



The outdated nature of bureaucracy

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(Mains GS 2 & 4: Role of civil services in a democracy & Public/Civil service values and Ethics in Public administration: Status and problems; ethical concerns and dilemmas in government and private institutions)

Context:

- COVID-19 has tested the resilience of all public institutions.
- Despite its efforts, bureaucracy has emerged as a major concern for the ineffective response to the COVID-19 crisis.
- This inadequacy questions the nature of public bureaucracy which in many experts view now become outdated.

Preference of generalist over a specialist:

- In the 21st century, democratic countries are still relying on traditional bureaucracies to perform public policy formulation and implementation roles.
- These bureaucracies have outlived their relevance and Weberian bureaucracy still prefers a generalist over a specialist.
- A generalist officer (IAS and State civil service officials) is deemed an expert and as a result, superior, even if the officer works in one department or ministry today and in another tomorrow.
- Specialists in every government department have to remain subordinate to the generalist officers.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed this weakness.
- Healthcare professionals who are specialists have been made to work under generalist officers and the policy options have been left to the generalists when they should be in the hands of the specialists.
- The justification is that the generalist provides a broader perspective compared to the specialist.

Weberian bureaucracy

- Traditional bureaucracy is still stuck with the leadership of position over leadership of function.
- Leadership of function is when a person has expert knowledge of a particular responsibility in a particular situation.
- The role of the leader is to explain the situation instead of issuing orders.
- Every official involved in a particular role responds to the situation rather than relying on some dictation from someone occupying a particular position.
- Weberian bureaucracy prefers leadership based on position and Bureaucracy has become an end in itself rather than a means to an end.
- Further, the rigid adherence to rules has resulted in the rejection of innovation.
- Thus it isn't surprising to see COVID-19 aid getting stuck in cumbersome clearance processes even during the pandemic.

New public management:

- The reform often suggested in India is new public management.
- This as a reform movement promotes privatisation and managerial techniques of the private sector as an effective tool to seek improvements in public service delivery and governance.
- But this isn't a viable solution, not the least in India where there is social inequality and regional variations in development.
- It renders the state a bystander among the multiple market players with accountability being constantly shifted, especially during a crisis.
- Further, COVID-19 has shown that the private sector has also failed in public service delivery.

Collaborative governance

- The most appropriate administrative reform is the model of new public governance.
- This model is based on collaborative governance in which the public sector, private players and civil society, especially public service organisations (NGOs), work together for effective public service delivery.
- There is no domination of public bureaucracy as the sole agency in policy formulation and implementation.
- As part of new public governance, a network of social actors and private players would take responsibility in various aspects of governance with public bureaucracy steering the ship rather than rowing it.
- During the pandemic, civil society played a major role in saving lives thus this role has to be institutionalised as part of new public governance.
- Bureaucracy needs behavioural changes where it shows flexibility in hierarchy, a relook at the generalist versus specialist debate, and an openness to reforms such as lateral entry and collaboration with a network of social actors.

Conclusion:

- Most of the major revolutions with huge implications on public service delivery have come through the collaboration of public bureaucracy with so-called outsiders.
- These include the Green Revolution (M.S. Swaminathan), the White Revolution (Verghese Kurien), Aadhaar-enabled services (Nandan Nilekani) and the IT revolution (Sam Pitroda).
- Thus new public governance is the future of governance, especially public service delivery.

Covid19