

Governing for the last citizen

PM's call for placing people at the heart of government decision-making aims to turn civil servants from 'karmacharis' to 'karmayogis'



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A FEW DAYS ago at the Rozgar mela where thousands of young men and women were getting inducted into government jobs, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a paradigm-shifting statement. He mentioned that citizens should be at the centre of everything that the government did and this is the mantra for governance for all public servants. In the past too he has repeatedly referred to "Jan Bhagidari" and that all development must keep the person at the last mile in mind (Antyodaya).

The concept of citizen-centric governance is constantly evolving and putting into action this momentous call of the PM requires clarity in the actions that civil servants perform and how citizens engage with the state. One needs to appreciate that this engagement is a two-way interaction between citizens and governments that give citizens a stake in decision-making to improve development outcomes. Traditionally, governance structures hold the power to make decisions that affect the lives of citizens. But citizen-centric governance focuses on providing citizens with access to information, services and resources and on engaging them in the policy-making process. This will necessarily demand a shift in the mindset of civil servants across the nation.

This shift in the mindset is not just wishful thinking but is now being intentionally fashioned in India through an exemplary programme that looks at the complete ecosystem of capacities of our civil servants in delivering on this mandate. Mission Karmayogi — the National Programme for Civil Services Capacity Building — has been strategically working to build the capacities of civil servants through various innovative interventions to sensitise and reframe the fabric of citizen participation.

Today, thousands of railway employees, Gramin Dak Sevak, police personnel in the UTs and employees of BSNL are all going through an outcome-based capacity-building programme that is shifting them from thinking like a "karmachari" to acting like a "karmayogi". Several personnel from the ministries of civil aviation, mines, ports and shipping, and steel have immersed themselves in private sector ecosystems to better appreciate the challenges faced by the latter and how they can enhance the ease of living and doing business from a citizen's perspective.

What exactly is citizen engagement? It refers to how citizens participate in the political, social and economic aspects of their community or society. This can include activities such as voting, attending public meetings and town halls, volunteering, participating in government committees, communicating with elected officials and holding public servants accountable. The real goal of citizen engagement is to increase the involvement of citizens in the decision mak-

ing processes. Citizen engagement is highly embedded in the nature of the political and governance context and existing power relations. It needs to be understood as a core component of any governance system and in democracies, citizen engagement is a basic principle because it is understood that governments derive their authority and power from the people. The maturation of Indian democracy is reflected in the fact that there is an intentional attempt by the state to make development citizen-centric. This PM's call for citizen centricity should be seen as a part of the social compact that the government is now creating between the citizens and the public service delivery systems. It is now for citizens to be fellow travellers in this celebration of democracy as India enters Amrit Kaal.

One also needs to recognise that citizen engagement is not about confrontation or merely about expressing restlessness and dissatisfaction. It is more about collaborative partnerships and dialogue. It is about inclusion, empowerment and is undoubtedly a political process. Citizen engagement should neither be viewed as the "citizen against the state" nor as the "state against the citizen", but as two complementary forces working together to ensure the overall development of a community or a nation.

Development by the people and for the people is indeed possible. Citizen engagement towards democratising the process of development necessarily involves a constructive dialogue between and amongst all stakeholders. Meaningful dialogue among the stakeholders — the state, citizenry, private sector, media, civil society and academia — can sustain only when there is mutual trust. The relationship between these multiple stakeholders needs to be driven by mutual respect and an appreciation of interdependence and reciprocity. However, this may involve redrawing boundaries of engagement and roles that stakeholders have traditionally assumed for themselves. Multi-stakeholder engagement would require the adoption of the partnership approach by all parties involved, but would it be possible without shedding biases about each other? Are there any traditional ethics of engagement that are likely to be compromised? These are questions that need collective reflection and sincere introspection. A development paradigm that involves multiple stakeholders is also about giving equal and dignified spaces in the decision making and execution process.

We must further appreciate that citizenry or community is not necessarily a homogenous mass of people and one must be conscious of elite capture that happens within citizen groups as well. Furthering democracy is all about constantly finding ways to negate the elite capture and respecting the last citizen's voice. It may need accorded new respect for the identity of the citizen herself. For this, we need to stay not only engaged but enlightened too. This mantra given by the Prime Minister provides the catalytic first step.

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