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## **UNIT 6    MAX WEBER'S THEORY OF BUREAUCRACY**

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### **6.0    LEARNING OUTCOME**

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After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- understand the Weber's contribution to the theory of bureaucracy;
- explains the types of authority;
- know the elements of bureaucracy;
- discuss the limitation of the bureaucracy; and
- analyse the criticism and relevance of Weberian model to the modern society.

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## **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

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In the classical approach to administration, Weberian model of bureaucracy finds a central place. Max Weber is the first thinker who has systematically studied the bureaucracy. He has provided a theoretical framework and basis for understanding bureaucracy. Max Weber's analysis influenced many modern writers on bureaucracy. Weber, apart from bureaucracy, wrote on various aspects of the society ranging from history, religion to legitimacy and domination. Weber was founder of modern sociology and a greatest scholar among the pioneers of administrative thought. He was one of the towering thinkers of the twentieth century. The Weberian ideal type bureaucracy continues to be the dominant paradigm in the public administration.

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## **6.2 MAX WEBER: HIS LIFE AND WRITINGS**

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Max Weber (1864-1920) was born in western Germany. He studied law at the university of Heidelberg. He joined University of Berlin as an instructor in law. He wrote a number of papers on law, and social, political and economic factors prevalent during that time. His major writings were, 'The Theory of Economic and Social Organisations', 'General Economic History', 'Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism' (1904). He studied law and economics and he became a specialist in the interpretation of religious doctrines and he was a notable biblical scholar. He had a thorough grasp of ancient Roman administration, medieval trading companies and the modern stock exchange. He became a specialist in comparative history of urban institutions. He also made a special study of social and psychological conditions of productivity in a West German textile mill. He studied methodology of social studies.

Weber always preferred knowledge obtained through practical experience than library research. His writings reflect the social conditions of Germany of his time. He saw the decline of liberalism and threat to individual in the bureaucratisation of the society. Unification of Germany under Bismarck and elimination of liberal middle class movement convinced Weber that the great goal could be achieved through power policies. (Prasad. et.al. p.77)

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### **6.3 WEBER'S BUREAUCRACY: THE CONTEXT**

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Scientific management and theory of bureaucracy mark the first major developments in the theory of organisation. These theories were responding to the needs of industrial organisations. Theory of bureaucracy was needed to bring the efficiency in its functioning. As stated by Weber 'no special proof is necessary to show that military discipline is ideal model for the modern capitalist factory. (Clegg and Dunkerley, p.75). The example of most developed form of organisation, bureaucracy, the theory of which Weber found, is developed from the Prussian military forces, and which enterprises such as the British Railway Companies actually found in the ranks of the British Army, was to become the specific form of management of big business. Weber felt that emergence of modern bureaucratic organisation is 'demanded', he further says 'a peculiarity of modern culture', and specific of its technical and economic basis, demands the very 'calculability of results' (Clegg and Dunkerley, p.81). More specifically 'today it is primarily the capitalist market economy which demands the official business of the administration be discharged precisely, unambiguously, continuously, and with as much speed as possible' (Clegg and Dunkerley, p.80.) Bureaucratisation offers above all, optimum possibility for carrying through the principle of specialising administration functioning according to purely objective considerations. (Clegg and Dunkerley, p.80).

Above lines show that the Weber's theory of bureaucracy was a response to the demands of industrial capitalist economy, which required an efficient administration. While Taylor attempted to rationalise functions of modern factory, Weber made an attempt at the rationalisation of bureaucratic structures. Both of them emphasised on control and discipline in the working of organisations.

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### **6.4 THEORY OF BUREAUCRACY**

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Bureaucracy was discussed prior to Weber's writings. The invention of word bureaucracy belongs to Vincent de Gournay, a French economist in 1745. He took the conventional term 'bureau' meaning writing-table and office, and added to it the word derived from the Greek suffix for the 'rule', in order to signify bureaucracy as the rule of officials. It rapidly became a standard and

accepted term in the conventions of political discourse. (Clegg and Dunkerley, p.75). By the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century the term was widely held to have been of German origin. J.S. Mill, an eminent political scientist included bureaucracy in his series of analysis. Karl Marx also discussed about bureaucracy at certain places. According to Marx, bureaucracy like a state itself is an instrument by which the dominant class exercise its domination over the other social classes. (Mohit Bhattacharya, p.52). Hegel conceived the governing bureaucracy of public administration as a bridge between the state and the civil society.

Bureaucracy as an institution existed in China even in the period of 186 B.C, public offices were in existence and persons for those offices were recruited through competitive examinations even then. (Prasad et. al. p.79).

The above discussion shows that there existed a bureaucracy much earlier to Weberian writings and also there were attempts to understand the bureaucracy by different writings. But the Weber is considered to be the first person to attempt at the systematic understanding of the bureaucracy.

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## **6.5 MAX WEBER ON AUTHORITY**

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Max Weber's concept of bureaucracy is closely related to his ideas on legitimacy of authority. He worked on theories of domination, leadership and legitimacy of authority. Weber differentiated authority, power and control. To him, a person could be said to poses power, if in a social relationship, his will could be enforced despite resistance. Such exercise of power becomes controlled. Authority manifests when a command of definite content elicits obedience on the part of specific individuals. For Weber, 'authority' was identical with 'authoritarian power of command' (Prasad, et.al.p.77). Authority is state of reality where a person willingly complies with legitimate commands or orders because he considers that a person by virtue of his position could issue orders to him. Unlike in 'power' there is willing obedience on the part of clientele to legitimise authority.

### **6.5.1 Components of Authority**

Weber identified five essential components of authority. They are:

- (1) an individual or a body of individuals who rule,
- (2) an individual or a body of individuals who are ruled,

- (3) the will of the rulers to influence conduct of the ruled,
- (4) evidence of the influence of the rulers in terms of the objective degree of command, and
- (5) direct or indirect evidence of that influence in terms of subjective acceptance with which the ruled obey the command.

### **6.5.2 Categories of People in Organisation**

The authority exists as long as it is accepted as legitimate by the ruled. Thus, an administrator or organisation can rule only when it has legitimacy. While explaining authority in various organisations, Weber concluded “all administration means dominance” (Prasad. et. al. p. 77). Weber categorised persons in the organisations in to four types:

- (1) those who are accustomed to obey commands,
- (2) those who are personally interested in seeing the existing domination continue,
- (3) those who participate in that domination, and
- (4) those who hold themselves in readiness for the exercise of functions.

### **6.5.3 Types of Authority**

Since Weber believed that authority could be exercised as long as it is legitimate he divided the authority in to three types based on sources of legitimacy for each authority. Weber classified authority in to three ‘pure’ or ‘ideal’ types based on its claim to legitimacy. They are: (1) traditional authority, (2) charismatic authority and (3) legal-rational authority.

#### **Traditional Authority**

It rests on “an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of the status of those exercising authority under them”. (Bertram Gross, p.137). In this kind of authority a command is obeyed because of the belief in age-old customs, traditions, conventions and beliefs. Those who exercised authority does so under the rules that have always existed, but may also exercise personal prerogative. This is a pure type of feudal, patrimonial regime under which the organisation consists of household

officials, relatives, and loyalists. Under this type, obedience is given not to the rules but to the rulers, not to the superiors, but to the chiefs. New rules are not enacted, they are “found”. The only documents in the administration of law are the “documents of tradition, namely precedents”. Resistance, when it occurs is directed against the person of chief or a member of his staff. The accusation is that he has failed to observe traditional limits of his authority (quoted from Weber by Bertram Gross, p.138).

Under the traditional authority a person enjoy authority by virtue of their inherited status. The persons who obey orders are called ‘followers’. They carry out the commands out of personal loyalty to the ruler and pious regard for his time honoured ‘status’. The system retains legitimacy as long as the customs and traditions are respected in the organisation.

### **Charismatic Authority**

It “rests on devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him” (D.S. Pugh, p.15). The term charisma (gift of grace) is taken from the vocabulary of early Christianity. Here it is applied supernatural, super human or extraordinary qualities of a leader. Among the holders of charisma are the sorcerer, the prophet or the warrior of chieftain or the personal head of a party and demagogue. (Bertram Gross, p.138). In this type of authority obedience was justified because the person giving order had some sacred or out standing character. The leader exercises authority based on his personal qualities rather than formal stipulations or prescribed norms. Those subject to the authority are “followers” of the leader, not “subject”. The only basis of legitimacy is personal charisma. He can exercise his authority, so long as it is proved, that is so long as it receives recognition and is able to satisfy the followers.

Under this authority the leader selects his disciples or followers as his officials based on their personal devotion to him rather than their special qualifications or status. These ‘disciple officials’ constitute an organisation and their sphere of activity and power of command depends upon likes and dislikes of the leader. (Prasad. et. al. p.79).

### **Legal-Rational Authority**

It rests on “a belief in the legality of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands. Obedience is owed to the legally established impersonal order. It extends to the persons exercising the authority of office only by virtue of the formal legality of their commands, and only within the scope of the authority of the office”. (Bertram Gross, p.139). Manifestations of legal authority are found in organisations where rules are applied judicially and in accordance with ascertainable principles valid for all members in the organisation. The members who exercise power under this authority are the superiors and are appointed or elected by legal procedures to maintain the legal orders. The organisation is a continuous process and all its members are subject to certain rules. Weber considers the legal authority as the most rational form of authority.

Obedience to the authority depends upon certain related beliefs. They are: (1) that a legal code can be established which can claim obedience from members of the organisation; (2) that, the law is a system of abstract rules, these rules are applied to particular cases, and the administration looks after the interest of the organisation within the limits of the law; (3) that the man exercising authority also obeys this impersonal order; (4) that only ‘qua’ member does the member obey the law; and (5) that obedience is done not to the person who holds the authority but to the impersonal order which has granted him this position. (Martin Albrow, p.43).

Of all the three types of authority Weber considers the legal authority, not only the most rational authority, but also the most efficient form of authority. He considers bureaucracy as legal-rational type of authority.

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## **6.6 MAX WEBER: THE CONCEPT OF BUREAUCRACY**

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Weber never defined bureaucracy. He only described it as “an administrative body of appointed officials”. (Prasad. et. al. p.80). He also described its characteristics. Bureaucracy includes explicitly appointed officials only leaving out the elected ones. Weber wrote a great deal about the place of the official in a modern society. For him, it has an increasingly important type of social role. As in the case of authority, Weber categorised bureaucracy into (1) patrimonial bureaucracy found in traditional and charismatic authorities

and (2) legal-rational bureaucracy found only in the legal type of authority. Weber identified certain features of legal-rational bureaucracy.

### **6.6.1 Features of Legal-Rational Bureaucracy**

The model of legal-rational bureaucracy described by Weber has the following features:

- (1) Official business is conducted on a continuous, regulated basis,
  - (2) An administrative agency functions in accordance with stipulated rules and is characterised by three interrelated attributes; (a) the powers and functions of each official is defined in terms of impersonal criteria, (b) the official is given matching authority to carry out his responsibility and (c) the means of compulsion at his disposal are strictly limited and the conditions under which their employment is legitimate are clearly defined,
  - (3) Every official and every office is part of the hierarchy of authority. Higher officials or offices perform supervision and the lower officers and officials have the right to appeal,
  - (4) Officials do not own the resources necessary for rendering the duties, but they are accountable for use of official resources. Official business and private affairs, official revenue and private income are strictly separated,
  - (5) Offices can not be appropriated by the incumbents as private property, and
  - (6) Administration is conducted on the basis of written documents.
- (Prasad. et. al. p.81)

### **6.6.2 Features of Officials**

Weber also discussed in detail, as a part of his model of bureaucracy, the features of officials. They are:

- (1) the staff members are personally free, observing only the impersonal duties of their offices,
- (2) they are appointed to an official position on the basis of the contract,
- (3) an official exercises authority delegated to him in accordance with impersonal rules, and his loyalty is expressed through faithful execution of his official duties,



- (4) his appointment and job placements depend upon his professional qualifications,
- (5) his administrative work is full time occupation,
- (6) his work is rewarded by regular salary and by prospects of career advancement,
- (7) there is a clear cut hierarchy of officials, and
- (8) he is subjected to a unified control and disciplinary system.

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## **6.7 MAX WEBER: ELEMENTS OF BUREAUCRACY**

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When we closely observe the above-mentioned features of bureaucracy we can identify certain important elements of Weberian model of bureaucracy.

They are:

1. Impersonal Order
2. Rules
3. Sphere of Competence
4. Hierarchy
5. Separation of Personal and Public Ends
6. Written Documents
7. Monocratic Type

### **Impersonal Order**

Weber emphasised that the official should perform their duties in an impersonal manner. The subordinates should follow both in the issuance of command and their obedience impersonal order. According to Merton, “authority, the power of control which derives from an acknowledged status, inheres in the office, not in the particular person who performs the official role”. (Prasad. et. al. p.82). It talks about the de-personalisation of relationship in the organisations.

### **Rules**

Rules are the basis for the functioning of the legal-rational authority. Officials are bound by the rules. The rules regulate the conduct of an office. Their rational application requires specialised training. In this regard Merton felt

that adherence to rules originally conceived as a means, becomes an end in itself. Rules become more important than the goals of the organisation.

### **Sphere of Competence**

It involves a sphere of obligation to perform functions, which have been marked off as a part of a systematic division of labour. It also implies provision of the incumbent with the necessary authority to carry out the functions.

### **Hierarchy**

According to Weber every office and every official is a part of a hierarchy. Under this system the lower office functions under the control of higher office. He attaches greater importance to the principle of hierarchy in the organisation of office.

### **Separation of Personal and Public Ends**

Weber pleads for separation of officials from their ownership of the means of administration. Officials cannot use his office position for personal ends. The office property is separated from personal property; at the same time the official is accountable for the use of office property.

### **Written Documents**

Written documents are the heart of Weberian bureaucracy. All administrative acts, decisions and rules are recorded in writing. These documents make the administration accountable to the people and provide a ready reference for future action.

### **Monocratic Type**

It means certain functions performed by bureaucracy cannot be performed by any other organisation. They monopolise certain functions and only the authorised official can perform that function, makes them monocratic in nature.

For all types of authority, Weber wrote “the fact of the existence and continuing functioning of an administrative staff is vital. It is indeed, the existence of such activity which is usually meant by the term organisation”. (Bertram Gross, p.139). Weber considered pure or monocratic bureaucracy is the most rational form of administrative staff. He further felt that “it is superior to any other form in precision, in stability, in the stringency of discipline and in its reliability. It thus, makes possible a particularly high degree of calculability of results for the heads of organisations and for those acting in relation to it. It is finally superior both in intensive efficiency and in the scope of its operations, and is formally capable of applications to all kinds of administrative tasks”. (Bertram Gross, p.139).

For bureaucratic administration is, other things being equal, always, from a formal technical point of view, the most rational type. According to Weber “for the needs of mass administration today, it is (bureaucracy) completely indispensable. The choice is only that between bureaucracy and dilettantism in the field of administration”. (Bertram Gross, p.140). Thus Weber believed that rational bureaucracy is technically superior and capable of attaining high degree of efficiency.

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## **6.8 MAX WEBER: LIMITS ON BUREAUCRACY**

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Weber while emphasising on the necessity of bureaucracy was aware of the fact that, the bureaucracy has inherent tendency of accumulation of power. The sources of this power could be seen in the special knowledge, which the official poses. In the course of his duties he acquired a great deal of concrete information much of it artificially restricted by ideas of confidentiality and secrecy. Nevertheless he was convinced that bureaucratisation was inevitable and that bureaucrats gained power. Weber resisted any identification of bureaucracy with rule by officials.

In order to prevent the bureaucracy from acquiring powers Weber suggested certain mechanism for limiting the scope of systems of authority in general and bureaucracy in particular. These mechanisms fall in to five major categories. The categories are: (1) collegiality, (2) separation of powers, (3)

amateur of administration, (4) direct democracy, and (5) representation. (Martin Albrow, pp.47-49). They are explained below:

### **Collegiality**

In a monocratic bureaucracy, Weber meant that at each stage of the official hierarchy one person and one person only, had the responsibility for taking a decision. This makes the bureaucracy more powerful. To prevent this Weber suggested the principle of collegiality involving others in the decision making process. Weber considered that collegiality would always have an important role to play in limiting bureaucracy. But it has disadvantages in terms of speed of decision and attribution of responsibility.

### **Separation of Powers**

Separation of powers meant dividing responsibility and functions between two or more bodies. For any decision to emerge a compromise between them had to be reached. This will avoid monopoly of decision by a single body or person. Weber regarded such a system as inherently unstable. One of the authorities was bound to have edge over the other.

### **Amateur Administration**

Since there is possibility of professional administration become powerful, Weber suggested the involvement of amateur administration in certain activities. Such men have sufficient public esteem to command and general confidence. But this system could not measure up to the demands for expertise which modern society made, and where the professionals assisted amateur it is always the professional who dominated the scene.

### **Direct Democracy**

To limit the power of bureaucracy Weber suggested direct democracy, where the officials were guided by and answerable to an assembly. Short term of office, permanent possibility of recall was designed to serve the purpose of direct democracy. But this system is possible only in small organisations and in local governments.

### **Representation**

Another method of limiting bureaucracy is sharing of authority of bureaucracy with the elected representatives of the people. With this method it is possible to control the power of the bureaucracy. But here, there is a possibility of representatives being bureaucratised. However Weber thought that through this medium there was a greater possibility of check on bureaucracy.

Through all the above means Weber wanted to limit the powers of the bureaucracy.

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## **6.9 MAX WEBER'S BUREAUCRACY: CRITICISM**

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The Weberian bureaucracy has attracted criticism from several corners. The criticism however revolves around the Weberian model, its rationality concept, administrative efficiency, formalism and the relevance of bureaucracy to the changing circumstances. Some of the very advantages of the bureaucracy claimed by Weber were turned against his own model.

Robert Merton and other sociologists have questioned the rationality of Weber's model saying that it results in certain dysfunctional consequences. Merton says that the structure of the bureaucracy especially its hierarchy and rules can easily result in consequences which are detrimental to the attainment of objectives of an organisation. Merton emphasises that the bureaucracy means inefficiency.

Phillip Selznick, pointing to the division of functions in an organisation shows how sub-units setup goals of their own sometimes conflicting with the organisation as a whole. Both Merton and Selznick have shown that the structure of formal organisations described by Weber is insufficient as a description of how bureaucrats behave clearly brought out this limitation of Weber's bureaucracy.

Talcott Parsons questioned the internal consistency of Weber's bureaucracy. Weber expected the administrative staff to be technically superior as well as poses the right to give orders. Parsons thinks that, this itself is not always possible to ensure that the higher-level authority will be matched by equivalent professional skills.

Alvin Gouldner and others have raised the problem of compliance with the rules by members of an organisation not so much because of informal processes arising within an administrative structure but to conditions outside the organisation which orient the behaviour of the member's vis-à-vis the rules. This criticism highlights the influence of environmental factors on the behaviour of the officials, which was neglected by Weberian model.

Bendix, the biographer of Weber argued against the belief that it is possible to adhere to a rule without the influence of the general social and political values. Rudolf questioned the very conception of Weber's model that administration was a rational machine and officials were mere technical functionaries.

Critics like Peter Blau questioned applicability of Weberian model to different places and times. Efficient administration is possible only when an individual is allowed to identify with the purpose of the organisation and to adopt his behaviour to the changing circumstances. Weber's bureaucracy and its assumptions about the human behaviour may not be valid in non-western environment. Joseph La Palombara believed that the developing societies may find Russian or Chinese model of administration more effective than Weberian model.

Some scholars like H.C. Creel questioned the very idea that rational bureaucracy is a modern phenomenon. He pointed that almost all characteristics of Weberian model existed in China by 200 B.C.

Simon and Barnard have proved that administrative efficiency would be reduced if we follow Weber's structural approach. It is possible to increase the efficiency in the organisations through informal relations than formal practices.

Critics questioned Weber's claim of internal consistency of bureaucracy and its ability to attain maximum efficiency. Gouldner who tested Weber's ideal type empirically found that it has internal contradictions such as tensions between the claims of expertise and claims of obedience based on discipline.

Simon and March who have included Weber in the classical thinkers like Gulick and Urwick felt that he too neglected the human behaviour in an

organisation. Maximum efficiency in the organisation cannot be achieved by emphasising on mere structure of bureaucracy without regard to its behaviour.

Weber was criticised for his neglect of power that a bureaucrat assumes. Phillip Selznick and others felt that a bureaucrat is increasingly pre-occupied with his own social position neglecting the very goals of the organisation.

Weber's model is also not relevant in the context of development administration. Strict adherence to rules results in delay and inefficiency in the administration. Adherence to hierarchy leads to authoritarianism in the organisation. Weber's insistence on records results in too much of formalism in the administration.

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## **6.10 MAX WEBER'S BUREAUCRACY: RELEVANCE**

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In spite of criticism from the several scholars, the ideas of Weber on bureaucracy continue to be relevant to understand the present administrative system. So far we have not been able to evolve an alternative model to Weber's bureaucracy. Weber is right in saying that when we are accustomed to the bureaucracy we cannot think of any other alternative. It is highly useful for managing large-scale organisations. His ideas on selection of officials based on qualifications, utility of written documents in administration, hierarchy etc., can be seen in any administration of the present day. The monocratic bureaucracy proposed by Weber is superior to all other forms of organisations in achieving the prescribed objectives. To overcome some of the problems of the bureaucracy, we can only bring reforms in it, but cannot replace it with any other organisation. Whether it is capitalist society or a socialist society, irrespective of the nature of economy, we find the bureaucracy playing a very important role. The people who talk about the de-bureaucratisation of the society have not been able to find a viable alternative to the bureaucracy. Even in the present context of liberalisation and privatisation, which emphasises on a minimalist state, cannot escape the necessity of bureaucracy to perform some of the functions of the state. We cannot think of the implementation of all the welfare and developmental programmes without the help of bureaucracy. The voluntary organisations and other forms of people's organisations can only supplement the bureaucracy, but they can not substitute the bureaucracy. In the context of developing countries, people look to the bureaucracy for their day-to-day requirements.

Hence, the bureaucracy of Weberian type continues to find its relevance even today.

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## 6.11 CONCLUSION

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Weber can be considered as one of the eminent thinkers of twentieth century. Though he has written extensively on various subjects, his contribution to the theory of bureaucracy is highly valued. Today we can see it in practice in all the societies of the world. Weber being proved correct when he said that the societies once governed by the bureaucracy can never get rid of it. His ideas on authority, rationality of bureaucracy continues to be relevant for the present day society. Most of the time, those who criticise the Weberian model are not actually criticising Weber, but the present day bureaucracy, which reflect the changes that are taking place in the contemporary period. Bureaucracy might need certain reforms to make it more relevant to the society.

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## 6.12 KEY CONCEPTS

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**Amateur Administration:** It emphasises on involving non-professionals and interested individuals in the activities of the administration.

**Collegiality:** Instead of one individual, a group of persons are involved in the decision making process.

**Impersonality:** It is one of the features of Weberian bureaucracy. Here rules are objectively followed irrespective of the person.

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## **6.14 ACTIVITIES**

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1. What do you understand about the Max Weber's concept of bureaucracy? Explain.
2. Do you think that the major elements of Weber's bureaucracy are basically meant for bureaucratic efficiency? Discuss.
3. Do you notice the existence of three types of authorities in present day Indian society? Please explain based on your experience.