CIVIL SERVICES REFORMS

L'affaire CSAT

The significance of Civil Services in the context of any civilized society can not be over emphasized though its nature, behavioral orientation, professional competence and equation of relationship with the political leadership and society at large always constitute a very relevant 'subject - matter 'for debate and discussion. The imperatives of reorienting our services '*in sync* 'with changing profile of the powerful entities of time and space is a rule of universal relevance. The reason being the constantly changing ecological setting of Civil Services in terms of evolving value system, growing will and aspirations of society, unending undulating waves of convergent and divergent forces of formation and deformation etc. to mention a few which demand appropriate acclimatization of services to avoid friction and irrelevance.

There is no denying the fact that reforms in the Civil services was long overdue in India and therefore the initiative taken by the UPSC was, at the first instance, well accepted by all of us including the students who are in the mode of agitation these days. But the outcome of the initiatives taken by the UPSC, particularly the one related to the introduction of CSAT merits serious reconsideration by the honorable members of the esteemed commission and the Government beyond the narrow confines of an examination and the syllabus. Any sort of typical bureaucratic ***'ad- hocism'*** and politically motivated decisions may have very serious implications for our society as it is governed by the civil servants in almost all the conceivable spheres of life in a modern state right from before the birth of an individual to his death or even beyond that. ***The deteriorating standards of services in the wake of technical and technological obsolescence, politically ordained reservation, hydra -headed monster of corruption born out of unholy nexus between the public servants and corporate entities and the consequent increase in the' trust deficit' between the administration and society have already eaten into the institutional credibility, competence and integrity of Civil services.*** Therefore, while pursuing reforms in Civil services whether it is related to the syllabus of the examination ,the selection process or others the Government should approach the issue in a very coherent and holistic manner.

The present scheme of Civil services examination and its syllabus despite a good initiative taken by the UPSC suffers from many serious limitations which are as follows:-

At the very first instance the Civil services aptitude test (CSAT) is based on 'questionable' assumptions regarding the aptitude desirable in civil services aspirants. The present scheme of examination with disproportionate emphasis on calculation, comprehension and matter of fact reasoning ability tends to undermine the far more substantive and relevant attributes of aptitude related to the understanding of core principles and values governing our polity, society, economy and culture in the larger matrix of the national and the international developments. ***The present system of examination unfortunately tends to push the 'criterion' for selection proximate to the one required for what we would like to call a 'value deficient' and 'management -oriented 'public administration the limitations of which have been acknowledged much earlier in more than one western democracies.***

The weight age given to the **CSAT** paper at par with **General Studies** shows a critical misunderstanding of thematic priorities in the syllabus. An IAS aspirant, subject to the basic minimum requirement of reasoning ability and scientific temperament, should be more conversant with socio-cultural, economic and political intricacies of environmental dynamism based on knowledge and ability to apply the same to a given situation.

The widespread opposition to CSAT emanates not so much from the introduction of aptitude test (CSAT) ***per se'*** but its disproportionate emphasis on some contents (English comprehensions) which has been calamiticaly instrumental in tilting the scales in favor of English medium students to the detriment of the principal of fair competition based on level playing field.

How does it work actually?

It is possible to score 90% or even more in the second paper given it's comparatively fact -based content and a definitive scientific orientation which by way of a very subtle and soft discrimination puts on premium the potential of even a reasonably good candidates of English medium with a background in engineering or management etc to the detriment of other candidates who despite being much more than reasonably good in all the thematic areas of the syllabus (history, geography, polity. economy, current affairs etc . in Paper 1) ends up as a looser because it is extremely difficult to think of such performance (90% or….)in the paper 1 which demand critical understanding of various issues between heaven and earth and the ability to apply ***'intelligent eliminative eclecticism'*** to strike the correct option out of *nearly* correct ones. No doubt a candidate with very good performance in the first paper but ordinary or sub-ordinary performance in the second can be easily thrown out of competition by the one who performs in alternate pattern. It seems that comprehensions are, at the first instance, drafted in English and then are translated into Hindi which makes it very much obfuscative and very often disjunctive with the original content of the passage. No doubt, it extends undue advantage to the English medium candidates. The selection of only 23 Hindi medium candidates out of 1100 or so selections in total gives irrefutable testimony to the apprehensions made above.

Given the ***'cut and thrust'*** of this highly competitive examination, even a little unintended bias emanating from one or other fallacies runs the risk of jeopardizing the future of tens of thousands of hard working students who are being made to pay through their nose for what is largely attributable to our undemocratic ally designed educational system. ***The mind boggling heterogeneity and formalism surrounding our educational system initiates the process of abolishing 'level playing field ' on the very day a child, depending on the socio economic standing of his parents, is admitted in a Hindi or English medium school (subject to few exceptions scripted by the intervention of God).***

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We need to remember that the difference between the English medium education and others is not merely a case of language but a divergent behavioral orientation of students in terms of values, scientific temperament and personal intellectual disposition. The present scheme of examination therefore not merely puts the Hindi medium candidates at the disadvantage but also runs the risk of returning unsuitable candidates to run the administration who may be seriously deficient in their understanding of 'value laden' and multidimensional environmental setting of Indian administration colored and conditioned by the our peculiar value system which has evolved from time immemorial.

Further, the over all syllabus of the main examination (G.S.) streamlines more particularly the knowledge and awareness of current developments pertaining to welfare and security, various issue of national and international importance rather than understanding of basic doctrines and principles on the basis of which developments are analyzed , interpreted and decided upon. The cognitive depth, expanse and the substance of the candidates under the new syllabus is getting deteriorated.

Given the distinct nature of Civil services examination in terms of syllabus which demands an integrated and in depth understanding of society, culture, polity, economy in a complex matrix of time and space, the introduction of negative marking puts hard working students at disadvantage because the cost of intelligent and eliminative speculation based on long drawn and widespread study of the subject matters increases immensely. Actually the concept of negative marking is more suitable for science based questions where there could be no room for value based subjectivity and one is exposed to the options being correct or incorrect without having anything in between. ***No doubt the deterrence of negative marking compels the students to prefer restrictive consolidation over unrestrained conceptual expansion in the course of study. Thus the intelligent hits based on 'inter- disciplinary' contextualization of the subject matter in question is discouraged to the detriment of good students.***

Thus, instead of opting for some immediate symptomatic , reconciliatory or symbolic reforms, the Government would do well to take its time and decide in 'concrete' terms but only after widespread consultation with all the stakeholders in an environment free from '***bureaucratic incrementalism'*** suffering from '***closed circularity'*** of prejudices and presumptions.

Instead of removing CSAT altogether, the comparative weight age of comprehensions in the paper could be reduced and the separate passages could be given but only after rigorous scrutiny in terms of standard and content free from the limitations of translation.

The rules of negative marking could be applied '***selectively'*** in the second paper (CSAT) only.

In keeping with the distinct nature and requirement of services in the Governments administration *vis a vis* private administration, the weight age of first paper can be increased to the tune of 60-70% in the overall scheme of examination.

There is no denying the fact that we are undergoing the stage of transition which is always characterized by the friction of conflicting interests and the UPSC is not an exception. Therefore, it will take some time before a far more credible, dynamic and judiciously designed 'pattern of examination' is developed

keeping uppermost in mind the larger interest of the society in long term. But the present pattern of examination is found to be a little deficient at the very threshold level itself.

I hope the politico- administrative leadership of the country would reflect on the issue with highest level of objectivity, dynamism and due sensitivity given the gravity of the subject matter which' ***inter alia'*** holds unfathomable significance and instrumental worth in pursuance of the objectives of a welfare state.

It is to be noted that we are not merely discussing the pattern of examination; we are confronting an issue, the policy decisions on which would determine the color, content and quality of our Civil Servants in the coming future who at the very first instance are looked up to by the people seeking justice in one or other denominations.

…… ***we have to decide because we can not settle for anything short of highly competent and humane civil servants with head erect, chest forward and thoughts steeled.***

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