

The Civil Servant's New Bible: How to cook a DOSA

Alok Sheel



Civil servants have for long had a reputation for being deliberately tardy, and risk averse, thwarting politicians at every turn with their vast experience, granular knowledge of the rules, and inter-departmental networking at senior levels. They are also traditionally seen as crabby, pulling down colleagues trying to get ahead of themselves. The popular BBC serial *Yes, Minister* was a play on the theme of the quintessential bureaucrat, Sir Humphrey Appleby and his minister, Jim Hacker, where the latter always appeared to come off second best.

“Yes, Minister”, however is now the Old Testament of the Civil Service. The equation between civil servants and ministers, at least in India, has considerably changed. The minister now seems ensconced in the driver’s seat, playing the ambitious civil servants driven by their quest for the loaves and fishes of office. Whereas the Old Testament was characterized by bureaucratic inertia, with the commandments written in stone, the New Testament is not; it is flexible, pervaded by interested bureaucratic hyperactivity with ministers, ambitious civil servants acting in tandem. The risk reward coefficient is also very different, as it brings both high reward with the threat of crucifixion hovering in the background.

As is the case with the Bible, the New Testament has not superseded the Old, but is simply superimposed on it. Civil servants can and do genuflect to both, with some leaning more to the old and others on the new. Here the Old Testament of the civil servant’s bible is represented by a poem entitled ‘Hymn and Prayer for Civil Servants’ that appeared anonymously several years ago in *Daily Telegraph* (London), and the New Testament by the poem “Dosa”.



The dosa, for long a staple breakfast item in South India, is now one of the most popular dishes all over India. During my career in the civil service I encountered what a colleague described as “cooking a Dosa” on government office files, much in the manner you cooked the edible version on a hot plate. Ordinarily, an official file is created with the receipt of some correspondence that cannot be linked to any file currently in circulation. This then becomes a ‘PUC’ (paper under consideration) in a new file, and subsequently a ‘proposal’ that is expected to be analysed on merits, where all aspects of the matter are debated and weighed keeping the public interest uppermost in mind, before a final decision is arrived at.

Formerly such proposals were usually lost in the labyrinth of the Old Testament. The bureaucratic DOSA (an acronym for ‘Decision Oriented Systematic Analysis’) however reverses this process, as the decision is determined upfront, usually by the minister. The notings on the file in such cases are oriented from the very beginning in a pre-determined direction. The arguments favouring the desired decision thus get strengthened and validated at every stage as the file works its way expeditiously upward – in contradistinction to the serendipitous manner of the Old Testament – with the departmental head and the minister required to simply put their signature of approval on the file at the end. This perversion of bureaucratic decision making, where the public interest even where cited is only incidental, is the ‘Decision Oriented Systematic Analysis’, or DOSA.

The Old Testament

Daily Telegraph, London (Anonymous)



Hymn and Prayer for Civil Servants

O, Lord, grant that this day we come to no decisions, neither run we into any kind of responsibility, but that all our doings may be ordered to establish new departments, for ever and ever, Amen

*O thou who seest all things below,
Grant that Thy servants may go slow,
That they may study to comply,
With regulations till they die.*



*Teach us, O lord, to reverence
Committees more than common sense;
To train our minds to make no plan,
And pass the baby when we can.*

*So when the tempter seeks to give
Us feelings of initiative,
Or when alone we go too far,
Chastise us with a circular.*

*Mid war and tumult, fire and storms,
Give strength, O Lord, to deal out forms;
Thus may Thy servants ever be,
A flock of perfect sheep for thee*

The New Testament



The DOSA

*Three parties there are it is often said,
To the set bureaucratic equation;
The civil servant, his reporting head,
Above both the wily politician;
Some civil servants can see very far,
Others are by imagination lit;
But the Reporting Heads frequently are,
Against new ideas inoculated;
For Ministers want DOSAs cooked, that is
The acronym for 'Decision Ori-
Ented Systematic Analysis';
Where their own decisions are carefully,
And systematically well analysed,
To rule books so meticulously hooked,*

*That they appear completely justified,
And thus is a DOSA on the file cooked.*

*With the head on cooking DOSA intent,
Cast aside are civil servants who write,
Notes on file that are inconvenient;
Thus the clever always get to sit tight,
Within walls of the bureaucratic fort,
Meticulously built through patronage,
Of the Annual Confidential Report,
Through which civil servants get the message.*



*Thus governance keeps ticking merrily,
Till a political turn of the die;
Then the big knives taken out you see,
Through Vigilance, ED and CBI;
The new government now combs every file,
The DOSAs cooked thereon to recognize;
The clever bureaucrats for all their guile,
It seems were not after all very wise;
As hastily leavened and poorly cooked,
DOSAs on the files lead to their downfall;
New faces are now in the fort entrenched,
By politicians who all the shots call;

But the newly found bright faces under the sun,
Are soon eclipsed by DOSAs of the new season.*

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