

Generalist vs specialist

In an earlier article ('The case for lateral entry', IE, August 9), we made a case for an institutionalised system of lateral entry of mid-career professionals into the IAS. We argued that lateral entrants will not only bring in much-needed external expertise into the government but will also challenge the regular recruit IAS into continuous self-improvement. But such self-improvement will not happen automatically; the government will have to institute an incentive structure, devote greater attention to career management and provide opportunities for specialisation. How the government should approach this task is the thrust of this article.

Arguably the biggest question confronting the IAS is its lack of specialisation. The IAS was modelled on the colonial era Indian Civil Service as a generalist service to deliver the core functions of the state - collect taxes and maintain law and order. The challenge of development in a large, populous and impoverished country was probably not on the radar screen when the IAS was designed. But it soon became apparent that this development task would become central to public administration, especially at the state level. The IAS adapted to these changing dynamics by retooling itself as a "development agent", and on the whole acquitted itself quite creditably.

As economic reforms deepened and the state started yielding to the market, the nature of administration changed, demanding domain knowledge, especially at the policy level. This raised questions about the role and relevance of the IAS. Two views emerged.

The first is the argument that the best leadership is provided by generalists who have a breadth of understanding and experience. Specialists, no matter how competent, tend to have a tunnel vision and are not equipped to take a broader view. Sure, domain knowledge has to feed into policy-making, but that can be accomplished by domain experts advising the generalist leader in decision-making. In this worldview, a good IAS officer can head the Department of Agriculture as competently as she would the Department of Shipping.

The opposing view is that the IAS, as generalists, tend to over-weigh their experience of the process and form over understanding of policy content. Only someone who has learnt the subject from the trenches, as it were, can provide competent leadership in a functional area. Having the IAS head specialised areas is an inefficient arrangement.

This debate has frowned upon moderation. But there is no need to look for binary solutions. The complex and interconnected nature of policy-making demands that specialist expertise has to go with generalist experience. Notably, the Constitution Review Commission 2002 suggested the "need to specialise some of the generalists and generalise some of the specialists". That seems to be a wise dictum for the way forward.

That raises the challenge of managing specialisation. When does an IAS officer start to specialise? How will the system be operationalised?

The private sector's example is instructive. There, young professionals are typically recruited in specialised areas and they rise to generalist leadership positions negotiating their way up the hierarchy. What we have, or should have, in the public sector is in fact its reverse. Young recruits join the IAS as generalists, acquire breadth and then go on to acquiring depth.

The first decade of an IAS' career is typically spent in field postings with responsibility for policy execution which hones her administrative and people management skills, apart from imparting invaluable understanding of ground realities. From there an IAS graduates to policy formulating positions, at the centre and state levels. This transition provides the ideal marker for beginning to specialise - combining the soft skills they have learnt with the hard skills of a specialised domain.

Managing specialisation can be a complex challenge. How much specialisation should there be? How should officers be allocated among the specialisations? What should be the weightages for expressed preferences and revealed competencies? Once allocated a specialisation, how should an officer's career be managed?

A starting point can be to categorise ministries broadly into three groups - welfare ministries, regulatory ministries and economic ministries since experience suggests that each of these categories demands broadly similar behavioural attributes and aptitudes. A couple of principles should inform the process.

First, allocating officers across specialisations cannot, and should not, be reduced to a formula. It is best to work the system flexibly, allowing specialisation to emerge gradually through a process of deliberate iteration at the mid-career level. This will facilitate officers in specialising as they move up the hierarchy based on their revealed aptitude and performance record. Because the system needs to be flexible, it places the onus on the government to make it predictable and transparent.

Second, specialisation need not be mandatory. Some IAS officers may prefer to remain generalists. Indeed, the system too is always in need of some generalists. One of the tasks of cadre management will indeed be to match the supply and demand across specialisations and generalists.

Once they are allocated specialist positions, officers should be afforded opportunities to deepen their domain knowledge through study and training. Also, since IAS officers are recruited at a young age, they hardly ever experience the government from the outside. They should, therefore, be allowed, even encouraged, to work outside the government, preferably in a non-governmental organisation for a few years, irrespective of their area of specialisation. This is bound to make them more useful and relevant civil servants.

This effort to optimise generalist experience with specialist domain expertise should apply to lateral entrants as well. Just as regular recruits are required to specialise, lateral entrants should be required to "generalise" through field postings so that they have an opportunity to dirty their hands.

Giving the IAS an optimal blend of breadth and depth is a complex challenge. The way forward lies in eschewing binary solutions and embracing a nuanced, iterative process of active but careful cadre management.

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