

# On the Side of the People?

*The draft report of the IAS induction training syllabus review committee proposes use of learning modules on various socio-economic issues to raise awareness among serving officers. But how far will these officers find space to successfully tackle these issues in a system designed to be deferential to powerful commercial interests? The truly dedicated officers will have to band together and make small positive changes.*

VITHAL RAJAN

The draft report on improving the induction process and training of young Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers is now available to the public for comment. An expert committee under the chairmanship of R V Vaidyanatha Ayyar, IAS (ret'd) has produced this carefully crafted 193-page report with annexures running to another 126 pages. One's instinctive reaction is that nothing much can be added by the common man to another periodic fine-tuning of a well-established process for maintaining the "steel-frame" of the country's administration.

Apparently, this review was called for because of the unease in governing circles that the composition of the recruits had changed significantly in the recent past, with many coming from non-elite rural backgrounds, while the political space had also changed dramatically in our times of liberalisation and globalisation. The report notes that the 73rd and 74th amendments

to the Constitution could possibly entail new measures of accountability and responsiveness from its elite officers. The report emphasises over and over again the need to strengthen the esprit de corps of its officers, and suggests some new foundation courses in social science and economics.

## Designed to Rule Not Serve

If these were the only reasons for concern, the senior people involved could well have been spared the trouble they have conscientiously taken to revamp the system. The British who gave birth to the elite corps may have gone, and the "Tamil-Brahmin" (Tamil-Brahmin) hegemony might be challenged today, but our elite officers have built upon their privileges over the decades, strengthened internal lines of communication within the "mafia" (as semi-jocularly termed by their own seniors), and carefully seen to it that any dalit or tribal officer from the very start imbibes the colonial mannerisms of arrogant rulers. The corps has realistically

understood that it is not possible by any other means to control a vast, teeming population of poverty-ridden, disaffected people in the interest of the rulers, whether a distant colonial power, or the moneyed class at home. It is true that in this new century bureaucratic power has to be masked in deference to the commercial interest of the ruling superpower which wishes to promote rapid and profitable growth of business and public-private partnerships, but the corps is in no real danger of losing its grip over the administration. The new amendments to the Constitution in favour of panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) have so far proved to be only ritualistic in nature in most cases, empty of effective budget provisions, and without any strength at the grassroots to demand accountability to the people of India.

If real reforms are intended, even heuristically, one must examine the structure of administration in its entirety, from its colonial roots in the necessity of the British to rule over a conquered people through an elite corps, to the reasons why an independent India maintained a hierarchical system of rule, with its core district officers, deliberately still known by the feared East India Company designation of "collector", and trained to be self-willed and arrogant towards their submissive people, demonstrating to all the callous "insolence of office". Though, like any other effective mandarin, they also wear the mantle of Platonic philosopher-kings.

The British sowed several dragon teeth before they left, the hasty partition of the country, forced through by Lord Mountbatten, being the best known to a crippled subcontinent. The Westminster model of "first past the post" electoral system has found favour with few democratic countries other than former colonies. This form of electoral politics has been gladly espoused by post-colonial political leadership for it has helped to secure their hold on power. When they left, the British openly pinned their hopes of continuity on the army, the steel-frame of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) – soon to be changed only in name to the IAS – and significantly the Congress Party. Mahatma Gandhi, perhaps, was the one person of those times who saw the danger to democracy posed by this powerful triumvirate, and called for dissolution of the Congress into samaj sevaks. He might have helped change administrative processes as well, but an elite Hindu's bullet carried him away. Pandit Nehru openly

declared around that time that he was afraid to change the structure. The curse of a powerful colonial army was bequeathed to Pakistan, stymieing for over half a century any possibility of amity between the two peoples, since one was ruled by a Muslim military elite and the other by a Hindu commercial one, both of which had vested interests in the status quo.

Hence, from those days till now, the people of India have inherited a system of rule not structured to be responsive to their needs or to real democratic principles, but created to serve efficiently the rulers and the powerful. The few but stellar individuals within the service, who have tried to serve the people faithfully, have only succeeded in giving people faith in the system – just as a few kindly British “philosopher-kings” did a hundred years ago – and hope that while their lives may be wretched their children would fare better.

It would be totally unfair to give the impression that the draft report is without meaningful content. There is much for serious reflection in it, especially for serving officers. It is heartening to see suggestions for learning modules on livelihood issues, the right to food, microfinance, self-help groups, and the various missions

on employment, public health and education. Such modules will certainly increase awareness among young officers. However, what is in grave doubt is the administrative space available to a dedicated officer to bring to happy fruition any such scheme for human development.

This becomes evident in the report’s pages on the north-east, though it perfunctorily warns us against using stereotypes here. It bemoans the fact that these areas are “chronically insurgent prone” reminding us of the good old ICS identifying sturdily independent people as “criminal tribes”, without the officers, past or present, ever bothering to question the structural violence that has led to popular disaffection. The report rightly notes that most officers in the north-east would be “outsiders” without any real knowledge of ground realities. However, it is a very slick assumption indeed that any of them know the ground realities of the regions of the poor, even in their own home towns.

### Strong Wills, Small Steps

To be honest, it is easy to carp, and difficult to be constructive, when good people try and fine-tune a colonial system

for democratic needs. For those who are determined to usher in a belated democracy there has to be stubborn realisation that they are in for the long haul. The romantic days of dreaming of quick “revolutionary” changes are long past. The report has rightly touched on fears of extra-legal pressures from politicians, and the attraction of corruption for the weak-willed. All governments, of whatever hue, face these same dangers. There is no training programme that can give integrity or courage to an individual. It is up to the recruiting officers to discern these irreplaceable qualities of character, and that is why a properly conducted viva voce examination continues to be important. But it would be a grave error on the part of superiors to imagine that style or posture acquired by a certain class denote integrity or courage.

First of all, the young incumbents to powerful office should sensitise themselves early in their careers to ground realities faced by the poor, by the marginalised, by dalits, by tribals, by women, by children, by the old, and by the disabled. The suggestions made in an earlier note might sound facetious,<sup>1</sup> but many of them are based on workable techniques by which



## INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT AHMEDABAD

### Requires

### FACULTY AND POSTDOCTORAL/RESEARCH FELLOWS IN CENTRE FOR MANAGEMENT IN AGRICULTURE (CMA)

**Qualification:** Candidate must have a Ph.D. in Agricultural Economics/Economics/Development Economics/Marketing/Finance/Agricultural Engineering/Food Technology/Rural Sociology/Communication or related fields. Demonstrated ability and interest in developing a strong research programme in area of food and agribusiness management and teaching at postgraduate and doctoral level in general management and agribusiness management.

Interested candidates may send their detailed resume, publications list, names and contact details of three references and a cover letter indicating your research and teaching interests to: **Director, Indian Institute of Management, Vastrapur, Ahmedabad 380 015. Email: [director@iimahd.ernet.in](mailto:director@iimahd.ernet.in). For further information, please visit our website <http://www.iimahd.ernet.in>.**

idealistic youngsters can learn what problems and insecurities are created for ordinary people by the present form of rule. It is a pleasant fantasy to believe they will be in charge of a “delivery mechanism”. It is best quite early to realise that they will be charged to operate a “denial mechanism”. Further, that another new programme of development pulled out of a hat does not denote governmental or institutional sincerity, but most times is nothing more than hastily contrived and deceptive populism to garner votes. Also, that it does not need officialdom to “empower” people, who might be far better off if official rules, procedures, and red-tape oversight were not so oppressively preventing them from rescuing themselves and the country from poverty. Finally, that this apparent bumbling is really rather well-designed to keep most people excluded and poor.

But there are resources still available to the honestly dedicated: mulish refusal to step beyond the letter of the law; dogged insistence that justice be done; telling it as it is, and then taking the consequences of deferred promotions and inhospitable postings, and the rejection that their patient merit would take from their unworthy colleagues.

To these personal resources could be added what can be achieved by daring bands of conscientious officers. These perhaps can form “democratic cells” within the establishment, and through close “unofficial collaboration” push through people-oriented studies, timely media exposures, and legislation demanded by the public. Manageably staged crises could follow with resolution in the people’s interest. Indian political space is much like a Chinese puzzle, and gives an alert group the chance to make a small positive change. This is not the time for grand gestures, but for an accumulation of small social steps to alleviate public suffering.

Much can still be done by a small group within the elite corps, but it will be done outside of official sanction, policy, or training programmes. Time will be on their side, for surely, one hopes, it is on the side of the people. **EW**

Email: [vithalrajan@hotmail.com](mailto:vithalrajan@hotmail.com)

## Note

1 Vithal Rajan, ‘Improving the IAS’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 24, 2005.