

Book Review

Bringing Governments and People Closer: A Development Practitioner's Prescriptions Dr. M.Ramachandran IAS (retd), Copal Publishing 2021 pages 126

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Dr. M.Ramachandran, a distinguished civil servant, former Union Secretary and former Chief Secretary Uttarakhand, an innovator and institution builder has analyzed the critical policy issues in ensuring hassle-free governance and service delivery at the ground level. The book focuses on key areas such as “What do People Expect”, “Procedures and Red Tapism”, “Urban Complexities and Citizens’ Woes”, “How Messy It is in Rural Areas”, “The Much-Needed Governance Changes” and “Towards Becoming a Global Model”. The author discusses the challenges to be overcome to make governance transparent and accountable.

Dr. M.Ramachandran is eminently qualified for undertaking this policy analysis having served 38 years in the IAS and 10 years of active post-retirement life. He has remained concerned about governance delivery at the ground level. His enthusiasm for simplifying a citizen’s journey through labyrinthine governance process stands out. Further, issues like empathy, ethics and morality, which are foundational and non-negotiable qualities of Governments have been discussed. The emphasis is on scaling up State capacity, digital inclusiveness and process re-engineering.

The Vice President of India in his foreword says that the author has drawn from his long and rich experience to outline the possible directions in the quest for good governance aimed at ease of living for citizens in tune with their 21st century aspirations. In his foreword, the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister, says that in India’s 75th year of Independence, it is incumbent on us to redouble our efforts to ensure that life becomes easier for those who are deprived and disadvantaged, to ensure that every citizen gets in a smooth and hassle free manner whatever he is entitled to.

The Chapter “Life After Retirement – Living with Dignity and Being of Service to the People” says that if you have been a pro-active officer and taken the pains to understand the various intricacies of the job, that is bound to generate interest in a cross-section of people associated with the sector. Dr. Ramachandran’s tremendous interest and value addition to good Governance is evident in his post retirement years also - he chaired the Indian Heritage Cities Network Foundation, delivered talks and published articles, wrote books and attended book discussions, each of these activities requires tremendous commitment and discipline.

The Chapter “What Do People Expect” commences the discussion by appreciating the huge changes brought about by the Central Government and State Governments in

making services faceless, paperless and cashless through electronic service delivery. Subsidy disbursement using Aadhar enabled DBT, PDS, MGNREGA, LPG and Pensions are well recognized success stories. People expect that services and information are available and delivered on time without hassle. Successful examples in digital service delivery include the Digital Land initiative of Government of Uttar Pradesh and the MahaRERA portal of Maharashtra Real Estate Regulatory Authority. There remain 3 specific public offices where there is a need for a more genuine change – property registration, issue of driving licences and police verification. State digital service delivery systems like e-Mithras, Mee Seva, MP online have scope for further improvements. Benchmarks for performance need to be established and independent assessment systems are necessary.

The Chapter “Procedures and Red Tapism” says that one of the main reasons why people get harassed while trying to get something done through government systems is that the process takes time and ambiguities in guidelines exist. It should be possible to bring in systems to where work is done in a time bound manner and purposeful monitoring is the key. The Secretariat system needs to be strengthened with emphasis on institutional memory. File disposal melas and janata adalats for time bound decision-making are good initiatives to reduce pendency in government. An institutional and professional grievance mechanism at all levels is beneficial. The Good Governance Index, created as a tool to assess the status of governance of States should be further expanded to cover indices of different cities and rural areas.

The Chapter “Urban Complexities and Citizens’ Woes” says that in urban areas, expectations of citizens revolve around basic amenities. Mega cities like Hyderabad and Bangalore get water for a few hours on alternate days. Service level benchmarks for water sector are required based on international standards. A responsive and performing electricity distribution system, timely availability of gas cylinders, and affordable housing remain areas of concern. Water and sanitation missions along with urban mobility have also been discussed. A utilities regulator to oversee service level benchmarks and a Liveability index are recommendations made for taking stock on how city residents feel about living conditions.

The Chapter “How Messy It is in Rural Areas” says that day to day governance related concerns in rural India are centered around land records, and the challenges of interacting with multiple government agencies during a crop cycle. Public grievances in rural areas largely pertain to corruption in land matters and indebtedness. The Telangana Rights and Pattadar Passbook Act 2020, combines mutation and registration into a single process. It has standardized the registration process and enabled generation of digital records. The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana has been a path breaking initiative for clean cooking energy in villages. The focus of the total sanitation campaign should now be shifted to personal hygiene. Health, education and safety along with road connectivity need focused work in rural India. The importance of digital connectivity has been visible under the PM Grameen Digital Saksharata

Abhiyan with 6 crore Indians benefitting from the campaign. Several examples of village level best practices have been presented, Mawlynnong in Meghalaya earned the prestigious tag of ‘cleanest village in Asia’, Hiware Bazar in Maharashtra has a record 60 millionaires and barely any poor.

The Chapter “The Much Needed Governance Changes” says that its important to lay down accountability at all levels of governance. Decision making levels must be clearly known and there must be clarity about discretion. Arbitrariness in decision-making can be checked by greater transparency with easy access to information. Staff must be trained in dealing with public and mobile phone protocol is required. Technology has to be easy and meaningful and grievance redressal more effective. The new initiatives need to be proactively shared and best practices published. A hassle free governance system would be the best way to celebrate India’s 75 years of independence.

The chapter “Towards Becoming a Global Model” presents ten key steps for India’s governance. Identifying the most important issues for the common man, preparing a comprehensive action plan on the requirements of a cross-section of society, creating an eminent public persons’ oversight mechanism, creation of a template for a six monthly feedback from MP’s and MLA’s, expanding the Good Governance Index to cover ease of common man’s interaction with government, common man’s assessment of governance delivery, enlarging the role of the Department of Administrative Reforms, major role for national institutions in the area of public administration and recognizing State performance are the suggested steps.

A thoroughly enjoyable read.

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