

Mrs. Jayashree Pradhan, IAS Rtd, Former Principal Secretary, Govt of Sikkim



Interview

1. You were inducted into the IAS in 1977, a time where it was rare for women to be taking up such careers. What were some of the challenges you faced at that time and do you think people have become more receptive towards women bureaucrats now?

Well, at that time there were very few women in services. Sikkim only became a part of India in 1975, and it was truly a boon at that time to be inducted into the IAS. I had my training with the 1974 batch of provisionals. Although the ladies were less in number, I always felt that the campus was very accommodating towards us and there were not many issues. Infact, a few years after I had joined the services I saw a whole lot of officer wives who left their homes and joined the services. There were many of them that realized that they could look after their homes as well as have a career in services.

Women in the services 5-6 years before me would have definitely faced many challenges, but during my time things were better. I think over the years society has become more accepting of women in important roles which is a very good thing.

And second, I must say, it's a very accommodating state because as an officer, I did not find it very discriminating. You'll be surprised to know that successively, every time a

dignitary, a very high ranking dignitary, let's say the Prime Minister of India was visiting Sikkim, I would be put on protocol duty and would be taken up for important duties. So there was no discrimination as such that I would say that as far as Sikkim is concerned.

And I had very, very cooperative senior officers when I was a junior officer. There were many officers who supported me in my journey till the end of my career.

Well, I wouldn't say that my task was that challenging because it's a pretty comfortable place, I must say. When lady officers come and join, especially my juniors, they come and meet me and ask me about it. And I always tell them that please don't get overwhelmed by the place since it's a hill station and difficult terrain and all that. I said "The people here are so friendly, the officers here are so good that you will really enjoy being here." That's how it's been. I've always found that the people here are very accommodating, very good, and very nice.

2. What motivated you to join the civil services?

Actually, I have always been interested in administration. I used to see things going wrong and felt the need to change it. I knew that only by joining the system would I be able to do something better and more useful.

It was challenging for me since I had already gotten married and had children. I had to leave my two little children behind when I went for my training. But my husband was very supportive. You know they always say that behind every successful man there is a woman, but the reverse is also true. At that time as an unmarried girl, you were always dependent on your father or brother. Ofcourse, the situation has changed now and you don't kind of need to fight for your rights to go to college and join a job and that sort of thing. But at that time I really needed the support of my husband and he gave it to me wholeheartedly. He looked after a 4 year old son and a year and a half year old daughter while I worked. The coach at that time was also very accommodating and allowed me to take my children and household help along with me when we had to go to remote areas.

3. During your tenure as Principal Secretary in the Government of Sikkim, what were some of the most significant challenges you faced, and how did you address them?

As Principal Secretary in the Government of Sikkim, things were generally better. We had to deal with the outbreak of the pandemic and ensure the health and safety of all our citizens, but we managed to do a good job with everything. Although you get more credit as a senior officer, a lot of the work gets done by people occupying lower positions.

Just as there are floods right now and the situation here is very bad, as a junior officer, I had to deal with many similar incidents. They were always tough to manage but I got through and I'm sure we will get through this as well.

4. Sikkim has made progress in development, today having one of the fastest rates of urbanization in India, while also being mindful of its environmental impact and being committed to the model of sustainable development. As someone who has worked in areas of agriculture as well as urban development before, can you share some strategies that were implemented to strike a balance between the two.

Well, Sikkim did make a name for itself as the first organic state in the country. When we started the journey, I was definitely there. But unfortunately for me, during the success, I had already retired, so I really cannot take credit for it. But definitely, there have been lots and lots of areas where we took the first step and moved forward the whole machinery for other parts of the country. We would plan diligently to ensure that development did not compromise sustainability and vice-versa, and I think that really worked to our benefit. If you are mindful of what you are doing when you are planning things out, the stage is set to achieve great heights of success.

5. Several policies have been introduced in the last few years to promote Micro Small and Medium Enterprises and Tourism in Sikkim. Do you think these two sectors can become a driving force of development and economic growth in the state in the new future? What other steps do you feel should be taken in this regard?

I would say that as far as Micro is concerned, I wish more and more young entrepreneurs would come and take up these micro industries. They take it up, you know, but then they get fed up easily or are searching for quick returns. That is definitely not going to be found. You need to work hard for a while. Especially when you are working in a small state like Sikkim which doesn't have much of a market, you've got to have patience. And I find that there is a lack of patience in our youngsters. They want to move from one thing to another quickly. I guess it's the age factor, because they all feel that they don't have the time and patience to stick with one thing and wait for it to flourish. Especially in the agricultural field, you've just got to wait. I wish our youngsters would have more patience and pursue their passions before chasing success.

6. What have been some of the most rewarding experiences in your career and how have they impacted you?

There's something very rewarding about proving your merit to people and showing them that you are capable of things they never thought you could do.

When I became the District Collector in the East District, everyone felt that it had been a very bold decision by the Chief Minister because I was the first lady district collector in the East District.

The East district is supposed to be a very prestigious district and there I had to face a lot of problems. Some would just come and through curiosity did peep and look at me and then go away. I would say, "What is the problem? Is there something you want?"

" No, we just want to see how a lady looks like in this chair." That's the thing. These are some of the very funny events. Then, of course, there were times when I had to travel long distances, walk uphill, and that's a physical challenge. But I managed to overcome all that, and earned the respect of the people of my state and I couldn't ask for more.

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

I think a lot more girls have started to take up civil services after seeing the examples of other women who have achieved so much. Education is one thing, but learning by example is the best kind of learning. We now have a female President, Droupadi Murmu. I'm sure she has inspired many young girls. Seeing women in positions of power will encourage girls and tell them that they are capable of reaching those stages too.

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

Well, I think most of the women are doing very well for themselves. I doubt they need advice from a senior person like me! I think they have all got a variety of opportunities in front of them. Civil services is one way, but of course now you have other careers like journalism and fashion design and so on. The girls are doing amazing, and I feel very very proud of them. It is great that parents are also encouraging their daughters to take up careers because at our time the final score was getting married. Truly, hats off to them! I would only encourage the girls to pursue their passions and go ahead with whatever it is they want to do.