

## A PROPER TRANSFER POLICY NEEDED

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

Good governance and better administration of development is often offered as a plausible solution to conflict management. At the heart of this solution are public administrators. Civil servants, no matter how dedicated, innovative and efficient they may be, need a stability of tenure to govern well.

Consider the case of Jammu and Kashmir. If the purpose of administering the region is to ensure peace and development, then it is unlikely to succeed till there is a proper transfer policy. As it stands presently, officers are transferred too often. This denies them the opportunity to settle down into an official role. At times, a particular administrative location is used as a testing lab where officers keep arriving and leaving, with a deleterious impact on officer morale, leading to a reduction in efficiency and effectiveness. The latter effect impacts development and governance and acts as a collective punishment to the population of that place. It has been a major reason for distrust, disconnect and alienation.

This disenchantment is palpable in Shopian district, which has often been the epicentre of protests and militant-related activities. Since its district status in 2007, it has seen 13 Deputy Commissioners (DCs) at its helm. In the last few years, the transfer policy in Shopian has become a theatre of the absurd. The last three DCs have had a stay of 378 days, 537 days, and 25 days, respectively. The last DC assumed charge on January 19, 2021 and was transferred to Leh on February 13, 2021. The story is similar in many other districts and government departments across J&K.

Often, the frequent transfer of officials is blamed on the interference of local politicians. However, the argument cannot be valid this time since there are no elected MLAs after the dissolution of the State Legislative Assembly in late 2018. Since then, in the absence of elected representatives, the participation of local people in governance and development is through civil servants. It is this participation that has been the worst affected due to the frequent transfers.

The issue of frequent transfers is not limited to J&K, of course, but is found across India. The analysis of the SUPREMO (Single User Platform Related to Employees Online) database of the Department of Personnel and Training, Government of India, shows that the average posting spell of civil servants in India is only about 15 months. This is despite an increase in the median tenure since 2014 at the national level. Ashok Khemka and Pradeep Kasni are two Haryana-based IAS officers whose cases symbolise this issue. Mr. Khemka has been transferred more than 50 times in his career and Mr. Kasni 65 times. The Union Minister of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions, Jitendra Singh, publicly accepted his helplessness in 2016 about the frequent transfer of officers in States.

The undermining of transfer guidelines has been a major shortcoming of personnel administration in India. The Second Administrative Reforms Commission has highlighted it. The Fifth Pay Commission had recommended that no premature transfer should be allowed and that there should be fixation of a minimum tenure for each post. The Hota Committee, which argued against frequent transfers, noted that “absence of a fixed tenure of officials is one of the most important reasons for tardy implementation of government policies, for lack of accountability of officers, for waste of public money because of inadequate supervision of programmes under implementation and for large-scale corruption.”

An oft-repeated argument used for transfers is that they are “in the interest of administration.” However, they essentially weaken administration. Transfers often reflect administrative favouritism and create divisions among civil servants. If they are done on a political basis, this impacts the neutrality of the civil services. The core values of the civil services — neutrality, impartiality and anonymity — cannot be maintained without an efficient transfer policy.

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