Governments in Play: Puzzling Through Implementation as Unfinished Politics

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Abstract:

Can implementation be seen as a puzzle to be solved instead of an intractable problem that has to be settled? This paper attempts to frame some generic implementation problems in India, seen as unfinished politics, through a review of the Appleby reports, as various puzzling types. By doing so, the paper seeks to broaden implementation analysis in India such that implementation is not viewed as a mere instrumental purpose but a strategic process having multiple solutions, and nevertheless, coherent ends.

Keywords:
Implementation, Puzzles, India, Politics, Appleby
1. Introduction

Why does policy implementation in India either fall short, or even deviate, from prior expectations? While there is no gainsaying the value of evidence based implementation research to evaluate programmes (White & Menon, 2015), it is necessary to distinguish an intervention from implementation like a distinction between a serum and a syringe respectively that together make the vaccination. A review of literature on implementation shows that scholars seem to agree that while ineffective outcomes may occur despite good implementation practices, it is almost certain that ineffective outcomes will occur under poor implementation. In other words, implementation is a necessary ingredient for improving the chances of effective outcomes (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). It is not enough to have tested which serum ‘works’ or ‘doesn’t work’, because the syringe that carries the serum is as important in vaccinating an individual (National Implementation Research Network).

This paper argues that implementation outcomes have to be understood as more than just deviations from administrative operations; as a process marked by unfinished political business, where diverse ends have to be puzzled through to arrive at coherent ends that meet a substantive set of expectations.

Implementation in developing countries requires urgent scholarly attention because research on administrative capacity has fallen through the cracks between the ideas of development and the business of development. The ideas of development whereby all states are expected to converge around the four basic goals of modernization (social inclusion, political liberty, economic modernization and robust institutions) are too far-fetched from the business of development because development practitioners on the field realize that the best lessons/practices are exceptions, and limited to organizations working in specific contexts that
cannot be scaled to a systemic level (The Grameen Bank experience cannot explain challenges faced by the Bangladesh financial sector, for example) where such ideas can resonate. Unfortunately, by bypassing problematizing state capacity, the opportunity to scale viable solutions is lost (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2012) (Pritchett, Andrews, & Woolcock, 2013).¹

Notwithstanding dramatic strides in democratic consolidation and human development, India possibly still has some chronic implementation challenges that have social, spatial and historical origins. The Indian government has had more than 600 committees and commissions review the administration, replete with recommendations, but it is anyone’s guess of the extent to which they are accepted, and more importantly, adopted. This lack of impact is probably deliberate as the advisors providing these recommendations are all ‘insiders’ from the administration, and therefore while their appointments are justified on the grounds of having much experience and familiarity with the workings of public administration, they are also there to pre-empt these advisory bodies “...from making any recommendation that could possibly detract from its antediluvian character” (Das, 2011, p. 11). That is, the ‘how’ question of ‘x’ recommendations remain unexplained because the authors are not able to grapple with implementation questions beyond the narrow instrumental and doctrinal frames in which the problems are examined.

It must be said here that implementation in India is - and only is - a challenge of sub national governance for several reasons. First, while the centre formulates and designs policies, barring

¹ For example, Mihir Sharma in a news article argues that the current mode of delivering governance through ‘Missions’ and Special Purpose Vehicles in India by absorbing the best talent from the bureaucracy. These new modes of governance are problematic as they have little chance of diffusing best practices within the traditional cadre, are not beholden to keeping citizens’ preferences front and centre and don’t build accountability mechanisms that can in turn reform and capacitate the Indian state. 
the District Collectors, there are proportionately fewer central government employees relative to state and local employees managing and delivering such policies in the districts and cities. Beyond Delhi, the reach of the central government tapers as implementation processes become more salient. Second, one would not be far off the mark to say that cities

This paper seeks to frame implementation problems as puzzles to understand the process of adoption of ideas that can either solve tractable or settle intractable (or wicked) problems of implementation. The second section of the paper attempts to provide some clarity on what are potential implementation puzzles. The third section will provide an overview of some classical implementation problems in India by focusing on a report considered to be a ‘classic’ on administrative reforms reports in India. The fourth section will attempt to recast the highlighted problems as possible implementation puzzles and the final section will provide some tentative conclusions.

2. Implementation as Puzzles.

2.1 Explaining Puzzles

It would not be farfetched to say that the study of Public Policy focuses on understanding and providing solutions to public problems (Turnbull). Problems can be understood as the gap between the world as it exists and how it should be (Brest & Krieger, 2010), where the gap is difficult to bridge, is important to either an individual or groups of individuals, but which has the potential to be resolved (Sage, 1992). Problem solving is also conventionally understood as a form of instrumental rationality, i.e. as the elimination of alternative solutions. One starting point is policy formulation wherein there might be the occurrence of certain events, called

\(^2\) The difference between the two kinds of problems is that tractable problems can be solved, but 'wicked' problems are partially met and can only be settled. And because they can only be settled, some people would may want to reopen the debate, engage in contestation about the unsolved parts. (Hoppe (2010) as quoted in Turnbull)

\(^3\) As quoted in (Hester & Adams, 2014)
focussing events, which have consequences that merit public attention, thereby bringing in diverse perspectives on the issue, attendant contestations, interested groups and solutions as alternatives, on the table. Inevitably, policy analysts within formal institutional channels then begin to converge on some alternatives in the context of competing values and constraints (Birkland, 1998). In fact, when it comes to taking decisions, solutions seem to incrementally come from muddling through possible and available feasible solutions, trade-offs, some form of deliberation or revising the framing of the problem itself (Winship, 2006). Critics of instrumental rationality will point out that a range of possible alternatives rarely exist in the real world, and in fact, it may very well be the case that while ends are known, they might be unclear and therefore people might not have worked out the complete attractiveness of all possible alternatives. The challenge then is to conceive a plan such that everyone finds both the means and the ends attractive. To meet such a challenge, some scholars have pointed to moving out of problem frames (which is the conventional frame to get out of ‘messy’ realities) into puzzling frames⁴.

Puzzling is an activity that attempts to assemble a set of pieces into a coherent pattern, where each piece is an end in itself and together become the means to establish a coherent pattern. A problem becomes a puzzle that we have to solve, and puzzling is the process as to how one can go about the same. If addressing policy is to achieve an end where everyone is better off without making anyone worse off, then clearly the objective of puzzling is to establish a coherent assemblage of ends such that all conflicting ends are realized simultaneously instead of being forced to choose among them or identifying a metric that makes them commensurable⁵. Such

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⁴ Such a distinction seems an established subfield of scholarship in Operations Research; see the classic work by Russell Ackoff (1974) among others. While, this author requires to further explore this strand of literature, the formulation from this literature seems to be that messes are those that have no clear definitions or solutions, problems have clear dimensions and variables but multiple solutions and puzzles have clear problems with a unique solution. The definition of a solution to a puzzle, from my review of contemporary literature, is that it has multiple components.

⁵ Akin to Rawl’s idea of an overlapping consensus.
a solution, of having a cake and eating it too, is the only workable solution for policy because if it were to meet everyone’s ends, then we don’t have to choose among competing ends and action will be possible.

The predominant types of puzzles are the jigsaw, the cross word, scrabble and the rubik cube and a more Indian version called rangometry\(^6\). Each of these puzzles have different levels of complex analysis, starting from the simple pegging and matching to weighing and finally to designing itself.

The simplest form as an example of the first type would be, say, a wooden board with figures of birds embedded into that board. In such a puzzle, the end is a coherent pattern (a collection of birds) and the objective is to find the right pieces to match corresponding to the contours of the gap (i.e pegging the right birds into the correct shapes of the holes). This can typically happen through either matching or through trial and error (if the jigsaw pieces are numerous – such as a board of say 150 insects). Thus, in this type, the end is clearly known and the pieces are unique, and all one has to do is to peg the right pieces in to complete the picture. A more complex form of this type would be the crossword puzzle, where the ends are known, but the codes to peg the right pieces require an appreciation of abstracted contexts (Grammar, punctuation and diction) but nevertheless, the ends are known and the pieces and assemblage of pieces are unique. Another complex type in this form is, say, a 500 piece puzzle, where again, the end is known, and the pieces are unique but the only way of puzzling through this level of complexity is through trial and error, by matching and aligning the ends of the respective pieces.

\(^6\) Rangometry is an Indian origin game for infants where assorted colourful geometric pieces can be used to create rangoli patterns (or what are formally called tessellations) or shapes (animals etc.) according to some preconceived ends. More importantly, a small shift of some pieces can radically change the design – for example, removing a few pieces from a butterfly can make the altered puzzle look like a Diwali earthen lamp. See [http://jodogyan.org/2011/07/27/rangometry-age-8-%E2%80%93-99-yrs/](http://jodogyan.org/2011/07/27/rangometry-age-8-%E2%80%93-99-yrs/)
An intermediary type of puzzle is that of weighing such as in scrabble or in the rubik cube. In this case, while pegging and matching are the means to puzzling, ends can be assembled in multiple ways depending on the weights attributed to different pieces (using some alphabets to create words in particular spaces, or choosing to align a range of colours first) (Winship, 2006).

The final type of puzzle involves designing, such as in ‘rangometry’ or tessellation, where pieces are given with certain underlying information, but the assembling of these pieces happens incrementally and is open to interpretation at any point of time in the process. There are no predetermined patterns or organizing principles that set the track for assembling.

Thus puzzling becomes like policy, the whole or ends may be unknown, the pieces may look similar or unique and there may be more than one solution to the problem.

2.2 Explaining Implementation as Puzzles

How do implementation problems become puzzles? Implementation itself needs clarification though lest it be understood thinly as a phase in the policy cycle between design and evaluation, as such a characterization might not be sufficient to characterize the phase into puzzles. More specifically, how should we characterize implementation in India – is it the phase post legislation and gazette notification (i.e. subordinate legislation) or is it the phase that occurs right after the photo op that happens during the launch (akin to cutting a ribbon, lighting the Olympic torch, planting a sapling etc.), and more importantly, is such a distinction required?

7 That is, implementation can be understood as associated events which have crossed the photo op moment and whereby the programme is, for the lack of a better phrase, ‘in play’. For example, implementation is possibly the series of events and actions that follow once the first child has been vaccinated by a dignitary that inaugurates the launch of a vaccination program. Imagine such an event, where once the dignitary leaves the podium, the things that begin to get activated are the moving queue of children, the buzz of associated activity associated with registering the children, the medical staff preparing the vaccinations, the impatient parents trying to get their child ahead in line, the officials overseeing various other procedures and so on. It is this series of interactive and intersecting events and actions that describe implementation and not so much the paper trail of notifications, circulars and other policy memos that preceded this function.
While there are varying interpretations as to what constitutes implementation, we can probably converge them to essentially two types. The first kind of definition, which one can describe as an instrumental type, tries to highlight the process as challenges involved (and hopefully resolved over subsequent iterations) in retaining the plan associated with the goal, actions and causal linkages. By this interpretation, implementation refers to “a set of activities designed to put into practice an activity or program of known dimensions” (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005, p. 11) but can also be understood “...as a process (not a one-time act), by which a [purchaser] recreates a complex, causally ambiguous set of routines in new settings and keeps it functioning. The purchaser gradually hones its ability to manage such a process through experience and repetition” (Winter and Szulanski, as quoted in (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005, p. 21).

The other kind of interpretation, which we can call the strategic type, would consider implementation as being political where iterations are required to retain felicity to the goals and actions and intervening links in the causal chain. As Shafritz and Hyde describe it “...Like lawmakers, administrators and those with whom they interact during the implementation process exert power over program objectives, and influence program inputs and outcomes. Implementation involves administrators, interest groups, and other actors with diverse values, mobilizing power resources, forming coalitions, consciously plotting strategies, and generally engaging in strategic behaviour designed to ensure their point of view prevails.” (Shafritz & Albert, 2011, p. 164).

Both perspectives on implementation can be viewed as puzzles; in the first instance the pieces are set and coded and aligned and the challenge is to match them according to specified criteria\(^8\). The challenge then is to identify the correspondences between pieces, whether they

\(^8\) Possibly like some sort of a check list. For example, the NIRN group has come with a tool, that they call the implementation hexagon, to measure the level of implementation readiness on a 5 point scale using six
have similar criteria and peg or align them. In other words, in the first instance there clearly are some places that have to be filled, and those places could be by some strict criteria or could have indexed pieces that will not change the structure but can change the content of the puzzle. In the second instance, puzzles are various pieces, and could be matched according to criteria that can change with each subsequent matching, and thereby lead to ends that might not be originally expected, but is an end that has been worked out by putting in all pieces. However, if certain pieces were given priority or if certain pieces are made mandatory, it limits the number of possible ends.

3. **Puzzling through Unfinished Politics: The Appleby Reports**

Appleby visited India four times during the years between 1952 and the early 60’s and submitted two reports on the state of Public Administration in India. The first report was published in 1953 which was a comprehensive review of the administrative structure in India, covering finance, personnel, development administration and administrative aspects related to agriculture and industry. The second report, published in 1956 was meant to be a review and prognosis of the public sector enterprises, but a substantial section of the report is a critical commentary on the politicians, the parliament, the CAG, and the administrative structure. While much attention has been paid to the setting up of the IIPA and O& M divisions in various ministries, as the substantive outcome from the first report, Appleby had some other interesting insights which seemed worth revisiting to understand implementation.

To identify some generic implementation problems in India, this paper will identify some issues highlighted in the Appleby reports. While there are many formal government committee reports, these particular reports are the starting point to analyse administrative problems in

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criteria: need, fit, capacity, resources, readiness, evidence. See http://implementation.fpg.unc.edu/sites/implementation.fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/NIRN-Education-TheHexagonTool.pdf
India⁹. Also, the reports were meant for internal government purposes (even though it was subsequently tabled in the Lok Sabha), and so was written with little compulsion to hold back any substantive criticisms of the administrative machinery. Lastly, one interesting insight that lends inadvertently to puzzling and therefore justifies the scholarly premise of the trajectory of examination underlying this paper, is his description of implementation essentially as the ‘unfinished business of politics’. In his first report he writes:

“…the great emphasis is still on keeping politics out of the civil service and out of “administration”. It similarly may be said that the invocation of “political neutrality” on the part of civil servants … tended to be made to appear to extend to “program neutrality”. The inclination was to a belief that “administration” is mechanical, merely technical, unvarying. Politics is essentially the reconciliation of different forces, functions, facts, ideas and interests. All government is political in carrying on this reconciliation. All of it that is not specifically handled by ministers, cabinet, or party is handled by administrators (emphasis mine). Theirs is what I have called the pre-partisan or sub partisan political field. If it be said that administration is only a “means” let it also be said, as Gandhi here and Emerson in America among others have pointed out, that “the end pre-exists in the means”. (Appleby, 1953, p. 21)

In other words, he clearly sees implementation as the bearer of residual problems that are possibly ‘wicked’ problems that have been shifted downwards by party officials and legislators, thereby inevitably leading to partially fulfilled expectations. Therefore, it is almost natural to presume that an instrumental approach to solve implementation (using a check list of attributes that are ticked or not, and then summed up to measure the level of deviation or felicity to the process) will prove inadequate. Instead, since implementation is possibly about unrequited

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⁹ It would not be wrong in fact to say that the literature explaining implementation in India from an institutional perspective (i.e. scholarship viewing implementation from the inside) is sparse to almost nonexistent.
values and expectations, the process of puzzling through (assembling a set of pieces into a coherent whole that achieves an overlapping consensus and consequently a workable solution) is a better line of inquiry to examine implementation problems.

In the following paragraphs, I highlight some problems identified by Appleby that can be possible puzzles:

**Unconscious Delegation**

The first problem that on the face of it seems to be at the core of any administrative structure is the question of delegation of authority. Appleby points out that the administrative system in India has been designed such that the Centre provides some fundamental coordinating and staff like responsibilities apart from some issues that only the centre can appropriately decide upon (foreign policy, financial system etc), and consequently the onus for welfare design and delivery are for the states. Appleby points out that as a consequence the bulk of the financial burden has also fallen on the states. As a consequence, what has happened is the shifting of responsibilities downwards whereby very few use their discretionary authority to align the mechanisms to the ends embedded in policies, and therefore there has been unconscious delegation to the person at the bottom of the hierarchy.

“The structure within ministries is ill designed for delegation, and there is, in fact much more unconscious than conscious delegation. One business man whose most important market is the government told me that the view of the man at the bottom of the hierarchy who writes the first “note” on a file is all important in most instances. Imperfect and insufficient conscious delegation is an important factor in making the heavy overload that grievously burdens ministers and secretaries. Group judgement, which is and should be an outstanding characteristic of administration is more often inter-ministerial and dependent upon successive
conferences between peers than achieved between levels of integrated hierarchies in well filled
in pyramids. (22)”

This impression suggests that there is non-formal distribution of power down the delivery chain
where the risk of inadvertently contravening the substantive purposes of a policy become real
if not certain. Further, this also clearly indicates that there is a single coherent end, but the
pieces arranged to achieve that end are not aligned, and therefore have the makings of a puzzle.
The type of puzzle that can be considered here is of the simplest type – fitting the shaped blocks
into the appropriate holes that together make up a coherent whole. Here the actors (pieces) are
clearly defined towards a well-known trajectory, the question clearly is whether the contours
of the pieces and the indicated holes are aligned. In other words, this problem seems to lend
itself to a pegging puzzle type because the attributes of the pieces (designated administrative
functionaries) and there is a single end (coverage, delivery or some such organizational
purpose).

**Fragmentation**

While the above problem is embedded in the vertical alignment of functions, there seems to an
equally chaotic problem across the bureaucracy. His numerous field visits gave Appleby the
impression that the lack of a unified service has led to exaggerated jealousies, rank
consciousness and some basic parameters of coordination. As he puts it”

There are too many forms of class, rank and prerogative consciousness, too much insistence on
too uniform concentration of communication in formal channels, too much cross-reference
including too many reviews of administrative papers by legal officers, too much control of
detail, too much preoccupation with “saving” rupees and too little with larger effectiveness.
Review at higher levels is too often wastefully duplicatory in the hands of persons remote from
action and programmatic realities. At the Centre most of the subordinate personnel necessarily
engaged in this reviewing process have little knowledge of India at large and little opportunity through field inspection trips to become so acquainted. The theoretically common civil service is becoming proportionately a smaller and smaller part of the whole personnel. (21)

Further he suggests "for the purposes of a fresh look, abandoning the very idea of “cadres”, “officers”, “clerks”, “ministry”, or “secretariat” as distinct from “establishment”, “Class I, II, III and IV”, the word “class” altogether, “gazetted”, “temporaries”, each named special service etc. I would hope similarly that there be temporarily expunged from the mind any old conceptions about numbers in any given rank, class or annual increment, about number of years in any given promotion or after which promotion should be thought mandatory, about number of …” (25)

In the second report he makes a clear case for abandoning cadre based recruitment through a centralized pool, but instead suggests that licensing should be the alternative. That is, he suggests that once the varieties of vocations are known within the bureaucracy, then academic or vocational programmes should be created such that potential applicants are trained and appropriately licensed. When the need arises within the bureaucracy, the agency has to then choose from a smaller specialized pool, instead of a much larger ambiguous pool whereby the selection of candidates becomes highly personalized.

This seems to fit well with a standard jigsaw puzzle, whose ends are a complex whole, having various smaller themes (houses, trees, cars, windows) but together fit into a coherent whole (a village). Further, since there are certain core functions, some pieces take priority over others (finance, personnel) and consequently set the tone and direction for the assemblage of the remaining pieces (welfare goals, for example).

The other possibility is to look at the organizational structure as a possible tessellated design (such as rangometry). In this case, as in the jigsaw puzzle, the idea is to set the tone by first
assembling a core set of pieces (ends/finance/HR) and then working our way outwards according to emergent problems, conditions and impacted communities.

**M Shaped Paper Trail**

Appleby describes various instances where red tape and coordination, have led to unnecessary duplication, delays, lost opportunities and so on where the particular staff was “ready for anything between murder and suicide, and at the same time entirely unable to express its feelings through proper “channels”” (Appleby, 1953, p. 41).

He points out that “Within the centre and within the states there is an enormous amount of coordination before the fact of action, a consequent lack of discretion and specific responsibility on the part of those presumed to act, and a general inclination not to make decisions. The coordination is to far too great an extent coordination between peers and between different hierarchies, not within unified hierarchies wherein many individuals at successive levels of definite responsibility can resolve indecision and make decisions.” (Appleby, 1953, p. 10)

In a separate section in the same report he identifies the paper trail that makes up for the delivery of a policy, whereby the trail starts from someone on top of an ‘X’ line department, then goes down the organizational chain for approvals, comes back up the same chain, then goes through similar vertical chains in finance, personnel and law departments, before it is finally operationalized. Such a trail seems similar to the alphabet ‘M’, where unnecessary duplication, vetting, approvals and vetoes stymie the process.

This implementation problem seems to easily lend itself to a scrabble or rubik cube puzzle type. Here the characters (cubes/alphabets) are essentially weighted ends that have to be linked into a coherent pattern. Considering that there is a paper trail to be followed as part of administrative procedure, this mode of puzzling through might help us identify actors that are duplicated, have
higher weights and consequently align the end pattern accordingly. Further, this would imply that depending on the nature of the problem to be addressed, the puzzle could follow different trails according to the weights and procedures required to oversee implementation concurrently.

**The Role of the Collector**

The last issue in this paper that Appleby points to is the chaotic role of the Collector. For example: “One Collector estimated for me the distribution of his time as spent 25% on revenue collection and village problems, 15 to 20% on police administration and the remainder on the highly diverse activities that can only be described as “government in general”. His work day is long and the load such as makes a somewhat arbitrary manner essential to its manageability. He is called upon by any state minister or secretary for duty with respect to any kind of government matter, but obviously owes no particular amount of time to any one and cannot be held accountable in terms of any particular activity by any particular superior because he is concurrently responsible to all others….To “responsible to government” at such level at a level of such particularity is not to be responsible to anybody.” (Appleby, 1953, p. 36)

Considering that the collector is the anchor of all things that happen at the district, and every district is unique, the challenges are multifarious, diverse and contingent, such that they can undercut each other if there is no overall minimal pattern that describes what the Collector should necessarily do. Perhaps then, this problem lends itself to rangometry or a tessellated puzzle, whereby the first few pieces (the necessary dimensions of the Collectorate) are inserted first before the design is tessellated subsequently depending on contextual contingencies.

**Conclusion**
This paper attempts to problematize some generic implementation problems in India as puzzles that have coherent multiple or single ends. The paper provides some summary justifications as to puzzle choice of problems that have to be empirically validated.
References


