

# Lateral entry, upward expertise in Government

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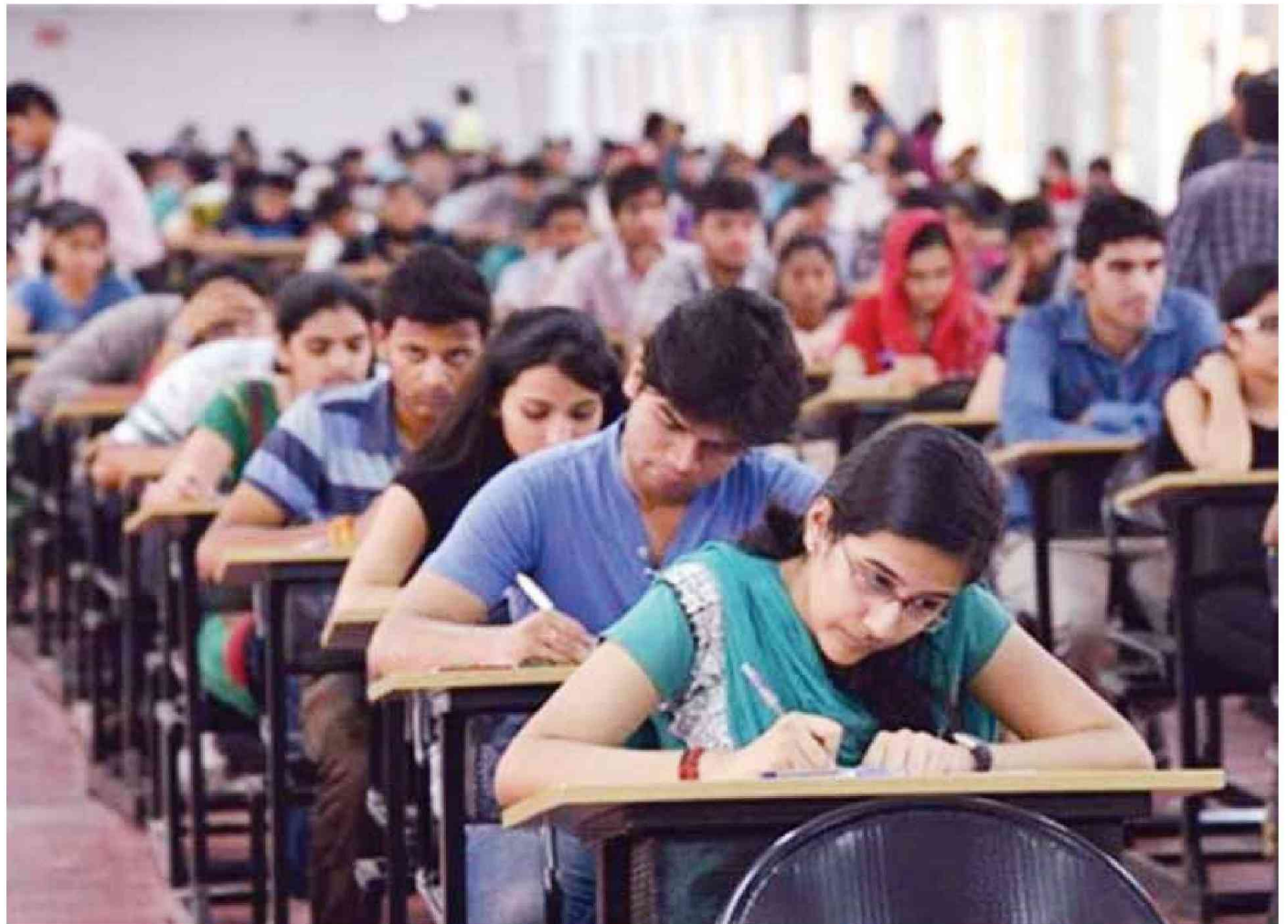
A significant news item just disseminated mentions that 10 positions at the level of Joint Secretary and above are being opened up for appointment of suitable persons from outside the system. This is obviously a follow up on action last year when instructions were provided by the Prime Minister's office to the Department of Personnel and Training for preparing a broad outline of modalities for selecting private individuals for appointment in the ranks of Deputy Secretary, Director and Joint Secretary.

It was reported that this move was also a response to the huge shortage of officers at the middle management level within the Government. It was intended that the shortlisting of private sector executives or social workers would be through a matrix of experience and qualifications. The final selection would be carried out by a committee headed by the Cabinet Secretariat. The preliminary estimate was for about 40 individuals, including successful entrepreneurs, academicians and social workers who would be taken in through lateral entry, mainly at the Joint Secretary level.

In actual fact, the civil service structure in the country needs major overhaul. There are several reasons for substantial reform and harnessing talent as well as the manner in which officials function. The most important reason relates to the fact that Government decision-making and operations now require specialised expertise, and the quality of decision needs expertise-based as well as positive attitude-oriented improvements.

This writer has been travelling regularly to the People's Republic of China since 1981, and was later a member of the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development, a global level think tank established by the highest levels of the Chinese Government for rendering advice to them on issues of environment and development. Through the past decades it has become clear that the quality and content of decision making in China has been upgraded substantially by bringing in higher levels of specialised expertise for different sectors of the economy. Cynical comments that "things work in China only because of a unitary form of Government" clearly ignore the astronomical rate at which expertise at senior levels of government has been upgraded and specialised.

Most importantly, even though the price of failure in that system can be quite severe, Government officials are seldom hesitant to exercise their imagination and display entrepreneurial capabilities in decision-making, essentially because rewards and promotions are largely



merit-based. This contrasts sharply with the scenario in India where playing safe and not taking decisions which may involve even the slightest risk of failure has become part of the prevailing culture.

We often refer to Sardar Patel's description of the civil services of the country as the steel frame of India. But the context and the challenge at that stage was different. What we need today is a differently equipped cadre of qualified officials whose main task is to achieve equitable and sustainable development for the entire population of the country. It is a sad reality that India is still home to the largest number of people living in poverty among all the countries of the world. While at the time of Independence there may have been some merit in the inheritance of a system and administrative structure developed by the British, we have hardly effected any reform of the system in keeping with newer challenges over time.

Significantly, the British have made radical changes in their own systems, which were attempted as far back as in the 1960s under Prime Minister Harold Wilson. But the most radical changes were introduced by Margaret Thatcher, targeted at improving efficiency in the system, while she also succeeded in cutting down the size of the civil services, which like our own system, was apparently bloated. The Thatcher reforms cut down the size of the bureaucracy from 732,000 in 1979 to around 500,000 in 1997.

However, the most significant reforms

were introduced in 1988 as what was referred to as "Next Steps", based on a document authored by Sir Robin Ibbs. According to the History Learning Site, the author of this report identified issues to be addressed, which were

- i) The service lacked innovation.
- ii) It was too large to be efficient with too many jobs duplication and some departments overlapping what others did.
- iii) The service was not providing a quality service for the country — both the advice it gave and its policy implementation were poor.

As part of this set of reforms the roles of rendering advice and executing government programs were split. The delivery of policy was handed over to executive agencies, which though staffed by civil servants were headed by chief executives. Each agency was given a clear brief, such that overlaps were eliminated.

India has set up an Administrative Reforms Commission on two occasions, first in 1966 and then again in 2005. These have both provided comprehensive reports, which have proved to be unwieldy and difficult to implement. The delivery of civil service reforms and systems of functioning have as a result remained stillborn. While the first step of induction of talent from the outside is a welcome initiative, there is need for looking at a wider agenda of ensuring upgradation of expertise and knowhow at various levels of the Government.

For instance, all the regulatory bodies in the country, both in the Centre and the States, are led by non-specialists. In most

modern democracies, these regulatory commissions are a repository of very high-level expertise, because regulatory decisions have major implications for economic efficiency and distributive justice. And, improvements in expertise within specialised systems would have to be supported by relevant knowledge in institutions of higher learning and research bodies. This requires urgent reform of the knowledge sector in the country, covering research and academia which display questionable quality and lack innovative capacity.

While in a democracy an important issue like civil service reform would understandably become a subject of hot political debate, it would help if political parties at least appreciate the need for change and improvement. And if we look around at other countries, it would become apparent that the two-century old format of decision-making in India with cumbersome movement of files should become part of history.

An example of private sector talent for Government operations is the example of John Manzonei, a distinguished leader of the private sector being appointed as Permanent Secretary for the British Cabinet Office in August 2015. We too have had distinguished private sector officials being appointed as secretaries to the Government of India, and they have generally performed admirably. The current initiative to induct outsiders into Government is a good start, and deserves political support and widespread acceptance.

(The writer is former chairman, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2002-15)