Tripped by triplicates

Jayan V. Narlikar

In the early Seventies, when the photocopying facility available in India was a novelty, the room for this facility was a small one, in a scientific institute. I recall a scenario of a baby on theotty, with the copy machine: "No job is complete until all the paperwork is done." The poster went on to explain that you had to face if you waited while your copy was being carried out. But the technology did not permit the speed and facility of the modern copying machines.

The poster, in retrospect, I find that the poster comment went beyond the limited confines of the photocopying room. It, in fact, captured our cultural identity. We Indians like to give a proper written brief before we take any action, be it a picnic of three hours duration or a visit abroad lasting several weeks. There are many other occasions... interaction with our elders, decisions on banking and investments, even sports — and in each case we must carry out proper paperwork beforehand.

Indeed there have been evaluations through surveys of how bureaucratic a nation is. Setting to the survey conducted by the Political, Economic Risk Consultancy (PERC) group about two years ago, amongst the leading Asian countries, India came out worst, i.e. bureaucratic the most inefficient nation. When I came out better, despite (or perhaps) a lack of democracy.

Bureaucracy makes its effect felt on the higher as well as the lower strata of the society. Despite the ease of recording and giving out information electronically, the dominance of paper persists. Thus, at the highest level of national awards, the nominator may be asked to submit the required forms, prepare 20 copies, or a number large enough so that the awards may be sent to all the members of the jury committee. In the daily life of the common man, several documents are required to be produced for him/her to be eligible to receive electricity, telephone, cooking gas, etc. A child's school admission is an even more difficult ordeal. In government run shops and emporia I am amused to see three copies of a metal being routinely made. One copy for the customer, one for the packer and one for the house record. When I travel abroad and am transiting through a foreign airport, I get feeling of missing something as I pass through the security section. Yes, what I am missing is the stamping of the baggage label attached to my hand-baggage. This is a must for security in India. The security guard at the boarding gate does check that what the passenger is carrying does have a baggage label that has been duly stamped. But barring a few exceptions, I have not seen security at any foreign airport enforcing such a requirement. Indeed, the way the security guard in an Indian airport looks at the baggage suggests that he is interested only in the stamped label and I sometimes wonder if he would allow a hand grenade through if it carries a stamped label.

The exceptions mentioned above also relate to our neighboring countries: Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh. With our close historic and cultural contacts, including the time spent as subjects of the British Raj, it is not surprising that we have adopted and adapted the British bureaucracy for use in our administrative framework. Here I cannot leave this topic without mentioning that small customs form that everybody is asked to fill. The passengers surrender it when exiting from the customs and as I board over miles to the customs standing at the exit door. I wonder what will happen to the form. Will some higher-ups bother to read it? Would it be fed to the computer for some statistical conclusion? Or, will it be simply discarded? The information collected from citizens through other forms on different occasions can likewise be seen to be (1) useless, but also (2) irrelevant or (3) not really needed.

Our banks are not far behind in the paper-chase. When I deposit a cheque in my account, I have to describe its particulars on a form which is part of the slip book for that account. In a typical bank in the West, this exercise is short and sweet. The depositor need simply list the cheques by writing the amounts against them. But for a similar exercise at a bank in India, the form is to be filled in duplicate and no less than 20 items of information need to be filled in. Perhaps there is a logistical reason for them. No, the reason escapes me.

But one can argue that the form filling is an aid to collecting information about the individual filling the form. This information may come in useful in some (exceptional) occasion. However, the general impression one has is that the information collected is insufficient for any specific future action: So why collect it? Short, can we not reduce the paperwork to the bare minimum, to facts that are really needed? As an aside to bureaucracy, there has emerged above the horizon the Right to Information Act, which helps the common man in piercing the layers of bureaucracy surrounding the issues in which he is interested. Prior to the Right to Information Act, the information sought would either be denied or made available in a non-readable form. Now, any citizen may request information from a public authority (a body of government or an "Instrumentality of State") which is required to reply expeditiously or within 40 days. The act also requires every public authority to compile their records for wide dissemination and to proactively publish certain categories of information so that citizens need minimal resources to request information formally.

The development has brought welcome change in the situation, which earlier saw an unequal tussle between the state and the citizen with the former playing the dominating role.

The writing, a renowned astrophysicist, is professor emeritus at Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics, Pune University Campus.