



# Steel frame or steel cage?

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## **Shah Faesal's resignation tells us about the receding powers of the civil service to make a difference to society**

### **Respect through merit**

- Before Independence, and for a while after it, competing for entry into the IAS was motivated by the urge to seek status in society.
- An open contest based on success in an academic examination presented the attraction of gaining social respect through merit.
- The status that accrued to an officer was associated with the authority he had to exercise state power.
- In those days, official power had few political constraints, especially at the local level.
- A district collector was seen as a meritorious monarch was the custodian of law and order which was a key role in the colonial order.
- Its cultural residues have persisted to the present times, and the status of the district collector — in some States, the district magistrate or DM — comes largely from his or her responsibility to maintain law and order.
- Following Independence, the IAS acquired a nation-building tinge in its earlier colonial role (as the Indian Civil Service as it was then called).
- From the local to the national levels, the IAS was seen as providing the firm and stable frame that India needed to overcome what were often described as 'fissiparous' tendencies in society.
- The addition of a nationalist lustre to an otherwise unchanged status gathered yet another layer when nation-building extended to a 'development' agenda.
- As a learned decision-maker, the civil servant was supposed to lend objectivity to the elected politician's agenda and wishes.
- This function made an impact on the lure of the civil service as a career.

### **Marker of change**

- Young entrants to the IAS have been known to resign early for social causes or academic careers.
- In each case, early abandonment continues to signify an act of renunciation for the pursuit of an ideal.
- Such examples have indicated the rising perception that the IAS officer's power is much too constrained, especially by those wielding political power.
- This trajectory has a considerable lesson to offer. To begin with, it shows how modernity in India has not brought an adequate appreciation of the different roles a society needs to run itself well.

### A 'syndrome'

- The civil services remain a big draw as the vast clientele of commercial coaching demonstrates.
- Probability of success is understandably low, and that is precisely what drives the coaching industry to ever increasing rates of growth and fee.
- The experience of failure leaves its psychological scab on many young minds.
- They continue to feel, for a long time, that they could have 'become' someone important.
- As a society, we obviously pay a high price for maintaining this syndrome.

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