

French Civil Service

History Historically, France has been a land of a high degree of centralisation with concentration of powers in the hands of emperors. This gave rise to a centralised administrative system in which the civil service enjoyed a powerful position. Another feature of the French Society has been its political instability for long periods. This also added to the powerful position of the French Civil Service. Because of the powerful position enjoyed by the civil servants, France has been referred to as a 'civil service state' or 'administrative state.'

Till the middle of the nineteenth century, France had the system of 'Sale of Offices' for entry into the civil service. Thus, the vacant posts in government were sold to the highest bidder in a public auction. In other words, the government posts were treated as a form of private property which could be purchased or sold. The advantages of this method of recruitment were:

- (i) It freed the government from political interference and patronage.
- (ii) It brought heavy revenue to the government.

The *disadvantages* of this method of recruitment were:

- (i) It made the civil service a royal service rather than a public service.
- (ii) It was undemocratic as poor people were denied the opportunity of entering into the civil service.
- (iii) It did not recognise the factors of merit and ability of the candidate.

Apart from this system of sale of offices, there were two more methods of entry into the civil service *viz.* gift (present) and inheritance.

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The French Revolution of 1789 put an end to the above systems and brought a fundamental change in the status of the civil servant who was no longer the servant of the Crown (emperor) but rather of the state. This depersonalisation of the state facilitated the growth of administrative law. The successive regimes introduced democratic and legal-rational elements into the civil service system. The merit principle of recruitment (based on open competitive examination) was introduced in 1847. However, till 1946 the French Civil Service did not emerge as a national institution and remained a departmental institution. There was no central (or national) agency to look after the various aspects of personnel administration.

Reforms of 1946 The Civil Service Act of 1946 provided the following measures to reform the existing civil service in France.

- (i) Establishment of a central civil service directorate (*Direction generale de la fonction publique*). It was to be placed under direct control of the Prime Minister.
- (ii) Unification of the structure of civil service.
- (iii) The counter signature of the Prime Minister to be required on rules pertaining to the civil service. Also, the counter signature of the Finance Minister to be required if they have a financial implication.
- (iv) The service conditions of civil servants to be set by the state which can also change them unilaterally.
- (v) The civil services to be divided into four categories—specialised functions, non-specialised functions, functions of planning and direction, and functions of application.

Due to the implementation of above measures, the French Civil Service emerged as a national institution and lost its departmental character.

Recruitment The merit system of recruitment occupies a strong position in France. It lays a great emphasis on the formal written examinations supplemented by interviews. The members of the highest civil service class are selected through the *Ecole Nationale d' Administration* (ENA). In addition to it, there are other specialised schools that prepare graduates for the technical services like the *Ecole Polytechnique* for science and the *Ecole Nationale des Impots* for finance.

The civil servants in France are drawn from an elitist social group. In the words of Ferrel Heady, "A unique feature of the French bureaucracy is the existence of an administrative super elite, made up of members of groupings known as the Grands Corps, tracing their origins in most cases to the Napoleonic period." It includes technical as well as non-technical corps. The examples of technical corps are: (a) Corps des Mines and (b) Corps des ponts et Chausses; while that of the non-technical corps are: (a) Conseil d'Etat (b) Course des comptes and (c) Inspection des Finances.

The *Ecole Nationale d' Administration* (National School of Administration) was established in 1945 in Paris. It acts as a central recruiting and central training agency in France. It works under the direct control and supervision of the Prime Minister of France. It performs the following functions:

- (i) It conducts open competitive examinations for recruitment into civil services. The appointments are made on the basis of the merit list prepared by it. In the USA and UK, this function is performed by the Office of Personnel Management and Civil Service Commission respectively.
- (ii) It arranges pre-entry coaching for the aspiring candidates. This function is performed in India by the government sponsored study circles for the OBCs, SCs and STs.
- (iii) It provides a long-term training to the civil servants, that is, post-entry training. This function is performed in India by the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration located at Mussoorie.

To sum up, the ENA in France is concerned with the recruitment, pre-entry training and post-entry training. Hence, there is no such institution either in the UK, USA or India which can be compared with the ENA of France.

Training The French system of training is popular all over the world. In fact, it serves as a model for training in many countries. The distinctive features of the French system of training are:

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- (i) It is practical rather than theoretical. It emphasises on making use of practical problems as a means of imparting training to the civil servants.
 - (ii) It is handled by the civil servants themselves. The new entrants to civil service are trained by the senior civil servants, and not by the academicians as in the case of other countries.
 - (iii) The civil servants receive training experience from the private sector also.
 - (iv) The system of training instils both specialist and generalist skills.
 - (v) The training programme is of long duration. The total training period is about three years and starts before recruitment.

In France, the higher administrative civil servants are trained at the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* (ENA) which is a postgraduate college for training. It provides 28-months' training to the new entrants in the civil service after which they are parcelled to the Grands Corps and to the ministries. This 28-month training period consists of two stages.

- (i) In the first stage, they are attached to the Prefecture for 11 months. Here, they are given practical training under the supervision of the Prefect. This is similar to the system of training of fresh IC officers during the British rule in India. After completing this training at the Prefecture the trainee returns to ENA.
- (ii) In the second stage, the trainees are imparted practical training at the ENA for 17 months by senior civil servants. During this training programme at the ENA, they are attached to an industrial establishment (generally in the private sector) for two-months' period.

Promotion A combination of both, the principle of merit and the principle of seniority is adopted for promotion in the civil service. The corps in France are divided into grades, classes and echelons. The scope for promotion is limited as it is generally effected within the same corps. The ENA prepares the list of candidates eligible for promotion and submits it to an advisory committee. This committee consists of equal number of representatives from both the sides—official and staff. It approves the list prepared by ENA for promotion. It is also authorised to settle the promotional disputes.

A civil servant in France can also be promoted to private organisations. He can come back to his post after serving some time in the private agency. He retains his seniority but may lose his pension rights.