

WHY HONESTY IS A PRICELESS ASSET FOR A CIVIL SERVANT

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Foundational values for Civil Service - Integrity, Objectivity, Impartiality & non-partisanship

Occasional musings on honesty, truthfulness, or professional ethics by some former bureaucrats appear to be a favoured time-pass, which to many may be entertaining. The age-old dictum — honesty is the best policy — was underscored recently by a former bureaucrat now holding a constitutional post in a news article a few days back. Curiously, he concluded that in the larger societal interest, bureaucrats need to remain honest though it has a direct or collateral cost to them. Illustrations were presented on forms of honesty along with dos and don'ts in various situations, leaving a feeling as if logic and virtue of honesty was being turned on its head. There is no point in guessing what prompted such outpourings.

Honesty or absolute integrity, truthfulness and hard work without indulgences form an inherent part of the life a civil servant whose sole objective is to efficiently deliver services to the public. These attributes cannot be viewed through prisms of additional qualifiers and costs. Pontifications by some leading lights who are also seen to be opposing policies and statutes they had promoted while in service appear opportunistic. After enjoying nearly four decades of public life holding key positions in the Republic of India, whose motto is “Satyameva Jayate”, when we are cautioned that honesty has a cost, the only logical albeit harsh conclusion that can be drawn is that of self-deception or an arrogance that led to failure to differentiate between appearance and reality.

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It is a travesty of truth to conclude that honesty has a huge cost. Honest decisions and truthful implementation of law do entail risks and difficulties in a society which fails to respect the rule of law in letter and spirit. Indeed, a society infected by various forms of perversions and delusions does not deserve to find absolute virtues in the instruments of State, be that legislature, executive or judiciary, which are mandated to serve without discrimination and to deliver justice efficiently without fear or favour. It thus follows that in the rat-race to grab key posts, competing claims are not necessarily based on merit; desired prerequisites at times are superseded by undesirable additional attributes of incumbents. Such carefully hidden distortions do get manifest ultimately. When the so-called ‘go-getters’ fail to fulfill their master’s expectations, the going get tough for them — and a ‘fishing and roving’ shining career sometimes suffers ‘fishing and roving’ enquiries’. Arm-twisting or blackmail is a crude expression to describe this syndrome.

By citing some examples it is sometimes alleged that otherwise ‘upright’ bureaucrats get victimized for decisions taken at the behest of their political masters. This is nothing more than a ploy to muddy the waters. Perhaps there is no country that provides the type of job security to civil servants as does India, particularly to those belonging to All India Services. Getting out of the service seems more difficult than getting in! The physician does not prescribe sugar-coated medicines to a diabetic simply because the patient does not want to have taste of a bitter pill. Likewise, the bureaucrat is responsible for examining each proposal on merit keeping public interest supreme for decision by the political establishment. He is within his power to convey his inability to implement illegal orders or resubmit the proposal if the executive decisions are devoid of merit.

How many public servants have actually suffered for discharging duties in accordance with the statutory provisions? Suffering cannot be reckoned in terms of transfers and being shunted to peripheral posts for some time. These are simply tools deployed by the polity to subjugate bureaucracy. To my assessment and experience, every post howsoever peripheral in bureaucratic parlance has potential to improve the delivery of public service. It is neither the post nor tenure that define the contributions of a bureaucrat; what counts is quality and quantity of work done with systemic improvements. Indeed, identification with specific political dispensation affects decision-making ability. Those with expertise in 'wheeling-dealing' forget that some day someone else will write their obituary.

We hold mismanagement of public sector responsible for its sickness ignoring that the net-worth of those at the helm of affairs has multiplied manifold. So-called discretionary powers exercised routinely invariably shower benefits to those deserving the least. Why should the Railway Board Chairman or Civil Aviation Secretary enjoy life-long privileges from Indian Railways or Air India? I remember a former Deputy PM-cum-Home Minister advising a Delhi Police Commissioner, in vain, to withdraw services of over 400 sergeants/constables who were servicing retired police officers! It is easy to blame politicians for everything. In reality, some bureaucrats found extolling the virtues of honesty and truth, hardly consider misuse of posts held in promoting their family or in availing of a variety of benefits which do not have an overt under or over-the-table monetary transaction as something that should prick their conscience. Honesty is priceless, with no trade-offs. An honest person may face occasional scrutiny, but in the long run he can't lose. Also, what is the point in crying over spilt milk?

(Dr Taradatt is a former civil servant)

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