



Reforming the civil services

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Highlights

- A recent move by the Centre seeking applications from 'outstanding individuals' to fill in 10 posts of Joint Secretary has caused consternation.
- A retired bureaucrat has filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court against the decision.

Issues

- Many serving Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers see this move as threatening their hegemony. Some retired officers and political opponents consider this as the beginning of the end of a "neutral and impartial" civil service with the likely induction of loyalists to the current dispensation.
- It has also been argued that lateral entry marks the "privatisation of the IAS".
- In our Cabinet system of government with collective responsibility, the secretariat plays a crucial role. The concept of a 'generalist' higher civil service can be contextualised against technical/specialised bodies on one side and the political executive on top.
- The key officials in the secretariat, from the Joint Secretary to the Secretary, are the point persons guiding the elaborate consultative process and advising the political executive to take a final call.
- How an abstract idea is to be given a concrete, implementable shape is one key concern of such officers.
- A Joint Secretary to the government has this crucial "line" function to perform in policy formulation and its implementation.
- Though the original proposal is often prepared by technical experts and sent to the "government", the final decision rests with the Joint Secretary/Additional Secretary, the Secretary and finally the Minister/Cabinet.
- The question often raised, in this context, is whether the higher bureaucracy is equipped to comprehend complex economic and technical issues in order to properly aid and advise the Minister.

Generalist v. specialist

- Evidently, terms like "professionalism", "specialisation", and "technical expertise" are often used vaguely and inter-changeably.
- Specialists like engineers, doctors, agricultural scientists, lawyers have always had a substantial say in the decision-making process as also in its implementation.
- Lateral entry at the level of Secretary has met with some success.
- Besides, Secretaries to the Departments of Atomic Energy, Science & Technology, Scientific and Industrial Research, Health Research, and Agricultural Research have always been scientists of eminence.
- Similarly, in departments like the Railways, Posts, etc., all senior positions are manned by

Indian Railway or Postal Service officers.

Therefore, there is nothing very original in the new initiative to allow entry at the level of Joint Secretary.

However, those inside the system feel threatened that their territory is under assault.

- One perceived fear is that the number of such lateral entrants may be increased with time and that the political leadership, by creating a 'divide and rule' mechanism, would further demoralise the 'steel frame of governance'.
- The second related fear is that in the garb of recruiting outstanding individuals, politically indoctrinated persons will be inducted into the system.

Way forward

- These fears could have been allayed by letting the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) handle the recruitment process, after defining the job requirements more explicitly.
- If they turn out to be truly outstanding, there should be provisions to induct them permanently in the government, with approval of the UPSC, and consider them for higher postings.
- Ideas have also been advanced for IAS and other officers to gain work experience, for a limited period, in the private sector.

The lateral entry scheme, if implemented properly, may foster more competitive spirit, break the complacency of the higher civil servants and eventually prove to be a pioneering initiative in public interest.

Source: [The Hindu](#)

