

---

Volume Forty 1998

*Essays in History*

Published by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia.

---

## **It's Personal Before It's Political: Ambition and Angst in the Lives of Indian Civil Servants, 1880-1950**

**Nicole Herz**  
**The University of Virginia**

When tracing the origins of India's independence, historians frequently describe economic and cultural developments, emerging political parties, rising castes and classes, and violent episodes that characterized the last century of British rule. While all these social forces were important to the development of nationalism during that period, there existed another dimension of modernizing India that deserves closer examination. Apart from the developing ideologies, devotionalism, and protests of the period were the individual struggles of a burgeoning elite. While certainly the developing ideologies of the Congress, Hinduism, and other movements contributed a great deal to Indian nationalism, a look at individual experiences, in particular those of aspiring Indian civil servants and other members of the new elite, is necessary for a better understanding of how modern India detached itself from its imperial identity.

Scholars have described how a rising professional class formed the core of such organizations as the Congress party and the Arya Samaj in the nineteenth century, but an equally important question is, what were the underlying motivations, emotions, and interests that enabled middle-class Indians to develop a corporate voice in the imperial regime?<sup>1</sup> Using short stories, personal accounts, autobiographies, and scholarly studies, the following essay will analyze how Indian students and civil servants dealt with the problems of working under the Raj. By discovering the personalized nature of educated Indians' ambition and frustrations, I will demonstrate how a certain "individual dimension" contributed to the rise and identity of the nationalist elite, as a force distinct from collective ideology, protest, and organization.

Of course, middle-class nationalism certainly was not the only form of nationalism in India during this period: peasant, tribal, and feminist strands of the movement all contributed to Independence. Because I am interested in exploring a particular, urban identity, however, and because of the professional classes' significant contribution to the intellectual and organizational aspects of nationalism, I have chosen to focus on what may be called middle-class voices within the movement.

Prior to the 1920s, officials administered the competitive Indian Civil Service (ICS) examination exclusively in London. Thus before that time only a handful of ambitious Indian youths could even attempt to endure the social prejudice, financial drain, and language barriers for a chance to enter a subordinate sector of their own country's government. Even before preparing for the competitive examination itself, aspirants were often obliged to make long journeys to an unknown part of the country in order to learn English, the first prerequisite for such a career.<sup>2</sup> Arduous conditions like these scarcely changed even after the opportunity to take the exam in India became possible, except perhaps that more Indians were able to take it, with a little less financial strain.

The forbidding circumstances surrounding Indians' entrance into the Civil Service during this period demonstrated the absurdity of the colonial situation: Indians were obliged to petition for a chance at participating in their own country's administration, if and only if they met the British standard of education, and were deemed morally and physically suitable. The process, even in the abstract, discouraged the most confident of school boys. In order to discover the link between individuals' early experiences and the development of a new elite consciousness, though, the historian ought to look beyond the hegemonic nature of the British system. A closer exploration of Indians' personal motivations and values is necessary.

Examining the complex set of relationships in the typical Indian ICS candidate's life makes any preconception of the "servile" or "collaborative" bureaucrat largely untenable. From the decision to receive a Western-styled education, to the choice of job locale, aspirants were first and foremost concerned with how the ICS could fulfill their personal goals and interests. Admittedly, Max Weber's assertion that a mass bureaucracy was "completely indispensable . . . because it provides the most efficient means of social control" offers some insight into the politics of colonial power.<sup>3</sup> However, a better understanding of the social dynamic at work between young professionals and the imperial system requires a look at the individual candidates themselves. It is true that until 1922, the "open examination" took place only in London, giving British candidates a considerable advantage.<sup>4</sup> It would be mistaken, however, to assume that Indians resented either the required trip to England or the need for temporary residence there.

For many Indian aspirants, the opportunity to travel to London, receive an Oxbridge education, a status enhancing job, and steady income (which in turn enabled them to marry) presented exciting possibilities. Moreover, many Indians were delightfully surprised at the kindness they received while abroad. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, one of the first batch of Indian students to gain admission to Cambridge before the First World War, described the hospitality of a British shopkeeper's family with whom he stayed:

He poured me out a lovely cup of tea, delicious, and when I went to pay for it, he said: 'No, I'm not going to take anything from you. You are my son, my Indian son, a first son from India. . . . They received me with so much warmth, I was actually floored. They were wonderful people.'<sup>5</sup>

The disparity between students' experiences in England and their treatment back in India, however, often caused a rude awakening. Another future civil servant noted that he "found the Englishman in India was so totally different from the Englishman in England," with whom he had been at university.<sup>6</sup> The difference arose from Anglo-Indians' obsessive attempts to maintain authority through social, professional, as well as racial distancing, as will be explained in more detail below.

Youthful ambition sprouted from many different sources, including family pressures, desire for fortune, an imaginative intelligence, or simply village boredom. Most often neither loyalty to the crown, nor the belief in the superiority of Western culture was the original inspiration for individual ambition: more important were the particular desires, talents, and personalities of the individuals themselves, and the benefits that various government jobs offered. A retired Indian officer explained that the British Indian army "was, after all, a mercenary army. The officers and *jawans* were serving in it in order to get a good salary and have a good life."<sup>7</sup> Another alternative was the growing popularity of the legal profession, which historian Zareer Masani has noted "became the most popular career for middle-class Indians who avoided or were rejected by the services."<sup>8</sup> Like soldiers and lawyers, aspiring civil servants saw a professional career as a vehicle of social mobility.

For Indians who found their personal curiosities and talents lay in the study of history, literature, and languages, a life of learning and the "emotions of scholarship" attracted them to the ICS program. Others yearned to put their aptitude for mathematics to use in an economics-related job, or an interest in comparative law and religion into a court clerkship or, one day, magisterial position. Still others must have simply desired to use their "people skills" in one of the many mediatory, interpretive, or clerical positions available in rural as well as urban areas. Taboos against agricultural labor among middle and upper caste Hindus, too, drew young men toward professional careers. Whatever the external factors, the individual himself had to decide in which particular direction he should bring his intellectual strengths and weaknesses. To understand why and how Indian sons endured the rigors and trials of the British-controlled system, then, it is necessary to discover what the candidacy meant in the hearts of the candidates themselves.

A post in the ICS offered upper-caste Indians two compelling prospects: "respectable" employment when "business was seldom a viable alternative for a young man from a 'good family' [i.e. high caste]," and the challenge of serving as a liaison between the British and Indian communities.<sup>9</sup> Indians and Eurasians' desire to bridge the gulf between British and Indian society appears to have been a common motivation, despite Britons' frequently resistant attitude toward such individuals. Harnessing the power of communication was also crucial to the new elite's development of its own modern identity. As Richard Taub explains, positions that enabled civil servants to act as bridges between the British and their fellow countrymen "were important, if stressful, positions, and they saw themselves as contributing. . . to an independent India of the future."<sup>10</sup> Indians' desire to mediate, moreover, did not spring only from professional ambition, but also from a psychological need to reconcile two sides of their personality. Educated children growing up during this period had to integrate the indigenous and Western traditions in their lives. One scholar has explained:

To organize what they had been taught into a coherent framework, they had to define roles which were no longer completely determined by traditional models -- and yet not completely free of the traditional either. Their dilemma focused on the need to incorporate and then accommodate themselves to the demands of two diverse and, on some points, antagonistic cultures.<sup>11</sup>

Personal motivations and ideological pulls thus intertwined as future members of a nationalist elite embarked on public careers. As idealistic Indians experienced repeated demonstrations of disrespect, segregation, and rejection within the Civil Service, military battalions, legal profession, and social clubs, personal resentments gradually transformed into nationalist anger as the century wore on.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, thousands of Indian interpreters, assistants, clerks, lieutenants, teachers, and magistrates continued to express professional enthusiasm throughout this period, reflecting a desire to reconcile one's family traditions with the Western habits and beliefs that they had adopted.

Each Indian candidate thus had his own personal motivations for beginning the process, and brought his own vision of what the future could hold for him as an administrator. Whether he was interested in finance, engineering, languages, or law, the ICS offered the exceptional student one of the few opportunities to fulfill his potential in those areas. Despite the financial barriers and the discriminatory practices of British higher officials, a small population of perseverant Indians managed to use the ICS system to cultivate their own personalities and values. In doing so, they contributed to the autonomy and identity of an emerging elite.

The case of S. K. Kirpalani, a lawyer's son from Hyderabad, illustrates well the emergence of a new elite consciousness during this period. Full of fascinating detail, Kirpalani's memoir describes the waves of discouragement and jubilation he endured as a student in England just after World War One. His first obstacle was not British racism (about which he has much to say), but his own mother, who "absolutely put her foot down" when his elder brother Dhama had expressed the desire to go to

London.<sup>13</sup> In the author's case she relented, albeit after struggles and tears. The road to a career in the civil service often forced a future student to leave home, abandon traditions, and even in some cases accept caste excommunication.<sup>14</sup> Many an ambitious youth found himself, like Kirpalani, caught between his wish to go abroad and his family's conviction that he should stay home and get married. Beginning the process thus required that the student possess an extraordinary sense of purpose and determination, without necessarily understanding all the sacrifices and changes that might occur.

At every stage, the aspirant had to plunge into strange and demanding circumstances without knowing what the results would be. For example, once Kirpalani arrived in England, he described the terrifying amount of material to be mastered and the danger of being distracted by the pleasures of London. Oppressed by the constant barrage of interruptions in his London lodgings, Kirpalani escaped to a lonely widow's cottage in Dorset to cram for the final oral and written exams. His ingenuity and aplomb certainly contradicted the stereotype of the bookish *babu* of the British imagination. On the contrary, it appears that the interplay between Kirpalani's original drive and the inner strength gained by experience only intensified his determination to create his own place within a restrictive system.

Kirpalani's tale is thrilling to read because it highlighted the individual circumstances and anxieties that went into his career. More important than conforming to any Western ideal or living up to his caste's expectations was the joy he took in the challenge itself and the accompanying process. He had to know whether or not he could conquer the strain, and surmount the terrible odds against him. Some scholars have asserted that success on the ICS path "demanded a ready memory uncomplicated by imagination or critical judgment."<sup>15</sup> Kirpalani's tales of his adjustment to life at Oxford, the engagement with his studies, overcoming the awkwardness of his first few posts, and confronting the challenges of frontier politics, on the contrary, indicate that a great deal of savvy and imagination were necessary for success. After taking the exams, Kirpalani's reaction to the notice in the *Times* that he had passed ("I collapsed completely. I burst out in uncontrollable tears.") showed that for him the ICS was more about personal excellence, or victory, than subscription to British imperial ideology.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, the flip side of such accomplishments was the sharpness of academic defeat when students failed their exams. Akin to the intense feelings of apprehension, anticipation, and joy that Kirpalani described was the damaging sense of shame that often overcame "B. A. Failed" Indians.<sup>17</sup> The combination of pressures from British examiners who often expected you to fail and family members who often expected you to succeed thus shadowed the path of even the most successful candidates.

Kirpalani's memoir went into detail about the abuses he suffered from the British, events that contributed to his individualistic philosophy of service, and how his involvement in the nationalist movement helped shape his career. The force behind Kirpalani's early ambitions, however, was his innate desire for broad experience and the sense of achievement gained by using his talents. The reader is not surprised, therefore, to learn that after serving in the Ministry of Refugee Relief during and after Partition, Kirpalani took posts outside India in New York, Canada, and the U.N., before retiring in Pennsylvania. He was a man following the dictates of his own adventurous intellect, bound by neither imperial nor national programs. Nevertheless, the same qualities that drove Kirpalani to forge his own career path made him passionate about promoting provincial autonomy, and eventually aiding Jawaharlal Nehru's All-India National Planning Committee, which created "a blueprint of economic development" for an independent India.<sup>18</sup>

Gradually, the interests of Indians with administrative influence began to merge with the broader nationalist project as propagated by Gandhi and Nehru during this period. The vital idea here, though, is the force of *individuals'* sense of independence that preceded Independence: before Nehru, Gandhi, or the Indian National Congress could accomplish a national program, the Indians who had a stake in the country's economic, administrative, and political workings had to develop their own idea of who they were, and what their new social role would be. Having completed the personal journey, India's future leaders had the inner resources with which to imagine a new nation.

A later case offers a fruitful comparison. In *Reflections On An Era*, S. Bhoothalingam revealed a great deal about his relationship to both pre-and post-Independence administration. His work in the National Council of Applied Economic Research, and his service as an interpreter of both Russian and French during his years in New Delhi, allowed him to put to use his intellectual talents during a career that spanned forty years.

Early on in Bhoothalingam's autobiography the author presented the reasoning behind his choice of province for service, which revealed the sense of personal autonomy that governed his career path. Deliberating between North and South, he mused that Madras was a sort of Indian "sub-universe" where opportunities were diverse and the culture distinctive. Then he remembered that "historically, the South had been the real battlefield leading to British rule. The North came later; the foundations were laid in the South."<sup>19</sup> Bhoothalingam's reasoning revealed his attraction to the vibrant, contested nature of life and politics in Madras. Thereafter, he devoted most of his book to describing the personal fulfillment he experienced as a vital member of several village communities, mediator between Hindus and Muslims, and his administrative autonomy, particularly during the war years. The main themes that ran throughout the autobiography included his determination to seek out the challenges that most intrigued him and his passion for meeting energetic people -- an array that included John Keynes, H. M. Patel, and Indira Gandhi among many others.

As is natural to an autobiography, Bhoothalingam's descriptions of his career were somewhat self-serving. He continually eschewed the easy route, his marriage appeared perfect, his politics correct. Nevertheless, his responses to everyday challenges and the shifts in a complicated hierarchy manifested how his personal values governed his career decision-making. Working in Kurnool as a new officer, for example, Bhoothalingam remembered that by that time,

my language [knowledge] was better. Wherever I went I could communicate freely in reasonably good Telugu. I won't say I spoke very well or with an acceptable accent. But I got by quite well.<sup>20</sup>

His description emphasized his personal development, his pride in playing the role of village mediator, and the increasing influence he enjoyed as his personal skills improved. Rarely does Bhoothalingam discuss the imperial context of his professional rise, but instead focuses on his personal involvement in the particular economic and social projects that came his way.

As with S. K. Kirpalani, Bhoothalingam's first priority in relating his years in the ICS was to show how an administrative career was first and foremost a tool with which he achieved his own self-fulfillment. The personal drive and eager adventurousness that dominated his career choices remained constant before and after Independence. One should not diminish the importance of his Western influences (e. g. his Cambridge education) or Nehru's charismatic influence on the author. However, Bhoothalingam's personal identity (e. g. a love of finance, solving problems, and family), not ideology, determined his relationship to the civil service and the nation. Bhoothalingam did not choose an administrative career in order to serve either Britain or India. He chose it because in his eyes it offered him the greatest possibility for travel, a secure household, stimulating work, and a diverse array of friends. His autobiography celebrated the success with which he achieved those

personal goals. Over the course of four decades, Bhoothalingam's struggle to resolve various difficult and awkward situations, whether involving communal conflict, peasant unrest, or wartime administration, reflected a broader trend of professional Indians developing a sense of authority over the country's social, political, and financial destiny. In the village or urban context, as administrators, as well as lawyers, academics, and financiers, a generation of educated Indians developed the confidence and expertise with which to claim a nation.

Although the joy of personal challenge for Indian candidates outweighed the injustices of the system, the psychological and social strain of a career in the ICS could be truly remarkable. Lack of encouragement from the British community, as well as the resentment expressed by various Indian social groups, generated a sense of anguish perhaps unique to the Indian ICS official. The remainder of this essay will use examples from imperial records and modern Indian literature to demonstrate how middle-class professional Indians suffered from both British and Indian prejudice, and in some cases created their own psychological isolation.

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, many British candidates and officials bitterly resented the increased Indianization of the civil service. Officials who led the rear guard action against expanding Indians' access to government posts saw it as "a further encroachment on the security and prestige" of the *Raj*.<sup>21</sup> In the 1870's, discontent over Lord Lytton's plan for employment of Indians in higher positions forced the Viceroy to eliminate the proposal from his agenda. Likewise the controversies surrounding the Ilbert Bill and Lord Ripon's reforms were examples of fierce protest against Indians gaining civil authority.<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Ballhatchet has observed that any incursion into British space during this period, professional or social, was perceived as a threat to Britons' racial identity and (therefore) authority.<sup>23</sup> One British finance minister of the period was convinced, for example, the participation of the "Bengali Baboo" could only subvert the British empire.<sup>24</sup> Despite intensified Indianization efforts, especially after World War One, such an attitude remained largely unchanged. Resentment at being employed under an Indian, for example, prompted hostile agitation, culminating in a sharp decline in the numbers of new European recruits in the 1930's.<sup>25</sup> It became clear to Indian youth throughout this period, therefore, that whatever rewards the ICS promised, a British welcome was not one of them.

Another aspect of the Indian official's plight was the professional "glass ceiling." Though the term may be anachronistic, it nevertheless describes the deliberate design of the ICS to keep Indians away from decision-making positions. The railway, post, and telegraph positions open to Indians (and in particular Eurasians), for example, were calculated to keep educated Indians away from political responsibilities. B. K. Nagla has noted that such posts often generated "new hopes and aspirations" which often led to disappointment.<sup>26</sup> Likewise Judith Walsh has observed that the "first rush of enthusiasm for Westernization faded later in the nineteenth century with the growing awareness of the degree to which its promises would remain unfulfilled.<sup>27</sup> As Indians realized the reserved posts were part of an intricate strategy for controlling "potentially disruptive or subversive" urban elements, their disillusionment increased.<sup>28</sup> British officials' establishment of "horizontally layered" (i.e. subordinate) civil service sectors within the main hierarchy, the enforcement of a complex (though not always explicit) set of rules for both candidates and officials, and the centralization of policy-making completed the strategy so that Indian civil servants found themselves barred from promotion to higher posts until the last decade of British rule.

"Special departments" such as Accounts, Jails, and Registration, in addition to the transport and communications posts, threatened to lead Indians into dead-end positions within the ICS. The creation of unofficial (but highly useful) "consultation positions" in the mid and late nineteenth century also

enabled the British to involve and at the same time subordinate talented Indians. However, Indians' continued pursuit of careers in the civil service did not mean that such discriminatory practices went unnoticed. M. N. Srinivas has observed that the "failure to admit educated Indians to the higher ranks of the administration and the army. . . provided an added impetus to the nationalist movement" during this period.<sup>29</sup> Likewise the lower pay, separate mess facilities, exclusion from entertainment, and general disrespect of British military officers towards Indian soldiers and sailors helped spur mutinies in 1857 and 1946.<sup>30</sup> Instances of personal frustration during this period, whether in military or civil services, thus reveals an acutely individual dimension to the rise of anti-imperial sentiment.

Often it appeared as though the more middle class Indians achieved British cultural and educational standards, the more adamantly the British community claimed its racial superiority. Rabindranath Tagore's despairing clerk in his 1891 short story "The Postmaster," for example, demonstrated how even the most cosmopolitan Calcuttan felt diminished by the indifference of the bureaucratic hierarchy. Shuffled about from post to post, civil servants like Tagore's postmaster struggled to find meaning in a system that denied them respect or even purpose. The postmaster "felt in need of comfort, ill and miserable as he was, in this isolated place."<sup>31</sup> Cursed by feelings of idleness and melancholy, Tagore's clerk revealed how the threat of despair hovered over such positions during the colonial period. The postmaster's own indifference toward a devoted servant girl, too, showed how modern life could lead to spiritual emptiness. In this way Tagore illustrated the tension between "inner" happiness and "outer" success, a dichotomy that became an important aspect of nationalist sentiment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as intellectuals began emphasizing the materialistic nature of the imperial regime.<sup>32</sup>

Tagore's story hinted at the peculiar sense of oppression that professional Indians experienced during this period. British officials claimed to acknowledge talented Indians through employment (had not Indianization progressed throughout the century?), but they could not give up the sense of inherent superiority that shadowed the partnership. As Kenneth Ballhatchett has explained, the English "gentlemanly" ideal intensified and became racially exclusive in the imperial setting, reinforcing British chauvinism.<sup>33</sup> If Indian civil servants attempted to live up to the gentlemanly ideal, bigoted Britons often rebuffed their efforts, or mocked them as "babus." Indians fell into a cultural trap, so that if they failed to become Westernized they were considered "savage," and if they did imitate Western mannerisms they provoked resentment or condescension.<sup>34</sup> To Indian administrators, barristers, soldiers, and clerks in the field, it became apparent that maintaining racial distance was more important to their British superiors than "converting" Indians to Western norms.

British officials' contrast between their own "efficiency" and Indians' supposed incompetence was one way they enhanced the racial dichotomy. The efficiency of British officers became a "racist desideratum" for the exclusion of Indians who were branded inept, "no matter how they might perform in the competitive examinations or in their university studies."<sup>35</sup> Similarly, as recruitment began filtering down through Indian society, it was thought that "masses of incompetent students who were drifting into universities" endangered the efficiency of the British-run ICS.<sup>36</sup> Surveyors accused Indian students of "cramming" rather than studying (i.e. learning thoroughly) for exams. A column in the *Madras Daily Times*, for example, commented that Indian students "did not know how to behave among gentlemen; they were crammed with book knowledge, but they could not read a page of nature and make good use of their knowledge."<sup>37</sup> Moreover, perceptions that Indian students were more likely to cheat on exams, or that Indian civil servants were more prone to corruption, dogged Indian bureaucrats in various spheres. One student remembered that "the Englishman could afford to relax because if things went wrong they managed to explain it to each other. . . ." If on the other hand an

Indian was caught in a mistake, the student continued, he was accused of incompetence, dishonesty, or stupidity.<sup>38</sup> An ideological trap thus ensnared educated Indians, so that they retained a kind of permanent probationary status long after their Oxbridge days.

The writings of British officials, too, revealed how ICS ideology preserved the imperial racial hierarchy even as the number of Indian recruits increased. Although officials expected Indians to accomplish the same rigorous program as their British competitors, they maintained the belief that Indians could never reach an equal status. Commenting on the age-related reforms during this period, for example, a civil service historian asserted that while

the increased age gives the native a better opportunity to come to England for his education, it is also true that the Asiatic develops young, and the older the age of the competition, the less his chance of success against the Englishman.<sup>39</sup>

One wonders how the writer arrived at such a curious conclusion. Whatever the foundation for his belief, his faith in British superiority despite the uniform standards within the ICS assumed an almost religious tone. As more and more middle class Indians received a Western education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the British could no longer claim authority on the grounds of superior knowledge. In order to maintain dominance over the administrative hierarchy, therefore, they resorted to arguments of inherent racial superiority. British officials thus gave Indian ICS workers the training to govern India, and yet rarely encouraged them to feel competent in doing so.

The ubiquity of British mistrust placed educated Indians in a state of limbo, psychologically and socially. To illustrate, Judith Walsh has observed that the negative images of what it meant to be Indian within the imperial system "became catalysts for intense confusion, ambivalence, and self-hate."<sup>40</sup> Civil servants' university educations had exposed them to a Liberal ideal, and yet in practice Indians were led to assume a "naturally" inferior status. In Lowell's discussion of the "Method of Recruiting Native Officials," for example, the author insisted that "all the governments of India" as well as the indigenous population were of the opinion that "the natives were not equal to Englishmen as administrators; and that their substitution would not be popular with the mass of people in India."<sup>41</sup> The so-called open examination led Indians to believe they had a chance of proving themselves, but British officers' disdain for non-British trainees discouraged them from fulfilling their potential.

Another British official believed that a child-like irresponsibility in Indians necessitated withholding authority: "If one cannot trust subordinates to make decisions, one must then see to it that they make not decisions of consequence," he asserted.<sup>42</sup> Did such officials believe educated Indians would not sense and resent such an attitude? Upper-caste Indians, in particular, resented the stinginess with which British officials delegated responsibility, and the racial mistrust that pervaded their actions. A future Indian politician, for example, "couldn't stand [that attitude] from people who were definitely not the sort of person that you'd invite to dinner."<sup>43</sup> Moreover, professional mistrust spilled over into the social sphere, where Britons often perceived Indians as a sexual threat to their wives.<sup>44</sup> A combination of such "slights," played out in academic, professional and social arenas throughout the century, amounted to individual, and eventually corporate and national, fury.

Higher officials' pride in their supposedly intimate knowledge of the "Indian character" was often as manifest as their faith in British superiority. Like Lowell's history, the written account of R. D. Macleod, a civil servant in the United Provinces from 1910 to 1934, also demonstrated the racial sense of authority among British officials. "I would venture to say," he wrote confidently in 1938, that "no European is in a better position to become intimately acquainted with the Indian people and their



doings [than I]."45 He described how Indians could obey orders but failed to take the initiative in situations that called for quick action. He never considered, however, that the Indian official perhaps had greater cause for caution than his British colleagues, in professional as well as domestic situations.

Perhaps Macleod's most interesting statement concerned his own feelings of isolation as a Briton in the Indian countryside: "Yes," he confirmed, "Europeans in India are exiles -- voluntary exiles if you like, but none the less exiles and strangers in a strange land."46 The irony of Macleod's melancholy view was that it described the lives of Indian ICS workers just as well. Indians who worked under the *Raj* were also in a sense exiled: from authority over their own government, from their first languages, and often their home communities. In order to succeed Indians had to recreate themselves and their sense of community in an environment that was at once hostile and isolating. A circumstance that, ironically, Britons felt as well, whether from the reverse snobbery of upper caste Indians or the resentment among revenue paying peasants. The result, for officials like Macleod, was the creation of "spacious compounds of several acres" where British families sheltered themselves in well-tended gardens and tidy drawing rooms -- made comfortable by *punkah*-pullers and kitchen staff.47 Though treatment toward servants certainly differed from that toward professionals, the racial exclusiveness of the Anglo-Indian community affected both classes. As Zareer Masani has pointed out, "feelings of discrimination made every Indian, however non-political, a potential nationalist."48 The frequency of individual frustration, professional disrespect, and daily "slights" in both urban and rural environments had just as much power to generate anti-imperial feeling among educated Indians as the regional clubs, associations, and *samaj* that sprung up in the mid and late nineteenth century.

The above examples of British attitudes also go to show the depth of individuals' sense of perseverance. Despite the possible language barrier, the herculean training program, the probationary status after passing the exam, the dead-end departmental subdivisions, loneliness, and the racist milieu, India's talented youth took their chances in civil careers. Whether it was an interest in scholarship or finance, an urban sensibility, a desire to travel, or a quest for status, Indian candidates embodied the unique combination of energy and struggle that fueled middle-class nationalism in the twentieth century. The strained relationship between Indian candidates and their British commanders, however, was not the only source of struggle that the new elite encountered during this period.

Hostility from Indian communities, too, made the ICS path a treacherous one. A short story written by Sharat Chandra Chatterji in the early twentieth century demonstrates the antagonism between villagers and the sons who left them behind. The story, "Natunda, Babu," depicts a city bureaucrat's visit to his cousins' village (whether or not it is his home town is not clear). Far from a sympathetic character, Natunda offends his relatives with his arrogance, demands, and lack of courtesy throughout the story. The narrator describes him as "in the prime of *babuhood*, complete with silk socks, shiny pumps, overcoat from top to toe, muffler, gloves and hat; he was taking no chances with the cold west wind."49 By making Natunda the object of ridicule, Chatterji revealed how an individual's career path could evoke a negative reaction among peers. Natunda's adopted Western ways are certainly an important subject of scorn in the story. However, his success in the outer (i.e. imperial) sphere lies at the heart of the village boys' hostility. Though deferential to Natunda, the boys resent his superior airs and demands. The new bureaucrat returns to the village expecting the locals to treat him like a prince. He also endangers his friends by demanding to go down the river in dangerous conditions. Chatterji thus showed how the enhanced status of the bureaucrat led him to think that the others were obliged to do his bidding. By presenting the perspective of the rural community, the author illuminated the bitter severance between the individual and those people he left behind.

Outside the domain of fiction, sociological surveys of people's attitudes toward bureaucrats frequently revealed hostility, before and after Independence. Civil servants "remained absolutely aloof from the people" one Indian claimed. "Just because a chap is an IAS officer," another observed in the 1960's, "he thinks he is an elite and he acts like it."<sup>50</sup> Though such attitudes were not universal, they showed that mixed feelings about the civil servant outlived British rule. They also show how the individual and the community were in danger of alienating each other during the course of modern administration's development -- the bureaucrat resentful of the people's lack of cooperation and disrespect, and the community suspecting the bureaucrat of dishonesty or insensitivity. Conflicting loyalties, contempt, as well as guilt were all feelings that went into the development of the new elite's attitudes during this period.

The Indian aristocracy, as well as militant nationalists, also voiced resentment at the new administrative elite. As B. B. Misra explains, members of the new middle class had moved into the social space "which the aristocracy was being obliged to gradually vacate."<sup>51</sup> True, the Indian aristocracy continued to find favor with the British as landlords, but in administration, the learned professions, and commercial enterprise, the new, educated classes would lead Indian modernization. That struggle for power led to a battle between Congressional and princely interests in the 1930's. As the Congress gradually emerged as "an alternative *Raj*," the zamindar class (i.e. the traditional, landed elite) could no longer rely on British enforcement of traditional authority. The rise of the educated elite "boded ill for the peaceful inclusion of the princes in free India," Judith Brown has observed, making nationalism a divisive force.<sup>52</sup> As educated Indians gravitated from the ICS to Congress and its adjuncts, the aristocracy resented more and more the erosion of a traditional social hierarchy. Such class conflict continued to mount in the twentieth century, as tension between urban and agricultural interests intensified.

Antagonism dogged the ICS candidate in the other direction as well. By the 1930's, many nationalists and social critics saw "service to the colonial ruler" as akin to treason.<sup>53</sup> In the army, too, straying from the tightly-knit community of Indian soldiers in order to mix with British officers was seen as a betrayal.<sup>54</sup> Not only was it becoming taboo for educated youth to support British authority (Gandhi's non-cooperation movement had brought disobedience into the mainstream), but civil servants were increasingly the objects of ridicule. Bibhuti Banerji's 1937 short story, "Bravo To The Boss," manifested that development. The tale revolves around a village trader's guilt at keeping an extra thousand rupees mistakenly given to him by a city clerk. The clerk who was responsible for the snafu, though not an official civil servant, nevertheless possesses the same delusional self-importance that characterized bureaucrats' reputations. The missing rupees have a humbling effect on both the trader, whose marriage suffers from the dilemma, and the clerk, whose office staff becomes frantic when it discovers the mistake. Whereas the trader learns his lesson, however, the clerk takes the opportunity to brag to his coworkers. He reports that the poor fellow "was really frightened when he handed over the money. . . . When he stepped in here, he had no idea of what he was letting himself in for."<sup>55</sup> As in "Natunda, Babu," the author mocked the urban underling by exposing his basically weak character. The crucial difference between the two stories was that the later tale portrayed the bureaucrat as a mere "cog in the machine." Mocked for their arrogance before the 1930's (as in "Natunda, Babu"), bureaucrats were more likely to be depicted as harried, essentially powerless "toadies" as Independence approached.

In addition to hostility from the aristocracy, as well as radical nationalists, Indian civil servants provoked resentment from the lower castes and Muslims. Since the benefits of higher education remained confined to the higher castes, so-called open competition enabled them alone to retain a monopoly of employment opportunities, at least until the 1930's.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, antipathies and frustrations

generated among those who had access to the new education and those who did not played an important role in the rise of nationalist sentiment, albeit secondary to the more general anti-British feeling that developed at this time. Consciousness-building groups like the Muslim League (established in 1906) and "untouchable" communities like the *Ezhavas* and *Satnamis* began demanding their share of educational and professional opportunities. As anti-elitist organizations, they made their own place in the emerging nationalist movement, and demonstrated that educated Indians could be the perpetrators as well as the victims of discrimination.

The impassioned writings of the low-caste activist B .R. Ambedkar during this period, for example, demonstrated non-elites' increasing sense of injustice. Ambedkar condemned the high-caste monopoly of power in India, and in fact wished for the annihilation of the entire caste system. Social subdivisions, he wrote, are "quite natural. But the unnatural thing about these [caste-based] subdivisions is that they have lost the open door character of the class system. . . . SOME CLOSED THE DOOR: OTHERS FOUND IT CLOSED AGAINST THEM," he thundered.<sup>57</sup> His pamphlets expressed the belief that high-caste Hindus had prevented the lower castes from rising to a higher cultural level, and he denied the educated elite's right to govern India. "Are you fit for political power," he asked, "even though you do not allow a large class of your own countrymen like the untouchables to use public school?"<sup>58</sup> A low-caste Hindu, Ambedkar was himself a remarkable example of perseverance and talent. He received the benefits of education in Bombay, London, and New York, eventually becoming a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council and founder of several technical schools and colleges for untouchables. His career demonstrated that personal ambition and determination were not exclusive to the professional higher castes during this period. Moreover, Ambedkar's protests revealed that the new elite's single-mindedness, so important to their professional success, also had the unpleasant effect of knocking other groups off the the rungs of power and opportunity.

Growing resentment at high-caste professional monopolies intensified as Independence neared. Movements like the Justice party and the Mahad conference, as well as lower-caste professional networks in central and southern India, all worked to find employment for individuals, raise the status of untouchables, and give them a political voice. Ambedkar and his followers claimed that the new elite lacked the courage to promote reform, and accused bureaucrats of sacrificing the rights of the majority in order to enhance their own status. The protests of Ambedkar and his followers thus revealed that a "dark side" of Indian individualism during this period generated inter-caste conflict. Personal drive and the desire for challenging work enabled Indians to endure the rigors of the British education system and the bureaucratic hierarchy, but it also led to the selfishness and discrimination of a new elite whose own progress appeared to be its only concern.

For better or for worse, the egoistic drive of individuals in the new elite enabled them to build a powerful class momentum during the last hundred years of British rule. However, the increase in their numbers created its own set of obstacles. Even for those who passed their examinations, for example, the problem of unemployment arose early in the twentieth century. Thousands of degreed Indians flooded the job market in cities like Calcutta, so that even access to the poorer-paid, lower echelons of the bureaucracy became fiercely competitive.<sup>59</sup> The quest for good employment, Bradford Spangenberg has explained, "fostered a spirit of keen competition and even bitter rivalry among civilians, pitting individual against individual and group against group."<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, the struggle to find a position in the hierarchy "was so arduous, relentless, and enervating that the final achievement often seemed hollow or devoid of its anticipated glamour."<sup>61</sup> The narrator in another of Tagore's short stories expresses such frustration perfectly: "I wanted to be Garibaldi -- and all I had become was assistant master in a village school!" he cries.<sup>62</sup> His sentiment shows the discrepancy between bright individuals' dreams and the banal jobs that often awaited them, if they were lucky.

Sons who had failed to make their way in the bureaucracy often had no choice but to return home, which in turn aggravated the "progressive subinfeudation and fragmentation of land" in the villages.<sup>63</sup> Such deconsolidation produced "a lower middle class of half-educated unemployed youths with no means to support the prestige their ancestors had enjoyed."<sup>64</sup> This group of youthful discontents formed a swelling pool of potential recruits for nationalist and communal (and sometimes violent) agitation. Western-educated terrorists in Poona in the 1890's and student unrest during the Quit India Movement, to name but two examples, showed that individuals' frustrations could channel into large-scale reactions.<sup>65</sup> Disappointment with or failure to find a position led educated Indians to find other outlets for their talent and energies, or at least strike back at a system that had no room for them.

Tagore's despairing clerk in his 1892 story, "A Single Night" captured the multidimensional anguish of the shuffled bureaucrat perfectly. First the narrator follows the example of a neighbor's son by running away to Calcutta to study, leaving behind his childhood love, Surabala. In Calcutta he joins a student society, proclaiming himself ready to rebel under orders -- an enthusiasm that only betrays his "rural naïvety" to the others.<sup>66</sup> Not only has he risked estranging his family and Surabala, he has also thrown himself into an unsure job market and an alien urban community, without having any idea how he would be received. The strain of having to balance his developing nationalist bravado with his determination to qualify for a civil position is both formidable and comic. Finally, the demands of the program make it impossible to keep in touch with Surabala. His father's death forces him to quit school anyway, and when he returns home he finds that Surabala has married another man.

In just a few pages, Tagore thus exposed a web of anxiety and alienation that threatened new civil servants: the young man risks his parents' love and his own security by running away; he sacrifices the chance for love, and finds himself torn between the ICS hierarchy and the budding nationalist movement, neither of which particularly value him. The title of the story, "A Single Night," refers to its resolution, in which the protagonist spends one last night with Surabala after returning home. An action that, while temporarily relieving his feelings of "triviality," adds to his plight by endangering both of their reputations. Though Tagore's civil servant harbors familial, professional, and national concerns, clearly his sense of personal autonomy directs his actions throughout the story.

The "single night" represents the individual passion that drove the protagonist, and Indians in his situation, to accept such a fragmented identity. The tribulations of Indian ICS candidates came from many directions: the imperial regime, village and caste communities, and within themselves. Although one ought not pity this small, relatively privileged segment of Indian society, the multiplicity of obstacles that Indian civil servants encountered before Independence was undeniably formidable. The desire to discover and use one's own talents, the ability to adapt oneself to new circumstances, and sheer perseverance were qualities that gave the professional class, of which civil servants formed a part, the strength and momentum with which to assume leadership during the nationalist movement. Those qualities also drew sharp criticisms from groups that were excluded from administrative and academic positions. A mixture of self-assurance, egotism, and despair thus all went into the developing identity of India's modern elite. The bitterness that British racism produced, in addition to the tension between Indian castes and classes, in turn further energized the nationalist movement. More than a lesson about the evils of colonialism, the individual experiences of students, Indian civil servants, and others in that professional class reveal the powerful feelings of fear and desire, expectancy and impatience, that went into India's movement toward Independence.

---

## Notes

- [1] Standard histories of modern India that trace the development of the elite include C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, vol. 2 in *The New Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge, 1988), Judith Brown, *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy* (New York, 1988), and Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India* (New York, 1977).
- [2] Judith E. Walsh, *Growing Up in British India* (New York, 1983), 39.
- [3] Quoted from Weber's essay, "The Theory of Social and Economic Organizations" in B. K. Nagla, ed. *Development and Transformation. Themes and Variations in Indian Society* (Jaipur, 1993), 293-294.
- [4] Nearly a century before the 1922 measure, the East India Company's charter that had provided that "neither religion, birthplace, descent or colour should be a bar to official employment" did little to actually increase opportunities for Indians. See Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj* (London, 1980), 99.
- [5] Quoted in Zareer Masani, *Indian Tales of the Raj* (Berkeley, 1987), 56.
- [6] Masani, *Indian Tales of the Raj*, 57.
- [7] Quoted from Tony Bhagat, a retired Brigadier, in Masani, *Indian Tales of the Raj*, 23.
- [8] Masani, *Indian Tales of the Raj*, 22.
- [9] Richard P. Taub, *Bureaucrats Under Stress: Administrators and Administration in an Indian State* (Berkeley, 1969), 10-12.
- [10] Taub, *Bureaucrats Under Stress...*, 12.
- [11] Walsh, *Growing Up in British India*, 52.
- [12] See the accounts of prejudice in professional and social situations in Masani, *Indian Tales of the Raj*, and the tension between traditional and professional life in M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Berkeley, 1966). The connection between personal frustration and burgeoning nationalism is well-illustrated in Subhas Bose's autobiography, *An Indian Pilgrim: An Unfinished Autobiography and Collected Letters, 1897-1921*, ed. and trans. by Sisir Kumar Bose (Calcutta, 1965).
- [13] S. K. Kirpalani, *Fifty Years With the British* (Bombay, 1993), 10.
- [14] Walsh, *Growing Up in British India*, 8.
- [15] Walsh, *Growing Up in British India*, 4.
- [16] Kirpalani, *Fifty Years With the British*, 76. A glance at the regulation curriculum for the ICS candidate enhances Kirpalani's story: Knowledge required for the examination included English composition, Sanskrit, Arabic, Greek, Latin, English literature and history, German language and literature, mathematics, advanced math, natural science, chemistry, physics, geology, botany, zoology, Greek and Roman history and law, general modern history, logic, philosophy, political economy,

economic history, political science, English law, an option in Hindu and Muslim law, in addition to riding. See the appendix in Abbott L. Lowell's *Colonial Civil Service: Selection and Training of Colonial Officials in England, Holland, and France* (New York, 1900).

[17] Walsh, *Growing Up in British India*, 49.

[18] Kirpalani, *Fifty Years With the British*, 236-237. Nehru's committee was established in 1938.

[19] S. Bhoothalingam, *Reflections on an Era: Memoirs of a Civil Servant* (Delhi, 1993), 6.

[20] Bhoothalingam, *Reflections On An Era....*,10.

[21] Bradford Spangenberg, *British Bureaucracy in India: Status, Policy and the ICS in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Delhi, 1976), 270.

[22] The Ilbert bill, introduced in 1883, ensured that all Anglo-Indians would be tried exclusively by European magistrates. Lord Ripon, the British viceroy in the 1880's, provoked conservative reaction in the ICS by proposing the expansion of local elective bodies.

[23] Ballhatchett, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj*, 2, 4, 121, and 164.

[24] Quoted in Judith Brown, *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy* (Oxford, 1994), 133.

[25] B. B. Misra, *The Bureaucracy In India: An Historical Analysis of Development Up To 1947* (Delhi, 1977), 244.

[26] B. K. Nagla, ed., *Development and Transformation: Themes and Variations in Indian Society* (Jaipur, 1993), 300.

[27] Walsh, *Growing Up in British India*, 68.

[28] Taub, *Bureaucrats Under Stress....*,153.

[29] M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Berkeley, 1966), 85.

[30] Masani, *Indian Tales of the Raj*, 31.

[31] Rabindranath Tagore, "The Postmaster," *Selected Short Stories* (London, 1991), 44.

[32] For an analysis of the ideological development of the "inner" and "outer" spheres in Indian life, see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, 1993).

[33] Ballhatchett, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj*, 121.

[34] Perhaps most interesting are the paternalistic views of the many *unbigoted* British officials during this period. Indian clerks or police suspected of stealing were described as "only human," for example, and the Northern "fighting castes" were praised for their "staunch reliability." See Evan Maconochie, *Life in the Indian Civil Service* (London, 1926), 43 and 238.

- [35] Spangenberg, *British Bureaucracy in India...*, 347.
- [36] Misra, *The Bureaucracy in India...*, 280.
- [37] Quoted from an 1859 editorial in Ballhatchett, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj*, 101.
- [38] Quoted in Judith Walsh, *Growing Up in British India*, 123. See also the analysis of bureaucrats' reputation in modern India in Taub, *Bureaucrats Under Stress...*, ch. 6.
- [39] Abbott L. Lowell, *Colonial Civil Service...*, 43.
- [40] Walsh, *Growing Up in British India*, 116.
- [41] Lowell, *Colonial Civil Service...*, 59.
- [42] Quoted in Taub, *Bureaucrats Under Stress...*, 157.
- [43] See the anecdote of Rashid Ali Baig's widow in Masani, *Indian Tales of the Raj*, 26.
- [44] For discussions of paranoia about Indian men as "would-be rapists and seducers," see Masani, *Indian Tales of the Raj*, 54-55, and also George Orwell's acid novel, *Burmese Days* (London, 1934), and E. M. Forster, *A Passage To India* (London, 1924), whose plot centers around such misplaced paranoia in an Anglo-Indian community.
- [45] R. D. Macleod, *Impressions of an Indian Civil Servant* (London, 1938), 7.
- [46] Macleod, *Impressions of an Indian Civil Servant*, 135.
- [47] Macleod, *Impressions of an Indian Civil Servant*, 121. The entire chapter entitled "The European's House and Household" provides a fascinating description of the different Indian servants that he employed. Whether sweeper, valet, gardener, groom, cook, driver, or watchman, most Indian household servants worked for tiny wages and lived in cramped quarters separate from the house.
- [48] Zareer Masani, *Indian Tales of the Raj*, 70.
- [49] Sharat Chandra Chatterji, "Natunda, Babu" in Dutta and Robinson, eds., *Noon In Calcutta: Short Stories From Bengal* (New Delhi, 1992), 13.
- [50] Taub, *Bureaucrats Under Stress...*, 133
- [51] Misra, *The Bureaucracy in India...*, 314.
- [52] Brown, *Modern India*, 295.
- [53] Taub, *Bureaucrats Under Stress...*, 12.
- [54] See the anecdote of the retired Indian general "Monty" Palit in Masani, *Indian Tales of the Raj*, 25.
- [55] Bibhuti Bhushan Banjeri, "Bravo To The Boss" in Dutta et al, 121.

[56] Misra, *The Bureaucracy in India*...,320.

[57] B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste, with a reply to Mahatma Gandhi*. . . (Jullundur City, 1968), 153. The capitalization is his.

[58] Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*..., 25.

[59] Brown, *Modern India*,128.

[60] Spangenberg, *British Bureaucracy in India*..., 257.

[61] Spangenberg, *British Bureaucracy in India*..., 257.

[62] Tagore, "A Single Night," *Selected Short Stories*, 96.

[63] Misra, *The Bureaucracy in India*, 319.

[64] Misra, *The Bureaucracy in India*, 319.

[65] Brown, *Modern India*, 178 and 320.

[66] Tagore,*Selected Short Stories*,93. New civil servants' shame at not possessing the sophistication of their urban peers was a common anxiety. See Nirad Chaudhuri's account in Walsh, *Growing Up in British India*, 106.