

# Grappling with Foxes and Hedgehogs of India's Senior Civil Services

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One of the neglected areas of reforms of India's organised senior civil services relates to the rationalisation of its branching structure and the related debate of generalist vs specialist services. The present structure is a confusing hotchpotch of specialist and generalist branches, at different layers of government, and has largely resulted in inter-branch rivalries, dissatisfaction, and a dysfunctional organisational structure, affecting the efficiency of the senior management and governance. In light of this, a rationalised redesign, effected through a mix of mergers, abolitions, and reinvention and with specialised-generalist branches responsible for broad domains of functions, appears to be the most suitable strategy for reform.

The views expressed in this article are the personal opinions of the author and do not represent the views of the Government of India.

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The “steel frame of India” is the phrase often used to describe the organised civil service of India, and has been in use since before independence. Although the civil service was a legacy of the British and Jawaharlal Nehru was sceptical of it in the beginning, he came to appreciate that a highly-qualified, professional and meritocratic civil service institution would, perhaps, be an important factor in India's successful transition from a backward nation to a prosperous country. As it turns out, though this transition may not yet have been achieved even after seven decades of independence, the civil services, as a professionally-managed cadre of bureaucrats, has evolved into one of the pivotal institutions of democratic India. It has even been identified as one of the important factors in the deepening of democracy and consolidation of the idea of India (Guha 2007). In the parliamentary democracy of India, where the political executive come and go through regular general elections, the executive civil service is permanent, providing much needed continuity, knowledge pool, expertise and professionalism, to better manage a vast and diverse country. Though responsible and answerable to the political executive, the administrative and institutional structure of the civil service is not dependent on the whims and fancies of the political class, thus providing a fine system of checks and balances, together with the independent judiciary and free press.

This article, though placed within the larger framework of bureaucratic reforms, is focused on analysing the often-ignored issues arising out of the peculiar branching structure of the organised senior civil services of India—known popularly as the Indian Administrative Service (IAS),

Indian Police Service (IPS)—and other branches, the underlying debate of generalist vs specialist, and suggests ideas moving forward.

One of the most important, and often-neglected institutional reform in the senior civil services relates to restructuring and realignment of different branches. In this sense, many other important issues in civil services reform, like method and mode of recruitment and selection, promotion and performance evaluation, tenure and stability, job security and time-bound promotion, lateral entry and equal opportunity, etc, have not been addressed here. This discussion on the reorganisation of service branches, also presumes that the broader structure of the higher civil services would largely retain its career-based permanent civil service character, consisting of officers recruited through open, fair competitive examinations, who then serve for almost all of their working lives.

## Restructuring and Realignment

The larger issue of the overall structural reorganisation of different branches is perhaps the most important issue which has not been getting the attention it requires. There is an institutional mandate and prescribed procedures for stand-alone restructuring of different service/branches periodically, to be carried out under the overall guidance and supervision of the Department of Personnel and Training (DOPT). Though it is not what I mean by a comprehensive overall relook at the organisation and structure of various branches of the civil service, it still provides an opportunity for individual branches to reform and reorganise themselves in light of the changing needs and circumstances. However, this has rarely been done. The periodic restructuring of individual branches has hardly achieved any objective goal with a long-term reform focus. Essentially, these exercises have been reduced to the rigmarole of inter-service comparison and then trying to ensure career/promotion prospects vis-à-vis other branches, often resulting in increasing the size of the service/branch, and creating a redundant structure and

superfluous posts, especially at the senior management level. The result has been that no meaningful or rational end has been achieved, to say nothing of visionary change.

Further, as all these services have a theoretical parity with the IAS, the very different reality that actually prevails has a further dampening effect. A recent Government of India study itself has rightly identified that at the national level, the issue of IAS officers occupying most of the senior management-level posts is a cause of deep concern and resentment among other branches (GOI 2010). This only highlights the seriousness of the issue, where a large number of officers from various central Group “A” services (mostly non-IAS) forming as much as 80% of total group of civil servants are dissatisfied, frustrated and demotivated. This indeed is a very serious organisational problem, often ignored and deliberately overlooked. Many of the officers from smaller and lesser-known service branches are demotivated and frustrated by the lack of opportunity, limited exposure and poorer career prospects, which are often accentuated by exercises of stand-alone cadre restructuring.

Another important issue is the neglect of “technical service branches” (mostly in states, but at the central level too) which manage many of the public service delivery and infrastructure provisions. Most of these departments, especially in states, for instance, education, public engineering, public infrastructure, public health and medical services are again staffed by IAS officers at the top. The situation is similar at the central level in departments like energy, minerals and metals, shipping and transports, education, public healthcare, etc. This offers very little opportunity for bright technical specialists at the top, and breeds large-scale resentment and dissatisfaction. A structure where competent, professional, and suitable officers are given due recognition and responsibilities, irrespective of their service affiliation is the need of the hour. Though I will be discussing these issues in reference to the civil services alone, the ideas and suggestions presented will be equally applicable to the technical services as well.

All such questions become more pertinent in this era of highly dynamic social and economic challenges of our country, and also in light of the fact that these challenges are no less humongous or complex than they were at the time of independence. It becomes important, more so, as the structure of the higher bureaucracy has hardly changed and reformed since independence, and it is a fair claim that perhaps the present structure of civil services and its branches do not represent the realities of India, and are poorly equipped to face the complex challenges of modern India.

The present organisation of civil service makes it instantly clear that it is a hotch-potch of one generalist branch and various kinds of specialist branches. Though all of these branches are, as per rules and in theory, treated at par in terms of career prospects, salary and perquisites, opportunity for growth, etc, the reality is quite different. This leads to further inter-service rivalries, competition, power politics and exploitation, resulting in all kinds of bureaucratisation and inefficiencies. In light of the above, the crucial question is how to, and in what fashion we need to reorganise and reform the existing senior civil services branches. How should such a division or demarcation of branches be done? What are the problems and issues with the present division/distribution? And how can this realignment restructuring be done in a more effective, efficient and productive way? Or, on the basis of the original principles, should we also consider not dividing the higher bureaucracy into branches at all, and instead, keep all of them as one perfect generalist group?

### Do We Need Various Branches?

Why do we need to have different branches for senior management levels? Especially when we have a generalist branch, the IAS, which occupies most important leadership positions in diverse functional domains. Why not then, abolish these specialised branches, and have only IAS officers manning all such posts?

This idea of keeping every Group “A” civil servant as a generalist may seem radical, naïve and even impractical. However, it will have one important

benefit; it will end the inter-service rivalry and resulting discontent and frustration. In effect, everyone recruited will be in the IAS, and then they can be assigned to different posts, departments and functional domains over the course of their service career. If we look at the present structure of IAS, it is more or less what I am proposing here, with the distinction that some important functional domains like policing, revenue (to some extent), accounting, etc, have specialised service branches. Otherwise, IAS officers do hold leadership positions in all other functional domains across the country, both at central and state government levels. So why leave out these few remaining domains, wherein by creating equivalent specialised service branches, the government has given rise to such intractable issues which have a detrimental effect on bureaucratic performance. Therefore, let us have only one service, identified with whatever name one wishes to give (IAS would be good option, the old ICS also comes to my mind), and let them manage all the senior position across all functional areas, from police to health, from tax to rural development, and at all levels in federal India, from central government to state, and to local governments. For proposing thus, I may be charged as unprogressive and conservative, looking back to the halcyon days of the ICS in this modern world of highly complex societies and institutions, where the problems facing the government need very different—and specialised—treatment from experts.

Nevertheless, this appears to be an attractive idea and perhaps a feasible option. However, the issues need to be considered in more depth and with a nuanced understanding of the various facets involved. Therefore, without taking a call on this proposition, let us examine its underlying logic and the related debate of generalist vs specialist.

### Foxes and Hedgehogs

One of the great philosophers of the 20th century, Isaiah Berlin (1953), in his essay “The Hedgehog and the Fox” says:

There is a line among the fragments of the Greek poet Archilochus which says: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows

one big thing.” Scholars have differed about the correct interpretation of these dark words, which may mean no more than that the fox, for all his cunning, is defeated by the hedgehog’s one defence. But, taken figuratively, the words can be made to yield a sense in which they mark one of the deepest differences which divide writers and thinkers, and, it may be, human beings in general.

Berlin analysed and interpreted this idea in broader and philosophical terms, wherein the hedgehogs were seen as approaching the world through a single defining idea and having a central vision and focus, while the foxes were perceived as those who draw upon wide experience and are flexible and open to ideas. Although it might be quite tempting to see the resemblance of foxes and hedgehogs with the more prosaic organisational ideas of generalist and specialist, at the deeper level there are nuanced distinctions. In any case, I will not explore foxes and hedgehogs further, and limit myself to the generalists and specialists debate in relation to the senior bureaucracy of India.

As of now, different services are structured and organised according to their functions. However, in a modern society and in the complex federal democracy of India, it is difficult to attain a neat functional division and this produces concomitant issues. Whereas all other services can more or less be identified with functional domains and often with departments, the IAS cannot. In fact, due to its generalist nature, colonial history and traditional influence, it has been the most visible, most powerful, influential and most sought-after branch.

The second Administrative Reform Commission (ARC) has recommended that the IAS too needs to be a specialised service (GoI 2009). Various commissions have put forward recommendations for domain specialisation of IAS officers, with public finance and taxation, financial management, industry and trade, domestic affairs and defence, housing and urban affairs, agriculture and rural development, social sectors, energy, natural resource management and environment being some of the common domains identified (GoI 2009). These commissions have also emphasised the assignment of officers on the basis of knowledge and experience in

these domain areas. However, these recommendations have not yet been implemented. Further, it must be noted that these domain specialisations are recommended only for the IAS; the report does not talk about other service branches. When there are already specialised services for, for instance, police and revenue, why do IAS officers need to have a specialisation in that domain, and, to take the argument further, why do IAS officers need to be at the top in revenue departments or for that matter in police departments? This leads us to the question of the desirability of a “generalist” holding the top position in a “specialist” branch. There is also a tendency to reduce this debate of generalist vs specialist in the bureaucracy/civil service to the question or desirability that IAS officers need to specialise in certain domains, conveniently ignoring and forgetting that there already exist specialised branches and that the whole question needs a comprehensive treatment.

The debate of generalist vs specialist is an old one, and an issue which has been contested at various levels, in different wakes of the public sphere, including in business, professional, and of course the civil services and governance. Identifying a generalist as someone who knows “nothing about everything” and a specialist as someone who knows “everything about nothing” is a striking, though interesting, way of highlighting the key issue of the debate. It would suffice to say that there may not be a need to look only for a binary solution. Even in the context of foxes and hedgehogs, Berlin (1953) says that

Like all over-simple classifications of this type, the dichotomy becomes, if pressed, artificial, scholastic and ultimately absurd. Like all distinctions which embody any degree of truth, it offers a point of view from which to look and compare, a starting point for genuine investigation.

Let me also say that in a sense, the debate is superfluous, and skips the most important point, as most often, instead of really analysing the deeper organisational and institutional ideas ingrained in this issue, the emphasis has been reduced to the question of who, a generalist or a specialist, should possess final control or

the ultimate decision-making authority at the highest level of an organisation or institution.

Of course, in any organisation, with specific aims and responsibilities, and especially in a government bureaucracy, both generalists and specialists are required. The important question is where and how they should be placed, how and in what manner their roles, responsibilities and functions should be decided and distributed so that the objective and goals of various organisations can be achieved with utmost effectiveness and efficiency.

### Specialised Generalist

In the Indian context, ministers, at state or central government levels, possessing the highest level of executive authority, are the ultimate generalists, as they are public representatives, and their qualifications, professional and other experiences often have no bearing on the ministry/portfolio assigned to them. They are expected to make decisions on the basis of their innate broad generalist outlook and understanding, of course, aided and supported by a set of domain experts with vast experience.

Therefore, in practical terms, comes the crucial question: do we also need the positions one or two levels below the minister to be held by generalists? The answer to this question underpins the role being played by the IAS vs other service branches at various levels and in various departments.

I would tend to largely agree that the positions one or two levels below the minister (which may be called the senior management level), which in practical terms, are often the positions of heads of department—variously called secretary, principal secretary, director, district magistrate, etc, in state government departments, and secretary, additional secretary, joint secretary, etc, in central government ministries—should be manned by civil servants who are more generalist than specialist. These levels are fairly senior ones, where the responsibilities are more in the nature of providing broad leadership, formulating and supervising longer term visions, missions and related goals of the organisation, conceiving,

formulating and supervising public policy issues, coordinating with diverse agencies and institutions across various levels and types of organisations and governments, and often thinking and communicating across boundaries of domain knowledge and expertise. Concomitantly, these very senior positions need not have very deep and in-depth knowledge of the relevant specialised field of function/domain. Such inputs can be and are generally provided by the specialised personnel at the middle and junior management levels of the organisations.

Therefore, higher the level of responsibility and position of a civil servant in an organisation, the more generalised should their leadership style and approach be. While domain specialisation is very important, even crucial, as we move higher up in an organisation, a broader outlook, leadership qualities, strategic thinking, etc, become relatively more important than pure domain expertise. These qualities are of a more generalised nature, though certainly enriched and sharpened by specialised experience and knowledge.

Therefore, ideally, one would prefer the senior civil servants to be what I would call “specialised generalists.” While this may look like what the second ARC has recommended, my conception is very different. The second ARC only referred to the IAS, and the need for their specialisation in different domain areas, and conveniently forgot other large number of specialised services, and issues related to them. I am emphasising that a generalist conception, superimposed on the specialised knowledge and experience, is likely to be the best for leadership roles in various organisations, and the specialist service branches in India need to be restructured and redesigned along these lines.

I would like to add that, accordingly, we need to organise/structure different service branches themselves in consonance with “specialised generalist” domains. Let me examine some other related strands of thoughts and issues having a bearing on this discussion.

### Central or State Governments?

Looking at the organisation and the different branches of Group “A” services as they have developed over the years and

exist today, it is noticed that most of the services other than the IAS and IPS have been created to man one particular department (or even a sub-department) of the central government. Further, there are only few service branches except the IAS and IPS which function beyond the narrow confines of a department. So Indian Revenue Service (IRS) (income tax) is responsible for manning top-level posts in the income tax department (it is actually not a department, but a sub-department, called Central Board of Direct Taxes, under the Department of Revenue, Ministry of Finance). Similarly, the IRS (Customs and Central Excise) (IRS-CE) officers are responsible for running customs and central excise functions (again not a department, but a sub-department, the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs [CBIC] under the Department of Revenue). The recent case of introduction of the goods and services tax and related fiscal reform is an excellent example of how inter-service rivalries, turf wars and power politics between the IRS-CE and IAS can derail and damage the implementation of an important and historical tax reform in the nation.

Similarly, branches like the Indian Information Service, Indian Postal Service, Indian Post and Telecommunication Accounts and Finance Service (IP&TAFS), Indian Trade Service, Indian Defence Estate Service, Indian Defence Accounts Service (IDAS), the three “civil” services of the railways—Indian Railway Traffic Service (IRTS), Indian Railway Personnel Service (IRPS) and Indian Railway Accounts Service (IRAS)—fall in this category of department-specific branches. Some accounting services straddle functional domain and department specificity. Thus, the Indian Audit and Accounts Service (IA&AS) officers are part of the Indian audit and accounts department, but are responsible for the broad function of auditing of all central and state government organisations, and are responsible for some accounting functions at the state level too. The Indian Civil Accounts Service is again a functional service that is responsible for the accounting function of central government organisations/departments, and therefore this service

spans many departments. However, it operates in a world where there are other accounting services like the IDAS, IP&TAFS and IRAS which are limited to specific departments. This is clearly not a very efficient or rational organisation.

Thus, what we have is a hotchpotch of organised Group “A” services, sometimes created for some administrative functional domain, like accounting of government, whereas in most other cases, created to be part of a department only, to perform its own specialised function. This creation of service branches has often been done without much thought and planning. A recent example of a decision to create another Group “A” service (in January 2017) without much thought for its use, function, logic, structure and future was the creation of the Indian Skill Development Service (ISDS) by the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE). Though not strictly a “civil service”—as its recruitment is to be carried out through the Indian Engineering Service Examinations—it is an example of how these services are created, without much thought given to cadre planning, career prospects, or roles and functionality in the long run. There are abundant examples where many “services” so created in the past have lost both their relevance and functionality, and are now textbook cases of inefficiencies, redundancy, frustration and demotivation, bureaucratic apathy and red tape.

From this perspective, the IAS, IPS (and to some extent the Indian Forest Service [IFoS]), vs almost all the other services provides an interesting contrast. The IAS and IPS officers are mostly responsible for running the state government and state-level bureaucracies. IAS officers are generalists, and are responsible for running all the departments and domains, from agriculture to healthcare, education, urban development, and even revenue (and in many cases supervising law and order too, as secretaries of the home department). In the same vein IPS officers, as specialised generalists, are responsible for policing, internal security, and law and order functions.

On the other hand, most of the central service branches are created and confined

to one department and functional area, and that too within the central government. They hardly work with state governments. This is a crucial difference with profound effects.

### Life Cycle of a Service Branch

Societies are dynamic entities, and so are governments. Apropos, the organs of the state and government structures also need to change, reform, transform and reinvent themselves. In the case of service branches, their importance cannot be overemphasised. Nevertheless, there are situations where even the most vigorous of reformation and reinvention may not be able to salvage the relevancy and utility of a service. In such cases, the service should naturally die, having completed its life cycle.

But is this possible in the Indian system of a permanent civil service, where employment is mostly for life, where there is a cadre-based employment, recruitment is carried out every year, and officers get promoted, mostly without much regard to their performance but on the basis of years they have spent working (or not working) with the government? Also, these kinds of organised service branches develop entrenched lobbies, form vested interest groups, exert pressure and influence through legitimate as well as illegitimate means, and often do everything possible to perpetuate their existence. Therefore, any talk of abolishing a service branch may just be a wishful thinking.

Nevertheless, despite the difficulties, the perpetuation of such a situation should not be allowed, and a genuine periodic exercise must be carried out to evaluate and assess the relevance, roles and responsibilities, required reform, etc, of a service branch. Perhaps, the idea of a periodic cadre review, as I mentioned earlier, was the same, though in practice it has largely been reduced to an exercise in increasing the size of the service. Let me add here that it may not always be necessary to abolish a service/branch and compulsorily retire the officers. It could be possible to retrain, reutilise, and absorb such officers in some other organisation, service branch or functional domain, while abolishing the branch which has outlived its purpose and function.

So, are there, in fact, service branches that have outlived themselves? Two branches readily come to my mind: Indian Information Service (IIS) and Indian Trade Service (ITS), as these hardly have much to do in this age of independent media and liberalised and globalised economies. It is worth mentioning that the opinion that it is the IAS which should be abolished forthwith is also common; however, such opinions are motivated more by jealousy than by actual appreciation of issues.

### Mintzberg Hierarchies

The double whammy of being department-specific and functioning for the central government, is also responsible for giving rise to another widespread problem in all central Group "A" service branches: their top-heavy structure. The widespread understanding of a standard organisation structure propounded by Mintzberg identifies a higher management/strategic apex in most organisations which sets strategies, policies and goals, and provides directions to the entire organisation (Mintzberg 1979, 1981). The world over, across public and private organisations, this strategic core has to be a small number compared to the total number of people working in the organisation. It is estimated that on an average, it should not be, more than 1% of the total number of employees, and often lies in the range of 0.5%–1%. This golden ratio is now routinely flouted in the case of most Group "A" services.

To ensure promotion and career progression, the Group "A" services have, over a period of time, increased the senior level posts, mostly at the level of directors (technically called Junior Administrative to Selection Grade) and above. However, since these service officers are confined to one department only, and that too within the central government, the option of having a large number of senior management-level posts in any pyramidal hierarchical department remains limited, leading to a structure that is very top-heavy, with hardly any meaningful work for those top-level officers. Most of the central services suffer from this problem. Even if we consider only the very senior posts at the joint secretary level

(technically called Senior Administrative Grade [SAG]), a large number of service branches still flout the golden ratio mentioned above. Cases that need special mention here are the IRS-IT and IRS-CE.

The intensity and severity of the problems differ from service to service, and those few services which have been able to depute their officers to other central government organisations in large numbers have been able to somewhat resist this problem. The IA&AS needs to be mentioned here.

It would also be instructive to point out that this top-heavy organisational structure is found in states too, especially in the IFOS, and to a lesser extent, the IPS as well. The reasons remain the same. Whenever the domain of a service is restricted to a department, this problem arises sooner or later, due to the creation of senior management-level posts in order to ensure career progression. In the case of the IFOS, which is confined to the forest and environment department in states, a similar top-heavy structure results, although the situation is ameliorated by the fact that at senior level, IFOS officers also move to work in central government departments and ministries. IPS officers have similar problem, though policing is a much broader and larger functional domain, and the opportunities for policing function at the central government are also very large.

IAS officers are largely immune to such issues, though there are a few senior posts in each state, like on revenue boards or in state planning boards, which are often used for sidelining officers who are not in favour with the political dispensation. The generalist nature of IAS officers—whereby they function mostly as heads of departments/organisations/units in states—and the opportunity to move to central government ministries and departments in large numbers at the senior level, takes care of such problems.

### Group 'A' or Group 'B'?

We also need to examine the specialised, department-based creation of service branches from another perspective. There are close parallels between what the central government does by creation

or institution of civil service branches and what state governments also do in their respective states. All the states in India also constitute and recruit department-specific civil servants under different branches—they are generally called state civil service officers—most numerously for administration, police and finance/revenue functions. These are designated Group “B” services, though officers from these state civil services also hold managerial positions, and are subsequently, through promotions, inducted into the IAS and IPS. It should also be noted that there are few states where some of these state civil service posts are even designated Group “A” from the start, although officers remain as a part of the state services, and are not inducted into the IAS or IPS. These state service branches are again mostly organised in the form of department-specific services with specialised functional domains.

Is not the central government doing the same thing by creating different central services for its own departmental functions, inducting them at the Group “A” level, and through common civil service examination of UPSC? Then, why not make these central services also Group “B” services? In fact, even now, certain Group “B” service officers are recruited through this common civil services examination, notably administrative and police service officers for union territories, for instance, the National Capital Territory of Delhi, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Lakshadweep, Daman and Diu and Dadra and Nagar Haveli Civil Service (DANICS) and Police Service (DANIPS) and for the Central Secretariat Service (CSS). The whole idea may find strength in the fact that the middle management level needs to be more specialised, whereas the top-level management needs to be what I, as mentioned above, call “specialised generalists.” Why should civil servants, working within central government departments and as a specialised cadre, be assigned a Group “A” status, when their state counterparts have not been? Should not then, all the specialised cadre officers be categorised as Group “B” officers, whether they are with the central government or state governments?

It seems that the Group “A” status—the attached promises of significant roles and responsibilities, as well as career progression prospects—and the common recruitment process for these central branches and the IAS is largely responsible for generating resentments and frustration among a large number of officers vis-à-vis the IAS. It would make lot of sense, if from the beginning, other officers are aware of their status and subordinate position compared to the IAS or IPS. It is unjust, hypocritical and exploitative to promise equal status and opportunities, but then fail to provide the same.

In any organised and permanent bureaucracy, well-defined, fair and logical structures, hierarchies and career progression plans are important for smooth functioning and efficient performance. These are markedly absent at present, with respect to the different branches of the senior civil service.

### Hegemony of the IAS

All service officers are selected through the same process, and are theoretically treated as equivalent, with “similar” pay and emoluments. The term “similar” has been used here instead of “same” because there are, no doubt, some hidden benefits which IAS officers arrogate to themselves, one being availing two extra salary increments at the time of promotion. Further, the nature and structure of career prospects and promotions are also similar theoretically. However, the realities in terms of career prospects, domain and span of control and of responsibilities, type of works performed and broader career potential are vastly different. This is the result of various reasons that have already been discussed. These differences result not only in resentment and dissatisfaction, but are also reflected in various other forms, some of which are detrimental to the overall health of the bureaucracy and governance structure.

It would be pertinent to note the contrasting situation at the senior level in central government secretariat/ministries where this difference is starkly visible. As per norms and rules of the DoPT, all services are (largely) treated equally

while selecting them for manning middle management level (deputy secretary, director, etc) and higher management-level (joint secretary, additional secretary, secretary, etc) positions in central government departments, ministries and organisations. This process is called the Central Staffing Scheme (CSS), in which all the organised Group “A” services (including technical services) participate. However, it is a well-known fact that through various subtle and not-so-subtle machinations, IAS officers are able to garner most of the higher management-level posts. It has been a matter of record that as much as 75%–85% of the joint secretary posts in the central government ministries are occupied by IAS officers, and all the other services are limited to meagre 15%–20% of such posts. This is in contrast to the respective strength of officers where the IAS cadre forms around 12% of the total number of Group “A” civil service officers. The situation is even worse in the case of secretary positions, where IAS officers arrogate more than 90% of these posts for themselves (Thakur 2015). This is despite the fact that all other services have been trying, through various means, to highlight this anomaly to the political bosses, and correct the situation. Their failed attempts are testament to the fact that it is the IAS officers, as a lobby group and organisation, who have the real say and command influence in government decision-making.

As regards middle management-level posts, we see a much higher proportion of officers from central Group “A” branches manning these posts. This is explained by the fact that at this level, most of the IAS officers themselves are often not interested in joining the central government since they are serving mostly as district magistrates in their respective states. Further, some of the IAS officers who are with the central government at these levels are mostly from those states considered “not so good” like the north-eastern states, Jammu and Kashmir (and even Kerala), or those few who have been allocated a state cadre distant from their home state (for example, someone from Bihar allotted to Tamil Nadu cadre) against their choice.

Let me highlight one more aspect, which may be taken as further evidence in support of specialised generalist. All the specialised services do take part in the CSS process and officers are then allocated to different ministries and departments, and in many cases, to such domains which are not their specialisation. In a way, this is recognition of the fact that at the higher (and middle) management level, which is the leadership, policy, and strategy level, the generalist approach becomes more important. In fact, the entire CSS design can be termed as generalising some of the specialists and specialising some of the generalists.

### Broader Domain-based Branches

I have, over the course of this article, examined the issue of structure, organisation, branching and grouping of the senior organised civil service in India on various axes:

- (i) Need or otherwise of dividing the pool of senior civil servants into branches, and the basis on which this should be done.
- (ii) Roles and responsibilities for generalists vs specialists, and the debate surrounding this issue.
- (iii) Creation of service branches which are confined to a specialised role within a department.
- (iv) Many service branches limited to central government whereas IAS, IPS are for both state and central governments.
- (v) Dynamics of society and government and life cycle of service branches.
- (vi) Organisational design and limitations of branches leading to top-heavy structures.
- (vii) Existence of Group “B” service branches in states for specialised functions within a department, and their uncanny resemblance to central service branches.

The numerous facets of the civil service structure highlighted above are not only interrelated and interdependent, but are also entangled and constantly interacting, thereby giving rise to the discourse on need for an organisational redesign of civil service branches.

How can this be achieved? There could be many, largely though not fully independent reform and reorganisational

approaches which can be taken in an attempt to tackle this complex situation. While discussing the issues along various axes, three possible approaches emerge.

First, let there be no branches. All senior civil servants should be considered part of one homogeneous group, and be assigned different responsibilities and functional domains from time to time, as well as move seamlessly between different levels of government. It is quite similar to what would be the case if we have only the IAS, and no other service.

The second option is to let the informal, but actually visible, distinction between the IAS (and perhaps IPS too) and other service branches become formal, wherein the IAS (and IPS) will have a separate and distinct identity and clear demarcation assigning them superiority as a service. This formalisation would perhaps also require a separate examination/selection process for the IAS (and IPS). Further, it may also be desirable to designate the present central service branches as a Group “B” service, responsible mainly for middle-management functions, confined to their functional department, and supervised at the top by IAS officers.

The third option, the obverse of the second, is to strictly ensure the promised equality of service branches in terms of status and identity, career prospects, equal opportunity to perform and excel, and also in ensuring equal and fair chance in all appointments/assignments and responsibilities. Perhaps, it will also require making the IAS a strictly specialised service. A hotchpotch, hypocritical and unfair situation, where the reality is very different from what is stated and promised at the outset, has already created serious organisational issues in the whole bureaucracy and in the efficient management of cadre-based higher civil services.

Implementing any of the above options is easier said than done. Nevertheless, let me sketch out an alternative vision and scheme for reorganising and restructuring the different branches of the services. A civil service cadre, organised into feasible and worthwhile branches in accordance with large domain areas could have significant advantages over the three alternative structures proposed, and certainly would

be much better than the existing organisation. The following could be its salient features and related benefits:

(i) Service branches would be organised as per broad domain/functional areas. They should not be organised or created for any specific department or for narrow purposes. The underlying principle is to have a cadre of “specialised generalist” officers who are capable, competent and exposed enough to shoulder responsibilities of the Mintzberg strategic apex, providing leadership and strategic direction in public management.

(ii) This will help not only in creating feasible service branches, with robust, well-planned career prospects, but will also take care of the problem of very small, overspecialised services branches. Obviously, there will not be as many branches as is the case now (25–30), but may be limited to not more than 10 branches.

(iii) Such a structure will also have the appropriate mix of specialisation and generalised exposure, with good scope for reorganisation and cross-agency experience, leading to greater flexibility. This exposure to specialised as well as generalised domains within a broad function, where transferable skill sets would be used over a larger, diverse domain, will lead to greater efficiency and effectiveness.

(iv) Service cadres, organised on the basis of large domain areas should also be designed in a way to make the movement of officers across levels of government—for example, between central and state government—natural and effortless. It should be something like the case is now for the IAS and IPS.

(v) Of course, all these services should be treated equally, as a Group “A” service, in practice. Once we have robust service branches based on larger domains, doing more meaningful and diverse work, with ample opportunity for growth, exposure and experience in broader areas, the satisfaction and motivation will naturally be enhanced, while the present situation of rivalries, frustration and demotivation, will certainly be significantly reduced.

(vi) Such a scheme will also be compatible with reforms in other areas of civil services, like lateral entry, open and fair opportunities for important assignments,

internal competition and recognition of excellence and efforts, revamped performance management systems, etc.

### Identifying Broad Domain Areas

How to identify and define these broad domain areas and then create service branches for them? One approach could be to identify the areas where modern governments operate and then group them into broader categories, thereby coming out with feasible and operational domains for constituting service branches. In this exercise, evaluation of the existing branches, their roles, functions and relevance, would also be useful, and the possibilities of mergers, abolitions, etc, should be taken recourse to, while also matching and aligning them with the functional identification of government operations. Further, the distribution of power/functions between central and state governments through the Constitution of India into union, state and concurrent list will also be useful in identifying domain areas.

Three broad categories of functions have generally been identified, which a modern state needs to perform, and is also expected to be performing in the coming decades. In the specific context of India these can be categorised as:

**Sovereign functions:** Law and order, internal security, foreign relations, fiscal and revenue management, defence, ensuring justice and fairness

**Provision of public goods:** Development administration, education, public health-care, human development, promoting general welfare, carrying out distributive transfers, protecting property rights and enforcement of contracts for operation of markets

**Economic and social management:** Infrastructure development and management, economic and financial regulation and control, urban and rural habitats, and environment, natural resource management, power and energy, agricultural, commercial and industrial management, communication and transport.

In a loose sense, the importance of these functions decreases as we move

from sovereign functions to provision of public goods, and then to economic and social management. The sovereign function should always be performed by state. Most of the public goods, due to the externalities inherent in them, and also due to their non-rival and non-excludable character, have to be provided by public authorities, financed through taxation. In the case of provision of economic and social goods, service delivery, regulation and control, market mechanism may be applied, but it also depends upon the nature and level of development of the market as well as public institutions. Some form of government management and intervention will, nevertheless, be required in our country in the foreseeable future.

As societies and nations develop, some of the functions falling under the provision of public goods can be performed through private involvement and initiative, with the government playing the role only of a regulator, or facilitator. In any case, many functions falling within economic and social management can be, and are being performed and services being delivered with the active involvement of market mechanisms.

The whole idea of this threefold classification is to come out with a more rational, meaningful and functionally effective division of civil service branches. However, despite this exercise, it is not easy to get a very neat and clean solution. There are many grey areas and overlaps, as well as contrasting and even confusing possibilities.

What remains to be done now is to examine and analyse all the individual branches of civil service like the IAS, IPS, IRS, IA&AS, etc, within the framework of the broad domain-based service branches discussed above, what are the issues with individual branches and how can they be handled and also try to figure out how to move towards a broad domain-based branching structure. It will also delineate how these present branches can be redesigned and reorganised and in that process some more concrete ideas and proposals for a better and more effective civil service organisation would be fashioned out.

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