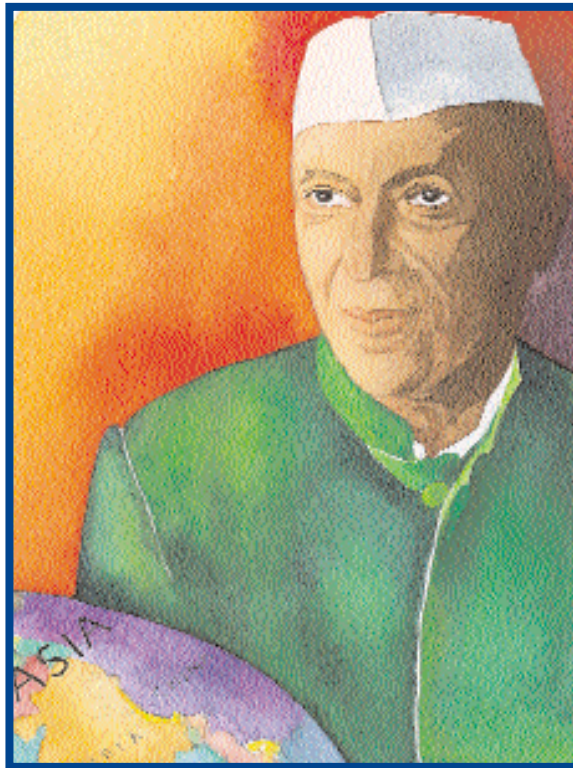


# INSIDE THE INDIAN FOREIGN SERVICE



Dana Cooper

AMONG DEVELOPING COUNTRIES, THE INDIAN FOREIGN SERVICE IS ONE OF THE OLDER AND BETTER-ORGANIZED DIPLOMATIC SERVICES. AN INSIDER DISCUSSES THE IFS'S ORIGINS AND CURRENT CONTOURS.

By *KISHAN S. RANA*

**A**mong the countries of the developing world, India has one of the older and better-organized diplomatic services. Part heir to the 'Political Service' of the renowned colonial Indian Civil Service, the Indian Foreign Service was established in 1948, a year after independence. From the outset the IFS was imbued with a sense of uniqueness and relative isolation from the rest of the central government, due primarily to the circumstances of its creation as virtually a personal project of India's first prime minister, the urbane and worldly national movement leader Jawaharlal Nehru.

In 1946, on the eve of independence, Jawaharlal Nehru articulated India's commitment to approach the world with "clear and friendly eyes" and spoke of the newly liberated country's right to choose an external policy that reflected its independence and was not a pawn in the hands of others — the basic policy of nonalignment. Nehru functioned as his own foreign minister for his entire prime ministership, from 1947 until his death in 1964. It was Nehru who set up the Indian Foreign Service and, with his towering personality and penchant for micro-management, stamped it indelibly with his style as well as his worldview. For nearly two decades, both the IFS and the Ministry of External Affairs basked in Nehru's reflected glory.

It is not our purpose to discuss the Nehruvian foreign policy legacy, but some instances of his passion for detail help shed light on facets of the Indian Foreign Service. It was not unusual, for example, for Nehru to write replies to incoming cipher telegrams from ambassadors, which were then sent out in the name of heads of territorial divisions, or even their deputies. In the very readable memoirs written by Badr-ud-din Tyabji, former ambassador and secretary in the MEA, *Memoirs of an Egoist* (Roli Books, 1988), this has been described as the syndrome of the time: "leave it to Panditji" — pushing up all decisions to Nehru, however minor.

Working on the staff of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1981-82, I came upon a set of long notes exchanged in the mid-1950s between Nehru and the Civil Service head of MEA, called the Foreign Secretary in Indian terminology. Nehru sent him a four-page note describing the criteria that should be applied to the selection of ambassadors. The Foreign Secretary sent a two-page rejoinder the same day, gently pointing to the practical difficulties in finding ideal choices, to which Nehru sent a further long response the next day. No decision was taken, the more so as selection of envoys was principally the prime

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minister's prerogative, with the Foreign Secretary acting as his adviser. The exchange reflected Nehru's passion for philosophical debate and his speed of thought, but also a certain disinclination for hard decisions.

The fact that for the first 30 years new entrants had to rank among the top 20 to 40 individuals in the Union Public Service Commission annual combined Civil Services examination merit list, out of the 20,000 to 40,000 who sat for the exam (which was the only entry route into the high civil services, including the sister service, the Indian Administrative Service), reinforced the sense of elitism.

In recent years career opportunities in India have greatly expanded. Yet the civil service, and the IFS in particular, continue to attract top talent. What are the contours of this diplomatic service today? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

### **The IFS Today**

**Structure.** The first thing to note about the Indian Foreign Service is that it is exceptionally small in size, by comparison with not just India's needs but also the functions performed. To operate some 115 embassies and permanent missions and 40-odd consulates abroad, plus man the MEA, there are only some 750 officials of the rank of desk-officers and above (i.e., third secretaries and higher). By comparison the "tail" is much longer, consisting of about 2,800 non-diplomatic support personnel, according to the MEA *Annual Report* published each March.

MEA simply does not have the personnel it needs for vital tasks, and the number of missions abroad is too large. Ideally, looking to the experience of other major services, the ratio of officers at headquarters to missions should be around 1-to-1.5 or -2: in India it is 1-to-4. The IFS cadre needs urgent expansion to at least 1,000, and with it a pruning of support staff, via upgrading many to function as junior desk officials. With this must come also a reduction in the number of missions and posts. But as long as assignments abroad are seen as an essential "right," vested interests block these cutbacks.

The results are plain to see. Public diplomacy, for example, is in its infancy in India, not because its methods are not understood, but because the structure for handling this work does not exist. Today, the official heading the external publicity division is the MEA spokesperson; this same person heads the entire publicity and

information apparatus, and handles some aspects of public diplomacy as well, as there is no dedicated unit for this purpose.

Further, although all but one of the foreign ministries of the 19 countries of the E.U. and the G-8 have carried out structural changes since 1990 to cope with changes in the post-Cold War world (according to a comparative study by the Italian Foreign Ministry), MEA has so far limited itself to adding a new territorial division to handle relations with the strategically important Central Asian countries. Deeper structural change has yet to materialize, though some reforms are under consideration.

There has always been an abundance of ideas — the problem is with action! The initiative of External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh to re-examine the Service's structures, set into motion at the end of 2000, was moving slowly toward concrete action until he and Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha swapped jobs in July, and it is now unclear if the planned actions will be implemented. These included creation of a Foreign Service inspectorate (vital to undertake periodic inspection of all missions, ensure uniformity of standards, and help to enhance their performance) and placement of IFS officials within the administration of some states to help in their international contacts. There are also plans to expand the strength of the cadre, though not to the level needed; that would require a major decision of the government, especially to link the expansion with cuts in the support staff.

Still, there is some expectation that the Jaswant Singh initiative may yet lead to some real improvements; the new minister has not revealed his thinking as yet. The recent reform proposals echo suggestions contained in the Pillai Committee Report of 1966, the only public document on the IFS and its reform. But the exercise that Jaswant Singh launched was different in one important respect — it was the first effort that originated at the ministerial level, and from within MEA.

**Training.** Training for new entrants has improved dramatically in the past 15 years, with the establishment of the Foreign Service Institute in 1986 in New Delhi (set to move to its new campus in a year or so), and with a continuous improvement in training content. New

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entrants spend three months attending a common foundation course with all other entrants to the civil services for that year at the National Academy of Administration, located in the Himalayan hill-resort town of Mussourie, and then come to the Institute for a year. Their program encompasses lectures, workshops and visits to many partner agencies, including forma-

tions of the army, navy and air force. It also calls for about five months of travel to different locations in the country to see the challenges of economic and social development, as well as two separate tours to neighboring countries. Concerning languages, new recruits undergo training in the assigned foreign language at the first station of assignment, and are confirmed in service after passing the language test.

What the IFS misses, however, is mid-career training — the Institute does nothing at all at this level, nor for senior officials. MEA is simply not able to spare anyone.

**Recruitment and personnel management.** The examination system for selection of civil servants, administered by the Union Public Service Commission, now has some 300,000 applicants annually competing for about 300 to 400 jobs in all the “central services” — the other services are the Administrative Service, the Customs, Audit and Accounts, and the Police Service. The written exam is at two levels, with only about 20,000 who qualify at the first stage (the serious candidates) appearing for the second exam. Within a couple of months after the results announcement, all Civil Service entrants join the “foundation course” at Mussourie mentioned earlier, and thereafter separate to attend training at their own services.

The IFS takes an average of around 10 new entrants each year, though in 2001 the number was stepped up to 18. A notable feature of recent years is the progressive widening of the intake — in terms of the regions and groups represented, the educational background and the presence of rural candidates. Around 20 percent of new recruits are women.

British colonial administrators borrowed the concept of a single open examination for the Civil Services from China. It has provided India with a stable, unified administrative structure, which has its faults — princi-

pally that it has become a vehicle for corruption, and a victim of political pressures, and the two are intertwined — but no one has come up with a remotely comparable or viable method of selection for new entrants into the Service.

Human resource management is the key issue for all organizations, the more so for diplomatic services that mainly deal in intangibles. Throughout the Indian administration promotion by seniority is the norm; the only obstacle to promotion is outstanding incompetence. Since 1950 the constitutionally-mandated affirmative action policy of reserving 22.5 percent of government service jobs for individuals from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes has been in effect. Now some even demand that this policy ought to apply also to promotions.

Against this background, maintaining the traditional systems of rotation among “hard” and “soft” posts and motivating individuals to perform their best are challenges. Many of us lament that the system does not work optimally, but we should be thankful that it works at all.

### A Learning Curve

Like many other diplomatic services, the MEA is still on a learning curve when it comes to coping with the new domestic players in diplomacy. Today as it shifts from the classic gatekeeper role in external affairs to that of the privileged coordinator, every foreign ministry has to handle three broad clusters of players — the official agencies beyond the foreign ministry, the non-state agents (chambers of commerce, academic institutions, think tanks, NGOs and the like), and the ordinary citizens who too are involved players in virtually every country. (The best definition of these new roles is provided in the opening essay by Brian Hocking in the book he has edited, *Foreign Ministries: Change & Adaptation* [Macmillan, 1999].)

All government agencies are autonomous actors in the foreign arena. They will accept the foreign ministry as a coordinator only if they perceive this brings value to their interests and concerns. It is entirely possible for the Indian foreign ministry to do this, but to win credibility it

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## F O C U S

needs to cultivate an inclusive attitude, and modify the past mindset of exclusivity and the corresponding turf-warfare reflex. There are exceptional senior MEA officials who are able to get other ministries on board on specific issues, but this is not the general practice as yet. Cooperation with non-state players is good in some areas, such as with the apex bodies of business and some branches of non-official international organizations, but almost nonexistent with high-profile NGOs and human rights activists.

Though performance enhancement methods, many of them borrowed from business management, have crept into the diplomatic work arena, the infrastructure to maximize productivity is not uniformly in place. Methods to improve performance encompass annual action plans, benchmarking and service optimization (for example, in consular work, public affairs, and commercial promotion). MEA uses annual plans, but has not got around to tying resources into these, or carrying out a real delegation of financial powers. (This is a general weakness of

the Indian system: even the budgeted funds of ministries, duly approved by parliament, can be spent only with the approval of the Finance Ministry, either directly for big-ticket items, or through the “financial advisers” it appoints and supervises in each ministry.) A ministry-wide computer network does not exist, though most territorial divisions have their own local area networks; they do not talk to one another, or to the higher officials. An intranet or virtual private network linking MEA and the missions remains on the drawing board.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses**

What are the accomplishments of the IFS, and its points of strength? What might one expect from this set of professionals? My comments are necessarily subjective, because within a “brotherhood” one may not find the distance for dispassionate scrutiny, and also because there exist no real tools for comparing foreign ministries and diplomats. With these caveats I offer the following.

Indians are individualists for the most part, and this

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shows in a huge variation between the best and the worst among diplomats. Major missions are natural concentration points for talent, not just at the level of the head of mission. Anyone who has dealt with Indian counterparts in Washington, D.C., New York or Paris will bear witness that the best can hold their own against anyone. But if the true measure of a good system is that it evens out the peaks and troughs by elevating the performance of the lower half, then the IFS has a way to go.

In multilateral diplomacy during the 1970s and 1980s, in what we might call the heyday of declaratory diplomacy, Indians seized the high ground at conferences, U.N. assemblies and committees — alas, not all of it very productively. In bilateral diplomacy, which is necessarily practiced on a much broader canvas, there are the bright stars, and the rest. And it is often noted that the discrepancy between the peaks and troughs of ability and performance among different persons is glaring. Management and business culture specialists observe the same trait of individualism, and a relative weakness at teamwork, when they look at the Indian corporate world.

One of the strong features of the IFS was an early shift to economic diplomacy. The first oil shock of 1973 delivered a body blow to the Indian economy at a time when it had barely recovered from the disastrous droughts of the late 1960s (when P.L. 480 provided succor, before the Green Revolution became a reality), and from the Bangladesh War of 1971. Economic diplomacy became a matter of survival for India, and the IFS adapted rapidly, quickly learning to blend political and economic objectives, and practice integrated diplomacy.

The service produced role models like Bimal Sanyal and Vishnu Ahuja, both senior heads of MEA's Economics Division, who demonstrated that being proactive involved a vast amount of internal diplomacy with the other ministries and agencies, but reliably produced results. The two mobilized public-private partnerships at home, at a time when even this concept was in its infancy, to push for project and consultancy contracts in the Gulf region, and to win placement for Indian technicians. Simultaneously, they motivated Indian missions to blend political and economic diplomacy, a craft I, too, learnt in my first ambassadorship in Algeria (1975-79). Today there is hardly a

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diplomat or a mission that fails to treat economics as virtually the first priority at the majority of posts, on the premise that good political relations are a given condition in most countries but it is economics that explores the full envelope of action, and valorizes the political relationship as well.

Is there an Indian negotiating style? Stephen Cohen, one of the gurus of South Asia scholarship in the U.S., has a brilliant chapter in his book, *India: Emerging Power* (Brookings

Institution, 2001), titled "The India That Can't Say Yes." Cohen's thesis is, first, that Indians are intent on establishing the moral and political equality of the two sides and are especially touchy over "status"; second, they are patient and will wait till the terms improve; third, they negotiate for information; and fourth, they tend to have a good institutional memory, better than that of the Americans. Cohen also speaks of "a defensive arrogance and acute sensitivity to real and perceived slights," and concludes that India seems to relish "getting to no." He adds that MEA has tight control over foreign negotiations and is difficult to bypass.

### **Behind the "Indian Negotiating Style"**

Some of the above criticism comes from experience with India-U.S. relations of the pre-1991 era, when India's South-centered diplomacy (including leadership of the Nonaligned Movement, G-77 and the like) produced inevitable confrontation with much of the West. However, Strobe Talbott, whose 10-odd rounds of discussion with Jaswant Singh between 1998 and 2000 are the most intensive dialogue carried out by India with the U.S. or any other partner, may not agree with all of Cohen's characterization.

Indian negotiators are often hemmed in by an impossible brief, which is relatively rigid, to the point that no fallback positions are provided or flexibility given to the negotiators. The result is "positional bargaining" and an impression of negativism. For example, this was the case in the past with WTO meetings and other multilateral economic fora. By contrast, at Doha in November 2001, a strong Cabinet minister leading the Indian delegation, with the personal clout to obtain flexible instructions, managed to produce a good result, overcoming the rigidi-

ties of the brief and past policy.

Many individual negotiators are brilliant, adept at winning trust and working to achieve results. And generally, in multilateral settings Indians are often a popular consensus choice as rapporteurs and committee chairmen. But in regional diplomacy, being adept at tactics is not enough when policy has been unimaginative or defensive. This has been the case, for example, in India's past stance vis-à-vis ASEAN, when opportunities for close association were passed up in the 1980s. Defensiveness has crippled India's approach to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, where a fear of all the smaller neighbors ganging up blocked innovative ideas to overcome the impasse created by Pakistan's obduracy.

India's economic reforms, launched in 1991, coincided with the end of the Cold War. Both have affected the way India looks at the world, and the goals it pursues externally, in bilateral, regional and multilateral settings. India

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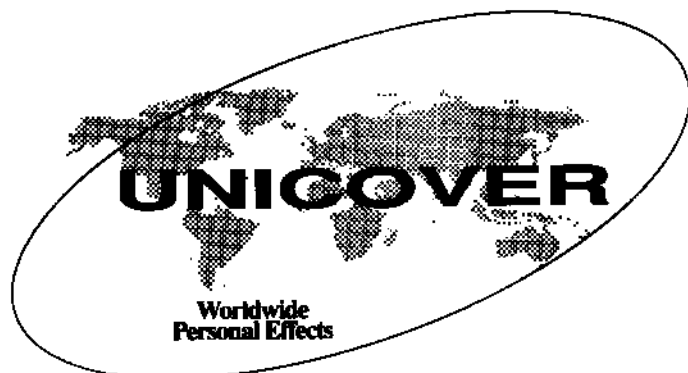
remains nonaligned in the original sense of the term, but real Indian involvement with NAM and G-77 has waned. Instead, there is a clearer perception of self-interest, and a willingness to say so. This translates into hard-headed pragmatism, where ideological rhetoric of the past is absent,

and does not cloud actions. This is especially visible in pursuit of eco-political objectives. In the Sept. 11 attacks, India finds vindication of the battle it has long waged against terrorism, plus the opportunity to pursue new relationships in Central Asia and elsewhere that move beyond a fixation with Pakistan.

As a service, the IFS has no political bias and it is well harnessed in the pursuit of national goals. Yet it has the latent capacity to perform far better, provided that real reform can be implemented in the MEA and its processes incrementally — for that is the only “Indian way” that produces results. ■

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