

Lateral entry for the civil services must be transparent

The government's decision to recruit 10 senior bureaucrats through lateral entry is, in principle, a bold and long-overdue step. The Indian state apparatus suffers from three key deficiencies. Contrary to the widespread impression that it is bloated, the government is actually understaffed. For instance, the foreign ministry has fewer diplomats to service India's global ambitions than Singapore has. This is true for other departments, too, where senior officials end up dealing with policy and operational matters. Indian administrators are generalists -- and this has its own advantage of them having a larger, more comprehensive vision. But in an era when policymaking has become increasingly specialised, where governance requires knowledge of complex and dynamic technologies, there is a need for officials who are immersed in a particular area. In addition, the system is closed -- those who make it through a competitive examination, mostly in their 20s, stay on till they are 60. There is advantage in having a permanent bureaucracy when the political executive changes constantly. But at the same time, management and public administration literature suggests that it is dynamic and open systems, where there is constant infusion of energy, new blood and ideas thrive. Lateral entry will thus be a step forward in resolving these three structural issues -- by bringing in additional human resources, specialisation, and new ideas.

But political and social realities have to be kept in mind while making changes in public administration. There are two key concerns. One, the government is among the only truly diverse and representative employers in the country. It not only helps the disadvantaged access opportunities but has also lends systemic stability by giving different social groups a sense they have a stake in the Indian state. In government, there is already a trend towards contractual appointments and there exists concern that if the principle of lateral entry is extended, it will compromise the architecture of affirmative action. Diversity must remain an important principle in lateral entries as well. The second concern is of "politicisation" of the bureaucracy. The fact that Indian bureaucrats have come through an independent system and will remain in office irrespective of the political regime insulates them, to some extent, from undue pressure. In India, for any job, there is often a tendency to compromise on merit and use "connections". If lateral entry becomes a way for only those who are politically and ideologically committed to the regime in power, the exercise will be undermined. The government should go ahead with its initiative, but with caution, while keeping the credibility and integrity of the process intact.

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