UNIT 20 BUREAUCRACY

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20.1 INTRODUCTION

In today’s world, it is almost impossible for anyone not to be confronted by governmental agencies such as police, tax authorities, municipal authorities, authorities dealing with public utilities like public transport, sanitation, supply of electricity, water etc. several times a day within our normal daily activities. The realm of bureaucratic authorities has considerably gained in size and importance owing to the enormous horizon of the modern political regimes, which tends to encompass manifold activities with a view to achieving goals in a more rational manner. No modern state can think of surviving without the minimum support of the bureaucratic structures, as these agencies are quite capable of achieving objectives in an extremely efficient manner for big organisations.

Thus public bureaucracies—civil service, or other administrative agencies—dominate modern societies and political regimes. These agencies comprising the members of the executive branch below the chief political executive are normally responsible for implementing public policies. There has been an increase in the size of government bureaucracies over the last century or so as a result of the proliferation in the governmental functions. In other words, the growth of the modern state and the demands of the social and economic development have given rise to administrative structures and their multiplication. These bureaucratic structures have assumed immense importance in view of their technical, intellectual superiority and expertise against their amateur political executives. Many scholars believe that only a society having legal-rational authority structures would be capable of sustaining administrative structures of the bureaucratic model (Dwight Waldo, 1953).
20.2 MEANING OF BUREAUCRACY

Bureaucracy commonly is used to refer to all agencies and structures involved in public administration. Bureaucracy however refers to a particular way of organising such agencies. Encyclopaedia Britannica defines bureaucracy as a professional corps of officials organised in a pyramidal hierarchy and functioning under impersonal, uniform rules and procedures to secure the goals of their organisations.

20.3 WEBER’S THEORY OF BUREAUCRACY

It goes to the credit of Max Weber, the German historian turned sociologist to give a systematic theory of ‘bureaucracy’ – the patrimonial type prevalent in ‘traditional’ and ‘charismatic’ authority systems and the ideal model of ‘legal-rational’ bureaucracy of legal rational authority systems of modern times. Max Weber was the first one to talk about bureaucracy as a big improvement over the haphazard administration. His is not merely the most oft-quoted theory of public administrative organisations, but also a starting point for most social science researches on bureaucracy.

20.3.1 Weber’s Authority System

In his typology of authority systems, Weber, on the basis of its claim to legitimacy, has classified authority as: (i) traditional authority, (ii) charismatic authority, and (iii) rational authority. In the traditional authority, the basis of acceptance and legitimacy of the authority is sacredness of the ruler and his orders. Under this system, personal contacts, loyalties, kinship etc. influence the structure and decisions of the administration. In the charismatic authority, charisma or the supernatural qualities of the ruler are the basis of acceptance of the authority. Charisma is the gift from above where a leader himself knows what to do. A charismatic leader contrasts with traditional leadership of a king or modern rational leadership of an administrative or elected leader.

In the legal-rational system, the acceptance of authority is sought on the basis of the rules, which are framed in an impersonal, impartial and rational manner. To Weber, a bureaucracy is a particular type of administrative structure developed in association with the rational-legal mode of authority. In his view, only traditional and rational-legal authority relations are sufficiently stable to provide the basis for the formation of permanent administrative structures.

Max Weber gave the concept of ideal type bureaucracy with structural and behavioural features such as rationality, division of work and specialisation, hierarchical authority system, merit based recruitment and promotion, distinction between position office and its incumbent, between public and private, emphasis on written documents, office procedures, rule-orientation, formalism etc. Bureaucracies are organised according to the rational principles. Offices are ranked in a hierarchical order and their operations are characterised by impersonal rules. Personnel are governed by systematic allocation of duties and functions. Recruitment is done on the basis of the merit of the candidates, or according to specialised qualifications rather than ascriptive criteria. This bureaucratic
coordination of the actions of large numbers of people has become the dominant structural feature of modern forms of organisation. For Weber, bureaucracy is a type of administrative organisation with above characteristics which once established will continue because it is the most efficient, most rational form of organisation for exercising legitimate authority (distinct from power) in a modern society. Since all modern states claim to be ‘legal-rational authority systems’ public administration is carried on everywhere through a bureaucracy (civil service) modelled upon the Weberian ideal type. To Weber, a bureaucracy is an administration based on discipline; and discipline is “nothing but the consistently rationalised, methodically prepared and exact execution of the received order”.

**20.3.2 Characteristics of Weber’s Model**

Weber’s model of bureaucracy has the following characteristics:

1) Specialisation and an elaborate division of labour
2) Hierarchy of positions
3) Technical competence as the chief criterion for recruitment and promotion
4) Written rules and regulations
5) Impersonality and
6) Formal, written communication.

**Division of labour**

The most fundamental feature of Weber’s theory of bureaucracy is a highly developed division of labour and specialisation of functions. This is done by an explicit and detailed definition of duties and responsibilities of each hierarchical unit. The allocation of a limited number of tasks to each office operates according to the principle of fixed jurisdictional areas that are determined by administrative regulations.

**Authority structure**

Unlike traditional authority structures, where the inferior-superior relationship tends to be on personal grounds, inferior-superior relationships in bureaucratic organisation is based on “rational” and impersonal regulation of authority. There is a definite distribution of official duties in a fixed way. The authority to issue orders to carry out work is strictly delimited by rules. Methodical provision is made for the regular and continuous fulfilment of these duties and for the execution of the corresponding rights. Thus authority is legitimised by administrative rules and the loyalty of the incumbent is aligned to an impersonal order, to a superior position, not to the particular personage.

**Position and role of the incumbent in a bureaucratic organisation**

The role and status of the incumbent in a bureaucratic organisation is characterised by the following features: selection and recruitment on the basis of formal qualifications (diplomas, university degrees) that testify applicant’s necessary capability to accomplish effectively his specialised duties rather than such considerations as family position or
political loyalties. His office is his sole occupation, ensuring stability and continuity, a “life’s work.” It constitutes a “career.” In other words, positions in the bureaucratic organisations are not offered on an honorary or short-term basis. There is normally an elaborate system of promotion on the basis of the principles of seniority and achievement. The system of remuneration is based on the status of his position rather than on his productivity performance per se. There is a clear-cut separation between the private and the public sphere of the bureaucrat’s life.

**Rules that regulate the relations between organisational members**

The presence of a system of control based on rational rules is the most important and ubiquitous feature of bureaucracy. According to Max Weber, “Bureaucratic administration means fundamentally the exercise of control on the basis of knowledge. It is this feature which makes it specifically rational”. This stands in extreme contrast to the regulation of all relationships through individual privileges and bestowal of favour, which is dominant in patrimonial organisations, at least in so far as such relationships are not fixed by sacred tradition.

**Formal, written communication**

The management of the modern office is based upon written documents. The officials engaged in a ‘public’ office, along with the respective apparatus of material and the files, constitute a ‘bureau.’

Weber has justified the rationale of the bureaucratic organisations in a democratic regime. Firstly, there is the principle of “fixed and official jurisdictional areas”, which ensures job rights to the employees. Secondly, bureaucracy has hierarchical supervision that allows the governed the right to appeal to a higher level of authority with the “full” type of bureaucracy. Weber states that an office manager receives expert training and the official receives compensation for the services one renders to the organisation.

### 20.3.3 Weber’s Critics

Weber’s model of bureaucracy has met with a lot of criticism at the hands of behavioural scholars. Among such scholars who also contributed to the studies of comparative bureaucratic system, Robert Merton, Michael Crozier, Robert Michels, Monroe Berger, Alfred Diamant, Ferrel Heady, and Robert Presthus are most prominent. The emphasis in most of the writings on comparative bureaucracy appears to be on the interaction between the administrative sub-system and the political system in which it (i.e., the administrative sub-system) exists, although some attention has been paid to other dimensions of administrative ecology. Let us examine some of the views of Weber’s behavioural critics in some detail.

i) **Robert Merton**

The most general argument against such structures was developed by Robert Merton, who argued that there is a tendency for “the rules to become more important than the ends they were designed to serve, resulting in goal displacement and loss of organisational
effectiveness.” Robert K. Merton starts by telling us about the miracles of bureaucracy. Merton is among the first sociologists to emphasise systematically dysfunctional aspects of bureaucracy: redtapism and inefficiency. According to him, the preponderance of rational rules and procedures brings about lack of flexibility. Procedural rules become ends in themselves instead of simply means leading to “goal displacement”. Robert Merton first identified this problem and applied the term to organisational preoccupation with its rules and regulations to the point that managers keep the organisation from meeting its goals. He said that in this system, “goal displacement” occurs as the “instrumental and formalistic aspect of the bureaucratic role becomes more important than the substantive one, the achievement of the main organisational goals”. According to Merton, when one leaves the sphere of the ideal and studies a real organisation, one can see that a certain bureaucratic characteristic can both promote and hinder organisational efficiency; it can have both functional effects and dysfunctional effects.

ii) Michael Crozier

The French sociologist Michel Crozier’s study (Michael Crozier, The Bureaucratic Phenomenon, 1963) of two French government agencies was another important step in the analysis of organisational power and conflict. In Crozier’s analysis, the social structure consists of highly cohesive occupational groups, each presenting a unified and rather hostile front towards the others. Each group tends to manipulate the rules with a view to promote its own privileges and rights.

iii) Robert Michels

Robert Michels, in his “iron law of oligarchy,” postulates that intensifying complexity and bureaucratisation of modern organisations is leading to the concentration of power at the top level, in the hands of a few who tend to rule in a dictatorial manner. He holds the increasing size of modern organisations and the increasing complexity of the problems responsible for this. The position of the topmost officials turns to be invincible. A few can manoeuvre facts to use the communication network against any potential rival. In the process of repeated performance of duties, specialised knowledge and skills are acquired which add to his importance in the organisation. Once in control, the organisational oligarchy always aims at the consolidation of its own position and tends to sacrifice the general aims of the rank and file rather than its own, whenever any threat occurs. This finally leads to societal oligarchy. If the organisational systems of such voluntary organisations as trade unions and political parties cannot work democratically, then the political institutions of the whole society are undermined at their very roots. Indeed, a society dominated by large-scale oligarchic organisations eventually develops an oligarchic political regime.

iv) Fred Riggs

Fred Riggs (1966) is one of the important western scholars who have found congruence between the administrative behaviour of functionaries and notions of bureaucracy. He identified Thailand as a bureaucratic polity in which Thai bureaucrats not only formulated and implemented policies, but also acted as interest groups and at times assumed the function of the legislature. He feels that the prismatic bureaucracy of Thailand represents
a transition between a traditional society in which roles are fused and a modern society in which they are diffracted, and was characterised by the co-impingement of both traditional and modern values. According to Riggs “Obviously in such a society, there could be no separate doctrine or study of “public administration” any more than there could be separate teachings on economics or religion. Religious ideas were embodied in myths and teachings, which related to politics, administration and economics but not per se - more realistically, they simply related to life.

20.4 MARXIST VIEWS ON BUREAUCRACY

Marxist writers view bureaucracy in their own perspective. Whereas Lenin and other Soviet writers could not admit that bureaucracy had a permanent and “organic” position in the Soviet system, other Marxists thought that it was at its centre and that it defined more than anything else the very nature of the regime. From their point of view, bureaucracy was not only a privileged oppressive group but a new exploiting class, a class characterised by a new type of oligarchic regime that was neither socialist nor capitalist and that was rapidly spreading both in the East and in the West. The first systematic elaboration of this position was attempted by the Italian Marxist Bruno Rizzi in *The Bureaucratisation of the World* (1939). For Rizzi, the Soviet bureaucracy constituted a new ruling class that exploited the proletariat as much as the capitalists had in the past. It differed from capitalism only in that the new type of domination was based not on individual but on group ownership of the means of production. In fact, in the Soviet system the means of production represented not “socialism” but “statism.” They did not belong to the whole collectively but to the state and to the bureaucrats who controlled it. In the last analysis, it was these bureaucrats—the technicians, directors, and specialists holding key positions in the party and state administration—who exploited the proletarians and stole the surplus value of work. According to Rizzi this new type of regime, which he called bureaucratic collectivism, was not limited to the Soviet Union. Similar tendencies could be discerned in fascist countries and even in the “welfare state” type of capitalist democracies. The Yugoslav Communist Milovan Djilas in *The New Class* (1957), a later criticism of the Yugoslav Socialist regime, used arguments similar to Rizzi’s.

20.5 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICAL AND PERMANENT EXECUTIVES

Power is the most important variable in the study of the bureaucracy. The control of bureaucracy by political leaders has lately diminished owing to the growth in the size and discretionary powers of bureaucracies.

The relationship between the political leaders and bureaucracy is quite intricate and complex, symbiotic as far as the formation and implementation of policies is concerned. Bureaucratic guidance and support are crucial to the political leadership and bureaucrats have many assets: their permanence, freedom from electoral worries, their knowledge of the files, and their control of communication— which they can use to get their way in encounters with politicians.
Weber himself argued that bureaucracy is essentially a directionless force which ‘is easily made to work for anybody who knows how to gain control over it’, through the device of changing the top officials. It is true that he doubted the capacity of political leaders for directing the bureaucratic experts, and became extremely wary of political leadership. His statement about the ‘over towering power’ of the experts was partly an argument about the inevitable dominance of executive government over an elected legislature under modern conditions. Thus Weber voiced anxieties about the control of bureaucracy, which strike a very modern note, but Peter Self has argued, he did not envisage the growth of administrative pluralism. Bureaucracy was left by his theory as a judgement, which, because it was technically competent but politically neutral, would necessarily be controlled from the top downwards.

Bureaucracies have always been judged against the standards of an effective organisation. The combination and reconciliation of bureaucratic “efficiency” and democratic “accountability” is another issue that Weber has addressed in his writings. Earlier the scientific management school had assumed that bureaucracy could be made to work for any organisational and instrumental efficiency of bureaucracy. Even human relations school did question the role of political control.

However, Peter Self argues that Weberian concept has become outdated owing to the following considerations. Firstly, the bureaucratic exercise of discretionary powers has grown enormously. It is a fact that in modern government, bureaucracy has become more and more involved with discretionary forms of intervention, arbitration and financial support. Secondly, the political environment of modern bureaucracy is characterised by the complex and variable political pressures rather than by the direct political leadership. To add to this there has been rise and growth of more individualist or anti-authoritarian attitudes among officials themselves, which weakens the discipline of hierarchical system.

The study of relationship between the bureaucracy and the politicians shows that there is a general trend towards strengthening of bureaucracies vis-à-vis the political structures. To generalise this is however not an easy task, in view of the fact that the specific situation varies from country to country. In Britain, bureaucrats are recruited and trained to show political sensitivity, their influence will, therefore, be interpretative. On the other hand, French political system, being characterised by greater political instability and the traditions of stronger political authority, makes excessive use of bureaucracy (or technocracy). Bureaucratic power is concentrated in the two wings of the administrative system: grands corps and the polytechnicians. Owing their broad based education, highly elitist education, the bureaucrats are well equipped to exercise power.

Apparently, the bureaucracy occupies a relatively subordinate position vis-à-vis the political executives in the USA. There is a system of appointment of political executives on a very large scale at the wish of the President. However, these appointments are done in a hasty manner. Moreover they are short tenured and temporary in nature and sometimes the lack of party discipline and programmes make these appointees less significant in the political system. Consequently, the permanent executives emerge more powerful and influential.
20.6 FUNCTIONS OF BUREAUCRACY IN MODERN TIMES

In modern democratic political regimes, bureaucracy is entrusted with the function to implement the rules made by the legislature. Rule-implementation is considered to be ‘mechanical’ and a ‘quasi-automatic process’. However, according to Blondel, this view is ‘oversimplified’ as administrators help their ministers to prepare the decisions as they cannot draft all the rules and regulations without the help of the administrators. Hence, the help rendered by the administrators to their ministers is of immense magnitude in view of the fact that even rule-making has become a very complex function. The political regimes are involved in the preparation of both short as well as long-term socio-economic plans and policies. Thus it would be ironical to say that the administrators just play a role in the implementation of the rules and programmes formulated by the state from time to time, rather their contribution in the field of formulation of the rules, policies, and programmes is immensely significant.

However, according to Blondel, even the process of implementation should not be considered as “automatic and mechanical”. Rule implementation is also a decision making process as the administrators have to choose one path from among various alternatives available to them (J. Blondel).

Much of the administrative work is ‘managerial’ or ‘technical achievement’ in nature. Technicians are specialists and their aim is the growth of the service and its achievements, though not all bureaucracies have attained the similar level of specialisation and technical expertise. For example, French civil service is involved more in technical development than the British and the American bureaucracies. However, proliferation of public functions has led to a greater emphasis on technicians in all states. Managerial demands and the consequent increase in the numbers of specialists in positions of considerable importance, the relationship between bureaucracy and government has taken a form different from that which the theory of representative government anticipated. Bureaucracy is not merely a technical instrument. It is also a social force with interests and values of its own. As such, it has social consequences beyond its instrumental achievements.

20.7 BUREAUCRACY IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

20.7.1 Nature of Bureaucracy in Developing Societies

In the emerging developing societies, bureaucracy has come to acquire the following features.

Firstly, as state plays a key role in the process of development, bureaucracy has been regarded as an important instrument for modernisation, growth and development. However experiences in most third world shows that bureaucracy has not been able to deliver goods as effectively as the theorists on bureaucracy had expected. On the other hand, the structural and behavioural characteristics of Weber’s bureaucracy proved to be
instrumental in impeding development. Hence it has been attempted to recast and adapt Weber’s construct of bureaucracy to the specific realities of developing societies. This has led to the concept of development bureaucracy.

Secondly, unlike the developed countries there is less differentiation of functions in the developing countries as a result of which the powers and importance of bureaucracy crossed its legitimate limits. Fred Riggs argues that the development process involves a clear-cut separation of spheres of activity, provision of separate structures for various functions. There has been a proper coordination between bureaucracy and other political structures.

Thirdly, appointments are done on the basis of merit, which is judged through a public competitive examination comprising both written and personality tests. However the intervention of primordial factors such as personal, caste, tribal, ethnic or religious considerations is still a harsh reality. Favours are bestowed on the basis of non-merit factors to those who qualify the written tests. Appointment to key posts is done mainly on the non-merit considerations. Ethnic considerations have emerged as a strong basis for public appointments. In some states like India there is a system of reservation of seats to the members of most and other backward castes and classes in the matters of public appointments. This is done with a view to make bureaucracy a representative bureaucracy. Such practices tend to limit the ability of states to make effective rules for the society. There is absence of uniform procedures regarding the selection and recruitment of bureaucrats.

Fourthly, the politicisation of bureaucracy is another characteristic in the developing countries. In India, the concept of “committed bureaucracy” was mooted by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in the late 1960s, implying that bureaucrats should be committed to the party in power. However, because of a great public cry, Mrs. Gandhi had to later revise her stance clarifying that what she wanted was commitment to the basic law of the land rather than the government. But the fact is that there has been erosion of the principle of bureaucratic neutrality in the country. The appointment to top officials both at the centre and the states are done on the basis of personal and party loyalty. The reshuffling and transfers of civil servants before and after the elections have become a common phenomenon. The situation in African states is worse than the situation in Asia. In Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Nigeria, and Uganda as the policy of political mobilisation became an established feature of political systems, the political parties felt it necessary to look for the support of the bureaucratic apparatus. As a result of this, a variety of pattern of links between the political parties and the bureaucracy came into play in these societies. Owing to these relationships, the bureaucracies in these states seem to function in a subservient status vis-à-vis the office of the Presidency within the framework of African socialist ideology and benevolent welfare capitalism. The enmity between the political parties and the state bureaucracies have at times become quite intensive, giving additional impetus to the office of Presidency and to the institutionalisation of patronimialism and personal rulership. Such phenomenon is present in the Latin American countries too. However Botswana is an exception amongst the African countries where the principle of neutrality is still the basis of relationship between the politicians and the public servants.
Fifthly, another feature of bureaucracy in developing countries is the existence of rampant corruption within its ranks. It has become so menacing that it is eating into the stability, efficiency and effectiveness of public services. Not only small payments are offered to lower level officials for expediting the work, but also huge sums in bribes and kickbacks for facilitating higher financial and political interests. In Africa public officials are legally permitted to engage themselves in private business, which only accentuates the problem.

20.7.2 Role of Bureaucracy in Developing Countries

After the Second World War, these former colonies were to attempt a mammoth exercise to bring about development in their respective societies. The goals of rapid economic development were to be combined with the democratic political development. Development meant nation-building, growth, equity, democracy, and stability and autonomy. These countries had inherited a colonial bureaucracy. The characteristics of colonial bureaucracy included centralisation of authority, hierarchical, generalist administrators, neutrality. Such a bureaucracy was elitist, authoritarian, and paternalistic in nature. Any organisation of such characteristics as colonial bureaucracy cannot be effective in playing a role in the development process. Thus, generally, the rational legal bureaucratic organisation prescribed by Max Weber, and constructed by the colonial masters to carry out the task of policing and revenue collection, came to be doubted as the effective tool for development.

However some scholars made a plea to these countries to attempt to strengthen the centralised, efficient and strong bureaucracies, if they were to achieve the task of economic and political development. In the words of Joseph La Palombara, a powerful bureaucracy is said to be essential if one is to override the disintegrating influences of artificial political boundaries, the competitive forces of familial and tribal structures, the difficulty for organising and financing political parties, the low energy output of the population and the tendency of the population to want to expend funds on consumer gadgets rather than on capital formation. In developing states, powerful bureaucracies are simply necessary evils that one must learn to tolerate, hoping for the best from a democratic standpoint.

20.8 SUMMARY

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that despite the vehement criticism and the dysfunctionalities with which bureaucracy suffers today, it has come to stay as a vital institution of governance. No political regime of whatever nature and ideology can do without it. Of course, there are considerable differences about the way the bureaucracy functions and the kind of role it performs in different political regimes depending upon the way its members are recruited, trained, and inducted in the political system. Its specific role in governance would also depend upon the relationship with other political institutions and the political leadership in the country concerned. In the past one decade, the emergence of new public management movement in most countries has sought to downsize the role and apparatus of bureaucracy in most political regimes; but nowhere
in the world has bureaucracy come to be completely abolished, which reinforces its continued importance in shaping the activities of modern political regimes.

### 20.9 EXERCISES

1) Critically examine Max Weber’s ideal concept of bureaucracy.

2) Discuss the relationship between political executive and bureaucracy in democratic political systems.

3) Examine the characteristic features and role of bureaucracy in developing societies.