

The Post Office Paradox

A Case Study of the Block Level Education Bureaucracy

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Elementary education administrators at the block level primarily perceive themselves, or report themselves to be, disempowered cogs in a hierarchical administrative culture that renders them powerless. They refer to their own roles and offices as “post offices,” used simply for doing the bidding of higher authorities and ferrying messages between the top and bottom of the education chain. Using the case of education delivery, this paper attempts to probe an administrator’s perspective in resolving the implementation problem at the last mile and is based on detailed primary fieldwork in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh along with some quantitative surveys conducted in Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Himachal Pradesh. It endeavours to trace the “cognitive maps” of administrators by capturing how last mile public servants see themselves and their jobs, and how notions of job performance are internalised and interpreted within the administrative context of elementary education in India.

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Reams and reams of pages have been spent on characterising poor last mile governance in India. A casual glance at the news will frequently yield a story or two on the dysfunctional nature of our administrative system—misconduct, indifference, rent-seeking, bungling service delivery, front-line worker absenteeism; modern Indian public administration is plagued with the persistence of implementation failure. From policing to tax collection, our state apparatus is struggling to get things done. In response, Indian policy debate has been deeply engaged in discussions and articulations of solving the implementation problem.

1 Last Mile Implementation

Solutions to the implementation problem primarily focus on a range of tools and techniques aimed at disciplining the front line by ensuring that rules are followed and discretionary behaviour curbed. While the specific nature of these solutions can provide a litany of intimidating and baffling acronyms (from management talk to various government committee reports), the broader discussion can be characterised as traversing two dominant views on building state capacity. First, there is the view that technology-enabled business process reforms—from biometrics to sophisticated management information systems—can be deployed to strengthen state capacity through cheaper and better monitoring of implementing agents by making last mile transactions more transparent and tractable. According to this viewpoint, technology combined with required “Business Process Re-engineering” can serve as the foundation for creating an efficient and effective government.

A second view argues that technology alone cannot yield gains without adequate empowerment of the citizenry. This viewpoint understands implementation failure as a function of the power asymmetry between citizens and the state, which can be redressed by deepening democracy through the creation of rights and entitlements and ensuring that citizens have the space to place accountability claims on the state. According to rights advocates, more democracy is the key disciplining force that can ensure implementation by the state, premised on a clear and codified articulation of citizen’s socio-economic rights. Even as these differing perspectives jostle for policy space and attempt working together, a fact that often gets lost in this ideologically heated contestation is that each solution to the implementation problem requires implementation.

Very few solutions to the implementation problem provide helpful accounts on how to become embedded in the everyday

behaviour and practices of implementing agents. We know very little about how implementing agents understand, interpret and finally implement solutions. And inevitably when solutions fail to institutionalise, the debate circles back to implementation failure. It is our contention that resolving India's implementation failure conundrum requires a deeper, structural shift in administrative design and norms of functioning, which can in turn shift the way administrators see themselves and their roles. This requires reforms that bolster last mile cadres and their ability, authority and apparatus to understand, aggregate, and reflect on the local context of administration in their blocks and clusters.

Using the case of education delivery, this paper attempts to probe an administrator's perspective in resolving the implementation problem at the last mile. Drawing on frameworks of "cognitive maps" and worker motivation, this research aims to develop an analytical account of the everyday behaviours, understandings and practices of last mile implementing agents and examines what facilitates and sustains this behaviour. Our findings motivate an appreciation for how the organisational design of Indian public administration, at the last mile, can interact with the perceptions and practices of implementing agents to ultimately distort implementation of successful "solutions."

2 Cognitive Maps, Worker Motivation and Implementation Success

Our research questions are premised on the contention that any solution to the implementation problem will require the cognitive maps and attitudes of administrators to change. In this section, we draw on the current literature on state capacity, worker motivation, organisational design, and features of successful organisations to develop a framework within which to contextualise our analysis.

Mehta and Walton (2012) highlight the role of "cognitive maps"¹ in determining state capacity to implement in India. They define "cognitive maps" as discourses and rhetorical frameworks which structure how agents view themselves and others, particularly in the actions expected from others and considered "legitimate" for one-self. In their discussion on implementation, they hint at how a policymaker's cognitive map, in particular, the sceptical perspectives on an administrator's intentions can impact implementation capacity in concrete ways. They say:

A common elite perspective on the middle and front-line bureaucrats is lack of trust: the dominant cognitive map is that India's government workers are corrupt, unresponsive and caught up in distortionary local political and social networks. Teachers and nurses do not turn up to work, police officers insist on bribes, office bureaucrats push paper with no regard to real effects. This can lead to a self-enforcing arrangement in which front-line bureaucrats remain disempowered, and it becomes normative for them to follow these behaviours (Mehta and Walton 2012: p 11).

Our research aims to deep-dive into how last mile administrators enter into such "self-enforcing arrangements" of being apathetic demotivated paper-pushers. Rather than starting at the top through documenting how powerful policy actors

imagine a bureaucrat's motivations, we try to understand the cognitive maps of last mile administrators themselves.

Digging deeper into why many last mile administrators purport a discourse of demotivation and apathy requires concrete frameworks to investigate and influence worker motivation itself. Work motivation is defined as entailing psychological processes that direct, energise, and maintain action towards a job or task (Campbell and Pritchard 1976; Kanfer 1990). Recent scholarship stresses how worker motivation and morale assume significance in organisational success. In the field of public administration, scholars show the importance of two types of motivation in explaining the behaviour and productivity of public officials such as tax collectors (Khan et al 2014) and healthcare providers (Ashraf 2014). They find workers can be motivated through incentives, monetary rewards and outcomes. However, the literature highlights that pecuniary incentives are often insufficient due to the important role of intrinsic psychological factors and contextual influences on influencing worker motivation.

Theorists highlight two key exogenous determinants of intrinsic work motivation—goal-setting and job design. First, the way any organisation sets goals and monitors itself and its employees has major implications on productivity and performance. Within "monitoring," goal-setting—how goals and employee targets are tracked and articulated—assumes immense importance. Recent work on organisational behaviour internationally highlights how clear and cogent alignment of targets demonstrating individual employee success with larger organisational goals is fundamental for organisational success (Bloom and Van Reenen 2007). Second, the design and social context of organisations and jobs impact the motivation and behaviour of workers. Well-designed jobs meet three basic psychological needs for any employee: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci 2000). Autonomy implies the feeling of choice and discretion in one's job, competence refers to feeling capable and useful within one's organisation, and relatedness implies feelings of connectedness with clients and other co-workers. Theorists propose that when these three psychological needs are fulfilled, employees are more likely to be intrinsically motivated and internalise external organisational goals and objectives.

This paper investigates the phenomenon of implementation failure from the lens of everyday experiences and motivations of the last mile public servants themselves. Through our analysis, we attempt to trace the "cognitive maps" of administrators by capturing how last mile public servants see themselves and their jobs and how notions of job performance are internalised and interpreted within the administrative context of elementary education in India. We then demonstrate how attributes of organisational design and fuzzy goal-setting fortify administrative apathy by sustaining the claims of poor work-motivation amongst last mile administrative staff. This study is focused on the block education office. In particular, we base our analysis on a set of in-depth interviews and participant observations with block education officers (the key administrative unit for delivering education at the last mile) and the cluster resource

centre coordinators (officers in-charge of providing academic support within a geographic cluster of 15–20 schools).

3 Methodology and Scope of Study

Our comments and observations are drawn from a range of primary and secondary sources, including time-use studies, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and data collected through the PAISA (Planning, Allocations and Expenditures, Institutions: Studies in Accountability) surveys.²

The first step into understanding the daily functioning of the block office was to map the on-paper expectations from the local administration. The starting point of the analysis was to identify the specific roles and responsibilities that any block level officer is expected to undertake in the delivery of elementary education. However, service rules are hard to come by, and the few government orders we found for some specific officers tended to be vague and all encompassing. Consequently, the bulk of our analysis is based on the available service rules and guidelines for the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA).

Next, we focused on unpacking the in-practice functioning of the block office. To do this, researchers were trained to record daily tasks and functions of block education officers through a standardised time and task diary for observation. This required researchers to visit specific block resource centres and observe daily activities. In total 16 officers were observed across 12 blocks in six districts.³

To gain an in-depth perspective on work motivation, we undertook structured interviews with block education officers in four blocks in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh (AP). We chose Bihar and AP as sites for our detailed interviews because they represent two very different administrative settings, which could enable us to capture variation. In addition, we tracked the implementation of two select education activities through the PAISA surveys: civil works construction and school level planning.

We focus on elementary education because we believe it highlights a unique problem that India's administrative structure faces. In recent years there has been a slew of studies, most notably the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) surveys that have highlighted the deep and growing crisis of learning faced in India's elementary schools. The current crisis (ASER 2014; Muralidharan 2013; Mukerji and Walton 2013) poses an important question: how does a system that is designed, incentivised (and is still struggling) to provide the basic infrastructure respond to the far more complex challenge of improving outcomes? As new information on the quality of services is being regularly produced people's aspirations and expectations of delivery are changing. All of this poses a very different set of challenges to the bureaucracy. The first step in answering this question is to understand the incentives and style of administrative functioning at the last mile.

4 Daily Functioning of the Block Education Machinery

“What can I do? I am only a BEO”

— Anonymous 2013

An average block education officer's (BEO) room looks like a perfect caricature of the Indian bureaucracy. Disgruntled

officials, poorly painted walls, files flying around, teachers and staffers crowding in, local political gossip and district orders being discussed, work being delegated and shirked, and phones buzzing with instructions from senior officers of one new task or another.

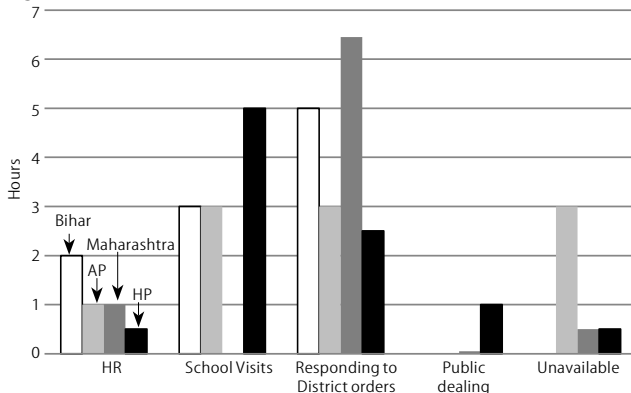
Despite the humdrum of activity, during the course of our 24 interviews in 2013, it was common to hear how elementary education administrators at the block level primarily view themselves as cogs in a wheel. We regularly heard BEOs refer to their own roles and offices as “post offices”—used simply for doing the bidding of higher authorities and ferrying messages between the top and bottom of the education chain. As one BEO said of one of his critical tasks, managing teacher training—“I spend much of my time ensuring everyone knows when the teacher or staff trainings are, ensuring all teachers and my own staff arrive on time and their TA/DA is paid.” When asked whether he engages with issues related to pedagogical content or teacher training modules, he offers an answer echoed in many of our interviews:

I don't think that's really my job. My job is to make sure everyone goes to training, how much they learn is up to the individual. The state decides on the training needed—they have good people for such work. Even if I provided suggestions, who would take us messengers seriously?

In media and policy debates, it is common to assume that administrators treat citizens callously due to arrogance and an inflated sense of power. Yet the lived experience of BEOs appears to contrast sharply with this image. Through our interviews, the one clear theme that emerged when interacting with block officers in very different administrative settings is that these powerful bureaucrats, in fact, perceive themselves or report themselves to be disempowered cogs in a hierarchical administrative culture that renders them powerless. How is such an atmosphere produced and sustained?

Literature on management and organisational design suggests that the optimal use of a block officer would be to leverage and receive local information on school needs and teacher performance through them, as these offices are most proximate to clients with cheaper means to access, aggregate, and understand local contextual information. To what extent does the lived reality of block education officers' work environment facilitate the optimal use of this office? The first step in our analysis is to highlight what the BEOs are expected to do. The tasks assigned to a BEO are listed in the box.⁴

The clarity and difficulty level of goals set by organisations for employees are an important contextual influence on motivation and worker performance. However, as economists (Tirole 1994) argue, the internal organisation of government is predicated on “fuzzy” goal-setting, whereby clear codification and quantification of organisational targets can be very difficult to do. This is because, at any given time, government agencies pursue multiple goals. Our analysis of the on-paper work description highlights (see Box 1) this. An average BEO is expected to manage multiple activities—from monitoring schools; to responding to academic and infrastructure needs of schools. So which of these activities should be prioritised? We answer this question through data collected from our time-use studies.

Figure 1: Time Allocation of Block/Mandal Education Officers

Source: Primary data collected through Time-Use Observations by PAISA Fellows in 2013–2014 at selected Block/Mandal Offices. See methodology section for more details.

The time-use studies were conducted over a two-month period between December 2012 and February 2013 in the

states of Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Himachal Pradesh. During this time, PAISA associates visited each officer three times to document tasks undertaken in three-hour slots each. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the observed hours in each state allocated to different tasks. The researchers were also trained to maintain notes along with data entry sheets recording the type of tasks performed, persons met and the purpose of activities carried out by the official observed. Thus, we see that in Bihar the BEOs were observed for a total of 10 hours and of these two hours were allocated in dealing with human resource management issues and three hours were spent in conducting school visits.

The overall data from time-use suggests that all officers work nearly six hours a day and spend majority of their time conducting school monitoring visits affiliated to district requests for data or chasing/communicating district orders. In other words, tasks are prioritised entirely based on signals

Box 1: Tasks Assigned to Block Education Officer

(i) Academic

- Assess requirement of new schools and take necessary steps to open new schools.
- Assessing requirements of teachers.
- Take steps to ensure proper and timely conduct of scholarship exams, and other events ordered by the state at the block level.
- Take steps to ensure teacher training happens in coordination with district and state training institutes.
- Ensure norms laid down under right to education (RTE)/SSA are enforced.
- Head the monthly meeting of block resource persons, cluster resource centre coordinators (CRCC), and headmasters to take stock of all school related matters.
- Ensure cent percent enrolment, retention, transition of students and attendance of both teachers and students.
- Identify and make the required provisions for children with special needs and identify areas in block which need special attention.
- Take steps to ensure that the pupil–teacher ratio is optimum.

(ii) Administrative

- Disciplinary authority for all levels of teaching and non-teaching staff of government-run and aided schools.
- Ensure implementation of all activities relating to education and other programmes launched by the government.
- Approve formation of school management committee in primary and school management development committees in high schools.
- Take steps to ensure that activities of RTE and SSA are properly implemented.
- Ensuring compliance of private institutions (both aided and unaided) to rules and regulations.
- Ensure proper and timely collection of education related statistics and support other state authorities in doing the same when required.

(iii) General Administrative Vigilance and Grievance Redressal

- Could function as the state public information officer under the Right to Information Act.
- Grievance redressal officer pertaining to elementary and high schools.
- Deal with the matters pertaining to recognised and aided private schools and recognised and unaided private schools at senior secondary level.

(iv) Financial

- Act as drawing and disbursing officer (DDO) for all teachers and staff of elementary, secondary schools including aided schools (in places where a DDO is not designated or is unavailable).
- Disbursal authority in respect of block resource centre coordinators (BRCCs), CRCCs and staff of BRCC office, zilla parishad teachers, and other teachers.
- Sanction increment, leave, temporary withdrawal of general provident fund (GPF), part final advance from GPF in respect of the employees of elementary schools, staff of secondary schools (except headmasters of secondary schools) and teaching and non-teaching staff of aided schools.
- In-charge of budget formulation, allotment of funds, submission of utilisation certificates (UCs), all grants-in-aid and other grants received under different schemes/programmes under plan and non-plan.
- Maintenance of book of accounts, UCs, pensions, other finance and procurement related issues in the office of the BEO and offices in the jurisdiction.
- Maintain accounts statements, cashbook and expenditure reports, etc, in respect of funds/grants received under various programmes, including the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) and Directorate of Secondary Education (DSE) for various types of activities, salaries, loans and advances, and facilitate their audit process.

(v) Inspection

- Inspect all elementary and high schools in a timely manner (as laid down by the state).
- Test work of teachers and see the pedagogical improvement in schools by taking classes.
- BEO to inspect and submit report for grant of no objection certificate (NOC) to private schools in the block.
- Inspect the implementation of mid-day meal and other programmes under SSA, RMSA, civil works, etc.

(vi) Community Involvement and Coordination with Other Line Departments

- Chief coordinator to organise any event or activity assigned by the department from time to time.
- Convergence of schemes with other departments such as health, rural/urban departments, public works, and civil society organisations for implementation of various programmes.
- Take steps to strengthen the school management and school management development committees and arrange their training and orientation programmes.

Any other task that the Government of India might assign.

from above. Two characteristics of a block officer's job emerge from this analysis.

First, the typical block officer organises his/her daily tasks based on diktats received from the district office (who in turn are responding to orders from the state government). As a result, each day is spent executing orders received from higher authorities, rather than seeking inputs and feedback from cluster level resources or schools on the state of education management. For instance, the state of Bihar was running a campaign to distribute free school uniforms and scholarships to children. During our study, the block offices had received orders to implement a camp for the distribution of uniforms and scholarships to schools. And this was the BEOs priority. It was common for headmasters and village elders who visited block officers to be asked to wait while they completed their preparatory work for district level meetings on the status of uniform distribution.

In Himachal Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh, we find the directive to manage exam dates and teacher recruitment respectively took over the time-use of each officer observed. None of the officers observed found any time to review monitoring reports and provide feedback to cluster officers on what was learnt and done based on monitoring data collected. Importantly, most of the monitoring visits to schools were determined on the basis of district requirements specific to the priority of the day. And when BEOs or their staff did go out into the field to gather data, they prioritised the hasty collection of information required by higher-ups—on attendance, the status of infrastructure, or the delivery of mid-day meals—over spending time in classrooms and understanding students' needs.

In summary, the entire block office appeared to be geared towards implementing schemes rather than focusing on the learning and infrastructure needs of the school. Interviews and time-use diary entries highlight that officers simply did not discuss issues surrounding learning, curriculum design or school governance.

Second, apart from responding to diktats from above, a large focus of the block office is human resource management. All BEOs observed spent one-third of each working week on dealing with concerns raised about teacher administration and union related problems. During interviews, BEOs stated that dealing with teacher complaints regarding their travel allowance (TA)/dearness allowance (DA) and pensions was one of the key elements of their job. Schools and headmasters saw the block as the primary administrative unit for problem solving on teacher management issues. Interestingly, however, the time-use findings highlight that time allocated to "public dealing" with school management committee (SMC) members or panchayat representatives who arrive at the office is very limited. These members of the "public" are usually made to wait for long periods of time by block officers and rarely given much of their time when given a chance to present their problems.

Two important conclusions emerge from this descriptive account of the average block education officer's work day. First, the administrative system relies on hierarchy and consequently

functions on the basis of orders and diktats from above rather than responding to school needs. Tasks and organisational goals are prioritised entirely on the basis of orders received. Second, in responding to orders from above, BEOs have primarily shaped their role in the administrative structure as being rule followers and data gatherers rather than active agents of administration. In other words, the hierarchical norms and internalised notions of what a block officer does impede them from utilising their offices as effective aggregators of needs and information on school performance, thus legitimising the narrative that BEOs are mere "post officers" within the administration. In the next section, we attempt to unpack how such an atmosphere prevails and is sustained. We also examine how this atmosphere serves to undermine and distort implementation.

5 Drivers for Effort Allocation and Motivation

Recent empirical work in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand (Mangla 2013) has shown how bureaucratic norms—the unwritten rules that guide public officials—can deeply influence the ability of states to implement policies successfully. Mangla's work credits Himachal Pradesh's remarkable ability in implementing universal primary education to the encouragement and enthusiasm demonstrated by higher state authorities and public officials to teamwork and locally adaptive policy implementation, with impetus for strong participation of block level staff, citizens and civic agencies—women's groups in particular—in the policy implementation process. Consequently, policy implementation in Himachal Pradesh has been highly responsive to local needs and thus implementation has been more effective. In contrast, he finds that the more legalistic and rule-bound approach followed in Uttarakhand discouraged any block level motivation for responsive governance.

Other scholars (Adams and Freedman 1976) also place work-motivation in a social context by shedding light on how employees are motivated by feelings of equity and fairness within the organisation based on how their efforts are reciprocated by their employers through salaries and recognition. Thus, norms amongst organisational agents clearly matter for worker motivation and output. What characteristics of BEO jobs within the education delivery system drive the in-practice norms which shape motivations and prioritisation of effort levels amongst tasks?

5.1 Organisation Design: Hierarchies and Apathy

To understand organisation design and its influence on in-practice norms of the bureaucracy, the first step in our analysis was to map the administrative hierarchy within elementary education. To do this, we draw on a framework developed by Pritchett and Pande (2005). This framework unbundles the process of delivering elementary education into its constituent functions and activities. Based on an analysis of a range of government documents, including the Right to Education (RTE) Act, programme guidelines, circulars and orders,⁵ budget allocations, data from PAISA surveys, and interviews

with relevant government officers, we populated this matrix by linking activities to the specific administrative layers responsible for delivering the activity (see Box 2).

As even a cursory glance at this matrix makes apparent that the on-paper organisational design allocates the bulk of the

Box 2: Organisational Design of Education Administration: Roles and Authority

Function	Activity	Centre	State	District	Block	School	SMC
Policy/ Design Standards	Curriculum design						
	Learning achievement standards						
Planning	Plans for physical expansion						
	Plans for quality improvement						
Asset Creation	Human capital						
	Teacher training						
	Social capital						
	Community mobilisation						
Physical capital	School construction						
	Beneficiary selection						
Operation	Choice of students for targeting entitlements						
	Enrolment						
Recurrent	Textbook choice/purchase						
	Learning materials						
Personnel	Pre-service training						
	Hiring of teachers						
	Assignment of teachers to specific schools/classes						
	Performance evaluation						
	In-service training						
Maintenance	Promotion						
	Supervision						
	Maintenance of school buildings/facilities						
Monitoring and Evaluation	Monitoring of school processes						
	Tests of learning achievement						

Source: Authors construction. Adapted from Pritchett and Pande (2005).

authority and decision-making ability to the state and central governments. This is evident through the following characteristics of the education administration: First, elementary education is a concurrent subject and responsibility for delivering education, that is shared between the state and central government. The responsibility for key policy decisions such as setting standards and determining curricula thus rests at the state level in collaboration with the central government. The district and block offices attend to all operational activities. This includes operational decisions related to hiring teachers, constructing and maintaining school facilities, utilisation of non-wage expenditures, and purchase of learning materials. The district also plays a facilitating role of providing

for the technical aspects of improving pedagogical practice through training (anchored in the District Institutes of Education Training), coordinating the data collection on schools, physical assets and teachers for building the District Information System for Education (DISE) database, developing annual work plans, and supervising compliance with the processes outlined by the state and central governments.

A close reading of the rules, guidelines and budgetary allocations highlights that even where functions have been delegated to the local block/district administration, in many cases, actual decision-making authority rests with the state government. The SSA envisages the district to be an important unit of planning. According to the programme guidelines, districts are expected to make an annual work plan based on which budgetary allocations are made. However, as PAISA studies highlight, the elementary education budget is designed such that key decision-making powers rest primarily with the state and central government. To explain, in 2013–14, the bulk of the budget (85%) was allocated to investments in teachers. As Box 2 highlights, all critical teacher-related decisions—hiring, salary payment and training—rest with the state and district administration. Following teacher salaries, the second largest investment is on school infrastructure (5%) and the provision of direct entitlements to children (5%) such as free textbooks, uniforms and scholarships. Funds for school infrastructure development and children’s entitlements are often channelled to schools. Schools, in turn, are responsible for actual “implementation” (construction in the case of civil works and distribution of entitlements in case of children-specific activities).

However, as Box 2 highlights, key decisions related to implementation—the kind of infrastructure to be built, sanctions and procurement—are all taken by the state administration. Similarly, funds for quality (less than 1%) are also allocated based on the state and central government priorities.⁶ For instance, the quality line item has a Rs 1 crore innovation fund for districts, 50% of which is mandatorily required to be spent on computer-aided learning programmes, leaving districts with a discretionary spend of half the allocation.

In practice, therefore, the administrative architecture is designed in a manner where tasks are delegated to line agents at the district. The district, in turn, delegates tasks to the block level without significant transfer of authority power or space to take decisions. Officers are thus primarily cast in the role of being monitors and facilitators responsible for ensuring that directives from the state government are circulated and followed in schools, thus facilitating the “post officer” syndrome.

But even in this role as monitors, the local administrative hierarchy is designed such that block offices do not have any authority to actually take decisions and resolve problems they unearth when doing their job. This is best illustrated through the experiences of headmasters who were interviewed. In one instance, the headmaster interviewed had to wait for six months to get news on teacher appointments. Multiple visits to the block did not provide any new information, as block

education officers have no decision-making authority on teacher appointments. All they did was to register the request and tell the headmaster to wait for information from the district. In another, a headmaster had placed a request for the construction of a classroom. Like in the previous case, multiple visits to the block only afforded the response that the block too was waiting for intimation from the district. In this instance, the headmaster redirected his query directly to the district, bypassing the block entirely. In the headmaster's words: "The Block could do nothing...they said only after the DISE data was verified would the construction be sanctioned."

Lack of decision-making authority aside, these instances also highlight how the opacity and limited information flows within the administration curb any employee's sense of competence and self-worth in the education value chain. During one interview, we asked why the concerned officer could not spend more time in public dealings. In response, he said that a typical BEO had limited information on any requests or issues raised by the school as these decisions were taken at levels above without any intimation on status or progress to the blocks: "The HM (headmaster) comes here and I have no answer I have to send them to the district office or ask them to wait till I hear anything."

And this lack of information and power serves to entrench the post office syndrome. As this BEO said, "I feel bad. I have no power to give them anything, but I don't know what happened to their case either."

The hierarchical culture that this top-down decision-making system creates also ensures that higher levels of authority rarely provide block officers with information on progress over decisions and feedback on information provided by them. In fact, the BEOs interviewed worried about being overworked due to district- and state-level directives, and complained about having limited time to pursue innovations or independent monitoring and action based on reports.

Moreover, they do not consult lower authorities when allocating tasks. Thus, local officers rarely fully comprehend the reasons why they are expected to perform tasks and inevitably reduce even the most complex of tasks to rules and orders received. For instance, when block officials were asked to describe their role vis-à-vis school committees, most described their role as that of communicating new rules and guidelines to headmasters. Ensuring that committees function in a manner that enables effective parental engagement with the school is simply not on their agenda. In this world, rule following rather than responsiveness to schools is the framework within which block officers engage with schools.

As is evident from this discussion, the design of the education administration curbs the likelihood of any last mile intervention on quality or responsive monitoring leading to any result or impact on decisions made on infrastructure or learning enhancement—let alone any bearing on the personal reward scheme of last mile cadres. Block officials simply claim powerlessness and attempt at getting through each day—one directive at a time. Higher authorities in turn never expect block officers to do more than merely fill forms and ferry messages to

schools. This state of low expectations sustains apathy within the administration.

5.2 Understandings of Performance

In the sections above, we see that block officers perceive their role as being responsive to directives from above, as opposed to dedicating time to sourcing and responding to information from schools and parent communities below. This attribute is exaggerated due to the hierarchical and seniority-obsessed culture of Indian administration, discussed by many scholars, where questioning and dissent from lower ranks is rarely tolerated (Chand 2010; Bagchi 2007; Dwivedi and Misra 2011; Parashar 2003). This lack of authority constrains the ability of administration to tackle seemingly simple issues, and allows staff members to internalise their own powerlessness.

It is in this context that our interviewees reflected on their notions of performance. For lower bureaucrats, merit is demonstrated by speedy dissemination of new orders or programmes to school and efficient production and delivery of reports and data to the higher levels of the administrative chain. As one official in Bihar said, "as long as you keep sending data and as many forms as possible, you are a good worker here." Mandal level staff in AP agreed. "Our job is focused on filing per forma well, we don't honestly know what happens after we collect this information."

This interpretation of job performance as "responsiveness" to orders from districts is exacerbated by the complete absence of clearly-defined "performance" indicators. As per terms of references and implementation orders reviewed by our team, each officer in the sub-block chain is meant to be held responsible for the production and delivery of reports and data to higher levels of the administrative chain as a means to gather locally relevant information on the state of education and RTE compliance in the state. However, officers are not trained regarding the approach to collecting data, how to view and prioritise their roles, and actions either. No specific budget for developing training curriculum which helps clarify powers and priorities is allocated for last mile workers within the education budget at the state level. These costs are part of the overall management budget—being 4% of the total SSA budget.

Most BEOs understand their personal training curriculum as related to specific data entry and collation activities such as DISE. In the absence of training on what their jobs ought to focus on and the lack of explicit key performance indicators, informal understandings of performance pervade the administrative system derived from the power hierarchy of the administration.

Economists emphasise the career concerns of workers as a major source of work motivation within government agencies (Dewatripont et al 1999). In a world where government jobs are extremely sought after, last mile workers are keen to hold on to their comfortable jobs and pay. Yet, the only tools they have available through which to signal their ability as meritorious workers within the system is to respond to hierarchy. Such notions and incentives assume importance in the public sector where officers may be keen to hold on to their comfortable jobs

through garnering goodwill by prioritising tasks demanded by his/her superiors, which may be time inconsistent and result in workers allocating lesser effort on dimensions of their roles that cannot be easily observed or rewarded such as civic responsiveness and quality of monitoring/data captured. Consequently, such last mile staffers see their actions as relatively insignificant to the larger education system. They simply show up to meetings, do their best to gather data and manage data collation.

During our discussions, we observed how many last mile workers joined government, hoping and longing for greater societal recognition and status, yet end up working in a culture of feeling intrinsically meaningless with precarious rewards. Those administrators tasked with leadership attempt to seek proofs of power—in their dealings with local citizenry—as an attempt to reclaim their sense of worth, the latter being consistently attacked by the internal administrative structure.

6 Conclusions and Discussion

Discussions on resolving the implementation problem tend to assume a simplistic landscape of action, where most public officials are cast as corrupt rent-seeking entities who are capable of providing cleaner and responsive service delivery through the application of pressures, financial rewards or threats. These pressures could be from senior officers embarking on reform through stealth, through private actors and allowing for more market-based competition or through citizen demands and rights. Such formulations guide solutions such as allowing for private sector involvement in the provision of basic services or the use of rights, technology platforms or citizen protests as a form of pressure and threat to errant last mile workers. Our contention is that any of these solutions will require the cognitive maps and attitudes of administrators to change. Reforms require bolstering last mile cadres and their ability, authority and apparatus to understand, aggregate, and reflect on the local context of education administration in their blocks. Thus, morale is a must and is tractable to training, human resource management practices and policy action.

Through our analysis, we highlight how organisational norms and design produce a rhetoric of demotivation and apathy, which yields poor outcomes on how needs are assessed and addressed at the last mile. Our attempt was to demonstrate how a sense of powerlessness legitimises block officers' exclusive focus on being driven by district orders while sacrificing the more deliberative and client-oriented aspects of their jobs. This trend is fortified by the design of the larger education bureaucracy which undermines autonomy by vesting greater authority to higher echelons of government. Workers at the block, district and cluster level within the education delivery chain are aware of the problems plaguing their own day-to-day functioning—and most complain about the “government system” reducing their ability to take effective decisions. The irony is that they are the government.

Our observations on the time-use and our interviews with officials highlight how the education bureaucracy at the last mile struggles to allocate time to reflect and identify challenges faced by schools and students. The block and

cluster level officials translate their overall goal of being effective communicators of constraints faced by schools—a process envisioned as being deeply deliberative and responsive to local contexts—into merely collecting data points and feeding checklists and formats to the higher authorities in as little time as possible. This prioritisation of the speed, number of formats and meetings completed, as opposed to the quality of information collected and understanding what their visits or data indicates, highlights a form of functioning which undermines effort investment in deliberation with smcs and parents, creativity, responsiveness, and administrative adaptation to local contexts. Effort is disproportionately spent on filling forms, mechanically conducting visits and following higher directives. In a world of limited implementation resources and effort, block level staff are incentivised to pay much greater attention to executing directives from above as opposed to spending time in soliciting feedback from below on general schooling related concerns.

The marriage of on-paper design with local political dynamics and an administrative culture hinged on guidelines and rule-following yields a mindset whereby local level administrators see themselves as small insignificant cogs in a grand government wheel. The lack of effective and credible decentralisation allows local administrators limited space to source information, identify or react to local needs. In addition, local administrators and staffers have major constraints in terms of time and resources to govern beyond guidelines and directives. Sadly, management of the education system has been translated to

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simply checking boxes by complying with higher orders and directives. Efficiency means doing so in a speedy and cost-effective way.

As we make more demands from the education system, administrative reform in the sphere of last mile delivery of high quality schooling shall assume greater significance. The landscape of education delivery has changed since SSA in its early years. Far from focusing on ensuring schools are built and students show up, the next generation of education delivery reforms will need to contend with learning, teacher accountability and deeper parent engagement. This requires an administration that does more than follow rules. Mangla's recent work in Himachal Pradesh highlights these themes as well. If we need a deliberative and responsive administration, line agents must have the time and tools to enable deliberation, reflection on information and feel confident in their authority to respond. Credible decentralisation and training curriculum are keys to empowering and stimulating last mile action and sustaining sporadic sparks of creativity and leadership. The shape and form of decentralisation can look different in each state, depending on the external environment and type of tasks. At present, much finance, energy and focus is placed on training teachers, while training and norm-building amongst administrative staffers is allocated less attention.

Changing norms and morale within the administration cannot be done by articulating the rights of citizens on paper alone nor by spelling out roles and responsibilities of the last mile bureaucracy in written information and communication technology specifications or government guidelines. This requires a cognitive shift whereby administrators need to see themselves and citizens differently. For this, the development of training and performance management tools whereby last mile workers' sense of individual achievement can be aligned with larger organisational goals are an important ingredient. A BEO ought to value the quality and way in which his/her cluster resource officers identify and respond to the needs of schools and students as opposed to the number of pro formas signed and sent in record time. If teachers need to be monitored and held accountable, if plans must reflect the realities and needs of schools, if parents are to be encouraged to participate in school management and planning, if student learning levels need to be monitored with more sophistication, new norms within the last mile bureaucracy must be seeded. Experiments which vest greater authority downstream and empower workers with a clearer sense of their role in the larger objective may pave the path to better implementation. We cannot run new sophisticated software such as "rights" and "technology" on old shaky hardware predicated on "rules."

NOTES

- 1 http://www.effective-states.org/wp-content/uploads/working_papers/final-pdfs/esid_wp_36_mehta_walton.pdf.
- 2 PAISA is a study that tracks budgets and fund flows in key social sector programmes undertaken by Accountability Initiative, Centre for Policy Research. As part of its mandate, PAISA undertakes an in-depth district level survey of fund flows in elementary education. The data used in this study is drawn from a 2013 PAISA survey. The survey was conducted in the following eight districts: Medak, Andhra Pradesh; Nalanda and Purnea, Bihar; Kangra, Himachal Pradesh; Sagar, Madhya Pradesh; Satara, Maharashtra and Jaipur and Udaipur, Rajasthan. For more details see www.accountabilityindia.org.
- 3 For details on PAISA surveys see www.accountabilityindia.in/paisa_states.
- 4 Collected from various government documents and websites.
- 5 The roles and design created through reviewing state level government orders on the roles and responsibilities of actors concerned. The following state government orders have been referenced: GO 124561/1/2/2013, GO 17654/1/6/2013, and GO 18/68-2012.
- 6 Public expenditure on quality entails funds for programmes for improving quality of teaching, curriculum design, academic support to schools. For more, see Dongre, Kapur and Tewary (2014).

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