



## Is bureaucracy the real culprit for all our woes?

**M**any in this country consider the Indian bureaucracy to be the prime suspect along with our political class for India not taking off the way it should have. They feel that because of many ills including the one emanating from our bureaucracy, India seems to have got stuck in a developmental time warp.

Now the point is, is that really so? Have we verily lost so much because of this behemoth, the formidable steel-frame bequeathed to us by the Raj when it departed from this country? No doubt, bureaucracy is to blame to some extent along with other usual suspects for many of our problems. But no good student of Indian developmental history would and should deny the credit that Indian bureaucracy deserves.

True, many of our time twins have surpassed us in the developmental rat race but isn't it also true that many of them have also fallen by the wayside. We always look at the successful to despise our own achievements without also looking at and comprehending the various inherent constraints India is burdened with. India's mind-boggling socio-cultural diversities along with an inequalitarian social structure often engender a fierce and noisy competition among various stake-holders in a liberal democratic setting.

The various political institutions are still undergoing frequent experiments in the light of emerging socio-political realities to reconcile the same with the demands of a young democracy. And it is heartening to note that India has slowly but successfully been able to not only stabilise its socio-political structure but has also been growing steadily in the international pecking order. And if all this has happened, the Indian bureaucracy, in the form of its permanent executive, does deserve some credit.

Comparing the incomparable is never advisable. Look at Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and many other countries in Africa and Latin America and then we can better appreciate our own achievements. We were fortunate in not only having some selfless, dedicated and committed leaders at the helm at the time of our independence who led us successfully through the many

initial teething troubles but we were also fortunate in having this strong institution of Indian bureaucracy which proved to be a great asset, something lacked by many.

And that is why the bureaucracy that is said to be so far hiding in a cocoon has itself been frantically trying to come out of it responding again to the logic and genius of time and place which have changed a lot by now. So, you have a slew of initiatives being taken right since the early nineties of the last century to reform the bureaucracy to make its functioning simpler, transparent, accessible and effective. Hence, the concept of a Facilitator Bureaucracy than that of a Provider Bureaucracy intoxicated with the opium of power and consequent feudal obeisance.

A society gets what it deserves. Bureaucracy cannot but be a reflection of the society it comes out of. We all agree that our values are at an all-time low. So as the value system of our society changes, so is changing the way people perceive the power and the bureaucracy. Some members of the bureaucracy, hidden behind the veil of Official Secrets Acts and such information which was not so far available to the people, so far could get away with many of their acts of omissions and commissions but no longer so. Not only is there a Right to Information in the offing, but there is also a much conscientised civil society ably assisted by a vibrant media and multiple interest groups which have put paid to the continuation of the lordly way in which the bureaucracy has functioned so far. Hence, the need for reform in bureaucracy and reform in the outlook of the people towards the bureaucracy.

While talking about the bureaucracy, we often forget that administration is not simply the All India Services or other Class-I services. It is, in fact, the entire machinery of the government at political level, the senior decision-making level and the implementation level. It is not only the District Magistrate at the district level but also the Patwari, the Tehsildar, the Revenue Officer, the Head Clerk, the policeman, the teacher of the government-run school, the doctor in the primary health centre and various elected officials of the panchayati raj institutions and all those at the lower rungs of the bureaucracy whose role is more crucial as it is the latter who come to contact with the hoi polloi on day to day basis.

It has often come to be seen that even though the senior officials are quite honest, it is the lower rung staff which has worsened the situation. Here, we would have to think of the whys and wherefores of their negative acts including the various ways to provide them a good career and incentive structure, something which is very much lacking in our system. Not only this, the bureaucracy also needs to be cushioned against the insidious and motivated transfers which often demoralise it from effectively and efficiently executing its assigned tasks. The reforms suggested by the various pay commissions should also need to be revisited and implemented after suitable discussions.

So, tinkering with bureaucracy would be of no avail unless and until we do the same for the whole society and the system at various levels. If we really wish to translate to goals of the welfare state that India is, we need reforms at every level, from top to bottom with better incentive and monitoring structure backed by a sound education and value system.

Today, we need a conscientised civil society ably assisted by a vibrant Fourth Estate to make informed choice about every important issue at hand. We also need a well-oiled

education system backed by a positive value system and a sound top-to-bottom bureaucratic and political structure with proper incentives and an effective system of checks and balances before we can actually expect to get our deserved place in the sun. So, all our ills as seen from time to time are due to the process of churning and transition undergoing in a democratic but inequalitarian society trying to come to terms with newer realities. We cannot keep on blaming our bureaucracy only for the same as there are multiple factors which could be attributed to the same. But, our bureaucracy does need to keep reinventing and rediscovering itself to acclimatise and adapt itself to emerging demands and challenges of an increasingly developing India.

### Salient Points

- We always look at the successful to despise our own achievements without also looking at and comprehending the various inherent constraints India is burdened with.
- Comparing the incomparable is never advisable. Look at Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and many other countries in Africa and Latin America and then we can better appreciate our own achievements.
- A society gets what it deserves. Bureaucracy cannot but be a reflection of the society it comes out of.
- There is need for reform in bureaucracy and reform in the outlook of the people towards the bureaucracy.
- We often forget that administration is not simply the All India Services or other Class-I services.
- But it includes all those at the lower rungs of the bureaucracy whose role is more crucial as it is the latter who come to contact with the hoi polloi on day to day basis.
- Today, we need a conscientised civil society ably assisted by a vibrant Fourth Estate to make informed choice about every important issue at hand.
- We cannot keep on blaming our bureaucracy only for the same as there are multiple factors which could be attributed to the same.

### Glossary

**Behemoth:** any creature or thing of monstrous size or power

**Bequeathed:** to dispose of (personal property, especially money) by last will

**Despise:** to regard with contempt

**Hoi polloi:** the common people