



THE IMPACT OF RED TAPISM ON PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY: A LEGAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Red tapism, or bureaucratic red tape, symbolises excessive rules, paperwork, and delays originating from historical practices of binding legal documents with red ribbons in England. This article delineates red tape's manifestations—hollow formalities, centralised decision-making, and hierarchical structures—that frustrate employees and citizens alike, eroding public service motivation, innovation, and organisational efficiency. Distinguishing "red tape" (burdensome rules causing compliance fatigue) from "green tape" (effective, positive formalisation), it explores types including formal, informal, high/low, organisational, and stakeholder red tape, whose effects vary contextually—sometimes fostering efficiency, other times alienation and stress. Focusing on public service delivery in India, the article highlights red tape's economic toll (e.g., delayed projects inflating costs by 20-30%), social inequities (e.g., 25% MGNREGA dropout due to procedural hurdles), administrative stagnation, corruption, and psychological strain. Drawing on World Bank, CAG, and NITI Aayog data, it underscores how red tape undermines welfare schemes like PDS and healthcare amid resource constraints. Finally, the article proposes reforms: digitisation (e.g., Digital India), regulatory simplification, accountability via KPIs, frontline empowerment, capacity building, and public-private partnerships, emulating Estonia and Singapore. Slashing red tape is imperative for equitable governance and sustainable development.

Keywords: Red Tapism, Bureaucratic Red Tape, Green Tape, Corruption, Regulatory Simplification.

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INTRODUCTION

Red tapism is also called red tape theory/government red tape/bureaucratic red tape. The term red tape derives from the ribbon once used to tie up the legal documents in England, and because common law gives great weightage to precedents, every judicial decision must have been preceded by a thorough search of records for guidance and authority. Clerk and lawyers spent a good deal of their time in tying and untying the ribbon and folders. On the other hand, citizens and administrative officers were interested in action, but they had to wait due to unwrapping and rewrapping the documents. The ribbon has long disappeared, but the hated conditions and practices it represents continue, keeping the symbol alive. It symbolises:

- Hollow and unwarranted file and paperwork
- Unnecessary rules, procedures and regulations
- Centralised decision making
- Formal system
- Hierarchical organisational structure
- Inefficient and unjustifiable delays

that ultimately results in frustration and irritation. Red Tape is part of every organisation, public or private, but it is generally associated with public/government organisations. Red Tape negatively influences the employee's behaviours like public service motivation, decision making, innovation, etc., which ultimately affects the employee's performance. This, in turn, reduces the efficiency and effectiveness of an organisation. Red tape creates a compliance burden for employees, which ensures that employees feel a lack of efficacy.

CONCEPT OF RED TAPISM

Now, the question that arises in our mind is whether all formal rules, regulations, policies and procedures entail a compliance burden on employees? The answer obviously is "no". Only those rules and procedures constitute the red tape that negatively impact employees' behaviour and frustrate them. The rules and policies that are effective and do not entail compliance burden on employees are referred to as "green tape. In contrast to the red tape, the concept of green tape explains that all rules and procedures entail a compliance burden on employees because not all formal rules and procedures in organisations are bad. Some rules, regulations and policies are good, effective and influence employees positively.

Some of the literature shows that formalisation is positively related to work alienation, stress levels, absences, powerlessness, and self-estrangement.¹ Other research has found that more formalisation may result in higher levels of efficiency,² greater organisational commitment,³ improvement of dynamic capabilities,⁴ and mobilisation of local knowledge.⁵ In sum, the effects of formalisation/Red Tape are context-specific and may be neutral, positive, or negative.

TYPES OF RED TAPE

Formal Red Tape: It refers to the constraints faced by employees due to organisational laws, rules and regulations and paperwork that create significant delays and obstacles, hindering efficient decision-making and service delivery, often leading to public frustration, inefficiency and even corruption.

Informal Red Tape: It refers to the impediments faced by employees from unwritten obstacles, political pressure,⁶ or corruption that influences or bypasses those formal rules, creating even more friction.

High Red Tape: High and low red tape are differentiated in terms of "procedural burden imposed upon subjects."⁷ High red tape in government means excessive, unnecessary rules, paperwork, and procedures that slow down decisions, frustrate citizens, increase costs, and foster corruption. For example, multi-sign-offs for simple tasks, unnecessary licenses and permits, delayed funding releases for government schemes, etc.

Low Red Tape: It involves streamlined, efficient, citizen-focused processes, often using digital tools, to make interactions smoother and more effective. So, it can be said that these are justified rules. For example, one-stop digital portals for services, simplified tax filing and reduced waiting times for permits and licenses.

Organisational Red Tape: It consists of rules that obstruct organisational functioning and goal achievement.⁸ While sometimes stemming from necessary safeguards, it becomes a problem when it hinders efficiency, reduces employee motivation, and stifles innovation,

¹ Agarwal 1993; Aiken and Hage 1966; Kakabadse 1986; Rousseau 1978

² Adler and Borys, 1996

³ Michaels et al., 1988

⁴ Zollo and Winter, 2002

⁵ Ahrens and Chapman, 2004

⁶ Baldwin 1990; Pandey & Kingsley, 2000

⁷ Scott & Pandey, 2000, p.621

⁸ Bozeman, 1993

impacting both public and private sector performance. For example, needing multiple committees to approve a simple purchase, and filling out redundant forms for internal processes.

Stakeholder Red Tape: It entails those processes which have no usefulness for any group of stakeholders, like citizens, businesses or employees and cause unnecessary delays in their work.⁹

IMPLICATIONS OF RED TAPE ON PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY

Red tape, often synonymous with excessive bureaucracy, poses significant hurdles to efficient public service delivery. Public services—ranging from healthcare and education to welfare schemes and infrastructure development—form the backbone of governance. They ensure equitable access to essential resources, fostering societal progress. However, "red tape," characterised by convoluted procedures, excessive paperwork, multiple approvals, and rigid regulations, undermines this framework. Originating from the literal red ribbons used to bind official documents in 18th-century Britain, red tape now symbolises bureaucratic inertia. Its implications ripple through economies, delay citizen benefits, erode trust in institutions, and stifle innovation. In developing nations like India, where public services already grapple with resource constraints, red tape exacerbates inequalities, making timely delivery a distant goal.

Economically, red tape inflates costs and hampers growth. Businesses and individuals seeking public services, such as licenses or subsidies, face prolonged delays. A World Bank study on Ease of Doing Business ranks countries partly on regulatory efficiency; nations with high red tape, like India in earlier rankings (pre-2020 reforms), lose billions in productivity. For instance, obtaining environmental clearances for infrastructure projects can take years due to layered approvals across ministries. This delays projects like highways or renewable energy plants, increasing capital costs by 20-30% from idle investments. Public service providers, including government hospitals or schools, divert resources to compliance rather than service. In India, the Public Distribution System (PDS) for food security suffers from redundant documentation, leading to leakages estimated at 30-40% by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG). Citizens bear opportunity costs: a farmer waiting months for a crop loan misses sowing seasons, perpetuating poverty cycles.

⁹ Bozeman, 1993 (A Theory of Government 'Red Tape')

Socially, red tape disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, widening inequalities. Marginalised groups—rural poor, women, tribals, and migrants—lack the literacy, networks, or mobility to navigate bureaucratic mazes. In India's Aadhaar-linked welfare schemes, such as MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), applicants endure repeated visits to block offices for biometric verifications and form submissions. A 2022 NITI Aayog report highlighted that 25% of eligible beneficiaries drop out due to procedural fatigue. Healthcare delivery fares worse: during the COVID-19 pandemic, excessive protocols delayed ventilator procurements and vaccine distributions in public hospitals. The urban-rural divide amplifies this; urban elites bypass red tape via agents or influence, while rural citizens queue endlessly. This fosters social exclusion, undermining constitutional mandates like Article 21's right to life and dignity. Moreover, it breeds corruption—bribes become shortcuts, as seen in petty graft for ration cards, eroding faith in egalitarian ideals.

Administratively, red tape stifles innovation and accountability. Frontline workers, bogged down by documentation, neglect core duties. Teachers in government schools spend more time on attendance registers than on lesson planning, contributing to India's low learning outcomes. Digital tools like e-governance portals (e.g., India's DigiLocker or UMANG app) promise relief, yet legacy rules mandate physical signatures, negating gains. A 2023 OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) paper notes that bureaucratic rigidity discourages public-private partnerships (PPPs), essential for scaling services like smart cities. Politically, it shields inefficiency; politicians exploit delays to favour loyalists, perpetuating patronage systems. In federal structures like India, inter-state variations—Kerala's streamlined services versus Bihar's notorious delays—highlight how red tape entrenches regional disparities.

The psychological toll cannot be overlooked. Citizens experience "bureaucratic harassment," leading to learned helplessness. Surveys by Transparency International reveal that 60% of Indians perceive public services as corrupt due to delays. This erodes democratic legitimacy, fuelling protests like the 2020-21 farmers' agitation against farm laws entangled in regulatory fears.

Thus, red tape transforms public services from enablers to obstacles, costing economies trillions and societies' cohesion. Streamlining regulations, leveraging technology, and fostering

accountability can reclaim efficiency. For nations aspiring to sustainable development, slashing red tape is not optional—it's imperative.

WAYS OF IMPROVING RED TAPISM

Mitigating red tape demands bold reforms. India's 2014-2024 initiatives, including the Jan Vishwas Act, decriminalising minor offences and single-window clearances, show promise. Globally, Estonia's e-governance model, with 99% digital services, cuts processing times to hours. Blockchain and AI can automate verifications, as piloted in India's Ayushman Bharat for claim settlements. Yet, cultural shifts are vital: training bureaucrats in citizen-centricity and empowering local bodies via decentralisation. Addressing red tapism equires systemic reforms that prioritise simplicity, technology, and accountability. The following are the key strategies to streamline bureaucracy effectively.

Digitise Processes and Leverage Technology: Governments and organisations can reduce paperwork by adopting e-governance platforms. For instance, India's Digital India initiative has introduced single-window clearances for business approvals, cutting processing times from months to days. Implement AI-driven tools for automated approvals, chatbots for queries, and blockchain for transparent tracking. This minimises human intervention, eliminates physical queues, and ensures real-time monitoring. Training officials in digital literacy is crucial to overcoming resistance.

Simplify Regulations and Reduce Layers: Audit existing laws and eliminate redundant rules. A "regulatory guillotine" approach—sunsetting outdated regulations unless proven essential—works well, as seen in New Zealand's 1980s reforms that slashed compliance costs by 25%. Merge overlapping agencies and flatten hierarchies to shorten decision chains. Set strict timelines for approvals, with automatic clearances if deadlines lapse, fostering a "silence means consent" policy.

Promote Accountability and Performance Metrics: Introduce key performance indicators (KPIs) for bureaucrats, linking promotions to efficiency rather than seniority. Citizen charters, mandating service timelines with penalties for delays, empower users to seek redressal. Independent audits and whistleblower protections expose corruption. Singapore's Public Service Commission exemplifies this, using merit-based evaluations to maintain one of the world's leanest bureaucracies.

Empower Frontline Staff and Foster Innovation: Grant discretion to lower-level officials for routine decisions, reducing upward referrals. Pilot "sandbox" programs allowing experimental reforms in select departments, scaling successes nationally. Regular feedback loops from citizens via apps or portals help identify bottlenecks. Denmark's delegation of authority to local offices has boosted responsiveness without compromising oversight.

Capacity Building and Cultural Shift: Invest in training programs emphasising customer service and problem-solving over rule-book adherence. Public campaigns can reframe bureaucracy as a service enabler, not a hurdle. Incentivise inter-departmental collaboration through shared rewards. Estonia's e-residency model transformed its administration into a digital powerhouse, inspiring global shifts.

Public-Private Partnerships and Oversight: Collaborate with private firms for process re-engineering, as in the UK's Government Digital Service. Establish independent regulatory ombudsmen to fast-track grievances. Periodic third-party audits ensure sustained improvements.

Implementing these measures demands political will and a phased rollout to avoid disruption. Countries like Singapore and Estonia demonstrate that curbing red tapism enhances governance, boosts investor confidence, and accelerates growth. By prioritising efficiency, nations can turn bureaucracy from a barrier into a facilitator of progress.

CONCLUSION

Red tapism, born from the literal red ribbons of England's legal past, endures as a modern scourge of hollow formalities, delays, and hierarchical inertia that plagues public service delivery. In India, the toll is stark: economic losses from delayed projects, social dropouts from schemes like MGNREGA, entrenched corruption, and eroded trust, as evidenced by World Bank, CAG, and NITI Aayog data. While distinguishing burdensome red tape from efficient green tape reveals context-specific effects, the net harm—stifled innovation, administrative stagnation, and psychological strain—demands urgent reform. The path forward lies in bold, multifaceted strategies: digitising via Digital India and AI, slashing redundant regulations, enforcing KPIs for accountability, empowering frontline workers, building capacity, and forging public-private partnerships. Models like Estonia's e-governance and Singapore's meritocracy prove these viable, transforming bureaucracy from obstacle to enabler. Slashing red tape is not merely administrative housekeeping; it is a moral imperative for India's

constitutional vision of justice, equality, and dignity under Article 21. By prioritising simplicity and citizen-centricity, India can unlock sustainable development, foster inclusive growth, and restore faith in governance. The time for action is now—untying the ribbons of the past to weave a future of efficiency and equity.

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