

Earnest leaders and administrators can achieve plenty

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The political and senior administrative leadership in government can make a significant difference to the lives of people. Depending on what these leaders do or don't do—even in short tenures—they can cause development, drift, or decline. From education and health to trade and industry, from public safety to the environment, and for everything in between, this is true.

Since the state plays such a large role in our society, why does the obvious need to be stated? Because too often such leaders themselves and we as citizens give them a getaway pass by saying “they can't do much individually, it's the ‘system’.” Even accounting for the intractability of ‘systemic’ issues and for short tenures in any role for an individual, good work matters. Cumulatively, that is what changes things for the better at the nut-and-bolts level of governance and administration. In fact, it is changes at this level that enable or stymie progress. Most election manifestos or high-level policies would lead to some real improvements in people's lives if such good work were to be done by most individual actors, with its cumulative effects getting clearer over time.

Let's get a few things out of the way first. First, political and administrative leaders do not lack in smarts (or competence). The normal curve of distribution of smarts among these people is probably higher than in the corporate world of business, academia and civil society. Politicians survive by their smarts—so almost all those in leadership have ample measures of it. Administrators get selected into the services for their smarts, so most have it, though unlike politicians, they can survive in their careers even without using these capacities; and so many lose that sharpness over time.

Second, almost all politicians are incredibly hard-working. Most don't know the notion of a holiday or moment of rest. They are constantly surrounded by people wanting things done and are themselves hustling continually, persuading and organizing, be it Diwali or Eid, late night or early morning, in their constituency or the state capital. On this matter, the distribution of administrators looks bimodal. One group is much like politicians, without a moment of rest; this is the larger group. The other group is not small, but relaxed, having given up on the notion of working—to enjoy their sinecures till retirement.

Third, take the matter of corruption—just the monetary kind, not intellectual or moral corruption. The financial basis of our electoral political system is such that politicians are corrupted by merely being engaged in what they are. But such a black-and-white

categorization has no explanatory or descriptive usefulness. It's worthwhile to delve a level deeper.

We can imagine two axes of monetary corruption. Imagine the X-axis on this graph to be 'makes/enables money to be made for the party' and the Y-axis to be 'makes money for him/herself'. There are those who are zero or very low on the Y-axis, but even they are forced by electoral financial demands to be high on X-axis at senior levels of leadership; even if not actively, but merely by looking away. There seems to be a high correlation between being low on the Y-axis (personal corruption) and doing good work. The same seems to be true of administrators. Though for them the X-axis is more accurately labelled 'stop-facilitates corruption'. There is a fair proportion who will do much to stop corruption, often strategically and therefore effectively.

So, if a large number of political and administrative leaders are smart, hard-working and can deal with corruption in some manner, why don't we see more good work? In decades of dealing with such leaders, I have noticed that what differentiates those who make a difference is a certain sense of professionalism and professional pride. They simply want to do a good job of whatever role they are in. For sure, there are also those who are driven by a real sense of mission to do good, but a sense of professionalism is often sufficient to make a genuine difference.

Cross-state differences on human development are instructive. That most of India's southern states are way ahead on most parameters is well known; the thought-provoking cases are from the rest of the country, where one can see marked differences across groups of states that were in one cohort till about 20 years ago.

Dealing with them (and also in the south), one realizes that a key difference is a culture of professionalism in their governance. Both kinds of examples are there: a chief minister who has been at the helm for many terms in a state and has fostered this culture, and cases where the baton has switched between two parties, but both side leaders have fostered the same culture of professionalism. In these cases, state leaders have made a real difference; in part by merely doing their job with a professional commitment.

This is not an apologia for our systemic failings and dysfunction. Nor a case for ignoring systemic improvements. Simply a description of the reality that nuts-and-bolts improvements can happen through a professional approach within dysfunctional systems, which cumulatively can help improve systems. The recent history of many states offers us testimony that staying with such a course over time can transform the lives of millions. And so no political or administrative leader has a getaway pass. Either they are complicit in dysfunction and decay or are contributing to progress. Citizens will do better if they remember that.

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