

This article is related to General Studies-Paper-III (Infrastructure)

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"The government has decided to trim the Railway Board, and merge service cadres. How were the Railways being run so far, and why was an overhaul felt necessary? And why has it upset civil servants in Railways?"

The Cabinet recently approved trimming of the Railway Board, the powerful body that governs the Indian Railways. From nine, the Board will now have only five Members.

The Cabinet also decided to merge all central service cadres of Railways officers into a single Indian Railways Management Service (IRMS). Now, any eligible officer could occupy any post, including Board Member posts, irrespective of training and specialisation, since they will all belong to IRMS.

The five members of the Board, other than a Chairman-cum-CEO, will now be the Members Infrastructure, Finance, Rolling Stock, Track, and Operations and Business Development. The Board will also have independent Members, who will be industry experts with at least 30 years of experience, but in non-executive roles, only attending Board meetings.

The move has led to protests from serving civil servants, prompting the Railway Board to reach out to them to allay their concerns.

What is the present system like?

The Indian Railways is governed by a pool of officers, among whom engineers are recruited after the Indian Engineering Service Examination, and civil servants through the Civil Services Examination. The civil servants are in the Indian Railway Traffic Service (IRTS), Indian Railway Accounts Service (IRAS) and Indian Railway Personnel Service (IRPS). The engineers are in five technical service cadres — Indian Railway Service of Engineers (IRSE), Indian Railway Service of Mechanical Engineers (IRSME), Indian Railway Service of Electrical Engineers (IRSEE), Indian Railway Service of Signal Engineers (IRSSE) and the Indian Railway Stores Service (IRSS).

Until the 1950s, the Railways system was run by officers from just three main streams: Traffic, Civil Engineering, and Mechanical. The other streams emerged as separate services over time.

Why was the reform needed?

The government wants to end inter-departmental rivalries, which it says have been hindering growth for decades. Railway Minister Piyush Goyal said departments were working "in silos".

Several committees including the Bibek Debroy committee in 2015 have noted that "departmentalism" is a major problem in the system. Most committees have said merger of the services in some form would be a solution. The

Debroy report recommended merging of all services to create two distinct services: Technical and Logistics. But it did not say how to merge the existing officers.

A separate exam under the Union Public Service Commission is proposed to be instituted in 2021 to induct IRMS officers.

Why are officers opposed to the move?

The questions started with a proposal to merge all 8,400 officers in the eight services — five technical and three non-technical — to prepare a common seniority list and a general pool of posts, especially in higher managerial ranks. The Cabinet has decided that a Group of Secretaries, and then a Group of Ministers through the ‘Alternate Mechanism’, will look at how best to do this. The process might take a year, officials said.

Those protesting the government’s decision say that the merger is unscientific and against established norms, because it proposes to merge two fundamentally dissimilar entities, with multiple disparities.

First, the civil servants come from all walks of life after clearing the Civil Services Examination. The engineers usually sit for the Engineering Services Examination right after getting an engineering degree. Various studies have noted that engineers join the Railways around the age of 22-23, while the civil servants join when they are around 26, barring exceptions. The age difference starts to pinch at the later stages of their careers, when higher-grade posts are fewer. There are more engineers than civil servants.

Protesters are also saying that the merger is against the service conditions which civil servants sign up for while choosing an alternative if they cannot make it to IAS.

How pronounced is this skew?

The Railways have legitimised a system wherein an officer with a certain number of years left in service will be considered eligible for general-management higher posts, the most important of which is that of General Manager, who heads zones and production units.

An officer, irrespective of seniority in his batch and acumen, requires at least two years of service left to be eligible for GM. There are 27 such posts, including as the heads of the 17 zonal railways.

While any officer from any service can be considered for GM, civil servants have often found themselves at a disadvantage since they don’t have the required service tenure left. Today, of the 27 posts, civil servants occupy only two. One of them is from the Traffic service, not just because of merit but also because the Member (Traffic) post cannot be filled by anyone other than a Traffic service officer and, to be the Member (Traffic), an officer needs to have served as GM. And only engineers have been Chairman Railway Board since July 2013.

In the fields where the Railways are actually operated, the share of civil servants in junior-to-middle levels is over 40 per cent. But in higher management, their representation is around 16-17 per cent.

What will change with the restructure?

In inter-departmental seniority — a complex process to fix, which has led to court cases in the past — problems arise when different services compete for posts that are open to all — like those of Divisional Railway Managers (DRMs), GMs, and subsequently, the Chairman Railway Board. And here lies the major criticism of the move.

The civil servants are saying that if all present cadres are merged and even higher departmental posts become open to all, engineers, being in larger numbers and of a certain age profile, may end up occupying most posts, if not all. Another aspect is the suitability of jobs. The move, many say, emerges from the “simplistic” belief that while non-technical specialists cannot do technical jobs, technocrats can do both. The counter-argument is that civil servants in government, by virtue of the screening process and subsequent training, possess acumen and skills that go beyond academic specialisation.

How did the Railways get here?

Departmental posts are ring-fenced; promotions happen within each department from officers of that service. The problem starts when, within a department, there are too many officers eligible for a few posts. A department needs a constant supply of posts in higher grades to keep promoting its seniors so that the juniors can keep getting timely promotions.

In the Railways, this has happened either organically when the government restructured the cadres and created new posts at intervals of several years, or through the execution of projects.

Across the Railways, the internal attempt by each department has always been to get a bigger share of resources to spend on projects, although the limited funds are meant for all. Until recently, for execution of each project, departments could create “temporary” posts, called “work-charged” posts, funded through money from the particular project. Departments would seek more projects since the byproduct was more work-charged posts — and that meant more promotional avenues for the department’s officers. The departments grew, promotional prospects expanded, even if Railways did not. The “temporary” posts were almost never surrendered, and were “regularised” over time. This was most prevalent in the technical departments and, to an extent, in the Accounts department as well, officials say.

In the cadre-restructuring exercise, overseen by the Cabinet and the Cabinet Secretary, work-charged posts have been banned. But a majority of the “temporary” posts were absorbed in regular cadres.

In 2015, the government merged the verticals (not cadres) of Electrical and Mechanical on “functional lines” to make the Rolling Stock and the Traction departments. Electrical was made in charge of locomotives, and Mechanical of coaches, wagons, AC — even though the Railways are an electrical system. So Mechanical verticals working in one field started reporting to an Electrical boss and vice versa, with many of them losing influence on their domain subjects.

What happens next?

The current demand is for two distinct services instead of one — a civil services, and one that encompasses all engineering specialisations. The logic is that functionally, departments will continue to exist through various technical and non-technical specialisations, so merging them will not end departmentalism per se.

The government has on record assured all existing officers that no one’s seniority will be hampered and promotion prospects will be protected. “We would not have taken such a big decision without some planning. Everything will be apparent in due course,” a senior Railway Board official said.

The protests are gathering momentum. Some of the recently graduated civil services batches plan to write to the Department of Personnel and Training seeking a permanent transfer to a non-Railway service. Unofficial support is said to be coming from civil service groups outside the Railways. Railway unions are planning protests next month. There are boycotts of official functions, and a clamour to meet the Prime Minister. There are allegations lower down the ranks that seniors in the Ministry did not put up resistance to the move. The morale of officers is said to be affected.

Amid all this, one concern among the higher-ups is that the actual job of safely running trains 24/7 must not get neglected.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements in the context of recent reorganization of the Frailway Board.

1. The number of members of the revised Railway Board has been increased.
2. The eight services of the Group 'A' in Railways have been integrated into the Indian Railway Management Service.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1 (b) Only 2
(c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 2 Jan., is 1 (c)

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

Q. How have the recent changes in Indian Railways addressed administrative and institutional reforms in the railways together? Discuss and also mention the negative effects of these changes.

(250 words)

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.

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