



Mains Practice Question

Q. Autonomous bodies are very crucial to the government's functioning. In the light of the statement critically discuss the role of Autonomous Bodies and their governance issues. (250 words)

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Approach

- Introduce what autonomous bodies are with some examples.
- Explain the role of autonomous bodies.
- Mention the issues with autonomous bodies.
- Suggest a way forward.
- Conclude suitably

Introduction

- 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.

Body

Role of Autonomous Bodies (ABs)

- 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.
- ABs is set up by the government for a specific purpose and are independent in day-to-day functioning.

Issues with Autonomous Bodies

- **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 not 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.
- **Opaque Recruitment:** ABs 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 SSC, UPSC, there is no such body for such recruitments.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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. 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.