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ELEVATING NEPAL'S CIVIL SERVICE*

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Cultivating Excellence in the Nepal Civil Service: A Blueprint for Institutional and Behavioural Reform

The civil service serves as the fundamental bridge between the state and its citizens, acting as the primary agency for creating and delivering public services. In Nepal, the quest to elevate this service has spanned decades, with the Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC) standing as the central institution mandated to build the capacity of this vital workforce. For 45 years, NASC has functioned as an autonomous statutory body, established via a Parliamentary Act to provide training, research, and consulting services to the public sector.

The Staff College operates under a “Three Plus” mandate designed to ensure the continuous professional development of civil servants. The first pillar is training and capacity building, which involves identifying needs and designing programs for various levels of government officials. The

second is research, focusing on the dimensions of public service, structural bottlenecks, and the motivation of employees. The third pillar is consulting, where NASC acts as a technical advisor to the government on organisational development, management audits, and structural reforms. A fourth, emerging mandate is education, with efforts underway to convert training credits into academic degrees to further professionalise the service.

To maintain its autonomy, NASC utilises a diversified funding model. While it receives block grants from the government through the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration (MoFAGA), it also generates revenue through consulting projects and partnerships with multilateral agencies like the World Bank, UNDP, and ADB. This financial independence supports a “flat” organisational culture that prioritises collective decision-making and rapid communication, contrasting with the often-delayed processes found in larger government bureaucracies.

One of the most persistent challenges in the Nepal civil service is what experts call a “design error”: the over-reliance on a generalist cadre. Unlike systems in India or Bangladesh, which utilise a more rigid “cadre system” (Bangladesh, for instance, has 29 distinct cadres), Nepal often places officials in roles

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that do not align with their academic or technical backgrounds. Evidence of this mismatch is stark: individuals with Master's degrees in Geotechnical Science or Sanskrit are frequently recruited into revenue and tax administration roles. This creates a massive knowledge and skill gap at the point of delivery. In such a system, an officer might spend years in land administration, only to be transferred to the Ministry of Culture, Civil Aviation, and Tourism, preventing the development of deep, sectoral expertise. While NASC attempts to bridge this by focusing on "core competencies" (fundamental skills like office management, service delivery, and governance), the lack of specialised career paths remains a barrier to high-level efficiency.

There is also a debate over "Hire and Fire" policies in the civil service. Currently, the Nepal civil service offers extreme stability; once an individual enters the "funnel" of public recruitment, they are virtually guaranteed employment until retirement, followed by a lifelong pension. While this security is a draw for talent, it can lead to lethargy. When performance, or the lack thereof, has no bearing on job retention, the incentive to innovate or excel diminishes. A proposed alternative is a hybrid model: increasing disposable income (potentially two to three times the current salary) to make the roles more attractive and reduce the temptation for corruption, while simultaneously introducing

"permanent tenure" to one of "earned continuity".

The efficiency of the civil service is further hampered by a "collective mistrust" that has become institutionalised within the state. This is exemplified by the way the government treats its citizens and its own employees. The state often operates on the assumption that the citizen is untrustworthy, leading to redundant verification processes and delays. For example, a simple marriage certification that takes days in a "trust-based" government can take six months in Nepal due to excessive "investigation".

Furthermore, a role reversal has occurred between political agencies and the bureaucracy. Political agencies have become increasingly inclined toward project management rather than long-term policy making, seeking the immediate "visibility" of short-term projects to satisfy their constituencies. Conversely, the bureaucracy has stepped into the policy-making vacuum but often uses this power to create protective legal frameworks that shield officials from accountability. This results in a system where those who take risks to deliver services are often scrutinised or penalised (sometimes by oversight bodies like the CIAA), while those who do nothing remain perfectly "safe".

As the world moves toward AI, Big Data, and Machine Learning, the Nepal civil service risks falling behind not due to a lack of awareness,



rigorous performance ratings every two to three years that determine continuity. Such a shift would move the bureaucracy from a culture of

but due to a lack of strategic investment and orientation. The state's investment in technology does not match the scale of global shifts. While



there is awareness of these tools, there is no clarity on how to harness them to change the fundamental nature of government work. To move forward, the government must shift from viewing IT as an “additional” cost to seeing it as a primary driver of strategic speed.

Recommendations for Reform

1. **Transition to a Cadre-Based System:** Align recruitment and postings with specific educational backgrounds and develop specialised tracks in areas like Revenue, Land Administration, and Trade to foster deep expertise.
2. **Reform the Incentive Structure:** Move toward a performance-linked pay system. High performers should be rewarded with “attractive” postings and higher disposable income, rather than the current system, where merit is often rewarded with the easiest (rather than the most needed) roles.
3. **Enhance Transparency of Knowledge Products:** NASC generates significant policy research through its Senior Executive Development Programs (SEDP), but much of this remains internal “government property”. Making these participant-generated knowledge products public would enrich the national discourse and provide researchers with valuable data.
4. **Adopt a “Trust-Based” Governance Model:** Simplify administrative procedures by assuming

the honesty of citizens and employees until proven otherwise, thereby reducing the friction and delays inherent in the current “mistrust-based” system.

5. **Focus on Strategic Speed:** While immediate “100-point plans” provide a temporary boost, long-term excellence requires institutionalising compliance and ensuring that the “public servant” identity, defined by service rather than mastery over the citizen, is restored.

In conclusion, elevating the Nepal civil service requires more than just training; it requires a fundamental re-engineering of the bureaucratic soul. By addressing the design errors of generalism, recalibrating the balance between security and accountability, and embracing a culture of trust and specialisation, Nepal can transform its civil service into a truly excellent engine for national development.

