

Has the IAS Failed the Nation?

An Insider's View

NARESH CHANDRA SAXENA

The decision to recruit experts from the open market in certain departments at the level of joint secretaries is not enough to radically professionalise the civil service. Internal specialisation must be promoted by insisting on stable tenure in the states so that there is incentive for the Indian Administrative Service officers to acquire expertise in their chosen sectors. Also, the IAS officers should take the entry of the outsiders as a challenge, because if they do not improve their performance, there could be repetition of such recruitment every year.

The Government of India (GoI) has decided to recruit 10 outstanding individuals from the open market with expertise in the areas of (i) revenue; (ii) financial services; (iii) economic affairs; (iv) agriculture, cooperation and farmers' welfare; (v) road transport and highways; (vi) shipping; (vii) environment, forests and climate change; (viii) new and renewable energy; (ix) civil aviation; and (x) commerce. Their initial appointment would be for three years and extendable up to five years depending upon their performance. They would work at the level of the joint secretary, a post normally occupied by the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) or central service officers. It is a crucial level of senior management in the GoI administration, as joint secretaries lead policy-making, design programmes, and monitor their implementation.

This initiative to prefer specialists over career bureaucrats has been hailed as a bold and radical step by some who argue that it would bring in fresh and vibrant ideas, expose the top civil service to competition, and promote better policy formulation based on expert domain knowledge. On the other hand, many have condemned the bypassing of the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) as an attempt to facilitate the backdoor entry of people committed to the present government's ideology, or recruit employees working for those industrialists who are close to the ruling party.

Game Changer?

It is difficult at this stage to guess the intention of the government; whether this decision is targeted at roping in the best talent from outside to nurture the civil services, or to stifle the independence of the bureaucracy by making it subordinate to the ideologues of the ruling party.

However, certain facts may help us assess the situation more objectively.

One, in the past too, experts had been inducted at senior positions in government, generally without any advertisement. Many of them, such as Manmohan Singh, Bimal Jalan, Lovraj Kumar, Vijay Kelkar, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Rakesh Mohan, Jairam Ramesh, and Arvind Subramanian made a very good impact and contributed substantially in senior positions. The fact that some of them later joined the ruling party and served as ministers did not invite criticism of their past contribution when they served as joint secretary or secretary. Nor was the regime criticised for recruiting party-friendly professionals. Russi Mody from the Tata Group headed Air India back in 1993 and, in 2002, former Bombay Suburban Electric Supply (BSES) Chairperson and Managing Director (CMD) R V Shahi was made the power secretary for five years. As a general rule, scientific ministries such as those of space or atomic energy are less hierarchically organised and have resorted to lateral entry more liberally. Thus, the experiment of inducting outsiders in government is not new. The second Administrative Reforms Commission too had recommended lateral entry at senior positions. It is likely that some of the joint secretaries who would be recruited through the new process are already working as consultants in the same ministry.

Two, only 10 positions have been advertised as against a total strength of about 400 joint secretaries in the central government. This should not cause any insecurity in the minds of UPSC-recruited career bureaucrats that it would minimise their scope for promotion.

Three, there is an acute shortage of middle-level IAS officers with 18 to 25 years of seniority, as the annual recruitment to the IAS in the 1990s was curtailed to just about 60 to 70 as against the present recruitment of about 180 per batch. This was done under an illusion that the economic liberalisation would vastly reduce the need for central staffing. However, the reverse happened, as with enhanced revenues GoI expanded its role not

A shorter and abridged version of this note was published in the *National Herald* on 17 June 2018 titled "The IAS Is Not Really Threatened."

Naresh Chandra Saxena (naresh.saxena@gmail.com) was posted at the IAS academy for eight years and trained several batches of the IAS. He retired as secretary, Planning Commission in 2002.

only in the social sector, such as for the anti-poverty programmes, education, health, and tribal welfare, but also in many new emerging sectors such as telecommunications, information technology, climate change, and road transport. Due to the overall shortage, most states are unwilling to release senior IAS officers for central deputation, leading to a bizarre situation where a railway traffic officer works as joint secretary, health, and an ordnance service employee finds himself in the Ministry of Tribal Affairs!

IAS Performance

Temporary shortages apart, the larger issue is: Have the IAS officers been found deficient in their role as policy advisers? Do these officers possess the necessary domain knowledge so essential for effective policymaking and delivery? Historically, the IAS was needed because India is a union of states, has a federal system, with all essential subjects with which the people are concerned, such as education, health, agriculture, water, housing, and police, being dealt with at the state level, but largely supervised and funded by the centre. A common civil service not only facilitates coordination, but also helps in national integration as almost half the IAS cadre in each state consists of outsiders. A rigorous process of recruitment for the higher civil services ensures that the best talent available in society joins the civil service in India.

A capable public service is essential for creating a favourable investment climate and facilitating people's participation in economic life. As countries become more globalised, governments face increasingly complex and cross-cutting issues, such as economic volatility, climate change and migration. The wide use of the internet has made citizens more aware and impatient, putting public servants under greater public scrutiny. Against this backdrop, public service delivery has acquired new dimensions as governments need to respond not only to changes in the global environment, but also to the demands of an active citizenry. Formulating integrated policies and their effective implementation would require an adaptable and efficient public

service that can anticipate emerging challenges and ensure that potential strategies are informed by better understanding of future contexts. It must also learn to empower people and be able to work with them, as traditional vertical accountability systems can act as a major impediment to working across boundaries (O'Flynn et al 2011).

Despite initial competence and enthusiasm, the hard reality is that many civil servants in the course of the 30 years of their career lose much of their dynamism and innovativeness, and end up as mere pen-pushers and cynics, with no faith in their own contribution to public welfare. A high degree of professionalism ought to be the dominant characteristic of a modern bureaucracy. The fatal failing of the Indian bureaucracy has been its low level of professional competence. The IAS officer spends more than half of their tenure on policy desks where domain knowledge is a vital prerequisite. However, quick transfers from one post to the other in many states dampens the desire to learn. In Uttar Pradesh (UP) the average tenure of an IAS officer in the last 10 years is said to be as low as six months. In the Indian Police Service (IPS) it is even lower, leading to the wisecrack that "if we are posted for weeks all we can do is to collect our weekly bribes."

With this environment prevailing in many states, there is no incentive for a young civil servant to acquire knowledge or improve their skills. There is, thus, an exponential growth in both their ignorance and their arrogance. It is said that in the house of an IAS officer one would find only three books: the railway timetable, because they are always being shunted from one post to the other, a current affairs magazine because that is their level of interest, and of course, the civil list that describes the service hierarchy! An important factor that contributes to the surrender of senior

officers before political masters is the total lack of any market value and lack of alternative employment potential.¹ Beyond government, they have no future, because their talents are so few. Most IAS officers, thus, end up as dead wood within a few years of joining the service and their genius lies only in manipulation and jockeying for positions within the government.

This service is primarily responsible for India's failure to achieve Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in hunger, health, malnutrition, sanitation, and gender, as most IAS officers can neither design effective programmes nor can they implement them with accountability. Some decades ago, one used to compare India with China and Sri Lanka, but these countries have left India far behind as far as development goals are concerned. On social indicators, India unfortunately does worse than countries even poorer than India, like Bangladesh and Vietnam (Table 1).

Credible Reporting

Though the IAS is failing on many fronts, here one would like to concentrate only on two issues that are exclusively under its domain: monitoring of programmes and flow of funds.

At present, officials at all levels spend a great deal of time in collecting and submitting information, but these are not used for taking corrective and remedial action or for analysis, but only for forwarding to a higher level, or for answering Parliament/assembly questions. Moreover, outcomes are hardly measured and the system gets away with inflated reporting. Pratham, a voluntary organisation, has evolved a simple test in education at a low cost, which judges the extent of learning in primary schools. Their findings show that the actual learning levels of students are abysmally low and declining. However, the states

Table 1: India and Other Developing Countries on MDGs

Indicators		India	Bangladesh	Vietnam
Infant mortality rate	1990	88	100	37
	2016	35	28	17
Underweight stunted children under five years		38	35	25
Rural population with adequate sanitation		40	92	79
Attendance ratio of girls to boys in secondary school (net) (%)		83	116	93
Total fertility rate (TFR)		2.3	2.1	2.0

Source: UNICEF (2017).

neither accept Pratham's findings nor monitor quality of learning themselves.

There is great pressure on the field staff to spend the allotted funds, but not in terms of long-term results, because those are not monitored. Thus, financial planning is divorced from physical planning. Equally, state governments do not discourage reporting of inflated figures from the districts, which again renders monitoring ineffective. As data are often not verified or collected through independent sources, no action is taken against officers indulging in bogus reporting. The practice is so widespread in all the states, presumably with the connivance of senior officers, that the overall percentage of severely malnourished (grade III and IV) children in the 0–3 age group according to the data reaching GoI from the states is only 2%, as against 9.4% reported by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in its survey. The field officials are, thus, able to escape from any sense of accountability for reducing malnutrition. Figures from some states show their children to be as healthy as in Denmark and Sweden! (Table 2)

Table 2: Reporting of Severely Malnourished Children in 2013–14 (%)

	State Government	UNICEF
Andhra Pradesh	0.8	4.7
Gujarat	0.8	10.1
Jharkhand	0.5	16.0
Odisha	1.4	11.0
Uttar Pradesh	0.8	12.9
West Bengal	0.7	8.9
India	2.1	9.4

Source: UNICEF (2014).

One district head, when confronted with this kind of bogus figures, told me that reporting correct data is “a high-risk and low-reward activity”! Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister called the government's performance in combating malnutrition a “national shame,” but he was not able to persuade the state bureaucracy to accept that the problem exists.

The sad story of fudging of data by the field staff got a great deal of publicity when the census report in 2011 brought forth the startling revelation that about 3.5 crore rural toilets built in the last 10 years at the household level were missing. In some states, like Madhya Pradesh, UP and Tamil Nadu,

the number of missing toilets was more than 60%.²

Flow of Funds

Many state governments, especially the poor ones, are neither able to draw their entitled funds from the GoI, nor are they able to release these to the districts/villages in time, with the result that the GoI is often constrained to divert the unclaimed funds to better-performing states. The reason for poor performance by Bihar, Odisha, UP, and Assam is often due to the widespread shortage of staff at all levels, adversely affecting implementation and supervision of programmes. Among the states, the record of Bihar is atrocious in using central funds. In the Accelerated Rural Water Supply Programme alone, it lost about ₹540 crore of central assistance during 1994–2005. Even salaries were not paid on time in Bihar in the pre-Nitish Kumar (currently the chief minister of the state) era. An evaluation of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in Bihar in 2007 by UNICEF showed that only less than 10% of anganwadi workers (AWWs) received their honorarium regularly; most receive it only twice in a year rather than monthly. Another study by UNICEF showed that only 18% of officials in Jharkhand working at the grass-roots level are paid their salaries on time (Saxena 2017).

It is also observed that the contractual staff in centrally sponsored schemes, such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), ICDS and National Health Mission do not receive their emoluments regularly. For instance, 39% of contract teachers received their monthly salaries with a delay of three months and more (AI 2015). Even electronic transfers take months with the result that in the mid-day meals programme ground staff such as cooks and helpers are not paid for months, the Food Corporation of India (FCI) withholds supply of grain, and mid-day meals are served only for 60%–70% of the working days in some states. Similar delays take place in supply of textbooks in SSA, filling up of vacancies (especially in the remote and tribal areas), capital works, funds for maintenance, etc. Empirical studies are needed to suggest what changes are needed in financial procedures at

the state level so that utilisation of funds improves, timely payments are made to the staff, and utilisation reports are sent to the GoI in time without delay.

The Inverted Pyramid

Coming back to the issue of lateral entry, the fear that the outsider joint secretary would be ideologically inclined to the present regime needs to be judged in the context of the mushrooming growth of “committed” bureaucracy (I would place their number as between 25% and 50% of the total, depending upon the state) that has taken place over the decades for a variety of reasons. The most important of these reasons being cut-throat competition that exists in the IAS for important positions both at the state and central levels.

Due to the control that the IAS lobby exerts on the system, a large number of redundant posts in the super-time and superior scales have been created to ensure them quick promotions. Often a senior post has been split, thus diluting and diminishing the scale of responsibilities attached with the post. For instance, in UP, against the post of one chief secretary, there are 18 officers now in equivalent but far less important posts drawing the same salary. This inverted pyramid (too many people at the top and too few in the middle and lower rungs) has apparently been created to avoid demoralisation due to stagnation, but the net result has been just the opposite.

First, it leads to cut-throat competition within the service to grab the important slots. The old camaraderie has vanished. Instances are not lacking when IAS officers wanting plum jobs have gone to the politicians denigrating their competitors. Second, this no-holds-barred competition is then exploited by politicians in playing up one against the other, leading to officers becoming more pliable. The lure of after-retirement sinecures further increases the number of those who would be willing to crawl when asked to bend.

However, getting only 10 joint secretaries from the open market is not enough to radically professionalise the civil service. The government needs to promote internal specialisation by insisting

on stable tenure in the states so that there is incentive for the IAS to acquire expertise in their chosen sectors. An IAS officer who has seen the plight of patients at the district level and has also worked in the state medical department would be a far more effective joint secretary in the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare than a doctor with specialisation in just one narrow subject. But, it is counterproductive to fill up senior positions with career civil servants who do not have previous experience in that broad field. Therefore, after the first 10 years of service, each IAS officer should be encouraged to specialise in one or two chosen sectors by not only giving them long tenures, but even permitting them to join academic or research organisations where they could improve

their intellectual skills. The IAS officers should take the entry of 10 outsiders as a challenge because if they do not improve their performance, there could be repetition of such recruitment every year.

The present proposal would not have attracted adverse criticism had the UPSC been involved in the recruitment process. One can only hope that the selection committee set up by the GoI would be impartial, objective and transparent, and puts up the curriculum vitae of selected candidates online to establish their credibility.

Summing up, one welcomes 10 experts from the open market, but professionalising the rest of the 390 joint secretaries requires greater attention. This needs wider administrative reforms by addressing issues of governance at the state and district levels.

NOTES

- 1 Of late, some senior officers are being hired by the private sector, not so much for their professionalism, but for their ability to influence the government in favour of the hiring company.
- 2 <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20141013-clean-india-modi-govt-toilets-missing-defunct-india-805413-2014-10-02>.

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