The Indian Civil Service Exam: A Modest Beginning toward Democratization

Anna Dinkel, author
Dr. James W. Frey, History, faculty mentor

Anna Dinkel, a senior at UW Oshkosh, is majoring in history and minoring in women and gender studies. She is the president of the history honor society, Phi Alpha Theta, and served as the vice president of the History Club. She is also an Honors College student and is the social media manager for the University Student Honors Association. Anna works for the Center for Academic Resources as a student learning assistant. In the past year, Anna also worked as a National History Day judge and won the Goethe Book Award for her studies in German. Last spring, she completed an internship at the University Archives and developed a primary source literacy workshop for undergraduate students. Anna plans to attend graduate school at UW Madison in library and information sciences.

Dr. James W. Frey, an associate professor of history at UW Oshkosh, specializes in South Asian history, specifically eighteenth- and nineteenth-century India. He is currently writing a book about the Indian Rebellion of 1857 for Hackett Publishing.

Abstract
In 1855 the Indian Civil Service (ICS), the cornerstone bureaucratic system of the East India Company (EIC), made an important change in the appointment of officers. Rather than continuing with the system of individual appointment—that was often based upon merit, rank, and insider connections—the EIC developed a civil service examination for admitting new officers into the inner workings of the public service. The exam also allowed for unprecedented equity within the British colonial system; new prospects for the exam had to be British subjects, which meant they could be Indian. Statistical analysis shows that the exam did not increase Indian involvement in the civil service. But, as this article will demonstrate, the introduction of a standardized procedure and body of knowledge required for the selection of ICS officers had other important consequences. The civil service exam, which first served as a barrier for Indian cadets, would later make the bureaucracy more efficient, even after India gained independence.

Introduction
Beginning in the seventeenth century, the East India Company’s (EIC) economic and political dominance reigned second to none in the Asiatic niche of India. The EIC would be the largest privately held benefactor to wield political and economic power until the mid-nineteenth century, after which the British Crown prevailed as the new institution that would control India’s bureaucratic and economic power. One of the most important branches of the EIC was the Indian Civil Service (ICS), which had been heralded as India’s bureaucratic enigma. The ICS had a complicated history, which some would argue as wholly ineffective during its control in the private realm. Writing under the pen name “a retired Indian,” one letter to the editor in the August
21, 1855, issue of the *Daily News* (London) suggested that the ICS lacked the ability to sustain marketable competition for employees. The letter also stated that “another great evil of the Indian Civil Service is, that it excludes that emulation and competition which give such a healthy impetus in every other body of public servants throughout the world.”

Others disputed its effectiveness in absolutist control over commerce. Despite the common perceptions of British citizens, one unquestionable standard of the ICS was its exclusivity. The selection process was carried out mostly through cross sections of aristocratic standing and personal connections that allowed for a traditional bureaucratic system of white Anglo-Saxon men within India.

This classic feudal system ended up excluding individuals based on Indian caste and British class, but it also meant that British men were the vast majority of officers servicing the ICS. In the nineteenth century, efforts were made by Lord Bentinck to remedy this problem by promoting Indian officers to new roles, but over the span of 21 years from 1828 to 1849 little progress was made. Ram Parkash Sikka, a historian at Panjab University, observes that while “European and Anglo-Indian or Eurasian elements increased” within the ranks “the Indian element remained, more or less, stable in the uncovenanted branch of its civil service.”

In 1858, when the company was forced to transfer ownership to the British Crown, significant changes and problems arose in India. The ICS and other soldiers had just recovered from a long, bloody rebellion under the direction of Governor General Lord Canning. Upon liquidation of the EIC as a provision of the Government of India Act of 1858, the Crown, specifically Queen Victoria, had direct territorial control of India. In addition, under the auspices of a more democratic rule, Queen Victoria would base the bureaucratic appointments of the ICS on the completion of an arduous civil service exam. After passing the exam, Indians themselves could be a part of the ICS.

The new civil service exam helped form what is often deemed as the iron framework within the ICS. Many saw the ICS as an unwavering bureaucratic institution that survived political and economic calamity, therefore garnering its nickname. The civil service exam of the EIC helped form a democratic, Indian institution, even though the test itself promoted ethnocentric behaviors. Although it was difficult for Indians to become high-ranking officials, by allowing Indians into the officer pool Britain opened the door for a systematic and regulated liberal education through strenuous exam preparation. The importance of the exam lies in its being a small but significant turning point toward eventual independence from the British Crown.

The culmination of both Britain’s growing colonial state and the necessity of newly regulated processes set history on a tumultuous precipice of democratization. From this point on, democratization refers to the new opportunities that Indians had in exploring and becoming more knowledgeable about British bureaucracy, administration, and global politics—which would later serve them and others as independence movements gained traction. Despite initial statistical analysis revealing that the exam did not raise Indian involvement in the civil services, it is important to note that the argument for democratization relies not upon initial race integration in the ICS, but upon the rise of standardized procedure and knowledge that was now an expectation for all ICS officers. The exam, which was instituted in 1855, put the ICS a step ahead of other government institutions, which aided in democratization and stabilized its infrastructure during the coming independence. Eventually, this standardized and difficult checkpoint, which first served as a barrier for Indian cadets, would be a neutralizer for future officers and would remain intact indefinitely.
The arguments in this paper build off of a foundation of existing scholarship that includes Gentlemen of the East India Company: The Indian Army Officer Corps, 1817–1949 by Pradeep Barua; “The Indian Civil Service and the Nationalist Movement: Neutrality, Politics, and Continuity” by Arudra Burra; “Administrating India: The Indian Civil Service” by Ann Ewing; and “The Masculinities of Post-Colonial Governance: Bureaucratic Memoirs of the Indian Civil Service” by Inderpal Grewal. These sources particularly help shape my argument in relation to the various appointment schedules—referring to the typical promotion of officers in the ICS—that had previously been a part of the Indian Civil Service. These sources help nuance my argument that the ICS was a government branch that successfully remained intact from imperialism to independence because of its unintentional liberalism. In addition, I also utilize two other books—E. W. R. Lumby’s The Transfer of Power in India 1945–1947 and Ram Parkash Sikka’s The Civil Service in India 1765–1857. These works give significant insight on how the ICS worked on the implementation of the civil service exam over the years. Some of these sources focus on the question of how and why the civil service remained intact during indianisation. These sources help develop my argument that the civil service exam in 1855 put the ICS a step ahead of other institutions, which aided in democratization and stabilized it during independence.

My main primary source is the East-India Company’s Civil Service Examination Papers by William Watts. This booklet is an extensive guide about all of the subjects tested on the exam and the questions and expectations for applicants. The source covers in detail the different sample questions of the exam and is dated 1857 (near the inception of the exam). Also included in my research is a Book of Exercises for the Lower and Higher Standard Examinations by Adalut Kahn, which is a later edition of exercises in preparation for the civil service exam that focuses solely upon language preparation. These two primary sources bolster my defense of England’s test curriculum, and its creation of globalized and internationalized Indian officers. They also confirm that England’s democratic leanings in political theory hurt its imperial holdings in the nineteenth century. In addition, I have used several primary source biographies that chronicle the intended functions of the ICS directly from officers involved in the EIC. These include The Education of the Civil Service by Henry St. George Tucker; The India Office by Sir Malcolm C. C. Seton; and “A Letter of Warren Hastings on the Civil Service of the East India Company” by Warren Hastings. These sources back up my arguments about the ICS exam curriculum and also bring to life the experience of ICS officers and their unpreparedness for the reality of their career.

Where Wealth and Class Reign: Appointment Schedules Prior to 1855

Before the civil service exam, the EIC kept a close check on appointments using a classic feudal system that relied upon socioeconomic status. This method of entrance into the civil service was insufficient because it created an inequitable system that would not continue to serve the needs of a growing colonial state such as Britain. Using this discriminatory tradition, many ICS officers romanticized the hardships of attaining a position based upon its criteria. The process often involved studying at a university in Britain and then traveling to India on a meager budget. After students made it to India, they would be employed as apprentices for some years, earning a wage that was barely sustainable. After the apprenticeship, he would work his way up...
the ranks during the course of his service, which was often a lifetime stretching 30 to 40 years. Sir Malcolm C. C. Seton, an Indian Office official, has concluded that university and age requirements made becoming a civil servant as an Indian impossible before the exam was enacted. Sir Seton was a liberal-minded official at the time, effectively criticizing the EIC and Raj, the British Crown’s imperial rule of India, for the manner in which they appointed officers. He also suggested that the governors of the EIC, during the latter half of the eighteenth century, should help restore the system to a less mentally and physically demanding process. “The scandals caused by the original plan of sending young men out to the east on a starvation wage but with liberty to engage in private trade,” Seton argues, “were checked by Clive, Warren Hastings, and Cornwallis, and an adequately paid Service with most rigid standards transformed the spirit of the Indian administration.” However, the transformation of the ICS during the eighteenth century still relied on British aristocratic men with little knowledge of the infrastructure, commerce, and city life of India. The men would be thrown into service on the basis of their economic privilege with little training. This left Indians vulnerable to authoritarian sources of power with too much privilege and too little practical experience in building and maintaining Indian towns and cities. Not only was this system undemocratic, it was disarrayed and subjective.

Because of the EIC’s reliance upon the archaic system of appointments, it had deemed a more standardized entrance unnecessary. Even as late as 1855, the EIC director, Henry St. George Tucker, wrote that “we do not require for our service deep theologians, profound lawyers, erudite physicians or metaphysicians, or subtle political economists. The most distinguished in our service have gone out to India before the age of eighteen; and when they felt a deficiency, some of them have educated themselves.” Here, Tucker suggests that the EIC leadership valued direct experience and self-instruction over a more formal education and training for members of the ICS. The pre-1855 system was arguably undemocratic, disorganized, and ineffective. As demonstrated by the 1857 rebellion, these weaknesses perhaps even threatened the capacity of Britain to sustain its empire.

A Brave New Age: The Beginning of the Civil Service Exam

Even though the introduction of a standardized civil service exam might suggest the intent to democratize the ICS, that was not necessarily the case. The exam was intended to be a barrier, argues Dr. Pradeep Barua, history professor at the University of Nebraska: “Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that the British were increasingly apprehensive about a possible influx of Indians into the hitherto all-white ICS.” To increase difficulty for Indians, British officials decided that “the competitive [civil service] examination was to be held only in London. That this arrangement would pose a formidable obstacle to prospective Indian [c]andidates was realised by several members of Parliament and they therefore urged the [g]overnment to hold the examination in India as well as in England.” The officials decided against multiple testing locations; thus the civil service exam did not equalize the playing field for Indian candidates. Instead, it showed the privileges of class and insider connections with little effort to standardize exam testing centers. These details are salient in the analysis of long-term effects of the exam on the Raj and later India’s independence.
From the beginning, according to Ram Parkash Sikka, the Englishmen who created the exam favored classic British liberal education. “The Committee found the vernacular Indian languages of ‘no value’ and specifically recommended that these ‘ought not to be the subjects of examination.’”¹⁰ This action demonstrates the ethnocentrism and benightedness that British officers had in planning an exam that would be relevant for the service of ICS officers.

**A Biased Start: Civil Service Exam Curriculum**

Despite ethnocentricity littered throughout the administrative ideology and practice, the exam gave credence for Indian candidates to explore a globalized worldview through the British colonial curriculum. While this appears problematic, when the test curriculum is analyzed, the questions served later governmental and political movements quite suitably. To analyze the long-term effects of the exam on democratization, it is crucial to look at the curriculum. The subjects included were chosen for their relative importance to Englishmen and their perceived ability to create strong and disciplined leaders. The depth of knowledge required for the exam was a testament to students’ dedication. As Indian involvement became more common in the twentieth century, the liberal arts content of the exam gave cadets useful know-how for placing the Indian bureaucracy on an international level. The exam contained questions such as: “Describe the means—military, civil, and economical—by which the Romans ruled Britain. Compare their government of this island with our own in India, and with the French and Algeria.”¹¹ Stripped of academic loftiness, these types of questions created a foundation for political knowledge and encouraged cadets to take a holistic approach to political systems. Not only were cadets expected to recite historical fact, they were also expected to analyze different subjects. Another prompted, “Describe our [English] foreign policy between 1820–1837.”¹² With these test questions, Britain was unintentionally preparing Indian independence on a political basis. Giving candidates a means and purpose to explore the historical methods of war, revolt, government institutions, and law meant that a change was quietly taking place in how Indian candidates viewed themselves. Great Britain also started a small-scale democratization of India through its demand for extensive knowledge of languages. Cadets were expected to know German, French, Italian and, to a smaller extent, Arabic and Sanskrit.¹³ Cadets’ knowledge of foreign languages helped situate India as an international power. This is the crux of the argument for democratization; Great Britain, priding itself on colonial dominance, gave some Indian candidates an exclusively intimate look at global and national politics, which would later herald in the new age of indianisation and self-sufficiency. The colonial machine and the Crown itself fostered intimacy in order to appropriate regularity to the growing system.

Great Britain did not fail in its ethnocentricity of language curriculum, either. Warren Hastings, English statesmen and governor of Fort William in Calcutta, had an interesting comment on learning the languages of India, writing, “To the Persian language as being the medium of all Political intercourse the first place ought to be assigned in the studies of the [p]upils. . . . The next in order, and necessary though not in the same degree to be understood and spoken by all, is the language in common use among all the Mahommedan Inhabitants of India called Kootta, or Hindostanny.”¹⁴ Often the decisions made for spoken communication were ethnocentric and, in most
cases, unhelpful for bureaucrats on a local level because they failed to learn the languages of the people they were commanding.

However, for many officers the on-site training occurred after they passed the civil service exam when the focus shifted from a traditional English liberal arts education to vocational training appropriate for lower-rung officials in the EIC. Lord William Bentinck, who was governor general of India, suggested a more practical form of study for the time: “first, Indian History; secondly, the Science of jurisprudence; thirdly commercial and Financial Science; and, fourthly, the Oriental tongues.”\textsuperscript{15} As a result of the ethnocentric test questions, Indian candidates had more exposure to a global scale mindset—preparing them for independence by teaching them about historical revolutions and other events that pushed forward liberation from colonial oppressors. In addition, cadets would have an acute awareness of potential allies and enemies on a worldwide scale. For the few Indian officers who did make it into the ICS, their global interaction is significant. Sir Krishna Govinda Gupta, a member of the Secretary of State’s Council of India; Sir Atul Chandra Chatterjee, an international diplomat and a former Indian high commissioner; and K. P. S. Menon, a foreign secretary and later state ambassador, all became international figures throughout their service in the ICS.

Not only did the curriculum push for an international India, it also focused on creating an industrialized state. Various questions in the exam reflect this change. One question prompted students to “explain the principles of soap-making,”\textsuperscript{16} which was the newest technology during the first Industrial Revolution. On a theoretical level, the exam asked cadets to “examine the arguments for and against the beneficial effects of an increased use of machinery upon the condition of labourers.”\textsuperscript{1} While many of these questions seem both high-minded and trivial for civil servants, hidden amongst them are some real applicable properties for ICS officers in both governmental bureaucratic interactions and public relations for the eventual independence of India. The questions prompted candidates to start thinking about the basis of industrialized business in an independent Indian economy, and also set the foundation for labor policy and ideology after the British Raj stepped out of India.

\textbf{The (Im)perfect Civil Servant: The British Raj and Beyond}

According to Inderpal Grewal, for the elite members of the Indian bureaucracy “the idea of ‘character’ was a critical element of the selection process and after independence it continued to be so in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), but with some changes which came from challenges to elite power.”\textsuperscript{1} When ICS officers reflected upon what they thought constituted knowledgeable and esteemed ICS officers, the general opinion was their inherent character—which often meant what British family they were born into. However, it should be noted that a standardized focus on education in preparation for the exam made honest and better-discerned leaders who were fit to dispense justice, therefore creating a more sustainable ICS. These leaders had better character because of their exposure to a liberal arts education, not because of their families’ socioeconomic class. This created a more sustainable system that relied upon equity as its basis for admission and seemed another small step toward democratization whether it was recognized at the time or not. R. P. Sikka’s history of the civil service argues that the ICS strongly believed in the ability of a liberal arts education “to open, to invigorate, and to enrich the mind” rather than solely focusing
on one specific skill. The EIC wanted problem solvers with a broad knowledge base, people who could be easily trained in the processes and intricacies of the bureaucracy, which was what the exam required and prepared cadets for.

Sikka observes that there was public dissent on the EIC’s decision to require an exam that was only offered in London. Indians like Harishchandra Mukherjee, who was a political and editorial writer for an Indian newspaper, maintained that Indians should focus their attention on the three branches of the EIC that garnered the most power: “[t]he Civil Service, [t]he Supreme Court, and the Zamindars.” He argued this trifecta of governmental offices should be held by Indians, as Indians are subject to them, and therefore the civil service exam should be open to Indians and by default offered in India, not just London. Besides Mukherjee, there were many other dissenting opinions, including those of British officers. There was another large disconnect between ICS application and lofty policy. Not only was there disagreement about the logistics of the exam, but in practice the exam proved even less capable in its initial aim to involve more Indians. Ann Ewing, in her study of the Indian Civil Service, writes that “the Public Services Commission of 1866 found that officers too often rose by seniority rather than by merit.” With Indians having little seniority in the ICS, and being uncovenanted, the exam failed to centralize a system for advancement. However, the true success of the exam is its sustainability in the long-term political landscape of India.

The exam remained relevant after Indian independence because it could be altered to fit new ideas in the changing centuries. The civil service was historically a more progressive bureaucratic system within the Raj. For example, after the civil service exam, ICS officers were not allowed to join political parties, which is why they can seem “aloof” in their decisions. This is also why cadets in the civil service appear disconnected from their communities. Administrative and subject “disconnect” is built into the exam questions. The application of political and philosophical theory often does not translate to administering policy to Indian towns and cities. Some of the theory speaks to the way a large bureaucracy should run at the national level, but these ideas are hard to implement in small locales.

The ICS, which would become the Indian Administrative Service (ICA) during independence, was not without its faults. As stated in The Transfer of Power by E. W. R. Lumby (India Office official from 1934–1948), “Although the Indianisation of the administration had gone far, the two principal services—the Indian Civil Service and Indian Police—still contained a considerable proportion of British officials, and the proportion was highest in the higher ranks.” In uncovenanted ICS positions, the numbers of Indian officials were not any better. According to Parliamentary records, “the number of Indians employed in the various civil situations of the government in India was 2,813 in 1849, rose to 2,910 in 1851, to fall to 2,846 in 1857, of course, all in the [u]ncovenanted service.” These numbers show why it is impossible to evaluate the short-term impact of the civil service exam. The exam was not direct in its democratization approach; the ICS still had a large amount of baggage from its racialized past. Instead, the exam served the branch over the course of political and economic uncertainties—standing as the iron framework. Looking at the deep pockets of time the trends will point toward more equitable access of bureaucratic branches starting with the standardization of the civil service exam in 1855.

Conclusion
Academic scholarship on this topic has always presented short-term issues with the Indian Civil Service exam. To understand the holistic implication of the exam on the larger scale of independence, one must examine its ability to remain relevant as a standardized factor among competing political systems. Because the test’s curriculum was set up for alterations and adaptability, it was changed throughout the years to retain relevancy. By 1897, the civil service exam saw a shift in exam policy, in which some Indian languages—Persian, Hindi, and Urdu—would be included in examinations.26 The civil service exam was finally proctored in India in 1922.27 This kept it in the forefront of bureaucracy, while it slowly made an effort toward long-term and equitable democratization.

These ideas would be important in the formation of an independent India. As Inderpal Grewal argues, postcolonial masculinity remained a key element when the ICS became the Indian Administration Services in 1950.28 Grewal’s argument draws upon the work of the prominent scholar of imperialism, Ann Stoler. According to Stoler, “in British India, too, such exams selected for something called ‘character’: ‘self-denial, diligence, temperance, and self-control were coveted bureaucratic traits.’”29 Grewal explains the complicated viewpoints about the ICS after the end of colonial rule. While some nationalists considered ICS officers to be traitors against the movement, many saw them as a necessary evil, and they were allowed to continue to serve the new Indian state in 1947. Problems ensued when many officers remained silent on the issues of independence and kept in line with their service as though they still sought to serve a state that resembled that of the EIC.30 However, the exam curriculum ICS students were exposed to molded them into neutral bureaucrats, expecting to ensure their integrity and prevent political corruption. In reality, the democratization of the exam with its extensive focus on “bureaucrat building” created public dissent, making people feel that the ICS administration was more elite than its citizens, even though many ICS officers were deeply involved in their local communities and connected to the people they served.

After such a contentious and convoluted relationship with the historical ICS, and now IAS, why did India turn to a civil service examination? Historically speaking, in the long run, the exam has always offered a standardized and democratic bureaucracy that relies less upon political favors and corruption and gives credence to the importance of liberal arts education and values leaders with a broad knowledge base. Despite its beginnings in the colonial state, the civil service exam today offers a more democratic process than its predecessors, which was steeped in suppression and ethnocentricity. Because it stands as a classic staple of bureaucratic neutrality in the face of tumultuous political structures and is a standardized procedure, the exam has proven itself as a sustainable force that continually works on equalizing differences in the face of government employment. If one analyzes the introduction and implementation of the exam there is a distinct pattern that adheres to the lofty political and economic theories written into the curriculum. These tenants rest upon the ideas of democratization, equitable access, and a search for truth and knowledge. While these ideas seem aristocratically liberal, the curriculum continues to influence change through its belief in these principles. The liberal-minded ICS officers fostered change in high office positions, granted more equitable access to the exam, and secured proctoring rights of the exam in India. All of these advances rest upon the preceding
values that were written into the curriculum. While the exam is not perfect and untouchable, its key to sustainability in the modern age is its agency to change based on its founding principles of democratization, access, truth, and knowledge.

Notes
2. Ram Parkash Sikka, *The Civil Service in India 1765–1857*, (New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 1984), 109; Seton explains that covenanted work was for high-ranking officials, and was almost exclusively done by white British men. Uncovenanted work was done instead by lower ranking officials, often Indians and men of color, and was poorly paid and without the benefits of appointment. He further writes on the subject that eventually, due to size, the service was split into three branches: imperial, provincial, and subordinate. All three dealt with different issues: imperial had many appointed officers and dealt with international issues; provincial, where most Indians were employed, dealt with more local issues.; and subordinate included small local authorities. Sir Malcolm C. C. Seton, *The India Office* (London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1926), 131.
3. For this research, cadets and candidates are synonymous. A cadet in this understanding is a person who is preparing and training to enter the ICS. This definition is identical to that of a candidate. Both of these words will be utilized as equivalents in the text that follows.
4. The pronoun his is used in this instance because females were not allowed to enter the civil service; James Frey, “The Company Raj” (lecture, Modern India, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, October 25, 2017).
5. Seton, 131.
6. Ibid. Seton tells readers that within the British Raj apprentices started at £5 and writers at £10.
9. Sikka, 177; several times throughout this paper there will be instances where the leading letter of a word is in brackets, i.e. [c]andidates. For this source and several others the authors chose to utilize a British grammar system. However, for readability and clarity I have changed this capitalized letters to lowercase.
10. Ibid., 167.
12. I acknowledge that this question is based on English history and for Indians to answer negatively would have resulted in a disqualification from the exam. However, that does not mean that in practice they did not learn the basics of opposing viewpoints, giving them the opportunity to explore competing ideas, even if they weren’t so boldly stated during the actual exam. Watts, 6.
13. Ibid., 21–24; Ibid. 45–48; Ibid., 53–60.


16. Watts, 49.

17. Ibid., 35.


20. Ibid., 197.

21. Ibid., 197.


27. Seton, 138.


30. Grewal, 624.

Bibliography


