

The DM Diary: Insights from my Job Shadowing Experience

Day 1: 12th June 2023

It's 8:30 a.m. I arrived early. I was all alone.

The exterior of the building was imposing. Although inanimate, it spoke of the position of the official working inside.

As I stepped inside, I passed through security personnel who smiled at me. Eyes gleaming with respect, they looked at me as if I was an important person.

Inside, the fan's air fanned my cheeks. I took a deep breath. I was ready for the day.

The wind in the office was serious and laden with responsibility. The revolving chair symbolised power—the power to help—the power to serve.

A pile of files wrapped in dilapidated threads, waiting to be opened, ready to decide the destiny of the citizens.

An army of helpers and mediators on their feet to help the officer in whatever capacity, to take care of his tiniest of needs.

The desktop, every working professional's close confidante, was sleeping before the hustle on data began.

The calendar spoke of bygone days and the ones that will follow. It was 12th June, Monday..

The Indian flag unfurling with the wind filled my chest with pride for my nation. It reminded me of my purpose.

But what grabbed my attention the most was the nameplate on the table. It read:

“Rakesh Kumar Singh-ii

D.M. and Collector”

I was at a loss for words. It filled me with awe and strengthened the wings of my dream—to become an IAS officer.

Greeted with salutes from everyone, the D.M. arrived in a swanky car. As he entered, he brought with him a gush of positivity. The office was transformed anew. It seemed as if the place was teeming with action. Silence faded away.

I felt important. I thanked my lucky stars for the opportunity to job-shadow such a dignified professional.

During my one week of intensive learning at the DM's office in Ghaziabad, I have imbibed more understanding of the ins and outs of the Indian bureaucracy than I could have from the worldly wisdom printed in newspapers or shown in the media. This nudged me to contemplate a looming question:

Why is the bureaucracy criticised? Why does it continue to have a negative connotation in the eyes of the world?

Bureaucracy has been imbued with a distinctly negative connotation, as is evident from a London Times article in the year 1815, which stated: "...It is in this bureaucracy, Gentlemen, that you will find the invisible and mischievous power which thwarts the noblest views, and prevents or weakens the effect of all the salutary reforms...."

Counting on the bureaucracy as a foundation to hold up the nation, Sardar Vallabhai Patel called the IAS officers "India's steel frame." However, many people hold the opinion that this steel frame is rusting. Corruption has made inroads, rendering it ineffective. Infirmities like red tape, hierarchy, and unaccountability have corroded its core. Rather than driving the implementation of success schemes, bureaucracy acts as an impediment to them.

The inability of the officers to deal with matters single-handedly leads to corruption. Constant political interference snatches their freedom for effective decision-making. Myriad transfers, one after the other, hamper their effective working and leave them bereft of significant domain expertise.

The officers are inept. The bureaucrats are considered cogs in the wheel, serving their ends. They are no longer a means to an end. Their self-serving motives have overpowered their humility to serve people. Resorting to bribery has become a commonplace occurrence in government offices.

Red tape refers to the excessive formalities or standards required before an official action can be taken. Such rigid regulations, mounting paperwork, and a fixed chain of procedures delay effective decision-making.

It is only in the face of crises that the shortcomings of the bureaucracy are exposed. A crisis, for instance, like the COVID-19 pandemic, was a litmus test for its effective and timely management. There was a lack of coordination among authorities and poor implementation of decisions at the ground level. For example, the Aarogya Setu application proved ineffective, and the health declaration forms didn't serve any purpose because people never stopped lying about them.

Analysts Milan Vaishnav and Saksham Khosla, in their study on IAS, write about the pitfalls of bureaucracy:

"Those who have come into contact with the country's bureaucracy have long criticized it for being cumbersome, slow, inefficient, and often venal. Indeed, its infirmities are so widely known that the Indian bureaucracy is the subject of unstinting pop culture mockery."

Even its global image seems to be unforgiving. World leader and former US President Barack Obama¹ in his memoir “A Promised Land” provides the stereotypical Western view of Indian bureaucracy:

“Despite its genuine economic progress, though, India remained a chaotic and impoverished place: largely divided by religion and caste, captive to the whims of corrupt local officials and power brokers, hamstrung by a parochial bureaucracy that was resistant to change.”

The universally accepted narrative maligns the reputation of those hard-working individuals who dedicate their lives to the service of others. Although negative narratives pervade, I intend to forge a counter-narrative that the picture isn’t as gloomy as it’s painted. My counterargument will be informed by my experience of job shadowing the DM and my keen observations of how things transpire at grass-roots levels.

Since I am a product of society, I succumbed to the widely accepted parochial view of bureaucracy. But as I grew and woke to my senses, my views changed. Although bureaucracy suffers from some maladies, I wish to dispel all myths regarding its inefficiencies. We cannot generalise that all bureaucrats are corrupt and bureaucracy is ineffectual. Not all bureaucrats are lackadaisical. Most of them are the wind beneath the wings of the Indian administration. They are the wheels that ensure the smooth running of Indian governance.

Here’s my account of a seven-day on-the-job training with Rakesh Kumar Singh-ii, the D.M. and Collector of Ghaziabad.

Day 1 of my epiphanic journey continued:

As the public saw the DM, their “messiah,” enter the office, there was a flurry of activity. They tied their fears in a bundle and stowed them away. There were people from all walks of life. Some of them were waiting for a long time. They felt relieved to see him finally. I was happy to see their faces light up with respect.

When he entered the office, I greeted him with “Good morning.”

Overwhelmed with problems, the people hurried to meet him. The guard told them to go one by one.

People came to him for all sorts of problems. Some of the people had ongoing land inheritance issues, which they brought to his attention.

There were predominantly women-centric issues that had cropped up. There were also religious problems that had erupted. Some women were beaten up by Muslim men outside a temple. I also saw some widows who seemed to be worried about their pensions. Cases relating to divorce also formed a small part of the problems for which people sought the DM’s help.

¹ 1]

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/obamas-book-unleashes-western-stereotype-of-violence-caste-in-india/articleshow/79245622.cms>

Apart from the social problems, several criminal disputes needed his jurisdiction. Eye-opening murders and family bickering were also pushed into the ambit of his governance.

The atmosphere was quite disturbing. Some people were shedding tears while others were creating a hullabaloo. Compared to the placid calmness of my home, it seemed to me as if I had been ushered into a very different world.

There were people from all walks of life. Individuals hailing from different religions, castes, and economic groups were offering their plate of woes and worries to the officer, who was conjuring up solutions. The DM's office seemed like a microcosm of the world. I witnessed a slice of life in Ghaziabad.

On the same day, he had gone to meet the people of his area to better understand the problems that bothered them. Violent and unruly people had gotten into brawls over land bequeathment, family discords, and child labour were some of the other issues that were entrusted to him.

I sat next to him and closely observed people and the kinds of problems they sought his advice on. I felt that there was a big chunk of life that I was ignorant of. I noticed that his purview of knowledge was vast and impressive. How he dealt with disagreements, friction, disputes, and proposed solutions was remarkable. It completely floored me.

Day 2:

It was the same story every day. But each day brought about its own set of novel learnings.

On the second day, he was constantly regaled with tales of woe. People badgered him regarding the absence of an electricity connection in their area, not just for a day but for weeks. I could not even imagine a day in my life without electricity—forget weeks. Water cuts added to their mounting problems. The gravity of the situation was serious. Nature's fury in the form of scorching heat in June was relentless.

I felt grateful that I had water and electricity at my disposal. It prodded me to think that such facilities, which we take for granted, can mean the world to someone else. It made me realize that my job-shadowing experience not only taught me the intricacies of a bureaucrat's worklife but also cultivated a sense of thankfulness for the life I had. The bigger picture was quite a revelation, indeed.

What struck me was Sir's calmness amid chaos. People were bruised and hurt. He was enveloped by the worst side of humanity. But like a stoic, he maintained his composure without giving way to a flood of emotions. With the wave of cases not seeming to subside, he was quick and efficient in dealing with them. This epiphanic realization bolted sense into me, and it was at this crucial moment/juncture that I decided to take civil services as a potential career of my life.

Rakesh sir also had a word with me regarding his professional journey. He has held various posts, like the ADDL. C.E.O. Yamuna Express-Way Authority in 2015. Then he became the Director of the Cane Institute & MD Sugar Corporation, UP, in 2016. After a brief stint there, he headed the Hapur-Pilkhua Development Authority as the Vice Chairman. Then he was appointed the D.M. & Collector of

Moradabad and shouldered multifarious responsibilities over four years. Then he was transferred to Ghaziabad, where he held the position of D.M. & Collector. It was at this turn of life that I met him and was lucky to learn under his tutelage.

His rich experience over the years as the head of administration helped him resolve criminal cases with great ease. Understanding these complex issues came naturally to him. Tactfully, he would foster efficient solutions.

To help him preside over cases, he had an army of helpmates in his office. As Hindi is the language of communication in the government's official works, a translator was present, who aided him in overcoming the language barrier. He also had other members in his office to deliberate on crucial matters and aid in the critical thinking process. Together, they worked as a team to cut the Gordian knot.

Day 3:

A key takeaway from this learning curve was not to be too benevolent. I learnt that while benevolence is admired, being overtly benign can cause problems. While people from different backgrounds thronged Sir's office, not everyone suffered from genuine problems. Once, some rich and elitist people visited him, and he gauged that there was no veracity in their narrative. They had forged their cases and statements as well and were attempting to fool the DM. But Sir could see through their lies and find loopholes in their accounts by questioning them. There was an instance when some businessmen were trying to capture the land that belonged to indigenous people. He was not taken in by their sob stories and questioned their credibility. I was stumped by their deception. It reminded me of the former British Prime Minister's famous quote:

“The art of leadership is saying no, not saying yes. It is very easy to say yes.”

—Tony Blair

Also, some people brought along several gifts to appease him. They tried to bribe him so that he would expedite their cases but to no avail. He was a man of his principles. Such pleasantries were not worth a penny for him. He would work incessantly for everyone, without any discrimination whatsoever.

It felt as if Indian secularism was at its peak. Here was a man who was conducting human affairs without the least regard for religion. His actions were truly praiseworthy, and I felt a newfound respect for him.

Day 4:

With his efficient problem-solving and solution-oriented approach, he emerged as a beacon of hope for the people of Ghaziabad.

He made sure that he had time for everyone and everything. He tried to squeeze in time from his busy schedule for social functions. Certain events and programs at different places in Ghaziabad would call for his presence, and people would invite him as a dignitary to grace the occasion. Apart from fulfilling his administrative role inside the office and outside during field visits, he would also show up at such social events to showcase his participation in community building.

I helped in the conversion of an old community hall in a primary school into a fully-equipped library in Dasana, a town near Ghaziabad. I undertook this thoughtful initiative in my capacity as a representative and active volunteer of the Bharat Bhushan Foundation. It is a non-profit foundation envisioned to empower underprivileged children and give back to society. We had a fundraising round to procure textbooks, fans, notebooks, etc. We had converted an old room in a primary school into a library. It was so kind of DM sir to inaugurate the library and grace the occasion with his awe-inspiring presence on Independence Day. He delivered a speech and motivated everyone with his impactful words.

He would try to comply with most of the requests people asked him for. He would accommodate their appeals in his tight-packed schedule. He was undoubtedly a people's person. People would look up to him for guidance and support. Like a true architect, he tried to build their lives, ensuring ease and peace in the pandemonium of their lives.

Day 5:

Another striking insight I imbibed from him was that there are no shortcuts. I observed him going to great lengths to finish the entire process. I learned that there is a certain manner in which things are done, which requires time and patience. Rome was not built in a day, goes the famous adage.

Paperwork is a necessary evil when it comes to government work. Although it is sometimes believed that heaps of files, unnecessary documentation, and official formalities postpone the decision-making process, I realised that sometimes it is imperative to pause, reflect, and then act. After all, the stakes are high; we are dealing with people and their lives.

It is significant to sometimes be slow and steady and follow the chain of procedures that ensure smooth, uninterrupted, and systematic administrative governance.

His sincerity and commitment to work were commendable. He was a genuine leader, working tirelessly to better people's lives. He would listen to people patiently and even take feedback positively. It seemed as if people were themselves involved in the governance process. They felt satisfied when they participated in their region's decision-making process. It was truly a democratic leadership that I witnessed in Ghaziabad, helmed by Rakesh sir.

Day 6:

As my training was coming to an end, other ongoing issues captured my attention. Women complained about domestic violence. When they recounted their harrowing tales of abuse, he would console them, guide them, and empower them to stand up for themselves. He would make them aware of certain government initiatives and emancipate them.

Neighbours would come to him cribbing about each other over the use of loudspeakers in the night. He would solve such difficulties very adroitly.

I remember an incident very vividly. A girl had taken up the science stream in 11th grade under family pressure. She didn't secure good marks in physics, owing to which it was difficult for her to get admission to a good college. She had secured 68%, while the cut-offs were 70%. I was amazed that people even sought Sir's guidance on such matters.

Sir spoke to her for a good deal of 15 minutes. She promised him that if he got her into the college that she had wished to go to, she would put in nights and days to get good grades. There was a major shift in the girl's commitment. I realised that sometimes you just need a little guidance from others' knowledge and experience to nudge you in the right direction.

People would even come to him to obtain an arms license. He would inform them about the formalities for the same. It seemed to me as if the range of subjects that people approached him for kept on stretching to include more and more. His expertise on a panoply of subjects helped him address all the matters deftly.

Day 7:

As my training was approaching its end, I reflected on my journey. I would catch the local train every day to reach his office, take notes, and keenly observe how he does what he does best: administering governance. Job-shadowing him was an unforgettable experience.

The words of Lord Acton kept ringing in my mind: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

But this wasn't the case with him. Sir was sincerely using his position of authority. I fathomed that power is addictive. When used wisely, power can work wonders. It was easy to get carried away by its current. But it takes a great deal of strength to wield power and use it to serve others. That self-effacing attitude was personified by the DM.

People had come to him to complain to the chairman, who was threatening them and not behaving with integrity. He talked to the chairman and resolved the issue in a blink of an eye.

He also kept himself abreast of the latest trends in the domain of education. He attended a Zoom meeting with officials regarding the new education policy for CBSE and ICSE boards. It was quite an interesting episode.

Once, a competition was being organized. The concerned authorities reached out to the DM as they could not afford to procure trophies. Sir had a lot of trophies for the fantastic work he had been doing in the district of Ghaziabad. He happily gave them all away to those people to get them rebranded for the competition. It was a heartwarming act, indeed.

CONCLUSION:

The famous poet Thomas Gray paints a sad reality:

“Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.”

Just like deep, dark caves in the ocean hold many precious gems unknown to the world, a good many flowers bloom, wilt, and fade away in the desert unseen. In a similar vein, bureaucrats like the DM perform honourable deeds that go unacknowledged. They are like unsung heroes who are never recognized. Their actions do not get recorded in history. The media does not cover them because it won't scale their TRPs. And it's a bitter truth.

They deserve all our appreciation for the unwavering support that they lend to the government. Catering to the problems of a diversified group of people isn't a cakewalk.

Sometimes they find themselves in a maze of politics,
with no way out.

Sometimes they confront people with daggers drawn,
but can't take sides.

Sometimes the heart-wrenching tales get the better of them,
but they are tied,

Sometimes they have to deal with prickly issues,

But solutions seem to be at bay

Sometimes finding solutions pushes them to their wit's end,

But they can't complain

Sometimes they deserve to be acknowledged for their efforts,

But oh! They have none.

It is the bureaucrats who translate the government's vision into reality. They are the backbone of our country's administration. Being mediators between the government and the people, they shepherd people in the right direction.

They have to clear the dreaded UPSC exam, which is considered to be the toughest in the world. Even 'ChatGPT', the AI chatbot, failed to clear UPSC CSE Prelims 2022 by 30%. Clearing it is a herculean task in itself, which, coupled with intensive training, prepares the candidates, who are no less than warriors, ready to lead the nation. Their mental calibre and dedication to work are unquestionable. It also assures that the fate of the citizens will be in the hands of the most competent of the lot.

It isn't that there is no chink in their armour. But we should not overlook their collective efforts just because some can't stand tall in keeping with their position. Although bureaucracy seems to be inflicted with some problems, it is continuously reinventing itself to cater to the demands of both the authorities above and the common people below them. Also, change begins with us.

Life in Ghaziabad plods along. My job-shadowing experience shattered my opinion, which revolved around bureaucracy being ineffective. A majority of us believe that bureaucracy is inundated with corruption, elitism, red tape, and whatnot. But I have a different story to tell. My experience with the DM was an eye-opener. Seeing what transpires at a collector's office on a day-to-day basis reinstated my belief and strengthened my faith in them. The future of our country is in safe hands.

I learned how to deal with diverse voices and their real-life problems. Seeing the magnitude of problems dealt with, my problems seemed inconsequential. It was an enriching experience that left me craving for more. It whetted my appetite for a career as a civil servant.

I was sad on the last day of my training. But as I left his office and stepped into the world, I was a sadder but wiser person.

As I parted, mixed emotions overpowered me. I bid adieu with bittersweet emotions. I felt a poignant sadness enveloping me. But I fondly cherished the fond memories of that life-changing experience and looked forward to new beginnings.