

It would indeed be a tall order for me to define and compare the personnel systems in the United States and India in a short lecture. Here I try only to dwell on important criteria.

In general only two systems are talked about: Rank-in-Person (Originally called Rank-in-Man) and Rank-in-Position. However there is another that preceded these two, and some traces of it still prevail: The Spoils System. The dictum is that to the victor belong the spoils. Every time there is a regime change, administration follows it as the new regime exercises its privilege of bringing its own personnel. This practice has its advantages. It provides comfort to the chief executive as policies of the incumbent are expected to be better administered because the personnel belong to the same regime, sharing similar ideology. In the absence of “guerilla” bureaucrats, there would be no sabotage of policies. It enhances political control. For the party workers, the prospect of employment would also serve as a motivating factor, leading to better political participation. Consequent strong party system is good for democracy. It also works against the proprietary feelings of a tenured administrator. Rotation of personnel also could bring fresh perspectives.

Yet such a system is fraught with many a pitfall. There would be no continuity in administration, which makes it difficult to predict what course of action would be forthcoming. Discontinuity leads to chaos. Worse, all sorts of extraneous considerations might creep in while making the appointments which can be summed up as “nepotism”. Fellow travelers are picked, which does not necessarily guarantee “merit”. Inefficiency ensues. Party politics take center-stage to the detriment of public interest.

Given these shortcomings, policymakers began thinking of “merit” as the criterion. One can trace these beginnings to the Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1853-54 in England, which inspired the 1883 Pendleton Act in the United States. Merit is determined, following the Chinese Imperial tradition of written tests. While ancient Chinese rulers considered writing decent poetry as a measure of merit, the Western tradition veered towards professional examinations. This is not to say that merit ended spoils. Even in the most modern merit systems, some aspects of spoils may still be seen. When a new President is elected in the United States, all Heads of Departments change (with the exception the President might retain those who are top notch administrators), as is the case in case of a new Prime Minister who chooses their own Cabinet Ministers. Similarly top diplomatic heads too change just as heads of statutory commissions. In India a change of government would see a change of State Governors who serve at the “pleasure” of the President despite a constitutionally sanctioned five-year tenure. There is a rather curious case of Jyoti Prasad Rajkhova who was appointed as Governor of the State of Arunachal Pradesh. He was censured by the subsequent government which also sought his dismissal. He in turn claimed that he has a five-year appointment, and can only be dismissed by the President at whose “pleasure” he serves. President Pranab Mukherjee in fact did dismiss him in 2016.

Of the two other major “merit” personnel systems, the British and its former colonies (largely) follow the Rank-in-Person system. Young persons (of varying age limits) are selected after competitive written tests followed by an oral examination. Such persons are posted from position to position, depending upon the experience and expertise, wherever their services are needed. Rank inheres in the person, implying that as the person grows so does the position. Personnel are moved wherever their talents are needed. These are called “generalists”. There is also often used expression that these tend to be “jack of all trades,” who may be “masters of none.” In India, Administrative Reforms Commissions I & II took notice of the agitation of “experts/professionals” that they are being shut out of higher administrative positions. That led to the recommendation that they too be considered for promotions.

Rank-in-Person has its own drawbacks. Number of years of service does not ensure proficiency. For, one may be repeating the first few years’ experience *ad infinitum* which might turn into *ad nauseam*. Movement across various positions need not guarantee any expertise. A certain proprietary feeling might also creep in with the incumbent getting smug and even arrogant, given tenure in job. Commitment to self-aggrandizement may take precedence over public service.

Contrarily, the United States follows the Rank-in-Position system. It would be useful to note that the concept of “civil service” as understood in the British and other colonial countries, is alien to the Americans.

Personnel practices are largely decentralized between federal, state and as many as 18,000 local entities. Even at each level, variations occur as between departments.

The emphasis is on the position to be filled which must first be defined as precisely as is possible. Then the qualifications and experience needed to perform on that job are set. A Grade is assigned with commensurate compensation. Thus, the exercise comprises what the job entails, and who can do it best. There is a certain underpinning of egalitarianism in this system. It is not one's educational accomplishment, nor the status in the society, but only qualifications to do a job that matters. The latest example is an Executive Order issued on January 18, 2023 by the newly elected Governor of Pennsylvania, Joseph Shapiro, mandating that no college degree is required for any of the nearly 65,000 positions in the state government, constituting 92% of all positions. As *New York Times* reported on January 29, 2023 that "relevant work experience and skills-based training regardless of the educational attainment" is what is sought. It is to be noted that the states of Maryland and Utah have been following this method for the last one year. Nonetheless, it is not a single candidate, but either three or seven top names are forwarded to the chief executive to provide some leeway to choose.

Position classification is not an easy exercise. For one, it is often quite difficult to define some public service positions such as those in the social service sector. It ignores what one learns on the job, and what one comes with to the job. While writing the position description, the first to be consulted are the incumbents, who have the experience on the job. Then the supervisor is consulted, following the organizational chart, and so on. It is known that most all, as is human nature, embellish the job they are doing, just as the supervisor would not admit overseeing sub-standard personnel. Giving the position a high-sounding name might result in a higher Grade (with better pay). This is commonly known as "grade creep". A dog-catcher's position might be rechristened as "canine rehabilitation officer," or a janitor as "sanitary engineer".

It shall be noted that even in the United States which provides the classic example of the Position Classification system, there have been limited, and not very successful, attempts to promote the Rank-in-Person method such as the 1973 Civil Service Reform Act which established the Senior Executive Service.

Thus, each system has its own highs and lows. Much depends upon concepts as old as Plato, but Fred Riggs in his works provided currency and advocacy, which I summarize under two headings: "Culture" and "Context". What works in one country and in one context need not, and would not, work in a different country under different conditions. Thus a good personnel system must always strive to match the right person with the right job.

A clarification: "Affirmative action" (AA) does prevail in the US personnel system. After all, that very expression is American! But, contrary to the Indian "reservations", AA is more passive. There, certainly are no quotas. The very thought of a "quota" is abhorrent within the US context. Moreover, AA has had minimal impact on public service, but largely confined to higher education which in itself is under attack. While the Supreme Court affirmed AA in 1973, current Court is likely to take a dim view as it is currently considering two cases challenging AA.

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