Decentralisation For Better Governance

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Public administration functions through bureaucratic organisations. The definition of bureaucracy, which is based on the function of specialisation, has two significant components viz. communication and delegation. No plan can be executed without proper communication and delegation of authority. Communication is never complete without feedback. Delegation is never complete without decentralisation. Communication and delegation run side by side.

Bureaucracy as an institution has been studied from different angles by thinkers and researchers in many parts of the world. The classical literature on bureaucracy has been greatly influenced by Marxist, Weberian and Michelsian thought. While the concept of bureaucracy was not central to Marxist thought. To Marx, the bureaucracy, as the State itself, was an instrument by which the dominant class exercised its domination over other social classes. To Marx, the main function of bureaucracy appeared to be to maintain the status quo and the privileges of its masters. From this point of view bureaucracy and further bureaucratisation become unavoidable and indispensable in a society divided into classes. Marx also stressed the incompetence of bureaucracy because of bureaucrat’s lack of initiative and imagination and his fear of taking any kind of responsibility. Nonetheless, he felt that the bureaucrats tried continually to extend their functions of domination in order to consolidate their position and prerogatives. Both Marx and Michels looked at bureaucracy essentially as a political institution with a power game of its own.

Weber’s ideal type of bureaucracy on the other hand, has been the starting point and the main source of inspiration for the modern organisation theory. Weber created the “ideal” type of bureaucracy as a conceptual construction of certain elements into a logically concise and consistent form.

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The existing literature does not provide adequate guidelines for evaluating the functioning of bureaucracy in the development context, because of a peculiar slant given to the study of bureaucracy, by perspective use to observe and evaluate its functioning. This perspective is derived from Max Weber and it is assumed that any study, which ignores the Weberian model is not sociological. He suggests that “study of bureaucracy in the context of developing societies like India will have to depart from Weberian model and develop a framework which can enable to observe its performance under rapidly changing conditions.”

Rural development and anti-poverty programmes suffered due to the bureaucratic rigmarole, lack of co-ordination between different departments, political pressures on bureaucracy over-burdened staff, lack of promotional opportunities to the lower officials, steep hierarchy, which prohibits frank discussion linkages with middlemen, pyravikars, irresponsibility towards the problems of the poor, etc. Some of the failures of public services in reaching the targeted poor groups arise from the way the bureaucracies are organised and operate and the approaches of administrative strategy and planning. The character features of bureaucracy such as lack of accountability, absence of incentives, long decision making processes, overstaffing, hierarchy, rigidity, maintenance of status quo, conservatism and lack of innovative approaches adversely affect the objectives in view (Panda, 1978).

Social scientists observe that in most Afro-Asian nations, decentralisation is a fashionable concept but weak, for not much support is being derived from both the bureaucracy and political leadership. Decentralisation is just a matter of political convenience. The strong central administration, the strong values within a society, their belief in centralised rule, the much-dissatisfied bourgeoisie at the medial level, have often come in the way of decentralised planning. The achievements of decentralisation will prove to be harmful to the antagonists of decentralisation, who will lose the power base, which centralised power had conferred on them. This apprehension itself vindicates the arguments that bureaucracy holds the key to decentralised development. Reiteration of arguments against decentralisation is an attempt to hide the truth.

B. Panda writes (1978) in his most controversial book on bureaucracy in Orissa that the same old British tradition of aloofness and class consciousness has been retained by the top civil servants. The subordinate officers, who work very closely with higher civil services testify the lack of substantial changes in the attitude of the civil servants during the last two and half decades. This aloofness and class-consciousness has created a gulf of difference between higher and lower bureaucracy. The higher civil servants think it below their dignity to talk, mix and work with the subordinate gazetted and non gazetted
employees. In their official positions they only contact with the officers immediately below their rank and issue direction through them. They have hardly any idea about the individual employees working below them under the same roof. For their annual assessment report, they depend upon their immediate subordinate officers, who, because of their position and close association with the head, play various mischief in between. Take the case of District Collector or Commissioner who should have close link and better communication with the field staff like tahisildars, BDOs, inspectors, superintendents, but in practice, it is found that the commissioner or collector only keeps company with additional collector or commissioner. He does not keep direct touch with the assistants in his own office as well as field officers. What Panda observed years ago, cannot be falsified even today, has worsened.

The researchers have observed that the civil servants are always reluctant to delegate authority to the lower level bureaucrats. Centralisation of power and authority was very much prevalent in British days. In spite of introduction of various reforms on decentralisation of power and authority to the lower levels and democratic bodies, the progress in this regard is never spectacular. What has been done in the initial stage has been withdrawn. This is owing to the reluctance of top civil servants who think that the halo and glamour will fade away if power and authority is delegated to the juniors and small democratic bodies. (Panda, 1978) Centralisation of power is never a remedy for bad performance. The remedy lies in proper execution of the powers. If the system fails and the target is not achieved, this is due to negligence of our top bosses.

The lower bureaucrats face innumerable difficulties in the field and sometimes sit finger crossed and express their helplessness in execution of emergent functions in the absence of required power and authority. When a subordinate field officer faces a problem, which require immediate measures, he simply refers the matter to the higher authority for necessary direction, sanction of funds etc. The paper moves in its usual way, the pen pushers become active and by the time decision is communicated, the people have already suffered a lot. The senior bosses sit on the files for months, but later order the juniors to complete the action in hours; if their position is in stake, run for feedback otherwise there is always one way communication.

All that is needed to be done at this juncture is to make bureaucracy the guardian of decentralisation. David Hirschman quoted authors like Esman, Gross, Pananadikar and gave some proposals including flattening of the civil services hierarchy; flexible taskforce approaches; a very different relationship with the public; and an emphasis on field offices rather than headquarters. The rationale is clear. If effective, decentralisation can overcome severe limitations.
of centrally dominated planning and administration, cut through red tape, and increase sensitivity to local problems and needs. To make decentralisation work would require an affordable means of attracting able administrators from the experienced cadre.

The present position in all Central Revenue departments is not different. The recent cadre restructuring in Customs, Central Excise and Income Tax is a step towards centralisation. The six layers pyramid set up at Group ‘A’ level has resulted into disturbed communication, bitter relations at all levels, non-executions of plans, poor staffing, exploitation of field staff, harassment to traders, delay in results and failures in achieving targets.