

## The Role of Ethical Values in Public Administration and Good Governance

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### Abstract

Ethics is a system of accepted as “science of morals, the rules of conduct, the science of human,”<sup>1</sup> a set of beliefs, and values that influence human behaviour. It has been stressed upon in individual life as well as public life through time immemorial. In other words, it is a system of study and decides what is right or wrong. Etymologically, the word ‘ethics’ has come from the Latin term ‘ethicus’ which means ‘character.’

Ethical behaviour has been underscored widely in Indian scriptures and other treatises such as *Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, Buddha Chairta, Arthashastra, Panchatantra, Manusmiriti, Kural, Shukra Niti, Kadambari, Raja Tarangani, and Hitopadesh*. But, the modern man ignored all the values mentioned in such treatises. He doesn’t even care for the teachings and preaching of the great philosophers or thinks. Perhaps, one of the reasons for this is that the 21<sup>st</sup> century man, due to industrialization and globalization, is craving for accumulation of more wealth and maximization of sensual pleasures in order to be happy.

The aim of the present paper is to discuss the meaning of ethics, dimensions of ethics and values and their relevance in public administration for good governance. The paper also analyzes the obstacles to ethical accountability, role of an administrator in strengthening the governance.

**Keywords:** Ethics, morals, public administration, governance, administrator

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Ethics, in public administration, focuses on how the public administrator should question and reflect in order to be able to act responsibly. One cannot simply bifurcate the two by saying that ethics deals with morals and values, while public administration is about actions and decisions. The levels of governance are dependent on the social, economic, political, cultural, legal-judicial, and historical contexts of the country. For any governance, transparency, accountability, efficiency, sensitivity, procedural norms, and administrative strategies are highly essential.

In a country like India, the role of public administration has been increasing incessantly. Its regularity, development, promotional, and entrepreneurial responsibilities have been multiplying. The number of public personnel as well as the agencies have gone up so much that it is rather difficult for the political executive or the legislature to exercise effective control over people.

Civil servants frequently engage themselves in actions that are unethical and work against public interest. Over time, they get used to defining their role and responsibilities in a parochial manner that is either self-centered, group-centered or organization-centered but never people-centered. Since all the important administrators and the professional groups adopt a tunnel vision in perceiving social reality, there are hardly any countervailing forces for the prevention or correction of a parochial interpretation of public interest by the administrative personnel. As a result, both ethics and accountability are suffering a lot.

Corruption is the abuse of social authority for personal gains. It is the betrayal of public trust for protecting private interests. Corruption is currently viewed as a universal phenomenon, especially in India, although the nature and quantum of

corruption differ from nation to nation, person to person. It hurts everyone who depends on the integrity of the people in a position of authority. Politicians and administrators are generally in league with each other in perpetuating corruption. Citizens are, thus becoming, the victims of immorality in governance.

An important question arises in connection with the moral obligation of an administrative system. Is the administrative system confined to acting morally in its conduct or does it also share the responsibility of protecting and promoting an ethical order in the larger society? While most of the focus on administrative morality is on the aspect of probity within the administrative system, there is a need to consider the issue of the responsibility of the governance system (of which the administrative system is an integral part) to create and sustain an ethical ambience in the socioeconomic system that would nurture and protect the basic moral values. Moral political philosophy assumes that the rulers will not only be moral themselves, but would also be the guardians of morality in a society. Truly, being moral is a prerequisite to being a guardian of wider morality. Both the obligations are intertwined.

It is a truism that the crux of administrative morality is ethical decision-making. The questions of facts and values cannot be separated from ethical decision-making. Thus, the science of administration gets integrated with the ethics of administration. And in this integrated regime, only that empirical concern is valued, which respects the normative concerns in the delivery of administrative services.

Woodrow Wilson, in his inaugural address of “The Study of Administration” (1887), averred that justice was more important than sympathy. Thus, he “placed

justice at the top of value-hierarchy in a governance system. Paradoxically, there has been a lot of discussion on the formal legal aspects of administrative law since then, but very little analysis has been made of the philosophical dimension of administrative justice.’’<sup>2</sup>

The other two issues of ethical decision-making, viz. fairness and objectivity are, in fact, integral components of administrative justice. When administrators are true to their profession, they are expected to be impartial and fair and not get influenced by nepotism, favoritism and greed while making decisions of governance. Objectivity should not be misconstrued as a mechanical and rigid adherence to laws and rules. From the decision-making angle, it has undoubtedly wider ramifications encompassing a set of positive orientations.

Besides the aforesaid, the full-time status of bureaucrats make them corrupt, lack of coordination between established government, anti-corruption agencies, and institutions, misinterpretation of role and obligations, improper carrying out of policies for the upliftment of society, unimpactful policy decisions, are some of the factors that spoil the governance and bringing chaos into the society and the public.

Currently, the notion of ethics has expanded itself to involve all major realms of human existence. Some of the salient aspects of ethics in public administration that may bring change in the society and strengthens the governance are a) An administrator should follow the rules that are framed to govern and guide the public, b) An administrator should accept the moral responsibility and use his discretion properly in making decision, in introducing policies that would help the public, c) An administrator should be committed to his duties and perform his work with

involvement, intelligence, dexterity, punctuality in fulfilling the promises made to the public. As Swami Vivekananda rightly points out “Every duty is holy and devotion to duty is the highest form of worship,”<sup>3</sup> d) An administrator should ensure that the implementing policies and decisions would bring the greatest happiness and benefits to the greatest number, e) An administrator, without violating the prescribed laws and rules, should demonstrate compassion for the poor, for the disabled and the weak while using his discretion, and e) An administrator should undertake an administrative action on the basis of honesty and should not use his power, position, and discretion to serve his personal interest and the illegitimate interests of other individual or groups.

Unfortunately, in India the standards of ethics in the governance system have differed staggeringly in proclamations and in practice. The Constitution, laws, policies, manifestoes of political parties and speeches of politicians are replete with direct or indirect references to ethical basis of governance, but in practice, however, there is a gross violation of moral precepts in the functioning of the politico-administrative system. The critical reasons behind administrative corruption are scarcity of what people want from public administrators and the inconveniences involved in the normal channels of administrative decisions. As Michael Johnston (1982) explains “The demand for government’s rewards frequently exceeds the supply, and routine decision-making processes are lengthy, costly, and uncertain in their outcome. For these reasons, legally sanctioned decision-making processes constitute a ‘bottleneck’ between what people want and what they get. The temptation to get around the bottleneck – to speed things up and make favourable decisions more probable – is built into this relationship between government and society. To get

around the bottleneck, one must use political influence – and corruption, which by definition cuts across established and legitimate processes, is a most effective form of influence. Because of the scarcity of what people want from the government, they are willing to pay bribes in exchange for jobs, land, licences, quotas, admissions, passports, utility service connections etc. or even for getting them speedily or illegitimately. They may also bribe administrators for escaping arrests, punishments, fines or major inconveniences. All these are examples of a transactional corruption. This acquires frightening proportions when it becomes an accepted trait of the socio-cultural system.”<sup>4</sup>

For any governance system should be transparent, accountable, efficient, and sensitive. The administrators and the public should follow a code of ethics, rules, procedural norms, and administrative strategies for good governance. It is not possible to bring into force a code of ethics, if it is self-serving and is subject to constant external interference and manipulation. The other essentials to ensure the practice of ethics in administration are a) faith and determination towards pursuit of excellence of service in their professional activities via methods of training and sensitization, b) infusion of ethics into politics through trainings and other programmes so that it is passed on to their subordinates, c) relations between citizens and personnel to create favourable opinion of society and people towards public services and servants, d) need for character building in public servants through education, adult education, and functional or job responsibility literacy, e) impartiality should be practiced and encouraged, and f) educating administrators and the public regarding their rights.

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