

The Need to Re-Design IAS

- Dr. Rajnish Karki¹

The Indian Administrative Service forms the core of government establishment in the country. Although a small organisation, of just around four-thousand officers, it is the pivot for India's over a million member civilian bureaucracy. Its scope of responsibility and complexity is breathtaking – spanning the sub-district to central secretary levels and across the routine civil administration, development programmes, policy, and government entities. The IAS, however, is ailing.

A recent book by NC Saxena, who entered the service by topping the national examination in 1964 and went on to serve with distinction, makes a frank appraisal. He was the scholarly director during my faculty stint at the administration academy in Mussoorie. The appraisal is expectedly definitive. It reckons, while the officers are individually high calibre and hard working, the organisation as a whole is underperforming. The IAS is particularly found wanting in the development programmes, and the organisation as a whole is inefficient, poorly governed and affected by corruption.

Since an organisation's efficacy depends on the design or framework and the members' capability therein, the fault lies clearly and primarily with the design of IAS organisation. The design is discerningly infirm, in the basics of pooling together the efforts of members and developing organisational specialisations and competencies, and fails grossly and repeatedly vis-à-vis objectives. It is dysfunctional too, for instance, by pushing a significant proportion of members that are high on integrity and motivation to start with into the inefficient and corrupt ways. A good organisation design would work the other way around.

The antecedents of IAS lie in the covenanted service of East India Company, which was given shape as the Indian Civil Service in 1858. The founding construct or design was as per the objectives and functions as well as the constraints and orientation of a colonial administration. For instance, the staffing initially was exclusively British and the entry was through a London centred examination. The primary focus was revenue and law & order and the structure was very lean – where young officers single-

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handedly administered vast territory and population and a tight hierarchy of few hundreds the entire subcontinent. There was high functional discretion albeit along a minimal but clear set of expectations and guidelines. The mindset was clearly colonial, in being different and superior to those administered. And standing apart, in the work and the ways, became the leitmotif of ICS culture.

Peter Drucker, the pioneering management thinker, marvelled at the ICS. He recognised it as about the first great organisation in the world – a meritocracy, highly efficient, and phenomenally effective given the scale, scope and longevity. An organisational construct once set gains a life of its own, and that of the ICS, being very successful, was inherently strong. The entry of Indians, whose proportion rose to 5% by 1905, and the addition of Delhi as examination centre in 1922, made only a marginal difference. The force of isomorphism or conformity was overpowering and the founding structure, processes, mindset and culture carried through – even after India gained independence, barring in the change of name to IAS.

A fundamental shift in the operating context and the objectives and functions of an organisation, as in 1947, needs to be accompanied by a shift in the design. In its absence, the efficiency and effectiveness suffers. For instance, the coming of democratically elected polity and the development role of government weren't incorporated at the concept or fundamental level of the organisation design. The adaptations were piecemeal and half-hearted and were largely left to the discretion and ingenuity of officers individually. They weren't coherent too and accumulated into the infirmities and dysfunctionalities over decades. This comes through in the evolution of major components of the IAS organisation.

Structure The reporting levels, designations in the central and provincial governments have remained remarkably identical to those defined in the late-nineteenth century. Even the proportion of directly recruited officers, outlined in 1922 at 50%, continues. While the increased strength, from 980 in 1947, has kept pace with the rise in population, the responsibilities at every level have multiplied and there is greater variety in accountabilities, in particular to the democratic institutions going all the way till village panchayats. The structure should have shifted, for greater variety in the roles, skills and specialisations and for stronger integrative mechanisms.

Processes The entry and two-year induction process remains intact from the late-nineteenth century. Targets and plans have proliferated, with a district level officer often accountable on hundreds of parameters, thereby obfuscating performance assessment. Linkages to the basics of remuneration, increments and promotions, are weak or non-existent. Generally everyone gets promoted up to the secretary level, in remarkable contrast to the armed forces, and the IAS organisation has become an “inverted pyramid” -- Uttar Pradesh once had fourteen chief secretary level officers, making the situation ripe for

adverse selection at the top. The organisational processes are akin to the nervous system of a living being, and they are misaligned and infirm currently.

Culture The acculturation during probation propagates a mindset similar to the colonial times, albeit the positives of integrity and standing apart amongst officers. This withers along the way. A significant proportion fall into each of the four quadrants of a 2*2 matrix along the high/low performance and the high/low integrity axes. With substantial part of the organisation coming short either on performance or integrity and the four groups being inherently incompatible, the extant culture is contradiction ridden, enfeebled and makes for poor esprit de corps. Culture defines an organisation's cohesiveness of beliefs and identity, and it's currently fragmented, diffident and thus subpar.

The IAS, more appropriately its organisation design, is indeed ailing. It is still rooted in the late-nineteenth century construct and is decidedly far out and behind its operating context. The sporadic adaptations since independence have been inadequate and made the situation worse. A holistic re-design in the concept and detail of IAS organisation is called for. The re-design ought to address not only the present but the requirements at least a few decades into the future. A good design will closely align with the needs and aspirations of emerging India – a democratic nation of over a billion people, amongst three largest world economies, and potentially a global superpower.

A re-design of the IAS organisation besides being a necessity is better taken as an opportunity. There is a wealth of expertise and Indian and overseas experiences to draw upon. The information and communication technologies, in particular, make hitherto inconceivable organisation design concepts and mechanisms feasible. One can not only aim world-class but for the finest and ahead of curve vis-à-vis other large countries. The new organisation design can be put in place, firstly through a shift in the structure and then nurtured by calibrated process changes, which in turn will evolve the right culture component. The IAS re-design will also catalyse the equally important and much needed revamp and reforms in the rest of government organisation.