

LESS TAXING: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON NATIONAL RECRUITMENT AGENCY

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Provisions related to UPSC, State PSCs and Civil Services in India, and their Role in Democracy

The [Union Cabinet's decision](#) to create a [National Recruitment Agency](#) to conduct a screening examination for non-gazetted jobs, eliminating the need for candidates to take separate examinations of the Railway Recruitment Board, Staff Selection Commission and Institute of Banking Personnel Selection, is a welcome administrative reform measure. For some years now, the railways have been using contractual labour in projects and services, but the [government system remains a major recruiter](#). In March this year, Railways Minister Piyush Goyal told Parliament that four employment notifications for Group C employees in the Ministry were issued in 2019 for 1.43 lakh posts, besides a similar number selected the previous year. Overall, the posts coming under the ambit of the proposed NRA would cover about 1.25 lakh jobs a year, which typically attract about 2.5 crore aspirants. The gains from a single examination, when offered at the district level in the regional language, as opposed to a multiplicity of tests in far fewer locations are self-evident. Candidates would no longer have to travel to urban centres at considerable expense and hardship to take an employment test. Opportunities to improve performance, subject to age limits, and a three-year validity for scores are positive features. Yet, the long-term relevance of such reforms will depend on the commitment of governments to raise the level of public employment and expand services to the public, both of which are low in India.

While announcing the proposal for the recruitment agency in her Budget speech earlier this year, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the NRA would be an independent, professional, specialist organisation. There would also be an emphasis on creating advanced online testing infrastructure in 117 aspirational districts, many of which are in States with low social development indices. These are laudable objectives, but it is relevant to point out that as a share of the organised workforce, Central government employment appears to be declining. New posts are sanctioned periodically, but a large number of vacancies remain unfilled. With growing emphasis on transferring core railway services to the private sector, there may be fewer government jobs on offer in the future. Moreover, jobs under the Centre, predominantly in the railways and defence sectors, constitute around 14% of public employment, with the rest falling within the purview of States. Reform must, therefore, have a wider reach to achieve scale. It must be marked by well-defined procedures, wide publicity and open competition, besides virtual elimination of discretion. As a preliminary screening test, the NRA can potentially cut delays, which are a familiar feature with government, boost transparency and enable wider access. The entire process of candidate selection must be a model, raising the bar on speed, efficiency and integrity.

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