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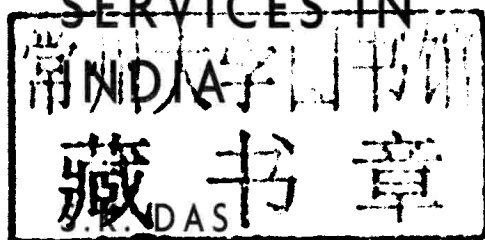
S.K. DAS

THE CIVIL SERVICES
IN INDIA

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Published in India by
Oxford University Press
YMCA Library Building, 1 Jai Singh Road, New Delhi 110001, India

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First Edition published in 2013

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ISBN-13: 978-0-19-808609-3

ISBN-10: 0-19-808609-1

Typeset in 11/15.6 Bembo Std
by Excellent Laser Typesetters, Pitampura, Delhi 110 034
Printed in India at G.H. Prints Pvt Ltd, New Delhi 110 020

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Introduction

The civil service system has always formed the backbone of administration in any country, irrespective of whether its government is headed by a king, president, prime minister, governor, or chief minister. In common parlance, the terms 'civil service' and 'bureaucracy' are often used interchangeably. It will be useful here to understand what these terms mean.

The original use of the term 'bureaucracy' referred to a cloth that covered the desks of eighteenth-century French officials. It was a way of describing a government ruled by officials. Over time, the term 'bureaucracy' acquired a negative connotation. It was used to describe procedures which were unreasonably time-consuming, and led to the harassment of people and petty tyranny of officials.

On account of this bad association, the term 'civil servant' came to be used instead. There is very little difference between a bureaucrat and a civil servant, although the latter also means a full-time employee of the government. The term 'civil service', as it is used now, has two distinct meanings. First, it is a branch of the governmental service in which individuals are employed on the basis of merit as tested in an examination. Second, it refers to a body of employees in any governmental agency other than the military and the judiciary.

The origins of civil services go back a long way. It was civil services that formed the key to the great river valley civilizations that flourished as early as 3,000 BC. The water sources of the Nile, the Tigris and Euphrates, the Indus, and the Yellow rivers formed the lifeblood of the civilizations they nurtured. There was, thus, a need to regulate these resources. It required officials to monitor the river flow and supervise their distribution into irrigation systems.

These officials were the first civil servants. They also took part in construction activities, which were organized along military lines. Once in place, it was

only a matter of time before these officials took over the administration of the entire state.

In China the civil service system has been in place since, at least, 200 BC, and has played a crucial role in the preservation of the empire. Civil servants were recruited on the basis of merit and serving the state was considered a great privilege in China. Similarly in Japan, the system has existed since AD 645. This is despite the fact that there were frequent changes in the ruling dynasties in Japan.

We also have examples of powerful empires that crumbled because of the absence of civil services. The African empires, for instance, lasted only for brief periods of time because they lacked a proper system. Similarly, the Carolingian Empire came under strain once its civil service disintegrated.

The idea of a modern state, in its present form, developed in Europe in the Middle Ages. It involved a lot of nation-building activities in Europe at that time. Developing an efficient civil service was essential to such processes; the early leaders being France, Prussia, and England.

Interestingly, in these European countries, civil servants were not appointed on the basis of merit. In

England, for example, until the early nineteenth century, the appointment of civil servants depended on the pleasure of those in power. There was no common system of remuneration; and corruption was rampant. The government offices were seen as private property, which, like any other asset, could be sold or used for making money.

The reforms in civil services were introduced in these European countries during the nineteenth century when industrialization was taken up in a big way. Such countries, therefore, could not afford a corrupt administration. So they started restructuring the existing system in which officials would be appointed on the basis of merit and given a lifelong career. In order to curb corruption, systems were established to ensure uniform application of law, rules, and regulations.

These reforms yielded impressive gains. They not only succeeded in establishing merit-based systems but also checked corruption. However, they ended up creating a rigid and rule-bound civil service. By insisting on a strict application of law, rules, and regulations, the reforms certainly prevented civil servants from misappropriating funds but inadvertently made it difficult for

the officials to manage public money in a meaningful manner.

It was true that these reforms restricted arbitrary dismissals of civil servants, but they also made sure that no one, not even the most incompetent official, could be removed. Thus, in their obsession with how things should be done in accordance with rules and regulations, the reforms ended up ensuring that civil servants do not deliver results. As a result, the system that finally emerged out of the nineteenth-century reforms was slow, inefficient, and rule-bound.

For most part of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the tasks that civil servants were called upon to perform were simple and repetitive in nature. Most people wanted similar kind of services and were not critical about the quality rendered. This meant that the civil service constructed roads, railways, and schools; built parks, jails, and libraries; maintained law and order; and generally upheld the authority of the state. The system, therefore, functioned in an environment where change, if any, took place slowly and gradually, and people had similar wants and needs.

It was only by the 1970s and 1980s that the functioning of civil services came under intense scrutiny.

By this time, the size of the services had grown enormously and the wage bills were high. Civil services had also, by then, come to acquire too many people and too many grades. The range of services that officials provided was as diverse as their grades. Civil servants guarded art treasures in museums and convicts in prisons; they minted coins and made maps; they collected taxes and gave away benefits; and they prevented smuggling and made weather predictions. But the quality of all these services left a lot to be desired.

It was at about this time that questions began to be raised as to whether the prevailing system was of any use to citizens who wanted better and faster services. It was also pointed out that the civil service had become too rigid and rule-bound, and was steeped in bureaucratic behaviour. Bureaucratic behaviour is a term often used to denote the painfully slow and ponderous conduct which is all about the unrelenting routine and endless procedures, and does not respond to the needs of the people being governed. These traits led to the frustration and harassment of citizens at the hands of the civil servants.

It was only natural, then, that citizens were disenchanted with the civil service. They believed they

deserved a better system: one that delivers services to make them healthier, more secure, and better equipped to tackle the challenges that they face; one that responds directly to their basic needs, such as education and healthcare, and which acts for the society as a whole; one which is available when they need it, and provides for services to improve the quality of their lives; and one which is focused on results rather than rules and regulations.

It was, therefore, time for another round of reforms in civil services, in the 1990s. These are currently taking place in civil service systems across the globe. Particularly important are the ones being brought about in countries like the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, with whom India shares a common ancestry of civil service traditions. They focus on the benefits that people should derive from the usage of government funds. They emphasize the importance of measuring results that have been achieved and have led to enhancing the quality of life of the citizens. While some countries have already reformed their civil services along these lines, in some others it is still an ongoing process.

This short introduction is a very brief history of civil services during the last 5,000 years. It is against this backdrop that we analyse the civil service system in India: its evolution, role, structure, and size; the methods of recruitment and training; performance management systems and mechanisms of accountability; and finally, the relationship between civil servants and their political masters.

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1

Evolution of Civil Services in India

The legends of the Aryans speak of how administrative arrangements evolved in ancient India. The gods, at war with demons, were on the verge of defeat. In desperation, they got together and elected a king to lead them. The origins of the early Aryan administrative system may perhaps be traced to these legends.

An administrative system evolved with the king as the focal point. A court of elders assisted the king, but his principal advisers were the commander of the troops and the chief priest who also doubled as an astrologer. Spies, messengers, and a superintendent of dicing completed the king's civil service. These kingdoms were small in size and the administrative

organization resembled a family set-up of which the king was the head.

The Mauryas

When the Aryans settled down in the Gangetic region, there were a number of kingdoms. The battle for supremacy among these kingdoms lasted for about a hundred years, but finally Magadha emerged victorious and established the Mauryan Empire. The emperor was at the top of the Mauryan administrative structure which consisted of *mantrins* and the *amatyas*. While the *mantrins* were the highest advisers to the emperor, the *amatyas* were the civil servants. There were three kinds of *amatyas*: the highest, intermediate, and the lowest, based on their qualifications.

There were two key civil servants: the *samahartr* and *samnidhatr*. The *samahartr* prepared the annual budget, kept accounts, and fixed the revenue to be collected. It was his job to ensure that the expenditure did not exceed the revenues. The *samnidhatr*, assisted by a number of civil servants, kept record of the taxes that came in from various parts of the empire. He was in charge of the stores, and of the actual revenue and other

income received by the government. Everything that needed to be stored and guarded was the responsibility of the *samnidhatri*.

There were many major departments of the government, each headed by a senior civil servant. *Panyadhyaksha*, the superintendent of trade, headed the commercial department dealing with internal and external trade. *Sitadhyaksha*, the superintendent of agriculture, looked after the state farms, government lands, and regulation of land belonging to individuals. *Rathadhyaksha*, the superintendent of chariots, was the head of the defence department. *Swarnadhyaksha*, the superintendent of mines, looked after the mining of various minerals such as gold, copper, iron, and diamonds. *Vanyadhyaksha*, the superintendent of forests, was the head of the department of forestry. *Bharadhyaksha*, the superintendent of weights, was the head of the weights and measures department. *Sutradhyaksha*, the superintendent of textiles, was in charge of textile factories.

The kingdom was divided into four divisions, each under a civil servant called the *sthanika*. Under the *sthanika*, there were junior civil servants called *gopas*, each in charge of five or ten villages. Next in line was