

Introduction

One of Oscar Wilde's characters remarks that memoirs are being written by persons who had either entirely lost their memories or by those who had led such dull lives they had nothing worth remembering. This was over a hundred years back but things have not changed much. Perhaps he was exaggerating to make a point. We all remember the high and low points of our lives, indeed our struggle is to escape from memory. What he probably meant was that the memoirs are dressed up and sanitized and so their lives appear respectable and dull. The exciting parts, the truthful bits they leave out because no one wants to appear to have lived in a way different from what is acceptable and in no way different from others. It is for this reason that most memoirs, particularly those of men in public life today, are unreadable. The gap between what is presented and the known reality is difficult to accept. The average reader would prefer genuine fiction.

But every person does experience life uniquely. In a sense each of us walks subjectively different paths no matter how similar our life circumstances. A tale told truly will have the odor of freshly trodden leaves, and is worth the telling. But that alone is not enough reason to bring out a book on one's life experience. A poet or an artist is entitled to do that. A genius can write a 900 page work of art on the events of 24 hours in an ordinary life and give it universal meanings which startle us into recognition.

This book does not claim any artistic merit nor is it a scholarly treatise or an entertainment. What is written about are insights and understandings from my work experiences. Mine is not a household name. So why am I writing this book?

I wanted the world to know of a new model of ethical leadership which I developed and practiced in my professional life. It is set out in this book in a complete form, a combination of practice and theory, but a theory which emerged out of practice and not the other way round. Ethics professors talk of ethical management and the business managers and organizations practice it in letter if not in spirit. But perhaps nowhere else has a successful CEO developed such a discipline and used it for the revival of organizations at a personal cost. In that sense this book is unlike

any other.

Ethical leadership is the vital ingredient missing in our societies; let us call it vitamin E. It appeals not to man's greed and fear but to that which is his best within him. The book talks about fight backs and successes in the organizational field. What is narrated here will change the reader's weltanschauung, the way he looks at our world. Can an ethical approach succeed in government departments and in commercial bodies? Contrary to conventional wisdom, the answer is, yes it can and did. A large number of people benefited and public interest was served. Was the commitment to ethics a handicap which slowed down our work? On the contrary it speeded it and made the results more certain. Were these results as good as those obtained with the usual methods of bureaucratic and corporate management? They were better. Were these results acknowledged by objective observers? Yes they were. Was this success a chance event or did it cover a number of organizations? As a CEO through ethical management I was able to turnaround or substantially improve the working of nine commercial organizations, of different sizes, to the objective satisfaction of market observers. In the GSFC, a big publicly listed company with a turnover of around a billion dollars, my efforts increased the share price from Rs 14 when I joined to Rs 251 three years later. I think I created more wealth at a faster rate for more people at a lower personal benefit and against more opposition than any person anywhere in the world; and this without the faintest whiff of wrong doing. Today, years after I left these companies, my image among its stakeholders is, if anything, brighter than what it was when I was working there. They now realize how immeasurably superior my model of ethical management is to everything they now see and hear about else where. This is unprecedented. The world ought to know about the ethical techniques that enabled these results particularly when there was no prospect of material rewards and the certainty of powerful opposition and also how a person like me with modest academic achievements and limited personal capabilities could bring about such serial transformations not only in the bottom line of companies but more important, in the hearts and minds of men and women. After having cut all the necessary corners to get what one wanted, it is customary in India for the successful man to appear humble in public appearances and to ascribe one's success to destiny. To those who find my assertions uncomfortable, my request is to please read the book.

This account talks about the revival of organizations by a reassertion of values in a world which at first appears indifferent and even hostile but allows you, if you are prepared to take your chances and swim against the dominant current, to show a better way. Ethical management and leadership could yet save India from most of the ills that trouble it. This book will show how.

The number of saints, geniuses, artists and the very rich is not large any where. They can live independent of others. The average educated Indian needs the shelter of an organization to survive, to look after his family and grow to his full professional stature. The health of a nation too finally depends on how good its organizations are. These are the machines that funnel up people's energies for national development. If organizations can be made to work at their full potential, then many would like to know how. An organization could mean any community of individuals working together to achieve economic aims. Most persons are dissatisfied in one way or the other with the place where they earn their living or have to deal with. Excellent ones are few.

I had to overcome my hesitation in pushing forward ethics as the driver of organizational, and national, revival. There was the possibility of coming across as an ineffective do-gooder who could not quite make it in material world and so be instantly disqualified from being taken seriously by those who pronounce judgments on such matters. The perception even among fair and decent persons is that running a successful business in India today was for hard headed, unemotional, tough, realistic men and women and not for wimps who talked of ethics. The few who have faced it know that ethical leadership is strong enough to overcome and outlast wealth and power. It is no wilting flower. Yet ethical management is today a practice that dare not speak its name. A successful ethical project would be seen as a threat by the powerful who benefit from the way things are run today and who would disparage any attempt to suggest an alternative ethical model, particularly one which had actually worked in the field of competitive business. But I am not preaching from a moral pulpit. It is scientific ethics that will be described here. The book unhesitatingly spells out, without any false modesty, the successes this ethical method achieved, just as it makes no attempt to dignify or gloss over my career failures. Without highlighting the successes the ethics behind it would not be taken seriously. It is not personal chest thumping. These two set of events, the organizational successes and the personal setbacks, are causally linked and reflects the antipathy of the powerful to ethical action in our country.

This is the one single overwhelming reason for our country's failures and it needs to be given the utmost importance when wise heads are discussing these issues. At this stage it must be made clear that there is a great difference between mere honesty, usually called integrity, and ethics. At the higher levels of decision making, mere honesty/integrity is pretty ineffective. Honesty/integrity merely tells us what not to do mainly for fear of the adverse consequences. Ethics tells us what we should and must do even while being aware of the adverse consequences to us personally of this course of action. Most persons are uncomfortable

acknowledging an ethical success as it urges them to undertake similar efforts which they are averse to because of the risks. An unethical success presents no such difficulties as they could say they are not prepared to stoop to those levels of conduct. Some good people are also embarrassed to talk about ethics as it appears to be talking down to others which is bad for one's career. It may also be seen as a reproach to the large number of content and complacent worthies who profess to be ethical but lack the courage required and end up as a supportive audience to the unscrupulous who dominate most organizations. But also, perhaps the common man in India may feel he has had enough of being lectured on morality by those who use it to hide immoral acts. In deference to him I will largely talk about deeds, not theory.

But the ethics described here is a little different from how it is conveniently understood. This ethics has to be used in the field of one's professional work rather than in private life and it is a positive urge to do what is right rather than desisting from doing what is wrong. Not only does it urge us on but it also shows us the correct step forward by a scientific dialectic. It carries more risk to the doer as it is likely to pit one against those who could harm or help him. It is not the ethics of the monastery either or of weekend social work, feel good symbolic acts which do not change the reality. An iconoclast should break the icons of his/her own group, not those of others. Feel good and symbolic acts on the stage rarely does good while doing good never feels good. Real patriotism can be expressed by a grown up person only through one's vocation and not by speeches, expressive postures or giving and receiving awards in front of a clapping audience. Ethics is something more than merely refraining from doing anything illegal, as interpreted by high priced lawyers on one's pay. It is definitely not a feel good activity as it exposes you to uncertainty, doubt and conflict as you walk alone. The payback of success and public vindication comes only after it is all over and brings no material benefits to its practitioner. If as a person of influence and power you do not face danger and hostility from the powerful, then most likely what you are practicing is not ethics in your professional life.

If my conduct has been truly ethical this way, then it will be evident in what is described in this book. There will be no fact free analyses but ethical principles and analyses arising out of instinctively felt beliefs will be embedded throughout the narrative, like plums in the pudding, showing the link between these and my actions. But at the end there is a thick chunk of ethical speculation on what is to be done.

The serious objection to ethics is that it does not 'work' in the world

of business and govt. To those who say this, I would point out that in my experience it did work particularly well in government and business. It clearly depends on which meaning of 'work' we have in mind. Does 'work' mean benefiting the genuine stakeholders of the organization for the long term, with fairness and transparency? If we mean this, then ethics does work as will be shown in the book. Or does it mean helping the organization man to move ahead in life, or at least avoid problems, by taking care of the interests of those who control his posting and future career and avoiding conflict with those who could harm it? Definitely ethics I describe does not do this, and again the book will show this too all too clearly. Such persons will find it hard to accept this ethics. Upton Sinclair had said that it is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on him not understanding it. Their economic interests are opposed to this ethics.

There is a problem here which cannot be brushed aside as merely semantic. It arises from the perception of India as a country which is being dishonestly and unjustly managed for the interests of the rich, the powerful and those who are clever. This pattern of dominance is growing stronger the world over. To such persons ethics, as described here, is seen as a discipline which hampers the free pursuit of self interest.

The sad fact is that in our country, and probably in the rest of the world too, the good side is losing. It is losing because its members are continuously abandoning strongly held positions. One feels sickened and numbed at these betrayals which happen regularly. These positions should have been defended because on them rests the public interest of India's powerless and struggling millions, so many of whom are falling off the edge, unable to hold on. They are not visible to those who choose to look away.

Unless rearguard actions are taken by reforming elite in our country to reestablish ethics in public life, we in India run the risk of the ruling class losing legitimacy in the eyes of most of our citizens. All legitimacy must have within it the core of a moral purpose. Without this, authority will be seen as illegitimate and will first be resented and then actively resisted. And then, as the poet warned, we will have a situation where things fall apart, the centre cannot hold and mere anarchy will prevail. This will happen not by one cataclysmic event but in low whimpers, debasing the human being and devaluing social cohesion and values. Our society has a stake in trying out an alternative ways of working in public institutions. If these ways can give us what we need then they must be tried out. The present situation where a few are benefiting at the cost of many is a highly unstable equilibrium and is an unsafe foundation on which to build our nation's future.

In this book my central assertion is that most failures in the public field are the result of ethical failures by the leadership. By 'leadership' I mean individuals in position of leadership. These failures are individual failures of character and not of policies. Later on in the book we will see how, for example, the fiscal deficit, a term used by finance mandarins which the common man is encouraged not to understand (most persons are impressed by and accept what they do not understand) , is the monetary counterpart of an ethics deficit among our leadership. A thousand ethicals like me in positions of leadership could bring down India's fiscal deficit to that level consistent with investing for future growth. The wastage and corruption which bloat up government expenditure and shrink its income would vanish. At the same time income due to the government and also profits of companies would rise with corresponding increased inflows into government treasuries. By leadership I mean all who operate independent levers of power in the public field and not just the Prime minister, Chief Ministers and other Ministers. It includes top businessmen and heads of corporations and other organizations. Yes and definitely all members of the higher civil services. Successes come when all such leaders operate ethically, ethical as defined in this book, independently and following their own directional guide. There will be challenges and difficulties but people will not see these as failures of the leadership if it leads ethically. It is in this sense I claim that ethical leadership can never fail. The stakeholders will see such efforts as a successes which sets the stage for further objective breakthroughs in the days to follow. Only when this central role of ethics in national development is acknowledged would the great energies of our people be released and true development takes place. The task of Indian leadership is to be ethical or, if this is not possible, at least to support ethical leadership whenever they see it. If we are not prepared to do this then we may as well bid good bye to our dreams of glory and greatness for our nation.

The more ethicals there are in powerful positions, the faster will India grow. India will glow from the light of these thousands of ethicals spread over the country. It will never happen by the central switch of wise policies as our leadership fondly believes today. No reform can take place by a centralized law or policies if the persons occupying important positions are not ethical and are loathe defending the public interest standing alone against the powerful. An ethical leader creates thousands of ethical strivers under him but he must be prepared to face danger. Our effort must be to create some supply style incentives for the ethicals to thrive and grow in number. Otherwise their number will remain pitifully small.

A nation will grow to greatness by the ethical striving of its best as they lead the rest of the country to similar efforts. The mass can never lift

itself up. This statement is in no sense patronizing. The ethical leader brings out the best in those he leads. Our task is to bring out the great capabilities and aspirations which lie submerged in the heart of each Indian. The ethical task begins by recognizing these strengths. The ethical does not look down on those he leads; instead he looks to them with hope and eager expectation. It is their response that will vindicate him, otherwise he is lost.

Although this is a book by a civil servant, I will write only about the organizations I served in and the impact of what I did there. My biographical details are of no interest and there will be very little of it. One's early life and background does not explain what happens later on. Those whose initial life circumstances were similar to mine turned out very different from me. Neither our stars nor our heredity determines what we will become. With free will we choose our future. There will be a little about the Service and the govt working but only as a background to some of my actions. Mine was not a conventionally successful civil service career, as will be painfully clear. It was not that I planned it that way but the conditions for career advancement turned out to be at variance, and even in conflict, with the goals I chose to pursue, though this incompatibility was not evident in the beginning.

So I have no awe inspiring details to reveal of momentous decisions at the top or what really happens when statesmen gather, who said what, witty repartees at meetings, tongue in the cheek recollections and things like that. The life of a civil servant has been well described by many writers starting with the note worthy events of their days in the district. In any case public appetite for interesting insights from the civil servant has waned. He is no longer an admired figure and consequently the man in the street does not want to know much about him. The let downs have been too many and the civil servant is seen to be just another shabby, clever person hiding behind the anonymity of power. The media provides all the inside stories you did not want to know about and which you are heartily sick of now. Those who wish to understand how the higher civil service functions will find little of substance here.

There will also be no discussion of what ails the country and what policy level changes by the government are required. This is an area where there is neither a dearth of prescriptions nor any shortage of medicine men. The effectiveness of policy making as a way of solving problems has been overestimated, mainly by the policy makers themselves for reasons of self interest. My assessment of what works is empirical and inductive, emerging naturally from the experiences and events of my official life. Those who have prospered by top down policy making while keeping a safe distance from the sharp and conflicting edges of field

engagements may not be inclined to accept what is said here. But the common man will instinctively understand and appreciate what is written here. A policy driven administration concentrates power at the top, is hierarchical and demoralizes the field level managers. There will also be far more policies than is actually required and this clutter of policies will slow down field level initiatives.

What about corruption? Many thinkers/writers/speakers, including some retired civil servants, have established themselves as authorities on this subject. They talk on the issue of corruption, how it weakens the country and the economy and what macro policies are needed to combat this menace. But they are silent on the corruption they personally faced in their own assignments and how they tackled it. There is a calculated reluctance to talk about their own experiences. They are active in the lecture circuit and other forums which is today quite lucrative so it may be unwise to upset those who host such events. Their phones will continue to ring. This book does not shy away from it though it asserts that the absence of ethics is a far greater weakness than corruption. Corruption was demolished and uprooted completely through ethical management wherever I worked. The corrupt are stupid and apt to scare easily. It was no contest. No macro policies or law are required to fight corruption. The person heading any organization can do it effectively.

Ethical functioning from the top is the finest policy directive for the entire country. To repeat, an leadership which is seen to be ethical in its actions will be looked upon by the people of India as the most inspiring policy directive. The implementation of this policy directive will be total all over the length and breadth of this country. Yatha Raja, thatha praja. In all my assignments ethical functioning was the policy directive I set before our team. The rest, which is mere detail, followed. Everyone knew what to do.

In the wake of scandals coming fast and furious in our country and elsewhere, one hears the wailing chorus from those who, having climbed the greasy pole of material advancement and held important offices in the public and private sector, now point a finger at bureaucratic rigidities, venal politicians, malign corporate influence, the criminalization of public life, corruption and money power and the decline of values which they say have *let them down*. They feel let down! But what about those who looked up to them? Perhaps it is this very large number spread over our vast country who really feel abandoned and let down. True, things have deteriorated. But that is an odious rationalization, no matter how convenient, for standing by safely and not committing to the fight heart and soul. The fact that leaders are bad does not free the civil servant from an

obligation to the people they lead or to the common wealth which ultimately we are sworn to serve and which at times appears to be an orphan. In fact this obligation becomes more insistent and cries out louder for redress. One would need a heart of stone to turn away from it. But hearts are turning to stone. This book argues that public interest, as formally projected by the government and understood objectively by the civil servant, takes precedence and prevails over oral orders of politicians. This assertion will enrage most politicians and send shivers down the spines of civil servants.

No organizational changes or outside help were required for what I did. This may dismay those who clamor for 'policy level changes in the system' whenever faced with a situation which they find unable to handle, having ruled out taking independent decisions. The changes were made with the human, financial and legal resources and decision making powers available within the perimeter of the organization and with the help of sympathetic forces who gravitated to our support. Nothing prevents similar efforts elsewhere.

There is today excessive criticism of the politician on whom the entire odium is dumped. The politicians I faced were a pretty representative lot against who I had frequent conflicts yet I was able to bring about improvements wherever I worked. The Prime minister or the Chief Minister, other politicians or the prevailing laws of the country had nothing to do with my successes or failures in the field. These were entirely mine. They are not responsible for the failures in different fields. That responsibility rests squarely on the shoulders of the functional heads of various organizations in the country all of whom have considerable degree of operational freedom of which they use but a fraction. Let us stop blaming the politicians. Taking their hostility as given, the functional leaders in the field can still "win marvelous victories". The politician should not be used as an alibi. A critical mass of ethicals in positions of organizational heads can uplift the country without any help and even against the opposition of the powerful. Perhaps the fault, dear reader, is not in our politicians but in ourselves, that we are underlings! No new laws or policies are required. No such changes in law or policies were required for my successes.

We today experience a strong urge to identify and punish the wrongdoers in public life. The adrenalin is stirred and rushes like a huge tidal wave when the alleged wrongdoer is spotted and is seen to be squirming under a prosecutorial examination. On TV discussions all participants display surprise and indignation at the skeletons being unearthed. Looking self righteous, they bay for the prosecution of the guilty. They say nothing about the wrongdoings in their own organizations. Are they emitting similar loud throated cheers in favor of successful ethical action within the government? There is nothing of the sort. Punishment of

the guilty will not add one rupee to the GDP. It may in fact lead to a contraction as risk taking and opportunity creating economic behavior holds back fearing some bureaucratic harassment. Indian society and the opinion molders must show the wisdom to support the ethicals and tap into the well springs of human motivation towards nation building. Today there is no support for ethical action; in fact it is opposition we face. I fear for the future of our country if we continue on the present path. This is a fear shared by most Indians. We need to change. It is not the common people but those in positions of power who must do so. They must follow ethics in their professional life.

How to recognize an ethical? There are three distinguishing characteristics:-

1. An ethical person is a member of the power elite, and heading an organization, who by his actions materially benefits all stakeholders of his organization to a far greater extent than expected. He also increases their self worth.

2. His actions do not directly benefit himself. He expects the stakeholders who have benefited to repay him, preferably by public honor and prestige and not through money.

3. Those who are powerful will oppose him.

These are the necessary and sufficient conditions which identifies an ethical. Societies which wish to prosper will defend, support and encourage him. This respect and deference to the ethical is the practical expression of their desire to progress. The more this support, the more will be the number of ethicals who will spring up. Societies which do not wish to prosper but whose members wish to win wealth and power on their own will see him as a danger. In both cases the respective societies will find their wish granted. Without a critical mass of ethicals among the decision making elite in the country, hope, idealism, compassion, daring and creativity will die. What will take its place is too ghastly to even contemplate. There is a long way to go down. Look at any failed society.

There are choices. I hope this book shows these choices open to us in the real world and will encourage others to take to paths less traveled by. Such paths are not only for poets and saints. Any one who trusts his instincts and follows his own independent thinking walks this way. But he must abandon expectations of dining at the high tables, and trust to the good sense of society to reward him at the end, not with gold coins, but perhaps with an acknowledgement that something different and worthwhile was done because of which so many could walk upright over hope lit paths.

What I write about covers thirty of the most important years of my life. But it is a personal history and an impressionistic recall. It leaves out many details of events in my organizations that I did not consider belonging to the main theme of the narrative. The events described are true. But as the interpretations put on them are shaped by a certain inclination, my opinions and views are apparent. The description of events is theory laden. There ought to be a moral axis that guides the country's elite. That alone is what justifies membership to this group. This is the belief that colors everything written here. Consequently a strong emotional tone and urgency would be heard throughout the narrative. No attempt is made to keep equidistance between differing viewpoints in the name of objectivity, moral relativism or tolerance. In the fight of the public interest against vested interests there can be no neutrality.

It is not complete case studies of the organizations I worked in that are presented here. This is not an official history. Only those levers I developed to revive these organizations and the people working there are described. In essence the primary lever was to create conditions to bring out the best capabilities of our employees and other stakeholders. This is what made the difference. It also explains the serious opposition I faced from those who felt left out in this arrangement. This opposition was not directed at me for any personal reasons. Any one who did what I did would have had to run this gauntlet. So many millions of our countrymen and women are facing these same dangers but without the protective armor that I had. This book presents a microcosm of the countless challenges and rebuffs the common man in India faces. They will know I speak for them. And reading this book they will know it need not be like this. There is an ethical alternative which is superior to the best of today's models of corporate and administrative excellence. But it will have to be fought for and the few who do so will pay a price for the many.

This book will attract those readers who have not let their careers dominate their ideas and are still able to think independently. Their number will be small. Most successful professionals today are articulate, persuasive and promote ideas with considerable visible conviction. But look carefully and you will see that all these ideas or concepts are such as would assist them in their career and material pursuits. Some of them, the full time ideas men such as management thinkers, economists, etc are spokesmen of powerful group interests. A few big business houses maintain intellectuals aligned with them who then talk as independent thinkers on news channels. All such persons are skilled at diverting any discussion away from ethics. This book will not flatter them but strip the facile rationalizations with which they defend their interests. The moment they begin to speak from conviction over a periods of time (some

temporary outbursts are acceptable), they will find they no longer figure in the list of invitees of the seminar organizers.

What this book asserts is that it is not better management we need in our public life but better ethics. Some experts will double up with laughter at this assertion but if they read the book, they will know I speak the truth. Good ethics is better than the best management of the management schools and gurus and produces results that are clearly better. Some sort of supply side management of this most vital resource would make it available to transform the country. There is an ethical person in everyone and it is the task of true leadership to bring out this hidden person.

Those who are comfortable with the present values of governance and feel it only needs some policy fixing to “get things done and take quick decisions” would be impatient with talk of ethics. “Hot for the certainties of this our life”, they are unlikely to get past this chapter. An ethical success in the field of business is not something they can accept or even acknowledge as it strips away the rationalizations for their personal obeisance to power and wealth which paved the way for their success. Looking at their watches they know there are more important things they have to do so “let us end this discussion which is leading nowhere.” Ok, we are not sorry to see them go. They are doing well in the present set up and would see ethical revivals as being a dangerous prescription. To them, ‘dynamic decision making, new technologies, and sound financial policies’ are the need of the hour. Why then talk of ethics which makes everyone uncomfortable? It is unprofessional and naïve so we do not wish to even discuss it, they say. My answer to them is that we have been talking of ‘dynamic business policies’ etc for the last two decades and the harvest was scandals stinking to high heaven. ‘Dynamic business policies’ is a code word for taking that which belongs to the public or the small man, assets such as forests, clean air, water, coal, minerals and agricultural land and giving it to powerful moneyed interests. This is what happened during the past two decades when loot of the national wealth was given this label and the consequent growth on steroids was shown as a vindication of such policies. People have seen through this and will not allow it to be repeated. There will be conflicts if such policies are implemented in the field. My blunt message is that you are not going to get such ‘dynamic business policies’ again anytime in the future. Why not try ethical leadership for a change and turn a new leaf? Ethical leadership will give you the real 24 carat dynamic business policies which the people will support.

The Indian leadership and power elite are today, with honorable exceptions, not worthy of being the torch bearers of the country’s aspirations towards greatness, a greatness which is true to its humanistic

and spiritual heritage. Even the desire for playing this role is absent among them. They are largely ethical in their private lives but are unethical in their professional pursuits. This book is a plea to the Indian elite to embrace ethics in the professional sphere even while being a little more adventurous in their personal lives to maintain a balance. Indian civilization, history, culture, our human intelligence and capability all make an unassailable claim for our country's greatness. This claim will remain hollow without a commitment to professional ethics. With ethics among our elite, we will make this leap to greatness. This is not impossible. Every unethical person can, if he so wishes, turn ethical overnight. This book asks them to do this. Drink a deep draught from this cup. It may taste of gall and wormwood but will wash out the detritus of dead ideas, fear and prejudices that clog the thinking of those who have achieved material success. A thousand million Indians will then look at the future with a reality based sense of hope. Think of your children and their future. Give them the chance to live and grow up in a more honest, brave and enlightened India. Take some risks on behalf of the many who look up to you. This advice is not for the ordinary citizen who has no protection and is financially weak. But it is aimed directly at the civil servants and those who have some independent means. But those who for what ever reason are unable to take risks for others , my advice is to respect and support the persons who do take such risks which will benefit you and your children.

Our middle class is enraged at corruption within the government. The agitations against corruption are being waged on the Indian streets, maidans and in the heart of every Indian. My journey was different but perhaps equally hazardous. I worked for thirty five years within the government and, against powerful opposition, ethically revived more than a dozen organizations. Along with ethical revival the organizations were cleansed of corruption, which happened as a necessary consequence of the ethical revival. Only with more such efforts like mine, within the government and other structures of power and wealth, will the struggle for a cleaner, more enlightened society be won. Agitations on the streets cannot do it alone. They need allies amongst us within the fortifications of power.

This is not an angry book but one about hope. As a great mystic said, hope has two beautiful daughters, anger and courage. Anger at the way things are and courage to make them the way they ought to be. These, and other wordless fevers, were the driving spirits which sustained me as I stumbled over the ever shifting sands of my professional life.

*** In the book I have used a number of lines from literature and words which are otherwise famous. These are used without attribution though some are between quotation marks. These lines are very well known and it

is not my intention to claim them as my own. They are used because they fit in.

Chapter1

I was privileged to be a member of the Indian Administrative Service and fortunate to be allotted to Gujarat. Without these two events, my life may have been one of unrealized aspirations, “bound in shallows and miseries”. The Service gave me big goals to aim at. Gujarat allowed me to work in its autonomous govt depts. and commercial bodies in a relatively pragmatic business friendly setting. These twin wings took me on an exciting and fulfilling ride over some of the most creative years of my life. I am grateful to the Service and I am grateful to the good people of Gujarat.

As stated earlier, the purpose of this book is not to narrate details of my official life or explore morality but to talk about some management insights that were developed and which could be applied anywhere. These man skills grew out of ethical roots but can be understood without a description of or any reference to its ethics for those who would prefer that. They were insights I gained in the process of struggling to improve the working of organizations. It was neither a well conceptualized theory of management or of ethics which was then applied and results obtained. The theory emerged from techniques tried out, techniques that came to us on the spur of the moment through the free play of imaginative construction. These fragmentary day to day actions were common sense attempts to break through an obstacle or create and harvest a benefit but without any theory consciously being applied. The traditionally accepted logic of first understanding and then doing was reversed. It is never possible to understand a situation entirely. If one tries to do so, mental and emotional bottlenecks will develop. It was first doing, then understanding; first practice, and then theory and then repeating the process in small steps, making small corrections while on the move, looking at the results. The theory and understanding even so gained are always partial. This too was nothing new. It describes the empirical approach to life but allied to a purpose that keeps pushing us forward. The world of reality that we experience is not fundamental or unchanging. It can be altered bit by bit by human effort and imagination. The world we see and experience is not the only one possible. There are many others which can be created. The

results summed up over a period of time can look astonishing. Only when looking back and attempting to trace some intelligent pattern do the clear outlines of a theory become visible. A macro understanding that does not emerge out of micro insights is abstract and of little utility in the objective world we are forced to live in.

The advantage of this way of looking at challenges is that it forces you to act without an exhaustive and exhausting, morale destroying process of analyses, so dear to action averse time wasters in all bureaucracies. The native hue of resolution is not sickled over with the pale cast of thought! Leapfrogging over analyses to action, and thinking on your feet not on your seat, is the drum beat that accompanies this book. Most civil servants would be aghast at such suggestions. But to be fair, working in Central ministries and secretariats is different from commercial corporation and semi autonomous field departments where I spent much of my time. But one cannot help remarking that there are too many persons working in secretariats and too few in field agencies. Is it because the secretariats are in the big cities and the field agencies are, well, in the field?

I mention this because it was this kind of focus that enabled me to be effective in widely separated areas of work. It is a fundamentally optimistic way of looking at life's possibilities and sees success as a series of small forward steps. The Fabian philosophy of traveling hopefully, rather than arriving at a particular destination, would describe this well. As long as you do this you are winning.

But it was a journey not without some serious skirmishes on the way. In today's India, protecting and growing the commonwealth is fraught with hazard. The reason is simple. Public interest is diffused and benefits a large number of people but each to a very modest extent in a particular case. Serving the vested interests benefits a small number but rewards them disproportionately whereas to the very large number of others, the loss may appear marginal. Which of these will be more tenaciously fought for is easy to guess. There is extensive, some would say excessive, coverage of conflicts with the powerful. I make no apologies as it reflects the fundamental antipathy of the Indian power elite to ethical action in the public sphere. There is a conflict, in fact an all out fight, raging in India between the public interest and vested interests, a fight which the public interest is losing. Without this understanding our situation would be incomprehensible. It is the reason for almost all our failures in government. This antipathy will force the ethical agent, if he is to be true to himself, into conflict against powerful formations. This is a conflict one cannot and should not avoid if India is to become what we all imagine it is capable of.

The term “Seeking Directions”, in its two meanings, represents the extreme ends in the spectrum of a civil servant’s ability to act. In its commonly accepted organizational meaning, it would indicate subordinating oneself to the decisions of a more powerful authority on an important issue even though one may have the formal power to decide. At the other end it could mean trusting one’s judgment and searching for and moving in that direction which is true and in the best interests of the organization in a particular instance. The first route is safe and convenient but dull, and results in actions which are always suboptimal and at times wrong outright, but does not impede, in fact may advance, career development. Those who are consulted and deferred to would see you as a good modest team player who is, paradoxically, fit to hold higher office. But it confines us to a meaningless world of ever narrowing choices. The second route is hazardous but exhilarating, and if pursued scientifically and creatively can lead to real breakthroughs in those struggles that the common Indian has a stake in winning. The more you move towards this kind of autonomous path finding, the better for the organization and better for our society though more risky for you. Most civil servants swing between these two opposites and try to take a position in the middle. In the majority of the decisions they use their own judgment, but in the few big ones where some powerful interests are involved they defer to the views of the higher ups who control their careers. It is a comforting fallacy that the middle path is inherently superior. It is not so when a better course is possible and the middle path is chosen to reduce risk, not to the organization, which would be understandable, but to the decision maker. In fact the organization may be put at greater risk by this middle path. I was prepared to seek directions by thinking independently and to go wherever it led me. My understanding was that the IAS was a well protected service, and if one maintained integrity and was not certifiably incompetent, then one could get away with taking independent decisions by seeking directions autonomously.

How do the employees see ethical management? They welcome it and not just because it improves their benefits and long term future. Ethical leadership is a capability multiplier for each member of the team. Ethical management brings out the best in them and increases their self worth, how they see themselves. This is the most precious gift they can get and they cherish it. In every organization I worked in the employees still see me as someone who brought out from within them those qualities they themselves did not suspect they had and because of this they still retain a good will towards me which has survived the years. They cherish this gift. Do they like me for my brilliant personality, great academic qualifications, oratorical skills, humor, wheeling dealing abilities and networking? No because I did not possess any of these. Their affection for me is also not because I gave them material gifts. It springs up because I proved to them

that each one of them was a better person than he/she thought, brought out their strengths and created conditions where this was proved. Their self assessment increased. This is a gift that survives the passing years and is always valued.

The conflict between seeking directions from a more powerful authority and searching for it autonomously is not new. Our civilization is a record of this struggle. Following what is prescribed is more convenient. Coming to a decision after studying facts, scientific and other logic, human aspirations and morality is fraught with opposition and risk. All great advances in science, morality, political ethics, art, poetry, human rights and everything else which elevate humans above animal existence came about through autonomous direction seeking by individuals. But those who walked this way suffered the world's hostility as any new way of working and understanding the world challenges the authority of dominant groups, a dominance which is based on the existing arrangements. Society benefits from these new ways of working. Societies which are open to ethical direction seeking will be creative and, finding solutions to the challenges facing it, thrive. Societies where autonomous direction seeking is suppressed will stagnate and wither. If India aspires to reach her destined greatness, then our society must encourage and honor the ethical impulses within us. Not in our private lives but in the professional public arena.

In the Indian tradition knowledge must be sought before one can act. Knowledge comes from one's betters, wise men, teachers and books. Only when armed with this knowledge does one step out into the world. Seeking an understanding of the world by directly interacting with it and learning from observations and logic is alien to our culture. One result of this is the strong discouragement, at times even intimidation, a person faces when he or she seeks to think in a way different from others. Such efforts are discouraged by labeling them as examples of ego as if it is some form of mental disturbance which needs to be corrected.. The term 'egoistic' or 'driven by ego' is the worst judgment that can be applied to someone. Another word fashionable now is hubris. And finally the autonomously acting person is asked to "show some humility and not be arrogant, please", meaning one should seek the advice of one's organizational superior even in one's own area of authority, and try to be helpful to the powerful who have legitimized themselves. As if searching for the truth and using it to serve the public interest at a personal cost is not the highest form of humility. Independent thinking is rightly seen as likely to overturn the existing exploitative and unjust control over men and women.

The ethical person takes a stand and is prepared to fight for the public interest but he stands alone. Seeking allies he would lose his freedom to seek directions autonomously. He accepts only principled support without any quid pro quo. As a result he is free but alone. But he is protected by a canopy of virtue which deters the ungodly from harming him.

I put this understanding to the test repeatedly and survived, not without mishaps, but without damage to my reputation which is all that finally matters. There was no point in joining an elite group like the IAS if one was not prepared to use the formidable protective armor it provided and take some personal risks for the sake of the many. In the poet's words, do we "rust in shade or shine in strife"? There is only one answer provided the conflict is not for your own material gain but on behalf of those who cannot pay you back and who you do not know. So it was to such pathless directions that my steps took me. I never regretted the heady air of freedom which suffused with at least some meaning the years of my professional life.

Chapter 2

The assignments which molded my responses were in Fisheries Dept, Housing Board, the Sardar Sarovar Project, Gujarat Alkalies and Chemicals, The GSFC, The GNFC, The GGRC, all Gujarat The KMML, The TTP in Kerala and Gharda Chemicals in Mumbai. But I will also write on some of the other jobs which came my way. Though the list may look alarmingly long there is a thread connecting all of them. As much of my professional life was spent in Gujarat, it would be proper to begin with a survey of the opinions and values which characterize the public life in the state. This is a very brief sketch for the purpose of providing an explanatory frame to my experiences. Otherwise a much larger treatment would be required which is far beyond the scope of this book and my limited abilities.

Till the end of the decade of the seventies, among the Gujarat leadership were men and women of conviction and a certain moral quality. Some were clever and devious but outright dishonesty was uncommon and frowned upon. Most of the older ones among them had personally walked with Gandhiji in his epic struggle for freedom and morality. An experience of this kind is not easily shaken off. Among the state's political leaders, its trade unions, its cooperatives, its academicians, its artists, architects, and

other intellectuals and even industrialists there was a determination to see themselves as trustees for the future. After the birth of the state in 1960 there was a sense of new beginnings, and limits not yet visible. At times they were moralistic and dull but rarely dishonorable. They acted as a check to those who saw commercial opportunities in Govt decision making.

But by the early eighties things were loosening up. The genius of the Gujarati people is business. This urge needed to be carefully harnessed with a bold but honest administration or it would find ways to get around restrictions which stood in the way. Among the people of India, in my view it is the Gujaratis who place the highest premium on honesty in Govt or any other authority, provided it results in quick and effective decision making; in other words, ethical decision making. To some this may seem an astounding assertion but I stand by it. There are two reasons for this. It is in business that honesty, and standing by your word is tested to the utmost and therefore most highly valued. Money is involved and honesty and taking decisions is best measured when handling money. Standing by your word is the essential assurance that facilitates business. Without it there could be no business. Secondly they realize how much the ethical decision maker is giving up in opportunity costs in order to serve the public interest. But an honesty which is merely the result of a fear of taking independent decisions does not get high marks. They look up to civil servants to take bold decisions too. To Gujaratis, delaying a decision is little different from dishonesty. They expect decisions to be transparent and firm, free from vested interests, but be quick. If they get it they respond with overwhelming trust.

Dr. Kurien's efforts in milk production, the success of the good ladies of Sewa and the cooperative movement, the setting up of institutes of national prominence in Ahmedabad, the giant public sector undertakings, the successful role of the Govt in setting up industry and business, drew strong support of the people. and most of these grew to their full potential in the coming years. The Sardar Sarovar project was a genuine expression of people's will translated into an awe inspiring design for the diversion of a mighty river on a grand scale to serve human needs. There was no partisan bickering over these efforts.

Those working in the business culture of Gujarat are aware of how an urge for a better life is realized in practice. A distant future is hazily visualized but steps towards it are taken on a day to day pragmatic basis. No elaborate plan is made out detailing the stages through which one will have to travel to get there. The Gujarati realizes that life is too complex and unpredictable for this kind of self deception. The watchword is flexibility to respond to a changing reality. The motto is to study the situation continuously and respond continuously so that you are never caught flat

footed. Resources need to be arranged so it is likely he will need the business help of others as no individual will have all it takes to put in all the investment. A cooperative approach is consequently seen to be essential. Ideological or theoretical considerations rarely enter into a business decision. In Gujarat the person entering business does so by investing a considerable amount of his own money and of his friends and associates. He prefers to keep all avenues open to see that this money generates returns.

In starting any new venture two things are always paramount. The first is, is it worth doing. Will the time effort and money be justified by the likely payback? Secondly he knows that the only way to learn how to do it is by actually doing it. The first question is answered in a rough and ready way, by common sense calculations, by talking with associates and visiting similar establishments. A business understanding of the technology is obtained. These decisions he takes himself. Management consultants will be used only after he has decided to go ahead and that too for preparing documents to convince bankers, the govt and the market, not himself. I thus imagine Dhirubhai Ambani when long ago with nothing to weigh him down, he stalked the markets with young, opportunity seeking eyes.

But the potential entrepreneur also realizes that some sort of fair play is essential in business. Promises should be kept. Any one who breaks his promise is likely to be black balled out of the market by his own associates. His credit rating suffers. In this arena of transactions the govt is the biggest presence and guarantor of an infrastructure of rules and fair play . The govt too must keep its promise. The biggest promise given by the govt is to provide a level playing field. The Gujarati entrepreneur be he small or big, expects civil servants to deliver on this promise. At heart every Gujarati is a potential entrepreneur. But unlike what can be done to other businessmen who break their promises, the Govt cannot be blackballed. The citizen is condemned to deal with the govt no matter how many promises are broken. Consequently the businessman is prepared to go out of his way to see that the govt is properly “managed”. As a consequence any payment to govt officials, including the political executive, is treated as a cost, not a wrongdoing. But such payments are not kept secret .These are made known to all concerned by the very person who made the payment because the market would like to know the cost of setting up a business. The person keeps written records of such payments which he shows to his associates. A govt servant cannot sin in secret in Gujarat.

In Gujarat civil society, as I suppose elsewhere too, leadership in the govt is a greatly valued quality because it can lead to a better life for all. For the Gujarati, leadership is not revealed by the individual's personality, his oratorical abilities, his convincing presentations or his ability to get on with people. This version of leadership is discounted because it does not rule out core incompetence or what is a worse, ethical weakness. Leadership for them is something that can be deduced from the individual's objective record of achievement in the field, and also as measured by the knowledge and satisfaction of those who deal with him, his "customers". In Gujarat the public at large maintains a fairly accurate assessment or let us call it the ACR. of those who play a public role. Such an assessment is ultimately unemotional, factual and objective and is shared freely among them. What people would like to know is the quality of service a public official gives and what the "cost", is in time and money, in dealing with such an officer. The better this service and the lower this "cost" and the higher the benefit cost ratio, the better is the person rated. I saw it as a fair tribunal to be judged by. Early on in my career I decided to place a greater weight on this "ACR" in the minds of the objective Gujarat observers than on the official green colored one.

But by the eighties, as noted, the commitment to maintain certain values of integrity in public life which had been there earlier was weakening. The leaders from the generation who had fought for freedom were aging and withdrawing, at times disillusioned, peevish and feeling let down. The new leadership was unable to lead but prepared to be pushed. Who could push harder than big money which can put on so many convincing masks? Now a patriot, now a philanthropist, now an altruist, sometimes a scientist, now a man of courage and vision, now the Indian homesick for his motherland after eating for so long the alien corn – thus they come to the chambers of the powerful. Some in the bureaucracy, skilled at reading such signals, began to respond, outwardly with an air of feigned reluctance but inwardly fascinated by the glitter of money and the good life. Many political leaders and also the more daring bureaucrats began to have cordial personal relations with businessmen. Needless to say these were businessmen who needed Govt favors. The members of the higher civil service were turning from decision makers to facilitators, as this was a safer role. The new breed of politicians represented a different and a more assertive caste and class alignments and they were less tolerant of any show of independence.

Only a simpleton talked of right and wrong. But in the beginning of this process a direct cash nexus or quid pro quo for specific actions was rare in the higher civil service, being encountered mainly among lower bureaucracy. This prevailed up to the end of the eighties decade. After that it is foolhardy to make any guess. My personal assessment was that many of the members of the higher civil service remained honest till the end but

were won over by something more powerful than money, the seduction of power. The need to be in the inner circle, among the best and the brightest, being petitioned by the powerful and moneyed, to travel frequently to Delhi and Bombay and elsewhere, stay in luxury hotels, visits abroad with lavish per diem corporate allowances which enabled duty free shopping and gifts for the family and friends, to be “in the know” before others knew it, who was likely to get which assignment, what one powerful person thought of another, juicy gossip - all these were like a drug which the ambitious spirits craved. And there was too the prospects of post retirement assignments. In return for these, steps had to be taken to grant govt favors to the newly assertive business groups. These centered around the grant of land and various permissions to facilitate business. Laws had to be “flexibly” applied. These had to be packaged as outcomes of state policy and not as individual favors, which in fact many of them were. It was the bureaucracy which had to deliver this. They developed the skills for it . The blandishments of the corporate state, for that was what Gujarat was becoming, were overpowering. Corporations and govt were coming closer, pushing the common man to the margins. In a corporate state the goals of the Govt and those of big corporations and organizations are similar. They work together. There is a yearning for strong leadership which will deliver the results corporates want. Politically such states were to the right of centre, but this was dressed up as being development oriented. Labor and human rights, the needs of the poor and marginalized were not to be specifically addressed; they would get pulled up by the industrial progress, a thinking which was the equivalent of the trickle down theory. Among the civil servants there was a preference to work in an assignment where one dealt with the private sector, preferably corporate. Some went out of the way to involve the corporate sector in their organization working even when no such role could be even remotely justified. In one city the municipality handed over the best municipal gardens to some corporates who promptly renamed them after their family patriarchs. A cash nexus remained uncommon but something more insidious took its place. It was a network of favours and privileged access they were signing into. Various doors were magically opened for them in the govt and outside. And best of all, this was also a good ladder for career growth aided by “outstanding” ACRs which you were more likely to get if you were corporate friendly. Such a person was considered to be having the right combination of dynamism and pragmatism. Members of this group were more likely to have a Delhi posting as their ultimate goal. Once they got there they stayed on there. The perks of office were even greater in Delhi than in Gujarat. All this and heaven too, the favored few chortled!

But personally they justified their role more positively. The chariot of industrial progress was what was taking the state forward and also the country. They wanted to be on the side of this triumphant prime mover of development. It never occurred to them that this could be a mere rationalization for their self interest as this was where money ,power and

influence were generated and it was also likely to propel them forward.. They were untroubled by any apparent guilt. They felt they were in the vanguard of progress, backing that horse which was history's favorite to pull the country towards progress. But there was a subliminal understanding, a message which it was not necessary to repeat, in this arrangement. What has been given can also be taken away. So please stay in line, the power structure continuously whispered into their ears. This was the Faustian bargain with the devil that was entered into. The goals and ambitions of a simpler , moral, Nehruvian age in which they grew up in and which they had promised themselves they would hold on to while joining the Service, were quietly forgotten. A commitment made when young could not be taken seriously, surely! Boon companions of one's youth were abandoned to the embrace of more persuasive and seductive suitors. Something like the Hindi film hero forgetting his village sweetheart and falling for the wiles of sirens in the big bad city. But in the Hindi film the hero finally realizes his mistake, repents and redeems his promise to his first, true love. This did not happen here.

Obviously similar events were being enacted elsewhere in the country too. The civil service was studded with persons of drive, ambition and a toughness which could be switched on and off at will depending on who they were facing. They were undoubtedly intelligent and could talk with a startling confidence which removed all doubts in the minds of the uninitiated. They were capable of working intensely for extended periods of time. But we should have known that appearances were deceptive. All that glisters is not gold.

The group of select few who drove decisions and were favored by the dominant economic interests would number about 10 % of the total. The rest were a more realistic lot .They too put in hard work but had scaled down their ambitions over the years having decided to play neither a collusive role nor a reforming one with the power structure. Though of a higher intelligence than the first lot, temperamentally, they were not inclined to fight except when pushed into a corner. They ran their depts. capably and sincerely but without any daring leaps of imagination. They were conservative and middle class in their views. It was not ambition which drove them but the desire for security. After a few years they saw the IAS as just another job where extravagant expectations were foolish. Talk of commitment, ideals and pursuing the public interest or, even worse, confronting the power system were met with a tired smile which seemed to imply that they too had been there but come back scathed. (Actually they had done nothing of the sort. They had only imagined it in their minds and taken fright.) For them wisdom lay in creating your own space for contentment, perhaps even some happiness, and not chasing impossible goals which would bring nothing but trouble. Turned out they were not entirely wrong.

These two groups were conceptual and not sharply defined. There was mobility between them as some moved from one to the other. A person could fall out of favor and another could be identified by the talent spotters for the fast track based on some good work done or, what was more often the case, for services rendered. What about corruption? It was perhaps a little greater in the second lot. They had to compensate for not being on the winning side.

It was in this context that my choices were made. Against the group think of the official establishment, I would be a deviant. I would be judged by the Gujarat society (by which I mean the common man in the street and not the haute monde) rather than by the institutional mechanism of the govt. Just as I would seek approval from outside the govt, so too would I seek the truth outside the govt. This would be my driver and direction finder. The second choice which developed from this was to seek directions autonomously as I took my coordinates continuously in a bewildering, ever shifting world without fixed land marks.

Chapter 3

The Fisheries Dept. was a fairly big establishment in Gujarat during the decade of the seventies and eighties. This may look surprising considering the strongly vegetarian habits of the people there. But the state had a long coastline of 1700 km, dotted with small fishing ports and villages and there were a substantial number of coastal fishermen living as separate communities along this coastline from Valsad in the south(just north of Mumbai) all the way to Jakhou in the north west tip of the state, bordering Pakistan. I held the post of Fisheries Commissioner twice, once in the mid eighties and then in the early nineties. But before that one of my earliest postings was as the General Manager of the State Fisheries Cooperative, the GFCCA during 1978-80.I joined in December 1978.

This cooperative, called the GFCCA, was my first commercial organization. The full name was Gujarat Fisheries Central Cooperative Association, if you want to know. It was a small organization with about 600 employees and an annual turnover of Rs 5 cr. then. But even so it was perhaps the biggest fishery cooperative in the country. A modern nylon net plant in Ahmedabad made high quality nets for fishing, and there was a well equipped boat building yard at Veraval, the big fishing centre in the Junagadh district. The GFCCA, though small, had a sea food processing plant in Sassoon docks, Colaba, in Mumbai city. This property covering an area of around 3500 sq yds, was of keen commercial interest to many. It will play an important role in my narrative. There were a number of large and medium irrigation dams in the state. These water bodies, some hundreds and even thousands of acres, were developed for fishing by the

Fisheries Dept. and handed over to the GFCCA for operation. First the fishing was done by hired fishermen and later through local cooperatives of those whose land was taken for the project. The GFCCA marketed this fish sending it by train with ice packing to Calcutta and Delhi. It also sold Ashok Leyland inboard marine engine and Yamaha outboard engines as an agency. These were fitted to the boats made in the boat building yard. These engines were popular with the fishermen and we constantly request Ashok Leyland and Yamaha to allot us more engine for sale as the commissions were good profits for us. The boats, both wooden and later fiberglass, were of good quality. The fresh water and sea fish had a reliable demand in Delhi and Calcutta. All activities except the Mumbai plant were profitable.

But there were problems; some mere pinpricks others nastier and even threatening. It was felt in the govt that this post was not fit for an IAS officer. My predecessor was the first IAS officer and I was the last. Probably it was felt that with a long career ahead an officer should not have a fishy spot against him at the very start. What was expected of the General Manager of GFCCA till then was that he should be subservient, not rock the boat and ought to allow things to go on as usual. GFCCA was not a prestigious organization but it could perform several useful services to important persons. So it was better to keep a submissive person as GM who would not get ideas above his station. After me there has not been an IAS officer in the post.

The reason why it was decided to post an IAS officer was the new World Bank financed fisheries project in Gujarat. This was a 34cr scheme approved sometime in 1977 in which the GFCCA was to be financially supported to play an important role. The main components of the project was the construction of the two fisheries harbors at Veraval and Mangrol in Junagadh distr. But the GFCCA was to get assistance for marketing and modernization. It was stipulated in the assistance terms that GFCCA should have modern and efficient management. I was to provide the "efficient management". The fact that I had no commercial experience was never mentioned.

In GFCCA I began to understand why in common parlance the word fishy was used to refer to a certain kind of conduct. Fish is slippery and difficult to hold, weigh and count, and an inferior variety can be passed off as a superior one. Another reason could be that it is easy to be cheated in the fish trade. Fish is likely to spoil once it is on land. Fish spoiled even slightly fetches lower price. Slightly spoiled fish could be passed off as fresh to an unwary buyer though rotten fish stinks so it cannot be sold. There is also an opportunity to claim the fish is spoiled, to sell it at a good price and pocket the difference. It is also an opportunity to allege others are doing it though they may not be actually doing it. Those dealing in the fish trade are likely to be quick witted. One has to be equally quick witted to counter their moves.

I noticed that fish sent to Calcutta appeared to have less spoilage than that sent to Delhi. The funny thing was the train journey to Calcutta took longer than the trip to Delhi. And the Calcutta end was handled by a trader whereas the Delhi work was looked after by our own office. Logically the Calcutta spoilage should have been more. Was it the Delhi “overheads” were higher? Or was it plain inefficiency which allowed the fish to spoil without ice? I pretended to be mystified at this strange phenomenon of the spoiled fish and repeatedly enquired the reasons for it. When this puzzle remained unsolved, we began to send an officer now and then from the head office, ahead of a consignment, by plane to Delhi and surprisingly the fish was reported to have arrived fresh on that day! I sternly asked the head of our Delhi office to keep a close watch and gradually the spoiled fish percentage came down. The Delhi officer was a capable man, cultivated and refined, but being in Delhi there were many he had to please. He claimed, not implausibly, that the packing section in Ahmedabad could be putting less ice in the fish boxes going to Delhi so as to send more fish to the Calcutta trader. And what about the days when it arrived fresh? Perhaps they put more ice on those days! This was impossible to answer. So we kept a watch at the Ahmedabad end also. By closely looking at the activity, things improved. How this happened was better left to the imagination. In the course of my assignments this link became well established. Any activity improves if you just look closely at it. But as a result the freebies to some important persons in Delhi may have stopped. Such persons would be upset. But you can't have your fish and eat it too. What I mean is you cannot have two conflicting objectives and pursue both. You can either try to please important people or you try to do everything to strengthen your organization. In a good society both these would be complementary. In India they are opposed. Most successful careers are built on ticking the first option. But those were simpler times. Today men of power would laugh contemptuously at something as plebian as cut fish.

In our Bombay plant operations too where fish was purchased in huge quantities every day a certain quantity was later found to be spoiled. Was this spoiled material purchased unknowingly or knowing it was rotten? Or was it never purchased and shown as a way to inflate costs and siphon out money? We never found out but had to close the operations there. Another officer resisted accountability and was unnecessarily aggressive. Though he was technically a good officer, proximity to a powerful person had made him question my authority. We kept him under control but with difficulty. Five years later when as Fisheries Commissioner I also was Chairman of GFCCA, one day we transferred him to the HO, in the same city, as an advisor. Claiming I was out to harm him he went to the High Court which admitted his petition. He threatened to reveal damaging secrets about me He was told to do his worst. He kept quiet. The High court rejected his petition and he spent his last year in harmless inactivity in the

HO. These persons were managerially competent and capable of improvement. But there is a practice of influential people in the Govt at times using key persons in Govt organizations for serving their personal interests and thereby destroying discipline. Looking back I could see that acting in a firm manner I was stepping on the toes of some who could help or hinder me in my career. But the organization benefited. All activities other than the Bombay plant showed improvements. Morale went up and corruption was driven out in these activities. We drew up and began to implement modest plans for growth and expansion.

Even so early in my career I tried to work out the relationship with my official superiors. I understood it this way. They could convey the broad strategic direction the organization should take .But in operational matters their role was very limited unless something was going wrong. This conviction, which strengthened over the years, caused all the tempests which were to rock me in the future.

But there was a serious slipup on my part. Sitting in Ahmedabad I failed to keep a close watch on the operations of the Bombay plant assuming that the plant head, reputed to be a fishery expert, knew his business thoroughly. Profitability of any seafood processing plant depends primarily on procurement of the raw material which is prawns, lobsters, cuttlefish, squid and fish. The price at which it is purchased and it's freshness decides the profits of the unit provided it is processed quickly and reasonably well packed.. Because of my inexperience I assumed that the price paid by us was the correct market price and the product was fresh. The so called market price covered a range reflecting the quality of the material and, let it be frankly said, the intentions of the buyer. There was no fixed market price. Price was what was decided between the buyer and the seller. The Bombay plant head was buying material in large quantities at a high price and of doubtful quality without any monitoring by me. There were frequent complaints from those who brought the finished product from us and we got a lower price for our product. It was a double whammy and the plant was hemorrhaging money continuously. There was a huge loss in this operation between Jan,79 June 79,the year end was June. The closure of the plant was inevitable. It took me four months to know something was just not right. Today it would take me less than a week. To say that I took my eye off the ball then would be charitable way of putting it. It may be truer to say I did not know where the ball was or that even I was supposed to keep an eye on it. Such is the wisdom of hind sight.

There were two even more tense episodes concerning this plant. The Board of the GFCCA at my suggestion decided to close down the plant 6 months after I joined, in July 1979 and to subsequently give it on lease. But the Bombay plant was losing money earlier too so the recent losses were the last straw. Having taken this momentous decision they passed it on to me to implement it. They gave me

“full powers” to negotiate and come to the Board with a proposal. The “full powers” should have been taken with a large pinch of salt. I was a little apprehensive about being handed over this very hot potato. It did not occur to me then to use the time honored bureaucratic gambit of proposing an empowered committee to take this decision and spread the responsibility and buy time. I took the Board decision as a sign of their confidence in me. I plunged right in into the shark infested waters. I was lucky to come out with limbs intact.

The first step was to get the plant valued by a reputed firm. They gave us the valuation of Rs,40 lakhs which was conservative not taking into account the full market value of the land covering 3500yds in South Bombay. But before we invited bids the plant had to be cleared and given as vacant possession. In other words the labor had to be paid and let go. These things normally take a long time and that period was much more pro labor than now. Even though most of them were not permanent we offered them a fair settlement as per the ID Act. All my sympathies were with the workers but our ability to pay was limited by the huge cash losses we had suffered. They demanded a very high figure which could not be agreed to. They then changed their union one day and aligned with what they claimed was a Shiv Sena union. They told me one day their new leader would meet me soon in the Bombay plant.

He arrived the next day. Smiling continuously he said he was Shinde and assured me that the matter could easily be settled. We both agreed that it was unfortunate the plant had to close and of our concern for the workers. He asked me how much we could pay. The smile vanished when I told him. It was nowhere near enough he said. He then demanded a jaw dropping figure both for the workers and for himself. I explained that as a govt organization we had limitations and could not pay. He said that was our problem. If the amount was not paid and we tried to evict the workers, he would personally ensure that I was thrown into the sea. He did not specify whether I would go in alive or dead. He had treated me as if I was some private sector manager! I did not think it worthwhile to call him back and tell him that ‘I was an IAS’ He may not have believed me or even worse asked me what IAS was.

But it was not amusing. Those days Bombay was a more violent place and labor militancy and gangster blood letting was an everyday occurrence. A threat combining both these had to be taken seriously. Threats were not made lightly. I had no protection in Mumbai. They were not likely to ask for my ID before starting with the physical stuff. Other officers were cautiously standing back and allowing me to lead from the front. The obvious course open to me was to write to the Labor Dept to allow closure and come back to Ahmedabad and “ allow the law to take it’s own course”(a beautiful phrase much favored by politicians). I do not recall why I did not do this. Probably because it would have taken a very long time with the workers occupying the plant and the company would have bled to death.

In principle, the plant belonged to the Gujarat fishermen and looking to the tense atmosphere, two of them from Porbandar and Mangrol came one day to Bombay prepared to assist in any way. They said there was a person from the fishing community living in Mumbai and he had offered to help. He was not expecting any money or any favor in return. It was his concern for the Gujarat fishermen's interests that prompted his offer. He knew about Shinde and would deal with him. But I must agree to meet him. I was skeptical but I went.

Along with my two fishermen friends, we met that night at the Khyber restaurant after dinner. He was called Kaka and he walked in quietly. He was a big man with a menacing intensity but soft spoken and polite. The diners at the nearby tables looked at him with fascination and unease. My two friends treated him with respect. He told us not to worry about Shinde, he was nothing. He would not trouble us any more. He said he was happy to do anything for the Gujarat fishermen, had a cup of coffee and left. I never heard from him after that.

Shinde did not turn up the next day. The day after that when I reached the plant, he was waiting for me. All the bluster and aggression was gone. He said he fully understood our position and would do everything to help the management and convince the workers to accept our offer. I thanked him for his constructive role without which the issue could not have been settled. We appreciated each other's approach so much that we stopped just short of hugging each other. He left promising his help whenever I needed him. Neither of us mentioned what had happened between our two meetings. But some of his earlier confidence was returning. Before leaving he said a small token of appreciation for his role would be welcome. The answer I gave him has escaped my memory.

The Shiv Sena was not an organization of the working class and its label was something like a franchise given to local muscle. Perhaps that was why Shinde folded so fast.

Within a month of the closure of the operations of the plant an agreement had been reached with the workers, about a hundred of them, and they left the plant. Those who recall the situation in Mumbai would agree it was very fast indeed. But it left a bitter taste in my mouth. This was not what I wanted.

What now had to be done was to lease the plant on rent to a reputed party. If higher ups in the Govt had not interfered, this could have been done harmoniously. With its close location to Sassoon docks, many seafood processors were likely to be interested. Some of the machinery would have to be repaired or replaced but the amount so spent could be recovered in a single season. We were confident of getting good offers.

Bids were publicly invited. Three parties showed serious interest. Let us call them the Sindhi party, the Punjabi party and the Malayali party. All three reeked of glamour and serious wealth. I noticed that many seafood exporters those days tended to dress flashily and have a theatrical air about them. It was probably a compensatory mechanism to proclaim they are not just fish merchants. Of the three, one had married a famous film star and another, looking like a film star himself, was the son in law of a well known film producer. The third party was probably richer than either of these. When the bidding reached a decisive stage the Malayali party discovered that some generations back his family had moved to Kerala from Gujarat so his roots were in Gujarat. He changed the name of his company to that of a district in Gujarat hoping thereby to show that he had left his heart behind here. He was trying to score some points with the Gujarat decision makers. With hind sight I could have told him that cash would work better. But as it turned out he already knew that. When finally the bids were opened the highest offer of the Punjabi party was attractive and acceptable and we sent the proposal for formal approval to the Govt. In the meantime the second lowest, the Malayalee party directly approached the Govt quoting a slightly higher price He should have been ignored. Instead, the govt instructed us to invite bids again. No reason was given for this decision. It was clear to all what had happened. This convinced the highest party that the process was rigged and I lost credibility. When the bids were opened for the second time, the Malayalee party, now bidding the highest after having first lobbied with the govt, backed out. Then the second highest too backed out when we accepted their offer. There was the perception that certain people in the Govt were in the mood for interference so the process would not be fair. This assessment was not far from the truth. After this process collapsed, we once again invited offers. One new party, offered an amount equal to the highest bid, Rs 9 l per annum and it was given to him for two years. But it later appeared he had overstretched himself and found it difficult to run the plant and gave it back after one year. I was transferred out soon after, in May 1980 as I was clearly proving inconvenient.

Three years later in 1983, the entire plant with land was SOLD, lock stock and smoking barrel, to one of the three parties for Rs 9 lacs. No prizes for guessing the identity of this party. And no zeros are missing in this figure. (The plant had been purchased in 1963 from the Tatas for Rs 9.5lacs.) It was a big deal for whoever arranged it. I sent a damning report about it to the Govt in 1984 after I came as Fisheries Commissioner, charitably assuming they did not know anything about it. No corrective or punitive action was taken as far as I am aware. It was a big heist and I suddenly realized how brazen those in power could be.

The GFCCA allowed me to travel and see much of Gujarat particularly Saurashtra. Its grassy plains on vast stretches of rolling undulating land had very few trees and the sky as far as one could see. The

few man made structures were single storey shops and houses. The roads were well built and the traffic sparse. Elegantly built small town on the way like Morbi, Gondal, Mangrol and Porbandar were surprisingly well planned with imposing and aesthetic structures in the town's central square, a clock tower being the most prominent. Prior to independence these were states with local rulers. English architects had been engaged to modernize their capitals. The buildings were laid in straight lines to allow broad avenues for the traffic and people to move. Here one met persons who spoke English far better than any Englishman would have dared to speak. But just outside these capitals one was once again passing through a conservative and unchanging countryside. You crossed the cow herds, tall and dignified, shepherding hundreds of cattle with perfect calm and patience walking throughout the day even in the hottest months. One sensed an unhurried and deeply traditional world that had a quiet timeless air about it, like looking at a still painting. What I saw had probably remained unchanged for the last hundred years. Since then the area has been transformed with urbanization, commercialization and industries. I visited the many dammed reservoirs where the GFCCA fished. I looked forward to the ride through the hilly forests to get there and then staying in the well built and managed guest houses. The big fishing harbour at Veraval and the smaller ones at Mangrol and Pobandar where work was going on made one feel one was witnessing the beginning of exciting things. From a distance I could feel Gujarat on the move. But it was in the process also abandoning many of the values of public life which had given it a name for propriety.

Among those who spoke English better than any Englishman would dare to speak was Zaheed Sheikh, from the erstwhile Royal family of Mangrol. He was called the Prince of Mangrol but the kingdom had been lost long ago when his uncle the then Nawab had fled to Pakistan at independence along with the rulers of Junagadh and Manavadar. His elder brother joined the Indian Army and was killed in the 1965 war, perhaps thereby settling accounts with the Indian state. His widow became an aide to Indira Gandhi. The Nawab was said to have been miserable in Karachi bitterly regretting his decision to leave this land where hundreds of years ago his ancestors landed and set up a kingdom on this coast. Many an evening have I sat with Zaheed in his fortress like house talking about this and that. He had almost made it to the India cricket test team and led the team of Indian Universities to the West Indies in the early sixties where he faced some nerve wracking deliveries from Gilchrist. Those days one batted without helmets so there was a danger. He tried to placate Gilchrist with some lighthearted banter at the crease but was met with a contemptuous response. His attempts to enter films were unsuccessful. He looked a bit like Dev Anand, perhaps better. But always Lady Luck was untrue to him or maybe he never tried really hard. After all he was a Prince and royalty considers it unsportsmanlike to try too hard. His efforts to get back some property which the Govt had confiscated as

state assets were fruitless. The bureaucracy stalled him but the harshest he could bring himself to say was to wonder what else could one expect from dunces such as these. Life was a game and sportsmanship his defining grace. There was a time when personal style, wit and charm were important and those like him had an entry everywhere. Today your calling card has to be money or the promise of it. The sportsmen have given way to the hustlers. The laptop has replaced the card deck. It was easier to detect the cheat at cards. The stakes have now become much bigger and the game has turned deadly serious.

I look back thoughtfully on my GFCCA stint where many useful lessons were learnt. Those who sought to interfere share only part of the blame. My own inexperience was painfully evident and my stay of eighteen months was short. A commercial corporation must be controlled through management instruments and levers, not only by personal visits and appeals or threats of punishment. Good intentions are not good enough. The daily production, costs, sales, cash flow were unknown to me. Without a structured framework of day to day decision making, you cannot guide a commercial organization. Cost cutting was not seen as an option. I thought costs were something calculated by the accountant every month and not a tool for day to day decision making. And the Bombay plant for which I risked so much was practically given away later. If the Bombay plant could have been made profitable the GFCCA would have dominated the fishery field today. These are but idle speculations of what might have been.

But some positive things had happened. The profitability of the company improved after the closure of the Bombay plant. Accountability was fixed and the first rudimentary MIS systems were introduced. The fresh water fishermen were paid on a per kg basis and with proper records, any possible leakage was plugged. The amount of ice needed in packing fish for long distance travel was constantly monitored looking to the weather and time of travel. Thicker insulation was used. Instead of bringing all fish to Ahmedabad, some were sent directly to Calcutta or Delhi from the reservoirs loading it at the nearest railway station or even sending it by road. The condition of the fish at arrival was constantly monitored. The head of the fresh water section was an exceptionally capable and tough individual who continuously brought in improvements with my full backing.

All this was small incremental modest stuff but we experienced a genuine sense of doing something new. The morale rose and willingness to try out new things was being seen.

We started selling fish in a modern well equipped van which went to different housing areas in Ahmedabad. While it was commercially successful, I received agonized calls from Gujaratis that could we please park the van so that it was not be seen or smelt from their houses! Our

keenest customers were the wives of Bengali officers in the Govt.

I left this organization knowing that the job could have been better done. But my nerve had held against money and power. I could stand the heat. I was dimly beginning to understand that there was something called the public interest and that as a member of the Service one was pledged not only to serve it but also to identify it by thinking independently. Nobody else could do it for you and you could not take anybody's word for it. It was steady and unwavering and if you looked long enough you could see it clearly in all its purity. With a thrill I realized I was not alone but was acting on behalf of countless others, those who could not pay me and those whom I did not know. I understood that integrity was all that protected a public servant but it was all you needed. It was the supreme deterrent shield which many times disarmed even your opponent. Any additional layers of protection would have to be paid for in quid pro quo and compromise. I learnt that people above one in the hierarchy could be wrong and those you commanded were usually right, that there were times when you had to choose between your career and the public interests and there were things worth fighting for even at a personal cost. But I also realized that in my bravado I had come very close to something dark and dangerous in Mumbai and that one could gain the world yet lose one's soul.

It would be more than 15 years before I got my next commercial corporation. I would not fail again.