INDIVIDUAL AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IMPACTING RESISTANCE TO AND READINESS FOR CHANGE:

A STUDY OF INDIA POST

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ABSTRACT

As the change in public organizations or government entities remains relatively underexplored, this research seeks to explore issues in change management in India Post, which offers a rich research site for its unique organizational characteristics— a large bureaucratic public organization, more-than-150-year-old history with rich legacy systems, a large human network of 418,239 people, the largest postal network in the world with a pan India presence of 156,600 post offices, 90.04% of which resides in rural parts of India (Department of Posts, 2020: 9). Its core operations include the delivery of mails and various financial services.

Over time, India Post could not remain insulated from the external environment and escape change as it encountered an imperative for change driven by factors like globalization, competition from private couriers, mobile telephony, choice of new alternatives to the customers. With such triggers, India Post has been undergoing a major transformational change known as India Post IT Modernization Project 2012 or ‘India Post 2012’ in short.

Against the above backdrop, before proceeding to identify as to which aspect(s) of change management in India Post would be relevant for research, we decided to explore and study the management’s perceptions on the major issues faced by India Post in general, and any issues relatable to the management of change in the context of technology change project i.e., India Post 2012. As our broad research question was to explore issues in change management in a large public organization, we undertook an exploratory study (Study 1) through semi-structured interviews of eleven officers of India Post from senior and middle management levels, who were familiar with the organization’s work and the processes including the ongoing India Post 2012 project. The respondents’ work experience with India Post ranged from 14 years to 36 years. Mindful of the ‘anything goes’ critique of qualitative research (Antaki et al., 2003), the ‘thematic analysis’ method was adopted for identifying,
analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In all, 205 codes, which were something like thought units in grounded theory, were identified from the replies to the questions and were assigned code numbers. All these codes were then analyzed for thematic commonness, and categorized under certain distinct themes.

At the macro level, results of the exploratory study (Study 1) showed that that people are ‘change aware’ and they consider readiness for change as distinct from resistance to change. The interviews also enabled us to infer certain thematic factors impacting readiness for and resistance to change in India Post. Readiness for change was seen in the employees’ awareness of the need for change as also slow pace of change, their active problem-solving approach, their adaptability, their awareness about need for employee training, and also their awareness about the need for the organization’s vision and its communication down the line. Resistance, on the other hand, seemed to stem from low employee morale, bureaucratic mindset, management’s skepticism about employees’ capabilities, and organizational inertia. These findings coupled with early literature review helped us refine our area of research. As any large-scale change not only impacts the organisation but also its employees, we identified the factors impacting change resistance and readiness in India Post as our central constructs for this research. This led us to a more focussed review of the literature to identify the significant individual and contextual factors influencing change resistance and readiness to capture the entire gamut of factors at play in managing change at India Post.

The available literature on change management highlights several perspectives and approaches to understand change. Change is understood in terms of its typology through the dimensions of focus (strategic or operational), scale (incremental or transformational), source (bottom-up or top-down, planned or spontaneous) or duration (short-term or long-term). One prominent line of study on change has been to view change as a sequential process with distinct
stages starting with Lewin's three stages of unfreezing, changing, and refreezing (Kotter, 1995; Fernandez & Rainey, 2006).

As the change initiatives in any organization inevitably trigger supporting or opposing reactions among the people concerned, such reactions in favor and against have been termed as ‘readiness for change’ and ‘resistance to change’ respectively in change management literature. These are the most prevalent negative and positive attitudes toward change that have been extensively studied in the organizational change literature. Change readiness and resistance to change have been the subject of more than 90 percent of the conceptual work on change attitudes (Bouckenooghe, 2010).

In recent years, though, there have been attempts to look at the sources of change resistance and readiness together. We have also looked at their sources together. Drawing on Shimoni (2017) and Respovs, Drnovsek, and Kase (2019), we identified four approaches to both change resistance and readiness- a) the traditional approach focussing on the individual’s psychological disposition as a source; b) the social context approach emphasizing context-dependence of resistance and readiness; c) the social construction approach seeking to integrate both and seeing the individual’s psychological disposition and change context as a source; and d) the habitus-oriented approach, focussing on social agents' habitus as the source. In our research, we have broadly applied the social construction approach in studying the individual and contextual factors for change resistance and readiness.

We noticed major research gaps in the literature. There are practically limited studies, which address both the concepts of change readiness and resistance simultaneously in the context of organizational change initiatives. In the more specific context of India Post, there has apparently been no research on the aspects of change resistance and readiness. Secondly, the balance between resistance and readiness at individual and organizational levels is missing
in the studies. It is not clear which factors are the most important for change readiness and resistance, especially in a public organization under the Government's control?

Though the literature on change is replete with several individual and contextual factors for change resistance and readiness, we considered the overall context of India Post as a public organization and identified the key change resistance and readiness variables for this research work based on the reflections and research directions culled out from the literature review as also from the qualitative study (Study 1). In addition to identifying resistance to change and readiness for change as dependent variables, we identified eleven independent variables, which comprise four individual variables (namely, dispositional resistance, bureaucratic mindset, fear of change, and feeling of pride in the organization) and seven contextual variables (namely, trust in management, information about change, training for change, supervisor relations with subordinates, social relations at workplace, job satisfaction and job insecurity).

The variables so identified were then taken up in our survey-based quantitative Study 2. After its Hindi translation following the protocol, survey questionnaire was administered offline to 482 respondents in Uttar Pradesh Circle, the biggest Circle of India Post and finally 465 valid and complete responses were retained for study. The sample for this survey included Postal officers from the strategic level (e.g., Postmasters General) to the junior-most field functionaries at the last mile (e.g., Postmen and Gramin Dak Sewaks i.e., rural postal agents) in the Circle. The participants from the operative level and last mile were drawn from eight Postal Divisions of UP Circle (Lucknow, Faizabad, Rae Bareli, Varanasi (West), Fatehpur, Budaun, Jhansi, and Ghaziabad) considering the geographic and socio-economic variability of UP after deliberations with few Postal officers of the Circle. The mean age of the respondents was 42.626 years (SD=12.187). The questionnaire items were adapted from the scales already developed and used except for training for change, which was self-developed. The overall data
fit of the sample was checked by evaluating the measurement model. To evaluate the construct validity, all scales were subjected to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with AMOS 20 to check if they were a valid measure. In all, four models were run for CFA- one each for resistance to change and readiness for change, one for individual variables (fear of change, bureaucratic mindset and feeling of pride in India Post) and the fourth one for all seven contextual variables. As the variable on dispositional resistance had only two items, no CFA was run for it and only its reliability was checked. In an attempt to get good data fit indices, items with low standardized factor loadings (< 0.50) were dropped. The psychometric properties of the model comprising all independent and dependent variables were also assessed for their internal consistency reliability (using Cronbach’s coefficient alpha value 0.70 or above), convergent validity (CR > AVE and AVE > 0.5), and discriminant validity (square root of AVE to be greater than inter-construct correlations). All the tests of internal consistency reliability and construct validity were acceptable. Finally, common method bias was checked and data was seen free from such bias.

The direct, mediation, and moderation hypotheses developed for Study 2 were tested using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) in AMOS 20. Results show that resistance to change and readiness for change are impacted by several individual and contextual factors. These factors, however, associate differently in their influence on change resistance and change readiness. The key results of both studies also have implications for both theory and practice.

The study results bring out a fundamental change theme, which is people’s awareness of the need for change in the organization. Another major theme ‘bureaucratic mindset’ as a change barrier, which prominently emerged from Study 1, has not been empirically confirmed by the results of Study 2.
The study significantly brings out the role of training for change in the change process highlighting the criticality of training both as a direct as well as an indirect factor impacting readiness for and resistance to change. Therefore, India Post needs to focus on the proper implementation of the training policy to ensure effective induction and in-service training for all employee cadres.

The study also brings out that the overall internal social environment plays a vital role in influencing individuals’ supportive or negative reactions. Such an environment may be reflected in factors like employees’ trust in management, supervisors’ support to their subordinates, overall social support available at the workplace as also in the nature and methods of internal communications. The results of this study bring out that supervisor support, social support, and trust in management have a significant positive relationship with readiness for change, while social support and trust in management have a negative effect on resistance to change. The results also indicate that information about change provided to the employees has positive and negative effects on change readiness and resistance respectively. Hence, India Post should account for these factors in building up a congenial and change-supportive internal environment.

As the results indicate the importance of change information, the organization should take effective steps for a proper communication strategy so that the change information reaches the stakeholders at every level down the line.

This study brings out the feeling of pride among employees as another important theme impacting their reactions to change. While Study 1 has identified low employee morale as a resistance factor, Study 2 brings out the feeling of pride significantly impacting readiness and resistance. It signifies that individuals exhibit a commitment to their organization if their morale and sense of pride in being part of it are high. An exploration of the factors that bring
about this commitment and then strengthening the culture around these factors would, therefore, be useful. Moreover, there should be continuous efforts to frame the HR policies objectively and to have an overall conducive internal work environment, which engenders organizational pride and commitment among employees. Hence, not only India Post but all other organizations in the government should project themselves as good employers in the eyes of the people they employ so that the people are supportive of any new change initiatives of the Government.

This research study also contributes to the research on change management in public organizations in different ways. One, there is a substantial amount of work on resistance to change in public organizations but as there are almost negligible studies in which both resistance to and readiness for change have been taken up together for study, this research fills the gap by studying both the constructs together in the context of a large public organization in India. Two, going by the distinction of endogenous and exogenous sources made by Kumar, Kant and Amburgey (2007) in respect of change resistance only, this study extends the distinction of endogenous and exogenous factors to the study of both resistance to and readiness for change in the context of a large public organization. Three, though this research has not specifically focussed on studying leadership during change, it empirically proves that supervisor support is positively associated with readiness for change. Four, the theoretical significance of this research also lies in identifying a new barrier to change i.e., ‘management skepticism’ wherein management is skeptical about employees’ change efficacy as different from what Stanley et al. (2005) call ‘employee skepticism’ wherein employees are rather skeptical about the efficacy of the management to bring in change. The existing theories on change, therefore, need to incorporate and develop management skepticism as a construct of resistance to change for future studies. Five, as the issues of resistance and readiness are encountered in the change implementation process, this study contributes to the literature by
offering insights about the implementation processes of change in a large public organization by delving into the individual and contextual factors of change resistance and readiness in India Post.

One thought-provoking result from Study 1 having theoretical implications is that resistance and readiness are not two ends of a continuum, rather they operate independently. It means that the absence of resistance does not automatically mean (presence of) readiness and vice versa i.e. (presence of) readiness does not automatically mean the absence of resistance. It is possible for readiness and resistance factors to co-exist and operate simultaneously at the same time. A reflection of the complexity of the situation. Practically, it means that just overcoming resistance may not be enough; organizations need to make additional efforts to make their people ready for change.

We also reflected on the possible limitations and directions for future research. Though the results are qualified by coming from a single organization i.e., India Post, they nonetheless can be useful during change initiatives in other bureaucratic organizations owned or controlled by the Governments in India. Although the findings are generalizable in the change contexts of other large public bureaucratic organizations in India, yet generalizing findings of this research across cultures in other postal administrations may be limited considering the contextual specificities involved in each. Future researchers need to validate our findings in other cultures and postal administrations.

This study has dealt with India Post, which is a large public organization. To further enrich research on change in public organizations, we strongly encourage future researchers to design and undertake similar studies including case studies on change readiness and resistance
on large public organizations in other countries as well as to assess cross-cultural consistency or otherwise of the findings of this research.

**Keywords:** Resistance to change, readiness for change, public organization, India Post.