

A Farewell to Arms

A former IAS officer looks back with mixed emotions at a career in the civil service that spanned the divide between two centuries.

ALOK SHEEL

On 31 May 2016, after having served a little over a third of a century, I superannuated from the Indian civil service.

Like most retirees, I go with mixed emotions: a little trepidation from the unfamiliar going forward, but also with a sense of liberation, indeed of manumission, although I can never say that I was slave-driven by any other than myself.

My career in the civil service spanned, in almost equal measure, the divide between two centuries, and also two millennia. I cannot help but look back at my career through three completely different time horizons. First, over the short term, do I leave behind a better place than what I found at the outset of my career? Second, over the medium term, is my country better placed at the beginning of the current century than what it was in the opening years of the last? And finally, over the *longue durée*, what are the broad brush continuities and changes over the past millennium?

Let me attempt to move from the very long term to the short and immediate.

A thousand years ago, Europe, destined to one day fundamentally reshape the world, was in the Dark Ages. It barely survived the Islamic and Mongol invasions, and stood unmoored from its classical heritage. India's classical civilisation too succumbed to the seemingly unstoppable Islamic surge, even as the other great classical civilisation of the East, China, escaped. Islam succeeded not because of the brute force of its armies, or on the tenets of the new religion, but because it also became the contemporary fount of knowledge and science. It dipped into the knowledge of classical antiquity, India and China, and carried human civilisation forward, including back into Europe through Spain and, ironically, the Crusades. Following the European Enlightenment and industrialisation, it, however, retreated into a defensive and backward-looking mode from which it is yet to recover.

Islam came to India with the sword. But it was also then at the vanguard of human civilisation, and it brought new ideas, new science, new technology, and with it, progress. By the middle of the second millennium *Anno Domini*, India, along with China, was one of the most affluent societies in the world. But it was too inert and quite unprepared to survive the post-industrial Western onslaught, leaving it open to colonial plunder and domination.

At the opening of the 20th century, India seemed to be pulling back from the deadwood of the past, coming to terms

with the modern world through the flowering of new ideas collectively termed the “Bengal Renaissance”. This involved, inter alia, intellectual self-critique and attempts to reform beliefs and practices holding the country back. These new ideas informed the rise of a new-found nationalism which won the admiration of the world for its spiritual and non-violent content. It not only brought the greatest empire since Rome to its knees but also inspired anti-colonial movements all over the developing world. When it attained independence, India appeared poised to lead the developing world into modernity, its famous textile industry recovering to compete effectively against an industrialised Manchester.

But it was Japan, and the four industrial tigers of the East—Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong—lagging far behind India, that led the Asian resurgence.

Why has India time and again missed the bus, compelling the *Economist* to call it “the world’s greatest underachiever” almost two decades ago?

It was at the turn of the second millennium, when Islamic civilisation was at its peak, that the great Persian scholar, Al-Biruni, was constrained to accompany Mahmud Ghaznavi to India. His pen sketch of India’s greatest failing has not been bettered since:

The Hindus believe that there is no country but theirs, no nation like theirs, no kings like theirs, no religion like theirs, no science like theirs. They are haughty, foolishly vain, self-conceited, and stolid. They are, by nature, niggardly in communicating that which they know, and they take the greatest possible care to withhold it from men of another caste among their own people, still much more, of course, from any foreigner ... Their haughtiness is such that, if you tell them of any science or scholar in Khorasan and Persis, they will think you to be both an ignoramus and a liar.

A thousand years later, this civilisational arrogance—presently embodied in the popular phrase “*Mera Bharat Mahaan*” (My country is great)—and in the propensity to dwell more on past achievements than on present failings, remains India’s greatest failing. It is, therefore, unsurprising that while India and China were on par in per capita income when I joined the civil service, China has since moved ahead by a factor of three to five, depending on how it is measured. It is currently the world’s fastest-growing major economy. But, unless we grow the humility to be more open to outside ideas and are willing to adopt global best practices, we will keep watching helplessly as other nations overtake us.

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The culpability of my generation of civil servants is limited to the short term. Do I leave behind a better place than what I found at the outset of my career? When I joined the civil service, being a member of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) was in itself a badge of honour. The general image of the service was that its officers were intelligent, determined to stand up for justice and for the downtrodden. They were considered not only incorruptible, but also resolute in taking strong action. Now, however, entry into the service is less on the basis of merit, and more by virtue of entitlement. IAS officers are seen in league with their political masters, having failed to stand up to their transgressions of the rule of law, despite the constitutional protections given to them. I was proud to be a civil servant at the beginning of my career. I seem somewhat apologetic about being one towards the end.

My first exposure to the civil service was in the state of Kerala, where I spent the first seven years of my career, and not in the federal government in the national capital, New Delhi. I saw Kerala for the first time after being allotted that cadre. Crossing the Palghat gap in the Kerala Express for district training en route from the IAS training academy in Mussoorie was an amazing experience. A dull and dusty countryside suddenly turned fully green. It was raining then, as it very often does in the state that bears the first brunt of the Indian monsoon. Nothing had prepared me for a place as green as Kerala.

Over the next few years I realised that even though shockingly green as Kerala's landscape was, it was very humanised. Missing was the familiar countryside of expansive fields of wheat or rice or mustard, interspersed with cramped hamlets whose residents had long been fearful of marauding armies that punctuated the long history of northern India. Kerala's rural landscape alternated between rice *elas*, coconut gardens and plantations, with people living in houses with urban amenities on their homesteads evenly spread over the state, instead of clustering together in dense hamlets separated by vast open spaces.

I consequently found it difficult to pursue my two passions—watching birds and running. Salim Ali, the great Indian

ornithologist, had told me during his visit to the IAS Academy in Mussoorie that Kerala was the best place in India to watch birds. But what I confronted when I landed in Trivandrum (now Thiruvananthapuram) was a city of crows that had driven other native species out. The sparrow, ubiquitous in Delhi in the 1980s, was nowhere to be seen. It was my first posting in Perinthalmanna, on the fringe of the Western Ghats, that exposed me to the rich avifauna of Kerala.

The humanised landscape has made Kerala a relatively safe place, where most crimes are crimes of opportunity. But it also made its society very litigious. Much of my time during my first posting, as subdivisional magistrate, was consumed by invoking the public nuisance provisions of the Code of Criminal Procedure to mediate between raucous neighbours feuding over overhanging coconut trees, house access, waste disposal and sundry nuisance.

This landscape also lies behind the single biggest infrastructural challenge in Kerala currently: disposal of waste, solid and liquid, human and animal, and noise pollution. Nobody wants widened roads, pipelines, powerlines and burial grounds near their own backyards. The state needs to evolve an innovative mechanism to forge local consensus for the delivery of critical public goods. Political messaging is essential as civil servants can only provide technical solutions.

India is a very diverse country, with each state having its own set of challenges. Provision of basic education and healthcare, and indigent poverty, are not Kerala's chief problems, as they are in wide swathes of the country. The state leads the country in human development indicators. It is the second-order problems of quality and skilled education, public health and unwillingness to accept blue-collar jobs, that need urgent attention. Improving the quality of life of Kerala's citizens has less to do with the inability of government to provide critical infrastructure as in the willingness of its citizens to accept the solutions on offer.

The biggest economic challenge facing Kerala at the outset and the end of my career was employment and domestic value addition. This challenge was both the outcome and cause of the peculiar "Kerala model of development", where redistribution

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preceded, rather than followed, large increases in per capita incomes. Relatively high wage costs drove value added, productive activities out of the state, and with it, labour that sought avenues outside, including outside the country. The resultant inflow of large amounts of remittances, nevertheless, increased incomes, and with it, consumption. If Kerala were a separate country, it would be running a huge trade deficit financed by a surplus of service exports. This is the macroeconomic prism through which one should view the structure of the state economy and its growth model.

But Kerala is also ageing fast. With fewer young workers to export, it is at risk of falling into the middle-income trap of growing old before becoming rich without changing its growth model. Europe and Japan will age first, as the US has staggered the process by virtue of being an immigrant society. The rising tide of blue-collar immigrant workers in Kerala indicates that it is already headed in that direction. As the first Indian state to age, it has the ability to leverage its good medical infrastructure to be a trendsetter in preparing for an aged society for which no economically viable model exists globally. Public health and tax policies need to nudge people to take greater responsibility for their health outcomes.

I leave public service from Kerala, where I first entered it. At the end of my career, I find the state in better shape than what it was at the beginning. I cannot speak with authority about other states, but I cannot say the same about the federal government where I spent most of my career. In the early years of my career, I could express my views with impunity on file, even if these ran counter to those of my bosses. I could do likewise at the end of my career in Kerala, but I no longer had the same confidence towards the latter part of my career serving with the federal government.

In Trivandrum I leave behind a beautiful city which still retains an old-world charm and character, even as cities all over the globe become indistinguishable from one another. Despite the recent profusion of high-rise apartment complexes, Trivandrum still looks like the city which I first saw a little over three decades ago. The government secretariat is practically unchanged, but for the ubiquitous air conditioners that have made the work environment more comfortable. The row of shops across the road towards Statue Junction is unchanged, including the unassuming Arul Jyoti restaurant, with its quaint but modest surcharge for use of its tiny 'AC-it' room, where I would often hop across for lunch as an IAS probationer. The infrastructure is better than that of Delhi now, if the Lutyens area is excluded. It is much cleaner, less polluted, safer, with better, more reliable and cheaper medical facilities, all of which matter for old people like me.

Meanwhile, the sparrow has long left central Delhi, even as I came across one during an early morning run in Trivandrum. I now find that it is much easier and enjoyable to run in the Olympic-size stadiums in the heart of Trivandrum, thanks to the infrastructure upgrade for the recent National Games, than in Delhi, with its high levels of suspended

particulate matter. I don't know where I can enjoy a run in Delhi now.

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