

BUREAUCRACY'S DIGITAL CHALLENGE

Relevant for: Polity | Topic: Executive: Structure, Organization & Functioning ; Ministries and Departments of the Government

A scene at the Secretariat in Hyderabad

The biggest challenge today to Indian bureaucracy is the shift from desk to digital. This shift is not limited to a transition towards e-office and e-governance, but includes the organisational and bureaucratic response to digital spaces, especially the use of social media. The focus has been mostly on the former, while the latter has remained largely unaddressed.

There are two opinions on the use of social media by civil servants. While there are many people, including former civil servants, who are in favour of civil servants using social media in their official capacity, others argue that anonymity, the defining feature of Indian bureaucracy, gets compromised in the process. In fact, as an organisational form, the bureaucracy is incompatible with social media. While bureaucracy is characterised by hierarchy, formal relationships and standard procedures, social media is identified by openness, transparency and flexibility.

The outdated nature of bureaucracy

It is true that many civil servants have become accessible to the common people and public service delivery issues have been resolved through the use of social media. Social media has also created a positive outlook towards an institution long perceived as opaque and inaccessible. Social media has increased awareness among people about government policies and programmes.

But social media also does more. It provides an opportunity to bureaucrats to shape the public discourse and engage with the public while being politically neutral. At a time when the tendency among the political executive is to receive the very remarks or advice from bureaucrats that they want to hear, social media ensures that blind obeying is minimised and bureaucrats serve the people.

Anonymity has been a hallmark of Westminster bureaucracies, including in India. But there is a basic contradiction in remaining habitually anonymous while governance in public is now the new normal. Further, values are becoming more dominant than facts in public policymaking. And both values and facts are getting reshaped due to fake news and systematic propaganda within public policy circles as well. In such a scenario, the bureaucracy, which is expected to be the epitome of public values and a storehouse of facts, shouldn't be expected to govern in private.

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The use of social media is gradually getting institutionalised in many Westminster system-based countries. During the Brexit debate in the U.K., many civil servants shaped public debate through the use of social media even while remaining politically neutral. In India, civil servants haven't reflected on this aspect of digital bureaucracy. Anonymity and opaqueness have already been watered down through the Right to Information Act of 2005. But they continue to be prominent features.

In India, the role of social media in bureaucracy has taken a different direction. Social media is getting used by civil servants for self-promotion. Through their selective posts and promotion of

these posts by their social media fans, civil servants create a narrative of their performance. All this is justified in the name of accessibility and accountability. There is a wrong notion getting entrenched in the public consciousness that social media is the way to access civil servants and make them accountable. Social media may have improved accessibility and accountability, but it is important to note that civil servants are at an advantage to share the information they want and respond to those they want. It is not a formal set-up where accessibility and accountability are based on uniformity of treatment. Social media accountability is no alternative to institutional and citizen-centric accountability. It is, in fact, partly unethical to use social media during office hours and justify it when some people who have travelled long distances are waiting outside the office.

Bureaucrats should use social media to improve public policies. If they don't use social media appropriately, their role as independent advisers stands threatened.

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