

## **Ethics of Public Service**

### **Humility - an essential component of ethics**

The members of All India Services, the Central Services and the superior state services are at the higher echelons of the administrative structure of the Union and state governments in our country. They carry huge responsibilities of carrying out government's policies and programmes besides assisting in the formulation of policies. And for performing their functions, they are endowed with requisite authority under the laws and regulations.

They are a critical part of the so called 'steel frame'. And being a product of the Weberian system of bureaucracy, they are traditionally guided by formal impersonal structures and codified procedures to discharge their duties. They are required not to transgress the prescribed codes of conduct. Resultantly, they come to believe that adherence to rules and procedures without violating the provisions of the code of conduct is not only the sine qua non but the pinnacle of their performance.

It is my observance over decades that the majority of superior civil servants, who are recruited to various services on the basis of merit, discharge their stipulated duties satisfactorily. The stability of administration and the integrity of the nation state owe much to the cumulative performance of the civil services. That they have carried out the developmental and welfare functions ascribed to them satisfactorily is exhibited by the continued sustenance of parliamentary democracy, maintenance of order and the legitimacy of the governments over decades.

However, they have committed mistakes – many mistakes. For instance, I think they could have appended another dimension to their performance and given a new meaning to the delivery of services to the people. The question whether they observe ethical principles of governance while executing their functions is debatable. Here I do not restrict the meaning of 'ethics' merely to the commonly understood notion of personal honesty.

For example, the generations of civil servants have failed to make the systems and procedures of service delivery people friendly. In my generation, it was considered suspicious if a district magistrate mingled too much with the people. A large percentage of civil servants are still unwilling to engage with people and answer all questions in a true and transparent manner.

This is especially disquieting in view of the many crises we are facing—a global virus, economic downturn, climate degradation, income inequality, unemployment, extremism, growing polarization - that require better communication, trust and

collaboration with diverse professionals. The new generation of bureaucrats needs to bridge the divide within the civil services and with people at large.

How can we find a way across our divide and come together for the common cause of nation building? With so much of self aggrandisement and cut throat competition around, they need to practice more modesty to communicate and cooperate.

In the IC Centre for Governance, we've been studying and talking about various ways to bridge divides, putting together tools to help people connect. We have found that there may be one key character trait that's necessary for applying those tools in a constructive way: humility.

Humility is not yielding to the stronger or more domineering; it is accepting the truth in the other person's view with grace, irrespective of whether the other person is of a higher or lower status.

Humility is listening to displeasing views with patience and not reacting with aggression.

Humility is refusal to give offence merely to push one's point of view. Humility is not showing weakness, but inner strength of conviction.

"Humility is a kind of a master virtue that can pull along other virtues if people develop it," says Everett Worthington. Humility, as Worthington defines it, is multifaceted, involving an awareness of our personal strengths and weaknesses, as well as a willingness to acknowledge those weaknesses while working to improve upon them.

In my view, humility is at the heart of authenticity. And unfortunately, humility is in very short supply in our civil servants at all levels; particularly in the higher echelons of civil services. They start believing in their inherent superiority from the day they are selected by the UPSC.

There was an additional secretary in the Ministry of Finance who kept essential facts and details in his personal custody and did not share them for formulating policies. He was in the habit of scoring points and belittling his colleagues by revealing them in meetings with the Prime Minister or the Cabinet Minister. Eventually, he was exposed and had to suffer.

An otherwise competent officer was in the habit of rebuking and ticking off his subordinates by unnecessarily pointing out their mistakes or omissions and throwing files at them. I also remember a secretary to Government of India taking delight in

picking spelling mistakes or trivial grammatical errors in the file notings of his subordinate officers and marking them in big red ink.

In one of the programme of Ethics in Governance in Panchgani, when a facilitator remarked that all participants are basically common citizens, one senior IAS participant retorted that IAS officers are special people, not common people. It took three days to take care of his ego. After that incident, I invariably request the participants to leave their ego at the gate of Asia Plateau when they enter the premises and pick it up on their way back.

These are only some illustrative instances of arrogance and haughtiness displayed commonly by civil servants.

Another mistake civil servants selected by UPSC have committed over the years is that each one of them considers himself/herself as more brilliant, more accomplished, more competent and more creative than others; whereas in fact, all of them are of comparable calibre with some exceptions. This is the reason why an initiative started by the predecessor is often derided and scoffed at by the successor. Celebrating the achievements of peers and colleagues is a rare attribute in an all India service officer.

How a civil servant sees the infallibility of his/her own position determines how inclined he/she is to condemn the people who are on the other side of the fence. If he/she has intellectual humility, he/she will be more disposed to pay attention to the reasons in others' views, That means he/she is going to notice the limits of his/her knowledge and will be more receptive to new information.

The fact is that we are not always very good at understanding what another person is thinking or feeling. In fact, we only pretend to be listening to what the other person is saying.

I believe that a credible civil servant requires presenting himself/herself in modest ways, while caring about the well-being of those around. A growing body of research shows that being modest may be useful in bridging differences. That's because it helps people let go of defensiveness, take in information that challenges their views, and see the humanity in people on the other side of the divisive spectrum.

We are forced by our active brain into hearing only what we already believe. For example, one study showed that people assigned to watch a demonstration reported different levels of protester violence depending on whether they agreed with the cause being protested. They literally could not see the same events in the same way.

Research has found that people see differences between people without noticing their commonalities. This can create huge gaps in understanding others and create antipathy.

It makes sense that knowing we don't own the centre of truth could help us bridge our differences, lessening our intolerance for diverse opinions and antipathy toward people on the other side. This is the essence of humility.

People that have more humility treat people that disagree with them in better ways and have less animosity toward them. People with less humility would consider people who disagree with them to be suspect, unintelligent, or morally deficient—not endearing qualities.

It would be of immense advantage to have an awareness of the limitations of our own beliefs.

The question arises whether humility can be taught. It is generally believed that basic behavioural characteristics can only be altered or modified in early childhood. But in behavioural science, there have been some studies in finding ways of increasing humility in professionals. Though the research on how to induce humble strands is young, there is some evidence that it can be done.

It has been tested in randomized controlled trials to teach forgiveness, patience, or modesty. In one study, people who attended a training programme on humility were found not only to be humbler according to their own report, but also scored higher in forgiveness and patience.

I think civil servants should be nudged to learn more about what humility is and isn't; they should be encouraged to use self-reflections to examine humility in themselves and to engage in practicing humility. And the best way to nudge them for more humility is through inspiring stories of their colleagues.

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