

UPSC-CSE: DECOLONISATION TO INDIANISATION

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Abstract: *The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) is a constitutional institution empowered to function as the watchdog of merit and excellence in hiring permanent executives to the service of the nation. The commission conducts around 25 examinations/ recruitments in a year to fill the vacancies of All India Services- the Indian Administrative Services, the Indian Police Services & the Indian Forest Services, and specialised central government services & various other groups A services under the central government. This paper strives to analyse the various dimensions of the structure and functioning of UPSC concerning the Civil Services Examinations (CSE) and associated challenges from the prism of decolonial studies.*

The paper attempts to deconstruct the continuing colonial legacy of the UPSC-CSE from its foundation to contemporary challenges. In this process, the reports of prominent reform commissions and their interventions with the ground reality will be thoroughly examined through the lenses of constitutionalism and substantive justice. Finally, this paper attempts to advocate for decolonisation and Indianisation of UPSC along the lines of the Indian Prime Minister's call for the decolonisation of minds and institutions for achieving the target of a Viksit Bharat@ 2047.

Keywords: *UPSC, CSE, Colonial Hangover, Decolonisation and Nationalisation.*

Introduction

UPSC- CSE is considered to be the most prestigious and hard-hitting of all recruitment examinations, rightly called the mother of all examinations, attracting the youth from all parts of India with various differentiated socio-economic upbringings. Over the last decades, owing to the popular pressure and changing nature of demand, responsibility and challenges of services, UPSC has brought radical changes in the scheme, pattern, and syllabus of CSE, like increasing the number of prescribed attempts from four to six, introducing of

Civil Services Aptitude Test (CSAT) in prelims, eliminating one optional subject and introducing four papers of general studies, including one specific paper for Ethics, Integrity and Aptitude in Mains Examinations.

However, there are many allegations against the UPSC-CSE discrimination against candidates of rural backgrounds and vernacular languages, preferences for IITians or students from central Universities, no grievance mechanism for prelims answer keys, opaque and subjective process of Mains examinations copy evaluations,

disproportionately high weightage of marks for personality tests varying as per the boards conducting interviews, to name a few. Despite the aforementioned allegations, there are also serious charges of the constitutional institution following the legacy and approach of the colonial regime and that the UPSC has become a modern version of the elite colonial imperial services, not only in function but in character and intent, producing officers (Mai Baap) disassociated from the public. One prominent issue reflecting the colonial character of apathy of UPSC-CSE is turning a blind eye to the popular demand for a one-time compensatory attempt for loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic and implementation of EWS reservation in its holistic spirit. There is also a critical issue of a parallel economy of crony capitalism of mushrooming coaching industries, playing with the lives and dreams of aspirants, destroying the demographic dividend of the nation, with negligible respect for administrative and legislative rules, regulations or guidelines.

THE COLONIAL HANGOVER

The Western ethnocentric worldview of English enlightenment, separating cultured West and Barbaric East, culminated in Indian subjugation specifically due to its “*apparent unwillingness to accumulate and deploy power in its own interests.*” The founding pillars of the British Raj in India were the Army and Bureaucracy, the indistinguishable pillars of coloniality of power, which held colonialism intact for more than two

centuries. The role of the military was limited to fighting and winning battles; however, the Imperial Civil Services were tasked with retaining, stabilising and deepening that victory, not only in socio-political dimensions but at the subconscious, epistemological and ontological minutiae of the Indian masses. Pertaining to its role in the establishment and sustenance of British Imperialism in India, the British Prime Minister in 1922, Mr Lloyd George, in his speech in the House of Commons, rightly called the Indian Civil Services a “*Steel Frame on which the whole structure of our [British] government and of our administration in India rests*”. The same structural and attitudinal colonial scraps continued even after independence, where the commanding authority of civil services transferred, but the nature, purpose and functions of services remained undiluted.

LATERAL ENTRY DEBARS UPSC?

The colonial regime, to sustain its hegemony via administration, had made several extensive studies towards the establishment and enactment of civil services in India. The Royal Commission on Public Service, or Islington Commission (1912- 1915) and the Royal Commission on Superior Civil Services or the Lee Commission (1923-24), were prominent transformation commissions under the British Empire in India. After independence, various governments have tried to study and analyse the structural and functional insufficiencies of the civil services in India, the most contemporary being the Hota Committee of

2004 and the Baswan Committee of 2016. The committee on the Civil Services Reforms (July 2004) or the P. C. Hota committee, in its analysis, recommended the measures to make officers *“honest, responsive, politically neutral and professionally sound”* with a caveat that the higher civil services cannot be reformed without reforming the administrative structures and governmental processes. The committee on the matter of hiring experts from the private sector, commonly termed as lateral entry, firmly note that *“hiring experts from the open market as members of the higher civil services...may not be worthwhile”* barring some scientific and technical ministries or departments.

The Niti Aayog, however, in its ‘Three Year Action Agenda’ -2017, recommended the ‘Lateral Entry’ in the central secretariat at the ‘middle and senior management’ level, from the market to infuse private professionalism, new out-of-the-box thinking and expertise. While replying to a question in Rajya Sabha, Union Minister for State in DoPT Dr Jitendra Singh on August 8, 2024, remarked that *“keeping in view their specialised knowledge and expertise in the domain area, lateral recruitment has been undertaken to appoint persons for specific assignments.”* The recommendation was accepted and implemented by the government; nevertheless, it has raised questions on the capacity of the UPSC to recruit desirable personnel for the job, as the government has been compelled to look for an alternative for the seasoned bureaucrats

outside the domain pool of All-India Services or Central Services.

COVID-19 COMPENSATORY ATTEMPT AND UN-PARLIAMENTARY UPSC

The 112th report of the Department Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice tabled on the floor of Lok Sabha on March 24, 2022, categorically recommended that *“Covid-19 has caused untold agony and insurmountable sufferings to many... the student community was also adversely affected. Keeping in view the hardships faced by the student community during the first and second COVID waves, the Committee recommends the Government to change its mind and sympathetically consider the demand of CSE aspirants and grant an extra attempt with corresponding age relaxations to all candidates”*. The COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on humanity, stilling the lives and aspirations being part of the suffering and bleeding society are no exceptions. Many of them lost their near and dear ones, many of them were symptomatic and looked in the isolation rooms, others were unable to move out of the containment zones, and many even worked as the frontline workers serving the society at the time of the hour. All the teaching centres and libraries were closed, similar to breaks in wheels of transportation; however, in this gloomy and pathetic state of humanity, UPSC went ahead with

conducting CSE in 2020 & 2021 with tokenism of postponements.

In an exam where one can be eliminated from the race by the margin of just 0.1 mark, where there is a cut-throat competition with limitations on the number of attempts and upper age limits, candidates were left with no choice but to risk their lives and those of others and to appear in the examination. They were forced to disobey the COVID-19 guidelines to travel to exam centres; still, many were denied entry into the examination hall due to a temperature scanner at the gate finding high temperatures. Perceiving the authoritarian apathy which echoes the after-effect of the colonial era, the candidates requested the various members of parliament and tried unsuccessfully to reach out to the top of the government to grant them one more chance to appear in the examination of CSE. All the elected members sympathised with their cause of getting COVID-19 compensation attempts, but simultaneously showed their helplessness. The aspirants had given their precious years of youth to the preparation and were never expecting this tragic end of their journey used their democratic right to protest peacefully, which had gone unheard, unable to influence the authorities to again seek some wisdom from the parliamentary standing committee report. The highest court of the land, although sympathising with the victimised aspirants and in the *Abhishek Anand Sinha v. UOI* on July 22, 2021, has advised

the government to “*take a lenient view in the light of the prevailing situation.*”

In a federal polity voice from the periphery and margins consolidates into a national assertion of popular will. More than 18 state governments and their respective State Public Service Commissions, constitutional bodies like that of UPSC, have given Covid-19 compensation with additional attempts, along with age relaxations of up to 5 years. The Union government has also provided required relief to the candidates of SSC-GD, SSC-CGL, IIT-JEE, UGC-NET and various other central examinations. However, the UPSC and its parent ministry, DoPT, remain adamant on their stand that the “*matter has been considered and it has not been found feasible to change the existing provisions regarding the number of attempts and age limit.*” It is an established fact in the light of the parliamentary committee recommendations that COVID-19-devastated aspirants never demanded to change the provisions of UPSC-CSE; nevertheless, they are only demanding the ‘one-time’ exceptional welfare measures from the welfare state to compensate for the loss due to exceptionally distressed circumstances. The unreasoned denial of the authorities reminds the ‘era of darkness’ where the future and livelihood of hundreds of thousands of UPSC-CSE aspirants, the maximum of those coming from the poor, disadvantaged and marginalised societies, are left in a perpetual state of disastrous darkness.

CORPORATISATION OF THE UPSC-CSE

The crunching manufacturing sector, stagnant primary sector, overheated service sector and 'jobless growth' in the era of uncertainties of fluctuating globalisation pushed the aspiring youth towards eyeing a career in civil services. Apart from the privileges, prestige and power, the civil services offer the appropriate opportunity to serve society and lead an eloquently meaningful life for self and surroundings. However, the exhaustive pattern and rigorous curriculum of the UPSC-CSE, compounded by the cut-throat competition for a disproportionately low number of seats, led the candidate to seek expert guidance from the experienced faculty from various private coaching centres. Barring exceptional examples like that of the Jamia Millia Islamia Residential Coaching Academy, the field of UPSC-CSE coaching is monopolised by the private players, banging on the maximising the profit from the vulnerability and desirability of aspirants. The accumulative multiplying thrust for making more money in the shortest period by exploiting the dreams of vulnerable youths, has generated a complex nexus among the administration, corporates and coaching flouting every norm of law and form of ethics and morality.

The tragic loss of life of three UPSC-CSE aspirants, for instance, on the miserable night of July 27, 2023, due to the drowning in the basement of Rau's IAS been illegally converted into an underground library at the Old Rajindra Nagar

(Karol Bagh), is known as the Mecca of UPSC preparation. Just days before of ORN incident 26 years 26-year-old UPSC aspirant was electrocuted in nearby Patel Nagar due to faulty wiring. At Mukherjee Nagar in Delhi, another hub UPSC aspirants preferred mostly by Hindi medium students, a fire broke out at the building of a coaching centre running without any fire safety norms, injuring more than 60 students. The lust for maximisation of profit by accommodating more and more students into congested classrooms is not possible without the active involvement of the authorities. Another phenomenon is the exponential growth of the PGs (paying Guests) and rental rooms with skyrocketing rents in and around ORN and Mukherjee Nagar area of Delhi, and in various cities of India, but without providing even the basic minimal environment of ventilation and breathing spaces, food and shelters, let alone the social and emotional support. These suffocating so-called rooms with the only available space of one foldable chair and table have forced the "demographic dividend of India to perish precariously daunting sub-humans' space" and accommodations to prepare for the civil examination. The administration is not only aware of this melancholic crony capitalism but is also an active participant in the looting of the hard-earned money of aspirants from all the nooks and corners of the country. This is the modern method of colonial 'Drain of Wealth' where the nexus of 'corruption and capitalism' helped the growth of

coaching tycoons at the centres of Delhi, Lucknow, Prayagraj, Bangalore, at the cost of perishing dreams and wealth of peripheral communities. The hype of the ecochamber created by the corporatisation of the success in UPSC-CSE by creating the ‘glamourisation’ of the successful candidates praising these coaching centres for their success, many a time, paid advertisement of appreciation, pulling others to deposit the hard-earned money of their family.

DENIAL OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND DELIBERATE DEPRIVATION OF DELICATE

The influx of globalisation, post the neo-liberal LPG reforms of the 1990s, coupled with the digital revolution, has aggravated the inherently buried desire of marginalised communities to claim their justified share in the resources of the state and society. The deprived, delineated, discriminated and disadvantaged communities gaining political momentum from the “Democratic Upsurge” are no longer willing to live under the command of the administrative ‘Mai-Baap’, and sought to have ‘Bureaucratic Assertion’. The percolating waves of globalisation and associated modernisation had given the peripheral communities a new self-confidence that their human existence is possible. The principles of affirmative action enshrined in the Constitution of India and the improved level of literacy and awareness have given them the push to enter into the permanent executives by clearing the UPSC-CSE. This single exam and reputed posts of

IAS & IPS, among others, had not only given them career security but also much cherished respect and recognition in the hierarchically rigid society.

The empirical reality is however, point out to the fact that the UPSC is an elite institution for selecting elites for elite positions of power. The breaking news every year that a son of rickshaws Wala or a daughter of poor farmers, is just the shining covering layer to hide the ‘elite truth’ beneath its layers. The UPSC-CSE has been successful in maintaining the trust and faith of the masses in the process of the procedural selections, so much so that no one can question the substantive justifications of the outcomes of these divine processes of procedure. The Parliamentary panel, while reviewing the 131st report titled ‘Review of Functioning of Recruitment Organisations of Government of India’, highlighted that over 70% candidates selected through CSE hailed from technical or medical backgrounds, with a decline in humanities education to 23%. The Civil Services Survey report of 2010 of DARPG highlights that 69% of civil servants belong to the general category, 13% to SC, 7% to ST, and the remaining 11% to OBCs. A research paper by Milan Vaishnav and Saksham Khosla claims that the Indian Civil Service is not Indian, nor Civil, nor Services and accuses it of elite biases which protect and promote only the elites of the societies across the caste and regional backgrounds. The Print report of August 2020 highlights that at least 50% of IAS % IFS comes from families with a

government service background. A 2018 paper of the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) titled 'Social Proximity and Bureaucrat Performance: Evidence from India' notes that around 75% of IAS officers come from an urban background. There is an unshakable monopoly of DU, JNU and IITs in UPSC-CSE, taking the major chunk of selected candidates, leaving the rest of the Universities and state government educational institutions impoverished. The language preferences for only 'English Candidates' is now an openly disclosed and criticised secret of UPSC. The column in the Detailed Application Form (DAF) about the interests and hobbies of candidates is a cruel gallows humour of the miseries of millions of candidates coming from a subaltern background, where the daily struggle for livelihood leaves no room for the pursuit of anything except the continued struggle for existence.

PM'S CALLS FOR DECOLONISATION

India has a rich legacy of legendary Prime Ministers addressing the nation from the ramparts of the Red Fort on the eve of independence. One of the uniquely placed historic addresses to the nation was by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the eve of 76th Independence Day, August 15, 2022, where he called for five vows or Panch Pran of Amrit Kaal with a focus "to remove any trace of colonial mindset." India cannot become Indianised without denouncing the colonial mindsets deliberately and delicately infused by the colonial masters to

maintain their 'hegemony of colonial hangover' over India and Indians to maintain and sustain their neo-imperialism in India. The centrality and continuity of the phenomenon of 'Mai-Baap', the local designations of the IAS and IPS officers selected by the UPSC-CSE, and the indifference of officers towards the public and detachment of the public from the officers are perpetuating the hegemony of colonial hangover, impeding the development of democratic governance and equitable development. It's high time for reform, rechristened and reintroduced the pending drafts of legislations like the Public Services Bill, 2007, Civil Services Bill, 2009 and Civil Services Standards, Performance, and Accountability Bill, 2010 in the public domain and Indianize through the Parliament to decolonise the UPSC-CSE.

The Honourable Supreme Court to publish the Prelims Answer keys just after the Preliminary Exams must be implemented in letter and spirit. The aspirants' long-standing demand for reducing the subjectivity of human nature in Mains Examinations, especially in the Essay paper and prominently in Optional papers, needs an immediate resolution. Establishing Interview boards on Language bases of the 8th Schedule of the Constitution, and thinking over D. Subba Rao's suggestion of mid-level entry into Civil Services for professionals in their 40s could be explored.

There is little to distrust that UPSC has given many marvellously brilliant civil servants to the nation with exceptional success, but this is the time to

infuse pure Indian Steel in the steel frame of the nation. John D. Hargreaves described the central theme of decolonisation as the creation of the “self-governing nation state.” The decolonisation happening in the ‘Global South’ is faster than globalisation, which has its meaning more than the oppositional binary of colonisation or anti-colonisation. The phenomenon of decolonisation embarrasses the ethics of ‘self-governance’ in all aspects of socio-political, economic and spiritual life. Reforming and decolonising the UPSC-CSE will be the ethics of ancient Indian wisdom of self-governance.

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