IAS

The Indian Administrative Service (IAS) is the top-most layer of the government bureaucracy in India, consisting of fewer than 5000 officers in 2005. IAS bureaucrats staff the most important positions in district administration, state and central government secretariats, and state-owned enterprises. A particularly important position is that of a District Officer, who is responsible for ensuring law and order, providing certain judicial functions, organizing relief and rehabilitation in cases of natural disasters, implementing development policies and overseeing all aspects of administration in a specific district.7 These are positions of considerable importance: the median population of a district in 2001 was 1.5 million people, and District Officers frequently administer budgets of the order of $2 million. Lower levels of administration are staffed by members of State Civil Services. IAS officers are career civil servants, and political neutrality is a requirement of their position. IAS officers cannot join political parties or be involved in any political events. On the other side, politicians are not involved in the hiring process of IAS officers. Recruitment is either through extremely competitive nationwide examinations conducted by an independent Commission (“direct recruits”), or by promotion of the best-performing officers from the lower State Civil Services (“SCS promotees”), the latter category being restricted to not more than one-third of officers in a state.8 After recruitment and initial training, direct recruits are assigned to specific state cadres, where they typically spend most of their careers. This assignment of officers to states is done by a rigid (rather complicated) bureaucratic rule, resulting in a quasi-random assignment of officers to states. In particular, it is very difficult for elected politicians or the bureaucrats themselves to affect this assignment.9 Not more than one-third of the direct recruits assigned to a state can be natives of that state. The Constitution of India provides IAS officers considerable immunity from statelevel politicians by stipulating that an IAS officer “holds office during the pleasure of the President,” and cannot be “dismissed or removed by an authority subordinate to that by which he was appointed” (Articles 310 and 311). This means that IAS officers cannot be dismissed or demoted by state-level elected representatives.

The Indian Administrative Service (IAS), India's premier bureaucratic tier, comprised under 5000 officers in 2005. These civil servants occupy key roles in district, state, and central government administrations, as well as in public sector undertakings. The role of District Officer is particularly pivotal, charged with maintaining public order, executing judicial duties, managing disaster responses, implementing development programs, and overseeing district governance for populations averaging 1.5 million, with substantial operational budgets. State Civil Services personnel fill subordinate administrative ranks. IAS officers must adhere to political impartiality, barred from political affiliations and insulated from political involvement in their recruitment. Entry into the IAS is via highly competitive exams or promotion from State Civil Services, with limitations on the proportion of promotees. Initial training is followed by cadre assignments, largely determined by a complex, impartial bureaucratic process, limiting the proportion of officers serving in their home state. Constitutionally, IAS officers enjoy protection from dismissal by state politicians, with their tenure secured under the President's pleasure, ensuring a level of autonomy from state-level political interference.

Bureaucrat Careers

IAS officers start by holding positions at the sub-district level, and move on to higher positions within the district, the state secretariat or state-owned enterprises. Officers are usually appointed as District Officers after attaining five to ten years of experience (this varies by state). Promotions are based on years of service for the first few years, and have a meritbased component for the higher level positions. IAS officers are evaluated by their superior officers in Annual Confidential Reports. Wages and salaries are set by independent Pay Commissions, and are determined by the bureaucrat’s rank within the hierarchy. IAS officers are subject to a comprehensive career review approximately twenty years after they join the service. This review is conducted by senior bureaucrats, who decide whether the officer is eligible to hold positions of Joint Secretary and higher in the central government at New Delhi; such positions are usually considered very prestigious. The selected officers are put on a panel from which they can be selected for such positions, as and when the need arises in the central government. This process is called “empanelment” and being “empaneled” is widely regarded as a signal of superior competence within the bureaucracy

IAS officers commence their careers at the sub-district level, advancing to district and state-level roles or to positions within public sector undertakings. With five to ten years of service, they may ascend to the role of District Officer, with promotions initially tied to tenure and later incorporating merit for senior designations. Annual Confidential Reports by superiors inform their evaluations. Independent Pay Commissions determine their remuneration based on rank. Roughly two decades post-recruitment, officers undergo a stringent review by high-ranking bureaucrats to assess eligibility for prestigious central government roles like Joint Secretary. Successful officers are placed on a panel, marking them for potential selection to these roles as opportunities arise. This "empanelment" is a recognition of exceptional capability within the service.

India’s Political System

India is a parliamentary democracy in which elections are held every five years, both for the central government in New Delhi and for the 28 states that constitute the Indian Union. The head of the state executive is the Governor, who acts on the advice of the Chief Minister and the Council of Ministers. The Chief Minister is usually the leader of the party which wins a majority of seats in the state legislature (similar to the Prime Minister at the national level). If the current Chief Minister loses the support of his party (due to internal party politics), or the parties in a coalition government fall apart, efforts are made to form another government, either by choosing a new leader from the same party, or by putting together another coalition. If these efforts fail, the central government often steps in to declare “President’s Rule” in the state, when the administration of the state is brought under the central government until fresh elections are held. The election calendar resets to a five-year one after any such midterm poll. Differing incidence of midterm polls across states has now resulted in states’ calendars being different from each other and from the national election calendar. For instance, the last national elections were in 2004, but five states had state elections in 2006

India operates as a parliamentary democracy with elections every five years for both the national government and its 28 states. The state's executive is helmed by the Governor, advised by the Chief Minister and the cabinet. The Chief Minister, typically the majority party's leader in the state assembly, parallels the Prime Minister at the federal level. Political shifts within parties or coalition breakdowns can prompt the formation of a new government or the invocation of "President's Rule," where the central government assumes state administration until new elections. This can result in staggered election cycles among the states, independent of the national election timetable. For example, while national elections took place in 2004, five states held their elections in 2006.

Transfers of IAS Bureaucrats

As described in section 2.2, IAS officers cannot be hired or fired by state-level politicians. However, officers can be reassigned or transferred from one post to another. Such transfer orders are signed by the Chief Secretary (the top bureaucrat) who reports directly to the Chief Minister of the state. While bureaucrats can request specific assignments, they have very little power to affect the outcome of such requests. These transfers are almost always within the state, or sometimes between the state and central governments; transfers across states are extremely rare. In our data, we find that IAS bureaucrats are transferred quite frequently: over the period 1980-2000, the probability that an officer experiences a transfer in a given year is 53% (Table 1, Panel B). The average tenure of IAS officers in a given post is 16 months and only 56% of District Officers spend more than one year in their jobs. This is in violation of the recommendations, put forward by the Ministry of Personnel and the Fifth Pay Commission, for a three-to-five year tenure in each post. Interestingly, frequent transfers of bureaucrats has been a long-standing feature of the Indian bureaucracy. For instance, using data from the British colonial period, Potter (1996) finds that two-thirds of all District Officers in 1936 had held their posts for less than one year. Gilmour (2005, p 220) provides a vivid example from an even earlier period: “...between 1879 and 1885 Colonel Tweedie did three stints in Gwalior, two in Baghdad, two in Ajmer, one in Jodhpur, one on the road between Peshawar and Kabul as Political Officer during the invasion of Afghanistan, and another as Political Officer in charge of Jalalabad.” Consistent with our hypothesis that such transfers are used as a control mechanism by politicians, we find that the average rate of bureaucrat transfers in a state increases significantly when there is a new Chief Minister in that state (see Figure 2 for a graphical illustration of bureaucrat transfers in Tamil Nadu state). Such alleged “politicization” of the bureaucracy has become a major public policy issue in India. A Public Services Bill currently exists in draft form, which proposes explicit limits on the political executive’s ability to transfer bureaucrats before they complete two years of service.10 However, politicians seem to value the ability to reassign bureaucrats frequently: during initial consultations regarding the Bill, only eleven states agreed to have a minimum two-year tenure for District Officers, and ten states refused outright!

As delineated in section 2.2, IAS officers are beyond the hire-and-fire authority of state politicians but are subject to reassignment and transfer. These moves, authorized by the Chief Secretary who is accountable to the state's Chief Minister, occur within the state or between state and central governments, with interstate transfers being a rarity. Data from 1980-2000 reveals a high transfer frequency among IAS officers, with a yearly transfer probability of 53%, and an average post tenure of 16 months. Such frequent relocations, which contravene the advised three-to-five-year tenure per post, have historical precedence in the Indian bureaucracy. This pattern of frequent transfers, potentially a political tool, escalates with the induction of a new Chief Minister. The proposed Public Services Bill seeks to restrict this by setting a two-year minimum before transfer, yet resistance from state politicians highlights the challenge of reforming this aspect of the bureaucracy.