

The Indian Administrative Service – How Good, How Relevant?

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The East India Company which came to trade in India soon found that its role of trading transformed into one of governing. Governance itself began with the settlement of revenue which a district was required to yield and for this purpose there had to be a survey. The revenue had to be collected and for this there had to be officials who could administer land and the peasants who tilled it. This was the beginning of district administration in India. It was part of the philosophy of government as expounded by the Marquis of Wellesley in the following words, “I can declare my conscientious conviction that no greater blessings can be conferred on the native inhabitants of India than the extension of British authority, influence and power”. The entire social reform movement which restored order by suppressing the Pindaris, abolishing sati, eliminating Thugi, all culminated in the extension of settled administration to the whole of India.

A regular administration and the rule of law began to be established. There was need to create a regular civil service which could perform this function. Instead of ad hoc appointment to posts under the government of the East India Company, in 1800 A.D. Lord Wellesley established the College of Fort William at which newly appointed persons to the Company’s service were to be trained for three years. This move was scuttled by the Board of the East India Company which, in 1806, founded the East India College, transforming it in 1809 to Haileybury College. It is here that the cadets of the East India Company Civil Service were trained. Being a cross between an English Public School and a college at Cambridge or Oxford Haileybury inculcated a certain spirit of camaraderie which reflected itself in the ‘biradari’ which the Haileybury boys established in India. Haileybury fostered a close family spirit, but it failed to inculcate professionalism in the Civil Service which was increasingly required to exclusively dedicate itself to the complex business of governing a country the size of India. It was also clear that the East India Company could not last and that the servants of the East India Company for all intent and purpose were now the servants of the Queen. Therefore, in 1853 a competitive examination was introduced for selection of civil servants who would rule India. In 1857 took place the Great Indian Mutiny, or the First War of Independence and in 1858 the Government of India passed from the East India Company both de facto and de jure to the British Crown. The Indian Civil Service became fully established, to be followed shortly thereafter by the Indian Police. These two Services became the backbone of empire in India. To the credit of the British it must be said that they did gradually introduce Indianisation of the Services as also the Indian Armed Forces so that in 1947 when India became independent there was no civil service vacuum as happened in a great deal of British ruled East and West Africa.

The Indian district officer started as the ruler who extended to the native population of India what Wellesley called the blessings of the extension of British authority, influence and power. The strength of the district officer at this stage in our history was that he brought order where chaos reigned in the past, he replaced the arbitrariness of local chieftains by the certainty of justice under a system of laws and he established peace in districts where turbulence was the normal state of affairs. The people looked on such an officer as an improvement on what existed in the past and, therefore, British rule established itself in the districts because the people accepted British officers as distinctly better. There was as yet no concept of or demand for either independence from foreign rule or participatory government at local levels. These demands rose only when the local boundaries within India were

abolished and the British established themselves as rulers of the entire sub-continent. The Princely States were less than vassals and existed because the British tolerated them. The paramount power was the British Crown.

Paradoxically as India consolidated and coalesced as a single nation under British rule the awareness of Indian nationality and nationhood also began to assert itself and with it the desire of Indians to participate in their own governance increased. Now the role of the district officer began to change because it brought him into conflict with the very forces which were demanding what had been for years an established right in Britain, that is, the democratic right to be self-governing.

Under the changed circumstances the British district officer found himself in a dual role. The first was to ensure that order was maintained and that there was no threat to British rule. The second was that of facilitating greater participation of Indians in government, initially through the beginnings of local self-government and, from 1919 onwards, as civil servants of a government which at Provincial level was becoming increasingly Indianised and democratised. It would be wrong to think of the Indian Civil Service in British days as being entirely dedicated to the maintenance of empire. It was slowly settling into the role of a Civil Service which still had a great deal of power and in the area of law and order almost unlimited power which, at the same time was required to take orders from a newly emerging political class which was beginning to realise that India could move towards not only self-governance but even independence. The greatest tribute to the ICS would be that its officers performed this dual role without slipping into schizophrenia, because the very ministers whom they had to obey in 1937 were also the ministers whom they had to jail in 1942.

The Indian Administrative Service is the seamless successor to the Indian Civil Service, whose entire Indian component became the premier Civil Service of India on 15th August, 1947. Government chose to retain the identity of the old imperial services, the ICS and IP, while simultaneously creating the Indian Administrative Service and the Indian Police Service to fulfil the very role that the ICS and IP did. The difference between the two is that the creator of the ICS and IP was an imperial power and the creator of the IAS and IPS was the first government of independent India. Why did India retain the civil services in the form that the British created? The British, by increasing Indianisation of the civil services and the Army left behind a substantial number of civil servants, technologists and professionals who were used to organising and running a system. India had a wise leadership which decided to absorb and continue what the British had left behind. In sharp contrast when the Americans when they took over Iraq in 2003 Paul Bremer, who was head of the US administration in Iraq, disbanded the Iraqi Army and Police and dismantled the entire administrative structure down to the last village. This left Iraq leaderless, officerless, completely devoid of administrative structures and, therefore, in a totally helpless state in which there was no one to enforce the law, manage the administration or even run such basic services as water supply, sewerage and electricity. The nation descended into chaos. In India we took over the entire administrative system and the transfer of power was seamless.

The question, however, arose whether this country should continue civil servants who had served an imperial power. On 10th October 1949, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel made an extremely powerful speech in Parliament in defence of the Civil Services, portions of which are worth reproducing. He said, "For the purpose of record of this Assembly I would like to state that if in the last two and three years the majority of the officers of the Civil Services had not worked with a sense of patriotism and honesty the Union would have been destroyed. You may ask the Premiers of all the Provinces, is any Premier prepared to work without these Civil Service officers? ... The police, which was left a divided service, has been brought back to a reasonable level and has been working with great competence. The heads of the Provincial police forces come under guarantee, Do you want to change the system? Do you want the

Congress Swayam Sevaks to appoint the heads of the district police forces? ... It would be wrong to quarrel with those with whom you want to work together. You should take work from them. Every person wants some incentive. If you continuously criticise a person in public and mock him he would not like to work. Like this no one will do your work. That is why once and for all please decide whether you need these Services or not. If you have made up your minds that despite my promises to them you want to abolish these Services, then I will take the Services with me and go, thinking that the nation has changed its mind ... This Constitution will be implemented by such a Service Group which will preserve the unity and integrity of this country". After that the Constituent Assembly had nothing further to do except adopt Article 312 which establishes the All India Services. There are three of them today, the IAS, the IPS and the Indian Foreign Service. There is the option of constituting an Indian Judicial Service.

The competitive examination through which the Services are recruited formerly consisted of three parts, three compulsory papers, three lower papers and two advanced papers for the Indian Administrative Service and the Indian Foreign Service, three compulsory and two lower papers for the Indian Police Service and the class-1 Central Services and three compulsory and three lower papers for the Indian Audit and Accounts Services. The distinction between the IAS and the Indian Foreign Service and other Services was maintained at the examination level itself. This has now changed and there is a single examination for all the Services. Generally the top ranking candidates select the IAS and the Indian Foreign Service and the thereafter, in descending order, other Services are opted for. However, this has given rise to a feeling amongst officers of other Services that it is the luck of the draw which has ranked them below the IAS and that actually all the Services are equal. This has increased inter-service rivalry and bitterness. I think government and UPSC should do some fresh thinking in this behalf and consider whether selection to the IAS and the Indian Foreign Service should not be done on the basis of a more rigorous examination than for the other Services. There is merit in this suggestion. There is also need to do considerable rethinking on the format of the examination. When I joined the Service, apart from the compulsory papers, of the three lower and two higher papers I could take only two which could be from a subject I had studied in college because that is how the grouping of papers was done. With a limited range of age for recruitment between 21 years and 24 years one could not really take more than one discipline at the undergraduate and postgraduate stage of study. My discipline was Economics and only two out of five papers could be in my area of study. I chose General Economics for the lower and Advanced Economic Theory for the higher paper. I was forced to take World History and International Law as my other two lower papers and Advanced Political Thought for my second higher paper. These three subjects I had to study on my own. The questions basically tested my ability to understand the problem and analyse it rather than my ability to learn by rote a huge number of issues relating to my subject. People from the science stream were equally handicapped in that they had to select at least three papers from Humanities and Social Sciences. Entrance to the Service came from a wider range of educational experience. The present system which is largely based on multiple choice questions and objective tests is highly skewed in favour of students of Technology or Applied Sciences and, therefore, the area from which recruitment is done to the IAS has become relatively narrow. Medical doctors and technology graduates have now come to predominate. My own experience is that a person whose educational background has a wide spectrum can be taught to focus, but a person from a narrow technology background with a narrow focus finds much more difficulty in widening his horizon. This is stated as a matter of fact and is not by any means judgemental.

In 1951 India opted for a new model of rural development called Community Development. This was S.K. Dey's idea and it co-opted the entire population of a village as a community. Rural planning was turned upside down, a new administrative unit called the Community Development Block was

established and planning became a participative exercise involving both people and officials. The development model was that development would be community demand driven and implemented through the community which would have to contribute a share of the cost in cash, materials or labour. People who contribute also keep a watch on how their money is spent and the works taken up in the fifties and sixties of the last century still survive. The new development administration, distinct from the Tehsil, separated the development from the regulatory functions of government and a new cadre of Block Development Officers and Extension Officers was created. This was the precursor to the Panchayat Raj established by the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution. The IAS also found itself in a dual role. In the district the D.C. and D.M. was the head of the district administration, but he also had the role, directly or through the District Development Officer, of administering the C.D. Programme. To the credit of the IAS its officers adjusted, through an evolutionary process, to the new administrative arrangement.

As India settled down to an increasingly democratised polity whose mantra was devolution and decentralisation the paternalistic role of the Civil Services underwent change. Policy formulation and decision making increasingly passed to elected representatives, though the Civil Service's function of advising fearlessly, being politically neutral and administratively impartial in implementation of policy and ensuring the welfare and safety of people become strengthened. New equations between civil servants and politicians had to be forged and up to 1967 this did happen. In 1967 everything changed because unscrupulous, power hungry politicians suddenly found that they could buy power by bribing legislators and causing them to defect from the ruling party. To find the money to bribe legislators and to keep them from again changing their minds the State had to be subverted so that the leverage of the State could be used to make money illegally. To do this the Civil Service had to be tamed, its integrity jeopardised and its impartiality and independence had to be destroyed. By threat of arbitrary action, transfer, denial of advancement and other unfair means the politicians broke the morale of the IAS and IPS, whose subordinates meekly followed suit.

At the very moment that we needed the IAS to stand firm a substantial number of its members broke. The Service split between those who did their duty and those whom Indira Gandhi called "committed". The politicians distinguished between convenient and difficult officers, with the latter being sidelined. I fell in the latter group and quit the Service at the peak of my career eight years before my date of retirement. The convenient officers were co-opted into multi-faceted, multidimensional wrong doing. Having tasted the wages of sin these officers soon became partners in and sometimes even instigators of unlimited sin. Lest IPS officers feel that my remarks permit them to adopt a smirkingly patronising attitude towards their IAS colleagues, let me tell them that they are no better and are equal sinners.

Where does that leave the IAS today? The Service in 2012 is not the Service of 1957, when I joined it. It is more heterogeneous, four times larger and commands immensely larger funds than we did. Its entrants are perhaps more intelligent than my peers and I, but its motivation is entirely different. We joined the Service because Nehru's dream of building a new India inspired us and we wanted to participate in this venture. As in all else in an increasingly material world, in the Service, too, idealism is dead and youngsters join the Service because it is a job which promises power and what that power can give. There is no particular desire to serve the people. When motive changes attitudes also change. Impartiality and fairness may bring a clash with politicians, which is career unfriendly. An ability to bend brings advancement and, depending on how lax are one's morals, even unearned wealth. One notes with satisfaction that there are still some officers who are true to their salt, but one is also

alarmed by the growing cases of corruption in the IAS. A Service which was a byword for integrity cannot hold up its head today.

The IAS must realize that on its shoulders rests the burden of not only being India's premier Civil Service, but also that it mans practically every important post in India. The Cabinet Secretary, the Head of Civil Service, is an IAS officer, as are the Chief Secretaries of States. In the district the senior-most officer is the District Collector, who is the Chief Coordinating Officer in the district. The officers of this Service are the ones who have maximum access to the Prime Minister and Chief Ministers. In every matter of policy an IAS officer has a very important role. For example, under the Rules of Business of the Executive Government framed under Article 77 of the Constitution for the Union and Article 166 for the States it is the duty of the Secretary of the Ministry or Department to ensure compliance with the rules and even if the Minister concerned passes an order contrary to rules, the Secretary is duty bound to point this out to the Minister and if the Minister insists on his order being complied with, then to submit the file through the Minister to the Prime Minister or Chief Minister as the case may be. If the Union Secretary for Communications had insisted on a Council order in the Spectrum allocation case and refused to comply with the Minister's orders in the absence of such Council order, he might have faced personal discomfort and even humiliation, but there would have been no 2 G scam. That is expected of an IAS officer and that is the price he has to be prepared to pay.

At the other end of the spectrum is the massive corruption in our programmes to benefit the poor, especially in rural areas. If the D.Cs and CEOs of Zila Panchayats were to carefully monitor the programmes, tour extensively, listen to the grievance of the citizens and act sternly against erring officials and panchayat functionaries the corruption in project implementation would drastically reduce. If there is corruption at this level it can only mean one of two things, or both. The officer is lazy and is not doing his supervisory duties, or is himself corrupt, or is both corrupt and lazy. Part XIV of the Constitution gives the Civil Services an unique protection from arbitrary action not available to any other civil service in the world, or even to our own Armed Forces. Article 312 gives enhanced protection to the All India Services. In return the nation expects from them pea-green incorruptibility, the courage to give free and fair advice to the elected representatives, a commitment to do their duty diligently and impartially, the cultivation of professional competence (the coat of arms of the IAS bears the words, "Yogaha Karmasu Kaushalam") and the service of the people of India as an article of faith. I have doubts whether we inculcate these qualities in our officers during training and I am certain that very few officers remind themselves about what the people expect of them. Many of them are far too busy looking after their own interests to care for the people whom they are required to serve.

Sardar Patel had in mind the basic fissiparousness of the Indian polity and, therefore, built into the Constitution many centripetal forces which gave the Union strength and cohesion. The All India Services were meant to perform a centripetal role. In his address to the Constituent Assembly on 10th October, 1949 he said, "This Constitution will be implemented by such a Service Group which will preserve the unity and integrity of this country". Unfortunately stratified state cadres have diluted the all India nature of the Services and this has reduced the efficacy of the three All India Services to play a unifying role. Inter cadre transfers, regional grouping of States for cadre management and exposure of every single All India Service officer to a Central posting would probably help in restoring a nation-wide perspective to the Services.

One main criticism of the IAS is that a generalist service sits in judgement over specialists and this has severely affected the development of professionalism in India. Partially this has happened because IAS officers have thrust themselves on departments and posts where they have no business to be. An IAS Commissioner of Health Services or Director of Agriculture is a ridiculous proposition.

Similarly, why should a public sector business or industrial undertaking have an IAS or IPS officer as its Managing Director? This is the job of a business manager. What, then, is the role of the generalist? There is fundamental difference between management and administration. In management the variables are predictable within a given range and, therefore, with exceptions and a flexibility which permits change, one can build a linear model. In administration every citizen is a variable in himself and the variables are unpredictable and themselves subject to irrational deviation depending on many factors, including political will and decision making. An administrator, working within the framework of laws, the ideology and programmes of the party in power, even building political whimsy or even waywardness into the process, has to deal with a non linear model where decisions have to be instantly crafted to deal with an emerging situation. This only a generalist trained in administration can do. A professionally trained managerial mind would probably be unable to cope and this can have unfortunate consequences. Therefore, we need administrators to govern and they will be generalists having a wide range of experience.

Another criticism is that the frequent transfer of IAS officers prevents them from acquiring any expertise in any field. Actually the exposure of an IAS officer to a wide range of subjects, posts and issues is the strength of the Service, not its weakness. When at an early age an officer is made to face different situations ranging from law and order to human relations, man management to crisis management, societal issues to economics, he learns situational analysis on the job and his mind becomes attuned to quick and firm decision making. An administrator has to process the inputs from various sources, look at available resources and predetermined plan priorities and then decide on or advise on the optimal course of action. In Army parlance the Chief of every Service presents his case, but the Chief of Defence Staff then decides on priorities, inter service responsibilities and prescribes the bounds of action. That, incidentally, is the job of the IAS Secretary of a Ministry or Department. That makes the Service relevant in today's context --- not as a superior but as a consensual coordinator. Within this certainly there has to be earmarking of IAS officers sector wise so that an officer with the correct aptitude and attitude becomes increasingly assigned to that sector. Unfortunately many IAS officers just neglect the acquisition of such professional skills and, therefore, the Service is the biggest provider of square pegs in round holes.

To sum up, though relevant the IAS fails to make the grade on counts of a willingness to learn, integrity, courage and, unfortunately, hard, slogging work. Not all, of course, but many and that is a cause for worry. The Service as a whole has also forgotten that it is a servant of the law, not of individual politicians. Wake up IAS or perish!!
