Bureaucracy: The Concept

The use of the term “bureaucracy” is traced to Vincent de Gaurney (1712-1759), a French civil servant and physiocrat. In 1745, he used the term “bureaumania” to criticise the government that existed in France and was ailing with red-tapism, formalism, hierarchicalism and laziness. Before Weber developed the theory of bureaucracy in the 1920s, the concept had been given by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx.

The Hegelian Concept

Hegel in his concept of the idealist state gave the theory of bureaucracy. However, he did not propound a well-structured concept of bureaucracy; for some, it is as broad as that of Weber. Like Marx, Hegel’s main concern was not bureaucracy as such, but he developed it in the larger interest in examining the nature of the state. The state, for Hegel, is the last development in a series of rational social orders; the other two being the family and the civil society. Once the state is produced, it is supposed to provide the grounds where the unconscious and particularly oriented activities become gradually self-conscious and public-spirited. For Hegel, the prince, the bureaucrats and the deputies of the estates are political actors par excellence. In his Philosophy of Right (1921), he raised the concept of bureaucracy to abstract heights—a transcending entity, a mind above individual minds. He defined it as a “state formalism” of civil society, and the state power as a corporation.

The Marxist View

We do not find an elaborative discussion on bureaucracy in the writings of Karl Marx. In fact, he could not attempt a very systematic analysis of the state itself due to his preoccupation with political economy. However, his first lengthy piece of writing after his doctoral dissertation, namely “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law” (1843) is in a large part concerned with the state. In this work, we find some very brief comments on bureaucracy. Marx studied bureaucracy in the context of the capitalist state and its administrative apparatus. He deduced the notion of bureaucracy from the relationship that existed between the power-holding institutions, primarily the state and the social groups subordinated to it. The significance of Marx’s analysis of bureaucracy lies in his insistence that bureaucratic structures do not automatically reflect the prevailing social power relations but pervert and disfigure them. Bureaucracy is thus the image of a prevailing social power,
distorted by its claim of universality.

The Weberian Model of Bureaucracy

It goes to the credit of Max Weber, a German historian and sociologist, to give a theory of bureaucracy. It is his theory of bureaucracy which set the foundations for many subsequent works on the subject. Max Weber was the first one to talk about bureaucracy as a big improvement over the administration. He provided a profound account of the nature of bureaucracy and the forms of bureaucratic organisation and thinking. He described bureaucracy as one of the most rational and efficient means to organise authority. Weber presented his ideas on bureaucracy within the broader formulations of power, authority and legitimacy. It is important to point out that he differentiated between power and authority on the basis of legitimacy. According to him, if the individuals on whom the power (influence even against their will) is exercised deem it as proper or appropriate, it becomes legitimate and takes the form of authority. While talking of his authority systems, Weber, on the basis of its claim to legitimacy, classified authority as:

1. Traditional Authority
2. Charismatic Authority
3. Legal-Rational Authority

Under the traditional authority, the basis of the acceptance and legitimacy of authority is the sacredness of the rulers and his orders. Under this system, personal contacts, loyalties, kinship, etc., influence the structure and decisions of the administration. Under the charismatic authority, ‘charisma’ or ‘the supernatural qualities’ of the ruler are the basis of acceptance of the authority. Charisma is a God-gifted virtue where a leader himself knows what to do. A charismatic leader contrasts with the traditional leadership of a king or the modern rational leadership of an administrative or elected leader.

Under the legal-rational system, the acceptance of authority is sought on the basis of rules, which are framed in an impersonal, impartial and rational manner. It is to be noted that Weber never defined bureaucracy; rather, he outlined the essential features of an ‘ideal type’ bureaucratic organisation based on the legal-rational system. His ideal type bureaucracy consists of structural and behavioural features such as rationality, division of work and specialisation, hierarchical authority system, merit-based recruitment and promotion, distinction between the position and its incumbent, between public and private, emphasis on
written documents, office procedures, rule-orientation, formalism, etc.

A systematic division of labour and specialisation of tasks is one of the fundamental features of bureaucracy. To achieve it, a precise and detailed definition of duties and responsibilities of each position of office is drawn out. It constitutes ‘a specific sphere of competence’ which involves a sphere of obligations to perform functions; the provision of the incumbent with the necessary authority to carry out these functions and the necessary means of compulsion, clearly defined, with the use being subject to definite conditions. A unit of exercising authority which is organised in this way will be called an ‘administrative organ’ (Weber 1964: 334).

The hierarchical system of the organisation is another basic feature of bureaucracy. According to Weber, bureaucracy is organised according to rational principles and is characterised by a rational and impersonal regulation of the inferior-superior relationship. In the traditional (feudal/patrimonial) types of administration, the inferior-superior relationship is personal and the legitimisation of authority is based on a belief in the sacredness of tradition (Bondless 2015: 1). On the other hand, the legitimacy of bureaucratic authority lies in the belief of the correctness of the process by which the administrative rules were enacted. The loyalty of the people in the bureaucrats is based on the superior position of the post and in the impersonal order. The offices are ranked in a hierarchical order in this organisation and the officials are set for a career within this hierarchical order of the public service. The personnel are recruited on the basis of the merit of the candidates, or according to specialised qualifications and not on the basis of such particularistic considerations as family positions or political loyalties (Mouzelis 1975: 38-43).

Weber emphasised the appointment by a superior authority and considered it as an essential feature of bureaucracy. In contrast to elected officials, an appointed official, from a technical point of view, functions in a more exact manner because his selection and promotion in his career depend purely upon his functional capabilities and qualities (Dolan and Rosenbloom 2003: 10). A bureaucrat gets his salary based on status rather than productivity or performance, but usually promotions within the bureaucracy are based upon seniority as well as achievement. Also, there is a clear-cut separation between the ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres of a bureaucrat. In his official job, a spirit of impersonality without any hatred or passion—and hence without affection or enthusiasm—dominates (Weber 1964: 340). Weber
said that the more it is dehumanised, the more the bureaucracy’s specific nature perfectly develops, that is, “the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from officials’ business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational and emotional elements which escape calculation. This is the specific nature of bureaucracy and it is appraised as its special virtue” (Weber et al. 1970: 216). To Weber, the bureaucracy is a particular type of administrative structure developed in association with the rational legal mode of authority. In his view, it is capable of attaining the highest degree of efficiency, and is in this sense formally the most rational known means of exercising authority over human beings (Weber and Slattery 2003: 32). To him, it is an administration based on discipline, which is “nothing but the consistently rationalised, methodically prepared and exact execution of the received order” (Antonio 1979: 895-912). According to Weber, only traditional and rational-legal authority relations are sufficiently stable to provide the basis for the formation of permanent administrative structures. Thus, the bureaucracy is a type of administrative organisation with the above-mentioned characteristics which once established will continue because it is the most efficient, most rational form of organisation for exercising legitimate authority in a modern society.

**Causes for the Emergence of Bureaucratic Organisation**

Weber gave many causes for the emergence of an organisation based upon legal and rational principles, three of which, however, need special attention:

(i) The creation of a money economy: The emergence of money economy was a major factor in the development of a rational form of administration. Weber states that while capitalism and bureaucracy have arisen from many different historical sources, they are today interdependent; capitalism is the most rational economic basis for bureaucratic domination, since it supplies the necessary monetary resources for the payment of officials. Thus, the bureaucracy presupposes a monetary economy for its continued existence (Cohen 1991: 92). Bureaucracies based on compensation of kind had existed, for instance, in Egypt, Rome and China. But a payment in kind could not ensure dependable revenues for the bureaucrats. Hence, the practice was to reward them by grants of land or the collection of tax revenues from given territories. This led to the disintegration of bureaucracies into feudal or semi-feudal domains. A money economy, on the other hand, permitted a payment of secure, regular salaries, which in turn created dependable organisations.
(ii) The emergence of a capitalist economy: The system of free enterprise, the essence of capitalism, fostered bureaucracy. It created those needs which only a bureaucratic organisation could satisfy. The growth of capitalism required and even encouraged a strong and orderly government based on a bureaucratic organisation in its own interests. Not only governments but also capitalist enterprises themselves began to follow the bureaucratic principles of organisation because of the requirements of rationality and calculability—the prime feature of capitalism.

(iii) The more encompassing trend towards rationalism in the Western societies: This trend found an expression in a general ‘disenchantment’ or demystification of the world, in a more effective adaptation of means to ends and a more systematic organisation of reality. For Weber, the Protestant ethic was the basic of the spirit of capitalism which called for the rational investment of time and effort so as to maximise profit and achievements. The general trend towards rationalism was also evident in the development of modern science with its combination of rational theory, mathematical calculations and systematic empirical observations. Protestantism, capitalism, science and bureaucracy were thus all part of one cluster of development—the process of rationalisation (Merton 1952: 60-68).

Weber formulated his ideal type concept of bureaucracy having in mind mainly the administrative apparatus of the modern Western state. Being primarily concerned with explaining the features of Western civilisation, he wanted to examine the process that made the state apparatus of western European societies approach closely his ideal type of bureaucracy. He observed that the power position of bureaucracy could vary from case to case, but its permanence and technical indispensability in the modern societies was beyond doubt. Revolutions of all type in the modern societies could change radically the power positions of various groups, but even they could never abolish it. Whatever the political regime and whatever the socio-political changes in the modern society, according to Weber, bureaucracy was there to stay (Sharan 1989: 23) Not only would the state bureaucracy not wither away, but the bureaucratic form of organisation would spread and become dominant in
all spheres of life.

On this account, Weber did not agree with the Marxist notion of the eventual disappearance of bureaucracy. He criticised the Marxist theory of socialism, contending that the socialisation of the means of production would merely subject the economic life to the bureaucratic management of the state. The state would in this way become totalitarian as Weber felt that this socialism would lead to not an egalitarian society but to further serfdom. For him, “the dictatorship of the official and not that of the worker is on the march” (Weber et al. 1970: 335).

Similarly, Weber rejected the prediction of some others that the spreading and technical indispensability of bureaucracy in a modern society would make the bureaucrat’s political dominance inevitable. In his view, the bureaucracy’s indispensability does not automatically imply political dominance; its impersonality makes it a tool that can serve many masters. The masters, being at the top of the bureaucratic organisations, are necessarily not purely bureaucratic (Weber 1964: 335).

**A Critical Appraisal of the Weberian Model of Bureaucracy**

As a matter of fact, Weber himself was aware that an ideal bureaucratic functioning is a difficult proposition—a mere abstraction (Srivastava 1992: 16). Weber’s model of bureaucracy has met with a lot of criticism at the hands of behavioural scholars like Robert Merton, Michael Crozier, Robert Michels, Monroe Berger, Alfred Diamant, Ferrel Heady and Robert Presthus. These behavioural writers have the common tendency to concentrate upon that behaviour which is “dysfunctional” or “pathological”. This refers to the tendencies of the bureaucracies to develop those behaviour patterns which, although linked to the rational base of bureaucratic organisation and related structural devices, inhibit the attainment of the legitimate objectives of bureaucracy (Heady 1959: 517).

The most generalised argument against such structures was developed by Robert Merton, who argued that there is a tendency for “the rules to become more important than the ends they were designed to serve, resulting in goal displacement and loss of organisational effectiveness” (Merton 1952: 361-371). Merton was among the first sociologists to emphasise
systematically the dysfunctional aspects of bureaucracy i.e. red-tapism and inefficiency. According to him, the preponderance of rational rules and procedures brings about lack of flexibility. Procedural rules become ends in themselves, instead of simply being means leading to a “goal displacement”. Merton first identified this problem and applied this term to organisational preoccupation with its rules and regulations, to the point that the managers keep the organisation from meeting its goals. He said that in this system, “adherence to the rules, originally conceived as a means, becomes transformed into an end-in-itself; there occurs familiar process of “displacement of goals” whereby “an instrumental value becomes a terminal value” (Merton 1952: 365).

Another point of criticism which emerges from Merton’ discussion is that while bureaucracy emphasises a rational and secondary relationship between functionaries and beneficiaries, the beneficiaries who are to be served by the bureaucracy want to establish a primary group relationship with the bureaucrats so that they can get things done. Hence, there appears to be an incompatibility between the structural demands and their execution by the primary group. Yet another shortcoming of the bureaucratic system is that very often it is difficult to pin down the responsibility of an individual. And the irony of it is that the bureaucracy can turn down any programme of reform when it does not want to accept it by refusing to act immediately. It tries to serve its own interests, and for this a general slackness in the system becomes a part of its functioning (Merton 1959: 321-332).

Lipset contends that bureaucrats have their own vested interests in the existing legal order and therefore are resistant to change. This is where bureaucracy is attacked as an impediment both to democracy, and more particularly, to change (Merton 1959: 321-332).

In addition to these criticisms of bureaucratic functioning, the Weberian model has been questioned for being a theory per se (Udy 1959: 415-418). Hall observes that it is presented as a finished tool, whereas it is a set of hypotheses to be verified by empirical findings (Hall 1963: 32-40). These attributes need to be first established before being accepted as a universal model. It has also been felt that it overstates the positive functions of bureaucracy such as efficiency, rationality, etc., but misses out on the ‘dis-functions’ like red-tapism, trained incapacity, procedural delays, occupation, etc. (Merton 1952: 50-54).
Similarly Damle criticises Weber for not foreseeing the possibility of the political and administrative authority being coalesced into one (Dube 1979: 11-15). He also criticises him for not visualising the bureaucrats as being called upon to perform the task of providing leadership for social transformation. He observes that it would not be desirable to have a technocratic rule in a democracy, particularly when modernisation and social change are the goals. A democratic process requires that people should be involved in the new changes in all walks of life. As such, apart from the fact that the bureaucrats have to supply the relevant services and facilities for the production of goods and commodities, they also have to educate the people with a view to changing their mental attitudes. It is absolutely necessary in a democracy that a bureaucrat plays a role wider than that of a mere technocrat. It is because of this that the formalistic model of bureaucracy would not be enough and that informal groupings will have to be reckoned with by the bureaucrats in their day-to-day working (Damle 1979: 17-20).

La Palomabara points out that as an instrument of economic change, the structural model is not fit for developing countries. While giving the example of India, he adds that “in a place like India, public administrators steeped in the tradition of the Indian Civil Service may be less useful as development entrepreneurs than those who are not so rigidly tied to the motions of bureaucratic status, hierarchy and impartiality” (La Palomabara 1963: 12). Philip Selznick points out the organisational paradox in the structure of bureaucracy. The goals, responsibilities and powers need to be delegated to sub-systems by the central system in order to accomplish the task but in due course these sub units or sub-systems develop an informal system and set up their own goals which may be in conflict with the real purpose of the organisation (Selznick 1943: 47-54). According to him, this informal structure serves a triple function: (a) it serves to control the behaviour of the members of the worker group (b) it also affects the conditions of its existence being the member of a large organisation (c) it also acts to develop an expression of informal and personal relationships which a formal organisation does not provide. This informal structure exists in every organisation and in every organisation, the goals of the organisation are modified (abandoned, deflected or elaborated) as per the needs of this informal structure. It further leads to a bifurcation of interests as well as a conflict between the central system and sub-units.
The problem of developing an informal structure has also been identified by Peter Blau—“this informal structure is a more cohesive and cooperative group”. He criticises the bureaucracy for being ritualistic. The people in an organisation or bureaucracy are not only linked with each other through official channels and links but also share their life situation, happiness, sorrows, dreams, and aspirations as the office constitutes a mini-world for them (Blau 1956: 43). The existence of an informal structure can work both ways for the bureaucratic organisation. It can increase the efficiency of the organisation as unnecessary official hurdles are surpassed by the informal links, but at the same time, this informal structure can be detrimental to the organisation if it starts functioning with cross-purposes and sets up its own goals and objectives (Jacobs 1969: 414).

Gouldner has pointed out the structural contradictions of the ideal typical model. According to him, certain characteristics enumerated by Weber are mutually inconsistent. There is an in-built contradiction between the authority of the ‘experts’ and the authority of a ‘hierarchy’ based on discipline. One comes from superior knowledge and another from the office held. Professionals may have more technical knowledge than hierarchical super-ordinates. It is very easily possible that people who have an expertise, who know how to do things, would find themselves stifled by unnecessarily submitting themselves to the dictates of the rules and procedures slammed upon them by their superiors (Gouldner 1954: 16-29). He also made a point that though the structure of the Weberian bureaucracy is based on the rationality of the civil servants and Weber seems to have assumed that the cultural setting of a specific bureaucracy would be neutral, but since that culture is not neutral and prefers the agreed-upon rules rather than imposed ones, these two cannot be fused together without blurring the dynamics of a bureaucratic organisation (Gouldner 1954: 20).

Finally, looking at the Weberian structural model of the ideal-type bureaucracy, one is forced to infer that the structure depends a lot on the socio-cultural context in which it operates, the people and the officials who man the structure and the circumstances in which they operate (Haque 1997: 432-462). If the structure is universal and secular but has to operate in a society where people are governed by primordial identities, it would fail to serve the purpose and remain largely ineffective despite being efficient. This appears true particularly in the context of developing countries, many of which have stable bureaucracies and an unstable political regime. The result is that the bureaucracy, manned by the modernising elites of these
societies, provides stability and continuity to an otherwise unstable system of government. In these societies, the bureaucracy already has a firm and strong position than the other structures of politics which are struggling to establish themselves. While the political leadership, party organisation, electoral system and elected legislature, all are in a state of flux, the bureaucracy continues to provide a permanent leadership in the administration. This leads, in many of the newly independent countries, towards a bureaucratic rule, often with the backing of the army—its natural ally. In this way, the natural growth of emerging political institutions is hindered as the bureaucracy harbours its traditional hatred towards democratic principles. The bureaucracy consolidates its already firm position in the background of the frequently emerged internal and external threats which a newly formed state faces in the initial years and leads the way to authoritarian rule, thereby further impeding its political growth (Jha 2004: 51).

This point becomes more relevant in the Third World context. An organisational rationality to determine administrative action tends to freeze the administrative autonomy. In uncertain and rapidly changing conditions, results and achieving objectives are more important than adhering to rules. Rules must be deemed as resources, to be weighed from the point of view of their adequacy for specific tasks. Societal expectations of programmes and results should be the main driving force of a government organisation and not the rules, norms and procedures. Also, in the context of the Third World developing countries, the structural characteristic of “formalistic impersonality” is not suitable as the need to fulfil developmental programmes is more urgent. What is required here is not impersonality but rather identifying with the purpose, goals and the people for whom these development programmes have been designed. One needs to be socially sensitive to the cause of the poor, marginalised and downtrodden sections of society. Also, a little bit of personal touch in the delivery of the services would be more desirable.

There is a need to adopt a behaviouralistic outlook in terms of bureaucratic behaviour, according to the changing context of the cultural environment of the developing countries. The people in these developing countries are still being guided by primordial loyalties and a particularistic identity. It does not mean that the bureaucracy should discard its universalistic norms and procedures to accomplish the task, for that would undermine the very ethos of bureaucracy. But it can definitely adopt a more humanist posture and shed off its mechanistic dispositions in order to establish a positive atmosphere with the people whom it is meant to
serve.