



Public Administration in India: Research trends and initiatives

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Abstract

The study of Public Administration in India is quite different from the Western approach. It depends upon the interrelationship of the different stakeholders of our Democracy and so the research techniques adopted should be contextual and real-time rather than theoretical. There is a lack of scholars engaged in active research in this discipline and also a gap in understanding the essence of the subject. The research methods are highly dynamic and varied but the researchers suffer from lack of institutional support and this hampers the growth of the subject. Survey research methods are most acceptable but after avoiding extraneous influences. There is a scope of inter-disciplinary research in this field which will widen the scope of understanding. New research techniques based on modern technology are emerging which are capable of handling the present complex scenario. So the need of the hour is to restructure the course based on our fundamental understanding of the knowledge so that it could be applied in real life situations.

Key words

Common platform, extraneous influences, government funding, planned research, real life situation, socio-economic and political character, survey method.

Introduction

The study of Public Administration as a separate discipline in India started in the 1930s but its development as a fully fledged subject in Indian Universities took almost another two decades. During this period, the subject evolved from its basic theoretical character to a more practical form by incorporating the developments that took place in post independent India in terms of planning, policy making, governance and bureaucracy. This is quite different from the contemporary Western pattern which was still influenced by “New Public Administration” patronized by America and a few European nations. Two distinct approaches of this discipline that evolved in India during this period are Social Equity and Social Reforms.

One of the significant issues that have broadened the scope of this discipline in the recent years has been the interrelationship between the various stakeholders of Democracy such as bureaucrats, politicians, wage earners and beneficiaries and how it has resulted in crisis situations for the administrators. The present trend of dealing with these issues is to synthesize various methods from related disciplines such as Political Science, Rural Development, Urban Planning, Human Resource Planning, etc. and come up with a holistic solution rather than an isolated and methodological approach. This has made the subject more practical and context-specific for the research scholars and academicians and some of them have even started inter-disciplinary research by relating this discipline with more traditional subjects such as Anthropology, Economics, Philosophy, Management and Psychology. Even the “public” nature of this subject has undergone a change from its citizen-centric approach to a wider paradigm which includes the Civil Society, Non Governmental Organizations, Trade Unions and various Pressure Groups that exist in our society. So the focus has shifted from mere “public interest” to the bigger “public affairs”.

Methodological approach

Since the subject initially evolved as a highly methodological approach based on certain orthodox policies and patterns of administration, it took a rather long time for it to shed off its archaic, static and impractical nature. This has raised several doubts about the acceptance and viability of the subject among teachers and researchers who started questioning its very requirement. Added to it is the fact that this subject fails to recognize the contributions made by specialists of other disciplines such as Economists, Bankers, Social workers and even Politicians who have

an important role to shape our policy decisions and implement them at the grass root level. This has led to two serious problems which are basically interrelated. The first is a lack of enough research scholars who are actively involved in this discipline and the other is a lack of understanding the essence of the subject along with its methods and policies. This has hampered the enrichment of this uniquely diversified and contemporary subject and hindered its growth as a major discipline of Social Science. This requires a planned approach to increase participation of researchers in this subject with the help of funding from Government agencies such as University Grants Commission.

Change in syllabus

A study of the syllabi of Public Administration being taught in Indian Universities results in a unanimity of decision on the necessity of teaching students of this discipline about the various research methods of Social Sciences. This is because of the fact that this discipline has a vast scope because of its dynamic character and its contextual interrelationship with other disciplines. So a study of Research Methodology in Rural development differs from that of Policy Planning and so does Statistical concepts between e-Governance and Human Resource Planning in Government organizations. The Survey methods which play a prominent role in this discipline also vary largely with different contexts. However, it is disheartening to note that very little emphasis has been attached to such practical research applications in solving real-life problems and the Research Methods are just mentioned in a chapter as a formality. As a result, the practical knowledge gained by a student of this discipline by his own initiative finds no channel of application or recognition and could not enrich the discipline in general. This leads to a casual approach by the students whose application of research methods depend on personal choice and understanding of the problem statement rather than a scientific and pragmatic approach. Such research studies have no practical implication and so the subject remains seriously unexploited in India in spite of the variety and innumerable research problems that exist in our society. This fact was revealed in survey reports conducted by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA).

Research methods

Survey Research methods are very popular among Social Science students particularly associated with this discipline. A lot of students also adopt inter-disciplinary studies such as involving this discipline with Economics for Budgetary Planning and with Human Resource Management for Training strategies for Bureaucrats. However, most of the research outcomes tend to arrive at generalizations which have very limited applications in this subject. Another point of concern is the absence of any discussion between the students of this discipline and the specialists of other disciplines of Social science to arrive at a pragmatic solution. The Survey methods are infested with several extraneous influences in a complicated social system like India and so there is a need for Controlled Field Experiment method for yielding viable results. Another approach which is considerably dynamic compared to the Survey/interview method is the examination of changing roles depending on contextual variations. This method explains a certain research problem in a limited manner but has the capability to produce specific results based on the existing socio-economic and political backdrop.

Several new research techniques have evolved in this discipline with the development of Science and technology such as Computer and Electronic Data-processing, Systems Approach and Management Science (quantitative-oriented tools) methods. These methods involve systematic processing of information and yields more objective and reliable results as they take into account more number of relevant variables. Business Management professionals are studying the various decision-making processes in Public Administration as they have a large impact on the huge population of a country. Donald Tull and Gerald Albaum has differentiated between two types of survey methods, the Decisional and the Basic. "While the former survey is conducted to provide information for making a pending decision, the later are those concerned primarily with the advancement of scientific knowledge. The main difference between the two approaches of research lies in the admissibility of the researcher's decision in the collection and analysis of data. An authentic and admissible basic survey approach makes a serious effort to collect data so that they may be checked objectively, the resulting sampling errors are random, systematic errors are measurable and non-judgmental means of analysis are taken recourse to. It requires fundamental knowledge to design and implement it so as to produce acceptable outcomes. On the other hand, a research based on decisional survey approach is used to supplement and in some cases supplant these non-judgmental procedures. The principle involved, as applicable to

both the research as a whole and to each element in particular, is to weigh value versus cost of information” (Tull and Albaum, 1973).

Another form of research method is to employ mathematical analysis and behavioral techniques in order to study Bureaucratic concepts and Human Resource Development and this might be employed by modern researchers to find solutions to complex problems in this discipline.

It must be mentioned at this juncture that Public Administration, as a discipline, is so varied and its scope is so large that almost all the traditional methods of inquiry such as Personal Experience, Deductive Reasoning and Empirical Observation could be applied to it but it must be observed that such application might not yield favorable results in all circumstances as it is a highly contextual driven discipline. Lynton Cadwell has put more emphasis on two other methods namely Heuristic Analogy and Inductive Reference. However these methods have limited scope of application in research methodology pertaining to this discipline. Heuristic analogy leads to the formation of a behavioral model which is used as a replacement for the less acceptable control experiment in real life administrative situation. This analogy helps in the practical study of the changing patterns of this discipline and also finds out the solutions to complex real-life situations faced by administration. On the other hand, Inductive inference builds a theoretical model of its own and the data on which it rests is willing to accept the objective tests. This method is considered as a very reliable source of research and can significantly contribute to this field of study. “But this method involves devising alternative hypothesis, forming appropriate experiment with alternative outcome and repeating procedures to obtain elimination or refinement of sequential hypothesis” (Cadwell, 1968).

So it may be accepted at this juncture that it is indeed difficult for any researcher to determine the most appropriate method for the study and analysis of the various research problems in this discipline. This is because the methods which are available for conducting research are subject to continuous change in several areas and some of the modern methods are still existent only in the experimental stage. The situation is even more complex in the Indian scenario with its unique socio-economic and political character which tends to prevent the established and widely accepted procedures from extracting acceptable results.

Conclusion

Thus we have a unique scenario of choosing the most appropriate method of research from the available knowledge and it requires a lot of understanding the ground reality of the research problem which we need to analyze. Though it is true to some extent that this discipline relies on the available techniques and tools, yet it may be stated that as a discipline, public administration has a much wider scope of study compared to the other branches of Social Science. The need of the hour is to restructure the courses of Research methodologies in Public Administration keeping in mind the contextual patterns and the new methods applied in research. James Charlesworth had once observed that “method in Public Administration cannot be standardized and prescribed: method is the man himself”. Therefore, in any modern society, the beneficiary, the common man, the workers, the business community, the scholars, the administrators and most importantly, the politicians shape the society we live in and it is their complex interrelationship which ultimately decides the nature of administration, the research possibilities and the research methods to be applied. It is thus evident that much of our study and progress in this discipline as well as its growth depends upon the extent we can assimilate the dynamic forms of the society and the dependence of this discipline on other streams of Social Science. Along with this aspect, we have to bring about several reforms in our teaching methods from merely explaining the theoretical aspects of Research Methodology in this discipline to practical exposure such as field trips and real life experiences. This will enable the students to develop a fundamental understanding of this subject and search for realistic and feasible solutions to administrative problems. There is also a need for a common platform for all the eminent scholars and academicians to meet periodically and share their findings and experiences on implementation of Research Methodology in different cases and how far they have been successful in finding out acceptable results which could be applied in real-life situations. Such interaction might also lead to emergence of new ideas and possibilities will definitely enrich the subject. The Government should utilize agencies such as University Grants Commission and Indian Institute of Public Administration to coordinate among the research scholars so that any new idea or finding at the personal or institute level may be utilized at the national level to enrich the discipline. Public Administration, as a discipline, is one of the very few subjects which has its impact on the working and development of the State and so effective steps should be taken to enrich the discipline,

with the help of researchers and academicians, so that it is able to scale the heights of dynamism and popularity which it so well deserves.

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