



Invoking the domain competence principle in India's maritime governance: A case for an Indian Maritime Service

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ABSTRACT

India's growing role as a maritime powerhouse beckons unprecedented opportunities and challenges. The present mode of maritime governance characterised by the outdated role of generalists, particularly the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), is nothing more than an unfaded representation of a colonial stopgap arrangement with no scientific substance per se. Irrespective of an ideation that took place in 2014, the Indian Maritime Service (IMS) as a technocratic cadre for maritime administration never came to fruition. The commentary builds a rationale for IMS as a non-uniformed branch of specialists in view of the highly technical frontiers of civilian maritime domain, which is left in the hands of generalists. It concludes with the requirement of recalibrating the civil services with sub-specialist credentials to enhance the Indian maritime trajectories.

KEYWORDS

Indian Maritime Service; specialists; generalists; Indian Administrative Service; Indian Navy; maritime governance

Introduction

India is making progressive strides in curing its historical sea blindness. In what could be touted as a consequence of a “de-continentalisation” process, the Indian ambition to be a global maritime hub is on an ascendancy. After independence, despite advancements on matters of navy, port infrastructure, blue economy, and maritime diplomacy, the need for a specialised maritime bureaucracy remained unexplored. A sign of respite surfaced in 2014, when the National Shipping Board (NSB) approached the Ministry of Shipping (currently Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways), Government of India, requesting the introduction of an Indian Maritime Service (IMS) on the lines of other civil services in the country.¹ Notwithstanding the ambiguity regarding the true nature of the proposed IMS, it can possibly facilitate the talents for top-notch managerial and directorial posts in maritime governance. Hence, the IMS can partake in administrative activities, ranging from mercantile marine, port and lighthouse administration, shipyards, inland waterways, maritime boards to diplomatic assignments at the International Maritime Organization (IMO) or in national missions abroad. However, indications, of any sort, in terms of a follow-up have been hardly seen since then.

Why India needs a maritime service

India's sea blindness in the pre- and post-independent contexts has been a result of both cultural and bureaucratic disinclination towards maritime affinity. The earliest signs of anti-sea attitudes in the subcontinent can be traced back to caste-centric restrictions on "crossing the seas". The European colonial ventures into the subcontinent exposed the magnitude of blunders that sea blindness as a political behaviour postulate. However, apparently, the Indian state continues to thrive under a reactive project of maritime engagements in lieu of a proactive one.

India's civilian maritime administration has invariably lacked a specialist leadership. Conventionally, the personnel for top-level management of various bodies that make up the larger complex of India's maritime administration have been supplied by the IAS. Importantly, the Secretary to the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways has invariably been a member of the IAS. Some occasional deviations have been registered, with the Indian Revenue Service (IRS) officials being given charges outside income tax/customs-related assignments. The appointment of Amitabh Kumar, hailing from the IRS (Income Tax) cadre, as the Director General of Shipping in 2019 is an example.² There is also no dearth of incidents of people being drawn from various ranks and backgrounds, including engineering, finance, etc., belonging to the corporate realm, and also through governmental inter-agency pollination, to run maritime offices. The continuing non-specialist leadership undoubtedly contributes to the sea blindness in an essentially bureaucracy-led Indian establishment. An elite-cum-effective civilian expertise in maritime administration is inevitable to nurture a better governing architecture for maritime affairs.

A new cohort of specialists may provide consistency to the maritime policy track given the non-permanent nature of the political executive. The policy efforts to include a Central Marine Police Force (CMPF) alongside the Indian Navy (IN), the Indian Coast Guard (ICG), and the State Coastal Police forces, although worthy of commendation, are insufficient to meet the needs of contemporary maritime reality. The reason is that the sea blindness cannot be viewed just from the prism of conventional maritime threats. Considering the maritime security concerns in the frame, actions afoot should discard the narrow idea of addressing non-military challenges through uniformed services. Policy responses to issues of the likes of blue economy, marine safety, pollution and climate change, which find a place in the Christian Bueger's maritime security matrix, require a dedicated non-uniformed branch. Bueger's matrix offers a theoretical framework to understand how various actors perceive and situate maritime threats.³ Besides, in April 2021, General Bipin Rawat, the former Chief of Defence Staff, had announced the constitution of a National Maritime Commission (NMC), which is to be headed by a National Maritime Security Coordinator.⁴ This long-pending need had been laid out in the 2001 Kargil Group of Ministers report. Once established, the NMC would need a team of its own, which further legitimises the need for an IMS.

Furthermore, the first-ever statement on maritime security adopted by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) under India's presidency, on August 9, 2021, stretched its very scope.⁵ Actions to realise the five-point framework laid down by Prime Minister Narendra Modi also implicitly necessitate an exclusive civil service for maritime management. On the economic front, official sources confirm that India is aiming to be a US\$

250 billion maritime economy by 2024.⁶ In addition, in the 2021 edition of the Maritime India Summit, Prime Minister Modi had underlined that India will invest US\$ 82 billion in port infrastructure by 2035 under the Sagarmala Project.⁷ This massive economic projection can be expedited through the establishment of a specialised maritime bureaucracy. If this bureaucratic experiment materialises, New Delhi can definitely be a trailblazer among the maritime states.

Building a maritime bureaucracy

Initiating a maritime service cannot be decided solely on the premise that “maritime” is an item that falls in the Union List. Politically, like any non-unitary system, India also has to take into account the “federal undercurrents” while deciding to float a new civil service. Having a coastline of 7,516.6 kilometres (km) spread across nine states and four union territories (UTs) out of a total of 28 states and eight UTs, the possibility of an all-India service akin to the IAS, the Indian Police Service (IPS), and the Indian Forest Service (IFS) is surreal, which, in turn, requires an addition of a technical cadre under Group “A” Central Services. This could also set a rationale for the coastal states to design a state maritime service to meet their maritime administrative requisites, if deemed necessary.

The recruitment for this central service, in consonance with Article 320(1) of the Indian Constitution, shall be the responsibility of the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC). Being a technical cadre, the recruitment can be modelled on services having similar attributes, like Indian Engineering Services, Indian Economic Service or Indian Statistical Service, wherein special educational qualifications, such as a bachelor’s degree in disciplines of maritime significance, can be sought as the basic criteria for inducting officers. The role of parental authority, factorising the professional nature of the service, can be assigned to the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways. As of now, the only Group “A” service that comes under its aegis is the Mercantile Marine Training Ship Service. If the coastal states also venture into constituting a maritime service under the State Civil Services, the creation of a full-fledged Department of Maritime Affairs by merging the existing Department of Fisheries (mostly found in these states) would ease the seaborne mandate.

It is also desirable that the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways (which was renamed in 2020) undergoes a further overhaul from within and be renamed as the Ministry of Maritime Affairs, since the scope of Indian oceanic engagements is experiencing a surge in all directions. The neighbouring state of Pakistan has already set a precedent in 2017 by renaming its Ministry of Ports and Shipping as the Ministry of Maritime Affairs.⁸ On the other hand, Indonesia has gone to the extent of creating a Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs in 2014, placing energy and mineral resources, maritime affairs and fisheries, tourism, and transport ministries under its aegis, as part of the then Jokowi administration’s idea of transforming Indonesia into a global maritime fulcrum (*poros maritim dunia*).⁹

Dilemma of inter-agency cooperation

The generalists-versus-specialists paradox is a global administrative hallmark, and India is no exception. As in the past, the first and foremost opposition towards the creation of

an IMS shall be from the IAS. There is also little doubt as to why the proposal for IMS by the NBS never saw the light of the day. To be precise, the administrative delay in the creation of IMS is more than the usual bureaucratic constraints exemplified by the mechanistic theory of public administration. Rather, it reveals the inability to reform the administrative situation wherein generalism has become the model which stood the test of time.

If the IMS manages to come into operation, checks must be employed to protect its “specialists” status. Apparently, the problem of domination by generalists was critically appraised in the 2002 report of the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution.¹⁰ The report highlighted the need to specialise some of the generalists, and vice versa, in a bid to resist this lobbying-backed menace. The intra-civil (civil-to-civil) relations of a central maritime service with the generalist IAS could actually muddy the waters, leading to more trouble.

India’s political superstructure, defined in terms of its democratic base, and the civil–military relations (CMR) also become pertinent factors that impact the call for an IMS. On the military front, it would be wrong to speculate that the IN would not have any reservations about this hypothetical service. The prospect of civil–military tussles with the IN can be a blow to inter-agency cooperation and is capable of effecting serious damage to the maritime morale. The IMS must be able to utilise the IN’s maritime know-how and institutional memory. Even with a small chance of an IMS officer taking over as the Secretary to the Ministry of Defence, the navy’s concerns will be further heightened. The navy will also have to prepare to share the burden vis-à-vis the maritime domain with a new civil service. After all, “maritime” shall be the lingua franca between the two services. Having another cohort to further split the maritime domain through strict civilian and military delineation can have unseen repercussions. Succinctly put, the IMS must be able to rise to the level of “sub-specialists” capable of maintaining cordial relations on both civil and military fronts.

Tensions can arise with the ICG too, giving way to civil–paramilitary complexities. One of the stated objectives of the ICG, as a law enforcement agency, is combating marine pollution. Since IMS is a potential policy-deciding agency on marine pollution, there could be a tug of war with the ICG at the functional level. As far as the CMPF is concerned, an assessment can be made only if its nature (whether it is paramilitary or just an armed police force) and functions are properly defined, as and when it is created. In short, measures are necessary to avert any crisis of “operational disconnect”.

Therefore, it is evident that just raising an IMS is not enough. The so-called maritime specialists should receive their due share in the power corridor. One of the most noticeable attributes that continues to exist is the IAS supremacy over posts like the Revenue Secretary and Comptroller and Auditor General of India, under whom the IRS and Indian Audit and Accounts Service (IA&AS) officers function respectively. In fact, in India’s administrative history, an IRS or IA&AS officer has never managed to occupy these posts. Therefore, if the maritime service comes into being, measures must be in place to ensure that posts such as Shipping Secretary or Maritime Secretary are occupied by IMS officers. Otherwise, the very purpose of IMS may be defeated.

Invoking the domain competence principle

Given the technical nature of maritime affairs, domain competence is a necessary attribute in a maritime bureaucrat. The lack of domain competence in the Indian civil services has been reflected in the reports by the First and Second Administrative Reforms Commissions, appointed in 1966 and 2005, respectively. The Surinder Nath Committee, in 2003, succeeded in providing the conceptual differences between “domain competency” and “domain competence”. It clarified the same as follows:

Domain competency relates to sufficient background in a certain context of policymaking. It differs from general schemes of policy programme formulation in that such general skills would relate primarily to knowledge of formal techniques of policy analysis/programme formulation and experience of policy/programme formulation generally, while “Domain Competence” would involve, in addition, significant subject matter knowledge, gained from work experience, academic study, training and research.¹¹

The principle of “domain competence” is a critical lens through which the gaps in India’s maritime governance can be addressed. A dedicated civil service with personnel equipped with technical know-how and domain scholarship is what is needed to enhance India’s oceanic profile. An identical consideration that has emerged is the need for “specialised generalists” with domain-specific knowledge, recommended by the 41-member Parliamentary Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice, headed by Bhupender Yadav, in March 2020.¹² The panel has also suggested the categorisation of ministries into various clusters, with appointments made on domain-specific knowledge. It is not easy to change a generalist-centric system that has proved to be a conducive template for India’s administrative profile. Yet, a set of officials with “scholar-bureaucrat” credentials is indispensable for guarding Indian maritime interests.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the challenges, the establishment of IMS as a bureaucratic lever to the maritime institutional ecosystem is vindicated on multiple grounds. One such argument from the theoretical dimension is, of course, the need for specialists, a view that is substantiated by a galaxy of administrative thinkers, including Herbert Simon and Max Weber.

There have also been wake-up calls from various quarters, including corporate and political, urging a shift to discard the outmoded philosophy of generalism. For instance, as a sympathiser of specialism, N.R. Narayana Murthy, the Infosys founder, supports the abolition of generalist bureaucracy, and the IAS in particular.¹³ Taking a parallel approach, Arvind Kejriwal, the Chief Minister of Delhi, has underscored the need to replace bureaucrats with professionals and sector experts.¹⁴ The creation of the Indian Skill Development Service in 2019 does sustain the hope concerning government’s openness to welcome untried services. Moreover, the lateral entry scheme, approved in 2019, for joint secretary-level positions, provides a direction for future course of action. Under this mode, Bhushan Kumar was appointed as Joint Secretary (Sagarmala and Public-Private Partnership) in the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways in 2019.¹⁵ This, indeed, can be viewed as a welcome move.

However, the exigency to gauge the “specialists deficit” should not be unsympathetic of the domestic reality. Having said that, any move which is tantamount to the decimation of IAS or the very notion of generalists can incur a heavy price that could potentially lead to an organisational entropy of no precedent. Regarding federal implications, it is needless to say that with the constitution of a central maritime service, centre–state relations also may become a political casualty as the states in the coastal belt may undergo a maritime rejig. At its worst, state maritime services would fail miserably to match up with a more powerful central counterpart. On the flip side, the state maritime services will have their own space over an array of key functions, including maritime paradiplomacy.

With all being told, specialist civil services are a benchmark of political modernisation. Hence, the centre ought to initiate necessary bureaucratic reforms to float a truly post-colonial administrative interface. For instance, the Indian Salt Service can be discontinued and its responsibilities could be transferred to the new cadre by virtue of the maritime character of “salt affairs”. Doubtlessly, an IMS is indeed the need of the hour. A brand new maritime bureaucracy, made out of decentring “generalism”, will further strengthen the proverbial “steel frame” of the country.

Notes

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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