



# GORA SAHIB SYNDROME IN NEW INDIA AND THE ROAD AHEAD

*Even after gaining Swaraj in 1947, why higher civil services in India are seen as a class apart from the common citizens? Why barring a few 'conscientious' public servants the large swathe is brimming with condescending and boorish vibes for fellow citizens? Why ICS which was transplanted as IAS in the politico-administrative structure of India amidst great stonewalling failed to strike a chord with the populace? When it was transplanted as IAS in independent India it successfully served the formative decades of nation-building till it was anchored by the dyed-in-the-wool Gandhians till the late 1960s. Later on, except for the 'conscientious' civil servants with the exemplary contribution to public service, the imperious and condescending conduct of some members towards the citizens of India (in whom constitutionally the ultimate sovereignty resides) leaves a lot to be desired. It is high time to undertake radical reforms in 'the bureaucracy with an effusive colonial hangover'. This is indispensable to tailor it to be an enduring vector of public spirit in the omnibus body of public services in India.*

## ICS as a 'ruling bureaucracy' not 'civil service' per se

The recent boorish conduct of some public servants especially Collectors during country-wide lockdown during Second Wave of Covid-19 was a surprise for the millennials and sparked widespread criticism and debate. In 'New India' to dissect the significance and maladies of IAS as an institution of nation-building it is important to evaluate the *raison d'être* of its *alma mater* the Indian Civil Service (ICS).

It will be interesting to analyze the enduring legacy of ICS in IAS and the departures from it in post-independent India. In the British Raj, the ICS was created through the Government of India Act 1858 on the recommendations of the Northcote-Trevelyan committee. ICS was though christened as service but essentially it was a 'ruling bureaucracy' and not public service per se and it was impossible also as structurally, India was a colony of the British Raj. Yes, it was a 'ruling bureaucracy' that exercised untrammelled powers on behalf of the sovereign crown far away in London.

A common man may perceive public service and bureaucracy as two sides of the same coin but all bureaucracies are not public service. The genesis of public services should not be confused with the genesis of bureaucracy. The eminent German sociologist Max Weber described bureaucracy as a structural and functional arrangement through which authority is exercised. The sources of authority can be traditional (kings, church etc.), charismatic (namely spiritual leaders, gurus etc.) and legal-rational authority (legislature, political executive, judiciary etc.). The authority is sometimes exercised also in combination. The most evident example is in politics. History is replete with examples that even in democracies a politician with legal-rational authority (President, Prime Minister Etc.) also blends charismatic authority (lineage, oratory, personality etc.) to bolster his control over the external environment and decimate challenge to his authority.

Public service is a different ballgame. In a contemporary sense, public service is bureaucracy invested with public service ethos, with motives to serve popular will, public interest and public cause. Frederickson and Hart, the doyens of public administration, pithily observed that public service is "an extensive love of all people within our political boundaries and the imperative that they must be protected in all of the basic rights granted to them by enabling documents."<sup>1</sup>

Thus the modern concept of public service is closely intertwined with the nationhood sentiment and its political boundary. When scanned in the light of the above observations, it will be amply clear that ICS was never conceived and designed as a public service either structurally or functionally. This is because India was never a part of Britain; it was essentially a colony for it. Consequently, Indians were not granted basic rights, something that was protected and promoted for the British citizens even in India with separate courts presided by Europeans for the trials of the Europeans. Interestingly, the very few Indians initially who successfully competed and joined ICS were perfectly moulded in Macaulayism, “.. a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect...”.<sup>2</sup> ICS was singularly efficient, clean and professional in bleeding India fortunes and oppressive, condescending and boorish towards native Indians.

## The first challenge to ICS supremacy

The ‘ruling bureaucracy’ unbridled supremacy was challenged with the electoral victory of the Liberal Party in 1906 and the appointment of John Morley as the new secretary of state for India. John Morley was keen to increase the involvement of Indians, albeit in a limited way in the governance of India. However, this challenge was blunted by then viceroy Lord Minto with the active cooperation of ICS officers at Calcutta and Shimla. This was achieved by defeating the legislative and administrative innovations under the aegis of Indian Councils Act of 1909 also known as Morley-Minto Reforms through the retention of executive veto over all legislation.

## Fading charm of ICS among British natives

With the dawn of the 20th Century, the ‘ruling bureaucracy’ charm of ICS began to whittle down among the British natives. This was due to brewing political turbulence after the division of Bengal (1905), the opening of new avenues of remunerative employment with the blooming of the industrial revolution in England, the outbreak of First World War, the burgeoning crescendo of the popular agitation under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi viz. Champaran Movement, Khilafat Movement, and Non-cooperation Movement that raised security concerns among the aspirants of ICS in Britain.

Another significant ominous sign that portended as undermining of the British Raj in general and ICS, in particular, was the introduction of Dyarchy (dual governance) at the provincial level under the aegis of the Government of India Act of 1919 (also known as the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms). This created a flutter among ICS officers and sent shivers down their spine on the prospect of working with the ‘Indian’ ministers elected to preside over “transferred” departments (education, public health, public works, and agriculture).





## Lloyd George's steel frame speech and historic admission

The upheaval in India culminated in a growing disenchantment and resignations of ICS officers that pushed the anxious British parliament to constitute Lee Commission for 'investigating the difficulties of the Service— [in the backdrop of the]... extremist agitation in India'.

Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, in his historic 'Steel-frame' 1922 speech, in British Parliament exhorted that: "the British civil servants were the very basis of the Empire in India and .... If you take that steel frame out of the fabric, it would collapse. There is one institution we will not cripple, there is one institution we will not deprive of its functions or of its privileges, and that is that institution, which built-up the British Raj..". There cannot be more direct admission on how instrumental was ICS for building up and anchoring British Raj in India and how India was pauperized with the decline from its share of 18.1 percent of Global GDP in 1820 to the nadir of merely around 4.2 percent when the British left India in 1947. Even the Simon Commission (1928) testified that "of no country can it be said more truly than of India that 'Government is administration'.

## Some 'empathizing and conscientious' Gora Sahibs (ICS)

Notwithstanding, the disjunction between British ICS officers and the increasingly pauperized natives, it will be intellectual turpitude to ignore the contributions of some outstanding and conscientious British ICS officers. Sir Malcolm Darling, Sir John Austen Hubback, F.L. Brayne, and many others deeply empathized with the multitude misfortunes of the masses in the British Raj. Sir John A Hubback spearheaded scientific estimation of food grains production through statistical techniques when he was Divisional Commissioner of Bhagalpur. This was not only academically de novo in the world but more importantly, was a gargantuan moral odyssey for a country ravaged by recurrent famines. His work also inspired his compeer ICS and statisticians alike most notable being Sri P.C. Mahalanobis the architect of robust statistical architecture and planned development in the newly Independent India.

## Constituent assembly conundrum over transplanting ICS

India's Independence witnessed demand by freedom movement leaders to disband ICS- a relic of the British Era. Jawahar Lal Nehru unsparingly chided it as, "with which we are unfortunately still afflicted in this country, as neither Indian, nor civil, nor a service." However, Sardar Patel opined differently as he was ably assisted by some highly professional ICS officers viz. Sri V.P. Menon, Sir Chandulal Trivedi, Sir C D Deshmukh, Sir Girija Shankar Bajpai, H.M. Patel in overcoming the turbulence that came with the transfer of power. The formidable challenges with the transfer of power were seamless integration of princely states in Independent India, restoration of law and order in the riot afflicted wounded cities, and rehabilitation of the Hindu refugees from West Pakistan. This convinced Sardar Patel to integrate ICS into the politico-administrative structure of independent India.

Notwithstanding the yeoman services of some motivated ICS officers, most of the members of the Constituent Assembly were unconvinced of the assurances of Sardar Patel. Ananthasayanam Ayengar distraughtly lamented and warned that, "... they were the rulers under the old regime and that they will continue to be so in this new regime. [You]... asks us to forget that these persons were all still in service-400 of them-committed excesses thinking this was not their country."<sup>3</sup>

Sardar Patel single handily bulldozed all opposition in the Constituent Assembly and thundered, "If you have done with it and decide not to have them at all, even in spite of my pledged word, I will take the services with me and go,"<sup>4</sup> His resolute led to the gelling and gliding of ICS in the administrative structure of free India through Article 312(2) that enabled Constitutional safeguards to the rechristened ICS-IAS and IPS.



## Dichotomy of the dyed-in-the-wool Gandhian Ministers and IAS

India as a republic inherited a strange dichotomy between political and permanent executive vis-à-vis public service climate and culture. Public service climate implies- a collection of shared perceptions on characteristics, objectives and approach of public service in general and the ethical conduct of the public servants in particular. It is also recognition of the public service as a moral or 'spiritual calling' to serve the marginalized, vulnerable and dispossessed in the ambit of fundamental freedoms. When a majority of members share these perceptions, approach and objectives and adhere to the canons of ethical conduct it moulds it into a more enduring 'public service culture'. This public service culture inculcates public service motives and anchors the incumbent and future public servants for the common good. Strong public service culture is also characterized by the existence and application of the structural pressure, subtle and coercive, on the entrants with weak ethical and moral compass to adhere to the strong centripetal mores of the public service in the organization.

The transplantation of ICS as IAS did not result in the blooming of public service climate and culture in bureaucracy. Surprisingly, except for the Second Administrative Reforms Commissions (ARC) in 2005, none of the committees/commissions constituted earlier grappled with this palpable absence. This 'anaemic public service' culture in the bureaucracy thwarted the creation of a strong ethics regime synchronized with the crying needs of the Republic and morally embedded public service. The strong 'moral culture of public service' is indispensable as it transforms even the weak ethical basis of the recruit(s) in the public service and makes it meaningful and directional when a particular organizational setting and structural pressures converge. Sadly, in India, in the recent past the 'folklore of collector's despotism' that reminisces the local episodes of brutish and boorish treatment of natives by Gora Sahibs fed the oppressive instincts and shaped the career choices of perpetually powerless middle and lower classes. The choice is also symptomatic of the absence of a strong, homogenous, and humongous civil society in India.

In stark contrast to the 'ruling/master bureaucracy', independent India was fortunate to inherit a very 'benign public service climate' in the political executive at least till the late 1960s. The political stalwarts were the ones whose baptism in politics then warranted the physical and psychological capacity to endure pain and hardships for self and family. Not surprisingly, only persons with strong ethical edifice and empathy with the suffering of the masses were motivated to join the mission. Politics for freedom fighters was a saintly profession of sacrifice & suffering for the service of languishing masses under the colonial yoke.<sup>5</sup> The infectious public service motives radiating from these political leaders profoundly resonated in the bureaucratic chambers and channelized the talent and organizing capacity of newbie IAS officers mellowed them albeit transiently, in the onerous task of the institution-building of an impecunious yet sanguine nation.

## Return of the 'folklore of collector's despotism' in Emergency years

With the gradual departure of towering leaders from the late-1960s, the prophetic warning of the seasoned freedom fighters in the Constituent Assembly began to unravel when Independent India was anchored by the second generation leaders. The 'ruling and despotic motives' of the bureaucratic chambers which were tamed earlier by the dyed-in-the-wool Gandhians, began to trespass, cultivate, and anchor the political executive at federal and provincial levels. The culmination of the bureaucratic despotism was manifested with ferocity and ruthlessness during the Emergency years-1975-77. Its scars and resonance are still reverberating in the 94 years old Veera Sarin's petition in the Supreme Court in December 2020, asking for the Emergency proclamation of 1975 to be declared "wholly unconstitutional".

No course-correction was attempted in post-emergency years to mitigate the torment of the common man due to highly skewed balance of power favouring one-upmanship, red-tapism and even pecuniary corruption of some unresponsive bureaucrats. The groundswell of public sentiments against the high handedness of ruling bureaucrats and harassment of common citizens by their petty officials found voice in the political derision of bureaucrats with the emergence of regional parties in the late-1980s in the Hindi heartland. It was seen as a poetic justice moment by some when a popular Chief Minister ridiculed the 'chief secretary' as 'bara babu' (head clerk).





## The way ahead: Stomping out 'Gora Sahib syndrome' and fostering a strong public service culture

In a parliamentary democracy, the political system of a country is the habitat of its public administration. Thus it would be infantile and pretentious to assume that administration will remain insulated from values and mores of the political system and vice versa. Although, one cannot gainsay the significance of All India Services in the federal polity of India and the contribution of 'conscientious' public servants in nation-building, but a new legal and ethical architecture is needed to foster public service culture and squeeze out dead wood promptly. The reformist initiative by the incumbent government in the top echelons of the civil service through the lateral entry and periodic review of Central Government Employees for strengthening of administration under Fundamental Rule (FR) 56(J) is commendable. It needs to be further widened and deepened.

There are still some grey areas that demand radical changes viz. recruitment, performance appraisal, promotion and privileges associated with the public services in India. This is indispensable to stomp out the sense of 'Gora Sahib syndrome' which creeps in after passing the competitive exam for public services and is embolden during training and service period. Some changes worth consideration are:

**Adopting position classification for promotions:** Policymakers must look into the feasibility of adoption of position classification which is in vogue in the USA, Israel etc. In the position classification framework every position is treated as open and is filled after testing competence and domain knowledge garnered commensurate to the period of service. This is in complete variance with time-bound seniority-based promotions prevalent in the rank classification that is vogue in India. In rank classification, the competence of a public official is tested only once at the entrance level to public service and thereafter s/he increasingly relishes the increasing emoluments, promotions, perks of public service without the test of his domain knowledge or worth for public service. Initially, position classification may be adopted for direct 'Group A' recruits and later can be extended to 'Group B' services too.

**360-degree performance appraisal:** Public servants elected or appointed are custodians of public interest and sentinels of democracy. Public officials should view public resources and executive power as sacrosanct rather than spoils of office. The upholding of public trust is a function of character. The performance appraisal in public service is expected to disperse the character streaks of the official as dispersion of light in the prism unearths the different colours of the white light. Robert Ingersoll rightly prophesied that "Nothing discloses real character like the use of power. It is easy for the weak to be gentle. ... But if you wish to know what a man really is, give him power. This is the supreme test. It is the glory of Lincoln that, having almost absolute power, he never abused it, except on the side of mercy." Except for immediate subordinates who else can be witness to the 'uncontrived self' of the bosses?

Therefore, 360 degree performance appraisal is quintessential to lay bare the dark underbelly of some public servants which they are able to obscure from their higher officers but which is conspicuous to their subordinates. It is no surprise therefore that in India, both at state and union level, even when hundreds of public servants are prosecuted for possession of assets disproportionate to their known sources of income and acquired over a period of ten years or so (the test period) but if one were to look into their appraisal reports for the relevant period one would hardly ever find any adverse remarks about their integrity.<sup>6</sup>

360 degree performance appraisal will act as deterrence and may prevent four types of willful abuse of office delineated by the Second ARC in 2005 and recommended for their classification as offences under the Prevention of Corruption Act. The four misconducts which prima facie are not illegal but do seriously erode ethical governance and rule of law are;

- *Gross perversion of the Constitution and democratic institutions without pecuniary advantage or gratification*
- *Abuse of authority unduly favouring or harming someone without any pecuniary consideration or gratification*

- *Obstruction or perversion of justice* by unduly influencing law enforcement agencies and prosecution
- *Squandering public money* for ostentatious official life-styles without private pecuniary gain or misappropriation

India cannot further afford bureaucratic values and structure which is a relic of the British Era characterized more as a 'ruling bureaucracy' where the civil servants enjoy feudalistic privileges like high compensation, quiet life, low accountability and pampered hubris. The cloak of ministerial (collective) responsibility that guarantees personal immunity to all and accountability to none needs to be revisited. The perpetuation of colonial public service practices and values that triggers diffidence and fear among the citizens of India, in whom constitutionally the ultimate sovereignty resides needs to be dismantled through reverse engineering.

Despite luminary public services by some outstanding public servants (both frontline and top-echelons) during the current covid-19 crisis, still if according to the recent survey findings 61 per cent of Indians are angry, upset, depressed, or worried over the Covid-19 crisis, it is a grim reminder of anaemic public spirit in the body of public services. Steven Kelman, a public management scholar, rightly cautioned that "if the norm of public spirit dies, our society would look bleaker and our lives as individuals would be more impoverished."<sup>7</sup> ■

## REFERENCES:

1. Frederickson, H. G., & Hart, D. K. (1785). The Public Service and the Patriotism of Benevolence. *Public Administration Review*, 45(5), 547-553.
2. <http://www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/history/primarydocs/education/Macaulay001.htm>
3. Constituent Assembly Debates On 10 October, 1949 Part I.
4. Constituent Assembly Debates On 10 October, 1949 Part I.
5. Upadhyay Ranvijay, *Ethics, Integrity, and Aptitude in Governance* - by SAGE Publications, 2018, pp 357.
6. Upadhyay, pp 369.
7. Kelman, S. 1787, Public Choice and the public spirit, *The Public Interest* 87.

## AUTHOR



**Ranvijay Upadhyay**

**(The author is a public servant and author of "Ethics, Integrity and Aptitude in Governance" published by SAGE Publications, 2018. Views are strictly personal to the author.)**