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**Is India a Flailing State?  
Detours on the Four Lane Highway to Modernization**

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**Introduction**

The premise of the recent Indian novel *Q&A* is that the hero, an uneducated working class waiter in a downscale restaurant, has won a billion rupees in a game show that requires answers to twelve questions of increasing difficulty. The novel then weaves in and out of the hero's life with vignettes that reveal how he came to know the answers to each of the questions. The novel opens with the hero having won the game show but does not have a million rupees but rather is being beaten by the police in a Mumbai police station as the producer of the game show, short on cash, has decided to pay-off the police to extract a false confession of cheating rather than pay out the winnings. This is not unusual. As one reads the novel in each instance in which the hero's life intersects with agents of the government—from police to hospitals to orphanages--he is treated with the same mix of venality and casual brutality. This is especially striking for two reasons. First, the bad behavior of the government is not a theme of the book nor is it ever remarked upon, rather these descriptions are there to provide verisimilitude of a real person's life—to make the book seem realistic and in-

touch with the “true” India. Second, the novel was written by an active duty member of the Indian Foreign Service.

To understand the Indian state today one has to read fiction that acknowledges it is fiction because its non-fiction, the streams of government reports and commissions and documents produced by official agencies (including of those foreign agencies working with the government) are truly fiction. Because of the incredibly spectacular intelligence, cleverness, and competence of the top tiers of the Indian government—in particular the national services such as the Indian Administrative Service—it has managed to project the myth that India is just another regular modern state, with a growing economy, a democratic politics, a functional civil service, and making progress on social issues. For instance, ask any of them in an official setting about India’s health system and you will get an elaborate and intriguing story about how many of this type of facility per that type of population, how each of those is staffed, what services they provide and the recent efforts to address their problems, like eliminating vacancies---all backed, if you want it, with data and reports. Travel to any part of India, but particularly the North—the BIMARU states—and you will realize that this description of India’s actual health system, while it may serve as a organizing myth for the normative goals of the system, is, as a description of India’s “health system”, a complete fiction.

India today is a fascinating mix. The economy is booming. Amazingly, after two decades of rapid growth performance that started in the 1980s, and that continued, after a brief interruption in 1991, after the economic reforms through the 1990s has *accelerated again* in the last few years. India’s democracy, by any measure, continues to astound, as despite all kinds of pressures, free and fair elections are held and control of the

government changes hands regularly. Unlike all its neighbors, no one can argue that India is a failing or failed state.

The government of India and its personnel at the top levels in the elite institutions is impressive indeed. The Indian Supreme Court, the Indian Institutes of Technology, the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), India's nuclear program are all world class institutions. The IAS is full of officers who have passed an entrance examination and selection process that makes getting into Harvard look like a walk in the park. As a personal example, having lived and worked in India recently for the World Bank (from 2004 to 2007) my impression was that the World Bank, which tries to recruit staff of high quality with international expertise (and to my assessment succeeds), was by and large matched or over-matched at nearly every level by their counter-parts at the corresponding levels in the government. The brains of the Indian state can formulate excellent policies and programs in nearly every domain. The head is so strong it can even remain in teetering control of the mountain of official paper work the maintenance of the appearance of the function of those programs requires (no one who has visited the offices of senior IAS officers have help but be awed at the amount of paperwork they handle—and simultaneously horrified by the amount they have to).

And yet, as I describe more fully below the capability of the Indian state to implement programs and policies is weak—and in many domains it is not obvious it is improving. In police, tax collection, education, health, power, water supply—in nearly every routine service—there is rampant absenteeism, indifference, incompetence, and corruption.

How does one reconcile the contradictions of a booming economy and democracy with world class elite institutions and yet chaotic conditions in service provision of the most rudimentary types? I argue that for India we need a new category. *I argue that India is today a **flailing** state---a nation-state in which the head, that is the elite institutions at the national (and in some states) level remain sound and functional but that this head is no longer reliably connected via nerves and sinews to its own limbs.* In many parts of India in many sectors, the everyday actions of the field level agents of the state—policemen, engineers, teachers, health workers—are increasingly beyond the control of the administration at the national or state level.

The contrast with China could not be more striking. In China one worries that, due to the lack of the processes of democratic representation the head of the state, while capable, is beyond the control of the citizens. Yet, at the same time one reads of local government officials being *executed* for corruption. Clearly the head has a strong interest in retaining control of the administrative apparatus of implementation.

The first section outlines the four-fold structure of the transitions to modernization and suggests the term “flailing” state for those for which a primary failure is in administration. The second section gives evidence from a variety of sectors as to why India can be said to be a flailing state—with examples from a variety of publicly provided services: education, health, transfer programs, driver’s licenses. The third section, the most speculative, presents conjectures about the underlying causes of the failures of administrative modernization to date and what the future might hold.

#### **D) What is a flailing state? Varieties of Deviations from Four-Fold Modernism**

The idea of “development” as an endeavor has been heavily driven by notions of a four-fold transformation that was called modernization. To become “developed” the newly colonized countries were expected to follow, roughly, a faster version of the historical transformation of the countries—almost exclusively Western in origin—who were then developed. This was a four-fold process of economic, political, administrative, and social transformation from “pre-modern” to “modern” institutional arrangements. I am going to describe that four-fold transition, including how the modern has moved to become in many instance “post-modern.”

Before I venture into this territory let me just issue three big caveats. First, much of what I am going to say is the kind of broad-brush descriptions that are entirely out of fashion, for many good reasons, with historians and social scientists. I am well aware that to every generalization I make there are a host of exceptions, divergences, and, one might say, counter-narratives. But if one wants to speak of where a notion and nation as complex as “India” is headed one has to pick some narrative thread and stick to it.

A second difficulty of this discussion is that the set of ideas called “modernization,” the view that there is a single linear path of “development” has been intellectually completely discredited as a positive or descriptive notion. But this disappearance as a positive theory and part of respectable social science does not mean it has disappeared as a normative view, either popularly or organizationally. While no one today defends modernization, the overarching narrative of “development” as embodied in actions of all of the official agencies remains modernization. As a program of action and normative goal there is no compelling alternative. So at one and the same time no one believes in modernization and everyone believes in modernization.

Third, as I articulate in the discussion, the world has moved on from the modern to the post-modern. As I will show, this enormously complicates any discussion as many of the ideas promoted as reactions to the success of modernization share similar vocabulary and hence a superficial resemblance to the pre-modern. I'll return to that later.

**I.a) The four-fold structure of the pre-modern, modern and post-modern**

*Economic.* The pre-modern economy is one characterized by most of the labor force engaged in agriculture and resource based activities, low levels of income, little industrialization and few people engaged in large scale enterprises of any kind. The economic transition to modern that I wish to identify is not just the shift in early industrialization from agriculture to factories but the equally important later shift to the large scale industrial corporation with professional management. That is I am thinking of the rise of the “modern” economy as described in Chandler’s magnificent *Scale and Scope*. This transition created large scale organizations who emphasized the benefits of coordination and economies of scale achievable with hierarchical management. I am regarding as the paradigm of a “modern” economy not the transition from mercantilism to market but the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century transition to “managerial capitalism” (Chandler, 1977) and the multi-divisional firm as described by early practitioners such as Barnard’s *Functions of the Executive* and Sloan’s *My Years with General Motors*. This can be contrasted with an emerging “post-modern” economy in which the gains to flexibility and creativity exceed those of coordination and scale (Roberts).

*Political.* Any description I can give of the political transition to the modern will be inadequate, particularly when compared to recent magisterial expositions such as

Bayly's *Birth of the Modern World*, but to my mind it has two key, related elements. One element is the transition of the proto-typical relation between the ruled and the ruler(s) from subject to citizen. To caricature, a pre-modern conception was that the people living in a territory were chattel of the state, who could be transferred from one ruler to another. The modern conception is that the citizens constitute the state which exists legitimately only as an expression of their will.

A second foundation of the modern political state is the expansion, in fits and starts over time, towards the idea of universal equal treatment of all citizens by the state—the extension of the franchise being an obvious, but not the only example. This dates the emergence of “modern” polities not into the 18<sup>th</sup> century or early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (by which times many countries unambiguously had some form of “democracy”) but rather into the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, arriving only definitively and irreversibly after the debacle of World War I saw the definitive collapse of royalty as an alternative. Of course, the triumph of this notion in practice took into our lifetimes with respect to Africa Americans—which again stresses that categories are not hard and fast but hugely permeable and co-exist.

*Administrative.* The “modern” administration is the civil service bureaucracy, as is typified say, by the post office. The description by Max Weber of this new type of organization is justifiably called a Weberian bureaucracy. The central defining features are merit based recruitment, tenure in office not linked to personal or political patron, hierarchical structures, with the agents of the organization tasked with performing through an impersonal application of rules. Since the course of administrative modernism is the main subject I elaborate this more fully below.

*Social.* The other three modernizations were expected to go hand in hand with a social modernization, particularly with regard to the primacy of the needed economic, political and administrative modernizations over social ties. That is, modern economic transactions were expected to depend on arms-length exchanges that were not (necessarily) embedded in other social relationships—either lateral or vertical (e.g. free labor). The rise of the modern polity similarly depended on the construction of an “imagined community” (Anderson) of the nation for which an individual was expected to feel some solidarity and ascriptive identity. This in particular in the experience of the West required overcoming religious affiliation and regional sentiment in favor of the nation-state.

The triumph of the impersonal application of the rules that treated all citizens as equally placed required that this relationship between human beings was socially legitimate—which required overcoming both vertical allegiances (e.g. to patrons), vertical entitlements to superior treatment, and also horizontal attachments to treat members of one’s own group (by ethnicity, religion, political persuasion) as superior in fulfilling their tasks.

Table 1: The four-fold transition from pre-modern to modern, following on to post-modern			
	Pre-modern	Modern	Post-Modern
Economic	Agricultural, small scale, face to face transactions	Large scale corporations, creation of institutions for large scale impersonal transactions	Move to production of immaterial value, near zero transaction costs, product differentiation
Political	Fractured, personalistic, subjects not citizens	Citizens control nation-state, equal treatment of all citizens	Deeper levels of participation, more local
Administrative	Personalistic, appendage of office, patronage based.	Civil service bureaucracies (merit based recruitment, hierarchical), impersonal applications of rules	Greater civic engagement, “Re-inventing” government, more flexibility, the new public sector management (autonomy for accountability)
Social	Small scale (kith and kin) local affiliations plus regional, ethnic and sectarian	Nationalism as a primary social affiliation	Proliferation of identities, micro-communities, globalization

The essence of modernization as development was a narrative that was both positive and normative both in retrospect and prospect. The dominant narrative told as history was the rise of the West, in which all the existing countries went through a mostly similar set of stages to arrive at the “modern” with roughly similar features—industrial economies, liberal multi-party democracies with universal franchise, civil service bureaucracies as the main agents of implementation, and “nationalism” as a social force. Moreover, this was normatively regarded as a “rise” of the West. At its most blatant, the history of administrative modernization in the USA was called the “Progressive” movement—hard to argue there was value neutrality. Again, the dominant narrative was

that all four of these transitions were “progress” and progress that was not just the inevitable hand of history but also good.

### **I.b) Deviations from the four fold path: Distinguishing Failing from Flailing**

The concept of a “failing state” has achieved wide currency, including, like every concept these days of any heft, its own index (published by *Foreign Policy* and the Fund for Peace). Their “failing state” index combines a dozen indicators (four social, two economic, and six political) to come up with an omnibus ranking with Sudan, Iraq and Somalia at the bottom and, naturally, the Nordics Sweden, Finland, Norway at the top. While it is obvious that there is no hard and fast definition for the concept of a “failing state” the index is plausible as it combines a variety of types of failure into a single index.

On this score India looks very good, especially compared to its neighbors. Out of the 177 countries ranked in 2007 India was 110<sup>th</sup> (better than 109 other countries, low rank means more failed). In contrast Pakistan was the 12<sup>th</sup> most failed state, Bangladesh 16<sup>th</sup>, Nepal 21<sup>st</sup>, Sri Lanka 25<sup>th</sup> and Afghanistan was 8<sup>th</sup>. But too rapid a pressure to aggregate ignores Tolstoy’s wise observation that “All happy families are alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” While there are obvious cases in which all four dimensions of the transition to a modern state have failed, there are also different types of failures. Some countries, like Cuba, have little economic progress but do have strong administrative systems in some dimensions. Other countries, like Bangladesh or Pakistan have weak democracies and weak administrative systems, but have had quite robust economic growth.

Table 3: Deviations from the positive description of the four-fold transition to modernization (“fail” is relative to the <i>expectations</i> of modernization not normative)						
Economic (rapid sustained growth)	Fail	Fail	Succeed	Fail	Succeed	<b>Succeed</b>
Political (mechanisms of political expression)	Fail	Fail	Fail	Succeed	Succeed	<b>Succeed</b>
Administrative (Capable bureaucracies)	Fail	Succeed	Succeed	Succeed	Succeed	<b>Fail</b>
Social (Nation-state affiliation)	Fail	Succeed	Succeed	Succeed	Succeed	<b>Mixed</b>
Name of type or representative types	Failed States	Pre-reform communist	Market Authoritarian	Successful Stagnaters	Stars	<b>Flailing</b>
Examples?	Somalia, DRC, Nepal, Burma, North Korea	Cuba, China (pre-78), Vietnam (pre-86)	Indonesia (1967-1998), Singapore, Malaysia, China, Vietnam,	Costa Rica	Korea, Taiwan	<b>India?</b>

The fascinating aspect of India is that, while it scores far above its neighbors in measures of democracy or human rights or absence of conflict—it does not outperform them in measures of human development outcomes and is side by side in measures of governmental effectiveness or (negatively) on corruption. Three quick examples of this phenomenon in cross-national rankings will suffice before moving to more India specific detail.

First, two of the components of the failed states index on which countries are ranked from 1 (best) to 10 (worst) are the “Progressive Deterioration of Public Services” and “Suspension or Arbitrary Application of the Rule of Law and Widespread Violation of Human Rights.” On the latter, India scores substantially better than any of its neighbors with a score of 5.4 while on the “Progressive Deterioration of Public Services”

India ranks worse than Sri Lanka or Nepal and only modestly better than Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Table 4: India scores far the best in its region on rule of law and human rights, but middle of the pack in services		
	Suspension of Rule of Law, Violation of Human Rights (1-10, 1 worst)	Progressive Deterioration of Public Services (1-10, 1 worst)
India	5.4	6.7
Sri Lanka	7.5	6.5
Bangladesh	7.8	6.6
Pakistan	8.7	7.1
Nepal	8.8	7.4

Source: Failed State Index, <http://www.fundforpeace.org/web/>

A second comparison is to compare a standard measure of “democracy” which is a measure of the “polity” which subtracts from a 1 to 10 measure of “democracy” a 1 to 10 measure of “autocracy” (recognizing that these can co-exist in various measures) so that complete democracy is a polity score of 10 and complete autocracy a polity score of negative 10 (e.g. Turkmenistan, North Korea are -9 in 2006). By these measures what is striking about India is not only that it is democratic today, but that it has been (almost) continuously democratic since independence and so has very little variability in the score as well. In contrast, most of its other South Asian neighbors have had mixed histories of military interventions, widespread civil conflicts, and autocratic regimes—and show both low average and highly volatile political regimes. And yet, if we compare these same countries on measures of an output that is universally acknowledged as desirable and primarily a governmental responsibility to ensure like child immunizations then not only

does India lag dramatically but has shown retrogression. Whereas both India and Bangladesh has DPT3 immunization coverage of around 70 percent in 1995 by 2006 this had risen to 88 percent in Bangladesh but *fallen* to 55 percent in India. This “democracy/performance” puzzle is also revealed to some extent in a general indicator of well-being like infant mortality (which also, since it is influenced by income, distribution of income, maternal education, nutrition and government services is taken an omnibus non-money metric measure of performance). India is superior to only Pakistan in both the level of infant mortality and the reduction since 1980.

Table 5: Among South Asian states India has been the only continuously democratic country—and yet progress on basic outcomes like infant mortality and immunizations lag other countries...with reversals in immunization rates

	Average polity score (10=most democratic, -10=most autocratic)	Variability (std dev) in polity score	Infant mortality				Percent of children 12-23 months immunized for measles	
			1980	2004	Fall	Percent Fall	1995	2006
India (1950)	9	.6	105	59	46	43.8%	70	55
Sri Lanka (1950)	6	1.1	35	12	23	65.7%	93	99
Pakistan (1950)	1	11.9	109	79	30	27.5%	58	83
Bangladesh (1972)	1	6.0	126	54	72	57.1%	69	88
Nepal (1959)	-3	6.1	127	49	78	61.4%	54	89

Source: Polity scores from the Polity IV data (<http://www.systemicpeace.org/inscr/inscr.htm>), child immunization from *Immunization Summary* from UNICEF and WHO, infant mortality from GAPMINDER.

A final way of posing the difference between a failing state in an economic or political dimension and a flailing state is to compare India to other countries with similar track records on democracy in their performance in controlling corruption. Table 6

compares two indicators of corruption for those non-OECD countries that were as “democratic” as India and has achieved a polity score of 9 or better continuously since 2000. Compared to these countries there is a big gap between countries like Chile, Taiwan, South Africa and Costa Rica (all with scores above 5.0) and India, which has rankings with countries like Jamaica and Panama.

Table 6: Comparing India to other stable democratic (non-OECD) countries on control of corruption

country	Polity Score in 2006	Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2007	Control of Corruption (percentile rank among countries)
Chile	10	7.0	89.8
Taiwan	9	5.7	70.4
Botswana	9	5.4	78.2
South Africa	9	5.1	70.9
Costa Rica	10	5.0	67.0
India	9	3.5	52.9
Jamaica	9	3.3	44.5
Panama	9	3.2	49.5
Trinidad	10	3.1	54.9

Polity scores from the Polity IV data (<http://www.systemicpeace.org/inscr/inscr.htm>), CPI from Transparency International, Control of Corruption from

While one doesn’t want to place too much weight on any given cross-national comparison, it is clear that there is no question that India is *not* a failing state. It is not failing economically. It is not to maintain the basics of law and order and security—with some exceptions with Naxal areas, and movements on the edges of India the state actively maintains order. It is certainly not failing to maintain democracy, while there are certainly pockets of trouble, by and large India has maintains all of the features of a modern democratic polity: electoral democracy, an active parliament with constraints on the executive, respect for human rights, a free press, an independent judiciary. But at the same time, it is clear India is not an entirely successful state either—its performance in

basic services lags even compared to its region. I characterize this inability to maintain control of the administrative apparatus in order to effectively deliver services through the government I label as a “flailing” state and turn to greater description in the next section with speculation on diagnosis and prospects in the final section.

## **II) The Weakness of Administrative Modernism**

I want to supplement the fiction of the introduction and the crude cross-national comparisons of aggregate indicators with specific indications of what I mean by the failure of the transition to administrative modernism in India. The essence of administrative modernism is that civil service agents of the state carry out their prescribed functions according to the organizational processes and procedures and irrespective of politics, personal characteristics, or pecuniary motivations. This, while certainly it happens, has ceased to be the norm in large parts of India in which the civil service, from top to bottom has been politicized, personalized, and corrupted. I could give dozens of examples, including from government reports. In fact, one indication that the Indian state is flailing and not failing is that the governmental audit offices still produce reports detailing the flaws in program implementation. But I will focus on three relatively recent studies that have examined particular aspects of the flailing state: attendance, effort, and corruption.

### **II.a) Attendance of nurses in Rajasthan**

*80 percent of success is just showing up*

*Woody Allen*

A group of academics have been working with *Seva Mandir*, a local NGO active in Rajasthan, to define and examine using rigorous controlled experimental methods

innovations that would benefit the poorer rural population of Rajasthan. Their initial investigations revealed that health issues were important and an extended careful tracking study of the attendance of the medical staff at local level facilities (sub-centers and PHCs) confirmed what earlier studies had shown (Kremer, Hammer, et al)—that attendance on any given day was only around *one-half* (Banerjee, Deaton, Duflo 2004). That is, one half of the staff appointed and being paid to run these facilities were present during the facilities stated hours of operation. This of course led most people to seek health care elsewhere, with the richer population mostly using other private providers and with the poor resorting to what are, euphemistically called “less than fully qualified providers” which range from traditional healers (*bhopas*) to “Bengali doctors” (individuals with some literacy who give injections and dispense drugs).

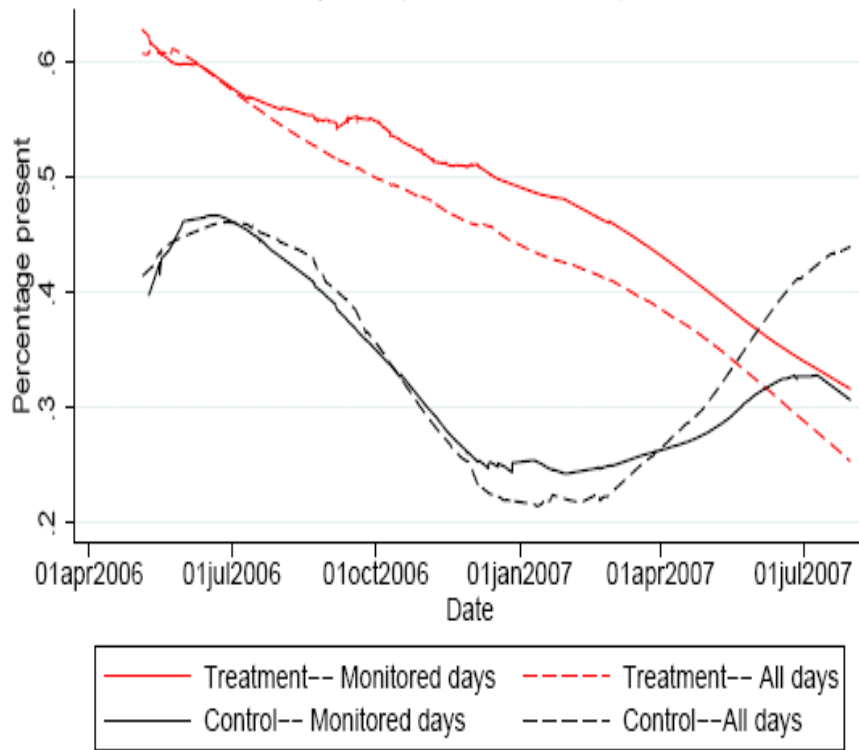
To address this problem of staff absenteeism the NGO worked with the government to devise a scheme to improve attendance that would be implemented as the government moved to put two ANM (auxiliary nurse midwives) into each clinic. In this program the ANMs had to keep strict track of their time (using a time clock that would date stamp their attendance records), the NGO would double check these official attendance records with spot checks. Any ANM who missed more than one half of the assigned days without a legitimate excuse (such as illness, authorized other duties, off site training, etc.) would have their pay docked. Moreover, in order to reduce complaints that absence was the result of other duties the government declared that one day would be the “monitored” day on which ANMs would have no other duties. It was hoped this intervention would raise attendance and hence raise facility utilization and services. The

program was implemented in “treatment” areas and not implemented in “control” areas so that one could rigorously examine the impact.

The reader can get some idea of the results from the title of the resulting study: *Band-aid on a corpse: Incentives for Nurses in the Indian Public Health Care System*. Figure 1 (figure 3 of the paper this is taken from) shows the key results, which track the difference between attendance at treatment and control clinics. What appears to have been the case is that the launch of the program initially raised attendance in both treatment and control areas (perhaps as the result of “Hawthorne” effects of being observed), then attendance in the control areas (in which no incentives were given) fell back to presumably baseline levels. More interestingly, in spite of the additional observation, in spite of the incentives, in spite of the monitoring, in spite of the fact these were “additional” ANMs (and so might have been not accustomed to poor performance), in spite of the introduction of “monitored” days attendance in the “treatment” areas fall so that by July of 2007 the presence rates were exactly the same—both around one-third.

Figure 3

Additional ANM present, two ANMs centers, random checks



Source: Banerjee, Duflo and Glennerster, 2007

The comedian Woody Allen once quipped that 80 percent of life is just showing up. When workers do not even show up this is an indication of a serious inability of the administrative system to control the behavior of government employees—how can it induce the correct behavior in the job when they cannot even assure attendance. Feasible attendance rates (given illness, other duties, emergencies, etc.) are almost certainly more than 90 percent. If absence rates are above 10 percent an organization has a management problem, if they are more than 15 percent it has a management crisis. But when one-half to two-third of workers do not show up—that reflects not the management of a particular school or district or agency, but rather a more severe system crisis. And when these attendance rates are impervious to well-designed attempts to raise them this suggests the

systemic issues run deeper than merely organizational or incentive design<sup>1</sup>. I am of course aware of the dangers of extrapolating from a single district in a single state, but Rajasthan is unfortunately not atypical of attendance rates around India, I am only focusing on this particular study not because it is particularly egregious or atypical but because of the new information about the ability (or not) to alter these attendance rates.

## **II.b) Doctors in Delhi**

A second example is from a study of the qualifications and practices of health care workers in Delhi. This study chose a random sample of the providers of medical care in Delhi, stratified to reflect different neighborhoods (poor, middle and rich), different sector (public versus private) and different facilities (clinics versus hospitals). Note that since the sample was drawn from the “medical” care people actually used this includes many “less than fully qualified” individuals who are providing health care. The most interesting aspect of the study for my purposes is that the study independently measured the competence and the practices of providers.

In order to assess competence the researchers used vignettes in which providers were presented with “patients” who would answer questions as if they had the disease for five common medical conditions to see if the providers could successfully diagnose and recommend appropriate treatment for these five conditions. For instance, for TB the hypothetical patient (and the provider knew the patient was hypothetical) would present with a persistent cough, if the provider asked about sputum and blood in the sputum the patient would answer appropriately. If the provider recommended a chest X-ray the patient had one prepared that would be given to the provider to interpret. The researchers

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<sup>1</sup> This is in contrast to an effort to use date stamped cameras to improve attendance in NGO run schools which reduced absence rates from 42 to 21 percent, suggesting that in the context of these NGO schools incentives did work, impressively (Hanna and D

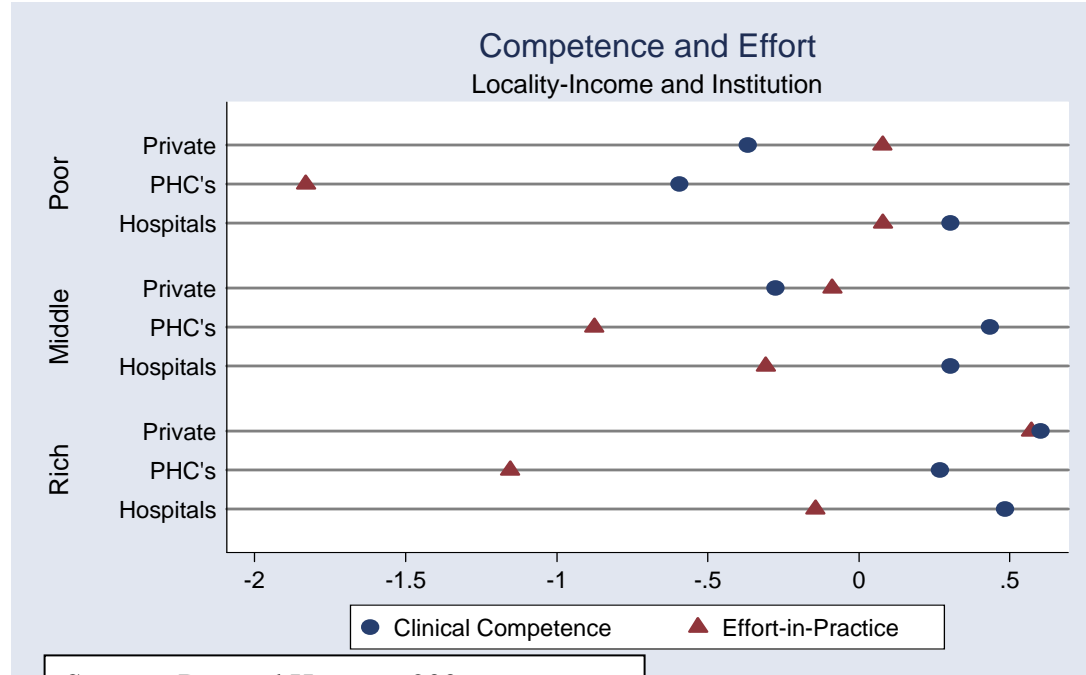
combined the likelihood of the provider correctly responding to the five vignettes to create an index of competence or theoretical knowledge. Subsequently, the researchers visited the providers premises to observe for an entire day the providers practice—what questions did they ask, what tests did they perform, what did they recommend on the basis of those tests. From these observations they created an index of provider “effort.”

The truly unique feature of this study is that one can compare the various providers’ clinical competence (the blue diamonds), what they know in theory they should do, and what they actually do in practice (the red triangles). Figure 2 shows the results on those two dimensions, each summarized as a normalized (mean zero, unit standard deviation) index, stratified by whether or not the provider is in the public or private sector and the facility. The results for the government lower level clinics, the Primary Health Center (PHC), are striking. For instance, in the middle tier neighborhoods in Delhi the PHC providers (all of whom are MBBS trained doctors) have higher clinical competence than do the private providers. But when one compares the effort in practice, there is a huge difference—the effort of private providers exceeds their competence score while that of the public providers is far lower<sup>2</sup>. The same is true in all three types of neighborhood, the effort in practice of public providers in clinics is far lower than their clinical competence (by more than a full unit of the index) while in each case the private providers have more effort than competence.

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<sup>2</sup> This is not meant as praise of private sector health care, after all, what “more effort” by practitioners without adequate training means they do more to make the patient happy—but that often included over-prescribing medications that are worthless or even contra-indicated in order to give their customers/patients they are doing something.

**Figure 2: Competence and effort of public and private providers of health care services in New Delhi**



Source: Das and Hammer 2006.

All of the PHC effort-in-practice scores are at or below negative 1. At that level of the index of effort the median (typical) patient/provider interaction consists is 2,1,0: it lasts 2 minutes, there is one question asked and no “physical exams” (which includes, pulse, blood pressure, temperature). The important point is that the providers have the clinical competence to know that they are not providing quality treatment. This suggests that, in addition to the difficulties of absences, even when present the existing system of administration are not able to elicit high quality effort from providers<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> And we are deliberately focusing on the PHC level, that is not typically as busy as the hospitals. That is, some feel the public sector doctors are stretched by the number of patients and simply cannot do what is needed in the time available, while these may be true at the premiere facilities, the research did not suggest this was true at the typical PHC.

## II.c) Driver's Licenses in Delhi

*For my friends, anything; for my enemies, the law.*

*Oscar Benevides, President of Peru, 1933-1940*

A third recent study also uses the method of a controlled experiment in obtaining a driver's license in Delhi to get more insight into the organization and consequences of corruption of routine administrative tasks. The study solicited individuals who were about to obtain a driver's license to participate in an experiment. The comparison group was given no treatment at all. The "treatment" consisted of either simply paying a bonus to individuals who obtained a license more rapidly while another group received free driving instruction to improve their performance on the driving exam. The individuals then were left free to go about getting a license. The individuals then had follow up to see (i) whether they had obtained a license, (ii) whether they had hired an agent to assist them in obtaining a license, (iii) whether or not they had complied with all of the stipulated procedures for obtaining a license, and (iv) the study have the driving competence of each person who obtained a license assessed by an independent driving instruction firm.

Some of the most important results of the study come from just examining the comparison group, although these results confirm what any resident of Delhi intuitively knows. First, even in the comparison group that had no bonus for rapid acquisition of a license many hired an agent to facilitate the process. The hiring of the agent did in fact accelerate the process, in particular by almost completely subverting the driving test. Of those in the comparison group that hired an agent only 12 percent took the driving exam compared to 94 percent of those who did not. Many of those who did take the driving

examination failed the exam. The primary response of those who failed the exam was not, as you might guess to receive more driving instruction but rather, in the next round of application, hire an agent (which, one suspects, was the point of failing them). In administering the independent assessment the driving firm classified as “automatic failures” those who could not answer some very basic questions about the operation of an automobile sufficient to make the driving instructors feel safe in actually administering the exam. Of those in the comparison group who hired an agent (and hence almost universally avoided the driving test) 69 percent were *automatic* failures in the independent test. The point is that this agent-payment induced informal “waiving” of the driving test is not benign, in that it is merely “speed money” to accelerate a license for those who are competent drivers, but rather the failure to comply with regulations actually subverts the public policy purpose of having a driving license.

The experimental treatment confirmed these results of the comparison group and showed that by increasing incentives to individuals for a rapid license the process was easily subverted. In the treatment group paid for getting a license more rapidly they were (a) more likely to hire an agent and (b) were 18 percentage points more likely to *both obtain a license and fail an independent driving test* than the control group. Again, not surprisingly, providing training to improving driving skills had little impact.

The importance of this study is not documenting the existence of corruption in obtaining a driver’s license but rather three features of that corruption. First, it is fully institutionalized. Almost no one reported paying bribes directly to the public sector employees, rather they paid fees to agents. This suggests that the corruption is highly organized, with the take from the corruption divided amongst the various actors and is

not the behavior of a few “rogue” instructors who elicit payments retail. Rather, the *de jure* process no longer has any real claim on the behavior of the agents of the state, who are following a different *de facto* set of procedures. Second, the *de facto* behavior of the agents of the state in granting licenses deliberately subverts what is intended as a step in the process intended to ensure the purpose of the regulation. That is, if the paying of agents subverted some element of the regulation that seemed trivial or pointless with regard to traffic safety (say, verifying residence) one might think this deviation was harmless, part of the normal adaptation of by-the-book regulation to reality in any “street level bureaucracy.” But the step that is subverted is precisely assessing driver competence. Assessments of driver competence as part of licensing may or may not be truly effective in increasing traffic safety, but this is surely its intent and it is this that is avoided by paying agents. Third, it does appear that this subversion of assessments of driving competence does allow unqualified drivers onto the road. The corruption does not merely accelerate outcomes but changes them.

While these are isolated examples, they are consistent with the cross-national evidence, the nation-wide evidence on absenteeism (Kremer et al.), corruption and leakage (), and citizen satisfaction (Paul et al), and with everyday experience of Indians<sup>4</sup> (and, not coincidentally, modern fiction). Moreover, they illustrate key points about the depth and intractability of the problems with the failures of administrative modernism:

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<sup>4</sup> In one meeting about accountability of government workers a member of the Planning Commission related the following story. The gardener at his government assigned housing in Delhi came to him to tell him that he would soon be getting a new gardener. When he asked his current gardener why he was leaving his job he got a quizzical look. His gardener patiently explained that he had been on contract, but as he had now been confirmed in a regular government post as a gardener he would obviously not be doing any more gardening and hence he would need a new contract person to do the gardening.

- even routine expectations of government employees, like attendance, are resistant to reform, even reform championed by the “head” (e.g. the local district IAS officers) and supported by effective NGOs,
- Increased competence is not incompatible with exerting effort to perform jobs satisfactorily,
- Corruption and deviation of the *de facto* practice from *de jure* regulations have become not just prevalent, but institutionalized.

Organizational capability can be defined as the ability to consistently produce actions by the agents of the organization across a variety of situations that comply with organizational policies and procedures and further the goals of the organization. This is as true of private firms as not-for profit organizations (from religions to universities to hospitals) as for government agencies. This needn't involve mimicking the organizational practices of private firms—it can be accomplished in a variety of ways from high powered incentives to fear and intimidation to rigorous selectivity to sustained inculcation of the organization's values (and likely some combination of all of the above). While organizational capability might be low because of low individual capability, the inability of the agents to correctly assess the situation and the appropriate response (e.g. doctors with too little training, under-educated engineers), low organizational capability can also be the result of weak organizations and a weak institutional environment in which the organizations operate. That is, the inability of organizations to hold its agents accountable, often due to institutional constraints beyond the control of the management of the organization (e.g. the high costs or impossibility of sanctioning any employee of the public sector), make accountability impossible.

Administrative modernism was one way of creating capable organizations in the public sector to carry out the range of functions required in a modern polity and economy from delivering the mail to teaching children to enforcing the law. While often criticized in advanced modern economies (for whom “bureaucracy” is a criticism and the “post office” a synonym for an antiquated organization) administrative modernism is a distant dream in today’s India.

### **III) Looking to the Future**

*...the government, at every level, is today not adequately equipped... to meet the aspirations of the people. To be able to do so, we require the reform of government and of public institutions ... No objective in this development agenda can be met if we do not reform the instrument in our hand with which we have to work, namely the government and public institutions.*

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, June 24, 2004

I can hardly claim originality in pointing out the depth of the problems with government administration in India. The current Prime Minister, who is not a professional politician but rather a technocrat long engaged in policy making in India, has emphasized that improving implementation is a key constraint on achieving goals, and made progress in this reform an area of emphasis in his first major speech as Prime Minister. But there is today perhaps even less consensus about the direction forward on this front than in 2004 and, while many promising initiatives are underway, the way forward is at best murky. Neither, as an economist, can I claim disciplinary expertise and I worry that this essay will be like Robert Solow’s characterization of growth theory, begin in empirics and end in a “blaze of amateur sociology.” Yet Robert Solow also taught me that “just because the tire is flat does not mean the hole is on the bottom.” There is little question that, while the *symptoms* are manifest in administrative failure, this does not mean administrative reform is the cure.

There is a substantial body of thought in India today that believes that it is the way in which democracy has evolved in India that has undermined, rather than strengthened, administrative modernism in India. Naresh Saxena, a former IAS officer and Chief Secretary of Uttar Pradesh, penned a note for the National Advisory Council of the recently elected government that is breath-taking in its hard hitting honesty about the current state of affairs (particularly in North India) and which articulates a common view of the civil service that things are going downhill, in large part because the integrity and non-partisan character of the civil service have deteriorated. As he says:

*“...because between the expression of the will of the State (represented by politicians) and the execution of that will (through the administrators) there cannot be any long-term dichotomy. In other words, the model in which the politics will continue to be corrupt, casteist and will harbor criminals where as civil servants will continue to be efficient, responsive to public needs and change agents cannot be sustained indefinitely. In the long-run political and administrative values have to coincide.”*

In this view, the steady deterioration of the Congress Party’s role as an “encompassing interest” and institutionalized political aggregator from the grass roots, the rise of regional parties, and especially the rise of caste based parties have resulted in a politics that is detached from delivering the broad based benefits to citizens and more focused on jobs and contracts for their supporters and actively leads to a deterioration in administrative functioning<sup>5</sup>.

But as Pratap Bhanu Mehta has pointed out in his insightful essay, *The Burden of Democracy*, one cannot explain the situation as being caused by bad politicians, as those willing to take the role of bad politicians are in abundant supply in every country.

Rather, one must seek the root cause of the ability of bad politicians to survive and thrive

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<sup>5</sup> Again, Saxena (2004) puts it bluntly: “The political system in many states is accountable not to the people but to those who are behind the MLA; these are often contractors, mafia, corrupt bureaucrats, and manipulators who have made money through using the political system and hence are interested in the continuation of the chaos—and patronage based administration.”

in a very competitive electoral environment. In India, unlike in the US, there is a massive *anti*-incumbency bias in elections so one cannot explain the poor performance of democracy as facilitating administrative effectiveness as the result of “entrenched” politicians—they are not entrenched but must fight elections on an open and level playing field. One cannot blame politicians for trying to win elections. The question is, how are politicians winning elections while the government apparatus is weak?

A likely answer is that politics is an arena not just for competing for some neutral notion of government efficacy or even about a set of “policies” but is also a space for contestation over identities<sup>6</sup>. Perhaps the root issue with the flailing of administrative modernism in India today is the as yet unresolved (especially in the North) issues of identity politics around caste and communitarian concerns. Up to a point, politicians have been able to survive on creating identities around caste and religion claiming to deliver social justice by the very fact of their election. That is, that someone of their group holds high office in and of itself provides social legitimacy to a group’s claims to fully equal participation in the social and political sphere. As one infamous Bihari politician, Lalu Prasad, put it, “people should have their dignity first, roads and bridges and other facilities can come later.” For groups for whom the election of politicians who shared their identity represented a public symbol of their own personal and identity claims to equal treatment in the social and political sphere at the local level, attacks on these politicians for a lack of effectiveness or corruption could be seen as, at best, missing the larger social point and at worst, as a retrograde attempt of the forces of the elite to “keep them in their place.” While Gandhi and Nehru are more widely known in

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<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank Adarsh Kumar with helpful conversations on this section.

the West, it is the actual or rumored desecration of a statue of Ambedkar can create deadly riots even today<sup>7</sup>.

If this view, that the failure, so far, of the forms of political and administrative modernism to deliver the benefits of effective government is the result of unresolved issues of social identity that are playing out in the political and administrative spheres, is correct, what of the future? Is it bright or dim? Let me make three comments.

*Lessons from history?* It is difficult to know how to use the history of the emergence of administrative modernism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century USA or Europe (or its accelerated adoption in Japan under the Meiji) to understand how to proceed with administrative reform in India, as one suspects that one will fall victim to the fate predicted by Hegel (via Marx) that history will repeat itself the second time as farce. In the USA the modern administrative structures—from the army to schooling to police forces—were not transplanted but rather emerged organically from earlier attempts of citizens to establish services for themselves in a variety of contexts. What was new was not the carrying out of the *function* but rather the new *form*. For instance, the modern administrative structures of schooling were the result of a consolidation and gradual regularization of pre-existing schools under local control. This meant that often the new formal structures of administration inherited informal mechanisms of social control and external accountability that were operating in the background while the administrative regimes were consolidating. In contrast, India today inherited its basic administrative structures wholesale from a colonial period in which the primary purposes of the administration machinery were not particularly developmental or service provision

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<sup>7</sup> The fact my Microsoft Word spell checker recognizes Gandhi and Nehru but red-lines Ambedkar makes my point about name recognition.

but maintaining order and extraction of revenues. They did not, one might say, emerge entirely organically from local soil.

This perspective puts the debates about decentralization to the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI) in a much broader context that merely debates about fiscal allocation rules or economies of scale and scope. As Rao (2005) argues there is a role of what he calls “symbolic public goods” and the way in which administration has been designed almost exclusively as vertical programs from the state or central level leaves little deliberative space for the creation of a sense of common purpose and destiny. Of course not even the most wild-eyed romantic should imagine that moving more decision making and responsibilities to the local level will immediately lead to better outcomes, rather the intent is to create a long-run process in which contestations in the political space are gradually transformed from contests of identity and recognition of the full equality of various groups into contests about the pragmatics of the operation of government.

*Post modern is modern plus, not pre-modern.* Many ideas about administrative reform are essentially “post-modern”—that is, are primarily aimed at improving on functional modernism. This is a complicated two-fold move against (and after) the triumph of the bureaucracy.

One element is the administrative reforms under the broad heading of “new public management” or “reinventing government” of the type implemented in the UK, New Zealand, parts of Australia and the USA in the 1990s. This was intended to make government more effective through an “autonomy for accountability” bargain in which bureaucrats were freed from onerous obligations to process (“red tape”) in favor of more professional autonomy in achieving objectives. The counter-part to the increased

autonomy was greater performance measurement and more accountability for results. As these are often regarded as “state of the art” administrative reforms there is a temptation to transplant these into a variety of settings. However, it is increasingly clear that moving to post-modern forms of governance rely just as much, or more, on the core of administrative modernism—it is not necessarily the case that if cannot do it yourself you can successful contract it out. Moving to the post-modern is not necessarily a solution to failed modernism.

A second element of the post-modern impulse is the softening of the hard edges of the Weberian bureaucracy through downplaying the notion of decision making through technical expertise and through emphasizing more “civic engagement” and “direct participation”—not just in the more purely political processes (which is to be expected) but in the process of administration itself. The advent of requirements for open public hearings in the making of regulatory decisions (which in the transition from pre-modern to modern would have been characterized as the exclusive province of the technician applying “scientific” notions or “neutrally” applying the law) is just one example. This is often supported through criticisms of the excesses of what James Scott refers to as “bureaucratic high modernism.” The work of Robert Putnam on the impact of “social capital” on the operation of democracy in Italy showed that, for all the claims to government bureaucracies were rules based organizations, even in a rich modern country like Italy the efficacy with which the mail was delivered was a function of how many singing clubs existed in the town. The social fabric mattered in important ways for the operation of quintessentially modern government organizations.

However, again, one can go overboard and attempt to lionize “social capital” as a replacement or substitute for functional modern organizations. Community participation and engagement in project and program implementation is very different thing if imagined as a post-modern reincarnation of pre-modern social ties as a substitute for an effective administration than if it is a post-modern supplement to the efficacy of existing institutions.

*Existing initiatives.* India does not suffer from a dearth of proposals or initiatives for administrative reform nor from a lack of commissions (including of course an Administrative Reform commission). Nor even does it suffer from a lack of successful initiatives. Vikram Chand (2006) has documented more than a dozen case studies of successful initiatives in service delivery. However, the key question is why, if there is not dearth of initiatives, or even successes, things are not getting better at a more rapid pace. There are three generic issues that face the political economy of administrative reform.

First, a number of successful initiatives are the result of senior and powerful civil servants creating (or being given) political support and space to act as “reform champions” or “change agents.” They can then use their power within the administrative structure to initiate reforms. However, these reforms often prove fragile as they do not have a solid either popular base nor broad political buy-in. Hence a change in chief minister or even sectoral minister can bring reforms to a halt. This leads to the phenomena illustrated by Kapur (2006) of a life cycle of innovations (he illustrates it with institutional success) such that at any given time there are innovations being born, innovations maturing to scale (at the local or state level) but there are also reforms

petering out and ending. If the reform death rate and birth rate are similar then there will always be a stream of reforms, but no forward progress. As long as the reforms are dependent on a particular civil servant (rather than politicians, who even with anti-incumbency bias sometimes have a longer and more protected tenure in office) it is difficult for the reform to take hold.

A second problem is that existing initiatives are always up against the powers behind the existing dysfunctions—whether it be the institutionalization of corruption, the patronage protection of civil servants or the contractors and their allies. There is a big difference between reforming a functional organization with problems and bringing a dysfunctional organization, in which the dysfunction has become the standard operating procedure for some time, back from the brink. When dysfunction has settled in, then there are settled expectations about future flows, which are often capitalized, and hence, paradoxically, people will oppose the fundamental fairness of reforms which they believe “expropriate” them. That is, at this stage, many positions, both political and civil service appointments are effectively auctioned off. The prices paid for positions depend on the anticipated take. Hence reforms that attempt to reduce the benefit of a position can be seen as taking away an asset they had purchased. This will be strongly resisted. How to dig one’s way out of corruption that been “capitalized” and is traded is a very difficult problem.

A final difficulty with mobilizing reform is that, in response to governmental dysfunction, people adopt coping mechanisms to provide the services in alternative ways. Once they have abandoned the public sector they have personal pecuniary interest in reform only if it allows them to return to the public sector. When, however, the potential

gains from reform are small and uncertain it is difficult to mobilized a political coalition for reform, as it is often the potentially most powerful who have opted out first. Just as an example. Municipal water services have deteriorated in most Indian cities to the point that, even for those who have connections for piped water, the pipes are only pressurized for a few hours a day. In response to this, houses in the richer neighborhoods of Delhi have invested in an array of ways of coping—private wells, cisterns, storage tanks on the roof, etc. Once these expenditures are incurred, households do have 24/7 pressurized water inside their house. A recent study in Delhi showed that, in richer neighborhoods households did spend more private on water alternatives than their payments to the water corporation. Suppose now there is an initiative for reform that promises better service, say 24/7 water, but at higher than current cost (but lower than total public plus private coping expenditures). Do you support this? Probably not as the costs (higher bills) are immediate and the benefits are uncertain (what if the reform doesn't work) and in the future (when one would have had to replace the existing durable capital). These dynamics can lead into tipping point dynamics into a political vicious circle, beyond which one cannot assemble a majority (particularly a political power weighted majority) for reform because the threshold at which the typical household benefits is far from the realistic potential of reform improvement. This is already almost certainly true of ambulatory curative care (85 percent of visits private) and urban private schooling in states where two thirds or more of children are in private schools.

The above does not mean that reform is impossible. It is just that it is not obvious whether one should go the route of “business as usual” reforms piecemeal in the hopes they scale or “game changing” reforms that create a different context and pressure for

reform. For instance, how does one view the Right to Information act? On one level it is another in a string of attempts at piecemeal reform. However, in another light, it is an organizing principle of using information to create accountability, to create a groundswell of pressure, not just for the piecemeal addressing of individual concerns, but for broader reforms as the RTI is used to force larger number of issues onto the policy agenda in a way that mobilizes citizen constituencies around both general principles of improved governance as well as specific initiatives.

### **Conclusion**

Suppose a development expert from a modern, well-governed country, of today, say Norway, were told he was traveling to a foreign country but really transported in a time machine to Chicago in 1929. He would find a booming economy, but corrupt politics, huge social tensions across races and ethnicities, vast economic inequalities, barely functional municipal services, unplanned and unregulated expansion of the city in all directions as it was crowded with immigrants from rural areas and from other nations. What is his forecast? Should he be optimistic or pessimistic? What is his prescription? Where does one start with “reform” when everything seems out of control? From the hindsight of history, he should be optimistic, Chicago, while far from being Norway, is a rich, vibrant, and functional city. But there was no magic bullet, change was a long, hard, slog. Corruption did not disappear overnight (or overmonth or overyear or overdecade). The police did not become less brutal and racist with one application of “reform.”

I would have thought the lesson from collapse of the Soviet empire in which the collapse was not expected or predicted followed by a transition to liberal democracy and market capitalism that did not go at all as hoped and predicted would have taught all

experts that the only safe way to be prophetic is to be Delphic. Yet the theme of comparing “Rule and Reform” in India and China is too fascinating to resist, particularly as it appears that looking ahead China and India face almost polar opposite problems.

As Alexander Woodside argues in *Lost Modernities*, many, if not most, elements of what I call “administrative modernism” were present in China at least by the Tang dynasty—almost 1400 years ago. The notion of “civil service” administration in which individuals chosen for their merit (not birth) by a competitive examination play a role in the implementation of policies is certainly very old and very respected in China. In contrast, China has little or no history or tradition of functioning democracy to call upon. The question for China is making the transition from authoritarian one-party control of the state and its functional administrative apparatus to some alternative means of political control of the state. Perhaps this is not a linear path to the “end of history” and the adoption of Western liberal democracy but something uniquely Chinese, but it is hard to believe that one-party rule survives for another fifty years.

India was born and has always lived in a democratic tradition, but has increasing weakness in the adoption of administrative modernism to its society and politics. To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln via Naresh Saxena no government can long survive half democratic and half corrupt. India, with its multitude of reform efforts is struggling on the path to reforms that lead to the effective implementation of rules, but they are far from out of the woods.

What this produces is a combination of different uncertainties at different horizons. In India, one is uncertain about the near future (and even, for that matter, about what is really happening in the present). But, as India’s formal political and

administrative institutions are roughly those of many advanced nations, one can imagine India 50 years in the future without having had any major institutional shifts but having made a long hard steady slog to prosperity and governmental efficacy so long-run uncertainty is less. In contrast, in China one is very confident about the present-what the government says will happen will, with some slips twixt cup and lip, happen. But transitions in authoritarian regimes have, in many instances, been very problematic, and accompanied both in Chinese history and in recent practice, led to long interruptions in both economic and social progress so the long-run future of China is especially uncertain.

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