startup India should analyse what is working and see how it can be done better and smarter. It need not be startup-related. Phoenix in Arizona was able to get Uber to birth with business-friendly policies, and they are on an ecosystem spree with such initiatives as IoT Challenge, Startup Week and Seed Spot. In India, the capital needs of sub-Rs100 cr start-up ideas are unmet. Mentoring for scale is another gap. Cities should continue to compete to attract investors, entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, free agents and so on in a similar fashion Andhra CM has been doing.
- Focus on a few areas other than IT and find champions for each. IT has already been to its nadir and India has an image of IT sweat shop, so it does not require much handholding. Besides, it has been copy-paste or cost arbitrage platforms. Sectors like healthcare, life sciences and biotech offer great opportunities for ecosystems. Identifying champions in these areas is an art as there is no right way to describe them but if one searches they could be spotted easily in places where something is already thriving such as in the Himalayan Valley.
- Build pilot ecosystems with established organisations. Instead of spreading the funds thin, focus big on creating pilot ecosystems in areas beyond IT. Creating just incubation centres will not achieve anything without accelerators, free agents, academic institutions, venture capitalists, large corporates, SMEs and of course media. A Silicon Valley disruptor such as "mach49" will be able to build a mirror ecosystem here with better ROI than ever attainable with current efforts of Start-up India.
- Encourage existing systems to work together. Once pilot systems show green shoots, get cross-pollination from industries. Corporate startups can get involved for developing new ideas, processes and technologies, and sharing supply chains, distribution channels and customers.
- Involve other ecosystems. To ensure consistent stream of innovators and other stakeholders into the new ecosystem, start



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collaborating with other ecosystems here and elsewhere.

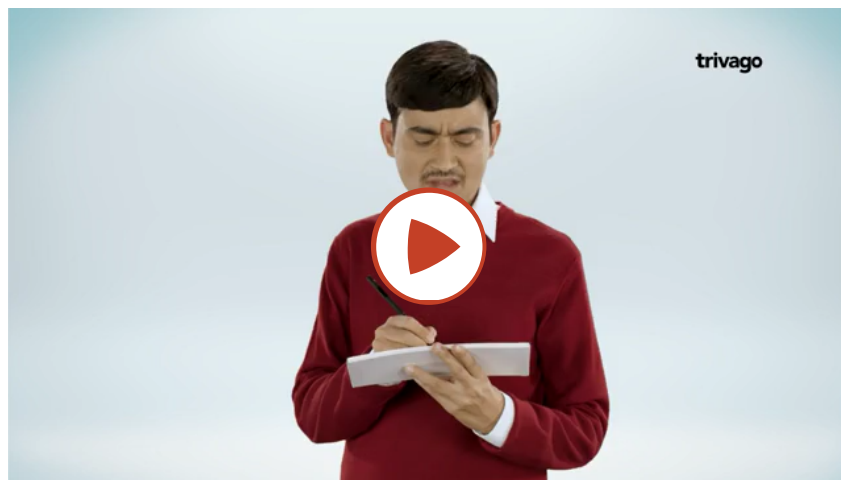
There can be no second or third thoughts once it is clear what success looks like. For that, Startup India should get rid of the squirrels!

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