

Perspectives

EXCELLENCE IN ADMINISTRATION

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A few years ago, the first words in the National Academy of Administration were 'Administration is the art of anticipating the unanticipated'. In 1970, I spent a whole year in posting, since my Chief Minister was annoyed with me. I was the director of tribal and urban welfare. I was in the service but quite without a job, till my CM's wife got jaundice. I suddenly had my hands full. He set me the task of doing something about the water sanitisation at Bhopal in spite of the fact that I headed around 14 departments in Bhopal at the same time. So it was that the unanticipated put me on this job.

In business, you have a very clear mandate before you. When you join a company, it has certain business objectives. Accountability in the ultimate analysis is the success that you bring to the company, which is quantifiable. But in administration it is not so. I wish it were. You are given a whole mass of people. For example: an officer in charge of a district, whether an I.A.S. or an I.P.S servant, has to deal with every issue in proper perspective, where he alone cannot be the decision maker. In a democracy, no one person can be a decision maker. The decisions have to be taken collectively. Democracy works on the basis of the interest of various groups and the number of compromises that must be made. This is the reality of administration in India.

In a comparison made between India and China, they said of 'The Bombay Worli Bandra Sea Link', that had it been China they would have constructed five such bridges, in an equal number of years. China's administration is I think much better than India's. We have built five of the largest dams in the world, which on the flip side, have displaced 30 lakh people. In India the NBA has been able to prevent the completion of dams over a large number of years, over this single issue. While I disagree with the NBA, Medha Patkar has been able to awaken our conscience to one requirement. Those who have to do without when a development project comes up so that others may benefit, must also be a part of the benefit. China does not have that philosophy. And in the long run, I am not sure if our system will be better than China's. These are the questions that you must ask yourself and answer honestly. There will be a lot of people who will question us as to what we think is wrong with China's policy. At least they have been able to build those bridges. This is where we usually leave the questions open to the people to answer. After all there is a difference between dictatorship and democracy.

Having said that, I want to go one step further. This does not mean that administration in India will always be chaotic. India has a first rate administrative system. And I could give you an example of this. When Hurricane Katrina hit the USA, their entire system collapsed. They still have not been able to bring full rehabilitation. What is our system in India? Even with a single flood, we reach there with creaking machines and systems. Ours was the first Naval ship to reach Sumatra, before the Americans could mobilise themselves. My own theory is that in India we could live quite happily in a perpetual state

of crises. It is the routine, which we cannot handle. We still have a reasonably working functioning system. We cannot handle the routine, but if there is a crisis we all come out on top.

And to this again, I want to take up the Bombay example of November 26, 2008. In Moscow last year, the Chechian rebels took over. The Russian army stormed this theatre and ended up with 283 people killed. In the Bombay incident, we did lose a 100 odd people, but by handling this step-by-step, we probably saved a 100 more lives. Yes, there was an intelligence failure. The terrorists landed at Nariman Point and not at any other creek. It is true that the command structure did not come up well. But the individual efforts that were made. Omble, the Asst. Sub Inspector who actually captured the terrorist and took 5 bullets in his chest, managed to save thousands of lives. He was unarmed.

So, the Bombay case shows that there were a large number of people from the lower to higher-level administration who did their job well. The NSG did their jobs well. They could have gone in and turned it into another Russian case, but instead they saved lives. They are handling floods, terrorists, even Naxals, well. Take the Lalgarh case. We did not go there with guns blazing and with tanks full. The police cleared the area village by village with very few casualties. Would you not call this an example of excellence by the police? The Pakistani army experienced huge losses in the Waziristan episode. There is no militancy in Kashmir, which cannot be taken care of in five minutes. The Indian Army and the Police have decided not to use any heavy weapons or artillery. They would take casualties, but in no way would they look at Kashmiri citizens as their enemies. The Police have lost 118 men in this process. This is because our philosophy is one of step-by-step action and not of action that escalates from the tenth degree at the beginning. This is a great achievement of the IAS, which we must not overlook.

In business, we anticipate what the business needs etc. And on that basis plan a production model, which is fairly linear for a predictable period of time. For example in the Government, if we have to launch a project and you have the Congress Government in power, and in the next elections, a new Government comes up and says 'Let's get rid of this. We have other priorities'. The model gets dumped. Or sometimes, the people who have least benefited or are annoyed at a particular model oppose the model the Government has to listen to them. This is the type of situation you have to face. You learn to improvise. It becomes absolutely important for the government officer to do this.

The skill of an administrator comes into play in critical situations like the removing of a mosque or a temple, which obstructs the construction of a road. I have three simple mantras for bringing about excellence in the Government administration. The first is this - The government servant must know his job. When I joined the IAS, the collector of my district sent his staff on leave. I assumed all the duties, right from the patwaari to the clerk and I will never forget how much it taught me. So let me reiterate - you must know your job. Secondly, you must be amenable to suggestions. Unfortunately, the IAS officers of this country think they hold all the wisdom of the earth. Accept the fact that you may not have all the best ideas in this world. Third and lastly, you must be accessible. It is only when you talk to people with an open mind, that you find out what is what. This, according

to me, is a way of bringing about excellence in the government. Let me end with one last thought. Excellence does not come because of outstanding individuals. Excellence comes when people demand it from the government. The secrets to Government Excellence are the people in this country. The secret to Government Excellence is you.

Author's Profile

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The author is currently **Chairman of the National Centre for Human Settlements and Environment** at Bhopal. He is also **Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Atal Bihari Vajpayee - Indian Institute of Information Technology and Management, Gwalior**. He has won the **UNEP Award for Desertification Control** in 1994-95, the **Agha Khan Award** for Architecture in 1998 and the **Man of Vision Award** by the Hindustan Times in 2003.