The outdated nature of bureaucracy

What is the issue?

- Despite the efforts of all public institutions, bureaucracy has emerged as a major concern for the ineffective response to the COVID-19 crisis.
- This inadequacy is the reflection of the outdated nature of public bureaucracy, and its high time that bureaucracy is overhauled.

How does traditional bureaucracy work?

- In the 21st century, democratic countries are still relying on traditional bureaucracies.
- They perform primarily the public policy formulation and implementation roles.
- This traditional bureaucracy/Weberian bureaucracy still prefers a generalist over a specialist.
- A generalist officer (IAS and State civil service officials) is deemed an expert and as a result, a superior.
- Traditional bureaucracy is still stuck with the leadership of position over leadership of function.
- Under this, bureaucracy has become an end in itself rather than a means to an end.
- Further, the rigid adherence to rules has resulted in the rejection of innovation.

How has it performed during the COVID-19 crisis?

- Under the above structure, specialists in every government department have to remain subordinate to the generalist officers.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed this weakness.
- Healthcare professionals who are specialists have been made to work under generalist officers.
- The policy options have been left to the generalists when they should be in the hands of the specialists.
- The justification was that the generalist provides a broader perspective compared to the specialist.
- Also, under rigid adherence to rules, COVID-19 aid got stuck in

cumbersome clearance processes even during the pandemic.

What is the alternative ?

- Leadership of function is when a person has expert knowledge of a particular responsibility in a particular situation.
- The role of the leader is to explain the situation instead of issuing orders.
- Every official involved in a particular role responds to the situation.
- They do not rely on some dictation from someone occupying a particular position.

Is New Public Management the right choice?

- The reform often suggested in India is new public management (NPM).
- NPM as a reform movement promotes privatisation and managerial techniques of the private sector.
- This is seen as an effective tool to seek improvements in public service delivery and governance.
- But this is not a viable solution, not the least in India where there is social inequality and regional variations in development.
- It renders the state a bystander among the multiple market players with accountability being constantly shifted, especially during a crisis.
- COVID-19 too has shown that the private sector has also failed in public service delivery.

What is appropriate for India?

- The most appropriate administrative reform is the model of new public governance.
- This model is based on collaborative governance.
- Here, the public sector, private players and civil society, especially public service organisations (NGOs), work together for effective public service delivery.
- There is no domination of public bureaucracy as the sole agency in policy formulation and implementation.
- As part of new public governance, a network of social actors and private players would take responsibility in various aspects of governance.

What is the way forward?

- During the pandemic, the civil society is playing a major role in saving lives.
- As part of new public governance, this role has to be institutionalised.

- It needs a change in the behaviour of bureaucracy, through -

i. flexibility in hierarchy
ii. a relook at the generalist versus specialist debate
iii. an openness to reforms such as lateral entry and collaboration with a network of social actors

- All major revolutions with huge implications on public service delivery have come through the collaboration of public bureaucracy with so-called outsiders.
- These include the Green Revolution (M.S. Swaminathan), the White Revolution (Verghese Kurien), Aadhaar-enabled services (Nandan Nilekani) and the IT revolution (Sam Pitroda).
- It is high time that India understands New public governance as the future of governance, especially public service delivery.

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