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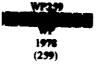# INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT
AHMEDABAD

THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF YOUNG
INDIAN DECISION ELITES

by

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THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF YOUNG INDIAN DECISION ELITES

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The Indian Administrative Service (IAS) has been considered the kingpin of the entire administrative structure in India. It has often been referred to as the "steel-frame" of India's development and there exists at least one school of thought which holds that the smooth political transition in 1947 as well as in 1977 was due in large measure to the character and nature of the IAS. It is a cadre-based system, whereby a member is given gradually more responsibilities covering all aspects of civil administration. At a relatively young age, often below 30, administrators are given full responsibilities for a district covering upward of a million people.

Professional management institutions, such as the Indian Institutes of Management (IIM) have arrived on the scene relatively lately. The oldest among these have been in existence some fifteen years. Yet, within this short span, they have been able to build a prestigious image of their graduates. Upon obtaining their diploma from IIMs, young graduates in their middle twenties are often given major responsibilities in various

functional areas of management, both by public and private sector organisations. Their incomes are certainly comparable to those of their counterparts in the IAS and quite often also their prestige.

The two groups of young decision-makers are a statistician's delight insofar as comparisons are concerned. They come from relatively high income families, with family incomes often exceeding Rs 15,000 a year. The father, and quite often both parents, are highly educated, and enjoy a high status in the society. The decision-makers themselves are marked by high scholastic achievement during their highschool and undergraduate studies. Thus, on family and educational backgrounds, ages and other preoccupations, the two groups are quite comparable.

We have been closely involved in the training of the two groups over the better part of the last decade. It is our impression, although direct statistical evidence has not been collected, that within the first five years on the job, the two groups display markedly different attitudes towards work and towards wider social concerns. This, on the face of it, appears to be a somewhat puzzling situation, given the basic similarity prior to their entry into the respective occupations. In this paper, we make an attempt to posit an exploratory hypothesis to account for this difference. The hypothesis is advanced on the basis of our impressions regarding the career objectives and demands the respective organisations make on the subjects of this paper. We hope that we will be able to collect sufficient empirical evidence in the future to verify this hypothesis.

The two groups spend two years in a training institution. The IAS probationers spend the training period at the Lal Bahadur Shashtri Nationa Academy of Administration and the management graduates in their respective institutions. Both the groups have some exposure to the practical situatio this being built into their curricula. The training institutions are residential in nature and throw the trainees and their trainers into close per sonal contact over this period. Both sets of institutions have from time t time been accused of being elitist and exclusive in their nature.

The decision to opt for either of the careers, however, predates the actual entry into the training institution by about a year. The selection for IAS is on the basis of an all India competitive examination held in September/October every year. This is followed by intensive interviews of selected candidates and the actual entry into the Academy the following July. The IIM selection process also starts roughly about the same time. There is an entrance examination, although it is not on the basis of a number of papers in selected subjects as is the IAS examination. This is held in December/January. An interview and a group discussion is the next step of selection process, with the selected candidates entering the institute in July of the following year.

While there would doubtless be candidates who apply for both sets of careers, by and large the decision is of an exclusive nature, that is, the number of such common candidates would be very small. Thus the career decision is made approximately a year prior to the actual selection and entry into the respective occupations.

This decision requires some amount of thinking on part of the concerned candidate. The influences that he is susceptible to at this stage is the feedback from friends who had opted for similar careers, the opinions of family and relatives, and some, although limited, interaction with teachers in the undergraduate institution. A cognitive map of career and life progression under either of the choices gets made in this process, even as the application is being prepared for the respective career. During the course of the selection process, the candidates seek further inputs, mostly from their seniors who are already on the jobs or in the training institutions.

It is with this inherited set of attitudes that the candidate enters the respective training institutions. Thus, given the influence of friends already in the respective jobs or in the training institutions, there is a tendency to reinforce their existing biases. The preferences of the senior group are inherited and a process of selecting evidence in support of these is initiated. The candidates who had begun with roughly identical backgrounds and views the previous July have undergone some change by the time they enter the training institutions, so that they are no longer on a totally comparable basis as the family and educational background data might reveal.

During their training, in addition to the academic instruction, they receive inputs from their peers and from their seniors, and to a somewhat lesser extent, from their trainers. The academic instructions consists

of training both in discipline-oriented subjects such as mathematics, economics, and organisational theories, as well as in practice-oriented fields such as finance, marketing and industrial relations for the management graduates and law, principles of administration and project management in the case of the administrators.

Therefore, there is some difference in the academic curricula of the two sets of institutions. The relative emphasis placed on practice-oriented subjects is obviously greater in both the situations. This may not be reflected in terms of allocation of times, but is certainly reflected in terms of the trainees' attitudes to obtaining learning from different subjects. Both sets of training institutions have placed considerable importance on experience-based teaching methods for these subjects. Some amount of divergence is to be found, therefore, in terms of the inputs to work attitudes from academic instruction.

Far more important in our view, however, are the inputs provided by the peers and the seniors. The informal communication process is strong in both sets of institutions. Experiences of the seniors quickly percolate to the trainees. This percolation, however, is not without its own biases. To the extent that experiences support the existing biases, their dissemination is quick. When they happen to contradict the existing biases, the percolation is either slow or these experiences are dismissed as being exceptions. For example, the management graduates tend to believe that there is not sufficient appreciation of professional management in most organisa-

tions. The administrators tend to believe that their work is hampered by interference from politicians. Wherever a cross-fertilisation of ideas is possible, such as, for example, through visits and lectures of trainers from the other set of institutions, the attitudes of the trainees are quite sceptical to begin with. The young administrators tend to believe that the management approach is fine as a puzzle-solving approach, but will be of limited use in their roles as administrators. The young managers, on the other hand, tend to believe that the bureaucracy is mired entirely in red tape and the bureaucrats are incapable of taking even simple decisions in an innovative fashion. The source credibility of such speakers is restricted, not on account of their proven incompetence, but on account of the existing biases.

The trainers in the Academy are drawn largely from the various administrative services. When they handle subjects related to practical matters, they are listened to with respect. Trainers drawn from academic backgrounds are generally not paid any serious attention. At a personal level, the young administrator is more likely to seek guidance and counsel from a trainer drawn from the administrative service itself. Quite often, these difficulties are perceived to be related more to procedural matters, rather than to a clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities of administrators.

* The faculty of IIMs largely consists of academics. While some of them may have practical experience, most have made their mark through their academic work and, to a lesser extent, through their consulting assignments. The young management student, therefore, while seeking guidance

and counsel, attaches even less credibility to the words of the trainers. While some selected instructors may have the image of being sympathetic listeners, this does not necessarily endow their advice with greater realism.

These then are the inputs that form the attitudes at the time of entry into actual work situation. Both sets of decision-makers enter their respective organisations at relatively senior positions at young ages. Their subordinates are often people considerably older in age and with more experience in their respective tasks. Yet the young decision-maker must make his mark in this somewhat hostile environment rather quickly. The two sets tend to follow different approaches in doing so.

To an extent, the administrator's task is relatively easier. His role is formally defined and he has considerable authority and control over his subordinates. Further, given the long history of the administrative service, the bureaucracy accepts young administrators with relatively less reluctance. This does not mean, however, that there is no need for individual effort on part of the administrator to establish himself. In a majority of cases, this is done by the simple expedient of exercising his authority. This could mean the dispensing of rewards and controlling the allocation of resources at his disposal. At times, it could mean an appeal to a higher authority to back him up.

The young manager, on the other hand, often enters an organisation which has had a relatively short history of accepting younger people with higher responsibility. He has to establish himself by proving his effectiveness in the limited task he perceives as being given to him. More often than not, he has to rely upon the backing of the superiors in addition to his own resources. This implies that the young manager has to prove his utility to the organisation beyond reasonable doubt. He can do so by generating additional resources. For example, a young sales manager will have to prove himself by showing that he can actually generate greater sales, or a young accountant will have to do so by showing his control over expenditure and cost savings.

This leads to a substantial difference in the perception of their respective roles among the two sets. The administrators see themselves as controllers of resources and dispensers of justice and rewards. Part of this is because of the structure of the organisation that they enter and part of it is because of the image of the role that has been steadily reinforced over a period of two to three years. The yardsticks by which their effectiveness could be measured in meeting their responsibilities are often spelt out in relatively vague terms relating to maintenance of law and order and furthering of developmental objectives. Therefore, there is some lattitude possible in interpreting them. Models of this or that senior being considered a good administrator are often handed down and emulated. At the same time, the administrator is aware of the rigidity of the organisation he serves in dispensing rewards to its members. Promotions accrue more

often as a result of seniority in service than as a reward for exceptional work. He, therefore, learns to distinguish between internal rewards, over which his performance has little bearing and external ones, such as his social standing, which he can manipulate.

The manager, on the other hand, sees himself as a creator and generator of resources. He perceives that his task is in some way measurable in terms of these resources, if not in actual monetary terms. The measure of effectiveness, therefore, appears to him somewhat more quantified and, to an extent, a more objective yardstick as compared to that of the young administrator.

The rewards that the two sets seek, therefore, are also different. The young administrator seeks to enhance his prestige and social status so as to better exercise his authority. His status within the organisation is relatively well-defined. Given his overall control on matters beyond the organisation that he works in, he seeks to enhance perceptions regarding himself among the citizenry at large. Non-monetary rewards, therefore, become exceedingly important.

The manager, on the other hand, seeks a share of the additional resources that he has been instrumental in generating. These are often reflected in terms of the monetary gains that he would expect. What am I worth to the organisation is a constant question posed by the young managers. The concern regarding non-salary perquisites is also to be understood in this context. To a considerable extent, the perquisites enhance real income of the managers, and as such, are understood to be rewards to be expected for better performance.

These concerns are also reflected in the choice of a life-partner. The administrator looks for a person who will help him or her fulfil the larger social role. Therefore, empathy for the people, ability to organise activities outside of the official boundaries but complementary to he official roles, and patience with subordinates as well as the general population are prized characters. The young manager, on the other hand, looks for qualities which will be helpful in the limited milieu of the organisation or related organisations. Social graces, abilities to win influential friends and possibilities of furthering the mate's career through efforts at a personal level are the characteristics that are emphasised. Not surprisingly, marriages between two careerists belonging to the same group are far more frequent than across the career sets.

Quite clearly, the available degrees of freedom are perceived differently by the two sets of young executives. The administrator finds that the organisation within which he works is relatively inflexible. He finds, however, that he has greater lattitude to influence decisions outside of his limited organisation. This is because of his perception of his role as the allocator of resources and dispenser of justice and rewards. His concern, therefore, becomes that of modifying the social system and bringing about changes which are rather far-reaching. The young manager, on the other hand, sees quite clearly that he has to function within the given framework of the broader social, political and economic structure. Within the organisation, he finds that he could have greater flexibility in order to achieve the desired results. Hence his quest for an efficient organisation and its effectiveness in dealing with its limited objectives.

Both these perceptions, however, are severely partial. An individual administrator by himself can hardly hope to bring about social change. This is all the more difficult in view of the inflexibility of his organisation and his inability to infuse enthusiasm among his colleagues, superiors, and subordinates within the organisation. He may, therefore, end up working at cross purposes with the rest of the organisation. The likely result is that of early idealism giving way to cynicism and frustration. Such changes are by and large irreversible. The individual then becomes resigned to the limitations imposed by the micro and macro environment. The charge of lethargy and inaction levelled against even senior bureaucrats could stem from such a transformation.

Similarly, the young manager could achieve only limited success even when he is imbued with a sense of pragmatism. The effectiveness of his own self as well as his organisation is not entirely a function of factors under his control. Inasmuch as he does not concern himself with the broader realities, his efforts are likely to be effective only in part and that too for a limited period of time. Once again, the result is that early enthusiasm for efficiency giving way to concerns which are purely self-oriented. Hence the charge levelled against senior managers that they are concerned more about their monetary and related rewards.

The unintended tragedy of this attitude towards work is that relatively early on, the most talented and best trained young decision elites get disillusioned. They leave their training institutions with an air of

expectancy regarding work. They expect to change the system, achieve worth-while results and in general, expand their roles and life space considerably. Within a few years, work appears narrow and not sufficiently rewarding. There is a shrinkage of the self, rather than an expansion, leading to the disillusionment. This disillusionment is only partly the result of environmental factors. The more important cause of this disillusionment is the self-reinforcing tendency of the inputs received at the formative stages of their careers which determine their work attitude. Neither set of executives is fully in touch with the overall social reality which both affects them as well as gets changed by their actions. The consequence of the disillusionment is the feeling that they are fighting battles which were lost before they were begun. To this extent, the young decision elites even when they are full of enthusiasm and bravura, are doomed to a relatively self-imposed martyrdom.