Study of Public Administration in India: Concerns and Prospects
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ABSTRACT

Public Administration has witnessed a radical change as a discipline from the conventional Weberian model embarking on the western philosophies to the neo-liberalist model which banks on the universal theory sponsored by the World Bank. However, neither of these models does justice to the discipline which is specifically context-driven and depends upon the society in which it is applied. In India, this discipline was originally treated as a part of Political Science and was introduced, before Independence, in certain universities in a limited form. However, it was Appleby who institutionalized it as a distinct discipline in several Universities after Independence. The discipline received a major fillip when it was inducted as a compulsory subject in the curriculum of the Indian Civil Service Examination conducted by the UPSC. But it could not attract the best brains due to the limited scope of research and excess emphasis on its technical aspect. A research survey made on the study of this discipline brings out its inherent weakness as a goal-driven exercise without identifying its socio-economic and political perspective. The recommendations of the Administrative Reforms Commissions led to the formation of several bodies and the enactment of certain laws in order to root out administrative corruption and uphold the spirit of ethics in governance. So the fundamental task of Public Administration is to defend its methodological diversity, context-specific approach and public character to survive as a praxis discipline in the face of the ever-changing global scenario.

Keywords: Public Administration, Western methodology, Political Science, Governance, Re-conceptualization, Ethics, Neo-liberal perspective.

1. Introduction

Public Administration (PA) is a specific study of any society and cannot be applied universally. One of the main reasons for very little independent study in this field is our dependence on the Western models of governance. This has impeded our learning into the specific societal arenas of administration in the non-Western countries. This is an area of concern for the syllabi of Public Administration of several Indian Universities. The context of the evolution and nature of this subject in post-independent India has been taken up by a group of academia who are trying to re-conceptualize the subject by incorporating the peculiarities of
our society but without completely ignoring the Western philosophies. The underlying principle is that generalization does not apply to this field of study. The thrust on the “public” part of administration which was given by Woodrow Wilson in 1887 has recently been overshadowed by the acceptance of the concept of “governance” by the World Bank. However, it must be understood that this subject is not merely a goal driven and theory based but relates to serving the people through “public governance”. Thus the theoretical limitation of the study as espoused by the World Bank guidelines seems to pose a serious cause of concern for contemporary research. There is an ongoing debate between the “governance” discourse and traditional “publicness” of the subject which is taken into concern by the universities while framing their syllabi in this subject (Chakraborty, 2014).

2. Arguments for the study

The major argument is that PA depends upon the specific context and its purpose cannot be studied by ignoring the “public” part of the administration. The supplementary argument is that PA is an applied discipline that includes the role of politics and scientific research is wanting in this subject with the emergence and establishment of a universally networked society. PA is an isolated subject in India as academicians are more interested in other branches of social sciences. The principal reason for lack of interest in the subject is the peculiar nature of public governance in India with its prevalent institutional, political, economic, and social context as also the colonial influence.

3. Methods of study

There are some methodological difficulties in comprehending the subject. The most important factor is the blind imitation of the Western philosophy in the Indian context which tends to make it intellectually limiting and one tends to ignore the issues shaping governance. However, we notice some changes after the 1970s when a group of academics questioned the Western approach of derivative wisdom and emphasized building models on the prevalent socio-economic circumstances. This resulted in significant changes in our way of dealing with the subject as a “natural truth” based on empirical facts.

The search has already begun to re-conceptualize some of the methodological tools which are used to analyze the subject. From this, it surfaced that PA is an integral part of governance and since it encompasses the extremely detailed social, economic and political processes, the researcher must necessarily possess an interdisciplinary base. A study of the literature of the 1970s reveals that the analysts undertook empirical research based on the interdependence of the areas of concern. They understood that it required disciplinary rigor and depth rather than merely focusing on bureaucracy. Bureaucracy has to be understood in the larger social scenario which shapes its actual nature in practice.

The sustained endeavor exposed the limitations of the subject and forced us to re-examine the methods with which it is taught in universities. The predictable weakness of descriptive studies and the concepts derived from the Western sources led to a distorted form of PA which was devoid of its empirical nature of real-life application. The effect of the 1st Minnowbrook Conference (1968) which enlightened the subject was
ideological and the new group of academicians were supportive of accepting methods and features from multiple disciplines of social sciences to understand PA that was constantly rechristened for obvious reasons (Waldo, 1971).

The PA had a silent beginning as it had a few takers in academic fraternity and was treated as an inseparable entity of Political Science. There is a mismatch between the academic interest and the bureaucratic intervention to understand the administrative problem and suggest a possible solution. There is a striking communication gap between the two groups who do not seem to realize the value of sharing of concepts, theories, methods and case studies. Still, the government data remain a major source of concept formation and secondary data to aid in research.

4. Beginning of the journey

Till 1937, Indian Universities did not recognize PA as a separate discipline but it was the University of Madras that started a course on Diploma in PA in the very same year followed by Allahabad University (AU) which started a course on Self-Government in 1938. Within 4 years, Lucknow University (LU), Patna University (PU), Osmania University (OU) and Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) started offering a Diploma in PA. The stalemate was finally over in 1949 when Nagpur University (NU) opened a full-fledged department of PA. In 1954, Paul Appleby founded the Indian Institute of Public Administration in Delhi which is now responsible for providing training to IAS officers of different seniorities. Paul Appleby also founded separate Departments of PA in Jaipur and Chandigarh Universities in 1956. The subject was introduced in 1987 as a compulsory part of the syllabus for the All India Civil Service Examination conducted by UPSC which resulted in gaining popularity of this subject in universities across the country (Appleby, 1967).

Paul Appleby was a follower of the Weberian model who believed that the bureaucracy is exclusively responsible for attaining goals and socio-economic reconstruction can only occur through state intervention. However, this results in overlooking the wider considerations of social sciences to solve the administrative issues. The PA has thus become vocation-oriented which is evident from the recruitment of personnel from general streams to make the administration efficient. This tends to modify the subject as per the demand of the customer overlooking the wide social scenario in which the administration is rooted. This is self-defeating as it will turn our attention from the wider socio-economic and political paradigm and make the subject more technical and constricted by perhaps robbing its core in the long run. Several universities teach the subject to prepare the students for the competitive examinations for jobs which is itself self-defeating as it has been reduced to a mere training exercise and will certainly be robbed of its unique nature as an integral entity.

5. Shortcomings of the discipline

There are several grey areas in the study of this subject. The subject continues to be intellectually crippled as it lacks a specific domain of query and after India’s independence; it never grew to become an effective tool to evaluate India’s administrative scenario since it did paid no heed to the socio-economic base in which it is
rooted. As an analytical tool, it failed to become meaningful as it could not properly take into account the real behavior of the State, the actual administrative background, the Constitutional pattern and the nature of Government, the political process and the social setup (Bhattacharya, 1997). So it failed to become natural and grounded in character and was incapable to understand the nature of PA of post-independent India. It hinders investigation of the relationship that exist between the theory and context which robs the energy and variety from the subject.

Despite these shortcomings, the study of PA continues to prosper in India. A study was conducted in India in 2005-06 based on whose responsibility it was evident that the subject failed to emerge from its inherent handicap of being unable to address its deficiencies conclusively (Rao, 2001). Firstly, it was unable to emerge from the cultural bias of American and European models and will never be able to evolve as a dominant explanatory area of inquiry as long as it exists. Secondly, the attempts to make the subject an instrumental and result-oriented exercise has robbed off the dynamism of the discipline which is now reduced to developing specific skills to address identified problems without attaching any importance to their socio-economic or political underpinnings. Finally, the above-mentioned reasons have led to the rise of a largely compromised subject which is neither capable of providing an independent solution nor possess the authority to find suitable solutions for the administrative deficiencies of the day. The result is thus an absence of clarity in the growth and character of the subject which is unable to come up as a distinct entity of social science inquiry. The survey also points out the fact that as a result of the above-stated reasons, this discipline has failed to attract the best brains in the country as it is less attractive as a field of research. But the discipline has drawn researchers from several other fields such as Historians, Sociologists, Political Scientists and even Administrators who have made considerable contributions in unraveling the varied and complicated nature of India’s public administration. These works are extremely useful for research in fields like Rural and Urban Local Self Government and the dynamic nature of India’s bureaucratic model.

6. Efforts to revive the discipline

Since the 1980s, efforts have been made to re-conceptualize the discipline in various Indian universities. It was felt that merely a theoretical understanding of the subject was not enough and that one needs to understand the existing socio-economic background or else it will be a futile exercise. It may be reiterated that this discipline is a process-driven endeavor for understanding and meaningfully addressing those problems faced by the society whose roots are embedded in the administrative functioning.

The PA, as a subject, incorporates the new ideas which have been subjected to experiments under varied situations and contexts by researchers and academicians. Due to its practical nature of study, several universities have introduced field trips to Government offices and other places, which are part of the administration, for the students, as a compulsory component of the teaching of this discipline. An important point in this regard is that governance is not synonymous simply with governing but involves the whole set of
activities to universalize the neo-liberal model of government functioning. So the discipline is constantly changing from its inward nature to the needs for focusing on the influence of the ongoing process of globalization and their impact on governance of the nation. The purpose is to transform a complex, isolated, powerful bureaucracy into one which is pro people and aware to the needs of the customers.

7. Improvements in governance

The Indian Government had employed two Administrative Reforms Commissions in 1966 and 2005, respectively whose recommendations had a huge impact on the administration. It emphasized the importance of civil society organizations and recognized the need for mutual cooperation between the bureaucracy and those organizations contrary to the Weberian Model which suggests a strictly hierarchical and largely status-quo set-up. These efforts broadened the sphere of Indian bureaucracy by seeking to involve non-State players in its functioning. The World Bank has suggested downsizing of bureaucracy and allowing a market economy and an active role of civil society, thus promoting the idea of globalization. This is a cause of concern for the developing nations who are struggling to deal with the extremely sensitive issues like ethics in governance and circumstantial hindrances, both social and political. As a result of the recommendations of the Santhanam Committee (1964), the Indian Government introduced a series of measures to remove administrative corruption and several new institutions like the Central Bureau of Investigation, Comptroller and Auditor General of India, and the Central Vigilance Commission surfaced. The Right to Information Act, 2005 also seeks to establish ethics in governance by allowing citizens’ access to Government information (2nd ARC Report, 2007). The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts were path-breaking measures in local self governance at the rural and urban levels as the former introduced reservation of one-third seats for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions.

8. Challenges faced by the discipline

The reports on PA in India as a separate discipline identifies the sources of both the merits and perils for the researchers involved in the pedagogical exercise, especially in the Indian universities. There is absolutely no patronage for sustained research in this field of study to develop the discipline and even the University Grants Commission (UGC) is not as supportive in this regard as its counterpart in Bangladesh. Some of the leading Indian Universities such as Calcutta University (CU), AU, DU, JNU, among others, do not have a full-fledged department of PA and continue to teach it as a part of the Political Science syllabus. This is a serious drawback for this discipline and prevents its growth as a separate entity. However, it is encouraging that the Government of India has undertaken a continuous endeavor in understanding this discipline and is continuously evolving new strategies to encompass the various scenarios and make administration more effective and meaningful.

9. Conclusion

The inherent weakness of PA as a subject cannot be addressed easily. But its strategic application in everyday governance provides solutions that make the discipline dependent upon specific actions in relation to a
particular context and easily implementable in practice. To make the subject more acceptable, the methodological jargons have to be ignored and the discipline needs to appreciate inter-disciplinary theories. The emergence of Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization and falling apart of Communist regimes of the former USSR have led to inevitable changes in administration which are context-specific but not necessarily traditional. The resulting methodological diversity and changed administrative reality have strengthened the discipline by blurring the national boundaries and the rise of global governance. But it has its share of pit-falls as the neo-liberals tend to generalize the discipline by prescribing a “universal design” which is injurious to its “public” aspect (Bhattacharya, 2013). To conclude, the principal task is to rediscover the discipline by emphasizing on its people-centric face and the mantle lies on the shoulders of the academicians and researchers to develop different modes of teaching in order to impart knowledge pertaining to this discipline in various centers of learning which would decide the future of this discipline.

10. References

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