

Restructuring Railways

Why in News?

- The Cabinet has recently decided to merge all central service cadres of Railways officers into a single service.
- It has also approved the trimming of the Railway Board from a nine-member board to a five-member one.

What are the decisions taken?

- **IRMS** - All the central service cadres of Railways officers will be merged into a single Indian Railways Management Service (IRMS).
- Now, any eligible officer could occupy any post, irrespective of training and specialisation, since they all will belong to IRMS.
- **Board** - The five members of the Board, other than a Chairman-cum-CEO, will 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 through 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 Services of Engineers (IRSE), Mechanical Engineers (IRSME), Electrical Engineers (IRSEE), and Signal Engineers (IRSSE); and the Indian Railway Stores Service (IRSS).

Why was the reform needed?

- The government wants to **end inter-departmental rivalries**, which it says

have been hindering growth for decades.

- Several committees including the **Bibek Debroy committee** (2015) have noted that “departmentalism” is a major problem in the system.
- 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 opposition started with a proposal to merge officers in the eight services to prepare a common seniority list and a general pool of posts.
- Those protesting the government’s decision say that the merger is unscientific and against established norms.
- They say that the proposal is trying to merge two fundamentally dissimilar entities, with multiple disparities.
- The civil servants come **from all walks of life** after clearing the Civil Services Examination, not like the engineers who usually sit for the Engineering Service examination right after getting a degree.
- Various studies have noted that engineers join the Railways around the age of 22-23, while the civil servants join 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.

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 these posts is the General Manager post, who heads zones and production units.
- An officer, irrespective of seniority in his batch and acumen, requires at least two years of service left for being eligible for GM.
- The civil servants have often found themselves at a disadvantage since they don’t have the required service tenure left.
- In the fields where the Railways are actually operated, the share of civil servants in junior-to-middle levels is over 40%, but in higher management, it is around 16-17%

What will change with the restructure?

- In inter-departmental seniority, problems arise when different services compete for posts that are open to all like those of Divisional Railway Managers (DRMs), GMs and the Chairman Railway Board.
- If all present cadres are merged and higher departmental posts become open to all, **engineers may end up occupying most posts**, if not all.
- Another aspect is the **suitability of jobs**.
- The move emerges from the 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.
- A department needs a constant supply of posts in higher grades to keep promoting its seniors so that the juniors 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.
- For execution of each project, departments could create **temporary “work-charged” posts**, funded by the particular project for itself.
- Departments would seek more projects since the by-product was more work-charged posts and that meant more promotional avenues for the department’s officers.
- 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.

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.
- The protests are gathering momentum.
- Amid all these protests, one concern among the higher-ups is that the actual job of safely running trains 24/7 must not get neglected.

Source: Indian Express

