Generalists vs Specialists in Indian Administration—I

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T N order to understand the issues in the debate on Generalists vs Specialists in the Indian administrative system one has to be clear about the definition of the terms. A generalist is one who has knowledge of the technique of the processes involved in a factory or a technical undertaking or in administration but he is not an expert. A specialist or an expert is a man whose special training makes him an authority in a particular field. Whereas the concern of the expert is with the ‘particular’, the distinguishing feature of an administrator is the element of ‘generality’. The expert is a specialist in knowledge and in action; the administrator must be a generalist in knowledge and in action.

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The Two Models

The British administrative class and the ICS have truly embodied the principle of the generalist in governmental administration. The instrument of a laissez-faire government at home and a colonial administration in the Empire, the administrative generalist was both a product of and suited to the objectives of a law and order, revenue-collecting government. By education, training and experience he was deliberately made non-specialized. His functions were to limit the role of government, to promote stability by minimising change, to coordinate the activities of government. His major administrative tasks were the “rules” and the “files”.

The use of the specialist in government finds its most vigorous expression in the American Civil Service. The skills needed to administer a vast continent, to develop its natural resources, to promote social and economic growth were specialized skills. The staffs of governmental agencies were accordingly recruited as specialists, each group highly committed to the importance and relevance of specialization. These agencies were led by specialist administrators. No class of generalist administrators was interposed between the specialist and the ‘political’ executives and the legislators who supervise them. Coordination was achieved by statute, by budgets, by Presidential supervision and by Congressional vigilance; in essence, coordination by ‘rules and files’ was subordinated as a goal to the more preferred objectives of experiment, competition among specialists and innovation in policy and procedure.

The preceding observations are brief and over-simplified. Each of these systems, of course, makes some efforts to accommodate the rival claims of the generalist and the specialist. The specialists in the British system have made some notable recent gains in science agencies, in public enterprise agencies, in the welfare agencies. In the US the generalists struggle for greater recognition and have gained a little. A generalist service recruited by competitive examination and known as the Junior Management Service has been created. All other administrators are recruited departmentally. The recommendation of the Hoover Commission for the creation of a Small Senior Civil Service Cadre has not been accepted. “But the fundamental contrast remains; in Britain the generalist administrator is on top, the specialist is on tap to the generalist, while in the US the specialist is on top while the generalist is on his tap.”

The suitability of each of these models in the context of Indian administrative system will be discussed in this paper. Before that we will analyse the developments which have led to the debate on the specialist versus the generalist in administration in advanced countries and in the developing economy of India.

Changed Character of the State

The bureaucracies of the 20th century differ from those of the 18th and 19th centuries largely because the character of the state and of government problems has changed. Large-scale industry, division of labour, the headlong pace of development of applied science, the concentration of economic power and the increasing recognition of the responsibility of the State towards the under-privileged have all contributed to determine the character of the modern administrative system. The above developments have led to a conflict between ‘line’ and ‘staff specially technical ‘staff agencies. The traditional concept of staff is aid to the executive. This is to be done without disturbing the formal command relationships in hierarchy. Increasing specialisation in the organisation and growing pressure on the top executive have complicated this initially simple concept greatly. Secondly, the watertight division between staff and line looks unreal. Authority is now believed to be a matter...
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of influence than of command. The staff, like the specialists, now exercises authority, control and command over the line authorities like the generalists. Staff agencies like planning, personnel, budget and finance, organization and methods, etc., wield coercive power over the line agencies. The staff work is performed by persons of high intellectual attainments and specialised training. The fact that they are near the chief executive invests their work with extraordinary importance.

Indian Context

The generalist versus specialist debate in the Indian administrative system has assumed much importance since the launching of planning. India has combined planning for a socialist economy with democracy. She has launched an ambitious programme of industrial development to diversify the economy. Side by side there are the objectives of reducing inequalities in income and promoting the welfare of the greater number of the population. In fine, India is a welfare state with a socialist pattern of society as its basic objective. This means the expansion of state activities to realize these objectives. Due to the extension of the functions of the state and change in the conception of the state the specialists as staff agencies are not content with their advisory functions. They do not like to be placed in line hierarchy. They interfere in the work of line authority.

It is against this background that one has to consider the arguments advanced in favour of the specialist and the generalist in India.

It is argued that administration in the context of a developing economy should place less reliance on procedures, rules and regulations and more on speedy work based on expert knowledge in various fields of development. A dynamic situation created by the need for speedy, multi-sided development of a country, it is said, requires a change in the principles and methods of administration in such a way that the natural allies of the development process, namely technology and science, get their due. This, it is remarked, is not possible so long as those who head the administrative machine are themselves semiliterates in so far as knowledge of science, technology, economics, etc., is concerned.

It has been contended that in the present era of rapidly advancing technology, a non-technical civil servant is generally incapable of informed judgment on technical matters. It is said that there is no person more dangerous than a layman with pet ideas. In fact in the modern world the administration of engine-ring enterprises, can only be done by technical generalists.

This point has been supported by Dr K L Rao. He has analysed the administrative working of D V C and pointed out that non-technical administrative men were put at the head of this project. The D V C had no Chief Engineer for years. Foreign consultants were imported to advise the non-technical administrators at the top. Work was done at a higher cost than if indigenous sources had been tapped. According to Dr Rao, the most important lesson one could draw from the D V C venture is that for engineering projects it is most essential to start the work under technical control. To avoid faulty implementation in the plan it is necessary for fully qualified technical personnel to be entrusted with erecting the engineering works. In most of the projects, materials account for 60-70 per cent of the total cost and labour for about 10-15 per cent. A saving on materials by proper selection will lead to a large saving and this obviously can be done by an engineer. It is only the technical men placed at the top who can assume responsibility with authority.

Too Many Non-Experts

It is contended next that with persons drawn from generalized service as heads of departments concerned with development, planned development suffers. It is the view of Prof V K N Menon that a generalist head of department is likely to view things from the point of view of generalist administration of the Secretariat rather than the technical work of the department. In the context of a welfare state, a generalist as head of department is undesirable. This system results in a non-expert minister assisted usually by a non-expert secretary to whom a non-expert head of department is adviser. There is thus a solid non-expert top and many technical people feel that it is a hopeless situation. Senior engineers have to waste a good deal of their time in educating civil servants in the intricacies of the department’s work and in writing minutes on simple technical matters, on which they could easily have given final orders if they had the authority. Another anomaly is that the responsibility for efficient performance of the department rests entirely on the head of the department. Its progress depends entirely on his initiative, whereas a Secretary who has the power to over-rule him bears no responsibility for giving effect to technical or departmental proposals. Hence there is the pattern where there is authority without responsibility and responsibility without authority. Moreover, the present system involves frequent transfer of officers from one department to another. These transfers lead to a confusion in the department and continuity is lost. One takes time to become proficient in his departmental matters. Before one has learnt his job, he is transferred.

Less Bureaucratic

In a developing economy specialists like doctors, engineers, physicists, economists, etc., should be right at the top in the line authority rather than thrown somewhere in a staff-cell attached to the generalist line authority. As an incidental advantage of adopting this system, it is claimed that government would become less bureaucratic, more programme-oriented and committed and better suited to create an environment of respect for science and knowledge in the community.

It is also advocated that experts understand each other better because they speak in a common language and know each other’s difficulties sufficiently well to appreciate and understand each other’s problems. The generalist administrator usually does not develop a sustained interest in any particular field of activity. Even in exceptional cases when he does develop such an interest, this becomes infructuous because by the time he has learnt the job he is transferred to some other job.

Another line of thinking is that there should be differentiation and specialization in different types of administrative work. It is argued by H K Paranjape that in the face of the changed character of a considerable proportion of government operation, it is essential to break up the generalist administrative cadres into more and more specialized ones.

The crux of the whole argument in favour of the specialist in the Indian administrative system, especially at the top level, is that the management and the administration should be well-trained in the know-how of the enterprises that they manage. The emphasis should shift from mere theoretical, bureaucratic control to a self-con-
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tained knowledgeable set-up. This would impact scientific and practical orientation to the formulation of plans and their implementation.

The generalist admits that the requirements of administration in a planned developing economy are different from those in a laissez-faire economy. He accepts the thesis of the specialist that science and technology are the allies of progress and routine, precedent and rigid adherence to hierarchical formalities inhibit progress. He confesses that answers to all the complexities have not been found. But he argues that these are problems of long-term adjustment and not of mere orderly transition. His view may be summarized as follows:

Enforcing the General Point of View

(1) Administration is politics in action. It cannot, therefore, be divorced from the political process. According to Paul H. Appleby,4 "government is the primary, indispensable institution capable of maintaining an advancing state of balance in a condition of advancing complexity. It is charged with the extraordinary function of making general sense out of a dynamic proliferation of special occupations and preoccupations." The very quality of administration is derived from the fact that as the divergent points of view get coordinated, filtered and ultimately crystallized into decisions, compromises are affected all along the line in such a manner that an overall general view emerges in the shape of policy. No matter how specialized in training and interests a civil servant administrator may have been initially, each promotion upward constitutes a vesting in him of successively larger responsibility for enforcing the general point of view of his minister and his government. If the thesis of the specialist were accepted, decisions should be weighed in favour of specialization in such a way that while the specialist view would, of course, get the place of prominence, the entire nature of administrative decision, being ultimately a generalist one, would undergo an undesirable change as Appleby has argued. "A specialist knowledge increases in a specialized way, by study or situation and assignment, one's general ignorance increases disproportionately. The price of specialization of every kind is parochialism."5

(2) Top management job requires a general understanding. It requires a view of the whole. It demands tested ability for independent command and the willingness to assume the responsibility for a decision. It asks for detachment, patience and the ability to take a long view. This function can be discharged adequately by a generalist administrator.

(3) The more the specialists get involved in administration, the less they will be able to develop in their own fields of specialization. Two results would follow from this.

(a) they will lose touch with their subjects and therefore suffer loss of their special utility to government; and,

(b) their other colleagues, who are less fortunate in terms of opportunity and authority but have more time to devote to their subjects, will lose respect for the knowledge of their specialist bosses.

(4) Government through specialists may be a luxury for highly developed countries but in the initial stage of development of nascent democracies like ours where articulating the feelings and desires of a vast mass of illiterate people is of vital importance, it may even be dangerous to place specialists at the level of secretaries.

Narrow Approach

(5) A general mind is far more important today when the entire character of the State is undergoing radical and revolutionary change. In such a context a specialized mind and a narrow approach are a hindrance rather than a help. A person who knows much in a small field cannot have the vision and foresight which is required for the administration of a modern state. In the words of N V Gadgil "we should have the general mind in preference to a specialized mind. What really is needed is not the knowledge in a detailed way but the right approach, the right perspective with which the man analyses the problem."6

(6) The chief function of the administration is generalization. The more the specialization, the more the need for generalization to put technical knowledge in a form and in a manner which would facilitate the formulation of policies. Thus Appleby argues that with the increase in technical character of government activities, the need for generalist personnel who can sensibly relate different aspects of matters will increase both in importance and in numbers at geometric ratio.7 A generalist at the top becomes a specialist in generalisation.

(7) Many of the grievances of the specialist are in the nature of charges against the generalist. It is bad if specialists are arrogantly treated or insufficiently respected by the generalist. Perhaps some civil servants may be guilty of this. The hangover from the past is partly responsible for this. The remedy, however, is not necessarily that the specialist should replace the generalist. A system of co-operative working and right of directly approaching the Minister in case of disagreement, perhaps may provide better answers.

Difficulty in Communication

(8) Most specialists usually employ an esoteric language to convey their ideas. In administration it leads to difficulty in communication between the eminently non-expert minister and the highly specialized expert secretaries. This difficulty is not limited only to the Minister-Secretary relationship but becomes worse in inter-departmental communication. In this connection the extreme example given by Appleby of the Manhattan Project where an English Professor was brought in as interpreter among various specialists is relevant. A lot of capacity for expression in elegant and diplomatic language is required to get the departmental point of view accepted. It is doubtful whether in this game, the specialist, by virtue of his knowledge will be able to measure up to the task.

(9) No generalist is a downright generalist in the sense that he knows nothing of anything else. In fact the advantage of a generalist is that as he goes to the top he brings to bear on the job an intelligent awareness of a vast variety of knowledge with capacity to articulate in meaningful overall terms.

(10) Today if specialists are not at the top in many cases, they are not necessarily at the tap. They are in fact found at all levels from the top to the tap according as they are needed. With the change in the nature of the functions of the government, there has been evidence in India of a growing diversification in the composition of the public services by the employment of more and more specialists, technicians, and experts. The Report of the Second Central Pay Commission (1960) reveals that one-third of the total number of the employees in 1957 were specialists.

(11) It is said that generalists are prisoners of rules, regulations and precedents and there is too much stress on continuity, caution, and
red tape. There is no doubt some truth in this statement. But there is no proof that when specialists are at the top they do not suffer equally or even more from the same maladies.

We shall now attempt to analyse the impact of this debate in three spheres of the Indian administrative system—at the district level, the secretariat level and in the public enterprises.

Notes

Business Notes

**Guest, Keen, Williams**

ALTHOUGH Guest, Keen, Williams declared a lower dividend of Rs 1.20 per share for the year 1963 as against Rs 1.40 per share for 1962, the distribution is on the increased paid-up capital. The paid-up capital was increased during year from 4 crores to Rs 6.32 crores by the issue of new as well as bonus shares.

The Company's operations during 1963 were quite good with a substantial expansion in total output and sales. Although raw material supplies, particularly those of steel billets, were a limiting factor checking a rapid advance, the comparatively large billet stocks held by the Company at the beginning of the year enabled it to maintain an adequate level of production. Output of rolling mills rose in spite of irregular billet supplies and production of spring steel bars increased satisfactorily. Production of bright steel bars doubled although full use of potential capacity could not be made on account of the shortage of cutting steel. Output of railway track materials was substantially higher despite competition and raw material difficulties.

The turnover of the Company during the year increased by 25.4 per cent from Rs 13.06 crores to Rs 16.37 crores. As a result profits rose by Rs 89.88 lakhs to Rs 217.43 lakhs. But again taxation, including bonus shares tax and dividend tax, took away as much as Rs 136.59 lakhs as against Rs 55.60 lakhs in 1962. Even then the surplus available amounted to Rs 78.92 lakhs comparing favourably with Rs 60.40 lakhs in 1962.

Yet another project for the manufacture of brake components for the automobile industry is in hand, stated Sir Raghavan Pillai. A new steel melt ing shop is now under construction and will be commissioned next year. Reorganisation of the old rolling mills has been completed. The old plant at the Calcutta bolt works is being replaced by specialised modern equipment which will lead to improved quality and some diversification in the range of manufactures. The new bright steel bar shop which is already commissioned will contribute to the earnings of the current year.

All told the Company is now well set for a further vigorous growth in the coming years. The capital expenditure of the Company during the years 1964 to '66 on planned expansion and rehabilitation projects is expected to be of the order of Rs 7.5 crores of which a sum of Rs 2.5 crores will be in foreign exchange. The expansion plans will continue even beyond this period and be subject to such revision as may be found necessary in the light of changing conditions and shifts in priority.

**Texmaco**

THE Textile Machinery Corporation has stepped up the dividend on its equity shares from 12.5 per cent for 1962 to 15 per cent for 1963. This has been the result of a substantial improvement in the working of the Company during the year. The Directors state that the past year was one of all-round prosperity. The progress was achieved in spite of huddles and bottlenecks in the procurement of certain raw materials and components, occasional labour troubles and critical power supply at times. Production of textile machinery on the whole was higher. There was a rise of 20 per cent in the production of ring frames, 40 per cent in carding engines and 81 per cent in drawing frames. The rise was accompanied by improved quality and workmanship.

The Company has entered into technical collaboration with a West German firm, well-known in the manufacture of textile machinery, with a view to manufacturing high quality machines. The machine tools division of the Company has achieved an indigenous content of 50 per cent which is expected to rise to 75 per cent in the current year. The steel foundry of the Company worked satisfactorily during the year in spite of a power cut which is now restored. The capacity of the foundry is being expanded from 3,000 tons to 9,000 tons. The rolling stock division has recorded a rise of 10 per cent in its out-turn. Production of water tube boilers and sugar mill machinery was maintained though full capacity was not utilised for want of orders. The Company has received a huge order from the Bihar State Government for gates and gearings for the Sone Barrage Project.

Sales during the year shot up by 27 per cent to Rs 12.22 crores from Rs 9.61 crores in 1962. Gross profit be-