

Nepal Administrative Staff College: Promises, Problems and Prospects

- N. N. Singh*

“A structure is any relation between entities that avoids dissolving. The self that you know as a human being is a structure, an organization of a billion entities.

An odd thing about structure is that they will dissolve both from success and failure, so the problem, if you want a structure, is to maintain a tension somewhere between the two.”

- Thaddeus Golas

Background

In many ways the year 1950 marks a watershed in Nepal's history: it effectively put an end to an age-old Rana oligarchy and ushered in an era of freedom and hope; of democracy and development. But it was not to be until late Shri Tank Prasad Acharya was sworn in as Prime Minister in 1956. He was a freedom fighter and a conscientious political leader with a vision and a blueprint for the future. But the nation's coffers were empty and he had to turn to friendly countries for assistance. A national development plan was prepared and to complement the government a modern civil service system along the lines of the British model, also in practice in India, was put in place. It was expected that such a bureaucracy would be based on 'merit' and be permanent 'with features of integrity, political impartiality and an ethos of public service' suited to the needs and challenges of a multi-party system of democratic governance. One government followed another and nothing appeared to have changed as the entire focus had shifted from merit to kinship, loyalty and 'sources' to power that be in all public appointments. From this time on Nepal's bureaucracy went in to a spin and in course of time started losing its *raison de'tre*, its very aim and purpose. This was evident from the failures of successive development plans in the country despite the best efforts of the government of the time. It may be recalled here that with a view to spurring the pace of development the experts in the National Planning Commission (NPC) tried hard and new ideas and slogans had come flying thick and fast. There was 'Go Back' to Village Campaign, Voluntary Labor Program, Panchayat Sector Plan, besides public and private, but

* Former Secretary GoN and former Executive Director, NASC.

nothing seemed to have worked . Then a Jaanch-Bujh Kendra' was formed superseding the authority of the government which sprang into action. Government secretaries were called to explain their numerous acts of omission and commission. In many cases their own junior staff members working there subjected them to long questioning. This was resented but in private but suffered in silence. Then the country was divided into four development regions and regional offices were set-up to see that development gathers momentum. The Zonal Commissioners and CDO's were involved in the development process. A National Development Council was formed under the chairmanship of the King which provided a forum to all concerned including the district representatives to regularly review the progress of plans and programs of the government being implemented in the districts. The King himself started camping in the headquarters of different regions by turn and there from directives were issued in good number to concerned ministries what were going wrong and how things were to be corrected. Slogans like 'to take Nepal to Asian standards' by certain date and Basic Needs Approach to development emanated from the NPC but, ironically, when a Prime Minister while presiding over a planned progress review meeting candidly admitted before the audience that though he had made several speeches eulogizing the clarion call to take the country to Asian standards, in truth he himself did not understand what did it really mean. It indeed summed up the whole process of development exercise taking place at the time. The lesson was inescapable. After much deliberations both in the National Planning Commission and in the National Development Council the conclusion was reached that unless and until the bureaucracy is made efficient and effective no development efforts could ever succeed. This realization in fact led to the establishment of the Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC).

Promises

The College was established in 1982 with a mandate to provide training to public servants of all levels with a view to enhancing their administrative capabilities and suggesting measures to enable public administrative system to gear it up to the task of national development and a mission to continuously strive for 'excellence' in management education, research and training, and a motto to 'help management be the best it can be.' How far NASC has traveled in this direction in the last twenty-five years since its inception is a moot point, but this is not the place to write about the issue. Suffice it to say, that NASC has been built and developed in a way that it has all the ingredients to keep its promises,

but in its quest for quality and excellence it will indeed have ‘miles to go’ through ‘dark and deep forests.’

To set up an organization and turn it into an institution is not easy even at the best of times. But credit to all those who were associated with or involved in the development of NASC, especially in its formative years. The task to be accomplished required a vision, commitment and managerial skills of high order. Everything was to be started almost from a scratch. The proposed college site selected was a plot of land with an old ‘durbar’ standing in the middle at Jawalakhel, the hub of Lalitput, and training programs were started immediately from a rented building nearby. But then finding qualified hands to run training courses for public sector employees was rather a difficult proposition then. Of course, government employees were being trained even earlier both abroad and in the country by the Ministry of General Administration and Nepal Public Service Commission. But they were of little significance or purpose in the prevailing situation which called for skills of modern management. It was, in a way, simple to erect physical infrastructure in place but indeed difficult to get suitable hands to run the proposed training programs and to do research works. Under the circumstances then, the college management sent out circulars and published notices inviting qualified candidates to apply for different jobs on offer. And they came from all different quarters, government, public corporations, universities etc. Some to benefit from new opportunities to study abroad and others to make a career and seek advancement for themselves. And they brought with them the ‘organization culture’ of where they had worked earlier.

Simultaneously, renovation and new construction works had started at Jawalakhel. In time they were ready. What is on view there today is one of the best physical facilities available in the country. Spread over 3.7 hectars of land the College has 20 training halls, 20 syndicate rooms, two residential blocks, an auditorium with 300 seating capacity, a desktop publishing center, a library with over 9000 books and journals on public administration/management, as well as a canteen and some sports and other recreational facilities. You can also locate the old ‘durbar’, now a renovated one, maintaining its old architecture and so combining the old and the new, housing the college administration with a fine sculptured marble emblem in the front signifying what the College in spirit stands for. As a whole, the idyllic surroundings, the mix of the old and the new lend special charm, beauty and harmony befitting NASC’s activities.

As mentioned earlier, NASC had started its mandated works in quite earnest so much so that in the very year of its establishment and thereafter it has successfully conducted a public service induction training program for 81 candidates and in-service training programs for different categories of government employees besides holding workshops, seminars, symposiums, et al. They have multiplied over the years both in types and quality. Looking back, it appears that for the first seven years or so NASC kept on a smooth and steady progress and it all seemed to be going on very well.

Problems

However, the trouble was soon to be started following a political change in 1990. National Elections were held in 1991, which saw the Nepali Congress coming to power. It lost no time in forming an Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC) to recommend timely changes in the bureaucracy which was considered 'extractive' rather than 'productive.' It was seen that the public sector in general and the civil service in particular needed to cultivate a 'service culture.' The detailed recommendations of the ARC were extensive and radical. NASC was identified as a 'key agency' to assist in facilitating the needed changes through training and development interventions. However, a chronic lack of political foresight within the governing party leading into overt factionalism and its inability to reach a consensus on a vote to the King's speech to the Parliament led to mid-term elections which resulted in a fractured mandate and ever since Nepal has been made to endure one minority government, two coalition governments, a short spell of the King's direct rule, and now an eight party coalition government. Truth to say, all this has adversely affected political stability and prevented democratic culture to seep into the governance of the country. Corruptions have by now become endemic and widespread and are slowly eating into the very vitals of our polity. Unfortunately bureaucracy has stood badly shaken by the political instability leading to frequent changes within it. This is further exacerbated by its historical roots going back to Rana times when all appointments were typically through patronage cascading from the prime minister outwards from Kathmandu and downwards through the administration. Such appointments were then usually made for one year, and the absence of guaranteed employment encouraged government officials to make quick financial returns. This, sad to say, is even today the practice, albeit the loyalty has now shifted to different political parties. This has, unfortunately, fragmented the entire bureaucracy and as a result has gravely jeopardized any prospect of local economic development. No wonder Nepal still remains a least developed country

and perilously poor. As a consequence, the remuneration paid to public sector employees remains pathetically and dangerously low from the point of view of potential corruption among the emerging neo-feudal class with their rising aspirations now constituting the bulk of the urban population as also the government. These factors were impacting on the change and institutional development of NASC in 1992, as they will always do so long as NASC remains inextricably linked to the government administrative system.

In 1992, NASC was obviously found to be on the decline. As is only to be expected during a transition, an institution generally finds itself in turmoil. There are always some uncertainties and there are always elements who lurk and wait for uncertain situations in which they show their true colors and they can always be identified. It was observed that for nearly three years NASC had been drifting. There were manifestations of internal bickering, frustrations and indiscipline openly demonstrated on the college campus adversely affecting both the quality and quantity of NASC's outputs. This is best illustrated by the recorded facts and statistics relating to classroom training (contact) hours and participant hours (the training hour times, the number of hours). It was obvious that the average number of classroom hours undertaken by the professional staff had fallen from a high of nearly 100 a year to around 40 hours, fewer than in its first year of operation. The number of participant hours had similarly dropped from a high of ninety five thousand a year to forty five thousand a year. This clearly showed that NASC was not living up to its build-in potential and promises to provide sufficient training for the public sector employees. Also, NASC's other areas of activities were not taking place. Research had virtually all but stopped. Consultancy work carried out was minimal, thus preventing NASC as an institution from generating additional resources for its further development. In reality, many senior staff members were undertaking consultancy works on their own and forming teams from within NASC staff to run them, in many cases competing with the very organization which provided them employment and trained them abroad, thus seriously breaching the discipline and gravely jeopardizing the future of NASC. This also meant that the physical facilities created with generous foreign assistance were not only misused but also the human resources developed with help from the British Council and UNDP were not being rightly utilized. It may also be noted here that by this time the organizational structure of NASC had evolved into a long hierarchy of some seven levels of authority, most of the decisions needing approval from the Executive Director, thereby protracting the decision-making. Within the structure, staff had become badly factionalized resulting in weak communications

between/among the different groups. There was little team spirit. In sum, the situation begetting then was totally negative and unproductive.

Prospects

However, there were many within NASC who were able, committed, hard-working but were marginalized. They favored 'change' and improvements in NASC's mode of operation. They were encouraged to come forward with their suggestions for improvements and reforms. The group produced an 'agenda for change' in the modus operandi of NASC. They identified a revised mission and the strategies to achieve it by ensuring staff commitment and ownership of 'change' breaking the stranglehold of factionalized groups to better deal with external factors, bringing in a system that rewards contribution and performance, delegating responsibility and accountability to the lower operational levels and thus improving both the quality and quantity of output for the customers of NASC. This agenda for 'change' was in fact a simple list of prioritized sequential actions that had to be taken simultaneously with adoption of suggested strategies in order to bring out tangible improvements. This way, quite understandably, both the quality and quantity of NASC's services witnessed a jump-start. As each agenda item had its decisive impact on the critical players within NASC their reactions to the proposed changes varied enormously. It also meant that individual staff members who felt unhappy with the proposed changes could attempt to use their political connections to sabotage the process of 'change.' Regrettably, for some of the players that was the time to change forever their involvement with NASC.

NASC's revised mission then was 'to provide continuous quality opportunities for the improvement of management capabilities in Nepal, which it is understood, presently stands further elaborated and enhanced, and strategies revised where to bring about positive change in the public sector through relevant training and development solutions. Through focused consultancy, through informed research, and policy identification, through the collation and dissemination of information, and through planned training development. The Group also recommended that NASC needed to become more accountable and to that end the organizational structure needed change so that the professional staff were given clear responsibilities for achieving the required outputs and in order to achieve all this it was incumbent upon NASC to move to active management of public resources, to failsafe proaction of improvement processes, ensure practical competency and concentrate on outputs and transparency of process.

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The Group observed, 'preaching about effectiveness and efficiency and prescribing solutions to clients from the top of an ivory tower rarely solves anything, climbing down and meeting with customers on their terms and listening to their needs provides a basis for proper intervention and change.' They further said 'NASC's contribution must be to move away from prescribed training and development solutions and move towards bespoke solutions designed after proper consultations with customers.' They continued 'opaqueness of operations is the hallmark of so many public institutions. It is as if they have been deliberately conceived to demonstrate the art of obfuscation. Transparency of process must be the order for both those who work inside and those who are the customers. NASC's contribution can be as a model of process transparency to which other institutions can look for inspiration.'

These were words written in anguish almost a decade ago. Since then many changes must have taken place within NASC as they always do whether you like them or not. Some of the staff who worked then have already moved on and some others have joined in. This is the way it always is, but the show must go on.

It may be appropriate here to mention that the group's recommendations were taken in all seriousness at the time and it maybe recalled that they yielded desired results. Those who performed got their rewards: they earned more from their consultancy work, which was not the practice earlier. This also meant that NASC was able to earn additional income and at the same time pay the staff more keeping them busier and happier. In 1993, the total earning from different activities by NASC was a meager Rs. 1.5 million in total, which in 1997 rose to a phenomenal Rs. 17.0 million. That was indeed a significant stride. During the same period training contact hours had more than doubled in respect of other programs and this brought more than treble the number of participants compared to 1993 figures. It is interesting to note here that the Nepal government budget allocation to NASC in that financial year stood at around Rs. 16 million. NASC had indeed great potential and a bright future ahead of it. But it need consider further diversifying and upgrading its programs to include academic courses as well like BBA and MBA, which are currently in hot demand in the country. Interestingly, this organization is christened as College, which in Britain means both a place of study and training. It is true that in the past this idea has been disapproved by top bureaucracy in the government who in their retirements themselves are running such programs. It may also think of running more training programs specifically designed and developed for different private sector clientele. Finally, NASC may also consider to distance or even de-link itself from

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the administrative decisions and practices of Nepal government with a view to escaping the domino effect and the implications of those decisions and thereby safeguarding the professional character of NASC. In that order it may think over the idea of converting NASC from a public enterprise into a Public Company Limited under Nepal Company Act 2063 B.S.

This year NASC is celebrating its silver jubilee. It is a right time for NASC to introspect and renew itself and move ahead in quest of its ideal 'to be the best it can be.'

*Wear, and sick of asking
What I am, and what I ought to be,
At this vessel's prow I stand, which bear me
Forwards, forwards, over the starlit sea.*

From Self-Dependence
By Matthew Arnold