

# *The Administrative Reforms Commission of India and its relevance for South Africa*



India's long negotiations towards the 1947 liberation from colonial rule: Gandhi and British Prime Minister Ramsey Macdonald meet in London in 1931

The administrative arm of the state carries out policy. If this arm is not carefully supervised it can sabotage any meaningful change. How do you reform the

administration to avoid this arm suffocating progressive moves? VASANT MOHARIR\* draws lessons from the Indian experience.

**A**s the process of decolonisation in the "third world" proceeded after World War 2, the political leadership of newly independent countries was often in a hurry to introduce many economic and social changes in the light of rising expectations of the masses and was really looking to its administrative leadership as the main change agent in this process. But due to weakness of other social and political institutions, such as trade unions, women's groups, etc, the bureaucracy emerged as a strong well-knit group in the society at the time of independence, often resistant to change.

Also, massive programmes of technical assistance to developing countries were started. In this process, the administrative system of the country was considered very crucial and a large number of foreign experts were sent to many developing countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa to suggest administrative reforms.

These (western) practitioners failed to provide alternative models which were appropriate to the economic and social environment of the developing countries and which would hasten the pace of economic and social development.

### **Breaking through the resistance of entrenched bureaucracy: is it possible?**

The politics of administrative reform relates to the fact that reforms cannot be implemented without strong political support from the ruling party as they often result in changing the power of bureaucracy vis-a-vis other groups in the society or between various groups and agencies within the government. For instance, they may weaken the power of the bureaucracy over ordinary citizens and this will require strong political direction from the President and Parliament. In the practice of administrative reforms in

developing countries, this aspect has been neglected resulting in lack of implementation. In general, politicians are not interested in administrative reforms per se, but in terms of realizing other higher social and economic objectives. Thus, often, political leadership may pay lip service to the need for administrative reforms, even allocate some financial resources, but their full political weight will be extended only if tangible political advantages can be secured through administrative reforms.

Although often political leaders and parties may make a scapegoat of administration to divert attention from other pressing problems, it is very rarely that politicians pay adequate attention to it. It is seldom that political parties put administrative reforms on an election manifesto. The indifference of political leaders to administrative reforms is also caused by not linking the content of administrative reforms to major economic and political changes.

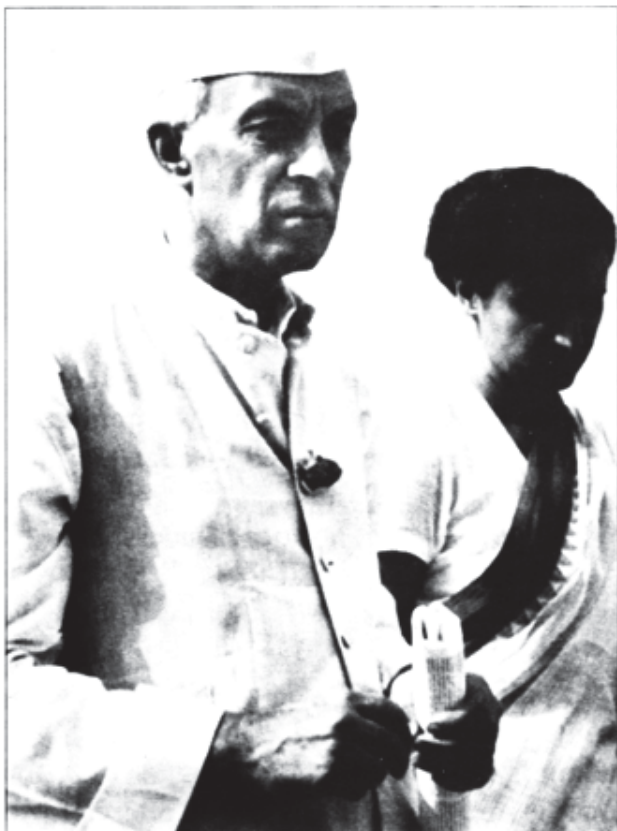
### **The need for a conscious strategy of administrative reform**

Actual experience of administrative reforms in developing countries shows that often the reforms failed not because the contents of reforms were wrong but that either there was no conscious strategy to introduce them or the implicit strategy was inadequate. Out of the experiences both of the success and the failures, the following aspects of strategy have been identified as crucial:

#### ***1. Linking administrative reform to major economic and political changes***

Political leaders and people generally, can better see the reason for administrative reform in terms of substantive political, economic and social change. If reforms can be shown to lead to more equitable access to public services or to the development of backward regions or to increased industrial output or exports or more democracy/ participation, getting support becomes easier. Unfortunately,

\* Dr Moharir is a lecturer at the University of the Hague in the Netherlands and has been a guest lecturer at the Public and Development Management Programme, Wits Business School.



Frustrated reformer? Nehru, India's first post-independence Prime Minister with his daughter Indira, who became Prime Minister in 1966

many reform efforts concentrate on improving the conditions of work for civil servants, their salaries, their housing, training, etc. This can give rise to a cynical reaction from society that reform is for the benefit of administrators rather than for the benefit of the society. Though reform of salary scales and other working conditions may be equally important, in terms of strategy support to administrative reform movement is likely to be stronger if initial reforms lead to a visible improvement in the delivery of services to clients.

### **2. Timing of administrative reforms**

The best time for major reforms is a political and economic turning point. For most developing countries this was at the time of their independence when comprehensive change was being introduced in all areas of economic and social life. South Africa is at the threshold of such a comprehensive change and the present is the ideal time for major administrative reforms. Many developing

countries missed this opportunity at the time of independence and launched such changes much later when bureaucracy got entrenched and resistance to change became very strong.

### **3. Resistance to change**

When reforms aim at reducing the size of the bureaucracy or the power of senior bureaucrats, or increase control over them, resistance is to be expected. Either the losers need to be compensated or sanctions or persuasion needs to be used to overcome resistance. At times the resistance may not come from administrators but the clients who may stand to forego certain benefits from the previous system. Not all the clients are in support of eradicating corruption.

### **4. Implementation of administrative reform**

Implementation has been the Achille's heel in administrative reforms. The implementation record of most administrative reform interventions in developing countries has been poor. Very few of the reformers recommendations have actually been implemented due to bureaucratic inertia and resistance, changing priorities of political leaders, wrong timing and vague, non-operational recommendations of reform bodies. Lack of a conscious strategy for implementation as a part of the reform design, including provision for monitoring and overseeing of reform implementation by outside bodies, has often been responsible for it.

### **The Administrative Reforms Commission of India**

At the time of independence in 1947, India had inherited a system of administration initially developed by the East India Company for its colonial purposes, characterized by recruitment of senior administrators on the basis of a rigorous examination, a high degree of centralization of decision-making, political neutrality of the civil service, division of the civil service into water-tight compartments minimising horizontal and

vertical mobility, the existence of a large number of grades/scales and occupational groups but maintaining the hegemony of generalist administrators, both at the Centre as well as in the provinces.

### **Major changes in administration after independence**

Despite its association with the colonial period, the basic character of the inherited system of administration was not changed in India by the new leadership. The changes which were introduced immediately after independence had to do more with the constitutional changes leading to the adoption of a federal, democratic, parliamentary form of government and the introduction of five year plans. A major administrative reform in the federal context was the setting up of the Indian Administrative Service as a successor to the colonial Indian Civil Service (ICS), with recruitment of only Indian personnel and local training and provision for the recruitment of persons from outside the service, particularly Indian women. A number of new training institutions in general and sectoral areas of administration, along with an Organisation and Methods (O&M) unit in the Cabinet Office were set up, based on recommendations from external consultants.

### **Attempts at democratisation**

A major reform in the area of democratisation was setting up of elected councils at district and sub district levels called Panchayats and creating a separate cadre of Block Development Officers and Village Level Workers to concentrate more on developmental work. Some of the reforms introduced in the context of economic and social planning were the creation of a Planning Commission, setting up of an Industrial Management Pool to manage the large number of public enterprises and an Institute of Public Administration set up to encourage advanced education and research in public administration.

### **The failure of first attempts leads to creation of a government body to supervise reform of administration**

Although many of these changes improved the situation a little, they were inadequate in the light of the enhanced tempo of economic and social planning, starting from the Second Five Year Plan (1956-61). The size, scope and nature of expertise available to the O&M Division, were inadequate to meet this developmental challenge and complaints of administrative bottlenecks slowing down the speed of development were made in the legislature and elsewhere. In order to address these bottlenecks and prepare the ground

for more comprehensive administrative reform, a Department of Administrative Reforms (DAR) was created in 1964, as part of the Ministry of Home Affairs, with a senior, experienced member of the Indian Civil Service as its head. The DAR, which was more broadly staffed than the O&M Division, concentrated on in-depth studies of some of the government agencies like the Central Purchasing Agency, Central Public Works Department, Ministry of Industry, Treasury, etc. along with setting up of administrative reform units in departments and staffing them with newly trained staff.

### **The Commission – though given a wide brief – bogs down**

Activities of the DAR were showing results, but the politicians and the people at large were impatient and called for a more comprehensive scrutiny of the whole administrative system. Thus the Administrative Reforms Commission was set up in January, 1966, with a leading

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**“In developing countries, very few of the reformers’ recommendations have been implemented”**

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**“Prioritise reforms that improve delivery of essential services to the citizens – don’t start with improving the conditions of the civil service employees”**

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political personality as Chairman and six other members. The government leadership wanted to ensure that substantive and far reaching changes were suggested by the Commission and that the bureaucracy would not be allowed to create obstacles in the way of their implementation.

The government asked the Commission to consider “the need for ensuring the highest standards of efficiency and integrity in the public services and for making public administration a fit instrument for carrying out the social and economic policies of the Government, and achieving social and economic goals of development, as also one which is responsive to the people.” The Commission was asked to look at not only the machinery of the government at the central level but also administration at the provincial and local government level, to examine the administrative-political area of national-provincial government relations and the problem of providing redress to citizen’s grievances against administrators and politicians. These wide terms of reference, coupled with the changes in its chairmanship and the research based style of decision-making it adopted led to a very long period (5 years) of deliberation.

**Good intentions not enough: the importance of achieving results within a limited time-span**

The method adopted by the Commission was aimed both at some form of popular participation in the reform effort by way of interviewing eminent persons from the public and private sector as well as rigorous, empirical studies of administrative problems by researchers from the DAR and other research and training institutions. For each of the major

areas of its work, the Commission appointed a Study Team with generally a chairperson from outside government and a civil servant or researcher as secretary. During the five years of the Commission’s life, there were 20 study teams, 13 working groups for specific subjects, four expert groups on science and technology issues and one task force on redress of citizens’ grievances.

**New politicians, new policy: good-bye to the administrative reform work of five years!**

Although at the level of the Commission, politicians dominated, at the level of the study teams retired and working civil servants constituted 60 percent of the membership, the remaining coming from the professional groups of educationists, economists, lawyers, journalists, industrialists, etc and present and retired members of legislature. These external inputs led at times to some innovation but the domination of the civil servants was strong enough to filter out more radical changes. This coupled with the changes in political priorities of new Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi and the excessive time taken by the Commission to process its recommendations, led to a general lack of interest in implementing its recommendations, despite Commission’s efforts to prevent bureaucratic sabotage during the implementation phase.

**Lessons learnt from the experience of administrative reform in India**

The following lessons can be drawn, which can guide future administrative reforms in other developing countries:

1. Administrative Reforms are political in nature and without sustained, long term political support, their effective implementation is difficult.
2. Although the need for administrative reforms may be comprehensive and radical, the preconditions for their success are rarely available. In view of

this reformers should aim at a mixed scanning strategy, selecting a few areas of administration for a more fundamental, comprehensive change while others are to be subjected to the process of incremental change.

3. Do not underestimate the power of bureaucracy to sabotage reforms going against its interest. Incorporate adequate incentives, sanctions, wider political and social support to reform in the design of reform itself.
4. The timing of reform is crucial for its success. If major administrative reforms are undertaken at the time that other fundamental political and economic changes are taking place, they have a better chance of legitimacy and success.
5. In the absence of alternative operational models of developmental bureaucracies, more benefits can be realized by concentrating administrative reforms in functional areas of administration such as educational administration, health administration, industrial administration, etc.
6. In designing specific administrative reforms, the use of internal and external expertise together is likely to be more effective rather than reliance on only one.
7. Objectives of administrative reforms are not only efficiency related but should also be aimed at making the bureaucracy representative of the society at large and responsive to the people and their representatives.
8. Integrate the processes of administrative reforms and

development planning, thereby providing a permanent rationale for administrative reforms.

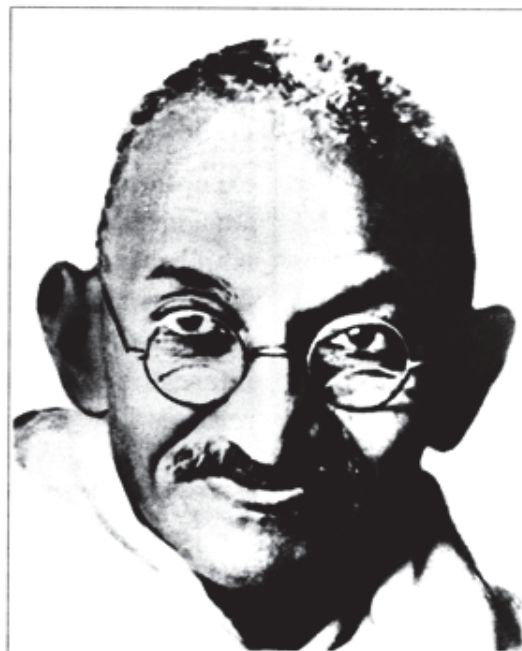
9. In sequencing of administrative reforms, give priority to reform which will improve citizen satisfaction and delivery of essential services, rather than improving conditions of service of the civil service itself.

The relevance of the Indian experience for South Africa

In a way, the problem of administrative reforms in South Africa is more urgent and complicated than in other countries. At present South Africa is involved in a double transition; transition from an apartheid to a non-apartheid society and transition from a non-accountable, minority government to a democratic accountable government providing participation to all groups in the society. The speed of change has to be fast, if the expectations of the masses are not to be dashed to the ground. It is therefore surprising that so little attention has been paid to this problem in the multi-party negotiations and the discussions of various political groups in South Africa. The problem of administrative reforms in South Africa is not only of replacing white senior

administrators with blacks, but of a critical review and reform of each of the major policies and each of the major institutions concerned with those policies, to build the new democratic, non-racial South Africa.

In order to do justice to the magnitude and complexity of the problem, all available resources in the area of public administration/development management/human resource development need to be marshalled in



Symbol of the Indian anti-colonial struggle

support of the administrative reform effort. Drawing up priorities and an operational programme of administrative reform is a necessity. For this it is necessary to create a high level body a ministry or a Commission on Administrative Reforms representing important social groups and staffed by qualified people with the proper orientation (ie progressive). Combining the innovative tasks of reform with the ongoing tasks of managing the civil service is not likely to be effective at this stage. However, such a commission will need inputs and information, from some of the existing institutions.

### **How to maintain public interest in reform of the administration**

In view of its importance, the administrative reform movement in South Africa needs to become a social movement and discussion of specific reforms and their strategy need not be restricted only to public administration experts and administrators, but the society at large needs to be involved in the process. This can be done by constituting "Ginger Groups" of interested citizens in different regions which create wider public interest in administrative reform and provide feedback on specific problems and issues. Such a strategy was used by the Hoover Commission in the United States and is necessary in South Africa to sustain interest in reforms like affirmative action in public sector.

### **"Efficiency" and "cost reduction" are not the most important concerns**

Objectives of administrative reforms and criteria for selecting different reform options need to be more broad based in South Africa than the current concerns of efficiency and cost reduction only. Concerns of representative bureaucracy, affirmative action, adequate distribution of administrative person-power and agencies in different parts of the country, eradication of poverty and inculcation of

the right conduct and ethics, accountability and answerability of administration, proper balance of the sexes in the bureaucracy, are probably more overriding concerns than cost reduction alone.

### **Training: crash programme needed for new and old civil servants**

In view of the need for reorientation of existing civil servants and to train in a crash programme a large number of new entrants to civil service, training of administrators at all levels becomes an important, high priority in administrative reforms. In a society divided by tribal, religious and linguistic differences, administration, especially the senior ranks, can provide a unifying function and bring to bear common standards of objectivity and service delivery.

### **Can SA succeed where others have failed?**

The needs and opportunities for administrative reforms in South Africa are considerable. There is also the accumulated experience of other developing countries which introduced similar reforms in the past. Moreover, South Africa has its own indigenous expertise in public and development management and need not depend on foreign expertise in all areas. The present timing for such reforms is also ideal. Maybe South Africa can provide the exceptional example of successful administrative reform in its true spirit which can be a model for other countries. Administrative reform experts and scholars all over the world will be watching with interest the progress of administrative reforms in South Africa in future. ☆

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**"It is suprising that the multi-party negotiations have paid so little attention to the issue of administrative reform"**