Mission Karmayogi

Paradigm Shift in

Civil Services Capacity Building

Assignment on 'Conceptual Thinking'

By

Ms Renuka Mishra (IES)

Roll No 4715

1. Introduction

1.1   According to Bhagavad Gita 'Karmayogi' is a person who feels concerned about the well-being of his/her people, thinks about the protection of his/her people, and works for creation of a new world for the benefit of his/her people. Selflessness is at the core of being a 'Karmayogi'. With the objective to inculcate this spirit of selflessness through training of its officials in 5 core values of Ethos, Ethics, Equity, Efficiency and Productivity, Government of India is working on **Mission Karmayogi.** For this, training in 30 core competencies have been emphasized. Conceptual Thinking is one of the 30 core competencies identified for the exercise.

1.2   The etymological meaning of the term 'concept' indicates an abstract idea. Concepts though abstract ideas are containers of future realities. Conceptual thinking is the soft skill which facilitates conversion of these concepts into realities. Conceptual thinking involves deep understanding of the concepts, its multi-faceted linkages and causation factors and strategy for going beyond <u>what is</u> to <u>what can be</u>. This is best demonstrated with an example. The individual who explains a mathematical argument, as well as the one who listens to it, are both conceptual thinkers. A person who engages in any form of classification, as well as a judge who applies a legal statute to a situation, are both conceptual thinkers . Any child who correctly employs a colour-word demonstrates that he is a conceptual thinker.

1.3   India's Struggle for Freedom (abstract idea) under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi is a live example of implementation of conceptual thinking. Sun never set in the vast British empire. The Empire had establishments in Africa, Asia, Europe, America, and numerous Islands across the globe. Roughly 25% of the earth landmass was in control of the British. It was a Herculean task to challenge the might of this empire for poor Indians. Gandhiji after having travelled the length and breadth of his subjugated country and after having observed constant exploitation of the poor masses at the hands of the British rulers   evolved the twin tools of 'Satyagraha' and 'Ahimsa'[1]. To apply these tools for the struggle by the masses for emancipation from British rule was 'out of the box thinking'. Soon the struggle for freedom converted into a Mass Civil Disobedience Movement signaling the death knell for British rule in India. This gradually resulted in the independence (reality today) of our country from British rule.

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[1] Satyagraha- a policy of passive political resistance based on Truth
Ahimsa-Non-violence

2. Conceptual Background

2.1 <u>What is Conceptual Thinking?</u>

2.2 Conceptual thinking is a thinking pattern that is designed by a concept or a mental model[2], not built on direct contemporary reality.

2.3 Conceptual thinking is about <u>large</u> concepts, abstract thoughts, systems, and systemic thinking. Conceptual thinking is the <u>big picture</u> thinking or the macro-thinking rather than the details.

2.4 Conceptual thinking is the ability to understand something at the abstract level, ability to see the big picture, see behind the curtain, the why, the cause and effect without having to physically observe something with your five senses. It is the ability to understand concepts behind what is talked about that cause it to make sense or help us to understand why it is happening, how it is happening and what we could do to alter the results. It also includes analysing hypothetical situations.

2.5 It is akin to systemic thinking, the discipline that allows to change systems more effectively while acting according to the processes of the natural and economic world with the objective to create a unique solution that meets the expectations of all the parties involved.

2.6 Conceptual thinking is not only an intellectual thinking but also emotional thinking.

2.7 Strategy development is conceptual thinking.

2.8 <u>What is not Conceptual Thinking?</u>

It is not <u>Concrete Thinking</u> which is based on facts and logic. Concrete thinkers think in terms of think, analyse, device, calculate, parameters and practical details. It is neither literal interpretation of things nor sequential or linear presentation of facts or applying same linear logic to problem solving.

Though the conceptual thinking may originate from criticism of results of a system it is <u>not critical thinking</u>.

It is also <u>not design thinking</u>, but it can be an important tool is design thinking[3].
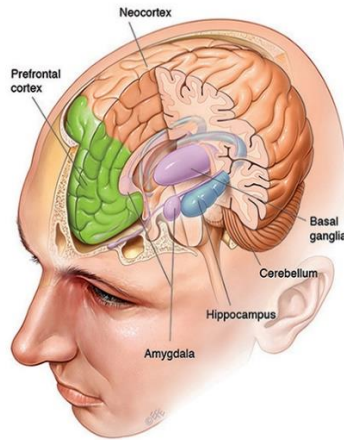
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[2] <u>Mental Models</u>: When people think, they generally do not draw on concepts that they have invented themselves. Instead, they use concepts, categories, identities, prototypes, stereotypes, causal narratives, and worldviews drawn from their communities. These are all examples of Mental models.

[3] Design thinking is a term used to represent a set of cognitive, strategic, and practical processes by which design concepts (proposals for products, buildings, machines, communications, etc.) are developed.

2.9   <u>What is the science behind Conceptual Thinking?</u>

The biological machinery that supports conceptual thinking has been identified as primarily requiring three cerebral structures: the amygdala, the neocortex's language sections, and the hippocampus. When a verbal stimulus causes the tiniest discomfort in the amygdala, these three structures have been seen to activate in a very specific order, causing the individual to pay close attention to what the verbal stimulus reminds him of. Because of the human ability to use articulated language, verbal stimuli play a critical part in conceptual thinking.[4].

2.10   <u>Developing Conceptual Thinking Skills</u>:

Conceptual thinking skills include both a *diagnostic pathway* and a *prescriptive pathway*. The diagnostic pathway starts with looking at the results of a system, the behaviours (good, bad, helpful, and hindering) creating these results, the systems in place to drive those behaviours, the beliefs and assumptions that resulted in the creation of the system. Prescriptive pathway focuses on policy options that can lead to better results from the system by focusing on addressing the systemic issues.

Following measures are important for cultivating the skill of conceptual thinking:

(i)   Learning, unlearning, and re-learning.

(ii)   Reading and staying ahead.

(iii)   Consistent thinking practices.

(iv)   Challenging your thoughts and concepts.

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[4] Articulated language allows us to name absolutely all aspects of all nonverbal objects, processes, or events that our senses allow us to perceive, of all nonverbal abstract concepts that we conceive of, as well as of all nonverbal emotions and feelings originating in the limbic system.

(v)   Exchanging ideas with like-minded people in a study circle and staying with such people is important. Conceptual thinking develops new   ideas that challenge the system. In the absence of support, they may get nipped in the bud.

(vi)   Mind should be open to acceptance of multiple perspectives. Nobody works in isolation. It is all connected. It is important to understand and recognize the processes at the systems level.

(vii)   Self-resistance is also likely during the process of conceptual thinking. There is need to create belief that you can invent or discover.

(viii) Grounding techniques include meditation, mindfulness/staying in present breathing and visualization.

(ix)   Finding a mentor.

2.11   <u>Application of   Conceptual thinking in personal life and professional life</u>:

Conceptual thinking is a very important skill for our performance both at the personal level and the professional level. At the personal level, I remember how the lessons in conceptual thinking made me come this far. Coming from a traditional progressive family and an insurgency torn State this could not have been possible without application of <u>conceptual thinking or long-term thinking</u>. My first lesson in conceptual thinking came from watching DDLJ[5]. Do you know what I learnt? I learnt <u>pattern thinking/systemic thinking.</u> Just like Simran communicating to her father that she wants to move around the world, I requested my father to allow me to study for at least 2 more years. It was an unconventional decision. I was the only girl in my society and my family in my batch asking for this : Sort of aberration. They feared this decision. That's when I observed the <u>role of mentoring in conceptual thinking</u>. I found very nice mentors who helped me sail through all visualized and non-visualised challenges in the process. I read good positive literature, was spiritual, was part of Vivekanand Kendra and Chinmay Yuvak Kendra. My mind was clear. Conceptual thinking is <u>clear thinking,</u> and it helps you get where you wish to be in the long run. You need to think it through. At the professional level, the skill of conceptual thinking has been inculcated in me at different stages of my career by my seniors. Particularly, I remember my role in Department of Economic Affairs where we were in the habit of drafting concept notes as young recruits. All these concept notes became reality in years to come.

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[5] Hindi movie -Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge

3. **Discussion**

3.1 <u>Relevance of development of Conceptual thinking skills in future Competency Based Trainings (CBTs) for Civil servants:</u>

Conceptual thinking is critical to effective leadership. One of the important things a leader can do for its followers is to have the kind of clarity so that they can be at ease knowing where they are going. People will accept weaknesses in their leader if they are predictable and there is a consistency. Consistency always comes out in case of leader being a clear thinker. Conceptual thinking results in clear thinking.

3.2 The importance of cultivating the habit of conceptual thinking in public administration has been recognized since ancient times. The 'Rajarshi' of ancient India for 'Ram Rajya'[6] and the 'Philosopher kings' of Plato[7] for ideal city 'Kallipolis'[8] are instances of leadership by people who reached the epitome of reliability based on their wisdom, intelligence, and a willingness to live a simple life. While 'Ram Rajya' and 'Kallipolis' are both concepts for ideal governance for larger good, conceptual thinking led to giving the mandate for the same to only a 'Rajarshi' and 'philosopher king' respectively.

3.3 Civil servants are required to function as Secretaries/Advisers to the elected leaders in the democratic set-up. They work in close co-operation with Ministers[9]. They are required to provide conceptual inputs for formulation of public policy, plans, proposals, schemes, and programmes of the Government. Public policies transcend various sectors of the economy. Therefore, systemic knowledge of government functioning becomes important. Initial abstract thoughts are voiced through policy documents. The conceptual thinking skill is essential at the formulation stage of public policies and programmes. It is observed that sometimes due to lack of conceptual thinking and the systemic knowledge at the initial stage, government is required to make amendments to the policy decisions taken or backtrack on its policies or the policies remain redundant in terms of its intended effects. This results in embarrassing situation for the ruling Government and increasing chances of losing constituencies and elections.

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[6] Ram Rajya simply means an 'adarsh rajya' or principled rule for the well-being of all''.

[7] Most people, according to the Platonic dialogues, are the slaves of their senses and never attain to a system of clear concepts. They fail to translate their perceptions into conceptions and to pass from the sensible world to the super sensible or intelligible world. Those who attain this level of intelligence qualify to play the role of a philosopher king.

[8] For Plato, Kallipolis was meant to reflect two drastically different things on two totally different levels. On the baser level, Kallipolis' inclusion of human virtues just as justice and moderation mirrors the individual. On the other side, Kallipolis also represents the entirety of the cosmos with its realm of infinite possibility and wondrous ideals. To Socrates and Plato, this city was a socio-political organization which allowed citizens to achieve their potential, serve the state, and live according to the absolute truths which govern our existence.

[9] Members of Parliament selected through the democratic system of the country are the representatives of the people.

3.4   Conceptual thinking enables to accurately forecast long term outcomes so that we become more intentional in the work we do, it helps us to identify the potential impacts of varying strategies that we might be considering, helps us to identify more options for achieving better results, not only to uncover not just the symptoms of a problem but also the cause of the problem.

3.5   Conceptual thinking is required for futuristic thinking for setting the vision of a Nation, the society, organization, and institutions therein. Through its emphasis on comprehension of problems by understanding patterns and relationships in a system, it can be an important tool for solving long-term persistent problems. It can lay the foundation for creation, development, innovation and discovery of new products, theories, and solutions.

3.6   <u>Barriers to Conceptual Thinking in Bureaucracy</u>

➢ <u>Complacency/hierarchy</u>: Complacency is a big hurdle to conceptual thinking as it results in inertia in thinking process. Many young people on joining service may feel complacent on getting the job itself. In the public sector, the hierarchy system is the bane on conceptual thinking. Hierarchy system means a system of 'sticks and 'fear' of the top boss. In an environment of fear minimum required for survival within the system is delivered.

➢ <u>Comfort inside the box</u>: The scientific basis of conceptual thinking as described at para 2.5 above makes it clear that a position of verbal comfort and appreciation may not create the requisite stimulus for conceptual thinking.

➢ <u>Fear of Failure</u>: Conceptual thinking happens in a cool mindset and in an atmosphere 'where the mind is without fear and the head held high'[10]. Fear or failure are discouraging factors for a conceptual thinker.

➢ <u>Educational Flaws</u>: Under the conventional education system, we have been taught to follow but we have not been taught how to discover and invent. The curiosity instinct in the child is marred to a great extent by the dominant culture of teaching.

➢ <u>Dominant social influences</u>: Dominant social influences encourage a culture of status-quo. This discourages conceptual thinking.

3.7   <u>Steps taken by Government of India for inculcating culture of conceptual thinking</u>

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[10] Where the mind is without fear and the head held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by Thee into ever-widening thought and action;
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)

(i) <u>Constitution of NITI Aayog in place of Planning Commission</u>: The objectives of NITI Aayog clearly lays emphasis on points which invariably requiring skills in conceptual thinking. These objectives include: (a) evolving a shared vision of national development priorities, sectors, and strategies with the active involvement of States, (b)Ensuring on areas that are specifically referred to it, that the interests of national security are incorporated in economic strategy and policy and (c) Paying special attention to the sections of our society that may be at risk of not benefiting adequately from economic progress.

(ii) <u>The National Education Policy 2020</u> gives significant emphasis to the development of an individual's creative potential. It focuses on the principle that education must develop cognitive capacities such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and social, ethical, and emotional abilities, and dispositions of the students. With the objective to inculcate the spirit of conceptual thinking among students there is emphasis on multi-disciplinary education.

(iii) In the <u>Civil Services Competency Dictionary</u> published by Department of Personnel &Training, GOI, Conceptual Thinking has been defined in the efficiency dimension of the functioning of a civil servant. Herein Conceptual Thinking is defined 'as the understanding of a situation or environment by putting the pieces together and identifying patterns that may not be obviously related, connecting the dots while resisting stereotyping'. The different levels involved in the application of conceptual thinking in office environment to solve issues and problems has also been delineated in this document. The gist of these steps is given as under:

(a) <u>Level 1: Applying basic rules:</u> This includes application of common sense and past experiences to identify causal relations, patterns etc or their absence in addressing the issue/issues under consideration.

(b) <u>Level 2: Recognizes Patterns</u>: This step involves quickly identifying key issues or patterns in day-to-day situations, derive conscious rationale or its absence from recurring situations or events and further evolve own hypothesis to current situation or problem.

(c) <u>Level 3: Applies Learning</u>: At this stage, use well-chosen analogies to illustrate an issue or a situation, apply and modify complex learned concepts appropriately, consider how well situations are described by existing models, reach conclusions by identifying the similarities and differences between situations. Also take a step back to see the bigger picture.

(d) <u>Level 4: Clarifies complex situations to Stakeholders</u>: At this stage, communicate the 'big picture' clearly to others by making complex ideas or situations clear, simple, and

understandable. Break down a complex issue into a useful model or illustration. Assemble ideas, issues, and observations into a clear and useful explanation.

(e) <u>Level 5: Develops new understanding/meaning</u>: Finally, develop new ideas that lead to greater efficiency and inclusiveness by looking at global best practices. Be ready to experiment without being constrained by bias, stereotypes, and traditional views. Propose new approaches to the Department and/ or Civil Services, propose alternative, radical hypotheses and test them/keep them in play. Redefine the understanding of stakeholder and community needs.

4. **Way ahead**

4.1   It is essential to address the barriers   to conceptual thinking in Civil Service. The quagmire of hierarchy, complacency, comfort inside the box, fear of failure is not encouraging the officers to come up with innovative solutions. They are in constant fear of the applicability of the rules to question their actions so much so that at times important decisions are delayed. Given the focus on rule-based administration, the officers are more keen on saving their skins than taking an upright decision.

4.2   <u>The concept of 'Karmayogi' with emphasis on role- based performance is aligned to the idea of conceptual thinking.</u> <u>If the officer is focused on the role assigned to him and the assessment of the officer is also aligned to the role assigned to him/her then automatically the officer will be encouraged to focus on his/her role rather than on the rules. Rules will remain important but for the sake of rules important government functions will not suffer.</u>

4.3   Role based performance for an officer has myriad dimensions. The officer will look at the big picture, patterns in past experiences while comprehending the issues, will be sensitive to the needs of the stakeholders and the citizens, will look beneath the surface for solutions, will do his/her due diligence not only in terms of rules but also in terms of the role assigned to him/her, will be better equipped for an advisory as well as executive role. Such officers with deep insights would be assets to the government like the 'Navratnas'[11] and 'Astadiggajas'[12] in the court of kings Akbar and Krishna Deva Raya respectively.

4.4   <u>Conceptual basis for Citizen-centric governance</u>: Our concern is citizen centric governance. Let us first understand the Conceptual basis of it. It is said that in conceptual thinking you must try

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[11] *The navratnas of Akbar were as follows: Raja Birbal, Miyan Tansen, Abul Fazal, Faizi, Raja Man Singh, Raja Todar Mal, Mullah Do Piazza, Fakir Aziao-Din, Abdul Rahim Khan-I-Khana.*
[12] *Ashtadiggajas is the collective title given to the eight Telugu scholars and poets in the court of Emperor Krishnadevaraya who ruled the Vijayanagara Empire .*

to answer at least 5 whys in sequence. Answering 5 whys in this context gave me following answers:

(i) Because we the people of India chose to be a Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic nation.

(ii) Autocracy or monarchic rule was the order of government system in India prior to British rule. India wanted to be a Republic where any person could rise to the highest level of the political power in the country.

(iii) India's struggle for freedom from British hegemony was a mass movement led by Father of our Nation Mahatma Gandhi. For involvement of people the specific tools introduced were Satyagraha, Ahimsa, Swadeshi wherein people of India played a significant role.

(iv) Pockets of dissent seen today in the country in the form of insurgency, militancy, naxalism, poverty, unemployment, inflation resulting in law and order issues at times.

(v) The poor image of the Government in the minds of the large sections points towards inefficient and ineffective administration.

4.5   Why conceptual thinking for citizen centric governance?

Conceptual thinking is the answer to challenges like the global pandemic COVID 19. Mass vaccination drive in speed is the outcome of citizen centric approach. Making the best of demographic dividend in the country requires in depth understanding of requirements of skills in the various sectors of the economy. The agenda of inclusive development calls for big picture thinking. This calls for understanding the inner faults in the system that needs to be plugged for seamless flow of outcomes and proper targeting. There is need to establish connect with the requirements of the citizens. There is need to evolve a system which is efficient in terms of providing delivery, last mile connectivity.

4.6   How is absence of conceptual thinking impacting work?

(1) Results not commensurate with efforts put in - Whether what we are proposing is sought for by the citizens or not. This aspect is missed.

(2) Outcome not very often as per the amount of funds invested. In the absence of conceptual thinking not looking at the sustainable and maintenance aspects of projects very often the projects remain non-productive and burdensome.

(3) In day to day functioning if conceptual clarity on the objectives and outcomes expected is lacking then lop-sided policies are prepared which need amendment, they remain redundant, often resulting in embarrassing situation for the government.

5. Inculcating Conceptual Thinking skills in Civil Servants:

5.1   Developing Conceptual Thinking Skills is crucial to role-based performance by officers. Conceptual skill can be cultivated at various levels of the government:

5.2   Cultivating conceptual skill at the managerial level:

(i) For cultivation of conceptual thinking among civil servants, right amount of stress needs to be created. Science behind this is that any verbal stimuli creating slightest feeling of discomfort activates three cerebral structures viz. amygdala, verbal areas of the neo cortex and the hippocampus very essential for sequential thinking.

(ii) As a leader, developing conceptual thinking in one's team would require sitting with your team on issues which require digging deep, connecting the dots, exploring the reasons for failure, finding out cases of success, how the pattern in these success scenarios can be replicated in the case of problem at hand with emphasis on new solution.

(iii) Giving due importance to the role of an Advisers/Financial Advisers/Economic Advisers in such discussions.

(iv) The team leader must motivate and mentor his team into ideating and creating innovative ideas and concepts rather than act as a hierarchical super boss. A bossy environment demotivates conceptual thinking.

5.3   <u>Cultivating conceptual skill at the staff level</u>:

(i) By forming study circles specific to the Division, having weekly discussions with the team. The Division can identify such officers who have the in-depth knowledge of the key issues handled by the Division.

(ii) Officers having good institutional memory (having put in many years of service and having stayed in the Division for a longer duration than the Division head) need to be encouraged to speak up during the study circle meetings.

(iii) The officers with expertise in emerging technologies can be involved in looking at the big picture in terms of Big Data Analytics (view on unstructured data) if large unstructured datasets are to be employed in the exercise.

(iv) Looking beyond the data need to be encouraged, this would enable a search for obvious causal relations in past experiences, linkages, and relevance of the same for finding solution to the problem under consideration.

(v) A presentation on the new learnings needs to be made before the study circle for further brainstorming.

(vi) Understanding evolved in the process would enable the team to create or find many possible/feasible solutions to the problem.

(vii) Such study circles in the Ministry/Department and across Ministries/ Departments can remain connected through a portal where the new learnings and solutions are posted for further comments to get a complete systemic view on the actions to be proposed.

6. Take away points

The key takeaway points are given as under:

- Conceptual Thinking is an important skill for performance both at the personal level and the professional level.

- Conceptual thinking involves digging underneath the surface of a problem and understanding deeper meanings behind problems.

- The conceptual thinker is the acceptor of ostensive concepts, ventures beyond the narrow confines of their acceptance and application, commits himself/herself to logical propositions which though compatible to primitive logic, no longer belong to it.

- Describe the concept and the understanding in the form of theory or any other way. If the understanding is not made public one can never achieve the goal.

- Based on the understanding imagine as many solutions as possible to the problem.

- Conceptual thinking helps us to deal with more and more complex problems in a world which is moving much faster now owing to globalization and digitization.

- Emerging working model from conceptual thinking would imply working with different teams across the world.

- In India, already Government is concerned about looking at the conceptual basis of problems and issues and is keen on developing conceptual skills among its Civil servants.

- Conceptual thinking is an important skill for citizen- centric governance.

7. Conclusions:

A Sanskrit invocation reproduced below very well captures the essence of the path which calls for conceptual thinking:

ॐ असतो मा सद्गमय ।

तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय ।

मृत्योर्मा अमृतं गमय ।

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥[13]

In 2020, COVID-19 pandemic brought with it an atmosphere of darkness and gloom all around (industrial to agrarian and most developed to laggard developing ones alike). The whole world was in a near standstill and in locked down mode. It is during this period that in May 2020, India conceived and announced the concept of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' or self-reliant India. In the words of PM Narendra Modi, the concept is defined as "When India speaks of becoming self-reliant, it doesn't advocate a self-centred system. In India's self-reliance, there is a concern for the whole world's happiness, cooperation and peace". The intent is to put India firmly on the path to a $5 trillion economy, a long-stated goal of the government. The concept of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' carries with it the need for   conceptual thinking and required action to make India 'brain and tech hub' of the world, factory of the world and promoting domestic start-up story. India is steadily moving towards these goals.

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[13] Meaning: *Lead us from the unreal to the real*
Lead us from darkness to light
Lead us from death to immortality
Aum peace, peace, peace!

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