

INDIAN ADMINISTRATION  
PAST & PRESENT

by

V. P. MENON



FORUM OF FREE ENTERPRISE

235, DR. DADABHAI NAOROJI ROAD, BOMBAY-1

# INDIAN ADMINISTRATION

## PAST & PRESENT

by

V. P. MENON

THE story of the British Empire in India is a strange and unique story. You will not find its parallel in the history of the world. The British came to India in 1750 to trade; but they remained to rule. In the beginning the East India Company had no sovereign rights but merely traded on the strength of the Charters given to them by the British Crown. They had their trading posts in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. But by 1850, with the overthrow of the Sikh kingdom in the Punjab, the East India Company and the British Government were the undisputed masters of India.

The Company's first essays in administration were quite disastrous. The servants of the Company were civil servants and traders at the same time. This led to corruption. After the battle of Plassey, the Company acquired the *Diwani* of Bengal. There arose a strong demand from the public in England for the intervention of the British Parliament in the Company's affairs, for the British people felt that the Company was not competent to run the administration of the large territories acquired. Hence the passing of the Regulating Act of 1773. This Act did not regulate anything at all. If anything, it disorganised the administration. The Act created a Governor-General in Council in Calcutta. There were two Presidencies of Madras and Bombay governed by two Governors; the only

"People must come to accept private enterprise not as a necessary evil, but as an affirmative good."

—Eugene Black  
President, World Bank

control the Governor-General had over these Governors was confined to the making of peace and war, The Governor-General was supposed to be assisted by a Council, but he had no control over his Council. There was a Supreme Court which was independent of both the Governor-General and his Council. It was only the great genius of Warren **Hastings** which made so impossible a system work.

The next landmark was Pitt's Act of **1784**. It got rid of some of the bad features of the Regulating Act. It augmented the powers of the Governor-General. It created two authorities in England to supervise the affairs of the East India Company. There was already one in existence—the Directors of the Company in England. The other was Parliamentary Board of Control. These two authorities started quarrelling almost from the day they came into existence. There was so much friction between the two authorities that the position of the Governor-General was anything but enviable. This dual control continued till, in 1857, the British Crown took over the administration.

The East India Company, the greatest mercantile corporation the world has ever known, was liquidated after the **Sepoy Mutiny** in **1857**, and the Crown assumed the administration of the country. By this time the successive Governors-General had been able to lay a solid foundation for the administration in India. The Company was very fortunate in having most outstanding persons as their agents in India. These men created a workable system of Government out of chaos. They went their way unwept, **unsung!** Take, for instance, Lord Cornwallis. It was he who for the first time reorganised our revenue system and created the Indian Civil Service and the Indian Police Service. Again it was his genius which invented the district as the administrative unit. **From** 1857 the ad-

ministrative system was further improved and before the first World War it reached its highest efficiency, judged by the standard then prevailing.

Let us look at the salient features of the administration at this stage. The Secretary of State for India was at the top. He was supreme. The revenues and the administration of India were vested in him. The Secretary of State for India was responsible to Parliament. Next to him was the Governor-General, who was assisted by an Executive Council of seven Members. The Governor-General was the head of the Indian administration. His powers, however, were very restricted. Although he had a vast territory—~~at~~ that time Burma was part of India—to administer his powers were so restricted that he could not even create a post carrying a salary of over **Rs.1,250/-** a month!

Lord **Curzon** has given a description of what the successive Governors-General went through at the hands of their masters in Whitehall. "Of the Governors or Governors-General or Viceroys whose story I have told we have seen that Clive was driven by the persecution that he endured, after his return to England, to take his own life; that Warren **Hastings** was recalled and actually displaced when in India, and was driven repeatedly to insist on resignation, while after his return to England he was the victim of an impeachment that is one of the crimes of history; that **Wellesly** was openly censured and recalled and narrowly escaped a similar fate; that the first Lord **Minto** was overthrown by a gross political manoeuvre; that Lord **Hastings** was severely censured after his retirement; that **Amherst** only escaped the ignominy of dismissal by a timely resignation; that **Auckland** resigned to avoid a similar fate; that **Ellenborough** was recalled in disgrace; that **Northbrooke** retired because of a disagreement with the Home Government; **that** **Lytton** did the same as the

result of a general election; that a subsequent Viceroy, though in his second term of office, was driven to a similar step because he and his entire Council were overruled by the British Cabinet on a fundamental principle of Indian administration, in which he was subsequently declared by a public enquiry to have been in the right". India owes a great deal to these men. Their conduct stands as a classic example of how men respond to the stimulus of great authority.

I told you that there were seven Members of the Governor-General's Executive Council, including the Commander-in-Chief. They were in charge of seven Departments of the Government of India. The Viceroy was personally in charge of the Indian States and Foreign Affairs. I joined the Home Department in 1914. Let me give you some of the functions of that Department. The Home Department was in charge of law and order throughout the country; it was in charge of the Services, like the I.C.S. and the I.P.S. ; it was in charge of the judiciary; it was in charge of the administration of jails; and it was responsible for the administration of minor Chief Commissioners' Provinces. All this work was entrusted to the Member in charge of the Department, a Secretary, a Deputy Secretary and an Under Secretary.

A friend of mine, Sir John Thorne, a very distinguished Member of the I.C.S. who finally retired as Home Member of the Governor-General's Executive Council, came back on a visit to India in 1956. I will give you his comments on the working of the Government of India as he saw it: "When I was translated from my province to a Department of the Government of India, in 1935, the number of Officers therein was six--one Member of Council, one Secretary, one Joint Secretary, two Deputy Secretaries and one Under Secretary. The other day, looking at the Delhi telephone directory, I found that the

staff in that department now is one Minister, one Deputy Minister, one Secretary, one Additional Secretary, four Joint Secretaries, fourteen Deputy Secretaries, and twenty-three Under Secretaries. Moreover, 20 years ago the world had direct access by telephone to all officials, not excluding the Member of Council. Now everyone down to Deputy Secretaries (inclusive) has at least one Private Secretary or Personal Assistant, sitting in ante-rooms and protecting their masters from interruption by telephone or otherwise. As regards 'otherwise', the procedure introduced during the War for preventing invasion of the Secretariat by visitors is still in force; and, unless one makes previous arrangements with the official one wants to see, it is not easy to get at him. So the change is complete from the pre-war days when Congress Ministers in some Provinces proclaimed that they would be accessible all the time and work became impossible. From these facts various deductions might be drawn, including the following, that work in the Secretariat has greatly increased; that officials are more bureaucratic than they were; that the cure for unemployment among the educated has already begun in the Central Government. Above all, that the Planning era is in full swing."

In 1914, there were eight major provinces. The Presidencies of Madras, Bombay and Bengal were governed each by a Governor assisted by an Executive Council. The United Provinces, Punjab, Bihar and Orissa, and Burma were governed by Lieutenant Governors. Bihar and Orissa had an Executive Council to assist the Lieutenant Governor. The Central Provinces and Assam were governed by Chief Commissioners. There were also five minor Chief Commissionerships, namely the North-West Frontier Province, Ajmer-Merwara, Coorg, Delhi, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The Reforms of 1919 introduced for the first time

Ministers for the administration of certain subjects in the provinces, other subjects being administered by the Governor in Council. This system was known as Dyarchy. Under the 1935 Reforms, the Ministers were in charge of all the provincial subjects, but the position of the Central Government was not fundamentally changed either by the 1919 Reforms or by the Reforms of 1935.

The Provincial and Central Secretariats were in the main manned by I.C.S. officers. The linch-pin in the Provincial Secretariat was the Chief Secretary. At the Centre each department was independent of the others and important matters of policy were co-ordinated by the Executive Council. Other all-India Services like the I.M.S., I.F.S., Indian Irrigation Service, and the All-India Service of Engineers were created, and all these services were controlled by the Secretary of State. Besides there were separate services constituted for the administration of the affairs of the Princely States and for foreign affairs. Seniority and experience were insisted on at all levels and no officer was confirmed as a Collector unless he had adequate service and experience. The first three or four years of service of an I.C.S. officer were spent in training, and he was given real responsibility only after that period. Generally, only very senior officers were appointed to key posts, both in the Provincial and in the Central Secretariat.

## II

I have given a very brief outline of the administration as it developed up to the time of the First World War. Thereafter, there was not any fundamental change. The administrative machine stood up, in fact, through two World Wars. Political agitation during this period reached its full fury. Recruitment to the Services practically ceased during the Second World War. All leave was stopped and by the time of the Transfer of Power most of the serving officials were tired men.

At the time of the Transfer of Power, there were about 1,150 I.C.S. officers and about the same number of Indian Police officers. The partition of the country broke the "steel frame" of the administration. The majority of British officers opted for retirement. Pakistan took away practically all the Muhammadan officers. India was left with about 450 I.C.S. officers and a few Britishers who opted to remain behind. The position was similar as regards the I.P.S. But we were fortunate enough to retain good provincial and subordinate services in the provinces and an efficient Secretariat at the Centre.

The initial problems resulting from Partition were indeed very grave, especially in the Punjab, Delhi, the United Provinces and Bengal. The exodus of population and the consequent blood-bath threatened to undermine the stability of the country, but the administration manfully stood up to the challenge. In Delhi the situation was particularly difficult, and the Centre had to take direct control. A special organisation was set up under the Chairmanship of Mr. C. H. Bhabha. When I look back on those difficult days, one thing that stands out is the confidence and support received from the Cabinet and, in particular, the late Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. He was one of those who never interfered once the policy was laid down. After all, the function of a Minister is to tell the officers serving under him what the public will or will not stand. Sardar Patel had, indeed, a great sense of administration and a practical approach to every problem. It is a fact that, at the time of the Transfer of Power, most of the officers of the I.C.S. and I.P.S. were troubled that they might not receive fair treatment at the hands of the popular Ministers. Sardar Patel dispelled such fears and instilled into the officers a sense of security and esprit de corps. Once the law and order situation was brought under control, he set about reorganizing the key services, instituting a new service, the Indian Ad-

ministrative Service, to take the place of the Indian Civil Service. For services like the Indian Police Service, arrangements were made for the recruitment of personnel of adequate standard. He established an Administrative Training School at Delhi in order to get the recruits trained quickly. A similar School was established at Mount Abu for the Indian Police Service.

Let me mention at this stage one or two other developments relating to the services. Officers had to be found for Embassies abroad. For this purpose it was necessary to indent upon the existing services, denuding them of able and experienced officers. The reorganisation of the Princely States also necessitated the taking away of officers to man key appointments in those States. All this considerably reduced the strength and efficiency of the administration, both at the Centre and in the Provinces.

We did secure good material for our Indian Administrative Service, but the difficulty was that we could not give them adequate training and there was no one in the provinces to which they were posted to guide or train them. Thus officers of barely three or four years' seniority were pushed into charge of districts without any guidance. This I myself saw when I was Governor of Orissa. Further, the standard of education has progressively gone down and I am apprehensive that the requisite calibre of recruits will not be available to man all the service posts hereafter.

The first General Election was held in 1951 under adult franchise. At this stage we had only a handful of I.C.S and I.P.S. officers with experience. The main brunt of the administration had to be borne by the new recruits appointed after the Transfer of Power. The majority of the Ministers lacked administrative experience, but in their zeal for a new Utopia they did not hesitate to launch

schemes of reform beyond their capacity to control and regulate, and beyond the capacity of the administration to bear. Work in the Secretariat, both at the Centre and in the Provinces, started to increase and men from the staff were promoted to cope with the increased work, even though most of them had neither the requisite training nor experience. Today, the number of officers of the rank of Under Secretary and above in the Government of India Secretariat has swelled to incredible proportions. Take the case of the nationalisation of certain industries, which were being managed well enough by private companies, but which the Government took over without adequate man-power, leave alone technical skill.

Then came the reorganisation of States on a linguistic basis, which brought out the worst in us. It has robbed us of our national outlook. The political and administrative confusion resulting from this will continue for many years to come.

Meanwhile, the wretched District Officer is forced to carry tremendous responsibilities. If he takes firm action to maintain law and order, he gets no support from his Minister; and if he fails to deal with the situation firmly, he is "put on the mat."

I have yet to come across an officer who is "trigger happy", who is not averse from using force against, and shedding the blood of, his brethren. He resorts to firing only in the last resort. The difficult position in which he is placed is well summed up by an eminent Judge, Lord Sumner:-

"The measure, as I understand it, of the legal duty of an officer in such a case is the necessity of the occasion. I think it is a very hard position in which a man is placed that he should be obliged to measure

his duties and his powers by a necessity to which he alone is a witness, and then have to stand by what he does upon the views that may be formed afterwards by others who were not there, upon a necessity which is not present to their immediate attention. But such is the law; he has to do it".

The fact of the matter is that the District officer, or for that matter any Government servant, has defined responsibilities and obligations, whereas the "man in the street" can act just as he pleases. That is the position today.

Sardar Patel was always at pains to impress on his party men not to interfere in the administration; but interference goes on, differences being only a matter of degree, in all the States. The District officer gets no credit for good work. Often he is judged by reports from political busybodies in the district.

We are being treated ad *nauseam* to communiques from various Governments on the action taken against "corrupt" officers. These statements leave an impression on the public mind that all officers are corrupt. By all means, I say, punish officers found guilty of corruption, but this sort of publicity only serves to undermine the prestige of the Services generally. In fact, corruption is not the monopoly of the Services. I remember the time when Sardar Patel ordered the prosecution of certain Ministers on a charge of corruption. The prosecutions were actually launched but were withdrawn after the death of Sardar. One of these very gentlemen is today an absconder in a non-bailable, warrant case of misappropriation of public funds. I do not blame the politician. Consider the amount which he has invested in order to get himself elected! Do not mistake me. I know as well as you that there are honourable exceptions. But the point I want to make is that the election expenses of

parties and individual candidates under adult franchise are becoming prohibitive. Good candidates with limited means have no chance to fight elections. Money is playing a leading part and if we are not careful it will undermine our moral and ethical standards.

In this sorry state of affairs the head of a State could play an important role. But what the Ministries have done is to reduce the position of the Governor to that of a figurehead. It is always dangerous in an administration to create functionaries without responsibility, but the Congress are apparently quite unable to forget their past conflicts with Governors during the days of the British. The Governor is still distrusted and is generally ignorant of day-to-day administrative problems. The Governor, at any rate during his term of office, is supposed to be a non-party man, a position enabling him to ascertain not only the views of the Congress but also the reactions of other parties in the State. He should thus be a valuable asset to his own Ministry. The latter in its turn should consult the Governor on all important matters affecting the policy and administration of the Government. A well-informed Governor could also be a stabilizing factor so far as the Services are concerned. But neither the Chief Minister nor the Chief Secretary ever sees the Governor for consultation or advice. No Governor would wish to usurp the authority of the Ministry to take final decisions, but he could by his detached outlook and experience help the Ministry in a substantial way. I speak with some experience of my own position in Orissa. The Chief Minister had full consultations with me as Governor on all important matters of administration and even invited me to preside over Cabinet meetings. I also had constant contacts with the Chief Secretary and even summoned meetings of Collectors—all this with benefit, I am sure, not only to myself but also to the Government. What purpose can a Governors' Conference serve when the Governors them-

selves know **only** what they glean from the newspapers?

Now look at the Centre. The Prime Minister is the only person who really matters in the Government of India. The other Ministers are mere satellites moving around him. When Sardar **Patel** was alive the position was different. The Prime Minister and he shared the leadership and confidence of the Congress party, and neither took an important decision without considering the reactions of the other. Now the joint responsibility of the Cabinet is only in name, and the pity of it is that some of the provincial Chief Ministers are emulating the example of the Prime Minister. Since the Congress came into power, provincial autonomy has become a dead letter. The State Governments have become **entirely** dependent upon the Centre as to both policy and finance. The State Governments are thus reduced to mere agents of the Central Government. As a result, there is now no provincial leadership or **initiative**.

I have already had a word to say about the **abnormal** increase in the number of officers in the Central Secretariat. It may be argued that the **Central** responsibilities have vastly increased. Even so, I feel that there is no justification for so vast an increase in the number of officers. Too many cooks spoil the broth is as true in the Secretariat as in the kitchen especially when these cooks are chosen not on the basis of merit but on the whims of the person running the household.

I have mentioned some of the things which I have seen and heard, but what I have said should not be taken as having been said in any spirit of carping criticism. There is all-round demoralisation in the services. The Communists **have** contributed more than their share in Kerala State. My anxiety is that we should not land ourselves with a weak political set-up as well as a weak administrative machinery. That would spell disaster if

this country has to face a crisis. The ideal is that both should be strong. If that cannot be, then at **least** one must be strong. If the **Officer has** to contribute his best the objective which the Government wants to pursue must be **clear** to him. That is not **the position** today. When there is no clear objective the **Officer** will be inclined to take the attitude "sufficient unto the day the evil **thereof**". This will ultimately sap his initiative and lead him gradually to demoralisation.

The basis of the existing administrative machinery is still that which was left to us by the British Government. The Central Government has embarked on various activities and is employing officers on those activities, for which they have no training. Congress has declared its ideology as "a socialistic pattern of society", whatever that may mean. The officers must have some guidance on the Congress policy and how they are expected to implement it. Some of the provincial districts are too large for one man to manage, and if development activities are to be **properly** supervised, some of the districts should be reduced. The Collector, on whom all development activities converge, cannot be expected single-handed to carry out his responsibilities. There should be appropriate agencies created for particular development work, *e.g.*, the Grow More Food campaign. Ours is a vast country and we cannot govern it from Delhi. The Centre must be strong but consistent with that there should be de-centralisation at all levels.

These and other considerations lead me to the conclusion that we must appoint forthwith a high-powered Commission to examine and make recommendations for reorganising the existing administrative structure, both at the Centre and in the provinces. To cope with the **existing** needs there should, in my view, be appointed a Central Commission, with provincial committees to assist it, for the purpose of reorganising the administrative machine at all

levels, at the Centre and in the provinces. In Kerala, the Communist Government have appointed a Committee for reorganising the administration of that State. I have not seen the Committee's recommendations, but I feel that it is very important that there should be no conflict of principle between the Centre and the State in matters of administration. Our task should be to lay down the foundations of a good administration which would be outside party politics and serve whatever party comes into power.

One final word. The officers are, after all human beings; they will react to good treatment. Pat them on the back when they have done a good job, and thus encouraged they can work wonders.

We have great opportunities. We are not lacking in human material. We have a history and a tradition. In fact, everything is in our favour. In the ultimate analysis, the country will not be saved by its institutions, if it is not saved by its own people. Can they do it?

Jai Hind!

*Views expressed in this publication  
do not necessarily represent the views  
of the Forum of Free Enterprise.*

*Based on a lecture delivered under the auspices of the  
Forum of Free Enterprise in Bombay on Aug. 5, 1958,  
in its series on "Government Expenditure."*

Free Enterprise was born with man and  
shall survive as long as man survives.

— A. D. Shroff

HAVE YOU JOINED  
THE FORUM?

Annual Membership Fee is Rs. 10/-

*Bona fide* students can get our  
booklets for a year by becoming  
Student Associates on payment of  
Rs. 2/-.