

HONESTY ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH

Bureaucracy has not withered away in any part of the world. We may condemn, criticize, castigate and ridicule it but it is indeed an essential tool to carry out the programmes of the government. In order to do that effectively, it has to not only to survive, it has to thrive in the interest of our country and our people. However, for it to thrive, honesty alone is not enough. Honesty is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the welfare of the people.

Government pays the bureaucrat to perform, to deliver. It is a different matter that on account of the emerging socio-political environment, this performance is not always expected to be in public good. It is also a pity that on occasions, the bureaucrat is expected to perform in the interest of a few. Unfortunately, such occasions are increasing by the day and those bureaucrats who do not conform are not only shown the door but are also harassed. What is even more appalling is the fact that far from recognizing good performance, there are instances of officers being penalized for performing well. Such signals do not augur well for the system and the society. However, there is still a huge area where such pressures either do not exist or, if they do, they can be managed. Whatever be the situation, honesty alone may not serve the desired purpose.

There are several categories of honest officers. There are those that are honest, efficient and non-pliable. Then there are those that are honest, efficient but pliable. These categories also include those that are honest but think that the entire world around them is falling apart. They then take upon them the task of cleansing the system. The “crusader” in him gets the better of him and the media attention adds fuel to fire. A campaign is launched against those whom he perceives as dishonest. Honesty becomes an end on itself. He forgets the fact that he is paid not merely to remain honest but to perform as well. He evaluates his own performance in terms of punitive actions that he has taken against others, the number of people

or institutions he has exposed (becoming a quintessential whistle blower that brings “name” and “fame” to him), the number of disciplinary proceedings he gets initiated and the number of FIRs he gets lodged. In fact, in the ultimate analysis, such precipitate actions do not even serve his professed goal of cleansing the society as no effort is made to evolve systems that can reduce, if not eliminate, the incidence of corrupt practices. Evolving systems is a time-consuming process and may not provide immediate fodder for publicity.

As mentioned earlier, a bureaucrat has to deliver, as he is the prime instrument available with the state to deliver. The "honest-only- bureaucrat" does a huge disservice to this cause. He smells a rat everywhere and in every file. Hence, nothing gets delivered or, if it does get delivered, it is too late for the desired impact. There is a "paralyses of analyses". For him honesty pays because he leads an honorable life as an honest officer and is recognized by many as a crusader against the dishonest. However, through an "honesty-alone" approach he would have done precious little to encourage initiative or motivate those working with him to perform. He himself does not have much to write home about his own performance except proudly displaying the trophies of the victims of his crusade.

In order to perform, a bureaucrat, especially in the higher echelons, has to evolve as a leader and has to cultivate such leadership qualities that do not inspire awe or fear but respect. This is done through leading by example, focus, objectivity, consistency, empathy, commitment to the tasks and an ever-burning desire to deliver. All these are necessary virtues that need not necessarily be consumed in the crusade against the dishonest. The virtues need to be used for evolving better systems and for inspiring colleagues to perform. Fortunately, there are indeed a number of bureaucrats who are honest and efficient. They may not be as visible as those that are going hammer and tongs against the “dishonest”. They are not crusaders. They are the “doers”. The Swachhta Abhiyan led by the redoubtable Parameswaran Iyer is creating an impact. Fortunately it is becoming visible as well.

The thrust on efficiency and integrity in Railways by its present Chairman, Ashwani Lohani is already yielding results. One can witness the impact of the changes he has brought about in the functioning of the railways. He has not gone to town with what he has done but it is all visible. The team of Indu Bhushan and Dinesh Arora, engaged in implementing Prime Minister Jan Aarogya Yojana (PMJAY) as a part of Aayushman Bharat, provides another example of honest and efficient working. What was done by a technocrat to usher in Metro Railway revolution, E Sridharan is legendary. These are honest and efficient bureaucrats committed to the cause for which they are paid from the public exchequer. They are performing their tasks as professionals. Their crusading spirit is directed towards the tasks assigned to them. However, unfortunately, there are equal numbers of bureaucrats who stop at just being honest.