

Subjects or Citizens? Political Parties, Indianisation, and the Contest over Bureaucratic Reform (1930–1950)

Akansha Goel

Research Scholar, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, SSHSS, Sharda University, Greater Noida, U.P., India.

Khushboo Kumari*

Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, SSHSS, Sharda University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India.

*Corresponding Author Email: khushboo.kumari@sharda.ac.in

Abstract: *This paper examines the role of political parties in reshaping the Indian Civil Service (ICS) between 1930 and 1950, situating bureaucratic reform within the broader context of nationalist politics and decolonization. It argues that while democratic structures were adopted after independence, administrative social relations persisted, creating a service where citizens are treated more as subjects. The paper explores the historical roots of the interaction between administrative services and political parties' practices across the pre- and post-independence eras. To understand the critical dimensions of political party theories of democracy within the Indian Administration Service (IAS), it is essential to focus on changing guidelines, spending patterns, assessments at overtime. The Indian National Congress and the Forward Bloc's determination to promote Indianization framed it as a symbol of imperial domination and an obstacle to representative governance. Consequently, the pursuit of Indianization became a wider struggle over sovereignty and legitimacy within a decolonizing polity. This article focuses on enduring tensions between professional ideals of neutrality and the practical challenges of governance during periods of violence, displacement, and competing political claims. The paper concludes that the gradual transformation of the ICS into the IAS in 1950 did not merely signify administrative continuity but embodied the negotiated outcome of these political struggles. I. It stipulate fundamental reforms in how developmental schemes are conceived, implemented and evaluated to achieve meaningful citizen empowerment and democratic governance.*

Keywords: Bureaucratic, Indian Administrative Service (IAS), Indian Civil Service (ICS), Indian National Congress, Political parties

INTRODUCTION

The transformation from the Indian Civil Service (ICS) to the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) represents a shift from colonial rule to democracy, from status to equality, and from authoritarianism to democratic governance within liberal democracies. In democratic India, both ministers and civil servants are accountable to the people, working in tandem to ensure governance that upholds public accountability and advances the welfare of all citizens. Following partition, a civil servant became an equal member of the political community, requiring rational autonomy and participatory political allegiance. Minister and IAS are thus binary opposites. Lloyd George described the Indian Civil Service (ICS), as the “steel frame” of British rule, increasingly came under scrutiny as Indian political parties mobilized for self-government. For the colonial state, the ICS served as a guarantor of continuity and order, yet for nationalists, it embodied imperial dominance and exclusion. The structures of a liberal democratic state were adapted to the prevalent cultural ethos, shaping a distinctive relationship between civil servants, ministers, and citizens. This paper examines how infrastructural development under political parties demonstrates administrative effectiveness; however, this could have been significantly enhanced had Indian Civil Servants been more closely connected with local populations, facilitating improved communication, trust, and coordination during periods of crisis. With the end of British rule in 1947, India reformed its civil services to ensure administrative continuity and foster national unity.

On October 29, 1951, the All-India Services Act established two All India Services—the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and the Indian Police Service (IPS). This legislation enabled the creation of additional services, broadening the scope and reach of the civil services across the country. However, the emergence of the Indian National Congress as the dominant political force following independence directly influenced the functioning of the newly constituted Indian Administrative Service (IAS). Its post-1947 leadership faced the challenge of adapting the inherited administrative machinery to serve democratic governance. Mahatma Gandhi, writing in *Harijan* in July 1934, characterized the Service as “neither Indian, nor civil, nor a service” (Gandhi 1934), reflecting a deep suspicion of its elitism and insulation from Indian realities. Similarly, Jawaharlal Nehru repeatedly criticized the ICS in his speeches, describing it as an “unrepresentative machine” designed to maintain colonial interests rather than serve the people (Nehru 1975, 123-25). The ICS was regarded as

the administrative backbone of British India, playing a central role in maintaining colonial control—structured primarily for law and order, revenue collection, and policy enforcement. . The Empire’s most trusted tool for governance, the ICS served to maintain order (Misra 1977, 102). The nationalist reaction to democracy oscillated between Nehruvian modernism, *aiming to modernize the bureaucracy* in tune with democracy, and **Patel’s neutral, professional bureaucracy** to safeguard stability and unity (Chandra et al. 1989). (Chandra et al. 1989) Beyond the impact of colonialism, the underdeveloped nature of citizenship in post-independence India may also be attributed to the profound poverty and civil turmoil of the period. In this context, the state was largely perceived as a source of patronage. Rajni Kothari (1970) locates feudal patronage as a central element within the modern democratic system. Building on this, the study employs an analysis of political parties as organized entities aiming to shape governance and policy, utilizing this framework to explore how they contested centralized authority in newly independent states.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Political parties and the Indian civil service have been a persistent theme across histories of colonial administration, nationalist politics, and postcolonial state-building. The Indian National Congress (INC) has long been described as the first major, organized political party in India that survived under British rule, and its transformation during the decades leading to Independence has been the subject of substantial scholarly inquiry. However, the intersection between political parties and the ICS—particularly between 1930 and 1950—remains relatively underexplored. The following review surveys existing literature across administrative history, political historiography, nationalist critiques, and Partition studies, identifying the contributions and limitations of each strand. It situates this research within that broader historiographical field while also highlighting the conceptual and thematic gaps the present study seeks to address.

Regarding the conversation around India Struggle. After Independence, evolution of the ICS, later the IAS, with a focus on political interventions. Scholars like B.B. Misra (2007) and Percy S. Allen (1960) highlight that political parties, particularly the Indian National Congress, played a critical role in pressuring the British administration to Indianize the service. Misra (2007) emphasizes that debates in the Central Legislative Assembly between 1930 and 1947. Scholars like S.R. Maheshwari (2005) and Paul Brass (1994) argue that political parties often sought to leverage bureaucratic machinery to implement party agendas, particularly during periods of coalition politics or one-party dominance. These studies suggest that while the IAS was designed as a meritocratic and politically neutral service.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs data collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include governmental reports, civil servants memoirs and autobiographies of Indian and British officers, as well as those of political leaders, obtained from the Prime Minister’s Museum and Library Society in New Delhi. These sources provided insights into the lived experiences, professional

dilemmas, and ideological motivations of those involved. The author utilized a historical analytical methodology to examine the transfer of power within the Indian Civil Service during the period between 1930 and 1950, influenced by political parties and nationalist movements. Both primary and secondary sources were qualitatively analyzed to understand the complex dynamics of governance, conflicts, and their implications for the functioning of independent India.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE INDIANIZATION OF THE ICS

Between 1930 and 1950, nationalist parties—most prominently the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Forward Bloc—centered their political programs on the demand for Indianization of the Indian Civil Service (ICS). For the Congress leadership, the ICS symbolized colonial domination, its elitist composition fundamentally at odds with the aspirations of representative government. In the Central Legislative Assembly debates of 1930 and 1935, leaders such as Vallabhbhai Patel and Govind Ballabh Pant argued forcefully that a bureaucracy staffed largely by British officials could not be expected to govern in harmony with Indian social and economic priorities. Their criticism drew upon earlier nationalist thought, notably the Nehru Report of 1928, which had already underlined the necessity of an Indian-controlled civil service, anticipating the constitutional reforms of the subsequent decade. Yet the official British position remained cautious. Nevertheless, the official British position remained cautious; the Lee Commission of 1924 had recommended gradual Indianization but insisted that “efficiency must not be sacrificed to speed,” a phrase that colonial officials repeatedly invoked to justify delays.

By the late 1930s, statistical data revealed limited progress. Of the 1,157 Indian Civil Service (ICS) officers in service, only 322 were Indian, with an even smaller number holding senior administrative positions. For the Forward Bloc, this slow advancement represented a betrayal of nationalist aspirations. Its resolutions of 1940 censured the “trickle” of Indian appointments and demanded immediate access for Indians to the highest ranks of provincial and district administration. This became popular to media as well. *The National Herald, newspaper sympathize* to the national cause, these criticisms echoed. An editorial published on 14 June 1949 argued that constitutional reform would be meaningless if Indian politicians were merely operating through “colonial machinery” still dominated by British officials. Consequently, the continuity of this imbalance was framed not solely as an administrative shortcoming but as a political contradiction threatening the credibility of self-rule. The Government of India Act of 1935, which extended provincial autonomy, intensified the urgency of Indianization. In 1937, the Indian National Congress’s sweeping electoral victories resulted in Indian ministers taking office, who now required administrators willing and able to implement reformist policies in land, education, and social welfare. The 1937 Report of the Public Service Commission acknowledged this mounting political pressure, but its recommendations reflected only halting progress, further frustrating nationalist expectations. British apprehensions regarding loyalty continued to impede the pace of reform. A confidential note to the Governor of Bombay in 1942 exemplified this concern, asserting that

Indian entrants to the Service “cannot be expected to divorce their sympathies from the nationalist cause.” Such observations revealed a fundamental mistrust of Indian officers’ political impartiality. (Misra 1970, 112).

Nationalist leaders contested prevailing assumptions during the colonial era. Bureaucracy and accountability, rooted in Indian society, were seen by Nehru and his followers as the sole means to achieve neutrality through electoral representation. Consequently, the debate surrounding Indianisation became a debate concerning the very nature of sovereignty: whether authority within India resided with a foreign power or with the nation’s people. Therefore, the Indianization of the ICS between 1930 and 1950 was not a narrow bureaucratic adjustment, but a contested political process. Nationalist parties advanced their arguments through Assembly debates, party resolutions, and the press, while British policymakers sought to regulate the pace of change to maintain colonial control. By 1947, more Indians had indeed entered the upper echelons of the Service; however, the underlying conflict remained unresolved. The slow, reluctant nature of Indianization reflected the tension between colonial continuity and nationalist sovereignty—a contradiction that would continue to shape the civil services of independent India.

THE IMPACT OF INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS ON ICS DYNAMICS

During World War II (1939–1945), following Britain’s extension of India, numerous Congress ministries resigned, allowing full control to Indian Civil Service (ICS) officers under governors. Wartime expanded ICS functions to include rationing, censorship, and defense, thereby strengthening its imperial role. Further in Quit India Movement of 1942, the ICS officers enforced mass arrests and censorship. As Bose and Jalal note, this hardened the divide between nationalist leaders and colonial bureaucracy (Bose and Jalal 2017, 265). The postwar period witnessed a transition of power, marked by the 1946 Cabinet Mission and the Interim Government, as Indian leaders increasingly assumed administrative responsibility. Indianisation accelerated, preparing the way for the transformation of the ICS into an institution aligned with independent India’s governance priorities (Misra 1978, 170-80). However, Postwar period saw a gradual transition of power: with the 1946 Cabinet Mission and the Interim Government, Indian leaders increasingly took administrative responsibilities. Indianization accelerated, preparing the way for the transformation of the ICS into an institution aligned with independent India’s governance priorities (Misra 1978, 170–80). The Indian National Congress, from its first session in **Bombay in 1885**, demanded the **Indianization** of higher administrative services, including the ICS, seeking greater Indian participation in government roles. Initially moving from constitutional petitioning to direct confrontation, this forced the ICS to engage with mass politics.

Following India’s independence, a significant challenge arose concerning administration. This alternate service’s image as colonial “steel frame,” oriented towards law-and-order rather than political reform (Misra 1978, 160-65). The Indian National Congress subsequently transformed the Indian Civil Service (ICS) into the All India Service (IAS), aiming to establish civil servants as instruments of democratic governance, development, and public service, rather than colonial control.

Being tasked with managing refugee inflows, maintaining law and order, and implementing relief policies under the direction of the Indian National Congress and political leaders, the administration occasionally faced criticism regarding administrative delays, which affected public perception of the service. Officers had to balance professional neutrality with urgent political directives, coordinating camps, transport, and essential services for displaced populations (Patel 1947–48; National Archives, Delhi, Report on Refugees in Delhi, October 1947). Memoirs of Hirubhai M. Patel highlight the stress and responsibility officers experienced while ensuring refugee safety and basic amenities. Despite these pressures, this period solidified the IAS’s transformation into a people-centered institution committed to democratic governance and public welfare.

THE SOCIALIST PARTY’S ROLE IN SHAPING THE IAS

For the Socialist Party, these developments reinforced its skepticism regarding the ICS. In its 1948 Manifesto, the party denounced the Service as undemocratic and elitist, unsuitable for a people’s democracy emerging from the trauma of Partition. Ram Manohar Lohia sharpened this critique in the Constituent Assembly, arguing that bureaucratic centralism prevented genuine mass participation in governance. The Socialist position contrasted with V.P. Menon’s emphasis in *The Transfer of Power in India* on the indispensability of bureaucratic loyalty (Menon 1957), and with Ambedkar’s defence of a strong professional service as a stabilizing institution. From 1947–50, the ICS became both transitional and indispensable. As Misra argued, it “held together the administrative framework at a moment when the state itself was being refashioned” (Brass 1990, 112-15). Its reconstitution as the IAS in 1950 institutionalized continuity within democratic structures. The Socialist Party, however, called for deeper reform. Its 1948 Manifesto denounced the ICS as undemocratic, while Ram Manohar Lohia attacked it in the Constituent Assembly. Ambedkar, by contrast, defended a strong professional service. *The National Herald* (14 June 1949) echoed ambivalence, noting the Service’s persistence of “habits of rulers.” By the early 1950s, debates in Parliament (Ashoka Mehta) and critiques in the press (*The Hindu*, 3 March 1952; *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 5 April 1952) underscored the contested role of the IAS. Paul Brass later observed that these continuities shaped Indian politics in enduring ways (Brass 1990, 112-15).

DISCUSSION

ICS was regarded as the administrative backbone of British India. The service’s origins can be traced to the mid-nineteenth century, following the Macaulay Report of 1854, which introduced competitive examinations in London, establishing a British-dominated bureaucracy (Maheshwari 2001, 54). The recruitment, structure, and evolving character of the ICS were continually negotiated through British Parliamentary debates, serving as its ideological and legislative arena. Historians such as B. B. Misra and Clive Dewey have emphasised that Parliament debates exposed the gap between moral contradictions of British India through a bureaucracy that largely excluded Indians (Sutton 1968, 113–125; Dewey 1981; Metcalf 1995,

211–218). The Charter Act of 1853 introduced merit-based recruitment, an open competition exam intended to bolster moral responsibility within imperial administration. Concerns regarding the Islington Commission (1912) revealed sustained apprehension about the racial exclusivity of the ICS and its implications for efficient governance. During the Commons debates of June–July 1853, Members of Parliament noted that the Act represented the first attempt to include local representation in the Indian (Central) Legislative Council. Further proponents of Indianisation argued that exclusion fostered alienation and weakened administrative authority, while opponents defended British dominance on grounds of neutrality and experience (UK Parliament, House of Commons Debates 1912–13, vols. 38–39). During the Montagu Declaration (1917) and at Government of India Act (1919). Edwin Montagu's parliamentary statements acknowledged that responsible government could not function without Indian participation in administration, thereby situating Indianisation as a functional necessity rather than a concession to nationalist pressure (UK Parliament 1917, cols. 1709–1735). Resistance to this transformation was particularly evident in the House of Lords, where debates in the early 1920s repeatedly invoked “administrative efficiency” and “bureaucratic neutrality” to caution against rapid Indianization (UK Parliament, House of Lords Debates 1920–21, vols. 41–47). Clive Dewey has shown that such arguments were deeply embedded in racial assumptions about governance, revealing the limits of imperial willingness to fully relinquish control even as reform was rhetorically endorsed. The Government of India Act of 1935 further institutionalized these tensions. Parliamentary debates on the Act focused on the position of the ICS under provincial autonomy and its relationship with Indian ministers. MPs acknowledged that civil servants would increasingly operate within Indian political frameworks, necessitating administrative sensibilities attuned to local social and political realities (UK Parliament, House of Commons Debates 1935, vols. 298–305). S. C. Sutton and Potter both emphasise that by this stage the “Indian character” of the ICS—though constrained—had become administratively indispensable.

Thus, independence did not dismantle administrative legitimacy; rather, it relocated it, as the Congress leadership inherited a service that was already Indianized in form yet remained imperial in logic. This inheritance framed postcolonial debates surrounding the IAS, particularly under the pressures of Partition and democratic governance.

The INC has remained controversial since its inception. At the perception level, the introduction of this Indian Civil Service (ICS) was viewed as a strategic maneuver by the INC government to secure the loyalty of the populace. This perception was reinforced by the revival of ICS and the rapid implementation of its policies. The continuation of ICS was initially proposed by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, India's first Deputy Prime Minister, to maintain national unity and ensure efficient administration following British withdrawal. The impetus for continuing ICS stemmed from India's considerable diversity and the population's extended experience under centralized British rule. The government was perceived as purchasing the

loyalty of ICS officials, who, in turn, would ensure the allegiance of their constituents. During a period of unstable coalitions at the center, governance lacked provisions for internal audits. This perception undermines the foundation of democratic citizenship—an enlightened and autonomous citizen.

The implementation of the IAS has been particularly contentious since its introduction. Over the last 75 years, numerous evaluations have been undertaken, raising questions regarding the nature of their duties beyond typical concerns about corruption. The IAS's memoirs suggest significant involvement of political parties in their official tasks, with IAS officers frequently serving as the face of criticism rather than political parties themselves. The issue of criticism has remained the most prominent and largely ignored, as systematic acceptance of responsibility was uncommon. This observation highlights both the strengths and limitations of governance while also revealing the political parties demand for Indianization as a central element of their agenda. Rajni Kothari's states alignment of political participation under colonialism which was permitted only through tightly controlled channels (Kothari 1970, 34–36). The discussion corroborates Myron Weiner's observation that the Congress evolved from an elite petitioning forum into a mass movement (Weiner 1967, 12–15).

A potential limitation of the study is the uneven availability of sources. Archival documents from the Prime Minister Museum and Library, alongside contemporary newspapers, provided valuable perspectives; however, certain collections remain inaccessible or incomplete. Taken together, these findings carry broader implications for understanding the transition from colonial to postcolonial governance. Political parties, by persistently advocating for Indianization, effectively reshaped the terms of debate surrounding governance, ensuring that the post-1947 Indian Administrative Service would be built on principles of national legitimacy rather than imperial loyalty.

CONCLUSION

The conception and implementation of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) offer significant insights into the nation-building process and the relationship between local populations and postcolonial leaders in post-colonial India. The scheme's design and implementation reflect an incomplete transition from the Indian Civil Service (ICS) to the IAS during this period. IAS, while potentially useful, does little to empower citizens or strengthen local self-government institutions. Instead, it kept key decisions in hands of political parties' power structures and limit the local accountability. The scheme's design and implementation gradually Indianized bureaucratic responsibility, with Indian officers assuming increasing roles in governance and administration. Despite the immense challenges presented by Partition, refugee rehabilitation, and the complex demands of a newly sovereign nation, IAS officers collaborated under the guidance of both the Indian National Congress (INC) and Socialist Party leaders to stabilize administration and serve the populace. This approach further entrenched the INC-IAS dynamic, characterized by development initiatives imposed upon or for the populace rather than through active participation.

In conclusion, while political parties sought to address local developmental needs, their implementation inadvertently reinforced existing power structures and governance patterns.

To achieve meaningful citizen empowerment and democratic governance, fundamental reforms are needed in the conception, implementation, and evaluation of development schemes by both political parties and the IAS.

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