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**The Politics of HRM in India****Dr. Shilpa Mishra***Guest Lecturer, UIM, RDVV Jabalpur MP***Abstract**

The political climate can have a great affect on any business and subsequent business departments such as human resource management. If the government decides on spending cuts or increasing taxes on businesses then this will dramatically affect the running of the business. Department budgets may have to be trimmed or the department may even have to be completely scrapped. This study illustrates the fundamental importance of a political understanding in order to improve HRM in both public and private organizations. It complements studies that have found a statistical relationship between public staff management and economic growth by presenting a case study of India, using the strategic human resource management (SHRM) model as a framework. There are several reasons why HRM in the India civil service has stagnated, notably unfamiliarity with HRM models, and the French administrative heritage. But the fundamental reason is India's political system, where real power resides in the Palace, and where political actors are reluctant to take bold initiatives. Thus a focus on the management level is currently misplaced, and fundamental political action harnessing the authority of the Palace without disempowering other political actors is needed. The study implies that a political analysis is sometimes a prerequisite for improving HRM in both public and private organizations.

**Key Word :-** HRM, civil, political

By now most HR scholars are familiar with the bold contention that the way organizations manage their staff can improve their performance (Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Guest, 1997; Huselid, 1995). But in another scholarly quarter, an even bolder contention has emerged, one that we seek to explore in this article: that the way governments manage their public servants can improve the performance of an entire national economy. It goes against what was until recently the received wisdom. Throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s, the hugely influential IMF and World Bank had promulgated the view that governments hindered rather than helped economic growth - 'No government or little

government was better than big government', as one of the World Bank's staff put it (Chaudhry, 1994: 199) – and they had consequently exhorted their sovereign clients in the developing world to abandon grandiose capital projects that crowded out private investment, stop wrapping investors up in red tape, and so on. But in the mid-1990s a more indulgent view emerged. It contradicted the 'minimal state' view by emphasizing positive actions like creating sound budgetary institutions; the 1997 World Development Report (World Bank, 1997) was its first substantial manifestation.

It was in this changed policy context that researchers working under World Bank auspices began to bring forward evidence

of a positive connection between governance and growth. A 35-country study uncovered a significant positive relationship between merit-based selection of civil servants (which WDR 1997 had also emphasized) along with rewarding, predictable career progression on the one hand, and growth on the other (Evans and Rauch, 1999; Rauch and Evans, 2000). A little later, Kaufmann and Kraay, using a new 175-country dataset and different definitions, agreed with Evans and Rauch (Kaufmann et al., 1999), although they went on to qualify their view by developing an explanation of those economies which were growing but were governed badly (Kaufmann and Kraay, 2002). There could, it seemed, be growth without good governance. The message was that governments should not rely on the rising tide of prosperity to lift the governance boat but should take deliberate steps to improve governance.

Such correlational, cross-sectional studies have methodological limitations that are familiar to anyone who has followed the HRM-and-organizational-performance debate. Their findings are broad rather than deep, identifying patterns across a range of countries but not explaining the character of any single country, even though we know that the outcomes of government reform programmes depend on complex combinations of many factors, almost none of which applies uniformly across countries (Campos and Esfahani, 2000: 222; Nelson, 1990; Whitehead, 1990). They stop short of understanding how the relationship they have uncovered actually operates, making it hard to extract policy prescriptions from them to offer to governments (though Kaufmann and Kraay do make suggestions about

promoting mechanisms for external accountability, participatory voice and transparency as a way of dealing with the problem of 'state capture' by particular interest groups.

We point out these limitations not to dismiss the studies that we have just discussed, but because we want to complement them. Where those studies are broad, shallow and quantitative, ours is narrow, deep and qualitative. Thus we hope that our study will give an insight into how the relationship between effective government and economic development actually works.

Do governments help or hinder growth? Throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s, the IMF and World Bank appeared to believe it was the latter, exhorting their sovereign clients to abandon grandiose capital projects that crowded out private investment, stop wrapping investors up in red tape, and so on. It was a period where the dominant view was 'That no government or little government was better than big government' (Chaudhry, 1994: 199), as one of the World Bank's staff put it.

The 1997 World Development Report (World Bank, 1997) was the first substantial manifestation of a more indulgent view, one that contradicted the 'minimal state' position by emphasizing positive actions like creating sound budgetary institutions. Emboldened by this policy sea change, researchers working under Bank auspices began to bring forward evidence of a positive connection between governance and growth. Evans and Rauch came first, with a 35-country study that uncovered a significant positive relationship between

merit-based selection of civil servants (which WDR 1997 had also emphasized) and rewarding, predictable career progression on the one hand, and growth on the other (Evans and Rauch, 1999; Rauch and Evans, 2000). A little later, Kaufmann and Kraay, using a new 175-country dataset and different definitions, agreed with Evans and Rauch (Kaufmann et al., 1999), although they went on to qualify their view by developing an explanation of those economies which were growing but were governed badly (Kaufmann and Kraay, 2002). There could, it seemed, be growth without good governance. Governments should not rely on the rising tide of prosperity to lift the governance boat but should take deliberate steps to improve governance.

Such studies have familiar methodological limitations. Their correlational, cross-sectional design means that their findings are broad rather than deep, identifying patterns across a range of countries but not explaining the character of any single country, even though we know that reform outcomes depend on complex combinations of many factors, almost none of which apply uniformly across countries (Campos and Esfahani, 2000: 222; Nelson, 1990; Whitehead, 1990). They stop short of understanding how the relationship they have uncovered actually operates, making it hard to extract policy prescriptions from them to offer to governments (though Kaufmann and Kraay do make suggestions about promoting mechanisms for external accountability, participatory voice and transparency as a way of dealing with the problem of 'state capture' by particular interest groups.) Both limitations are evident when we consider India, our subject, for which Evans and Rauch's data

is limited to a questionnaire filled in by two unidentified 'experts', while Kaufmann and Kraay's is based on pre-existing survey data from the Economist Intelligence Unit, Freedom House and the like.

We point out these limitations not to rubbish these studies, but because we want to complement them. Where their studies are broad, shallow and quantitative, ours is narrow, deep and qualitative. Thus we hope that our study will give an insight into how the relationship between effective government and economic development actually works.

### **Strategic HRM**

We focus on just one of the deliberate steps that governments can take: improving human resource management. This is much the same as Evans and Rauch's focus, although narrower than Kaufmann and Kraay's, for whom government effectiveness was only one of five governance elements. But whereas Evans and Rauch went back to Weber (1968) for their model, implying that we have learnt nothing about staff management since Weber left us in 1920, we have preferred to derive ours from the body of work on human resource management (HRM) that has grown up in the last fifty years, and in particular from the development of the strategic HRM (SHRM) model. It gives an account of how staff management contributes to achieving an organization's purposes (such as profitability where private companies are concerned), and we have strong empirical evidence, subject to the usual methodological limitations, that applying it does actually make a difference (Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Delery and Doty, 1996;

Guest, 1997; Huselid, 1995; Patterson et al., 1997; Tsui et al., 1997). HR practitioners and scholars, a somewhat downtrodden sub-profession only 15 years ago, have acquired a sudden self-confidence, reflected in a leading scholar's claim that the favoured HR practices have a universal validity (Pfeffer, 1998). Translating all this into the language of governance, it offers governments a way to improve their effectiveness, and in so doing achieve their overall purposes, including facilitating economic development.

### **The SHRM Model**

The SHRM model is by now extensively documented on both sides of the Atlantic (seminal texts include Beer et al., 1985; Fombrun et al., 1984; and Guest, 1989). Despite its current competitors, such as the so-called 'resource-based view' (Kamoche, 1996), we judge that it remains the dominant normative model, given the powerful theoretical and empirical support which it has obtained, and which we outline below. We have chosen to analyse selected features of it in detail, rather than to attempt a more comprehensive but inevitably superficial analysis.

While some writers reject the idea of a monolithic model, distinguishing, for instance, between 'hard' and 'soft' HRM (Storey, 1995) or 'lean' and 'team' production (Appelbaum and Batt, 1994), there are several features on which most writers agree. Probably chief among them is the notion of strategic integration: 'All definitions of human resource management agree on one point: that there must be a link between a firm's strategy and ... the human resource' (Purcell, 1995: 63). Strategic integration means aligning

staff management systems with organizations' overall strategic objectives and with each other (Anthony et al., 1993; Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Fombrun et al., 1984; Guest, 1989; Wright and McMahan, 1992). While it has emerged from the normative HR literature, there is some empirical support for the implication that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts (Huselid, 1995; Macduffie, 1995). Indeed Becker and Gerhart (1996) suggest in their review of the performance debate that it is what they call the 'strategic architecture' rather than individual HR practices that has a universal validity.

Strategic integration implicitly changes the HR specialist's relationship with line managers. The specialist is supposed to design the HR systems that will align with strategic objectives, while the manager is supposed to carry them out. Guest (1989: 51) observes that almost all writers say that HR must be managed by line managers: 'HRM is too important to be left to the personnel managers.' Thus at the strategic level we concentrate on the twin questions of 'strategic integration' and 'line manager ownership' of HR.

### **Recruitment and Selection, and Performance Management**

We also address two HR operational activities, employee selection and individual performance management and appraisal. We have chosen them because:

1. We have good evidence for their effect on organizational performance. The evidence for employee selection is particularly robust (Schmidt and Hunter, 1977). The evidence for performance management is also robust, although oblique: it documents the effect of objective setting and feedback on

performance, both central features of performance management (Walters, 1995).

2. Both are relevant to Evans and Rauch's research. Employee selection is one of the two 'Weberian' elements on which they focus, and performance management is implicit in their second element, predictable career progression. Moreover, we have seen already that WDR 1997 emphasized merit-based selection, and it also appears in several of the surveys that Kaufmann and Kraay draw on.

3. We know from previous studies that there are substantial national differences in the practice of performance management. Countries as far apart as Denmark and Japan have resisted the Anglo Saxon model that focuses exclusively on the individual's performance (Brewster and Hegewisch, 1994; Love et al., 1994; Milliman et al., 1998).

Readers who are boggling at the apparent implication that the elaborate SHRM model and associated HRM practices are widely applied, or even applicable, in developing country governments should be reassured that the question of applicability is one which our study explicitly poses.

### **The Political Context of Reform**

Our case study focuses on public staff management in one developing country. Why India? Firstly, because developing an effective public administration, including staff management, in order to facilitate economic development is an explicit aim of the government's reform programme: 'India has undertaken reforms to ensure sustained economic growth, macro-economic stability, opening up to the global economy ... Their success

### **Methodology**

We have used a case study methodology for three reasons. First, it is especially appropriate to research on government, since in the nature of things each country has only one government to study, precluding the quantitative, multi-firm study that is the staple of the SHRM/performance literature (Yin, 1994). Second, Becker and Gerhart's review of that literature calls for 'deeper, qualitative research to complement the large-scale, multiple firm studies that are available' (1996: 796), a call that Guest (1997) has echoed. Third, as noted already, it complements the quantitative methodology used by Kaufmann and Kraay and Evans and Rauch.

The case data came from both primary and secondary sources. Using two methods sources of data collection increased the numerical representativeness of the findings allowed some triangulation of findings. Secondary data consisted of reasonably current government reports and other official publications, donor agency reports, and some academic publications. Primary data gathering in 2001 and 2002 in took the form of personal interviews and a focus group meeting. Secondary data comprised government reports and other documents, including the reports of two workshops, organised by the Civil Service Ministry and by a trade union, and the academic literature on India. The focus group brought together a heterogeneous group (in terms of age, sex, and job position) of junior civil servants, randomly sampled from a large population of part-time University students. An open invitation was sent to the population group via notice boards and a firm list of ? was drawn up. The rationale for using focus group data was to tap the perspective of a



‘junior’ level of employee in the civil service hierarchy.

Our main primary data-gathering method was interviews with key stakeholders (Burgoyne, 1994). A semi-structured format (Lee, 1999) was used, based on the themes outlined in the previous section (strategic integration, line manager ownership, employee selection and performance management). Interviews All interviews were conducted face-to-face and ranged in length lasted from one hour to one hour and a half sixty to ninety minutes. The two authors conducted the interviews jointly, with the exception of two interviews, which the first-named author conducted alone.

A nonprobability judgement sampling approach was used, targeting officials at the most senior levels. Our second approach was the face-to-face interview. Seven government officials were selected for interview, identified by one of the authors, who is familiar with the structure of the India civil service, as having a key responsibility for the design and operation of HRM systems inclusion in the study. In two cases, officials were accompanied by two subordinates.

As one of the authors is based in Mauritius and well acquainted with the network of senior officials in the Mauritian Civil Service, it was decided to aim for a 100% response rate by ensuring that all respondents were indeed interviewed. This non-probability ‘sampling’ approach was used, after consideration of time constraints (the first-named author being jointly involved in the interviewing process during a short visit to Mauritius) as well as of the research objective, being, to make a contribution to the theory and

not to seek numerical representativeness (as a wide-scale survey would, for instance).

In addition, we interviewed a member of the national executive of one of the largest trade unions representing civil servants, and an international consultant based in India who has conducted HRM projects with several Ministries. We also conducted a mixed gender focus group (Morgan, 1997) of junior civil servants from different Ministries to give the point of view of a lower level in the hierarchy. The semi-structured format based on identified themes was again used.

Data came from a focus group session held with a group of junior civil servants, giving the point of view of a lower level in the hierarchy; and from semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews, subsequently transcribed, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes each, with the following senior officials:

All but one interview, and also the focus group meeting, were conducted in French, and were taped and subsequently transcribed. An interview schedule was prepared to ensure that essentially similar data would be obtained from each respondent, although some degree of flexibility was also applied. All interviews were taped, transcribed. A content analysis was carried out in which interview and transcripts, our own interview notes data was categorised into emergent themes. Strategic integration, line management ownership, selection and performance management are the particular themes explored in this paper. and government reports and other documents were coded using the themes previously identified.

## Findings

The picture that we hope to paint is of a new government inheriting a stagnant, partly corrupt administration leavened by some able technocrats in senior positions, and relying on weak central authority and a standard but very slow-moving reform model as a vehicle for change, while a few technical ministries have moved ahead and introduced HRM initiatives of their own whose sustainability and transferability, however, are in doubt.

## Strategic Integration

We turn now to the first of the HRM elements on which our study concentrates. In a word, there is virtually no evidence of SHRM-style strategic integration in the civil service. There are favourable factors: the policies of the new government could be the basis for strategy, piecemeal though they are; there is some awareness of strategic management among central officials and in some technical line ministries; and the relative autonomy of line ministries makes it possible for them to develop their own strategies, as one of them was at pains to point out. But one searches in vain for the strategic elements: there is no HR strategy, and no conscious attempt to link individual HR activities such as recruitment and selection to an overall strategic plan which in any case does not exist (vertical integration) or to each other (horizontal integration).

What goes on instead is what ministries call 'gestion courante' or day-to-day management, pretty much what Tyson and Fell (1986) called the 'clerk of works' model of personnel administration. The more able technical ministries, such as Finance, Housing and, Public Works have taken professional initiatives, introducing

computerized HR information systems or performance appraisal. The less able ministries see themselves as fighting, and often sometimes losing, a battle to maintain basic integrity, with a demoralized, partly corrupt HR function which competent staff make it their business to get out of. Able and unable alike are pinned down by personnel files. To get a civil servant promoted, a ministry has to satisfy itself that there is a case, before referring it first to CSM and then to Finance. The whole thing takes up to three months, during which the anxious civil servant bombards the ministry with requests for an update ('you might have a couple of hundred a day' said one official, using dramatic exaggeration to make his point).

## Conclusion: The Politics of HRM

In this paper we have tried to understand why one developing country, India, has made so little progress in improving the way it manages its public servants. We have suggested that while the SHRM model has some relevance to its problems, ignorance of the model means that the effort of introducing it would be disproportionate, and would be at the expense of tackling India's fundamental problem, the institutional timidity of political actors which is not a personal failing but is a consequence of the way in which India politics has evolved. Rejecting the Beckett-like fatalism into which an analysis like ours might easily slide, we have suggested practical steps that political actors might take in this unpromising situation.

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