

Dilemmas in civil services selection

About 1,000 young men and women got the nod a few days ago from the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) for induction into the Indian Administrative Service, Indian Police Service, and other services. This was at the end of a tough three-stage selection process, in which more than 4,50,000 candidates appeared at the first stage, a written test called the Prelims. Only about 13,000 made it to the written main examination, and 2,500 to the final interview stage.

Selection process

We should be grateful that we have such a rigorous process to choose those who'll occupy vital positions in the higher echelons of the bureaucracy. Some five decades ago, when I took the examination, only about 10,000 competed for a little less than 1,000 openings. Interestingly, a candidate can now take the examination in his or her native language. Surprisingly, this facility is availed of only by a few. This will not change as long as our university education remains English-oriented. Despite all this flexibility, the current examination is extremely tough to crack, and it holds many surprises to a candidate who appears for the first time.

It's gratifying that the entire selection process has till now not been hit by any scandal, something very few other prestigious systems of recruitment in the country can claim. Also, the UPSC has had an enviable record of relative freedom from graft and politics, against the sordid image of most of the Public Service Commissions in the States, where jobs have often been sold.

We can certainly have a more representative bureaucracy. Given the skewed selection decades ago, when the urban elite and middle classes managed to hog the services, we have come a long way to recognise and respect the diversity that is Bharat. This year, many of those selected were from rural areas; 120-odd were from the minority communities. Who can take exception or be blind to this inclusive nature of selection? We would like to see more from these groups. Any attempt to prescribe quotas among these groups will, however, be undesirable, apart from being unconstitutional. Of the successful candidates, 240 were women. We need to have a greater number of women.

Several fault lines

All this does not mean that we have a faultless system that offers no scope for improvement. A widely prevalent criticism is the pushing up of the age limit and the number of times a candidate may take the examination. Recent years have seen older candidates succeed. This has certainly had a negative impact on the utility of training.

I don't want to undermine the talent or sheer perseverance of those who get appointed in their thirties. What is disconcerting is the baggage that these recruits bring and the possibility that they may not be receptive to new inputs offered by a modern training programme. Is there, therefore, not a case for lateral entry through another set of examinations, whereby older individuals with past job experience can still get into the civil services at appropriate levels?

There are two issues which are worrying. There is a certain lack of sensitivity to the needs of the common man, even among recruits from the lower economic stratum and those who have a rural upbringing. You will comprehend this harsh reality if you go to the grassroots of village administration, including the police. It is precisely to extirpate this phenomenon of bias against the rural poor that we welcomed the changing profile of the civil service. If the rural inductees to the IAS and IPS do not empathise with the villager, who will?

Public servant corruption is still a harsh reality in urban and rural settings. While the intensity of this evil has come down appreciably in the Central government, the picture remains largely unchanged in the States. A 33-year-old IPS trainee in Maharashtra was recently caught demanding a 3 lakh bribe through an agent. An even more strident complaint against young recruits is their lack of preparedness to cope with political interference in day-to-day administration. Here again the fault is more with our vague training inputs and the leadership. Until we have an honest and fearless civil service we will not have fulfilled the dream of Sardar Patel, to whom a strong bureaucracy was the sine qua non of democracy.

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