

Musings: IAS has failed the nation?

We're getting rid of bureaucracy, so that we're releasing time for police officers to be crime fighters and not form writers. – Theresa May, British Prime Minister

In 1949, Sardar Patel did not mince words or spared any political party while making a scathing attack on the Members of the Parliament who were opposed to giving guarantees to All India Services, their proposed pay and increments and so on. In reference to AIS, in his most perspicacious and prescient words (that are true even today and perhaps far more so) he stated¹,

'If you want an efficient all-India service, I advise you to allow the services to open their mouth freely. But I see a tendency today that in several provinces the services are set upon and told. "No, you are servicemen, you must carry out our orders." The Union will go-you will not have a united India, if you have not a good all-India service which has the independence to speak out its mind, If you do not adopt this course, then do not follow the present Constitution. Substitute something else. Put in a Congress Constitution or some other Constitution or put in R.S.S. Constitution- whatever you like-but not this Constitution.these people are the instruments, remove them and I see nothing but a picture of chaos all over the country'.

1. IAS is a service at once much maligned as well as admired. Much has been written about it for quite some time, the latest of which are the Dr. Duvvuri Subba Rao's article (*IAS is a system that promotes mediocrity and risk aversion*) on IAS (March 25, 2022) and the subsequent interview masterfully conducted by Mr. Karan Thapar with his characteristic consummate skill for The Wire on 2nd Apr 2022 (*'The IAS Has Failed India and Must Change'*). The WIRE reported that *"This a very thoughtful and insightful interview and particularly necessary for serving IAS officers as well as those young people who are considering joining the IAS"* (emphasis added).

2. Dr. Duvvuri Subba Rao (IAS 1972 topper), one of the sharpest minds and an illustrious member of IAS has given his candid views on the above two occasions saying that the *IAS has failed the nation is his firm opinion* as an opinion based on experience and perception based on his years of experience in the IAS and his reflections on the question thereafter. He remarked that "this question has been swirling in my mind for several years or even several decades". He also says he has been reflecting on it for 14 years ever since he left the IAS in 2008 (i.e., after demitting office in the service of the Government) when he became governor of the Reserve Bank of India. He also amplifies that *"more important than my opinion is the opinion of people who are informed about questions like this. If you ask them, much to my regret and disappointment, a large majority of them will say yes, rather than no"*. As the WIRE has emphasised that the interview is "necessary to those young people who are considering to joining the IAS" I am limiting on the *"failed the nation"* aspect.

¹ "Constituent Assembly Debates On 10 October 1949 Part I, CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY OF INDIA VOLUME X Monday, the 10th October 1949", <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/735670/>

3. Predictably, these comments drew a number of views. While many felt that Dr. Duvvuri Subba Rao has held a mirror before us, and we should not be defensive but introspect many others differed. Just to give a flavour, Deepak Gupta, an IAS officer and former Chairman UPSC wrote a piece "Has IAS failed the nation? Not really: Critiques of the service should also recognise its immense strengths & many constraints" Times of India, April 6, 2022², or "Don't Blame The IAS, A Nation Gets The Civil Services It Deserves by Avay Shukla April 7, 2022³, retired from IAS in 2000", or "Foster innovative thinking in the IAS by defining KPIs, KRAs by Gaurav Choudhury, March 28, 2022⁴", or by Satya Mohanty, Former Secretary to Govt of India, "India's steel frame stands at the crossroads", The Tribune, 19th April 2019⁵.

4. The reason for quoting Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel is neither to extoll the virtues of the IAS (there are many) nor its ills (that too are in abundance). The comments in the articles mentioned above do a good job thereof. Since the issues are complex, many opinions have got entrenched, unanimity is unlikely. No doubt there have been black sheep within the IAS on the aspects of corruption that as the Prime minister remarked is like a termite which makes country hollow. This is a vast subject for another discussion. All of us know "horror stories" of wealth amassed by IAS far beyond their known means of legitimate income. That is why there is a system of yearly property returns to be submitted to the Government by offices (all the civil services offices, as well as for the MPs and MLAs every time they file nominations, so incremental increases in wealth year after year can be ascertained). "*Having failed the Nation*" is an important observation quite independent only of corruption and this alone I propose to analyse in this essay.

5. Subba Rao gave an example of the observation of a Chief Minister who, putting the IAS officers in three bins remarked that (i) about 25% of IAS officers are callous, corrupt or incompetent, (ii) the middle 50% had happily turned into sinecures and (iii) it is only the remaining 25% he can depend on to get all his work done. Presumably, "*his work*" (i.e. the CM's work) would always be in public interest and the Honourable CM was really not referring to such officers that would "do his bidding", i.e. pliable officers. It is also unclear what steps, if any, The Chief Minister had taken to rectify the situation like compulsory retirement, Departmental Enquiries (or the ACB or the CBI) for the corrupt, shifting them to other departments with less opportunities to be corrupt.

6. A discerning reader may doubtless find the last statement to be particularly odd. But it is taken straight from his interview (Time Stamp 07.27), when Dr Subba Rao gave what he called a "*thought experiment*." This is indeed a very interesting and thought-provoking experiment and needs to be given in full. He said, "*Take a household, two brothers, one brother gets into the IAS another brother becomes, let's say a university professor. Both of them brought up in the same household, same family values, culture traditions. The*

² <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-edit-page/has-ias-failed-the-nation-not-really-critiques-of-the-service-should-also-recognise-its-immense-strengths-many-constraints/>

³ <https://hillpost.in/2022/04/dont-blame-the-ias-a-nation-gets-the-civil-services-it-deserves/117274/>

⁴ <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/opinion/foster-innovative-thinking-in-the-ias-by-defining-kpis-kras-8284671.html>

⁵ <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/indias-steel-frame-stands-at-the-crossroads-387167>

university professor has much less opportunity to be corrupt, much less temptation to be corrupt as compared to the IAS officer. So, the IAS officer succumbs to temptation of corruption. So, I would think that it's the environment that makes the IAS officer corrupt and succumb to the temptation".

7. Since all comparisons are odious, I am not going into the corollary of the thought experiment that it is the IAS alone that operates in an environment conducive to maximum opportunities of corruption compared to other civil services. In fact, again as per the popular perception, the very IAS officers involved in the horror stories above had blessings and patronage of the political bosses and particularly that of the Chief Minister. That is why they could continue to follow the path that the Prime Minister lamented that makes the Nation hollow. On the matter of perception, and purely as an aside, one would note a comment by Prathap Simha, Member of Parliament, Mysuru – Kodagu Lok Sabha Constituency stating "*In my own experience, I have come across a few IAS and IPS officers who are actually corrupt and incompetent, yet have an impeccable, crusader image in the public eye, courtesy the power of social media.*"⁶

8. Mr. Karan Thapar picked up on this observation made by Dr. Suba Rao in his Times of India article, as "*an indication of how deep the rot has gone*" (Time Stamp 05:09) and that "*only 25%, just a quarter can be relied upon to get work done. That's a pretty small number*". He also gave an illustration of Mr. Nirmal Mookerji who "*as Home Secretary when the emergency broke out, objected to the emergency and was shunted out of that Ministry and demoted (emphasis added) to Civil Aviation (Time Stamp 23:25)*". Mr. Thapar also alluded to the CM's observation (Time Stamp 24:03) and added "*the goodness of our country and the goodness of our people depend upon the strength, the courage of the unsung heroes. That's absolutely true. The only sad thing is that the chief minister who spoke to you said that's just 25% of the service. It's not a very large number*". Dr. Suba Rao also added that "*I must add though, that as much as we are talking about corruption, lot majority of the IAS officer are clean. It's a minority that I corrupt, but that minority shapes the public perception*" (emphasis added)⁷.

9. Dr. Subba Rao also added that "*(IAS) still attracts some of the best talent in the country, and young recruits come in with sharp minds and full of enthusiasm. But soon, they become cogs in the wheels of complacency and acquiescence, turn lazy and cynical, and worse, lose their moral compass*". The context as he explained in the interview, was the reluctance of the CM to let go an honest competent IAS officer falling in bin (iii) to go to the World Bank. A more fundamental question could be why the officer wanted to go to the World Bank when the officer enjoyed the CMs confidence, leaving the job in the State even if temporarily. It could be to get more legal money, having a cleaner work environment than in the State (and work environment in the State is not restricted to IAS alone), to broaden his horizons, to get specialised experience (a point highlighted by Dr. Subba Rao as necessary) of

⁶ [OPINION: Ban IAS, IPS Officers' Personal Social Media Accounts Grabbing Needless Attention \(news18.com\)](https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/ban-ias-ips-officers-personal-social-media-accounts-grabbing-needless-attention/news18.com)

⁷ On the matter of perception, one may venture to add that treating transfer from Home Ministry to Civil Aviation can be a matter of perception, as there is no "*pecking order*" amongst Secretaries either in the warrant of precedence or in postings by the Government. But this is subjective, and I shall leave it at that.

exposure to different economic systems or a host of others. Somewhat facetiously, half in jest and half earnest, one could even raise another issue if the CM is reluctant to let go an officer in bin (iii) above would an officer prefer to be in bin (i) or (ii) instead?

10. One takes it that the perception shaped by the minority is a reflection of how deep the rot has gone *presumably* in the IAS. Dr. Subba Rao has also mentioned in his article in the Times of India that "*It's difficult to put a precise date on when the decline started*". In his interview he stated that the IAS is "*not as incorruptible and honest as it should be or it used to be*" And that "*incidents of corruption are much higher than before*" meaning that the rot started much later.

11. There are other All India Services apart from IAS. For example, the IPS is discharging a very important and fundamental role of maintaining law and order, and citizens' safety and security, elements without which no development is possible. Then there is the Indian Forest Service to maintain and increase the forest cover and thereby protecting the environment. The Indian Foreign Service makes India proud in international arena and is seen to be performing a sterling role in the foreign policy environment in the integrated world. Additionally, there are 24 Central Services like the Revenue Services (Income Tax and the Custom and Excise) that are equally involved in the Nation Building activities in their own respective domains.

12. **Custodians of the nation:** Without going into the question if only one service can be said to be the sole custodian of the Nation (and one can even agree with Dr. Subba Rao if this is an indication of his assessment that IAS should indeed be a *torch bearer*, and he is leaving out the other 24 civil services that are also manned by the results of the Civil Services examination, where entry into IAS or exclusion therefrom is determined merely by a mark or two), it begs the question that if the general perception is indeed that IAS has failed the Nation, why then so many aspire to join this club that has "failed the Nation", the club viz. the IAS, a service assumedly held very low in the general perception shaped by the minority. By and large, the first preference of the applicants in the Civil Services Examination is either the IAS or the IFS. Not only that, if an aspirant does not get IAS in his first attempt, and is selected to any other service (even IPS or Indian Forest Service), I have seen two types of responses: (i) that aspirant joins the service he or she is selected and takes another shot at the examination to secure a place in the IAS, or (ii) does not join the service he is selected for and devotes his full time to study for the examination to give a second shot, even though there is a possibility that in the second such attempt, he may not get even any central service at all. This is because, by its very nature, the success depends not on how well one does but on how badly others have done in the examination.

13. In order to remove the label of an elitist service for only for the English speaking, and to make it more representative and reflective of the Nation's diverse ethos and culture, now the IAS, along with other civil services have provisions of answers in regional languages making it more inclusive and draws within its fold, a fairly wide spectrum of cross section across India. As of 12 April 2021 as has been noted by the Rajya Sabha panel, UPSC has changed the pattern civil service exam has changed drastically since 2010. Since 2010, a slew of changes has been introduced in the civil service examination — from the number of

optional papers to the introduction of the Civil Services Aptitude Test (CSAT) paper; an increase in the number of general studies papers; or the elimination of foreign languages from the language paper. These changes, several experts have said, have fundamentally altered the composition of the country's top bureaucracy. The then Secretary Department of Personnel and Training Satynanand Mishra said the changes introduced by the UPSC have ensured that the bureaucracy is more representative than ever before. "If you say that there are a lot of graduates from IITs coming in, we should see the social composition of the IITs. Several people who crack the exam are those from rural backgrounds," Mishra said.

"Especially after the Mandal Commission report was implemented, the bureaucracy has only turned more representative.⁸" Even the lowest rung in the societal ladder can aspire to join IAS (without language barrier), become a District Magistrate, rise up the ladder and so on. Recent case of Ansar Shaikh a son of an auto driver becoming the youngest IAS officer (2016) in the first attempt is equally inspiring⁹. This is a development to be genuinely proud of.

14. **IAS Failed the Nation?:** It is instructive to note the intake of IITians and other candidates from top Engineering Institutes into IAS. As recalled by T. K. Ramachandran, and IAS officer of the Tamil Nadu cadre, in his batch of 106 IAS officers there were around 50 engineers and 36 — including the batch topper — were IITians¹⁰. Gaurav Agarwal, who was from IIT Kanpur topped in the year 2014 in the UPSC civil services examination. He is also Management Graduate from IIM Lucknow. Rank 2 holder in IAS 2015 exam Raj Purohit is from IIT Delhi. Nidhi Gupta (IAS UP 2015) who got the rank 3 in the IAS examination. She was from Netaji Subhas University of Technology, Delhi (formerly Netaji Subhash Institute of Technology, NSIT). In 2019, Kanishak Kataria, a B. Tech (Computer) from IIT Bombay, a backward candidate, topped the IAS examination while the second rank went to Akshat Jain, an engineering graduate from IIT Guwahati. They were followed by Junaid Ahmad (the third topper in CSE 2018 who have been attempting since 2013¹¹) and Shreyans Kumat.¹² UPSC 2017 topper Dhuri Shetty Anudeep (completed his engineering in 2011 from BITS Pilani, Rajasthan, he has also worked with Google) and has been working with government of India as revenue officer after passing UPSC 2013. Ankur Garg, (IIT Delhi, a civil service entrance topper 2002, Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Mizoram and Union Territories (AGMUT) cadre), is studying International Development at Harvard, and achieved 171/170 in macroeconomics¹³. He also got Raymond Vernon Award for Commitment to International Development, says it adds value 'because I was representing India at the top international university'.

⁸ <https://theprint.in/india/governance/upsc-changed-many-exam-rules-in-10-yrs-now-mps-want-to-know-how-they-impacted-civil-service/638283/?amp>

⁹ <https://www.tv9marathi.com/national/become-the-son-of-an-auto-driver-read-the-inspiring-story-of-ansar-sheikh-the-youngest-ias-officer-in-india-au130-701202.html>

¹⁰ (6) What is the percentage of IITians in IAS? - Quora

¹¹ <https://blog.oureducation.in/upsc-civil-services-2018-final-result/>

¹² <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/upsc-exam-results-out-iit-grad-tops-full-list-here-727203.html>

¹³ <https://theprint.in/india/governance/this-ias-officer-scored-171-out-of-170-at-harvard-now-he-plans-to-solve-indias-problems/173833/>

15. Case of Ms Ira Singhal (B. Tech from NSIT, MBA from Faculty of Management Studies Delhi.), a differently abled officer is truly inspiring¹⁴. After her MBA degree, Ira worked as a Strategy Manager at Cadbury India. Hence, she served at a reputed corporate firm. She has also been a marketing intern at the very famous Coca-Cola company. Ira Singal has written the exam about five times. As per Ira Singhal Blog, she wrote the exam in 2010, 2011, 2013, and 2014. When she first decided to take up the UPSC exam, she quit her two-year-old job. However, she says that the job was quite well-paying, but she had more plans other than financial stability. She cracked the exam during her first three attempts. However, she bagged the Customs and Excise Service Cadre. But she didn't wish to continue in the service. Rather, the lady officer was aiming for the IAS. She finally topped the UPSC 2014 exam. As the blog would indicate, the officer had to face many a legal hurdle (up to CAT) on account of her disability to get entry into the Civil Services. Clearly the officer did not want to join the club that failed the Nation.

16. The most recent example is that of Mr. Shubham Kumar who is a B. Tech from IIT Bombay, 2018 batch. He first got selected in the Indian Defence Accounts Service (IDAS) after qualifying for Civil Services Examination 2019, Since he wanted to join IAS, this was his third attempt at UPSC in 2020 when he topped. There are many such examples and need not be repeated. Dr. Subba Rao himself is M.Sc. (IIT Kanpur), obtaining other degrees post joining IAS. So is Ashok Khemka (IAS 1991), B. Tech Computer Science Engineering (IIT Kharagpur), Ph.D in Computer Science (Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Mumbai) and an MBA degree in Business Administration and Finance. Vinni Mahajan, graduated from IIM Calcutta before joining the IAS in 1987. She is from the Punjab cadre. She was posted in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) between 2006 and 2009 and is now back home as principal secretary in the Department of Health and Family Welfare, Punjab.

17. Similar is the case of G. Lakshmikantha Reddy. A son of Sharatchandra Reddy and Varalakshmi, a farmer couple from Gunjalli village in Raichur taluk, he has secured the 21st rank in Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) Civil Services Exam, 2014. He graduated in Computer Science in Bengaluru and then joined the IIM Ahmedabad, to do his MBA. He then worked for Strategic Consulting from KPMG Advisory Services. Later he cracked the UPSC examination and joined the Civil Services. His answer as to why he joined IAS, *"I did have a plush job after completing my MBA but nothing matches the job satisfaction that I am getting here in this field. I like taking up the day-to-day challenges and complex work structure that comes along with this job. Giving your best to bring about a change in the society is very satisfying and only Civil Services provide you the opportunity to work directly for the betterment of the society"*.

18. In another article in Indian Express, May 11, 2022, titled *"IIM-A honours its IAS alumni, five other achievers"*¹⁵ it is reported that Kartikeya Misra (IAS 2009, PGP 2004), Collector of East Godavari, Andhra Pradesh, and Rohan Chand Thakur (IAS 2009, PGP 2006), Deputy Commissioner of Shimla, Himachal Pradesh — were honoured at the third IIM-A Young Alumni Achiever's Award on the campus. Rohan Chand Thakur was hired by TAS and

¹⁴ [Ira Singhal IAS Officer - Blog, Marksheet, Education & Age \(iasbabuji.com\)](https://iasbabuji.com/blog/ira-singhal-ias-officer-blog-marksheet-education-age/)

¹⁵ <https://indianexpress.com/article/education/iim-a-honours-its-ias-alumni-five-other-achievers-4717845/>

worked for two years before joining government. He is also MPA from Harvard Kennedy School USA. There are many such examples that will fill a number of pages. Does then some of the best talent capable of getting higher paying jobs outside the government, consciously and with open eyes wish to and do join a service like IAS only to belong to a club that by perception has "*failed the Nation*", become a cog in the wheels and finally lost its moral compass?

19. Let me now come to the question of how many applicants have been wishing to join the "rot that has deeply set in". With an yearly intake not exceeding 180, the number of aspirants (including those from IITs, Regional Engineering Colleges, IIMs, Doctors, Humanities etc.) to the IAS is increasing, (most of them giving IAS/IFS as their first choice) from 3.25 lakhs in 2008 to 10.57 lakhs in 2020 (though admittedly, many of them may not really be serious contenders, and since 2014, about 50% of the applicants appeared for the prelim, still a large enough number¹⁶). Many prefer All India Services and especially the IAS to other alternative jobs in the private sector, many leave other jobs actually held in the private sector or academia, where generally speaking, the pay differentials of their current salaries are be higher than the starting salaries in the IAS. The reasons could be many like perquisites like housing, vehicle, apart from the very people's perception that they are doing something different and in the spirit of public service in a prestigious IAS, but certainly not a burning desire to join the club "*that has failed the nation*".

20. It would thus be clear that the bright young minds of today do not share the alleged perception that IAS (or for that matter any of the civil services) has failed the Nation. And there is thus no need to be self-deprecating as Dr. Subba Rao does in his interview with Karan Thapar "(Time Stamp 24:50) *that in the first two decades of Independence, we had outstanding officers who built the traditions, values and culture of the service, built a formidable system of development administration earned formidable reputation for the service for commitment, integrity, or competence. But in subsequent decades that reputation started unravelling, and I was a traveller in that system. So, my generation and subsequent cohorts must take responsibility for all the looseness, all the corruption, all the cynicism, all the lack of performance that has crept into the service*". Nor it is necessary to end on his self-deprecating apologetic note in the Times of India article, "*Sadly my generation of civil servants and subsequent cohorts have bequeathed a flawed legacy to these unsung heroes. To them passes the challenge and opportunity of recovering the soul of the IAS*".

21. It is nobody's case that IAS is perfect and needs no change. No doubt, IAS has gone through its own trials and tribulations, at once disparaged and admired. IAS officers know that it comes with the territory. They have discerningly built on past legacies of stalwarts like him, and many others, and IAS is resilient enough not to have lost its soul. Nor it will ever will.

¹⁶ <https://www.clearias.com/number-of-candidates-apply-ias-exam/>