

Public Servants and the People: The Growing Divide

by Julio Ribeiro

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Mrs. Doshi, Mr. Bongirwar, my friend and old colleague Mr. Bam, Mr. Bharat Doshi and friends. I am deeply honoured to have been invited to deliver the second Lalit Doshi Memorial lecture. The late Lalit Doshi was a man I admired, both as a person and as an officer. Mr. Bam has just said that something very interesting or very pertinent, which I presume you all have taken into account and assimilated, he said though, he was a civil servant he still remained popular. This is the gist of what I am supposed to talk to you about today.

I was also extremely pleased to hear about the incident of a possible riot that was averted because of the force of his own personality, because of his goodness, that people were willing to listen to him. It is not an easy thing to do and it is a measure of his qualities and of the influence that a man of with his attitudes can give. Lalit Doshi was an intelligent man, but there are many intelligent men and women in the services, particularly in the IAS, the service to which he belonged. Besides being intelligent he was also a wise man. The number of intelligent men who are at the same time blessed with wisdom reduces the total in any service or sphere of endeavour by fifty percent or may be more; there is no yardstick to compute the figures. It is only our subjective judgement and if I say fifty percent it is my subjective judgement.

But Lalit had another quality that a great many officials in government sadly lack. That is humility. He was a humble man and that was the true measure of his greatness. He had no airs, no false pretensions, no aura of superiority about belonging to a superior service or being vested with the powers of doing and undoing things. He treated everyone with respect, the respect that all human beings crave, however low the status in society or the standard of their knowledge or capability.

I start this discourse by delving a little on the psychology of a government servant. Let me assert very categorically at the very beginning that I have no pretensions to scholarship. I have not made any research into psychology or the dynamics of governance or any other aspect of relations between government

servants and the people at large. But I speak from my own experiences; my very personal perceptions with which you may agree or may not agree or which may not be palatable to many or to some of you.

Remember, also, I have also to remember that, I joined the government service forty years ago, when the political, social and economic factors were quite different from those in place today, when Mahatma Gandhi was still very relevant to our lives and our thinking, when the value systems were not corroded by consumerism and when political bosses were men and women of stature, who we looked up to and admired. Since, therefore, we lived and worked for the better part of our service in a different day and age, it would be patently unfair for me or any of you or all of us to judge and even more unfair to condemn those who succeeded us.

We have to temper our opinions in the light of the fact that two generations make for a lot of change and that change is inevitable. Yet there is a basic quality in the psychological make up of the stereotype government official, which we had to unfortunately admit and I believe that this make up was present in the fifties when I joined service, continues also in the nineties in present day.

As soon as a man or woman enters the service of government at any level of the hierarchy and in any department, in any State of the Union, he or she is, one, elated to be employed, which we cannot quarrel with him about or with her about, everybody wants employment. Second, elated because he or she feels that no one can easily get rid of his or her services, which is to some measure unfortunate. Three, elated because he or she develops a feeling of superiority of belonging to a superior category of Indians, superior atleast to all others who do not happen to be in the service of the government.

A retired General, a very good friend of mine, once remarked to me that every *sarkari babu* is convinced that he is the son-in-law of the government. He did not talk of daughter-in-law for obvious reasons, though I am sure he did not mean to discriminate on the basis of gender. The most commonly found mindset of a government servant is that he belongs to the exalted ranks of the “masters of the people” and accordingly he proceeds to throw his weight about, with greater vigour

of course, if the member of the public who asks for his services is meek, poor, and illiterate, as a great majority of our countrymen are at the present moment of time.

The fear generated by a police party visiting a village for routine investigation should be seen to be believed. The biggest complaint, even today when I talk to people, is that nobody is willing to go to a police station, because he or she is very badly treated there. There is a theory that the police should be perceived as “strong” and this perception can come only if they display a naked show of authority with some brutality thrown in for good measure. I remember an old home minister, when I was a young SP, who once told me you must show what the police means. He was talking about a certain person who I had the misfortune of being arrested; I knew exactly what he was trying to tell me, I need not repeat it here. So it is even our betters who are teaching us or feel that this is what we had to do in order to show our strength.

But even more arrogant, minus of course the brutality part of it, are the petty officials who populate our secretariats. First of all there are too many of them, many more than necessary, which gives everyone time off to work at selfish pursuits not connected with work, whereas they should have been working whole time at their desks.

Should a supplicant worm his way in to that august presence, these worthies do not hesitate to treat him like dirt, sometimes even extracting from him a price for the favours done or promised. I agree, of course, that if they speak civilly to the supplicant or treat him with some respect, the latter may forget to part with tokens of appreciation, which in the final analysis is what guides all their behaviour patterns.

The tendency to display superiority and authority is marked in greater measure at the lower and middle levels, where the maximum interaction takes place between the public and those who are designated as their servants. The people who approach public functionaries at those levels are also less sophisticated or less affluent than the ones who have access to the higher echelons of government. It is not easy, you will admit, for even the most arrogant of senior officers to brush off those with political or economic clout. But the test comes when that official has to deal with the humbler sections of the populace.

More and more in today's context, the need for the poorer segments of society to approach senior officers is being felt. This is because the checks and balances that were in place to supervise the working of the functionaries of the cutting-edge are disappearing. As a young A.S.P. and later as a Superintendent of Police I was supposed to inspect police stations, staying four nights at the headquarters of the '*thana*', giving me enough time to meet everyone who had to be contacted to feel the pulse of the populace and check on the merits of the policing. As a young A.S.P. I visited the scene of every heinous crime, talking to the witnesses and the villagers to ensure that no injustice was done in the investigation.

Similar inspections and visits were enjoined for the S.D.M. and the Collector. But today, I am told, that such essential interaction is no longer sacrosanct. The vacuum created in the communication links between the people and the Government's officials is filled by more frequent visits to the aggrieved parties to Ministers and senior government officials.

I may mention here that for about a year-and-half I had the experience of working as adviser to the Governor of Punjab. As you know, the adviser has ministerial powers. There were many departments with me; half the departments were with me and the other half with the governor. I was surprised at the number of people who came everyday to meet me. There were long queues; I thought as adviser I would have much less work than I had as DGP, but exactly the opposite took place. I used to come home at 8, because of the number of people who were pouring in and obviously there was nobody to listen to them or the people at the lower level did not bother, with the result that they all streamed into the secretariat with very minor type of requests, some of course were important, but the rest were very minor, which gave me an idea of how the people are being dealt with at the level where they should be dealt with, at the cutting edge.

So, considering that there are many more officials in place to cope with the increased work load, it is true that the work load has increased with the rise in population, with expectations, with economic liberalization, what have you?, but it is tragic that essential supervisory chores are being relegated to the backburners. What is the solution we have conjured to correct such man-made imbalances? We create

posts in the top echelons of the hierarchy with a greater number of very senior leaders, when the actual need of the people is the solution of their problems and complaints on the ground.

And even greater tragedy is that many of these very senior leaders are sidelined to perform peripheral tasks that do not require them to spend time in attending to people's grievances. Even though such posts are not strictly necessary, they have been created to provide avenues for promotions for officers who have completed a certain number of years of service. Even if this means that the public are not benefited thereby and have to pay for this luxury. At least, if the officers themselves were happy, one essential purpose and that is of keeping up the morale of the services would have been fulfilled. But, unfortunately, even that does not happen, as those who have been allotted non-descript jobs spend their waking hours in grumbling and in self-pity or in calculating and plotting strategies to replace the luckier ones.

This reference to newly-created superfluous senior posts brings me to the subject of politicisation of the services. In the past there was only one post at the very top, only one Chief Secretary, only one DGP, there was not even a DGP there was IGP only, only one Chief Engineer, - I remember when I was an ASP the Chief Engineer came to Bharuch, that was my first district, for inspection and the Collector specifically asked me to go and call on him. Today, I am quite sure, they treat him almost as if he is one their own subordinates, which is very unfortunate, according to me - only one Director of Medical Services and so on. Now, in the name of organisational morale there are four or more such posts in each department, there are four DGPs as far as I know, chief secretaries, I am not sure, might be more, ten or twelve. At every subsequent level of the hierarchy the same story is repeated. As I said earlier and this merits repetition, if the public was benefited from this boost to the morale of officialdom, nobody would complain. But what happens is diametrically the opposite.

Since only one post at the top and maybe two or three posts at each subsequent level attract public attention and give the incumbents a feeling of importance, there is a mad scramble for those positions with candidates demeaning themselves and their honour by lobbying the powers that be, approaching power

brokers and even their womenfolk. The ones who succeed have to repay their debts to their benefactors invariably at the cost of the people. The public good is surely not served if these officials are forced to circumvent the rules and regulations or overlook violations of the law, in the course of repaying such debts.

The divide between the administration and the people established because of corrupt practices of Government officials or distortions in the application of laws, rules and regulations or because of simple and plain indifference of insensitive officials to the plight of the people is further widened through this process of politicisation of the services. I read in one newspaper a few days ago, that Mumbai's Police commissioner had prohibited the junior officers upto the rank of D.C.P. from entering the Mantralaya or the Ministers' bungalows without his permission. The order could not have come a day sooner, according to me. I remember, one of my illustrious seniors, under whom I worked and whom I consider my guru, Mr. Vasant V. Nagarkar, now deceased, remarking that he would not care if the government posts senior officers, including him, transfers them here and there, but he would bother if the government did not keep its hands off the junior echelons.

As I.P.S. Officers we used to grumble about political interference in transfers and postings of Inspectors and Sub-Inspectors, watching before our very eyes the steady erosion of departmental discipline due to such interventions. And now how low have we ourselves have sunk? I.P.S. and I.A.S. Officers, even very senior ones, are indulging in the same pernicious practices that junior functionaries were accused of practicing. Who suffers? The people - who seek justice, but to whom justice is denied because of the inexorable march of the politicisation in the services.

Here I may mention to my great sorrow and pain that when I returned from Romania, after completing my mission there, I had some officers with me who were providing security to me, while talking to them, one of them said now there is no difference between us and an IPS officer. I really felt extremely dejected at hearing this, these are comments by the junior, you know the best judges are the juniors. No senior can really give a good chit; I mean if he gives it then it could be prejudice, but a junior can never lie, you can never fool a junior. This was of the one of the things that I felt really rotten when I heard that.

I will not say half the time, but certainly quite a lot of time of government officials in any department today is now spent in politicking, plotting, calculating, and lobbying, when all that time should be more profitably spent on doing good to the public. No one can deny that there is immense scope for doing such work even without assuming adversarial positions with politicians. Lalit Doshi, for instance, was a low-key individual by temperament. An adversarial role would be alien to his very nature and mental make up. Yet he was loved and appreciated by the people wherever he served or with whom he came in contact.

I do not concur with those who believe that only angry officers like K.G. Alphonso or G R Khairnar are acceptable to the public. It is true that a public that is disgusted with official apathy, corruption and non-performance, hero-worship officers who have come out openly against the system. But I am firmly of the view that those would do their own allotted tasks fearlessly and honestly without seeking any particular recognition or reward and without hankering over a particular posting soon come to be noticed and appreciated by the public at large. The people are not foolish. They discern very quickly who is on their side and who is for himself or herself. They appreciate those who work for the public good instead of their own good. The public itself will protest if such officers are shifted out, just because they have failed to pamper the selfish whims of the political establishment. And there is no need, indeed no justification at all, to go public against the sins or perceived sins of politicians in order to achieve their own legitimate goals.

It is very easy to blame some other department, I mean the police will blame the judiciary, they will blame the IAS, the executive magistrates or they will blame the press, they have not blamed the criminals as yet, but each one blames the other and everybody points at the other person where the politicians have their own compulsions. Their compulsion is, what is politics, it is a quest for power. In the quest for power they will do things that can be explained very easily by them and even by us if you think about it. I do not see why we should blame them for what is legitimately their goal. We have to work around that and see that we do our work. That is how I look at things.

Take Khairnar's case for instance. I had commented on this, it is not that I am saying it for the first time on this case, twice or thrice in the past. While

commending his indisputable honesty and integrity, I did say that he should not have contravened basic disciplinary rules that are the “*sine-qua-non*” of any organization, whether in the government or in the public sector. I think Khairnar would have served the public cause much better and more effectively if he had persisted with his task of demolishing the illegal structures of the high and mighty without making allegations that incidentally he was not able to prove. It was not possible to prove such allegations. He should have remembered that no authority even the most powerful could stop him from doing what he had to do as per law. At the most he would have been transferred out, but that move itself would have made the authority most unpopular. I think that one thing that government servants should be prepared for is a transfer that is all that can be done to those who are doing their duty honestly. There is nothing else that can be done, he cannot be dismissed. But if he makes allegations which he cannot prove it, then he has had it.

I shall now speak about the aspect of inter-services relations as they affect the public. The people are not greatly interested to know who is more important, whether it is the Collector or the S.P. The people want their work done. If the Collector is positive and helpful, they will appreciate his qualities. If the S.P. does his duty justly and honestly they will support him. If the officers quarrel, the people will not only suffer but they will think very poorly of both of them.

There is not one good argument to show why government officials of various disciplines should not cooperate for the public good. In a District the Collector is entrusted with the specific task of coordinating the activities of all departments. This arrangement is to my mind the best one and most convenient and hence it has to be respected.

In the city of Mumbai the Municipal Commissioner and the Police Commissioner play vital roles in the daily lives of the citizen. If each stands on his or her dignity or dallies over their relative status the people will be the sufferers. Of course, these two dignitaries will complete their respective terms without achieving what they should have achieved, if they had kept their pride under wraps. I remember as a D.C.P., I will not mention names, I don't intend mentioning any names, hearing the Police Commissioner telling all the young officers, there was a Municipal Commissioner he did not like, perhaps he did not like any Municipal

Commissioner, he said that “what does he think” and “who is he” and that kind of thing, and of course no work was done and we had to go. So, I decided, if ever, I became Police Commissioner then I would go out of my way to ensure that there was proper coordination and cooperation. The first thing I did after meeting, as usual, the Chief Minister, the Home Minister and all that, is call on the Municipal Commissioner at his office and I told him, Mr. D. M. Sukthankar was there, any time you have a meeting which concerns the Police, please call me and I will be there. I think we attended a meeting in his office every month where we drew up our plans for what should be done, what should not be done to help the people of the city. This was noticed by no less a person than Mr. J R D Tata, who when he was honoured by the municipality at the hanging gardens, he made a mention of this, of the cooperation of the Municipal Commissioner and the Police Commissioner for the benefit of the people of the city. A copy of his speech, which he himself sent me.

Because, what do the people want? What do they want from government officials? Do they want “*Roti, Kapda or Makan?*” Perhaps few are unreasonable enough to expect the government officials to deliver these. But, the ordinary people, as a rule, are sensible. They do not have such high expectations. They will blame the *sarkar* or politicians for deficiencies of these scores, but not the officials who they meet in the ordinary course of business.

What people want from officials is a patient hearing, they want sympathy, their life is not very happy, the ordinary poor man’s life, and above all they want justice. It is injustice to individuals or to groups that irks most of all. Many officials want justice done to themselves, they want justice from their superiors, they want justice by their political masters, they want justice by the Courts, but when they have to dispense the same justice themselves they conveniently forget all these principles. When justice is denied or when it is skewed, the divide between the people and government servants widens. When laws, rules and regulations are only selectively enforced the divide widens. When this happens day after day in the daily course of business the divide assumes a proportion that will be difficult to bridge even with the best of intentions.

Lastly, let me touch on the issue of the misuse of powers that are becoming more and more frequent nowadays. In the aftermath of the rapid politicisation of the

services, the over familiar relations between individual officials and individual politicians, the growing neglect of supervisory functions and the steady all round deterioration of discipline and conduct, unscrupulous officers take advantage of the prevalent climate to misuse the powers that have been reposed in them by law.

The government's officials have been empowered, because they are expected to be the instruments of social change, this is what I was told when I joined services. If, therefore, they misuse their powers they only succeed in ensuring that the change they usher in is for the worse. More often than not, such misuse goes hand in hand with corruption. But, there are senior officers who are not necessarily monetarily corrupt, many people feel everyone is corrupt; it is not true, yet they find pleasure in delaying decisions or even giving wrong decisions purposefully to display their powers, to prove their own worth to themselves, very often to their wives also or to their sycophants. This is perhaps the most disgusting of all manifestations of the misuse of power and needs peer condemnation. If a licence can be issued after all conditions are fulfilled, the official will take pleasure in making the applicant wait for days, forcing him to visit his office umpteen times merely to show the poor man who is king.

One newspaper today made mention of a move by I.A.S. Officers in Uttar Pradesh to determine by secret ballot the three most corrupt officers in their services. This has been going on for sometime, being postponed, but now it has come up again. There are some senior officers who have objected to this move, perhaps there are valid reasons for their objections. For example, as far as I can see, a very corrupt official, could be who is an easy going, friendly sort of fellow, he may not be voted for this honour. The great majority of officers may not like to target him because he is good to them. But the opposite can conversely be true. An obnoxious and arrogant person may not be the most corrupt, but he may get the most votes. He is more amenable to the wrath of the juniors, so it could be unjust.

But leaving this factor aside and avoiding a debate on the merits and demerits of this vote, let us delve briefly on what prompted the officers to think of this novel method of voicing their displeasure with their seniors. To my mind it points to a very deep malaise, it speaks volumes of the state of the morale, the discipline and the commitment of officialdom in the biggest State in this country. Let me say,

similar state of affairs, in varying degrees, some less, for example I do not think it is that bad in Maharashtra, certainly not, but it exists in some form or other in other States of the Union.

It should jolt us out of our self induced stupor. Make us think and make us take some concrete action to put our houses in order. It is no use pointing fingers at others, as I said earlier, politicians or press, no point, each of them have their own work. Each of us as a body of men and women should look into ourselves and seek solutions within. A one time attempt to do so was made by I.A.S. & I.P.S. Officers after the Emergency, brought on a non-Congress Govt. in the Centre. There was much breast-beating, which was soon forgotten, very soon the same sycophancy, debasement of personal dignity, debasement of values, was evident, and all came back.

Now, I think, all these despicable practices and attitudes go to widen the gulf between the people and government officials. What are the solutions to these problems? I should not be accused of preaching, but I see no alternative to individual awakening and self examination. It is only the individual who can do something about it, if he can influence others, if each official decides to make an examination of conscience he will have taken the measure of the people's wrath against government officials, who are supposed to be the servants of the public but actually act as if they are their masters.

Well, I have just taken over from Mr. D. M. Sukthankar, my old friend, the Chairmanship of the WWF for Maharashtra – the World Wide Fund for Nature. Something new to me, because I have never dealt with the environment, it is very interesting, I am getting used to it. But, the first complaints I got from the people there, they are committed people, they are employees of the WWF, they get paid, but they kept telling me “can you speak to so and so”. I said why, what have you done, before I came? Sir, we had spoken to them but they are rude sometimes, in any case they don't bother. Now, this is the immediate reaction of people who are doing committed service. They are people at a very low level, but this is how things get spread. One person tells another and each person has got twenty relatives and each relative has got twenty friends and it goes on. There is no need really for them to tell, everybody who has an experience will you tell you how bad things are.

On a personal note, I had an experiment done in Thane, when I was the Commissioner there. I got people to come and talk to a captive audience of police officers. One day the speaker whom we had called didn't come. They were ordinary people, students, labour leaders, even labourers, so I said now what happens? We have some time on our hands. Who will speak? One of you come and speak; I said if you an experience with your own department please stand up. One of the constables stood up and said that "I was in the CBI for four years on deputation. So, I was no longer in uniform and people in the police station did not consider me to be part of the police and somebody stole my cycle. I went to the police station to complain and I was immediately told to go away, you must have lost it somewhere, go and find it for yourself." So, this is how even people who are in service are treated. Everybody is going to retire, like I have retired, for all you know you may be treated like that, so be very careful when you are in service; you see that you do not treat others like that.

Thank you so much.