

Book Review

**Public Service Ethics – A Quest for Naitik Bharat Shri Prabhat Kumar IAS (retd)
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V.Srinivas IAS

Shri Prabhat Kumar, a distinguished civil servant, former Cabinet Secretary and former Governor of Jharkhand, a legendary figure in the Civil Service with over 50 years of experience in Government has written a monograph to highlight the crucial element of human character, the practice of ethical principles as a way of life. He believes that India needs a movement of Ethical India to tide over the crisis of ethics in every profession. The important elements of this crisis are inefficient delivery of public service, rampant corruption at all levels, and lack of civil society participation at all levels. These have significant ramifications to the quality and trustworthiness of public governance system.

Ethics in public service is an essential component of Parliamentary democracy, encompassing serving the people and helping the weak, the poor, the downtrodden, and public servants should be imbued with the ethical spirit of compassion, empathy, and understanding of issues which face community in which the public servant works. India's citizens expect a Government that looks after their needs, a Government that is responsive and acts fairly and impartially. This in essence is the DNA of ethics in public service. A corruption free Nation, with dedicated public servants imbued with an ethical spirit is what our country need. The motto "I am Ethical, I am Accountable, I am the IAS" imbued in the words "Sheelam Paramam Bhushanam" holds very much true for modern day Public Servants.

Through the Twelve chapter book the author has discussed the related aspects covering the perceptions of civil service, role of democratic institutions, and elements of understanding modern principles to drive home his point. Shri Prabat Kumar eloquently argues the virtues of honesty, abiding by rules, or obeying orders of seniors are not enough for public servants. They need to be innovative, imaginative and sympathetic to the needs of the citizen. Adoption of the practices enunciated in

the book will give a quantum leap to India's prestige in the comity of Nations and also make the Nation more competitive in a multiplicity of global endeavors. It is important to recognize Shri Prabhat Kumar ji's signal contribution and salute him for his services to the Nation.

Shri Prabhat Kumar's hypothesis is that Ethics of Public Service should be the cornerstone of all trainings of Union Government and State Governments. Civil Servants should be told that they should endeavor to go beyond their normal duty to serve public better, that ethics makes their duty bigger, it makes their duty more meaningful, it makes their duty more uplifting. Ethics of Public Service urges us to do more than what is expected of us. Popular discontent with the conduct of civil services has a universal dimension when the citizen is asked to wait for legitimate rights from Government, and there is dilution of integrity of institutions. This happens when civil servants begin to consider themselves bigger than the institution to which they belong, showing a contempt for the service in which they spend their life.

It is recognized that India has an incorruptible system of recruiting higher civil services based entirely on merit. They undergo rigorous training in their disciplines and are given enormous responsibilities from the first day of their postings. While the Civil Servants have done reasonably well in maintaining the stability of the Nation and the system of governance, they have suffered from a bias to status quo, inability to learn from future, working in compartments rather than trying cross-cutting initiatives and failing to be seen as people friendly. One of the major mistakes of senior bureaucrats is to act alone. Most of the officers who could have set the standards of service were loners. The individual alone, however competent and charismatic does not possess the endowments to overcome the inertia of the system. Team building is essentially based on shared perspectives and shared goals. A forceful boss can start an initiative but cannot bring behavioral change in his subordinates. After her departure, the initiative is forgotten or replaced by the initiative of her successor.

Shri Prabhat Kumar says that civil servants need to build an identity of their own, fix benchmarks for conduct and processes and create safeguards against failing to deliver services to the people. Too long we have toyed with the conservative

approaches to reform the civil service and have had limited success in infusing vigor in its functioning. The reforms suggested and implemented have often lacked depth and generally been one-dimensional. Benjamin Franklin's statement "he that is secure is not safe", applies to the Indian bureaucrat. Shri Prabhat Kumar says that the Indian bureaucracy today needs a new narrative. It has to come out of its latent conservatism to discover a fresh idiom. Mission Karmayogi is a welcome initiative, expected to provide precious capacity building in the behavioral attributes of civil servants. Ethics of Public Service can help lay the strong foundation of governance in the third decade of the 21st century.

The OECD identifies 8 key components of an ethical infrastructure in governance – political commitment, effective legal framework, efficient accountability mechanisms, workable codes of conduct, professional socialization mechanisms (through training), supportive public service conditions, existence of central ethics coordinating body and an active civil society able to act as a watchdog over the actions of officials. Shri Prabhat Kumar has identified several sterling examples of unflinching adherence to standards of public service, I have had the opportunity to serve with a number of officials whom he has cited – Gajendra Haldea, Balvinder Kumar, Anil Swarup, Amarjit Singh, Jayesh Ranjan, Prabhakar Deshmukh, Rajendra Barud, Umakant Umrao, Jitendra Kumar Soni, Durga Shakti Nagpal, Shrikar Pardeshi – each one of them has stood out as a high performing civil servant critical to good governance and to the effective delivery of public services while finding an identity in public perception. There are several young officers whom I wish to cite – Keerthi Jalli, Varnali Deka, Krishna Bhaskar, Ghanshyam Thori, Dr. Ashish Srivastav, Bhagwati Prasad, D.Sajith Babu, Andra Vamsi, Shubham Saxena, Adeela Abdulla, Harichandana Dasari – officers who have stood in the frontlines of duty, putting service above self, representing the foundational and non-negotiable values of ethics of public service. The Civil Servant of the 21st century will have to be more accountable for his services to the common man, develop an understanding that whatever decision he makes needs to balance the different parts of the whole system.

Functioning of Countries are measured in terms of quality of governance. Some of the common fallacies identified include class arrogance, personal ego, stressed

attitude, conflict of interest and in-betweenity. Ethics is very fragile. It is built with a lot of effort over time, but can be demolished by a single act of selfishness or greed. There is tremendous gratification that can be drawn from doing good for society, in becoming role models for others, particularly the younger generation, the satisfaction that one's life has touched other people's lives. The fragility of ethics is particularly visible in some organizations which over time become unproductive and toxic, where employees are fragmented, the purpose of serving the people is lost to the goal of serving themselves. Corruption in our system has 2 fronts – transactional corruption and collusive corruption – as the author says, “most get on the bus, others run alongside it, yet very few stand in-front of it”. It is important to change the mindset of officials who run government institutions, by introducing institutional corrections and strengthen the ethical movement in government. Civil Servants need to consciously examine the ethical content in decision making and most of the time get it right. The IC Centre of Governance needs to be commended for commencing the “Alliance of Change Makers” webinars.

To conclude a rough definition of EPS is “Ethics of Public Service in its widest connotation, includes the legitimate selfless exercise of the position, and the authority, power and influence that go with it, in the service of the people and beyond the boundaries of one's job. Its doing more than what the law requires and less than what the law permits. The 3 layered test of ethics of public service in day to day decisions and actions of conscious civil servants is doing what is right, doing what is not only legal but just, not only defensible but compassionate, not only part of an ethical/ moral code, doing more than what is expected of you. The last aspect is one's unique personal contribution to ethical public service. Always respect the art of listening, communication is an essential ingredient of ethics of public service.