

A Feminist Analysis of Indian Bureaucracy

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Abstract

The Indian bureaucratic system occupies a central position in governance, often associated with neutrality, rationality, and procedural efficiency. Yet, when viewed through a gendered lens, this apparent neutrality begins to reveal uneven patterns of representation and participation. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality in public employment, women's presence within higher civil services continues to remain limited, raising questions that extend beyond access alone. Attention to these patterns suggests that the issue may not lie solely in the entry of women into bureaucratic institutions, but also in the ways in which these institutions are structured and experienced. Hierarchical arrangements, organizational norms, and workplace practices appear to intersect with broader social realities, shaping the conditions under which women enter, remain, and advance within these spaces. The assumption of bureaucratic impersonality, therefore, invites reconsideration when situated within historically gendered contexts. The experiences of women within bureaucracy are not uniform; they are mediated by factors such as caste, class, and social location, pointing towards the relevance of an intersectional understanding. Seen in this light, the persistence of gender disparity within bureaucracy may be read not simply as a gap in representation, but as an outcome shaped by deeper institutional and social structures, which continue to influence the possibilities of participation and authority.

Keywords- bureaucracy, gendered power, institutional hierarchies, feminist theory

Introduction

Bureaucracy in India occupies a central position within the functioning of the state, often associated with continuity, rationality, and administrative efficiency. It is frequently understood as a neutral institutional mechanism designed to implement policies and maintain governance across changing political regimes. However, such an understanding tends to overlook the internal dynamics through which bureaucratic institutions are organized and sustained.

A closer engagement with bureaucratic structures brings attention to the hierarchies, norms, and power relations that shape everyday functioning within these institutions. These structures are not merely administrative arrangements; they are embedded within broader social contexts that influence how authority is distributed, exercised, and experienced. The organization of roles, the concentration of decision-making power, and the valuation of

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certain forms of work over others together contribute to defining the institutional character of bureaucracy. Within this framework, the location of women in Indian bureaucracy raises critical questions. While formal provisions guarantee equality in public employment, patterns of representation and advancement suggest uneven participation, particularly in positions of authority. These patterns invite a shift in focus from questions of access alone to an examination of the institutional design of bureaucracy itself. The issue, therefore, is not only who enters these structures, but how these structures operate and whom they enable or constrain. Engaging with feminist critiques of institutions, it becomes possible to reconsider the assumption of bureaucratic neutrality. Institutional hierarchies and modes of functioning may reproduce forms of exclusion that are not always explicit but are nonetheless consequential. In this sense, the analysis of women's position within bureaucracy opens up a broader inquiry into how power operates within administrative systems, and how these systems are shaped by, and in turn reinforce, existing social relations.

The discussion that follows situates women's participation within Indian bureaucracy in relation to these institutional dynamics, drawing attention to the ways in which structure, hierarchy, and social context intersect to shape patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

Bureaucracy as Structure: Hierarchy, Rationality, and Power

Bureaucracy has been widely conceptualized as a rational form of administrative organization, characterized by hierarchy, specialization, and rule-bound functioning. Max Weber's formulation of the "ideal type" of bureaucracy describes a system in which authority is arranged in a graded hierarchy, tasks are distributed among technically qualified officials, and decision-making is governed by formal rules and written procedures (Weber, 1947). These features are generally understood to enhance efficiency, predictability, and administrative coherence.

However, the structural features that underpin bureaucratic organization also shape the distribution and exercise of power within it. Hierarchy, while ensuring coordination, establishes vertical chains of authority in which decision-making is concentrated at higher levels, limiting the autonomy of those positioned lower within the structure. This concentration of authority is not merely functional; it produces differentiated access to institutional power, visibility, and influence. Similarly, the division of labour organizes roles in ways that extend beyond technical specialization. The allocation of tasks and responsibilities often reflects implicit valuations of certain forms of work over others, contributing to uneven distributions of status and authority within the institution. These arrangements, while formally neutral, operate within broader social contexts that influence how roles are assigned and recognized. The principle of impersonality, central to Weberian bureaucracy, further complicates this understanding. While intended to ensure fairness and objectivity, impersonal rules may obscure the ways in which institutional norms are shaped by historically dominant groups. Expectations around mobility, availability, and career progression, embedded within bureaucratic procedures, may not be equally accessible to all individuals. In this sense, neutrality is not simply an inherent feature of bureaucracy but is produced through rules that may carry implicit assumptions.

Viewed through this lens, bureaucracy can be understood not only as an administrative mechanism but as a structured system of power, where hierarchy, rules, and organizational practices interact to shape patterns of authority and exclusion. Such an understanding provides a necessary framework for examining how these institutional arrangements affect the location and experiences of women within bureaucratic systems.

Locating Women in Indian Bureaucracy

The entry of women into Indian bureaucracy is closely linked to the constitutional framework established after independence. The Constitution of India guarantees equality of opportunity in matters of public employment, formally prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex and enabling women to aspire to positions within the civil services. These provisions laid the foundation for women's inclusion within state institutions, marking an important departure from earlier patterns of exclusion. However, the formal commitment to equality did not immediately translate into uniform institutional practices. For instance, Rule 5(3) of the Indian Administrative Service (Recruitment) Rules, 1954¹ empowered the government to require a female officer to resign upon marriage on grounds of administrative efficiency. The presence of such a provision highlights the persistence of gendered assumptions within bureaucratic structures even after the adoption of constitutional guarantees. It was only after sustained opposition from women parliamentarians and political leaders that this rule was removed in 1972, reflecting the role of political contestation in expanding women's access to bureaucratic careers. Over time, women's participation in civil services has shown a gradual increase, particularly at the level of recruitment. Trends in the Civil Services Examination indicate a rising proportion of successful female candidates, with women securing a significant share of top ranks in recent years. Despite this, their overall presence within higher civil services remains limited when viewed across longer time periods. Data on the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) from 1970 to 2020 illustrates this pattern. In the initial decades, women constituted a very small proportion of recruits, often remaining below ten percent. While their share has increased steadily over time, reaching close to one-third of recruits in recent years, their cumulative representation within the service continues to remain relatively low (TCPD-IAS Dataset). This suggests that the expansion of women's entry into bureaucracy has been gradual rather than substantial. Further, participation patterns reveal variations across social categories. The proportion of female aspirants in civil services examinations remains lower than that of male candidates across all groups. This gap becomes more pronounced among candidates from marginalized communities, where the share of women is significantly lower compared to men. Such patterns indicate that access to bureaucratic careers is shaped not only by gender but also by intersecting factors such as caste and socio-economic background (IndiaSpend analysis of UPSC data)². Taken together, these trends indicate that while formal barriers to entry have been reduced over time, women's presence within Indian bureaucracy remains uneven. The gradual increase in

¹ THE INDIAN ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICE (RECRUITMENT) RULES, 1954 [Microsoft Word - Revised AIS Rule Vol II Rule 03.DOC \(dopt.gov.in\)](https://www.dopt.gov.in/MSWord/RevisedAISRuleVolIIRule03.DOC)

² Bhatia, S., & Chawla, A. (2022, January 5). *Why there have been so few women in India's administrative services*. IndiaSpend. <https://www.indiaspend.com/gendercheck/why-there-have-been-so-few-women-in-indias-administrative-services-795991>

representation reflects the impact of constitutional provisions and policy changes, yet the overall distribution continues to reveal significant gender disparities. At the same time, this presence is not incidental; it reflects the outcome of sustained struggles, negotiations, and interventions that have gradually expanded women's access to bureaucratic spaces. The gradual increase in representation, therefore, may be read not simply as a linear process of inclusion, but as one mediated by collective efforts that have pushed institutional boundaries over time.

Institutional Structures and Gendered Power in Indian Bureaucracy

The increasing presence of women within formal workplaces has also brought attention to the conditions under which they work, leading to gradual recognition of gender-specific challenges within institutional spaces. One of the most significant developments in this regard was the formulation of the Vishakha Guidelines by the Supreme Court in 1997, which, emerging in response to sustained advocacy and mobilization by women's groups, recognized sexual harassment at the workplace as a violation of women's rights. This was later followed by the enactment of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act in 2013, which provided a formal legal framework to address such concerns. The emergence of these legal mechanisms is notable not only for what they address, but also for what they reveal. Despite decades of women's entry into public institutions, the formal recognition of workplace harassment as a structural issue came relatively late. This delay points towards the ways in which bureaucratic institutions, while formally inclusive, have been slow to respond to the lived experiences of women within them. The introduction of these frameworks marks an important shift; however, it also raises questions about the extent to which legal interventions alone can transform deeply embedded institutional practices. While laws such as the POSH Act seek to ensure safer and more equitable working environments, the broader structure of bureaucracy continues to shape how power is distributed and exercised. The hierarchical organization of bureaucracy concentrates authority at higher levels, where women remain underrepresented. This concentration of power limits the ability of women to influence decision-making processes, even when they are present within the system. As a result, inclusion does not necessarily translate into substantive participation. The division of labour within bureaucratic institutions further reinforces these dynamics. Women are often channelled into roles associated with social sectors or welfare administration, while positions linked to core governance and strategic decision-making remain predominantly occupied by men. Such patterns reflect not only institutional practices but also the interaction between bureaucratic structures and wider societal norms that shape perceptions of suitability and competence. Norms around leadership, authority, and professionalism are often embedded within gendered expectations, influencing how women's work is evaluated and recognized. The dynamics may manifest in subtle forms of exclusion, including differential standards of assessment, limited access to informal networks, and constraints on career progression. These structural and cultural dynamics shape not only the distribution of roles within bureaucracy but also the extent to which women are able to participate in substantive decision-making processes. While women's presence within the system has increased over time, their location within institutional hierarchies often limits their engagement with sites of policy formulation and

administrative control. Studies on representative bureaucracy suggest that numerical inclusion does not automatically translate into influence, particularly when access to positions of authority remains uneven. This disjunction between presence and power is further reinforced through institutional practices governing postings, cadre allocations, promotions, and career trajectories. As a result, their participation, while visible, remains circumscribed within specific domains. This indicates that the question is not simply whether women are present within bureaucracy, but where they are positioned within it and what forms of authority they are able to exercise.

The implications of these institutional arrangements become more apparent when attention shifts from formal structures to their everyday functioning. Within the Indian bureaucratic system, the realities of hierarchy and power are often experienced through patterns that are not always visible at the level of formal rules. The presence of women in leadership positions, for instance, may at times reflect what Rosabeth Moss Kanter conceptualized as ‘tokenism’, where inclusion serves a symbolic function without substantially altering underlying power relations. In such contexts, the appointment of women to visible positions does not necessarily translate into control over institutional priorities. Empirical insights further illuminate these dynamics. Drawing on a comparative analysis of civil services in South Asia, Syeda Lasna Kabir (2013) observes that women officers frequently describe their position within administrative structures as being relegated to a “number two” role, even when occupying formally significant posts. This suggests that authority within bureaucratic institutions is not only determined by formal designation but is also shaped by informal practices, perceptions, and entrenched hierarchies that limit the exercise of power.

These patterns resonate with broader feminist critiques of bureaucracy, which question its claims to neutrality and rationality. As Ferguson (1984) argues, bureaucratic structures, with their emphasis on hierarchy, control, and impersonal authority, may reproduce forms of subordination rather than eliminate them. In this sense, the experiences of women within Indian bureaucracy point towards the persistence of gendered power relations embedded within institutional design, where formal inclusion coexists with constrained agency.

Rethinking Bureaucracy

The preceding analysis suggests that the question of women’s participation in Indian bureaucracy cannot be understood solely in terms of access or representation. The patterns observed uneven presence across hierarchies, segmentation of roles, and limited access to decision-making authority point towards deeper institutional dynamics that shape the distribution of power within bureaucratic structures. In this context, it becomes useful to revisit classical understandings of bureaucracy as a site of control. Karl Marx, in his critique of the modern state, conceptualized bureaucracy as an apparatus through which power is organized and exercised, reproducing hierarchical relations rather than neutral administration. Read alongside contemporary institutional realities, this perspective draws attention to the ways in which bureaucratic structures may not merely administer governance but also sustain asymmetries of authority. When situated within the Indian context, such a reading resonates with the patterns discussed earlier. The concentration of decision-making power at higher levels, the differentiated allocation of roles, and the persistence of informal hierarchies

together suggest that bureaucracy operates not only as an administrative system but also as a structured field of power. In this sense, the limited participation of women in positions of authority is not simply an outcome of insufficient inclusion but reflects the ways in which institutional arrangements continue to organize and reproduce inequality. Empirical evidence further substantiates the ways in which bureaucratic authority operates in gendered terms. A study by Bhumi Purohit (2024), based on a survey of 1,051 elected village council presidents in Telangana, highlights how interactions between elected representatives and bureaucratic actors are shaped by differential treatment. The findings indicate that women representatives report experiencing bureaucratic discretion at higher rates than their male counterparts; they are significantly more likely to encounter delays or refusals when seeking administrative support for policy implementation. These patterns point towards the persistence of informal hierarchies within state institutions, where formal positions of authority do not necessarily ensure equal recognition or cooperation. It suggests that bureaucratic practices may continue to mediate and, at times, constrain the effective exercise of that authority. The perception of women as less capable of mobilizing resources or implementing policies further reinforces these dynamics, shaping the terms on which they engage with administrative structures. Seen in relation to the preceding discussion, such findings indicate that the functioning of bureaucracy extends beyond formal rules to include discretionary practices that can reproduce existing inequalities. In this sense, bureaucratic institutions do not merely implement policy but also participate in structuring the limits of political authority, particularly for women operating within them.

The tension between feminist aspirations and bureaucratic structures has also been explored within feminist organizational scholarship itself. In her analysis of feminist organizations, Patricia Yancey Martin characterizes them as operating within what may be understood as a “feminist bureaucracy,” a hybrid form that combines commitments to equality with the hierarchical and procedural requirements of organizational functioning. Such formations, as she suggests, are marked by what Karen Ashcraft terms “organized dissonance,” where egalitarian ideals coexist with and are often constrained by bureaucratic arrangements. While this framework is useful in highlighting the complexities of institutional practice, it also draws attention to a deeper contradiction. The attempt to reconcile feminist principles with bureaucratic structures does not necessarily resolve the tension between them; rather, it may normalize the coexistence of equality and hierarchy within the same institutional space. In such contexts, the persistence of inequality is not always experienced as a failure of the system, but as an outcome that must be continuously managed and accommodated. This raises important questions about the transformative potential of bureaucratic institutions. If feminist goals are required to operate within organizational forms that are themselves structured through hierarchy, control, and differentiated authority, then the scope of transformation may remain inherently limited. The language of negotiation and accommodation, while capturing institutional realities, may also obscure the extent to which these structures shape and potentially constrain the possibilities of substantive change.

At the same time, these institutional dynamics also shape the terms on which individuals are able to act within bureaucratic settings. Bureaucratic functioning is not only a matter of formal rules and hierarchies but also involves the production of particular modes of conduct,

expression, and authority. The exercise of power within such institutions often requires adherence to established norms of professionalism, rationality, and detachment, which define what counts as legitimate administrative behaviour. Within this framework, the presence of women does not simply introduce new perspectives into existing structures; it is mediated by expectations that align with dominant institutional norms. The ability to be effective within bureaucracy may depend on conforming to these norms, which are historically associated with masculinized forms of authority. As a result, participation can entail a negotiation in which women are required to adapt to institutional expectations in order to be recognized as competent actors. This raises further questions about the nature of inclusion within bureaucratic systems. If the exercise of authority is contingent upon conformity to pre-existing norms, then the space for alternative ways of organizing, leading, or decision-making remains constrained. In this sense, the issue extends beyond access to positions or roles, and points towards the shaping of agency itself within bureaucratic institutions.

This also points towards the ways in which authority within bureaucratic institutions is not merely exercised but performed. The functioning of bureaucracy depends upon the enactment of roles that derive legitimacy from adherence to established norms of rationality, procedure, and professional conduct. To “perform bureaucracy” is, therefore, to align oneself with institutional expectations that define what constitutes appropriate administrative behaviour. In this sense, the exercise of authority becomes tied to the reproduction of these norms rather than to individual agency alone. The presence of women within such structures does not automatically disrupt these patterns; instead, it often requires navigating and, at times, embodying the very forms of authority that have historically excluded them. This suggests that inclusion may operate through adaptation as much as through transformation. Hannah Arendt suggests in her reflections about the understanding of bureaucratic power as a form of rule that operates through impersonal structures rather than identifiable actors. Authority, in this framework, is diffused across procedures and offices, making it difficult to locate responsibility while reinforcing compliance with institutional norms. Within such a system, the exercise of power is less about individual dominance and more about the continuous reproduction of a form that governs how action itself is possible.

The foregoing analysis suggests that the question of women’s place within Indian bureaucracy cannot be resolved within the terms in which it is often posed. The emphasis on inclusion, representation, and procedural reform assumes that bureaucracy is a neutral institutional form into which women can be more fully integrated. The discussion here indicates otherwise. Bureaucratic structures, with their hierarchical organization, norms of authority, and modes of functioning, are not external to inequality but are implicated in its production and regulation. This shifts the terms of the problem. The persistence of gendered disparities within bureaucracy is not simply a reflection of incomplete inclusion, but points towards the limits of attempting transformation within an institutional form that is itself structured through asymmetries of power. In this sense, the expansion of women’s presence, while significant, does not by itself alter the conditions under which authority is constituted or exercised. What follows from this is not a rejection of efforts towards inclusion, but recognition of their limits. A feminist engagement with bureaucracy must move beyond the question of how women can enter or advance within existing structures, and instead confront

the ways in which these structures shape, constrain, and define the possibilities of action. This entails a more fundamental interrogation of bureaucratic organization itself, its hierarchies, its claims to neutrality, and the forms of authority it sustains. To engage bureaucracy critically, therefore, is not only to seek greater representation within it, but to question whether its existing institutional logic can accommodate feminist principles without reproducing the very inequalities it seeks to address.

The argument advanced here also invites a reconsideration of how Indian bureaucracy itself is understood. It operates as a field of power whose apparent neutrality is sustained through social arrangements that unevenly distribute the capacity to enter, remain, and advance within it. While the examination system is often foregrounded as a site of meritocratic access, it does not exhaust the conditions that shape bureaucratic careers. Women enter this system from a social world structured by patrilocal marriage, unequal distributions of care work, familial gatekeeping, constraints on mobility, reputational surveillance, and differential access to durable networks. These conditions do not disappear upon entry into the state; they continue to shape postings, the ability to exercise voice, experiences of safety, and trajectories of advancement within bureaucratic institutions. In this sense, the boundary between “society” and “state” becomes difficult to sustain, as bureaucratic functioning remains entangled with broader social relations.

This is not a question of extending inclusion within an otherwise stable framework, but of situating bureaucracy within the social relations that shape its very operation. This also highlights the need for a more sustained engagement with intersectionality within the study of bureaucracy. Gender does not operate in isolation but is mediated through caste, class, religion, region, language, disability, and other axes of inequality. The institutional experiences of an upper-caste, urban woman officer are unlikely to mirror those of a first-generation rural Dalit woman officer, even within the same administrative structure. Attending to such differences is essential for understanding how bureaucratic power is differentially encountered and negotiated. Finally, the scope of analysis must extend beyond cisgender women. The implications of heteronormative service rules, familial expectations, and workplace cultures for queer and trans public servants remain largely absent from existing scholarship. A fuller account of bureaucracy as a gendered institution requires engaging with these exclusions, not as peripheral concerns, but as central to understanding how norms of belonging and legitimacy are produced within the state.

What is at stake, therefore, is not only the question of representation within bureaucracy, but the need to rethink the institutional form through which authority is organized and exercised.

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