

THE BUREAUCRATIC CASTE SYSTEM

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The Indian bureaucracy is highly caste bound, with the IAS being the Brahmins, the IPS being Kshetriyas, the bulk of the bureaucracy being the Vaishyas and the teacher and the scientist being the workhorse Shudras. We still identify the importance of an official by the caste of the service to which he belongs rather than by the work he is doing. Let us take two examples. In the police the Director General is the king of kings. The humble traffic constable is a beast of burden. Everyone **bows and scrapes** to the DG Police whereas the traffic constable is harangued by his superiors, bullied by influential people and generally harassed in trying to make people obey the traffic laws. The fact is that the traffic constable, when on point duty, is also king. No one can order him to allow traffic to merge at an intersection at right angles because this would cause accidents. When he orders traffic to stop everyone from the President downwards must stop. Does he not deserve the respect that his job entails? If the Zonal IG were to stand on traffic duty he would certainly be feared and respected. Why deny this to a person because his rank is that of a constable?

The other example is that of a Municipal street sweeper. Both because of his caste and his lowly position and because he performs the unsavoury task of handling garbage, he is a figure of derision and revulsion. The Municipal Health Officer who supervises the sanitation work would be welcomed by any householder and given a cup of tea. A street sweeper, on the other hand, may not even cross the threshold. Actually his is one of the key persons for maintaining sanitation and hygiene in the city, removing garbage and ensuring that the city remains healthy because it is clean. In any sensible society such a person would be treated with respect and honour by the citizens because he is performing such an important task.

The hierarchical system is further reinforced by our obsession with pay scales, pay bands, grade pay, etc. A professor in a really top class university would get a grade pay of Rs. 10,000 even at the end of his career. A professor in an IIT or IIM, even if the institute has been set up only a week ago and has no infrastructure would get a grade pay of Rs, 10,500. Is a professor of English at the Central University, Hyderabad less of a teacher than a professor in the IIT at Hyderabad? Of course the argument given is that it is difficult to find faculty for an IIT whereas an university teaching Humanities, Law, Commerce, Physics or Economics can get teachers more easily. Besides the fact that this is not necessarily true, for a person to teach rather than seek some other services in itself an evidence of the person's desire to remain in the knowledge field. Does this person not deserve special recognition?

The purpose of this paper is not to do away with or decry the All India Services. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel very rightly recognised that centrifugal forces in India are more powerful than centripetal ones and, therefore, there have to be some unifying links which would hold the country together regardless of instability in the political field. That position remains today also and we do need these strong links formed by the All India Services. If the Central Government is to play its true role as the cadre controlling authority of the All India Services, it must both protect and encourage All India Service officers to work without fear or favour and to punish those rogue elements who succumb to local pressure and deviate from the path of duty. This is one role the Central Government almost never plays though it is empowered to do so under Part XIV of the Constitution. The only example that one recalls of central intervention is when Jayalalitha ordered the arrest of Kanunanidhi and the Tamil Nadu police executed this order at 2 'o clock in the morning, dragging the elderly Karunanidhi out of bed in a

most unseemingly manner. The Central Government transferred both the D.G. Police of Tamil Nadu and the Police Commissioner of Madras (Chennai) to Delhi with the objective of sending across a message that All India Service officers who transgress rules and laws were vulnerable to central intervention and punishment. The message was incomplete because the officers were not punished and in a short while were returned to the State. Had they been dismissed, police and administrative officers throughout the country would have woken up to the idea that they are servants of the law and not of individual Chief Ministers.

One has spoken of the caste system, but there is one area where we cut across castes and that is the complete divorce of our deeds and the consequences of wrongdoing. We do not punish dereliction of duty, corruption, inefficiency, incompetence, lack of impartiality in performance of duty and the complete lack of courage in giving the political executive the correct advice. These are all areas of accountability in which an officer must be punished. Even here there is a caste system. When something goes wrong somebody in the lower rungs of the administration has taken action against him. When the Government of India completely messed up the list of wanted criminals allegedly hiding in Pakistan it is not the Director of the CBI or his senior officers who were held accountable. Action took the form of suspension of a sub-inspector and transfer of a Superintendent of Police and a Deputy Superintendent of Police. No one in the Home Ministry who approved the list for transmission to Pakistan was made accountable. The more serious the offence the less likelihood is there of officers in the upper echelons of government being punished. The scapegoat is always a junior engineer, a clerk, a sub-inspector of police, a naib tahsildar or some such functionary. The senior officers go scot-free. This is a mirror image of the caste system. A Brahmin can do no wrong, a Shudra can do nothing right. We have to break this system because action must start from the top and senior persons must be held accountable not only for their own actions but of their subordinates also.

All India Services, especially the IAS, are at a level where in matters of policy and its implementation they play a critical role in rendering advice to the Ministers, piloting policy resolutions and then ensuring compliance. They deserve the high stature now they enjoy. But at the same time there are many areas of specialisation where the scientist, the engineer, even the philosopher has a key role. A good professor is a treasure, as is a good archaeologist, a good historian, a good geographer, a good teacher of technology. Equally important is the master crafts man who translates design into product. Is their work not important enough for us to pay them adequately and give them a high status so that they live and work in India and produce results? Sumant Mulgaonkar, at one time Chairman and Managing Director of Telco, often said that whereas in India one can find scores of graduate engineers, it is impossible to find a master craftsman. The skill of a master craftsman is somehow considered as much lower than the erudition of a teacher, whereas the two are complementary. It is the scientist who develops a concept, it is the master craftsman who makes it into a product. However, the best hands and the best brains would never go into the profession of craftsman because somehow on the social ladder the craftsman is much lower than a scientist, just as a scientist is much lower than the Secretary of his administrative ministry. To return to the police, scientific investigation and a whole plethora of forensic skills are absolute essentials for criminal investigation. The people working in this area are learned scientists and forensic experts. The status in the police hierarchy is low and, therefore, a person would be an Assistant Professor in a very ordinary university rather than be a senior scientific officer in a forensic laboratory. A way would have to be found whereby in matters of pay scales, status and working conditions a forensic scientist is given both stature and salary to attract him into the job. Neither pay bands nor grade pay should be the restricting factor.

This point can best be illustrated by an example. In 1989 Shyama Charan Shukla was the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh and R.S. Khanna was Chief Secretary. The Chief Minister appointed an expert as Advisor to the Electricity Board and wanted to give him a salary higher than that of the Chief Secretary or the Chairman of the Board. When Khanna protested Shyama told him, “ Mr. Khanna, your status is not determined by a salary but the post you held. What I want to pay the expert is what is due to a person in his area of expertise. Let us say that I am paying the workman his due wages”. Khanna saw the point that people in authority should not feel threatened because someone in their organisation is being paid more than they are. The caste system based on salary must go.

Not directly related to the caste system but certainly an offshoot to it is our systemic inability to recognise merit and to reward. Progression up the bureaucratic ladder is almost entirely seniority based, which means that a bright officer with ideas can never innovate or be promoted out of turn because the hierarchy does not permit this. It is very rare indeed for a junior officer who has done outstanding work to be recognised publicly by a Padma Award. A complaint, however, false, a misjudgement, a decision taken honestly but hastily, all are enough to ruin an officer’s career. Therefore, all civil servants play safe. After all, if the poojari in one of the twelve temples having a jyotirling were to invite a Shudra to sit with him as assistant during ‘bhasma aarti’ in order to prove that in the eyes of God there are no untouchables, he would be reviled and thrown out whereas he should be rewarded for upholding the true meaning of the Hindu religion. Until we bring in a system of rewards which cuts across hierarchical lines, unless we make it clear that incompetence, inefficiency, laziness and lack of decision making will stand in the way of a person’s advancement, we cannot break the caste system. It is only when we are able to establish, at least within each cadre if not across cadres, an upward mobility for the meritorious, the Brahmin always remains a Brahmin and a Shudra always remains a Shudra.

Any future attempt at administrative reforms must look at the bureaucratic caste system directly in the eye and suggest the measures in which merit will be the only caste.
