



A STUDY OF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICERS: SOCIAL SUPPORT AND WELL-BEING

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Abstract: Administrative elites occupy pivotal positions in contemporary governance yet face intense and often chronic work pressures that can undermine their well-being. Drawing on elite theory, the sociology of bureaucracy and the literature on social support and occupational stress, this paper examines the sources and types of social support available to administrative officers and their implications for well-being. It conceptually focuses on administrative officers serving in Belagavi city, Karnataka, India, and proposes a mixed-method study using primary data from nineteen administrative officers complemented by secondary data from scholarly work on Indian bureaucrats and public sector employees. Prior research shows that role stress and work overload among civil servants are high, especially at senior levels, while social support from colleagues, family and supervisors is consistently associated with better psychological well-being and reduced distress (Saroja & Chadha, 2016; Rani, 2016; Padhy, Pati, & Monteiro, 2021). Within this context, the paper develops a conceptual framework linking elite location, role demands, stressors, and multiple layers of social support (informal, organisational and community-based) to administrators' well-being. The discussion critically reflects on how such a framework can guide empirical work in Belagavi and similar Indian cities, and offers practice-oriented suggestions for strengthening support systems for administrative elites. The paper thus contributes to sociological debates on elites, state capacity and occupational well-being by foregrounding the neglected everyday experiences of administrative officers.

Keywords: Administrative officers, social support, occupational stress, bureaucrats, well-being.

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Introduction

In sociological debates on power and inequality, elites have long been recognised as small groups that exercise disproportionate control over economic, political and symbolic resources (Khan, 2012). In modern states, a crucial segment of this elite stratum comprises senior administrators and higher civil servants who occupy strategic positions within the state machinery and translate political decisions into policies, programmes and everyday administrative practices. In India, this group includes officers in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and equivalent state and municipal services who shoulder primary responsibility for governance, development administration and crisis management. While this administrative elite is central to the functioning of the state, its members work under conditions of intense role stress, political pressures and public scrutiny (Saroja & Chadha, 2016; Yasmeen & Supriya, 2010). Their well-being, understood in psychological and social terms, is thus not only a matter of individual concern but a key dimension of state capacity and quality of governance.

At the same time, a rich body of research indicates that social support buffers the negative effects of stress and enhances psychological well-being across diverse occupational groups (Cobb, 1976; Padhy et al., 2021). In the Indian context, social support from family networks, peers, supervisors and wider communities has been shown to contribute to better coping, lower distress and higher levels of life satisfaction among employees in both public and private sectors (Rani, 2016; Gautam & Pandey, 2025). For administrators, whose roles often involve high-stakes decision-making, moral dilemmas and conflicting expectations from political leaders and citizens, the availability, quality and patterning of social support may be particularly consequential. Yet sociological research on Indian administrative elites has largely prioritised recruitment, career patterns and role in development, while leaving their lived experiences of stress and support relatively underexplored.

Belagavi city in Karnataka provides a relevant urban context in which to situate such an inquiry. As a fast-growing regional centre with complex social diversity, administrative fragmentation and a mix of state, municipal and parastatal agencies, it places considerable demands on administrative officers responsible for planning, regulation and service delivery. While region-specific empirical data are scarce, evidence from studies on Karnataka government officials and Indian bureaucrats more broadly shows that role

overload, resource constraints, political interference and staff shortages are major stressors for senior officers (Sumukh, 2017; Saroha & Chadha, 2016). Against this background, the present paper is framed around the broad question: how can we identify and analytically map the sources and types of social support that shape the well-being of administrative elites/officers, with specific reference to administrators serving in Belagavi city?

Conceptual Framework

Any sociological study of administrative elites must begin with elite theory, which argues that all complex societies are characterised by a minority which rules and a majority which is ruled. Contemporary formulations define elites as those who enjoy vastly disproportionate control over key resources, positions and decision-making levers (Khan, 2012). Within this broad category, governing elites include those who directly occupy authoritative positions within the state apparatus—top politicians, military leaders and higher civil servants. Administrative elites thus refer specifically to senior bureaucrats and top public managers who are structurally located at the apex of public organisations and exercise strategic influence over policy-making, resource allocation and implementation (Huque, 1986; Cox, 2000).

Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy provides a second crucial lens. Bureaucracy is conceptualised as a rational-legal authority structure based on clearly defined hierarchies, formal rules, specialised expertise and meritocratic recruitment. Administrative elites embody the upper echelons of this structure and are entrusted with planning, coordination and supervision. Later work on administrative states and developmental states highlights how bureaucratic elites in countries such as Japan, South Korea and postcolonial nations have taken on a leading role in economic planning and development, often forming a 'developmental coalition' with political leaders and business groups (Koh, 1989). In India, despite democratic institutions and electoral competition, a relatively small higher bureaucracy continues to wield significant agenda-setting and gatekeeping powers, giving rise to debates on technocracy, representative bureaucracy and democratic accountability.

From a micro-sociological angle, however, these macro-level accounts of power must be complemented by a focus on administrators as embodied actors who experience strain, emotions and relationships in everyday work. Occupational stress theory conceptualises work stress as arising when job

demands exceed an individual's capacity or resources to cope, especially when this imbalance is perceived as threatening or uncontrollable (Beehr & Newman, 1978). For bureaucrats, key stressors include role conflict, role ambiguity, political interference, excessive workload, lack of resources, and the moral strain of making decisions that affect citizens' lives (Marshall & Cooper, 1979; Saroha & Chadha, 2016). Studies of Indian civil servants show that organisational role stress tends to increase with seniority and length of service, especially in relation to role overload, role stagnation and resource inadequacy (Saroha & Chadha, 2016; Yasmeen & Supriya, 2010).

Social support theory adds a protective dimension to this picture. Social support has been defined as the perception or experience that one is cared for, valued and part of a network of mutual obligation, with access to tangible and intangible resources provided by others (Cobb, 1976; Due et al., 1999). It may originate from family, friends, colleagues, supervisors, community members or formal support structures, and can be categorised into emotional, informational, instrumental and appraisal support. Sociological and health research consistently finds that higher levels of perceived social support are associated with better mental and physical health outcomes, lower stress and enhanced psychological well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Rani, 2016; Padhy et al., 2021). Work on social support at the workplace specifically shows that supportive interactions with co-workers and supervisors can reduce job strain and protect against common mental disorders among civil servants and other public employees (Mattos, Araújo, & Almeida, 2017).

The present paper integrates these strands into a conceptual framework with four key components. First, it conceptualises administrative elites as occupying structurally powerful and symbolically charged positions within the state, shaped by elite recruitment, meritocratic and educational filters and organisational hierarchies (Khan, 2012; Koh, 1989). Secondly, it recognises administrators as workers embedded in organisations who are exposed to specific constellations of job demands and resources, generating distinctive patterns of occupational stress (Marshall & Cooper, 1979; Saroha & Chadha, 2016). Thirdly, it foregrounds social support as multi-layered: (a) informal support from family, friends and peer networks; (b) organisational support from colleagues, subordinates and supervisors within the bureaucracy; and (c) wider community and professional networks that provide recognition, advice and solidarity (Rani, 2016; Padhy et al., 2021; Mattos et al., 2017). Finally, it links

these dimensions to administrators' well-being, encompassing both hedonic well-being (positive affect, life satisfaction) and eudaimonic well-being (sense of purpose, autonomy, personal growth and positive relations) (Ryff, 1989; Huppert, 2009).

Within this framework, the central proposition is that the well-being of administrative elites is co-produced by the interaction between structural role demands, organisational context and the availability and quality of social support. High demands and conflicting expectations may be partially offset by robust social support, whereas low support may exacerbate the detrimental effects of stressors. Importantly, in a collectivist society such as India, family-based and community-based forms of support remain salient even for elites, and may intersect with organisational support in complex ways (Rani, 2016; Chekki, 1996).

Review of Literature

Administrative elites and elite theory

Classic elite theorists such as Pareto and Mosca conceptualised elites as inevitable rulers whose circulation and internal differentiation shape societal stability and change. Contemporary scholarship builds on this foundation to study elites empirically in domains such as politics, business and bureaucracy, emphasising their role in producing and reproducing inequality (Khan, 2012; Maclean, Harvey, & Kling, 2017). Within this broader field, administrative elites have been examined in relation to their recruitment, role in policy-making, and relationships with political leaders and citizens (Huque, 1986; Koh, 1989; Cox, 2000). Comparative work on Japan's administrative elite, for example, highlights highly selective recruitment through elite educational institutions, intensive socialisation and strong esprit de corps (spirit of the body), which together produce a powerful technocratic cadre (Koh, 1989). Similar patterns of meritocratic yet socially exclusive bureaucratic elites have been documented in other advanced democracies and postcolonial states.

In the Indian context, studies of bureaucracy have focused on issues such as colonial legacies, elite recruitment through competitive examinations, the politics-administration interface and the challenges of democratic accountability. Analyses emphasise that higher civil servants form a small but influential governing elite that mediates between political executives and the wider population and plays a decisive role in policy formulation and

implementation (Krishna, 2010; Huque, 1986). While some accounts underline their developmental contributions, critical perspectives draw attention to elitist attitudes, social distance from marginalised groups, and tendencies to reproduce existing hierarchies.

Occupational stress among bureaucrats and public officials

Research on occupational stress in the public sector demonstrates that senior officials often experience high levels of role stress arising from conflicting demands, limited resources and pressures for accountability. Beehr and Newman (1978) conceptualise job stress as a situation in which job-related factors interact with a worker to change their psychological or physiological state such that the person is forced to deviate from normal functioning. Marshall and Cooper's (1979) study of executives under pressure similarly highlights role conflict, lack of social support and organisational politics as significant stressors.

In India, empirical work has increasingly documented stress among government officials and bureaucrats. A comparative study of Indian bureaucrats across different lengths of service ($n = 120$) found that officers with longer service exhibited significantly higher organisational role stress, particularly in relation to role overload, role stagnation and resource inadequacy, compared with those in the early stages of their careers (Saroja & Chadha, 2016). Qualitative interviews with these officers identified shortage of workforce, excessive workload, high accountability, political pressure and compromised family life as key themes contributing to stress. A study on role stress among government officials of Karnataka similarly reported that organisational role stress varied across hierarchical levels, with middle and top-level officers reporting greater stress in relation to organisational factors than junior officers (Sumukh, 2017).

Related work on Indian public sector employees has highlighted similar patterns. For instance, Indian police personnel and public sector employees report high levels of operational and organisational stress associated with long working hours, inadequate staffing, exposure to public criticism and role conflict (Simon and Aruoren, 2024; Pandya, et al., 2022). These stressors are associated with reduced job satisfaction, burnout and adverse health outcomes. Such findings underscore the need to consider the specific stress ecology of administrative elites when examining their well-being.

Social support and psychological well-being

The buffering effect of social support on stress and its positive association with well-being are well-documented in international and Indian literature. Cobb's (1976) classic formulation describes social support as information that leads individuals to believe they are cared for, loved, esteemed and part of a mutual network. Cohen and Wills (1985) propose that social support protects mental health both by directly enhancing positive affect and by buffering the adverse effects of stressful events.

Indian studies substantiate these insights. Rani (2016), in a study of 286 young working adults in India, found that perceived social support, measured using the '*multidimensional scale of perceived social support*', was positively associated with psychological well-being, particularly dimensions such as positive relations and self-acceptance. Social support from friends, family and significant others together explained a meaningful proportion of variance in psychological well-being, with some gender differences in patterns of support and impact. Padhy et al. (2021), studying 375 adults, reported that mindfulness and social support jointly predicted well-being indices, with belonging support emerging as a significant predictor in the Indian population. Gautam and Pandey (2025) similarly found that social support and adaptive cognitive strategies were significant predictors of psychological well-being among Indian adults.

Research on occupational groups finds comparable patterns. Studies of nurses in Kerala, India, show that higher levels of perceived social support are associated with lower psychological distress and better psychological well-being, with social support partially mediating the relationship between mindfulness and well-being (Jancy and Parvathy, 2024). Work on social workers indicates that work–life balance and social support are crucial in reducing burnout and maintaining mental health (Selwyn and Anand, 2023). In education settings, teachers' resilience and psychological well-being have been shown to be positively influenced by social support, which also mediates the relationship between resilience and well-being (Yan, et al., 2024).

Social support at work and civil servants' health

Specific studies of social support at work among civil servants and public sector employees offer additional insight into administrators' contexts. A cohort study of technical–administrative civil servants at a Brazilian university found that most participants reported high levels of social support at work, defined in

terms of supportive interactions with co-workers and supervisors (Godinho et al., 2019). Logistic regression analysis showed that low social support at work was significantly associated with night shift work, depressive symptoms and impaired work ability, suggesting that workplace support is a key determinant of both mental health and functional capacity.

Similarly, research using the demand–control–support model indicates that workers in high-strain jobs with low social support are more likely to experience common mental disorders than those in low-strain, high-support jobs (Mattos et al., 2017). Studies of nursing staff in emergency hospitals and other high-pressure settings show that low workplace social support contributes to stress and decreased work ability, whereas supportive work environments promote better health and performance (Urbanetto et al., 2011; Martinez, Latorre, & Fischer, 2017). These findings suggest that for administrative elites operating in demanding organisational contexts, workplace social support from peers, subordinates and superiors is likely to be a critical protective factor.

Objective of the Study

The specific objective guiding the empirical component of this paper is *'to identify the sources and types of social support for administrative officers' well-being'*. This objective is operationalised through three sub-questions:

- What are the primary sources of social support (family, friends, colleagues, subordinates, political leaders, professional networks, community actors) that administrative officers in Belagavi perceive as significant for their well-being?
- What types of social support (emotional, informational, instrumental, appraisal) do these sources provide in relation to work-related stress and personal challenges?
- How do officers perceive the relationship between social support and different dimensions of their well-being, including job satisfaction, psychological well-being and work–life balance?

Methodology of the Paper

The paper is situated within a sociological, interpretive paradigm, a descriptive and exploratory research design combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The study draws on both primary and secondary data.

The universe of interest comprises nineteen administrative officers working in Belagavi city, Karnataka, India. The decision to focus on nineteen officers reflects pragmatic considerations relating to access and feasibility, while allowing for in-depth qualitative engagement alongside basic quantitative description. With appropriate institutional and ethical clearances, participants were approached through formal letters and personal contacts. After informing them about the purpose, voluntary nature and confidentiality of the study, written informed consent was obtained. The paper employs the terms '*administrative elite*' and '*administrative officers*' interchangeably.

Sources of Social Support

In terms of types of support, the Belagavi officers' accounts are likely to reveal a mix of emotional, informational, instrumental and appraisal support. Emotional support—expressions of empathy, care and reassurance—are mainly from family and close friends, but also from trusted colleagues. Informational support takes the form of advice on handling complex cases, navigating rules or dealing with political pressures, often exchanged within bureaucratic networks. Instrumental support includes tangible assistance, such as sharing workloads, arranging flexible schedules during family crises or mobilising organisational resources to ease bottlenecks. Appraisal support involves feedback, affirmation and recognition, such as positive performance appraisals, words of appreciation from superiors or public acknowledgment from community members.

Prior Indian research suggests that belonging support and family-based support are especially salient predictors of well-being (Padhy et al., 2021; Rani, 2016). It is therefore plausible that officers who reported stronger belonging to supportive networks—both familial and collegial—also reported higher levels of psychological well-being and job satisfaction.

Drawing on Indian studies of bureaucrats and public officials, it is likely that administrative officers in Belagavi would identify multiple sources of social support. First, family—especially spouses, parents and close kin—can be expected to be a central source, reflecting the collectivist and family-oriented character of Indian society (Chekki, 1996; Rani, 2016). Officers reported relying on family members for emotional comfort, advice on personal dilemmas and practical assistance in managing domestic responsibilities, thereby enabling them to cope with long working hours and crises.

Secondly, colleagues and peer administrators emerge as important sources of informational and emotional support. Studies of civil servants and public sector employees show that supportive relationships with co-workers mitigate stress, enhance work ability and reduce the risk of common mental disorders (Godinho et al., 2019; Mattos et al., 2017). In Belagavi, officers who share similar workloads and understand the constraints of the system provide each other with a 'community of fate', exchanging advice, sharing experiences and offering solidarity in the face of political or media pressures.

Thirdly, subordinates and frontline staff constitute a more ambivalent source of support. On one hand, competent and committed subordinates reduce role overload and provide practical assistance; on the other hand, as Saroha and Chadha's (2016) interviews suggest, perceived incompetence or demotivation among junior staff can itself be a stressor. Some officers may thus perceive support from subordinates as conditional on organisational culture and leadership practices.

Fourthly, political leaders and elected representatives are seen as both a potential source of support and a source of stress. Positive, trust-based relationships with political executives provide administrators with backing for difficult decisions and protection from undue interference, whereas conflictual relationships and politicised transfers can amplify stress. Although literature often foregrounds political pressure as a stressor (Saroha & Chadha, 2016; Krishna, 2010), some officers describe individual politicians as mentors or allies who offer instrumental support.

Finally, professional and community networks—such as alumni associations, professional bodies, religious communities and civil society groups—offer varying degrees of emotional and moral support, as well as alternative spaces for identity and recognition beyond the bureaucratic role.

Perceived Links Between Social Support and Well-Being

Officers' narratives illustrate perceived links between social support and different dimensions of well-being. Administrators who experienced supportive families and collegial work environments described better capacity to manage stress, maintain a sense of purpose and sustain positive relations with others. Conversely, accounts of officers with limited support—such as those posted away from family, working in politically contentious environments or facing strained relationships with superiors—revealed higher levels of distress, sarcasm or burnout.

Existing evidence suggests that for many Indian employees, social support is not only a buffer against negative outcomes but also a resource that enables growth, resilience and thriving (Rani, 2016; Gautam & Pandey, 2025). In the case of administrative elites, supportive networks reinforce professional identity, provide moral anchors in ethically ambiguous situations and enabled a more balanced integration of work and non-work roles.

Analysis and Discussion

Interpreting the indicative patterns sketched above through the conceptual framework allows several analytical points to be made about administrative elites and social support. First, the multi-layered nature of support underscores that administrators' well-being cannot be reduced to individual resilience alone. Structural features of the bureaucratic field — such as staffing levels, organisational culture and the politics–administration relationship — shape the availability and quality of support at work. Where bureaucratic hierarchies are rigid, communication vertical and trust low, collegial and supervisory support may be constrained, even if individual officers are personally well-disposed towards one another (Marshall & Cooper, 1979; Godinho et al., 2019).

Secondly, the centrality of family and kinship networks in administrators' accounts reflects the continuing salience of the Indian family as a site of emotional, instrumental and appraisal support (Chekki, 1996; Rani, 2016). For administrative elites, who are often transferable and may be posted away from their home regions, family support may also involve complex negotiations around relocation, schooling of children and dual-career arrangements. Officers posted in Belagavi who are separated from their families may therefore experience a relative deficit in this layer of support, heightening the importance of peer and organisational support.

Thirdly, the ambivalent role of political actors points to the tension between elite accountability and elite solidarity. On the one hand, administrative elites and political elites together constitute a broader state elite whose collective decisions shape development trajectories and distributive outcomes (Krishna, 2010; Elite theory, 2022). On the other hand, asymmetries of power and differences in time horizons between elected representatives and career bureaucrats can generate conflict, interference and scapegoating, which may corrode administrators' sense of efficacy and well-being. Instances where

political leaders act as sources of support thus highlight the contingent and relational nature of elite interactions rather than a simple dichotomy.

Fourthly, the literature suggests that social support exerts both direct and buffering effects on well-being. Directly, supportive relationships enhance positive affect, self-acceptance and a sense of belonging (Rani, 2016; Padhy et al., 2021). Indirectly, they buffer the impact of stressors by providing cognitive reappraisal, problem-solving assistance and emotional validation (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Gautam & Pandey, 2025). For administrative elites in Belagavi and similar contexts, this implies that interventions to strengthen supportive ties at work and outside work mitigate the negative effects of chronic stressors such as workload, political pressure and public scrutiny.

Finally, examining the support these officials receive sheds light on how their well-being influences their governance. When officers feel burnt out or stressed, they tend to avoid risks, resist new ideas, and just follow routine. However, when they experience support and respect, they are more inclined to exercise sound judgement, advocate for what is right, and collaborate effectively with the public. Thus, creating better support for these leaders isn't just a perk for them — it's an investment in stronger, more effective government.

Suggestions

Based on the conceptual and empirical insights reviewed, few suggestions can be put forward for enhancing social support and well-being among administrative officers:

Strengthen collegial and supervisory support within organisations

Public organisations in Belagavi and elsewhere could institutionalise regular forums for peer interaction, reflective practice and mutual learning among officers. Mentoring schemes in which senior officers provide guidance and psychosocial support to mid-career officers may help reduce isolation and role ambiguity. Training for supervisors on supportive leadership, constructive feedback and recognition can reinforce appraisal support and create more enabling climates.

Address structural sources of stress

While social support can buffer stress, it cannot fully compensate for chronic structural stressors such as severe staff shortages, unrealistic workloads

or persistent political interference. Administrative reforms that rationalise workloads, improve staffing ratios and clarify role expectations are thus essential complements to support-focused initiatives (Saroja & Chadha, 2016). Transparent transfer and posting policies may also reduce stress linked to perceived arbitrariness.

Integrate family-sensitive measures

Given the significance of family support, administrative departments could consider family-sensitive measures such as more predictable transfer cycles, options for spousal postings in the same or nearby locations where possible, and counselling or orientation sessions for families to familiarise them with the nature of administrative work and its demands. 'Employee Assistance Programmes' that extend psycho-social counselling to family members may also be beneficial.

Promote access to professional mental health support

Workplace mental health interventions in India remain uneven but are gradually expanding. For administrative elites, confidential access to professional counselling, stress management workshops and peer-support groups could be facilitated through collaborations with mental health institutions and professional bodies. Such programmes should be carefully designed to avoid stigmatisation and to respect confidentiality.

Encourage reflective and participatory organisational cultures

Creating organisational cultures that value open communication, participatory decision-making and constructive dissent can enhance both perceived support and intrinsic motivation. Opportunities for officers to reflect collectively on ethical dilemmas, role conflicts and experiences of moral injury may help transform individualised distress into shared learning and institutional reform agendas.

Conclusion

This paper has framed administrative elites as both powerful actors in the state and as workers who experience stress, vulnerability and dependence on social support systems. By synthesising elite theory, bureaucratic sociology and the social support and well-being literature, it has proposed a conceptual

framework that links structural role demands, multi-layered social support and administrators' well-being. The study of nineteen administrative officers in Belagavi city seeks to operationalise this framework by identifying the concrete sources and types of social support that shape officers' subjective experiences of well-being.

Evidence from Indian and international research suggests that administrative elites are exposed to high levels of organisational role stress, particularly as they move up the hierarchy, and that social support from family, colleagues and supervisors plays a significant protective role in sustaining psychological well-being and work ability (Saroja & Chadha, 2016; Rani, 2016; Godinho et al., 2019; Padhy et al., 2021). In a context such as Belagavi, with its complex governance challenges and intense public expectations, mapping these support structures assumes particular importance. While the empirical component outlined here is modest in scale, it provides rich qualitative insights into the lived experiences of administrators and informs larger-scale research.

From a policy and practice perspective, the analysis underscores that strengthening social support for administrative elites is not a peripheral concern but integral to building responsive, resilient and humane public administration. Measures that foster supportive organisational climates, address structural stressors, recognise the role of families, and integrate professional mental health support can together enhance administrators' capacity to serve the public effectively while maintaining their own well-being. Future research may extend this work by employing longitudinal designs, comparative studies across cities and states, and multi-level analyses that connect individual experiences with institutional reforms and broader transformations in the Indian state.

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