

'I have this huge feeling of gratitude that I got this opportunity'

Not many people in the country would be familiar with what the National Institution for Transforming India is about but its acronym, NITI Aayog, has become well-known in the short and eventful duration of its existence. Established in early 2015, and created to replace the erstwhile Planning Commission, the Aayog has been much more than the Indian government's premier economic policymaking body. The deviation from what its predecessor represented is amplified by the range of initiatives that the organisation is occupied with, from agricultural reforms and the digitisation drive to nutrition, skills development and improving medical education.

Overseeing NITI Aayog's increasingly heavy load of functions and responsibilities is veteran economist Rajiv Kumar, who took over as its vice chairman in 2017. An alumnus of Lucknow University and Oxford University, he has had a stellar career, within government as well as outside, while also being a prolific writer on India's politics and economics and the confluence of the two. The 67-year-old Dr Kumar speaks here to **Christabelle Noronha** about NITI Aayog, its priorities and accomplishments. Excerpts from the interview:

"Having worked in the NGO space, I am aware of the synergies they can bring for the successful implementation of government programmes."

How has the journey been thus for NITI Aayog?

NITI Aayog's very formation was a departure from the composition of its predecessor, the Planning Commission, and despite our teething problems in terms of structure, design, etc the Aayog has emerged as a credible organisation. We are committed to our role in nation-building.

The Aayog's role is to catalyse and facilitate the expansion of policy frontiers and thereby expedite India's transformation. We provide significant inputs to the government for policymaking and are being recognised as a strong development partner for all of India's states.

While the relationship of the Planning Commission with India's states

was more in the nature of principal-client, we have a collaborative and constructive relationship with them. This is being executed in two key ways. One, instead of the 'five-year plan' approach, we are working with the states and helping them develop region-specific blueprints for development. Secondly, we are engaging with several states to foster the spirit of competitive federalism and we are developing a ranking system across sectors to redefine the benchmarks of development.

We are also supporting the states on improving efficiencies in the delivery of public services and governance. NITI Aayog has also broken new ground in several other areas. For example, we are in the process of forming regional councils that will bring states that are geographically close into a single grouping so that they can collectively address common concerns and tap opportunities.

How is NITI Aayog enabling a culture of innovation in India?

One of our key objectives is to establish a new innovation ecosystem. We already have more than 2,000 'tinkering labs' across India and it will increase to 5,000 by March 2019. As many as 30 incubation centres are operational and these will expand to 50 in the months to come.

We are also in the process of setting up 'small business innovation research' programmes in six states. An immediate challenge is to encourage the adoption of science and technology in the public sector. Additionally, we are breaking away from the conventional module of government recruitment to attract fresh talent. For instance, we have a senior resource from Tata Consultancy Services on deputation with us and we recently inducted 60-70 bright young people on contract, which is unheard of in the government system. The objective is to ignite a culture of innovation and rejuvenate the whole system.





Children at a government school in Dhanora village in Odisha; resources are the issue in increasing spending on education

The Aayog has set itself up to become a repository of knowledge on good governance and best practices. Are you satisfied with the progress made on this front?

Besides facilitating key policy initiatives, NITI Aayog has brought out a large number of reports cutting across different themes, covering governance issues and identifying best practices in specific areas, schemes and programmes. We are in the process of developing a knowledge portal that is aimed at showcasing the best practices of states and other stakeholders in different spheres. A 'samavesh' initiative has been launched wherein agreements have been signed with 35 top knowledge and research institutions to extend and deepen the institutional capabilities necessary for an ecosystem of evidence-based policy research.

We are using our expertise and knowledge to monitor outcomes and evaluate the performances of the government ministries and departments through real-time data collection. Our development monitoring offices have live dashboards for key portfolios and major ministries. The prime minister relies on our data and evaluation reports to monitor the performance of his ministries and to affix accountability.

The enabling of 'cooperative federalism' in India has been an avowed goal of the organisation. How has this part of NITI Aayog's agenda gone?

The NITI Aayog's general council, chaired by the prime minister and

comprising cabinet ministers and all the chief ministers, jointly pursues the goal of cooperative federalism. It does this even as it sets the agenda for the Aayog. We are constantly in touch with the state governments – I have visited 23 states in the past year – to ensure that we are partners in development and not merely an organisation to whom they can appeal for funds and grants. This approach furthers the goal of cooperative federalism. Then we have regional groups for focused development, such as the 'NITI forum for the Northeast', where all the eight states there are members.

Nutrition is a challenge for the NITI Aayog and also a big piece of the partnership that you have forged with the Tata Trusts. How is the battle against malnutrition shaping up?

Nutrition is one of the focus areas and as chairman of the National Nutrition Mission, I am personally invested in ensuring that we succeed in meeting our nutrition goals for the country. Some of our chief ministers are members of this mission and we are taking proactive steps to tackle the issue and to ensure adequate nutrition for disadvantaged groups.

We designated September 2018 as 'nutrition month' and sought the cooperation of all states, multiple ministries of the Government of India and other development partners and philanthropies. We highlighted the importance of nutrition, especially in early childhood and we have tried to ensure that the drive against malnutrition becomes a people's movement.

We are glad to have on our side a resourceful and reliable partner like the Tata Trusts in our battle against malnutrition. When 38% of the young children in the country are stunted, there's a huge task ahead of us and committed partners like the Trusts can bring their expertise to the fore.

Our target is to reduce malnourishment by 2% annually, but we have managed to cut it only by 1%. We rely on organisations like the Trusts and the Piramal Foundation who have worked effectively in this field for years to provide effective solutions to help curb malnutrition. The Trusts are helping us with artificial intelligence and GIS [geographic information systems] tools for analysis of data at the district as well as beneficiary levels.

What kind of role can foundations and NGOs play in improving India's social development indices?

NGOs can play a vital role as partners in government initiatives. We are engaging them and industry to pursue the agenda of specific development. We have got some terrific ideas from civil society representatives; in fact, they have been key contributors for our vision documents.

Having worked in the NGO space, I am aware of the synergies they can bring for the successful implementation of government programmes. What we need is to develop trust on both sides, for NGOs to feel that the government is serious about its plans and allocation of resources, and for the government to have confidence that an NGO is credible and committed to the cause.

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A couple in Nagaland's Phek district; the delivery of public services has to improve to enable those most in need

On the sustainable development goals, everybody agrees that India needs to increase its spending on education and health but this seems to be easier said than done. What's holding us back?

To begin with, resources. Besides lack of proper design, there is also the fear of putting good money into bad projects because there is no accountability in the system. The delivery of public services has not been efficient so far. But now the 'Aayushman Bharat' initiative will be a game changer for public health, impacting the lives of 500 million people. For education, our prime minister has just announced a major plan to revitalise the entire system.

You had experience of working in government before you became NITI Aayog's vice chairman. How much of a help has that been in navigating the bureaucracy and its ways of working?

My experience with the government is hugely handy now. My stint with ADB [the Asian Development Bank, in Manila from 1995 to 2005] gives me the comfort to work with different stakeholders. And then, my meditation practice helps me keep my calm and navigate my way.

You have been a prolific writer for long. Do you get enough time for writing these days?

I have this huge feeling of gratitude that I got this opportunity to do something for the country, and I am totally immersed in my work. But yes, I do make time to write for the two books that I have in the pipeline. ■