



Do We Need a Neutral Bureaucracy?

(This editorial is based on the article “Do We Need a Neutral Bureaucracy?” which appears in E&PW on 29th December 2018.)

Recently, there has been a debate whether bureaucracy is being neutral or not. Involvement of bureaucracy in politics has become a very controversial issue.

When caught between various political ideologies and in conflicts of opinion, officials are supposed to maintain their neutrality. But there is an opposite view—that the top civil servants are not neutral at all, on the contrary, they are very “hungry for power” and to satisfy their hunger they participate in politics.

What is Bureaucracy?

Bureaucracy refers to a specialized system and processes designed to maintain uniformity and controls within an organization. Bureaucratic processes are most common in large organizations or governments. For example, an oil company may establish a bureaucracy to compel its employees to complete safety checks when operating on a rig.

“Bureaucracy means the civil servants, the administrative functionaries who are professionally trained for the public service and who enjoy permanency of tenure, promotion within service—partly by seniority and partly by merit.” - **Robert Garner**

Role of Bureaucracy

- **Implementation of Governmental Policies and Laws:** It is the responsibility of the bureaucracy to carry out and implement the policies of the government. Good policies and laws can really serve their objectives only when these are efficiently implemented by the civil servants.
- **Role in Policy-Formulation:** Policy-making is the function of the political executive. However, the bureaucracy plays an active role in this exercise. Civil Servants supply the data needed by the political executive for formulating the policies. In fact, Civil servants formulate several alternative policies and describe the merits and demerits of each. The Political Executive then selects and adopts one such policy alternative as the governmental policy.
- **Running of Administration:** To run the day to day administration in accordance with the policies, laws, rules, regulations, and decisions of the government is also the key responsibility of the bureaucracy. The political executive simply exercises guiding, controlling and supervising functions.
- **Advisory Function:** One of the important functions of the bureaucracy is to advise the political executive. The ministers receive all the information and advice regarding the functioning of their respective departments from the civil servants. As new to a department, the ministers have little knowledge about the functions of their particular departments. They, therefore, depend upon the advice of bureaucracy. Qualified, experienced and expert civil servants working in all government

departments provide expert and professional advice and information to the ministers.

- **Role in Legislative Work:** The civil servants play an important but indirect role in law-making. They draft the bills which the ministers submit to the legislature for law-making. The ministers provide all the information asked for by the legislature by taking the help of the civil servants.
- **Semi-judicial Work:** The emergence of the system of administrative justice, under which several types of cases and disputes are decided by the executive, has further been a source of increased semi-judicial work of the bureaucracy. The disputes involving the grant of permits, licenses, tax concessions, quotas etc. are now settled by the civil servants.
- **Collection of Taxes and Disbursement of Financial Benefits:** The civil servants play a vitally important role in financial administration. They advise the political executive in respect of all financial planning, tax-structure, tax-administration and the like. They collect taxes and settle disputes involving the recovery of taxes. They play a vital role in preparing the budget and taxation proposals. They carry out the function of granting of legally sanctioned financial benefits, tax reliefs, subsidies and other concessions to the people.
- **Record-Keeping:** The Civil Service has the sole responsibility of keeping systematically all government records. They collect, classify and analyze all data pertaining to all activities of the government. They collect and maintain vital socioeconomic statistics which are used for the formulation of Public policies and plans.
- **Role in Public Relations:** The era of the modern welfare state and democratic politics has made it essential for the government to keep close relations with the people of the state. The need for maintaining active and full public relations is a vital necessity of every state. The civil servants play an active role in this sphere. They are the main agents who establish direct contacts with the people. They serve as a two-way link. On the one hand, they communicate all government decisions to the people, and on the other hand, they communicate to the government the needs, interests, and views of the people. Thus, bureaucracy plays a vigorously active and highly important role in the working of the government.

Need for a Neutral Bureaucracy

- **Neutrality depicts that public officials are not slaves to either the politicians or any other authority** other than the moral authority of the Constitution. It shows that the principle of neutrality implies a measure of independence both from the partisan interests of the government of the day and the exogenous agenda that prompts certain social groups to cow others down to humiliating vulnerability.
- **Bureaucracy should be neutral in terms of ideology and politics.** So that there will not be an affinity to a particular class or ideology. Most importantly, it also suggests that even in the post-retirement period, public officials could make significant interventions for more noble purposes underlying the good society even without joining a particular brand of formal politics that has scant regard for constitutional principles such as freedom from fear and human dignity. For a genuine public official, commitment to constitutional principles is not only a lifelong project but, more importantly, it can be carried out without any political or ideological mediation.
- **If bureaucracy won't be neutral then it cannot lend its whole-hearted support to the existing political system, and to the economic and political system if any radical changes are introduced.**
- Without neutrality, there can be a close nexus between bureaucracy and large-scale enterprises which could further lead to crony capitalism.
- In advanced societies, there is a number of classes and this finally leads to the conflict among classes. The officials should remain neutral in this conflict. Otherwise, they will be very eager to protect the interests of the class/classes to which they belong.

Way Forward

- **Public officials have two interrelated moral functions:**
 - First, the bureaucracy has to protect the very state of which it is a part, from being disrupted or being undermined by the disquieting elements of the civil society.
 - Second, the bureaucracy has to prevent the disruptive efforts of a society that is ridden with caste and patriarchal consciousness. Bureaucracy has to intervene in public life to see to it that society does not degenerate into aggressive obscurantism.
- The formative conditions to perform these twin tasks involve public officials' moral capacity to

resist anti-constitutional interests that the government of the day may try to push.

- Thus, **the neutrality principle has a moral function to prevent public officials from becoming slaves to the government of the day.**

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