

REFORMING THE CIVIL SERVICES

Relevant for: Governance in India | Topic: Role of Civil Services in a democracy esp. after Globalisation

A recent move by the Centre seeking applications from 'outstanding individuals' to fill in 10 posts of Joint Secretary has caused consternation. A retired bureaucrat has filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court against the decision. The response from applicants, however, has been overwhelming.

Many serving Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers see this move as threatening their hegemony. Some retired officers and political opponents consider this as the beginning of the end of a "neutral and impartial" civil service with the likely induction of loyalists to the current dispensation. It has also been argued that this marks the "privatisation of the IAS". Doubts have been expressed if private business houses would "plant" their people in order to influence government policies. But the fact remains that most others think this is a bold decision that should be given a fair trial.

Since criticism is based on perception, a reality check is necessary. In our Cabinet system of government with collective responsibility, the secretariat plays a crucial role. The concept of a 'generalist' higher civil service can be contextualised against technical/specialised bodies on one side and the lay political executive on top. Political scientists like Prof. M.A. Muttalib have studied this aspect in their works on public administration.

Higher bureaucracy in the secretariat often has to examine proposals received from specialised departments/corporations (say, the Central Public Works Department, Central Water Commission, various Central public sector undertakings, manned largely by technical experts), and in consultation with other ministries/departments like Finance, Personnel and Law prepare a cohesive note to facilitate the Minister concerned or the Cabinet to take a final decision. This is a complex consultative process for which detailed procedures have been formulated. How to steer a proposal through this labyrinth requires both expertise and experience. A final government decision is obtained, after the file moves through this long internal and hierarchical process, when the proposal is approved. The key officials in the secretariat, from the Joint Secretary to the Secretary, are the point persons guiding this consultative process and advising the political executive to take a final call. How an abstract idea is to be given a concrete, implementable shape is one key concern of such officers.

A Joint Secretary to the government has this crucial "line" function to perform in policy formulation and its implementation. Though the original proposal is often prepared by technical experts and sent to the "government", the final decision rests with the Joint Secretary/Additional Secretary, the Secretary and finally the Minister/Cabinet. The question often raised, in this context, is whether the higher bureaucracy is equipped to comprehend complex economic and technical issues in order to properly aid and advise the Minister. Can a career civil servant, recruited through a tough competitive examination, cope with the increasingly complex matrix of decision-making at the senior levels of government? Can an IAS officer, however brilliant and diligent she might be, based on her experience at the sub-district and district levels, handle diverse portfolios from civil aviation to power to defence? These are valid questions that have been raised from time to time.

Evidently, terms like "professionalism", "specialisation", and "technical expertise" are often used vaguely and inter-changeably. Doesn't an IAS officer, after years of experience at the field level, become an expert in public systems? Can the expertise of a doctor or an engineer be of the

same nature as that of a policeman or an auditor? Can a renowned oncologist, for example, be suitable to advise on how the health policy of the nation is to be formulated? How valid is the observation to 'keep experts on tap, not on top'? Admittedly, concerted efforts should be made to help IAS officers, after their first decade of "immersion" in districts, acquire specialisation in broad sectors like social, infrastructure and financial, based on their qualification, aptitude and preference. This idea had never been pursued seriously.

Specialists like engineers, doctors, agricultural scientists, lawyers have always had a substantial say in the decision-making process as also in its implementation. Lateral entry at the level of Secretary has met with some success. Besides, Secretaries to the Departments of Atomic Energy, Science & Technology, Scientific and Industrial Research, Health Research, and Agricultural Research have always been scientists of eminence. Similarly, in departments like the Railways, Posts, etc., all senior positions are manned by Indian Railway or Postal Service officers. Therefore, there is nothing very original in the new initiative to allow entry at the level of Joint Secretary.

However, those inside the system feel threatened that their territory is under assault. One perceived fear is that the number of such lateral entrants may be increased with time and that the political leadership, by creating a 'divide and rule' mechanism, would further demoralise the 'steel frame of governance'. The second related fear is that in the garb of recruiting outstanding individuals, politically indoctrinated persons will be inducted into the system. These fears could have been allayed by letting the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) handle the recruitment process, after defining the job requirements more explicitly.

The government must ensure that only candidates, the likes of whom are not available in the existing system, are appointed. If they turn out to be truly outstanding, there should be provisions to induct them permanently in the government, with approval of the UPSC, and consider them for higher postings. Ideas have also been advanced for IAS and other officers to gain work experience, for a limited period, in the private sector.

The government should have the best people at the helm of affairs and if there is a need to supplement the existing stock of talent by attracting fresh blood into the system, the IAS, in fact, should welcome such an inclusionary move. The automatic mode of every member of the higher services reaching the top echelons requires a hard look. In view of this recent move, it is hoped that IAS and other officers will introspect why many of them turn out to be indulgent, self-serving and subservient to the political executive and how the system can be shaken to discourage such officers from ceaselessly moving upward, even after retirement. This move to reform the services should have come from within than from without. The lateral entry scheme, if implemented properly, may foster more competitive spirit, break the complacency of the higher civil servants and eventually prove to be a pioneering initiative in public interest.

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