

RESTRUCTURING ISN'T ALWAYS REFORM

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Infrastructure: Railways

The Railway Minister, [Piyush Goyal](#), has recently announced the policy decision of “restructuring” of the organisation. He has thereby put the onus (of mismanagement?) on the structure of the officer cadre, and hence also on the officers. The stated aim is to end “departmentalism” — unification of services will “expedite decision making”, “create a coherent vision” and “promote rational decision-making”. It is an unusual admission — that hitherto decision-making in the Railways was incoherent and irrational — and this coming after he has been the minister for over two years. Or is it an abdication of responsibility for the past? And for future actions as well — till the decision is fully implemented?

Reportedly, a comprehensive plan for execution of the decision would be worked out by a committee of secretaries, and perhaps a group of ministers. If true, it is a very strange — no, incoherent — way of proceeding, that so disruptive a policy should be decided without firming up a blueprint of action and examining its future implications.

Restructuring of the Railways has been on the agenda for decades. Committees — Prakash Tandon 1994, Rakesh Mohan 2001, Sam Pitroda 2012 and Bibek Debroy 2015 — have done this exercise in past. Is it just the familiar family ghost that visits the corridors of Railway Board with indeterminate periodicity and with the predictable outcome of nothing?

While the details of the plan are not yet available, it would nonetheless be worthwhile to discuss what we know of the decisions. The size of the Railway Board is proposed to be reduced from the present eight to five. This is a good decision in itself, but also raises the question — why were two additional posts of members added to the Board as recently as April 2019? Whose irrational decision was that? What is the methodology by which decisions are being taken?

The decision that posts of some 27 general managers would be raised to the “apex” level (secretary?) and hence at par with the board members is doubly problematic. Will the IAS lobby agree to create so many secretary-level posts for Railway officers — unless they are given the top positions? Is that the aim? The panel of secretaries may well make such a recommendation, but will the finance ministry agree? It is claimed that Railway officers have welcomed the decision. How could they, when they do not even know what is in store for them? They were certainly not consulted. Of course, that was not even necessary because democracy gives the right to the elected — even to be dictatorial!

Secondly, the Railway Board is the governing body and the general managers are subordinate to the board. How would the board control the GMs of equal rank? Or is it a ploy to make board members dispensable, and hence pliable, because once the GMs and members are of equivalent grade, an uncomfortable member can easily be shunted to some remote corner as GM. In the present set-up, the minister can do nothing to an unyielding member except to suffer in silence, and at worst, sabotage his foreign trips and post-retirement aspirations.

Coming to the basic objective of the policy decision — of ending “departmentalism” — prima facie, this sounds well intended. However, departmentalism is just a word and means nothing for the rail users, or for the national economy. Every large organisation is bound to have many departments. Even after the merging of cadres, departments will continue to exist, they would continue to quarrel, and it is the minister’s job to settle these disputes. He cannot remain a bystander, passing judgements.

The minister should also understand that the problem is not departments but the composition of the same, and their role in the Railway organisation. This should be seen from the perspective of the national economy rather than as an issue pertaining to the Railways in isolation.

If the restructuring is done with such national priorities in mind it can be a game changer, not only for the Indian Railways, but for India as a nation. Or else, it may only create a bigger mess than it imagines it is solving.

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