

ACTIONS THAT CORRODE THE STEEL FRAME OF INDIA

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights Issues - Consumer Rights in India

There are definite norms that define neutrality | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

A letter war between two sets of retired public officials (civil servants, judges and army officers), concerning the prevailing political and social situation in the country, has been widely reported in the media. In the last week of April 2022, a group of these retirees, calling themselves as the Constitutional Conduct Group (CCG) [sent an 'open letter' to the Prime Minister](#). In the letter, they appealed to him to call for an end to the politics of hate and violence against the minorities, particularly Muslims.

Very soon thereafter, another rival group of Concerned Citizens (CC) surfaced and [rubbished the allegations as a 'false narrative'](#), inspired by western and international lobbies.

Unfortunately, in neither of the formulations, is there any reference to the role of the civil service (of which they all were distinguished members in the past) in whatever is happening or not happening in the country, concerning law and public order and the security of citizens. It is the police and magistracy, judicial courts and other regulatory agencies — not politicians — which have been authorised and empowered by law to take preventive action against potential troublemakers, enforce the laws relating to criminal, economic and other offences, and maintain public order. In mature democracies, self-respecting public officials normally discharge their constitutional and legal responsibilities with honesty, integrity and their own conscience, firmly resisting the dictates of the vested interests. What is happening in our country?

Perhaps, a reference to the recent events in Great Britain will serve to clarify things, as the main features of our governance system — the cabinet system with accountability to Parliament and a permanent civil service with political neutrality as its hallmark — are patterned on the English constitutional model.

Recently, Britain's two top Ministers, Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Finance Minister), Rishi Sunak, were accused of violating their own lockdown regulations for COVID-19 by attending Christmas and other parties at 10, Downing Street, London (Prime Minister's residence) in the months of November to December 2020.

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A career civil servant, Sue Gray, was asked to inquire into the veracity of the charges. Of Ms. Gray, it was said that she would never want to tarnish her reputation by claims of a cover-up or a shoddy investigation.

She came to the finding that against the background of the restrictions on all citizens, the gatherings held were inappropriate and represented a serious failure to observe the high standards expected from top public functionaries. The public and the political establishment accepted the integrity of the exercise. Then, another wing of the civil service, the London Metropolitan Police, imposed fines on the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of Exchequer for their misdemeanour, and again both the top Ministers accepted the penalty.

Can this happen in India? It might have been possible in the early years when Sardar

Vallabhbhai Patel created independent India's civil services, but no longer. The deterioration in standards was very visible during the National Emergency declared in 1975. The civil services, like other institutions including the judiciary, just caved in; the trend might have accelerated over the years; now, no one even talks of civil service neutrality, although there is the rare purist who could be sticking to the old standards of behaviour.

Earlier, during communal or caste riots, the Administration focused on quelling the disturbances and restoring peace in the affected locality, without ever favouring one group over the other. Now, there are allegations of local officers taking sides in a conflict. For civil servants who work with ruling politicians directly, following a political master's diktats and identifying with his interests, anticipating his views in official work and acting on them and pandering to his narrow political interests, often become easy options that put them out of harm's way.

The politician, lacking the vision and intellectual grasp of a Sardar Patel, could also reward a compliant bureaucrat by offering prized and lucrative assignments both within and outside the country. He could also have him placed in an inconvenient position or even punish him if he does not follow his line. This can happen despite the protection and safeguards in Article 311 of the Constitution. That a civil servant's pliant and submissive behaviour means an end to civil service neutrality and the norms and values that this trait demands, does not seem to bother either the political or bureaucratic leadership.

The norms that define neutrality are: independence of thought and action; honest and objective advice; candour and 'speaking truth to power' even if it is done in the privacy of a Minister's chamber. Associated with these norms are the personal values that a civil servant cherishes or ought to cherish, namely, self-respect, integrity, professional pride and dignity. All these together contribute to the enhancement of the quality of administration that benefits society and the people.

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This objective may, however, be at a discount when politicians are eager to serve their personal and party interests, and overzealous and ambitious officials dance to their tune, thereby leading to a dilution of standards. It could also create favourable conditions for both political and bureaucratic corruption.

"Constitutional morality is not a natural sentiment," wrote B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of the Constitution and added, "It has to be cultivated. We must realise that our people have yet to learn it. Democracy in India is only a top dressing on an Indian soil which is essentially undemocratic."

Nilmadhab Mohanty has worked in senior positions in both national and international bureaucracies

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