

Current Affairs of the Day

Fall in deputations to Centre in 2021

1. Only 10% of mid-level IAS officers were posted with the Union government in 2021, a sharp fall from 19% in 2014.

2. The decrease in the central deputation of IAS

officers becomes even starker as the total pool of such officers at this level expanded from 621 in 2014 to 1130 in 2021, an increase of around 80%.

3. According to data available with the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT), the number of central deputation reserves of IAS officers has gone down from 309 in 2011 to 223.

4. A senior government official said that DoPT's proposal to amend Rule 6 (deputation of cadre officers) of the Indian Administrative Service (Cadre) Rules 1954 was necessitated as the number of officers available under Central Deputation is not sufficient to meet the requirement of the Government of India (GoI).

States With Poor Record		
Cadre	CDR*	No. of Officers at Centre
Chhattisgarh	38	5
West Bengal	78	12
Tamil Nadu	81	22
Maharashtra	78	21
Rajasthan	64	18
Haryana	44	15
Total (All-India)	1382	545

*Central Deputation Reserve

Four amendments

1. Four amendments are proposed that will enable the Union government to seek the services of an Indian Administrative Service (IAS), Indian Police Service (IPS) and Indian Forest Service (IFoS) officer posted in a State even without the State government's consent. The Centre can depute the officer if the State does not decide on a time.



2. The official stated that the existing rules did not have specific provisions to cater to situations when services of an All India Service (AIS) officer may be warranted in the Centre to meet specific situations such as a major disaster or national security.
3. “Similarly, services of an AIS officer with specific domain expertise may be required for any important time-bound flagship programme or project. The extant Cadre Rules do not have specific provisions to cater to such situations, which have now been proposed through these amendments,” the official explained.
4. The total strength of any cadre is calculated by including central deputation reserve (CDR), which is around 40% of the sanctioned posts.

CDR obligations

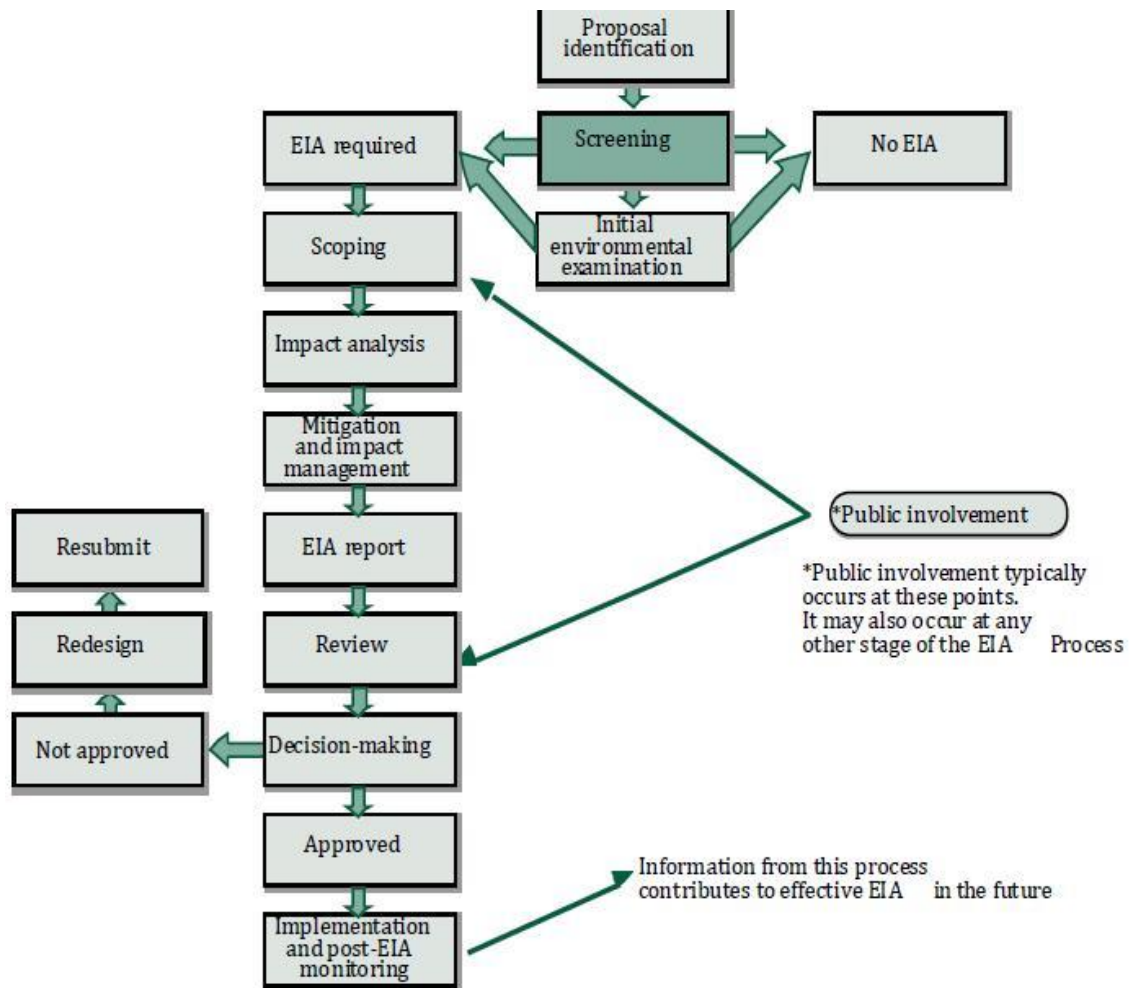
1. “However, a trend of decreasing representation of IAS officers up to joint-secretary level has been noticed as most of the States are not meeting their CDR obligations and the number of officers sponsored by the States to serve the Union government are much less than the reserve,” said the official.
2. The CDR utilisation has gone down from 25% in 2011 to 18% presently.

Environment Ministry plan to rank States draws ire

1. A proposal by the Union Environment Ministry to “rank” and “incentivise” States on how quickly they could give environmental clearances to proposed infrastructure projects has drawn fire from environmentalists on the grounds that it contravenes basic principles of environmental regulation.



2. A note to States by the Union Environment Ministry spells out seven criteria to rate State Environmental Impact Assessment Agencies (SEIAA) on “transparency, efficiency and accountability”.
3. On a scale of seven, an SEIAA, for instance, gets two marks for granting a clearance in less than 80 days, one mark for within 105 days and no marks for more.
4. If less than 10% of the projects for scrutiny prompted a site visit by committee members, to examine ground conditions, an SEIAA would get one mark.
5. More than 20%, on the other hand, would be a demerit or zero marks. SEIAA with a score of seven or more would be rated ‘five star.’





‘Violative proposal’

1. The Legal Initiative for Forest on Environment (LIFE), a prominent environment organisation, described the proposal as “violative” of the Environment (Protection) Act.
2. “A perusal of the criteria reveals that greater weightage is given for projects where due diligence is less. SEIAA members should sit in the confines of conference rooms take decisions and earn high marks.
3. The process ensures that the aim will be to clear projects in the shortest possible time.
4. The task of the SEIAA is to undertake a ‘detailed scrutiny’ whereas this notification makes them rubber stamp authorities,” a statement noted.
5. Ministry officials told that the ranking criteria were not intended to accelerate the speed with which clearances were accorded but to encourage the SEIAA to make quicker decisions on approving or rejecting a project, and adhere to timelines already specified by the provisions of the Act.
6. Experts on environmental law and governance matters noted that the rating system “seriously limited SEIAA members from exercising their scientific, legal and administrative knowledge.” By stressing “quick and efficient clearance” the process undermined scientific rigour in the decision making process.

Category A and B

1. All proposed infrastructure projects above a certain size with a potential to significantly alter the natural environment must be first approved by an SEIAA, that consists of State officers and independent experts.
2. Projects that are even bigger or involve forest land — called category A — must be cleared by a committee of experts constituted by the Centre.
3. SEIAA projects are category B and relatively smaller though they make up the bulk of projects that are presented for approval.
4. ‘B’ category projects include the bulk of building and construction, small mining, and small industry projects and are considered to be ‘less polluting.’
5. The project appraisal process is an online process where aspirant companies must upload documents on a portal called Parivesh.



Learning crisis in schools demands urgent interventions, radical reorientation from governments, educators

Recovery in the classroom

1. Two years into the Covid-19 pandemic, a recovery that also needs critical attention is in the classroom. India has seen one of the longest school closures in the world.
2. The pivot to digital learning has locked vast numbers of underprivileged schoolchildren out of the classroom, and online classes have struggled to replace the experience and quality of teaching in a physical classroom. This is adding up to a grave learning crisis.
3. A study carried out in January 2021 in five states by a research group from Azim Premji University found not only clear evidence of learning loss but an alarming regression in children's foundational abilities — to read, to understand what they are reading or do simple sums.
4. A report in this newspaper has pointed to more evidence — over a third of Class X students in Gujarat needed grace marks to be promoted to the next class. Worryingly, this suggests that the deficit is not restricted to primary school, but is also showing up in higher classes.
5. A field assessment carried out by Pratham-ASER in Karnataka in March 2021 had revealed, for instance, that only 66.4 per cent of Class VIII students could read a Class III textbook, compared to 70 per cent three years ago.
6. If not arrested, the slide in learning, at this scale, has grim consequences for the young, and is likely to push them out of education entirely and stunt their future income opportunities significantly.



A NEW LESSON PLAN



Way forward:

1. All of this leads to an irrefutable conclusion — after the third wave abates, schools and education departments, across the states, cannot slip back to business as usual. This crisis demands a radical reorientation of priorities and pedagogies from all stakeholders.
2. The first step is to acknowledge that students are re-entering the classroom with diminished skills. And so, the syllabus must be set aside.
3. The task for the school and the teachers must be reset and underlined: To help children recoup their losses, to make sure that their learning journeys are only interrupted, not derailed.
4. Short and intense bridge courses, a few months long, might not cut it. Much of this year, if needed the next 10-odd months, must be devoted to this goal.
5. The teacher must be given the freedom to teach students at different levels — within the same classroom. But that is possible only when governments provide the support — whether it is in terms of an education bureaucracy that does not insist on short-term syllabus goals or a clearly stated policy that prioritises this recovery.
6. It is possible only when the power to make academic decisions is decentralised to schools and teachers. “Remedial” learning often comes with added stigma for underperforming students. Care must be taken — at all times — that their confidence is not broken in this process.

Finally, governments must prioritise keeping schools open, with closure as the last option only in cases of an immense spike in infections. Learning — with and without Covid — is an urgent imperative.