

# THE BUREAUCRACY IS AILING

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(English Version)

There is no point in denying that the Indian bureaucracy is one of the worst in the world and is widely notorious for its labyrinthine rules and genetic negativity. India is also among the most corrupt nations: surely a large part of the bureaucracy must have either connived or abdicated its tasks. On the Corruption Perception Index, India's rank is 79th which is rather shameful, while where 'the ease of doing business' is concerned, we have moved just a couple of notches but are still below 129 other nations. What amazes us, however, is that even so, several lakhs of young and not so young aspirants spend months and years to prepare and appear for the prestigious Civil Services examinations. They include a large number from the Indian Institutes of Technology, National Institutes of Technology, Indian Institutes of Management, medical colleagues and rank-holders of Indian and foreign universities — for a job where they would earn a pittance. It is certainly not true they enter the services to be a party to corruption, except for a very small section, and to most 'public service' is better than enriching a merchant. It confers greater responsibility and social prestige. Despite such 'good boys' heading administration, India's ranking is 168th in the world where literacy rate is concerned; 131st in Human Development Index while in the Global Hunger Index, we are below 96 nations.

Before we proceed further in self condemnation, it may be appropriate to get some points clear. The size of India's bureaucracy comprises approximately 48 lakh people, while all the top layers All India and Central Services put together, would constitute less than one percent of these. This is not to imply that the senior services are not responsible because if the income tax babu takes his mandatory cut before clearing each file, it does not matter if his boss is a saint. The more worrisome question is why do the university 'toppers' who succeed in the Union Public Service Commission examinations fail to deliver thereafter? Either some mysterious force holds them down or we just accept the terrible fact that personal zeal or honesty can hardly change a bottom-dominated politicised pyramid. The task of cleaning up is just too daunting and unless the political masters are really keen to join forces in this, not just exploiting every layer for what's they can extract from each, it slides from bad to worse. Not a single posting can be executed without political lobbying and rules and systems are added on every year, mindlessly. Every attempt to reduce or

simplify them is met with reprisals from the powerful clerical and inspector's establishment whose rapacity has only increased under the 'clean' government. The three fearsome C-s, the CBI, CVC and CAG, have failed as they are unable to cleanse the system because of terribly dilatory procedures and many are kept busy with the master's vendetta. The fact that these 'holy cows' of rules and procedures could not prevent the biggest scams and swindling of public resources means absolutely nothing to babus.

Hierarchy and subjugation to rank are so stifling and so merciless is the retribution if one tries to be too 'bright' or reaches out to citizens, that one has perforce to gulp the ethos of compliance to rules and become a nameless, faceless cog. This mandated colourlessness makes administration drab, unfeeling and unresponsive but it suits the backroom operators: they draw their power from political bosses who dominate the public arena. In fact, the present central government was petty enough to stop young officers from expressing their sympathy with worthy causes even over the social media. This self-imposed cloak also ensures that there are no 'role models' seen in public, which makes it tragically the only such profession to do so. No one can be a 'hero': except for some police officers in movies, but then they are portrayed as villains as well. In an age of competitive oneupmanship where even grave judges play to the gallery, this namelessness does extreme disservice to the public servant's public image as a lot of good work goes unnoticed. Frankly, an excess of this hush hush business breeds complacency and hides both mediocrity and accountability. Disaster struck when the Right to Information Act was passed in 2005 and after a lot of hedging, filibustering and evasiveness, peace was made with cruel fate. But file notes became short and careful so as to pass the 'public scrutiny tests', while what one actually wanted to say was often conveyed over phone or through removable yellow stick-on slips.

The classic bureaucrat who confused his political bosses in true 'Yes Minister' style did exist decades ago, but once Indira Gandhi made her lightning strikes in the late 1960s, the political class simply took over and overpowered the bureaucracy. True, a few sagacious civil servants did voice honest opinions and paid the price, which deterred other less strong administrators to lead to an effective surrender. The nation wanted it that way and frankly, democracy demands that the Minister really rules. One has witnessed this 'transfer of power' take place over the last quarter of a century until all ministers led by the chief minister or the prime minister demand that the secretaries just find a way to carry out their plans. Or, just get out. With increasing stagnation, the tenure of an average secretary in the government of India is less than two years, in which he wants no trouble and most concentrate their energy

in ensuring that they get a five-year post-retirement job in tribunals, constitutional bodies or somewhere else. Being 'agreeable' became the norm and as the fate and future of the joint and additional secretaries depended almost completely on the secretary and/or minister, the pendulum swung from compliance to subservience. But, to be fair, is there any profession left anywhere that encourages argument with the boss? Except that where public service is concerned, the costs of surrender have damaged the system a lot. Frequent transfers meant moving one's lifetime possessions from place to place and yet ensuring the education of children. This was or is too daunting a task to most, but believe me, every year many civil servants actually take on their bosses, whether they are political or their own 'adjustable' seniors.

The question is: can nothing be done? Let us look at inefficiency first. Article 311 of the Constitution has nurtured immunity and complacency but if fast-track judicial tribunals are constituted, other than the administrative tribunals that are meant for service grievances, some progress can be done to weed out the chronic shirkers and pass the message down the line. Besides, one can guarantee that the truth about corruption can be ferreted quite easily if government is really serious. Every one in every office has a fair idea about who is corrupt and who has a glad eye. If a periodic secret ballot system is instituted every six months even the courts would be convinced with the solid data thus generated, through a system akin to the United States of America's Back-Channel. Anti-corruption agencies can then concentrate their limited energies on only on the 'shortlisted' dirty officials and refrain from harassing, for decades on end, others who are usually victims of intra-office politics. There is some light provided one is willing to walk through the tunnel, not just call it dark. The results, after all, affect all of us.