

Fantry Mein Jaswal (IRS, Rtd)



She joined the Indian Revenue Service (Customs & Central Excise) in 1976. She is the first woman to join the civil services from Arunachal Pradesh. She worked in various capacities and held several challenging posts in the department in a career spanning 35 years. She received the President's Award for Meritorious Record of Service in 2003. She retired as Chief Commissioner of Customs & Central Excise in July 2011. Fantry Mein Jaswal was appointed as Chairperson of the 2nd Arunachal Pradesh State Finance Commission in 2012. She submitted her report to the Governor 2014 and demitted office thereafter. She is Founding Member of Integrated Mountain Initiative (which advocates sustainable development in mountain areas) and currently serves as its Vice President. She served as its secretary for six years. She was instrumental in the formation of the Sustainable Forum of Arunachal Pradesh (SDFP) and serves as its Chairperson. She also served as a director for BASIX Academy For Building Lifelong Employability

Interview:

1. As the first woman to join civil services from Arunachal Pradesh, what were some of the main challenges that you faced at the time?
Do you believe that people have become more receptive towards female bureaucrats in recent times?

The first challenge was that in those days not many people knew about the civil services, and the idea of a woman joining civil services was quite unheard of. But my parents were very supportive and encouraged me to take the civil services exam. In 1976, there was not a lot of dissemination of information and it was difficult for me to figure out what to study and where to study it from. Thankfully, there was a deputy Commissioner in my colony who helped me out and provided me with the necessary inputs.

As a woman, I did face additional challenges as well. We have to work much harder to prove ourselves. In those times especially, it was difficult for my male subordinates to accept a woman boss, particularly those who came from more traditional backgrounds. When I joined I was 23, and was decades younger than many of my subordinates. Being a north-eastern as well, and the first woman from my state, they were always those who were jumping to doubt my capabilities. But over time, by giving them their due respect and proving my own mettle, I was able to earn their respect and acceptance. It is unfortunate to see that these barriers continue to exist for women today, in all spheres of work in fact. But women have paved the way for themselves and will continue to do so.

2. What have been some of the most rewarding experiences in your 35 years of service? How have they impacted you?

You see, as a Revenue Officer, your role is multifaceted. You play the role of a police officer in the sense that you do raids, arrest people and all of that. Then you have the role of a taxation officer where you collect revenue. You also play the part of an administrator because you are doing tax administration. And you act as lawyers and judges, by fighting your cases when assesses go in appeal and adjudicating others. It was fascinating to play these different yet equally challenging roles. I don't think I could pinpoint a singular experience. In my 35 years of work, there has never been a day that I didn't look forward to going to work, and I think that sums it all up.

3. You held a pivotal role as the Chief Commissioner of Customs & Central Excise. What did your responsibilities include? Could you describe some of the significant reforms you implemented during your tenure that had a positive impact on the department?(17:13)

As the Chief Commissioner of Customs & Central Excise, one is an executive officer but also does a lot of administration since you have many commissioner rates under you. My job as the Chief Commissioner was to ensure that all my commissioner rates achieved their revenue target, and to oversee that administration was run smoothly.

As for the reforms, there was an incident that took place early in my career that left an impact on me. In 1983, I was posted on deputation to the ministry of Labour. I was the undersecretary in the Women and Child Development cell. At the time it was just a cell, but today is a full division. I had a very dynamic secretary, Mr B. G. Deshmukh, who later became Cabinet Secretary of the Government of India. He called me one day and

informed me that the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, wanted to bring up cases of gender discrimination in the Cabinet meeting that was to be held soon.

I remembered wanting to take a life insurance policy while expecting my first child but was not allowed to do so by LIC because I was pregnant. I had tried to argue with them by explaining how much medical science and society had progressed, but the policy was about 100 years old and they were not receptive to my complaints at all. I decided to use this opportunity to bring this issue up. It was discussed in the meeting, and the decision was passed by the Prime Minister to have this part of the LIC policy abolished. Gender equality was something I felt very strongly towards, so this incident was extremely satisfying for me.

4. Your work in the The Sustainable Development Forum of Arunachal Pradesh as well as the Integrated Mountain Initiative have taken strides towards promoting sustainable development in mountain areas. What are some of the key activities you believe should be focused on to achieve these goals?

As soon as I retired, I was invited to join the Integrated Mountain Initiative and served as the secretary for six years. My work with the IMI has been challenging. We act as a catalyst between science and policy and work across the Himalayas with Ministers, politicians, and so on. A key highlight was the work we did with the Fifteenth Finance Commission. The Himalayan States provide a lot of ecosystem services that we are never compensated for. In this regard, we made a case in front of the Chairman, Shri N K Singh, and also lobbied with the Chief Ministers of all the Himalayan states and convinced them to come together on the same platform and speak in one voice, for all of our collective benefit. The Chief Minister of Uttarakhand agreed to host this conference which included all the Chief Ministers of this region, Shri N K Singh, Nirmala Sitaraman, the secretary of the government of India, the Agriculture Minister, and several other ministers. The initiative was successful and the ten Himalayan states were given 8000 crore rupees for ecosystem services, something that was a huge accomplishment for us. We have also worked closely with the Environment Ministry.

5. What do you believe is the biggest policy concern in Arunachal Pradesh right now? How do you plan on addressing the same?

Arunachal Pradesh is still developing and we continue to face many challenges. One of the biggest policy concerns is infrastructure development. Without good roads and connectivity, no matter what you do, you cannot sell your ware to the rest of the country. Thankfully, the Chief Minister has addressed this and we now have the Trans-Arunachal Highway that has helped us connect with the rest of India. We have airways, railways and roadways now. Yet, many of the villages are still disconnected, and this continues to be a work in progress. Unless the last man in the hills is benefited, I will not say that we are developed enough.

Another challenge is agriculture. Agriculture is one of the main occupations in Arunachal Pradesh. The soils are fertile and the produce is organic. Despite this, it is a challenge to sell the produce outside because we don't have a market in our space.

6. What drew your interest towards pursuing a career in civil services?

Right from when I was a young girl, I had aspired to have a full time career. After graduating, I immediately wanted to start working. At that time teaching was something that girls were heavily encouraged towards. My father was an industrialist who had opened a primary school in our region, and whenever I visited on holidays I would go there and teach singing, subjects, all sorts of things. Today, it has expanded into a fully developed high school and is run by the government. I applied for the post of a teacher and got a job in a government high school. Although I taught there for a while, I always felt out of place in that society. I felt I had a completely different calling. I was advised by a senior of mine in college to opt for the civil services, and during this time felt that it was an area I could potentially consider. I locked myself up for a year, prepared for the exam, and thankfully cleared it on my first attempt itself.

7. In your opinion, what steps should be taken to encourage more women to pursue careers in the civil services and policymaking roles?

Contrary to popular belief, women in Arunachal Pradesh are not very empowered. They are in the forefront in the market, in selling vegetables and so on, because they are responsible for looking after the family. This is particularly true of the women living in villages. They do all this because they have to. They are not financially independent. I believe a woman cannot be empowered unless she is financially independent and that is the first thing to be addressed. In Arunachal Pradesh, women don't even inherit property from their fathers. Such regressive mindsets must be fixed.

8. What advice would you offer to young women aspiring to pursue careers in policy and governance?

I always encourage girls to join the services, and take up strong careers. They have a voice through civil services. They can make a real difference over here. If you want other women to be empowered, it is you who must show them the way.