

Inside the arena. Book Review: Tata's Leadership Experiment: The story of the Tata Administrative Service

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While the TAS has thrown up exemplary officers, the problem over time was the lack of attention from the top management for a career plan and path

By S Giridhar

Tata's Leadership Experiment: The story of the Tata Administrative Service

When I received a request to review a book on Tata Administrative Service (TAS), I accepted with alacrity. After all, TAS was the brainchild of the legendary JRD Tata. And to pique the interest further was the fact that a college batchmate, a lousy ex-boss, a delightful customer, and my daughter's classmate were people I knew from the TAS fraternity.

Tata's Leadership Experiment: The story of Tata Administrative Service is written by three ex-TAS officers. Bharat Wakhlu is a 1985 batch officer while co-authors Sonu Bhasin and Mukund Rajan are from the 1987 and 1995 batches respectively. Though the authors are from the Ratan Tata generation, such is the panache with which they have told the story that you feel they were in the Board Room, as JRD Tata and his team conceptualised this ambitious programme.

The storytelling is competent. The research, the interviews, anecdotes, and stories are brought together skilfully into a warm broth of a book. The story of the TAS protagonists and their contribution has been seamlessly woven along with the journey of the Tata Group through the good and tough times. Even as the authors enjoy telling the story, they remain objective, calling out things that did not go well and the reasons why TAS, while being a great experiment, fell short of what might have been possible. The story of the Tatas has been told earlier but here we hear it through the eyes, ears, and experiences of TAS executives who were in ring-side seats or inside the arena itself.

The chronicling is linear, and elegant; the first section of 12 chapters describes the genesis of the TAS; Part II called The Post -JRD Era, describes the trajectory during the Ratan Tata years and the final section, titled, 'Leaders for the Future' does a stocktaking and ends appropriately with a chapter, 'Whither the TAS?'

Sample this: Surya Sethi (TAS 1975) having reached the final round of interviews, rushes into the interview room from the washroom and is asked to speak impromptu on the subject 'Fate'. Recovering his wits, he does a tour-de-force speech and has the distinguished panel spellbound. As he finished, Jamshed Bhabha, stood up to applaud and even as he conveyed that Sethi was selected, said, 'Young man, *que sera sera*, you will be, you will be! But before you go, zip up that fly of yours'.



Admirable as the TAS programme has been, the imperfections stand out. A problem that came into sharper focus over time was the lack of attention from the top management for a career plan and path. It forced many TAS officers to attach themselves - almost swearing allegiance - to towering leaders of the major Tata companies. Thus, a TAS officer's career could zoom or crash if they were a 'protégé' of the satraps who ran their Tata units with the independence of a promoter. Vijay Rai (TAS 1971) groomed by Darbari Seth and riding this escalator, became the Managing Director of Rallis at the age of 41. But shortly thereafter, Darbari Seth passed away, and Vijay tells the authors: 'My career ended a few months after my boss, Darbari Seth, died'.

Closed to women in initial years

Another glaring hole was that for nearly 20 years – 1960s to mid-1980s – TAS was not open to women. One of the authors, Sonu Bhasin, is trenchant in her critique of the glass ceiling in a progressive organisation such as the Tatas. The authors write, "What will be of interest is to see when a large Tata company gets its first woman CEO."

The attrition among the TAS has been significant and the authors quote numbers to highlight this. One cannot also miss the fact that the three authors who joined between 1985 and 1995, have all left the Tata Group some years earlier. While the TAS might be a coveted campus placement, there are candidates who prefer organisations with well-structured training programmes. The authors bring this home in a conversation with Nitin Paranjape, who turned down TAS and instead chose the Hindustan Lever Management Trainee programme. Paranjape in a stellar career went on to head Hindustan Unilever in India.

As the book moves, the blithe-spirited narration of TAS in its youth gives way to the measured tone of middle age. The Ratan Tata years are narrated in some detail and with empathy. The authors - Mukand Rajan served as Executive Assistant to Ratan Tata - describe his leadership, commitment to Tata values as also his foibles and errors. The highs of Titan and TCS, the Tetley acquisition, the Tata Finance scandal, and the tribulations of Singur and Tata Nano are treated with restraint and candour. The authors wistfully say that had Ratan Tata relinquished his Chairmanship in 2002 (when he turned 65) and not held on till 2012, he 'would have been spared the many stresses that took their toll on him in later years.'

The TAS has moved from the days it was referred to as 'Tata's Adopted Sons' to the no-special-treatment times of Ratan Tata and now to the current days of N Chandrasekaran, which a TAS officer pithily describes as 'TCS is the new TAS'. Tucked away on page 216, is

a paragraph that poignantly captures how much things have changed for TAS. “During the writing of this book, the Tata Group lost its first woman TAS officer, Khorshed Jhaveri (TAS 1960). A contemporary of Khorshed, Nawshir Khurody, took it upon himself to inform the Head of Group HR about this loss. Maybe it is a reflection of the times but he received a terse two-line message in response, which read: ‘I am sorry to hear this sad news. May her soul rest in peace’.

(The reviewer, S Giridhar, is a member of the Azim Premji Foundation)