

*In Quest of a Meaningful Life: Autobiography of a Civil Servant*

by Prashanta Kumar Mishra

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Prashanta Kumar Mishra. *In Quest of a Meaningful Life: Autobiography of a Civil Servant*. New Delhi: Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2017. pp. 308+xii. Rs. 650/-.

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**Reviewed by Nibir K. Ghosh**

Though writings of all kinds by bureaucrats (both working and retired) in the Indian Administrative and other allied services is very much an in-thing in contemporary times, it sometimes becomes imperative to observe from close quarters how, in such creative renderings, we find the reflection of the so-called Civil Servants undertaking the responsibility of rising to the occasion in upholding the principles of governance and their commitment to serve the nation with honesty, devotion and integrity. William Shakespeare writes in *Hamlet*: "In the corrupted currents of this world/ Offense's gilded hand may shove by justice,/ And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself/ Buys out the law." It is pertinent to see how, over four centuries after Shakespeare's astute observation, the situation has worsened to an infinite extent in the Indian context.

Even a cursory glance at *Journeys Through Babudom and Neta Land — Governance in India* authored by T. S. R. Subramanian (former Cabinet Secretary, Government of India and Chief Secretary, Uttar Pradesh) offers a glimpse into the attitude and working of the bureaucracy. T. S. R. Subramanian refers to the members of the coveted I.A.S. as "babus" and candidly speaks about them: "They contribute very little, rarely perform any useful function, are arrogant and rude to the general public, and at the same time subservient and sycophantic to seniors and their political masters. A civil servant generally creates and lives in his own make-believe world unrelated to reality — that is why most of them have a faraway look when you see them — they will not meet you in the eye." In the said book, Subramanian quotes the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, Mulayam Singh Yadav addressing a conclave of IAS officers: "You all have such excellent minds and education; some of you are scholars; some of you have Nobel Prize minds; you will all succeed in any walk of life, wherever you turn your attention to; you have good jobs; you can educate your children well; and you are all respected by society; — (and then, the clincher, raising his voice)—Why do you come to me for personal favours? When you do, I will do as you desire and then extract my price from you."

If Subramanian's portrayal of "babus" -- aka the Civil Servants, who seem to be neither 'civil' nor 'servants' in their being mere advocates of "Might and self-interest and not "right" and "public interest" – tends to disturb our outlook and makes us aware of dismal and grim ground reality, I suggest that the custodians and guardians of righteousness take a close look at *In Quest of a Meaningful Life: Autobiography of a Civil Servant* penned by Prashanta Kumar Mishra.

At the very outset Mishra makes his interest in writing his autobiography explicitly clear: "The book is primarily an autobiography covering my administrative and spiritual experiences" (p.ix). He does acknowledge that "In pursuit of material development, we have lost sight of moral values that are the bedrock of any civilized society" (p.1). He is quick to emphasise the importance of "Cherished ideals and the principles of life without which man would be reduced to an animal" (p.x). He shares with his readers that "The world has suffered enough, not because of the actions of the violent people but because of the silence of the good people" (p.1). As the following statement indicates, *In Quest of a Meaningful Life* does not ignore the implications of violent people who are evil incarnate:

There was little respect for established norms and procedures and everything was governed by political considerations. There were groups and cliques in the bureaucracy and one could feel a perceptible politicization of bureaucracy. This trend is ominous for every State. The politicization of bureaucracy, the criminalization of politics and the unholy nexus between bureaucrats, corporates, politicians, police and anti-social elements poses a grave danger to national unity and even its very existence (p.289).

Yet, despite the ominous presence of evil, *In Quest* makes it evident as to what happens when good people break their silence against evildoers without considerations of fear and favour. Probably in unison with charismatic leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mishra believes with conviction that "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." What is truly significant in this autobiography is the fact that the author does not merely quote from scriptures and other works of literature to indicate the path and the goal that ought to be chosen by a civil servant in contending with professional challenges but takes the lead to show through his own personal experiences as a bureaucrat how he negotiated the landmines of evil, corruption and nepotism in order to establish the power of truth over lies and falsities. He has adequately acquired administrative wisdom from the Greek philosopher Cicero, who says, "A person who is not governed by laws, rules and regulations is either a beast or a god" (p.103).

*The Autobiography* contains thirty-six chapters that chronologically begins with his birth, parentage, education and goes on to describe his administrative roles in various capacities like Sub-divisional Magistrate, District Magistrate of several districts, Divisional Commissioner, Special Secretary and other prestigious assignments at the State and Central Government organizations including his stint as the Chief Secretary, Uttar Pradesh Government and, finally, as Member of Union Public Service Commission. In all his assignments he created a niche for himself not only in the corridors of power but also in the hearts of all he came into contact with.

One can easily find the secret of his success in his confession: “If we are sincere and act selflessly for a noble cause, I am sure we will always be protected by the divine force which will ward off all the obstacles on our path” (p.117). As an Administrator, he accepts he has observed how “a bit of authority and power always gets to the head of the person who then behaves in an arrogant manner” (p.123). Drawing from the wisdom of Yoga Vasistha that ego itself is a terrible enemy of man and it is the root cause of all miseries, Mishra, through his innate and deep spiritual leanings, never allowed any false ego to colour his administrative as well as personal decisions that shaped his life and career. He states with confidence and self-restraint: “The national security Act (NSA) is a potent weapon which the DM needs to use with caution and prudence. I used it against dreadful criminals and anti-social elements indulging heinous crimes and did not even hesitate to use it against an MLA of the party in power” (pp.118-119).

Theodore Dreiser, in *Sister Carrie*, remarked, “When Waters Engulf Us, We reach for a Star.” One may be startled to find that rather than rush to godmen and god-fathers as many do in times of adverse situations and challenges, Mishra preferred to take refuge in deep meditation and spiritual contemplation in “Vashistha Gufa” that gave him the strength and the courage to come to terms with the situations at hand.

The litmus test of the author came during his tenure as the Chief Secretary, U.P. Government (2007-08). Though the greatness of the coveted post was literally thrust upon him in consideration of his avowed principles, missionary zeal and exemplary commitment, he fully realized the forces he was up and against with in discharging his duty and responsibility as Chief Secretary. Matters came to such a pass in less than a year’s time that, rather than compromise on his avowed principles, Mishra decided to confront the Chief Minister herself on issues of truth and justice by submitting his resignation and seeking VRS. He quit the service on 23 May, 2008. Mishra lucidly states in Chapter 33:

I preferred to quit the coveted post rather than dance to the tune of politicians. In my own way, I had maintained the dignity of the office and also preserved the dignity of the profession.... A successful life is a life of duty, honesty, integrity, perseverance, self-sacrifice regardless of material rewards.... I quit not to impress anyone or for cheap popularity. I did it just to live up to my own standards and principles of life (pp.292-293).

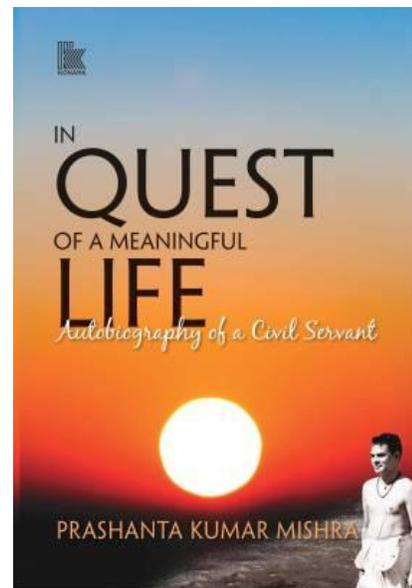
After he relinquished the post, he sent emails to his friends and fellow civil servants that read: “Life is never a straight line. It is not a bed of roses nor is it a midsummer night’s dream. At times it becomes a tempest or a winter’s tale or you take it as you like it.... Always keep up ‘Principles of Life which are more important than the mundane pecuniary material benefits of the Service’” (p.292).

At this point of the narrative one may wonder that if an honest, conscientious, efficient, dedicated and committed officer has to seek VRS in defiance of adverse and unpalatable situations created by the powers that be, one is virtually in doubt whether the path of truth and

justice is worth treading. Such honest doubts are dispelled when one learns from the autobiographical account how the very day Mishra reached Delhi after quitting his enviable Lucknow assignment, when he had no inkling of what divinity had in store from him, he received a call from the PMO's office stating that he was appointed a Member of the Union Public Service Commission, New Delhi.

Apart from the inspirational effect that the book may have on a lay reader or a Civil Service aspirant, what is bound to attract many to this heroic tale is the wonderfully lucid style that brings to the fore Mishra's innate ability to tell a story about his own self with a high degree of humility. The easy conversational style of the book makes it a compelling read. The anecdotes used in the narrative seem to appear straight from the heart, allowing one to identify oneself with the scene or situation in question. The autobiography may not offer any easy recipes for success in worldly terms but what it provides beyond doubt is a roadmap to all those who aspire for a truly meaningful life, a life that is a perfect blending of the material and the spiritual. He confesses towards the end: "I love to live an ordinary life of a common citizen, devoid of power, authority and glamour of the service. To lead such a life does require an extraordinary effort and a positive attitude to life."

May Prashanta Kumar Mishra's tribe increase!



### **About the Reviewer:**

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