

Mai-baap re baap

UPON MY WORD



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FRESH OUT of South Africa, Mohandas Gandhi made a particularly strong speech in Benares in February 1916. He was gloomy about Indians earning the right to self-governance. He said a British member of the "much-abused" Indian Civil Service (ICS) had asked him to put in a good word for the administrators. Although many of them were "most decidedly overbearing; they are tyrannical, at times thoughtless", Gandhi said, "What does that signify? They were gentlemen before they came here, and if they have lost some of the moral fibre, it is a reflection upon ourselves... The atmosphere of sycophancy and falsity that surrounds them on their coming to India demoralises them, as it would many of us. It is well to take the blame sometimes."

Why was the Mahatma so cutting in his criticism of his own countrymen? The new nation he wanted India to be needed good governance. Our propensity to bicker, undercut one another, politicise everything and slowly corrode the Steel Frame was evident to him three decades before Independence.

The ICS ran India until Independence. The aura surrounding the "heaven born" did not dissipate until well into the 1980s, and Dharma Vira and K.B. Lal are still spoken of in reverential terms. The old guard were slowly supplanted by homegrown Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers. In 1947, British ICS officers returned

home on pensions, Pakistanis moved across the border, and many of the early IAS appointments were nominees who included military officers. But the allure of working your way up from your first posting in the countryside was very strong, and the civil services attracted some of our best and brightest in the first flush of freedom.

"The IAS officers recognised the need to work in a democratic structure under political direction... They were among the few groups in the prevailing heterogeneity of India which looked upon India as a whole; regarded the governmental system including both Central and state governments as a unity, and was in general refreshingly free from certain caste, provincial or communal prejudices which, by and large, have affected all other groups in the system," writes Nitish Sengupta in *My Times: A Civil Servant Remembers*.

Indeed, there was something romantic about helping to govern India, as in old daguerreotypes of the *solar-tooped* district administrator writing his journal by the light of a kerosene lantern, and truth be told, not unlike the caricature Ann Ewing drew in *History Today*: "Much nonsense has been written about the romantic, glamorous notion of a single ICS officer riding around his district, dispensing even-handed justice to a grateful and submissive peasantry. Settling law cases before breakfast, such a paragon apparently corrected land records before lunch, shot a tiger or two before dinner and wrote some Latin verse before taking a cold bath and retiring to a camp bed."

Well, at least they left us the sepia prints, and there are few experiences more charming and magical even today than sitting on a verandah in a planter's chair at a Circuit House in the countryside as dusk descends after a hard day's work, looking at the clouds of fireflies dancing over the rice fields and listening to the cicadas.

When I was growing up, aspiring to be an engineer was next only to joining the IAS. You had to be very intelligent, hard-working and able to absorb huge texts — plus be superlative in your "general knowledge", in order to make it to the IAS. Of course the IAS was very male dominated, and still is — I understand the marriage brokers and groom-hunters are good at scouting out the latest crop at the IAS Academy in Mussoorie. One of the earliest books my parents bought me was *Questions and Answers from the Book of Knowledge*. I was being subtly seduced — why else would I need General Knowledge in those days before the Bournvita quiz contest, Mastermind or KBC? There was virtue in wearing thick eyeglasses, not being athletic, and guarding your collection of Viewmaster slides of the Great Pyramids. Despite the prepping, some of us never made it to Mussoorie, but we contin-

ued to be awed by those three letters after somebody's name.

You only have to look at the advertisements for IAS classes across the country to see why the civil services are still a big draw. "The examination is as much a test of one's stamina, determination and will as it is of the knowledge base, awareness, intelligence and writing and speaking abilities of the candidates," the Mussoorie website says without irony.

Stamina, determination, will. Here's the nub of the problem. This year 300,000 candidates applied for the civil service examination. Two lakh took the tests. The list is slashed to 7,500 for the main examination, then 1,200 for the interviews — and finally, 435 made it through the interviews into Nirvana. In the first decades after Independence, you could make a maximum of three attempts to enter the civil services, and had to be between 21 and 24 years old. Now, the age limits are 30 for the "general" category, 33 for Other Backward Castes, and 35 for Scheduled Castes/Tribes. General candidates can try a maximum of four times; OBC candidates, seven times; and SC/ST candidates can try endlessly. A recent IAS "topper" succeeded on his fourth attempt (he had got into the Indian Police Service on his third attempt). What do these age limits mean? Somebody who gets into the IAS at 35 has only a quarter-century to build a career. "Many of them have never worked in a full-time job, and their

families support them while they keep trying," a senior administrator said. "They would be lucky if they made the joint secretary rank. They don't want to waste time doing rural service. Their attitudes have been set. They want to be where the power is, where the money is."

There is money to be made because there is very little money paid by the exchequer. A secretary to the Government of India, or a Director-General of Police, can expect to retire at princely salaries of between Rs 26,000 and 30,000 a month. Their children, too, want to hang out at the mall, buy iPods, surf the Internet and study in the United States.

No wonder the Steel Frame is very badly corroded, tottering and no longer the *mai-baap sarkar* of legend. "Many officers are genu-

inely concerned that quite a few of their colleagues are not behaving and performing in a manner which commands respect, that many are judgmental about people outside the service, and are unwilling to respect differences, to interact with 'outsiders', to work in a very participatory kind of a fashion, and that there are very many valid complaints of corruption, caste bias, insensitivity to the problems of the poor and under-privileged, and the poor delivery of services," the Alagh Committee, set up to recommend reforms, said in 2002.

Compare this with corruption-free Singapore, which pays its civil servants or Permanent Secretaries annual salaries of S\$1.6 million, or about Rs 4.3 crore — plus a performance-linked bonus that could add up to seven months' pay. Singapore is unequivocal about attracting the best talent to government. It "streams" schoolchildren based on their IQs and proficiency, and the best get scholarships to study at the world's top universities. There is a string attached — they have to sign a bond and return to work for the government back home. In India, a civil servant counts it as his crowning achievement if his child gets a scholarship to study overseas, and then goes on to work on Wall Street.

Is there hope? The second Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC), set up in 2005, is expected to complete its work shortly. Headed by Veerappa Moily, the ARC has already issued five comprehensive reports, the latest last month on public order. The commission is also studying a draft Public Service Bill. The ARC has been quite consultative and open. Transparency is improving. You can see the Moily committee's reports at <http://arc.gov.in>. A few days ago President Abdul Kalam listed ten visions for India 2020. Among them was "a nation where governance is responsive, transparent and corruption-free." There is hope.



IN THE SADDLE: IAS officer trainees with President Kalam