

**HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF COLONIAL BUREAUCRACY  
IN BRITISH INDIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*There is a plenty of published and un-published sources available on Colonial bureaucracy. These sources focus on the structure, organization and performance of Imperial Civil Service (ICS). However, the public image of the service has been shaped by three of its official historians. I S S O Malley, E A H Blunt, and Philip Woodruff were articulate retired members of the service for whom the service was something special and fine (Taub, Richard P., 1969). The aim of this paper is to analyze the political role of Colonial bureaucracy in un-divided India. It is argued that Colonial bureaucracy was established to strengthen the Colonial rule in India. Nevertheless, it became the source of strength and weakness for the British. It worked like a machine and ignored the feelings and sentiments of people. Their working style created a sense of deprivation among various communities and thus, they began to resist the bureaucratic rule over India.*

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**Keywords:** Colonial rule, Bureaucracy, Impersonal administration, Neutrality.

**BRIEF HISTORY OF COLONIAL BUREAUCRACY**

Civil service began to develop with the rise of East India Company in Sub-Continent. In 1765 the company was authorized to perform the function of revenue collection in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. After few years the company appointed supervisors to collect land revenue from Bengal. The functions of collectors were increased when they were given additional responsibilities. In 1781 were made in charges of districts and however, their powers increased within the next few decades. They began to exercise blend of judicial and administrative powers in order to settle local revenue. By 1818, however, the Cornwallis system was brought to an end under the influence of Munro.<sup>1</sup> By then the collector who was confined to revenue functions became the effective head of the district. The

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<sup>1</sup> Munro was one of the great civil servants worked in India.

powers of bureaucracy were further increased after the war of independence in 1857. The district officer became the focal point of the Indian administration. He not only exercised revenue, judicial functions but also maintained law and order. He devoted his energies to suppress the crime and to carryout development work. Thus the Colonial administration significantly contributed to the establishment of British power. The authority of the British crown, after the war of independence, was unchallenged throughout India and relentless uniformity of British administration began to mould all India into one pattern (Griffiths, 1965:165).

#### **PUBLIC DEALING OF COLONIAL BUREAUCRACY**

The colonial way of dealing with common people in British India was based on social status and social hierarchy.<sup>2</sup> This prevented Colonial bureaucracy from establishing direct relations with common people and gave birth to public discontent and political resistance. In addition, colonial bureaucracy introduced impersonal form of administration which further affected their relations with local people. Gradually, these attitudes of bureaucracy created new aspirations for political change in British India. People of India began to resist British rule. Both communities Hindus and Muslims were united against the policies of the British until the 1930s. The idea of new country attracted some Muslim communities mainly because they had hopes and aspirations about a new change which came to form two sovereign states in 1947. People in the geographic regions which constituted Pakistan had expectations that the post-colonial world would be a place where they would exercise freedom, and they would be treated by bureaucracy in a decent manner. In addition, people of princely states had expectations higher than the people of the other regions. Thus, change was expected in attitudes and behaviors of the bureaucracy in addition to way they worked.

The idea of creating a civil service was conceived by the British to strengthen their rule and establish authority in colonial India. This service was commonly known as Imperial Civil Service and later

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'social hierarchy' has been used to indicate that colonial bureaucracy treated people according to their social statuses. The factors such as class, occupation, political power were considered in dealing with people.

Indian Civil Service (ICS). This service possessed qualities such as efficiency, neutrality and effectiveness. The purpose of the service was to establish British authority and promote loyalty among the chiefs of tribes, *nawabs*, *zamindars*, and *jagirdars*<sup>3</sup> towards their rulers and to protect imperial interest. Colonial officers considered power and position of these chiefs, when they came to see them in their offices. These officers only liked to meet with those landowners who possessed political influence. All the visitors to the collector or commissioner were required to keep waiting for their turn. The person who was invited first amongst all to meet the colonial officer was regarded very important person (Rashdi, 1987:17-18).

Thus, every landowner tried hard to meet the colonial officer as early as possible in order to create impression that he was more important than the other visitors. For this reason, the landowners also required to please the officials. In the offices of these officers only chair holders were allowed to sit in. Sitting in the special chairs indicated the privileges enjoyed by influential landowners. This code of bureaucratic conduct was followed by everyone. For example landowners were not allowed to walk on carpets spread in the colonial offices with locally manufactured shoes. In addition, the meetings were structured and formal which did not last more than few moments. This attitude of colonial bureaucracy to their loyal supporters of the British rule exposed the arrogance, pride and superiority displaced by colonial behavior. Thus, it is not difficult to imagine the way common people were being treated by the bureaucracy.

#### **NATURE OF COLONIAL BUREAUCRACY**

Members of Colonial bureaucracy were committed to the Imperial objectives. The higher levels of their self-motivation emerged as a main source of British power. Philip Woodruff has characterized them as guardians, who were 'expert in nothing or everything, answerable in practice mainly to themselves, foreign to the country they ruled' (Woodruff, 1954:19). Nevertheless, they were able to provide means of an administrative power British required for ruling over India more than three hundred years. Theoretically, the

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<sup>3</sup> The term Zamindar means Landowner and Jagirdar means property holder. Jagirdars were gifted properties by the British for their loyalty to British rule. The British also gave titles to their supporters. These titles included Nawabs and Raees, etc.

members of colonial service were efficient in the development and management of resources. The impersonal character of the administration created an opportunity for colonial bureaucracy to work as a systematic and organized body of administration.

The major contribution of impersonal administration was to establish a rule of law in the urban and rural India. Thus, the administration was not only able to define the need for social control but also establish the means to achieve it. Thus, the establishment of rule of law and maintenance of order in society became an important duty of colonial bureaucracy. In performing these duties, colonial bureaucracy followed rules and regulations rather than the traditions and customs prevailed in society. This way of rule created an image of British as an efficient administration suitable to the British interests rather than a rule people aspired for. Thus, people developed feeling that India was being ruled in a very unfamiliar way. Most discouraging situation for people was to feel superiority of colonial ethos and styles. The Indian ways of doing things became inferior to the colonial styles. The social needs, sentiments and aspirations of people were largely ignored by British officers when they dealt with common people. Thus, the actions of British officers did not motivate people to cooperate with them. They could do so if they could work in a familiar way to achieve British interests.

However, it was believed that this 'machine-like character of the administration was the source of both weakness and strength' (Griffiths, 1965:227). The impersonal administration was an opportunity for the colonial officers to grow stronger and powerful in dealing with public. This helped them to develop the administrative behavior they needed in order to implement policy promptly. Thus, it had a positive impact on the performance of the bureaucracy. For example, administrative efficiency as an outcome of impersonal administrative behavior helped the bureaucracy to develop an ability to neutralize the forces of Indian culture. It was able to resist the pressures and worked to achieve objectives. Thus, the administration performed its functions of revenue collection and maintenance of law and order in economical way.

Another contribution of ICS was to establish the new structure of administration in India based on the principles of efficiency, rule of law and team work. These skills were also transferred to the indigenous administrators who were trained in the art of colonial

administration. They learnt new philosophy of work and administrative skills from their European mentors. They worked so closely that they began to share same bureaucratic culture. For example the Indian members of ICS adopted Colonial attitudes, habits in a way that they replicate their style of eating, dressing, and behaving in various situations of public life.

#### **IMPACT OF IMPERSONAL ADMINISTRATION**

However, the negative impact of impersonal administration was equally devastating for social and moral standing of colonial rule. The major defect of this administrative model was that it did not produce sensitiveness to the feelings, desires and opinions and public sentiments, which sometimes caused serious problems (Griffiths, 1965:227). This iron made model of administration had no soft corner for indigenous values and beliefs. Thus, the local people feared that this model would bulldoze all norms, traditions, beliefs and customs which formed the historical identity of people of India.

These fears began to convert into a resistance to foreign rule, which ultimately challenged the dominant position of ICS. People began to oppose the way all the important positions in public service were reserved for the ICS officers. However, the ICS continued to enjoy enormous powers and privileges until the emergence of the Act of 1935. This act changed the functions of the civil service. It was fact that they [i.e. civil servants] were required to serve under, and consequently, to obey Indian ministers, whom as their secretaries, they also advised on all matters of policy relevant to their administrative duties (Government of West Pakistan, 1969:26).

Polarization between the emerging political leaders and colonial bureaucrats began in the 1940s. However, this struggle came to an end when British decided to windup their stay in India. Thus, the colonial administration handed over powers to Indian political leaders, who were divided into two major groups---Muslims and Hindus. The latter were in the majority and in favor of democratic rule. But the former were not willing to live under the system based on majority vote. Both the communities belonged to their different social systems shaped by their respective religious philosophies. According to Philip the two religions were alike in one respect only, that for their followers they affect 'every aspect of life---clothes, food, and attitude to the family, sacred books, language, and mythology' (Woodruff, 1954:19).

**CONCLUSION**

The paper concludes the key points about the political role of Colonial bureaucracy. It concludes that bureaucracy in India worked like machine. This machine like character of Civil servants created insensitiveness and sense of deprivation among the local masses. However, the remarkable characteristics of Colonial bureaucracy were its integrity, and its insistence on the equality of all before the law (Griffiths, 1965:227). Thus Colonial administration could be distinguished from the other systems of administration by its integrity, political neutrality and insistence of rule of law.

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