Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Lecture on Ethics-3

Ethics in Politics and Governance

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Introducing 'Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Lecture Series on Ethics' at ISEC:

M V Nadkarni

at the Third Lecture under the Series by Dr A Ravindra,
October 14, 2025 on

'Ethics in Governance and Politics'

I am very happy that we are having today the third lecture under the 'Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Lecture Series' started in 2023. This is going to be delivered by an eminent thinker, author and administrator, Dr. A Ravindra, on 'Ethics in Governance and Politics'.

The purpose of instituting the 'Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Lecture Series on Ethics' at ISEC is to promote ethics as an academic discipline of both theoretical and practical significance in India, to spread ethical consciousness, and sharpen ethical intelligence. Everybody needs ethics. It is needed both in public and private life, in research too!

A few scholars distinguish between ethics and moral values, the former taken as indicating abstract philosophy for theorising, and the latter righteous behaviour for practice. Actually, 'ethics' is derived from Greek and 'moral' from Latin, and both mean the same thing. The difference in meaning between the two, if any, was a latter thought. We can very well use the two words, 'ethical' and 'moral', interchangeably.

Ethics is a product of human evolution or, evolution of civilization, seeking stability and peace in society so that conditions can be created wherein all human beings can develop. A moral evolution takes place when people grow in numbers and have to tackle conflicts of many types.

India has a tradition of thinking on ethics since the Rigveda, much before Socrates and Plato. It was termed as *Ritam* in the *Rigveda*, and subsequently as Dharma. Etymologically, what upholds or *Dhaarayate,* is Dharma. What does it uphold? It upholds people, society, nation, all

humanity. We cannot live in a condition of moral jungle or ethical chaos. We live and grow because the bulk of humanity observes certain ethical norms.

Indian civilization has taught us the values of Truth, Nonviolence towards both humans and nature, compassion, generosity, self-control, tolerance for differences and resolving them through dialogue, openness, universal brotherhood, and courage. The western civilization has taught us the principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. We need to learn from all civilizations in the spirit of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* – the whole world is one family.

According to Charles Darwin, Evolution takes place through the survival of the fittest in a competitive struggle. According to Dharma or ethics, however, evolution and progress take place because of mutual cooperation in observing ethical norms. Civilization is a product of mutual cooperation and support, which in turn result from observing ethical norms. As civilization evolves to higher stages, ethics of cooperation and mutual concern will have to dominate competition. Otherwise, humanity cannot survive. This is urgent because humans themselves have developed weapons of mutual destruction of unprecedented power. They have also tried to dominate and exploit nature to the detriment of their future.

Unlike evolution by natural selection which apparently takes place without somebody guiding or designing it, moral evolution of human civilization has been guided from time to time by moral luminaries like the Vedic and Upanishadic Rishis, the Buddha, Plato, Bhartrihari, Jesus Christ, Prophet Mohammad, Basavanna, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr B R Ambedkar and others.

But the world is fast changing, and the teachings of these luminaries have to be interpreted and re-interpreted. Light also may have to thrown on new ethical dilemmas which constantly arise in all spheres. Ethical dilemmas arise, not because of conflict between what is obviously good and what is obviously bad, but because of conflict between ethical values themselves. Ethical wisdom has to be cultivated and capacity for ethical judgement has to be developed widely among people to resolve moral dilemmas facing them.

This task cannot be left to religious leaders alone, because sadly, religion is often sectarian and divisive. We cannot expect statesmen in charge of governance or business leaders to consult religious leaders on the problems faced by them. There has to be secular expertise on ethics for the purpose.

To develop this expertise and research in ethics, I had proposed starting a new Centre for Ethics Studies at ISEC. But due to paucity of funds, no progress has been made in this. I thought, therefore, of instituting at least a Lecture Series on Ethics in honour of Mahatma Gandhi, a great exemplar and modern teacher of ethics, by giving a small donation out of my modest savings. This is no substitute for starting a Centre for Ethics Studies. But it least, these lectures will contribute to spread ethics consciousness and thinking.

Ethics needs to be studied both in theoretical aspects and as applied. Ethics today has entered all spheres of life; it is all embracing, from guiding the relations between husband and wife to relations between communities and nations. These Lectures will, therefore, have a wide scope, covering: Ethics and Religion, Gandhian Ethics, Environmental Ethics, Ethics in Politics and Governance, Social Justice, Equality, Human Rights, Gender Justice, Ethics in Economics, Ethics in Law, Ethics in Political Science, Ethics in Business and Industry, Medical Ethics, Ethics in Research, Ethics in Journalism, Media Ethics, Ethics of Technology, Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, and so on.

These lectures will be delivered by very eminent people, which will be both scholarly and inspiring. They will stimulate both the head and the heart. The Director has promised that ISEC will publish every lecture under the Series for wider circulation.

I am grateful to Dr A Ravindra for kindly agreeing to deliver this year's lecture under the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Lecture series. My hearty thanks are due also to Prof Parmod Kumar (Acting Director, ISEC) and Smt. Vidyashree Chandargi (Registrar, ISEC) and their staff for making arrangements for holding the lecture, to Prof Sunil Nautiyal for introducing the speaker, and to the audience for attending.

Ethics in Politics and Governance

A. Ravindra, IAS (Retd)

Introduction

I am extremely grateful to ISEC for inviting me to deliver the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Lecture 2025.I would also like to thank Prof. MV Nadkarni who has instituted this Memorial Lecture, for suggesting my name. It is with some trepidation that I accepted the invitation, for I am neither a Gandhian nor a scholar of ethics. However, having worked as an administrator, I thought of giving it a try.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Ethics is the discipline concerned with "what is good and bad and morally right and wrong". The term is also applied to any system or theory of moral values or principles. Ethics has engaged the minds of thinkers and rulers since ancient times. Ramayana and Mahabharata bristle with ethical issues. Ancient India produced thinkers and philosophers who propounded ethical values, particularly their application in daily life. Gautama Buddha and Mahavira were two of the earliest (6^{th} century BC) personalities who have influenced the lives of people in large numbers up to the present times. Kautilya, prime minister to emperor Chandragupta Maurya in 3rdcentury BC, authored Arthashastra a treatise on statecraft ingrained with ethical principles. Lateir, saints and poets like Thiruvalluvar (Tamil-6^{th}C, Tamil),Basaveswara(12thC, Kannada) and Guru Nanak (15-16thC, Punjabi) were some of the prominent personalities who embodied ethical values in word and deed.

In the west, ancient Greek philosophers, led by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle have left behind a rich legacy of literature on ethics. In modern Europe, Immanuel Kant, John Locke, JS Mill, David Hume, Frederich Nietzsche, William James, GE Moore, John Rawls and Thomas Nagel are some of the

prominent names that have dwelt on ethical issues So has Amartya Sen, economist-philosopher from India.

It is not my intent to enter into a discussion on ethical concepts and controversies, as the topic assigned to me for today's lecture concerns more mundane matters like politics and governance with which I am more familiar. In the present-day environment pervaded by conflicts, violence, hate speech and corruption, to speak about ethics may sound strange, but it is of great contemporary relevance, a formidable challenge though.

The life and work of Mahatma Gandhi serves as a beacon and offers hope. He led India's freedom movement through ethical means-truth and non-violence being the weapons he used. Gandhi's campaign against the colonial rule of the British took three different forms during the three decades of the freedom movement he led-the non-cooperation movement of the 1920s,the civil disobedience movement of the 1930s(whose highlight was his march to the sea to make salt, then a state monopoly) and the Quit India movement of the 1940s(R Guha,2010).These movements were political as well as moral, perhaps for the first time in history when a political battle was imbued with moral fervour. Opposed to the use of arms, Gandhi believed in passive resistance which according to him "is a method of securing rights by personal suffering; it is the reverse of resisting by arms". He preferred to spend long years in jail and undergo suffering to resorting to violence.

It is important to note that Gandhi himself claimed that the politician in him had never dominated a single decision of his and he had sacrificed no principle to gain a political advantage(Young India,March,1925).As Raghavan Iyer puts it, "politics was to him not a profession but a vocation, and he was a politician only in the sense that he was conscious of a mission to serve the masses in the political and social sphere and to inspire them with a love of the common ideal"(1973).Ethics embraced all aspects of his life. He was firmly of the view that if a person violated a moral principle in any one sphere of his life, his action

will certainly have an effect in other spheres. "…the belief generally held that an immoral man may do no harm in the political sphere is quite wrong .And so is the other belief that a person who violates moral principles in his business may be moral in his private life or in his conduct in family affairs"(The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, ed: Raghavan Iyer,1990).

It is not possible to pin down the Mahatma to a particular ideology or a belief system, political or religious. To him, politics and religion were intertwined, which would appear contrary to the modern concept of secularism, an essential ingredient of our constitution. Gandhiji wrote in his Autobiography: "Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics, do not know what religion means". He was echoing Swami Vivekananda who told an American audience in 1900: "If you want to speak of politics in India, you must speak through the language of religion". Gandhi was both secular and religious, perhaps more secular than the secularists, for he respected all religions while avowing to be a Hindu, and more religious than the priests, for he practiced what he preached.

According to Prof Morris Jones, the political scientist, Gandhi's aim to be regarded as a political thinker lies in that he did give an account of the nature of political activity, presented a relationship between the activity and political nature of man, and gave a sketch of a set of criteria for the judgement of politics. But none of these attempts can be understood without going into the depths of what Romain Rolland, the renowned French writer, called "the vast religious crypt below the edifice of his moral and political thought". In other words, religion constituted the foundation on which he built the edifice of his multidisciplinary ideas.

Politics and Governance

With this brief background, let me move on to the subject matter of my talk, "Ethics in Politics and Governance". 'Politics' is derived from the Greek 'polis' meaning city or state, or city-state, as it prevailed in ancient Greece. It referred

to a community of citizens organized under a constitution and centred in a city or urban area. The concept of 'state' has evolved over time, culminating in the present 'nation-state'. Whatever the type of the nation state-democratic, communist or authoritarian, citizens are central, and all actions are carried out by the state in the name of 'citizens' or 'people'.

'Governance' may be defined as the exercise of political power to manage a nation's affairs. The UNDP describes it as "the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels. It comprises mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their legal obligations and mediate their differences". Governance is distinct from government-the latter is composed of the three arms of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary, while the former includes other stakeholders like the private sector, and the civil society. The Constitution does not define the term 'governance' but provides the framework, laying down the powers and functions of different authorities, and the fundamental rights and duties of citizens.

Politics and governance are intertwined; one cannot be separated from the other. Politics is essentially about the exercise of power by players in the political arena, viz, the political parties, parliamentarians, ministers and the prime minister at the national level, the legislators, ministers and the chief minister at the state level, the members and chairpersons of panchayats at the district level, the municipal councilors and the mayor at the city level.

Governance is the responsibility of the political executive and the bureaucracy. While the former is responsible for taking policy decisions, the latter is responsible for their implementation. The bureaucracy comprises the civil services,viz,the All-India Services, the State Services and the supporting staff.

Different organs of government are governed by a set of rules and procedures, and they are expected to discharge their duties and functions in accordance with

them-in passing laws, implementing them and in providing justice. To what extent they are followed in practice, without losing sight of the broader aims and objectives of serving the people, is a critical question. And this is where Ethics comes in. Ethics not only concerns laws and procedures, but the conduct of individuals.

Ethics and Politics

In the pre-independence period from 1920s to 1947, politics was, by and large, guided by the thoughts and ideas of Mahatma Gandhi. Non-violence became the accepted means to fight the British and all leaders who participated in the freedom movement willingly bore the brunt of the violent and inhuman treatment meted out by the imperial rulers. In the post-independence times, however, things took a different turn. The Second Administrative Reforms Commission set up in 2005, under the chairmanship of Veerappa Moily, former chief minister of Karnataka, which submitted 15 reports, including ethics observed: "Any discussion on an ethical framework for governance must begin with ethical values in politics…. India was fortunate that high standards of ethical conduct were an integral part of the freedom struggle. Unfortunately, ethical capital started getting eroded after the transfer of power. Excesses in elections (in campaign funding, use of illegitimate money, quantum of money…) and abuse of power in public office became major afflictions of the political process over the years".

Parliamentary Practice

Parliament, realising the importance of ethics, set up the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Ethics, first in Rajya Sabha in 1997 and in Lok Sabha in 2000. The committee is to be reconstructed for every newly elected Lok Sabha. The functions of the Ethics Committee are two-fold:a)examination of complaints regarding any unethical conduct by a member referred to it by the

Speaker and making recommendations based on its findings, and b) responsibility for developing a Code of Conduct for Lok Sabha members. For the Rajya Sabha, a 14-point Code of Conduct has been in place since 2005. Its key features include:

1) Private interests are subordinate to the duty of the public office,

2) Members must not do anything that brings disrepute to the parliament and affects its credibility, and

3) Members must utilize their position to advance the general well-being of the people.

In the case of Lok Sabha, the Ethics Committee was mandated in 2015 to formulate a code of conduct for its members, but it has yet to see the light of day. The Rajya Sabha has maintained a Register of Members' Interests which shall be available for inspection on request and is accessible to ordinary citizens under the Right to Information (RTI)Act. The Lok Sabha Committee had recommended in 2012 adoption of the Rajya Sabha model of Register of Members' Interests, but this again has not been given effect so far.

In the British parliament, a Register of Interests is maintained for disclosure of members' financial interests, and "MPs are required to set out information of any pecuniary interest or any material benefit a member may receive, which might be thought to affect his conduct as a member or influence his actions, speeches or vote in Parliament". Several MPs were suspended from the House of Commons for their failure to register their interests. as required under these rules. In 1999, three Labour MPs were suspended for their role in leaking draft Committee reports. Former Prime Minister, Tony Blair was reprimanded for his failure to register his attendance at a British Grand Prix, a public event.

The Model Code of Conduct for elections issued by the Election Commission lays down how political parties, contesting candidates and the party in power should conduct themselves during the process of elections. It includes matters such as confining criticism of other political parties to their policies and

programs and refraining from criticism of all aspects of private of life, avoiding appeal to caste or communal feelings for securing votes, cooperating with the officers on election duty to ensure peaceful and orderly polling, ministers not combining their official work with electioneering work and following the guidelines of the Election Commission on the contents of election manifestos.

The history of parliamentary practice over the last over half a century since the first parliament came into being in 1952, shows a deterioration in ethical standards. A report by the Association of Democratic Rights (ADR) shows that about 47% of ministers in India have declared criminal cases against themselves, of which 26 % are of serious nature like murder, kidnapping and crimes against women. About one in four ministers in the country faces serious criminal charges.

Let us look at the number of days the parliament functioned since its beginning. The 17th Lok Sabha (elected in 2019) worked only for 55 days, less than half the first Lok Sabha's (1952). Parliament also has a long history of disruptions, reducing the space for debates and discussions. In the latest monsoon session of August 2025, disruptions took nearly two-thirds of the scheduled time, according to PRS Legislative. In 1957, when no Ethics Committee or Code of Conduct was in place, parliament dealt with what came to be known as the Mundhra Deal in an exemplary manner. The Life Insurance Corporation (LIC)was manipulated by Haridas Mundhra, a Calcutta based businessman into buying shares worth a little over Rs1.26 crore of companies owned by him. The case was exposed by two enterprising Congress MPs, Dr Ram Subagh Singh and Feroz Gandhi, none other than Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's son-in-law.They pursued the case with relentless zeal, and Gandhi in particular, in a hard hitting speech in Lok Sabha, laid bare the details of the scandal, leading to the appointment of the Chagla Commission to enquire into the case. Following the Chagla report which exposed the irregularities, Finance Minister, TT Krishnamachari submitted his resignation. Mundhra was

arrested, prosecuted and punished for his criminal offences. In 1974, Congress MP,Tul Mohan Ram was indicted on corruption charges for getting licenses issued by the Foreign Trade Ministry.

Contrast this with the behaviour of some of our MPs in later days. The Question Hour in Parliament, described as a form of 'direct democracy 'is meant to elicit answers from the government on critical issues of the day. This privilege has unfortunately been misused by some MPs.In 2005,11 MPs from different parties were accused of accepting cash for raising questions in the House. In a historic decision, Parliament expelled all 11 MPs. During the license-permit raj, several MPs were alleged to have got permits for petrol pumps and gas agencies and sold MPs' quotas for telephone and gas connections.

In 2023, Mohua Moitra,TMC MP from West Bengal tabled 60 questions in the Lok Sabha, many of which were said to pertain to Gautam Adani, allegedly for a price from businessman, Darshan Hiranandani, with intent of "protecting or perpetuating its business interests". Moitra rejected the charges, and the Speaker referred the matter to the Lok Sabha Ethics Committee .Hiranandani submitted an affidavit to the Committee claiming that Moitra who "has been a close personal friend of mine" had shared her parliamentary portal login ID and password, "so that I could post the questions directly on her behalf when required". Moitra dismissed Darshan's affidavit as a 'joke.' The Ethics Committee recommended her expulsion, and she was expelled. She contested the decision saying that it violated procedural rules. With the general elections approaching 2024, the matter was not pursued further, and the truth remains a mystery. The nexus between politics and business started sometime during the 1980-90s.Businessmen and industrialists like KK Birla, Naveen Jindal, Vijay Mallya and Murasoli Maran gained entry into the Rajya Sabha. The Badal family in Punjab, Amar Singh from UP, Praful Patel and Milind Deora from Maharashtra, prominent businessmen, became influential politicians. Janardhan Reddy, a mining baron from Bellary in Karnataka and his brothers

became state legislators. As a collar, politicians started acquiring business interests, setting up or partnering in establishing educational institutions (mainly engineering and medical) and real estate projects. Thus, business and politics are mixed freely, impacting both politics and governance.

In 1993, a no-confidence motion was tabled against Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's government in the Lok Sabha. Although the ruling Congress party, with 251 members, was 13 short of a majority, the motion was defeated with 265 votes in favour and 251 against. It was alleged that some Opposition party members were bribed into voting for the ruling party. In what has come to be known as the JMM case, Shibu Soren and four other fellow MPs reportedly received bribes in exchange for voting against the no-confidence motion. The matter was challenged in the Supreme Court, and in 1998; interestingly the Court held (3-2 verdict in a 5-judge Bench) that legislators were protected from prosecution for accepting such bribes. Much later, in 2024, the apex court overturned its own ruling and ruled that legislators are not immune from criminal prosecution for bribery charges related to their speeches and votes in Parliament and Legislative Assemblies.

This case illustrates the political manouvering by parties to remain in power, shorn of all ethics, and the ambivalent attitude of the judiciary in such important matters.

Mention must be made of exemplary conduct of certain individuals who considered honour more important than office. In 1951,Dr Ambedkar, who was serving as Law Minister, resigned from the cabinet, after the Hindu Code Bill which he piloted, was defeated in parliament…Much later, in 1998,LK Advani, resigned from his position as MP, following allegations in the Hawala case, saying that he would not step into the parliament unless cleared by the enquiry committee. He was reelected to Lok Sabha after being cleared by the committee.

Ethics in Governance

The true test of a government lies in how well a state is governed. Good governance refers to "a public service that is efficient, a judicial system that is reliable, and an administration that is accountable to its public" (World Bank,1989). The UNDP (1997), while elaborating on the principles of good governance has underlined the importance of accountability and transparency, equity and rule of law. How do we translate these principles into actionable content in the Indian context? The Indian Constitution provides an answer in Part 4(Art 37), dealing with the Directive Principles of State Policy which states:

"The provisions contained in this Part shall not be enforceable by any court, but the principles therein laid down are nevertheless fundamental in the *governance* of the country and it shall be the duty of the State to apply these principles in making laws".

What has been the record of government in promoting good governance? We have achieved remarkable economic progress, making us the fourth largest economy in the world. There are also shortfalls-our per capita income is Rs 2.12 lakhs, one of the lowest in the world, our educational standards are still pretty low, there are concerns about the general health of the people. The country is witnessing rapid urbanization but the quality of life in our cities is poor-inadequate infrastructure, traffic congestion, air pollution and unreliable civic services.

What is the role of ethics achieving the goals we have set for ourselves in the democratic framework of governance? The Second ARC in its report on 'Ethics in Governance 'deals with various issues such as corruption, transparency, accountability and public trust, and made several recommendations for corruption-free and citizen-friendly administration. Broadly, it has proposed the following reforms:

1.Reform of Political Funding and Tightening Anti-Defection Law

2.Ethical Framework for Ministers, Legislators and the Judiciary

3.Code of Ethics for Civil Servants and Regulators

4.Vigilance Network that includes Lok Pal and Lok Ayukta to deal with corruption cases

5.Role of Media: evolving a Code of Conduct and self-regulating mechanism to adhere to the Code of Conduct.

I would like to highlight some key concerns about how governance is carried out in practice.

Electoral Funding

Financial resources raised and spent by political parties and the way it is done is crucial in the conduct of free and fair elections. The mechanisms for funding elections include individual donations, corporate funding and electoral trusts. In 2018, GOI introduced electoral bonds designed to streamline donations to political parties, while maintaining donor anonymity. In 2024, the Supreme Court struck down the electoral bond scheme on the grounds that it was unconstitutional and violated citizens' fundamental right to information by obscuring the identity of donors.

The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), a non-profit and non-partisan organization, has been playing a significant role in exposing electoral malpractices and suggesting electoral and political reforms. Some of its landmark achievements include:1) the Supreme Court judgement mandating contesting candidates to file self-sworn affidavits declaring full information regarding their criminal, financial and educational background,2)ruling of the Central Information Commission(CIC) that Income Tax Returns of political parties would now be available in the public domain,3)CIC ruling that information on the 'Register of Members' Interest “would be available in the public domain, and 4)introduction of the NOTA(none of the above) button in the Electoral Voting Machine(EVM).

Inspite of several reforms and regulations, lack of transparency and

accountability stands out as a major issue. What is called the 3-M Power-Money, Muscle and Media, continues to play a significant role in influencing the election outcome. Money seems to count most in selection of candidates for party tickets and in meeting election expenses. Muscle power is resorted to extracting money from rich individuals and businesses. Media which is supposed to be neutral in reporting and publication of political views are not free from subjectivity and partiality. All the 3 Ms play a part in influencing the voters.

The Executive and the Practice of Governance

The primary responsibility of governance in a democracy is that of the government, comprising the Council of Ministers and the Bureaucracy. They take decisions on almost all aspects that touch the citizens' lives--raising taxes, regulating banking, the stock market, telecom services, civil aviation, electricity, transport services and more. They execute projects for socio-economic development, and provide services relating to education, health,infrastructure, and welfare to the weaker sections of society.

Three critical issues impinging on ethics and governance pertain to:

1) Corruption,
2) Transparency, and
3) Accountability.

All three are related to each other and corruption looms large in almost all sectors of the government and at all levels. It ranges from what is called 'petty corruption' at the 'grassroots' to corruption in 'high places. The Prevention of Corruption of IndiaAct,1988 defines corruption as “taking gratification other than legal remuneration in respect of an official act…to show favour or disfavour to any person or for rendering…any service or disservice to any person”. In short, corruption refers to the abuse of public power for private gain. The way corruption thrives in a few sectors impacting people at large is

discussed below.

Construction and Contracts

Let me begin with my own personal experience. Way back in late 1990s, when I was Commissioner. Bangalore City Corporation, we raised funds by floating municipal bonds, the first time in India, for upgrading city roads which were in a very bad state. It involved a lengthy and arduous process-rating of the municipal corporation for its credit worthiness by a credit rating agency, obtaining the approval of the corporation council, carrying out a scientific survey of the condition of the roads and preparing bid documents.

After successfully passing through these stages, we were about to finalize the bids and issue work orders, when the mayor called me for a discussion on the subject. Having sensed that the contractors who had qualified would not show favours or compromise on quality, he suggested that the work be retendered, as no bids were received from the 'right people', meaning the local contractors who had hitherto been executing the roadwork, with required compromises. I had to explain that we were bound by the commitments made under the bond scheme to the subscribers and the public and no compromises could be made. The discussions carried on for a few days, but there was no meeting ground. The mayor and his councilors were clearly unhappy, and I had to accept a compromise or face a 'transfer', which did not take long to come. My attempt to break a nexus between the contractor-the politician-the bureaucrat failed. No wonder, the potholes continue to mar our roads.

In 2010, the Commonwealth Games held in Delhi got mired in a big corruption scandal. The organisers were accused of financial irregularities in collusion with contractors, leading to filing of several criminal and money laundering cases. There was a big political uproar by the opposition parties against the then central and state govts alleging huge losses to the financial exchequer on account of misconduct and misappropriation on the part of the chairman, Mr

Kalmadi and other members of the organizing committee.

In Karnataka, contractors doing construction of civil works have openly raised their voice in what they termed as '40% commission'-the powers that be in the state govt and its agencies demanding 40% of the project cost before their bills are passed. The issue reached a climax in 2022 when a contractor from Belagavi took his own life after blaming a particular minister for holding up payment of RS 4 crores due to him, resulting in resignation of the minister. The problem continues with no solution in sight.

Education: public and private institutions

Schools and colleges run by the government, state govts in particular, especially in rural areas, face several problems-inadequate funding and infrastructure, shortage of teachers, largely average or poor educational standards. Private schools face the problem of excessive govt regulation-obtaining permission, inspections and interference-translating into bribes at every stage.

Public universities and colleges are also beset by similar problems as schools. The most distressing feature is the selection of Vice Chancellors, which is not free from corruption at the highest levels of government. The appointment of faculty including professors is riddled with considerations of caste, community and favouritism.

The examination system, which is antiquated, testing rote and memory power of the students, is mired in malpractices like leakage of question papers and impersonation. It seems to be oriented more towards preparing students for competitive examinations than testing their true knowledge. Competition getting increasingly tough has led to creation of private coaching institutes, which sadly seem to be replacing regular educational institutions at the plus-2 level, at least partially. In Maharashtra, 300 junior colleges had shocking experience of getting zero admissions in 2024-25, while the coaching centres

industry estimated to be currently worth Rs 58,000 crores, is projected to reach 1.34 lakh crores by 2027. Those who can afford the high fees directly admit their children to these institutes.

Public Health: lack of public concern

Govt has a large network of hospitals, from public health centres at the grassroots to taluk, district and state level including speciality hospitals. Many of them face problems of overcrowding patients, shortage of doctors and auxiliary staff. These factors contribute to the poor governance of government hospitals, as in the case of schools and colleges. It must, however, be said that some of them, particularly specialty hospitals like NIMHANS and Jayadeva Cardiology Institute in Bengaluru and AIIMS in Delhi are very well managed. Private hospitals, though mostly well managed, charge exorbitant rates which become unaffordable, beyond the means of even middle classes. They are accused of unethical practices, subjecting patients to unnecessary procedures, prescribing drugs more than the essential and overcharging, all with a view to maximize their profits.

The marketing of drugs by pharmaceutical companies in collusion with the medical profession reflects the utter lack of ethics by both. In August 2022, a PIL before the Supreme Court highlighted the manner in which Dolo-650, a popular drug during Covid 19, was marketed. It was alleged that Micro Labs spent about Rs 1000 crores on 'freebies' to doctors that included gifts, travel and perks to promote prescription of Dolo-650. The government brought in a Uniform Code for Pharmaceutical Marketing Practices,2024, that prohibited pharma companies from offering freebies or any monetary benefits to medical doctors. But the ingenious pharma industry found a way to circumvent it,by motivating some unprincipled doctors to form a medical society (such as Cardiologists' Society, Orthopaedic Doctors 'Association etc) to hold seminars and workshops in luxury hotels in India or abroad, which would be funded by

the industry.

Instances of corruption can be multiplied. Suffice it to say, corruption has afflicted not only the body politic, but all sectors, public and private. Back in 2007, Ban Ki-Moon, then Secretary-General, UN, succinctly summed up the damaging effects of corruption in these words:

"Corruption undermines democracy and the rule of law. It leads to violation of human rights. It erodes public trust in government. It has adverse effects on the delivery of basic social services. It has a particularly harmful effect on the poor. And it is a major obstacle to achieving our Millennium Development Goals".

Judiciary: Holding the Balance?

Montesquieu, the 18th century French philosopher, who propounded the concept of separation of powers between the three organs of government in a democracy-the legislature, the executive and the judiciary, argued in his famous work, Spirit of Laws that "to prevent this abuse of power, it is necessary from the very nature of things that power should be a check to power". Checks and balances thus became a core principle of democracy. An important role of the judiciary is to act as a check against arbitrary actions of the executive and unconstitutional actions of the legislature. By and large, the higher judiciary in India has been playing this role extremely well and has emerged as a protector of the fundamental rights of citizens.

However, there have been aberrations. The first glaring instance of the apex court succumbing to the executive was when the emergency was imposed in 1975.The chief justice of India became a rubber stamp to the decisions of the government, leading to the subversion of human rights and supersession of some judges. A draconian law, the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA)was brought into force which enabled detention of anyone without trial. Several eminent opposition leaders were detained under this Act. After the

emergency, MISA was repealed but controversy cropped up on the issue of appointment of judges of the supreme court and the high courts, both the executive and the judiciary claiming primacy. In 2014, the government enacted the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC)Act aimed at balancing judicial independence with executive input and a broader consultative process. This was, however, struck down by the supreme court on the ground that it violated the basic structure of the constitution, particularly the principle of judicial independence.

This battle between the executive and the judiciary gives rise to an ethical question: Is it right to vest the power of appointment of judges exclusively in one institution, more so, in the very institution that sits in judgement over the actions of the others and on other vital issues of governance of the state and the rights of citizens? Does it not violate the principle of separation of powers? As the debate rages on, it is important to ensure that independence of any entity must coexist with accountability and no one entity can enjoy unfettered power, and any arrangement must earn public trust.

Delays and Denial of Justice

Perhaps the most irritating aspect of judicial administration is the enormous delay in hearing and concluding cases. Several reasons are attributed to this-the huge backlog of case, shortage of judges, inadequate infrastructure, difficulty in securing evidence and the culture of frequent adjournments and stay orders. There are over 50 million (5 crore) cases pending in Indian courts-82,000 in Supreme Court,6.2 million (62 lakhs) in High Courts and nearly 50 million in lower courts. While the large pendency is one kind of a problem, the vacancies of posts is another. Out of the sanctioned number of 31 positions in SC,5 are vacant; corresponding vacancies in High Courts-464/1079 and in district and subordinate courts 4166/21017.The number of judges per million population is also pretty low in India-17, compared to 22 in England,108 in USA and 124 in

France.

The subordinate judiciary, handling 87.5% of India's cases, constitutes the foundation of our legal system and it is the lower courts most people approach to seek justice. The common man making endless trips to the court, is forced to wait for years for a decision. Even in serious cases of crime where innocent people become victims, they face prolonged trials. The case relating to the Mumbai serial train blast that occurred in 2006 killing 187 people and injuring over 800, dragged on for 19 years for the final judgement to be delivered in 2025, acquitting all the accused. The Malegaon blast case where the blast occurred in 2008, killing six persons and injuring 110 took 17 long years to conclude in 2025, again ending in acquittal of the accused. The sad part is the real culprits went unpunished.

The number of undertrial prisoners in India as at the end of 2022, confined in jail for more than a year, was 63,502 and over five years 11,468, according to the National Crime Records (NCRB)Bureau Report. Prisons which are intended to be not only centres of punishment but also rehabilitation have, unfortunately, become centres of corruption and extortion. Rich and influential people manage to get special treatment, while the others are forced to live under harsh conditions. Several ethical issues arise in prison management.

The judiciary, supposed to be an impartial forum for justice and protection of the rights of citizens, is unfortunately not free from corrupt practices. The recent instance of Justice Jaswant Sharma of UP High Court, at whose house a huge pile of cash was found and is now facing impeachment proceedings, exposes corruption at high places in the judiciary. to conduct an inquiry.

The Global Program Against Corruption Conference, Strengthening Judicial Integrity Against Corruption(Vienna,2001),listed 17indicators and causes of corruption in the judiciary such as delay in the execution of court orders, prisoners not being brought to court, lack of public access to records of court proceedings, delays in delivery of judgements, high acquittal rates, conflict of

interest and post-retirement placements.

Judicial governance is as important as governance under the executive. The question that remains unanswered is: Who is to judge the judges? The appointment of judges of the higher judiciary is surrounded by controversies. The judiciary is not inclined to share its exclusive privilege to select judges for appointments to the high courts and the supreme court, while the government, frustrated, but unwilling to get into confrontation, tries to show its power by delaying the issue of orders of appointment or at times and raising queries. More than the law, it is essential for judges to earn the trust of the people. As Albie Sachs of the South African Constitutional Court put it: "If respect for judiciary is to be regarded as integral to maintenance of rule of law…such respect will have to be spontaneous, enduring and real to the degree that it is earned rather to the extent it is commanded".

What ails the system?

Corruption is the outward manifestation of a system that is deeply flawed, for which no government has been able to find proper remedies. In my view, there are four major issues that contribute not only to corruption, but to deficiencies in governance.

1. Red Tape and Bureaucracy

No administrative system in any country can be said to be free from 'Redtapism',a synonym for delays and procrastination.Indeed,the bureaucracy is identified with the 'red tape',the former subject to endless criticism and the latter, the butt of jokes, both aimed at conveying inefficiency, apathy and corruption in the functioning of the government, reflecting lack of ethical standards in administration.

2.Politician-Bureaucrat-Businessman Nexus

Having worked in the bureaucracy and semi-political positions for over four decades, I have been witnessing the myriad forms of the functioning of government, involving multiple actors-politicians including ministers and legislators, bureaucrats, and the external 'influencers', who influence decision-making. Hence, despite all the efforts to cut red tape, delays do occur.

Public decision-making is a complex process which is not always rational, as it involves human behaviour. Herbert Simon, the renowned Nobel Prize economist and administrative thinker, used the term 'bounded rationality',ie,instead of 'optimizing', 'satisfying' becomes the basis of decisions. In other words, compromises are made in achieving the final decision. And in this process, ethical issues do arise.

The civil services are expected to act independently, and the constitution provides them with protection under Articles 308-323. However, over time, a politician-bureaucrat nexus has developed, leading to unethical practices. Politicisation of the bureaucracy has only grown over the years, belying the hopes of Sardar Patel, the first Home Minister of India, who forcefully argued the case for an independent civil service. Speaking at the Constituent Assembly in October 1949,he declared: “The Union will go, you will not have united India if you do not have a good All-India Civil Service which has the independence to speak out its mind…”.The Union has survived, but critics point out that the famed 'steel frame' has got 'rusted' and overly politicised. The bureaucrats complain that the political environment has changed over the years, with politicians trying to assert themselves as 'representatives of the people in a democracy, calling for a 'committed bureaucracy', advocated by former Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. Bureaucrats who tend to be independent and take a strong stand on issues that matter, are shown the door,ie transferred, making way for a flexible person. Indeed, transfer' has become a potent instrument to subdue bureaucracy. I was myself subject to frequent transfers, with their own consequences. In the result, ethics in politics and governance

has taken a back seat.

Sir William Ivor Jennings, a constitutional expert, perhaps foreseeing the things to come, warned as early as in 1950s: "The intrusion of politics in civil services is the first step towards the intrusion of corruption". There is no denying that corruption has afflicted the civil services. In the Rs 900 crore fodder scam case in Bihar, although former chief ministers, Jagannath Mishra and Laloo Prasad Yadav were held primarily responsible and the latter had to serve a term in jail, six senior IAS officers too were convicted and sentenced. In Madhya Pradesh, an IAS couple were dismissed from service, following an income tax raid that unearthed disproportionate assets worth Rs 350 crores and Rs 3 crores in cash. And there are many cases that go undetected or where the guilty go unpunished. This is true of politicians too. In Karnataka, during the regime of Bangarappa, it was well known that corruption was widespread and there was a close nexus between the chief minister and a senior bureaucrat, who was made the chief secretary and was assigned a number of key positions-a classic case of concentration of power, facilitating corrupt practices and poor governance. Yet, they faced no punishment, although the chief minister was replaced. The politician-bureaucrat -businessman nexus is well established.

Economic and social issues: some ethical questions

Although India's economic growth story may appear impressive, with expanding GDP and rising corporate profits, there are nagging questions-increasing inequality, rising unemployment leading to jobless growth, crime, caste and communal divides that need to be addressed. Has GDP growth translated into better livelihoods? The last three decades have witnessed rising inequality. While at one level, wages stagnate, at another, salaries have been rising. In a flourishing sector like IT, according to a May 2025 study, while CEO pay soared 50%, average worker wages rose by a mere 0.9 %, said to be the steepest divide in a decade. A 2022 ILO report revealed that real global

wages declined by 0.9%, while American CEOs earn 272 times what the median worker gets. About the plight of the agricultural labourers and the workers in the informal sector, the less said, the better. A more complex problem is horizontal inequality among groups with a shared identity-caste, class, gender, region etc.

A matter of serious concern is the several mafias thriving in India-coal mafia, sand mafia, water tanker mafia, slum mafia etc. They exploit public resources without state's permission, but with the connivance of the state instruments-the officials and politicians in power. Ernst &Young's report on 'Shadow Economy Exposed' estimates India's underground or unaccounted economy at over 26% of GDP in 2023 which also includes felony-crimes like drugs and human trafficking. These illegal activities not only deprive the state of revenue, but over a $1tn of its GDP.

The recent case of Ranya Rao, Kannada actress who was arrested in March 2025 for allegedly smuggling a substantial amount of gold from Dubai to Bengaluru(14.2 kg worth Rs 12.56 crores) according to DRI(Directorate of Revenue Intelligence) and her own admission to using hawala channels to facilitate gold smuggling operation, reveals how security protocols are circumvented and the system is manipulated. It's a vicious circle-mafias, political patronage and corrupt officials acting in collusion, causing enormous damage to state resources and state authority, even as the common citizen is deprived of his legitimate due.

On the social front, India is wrestling with deepening caste differentiation and religious intolerance, which are stymieing its progress. The stranglehold of caste is so strong that President Draupadi Murmu and her predecessor, Ramnath Kovind were reportedly denied entry to some temples as they were Dalits. The fate of others belonging to the lower end of the caste hierarchy can well be imagined. Inter-caste marriages are still frowned upon not only among the conservative rural population but even in elite urban circles.

The recent caste census, while intended to count the exact number of people in each caste and identify the more deprived groups, has also raised the question whether it would only reinforce the salience of caste in Indian society. The demand for reservation seems to have turned into a battle among socially powerful communities for more political power. In Karnataka, the forward communities of Vokkaligas and Lingayats clamour for more reservation, although they have cornered the position of chief minister the greatest number of times.

Here is Dr Ambedkar's warning: "The castes are anti-national. In the first place because they bring about separation in social life. They are anti-national also because they generate jealousy and antipathy between caste and caste. But we must overcome all these difficulties if we wish to become a nation in reality".

To recall my own experience, when I was Secretary to Chief Minister Moily in the early 1990s, after assuming charge, one of the first tasks of the CM was to form his cabinet. Although it was essentially a political exercise, he asked me to accompany him to Delhi for an important engagement. Keeping my fingers crossed, we reached the national capital. He then disclosed that he had to finalise the list of candidates for his cabinet, and we must find a quiet place where nobody would disturb him. A newly built hotel that was not yet functional was discovered.

The selection of candidates had to be based on representation, primarily to caste, followed by region/district. Then came political experience and efficiency. The CM was keen on having a small council of ministers, limited to about 25. Balancing all these interests was a challenging task. After long hours of toiling, the list was getting a final shape. Then came an unexpected phone call from no one other than the Prime Minister Narasimha Rao who wanted a particular person to be accommodated. Similar calls followed from other VIPs, creating a dilemma about who should be included and excluded. It was a harrowing time for the CM.Finally, the list went up from 25 to to 43 and what

was intended to be a compact cabinet became heavy weight. Then I realized that apart from other requirements, an important qualification for a person to become a minister was 'political influence'. I may add that political influence has also crept into the bureaucracy for recruitment, postings and transfers.

Politics and governance have thus been allied in the decision-making process not only for those seeking favours but also for citizens to get legitimate things done. Like for instance, registration of property transfer deed, getting a khata or a driving license or contract or permission to start a business. What sems to be working is influence or money or sometimes both. In such a scenario, is ethical decision making possible? There are, of course, rare exceptions, some rare individuals valuing integrity more than money or privilege.

It's relevant to note that state level politics and governance is more complicated than at the Centre. For one reason, the prime minister is less exposed to day-to-day problems as he is pre-occupied with the crucial national issues such as defence, foreign relations, economic affairs and crisis situations. Secondly, PM's security demands that he is kept away from the crowd and visitors are thoroughly screened before they can meet him. The chief minister of a state, however, is much nearer to the people and cannot afford to alienate them. I am myself a witness to the endless stream of visitors to the CM's chambers and residence that include legislators, VIPs, officers and the common folk. Not just the CM, even the ministers in the state are besieged with visitors from their constituencies and others with their demands and grievances. To what extent they go back satisfied is a moot question.

The major difference between the matters dealt with at the centre and in the states is that in case of the former, it pertains mostly to policy issues and big projects. Also, there are well-defined systems and procedures which are, by and large, strictly followed. All important decisions are made through a committee system with little interference. Meetings are held on time. Entry to govt offices is streamlined and security is tight.

In states, these things hardly work. At times, officers and invites have to wait for long at the meeting hall for the CM or ministers to arrive. Time seems to be of little consequence, except where the CM sets the tone. For instance, in Karnataka, I have seen CM Gundu Rao was very punctual and prompt in attending his work. This had a salutary effect on ministers and officers. I understand that in UP, Yogi Adityanath has streamlined systems and procedures which are strictly followed by all down the line, himself setting exemplary standards, which were hardly known in a state like UP.

International Politics

No nation can be isolated in the present era of globalization. Although there is a debate about a trend towards deglobalization and the revival of nationalism, technological advancement in communications and transport and the emergence of AI and related networks, the world is closer than at any time in the past. The latest trade or tariff war unleashed by the US is proof enough of the interdependence of nations for economic development-from agriculture to industry, semiconductors to rare minerals, almost all commodities are exported and imported. Economically powerful nations like US and China are calling the shots to the detriment of all those dependent on these two countries to maintain their trade balance and economic growth.

The tariff war is, however, not just an economic war, it is also political warfare. How else do you explain two close friends like India and US turn almost foes overnight? American President Trump's dissatisfaction with India in not acknowledging his proclaimed role in ending the Indo-Pak conflict, following Operation Sindhoor, has disrupted the relationship between the two nations, resulting in sudden increases in tariffs on Indian goods, adversely affecting India.

In the political arena, the two wars -one, between Russia and Ukraine, and the other, between Israel and Palestine, raging for the past 2-3 years, with

thousands of innocent people being killed and several injured, children dying from malnutrition and hunger in Gaza are soul stirring. But the political leaders involved seem to be unmoved, each asserting suzerainty over its territory. As in ancient times, it has become a war for territorial expansion, the weaker ones - Ukraine and Palestine, being the victims. The brutal and insensitive killing of Indian men at Pahalgam in Kashmir in front of their families led to the conflict, however brief, between the two neighbours. Yet, the US, instead of condemning the brazen act of terrorism, decided to support the terrorist nation. At the same time, it has no qualms to allow Israel to bombard Palestine and perpetrate inhuman acts.

Clearly, these are unethical acts. Basically, all wars are unethical, although it may be argued that at times, wars become inevitable, because of the aggressive behaviour of certain nations like Germany during the two world wars. Was the dropping of atom bomb on Japanese towns ethical, despite Germany having been defeated and Hitler had died, just to wreak vengeance against Japan for its Pearl Harbour bombing? One may also ask whether the Mahabharata war was ethical, though it has been called a *dharma yuddha*?. The war ended in a gory tragedy, with thousands killed on both sides, Kauravas being virtually wiped out and the five children of the Pandava brothers murdered while asleep. In reality, there is no victor and vanquished in a war; both sides are losers.

Yet, an attempt was made after the two world wars to establish peace and avoid future wars by setting up international organisations-the League of Nations in January 1920, after the first World War, and the United Nations Organization established in 1945 after the second. The former failed while the second survived. The UN has done commendable work to promote social and cultural cooperation and in containing international conflicts in the initial years, but it has proved ineffective in recent times, thanks to the selfish interests of the superpowers.

What's worrying is the increased spending on defence budgets, reaching,

according to UN report, a new high of $2.7 trillion in 2024 and projected to reach $3.5trillion by 2030 and $4.7 tn by 2035.Commenting on its impact on development goals, the report says that just 3% of the defence budget can end hunger by 2030 and 5% could eliminate extreme poverty. Unfortunately, what we see is a race towards more militarization, aided by advancing technology, than a battle towards eliminating the world's real enemies of hunger, poverty, disease and environmental degradation.

Technology, AI and Ethics

Today, the buzz is all about smart phones, algorithms and AI. Technology has penetrated everyday life and AI in particular "is pervasive, often invisibly embedded in our day-to-day tools and as part of complex technological systems" (Boddington,2017). It is shaping not only our thinking but feelings and actions. "Machines can now read our faces not only to identify us but also read our emotions and retrieve all kinds of information" (Cockelbergh,2020). Robots are now doing the work of humans. They are deployed at bars, offer welcome drinks at hotel reception areas and assist doctors in surgeries.

No organization, big or small, government or private, is free from the impact of AI. In fact, they are exploring the potential of AI to improve the efficiencies of their processes. The GOI has taken a number of policy initiatives for adoption of AI such as National Artificial Intelligence Mission, National AI Portal(ai.gov.in), AI for India 2030 and Foundational AI Models to facilitate development of its own LLMs and problem-specific AI solutions. In order to foster AI research, a National Research Foundation and Centres of Excellence are being set up. Skilling and Capacity Building-to establish India as a global leader in AI skills. Some specific AI applications include healthcare diagnostics, real time advisory to farmers to optimize crop cutting experiments and detecting pest infestations; intelligent traffic management in cities, and justice delivery by accelerating case processing.

Commendable as these initiatives are and amazing as the benefits of AI, its adverse effects cannot be ignored.AI raises deep ethical questions. It's not just about technology but about human life. While transforming our economies, will it radically alter the way we live and work? Will it take away people's privacy, and in effect, their liberties? Even technology leaders and AI founders have expressed their fears. “Humans should be worried about the threat posed by artificial intelligence”, says Bill Gates, “they are a 'shock wave' that turns apps into proactive assistants”.AI agents(autonomous programs that can reason, plan, learn and adapt)are not only taking over human tasks but they can even tell humans what to do and actually perform the tasks for them. Jaspreet Bindra, a leading expert on digital transformation and founder of 'AI and Beyond' warns: “Agents raise ethical questions. There is something uncomfortable about giving human agency to a machine; agents are a direct threat to human jobs”.

On the impact on AI on the future of work, *The Economist* (13 February 2025) reveals that inequity in wages is likely to increase further, the lower-skilled jobs will be broken up and eliminated, and the best educated will be able to earn much more. This is already visible from the recent laying off of of thousands of employees by MNCs like Google, TCS, Cognizant and Microsoft. Developing countries like India with a large number of poor and low paid workers will be particularly affected. According to India Today report (Aug 25, 2025), there is a 50% drop in new hirings in the bigtech entry level hirings from pre-covid levels and a 72% drop in staff hiring by 6 IT companies in Q4FY25.

AI may create some jobs, but the fact is, more the adoption of AI, the more inequity in society. Today, AI has become such a powerful force, countries, while engaged in geopolitical competition, are investing huge amounts of money to gain technological supremacy. After assuming the office of President in January,2025, one of the first announcements of Donald Trump was to build “the largest AI infrastructure in history”, a $500 bn investment, named

Stargate.

BigTech companies are trying to break free from regulations. Trump came down heavily on the European Commission for penalizing American companies-imposing heavy fines on Google ($2.66 bn) and Meta ($1.32 bn) for violation of antitrust rules and data protection laws. Sven Nyholm, Professor of Ethics and AI at Ludwig Maximilan University of Munich said “Many of the companies now backing Trump were once vocal critics. We have seen them suddenly making large donations and attending key political events. These companies are likely driven less by ideology and more by pragmatism-aligning with whoever is in power”. Strong lobbying by bigtech companies resulted in watering down much of the EU's AI Act. Corporate leaders who earlier championed ESG (Environmental, Socialand Governance) and DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) are now abandoning their commitment to ethical principles at the altar of Trumpian unethical policies.

It's deeply disturbing that the terror threat has now shifted online. The Islamic State (IS) is resorting to online radicalization and recruitment to draw fighters for its cause. Minors exposed to social media are targeted, especially in south-east Asia. It is reported that in Central Java, a young boy joined an Islamic State-linked terror group after being radicalized virtually.

Renito, a former Japanese diplomat and co-founder of Sakana AI, has drawn attention to the race to build artificial general intelligence(AGI) models between AI leaders like Open AI and Deep Mind, capable of performing any intellectual task that a human can, and at the same time, the US and Chinese governments seeing the AI race as a national security priority that demands massive investments reminiscent of the Manhattan project. In both cases, AI is seen as a new form of 'hard power', accessible only to superpowers with vast computational resources. This is a dangerous trend likely to result in further geopolitical disruptions and big corporate-super power dominance, placing developing countries at a great disadvantage.

This leaves us with some uncomfortable questions: Is AI just a machine or a super-intelligent agent? If it's the latter, what are the moral consequences? And what should be the attitude or behaviour of we humans towards these artificial entities?

Ethical Dilemmas

Taking an overall view of the various issues discussed above, we are confronted with certain ethical dilemmas in dealing with problems relating to politics and governance. I am highlighting some salient ones below.

Let me begin with a couple of recent events that have attracted wide public attention.

Stray dog menace: The gory death of a girl in Delhi caused by a stray dog bite opened up a pandoras box on the issue of stray dog menace across the country. It is estimated that Delhi alone records 30,000 dog bite cases a year and rabies kill poor urban residents with poor access to post-exposure prophylaxis. A serious debate ensued between dog lovers and those who see stray dogs as posing a risk to humans, particularly children.

The matter reached the Supreme Court which in its August 11,2025 order directed Delhi govt to collect every street dog within eight weeks and confine them permanently in pounds. This however conflicts with the Animal Birth Control Rules,2023, specifying the principle of “capture, neuter, vaccine, release”, and forbidding municipalities from permanently relocating healthy dogs or impounding them for long periods, except where a dog is rabid or dangerously aggressive.

The order gave rise to serious expressions of dismay over its impracticality in implementation. The court soon modified its 'harsh' order and directed that the animals be released into the localities from they were captured, after sterilizing them, deworming and immunization. It also directed the municipal authorities to set up dedicated feeding zones in every ward to ensure no inconvenience is

caused to the public.

The ethical dilemma for policy makers and municipal authorities is: What is more important-protecting human life or preventing cruelty to animals? The answer depends on one's perception. The municipal authorities are sandwiched between the law, viz, Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act,1960, and preventing cruelty to humans walking on the streets. From practical experience of having dealt with the problem as Commissioner of a municipal corporation, I can say implementation of the law is not that easy, nor safeguarding the interests of humans.

Online Gaming Ban: In August 2025, parliament passed the Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Act which prohibits online gaming. viz, games that involve stakes purchased with money, directly or indirectly, including by means of virtual assets. It identifies three categories of games: sports, online money games and online social games. While e-sports and social games have been permitted, online money games have been totally prohibited. The reasons for enacting such a law include the social, financial, psychological and public health harms of such games, particularly among young individuals and economically disadvantaged groups, apart from the risks of financial fraud and money laundering.

According to Lumika, that publishes gaming reports, India has over 590 million gamers (2024), adding as many as 23 million in one just one year, and the gaming market was expected to grow to $9.2 bn by 2029.

The reactions have ranged from calling the law ill-conceived and fraught with serious consequences-the closure of businesses, loss of a large number of jobs affecting livelihoods and govt's capacity to implement the law, on the one side, and welcoming it as online gaming had led to addiction and financial ruin of several families. Both arguments are valid. As in the case of prohibition and other banned activities, gaming will go underground, URLs will resurface, and grey market activity will thrive. At the same time, many families would be

relieved that the scourge of the addictive game would end.

Public policy dilemma that arises is: Should government risk losing increasing revenue from gaming and growing job losses, impoverishing families, or prohibit something that is ethically wrong? Ananth Nageswaran, chief economic advisor to GOI, argues that govt's decision to ban online gaming has been taken in the interest of realizing India's demographic dividend. "Jobs will go to those equipped with education, skills, attitude and mental as well as physical health. The consumption of ultra-processed foods, social media and online gaming-a deadly troika-threatens to erode India's dividend significantly…addiction to online gaming amid social media usage renders humans economically unproductive and socially reclusive" (Mint,August 26,2025).

Judicial decisions: **punishments and dissents**-In cases of serious crimes, judges often face the dilemma of the quantum of punishment. Even in 'rarest of rare cases' punishable by death sentence, we find that punishment awarded by one court is set aside by a higher court in appeal. Dissenting judgements have become common. In important constitutional cases, at times, the decision that prevails is by narrow majority of one. There are cases of the same court recalling its earlier judgement and making a revised decision, as witnessed in the stray dog's case.

Although judicial decisions are supposed to be based on law (justice is blind principle), ethical questions do arise, creating dilemmas for the judge. The morality of death penalty itself has been questioned. Some countries like Denmark, Norway and Portugal have abolished death penalty for all crimes.

Nature vs Development

A critical issue that confronts decision makers, particularly in the developing countries is the relative importance to be given to economic development and protection of nature or environment. Both are essential, the former for

livelihoods of people and prosperity, and the latter for a healthy life on earth. By and large, political leaders give priority to economic development to the detriment of environment. This has unleashed nature's fury in the form of extreme weather events-floods, droughts, cyclones and landslides resulting in devastation, loss of lives and human suffering.

Climate change and global warming are a reality.2024 was the hottest year recorded globally, the annual mean temperature in India going up from 25.05*C in 2001 to 25.74*C in 2024.India now figures among the top 10 climate-vulnerable nations, with 89% of Indian districts going to be extreme event hotspots by 2030.Inspite of strong environmental laws and ambitious targets of achieving net zero by 2070,and reducing carbon emissions by a billion tonnes by 2030,implementation on ground is weak, resulting in poor compliance. “The 2025 floods have exposed more than climate fury, they have exposed the fault lines of India's relief system” (India Today,Sep 29,2025), the northern states of Punjab, Uttarakhand and J&K witnessing unprecedented floods, inundating homes and hotels in tourist spots.

There is a loss of respect for nature-the *Pancha tattvas*, the five elements of nature-*Prithvi(*earth),*Jala(*water),*Agni(*fire),*Vayu*(air) and *akasha* (the space around us) which according to our tradition, decide the basic quality of life. Excessive consumption has resulted in the earth being poisoned with chemicals, forests being into converted dry jungles, depletion of underground water and water scarcity, energy crisis, pollution of air, water and land, and garbage occupying our streets and drains.

The etica dilemma-how to balance the compulsions of development with the dire need to protect the natural environment?

Several dilemmas arise in policy making as well as in governance and decisions taken may not always be to the satisfaction of the stakeholders or even the people at large.

The Future: Ethics v Power Politics

"Concern for man and his fate must always form the chief interest of all technical endeavours", said that doyen of scientists, Albert Einstein, "never forget this in the midst of your diagrams and equations".

So should it be for all political endeavours. Like it or not, politics has been and will continue to be the dominant force that will decide the fate of people. It wasthe decision of then US President, Harry Truman to drop the atom bomb on the cities of Japan in August,1945 that resulted in a holocaust never seen before, although the Second World War had practically ended in May,1945, with the surrender of Germany in May that year. In present times, it is again the top political leaders of powerful countries like US, China, Russia and Israel who are shaping international affairs, be it for political gains through wars or economic supremacy through tariffs. The suffering caused to thousands of people including women and children and the trail of destruction left behind, nor the disruption of international trade relations, seem to matter little or nothing to them.

Similarly, in governing their own nations, the political establishment calls the shots. Events in recent years in countries like Afghanistan (2021), Sri Lanka (2022), Bangladesh (2024) and Nepal (2025) where people revolted and pulled down the ruling establishments expose their struggle to overcome problems relating to corruption, elitism, joblessness and inequity, thanks to power hungry and greedy politicians. India, though a rising emerging economy and a stable democracy, is yet to overcome similar problems.

These formidable challenges cannot be met merely through laws, regulations and codes which can be flouted (like Prevention of Corruption Act and Money Laundering Act. Although a number of measures have been recommended by various committees and commissions over the last seven decades and some action has been taken to implement them, politics continues to be vitiated and governance, more a story of failures.

The real answer lies in ethical conduct of individuals, particularly of the leaders - politicians, civil servants, businessmen, professionals, and of institutions, public and private and civil society organisations. How to bring about this change?

Having gone through the rough and tumble of governmental systems and practices, and after close interactions with civil society associations, I am well aware that this is easier said than done. It may appear impractical. But there seems to be no alternative to the infusion of ethics in politics and governance, as well as in other walks of life, if we aspire for peace, progress, prosperity and justice for all sections of people. My conviction comes from the inspiration drawn from our own civilization values inherited across centuries, the lessons drawn from its chequered history and from the guiding principles of our constitution, as articulated in its Preamble. The question is what means do we adopt in achieving the goal of securing Justice for all.

Ends and Means

The first principle in ethical politics and governance is to follow the dictum: the means to achieve a goal or an objective is as important as the end, which was exemplied in the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi, who articulated it thus:

"Ahimsa is the means and Truth is the end…If we take care of the means, we are bound to reach the end sooner or later…Truth exists and it alone exists…there is but one way of realisng it and that is ahimsa" (CWMG 44:59).

It may be argued that we have never been able to avoid himsa or violence, even if the end was noble. In the Mahabharata, while preaching the importance of Dharma in the Bhagavad Gita on the eve of the war between Pandavas and Kauravas, Krishna calls upon Arjuna to take up arms and fight. But then, war became inevitable as all efforts to find a peaceful solution failed. In the recent brief battle against Pakistan, India had to resort to Operation Sindhoor, after Pak terrorists unleashed brutal violence against innocent tourists in Kashmir,

without any provocation. Even Gandhiji said that violence is preferable to cowardice. As the saying goes, we must love peace but keep the powder dry.

To take some recent instances of policy making, in the case of banning online gambling, it can be said that ethics prevailed over profit, as the government did not mind losing revenue in the larger interests of people's welfare. However, in the case of demonitisation enforced in 2016, although it was well intentioned-curbing black money and use of counterfeit currency, it created enormous disruption, causing cash shortages, and a negative impact on the informal sector, small-scale businesses, and poorer people in general. It was a case of questionable means to secure a desirable end.

Citizenship, along with migration, has emerged as a serious issue in India and globally. While the intention is to curb illegal immigration, doubts are being expressed about the Indian Citizenship Amendment law being used as an instrument for exclusion. Across the world, it is seen as a political tool that helps those in power to decide who can vote and own land. How does one establish one's identity? Is it ancestry and geography or state documents like Adhaar, Election Identity Card and Passport? Which amongst them is actually accepted by the authorities? There seems to be no end to controversy over the issue.

Quality of Education

From a long-term perspective, the single most important factor that will determine the role of ethics in public and private life will be the quality of education imparted in our schools and colleges. Considering that students in higher educational institutions do get interested in politics and student elections have political overtones, ethics must form part of the educational system. The National Education Policy (NEP),2020, calls for value-based education, integrating ethics and human values like integrity, empathy, respect, responsibility, social justice and constitutional values into the core curriculum.

The measures for implementation include developing guidelines for ethical conduct, integrating ethics into teacher training, and creating mechanisms to monitor the impact of ethics education on students. It has further emphasized institutional ethics-promoting transparency, accountability and ethical leadership to safeguard against corruption and malpractice.

After five years, these grand ideals remain on paper, exposing the gap between policy and action. The public education system itself suffers from basic deficiencies such as teacher vacancies, untrained teachers, malpractices in recruitment and promotion etc. We cannot wait for the systemic deficiencies to be overcome before focusing on ethics. In the context of the widespread use of social media and mental health problems like anxiety, stress, depression and increasing suicides amongst the student population, ethics must be accorded high priority. It can begin with including Ethics as a compulsory subject in all teacher training institutions and orientation programs for working teachers. The syllabus for ethics and the methodology of instruction is a matter of detail.

GDP v SDP

"At present, we are stealing the future, selling it in the present, and calling it GDP".

This observation by Paul Hawken, the renowned American environmentalist, ecological entrepreneur and activist, reflects the inadequacy of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) which quantifies the total value of goods and services produced within a country over a period of time and is presently the universally accepted indicator of progress. But it does not include all factors that contribute to the health and well-being of the people. Hence, some economists have been arguing for alternatives to GDP that can serve as a more reliable indicator of the overall progress of a nation. Simon Kuznets, the American economist who gave the policy makers this new statistical tool at the time of the Great Depression in 1934, himself cautioned that it should not be mistaken for an

index of national welfare.

GNH (Gross National Happiness)

Proposed by the 4th King Jigme Singye Wangchuk of Bhutan,GNH is a holistic development concept that prioritizes the collective well-being and happiness of citizens over purely economic growth. It provides a policy making framework and stands on the balance of four pillars: sustainable socio-economic development, cultural preservation, environmental conservation, and good governance, and was adopted by Bhutan in 2008.The GNH Index is built on nine equally weighted domains that reflects different aspects of life: psychological well-being, health, education, time use,, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, communal vitality, ecological diversity and resilience and living standards.

Bhutan calculates GNH Index every five years, aligning it with its five-year planning process. It is also said to play an important role in resource allocation for the local governments. Overall,it serves as a valuable policy tool in guiding the integrated development of Bhutan.

SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals)

In 2015, the United Nations adopted SDGs to "end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure peace and prosperity". It includes 17 inter-connected goals to be achieved by 2030 through the Agenda for Sustainable Development that address global challenges and offer "a shared blueprint for a better future, requiring collaborative efforts from governments, businesses and individuals". Although ethics as such is not a part of these goals, they all have an ethical overtone and three of them can be said to directly contribute to an ethical outcome,viz,Goal10-reduced inequalities,12-responsible consumption and production and 16-Peace and Justice.

All UN member countries including India have adopted SDGs, but it is

doubtful if all goals can be achieved by 2030.Hardly anything has been done to fulfil the three goals mentioned above. On the contrary, they seem to be moving in the reverse direction-increasing inequalities, irresponsible consumption and increasing conflicts and injustice to innocent people.

SDP (Sustainable Development Product)

Taking into consideration the various aspects that go into overall welfare of people-economic, social, environmental, health and mental well-being as well as the ethical component, I propose that we develop a Sustainable Development Product (SDP) as a new tool to measure and guide the overall progress of a nation. Measuring ethics will not be easy, nor should we labour over it, but we can develop criteria to integrate it into the mainstream. For instance, is a law aimed at public good or does it confer arbitrary power on the state to curb human rights? Has the fund earmarked for construction of a road or a school building or for public distribution been spent for the intended purpose or has there been leakage? How much excessive consumption and wastage and how much conservation?

A multi-disciplinary team comprising economists, sociologists, psychologists, legislators and public administrators must deliberate and suggest the criteria and indicators to determine the SDP.

Global Governance: inclusive, plural and muti-cultural

The United Nations, established in 1945, after the Second World War, specified in its charter its aim to "maintain peace and security".80 years later, its Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres laments: "Today, peace is under siege. Conflicts are multiplying. Civilians are suffering. Human rights and international law are being trampelled". Not losing hope, he has proposed the Un80 Initiative aimed at making the UN more effective through structural changes and reforms and strengthen global governance for present and future

generations.

On ground, however, global governance seems to have broken down. The actors engaged in war and violence have only shown utter indifference to the call of the Secretary-General. These same powers, dominating the Security Council are standing in the way of reforms and blocking the entry of the largest nation on earth, India with a population of 1.4 bn,into the Security Council. Tensions are rising and conflicting interests and values are making the world more ungovernable. The US Department of Defence has recently been renamed Department of War, a post-World War2 nomenclature that "underscores Mr Trump's efforts to reshape the military to align with his goals of projecting a more aggressive image by showcasing war-fighting capabilities", as the New York Times put it. The challenge of peace-loving countries is to counter 'war-fighting capabilities 'by 'peace-building capabilities.

In envisioning the future, the nagging question is: In the conflict between Ethics and Power Politics, what will prevail?

Politics essentially involves seeking power by democratic or other means and trying to retain it. In doing so, politicians and political parties are likely to deviate from ethical means, with an eye on success. What the world needs today is a trustworthy, transparent and accountable political system, in nation states and in international fora. The path lies in fostering ethics or more appropriately *Dharma* in politics and other walks of life. *Dharma* is that which sustains the universe (*dhriyate loko anena iti dharma*) and implies a consistent behavioural style that supports the highest good of everything. It is inclusive and plural. The Dalai Lama, the great Tibetan leader and winner of Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 explains its importance:

"Politics and governance are essential parts of human society. Wherever people live together, there arises the need for order and guidance, and leadership. But for such systems to benefit all, they must rest on ethics,

responsibility, and sincere commitment to the common good.The principles of dharma offer a timeless guide…. The union of *Dharma* and politics does not mean merging religion with the state but guiding governance with ethical values. It calls for leadership rooted in wisdom, compassion and fairness".

This is where people's participation becomes relevant. A shining illustration of involving people is the Anubhava Mantapa (AM), an experiential forum established by Basaveswara,an administrator, poet, philosopher and social reformer of the 12th century in Karnataka, where people of all denominations irrespective of caste, creed, gender or status could gather, exchange ideas and work towards the betterment of society. We need a similar forum today which can bring together people of all communities, religions and other diverse groups to promote ethical values in society. There are of course, several NGOs and civil society organisations working towards specific purposes such as environment, city improvement, health, education and political reform. The focus of a forum like Anubhava Mantapa will be on ethical practices in any field of human activity-be it politics, governance, business or any other profession. What is important is the concept and philosophy of AM must become part of civil society and professional associations.

For such an effort to succeed, the initiative should come from leaders, as in the case of Anubhaa Mantapa, where Basaveswara who was the Prime Minister set the tone.Elected bodies like panchayats and municipalities must take the initiative to set up AMs(by whatever name called) at the local level.Gram Sabhas can also serve as a forum. Apart from government schemes, open discussion must be encouraged on the state of affairs in political and governance matters with a focus on ethics. It must be a transparent process to promote accountability in the governing class.

Leadership is the key. We have the illustrious examples of Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela who inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, used non-violence as their weapon-the former to seek equal rights for the black community in

America, and the latter to gain independence for South Africa, with a majority of coloured people, from the whites' colonial rule, after suffering for 27 long years in prison.

What counts is the type of people we elect or select to positions of power, be it in politics, business or to any other leadership position. The end is to provide justice to people. And what is just rule? Let us listen to Tiruvalluvar, whose work Thirukkural inspired Gandhiji who called it "a textbook of indispensable authority on moral life":

Enquiring, favouring no one, being impartial,
Consulting and rendering justice is just rule.
World's safety depends on the ruler
Just rule defends his honour.

Recognising Gandhiji as an apostle of peace and ahimsa, the United Nations has declared October 2 as the International Day of Non-Violence. Conflicts cannot be avoided, be it in politics or in society, but what can be avoided is violence in resolving conflicts. This is the biggest tribute we can pay to the Mahatma. How do we achieve this? The preamble for the Constitution of

UNESCO provides an answer:
"*Since war begins in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed*".

We can begin by sowing the seeds of peace in the minds of children and the youth through the right type of education. As for the present, we can draw inspiration from a Facebook page titled 'US Department of Peace' created by peace lovers in US as a counter to the creation of the 'Department of War', with an introduction that says, "Official page for a national movement advocating

for peace building policies and for the prevention of violence to be held as a national priority"(*PeaceAlliance.org*-amity).Such peace movements must be created in all countries.

India can take the initiative by creating a 'Department of Peace and Harmony' and carry the message of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the world is one family) across the globe, not as *vishwa guru*, but as *Vishwa Mitra*, friend of all mankind and build bridges with nations, big and small. At home, it must promote social capital and cohesion, underlining the importance of unity and fraternity. As Dr Ambedkar said, "There will be no nation without unity…without fraternity, equality and liberty will be no deeper than coats of paint".

This is the greatest challenge of our times.

And this is an **Ethical Imperative**.