

A public servant or his master's voice?

Democracy will not survive, in spirit, when State institutions, particularly bureaucrats, are actively politicised

"Im merely a civil servant, I do as instructed by my master" — Humphrey Appleby, *Yes Minister*. I was reminded of Humphrey's caustic comment (made to avoid accountability) while reading about the latest controversy between bureaucrats and politicians in India caused by the government order to depute joint secretaries, directors and deputy directors and as "rath prabhari" (later amended to nodal officers) to publicise achievements along with the ministry of defence's efforts to create "soldier ambassadors" to promote government schemes. The scheme was met with sharp criticism from various stakeholders including former bureaucrats for its blatant attempt at politicisation of the bureaucracy.

But public memory is short. This is not an isolated event. Back in 2018, months before the 2019 general election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Gram Swaraj Abhiyaan. Like the current campaign, officers were tasked with spreading awareness about the government's achievements. Given this, it is important to step back from the present moment to reflect more broadly on the relationship

between different political regimes and the bureaucracy in India and ask what distinguishes the contemporary form of politicisation from the past to better understand the dangers it presents. In commanding bureaucrats and the Army to publicise government schemes repeatedly, are we witnessing a systematic effort to cross the line by fusing party and State? And are bureaucrats innocent bystanders, merely acting on the "will of their political masters"?

Political neutrality is a principal doctrine of the original design of the Indian Civil Services. According to the rules of conduct, civil servants cannot join political parties or be involved in political events. The architect of the modern civil services in India, Sardar Patel, emphasised independence, impartiality and the freedom to speak as core values of All India Services. To enable this, the Constitution provided strong legal protection and security of tenure, through Article 311. The logic was to allow frank and free exercise of authority without fear of political pressure. Civil servants cannot be dismissed or demoted by politicians.

But for several decades now this principle of neutrality has been in deep tension with the political culture of the day. Writing in the early 2000s and subsequently in 2017, on the challenges afflicting India's civil services, civil servants KP Krishnan (now retired) and TV Somanathan pointed to the trend of increased politicisation of the bureaucracy through the exertion of political

influence on transfers and postings, which served as a means of demoting difficult and promoting pliant officers. This was particularly dominant in the coalition era of politics when declared loyalty (including through willing acquiescence to corruption) and caste affiliation became the key determinants of promotions and demotions.

Through a carefully constructed cross-country ranking exercise they estimated that between 1995 and 2013, the extent of political power over civil services was higher than almost all other parliamentary systems. On another measure, the extent of interference in policy matters to be decided by the civil service, India ranked the worst. This kind of politicisation that

Krishnan and Somanathan surmise has encouraged a culture "passive neutrality — a total submission to whoever is in power without any attachment to the part per se". The consequences on civil service efficiency, neutrality and impartiality have been disastrous and continue well into the present.

India's contemporary political culture has added a new dimension. Politics today is dominated by a populist, personalised leadership culture that legitimises itself through a direct, emotive connection with the voter. This kind of politics, by definition, centralising and requires the bureaucracy to play a central role in monitoring and implementation and above all, bypassing local intermediaries to present the party leader as the face of government schemes. Casting them as rath prabhari



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Ahead of the 2019 polls PM Modi launched the Gram Swaraj Abhiyaan. ANI

is an instance of just this! The difference between this form of politicisation and passive neutrality of the past is that political alignment is not limited to carrying out "orders". Rather it expects officers to become active policy propagandists of the government, not mere implementers of political agendas and enablers of corruption. In such circumstances, the primary role of civil servants — free and frank exercise of authority — is simply unviable.

This is not new for India. In a previous era of personalised politics, Indra Gandhi's operandi of a "committed bureaucracy" that actively prioritised her political agenda and facilitated her to bypass party bosses and appeal directly to voters is well documented. But while India is familiar with this model, the tools being deployed for building a committed bureaucracy today are far subtler than in the past.

For instance, in the age of technology and hyper communication and branding, the bureaucracy is expected to remain in conversation with the public. This opens new sites of politicisation. At what point is the line between legitimate governance-related communication and partisan propaganda crossed?

Beyond the rath prabhari proposal, which is a clear-cut case of crossing lines, there are several instances where bureaucrats use social media to defend and promote government policy. Direct references to politicians by name in tweets and public writing and responses to criticism by researchers and practitioners in the public sphere by bureaucrats are common practice today. Are these legitimate acts of governance and communication or are lines being crossed? Most puzzling is the silence of the bureaucracy. Why is there no visible pushback, just as there was against frequent transfers and corruption, against this insidious form of politicisation? Are bureaucrats willing participants?

No democracy can survive, in spirit, when state institutions and especially the bureaucracy, are actively politicised. As politics becomes more personalised and populist, as technology provides new tools, acts of politicisation are more insidious. We need to understand and challenge these acts. They pose a serious threat to democracy.

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