

Evolution of the Civil Services in India

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), India's elite section of bureaucracy, over the past 4 decades. The paper relies on a primary survey of 14 retired IAS officers of different age groups to capture their motivation to join the service and their reflections on how the services have evolved during their tenure of service. Some suggestions on how to improve the effectiveness of the service and keep it relevant to the changing governance landscape of the country are also presented. The paper also seeks to contrast the views of two cohorts of officers – those who joined the service between 1950-70 and those who joined between 1970-90.

Purpose

The Indian Administrative Service (IAS or Civil Services of India) are an essential component of the government machinery of the country. They comprise various administrative and managerial positions responsible for maintaining law and order and implementing the government's policies and programs. The Civil Services of India today are an evolution of the Indian Civil Services (ICS) established by the British East India Company in the mid-19th century which comprised mostly British officials. Post-1947, the civil services were reformed to suit the newly formed democracy.

The Civil Services in India have been evolving ever since to adapt to the ever-changing landscape of the world's largest democracy. This paper seeks to identify in what ways these civil services have changed, for the better or the worse, and the reforms that should be adopted to strengthen the administrative and bureaucratic arms of the Indian government.

Methodology

This paper relies on a survey conducted among retired officers of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) to understand their opinions on the evolution of the Civil Services and reforms they believe should be introduced to improve the administrative system. The Indian Administrative Service (IAS) is the administrative arm of the government that serves both state governments and the Central government directly. The retired officers chosen for this survey are from a variety of age groups, with the oldest officer having joined the IAS in 1954 and retired in 1986 and the youngest officer having joined the civil services in 1988 and retired in 2022. They have each held a variety of posts from District Collector or Chief Election Officer, to Municipal Commissioner or Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister.

The educational backgrounds each of the respondents hail from is even more diverse. Two of the fourteen respondents hold Bachelor of Science (BSc) degrees, two hold Bachelor of Legislative Law (LLB) degrees, one each hold Bachelor of Arts (BA), Bachelor of Technology (BTech), Bachelor of Medicine (MBBS) and Bachelor of Engineering (BE) degree respectively; one holds a Postgraduate in Sociology degree; five hold Master in Science (MSc) degrees out of which four are for Physics while one is for Public Policy, eight more hold Masters degrees in subjects like Political Science, Economics, History, Commerce, Public Administration and Financial Management. Further, one of the respondents possesses a PhD.

It is fair to say that the respondents of the survey belong to an extremely varied group of individuals, each with a distinct educational background from a variety of age groups, having held a myriad of posts. This cohort is fairly representative of the general opinion on the Indian Administrative Services and will allow this paper to draw conclusions that are widely applicable.

Key Takeaways

Primary motivation to enter the civil services

Most of the respondents had overlapping responses with the most common reasons for seeking a career in the civil services including the following (in order of decreasing popularity):

1. Seeking an opportunity to serve people and create a positive impact by improving the quality of life of citizens.

2. Seeking the prestige and respect that comes with being a civil services officer.
3. Seeking job security (since civil service jobs are generally permanent).
4. Seeking the best career option available at the time.
5. Succumbing to family pressure.
6. Seeking a decent living.

Positive changes observed during years of service

The most common responses have been divided into two categories, the first group comprises responses provided by officers who joined the civil services between 1950 and 1970, while the second group comprises responses provided by officers who joined the civil services post 1970. These two categories represent distinct time periods in the evolution of India's administration which lends itself to different changes seen during these two time periods. However, there is a fair degree of overlap in the types of changes, which can be gauged by comparing the two columns below. The table below represents the most popular responses to the question "What positive changes did you observe in the civil services during your years of service?". (The responses are in no particular order).

Responses by ex-IAS officers who joined the civil services in <u>1950-1970</u>	Responses by ex-IAS officers who joined the civil services in <u>1970-1990</u>
Increased focus on poverty alleviation	Greater emphasis on economic growth
Increase in age limit for recruitment leading to greater geographical and social diversity in the civil services	More inclusivity and greater representation in the civil services brought about by OBC reservations and more women and individuals from poor backgrounds joining the services
Specialization in civil services	More job-oriented training and comprehensive training modules
Greater trend of professionals (doctors, engineers, etc.) entering the civil services	Independence of the Election Commission at the State and Central level
Younger officers being enlisted, who were more attuned to the problems that plague the common people	Implementation of the RTI (Right to Information) Act, fostering greater

	transparency and direct accountability to citizens
Officers became increasingly more change-oriented	Rights based legislation
Democratic decentralization and heightened role of the Panchayati Raj system	More people oriented administration that was easily accessible by citizens
Transition from English to Marathi as the main language of the administration (this change pertains to administration in the state of Maharashtra but indicates the national trend of shedding the remnants of colonialism and shifting back to using local languages in governance)	Maintaining coherence in administration and remaining committed to the Constitution even as civil services operated under different ideological dispensations
Improved access of education and healthcare	Adaptability to changing requirements (for example, from a command to a liberalized economy)
Proficiency in digital literacy and improved communication due to the introduction of cell phones	Application of Information Technology

The above table reveals the positive changes that have continued from a newly independent India until recent years such as digitalisation of administrative functions, increased accessibility of the administration, and greater inclusivity in recruitment.

Further, the above information relates changes that have taken place in the early years after independence such as democratic decentralization and increased age limit for recruitment, and changes that are relatively more recent like the implementation of the RTI Act and the political independence of the Election Commission.

Negative changes observed during years of service

The negative changes observed by former officers of the civil services during their years of service are similarly demonstrated below:

Responses by ex-IAS officers who joined the civil services in <u>1950-1970</u>	Responses by ex-IAS officers who joined the civil services in <u>1970-1990</u>
Expansion of posts at the senior level with greater vacancies at the field level	Inefficiency and procrastination in administration
More risk-averse officers who were afraid of decision-making	People joining the civil services only for the power and not the responsibility
More ambitious officers	Growing compromising attitude of civil servants for personal benefits
Increased interaction of the administration with political organizations	Civil servants becoming servants of political leaders and not the Constitution
People from rural background still underrepresented in administration	Greater political interference in administration
Attraction of posts related to Finance or Industries, less importance to posts like Agriculture	Dilution of ethics and increased corruption

The above summary of data can be analyzed to understand the negative developments in the administrative arm of the government that have persisted over the years such as the politicization of administrative functions or the ever-expanding body of self-serving civil servants. Additionally, the data discloses the negative developments in post-Independence India that are not as much of a pressing issue anymore as they have been partly resolved such as the underrepresentation of people from rural backgrounds in the administration. Moreover, the data divulges the negative changes that have recently developed in the administration such as increased corruption, which must be tackled urgently and effectively.

Specialist vs Generalist Debate

There is an ongoing debate about whether specialists or generalists are better suited to form government policy effectively. The survey revealed that the ex-IAS officers almost unanimously agree that the administrative services should retain permanent generalists while bringing in experts for particular issues, something that is already being followed in the IAS.

The respondents put forth various reasons for the noteworthiness of generalists. Generalists have knowledge of the grassroot-level issues and have experience in coordinating opposing views. According to one respondent, “generalization is a kind of specialization”, because the nature of the job requires someone who can arbitrate on conflicting scenarios.

There are also several difficulties associated with hiring specialists in government. Firstly, there is a difficulty in defining specialization. Governance and public policy can be said to be an area of specialization itself. Further, although specialized domain knowledge is required, different departments work “in silos”, while an administrative official must consider the overall impact of a decision and not be confined to narrow, limited views. Specialists further have their own agenda set by particular private players which may conflict with what is best for society. Additionally, one respondent put forth the more localized issue that specialists from different fields find the atmosphere in a government office to be stifling and they fail to command respect there, which may lead to reduced productivity in that department.

Many respondents argued that the current system is working well with the government consulting various expert bodies when making field-specific decisions. Many also spoke about the government’s program of lateral entry, or the induction of private sector specialists in government departments on a contract basis. However, some argued that this program of lateral entry had failed because individuals from the private sector have no motive of public service and it brings corrupters into a system already plagued by corruption.

Several suggestions were offered to make better use of generalists and specialists. A good generalist must have a good understanding of underlying development discourses. The training at the Academy is currently not equipped to provide this to recruits and should be improved to provide training in tune with job requirements. Exposure to economic and social thinkers on how societies evolve should also be understood and questioned during the process of this training. More case studies of successes and failures of policies should be studied and debated. Further, officers must develop the ability to listen and consider others’ perspectives to be good administrators.

Proposed reforms in civil services to make them more effective

The respondents’ recommendations have been grouped according to the following categories.

Recruitment:

1. The age limit of 30 years and maximum number of six attempts for the Civil Services examination leads to many young students wasting many years trying to clear the exam. Therefore, the maximum number of attempts allowed should be reduced to three.
2. The age of recruitment should be lowered to 1960s' levels.
3. The Civil Services examination is one of the toughest in the world and the process of recruitment is extremely long which puts off bright candidates. This process must be shortened.
4. The Civil Services examination has little opportunity to evaluate the EQ of a candidate, which is supposed to be done in a personal interview but the interview has limitations related to time and the capacity of the interviewer. As a result, character traits like integrity of a candidate get ignored.
5. There should be more emphasis on qualities like commitment, dedication and a positive attitude while recruiting.
6. Students with independent views should be favored in the recruitment process.

Training:

1. In-situ training is essential. Also, since each IAS officer stays in the civil services for 35 years on average, training should be repeated in the second half of one's career which should include domain training and a refresher at the generalist level.
2. Training should include more problem-solving than classroom lectures. Real-life problems of citizens should be tackled from training itself.
3. Training should be designed to mold young officers to be dedicated civil servants. The training Academy should be moved from Mussoorie to a metro city where the officers can interact with senior officers and go into the field to gain hands-on experience. The same holds for districts where the officers in training should get hands-on experience to learn the nitty-gritties of rural administration.

Posting:

1. The posting mechanism should be institutionalized wherein the authorities should take care that officers are posted as per their chosen domain with a fixed tenure in the second stage of their career.

2. After 10-15 years of working for States, IAS officers should be given the choice about whether to work for permanent accreditation to the GOI (Government of India), such that they are permitted to make a choice between working for the States or the center. Selection of officers for GOI may be strictly in terms of expertise for sound policy making.
3. The cadre should be divided into different fields of specialization at initial stages and posting should be connected to the specific chosen sector such that the officer is more equipped to deal with challenges that arise in that sector.

Attitude:

1. Officers' dedication must persist regardless of political interference, working environment, career opportunities, compensation, etc.
2. The idea of the IAS being a job with money and power must be done away with. It has to become the "Indian Seva Service", because service to the common man is service to the nation.
3. The smugness of some officers who believe they are there to govern and not to serve must be done away with.
4. The flame of idealists must be kept alive.

Others:

1. The composition of IAS officers in each state, which is meant to be 50% from within the state and 50% from outside, is being adversely affected and is affecting political neutrality. It must be monitored to maintain the all-India character of the civil service.
2. The corrupt officials must be weeded out.
3. Improvement of civil services and the system as a whole is continuous like the RTI Act, RTS Act, etc. because one cannot isolate civil service from the system it operates in.
4. Effective platforms should be created to learn from other countries.

Conclusion

The civil services have been evolving ever since their formation. While most of these changes have been beneficial such as increased transparency in governance and technological progress, some have been negative such as the unnecessary politicization of administration and the erosion of ethics among

civil servants. Important reforms must be undertaken in the recruitment, training and posting of IAS officers and the attitude of service for the public good must be maintained.