

# **A Study on Evolution of Indian Administrative System**

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## **Abstract**

The present study is organized into analyzing the evolution of Indian public administration, the several acts passed during this period (1858-1950), the main features of the system introduced by those acts, and how they brought about reforms in the Indian administration. In the nearly four thousand years-long administrative history of India, three imperial and unitary forms of administrative systems — the Mauryan (or Kautilya), the Mughal, and the British are considered to be the greatest landmarks in the evolution of the Indian Administrative system and institutions in India. The Indian administrative structure is large, a legacy of the British rule. The various structural and functional aspects of Indian Administration like secretariat system, all-India services, recruitment, training, office procedures, local administration, district administration, budgeting, auditing, centralizing tendency, police administration, revenue administration, and so on, have their roots in the British rule.

**Keywords:** Indian Administration, Colonial Legacy, Government.

## **Introduction**

Concern about reforming public administration in India is not something new. What is new is the context in which it is being talked about today. The period beginning from 1991 is marked by the emergence of a liberal economic regime that is attempting to dismantle the centrally directed framework of economic development. It is also the beginning of the period when the international multilateral agencies have begun attaching conditionalities while giving aid. These conditionalities initially were limited to prescriptions on how the aid would be administered but have gradually broadened their scope by suggesting reforms in the overall framework of governance itself. This is happening all over the world. Reform is in the air and no country is left out of this global discourse. Changes in the intellectual climate that provided a new understanding of the role and scope of public administration propels this

discourse while 'Reinventing Government' summarises and celebrates this new understanding.

## **The Colonial Legacy**

The building blocks for the study of public administration in India were provided by the contribution of many British administrators mainly belonging to the Indian Civil Service. Many of these contributions were in the nature memoirs and apart from being descriptive of the customs and manners of Indian society were rich in detail of the working of the British Indian administration. One of the major outcomes of these writings was the creation of what has come to be known as the 'ICS mythology' and a romantic view of field administration. One of the premier representatives of the most romanticized version of the role of the ICS is 'The Guardians', the second volume of Philip Woodruff's well-known study 'The Men Who Ruled India' (1954). Even though Woodruff asserted that the term guardians was his own, several writers (ex-civil servants) joined him in perpetuating the myth of the altruistic characteristics of the ICS in which platonic guardianship and men being of superior virtue dominated. The love of outdoor life, commitment to the district and the welfare of its population, courage and daring in decision making, independence and integrity were among the many other virtues that the ICS seemed to possess. The Indian members of the ICS helped in perpetuating these myths through their own writings in the post-independence era.

A number of scholars particularly British also joined in this chorus. A rhetorical question like the following was asked: "How is it, that 760 British members of the ruling Indian Civil Service could as late as 1939, in the face of the massive force of India national movement led by Gandhi, held down 378 million Indians?" Such a question implied that the British had the skills to govern India. This assertion was based on three essential myths: a. the myth of the popularity of the civil service as a profession that attracted the best minds; b. the myth of efficiency in administering India; and c. the myth of sacrificial esprit de corps of the ICS which ostensibly infused the government with the primary concern of working for the welfare of the people. For the British, the perpetuation of this myth served many functions. It came as a defence of British imperialism in the court of world public opinion. Teddy Roosevelt, at the end of his second term as President in 1909, cited British administration in India as a prime example of overwhelming advancement achieved as a result of white or European rule among the 'peoples who dwell in the darker corners of the earth' (Spangenburg 1976:7). It also

helped assuage internal opinion in England reassuring the British ruling classes that the British rule was beneficial to India.

### **The Reform Effort**

The emphasis on the schism between the old and the new gained scholarly attention really after Paul Appleby, a Professor at Syracuse University, was invited by the Government of India to report on Indian administration. He expressed the view that there was a dichotomy between bureaucratic dispositions and development needs in India (Appleby 1953). Some Ford Foundation experts reinforced this view when they recalled their work in community development programmes, commented that ‘...the inadequacies of the Indian bureaucracy are not due to the fact that it is bureaucracy but due to considerable fact that it carries too much baggage from the past’ (Taylor et al. 1966). This view gained further support when scholars like La Palombara (1963) wrote ‘Public Administration steeped in the tradition of the Indian Civil Service may be less useful as developmental administrators than those who are not so rigidly tied to the notions of bureaucratic status, hierarch and impartiality’.

Simultaneously, the development administration movement was gaining momentum within the discipline of public administration. This thrust had several dimensions among whom at least two dominated. One was of professionalisation of administration through the acceptance of a management orientation. It was argued that management techniques and tools could be used successfully to improve the implementation of development programmes and administrators must spent significant time and effort in learning these techniques and applying them. Improved education and training became the core efforts at professionalisation.

Another dimension of this movement had to do with change of behavioural orientation of public administrators. This focus was aptly summed up by a leading contributor when he suggested that only by becoming less oligarchic, less technocratic, less stratified, closer to the administered and the managed, more deeply rooted in the aspirations and needs of the ordinary people, only by such changes can public service become a force with which the people of a developing country may identify and they may have justified confidence (Gross 1974).

It was this message that the academics and consultants from the West, particularly the United States, brought to India and through financial and technical aid influenced the theory and

practice of public administration in the country. The Ford Foundation alone spent US\$360,400 in grants to institutions and US\$76,000 in providing consultants and specialists to improve public administration in India during 1951–62 (Braibanti 1966). An important consequence of this financial and technical aid as well as the intellectual thrust of development administration was that it began to be believed that change in the colonial administrative system lies in changing the behavior and the professional capacity of the individual bureaucrat. This was possible through education and training programs. Training institutions proliferated and studies that supported this broad argument multiplied. A large number of scholars were attracted to the field of development administration, motivated not only by scholarly reasons but also by the belief that administration was the instrument of change and administrative behaviour could be transformed without structural changes in the colonial administrative structure and procedure.

During the period 1952–1966, policies of administrative reform were heavily influenced by the developments in disciplinary understanding of public administration in the United States and the perceptions of these academics and consultants of the problems of administration in developing countries, such as India. It was at the request of the Government of India that Ford Foundation readily made available Prof. Paul Appleby of Syracuse University to suggest changes in the administrative system in the country. He presented a Report in 1953 that set the tone of much of what was done later. What is important to note is that until 1966, no other committee was appointed to have a broad look at administration. As a consequence of the Appleby Report Organization and Methods, divisions were established in each government department to take care of the everyday issues of procedural efficiency. Another recommendation of Paul Appleby to establish an Indian Institute of Public Administration was also accepted. This Institute was supposed to take up reform measures on a continuous basis but based on research studies.

### **Failure of Reform Effort**

One possible reason that administrative reform failed to make a dent into the inherited administrative system was the weakness on the conceptual front. No alternative was offered. What was offered was ways to improve the existing system. In addition, these ways were too inconsequential. Intellectually, adherence to the Weberian model and Taylorian norms of work considerably constrained the generation of alternatives. Overwhelming academic response to administrative problems was through analyses of structural attributes that caused

bottlenecks in coordination or communication, or of the behavioural irritants that led to friction either in a team of bureaucrats only or one of bureaucrats and politicians. The prescription was already decided and not questioned, and therefore, when the problems persisted, the solution was to increase the dosage of further division of labour, and specialization or tighten controls through improved lines of communications and authority.

The problem was that the empirical insights did not reflect the dominant concerns in the intellectual study of public administration, where Weberian influences held the attention of most scholars who explained variations in administrative performance by examining issues of neutrality, training and professionalism, structure of hierarchies, and processes of work and behavioural orientations. Another source of explanation was the emphasis on the abilities and qualities of an individual and the belief that it was an individual who made the difference whatever be the structural constraints. A development oriented bureaucrat implemented programmes well in spite of the prevailing administrative system. The memoirs of the civil servants are replete with illustrations that show how they as individuals dealt with new political issues.

Little concern for administrative reform was expressed in the 1970s and later. Severe indictment of the civil service was made by the Shah Commission of Inquiry, which reported that they carried out instructions from politicians and administrative heads on personal and political considerations. There were many cases, where officers carried favor with politicians by doing what they thought the people in authority desired. In short, the evidence showed, as a journalist remarked, “(the Emergency was) the high water-mark of the politician’s victory in the long drawn out struggle against the civil service”.

In the last two decades, the story of administration as an impediment to development has taken a drastic turn. If the beginning of the Plan period saw an effort to strengthen state intervention as recipe for triggering development, the 1980s ended with disastrous accounts of failures of regulatory and interventionist states and with strong pleas to dismantle state machinery and its roles. Neo-liberal economic theory tended to build its case on how rulers extract resources and invest them. It argued that rulers in interventionist states tend to use resources for their own benefit to the detriment of the development of their societies. The argument of state failure was based on how monopoly rents are created through the imposition of regulation and control of the economy. Political pressures dominate economic policy formulation and execution. A consequence of this system is that government

machinery is used for personal interests. The policy recommendation that follows from this diagnosis is to minimize state intervention and to rely increasingly on markets for resource use and allocation.

### **Renewed Efforts**

The above diagnosis of the failure of government in development led to rethinking about the structure and role of public administration. A kind of revolution occurred and the focus shifted from control of bureaucracy and delivery of goods and services to increasingly privatise government and shape its role as an entrepreneur competing with other social groups and institutions to provide goods and services to the citizens. The book of Osborne and Gaebler 'Reinventing Government' (1992) was a landmark in the growth of ideas that have sought to build a New Public Administration. Public administration was admonished to 'steer rather than row' for 'those who steer the boat have far more power than those who row it'. Since then, these ideas have swept across the world and the international/multilateral agencies have used them to influence public management of their economic aid programs. The common theme in the myriad applications of these ideas has been the use of market mechanisms and terminology, in which the relationship of public agencies and their customers is understood as based on self-interest, involving transactions similar to those occurring in the market place. Public managers are urged to steer not row their organizations and they are challenged to find new and innovative ways to achieve results or to privatise functions previously provided by government (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000). In this new world, the primary role of government is not merely to direct the actions of the public through regulation and decree, nor is it merely to establish a set of rules and incentives through which people will be guided in the proper direction. Rather government becomes another player in the process of moving society in one direction or another. Where traditionally government has responded to needs by saying "yes, we can provide service" or "no, we cannot," the new public service suggests that elected officials and public managers should respond to the requests of the citizens by saying "let us work together to figure out what we are going to do, and then make it happen" (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000).

Operationally, these ideas have advocated: a. managerially oriented administration; b. reducing public budgets; c. downsizing the government; d. selective privatization of public enterprises; e. contracting out of services; f. decentralization; g. transparency and accountability; and h. emphasis on civil society institutions and non-governmental

organizations to deliver goods and services. When India embarked upon an ambitious programme of economic reform in 1991, the ideas about public administration reform had already entered the package of aid that was promised by the World Bank and the IMF. It will be fair to say that they were reflecting a change in the disciplinary thrusts of public administration too. Country after country was deciding to change and reform their governments. There is little doubt that this change was being triggered by the wave of policies of structural adjustment and liberalization prompted by a new globalization set in after the collapse of Soviet Union. Therefore, while administrative reforms are profoundly domestic issues, the fact that they are being seen as part of package of the 'new deal' makes them open to external pressures and influences. Reform is stylish today, and there is more than a single reason why it is so. Technological changes are calling for managerial changes. The information technology with its computer base has caught the imagination of both administrators and politicians. Demands for greater decentralization are being met because of change in the political scenario. People's groups are becoming more aware of their rights and demanding improved government services that are transparent and accountable to them. This is apart from the influence that the international financial agencies are exercising on government to reform to be eligible for more loan/aid and directly funding NGOs to implement development programmes.

The effort at reducing the size of government began with successive budgets presented by the Union Finance Minister from 1992. The imperative need was to reduce the fiscal deficit and cut down on unproductive expenditure. In a bid to bring about fiscal prudence and austerity, the Centre imposed a 10% cut across the board in the number of sanctioned posts as on January 1, 1992. The Fifth Pay Commission that submitted its report contained a recommendation for a whopping one-third cut in government size in 10 years. The downsizing exercise was later taken up by the Expenditure Commission, which further recommended cut in the number of sanctioned posts as on January 1, 2000. As a matter of fact, instructions for cutting sanctioned posts were renewed in 2000 directing a 10% reduction in the posts created between 1992 and 1999 (Raina 2002). Statistics maintained by the Ministry of Finance show that pay and allowances bill of the central government was Rs. 33,977.79 crores for the year 1999–2000 showing a hike of Rs. 31,560.19 crores over the previous year. The number of central government civilian regular employees was 38.55 lakhs on March 1, 2000 down from 39.07 lakhs on March 31, 1999. There had been a decrease of

51,605 posts or of just 1.32% (Mishra 2002). As one can see, there is very little impact of these efforts.

In 1996, a Chief Secretaries Conference reiterated the popular policy prescriptions for a responsive and effective administration. The Conference recognised that the public image of the bureaucracy was one of inaccessibility, indifference, procedure orientation, poor quality and sluggishness, corruption proneness, and non-accountability for result (Government of India 1997a:1). The Fifth Pay Commission (Government of India 1997b) took the concerns of the Chief Secretaries listed among many of its recommendations the need to downsize the government and to bring about greater transparency and openness in government. Two developments of significance took place. A Chief Minister's Conference endorsed the issue of transparency through citizens' right to information in 1997. In addition, the concept of Citizen's Charter took shape. Both were a follow-up on the recommendations of the Pay Commission, which in turn was in a way responding to grassroots demands in villages of Rajasthan.

A people's organization in Rajasthan, known as Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), has been in the vanguard of this struggle and forced government to respond to the demands of information and accountability. As documented in Roy et al. (2001), the people began to understand that their livelihood, wages, and employment depended a great deal on the investments made by the government as a development agency. If these benefits were not coming, then they had the right to know where the investment occurred and how much of it was actually spent. The right to economic well-being got translated into right to information. As Roy et al. (Ibid) point out, the struggle became for 'hamara paisa hamara hisab'. In other words, accountability became a critical issue in the public hearings organized in five blocks of four districts. Four demands were made: transparency of development spending, accountability, sanctity of social audit, and redressal. This campaign began in 1994 and gradually gained momentum spreading to the most parts of the state. It reached to the level, where assurances had to be provided by the Chief Minister.

The essence of the campaign that steamrolled into a movement for right to information was the jan sunwai (public hearing), where villagers assembled to testify whether the public works that have been met out of the expenditures certified by the government actually exist or not. The first Jan sunwai was held in a village of Kot Kirana in 1994. Since then, they have caught the imagination of the MKSS that has held them at several places. Beawar was the

scene of a major event in April 1996. It was followed by a 40-day dharna in which activists were fed and sheltered by the public. Another 53-day dharna was organized at Jaipur (see Bunker Roy, *The Asian Age* 30 May 2001). The Rajasthan government responded reluctantly, but the Chief Minister ultimately announced that the people had the right to demand and receive details of expenditure on development works in their villages.

Three months after the event in Beawar, politicians, jurists, former bureaucrats, academics, and others joined in demanding right to information legislation at a conference in New Delhi. A committee under the chairmanship of Justice PB Sawant was authorised to draft a model bill. The central government too came under pressure to introduce legislation in the Parliament that could be followed by the states.

Government of India sets up a Working Group on Right to Information and Promotion of Open and Transparent Government in 1997. The terms of reference of the Group included the examination of feasibility and need to introduce a full-fledged Right to Information Act so as to meet the needs of open and responsive government. The Working Group placed its tasks within the broad framework of democracy and accountability and emphasised, 'democracy means choice, and a sound, and informed choice is possible only on the basis of knowledge' (Working Group Report 1997:3). It also argued that transparency and openness in functioning have a cleansing effect on the operations of public agencies and approvingly quoted the saying that sunlight is the best disinfectant.

The Working Group accepted the following broad principles to the formulation of the legislation:

- (a) Disclosure of information should be the rule and secrecy the exception.
- (b) The exceptions should be clearly defined.
- (c) There should be an independent mechanism for adjudication of disputes between the citizens and public authorities.

A draft bill has been prepared which was put to public debate and now the proposed legislation is lying with the Parliament for approval.

Transparency in government also became an issue on the agenda of the Conference of Chief Ministers held on 24 May 1997. The conference issued a statement that provided an Action Plan for Effective and Responsive Government at the Central and State levels. In this statement, the Chief Ministers recognised that secrecy and lack of openness in transactions

are largely responsible for corruption in official dealings. The government set for itself a time limit of three months to ensure easy access of the people to all information relating to Government activities and decisions, except to the extent required to be excluded on specific grounds, such as national security. The statement also gave an assurance that the Report of the Working Group on Right to Information would be quickly examined and legislation introduced before the end of 1997. Political events have taken over, and the Act has yet to come into existence.

## **Conclusion**

Some lessons can be drawn from the experience of administrative reforms in India. Those who resisted change have derived great inspiration from the support that Sardar Patel, India's first Home Minister, gave in saving the ICS and the steel frame. At the time of India's partition, he warned that chaos would result if the Civil Service were removed from the scene. Nehru agreed and civil service reform was not on high priority at the time when riots and uprisings had to be handled to maintain the integrity of the country. Since then, one crisis or the other has taken precedence and administrative reform commanded little attention. When it did, it was an administrative matter to be handled by the administrators themselves. The committees and commissions that came to review administration had administrators themselves as members. The administrators for purposes of feasibility of implementation processed even the recommendations of the Administrative Reforms Commission, 1966–1970, that had a wide range of consultations with people from various professions. One reason could be that the understanding of public administration was heavily influenced by a paradigm that was inward looking and perceived bureaucracy as a more or less autonomous instrument of implementing development policies and programmes.

Another could be that political leadership saw advantage in maintaining the status quo while continuing to articulate the need for radical reforms for public rhetoric. Mrs. Gandhi and her group quickly saw that civil service could be 'committed' while continuing the public posture of neutrality. The Emergency period and the subsequent years of 'transfer industry' are ample evidence of keeping to form rather than substance. Even in questions of downsizing the government, a mantra from 1992, the same evidence is forthcoming. The A level positions continue to remain largely untouched, while all reforms—reduction of positions or contracting out principles—are targeted at lower levels. The IAS or the IPS that has held critical positions in government has never been under scrutiny for reforms in spite of public

outcry against their role and behaviour. The only time that a serious attempt was made was when the Administrative Reforms Commission made the recommendation of delimiting areas of specialization in the secretariat and manning, these areas from personnel drawn from all sources through a mid-career competitive to include more specialists in the higher positions were made. This recommendation was scuttled and not accepted by the Government when the IAS itself sought specialization through training and postings.

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