

Government of Assam

CIVIL SERVICES DAY 2018

Parables in Public Administration

21st April 2018

Honourable Minister, respected Chief Secretary, Fellow Civil Servants, and Friends,

I am greatly honoured by the invitation extended to me. I have a special place in my head and heart for Assam. I have some valuable life-long friends in Assam, such as Madan Bezbaruah and H.S. Das, former Finance Secretary.

I must congratulate the Government of Assam in particular Chief Minister and Chief Secretary for organizing the Civil Services Day in a thoughtful manner. All Departments and all Districts are represented in this meeting. Doctors, Engineers, Finance officials, and others at all levels are participating in this event here. I have been told that a few Union Government officials also have been invited.

Civil Services touch the life of every citizen of India every day and, in fact, a number of times every day. The number of Civil servants in the Republic of India is over 6 million, excluding Defense personnel. 6 million is more than the population of several countries. About half of them are in the Union Government, and the rest in the State Governments. Assam has reported the number of Civil servants in

2012-13 as 3,95,715. So, when we talk of Civil services in India, we are talking of millions of people and not merely 50,000 of them who are holding supervisory positions.

Mr. Dwivedi asked me to share my experiences, guide the officers on the future challenges and give views on good governance. That is a huge task. I will cover these subjects to the extent possible through what I may call Parables in Public Administrations – based on my personal experience.

Parable, as you know, is a short simple story that touches or explains an idea especially a moral or a religious idea. Today I will present the theme as a series of recollection of incidents rather than full fledged stories.

When I joined the IAS Academy, the first lecture in Economics was taken by Professor Ramaswamy. He said, "Congratulations. You are the best and the brightest in the country. You have the privilege and opportunity for servicing the people of India. Please remember that people of India are those "who are not in IAS." Generally, the message was that we civil servants have to always think of the common person.

On arrival in the State, I joined as Assistant Collector, Vishakapatnam. My PA was a young man. I asked him his qualifications. He passed his matriculation,

except that he was a topper in the District. He could not afford higher education. On that day I realised that being a boss does not mean that I am more intelligent than my subordinate.

As Assistant Collector, I attended a Collectors' Conference. Some IAS Officers made a comment about some Collectors saying that, "they are promoted to IAS. Naturally, they cannot be as good". Immediately, I replied that "my father was a promoted IAS Officer. I know that he was better than me. The class distinction between direct recruited and promoted does not make for good administration."

During the first two years of service, I was transferred five times. Every time it was because I had differences of opinion with the elected head of the Panchayat Samiti and the elected head of Zilla Parishad while I was Chief Executive. I explained to the Chief Secretary that I was right and the elected representative was not. The Chief Secretary told me, "Venu, I cannot transfer Samiti President; I cannot transfer Zilla Parishad Chairman; so, I have to transfer you. That will avoid tension." That is an important lesson which many of the civil servants fail to appreciate. A transfer does not mean that the civil servant is wrong. In fact, at least half the times, if not more, civil servant is right, but the government may not have many options. However, I was lucky that the government protected the

service conditions. The responsibility of senior civil servants as well as political leadership is to protect and encourage honest and efficient officers even when they are compelled to transfer for political reasons.

My first independent charge was Sub-collector, Ongole. In my first conference of the Tehsildars, I reviewed the DCB statement, namely, Demand, Collection and Balance. The demand contains arrears as well as current dues. I insisted that all the arrears should be cleared by specific date and there should be no arrears or no balance to be collected by a specified date. At the end of the review, one Tehsildar got up and said, "Sir, I am retiring in one month. I have a submission to make. There is demand, there is collection, there is balance; there is fresh demand, there is collection, there is balance. Sub-collectors come, Sub-collectors go. The DCB goes on", and then he sat down. That made me feel humble because as young man I thought I can sweep everything clean. We can do a lot in our time in a job, but not all that is necessary.

On one day, a young girl came to my official bungalow in the morning. She said that she was applying for medical college. She had to produce a 'Character Certificate' from a Gazetted Officer and she does not know any Gazetted Officer. I did not know what to do. I told her through my PA that I do not know her and so how can I give a Character Certificate. She responded by asking me, "Sir, I must

have this Certificate to get admission. I have to know a Gazetted Officer. How can I know a Gazetted Officer - please advice me." I thought about it. What advice can I give? I gave her a Character Certificate. Technically, it is a false Certificate.

One day, in a discussion, a Revenue Board Member made an unparliamentary remark. I reacted and said: "You should not talk like that." He was visibly angry and said: "What"? Immediately, I responded: "I am sorry Sir, I apologise". My humble submission is that you may not like to talk like that." He laughed and said: "That is good." The lesson was that you should be humble when you differ with the boss. The more you differ, the more you should be humble.

I was Secretary of the Rayalaseema Board. Funds were allotted for the region and the political leadership wanted to take projects in their respective villages. How do we introduce rationality? We prepared guidelines and arranged their demands as well as the department's proposal in order of preference as per the guidelines. Once we give an order of preference, it becomes difficult for political factors to fight rationality beyond a point. As one goes down the list, those that are overlooked will join to resist. Through analysis we will definitely avoid bad options though we may not get first best results due to political reasons.

I was appointed as a Special Officer for separate "Jai Andhra agitation" in 1973. A Brigade was deployed. I was Liaison Officer between the Army and Civil Administration. The Collectors and SPs used to demand assistance of the Army. The Brigadier used to be annoyed at their demands. I explained that the Collectors and SPs are under stress. They want assurance more than assistance. Let us give them an assurance first and then consider assistance.

I joined rather unwillingly, the Ministry of Finance in 1976, in a very difficult job; I did not know much about IMF and World Bank then. I adopted a "hundred day silence principle". I was dumb but with eyes and ears open. For 100 days, I went on reading the files, including the linked files also. During this period, when somebody asked for my name, I used to tell: "I will check up and let you know, Sir." Then I was reasonably confident. Learning is good for us and that we are learning makes other people careful in dealing with us.

I was the coordinator of Indian team negotiating with World Bank. Once a negotiator from World Bank complained about Orissa Chief Engineer and said "I cannot understand your English." I did not get annoyed. I told him: "that I am happy." So far we thought that we could not understand his English. Now that we don't understand each other's pronunciation, we can have level playing field negotiations.

In substantive terms I learnt that for good negotiations, we should start with what we agree. That makes a pleasant beginning and positive start. Then, we discuss only what can be negotiated. If we cannot negotiate something, we take it to the end. Most of the time, the negotiators have to help each other in public policy matters, to please their bosses.

I came back to Government of Andhra Pradesh in 1983. I had to lead a discussion with Planning Commission about Andhra Pradesh plans. Planning Commission insisted that we provide fully for all the on-going schemes. Then there would be nothing left for new schemes. Out of frustration, I told the Planning Commission, "If the people of Andhra Pradesh wanted on-going schemes, they would have elected on-going government. Therefore, we have to accept re-ordering of priorities. Is Government of India not re-ordering priorities even when the government does not change? I am not saying that it is good to change priorities, but sometimes it may be necessary. Otherwise, we should be able to convince the political masters not to change the priorities."

In 1980, I went back to the Government of India as Joint Secretary; I was in-charge of a complex subject, Balance of Payments. After reading all the manuals of RBI on the subject I went to Bombay to the Reserve Bank of India. I met officials at different levels and discussed and learnt from them. After sometime

when the crisis happened in 1991 and we had to sell Gold, I knew the problem, I knew the people who could solve it and I could gather full coordination. There is no hierarchy for learning.

As Deputy Governor, I told Governor Rangarajan that I was a bit anxious before giving my first speech. He told me that after long experience, he still feels anxious whenever he goes for a talk. Being anxious is helpful up to a point if it encourages you to prepare well.

Once I sent a proposal to set up a separate debt office to Governor Jalan. He called me and told me that he entirely agrees with me, but my proposal is based on the assumption that the Government will contain fiscal deficit. However, he wanted to know, what are the risks of the assumption being wrong, however small the likelihood of the failure. Then I thought and I decided not to go ahead. On important policy matters, however confident we are that we are right, we should also think of the consequences of our being wrong before deciding to do the right thing. At one level, micro level, one can take risks, but not at higher levels.

When I joined as Governor, I had a meeting with a few middle level officers in Hyderabad. I asked them, "How many of you went to government schools?" The answer was that most of them went to government schools. Then I asked,

“How many of your children are going to government schools?” The answer was, very few. Similarly, I asked, “How many of you went to government hospitals when you were children?” Most of them said “yes”. “How many are going to government hospitals now?” The answer was “none.” Then I told them that people are by-passing government schools and government hospitals because the service is poor. If the Reserve Bank also gives poor service, the people will by-pass Reserve Bank also.

As Finance Commission Chairman, my task was to keep listening so that we give a well informed award. We had to listen to representations / representatives in 39 different languages. We passed the final test of success. The final test was whether we made everybody equally unhappy since in any case we cannot make all of them happy.

My experience has shown that there are different skills required in different jobs and at different levels. Enforcement of rule requires skills which are different from making the rules themselves. Everyone is not good at everything.

Let me say something about All India Services. In India, we have dual polity - Union and State. There are Civil Services for the Central Government and there are Civil Services for the State Government. However, in India there is a unique

category called All India Services. They have been created under a Constitutional provision. They are loyal to the State when working in the State; they are loyal to the Centre when working in the Centre; but under all circumstances, they are expected to be loyal to the Constitution. They are one of the three unifying factors in the Indian federation, the other two being common Judiciary and common Procedural Law. Therefore, there is a special responsibility of All India Services. They wield power. However, power without knowledge is liable to be ridiculed. Power with knowledge can be exercised effectively while commanding respect. All India Services carry heavy fiduciary responsibilities.

In my view, the most important responsibility for All India Services is to improve the skills of large number of Civil Servants in India. They must improve the systems and the conditions under which lakhs and lakhs of civil servants work. The All India service officers have to ensure that the level of efficiency in services in the government is up to global standards. We must have civil services of global standards if we want our private sector to be globally competitive.

Let me say a few words about Civil Servants in general. They are privileged. They are well paid. The Government is kind to them. It is indulgent. They have protection under Article 311 of the Constitution. People have a right to demand impartial, equitable and high quality services. People have a right to demand

respect from the civil servants because their salaries are paid from the taxes collected from the people, particularly poorer people. In private sector it is said that customer is the king because customer pays for the service. For the civil servants, common person is the king.

Unfortunately, I find that many civil servants treat people with suspicion rather than respect. I recall a conversation some years ago with my batch-mate in Income Tax Department. I argued that they should accept the Income Tax Returns and only if the Department had independent evidence, they should question the Income Tax Returns. I said that the Department should concentrate on information gathering rather than keep questioning through mere suspicion. He replied that "India is not like other countries. People are dishonest. They cannot be trusted." I asked him whether Government Servants are not Indians. I also asked, why we should assume that the regulator is more honest than the regulated. In recent years, however, there are some changes in attitude.

No doubt, there are many difficulties faced by the civil servants at work, but the general impression is that Civil Servants complain too much and work less.

We must make a distinction between people and peoples' representatives. Civil Servants have to serve the people and peoples' representatives can bring the

problems of the people to the notice of the civil servants. Peoples' representatives can demand attention of the civil servants, but the civil servants have to take independent decision on each issue. In one instance, when I was Collector, I told my Sub-collector, "The MLA has a right to demand first application of your mind, but he has no right over your mind."

Civil Services cannot operate except within political framework. Political leadership in the government uses the bureaucracy for executing its priorities. Bureaucracy is a tool. Complaining about bureaucracy is not helpful to political leadership except as an excuse.

Political leadership gets the bureaucracy it deserves just as people get political leadership that they vote for.

I should also mention about the media. The media seems to concentrate on weaknesses of government disproportionately. In any system, including private sector, there will be some bad eggs. Media should be responsible in reporting. The bureaucracy should also be careful in creating a good image of itself.

Conclusion:

We have to recognise that private sector is adopting global standards of technology in India also. That is propelled by competition. In public policy, there is

no such pressure of competition. So, there should be conscious effort by senior civil servants to introduce modern technology. Then only the Civil Services can cope with globalised private sector and command respect.

Civil servants should improve their skills; if not, the activities will by-pass the Government. Civil servants have to learn and improve their skills. Private sector is knocking at your door, to occupy your space. The present and future generation of Civil servants has to face competition for survival with dignity.

Thank you very much for the opportunity.

All the best.