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When will Gol learn to execute?

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After weeks of calling COVID-19 alternatively as Chinese virus and Wuhan virus, Trump has now hailed, and joined hands with, Xi in fighting the pandemic together. On the other hand, Gol found great solace in coronavirus as the greatest panacea for all its shortcomings and termed it as Tablighi virus or act of God to divert attention from the inhumane treatment meted out to the migrant labour in India.

The PM also found this as a great opportunity to build image by using superstitious and borrowed symbolism of hand clapping from balconies (European style) and lighting diya to ward off the evil. Worse, the Gol sat around doing nothing for almost two months of having seen the first case in Kerala whose CM got his act together quickly, armed with the experience of fighting the Nipah virus a year before.

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Gol also delayed the approvals for indigenous manufacturing of PPE covers and alternative faster and cheaper testing kits. It also allowed profiteering suppliers from China to deliver faulty kits despite recommendations. The total lockdown was planned without much thinking showing the hallmarks of a quixotic demonetisation move of 2016. It was as if the citizen quality of life was never an objective of this government – look at most of its policies so far. Worse, any of them got executed well?

The coronavirus is a great leveller in that it does not discriminate between incumbent or future super power, rich or poor, upper or lower caste, Hindu or Muslim. Clearly, it is a failure on the part of government, which has been struggling for execution excellence for that last 6 years. They have not made use of any of the execution frameworks that have been proposed including preparedness for epidemics or use of risk heat maps.

WHO projects over 425 million infected with the virus by end of May, with 100 million in the USA alone. The estimated 1.3 million in India is misleading because of the low testing (<230/million). Was this done to project a better image for India despite its low mortality rate for reasons other than Gol's doing?

Yet, praise for the PM is all that media report every day. We spent less than 1% of GDP as stimulus as compared to Germany's 20% and media praises the PM for fiscal discipline. The cause and effect relationships between actions and outcomes have not been seen on any radar. It is like saying you are a high performer because you maintain normal blood pressure, glucose level and heart beat. Or, it's like crowning an enterprise for exemplary performance just for keeping its expenditures within budget. What about its vision, strategy, revenue growth, profitability, market share and so on?

While fiscal discipline is necessary and vital – just as normal blood pressure and glucose levels are for an individual – just being healthy will not deliver high performance. Especially

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Dr Muneer

Muneer is a global expert columnist, writing on topical issues looked through management frameworks. He wears multiple hats including that of a social evangelist as the co-founder of the non-profit Medici Institute that was mentored by the late Dr Kalam, management consultant and startup entrepreneur. His expertise is in strategy execution having worked with global brands across borders. Current passion is in driving governments to execute what they promise. He is the managing director of CustomerLab Solutions, an innovative consulting firm in partnership with leading minds of the world and also that of a US-based deep-tech startup. He pioneered the setting up of thought leadership seminar industry in India in the late 1990s and had been instrumental in delivering cutting-edge knowledge to the C-suite, in partnership with Times Group.

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in a world that is totally disturbed by this pandemic. The failure of governments to execute their mission starts from the inability to project what success and performance look like. The government’s think-tank should have made the baby steps to a strategic change agenda based on what success would look like in 5 years. But alas, they have all been admitted to a ventilator for the time being and have not used any time-zero event scenarios for the future course of action. Probably Gol is waiting for the business to go back to normal sooner than later.

The fiscal discipline is just one of the many bubbles in a complex execution agenda. It alone will not deliver what the government has promised us. On the eve of Modi government completing its sixth year, it is only appropriate to revisit why Gol continues to fail.

Post Independent India has not seen a single elected government delivering in full what was promised at the elections. This is a dismal record – much worse than the business world where at least one in ten companies delivers what it promised its shareholders.

NITI Aayog is in an unenviable position unlike the erstwhile Planning Commission. It is considered as an extension of the PMO and so there is no specific strategy for it other than whatever the PMO fancies. That means any success will be hailed as PMO’s while all failures of programmes will be NITI’s fault. It also means frequent shifts in strategies/programmes and no 2-3-or-5 year plans.

It also does not have teeth to get things executed with ministries and States. Sun Tsu had said famously in the *Art of War* that “strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory and tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.” Perhaps this explains the loud noises its CEO makes on the natural evolution of the country even where it doesn’t have any role to play in, such as this pandemic where death rates are low here just as in Africa.

Medici Institute’s research across the globe shows the following five barriers to execution by governments:

- There has not been any generally accepted method to describe government’s mission other than a long wish list called poll manifesto.
- 97% of government employees do not understand mission/policy/strategy. How do you expect them to do what the PMO wants to be done?
- 70% of government organisations do not link planning with budgeting. Essentially they are monitored for fiscal discipline and not for taking initiatives that will help achieve the PM’s audacious goals.
- 90% of government employees do not have any incentives linked to mission achievement.
- 90% of bureaucrats spend less than one hour a month discussing policy achievement. The CS holds monthly reviews with secretaries for budget utilisation, not the quality of spending, programme milestones or process drivers.

Any new government wanting to change the dismal failure rate of past governments will have to overcome the five barriers, and will do well to configure the strategic change agenda in line with the manifesto to reflect “citizen-jobs-to-be-done” instead of maintaining status quo of a long wish list and sub-optimal allocation of budgets to various ministries and departments based on the influence or history. The agenda items shall then be organised around themes and five perspectives – Mission, Constituent, Fiscal, Processes and Government Capital – for facilitating execution with clear unambiguous objectives, metrics and targets. This will all point upwards to achieving the overarching mission objective, which can be, for example, something like what the Kerala government set out to do (but lost focus as always): Building a Secular, Corruption-free and

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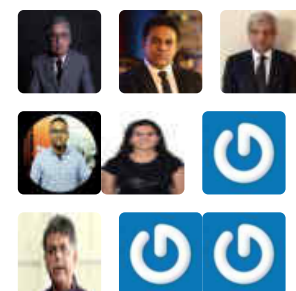
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A balanced execution agenda (BEA) is key to translating the mission and policy into operational terms at all levels – from the cabinet to ministries, departments, districts and villages. It is a widely used framework now and many countries and cities have been flourishing with meticulous adaption. Just as Botswana fought its many ills including a high corruption rate and gargantuan AIDS menace with a well-managed BEA, Gol too can do well with its adaption. Instead of ministry-wise budgeting and monitoring for fiscal discipline, Gol should monitor and manage key citizen-jobs to be done by themes and perspectives. This will drive shared goals between ministries and ensure alignment of all stakeholders around the mission. A well-constructed BEA will address all the five barriers to execution. Cabinet meetings will undergo a paradigm shift in thinking.

The issue is that the bureaucrats don't want to wear their thinking caps or take risks, especially when retired folks head NITI Aayog. They are conditioned by the IT industry to manage by dashboards and drop-down menus instead of applying thought for the change agenda.

Gol has a jazzed-up a website with dashboards, which show only outcome metrics, and not driver metrics to assess, improve and manage the processes and government capital (human capital, leadership, culture, etc). If the targets are in line with the poll promises and the data are authentic, this is a welcome first step.

Driving execution should be a key competency of NITI Aayog. As a best practice, it should create an exclusive centre of excellence (CoE) driving alignment of Gol mission with ministries and States, and measure, monitor and set governance models for what matters most. The time is here and now when coronavirus is the biggest inflection point for a tectonic shift, requiring adaptive planning but meticulous execution.

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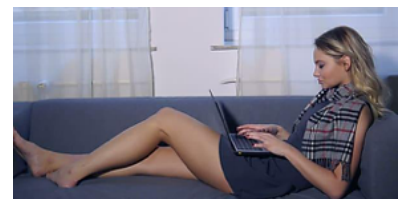
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