CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI "CESARE BONACOSSA" - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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Asia in 2020: Coping with COVID-19 and other crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni

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Policy making in India: How two civil service insiders got things done

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Montek Singh Ahluwalia, (2020) *Backstage: The Story Behind India's High Growth Years*. New Delhi: Rupa, 2020, xiv+434 pages (ISBN: 978-93-5333-821-3).

Ram Sewak Sharma, *The Making of Aadhaar: World's Largest Identity Platform*. New Delhi: Rupa (Kindle Edition), 235 pages (ISBN: 978-93-9035-12-6).

At first sight these two books make unlikely companions. But they fit together. They are important resources for thinking about how important and difficult things can be done in official India. Two very different senior officials tell how they combined understanding and respect for civil service procedures with knowing how to get around them in order to help the government of the day. The result was advice to ministers on which the politicians felt they could act. Impacts, immediate and continuing, followed. Implications for future approaches to other effective innovations in policy and public management are significant.

The book by Montek Singh Ahluwalia is about his role as an advisor on economic policy, including the still debated dismantling of restrictions on economic activity since 1991. The other by Ram Sewak Sharma is about his role with Nandan Nilekani and hybrid teams of civil servants and private sector secondees in creating Aadhaar – the much used but controversial unique identification number system. Their paths crossed when Mr Ahluwalia was deputy chair of the Planning Commission and Mr Sharma was Director General of the Unique Identification Authority of India. Both studied abroad but passed up opportunities overseas in order to return to senior positions India. Mr Ahluwalia studied economics at Oxford before appointments with the World Bank and, later, the IMF. On special leave at a senior level from the civil service, Mr Sharma studied computer science at the University of California-Riverside. He did this to complement his graduate degree in mathematics from IIT Kanpur and experience on the job with coding. Both men proved adept at poking at closed doors and shaking loose fresh possibilities.

In their accounts they take the reader into *sarkari* (government) work behind the headlines. Themes in common include how to work out what appropriate and effective policy initiatives look like, build working relation-

ships with ministers, develop feasible policy proposals ministers can endorse, and carry approved proposals through to effective implementation.

Especially important is how, within the civil service system, to draw on people with the relevant skills and knowledge. The authors take the well-known effects of over reliance on generalists, rigidities of hierarchy and procedure, and taking decisions on files as starting points. They then recount how they probed ways of getting more out of existing systems. Their stories are about networking within the civil service system; building on experience in other systems, sectors and countries; creating coalitions and bypassing obstacles; developing, managing and evaluating complex programmes and projects; taking into account experience from beyond the centre; and more. In the stories the uses of analysis, persuasion, gradualism, continuity and boldness blend. There is much to encourage others to chart their own paths to possible further changes.

Montek Singh Ahluwalia's account highlights how he sought to create options for a more dynamic economy; one which could stand on its own feet, avoid asking for international assistance, and develop patterns of inclusive growth. He advocated a less restricted and more market-oriented economy in which local producers could compete on quality and price, and do so domestically and internationally. He advocated measures to align prices with international competitors, cut reliance on subsidies to domestic suppliers and consumers, increase use of Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) in welfare schemes, and use DBT also in schemes providing input assistance to domestic producers (for example farmers).

In response to a shortage of capital for growth-promoting infrastructure development he advocated increased use of Public Private Partnerships (PPP). He wanted projects that got built and also built capability. But he did not want a free market free for all. When he returned to India as Deputy Chair of the Planning Commission, after a brief term as inaugural head of the independent evaluation office at the IMF, he suggested regular programme evaluation to improve policy making. Following his experience at the Planning Commission, and in a significant departure from his earlier thinking, he also advocated increased policy consultation with the Indian states.

In an insulated economy protected by policies of import substitution these proposals were hard to advocate. He saw two options. One was change by stealth. He shows how it could be done. However, its effects were limited. The second, advocated by Dr Manmohan Singh, a consistent mentor, was to be explicit. This meant setting out proposed reform programmes, making them «digestible» and implementing them as opportunities arose. The aim was to create «pragmatic consensus» leading over time to big changes. Such an opportunity came with the foreign exchange crisis of 1991.

Much is already published on how the newly installed Narasimha Rao government came to ease existing economic restrictions. Mr Ahluwalia's

contribution is that he sets out the lengthy background to the proposals implemented, including lessons from other developing countries he thought could be relevant. The foundations of the proposals included ideas worked up over lunch in colleagues' offices early in his civil service career and papers prepared for earlier purposes. One of these, known as the M Document, was prepared for Prime Minister VP Singh. But it was based also on existing notes, in this case for Rajiv Gandhi's possible return as PM at an earlier election.

When Prime Minister Rao took office, with Dr Manmohan Singh as minister of Finance, he asked for a note on how to handle the foreign exchange crisis, including the demands of the IMF. The requested note was carried past the usual bureaucracy straight to the Finance Minister. Mr Ahluwalia's recollection is that the Prime Minister accepted the recommendations on the basis that, if they worked, he would be acknowledged; if not Dr Singh would be held responsible. The Prime Minister's assent meant that the proposals were implemented. However, the manner of it meant that prime ministerial authority did not extend to a sustained campaign of reform. But it did lead to continuity in policy. Following the fall of the Rao government, ministers in later governments followed the direction of the limited reforms introduced under him. This was described by Mr Ahluwalia as a «strong consensus on weak reforms».

Drawing from his experience as an economic adviser, ministry secretary, member and finally deputy chair of the Planning Commission, Mr Ahluwalia concludes the book with observations on a set of long running, well known but unresolved policy problems. Many are in human services and agriculture. He suggests specific options. However, he sees also a need for system changes in the public sector. These include building enhanced skills in policy work and improved use of technical expertise. He sees as particularly important improved coordination between agencies and levels of government. Bringing in people laterally, as he himself joined the service, would help. But his account of policy development suggests that ways of improving civil service performance from within may be just as important.

From his time with the Unique Identification Authority of India Ram Sewak Sharma brings a complementary perspective. He too explores the longish gestation period for implemented policies, the layered factors supporting progress and the need for persistence. He also reflects on his own experience in using computers in local administration and the usefulness of his own skills in solving problems in coding. Mr Sharma highlights the relevance to the project of the role of contractors and state agencies. He shows also the relevance of the willingness of state administrations to use applications supported by a unique identification number. In particular, Mr Sharma demonstrates how an agency could deliver its mission with staff from the private sector as well as from the civil service; and gain acceptance for its product as agencies learned how they could use it.

The Authority was explicitly hybrid. When Nandan Nilekani, who began work as chair in 2009, sought a Director General, he looked for a «maverick bureaucrat» — someone who could lead a mixed team of technologists, problem solvers and managers but within a public sector framework. Ideas could come from anyone but decisions would be entered in civil service files. Ministers would make the final decisions.

The task was to provide every citizen and resident with the opportunity to acquire a unique identifier. At Mr Nilekani's insistence this turned out to be a randomised set of numbers. Mr Sharma had at first wanted a card. A stand-off was avoided by agreement that a card would have been the body but the number was the soul. In this way the two melded entrepreneurial creativity with effective management. In this way too, but not without further struggles as external recruits and seconded civil servants learned to accommodate each other, they enabled the Authority to create *Aadhar* (foundation) numbers for more than 1.25 billion people (and more since the book was published).

The technology strategy was simple: create a platform with a single objective and function. Aim for simplicity in design: «solve once»; replicate as appropriate. Existing data bases on the identity of citizens were regarded as too inconsistent to allow aggregation. This strategy depended on problem solving by teams of highly skilled coders. Nonetheless the path to solutions and possible further uses was iterative. As the work proceeded it was decided to use biometric identifiers — iris and fingerprint scans — and include private organisation in those enrolling citizens in the programme. Eliminating duplicate enrolments (and assuring sceptics that this could be done) was a major effort.

However, while putting the programme into operation was a technical challenge, battles for approval and legitimacy were no less hard. Politically it included opposition from within the UPA Cabinet, from a parliamentary committee, from opposition political parties and from civil society. There was also opposition within the civil service. Mr Sharma discusses grounds advanced from many directions but argues that most were capable of resolution. The programme itself collected minimal data. However, questions of security breaches, data aggregation and misuse, surveillance, privacy invasion, and social exclusion continued to be raised. Following legal action, mandated use of *Aadhaar* numbers was restricted to official agencies. But as making presentation of *Aadhaar* numbers as a condition of service expanded, along with other sources of identification, problems of access to services remained. Later legislation made use of numbers for access to private services voluntary.

What pulled *Aadhaar* through came from an unexpected source. After the election in 2014, which brought Prime Minister Modi to office, there were fears that the programme would be scrapped. Mr Modi and the BJP had opposed it. The Prime Minister changed his view after hearing in direct

discussions with Mr Nilekani and Mr Sharma about the administrative and service functions *Aadhaar* could facilitate. Mr Nilekani's discussion was carefully arranged. Mr Sharma's came when he took an opportunity, for which he received a reprimand, for direct discussion with the prime minister. As the prime minister reviewed ministry programmes Mr Sharma raised options for digital applications. The prime minister asked about monitoring civil service attendance digitally. Mr Sharma replied that he had already used *Aadhaar* to introduce such a system for a state administration. With the expansion by the Modi government of digitally enabled DBT schemes *Aadhaar* secured a continuing place in the instruments of government.

Overall, the two authors discuss how they and their colleagues developed proposals with far reaching impacts, negotiated obstacles within and outside government, secured government endorsement and put final decisions into effect. Probably neither expects that theirs will be the last word. But there are good grounds for arguing that their accounts will be of continuing relevance. As competing prescriptions for economic growth, accelerated employment generation and improvements in the life chances of all citizens are considered in future years Mr Ahluwalia's book will be one for thoughtful scholars and policy process participants to turn to. So too will Mr Sharma's book as digital applications transform not only delivery of government services but also the basis on which economic and social life takes place and value, public and private, is created. In discussing how they approached difficult policy and management problems the authors have written books that provoke thought about how difficult and continuing problems can and should be approached.