

What Indians Want (From the Bureaucracy) & How to Get it

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As someone with firsthand experience of how *Babudom* functions in India, I am often amused and at times distressed by people's assessment of how to cure the many ills of our bureaucracy. It is understandably difficult for the outside observer to pin down the crux of the problems of corruption, lethargic decision making and general inertia that is evidently keeping this institution from delivering. It is clearly frustrating for the average Indian to pay taxes to sustain this huge, apparently useless institution whose members seem to only abuse power and enjoy perks and do no good, or not enough, at any rate.

Various analysts have narrowed down the problem to low salaries, fear of the vigilance and audit machinery, lure of post retirement jobs, general lack of ethics in society etc. They are right, but the difficulty is that there is no easy formula to tackle these problems.

I heartily agree with Anja Manuel that India needs "a comprehensive ethics and education campaign in schools and the news media would shift cultural norms away from seeing graft as an inevitable part of life."¹ I cannot emphasize enough the importance of bringing back a much needed sense of shame to our society and cynical bureaucracy where one is counseled to look the other way when confronted with corruption. Many an honest bureaucrat could be held guilty of stoic, if unhappy, tolerance of colleagues who bend rules for personal gain, because they have learnt the hard way that they are a disappearing minority in a huge system that seems to censure probity, sincerity and industry. This brings me to the next oft touted solution.

I agree only partially, with those who blames the 3Cs (C&AG, CBI and CVC) for the resident inertia of the Indian bureaucracy. The truth is that we desperately need these institutions to do their job well. The trouble is that more often than

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/20/opinion/tackling-graft-in-india.html?_r=1

not, the resources of these bodies are being misused to settle scores and wreak revenge. Very often decisive bureaucrats who are the epitome of diligence and honesty are subject to malicious inquiries (initiated by unscrupulous and the dishonest) to teach them a lesson and to reign them in or even as convenient scapegoats. It is up to the Government to rehaul these bodies and to severely punish those found to have abetted the harassment of upright bureaucrats, either deliberately, or because of their sheer indifference or carelessness. A little digging would often reveal crooked fellow bureaucrats behind bogus complaints or audit paras and the complicity of the staff of these bodies lies at the root of the manipulation of the 3Cs. The careful selection of officers who man these bodies must be given utmost priority. The need for a genuine understanding of policy and programme implementation rather than a pedantic, hyper-technical or policing mindset is of utmost importance if these bodies are to concentrate on curtailing dishonesty. Only when this happens will this country set free the bright, honest bureaucrat who truly wants to serve his/her country and is willing to work day and night to deliver.

Shishir Gupta's idea of giving bureaucrats the option of branching into the regulatory stream after the age of 55 is a good one². He has stated that,

“One of the first steps in the reform of the bureaucracy by the government should be an end to job extensions to civilian bureaucrats. This is an incentive to make them malleable to the pressures of the party in power. It also enables dithering in decision-making so that errors of commission are eliminated. This system of rewards in the form of governorships, staff cars and State-subsidised bungalows in Lutyen's Delhi must end. One solution is to divide jobs between regulators and line appointments. On reaching at the age of 55, the bureaucracy should be asked to choose between the two careers. Those interested in regulation should be allowed to continue till 65 years while other follow the direct line operations till 60 or, in exceptional cases, 62 years.”

However, how this will solve the “malleability” of regulators is not clear. In a liberalized market economy the professionalism and autonomy of the regulator

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is critical and regulators who are at the end of the day political appointees may necessarily exhibit these traits. What is needed is more transparency and accountability in regulation. The actions of a number of regulators are still cloaked behind an opaque or at least translucent wall that hides regulatory capture and worse. The public should have a right to know the rationale for all government and regulatory decisions. One of the ways of achieving this is proper enforcement of the RTI including the requirement of voluntary public disclosure which is only being given lip service so far. The public too needs to wake up and demand more from the government. Further, they must stop paying speed money and using political patronage to manipulate the system. In general, Indians need to practice what they preach as desirable conduct from their fellow Indians in the bureaucracy. Not easy? Blame the system? It is a chicken and egg dilemma indeed.

Bringing in lateral entrants at higher levels of bureaucracy can instill fresh ideas and professionalism provided one can ensure the integrity and autonomy of these experts. This too leads right back to all of the above.

Finally, there is a need to pay well to attract talent. It has been rightly said that, “if you throw peanuts you will get monkeys” This country does not need a bunch of rapacious monkeys to manage its affairs. The paring down of the lower level bureaucracy and digitalization of government services must be coupled with a large enough higher level bureaucracy consisting of the country’s best brains, who are rewarded well for work. The Singapore model where the Government selects and trains the best students for bureaucratic positions on a renewable contract basis is one worth emulating. They also punish severely for corruption, which acts as an effective deterrent.

All these issues are intricately interlinked and difficult, but not impossible, to tackle provided, that is what Indians really want.

The author is a civil servant. Views are personal