

EVOLUTION OF PMO IN INDIA: FROM NEHRU TO MODI

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Abstract

Prime Minister (PM) plays a pivotal role in the parliamentary-federal political system of India. In order to perform his role, the PM needs help and assistance. The need for providing such an official assistance was first felt in the initial years of Interim Government of India in 1946-1950. The functions of the PM have increased manifold since 1947. The present article, perhaps the first of its kind, discusses how the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) (known as Prime Minister's Secretariat till 1978) has developed in India chronologically right from the days of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first PM, to the present incumbent, Narendra Modi, covering a period of 73 years. It shows under what situations the non-descript, low-profile office during the Nehru period has developed into the most powerful centre of governance in the country. It accounts for how the PMO has taken different and varied course under the leadership of different PMs ranging from one-party strong governments to weak coalition governments. The article also throws light on how the emergence of a powerful PMO has, apart from other matters, impacted the role of both the Cabinet Secretariat and the Cabinet Secretary. Finally, it also highlights certain issues arising out of the functioning of a powerful PMO that need serious thought for thinkers and practitioners of Indian administration. Thus, this write-up provides a comprehensive study of the development of the PMO based on the primary and secondary available sources. The methodology adopted is descriptive and analytical.

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India opted for a parliamentary or parliamentary-federal form of government after getting Independence in 1947 from about 200 years of British colonial rule. The choice of parliamentary form of government was natural in the sense that many of our leaders were trained in this system which the colonial government had gradually introduced over the years in India. In the opinion of Walter Bagehot, one of the striking features of the parliamentary system of government is that it consists of the 'dignified' part and the 'efficient' part. The dignified part is represented by the head of the state who reigns but does not rule: (Bagehot 1867:4-5). The President of India represents the dignified or ceremonial part of the system. On the other hand, it is the Prime Minister (PM) who represents the efficient part of the system and it is he who basically governs the country with a Council of Ministers. All the powers listed in the Constitution of India in the name of the President of India are, in fact, used by the PM. He is the real centre of power and authority in the government and the political system.

Position of PM

In a parliamentary system of government, the position of the PM is most important¹. His position has been described by political commentators in the UK and India in various ways: 'first among the equals'; 'moon among the stars'; 'sun around which the planets revolve,' etc. In due course of time, the parliamentary system made a way for the cabinet system in England and the term cabinet government became a much more familiar term to be associated with the British system of government. The principles of collective responsibility, confidentiality, leadership of the PM and accountability to the lower House were flaunted as the hallmarks of the system. This much appreciated system in the post-Second World War period witnessed the transformation of the cabinet system into what R. H. S. Crossman - the British thinker and Labour Party leader and statesman, called 'Prime Ministerial government'. He added further that the role which the earlier cabinet used to do was of 'the hyphen which joins, the buckle which fastens, the legislative part of the state to the executive' and which is now fulfilled by a single man - the PM: Crossman 1985:189), and that the parliamentary supremacy had become a myth and even the cabinet government an obsolete concept; the PM alone stood at the apex of the pyramid of power.

The major difference between the British and the Indian parliamentary systems is that whereas the former is the result of the development of long years of conventions, constitutional customs and traditions, the Indian version is the result of a written Constitution produced by the Constituent Assembly of India after long, thoughtful, discussions, spanning over a period of almost three years. Unlike the UK, the office of the PM in India is created by the Constitution and his authority carries the constitutional sanction. Widely acclaimed as the longest Constitution, even then, many matters, in actual practice, have been assumed to be governed in India by the British practice. The powers and position of the PM of India is one such example. The powers of the PM are awesome, but the Constitution of India does not talk much about his position and powers nor about his duties in detail. Only Articles 74, 75 and 78 of the Constitution talk about the PM which do not give his real position and power in the governmental system of India. The real power and authority of the PM comes to him owing to the popular mandate that he enjoys in full measure. So does the British PM! He is the linchpin of the government. He is the creator, preserver, and destroyer of his own cabinet. He is not only the chairman of the cabinet but its boss in a real sense. In this context the UK PM is more powerful as his advice is honoured by the Crown even when he has lost his majority in the House of Commons, which is not the case in India as the precedents or even the convention has developed by now (Singh 2017). No minister can survive in the cabinet without the wishes of the PM in a one-party government enjoying full majority in the Lower House. This is true if the minister does not agree with the policy decided by the cabinet, he/she has no option but to resign. If the minister does not resign, the PM can ask the President for the said minister's dismissal from his Council of Ministers. The resignation or death of a minister only causes a vacancy in the Council of Ministers, but the death or resignation of the PM dissolves the whole ministry. Once a Council of Ministers has been formed it is the prerogative of the PM to allocate portfolios to them. A Minister can stay in the Council of Ministers only as long as he enjoys the confidence of the PM. The power of the PM to appoint and distribute portfolios among his Council of Ministers is largely restricted in the case of a coalition government where the coalition parties coming together to form the government decide on who from their political party will represent in the government with what portfolios. Important policies to be pursued by a government are also finalised in the form of agreed agenda which is generally known as the 'Common Minimum Programme' of the government or the National Agenda

for Governance during Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Prime Ministership in 1998. But once a PM loses majority support in the Lok Sabha, the President may not accept his advice and act in discretion which may include just sitting over the matter, as illustrated by President Zail Singh's 'pocket veto' to refuse assent to the Post office (Amendment Bill in 1986) . The bill was later withdrawn by the subsequent government in 1990.

PM and Parliament

As the head of the Cabinet of a one-party majority government, the agenda of its meetings are largely determined and decided by PM. The PM is the link between the President and the Council of Ministers and also its link with the Parliament. He is appointed PM because he is the leader of the majority party in the Lok Sabha and is responsible for all his actions with his Council of Ministers to it. Accountability to Parliament is the key element in this system. In capacity of the leader, he has to ultimately defend and justify the policies and programmes of the government on the floor of the Parliament. As per parliamentary convention, all the important policy announcements are made by the PM in the Parliament. The sessions of the Parliament are summoned and prorogued by the President on the advice of the PM. The general convention developed in the 20th century-England is that the PM must belong to the Lower House of the Parliament. In India, the Constitution only stipulates that the PM should be a member of Parliament and if he is not, he must become one within a period of six months of appointment. This holds true of the Ministers as well. This convention was followed during the Nehru and Shastri years but when Indira Gandhi was appointed the PM after the sudden demise of Shastri in 1966, she was a member of the Rajya Sabha only. She, however, became the member of the Lok Sabha in the fourth and, so far, the last simultaneous election to the Parliament and State Assemblies, held in 1967. Similarly, P.V. Narasimha Rao (for some time in 1991), H.D. Deve Gowda, I. K. Gujral and Manmohan Singh were also members of the Rajya Sabha. In such a situation, a Cabinet member of the government is formally designated as the leader of the Lower House.

Coordinator of Ministries

The PM is the general coordinator of the working of various ministries and it is his duty to resolve the inter-departmental disputes with the

assistance of the Cabinet Secretariat whose mandate is to see that the policies and programmes of one department do not clash with other departments. The general convention in England is that the PM has no separate department of his own. But in India since 1947 PMs have headed departments like Atomic Energy, Foreign Affairs, Department of Personnel and Public Grievances, etc. L.B. Shastri was an exception who did not have a department of his own as PM. The present PM, Narendra Modi, is heading the departments of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions, Space, Atomic Energy, etc. In addition, the departments for which no ministers have been appointed remain temporarily with the PM. In England also one finds, after 1968, the PMs have been Minister for the Civil Service under them. Boris Johnson, the incumbent PM, is the Minister for the Union also — a newly created ministry under his charge.² PMs like Gordon Brown and Boris Johnson appointed Tom Watson and Michael Gove respectively and gave them the responsibility of civil services.

Powers of Patronage

The PM in India enjoys a lot of powers in the distribution of patronage through appointments like the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, Attorney-General, Chief and other Election Commissioners, Chairman and Members of the Union Public Service Commission; Chief and other Central Information Commissioners, Governors, Lt. Governors, Chief of Defence Staff, Chiefs of Army, Navy and Air Force, Ambassadors and High Commissioners and other high officials, are virtually made by the PM and the Council of Ministers though formally in the name of the President. He is the authoritative voice of the nation within the country and outside. On the important and major issues concerning the departments of defence, home, finance, and foreign affairs the pronouncements by the PM are taken as the final word of the government. He is the Chairman of the NITI Ayog constituted in place of the Planning Commission in 2014. He also heads the National Development Council. The PM enjoys unparalleled power of patronage, especially through appointment to important positions like Ministers, Governors, Chairmanship of various Commissions, etc. He can induct some important persons from outside in his cabinet. By way of example one can cite the names of T. A. Pai, D. P. Dhar during the Indira years and Arun Shourie during the Atal Bihari Vajpayee regime. In the Modi government also we find two former IFS officers, namely, Hardeep Singh Puri (a

former IFS officer of 1974 batch) and S. Jaishankar (former Foreign Secretary) being inducted as a Minister in September 2017 and May 2019 respectively.

Constitutionally, under Article 78 of the Constitution PM is the main channel of communication with the President. One may term him as the first information officer of the President whose responsibility is to apprise the President regarding the functioning of his government. The ultimate power that the PM possesses is the power of dissolution of the House of the People which means that the members hold their seats in the House on the mercy of the PM. PMs like Indira Gandhi (1970 & 1977), Chaudhary Charan Singh (1979) and Atal Bihari Vajpayee (2004) have used this prerogative when they advised the President for dissolution of the House of the People and order new elections. Thus, with a stable majority in the house and so much power as head of the government, the PM has come to acquire the most important position in the parliamentary system of government in India. According to British Political Scientist, Dennis Kavanagh, 'the Prime Minister is a political as well as an executive leader': (Kavanagh 2000: 253). Put briefly, his powers are awesome.

Pressure of Work: Stupendous

In contemporary times the PM has a number of roles to perform as head of government, head of the council of Ministers, Leader of the Parliament, usually most important leader of his party, as the chief spokesperson of the country in international relations, etc. The cabinet system of government in India also has given rise to the Prime Ministerial form of government in party governments, not coalition governments. Briefly put, a Prime ministerial system of government may be described as one in which the government is headed by a dynamic, efficient and strong PM who wields enormous powers by virtue of his/her personality, his/her control and command over party and his popularity with the masses. The structure of government becomes centralised and the leader/PM has strong control over decision-making. This has been possible in India due to some developments in which increasingly we find that the parliamentary elections have turned into the election of the PM and his position as the real executive has got strengthened. His role as the coordinator of the policies of the government, right to supervise the functioning of all the departments and intervene in case of an emergent need have all been internalised and accepted over the years. The PM has to attend numerous summit level meetings of Heads of Governments

on economic, strategic, environmental, diplomatic and host of other issues. He has to remain in touch with most of these world leaders from time-to-time utilising different occasions. Within the country also people want to stay in touch with the chief of their government through letters, fax, email, Twitter, Facebook and other social media for the redressal of their various kinds of grievances and sometimes also to suggest to the government what in their opinion could be a better way of resolving a problem continuing at times for years. It has become a practice in recent years to get suggestions from people for improving the policies and system of government in India. The government in India in popular parlance is known by the name of the PM. He is the most important, visible face of the government. In fact, the essence of strength of a popular national leader lies in how strongly he/she is connected with the people. Thus, the increasing complexity of governance in India today and the pressure of work for a PM is really stupendous and it is humanly not possible for one person to accomplish it.

Evolution of PMO

The Prime Minister's office (PMO) in India was formally started/ inaugurated *de facto* with the appointment of Nehru as Vice-President of the Viceroy's Executive Council in the Interim Government on 2 September 1946. However, it was not until the promulgation of the Constitution of India on 26 January 1950 that it was recognised *de jure*. (Singh 2014: 11). Thus, it was under the leadership of PM Nehru that the interim system was organised to facilitate transfer of power from British rule to Independent India. Nehru became the first PM of India after Independence. At the time of Independence there was perhaps not a very long and strong tradition of a Prime Minister's Office, even in England. Only Lloyd George felt the need of such an office during the period of the First World War and he started it as his own personal secretariat known as 'Garden Suburb'. Whatever support the PM had was more in the nature of a 'private office' located in 10 Downing Street — the PM's office. In this office some advisers from different fields were also associated by the PM in their private capacity to advise him. After some period of dormancy, the private office was again revived by Winston Churchill coincidentally during the Second World War period. He also associated some people as advisers. The British system, however, relied heavily on Cabinet Secretariat, founded in 1916 by Lloyd George, as the coordinating link of the government under the leadership of the PM.

Beginning of Official Assistance

As a member of the Governor-General's Executive Council, Nehru was associated with the process of transfer of power. The term Cabinet began to be used in place of the Council, but official orders were still issued from the 'Governor-General in Council'. In a private and secret communication to Lord Pethick-Lawrence, the Secretary of State for India, Lord Viscount Wavell, the Governor-General and Viceroy wrote on 10 September 1946:

Although Nehru is not Prime Minister or Chief Minister, it is inevitable that he should have all sorts of miscellaneous correspondence to deal with as head of the popular part of the Government and as the person who can most easily bring pressure to bear on a particular Department through its Member. I have arranged for him to be given as his Principal Private Secretary one of the Cabinet Secretariat staff, an experienced I.C.S. (Hindu) official, who will also continue to be Joint Secretary to the Cabinet. Thus, his Private Secretariat will be integrated with the Cabinet Secretariat, and I think this will be easier for Nehru and also limit the occasions on which he goes off at tangent: (Mansergh and Moon 1979: 483-484).

Two things emerge clearly from the above letter. First, Nehru was provided official assistance with the deputation of an official of the Joint Secretary rank. The official selected was H.M.Patel, a distinguished member of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) who was the first Indian civilian to be appointed joint secretary to the Viceroy's Executive Council. He was virtually the *de facto* secretary in the Cabinet Secretariat. He was also appointed Principal Private Secretary (PPS) to PM Nehru basically with an idea of helping Nehru to get well informed with the norms, procedures and actual business transacted in the various departments of the Union Government. Thus, H.M. Patel had the unique distinction, at least for a short time, of handling two posts together- one of the Cabinet Secretary and the other of the PPS to the PM. This was purposely done to integrate Nehru's private secretariat with the Cabinet Secretariat. The designation of PPS was also taken from England. Second, as was the practice in England, the secretariat of Nehru was also treated as PM's private secretariat.

Nehru: Nondescript PMS

Nehru, it is said, was of the view of establishing a high-powered secretariat to assist him along with the Cabinet Secretariat. But this idea was not supported either from his colleagues like Patel or the

senior civil servants like V.P. Menon and H.M. Patel who perhaps saw in it the emergence of a powerful Prime Minister's Secretariat (PMS), a rival centre of power and a danger to the nascent Cabinet and Cabinet Secretariat system. This episode has been succinctly captured by Lord Louis Mountbatten, the Governor-General in his last report to the British government on 16 August 1947 in the following words:

There have been considerable informal discussion among the Congress members of my cabinet as to how the cabinet secretariat should be organised and its relations with Nehru's personal secretariat. Nehru is most anxious that he should have a high-powered secretariat under him, with which to "Swamp" the cabinet secretariat. This was opposed by his cabinet secretariat and by V.P. Menon (Secretary in Minister of State). When these discussions were going on, H.M. Patel, the secretary of the cabinet, brought a letter to Ismay (General Hastings Lionel Ismay, Chief of the Viceroy's Staff, 1947) asking him for his views in the matter. Ismay, with his valuable experience, sent a reply to H. M. Patel. This letter was placed informally before Sardar Patel and one or two other members of the cabinet; they were completely convinced by the remarks contained in Ismay's letter.

The next question which arose after the opinion of others was how to convince Nehru about the desirability of going by the advice of Ismay. On the suggestion of Sardar Patel, an informal meeting was held on the 14th August 1947 between Nehru and some officials, including H.M.Patel, secretary to the cabinet. Nehru patiently heard the arguments why he should not have a high-powered secretariat. He listened to the arguments carefully and also read Ismay's letter. The position now rests with him, and I very much hope that he will retain and use a proper cabinet secretariat (Mansergh and Moon 1979: 766).

However, except for his initial wish Nehru did not try to establish a separate secretariat for the PM during his long tenure as the PM of India from 1947 until his death, in office, in May 1964. During all these years the PMS had a low profile. Nehru maintained a small secretariat staff known as PM's personal office and left the coordination of government functions to the Cabinet Secretariat. Even his personal office staff could not acquire extra-institutional authority due to Nehru. In the words of M.O. Mathai, his special Assistant, they remained 'only gatherers and conveyors and, in short, mechanics men': (Mathai 1978: 76). However, not being allowed to establish a "powerful" secretariat was in no way hurdle for Nehru who himself had a wide knowledge and understanding of India. He did not need much help from his staffers either for delivering a speech in Parliament or outside or for any policy matter. Whatever little

secretarial assistance Nehru needed, it was met through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as well as by the Cabinet Office. Contrary to the general impression, L. K. Jha, Secretary to PMS (1964-67), elaborates that PM Nehru did have quite a number of senior officials and experts to assist him. He had Girija Shankar Bajpai with the rank of Secretary-General 'to advise him on issues not connected with foreign policy'. In the field of the development of science and technology — he had Homi Bhabha who worked directly under him as Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission with the rank of Secretary to Government. Similarly, Pitambar Pant was attached to him as Private Secretary (Planning) to help him in discharging his responsibilities as Chairman of the Planning Commission (*The Hindustan Times*, 1987, 26 August).

Cabinet Secretary & PPS

Nehru, more or less, adopted the method of conducting inter-ministerial business through the Cabinet Secretariat. The PMS was soon reorganised on the British model and the post of PPS to the PM was reduced to the rank of Joint Secretary. This was perhaps done to keep in view the protocol as well as differentiating between the Cabinet Secretary and the PPS. Dharma Vira, Nehru's PPS and later Cabinet Secretary and Governor of Karnataka, tells us that it was done "as an economy measure, on the suggestion of C. D. Deshmukh (Finance Minister) that the PM should give a lead in this matter, the post of Principal Secretary to the PM was downgraded to the joint Secretary to the Government of India level": (Dharma Vira 1975: 54). Lowering the status of the PPS was perhaps also done to convey the message that Nehru did not want to use the office the way it was thought/assumed by others in the beginning. The PMS, however, ranked next in importance only to the powerful Cabinet Secretariat during Nehru's period. On assuming Prime Ministership, the first thing Nehru did was to appoint H.V.R. Iyenger, a senior ICS officer as his PPS. He was a competent officer with overpowering personality. It is averred that on the advice of Lord Mountbatten Nehru separated the position of PPS and the Cabinet Secretary: (Deshmukh 2004:210). But one similar British tradition started by Nehru in India was that the PMS's PPS would attend each and every meeting of the Cabinet. This provided the PPS a unique opportunity not only to have the first hand information of all the major decisions of the highest policy/decision making body of the Government of India but also occasions to rub shoulders with the Cabinet Secretary—the highest ranking civil servant of the government. In a way, this

practice in actual terms, undermined the importance of the Cabinet Secretary in the long run as we shall examine later. The PPS attending the Cabinet meetings was not liked by cabinet ministers like Sardar Patel, Sanmukham Chetty and John Mathai whose displeasure Iyenger earned. Mathai writes, "They all took exception to Iyenger attending Cabinet meetings. Eventually Sardar Patel adopted the practice of kicking people upstairs. He requested Nehru to release Iyenger for appointment as Home Secretary. This was agreed to" (Mathai (1978: 74). In the PMS Iyenger was replaced by another ICS officer, Vithal Pai, who, in the opinion of Mathai "was the best PPS Nehru had". He further discloses "since the exit of Iyenger, no PPS has attended Cabinet meetings" (Mathai (1978: 74).

Thus, during the Nehru era the functioning of the Cabinet Secretariat was combined together with the PMS. Vithal Pai was succeeded by another ICS officer, Dharma Vira, who served from 1950 to April 1951. He, in a way, contradicts Mathai when he writes that as the Cabinet Joint Secretary and PPS to Nehru he was required to attend the cabinet meetings (Dharma Vira 1975: 51). It is somewhat strange that after Dharma Vira we do not hear about or there is no mention of other PPS of Nehru. Explaining the reason, L. K. Jha writes, "It was only in the last days of Nehru, when he was not in the best of health and attending to the minimum amount of work, that the post of PPS, when Dharma Vira left it, was not filled and K. Ram, who had been working under Dharma Vira, carried on some of the duties of the post with the designation "Special Private Secretary", as he was not senior enough to be called PPS" (*The Hindustan Times*, 1987, 26 August). Therefore, one hears only about Mathai who, it is said, after the death of Patel had emerged as a very powerful person after the PM. In his own words Mathai admits:

After the death of Vallabhbhai Patel, much to my embarrassment ministers, MPs and senior officials used to refer to me as "Deputy PM", "Power behind the throne" and the like. C.D. Deshmukh, in his autobiographical book, choose to refer to me as "the powerful acolyte of the PM" (Mathai 1978: 9) .

During Nehru's time Mathai was given preferential treatment. Subsequently, Nehru brought in N. K. Seshan to perform the duties of Mathai. One cannot dispute that throughout the Nehru period the PMS kept a low profile and the primacy of the Cabinet Secretariat remained intact. However, it was during this period that the PMS got the status of a department under Allocation of Business rules, 1961. N.K.Singh IAS and once secretary in the PMO (19 August 1998-1 May 2001) writes that Nehru believed in working through the

institutional structure of the Cabinet Secretariat. In fact, in 1958-59, the strength of the PMS was reduced to 129, and in 1961, Nehru reduced it further to just over a hundred. This further strengthened the office of the Cabinet Secretary, who had legitimacy in his advisory role, considering that the rules of Allocation of Business Rules (AoB) described his office as the Secretary to the Council of Ministers: (Singh 2020: 49).

Shastri's PMS: Gaining Prominence

One notices PMS coming into prominence when Lal Bahadur Shastri became the PM after Nehru's demise in May 1964. There were two basic reasons for PMS coming into focus. One, despite being a seasoned politician who was known for his simplicity, sincerity, and clean image, Shastri's understanding of international, economic, and scientific matters were somewhat limited. Two, it is said, he had suffered a mild heart attack soon after taking over as PM, on 9 June 1964, and needed rest and proper assistance in managing huge governmental affairs. On 11 June 1964 PM expressed his determination to continue with the policies of his charismatic predecessor. This situation created a new challenge and for the sake of meeting those challenges, right solution had to be devised. As a result, the low-profile PMS during Nehru period was innovated into a powerful body. For this, the PM selected two bright ICS cadre officers of the secretary rank - L.P .Singh and L.K. Jha - for his office. However, he could not get L.P .Singh because G.L. Nanda, then Home Minister and one who had been interim PM after Nehru's death, was not ready to spare him. L.K. Jha, then a secretary-level officer joined Shastri's PMS on his own terms which was: that he should be called Secretary to the PMS and not PPS as was the practice ; that he will attend the meetings of the Cabinet and that his position in the warrant of precedence should be the same as that of the Cabinet Secretary: (Mathai 1978:74). The terms were accepted by the PM. Thus, Nehru was restrained to continue with the powerful PMS at least during the initial years of Independence, and, thereafter, it seems, he lost interest in a powerful PMS. L. K. Jha, then Secretary in the Department of Economic Affairs, was appointed for the first time as Secretary to the PM on 13 July 1964. This made a striking difference in the hierarchy. For the first time, thus, the PMS got a well-defined status under the change effective in the Government of India (Allocation of Business Rules,1961) on 16 June 1964. There was now a new insertion in the AoB Rules which

explained the justification for the PMS: “To provide secretarial assistance to the PM” (Singh 2020: 49). Tribhuvan Prasad (T.P.) Singh, L.K. Jha’s batchmate in the ICS while congratulating him jocularly remarked: “Congratulations, LK, for two things: First, for the high office you now occupy; and second, for this remarkable coup, which has now permanently destroyed the traditional ethos of the civil services establishment”.

L. K. was quick to quip “How can you say that? I have a profound respect for the cabinet secretary.”

T. P. Singh is said to have retorted, “Let’s not get into semantics. Time will tell.” (citation)

This structural change permanently eroded the primacy of the cabinet secretary, opines N. K. Singh. As T.P. Singh had visualised way back in 1964 that “it was obvious that the primacy of the position of the cabinet secretary emanated from his being the last person to tender any advice to the PM and that from here onwards, as secretary to the PM, LK’s note would be the last one to be read by the PM. This made a qualitative and structural difference in the hierarchy of the civil service establishment” (Singh 2020: 50).

It was during Shastri’s tenure when a powerful secretary like L.K. Jha gained much power under a seemingly weak PM and the PMS was expanded. The strength of PMS was increased to 235 in 1965-66: (Maheshwari 1968: 25). The PMS was housed in the South Block, Secretariat Building, New Delhi. According to Francine R. Frankel, Shastri had strengthened the PMO to deal with the party organisation and economic as well as foreign affairs in an effective manner, and it was beholden only to the PM (Singh 2014: 132).

It is worthwhile to remember here that about the same time in England also during the Prime Ministership of Harold Wilson the strength of the PMO was increased (Dhar 2000: 139), but it cannot be compared with the massive Secretariat under Shastri. The Secretary to the PMS is like the Chief of staff of any such administrative office attached to any President or PM in other countries of the world. The organisation and the process of Government business depend on him. He is the conduit to PM. All information that needs to be passed on to the PM passes through him precisely to save precious time of the PM. In this sense, the Secretary acts as filter to PM’s information. It is said that L.K. Jha as Secretary started acting in a powerful way and was nicknamed as ‘Super Secretary’ but the untimely death of Shastri in Tashkent in January 1966 made this experiment short-lived. However, the institution devised during Shastri’s Prime Ministership had the potential of far-reaching consequences to be manoeuvred

for increasing personal power under a strong PM. It also opened the way for 'bureaucratic ascendancy' over the functioning of the government through the PMS (Limaye 1989: 111).

Indira's PMS: A Parallel Government

When Indira Gandhi became PM after Shastri, Jha was continued for almost one year as Secretary to PMS and acted in a powerful way but she soon lost her confidence in him. As I.K. Gujral, India's PM during 1997-1998, remarked in a public lecture delivered in 2002: "it was primarily due to devaluation of rupee that gravely downed her political reputation" (Ramesh 2018: 87). It is believed that Indira Gandhi agreed to devaluation on the advice of her Secretary. On the issue of devaluation of Indian rupee in 1966, I. K. Gujral writes: "To this day, Mr. L. K. Jha asserts that both in writing and orally he had opposed this proposal of the World Bank. We three were not in the picture at all. All accusing fingers pointed at C. Subramanian and Ashoka Mehta. They were embarrassed but choose to keep quiet" ('Prime minister's office: Emergence of a power centre', *The Hindustan Times*, 1987, 14 August, p. 9). Another reason was that since Jha was Shastri's choice, Indira did not feel comfortable with him. In the opinion of Gujral, She 'was keen to replace Mr. L.K. Jha even in 1966 but she could not find a satisfactory substitute. She had mixed feelings about him. While she respected his ability and integrity, she thought he was not the type she would like to have as her main aide' (*The Hindustan Times*, 1987, 14 August, p. 9).

After the fourth general elections in 1967 Congress party lost power in many states and formed government at the centre with reduced majority. Indira Gandhi's cabinet was not the cabinet of like-minded persons. At the union level, according to P. N. Dhar, the PM faced two-fold challenges to establish her preeminence in the Cabinet and to forge a set of coherent policies and to develop a credible political stance (Dhar 1989: 57). In order to meet these challenges, the PM could not depend on her cabinet colleagues some of whom were her arch political rivals or "big political beasts" having long years of experience in government and in the party. At this juncture, she, in fact, needed aides who could give her frank, trustworthy advice and professional assistance. She appointed P.N.Haksar of the Indian diplomatic service/Indian Foreign Service as Secretary to PMS. Haksar was well known to the PM since the days of her father. It must be acknowledged to the credit of Haksar that he organised the work of PMO and raised its calibre and potential for assistance and advice (Dhar 1989: 58). The PMS started functioning as a think

tank, policy planner, political strategist and a hub that coordinated the policies of the government. With the consolidation and rise of the PM's power, the power of the PMS also grew tremendously and it emerged as the parallel government, a parallel centre of power. The position of the Cabinet Secretary got considerably weakened during the Haksar era. In the opinion of P.C. Alexander (Principal Secretary to Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi from 1981 to 1985), Haksar proved to be one of the most successful secretaries in the PMO: (Alexander 2004: 135). Inder Malhotra, a known journalist and biographer of Indira Gandhi, writes about Haksar "Of him it was rightly said that, at a critical juncture in modern Indian history he was "not only the most powerful civil servant but also the second most powerful person in the country" ... He did "not derive all his authority from Indira Gandhi. He contributed to no small measure of her own dominance" (Ramesh 2018: xiv).

As long as Haksar was with Indira Gandhi, first as her secretary from 6 May 1967 to 5 December 1971, and then as Principal Secretary from 6 December 1971 to 28 February 1973, there were few events which did not bear the stamp of Haksar's hand. He was frank and fearless in his advice to the PM, telling her what he thought would be the correct course of action even though he knew that she would not like it. Like a sincere, faithful civil servant he never sought spotlight on himself but worked anonymously behind the curtain with "non-negotiable loyalty" to her. Haksar and Sanjay Gandhi, the younger son of Indira Gandhi, never got on well since the days Sanjay was doing automobile apprentice course with Rolls Royce in London in 1967 and Haksar was serving as India's Deputy High Commissioner there. Their political and economic views were diametrically opposite. Haksar did not approve of Sanjay Gandhi's small car manufacturing project and conveyed this to PM in no uncertain terms. With the emergence of Sanjay Gandhi in politics, the position of Haksar started getting weakened. What caused the rift between the PM and Haksar? On this, Sharda Prasad, long associated with Indira Gandhi as her speech writer, beautifully summed up: "...*there was growing friction between the sovereign and chamberlain over the doings of the prince*" (Ramesh 2018: 297).

Another reason for letting Haksar go was that by now Indira Gandhi had acquired the status of a charismatic leader and "no PM would like to be in the shadow of an aide to acquire a larger than life personality on this own." citation But during the tenure of Haksar the PMS was transformed into a new identity as the centre of power in the government. Nitish Sengupta, a long time civil servant, observes:

Interestingly, PM's secretariat became a miniature central secretariat. Some of the Joint Secretaries or even Deputy Secretaries would only deal with the Ministers or Secretaries of other departments and would zealously guard their authority. The P.M's secretariat became, for all practical purposes, the most important Ministry in the Government of India between 1970 and 1977. It had the power to veto any proposed activity (Sengupta 1995: 239 and Singh 2014: 132-133).

P. N. Dhar, then Director of the Institute of Economic Growth, New Delhi, had joined PMS as an Economic Advisor in 1970 to look after economic and trade policy issues. He succeeded Haksar as Secretary to PMS in 1973, not as Principal Secretary. The Haksar era in the PMS, it is believed, ended rather abruptly. Compared to Haksar, Dhar was more liberal than the leftist ideological bias during the Haksar era. Dhar continued as Secretary (1973-77) during the turbulent years of the Emergency. Indira Gandhi took several steps to expand the authority of her secretariat during this period. Dhar, however, emphasises that the PMO is not a think tank. It does assemble ideas from other parts and more often acts as "a transmission belt for ideas that constitute part of the inputs that go into policy formulation": (Mathur 1996: 149). After the declaration of Emergency, the PMS became the focus of all authority and its writs began to be obeyed by all central ministers, departments and other executive agencies. Even the once powerful Cabinet Secretariat had to take a back seat to the PMS. During the Emergency, the PMS began to be viewed as the pernicious power-centre working under the influence of Sanjay Gandhi, an extra-constitutional power by virtue of being the PM's younger son.

Morarji's PMS: Downsized to PMO

The position of Principal Secretary to the PMS was again revived when Vidya Shankar, ICS, who had earlier served as secretary to Sardar Patel and had retired from service a decade ago, was appointed as the Principal Secretary in 1977 when Morarji Desai joined as the first non-Congress PM of India after the Emergency. Shankar wielded considerable influence. Though mild-mannered, he was a tough administrator. The PM had the impression that the PMS was a bloated office and declared that he would cut it to size. But what actually Desai could do despite all his aversions against a powerful PMS, says Dhar, was to change the name of Prime Minister's Secretariat into Prime Minister's Office - a name that still continues and reduce its staff strength from 229 to 211. Desai personally and

the Janata government collectively were committed to the dilution of the PMS as it was viewed as the evil apparatus that was misused by the extra-constitutional power of Sanjay Gandhi during the Emergency. The PMS under Desai came under controversy on two occasions — concerning the appointment of V. Shankar as PS: (Limaye 1989: 140-141), and the role of Kanti Desai, the PM's son, who also happened to be his 'political assistant' (Limaye 1989: 139, 150). PM expressed his view of reducing the concentration of power in the secretariat of the PM so that in future no PM could individually or unilaterally exploit the administrative and governmental apparatus. He declared that he desired to moderate the once awe-inspiring and all-powerful secretariat to the status of a mere office of the PM whose main role would be to assist the PM in performing duties. This resulted in his secretariat divesting some of its various policy-making units and to restricting its functioning to actual assistance of the PM in administrative and several other matters of national importance. Despite P. N. Dhar's views to the contrary, the position of Cabinet Secretariat and other departments was considerably restored and the intervention from the PMO in the functioning of ministries was minimal (Panandiker & Mehra 1996: 228). This move obviously resulted in the Cabinet Secretariat becoming a powerful institution once again.

When Chaudhary Charan Singh became PM, it is said, one of the first acts that he did was to abolish the post of Principal Secretary in the PMO . He wanted to appoint a retired senior bureaucrat G. V. K. Rao as his PS but Rao advised Singh to appoint a serving civil servant who would not move into a political role. Consequently, Krishnaswamy Rao Sahib, the only Secretary to the PM who later became Cabinet Secretary was appointed : (Singh 2014: 134-135). Both PMO and the PM lapsed into low profile. Rao Sahib continued in this post for almost five months after Indira Gandhi started her second innings as the Prime Minister.

Indira's Return : PMO Still a Power House

With her return to power in January 1980, Indira Gandhi undid many things which the previous government had done but the nomenclature from secretariat to Office remained. The PMO again shot into prominence but never attained its earlier position. Unlike the Haksar years(1967-1973),it was more professional and cautious to avoid the charges of over-centralisation under P.C. Alexander as the Principal Secretary (2 May 1980-18 January 1985). The new

PS was able to provide a “well-knit team... one of the best teams the Secretariat has ever had” (*India Today*, 1981, July, pp. 1-15). It brought back some amount of credibility and prestige...to this office and helped a great deal in restoring the good name of the office” (Alexander 2004: 150). The PMO during Indira Gandhi’s second innings ushered in both quantitative and qualitative change and “had more technocrats than bureaucrats“. The infrastructural support was also strengthened. Undoubtedly, the PMO remained the power house of influence and it also initiated some matters which genuinely came under the proper jurisdiction of ministers and ministries. As an example one may mention here that the permission to import colour TV sets as “gifts” during the 1982 Asian Games was taken at the level of PMO without the knowledge of the Department of Electronics (Mathur 1996: 73). In an unprecedented move, the PM started meeting secretaries from various ministries individually in order to get a first-hand report on the ministries under their charge. The PMO, in fact, started acting like a shadow cabinet. All important matters which need the approval of the PM were routed through Alexander and the decisions of the PM on each file were conveyed to junior officers for onward communication to various ministers (Mathur 1996: 73).

Rajiv: Imperious PMO

Under Rajiv Gandhi (1984-1989), after Alexander, perhaps in deference to the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985), Sarla Grewal, the second female IAS officer who joined service in 1952, was appointed as PS to PMO on 25 September 1985 and continued up to 1 March 1989 before being sent to Madhya Pradesh as Governor. This change from Alexander to Grewal was necessitated when a spy ring was found operating in the PMO (*Sunday*, 1987, 27 September-3 October, p. 3). There were some suspicions about leakage of information by Alexander’s personal staff. Sarla Grewal was succeeded by an outstanding civil servant, B. G. Deshmukh (March 1989) who had earlier successfully served as Cabinet Secretary and was a level-headed, efficient officer. Initially, for sometime it appeared that Rajiv was more democratic in his functioning but later the functioning of the PMO continued on the same lines as during the Indira period. During Rajiv’s time the PMO took initiative in the fields of information technology, economy, defence and industry, etc. The influence of outside advisors was quite visible in the PMO. Besides the PS, certain other officers dominated

the scene in the PMO. These included: Ronen Sen (foreign policy), Montek Singh Ahluwalia (economic affairs), Mani Shankar Aiyer (media) and Sam Pitroda (information technology), Gopi Krishna Arora, G. Parthasarathy, R. Vasudevan, etc. All these advisers formed a formidable group nicknamed as 'politburo'. Once again, the PMO became the most important centre of policy initiatives and the main overseer of government functioning.

Rajiv was in a hurry to take India into the 21st century. The PMO naturally reflected this urge. The scope and significance of the office was growing so rapidly that during the last two years of Rajiv Gandhi's rule it occupied an extra 12,000 square feet of the office earlier held by the neighbouring Ministry of External Affairs. As a result of this, the Ministry was forced to move out partially to a former hotel. The status and influence of the Planning Commission also got adversely affected during this period. The PM did not have good opinion about the Commission which is reflected where Rajiv Gandhi had once described the members of the Commission as "a bunch of jokers". Its role was devalued in the sense that the PMO informally took over the responsibility of formulation of the Eighth Plan. Some of the important flagship technology missions for drinking water, literacy and telecommunications were set up outside the Planning Commission (Goyal 2001: 535-536). The PMO reflected the style of functioning of a PM who had unprecedented majority in the House and who functioned like an autocrat. This was evident in the dismissal of AP Venkateswaran, the Foreign Secretary, in the midst of a press meeting.³ The PMO functioned as a powerful organisation concentrating many decision making powers. During these years it is believed the PMO was changing into something resembling the office of the American President. Thus, it came to acquire "imperious powers and influence under Rajiv Gandhi". citation

V.P. Singh: Streamlined PMO

When V. P. Singh (1989-90) became the PM in December 1989, it was widely believed that the new PM would cut down to size the PMO and reduce its importance as, in his view, the PMO had assumed undue importance and started interfering in the works of other departments. But as his PS, B.G. Deshmukh writes the new PM slowly started to appreciate the importance of PMO in the running of government and had good opinion about its impartiality and non-interference: (Deshmukh 2004: 254-256). The very idea of cutting down the size of PMO was pigeonholed. But it cannot be denied

that V.P. Singh somewhat streamlined the functioning of PMO. For administrative coordination and efficiency, he brought few trusted officers into office which he thought necessary for its functioning. But he did not pack the PMO with his favourite officers. Ministers were asked to take decision on their own. The idea was to reduce the pressure of work of this powerful office. More realistically it was the compulsion of a coalition government and this was naturally bound to lead to reduction in the size of the PMO. In the process of streamlining, he abolished several posts in the PMO. The PM, it may be mentioned, started depending on handful of officers whose main task was to assist the PM in decision-making and in the clearance of files (*The Hindustan Times*, 1990, 15 April). Thus, V.P. Singh did not believe in a powerful PMO but a functional and efficient PMO. Deshmukh continued as PS to PMO under V. P. Singh and his successor, Chandra Shekhar, thus, gaining the distinction of serving under three PMs in a row. After Deshmukh, S.K. Misra, an IAS officer of Haryana cadre, became the Principal Secretary to Chandra Shekhar. The Chandra Shekhar regime was too short to make any impact on the functioning of PMO. "The PMO reached the lowest point of its working, as it could only reflect the authority of the PM of a freak government" (Deshmukh 1997: 414). One may not fully agree with Deshmukh's above observation as towards the end of his term in the PMO, the relationship of the PS with his boss had gone a bit sour and he was abruptly replaced by S.K. Misra as the new PS. But on his own Chandra Shekhar believed in a powerful PMO and in some quarters it is believed that as PM he did a creditable job given the limitations he was facing as the head of a minority government surviving on the outside support of the Congress.

Narasimha Rao's PMO: Raised Importance & Authority

After the general elections in 1991, fate smiled on P. V. Narasimha Rao who had virtually planned to take 'sannyas' from politics. In the wake of Rajiv Gandhi's tragic assassination, Rao became the PM of a Congress minority Government supported from outside by the Communist parties and some other parties. Amar Nath Verma, IAS, who had retired as Industries Secretary and was serving as Member Secretary to Planning Commission, was picked up as PS to Rao thereby becoming the main enforcer of his economic reforms and policies. In the beginning the office started functioning on a low key but as time passed, the office grew from strength to strength. The PMO started spreading its influence and started interfering in the functioning

of other departments. An important example of this often cited development was that the newly created Foreign Investment and Promotion Board was kept directly under the PS. One may argue differently that by keeping the new ambitious institution under the PS, its functioning, progress and development could be monitored easily. During the Modi government this organisation was scrapped in 2017. But decidedly the concentration of power in the PMO was increasing. The PM himself held the charge of many ministries and departments and the importance and authority of PMO increased manifold during this period. The feeling was that “the PMO was often definitely interfering with the normal governmental machinery, if not riding roughshod over it” (Deshmukh 1997: 414). Another important reason for the PMO and its PS becoming very powerful was that during 1990-1996 at least four Cabinet Secretaries changed hands at short intervals. Verma continued to hold a stronger position in decision making in relation to the Cabinet Secretary except for the period when Surinder Singh was appointed as the Cabinet Secretary when, it is said, a sort of balance of influence emerged “between the functioning of these two supreme administrative positions in the central government” (Goyal 2001: 536). Verma was senior to them all and, in bureaucracy, seniority matters. Verma was, therefore, one of the most influential bureaucrats of his time who advised Rao on the 13 portfolios he handled himself.

A lot of care and consideration need to be given in any appointment in the PMO as it is not only the centre of power but carries immense influence also. Two incidents during Rao’s PMO need to be mentioned here. Jairam Ramesh was appointed as an officer on Special Duty (OSD) in the PMO but soon sacked even before he could settle down. It was known afterwards that he had violated the principle of secrecy and had tipped a journalist about the details of the steel deregulation policy which could have led to inside trading. Another case was of a Joint Secretary, PVRK Prasad, who was under suspicion for working as a link with a controversial godman (Goyal 2001: 536).

Rao was not happy with the bureaucratic delays in implementation of policy particularly over economic liberalisation and privatisation. It is learnt, he wrote an unusual letter to the UK’s department of trade and industry through private channel wanting to know how the private office of the PM in the UK is organised. This highlights the frustration of Rao who was keen to improve the functioning of his PMO even when his office was being run by his confidant PS Amar Nath Verma⁴.

Deve Gowda & Gujral: Active, Not Strong PMO

During the Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral governments (1996-98), the PMO was active but not strong as they were coalition governments. Satish Chandran, IAS, former Chief Secretary of Karnataka during Deve Gowda's Chief Ministership was the PS to Deve Gowda (12 June 1996-30 June 1997). Some years earlier, he was Power Secretary in the Union government. Deve Gowda relied not only on his PS but also sought the help of some Joint Secretaries and Directors. The notes, references and comments of these officials served as a valuable guideline for the PM who was new to Delhi and was trying to gain hold onto central administration. Deve Gowda used to rely heavily on these notes and comments. Precisely for this reason, S S Meenakshi Sundaram, one of the Joint Secretaries in the PMO, emerged as the second most powerful person in the PMO after the PS. Deve Gowda believed in strict appliance of rules. So perfect and unbending was his attitude that 'when it came to backtracking or changing an opinion it was the PM and not the PS'. This is not to suggest that the PM did not rely on his PS. Deve Gowda relied on Satish Chandran's advice also. In the words of T S R Subramanian, then serving as Cabinet Secretary, "Chandran probably represented the ideal civil servant. His analysis was brilliant based on a sound command of his facts, and he could, in any forum, express his views calmly and cogently, without fear or favour" (Subramanian 2004: 297). One noticed a sharp difference between the functioning style of Satish Chandran and his predecessor, A. N. Verma. What is striking to point out is that Deve Gowda did not appear to be in the hard grip of bureaucracy as in the case of Rao and he did not appear as an awesome figure. Another difference between Deve Gowda and Rao was that whereas the former visited the PMO almost daily the latter seldom visited his office (Goyal 2001: 537).

N. N. Vohra, IAS, former Home Secretary, was the PS to the PM Inder Kumar Gujral from 1 July 1997 to 19 March 1998. Yet another incident came to light which shows how much care needs to be taken while making any appointment in the PMO. Bhabani Sen Gupta, a known journalist, was drafted into the PMO and his stay of one day in the office is the shortest in the history of this institution. Sen Gupta's stand on the issue of CTBT proved highly embarrassing for the government and he was immediately sacked. Gujral during his short stay as PM did not make any major changes in the PMO. However, he deserves credit for setting up the 'Anti-corruption Cell' in the PMO during his period, which was perhaps, kept going during the Vajpayee regime and thereafter also (Goyal 2001: 537). Another

good practice that he started was that the personal secretaries and staff officers to ministers should not be considered for foreign posting, as was the existing practice (Subramanian 2004: 158).

Vajpayee: Strong & Effective PMO

The scene, however, drastically changed when Atal Bihari Vajpayee became PM of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA)-led coalition government in 1998. In this coalition government the PMO came to acquire a powerful stature. It may be perhaps due to the very coalitional nature of the government, in which the PM finds himself under pressure from different coalition partners, sometimes vigorously pursuing their interests. When such a situation comes, the PM looks up to the PMO for advice to help him in decision making process. Like every PM, Vajpayee too showed his trust and confidence to the man appointed as the Principal Secretary to the PMO, which is clearly evident in the appointment of Brajesh Mishra as the PM's PS. It may, however, be mentioned here that Bishan Tandon, IAS, served as his PS during the period of 13 days when Vajpayee was appointed PM for the first time in 1996. Vajpayee made the PMO a very powerful institution in 1998 by appointing his close confidant and man of trust Brajesh Mishra, a retired Indian Foreign Service Officer who had also served as the Head of the foreign policy wing of the Bhartiya Janata Party. The PM reposed full faith and trust in Mishra, so much that he was appointed the first National Security Advisor also. Interestingly, Mishra joined as PS on 19 March 1998 — the same day as Vajpayee was sworn in as the PM. If newspaper reports are to be believed, he was regarded as the principal mover and shaker in matters of defence, national security, foreign policy and represented a single window clearance for power, telecom, fertiliser, highway projects, etc. He was very quick in his decision making. He joined PMO as Vajpayee's personal nominee. Whenever he used to speak for the PMO his voice was taken as the authoritative voice of the PM (*India Today*, 2001, 2 April, p.19). Due to the increasing clout of Mishra in the running of the government, whenever his functioning was criticised within the party, by the RSS (Sinha 2020: 264-265, 201) and in the Parliament, demand for his removal was made at least two times, it is believed, the PM himself offered to resign rather than remove Mishra. Such was the unwavering trust and total confidence of the PM in the working of his PS.

On several occasions, Mishra was sent abroad by PM as his personal emissary without any prior consultation with the External Affairs minister. Apart from the External Affairs minister, Mishra used to

provide important inputs to India's foreign relations based on his long experience as a diplomat (*India Today*, 2001, 2 April, p.19). Defence Minister, George Fernandes and PM's National Security Advisor, Mishra used to discuss about defence matters independently. Never before this had happened that the PM had treated Defence Minister and NSA on almost equivalent stature/status. When files relating to defence ministry used to come to the PMO, it used to reach the desk of the PM only after it had been cleared by the NSA and, it is believed, his advice on each and every file mattered. Thus, it can be remarked that not only defence ministry but even home ministry, then headed by formidable L.K.Advani, was at times overshadowed by Brajesh Mishra. One could make a comparison of Bajpayee's PMO with that of Shastri, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. It was widely believed that Mishra was much more powerful than any Cabinet Minister. Why Mishra became so powerful? Reason for his getting powerful may perhaps be searched in his being versatile on the one hand and the PM's ill health on the other due to which many areas which were not personally looked after by the PM were taken care of by the PS to the PM. Mishra was even described as the Prime Minister-minder bureaucrat and ministers used to give instances of Vajpayee nodding off at important meetings and used to be propped up by Mishra. Considering the indispensability of Mishra for Vajpayee many believed that by removing Mishra, the PM would virtually be handicapped in his functioning (*Outlook*, 2001, 2 May). No wonder why after the death of Mishra in 2012, paying a rich tribute to him, Gopalkrishna Gandhi⁵ wrote: "During the five years that Atal Bihari Vajpayee was Prime Minister, his safari-suited Principal Secretary and National Security Adviser was, after the charismatic PM himself, the nearest that anyone came to embodying 'Bharat Sarkar'...True, the Cabinet had a powerful Home Minister, a very visible Defence Minister, and an articulate Foreign Minister. Yet, if the magnetic field of Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government had one single lodestone charging the terrain and holding it together, that was Brajesh Mishra (*The Hindu*, 2012, 1, October, p. 9).

Manmohan: Low-Profile PMO

The 2004 parliamentary elections were held in the shadow of Vajpayee regime's much advertised 'India shining' slogan. To the utter surprise of many analysts, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) came to power somewhat unexpectedly. Manmohan Singh was preferred over his other powerful colleagues in the party

for the top job in the country because of the common perception that he was rootless in politics and hence politically harmless. But, more importantly because he enjoyed the trust and confidence of Sonia Gandhi, the Congress President and United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Chairperson. The PMO during the Manmohan Singh period (2004-2014) was considered a somewhat lowprofile PMO because the real power was with Sonia Gandhi. It was widely believed that policy decisions and even appointments in the PMO were decided by her. The PS to the PMO, T. K. A. Nair, a Punjab cadre retired IAS, who had worked briefly as secretary to the PM in I. K. Gujral's PMO (1997-98) was the third choice in order of preference of the new PM for the post of PS. Though he had earlier served as the Chief Secretary of Punjab, Nair did not enjoy higher standing among civil servants. For, he had not served as Secretary in the supposedly powerful Raisina Hill departments like home, finance and defence, etc. He was thought of as a "bureaucratic lightweight" (Baru 2014: 36). Nair was no match for some of his eminent predecessors and his immediate predecessor and larger-than life Brajesh Mishra who was more than just a "Principal Secretary" (Baru 2014: 34-36). Nair depended very much on Pulok Chatterjee, a Joint Secretary in the PMO for advice on important policy decisions. Pulok was close to the Gandhis since the early 1980s when he was serving as an young IAS officer in Uttar Pradesh. He caught the eye of the Gandhi family as a dynamic, low-key-style officer of personal integrity with a talent for discretion. When Rajiv Gandhi was the PM he was called to the PMO as Deputy Secretary in 1985. Thereafter, he worked at the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation and also worked as OSD to Sonia Gandhi when she was Leader of the Opposition (1999-2004). Pulok was brought to PMO again as Joint Secretary when Manmohan Singh became the PM. His stated responsibilities in the PMO included ACC or the Appointments Committee of Cabinet which decides appointments of all civil servants above the rank of joint secretary (*Outlook*, 2007, 23 April). This was enough to show how powerful he was! It is believed Pulok was inducted into Manmohan Singh's PMO at the behest of Sonia Gandhi. It has also been pointed out that Pulok used to meet her almost daily to brief her on important key policy issues of the day and seek her instructions on important files to be cleared by the PM suggesting that there was only one power centre (Baru 2014: 36). This claim of Baru was, however, dismissed by PMO as "baseless and mischievous" which "categorically denied any PMO file [had]... ever been shown to Smt. Sonia Gandhi" (*The Economic Times*, 2014, 13 April). TKA Nair continued as PS to Manmohan Singh from 2004

to 2011 and later for few days as advisor to the PM in the rank of minister of state. Nair never asserted his position as PS nor made any comment(s) on important files, just used to forward files to the PM after putting his signature only (*The Economic Times*, 2015, 11 March). The overall impression of Nair was that of an honest and efficient person with administrative skills but a weak PS. It is not surprising because the PMO and its PS only reflects the power of the PM.

Nair was succeeded by Pulok Chatterjee who was earlier in the PMO as Joint Secretary from 2004-2009. Thereafter, he moved to the World Bank to work as executive director. After retirement from IAS and leaving his World Bank assignment before the expiry of his term, Pulok, an old hand in the PMO, joined as PS to the PM and continued till May 2014. Why was Nair changed in 2011? Although PM had trust in his PS and relied on him but it was perhaps because of the lack of coordination in the government which had created embarrassing position for the government in the Parliament and also in the court on some occasions in the recent past. In addition, the impression of a weak government, a weak PMO and the PM not in command of his government increasingly became a worrying point for the government and the party in view of the impending 2014 Lok Sabha elections. This scenario perhaps prompted the Congress high command to empower the PMO and to dispel the perception that PM Manmohan Singh's writ did not run, as this could hurt the prospects of the party at the time of electioneering. As such, Pulok Chatterjee was brought back to the PMO in 2011 to provide seriousness and raise to the office. His return also matched with the thinking in the Congress, especially with the Sonia circle that the PMO needed to be looked upon with respect and not sidelined in order to boost the image of the party. It, however, needs mention that like Nair, his predecessor, Pulok also did not enjoy high standing among civil servants. He never acted as the secretary to any department in the Government of India nor had he the experience of serving as Chief Secretary. Yet, with him in the PMO better coordination between the government and organisation was expected. Soon after the induction of Pulok in the PMO, the PM set up a Committee of Secretaries under him to work out a plan to tide over the coal and gas shortage. The PM was keen to rely on Pulok for refurbishing the image of the PMO (Singh 2014: 136-137). In short, Manmohan's was a modest PMO in which significant power rested in the office of the Congress President and not the PMO (Singh 2020: 60).

Modi: Dominant & Powerful PMO

Narendra Modi's credentials as the powerful, efficient Chief Minister of Gujarat had already been established and well known before he moved to the national politics. When Modi-led NDA came to power in 2014 with a comfortable majority, it was assumed that he would be a strong PM and his PMO would be equally strong and powerful. The PMO under Modi has been made a mechanism of exercising control and establishing the PM's authority over ministries. The signal to this effect was sent soon after the formation of the Government when the convention of ministers appointing their personal staff including the OSD was brought under the Cabinet Committee on appointments. The dominance of PMO was affirmed when the Department of Personnel and Training (DOPT) stalled the appointment of three private secretaries — two in the Ministry of Home Affairs and one in the Ministry of External Affairs (*The Times of India*, 2014, 17 June). Modi made it clear that power in the government would vest in the PMO. Not only his style of campaigning during the 2014 elections was 'presidential' (in the US Sense), but his functioning as PM also reflects the same style. He relies more on bureaucracy than his Cabinet. Transparency, accountability and delivery of results appeared to be his mantra of governance. His address to the secretaries of different departments attests to this thinking of Modi. The PM restructured the PMO by discontinuing many advisory committees, the Group of Ministers (GoMs) and Economic Group of Ministers (EGoMs) constituted during the Manmohan Singh period. An empowered PMO is the idea which is not dependent on ministers for policy initiative and direction. The NITI Aayog is the brainchild of the PM for policy initiatives and starting a new phase of Union-State 'cooperative Federalism'. The PMO during Modi's period reflects the image of an efficient and effective organisation which is constantly engaged not only in grievance redressal but also in directing, supervising and monitoring different plans and projects. It also asks different organisations to initiate different policy initiatives.

Modi's PMO is regarded as the most dominant PMO since the days of Indira Gandhi. As the Chief Minister of Gujarat, he had direct rapport with bureaucrats. He depended more on civil servants than his cabinet colleagues. This became abundantly clear when Modi addressed the Secretaries of Union government as PM for the first time on 4 June 2014. He gave them his RAX and email numbers and asked them to directly get in touch with him if they have any problem in working or if they had any suggestion for the PM to improve the

system. It was clear that they need not approach the PM through their ministers. The total power remained with him and him only. Commenting on Modi's PMO, N.K. Singh writes:

Following the elections of May 2014, there was a new PMO whose complexion had changed. It reflects the personality and style as well as the implementational capabilities of the PM. The PMO has had the difficult task of coping with new challenges - the punishing schedule of PM Narendra Modi and, more importantly, the scrutiny and implementation of programs and special initiatives undertaken by various ministries and entities (Singh 2020: 61).

Organisation of PMO: PM's Prerogative

It remains a well-established convention that selecting the officers of his trust/choice is the prerogative of the PM. It was reported that Modi in 2014 selected his team of officials in the PMO on the basis of "experience, expertise and performance" in Nripendra Mishra as his PS or loyalty and expertise in P. K. Misra or Ajit Kumar Doval. It was reported that the PMO in Modi's government would be more influential than most of his cabinet ministers (*The Times of India*, 2014, 11 June). Nripendra Mishra who was appointed as PS to the PMO was a retired IAS officer from U.P cadre who was not only experienced, efficient but possessed domain knowledge of national and international issues. As an efficient civil servant, he understood what the leader wants. It is said that he has friends in all political parties of north India. As an experienced bureaucrat he became the 'eyes and ears' of the PM as Delhi's bureaucratic elite was unknown to Modi. This is clearly reflected in the farewell Tweet on Nripendra Mishra by Modi in November 2019, "When I was new to Delhi in 2014, he taught me a lot and his guidance remains extremely valuable" (Singh 2020: 61). In order to avoid a Haksar- or Brajesh Mishra-like situation of the 1970 and late 1990s in the PMO, Modi was careful not to vest unlimited power in one individual person or place. This was reflected in the creation of a new post in the PMO as that of Additional Principal Secretary and the appointment of P.K. Misra to act not only as a counter-check vis-a-vis the other officers, but to serve as an alternative source of management of government business. It is interesting to know that P. K. Misra is a former Gujarat cadre IAS officer and was Principal Advisor to Modi during 2001-2004 when he was the CM of Gujarat. Since his retirement, P.K. Misra was serving the state in one capacity or the other. In the PMO his assignment included the Appointment Committee of the Cabinet which is responsible for all the major appointments in the

government. This shows the level of trust and confidence of the PM he enjoys. This also indicates that the PM not only believed in division of work and application of the theory of checks and balances at the top in the PMO but also created alternative source of advice that he considers more dependable. But the Mishras No.1 or 2, it appears, were apparently not given the freedom to deal with political or policy issues. This also shows that there is hardly any restriction on the way in which the PM wants to organise his office. By exercising his discretion in the constitution of the PMO, the PM signalled that his PMO would be the hub of decision making, play a crucial role in streamlining decision-making and interaction with other ministries. Even though placing heavy reliance on bureaucracy in the PMO, the political decisions are made by the PM himself unlike the Indira and the Vajpayee years when Haksar and Brajesh Mishra had important political roles to play.

Power with PM & PMO

From the very beginning, Modi hammered home the idea that power lies with the PM and his PMO only. Even senior Cabinet Ministers were not given the freedom of selecting their personal staff as was the customary practice till then in the government. The case in point to be mentioned here is that of Rajnath Singh who besides being a Cabinet Minister was also the President of the BJP at that time but was not allowed to have IPS officer Alok Singh as his private secretary. This was a new trend which shows the control of the PM and his PMO even on minor but important issues as the above. The ministers and bureaucrats in the government have a feeling that they are being constantly watched by a third eye. On many occasions some of them have been asked to mend their ways. That the real power lies in the PMO became crystal clear when soon after taking power in NDA-2, the two Mishras and NSA Doval were given the status of Cabinet rank in the PMO (*The Indian Express*, 2019, 12 June, p.10). This is a clear indication that the PM keeps his officials on par with his Cabinet colleagues. Again, a first of its kind! Can one visualise this as further erosion in the cabinet system of India? This also greatly upsets the status between the Cabinet Secretary and the Principal Secretary. By downgrading the status of Cabinet Secretary vis-a-vis some retired but top officials in the PMO (PS, APS, NSA, etc), the overpowered PMO is bound to reflect this concentration of power in the functioning of the government. It appears the PMO is being substituted for the Cabinet.

With the departure of Nripendra Mishra in November 2019, P.K. Misra was appointed the Principal Secretary to the PMO, who fully enjoys the trust of the PM. Writing about the qualities of P.K. Misra (PK to his friends), N.K. Singh remarks:

In some ways it is difficult to replicate PK's rapport and unalloyed trust with the PM - never adding any salt and pepper in which he transmits back and forth and acting with neutrality and objectivity. Indeed, in many ways, this is unprecedented. He is a solution-seeker but would like to do so while fully observing the rules of the game and with integrity not only towards the Constitution but also the AoB rules (Singh 2020: 61).

Principal Adviser: An Innovation

But before Nripendra Mishra's departure, the Modi government created a new position to accommodate the former IAS officer and Cabinet Secretary, P. K. Sinha, as the Principal Adviser to the PM into the PMO, thus, "providing continuity between the PMO and the Cabinet Office" (Singh 2020: 61). Though not clearly defined, it was expected that P. K. Misra, who had been pivotal in bureaucratic functioning as well as appointments, would continue doing similar work as the PS, and Sinha would take over policy matters in the PMO that Nripendra Mishra had been taking care of (*The Print*, 2019, 3 September)⁶. When the PM created the new designation of Principal Adviser for P.K.Sinha while appointing him in the PMO no one had a clue as to why it was done. The designation is unheard of in the PMO and left people guessing why this was done. While the roles of PS P.K. Misra and NSA Ajit Doval were well defined, the matters to be handled by Principal Adviser Sinha were not clear. Sinha is the second retired Cabinet Secretary to be moved to the PMO, first being B.G. Deshmukh. Since Cabinet Secretary is the most senior bureaucrat in the hierarchy, he could not have been junior to PS Mishra and report to him. In terms of service, Misra has been senior to Sinha by five batches in the IAS. So, what to do? The PM showed his innovative skills and created the post of Principal Adviser for Sinha. Secondly, drafting Sinha in the advisory role would provide him with a wide canvas to give his advice to the PM on policy, implementation and coordination with different ministries and departments. His role would not be confined to merely infrastructure as was widely expected. Secondly, it would also rule out any possibility of who is the No.1 or No.2 in the PMO. All the three top officials will be independent of each other and no one will report to anybody (*Orissa Post*, 2019, 23 September, p. 9). As it appears, the job of coordination

among the top three officers in the PMO now rests ultimately with the PM.

Thus, the development of the PMS/PMO shows that the initial apprehension that if a powerful PMS is created it will eclipse the stature, importance and influence of the Cabinet Secretariat has come true. Both Cabinet Secretariat and PMO were created as executive support to assist the PM in his functioning. Both find mention in the Government of India Allocation of Business Rules, 1961. Whereas Cabinet Secretariat remains of the British administrative vintage, PMO is an extra-constitutional growth in the system albeit gaining the status of a department in 1961. Deshmukh observes, "The PMO is... a visible, regular and well-established institution consisting almost exclusively of serving or retired civil servants. It, therefore, has certain code of conduct and business and can be held accountable. Its functioning is reflected in written documents and its orders are well recorded" (1997: 413).

PMO Today: A Multitasking Organisation

The journey of PMO has taken different and varied course under the leadership of different PMs ranging from a one-party strong government to weak coalition governments. The power and fortune of the PMO has depended on the position, powers, and perception of the incumbent PMs and how they want to use this important institution of governance. The internal system of working developed in the PMO may be characterised by two features - efficiency and time-bound delivery of services. This has been the standard basis of its service to the PMs. The PMO has no power of its own. It reflects in the reflected glory of its incumbent PMs. There have also been occasions when extra-constitutional authorities have tried to influence its working and the role of PMO came under controversy under Nehru (Mathai's role), Indira (Sanjay's undue interference/ influence), Morarji (appointment of PS and Kanti Desai's role), Narasimha Rao (godman Chandra Swami's clout) and Vajpayee (his adopted son-in-law Ranjan Bhattacharya's pulling strings in economic matters). The PMS which started as a simple gatherer of information and helper of the PM in dealing with his correspondence and files, etc. by way of 'providing secretarial assistance' has today developed into a big, powerful organisation which performs a multi-tasking role for the PM. It acts as the information-provider, media manager, advisor for policy inputs, coordinator of various ministries, monitor of different on-going projects and programmes within the country and outside,

facilitation point for fixing PM's schedules within the country and abroad, sometimes also playing political role, managing his social media, acting as think tank and as an enabler deals with all that comes under the lap of the PM as the most important and powerful executive in the country. Matters have to be finally settled as the buck stops here.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, it may be concluded that the PMO which began as a small organisation to assist the Prime Minister has developed, after the Shastri period, into the most powerful centre of governance in India — the fulcrum of Indian administration. The PMO is viewed today as the *de facto* Government of India. This changing dynamics in our political system has been reflected from time to time in the changing designations of the head of the PMS/PMO — starting from the PPS to Secretary and finally Principal Secretary with cabinet rank. It has shifted the balance of power from the Cabinet government system to the Prime Ministerial system — in substance, if not in form. All over the world, the Westminster model is witnessing the concentration of power in the PM's office, as a common phenomenon. With the office of the PM getting 'presidentialised' (in the US sense), in its outlook, and style of functioning, the PMO is bound to reflect this reality. Thus, the initial idea of Jawaharlal Nehru that the PM should have a powerful secretariat of his own is vindicated by later developments. This development in our polity, over the years, points to two trends — the concentration of power in the PM and his PMO and the apparent undercutting in the functioning of Cabinet Secretariat and the Cabinet Secretary. The role and status of the PMO and the Cabinet Secretariat has depended on the stature of the PM, his standing within the party and the Cabinet and the political climate of the country. It also depends on the personality of the officials occupying the positions as PS to PMO and Cabinet Secretary. The basic point is whether the PM believes in centralised or decentralised functioning in the government. It is the PM who has to do the balancing act between the PMO and the Cabinet Secretariat keeping in view the parliamentary traditions and democratic functioning. However, with the rise of the PMO, over the years, a sort of hybrid model combining the presidential and parliamentary systems appear to be emerging and subtly working in India. This has not only greatly eclipsed the role of Cabinet Secretariat and Cabinet Secretary as the coordinating link among

various ministries and departments of the Government of India but has also impacted the position and role of the Cabinet System in India.

Notes

1. Refer to www.pmindia.gov.in/en Prime Minister's Office: Role and Functions in the System of Indian Government
2. Riley- Smith, B(2021, February 16). Exclusive; Boris Johnson urged to appoint Cabinet Minister for Union. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2021/02/16/exclusive-report-urges-Boris-Johnson->
3. <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/19870215-rajiv-gandhis-most-insensitive-blunder-a.p.-venkateswaran-removal-as-foreign-secretary-798506-1987-02-15>. Retrieved on 11 February 2021.
4. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/narasimha-raos-yes-minister-moment-uk-please-tell-me-how-to-handle-the-babus/articleshow/65305937.cms> - Retrieved on 11 February 2021.
5. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/Man-who-was-%E2%80%98Bharat-sarkar%E2%80%99/article12540158.ece>
6. <https://theprint.in/india/what-makes-retired-ias-officer-p-k-sinha-modis-most-favoured-bureaucrat/285684/>

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