The IAS lacks norms to deal with political authority

21st century officers have to be environmentally enlightened

by S. S. Dhanoa

The Indian Administrative Service, the successor to the steel frame Indian Civil Service, is under siege after serving the country for half a century. The first regular batch of the IAS was the 1948 batch. There are five areas where the incapacity of the IAS to meet the current challenges stares one in the face.

Firstly, the IAS has not been able to develop a service culture or norms to effectively deal with the political authority, and it has not learnt to successfully function in a political milieu. Secondly, the IAS has been marginalised as an instrument for the effective maintenance of law and order in the country. Thirdly, the initial in-service training system based on the new recruits learning from the example and practice of administration from their senior colleagues has failed as there are fewer and fewer seniors worthy of setting an example, and even if there are some seniors like that they do not have the interest and time for training the young officers. Fourthly, the administrative machinery under the IAS officers is neither distinguished by its efficiency, accountability, or its spirit of service to the citizen. Fifthly, the image of probity and integrity of IAS officers has suffered badly.

The observations of P.A. Sangma, former Speaker, Lok Sabha, in the special session of Parliament on the occasion of the golden jubilee of Independence on administration are pertinent in this regard. "We have a highly flawed system of management of administration. It is highly centralised administration away from the people. Our administration, including the police force, has got significantly politicised. The civil service which is designed to be neutral being pressed in to service of political masters and use of the police force for settling political scores have become facts of life today. This is not conducive to the rule of law. The administration should be depoliticised and made responsive to the public and responsible only to the rule of law."

The positive side of the above dismal picture is that the IAS still has the largest number of problem-solvers available for undertaking challenging assignments in our administrative set-up, and there is a core of serious-minded honest officers who are capable of proving themselves in any job, and also if given the opportunity, they can reverse the downward drift.

A retrospective analysis of the situation would indicate that even in our fight against British rule, we had come to imbibe values and norms that were perceived to be prevailing among the colonial masters in managing their own affairs in the home country. Our Constitution and ethos of the civil services sought to replicate what was considered to be the best in the British tradition. There was optimism and euphoria pulsating all over in the initial years of our freedom. Nehru described the change over in 1947 as our 'tryst with destiny'. When one reads accounts of handling of various problems by our national leaders who had taken over from the British, one can discern the classical mould of the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy. One cannot but admire the exchange of correspondence between Sardar Patel and Nehru on the propriety of the private secretary of the Prime Minister visiting Ajmer to undertake an assessment of law and order situation for a report to the Prime Minister over the head of the Chief Commissioner, Ajmer and the Ministry of Home Affairs.
However, the classical period of the Indian polity did not last for even two decades. The changes that came were fast and far-reaching. The founders of independent India could neither anticipate these changes nor could they provide a remedy for the overall downward drift. The freedom struggle in India was led by the English educated professional classes. There was overwhelming preponderance of the urbanites and the classes that had gone for Lord Macaulay’s educational dispensation. It did not, however, take long for the deprived sections to challenge the dominance of the first generation English educated classes. The neutrality, impartiality and integrity of the civil services came under pressure as in the vast discretionary areas of authority of civil services, the political masters started expecting collaboration and subservience in purely political objectives. Towards the close of the fifties, the author could discern a clear change in the scenario.

The ICS Chief Secretary of Bihar in early sixties in a coordination meeting taken by the Chief Minister to review the progress in developing infrastructure of the Bokaro Steel Plant, advised the State Labour Commissioner, to register an INTUC-sponsored union for workers of the Bokaro Steel Plant even before the steel plant got set up. The Deputy Commissioner of Singhbhum was transferred in 1958 because he was ineffective against the recognised AITUC, the trade union of Tisco, who had successfully marginalised the official INTUC trade union. The new Deputy Commissioner won accolades from the state government and the Chief Minister for forcing a confrontation with the Communist-led union resulting in opening of fire on the demonstrating workers. The standards of performance appraisal of civil servants slowly underwent a change.

There are many scholars who blame Mrs Indira Gandhi for the decline in public life and civil services morale. This view seems to be superficial and biased as clearly the rot had set in much earlier. The rot had set in because it was not appreciated by the founding-fathers of our Constitution that the social, political and administrative environment and realities of India required a suitable modified version of the Westminster parliamentary government.

The new vistas that opened up before the civil servants in the wake of the Five Year Plans proved to be too dazzling as the ambitious ones eyed the new openings neglecting to master the nitty-gritty of the administrative process. It was in the districts that an IAS officer developed his problem-solving skills and skills of interacting with other officials, the local political leaders and the general public. The new generation started preferring cultivating excellence in managing bosses and political masters without ever going to districts. The author is of the view that mishandling of the Punjab problem in the eighties and demolition of Babri Masjid came about more due to administrative ineptitude than any political design as officials in key positions in the Government of India had successfully reached the top positions in the civil services without having administered a district. The author holds the same view about the fodder scam of Bihar.

One glaring failure of the IAS as a civil service has been their inability to evolve norms, rules, precedents and practices of managing our administrative system presided over by political executives. The British or American experience does not help as the situation in those countries is entirely different, mainly because these countries are functioning democracies at all levels of administration but in India democracy is sought to be fostered from top to the grassroots level. The solutions to the problem that have been advanced are either directed at restraining the political executives or to suggest civil service boards for postings, transfers and promotions. The experience so far in both the areas has not been very encouraging.

There are two areas in which serious effort need to be made to restore the balance between civil servants and politicians and to restrain the politicians from encroaching in areas of administrative legitimately falling within the sphere of responsibility of civil servants. The first priority has to be
the development of competence and capability in performing the tasks assigned. The efficiency and effectiveness in delivery of services, clearing of obstacles for such delivery and redressal of grievances can be the weapons in the hands of a civil servant to disarm politicians who try to ride roughshod over the norms and rules of the administrative set-up. The other effective instrument that has been tried with some degree of success is freedom of information and transparency in decision-making. Lakhina in Maharashtra during the eighties had successfully demonstrated how delivery of service to the citizen can improve and petty corruption checked if information at various points could be made available to citizens.

The use of computer in as many fields of administration as possible is another instrumentality that can help in reducing arbitrary demands of politicians on the administration. The author has personal experience as well as knowledge about the state of administration in Bihar. The Bihar administration was considered to be one of the best in India by Paul Appleby in the fifties but Bihar is now synonymous with everything that could be called bad about administration. It was a pleasant surprise that under Laloo Yadav’s dispensation the IAS officers who had developed professional competence and had a reputation of honesty and impartiality, had been given recognition and placements in key government positions. It seems to be a superficial perception that in the current political environment only collaborators and hatchet men prospered. The IAS training academy must make a special effort to get senior officers who had excelled in performance in a political milieu to share their experience with their juniors. The emphasis on getting things done under political executive should become a criterion in assessment of performance of the IAS officers.

The proliferation of government activities has underlined the necessity of a co-ordinator and facilitator at all levels of administration. The IAS officers who are called generalist officers have all along been performing the specialists role of being coordinators and facilitators at the district, divisional level and in many positions at the state and the central level.

This is one function in which the IAS has an advantage over all other services because of the nature and variety of responsibilities that they have to undertake independently and statutorily. No other public service provides such opportunities to serve the people and for personal fulfilment and growth at such an early stage of service career. The IAS officers in the 21st century will have to excel in this area of performance. It will be necessary for them to be social scientists so that their experience could have an underpinning of academic discipline relevant for their jobs. Everyone in the 21st century IAS will have to be computer-literate and environmentally enlightened. The proliferation of administration in itself has made the administration distant from the citizen. The IAS has to step in to assume the role of Ombudsman. It is the citizen-friendly face of the IAS that can shield the IAS officers from politicians as the citizen is the master of politicians.

There is, however, one reform in the IAS that is overdue. The IAS is a common administrative service recruited for service under the Central Government and the state governments. All IAS officers are initially allotted to states from where the Central Government selects officers for deputation to the Central Government. There is a stricter selection for officers of the level of joint secretary. The Cabinet Secretary along with a few other senior secretaries in the Government of India undertakes an exercise to prepare a panel of IAS and other officers eligible for appointment at the level of joint secretaries, additional secretaries and secretaries in the Government of India. Those IAS officers who could not make to these panels are left in the states to stagnate and spread frustration all around.

Meanwhile, the state administration remains bereft of talent. However, in the states all IAS officers reach the highest scale of pay through sheer passage of time. The state government administrations have another element which often got overlooked and neglected. All state governments generally have state civil services to man administrative positions at a subordinate level. Some of the state civil service officers do so well that any day they could compete in
performance with the IAS officers. One-third of the cadre strength of the IAS in the states is reserved for promotees from the state civil services. This arrangement is not very satisfactory as even the most brilliant among the state civil service officers got promoted to the IAS at the fag-end of their careers. What is really required for the IAS officers after 15 years or so of service is a provision for axing the deadwood or a golden handshake. There could be an involvement of the UPSC in preparing panels for officers of the level of commissioners in state governments or joint secretaries in the Government of India for which all officers of the IAS and the outstanding state civil services officers of a particular seniority should be eligible on the basis of merit.