

Understanding Public Administration: Contemporary Approaches

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Abstract

Several fields in social sciences such as Public Administration are characterised by the diversity of approaches to study the phenomena critical to their disciplinary foci. Understanding the complexity of the subject of public administration and political process in real terms is not an easy task. For that, it needs to be studied from all possible methodological and analytical frameworks to get proper insight of its problems in order to bring suitable solutions. Accordingly, with a perspective to study the multiplicity of dimensions of a subject critically and realistically, the diversity of methods along with techniques and approaches (traditional, modern and contemporary) were evolved over a period of time. These differing approaches, over the years, also reflect the changing priorities, value systems and conceptual innovations that go into the constant reinvention of the discipline. As such, approaches are the methods of investigation and critical examination of the evolution, themes, foci and overall structure of a subject. That way, the major approaches to the study of public administration are classified into three main categories of traditional, modern and contemporary approaches. Initially, the first two approaches were quite helpful in the study of the subject when it was in the stage of infancy and there was not much of complexity and inter-disciplinarity in it. However, as and as the fields of enquiries started becoming wide-ranging, complex and inter-disciplinary in nature, the traditional and modern approaches were faced with their inherent limitations, giving way to the contemporary approaches. Accordingly, in this paper a detailed account of the contemporary theoretical explorations in the emerging trends in Public Administration is provided.

Amongst the contemporary theoretical explorations in the emerging trends in Public Administration, development management and new public service stand out prominently as conceptual categories. This paper covers two significant theoretical constructs of Development Management and NPS which represent important landmarks in the post-New Public Management phase of the theoretical progression of Public Administration as a discipline. However, the ideological locale as well as the functional objective of the two stand in sharp contrast to each other. Indeed, development management and NPS have been able to set new trends in understanding the institutional machinery as well as functional dynamism of public administration in current times.

Keywords: *Approaches, Methods, Development management, New public service*

Introduction

Public Administration as one of the fields of social sciences is characterised by the diversity of approaches to study the phenomena critical to its disciplinary foci. Theoretically, an approach “consists of a criterion of selection – criteria employed in selecting the problems or questions to consider and in selecting the data to bring to bear; it consists of standards governing the inclusion and exclusion of questions and data” (Dyke, 1962, p. 114). Further, the multiplicity of dimensions of a subject and the perspectives through which they can be studied act as the fertile ground for the evolution of different approaches in various fields of knowledge. For instance, referring to the subject of Political Science, Isaak (1969) writes so succinctly:

An approach, in political enquiry, is a general strategy for studying political phenomenon. Approaches are formulated and used for a number of reasons. They can function at both heuristic and explanatory levels. That is, an approach might provide the framework for, or even take the form of, a model or conceptual scheme, or it might serve as the impetus for the development of theory of politics. (p. 157)

At the same time, with the change of focus or axes through which a phenomenon is going to be studied, a subtle transformation in the approach to study that phenomenon takes place. It is for this reason that the social sciences experience a rich variety of approaches of study.

As a field of enquiry, varying approaches have been adopted by different scholars to study and explicate the various dimensions of Public Administration. These approaches, in fact, mirror the dominant paradigmatic prisms through which the scholars have attempted to look into the theoretical structures and functional dynamics of the subject. Differing approaches, over the years, also reflect the changing priorities, value systems and conceptual innovations that go into the constant reinvention of the discipline. As such, approaches are the methods of investigation and critical examination of the evolution, themes, foci and overall structure of a subject. That way, the major approaches to the study of public administration are classified into three main categories of traditional, modern and contemporary approaches. Initially, the first two approaches were quite helpful in the study of the subject when it was in the stage of infancy and there was not much of complexity and inter-disciplinarity in it. However, as and as the fields of enquiries started becoming wide-ranging, complex and inter-disciplinary in nature, the traditional and modern approaches were faced with their inherent limitations, thereby giving way to the contemporary approaches. Amongst the contemporary theoretical explorations in the emerging trends in Public Administration, development management and new public service stand out prominently as conceptual categories. In this paper a detailed account of these two significant theoretical constructs is provided.

Development Management

Conceptually, development management represents the generational transformation in both the idea of development as well as its administration in the times dominated by the neo-liberal perspective of life. It is, in fact, the reinvention of the idea of development administration that has remained critical in conceptualizing and administering the processes and objectives of holistic development in the post-colonial societies. The move towards recasting the notion of development administration into the mould of development management has been necessitated primarily by reconceptualising the conventional idea of development into the contemporary discourse of sustainable development, on the one hand, and elevation of the traditional institutions and processes of administration into more focused and effective tools of management, on the other hand. Thus, development management

signals the recasting of the long-standing idea of development administration as per the contemporary needs of the society. Development management indeed seeks to re-strategize the objective of both short term as well as long term goals of society, and evolve appropriate management tools and techniques to achieve the desired objectives. In present times, the concept of development has been argued to give space to the idea of new public service which has become the latest fad in administrative sciences.

Though development management has been defined variously, in doing so, it is pertinent to first explicate the connotations of the terms 'development' and 'management', before arriving at the meaning of development management. As a concept in Public Administration, development is generally understood as the positive transformations brought about in different walks of life of people in a society. Such an idea of development was almost universally acceptable during the decades of rapid socio-economic transformations in the development societies. The essence of such a notion of development was to make provision for the basic needs of the life of people in order to make their life enjoyable, if not affluent. But with the emergence of a number of ecological side-effects of the processes of conventional development, presently, the term implies to that which lasts or in other words, is sustainable development. Likewise, with the cutting-edge advancements in the nature, tools and techniques of administration, the conventional administrative processes have become more and more scientific and precise, giving way to their recasting into management. In sum, thus, development management is defined as 'end-to-end management of the delivery chain for sustainable development.'

Development management may be distinguished from development administration in three distinct ways. Firstly, theoretical overtones of the term 'development' in the two differ drastically. While in development administration, it is understood in the most comprehensive sense to include all the probable aspects of the life of people, it is conceived in a very narrow sense of just delivery of services in the discourse of development management with the social objectives almost totally forgotten. Secondly, the primary objective of the performance of managerial activities in the two also differ substantially. For instance, development administration focuses on bringing about a holistic transformation in the life of people positively, whereas in development

management, the prime objective of meeting people's basic needs comprehensively has now apparently been overshadowed by environmental protection concerns. Lastly, the scales of assessing the operational dynamics of administrative activities have shifted from effectiveness, change-orientation and participation orientation to that of economy, efficiency and profitability in the delivery of goods and services. In a nutshell, development management manifests the contextualization of development administration in the framework of neo-liberal economic policies advocated by the international donor agencies, on the one hand, and incorporation of the theoretical innovations in the administrative sciences in the current times, on the other hand.

The theoretical roots of development management may be located in the neo-liberal political discourses arguing for the withdrawal of state from the overstretched welfare related activities that it had acquired for itself in the post-war period. Politically while these policies resulted in the radical recasting of the political and administrative systems particularly in developing countries, administratively, they led to the demand for institutional pluralism in the administrative structure of these countries. The recasting of political systems obviously led to the externally-induced policies of liberalization, privatization and globalization, whereas the administrative discourse got increasingly dominated by the creative theoretical interventions underscored by public choice theories and reinvention of administrative processes and products. As a result, the hitherto notion of development activities being all inclusive (social, economic, political and administrative) was replaced by the market induced activity of delivery of goods and services. Moreover, such goods and services needn't be delivered in a monopolistic manner by the government agencies. Rather, there must be institutional pluralism in which market and the private players would play a critical role in delivery of services. Thus, development management turned out to be the perfect articulation of the new conception of perceiving the needs of the life of people and the machinery and processes of fulfilling those needs.

The functional dynamics of development management are underlined by a number of interrelated steps. It begins by setting an early agenda of development that has to reflect the running theme of the entire exercise. At this

stage, the focus of management needs to be on visualizing efficient and effective strategies to achieve the ultimate objective. After strategizing the executive actions, a comprehensive framework of assigning responsibilities and stipulating rewards for delivery of objectives become sine qua non in order to make the system operational. Once the system gets going, it becomes imperative on the leader to ensure that all types of logistical as well as managerial support are available to the workers engaged at critical points of the management chain. An important attribute of development management is to take every task in hand as a team work so that maximum output could be obtained by minimum inputs. In such a team work, the involvement of community also gains salience in view of the constant review of the processes and products of the exercise. That way, development management could become the mainstay of administering development in complex situations being witnessed in contemporary times.

In sum, development management has come to symbolize a complete turnaround in the conventional discourse on development administration. It has not only dislocated the vision of holistic development that the developing countries cherished and sought to achieve through the concerted strategy of development administration, but also reoriented the nature and ethos of the machinery that has to undertake the task of carrying out such development. In a way, metamorphosis of development administration into development management signals the withering away of socialist and welfare-oriented perspectives of administration in the developing countries and their replacement by the neo-liberal concerns of placing everything at the doorstep of market forces. While such a reinvention in the administrative system of the developed western societies may be an acceptable phenomenon, it would probably not be the best way of taking care of the developmental needs of the common people in the developing countries where the toiling masses still depend upon the government for meeting many of the basic needs of their life. So, what development management seeks to establish may be appropriate for certain societies patterned on neo-liberal principles and having reasonable level of development, its prescriptions might not be plausible option to be emulated in the developing countries.

New Public Service

The concept of New Public Service (NPS) has been evolved by J. V. Denhardt and R. B. Denhardt (2007) to reorient the focus of conventional administrative systems in order to make them better equipped to meet the challenges of administering the growing complexities of the modern societies. NPS may be considered as an ideological antidote to the hegemonic assertion of the neo-liberal perspective and the only plausible framework of constituting administrative systems in the contemporary times. In other words, it is a strong rejoinder to the universalistic aspirations of the free-market forces that have sought to reverse the democratic and socialistic credentials, albeit the focus of the public administration in the majority, if not all, of the developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. NPS is considered probably as a subtle effort at reintroducing the ethos and values of New Public Administration that have been ruthlessly eroded in the wake of the consolidation of neo-liberal economic agenda in almost all parts of the world. Amidst the chanting of market mantra by all and sundry, NPS argues for resetting the agenda of administrative reforms in order to make public administration responsive to the needs of the people instead of serving the interests of the market.

In putting forward the notion of NPS what Denhardt and Denhardt (2007) do is in fact an argument in favour of such a reorientation in the nature and functional dynamics of administrative system that it becomes the mainstay of serving the interests of the common people. In other words, the proponents of NPS seek to provide certain functional indicators to reshape the public administrative system so that it truly becomes a servant of the public rather than remaining a mute spectator of the free play of the predatory market forces to devour the public interests. Hence, instead of the prevalent focus on making public administration a facilitator of the market forces in delivering goods and services to the people, NPS asks for an activist role of the public administration to serve the interests of the common people rather than just playing second fiddle to the market forces. At the same time, such a role can be played by the public administration only when it is sure of its vision and mission of pursuing public interests rather than being a mere facilitator to the serving of the interests of the big corporations.

In calling for reorienting the ideological focus of public administration, NPS

does not seem to undermine the universal core values of efficiency, economy and effectiveness of the administrative processes. Its focus is mainly on putting the people first in the entire process of public administration in such a way that public interest does not suffer at the cost of market forces in any eventuality. Further, it argues for the fullest use of the administrative and managerial innovations and creativities so that the administrative activities reflect the contemporary state of things in the discipline. However, in making the administrative processes efficient and economic, NPS does not seem to compromise with the objective of effectiveness in delivering the goods and services to the people. That way, it seeks to bring the clock back by reinforcing the identity of people as citizens rather than customers. Such a conceptualization of the beneficiaries of the public services is quite reassuring in view of the fact that citizens of a country are entitled for certain rights and privileges to be provided to them by government agencies without minding the loss or gain arising out of them. But in the conceptualization of people as customers, the profit motive of the service provider becomes the foremost concern which quite often makes the agencies breach the norms of civility, humanity and democracy.

With the understanding of people as citizens with sovereign rights and entitlements, the administrative system is expected to work in an ambience of responsibility. It needs to be held accountable for whatever it does to the public institutions as well as people at large. For instance, in democratic societies like India the elected government in the form of ministers and other functionaries is put to scrutiny for its performance every five years. And, if it is found to be wanton in discharging its responsibilities as per the expectations of the people, it is simply voted out and replaced with another set of representatives. Hence, NPS argues for a paradigm shift in the accountability structure of the administrative systems in such a way that the expectations and aspirations of the public bodies including the basic law of the land or constitution are given priority over the corporate and other private interests. This seems to be quite an important reinforcement on the part of the NPS, given the fact that the current phase of corporate and other private interests claim hegemony over public interests.

The crux of the theoretical hypothesis of NPS resembles to that of the New

Public Administration to some extent, especially with those arguing for privileging people over all other concerns of administrative efficiency or increasing the productivity of an organization. Given that the NPS has been a subtle protest against the overstretched intrusion of managerialism in the realm of what has apparently been something made to serve the interests of the common people, the humanistic and democratic credentials of this argument is quite obvious. Its pursuits at snatching the mainstream public administration from the clutches of management and econometrics naturally fortify its argument for relocating the subject into the lap of political science. It indeed testifies the dictum that history repeats itself, given the action replay of the sixties and seventies, so far as dislocations and relocations of public administration as a discipline are concerned. The only marked contrast between the thrust of new public administration and NPS is probably that while the former sought the broader transformations in the discipline, in latter, the object of reformulation has been the public services only. Nonetheless, NPS heralds a new line of argumentation on the apparent nature and scope of administration amidst the war cry to make it as much non-political and entrepreneurial as possible.

Notwithstanding the newer perspectives thrown by the NPS on the nature and objectives of public services in contemporary times, it has been subjected to a number of scathing critiques. In this regard, two theoretical foundations of the NPS have been questioned by the theorists. Firstly, it has been argued that public services are a component of the administrative system of a country whose overhauling in a revolutionary sense would not be possible without resetting the foundations of the political system as well. On this count, the formulations provided by the proponents of the NPS appear to be paradoxical in nature as they argue for formation of a new public service without recasting the foundational context in which such a new service is to be created. Secondly, NPS does not seem to break new grounds in the theoretical formulations in public administration as most, if not all, of the things it prescribes have already been argued for at different places and times in the evolution of the discipline of public administration. However, despite such limitations, NPS surely provides a refreshing perspective on the contemporary phase of public administration.

Conclusion

Development Management and NPS represent two important landmarks in the post-New Public Management phase of the theoretical progression of Public Administration as a discipline. Drawing their conceptual lineages from the theoretical constructs such as development administration and New Public Administration respectively, these two streams of conceptualizations have sought to contextualize those the orizations with reference to the contemporary advances in the discipline. However, the ideological locale as well as the functional objective of the two stands in sharp contrast to each other. Indeed, development management and NPS have been able to set new trends in understanding the institutional machinery as well as functional dynamism of public administration in current times.

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