Ethics & Morality · GS - IV

Honesty and uprightness are the hallmarks of a civil servant. Civil servants possessing these qualities are considered as the backbone of any strong organization. In line of duty, they take various decisions, at times some become bonafide mistakes. As long as such decisions are not taken intentionally and do not benefit personally, the officer cannot be said to be guilty. Though such decisions may, at times, lead to unforeseen adverse consequences in the long-term.

In the recent past, a few instances have surfaced wherein civil servants have been implicated for bonafide mistakes. They have often been prosecuted and even imprisoned. The instances have greatly rattled the moral fibre of the civil servants.

How does this trend affect the functioning of the civil services?

What measures can be taken to ensure the honest civil servants are not implicated for the bonafide mistakes on their part? Justify your answer.

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EXAM YEAR	PAPER	SUBJECT
2019	GS - IV	Ethics & Morality

MARKS	WORD LIMIT
20	~250 words

Answer Hint

Administrative paralysis; risk aversion; declining morale; fear of decision-making; procedural delays; distinction between error and misconduct; independent investigation; objective accountability; legal safeguards; institutional reforms

Model Answer

Introduction

Honesty and uprightness are essential to civil service integrity. However, punishing genuine errors of judgment as misconduct can create a climate of fear, undermining effective governance. Accountability must distinguish bonafide mistakes from deliberate wrongdoing.

Impact on the Functioning of Civil Services

1. **Administrative paralysis:** Officers may avoid timely decisions, delaying public projects and essential services.

2. **Risk-averse behaviour:** Civil servants may prefer routine procedures over innovative solutions, weakening problem-solving and reforms.

3. **Declining morale:** Fear of prosecution despite honest intentions can discourage committed and upright officers.

4. **Excessive proceduralism:** Officers may prioritise paperwork and approvals over public interest, reducing administrative efficiency.

5. **Erosion of public trust:** Delayed decisions and ineffective service delivery can weaken citizens' confidence in public institutions.

Measures to Protect Honest Civil Servants

1. **Differentiate error from misconduct:** Distinguish reasonable errors made in good faith from corruption, gross negligence, deliberate violations and personal gain.

2. **Independent scrutiny:** Establish impartial review mechanisms to examine the officer's intent, evidence, decision-making process and circumstances before initiating punitive action.

3. **Strengthen legal safeguards:** Ensure fair investigations, due process and protection against arbitrary prosecution, while preserving lawful accountability.

4. **Transparent decision-making:** Maintain written records, reasoned orders and audit trails to demonstrate the basis of official decisions.

5. **Clear administrative guidelines:** Provide standard operating procedures and expert consultation for complex or high-risk decisions.

6. **Time-bound disciplinary proceedings:** Prevent prolonged investigations from becoming instruments of harassment and provide officers an opportunity to defend themselves.

7. **Promote ethical leadership:** Encourage responsible innovation and good-faith decisions while taking strict action against corruption and intentional abuse of authority.

Conclusion

A professional civil service requires both accountability and institutional trust. Protecting honest officers from unjust persecution must go hand in hand with transparent scrutiny of misconduct. The guiding principle should be **protection for bona fide decisions, not immunity from accountability**.

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