

OPINION

Relevant for: Governance in India | Topic: Role of Civil Services in a democracy esp. after Globalisation

This year, the central government launched the 'Transformation of Aspirational Districts' programme, for the development of districts with below average socioeconomic indicators. Moreover, senior officers have been allotted districts to monitor and support. Welcome as this attention to field-level governance is, does it address the core problems that bog programme delivery at the field level? In fact, have the problems of field administration been understood at all, before implementing this solution?

Consider a district administration case study finding: it turned out that the district collector (DC) was the chairperson of a startling 75 committees in total, and member or member secretary of another six, a whopping total of 82. These committees, spread across 23 departments, were formed as per central and state government directives. They addressed a sweeping array of subjects: planning, law and order, price fixation, staff recruitment, tribal welfare, promotion of industry etc.

The initial impression that this finding generates of the DC, is that of an administrative superman, exhibiting the traits of Fleischer's cartoon character with a twist: a mind faster than a spreading crop disease, energy greater than a politician's during elections, and an ability to take complex administrative decisions in a single meeting. But subsequent analysis revealed that the DC was human after all: committee meetings were postponed often, and issues remained pending. If there was a law and order problem, the recruitment of the Anganwadi workers came to a halt, the recruitment committee chair—the DC—being unavailable. Why then, does the DC chair this kaleidoscope of committees?

In fact, the DC's extensive committee-chairing is akin to a patchwork quilt: a desperate cover up for the basic weaknesses of field administration. In the study, only seven of the 82 committees really needed the DC as chair: two for overall coordination, and five to implement laws to protect women, children etc. In contrast, 25 committees simply monitored departmental schemes, which already prescribed activities in detail, indicating a fundamental problem in programme implementation.

Tardy programme implementation is usually a consequence of inadequate manpower and skills at the grassroots. A DC-chaired committee to implement a programme serves as a 'high priority' signal from the government. That particular programme usually speeds up, not because of the DC's magical powers, but because of their ability to provide temporary solutions, especially like the mobilization of personnel from other departments. Many departments lack the complex skill composition needed in programme implementation. For example, state drinking water departments may hire only engineers, but their programmes also require planning, finance and community mobilization skills. Similarly, our vast health and schooling systems function without administrators specializing in these areas. The DC provides these skills from elsewhere. But this 'effectiveness' lasts only till the next important programme comes along, when the DC's attention shifts.

The DC's popularity as committee chair is also an attempt to whitewash 'departmentalism' and to disempower local governments. There are more government departments in India than most other countries—36 in the district in this case study—and each department guards its territory keenly. Since subjects are split across many departments, constant coordination is required. Additionally, though panchayats are responsible for socioeconomic development as per law, in practice, state governments have not empowered them. As a result, many committees, which

should be the domain of Panchayats, are chaired by the DC.

Another impetus for the proliferation of DC-headed committees is excessive centralization, as no official below the district level is empowered enough to be an effective coordinator. Not only are Panchayats disempowered, but the authority of the sub-divisional magistrate, an agent of the DC at a sub-district level, is weak. Thus, many tasks which can be performed below the district level need to be brought to the district level. Extreme faith in hierarchy exacerbates the problem. DCs belong to the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), fashioned as a 'superior' service, while other district officials usually belong to state services. Consequently, the DC becomes an authoritative figure, even though other officials may understand their specific subjects better.

Finally, the ubiquity of DC-chaired committees is a consequence of the increase in corruption in the last three decades. Until the early 1990s, most IAS officers tended to be honest, while corruption grew exponentially in various other departments. At this time, appointing the DC as committee chair became a way to rein in corruption. Thus, the DC was introduced to chair 14 committees for subjects such as sanctioning loans and other benefits, appointing and promoting staff, making purchases etc. However, this check may not be effective any more, as corruption has now made significant inroads into the IAS as well. Though a fair number of IAS officers still act with integrity, there are many who don't. The latter's enormous power enables them to rake in more money than anyone else.

All in all, DC-chaired committees are nothing more than patchwork quilts to cover up fundamental administration problems: lack of appropriate human resource, disempowerment of local governments, hierarchical working, centralization and rent-seeking. But the quilt is inadequate, as no human being can do justice to 82 committees. It would be more meaningful to address the core problems of field administration.

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