

## BUREAUCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT : CASE STUDY OF A STATE DIRECTORATE

Arif Hassan

### Abstract

*This paper is based on a case study of decision making in an administrative department of one of the state governments in India. It presents how the manifold steps involved in the bureaucratic procedure in decision making create undue delay and suggests elimination of the redundant and meaningless steps in order to achieve efficiency in decision making.*

### Introduction

Bureaucracy is known for its slow and mechanical ways of decision making, its priority of rules, regulations and procedures over outcomes, and its ethos of impersonality. It might have been a method of rational solution of the organisational problems during the day of Weber (Mc Sheweeney 2006; Weber 1958) when the organisational tasks were relatively routine and the environment placid. But with growing uncertainty and turbulence in the environment, incomplete information flow and the complexity of tasks (Emery and Trist 1973), it is no longer functional either for the individuals working within its framework or for the organisational effectiveness (Steiner 1965).

And yet, we cannot dispense with it in India<sup>1</sup>. The resources of the country are still centralised in the hands of the state which has taken upon itself the gigantic task of a planned growth of the country and which does not know any viable alternative to bureaucracy. As a result, bureaucracy in India has grown in both size and importance. The danger, however, lies in the simplistic assumption that a

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Arif Hassan, Associate Professor, Department of Business Administration,  
International Islamic University, P.O Box 10, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.  
Email: arifh@iiu.edu.my

proportionate growth of the bureaucracy will enable the state to cope with the development needs and problems of this country. On the contrary, growth in size creates more problems of coordination and cooperation, role overlap, diffusion of responsibility and resultant suspicion and mistrust among unfamiliar persons working in a large bureaucracy. The problems are made more serious due to the presence of a socio-cultural milieu where people prefer personalised and dependency relationship and where they do not trust those who are not personally related and own people (Sinha and Sinha 1974)<sup>2</sup>. In other words, bureaucracy which was originally evolved as an impersonal technology of managing an organisation gets significantly blended with socio-cultural demands.

### Decision Making Model

A case for illustration is the way decisions are made by a Directorate of a state government. The Directorate was created with the purpose to expedite growth activities in an important sector of the economy. It coordinates and guides the functioning of a number of corporations located in the various parts of the state. While the corporations are entrusted with the responsibilities of initiating and organising growth activities in the field, the Directorate as an apex body is located in the state secretariat and functions in close contact with the parent department and other departments of the state government. For the effectiveness as well as the health of the corporations under its purview, it is necessary that the Directorate functions effectively. Let us see how files move and decisions are made.

Figure 1 indicates that there are four tiers of the executive in the Directorate: Director (D), Additional Director (ADD), Joint Director (JTD) and Assistant Director (ASD). A Sectional Officer (SO) heads the assistants having three categories: Dealing Assistant (DA), Diarist (DI) and assistants in the Distribution Section (DS). Let us assume, for simplicity, that the issue in question is the simplest and non-controversial one which does not conceivably involve any query, disagreement or opinion. It is, say, a letter addressed to the Director asking for a single piece of important and verifiable information which only a Dealing Assistant can provide. The figure reveals that the answer to the letter may possibly involve as many as 25 steps, that the file touch a dealing assistant, diarist, distribution section and sectional officer

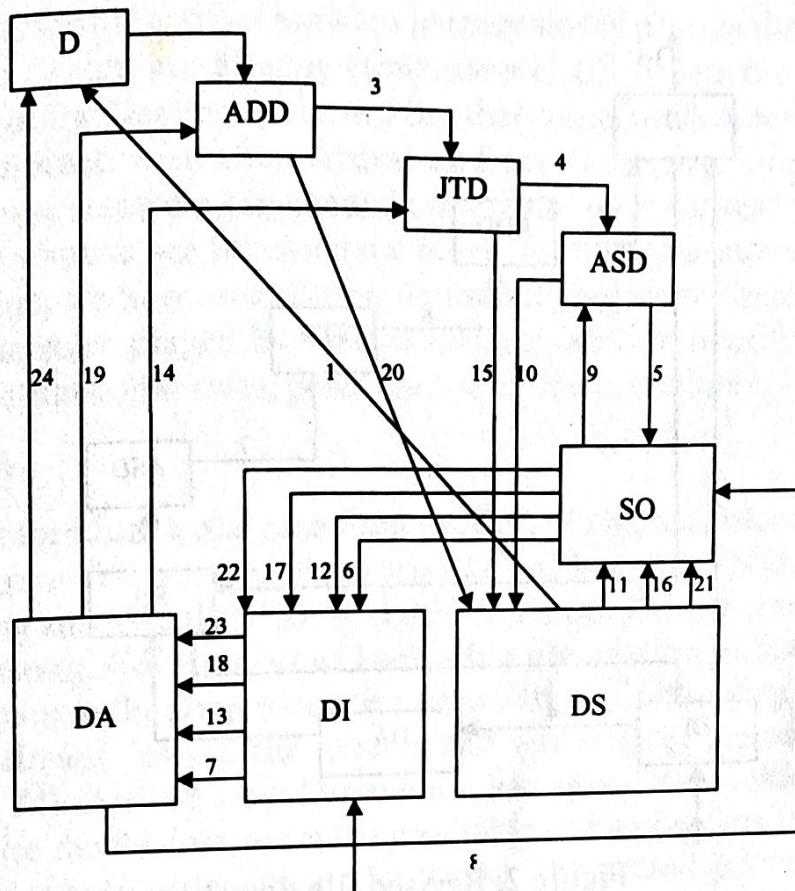


Figure 1: Typical file flow diagram in the Directorate

four times and that every time it has to move up above the level of ASD, it has to make round by passing through DS, SO, DI and DA. Even if the file is processed on the same day it reaches a position, which is rare, the Directorate will take about 25 steps to provide a simple piece of information to an outsider. Obviously, this is not the kind of bureaucracy which Weber might have had in his mind. If we stick to the bare requisite of bureaucracy, the steps involved in the file flow may be reduced to 10.

Figure 2, compared to Figure 1, has many advantages. Steps 2 through 5 of Figure 1 are short circuited by step 2 of Figure 2. The rationale lies in our experiences that when a letter which is addressed to the Director and is initiated by him, moves downward (i.e., step 2 and 5), ADD, JTD, ASD and SO also initial it and send it to diarist who records the movement and passes it on to a Dealing Assistant. It is at this level that relevant notes are given. Secondly, the round that a file has to make between the DS, SO, DI and DA in Figure 1 is seemingly redundant. We were, however, told that there was purpose

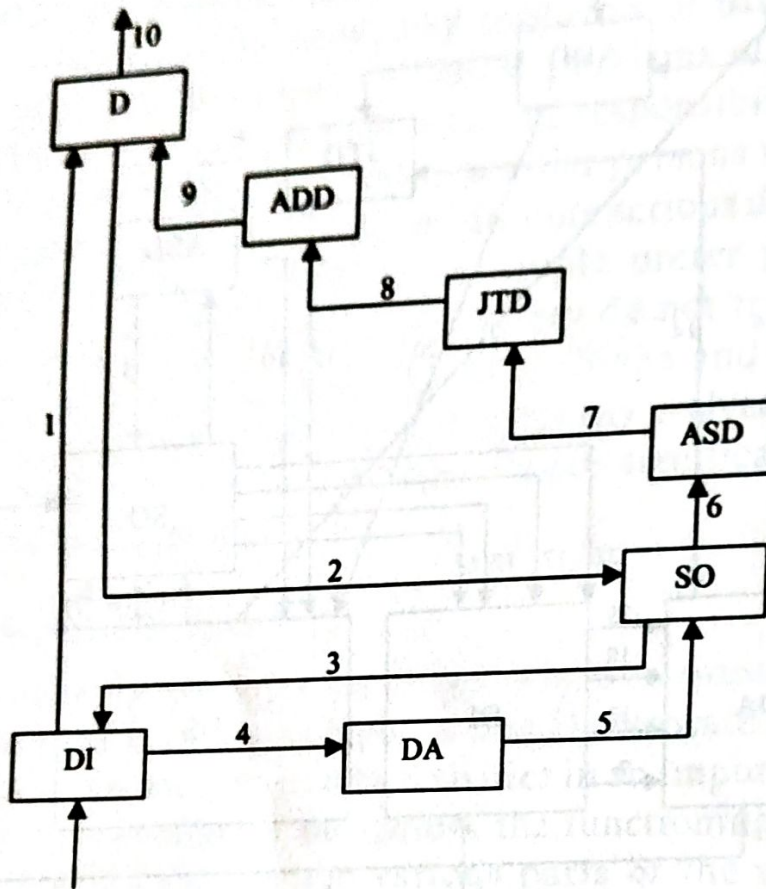


Figure 2: Revised file flow diagram

because nobody trusts anybody, there is a need to keep track of the file. The DS does this job although it consists of 12 redundant steps. A more rational solution of the problem is to attach one of the assistants of the DS to each of the ASD, JTD offices so that the DS men at these offices will monitor the movement of the file. If it is done, the load of DA will be reduced by four times, that of SO and DI by half. The decision in an ideal situation then can be made in 10 steps.

Such streamlining, however, means a rational solution which assumes that people at the helm of the affairs do want to get works done and that they are willing to make efforts in this direction. In actuality, the long tradition of Brahminical values in India creates a situation in which (a) work is not valued in itself, (b) people have high need for power and (c) strong status orientation (Sinha 1973). As a result, bureaucracy in India is employed in the service of personal power, status enhancement and ego trips (Varma 1973: 57) because myriad of rules and procedures prevent a bureaucrat from getting work done, and his sense of power is derived from delaying a decision by keeping a file for too long or by making all kinds of queries. Once a

query is made, the file starts downward journey slowly passing through the channels (which are already cumbersome) till it hits the rock bottom, that is, the Dealing Assistant. In other words the bureaucracy in India combined with the cultural and resultant psychological constraints have created a game matrix where there are snakes but no ladder. If we want to see bureaucracy move fast and implement the policy decision, we have to examine its functioning more closely, to scrutinise the roles played by various officers, and to identify and eliminate dysfunctional roles, positions, rules and procedures.

### A Case Study

Let us reproduce a real case from the files of a state Directorate. The story starts as follows: A proposal was received from the Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity (DAVP), Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India for a programme which was directly relevant to the Directorate, viz. installation of a hoarding. The DAVP had already invited the tenders and was to meet the cost of installation. All that the state Directorate had to do was to select a site, scrutinise the tenders, accept the suitable one and report to the DAVP after the completion of the work. The actual processes reproduced from the notings on the file are as follows (dates are in parenthesis):

- (1) The letter from DAVP received by ADD (November 28)
- (2) Referred to Section III (November 29)
- (3) Referred to SO XIII (November 29)
- (4) Referred to DI (November 30)
- (5) Referred to DA (November 30)
- (6) DA (December 21): "The letter under consideration was earlier placed in the miscellaneous file of the section. As the subject is important this new file is opened".
- (7) SO (December 28): "Two firms of Calcutta have submitted their quotations. A local firm was also asked to give their quotation. This has not come so far. The two site plans given by the Calcutta firms may be seen and approved".

- (8) JDD (December 29): "On what basis these tenders have been invited? It is not clear. Please clarify".
  - (9) DA (December 29): "Please see the DAVP letter. These tenders have been invited by them. ADD has to examine the tenders and proposed sites and may recommend anyone to DAVP".
  - (10) SO (December 29): Forwards the file.
  - (11) JDD (January 3): Forwards the file to ADD with the comments: "The file appears containing some tenders which are perhaps related to installation of hoarding board for a government programme. I do not know the basis on which these tenders have been invited. It seems that some of the tenders have been addressed to the former ADD, Mr. Y (who was transferred by that time). As I do not know anything about it, I am unable to give my opinion. If you so desire, Mr. Y (the then ADD) may be contacted and then necessary action may be taken".
  - (12) ADD (January 4) Asks for the draft of the letter to be sent to Mr. Y.
  - (13) DS (January 5): Initials
  - (14) DA (January 10): "Please find the draft, but it was hardly required. The letter from DAVP very clearly explains what is to be done" (He requests to see the letter appended in the file and explains the actions that need to be taken).
  - (15) SO (January 10): Initials and forwards the draft.
  - (16) JDD (January 18): Sees and forwards the draft.
  - (17) ADD (January 18): Signs the draft.
- Meanwhile the DAVP sends another letter (dated January 10) reminding ADD about the decision to be taken regarding the approval of a suitable site and the tender.
- (18) DS (January 18): Receives the letter.
  - (19) ADD (January 18): Endorses in the name of JTD.
  - (20) JTD (January 18): Initials.
  - (21) SO (Jan. 19): Initials
  - (22) DI (January 19): Makes the noting.

- (23) DA (January 19): "Kindly see the enclosed letter and my previous notes (in which he had observed that it was unnecessary to ask the then ADD Mr. Y about this matter). The issue under consideration looks straight. Even though, if so ordered, the approved draft (of the letter in the name of Mr. Y) may be sent".
- (24) SO (January 19): "The enclosed tenders can be put in order of preference on the basis of the proposed sites and the recommendation may be forwarded to the government of India accordingly".
- (25) JTD (January 20): Asks SO for his recommendation on the site.
- (26) DA (January 25): Makes a very thorough analysis of the two suitable sites, among a few others submitted to the office during this period. The analysis is based on the location, traffic situation and visibility factors and reason why Site A may be a better choice.
- (27) SO (January 29): Initials
- (28) JTD (February 3): Initials and forwards the file to ADD.
- (29) ADD (February 7): "What are the places where such hoardings have been installed in the past? How much did then it cost to our department and how much will it cost us now?"
- (30) DS (February 7): Initials
- (31) DA (February 27): "Never before such hoardings have been installed by the Directorate. Cost for this hoarding will be borne by the DAVP, Government of India. ADD may kindly recommend anyone tender which has been submitted to us. The recommendation should then be sent to the concerned officer of DAVP".
- (32) SO (February 7): Initials
- (33) JTD (February 10): Initials
- (34) ADD (February 15): "Decide through a committee consisting of four persons. Meeting will be held on February 21 at 11 a.m."

- (35) DS (February 15): Initials.
- (36) SO (February 15): Initials.
- (37) ADD (February 22): "Discussed with the officers. As proposed. Install the hoarding at the railway station".
- (38) DS (February 23): Initials.
- (39) DA (February 24): "As per ADD's approval of quotation for site A, the decision may be communicated to the DAVP accordingly. The draft letter to be sent to the DAVP is put up for approval".
- (40) SO (February 24): "Draft letter for ADD's approval is put up".
- (41) JTD (February 25): Asks the SO to see him immediately.
- (42) DA (March 9): "JTD asked me to talk to the ADD in connection with his approval, but I couldn't meet him in spite of my several attempts. He seems to be very busy. In fact, his note stating "as proposed" on the file is self explanatory.

However, in the note of ADD the word opposite railway station may be an error, because no quotation for this specific site has been submitted to our office" (DA had repeated three times the word railway station in his note while evaluating the suitability of site A. Probably the error seems to be due to this repetition).

- (43) SO (March 10): "Kindly obtain the approval of the ADD on the draft letter".
- (44) JTD (March 10): "Order from the previous page and the consequent draft is put up for your approval".
- (45) ADD (March 15): Signs the draft.
- (46) DS (March 15): Initials
- (47) DA (May 15): "M/S AB services requests that as per instruction detailed to them by the DAVP, they have installed the hoarding which is now ready for inspection. The same could be done and necessary information be sent to the DAVP so that the firm may be able to submit their bills. If so desired, JTD may personally like to visit the site to confirm the date and related facts and may report about it. Thereafter, the enclosed proforma



(certifying completion of work) may be filled up and sent to them”.

- (48) SO (May 17): Seeks JTD's approval on DA's request.
- (49) JTD (May 18): Approves
- (50) DA (June 27): “I personally saw the hoarding. The date of installation is 17<sup>th</sup> April. Now the proforma certifying the satisfactory completion of work may be signed”.
- (51) SO (June 29): “DA is unable to give details on many points raised on previous pages. He should write a letter to the production manager that such hoarding on with such and such slogan has been installed at this location. A copy of the same may be sent to M/S AB services”.
- (52) JTD (May 28): “Please put up draft letter as per instruction”.
- (53) DA (June 30): “Orders from the previous pages. Draft for approval is put up”.
- (54) JTD writes to ADD (July 7): “The reference from previous pages may help you recall the issue. Accordingly, a certificate has to be signed by you. Advertisement has been made by the government of India through M/S AB services. The concerned firm has asked for such a certificate. Kindly, give your approval on the draft put up in the file”.
- (55) ADD (July 14): Signs the draft.

### Summary of Decision Making

There are some very revealing properties of the case. The case, because it involved a simple decision, should not have taken more than a handful of steps. In fact, it took 55 steps. The number of times each of the persons initiated and received the notes were as follows.

	<u>Initiated</u>	<u>Received</u>
ADD	7	8
JTD	12	12
SO	14	11
DA	11	11
DS	6	5
DI	2	2

Obviously, JTD, SO, DA initiated and received more notes than the others. The diarist and distribution section neither were expected to make nor made any active contribution to the decision making. Their notes were to mark the flow of the file. Of the rest, SO also made no contribution at all except a negative one (step 51 when he pointed out the inadequacy of DA's note). This pointer was more of hair splitting than anything else. Rest of the time he forwarded or initialled the file.

Of the three, it was the DA who made significant contributions to the decision making (Appleby 1965). He put four relevant notes, provided details of the sites and made several sensible appeals to JTD and ADD whose only contributions were to raise irrelevant queries, side track the issue, shift responsibility, and delay the matter. JTD in the beginning wanted to get rid of the responsibility and actually refused to be drawn into the process. He first made a redundant query (step 3), then wrote a very indifferent note, and referred the issue to his predecessor who was already transferred (step 11). The ADD probably did not have time to read any notes. He simply dittoed JTD and made a fool of himself. When he did have time, he either made meaningless search for precedence (step 29), or asked for a committee decision (step 34). It simply reflects his apathy, indifference, and mechanical mode of functioning. The average time taken by the various persons again indicated that ADD (Mean = 3.75 days) was more responsible for the delay than DA (Mean = 2.7 days).

In sum, a simple decision of the type under investigation is made virtually by a Dealing Assistant (DA). The Joint and Additional Directors simply created problems and interference in the quick disposal of the file. The SO is a passive spectator and others have virtually redundant roles.

### Conclusion

To the extent that the case represents the style of decision making in the Directorate, it provides a number of significant pointers. If the government wants to retain the bureaucratic style and still plan to implement development schemes, it will have to streamline the functioning of its bureaucracy. The streamlining would require:

- (a) Serious examination of the relevance of the various roles and positions for the nature of issues for decision.

- (b) Reallocation of responsibilities and workloads in such a way that no one is overloaded or without any significant role.
- (c) Clustering of issues so that simple decisions are made at the SO levels and only those having policy implication are allowed to go to Additional Director or Director level.
- (d) A reasonable timeframe for disposing off the file along with the guidelines for making subsequent and sequential queries.
- (e) A monitoring cell in the Directorate which may conduct sample surveys of how and to what extent the guidelines are being followed and to ascertain what structural changes are necessary from time to time.
- (f) Use of communication technology and decision support system for streamlining the decision making process sooner-the-better.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a study, conducted almost a decade ago in one of the states of India. However a recent visit to the state suggested that nothing much has changed in the way the government department functions. The case discussed in the paper seems to be relevant even today. In the era of paperless office, flat organisational structure and employee-empowerment programmes, the state government does not seem to have grown out of the stage of Remington typewriter with all its nuances.

<sup>2</sup> Also see Prasad (1974) for sociological variables of jointness of family, caste, and kinship complex and Pai Panandikar and Kshirsoagar (1971) for low rationality of bureaucracy.

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