The Role of Bureaucracy in Policy Development and Implementation in India

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The role and performance of bureaucracy in a country as vast and varied as India is a controversial subject of considerable concern. There is a widely held belief that in India the role of bureaucracy is not only dominant in the implementation of public policies but is also pervasive in respect of policy formulation. Since the British times, bureaucracy has no doubt played a very decisive and important role in the administrative system of India, but after independence the role expectations and actual performances of the Indian bureaucracy have changed considerably. In the context of the goals of a welfare state and development administration, bureaucracy has certainly emerged as one of the key elements in the politico-administrative processes in India. However, it is wrong to assert that the institution of bureaucracy has a predominant role in policy-making and policy development in India. The two extreme views that the policy is essentially the concern of the Government, is set by the political executive and the bureaucracy simply implements it; and that it is the bureaucracy who settles the policy and the ministers simply articulate it are both of course erroneous. Government policies are the outcome of a continuous interaction between the political executive, the senior echelons of bureaucracy and many other governmental or non-governmental actors. Although there may not be more than a thousand persons at the top level of bureaucracy in India both at the Centre and the States who may be directly involved in the policy-making, but a majority of all of them are in one way or the other engaged in policy implementation. This paper is concerned with an analysis of the role of bureaucracy in India in the processes of policy formulation, development and implementation. Such an exercise requires an examination first, of the historical legacy of the bureaucracy in India, its profile in general and the political context in which it operates, and later, an analysis of the kind of role that it plays in relation to policy processes.

The Historical Legacy

The bureaucracy in India is the product of two different sets of influences: the British traditions and a democratic welfare system. The British, who ruled India from afar for almost a century, established a system of bureaucracy whose key outstanding features were its elitism and a strong loyalty to its masters. The system dates back to the Northcote Trevelyan Report of 1854, which demonstrated Lord Macaulay’s profound belief in English liberal education. This belief resulted in the recruitment

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of a band of administrators for India from Oxford and Cambridge Universities designated as the Indian Civil Service — the ICS — who were called "allrounders" by the champions of the system and "amateurs" by its critics. The advent of Independence and the concomitant change in the role of government to include the functions of a welfare state produced the second set of influences. The rapid technological progress attained since then has led to a proliferation of a number of para-state organisations such as public corporations, nationalised industries, public enterprises and voluntary organisations supported by public funds. These expanding frontiers and the new tasks of the government in India require an administrative state able to handle social, economic, political and scientific problems in the context of national and international setting. Bureaucracy has thus become one of the chief instruments in the hands of government to deal with the challenges of the new political order and the socio-economic imperatives. However, despite the environmental changes after Independence, the impact of the British system continues to dominate the Indian scene. The ideal administrator in India is still viewed "as the gifted layman, who, moving frequently from job to job within the service, can take a practical view of any problem, irrespective of subject matters, in the light of his knowledge and experience of the government machinery" [United Kingdom, Vol. 1 (1968): 11].

Compared with other developing countries, the Indian bureaucracy has had many advantages at the time of Independence. During the colonial period itself, the foundations had been laid for a modern education system capable of providing the personnel necessary for both the administrative system and the growing industries. A network of communications, a core of financial institutions and a well developed press provided the essential links in the infrastructure of a modern nation. The bureaucracy which was created by the British Imperial government for maintaining a colonial system proved to be a remarkable administrative legacy in post-independent India. The dominant feature of the British system, as noted earlier, was the ICS, an élite cadre of civil servants. They were both the policy-makers and the executive officials. In the British times, political power was highly centralised within the bureaucracy, which largely lay in the hands of the members of the ICS class. The structural characteristics of the ICS — an open entry system based on academic achievement, elaborate training arrangements, permanency of tenure, reservation of all the responsible generalist posts of central, provincial and district levels for members of this élite cadre alone, a regular, graduated scale of pay with pension and other benefits, and a system of promotion and transfers based predominantly on seniority — have all been retained in the present system after Independence with only slight modifications in details. During the colonial period, the bureaucracy served to some extent as an instrument of integration of the country. The administrative unity of the country, maintenance of law and order, reasonable standards of integrity and the formalisation of the relationship between the administration and the people in place of arbitrary dealings as in the past, were some of the main achievements of the bureaucracy of this time. To a lesser degree also the bureaucracy came to be involved in the tasks of the construction and maintenance of public works (road, railways, canals) as well as in the development of social services (education, hospitals) (Khanna, 1973: 223).

However, since the end of the colonial period it has been popularly and persistently argued that Indian administrators, retaining some of the negative aspects of the im-