Brief note on the concept of Bureaucracy as conceptualized by Max Weber

The concept of bureaucracy was developed by a social scientist, Max Weber. Max Weber {1864-1920) was a German Sociologist. Weber's news on organizational design were influenced by three factors, namely

(i) his military experience,
(ii) his lack of trust in human judgment, and (iii) the phenomenal growth of industrial organizations.

He conceived of bureaucracy as an abstract system for rational solution of management problems without the frictions caused by human errors and emotions. According to Weber, "bureaucratic organizations are the most rational means of carrying out imperative control over human beings".'

The theory of bureaucracy is based upon the nature of authority relationships in organisation. It is concerned with how organizations actually operate rather than with how they should function.

Weber visualized the bureaucratic model as an orderly structuring of power to achieve rational human behavior under a hierarchy of professionals. He identified three types of legitimate authority, which are as follows:

(i) Traditional authority:

It refers to the obedience a person gets because he belongs to a certain class which is traditionally recognized as possessing authority, e.g., member of a royal family.

(ii) Charismatic authority:

Such authority arises due to the follower's belief that a person has some special power or appeal.

(iii) Rational-legal authority:

It is the obedience a person gets because he occupies a legally established position or rank in the hierarchy of an organisation.

According to Weber, traditional authority does not recognize the competence of individuals and charismatic authority is too emotional and irrational.

Therefore, rational-legal authority is recognized as the most legitimate type in the theory of bureaucracy. Thus, Weber conceived of bureaucracy as the 'ideal type' of administrative organisation. The distinctive features of bureaucracy are as follows:

1. A set of written rules and work procedures:

Bureaucracy functions through a framework of rules and regulations. All administrative acts, functions and decisions are found by rules which are

formulated and recorded in writing. Rules are designed to ensure uniformity of action and equality of treatment.

They save time and effort by obviating the need for deriving a new solution for every problem or case. Written rules and work procedures serve as guides to action by managers and workers.

Norms of conduct are established and everyone is expected to follow them. A systematic interpretation of norms and enforcement of rules cannot be maintained through oral communication.

2. Specialization:

There is a systematic division of labor, rights and power. Every member of the rational organisation must know fully the limits of his job and powers so that there is no overlapping between the roles of different participants as otherwise the whole structure would be undermined.

Thus, there is a specific sphere of competence consisting of
(a) obligations to perform specific functions,
(b) provision of the necessary authority to carry out these functions, and
(c) clear definition of the means of compulsion which are to be used subject to definite
conditions.

3. Hierarchy of authority:

Through a series of delegations a hierarchy is created under which each lower office is under the control and supervision of a higher one.

This is necessary to ensure compliance of orders and instructions. Compliance cannot be left to chance, it has to be systematically checked and reinforced. Therefore, no office is left uncontrolled.

4. Impersonal relations':

As a matter of principle, the members of the administrative staff should be completely separated from ownership of the means of production. In addition, the organization's property which is controlled within the spheres of the office is completely separated from the personal property of the officials.

5. Trained personnel:

Members of the administrative staff are provided specialized technical training so that a fully rational application of technical rules or norms can be made. The bureaucrat derives his authority and legitimate command from technical skill and knowledge. Employees should be placed according to their command of technical training or competence.

6. Organizational freedom:

There should be a complete absence of appropriation of his official position by the incumbent the organization must be free from any outside control and positions cannot be monopolized by any incumbent. All positions must be free to be allocated and re-allocated according to the needs of the organization.