

“Director General of MCHRD, trainee officers, invitees, friends from media and brothers and sisters!

We are meeting at the confluence of two important events making this occasion all the more important and contextual. We are celebrating the 75th year of our hard fought independence. We are today observing the Civil Services Day with the services backed by the legacy of about 165 years.

This is an opportune occasion to reflect on the course of 'self-rule' over the last 75 years, the state of governance in our country and the role of civil servants in the same.

I would like to begin with the proposition that we have made several strides in different domains since our independence but we still have miles to go. The civil services have played an important role in this journey of ours but all is not well with the services and they are in need of revamp, reawakening and reorientation to meet challenges of the time.

Let us reflect on the status of civil services in respect of their origin, purpose and performance over the decades in the context of realizing the objectives of the freedom struggle.

The Indian Civil Service (ICS), officially known as the Imperial Civil Service was set up under the Government of India Act, 1858. Clearly, it was meant to serve the interests of the colonial rulers. With our independence, it became the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). While the ICS functioned in the context of 'exploitative nature of the colonial state', the IAS is to further the goals of the free Indian state propelled by the 'concept of welfare and development' of its people. The key difference being while the ICS was cut off from the people, the IAS has to work for them and with them.

While the IAS is the premier service among all the civil services, mandated primarily with functions of coordination in respect of governance, each of the civil services is important with all the services together making the architecture of governance. The opinions, comments and concerns that I am going to refer to are broadly applicable to all the civil services.

When the former British Prime Minister Lloyd George referred to the ICS as the 'steel frame', he meant it to be an instrument of perpetuating the British Empire without much concern for India and Indians. The prevailing thinking in London was that British Raj in India will fade away and disappear unless there is sound civil service to support it.

This orientation of civil services had to change in one stroke with our freedom in 1947. Their mandate, objectives and goals were elaborated in the Constitution that we adopted in 1950. Civil servants, as a part of the Executive constitute one of the three pillars of our democracy, with the others being the Legislature and the Judiciary.

All that our Constitution seeks to ensure is justice, liberty, equality and fraternity and the citizens leading a life of dignity, being entitled to certain Fundamental Rights. It is hence obvious that the civil services are required to further these noble constitutional objectives, which accordingly set the norms of governance in our country. This requires the civil servants not to consider themselves as above the people, as is seen at present and instead to work with and for the people.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the architect of IAS said to the first batch of IAS officers and I quote "Your predecessors were brought up in the traditions in which they kept themselves aloof from the common people. It will be your bounden duty to treat the common men in India as your own." This applies to all the civil services who deal with different segments of the people in different ways.

The civil services are envisaged as instruments to actualize the Constitutional vision into reality. Despite their hard work and contributions over the decades, there is still a strong perception that the civil services have not lived up to the expectations and there is a compelling need for a makeover with the changing context and mounting challenges.

Despite the best young minds being drawn into the civil services through difficult competitive examinations, the functional ecosystem connives to dent their initial enthusiasm to change the world. Over the years, the civil servants lose a certain amount of motivation.

Let us understand some of the reasons.

Recently, there have been a spate of newspaper articles focusing on the state of civil services and how they have failed the nation. Dr. D. Subbarao, a former IAS stalwart and former Reserve Bank Governor lamented that the "public perception of IAS today is an elitist, self-serving, status quo perpetuating set of bureaucrats who are out of touch with reality, who wallow in their privileges and social status and have lost courage of conviction to stand up for what is right." I have reasons to believe that this broadly applies to all civil services.

Executive consists of the political executive, who has to win the mandate of the people in every subsequent election and the civil servants who are the continuing part without any such need for periodic legitimacy.

There are some serious issues with regard to ensuring the accountability of the permanent executive that makes the civil services. It is said that the only examination that they face is at the time of initial recruitment and none thereafter. Continuous and meaningful performance evaluation is sadly lacking in our system. Continuation of the civil servants in services should be based on regular assessment of their contribution to formulation and execution of policies and programmes through introduction of new ideas, initiatives and practices.

I was a Union Minister for about five years and had the occasion to assess the performance of senior officials. From the Performance Appraisal Reports submitted to me, I was surprised to know that some of the officials were judged excellent which was not duly reflected in the service delivery. This appraisal system clearly calls for a radical change so that both the performing and nonperforming are clubbed together.

According to some veteran civil servants, the present system has a deeply flawed scheme of incentives and penalties which make the enthusiastic and sharp minds the cogs in the wheels of complacency and acquiescence, turning them lazy and cynical and worse making them lose their moral compass. Promotions with afflux of time gives no incentive to performance and skill upgradation. This is a serious concern and needs to be fixed. Performance only should be incentivized and rewarded and not mere file pushing.

Dear Officers!

Bureaucracy is all about keeping records in the form of files and taking all decisions in the files. You should remember that in every FILE, there is a LIFE, the life of an individual or a family or a community. It is the lives of such individuals that adds up to the life of our nation. Accordingly, every file you build and deal with has a bearing on the making of our nation. You need to be live to this aspect. Instead of preferring to be indecisive and evasive and defer a decision, every civil servant has to be dynamic, initiative bearing and problem solving. This calls for reorienting bureaucracy into meritocracy. Mediocrity should be dis-incentivized.

We often hear some civil servants lamenting that but for the political interference, they could have done wonders. Dr. Subbarao recently said that blaming politicians for the intellectual and moral decline of the civil servants is self-serving. He was right.

I can assure you all that the politicians are wise and receptive to good suggestions, if they are presented to them in a convincing and rational manner. This is because no Minister would like to risk being punished for a wrongdoing or a bad decision. The growing nexus between political class and civil servants being widely referred to is a matter of deep concern.

Civil servants need not take an adversarial position on all matters. When you are instructed to present a particular issue in a particular manner that suits the political executive, all you need to do is to speak for the right and if required, do so in writing. If you are overruled, the concerned authority would be taken to task. Political and permanent executive should work in tandem and in the right manner. Political executive should definitely change.

Foreseeing this problem of conflict between the political and the permanent executive, Sardar Patel said to the political class that and I quote: "I advise you to allow the service to open its mouth freely. Today, my secretary can write a note opposing my views. I have given the freedom to my secretaries. I have told them, if you do not give your best opinion for the fear that it will displease your minister, please then you had better go. I will bring in a new secretary. I will never be displeased over frank expression of opinion. "

The political executive has to take these words of wisdom of Sardar Patel seriously. All that the officials have to do is to show up their character and be on the right side of the law. If not, you will be conceding ground to your political masters from which neither of you will benefit. On the contrary, the country and the people will suffer that much. So, I advise you to strictly stand up to the right.

From my own experience, I can tell you that 'Yes Sir' types are not respected in the long run while speakers of truth are.

Dear Civil Servants!

These days we are hearing the concerns being voiced over the state of finances in several states with growing mismatch between the needs of welfare states and that of long term development. I am told that the revenues of some states are not enough to even run the administration and borrowings are being increasingly resorted to extend freebies and to the utter neglect of growth concerns and asset creation.

The concerns of welfare need to be harmonized with the needs of development which in turn open up new opportunities for the people to benefit in the long run and stand on their own.

Senior civil servants in particular have to shoulder the responsibility of enabling such harmonious development by being frank and honest to the political executive.

The task of assisting the political executive with right inputs for right decision making requires civil servants to be good at communication, marshaling the required facts and scenarios and presenting them in a rational manner and if required in writing.

I am aware of the constraints and challenges that civil servants face in the prevailing functional ecosystem. Frequent transfers do not permit internal specialization. Handpicked officials are given the plum postings so that you toe the line of the political executive. Rising expectations of the people coupled with their impatience, changed socio-economic scenarios, rapid technological advances and rising public scrutiny through RTI activism and civil society, growing interconnectedness globally bring along new complexities and challenges. You are under pressure all the time to deliver and quickly.

To rise to these daunting challenges, civil servants should evolve continuously by acquiring necessary skills and domain knowledge. You need not be masters of everything. But you should be good enough to understand the larger issues and coordinate with all the concerned for resolving the challenging situations. You should develop a certain level of professionalism.

To be able to do so, civil servants should constantly keep evolving at the personal level by cultivating equanimity, calmness of mind, moderation, knowledge of changing society and the world, self-confidence, empathy and skill upgradation. You should enable the best out of you to express itself when seriously challenged. All that you need to inculcate is courage, character, capacity, compassion, camaraderie and communication skills to do justice to your responsibilities.

You should focus on finding an effective support system of friends and family so that you can retain your sense of purpose. Regular physical exercises, yoga, meditation and healthy eating will help you in being rightly anchored during your journey in the service that you have chosen. At the end of the day, introspect if you have done the things right and if you could have done it better. Try to judge yourself based on what difference you have made to the system.

You should keep learning every day. Training programmes like the special foundation course at this institute and others in due course, would empower you with techniques and methodologies and necessary perspectives to handle different situations that you encounter.

Civil servants should be politically neutral and not so ideologically. You should be propelled by an idealism that keeps you always on the side of the poor and needy sections, who deserve your support the most. Keep meeting people, get feedback from time to time, be open, decisive, dynamic, development-oriented and deliver.

A capable public service is essential for creating a favorable investment climate and facilitating people's participation in economic life. You have got an opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to the socio-economic transformation of our country. You should equip yourself appropriately to live up to the mantra of "Perform, Reform and Transform" given by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi.

Civil Services do offer power and privilege. However, they should be used for the larger objectives and not for personal gains. Power brings along responsibilities and its right use will make you even highly regarded.

In the end, never run into doubt while making decisions. If you are in doubt, recall the talisman given by Mahatma Gandhi which is to think about the last poor man in the queue. It will show you the way ahead.

I compliment Dr. Marri Chenna Reddy Human Resource Development Institute for organizing this Special Foundational Course for your benefit. I am sure you would have gained necessary insights for your journey ahead.

On this occasion, I compliment the civil servants of the past and present for their hard work and contributions to the making of our nation in the spirit of our larger Constitutional objectives.

Thank you all!"
