Generalist vs specialist

What is the issue?

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- The debate on generalists and specialists is kick-started with rising demands for lateral entry into civil services.
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- Also, the changing nature of government creates the need for a reassessment of the nature of civil servants involved in administration.
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What is the need for specialisation?

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- **Changing nature** - The Indian Administrative Service(IAS) was modelled on the colonial era Indian Civil Service as a generalist service.
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- It was conceived primarily to deliver the core functions of the state such as tax collection and maintenance of law and order.
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- But with the evolution of public administration and economic reforms changing the State's role, there is a higher demand for domain knowledge at policy level.
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- **Drawbacks** - IAS, as generalists, tend to over-weigh their experience of the process and form over understanding of policy content.
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- Generalists heading specialised areas seems to be an inefficient arrangement at times.
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- There is also a misconception that only generalists who have a breadth of understanding and experience can provide best leadership.
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- All these have raised questions about the role and relevance of the generalised IAS.
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What could be done?

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- The Constitution Review Commission 2002 suggested the “need to specialise some of the generalists and generalise some of the specialists”.
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- However the task of managing specialisation needs the consideration of many factors:
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- **When** - From generalised field postings in the initial decade of service, an IAS gradually moves to policy formulating positions.
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- This mid-career level transition provides the ideal marker for beginning to specialise.
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- **How** - Possibly, complying to the demands of behavioural attributes and aptitudes, ministries could be broadly categorised into three groups - welfare, regulatory and economic ministries.
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- Secondly, specialisation process needs to be flexible according to the preference of IAS officers.
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- Given this flexibility, it is also essential that the government make the process more predictable and transparent to avoid favouritism.
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- Thirdly, once allocated to specialist positions, officers should be provided study and training for deepening their domain knowledge.
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- In addition to these, the specialised lateral entrants should be required to “generalise” through field postings.
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- The nature of policy-making at present demands that specialist **expertise** has to go with generalist **experience**.
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- Thus, proper cadre management that provides for a right proportion of generalisation and specialisation can improve the efficiency and relevance of civil services.
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Source: Indian Express

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