

**CHALLENGE BEFORE
THE ADMINISTRATION**

C. S. SESHADRI, I.A.S. (RETD.)



FORUM OF FREE ENTERPRISE

**PIRAMAL MANSION, 235 DR. D. N. ROAD,
BOMBAY 400 001.**

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Whatever the form of Government a nation has, it cannot survive, let alone progress, without a good administrative set-up, competent and honest. As an old English poet of the last century wrote, "For Forms of Government let fools contest; what is governed best is best", Having been a bureaucrat for the best part of my life, I am aware of my limitations to deal with the subject objectively. Even when in service. I was aware of the steady decline in ethical and moral standards not only in the administration but also in public life. I am aware that changes do come, good or bad, whether one likes them or not, yet it is sad to see that in the pursuit of progress, the nation losing its moral and ethical standards. The administration too has been changing, reflecting the general trend.

Public Administration is a complex system and its quality and competence depends on several factors. It is, in fact, management at the highest and most comprehensive levels. Though there are two distinct wings — one, the political wing which lays down the policy and, the other, the executive wing which implements it — the distinction between them often gets blurred as the political wing is also involved in appointments, supervision and control of the executive and the executive provides, or at least is expected to provide, the necessary information and advice and thereby have some influence on the policies of the Government.

* Text of the A. D. Shroff Memorial Lecture delivered in Bangalore on 30th October 1979 under the auspices of the Bangalore Centre of the Forum of Free Enterprise. Mr. Seshadri was in Government service from 1943 to 1976, and held many responsible posts in administration as also in public enterprises.

"People must come to accept private enterprise not as a necessary evil, but as an affirmative good."

—EUGENE BLACK

It is said that a civil servant is like an Alsatian dog who would be very faithful and loyal to one master but liable to get confused if there are too many masters or too frequent a change of masters, and is liable to bite everyone including the master. Another saying is that you can judge the behaviour of a dog by the behaviour of its master or of the family which owns it. Years ago, I gave a talk on All-India Services before a service Club and I concluded the talk by saying "Whatever the standards of integrity and efficiency the people expect the services to have, and whatever standards the services themselves desire to have, there is one limitation -- No servant can have better standards than the masters. The club printed the statement in italics in their bulletin and somehow a copy reached the then Chief Minister. Some days later when I had an opportunity to meet the then Chief Minister, he brought it out and asked me if my statement did not imply that the Ministers were inefficient and corrupt. I replied that such was not my intention and added that I considered the people as the masters and presumed that the Ministers were also public servants. He seemed satisfied with my answer. Whatever the interpretation of my statement, I still believe it holds good.

There is a general feeling that public administration has deteriorated both in integrity and in efficiency and that the trend continues. While I do believe the administration still has some devoted and honest officials and is still basically sound, it cannot be denied that there is a clear deterioration in the standards.

The challenges before the administration basically are whether this deterioration can be halted and the administration can be made honest and efficient. The challenges arise from --

- (1) the increasing demands and expectation of the people both in quantity and in standards. The increasing population has brought in more quantitative demands and the increasing awareness of their rights has resulted in

better qualitative expectations. This is natural and should be expected.

- (2) The change or the shift in the concept of governmental business, whereby the Government is entering into areas previously left largely to private enterprise, has brought in serious problem of management and has widened the opportunity for corruption.
- (3) The political instability and general deterioration in ethical and moral standards,

To these may be added the technological advances in communication, transport and production, which while providing better tools of management, also creates new problems of management to the administration by the vast and fast changes in the social and economic set-up.

The administrative machinery is traditionally conservative and slow to change and in the present context in India, the inability of the administration to adapt itself quickly enough to meet the changes in society has been too apparent. To appreciate and understand the challenges before the administration, it is necessary to look back into the history of the public administrative system in India.

The public administrative organisation in India is one of the oldest organised systems in Asia, having been organised by the British over a century ago. It has hardly seen any major change. It was not, however, a copy of the administrative organisation in Britain. Basically it was the traditional system evolved in India and generally similar to those of ancient Romans and almost all ancient Kingdoms and Empires. It was a system based on the concept of "area administrators", a concept in which there is one administrator at each level responsible as the representative of the State, for all aspects of administration. He was the coordinator of all departmental functioning and responsible only to the area administrator at the higher level. It was a system in which there was a straight line of control from

the bottom to the top. The old names like Patel, Shekdar, Tahsildar or Amildar, Desai, Nadigar are all connotative of their jurisdiction. The British organised it and prescribed responsibilities, powers and procedures and added to it certain of their concepts such as that of administration of justice and certain ideas to suit their imperial needs. To ensure high standards and loyalty they built up the civil service — a cadre of youngmen selected by competitive examination and interview, and trained in the several aspects of administration and law. Though originally it was an exclusive preserve of Englishmen in due course Indians were admitted to this service. The State Civil Services were only an extension of the system. The uniqueness was the creation of a cadre of professional career administrators — a concept now being increasingly adopted in business and industry as "professional" managers. The "Steel Frame", as the system was popularly called, had a certain strength and had quite high standards of integrity, efficiency and loyalty. Given a special status, adequate remuneration, opportunities for advancement and good retirement benefits, the civil service men had little grounds for corruption and quite some inducement for efficiency and integrity. They formed the elite core of administration and whatever the criticism there was about them, it was not of disloyalty, inefficiency or of dishonesty. Basically the system, inherited on Independence, remains practically the same at least in form, though their strength has been eroded considerably. The system continues to have still some strength as has been proved by its functioning without a major breakdown for over three decades of freedom and democracy. For all its weaknesses and lapses, it is still the best when compared to those of other newly independent or developing countries. Its election machinery has successfully conducted overall fair and free elections. The main question, however, is whether it can be expected to continue without a complete breakdown in the face of increasing pressures of politicalisation and general deterioration in the standards of public life and whether it would adopt itself to function effectively in the fast changing conditions.

The main criticism against the administration may be briefly stated as (i) undue delays and cumbersome procedures in decision taking, (ii) widespread corruption at almost all levels, and (iii) an attitude of apathy and discourtesy in dealing with the public. These are generally the usual criticism against the administration all over the world, but it has a special significance in a developing country like ours where such weaknesses and lapses can lead to great suffering and hold up much needed development. It is not as if there were none of these defects in the administration previously. In fact, all the present weaknesses had their roots in the past, the difference being in the extent and impact on the citizen's life. While previously the Governmental role was limited and corruption may be said to have been only at certain lower levels, the impact was very much less. Now the opportunities and temptations have enlarged as a result of change in the concept of Governmental business, there being no corresponding development of machinery for managing them. Then again, it has a direct relationship to the standards of morality and integrity in the general run of business and industry, The exploitation of shortages, blackmarketing, widespread adulteration and passing of substandard goods is too well known to need elaboration. It is the general lack of ethical standards and social consciousness of the private sector that has led the Governments to step into the distributive trade. The usual argument of private business and trade is that there is so much of controls, regulations, corruption and delays in Governmental functioning that they cannot survive otherwise. Whether it is public reaction to Governmental defaults or vice-versa, the fact remains that there is a general deterioration in ethical and moral standards. I started my official career in the year the first food control orders came in and I have seen every control or regulatory order of Government bringing in a new class of corrupt officials. However, the acts of omission and commission of the administration have greater impact and reaction. The one point in favour of administration is that its weaknesses cannot be hidden or covered up for long and can be publicly questioned.

Earlier administrators had a high status in society and the normal standards for admittance to the civil service was so high that to get into it was considered the hallmark of **intelligence**, integrity and competence. This position continued for quite some time after Independence, but in the last two decades the civil service has been losing its status and charm, while other professions such as medical, engineering and new business management with their comparatively higher remuneration have acquired higher social status. **The** civil service no longer attracts the best of the young people. Surprisingly, however, there still appears to be a complex, and if one may say so an inferiority complex, that makes the **professionals and the politicians want to step into administrator's shoes.**

There has been in recent years quite some controversy about the so-called "bureaucrat" and the "technocrat". **This** is unfortunate as the success of an enterprise or of administration depends not so much on which category the persons come from, but on the person's qualifications and experience and more on the person's aptitude and attitude. I know people of both categories who have been quite successful as also of many who have failed miserably. Professional or technical competence is different from management competency. In fact, management is a specialised field by itself and while technical or professional background and experience would be of considerable help, by itself it does not necessarily imply managerial or administrative competency.

I do not want to comment on the merits of the Governmental entry into business and industry or, as it is sometimes said, encroachment of Government into areas which **are** best left for private enterprise except to the extent it affects the civil administration proper. The important factor **is** not who owns the business or industry, but how it is managed and for what social purpose and at what social cost. **The** problem of the public sector is a problem of management or rather of the lack of or inadequacy of the management cadre. The normal civil servant is brought up in the concept of "area administration" and as overall the management

concept of business and industry is obviously different from that of normal administration, it places a very heavy strain on the civil servant if he is asked to manage industry and business. However I should add that some of them have done or are doing an excellent job in these spheres, but that I would attribute to the individual officer's initiative and ability. Incidentally, for a long period, before Independence, the civil servant (both in I.C.S. and in the State Civil Service) was often posted as magistrate and even as a judge of high court, but! that was based on aptitude and competence. Many of them proved themselves and justified such appointments. Even now, it may be possible to build up a cadre from the civil servants along with the professional and technical personnel, based on aptitude and competence. Perhaps a background experience of Governmental administration would provide for a greater social **consciousness** and more effective **management**. One aspect which appears to have been ignored is the effect **the** public sector business and industry on general administration. The concepts of business and industry are different or ought to be **different** from those of administration. The normal Government employee **finds** it difficult to understand the wide variation in remuneration and service conditions between them and those employed in the public sector, particularly when the employer is same for both. Is it any wonder then, if he also demands the same benefits such as limited working hours, bonus and D.A. linked to **cost** of living? What justification can be given for denying the **bonus** to the Railway or postal employees or for that matter even for the Secretariat Staff? Is it possible to evolve a national wage policy that can be enforced on private sector as well or whatever remains of it, without destroying the initiative and freedom?

The **adoption** of agitational methods such as strikes and demonstrations by Government employees appears to be a direct consequence of Governmental entry into areas where such methods are accepted methods for redress of grievances, real or imaginary.

At the risk of being dubbed as an old-time bureaucrat. I **deplore** the trend and advocate strict enforcement of **con-**

duct rules and discipline. To some extent, one could understand and perhaps even sympathise with the sense of frustration driving them to such methods at certain bends but what is shocking is the growing trend even among the senior officers and essential services resorting to such methods. It is indeed a dangerous sign that such sections as the magistrates and senior officers of the Reserve and other Banks going on strikes and holding demonstrations. As an old-timer, I believe that accepting service under the Government implies the willing acceptance of certain limitations on one's rights and of abiding by the service conduct rules. Public service is a privilege as it provides opportunities for service to the people while providing the security of a job and retirement benefits. It is indeed a bad sign when employees of essential services like water supply, power and medical departmental and even the police resorting to lightning strikes and sometimes resorting even to sabotage. and holding the community to ransom. The extension of the Industrial Disputes Act to essential services is a serious mistake. It is a greater mistake for the Government to yield to such agitations and not enforce discipline. It leads one to think that the Government is either unwilling or incapable of managing them. Without a disciplined and efficient administrative machinery the political wing, of whatever party or ideology, can achieve little. If democracy has survived in India and there is still a resemblance of law and order, it is mainly due to the still basically loyal, non-political and disciplined armed forces, the core of civil administration and of the judiciary. They cannot be permitted to get politicalised and demoralised without the risk of India going the way of its neighbouring countries. Apart from enforcing discipline and service conduct rules, there is an urgent need to build up a machinery which would continually review, consider and take action to redress the genuine problems and grievances of the services. Having been a civil servant all my life, I cannot help advocating the consideration of the problems of the Government employees. The wide disparity in remuneration and practically inflexible income against the high rate of inflation makes them highly vulnerable to corruption, particularly when many of the people who deal with them

tempt them with bribes to get an unfair advantage or drive them to trade unionism and agitation.

It is possible to effect considerable improvement in efficiency of public administration, by adoption of modern management techniques and systems. The word "administration" means only management of Governmental business. The modern management concepts and techniques are a post World War II phenomena and it has its origin in the armed forces where the management of limited resources of men, money and material to achieve given objectives had been evolved. The technological advances in communications, transport and production in recent years have provided managements with considerably more effective equipment and tools and to utilise them efficiently, systems have been evolved. Industry and business in India have been fairly quick in utilising the modern equipment and tools and to some extent, the systems also. The Governmental administration, however, has been rather hesitant and slow in recognising and utilising them. This has created quite an anomaly with modernisation going ahead in the field with the departments and secretariat dealing with them continuing to plod under out-of-date cumbersome procedures and systems. While some public sector units have adopted modern management techniques and systems, they are faced with the problem of having to seek for most of the important management decisions approval from the Government's administrative secretariat where delays and indecision are inevitable.

The basic reason for much of the delays in public administration is, apart from the political and other general factors, the out-dated equipment and systems. The old "dafter" system of filing, and the system of "noting" by the so-called "case worker" who is the lowest official in the hierarchy cannot deal effectively or promptly with the increasing workload and complex problems that come up. The tendency is to deal routinely without any ideas of priority. While there has been quite some use of modern equipment such as telex and even computers, the basic organisational set-up to utilise them effectively does not exist. Telephones

are still considered as a status symbol. As is well known, any system which causes delay will invariably lead to corruption. While there is an increasing use of irrigation pump sets, tractors and bulldozers, chemical fertilisers and new agricultural practices on the field, the Agriculture Department and the secretariat which deals with them have to plod on under a system where there is not even a good filing system. The position is practically the same in all departments. While in all our 5-year or annual plans, considerable attention is paid to several developmental projects as such, little or no attention is paid to the corresponding requirements of administration at the department and secretariat levels. For effective functioning, the organisational structure must be an integrated and co-ordinated one.

One of the basic hurdles in effective administration is the out-of-date system of evaluation and audit. While public accountability is very necessary for public administration, it should be based on proper evaluation and audit. The present system where the object appears to be to find out as many mistakes and deviation from rules as possible, the tendency is to question almost every decision and to be rather free in passing strictures without the consideration of the circumstances that led to the decision. This is mainly due to the lack of background knowledge or experience of departmental work and the attitude of going by thumb rule interpretation of the rules and ignoring their spirit. The best of civil servants are liable to commit some mistakes and if their work is not evaluated as a whole and minor mistakes or deviations are blown out of proportion, their initiative and decision taking will be curbed and make them resort to protection on paper. In fact under the present system, it is safer for a civil servant to say "no" or not take a decision than to say "yes" and take a decision. This has led to the saying that the style of Governmental administration is not "management by objectives" but "management by objections".

While, even when in service, I have been advocating modernisation of administration by adoption of modern management systems and tools. I was aware of certain limi-

tations inevitable in Governmental administration. In fact, certain amount of procedural red tape and delay are inevitable in any large public or private organisation. Not being able to depend on the individual employee's sense of integrity of efficiency, certain norms and procedural safeguards have to be there as a check against misuse, and certain limits on delegation of powers. There will be a need for record keeping to enable audit and evaluation. There will also be personnel problems. The larger the organisation, the greater is the extent of these problems. The Government being the larger organisation and the biggest employer, has the largest of these problems and also has the added problem of public accountability as also of recruitment of personnel based on concepts other than merit and qualification and where personal evaluation of integrity and efficiency is not possible. However, it is possible to effect considerable improvement by adoption of modern management systems and techniques.

The modern management systems include, among other things, not only the use of modern equipment but also of motivation, clear statement of objectives, delegation of powers, line of communication and control, monitoring review and evaluating systems. Modern management concept envisages a continued process of evaluation and modification as against present system of ad hoc inspection, fault finding and routine reviews. The Governments have been aware of the problems of administration for quite some time. The several administrative reform commissions, the establishment of administrative training institutes and the government sponsored Indian Institute of Public Administration are all evidence of the awareness of the problems. However, these have had little impact as they all tend to think in very general terms and even when there are some worthwhile recommendations, they are not taken seriously. Most State and Central Governments have had "organisation and methods" sections for a long time, but they have had little impact on administration. What is needed is a systematic study of each department and evolving necessary measures to improve their efficiency and effectiveness. A beginning should be made at the

Secretariat level for, it being at the apex, sets the pattern for rest of the administration. Anyone who has dealt with the secretariat (that includes Heads of Departments and the Public Undertaking Chiefs) knows the delays and frustration in getting a decision out. It is not due to inefficiency or callousness of the secretariat officers, many of whom are competent, devoted and hard working, but due to the complex system and out-of-date procedures which the officers can ignore only at their peril. The usual pattern is one in which there are more ministers than secretaries to Government and each minister dealing with two or more secretaries and each secretary dealing with two or more ministers. There is considerable confusion in the line of control. Re-organisation of the structure and introduction of modern management system can be done without much radical change. While these measures would not solve all the problems, they can be expected to improve the quality of administration to some extent.

The challenge before the administration is an integral part of the challenge before the nation. It is a challenge of moral standards and much needed development. While quite some improvement is possible in administrative efficiency, its moral and ethical standards depend ultimately on those of its masters — the people and their representatives.

The views expressed in this booklet are not necessarily the views of the Forum of Free Enterprise.

"Free Enterprise was born with man and shall survive as long as man survives."

—A. D. SHROFF
(1899-1965)

Founder-President,
Forum of Free Enterprise.

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