

The Development of Indian Civil Service in British India: An Analysis

Zafar Mohyuddin

*Lecturer,
Department of History and Pakistan Studies,
University of Sargodha, Sargodha.*

Muhammad Yasir Ali

*Assistant Professor,
Department of History & Civilization Studies
Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan*

Abstract

The British ruled India with the help of an organized structure of bureaucracy. An efficient model of Indian Civil Service was gradually developed by the British. It was a merit based civil administration, a new paradigm in India, which altered the culture of power in South Asia. An efficient and effective civil service established by the British is considered among the best administrative machineries of the time. Indian Civil Service helped British Empire to sustain its power for years, maintain law and order and collect taxes. The present paper is an attempt to look into the gradual development of the structure of Indian Civil Service, its organization and functions. It also ponders that how the merit based recruitments, transfers and promotions contributed in the efficiency and performance of civil servants under the British Empire in India.

Keywords: British Empire, India, Indian Civil Service, Administration, Culture of Power

Introduction

The strength of the British Empire in India largely based on their efficient system of administration run mainly by Indian Civil Service also known as Imperial Civil Service. The term Civil Service is comparatively recently coined and has come to currency during a century or so. Before that, civil administration of British India was named as the Covenanted, or superior services and Un-covenanted services.¹ The British introduced a

new paradigm in India which contributed to alter the culture of power in India. An efficient and effective bureaucracy established by the British is considered among the best administrative machineries in the annals of history.²

The structure of Indian Civil Service was gradually shaped. Originally, administration of the East India Company was a mercantile service. Later when the Company came to be a territorial sovereign as well, its civil servants had to combine their commercial and administrative duties.³ A private mercantile service silently transformed into full-fledged public administrative service as well as the most efficient civil service in the world at that time.

The Indian Civil Service (ICS) served as a backbone for the control of British Empire in India. Selected on the merit, it was the most literary and educated administrative service to rule a colony. The officers of ICS made and executed the policies in an efficient and effective manner.⁴ The present paper tries to study the gradual development of the Indian Civil Service and its impact on the culture of governance in India. It also looks into the organization, composition and the merit based structure of Indian Civil Service under the British Empire.

Foundation of the British Civil Administrative Structure

It is generally argued that the East India Company was fortunate, having two outstanding personalities like Warren Hastings (1773-1785) and Lord Cornwallis (1785-1793) in quick succession as heads of their affairs in India. The achievement of Hastings was that he brought order out of chaos and build up administration out of a mercantile service, and Cornwallis consolidated it by raising its integrity and morale. Lord Wellesley (1798-1805) followed up and started to provide systematic education and training to civil servants.⁵

Initially, Warren Hastings faced problems in constructing the framework of civil administration due to lack of local knowledge and inefficiency of the officials.⁶ However, Hastings was the first Governor General, who clearly spelled out the role of the Company's employs. The East India Company's bureaucracy was named Covenanted Civil Service (CCS). Members of the CCS were appointed by the Court of Directors of the Company. The other Service was Un-covenanted Civil Service (UCS)

whose officers were appointed locally by the Fort William authorities.⁷ The pattern of power however remained arbitrary under Warren Hastings, who served as the 1st Governor General of Bengal. He followed the same old pattern of arbitrary rule and made his own fortune. He exercised the power in a way, whatever he liked.

Then Lord Cornwallis succeeded Hastings as a Governor General (1785-1793). Due to his administrative reforms, his period is considered as a period of enlightenment. It was here when the pattern of power changed as he reformed the Government of India in all fields of administration. It was Lord Cornwallis who laid the foundation of a professional civil service with attractive salaries and certain rule based appointments, trainings, postings and promotions.⁸ The leading principles of civil service were established and duties of different departments were defined. Cornwallis put in place a well-structured machinery of government in Calcutta.⁹ The Cornwallis system of administration gave priority to judicial system. On the other hand Munro school argued that executive function must be superior from judicial. According to him it would be more effective because historically India has been governed by arbitrary administration through appointed officials.¹⁰

In 1829 a hierarchy of administrative units like provinces, divisions, districts and sub districts was established. A hierarchy of administrative officers was appointed to govern these units. The officers were trained in all fields and posted in different units. The officers also functioned as an academic elite of the empire and gave their input in policy making of the state.¹¹ Before 1833 the Court of Directors remained supreme in the selection and appointment of civil servants. Disciplinary control of the government of India over Indian Civil Service strengthened after the Act of 1833.¹² The powers of Court of Directors as an appointing authority were also abolished in the Charter of 1853. In January 1855, the Board of Control outlined regulation for the examination of candidates.¹³ After the War of Independence in 1857, on 2nd August 1858 British parliament enacted the Government of India Act under which direct Crown's rule was established, abolishing that of the rule of East

India Company. The Act put an end to the dual authority exercised by the board of control and the court of directors.

Indian Civil Service after 1858

Since the power of India was taken in the direct control of parliament, the British adopted a policy of administrative reform. The Indian Civil Service institute was established and competitive examination had already started to recruit best lot in 1853. At first the proportion of English in the services was much larger but later on Indians were also given considerable share in the administrative services.¹⁴ Paul Stuart is of the view that “reform of the procedures of the Indian office to select better personnel, to control their official behavior, to improve their efficiency, and to make them accountable to superiors has been featured prominently in efforts to change the operation of the governments of Indian programs since the early nineteenth century.”¹⁵

The efforts were made to introduce the element of transparency into the recruitment procedures of civil servants. The system of competitive examination was adopted almost two decades earlier in India than in Britain.¹⁶ Northcote Trevlyan report of 1854 suggests that Indian Civil Service was more composed and a role model for the establishment of Home Civil Service in Britain.¹⁷ The British even modeled their own civil service on the pattern of ICS. K. K. Aziz was quoted by Bradford Spangenberg on the administration of British India that the “British India was better administered than the Great Britain herself.”¹⁸ Spangenberg also quoted B. B. Misra that “the future of India would be determined by the extent to which it can extricate itself from its old traditions and move along the lines of rationality and morality provided by the imperialistic bureaucracy.”¹⁹ Recruited on the basis of an open competitive examination and merit, the ICS officers of India became the backbone of British administrative system.²⁰

All India Services (AIS) included different legs of British administrative services. These included Indian Civil Service, the Indian Police Service, and the Forest Service, Engineers, the Medical Service, the Agriculture Service and the Veterinary Service. The final appointing authority of AIS was the Secretary of the State for India after the passing of competitive examination. The provincial Services were mainly comprised of

Indians. These covered the provincial civil administration in the field.²¹ The Central Services included the Indian Railways, the Indian Post, Telegraph Service and Imperial Custom Service. The appointing authority of Central Service was the central government.²²

The Indian Police Service (IPS) was an important leg of British administrative structure in India. While commenting on the Indian Constitutional Reforms of 1933-34, Viscount Halifax discussed the importance of police services in the Indian Administration. He opined that “we must recognize that law and order, to use the compendious phrase, must always depend primarily and essentially upon the morale of the police force, and that morale will, in turn, depend upon its discipline, and the efficiency and impartiality of its administration.”²³ He emphasized that in charge of the police should be protected from improper political pressure in the direction of interference with the internal administration of the police.²⁴ In this regard, it was recommended in the Constitutional Reform Committee that “the Police Acts, and any of the rules made under them which in the Governor’s opinion relate to or affect the organization or discipline of the police, should not be alterable without the previous concern of the Governor in his discretion.”²⁵ So the efforts were made to develop an efficient and merit based structure of police force, an important component of administrative machinery.

It is argued that almost one thousand and five hundred members of the Indian Civil Service functioned like *mansabdars* of the Mughal Empire. But the mode of their appointments, transfers, promotions was different. The Civil Service, the department of Police, Custom and Forestry etc. were constituted under the law. The recruitment, transfer, and promotion were held on merit and the officers were not the personal servants of the Governor General. The Governor General had limited powers of appointment, transfer and dismissal over the civil servants. Governor General could transfer civil servants but with restraint. The principle was to transfer a servant after each three years to other departments to provide him diverse experience. However, it was not formalized and was not a law rather it was a convention.²⁶ It was also not exercised arbitrarily. Governor General was expected to explain why the transfer took place

before the time period. So, these officers had no threat of arbitrary transfer and dismissal from service unlike pre-British Indian practices.²⁷

The members of ICS tried to maintain high moral values.²⁸ Young Englishmen from the universities of England brought to India a tradition of efficiency, honesty and integrity.²⁹ The ICS was dominated by officers having academic insight of the issues and practical knowledge on the field. The ICS officers maintained good libraries, conducted research and produced good books and gazetteers etc. The place of ICS among the services was most important and ICS officers gained important posts in other departments as well.³⁰ Due to its neutral character, the advice of ICS officers was respected by Governor General. The relationship was of mutual trust. The servants thought the Governor General would not use arbitrary powers over them and the Governor General had confidence that they would provide him with sane advice.

The unity and cohesion of Civil Service was also remarkable as compare to earlier bureaucratic elites.³¹ There was a spirit of “Esprit De Corps” among officers. It was a sense of solidarity and collective responsibility to run the government machinery. If any one of the officers abused power, then there was a social criticism within the department. So there was peer check among the officers.

After the proclamation of the Queen in 1858, the ranks of Civil Service were open for all caste, creed, color or religion in principal.³² By introducing merit, British changed the culture of appointments of state officials in India.³³ The 1870 Act of India gave powers to the government to elevate Indians to the Covenanted Service from Un-covenanted Service without examination, on the grounds of their performance and exceptional ability.³⁴ This gave opportunity to Indians officers to compete with European officers and secure promotion into the Indian Civil Service.³⁵ During the first four decades of Twentieth Century, a large scale Indianization of the ICS occurred.³⁶ Particularly after the First World War, the British started to increase the numbers of Indians in ICS, military and in representative bodies. Under the Act of 1919, British introduced the system of Dyarchy, which marked the first introduction of

representative principle into the executive branch of administration.³⁷

It was on the recommendation of the Indian Public Service Commission in 1886-87 that the two services, Covenanted and Un-covenanted were split into three distinct divisions at different levels of responsibility. These were categorized as Imperial Services, Provincial Services and Subordinate Services, each of them organized into different units on the basis duties such as Civil Service, Police Service, and Educational Service and so on.³⁸

The main functions of the Indian Civil Services were to maintain law and order in a huge country of India and to provide advice to Governor General and his council in the matters of public policy. The ICS also helped in the collection of taxes and implementation of effective fiscal policy. The British appointed ICS officers to look after the district administration. It is an important fact that between 1858 and 1947 there were merely more than one thousand members of Civil Service, who controlled the population of millions of Indians.³⁹ In 1938 there were only 1029 ICS officers in government, who employed over a million people. The officers executed their policy through this support staff. The ICS officers were appointed all over India working half of them as a district magistrate, collector, and deputy commissioner and one quarter in the provincial administration.⁴⁰ These officers posted in the districts throughout the country, exercised a general oversight and control over the all field administration.⁴¹

British introduced the element of transparency into the recruitment procedures, promotions and transfers of civil servants. As the strength of the British Empire in India largely based on the efficient working of the ICS, British realized that the performance of the administration needs continuity to achieve organizational objectives. So, the recruitment and promotion were held on merit and the officers were not treated as personal servants of the Governor General. The ICS officers were not arbitrarily transferred.⁴²

Conclusion

To conclude, it would perhaps not be an exaggeration to affirm that British India was governed by the “Indian Civil Service”

which had no match anywhere else in the world at that time. The standard of educational tests and competitive examination, efficient trainings and impersonal character of public affairs made this merit based bureaucracy a hallmark of British Empire in India. It changed the culture of power in the Indian Subcontinent. To establish rule of law instead of rule of force, British separated military from politics. The formulation of strategy was in the hands of British Parliament and civil servants and armed forces focused on their operational proficiency. The principle that the country was not the personal estate of the ruler was applied to British officials presence in India at the top of which was Indian Civil Service.⁴³ The ICS was one of the important legacies of British rule in India. ICS not only helped British to control a vast and diverse region like India for many years, it also helped in the management of Imperial decline in orderly fashion in India.

References

- ¹ The word ‘civil service’ was used to designate the British administration in India. The British Empire called its employees working on the civil side ‘civil servants’ in contrast to those employed for military and naval duties.
- ² Ilhan Niaz, *An Inquiry into the Culture of Power of the Subcontinent*. (Islamabad: Alhamra Publishing, 2006.), 187.
- ³ Akshoy Kumar Ghosal, *Civil Service in India Under the East India Company: A Study in Administrative Development*. (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1944.), 4.
- ⁴ Niaz, *An Inquiry into the Culture of Power*, 203.
- ⁵ Ghosal, *Civil Service in India Under the East India Company*, 6.
- ⁶ Ilhan Niaz, *The Culture of Power and Governance of Pakistan 1947-2008*. (Karachi: Oxford University Press. 2011.), 43.
- ⁷ Aminullah Chaudry, *Political Administrators: The Story of the Civil Service of Pakistan*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.
- ⁸ After Cornwallis, Indian civil servants were no more recruited by patronage but by education, test and training. It was the beginning of meritocracy (a system of government in which power is given to those who are competent).
- ⁹ Chaudry, *Political Administrators*, 6.
- ¹⁰ Niaz, *The Culture of Power and Governance*, 47.
- ¹¹ Niaz, *The Culture of Power and Governance*, 48.
- ¹² B.B. Misra, *The Administrative History of India 1834-1947*. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1970.), 168-71.
- ¹³ Misra, *The Administrative History of India*, 177-82.
- ¹⁴ T. H. Beaglehole, “From Rulers to Servant: The I.C S. and the British Demission of Power in India”, *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 11, No. 2 (1977), 238. Initially, the examinations for ICS were conducted only in London. Maximum age limit was 23 years and minimum age limit was 18 years. European Classics had a predominant share of marks in the syllabus. All this made it difficult for Indian candidates. However, in 1864, the first Indian, Shri Satyendranath Tagore brother of Shri Rabindaranath Tagore succeeded.
- ¹⁵ Paul Stuart, “Administrative Reforms in Indian Affairs”, *The Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (April., 1985), 133.
- ¹⁶ Chaudry, *Political Administrators*, 8.
- ¹⁷ Chaudry, *Political Administrators*, 7.
- ¹⁸ Bradford Spangenberg, “Steel Frame of Obsequiousness, British Bureaucracy in India: Status, Policy and the ICS in the Late 19th Century”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 14, No.2 (Jan., 1979), 67.
- ¹⁹ Spangenberg, “Steel Frame of Obsequiousness”, 67-68.
- ²⁰ Hare Krishana Mishra, *Bureaucracy Under the Mughals 1556 A.D. to 1707 A.D.* (Delhi: Amar Prakashan. 1989.), 9.
- ²¹ Niaz, *An Inquiry into the Culture of Power*, 201.

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- ²² Niaz, *An Inquiry into the Culture of Power*, 202.
- ²³ Viscount Halifax, "Indian Constitutional Reforms", *International Affairs*, Vol. 14, No.2 (Mar-April., 1935), 201.
- ²⁴ Halifax, "Indian Constitutional Reforms" 201.
- ²⁵ Halifax, "Indian Constitutional Reforms" 201.
- ²⁶ Governor General could not appoint or remove them except in emergency. Service security was granted.
- ²⁷ It became a norm, not to disrupt unnecessarily the working of these officers to ensure the effective administration. The officers were given sufficient time to complete their respective assignments.
- ²⁸ Niaz, *The Culture of Power and Governance*, 203.
- ²⁹ Percival Griffiths, *The British Impact on India* (London: Macdonald, 1952), 195.
- ³⁰ Niaz, *An Inquiry into the Culture of Power*, 206.
- ³¹ Niaz, *The Culture of Power and Governance*, 48.
- ³² Ghosal, *Civil Service in India Under the East India Company*, 7. The Queen's Proclamation issued in 1858 reinforced the provision of the Government of India Act of 1833 which had stated that no Indian would, by reason only of his religion, place of birth, descent, colour, or any of them, be disabled from holding any place or employment under the Government of the East India Company. However, Queen Victoria's assurance was not implemented in letter and spirit. The Covenanted Civil Service particularly remained exclusively European in early decades.
- ³³ However, recruitment pattern in the civil service favored upper and upper middle class in India and had urban bias. Candidates from a rural background and from the minority communities founded themselves increasingly at a disadvantage due to their insufficient skills in English language etc. It is also argued that proportion of urban class in the civil services was larger in order to catch the loyalties of the segments who were connected to national politics. As a matter of fact the Indian politics in the pre-partition times was dominated by the people mostly belonging to urban areas.
- ³⁴ Niaz, *An Inquiry into the Culture of Power*, 219.
- ³⁵ Indians were mainly employed in the Un-Covenanted Service meant especially for them. This service was not an organized service and employees were locally recruited from India at reasonably cheap rates. There was no uniformity in the mode of recruitment or qualification for appointment to the Un-Covenanted Service, no fixed scales of pay, no security of tenure. Though appointed to respectable posts, especially in revenue and judicial departments, Indians were earlier not allowed to rise above subordinate positions.
- ³⁶ Niaz, *The Culture of Power and Governance*, 50.
- ³⁷ Claude Markovitz, ed. *A History of Modern India 1480-1950*, trans. Nisha George and Maggy Hendry. (London: Anthem Press, 2002.), 368,69. Under this system, however, the provincial ministers had much control over provincial civil service. These elected ministers started to

use their powers to safeguard their personal interests. In order to get good postings and transfers the civil officers also started to rely more on ministers than governors.

³⁸ Ghosal, *Civil Service in India Under the East India Company*, 3.

³⁹ Chaudry, *Political Administrators*, 18.

⁴⁰ Chaudry, *Political Administrators*, 19.

⁴¹ Ghosal, *Civil Service in India Under the East India Company*, 27.

⁴² Niaz, *An Inquiry into the Culture of Power*, 202.

⁴³ Ilhan. Niaz, “ A Survey of Proprietorship, Continental Bureaucratic Empires, and the Culture of Power, in South Asian History” . *The Pakistan Development Review*. 45:3 (Autumn 2006): 338.