

# THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

## Magazine

### Last of the Burra Sahibs

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After independence, the ICS came under great stress. Their old unfettered authority was gone, and the situation was altogether more complex. Independence had come without upheaval and the changes that accompany it. The country needed reforms. The service could have become an eager partner in bringing them about. But it chose to defend the past, within and without the secretariat corridors. On occasions, it was also put to the test in defending its British-acquired values. Sadly, one must confess where a Moon might have stood and fought, the men they left behind did not. The pursuit of scholarship too withered away in the heat of the Indian sun. In the end the ICS men were no better than the new bureaucracy they spawned. Only the image of a dwindling race of supermen was kept up, though it was increasingly called in question.

Now that it has passed into history, the ICS will be increasingly studied by scholars. After all, it is the other great Mandarinate of Asia. Perhaps I have been unduly harsh and have exaggerated the moles on its fair face. But that is only to somewhat balance the picture, and raise a debate. After all, for thirty-three years it has fed gullible Indians the idea: after us the deluge.



Keen shikaris and the 'mai-baap' of the people. A myth assiduously cultivated by and on behalf of the ICS since Independence.

And so, as has happened often in this country in the past, while the rulers sat on the throne, the priests became the power behind it. Incidentally, this happened even more in Pakistan where even the limited people's power that India enjoyed did not exist.

The people of India continued, therefore to enjoy the 'blessings' of the Raj long after it had formally passed. The ICS of course laboured valiantly to maintain India in the frozen posture in which the Raj had left it in 1947. Being at the top, they were able to block or emasculate any worthwhile proposals for change. Above all, they could choose and train their successors. They dominated the Public Service Commission, and looked only for the one school tie and the right accent. For a long time, the poor suckers from the 'bachelors' never had a chance. Jawaharlal Nehru might lecture the boys to emotionally involve themselves with the poor masses of India, but the pervading influence on them, through training and after, was of what Darling called 'the urban oriented men of the desk'. The ICS ethos will therefore live on decades after its formal demise.

In the case of the Foreign Service this is even more true. The ICS simply took it over. The new service was constituted of ICS men who moved over from the collectorates. God created man in his own image. So did the ICS the Foreign Service. It was to have only 'khandani' chaps. You couldn't allow any odd characters in. The few who were forced on the service often suffered in this last genuine 'burra sahibs' club in India. Many were destroyed by the sudden dose of new and undesirable values. As for the sahibs at the top, they now had the chance to really live like their mentors in England. Naturally, every patriotic man wanted a post in America or the West. Only the unwanted went to Africa. The world was divided into A, B and C stations. The fleshpots naturally came in A. While the Indian abroad might have been ugly, so often was India's rajdoot, for he hated the sight of a compatriot. 'Gora log' of course were another matter.

It must be clearly understood that the ICS we are talking about had two distinct and separate parts — the English and the Indian. The qualities that are often claimed for the service are perhaps the qualities of the English as a people. For example, the rule of law, a deeply felt sense of justice and fair play and, above all, sympathy for the underdog are qualities embedded in the very bone-marrow of the British. They have them even as butchers and barbers. Their civilisation is based on the rule of law; ours has always revered the rule of men. Is it any wonder, then, that we mourn and worry over the passing of good kings? For protection and justice we have always looked in the end to the supreme ruler. We yearn for Jahangir's golden bell, outside the Red Fort, centuries after his passing. In truth we have a principle of administration as much as the British. If theirs was rule of law, ours is 'jis kee lathi us ki bhains'. Is it any wonder that after 1947 the Indian ICS largely failed to uphold the 'mai-baap' image? So, for that matter, have their successors.

A valid impression about the British was about their great love for the beautiful Indian countryside and the peasants. Their passion for riding and shooting was part of their larger passion for the people of the land. This, again, is not altogether valid about their Indian compatriots. Barring rare birds like K.P.S. Menon who rode to China, the majority preferred the city to the village and bridge to shikar. After independence, they all gravitated to Delhi where they could make their future. They could not produce the Huttons to live for decades in Nagaland. The odd one who might

have lingered on in the mofussil was derided for his lack of foresight or lack of ambition. Our trouble with the tribal people is a major failure of the Indian ICS and their successors. Today the service attitude is even more explicit; those in the districts want to reach the State capital; those in the State secretariat want to get to Delhi and, of course, the Delhi-wallas want to go out to the World Bank.

Perhaps the greatest legend about the ICS is about their scholarship. This is indeed well earned. One salutes John Beames for his grammar of Indian languages, Vincent Smith for his histories, Hutton for his work on the Naga tribes, Archer for his delightful books on Indian miniature paintings — the list of those who contributed to uncovering India's past is indeed long. But what of the Indian contribution? Randhawa? Maybe a couple of others. Who else? It is a bitter truth that only the Englishman — more often than not, a confirmed bachelor — had such esoteric hobbies. The Indian, once in the magic circle of the heaven-born, was well married in a bullish market, had a few children — referred to in all seriousness as the 'baba log' — and settled down to placidly water his front lawn.

Let's face it: the European is a writing animal. Even when he is being boiled by cannibals for their supper, he would as a man of science record his impressions. We are a talking people. We hold forth beautifully over a glass of sherbet or something stronger of an evening. But it is all wafted away by the summer breeze. In this enervating climate, who has the energy to write? While many of the British members of the service have continued to produce worthwhile stuff even after leaving India, their 'desi' friends cannot be accused of any such failing. A few have after retirement hesitantly tried to write autobiographies. But most of these are insipid. The reason is not far to seek. While men like Penderel Moon dared to express unwanted opinions, even when at the peak of their

race of supermen was fostered and deliberately kept up.

In passing this rather harsh judgment on the service, Manohar Singh Gill deals with its work before and after 1947. In a companion article Bulbul Pal examines the causes of the administrative demoralisation that had set in in the country in the wake of Independence.

for Bhagat Singh. They had passed all the tests, and never been guilty of the slightest deviationism. Suddenly they were left forlorn, in an almost hostile and unknown environment. But the British even while leaving had not altogether failed them.

In the name of stability, the status quo was sold to the new rulers. The service was not even screened. On the contrary, absurd guarantees were written into the Constitution — as if, of all the Indians, the most deserving of immediate and total protection were the men who had ruled India. The absurdity of the situation can be judged from the fact that some of them even went to court to claim the pre-independence privilege of 'home leave' to dear old Blighty, with foreign exchange the country could ill afford.

Once the initial danger was past the ICS quickly enscathed itself in the seats of power. The new masters soon found to their chagrin that the service worshipped an obscure god called Status Quo. To pay him ritual homage in proper style, they

had a set of sacred writings that had come down from the hoary past when the white gods first descended on this land. These were called Civil Service Manuals, Treasury Handbooks, Revenue Codes and the like. These scriptures they preserved with the greatest care and, like the Devil, quoted them at the slightest provocation. It was also drummed into the supposed rulers of the land that to break any of these commandments was to invite the wrath of this all-powerful god. Most men quaked at the very sight of the sacred texts. A few, alas, too few — men like Kairon — who tried to challenge the priests and their holy books were broken at the rack of commissions and courts.

The scriptures were marvellous. To their devotees such as the priests and even their acolytes, they gave wealth, power and, above all, total security. There was a sacred text to support every demand. Strangely enough, there was a text to oppose any and every action that government might want to take.

The qualities claimed for the former Indian Civil Service — the rule of law, a sense of justice and fair play, sympathy for the underdog, love for the countryside and pursuit of scholarship — were more British than Indian. No wonder, after Independence, the Brown Burra Sahibs failed on the whole to uphold these values: only the image of a dwindling

ON March 31 this year the last serving member of the Indian Civil Service retired. Perhaps in some way this signified the final passing of the Raj from the centre stage of history. Much has been written about this remarkable group of Mandarins. Most writers would have us believe that they were a race of supermen, a breed apart, a rare species of Albino Brahmins, or maybe the last of the Mohicans. Dedicated administrators, the 'mai-baap' of the people, erudite scholars, great sportsmen and shikaris, the ICS men are often painted as the sort of young men who might have run Plato's Republic.

This is a myth which has been assiduously cultivated by and on behalf of the ICS since Independence. The men who ruled and left India in 1947 are of course full of a sense of romantic nostalgia. Sitting in college cloisters or village pubs in soggy England, they ruminate over the colourful past, of a sun scorched land of wide open plains, and lazy meandering rivers. While the talk around

man is of football and the pools, they cast the mind's eye back to 'Nikal Syne', the Lawrence brothers, the Metcalfes, Hodsons, Edwards and the like. They can hear the hoofbeats and the clash of swords. They can see the justice under the village 'peepul' down to the furrowed face of the petitioner. With each passing day, the glory of the Raj grows for them like an atomic cloud. Phillip Mason's work, 'The Men Who Ruled India', I would put in this category. Most personal memoirs by retired 'koi hats' are also in a similar vein. One would expect them to be.

Within India an equally impressive public relations job was carried on by the brown ICS that remained to serve the new masters. They had been recruited and trained to be pucca sahibs. English ways had been drilled into them. Some had even taken English wives. For years they had been watched for any hint of patriotic tendencies — the wearing of a kurta-dhoti of an evening was for them the same as the throwing of a bomb

# The supermen who failed

# LAST OF THE BURRA SAHIBS

by MANOHAR SINGH GILL



Would you be so good as to favour Government now with your views?

Mr Brown, or whatever his name was, hated disposing of files — a condition not altogether unknown today. But he had an obsession with keeping them neatly stacked on his desk and well dusted. All this he loved to do himself. He would spend hours in his office, pushing a file here, adjusting one there to maintain their perfect symmetry, and dusting them with a fly whisk. When the cold weather came, he would (as was the practice) go into camp for long and continuous tours of his charge. The files went with him. Unfortunately, more often than not, some gusty evening his office tent invariably caught fire and the Commissioner returned to Jullundur furious with the 'bandobast' but with his beloved files gone, or shall we say disposed of?

Another Fletcher favourite was about the Deputy Commissioner who went for the annual tehsil inspection. The tehsildar had some garbar to hide and was most nervous. Tables were laid out in the winter sun. The DC asked for some figures. The tehsildar bent over his vast registers. His fingers moved over the pages with nervous energy, but without success. Out of the corners of his eye, the tehsildar saw that the sahib was not watching him at all. His gaze was fixed somewhere over his bald pate. This agitated him even more. The Sahib Bahadur surely knew about his misdoings. He began to search the pages with renewed frenzy. Suddenly the DC gave the tehsildar a tremendous whack on the head. 'Saab mar gya', shouted the tehsildar, and fell down in a dead faint. The DC merely answered in a cool voice, 'Aap ka sar par makhhi baitha tha'. The Burra Sahib's favourite pastime, it transpired, was the killing of flies! He had not been able to resist the well-fed one, crawling about on the tehsildar's oily top.

If judgement is to be passed on the ICS, it will have to be in two parts — on its work before and after 1947. For its British period, the service can claim peace and tranquillity over the land, a boon still to be cherished when obtainable. Of course, by the same token it cannot but accept some of the blame for the massive partition killings, particularly in Punjab and Bengal. While Mountbatten must take the major blame for the policies and the important administrative decisions, the ICS men must share his guilt, for they were the advisers at his elbow and the executors of his will. In development their name will certainly be associated with the canal irrigation works, the spread of railways and telegraphs. When we think of what the Belgians did in Africa or the Dutch in Indonesia, we must be grateful also for the spread of education. But, above all, they will be remembered for their highly developed sense of justice.

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