

# Diplomatic Dividend: The IFS as a Career

*The author studied B.Sc (Hons) Physics at IIT Kharagpur after topping the entrance test from the Western Zone. He went on to do an M.Sc from Delhi University in 1968 and a Ph.D in theoretical Physics from Stonybrook University, USA, 1972 and returned to India to pursue an academic/teaching career as a CSIR Pool Officer with the Punjab University (1972-74). He joined the IFS in 1974 after getting the first rank in the civil services examination that year. He retired in 2007 and among other things, he is a visiting professor at JSS University, Mysore.*

India is being seen abroad as an emerging power with great economic potential despite many daunting challenges. Countries and institutions all over the world want to engage with India. Our Missions abroad and the Ministry of External Affairs play a central role in facilitating this engagement. The Indian Foreign Service (IFS) is the human resource that implements Indian foreign policy. It is currently expanding rapidly to match India's rising profile and increasing role in the international system. Recruitment to the IFS has been increased from about 15 per year to around 40. In 2011, of 34 recruits, 26 had a science and technology background.

In brief, the role of a diplomat is to promote his country's national interests and to provide assistance to nationals abroad. National interests are now wide ranging, covering political, economic and cultural sectors and involving not merely government agencies, but also relationships with businesses, and other cultural organizations. Effective diplomacy requires good cross cultural communication with people from different cultures and countries. It also requires good management skills, including being able to get the best out of the organization you belong to, in this case the Government of India.

A diplomat needs to develop the capacity for multitasking and adapting to a constantly changing environment. He needs to understand the country he is working in, develop contacts with key people there and project the most appropriate image of India. The work involved is constantly varying, from helping Indian business development, developing projects and implementing them, organizing events, winning friends and influencing people. It is a matter of great pride to represent India abroad, something that cannot be measured in material terms.

Science and Technology are playing an important role in our lives today, and diplomacy is no exception.

Today, a science and technology background can be an asset in dealing with issues such as nuclear energy, climate change, information technology, arms control, outer space, the oceans, energy security, environment protection, international health, S & T cooperation, to name a few. India as a growing technology and knowledge power with a huge market is deeply involved in almost all these international efforts. My own experience was that my training in Physics proved very useful in dealing with subjects that I came across in my work, and in particular helped me in interfacing with S & T institutions wherever I was posted.

Training for our diplomats is provided over 2 years at a dedicated well equipped Institute with good hostel facilities. It is comprehensive, covering areas relevant to diplomacy today. Basic



knowledge about India, its government, its politics, economics, history and culture is one aspect. A district assignment gives a firsthand exposure to realities at grass roots level. A course at the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade provides training in foreign trade and international business. There are modules on current international relations topics, diplomatic practice, communications, administration, and study tours abroad. Our training programmes for diplomats are well regarded and we also provide training for diplomats from other countries at our Institute.

Our training includes mandatory study of one foreign language. Language learning comes naturally to most Indians who are familiar with at least two languages. My own compulsory language was French, but along the way I did manage to learn others such as Arabic, German, Spanish, and finally Greek, with varying degrees of proficiency. It is possible with modern computer based materials to get a working knowledge of a

language in about three months.

Working in a Mission abroad is never routine or boring. Every day is different with new challenges to deal with and you constantly sharpen your skills and knowledge. You work as a team with your colleagues including those from other services of the government. Taking new initiatives forward gives one a sense of achievement. I can recall working closely with Indian companies in bagging contracts in pharma and IT in Syria, a rather challenging market, for example. The canvas for operations is vast, and you can literally define your work and targets and achieve them.

Along the way, you get to develop lasting friendships with people from many countries, Indians abroad and visitors from home. Your family also should have a positive attitude to change. After

unfair situations, and frustrating bureaucracy. But if you put in your best, you will also receive the best sooner or later.

The civil service includes many prestigious services which contribute to our national development, such as the IAS, IPS, etc. After a lot of introspection, I decided to join the IFS because it offered a professional and specialized career, with a core competence in international relations, which is becoming more important in the era of globalization. The IFS has also so far has remained relatively free of political interference and postings and transfers at the whims of politicians.

*Dr. Bhaskar Balakrishnan would welcome queries or comments on this article. He can be reached at [bb0947@gmail.com](mailto:bb0947@gmail.com)*

## A GC which the Institute won

In our previous issue, we reported the close race between the batches of 1991, 1984 and 1962 to raise Rs. 50 Lac and win the laurel of being the first 'Founding Donor' batch of the institute. This campaign, aptly christened as the 'Endowment General Championship' has been instrumental in reconnecting our alumni who are dispersed across the world and bringing them together for their Alma-mater's cause.

In a short span of three months, the batch of 1991 has leveraged its network and has reached the target. In acknowledgement of this feat, one of the new 120-capacity classrooms coming up in the Nalanda Academic Complex will be named after this batch.

Though the campaign tracked contributions batch wise, KGPIans did not miss a chance to rally behind their halls and show off their hall tempo. Hall-specific mailing lists were put to good use to spread the message and this helped to bring in a lot of contributors.

Mr. Anupam Sarkar, facilitator at the institute's Alumni Cell noted that more than half of the funds were raised by alums based in India. This is a markedly different from previous campaigns where we have seen NRI donations steal most of the limelight. Wherever our alums might be, we thank them for contributing back to their Alma mater and wish them the very best in their careers.

all, beneath the layers of language and culture all of us are human and share common values and aspirations. It is a lifelong learning experience in which you accumulate skills and knowledge. Every one of my assignments – Sudan, Syria, Zambia, Austria, Cuba and Greece, and the UN in Geneva and Austria, and in India, has been of great value for me.

Conditions of service in the IFS especially after the recent pay revision are quite good. Job security is assured. There is an effort to introduce performance based promotion systems. With modern communications, it does not matter much whether you are working in Manipur or Mexico – you can be connected to your home, access news, culture and family. With the rapid expansion of the IFS there will be many opportunities for career enrichment. It is possible to add to your skills through study programmes including higher degrees in relevant fields. Of course there are down sides. As in any other job there are difficult bosses,