

Public Administration Reforms in India: From Control to Performance Governance

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Abstract

Public administration in India has undergone gradual yet significant transformation since the economic reforms of the early 1990s. Traditional rule-based control mechanisms have increasingly been complemented by performance-oriented approaches aimed at improving efficiency, accountability, and service delivery. This paper examines public administration reforms in India up to 2017 from an institutional perspective, focusing on the shift from procedural control to performance governance. Using an original Performance Governance Transition Model (PGTM), the study analyses reforms related to administrative restructuring, results-based management, and accountability mechanisms. The paper argues that administrative reform in India represents an incremental transition rather than a rupture, reflecting institutional learning within a complex democratic system.

Keywords: Public administration reforms, performance governance, accountability, institutional change, India

1. Introduction

Public administration forms the operational core of the state. In India, administrative institutions inherited a strong rule-bound and hierarchical structure designed to ensure uniformity and control. While this framework provided stability, it also generated concerns related to inefficiency, procedural rigidity, and limited responsiveness.

Since the 1990s, administrative reforms have sought to address these limitations by introducing performance-oriented practices without dismantling the foundational legal-bureaucratic structure. This paper examines these reforms through a governance lens rather than a managerial or political one.

The central argument of this paper is that public administration reforms in India reflect a gradual transition toward performance governance while retaining core principles of administrative accountability and legality.

2. Public Administration Reform: Conceptual Perspectives

The literature on administrative reform highlights a shift from traditional public administration toward new public management and, subsequently, governance-oriented approaches. While early reforms emphasized efficiency and managerial autonomy, later frameworks stressed accountability, coordination, and citizen orientation.

In developing democracies, reform trajectories are shaped by institutional capacity, legal constraints, and political context. Scholars caution against wholesale transplantation of managerial models, advocating instead for adaptive reforms aligned with domestic institutional realities.

Indian administrative reforms illustrate this adaptive approach, blending control mechanisms with selective performance-based innovations.

3. Analytical Framework: Performance Governance Transition Model (PGTM)

To analyse administrative reform systematically, this paper introduces the Performance Governance Transition Model (PGTM), comprising three stages:

- ❖ Rule-Based Control (RBC): Emphasis on procedures, hierarchy, and compliance.
- ❖ Performance Orientation (PO): Introduction of targets, monitoring, and results-based evaluation.
- ❖ Accountable Governance (AG): Integration of performance metrics with transparency, responsiveness, and institutional oversight.

The PGTM framework conceptualises reform as a continuum rather than a binary shift.

4. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative institutional methodology involving:

- ❖ Review of administrative reform reports and policy documents
- ❖ Analysis of governance initiatives introduced up to 2017
- ❖ Secondary literature on public administration reform in India
- ❖ Institutional assessment of accountability mechanisms

This approach prioritises institutional analysis over programme-specific evaluation.

5. Rule-Based Control and Administrative Legacy

India's administrative system historically prioritised procedural compliance and hierarchical supervision. These features ensured legal consistency but often constrained innovation and flexibility. Rule-based control remains an essential foundation for administrative accountability. However, excessive proceduralism has prompted reform efforts aimed at improving administrative performance without undermining legal safeguards.

PGTM Assessment: Rule-Based Control – High (Foundational Stage)

6. Emergence of Performance Orientation

Performance orientation in Indian public administration emerged through initiatives focused on outcome measurement, monitoring, and service delivery benchmarks. Administrative reforms encouraged goal-setting, reporting mechanisms, and evaluation processes.

These measures sought to improve efficiency while retaining institutional oversight. Importantly, performance indicators were gradually adapted to sectoral and administrative contexts.

PGTM Assessment: Performance Orientation – Moderate

7. Accountability and Governance Integration

The integration of performance orientation with accountability mechanisms represents a key reform challenge. Transparency initiatives, grievance redress systems, and oversight institutions have complemented performance-based reforms.

This integration reflects an evolving governance model that balances efficiency with democratic accountability.

PGTM Assessment: Accountable Governance – Moderate

8. Discussion

The Performance Governance Transition Model reveals that administrative reform in India has proceeded incrementally rather than through radical restructuring. This gradualism reflects institutional learning and adaptation within a democratic polity.

Rather than weakening administrative accountability, performance-oriented reforms have introduced new layers of oversight and evaluation.

9. Conclusion

This paper concludes that public administration reforms in India up to 2017 demonstrate a measured transition from rule-based control toward performance governance. Institutional continuity has enabled reforms to be absorbed without destabilising administrative capacity. Administrative reform in India should thus be understood as a process of evolutionary governance transformation rather than managerial overhaul.

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