

ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS IN INDIA: NEED FOR SYSTEMS APPROACH TO PROBLEM-SOLVING

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ABSTRACT

In review of Indian administrative structure in 1950s, Appleby certified Indian Civil Service to be one of the best in the world. While there is still a lot to commend the civil service for, this article will focus exclusively on the deficiencies that have crept in the services over last few years. This should not be taken to mean that all is wrong with it. The article does, however, attempt to present the critique of the service from the perspective of an insider with a view to rid it of its malaise. Despite its notable achievements, over last five decades, disenchantment with public administration in India has dramatically increased. It is criticized for inefficiency, lack of professionalism, irresponsiveness, nepotism and corruption. After the assumption of power by UPA government, civil services have come under a real scanner. The government appointed an expert committee, under the chairmanship of the Hota committee, to review and suggest changes to the administrative structure. The committee submitted its report recently. It suggested changes in recruitment and performance appraisal system, opening of civil service position to outsiders and relaxing norms pertaining to removal from service to shake complacency of the civil servants. This article argues that these proposals are too restrictive in nature and scope. They are limited to changes in the upper echelon of bureaucracy. These don't just exclude a large part of bureaucracy from the reform efforts, but also fail to address the factors external to the administration that hinge upon its performance. To be specific, the article presents evidence of the linkage between the deficiencies in the political, electoral and judicial system and the decline in performance of civil service. It reasons that it is meaningless to talk of administrative reforms without undertaking simultaneous reforms in political and electoral system. Finally, it suggests a more comprehensive reform agenda to improve the performance of civil service, and above all emphasizes the need for adopting the systems approach to problem-solving.

INTRODUCTION

The performance of public administration in India has come under close scrutiny in the last few years. Rampant corruption, inefficiencies, wastages and irresponsiveness to the needs of citizens are some of the commonly acknowledged problems afflicting the administration. While these problems are common to all the levels in government, the spotlight has firmly been on the uppermost echelon of the bureaucracy- the Indian Civil Service (ICS or service).

ICS was constituted as Imperial Civil Service in 1886-87 by British colonial rulers and has continued virtually in the same form ever since (Indian Civil Service, 2006). When the Constituent Assembly gathered to draft the constitution for free India, most of its

members were in favor of dissolution of ICS. Given the history of freedom movement and the use of State apparatus to curb it, this was not surprising. Most freedom fighters did not understand that the service at whose hands they suffered was performing its duty to implement the law and the law was not made by the members of the services. It was made by a colonial power. However, Sardar Patel who was first Home Minister of India felt that without an apolitical, efficient civil service it was well nigh impossible to govern and keep India together. In a letter to Prime Minister Nehru, he wrote, "I need hardly emphasize that an efficient, disciplined, and contented service, assured of its prospects as a result of diligent and honest work is a *sine qua non* of sound administration under a democratic regime even more than under an authoritarian rule. The service must be above party and we should ensure that political considerations, either in its recruitment or in its discipline and control, are reduced to the minimum, if not eliminated altogether." (Nehru, 1999) In the end, he prevailed upon the leadership of Indian National Congress and the Constituent Assembly. And ICS was not just retained but was granted wide-ranging civil service protections under Article 311 of Indian Constitution itself. Once Patel succeeded in convincing the Constituent Assembly about the necessity of retaining ICS, the assembly went with him all the way and accepted the ICS as it then existed. It felt that the change in the men manning the service by itself would make a difference to the way it responded to the Indian public and its representatives, the politicians (Nehru, 1999).

While ICS has basically persisted with this structure without much change till date, its performance appears to be on the decline. Admittedly, corruption and inefficiency are serious issues facing public administration in India. India is ranked lowly 88th in Corruption Perception Index by Transparency International, despite being a free democratic country with liberal constitutional structure. The Alagh Committee appointed to study performance of civil services made a special mention of the decline in the levels of integrity among civil servants (Kaur, 2001). Guhan and Paul (1997) believe that corruption in India has gone ballistic over the last decade. While there are no statistics specific to corruption in the ICS, it is believed that "...over half of the officers have joined the politicians in corrupt practices." (Nehru, 1999) In the first 25 years of free India, ICS was believed to be largely free of corruption, though it was even then often accused of being elitist, remote, and inaccessible to common man. Over next quarter century, while it has become more and more accessible, the corruption has been steadily shooting up. Apart from corruption, the Alagh Committee noted, "A negative orientation, declining professionalism, intellectual sluggishness and a lack of ability to acquire new knowledge, un-dynamic outlook and, at times, a complete lack of intellectual honesty as some of the other weaknesses of the ICS." (Kaur, 2001)

The decay and decline of "steel frame" has increasingly become a matter of concern. In early 1950s when Paul Appleby visited India to suggest changes to its administrative machinery, he certified Indian Civil Service to be one of the best in the world. 'This scenario began to change after the death of Nehru and other statesmen in mid-1960s. The period 1977-80 witnessed the accentuation of some of the malpractices and distortions of the political system. Some of these malpractices began to degenerate into criminal practices and led to criminalization of the political system in many areas.' (Gadkari, 1996)

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

To address the issue, in the past also, a large number of commissions and expert committees have been set up to review the functioning of ICS and administration. These expert groups have basically limited their recommendations to making minor adjustments to the structure. They have implicitly assumed that the present system to be the best possible system, which with minor corrections and modifications can be rid of all its evils and shortcomings. Hahn Been Lee, who studied reform efforts in developing countries including India believes, "Administrative reforms have mainly been associated with staff services such as personnel, budgeting, and organization method. Administrative techniques and procedures were the main objects. Few reform projects were conceived in terms of substantive programs or institutions." (Singh, 2005: 24)

After the assumption of power by Congress-led United People's Alliance (UPA) at the center, reform efforts have gained momentum, partly because UPA government contested with an agenda of governance reforms, but mainly because the current prime minister is believed to be an honest reformer. While the efforts to reform governance have increased and become more concerted, it is surprising that the agenda has not altered in its breadth or scope. The reforms that are being suggested include, among others, changes in the recruitment and performance appraisal system, opening up of senior positions to "outsiders", increase in emoluments, declaration of assets, attachment of ill-gotten property of officials and summary dismissal of corrupt civil servants by amending Article 311 of the Constitution. As is easily discernible, these changes are still very much within the confines of what may be termed as "Hahn Been Lee Limits" -- reform agenda limited to changes in staffing.

These proposals do not address the core issues and challenges facing the administrative services in India. Before going into further details, let us consider what these proposals purport to achieve and how far they are likely to succeed. The changes in recruitment system envisage reduction in age at the time of recruitment. This recommendation has found special favor with training institutions since they feel that increase in average age at recruitment has limited their effectiveness in "shaping the trainees" to their liking. The government initially toyed with a radical idea of recruiting officers at very young age and increasing the length of training to about five years. This position was echoed by Cabinet Secretary Chaturvedi, who is the highest ranking bureaucrat in the country, said: "At the age of 17-18, their value system can be molded. Molding value system when a person is 30 and married with a family is a tall order." (Chand, 2006) This recommendation was slightly modified by the Hota Committee that was appointed by UPA government to review and suggest changes to the administrative system. It recommended the reduction in the maximum age at recruitment from 30 years to 24 years with no change in the present system of training for two years.

The changes in performance appraisal system envisage moving from confidential to open appraisal system, and outlining the career path of an officer at the time of annual appraisal. In the confidential appraisal system, no officer is theoretically expected to be told how his he performed and how he was graded. Therefore, there is no scope for feedback unless you get an adverse remark in your appraisal. However, if an adverse entry is made, the officer concerned has a right to appeal against it. This involves quasi-judicial and judicial process, which is entirely too much of an effort in justifying your evaluation. As a result, in practice, it is very rare that anyone is given an adverse

remark. Over a period of time, this appraisal system has virtually become meaningless. It is expected that making performance appraisal system more “private-sector” like would help improve the performance of public servants.

Opening up some civil service positions to non-career civil servants is expected to provide competition to career officers and shake them out of complacency. “The main problem the civil service faces today is that it is no longer getting the right talent either at the junior level or at the top. There are a very few good officers left in the service. The first solution, therefore, is to create competition by increasing the supply of good officers in the system” (Bhattacharya, 2005) It is suggested that this objective can be achieved by inducting top private sector managers in the civil service positions, if necessary by giving competitive compensation packages. For existing civil servants, the Fifth Pay Commission recommended about 20% increase in the emoluments and benefits, and of course this recommendation was promptly accepted. This increase in emoluments is supposed to provide some sort of parity between private and public sector salaries and lessen the incentives for corruption. Simultaneously, making provisions on declaration of assets and attachment of ill-gotten property more stringent is expected to act as disincentive to corruption.

It is also true that civil service protection and widely prevalent belief in life-long job security encourages non-performance. Therefore, it makes apparent sense to relax rules pertaining to removal from service on grounds of inefficiency, corruption and non-performance. Therefore, it is suggested that Article 311 of the constitution be amended to provide for summary dismissal of civil servants if they exhibit doubtful integrity or lack of competence.

WILL THE REFORM AGENDA SUCCEED?

How radical is this reform agenda and how likely is it to succeed? Let’s briefly consider different reform proposals severally at first before anticipating their impact in totality. Reduction in age at recruitment essentially is a policy recommendation that advocates reverting back to the age limits prevalent in 1970s. For this recommendation to be meaningful, a number of factors need to be established. First, it has to be shown that the training institutions have higher success rate in molding officers recruited at younger age than their older colleagues. Secondly, it has to be established that the younger officers show better inclination to stay honest. Third, younger officers show better understanding of job requirements and deliver better results. Since there have been no empirical studies to substantiate or contradict the recommendation, we will have to limit our analysis to the organizational folklore and such other evidence as is available. If this recommendation is true, we should expect a difference in the performance of officers recruited together, commonly known as batch of officers, but at significant age difference. One would also expect all batches prior to mid-1970s to perform better than the recent batches. From my knowledge and experience in ICS, unfortunately neither of the facts stands up to the scrutiny of the facts. In fact, the organizational folklore considers the length of service, and not the age, as the determinant of the decline in efficiency and integrity.

It is commonly joked around that every year a civil servant loses one column from his vertebra and therefore by the time he reaches final lap in service, he has no backbone left and bends towards any side the pressure forces him to. "Even comparatively straight and honest officers when reaching the end of their career have been known to have completely lost their spine in the hope of securing sinecure post-retirement jobs." (Mathur, 2004) This view holds that all officers are more or less equally likely to show commitment to values, however over a period of time, officers learn to compromise and adjust. Of course, there are significant differences in the meaning and the extent of what constitutes a compromise to different officers.

Secondly, it is in a sense in contradiction to the recommendation on professionalizing the services. Most recruits entering services at older age are the ones who have graduate degrees with practical experiences in management, engineering, accounting, community services or other professions. These recruits bring their experience in private organizations to the civil service, which has an effect that is similar to opening of the profession to outsiders. Because apart from bringing their knowledge, skill, and professional ethics; they also tend to have peers in private sector to compete with at a personal level.

Thirdly, wittingly or unwittingly, this recommendation is a negation of gains made by lobby for affirmative action. The age limits have been raised in response to demands of the experts who felt that it helped poorer and weaker sections to gain entry into the system, for unlike students from richer background who could devote their energies exclusively to study and prepare for rigorous competition, these people needed to support themselves and their education. If this is true, rolling back the age limits would help the more affluent or privileged sections within different communities. This recommendation, therefore, has the potential to be construed as an attempt by the elite to fight back.

There is a mixed reaction to changes in the appraisal system. Some experts are cautiously positive; others believe it to be a minor change. Bhattacharya (2005) states considers "...while a transition from a closed and secret system of evaluation to one where the officers have the right to know how they are being rated is a positive change, it is naïve to believe that the IAS system will permit a group of senior officers to make a bold and candid assessment of their colleagues." (Bhattacharya, 2005) The moot point in this respect, however, is that even when the appraisal was confidential, superior officers found it extremely difficult to make bold judgments about their junior colleagues. Even where they knew an officer to be corrupt or incompetent, they gave him a good appraisal most likely out of concerns for political viability or organizational culture. If the evaluation is open, in my opinion as an insider, it is extremely likely that superior officers will feel more pressured to give a good appraisal report to avoid political fall-out. The open appraisal is more likely to succeed if the politicization of services is avoided to a substantial degree.

CONDITIONS THAT MUST BE SATISFIED

Throwing open civil service position to outsiders is a good recommendation if three conditions are satisfied. First, there are no officers within the service who can do the job

equally good. Second, this option would not be utilized as a mean of patronage and nepotism. Third, the people thus hired will be given the autonomy necessary to deliver goods. As it happens, in most of the cases, none of these conditions are met to any satisfactory result. If competence is the criteria, ICS fortunately is not devoid of talent. In fact, of late, tendency to ignore the competent officers has been on the rise. Second, in a country just emerging from princely rules and that has long history of nepotism, including class and caste considerations, it is not clear that the political class, without considerable changes to their accountability mechanism as shown later in the article, can be trusted to hire people on the basis of their ability to perform the job better.

Finally, even when people have been hired directly from outside of civil service, they have not been given adequate power, autonomy and responsibility to make any impact. In fact, there has hardly been any effort to make change the institutional structures. Under the circumstances, merely co-opting private sector managers is not going to be of much help. It is also possible that it might exacerbate the problem since higher competition in the present scenario translates into higher pressure for pliability, which has, of late, been noted as a serious concern with ICS. Chandra (2006: 28), for example, notes that, "...the present-day civil servants have become subservient to politicians..... They are highly politicized and even divided along party lines and do not seem to mind politicians walking all over them so long as the important postings are secured..... Merit is no longer the criteria for a posting but factors like money, caste, proximity with political bigwigs are." If it is true, is it advisable to restrict the choice available to politicians to civil servants or expand it?

Provision for disclosure of assets is not a new feature at all. All public servants, including politicians, are expected to file their annual property returns -- a provision that is breached more often than observed, and such flagrant violation is overlooked without any qualms. Finally, let's discuss the proposal to relax the rules governing disciplinary action and removal from the service. It is true that the present rules and norms place significant restriction against arbitrary dismissal and provide significant protection to civil servants. However, there is no case where the government wanted to remove someone but could not because of such protections. Conversely, a large number of cases can be cited where officers were found guilty and recommended for removal despite such lengthy, involved and cumbersome procedure, but no action was or has been taken against them. It suggests that need to search for factors other than the rules and procedure that might be the root-cause. In fact, for reasons that are elaborated later in this article, I would argue that relaxing these rules will increase the pressure on civil servants to be even more pliable, which is contrary to the aims that reformers purport to pursue.

Outlining the agenda and need for reforms, Cabinet Secretary Chaturvedi stated that "he wanted non-performers to go out and upright officers to get more protection." (Chand, 2006: 29) While I agree with his assertion of the need for weeding out deadwood in officialdom, I don't see how present agenda can help meet this object. In their present form, these measures constitute no more than half-hearted tinkering at the edges at best, and harmful declension at worst. Even when taken together, they don't amount to much. They are nowhere near as radical as they are made out to be. "These are all marginal changes that seek to correct anomalies in the system that could have been eliminated long ago." (Bhattacharya, 2005; 56) What is even more noteworthy is the fact that the proposals do not cover more than 99% of total public administrative staff, which is

much more notorious for corruption, inefficiency, irresponsiveness, and pliability (Debroy, 2004). In fact, as a result of politicization of this lower level functionaries, including state civil services, ICS finds that it doesn't have adequate control over the organizations anymore. The proposals cover neither how they propose to address the similar problems at a much higher magnitude with non-ICS employees in the public administration, nor how they seek to address this control issue.

Further, much of what is being advocated now is not new either. "All these are changes that have been recommended by some government committee or the other in the last 30 years." (Bhattacharya, 2005: 151) An editorial in *The Hindu* riled the government after Hota Committee submitted its report. "One wonders what the government does with such reports. There was one some years ago by Surendra Nath committee. No one knows what happened to it, or to other reports submitted by other distinguished bodies such as the 5th Pay Commission." (Ghose, 2006) Most commentators blame the bureaucracy for not preventing these recommendations from getting accepted and implemented. Ghose (2006: 38), for example, states that, "It is as if these reports are simply swallowed up by the bureaucratic machine, and life goes on as usual."

BUREAUCRATIC RELUCTANCE TO CHANGE

These commentators ascribe two reasons for bureaucratic reluctance to change. First is bureaucratic inertia and lethargy. "One can understand the reluctance of the bureaucracy to accept recommendations that would curb its present manner of functioning, and alter the rather comfortable manner in which civil servants go about their day-to-day work." (Ghose, 2006; 38) The second is their resentment at being perceived as dishonest or incompetent. "One can also appreciate that such reports generate a certain amount of indignation because, contrary to the picture that is sometimes painted of the services, all officers are not a set of dishonest, incompetent people; on the other hand, for the most part, they are people who do their work as best they can, are not dishonest, are fairly efficient, with some being a little more so than others." (Ghose, 2006: 28) A survey of literature suggests that there has been very little attempt to search for alternative reasons for non-implementation of these measures and this seems to be the generally-accepted position. This is despite the fact that the politicization of bureaucracy is commonly acknowledged to be the major source for decline in the performance of civil service. While there is some truth in the allegation, it is not the complete truth. It is flattering, indeed, to believe that the services still retain adequate power to stall the changes that have been accepted by the popularly elected leaders against their wishes.

PRINCIPAL-AGENT RELATIONSHIPS

This article takes a contrarian view and suggests that the policy-makers are not really interested in the real reforms. In other words, what is suggested here is that in the Indian context, the problem is not that the agent (bureaucracy) is not responsive to the agenda set by the principal (elected representatives), but that the honest and good performance by the agent is in fact against the interest of the principal. This essentially means that

“civil services suffer more from problems external to them, especially those related to the environment in which they function. To put it bluntly, it is the excessive politicization of the civil services that hampers their performance, more than anything else. (Mathur, 2004) In stating this I don't mean to exonerate the services of their share of culpability. I merely intend to depict a vicious cycle in which public administration in India is caught up for the purpose of advocating a holistic, systemic approach for satisfactory resolution of the problem.

The first component of this cycle is the nature of electoral politics in modern democracies. As noted by Harold Lasswell, “The competition for occupying or controlling the power apparatus of society has become quiet intense. It often assumes a form in which no holds are barred.” (Bhagat, 1996: 9) This development is accompanied by the rise of career politicians. Politics is no longer the preserve of wealthy statesmen whose only interest in politics is to perform public service. Today, politician is an individual who makes his living by winning the elections (Tullock, 1999: 18). Now, since politics is viewed as an investment that though promises rich dividends but also carries high risk due to intense competition, candidates are not unexpectedly willing to spend incredible amount of money to win the elections.

The expensive electoral process, especially in the developing countries, makes it almost impossible for an honest politician to get elected. In India, election expenses have been spiraling up in recent years. Today, it is very common to spend a million dollars on an election to the Parliament of this poor country. To provide an appropriate context for this number, if elected, a Member of Parliament can officially expect to receive only about 500 dollars a month in salary in return for this investment. Similarly, elections to State Assemblies and local governments are prohibitively expensive. Further, frequent elections and insecurity often necessitates politicians to aim for early recovery of their “investments”.

This problem has been noted by expert committee after expert committee set up to study election process. For example, the Tarakunde committee stated that, “A major malady in the operation of elections in India has been the reckless use of money. We recognize that many of the obligations imposed on candidates in most keenly contested elections cannot be fulfilled successfully without substantial expenditure...The steep rise in election expenses is the result of a deliberate preference in favor of money power as a major instrument of winning election...the unrestricted use of big money inevitably leads to the corruption and distortion of political processes.” (Bhagat, 1996: 199)

This problem was recognized as early as 1971. The Election Commission in its report to the Government of India mentioned that, “The parties and candidates would do well to remember that apart from all moral considerations, even considerations of pure self-interest suggest that corrupt practices in the elections should be eliminated. Corrupt practice incites corrupt practices, and starts a vicious competition among political parties.” (Bhagat, 1996: 259) However, over the succeeding decades, role and influence of money in elections has, instead of going down, gone up manifold.

Of late, there have been some attempts to impose limits on expenditure without much success. “In reality, average expenditure in most states is several multiples of ceilings determined by law.” (Debroy, 2004: 156-157) It is easy to circumvent the ceilings by finding and using the loopholes in laws, for example getting the funds donated to the

party and then making the party to spend money on the election of the candidate. This loophole was noticed by the Indian Supreme Court in Kanwar Lal Gupta versus Amarnath Chawla. The court observed that "If a candidate were to be subject to the limitation of the ceiling, but the political party sponsoring him, or his friends and supporters were to be free to spend as much as they like in connection with his election, the object of imposing the ceiling is completely frustrated and the beneficent provision enacted in the interest of purity and genuineness of the democratic process would be wholly frustrated." (Bhagat, 1996: 201) After the court asked the government and the election commission to plug this loophole, a separate ceiling for party's contribution towards a candidate's campaign was imposed. However, there are still several shortcomings and ambiguities in the laws that permit mind boggling expenditure. And it is a continuous tussle between "creative" minds determined to find the loopholes and the enforcement to plug those. What complicates the task of enforcing the ceilings is that a large portion of expenditure is made by using black money for unaccounted and unaccountable purposes like direct distribution of cash to the targeted electorate or small-time political operators.

CONCLUSIONS

If the politicians and political parties willingly spend such huge amounts on elections, it is because they expect to collect exorbitant returns on their investments. This "rent seeking behavior is therefore endemic to the system. Most of this corruption is in the form of control of transfers and postings, which in turn sustains a system of retail corruption for a variety of routine services, regulatory functions and direct transfer of resources through government programs." (Debroy, 2004: 156-157) What this essentially means is that the political 'entrepreneur' creates his own supply-chain for managing his business. Under his business model, civil servants become distributors-wholesaler or retailer depending on their position, and they distribute patronage and contracts and collect rent by way of bribes, cuts and kickbacks.

This worldview is largely favorable to the civil servants. It visualizes civil servants as helpless victims at the hands of their political masters who prevent civil servants from performing their duties effectively. "Others, and an increasingly large number, view politicians and civil servants as the two sides of the same coin, both having joined hands in usurping the system for their personal gain." (Mathur, 2004) Whether a civil servant is viewed as a victim or a willing accomplice in this game of personal aggrandizement at the expense of people, the end result is same. Therefore, we would not be wrong in concluding that administrative reforms are intimately intertwined with political reforms. In the absence of electoral reforms that make it possible for honest and competent politicians to get elected, administrative reforms will not just bear any fruit, but also will make honest civil servants more vulnerable to pressure from politicians to align their interests with the goal of politicians. Therefore, any reforms of administration must be co-terminus with electoral reforms.

The last interaction is between the society and the governance system in general with regard to the learning behavior of people. "As the vicious cycle of money power, polling irregularities and corruption take hold of the system, electoral verdicts cease to

make a difference to people." (Debroy, 2004: 156-157) This leads to general disenchantment among people with respect to system of governance. Since irrespective of who is in the power they continue to be victimized, citizens start maximizing their short-term returns by habitually trading votes for money and liquor. Once the voters start trading the votes, political class finds itself confronted with a Frankenstein's monster that was largely its own creation.

This completes the vicious cycle afflicting public administration in India. All the factors in the vicious cycle are dynamically linked together, and a change in one factor is likely to impact all other factors. To succeed in pushing through a change in this situation, broadly two kinds of strategies are available. If the intervention has to be only in one sub-system, then it has to be large enough for its impact to be felt in all sub-systems. For example, if the corruption can be made significantly riskier or much less lucrative, it is theoretically possible to make the prospect of governmental power and position less alluring for the dishonest politicians if we assume that we can make the civil service completely free of corruption which means that no civil servant would entertain illicit demands from politicians. Similarly, the converse is also true. Ridding the political class of corruption by itself can rectify the system. In practice, such major changes in one sub-system without corresponding changes in other sub-systems are rare. If it is possible to make changes in several or all sub-systems, even relatively smaller changes can also succeed. There are a number of policy alternatives that satisfy the criteria outlined above. What is important to remember is that the intervention should either be large or broad enough. It is with this possibility in mind that recommendations are made in the succeeding paragraphs.

As far as civil service is considered, we immediately need to constitute a Civil Service Board, fix minimum tenures, introduce result-based management and take the transfers out of the control of political class. "The ability of the political executive to transfer officers arbitrarily has increased the play of politics in the administration. It enables the executive to punish disobedient officials." (Debroy, 2004: 106) The fifth pay commission noted the gravity of this problem and suggested detailed guidelines as a part of comprehensive transfer policy; including the constitution of a civil service board." (Debroy, 2004: 106) Recently, "Prime Minister Manmohan Singh...exhorted the states not to transfer officers frequently. Such exhortations have been made in the past too and even courts have taken cognizance of this phenomenon, but things have not improved; if anything, the situation has deteriorated over the years." (Mathur, 2004) The government needs to move beyond mere exhortations and evolve a consensus, define the role of the civil services in the scheme of governance, provide reasonable autonomy to the civil service and then hold it accountable for the results.

I would not recommend any one-best way of achieving this objective. I would rather recommend deciding the objectives in each case on the basis of the circumstances confronting it. However, I do advocate considering the Agencification model as far as practicable. This would necessitate assigning each agency, well-defined goals and its chief executives, adequate powers and responsibility to make changes, including to the compensation structure, as may be needed to make the agency work. This would also restore the control of chief executive on his agency and limit the political interference to the minimum necessary level.

This would also take care of the problems identified by the Economic Administrative Reform Commission. On review of some agencies engaged in development work, it stated that, "The targets for each organization were not well-defined. Limits to authority were emphasized through audit and other administrative procedures. Accountability was stressed through procedural norms rather than on the basis of task performance." (EARC, 1983: 3-4) This, though, runs the risk of increase in bureaucratic control, irresponsiveness and excesses. To avoid this, the quasi-contracts between the ministers and agency heads would need to be lucidly drawn and enforced rigorously. This change would need to be accompanied with the changes in the judicial and the political structures. Agencification, in particular, requires judiciary to increase its efficiency in disposal of cases brought before it. All the effort at reform would amount to nothing without making changes in the political system for making it possible for honest people to enter the politics and holding them accountable for their actions. This approach again emphasizes systems approach, which alone I believe has chance of succeeding in achieving the desired goals.

When A H Hanson, an expert on planned economy, visited India in 1970s he remarked that, "The men are able, the organization adequate, the procedures intelligently designed. Why have the plans since 1956 so persistently run into crises?" (Debroy, 2004: 129) Perhaps, the answer to his riddle lies in the fact that the administration in India has not embraced systems thinking. And not just that it has shied away from the systems thinking, it has also been steadfast in taking the oft-beaten path. If the Indian Civil Service is to claim back its fast losing glory, it needs to avoid the fate that legendary Sisyphus met. Every time it appeared that he had rolled the huge stone to the top of the hill, it rolled back down again. Like Sisyphus, proponents and adversaries of the present civil service alike should not remain locked in a tussle to push the same agenda down each other's throats. They need to search for creative institutional solutions that best meet the needs of the public service.

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