

**Anil Chaturvedi, District Administration : The Dynamics of Discord, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1988, pp. 185, Rs. 150.**

Public agencies now play an extremely important role both in the areas of governance and regulation as also in social and economic development. The present study tries to explore the nature of their inter-relationships through the perceptions of district level officials of four government departments, namely, public works, irrigation, police and the magistracy, as also to assess their effectiveness and ability to coordinate their efforts, particularly in handling natural calamities. The analysis is based on semi-structured interviews of 217 government officials spread over four districts of Uttar Pradesh. Two of these districts are disaster prone while the other two are less so. The field work was conducted between 1981 and 1983.

Unlike other areas of organizational study, research on inter-organizational relationship is still in an exploratory stage marked by scarcity in tested theories and dependable methods of measurement. While in the design of his questionnaire the author has been influenced by Hall et al's studies, the study design as a whole tries to posit the problem in a triad of which the 'environment' and 'organization' arms constitute two variables, which the author seeks to control, to make the third variable, (inter-organizational network) amenable to study and analysis. In studying the inter-organizational relationship the author follows the power-field approach in which an organization is seen as existing in a force field—the forces emanating from three sources, resource, domain and regulation. It is hypothesized that an

organization tries to arrive at a dynamic balance with its force field either instinctively or intelligently. Not only do the three bases of power influence the organization, they also exert influence on one another. Inter-organizational relationship thus becomes a power game between sets of organizations guided primarily by self-interest, and characterised by competition and cooperation.

The power field approach assumes that inter-organizational relationships constitute a process of entering into a dynamic balance with the environment. If the power field is balanced, the internal dynamics of the organization tends to be balanced also. More often than not, however, the power fields are distorted with one of the bases of power becoming much more dominant than the other. In such an eventuality, the interest of the organization gets deflected towards the more developed power base.

So far as the public agencies are concerned, their domains are clearly prescribed by the mandated agency. So one should normally expect that in the sphere of public organizations domain related conflicts would not be too many. But the fact is that changing environment exerts myriad pressures, and over the years an asymmetry develops between the mandated behaviour pattern and new pulls exerted by the environment. No where is it more apparent than in the office of the magistracy. Apart from domain, resource dependence is another source of conflict. The dynamics of resource exchange thus becomes a key element in the study of inter-organization dynamics. Still another crucial element is dependence on third party mediation. One can hypothesize that, higher the degree of mistrust, the greater the likelihood that regulation will be seen as the only

mechanism which can bring about coordination between the agencies.

Again, when an organization identifies a positive need for interaction, invests considerable energy to ensure that not only present, but future goals of interaction, are achieved, employs various formal, informal and even multiple means to ensure communication and commitment to decisions, and treats conflict as a mutually resolvable problem, inter-organizational relationships grows on a healthy base. On the other hand, taking decisions unilaterally, guarding information, communicating only through formal notes, memos and files, going through motions of interaction because superior authority demands it, and treating conflicts as intractable and mutually irresolvable are hallmarks of a pathological state. And that is the reality of public organization interaction in this country. Under this condition, it is but natural to infer that the concerned organization not only does not accept interdependence, but energetically resists it.

Let us now turn to the relationship among the members of the action set of the study. So far as the district magistrate is concerned, the whole administration in the districts hovers around him. But still his role and authority is not without ambivalence. Take the relationship between the police and the district magistrate for example. Law and order administration is an area of dual control which historically has remained an area of irritation compounded by the tension between the two service cadres they represent. In the case of relationship between say, administration and irrigation, it is not domain overlap, but resource dependence that dictates the relationship. While the revenue department harbours a suspicion that irrigation department sponsors projects to grab funds, the irrigation department suffers from a

feeling of unnecessary dependence on the revenue department for both 'access to government' (i.e., secretariat) and requisitioning of land for vital projects.

Among the organisations studied by the author, the weakest relationships seem to be between the public works department and the police on the one hand, and public works department and the department of irrigation on the other. Both these departments seem to ignore the former whose power has continuously eroded in recent times.

From the empirical findings of the author, it appears that, no member of the action set willingly accepts interdependence. Shared goals are either ignored or recognised under pressure from outside. While the objective situation enforces some degree of interdependence in various ways through domain overlap or resource dependence, the reluctance to recognise this interdependence creates tensions which soon degenerates into personality based conflicts. These, in turn, foment mistrust and promote a tendency towards aggressive boundary maintenance and belittling the work of others.

A basic anomaly that characterises the relationships of the departments studied at the district level is that while the larger system expects them to cooperate and coordinate their actions, the departments themselves do not sufficiently accept interdependence. Chaturvedi finds corroborative evidence to Mohit Bhattacharya's findings that, although the District Collector is supposed to be the eyes and ears of the government and the focal point through whom information about field administration should pass through to the state headquarters, and vice versa, normally the territorial units of the functional departments are upward looking rather than lateral looking.

The author also observes that the departments do indicate a positive shift in their approach towards each other and towards the need for cooperation when environmental pressures like flood or drought compel them to interact. Yet, because of the intermittent nature of that pressures, the shift is generally limited to cognition. However, it is not just the recognition of interdependence which is the problem, but also the means to manage it. Very interestingly, in response to the question how collaboration between the departments could be improved, the inevitable response was that the district magistrate should coordinate.

From all this the author concludes that, 'if a high performance pressure could be maintained through demands for joint accountability from the departments, and if accountability for obtaining results in the district were to develop on all the departments involved, and future allocation of resources made contingent upon the results achieved by the district as a whole, perhaps that will lead to better cooperative action and better supportive relationships'.

The author also draws attention to another more insidious implication of the crisis in the relationship and leadership in the districts surveyed. As the system continues to be immersed in unresolved conflict, it develops an insensitivity towards those stakeholders for whose benefits the system was created in the first place. When these stakeholders find their needs neglected, and the system itself is inaccessible to them, they begin to rely on their political representatives not only to voice their needs, but also to intercede on their behalf. 'To a very great extent the initiation of

interference in the working of the departments by political representatives of the people can be attributed to a lack of effectiveness of the system to enter to their needs. . . The power of the political representative is directly proportional to the extent that communication is absent between the bureaucratic system and its clients.'

The theme of inter-departmental cooperation, or lack of it, is not a new theme in public administration though the attempt to develop an organizational theoretical approach is somewhat new. Without detracting from the merit of the book which is based on honest and perceptive field work, one wonders whether given the limitations of the study, given the paucity of testable hypotheses, somewhat free flowing unstructured interviews, and low frequency of the responses in relation to the structured questionnaire (which the author has so painstakingly sought to measure statistically), the work can be rated as a significant contribution to organization theory. So far as the present reviewer is concerned, it is not the statistical tables or measures of statistical significance, but the qualitative evaluation of the responses that have increased the worth of the study. Yet it seems, the author has wavered between his behavioural training and social science perception. This is evident in the tension that runs through the whole length of the book and leads him to conclude, in a rather unsubstantiated manner that 'the problem of coordination, although based on structural and systemic deficiencies, are mainly perpetuated by the rivalries between the personnel involved.'

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