Ethics and Integrity in Public Administration : Need for a New Paradigm

Dr. Kartikay Gadiya*

***Ph.D, Department of Public Administration, MLSU Udaipur, Udaipur (Raj.)) INDIA**

Abstract : The role and function of public administration is essentially based on ethics and integrity of the institutions and its personnel. The traditional form of governance which is based on the formal procedures, strictly following rules and regulations and hierarchy is growing inadequate to cater to modern, complex and participatory governance. This paper suggests for the formulation and adoption of a new paradigm of ethics and integrity in public administration, one that is proactive, values-based, and embedded in institutional design. By analyzing historical frameworks, contemporary challenges, and international best practices, this study suggests a strategic shift towards ethical governance through citizen engagement, cultural transformation and systematic safeguards. In order to showcase the urgency and feasibility of the new approach, the case study in Indian context is analyzed.

Keywords: Public administration, ethics, integrity, governance, accountability, corruption, ethical leadership.

Introduction - Public administration plays a key role in how governments function, connect with citizens and helps in implementing laws, policies, and programs which directly or indirectly have an effect on citizens' everyday life. For any public administration system to function well and be trusted by the people, it must be based on strong ethical values and high standards of integrity.

Till recently, many governments have followed a traditional model of public administration which focuses mainly on adherence to rules, regulations, and procedures. This approach helped bring order and consistency but often ignored deeper moral questions. Strict adherence to rules does not necessarily always help in reaching the right decisions.

In recent years, public administrators have been facing new challenges which include corruption, abuse of power, increasing public expectations, the growing use of technology, and the need to work with different levels of government and private organizations. Situations today are often complex and require public servants to make decisions where rules may not always provide clear solutions which paves the way for strong ethical judgment. On the other hand, citizens' around the world are expecting more openness, fairness, and responsibility from their governments. Dishonest or unfair public official weakens public trust and ultimately democratic institutions. It shows that ethics and integrity should not only be personal values but the part of the entire system of public administration. Therefore, there is an urgent requirement for a new paradigm about ethics in public service where the focus

would be values like honesty, fairness, respect, and public interest rather than only laws and rules. It should encourage ethical leadership, accountability, and encourage participation of citizens in decision-making. Public administrators should be trained and supported to make ethical choices.

Conceptual Framework: Ethics and Integrity Defined: The concepts of **ethics** and **integrity** are often used together, but they carry distinct meanings that complement one another in shaping the moral foundation of governance.

Ethics: Meaning and Relevance in Public Administration: Ethics refers to the set of principles which guide human behavior and help in distinguishing between right and wrong. In public administration, ethics refers to standards and values of honesty, impartiality, transparency, accountability and commitment to the public interest which helps in governing the conduct of government officials in their respective duties and functions (Cooper, 2012).

According to Frederickson (1997), ethics in public administration is not merely individual choice but part and parcel of the systems and processes which define public service. Ethics ensures that the power is exercised with responsibility and in such a manner which serves the larger interest of the society. As Cooper (2012) notes, ethical public administration is necessary to maintain the legitimacy of government and public trust in institutions.

Ethical conduct is of extreme importance in such situations where multiple stakeholders are involved and have conflicting interests and laws or rules do not provide clear solutions. It is where public administrators are required

to rely on their moral judgment based on ethical principles and make fair and accountable decisions (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007).

Integrity: Beyond Ethics: Integrity although closely related to ethics refers to the consistency of actions based on ethical values and principles even in the difficult situations or when no one is watching. Huberts (2014) defines integrity as "the quality of acting in accordance with relevant moral values, norms, and rules," which emphasize that integrity is about upholding ethical standards internally and not only compliance.

In the context of public administration, integrity denotes the equilibrium between conduct of public officials and the ethical expectations from them. While ethics refers to what needs to be done, integrity refers to actual practice of such expectations.

Public Administration and the Ethical Environment: Public administration is value loaded. It functions in the social and political environment which affects and is in turn affected by its decisions. Svara (2007) stipulates that public administrators rather than mere implementation of public policy should be able to evaluate the larger impact of their actions on the society.

It is essential to develop ethical infrastructure which encompasses legal framework, institutional mechanism, leadership and such organizational culture that eventually promotes ethical behavior including code of conducts, training programs on ethics, strong accountability measures and protection system for whistleblowers (OECD, 2020).

The Traditional Ethical Paradigm: Strengths and Shortcomings: Historically, the ethical framework in public administration has been shaped by administrative norms such as:

1. **Rule adherence**: Compliance with laws and regulations
2. **Hierarchical accountability**: Superiors overseeing subordinates
3. **Impersonality**: Avoidance of favoritism or bias
4. **Code-based conduct**: Prescriptive codes of ethics

These elements helped prevent arbitrary behavior and ensured consistency. However, they also produced several shortcomings:

1. **Moral minimalism**: Doing only what is legally required, not necessarily what is right
2. **Reactive ethics**: Addressing violations after they occur rather than preventing them
3. **Rigidity**: Inability to deal with complex, ambiguous, or evolving ethical dilemmas

Emerging Ethical Challenges in Public Administration
In the 21st century, public administration faces a series of complex ethical challenges:

1. **Corruption and rent-seeking behavior**: Undermine development and democratic legitimacy
2. **Technological transformation**: Raises concerns about data privacy, surveillance, and algorithmic bias

3. **Multilevel governance**: Interactions between local, national, and international actors complicate ethical clarity
4. **Citizens' expectations**: Increased demand for transparency, responsiveness, and participatory governance
5. **Moral pluralism**: Diverse societies bring competing conceptions of right and wrong

These challenges require administrators to exercise ethical judgment rather than merely follow rules.

The Need for a New Ethical Paradigm: A new ethical paradigm must incorporate the following elements:

Value-Based Decision Making: Ethical decisions should be grounded in universally accepted public values such as justice, equity, and the common good. Administrators should be trained to reflect morally on decisions, considering both legality and legitimacy.

Institutional Ethics Infrastructure: Ethical behavior must be embedded in organizational culture through ethics commissions, whistleblower protections, internal audits, and integrity assessments.

Ethical Leadership: Leaders must act as role models. Their behavior signals organizational priorities and sets a tone for integrity. Ethical leadership also encourages open communication and dissent without fear of reprisal.

Citizen Engagement: Participatory governance via public consultations, citizen juries, and social audits adds a layer of moral accountability and enhances the ethical climate.

Ethics Education and Training: Professional development must include ethics training that moves beyond codes of conduct to foster ethical reasoning and resilience.

Technology with Integrity: Digital governance must be guided by ethical frameworks ensuring transparency, equity, and non-discrimination in AI and data usage.

International Best Practices: Countries around the world offer examples of effective ethical governance:

1. **New Zealand**: Emphasizes ethical leadership, citizen-centric services, and a high degree of public trust.
2. **Canada**: Integrity commissioners at federal and provincial levels monitor ethical behavior.
3. **Singapore**: Enforces strict anti-corruption laws and promotes ethics as a core component of public service.
4. **Sweden and Denmark**: Transparent administrative processes and strong civic culture help maintain ethical public sectors.

These experiences highlight that ethical governance is both a cultural and institutional challenge, requiring integrated approaches.

Indian Context: Opportunities and Challenges: India, as the world's largest democracy and a rapidly developing nation, presents a complex landscape for the implementation of ethics and integrity in public administration. While the country has made notable strides in institutional reforms and digital governance, it continues to grapple with deeply entrenched challenges such as corruption, political interference, and bureaucratic inertia.

The Indian experience thus presents both **opportunities and challenges** in advancing a more ethical, transparent, and accountable public administration system.

Opportunities

1. Constitutional and Legal Foundations: India's commitment to ethical governance is rooted in its Constitution which enshrines values such as justice, equality, and the rule of law. Fundamental Duties (Article 51A) urge citizens and public officials to uphold ethical behavior. Laws like the Prevention of Corruption Act 1988, **the** Right to Information (RTI) Act (2005)**,** and the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act (2013) provide a strong legal foundation for accountability and integrity in public life (GoI, 2018).

2. Digital Governance and E-Governance: Digital India initiative has helped reduce discretion and increase transparency in public service delivery. Platforms such as e-Sampark, MyGov, and Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) have minimized human interface and curbed opportunities for corruption. The adoption of Aadhaar-based authentication, online grievance redressal systems, and public dashboards are major steps toward ethical and transparent administration (MeitY, 2022).

3. Vibrant Civil Society and Media: The Civil society organizations and robust free press in India have played a key role in promoting transparency and exposing unethical conduct in public office. Investigative journalism, social audits, and public interest litigation have become powerful tools for demanding accountability and driving reform (Jenkins & Goetz, 1999).

4. Youth and Educational Reforms : The growing emphasis on ethics education in universities and training institutions such as the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA) reflects a renewed focus on building integrity in future administrators. Programs like the Integrity Pledge by the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) and ethics modules in civil service training are promising steps towards imparting moral values among public servants.

Challenges

1. Systemic Corruption and Political Interference: Despite legal mechanisms, corruption remains foremost challenge at various levels of government. Political interference in administrative decisions especially in transfers, promotions, and appointments undermines the independence and ethical discretion of public officials. The lack of insulation from political pressures compromises both morale and integrity (Paul, 2010).

2. Bureaucratic Red Tape and Discretion : Excessive rules, procedures, and centralization often create a culture of bureaucratic inefficiency and delay. In many cases, the discretionary powers of lower-level officials are notadequately monitored, increasing the scope for unethical conduct (Second ARC, 2007).

3. Weak Implementation of Ethical Frameworks: While India has numerous anti-corruption laws and institutions, their enforcement remains inconsistent. Bodies such as the Lokpal have struggled to become fully operational or independent in practice. Ethics codes, where they exist, are often non-binding or lack proper monitoring mechanisms (Transparency International, 2023).

4. Lack of Whistleblower Protection: The Whistle Blowers Protection Act (2014) is yet to be fully operationalized. Fear of retaliation, lack of anonymity, and delays in investigations discourage public servants and citizens from reporting unethical behavior. Strengthening this framework is essential to promote a culture of integrity (Bhushan, 2014).

5. Socio-Cultural Factors: In many regions, ethical norms are influenced by patronage, nepotism, and identity politics which can conflict with universal standards of impartiality and fairness. Social pressures, loyalty to caste or community, and informal networks sometimes override institutional ethics (Dwivedi & Mishra, 2007).

Policy Recommendations: Promoting ethics and integrity in public administration requires a strategic, multi-pronged approach that goes beyond legal compliance. While institutional frameworks exist in many countries including India, the key challenge lies in implementing and sustaining ethical values in the day-to-day functioning of public agencies. The following policy recommendations are designed to help build an ethical ecosystem in public administration.

1. Institutionalizing Ethical Governance: A comprehensive ethical governance framework must be embedded across all levels of government. This includes the development of:

i.   Mandatory codes of ethics and conduct for all public officials.

ii.   Ethics commissions or integrity units at national, state, and departmental levels.

iii.   Independent oversight bodies with real authority to investigate and enforce ethical standards.

These institutions should operate autonomously and be shielded from political interference to maintain credibility (OECD, 2020).

2. Ethics Education and Training: Ethical conduct is not innate; it must be cultivated through education and professional development. Policymakers should:

i.   Integrate ethics, values, and leadership training into civil service induction and in-service training programs.

ii.   Partner with academic institutions and think tanks to develop context-specific curricula that reflect local governance challenges.

iii.   Conduct regular ethical audits and simulations to test the practical decision-making abilities of public servants under ethical stress.

3. Performance-Based Accountability Systems: Ethical behavior should be embedded in performance appraisal systems:

i.   Public officials should be evaluated not only on efficiency and delivery, but also on ethical decision-making, transparency, and citizen responsiveness.

ii. Introduce ethics scorecards as part of annual performance reviews, particularly for senior bureaucrats and heads of departments.

This would encourage officials to prioritize integrity and public interest in their work (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015).

4. Strengthening Whistleblower Protection: Effective whistleblower mechanisms are critical to uncover unethical practices:

i.   Fully operationalize the Whistle Blowers Protection Act, 2014, with clear protocols for anonymity, time-bound investigations, and legal immunity.

ii. Set up confidential digital portals for internal whistleblowing within public departments.

iii. Provide incentives and protections to encourage ethical reporting by both officials and citizens.

5. Leveraging Technology for Transparency: Digital tools can significantly reduce human discretion and enhance oversight:

i.   Implement real-time public dashboards, open data portals, and e-procurement systems.

ii. Use AI and data analytics to flag anomalies in public spending and contract allocation.

iii. Strengthen citizen feedback loops through mobile apps and SMS platforms.

Technology should be treated as an enabler and not a replacement for institutional ethics.

6. Citizen Engagement and Social Accountability: Public ethics cannot thrive without informed and empowered citizens:

i.   Institutionalize citizen charters, social audits, and participatory budgeting at the local level.

ii. Promote civic education through schools and media campaigns that emphasize the role of ethics in public life.

iii. Encourage civil society partnerships to monitor service delivery, public spending, and administrative behavior.

7. Leadership by Example: Leadership plays a defining role in creating a culture of integrity:

i.   Senior administrators and elected representatives must act as ethical role models by declaring assets, avoiding conflicts of interest, and adhering to transparent decision-making.

ii. Establish consequences for ethical violations, regardless of rank or position, to demonstrate seriousness in enforcement.

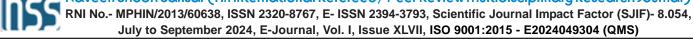iii. Promote a culture of openness and dialogue where ethical concerns can be raised without fear.

8. Periodic Evaluation and Reform: Ethical standards must evolve with changing public expectations and societal norms:

i.   Conduct regular assessments of ethical performance using measurable indicators such as corruption perception indices, grievance redress efficiency, and citizen satisfaction.

ii. Revise codes of conduct and policy guidelines every 3–5 years to reflect new challenges like AI ethics, environmental accountability, and data privacy.

Conclusion: Ethics and integrity are no longer peripheral to the practice of public administration, they are its core. A dynamic, value-based, and participatory ethical paradigm is essential for restoring public trust, ensuring effective service delivery, and strengthening democratic governance. This paradigm shift requires systemic reforms, cultural transformation, and committed leadership. As the demands of governance continue to evolve, so too must the ethical standards that sustain it.

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