

What Makes an IAS Officer

Salient Features

By P.C. Nayak, IAS (1955 Maharashtra)

I was 24 years old when I joined as an IAS Probationer at Metcalf House, Delhi in April 1955. My educational qualifications were postgraduate degrees of the Madras University in Mathematical Statistics and Economics.

Feature 1 : UNITY AND DISCIPLINE

First thing which struck me about the IAS, was the discipline which bound the members of the IAS as a SERVICE. Juniors instinctively respected seniors and seniors main concern was to train and protect their juniors. Take away this feature and the Service crumbles into a heap.

Dr. C.D. Deshmukh laid the following guidelines to me in my early days in the Service –Earn the respect of IAS Officers junior to you, the affection of your batchmates and the confidence of your seniors in the Service.

Even after more than 50 years of its upsides and downsides, today to a group of District officers from the IAS, the Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh refers to the IAS as a meritorocracy with a special elan and pride of its own.

Shri P. Chidambaram, the present Finance Minister remarked in a CII meeting in Bangalore as far back as in the early 1980's when he was Minister (Personnel) that he was amazed how one IAS Officer can immediately relate to another by stating his year of entry and the state cadre to which he belongs.

In the early 1990's Dr. R.A. Mashelkar once remarked to me at NCL Pune during a seminar, when 5 IAS Officers were having a jolly good time with me during coffee break and lunch time as how IAS Officers always gel together as an activist group while it is difficult to achieve such cohesive action in his own cadre of scientists!

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Feature 2 : HALL-MARKS OF VIRTUE AND CHARACTER

As Philip Mason in his monumental work "The Men who Ruled India" has said the ideal of the civil servant is to be "minutely just and inflexibly upright". To summarise further the civil servant "uses power not for selfish ends but as thought by him to be right". In other words, it is his conscience which is the guide.

Peter Drucker, the management guru also lauded the basis of character as the virtue on which the Indian civil servant was recruited and trained. As Goethe the German philosopher has put it. "Talent develops itself in solitude; character, in life's stream". Development of character in junior officers is the responsibility of seniors who have to lead by example and encouragement.

Later on in my career, when I was a Secretary to Government of Maharashtra, while considering postings of IAS officers to sensitive posts, an able CM, almost echoing the words of Warren Hastings agreed with me that "it was on the virtue rather than on the mere ability of the civil servant that the government must rely".

Feature 3 : ACTION IS THY DUTY – FRUIT IS NOT THY CONCERN

The motto of the IAS is "Yogah Karmasu Kaushalam" – Efficiency in Action is Yoga. As further elucidated in the Bhagwad Gita, for us in the IAS, action is our duty irrespective of the fact as to who gets the credit for it. In brief, performance of duty is something good in itself. We, in the IAS, are all Karma Yogis.

Action speaks louder than words. Often, craving for public acclamation and newspaper coverage has led to the downfall of many civil servants!

FEATURE 4: PUBLIC IMAGE — CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY AS THE BENCHMARK

Public image of the Service is formed by the outward contribution made by the individual members of the Service and not by their deepest contemplations. An efficient Municipal Commissioner's outstanding work in battling plague at Surat, an extraordinarily strong Chief Election Commissioner, a good District Collector's, tsunami relief work can build up the public image of the IAS. Similarly a corrupt officer can seriously tarnish not merely his reputation but the image of the entire Service as well.

Ultimately the IAS will be judged "not so much by its worst officers as by its best, and in the end not even by its best but by what the Service aims at".

Many foreign diplomats at Delhi have often wondered how the IAS officers perform so well in international negotiations and enquired about the recruitment and training details! The IAS as the senior most civil service of India can stand easily the comparison with many other national civil services of the western developed countries. But today, domestically the ideal benchmark is still the IAS officer as the District Officer. It is at the District level in India that the Indian citizen will judge the IAS and form his own perception of the image of the IAS. If the common man in India, especially the Indian farmer, looks at the District IAS officer "with the expectation of receiving justice and sympathy" then the IAS has succeeded in capturing not merely its own ideals but the public imagination as well!

FEATURE 5 : NOVELTY – NOT ORIGINALITY BUT SINCERITY

The novelty of the IAS is not its originality but sincerity. An IAS officer during his career is assured by constitutional guarantees that his progress can be interrupted only by gross misconduct. His ability to handle difficult persons and

onerous responsibilities will be severely tested. He will have to study diverse subjects and be confident to deal with experts in different disciplines of knowledge. Indeed he has to be an expert to appreciate and coordinate the work of experts in other fields. Decisiveness and not procrastination is the need of the hour, every hour! Time management becomes an art and managing the political bosses is not at all easy these days.

While he aims at perfection, the IAS Officer has sometimes to accept that many times, all the contribution he can make under very trying circumstances is to work towards a better right or a lesser wrong. It is not so much a question of white and black but an acceptable shade of gray as the first step!. It is in such circumstances that the sincerity of the officer has to shine through the dark days.

I had the privilege of working under Shri S.G. Barve an efficient and effective ICS officer who had resigned and joined politics and became my minister. He often used to tell me that "the better and the best are most often the enemy of the good"; because we are always discussing how to do better and the best. Since we do not do the good –bad automatically triumphs" !

FEATURE 6 : "BUILDERS" WILL BE REMEMBERED

Many successful IAS officers have come and gone and many more will come "The world will remember only builders" says Lester Thurow. A Commerce Secretary who in the early 1950s brought in the CGS system by a stroke of his pen, a Joint Secretary who quietly and without much fanfare introduced the culture of iodised salt or a self-effacing Secretary to Government who fights for special legislation for the Small and Medium Enterprises will be remembered in times to come. But in the true tradition of the Service they will themselves not talk about it. For them

performance of their duty is its own reward! We will be judged by what we have left behind and the qualitative changes we have been able to make in our field of jurisdiction.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Phillips Mason wrote about the ICS in his monumental study – “Men who Ruled India.” It is time for a similar study on the IAS – titled say “The Men who Serve India”.

We, in the IAS, have always been given impossible tasks. It was Napoleon who said that “Impossible” is a word in a fool’s dictionary. During the student revolt in Paris in the late 1960’s, a lot of graffiti appeared on the walls of the Sorbonne. One such graffiti read as follows: “Be Realistic : Attempt the Impossible”. Professor Mortimer Adler a well-known US philosopher who recalled this story, was delighted by such forward looking iconoclasm. Similarly we, in the IAS, should also realistically attempt “impossible” tasks dished out to us.

Finally, let us always remember the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi’s words “A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history”.