

DEBATES ON ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM IN INDIA

EXAMINATIONS AND RECRUITMENT

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The **State Capacity Initiative** at the Centre for Policy Research is an interdisciplinary research and practice programme focused on addressing the challenges of the 21st-century Indian state. The purpose of this initiative is to place the critical challenges of building state capacity at the heart of the field of policy research in India, where it has always belonged but remains surprisingly marginalised. We therefore start with first principles and ground ourselves in existing realities to deepen and expand the understanding of the challenges and possibilities of building state capacity in a democratic and federal India. Our programme of work focuses on the changing roles of the Indian state: institutional design, implementation and administrative capacity; the challenges of regulatory and fiscal capacity; and the complex and changing relations between society, politics and state capacity in India.

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DEBATES ON ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM IN INDIA: EXAMINATIONS AND RECRUITMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last 50 years, norms for recruitment in the Indian Civil Services have undergone several changes to reflect the needs of the administration, the aspirations of a democratic society and the changes in the country's political economy. There were two developments that led to these changes. The first development is domestic in nature—reform committees were set up to examine the different features of the examination and the recruitment system for entry into the All India Civil Services. A reform committee setup under A.D. Gorwala in 1951, published independent India's first report on public administration. Subsequent reform committees addressed several other aspects of the Civil Services examination system including educational qualifications, age for entry into the services, number of attempts and service allocation rules. The second, and a connected development is international in its scope and nature. Other Westminster democracies across the world were implementing new theories of public management—such as market-oriented reform of the Civil Services—and these developments advanced India's thinking on reforms for its own Civil Services.

Every reform committee has highlighted the importance of the recruitment exercise as a channel to draw people with merit into the services. Reforms were proposed to “weed out the dead wood” and professionalise the Civil Services in order to realise an efficient, incorrupt and a result-oriented bureaucracy (Alagh Committee, 2001, p. 35). This, the committees suggested, must be routed through the recruitment funnel by finding the ‘right type of persons’—candidates who can combine intellectual competence with a strong ethical value system and a positive public service orientation. An important objective of the recruitment system has been to also ensure that the Civil Services is more equal and representative and guarantees representation to historically underrepresented groups through recruitment quotas. However, some studies have argued

that the recruitment pattern reveals a distinct upper caste, urban bias, stressing the need for corrective measures to democratise the Civil Services (Barik, 2004).

Keeping this backdrop in mind, many debates pertinent to the recruitment and examination architecture have been held. On the surface, these debates appear to be procedural as they concern themselves with questions about age limits and number of attempts that applicants are eligible for. But a closer examination of the debates reveals that they are also fundamentally about questions of meritocracy and representation in the Civil Services. The Civil Services Examination (CSE) is expected to allow for equal opportunity and representation of all castes and classes in the Services. In addition, meritocracy plays an important role in the design of this system, but there are discussions on the validity of this idea of merit itself.

Examining some of these debates will serve as entry points for us to understand the examination and recruitment apparatus, a small but critical cog in the machinery of India's bureaucracy. The main objective of this working paper on examinations and recruitment in the Civil Services is to trace the origins of these debates in order to contextualise the present through an understanding of the past. The focus of this working paper is only on the All India Civil Services, although equally interesting and meaningful, reforms in the State Civil Services institutions—like the Punjab government's decision to mandate 33 percent reservation for women in direct recruitment for the Punjab Civil Services—have not been touched upon. There is a large volume of material to explore on the State Civil Services and we hope that this working paper lays the foundation for further studies in this regard. This working paper analyses various committee reports that were set up to reform the Civil Services. Most of the analyses are drawn from the Kothari Commission

Report (1977), the Satish Chandra Committee Report (1989), the Alagh Committee Report (2001), the P. C. Hota Committee Report (2004) and the Second Administrative Reforms Commission Report (Second ARC) (2009). Figure 1 outlines a timeline of committees that have made important observations on the debates on examinations and selection. The committee reports reveal a discernible pattern—three key debates that have been found to recur over and over again: eligibility status, examination process and service allocation. These debates may not cover the entire gamut of arguments but have been addressed in this paper because of the importance given to them in the committee reports and their relevance to contemporary India.

Overall, this working paper does three things: first, it synthesises the main ideas from the reform committee reports; second, through a discussion section, it highlights the normative principles that underpin the selection processes and third, it asks a few open-ended questions that warrant careful analysis, stakeholder conversations, and reflection.

2. ELIGIBILITY STATUS

Two important issues when looking at eligibility criteria for examinations are the age limit and the number of permissible attempts to appear in the Civil Services examination.

Age limit

The age limit for writing the Civil Services Exam (CSE) in the 1960s and 1970s was 24 years for candidates from the General category, with a relaxation of 5 years for candidates belonging to the SC/ST category. In the past four decades, there has been a progressive increase in the age limit, resulting in a discernible change in the age profile of the fresh entrants.

The table below lists the age limit and permissible number of attempts for candidates from different socio-economic backgrounds from 1960 to 2020.

Trends listed in Table 1 should be read keeping in mind certain underlying assumptions and tensions around the government's choice on age limits. This debate has been fuelled by two opposing views, one in favour of reducing the age limit for entry into the Civil Services, and another against reducing the age limit for entry into the Services.

Favouring the reduction of age limit for entry into the Civil Services

The first view is in favour of reducing the age limit for entry into the Civil Services. From the Kothari Commission to the Second ARC, all the reform committees have recommended a reduction in the maximum age limit for entry. The Alagh Committee argues that a higher age limit results in the recruitment of individuals “who might have already developed a self-centric worldview and are not very likely to change their attitudes after being recruited into the Civil Services” (2001, p. 8). The Hota Committee recommended that the age for entry in the Civil Services be set between 21 to 24 years, with a five-year age concession for members of the SC/ST category and 3 years for the OBC category. The Second ARC was of the view that the maximum age at which candidates “are the most receptive and will adapt to the intrinsic values of the Civil Services” is 23 or 24. NITI Aayog also released a similar view in 2018, “the upper age limit for the Civil Services should be brought down to 27 years for the general category in a phased manner by 2022-23” (NITI Aayog, 2018, p. 184).

As with the age of entry, the career progression in the services is also time-based. The retirement age for all the civil servants is the same at 60 years and service tenures are calculated based on their age of entry into the Services. Increasing the age limit can result in shorter service spans for late entrants, effectively stunting any opportunity for contribution to policymaking at apex levels. The Second ARC observes that there has been a retrogression in the age profile of officers belonging to the OBC/SC/ST categories, with very few of them available for the posts of Secretary. This is evidenced by the fact that of the 66 secretaries in the Union government, only four were from the SC/ST category. At the level of joint secretary, 26 of 174 officers were from the SC/ST category (Mandal, 2018). Age limits have important consequences for motivation and performance in a system such as the civil services defined by tenure-based career progression. For example, research on the careers of IAS officers has shown that officers who enter the Services at a later age are left with are also likely to have lower levels of motivation and therefore performance because they are ineligible for promotions to the highest levels. (Bertrand et al., 2015).

Figure 1 A timeline of key reform proposals on recruitment

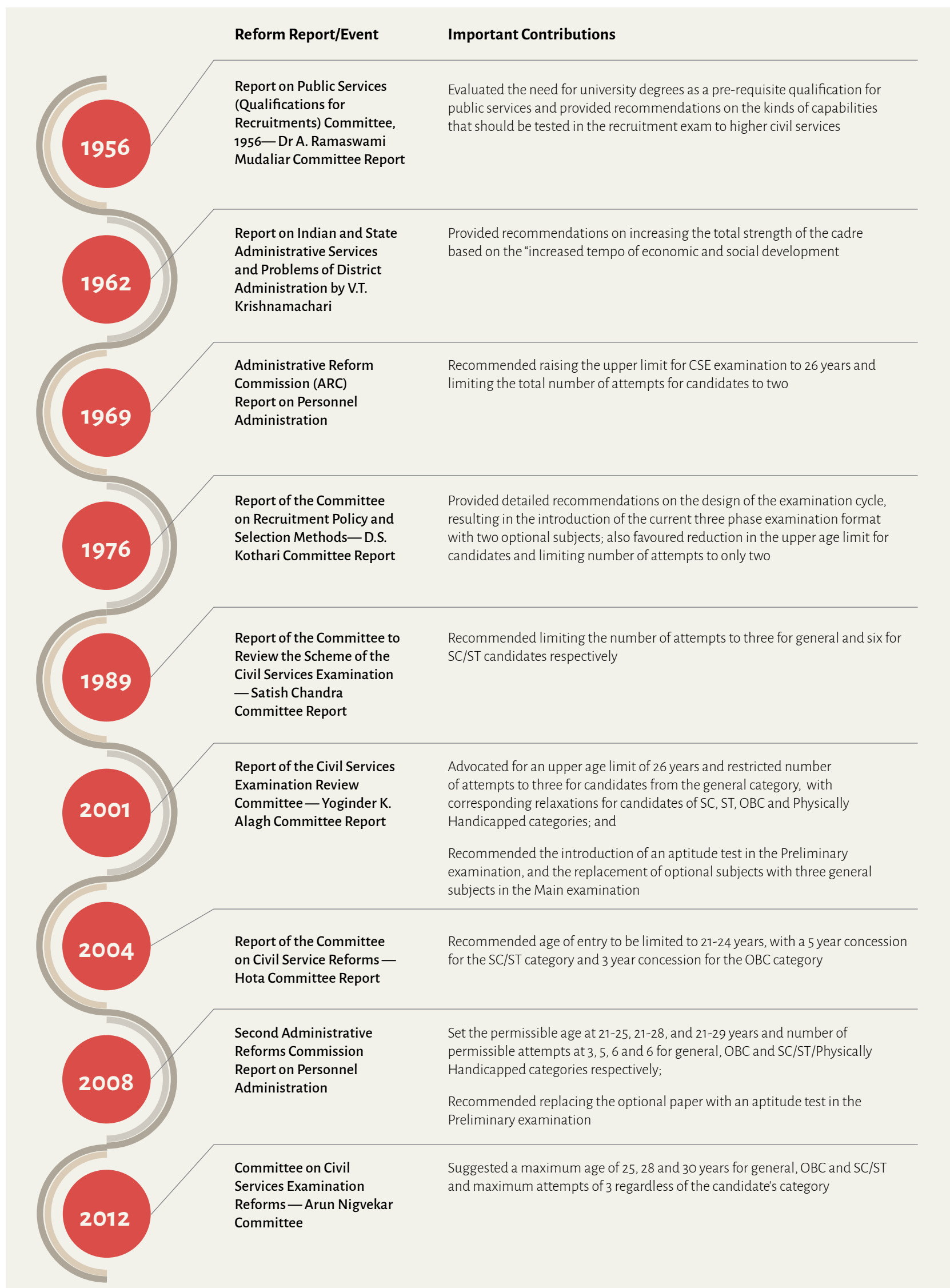


TABLE 1: Age limit and number of attempts for examination from 1960 to 2020

Category	Age limit					Number of attempts		
	1960-72	1973-79	1994-99	2000-2013	2013-2020	1960-1985	1994-2013	2014-20
General	24	26	28	30	32	3	4	6
OBC	NA	NA	31	33	35	NA	7	9
SC/ST	29	31	33	35	37	Unlimited	Unlimited	Unlimited
EWS	NA	NA	NA	NA	35	NA	NA	9

Source: Data collated by author from official sources

Against limiting the entry of age into the Civil Services

The second view is opposed to limiting the entry of age as proposed by the reform committees and the NITI Aayog. This view is benchmarked on ideas of inclusion and equal opportunity. Candidates from rural and under-developed areas are not in the same state of preparedness for the examinations as their urban or semi-urban counterparts. These candidates have to spend far more time preparing for the examination to compensate for the poor quality of education they receive. Increasing the age limit will ensure that a level playing field is created for everyone, including those candidates who have had breaks in education due to unforeseeable socio-economic conditions. However, the Second ARC also notes that the improvement in educational facilities have considerably reduced the perceived disadvantages accruing to candidates from rural and remote areas but no clear evidence is provided to support this observation (2009). Another push for the increase in age relaxations is to provide opportunities for the many motivated and bright older entrants who aspire to serve the nation.

Number of attempts

Similar arguments have been advanced in relation to the permissible number of attempts for candidates to enter in the Civil Services.

Against limiting the number of attempts for entry into the Civil Services

Three important observations have been made on this issue of increasing the number of attempts for entry into the Services. First, a large number of attempts at Civil Services examinations can have a high opportunity cost and social cost (both public and private), with adverse effects on candidates from marginalised and

underprivileged groups. Second, more attempts offer candidates greater opportunities to simply perfect the technique of scoring well in the competitive examinations and may not reflect the actual abilities of a candidate. Third, a higher number of attempts can lead to a loss of productive years, and also the self-confidence of those aspirants who undertake multiple attempts to pass the examination.

Overall, various committees have recommended against having a larger number of permissible attempts for the examination. The Kothari Committee favoured only two attempts, observing that increasing the number of attempts works towards the advantage of less deserving candidates (1976, p. 67). The Satish Chandra Committee and Alagh Committee, based on data analysis of the number of attempts made by candidates to clear the examination, recommended 3 attempts for candidates from the general category, 5 for the OBCs, 6 for candidates from the SC/STs and 7 for persons with physical disabilities. The Alagh Committee views the latter approach as a fairly balanced one, given that the negative outcomes of increasing the number of attempts outweighed the marginal sacrifice in terms of quality of candidates. The Second ARC also concurred with the Alagh Committee's recommendations on this issue, adding that a "higher number of attempts also lead[s] to a loss of productive years, as also the self-confidence of aspirants who keep making repeated attempts to pass the examination" (2001, p. 103).

Favouring the increase in attempts for entry into the Civil Services

Even though the reform committees have largely recommended against increasing the number of attempts, none of them elaborate on the counter; how restricting the number of attempts might negatively affect applicants from less privileged backgrounds. The CSE requires

elaborate and focussed preparation and candidates from under-privileged sections have to spend much more time preparing for the examination to compensate for the poor quality of education they may have received. A large number of permissible attempts will give them the additional time they need to compete with candidates from backgrounds who may have had a fairly easy access to information relevant to the examination.

Conclusively, the UPSC and the training institutions have consistently opposed the upward revision of age limits and number of attempts (Press Trust of India, 2019). A survey by the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) in 2010 indicated that 67 percent of officers in the service also agreed that the maximum age of entry to the Civil Services should be lowered from the present level, as younger recruits can be more easily groomed (p. 35). Despite the support for a reduction in the age limit and the number of permissible attempts by the UPSC and the reform committees, the governments have persisted with the current model.

3. EXAMINATION FORMAT

The recruitment examination for the All India Services, the CSE, is conducted once every year in three phases.

a) Phase I

A preliminary examination with two papers, one in general studies paper and one an aptitude test. This is a qualifying examination which filters candidates for the main examination. The aptitude test is a pass/fail exam that tests verbal, quantitative and logical ability.

b) Phase II

A main examination with nine papers, some of which are optional and some compulsory. This is a descriptive examination and tests the candidates' language, knowledge and analytical skills across multiple areas of study. Of these 9 papers, two are compulsory language papers (in English and one Indian language of the candidate's choice) of a pass/fail nature that require candidates to secure 25 percent to qualify. The marks from the other 7 papers are used to determine the selection of the candidate to the next stage and in the final selection.

c) Phase III

An interview or personality test conducted by the UPSC board to assess various skills of the candidate and evaluate their personality against suitability for a career in the Civil Services.

This design of the examination cycle with three successive phases was introduced in 1979 based on recommendations made by the Kothari Committee. The committee elaborated on the choice of design, maintaining that a comprehensive method of selection is necessary to:

1. Concentrate the available testing resources on credible candidates. A large number of candidates apply each year for the examination, and as the stream proceeds from one step to the next, the average quality of candidates will only get richer.
2. Select people who are capable of continually acquiring skills and knowledge—a process of continuing self-renewal—and to ensure that the candidates are temperamentally suited for the service.
3. Broaden the base of recruitment and widely attract as many deserving candidates as possible from across the country.

This design may be logically consistent but there are deeper tensions for recruitment in the Services. How can the CSE ensure that it attracts the most suitable candidates with knowledge, skills and attitudes required for a prospective civil servant, while also enabling a level playing field for the large number of candidates from diverse backgrounds applying to appear for the examination? Every committee has grappled with this core tension while proposing changes in the content and in the structure of the examination.

Prior to 2011, the preliminary examination included two papers: a common paper on general studies and an optional paper chosen from 23 subjects. After recommendations from the Second ARC in 2011, the optional subject paper was replaced by the Civil Services Aptitude Test (CSAT) to test the candidate's analytical and logical aptitude. The CSAT paper was introduced to remedy disproportionate emphasis that the optional subject papers placed on rote learning over analytical abilities, which did not provide a level playing field despite the scaling of marks.

This change in the structure has brought forward two important observations pertinent to the relevance and the representative quality of CSAT. According to a study on the civil services examination:

“The general aim of the curriculum and the specific objectives of each paper would emerge from the content of the society in which the Civil Services function. These bring out issues or problems that the Civil Service will need to address and therefore, the requirements of the job. Quantitative and verbal skills are only part of a battery of skillsets that encompass public service aptitude. This understanding of aptitude is also consistent with the view of the Kothari and the Second ARC committees. In this regard, the introduction of CSAT has garnered questions on whether the UPSC is keen to test managerial aptitude (much like the admission entrance tests for management institutions) over public service aptitudes” (Tangirala, 2010).

A core vision of the examination design was to create a broad base of recruitment to provide a level playing field for all aspiring candidates to compete. When CSAT was introduced in the preliminary examination phase, it was argued that such a course would amount to discrimination against candidates from rural, vernacular and humanities backgrounds, in favour of those from urban, English-speaking areas and selective STEM backgrounds. Because of this backlash, the Union government decided to make this a qualifying course (Sebastian, 2015). While the nature and relevance of this course continues to remain controversial (Sharma, 2018), the UPSC, in its 2019 vision document, proposed to remove CSAT from the preliminary examination phase. Optional papers in the main examination introduced by the Kothari Committee, to encourage more candidates to attempt the CSE, have also attracted similar views. The Committee observed that compulsory subjects would generally be related to national development, modern administration and management and candidates can choose the subject which he may have studied for the Honours or Master's degree in the optional papers. The Alagh Committee studied this issue in great detail and made three important remarks. First, it was difficult to administer optional papers given the structural issues that clogged the system. Second, candidates were opting for optional subjects “on the basis of scorability” and not on the basis of their specialisation. Third, testing of optional subjects based on school and college curriculum had no relevance to job requirements of civil servants.

Keeping these reasons in mind, the Committee recommended the replacement of optional subjects with a set of three compulsory papers: “Sustainable Development and Social Justice,” “Science and Technology in Society, and Democratic Governance” and “Public Systems and Human Rights,” which have great relevance to higher Civil Services. The Second ARC supported these recommendations as well.

4. SERVICE ALLOCATION

Allocation of services to successful candidates is based on the merit list recommended by the UPSC and the candidates' preferences of services. Candidates attempting the CSE are asked for their preference of services before the main examination. This process is administered by the DoPT, after which successful candidates of Group A Services report for a mandatory Foundation Course training at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA). While this appears to be a straightforward mechanism, there are unresolved tensions in the service allocation methods

Allocation of services post training.

It is widely acknowledged that candidates indicate their preferences without having an informed opinion on the nature of duties, transfers, work environment and promotional prospects of the different services. The process of allocation of services in an ideal situation must be aimed at achieving a closer match between the selected candidate and the requirement of a particular service. Reform committees are of the view that the candidates' choice of preference of services plays a great role in enabling a closer match to job requirements. The Satish Chandra Committee observed that many candidates who joined the Civil Services in the post-Kothari period were not very clear about the nature of these services and hence had indicated preferences as per the serial order of the gazette, with the belief that the services were listed in terms of their relative importance. The Alagh Committee also made a similar observation and suggested that for candidates to make an informed choice, they should be asked to exercise their preferences of services only upon the completion of their foundation course at LBSNAA. The rationale was that a three-to-four-month training at the Academy would give the candidates a sense of the scope of

different services and this in turn would allow them to make an informed choice about their preferences. The Second ARC also reinforced this view. The DoPT survey also shows that 82 percent of officers in service are in favour of post-selection counselling (2010, p. 36).

Foundation course in LBSNAA

The Second ARC, among other reports, has argued that the probationers do not take their training seriously when their grades do not influence cadre allocation. The Foundation Course was initially conceived as a non-competitive course that could promote esprit de corps among trainees. Though, given that all probationers are allotted services before the beginning of their training, this course remained a mere formality and there was no incentive to take this part of the induction procedure seriously. The reform committees emphasised on the need to allocate services after the Foundation Course, but they did not adequately address the perceived problem of lack of enthusiasm among the probationers to tackle this course.

In 2019, the Union Government under Prime Narendra Modi announced that, from 2020-21, service allocation based on ranking will include 10 percent weightage from the unified Foundation Course for civil service probationers (Dutta, 2018). The government announcement appears to be a prelude to implementing an earlier proposal from 2016 that recommended that the process of allocation be based on the candidates' performance in the unified Foundation Course, and not on the basis of their rankings in the UPSC exam. It remains to be seen what shape this reform will take in the future.

5. DISCUSSION

A few questions emerge after a careful analysis of the committee recommendations on the examination and recruitment apparatus of the Civil Services. These questions can be classified under two broad themes in the public administration literature: the attributes of a public servant, and meritocracy and representation.

Attributes of a public servant

Examination structure and recruitment procedures are crucial for determining the type of people who become part of the Civil Services. Many reform committees have underlined the fact that the quality of governance is

based on the "quality" of civil servants who become a part of the machinery. Interestingly, reform committees do not have unanimous views over what they value as qualities in a civil servant. The Kothari Commission expected a civil servant to have socio-emotional and moral qualities apart from relevant skills and knowledge (Kothari Committee, 1976). The Alagh Committee highlighted the importance of adherence to political neutrality and robust professionalism among civil servants. It recommended that recruitment practises must select candidates who combine intellectual competence with a strong ethical system and who can work closely as a networked fraternity with commitment to certain core values of ethical service (Alagh Committee, 2001). In addition to Conduct Rules for civil servants, the Second ARC called for a "Code of Ethics" to encourage impartiality and promote ethical conduct in the Civil Services.

The reform committees also talk about attracting the right candidates into the Civil Services and placing the right person in the right job. While these positions are useful in highlighting the importance of the examination machinery in the Civil Services, civil servants are recruited as generalists through an examination process that is not fully tuned to counter the challenges of twenty-first century governance. There is an urgent need for a reorientation in thinking to design a recruitment system that will focus on recruiting personnel who can foresee and quickly solve emerging problems than be stuck in what Akshay Mangla (2014) refers to as legalistic norms. In addition to critical thinking and essential digital skills (Bury, 2017) to tackle tasks and hazards caused by different kinds of catalysts such as cyber technology and mutating viruses, civil servants also require the impulse of compassion to guide their actions.

In this regard, it is useful to learn from the international community. Governments across the world have adopted creative approaches to delineate the attributes of a public servant. For example, the New Zealand government intentionally uses "Spirit of Service" as a central theme in creating a more unified public service (Scott and Macaulay, 2020). In the Indian scenario, the committee reports discuss attributes of a "right" civil servant, but the reports and the Conduct Rules do not clarify what is their idea of a "right" civil servant. Are "right" civil servants the ones focussed on service outcomes? Do they serve goals specific to institutional mandates or are they focussed on ethical public service? Public administration literature attempts to define

concepts such as public service motivation (Perry and Wise, 1990), mission valence (Wright and Pandey, 2010) and sensemaking (Weick, 1995). How should we interpret these concepts for the Indian bureaucracy? Moreover, if an exercise to delineate the attributes of a civil servant is undertaken, it must be supported by a framework that weighs in on how officers discern and understand their role as civil servants. Such an exercise will help build an examination and recruitment system that is driven by nuanced understanding of the way identities are constructed and implemented in the Services.

Meritocracy and representation

While a job in the Civil Services continues to remain a coveted position in Indian society, norms for recruitment into the system have been adjusted at various levels between 1979 and 2019. These adjustments have not only impacted the examination structure and content but have also been cause for several debates on access and identity.

Research shows that this idea of merit, founded on “competency and ability, measured by achievement tests,” exacerbates inequality even though it may have positive implications for corruption reduction (Evans and Rauch, 1999). Efforts have been made to widen the social base of recruitment through recruitment processes and reservation policies, but scholars have argued that this is not enough. A 2004 paper on reservation in the Civil Services, shows that the recruitment pattern reveals a distinct urban, upper class bias that can work against candidates from rural and low-income backgrounds who face constraints in access to coaching centres and education (Barik 2004). There are views that recommend that examination reforms must “transcend the binaries—Hindi/English, rural/urban, etc—so as to address the core issues of whether the changes made meet their limited objectives” (Tangirala, 2010).

How can the recruitment system cater to the needs of a Civil Service that wants to be both efficient and representative? For instance, the Arun Nigvekar Committee (2012) that was appointed to examine changes in the examination patterns observed that after the implementation of CSAT in UPSC prelims, selection of students from regional languages and from humanities background has declined. This Committee has also noted that, in 2009, 42.2 percent of the total qualifying

candidates were from Hindi medium background which was reduced to 15 percent in 2011. Although the government made the CSAT a qualifying paper in 2015, these abrupt and frequent alternations in the examination pattern has impacted candidates from non-English medium backgrounds more so than the others.

What are some ways for the government to work with the UPSC to ensure that changes made in the examination pattern do not disproportionately affect aspirants from certain backgrounds over the others? Surely merit is an important marker in the examination design, but the concept of merit itself is contentious. “Meritocratic models assume that ability can be quantified, separated from the social context and attributed to the individual. When operating within this framework, merit can be defined in different ways” (De Sario, 2003). It has been acknowledged that states run by meritocracies have higher rates of economic growth than those not focussed on a meritocratic bureaucracy (Evans and Rauch, 1999). A World Development Report also emphasised that “making a meritocracy of the civil service helps bring in high quality staff, confers prestige on civil service positions and can do a great deal to motivate good performance” (World Bank, 1997, p. 92). Having said that, merit-based recruitment in the Indian context can have hidden risks that may serve as obstacles to equal access. A simple example would be to think of an aspirant from an urban area with easy access to coaching centres as opposed to an aspirant from a remote village trying to find their way to a coaching centre. The paradox of merit plays out at every stage in the recruitment system. The schools that aspirants go to, the syllabus they are taught, the languages they speak, their gender, family backgrounds and the communities they come from have a collective bearing on their performance in the examinations and interviews. An examination system that factors in these realities will have to think beyond traditional conceptions of merit and define new archetypes for this concept to build an inclusive and equal institution.

A broader dialogue on representation and meritocracy is essential to designing an examination and recruitment system that will build capacity to cater to the goals of the Civil Services. This also means that skills and attitudes of people recruited must align with the overall vision of the Civil Services and the outcomes that it seeks to achieve. Examination and recruitment, as all the reform committees observe, must reflect these changes.

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