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Q18

Initially Civil Services in India were designed to achieve the goals of neutrality and effectiveness, which seems to be lacking in the present context. Do you agree with the view that drastic reforms are required in Civil Services. Comment (250 words).

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2017 · GS II · 15 marks · Civil Services in a Democracy

Role of civil services in a democracy.

Core demand of the question

- Initially Civil Services in India were designed to achieve the goals of neutrality and effectiveness, which seems to be lacking in the present context. Do you agree with the view that drastic reforms are required in Civil Services. Comment

Revision summary

Civil services were meant to be merit-recruited, politically neutral, and administratively effective.

Politicised transfers, oral orders and skill gaps now weaken both goals.

T.S.R. Subramanian (2013) and ARC reports asked for stable tenure and a Civil Services Board.

Lateral entry and capacity missions help if they do not become patronage.

Drastic reform of personnel systems is due; drastic politicisation is not.

Introduction

- The Indian Civil Service was built as a neutral, merit-based steel frame:** recruit by examination, serve any lawful government, and deliver administration across a continent. Neutrality means the file follows the Constitution and the law, not the party. Effectiveness means the State can actually build, regulate, and include. Both are under strain from politicised postings, outdated skills, and a culture of delay. Drastic reform is needed in some parts of the system; wrecking tenure and impartiality in the name of reform would be the wrong drama.

Body**Design: neutrality and effectiveness**

- Sardar Patel's** argument in the Constituent Assembly was an All-India Service that would hold the Union together and speak truth to ministers within the cabinet system.
- Neutrality was institutionalised through **UPSC recruitment**, security of tenure in principle, a written code of conduct, and the idea of anonymous, reasoned notings.
- Effectiveness was the generalist who could run a district:** law and order, revenue, and development in one office, which matched a poor, newly independent State.

What is lacking now

- Posting, transfer and suspension are used as rewards and punishments. A collector who fears a midnight transfer cannot be neutral or effective.
- The **Second Administrative Reforms Commission**, Hota and other committees documented delay, rule-obsession, weak domain knowledge, and poor accountability for outcomes.
- Coalition and intense media cycles increased ministerial pressure. A "committed bureaucracy" slogan from some political quarters collides with the constitutional duty to the lawful government of the day, not to a faction.
- Effectiveness gaps are real in regulation, urban management, digital public goods, and climate and health logistics - fields where a purely generalist rotation under-prepares officers.
- **Neutrality is also hurt from inside:** partisan social-media conduct, and a comfort with informal oral orders that leave no file.

Do drastic reforms follow?

- Agree that status quo is not enough. Recruitment still works better than many countries'; the crisis is after recruitment - tenure, skill, and political-bureaucratic bargain.
- **Needed reforms that are drastic in effect but constitutional in spirit:** a Civil Services Board for postings as the Supreme Court indicated in **T.S.R. Subramanian (2013)**; fixed minimum tenures; protection against oral instructions without written follow-up; and real performance appraisal linked to outcomes, not only to ACR loyalty.
- **Lateral entry** at senior levels for scarce skills can raise effectiveness if UPSC-like integrity and cooling-off rules apply. If **lateral entry** becomes a political side door, neutrality dies.
- Mission Karmayogi-type capacity building, mid-career exams, and specialist streams inside the service are reform, not revolution.
- Local government cadres, genuine devolution, and fewer parallel "mission" societies would make the district effective again; that is structural, not cosmetic.
- **What should not be drastic:** replacing UPSC with patronage, contractualising the entire district magistracy, or legally commanding officers to be ideologically committed. That would copy the disease.

Comment, with a measured yes

- Neutrality and effectiveness are lacking in important pockets, not in every officer and every State.
- Drastic reform of personnel management, tenure, and skills is justified.
- Drastic politicisation dressed as reform is not. The steel frame was meant to bend to the Constitution, not to break with every election.

Flow diagram

Design UPSC neutrality -> Strain transfers politics
 Strain transfers politics -> Tenure Civil Services Board
 Strain transfers politics -> Skills lateral entry training
 Tenure Civil Services Board -> Restore neutrality
 Skills lateral entry training -> Restore effectiveness

Conclusion

The civil services were designed for neutrality and effectiveness; politicised transfers and skill lags have damaged both. The view that drastic reforms are required is right for tenure, postings, accountability and specialist capacity, as courts and ARC reports have said. It is wrong if drastic means a committed, patronage service. Reform the frame; do not melt it.

Facts & figures

All-India Services

Articles 312 and the AIS Act, 1951: common officers for Union and States, the core of the steel frame.

T.S.R. Subramanian v. Union of India (2013)

Supreme Court directions on minimum tenure, Civil Services Board, and written instructions versus oral orders.

Second ARC

Recommended personnel, ethics, and performance reforms; implementation has been selective.

UPSC recruitment

Constitutional recruiting agency; the main remaining guarantee of entry-level neutrality.

Lateral entry

Union experiment to bring domain specialists at joint-secretary level; integrity design decides whether it aids effectiveness.

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