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Improving Administrative Accountability in India

Despite impressive economic growth in the last three decades India could not achieve many Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set by United Nations, particularly in hunger, health, nutrition, gender, and sanitation. India's social indicators are today worse than countries poorer than India such as Bangladesh and Vietnam. In the 2021 Global Gender Gap Report India fell by 28 spots to 140th rank out of 155 countries, much behind 65th rank of Bangladesh. In the 2022 Global Hunger Index, India ranks 111th out of the 125 countries, and its hunger level is described as serious. In 2022, India's Human Development Index (HDI) ranking was 132nd (HDI value 0.633) among 191 countries, while China's ranking was 79th (HDI value 0.768), Sri Lanka's 73rd (HDI value 0.782), Bhutan's 127th (HDI value 0.666), and Bangladesh's 129th (HDI value 0.661).

We discuss below some feasible solutions for improving India's performance on social indicators.

Focus on outcomes - India's administration since the colonial days has been input-based. Once staff has been appointed and funds released, it is assumed that outcomes would automatically follow. At present, there is great pressure on the field staff as a whole to account for funds utilized, but not in terms of longer-term results, because quality of outcomes is not monitored. For instance, one would like to know how many newly constructed toilets are being used, and what impact has it had on peoples' health and hygiene. However, this data is either not available or not credible. Similarly, although school infrastructure has expanded a great deal in India, there is no corresponding improvement in the quality of learning, a task for which teachers and their supervisors need to be held accountable.

Pratham, a voluntary organization, has evolved a simple test in education at a low cost which judges the extent of learning in primary schools. Their finding shows that the actual

learning levels of students are abysmally low. Such studies should be repeatedly organized frequently and for each district.

Check inflated and incredible reporting -

Officials at all levels spend a great deal of time in collecting and submitting information, but these are not used for taking corrective and remedial action or for analysis, but only for forwarding it to a higher level, or for answering Parliament/ Assembly Questions. Often data on performance reaches late, or is not available district-wise, with the result that accountability cannot be enforced.

Equally, state governments do not discourage reporting of inflated figures from the districts, which again renders monitoring ineffective. As data are often not verified or collected through independent sources, no action is taken against officers indulging in bogus reporting. No mechanisms have been put in place in any State in India to check blatant mis-reporting.

The practice is so widely prevalent in all the States, presumably with the connivance of senior officers, that the overall percentage of malnourished children, in case of zero to three years according to the data reaching GOI from the districts is only 8 percent (with only 1 percent children severely malnourished) in 2020, as against 36 percent reported by NFHS-5 (with 17 percent children severely malnourished). The field officials are thus able to escape from any sense of accountability for reducing malnutrition.

The situation can easily be corrected by greater transparency of the district records that should be put on a website, and by frequent field inspections by an independent team of experts, nutritionists, and grassroots workers. For instance, the Anganwadi worker under the ICDS programme should be asked to weigh children and measure their heights in

an open gram sabha meeting in front of the parents of the children and civil society, rather than fudge these figures secretly in her office when no one is around.

Similarly, under pressure from the PMO, states reported that 100 per cent rural households owned toilets in 2019, whereas independent survey by NFHS-5 showed this figure to be only 72%, with as low as 48% for rural Bihar.

Control absenteeism - All ministries/ departments should collect quantitative data on absenteeism of both service providers and service receivers (students in classrooms, or women turning up for institutional deliveries) as it throws a great deal of light on the quality of service. Through a carefully designed methodology backed by technology, it is quite possible to measure the performance of all service providing agencies, such as police stations, health centres, local bodies, etc, and to what extent they are responsive, efficient and participative.

Improve flow of funds - Many state governments, especially the poor ones, are neither able to draw their entitled funds from GOI, nor are able to release these to the districts/villages in time, with the result that GOI is often constrained to divert the unclaimed funds to better performing states. The reason for poor performance by Bihar, Orissa, UP, and Assam is often due to the widespread shortage of staff at all levels that adversely affects implementation and supervision of programmes. For instance, in 2017–2018, the government spent `12,312 under NREGA on each rural poor in Kerala—the least poor state in India—as against a paltry `918 in Bihar and 943 in UP! The number of rural poor in Bihar is six times similar number in Tamil Nadu, but expenditure on NREGA in Tamil Nadu in 2017–2018 was three times that in Bihar. NREGA follows a 'free-for-all' strategy in the interstate

allocation of funds with the result that better-governed states corner most of the funds irrespective of a low incidence of poverty in those states. On the other hand, PMGSY fixes state-wise allocations based on predetermined gaps in infrastructure, and funds are released accordingly, thus benefitting states with poorer infrastructure more. The Ministry needs to earmark NREGA funds for states, on the basis of poverty, just as PMGSY allocations are in proportion to the state-wise shortage of rural roads. The 'Free-for-all' approach punishes poorer states as they are not able to compete with better-governed states in attracting funds from the GOI.

Simplify procedures - GOI had in 2004 issued instructions for increasing the number of ICDS centres by four times, but many states took four to six years in completing formalities. Nine chief Secretaries had to appear personally before the Supreme Court in March 2007 because the proposed centres had still not been made operational. The state governments could expedite the process and cut down on possible delays. Rather than do activities sequentially, we should do them in a parallel fashion. For instance, they can complete several steps (creation of posts, recruitment, selection of villages and sites, advance budget provision) simultaneously rather than do one activity at a time, so that much of the delay can be reduced.

Restructure bureaucracy - There are too many government servants in the support positions, such as clerks, orderlies, and drivers, who are now not needed in this era of advanced technology, and too few people in the line positions, such as teachers, nurses, and policemen, who are meant to deliver public services. Key public services – education, healthcare, police and judiciary are starved of regular employees, whereas many wings are overstaffed with Group C & D

support staff that has become mostly irrelevant in view of computerisation and changing techniques of information management. Efforts should therefore be made to identify surplus support staff, set up an effective re-deployment plan and devise a liberal system for exit. There should be incentives for clerks and class IV staff to become teachers and constables.

Improve tenure of field officials - One of the main reasons why systemic reforms have not been effected is the lack of stable tenure for officials. Appointments and transfers are two well-known areas where the evolution of firm criteria are circumvented in the name of administrative efficacy. This game of musical chairs aka transfers is also an arena of massive rent-seeking for corrupt officials and politicians. As tenures shorten, both efficiency and accountability suffer. For example, in Uttar Pradesh, the average tenure of an IAS officer in the last 20 years is reportedly as low as six months. The average tenure for an Indian Police Service in Uttar Pradesh is even lower, leading to the wisecrack - "if we are posted for weeks, all we can do is to collect our weekly bribes".

Political Expediency over Public Welfare - In a well-functioning democracy, political pressures can be healthy if it results in greater demands on administration for efficiency and better services to the people. This is, however, not happening in India.

It is an open secret that India's political and bureaucratic elite insidiously misuses public office for personal benefits. State resources are the most valued prize for both politicians and their constituencies, which leads to the establishment of a client-patron relationship between the holders of state power and those seeking favours. Political system in most states is accountable not to the people, but to those interests who drive/support individual

elected MLAs. These are often contractors, mafia, corrupt bureaucrats, media barons and manipulators who have enriched themselves through the political system, and are, therefore, deeply interested in the continuation of governance chaos and a patronage-based administration. That some politicians are either criminals or have strong criminal links further compounds the problem.

That is why the almost universal belief is that the bureaucracy is wooden, disinterested and corrupt. Bright men and women join the IAS, but adverse work environment, constant political interference, frequent and often meaningless transfers, and corruption below and above them all leads to the death of idealism, and encourages them to also misuse their authority. Over the years, whatever virtues the IAS (once lauded as the steel frame of India) possessed - integrity, political neutrality, courage and high morale - are showing signs of decay.

To sum up, it is critical at this juncture to focus on improving governance and strengthen the delivery mechanisms of government interventions to ensure transparency, accountability and achieve better outcomes. However, the above-described policy reforms

would require strong political support. In many states political pressures for distribution of patronage are so intense that there is no time or inclination for the ministers and bureaucrats to do conceptual thinking, design good programmes, weed out those that are not functioning well, and monitor the programmes with a view to improve the effectiveness of delivery.

Consequently, the system consistently fails to ensure that teachers and doctors are present at their designated postings and providing quality services, or in ensuring timely pensions to widows and the disabled. Other areas of chronic failures include programme evaluation and monitoring, ensuring accuracy of land records and their updating without rent-seeking, ensuring harassment-free livelihoods for the urban poor, such as street vendors and rickshaw pullers, and assuring honest measurement and reporting of outcomes. Development is an outcome of efficient institutions rather than the other way around. Focus therefore must be shifted from maximising the quantity of development funding to maximising of development outcomes and effectiveness of public service delivery.

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