

'APSC credibility lies on Chairman, members'

Face to Face

Prasanta J Baruah

Dhruba Hazarika, IAS (Retd) was a member and chairman in-charge of the much maligned Assam Public Service Commission (APSC) during its crisis period (March, 2016 to July, 2018). As a senior officer of the government, he successfully held the National Games (2007) as Director (Operations). He was also DC, Darrang. A prolific writer, he has written over 100 short stories and essays, besides, being the author of three books.



How did you tackle the crisis in the Assam Public Service Commission (APSC) following the arrest of the chairman to restore the faith of the people on the institution in 2016?

During the period of the crisis we had a competent team comprising Brig (Retd) Ranjit Barthakur, Dr Anupam Roy and later Deepak Sarma. After the arrest of the chairman in early November, 2016, we took some active steps to restore faith in the institution. One of them was to declare the result of the directly recruited candidates on the very same day when the interviews were held. Secondly, a lottery system which was on the cards was vigorously implemented for constituting the Interview Boards for the directly recruited candidates. Videographing of the interview process was already in place. Further, we introduced a comprehensive calendar of events for the year which was not there in the APSC since its inception in 1937.

Recently the lottery system has been extended also to the candidates as to which Interview Board they will

be allotted.

What changes did you bring into the examination system?

Earlier the answer scripts were sent to the residences of the examiners. This was changed and now the pattern is to make the evaluation done in the office of the APSC within a fixed time period so that the process is made as transparent as possible.

A fresh panel of examiners was constituted by writing to the various Vice-Chancellors to nominate teachers with requisite credentials for examination related work. Several recommendations of the TL Baruah Committee and the MP Bezbaruah Committee relating to reforms in the APSC have been implemented. The gap between the closing date of advertisement and the date of the Preliminary examination has been reduced.

The standing operating procedure (SOP) for receipt of the answer scripts from various venues, the opening of the bundles, coding the answer scripts and then marking them to the designated examiners has been streamlined in such a manner that economy of time is

maintained in all fronts. This process also involves the almost immediate scanning of the answer scripts as soon as they are received by the confidential Branch. The scanning ensures that no subsequent manipulation can take place. Efforts have been made to plug all loopholes in the examination process.

Moreover, negative marking has been introduced in the OMR based question papers and for each wrong answer .25 marks will be deducted.

There have been several complaints regarding wrong answer keys being uploaded in the website.

It is unfortunate that despite the best of efforts by the Commission (which is entirely dependent upon the paper setters, evaluators, moderators, by virtue of them being subject specialists) there still remains loopholes in the answer keys. There should be greater degree of professionalism on their part to substantially reduce or totally eradicate such errors. Of course, no human institution is infallible.

The APSC has now started following the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) pattern

of holding examinations.

After several applications had been made by the APSC to the state government for changes in the examination format for the last two years, the state government recently amended the Assam Public Service Combined Competitive Examination (Amendment) Rules, 2019, whereby the Combined Civil Services Examination is now in the same pattern as the UPSC.

The APSC had first thought of this idea as the students of the state would also be simultaneously preparing for the UPSC examination while preparing for ACS examination.

Do you think the state school and college syllabi should be in sync with the APSC syllabi vis-a-vis the UPSC?

There is a general feeling that the UPSC syllabus is in tandem with the NCERT and CBSE course which help the candidates in preparing for the UPSC civil service examination. In case of the amended APSC examination syllabus, I feel that SEBA and AHSEC syllabi can also very well cope in meeting the challenges of the Combined Civil Service (CCS) examination. At the same time, it will be beneficial if the Education Department takes cognizance of the changes made in the CCSE syllabus and address their own syllabus accordingly. This will go a long way in helping the aspiring future candidates.

Orientation of the teachers and examiners associated with the ACS examination is equally important.

There are highly qualified professors and teachers in Assam. However, the teachers/professors who are often asked to come to Guwahati from other parts of the State for evaluation of papers do not readily do so, primarily because there is no government approval for counting the days devoted to APSC work as being on duty.

Moreover, the APSC has fund constraints for lodging them and paying them appropriate TA/DA. Inviting experts from other parts of the country becomes all the more difficult. As a result, the APSC depends entirely on teachers from Kamrup district alone. This is not to belittle the ones who are doing evaluation at present but to highlight the fact that the evaluation panel can be made more eclectic and competent by bringing in the best people from all over the State. For this, the government has to take a distinct call on leave, lodging and TA/DA.

What safeguards are there for local candidates?

According to the Government of India we cannot bar anybody from appearing in the examinations. But by virtue of the fact that the culture and ethos of the region form a viable part in the State Civil Service Examination, the amended CCE rules have kept a qualifying paper in Assamese, Bengali and Bodo languages in the main examination.

Simultaneously, in the preliminary examination of the two papers, 32 to 35% questions in the first part will be related to Assam.

Even during my tenure both as a member and chairman in-charge, we had taken pains to discuss critical matters with the candidates regarding Assam and North-east for assessing his comprehension of local issues.

Further to this, over and above the General Studies Paper as envisaged in the UPSC syllabus, the CCE syllabus of Assam incorporates a sixth paper carrying 250 marks entirely on the history, heritage, culture, geography, polity, economic development, bio-diversity, environment of Assam. It is felt that a combination of the parameters relating to Assam in the Preliminary, Main and Interview will allow the candidates hailing from Assam to enjoy a sufficiently distinctive edge.

What steps should the government take to maintain the integrity and efficiency of the APSC?

The government should focus on the selection of the chairman and members by the selection committee as has been recommended by the TL Baruah and MP Bezbaruah Committee. The selection of the chairman/members is the ultimate crucial factor in determining the efficiency of the APSC functioning.

For this, a huge responsibilities lies on the government and the selection committee. It is understood that the selection process has been activated. However, no notification has been received yet from the government. It is learnt that the Chief Secretary is the chairman of the panel. This panel is very important.