

Events versus processes

Individual efforts can produce spectacular results, but if not institutionalised these cannot be replicated in future

The relatively smooth and efficient management of the Maha Kumbh Mela in 2013, with several million pilgrims gathering at the confluence of the sacred Ganga and Yamuna rivers, is a Harvard Business School case study. This is an example of Indian success in executing complex and large-scale projects as singular events but being unable to scale the learnings gathered so as to positively impact project execution in general. E Sreedharan is celebrated for the timely execution of the Delhi Metro project. The team at the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has won international acclaim for its remarkable achievements in India's space endeavours. But these islands of excellence mostly remain just that, never quite expanding to create a continent of cumulatively advancing standards and, consequently, sustainable and economy-wide progress. Individual and sectoral achievements remain stranded in a vast pool of mediocrity and non-performance and may eventually be overwhelmed by it. In a political and social milieu where inclusiveness is achieved through a progressive lowering of standards rather than the more difficult, but indispensable, effort to raise standards across the board, it is only a question of time before the islands of excellence are marooned and then engulfed by the increasingly pervasive preference for reduced benchmarks for performance.

In such an environment ostensibly successful and even spectacular events can hide, for some time, the growing feebleness of institutions and processes which alone can deliver sustainable and across-the-board progress. In fact, it is often the case that institutions and their processes having been thus enfeebled in the name of inclusiveness, then get further undermined because

they can deliver only sub-optimal results and this puts a premium on showcasing events which may yield high visibility, apparently successful though ephemeral outcomes but only through the mobilisation of large human and material resources for a limited duration in each case. This deflects attention from the compelling need to construct systems and processes which ensure

efficient outcomes, event after event without the expenditure of extraordinary resources, time and energy each time. In this sense, every event, disconnected from its systemic context, represents an enormous waste rather than spectacular success. In prioritising event over process, we have ended up retarding the building up of institutions and evolving systems, which can only improve through accumulated experience and sequential learnings. Individual brilliance which operates outside a system may yield successful out-

comes temporarily but if they are not anchored in a system they will evaporate with the departure of that individual. Successful event management in this category rarely translates into replicable templates for application on a wider scale.

Our governance culture does not encourage institution building and systemic improvement. Functionaries are rated for performance in ensuring successful and high visibility events but rarely on their capacity to glean learnings from events and institutionalise them. Each event becomes an autonomous happening which may grab attention ephemerally but with little impact on more enduring objectives.

In 2015, a major India-ASEAN meeting was convened where some internationally acclaimed scholars from India and abroad were gathered to explore the different dimensions of the cultural links binding the Indian

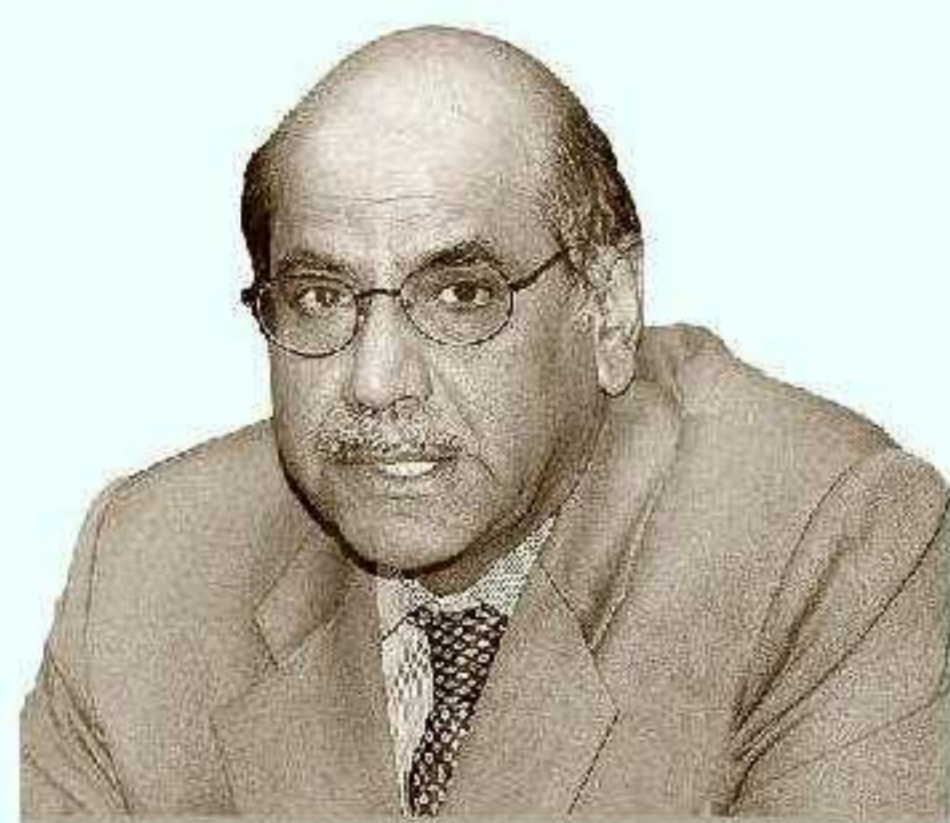
sub-continent and Southeast Asia. There were some exciting outcomes. Several areas were identified for further research which could be jointly undertaken by Indian and Southeast Asian historians. It was also agreed that in order to build capacity among younger scholars each senior academic would be assisted by a younger colleague. This was to be supported for at least a couple of years and the results reviewed at another follow-up conference. While it was easy to obtain resources for the conference itself, there was virtually no interest in the follow-up, which would have been mostly out of sight conducted in universities, libraries and museums. Yet it became possible to hold yet another conference just a year later on the same theme with presentation of similar papers but no prospect for advancing much-needed research. There was no effort to link the deliberations of one conference to the next. The result of such conduct is that the cumulative accumulation of knowledge and insights which should really be the objective of such effort never takes place. An event becomes an objective in itself and fails to serve as a link in a well-thought-out process leading to desired outcomes.

During my career as a foreign service officer, I would often have to handle the prime minister's visits to foreign countries or visits of foreign dignitaries to India. There would be immense pressure to come up with "deliverables" or outcomes in the shape of MoUs, bilateral agreements or at least some high-sounding declarations. With one visit over, the attention would shift to the next one and there would be little time and energy or even capacity in terms of personnel to ensure the implementation of the "deliverables, especially if this involved other ministries or agencies. The tendency was to move from visit to visit with little focus on digesting what had taken place, delivering on commitments made and ensuring that long-term objectives were being served in a systematic progression. This makes for a sub-optimal foreign policy.

One encounters similar patterns of behaviour in several domains of government functioning. Under Swachh Bharat more money appears to have been spent in its publicity than in the more painstaking work of creating public awareness, changing public attitudes, and doing pilot projects to gather adequate data which would enable more efficient design and implementation. The "event" of Swachh Bharat overwhelmed the "process" so that we are left with toilets that do not work, or where water is not available to clean them or a social taboo against the community itself cleaning and maintaining them. There is no system for proper evaluation of such schemes, learning on how they could be improved and what is required to sustain them. The temptation is to move away from such discomforting reality on to the next big event to generate more publicity and more photo-opportunities but little substantive change to show for all the effort put in.

I believe that this neglect of process is one of the major shortcomings in our governance and needs to be addressed urgently. It requires capacity building which emphasises institutional processes rather than just bandobast, which rewards performance in process management rather than just event management and above all, which strives for all-round excellence rather than be satisfied with islands of accomplishment and wonders of "jugaad". The India of tomorrow cannot be built on such meagre foundations.

The writer is a former foreign secretary. He is currently senior fellow, CPR



SHYAM SARAN