

A MORE EFFICIENT ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICE

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A.S. Amaraskera who has been with the Sri Lanka Administrative Service since 1975 served a four year term as Sri Lanka's First Secretary (Commercial in Singapore during this period. He makes these observations strictly in his personal capacity, from his experience and study of both, the Sri Lanka Service and the Singapore Service

At a time when much controversy has arisen regarding the role of the Administrator, his importance vis-a-vis the professional and a host of other questions about the administrative structure of our country and its effectiveness in development, it seems appropriate to examine the Sri Lanka Administrative Service (SLAS) in relation to an equivalent service in a developing country in the region. The Singapore Administrative Service (SAS) has been chosen for this comparison mainly because of the nature of its achievements over the past two decades which has resulted in its acceptance worldwide as an exemplary Administrative Service. This paper is the result of over four and a half years of close contact and association with Singapore's premier service within its public service (still called the Civil Service) and the experience thus gained in working in an environment and with a system the objectives of which always appear to be improvement and achievement.

The Singapore Administrative Service (SAS) is the country's premier service in all respects—prestige, functions, wages and importance. It is generally referred to as the No. 1 service and is ranked higher than the Engineering, Medical, Scientific and other professional services. There are several similarities as well as differences between the structure, concept and functions of the SLAS and the SAS. While some of the differences are obviously results of the disparity in the stages of economic

development of the two countries, some differences originate from other sources too. Similarities have been occasioned by the fact that the two services both stem from and have been initially modelled on the British Civil Service. However, the nature, functions and objectives of the two Administrative Services as they stand today are far different to the original British model.

Recruits to the SAS are from among persons with high academic qualifications and this is true of the greater number of SLAS recruits too. The number of SAS officers as a percentage of the total Civil Service is .3 percent while the comparative figure for the SLAS is about .34 percent. Both services initiated primarily to maintain law and order and collect revenue have over the years been gradually transformed and now engage in direct participation in development activities in their respective countries. All officers of the SAS as well as the SLAS are transferable and as a result perform a varied set of functions and duties as they progress in the service. Finally the goal of most recruits to each service is to reach the rank of Permanent Secretary (Secretary in this country) which is considered the most high ranking and prestigious post in the public service. The differences between the SAS and SLAS are likely to become clearer on a closer examination of the SAS.

RECRUITMENT

Only persons who have obtained a first class Honours degree or a second class (upper division) are eligible for selection to the SAS. Although recruitment takes place immediately following their obtaining the degree, actual selection takes place, generally, years earlier soon after the local General Certificate of Education (GCE) 'A' Level results have been

released. At this stage applications are invited from those who have performed exceptionally well. Candidates who have passed the preliminary examination for admission to the Universities of Oxford or Cambridge are also eligible to apply. Selection is by interview by the PSC or panel or board nominated by it. On selection the prospective recruits are offered a scholarship through the University on condition that they join the Service and serve the government for at least eight years after graduation. The assessment of their academic prowess at GCE 'A' Level is so accurate that almost all those selected after 'A' Level reach the required standard of a 1st Class Honours or a 2nd Class Upper Division. The probationary period is two years during which the 'cadets' are trained at home and abroad. They are also assigned brief planned postings under the supervision of experienced senior officers.

A factor worthy of note is that the subjects offered for the GCE 'A' Level or the degree are not material in the selection process. Candidates from such varied disciplines as the Arts, Sciences, Engineering, Medicine, Business Studies and even Languages are given an equal opportunity provided their achievements conform to the basic academic excellence required. Once recruited and trained, the government sees to it that maximum use is made of the particular subject or discipline the officer has specialised in. As a result, the knowledge, expertise and experience of these officers in their varied fields are never lost to government. Recruitment is also carried out to a very limited extent by means of open advertisement in the newspapers. The minimum qualifications required are the same as those outlined above. This affords an opportunity for late developers who may not have performed exceptionally well at the 'A' Levels but have succeeded in obtaining the required honours degree.

In the recruitment procedure, academic excellence and intellectual ability are not the only criteria for selection to the SAS. Aptitude, character and leadership qualities receive equal weightage. The Public Service Commission (the appointing authority) has laid down the following requirements for entry to the SAS:

"A good Honours Degree. Apart from good academic qualifications. Administrative Officers must possess integrity, self-discipline and commitment to the service. They should have a clear and analytical mind, able to size up problems or situations and come up quickly with practical solutions. They should also be self-assured, innovative and adaptable, coping well with the demands and pressures of change and able to get work done quickly" (1).

Although these requirements are not specifically stated, it is presumed that Selection Boards look for these qualities when selecting officers for the SLAS and therefore in this respect the criteria are similar. The differences however are more marked and greater in number. There are three methods of selection to the SLAS, namely Open Competitive Examination, Limited Competitive Examination and the Merit Promotion Scheme. The number taken in under the Open Competitive Scheme is the largest, comprising 60 percent of the intake while the other two schemes cater to 20 percent and 20 percent respectively. While the Open Competitive Scheme is purely for graduates it laid down (until recently) no specific academic excellence except the possession of a degree.

A significant difference between the schemes of recruitment to the SAS and the SLAS (Open Competition) was the emphasis placed on academic distinction by the SAS and the total absence of such a requirement for entry to the SLAS. An SAS recruit must necessarily possess a 1st or 2nd class Upper (Honours) Degree

but the SLAS entrant could get by with a mere pass degree. An emphasis on high academic qualifications did however, exist under the Ceylon Civil Service (CCS) recruitment scheme and for some years (since its formation in 1963) under the SLAS scheme. Sarath Amunugama, writing to the Economic Review in 1977 refers to this as the "Hailbury Tradition" which dominated the Colonial Civil Service. The scheme which was initiated in 1977 which he called a "radical departure from this system" had no such stress on academic learning.

The examination for entry was in two parts - (1) an Elimination Test and (2) Selection Test. The Elimination Test was made up of two papers - (a) Comprehension and (b) Intelligence Test. Successful candidates then faced the Selection Test which consists of an Essay paper, a General paper and a viva voce. It will be seen that although the very basis of the SAS scheme of recruitment is academic excellence, the SLAS entry scheme did not at that time require a test of academic knowledge. However, a decision has been taken recently to go back to the "Hailbury Tradition" and candidates have now to sit for 4 subject papers and 3 general papers-General Intelligence, Comprehension and General Knowledge. In fact the intake of SLAS cadets in 1983 was on this basis.

The Limited Competitive Exam is for those in service who have served over ten years (graduates five) and the Merit Promotion generally for those who have probably served longer and reached the 'top' with no further avenues of promotion open to them in their service. In all three schemes final selection is by interview. In contrast the SAS has no room for persons other than those with 1st class or Second Class Upper Honours Degrees, and does not entertain officers from the ranks either through competition or merit.

The SLAS scheme of recruitment appears more democratic in that it gives a chance through its Limited Competitive and Merit Promotion schemes, to intelligent officers who may not have been able to graduate due to lack of opportunity, to prove their capabilities and qualify to enter the service. In a country where educational opportunities and facilities vary considerably from district to district such arrangements are both humane and democratic. However, from the point of view of the usefulness and the effectiveness of these two schemes in the furtherance of government policy and development, arguments could be raised against as well as for them. For instance those competing for entry through the Limited Competitive Examinations are usually in the clerical and allied services and have thus been working at levels below the Administrative over long periods. As a result, these mature officers have formed ways of thinking that do not measure upto management level and are not therefore suited to take on a new and more demanding role which necessitates an almost complete change in outlook. Again, those promoted on merit are advanced in years and may serve only 3-5 years before they retire. The benefit here is mainly to the officer as he would draw a higher pension in retirement but the benefit to government is possibly minimal as he serves only a brief period in his new role. As against these disadvantages, these officers have experience in working within the system, have gained a knowledge of governmental activities, programmes and procedures and are therefore equipped in a sense to fit into their new positions.

The Singapore Administrative Service recruitment procedure is, on the other hand, autocratic. There are no second chances. Either one makes the grade at a particular stage or one loses the opportunity altogether. However, the formulation of this rigid system appears to have been governed by

two important factors which are peculiar to Singapore. One is that the small population of 2.4 million places limitations on the availability of human resources with the high level of attainment required to enter the SAS. The best intellect and talent therefore has to be put to the best use.

A Senior Singapore Civil Servant has put this rather simply but forcefully as follows:

"Singapore is a small country. We do not have resources such as minerals; nor have we got the expanse of land to develop agriculture. But one thing we do have and that is human resources; and the philosophy for development is to maximise the use of our citizens' abilities in the development of the economy".

The second reason lies more in the Singapore Concept of the 'Administrator' as compared with our own and this merits closer scrutiny.

CONCEPT

In terms of the Singapore Concept, the Administrator's responsibilities could be conveniently crystallised into three basic functions thinking, planning and decision making. As a thinker it falls within the purview of the Administrator to project his mind forward not a month or a year, but decades and to assess the state of development in the world as well as in the region and its possible repercussions on his country at that point of time e.g. in the year 2010. He is expected to do so by making use of statistical data, reports and other information in the relevant areas, which are made available to him. As a planner, the Administrator must then, necessarily assist in the formulation of plans and programmes to meet the demands that would be made on his country in terms of the assessment he has made stage by stage.

year by year, decade by decade. As a result of this type of activity the Singapore Educational Programme has been drawn up to meet the needs of the year 2010, while the Family Planning Programme envisages a population of 3.4 million in the year 2030. From this point onwards Singapore expects to achieve a zero rate of population growth.

As a decision maker the Administrator is called upon to deal with a host of problems that crop up in the implementation of programmes. He is constantly compelled to make quick decisions under great pressure: his decisions have to be directed towards the ultimate goal of achieving the objectives and targets set by his thinking and planning activities. To borrow an expression from Professor G.G. Thomson, SAS officers are doers or thinkers preparing for doing.

The explanation of the Singapore Concept of the Administrator given above may appear over simplified but could be considered basic to the thinking of the Singapore authorities on the subject. The following extract from the "Scope and Nature of Duties" as outlined in a memorandum on the SAS would serve to illustrate this:

"The Administrative Service is the premier service in the Civil Service Holding key positions in ministries and departments, Administrative Officers assist ministers in the formulating and implementation of Government policy as well as in the co-ordination and improvement of Government machinery. Work in this elite service is especially challenging, varied and rewarding and will be increasingly so with the growing complexity and modernisation of Government activities."

What becomes increasingly clear from the foregoing is that the SAS officer does not engage in routine work or establishments

work as the SLAS officer knows it. He will not approve the granting of an increment to a subordinate nor approve applications for leave. He is not concerned with an underpayment of a few hundred dollars to government or the refund of an overpayment. His own time and energies are too valuable and cannot be spent on these day to day matters. These are left to the 'Executive Officers' - a kind of middle grade in the Civil Service which functions at a level between the Administrative and the Clerical. The functions of the executive officer are similar to those of the Office Assistant (OA) or Chief Clerk (CC) in the local set up. He attends to office administration routine or establishments work and leaves the SAS officer's 'routine' consists in attending seminars, conferences, discussions at ministry and interministerial level, engaging in studies, compilation of reports and handling special assignments both at home and abroad. It will therefore be seen that he clearly functions at a level and in an area in keeping with the intellectual abilities and commitment that are required of him as an SAS Officer.

When one considers how often SLAS officers at all levels (this does not exclude "permanent" Secretaries) are hampered by having to see to routine matters which leaves them little time to engage in thinking, planning and formulation of policy and programmes, one wonders whether it is not time that the scope and nature of duties of SLAS officers is re-examined in the light of the Singapore Concept. One weakness may lie in the lack of a proper definition of the scope and nature of duties a deficiency which could be set right without much difficulty. While total absorption or imitation of the Singapore Concept is not intended, the possibility of modifying it to suit the role of the SLAS officer in the local environment seems to be desirable.

TRAINING

The training of SAS officers is carried out by the Civil Service Institute (CSI) which is in many ways the counterpart of the Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration (SLIDA). The induction training for SAS cadets lasts two months culminating in a two week tour of the ASEAN countries. The CSI conducts courses for all levels in the Civil Service but those relevant to the SAS are the Middle Management Course and the Senior Management Course. Middle managers are instructed in the principles of management, quantitative analysis and economic policies. The subjects are reminiscent of those covered by SLIDA for SLAS middle managers.

The more interesting and significant course is the Senior Management Course which is a residential course for Heads of Departments and Permanent Secretaries. This course deals mainly with concepts of management. The CSI also conducts English Language Courses at all levels but concentrates on the Senior and Middle level management. It is well known that the Singapore Prime Minister once made all Permanent Secretaries follow a two weeks English Language Course at the Civil Service Institute.

PROMOTIONAL PROSPECTS

Opportunities for promotion to higher grades in the SAS are attractive; depending on the ability and performance of each officer. The higher grades of appointment with salaries applicable to each are given in Table I at right.

An Administrative Service officer begins his career as an Administrative Assistant drawing S\$ 1600 p.m. Within a period of 4-6 years it is possible for him, depending on his abilities, to reach the grade of Assistant Secretary which carries an initial salary of S\$ 3300 p.m. The next grade called

Principal Assistant Secretary could be reached within another 3-4 years and would bring as monthly remuneration S\$4300.

Usually a Principal Assistant Secretary would reach the maximum in two years time and be eligible for promotion to the Deputy Secretary Superscale G in which he would earn S\$5500 p.m. In this category there are two other levels Grade E and Grade D which carry salaries of S\$6500 and S\$7500 p.m. respectively. By the time an officer reaches Superscale Grade D, he would have put in about 15 years service and served in several ministries and departments. He would now be eligible to become a Permanent Secretary in Superscale Grade C drawing S\$ 9,500 p.m. From this point onwards promotion is slower but a Permanent Secretary can aspire to receive a salary of S\$21,700 p.m. in the top grade of the service called Permanent Secretary Staff Grade III. As far as the writer is aware no officer is at present drawing this salary, the closest being that drawn by the Permanent Secretary Ministry of Finance who draws almost S\$18,000 p.m.

Two features worthy of note in the composition of the scales is the rapidity of promotion and the increases in salary even after reaching the rank of Permanent Secretary. There is no 'stagnation' at any point thus creating an atmosphere of recognition of ability and performance.

Sir Derek Rayner Adviser to the present British Prime Minister writing to "The Administrator" has made two significant observations on the lack of recognition of ability and performance in the UK and the need to correct this situation. Sir Derek says that "Too often it is the capacity to avoid error which collects the remarks" and in the same vein states elsewhere in his paper :

"Succession planning should be developed to ensure that those who are known to have capacity are promoted to top positions when the time comes and not those who claim to fame: is seniority".

Further, in the context of living costs in Singapore an SAS officer has few financial problems as his salary is more than adequate for his needs and the maintenance of his social position. This is because wages are based on actual cost and allowances made regularly for inflation.

Salaries in the private sector are, as in most developing countries, more attractive and jobs are accompanied by the usual fringe benefits. On the other hand, while a post in the SAS is both secure and satisfying, employment in the private sector though more remunerative, lacks stability. This is partly borne out by the fact that 'job hopping' is a common phenomenon among private sector establishments in Singapore. Again an SAS officer could look for a job

Table I

Permanent Secretary	Deputy Secretary
(a) Staff Grade III *S\$21,700 p.m.	(g) Superscale Grade D S\$7500
(b) Staff Grade II S\$18,800	(h) Superscale Grade E S\$6500
(c) Staff Grade I S\$15,900	(i) Superscale Grade G S\$5500
(d) Superscale Grade A S\$13,600	Principal Assistant Secretary
(e) Superscale Grade B S\$11,500	(j) S\$4300 - 300 x 2 - 4900
(f) Superscale Grade C S\$9,500	Assistant Secretary
	(k) S\$3,300 - 250 x 5 - 4550

*S\$ 1 = Rs 10 (approx.)

outside only after his 8 year compulsory 'bond' term which acts as a deterrent. Thirdly officers in the higher echelons of the service have a sense of commitment which may very well be the deciding factor in their desire to continue in the SAS. Whatever the reason, 'defections' to the private sector are few and far between and have never posed a serious problem to the authorities.

POLITICAL INTERFERENCE

It would not be correct to say that members of Parliament do not attempt to interfere at all in dealings the public as with the bureaucracy. However, such interventions often involve only an exchange of letters. To take an example: a Member of Parliament may at the request of one of his constituents write to the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Housing inquiring as to why one of his constituents has not been granted a Housing Board Flat although he has applied for one and been on the waiting list for over 2 years.

The Permanent Secretary would send the MP a polite reply (probably) stating that (1) 2000 flats have been allocated (2) the

constituents number on the waiting list is 3,221 and therefore would he (the MP) kindly inform his constituent that he would have to wait for his turn. It is obvious from this exchange of letters that both parties are aware that the situation cannot be changed. The system must not be violated. This is the basis of the relationship between the MP and the public servant and it is always recognised and respected.

THE ADMINISTRATOR AND THE PROFESSIONAL

As mentioned earlier, in the Singapore Administrative set up the professional always takes second place. Whatever the profession the scale of salary and the maximum enjoyed by the Administrator is way above it. This will be apparent in a comparison with the salaries of professionals listed in Table II below.

It will be noticed that except for the Engineering Service the initial salary of which is on par with the SAS at S\$ 1600 p.m., the initial salaries of the Medical, Dental and Psychologists Services

are higher. However, the maximum in any service does not exceed S\$ 9500 p.m. In comparison, in the SAS S\$ 9500 is the starting salary of a Permanent Secretary (Superscale Gr. C in Table 1). The Permanent Secretary scale rises from this point to S\$ 21,700 which is the maximum in the scale while no other professional or scientist could aspire to receive more than S 9500 in the service. However, as mentioned earlier, officers who have achieved academic excellence in other fields could always apply to join the SAS when vacancies are advertised.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Upto the middle of 1983 the Confidential Report System, which is followed in Sri Lanka too, served as the basis for promotion as well as for career development. However, it had been felt over the last year or two that there had been so much emphasis over the past two decades on economic development that little attention had been given to the development of human resources. The Singapore Government had also seen the need to develop the Administrative Structure to meet the demands of the next few years. In this context it was recognised that a special unit should be set up to appraise the performance of officers in the Service with special attention to the SAS. The new Division set up to handle career development is to implement what is known as the Open Appraisal System as opposed to the earlier Confidential Report System. Under this scheme an officer would be rated at the end of each year on his performance and not on a Confidential Report submitted by his superior or Head of Department. The new appraisal is to take the form of an interview or discussion with the officer on the role he has played over the past year with special reference to his successes as well as his failures, his

Table II

Initial Post	Salary	Highest Grade	Salary
Engineer ESO (Gr XI)		ESO Grade I Superscale	
Mechanical	S\$1600	"	S\$9500
Electrical	S\$1600	"	S\$9500
Civil	S\$1600	"	S\$9500
Chemical	S\$1600	"	S\$9500
Architectural	S\$1600	"	S\$9500
Defence Engineering and Scientific Officer	S\$1600	Defence Engineering and Scientific Officer Gr. I Superscale E	S\$6500
Medical Officer MBBS	S\$2050	Medical Officer Superscale Gr. D + Allowance	S\$8500
Dental Officer BDS	S\$1800	Dental Officer Superscale Gr. D + Allowance	S\$1750
Psychologist Gr. (V) Division I	S\$1700	Psychologist Gr. I Superscale G	S\$5500

abilities and inadequacies etc. Steps would then be taken to see that the officer is supervised and trained so that he would be able to perform better. Consideration would also be given to special abilities and skills in appointing the officer to subsequent positions. Thus there would be a 'real' appraisal with a view to career development as opposed to the former purely subjective Confidential Report. This new system has been adopted by the Singapore Government after a team of officials headed by the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Finance had made a detailed study of the Open Appraisal System (now being implemented by Shell in the United Kingdom) and made its recommendations to the government.

The SLAS too depends on the Confidential Report System and the form of its operation at present leaves much to be desired. Reports are called for months or even years after an officer has left the department. The head of department who prepared the report is very often unable to recall sufficient information about the officer in order to write an accurate report. On the other hand some heads feel that the officer would not stand a chance of promotion unless he gives him 'A' gradings for all the qualities and abilities he is asked to report on. All these have contributed to making the Confidential Report System a meaningless exercise and the scheme needs looking into. Perhaps a degree of appraisal may be considered initially until an entirely new scheme is formulated.

CONCLUSION

The appointment recently of a 'high powered' Cabinet

Sub-Committee to look into the salary scales of public servants seems most opportune in the light of the basic questions raised in this paper which are summarised below.

- (1) Should the present schemes of recruitment to the SLAS continue or should they be modified to recruit persons who would make the best contribution to the country
- (2) Should the SLAS be thrown open to technical and professional officers.
- (3) Should the present salary structure of the SLAS be revised to make it the premier service or should it remain a second rate service.
- (4) Should the concept of the Administrator be redefined so that he could perform the functions of thinking, planning and policy formulation or should he continue to devote his time to routine work.

(5) Should the system of appraisal through Confidential Reports continue or should it be discontinued and a study made with a view to introducing a new scheme, possibly Open Appraisal.

As mentioned at the very outset, the Singapore Administrative Service is committed to improve and achieve and this it has done admirably over 2½ decades. The secret of its success appears to be that officers are content in their jobs. They have no financial burdens. Promotional prospects are good and promotion is quick. Ability and performance are recognised and rewarded. Above all there is a sense of commitment to the task the Administrator is ultimately involved in - the task of nation building. If nothing else, this should commend the SAS as an example to be followed by the Administrators.

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