

India needs a new IAS

India is at the confluence of two trends that are fundamentally challenging the world: The rise of Asia, with the growing importance of the Asian consumer, and digitisation. The Asian consumer's rise between 2010 and 2020 will in dollar terms add a new United States to global consumption. Digitisation (ubiquitous connectivity, unlimited storage, massive and growing computing power, enormous growth in data, artificial intelligence, robotics, blockchain, computer capable mobile handsets) is profoundly changing not just how people live and interact, but also how businesses and governments are, or will need to be in future. The modern era's need for specialisation fundamentally challenges Macaulay's notions of a well-rounded generalist on which the Indian civil service was founded.

How should our bureaucracy evolve to navigate the challenge this creates? Is it an apposite time to question the set-up of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) in India? I argue the need for a high-powered committee to do a comprehensive review.

I believe our government is spread thin, in that it attempts to do too much. It is understaffed when compared with governments in developed countries and many important government departments are staffed by people who do not have the requisite skills to discharge their increasingly specialised jobs.

The discussion in this piece is restricted to the IAS because of its primacy though everything should apply to the entire bureaucracy. Till 1991, the IAS would have perhaps been the most attractive service in India. The entry exam was among the most competitive and those who qualified were truly bright people. The IAS had great prestige, enormous power, job variety, fairly good perks and assured career progression. Even currently, IAS officers inhabit all central ministries and most top positions in the states. Are they well suited to do so? To answer this question, I examine whether the job remains as attractive as before and attracts the best people? Whether it recruits all the skills the government needs in this increasingly specialised world? And finally, whether the experience IAS officers gather over their normal careers equips them for all the jobs they are asked to do?

Unlike until a quarter century ago, most IAS officers today do not want their children to follow them into the service. It is widely recognised that the prestige of the service has fallen since the 1991 reforms - the reduced controls and the accompanying reduction in licensing reduced their power. Reforms also saw the emergence of alternative professions in the private sector whose pay was considerably higher. The equation between the politician and the bureaucrat also changed decisively in favour of the politician. The service, therefore, lost a lot of its allure.

The recruitment examination, though extremely competitive, is not targeted. Candidates can choose any two subjects and have one common general knowledge paper. Thus, people who get in are from disparate backgrounds. While most people in business recognise that a brilliant scientist (even in pharmaceuticals) is the wrong person to hire for sales, the IAS does not differentiate based on academic qualification. The nature of jobs that are performed in the state secretariat and the Centre encompass disparate departments (education, health, finance, public works department, urban development etc). Many of these require specialists like accountants, town planners, environmental experts, economists, architects, management degree holders, but if they are hired, it is by pure chance and then, too, are likely to be asked to do jobs outside their specialisation. Generalists today perform all these disparate roles.

Finally, it is not as if customised training is on offer for the different specialist roles that are undertaken. In the open market, these skills are priced differently. But the government does not

differentiate on this count and all recruits are paid the same. The experience obtained in the first 10 years in the IAS is similar. All the officers get a year-long training at the Mussoorie Academy and then are posted to a district. They get trained to become good administrators. In today's highly specialised world, it does not prepare them well for many of the roles they are expected to perform in the secretariat, whether in the state or at the Centre. After a few years in the state secretariat, there is a race among them to get the plum jobs at the Centre. There is a pecking order here, with a posting in finance, home, defence, being preferred to minority affairs, culture or sports. Further, most jobs in the states are not as attractive as the posting in Delhi.

This is damning in two ways. First, it proves few state capitals in India are attractive to live in and second it shows that the best officers prefer to do jobs for which they have not been explicitly trained rather than do the jobs they are actually good at in the states. It is not obvious, as an illustration, that the skills and aptitude that will serve you well as district magistrate are the same experience required to become an effective joint secretary, capital markets, at the Centre. We still come across some outstanding officers in these positions but that cannot be the norm. What is expected of them is unreasonable and therefore on average there is a challenge in delivery.

Would we not do better if we moved away from the colonial paradigm? Is it right to staff specialised ministries, at the Centre or in the state, with people without the requisite skills, however bright they innately may be? As I argue at the start of this piece, the time has come to set up a high-powered committee to work out the correct bureaucratic structure for India. This is no mean task but it is urgent.

This can be India's century. But to make it ours we need the instrumentality of the state to be able to address the challenges we face and facilitate the changes we need. This requires, more than anything, a qualified and effective bureaucracy. We must ask: Is our bureaucracy in its current form, equal to the task? Can we even blame them if they are not? We expect them to do what they were never trained to do in an increasingly specialised, complex and changing world. We need to fix this now.

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