

Prime Minister's office: The Fulcrum of Indian Administration

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In a parliamentary system of government the position of the Prime Minister (PM) is most important. His position has been described by political commentators in various ways: first among equals'; 'moon among the stars'; 'sun around which the system revolves' etc. In due course of time, the parliamentary system gave way to the cabinet system and the post second world war period witnessed the transformation of cabinet government into what R.H.S. Crossman-the British thinker and statesman called Prime Ministerial Government. He further added that the role which earlier cabinet used to do (that of a hyphen and buckle that joins and fastens the legislative part of the state to the executive) is now fulfilled by a single man-the PM. That the parliamentary supremacy had become a myth and even cabinet government an obsolete concept. The PM alone stood at the apex of the pyramid of power. No wonder, in contemporary era some of the analysts have preferred to name it as 'Primedential system' basically to refer a situation in which the PM uses the power and authority which is almost analogous to the power enjoyed by the American President-supposed to be the most powerful executive in the world. It's a common knowledge that the position and role of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) very much depends on the political thinking, personality and the position of the PM in his party, his relations with his cabinet colleagues and his popularity with the masses. PMO receives its authority from the PM and he alone decides how and in which way he wants to use his office.

Need for a PM's Office

After independence India opted for a parliamentary democratic system of governance which was, in a way, natural as most of its leaders were trained in this system which was gradually being introduced during the period of long British rule in India. The Constitution of India does not talk much about the position and powers of the PM. nor about his duties in detail. Its well known that he represents, to borrow Walter Bagehot's phrase, the 'efficient' part of the constitutional system in India and all the executive powers listed in the name of the President of India are virtually enjoyed by him. He is the real source of power and authority which comes to him owing to the popular mandate that he enjoys in full measure. The PM is the linchpin of the government. According to British Political Scientist Dennis Kavanagh, "the Prime Minister is a political as well as an executive leader"¹. In contemporary times the PM has a number of roles to perform: as the head of the government, head of the council of Ministers, Leader of the Parliament, most important leader of his party, as the authoritative chief spokesman 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. Put briefly, 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 and his control and command over party and his popularity with the masses. The structure of governance becomes

centralized 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 PM; the PM is the real executive; has power to appoint and dismiss Ministers (they continue in office at the pleasure of the PM); he is the coordinator of the policies of the government and in that capacity has the right to supervise the functioning of all the departments and intervene in case of an emergent need etc. Unlike some 40 years back, the P.M 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. Within the country also people want to stay in touch with the chief of their government through letters, fax, email, twitter, face book and other social media for the redressal of their different kinds of grievances and sometimes also to suggest to the government what they think could be a better way of resolving a problem festering at times for years. In fact, the essence of strength of a popular national leader lies in how strongly he/she is connected with his people. Thus, the pressure of work for a PM is really stupendous and it is not possible for one person to accomplish it.

Historical Development

In order to perform his role efficiently and effectively the PM should have an office of his own for information, advice and necessary support, sometimes, at short notice. At the time of India's independence there perhaps was not any 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 World War I and he started it as his own personal secretariat known as 'Garden Suburb'. Whatever support system the PM had was more in the nature of a 'private office' located in 10 Downing Street-the PM's office. After some period of dormancy, the office was again revived by Winston Churchill during the Second World War period. The British system, thus, relied heavily on cabinet as the coordinating link of the government under PM's leadership.

When Jawaharlal Nehru was appointed as the first PM of India, he is reported to be in favour of a big and strong office of the PM. But he was dissuaded by some of his own colleagues like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and also by the then higher echelons of bureaucracy who perhaps saw in the emergence of a powerful Prime Minister's Secretariat (PMS) a rival centre of power and a danger to the growing cabinet system. As a result, during the long years of Nehru's rule (1947-1964), the PMS had a low profile. Nehru 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 Affairs ministry which he headed. Consequently, the rank of the Principal Private Secretary (PPS) to the PM as the head of this office was then called was that of an Additional Secretary level officer only. Vithal Pai of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) was the first PPS to Nehru who was succeeded by another ICS officer Dharma Vira. It is averred that on the advice of Lord Mountbatten Nehru separated the position of PPS and the Cabinet Secretary.² 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 continues till date. 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.

One notices PMS coming into prominence when L.B. Shastri became PM after Nehru's demise. There were two basic reasons for PMS coming into focus. One, despite being a seasoned politician who was known for his simplicity, sincerity and a clean image Shastri's understanding of international,

economic and scientific matters were limited. Two, it is said, he had suffered a mild heart attack and needed rest and proper assistance in managing huge governmental affairs. For this, he selected two bright ICS cadre officers of the Secretary rank—L.K.Jha and L.P.Singh for his office. However, he could not get L.P.Singh because G.L.Nanda then Home Minister 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 and that he will attend the meetings of the cabinet. The terms were accepted by the PM. It is worthwhile to remember here that about the same time in England also the strength of the PMO was increased.³ The strength of PM's Secretariat in India was increased from 116 in 1948-49 to 235 in 1965-66.⁴ 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 internal organization and process of government business depends on him. He is the conduit to PM. All information that need to be passed on to the PM pass through him precisely to save precious time of the PM. In that sense the Secretary acts as filter to PM's information. It is said that Jha as Secretary in the PMS started acting in a powerful way but the untimely death of Shastri in Tashkent in January 1966 made this experiment short lived.

When Indira Gandhi became PM after Shastri, Jha continued for some time as Secretary to PMS. After the 4th general elections in 1967 Congress 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 pre-eminence in the Cabinet and to forge a coherent set of policies and develop a credible political stance.⁵ In order to meet these challenges the PM could not depend on her cabinet colleagues some of which were her arch political rivals or "big political beasts". She, in fact, needed aides who could give her frank advice and professional assistance. She appointed P.N.Haksar of the Indian Diplomatic Service/Indian Foreign Service as Principal Secretary to PMS. It must be acknowledged to the credit of Haksar that he organised the work of the PMO and raised its calibre and potential for assistance and advice.⁶ 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 PM's power, the power of the PMS also grew tremendously and it emerged as a parallel government, a parallel centre of power. In the opinion of P.C.Alexander (PS to Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi from 1981 to 1985) Haksar proved to be one of the most successful secretaries in the PMO.⁷ When P.N.Dhar succeeded Haksar, the designation reverted to secretary to PM. It was again revived when V.Shankar, a retired ICS officer, was appointed as Principal Secretary to PMS in 1977. Once again, the designation reverted back to secretary when Krishnaswamy Rao Saheb held the post for about a year during Charan Singh and Indira Gandhi's prime ministership.

In the aftermath of emergency when Janata Party government headed by Morarji Desai came into power, 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 (PMS) into Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and reduce its staff strength from 229 to 211. Why? Was it his inability to do it as he headed virtually a coalition government? Or was it the result of a realisation that such an office is really needed? One may, therefore, conclude that after working for sometime PM might have realised the usefulness of the office. During the period of Chaudhary Charan Singh both the PMO and the PM lapsed into low profile. When Indira Gandhi returned back to power in 1980, the PMO, once again shot into prominence but unlike the Haksar years (1967-76) it was more professional and cautious to avoid the charge of over centralization under P.C.Alexander as the Principal Secretary (May 2, 1981-18 Jan, 1985). The new PS was able to provide a "well knit team" "one of the best teams the Secretariat has

ever had”.⁸It brought back some amount of “credibility and prestige ... to this office and helped a great deal in restoring the good name of the office”.⁹ Sarla Grewal succeeded Alexander as PS .She in turn was succeeded by B.G.Deshmukh (March 1989) who had earlier successfully served as the Cabinet Secretary. When V.P.Singh became the PM in December 1989,it was 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 the new PM slowly started to appreciate the importance of PMO and had good opinion about its impartiality and non – interference.¹⁰The very idea of cutting down the size of PMO was automatically shelved. Deshmukh continued to serve as PS to PMO under V.P.Singh and his successor ChandraShekhar-gaining the distinction of serving under three PMs. After the general elections in 1991 PV Narasimha Rao became the PM and appointed A.N.Verma as his PS to PMO. In the beginning the office started functioning on a low profile but as time passed ,the PMO started spreading its influence and started interfering in the functioning of other departments. One important example of this development was that the Foreign Investment and Promotion Board was kept directly under the PS to the PM. The PM himself held charge of many ministeries and departments.The importance and authority of PMO increased manifold during this period.¹¹ During Deve Gowda and I k Gujral Governments(1996-98) the PMO was active but not strong as they were coalition governments. Satish Chandran was Dewe Gowda’s and N.N.Vohra-the present Governor of Jammu and Kashmir, was I.K.Gujral’s PS to the PMO.The scene ,however,drastically changed when A.B.Vajpayee became PM of the BJP led NDA coalition in 1998.Vajpayee made the PMO a very powerful institution by appointing his close confidant and man of trust Brijesh Mishra,a retired Indian Foreign Service officer who had also served as the Head of 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.On several occasions he was sent abroad by PM as his personal emissary without any prior consultation with the Foreign Minister.It was widely believed that he was much more powerful than any Cabinet Minister and at times his influence overshadowed the Defence Ministry and the Home Ministry. When the functioning of the PS was criticised within the party, by the RSS and in the Parliament the PM offered to resign rather remove Mishra.Such was the trust of the PM in PS’s working that the voice of the PS was taken as the authoritative voice of the PM.

When Dr Manmohan Singh became what Sanjay Baru, his Media Advisor, described ‘the accidental Prime Minister’ in 2004 of the Congress- led United Progressive Alliance, the PMO again returned back to a low profile phase because of: this being a coalition government in which the supporting parties including the left parties decided policy issues; a new organization headed by the Congress President, Sonia Gandhi, known as National Advisory Council came into existence; it was widely believed that important policy decisions and appointments including one in the PMO were decided by Sonia Gandhi.The PS to the PMO, T.K.A.Nair, a Punjab cadre retired IAS, who had worked briefly as Secretary to the PM in Gujral’s PMO and had served as the Chief Secretary of Punjab did not enjoy higher standing among civil servants.He had not served as Secretary in important and powerful ministries such as home ,finance and defence. He was a ‘bureaucratic light weight’.¹² He was the third preferential choice of the PM for PS. 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’.¹³Nair depended very much on Pulok Chatterjee,a joint secretary in the PMO for advice on important policy decisions. Pulok, it may be mentioned here, was inducted into Manmohan Singh’s PMO at the behest of Sonia Gandhi who 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.¹⁴The PM had to deal with other ‘political rivals’ in Pranab Mukherjee(recently retired as President of

India), Arjun Singh and A.K. Anthony in the Cabinet. No wonder the general impression was that of a weak PM and his weak PMO.

Negating all poll predictions when Narendra Modi became PM and looking into his style and record of functioning as the Chief Minister of Gujarat, it was assumed that he would be a strong PM and his PMO would be equally strong and powerful. Modi's PMO is regarded as the most dominant PMO since the days of Indira Gandhi. Selecting the officers of his trust is the prerogative of the PM. It has been reported that PM Modi has 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. Mishra or NSA in Ajit Doval. It was reported in *Times of India*.¹⁵ That the PMO in Modi's government would be more influential than most of the cabinet ministers. In order to avoid a Haksar-like situation of the 1970s in the PMO, Modi has been careful not to vest unlimited power in one individual person or place. This is reflected in the creation of a new post in the PMO as Additional Principal Secretary and the appointment of P.K. Mishra 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. Mishra 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 PK Mishra was serving the state in one capacity or the other. In the PMO deals with major government appointments. This shows 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. This also reflects that there is no bar on the way in which the PM wants to organize his office. By exercising his discretion in the constitution of the PMO, the PM has signalled that his PMO would be the hub of decision making, play a crucial role in streamlining decision-making and interaction with other ministries.¹⁶

Organisational Structure of PMO

Every office has a structural set up. So is the case with PMO. Since PMO in India is an extra constitutional growth, one does not come across it anywhere in the constitution. It only finds mention in the Government Business Rules, 1961 where it has been accorded the status of a government department. The structure is the result of the evolution process over the years based on the prerogative of the Prime Ministers of India. The Principal Secretary is the Chief of staff and is at the apex of the PMO. Except the trust of the PM no special qualification is needed for the PS. Till now the post has been occupied by senior civil servants either serving or retired generally belonging to the Indian Administrative Service, Indian Foreign Service or any other service. The organizational hierarchy is flexible and the size and composition may vary with the change in political leadership. Below the PS, today, there is Additional Principal Secretary. Below him are, Additional Secretaries, Joint Secretaries, Officers on Special Duty, several Directors and many functionaries belonging to class I, II, III and IV services. The National Security Advisor, Ajit Dobhal, with the rank of a Minister of State is also a part of the PMO. In addition, technocrats, subject specialists, media advisor are also appointed by the PM to his office. Apart from the bureaucrats, the PM may appoint a trusted political ally and colleague as his political advisor. Bhubanesh Chaturvedi was appointed as a political advisor by PM Narasimha Rao (1991-96). During Vajpayee's regime Pramod Mahajan was appointed as a political advisor for the first time with the status of a cabinet rank Minister. Several Prime Ministers have appointed Ministers of State to the PMO. To name a few: Arun Singh and Sheila Dixit by Rajiv Gandhi, Ashlam Sher Khan by PV Narasimha Rao, Kamal Morarka by Chandrashekhar, Prithviraj Chavan by Manmohan Singh and Dr. Jitendra Singh under present government of Modi. It was during Vajpayee's regime that for the first time the organisational structure of the PMO and their work distribution came out in public domain.¹⁷ In 1948-49 the total strength of PMS was 116,¹⁸ in 1958-59 it

went up to 129; in 1965-66 it shoot up to 235; in 1976-77 the staff strength was 242;¹⁹ during Morarji it came down to 203;²⁰ during Rajiv Gandhi it went up to 388;²¹ during Vajpayee the strength reached 400.²² In 2012 the PMO had a staff strength of 404.

Functions of the PMO

Initially the PMO was established as a staff agency to assist the PM in the discharge of his role, functions and responsibilities. Its function is no where enumerated. The experience gained over the years provides us some help in putting these pieces of information together. Some of these are: to deal with the references made to the PM under the Rules of Business; to deal with all the matters that have come to the PM; to deal with the public relations side of the PMO i.e. maintaining relations with the press and the public; fixing the appointments of the PM within India and outside which includes party meetings, meetings with different interest groups and organizations; to provide assistance in dealing with the cases submitted to PM for orders; to help in preparing answers to questions which cannot be answered by a particular Ministry in Parliament; to handle PM's numerous correspondences, Face book, twitter account and other postings on social media; arrange the travel plan of PM; prepare the draft speech and important declarations of the PM. Unlike England, where the PM does not have a department of his own, in India, the PMs have traditionally been the Minister-in-charge of the Departments of Space, Atomic Energy, Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions etc. Sometimes as a result of reshuffle in the Council of Ministers those departments not given to other Ministers remain with the PM for a short term or at times for a longer duration. In such ministries where the Prime Minister is the Minister-in-charge, all matters requiring ministerial approval and not delegated to a Minister of State (MoS)/Deputy Minister are submitted to the Prime Minister for orders. The PMO works as the secretariat for such Departments and Ministries as mentioned above. It puts before the PM any proposal of any Ministry for consideration.

The PMO provides administrative assistance to the PM by giving informal notes on files; places before the PM important records, information, and precedents which may help PM in arriving at a decision. It monitors actions on different projects and activities going on within the country and outside. It directs and reminds the different ministries and concerned government agencies the initiatives they have to take as per the desires of the PM. It effects inter-agency coordination sometimes through formal but also through informal channels of conflict resolution. The PMO acts as the facilitation point regarding PM's interaction with the President, the Vice-President, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Cabinet Ministers, State Governors and Chief Ministers, Members of Parliament, Vice President of NITI Ayog, Cabinet Secretary and other Secretaries etc. It assists the PM in discharging his responsibilities as the Chairman of the NITI Ayog. Maintaining PM's relations with foreign dignitaries has also come under the lap of PMO as the PM meets a number of heads of governments at summit level meetings throughout the year. By keeping a continuous watch on the developments, stresses and strains in international and economic relations with other countries, PMO keeps the PM informed of these developments. It also keeps the PM posted with defence preparedness and matters of internal security. Since the PM of India is the greatest dispenser of important appointments in the country, the PMO helps the PM in making these appointments by providing important information and advice. As a party leader during elections the PM makes a lot of promises to the electorates. These poll promises have to be crystallized into concrete public policies. Here the PMO comes to the help of the PM in giving these promises the shape of a public policy frame. It helps the PM in operating the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund (PMNRF) and National Defence Fund (NDF). Last but not the least, the PMO helps the PM in crisis management on some public issues of national and international importance and urgency. Though not listed, some confidants in the PMO especially the PS may be entrusted with some works of political nature also. Thus, the jurisdiction

and functions of the PMO are myriad and of different types. It entirely depends on the personality, vision and attitude of the PM what shape he wants to give to his office with and what objectives in mind. It virtually basks in the reflected glory of its political chief: the PM.

Working Experience

The PMO has no original or inherent power (s) of its own. It does not find any mention in the constitution. That way it must be seen as an extra constitutional but necessary growth. It derives its power from the Prime Minister for whose help and advice the office came into existence. In the initial years of independence it was influenced by the practices in England. Nehru appointed H.V.R.Iyenger, a senior officer of the Indian Civil Service (ICS), as his first Principal Private Secretary in the Prime Minister's Secretariat(PMS).He was a competent officer with an overpowering personality and used to attend cabinet meetings which was not liked by senior Ministers like Sardar Patel,John Mathai and Sanmukham Chetty. A.V.Pai, another senior ICS officer replaced Iyengar about whom John Mathai writes that he was the best PPS to Nehru.²³ Dharma Vira, yet another efficient ICS officer, replaced Pai in 1950 and continued up to April 1951.M.O.Mathai who had been assisting Nehru as a part of Nehru's official secretariat before Indian independence was supposedly offered the position of PPS by Nehru which he initially declined. But, later, when assured that all papers would go to PM through him, he joined as Special Assistant to the Prime Minister. Mathai became a power unto himself and was termed as "power behind the throne".Mathai was not formally a part of bureaucracy, but was playing a political-cum-administrative-cum-influential role.. sitting in a room next to Nehru's in South Block ,and wielding a great deal of clout whether intended or not,"remarks L.K.Jha,ICS former Secretary to PM Shastri and Indira Gandhi and Governor of Jammu and Kashmir.²⁴ It deserves mention here that in his functioning ,Nehru used to get assistance from Tarlok Singh ICS , his private secretary, Pitambar Pant of the Planning Commission and Homi Bhabha ,the known scientist and secretary to the government. During Nehru's last few months before death, it is said, L.B.Shastri,a Minister without Portfolio used to work on behalf of the Prime Minister. P.N.Haksar, the PS to Indira Gandhi believed that the major failure of Nehru lay in his inability to create an institutionalised framework which could have built up his vision of new India.²⁵

What Nehru lacked or initially not allowed to do, was accomplished by his protégé and successor Shastri who by establishing a strong and powerful Prime Minister's Secretariat made an innovation in the public administrative system of India. With this a nerve centre of political and administrative power was put in place. This new organization had the potentiality to be manoeuvred/used for increasing the personal power of a strong Prime Minister. Shastri wanted two secretaries for the PMS but as stated earlier he had to contend with L.K.Jha, a former finance secretary, only.On his demand Jha was accorded in the warrant of precedence the same position as that of the Cabinet Secretary. Madhu Limaye, the socialist thinker- politician, beautifully depicts Jha's position in the PMS in his own words .Jha is reported to have said:

I had to advise him on most matters including the war with Pakistan,the non-alignment summit,Britain,Canada .And as Shastri was not in good health, people would come and ask me rather than him. Sometimes,after the UN Security Council meeting, our man there would ring me up at 2 a.m.rather than disturb Shastriji,I would either give a response if I knew the PM's mind or say that I would get back to the caller after speaking to the Prime Minister.But actually,my role was important largely because of Shastriji's weak physical condition. So at many times I had to present myself. And also,I was on so many committees.

He further added:

“So when I am not speaking on Shastriji’s behalf or giving the PM’s position, I was thinking of ruling at a personal level.”²⁶

Jha wielded enormous influence and began to be called a ‘super-secretary’. Michael Brecher is also said to have mentioned that long before the end of Shastri’s first year the PMS was a formidable influence in the making of decisions and Jha emerged as the policy adviser to the PM.

When Indira Gandhi became the PM in January 1966, L.K. Jha continued as Secretary. Indira did not have enough administrative experience and PMS facilitated the PM in taking quick decisions by processing all the proposals for her. Jha accompanied her in all her foreign trips and was with her in all important meetings/deliberations with visiting foreign dignitaries. The PM relied on Jha even for some politically sensitive assignments, remarks Sarla Malik.²⁷ Indira Gandhi assigned Jha important diplomatic responsibilities like discussing nuclear non proliferation treaty with important centres of world power. The all pervading influence of Jha led to growing criticism against him which resulted in his exit as the Governor of Reserve Bank of India. Jha was replaced by another distinguished officer of the IFS cadre, P.N. Haksar in January 1967 who turned PMS into a very effective machinery of governance. In a word, in him Indira Gandhi found a philosopher, tactician, guide, advisor and efficient chief of staff for her PMS. He raised the power and influence of the PMS to an unprecedented heights though himself shunned publicity greatly as he believed in the principle of anonymity for civil servants. The PMS during Haksar era when the PM was fighting for survival and establishing her credibility and pre-eminence in the cabinet is said to have devised such strategically oriented public issues/policies like abolition of privy purses, nationalization of banks, attractive programme of *Garibi-Hatao* etc which changed PM’s image from a ‘*Gungi Guria*’ to a powerful iron lady, the only man in her women’s cabinet. Haksar started directly ordering Secretaries to different departments. He ran a parallel government from the PMS. Madhu Limaye attests that under him the cabinet ministers were downgraded, the autonomy of the government departments were destroyed, the cabinet Secretariat became a cipher; the concept of the neutrality of the civil services was attacked. The PMS became a parallel government.²⁸ But, it must also be admitted that the finest coordinating and crisis management role of the PMS emerged during Bangladesh war, 1971. It was during this period that the PMS served as the think-tank, and, the process of concentration of power perhaps started taking roots. However, it would be perhaps an exaggeration to say that the PMS under Haksar had the final say in all matters, always. P.N. Dhar tells us that despite the opposition of the PMS wheat take over policy was adopted by Indira Gandhi government. The departments of Revenue Intelligence and Enforcement were brought under the control of the PMS from the Ministry of Finance during the 1970s. Intelligence agencies like IB, CBI and RAW were separated from the Ministry of Home Affairs and placed under Cabinet Secretariat. All this concentrated extensive powers in the hands of the PM and her PMS which severely undermined the normal functioning of the government and its machinery, more so, during the period of internal emergency (1975-77). The entry of Sanjay Gandhi as the extra constitutional power in the PMS led to the waning of Haksar’s influence and his difference with the PM over Sanjay’s Maruti project led to his exit from the PMS.

P.N. Dhar, a moderate economist drafted into PMS in 1970 as an advisor in the wake of Indira Gandhi’s economic initiatives as a Secretary, took over from Haksar without the coveted designation of Principal Secretary. The PMS, it is said, was dominated by Sanjay Gandhi and R.K. Dhawan during this period. The PMS during Indira Gandhi had three important functions—decision making, policy formulation and public relations.²⁹ The veteran journalist Kuldip Nayar comments:

The PMS had become an independent executive force comparable to what exists in presidential than parliamentary systems. It was the secretariat which shaped country's basic policies, processed senior appointments, and even took a hand in political field.

When Janata Party government came to power after emergency, PM Morarji Desai personally and his party were committed to reducing the size and importance of the all powerful PMS. Not only the name of PMS was changed to Prime Minister's Office (PMO), its size was reduced and there was change in the orientation towards this office whose central task now was just to help the PM in the functioning of the government. The Office was divested of some of its policy making units. Despite P.N.Dhar's views to the contrary, the position of Cabinet Secretariat and other departments was considerably restored and the intervention and interference from the PMO in the functioning of ministries were minimal.³⁰ Yet, as the saying goes: old habits die hard. The old bureaucratic and ministerial habits of nearly more than a decade led the bureaucracy to look up to V.Shankar, ICS and Principal Secretary to PM for guidance and advice.

With Indira Gandhi's coming into power, again, in 1980, the PMO came into prominence with the appointment of a seasoned civil servant, P.C. Alexander as the Principal Secretary to the PMO in 1981. This is what P.C Alexander writes what Indira Gandhi expected of his role as PS:

“She had stated, in unambiguous terms that she wanted me to get involved not only in government matters but also in political and party matters. In other words, she was keen that I handle all issues with which she was concerned”.³¹

Alexander not only accompanied the PM in almost all her foreign visits but was also a part of the informal group on national security. All files to the PM were routed through him. He started the practice of meeting all the officers of the PMO once a week. Accounts given by Alexander in his book (pp.140-143) shows not only the trust and closeness between the PM and her PS but also gives a glimpse of the different types of advice PM sought from him sometimes in the course of a meeting itself. At times the PS has to assist the PM at a very short notice in handling a crisis situation e.g when Anwara Taimur, the then Chief Minister of Assam lost majority in the House on June 26, 1981.³² The importance of Alexander could be assessed that he knew before hand any shuffling in the cabinet whereas Ministers came to know about any change in their portfolio barely an hour or so before. After Indira's assassination the decision that Rajiv Gandhi should be sworn in PM by the President (Gyani Zail Singh) and not by the Vice-President as was the wish of many party men, was Principal Secretary's.³³

Alexander who worked for some time under Rajiv Gandhi was replaced by Sarla Grewal, an IAS officer of the Punjab cadre. On an average Rajiv used to go through almost 300 files daily which was presented to him by senior Joint Secretary rank officials. PM gets a lot of requests at least 500-600 to address various jubilees and annual day meetings which need to be sorted out and prioritized accordingly for engagements. Briefing the PM before an interview or meet-the press and media is an important task of the PMO. So is the case when the parliament is in session. The overall impression during Rajiv's initial years was of a “powerful PMO and a coterie of strong bureaucrats who had worked their way into the prime minister's confidence”.³⁴

B.G. Deshmukh, a former Cabinet Secretary and a level headed civil servant joined Rajiv's PMO as Principal Secretary in March 1989. R.K. Dhawan also joined as Officer on Special Duty (OSD) but dealt mostly with political matters and the files specially given to him by the PM. Sometimes at the behest of the PM the PS has to have informal political meetings with the leaders of the political party (ies) on certain urgent issue. Deshmukh recounts having one such meeting with top BJP and RSS

leaders at the house of Appa Ghatate to discuss the matters connected with Shilanyas ceremony in the midst of Babri Masjid controversy.³⁵

Deshmukh continued as PS to PMO during V.P.Singh's period. He claims that he made it clear to the new PM :

“...that the PMO, at least during my time ,was a purely professional body giving advice and service to the prime minister. We had no intention of appropriating the work of other ministries and departments. The so called interference of the PMO was not by its civil servants but by non-civil servants and political appointees associated with the PMO.”³⁶

Like some other PMs, initially V.P.Singh also viewed PMO with some amount of suspicion and was not in favour of it being a powerful body but as Deshmukh tell us:

“the new prime minister was slowly coming to appreciate the importance of the PMO and was quite impressed by its impartiality and non-interference...After about four months he himself said that the PMO should be more assertive in the government without,of course,unduly interfering with its work.He was more than convinced of the PMO's importance during the Gulf crisis and also because of other initiatives started by us.”³⁷

When Chandrashekhar became the PM, Deshmukh continued for sometime. The PMO reached its lowest point as it reflected the authority of a PM of a weak government. As per the account of Deshmukh, Kamal Morarka, a MoS in the PMO wanted to dominate the PMO which was not allowed by the PS. Writes he, “I made it clear that the principal secretary is the head of the PMO and submits files only to the prime minister and he could not ask for any files unless specifically desired by the prime minister”.³⁸

This shows the role of the PS in keeping the PMO free from unnecessary political interference. Under A.N.Verma as PS to Narasimha Rao, the PMO gained prominence and made a come back. Rao depended heavily on Verma for decision making. He was very powerful person and used to remain present even when the Cabinet Secretary had to put up some files for crucial discussion with PM. Bhubanesh Chaturvedi, the MoS in PMO, looked after the party affairs and used to keep Rao posted with developments on political fronts. In 1995 Ashlam Sher Khan was appointed MoS in the PMO.The influence of godman Chandraswamy was evident in Rao's government but how much influence he did exercise on the functioning of PMO is difficult to say conclusively.

A B Vajpayee was sworn in as the PM on 19 March 1998. Brajesh Mishra was appointed as PS to PMO the same day. After PM, he was the most powerful person in the government. With his appointment as the first National Security Advisor (NSA), he became all the more powerful, virtually working as the most authoritative voice of Indian foreign policy. He used to address the media not only for the PMO but for the PM as well. It is reported that he was the only person taken into confidence by the PM regarding Pokhran II blasts.³⁹

During the period of Manmohan Singh the PMO remained on a low key because of the coalitional nature of government in the first place, and, the general perception that the real power lay with the Congress President, Sonia Gandhi who used to decide important matters. The PS to Manmohan Singh,TK A Nair was no match for a L.K.Jha, Haksar, P.C.Alexander, A N Verma or Brijesh Mishra. The PM himself maintained a low profile, so did his PMO and PS. Pulok Chatterjee who had served earlier in Rajiv Gandhi's PMO was inducted into Manmohan's PMO at Sonia's behest. He was her trusted man and main point of contact between PM and herself.Sensing which way the wind was blowing, the PS relied heavily on Pulok for advice.⁴⁰ Additionally, the deliberate low profile of the

PM compounded by the relative inexperience of the Principal Secretary not only affected the agenda of governance reform but at times also witnessed a sort of turf war among some of its important functionaries⁴¹. It was a weak but nevertheless an efficient PMO in its functioning, writes Baru.

With Narendra Modi emerging as the unchallenged leader of his party and perhaps the sole architect of 2014 unexpected parliamentary victory, his PMO was naturally expected to be a powerful one. It is claimed to be the strongest PMO since Indira Gandhi's. The PMO has been made a mechanism of exercising control and establishing the PM's authority over the ministries. The signal to this effect was sent soon after the formation of 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 stalled the appointment of three private secretaries-two in the Ministry of Home Affairs and one in the ministry of External Affairs.⁴² Modi made it clear that power in the government would vest in the PMO. Not only his style of campaign during elections was presidential, his functioning reflects the same style. He relies more on bureaucracy than his cabinet. Transparency, accountability and delivery of result appear 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 and Group of Ministers (GoMs) and Economic Group of Ministers (EGoMs) constituted during Manmohan period. An empowered PMO is the idea which is not dependent on ministers for policy initiative and direction. NITI Ayog is the brain child of the PM for policy initiatives and starting a new phase of union-state cooperative relations. The PMO during Modi's period reflects the image of an efficient and effective organization which is constantly engaged not only in grievance redressal but in directing, supervising and monitoring different plans and projects. It also asks different organizations to initiate different policy initiatives.

In the final analysis it may be concluded that the PMO which started initially as a small organization to assist the PM has developed into the most powerful centre of governance in India. As someone has aptly remarked that the PMO is the government of the Government of India. The parliamentary elections have turned into the election of the PM. People vote for in the name of an individual and expect delivery of services in return, wish to hold him/her accountable. Thus, as the office of the PM is getting presidentialised in its perception, outlook and style of functioning, the PMO is bound to reflect this reality. Thus, the initial idea of Nehru that the PM should have a powerful secretariat/office of his own is vindicated by later developments. However, this development in our polity points to two trends-the concentration of power in the PM and his PMO, and, the dilution in the functioning of Cabinet Secretariat and the Cabinet Secretary making it almost redundant. In my view, we need to reform our system in the light of new developments and reorganise Cabinet Secretariat or merge it with the PMO to make it more functional and purposeful.

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