

Fixing the steel frame

When we attained Independence in 1947, like British dominions such as Canada and Australia and colonies such as Malaya and Kenya, we continued to adopt the civil service system inherited from the British. The first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was aware that the colonial civil service system was unsuitable for a politically free, socially feudal and economically poor country such as ours. Lord Mountbatten, the “last Viceroy of India”, did little about it. Yes, we renamed our civil services, calling them the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and the Indian Audit and Accounts Service (IAAS), etc, but there has been only little change in practice. The IAS has continued to be deeply hierarchical and rule-bound rather than being driven by domain knowledge. Seniority is the basic criterion. We set up a brand new National Academy of Administration at Mussoorie, later to be called the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration. It was meant to train young recruits for the administrative services. The goal of the training imparted was still that of creating the all knowing “intelligent generalist”.

Over the last 70 years, many incremental changes were made. Meanwhile, our erstwhile “mother country”, the U.K., went ahead even as early as the 1950s to radically restructure its civil service. The famous Fulton Commission shifted the focus from a system based only on seniority and “experience” to one which gave pride of place to domain knowledge. This would avoid such ‘atrocities’ such as the secretary, water resources becoming the defence secretary, and the joint secretary, health being promoted as additional secretary, home ministry, which are commonplace today. When a non-commissioned officer or a soldier joined the Indian Army as an infantry man, he remained one throughout his career. He never became an artilleryman, a member of the armoured corps, or even a member of the signals (communications), corps. Moreover, when an officer in one of these disciplines reached the level of a brigadier, he was required to go to the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) to undergo a stiff examination. There were many objectives to those examinations, key among them being inculcating leadership qualities and a degree/level of domain knowledge. If he passed the examinations he became a major general and joined the elite of higher defence managers.

I am strongly of the view that we need to adopt such a system for the IAS, at the director level. The equivalent of the DSSC would be the academy at Mussoorie. However, faculty from the Indian Institutes of Management and the Indian Institutes of Technology should also be brought in to deal with their areas of expertise.

But changing the character of the personnel system would not by itself be enough. Organisational changes in the area of government ministries departments are also needed.

The core of those changes lies in the creation of “clusters/sectors” which are:

Security cluster: home, defence, security and intelligence and maybe even the foreign service, atomic energy, space and information technology.

Economic cluster: finance, commerce and industry.

Engineering cluster: public enterprises, heavy industries, electronics, telecommunications, and micro, small and medium enterprises.

Energy cluster: petroleum, coal, power and new and renewable energy.

Chemical cluster: chemicals and petrochemicals and pharmaceuticals

Transport sector: roads, ports, shipping and civil aviation, railways.

Social sector: health including the Indian Council of Medical Research, education, social welfare and social justice and empowerment, women and child development.

Rural sector: rural development, agriculture, agricultural research and education, Khadi and Village Industries Commission, water resources.

Science and technology sector: science and technology, scientific and industrial research, biotechnology, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, earth sciences, and environment and forests.

A key component of the new training programme would be to assess and develop domain knowledge, and the director being trained for the sector. Once “streamed”, the civil servants can then spend the rest of their careers “rotating” within the sectors concerned.

Questions may be raised about the feasibility of such an idea. My answer is this. If the defence forces have shown that it can work, and with positive results, why not apply it to the civil service?

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The new U.S. Fed Chairman is unlikely to opt for policies that might upset the President’s plan

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