

# The Indian Civil Servant and Modern Politics

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India is one of comparatively few developing countries which began independence with a fullgrown civil service, recruited among its own nationals. Since the Montague-Chelmsford reforms of 1919, more and more important positions in the Indian Civil Service were transferred from British to Indian personnel. The training of Indian civil servants resulting from this transfer was invaluable for the administration of a free India. However, it should be remembered that it was a training in British and not in Indian traditions, and the civil servants of Indian origin were frequently nicknamed "brown sahibs".

The importance of the transfer, however, was not only numerical. The new opportunities, together with the expectancy of India's independence, provided a great attraction to people of high calibre for entering the service. As independence drew closer, there was a tendency for standards among Indian personnel to rise. Simultaneously, the attraction of the Indian Civil Service for persons of British origin diminished, as less and less opportunities could be expected.

Independence and partition occurred at the same time. The existing civil servants, therefore, had to be shared between India and Pakistan, with a majority of the staff going to India. The few remaining civil servants of British origin soon left, and the higher posts in the administration were thus, without exception, in Indian hands.

Clerical and other officers of the "non-gazetted" class were largely recruited after independence, and it seems that these posts were occasionally or even frequently used as rewards for freedom fighters of the less important ranks. It is remarkable, however, that this recruitment, whatever its other consequences, did not diminish the authority enjoyed by senior personnel.

## 1. Administrative Organization

The organization of the administration in India was based less on British traditions than on the needs of colonial rule. Even before 1947, moreover, the system of government was federal in character. At the centre were the Union ministries with

Secretaries as their executive heads. There was a marked tendency to concentrate power at the top of the administration. The Secretaries tended to run their respective ministries in both major and minor matters. A similar organization existed in the States.

It should be noted that apart from certain specialized services there are no Union officers in the field. Regional and local government is part of state administration. The districts, with an average population of about 2,000,000, are administered by district officers, sometimes called collectors, sometimes deputy commissioners. In some parts of the country there are regional units, above the districts, and these are run by commissioners. However, this system is not to be found in all states.

In addition to the "generalists", there are specialized officers in the field, and these also belong to the system of State administration. At the local level, i. e. for the villages, there are village councils or "Panchayats", elected by the inhabitants. District and regional councils, where they exist, are also elected.

## 2. Personnel

The so-called "generalists" were those who used to form the traditional Indian Civil Service (ICS). After 1947, this service was re-named the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). Thus, the ICS comprises only the relatively few officers who entered service before 1947, and the designation is likely to disappear for active officers in the near future. There are a number of specialized cadres such as the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) and the Indian Police Service (IPS). The latter, under the designation Indian Police (IP), also existed before 1947. Entrance into each of these services is by a stiff competitive examination, and only those who, in addition to a good university education, have an aptitude for passing examinations are able to compete successfully. Thus, recruitment is highly selective.

After a successful examination, the newly recruited administrator (except, of course, in the case of the IFS) is assigned to the cadre of one of the states, most frequently *not* the state of his origin. Thereafter, promotion for a long time goes largely by seniority. After a short apprenticeship, the "generalist" is invariably sent out as a district officer, which means that at the age of about thirty he is made responsible for a district of 2,000,000 people. He is supposed to learn, even before assuming his post, the appropriate language and all relevant facts available about his district, but he normally stays for only two or three years in the same place. Sooner or later he is transferred to one of the ministries at the State capital. At a later stage (somewhere around the age of forty) he may be further transferred to the Union administration in Delhi. But until he has reached a very high post in the Union administration (and comparatively few civil servants attain those), he is always liable to be sent back to his cadre State or to district administration. The only real exceptions to this rule are Union Secretaries and comparable Union officials.

The retirement age is low (55—58). On retirement, a civil servant may pass into private business or, occasionally, be given some temporary assignment by the Union or State administration.

### 3. Position of the Civil Servant

The civil servant is a "babu", enjoying great authority among the common people. This is an inheritance from British times, and senior officials are frequently accused of having a colonial attitude towards their "subjects". The position of authority is particularly evident in the case of district officers. On the other hand, it is also generally agreed that it is precisely these who are, on the whole, remarkably competent and have a strong feeling of responsibility. The knowledge they manage to acquire about their districts is quite astounding. The "great civilians" of an earlier period, when communications were not as good as they are today, used to boast that they had walked back and forth all over their districts "on their flat feet". Today jeeps are usually available, but the ambition of moving around in the district, knowing all the villages and talking to their inhabitants, exists in the case of their younger colleagues as well.

### 4. Theory and Practice of Administration

The classical theory of this system is based on a sharp distinction between policy and administration. The civil servant is expected to be impartial and to show no political or ideological affiliations. He should supposedly be equally ready to execute government policies whether he agrees with them or not. His advice to administrative and political superiors should be based on the facts he has been able to ascertain in the course of his experience in the field, not least about the reactions of the common people. And there is no doubt that the district officer, or former district officer, often knows these reactions as well as, or even better than, the politicians. The most important reason for this is that he spent his formative years in field administration and not in an office in the capital.

The other aspect of this theory is that the responsibility for his actions should belong to the political leaders. They should be ready to protect him at all costs and never shirk the blame by passing it on to their subordinates.

This used to be the classical theory. More recently, on the basis of modern democratic and social thought, there is a tendency to accuse the traditional administrators and, above all, the "generalists", of being too conservative, too much guided by tradition and not "dedicated to policies of social change". Indeed, it must be readily agreed that the traditional theory was much too facile and tended to conceal basic problems of administration.

In the first place, the whole distinction between policy and administration is, in fact, somewhat academic, and this applies in all countries but above all in those attempting rapid economic development by novel methods. The implementation of policies is anything but automatic. It involves decisions which may change the content of policies themselves and above all determine priorities between their different elements. Similarly, advice tendered on the basis of "fact-finding" invariably involves selection of facts, and this selection may virtually determine the contents of the advice and consequently, to the extent that this is followed, the policies.

Moreover, in a status-bound society such as that of India, the personal social affiliations of civil servants cannot remain unimportant. And obviously most of them come from the upper classes and upper castes. It is true that a certain proportion of civil servants always have to be recruited from "scheduled castes and scheduled tribes", i. e. from the casteless and tribals, even if competitors belonging to these categories do not attain as good results in the competitive examinations as other successful candidates. But those who enter on this basis are often particularly anxious to live up to the tradition existing in higher social groups. To use a term frequently employed in racial conflict in the United States, they tend to be "Uncle Toms".

The Indian civil servant wields very considerable power, especially at the local level. This is inevitable in a vast country such as India, with enormous distances, great density of population and frequently unsatisfactory communications. There is every indication that most of the administrators, if not all of them, use this power according to their lights for the benefit of the people for whom they are responsible. The district administrator usually, if not invariably, merits admiration in this respect. At the same time, the field of vision of the "generalists" must, of necessity, be limited. It is a not entirely unjustified simplification to say that they understand law and order and agriculture, but not very much else. Consequently, problems such as those of education and social welfare are sometimes neglected, simply because they are unfamiliar.

## 5. Administrators and Politicians

Even at the level of district and regional administration, relations between civil servants and politically elected bodies present serious problems. It can hardly be maintained that "Panchayati Raj" has been an unqualified success or, indeed, any success at all. The local councils are mostly manoeuvred by caste and other pressure groups. They are sometimes blatantly dishonest. At the same time, they are undoubtedly elected in free and democratic forms. Their members are usually comparatively old and have strong roots in the tortuous structure of local politics. It is anything but easy for a young district officer to deal with such problems. How far should he go in shutting his eyes to dubious practices — and how far should he

interfere with the legitimately elected representatives of the local people? He may often feel that whatever he does must be wrong one way or another.

Passing from district and regional administration, there is an even more complicated relationship to both the Union and State governments. These may today belong to different political parties and have very different policies. The loyalties of the civil servant are divided. He belongs to a State cadre, but also to an All-India service. On the whole, and with notable exceptions, he may well feel that on moral grounds the All-India aspect ought to take first place. Many State governments not only hold comparatively narrow views but are also more casual and sometimes less honest than the Union government. In fact, it could be said without too much exaggeration that a member of the Indian Administrative Service is apt to conserve his innocence as long as he stays in the field, but frequently loses it when transferred to the State capital. The problem is especially difficult in the case of Secretaries in the State ministries, who are nowadays not infrequently selected at a comparatively junior level, with an uncertain future in front of them and therefore with insufficient powers of resistance when confronted with dubious practices and motives.

In some cases, there have also been open clashes on political grounds. Striking examples of this can be found in West Bengal and in the Union territory of Delhi. Sometimes they result in changes of personnel regardless of merit. When the political situation is unstable, this is both more serious and occurs more frequently than otherwise, and the result may be lack of consistency and continuity in the application of policies, as indeed in the policies themselves. In other, and more frequent cases, administrators even at the local level are expected to help the government of the day at election time – and there may be governments of different political colour in the State and in the Union. Moreover, there is the minor but irritating headache of political leaders who demand “V. I. P. treatment”, to the point of open favouritism towards their relatives.

The protection given to the civil servant is also incomplete in reality. His career can be wrecked by clashes with powerful political leaders. This is true at all levels, from the Union to the district, but the problem becomes particularly difficult with great political turn-over and large ministries, whose members are often chiefly interested in safeguarding their own political future – not always exclusively by fair means.

## 6. Bribery and Similar Malpractices

Finally, there is the question of bribery or other forms of corruption. Such malpractices are not unknown in the case of civil servants, especially at the level of State administration, but more rarely at the Union or at the local level. It should be added, however, that corruption at all levels is probably less frequent than is generally believed, particularly in the case of civil servants – State politicians are

more often open to justifiable suspicion, and the same is even more true of those at the local level. But India is the land of slanderous rumours *par préférence*, and this, perhaps more than the realities, constitutes the seriousness of the problem.

Malpractices of different types occur, particularly in certain states. In one of them, for instance, civil servants were compelled to stop land registration in order to prevent the application of land reforms adopted by the same political party whose leaders instructed them to prevent their realization. However, it is important to remember that administrative practices vary considerably from one state to another, and the state to which the example refers is traditionally known for dishonesty in politics and inefficiency in administration. What happened there could never have happened in most of the other Indian states.

## 7. Conclusions

Thus, the picture includes many dark shades. Having said this it should, however, be added that, on balance, the Indian civil servants – and not only the ICS – as a whole constitute a remarkably efficient body of administrators. The criticisms so frequently voiced today are not unwarranted, but they are often unbalanced. Most administrators, and especially the district officers and those who remember their days as district officers, are dedicated to their people and to India's development. The civil service is astonishingly homogeneous. It may perhaps be *too* homogeneous, but it is characterized by a strong and widespread sense of responsibility, often surpassing that of its critics. Few civil servants are "colonialists" in the negative sense or uninterested in the development of social equality. Most of them are better "protectors of the poor" than the majority of political leaders at the State and local level.

The future of the civil service is perhaps uncertain. Recruitment is not as easy as before. By comparison with other professions, the civil servant enjoys a position less enviable than ten years ago. The political pressures are resented and may also contribute towards making recruitment more difficult. So far, however, no real deterioration is apparent in the cadres.