Generalists vs Specialists in Indian Administration
A Comment
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Much of the generalist-specialist controversy is spurious. The modern administrator needs both generalist and specialist qualifications.

For the policy-implementing part of his job, the administrator has to be a coordinator, which is a generalist function. At the policy-implementing stage, he needs to be a generalist in the sense of feeling extra-disciplinary value-judgments, called from his wide administrative experience, into the decision-making process. But, at the same time, for policy-formulation he had to master specialised techniques or languages of discourse, in order to make taking of informed decisions possible.

Such specialised knowledge is, unfortunately, lacking in Indian administration and attempts to impart it to fresh recruits have been unsuccessful because of a misunderstanding of the nature of specialised knowledge required.

Unless our administrators are given rigorous training in certain social sciences, they will not be able to fulfil effectively one of their most important functions—the taking of informed decisions. It is time, therefore, to bid farewell to the I C S and usher in the age of the ‘specialist-generalist’ administrator or, more simply, of the technocrat.

A SHOKE Mohan Roy’s two long articles are more in the nature of a restatement and survey of old positions and battlegrounds in the generalist-specialist controversy, and do not add anything new to the debate. This comment seeks to redress this by focussing attention on some crucial distinctions, and clarifying some vague terms whose continual use has obscured the really important points in the debate. Finally an attempt will be made to outline a possible solution for this rather unnecessary cleavage.

The first important distinction to be noted is that between policy formulation and policy implementation. As most often the same governmental organisation is involved in both these aspects of government, there is a natural tendency to slur over this extinction. This is best exemplified by the indiscriminate use of that emotive word ‘coordination’. The generalist administrator’s chief virtue is that he is the co-ordinator par excellence. Once, however, it is remembered that coordination is an administrative function of the operational or implementational kind it becomes clear that it is connected with the policy implementing rather than the policy formulating role of the administrator.

Let us examine this term coordination a little more closely, for its loose use has been responsible for a great deal of confusion in the generalist-specialist debate.

To talk of an administrator exercising the co-ordinative function in the decision-making process sounds, to say the least, a bit odd. For ‘co-ordination’ normally implies the co-ordination of activities, seldom if ever, of ideas or theories. One can ‘synthesize’ of ‘reconcile’ the latter, but one can hardly talk of co-ordinating these ideas or theories. Thus common language makes a distinction between the co-ordination of decisions and the synthesising of ideas and theories which go to make these decisions.

Co-ordination is, therefore, a function which is concerned with the part of government which is concerned with the performance of various activities, i.e., implementation of policy. It is, moreover, related to activities which are complementary or interdependent and cannot be applied to areas which are completely unconnected with each other. This function moreover does not require any specialist expertise but is the most important part of the generalist art of managing people. Therefore a very important conclusion of our discussion at this stage is that in the policy implementing stage there is the need for the exercise of a very important function, that of coordination, which is pre-eminently a generalist function.

What Is Coordination?

If someone, however, does speak of ‘co-ordination’ at the policy formulating stage, what could he mean? What he means is, clearly, the reconciliation of divergent view points at the policy formulating stage, and this is not co-ordination, but the reconciliation of divergent viewpoints. It is important to put the above point in this tautological form, for it is sought to be emphasised that there is no need to twist the ordinary meaning of words to assimilate statements which can be stated quite adequately in terms of ordinary language in their own right.

There is, moreover, a grave danger in trying to dilute the fairly dear-cut meaning of words to make them fit different descriptions. For, by using the same word to describe two distinct kinds of functions one is tempted to assimilate one in the other. This, in fact, is what seems to have happened in much of the writing on the generalist-specialist debate. Roy’s statements, for instance. Here is an extract:

"It is argued that a general administrator is more appreciative of social necessity. He specializes in coordination. One important judgment which he has to make is whether the proposed programme is such as can be easily put into action for the benefit of society." (italics added).

Here we have three statements. From the first and the last it is clear that what is being discussed is the role of the generalist administrator in the formulation of policies, and yet sandwiched between the two is the statement in italics about a; ordination, which we have identified as a policy implementing function. Clearly Roy doesn’t appreciate the policy-formulating, policy-implementing distinction and the role of co-ordination in the latter. By this illegitimate slurring over of these crucial points persuasive content is given to the argument for having generalists in the policy formulating stage by quietly slipping in the term co-ordination which every one recognizes to be an exclusively generalist virtue.

Apart from the above methodological points the question ‘What are the specifically generalist functions in the decision-making process?’ still re-
mains. The first and last sentences in the passage quoted above illustrate the point that the distinctive role of the non-specialist in the decision-making process is in introducing what I will call 'extra-disciplinary' value-judgments. Whereas the mere specialist is likely to be myopic as regards value-judgments which do not directly impinge on his discipline, or his value judgments may not take cognisance fully of 'social reality' or 'necessity', the generalist, it is assumed, will not suffer from any of these disabilities, and his value judgments are likely to conform more to the needs of the 'general welfare' of the citizens. For, the non-specialist administrator has 'the advantage of bringing to the counsels of policy-making diverse held experience continually refreshed and renewed'. This enables him to work with value-judgments which are tied more closely to 'social necessity' than the specialist’s. In fact it can be maintained that the administrator’s generalist role in the policy formulating process is largely, if not only, that of applying the necessary normative constraints on the specialist’s recommenda­tions. This is all that off-repeated phrases "looking at matters from the point of view of the Government as a whole", "a wider outlook and a commonsense approach", "not detailed knowledge, but the right approach, the right perspective with which the man analyses the problem" can really be reduced if they are to have any meaning at all.

Value Judgments

Granted that the role of the generalist in the decision-making process is that of introducing extra-disciplinary value constraints, two questions arise. The first one is: "Isn't the introduction of value judgments the exclusive role, and right, of the political executive?" The answer to this is, not entirely. Apart from the normative question of whether it ought not to be, there is the contingent fact that the value constraints are given as a result of joint debate amongst the policy makers, i.e., the political and permanent executive. But even within the value sphere there are value judgments of differing kinds and of differing degrees of importance. Hence the second question: "The supplying of what form of value judgment, if any, is the exclusive prerogative of the bureaucracy?" To find an answer to this question we may approach it by asking: In the case of conflicting value judgments is there any particular sort of judgment which the political executive would find very difficult to over­
mes exclusively specialist skills are called for e.g. in building a dam. These may be called the 'engineering' aspects of implementation, and would clearly be a specialist monopoly, just as the other important aspect of implementation, co-ordination, it has been argued, is a generalist preserve.

This takes us to the sphere of decision-making. With the increasing role of government in the socio-economic life of the community, the problems faced by government have become more complex, more technical and more far reaching in their impact. At the same time planning necessitates positive decisions which involve choosing and allocating between different ends and resources. Very often the latter task in involves the evolution, understanding and application of fairly technical criteria. Furthermore planning is always being done within the constraint of the time factor. Quick technical decisions are called for.

These considerations bring us to the heart of the shortcomings of the pine generalist in the contemporary decision making process—the problem of being adequately informed. The decisions which the administrator has to make, or help to make, must be informed. and if a precondition of the success of the necessary information being understood is some technical knowledge, clearly, specialist knowledge will be required by the administrator. This knowledge can be looked upon more as familiarity with a particular language of discourse, or the ability to maintain a discussion in a particular idiom. This language or idiom must necessarily be that of the specialist, firstly, because of the time constraint noted earlier — constant translation into a language the administrator understands would be inefficient — and secondly, because the conclusions of the specialist will flow from the particular and peculiar logic of his own specialised language. So that in order to carry on a meaningful discourse with him, which would be purposeful in the sense of either finding fault with the logic of his argument, or the illegitimacy of his conclusions and/or assumptions (implicit and explicit), or of trying to grope towards an alternative formulation, the administrator will require knowledge of and training in, the specialist's idiom. Translation would be inadequate as the conceptual framework of the particular discipline, which alone gives meaning to disparate elements of fact and judgment, is likely to become hazy and loose in the process of translation, with all the concomitant dangers regarding the 'correctness' of the administrator's decisions. And considering the far reaching implications of even the most minor decision taken by government—in terms of people affected—even small mistakes would be socially costly, and hence have to be avoided.

Clearly therefore mere generalist capacities of 'having one's heart in the right place', i.e., feeding in the socially desirable value judgments, will not be sufficient and are certainly inefficient in performing the tasks of government in a welfare state. Lacking specialised knowledge—in the sense we have outlined—the administrator will become either redundant—just accepting the recommendations of the specialist departments, or else he will take a decision which, being uniformed, may be completely arbitrary and unjustified. This is especially so in the case of economic decisions. These can involve highly technical concepts and theory, whose complexity increases with the growth and sophistication of the economy. Dr Beeching's example shows what happens when a distinguished metallurgist begins to dabble in welfare economics without prior training.6

Training the Administrator

This raises the question of the content of the specialised, 'prior-training' for the 'would-be' administrator. Here again there are a number of confusions all connected with the term 'specialisation'. One general misconception is that specialisation is connected in some very close manner with the degree of rigour of a discipline. On this view a more specialised knowledge of a subject is merely a more rigorous knowledge, and hence what the administrator needs is a less rigorous treatment of a subject. This is the assumption behind the current training scheme for Indian administrators. That this assumption is false can be demonstrated in the following manner. Take two students of a particular discipline, of equal brilliance and competence in their subject. At the end of their degree course one of them decides to specialise in the subject, whilst the other decides to enter the bureaucracy. Clearly, before the choice of their respective careers both students had the same degree of rigorous mastery over their subject—given our homogeneity assumption. What then does the decision of one of these students to specialise imply? I would suggest that it implies two things. Firstly, it implies a decision to devote one's working time to that particular discipline, and this has got nothing to do with increasing rigour (assuming that both the students already have a rigorous mastery over the subject) and, secondly, it implies an undertaking to be at the forefront of advance of his particular area of study, in the sense of both assimilating and adding to advances. Specialisation can, therefore, be looked upon as a commitment to continue practising and using the skills and tools of a particular discipline. Specialised knowledge, on the other hand, would imply knowledge of, and proficiency in the skills and tools of a particular discipline, without any commitment towards using these tools and skills to make further advances in that area of study. From this it seems reasonable to conclude that when specialisation is talked about, what is normally meant is not the intensifying rigour of the discipline, but greater devotion of time and energy to a particular discipline. In mastering a particular subject, whether with or without the intention of specialising in it, the rigour of the discipline is indivisible, and the absence of rigour merely marks off the bad student from the good one.

Thus it is most important to remember that in imparting specialist knowledge to administrators, for the reasons we have outlined, it is imperative that the fallacy of considering the providing of specialised knowledge for the administrator as merely diluting the discipline, be avoided. To attain specialised knowledge, the particular discipline must be mastered, irrespective of whether or not one is going to specialise in it later on. In this context a study of the French system of training administrators may prove very useful. The French give their administrators a thorough grounding in specialised disciplines in the social sciences, and they perhaps approximate closest to the ideal administrator in a modern welfare state whose features will be delineated in the last paragraph of this article. The contemporary French bureaucrat is both a specialist and a generalist, and his superiority over the traditional dilettantish English bureaucrat is proved by the Brussels negotiations where 'in the negotiations with the French technocrats, the sole British representative to stand up to the challenge was a war time returnee from a University'.8

We are thus led to our general conclusion that much of the generalise specialist cleavage is spurious, and certainly as traditionally presented, confusing. The modern administrator needs both specialist and generalist qualifications. There is the need for, to coin a phrase, 'specialist-genetalists'. As Appelby points out9 generalist and specialist are relative terms. There should not be any question of an 'either-or'
type answer. In fact from our analysis we have discovered that the modern administrator needs both these qualifications for his efficient functioning. In the policy implementing aspect of his job he needs to be a coordinator, which is a very important generalist function. At the policy formulating stage, he needs to be a generalist in the sense of feeding in extra-disciplinary value-judgments, culled from his wide administrative experience, into the decision making process. The most important of these judgments is with regard to feasibility. But at the same time, in policy formulation, he requires mastery over certain specialised techniques, or languages of discourse, in order to facilitate the taking of informed decisions. This specialised knowledge is unfortunately lacking in most of our administrators, whilst attempts to impart this to fresh recruits are misplaced because of a misunderstanding of the nature of specialised knowledge required—a misunderstanding we have traced to the 'specialisation' fallacy. Until our administrators are given a rigorous training in certain social sciences they will not be able to fulfil one of their most important functions within the decision making process—the taking of informed decisions. We must therefore bid farewell to the I C S and usher in the age of the 'specialist-generalist' administrator, or more simply of the technocrat.

Notes
1 The Economic Weekly, June 27 and July 4, 1964.
2 Roy, op cit, p 1097.
3 Both the terms social reality and social necessity are by no means clear cut in their meaning, but we will for the purposes of this article abstract from the difficulties inherent in clarifying them.
4 Roy, op cit p 1097.
5 I shall be using the term normative in a wider sense than it is normally used. I shall use it to mean any subjective evaluation.
7 It may also be noted that in the decision making process the bureaucrat is generally presenting a departmental viewpoint in cases where the decision involves a number of departments, and as such phrase like 'point of view of the Government as a whole' are certainly false if not meaningless. To give them any sort of operational significance some analysis of the sort outlined above seems necessary.
8 Another very important distinction between inter-departmental and intra-departmental policy formulation has to be borne in mind. This has been slurred over in this article for reasons of space and emphasis. Using this distinction one needs to emphasise the role of the bureaucrat in reconciling divergent interests within his department at the policy formulation stage. Inter-departmental reconciliation is the task mainly of the political executive. But it must be emphasised that the reconciliation of divergent view points will be made impossible if the reconciliator lacks specialised knowledge which maybe a precondition of these view points being understood. See the later sections of this article.
9 Thomas Balogh: "Planning for Progress" (Fabian pamphlet, 1963) footnote 2, p 31. Also see his 'The Apotheosis of the Dilettante' in "The Establishment" (ed) Hugh Thomas.
10 Balogh, op cit, p 31.
11 Appelby: 'Generalist and Specialist' in "Public Administration for a Welfare State" (Asia Pub House.)