

The Prismatic-Sala Model and Bureaucratic Functioning in India: An Assessment of Formalism, Heterogeneity, and Administrative Transformation

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Abstract

The administrative systems of developing countries often exhibit unique characteristics that distinguish them from those of developed nations. Fred W. Riggs' Prismatic-Sala Model remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding the complexities of governance and bureaucracy in transitional societies. The model explains how traditional and modern structures coexist within developing countries, creating administrative challenges characterized by formalism, heterogeneity, and overlapping functions. India, as one of the world's largest democracies and a rapidly developing nation, provides a compelling case for examining the relevance of Riggs' framework. This paper analyzes the applicability of the Prismatic-Sala Model to contemporary Indian bureaucracy by assessing the persistence of formalism and heterogeneity and evaluating the extent of administrative transformation brought about by reforms, digital governance, and globalization. The study argues that although India has undergone significant administrative modernization since independence, many prismatic characteristics continue to shape bureaucratic behavior and governance outcomes. The paper concludes that Riggs' model remains a valuable analytical tool for understanding the interaction between social structures and administrative systems in India.

Keywords: Prismatic-Sala Model, Fred W. Riggs, Indian Bureaucracy, Formalism, Heterogeneity, Administrative Transformation

Introduction

The study of public administration has increasingly emphasized the relationship between administrative systems and their socio-economic environments. Traditional administrative theories often focused on organizational structures, principles of management, and bureaucratic efficiency, while paying limited attention to the broader societal context in which administration operates. In response to this limitation, comparative public administration emerged as a significant field of inquiry during the mid-twentieth century. Among the scholars who contributed substantially to this field, Fred W. Riggs occupies a prominent place. His ecological approach to public administration highlighted the importance of understanding administrative systems in relation to their surrounding social, cultural, economic, and political environments (Riggs, 1964).

Riggs developed the Prismatic-Sala Model to explain the administrative characteristics of societies undergoing a transition from traditional agrarian systems to modern industrial societies. According to Riggs, societies can be broadly categorized into three ideal types: fused, prismatic, and diffracted. Fused societies are characterized by undifferentiated social structures and limited specialization, whereas diffracted societies exhibit high levels of functional differentiation, specialization, and institutional development. Between these two extremes lies the prismatic society, which combines elements of both traditional and modern systems. Such societies often experience tensions and contradictions resulting from the coexistence of traditional values and modern administrative institutions (Riggs, 1964).

The Prismatic-Sala Model identifies several key characteristics of transitional societies, including formalism, heterogeneity, and overlapping. Formalism refers to the discrepancy between officially prescribed rules and actual administrative practices. Heterogeneity denotes the coexistence of diverse social, cultural, and economic systems within a single society. Overlapping describes situations where multiple institutions perform similar functions, leading to ambiguity and inefficiency in governance. Riggs used the term “Sala” to symbolize the multifunctional institutions found in prismatic societies, where political, economic, and social functions are not clearly differentiated as they are in modern bureaucratic systems (Riggs, 1964).

India provides an important context for examining the relevance of the Prismatic-Sala Model. Since independence in 1947, the country has adopted a democratic political system, a written constitution, an independent judiciary, and a professional civil service based largely on the principles of merit and rational administration. Simultaneously, Indian society continues to be influenced by traditional institutions such as caste, religion, kinship networks, regional identities, and community affiliations. The coexistence of these traditional and modern elements creates a complex administrative environment that closely resembles the characteristics of a prismatic society identified by Riggs (Maheshwari, 2019).

The Indian bureaucracy, often regarded as the backbone of governance and policy implementation, operates within this diverse and dynamic environment. While bureaucratic institutions are formally structured according to modern principles of hierarchy, specialization, and legal-rational authority, actual administrative practices are frequently influenced by informal networks, political pressures, social obligations, and cultural norms. Consequently, there often exists a gap between official procedures and practical outcomes. This phenomenon is particularly evident in areas such as policy implementation, public service delivery, welfare administration, and regulatory governance. Such realities underscore the continuing relevance of Riggs’ concept of formalism in understanding bureaucratic functioning in India (Sharma & Sadana, 2020).

Furthermore, India’s immense socio-cultural diversity contributes significantly to administrative heterogeneity. The country comprises numerous languages, religions, ethnic groups, and regional cultures, each with distinct social and political aspirations. Public administrators are therefore required to navigate a highly complex environment while ensuring effective governance and equitable service delivery. The challenges associated with managing diversity often lead to variations in policy implementation across regions and administrative units, thereby reinforcing the applicability of Riggs’ framework to the Indian context (Arora & Goyal, 2019).

At the same time, India has witnessed substantial administrative transformation over the past three decades. Economic liberalization, globalization, technological advancements, and governance reforms have significantly altered the nature of public administration. Initiatives such as Digital India, e-governance platforms, the Right to Information Act, and citizen-centric service delivery mechanisms

have sought to enhance transparency, accountability, and efficiency. These reforms indicate a gradual movement toward a more differentiated administrative system. However, despite these changes, several characteristics of the prismatic society continue to persist, raising important questions about the extent and nature of bureaucratic transformation in contemporary India.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to assess the relevance of the Prismatic-Sala Model in understanding bureaucratic functioning in India. It examines the persistence of formalism and heterogeneity within the Indian administrative system and evaluates the impact of administrative reforms on bureaucratic structures and processes. By revisiting Riggs' theoretical framework in the context of contemporary governance challenges, the study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on comparative public administration and administrative development. The analysis demonstrates that while India has made considerable progress toward administrative modernization, many features identified by Riggs remain embedded within its bureaucratic system, thereby highlighting the enduring significance of the Prismatic-Sala Model for understanding governance in transitional societies.

Conceptual Framework: The Prismatic-Sala Model

Fred W. Riggs developed the Prismatic-Sala Model to explain the characteristics of transitional societies. The model identifies several features that distinguish prismatic societies from traditional and modern systems.

Formalism

Formalism refers to the discrepancy between officially prescribed norms and actual administrative practices. In prismatic societies, laws and regulations often appear modern and rational, but their implementation may differ significantly from official expectations (Riggs, 1964).

Heterogeneity

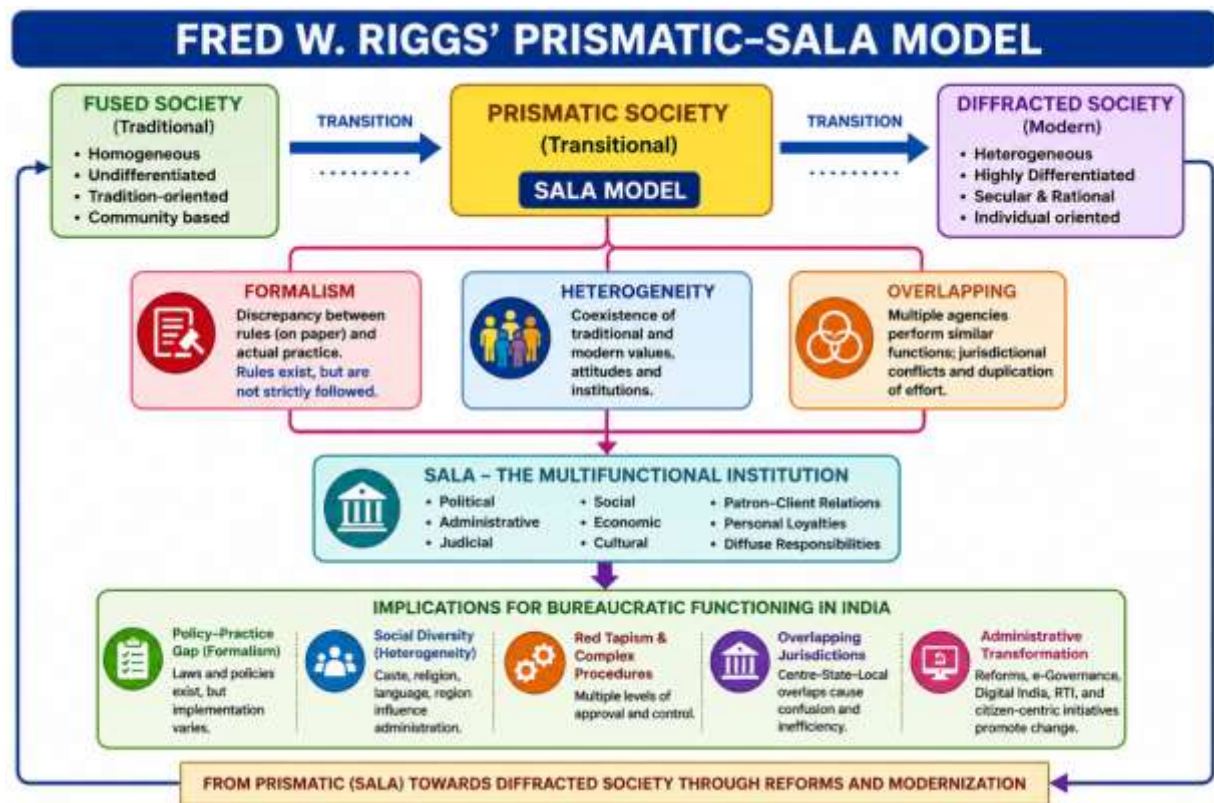
Prismatic societies exhibit social and cultural diversity where traditional and modern values coexist. Multiple value systems operate simultaneously, often creating tensions within administrative structures.

Overlapping

Overlapping occurs when administrative institutions perform multiple and sometimes conflicting functions. Responsibilities are not clearly differentiated, leading to inefficiency and duplication.

The Sala Concept

The "Sala" serves as the central institution in Riggs' model, symbolizing multifunctional administrative structures where political, social, and economic activities are intermingled. Unlike specialized institutions in modern societies, the Sala reflects the complexity and ambiguity of governance in transitional societies.



India as a Prismatic Society

India is frequently cited as one of the most prominent examples of a prismatic society as conceptualized by Fred W. Riggs in his ecological approach to public administration. A prismatic society is characterized by the coexistence of traditional and modern institutions, values, and practices, creating a complex socio-political environment. Following independence in 1947, India adopted modern democratic institutions, including a written Constitution, parliamentary governance, universal adult franchise, an independent judiciary, and a merit-based civil service system. Simultaneously, traditional social structures such as caste, religion, kinship networks, and regional identities have continued to shape political behavior and administrative processes. This simultaneous presence of traditional and modern elements reflects the transitional nature of Indian society and supports Riggs' argument that developing countries often experience institutional dualism during the process of modernization (Riggs, 1964; Bhattacharya, 2018).

A defining characteristic of India's prismatic nature is its extensive socio-cultural diversity, which Riggs described as heterogeneity. India is a multicultural society comprising diverse linguistic, religious, ethnic, and regional groups. This diversity significantly influences governance and public administration because policymakers and administrators must accommodate varying social realities and developmental needs. Administrative decisions often require balancing national priorities with local aspirations, making governance more complex than in socially homogeneous societies. The coexistence of different cultural traditions and value systems creates a heterogeneous environment where traditional norms and modern administrative principles operate simultaneously. Consequently, public officials are frequently required to adapt policies according to local conditions while maintaining uniform national standards (Fadia & Fadia, 2020).

The influence of traditional institutions remains visible despite the growth of modern governance structures. For example, while recruitment to public services is formally based on merit and competitive examinations, social factors such as caste affiliations, community networks, and regional loyalties may still affect administrative interactions and political decision-making. Electoral politics often demonstrates the continued importance of caste and community identities, even within a democratic framework based on equality and universal participation. Such interactions between traditional social systems and modern institutions illustrate the prismatic character of Indian society, where modernization does not completely replace traditional structures but instead coexists with them (Chaturvedi, 2017).

Formalism is another major feature of India's administrative system. Riggs defined formalism as the discrepancy between official rules and actual practices. Indian public administration is governed by extensive legal frameworks, procedural regulations, and administrative guidelines designed to ensure transparency and accountability. However, the practical implementation of these regulations often differs from their intended objectives. Government policies and welfare schemes may be comprehensive in design, yet their execution frequently encounters obstacles such as bureaucratic delays, procedural complexities, inadequate resources, and administrative inefficiencies. As a result, there is often a significant gap between policy formulation and policy implementation. This difference between prescribed norms and operational realities is one of the clearest examples of formalism in Indian bureaucracy (Avasthi & Maheshwari, 2017).

The procedural orientation of Indian bureaucracy further reflects formalism. Administrative decision-making generally involves multiple levels of approval, extensive documentation, and strict adherence to rules and procedures. While these mechanisms are intended to promote accountability and prevent misuse of authority, they can also result in red tapism and delays in public service delivery. Citizens often experience difficulties in accessing government services because practical administrative procedures differ from the efficiency promised by formal regulations. Such situations demonstrate how formal structures may not always correspond with actual administrative outcomes, reinforcing Riggs' observations regarding prismatic societies (Bhattacharya, 2018).

The persistence of corruption and informal networks also illustrates the gap between formal administrative norms and actual behavior. Although official regulations emphasize impartiality, transparency, and merit-based decision-making, informal relationships and patronage networks sometimes influence administrative actions. Political pressures, personal connections, and social obligations may affect decisions relating to public services, resource allocation, and administrative appointments. These informal practices coexist with formal bureaucratic structures, thereby creating a divergence between official expectations and administrative realities. Riggs considered such conditions characteristic of prismatic societies where modern institutions have not fully displaced traditional patterns of social interaction (Nigro & Nigro, 2014).

India's diversity also significantly affects bureaucratic functioning. Public administrators operate in an environment characterized by multiple languages, religions, cultural traditions, and socio-economic conditions. Consequently, governance requires flexibility and contextual adaptation. Policies related to education, health, rural development, and social welfare often need to be modified according to local circumstances to achieve effective implementation. The necessity of managing diverse populations and balancing competing interests increases the complexity of administration and highlights the heterogeneous nature of Indian society (Fadia & Fadia, 2020).

The interaction between caste and governance further demonstrates India's prismatic characteristics. Despite constitutional commitments to equality and social justice, caste remains an influential factor in social and political life. Reservation policies in education, employment, and political representation represent efforts by the modern state to address historical inequalities rooted in traditional social structures. Thus, contemporary governance mechanisms frequently interact with traditional social realities, illustrating the coexistence of modern administrative principles and longstanding social institutions (Chaturvedi, 2017).

Political diversity adds another dimension to administrative heterogeneity. India's federal democratic system accommodates numerous national and regional political parties with differing ideological orientations and policy priorities. Coalition governments, regional interests, and electoral competition influence administrative decision-making and governance strategies. Bureaucrats often operate within a politically dynamic environment where competing demands and priorities shape policy implementation. This interaction between diverse political actors further reflects the complexity and heterogeneity associated with a prismatic society.

In conclusion, India continues to exhibit many characteristics of a prismatic society identified by Riggs. The coexistence of traditional and modern institutions, socio-cultural heterogeneity, formalism in administrative practices, and the influence of informal social networks on governance demonstrate the continuing relevance of the prismatic model. Although economic reforms, technological advancements, and administrative modernization have transformed many aspects of governance, the interaction between traditional social structures and modern bureaucratic institutions remains a defining feature of Indian public administration. Therefore, the concept of the prismatic society continues to provide a useful framework for understanding the complexities of governance and bureaucratic functioning in contemporary India.

Administrative Transformation in India

The transformation of public administration in India has been a continuous process shaped by political, economic, social, and technological changes since independence. Administrative transformation refers to the restructuring and modernization of governmental institutions, processes, and practices to improve efficiency, accountability, transparency, and responsiveness. The Indian administrative system, inherited from the colonial period, was primarily designed to maintain law and order and collect revenue. However, after independence, the role of administration expanded significantly to include socio-economic development, welfare promotion, democratic governance, and citizen empowerment. Consequently, the Indian state undertook several administrative reforms aimed at adapting bureaucracy to the changing needs of society and governance (Mishra & Puri, 2018).

The adoption of the Constitution of India in 1950 marked the beginning of administrative transformation in the country. The Constitution established democratic governance, federalism, social justice, and the rule of law as fundamental principles of the Indian state. Public administration was entrusted with the responsibility of implementing constitutional values and promoting inclusive development. The expansion of governmental functions in areas such as education, healthcare, agriculture, rural development, and poverty alleviation significantly increased the scope and complexity of administration. As a result, bureaucratic institutions evolved from regulatory agencies into instruments of socio-economic transformation (Basu, 2021).

One of the most significant developments in administrative transformation was the emergence of the de-

developmental state. During the early decades after independence, India adopted a planned model of economic development. The establishment of institutions such as the Planning Commission and the implementation of Five-Year Plans required an active and interventionist bureaucracy capable of coordinating development programmes. Public administration played a central role in implementing welfare schemes, managing public enterprises, and promoting economic growth. This period witnessed the expansion of administrative machinery and the increasing involvement of the state in developmental activities (Jain, 2019).

The economic reforms introduced in 1991 represented a major turning point in the transformation of Indian administration. Liberalization, privatization, and globalization altered the relationship between the state, market, and society. The government's role shifted from direct control over economic activities to regulation, facilitation, and policy coordination. Bureaucratic institutions were required to become more flexible, efficient, and responsive to the needs of a competitive market economy. Administrative agencies increasingly focused on creating an enabling environment for economic growth while maintaining regulatory oversight. These changes contributed to a significant reorientation of governance practices and administrative priorities (Rao, 2020).

Decentralization has also played a crucial role in administrative transformation. The enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992 strengthened local self-government institutions and promoted participatory governance. Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies were granted constitutional status and entrusted with responsibilities related to local development and service delivery. Decentralization facilitated greater citizen participation in decision-making and improved administrative responsiveness to local needs. By bringing governance closer to the people, these reforms enhanced democratic accountability and strengthened grassroots administration (Singh & Sachdeva, 2017).

Technological advancement has emerged as one of the most important drivers of administrative transformation in contemporary India. The introduction of e-governance initiatives has significantly improved the efficiency and accessibility of public services. Programmes such as Digital India, BharatNet, and various online service portals have transformed traditional administrative processes by integrating information and communication technologies into governance. Services related to taxation, passports, banking, education, and welfare distribution are increasingly delivered through digital platforms. The use of technology has reduced administrative delays, improved transparency, minimized human discretion, and enhanced citizen convenience. Consequently, digital governance has become a key instrument for administrative modernization (Kumar & Bansal, 2021).

Transparency and accountability have also become central elements of administrative transformation. The enactment of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in 2005 marked a significant step toward open governance. The RTI Act empowered citizens to access information held by public authorities and enhanced public scrutiny of government actions. This legislation contributed to reducing secrecy in administration and encouraged greater accountability among public officials. Similarly, initiatives such as social audits, public grievance redressal systems, and citizen charters have strengthened transparency and promoted a culture of responsiveness within public administration (Paul, 2018).

Another notable aspect of administrative transformation is the growing emphasis on citizen-centric governance. Traditional bureaucratic systems often focused on adherence to rules and procedures, whereas contemporary governance prioritizes service delivery and citizen satisfaction. Government programmes increasingly emphasize outcome-based administration, stakeholder participation, and public

engagement. Initiatives such as Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), Aadhaar-enabled services, and online grievance redressal mechanisms have improved service delivery and reduced opportunities for corruption and inefficiency. These reforms reflect a shift from process-oriented administration to results-oriented governance (Laxmikanth, 2022).

Despite these achievements, several challenges continue to hinder the process of administrative transformation. Bureaucratic inertia, procedural delays, corruption, political interference, and capacity constraints remain significant obstacles to effective governance. The implementation of reforms often varies across regions due to differences in institutional capacity and resource availability. Moreover, rapid technological advancement has created new challenges related to cybersecurity, digital inclusion, and data privacy. Addressing these issues requires continuous administrative innovation, training, and institutional strengthening (Prasad & Prasad, 2019).

Global trends in governance have further influenced administrative transformation in India. Concepts such as good governance, sustainable development, collaborative governance, and evidence-based policymaking have gained prominence in recent years. Public administration increasingly emphasizes transparency, participation, accountability, effectiveness, and inclusiveness as essential principles of governance. The adoption of these approaches reflects India's efforts to align administrative practices with global standards while addressing domestic developmental challenges (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015).

Administrative transformation in India has been shaped by constitutional reforms, economic liberalization, decentralization, technological innovation, and changing citizen expectations. The transition from a colonial administrative system to a modern governance framework reflects the dynamic nature of public administration in a developing democracy. While significant progress has been achieved in enhancing efficiency, transparency, and citizen participation, persistent challenges continue to require attention. Nevertheless, ongoing reforms and innovations indicate a strong commitment to creating a responsive, accountable, and citizen-oriented administrative system capable of addressing the complexities of contemporary governance.

Continuing Relevance of the Prismatic-Sala Model

Although India has experienced substantial administrative transformation, many features of the Prismatic-Sala Model remain relevant.

Persistence of Formalism

Administrative delays, procedural complexity, and implementation gaps continue to characterize many government programs. The difference between official rules and actual practices remains a challenge in several sectors.

Enduring Heterogeneity

India's social diversity continues to influence governance and administrative decision-making. Public administrators must constantly navigate competing social, cultural, and political demands.

Overlapping Jurisdictions

India's federal structure often results in overlapping responsibilities among central, state, and local gove-

rnments. Issues such as education, health, and environmental governance require coordination among multiple agencies, reflecting the overlapping functions identified by Riggs.

Critique of Riggs' Model

Despite its contributions, Riggs' theory has faced criticism.

Some scholars argue that the model oversimplifies societal development by presenting modernization as a linear process. Others contend that globalization and technological change have transformed administrative systems in ways that Riggs could not have anticipated (Heady, 2001).

Critics also suggest that the model tends to generalize the experiences of developing countries without adequately considering historical and contextual differences.

Nevertheless, the concepts of formalism, heterogeneity, and overlapping remain valuable analytical tools for understanding governance challenges in India and other developing nations.

Conclusion

Fred W. Riggs' Prismatic-Sala Model continues to provide important insights into the functioning of Indian bureaucracy. The concepts of formalism, heterogeneity, and overlapping help explain many of the challenges associated with governance and policy implementation in India. Although administrative reforms, economic liberalization, and digital governance initiatives have transformed public administration, traditional social structures and informal practices continue to shape bureaucratic behavior.

India's administrative system reflects both continuity and change. While significant progress has been made toward creating a more efficient and accountable bureaucracy, the coexistence of traditional and modern elements remains a defining feature of governance. Consequently, Riggs' ecological perspective retains considerable relevance for scholars and practitioners seeking to understand the complexities of public administration in contemporary India.

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