Covid-19 & Attack on the Bureaucracy

What is the issue?

- In the Covid-19 crisis, the bureaucrats are being attacked verbally and physically in some parts of the country.
- Everyone wants the state to step-up, bail out, yet not be intrusive.

How is the bureaucracy performing?

- India's bureaucracy has delivered the world's biggest lockdown fairly effectively, without any playbook to learn from.
- This gave India time to prepare better.
- Our health systems have coped and every single arm of the government has risen up to the occasion admirably.
- But, the handling of the migrants could have been done much better, despite their unpredictable decision to go home in droves.
- This well-implemented lockdown ensured India has one of the lowest fatality rates in the world (<3%) and good recovery rates (49%).

Why the bureaucracy is accused?

- As per the Constitution, the permanent executive is expected to carry out every lawful directive of the political executive.
- But, when the bureaucracy does this, it is blamed for it.
- Indeed, there are overenthusiastic bureaucrats who want to be more loyal than the king, and make some regulations to cover their own backs.
- After all, one cannot be fired for being overcautious, but only maybe for super-performance.
- Thus, behaviour is as per incentives facing the civil servants.
- Bureaucracy is accused of becoming a **clarifications ministry** or opens itself up to allegations of allowing unwanted discretion and abuse.
- These clarifications should be seen as a responsive bureaucracy willing to learn from rapidly shifting ground realities and nuancing rules.
- If we abolish bureaucracy, there is a question about who will design and implement policy and advise elected leaders.

What could be reforms made?

- **Contract** - Coming to reforms in the IAS, lifetime contracts in employment are not found almost anywhere in the world.
- India should after, say, 15 years allow officers to continue only through 5-year performance contracts or let go with a golden handshake.
- **Lateral entry** - The government must open up 15% of joint secretary and above appointments by lateral entry.
- But, this should be only through the UPSC to ensure proper scrutiny and professionalism in intake.
- Competition is always good, and a revolving door in and out of government helps all sectors understand each other better - it shouldn't be one way only.

What could India do?

- In this current fight against an invisible enemy, **contact tracing** and **enhanced health infrastructure** are expected of every government.
- India should start spending in employing contact tracers.
- The governments need to know some **basic data of citizens** to identify, track and deliver food, cash, care.
- Every major corporate worth its salt in India today has a social media command centre, with granular data of their clients.
- Banks and hospitals have important citizens' records.
- They could allow their government to use it with some safeguards.

What is the conclusion?

- For the first time in India, the government has sent home numerous officers for corruption and incompetence.
- This needs to be lauded.
- The best livelihood antidote for Covid-19 is a strong economy.
- A control-freak bureaucracy is more dangerous than the virus itself.
- However, some interventions will be intrusive - so be it in these unprecedented times.
- India should take a slightly more generous view of bureaucracy and the government, which are working in tough ecosystem and yet delivering.
- They should try to understand the average officer's experiences and constraints and thereafter nudge him to explore better methods.

Source: Financial Express



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