

**BOOK II**  
**A COG IN THE MACHINE**

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## ON JOINING CIVIL SERVICE

My mother believed that I was destined to earn my living by serving government. She was sure about this as my horoscope suggested that ‘the baby born on Ekadasi’ was to be parsimonious and contented, destined to support his existence by serving the government of this country. The horoscope itself recorded : ‘नरेन्द्राश्रय जीविकः’ and ‘अल्पतोषी नरेन्द्रस्य गेहगामी’. Her idea entered my consciousness to grow and flower in my later years. But the *causa proxima* was starkly mundane. As a lecturer in the Post-Graduate Department of the Magadh University, I was getting Rs. 275 per month, whereas on joining government service I could, as a member of the Indian Income Tax Service, begin in the scale of pay Rs. 400 to Rs. 1250. I decided to become a cog in the machine we call ‘government’. Edmund Burke had said, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*: “Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants.” If dreams were to sell, I could be their largest buyers. I didn’t realize that even I could become Time’s fool.

### **At the National Academy of Administration**

My period of probation began in June 1964 at the National Academy of Administration at Mussoorie. It had a sprawling campus having an array of majestic buildings. The main building bore deep imprint of the Gothic Revival. Its liquid baroque style added romantic sweetness to the whole ambience. Its vast lounge, with its charming décor, provided a wonderful casement on the Himalayan Ranges across the vast ocean of green, dense forests ascending and descending the hills. They created the illusion of strange high tides of the green over which the rays of the sun wrought patterns of light and shade splashing colours from rich inexhaustible palette of nature. The adjoining dining hall could accommodate at a time almost all the four hundred and odd probationers. The adjacent hall, which had been once the cinema house of the hotel meant for the Britishers, was for us the lecture-theatre. The vast lawn had a lush garden in which we basked in the sun, and had sweet moments of friendship for which we had sufficient time. I was one of those who had been lodged in Chaman Estate built by some feudal lord decades back on the hilltop. The room in which I stayed had an extensive balcony with wide glass panes of several colours to prevent the aggression of cold winds from the valley which was yawning wide providing us glimpses of the antics of the clouds. The electrical lights of the valley created an illusion of the stars studding the semicircular deep green downs. The glass-

covered balcony was my most enjoyable place where, in my solitude, I could read and build up my rainbow. I read Dr. M.S.Randhawa's *Flowering Trees*, *The Kangra Paintings of Love* and *The Bhosali Paintings of Love*. I had read that Ravana kept Sitaji confined in Lanka underneath the Ashoka trees profusely laden with red flowers, but I had not seen such Ashoka trees. I had felt that it was a mere poetic description. But on reading the description of the Ashoka leaves and flowers in the *Flowering Trees*, I strove a lot to see the tree somewhere. I was lucky to discover such trees at Lucknow where we stayed for sometime in 1964 while returning from Bakshi-ka-Talab, near Lucknow, where we had gone to see the rural development programmes.

The inaugural address was delivered by Shri S.K. Dutta ICS, who had been the Director of the Academy. He offered in his measured speech timely tips to the budding administrators stressing that the *esprit de corps* is the prime requisite in Civil Service, and cautioned us against vainglorious segmentations in Civil Service in which the sense of comradeship gets lost. He referred to a sort of caste system in Civil Service which had bedevilled its solidarity and effectiveness. The pathology to which Mr. Dutta was drawing our attention continues even after more than four decades, rather this sinister phenomenon has become worse.

Whatever time I could steal, I devoted that in the library which was extraordinarily rich. A lot of books on philosophy and literature had been contributed to the library by Dr. A.N. Jha, ICS, who had been the Director of Academy before Mr. Dutta took over the charge. I had met Dr. Jha once, and was greatly impressed by his personality. He was a brother of Dr. Amarnath Jha who had been the Vice Chancellor of the Allahabad University, and then the Chairman of the Bihar Civil Service Commission. Dr. Amarnath Jha was a living legend when I was a student. My teachers made frequent references to his ideas, and he figured in various anecdotes which his eminent students narrated to us. I was shocked when several years later I heard that a substantial portion of the Academy's building, and its library, were destroyed in fire. Now the Academy has been substantially rebuilt and renovated.

#### **At the Income-tax Staff Training College, Nagpur**

After a stint of six months at the National Academy of Administration, I joined the IRS (Staff) Training College at Nagpur in December 1964. It was virtually an anticlimax. Now we constituted a small band of probationers residing in ordinary rented accommodation in the Civil Lines area, shorn of all glamour which had characterized our lifestyle at Mussoorie. But we could closely interact, and we succeeded in evolving excellent *esprit de corps*. The thrust in the training at the College was on acquiring proficiency in accounts and tax laws. I found the study of accountancy tough, and I felt I was on a wrong job. I wrote to my father that I intended to go back to the university to go ahead with my interest in creative literature. Soon he wrote back to me an inspiring letter telling me that clear comprehension, and a lot of exercise at solving the problems, could carry me through my crisis. He quoted Lord Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Arjuna found the Lord's teachings too tough to be comprehended. He asked him what he could do to get round this difficulty. Krishna told him that the only way to do so was 'by constant practice' with calm and detached mind (the *Bhagavad-Gita* VI. 35):

My father stressed on 'practice' "(अभ्यासः मात्रेण)". I followed his instructions; and I did well. Thereafter this student of creative literature saw how 'accountancy' itself became highly creative (they called it 'creative accountancy')! I found the study of law greatly interesting. I adopted the semasiological approach to find out the meaning of the legal language. Legal language seemed to me nearer to poetry than to prose! Mr. C.C. Ganapathy, the Director, taught us the applied tax laws; and Mr. V.V. Badami, the Deputy Director, taught us the theory of the tax law. They were ex-army officers. We held them in our highest esteem. They helped us develop an insight into the architecture of the Income Tax Law. To say out of context, once Ganapathy Saheb, when he came to know that I had studied literature, asked me who had judged human nature better: Hobbes or Rousseau. Thomas Hobbes had considered the humans inherently acquisitive and selfish, whereas Rousseau considered them inherently good and altruistic. His question was a bolt from the blue. I said: "It was Rousseau". Promptly came his comment: "I bid you to examine your comment after a few years in the Income-tax Department." Days and years passed. I often felt I had become 'Time's fool'. But that question hibernated in my mind: I often asked myself: why did he ask me that question? But my experience in the Department brought about a change in my view. I realised that Rousseau was not right. The Income-tax Department provided me a good opportunity to see how the world went. I could see how Mammon unmasks persons. It is said that in olden days one's valour was tested in the pursuits for wealth and woman. We live in the times when the battles are fought not for a Helen of Troy, or for a Padmavati, but for greed-driven lust for wealth and power.

At Nagpur, I found life easy-going with a plenty of time to listen to the classical music. I liked Jean-Paul Satre's existentialist literature, and devoted much time in reading his literature. He got the 1964 Nobel Prize but declined that. I wrote in the Nagpur Times an article explaining why he might have done that. Life's ephemeral glories did not matter for one who had seen its crudities and baffling conundrums.

Happy days are always felt fast flying. A year passed, and time came to bid goodbye to the Staff Training College to join my post as the Income-tax Officer at Patna. The closing peroration of the Director has remained ever-green. "You have learnt a little here, but your never-failing guide throughout your career will be your brain which you must keep scintillating always. It will help you in responding to all the challenges which would come to you, announced or unannounced."