



## REACTION OF INDIAN CIVIL SERVANTS DURING THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT: DILEMMA AND CO-OPERATION

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### Abstract

Indianization of civil services during British period started due to the immense pressure from the nationalists. Indians after the revolt of 1857 were continuously demanding of Indians joining the administration. British government too realized that without the help and support of Indians they cannot maintain their empire in India. Thus Indians were included in the administration and many Indians aspired and joined the most prestigious service of the world. The study shows the attitude and reaction of Indian bureaucrats during the national movement. An interesting dimension of the study is the variation in the attitudes of Indian bureaucrats. Quite naturally, the Indian officials were imbued with nationalist sentiments and welcomed the reforms that took India on the road to responsible government and freedom. They were extremely critical of reform acts that sought to curtail full participation of Indians in the process of government. However, most Indian officials were caught in a predicament since, on the one hand, they had to abide by their duty as civil servants of the British Empire, and on the other hand they were drawn towards nationalist aspirations. This conflict between official duty and nationalist calling defined their attitudes.

**Keywords:** Bureaucracy, British Officials, Nationalism, Indian Civil Servants, Administration.

### Introduction

One potent criticism of the I.C.S. was that it was neither Indian, nor Civil, nor Service. Before Lord William Bentinck, the higher civil service was completely British. The recruitment to CCS was made through 'patronage' system that empowered Court of Directors to nominate their sons or acquaintances to these positions. The professional bureaucracy of British India was an all-white affair until the last decade of the Company's rule.

The Government accepted the recommendations of the Charter Act of 1833 to appoint Indians in administration without any discrimination. However the declaration remained a dead letter until Charter Act of 1853 when the practice of nomination by the Directors was replaced by selection of CCS by an open competition. Indians were free to sit at the competitive examinations held at London. Eligibility to sit at competitive examination did not help Indians much. It was not an easy job for Indians to go there and take exams because of syllabi content, financial constraints and religious restrictions. For eleven years no Indian was selected. The first Indian to qualify the I.C.S. exam was S.N. Tagore in 1864. From 1855 to 1914, Indian recruitment remained insignificant (only 84 as against 2644 Europeans)<sup>1</sup> and no Indian could rise in rank above that of District Judge or District Magistrate. The principle of competition as adopted could not satisfy the Indian aspirations.

The Secretary of State's announcement of August 1917 put in the "forefront the contemplated increased association of Indians in every branch of administration and the introduction of Responsible Government"<sup>2</sup>. Consequently the Montford report recommended greater proportion of the Indian element in the service. On their recommendation, examination began to be held in India also and a fixed percentage of candidates were to be appointed from candidates examined in India. 33% posts on the cadre were to be filled by the Indians and an annual increase of 1½ % was allowed for 10 years. To the extent of 1/3<sup>rd</sup> reserved for Indians, the government could make nomination to secure fair representation of different communities and provinces<sup>3</sup>.

The appointment of number of Indians to position in I.C.S however did not lead to equal status with the British components. The Indian officials encountered discrimination, and at times, humiliation both in matters of administration and appointment as well as in personal and social interaction. Discrimination can be seen at two different levels-- one at the administrative and other at the social level. The British officials openly resented the entry of Indians into the elite corps. One of the examples is when Rao Bahadur Deshmukh was appointed as a Sessions Judge of Ahmedabad under the provisions of the 1861 Act, it provoked the Bombay civilians to memorialize the Secretary of State. Throughout the late nineteenth century, British officials used their ingenuity to prevent the entrance of Indians into the scheduled or reserved posts. On the initiative of the highest authorities, including Viceroys, Secretaries of State, and even Parliament, measures were adopted to provide legal sanction for such appointments but in every instance, British bureaucrats either interpreted these enactments narrowly or totally disregarded them.<sup>4</sup> Early resignations, mobility, and countless petitions were clear signs of disaffection among district officials.<sup>5</sup>The British government had to recruit Indians into the service because it was not possible for the former to administer without their help.



Another aspect of the Indian officials' plight was the professional "glass ceiling" that they encountered. It was the deliberate design of the I.C.S. to keep Indians away from decision making positions. The positions open to Indians were in departments like railway, post, and telegraph etc. to keep them away from political responsibilities. B.K. Nagla, has noted that such posts often generated 'new hopes and aspirations' but often led to disappointment.<sup>6</sup> Racial arrogance manifested both at the social level as well as in appointments, positions and authority. 'Higher officials' pride in this supposedly intimate knowledge of the "Indian character" was often as manifest as their faith in British superiority. The number of Indian and British officers always varied too much. In 1939, the date line fixed for attaining numerical parity between the two elements in the service, out of total strength of 1299 I.C.S. men, 759 were British and 540 Indians. The number of Indians and Anglo-Indian promoted from the provincial service to the 'listed posts' in that year was 85.<sup>7</sup>

There were some British officers who treated their Indian counterparts and even subordinates quite courteously. One such officer was Philip Mason, a British ICS officer who was, during the War, Joint Secretary in then War Department headed by the Commander-in-Chief. He had no racial prejudices and treated his Indian staff with the utmost courtesy and consideration as recorded by Dharam Veera, District Magistrate, Etah, Almorah, an Indian bureaucrat.<sup>8</sup> The racial distance between the British and Indian bureaucrats however led to the consolidation of the latter as a group. Relationship between the Indian officials on the other hand was harmonious.

Constitutional development in India was closely linked to the nationalist agitation. Most of the reforms since Indian Constitutional Act of 1892 were conceded in response to pressure built up by the nationalist demands. The constitutional development and the nationalist agitation were actually parallel processes. Reaction of Indian bureaucrats to national movement becomes important, as they were caught in a dilemma-i.e. on the one hand they were expected to be loyal to the British Empire but at the same time they were moved by their patriotic and nationalist feelings. During the early days of the civil service Indian bureaucrats were loyal towards the Government. They had only one motive to serve the country by performing their official duties. Gradually, after 1885 with the founding of Indian National Congress and heightened sense of nationalist feeling, the civil servants found themselves in a predicament. Moreover in spite of serving the British government, many Indian I.C.S. officers did not leave their traditions which signified their attachment to indigenous culture and values. For instance the first I.C.S. officer in India, Satyendranath Tagore, who was highly patriotic in an age when copying the west in matter of dress and language was a fashion in high society, Tagore stuck to wearing Indian dress and developing the Bengali language. While admiring the positive qualities of English society, Satyendranath took the path of reforming and developing Indian society. Another I.C.S official, Bhudev Mukhopadhyay's sense of nationalism was so strong that the English principal of Presidency College once noted, "Bhudev with his CIE and 1500 a month is still anti British"<sup>9</sup>. It was not that the Indians who were serving the British government did not oppose its policies or did not praise or got involved in the national movement. Many civil servants were often dissatisfied with their seniors or with the British policies which was reflected in their attitude. Romesh Chandra Dutt, one of the early Indian civil servants known for the nationalistic views, though belonged to the moderate phase of the national movement, remarked that when he was appointed as Assistant Magistrate at Alipur, he had to behave as though he were an Englishman, giving twenty or thirty times a day decisions which were based on a foreign system of thought. But, in spite of serving the British government he was patriotic and looked into the issues of the welfare of the Indian masses. He deliberated copiously on the drain of wealth from India and thus awakened Indians towards the immense loss their country was suffering from. Later he went on to become the President of the Indian National Congress<sup>10</sup>.

On several occasions Indian bureaucrats were drawn into discussions on national movement and its leaders, during which, N. Bakshi, Indian bureaucrat, made no secret of his view that all patriotic Indians, could not but support the national movement, whatever may be the merits of the methods that might be employed from time to time. These expressions and views created an impression that he was a nationalist and this impression became stronger after he went to the Khadi exhibition and also after the visit of Dr. Rajendra Prasad to his place<sup>11</sup>.

Mr. Iengar, I.C.S. Bombay Secretariat, gives an example of the peculiar situation in which the Indian ICS officers used to be in 1930, during the Civil Disobedience movement, during the Salt Satyagraha, when he was posted in the district Broach, the leader of the District Congress Committee was a man, Dr. Chandulal Desai whom he knew and rather liked. He had offered himself for arrest. So when he came to his camp, he was dusty and tired and hot and asked for a cold drink and bath. Mr. Iengar arranged for his bath in his own bathroom and offered him a cold drink. Then he remanded him to prison and gave him two years of rigorous imprisonment but 'A' class.<sup>12</sup> Thus as a government servant they had to go according to the rules but as an Indian they sympathized with the nationalist leaders. In the same way, S.K. Kriplani, a civil servant, has recorded his fondness for Congress and its leaders. He has recorded his exhilaration on meeting the charismatic leader Jawaharlal Nehru. He wrote, "I listened avidly to Pandit Nehru but I was in a kind of hypnotic trance. What he was saying did not seem to matter. I was lost in the education of this frail looking aristocrat who had given up a huge fortune and a princely palace to



wage uneven battle against the massive ramparts of fortified British power.”<sup>13</sup> Later, he was summoned by the Chief Secretary and was scolded and asked not to indulge in any such case in future. He was also called a ‘Congresswalla’ by many of his colleagues. British felt that civil servant should not dabble in politics. This injunction Indians could readily follow, but it was difficult for them to observe the convention that no Indian Civil Servant should have any contacts, even on a social level, with nationalist politicians. Indian civil servants showed their open sympathy with the national movement and this was not appreciated by British officials. Shankar Prasad, District Collector, Merrut, recalled two such instances, the first one concerned R.N. Dey, I.C.S., who was District Magistrate, Unnao. He had been Secretary, Local Self Government and his niece who was in Isabella Thobourn College, Lucknow was supposed to have taken part in some kind of a political demonstration. This was brought to the notice of the Governor, Sir Maurice Hallett and R.N. Dey was transferred to Unnao as a punitive measure. Later when Dey wrote a letter to the Commissioner protesting against the harsh treatment done towards prominent nationalistic leaders, especially Mahatma Gandhi, he was relieved from Service. Second instance was of Jagdishwar Nigam, District Magistrate, Ballia, who had yielded to the pressure of revolutionaries and in some ways cooperated with them. He too was removed from the Service. Thus this was clear that the British officers could never tolerate an Indian civil servant showing sympathy for the national movement. If done so they were considered disloyal towards the Government.<sup>14</sup> Dharam Veera, very clearly stated in his memoirs that “we have all, by now, been exposed to heavy doses of sentimental nonsense about the nationalist views of Indian Civil Service and the help it rendered in the fight for freedom. There was an undercurrent of contact between the two camps and most of the Indian members of the civil service acted in the interest of the national movement whenever possible”.<sup>15</sup> Thus he made no bones about the undercurrent of sympathy that Indian Civil Servants had for the national movement. H.V. Kamath, another Indian civil servant, also states about his experience during the national movement. He recalled that when he was in civil service from December 1930 to April 1938 the freedom movement was in full swing. On certain occasions when Indian officers along with the British gathered at the club in the evenings, some of the British officers used to talk of Gandhi and Subhash in abusive terms and Indian colleagues expressed their resentment and protest against such remarks. The general attitude of the senior in the service and of Mr. Kamath became hostile which resulted in his suppression and making him literally fed up with life in the service. He felt that he was wasting his time in these futile skirmishes and became convinced that he could put his time and energy to better use, more satisfying to his soul outside the civil service suffered from a feeling of divided loyalty. The members of the services generally used to pin their faith in the Governor and the service and in India’s freedom struggle<sup>16</sup>. The civil servants had to exercise extreme caution and restraint in their dealings with the nationalist leaders.

It is a fact that Indian civil servants were naturally drawn towards the national movement but they also observed their professional ethics as officials to the British Empire. As N.B. Bonarjee had recorded in his memoir, “my personal part, therefore, was in no way dramatic, however exciting it may have appeared to me, no one attempted anything unpleasant. We were government officers, cogs in the imperial machine, and it was our first duty to suppress the upheaval. I explained that I intended to do so. This was first and foremost an administrative matter, a question of the maintenance of law and order ---as government officer, we could not allow political or any consideration outside the purely administrative to enter the picture. I added that if anyone considered this to be anti-national or unpatriotic, he should resign forth from the service of the government which was paying him”<sup>17</sup>. This is illustrative of two things. On the one hand, they did not want to be caught out by the British government as being too soft with the political prisoners; on the other hand, they themselves did not want to be soft with the political prisoners as they assumed that the British Government wanted them to give the maximum possible imprisonment to political prisoners. According to him it was a very embarrassing and difficult situation.

As a civil servant Mr. Iengar looked upon these political developments with guilt in his heart. He was in a very embarrassing position and abnormal situation. On the one hand an Indian himself, he could not help but have tremendous admiration for these political leaders. He felt that he was leading a life of some comfort and luxury but there were people who had rendered great sacrifices, who had given up wealth, comfort and luxury, and were really sacrificing all these things for the sake of the country’s independence. On the other hand, he also felt that every country required civil servants, administrative talent and experience, therefore he was also doing his duty for India, for the country by continuing in the civil service. The primary responsibility of the officers was to maintain law and order and to collect the taxes. So long as this was done, they had done their job and got a good certificate from the superiors. Subject to this, they were treated with great consideration by the British authorities so long as they did not go beyond certain limits that had been laid down for them<sup>18</sup>.

C.C. Desai another Indian official on the reaction to the rising tide of political agitation felt that “it was a sort of two fold reaction. You always knew that you must do your duty, and if it came to arresting any person or shooting any person, you had no compunction in doing so. At the same time you always felt sympathy for the movement. So there was the difficulty of reconciling your feeling with duty. It was a case of doing your duty while wishing that the movement would succeed. But there was no going back on the doing of the duty. If you ordered to shoot, you ordered to shoot. Your main objective was to maintain law and order as against the agitation which was being organized to disturb the Government of the day.”<sup>19</sup> This



shows that that they were loyal towards their duty but being Indian could not keep themselves away from the national movement.

The Indian components of the bureaucracy in the later stages of the nationalist movement when independence was in sight started revealing their nationalist biases. According to Venkatachar, I.C.S. (1922), Assistant Magistrate and Collector U.P., who was a nationalist, felt that British rule should come to an end now; it was the time for the Indians to take over. To that extent, he was a nationalist. He did not believe in long term British rule<sup>20</sup>. R.N.Banerjee also felt that it had come over in the educated Indians, whether he was a young civil servant or a pretty old type of civil servant. The feeling that the British were more able than the Indians went away.<sup>21</sup> While the Indian bureaucrats were in the opposite camp there was an undercurrent of contact and sympathy when it came to truly national interests, the Indian components of the services acted in favour of nationalism rather than in favour of the British.

R.N. Banerjee, also felt that "attitude of the India civil servants did change as the nationalist struggle gained momentum and strength, especially at a later stage---towards the end of British rule--- they definitely showed nationalist feelings, in the sense that firstly, time had come for the British to go and the Indians to take over. Secondly, when the Congress formed the government and went away, the Indian officers felt that was wrong, they should have stayed on as they [Indian officials] would have more power in their hands because the next stage was for the displacement of British regime. To that extent, there was a nationalist feeling, but according to Banerjee the Indian officer did not parade it. He kept to himself and in general matters of policy of the Government; he was a conformist with the policies of the government. This was his inner feeling; his external behavior was that of a conformist. He felt that it was an illogical position."<sup>22</sup>

Dharam Veera, also felt that whilst as civil servants they were bound by the oath of loyalty to the Crown and as such were required to serve the government loyally, at the same time they could not but be affected by the national call for independence. It was all the more difficult for them as the then government endeavored to crush the independence movement by all means that a government could use under such circumstances. Quite a few civil servants had personal friends and contacts in the national movement and they found it very difficult to deal with them harshly on a matter towards which they could not but be sympathetic. So, many civil servants adopted a double role. Whilst they ensured their official dealings and work and provided no scope for complaints, they dealt with the Congress workers as leniently as possible and helped the independence movement, so far as they could, without infringing the government. In many cases the sympathy of the Indian Civil Servants for the national movement was not hidden. He wrote that "I still remember one of my Commissioners asking me about my sympathy for the Congress movement. I had to tell him candidly that so far as my duties as a civil servant were concerned I saw to it that I performed them faithfully and well but my sympathy for independence of my country was a natural personal feeling. I added that I was sure that if he was in the same situation as I was he will have the same feelings about independence of his country as I held for my own. He had no answer to this statement and sheepishly conceded my point. This I am sure was the position with many other Indian civil servants."<sup>23</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Thus the above discourse highlights the attitude of the Indian civil servants towards the nationalist movement. Most of them inevitably sympathized with the nationalist agitation particularly in the post 1935 era when prospects of self-government were becoming brighter. However they were caught in a dilemma, on the one hand they had to conform to their official duty on the other hand their heart felt impelled to fulfill their duty towards the nation. There was a feeling that Indian officials had to serve two masters. Two masters in the sense that they wanted to serve their country and people, but also had to serve the British. At times they were also targets of criticism because they were still serving the British Government that they could not give up lure of these plump offices. Never-the-less, on the whole they agreed with the constitutional demands of the nationalist movement and supported the reforms that gave powers to the Indians. Thus it becomes very clear that the Indian Civil servants were performing their official duties very well and being Indians wanted that India should achieve freedom as soon as possible and it was necessary that they remain in the service so that they can give the benefit of their administrative experience to the newly born nation.

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