



From Patronage to Competition: The Making and Unmaking of the Indian Civil Service (ICS)

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Abstract

This article explores the tumultuous evolution of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) in colonial India, focusing specifically on the shift from a system based on patronage to one of open competition in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Established by Lord Cornwallis in 1793, the ICS initially relied on nominations by the Court of Directors and training at institutions like Haileybury. The pivotal Government of India Act of 1853 abolished this system, replacing it with competitive examinations following the Macaulay Committee guidelines. However, this “steel frame” faced immediate challenges. The frequent reduction of the maximum entry age (from 23 to 19) and the rising popularity of cramming institutes signaled inherent recruitment difficulties among British candidates. Furthermore, the ICS suffered from increasing unpopularity due to social stigma from the British aristocracy, poor financial compensation (exacerbated by the falling rupee), and expanding professional opportunities back home. Simultaneously, the slow and reluctant process of Indianization heightened political tension. Ultimately, the sustained failure to attract sufficient European recruits significantly weakened the administrative structure, contributing critically to the eventual downfall of the British Empire in India.

Keywords

Indian Civil Service (ICS), Colonial India, Patronage, Open Competition, Indianization, Macaulay Committee, Haileybury College, Recruitment, Unpopularity, British Raj.

Introduction

On 31 December 1600, The British crown granted to a group of merchants a monopoly over the trade in eastern waters. In 1607-08, Captain William Hawkins reached Surat and requested Mughal Emperor Jahangir to give them permission to trade in his domain. From 1607 to 1740, the company had little interest in political development of India and their main concern was commercial. This work was done by factors,

writers or assistants whose recruitment was mainly endorsed and nominated by court of directors. The two landmark events, Battle of Plassey (1757) and Battle of Buxar (1764) and subsequently Treaty of Allahabad (1765), which make British dominant political and economic power in large part of subcontinent. From here arise the need for company to devise a systematized and honest mechanism for devising administration and revenue collection for its territories. At this critical juncture, Lord Cornwallis as governor general arrived with strong backing from court of directors for devising such a system. In 1793, Lord Cornwallis laid the foundation for civil service in India. This paper seeks an attempt to understand the historical evolution of civil service in India with major focus on recruitment, training, system of open competition, policies and reforms of various committees and ultimately seeks an analysis of the reasons for its unpopularity, which became one of the major reasons for British downfall in India.

Evolution of Civil Services (1793-1854)

In 1793, Lord Cornwallis laid down detailed regulations which defines civil service, policing, judicial aspect of company rule in India. He bifurcates the post of district collector (in charge of revenue collection) from judicial magistrate. The parliamentary acts of 1784 and Charter Act of 1793 defines early framework of civil service in India. The act proclaimed that appointment to civil service in India was through patronage and nominations (called writerships at that time) by court of directors. Promotions to all civil service positions in India were to be filled from covenanted servants of company on basis of seniority. From 1793 to 1854, the key to become civil servant in India was through nomination by Court of Directors. Training was done at Fort William, Calcutta founded under Wellesley's proposals. Soon closed, due to inefficiency and disfavour of Court of Directors to Governor General Wellesley's policies, it was replaced by Haileybury College at Great Britain. Bernard S. Cohn gives a detailed account of teaching and training curriculum imparted to training students at Haileybury with major focus on Classic Greek, Latin, One oriental language, science, mathematics etc.

The Covenanted Civil Servants were those who signed a bond with East India Company at time of recruitment. This term emerged during administration of Lord Cornwallis in late 18th century, after 1813, the title was reserved for graduates of Haileybury College. After 1855, it was applied to successful candidates by competitive examinations. Indians, who were in lower echelons of administration were called "Uncovenanted Servants". They did not sign bonds, no pensions, sabbatical, mostly expatriates.

The Shift to Open Competition and Recruitment Challenges

The Government of India Act of 1853 abolished the directors patronage and enacted that appointments in the covenanted civil services should be filled on the basis of open competitive examination including Indians as pointed out by J.M. Compton. However, Haileybury was not closed at that time. The Northcote-Travelyan Report argued that such an important post cannot be granted only on basis of patronage. They wanted it out of reach of political polemic. A committee chaired by Macaulay drew up plans and basic guidelines for implementing of this principle. The report favoured that successful candidates would be top

Oxbridge graduates. Age limit would be 18-23 years. Academic tests for Greek, Latin, German, Mathematics, History, General Literature comprising 6875 marks.

With this, question came on existence of Haileybury which were designed earlier to train 'Nominated' students. R.J. Moore outlined in his article that Members of the committee argued that the college is unsuitable for training graduates. Charles Wood argued that for education of youth of 17, Haileybury is constituted, but to instruction of gentleman from Oxbridge graduates, it is unsuited. In fact, Professor Amar Farooqui himself argued that Haileybury was a 'Mediocre' institution. The closure of Haileybury can be seen as a consequence of abolition of patronage. Hence, it was closed in 1857. The prospects of Civil Service represented the desire of having Oxbridge graduates who were proficient in language course and have good physical endurance training and English gentleman of low age and not from low social origins. Even Trevelyan believed that services should not be filled by 'sizar and servitors'. Bradford Spangenberg put up that Initial recruitment after mutiny was good, but soon decline happened. So, in 1860 and 1866, we see reduction in age limit from 23 to 22 and 22 to 21 respectively. The idea behind that men in 21 or 22 can be easily lured by jobs at abroad while they were in their graduation which is not easy after completing graduation. But, recruitment could not be stepped up. Later in 1876, A commission was set up under Lord Salisbury to speed up recruitment. It made university attendance compulsory for 2 years and lowered maximum age limit to 19, to attract young men directly from school before they considered their career elsewhere. Lowering the age effectively eliminate the resort to 'cramming'. Despite all these, Salisbury reforms got criticized widely and recruitment could not be stepped up. The social background of competitive aspirant comprised of upper middle class, clergy, menial job workers (Undertakers also) which is contrast to patronage system which comprises sons of serving civil servants, army officers etc. A marked feature for years 1860-1876 was that there is a decline in university students (Irish and Scottish university also) while at the same time, a marked increase of students from specialized cramming institutes (in 1874, their percentage was 84.2%). In 1886, A Public Service Commission under Sir Charles Aitchison were constituted which increase upper age limit to 23. A novel step again taken in 1895 which combines Indian civil services with examinations for clerkships in Home Civil Services. Through it, they want to lure large number of young men to career in Indian Civil Service. However, despite all these efforts, recruitment could not be stepped up and finally World War broke its back.

The Process of Indianization

A crucial aspect in the evolution of civil service is the case of Indianization meaning to create such conditions which stepped up entry of Indians in civil service which have only 12 up to year 1888. T.H. Beaglehole argued that Although Statutory Civil Service was introduced in 1878-79 by Lord Lytton under which 1/6th of total vacancies were to be nominated from high status Indian families. But it got abolished and evolved into Provincial Civil Service. But, it did not satisfy masses. Beaglehole put that With onset of war, the voice of Indianization becomes fast. Islington Commission (1913) inquired and put shocking fact that only 5% in civil service are Indians. On this, it recommended that 25% of superior posts should be

recruited for Indians. However, its demands were not met. After 4 years, Mont-ford report proposed the figure of 33%, to be increased annually by one and a half %. The first competitive examination was held in India and 9 were selected and period of training for Indian candidates selected in India was fixed at two years and one year for selected from Europe. The Lee Commission set up under Victor Lee, 1924) focus on addressing economic grievances of European candidates to step up their recruitment, it also step-up rate of Indianization. The commission urged that 20% of superior posts should be filled by Indians promoted from provincial services (listed posts) and that of men recruited directly should be 40% Indians and 40% European. Also, it was taken into consideration that posts of civil servants should not be swamped by only one community, so Muddiman pledge of 1925 named after Sir A. Muddiman, Home Secretary put that 1/3rd of vacancies to be filled by direct Indian recruitment be reserved and if necessary to be filled by nominations from among members of communities not adequately represented by examination results. W. Murray Hogben argued that The same reluctant Indianization can also be seen in Indian Political Service, responsible for management by indirect rule of princes and chief of Indian states and frontier tribesmen. They were reluctant for the political fear of strategic defeat or betrayal and strong sense of racial and moral superiority.

Reasons for rising unpopularity of ICS

The first reason for rising unpopularity was the negative and ignorant attitude of English aristocracy. The Prince of Wales argued that competition system was a failure and this become a 'truism' among British royalty. Many Viceroys made derogatory remarks on ICS recruits and regarded them with distrust, socially inferior and of low social origins. They even hesitated to assign high posts to covenanted civil servants. Throughout the aristocracy, any connection with India carried a definite stigma of social inferiority, even girl dancers would not dance with you, if they generate Indian connection with a men. The lure for ICS was not determined by its attractiveness, but by restrictive possibility of employment at home. The widening sphere of professional employment available in 19th century England is another factor for rising unpopularity. British political leaders often halted the problems and grievances of covenanted civilians and they justified their disregard by citing lowly social and educational background of officers. The Statutory Civil Service which takes direct entry of noble background Indians dampened the enthusiasm of many potential English candidates.

Falling value of rupee and correlative decrease in English value of Indian salary affected ICS recruitment adversely. This got coupled with problem of saving as rising expense of travel, higher educational fees for children in England. Officials constantly remind higher officials including Viceroy but ignorance and last minute compensation only tell that government had very little concern for these 'second rate men'. However, officials were granted permission to remit not more than half their salaries at rate of one shilling, six pence per rupee, subject to a maximum limit of 1000 pound per year. Also, youth aspiring for civil services in India thinks about unfavourable climate and health hazards. The thought of cultural and social displacement

was still another barrier to Indian carrier. All these account for massive unpopularity of ICS in India with changing time.

Conclusion

The Evolution of Civil Service in India is a fascinating genre of research in itself. From revenue collection to governing India, the civil service shoulders the responsibility within itself by being one of the three most important pillar of 'Raj'. From 1793 till 1854, things was going good for ICS. But after 1859-60, we see many problems in recruitment of ICS officers. Various committees were set up to step up recruitment but they did not make a mark. The ignorant and inferior behaviour of high British officials which coupled with their time delay addressing of grievances led to massive decrease in recruitment in ICS of Europeans. Had they attempted to ameliorate their grievances at an earlier point, the recruitment of Europeans would not be declined to such an extent. And at last as significantly argued by David C. Potter, this rapid fall of recruitment and subsequently dearth of European officers become one of the biggest reason in the downfall of empire in India as they now do not have sufficient officers to govern, to rely on. ICS got changed into IAS in 1947 and in 1959 an academy got established in Mussoorie to train civil servants which come to us as Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration. The Steel Frame continues its legacy of giving efficient officers to country till today.

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