

Book Review

Issues in Indian Public Administration

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A review of Dr. Shriram Maheshwari, *Indian Administration* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1979) 523 pp.

"The term 'merit' itself is highly subjective, more so when a character role is made the sole basis for assessment of merit. Often it is difficult to distinguish merit-scouting from sheer arbitrariness. As this term is interpreted today in government, it, at its worst, stands for disguised favoritism and, at its best, a measure of personal social relationship between the supervisor and the subordinate." Unorthodox views such as this, almost bordering on cynicism, are expressed by Dr. Shriram Maheshwari in his third, enlarged, and revised edition of *Indian Administration* which purports to be a textbook for the students of political science and public administration in India. "Merit," Dr. Maheshwari continues, "should be built into and should emerge from seniority. Seniority is a fact; merit is a matter of opinion. It is not true that seniority and merit are dichotomous. As recruitment for public services is already made on the basis of merit, seniority is merit plus x years of service. If the public service commission is doing its job well — and supervises theirs — seniority is merit."

Views such as these abound in this book which seeks to provide an overview of the Indian administration at the national, provincial, district, and local levels in India. Understandably, a substantial portion of the book is devoted to a discussion of the national government, its organization and processes. The accent is more on organizations and their functions, rather than on governmental processes which cut across organizations. There are, thus, substantial chapters on secretariat, various ministries of the government, executive agencies, constitutional authorities, and public undertakings which provide the basic information required for the students. What interests us more are the discussions relating to processes and issues in Indian administration.

The complexities of the Indian administration and the singular divergence between its promise and performance have baffled Indian statesmen and foreign scholars alike. It provoked Fred Riggs to formulate his celebrated prismatic society theory while Gunnar Myrdal found in it a confirmation of his concept of "soft states." It presents a spectre of an enormous and ever-growing army of ill-paid and ill-motivated clerks acting

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as boundary agents with complete callousness and a singular lack of imagination and sympathy toward the hapless public. The numbers are so large and the confusion is so complete that most of the time one wonders whether the clerks and assistants assist or lead the supervisors. The concept of service to the public and the consequent behavior patterns are conspicuous by their absence. Even a minor functionary regards himself as privileged and superior to the members of the public who hold no office in government. Politicians lack a cohesive ideology capable of standing rigorous theoretical analysis and most of them display little aptitude to convert whatever ideology they profess, into meaningful policies and practical programs. In a parliamentary democracy — as opposed to a presidential form of government — political executives are chosen not on the basis of their special competence or expertise for a given portfolio, but on the basis of their political strength and loyalties.¹ These generalist ministers — who are not technocrats — are advised by generalist civil servants, who flit from ministry to ministry and central government to provincial government and vice versa with such frequency that they have neither the time nor the chance to acquire expertise in any field. They are perpetual novices learning the basics of the new jobs all through their career. The solitary aim of the “specialists” seems to be to establish the indispensability of their specialization to the exclusion of all other disciplines. In the din of the generalist-specialist controversy, no one is allowed to remember that

development is a multi-disciplinary process which continuously requires the team work of specialists of various disciplines. Organizations are intensely hierarchical with several steps in each ladder, with the result that every given issue will have to be examined at all the levels — at least as a ritual before the views of the organization are formally expressed, if at all. One could almost claim that the output of a division will be equal to that of one man, even though it employs ten professionals. There may be no useful output since all the ten will be engaged in their favorite pastime of neutralizing each other. Special disabilities created by tall hierarchies compounded by problems of inter-agency coordination enable a great deal of deliberation, but effectively hinder dispatch of business. While in theory, civil servants owing allegiance to the constitution of the country, and not to the party in power, are expected to be a check against excesses by political executives, and advice them without fear or favor, they are condemned in practice for not being sufficiently committed to the ideology of the party in power. These are examples of the paradoxes confounding the students of Indian public administration.

Dr. Maheshwari's book, which gives the impression of being one put together using articles written at different times by the author, deals with selected issues at length and with insights. On the controversial question of whether the top jobs in public administration should be manned by generalists or by specialists — commonly referred to as the generalist-specialist controversy, Dr. Maheshwari after an interesting and detailed discussion comes to a sane conclusion

¹There have been some exceptions to this generalization.

that development administration needs them both and recommends that the generalists should acquire a degree of expertise/specialization in selected fields and should be moved to senior levels only in related fields. The specialist with aptitude for administrative work should be encouraged to occupy administrative positions, presumably through specialized training programs.

His views on the need to abandon the use of All-India Service, however, appear to be difficult to understand. The Indian Administrative Service and the Indian Police Service are called the All-India Services which belong to both the central and state (provincial) governments. They are borne on the state cadres and work alternately for the state governments and the central government — usually occupying top and middle-level positions. This arrangement is commonly believed to benefit both governments and is also regarded as beneficial to the cause of national integration. Dr. Maheshwari claims that national unity is no longer subject to serious challenge and argues for the liquidation of these services. With the advent of regional languages as the media of instruction in the universities, mobility in the university education has become limited. The adoption of the sons of the soil theory with respect to state government jobs effectively curbs mobility in the public-sector-employment market. The abolition of All-India Services will complete this process of isolationism.

The chapter on training of civil servants has been written on a sober note with a great deal of sympathy and understanding. The callous waste of resources by training only those

not wanted for any post or of posting the trained officials in jobs wholly irrelevant to the training given, has been criticized. At the same time, he also emphasizes the need for adjusting the contents of the training programs to suit realities. "A trainee exposed to these newfangled jargons, whose rationale is justified by commenting on the imperfections and shortcomings of the present administrative arrangements is likely to develop, consciously or unconsciously, disrespect and disaffection towards the whole machinery of administration, its methods of work and even personnel. Such an attitude on the part of the administrator is dangerous for his efficiency and morale, for he has necessarily to function within the given administrative framework and employ existing tools of work. Besides all the prevalent administrative codes, regulations and procedures and practices are really not so stupid as they are implied to be."

Public sector corporations occupy a prominent place in the public administration scene of India. As of 1 April 1979, there were over 174 central public manufacturing and trading enterprises with an investment of over \$20 billion. Besides this, there were public sector banks, insurance companies, railways, and so on. The most interesting area for study is the evolution and the range of the relationship between the central government ministries and these autonomous entities. There is a range of relationship from total ministry dominance to near complete autonomy. The concept of complete autonomy of these enterprises while the minister concerned is fully responsible to the parliament for their performance is an intriguing phenomenon. Differing un-

derstanding of this concept by the *dramatis personae* results. Similarly, the evolution of corporate personality and the emergence of corporate leadership in these enterprises should provide a fertile ground for research by scholars in public administration. Dr. Maheshwari's chapter on public undertakings is modest in scope and one may hope that in future editions it may incorporate findings and thoughts on some of the above concerns.

In the chapter on corruption, it would have been interesting to analyze the influence of intensely interventionist policy options followed by India in the context of scarcity of goods and services on the extent and depth of corruption in the body politic. Extensive negative bureaucratic behavior is perhaps primarily a function of environment and policy options which engender it and encourage its growth. The path to industrial growth through complete import substitution, calling for import trade control, exchange control, and so on, together with the decision to influence alloca-

tion of resources through bureaucratic processes of industrial licensing are examples of the type of policy options which run counter to the objective of minimizing opportunities for corruption.

With all its faults and shortcomings, administration in India has shown resilience and flexibility. The system had been able to adjust and adapt itself — though not with the speed and agility one would have desired — to the changing environment and the demands of differing development models. An analysis of the major changes in the administrative system as a function of the changes in the development model would have been interesting and would have highlighted inter-sectoral processes cutting across formations of ministries and departments. Dr. Maheshwari's book does justice to the analysis of changes in administrative system as a function of political change but would have been far more stimulating had it used economic and social conditions/objectives as independent variables.