

Probity in Public Life and Corruption

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Abstract

Probity in public life entail more than simply avoiding corrupt practices but also actively promoting certain values in public service such as accountability, impartiality, transparency and the rule of law. There is no dispute that the twin principles of integrity and probity in public life are the bare minimum that society expects from those in position of public office, yet these have to be based on well thought out processes and practices. The absence of integrity and probity in public life increases the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' and also promote counter violence by disadvantaged groups.

The dictionary meaning of probity is integrity and honesty and hence by extension, an adherence to integrity and honesty should be the key to ending corruption. So how would one ensure probity in public life?

It may be said that to bring about probity in public life one would have to ensure the adherence to not only certain ethical norms but also pay due attention to proper conduct and also streamline processes. In other words, it would entail more than simply avoiding corrupt practices and but also actively promote certain values in public service such as accountability, impartiality, transparency and the rule of law.

Though it can hardly be disputed that the twin principles of integrity and probity in public life are the bare minimum that society expects from those in position of public office, yet these have to be based on well thought out processes and practices. These processes and practices should ensure a system of meritocracy and also a strict equality before the law. Unfortunately, there is mounting documented evidence by credible organizations such as Transparency International that those in power often tend to misuse their power for narrow partisan reasons and

thereby inflict immense and at times, irreparable, damage to society and their systems. This trend necessitates the recourse to legislative and legal routes to prevent and punish such kind of dangerous trends.

The absence of integrity and probity in public life is manifested in corruption which in turn increases the gap between the haves and the have nots and also helps promote counter violence by disadvantaged groups.

In its 2008 Global Corruption Report, Transparency International draws a link between poverty, failed institutions and graft:

The continuing high levels of corruption and poverty plaguing many of the world's societies amount to an ongoing humanitarian disaster and cannot be tolerated. Stemming corruption requires strong oversight through Parliament, law enforcement, independent media and a vibrant civil society. When these institutions are weak corruption spirals out of control with horrendous consequences for ordinary people and for justice..... (Transparency International 2008 Corruption Perception Index).

There is no doubt that probity in governance is not only an essential component but also a vital requirement to ensure an efficient and effective system of governance and for socio-economic development. At the same time it must be understood that probity in governance is intimately connected to the absence of corruption. Probity and a corruption free environment can be achieved through effective laws, rules and regulations governing every aspect of public life. However, mere existence of these laws would not be enough but what would be essential is the effective and fair implementation of those laws.

This would bring us to the next question as what are the necessary preconditions that would foster an environment of genuine respect for law. It is often said that discipline may be understood as a cultural and sociological construct and certain countries such as Japan and most of the Scandinavian countries score high, whereas countries such as India or those in Africa score low. Discipline or the willing adherence to rules may be understood in relation to public and private morality as well as sense of honesty. Unfortunately, power is often understood as an ability to break or bend rules without being held accountable for it. When those in a position of power display an utter disdain for rules and regulations, it has a cascading effect on society leading to indiscipline.

It has to be appreciated that any abuse of public resources or position in public life for private gain is considered as corruption. Thus the scope for corruption would greatly increase when the distinction and division of power between the political, executive and bureaucracy is ambiguous and the application of the principle of equality before the law is tenuous. India is rated at 73 out of 99 countries in the corruption perception index prepared by Transparency International. Corruption has emerged as the single biggest danger to the quality of governance and is severely threatening the very foundations of the society and the State.

At this juncture, one would do well to recount the Seven Principles of Public Life are stated in the Report by Lord Nolan:

Selflessness

Holders of public office should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends.

Integrity

Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organizations that might influence them in the performance of their official duties.

Objectivity

In carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merit.

Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.

Openness

Holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their

decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands.

Honesty

Holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.

Leadership

Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

Concluding Remark

Following these seven principles should not be a difficult task for a country that has *Satyam Eva Jayate* or 'Truth Always Triumphs' as its national motto. What is required is the will and the desire which can be created with the adoption of tough measures to tackle deviant behavior. Ultimately, truth will become an integral part of our personal and public character, something that our religious and spiritual traditions have always advocated.

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