ABSTRACT

The present research work has been designed to analyse the 'Role of bureaucracy in people's empowerment with reference to new economic policy in India'. The study is confined to the operational aspect of bureaucracy, bureaucracy and development, bureaucracy and democratic decentralisation, bureaucracy and new economic policy and bureaucracy and people's empowerment.

The term bureaucracy is a very perplexing one and is susceptible to more than one meaning. To a common man bureaucracy means, a system of government characterised by inefficiency, delay, corruption, arbitrariness etc. But in administrative parlance, bureaucracy refers to rule of officials.

An all-embracing definition of bureaucracy, perhaps may be a political actor, an essential ingredient of the political system, a consumer and producer of social products, a power centre, a pressure group, a system stabiliser, a change agent, a political symbol, a political socialiser, a social elite, an interest articulator, a political, social and economic system, a source of political recruitment, a decision maker, an advisor and an environmental determinant.

The modern era is an era of Globalisation and liberalisation. Where State's activities have increased considerably. Today the administrative state is concerned with almost all aspects of human life including such areas as social services, economic situation of a country and their people, poverty, employment, health, sanitation, food conservation and distribution, exploration and conservation of natural resources, scientific and technological developments and space, satellite and communications research making, bureaucracy, the largest employer in the modern sector of economy of the majority of countries throughout the world.
However, in a developing country like India the role of the bureaucracy becomes more prominent, because very often bureaucrats have also to perform the role of a change agent.

Under the Indian Constitution, the top level bureaucrats have a constitutional responsibility to advice on policy options. The secretaries to the Government of India, for example, take or advice to ministers to take, decision that arise within the framework of existing laws or policies which otherwise cannot be dealt with the routine procedures.

The Indian bureaucratic system is one of the few organised systems anywhere in the world where officers move from state government to the central government and back, and apart from that, at times perform roles in public undertakings.

The role of Indian bureaucracy has infact changed dramatically during the last two or three decades and it is now poised for another big change because of the economic liberalisation and people’s empowerment programmes through democratic decentralisation (PRIs).

An important segment of economic liberalisation in public sector reforms, now-a-days is that public sector managers do not have the kind of freedom necessary to enforce the doctrine of accountability in the public sector. The political as well as bureaucratic leadership will have to consciously exercise self restraint and shed some of their power and control vis-à-vis public sector undertakings, if these undertakings are to have autonomy both in letter and in spirit. There is also the painful decision to be taken to close down totally unviable public sector undertakings, which politically speaking, is not an easy decision to take. At the same time, the drain on the public exchequer, because of the sustained loss making undertakings cannot be allowed to continue year after year, if the fiscal deficit of the government is to be kept under reasonable control.
Over the years bureaucrats have faced several challenges. In the early part of independent India, it was law and order, refugee relief and rehabilitation, food scarcity etc. From a purely law and order and revenue collection mind-set, bureaucrats got transformed into the mind-set of a development administrator. In the 60’s for example, bureaucrats well called to play an important role in food management, public distribution network, scarcity relief work, etc. along with development orientation towards rural development, extension network in the agricultural sector, family planning, etc. It is to the credit of this premier bureaucratic system, that the transformation was effected without much pain or dislocation. This was partly due to the high quality of the bureaucracy and the support it enjoyed at the top level. Partly it was also due to the enlightened political leadership, which saw the effectiveness of bureaucracy, particularly in development administration. The transformation which is now underway in the 90’s may not be that easy to achieve, because the social environment is more difficult and the task ahead more complex.

Today the bureaucracy has not only to cope merely with the problems of maintaining law and order, providing some limited public services, and the collection of taxes for the government, but also to devote its energies and time to time bigger and more important tasks of implementing plans and programmes for the socio-economic development of the state. It has to be specially involved in the mobilisation of resources and the allocation to a great variety of developmental activities on a large scale.

The bureaucracy plays an important role in the development of country, particularly in a country, which has recently moved on the path of the socio-economic development. Earlier, the development was defined in terms of increase in Gross Domestic product (GDP). But, of late if has been felt by economists, planners and social scientists alike that increase in the GDP may not necessarily result in reducing the misery of common man.
However, the bureaucracy is an integral part of the development process and has a significant role to play in this task.

It is needless to assert that the bureaucracy is the only instrument, which ensures administrative continuity in a developing democracy like India where the political executive changes according to the preference of the voters. In fact by virtue of its security of tenure and because of its crucial place in the power structure the bureaucracy maintains continuity in government. The bureaucracy, especially the higher level bureaucracies, are the link between the successive ministries and the responsibility of the principles and practices which endure Chief Ministers and other ministers come and go.

Historically, district level bureaucracy has played an important role in the overall bureaucratic set-up in India. The pinnacle of district level bureaucracy was reached during the British rule in India when the collector and District Magistrate heading the district level bureaucracy became a very important functionary for the colonial rule. Apart from maintaining law and order and collecting revenue, he became the principal coordinator for all government activities in his district. For the common man he was literally the government and consequently, he was the court of last resort in the bureaucratic set-up in the district.

In fact, the pressure on the district level bureaucrats today is many times more than it was in the colonial days. Gone are the days when a district level bureaucrat could ride from village to village, camp with his entourage whenever fancy took him, and spend days on end getting to know the villagers, their customs, rituals etc. and also their problems. At the same time, he was to ensure that all the central and state sponsored schemes are implemented well in his district. All these tasks hardly leave the district level bureaucracy with any time or scope for an in-depth study of local problems so as to advise any long term developmental strategy for his district.
The above realisation resulted in the idea that it is better to separate some developmental functions from the functions of a district level bureaucrat and entrust or empower these to a separate agency altogether. And it is also realised that the success of any developmental programme largely depends on the active participation of the people. It was in this context that democratic decentralisation, as a concept, took root in the countryside of India. For this purpose the 73rd and 74th amendments in the constitution, the central government enacted a model legislation providing for a three-tier setup and indicating clearly the manner of elections to these democratically elected bodies.

The intention is to have a democratically elected decentralised setup in the district administration with clearly demarcated powers and functions. Consequently, this is a step in the right direction because considering the continental size of the country, a democratic decentralised setup, as an important segment of district administration, appears to be a desirable institutional arrangement.

The objectives of democratic decentralisation is the empowering people through their participation in decision making processes.

Decentralising governance from the “Centre” to States, Towns and Villages-can be one of the best means of promoting people’s participation and efficiency in working. In India, the basic and fundamental unit of democratic decentralisation is widely known as Local Self Government (LSG). This term originated when the country was under British administration and did not enjoy and tinge of self government either at the centre or at the state level. When decision was taken by the British government to associate Indians in administering local affairs, it only meant a slice of self government for the people. The important local bodies today are District Boards, Municipalities, Improvement Trusts, Development Boards and Panchayats. Their administrative functions cover a wide
field like education, medical aid, public health, water supply, communication, lighting, sanitation drainage, construction of roads, bridges and culverts etc.

In the Indian context, the panchayats as institutions of self-government are expected to manage their resources and to plan and implement schemes for socio-economic development and social justice. Much depends on how the elected representatives use the available resources for the benefit of the community and how skillfully they perform the functions and also how vigilant and active the Gram Sabhas are. The Gram Sabhas can be regarded as the 'base' on which the pyramid of democratic decentralisation rests. Since it is the Gram Sabha whom the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) represent and to whose needs they must respond to and to whom they must respond to and to whom they must be accountable, therefore, it is incumbent upon the Gram Sabha in turn to be watchful about the general functioning of the PRIs as without the participation of the Gram Sabhas, the PRIs have no way to succeed village people now have a forum in the Gram Sabha for direct participation in managing their own affairs.

"True democracy cannot function through the twenty people sitting in the centre. It should be from base level and by the people of village", the above statement of Mahatma Gandhi reflects the importance of public participation and people's empowerment in decision making process. And public participation can be assured through democratic decentralisation or Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Another major challenge before India bureaucracy is New Economic Policy. The New Economic Policy or Economic liberalisation policy initiated in 1991 were crisis driven. The crisis in the balance of payments and mounting fiscal deficits (both at the level of the central and State Governments) promoted the congress-led Government under the stewardship of Mr. P. V. Narasimha Rao to initiate economic reforms.

During the post-economic reforms (1991-97), India has made some significant achievement in economic growth, industrial production especially
capitalist agriculture. It is found that growth rates in some of the key sectors of the economy such as GNP, per capita income, agriculture and allied activities, and domestic savings from corporate sector have risen in post-reform period.

National development can take place only if the growth rate of the economy sufficiently exceeds the growth rate of population. Thus if country like India growth rate at 6 to 7 percent per annum, prosperity would definitely percolate down to the masses with the concomitant increase in the employments.

The rational and the basic ingredients of the economic reform programmes cannot in any sense be said to adversely affect the poor and the needy if it will implement with right intention and free from corruption. With rapid economic growth it cannot be denied that investment in education, health, family planning, women and children will increase. Better facilities and services can be provided. The sea of humanity that lives in abject poverty in this country can only be uplifted by more investment and improvement in social sector and this is what the economic reforms aim at.

However, in a democratic setup politicians set goals and broad strategic directions, but sound institutional arrangements can determine whether the vision of political leaders get translated into effective policy priorities or not. The rules and norms embedded in the policy making process should be so designed that it curbs the political pressures that can lead to poor decision making and bad outcomes. Evidence across a range of countries has shown that well functioning bureaucracies can promote growth and reduce poverty. They can provide sound policy inputs and deliver critical public good and services at least cost.

In India situation it is to be said that bureaucracy has not fulfilled all the expectations of the people. And it will also be improper to say that bureaucracy does not want to empower people at grass root level, and benefit people from the New Economic Policy. It is a fact that policies and programmes are prepared by
secretaries (senior bureaucrats) of related ministries, then how, without bureaucratic will, New Economic Policy and Democratic Decentralisation policies or any other people-oriented policies have been drafted or prepared?

Finally / lastly it is be said, that, there can be no government without the bureaucracy. This is everywhere. Therefore, however, much it is to wish to the contrary, this institution cannot be done away with. As long as there is a government and the state, the bureaucracy is expected to be one of the indispensable organs of modern democracies.

So it would be a great mistake if the importance of the bureaucracy were not fully recognised by those involved in the developmental effort.