



Autonomous Bodies

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This editorial analysis is based on the article **Autonomous bodies are crucial to the government's functioning. Streamline them**, which was published in Hindustan Times on 11th of September 2020. It analyses the issues of Autonomous Bodies and their utilities.

The Union Government has recently abolished the All India Handicrafts Board, **Handloom** Board and the Power Loom Board in consonance with the government's vision of **minimum government, maximum governance**. The Ministry of Textiles also changed the status of the eight Textile Research Associations to "approved bodies", instead of the earlier "affiliated bodies".

Thereafter, the government withdrew the officials of the ministry of textiles from the governing bodies of these textile associations. These are bold steps in achieving leaner government machinery and to introduce systematic rationalisation of government bodies.

Further, it was evident for quite some time now that despite a laid out administrative structure in **Autonomous Bodies (ABs)**, there are a number of governance issues that need review.

What are Autonomous Bodies (ABs)?

- Autonomous Bodies are set up whenever it is felt that certain functions need to be discharged outside the governmental set up with some amount of independence and flexibility without day-to-day interference of the Governmental machinery.
- These are set up by the Ministries/Departments concerned with the subject matter and are funded through grants-in-aid, either fully or partially, depending on the extent which such institutes generate internal resources of their own.
- These grants are regulated by the Ministry of Finance through their instructions as well as the instructions relating to powers for creation of posts and etc.

- They are mostly registered as societies under the Societies Registration Act and in certain cases they have been set up as statutory institutions under the provisions contained in various Acts.

Functionality of Autonomous Bodies

- Autonomous bodies are a major stakeholder in the government's functioning as they are engaged in diverse activities, ranging from formulating frameworks for policies, conducting research, and preserving the cultural heritage, etc.
- The apex administrative body of ABs is called governing council or governing body and is chaired by the minister or the secretary of the respective ministry.
- These Autonomous Bodies have specialised committees such as the purchase committee, works committee, finance committee, with nominated ministry officials.
- These Autonomous Bodies are audited by the **Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG)**, and the annual report is presented in the Parliament every year.

Issues With ABs

Accountability

- These bodies are funded by taxpayer's money. However, there have been complaints that they don't follow the policies of the government and are accountable the way the government departments are.
- Even though the senior ministry officials are required to attend ABs' committee meetings, they mostly don't due to their busy schedules.
- They nominate junior officials who often lack the jurisdiction to take meaningful decisions during the meetings.

Opaque Recruitment

- The exact count of these bodies is not known, with estimates ranging from 400 to 650.
- Autonomous Bodies employ a considerable number of people. For example, the **Indian Council of Agricultural Research**, an Autonomous Body under the ministry of agriculture, has almost 17,000 employees.
- However, unlike the government and the public sector undertakings, in which the recruitment rules are uniform and the recruitment is done by a centralised body such as the **Staff Selection Committee (SSC)**, the **Union Public Service Commission (UPSC)** there is no such body for such recruitments.
- As a result, the mode of recruitment and recruitment rules differs for each of these bodies, sometimes even across ABs within the same ministry.

Non-Adherence to Envisaged Goal

- The boards have fallen into disuse and did not serve the purpose for which they were envisioned.
- The boards were merely advisory in nature and failed to impact on influencing policy-making while they became vehicles of “political patronage” with the emergence of a ‘middleman culture’ that did not help the interests of weavers.
- The structure of these boards made room for a large number of non-official members to advise the government.

Non Uniform Auditing

- There is no uniform audit procedure.
- Some ABs are audited by CAG whereas many are done by chartered accountants.

Way Forward

Legal Framework

- A legal framework should be devised which defines the boundaries of its working, its autonomy, and the various policies that it must follow.
- This will simultaneously help identify the numbers.

Comprehensive Review

- Each ministry will need to undertake a comprehensive review of ABs under their jurisdiction.
- ABs that have outlived the cause for which they were established may need to be closed or merged with a similar organisation or their memorandum altered as per the new charter.

A Pan India Recruitment Agency

- To bring about uniformity in the policies, a task force needs to be set up under a pan-Indian agency such as SSC or UPSC.
- It will streamline the recruitment rules, salary structure, allowance and perks paid to employees, and mode of recruitment.

Collaborated Approach

- To ensure the participation of ministry officials, committee meetings of similar ABs should be held together so that the appropriate authorities could provide meaningful suggestions.
- It is also alleged that most of the agenda items raised by ABs are routine in nature. This should be discouraged, and only the important policy issues that need the ministry’s intervention should be taken up in such meetings.

Uniform Independent Auditing

- Audits of ABs should be undertaken by an independent agency.
- CAG had done an exhaustive performance audit of autonomous scientific bodies in 2016, highlighting the gaps in their performance.
- Such a theme-based audit should be done for other ABs as well.

Conclusion

- All these years on, these ABs have remained the one official forum however watered down, where the voices and views of different stakeholders could be expressed directly.
They bring diversity and can shape the government policies in a more inclusive way.
- There is an urgent need to define them properly, bring uniformity in their policies, facilitate senior officials' attendance in their meetings, and seek independent audits.

Drishti Mains Question

“Autonomous bodies are very crucial to the government’s functioning. Thus, there is an urgent need to streamline them”. In the light of the statement critically discuss the role of Autonomous Bodies and their governance issues.