



## Changing role of public bureaucracy in India: A federal polity perspective

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### ABSTRACT

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In a federal polity, the role of bureaucracy is ineluctable to cement the centre-state relations. Being the primary catalyst for social change and nation building, Indian bureaucracy is stitched into the federal fabric. The bureaucratic system as well as its potential for public welfare is greatly influenced by the power dynamics in the centre-state relations. Therefore, the paper examines the role of public bureaucracy from the vantage point of centre-state relations. The study synthesizes the literature on the subject to explore the role of bureaucracy in the various phases of centre-state relations in India. The historical analysis is used to reveal the reasons for political control over bureaucracy in India. The main finding of the study reveals that a change in the power constellations of political authorities at the central and state levels of government also induces a change in the influence or capacity of the bureaucracy to work independently and impartially, thereby weakening the neutrality of bureaucracy. The study can be highly useful for policy analysts in understanding the federal democracy and adds to the canon of academic literature on politico-administrative relations in India.

**Contribution/Originality:** Most of the studies on centre-state relations in India revolve around the working of democratic governance. Very few studies have looked at the bureaucracy in India from the lens of the changing dynamics of a federal polity. The paper fills the gap by providing insights into the dynamic relationship between the elected leaders in politics and the permanent executive or public bureaucracy in India.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In its simplest form, federalism entails a division of powers and functions between a central political authority and its regional constituents, with each steering the work of development in its own independent sphere. This essentially implies co-ordination between the two levels of government and a cooperative spirit in matters involving collective efforts (Kapoor & Pundir, 2022). However, a nation-state is essentially a politico-administrative apparatus. While federalism is indispensable as a form of governance in a heterogeneous society, it is the administrative machinery that lies at the heart of the operative capacity of any governing authority. A federal polity cannot govern a nation without the existence of a permanent body of officials recruited for the execution of policy and working under a strict code of impartiality and neutrality for rational and incessant administrative governance. Bureaucratic competence in plan implementation is the

crucial link that sustains the political legitimacy for public welfare (Yerramsetti, 2022). The relation between the central and regional governments and the power dynamics that unfold in the functioning of the politico-administrative system is therefore crucial to fructify and realize the national objectives.

In India, the federal governance hinges on the power-balance between the centre and the states. Centre-state relations in India have a basis in the constitution that delineates its purpose and design in the political spectrum. While both constitutional and political dimensions characterize India's federal structure, it is the political aspect that has been more prominent in the actual working of the political system, largely owing to the exigencies of electoral democracy (Gupta, 2021).

Based on the British imperial model and the 1935 Government of India Act, the unitary tone of the Indian constitution is evident in a host of centralizing features viz., single citizenship; single system for higher judiciary; uniform and nationwide reach of fundamental rights and directive principles of state policy; appointment of Governor of a state; emergency provisions; the power to legislate on state matters; a large concurrent list and residual powers; and a vertical planning system (Alexandrowicz, 1954; Bhattacharjee, 1982; Lamba & Subramanian, 2020; Verma, 1986). In relation to the bureaucracy, Article 312 which calls for the creation of new All-India services by the central government has also been seen as a 'federal aberration' (Rajashekara, 1997). Myron Weiner had opined that the existence of these services "*results in heightened tension between the centrally appointed officers and the state politicians who often resent the very effort of these officers to resist their pressures*" (Weiner, 1968). Over the years, these provisions regarding centre-state relations have been instrumental in providing the central government with a strong influence and dominance over the states (Austin, 2000; Chandhoke, 2014).

## **2. THE CONTEXT: BUREAUCRACY AND CENTRE-STATE RELATIONS IN INDIA**

In contrast with the legislative federalism of the United States, Indian federalism is an 'executive federalism' wherein the governments in power interact rather than the legislative bodies (M. P. Singh & Verney, 2003). This implies that bureaucracy as the permanent executive of the nation has a very crucial role to play in Indian political system. Indian bureaucracy is deeply involved in policy formulation and implementation and serves as a vital link between state and society (Chakrabarti, Purayil, & Thakur, 2021). However, the executive governance that is carried out by the bureaucracy operates amidst political shifts and changing federal dynamics. According to the Constitution, each state has a central bureaucracy as well as a state bureaucracy (Rao & Singh, 2001). The central and state level tiers of the "public services" are given shape through the provisions of part XIV of the Constitution. Indian bureaucracy is thus not only built into the federal system of governance but also has a federalized structure itself. This has wide implications for the bureaucratic capacity in the effective execution of national and state policies. Thus, in federal democracies, the role of bureaucracy predicated on the interface between legislators and bureaucrats at different levels of governance.

## **3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND QUESTIONS**

The main purpose is to highlight that the functional overlapping between politicians and bureaucrats gives rise to a dynamic relationship between elected leaders and permanent executives. The centre-state political canvas with its competitive and cooperative nature affects the broader tone of bureaucracy-politician relationship. The paper argues that the Indian bureaucracy plays a critical role in multi-level governance. Depending on the political groupings and their ideological moorings at different levels of the government hierarchy, the role and competency of bureaucracy varies with the nature of intergovernmental relations that come to prevail at a given time. The research questions are - what has been the role of bureaucracy in

different phases of centre-state relations in India? To what extent political factors in centre-state relations affect bureaucratic neutrality? What are the reasons for political control over bureaucracy in India?

#### 4. LITERATURE REVIEW

##### 4.1. *Centralized Federalism and Tele-guided Administration*

The Nehruvian years after independence fortified centralization in the federal design (Das, 2001; R. Singh, 2020). The state governments functioned more as regional branches of the Congress at the centre. There were partial brakes on central authority with chief ministers defying central government's commands and asserting the constitutional federal rights, but the conflict was manageable as an intra-party affair. The centre-state cooperation was also made possible by the nature of political leadership. Nehru displayed sensitivity towards state concerns. In other words, a two-way communication did prevail in a broader sense. In terms of developmental role of bureaucracy under Nehru, there was a push for a socio-economic transformation of India based on planning, central directive, and a wide and deep public sector. The public bureaucrats were to be understood as the principal agents and stimulants on the path towards modernization (Kaviraj, 2000; Wilcox, 1965). The bureaucrats were supposed to serve the public and shed the attitude of ruling masters. This is also the time when politico-administrative relations were not antagonistic, and both worked together in tandem to fulfil the goals of development. Nehru (1954) had succinctly put it when he said that the Civil Service "is meant to achieve something and not to exist in some kind of ivory tower, following certain rules of procedure and, narcissus-like, looking on itself, with complete satisfaction."

In the context of a strong centre, the federal form of government leads to what is termed as a 'teleguided' administration (Pinto, 1996). This kind of administration operates under the supervision and control of one level of government and is officially accountable to another level of government. The direction and control over administrators is provided by the political leaders from a particular state occupying significant positions in the central government as well as their coterie of ministers of parliament as well as state legislatures who possess a direct access to them. In addition to this teleguidance, there are other forms of political control for states situated geographically closer to the centre wherein bureaucrats are called to issue direct commands in the garb of consultation meetings (Akerlof, 2019). This arrangement bypasses the state political interference. For the bureaucrats, interference by central government is preferable to the one by the state government as it can bring patronage and greater rewards for them both during and after service (Ricz, 2019). Thus, under a centralized federalism, while some bureaucrats accepted the role of a public servant and development agent at the given remuneration, others got tempted to make money by accepting gifts or other tangible benefits and even partnered with the political elites in making quick money (Mukherjee, 2018). The bureaucrats were crafty enough to understand that they should not rock the boat of the politicians too much (Pinto, 1996). Gradually, civil servants became tractable tools in the hands of the political masters.

##### 4.2. *Hegemonic Centralization and Advent of Committed Bureaucracy*

The non-confrontational relation between centre-state in Nehruvian era changed with the leadership of Indira Gandhi who was able to 'tame' the non-subservient states and establish a pattern of federal relationship between New Delhi and state capitals that denoted outright ascendancy of the ruling government at the central level (Diego, 2015; Roy, 1984). The President's rule was imposed in states 69 times between 1961 and 1980. This willful and brazen use of article 356 against unwanted state governments was tantamount to a gross violation of the participative governance within a state and between a state and central government. The emergency period testifies to the strangulating centralization pursued by Congress. As opined by Austin (2000) Nehru and Indira Gandhi basically differed in personality, situation and views on

power. The neutrality versus commitment debate in the politico-administrative relationship became prominent during the late 1960s when the stable hold of power by the Congress over the centre and the states suffered a setback. In the struggle to appease the populace in a regionalized and fragmented political landscape, the political leaders came to regard neutrality and excessive rule-based administration as an obstacle to quick delivery of public services (Lee, 2020; Tudor & Ziegfeld, 2019). Neutral civil servants were enjoined to show commitment towards the ruling party's development vision including its ideology, policies, and programmes informed by the pragmatic requirements of the ground reality. Indira Gandhi was a strong supporter of the committed bureaucracy to suit the Indian development path. However, as Ray (1981) notes, this paved the path for the politicization of Indian bureaucracy in a big way. The need for commitment in the form of pragmatism soon turned into opportunism of a worst kind. This is the beginning of the 'yes minister' syndrome in bureaucratic politics in India. Commitment to national development, to constitutional values and to public welfare became synonymous with commitment to the ruling party's political agenda and ideology. The non-defiant and subservient civil servant takes root in this era (Ahuja, 2018). In fact, Ray categorizes most Indian Administrators as either detractors or accommodators. In the subsequent decades, what ensued was rampant politicization of bureaucracy. The political boss could keep the bureaucrats toed in line through the power of suspension, transfer, or barring promotion. The nexus between political elites and bureaucrats grew stronger and even branched out to include antisocial groups making for unholy alliances (Desai, 2021).

#### *4.3. Multi-Party Coalition Era and Compliant Bureaucracy*

The dynamics of power sharing between central government and state governments underwent a radical change with the onset of the coalition era in Indian politics. Opposition parties and non-congress led state governments gained their own sense of identity and became assertive and confident in managing regional and national affairs (Prasad et al., 2019; Thachil & Ruparelia, 2018). Riker (1975) had quite rightfully asserted that the nature and structure of federalism parallels the nature and structure of party system. In other words, a centralized federalism results from a fully centralized party structure and a decentralized federalism emanates when parties are somewhat decentralized (Sharma & Swenden, 2017). In 1983, as regional party-led states started to express discomfort with the vertical command and control by the Congress, Indira Gandhi appointed a commission. The recommendations of the Sarkaria Commission were, however, not implemented seriously. The economic liberalization also gave more powers to the states, especially in industrial policy (Bagchi, 2003). The pluralization of the party system started to become a defining feature of Indian politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The multilayered political structure of India evolved to accommodate the emergence of new parties. Since 1989, there have been several chances for tiny parties to join national coalitions on a national level (Kailash, 2019; Tillin, 2015; Wyatt, 2019). Small parties such as the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) party in Tamil Nadu reacted to this federal incentive system and gained governance experience at the central level (Manikandan & Wyatt, 2019). Between 1996 and 2014, all federal governments were coalition governments with the state-based parties exercising considerable influence in national politics. While a fully decentralized federalism did not emerge, as Riker suggests, there have been traces of decentralizing in the centre-state relations as evident in the decreasing influence of discretionary funds on the total pool of grants to the states, the expanding space for policy variance in welfare policy, the imposition of certain Chief Ministers in para-diplomacy, and the declining incidence of President's Rule (Gogoi, 2020).

Studies analyzing the federal structure in coalition governments found the centre-state relations relatively more harmonious and healthier as compared to the one-party dominance in the past (Khan, 2003). This also influenced the functioning of the bureaucracy. The 1990s brought a deviation from the exclusive

role of a committed bureaucrat and expanded the role of bureaucracy to include a social activist role of the civil servant. Some bureaucrats spearheaded the government's struggle against corruption. However, it was widely recognized by the bureaucrats that a bureaucrat cannot overstep the boundaries set by service rules that prohibit any association with or criticism of government. The dawn of the coalition era has led to a regional assertiveness that transformed the dynamics of governance (Anklesaria, 2020). The shift in balance of power affected the bureaucracy with a greater tussle emerging over who exercises greater control over the bureaucracy appointed centrally but serving in state cadres. The emergence of state administrative tribunals and the central administrative tribunals post the coalition era bear testimony to the fact that these grievance redressal mechanisms were to protect the unfairly targeted non-compliant bureaucrats. The coalition era resulted in politicians at both centre and state level preferring displaying a proclivity to pursue a politics of least resistance and the bureaucrats participated indirectly through their passive attitude and compliant actions (Bajoria, 2020).

#### *4.4. Return to One-Party Dominance and Discernible Politicization of Bureaucracy*

The return to one-party dominance since 2014 has heralded a new era in Indian politics (Hazarika, 2018). Breaking with the coalition era that dominated the electoral space for the past twenty-five years, this was a turning point for centre-state relations, not only owing to a single party gaining majority but also because the single party was the centre-right and Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). A non-Congress party winning absolute majority without coalition-partners brought about the 're-nationalization' of Indian politics (Smogard, 2014). A one-party dominance has a vulnerability to centralize the federal design. However, recognizing the power of regional political forces, Modi had made 'cooperative federalism' part of the election manifesto in 2014. Once in power, certain measures were indeed taken to keep the promise – formation of Niti Aayog, Goods and Services Tax and an increased financial devolution to states. But things changed after Modi's impressive victory in the 2019 national election coupled with success in state elections. One of the promise made to the people has been to wipe out the rife in corruption and bureaucratic incompetence that was a creation of the political opposition (Anklesaria, 2020). The centralizing features started surfacing in centre-state relations (Joseph & Mathew, 2018). The imposition of President's rule in states of Arunachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Jammu and Kashmir; the alleged partisan role of governor in formation of governments in Goa, Manipur, and Maharashtra; direct supervision of centrally sponsored schemes; radical policy changes such as demonetization, the citizenship amendment act and the revoking of article 370 comprise the major centralizing aspects of Modi government's rule (Gogoi, 2020). While sub-national governments with strong regionalist identity have resisted the central dominance, most regional political forces have largely rallied behind central policy decisions.

With respect to the bureaucracy working under the new federal make-up since 2014, a number of trends can be discerned. There has been a visible politicization of bureaucracy that gets played out in the field of centre-state relations (Prasad & Vashishtha, 2018). The recent case of West Bengal Chief Secretary is testimony to the strong sway of the central government over top bureaucratic positions. The political tussle between Prime Minister Modi and Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee took place in May 2021 over the unexpected transfer order issued by the central government on the chief secretary of West Bengal, Alapan Bandyopadhyay. This was a clear case of procedural disregard and flexing of power by the centre over the states (Saran, 2021).

There has also been a direct centralized command and control over bureaucracy since 2014 (Chhibber & Verma, 2019). The Gujarat model of development had followed this direct line of communication and reporting between bureaucrats and Chief Minister bypassing the state ministers. PM Modi has replicated the model in national level governance as well (Tharoor, 2020). The New India Movement 2017-2022 was

intended to establish a straight link with the district level administration and the central administration headed by the Prime Minister in the aim to bring about good governance and increased use of technology. The Gram Swaraj Abhiyan launched in 2018 is another case in point. Started as a new way of policy implementation, it has developed into a mechanism of control by the central level of governance with the state administration having little say or role in the process. The direct connection of the central level of governance with the end consumer or beneficiary through the bureaucratic route provides mileage and publicity to the government of the day in its welfare-leaning quotient. In early 2022, Prime Minister Modi in his virtual interactions with the district administration heads enjoined them to keep in mind the time-bound delivery of welfare services and facilities as stipulated in the central government's targets (Ahuja, 2023).

Related to centralized control is the proliferation of centrally sponsored schemes (Rath, 2013) that has shriveled the welfare-delivering capacity of the state governments. These schemes effectively dampen the initiative and enterprise of the state government and its bureaucracy. The pandemic and the diversion of resources to central allocations of health and welfare have rendered many states financially redundant. Owing to this new direct line of authority, the state administration and state political leaders have expressed their unease with the 'relentless depredations' of the union over the areas and matters that require federal consultations with the states rather than unilateral commands. In February 2022, a joint memorandum was sent to the Prime Minister Modi by Members of Parliament from several opposition parties and some retired bureaucrats on the attack on federal fabric of India exemplified in the centralization of bureaucracy and union encroachment over areas that are squarely in state domain. The central government has also proposed structural changes in the All-India Service rules to eliminate the shortfall of bureaucrats on deputation in central administration from the various state cadres. The new rules mandate that the state government shall make available eligible officers of various levels for deputation to the central government. In case of disagreement, there shall be federal consultation and the state government shall give effect to the decision of the central government.

In yet another trend that incentivizes the politicization of top bureaucratic positions, pliant bureaucrats have been given extension of tenure beyond superannuation to serve political interest (Bhushan, 2021). In *Vineet Narain vs Union of India* case (1997), the tenure of the directors of Enforcement Directorate (ED) and Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) was fixed at two years to guard these positions against political pressure. The Modi government has issued ordinances to allow one-year extensions for up to four years and five years (for ED and CBI respectively). The cooling off period for bureaucrats for joining private sector service was reduced from two years to one year under the lobbying and pressure by the Indian Administrative Services (IAS) group. Even so, within the one-year duration, waiver of the cooling off period can be granted- a provision that was used for the former foreign secretary S. Jaishankar joining the Tata group in 2018. In sum, with the onset of the one-party dominance since 2014, the bureaucratic capacity and independence as a permanent executive body is again caught up in the push and pull of central and state government mandates. The current scenario echoes some facets of the post-Independence era of Congress dominance. But the Indian political system has become quite fragmented since then. The control and command of the governing faction at the centre over the non-conforming state governments as well as over the bureaucratic networks tied into the web of federal governance is not without resistance (Nayyar, 2022). The sub-national policy networks, localized expertise in policy areas, and regionally entrenched interest groups along with the constitutional safeguards make the centre-state tussle in intergovernmental relations a tough battle (Tillin, 2022). While centre-state relations have always been susceptible to political change, the main concern remains regarding the ability of the bureaucracy to circumvent political pressures and guard its executive efficiency.

## 5. REASONS FOR CHALLENGES TO BUREAUCRATIC PERFORMANCE

Self-respecting public officials in mature democracies should generally perform their constitutional and legal obligations with honesty, integrity, and their own conscience, resolutely defying special interests' dictates (Mohanty, 2022). It is a great lament that this is not the case in India. Looking at the role of bureaucracy from the vantage point of centre-state relations in the literature review, this paper uncovers certain reasons for the challenges encountered by the bureaucracy in the changing federal dynamics of India.

### 5.1. *Incongruence with Indian Socio-Political Reality*

To begin with, the Indian bureaucratic framework has been adopted from the Western bureaucratic models (Kapoor, 2020; Perumal, 1988). Three major models of relationships can be discerned from the interplay between bureaucracy and political elites. The British Westminster model upholds the neutrality in the functioning of higher civil servants. The American system of civil service is openly partisan and committed to political goals. The Communist model regards the bureaucracy as the instrument of political strong-arming in a divided society. In India, the Westminster model dominates the working of administrative apparatus as well as its relationship with the political policy makers. As noted by Bhambhri (1972) ecological imperatives play an important role in the effective functioning of an institution. The system of bureaucracy that befitted the British Imperial rule had been given the charge of Post-Independent India. The environment of the independent India differed vastly from British perspective. Yet, the system of bureaucracy still rests on the same Western-origin assumptions about operating culture, exclusiveness, and class-consciousness. Indian bureaucrats have gathered an elitist and rigid image. There is a perception of bureaucracy acting as an impediment to growth (Cornell, Knutsen, & Teorell, 2020). The perception has come to be deeply rooted and, at times, is even fueled by politicians to blame the bureaucrats for the faulty implementation of well-intentioned policies. This contrasts with the people-oriented, non-elitist and adaptive image of the political leaders. As the structure of political power at different levels of governance changes, the bureaucracy struggles to adapt to the new dynamics. This creates mutual distrust in the politico-administrative relations. Table 1 presents the top-rated reasons for lack of job satisfaction among Indian civil servants in the year 2010. After the lack of opportunity to make a useful contribution, the second most prevalent reason for job dissatisfaction is the inadequate level of authority and autonomy in job. The survey finding implies the centralized control over the bureaucracy and the highly restricted degree of freedom in day-to-day administrative work. The British administrative system and its rigid work structure still remains.

**Table 1.** Reasons for lack of job satisfaction.

Reasons for dissatisfaction	No.	% (Of those who responded)
Lack of regular feedback/Recognition of effort	324	33.2
Lack of opportunity to make a useful contribution	457	46.8
Lack of opportunities to develop and utilize one's skills	373	38.2
Absence of congenial work environment	327	33.5
Lack of challenging opportunities at work	313	32.1
Inadequate level of authority and autonomy in one's job	450	46.1
No response	11	1.1
Base (Those who reported dissatisfaction) = 976		

Source: Indian civil servants survey (DARPG, 2010).

### 5.2. *Dual Allegiance*

A key aspect of Indian Administrative Service as the central bureaucracy of India is its dual allegiance or responsiveness to both central and state level of governance (Krishnan & Somanathan, 2018). While the civil servants are appointed through an All-India test and trained centrally, they are posted in different states and technically as well as practically must function alongside the state bureaucracy and under the state political

executive. The constitution had an original intention to curb regional loyalties and promote national loyalty through the All-India Services. However, in the operational dynamics of federal divisions of power and prestige, the Indian bureaucracy has also become prone to a preference for centralized system. The top positions in the state level and appointment to central level agencies are all serving as incentives for the bureaucrats to show allegiance to the centre more than the states (Gulzar & Pasquale, 2017). In other words, in terms of power and prestige, career advancement and promotion, the central government holds the key for most bureaucrats. Even for the bureaucrats who wish to serve the state governments in public interest, central control can derail the process. The debate surrounding bureaucratic allegiance to political authorities also has a regional dimension. Bureaucrats come from specific regions and have an affinity with the local home state. The allocation of bureaucrats is either made in the home state or non-home state. In a study on social proximity (shared language and culture) and bureaucratic performance it was revealed that the bureaucrats serving in home states were more susceptible to unwarranted political stress. However, they were also found to be more likely to get top positions at senior levels in state bureaucracy despite contested performance (Xu, Marianne, & Robin, 2018). This suggests that political capture and corruption is mediated by social proximity in adversely affecting bureaucratic performance (Brader, 2021; Das, 2020). Figure 1 illustrates the perception of civil servants on the existence of unwarranted external influence. As per the survey, a higher percentage of civil servants in the higher pay band felt the undue pressure from outside the administrative system as compared to the junior officers and the undue pressure mostly comes from the political establishments.

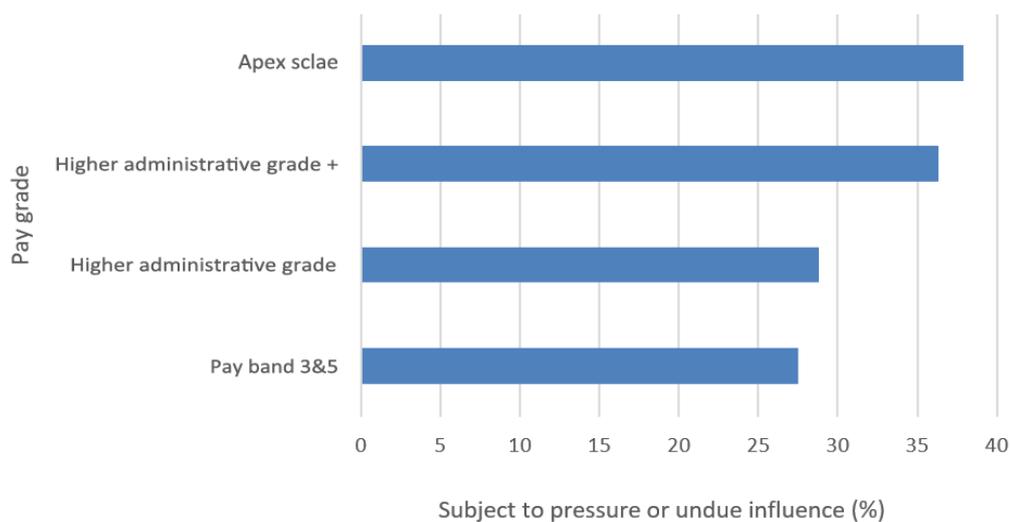


Figure 1. Perception of civil servants on undue external influence (Base=4517).

Source: Indian civil servants survey (DARPG, 2010).

### 5.3. Rational Choice Perspective

Most importantly, bureaucracy operates in a political setting (Iyer & Mani, 2012). Public bureaucracies are embedded in a contextual setting with a visible blend of political institutions, laws, taxes, budgets, plans, and negotiated programs. However, macro politics and micro politics in India do not move in unison. While a synergistic relationship between the political system and the permanent bureaucratic structure may exist in a formal constitutional sense, the reality of politics-administration association, much like the political game, is characterized by a rational choice game. Governments or political elites are mostly interested in consolidation of power through a subservient and pliant instrument in the form of bureaucracy. The bureaucracy itself has an interest in enhancing social status and obtaining higher rewards for their loyal services (Hanna & Wang, 2017). Following a political master's diktats and identifying with his interests, predicting, and acting on his ideas in official work, and appealing to his limited political objectives are

typically simple alternatives for public employees who deal closely with governing politicians (Mohanty, 2022). As societies become more complex, this master-servant relationship is subject to a complex set of loyalties hinging on class, political party and command over resources (Caiden, 1996). Centre and states as the two levels of government working under one political and constitutional arrangement show a proclivity to persevere by using the bureaucratic administration as the tool to assert power and influence in the changing political climate. Bureaucratic commitment to social change often degenerates into compliance with political mandates. Despite the ‘entirely unsuccessful’ anti-corruption reforms in the form of the policy on demonetization, the government was able to regain power (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020; Safi, 2018).

5.4. Dynamic Incentives

A related reason concerns the system of dynamic incentives that characterizes the relationship between the politicians and the bureaucrats. In the end, parliamentarians rely entirely on the bureaucracy to execute the initiatives that will eventually bear the politician's name. As a result, the politician is motivated to incentivize the bureaucracy as his reputation is on the line (Nath, 2015). The meritocratic recruitment system and fixed wage structure of the bureaucracy leaves scope for exerting influence only through lucrative assignments, relocation to favored administrative districts, swift promotions, or post-retirement benefits (Bertrand, Burgess, Chawla, & Xu, 2020). Thus, the incumbency of a political leader and the chances of re-election drive electoral competition. And electoral competition in turn drives the centre-state political groupings. Bureaucratic competence correlates strongly with the involvement of both central and state level political executives. When the relation between the centre and the states is cooperative and there is a high probability of political leaders being in the office for long term, it increases the ability of politicians to motivate bureaucrats through incentives. Conversely, when the relation between the centre and the states is discordant, it not only reduces the ability of politicians to promise durable incentives but also increases the scrutiny of administrative work by political bosses. Thus, the nature of centre-state relations can induce the necessary motivation or de-motivation for the bureaucracy to make extra efforts in the implementation of projects (Bellé, 2013). Figure 2 illustrates the grievances of Indian civil servants about the overall administrative system. The respondents in the survey were quite annoyed with the mismatch between training and postings; short term outcomes as criteria for appraisals; no reprimand for corrupt officers; and lack of objectivity in selection of trainees. These grievances relate directly to political interference over the higher echelons of bureaucracy and acts as a hindrance in objective functioning of the Indian bureaucracy.

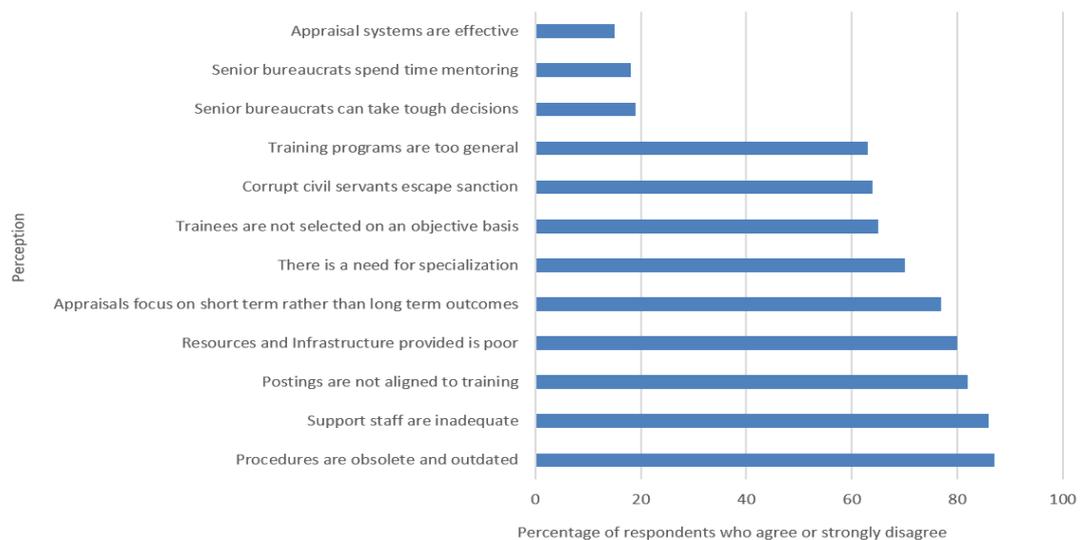


Figure 2. Selected grievances of Indian civil servant.

Source: Indian civil servants survey (DARPG, 2010).

### 5.5. Delegated Legislation and Political Control

Over the years, there has also been an enormous increase in delegated legislation (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2021). Owing to the complexity of developmental policy making coupled with paucity of time and excessive work, the legislature delegates certain legislative functions to the bureaucracy. This is intended to leverage the detailed knowledge and expertise of the bureaucrats in public policy. However, the shift from a one-party dominant federal structure to a multi-party federal structure and vice-versa affects and gets affected by the direction and trend of delegated legislation. Since the delegation involves expansion of powers of the bureaucracy, this also creates an imperceptible influence of the legislators or the ruling party over the bureaucracy. To prevent bureaucratic despotism in the exercise of delegated authority, the parliamentary committees such as Parliamentary Accounts Committee, Estimates Committee, and Committee on Public Undertakings scrutinize the delegated legislation. Members of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha comprise these committees to examine the delegated rulemaking by bureaucrats functioning under the administrative set-up of both centre and states. In other words, the political control over bureaucracy in a federal milieu pertains to the expansion as well as sustenance of their legislative power. Figure 3 illustrates the most common reasons for resignation from civil service. Not surprising to note, political interference occupies the second most common reason for considering resignation. Political control is also implied in the lack of recognition for work and bad postings which are shown as other important factor for self-termination of services by Indian bureaucrats.

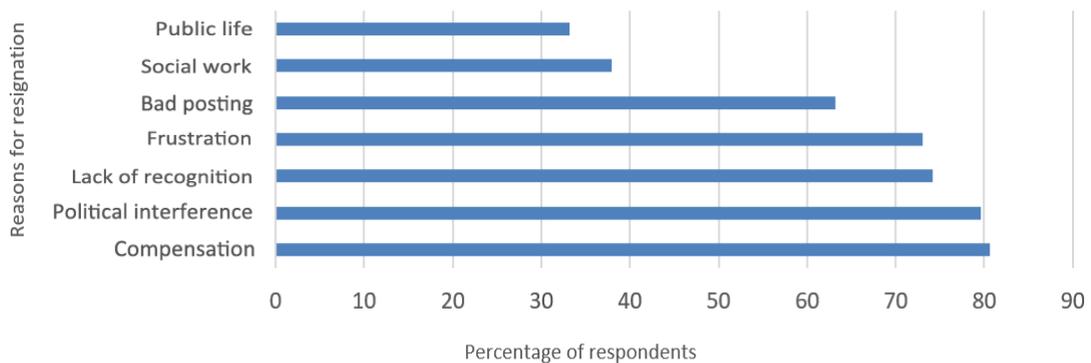


Figure 3. Reasons for resignation among IAS officers (Base=900).

Source: Indian civil servants survey (DARPG, 2010).

### 5.6. Policy Making Process

The evolution of policy space and the policy-making eco-system has transformed the federal balance owing to the increase in universal nationalized welfare programs. The central and state governments belonging to different political factions engage in a policy scramble to establish dominance over certain policy areas that generate high electoral returns or that appease the voters (Mukhopadhyay, 1996). The pitting of national welfare programs against the state welfare programs undercuts the administrative autonomy of sub-national governments. In fact, administrative autonomy in sub-national governance is a bedrock assumption that not only underpins the centre-state relations but has a direct involvement of the bureaucratic system. With the transformations in information and communications technology and the increasing emphasis on a bottom-up approach to governance, the contours of central governments engagement with the sub-state administration have become more direct and straightforward. The role of state political executive and the state administrative agencies has likewise decreased. In the implementation of public policies, the central government exercises complete control over the purse strings and has a symbiotic relationship with the top-ranking central bureaucrats who are given the charge of distributing the resources to the beneficiaries and be accountable to the central government for their actions (Bertelsmann

Stiftung, 2020; Encarnation, 1979). The centralization of bureaucracy to ensure effective control and monitoring of fiscal allocations has depreciated the value of the state administrative machinery as incompetent and not progressive enough in the eyes of the sub-national citizenry. This also points towards the still prevalent conviction that regards national bureaucracy as superior in quality and efficiency of professionals compared to the local bureaucracies (Tanzi, 1996). This hierarchy in terms of merit and ability of central and state bureaucracies has only exacerbated the gulf between centre and states. Our system of governance is increasingly leading to the partisanship and political capture of the Indian bureaucracy and the concomitant hammering of the federal balance (Chawla, 2022). Table 2 presents the survey results of the bureaucratic transfers regarding the ministries that have been at the forefront of most administrative reshuffling. There are certain ministerial portfolios that seem to have dominated the bureaucracy and its capacity to function by frequent transfers of civil servants at various levels.

**Table 2.** Over time, a similar set of ministries have remained the most active on transfers.

Oct 1999 to May 2004	May 2004 to May 2009	May 2009 to May 2014	May 2014 to May 2019
Land revenue management and district administration			
Personnel and general administration	Personnel and general administration	Finance	Personnel and general administration
Finance	Finance	Personnel and general administration	Finance
Agriculture and cooperation	Agriculture and cooperation	Urban development	Urban development
Industries	Urban development	Agriculture and cooperation	Agriculture and cooperation

Source: Supremo database of department of personnel and training, government of India.

A comparable group of ministries and departments have consistently recorded the highest transfers across time and governments. These are the ministries, especially land revenue management and district administration, finance, and urban development, which are often given the most responsibilities or have the most financial clout.

## 6. CONCLUSION

If Indian democracy has survived despite socio-political upheavals, human development challenges, natural disasters, macroeconomic concerns, intermittent violence, threats to national security, it is largely because bureaucracy in India has worked assiduously with remarkable determination. This role as the permanent executive of a nation requires neutrality and non-partisanship. The notion of bureaucratic neutrality presupposes an agreement on the values and ethics of governing a democracy. A neutral, value-free bureaucracy can flourish in a society that has a consensus on fundamental values related to democracy and development. Indian constitution lays down the framework and the basic structure of democratic governance. However, democratic ethos and the interpretation of democratic values alter with the changes in the political culture that dominates the political landscape at a given period. The centre-state relations have far-reaching implications for the formation of the political culture. The value preferences and welfare-commitments of different ruling factions in the political arena give rise to different perceptions regarding the role of bureaucrats. Some political factions believe in customizing the Weberian bureaucratic system built on neutrality and impartiality to suit Indian developmental needs by instilling allegiance towards political executive's nation-building goals. This not only necessitates techno-rational advice from the bureaucrats but also an emotional integration with the plans, policies, and programs that the political elites have crafted for public welfare. The problem arises when there is a divergence on goals and objectives of welfare or the kind

of welfare between central and state political establishments. The conflict emanates when bureaucratic neutrality is misapprehended as bureaucratic disinterestedness or apathy. Therefore, the neutrality of bureaucrats towards the ruling political executive is contingent on the political culture shaped by the prevailing temper of centre-state relations.

Public functionaries, whether permanent or elected, share a set of non-negotiable values that guide them in carrying out their constitutional and legal responsibilities with honesty, integrity, and professional morality to improve the quality of government services that benefit society and the people. A competent administration equips the ruling power to achieve the country's development objectives. Even in a volatile federal polity, the bureaucrats should be able to establish avenues for the optimal functioning of policies within the framework and spirit of the responsibilities entrusted to it by the laws of the nation. The unity strand of the seamless web of constitutional edifice rests on a synergistic centre-state relationship and the bureaucracy should be seen as the facilitator rather than a scapegoat in the democratic governance of India.

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