

Lateral Entry into Civil Service: A Timely Move

The federal democratic system in India since our independence has been governed by the elected Executive, popularly known as the Council of Ministers headed by the Prime Minister as *primus inter pares*. This elected Executive changes every quinquennium, depending which political party first gets past the post at the hustings. The winner is bestowed the responsibility to run the country as per the arrangements specified in the Constitution of India. However, to ensure systemic continuity there remains in place an impersonal, permanent Executive aka the complex hierarchical bureaucratic structure, the famed steel-frame of India.

Notwithstanding the eventful vicissitudes of fortune as Indian democracy has experienced over the years, if the country has seen peaceful transitions from one government to another, the credit, inter alia, has to go to India's often-maligned steel-frame, howsoever rusted it is alleged to be. This stereotypical Weberian institution, predicated on rational and predictable rules, has duly and ably ensured the sustenance of the often doddering and toddling baby steps of Indian democracy. And Indian bureaucracy usually has its recruits selected through one of the toughest recruitment examinations in the world as conducted by the Union Public Service Commission. The Indian civil service remains pretty ensconced in the system to provide the critical support and facilitation to the elected Executive in governing the country.

However, lately this hoary leviathan (read bureaucracy) has been under fire. Trenchant vitriolic attacks have been mounted by the critics for its conservatism and status-quoist approach to the various protean governance issues as facing our polity. It has been argued that Indian civil service has been failing and flailing in its duty to transmogrify itself to suit the developmental demands of this young nation. The civil service, which has so far rendered yeoman service to the country through its thick and thin, suddenly appears a villain of the piece in the face of these criticisms.

One needs to appreciate that Indian bureaucracy or any bureaucracy for that matter is genetically programmed to be status-quoist as wilful chopping and changing with a governance

system invites undesirable instability which could be simply dangerous for a complex, plural democracy like India with multi-layered societal diversities. We can't afford to ignore the examples from Latin America, Africa, East and South East Asia where such experiments have often resulted in balkanisation and failure of the governance system in those countries.

Given the multiple constraints in a complex, plural society like ours, Indian civil service has definitely delivered though observers feel that it has started showing signs of fatigue and does require a face-lifting to customise it to suit the changing times. And it is with this in view that the extant Central government is toying with sundry ideas to effect the desired reforms in our civil service to bring it in synchrony with time. One such reform, which reportedly is on the anvil, is lateral entry into the Indian civil service. The Centre is believed to be actively working to institutionalise lateral entry from academia and the private sector into some senior government positions.

This is posited to be a long overdue reform with far-reaching implications. The critics feel that to change the way bureaucracy works, it has become imperative to move from a closed to a more open system for recruiting Indian's future administrators. The bureaucratic glasnost is believed to be one of the prerequisites for enhancing quality of the quotidian governance in our country. In the past also, there have been suggestions by the government-constituted Expert Groups to institutionalise lateral entry into various critical positions requiring esoteric and specialised knowledge. But, such suggestions have often been pigeon-holed and not followed up in right earnest. However, with its commitment to good governance, the present federal government has been exploring various ways to enhance efficiency and effectiveness for better delivery of sundry public services and benefits. Ergo, in all likelihood, on this occasion, the government may see this important reform through to its logical end.

Lateral entry, though, has always existed in the chequered history of independent India's civil services. Nandan Nilekeni, the former Infosys official was drafted to oversee the '*Aadhaar*' scheme which has the potential to transform India's social welfare sector; is an illustrious recent example. Another illustrious example is Raghuram Rajan, the 23rd Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, a position usually occupied by career bureaucrats. The practice, however, has been ad hoc in nature and marked by dilettantism. Given the strong umbilical linkage between governance and prosperity amid growing complexities in the society, Western countries like the UK, the USA, Australia, Holland and Belgium have already thrown open specific government positions to qualified personnel from all walks. It has been found to be a better way to attract apposite talents for the job.

A judicious combination of domain knowledge and relevant expertise is a critical requirement in governance. It is felt by many that these attributes are often not present in a cadre of generalists. Moreover, the increasing penchant for politically correct recruitment through reserved quotas also restricts scope for merit in critical areas requiring definite skills and competences. The second Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC) also envisaged a shift from a career-based approach to a post-based approach for the top tier of government jobs. ARC felt that civil servants ought to compete with domain experts from outside the regular civil service for senior positions.

An important dimension of this reform is to enable genuine competition by setting up an independent authority to supervise the proposed recruitment process. Without an independent authority with well-laid out norms, there is a chance that lateral entry may turn out to be an excuse for a back-door entry of the 'spoils-system' to recruit politically-aligned persons which will further subvert the system thereby defeating the whole purpose behind the move.

The proposed lateral process of recruitment is also believed to be a move to prise open the alleged stranglehold the IAS lobby has on key appointments. While the move is definitely welcome, it should be ensured that the same does not become a change for the sake of change. After all, a system which has delivered over the years can't be jettisoned overnight. The baby should definitely not be thrown with the bathwater. One has to be very watchful while bringing in such far-reaching systemic changes. After all, Nandan Nilekeni has also been gasping for breath in the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIAI) with the 'Aadhaar' initiative going nowhere.

Such changes will only be skin-deep if other factors remain unaddressed including insulating the civil service from political interference. Besides, while allowing lateral entry, the members of Indian civil service should also be allowed to move out, do a stint in the private sector and come back to rejoin the civil service as per a pre-laid out protocol. Private sector enterprises also need to benefit from the rich and varied experiences that civil servants have. For sure, a change of this nature will not be easy as there is bound to be stiff resistance from within the babudom (read Indian civil service). The government, however, ought to push ahead with this paradigm shift in Indian governance as the national interest is always greater than the interest of a few though the proposal does need a more broad-based discussion with all the relevant stakeholders.

Salient Points

- India since independence has been governed by the elected Executive.
- The Indian civil service remains pretty ensconced in the system to provide the critical support and facilitation to the elected Executive in governing the country.
- Given the multiple constraints in a complex, plural society like ours, Indian civil service has definitely delivered though observers feel that it has started showing signs of fatigue and does require a face-lifting to customise it to suit the changing times.
- Central government is toying with sundry ideas to affect the desired reforms. One such reform, which reportedly is on the anvil, is lateral entry into the Indian civil service.
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Glossary

Quinquennium: a period of five years

Ensconced: to settle securely

Flailing: instrument used as a weapon of war

Transmogrify: to change in appearance or form

Posited: to place, put, or set

Glasnost: the declared public policy within the Soviet Union of openly and frankly discussing economic and political realities