

## Neither new nor undesirable

Our ceaseless search for the Holy Grail to fix the challenges of governance always leads us nowhere because the thing doesn't exist. But what we find in the process is a counterfeit, of... well, nothing; it looks like a solution but it is in fact a problem. Good intentions, unless tempered by thoughtful deliberation and preparation, do not lead to good policy outcomes.

The move by the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) towards [lateral entry in government service](#) falls in this category. It has invited applications from "talented and motivated Indian nationals willing to contribute towards nation building" to be appointed as joint secretaries in 10 Departments/ Ministries at the Centre. One cannot question the good intentions behind the decision to make lateral entry more institutionalised than the case till now. Nor should one read too much bad faith into this, until and unless that bad faith comes into the open.

### Government opens doors to lateral entry

Once we unwrap the new policy, however, what we find is a little incongruence that can one day grow into a monster. Since the problem that the new policy seeks to fix remains vague, we cannot hope for whatever improvements promised. It is also a distant cousin to the 'committed bureaucracy' bogey of the 1970s. Moreover, the lateral entry policy goes counter in spirit to the governance philosophy enunciated by the Constituent Assembly, insofar as it concerns the candidates from private sector, consultancy firms, international/ multinational organisations (MNCs).

Traditionally, the services of outside experts were availed through consultative processes, a practice quite widespread with the erstwhile Planning Commission and to some extent with its new avatar, the NITI Aayog. It is not clear why the government determined that the practice was not effective.

The lateral entry decision is based on the assumption that since our civil servants, especially those of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), are generalists and hence ill-suited to deal with policy implications of new technologies and new modes of thinking, the country is in dire need of domain experts. Nobody questioned the assumption so far as the government invoked it sparingly and also it is prima facie valid.

The policy's aim "also to augment manpower" can only mean that the lateral entry will be as wide as regular recruitment and used as regularly. In doing so the government is turning an exception into a rule but the whole enterprise also begs the question: what does all this mean?

Neither the DoPT nor Ministries concerned cared to define 'domain expertise'. For example, most of the 10 posts open for lateral entry are pretty generalist. A joint secretary in agriculture? And a candidate is merely directed to the website of agriculture ministry. Has the need for domain expertise in plant breeding been felt so as to look for another M.S. Swaminathan? Is there a need for a plant pathologist? A marketing expert? Or is the nation destined to have joint secretaries in all branches of a given Ministry? Therefore, we must recognise that domain expertise is salient only in a very narrow context.

What is common between the lateral entry policy and the push for simultaneous polls is a certain restlessness that the system has become too unwieldy to speed up development. The sentiment is honourable but misplaced. The Founding Fathers felt that India needed a responsible government

more than an efficient one. Trade-off, there is.

While elaborating why the Constituent Assembly preferred the parliamentary over the presidential system, B.R. Ambedkar reflected the sense of the House that while the former is more responsible but less stable, the latter is more stable but less responsible. Is the country in such a state to opt for efficiency at the cost of accountability?

Of the three methods at our disposal to ensure the government is responsible, one is independence of judiciary; the second is to subject the executive to constant scrutiny of the legislature; and the third is to maintain bureaucratic neutrality.

Most democracies train their higher civil servants to be accountable rather than efficient and India is no exception. What haunts a civil servant is the spectre of having to answer to a *quo warranto* writ against his alleged action/inaction. If this dynamic renders bureaucracy slow to act, it's a welcome trait. In any case, a civil servant is expected to follow the decisions taken by the political executive which is the real master.

The new system is open to three groups: 1) officers of State governments; 2) employees of public sector undertakings and assorted research bodies; and 3) individuals in the private sector, MNCs, etc. Among the three groups, any metric of accountability, bureaucratic neutrality and fidelity to due process gets progressively worse from group 1 to 3.

The nation cannot escape the havoc likely to be wreaked by a large number of private sector experts becoming joint secretaries on three-to-five year contracts. Whatever training or orientation that these new entrants will undergo cannot match 15-20 years of acculturation/on-job training that regular officers receive before they become joint secretaries.

Unless the government is mindful of the dangers, lateral entry can result in large swathes of higher bureaucracy being consumed by the 'nation-building' zeal at the cost of accountability.

*D. Shyam Babu is Senior Fellow, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi. The views expressed are personal*

Sign up to receive our newsletter in your inbox every day!

Please enter a valid email address.

Why India urgently needs a national asylum policy

Why India is upset over the UN body's report

END

Downloaded from [crackIAS.com](https://crackias.com)

© **Zuccess App** by [crackIAS.com](https://crackias.com)